

emanuel dimas de melo pimenta

seven sidereal sounds

requiem for phill niblock

to Katherine Liberovskaya

a homage to Alberto del Genio

lots of thanks to Juan Puentes

In 1992, in Lisbon, Portugal, Isabel Alves, widow of the great Portuguese artist Ernesto de Sousa, invited me to take part in an important intermedia art project: a scholarship with the aim of taking a young Portuguese artist every year to live for a year in New York City and launch his or her career internationally.

Five years earlier, in 1987, I had met Ernesto de Sousa at an exhibition-concert I created at the Modern Art Center of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon. He was very ill, but even so, his genius continued to be intensely projected through his eyes. We talked intensely. That meeting, which lasted only a few hours, marked my life. A few months later, he died. Ernesto was a close friend of the composer Jorge Peixinho who, in turn, was a pupil of Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez and Luigi Nono. Peixinho was a very dear friend of mine from the 1970s, when we first met him in Brazil, until his death in 1995.

In 1992, five years after that exhibition at the Gulbenkian Foundation, Isabel Alves - then still unaware of my meeting with Ernesto - invited me to be a permanent member of the jury for the Ernesto de Sousa Scholarship, which was supported by the Experimental Intermedia Foundation in New York, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and the Luso-American Development Foundation.

Through this project, more than twenty young artists lived in New York and were able to become internationally recognized with brilliant works over the course of twenty years.

Isabel Alves was responsible for putting Portugal on the world map of intermedia art.

The jury was made up of Phill Niblock, Isabel Alves, a representative of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation - who for many years was the painter Manuel Costa Cabral, the critic and journalist Rui Eduardo Paes, myself and, each year, a surprise juror.

It was there, in 1992, as part of this project, that I first met Phill Niblock. He was an essential element in the Scholarship.

We immediately became friends. I lived part of the time in Switzerland and Manhattan. John Cage died that same year and Phill never got to meet him in person.

Over the course of thirty years, whenever I was in New York City, I went to the Experimental Intermedia Foundation in Chinatown to meet Phill.

Phill Niblock was a quiet and very observant person. He always seemed to be serious... but he suddenly laughed, only briefly, showing only his small lower teeth, and his phrases were always short, synthetic, his voice almost pianissimo, almost inaudible... When people complained that they couldn't hear him, he repeated very loudly and then went back to almost whispering. At this point, he didn't look like an American, who usually speaks very loudly.

He was discreet and deeply observant.

Behind the lenses of his glasses, his small eyes shone with thoughts about everything around him.

Like John Cage, he was extremely generous and loved being surrounded by friends and young people. He was loved by many. I never met anyone who didn't like him.

At the age of twenty, in 1953, he left Anderson, Indiana, where he was born, to live in New York City. He became a photographer and dedicated himself to the nightlife world of jazz. He met Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane, Ben Webster, Coleman Hawkins, Paul Gonsalves and Ahmad Jamal, among many others. He photographed them all.

The world of photography announced the world of cinema to him, until one day - in the 1960s - he was enchanted by the sound of a diesel engine, a truck, and so he became a composer - for a music without melody, harmony or rhythm, just as I would do shortly afterwards, in the 1970s, still unaware of his existence.

His discovery of music through the sounds of a truck inevitably leads us to John Cage.

It is said that the so-called minimal music was born with three people: LaMonte Young following John Cage, then Terry Riley and finally with Phill Niblock. But beyond being minimalist, Phill's music is often the constitution of complex and continuous clouds of frequencies in continuous and profound interaction and metamorphosis. In a sense, it's only apparently minimal. When you listen to it carefully, you understand its gigantic complexity.

These clouds are always played very loudly. So loud that it hurt my

ears. I told him so. Phill simply suggested me to put absorbent cotton in my ears. Like John Cage, Phill was an extremely pragmatic person. He said it simply and directly, like the most natural thing in the world: "Emanuel, everyone should be fine. If someone has sensitive ears, just protect them". So I did. We were in Lausanne, Switzerland, in the early 2000s. During the concert, I was almost attacked by some people in the audience for putting absorbent cotton in my ears. It was as if I was offending the composer, as if I was sinning! But! We were already very good friends and he had suggested it! When I told Phill about people's revolt over cotton in my ears, he said laconically, in one short sentence: "They're silly... nobody has anything to do with what other people do".

In jazz, our worlds didn't entirely coincide. Of course, I loved those who were a reference for him, but I also loved Julian Cannonball Adderley - who I consider, with Charlie Parker, to have been one of the most fabulous alto saxophonists of all time. But Phill didn't like Cannonball, he thought he was too well-behaved, too "square". We'd talk about it and he'd laugh, with some astonishment, to hear that I liked Cannonball's music.

The person he loved most was Herman Poole Blount, Sun Ra, who died in 1993. But Sun Ra - an expression that means both "sun" and the Egyptian god of the sun - was a very particular personality. He was said to be an alien from Saturn on a mission of peace. Not just a composer, he was an instrumentalist, one of the introducers of electronic instruments in jazz, a poet, a mystic and a philosopher - although he didn't consider himself a philosopher. But this universe of great complexity fascinated Phill. Sun Ra adopted the free jazz of Ornette Coleman, a very dear friend of mine, with whom I played jam sessions at his home for about fifteen years. Phill didn't know Ornette personally - but he liked his music immensely.

Like Bill Anastasi, Phill had a wonderful, gigantic collection of vinyl records, with rare recordings - which we sometimes listened to for hours on end, without saying a word - always accompanied by some Italian red wine, usually Montepulciano d'Abruzzo.

In the early years, as soon as we met, I knew that Phill didn't like John Cage, who was another dear friend of mine, whom I admired and loved. I adored John, who was one of the most important persons in my life.

He considered Cannonball to be too well-behaved. And, in a similar sense, even though he had never met him in person, he had the impression that John Cage was too close to the institutional powers although, in fact, he had always been an anarchist.

John had become undeniably famous, Marshall McLuhan had written about him, Buckminster Fuller, Schoenberg, Moholy Nagy and Joseph Albers had been his teachers and friends at Black Mountain College. John lived surrounded by names like Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Philip

Johnson, John Lennon and Yoko Ono - his neighbors - as well as Joseph Beuys, Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki or Marcel Duchamp among many other friends and partners.

Phill immersed himself into silence. He built a world of young people, scholars, musicians, artists who were, in a sense, out of the spotlight, underground in many ways.

It was his personality.

I had the feeling that for him it was also about an aesthetic impression, about appearances - because, as a blatant contradiction, Phill was involved with the Luso-American Development Foundation, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and other powerful official institutions.

Everything surrounding John Cage was grandiose. There was always a permanent aura around him - and John didn't deny it. Ornette Coleman told me that it was exactly the same with Billie Holiday and Duke Ellington. It was something natural for them, and Phill Niblock suspected that. I soon realized that Phill surely had a serious problem with the powerful, or with anything that might reflect the dimension of power. It was an obvious contradiction. But we're all like that, in one way or another. We are constantly questioning life and ourselves.

Only over time and many conversations did I convince him of who John Cage had been: a true anarchist, a simple person, someone who dressed and behaved with extreme kindness and simplicity, a deeply generous person, a dedicated scholar, a great friend, a genius and a wonderful human being.

They were the same!

Had he realized that?

Only then did Phill openly accept him.

Ironically, Phill would end up receiving the John Cage Award from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts in 2014 - a Foundation that had been created precisely by John Cage, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg some fifty years earlier, in 1963!

Phill had an apparent aversion to the rich. Although he had never been rich, John had no feeling of aversion to either rich or poor, but only to people with little intelligence in relation to whom he had some pity and a lot of caution.

When I introduced him to René Berger, inviting him to a gala dinner, a celebration at the EPFL Federal Polytechnic School in Lausanne, Switzerland, he was amazed, simply delighted with everything and everyone.

In the early 2000s, Phill invited me to give a concert in Havana, Cuba. I told him I couldn't accept. I explained that I was absolutely against any kind of tyranny, that liberty and individual rights were two of the strongest reasons for my life. I was in Europe when I told him that. As soon as I arrived in New York, we met up. Phill opened a bottle of red wine and we talked at length. He said that he had been impressed by the fact that I hadn't accepted the invitation: "If you believe in liberty, you should communicate that everywhere!". He was right! I was wrong. The role of art, in any medium, is the critique of culture and that means discovery, the understanding of what we are. I had always advocated this and now I was falling into a blatant contradiction. Joseph Beuys said the same thing: those who work with art must always be present, wherever they are, wherever they are called. The reflection was quick. At that very moment, I told him that he was right, that I was wrong, that I had reconsidered and that, if it were still possible, I would go. But the festival in Havana didn't happen.

Most of the time, our meetings took place at the Experimental Intermedia Foundation - a large loft in an old building in Chinatown. There were hundreds of cables, equipment, books, records, all painted black. Or... that was the impression. Phill lived there. It was his home.

Being in that space meant being in the middle of thousands of cables, equipment, metal structures, projection screens, boxes, records, computers... it was an impressive setting - but one that seemed to some people to be "dimly lit" and even "lugubrious". If Phill's music was to be played loud and clear, his space was plunged into darkness.

I used to joke that it was a "black hole", where everything was gathered together, whether of a material or immaterial nature.

That space was connected to the kitchen, which was more like a pile of things and sets straight out of the 1950s. In a way, it was as if we had made an underground space from that era travel in time. On the walls there were photographs, forms, tickets, calendars, letters, newspaper articles, fragments of magazines, supermarket bills, electricity bills - almost everything you could imagine. In some way, this was also true of the bathroom, which was long, painted with epoxy in strong colors, with lots of objects. It stood between the kitchen and the entrance door, functioning simultaneously as a common bathroom or guest toilet. That was Phill's aesthetic.

Over the years I took thousands of photographs in that loft, just as I did in the homes of Bill Anastasi and Dove Bradshaw, Ornette Coleman, Baroness Durini, Maria Bonomi and John Cage, among others. Every time I photographed there, Phill and I would look at the pictures on a computer on the round table at the entrance to the kitchen, where we often met.

Particularly when it was just the two of us, we would talk at length about philosophy, politics, history, technology - Phill was a person very interested

on these universes, although in everyday life his quietness didn't reveal it. He was always quiet, with an inquiring look, but always peaceful.

He was always very generous and participative. One day, back in the 2000s, when we were talking about my Walden Zero project - a kind of memory center for the world since the 16th century, particularly focused on art, architecture, illustration, technologies, maps, books, cinema, photography and music - he stood up quietly, disappeared for a few moments, and came back with a small digital memory: "I was saving this for you. It's a gift". The memory unit contained many of his works. I thanked him very much but said it was too much. He stared into my eyes and said it was for me, because I should preserve those works. Obviously I would never think of selling them! My mission is to preserve them, to spread them. I've done that with the works of many friends. On the other hand, I have given him many of my works, in the most varied formats, over the years.

That was Phill Niblock!

We were almost twenty-five years apart in age, but we always remained without any difference.

Once a year, thanks to Isabel Alves, we had our meeting in Lisbon for the Ernesto de Sousa Fellowship - which unfortunately closed in 2013, due to an absolute lack of interest in maintaining it on the part of Portuguese institutions - even though the costs, year by year, were getting lower and lower. Quite simply, interest on culture, art, music and philosophy had come to an end - everything revolved around consumption, politics, power and continuous entertainment.

This growing lack of interest, the increasing mediocrity of the world, bothered him. But he didn't like to talk about it. Even at the end of his life, he preferred to make plans for upcoming concerts and screenings.

Phill Niblock's space in New York always remained a space of liberty - even though he received pressure from all sides to leave it! It was a rented space, and the area had seen a great deal of real estate appreciation over the years. Phill had no way of facing up to this increase in value. He resisted as best he could. As far as I knew, no organization, group of people or patron was willing to help.

Characters from the most diverse universes had been and still were meeting in that space. Robert Ashley, who was another dear friend of mine and Phill's, linked to John Cage, or RIP Hayman, another very dear friend that John had introduced me to in the 1980s; the poet Steven Dalachinsky, who had been introduced to me by my dear friend Wilton Azevedo; Fast Forward, who was on Merce Cunningham's team; Alex Adriaansens, from V2 in Holland, Larry Polansky, John King, David Behrman, Barbara Golden, Peter Zummo, Godfried-Willem Raes, Moniek Darge. All friends. Universes

that overlapped.

It was there that I met Monika Weiss, a great artist who would also become a dear friend forever. Marcia Grostein, Nina Colosi, the collector Khris Karasthatis, Baroness Durini and many others were there! Valentine Verhaeghe, Michel Collet, Juan Puntos, Cynthia Karalla, Joe Oppedisano, Marta Alvim and Rafael Toral among many others! So many names, so many brilliant personalities, that it's literally impossible to list them all here.

Like John Cage, Phill sincerely loved people, who were a real family to him. And like John, he loved being surrounded by young people all the time.

Apart from this love of young people, he loved and was very generous to everyone. I would say that, in this sense, in other times and in another context, Phill Niblock would probably have been considered a saint - just like John Cage.

An etymological root for the word saint is the ancient Indo-European *shnk. The Indo-European radical *S, which is the root of *shnk, indicated the idea of "connection". The emergence of the expression " saint " is said to have come from this ancient sense of connection, which also generated our word seed, of something that connects us to a genesis, to a birth, which can be a new experience, and which offers us vital energy.

This was the primordial meaning of the worlds of Phill Niblock, Ornette Coleman and John Cage. But they were different from Bill Anastasi's universe, which operated as a kind of "time capsule" to be opened and revealed only in the future - when only then would we be able to perceive this " saintly" dimension in it. In Phill, this sense was immediate.

I cooked many times in that magnificent black space in Chinatown. So many times we'd walk into the early hours of the morning listening to music and discussing philosophy, politics or photography. He was always up to date on the latest technological inventions in sound and photography.

I brought him the cameras or lenses I'd bought and he showed me the ones he'd bought.

Phill spoke "in jumps", like little compartments of thought. Never long sentences.

He stared at the person, eye to eye, opening his eyes slightly, remaining still for a few moments, serious, then suddenly smiling, but with his lips almost closed, he said a short sentence, in piano, at a low intensity, continuing to stare into the other person's eyes, his eyes widened a little, and immediately he was quiet again, as if he were serious, he smiled, but almost without showing his teeth, a few moments passed, then he spoke another sentence, quickly, almost blurting out the phonemes, and smiled again, quiet.

He was a quiet figure.

In the early 2000s, I realized that Phill had suddenly suffered a great physical degeneration. It was at this time that he suffered a violent attack in Madrid. He went out at night in a neighborhood that wasn't very recommendable and was beaten up violently. People thought he was an American capitalist. He ended up in hospital! He began to have difficulty walking. Now he walked with canes, a wheelchair... At that time he started drinking more red wine. And this love of wine is something that, like music, photography and cinema, united us.

I believe - as he did - that wine had saved his life. Always red, almost always Italian.

It's important to stress that over the thirty years of our friendship I never saw him altered by the effect of wine.

Then Katherine Liberovskaya appeared, who was also a great intermedia artist.

Katherine was an immense support to Phill in every way. She quickly became the light of his life.

After the violence on the streets of Madrid, the world quickly plunged into dark times.

There were the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York. A moment of immense sadness and astonishment for everyone. Phill was there. I happened to be in Lisbon and only went back to New York when the airspace opened up again.

Soon the war in Iraq began, killing more than a million civilians, destroying a priceless archaeological heritage, with the justification - proven false - that there was a production of weapons of mass destruction.

Everything stopped.

The world stopped.

At that time, the Experimental Intermedia Foundation stopped holding concerts.

I found Phill visibly depressed and scared. He was convinced that everyone was being bugged and that the world was plunging into a ruthless totalitarian dictatorship.

I became very worried about him. I started visiting him more often.

Phill didn't personally know William Anastasi or Ornette Coleman, my dear friends. So I decided to make dinner at Phill's place - of course with his agreement.

It was a way of relieving some of the tension.

Phill Niblock, William Anastasi, Dove Bradshaw, Ornette Coleman, Denardo Coleman and I were at the dinner, in the center of the black space immersed in wires and equipment. It was a very moving moment. I believe that saxophonist and dear friend Paul Goldberg was also there.

In 2004, I invited Phill to join us at Punta Campanella, on the Amalfi Coast, near Naples in Italy. It was the beginning of Holotopia, an informal academy of art, science, literature, philosophy and music. I invited him to project a movie and perform a concert.

I had also invited my dear partner of so many concerts, the Japanese composer Takehisa Kosugi. But unfortunately Kosugi fell ill and we decided to make a tribute to him.

Phill greatly admired Kosugi's work, who had been one of the first members of the Fluxus group with Maciunas.

We were then joined by many others, musicians, artists, thinkers... Phill was walking with great difficulty. At that moment, I discovered that he had never been on a boat in his life!

I spoke to Alberto del Genio, my dear friend, physician, scientist, collector, owner of Punta Campanella, the true responsible for the Holotopia project. We got a boat! There were five of us: Phill, Alberto, me, the owner of the boat and a cook, who worked all the time cooking and opening bottles of wine. The cook was excellent and the wines were very good.

We left Sorrento, headed for Amalfi, passed the Ligalli Islands, or Sirenuse, Positano, Capri... When, late in the afternoon, we got off and went to a restaurant, Phill was delighted, thrilled with the experience.

Katherine arrived the next day - she had performed in another country.

Over the years, since the 1990s, I've given many concerts with my music at the Experimental Intermedia Foundation in New York, curated by Phill. One of them was the electronic opera Metamorphosis, in 2016, which I created in partnership with the Swiss philosopher René Berger, a dear friend.

I've dedicated several other concerts to Phill.

Like John Cage, Phill Niblock loved being surrounded by young people, and like Anastasi, Phill was equally anti-clerical but deeply religious through music and the creation of images. So when he died a few days after Anastasi, I also decided to compose a requiem for him.

The word requiem comes from the fusion of the Latin particle re which meant "twice", "again", "once more", and the Indo-European expression *kweie which indicated the idea of "being still", "resting".

The music was composed for seven transverse flutes using the first seven notes of the Introduction of Mozart's Requiem. The composition also uses the blowing and aspiration tempos of the flutists, thus incorporating their biological tempos. These sounds are organized in long loops, or "circles" where the temporal differences between the voices prepare unexpected combinations.

While the requiem for Anastasi is characterized as an electroacoustic work - because he was fundamentally an artist connected to the acoustic world through the piano, drawing and painting - the requiem for Niblock is purely acoustic, because he was an artist deeply connected to the electroacoustic, electronic and digital worlds.

Phill was a deeply urban person. That's why the film of the requiem was made with nocturnal images of big cities.

The piece is called Seven Sidereal Sounds, because there are seven flutes that here become sidereal, in other words: beyond the Earth, in our minds and imaginations - with reference to his famous composition Four Full Flutes, from 1990.

That is to say, unlike the piece composed by Phill in 1990, where the flutes play a continuum, in Seven Sidereal Sounds, it is the sounds of the flutes, the tempo of each musician's breath and the tempo of their breathing that make the music.

Seven Sidereal Sounds brings us to the idea of the "sidereal" - which comes from the Indo-European *sweid, which indicated the idea of "shining", like the stars, each one different from the other, sounds like people. Stars that immediately bring to mind a 1920 poem by Vladimir Mayakovsky, particularly in a famous fragment:

*...I suddenly
ignite my flame
and the day shines again.
Shine forever,
shine like a lighthouse,
shine with eternal brilliance,
people are made to shine...*

Emanuel Dimas de Melo Pimenta

Locarno, 2024