

emanuel dimas de melo pimenta

33.33

requiem for william anastasi

to Dove Bradshaw

a homage to Alberto del Genio

all thanks to Juan Puentes

I was walking back and forth with John Cage at his home in Manhattan in 1987. We were preparing lunch for a couple of friends and for Merce Cunningham, who was in the studio rehearsing at the moment.

Luciana was on one side of the apartment. I think Laura Kuhn was there too.

I helped John in the kitchen - although most of the time he didn't want much help... He asked me to go to the round lunch table in the living room, where we would be having lunch, to make sure everything was set up.

We walked and talked as usual. We walked from the open kitchen to the living room, which had no walls. Suddenly, I bumped into something and very nearly fell over! John held me firmly by the arm. He was seventy-four years old, I was twenty-nine. I was walking quickly alongside him, and if I had fallen, it would have been a disaster!

There was something on the floor, something I hadn't noticed. It was a piece of metal. I asked what it was. Smiling, John looked at me and said: "You've just tripped over Bill Anastasi".

I had tripped over a sculpture of Anastasi, which was a metal plate on the floor. "He and Dove Bradshaw are coming for lunch today, it will be great for you two to meet. Dove and Bill are great artists and very dear friends. You and Bill will become friends forever, I'm sure," John continued, always with a broad, sweet smile.

William Anastasi was fifty-four years old, precisely twenty years younger than John, but he didn't look thirty. Dove was thirty-five, but looked like a girl barely twenty years old.

Bill and John loved playing chess. For years they played every day. I played chess with my father and a few friends - but never with them. After John died I played on that board with my daughter, Laura, but I never got to play with John.

On that first meeting, Bill and I talked at length. He spoke very little, was intelligent, sagacious and initially seemed to me to be a very distrusting person. But from that moment on, we were friends forever - just as John had predicted.

I lost count of how many times we had dinner at Dove and Bill's home over the next thirty-five years. Usually, the dinners went on well into the night and the conversations almost always revolved around philosophy, art, literature, science...

Dove was usually the one who prepared dinner. She was often inspired by John Cage's cooking. Sometimes I cooked. Only I drank wine. That's why I always brought wine to dinners. Sometimes, especially recently, Dove also drank wine, but very little.

I always enjoyed cooking for them.

I also have an Italian soul and once I made spaghetti with tomatoes, as they do in Naples and southern Italy, al dente. Bill was thrilled to say that it was the first time since he was a child that he had eaten pasta like his grandmother used to make. And he couldn't stop eating!

At each meeting, we talked at length about issues such as the nature of intention, free will, the limits of the Universe, consciousness, the nature of time, dissipative systems and so on.

Often, when I arrived or when I left, he went to the piano in the living room and played Chopin, which he loved. The neighbors were delighted - I once talked to one of them about it. Often, Bill and Dove intentionally left open the front door of the apartment.

Bill was a particularly brilliant visual artist.

In 1961, he made Relief - a block of concrete on which, while still fresh, he urinated on. In the early 2000s, he reproduced this work in Bolognaro, Italy, and I made a photographic work during its execution.

In one of his works, from 1966, Blind, the rooms were painted like war camouflage and in the middle, almost imperceptibly, he was completely naked.

One of his works from 2008 for an exhibition in Germany had just one word: "Jew". This work began in 1987, the year we met, with a painting featuring his image and the word "Jew". In 2009, there was another painting, intentionally called "untitled" but also "Ich bin Jude".

Regardless of the symbolic issues, Anastasi operated the process. And that was what had the deepest impact, sometimes revealing meanings eluded in the title, and not the other way around.

We talked a lot about all this, and often about the fact that what we call "Western civilization" is an emergence from the Judeo-Christian universe.

Bill was truly horrified, as we all were, by the horrors of the Holocaust.

Like me, he regularly read the Talmud and was enchanted by it.

He was, in fact, a Jew - he loved knowledge. Justice and respect were essential things in his soul.

There was a strong bond between us. As if we had always shared the same intellectual universe, ever since we were born, despite the great age difference. He interpreted this identity as a kind of projection of the universe of John Cage, whom he revered.

But there was a big difference between us - which we often talked about freely. Bill sincerely thought that human beings were essentially selfish, that everyone lived exclusively for their own personal interests, and that altruism was an illusion, something that didn't really exist, that wasn't human.

For him, what was human was characterized by war, exploitation and humiliating submission to others.

Back in the 1970s, Bill had read the book *The Selfish Gene* by English biologist Richard Dawkins. I also read it a few years later. This book became a fundamental reference for Bill. Thus, since we are all genetically selfish, we should always be suspicious of others. I never agreed with Dawkins and always thought the exact opposite, as I say in some of my work.

Bill sincerely believed that Hobbes was right, that a human being was the wolf of another human being. *Homo homini lupus*, he always repeated. On the other hand, throughout my life, I have always believed that there can be no creativity without generosity, and human beings are essentially creative.

We look around us and see totalitarian, uneducated spirits everywhere. But over thousands of years, with interruptions here and there, we have remained free. We can imagine and fear, not without reason, the metamorphosis of the world into a totalitarian globalist environment - as dictatorships and tyrannical thoughts promise in the 21st century. This may happen, but never before has the human being been bowed down to a framework of general slavery on a global scale.

If there is one thing that has always overcome our differences, it is liberty.

In 2013, when Bill Anastasi turned eighty years old, I presented a feature film I had made about him, with footage shot since the early 2000s. When he watched the movie for the first time, at home, on the video player in the small room next to the kitchen, Bill was thrilled. But it was just as

emotional for me and for Dove.

It was a celebration of love.

In addition to this feature film, which was about an hour and a half long, I made a few other films about artists or people connected to art, such as Baroness Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, who had worked with Joseph Beuys, or the Portuguese artist-architect João de Almeida, who had been a dear friend of Jean Arp's in Switzerland.

But, as if it was about something unexpected, old age arrived implacably and Bill left for another dimension. Thirty-six years had passed since John had introduced us.

His death was not sudden. First he went blind, then he lost his memory and his ability of spatial navigation. During this process of slow death, sometimes we all went out for dinner, when I was still in New York. We were very worried about Dove. Then, one day, I heard from a friend that he had died.

At that point, I decided to compose a requiem for him. Despite having been a deeply anti-clerical spirit, never having been a religious person in institutional terms, William Anastasi was deeply religious in life. I don't think he ever understood the meaning of a Mass and was radically averse to any mystical manifestation. But in front of James Joyce, Pound, Homer, Goethe, Dante, Lewis Carroll or John Cage, his dear friend, he became a marveled child, someone deeply connected to Nature.

When I offered him recordings by George Bolet, Samson François or Sviatoslav Richter, among others, it was as if he had received a priceless treasure. His little eyes would sparkle and he hugged me with emotion.

I think that in 1999 or 2000, Bill introduced me to his piano tuner - who became my tuner over the years. He was a difficult man, but very competent. He had been the tuner for the great pianist Glenn Gould! And here angry thoughts emerged, because Gould despised Cage; but when he presented his composition, it sounded exactly like what the much older John Cage had done - Bill, who had a strong spirit of justice, accused him.

How many times Bill and I delighted in reading together fragments of texts by great minds!

Those moments - marveling at the human mind, at dreams, through poetry, literature and philosophy - were the true dimension of the Earth for William Anastasi: thought as the concreteness of life and, in it, movement, which is always the foundation of metamorphosis, transformation and discovery.

This was William Anastasi's main sign: transformation, the mutation of

signs, time!

All his works operate in that dimension.

How can we not immediately think of Octavio Paz's *Conjunciones y Disjunciones*, a 1969 work? In it, the Mexican writer tells us: "The spirit of all men, at all times, is the theater of the dialogue between the body sign and the no-body sign. This dialog is men".

This tension between body and non-body, as I talk about in my book *SOMA*, is time, so strong for Augustine - and is the foundation of William Anastasi's work.

There is no time without metamorphosis, transformation and difference.

So, delving into those mysterious labyrinths of life in permanent transformation, it became clear that my own existence - twenty-four years younger - was also just that: time! The same time that had emerged technologically through my father's genetic pores.

Maybe that's why we became such deep friends so quickly.

Bill died on Monday, November 27, 2023. I found out a few days later. The temperature in New York City, which he loved so much, was mild that day - between 6 and 11 degrees Celsius. It had rained heavily in the early hours of the morning. At eight o'clock the clouds disappeared and the day became sunny, albeit cool. The humidity was low. He was blind and had serious cognitive problems.

But he was calm and quiet.

He was born ninety years earlier in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. His first solo exhibition was in 1964, at the famous Betty Parsons gallery, at the age of thirty-one.

In the very first years we met, Bill would proudly say - a playful, sarcastic pride - that he was the grandson of a dangerous Sicilian mafioso. He told it laughing, as if it were something lost in a mythical world, in another dimension.

Books have always been a magnificent and imperative light for both of us. So many times we talked about editions of authors, sometimes unknown, sometimes great classics.

Then, one day, I happened to come across a book about Bill Anastasi's grandfather. A terrible murderer, a violent gangster. I bought two copies, one for my library and one for his. When he picked up the book, he got livid. What had always been a mythical dream lost in time, a sarcastic and ironic joke, suddenly took on the form of life, history, reality. And he was stunned. Paralyzed.

Bill was an absolutely peaceful person - although if he had to fight, he'd be the first, he said. He recounted his only experience of fighting in his entire life: when he was young, he was in a car with a girlfriend and suddenly he was intercepted by another vehicle, with four very aggressive boys who threatened him. He got out of the car, got into a fighting stance and called out, one by one: "Come on! Who will be first?". And the guys left immediately. Bill would say at one of our delicious dinners: "I've never had a fight in my life! I don't even know why I did it. But I had to. It was the fastest fight ever, I won without touching them! And that experience taught me a lot about the nature of human beings".

Later, he would say: "Emanuel, we live in a very dangerous world. Just bear in mind that since Homer we've still been the same people - reread the Iliad, the Odyssey, it's all there! We're still precisely the same people! There is, however, an important difference: we now have machine guns, automatic weapons, missiles, atomic weapons... but we're still the same! We are just as restrained as before and, on the other hand, we have greatly increased our capacity for destruction!"

Some time later, in 2001, during filming for the feature film about him, I asked him to repeat this thought.

And he did. And I filmed it.

This deeply peaceful creative being would have been the descendant of one of New York's most brutal and feared gangsters!

When Bill opened the pages of the book about Albert Anastasia - whose real name was Umberto Anastasio - he sat down and was speechless. He didn't smile or say thank you. It was a weight off his shoulders. A weight that only he knew and that he believed had already sweetly evaporated into the shadows of a mythical universe, into the shadows of a memory without people, all of whom were already dead.

Now, the past - which didn't belong to him, but which was also him - was definitely there, in front of him, in that book.

I don't know what Bill did with the book.

In May 2024, investigative journalist Andrew Milne published an interesting article about the gangster: "The co-founder of Murder, Inc. and the head of the infamous Mangano family, Albert Anastasia was one of New York City's most feared gangsters - until his story came to an end in shocking fashion. The Greek word anastasis literally means "rising up." It's a fitting root for the name of Albert Anastasia, who went from a poor, fatherless boy in Italy to New York's most feared gangster - a man so bloodthirsty that he was called the 'Lord High Executioner'... (...) and his dramatic death in a New York barber shop".

Bill had often told me about this death in the barber shop, a brutal murder - like the ones we see in Scorsese's films, for example.

Vito Genovese, Carlo Gambino and Joe Gallo were paraded as the masterminds of the crime, but the killers were never caught.

Surely Anastasia had gone too far.

How can we put this descent and William Anastasi's declared devotion to John Cage - whose life was entirely dedicated to love - side by side? Or to his romantic dreams of a life with Dove Bradshaw, to the sound of Chopin's preludes, mazurkas or nocturnes!

William Anastasi's world was the world of transformation, of metamorphosis.

When I heard, on November 28, 2023, from Marcia Grostein - a dear friend, our neighbor in New York and a brilliant artist - about the death of my dear friend, I immediately wrote to Dove. On December 7th, she wrote me a loving message. "Every day there is so much to do and there are so many, many heartfelt remembrances from around the world..." - she wrote.

It was John's first sign - change!

That had been Bill Anastasi's life, which was repeating itself now, as if human existence could somehow, through memory, never submit to the interruption of metamorphosis.

I took Bill and Dove to Portugal and Italy. They became friends with Alberto de Genio, went to the Punta Campanella...

It's not often that there's a couple of great artists. Mario and Marisa Merz were dear friends of mine, and they were an exception. Bill and Dove's works are brilliant.

When I heard about my dear friend's death, I immediately started thinking about how I could compose a requiem for him.

A requiem is a mass dedicated to the dead. For many, the expression "mass" would indicate the sense of "letting go" of material things, of perceiving an order that surpasses them. However, the etymological origin for the word Mass, which I think is correct, is the Hebrew expression matzâh, which indicates the idea of a flat, unleavened bread, like a kind of pita, and which was translated into Latin as "messa". This word gave rise to the term "mission", the detachment from purely material matters in favor of a greater goal.

This may have been the primary meaning of matzah when, to this day, the Seder (Passover) celebrates the fabulous departure from Egypt, the Exodus, Israel and human existence. A mission!

This is the origin of folares, especially the savory ones, in the north of Portugal.

Bill was very sensitive to the question of mission.

It's something that has always remained mysterious to him.

Once, at the end of one of our dinners, he asked me why did I compose, why did I make my music, my books, my architectural designs, working tirelessly and undisturbed for nights and nights?... so many times without rest, without weekends or vacations. After all, what was the point of it all? Why was I doing it? I answered by saying that for me it was something mysterious, difficult to explain, like a kind of mission - but in a sense that transcended my own existence. He then told me that John Cage had exactly the same idea and that he had once confided in him that his reason for living, the meaning of his life, was a mission. John couldn't clearly explain what that meant either. For Bill, this idea always remained something mysterious, enigmatic.

It intrigued him deeply.

Mass - mission.

Bill Anastasi was a deeply anti-clerical person and, at the same time, deeply religious. He was sensitively opposed to all institutions - something that deeply connected him to John Cage and to me. The three of us have always been strongly aware of the idea of anarchy, in the sense of permanent criticism of manifestations of the concentration of power. We have never belonged to any party, any ideology or any particular religion. We have always believed in the importance of liberty - something that would become rare in a world made up of groups in permanent conflict.

Now that he was in another dimension, I had a challenge: to compose a requiem - a mass - for William Anastasi.

On New Year's Eve, from 2023 to 2024, therefore in the early hours of January 1st, I was staying with relatives near Saint Malo, in Brittany, northern France. A storm was blowing in from the North Sea. The winds started howling after midnight. At around three o'clock, I heard the shock waves of the water droplets and the screams of the wind against the glass of the bedroom window where we were sleeping. Those sounds were the expression par excellence of metamorphosis, of Nature's transformations!

I got up, went to the window, attached sensors to it and recorded the phenomenon.

That would become the basis of the requiem!

And so it was.

Twenty-two years earlier, in 2001, after one of our delicious dinners, I shot a photo session at Bill and Dove's home. It was after midnight. The photo shoot was done with the movement of lights and of three bodies - Dove, Luciana and Bill. This was the material used to create the film about the requiem.

Both the music and the film deal with movement and change.

The title of the requiem, music and film, is 33.33 - because at the end of the recording, surprisingly, that was its duration, without me having done it intentionally: 33 minutes and 33 seconds. And it's an obvious reference to John Cage's piece 4'33", which he loved so much - and to chance, to the laws of the world's metamorphosis!

A mysterious reference, hidden by life and by the hidden order of Nature, which so disquieted William Anastasi.

Emanuel Dimas de Melo Pimenta

Locarno 2024 Dove Bradshaw