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PHILL NIBLOCK interview
by Marcelo Aguirre & Daniel Varela

Could you tell me about your early years... I read about your first involvements with images rather than sounds...

I began to work with photography in 1960, which I found is very easy to do for me. So, I worked for several years photographing different things and this brought me closer and closer to the art scene. In 1962 - 64, I photographed jazz musicians frequently, particularly the Ellington band. Around 1964 I began to see a lot of theater and things music related... new music, contemporary classical, so, I began to follow the 60's music scene. Then, I became working as a film maker with choreographers of the Judson Dance Theater. I had a one man show with photographs in 1966 in a New York gallery that was the only photography gallery in New York at that moment. But after that, I stopped to printing and I became more involved in films and intermedia work.

I began to work more as an intermedia artist with dancers, and with images. My first intermedia performance piece was at Judson Church / Judson Dance Theater in 1968, with 16mm film and 35mm slide images, sections of live dance, and the first music of mine.

What about a possible influence of minimal art in your work ? The sixties in New York has plenty of visual arts and musical experiences ...

I saw a lot of work done in that period, people like Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Sol LeWitt or Carl André. I was going to many galleries and that was very much an influence. In those times there was a whole minimalist scene and that approach seemed to be very natural for me...

In this time was the creation of Experimental Intermedia Foundation (EI)? What are the aims behind the project in general?

Experimental Intermedia was founded by Elaine Summers, who is a film maker, choreographer and event maker- an intermedia artist. She saw that it would be necessary to have a non-profit organization / status to apply for funding from the government and private foundations. So, EI is one of the very first artist run organizations to become a non-profit. 1968 was very early, the New York Council for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts were just beginning to have more funds available. So it's very interesting that she saw that idea. I was one of the original artist members of EI and I became one of the artists producing concerts and events of the work of other artists, and, from the seventies, I used the name of the Foundation to apply for funding, and I promoted its name. Elaine Summers was also curating and producing the work of others in her own loft space. I was producing concerts in my own loft space, at 224 Centre Street. There were concerts / events in my space twenty or thirty times a year from 1973.

And you're curating these events until now?

That's interesting to me, the whole idea of artists producing other artists. That is the making of the Foundation. I think that artists are the best curators of other artists. This is because artists are close to the creation of work and know other artists who are working in a similar way. They see and hear work with better discernment. It's about people helping other people in developing themselves. Since 1973 I have been producing concerts in New York. I meet many people when I'm on the road and in the early years, I spent much more time in NY and many people came to NY from around the world. Now many people send e-mails, people that I've met or artists associated with someone else I know. It's a big network.

And respecting to your music, have you ever been interested in drone music ?... and about this, did you feel some affinity with experiences by LaMonte Young, Tony Conrad or musicians like that ?

To the first part of the question, well, I make drone music so I must say yes. And I only make drone music, although that would not be the way I would describe it. Much drone music came from the sixties. LaMonte Young and the group that included Tony Conrad and John Cale, made a big influence on me. Morton Feldman too. For a short period of time, about 1961, he made pieces with long tones and without rhythm and I thought that that was very amazing to hear. And in some sense it gave me a permission, was a model for me to make music without being a trained composer. I knew the kind of sound world I was interested in and I'm aware of this kind of structure that I've worked with. In music there's a typical structure with melody and rhythms. But another way to make music is to work with long tones. And I was / am interested in using a structure using many tones sounded at the same time which produce other tones as a result from that superimposition, and making very thick masses of sound. In some of my earlier pieces, I worked with precise intervals (tuning the musicians precisely) and using perhaps eight layers of tones (eight tracks). Now I'm working with many more tracks / layers, and producing different tunings using the computer. This results in very massed sounds and in more complex tones which I like very much. But in all pieces are these same principles.

Taking into account this, how do you organize in a formal sense your pieces?... I mean particularly the kind of precise charts of frequencies included in the liner notes of CD with "Five More String Quartets"

For the most part, for my pieces I make a score. They are essentially a score for the multitrack mix, not for the musician. In very recent years I work pretty much without scores, but directly in the lines of the computer software.

The scores are very precise. In general, I make the pieces very intellectually by deciding all these juxtapositions, then I make the multitrack tape without listening to it – listening only when its finished – so I hear the completed work. And only occasionally have I revised a piece.

Many times, your music includes multitracking of the same instrument, could you comment about this choice ?

Well, its a natural way of achieving layers of tones which produces a sound field that I find interesting. In using just one instrument, I play with that color of sound and with the interaction of tones. But I also have pieces using many instruments, one is "Early Winter", which is on the CD with the string quartets. In the works with many instruments, the different timbres of the instruments affect the structure of the overall sound. I used about fifty-five tracks in that piece and it results in a sound mass of forty five minutes length. It sounds like it's all sounding pretty much the same throughout, but if you go through – let say listening for a short time each five minutes - it sounds incredible different each time. Moment to moment it seems like the same sound, but it's actually constantly changing.

And considering that your music doesn't have melodies or rhythm patterns and it displays a kind of "timelessness" character, have you some particular interest from psychological, physical or philosophical points of view ?

I'm interested more in making work in which people could have individual perceptions about what is happening and in which aspect they react to. I'm interested to make music that is really open to a lot of different perceptions and that people lose the time sense, so one could easily think a piece is two minutes long, twenty minutes long, thirty, forty, and lose the sense of how much time has passed. And so that's why in most concerts I play a number of different pieces.

Each piece maybe twenty minutes long, but the shape of the whole concert is of long sound masses which change moment to moment and is centered in the nature of the sound itself.

So, you take the space as a musical parameter?

Yes, I'm very interested in large reverberant spaces in which the sound is shaped by the shape and size of the space. And the music changes with one's movements in the space.

Your music is very connected with the New York scene from Sixties to Eighties as is well documented in Tom Johnson's book "The Voice of New Music" which came from his columns for the Village Voice... Its possible to think there is a different approach between European sound artists and, let us say, "NY style" ?

What's the "New York style" ? (laughs) ... Well, its difficult to talk about a NY style due to fact that the city is a most international city, so many artists in NY came from Europe or from South America or Asia and all its incredibly mixed in New York. Berlin is another similar place, probably is the most international city in Europe. So, the reason for the New York sound is related to the fact that many artists working there are coming from out of New York.

Taking into account your work in Europe, what's about Experimental Intermedia in Gent, Belgium, and about collaborative work with other artists run organizations , like the Logos Foundation?

I was traveling and performing early in the 1970's in Europe, and as part of that travel I met the producers at Logos in Gent and I made friends. Because I'm in Europe much of the time I thought it would be good to have a base, a place to go and stay for a bit, to work, etc. I found a cheap house in Gent on the harbor of a canal. A great location. I decided to make a window gallery situation, where I could invite other artists to show work, and to come and stay. So the public does not come into the gallery, but sees the work through the windows of the gallery room. It's automatic, so if things have to be turned on, it's done by timers. No one stays in the house all of the time.

Other artists in Belgium liked the idea and proposed making an organization to administer the process. That organization was named Experimental Intermedia, like the NY one, and is generally headed by Maria Blondeel, herself an intermedia artist. EI Gent began to have collaborative projects with other organizations in Holland, Germany, Japan and Belgium, which has worked extremely well. The website for EI Gent is very good, experimentalintermedia.be

Your career seems so much linked to collaborations... many people from different places, including younger generations coming from rock or noise music. It comes to my mind, people like Oren Ambarchi, Susan Stenger, Jim O'Rourke, the project Guitar Army... What brings these artists to your music?

All these people... I don't know what the answer is really, but sometimes some people come because somehow it fits in the general scene or in what they are doing and interested in, and there are people that play with me. So this promotes interaction with many people in the scene and they form a network in various places. I was in Australia and New Zealand and played with several guitarists. There was a crossing of people in Sydney and in London, for instance. Oren Ambarchi, who played with me in Sydney and then recommended me to the CD label "Touch" in London, who had just published his CD. I had met Mike Harding of Touch at a festival in Vienna the year before, but had forgotten the label name. The contact worked out to be a CD on Touch.

In Tokyo I met a man at a concert of my work who is from Mexico City and he invited to me to a concert there. I have since invited him for a concert of his music in NY.

I have met a very mixed crowd of people on the road. I am always recommending contacts to them, and they also make contacts for me.

By moments, your work displays some tensions between abstract elements - music - and figurative, like the people at work in your films. Have you some particular reflection about it?

I'm interested in movement in the film frame, but the figurative aspects are less important than the fact that there is movement. I see the minimal esthetic as being the elimination of extraneous elements of structure. So in film, I am interested in eliminating film time (editing time) and montage, sequencing, narrative line, development, plot, all of the things usually relevant to film, and concentrating on stasis, reiteration on a single idea. So, I think that is abstract although at first sight the films appear to be figurative and documentary. But they have nothing of documentary film form.

The concert was for me a very special experience to see these people totally concentrated in what they're doing (in the film) and that's for me suggesting that work in certain cultures is a kind of ritual. I feel a mix sensation of the sound drones with the people working, concentrated. I see it as a kind of ceremony or ritual of the daily living that is far away from the modern workers in western cities and it was very appealing to me because I do my work in a very concentrated manner. I wonder if you have tried to document something or if you have some special message, intention or interest about work in ancient or in eastern cultures...

I was working with Elaine Summers in the mid-sixties and with other dancers and choreographers, I had shot films for them, mostly as material for performance. Then I began to make my own intermedia performance pieces. Eventually I found it more difficult to look at the intellectuality, the artificialness, of dance. And it was more difficult to set up performances with so many people and so much equipment. So I began to film the movement of people working, doing their everyday work, the most natural of movements. And I used that with my music, to make a simpler intermedia performance.

As it happened, I began to be more known as a composer, because the music world expects the kind of abstractness of my music, and the film world didn't seem to like that I eschewed the form and structure that they expected. Not even the experimental film world.

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Here is a paragraph from the notes to my first LP record release (circa 1985), which may clarify, or obscure, the way in which I work with the form:

From the original notes to "Nothing to Look at"

The pieces are instrumental works, made on tape, performed as tape only, or tape with live musicians. The scores are the composer's mix scores. In performance the live musician plays with the tape, moving around the space, either matching tones on the tape or playing adjacent tones, creating shifting pools of beats and changed harmonics as he moves through the space and a duration of time.

The pieces are made in stages. First, the tones are selected. The musician is tuned during the recording session by calibrated sine waves watches oscilloscope patterns to tune. Numerous examples of each tone are recorded. These tapes are edited (breathing spaces removed) into blocks of repetitions of each tone and then timed. The timed blocks are assigned to tracks and time

slots of the eight tracks. In the score, each horizontal line (8 of them for 8 track multitrack pieces) represents a separate track and a duration of time. Figures above the brackets represent minutes and seconds of elapsed time: within the brackets, above the line is the duration of the event; below the line, the frequency of the tone (the pitch in Hertz). After dubbing up the eight tracks, the top four lines (tracks) of the score are mixed down to one channel, and the bottom four to the second channel of the final stereo mix. The music is architectural - the intent is to fill the space. It is non-frontal music, non proscenium, anti-stage, not about the ensemble sitting in front of the audience, not about a single sound source. At least four speaker systems are desirable, arrayed around the periphery of the room, saturating the total space, engaging the air. The structure of the music comes from the reproduction of the tape (or CD). The live musician is not a soloist with tape background, but the converse.

Now I am working more directly in the computer in Protools, where I make the pitch differences - the microtonal intervals, directly in the computer, and also create the multitrack scores directly in the lines of the software.