



gil sansón *untitled (for dion workman)*

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interview of gil sanson by richard garet / august 2017

rg. gil sansón please tell us a little bit about your background. who you are, where are you from, and where do you currently live?

gs. i'm a person working in culture. that's a bit vague, but actually accurate, as i've had and still keep many guises, which in many ways enable me to work with full independency in a number of disciplines that are related through this prism of the person with a deep interest in culture, the arts, philosophy, science, etc. for instance, in some circles i'm known as a graphic novelist and some are still

waiting for that part of me to come out of retirement. i'm also a reluctant essay writer, appearing every once in a while when i feel an issue is not being fully examined, for example. in a way you could say i'm a very committed dilettante, jumping out of the boat as soon as i feel i got the gist of a method or practice, which is very much contrary to common practice if you want a career in the arts. i'm part of the x generation, now in my late forties. as i said, came out to music and sound making by way of accommodating myself to reality. i started doing music over a long time, in which i played freely, primarily on electric guitar, on free improvised sessions here in caracas. i moved to nyc in 1999, bought a tascam 4 track and started recording my music and that's it. while i was living in nyc i was also deeply invested in painting and for the time i lived there i combined both with the same amount of passion and dedication. i gravitated towards music improvisation over a long period, mostly due to my lack of patience with the art world and the immediacy of improvisation. if i'm correct, my first actual gig in nyc was with you, richard, at abc no rio, in lower east side, back in 2001, i think, you on no input mixing board and me on guitar. later on you introduced me to people like dion workman and gill arno, people who are not just interested in promoting their work but are also deeply invested in community projects, ways of opening our milieu to realities beyond aesthetics. i returned to caracas on 2005, and had to go through the readjustment period and subsequently my production changed. i worked for a number of years primarily as a laptop musician, but was also working on organizing concerts and programs in which i introduced works like young's poem for chairs, benches, etc. to local audiences. my laptop died in 2008 and has not being replaced ever since, which made me refocus on acoustic sounds and scored compositions for instruments without pitch. at the same time i started to get serious about sound editing on my desktop computer, and this is something that goes on today, on one hand scores to be brought to life on live performance, on the other hand, fully complete pieces worked out on the computer, often with similar materials but not always, and always taking into account the conditionings of each way of working as advantages.

rg. how and when did you start working with sound?

gs. i was both playing guitar in a more or less conventional, avant rock style but was also interested in classical and flamenco guitar and so i discovered other guitarists who were trying to push the envelope, people like loren connors, john fahey, derek bailey, keiji haino and so on, but the actual singularity event that placed me on the route i'm still trodding today was the happy discovery of both morton feldman's music and mark rothko's painting. this happened during the mid nineties and had a profound effect on me, dragging me away from figurative painting and away from functional harmony in music. without me really noticing, i was spending hours and hours improvising on top of for bunita marcus by feldman, and this was the mindset i brought with me to nyc, where i could

actually be in the same room with some of those paintings that had left so strong an impression, and these in return filled my head with music and sound.

rg. how would you describe your practice?

gs. i would describe my practice as a mixture of deep, instinctual empiricism and deep ethical and philosophical inquiry. there's no real method, it's in many ways a matter of coming to terms with reality as it is, ways to adapt to contingencies and ways to turn these into advantages. to be aware of that power to slip through every crevasse and juncture, to be and not be, the whole destruction of the dialectical principle that it's the essence of art, the paradox of it and it's ultimate futility, in other words, to always respect the mystery of art, even to the point of having taboos. all this is very important, to be able to start with the widest angle and perspective, to have a general picture as broad as possible, and then get in there with no real knowledge of what's going to happen. i want to be surprised just as much as any listener! it depends: sometimes an idea presents itself in such a way that i simply cannot avoid it and have to do something with it. some of these ideas have gotten my hands full for years, and some are still not fully explored, and some are fleeting and get lost if i don't have pen and paper in hand. sometimes, this idea can be a sound, other times a concept, other times an interesting sound combination, a three note melody, a sequence of chords, a name, a time frame, a format, the list goes on and on. the only constant is discipline. working 24/7, even if there's nothing to show for it, as with the time spent conceptualizing and working on contexts for the work, every hour spent doing active listening, all of this is work, regardless of remuneration. if you examine what's visible of my work, you'll see an emphasis on music and sound art, meaning that other types of work, like conceptual art, essay and graphic work often go unnoticed. i don't mind, like i said is a matter of emphasis, and the public work tends to eclipse the other by way of exposure. but the essential remains: my work doesn't comfortably fit any category or market niche, and this is deliberate. a way to avoid classification and definition, opting instead for a continued sense of becoming.

rg. what would you say your work is and does?

gs. i would say that my work is a way of showing my curiosity for the world and the medium in which an elegant compromise between reality as it is and reality as i would like it to be can be enacted. if the work is visual, then it's primarily the execution of the concept in the most direct way possible, devoid of rhetoric or narrative purposes, and yet never renouncing to formal beauty or the sensual aspect of art. if sound is the medium, a similar concern takes place, with the aspect of time more present, perhaps, than on other branches of my work. in any case, as i work on many mediums, including performance art, i tend to see what all these disciplines have in common and custom make my practice accordingly.

in any case, if my work is viewed through the prism of aesthetics, then a number of characteristics are evident: limited (often very so) materials, emphasis on the present moment, lack of narrative and illustrative sound, a tendency to present sounds so that they can be appreciated for what they are and the enjoyment of silence and quiet dynamics (with many exceptions, of course), and more generally, it tries to convey a sense of quiet wonder about the world, free of judgment, utopian, if you want.

rg. what's your material?

gs. material can be anything, from an idea to a timbre or collection of timbres. very often the performance space is what gives the good ideas. the material is chosen according to how strong it seems to be calling for an expression at the moment. some ideas keep floating around the mind, tugging my sleeve for attention, while others are happy to wait for the right conditions to arise and be finally worked out. with this frame of mind, inspiration is never a problem, or rather, an aesthetic problem whose solving is pretty much half the fun as the executing process of an idea.

rg. what kind of media do you use to accomplish your work?

gs. often the choosing of media is contingent to the venue or space in which the action is taking place, obviously budget concerns are a part of this process, which i try to make as creative as possible so as not to be seen as compromise but as an exploit. again, it depends on the origin of the idea. sometimes the idea requires a visual execution, others a mix of image and sound, other times sound alone, and sometimes even words and sentences alone, i try not to be too caught up in my personal choices and aesthetic biases when making decisions at this point, probably because i know that at a latter stage these concerns will be much more important, when doing the finishing touches to a piece (this can actually take far longer than the actual conception and basic structure), for example. considering how wide ranging my work can be, these biases can be quite surprising and even contradictory at times, something i not only do not mind but actually enjoy. once i feel that a conceptual framework is well established, i always feel free to add twists and curveballs if i feel like it. to put an extreme example, the piano piece untitled (for antoine beuger) inhabits the same space as my piece immanence, a life, a work of considerable complexity that requires a lot of work and creative input from participants, even to some degree a knowledge of the work of gilles deleuze and some of his basic concepts. it all depends on the idea, and for me there's no qualitative difference between a seemingly simple idea and a complex idea: complex ideas require ways at coming with simplicity, and simple ideas often reveal in execution to be quite complex in their implications.

rg. do you have any intentions with regards to how your work should be perceived and interpreted by audiences?

gs. i do, and try to make sure that the noise aspect is reduced to the minimum. by noise i mean everything that obscures the main idea or creates unnecessary complexities that take away the ear from the main idea. i'm an ideas composer, not an idea composer, so for me the emphasis is always on the idea. if the idea is sound, then i try to present the sound without rhetoric or narrative, so that it can be perceived as a concrete event and not as symbol, even when this is seemingly not possible. only in this way i feel i can present the audiences with the actuality of the material and its becoming. interpretations, of course, are impossible to predict or control, but i do take fundamental care in this aspect of idea presentation to avoid pastoralisms, overtly political discourse and basically anything that will alienate myself and the audience from the idea of the piece, which in itself is the kernel of the whole thing.

rg. i know that you lived in ny for many years and eventually you went back to venezuela. could you describe how your work shifted by such changes prior, during, and after ny?

gs. again, i somehow talked about this on a previous question, but i'll try to be more specific in my answer. even if i obviously have an artistic and aesthetic core that doesn't change much regardless of where i'm in, the reality is that my practice changes accordingly to the environment. in nyc, the environment is more daring, perhaps, than in caracas, which in comparison may seem a bit of an afterthought. but the void one sees in comparison (no scene, artists doing their thing unaware of each other, lack of venues or institutional support, among others) can be seen as an opportunity to custom made your own practice, even making an audience for the work where there is none, etc. all these can be turned into positives and help build a local scene that's more than a delayed imitation of what's happening elsewhere. of course people here gets mystified when they hear stories about me in nyc, the people i've met and collaborated with and so on, but i make sure to everybody that i present my work with the same care whether i'm in nyc or in caracas, regardless of the prestige of the venue you have to be yourself at 100%, all the time. for an audience of one or an audience of 100. one could say that there are obvious advantages if you have nyc as your base, and i wouldn't argue with that, but i suppose i welcome a challenge. also, despite not being able to tour (won't bother you with the current situation of my country) abroad, my network won't let me down and my music gets out there, for an international audience i care very much for, even if i never actually see their faces after a concert or presentation. also worth mentioning is my sound artwork, currently shelved due to the impossibility to present sound art installations in my country, for economic and sociopolitical issues. as i've said before, the ideas of this side of my work can wait for as long as necessary to be

able to find the proper conditions, so to me this is always a sign that i should take the chance to work in what's being made available, since this too could change any time and force me to take another creative route.

rg. how do you see your work now taking shape and partaking in a context like ccs venezuela.

gs. i'm in a curious position here in venezuela. somehow it's getting more and more difficult for the establishment to ignore me, but they keep trying :) on one side, the current government and their idea of what art should be, and on the other the private galleries with their survival strategies not offering much beyond the safe, tried and tested over and over that sells in regular quantities. luckily, i somehow developed some skills as organizer and programmer and can surf the tide of certain institutions like the goethe institute. these institutions do not have the same budgets that they have in other cities, so well put proposals on a budget tend to be attractive to these institutions. as of today, i'm getting moderate support from one of the main cultural complexes in the private sector, always on limited capacity regarding budget but with all artistic decisions on my side. in this way, i'm currently presenting a concert series there, on different spaces as they become available, focusing on a repertoire that remains unknown here. the first concerts have been quite successful considering the people are unaware about the music of cage, wolff, young, and also the current work by the composers associated with the wandelweiser tag. i find it an inextricable part of my creative work, to be able to stop being yourself, so to speak, in order to bring to the world a piece by a fellow artist, is, i think, a very beneficial practice for any artist. one goes back to one's own work with a clear head, plus it can help you to establish your own context in relation with a larger context.

rg. what artist or artists have significantly influenced your work?

gs. many artists have influenced my work and continue to do so. i think it's important to temper your own identity outside of your own perception and be open to these influences, at least when you have seen clear marks of identity in your own work. i named feldman and cage, but i've a collection of influences, as wide apart as anton webern and angus young, that it's more weather patterns than a genealogic tree. for example, i recently finished a piece for three female voices whose main influence, from a formal point of view, is the work of visual artist sol lewitt, and when i'm working with, say, layering of field recordings, i can't help but to think about the work of robert smithson, for example. so not always a music or sound artwork is influenced by any musician or composer, visual artists influence sound and vice-versa, other times philosophy is the main influence (this is very common in my sound art work), other times it can be poetry. a good case in point, i recently finished a piece that takes as starting point a number of drawings made by visual and sound artist lance austin olsen. he sent me some

pages of a notebook of drawings and small collages that he sometimes uses as score when he plays, and i somehow made a reading of two pages and came out with something that's quite different from my other work but still carries all those individual marks and identity. so the artist influencing me can be an old, dead master or a living person whom i happen to be collaborating with. a collaboration is always a bridge and pretty much i always meet people halfway.

rg. tell us about the process, ideas, and outcome of your release coming up in contour editions?

gs. the main idea for untitled (for dion workman) is simple: i miss dion. people like dion are the ones who make the scene, without them there's no scene, just artists doing their thing apart from each other, facing their insecurities alone or with small coteries of friends. dion made things happen, often with very meager means, and always interesting and current. the conversations to be had with articulate, creative and respectful people are as important as going to shows and buying records, perhaps even more so. it's been many years since i talked to him, to other people whose work i admire, the people who made the milieu in which i felt at home: dion, gill, you, people like dave gross and brendan murray, kenneth kirschner, ben owen, andy graydon, keiko uenishi, phill niblock, etc. meeting these people, not only in shared bills but also on social gatherings, all of this was very important to me and i wanted to do a piece that had to do with it. funny, because in many ways it's my most extreme piece, but this is more a way of expressing the void left by dion when he left the scene than any attempt of mine to be extreme. the piece simply came out this way, unbalanced, unmusical, empty, in many places, but it's at the same time perhaps the only piece of mine that i listen to for pleasure. it's mastered quite low, in part to make the listener to try to hear very quiet sounds, in part to encourage the listener to pump up the volume as if it was a magnifying glass. i used to do that back in the day, when first confronted to the work of people like francisco lópez and bernhard günter. dion's own work has an astringency i find very attractive. i can't match it, but i tried to make a work that could sit alongside his, knowing that that's unlikely. like some of my latest pieces, this is a letter to a friend, in which that what should be said is said without words, in wittgensteinian manner.