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Experiments With the Solstice in a SoHo Loft

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By ANDY BATTAGLIA

Phill Niblock has lived in the same SoHo loft since 1968, when he spied a solicitous sign on a fire escape and transformed a forbidding industrial space into a home for experimental art. Everything, in a sense, was experimental then.

"The landlord was in hiding from the fire department," Mr. Niblock said. "He either stayed in the basement of the building or slept in his Volkswagen van. I was still spry enough to be up on scaffolding, scraping away at the ceiling."



Enlarge Image

Ramin Talaie for The Wall Street Journal

Composer and artist Phill Niblock at his Centre Street loft, where he's hosting his annual concert series this week.

His renovation duties have since receded, but at 78 years old Mr. Niblock continues to loom on Centre Street. From his 4,250-square-foot loft, he directs an adventurous arts enterprise called Experimental Intermedia and, as a composer, carries on investigations into monumental masses of sound. This week (through Monday), his work with Experimental Intermedia figures in a series of nightly loft concerts in his home—an annual tradition since 1972.

One of the earliest such gatherings happened by accident, when Mr. Niblock had been booked to perform a concert at the original Kitchen at the Mercer Arts Center. Two days before, the Vienna actionist Hermann Nitsch had staged a performance that befouled the venue, as tended to happen at his notorious ritualistic affairs.

"There was an unbelievable stench of dried blood, so we decided to come here," Mr. Niblock said recently in an interview at his home. "I hadn't been particularly planning to do concerts here, but I had a good sound system and I wanted to make it available to other people."

His interest in sound was paired from the beginning with a related interest in vision. After moving to New York in 1958, Mr. Niblock started taking pictures of jazz musicians as a hobby. Eventually he became a chief photographer for Duke Ellington.

"I'm not sure I ever had a real conversation with him, but he saw the prints I was making and after a year he called me his favorite photographer," Mr. Niblock said. "Then I got busy with other stuff."

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"Other stuff" included some of the earliest forms of multimedia art conducted in the '60s, first by way of films made to complement dance pieces, then later in the form of voluminous musical works crucial to the development of minimalism.

"I knew what I wanted to work with from the beginning, which is exactly what I work with now: masses of tones that are very close together in pitch so that lots of other harmonics are produced in space," he said. "I was interested in the nature of sound and creating a big cloud, to use sound as something architectural."

In so doing, he commanded a project similar to those devised by fellow minimalist composers La Monte Young and, to a lesser extent, Philip Glass and Steve Reich. But from the beginning, Mr. Niblock followed his own idiosyncratic path.

"What makes him different from others who might be associated with him is the almost inscrutable, hands-off quality of his music," said Jim O'Rourke, a musician who has collaborated with Mr. Niblock and worked as a producer and a member of Sonic Youth, in an email. "Never can you feel the guiding hand of the composer. It is there, of course, just invisible."

Mr. Niblock's hand is also present in the programming of this week's Experimental Intermedia concert series. A stirring performance on Tuesday featured three multimedia artists improvising together using live video, electronic music, and wild vocalizing. Sunday's concert promises to focus on the suggestive bonds between sound and sea salt.

Then on Dec. 21, Mr. Niblock will leave his loft for downtown Brooklyn, where he'll host a concert of his own at the venue Roulette to mark the winter solstice. Set to run for six hours, as per his own solstice tradition, the performance will incorporate projections of "The Movement of People Working," an attentive series of documentary films that Mr. Niblock started making in the '70s, as well as music that stands to swell and suffuse the room. It will be the first of his solstice shows staged somewhere other than the loft, owing to significant crowds in recent years and a landlord eager to remove Mr. Niblock from his rent-controlled space. But he remains focused on a field of work that can make matters of physical space seem insignificant.

"Sound can change your perception," he said. "You start off hearing one thing, but when you begin to give up listening to one certain aspect of it or trying to intellectualize it, it opens up and you begin to float."

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