

Philip Corner

(New York, 1933)

Born in New York in 1933 and linked to Italy by his many visits, leading up to his decision to move to Reggio Emilia in the early 1990s, Philip Corner may be classified in that grey area that lies between the visual arts, music and something else. His career began in a strict and traditional manner with his studies in piano and composition, first in the United States and then in France, under the guidance of Olivier Messiaen. However, his time in Korea with the US army, between 1959 and 1961, would change his path for good. Already influenced by the most radical and innovative experiments of the composers of the day, John Cage first and foremost, in Korea Corner was enchanted by the rhythms of the court music of Sujecheon. It was also here that for the first time he studied calligraphy together with a local master, earning himself the name Gwan Pok ('contemplate a waterfall') – the name he would later put to some of his compositions.

The influence of Asian cultures, which from this moment on would characterise his production in a peculiar fashion, drove him by affinity towards that heterogeneous and international group of artists, musicians and performers known as the Fluxus movement. His encounter with George Maciunas on his return from military service provided him with an opportunity for full involvement in the activities of the movement on the occasion of the first major festival, held in Wiesbaden, in West Germany. Corner took part from a distance, sending the score for one of his *Piano Activities*, written to be performed contemporarily by various performers on a single instrument. The idea is to intervene on the piano, extracting sounds from it in the least conventional manner, for example strumming the wires with a plectrum, dropping various objects onto it from above, or preventing other people from intervening. What he had not contemplated and what instead happened was its destruction at the hands of a number of his colleagues, such as Higgins, Vostell and Maciunas himself, who attacked the instrument with hammers and handsaws, scandalising the local audience with what today is remembered as one of the most provocative Fluxus performances.

Cage's teachings and his stay in Korea led Corner to free himself from Western musical conventions. The result was scores dictated by indeterminacy, by the involvement of the audience in the room and by the interpretational freedom of the performers, granted the privilege of carrying out the performance as best seen fit. The elegance of the ideograms has a more direct influence on the musical writing, to the point of transforming the score into a graphic image which may also be appreciated on a visual level. Fascinated by natural and ancestral sounds, Corner then undertook a study of the gamelan, the Indonesian orchestra of metallic percussion instruments, and performed compositions for the Alpine horn, played in the open air in order to include sounds from the surrounding environment.

RA