Who's Who in Filmmaking:
Phill Niblock

by Abigail Nelson

On a screen nine feet high and thirty-six feet wide, three massive images are projected. We see close up a leaf, a part of a leaf, reflections on running brooks, a toad on a stone, then the stone, and mountains with clouds moving across. Each one is a small moment that seems an eternity and then an evaporation. At first, the shots may seem too long. A viewer can even mentally leave the film for a moment, and when he sees the same leaf again, it's as if he weren't allowed to look long enough. Experiencing nature so closely, so intently, we seem to know it less and less as time goes on.

Each view is formal and straightforward. The camera doesn't move. We look steadily at nature and it pulsates with the "speed" stillness possesses when man slows down enough to see it. At times, things seem to move too fast. The shaking of a flower when a bee lands on it, the flow of water rushing around the ice, they seem monumental. The size, the elegant richness of color glorify nature.

The film is overwhelmingly real and at the same time abstract, for we also see nature as colors and shapes, as elemental forms. It is as if you could see an object and at the same time see the wester of molecules brimming over. Without using a microscope, we see into nature, to the very throb of life.

Without labelling or shaping, Phill Niblock seeks to create, especially in his live performance concert pieces, a total non-verbal environment where each viewer can experience for himself a deeply emotional, even physical response. One which is without literary or connotative meanings of any sort, devoid of any verbally describable central idea. And for Phill Niblock, filmmaker and composer, nature is the most abstract form, untouched by man, that he can use to create in his audience that "first order experience."

A six-speaker, non-directional sound system permeates the performance area, building what he describes as "architectural sound." To create this "solid block of sound," Phill has tape recorded voices, a violin, a tenor saxophone and flutes. The attack of each sound is clipped off so that what remains is a constant rumble, what composer Gordon Mumma has called "massive sound without a hint of musical gesture." There are virtually no silences in the music. It fills both the time and the space completely. And although the sound track is a separate entity, composed without any film in mind, it has a quality of grandeur sympathetic to the filmed images.

TEN HUNDRED INCH RADII, the fourth in the Environments series, is the most pure and complete summing up of Phill Niblock's nature probings. It is a beautiful work both technically and artistically and made for me the "first order experience" I just described.

Unlike other filmmakers, Phill gathers material with a central, thematic reasoning behind it and then shapes this material for different media. For TEN HUNDRED INCH RADII, the film materials were gathered at ten locations in the vicinity of Keene Valley, New York. Ten areas of one hundred inches in diameter or sixteen feet were chosen and photographed in the summer of 1972, in the fall and following February.

A live performance concert piece is often one result of this footage. Working with the Environments Company, of which he is the director, Phill puts together separate entities: slides, film, music and dance. They are meant to remain separate entities. Incredibly enough, the first time Phill saw all three images together in the film section of TEN HUNDRED INCH RADII/Environments IV was during the premiere performance. Of course, it was also the first time the dancers saw it. His work with the dancers consisted of deciding with them just before the performance began who would perform first in the dance section. There was no discussion prior to the event concerning the content of the choreography.

Environments IV was so satisfying emotionally and technically for Phill that the preparation involved may seem shockingly haphazard. But of course the success was anything but accidental. The Environments Company, a loose collective of artists, has worked together since 1968 with relatively few changes in personnel. Much of Phill's artistic control rests in his choice of the dancers rather than the dance. Although he does leave himself open to be surprised, he rarely is. And that is a surprise. As he says, "Somewhow it does usually work out to be much closer to what I would have imagined or what might have happened if I had done everything very consciously, very studiedly."
Of equal, if not growing importance to him is the use of
the museum gallery as an exhibit space. At the Everson
Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York, TEN HUNDRED
INCH RADII was premiered as a concert event and two
weeks later began its life in a different format as a continu-
ous film and music exhibit. Two projectors placed side by
side screened nine foot images. Music filled the gallery.
Instead of walking into a room full of paintings, a person
would walk into a room full of images and sound, which
continually evolved and changed. The film loops were going
all day, concurrent with museum hours.

100 MILE RADIUS/ENVIRONMENTS III was produced
by the Kirkland Arts Center with funding from the New
York State Council on the Arts. It was also performed in
the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City,
and Phill Niblock beams as he describes the space. One
white wall was fifty-five feet wide, so the images weren’t
"restricted" to a mere thirty-six feet, the size of his own
screen.

Phill hopes to expand the sense of exhibit in his current
project, SUR I. A cooperative venture is planned with Juan
Downey, a kinetic sculptor and video artist and Ira
Schneider, a video artist and filmmaker. They were all down
in Mexico last summer and plan to go to Peru and/or
Bolivia shortly. The exhibit would showcase their percep-
tions of those places. One form of this exhibit would be an
automated show, perhaps running for a month, with video
materials, films, music, and some still objects like slides,
photographs and artifacts. A live performance event of a
days duration might also be undertaken in conjunction
with the gallery run. As yet no definite location has been
set, but they hope to have a museum sponsor in the spring.

Part of Phill’s uniqueness is his use of different media
and an awareness of the demands of each. Besides the con-
cert event and museum gallery exhibit, TEN HUNDRED
INCH RADII is also a film, actually two films, called THIR
FILM AND MUSIC ONE and THIR FILM AND MUSIC
TWO. Many of the images used in the concert are not used in
the THIR films, because they are not, in his words,
“concentrated enough.” In the concert, there are three huge
images. Certain screens at certain times have what Phill calls
“different energy levels.” The viewer’s eye is meant to rove
over the images. Although not tightly edited for this pur-
pose, the images are meant to have a rhythm or pattern of
interest. Because the projectors aren’t synchronous, this
pattern will vary from showing to showing, but some simi-
larity is always present.

When showing part of the concert film from 100 MILE
RADIUS, Phill was careful to note that it was not a film. It
was one screen, out of two, from the second half of
ENVIRONMENTS III, and had many “concave” images.
They tend to “recede in energy,” partly because of the way
they are composed or perhaps in the way light is used in the
frame. But it is not a film, because on a “single strand of
film, each image has to have a certain level of energy.”

This attention to the demands of each medium has even
carried over to television. It is, he feels, a different format
requiring a unique response. His most ambitious project so
far has been for a show taped October 1973. As footage
from SUR I was shown, live dance was superimposed over
the images. Rather than a simple screening of pre-shaped
material, the half-hour event was, in a sense, a premiere.

Finally, separate concerts of music are performed. Phill
generally does the music first now and his growing interest in
composing has much to do with his search for the ab-
stract.

Each Environments concert has brought a sharpening
both in concept and execution. The very first Environments,
produced in late 1968, was a split event. Phill had two films:
one of dancer, Ann Danoff, and the other of composer-per-
former, Max Neuhau, and he decided to show them along
with a live performance by each person. It was a learning
experience, for he learned what not to do. Using a dancer
and a film simultaneously in a live concert piece seemed to
muddle the action and disperse the energy. At one point,
the split screens were six in number; there were too many
images. Three screens are just enough, he feels, while two is
a static number. Any more than three spells confusion.

For ENVIRONMENTS II/ CROSS-COUNTRY, Phill
gathered materials specifically for the event, during a cross-
country motorcycle tour in 1969 and down the east coast
to Florida in the winter of that year. The event began with
slides. Nature materials were now the subject matter of the
film section. Live dance was a separate section too.

Museum performance was a new direction for 100 MILE
RADIUS/ENVIRONMENTS III. Produced by the Kirkland
Arts Center in Clinton, New York, and premiered at the
town hall, the material was gathered by Phill, again on
motorcycle, filming in a hundred-mile radius of Clinton.
The first major showing in a museum was at the Whitney
in April of 1971.

By TEN HUNDRED INCH RADII/ENVIRONMENTS
IV, the format had finalized. The essential change was in
the film material, with each image lasting much longer.
Phill has tried to make nature simpler, more abstract in
the way he has looked at it. He does it “by the closeness of
the image, by the exclusion of background and especially by
the way I use light.” TEN HUNDRED INCH RADII was
shot using direct sunlight only. It becomes for him as much
the subject matter of the film as the flowers and insects,
the mountains and streams.

His beginnings as a still photographer and one short inter-
view with photographer and documentary filmmaker, Ralph
Steiner, have affected his handling of images ever since.

From Steiner, Phill learned that the basis of photography
is recording tonalities that are generated by light. One can
either record those tonalities that exist or else manipulate
them in some way. Some of the most beautiful images in
ENVIRONMENTS III were slow shots that make us aware
of light changes, of the way clouds course through
the sky.

But there is a great difficulty in making the transition
from still photographer to filmmaker. Static, painterly com-
positions are a constant trap to avoid. Phill Niblock worked
with Elaine Summers, a choreographer and filmmaker, who
taught him a great deal about movement. It may seem a
contradiction that even though his camera is most often
stationary, his films are full of rhythms, pulsations and shifts
of light that flood the screen with movement.

An early film, MAGIC SUN, about the composer Sun Ra
and his Arkestra shows Phill’s interest in light and move-
ment. Although it seems to be the recording of a concert, it
was shot mainly in apartments, with each musician in turn
sitting in the same chair in front of one bright light. The
exception is the very beginning of the film which was shot
outdoors and then reversed so that it is negative. The effect
of the rest of the film seems like a negative because high
contrast black and white stock was used. The play of black
and white shapes is orchestrated to a totally separate sound
track. The images become more and more abstract, until
huge blotches of black struggle to blot out that one intense
light as the music reaches a frenzied pitch. It is a film of
extraordinary drama and technical virtuosity.

DOG TRACK, which Phill characterizes as an “interest-
ing failure” was an experiment in the use of non-related
sound and image. As we see bland images, bucolic and
urban, a narrator describes in flat, matter-of-fact tones her
childhood on an Indiana farm. It is, in fact, a Kinsey-like
report on bestiality. Funny and bizarre, her “romance”
with her dog, Romeo, is told in graphic detail. What Phill
wanted was a sound track so visually descriptive that people
remember having seen a film they have converted into
images from the sound track.

The Environments series, and particularly TEN HUN-
DRED INCH RADII are the finest expressions of his art. And I think the best place to leave you would be sitting on the floor, in front of that nine-foot by thirty-six-foot screen in a room humming with deep sounds, a landscape of colors and shapes — as much as the eyes can hold. It is an experience of special beauty, of special quiet, of special uplift. It is the world of Phill Niblock.

Ms. Nelson is a free-lance film and media reviewer.

PHILL NIBLOCK FILM PERFORMANCE DATA

I. Environment Series—Nonverbal Theatre with Slides, Film, Dance and Music. Performed with The Environments Company.

*1972. TEN HUNDRED INCH RADII/ENVIRONMENTS IV.
with Barbara Lloyd and Ann Danoff. Premiered at the Everson Museum, Syracuse, N.Y. This work was partially supported by a grant from the Creative Artists Public Service Program.

*1971. 100 MILE RADIUS/ENVIRONMENTS III.
with Barbara Lloyd and Ann Danoff. Premiere produced by the Kirkland Art Center, Clinton, N.Y. with the support of the N.Y. State Council on the Arts. Town Hall, Clinton, N.Y.

*1970. CROSS COUNTRY/ENVIRONMENTS II.
with Barbara Lloyd, Ann Danoff, and Vernita Nemec. Premiered at Judson Dance Theater, N.Y.C.

1968. ENVIRONMENTS.
with Max Neuhaus and Ann Danoff. Judson Memorial Church, N.Y.C.

II. Museum-Gallery Exhibits.

April 22-
May 1, 1972. TEN HUNDRED INCH RADII, Exhibit Project.
a continuous film and music exhibit, daily in the museum gallery, Everson Museum, Syracuse, N.Y.

III. 16 MM Films.


1972. THIR, FILM AND MUSIC ONE,
music by Phill Niblock, color, 43 minutes.

THIR, FILM AND MUSIC TWO,
by Phill Niblock, color, 17 minutes.

ANIMALS, music by Phill Niblock, color, 16 minutes.

1970. MORNING, members of the Open Theater as cast, black and white, 17 minutes.

ANNE, dancer Ann Danoff, color, 8 minutes.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN, a painter in process, color, 20 minutes.

1969. THE MAGIC SUN, a film of Sun Ra and his Arkestra, music by Sun Ra, black and white, 17 minutes.

1967. DOG TRACK, color, 8 minutes.

1967. MAX, a film of Max Neuhaus, composer-performer, edited by David Geary, music by Max Neuhaus, black and white, 7½ minutes.

IV. Television—short special pieces with film, music and live dance.

V. Concerts of music. (Available on tape).
Appearances at The Kitchen, Mercer Arts, Center, N.Y.C. and at 224 Center Street, N.Y.C.

Concerts with * are in repertory. Information about rental or purchase of films, and of concert appearances may be obtained from:

Phill Niblock
224 Centre Street
N.Y., N.Y. 10013

FILMS IN MUSEUMS

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The films are a collage of the most insightful and intense perceptions of nature -- perceptions which are powerful, sophisticated, stringently quietistic and at the same time, basic or, better, pervaded by animism. I have seen no other films that generate such high drama out of nature or make more intense psychic demands on the viewer.

JAMES HARITHAS, EVERSON MUSEUM, SYRACUSE, N.Y.

Proceeding out of a profoundly poetic empathy with natural forms, Niblock's films were spellbinding meditations on the animate and inanimate...details of nature...magnified so that they became monumental, extraordinary in their singularity...waves of sound that contrasted with the extreme delicacy and visual quiet of the filmic images.

FRANCES ALENIKOFF, CRAFT HORIZONS

(Music) consisting of sustained, closely juxtaposed notes knitted together in slowly but sometimes suddenly shifting texture. The notes were produced primarily by wind instruments, then altered and remixed subtly onto tape...concerned itself more with mood than with forms, but the mournful, meditative sound had a definite allure, and there was an added piquancy in the tense, tight beats, lazily cyclic curves and floating colorational shifts induced by clashing overtone patterns.

JOHN ROCKWELL, NEW YORK TIMES

Environments II was a rare, peaceful, regenerating evening. Images of nature. The dancers performed simple, one-theme pieces, very organic movement pieces that merged perfectly with the serenity of the images...going to the sources of uncrupt life energy. One left the performance revived, strengthened. A series of presences are created, we face a series of presences of purifying, uplifting energy.

JONAS MEKAS, VILLAGE VOICE

T H I R Film and Music One freezes microscopically in fragmented close-ups of nature, such as a twig, crystalline rocks in a brook or shadowy trees. As the camera glues hard, nature itself supplies the movement and impact, whether rushing water, shifting light or scudding clouds. These images, eventually pulsating with a inner life of their own, simple majesty.

HOWARD THOMPSON, NEW YORK TIMES

...fixed devotional image of terrain suddenly freakily in motion. Vastness of ocean, intense earth of earth color, brown land riddled striated by blue, bounded by blue infinite.

ARTHUR SAINER, VILLAGE VOICE

The music (T H I R) was sustained sounds, hovering around an out-of-tune cluster for a long time. Gradually it seems to become denser, and expands to the upper register -- the piece builds up in a dramatic way. Voice Four -- the sounds are voices, and they are beautifully blended to create an expanse of low-pitched vocal sound. His music has an undefined drifting quality much of the time, which leaves it vague and open to interpretation.

TOM JOHNSON, VILLAGE VOICE

...Splendid film show in throbbing sound environments that are sometimes excruciating, sometimes soothing. The camera stares, and all that moves is what really moves -- leaves in a wind, water over stones.

DEBORAH JOWITT, VILLAGE VOICE
Whitney Museum of American Art  
April 15, 1971
8:30 P.M.

100 MILE RADIUS
ENVIROMENTS III

A Non-verbal Theater Event
by Phill Niblock with Ann Danoff and Barbara Lloyd.

Produced by the Kirkland Art Center, Clinton, N.Y.

Miss Danoff's solo dance choreographed by Miss Danoff.
Miss Lloyd's solo dance choreographed by Miss Lloyd.
Dance on film choreographed by Phill Niblock.

Film by Phill Niblock.

Music composed by Phill Niblock.
Tenor saxophone: Martin Bough.
Voices: Cyrelle Forman, Barbara Niblock, Phill Niblock.
Organ, guitar: Phill Niblock.

Technical Director: Ivan Lewis Taub, Jr.
Assistant Director: David Gearey.

Special thanks to: Al Mazaltov, Calvin Hampton, Calvary Episcopal Church, Charles Forberg, David Behrman, Gordon Mumma, James Harithas, Larry Warshaw, Lucy Kostelanetz, Mario Yrisarry, Richard Feleppa, Richard Kline, J & D Film Labs.

This concert was made possible through the support of the New York State Council on the Arts to the Kirkland Art Center.