

# 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 ele-

mental forms. It is as if you could see an object and at the same time see the welter 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, "Somehow 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 studiously."

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 continuous 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 could 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 perceptions 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 few 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 concert 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 purpose, 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 similarity 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 abstract.

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-performer, Max Neuhaus, 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 interview 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 TEN HUNDRED INCH RADII are 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 compositions 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 movement. 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 "interesting 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.
- 1973. SUR I. Music by Phill Niblock, color, 25 minutes.
  - 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.  
ANNIE, 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 Gearey, 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

SIGHT  
LINES

Vol. 7, No. 3, 1973/74



Educational Film Library Association  
17 West 60 Street New York NY 10023 212/246-4533

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 uncorrupt 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.

Niblock begins by recording sustained tones, sung by voices or played on traditional instruments. Then he clips off all the attacks, giving the sounds a strange dehumanized effect. Later, he splices all these tones together and mixes them, using as many as 14 tracks, and plays the mixture in loud stereo. The recorded quality of his tapes is impeccable, and the sound is extremely rich. The music is quite dissonant, but since it always remains on one dynamic level and avoids any kind of rhythmic gestures, it never seems aggressive or expressionistic. The contrasts are quite sharp between the cold machine-like music, the attractive nature photography, and the silent dancing. In terms of theme or message, they don't belong together at all. But in structural terms these blatantly contrasting elements offset each other quite effectively. End structure is really what it is all about. Despite my groping for descriptive images, Niblock's version of multimedia, like his music, is basically an abstract art.

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

ENVIRONMENTS 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.