

Phill Niblock, *THIR*, 1972

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 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 shacking of a flower when a bee lands on it, the flow of water rushing around ice, they seem monumental. The size, the elegant richness of color glorifies nature.

The film is overwhelmingly real and at the same time abstract, for we also see nature as colors and shapes, as elegant 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 labeling or shaping, Phil 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 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 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. 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 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 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 studiedly"

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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.

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The environments series, and particularly TEN HUNDRED 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.

Abigail Nelson, 1973