Phill Niblock (1933-2024): Memories, A Description & An Analysis of His Work by Dan Senn

Introduction

Working for eighteen months on video projects without definitive words, I stopped to create a language platform for developing ideas further. I've reached these points numerous times, where action and intuition no longer suffices. Here, after two recent projects, I've created a faux interview and towards the end I found it useful to compare my work to Phill Niblock's. A long time friend, Phill had an oversized influence on me—from living in Europe to cooperative performing and producing, and then much more.

Phill passed earlier this year, Caroline and I attending a memorial in Prague for him where many kind words were spoken. And yet I felt other things could be mentioned and so, in this context, writing as if to myself, I am comfortable writing about his work from a very personal perspective.

In 1980, a bicycle on his shoulder, I met Phill at Jim Staley's loft in Tribeca, NYC, while they sat at the kitchen table. As we had similar midwest backgrounds we immediately hit it off. Since then I've produced numerous concerts of his, he of mine, and yet his work is more than I've experienced. Still, adequate for personal use, this should be stipulated. So, I've placed these things here, for whomever finds them, out of a deep respect for an artist that has impacted me so.

General Observations

Film/Video: Shoots from a still tripod through a long lens from a great distance out of necessity but also as to prevent interference with workers engaged cooperatively in specific tasks. While culturally obscure, lots of predictable, repetitive movement. Ambient sound not recorded or later eliminated.

Sound and Movement Concept: Slow shifts of pure waveform clusters masking resident ambient sounds in performance spaces. Carefully selected pitch ratios used to compose work free of a traditional score. Sounds do not evoke images of an obvious source mechanism, this assisting concentration on film projections and the performance environment. Gradual, microtonal pitch shifts setup beat patterns throughout the presentation space, these enhanced by unusual speaker placement. Alternative spaces with no fixed seating arrangements are preferred. Music played loudly to enable "playing the space" wall-to-wall, ceiling-to-floor. Audience movement is encouraged, through custom, to explore the acoustic phenomena, this an acknowledged distraction from the film refreshing interdisciplinary experience especially throughout long installation presentations.

Films: Fades not used in films or sound. Some slow image panning. Close up actions are contextualized from the larger frame. Film displayed against a loudly played sonic fabric. Both mediums are detached causing them to began and end independently, abruptly. The two are not synched causing intermittent, sudden silences or darkness. Audience may talk as this is masked by the sound.

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Sound tracks are not necessarily created to accompany specific films or videos. Again, they start and stop suddenly, are not crossfaded leaving breaks where the ambient sounds, like the projection system, outdoor traffic, people talking, etc., are exposed and then abruptly masked again with the next sound mass. When 16mil film was used (absent now with video) sudden darknesses would occur, this accompanied by the whipping sound of the film tape. The abruptness remains present with video projections. The impact of this anti-slickness, while rarely mentioned in print, if ever, is stunning—an essential part of Niblock's magical aesthetic.

At the conclusion of an event, as the film(s) end(s) abruptly, without credits, the sound is flicked off mid-stream. This too, "a tasteless error", is an extraordinary phenomenon to experience given the history of classical time-arts presentations. This sometimes even causes confusion as to the appropriateness of applause.

Viewing his films, an experienced artist is soon aware of Niblock's photographic genius and extraordinary eye for human movement. He once instructed me of his framing formula, *insisting I use it*, one he had taught his son Jasper and all his students. It never took... and so I can't explain it further. His films do not need sound accompaniment to be so recognized. Not sure, however, that an audience would stick around for 1-4 hours of his film played in silence, or as accompanied by some tonal, commercial schlock. Still, the films are truly exceptional.

His drones are smartly, competently composed and engineered, and are not trivial nor tiring especially when fitted into Phill's preferred industrial settings with audiences searching afoot for acoustic phenomenon. The sound tracks are played loudly, even louder in alternative venues like Trafačka in Prague, these featuring loose seating or none at all. By contrast, in traditional halls, audiences tend to sit silently in one place as they would in a cinema looking at a single screen, the sound played back over traditionally placed speakers. This setup w*orks* but is far, far less effective. The events are thus shorter in these contexts. The music, like the film, is of standalone quality and may be more durable than the film when played alone as the space is acting, by design, as a musical instrument with the audience on the inside. As Phill was reticent in public with those he did not know, you may have learned of these concepts only in his Soho kitchen and then after asking him. Artist written program notes, non-existent.

At a performance in Tacoma, Washington he started his mediums in tandem—a first film, then second, and then a sound track each separated by the time it took for Phill to lumber between the not-so-close playback devices. All very crude, pedestrian, and yet an extraordinary aesthetic experience witnessed by an audience that, in 1994, would have never encountered such direct, unpretentious power and beauty, especially at a free concert.

Phill's intermedia presentations work because the films are beautiful, the subject matter fascinating, the sound intellectually gripping as it activates the performance space, this all coalescing in a Zen-like performance-consciousness of a fluxes artist and one who understands without elitist fanfare the natural good sense of John Cage's 4'33".

Again, his films and sounds were of standalone quality when presented in any context. Together, they are conceptually

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simple and wildly complex. Had the films been of average quality, even with Phill's spectacular drones, he would not have been widely presented.

Pressurizing the Space

Niblock's intricately designed cluster drones are made to activate and perform the presentation space, and if taken full advantage of, can provide an "out of body" sensory experience that continuously shifts perception of the projected images, the performance environment, and the emotional-cognitive foundation of every attendee. It is where sound is made manifestly physical, where the subjects filmed, often laborers "dancing" in meticulous unity, are lifted to a nobility Niblock intends.

These blisteringly beautiful artifacts come not from a western tradition in pursuit of yet another 9th symphony, but from the musically untrained, innocent, aware mind of a gifted photographer who once sold jazz records. Phill's music and films are special but, perhaps, too fundamentally radical for the modern art culture it challenges, thus his reticence and the indecisive language as this work remains a century ahead of its time.

A Stepped Description

Films are still framed, shot from a tripod using telephoto lens/virtually no social or camera interference with human subjects/ dense, framed human activity (macro-content)/subject immediately recognizable/ close ups contextualized from larger frame/ minimal out-of-camera editing/films meant for large projection accompanied by his own sound tracks. **Sounds** are "micro-framed" (close up)/mathematically assembled with minimal, slowly changing shifts/unrecognizable source instruments in most instances/intended for irregular, alternative, industrial performance environments with large speakers pointed in various directions to maximize acoustic phenomenon/preference for presentation environments featuring movable chairs, or none at all, as music masks ambient sounds.

The usefulness of this stepped description is that it clarifies that Phill's music is far more experimental than his films even if these images are original and exquisitely captured. The point being, the durability of these images in presentations lasting hours, aka installations, comes from the calculated "sound pressure" of the music intended for alternative spaces as described above, a wholly new concept often landing outside the platitudinous descriptions and understanding of his work. The paradox here is that PN was a Professor of Photography at CUNY-Staten Island, unable to sing back a pitch played to him, introduced to complex music, jazz, in an Anderson, Indiana record shop where he worked as a teen. His college degree in Economics is from Indiana University. Phill's innovative films and music thus evolved from a working class background and a private interest in photography. After a stint in the army, he moved to NYC where he gained a reputation photographing jazz players, like Ben Webster and many others. He then met the choreographer Elaine Summers who suggested he film people working to show dance students, all of this preparing him to make these amazing films for sonically pressurized spaces.

Phill's work is powerfully meaningful and yet there is no intended meaning. As I knew him for many years, his family, his high school and army friends, exactly where he came from, his inability to communicate to larger groups unless questioned, I can state matter-of-factly that he was greatly influenced by this not-so-special, average upbringing. Phill grew up around cars and once fixed mine in a pinch in Muncie, Indiana for which I remain eternally thankful. DS 073124

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