



the gallery
sketch

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presents

PHILL NIBLOCK: THE MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE WORKING

20 JANUARY TO 10 MARCH 2007

CURATED BY MATHIEU COPELAND

Saturday 20 January, 12.30-2.30pm
A rare performance of Niblock's music,
featuring flautist/bassist Susan Stenger
& guitarist Robert Poss.



The series of films *The Movement of People Working* by intermedia artist, minimalist composer, filmmaker and photographer Phill Niblock (who was born in 1933 and lives and works in New York and Ghent, Belgium) portray human labour in its most elementary form. Filmed on 16mm stock in locations including Peru, Mexico, Hungary, Hong Kong, Brazil, Lesotho, Portugal, Sumatra, China (video) and Japan (video),

The *Movement of People Working* focuses on work as a choreography of movements and gestures, dignifying the mechanical yet natural repetition of labourer's actions.

A wide selection of Niblock's slowly evolving, harmonically minimalist music, realised between 1968 and 2006, are played back in the gallery during the projections, the sound level of these compositions allowing a visceral experience of the long drones and the ringing, beating overtones. The layering of tones echoes the repetitions of the workers' actions; the evolution of the films on each screen (changing throughout the day), combined with a program that randomly plays back different music pieces, results in a constant renewal of forms, continuously offering the exhibition of new juxtapositions of sound and image.

Mathieu Copeland: You told me recently that the films *The Movement of People Working (TMOPW)* came out of necessity.

Phill Niblock: By 1965 I started working in film (having been a photographer for about 5 years) with dancers and choreographers, such as Elaine Summers, Meredith Monk and Yvonne Rainer. My first intermedia performance pieces included elements of film, photos, music, and sections of live dance. The desire to do this series of films (TMOPW) came out of necessity because I was making these performances with live dancers and media, and it was too cumbersome & expensive to tour with so many people. So I started doing the TMOPW films which I could project when performing instead of using dancers. I consider these films to be dance, looking at very natural movement, without any of the artifice of the dance world.

MC: There is a beautiful analogy in the shift from filming the gestures of the dancers to filming the gestures of the people working.

PN: That material is dance material, deliberately, as what I wanted to find was natural dance.

MC: Natural dance, is working natural?

PN: They (the workers) do it naturally. Necessity isn't necessarily un-natural. That's what they do,

and they do it very naturally, it's not artifice.

MC: These repetitions are very mechanical movements. How did you approach these people?

PN: The first TMOPW film was shot in Mexico in the summer of 73, and I was looking exactly for that material. When I was travelling in other countries like China, I was accompanied by someone who spoke the language, and we tried to make simple contacts (social contracts) with the people, but sometimes we would simply start to film, for instance if they were too far away and was impossible to talk to them.

MC: TMOPW offers a very strong social and political comment, as highlighted by the title and represented by the closeness with the workers. How do you approach the idea of working? Do you view it as the generic idea of working, or did each have to be very specific?

PN: The rules (of what and how I could film) took about five minutes to think of, and they never changed. This was somewhere in the early 70s, before I went to shoot the first shots. I decided exactly what I could do and I simply never did anything else. Also I was shooting on film, which is very expensive, so I had to work exactly and sparingly.



I could carry about fifty 100 foot rolls of film, which was also the maximum that I could afford.

MC: How did your relationship with the works evolve throughout the years?

PN: It didn't. If you look at the film from 1973 and the one from 1991- they look exactly the same!

MC: If you say there is no evolution between 73 & 91, what happened in 91 for you to stop, did you feel that you reached the conclusion of that series?

PN: I decided that I had enough material.

MC: Regarding the exhibition that we are preparing, the material that you have shot between 73 and 91 is being shown on twelve screens and a wide range of music that you wrote throughout the years is being played. The entirety of the film series confronts the evolution of the music.

PN: I think that in some sense the music didn't change anymore than the films. If you listen to the first piece from 68 and to one done recently, pretty much all that has changed is the technique, but it is basically the same form. So in the essence I was not trying to "develop" over a period of time, going from one thing to another, I was really doing

the thing that I set out to do, and it was the same with the film.

MC: Is there a more formal link between the music that plays and the films that are projected?

PN: I don't believe that either the films or the music is the background for the other. And that is a problem when you play the music softly, as it becomes back-ground and you hear the drones, the tones, but you don't hear the the overtones. A primary aspect of the music is the use of microtonal intervals to produce rich overtone patterns in the space. These resulting tones are not on the recording, but are produced in the space itself, and they occur at fairly high sound volume.

MC: A striking parallel is when you experience the density of the music echoing the movements on the screens. And even if the music is not repetitive, could you discuss the position of repetition within the music?

PN: One of the main differences between film and music is that the film is sort of single channel linear and the music is not, so there is much more juxtaposition, and to some extent it is interesting to see the films on the 12 different screens in the room,



as in some sense the films are then more like the music.

MC: It is an over layering.

PN: Yes. But for the films you still have to make choices as to which one you decide to see/ look at, whereas in the music, it is the combination of the tones that is producing the effect.

MC: How do you feel about the idea of trance? Is this an effect that you are seeking, or to the contrary, do you want to have a very straight forward view of both the music and the films whilst they are playing together?

PN: It is the same answer; you (the audience) perceive it in your inner self.

MC: In 1967, several filmmakers including Chris Marker and Jean-Luc Godard gave workers cameras and informed them of cinematic techniques so that they could actually make their own films. But rather than doing any fictional or pure documentary film, they formed the Groupes Medvedkine and decided to film themselves working. Did you hear of such practice at the time?

PN: Frankly I don't remember, it's possible.

MC: Have you ever filmed in a factory too?

PN: I was particularly interested in not filming in factories, and not filming factory kind of work which is purely mechanical. Also I was interested in shooting in daylight. Although I did once shoot in a textile factory in video in Sumatra.

MC: I would like to conclude with the idea of gestures. Considering choreography and dance, and movements in space and in time, the gestures become an abstraction of forms. Furthermore, when you were filming the dancers back in 1965, you were already filming people working.

PN: I made a film for the dancer Tina Croll in the late 60s, for a dance performance where she had somebody painting a chair, and so I filmed a dancer painting a chair, and it was extremely like the material of the "movement" films.

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