

"UNMEDIATED REALITY"

"THE INEVITABLE MINIMUM MEDIATION OR THERE'S A BIT OF
THE BARD IN BARDOLINO"

"MASTURBATION AND/OR COPULATION"

"INTERFERENCE WITH REALITY"

"UNMANIPULATED MASTURBATION"

"INTERFERENCE WITH COMMUNICATION OR MOTIVATION"

"PREMEDITATED REALIZATION"

Phill Niblock and Jon Burris conversing:

Phill: The only, the one and only big question, do
you remember?

Jon: The only question?

Phill: It's important. Now what question? I would say,

Jon, the microphone is approximately equidistant; what is the
meter doing?

Jon: It's, say, minus 15. We need a little more gain.

Phill: Ah-ha!

Jon: So do you remember the one big question?

Phill: No, Jon.

Jon: Well . . .

Phill: The big question is: what am I doing before I am
doing it?

Jon: The question is: why are you doing it while you are doing it?

Phill: The question is: what are my motivations to motivate other people to motivate . . .

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Phill: ^{THE} Rationalization was essentially after the fact, I was already doing what I was doing before it became necessary to find a rationalization (verbalization), a more complex rationalization than already existed. The structure, the building of the idea, and the conception of the idea are at the very beginning. One of the more obvious aspects of structure is sort of ruled out. Here is a choice of subject matter decided upon, and there are certain parameters for what is acceptable and what's not acceptable within that choice of subject matter and how I'm going to approach it, and how I'm going to shoot it, and what's going to ~~xxxxxxxixix~~ ~~xxxxxxxixix~~ be included and what's going to be excluded. All defined at the conception of what I'm going to do. And also what's defined is that I'm going to accept or exclude stuff that I've shot after I've shot it, so that there are two stages of that: I've decided that I'm going to shoot certain things in certain ways and there's a limit to what I will find acceptable as I find it. with certain things I'm going to say: "No, that doesn't fit," so I won't shoot that. And then in the editing of this material I'm going

to either accept things because they are within the parameters or I'm going to accept or reject them because of their technical applicability.

Jon: You mean to say if they are out of focus?

Phill: If they are out of focus, or their depth of field isn't great enough or something happens in the subject matter, but more likely it's going to be out of focus that is a major factor, because I'm shooting fast in the field.

Jon: What happens if it moves too fast . . . what about those aspects?

Phill: That's almost never been a problem. That's a problem with selection. And sometimes the conception of the idea has to do with how fast something is going to move. You've got to pick something that, In the nature stuff, TEN HUNDRED INCH RADII, the idea originally was to make 100' shots, and then it sort of got down to be 50' shots, and so once I started the camera I was committed to the shot and then the process of editing had to do with either using it or eliminating it. In general, I'm committed to using long enough shots so that the feeling of cutting pace is eliminated, and my minimum shot length usually is about 10 seconds. Once you've gone beyond 10 seconds, then it doesn't make much difference how much longer you go before you cut, you've already lost the cutting pace. So then the pace is determined by the tempo of the subject matter, rather than the tempo of the editor manipulating materials.

So in my case the subject matter defines the tempo. ~~ixxxxxx~~

Jon: Sure, but the tempo in itself is not as it would be in a Hollywood film; the tempo is to establish a condition for which . . .

Phill: But the tempo exists in the subject matter.

Jon: Right. Within this dichotomy of both aspects the tempo exists not as a carrier of meaning, as it would be in say a Hollywood film, so that to experience some kind of anxiety, let's say, the tempo ~~would~~^{might} be speeded up. For you it ~~becomes~~^{is} not that aspect which denotes more specific audience reaction, ^{RATHER, THAT ASPECT} ~~but~~ establishes certain parameters of the experience of your materials which the audience is to have. So it's interesting because it's in that tempo, the regularity, to some degree the subtle irregularities, to a degree the type and the cyclicalness of this tempo in certain shots, that establish that the tempo ~~is itself~~ is not so much to be experienced as it is able to be assimilated into our experience of [✓]whatching the film.

Phill: Well, you're talking about it in sort of the viewpoint of the audience, and I don't think about it usually in that way. I think about it in terms of: I'm doing a certain thing, and I'm ~~not~~ essentially thinking about communication but about my defining what it is that I'm doing, the form that I'm working in. So what your statement brought up, however, is that there is a parallel between the music and film because of the fact that the music is played, the tones are played by musicians, by humans, there is a lot of variation

in frequency, for instance, so when ~~when~~ you put two of those tones together, because they're tuned by calibrated sine waves they should be in a very regular order. But because they are played by humans using instruments, they're very irregular, causing a variation of tempo in the beat frequencies. It's a parallel to what's happening in the image area. It's a humanization of an essentially mechanical thing, the film at 24 frames, constantly, but what's happening in the film is not proceeding at a constant rate.

Jon: In fact, the human tempo superimposed upon the mechanical tempo of the film running ^{through} ~~from~~ the projector.

Phill: And the music and film being mixed together. The film is serially linear, not superimposed. The music, however, is very superimposed, and its basic form lies in the superimposition to achieve the effects and the structures that . . .

Jon: It's interesting because there's this reduction to elements. You are reducing the sonic textures to their phenomenal element, for lack of a better term, the beat frequencies. And one temptation is to say that this reduction in sound is an analogy to a similar reduction in image, either in the mechanical process of reproduction: 24 frames per second; the chemical process encompassing such matters as grain structure and ^{contrast} ~~contrast~~ rendition; or the optical process ~~effect~~ affecting focus, depth of

field, resolution and other things. But in fact these aspects don't really seem to be experientially operative in viewing the film in the same way as listening to the music except as common expressions of diverse irregularities such as people moving and natural forces in the pix and human performance of the music.

Phill: The kind of structure you are talking about with 24 frames or the grain structure for instance, or if I were dealing with the noise level characteristics of tape as in J. J. Murphy's PRINT GENERATION, for instance, then that would be one thing, but I'm not. I would prefer to get rid of all that. If I had a noise-free medium, that would be terrific with me; I'd much rather have that.

Jon: All right, but I wouldn't have brought this up had I not thought that these things are operative in certain images, and those images are the animation of the sunsets, and there I saw that one very fundamental part of the experience of these images was from the random waves that resulted from the selective registration of the continuous flow of the water. And so that served as a handle on the experience of that film--an aspect I hadn't previously felt relevant, and that is in itself an interference with the film material in operation.

Phill: Interference with reality. But on the other hand I've gone away from that more and more, so that I only shoot 24 frames.

Jon

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Jon: Straight?

Phill: Yeah. And that was at the time the only real
manip-

ulation that I think I would call manipulation. I mean, they were always real images and all I was doing was speeding up the time so the movement was still an essential part of the film materials. When you come down to it, the essential aspect of film that I am interested in is the movement. I am always looking at movement. I am always concerned with movement being what movies are all about. I am always looking at movement, so if it turns out to be a kind of subject matter which requires some amplification of that movement, turning up the gain as the sun sets, what I did was turn up the gain. I made it faster.

Jon: So as to be perceivable?

Phill: Yeah. But I have moved continually away from that. I have gone toward selecting material which does not require amplification, which is true in TEN HUNDRED INCH RADII, where I tended to almost always go for 24 frames. There were a couple of shots that were 64, but most of the stuff . . . So 95% of the film was 24 frames. Since then I haven't used the variable speed motor at all. I have a governor-controlled motor which runs at approximately 24 frames, and that's all that I use. So that's an aspect of switching to human movement where amplifying the movement was against the idea, the conception of the piece; so we are looking at people moving in a very straightforward way. I did do some time-lapse of the people on the streets, in very early work in '65 as I was beginning to think about the structure of film. But since then, nothing. It's all 24 frames. Did you see the early film of

Middleman?

Jon: No.

Phill: The painter. That's full of time-lapse. The process of making paintings. So that was all experimentation with looking at time in a different way, a structural thing. But I have moved constantly away from that and don't have any great feel for going back to it. That might change, but it still seems like real time is an aspect I'm interested in. Now, for instance, I have a variable speed tape recorder so that it would theoretically be possible for me to simply record one tone from an instrument and alter the pitch on the recorder. So I wouldn't have to do all this other recording.

Jon: So how do you feel about that?

Phill: Well, I feel that it's the variation that occurs from tone to tone, for instance, when an instrument plays a slightly different tone it turns out to be a whole different timbre because the instrument changes enormously. It has these incredible resonances. That's especially true with the cello. It's remarkable--there was one piece last year which was a one-octave gliss, descent over 22 minutes. It's a four channel piece so that four cellos descend an octave at varying rates. ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ What happens is that in certain places in that octave the tone is fairly thin and in other places the instrument reaches a resonance point and you get an incredible change in the amplitude of the tone. The beats get louder as well as the tone getting louder.

Jon: And the timbre changes as well.

Phill: And the timbre changes as well. It's remarkable what happens in the upper harmonics as well as in the sub-harmonics. So the whole thing is changes, and that's an aspect of what's ~~happening~~ interesting to me--that human changeability-input.

Jon: Because when you see the films, when they are perceptually there, there is a quality of it that is absolutely non-human.

Phill: De-humanized, as Tom Johnson would say.

Jon: As Tom Johnson might be completely correct. And so these elements become only underpinnings, maybe kind of microcosmic variation within the structure that allow them to be perceived with more interest than they would be if they were simply sine waves of your pitch control on your tape recorder. And so, well I have to ask you, this might be off the record. . .

Phill: We'll keep it on the record . . . (he's getting the exact phrasing worked out).

Jon: The thing about the films, let's try to put music in the background for the moment, is that they in no way posit their own carriers of communication, meaning. Is this clear to you?

Phill: Uh.

Jon: The elements of movement that are in them are not there to be read. That is to say, I don't sit there and say, well this person is moving rhythmically like this and the music is beating like this, which is of course a haphazard relation in the first place.

Phill: Yes, because the music and the films are never used together, synchronized in any way, and the same piece is not used with the same film except by chance, to be perfectly clear.

Jon: And so through these subtle manipulations you look very hard at nearly unmanipulated or unmediated reality-- and there is in most of these except for the water shots, virtually no kind of manipulation or no mediation except for the inevitable minimum ~~that~~ occurring in the recording process. And so what I have to ask you is in doing this seemingly ego-less kind of operation, what is it that you are trying to say? What's the nature of that view?

Phill: That's the very question that I won't answer.

Jon: Why not?

Phill: Because it's too direct.

Jon: Because you have not a verbal motivation for what you are doing?

Phill: I think it's a covert activity. I don't know if I am prepared, if it's possible to answer that question. It's a key question.

Jon: I feel it's the only question to ask.

Phill: Why? Because you think that's the only artistic justification?

Jon: No, the question is "What is the most implicit communication in the work?" You are saying, "This is one way to look at reality," maybe implicitly "this is how I look at reality. I would like to challenge your looking at reality by presenting

you the similarly unmediated view." Let's forget about the music right now.

Phill: I don't think it's unmediated.

Jon: I'm not denying the act of manipulation or mediation. But I am saying that the mediation is transparent and that it does not state itself in the actual visual and temporal texture of the films themselves. Does this make sense to you?

Phill: Well, I'm not sure it makes sense. I mean, what we said about my not having a verbal schtick about the work, or not having to have a verbal schtick about the work, and that any verbal rationalization I make about the work is an afterthought, that the structure of the work is already decided before I . . .

Jon: But I am no longer asking you about elements of structure. I am asking you to tell me about motivation.

Phill: Well, that seems . . . I find usually that artists tend to hide behind elements of structure and describe that in detail and avoid talking about elements of motivation. That seems to be a common thread.

~~Jon: The reason I mention it is that it seems that any motivation you can possibly talk about, any motivation at all is ultimately~~

/Phill, no break/ OK, I have an answer to this question which is a common answer which is that I am essentially interested in an open field; I am interested in making materials, both visual materials and sound materials that any number of people can react to, each differently.

Jon: But that doesn't answer the question.

Phill: So, well, it does in a sense because I can always step back and say, well, here I have this objective position and I am making stuff that is either sufficiently opaque or sufficiently transparent, that everybody thinks, "I got that" and they make their thing ~~xxx~~ out of it, and they feel like they have been communicated to, or not communicated to, they think that it works or it doesn't work or whatever, and "I got this" or "I didn't get that" or understand what you are doing, or "the piece is terrific and I understand ^{exactly} what you are doing," but that everybody has a different take. If everybody ~~and~~ the same take . . .

Jon: You are saying you will not commit yourself.

Phill: Well, OK, but I mean I am committing myself in that I'm saying: that's what I want to do. The decision is whether I am opting out or not. It seems that most great art is that way. The Mona Lisa smile is . . . what is it . . . it's the open field, right? That seems like such hackneyed, common art schtick that even to define it as a schtick is already overdoing it. Except that I am dealing with this fucking medium where everybody expects a message. It's film, right? I mean, if you say you're a filmmaker, then there's always

the schtick that you're a filmmaker. If you say you're a composer, that's already subordinate to being a filmmaker. I mean you're already making music to go along with your film. I mean, it's completely unheard of that these two things are not subordinate to each other, that they are even non-interrelated, that they are two things that go on at the same time in the same space. Both of them are very spatially oriented. In the music I am interested in sort of an architectural aspect so that the stuff fills the space--it's all around; that's a basic aspect of it. In every space I go into the music sounds different because the space is different. It's a different music, essentially. I would prefer to perform here (224 Centre); it's the best space I have found so far. But I have found other spaces, where, when the equipment was reasonable things happened that don't happen here. There was a very interesting experience with that four-channel piece in Albany because there were all kinds of upper harmonics that never occur here. We did that piece in five different spaces in four states in eight days and every one sounded remarkably different.

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Phill: I think it takes six years to get it together really, and then how long does it take before you become known. I mean, you are known to a few artists and sort of getting a little reputation and stuff like that. Certain things are weird about me because I've gotten a lot of reviews,

for instance. I'm getting reviews like in the New York^{LC} Times, in the uptown press. I'm a weird downtown composer, but I have a lot of reviews in the uptown press and the Village Voice and shit like that. Some of which is because I'm producing this series of concerts by other composers. I'm making the most of this space (the Experimental Intermedia Foundation at 224 Centre St., New York) by being a producer and intentionally, because it's my best performance space, so I can get a New York Times critic to come to my/^{own}loft to see and hear something that I do, and he reports on it. He reports on it probably because I'm an artist but partly because I'm the producer of this series, and it's part of the series that I'm doing. But still I've only been a composer for nine years and four months, something like that; the first music I made was in December of '68, and I only started making films in the summer of '65. So in six years I was~~already~~ already producing in film what still seems like the best single work, which was TEN HUNDRED INCH RADII. I think it's the most focused work of all I've done, the least flawed. If I had continued doing that stuff, I could have got that stuff really down pat, you know, so that there were no flaws and I would have had a tremendous amount of material. If I had done that another two years even. And I stopped doing that and started doing the stuff using people, which is necessarily flawed. One of the reasons for doing nature was that I didn't have much money and I had to really make it work. The projects before TEN HUNDRED INCH RADII were

about making the most of the money because I was filming stuff that was mostly static; it was predictable. I could sit there, could focus myself very accurately; I could frame up very accurately, and it was always going to be about the same thing going on, all the stuff that I shot. So when I turned the camera on I knew what was going to happen, within a very narrow range. And so in TEN HUNDRED INCH RADII I expanded that by making this thing of the 100' shot or 50' shot. So I was really taking a chance with the material, because it was the first big grant I had, it was the first chance I had to shoot a lot of footage and not worry about the expense. I could really take a chance on the thing not turning out. If it was 100' and was wasted, before that it would have been inconceivable. Before, 100' was a huge chunk of what I could shoot every year. The only pieces that I was shooting for were performance (intermedia) pieces. Pieces for the Environments Company, for film and music and live dance. There was a company of five people, there were two dancers, and the productions were with three film images on a 36' wide, 9' high screen, so the images were big. The pieces were performed in relatively big spaces. All that early work was designed for those pieces, rather than as films per se. So the original intention of the work was multi-media, not single screen films. The music from that period was very flawed. It began to get together in '73 and by '74, which was six years after I started making music, it was very together. In fact exactly six years, because it was December of '74 that I did the piece that still

is my favorite piece of music--exactly six years to the month after I made the first piece. Maybe that's the reason I think six years is . . . Now there are two performance media I am interested in. One, a concert performance, using the single image films and music in a continuous slot of time, a couple of hours or more in duration, where the music and the film don't begin and end at the same time, so they are obviously different pieces occurring in the space at the same time; and the museum installations, which are usually two images, side by side, and music, running[#] all day, continually recycling, three hours of music and 20 to 25 minutes of film. So you wouldn't see the same two images together and you don't hear the same music together with it. So the presentation media for which the work is designed has changed over the years. I think that what is communicated changes also. But I am very interested in the whole ~~range~~ of the possibilities, because in the museum installation somebody can walk through the gallery and it's just another gallery--it's just a painting hanging in a gallery with some sound with it, some weird music, and usually those installations are in places where the audience is more unfamiliar with the material. And there's the whole other aspect of "What's the Motivation?" because "what's the audience?" And obviously the motivation changes drastically with the audience. If I do a thing in my own space, people who come, people who know me and know something about the work, and they are

usually artists of some kind, they are in the scene, so they come and they have a totally different expectation of what they are going to hear and see than somebody, say, in the museum in Buffalo. It's an advertised event, people come and if it is there for two weeks all day they could come any time they wanted to. Plus the fact that many are coming to the museum anyway. They came to the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, for example. People aren't coming because my show is there at all. They are coming to the museum. And they walk through this gallery and there's this weird stuff going on, and they can walk on through and go to another gallery or they can stay for a while, for twenty minutes or half an hour or an hour, some people stay for the length of time it takes them to walk through the gallery so they can get out of that terrible sound environment. ^{l.c.} And some people come and they stay for ten minutes, and they go, and they come back, and they stay for another ten or fifteen minutes, and they go someplace else, and they come back. I was in one gallery situation where I personally watched one woman and two kids who were about ten years old come and sit in the gallery several times. So that I think you can't talk about communication and motivation without talking about your audience. As an artist, if you are going to be far out, you know, whatever term you want to use, then your essential audience is the art audience. It's not the general audience. It may be sometimes the

general audience, but more than likely it's not going to be a general audience. So what I'm saying about communication is that it is relatively meaningless to single it out as a focal point for the definition of work.

Jon: ~~But nobody ever said anything~~ But nobody ever said anything about communication; it was always motivation.

Phill: But it's the same.

Jon: I think they are really distinct.

Phill: One is masturbation, the other is copulation.

Jon: There is absolutely no retort for that.

Phill: Put that in your article and smoke it. OK, let's give your definition and then I'll prepare my rejoinder, my retort.

Jon: You have it already. I have to confess to being a masturbator . . .

Phill: (inaudible) Now we're getting down to the inner resources of my soul versus the public.

Jon: The Public! I'm devastated. Oh, how to answer this.

I'm going to answer this primitively, as I answer for Woody. We have a long section in those interviews ^{For FF} a couple of days we stopped talking about concepts and started to talk about personal concerns, and I said that I am not interested in communication as such, and that what I am interested in is posing questions to myself and hopefully to the audience, not making statements, specifically that. What's interesting to me in your work is that it's not making statements, and ~~that~~ that I was not interested in making statements

to the audience or even communicating with them but posing questions for myself that perhaps the audience might be astute enough to clue into and maybe ask themselves the same questions. And so the path by which I came to this open field construct was an avoidance of intentionality because what I was interested in was maybe using the media, the particular media I was working with which were in various ways ~~specific and general extensions~~ extensions of my sight and hearing. This condition allowed me to use these media to ask myself primary questions about how I see the world. And how it is possible to see the world. And how it is possible to rationalize and understand the perceptions or sensations that are out there. And I find video extremely convenient for this because I found that it gave me access to a whole range of phenomena, and it gave me access to certain kinds of controls and operations which would not be viable in film, which would just be silly in film, but in video they ~~become~~ are able to be meaningful. And so what I was doing . . . it's funny because Woody made this perceptive statement, about how a thought might be original to you today, but tomorrow it's going to be just trivia, it's going to be completely clichéd, because you will have assimilated it. And so I am desperate not to be in that situation, and it's almost a never-ending struggle. To stay one step ahead of your own thought so that it never becomes where you are resting, and your thought is rationalized, ~~it's easy,~~)

perceptual mechanism and so forth, ~~and then~~ That calls into question another range of questions about artistic invention and expression as well. And so I am in this situation of nonintentionality because I'm not at the point where I can begin to ask questions about ^{FROM} intentionality, where I can begin to posit a statement about the world because ^u I am as much beholder ^e to its absolute complexity and, to a degree, confusion as everyone else is. Does that ~~make~~ [#] sense?

Phill: Mm-mm.

Jon: And so I come to the open field construct, the construct of non-intentionality, of posing a question and not answering it except in the experience of the question because I have no answers and because the only reason I am doing this thing that society finds convenient to package as art is because it is to me the most efficient, in a sense, and the widest way to ask questions about very fundamental and broad questions that can be mirrored in art, because art is unbounded (an exhilarating corollary to this dilemma). And that's why I am doing this. If I had no other reason . . . if I were satisfied with my parameters, I would not be making tapes, nor having dialogs like this one. But we are not at that point, and I am at a point where my culture does not answer its own questions. That's why the open field construct is relevant to me, because it provides me with a way of operating. You disagree?

Phill: Well, I don't know. Do you think it's true in other eras?

Jon: I see the fundamental paradigms residing in physics right now, and what I see is quantum physics giving this incredibly ambivalent . . . this might seem off-the-wall . . . giving this ambivalent paradigm between, say . . . on a fundamental level, a methodological level, on defining a single phenomenon as either wave or particulate matter. But on the other hand, it relates to an even more basic paradigm which is the broad assumption that our culture has brought to everything we have seen or known or done, which is that there is an absolute consistency to any ~~valid~~ phenomenon as expressed in a "valid" observation. So that we say that something is true and real, and I am observing it, and if I am not observing it than it would be the same even though I am not observing it, and if I observe it in a different way its identity is still preserved^{without paradox.} But subatomic physics tells us this is not always the case. And so that duality that exists there belies the largest challenge to our understanding, which is this consistency aspect. And it is this which puts us back to this absolutely primitive question, about what--not meaning-- but simply what do we see and how do we see it. And so that's why I asked you that very direct and naive question, and it would never ~~have~~ had to have been asked until quite recently. But it seems very hard to escape it right now.

Phill: It's interesting that I took the question as being about communication.

Jon: Right, and I meant it entirely about motivation.

Phill: Right, which is always a point that I would tend to avoid.

Jon: Well, that's why I asked you.

Phill: Do you think that we made it clear, I mean was there a statement?

Jon: You haven't answered the question yet.

Phill: I have avoided the question.

Jon: You have avoided the question.

Phill: Good.

Jon: You talked around the question.

Phill: I kept to my guns at least.

Jon: But that's not your guns. I think we should stop.

Phill: I want to be immortal!

Jon: Off!

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