

Document Citation

| | |
|---------------|--|
| Title | Film reviews |
| Author(s) | |
| Source | <i>Millennium Film Journal</i> |
| Date | |
| Type | article |
| Language | |
| Pagination | |
| No. of Pages | 4 |
| Subjects | Dorsky, Nathaniel Kubelka, Peter |
| Film Subjects | Triste, Dorsky, Nathaniel, 1996 Variations, Dorsky, Nathaniel, 1992 Schwechater, Kubelka, Peter, 1958 Alaya, Dorsky, Nathaniel, 1976 Pneuma, Dorsky, Nathaniel, 1977 |

THE MILLENNIUM

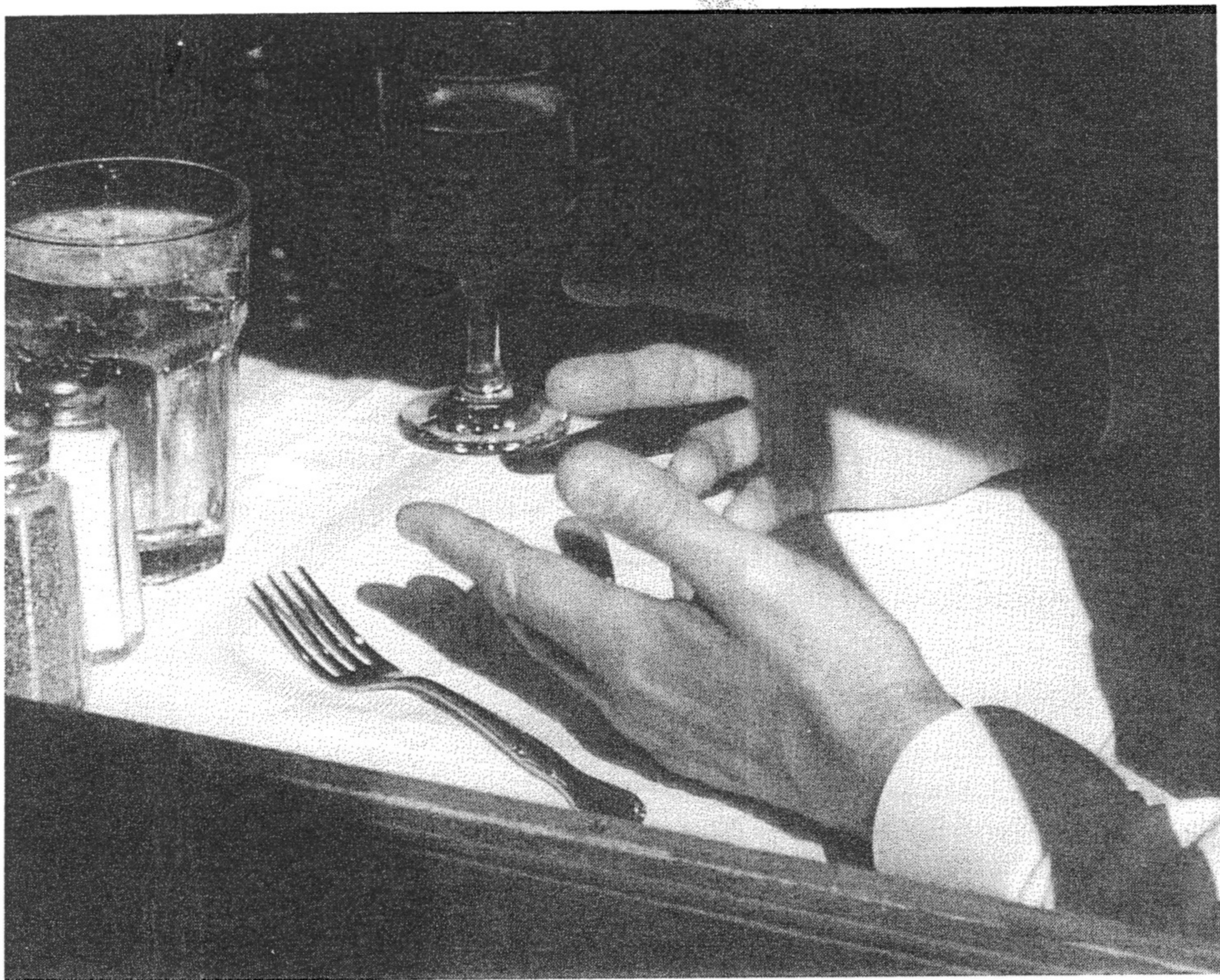
Nos. 35/36 \$10.00

millennium

FILM JOURNAL



FILM REVIEWS



Nathaniel Dorsky, *Variations* (1998)

Some viewers will see the beauty of the photography in the individual shots of Nathaniel Dorsky's most recent film, *Variations* (1998). Certainly there are many individual shots that are quite pleasing to the eye—from a long shot of delicately glittering water, to a close-up of translucent textured leaves, to a mid-shot of a precariously elevated traffic signal moving gently in the wind. The more profound aspect of the work, however, is in the way each shot relates to the next, the previous, and the whole. A facile reading of this film is that it is a series of comely, well-composed fragments. Indeed, fragmentation is all but expected in experimental cinema. But the wondrous thing about Dorsky's *Variations* is how it is neither simply fragmentary nor simply structured. This may sound like a contradiction because it is one, and that is part of Dorsky's point as a filmmaker. This is the basis of a new cinematic paradigm in which fragmentation is not equated with psychological anomie and alienation, long an artistic archetype in avant-garde cinema.

Indeed, the inspiration for the editing of this film seems to have come from Eastern poetry, long known for its penchant for contradictoriness. In *Haiku, Volume 1: Eastern Culture*,¹ the author R.H. Blythe describes some of the characteristics of the state of mind of the Haiku poet: in addition to contradictoriness, there is selflessness, loneliness, grateful acceptance, wordlessness, non-intellectuality, humor, freedom, non-morality, simplicity, materiality, love, and courage. These qualities are highly evident in

SARAH MARKGRAF & GREGG BIERMANN

Variations, which appears to have been created in the very state of mind of the Haiku

poet that Blythe describes. But in addition to the beauty of the individual images Dorsky presents—both an ancient and a modern beauty, both Eastern and Western, that celebrates both the extraordinary in the ordinary and vice versa—Dorsky's subtle editing is responsible for conveying this poetic spirit.

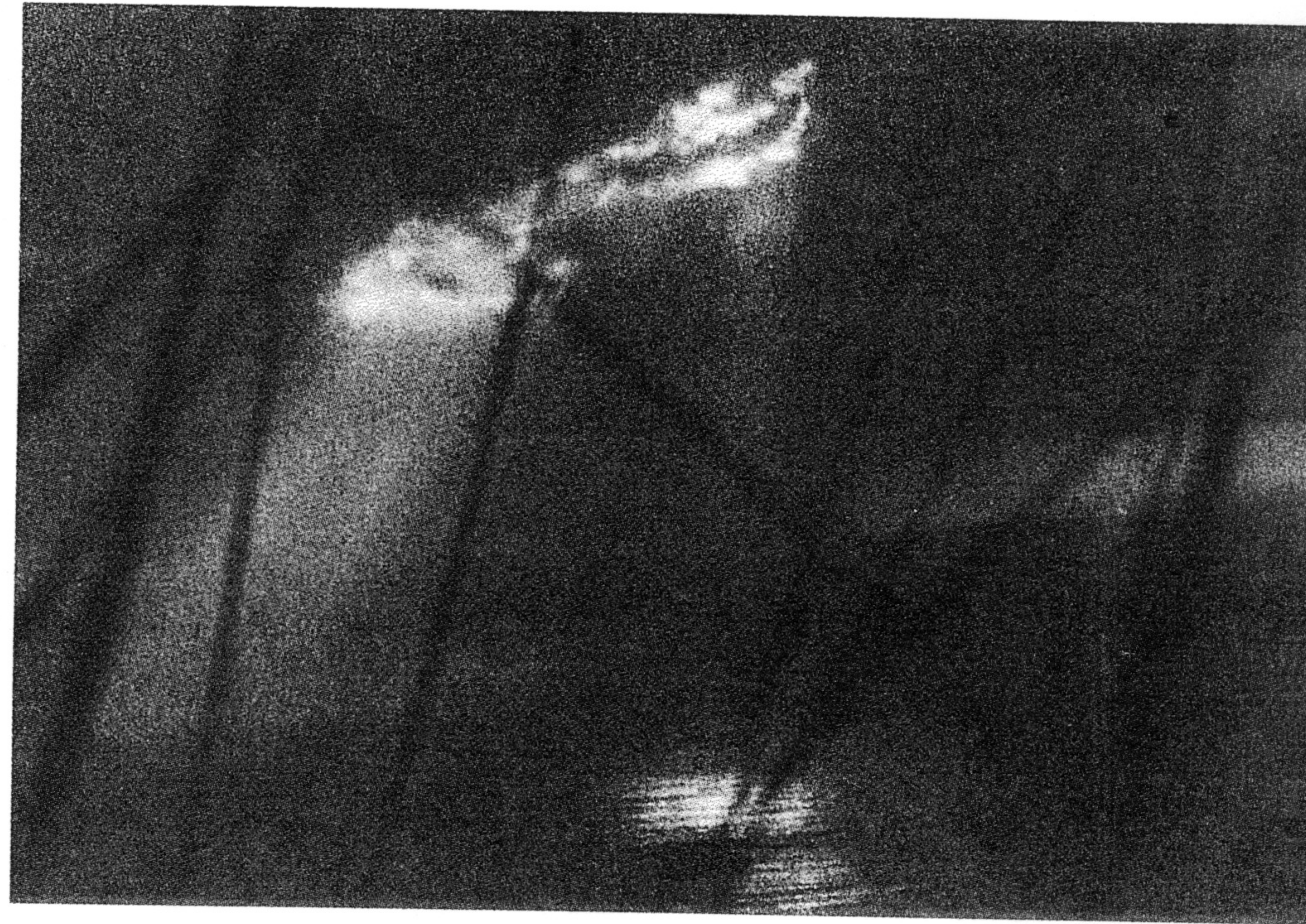
While comparisons between *Variations* and certain kinds of poetry seem natural, there is, of course, a cinematic context from which this work emerges. One could make an interesting comparison between Dorsky's *Variations* and Peter Kubelka's films, for example, which are often cited as examples of masterful editing. In films like *Schwechater* (1958), Kubelka creates montage through rhythmic, percussive hits, which seem much more violent than Dorsky's cuts. While both films involve disconnected images, the sense of Kubelka as an *auteur*, and as an ego is much more present in this work than in Dorsky's. In *Variations* we have less the sense

that Dorsky is controlling the film as *auteur*; rather, he is allowing the shots themselves to construct the film with his help, as their consort but not their master. Dorsky is present in his absence of ego—another seeming contradiction. By not bending the different shots into a shape by sheer force of will, he is communing with the shots and finding out what they themselves are suggesting. For example, in a recent interview he described the method by which he ended *Variations*. Dorsky arranged a tree at the end of a series of images. After trying different possibilities, he noticed that no other shot would work after this one, and in this way he realized that it must be the last shot. Similarly, he began *Variations* with a shot that was impossible to place after another shot. The shot is of a man. This almost intuitive style of editing contributes to how *Variations* is as strangely artless as it is startlingly vivid. Cuts that are without pomp and circumstance reveal moments of intense seeing. In this work, fragmentation as an expression of alienation does not exist; we have instead another aesthetic form emerging, one that affirms and celebrates difference.

The traditional way to organize different ideas into a cohesive whole is to make specific examples support one central claim. Thus, in this seemingly agreeable structure there is actually a hierarchy implied between the abstract statement and the material that supports it. In contrast to this, *Variations*' specific images are arranged not to be subsumed by a main intellectual statement, and thus projects an integrity not often part of traditional rhetoric. For example, most shots in this film contain one subject that is not repeated. It could, then, be tempting to conceptualize a formal scheme in which each shot must contain a different subject—the kind of predictable pattern that Dorsky calls “the conceptual coloring book”² approach found in many structuralist films. However, in *Variations*, there are three consecutive, very similar shots containing virtually the same gesture of foam moving in from shallow water to a smooth sandy shore. This is one example of how Dorsky's film resists a simple intellectual scheme.

As in many other experimental works, loneliness is an important aesthetic mood in *Variations*. Indeed, the title *Triste* (1996), Dorsky's most recent previous work, may refer more directly to this feeling. Nonetheless, if we look at a progression in Dorsky's cinema, from *Pneuma* (a film whose images are non-images, merely mesmerizing emulsions at various degrees of magnification) and *Alaya* (an unbelievably riveting film in which sand is revealed in much the same way), and then *Triste* and *Variations* (where a variety of different images from the world reveal themselves to presence), we can see movement from a more inward, private gaze to a more outward public one. All of these works convey loneliness in a

more complicated. Once again, the Zen mind provides some context: in Zen loneliness refers to the “interpenetration of all things,” the opposite of the Western idea of loneliness as isolation. And in *Variations*, somehow, despite the rapidly changing subjects, which we are accustomed to creating alienation, there is an almost inexplicable sense of faith conveyed that all of these different parts rep-



Nathaniel Dorsky
Variations (1998)

resent the same whole. We begin to pick up visual patterns such as the direction of the wind across different shots, the re-emergence of common subjects, such as insects, fabric textures, written language, water. As a result, the relationship between the individual shots and their connection to a wholeness in the film suggests both separation and universality, concepts most of us have trouble integrating.

Variations shows us glimpses of the world through an infinite eye. We see the forms of the world in their beautiful material immediacy: a cigarette on the floor, the brightness of white geese in the water, a shadowy chess board, a dog intently waiting for its owner with an expression of pure desire. But beyond the immediacy, the abstract poetic connections between shots suggests commonality of form—everything has a form—and in this sense all things are united. But we can and do still enjoy the pleasure of the visual differences, a pleasure that is, in turn, enhanced by the existence of similarity. Our act of seeing and our realization of a playful interchange between similarity and difference seems more vital to our viewing

projection. And yet, in contrast to this point, we still have a sense of Dorsky as a filmmaker; we can recognize Dorsky's work as distinct from others. Watching *Pneuma*, *Variations*, and *Alaya* in succession, we find that the internal rhythms are similar, regardless of what is on screen. Indeed, like many artists, Dorsky conveys a sense of his films working together as an overall emerging oeuvre.

There is wordlessness to *Variations*. The film is silent, yes, but, more importantly, it is not readily or completely translatable into verbal experience. Stan Brakhage³ is often cited for his argument that perception can be understood apart from cognition. He argues that this direct perception, which is not caught in the net of concepts, could lead to more meaningful experiences of the world or even of art. The notion is relevant to Dorsky's film: the essential nature of *Variations* is visual. In an era when the existence of "essence" or something "absolute" is usually met with suspicion (at best), Dorsky brings good name back to the notion of universality.

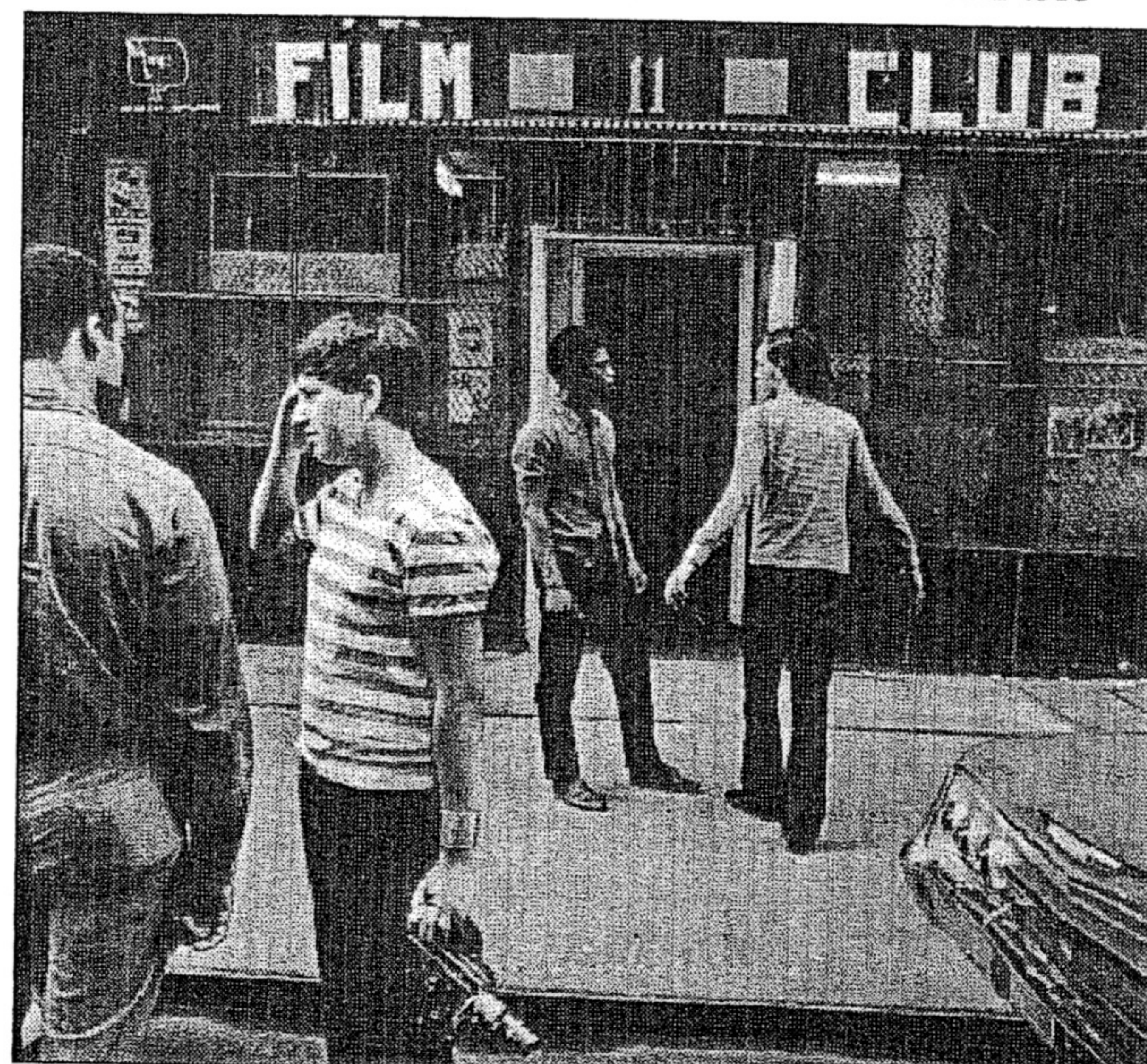
Variations is an example of avant-garde cinema in its maturity. Most avant-garde cinema needs to defend itself—often quite aggressively—as marginal to mainstream cinema. Often we find a celebration of this marginality within the films. Using scratches, edge numbers, punch holes, and end flares, for example, is the earmark, the veritable membership card, of what is considered stylistically avant-garde. We can still see these effects used in current art films as young filmmakers continue to defend their marginalization. Many of these films gleefully destroy works from the dominant cinema in irony-laden techniques that are often described as either nihilistic or nostalgic. In contrast, in *Variations* Dorsky conveys the feeling that he does not need to be "reactive to parental forces," or, in other vocabulary, to be caught in an Oedipal struggle with Hollywood. Of course, a film like *Variations* is itself marginal anyway. Just about any silent, 16mm, non-narrative film is marginal. However, Dorsky's film expresses no resentment about being so. It is marginal simply as one by-product of its freedom and originality. In this way, his work is not avant-garde in the common sense. In *Variations* Dorsky shows other filmmakers a way for the avant-garde cinema—a relatively young artistic project, yet one that seems to have aged all-too-rapidly—to be viable in the next century. During a decade in which rebellion and sub-culture have been commodified and mass marketed to such a degree that so-called alternative culture is hegemonic, works in the non-hegemonic, experimental tradition must also change. If the Avant Garde is wrapped up in certain unchangeable, emblematic trappings, then there is probably no reason for it to continue. In fact, perhaps the main difference between *Variations* and most other avant-garde films is that one is not waiting for it to be over. The film is utterly absorbing from beginning to end.

Variations is a healthy film spiritually, absent of neurosis, anxiety, cleverness, dogma, or competitiveness. Three years ago in an interview, Dorsky articulated his search for "a revolutionary film language which is completely open, anarchistic, sort of a utopian montage, in that there is no axe to grind except the human heart of mystery."⁴ Indeed, *Variations* speaks this courageous language.

4 Powers, Film is Like Release Pr pp. 26-28.

FILM VIDEO ARTS

A NONPROFIT MEDIA ARTS CENTER SERVING INDEPENDENTS SINCE 1988



EARLY YEARS OF FILM/VIDEO ARTS (A.K.A. THE FILM CLUB)

OVER 75 COURSES

CAMERA RENTALS

VIDEO EDIT SUITES

16MM FLATBEDS

DIGITAL POSTPRODUCTION

AVID MEDIA COMPOSER 1

AFFORDABLE RATES

50 BROADWAY, 21ST FL. NYC

212 673 9281

WWW.FVA.NY