

Video, Being and Time
Interview with Bill Viola 17/10/98
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'human knowledge, the "human condition", arises out of our awareness and understanding of the consequences of our temporal existence.' - Bill Viola

SK: Christopher Knight described your work in The Times as 'a narrative art with no beginning and no end, only a perpetually unfolding present'. How is time redefined? How is an ending possible within the circuit of works such as The Crossing or The Messenger?

BV: You have to look at two different kinds of time in a very general way that exist in the world. The time of each individual, their life cycles and their lifelines. And the kind of time that is associated with nature and the world which is eternal and infinite and exists beyond the span of any individual person. And we can only know the former but we aspire to understand the latter.

That's why all great religious traditions have some kind of theory or idea or concept of eternity and that's why when you look at human life in individual terms you end up with a life with a beginning and an end like films do. And if you look at human life from a social standpoint – the cycle of reproduction – then you're looking at a circle that is always turning and is eternal really.

Aristotle's theories of the dramatic narrative which come out of his work The Poetics 2500 years ago, which form the fundamental basis of the western tradition of performing art, really is looking at time from the point of view of the individual. His structure of introduction, crisis, resolution is basically the structure of the human life from childhood to maturity, old age and hopefully happiness.

What interests me about a lot about the Asian tradition in terms of the performing arts, which is where I first encountered these other ideas of time, is that they actually have the ... larger cycle of time of the world. For example, the [Wyancoolie?] Shadow puppet performances in Java start at 7 o'clock at night and go on to 6 o'clock in the morning. The Japanese Noh performances for the Emperor would last sometimes for 20 days during cherry blossom time.

There's something that happens when you are in a time field that extends beyond the horizon, that you really become immersed in, this time field in which you begin to inhabit the work of art instead of viewing it through a frame.

In my work I realised early on that ... in fact at the beginning, when I started in the 70s it was very hard to make a video so there was a lot of work done with live cameras. So video contains those two time structures. The video camera itself only connects with that individual sense of time when you bring editing into the computer recorder. If you don't record it, it's eternal, it's an eye that never closes.

These bank surveillance systems that run for months, years in the city ... it's like an open eye, the constant being/presence that exists beyond the idea of structuring, or dividing, or packaging it [time?]. So that's sort of implicit in the meaning ...

SK: So what of the loop? Is that one way of using one of the potentials in video to counterpose

linear time against cyclical time?

BV: Well, actually, to *create* cyclical time. The human heart, which is the source of human rhythm and music, is cyclical. The length of a human life is made possible by regularly repeating heartbeat and regularly repeating breaths. All of nature contains cyclical time structures from the rotation of the earth which gives us night and day, and the earth around the sun which gives us the seasons.

We're in a world where there's a constant turning over of things. leaves fall from the trees in autumn time and cover the ground which becomes mulch for new trees to grow. And all the societies that came out of the forest have very strong mythologies connected to death and to rebirth; the idea that death is a regenerative process which by necessity creates new life.

So that kind of idea of cyclical time ... The best example of cyclical time is the wheel of the car which rotates over and over and over and over again and meanwhile has gone 100 miles on the one object which allows you to do that because it's rotating. That's implicit in nature.

The video loop is a function of that. I've also thought that in my work one of the things I've learnt about time with the installations, was that I really felt free when I started making these installations that used prerecorded images because a lot of my early installations - the first ones - were done with live format. Then I started working with playback stuff, and tapes in my installations and then I had to get in this looping issue which video tape machines are not very well suited towards. Once I got into that area I really felt liberated from what I felt was the necessity to create these very clear and precisely defined montage editing structures in single channel videos.

Once the videos came up to a certain scale and were put into a room that became the work - which is what the installations are - then the montage structure was allowed to inhabit, or part of the function of the montage structure was allowed to be taken up, by the room itself. The viewer's movement within a sequence of alternating attentions and deattentions to a moment - they turn and see something and turn away and then turn back - creates this montage and so what happened was that it really loosened me up to put out this extended time which is very difficult to do in the context of a cinematic presentation.

Now Warhol did that with his extended time films. But again like Duchamp bringing found objects into the museum, the Warhol films function as an acknowledgment of the structure of cinema that it was defying. You can look at the Empire State building for 7 hours and it was interesting in that context, but the kind of stuff that I do with extended time cycles is very different because it becomes more of an architectural experience. It's outside of a theatrical frame and then it becomes part of a life cycle time frame mixed with a more expansive sense of time.

CD: And of your body, your moving, breathing ...

BV: Everything. How you move through the space, how long you're going to stay. There's no right time to spend in *The Messenger*. You can walk in the door, stay in there for a couple of minutes, maybe 5, and you'll pretty much get it. The guy's coming up, takes a breath, goes down. And if you want to stay for two hours which people have done you can do that.

SK: So if someone had that experience of the Messenger for five minutes, nonetheless the overwhelming sensation is one of perpetuity, one of repetition towards infinity. It's often discrete sequences which are reduced, distilled, or effected in some way. David Ross describes this effect as an 'antidote for a spectacularized society.' You've said that 'the central problem of the day is how to maintain sensitivity and depth of thought (both functions of time) in the context of our accelerated lives'. Is that why you stop, or certainly slow down very particular moments, to reveal their profundity?

BV: I think the interesting thing is that you don't actually slow down time because time is immutable. Photographs don't freeze moments. That's a misnomer, a total misunderstanding of photography. What they do is capture light and fix it on a surface. And the precise beauty of photography as an art form, one of the main aspects of it as an art form, beside the visual, is precisely the fact that you don't capture time.

So therefore your grandmother could show you her honeymoon photos from the 1930s and you're looking at a world that doesn't exist. You're looking at people with weird clothes on and strange cars. It's really quite profound because time has not stopped since that light was frozen and you're living a different moment.

So therefore you can see The Messenger for two hours and you will 'get it' by the way our logic structures work and what we think of as being experienced, how to receive and register things. If you're interested in facts you're not going to want to stay for two hours because the fact that the man is under the water, comes up, breathes and goes down again and does that 5 times every half hour and the video just repeats ... then you just have to stay for one loop and then you're out of there.

If you stay for two hours, what happens is the repetition becomes always new, because two hours later is not the same moment as when you're in there for the first time. You literally do experience it a different way although the information is being repeated, it's continuous in one sense.

So those all night shadow performances, when you're there for seven hours, are absolutely profound because what the puppet master or dramaturge can do in the seventh hour with those characters and that story you can't do in the first hour and he needs the first six hours to get to the place where he can give you the miracle of the seventh hour. And if you took the exact same lines, and the exact same text and script and performed it in one hour it would be a totally different thing. And that's the living aspect of time.

You know that recording media deceive us into believing that time is something you can fix on a plate or a film or a video or a tube or a tape and keep playing it back all the time. So in a way what these mechanical devices have done is to take the enchantment out of time, the magic and the living moment out of time and deceive us into believing that time can be mechanically and numerically portioned, which it can be that's only a very small part of it ...

SK: So you reassert another dimension or kind of experience of time.

BV: Yeah. It's like the difference between a cut board and a tree. The tree is time as it exists out

in the world for real. What we've done is to cut boards for so long that we think these squared off pieces of wood are trees.

SK: Many of the images you use seem to be universally understood: people meeting, a birthday party, giving birth, floating, etc. What is the status of these events in people's lives? What leads you to choose certain events as excerpts in terms of audience? What do you think is the status of video in people's lives?

BV: I don't really choose things for audiences although I am aware of the viewer when I'm making work. And I was always aware of that from the very beginning when I first turned on a recorder to record what the video camera was seeing. I became very conscious of it if I was outdoors because I used to do a lot of landscape things and work outdoors a lot. I was very conscious of being out in nature, the sun is shining, you push the record button, record it.

For me, I remember very strongly the reality of the viewing moment that was to be when that tape was finally played back. That's why it's uncanny for me to be doing a retrospective show like this where these moments I've had - like upstate New York under a tree shooting one day - all of sudden now 25 years later, it's in some museum in Amsterdam. And I remember being there that day, shooting that thing. And there it is. It's kind of amazing and I remember thinking when I was shooting it that it was going to be perceived at a different time: that moment or a representation of that moment.

It's really amazing that happens, that there are these two beings that happen whenever you turn on a recording device of any kind, audio or video. There's a window into another time and that's unique; it's really only been achieved in human cultural terms with very, very rigorous and difficult physiological exercises that are designed to modify the body and therefore change or shift consciousness to enable one to travel outside of one's body or have a vision of the future. And that was always a very specialised practice for a very special segment of society; and that was the shaman.

And now we've got these machines that do something of that and it's so profound a change in terms of mass culture in the 20th century that we had to invent a new word for time. We had a new word that came into our vocabulary that never existed before: real-time. And real-time came into common usage to distinguish it from other kinds of times that were beginning to inhabit the present moment which hadn't really been there before. Like I said, except for very specialised [seer]?

So whenever a new word comes into the vocabulary, you know something really profound has shifted. [Our understanding of] Time unequivocally changed in the C20th. It's [immutable; it is] not the same time field today as it used to be and that's very exciting.

SK: What's your reaction to the stock-in-trade of images today, to the mass circulation of so much televisual, video, film, and advertising imagery? What's the status of imagery you produce within that image repertoire?

BV: Well we've had this distinction between applied art and fine art, or we've had the awareness of the practice of image making and object making that we call fine art since the 18th century so it's not that old as a concept.

And of course art museums came out of a colonial period as a way to present the riches or spoils of victory to the people at home, basically, and therefore they were developed – and for example the whole history/practice of wall labels that we discussed earlier – comes from the fact that for the most part, the kinds of things that came into these new institutions and museums were basically objects that did not have a use.

And so they required explanation because you don't know what a medieval reliquary is and you don't know what an Egyptian bed was for because they were taken by the British from these various conquests and placed in these museums and therefore they're like this glass here without knowing anything about water, or that you're supposed to drink from it.

So it's created this kind of strange situation of dis-rootedness and that has been alleviated to some extent by image making in historical terms because images were always placed in some kind of cultural context and always read by the community they were made for. They were rarely travelling outside of those communities. They didn't show medieval Christian images in China for example. Why? Because no one could relate.

So today it's really unique that there is this vast interaction globally between different cultural forms which began in the 18th century, peaking with colonialism/imperialism. And you had all these things in circulation passing through in tremendous volume and so you had people exposed to things they'd never seen before and that's continued into the 20th century, but accelerated by these artificial devices we've made, these recording devices: photography, film, audio tape, video, now computers. They're like machines that generate images and capture images, reproduce them and distribute them.

So that idea of a dis-rootedness, or disconnectedness from the source or original function is much more pronounced today. To make an analogy to food: most people are eating food that's of no use to the body. They're seeing all this stuff and it's really not useful to them. That's something that I'm hopeful or optimistic will gradually change. It represents a transitional, historical period, and as we – through information technologies and the advancement of the information management systems that we're developing now to deal with all this vast amount of stuff that's floating around – we'll be able to get a handle on this image flow that seems so out of control and begin to really think about using it on our own terms and not on some corporation's.

CD: So that we'll be able to become more selective?

BV: Yeah. Which is what all the advancements in technology in the 20th century are all about really. The key word is user-control, it used to be user friendly. It's all based on now tailoring ... It's like you're dealing with a small body of water and all of sudden it became an ocean one day and nobody realises that right away. It's beyond any person so it has to be channelled and controlled.

CD: Do you think that because it's been going on for twenty years or so the younger generation have the skill to select?

BV: That's a debateable topic. In some cases I 'd say yes. The younger person today is probably better suited at dealing with this vast flow of images. They can grab bits and pieces of

them. An older generation wants the whole thing and the younger generation is taking out scenes from movies and they're fine with that.

At another level, a younger generation is bathing in these images, the way a dish bathes in water. The task of each human life individually and collectively, is to understand the context of things, is to understand the nature of the things that we're taken for granted.

Because the process of learning as a young child is increasing the database so that you can become a fully functioning member of the society you're living in. Which by its nature is a process which submerges a lot of that information onto to lower levels, deeper subconscious levels, and that becomes the basis of experience – consensus reality that you need to start from to do whatever you going to do with your life. And it takes a while as you get older that you can retrospectively modify that experience and become aware of things that you just took for granted.

SK: We've spoken about a difference between generations, but it's also a particular bearing that any individual has to that image flow or to the idea of time. Obviously one of the recurring themes in your work is the difference between knowledge and direct experience, a concept you've found more pronounced in eastern ideas or philosophies. What is the relation of those two attitudes to the image flow? In your work there seems to be a greater selectivity based on wanting to create a sense of being rather than more information. (Another strategy you can imagine is to simply overload information, bring it to some kind of radical breakdown where it becomes interesting or fascinating. But you don't work in that way at all.)

BV: Right, right, right. But that's been done in the 20th century. That was one of the major artistic projects of the 20th century. So we have now done that already. People like John Cage showed us that; what happens in that situation. Robert Rauschenberg. That's what they were doing. That's where the art of collage came from. This information threshold was reached and then we can use it as an artistic material but we can also deal with and embody this massive onslaught of information and images.

The most important skill that people need today is discernment and focus. If you don't have that you're swamped. So that's why there's a new relevance to eastern religions because they've been teaching that for the millennium; how to focus the mind, how to get control of it.

One of the metaphors for the mind is the racing steed: the horse is out of control and you're not even holding the reins. The whole idea of spiritual discipline is how to get control of this thing so that you are the rider. In my work, what I've been interested in is really that process of bringing things into focus through the kinds of images I use and how I use time and images. It's all about focus and a centering process.

What you said before about images; that's another important point. This environment we're in now – the image-world we've created around ourselves – the danger of it is this dis-rootedness which is precisely what the European intellectuals and particularly the French intellectuals have really been fascinated with - Umberto Eco, Baudrillard, Lacan. They're really interested in all this stuff jumbled up and it has no historical context and there's a lot of energy out of that and it's given a lot of 20th century artists an incredible source of energy to work from.

But when you really look at what's going on it's this kind of dis-rootedness that's also happened. That's the down side.

If you look at how an image works, say an image of a mother and child. Now in the middle ages and Renaissance that was a sacred image and it came out of pagan culture, out of fertility rites and female energy and it was coopted by the Christian church into the Madonna and child which also still speaks to those same things.

And that same image today can be used to represent life insurance on TV. The image is the same but the use and function have changed. And that's why we're in the image-world today because images are just symbols. They're not like written language; they're flexible and fluid. One image for two people can mean opposite things. That's the beauty of it.

And yet we're also in an age now that is like an image war, fighting for the re-representation of an image which is going to be life-giving and nurturing and positive. And I don't mean positive like a nice pretty image of a mother and child. I mean an image of someone getting slaughtered in a horrible war - images from Bosnia for example - are positive in the sense that they create energy that is going to alleviate that suffering. That's the big issue today. It's not the images *per se*, it's the use and function of those images and how they have been used and taken over by the commercial world or by political forces.

SK: You've actually described your work as a kind of pre-verbal or pre-linguistic space. That through the work you are returned to a space beneath language, prior to words. In the catalogue to *The Messenger*, David Jasper describes a similar space as the space of the theologian. He writes of your work: 'No God answers our questions, but we are left to respond either with wonder or fear ... 'What do we say?' and the response to that question is the task of the theologian'.

BV: Theologians have had as much to do with images - if not more - as political forces have; the king or monarch, the sultan or whoever. Because when an artist signed a contract in the late middle ages to the Renaissance they had to answer to theologians who had the ultimate power, acting on behalf of the bishop, to turn in the final form of the image. The image had to be theologically correct. And that even goes back to an ancient Byzantine idea that a good artist depicts the soul not the body. It's really beautiful. It was not considered important to represent optical reality; that was the least important aspect of our experience of the world.

SK: Where this ends up is a kind of positive image making in contrast to what we've talked about as a 20th century impulse towards critique which you have identified with in terms of your early work. Even the status of video in the 70s as a critical medium.

BV: I came through that and I have a lot of respect for artists who are doing political work who are showing us these things. It's extremely important work to be doing. It's work that is not just simply something that is appropriate at a certain time and then we've solved that so 'OK, let's move on to the next artistic problem'. No. Every age, every time needs vigilance, needs someone to be showing us something that is being concealed within, which all political systems excel at: keeping out of view, the nature of the power structure, the oppression. So that's an important function of artists and it's always going to be there and I have a lot of respect for people who are doing that.

But I think personally, I've seen a need for providing images or visions that talk to what happens when you're healed, and to the process of healing and to alternatives. If the world is all falling down, then let's envision a world that is built up again or complete. If the self is being fragmented, let's visualise a self that's whole.

That is, generally speaking, two parts to human being: fear and sense of hopelessness and dread that things are out of control and falling apart, dying; and the other side, that things are being made whole again, things are coming into balance again. And that's 'paradise' and 'inferno'. That's something in human beings that also oscillates through history, these two forces. And we need artists to give an image of a vision to those inner forces within us. That's what artists do. They embody in some physical form these invisible realities we live with.

SK: If that's a direction in your work or working premise, how are digital technologies involved in that direction? For example, your latest work called *The Tree of Knowledge* is entirely digital. You've said that 'the most liberating difference is that in the digital world you no longer have to rely on light as the basis for making an image – the direct connection to the outside world is broken'. I'm wondering why you experience that as a limit in the first place and in transcending or transgressing that limit what direction you're heading in and how digital technologies will get you there?

BV: Well I don't know how I experience that as a limit. I guess I didn't really think of it as a limit. I've been keeping up with the technology, with what's going on even though I haven't done any serious work in computer graphics. I've been aware of the theoretical implications of it, thought a lot about it, even written about it. But it was the first time I've had the actual experience of doing it.

It was interesting for me to come to that work out more recent experience of film and working in a more conventional structure which is the movie-making structure of director and crew. I really started that in the 90s doing some pieces in that medium - I call it a medium, it is like a medium, a full crew and you're the director, the people themselves are a medium, in order to do something, to allow something to happen.

So I had that experience and that's very similar to what happened when I was sitting down in front of the computer with this German programmer Lars? and doing that piece, as we were putting that tree in some kind of three dimensional space. We were lighting that tree, moving it, 'Let's change this, let's do that'. It became very directorial, very much about visualisation [which I also do a lot because I could never afford for many years to have a lot of equipment or shoot a lot of stuff, so I visualise a lot of stuff in my mind before I was actually ready to make a piece]. We were doing that a lot. It was in that kind of virtual - and I hate to use that word because it's become such a cliché – sort of non physical space of imagination; 'what if, what if, what if?'

You don't need a real tree. That was really comfortable. And if you look at what's been going on in my work recently, especially these big figure pieces, they're not in any kind of real space. They're in some kind of imaginary space, or a neutral space.

In the beginning a lot of the work absolutely had to be a real place. I had to go somewhere. I

went to the Sahara with my camera, I went to the mountains. I found a particular broken down old factory. It was like putting this image making device in a real place. And as it's evolved I can see it's moving into a more internal space. The guy walking towards you in The Crossing? He's inside; he's not out in the real world. That's an inner image. It's not an external image of the world. That's the natural space for the computer. The natural space for the computer is to not be out in the mountains because the computer's rendering mountains comes from some intrinsic reality of a code that describes a mountain, and not from the actual physical journey to go to a mountain, to open your eyes and see the images. It's contemplative and camera's are optical. The computer is a contemplative instrument.

CD: If you take away the real tree, then that helps to achieve another reality.

BV: Well that's Plato, right there. The difference between Aristotle and Plato. Aristotle was very much of the world. Plato was an idealist, his theory of ideal forms, which gave so much energy to the middle ages and artists in the Renaissance. Plato's treatise on beauty is what Michaelangelo and Raffael studied when they were young. Truth and beauty - that's pure Plato. The 'chairness' that's in a chair, the 'cupness' that's in a cup; these ideal forms, [that of] which the world of appearances is simply a very specific, diminished reproduction of, but [which] are still connected to some place which is not this physical world where these ideal forms reside. And his theory of ideal forms is very relevant to today, again.

SK: You describe this shift from optics to information – from optical reality to conceptual reality – which seems to be implicit in this discussion of Platonic forms and the idea in itself.

BV: That's exactly what I see technology is amplifying and accelerating for us: the reality of the world and the information age is the reality of codes and data, and the recombination of those elements. The reality of the mechanical age is the transformation and reality of physical material; the segmentation and division and quantification of the world. They're just different ways of looking at the same thing.

We're coming into an age now where the information of the existence of something is more real than the thing itself. Therefore the human being is being described as a sequence of codes - and a lot of money is being spent on this.

Now it's not coincidental that the human genome project has arisen in the same age as computers. It's not to say – as science typically does - that computers were invented and that sparked something and then [came] the human genome concept. No. I don't see that at all. I see both of those things as coming from something else deeper that generates those things as possibilities, in different forms of the same kind of process, and [which] is transforming our relationship to the physical world.

SK: Thyrsa Nichols Goodeve in Artbyte calls it 'Techno Spiritualism'.

BV: I totally expect that. It's [a] completely logical [response].

SK: But to be clear: it's not about ascending.

BV: Same problems. The human condition will never change. The same problems will be there

in every age. The Middle Ages was totally fucked up, socially and politically, and yet they had a world that even the common person believed was suffused with divine power directly from God. God was a force in the world. All the things of nature were imbued with God.

Now that seems like a cool idea. You probably wouldn't have war, would you? You wouldn't have famine and atrocities, would you? Nooooo! Science was going to cure us, now we're civilised, right? There's no war, we defeated the Hitlers. [Right?] Bosnia, Serbia, Pol Pot. Those guys will be there in the information age and the age of techno spiritualism. The demons are within.