



BILL VIOLA

## Bill Viola: An introduction

*With every moment a world is born and dies,  
And know that for you, with every moment come  
death and renewal*

— Jallaludin Rumi (1207–1273) *The Masnavi*

Commissioned for the monumental space of the Great West Door of the twelfth century Durham Cathedral, *The Messenger* is a video and sound installation which follows the rise and fall of a floating male figure – surfacing, gasping for air and sinking back slowly in the dark water. It possesses a spiritual resonance which transcends the specific religion of its initial commission, becoming a metaphor for emergence, renewal, rebirth, revelation, and the personal journey of individual existence. As Viola commented: 'It reminds you of where you came from. When you see the man emerge out of the water and take a breath, there is a birth every time he comes back into our world.'<sup>1</sup> For the viewer, the experience is immersive, and closer, it has been remarked, to that of floating under water than to watching a film.

When Bill Viola was ten years old, he fell into a lake and nearly drowned. 'The thing I remember is the imagery of this incredibly beautiful, serene blue-green world that I had no idea existed below the surface', he recalled, 'It was peaceful and mysterious. I wasn't afraid at all.'<sup>2</sup> He has repeatedly reinterpreted this experience of the underwater in sequences of his video installations from his early work onwards. As he has remarked: 'My work is a perpetual evolution and development of a series of ideas that I had when I was younger; it's not a chronological sequence.'<sup>3</sup> These ideas were worked through his progression from single-channel video to room-scaled video installation, assisted by his notebooks which he sees as 'a journal or a kind of travelogue, mapping a personal course through various readings, quotations, associations, observations, experiments and ideas for pieces, all jumbled into one.'<sup>4</sup>

Born in 1951, Bill Viola was raised in Queens, New York, by his English mother and American father. At school, he was captain of the TV Squad, played drums in a rock band and in 1969, he enrolled at Syracuse University to study advertising, but then moved to the College of Visual and Performing Arts. He read Eastern religious texts, particularly those of the thirteenth century Persian poet and mystic, Jallaludin Rumi, and studied electronic music which opened up 'the whole world of electronics, circuitry, and analogue-wave theory... which was a great basis for going into video'.<sup>5</sup>

Pursuing independent study in a new department called Experimental Studios, Viola, with a group called Synapse, wired the campus for two-way interactive-cable colour TV. He graduated from the University with a fine arts degree in 1973. In the same year he met experimental composer David Tudor and became part of his *Rainforest* project, making a number of recordings and sound

installations throughout the seventies. Sound would continue to play a major role in his video and filmic work. He made an underwater soundscape with audio engineer and sound designer, Bob Bielecki, while artist-in-residence at ZBS, Fort Edward, New York. He also worked as the video preparator at the Everson Museum of Art where he helped video artists like Peter Campus, Frank Gilette and Nam June Paik whose explorations of video and exacting specifications for installation and presentation were influential in his training.

In Florence, Italy, as technical director of a studio called Art/Tapes/22 in 1974, he assisted European and American artists like Jannis Kounellis, Guilio Paolini and Vito Acconci with their work and was impressed 'to see how these people were more focused on the ideas than on the medium.'<sup>6</sup> He exhibited for the first time in Europe with a video/sound installation, *Il Vapore* 1975.

Viola spent most of his time in Florence in pre-Renaissance spaces, lingering in the great cathedrals and churches with an audiotape recorder, making a series of acoustic records of much of the religious architecture of the city. He later recalled: 'It impressed me that regardless of one's religious beliefs, the enormous resonant stone halls of the medieval cathedrals have an undeniable effect on the inner state of the viewer. And sound seemed to carry so much of the feeling of the ineffable.'<sup>7</sup>

This period in Italy was the first of many overseas trips Viola undertook to study different cultures, music, art and dance, exploring various forms of spirituality and religious ritual. His travels were made possible through grants and fellowships achieved from the late 1970s and because Viola's father worked for an American airline. These diverse experiences of other cultures, together with his readings in Eastern and Christian religious thought, would continue to be fundamental influences informing Viola's work.

By the late seventies, Viola was an artist-in-residence at WNET/Thirteen Television Laboratory, New York, working with state-of-the-art broadcast technology. He was also travelling to make videos in the Solomon Islands, Java, and Bali, Indonesia, where he recorded traditional music and performing arts. He accepted an invitation to visit Australia in 1977 where he met Kira Perov, a photographer and director of cultural activities at La Trobe University and they travelled and worked together during 1978 to 1979, settling in 1981 in Southern California.

From his trips to the Tunisian Sahara to record mirages and to the bleak winter prairies of Saskatchewan to record snowscapes, Viola merged the two experiences of extremes in the haunting *Chott el-Djerid (A portrait in Light and Heat)* 1979, his first landscape piece, which received the Grand Prize at the International Video Art Festival, Kobe, Japan.

He made his second visit to Japan on a cultural exchange fellowship from 1980 to 1981 and lived there with Perov for eighteen months, studying Zen Buddhism with master Daien Tanaka and

advanced video technology at Sony Corporation's Atsugi Laboratories.

Around this time, Viola noted 'Sense of place has been of primary importance in my work. I have travelled all over the world to gather images for my videotapes. I have found that the more intense my experience at a place making a tape, the more power the piece absorbs for itself.'<sup>8</sup>

From 1982 to 1987, Viola and Perov travelled to Ladakh in the Himalayas to observe religious art and ritual in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and to Fiji, to document fire walking ceremonies of the South Indians. His installation *Room for St. John of the Cross*, 1983, inspired by the 16th century Spanish poet and mystic imprisoned in a tiny, windowless cell during the Inquisition, reflected Viola's spiritual influences at the time. These had moved from Eastern philosophies and the writings of Zen scholar Daisetz Suzuki and Ananda Coomaraswamy, the Sri Lankan art historian and scholar, to the Western mystics, like Meister Eckhart, St. John of the Cross, Hildegard van Bingen and Plotinus. His engagement with these writers reinforced his interest, begun during his early years in Florence, in the large public sculpture and architecturally integrated paintings in churches and cathedrals which he saw as a form of installation – 'a physical, spatial, totally consuming experience.'<sup>9</sup>

In 1987, he closed his studio to travel with Perov throughout the Southwest to study ancient Native American archaeological sites and rock art. He started filming exclusively in black and white, recording images at the threshold of visibility with image-intensified and infra-red low-light video cameras. That same year the exhibition *Bill Viola: Installations and Videotapes*, was held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York and he received the Maya Deren Award from the American Film Institute. The birth of their first son in 1988, the recording of a childbirth in 1989 and the death of his mother early in 1991, followed by the birth of their second son, resulted in the completion of four years of production on videotape, *The Passing* 1991, a reflection on birth and death. 'These events focused my investigations and interests in a very real way', he remarked, (my mother's) death gave me a deeper understanding of things I had been grappling with for most of my life.'<sup>10</sup>

Incorporating memory, reality and fantasy, *The Passing* includes an image of Viola lying underwater, fully clothed, as though drowned. *The Passing* marked a turning point, shifting his role from subject to viewer: 'I realised then that I wanted to jump over the moment of recording to get closer to what the viewing moment was like... from making work by embodying the experience to making work by observing the experience, moving my focus from the performance to the camera'.<sup>11</sup>

The *Nantes Triptych* of 1992, commissioned by the Centre National des Arts Plastiques, juxtaposed three large projected video images in a configuration based on the triptych altarpiece form, in keeping with an installation for a seventeenth



century French chapel. The right and left images are of a woman giving birth and an elderly woman dying and, in the middle, a submerged male body – suspended, as it were, between life and death. ‘I consider art to be a branch of knowledge, not a function of pleasure’, Viola noted at this time, ‘The sensory experience is the means of comprehending and encountering the invisible... I aim to connect the body and the mind.’<sup>12</sup>

In the same year he produced nine new installations most of which focus on themes on consciousness, death, birth, and mortality. *Unseen Images*, an installation of seven of these works, toured throughout Europe.

During this time Viola began working with 35 mm high-speed film and in 1994, Ensemble Modern Frankfurt invited him to create his first work with music, *Déserts*, to be screened with a live performance of music by Edgard Varèse, for broadcast on German television. This marks his first production using a full film crew, a constructed set and 35 mm film with video segments.

Viola created five new filmic and sound installation works for the US Pavilion at the 46th Venice Biennale in 1995. *Buried Secrets*, designed to function as an integrated whole, concludes with *The Greeting*, based on a Mannerist painting, *Visitation* by Jacopo Pontormo. This records a meeting of three women, which is shown in extreme slow motion, accentuating the nuance of every glance and gesture – an effect achieved by recording on high speed 35mm film, stretching a forty-five second event to ten minutes.

*The Messenger* commissioned by the Chaplaincy to the Arts and Recreation in North East England in 1996 was Viola's second work specifically created for a cathedral, following the earlier *Nantes Triptych*. The title however derives from a secular source, from the 19th century American poet, Walt Whitman:

*By the sea under yellow and sagging moon,  
The messenger there aroused, the fire, the sweet  
hell within,  
The unknown want, the destiny of me.*

Water, as with fire and breath, is a recurring motif in Viola's work, from his early pieces such as *He Weeps for You* of 1976, which concentrates on the drop of water as a lens and mirror, to the monumental *Stations* 1994, an installation commissioned by the Bohem Foundation, New York. Here five large-scale projected images of human bodies floating underwater are reflected onto black granite. For Viola, water is ‘the fluid of life, it's got a very fundamental connection to what we are and it also has some amazing visual properties. It can do amazing things with colour, it also at a symbolic level is a metaphor for the other world’.<sup>13</sup>

Last year Viola's key role in developing contemporary video art was marked by an honorary Doctorate from The School of The Art Institute of Chicago, a Getty Scholar's grant and the opening of a comprehensive twenty-five year survey of his work organised by the Whitney Museum in New York. This major exhibition demonstrated the thematic continuity of Viola's

videotapes and installations and the connections between his early and later works. His most recent composition, *The Tree of Knowledge* 1997, is his first interactive computer-generated work. Dealing with his primary concerns of birth and death, consciousness and memory, it uses simulated rather than recorded imagery and is composed to encourage viewers ‘to experience it, as much as possible, as a mental image.’<sup>14</sup>

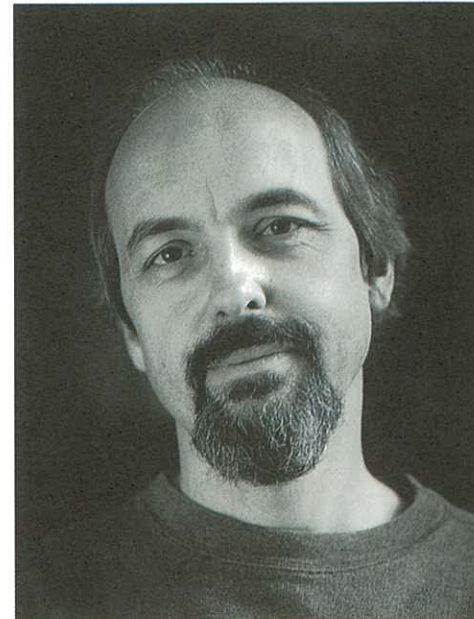
Viola's work since the seventies has been driven by a fundamental conviction: ‘There's another dimension that you just know is there, that can be a source of real knowledge, and the quest for connecting with that and identifying that is the whole impetus for me to cultivate these experiences and to make my work.’<sup>15</sup>

Jenepher Duncan October 1998

#### Notes

- 1 Bill Viola, interview with Lewis Hyde, March 10, 1997, *Bill Viola*, exhibition catalogue, curators David A Ross and Peter Sellars, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, in association with Flammarion, Paris, 1997, p.164
- 2 Bill Viola quoted by Hunter Drohojowska Philp, ‘The Self-Discovery Channel’, *ART News*, November 1997, p.206
- 3 Bill Viola interviewed by Rosanna Albertini, ‘Bill Viola, The Dividing Eye’, *Art Press*, 233, p.25
- 4 Bill Viola, *Bill Viola Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House. Writings 1976 to 1981*, edited by Robert Violette in collaboration with the author, Introduction by Jean-Christopher Ammann, Thames and Hudson, Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London, 1995 p.267
- 5 Bill Viola, quoted by Hunter D Philp, ‘The Self-Discovery Channel’, *ART News*, November 1997, p.208
- 6 Bill Viola, *ibid.*
- 7 Bill Viola, *Writings 1976 to 1981*, op.cit. p.241
- 8 Bill Viola, Note, 1982, *Writings 1976 to 1981*, *ibid.* p.149
- 9 Bill Viola, Note, January 11, 1991, *Writings 1976 to 1981*, *ibid.* p.182
- 10 Bill Viola, quoted by Hunter D Philp, 1997. op.cit. p.209
- 11 Bill Viola interview with Virginia Rutledge, ‘Art at the End of the Optical Age’, *Art in America*, March 1998, p.74
- 12 Bill Viola, Note, January 11, 1991, *Writings 1976 to 1981*, op.cit. p.182
- 13 Mary Blume, ‘Bill Viola: Bringing New Art to Old Church’, *International Herald Tribune*, October 19–20, 1996
- 14 Bill Viola interview with Virginia Rutledge, *Art in America*, March 1998, op.cit. p.75
- 15 Bill Viola interview with Lewis Hyde, March 5, 1997, in *Bill Viola*, exhibition catalogue, 1997, op.cit. p.143

Images: Front cover and inside: *The Messenger* 1996, (detail) video/sound installation. Photo: Kira Perov  
Below: Bill Viola. Photo: Beth Herzhaft



#### Bill Viola: The Messenger

Melbourne Festival in association with Australian Centre for Contemporary Art at Old Melbourne Gaol Chapel RMIT University. Exhibition dates: 17 October – 1 November 1998  
Curator: Jenepher Duncan

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