



BILL VIOLA

*January 21 to March 14, 1993*

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Bill Viola's world comprehends darkness and light, past and present, heat and cold, the infinitely large and the microscopic. It is embedded in the eternal cycle of life and death that permeates Oriental philosophy and that underlies, like a mandala, every aspect of the human condition.

The shamanistic works of this American artist are genuine visual poems whose images, touched by the effects of active contemplation, draw their inspiration from the great traditions of painting and an assiduous observation of nature, together with both personal and mythical events; they also reflect an ongoing interest in the history of religion, artificial intelligence, science and the origins of language. Bill

**Voyages in Memory and Time** Viola has exhibited at major international museums — among them the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris — and participated in a number of renowned world art events, including the Festival d'Avignon and the Venice Biennale. With people like Fluxus artist Nam June Paik and Peter Campus, Viola is considered one of the pioneers of contemporary video. During his fine arts studies at Syracuse University in the U.S. he became interested in rock and later electronic music, dipped into performance (notably with John Cage) and gradually moved along a logical continuum to the medium of video.

Since the early 1970s he has developed a powerful language centred on sound, time and memory. For Viola, sound — as important as image — is an energy field. Time, which destroys and serves simultaneously as a vital force, is the basic material of video. Memory, connected to both the past and the future, filters, records and selects information. By X-raying these three phenomena in an introspective and ontological approach that explores the fluidity of memories and tracks the tumult of the emotions, Bill Viola has produced a series of non-narrative videotapes and installations, most of which feature the artist in the role of "mediator between the external world and technology."<sup>1</sup>

His works are magnetic: spectators may decide to forgo a passive attitude, to employ their own memories and to examine their own selves. Few can resist the draw of such a pilgrimage into the realm of knowledge, experience and dreams. In contrast to television, that voluble fantasy-box that fails increasingly to satisfy our needs and desires, Viola's video work forces us to empty our minds, to reflect on the reality that surrounds us, to investigate the various levels of time that constitute the image, to dream. In the hands of Bill Viola, video is a living organism, a tool of knowledge that enables him to work with places, people and situations drawn from reality and subject them to the various highly sophisticated techniques of computer editing. Thus are established close correspondences between eye and ear, mind and body.

But this vision of the world around us is never immediate. The image presented by Viola is a veil that must be gradually penetrated before one can become part of the work. *Chott el-Djerid*, a videotape produced in 1979, plays on the mechanism of sight and the passage of time. Having patiently awaited the right weather conditions for filming on the plains of Saskatchewan and Illinois, and in the Tunisian desert, the artist-nomad — who frequently transports his high-tech equipment into vast, silent landscapes — succeeded (using, among other things, a powerful telephoto lens) in recreating a mirage. The aim was to seize the most precise moment possible and to retransmit it like some modern-day Delacroix, capturing on canvas with his paint-laden brushes the minutest subtleties of natural light. In the video's eye the heat causes atmospheric shimmerings from which the people, minute, fantastic silhouettes, emerge like fleeting hallucinations.

For Bill Viola, video represents a reflection on solitude, confinement and a particular form of external violence but it is also an exploration of sensorial boundaries. In *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House* (1982), a chair fitted with earphones is positioned in front of a video screen that shows an image of the artist, seated and somnolent. Despite his fatigue (he had gone without sleep for three days and nights), Viola tries to watch the interlocutor who faces him and who hears in the earphones organic noises and whisperings picked up by small microphones placed in the artist's ears. The piece sparks a process of projection and transfer: spectators are able to synchronize the rhythm of their breathing with the artist's, and virtually become the Other.

Then, at irregular intervals, someone enters the image and hits the artist on the head with a magazine, and the sounds broadcast on the private channel that links the two protagonists are interrupted. At this point a violent noise is emitted that can also be heard — with dramatic effect — by the spectators circulating within the vicinity of the installation.

In the tape *Hatsu Yume* (1981) the shock is visual; here, Bill Viola shapes light almost like a liquid and slows the image down till it floats and becomes a "microscope of time." The same microscope is at the centre of the installation *Science of the Heart* (1983), where a heart beats to varying rhythms above a bed. The artist has the ability to take an image and stretch it like a second skin: the grain becomes so evident, so clear, the effect is vertiginous. Drawn like a moth towards a brilliant bulb, spectators crash bodily into the blinding image of *Passage* (1987). Their gaze is caught by the pixels that riddle the children's faces, mimicking prematurely the stigmata of age.

A voyage between the folds of flesh and of memory. Sleep to forget a life filled with illusions, to shatter transient reality. A piece of furniture: on top, an alarm clock, a lamp, a bouquet, a video screen showing a man dozing. On the nearby walls of the room, projections: an X-ray, a skeleton that vanishes to reveal an owl, a bird of ill

omen, carrying with it a whole series of malevolent symbols. This is *Sleep of Reason*, an installation created in 1988. An excursion into the realm of dreams and nightmares, a return to primal sources, where consciousness sleeps and time takes on another dimension.

This nighttime vision recalls the etching entitled *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*<sup>2</sup> from the *Los Caprichos* series executed by the Spanish artist Francisco Goya in 1789: a man in profound slumber is attacked by predators who will disappear when he awakes and regains his reason. For the Romantic English artist William Blake, this reason, source of phantasmagorical monsters, is a cold, pure zone, rocky like the abysses that destroy the imagination. In one of his poems Blake makes his hero, Urizen, a symbol of nothingness, a master of time, which he violently battles and divides, as he renders circular the space in which he is dying.

Once, Bill Viola perched in the topmost branches of a tree and remained there, without moving, from dawn until nightfall, surrounded by birds.<sup>3</sup> He is an odd, chameleon-like figure, who draws us into his *chiaroscuro* theatre, scene of excruciating tensions between the realms of the said and the unsaid. Bill Viola is elusive: a visionary poet, a writer, a musician who, in his seclusion, tirelessly recomposes for us all the mornings of the world. Mornings as ethereal as air, as haunting as a plunge into the deepest sleep, where night greets the wanderings of the soul and the convulsions of the heart.

#### MARIE-MICHÈLE CRON

1. Stephen Sarrazin, "Bill Viola, la chaise et l'ordinateur", *Art Press*, special issue, No. 12, 1991, p. 35.

2. *Goya et son temps*, Richard Schickel (ed.), Time-Life Collection, 1968, p. 109.

3. "La sculpture du temps", interview with Bill Viola by Raymond Bellour, *Cahiers du cinéma*, No. 379, January 1986, p. 42.

Cover: *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House* (detail), 1982.

Inside: *Hatsu Yume*, 1981.

Photos: Kira Perov

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*The rooms in the  
installations are black  
because this is the colour  
of the inside of your head.  
So the real location of  
all my installations is  
the mind, it's not really  
the landscape, the  
physical landscape*

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