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A spiritual journey in Bill Viola's art

Elena Marcheschi

Exhibition: Bill Viola (Paris, Grand Palais, Galeries nationales, 5 March – 21 July 2014)
 Catalogue: *Bill Viola* (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 2014),
 sous la direction de Jérôme Neutres, <http://www.grandpalais.fr/en/event/bill-viola>

From 5 March to 21 July 2014 the Grand Palais in Paris presented the largest retrospective ever dedicated to the American artist Bill Viola¹ in France. Viola is one of the most important pioneers of video art, whose work has been showcased in many of the world's most important museums. This was also the first exhibition dedicated to video art in the history of the Galerie nationales du Grand Palais, a huge site for cultural commemoration, preservation, and canonised art that on this occasion became a spectacular context for showing what the medium of video is. Almost 40 years of Viola's work was presented, from 1977 to 2013 – a span that, apart from the 1960s, represents the historical development of video art. From single-channel videos, video sculptures, video installations, video projections, and sound environments, the retrospective depicted what may be called Viola's spiritual journey through the electronic medium.

The exhibition itinerary was conceived as an emotional path itself; the public was meant to step into a contemporary version of Plato's cave, a dark and silent space with a hushed atmosphere that recalled a house of prayer where the visitor was invited to establish a deep visual and spiritual connection with each work of art. As Jérôme Neutres, curator of the exhibition, writes: '[t]he artist's intention is to create conditions that enable the public to *immerse* itself in the image – a symbol expressed by the recurrent metaphor of a body plunging into water.'² In fact, as Valentina Valentini says, in Viola's exhibitions the visitor is not only a mere spectator ..., because his works are not just containers for different things.³

At the Grand Palais the invitation to a personal and intimate journey was marked at the beginning with a quotation by the soufi Ibn Arabi: '[i]f you engage the travel, you will arrive.' Divided into three ideal chapters connected to three metaphysical questions, the retrospective asked the public to confront some common and fundamental issues about the human condition, questions that have been investigated in Viola's research: *Who am I? Where am I? Where am I going?* In this perspective the artist's desire was to trigger an aesthetic experience and a spiritual confrontation. The cycle of life from birth to death, the practice of introspection, the relationship between landscape and mankind, the ideas of transcendence and transfiguration – these are the great themes that Viola offered in this exhibition.

Although the retrospective began with the grainy and trembling projection of *The Reflecting Pool* (1977-1979), one of his first works, and ended with the seven high-resolution screens of *The Dreamers* (2013), the 20 works of art presented in between were not in chronological order. There was the metaphorical beginning of Viola's video art, an entrance with a proactive jump into the water and all the possible temporal manipulations of that bounce (frozen image, slow motion, appearance, disappearance); also, a closure, with the apparent stillness and peace of seven individuals submerged underwater. As Maria Rosa Sossai writes, the presence of water

is an acknowledgement of the crucial role this element plays in the iconography of the great masters of painting, and of its value as a dynamic natural force. In its flowing, water stands in relation to passing time ... or, as Viola recalls, the flow of electrons. In its complex symbolism, water may be seen as a celebration of the ritual of purification through which ordinary gestures turn into something unprecedented.⁴

Like the protagonist of *Ascension* (2000), who suddenly plunges into the water from above as if involved in a choreographed baptism, in this retrospective the spectator was given the chance to drown into a spiritual element. As Viola says, 'the artist must immerse himself in a world so intimate and private, with the aim to create something that may be shared with many and different people'.⁵



Fig. 1: Bill Viola, *Ascension*, 2000, color video projection on wall in dark room; stereo sound; projected image size: 131 7/8 x 98 7/8 in (335 x 251 cm); room dimensions variable; 10:00. Performer: Josh Coxx. Photo: Kira Perov. Courtesy of Bill Viola Studio LLC.

Time is another crucial issue in Viola's work. As a sculptor of time (as Viola likes to define himself), his work is based on the manipulation of the speed of the electronic flux. 'In Viola's tapes we sense that he is manipulating the instantaneous – stretching it or exaggerating its effect of momentariness.'⁶ Although there is no stillness in Viola's work, his basic idea of expanded time is meant to calm the spectator in order to purify his capacity to look outside and inside himself. As Valentini writes, 'what is required is a religious vision, not a distracted and fast mass consumption ... to enter the vision of Viola's works of art it is necessary to dive into a bath of darkness, to purify our eyes'⁷ The exhibition visitors were engaged in a kind of meditation training, pushed to research something that was both mental and physical; a hidden place inside themselves, to embrace a holy sense of the infinite. That was the alchemy created by *Heaven and Earth* (1992), the second piece presented in the retrospective, a video sculpture formed by two exposed monitors facing each other, each one showing a black-and-white video image: the upper monitor presents the image of an old woman close to death, the lower monitor shows a close-up of a newborn baby. The two images reflect and blur into each other because of the glass surface of each monitor. In this touching installation, as in Buddhist philosophy, the concepts of birth and death melt together – since birth is not really a beginning and death is not really an end.



Fig. 2: Bill Viola, Heaven and Earth, 1992, video installation; in a small alcove, a wood column extends from the floor and ceiling with a gap in the center formed by two exposed monitors facing each other, two inches apart, mounted to upper and lower columns respectively, a black-and-white video image on each monitor; 9 1/2 x 16 1/8 x 18 ft (2.9 x 4.9 x 5.5 m); 29:52. Photo: Robert Keziere. Courtesy of Bill Viola Studio LLC.

With *Four Hands* (2001), a black-and-white video polyptych on four LCD panels, Viola has offered the public the chance for another intimate and symbolic reflection about the mysteries of our origins and the cycle of life. In this work four pair of hands – those of a young boy, those of a middle-aged woman and a man, and those of an elderly woman – perform a series of gestures influenced by Buddhist mudras and ancient English chirologia tables. In Viola's work the idea of passage of time is strictly connected to the important issue of the body, which is not only the expression of physical and mental decay but also the expression of the soul and passions.

In the video installation *The Quintet of Astonished* (2000), inspired by Bosch's *Christ Crowned with Thorns*, a group of five people are shown as they are afflicted by an intense emotion. The slow motion stretched to the extreme allows the spectator to catch the smallest details of facial expression. If many of Viola's works have been inspired by religious paintings realised by Giotto, Pontormo, Durer, et al., it is important to understand that he is not interested in a specific religion or god; also, how much he is fascinated by people with emotions, their surprises, their fears, their pains – feelings that Viola wants to represent in a meticulous and overemphasised way, as Anne-Marie Duguet says during an interview included in Jean-Paul Fargier's video *Bill Viola, expérience de l'infini*, created on the occasion of the retrospective.⁸

The biggest space of the exhibition was dedicated to the huge installation *Going Forth by Day* (2002). Divided in five parts directly projected onto the walls as in Italian Renaissance frescoes, it was the largest and most technically-complex work in the show, with five image sequences playing simultaneously that explore some fundamental themes of human existence: the relation between the individual and society, the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Once inside the room the atmosphere was that of a holy, collective ceremony. Overwhelmed by the light of a huge fire at the entrance, the public was free to move around and look at each single video or to keep still, trying to catch the subtle links between the complexity of images.

The final part of the exhibition was dedicated to those works connected to the ideas of rebirth and transcendence. Besides the previously-mentioned *Ascension* and *The Dreamers*, the two works opening this section were the haunting and immersive installations extracted from Viola's creation for Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*, directed by Peter Sellars: *Tristan's Ascension (The Sound of a Mountain Under a Waterfall)* (2005) and *Fire Woman* (2005).



Fig. 3: Bill Viola, Fire Woman, 2005; color high-definition video projection; four channels of sound with subwoofer (4.1); screen size: 19 x 10 3/4 ft (5.8 x 3.26 m); room dimensions variable; n:12. Performer: Robin Bonaccorsi. Photo: Kira Perov. Courtesy of Bill Viola Studio LLC.

The installations feature a projection onto a tall, vertically-oriented screen, where the soul of the literary hero is awakened after his death and raised to the sky through a spectacular waterfall. Also, a second tall projection presented the vision of a woman standing up against a wall of fire and then falling into the water. After these two mythical and mystical apparitions the public at the Grand Palais was invited to step back into the more concrete and human body in the diptych *Man Searching for Immortality/Woman Searching for Eternity* (2013), where two naked figures of senior citizens are projected on large vertical slabs of black granite, as if they are carved out over their graves; their skin is explored with a small light, trying to isolate diseases or corruptions. The seven submerged bodies of *The Dreamers* suspended between life and death closed the exhibition and the public's spiritual journey.



Fig. 4: Bill Viola, The Dreamers, 2013, video/sound installation; seven channels of color high-definition video on seven plasma displays mounted vertically on wall in darkened room; four-channel stereo sound; room dimensions: 21 3/8 x 21 3/8 x 11 1/2 ft (6.5 x 6.5 x 3.5 m); continuously running. Performers: Gleb Kaminer, Rebekah Rife, Mark Ofugi, Madison Corn, Sharon Ferguson, Christian Vincent, Katherine McKalip. Photo: Peter Mallet. Courtesy of Bill Viola Studio LLC.

Inspired by the great masters of painting and with a deep knowledge of Zen Buddhism, Christian Mysticism, and Islamic Sufism, Bill Viola's art, as Chris Townsend writes, is 'an art of affect rather than distanced appraisal ...; an art of duration and absorption rather than an immediate satisfaction and revelation'.⁹ His work engages the public in a vision that passes through the eyes as much as the heart.

Notes

1. See the artist's official website at billviola.com.
2. See the Album bilingue of the exhibition, Neutres 2014, p. 5, where one can find out about 20 of Viola's works of art through commentary by the artist himself.
3. See Valentini 1993, p. 11. This monograph includes texts by Valentini and Viola, an interview with the artist by Jörg Zutter, and an interview with David A. Ross by Gianfranco Mantegna.
4. See Sossai 2012, p. 25.
5. In this text Viola tries to explain his position as an artist in relation to the public. See Viola 2003, p. 165.
6. See Kuspit 1987, p. 73. On the manipulation of time see also Fargier 2009.

7. Valentini 1993, p. 11. On this idea of 'inner visions' see the catalogue for another huge solo exhibition on Viola in Rome at Palazzo delle Esposizioni in 2008-2009. See also Perov 2008.
8. The film rebuilds Viola's artistic journey through a mix of interviews with Viola and Perov, also seven international scholars and critics who are experts in Viola's art: Raymond Bellour, Nadeije Dagen, Anne-Marie Duguet, Alain Fleischer, Jean de Loisy, Valentini, and Neutres.
9. See Townsend 2004, p. 9.

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About the author

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'Leviathan': From sensory ethnography to gallery film

Malin Wahlberg

Can you pull in Leviathan with a fishhook or tie down its tongue with a rope? Can you put a cord through its nose or pierce its jaw with a hook? (Job 41)

I entered the doors of the Whitney Biennial (7 March – 25 May 2014) with the specific aim of attending the 2pm screening of *Leviathan* (Lucien Castaing-Taylor, Véréna Paravel, 2013), one of the most frequently-referenced films in the context of