

CHAPTER 4

SPIRIT AND MEDIUM

The Video Art of Bill Viola

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In *Passage* (20) a 1987 video installation by Bill Viola, the viewer walks through an unlit, narrow corridor twenty-one feet long to arrive in a small room. Once there, one faces a wall composed entirely of a rear-projection screen upon which appears the videotape of a young child's birthday party. The surface is covered by gigantic faces and bodies that move in extreme slow motion (one-sixteenth normal speed), while a highly amplified sound rumbles in the small space, along the walls, into the body of the viewer. The images are so magnified that the scene dissolves before the eye in ever-shifting patterns of colour and the horizontal scanning lines that comprise the video screen. Since the room in which one stands is only seven feet deep, the viewer cannot gain much distance from the screen. If one backs down the passageway to get a better view of the piece, most of the image is blocked. There is no optimal point from which to view the video and assemble it into a coherent narrative whole even though the subject matter is intelligible.

The obvious questions – Whose birthday party is this? Where is this taking place? What are the children and their parents saying? – are never answered because the viewer is deprived of the narrative framework that would explain the situation. By disjointing sound and image, reducing the soundtrack to ominous, rolling, tympanum-like cataracts of sound, the artist causes the imagery to unfold as if in a dream. The result is the estrangement of a very familiar subject, turning four-year-olds into surreal colossi. Viola undermines the documentary character of video as we in the age of television and photojournalism have come to understand it.

For artworld cognoscenti there is nothing new about video as an artistic medium. Spanning a history of nearly four decades, video installations have become a dominant form of art at the end of the old millennium and the beginning of



the new one. But for the uninitiated, video hasn't lost its strangeness, its challenge. There are several good reasons for this continuing difficulty of video art. One is that video requires the viewer to occupy real time in order to experience the medium. The minutes pass slowly in a video installation. One must patiently watch the whole piece unfold according to its time, which rarely matches or accommodates one's own.

Video requires you to stand as a body in a public space among other bodies and wonder what to do with yourself, your material self, as you spend anywhere from two minutes to an unbearable ten or twenty watching a stream of images on a monitor or projected onto a wall. There is something about the quick or dashing way of looking at art in museums that tends to conceal the body of the viewer from him- or herself. Video installations challenge this by making the viewer self-visible, a social presence confronting oneself, perhaps even as part of the artwork.

The issue of the body – the one seen and the one doing the seeing – is an important one in video art. It's hard to talk about the body and what it knows because its language is visceral, its states ephemeral. Whenever we think about our own bodies we know that we feel, but it is hard to find words to represent those stubbornly inexpressible states of being. So we rely on metaphors to convey the feelings and sensations to others. Movie theatres provide soft chairs and a dark room for viewers to forget themselves, including their bodies. But video installations in gallery spaces are altogether different. They are very often about the act of viewing and the time it takes to do so. They prompt a spatial and temporal self-consciousness whose first impression is frequently an uneasy one.

The time-based nature of the medium is closely related to another reason for the difficulty of video. Artists like Viola are deft at using their medium to anatomize human perception, dissecting its mechanics and ideologies. Seeing the machinery of vision subverted – whether it is clips of eye surgery, rooms darkened to the very threshold of perception, or disorientation caused by sporadically moving imagery and jarring sound – produces an awareness of how commonly we rely on fixed conventions and frameworks in 'ordinary' perception.

Passage, for instance, makes one aware that the solidity and familiarity of the world depends very much on the distance one views it from. Human perception is a

biomechanical construction of appearances. And memory, the perception of time, is a highly interpretive faculty. If the narrow corridor is the 'passage' to the past, which is replayed as the massive image of the party on the wall, the room itself is the inner chamber of memory in which the raw sense data of experience are played and replayed. It's as if Viola has constructed a spatial metaphor for memory in order to show that the 'you-are-there' experience we posit as the authoritative basis of memory, the trace of the original moment preserved faithfully in the mind, is itself incapable of resolution. Or that what arrives at the strictly sensuous level of perception is a confusing welter of data, sensations that do not conform to the conventional regulations of time and space.

A certain strand of Bill Viola's work since the mid-1970s remains reflective about video as a medium and as a search for its metaphorical capabilities. If Viola's work is occasionally 'difficult', it is because of the ideas he wishes viewers to consider as they experience his installations. But on the whole, there is a theatricality and a rich metaphorical suggestiveness in the last twenty years of Viola's output that is both a signature of his work and the reason why most viewers find his work engaging.

Consider *The Crossing*, 1996 (21): on a double-sided screen over twelve feet high are projected, one on each side, images of a man (who resembles the artist) walking toward the viewer. The screens begin as dark, wavering fields of black and grey, reminiscent of Mark Rothko's paintings. But these pictures move. They are animated with light and sound, and the small image of the figure at a distance, walking in slow motion. His loose shirt and trousers flicker as he approaches, his image assembled from the ill-defined, shifting patches of video's horizontal linear patterning. When he has reached a position a few feet from the picture plane, standing at a height of seven or eight feet, the man stops and stares at the viewer. On one side of the screen, a small tongue of flame appears between his feet. On the other side, water begins to drip and splash on top of his head. Seemingly conjured by wizardry, the flames leap as the man raises his arms from his side; the drops of water become a torrent. The sounds of crashing water and crackling flames rise in step with what we see. In a moment the flames engulf the figure, consuming him in their roar, his clothing appearing to blacken. A moment

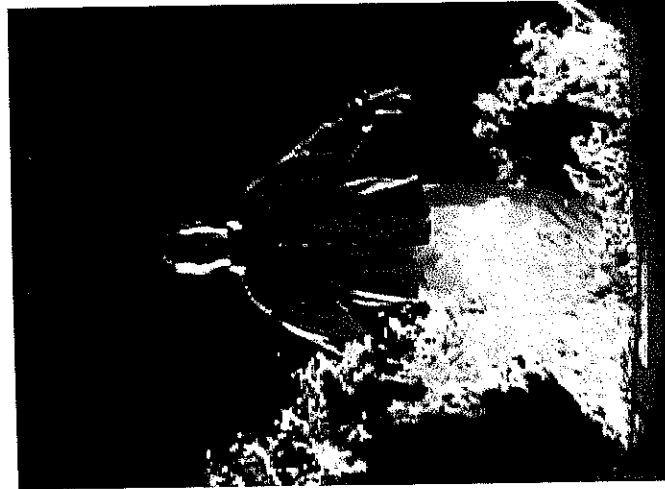
SPIRIT AND MEDIUM

later, the figure vanishes in the thick flames and the cascade of water. Then each subsides and the scene is left empty of man and elements.

The Crossing displays in dramatic fashion the immolation and inundation of a man; a towering figure who creates and succumbs to his destruction by nature's opposing forces of fire and water. This brief installation is charged with metaphor. The act of artistic creation may in fact amount to the destruction of the artist as a kind of mythic hero who is utterly consumed by the work. The reference to painting as well as to theatre is strong, and the allusion to a kind of divine creation sequence no less apparent. From the darkness appears a figure who strides boldly toward the viewer. It is difficult not to regard this figure as the artist himself. Stopping at centre stage, looming above the viewer, he submits to the prevailing logic of expressionist aesthetics: the agony of self-emptying, the spectacle of complete submission to the self-annihilating demands of art. A kind of alchemist, wizard, shaman, messiah, God and Wagnerian tragic hero, Viola transmutes the body into art as if the creative act were a cosmic principle engaging the primordial elements of fire and water.

Probably the 'easiest' of Viola's videos, *The Crossing* exhibits characteristics of theatrical spectacle and metaphorical evocation that help viewers think about what the piece might mean. And it is surely no coincidence that far more people gather quietly before this piece and remain there for its duration than most other Viola installations. This fact and the features of *The Crossing* suggest, moreover, that, in contrast to video informed by conceptualism, minimalism, and pop art, much of Viola's oeuvre is best described as Baroque. The spectacular roar of flames and deluge of water would have impressed Gianlorenzo Bernini, who thrilled his seventeenth-century audiences with dazzling stagecraft as well as hyper-theatrical sculptural installations.

The monumental scale, the spectacle, and the dramatic contrast of light and dark are certainly formal Baroque elements. But the penchant for metaphor and sublimity prompt another association: the Romantic cult of the artist-hero that culminated in Wagner and which is revisited, amongst other places, in the work of Anselm Kiefer. If Viola flirts with the mythic aggrandizement and mystification of art in *The Crossing*, Kiefer has created an entire oeuvre that explores the subject.

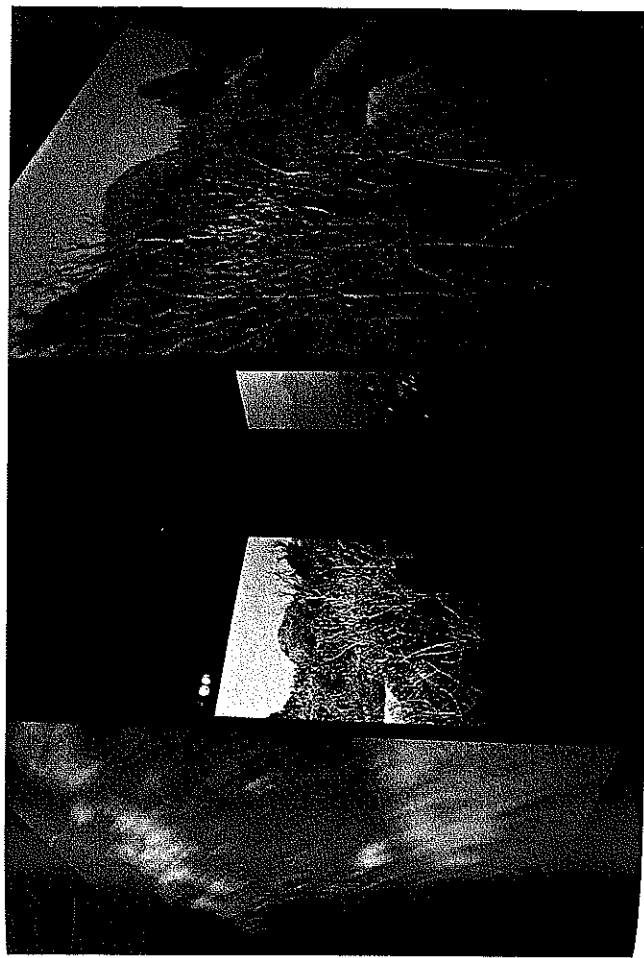
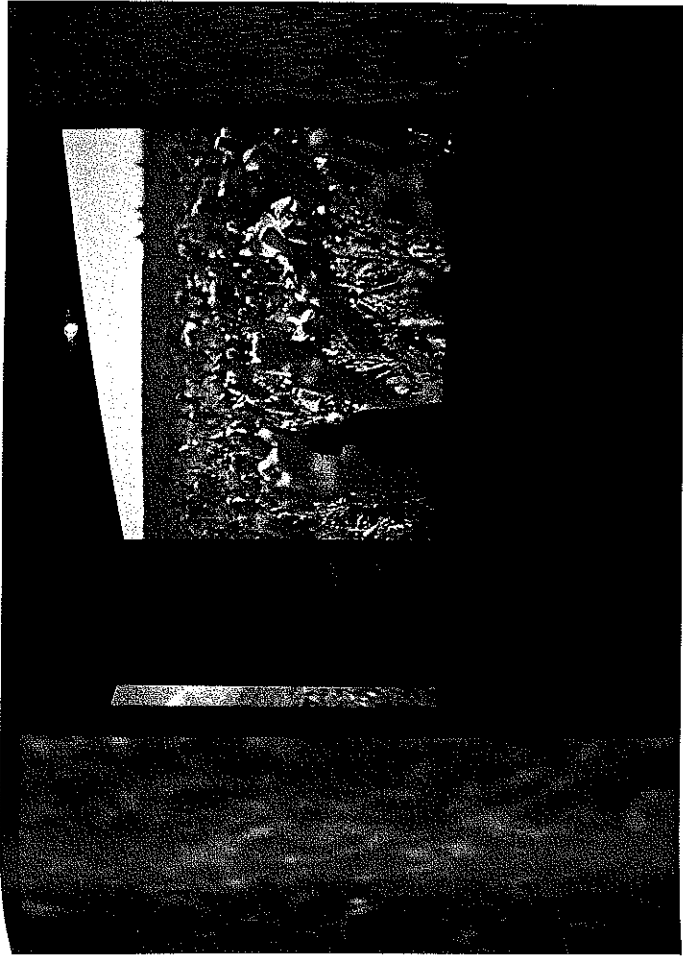


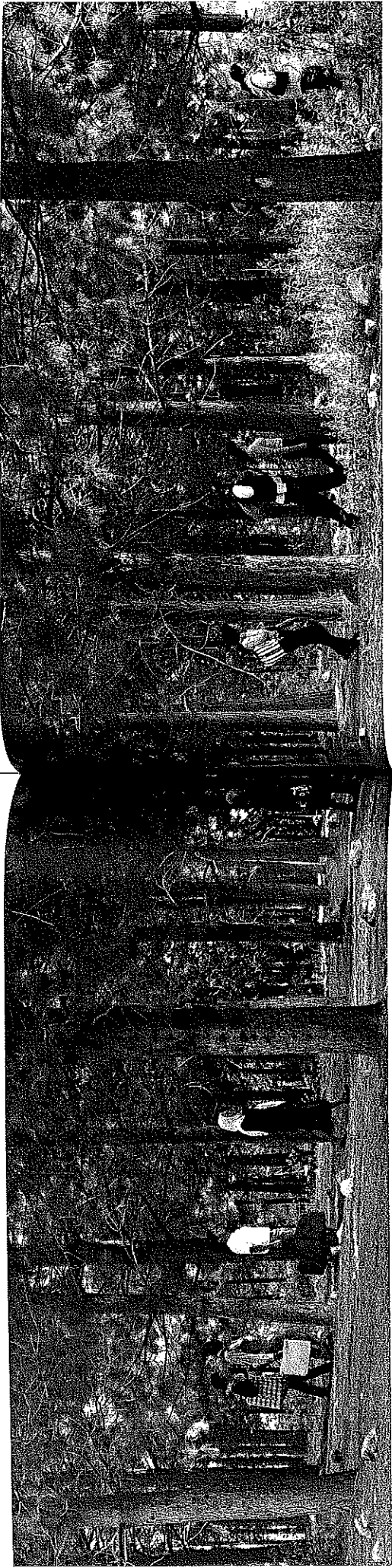
DAVID MORGAN

His canvases are huge, the subject matter consists of pyramids and temples drawn in looming perspective, and the compositions are filled with recondite allusions to history, legend, art, literature and religion. One is intended to exegete these images and to be awed by them. This may make them difficult as far as the need for a lexicon is concerned, but easy in terms of emotional rush and fascination.

Viola avoids the symbolic density and single-minded preoccupation with sublimity that pervades Kiefer's work, yet he displays a significant debt to Romanticism when he plunges the viewer into a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk* – a Wagnerian 'total work of art' – such as *The Stopping Mind*, 1991 (22), in which one is surrounded by four colossal screens and a sound system that alternately fills the space with the whispered, breathless poetry of the artist, then the screeching, metallic noise of rapidly shifting images. It is a work that synthesizes sound, motion, text and image into a single, enclosed space. But if Wagner's opera glorified blood, oath, fate and oedipal confusion, *The Stopping Mind* is not about artistic self-aggrandizement or sexual longing.

Viola's major recent work, *Going Forth By Day*, 2002 (23), is also a *Gesamtkunstwerk* that rivals Wagner for thematic monumentality and universal scope. The title is based on the actual name of the Egyptian 'Book of the Dead', 'The Book of Going Forth by Day', which Viola described as 'a guide for the soul once it is freed from the darkness of the light of day'.¹ In preparatory notes to the work, Viola wrote of his desire to create 'a space, an absolutely real, objective representation of the place where death is – or more, to make a work not about death but the place beyond death'.² The result was a long room whose walls present five continuous digital loops consisting of epic scenes that are sandwiched in the ordinary: fire/birth, the path, deluge, crossing and resurrection. An endless stream of people walking through a forest recalls the long line of Athenian citizens on the frieze of the Parthenon taking part in the city's famed ritual celebrating its patroness, Athena. Another loop shows a deluge and the frantic scrambling of people to escape its fury. A third narrative views the death of an old man, the sorrow of his children, and his leave-taking across a mythic river to the Isles of Bliss beyond. Beside that, another sequence portrays emergency workers





23 'The Path' from *Going Forth By Day*, 2002

struggling to rescue a trapped man, whose soul finally rises from its watery grave as the workers sleep.

In every case, Viola's imagery invokes artistic monuments from the past and mythic archetypes: the Parthenon, the biblical flood, crossing the river to the after-life, and the resurrection of Christ (or Osiris or Orpheus). From its conception, the work was intended to draw from the history of art as the grand repository of myth and spiritual quest. The viewer can become overwhelmed by the work's whirl of artistic and mythological references if the art historian's game of iconography is not held in check. As he indicated in his notes for the project, Viola was far more interested in the emotional effect of images on the viewer: 'The sea the swirling waters. Purple Black darkness churning, violent, seething, uncontrollable, threatening – sublime – viewing something harmful close up.... The roaring sound is deafening. A total physical experience.'³

For Viola, the sublime is more often than not a way of using darkness and monumentality, repulsive imagery, and terrifying bursts of sound and light to jar the viewer into meditation on something the artist finds genuinely enthralling.

the human condition. I say 'human condition' because I believe Viola considers there is one. Not the human situation, as if it might be otherwise. Not human nature, as if it were a timeless essence. The human condition is known by experience as the set of conditions that all humans confront. Interpreting Viola's work, the human condition would seem to consist of the fact that we are embodied beings, yearning but ill-prepared for communion with one another; that we suffer pain and loss; that we struggle to discover our bodies and transcend our suffering by connecting with a larger or inner aspect of reality; and that we die. Bodies, communion, suffering, transcendence and death collectively constitute a condition, in effect a world view, that the artist seeks to investigate in his work. Whether one is Buddhist or Christian or atheist (of the Camusian variety), coming to terms with suffering and fear and our incommunicability presumes an understanding of the human condition, and Viola finds in video a powerful artistic means of exploring these existential facts.

The remarkable retrospective of Viola's work, an exhibition that travelled through the United States and Europe in the late 1990s, offered the opportunity to consider in a comprehensive way the artist's treatment of the elements of the human condition. Firstly, people are alone. They rarely appear together in Viola's work, rarely commune with one another. On the contrary, figures appear to be self-absorbed. For instance, *Slowly Turning Narrative*, 1997, situates the viewer within a single mind, a

DAVID MORGAN

darkened room in which a panel revolves in the centre, bearing a screen on one side and a mirror on the other. As a voice recites a long list of phrases referring to the self, projections of a man's taciturn face and other imagery are reflected on the rotating panel as well as the viewer's own body, which is also reflected in the mirror on the other side of the panel. Viola has written that the 'entire space [of the installation] becomes an interior for the revelations of a constantly turning mind absorbed with itself'. The room is the ruminating, self-absorbed mind.⁴

Most of Viola's videos and installations are about the relationship between the artistic act and the viewer standing in or before the work. Engaging himself as well as engaging the viewer is what concerns Viola as an artist. If video is a kind of mirror he holds up for self-examination, it is not for the purpose of narcissism or self-enjoyment, but self-scrutiny and even self-interrogation. Where is the other in this analytical act of self-reflection?

If they are invited to insert themselves in *Slowly Turning Narrative*, to become thoughts reflected in the mind of another, in an earlier work, *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House*, 1982 (24), viewers confront the artist. We enter a room and are able to sit one after another in a crude wooden chair in front of a video monitor from which the artist stares. The viewer's chair is equipped with a set of headphones, which reveal a murmur and the sounds of the artist swallowing and breathing. One sits and beholds the man, who is periodically struck by someone in the darkness behind him, resulting in a sudden explosion of sound. A friend suggested to me that this recalls the practice in Zen meditation of the master striking the pupil who begins to fall asleep. One also thinks of the Puritan monitors who patrolled congregations whose otherwise stalwart members occasionally succumbed to fatigue during long sermons. Yet there is something menacing about Viola's installation. Viewer and artist face one another, as if mutual interrogators, or prisoners of unseen and cruel forces. The viewer shares the artist's quandary if only for a moment, mingles with his body, becomes the resonant chamber of his body's noises. We are in his head and his body, and it is terrifying. Who is he? What has he done to deserve this abuse? What is his disturbing claim on the viewer? Are we like him? Are we responsible for him?

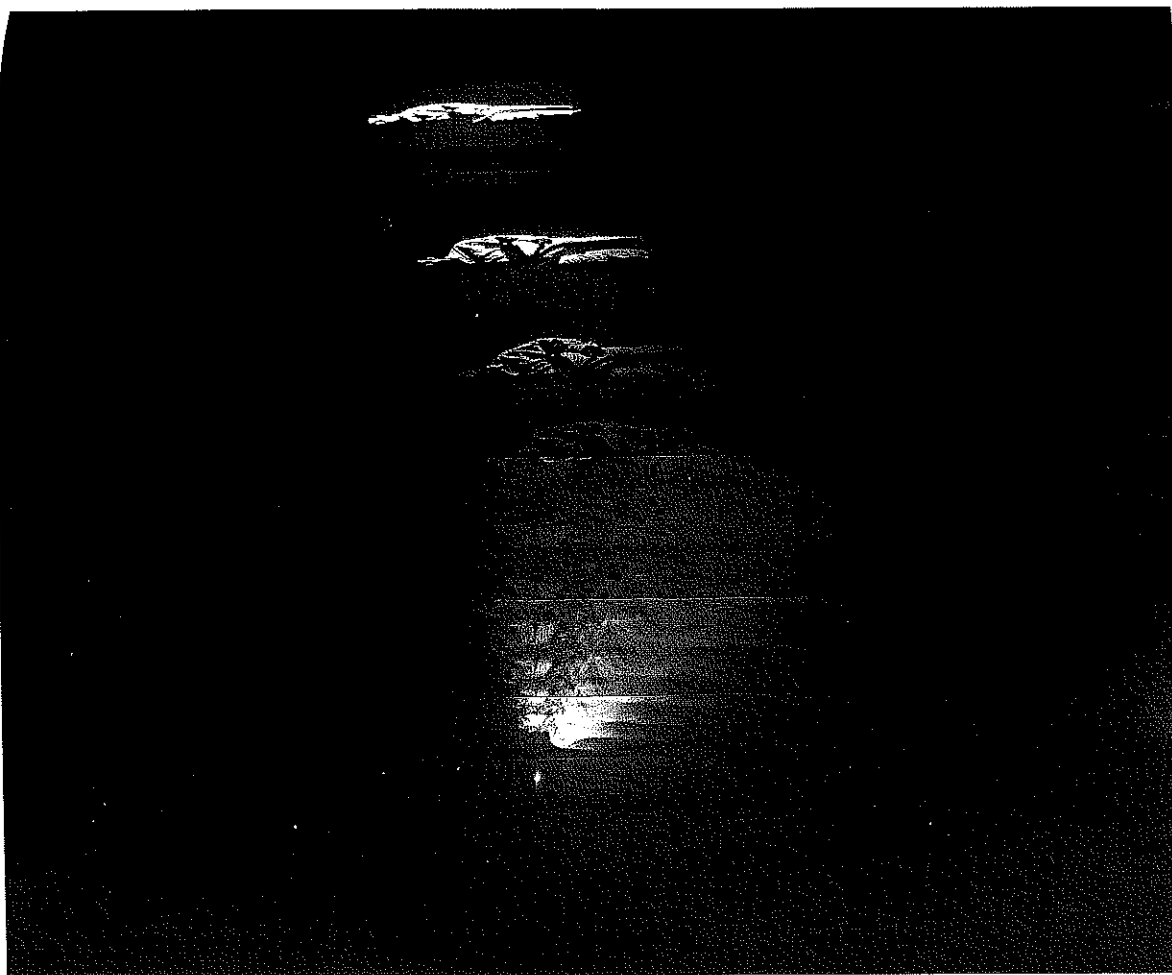


Being with others is an ethical state, a moment of action, that the theatricality of self-absorption in Viola's video art questions. *The Veiling*, 1995 (25), dramatizes this very well. A delicate, beautiful work that positions two video projectors at either end of a suspended row of nine translucent veils, *The Veiling* materializes in light two different figures, a man and a woman, whose images penetrate each scrim and meet in the central panel. In actuality, however, their incremental dissipation through the array of veils ends in a diffuse intersection. When the two finally meet they pass through the wan light of one another. It is a compelling metaphor of moral relations in modern life. Crowded cities, mobile lifestyles and a capitalist ethic of acquisition have contributed to a modern notion of personal independence that is preoccupied with the autonomy of the self. Autonomy comes at a price. Self-help cures, meditation, psychotherapy: all of these are modern strategies for dealing with crises in personal identity wrought by the isolated self.

Communitarian critics of modern individualism charge that both the cause and its attempted remedies have tended to withdraw allegiance from traditional institutional structures such as family, church, local community and voluntary associations as the dominant frameworks for personal development. Viola himself disavows 'formal adherence to any particular [religious] tradition', but practises Zen meditation and is deeply interested in the texts of Christian, Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic mysticism.⁵

Mysticism can tend to be about the self, or the dismantling of the self through an inward turning that relies on separation from others. Yet Viola's art is not a private retreat. It is public. In a statement written in 1989, Viola proclaimed that: 'The most important place where my work exists is not in the museum gallery, or in the screening room, or on the television, and not even on the video screen itself, but in the mind of the viewer who has seen it.'⁶ The work does not belong to the artist, but lives instead in the consciousness of whoever views it. Art commences in the artist's withdrawal and struggle, which Viola likens to 'the cloud of unknowing' or to the 'dark night of the soul'. Then the work belongs in time, where it is a gift ventured in faith, 'faith in that other thing, that something else dimly felt behind the veil of daily life'.⁷

Another feature of the world view evident in Viola's work is embodiment. His art is



about the insides of things, about being within, about mediation. We are rooted in media, we are always in or passing through somewhere: inside one's own body, inside another's head, in bed, beneath the surface of water, in wind-tossed fields of grain, in fire, in dreams, in buildings and corridors and barrels and ray tubes and a mother's womb. Viola's videos frequently include a body submerged in water. Since the late 1970s Viola has been fascinated by the imagery and sound of bodies plunging into water. *The Reflecting Pool*, 1977-79 (26); *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like*, 1986; *The Passing*, 1991; *Nantes Triptych*, 1992; and *Stations*, 1994 -- to name only a few works -- present bodies descending into water and floating inertly beneath the surface that call to mind such events as birth, baptism, ritual cleansing, death, recreation, rebirth. Each of these ritual acts takes place in the body. The body is where awakening happens. It is the medium of transformation. Its sensations are the very language of myth, the place where spiritual domains intersect with the ordinary world of time and space. Myth and ritual are grounded in the body, making it the register of transcendence. Descent into water is the operation of mythic metamorphosis, the manner by which the body is turned into a medium for spiritual experience.

Viewing these aspects of Viola's work, one recalls the experience as a young child of submerging in a swimming pool to listen to the modified sounds underwater and to feel the weightless abandon of one's body. The body suddenly seemed useless, the senses one relied on suddenly unreliable. This alienating loss of fit with one's habitat loosened one's grip on the concrete world. The mind suddenly severed from the body, the spirit was disoriented and left to float on its own. Such disorientation can be mesmerizing. The lesson of this estrangement is that our knowledge of the world is rooted in the rudimentary vocabulary of the body. Being deprived of that vocabulary means losing control over the world. This is perhaps why new media cause anxiety: the seamless connection between one's body and the environment seems ruptured by a new medium. But Viola is not content merely to disorient viewers. He is intrigued by the power of estrangement to illuminate. Suffering can yield a breakthrough, a new vision of self and world.

This brings us to the next element of Viola's world view: the place of suffering. If humans appear encased in bodies and alone in much of his work, they are not



abandoned there. Suffering is redemptive. Pain, when transformed into suffering, becomes the point of contact in a world of bodies set apart from one another. We saw in *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House* that the artist's agony became the occasion for the viewer's self-transcendence: the viewer's concern for the other, or compassion, suffering with another.

A major work of the following year explored the experience of embodiment and suffering. The installation, *Room for St. John of the Cross*, 1983, consists of a small black cubicle placed within a large, darkened room. Inside the cubicle are a chair and a table with a pitcher, glass of water and a video monitor. As we peer through the window, we hear an audio loop of St. John's Spanish poetry, composed between 1577 and 1578 while he was imprisoned in a space the same size as the cubicle. Abducted by a rival element of his religious order and beaten regularly, the Carmelite friar was subjected to what he called the 'dark night of the soul', the result of a deep sense of abandonment not only by humans and the church, but also by God. It was as if God had denied him, turned away from him, left him to dissolve painfully into the dark void of his prison cell. But strangely it was from these depths of loss and solitude that God finally spoke and St. John poured forth his most passionate poetry.

Outside the small cell, viewers, free of imprisonment, are dizzyed and nauseated by the quaking projection of a mountain range, accompanied by the unrelenting roar of wind. On the colour monitor inside the cell, a single mountain glows quietly, motionless; at the heart of St. John's anguish and joy is the image of rest, balance and permanence. Paradoxically, viewers find their own incarceration in the larger room and are offered the model of St. John before them in which to discover the meaning of suffering.

Viola's meditation on St. John of the Cross is not a masochistic glorification of pain. Pain is one thing and suffering another. Pain happens to a body, but suffering unfolds as a transfiguration of the pain, a way of living with it. Suffering is the spiritual practise that a body makes of pain it cannot stop. We suffer when we endure pain, when we transmute it into the struggle to live.

Suffering changes us. Those who have suffered see themselves and the world with new eyes. But art need not inflict pain or suffering on viewers in order to prompt a spiritual reflection. Viola's installations bear the conviction that the

conditions of traditional religious ritual can be simulated in works of art, in order to achieve something of the spiritual transformation wrought in the original context. In a note first published in 1982, Viola observed that:

Initiation rites and age-old spiritual training ordeals (fire walking, days of continuous dancing, circumcision rituals, holy torture, etc.) are all controlled, staged accidents, ancient technologies designed to bring the organism to a life-threatening crisis.⁸

One might call them deliberate accidents because they are created to rupture the normal routine of life with a disorienting violence. Accidents such as car crashes, Viola points out, seem to happen in slow motion, as a retarded time sequence characterized by uncommon clarity. By thrusting the initiate into liminal space and time, the ritual allows passage to a new form of life marked by a novel consciousness of the self. Viola's appreciation of ritual clearly stresses the rite of passage, which often employs pain, isolation, sensory deprivation and suspended time to effect transformation in the initiate. Its appeal to the artist can perhaps be explained by the way that it grounds the transformation of the world in the transformation of individual consciousness, and does so by the manipulation of time, Viola's principal medium as a video artist. He believes that the essential apparatus of ritual metamorphosis is still available to modern humanity in the work of art. Viola's global travel and extensive study of religious texts and rituals from many traditions serve his desire to fashion modern instances of ritual experience. By engulfing viewers in darkness and subjecting them to jarring sounds and random bursts of light, Viola creates moments in which they are pulled away from everyday life and urged to reflect on the profound bonds of suffering, love and fear that are entombed and enshrined in the body, the human medium of the spirit.

Of course, this may be more than viewers care to undertake. To be sure, a sober view of the power imputed to art is prudent. Art is very good at creating imagined situations into which viewers may project themselves. But art is not particularly good at preaching sermons that morally improve the viewer. Sermons themselves, for that matter, may not be very good at moral improvement either, but they are, like art, powerful means of evoking new visions of the world.

What is it that Viola aims to do in his video installations? Would he enrapture viewers? Would he like to impart the *unio mystica* described by the great mystics? Is the purpose of his art to provoke spiritual awakening and ritual rebirth? Since St. John of the Cross and Meister Eckhart, two of Viola's favourite writers, required years of rigorous spiritual calisthenics and precocious introspection to attain enlightenment, it is doubtful that an hour spent one Saturday afternoon in an art gallery will procure the same results.

The intention of Viola's installations seems more modest: to remove museum visitors from the ordinary world for the sake of a few moments of meditation. The long corridor of *Passage* suggests as much: passing through it we leave the present and return to the archetypal past. In the catalogue accompanying the retrospective exhibition, Viola writes that the passageway 'ultimately refers to the original passage through the birth canal' and that the corridor's destination – the birthday party – is 'a contemporary vestige of an ancient perennial ritual'. The party 'regains some of its ritualistic and mythic stature through the manipulation of space and the extreme extension of time'.⁹

Art, Viola believes, is able to re-pristiniate a secular culture, or at least certain moments of it, by reclaiming an aspect of the sacred that has been marginalized in modern life. In contrast to the theory of secularization, which regards religion and the sacred as outmoded vestiges of pre-modern culture, Viola affirms a view championed by Mircea Eliade, whom he quoted in an exhibition statement in 1989: 'The sacred is an element in the structure of consciousness and not a stage in the history of consciousness.' The sacred 'is within us all', Viola concludes, 'intuitive awareness and unwavering belief in this other world.'¹⁰

Viola's tour of the human soul brings us to the elegy of *Tiny Deaths*, 1993 (27). He dismisses his Christian upbringing as mere accident ('I was raised Episcopalian because my mother was raised Episcopalian growing up in England'). However the Zen celebration of sheer existence that Viola espouses in discussions of his work does not, in fact, eliminate a pervasive sense of loss that may owe something to his Christian formation.¹¹ If Zen teaches one to overcome anxiety about death by realizing the emptiness of self, Christianity finds in death the just wages of sin,

and a severe but endurable test of faith. *Tiny Deaths* captures the randomness and the particularity of death, its smallness and the wave of forgetting that follows so quickly upon it.

Four walls of an otherwise utterly dark room show dim fields of a tone slightly paler than black, against which dark silhouettes of human figures emerge. The viewer wonders at first if they aren't shadows of fellow viewers thrown onto the walls. A din of incomprehensible voices fills the room, something like the sound of a gallery opening or a busy lunchroom. At random intervals a figure appears in grey tones, blurry but clear enough to make out as no one special, someone ordinary, a young person, an older person, a man, a woman, standing and talking, casually dressed. Then, suddenly, the figure flares and vanishes in a burst of white light and a low buzz, before the darkness and din resume. Death comes as a luminous erasure, a small explosion of light that dissolves quickly into a field of shadows and murmurs. All that a person was has gone, swallowed up by the encompassing gloom.

Tiny Deaths feels like a lament. Life is a bleak place on the edge of oblivion and each of us a tiny flash of light. Memory is short, the length of an afterimage. This is among Viola's most difficult works. Visitors don't stay long. In the darkness they feel no more real than those whose being flares for an instant on the murky walls. But the truth of this work is undeniable if by truth one means the honesty to put things as they are, without needing a happy ending to soften matters. Some Christians will miss any reference to resurrection and the life of the world to come. But others will recognize in *Tiny Deaths* a forthright evocation of the terrifying reality of death that everyone must face, believer or not. The overwhelming injustice of death, the finality and the incomprehensibility of each person's extinction resonate in Viola's installation.

But there may be hope. Perhaps this work is akin to the allegory of Plato's cave whose walls are likewise peopled by dim shadows, while outside resides the world of truth that only lovers of wisdom can summon the courage to seek out. Viola embraces a notion of transcendence that refuses to see in death the material end of the soul. Clearly, the theme of the soul's journey after death explored in *Going Forth By Day* is a significant example of his persistent interest in transcendence. In notes to

SPIRIT AND MEDIUM

Vegetable Memory, a videotape of 1978–80, Viola referred to the 'brutal afterlife' as the consequence of the view that there is 'no afterlife for the soul, only cold, ugly physical death'. But he went on to describe what he called 'the other choice':

The spiritual liberation of the soul through death – death is birth. If we do not believe in spiritual afterlife then our bodies will rot away into material nothingness.

We will cease to exist. This is hell...the brutal afterlife. s

Hell, for Viola, 'is our non-belief' in the world to come.¹² The world outside *Tiny Deaths* confronts viewers as they leave the installation. They emerge to a second chance. The world awaits and the work of art exists to help them see it.

