

Telefonica

FOUNDATION

Bill Viola

Mirrors of the Unseen

Practical Guide

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BILL VIOLA. MIRRORS OF THE UNSEEN

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00. BEFORE YOU COME

This guide is aimed at all those interested in finding out more about the *Bill Viola. Mirrors of the Unseen* exhibition. In it we ask a series of questions, select a number of pieces and suggest some activities which you can do before or after your visit, making it an educational aid for families, young people, teachers and the public in general.

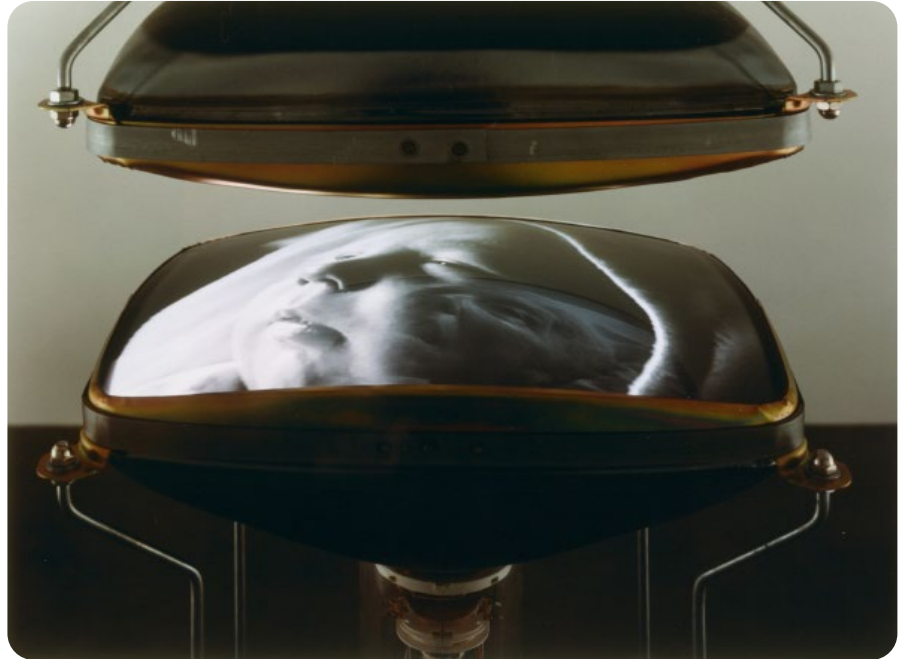


Before you go into the exhibition we invite you to reflect on the following questions and hope that, after your visit, you can take a moment to fill in this information:

- Do you know the differences between video and film?
- Is spirituality something that is only related to religion? What about art?
- How can an artist talk about life and death through a camera?
- What is the importance of water to us?
- What unites all humans cultural differences?
- Can a museum be a haven of tranquillity and reflection?

01. THE EXHIBITION

Known as the “Rembrandt of video art”, Bill Viola has a five decade-long artistic career behind him that has allowed him to explore subject matters such as life, death, spirituality – the human condition, in fact – through video technology. From his experimental beginnings in which he discovered the possibilities that electronic imaging and the manipulation of time could offer in videos in which he cast himself, to ambitious productions with actors and incredible camera effects, Viola was able to connect to the intimate emotional world of his audience which saw his work both in museums – which he considered to be the new religious spaces of our times – and in churches, cathedrals and other historic buildings.



Bill Viola, *Heaven and Earth* (1992).

This exhibition, organised by the Fundación Telefónica and Fundació Catalunya La Pedrera, combines an extensive selection of twenty-one of Viola's most important pieces, from his early days with work such as *The Reflecting Pool* (1977-79) to more recent productions such as the “Martyrs” series, derived from the work installed in Saint Paul's Cathedral in London.

With a markedly introspective feel, the exhibition is a unique opportunity to get to know Bill Viola's work and experience the emotions evoked by his images because, as he says: “We must take time back into ourselves to let our consciousness breathe and our cluttered minds be still and silent. This is what art can do and what museums can be in today's world. We have to recover time for ourselves, let our consciences breathe until our overcrowded minds are at peace in silence. This is what art can do, what museums can be in today's world.”

This practical guide is an accompaniment to the exhibition and an introduction to Bill Viola's video art and the subjects he deals with. As well as providing information on the artist, five pieces on show here are discussed. The reader can also find a suggested activity for a deeper understanding of the questions that Viola poses, as well as a series of print and audio-visual resources to complement and extend the information in the guide.

“I have to come to realize 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. In fact, it is only there that it can exist.” Bill Viola

02. A VIDEO LIFE



Bill Viola, 20 March 2011. Photograph by jeanbaptisteparis.

Bill Viola was born in 1951 in Flushing, a neighbourhood to the north of Queens, New York, one of the city's most racially and ethnically diverse areas. His artistic sensitivity has been ever-present since his childhood, as he explains: "The very, very first day I was in kindergarten, when I was five years old, they gave us finger-paints. I was making a finger painting, all the children were making finger-paintings and I made a tornado, quite a nice tornado. The teacher came along and said 'Oh, look what Billy did', she held it up and of course because I was very shy, I was hiding under the table and all red. (...) She held it up and showed everybody, putting it on the wall. From that day on, I was the class artist in every class growing up."

A year later, in 1957, he had a life-changing experience that would mark his future artistic obsessions. During a family holiday, he jumped from a raft into a lake, he lost his inflatable ring that kept him afloat and sank to the bottom. Viola remembers it as a peaceful, calming experience: "I was witnessing this extraordinarily beautiful world with light filtering down I was witness to an extraordinarily beautiful world, with the light filtering down (...). It was like paradise. I didn't even know

that I was drowning... For a moment there was absolute bliss .It was like paradise. I wasn't even conscious of the fact that I was drowning... For a moment, everything was absolute happiness." Luckily, his uncle pulled him up, although being so close to death affected him profoundly for the rest of his life. When he was nine years old, he showed an early interest in the audio-visual world, becoming captain of "TV Squad" at the PS 20 primary school in Queens.

In 1969 he began his studies at the Syracuse University School of Art in New York, also enrolling in the school's Experimental Studies programme in 1971 where they had a Sony Portapak video camera, introducing the young Viola to the media that was to shape his career. This programme proved to be a turning point in his training as Bill Viola began to focus on video, helping to install a cable TV system and a colour studio in the student centre. The following year he prepared installations for the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, assisting artists such as Nam June Paik. After graduating in 1973, he continued his electronic music studies as well as giving classes on audio-visual media at the same university. During this period, as technician for art/tapes/22, an artist's video production studio in Florence, Italy, he also met and worked with established European and American artists, such as Mario Merz and Vito Acconci.

This was also a period in which the young Bill Viola began to travel abroad, something that was to have a decisive influence on his work. In 1974 he had his first experience of the barren landscape of the Valley of Death in the Mojave desert, California. In the second half of the 1970s, Viola visited the Solomon Islands

"Simple facts of life become the way to find a bridge and shared vision with people from different cultures, races, history, and religion Life's everyday things become a way to discover connections and points of view that are common between people of different cultures, races, backgrounds and religions." Bill Viola

DID YOU KNOW...?

Nam June Paik (1932-2006) was a South Korean artist who lived and worked in Japan, Germany and the US. He was an experimental, innovative and carefree artist who worked with sound, performance, television, video art and information technologies and IT, anticipating the impact of the internet. Espacio Fundación Telefónica put on a one-man show of her his work in 2007.

Mario Merz (1925-2003) was an Italian artist who was close to the arte povera movement. His work, in which he used organic material such as clay, sticks, wax and coal, stood in opposition to post-industrial capitalist society, calling instead for ways of life in harmonious coexistence with nature.

Vito Acconci (1940-2017) was an American artist whose work encompassed poetry, art criticism, performance art, sound and video art, cinema, photography and sculpture. He was interested in exploring the movement of bodies in space, questioning the notion of gender and the invasion of private moments into public space.

in Oceania, Japan, Java and Bali in Indonesia, Melbourne in Australia, the wintry prairies of Saskatchewan, Canada and the Tunisian part of the Sahara desert. Having been awarded a fellowship, between 1980 and 1981 he spent eighteen months in Japan, where he studied the traditional culture of the country and its advanced video technology. In 1982 he travelled to the Himalayan region of Ladakh in northern India to study the art and religious rituals of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, while in 1984 he visited Fiji, filming the Hindu fire-walking ceremonies there. His travels not only led him to discover distant lands but also to better know his own country. In 1984 he spent three weeks with a herd of bison in the Wind Cave National Park in South Dakota, working on a project looking at animal consciousness which led to him becoming the resident artist at San Diego Zoo in California. In 1987 he spent five months in the south-eastern United States, recording nocturnal landscapes and studying ancient native American culture and remains. Bill Viola has never stopped travelling, complementing his studies with visits to places such as Tuscany in 2001, where he saw the narrative cycles on the frescos of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

On all these trips he has always been accompanied by Kira Perov, his wife who he met in Melbourne in 1977 when she was the cultural activities director at La Trobe University. In 1978 they decided to live together in New York, beginning a lifelong personal and professional collaboration which has been so important that it has been said that his work cannot be understood without Kira's participation. Kira Perov is currently the executive director of the Bill Viola Studio. She has systematically photographed the creative process, publishing and exhibiting his work on numerous occasions, as well as commissioning and coordinating exhibitions and publications on Viola. Underlining the importance of her work in Bill Viola's production, Perov recently defined herself as "the guardian angel of his work. I make his dreams come true." In recent years her influence has grown considerably, taking decisions over what can and cannot be done, decisions regarding the wardrobe and, above all, how to protect Viola's original idea once the actors go on stage. Her participation has always been essential.



Bill Viola, *Four Hands* (2001). The hands on the second screen belong to Kira Perov.

Viola's work has been exhibited in museums, cultural institutions, religious spaces and historical monuments around the world. He represented the United States at the Venice Biennale in 1995. Among his many exhibitions, special mention should be made of *Bill Viola: A 25-Year Survey*, organised by the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1997; *The Passions* at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles in 2003; *Hatsu-Yume (First Dream)* at the Mori Art Museum, Tokyo in 2006; *Bill Viola, Visioni Interiori*, at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome in 2008; *Bill Viola* at the Grand Palais, Paris in 2014, *Bill Viola: Electronic Renaissance* at the Palazzo Strozzi, Florence and Guggenheim Bilbao Museum in 2017, and most recently *Bill Viola/Michelangelo: Life Death Rebirth* at the Royal Academy, London, 2019. He has installed his work in Saint Paul's Cathedral in London as well as producing a four hour-long video for Peter Sellars' staging of the opera *Tristan und Isolde* in the USA, Paris, Canada, Japan and other European cities, including a production at Madrid's Teatro Real in 2014.

"So in today's world, where our lives are filled with so many messages floating all around us and affecting us, art museums are a special place where you can be quiet and still and focus on another person's dreams."

Bill Viola

Bill Viola has brought his work to Spain on a number of occasions. In 2007, he showed five of his installations in the Alhambra complex as part of the project *Bill Viola – The Invisible Hours* to mark the renovation of the Palace of Charles V in Granada. In 2014 he showed five short video pieces alongside classical paintings in the San Fernando Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Madrid, the first time that the institution had embarked on such a contemporary project. In 2017 a major retrospective of Bill Viola's work at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao was seen by 710,000 visitors. Between 2018 and 2019, the Castilla-La Mancha regional government presented *Bill Viola: Vía Mística* ("Bill Viola – a Mystical Path"), an exhibition consisting of four of his pieces at four historic locations in Cuenca's old town.

He has received numerous awards and distinctions, such as the MacArthur Foundation Fellows Program Genius Grant in 1989, an honorary doctorate in Fine Art from Syracuse University in 1995, the 21st Premi Internacional Catalunya in 2009 and the Japan Art Association's Praemium Imperiale award in 2011.

03. VIDEOART, MANIPULATED TIME, SPATIAL SOUND

“Generally speaking, I always work from the starting point of emotion and intuition: I often do not understand what I am doing until it takes form on paper. I usually write it down or make a drawing. It is then that the work begins to reveal its mysteries to me.” Bill Viola

On 4 October 1965, Nam June Paik filmed Pope Paul VI's visit to San Patrick's Cathedral in New York on his Sony Portapak from inside a taxi. Later, sitting at a café in Greenwich Village, he wrote in his notebook: “This is the birth of video art.” The video art breakthrough in the 1960s was a revolution in terms of its cheapness and ease of use, a real alternative to television. Over the more than fifty years that Bill Viola has been at the service of various conceptual art movements, maintaining a constant dialogue with photography, music and theatre. Viola discovered video while he was on the Experimental Studies programme at Syracuse University and through its Synapse Video Center, a unit with cameras and other equipment that had been designed and was run by the students themselves. This was where he created some of his first highly experimental work filmed in black and white and which incorporated his image in what could be described as exercises in self-discovery. As John G. Hanhardt, film curator and expert in the matter explains it, he produced his work “on the fly”, using a wide variety of methods. To this end, his script was based on Gene Youngblood's *Expanded Cinema* (1970), which described film and video as something open which could be creatively explored.



Bill Viola, *Chott el-Djerid [A Portrait in Light and Heat]* (1979).

Nevertheless, these purely conceptual or formalist explorations would soon take a back seat as his interest grew in examining subjectivity, creating a transcendental experience which would connect with the interior world of the viewer. Video and audio were to become the medium through which he would achieve this end. As he said in 2017: "Cameras and audio recorders are my paintbrushes, my tools. Each new advance in moving-image technology has meant that the range of colours on my palette has got bigger." This has allowed Viola to follow his own path, independent of any historic-artistic school or movement.

"I see that media technology is not at odds with our inner selves, but in fact is a reflection of it."

Bill Viola

Video allowed Viola to introduce a key element into his work: time. His audio-visual pieces manipulate time as a further element to his aesthetic, constructing wordless narratives both short and long that capture the attention of his audience. Faced with the constant bombardment of fleeting, banal images in our society, Viola seeks to cultivate an experience of attention and contemplation, in which sensations are more measured and the tone of voice a spiritual one. To this end, he mainly uses two resources: slow motion and loop editing. Slow motion is practically a constant feature in Viola's work, as it concentrates the audience's attention on the action and, above all, on the expression on the faces of the actors, thus revealing their inner world. The repetition of gestures, actions and visual segments is a technique that makes it seem as if his work has neither beginning nor end. Furthermore, as the priest and theologian Armand Puig says, "repetition is essential to our spiritual search and on the mystical paths we embark upon. Without repetition there is no depth, without reiteration there is no access to either our soul or to the Other" (Viola refers to a generic spiritual "other" or an "Other/God").

Viola is thus able to create complex sensations through the image, offering observations of conscience and alterations or changes to states. He ensures that the viewer focuses on a specific element, apparently superficial, to then deflect their attention toward something new, provoking a contrast that forces us to rethink and revise that already seen. The artist frequently brings together opposing poles as if in a dream: the poetic and the literal, the rigid and the flexible, the permanent and the ephemeral, tenderness and violence, love and hate, harmony and conflict, frustration and joy, youth and old age. This creates a mystical atmosphere that resonates within the deepest part of us: a way of connecting with the invisible, the inexplicable, the unknown.

DID YOU KNOW...?

Our emotional states are affected by our perception of time. Slow motion is a widely-used technique in film that adds emotional depth and intensity to a scene or sequence. In his video-essay [*The Art of Slow Motion in Film*](#), Julian Palmer gives illustrative and meaningful examples of this in the world of film over the past sixty years: from Wong Kar-wai's intimate and emotionally charged sequences to the grandiose action depicted in bullet-time (a version of slow motion) in *Matrix* (the Wachowskis brothers, 1999). David Lynch, whose cinema has been compared to Bill Viola's work, also uses slow motion to create disturbing dreamlike sequences.



Bill Viola, *Ablutions* (2005).

As well as his use of image, sound has also been a fundamental constant in Bill Viola's artistic output. As the musical director and current artistic director of the Liceu in Barcelona, Víctor García de Gomar has said, "Viola pays special attention to the detail of the palette of sounds with which he works. (...) Sound amplifies the effect on his characters and is delicately designed to complement, underline and give greater emphasis to the created images." In fact, alongside his artistic studies at Syracuse University, he voluntarily attended classes on sensory perception at the Department of Psychology. Viola thus embarked on an exploration of the possibilities of using sound ambiance as if it were a sculptural material. He met and worked with the engineer and creator Bob Bielecki, with whom he created an underwater soundscape in 1975. During this same period, as well as experimenting under the umbrella of Composer Inside Electronics, he became fascinated by the acoustics of cathedrals while living in Florence, something he described as "petrified music".

One of his works in which sound is a key element is *Anthem* (1983), which he created after returning from Japan. This piece, which coincided with the explosion of music videos, resembles pop videosthose by using a musical structure to tell an open-ended story of primeval fears and darkness: Amy, an eleven year-old girl, screams in the entrance hall of Union Railroad Station in Los Angeles. This scream, sped up, slowed down and distorted to a scale of seven harmonic notes, is the soundtrack to the video. Viola has always seen sound as an essential element in his work, not only in video projects like *Anthem*, but also in his musical compositions, installations and sound performance pieces such as *Sound Field Insertion* (1973) and *Street Music* (1976). We should, of course, not overlook his work with Peter Sellars, when Viola created a four-hour long moving image backdrop for Peter's production of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*.

"Human emotions have an infinite resolution – the more we amplify them, the more infinitely they expand." Bill Viola

04. ART, SPIRITUALITY, LIFE, DEATH AND WATER

Viola's work is full of symbols and references which are continuously repeated in each piece. However, throughout his career he has increasingly focused on certain areas which shared a common characteristic: universality. His subject matters (life, death, spirituality) are universal concepts which reach everybody. The medium he has chosen to communicate his ideas has been a contemporary one which has evolved alongside his work.

“What I want is to reach out to where people are: at home watching television, in an Internet cafe cybercafé, on their mobile phones, at the cinema... Wherever there might be images, that's where I want my work to be. I think most artists would agree with that. I want to reach people, the technology or medium doesn't matter. What counts is the message, the idea.” Bill Viola

In his first works, Viola's interest in the notion of time and its deconstruction is clear. He experimented with the disintegration of the image and the manipulation of video in order to change the sensation of time and space. *The Reflecting Pool* (1977-79), one of his most interesting pieces from this early period, depicts a pool in the middle of a forest in which Viola walks before diving into the water. However, the artist plays with the reflection of the water to show us images that do not correspond to the surface beyond the water. For example, night falls in the reflection while outside it is still day, while we see reflections of people who are not outside the water.

As in *The Reflecting Pool*, Bill Viola used his own figure in most of the videos he produced at this time. *Return* (1975) and *The Space Between the Teeth* (1976) are just two examples in which the artist becomes the focal point of his videos. In subsequent investigations, which focus on the exploration and self-awareness of the human body, he used professional actors to express emotions and take a deeper look at the human condition.



Bill Viola, *Incrementation* (1996).

“The moving images that I have created inhabit a place that is between the temporal fluidity of music and the material certainty of painting.” Bill Viola

Another of his major subject areas was that of the history of art itself. As he has said: “In my work, many artists from different periods of art history have been important to me, from Palaeolithic cave painting to the depths found in Mark Rothko's paintings.” In 1974 when he visited Florence for the first time, he began to feel the influence of the old masters, an interest that has never waned to this day.

Due to its pictorial nature, Bill Viola's work has often been referred to as “animated paintings”. An important example of this is *The Quintet of the Astonished* (2000), which depicts five people with five emotions, shown close-up, moving in slow motion. Viola had begun to work on the subject of passions taking an interest in paintings from the late Middle Ages, realising that human emotion is universal. In *The Quintet*, the influence in particular of Caravaggio is seen, especially in his dramatic use of lighting and medium-long shots against a dark background.

In 2001, Viola created *Catherine's Room*, which makes a clear allusion to ecclesiastical altar pieces, as well as the use of light by artists such as Vermeer. Viola explained that this piece was inspired by a painting by Andrea de Bartolo Cini depicting *Catalina de Siena* (c. 1394-8). He described his creative process in the following way: “In many of my pieces, I take the form of a painting and transform it into a moving image. I don't exactly copy it, the content is mine. In this case, for example, we built a set with five parts. In the window in each room you can see a symbol of the four seasons”. Nevertheless, Viola does not use religious scenes in the same sense as did the old masters, but rather seeks to depict their emotional content and humanism, embodied in ordinary people.

This interest in the art of the past saw Bill Viola adopt it as a starting point in some of his works. He was not interested in representing a religious point of view such as were in the works of the old masters. In fact, Viola uses spirituality in its universal sense, one which does not pertain to any specific religion.



Bill Viola, *The Quintet of the Astonished* (2000).

His influences stem from both eastern and western art and include the traditional spirituality of Zen Buddhism, Islamic Sufism and Christian mysticism, reading texts by Ibn Al'Arabi, Rumi, and Saint John of the Cross. In 1980, Bill Viola and Kira Perov spent eighteen months in Japan, studying and visiting museums and temples. Here they were taught Zen meditation by Viola collaborated with the *sensei* Daien Tanaka, which provided inspiration for some works

Numerous writers have had an important influence on Viola, including Edmund Burke (1729-1797) with his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), published at the height of the Enlightenment. Here we should also mention the Sufi mystic Al-Ghazali (1058-1111), particularly his *The Niche for Lights*. Another key point of reference for the artist is the English theologian and philosopher Robert Grosseteste (1175-1253), the Bishop of Lincoln. Even with these diverse influences, Viola never fell into the temptation to become a mere collage of spirituality, but rather sought to bring together archetypal spiritual elements to build audio-visual narratives that resonated with a wide range of traditions.

In order to accentuate the spiritual experience, as we have seen, Viola slowed down the images he used, employing loops in the style of a Baroque musical canon, a Hindu mantra or the *laus perennis* (continuous prayer) of Christian monastic liturgy. Viola said that he wanted to use his work to create "an enveloping emotional experience such as that found in a church". In fact, throughout his career, he has created specific pieces for places of worship: *The Messenger* (1996), an installation produced for Durham Cathedral in England, was the first such piece of work, followed by *Ocean without a Shore* (2007), exhibited at the Church of St. Gall during the Venice Biennale and *Martyrs* (2014) and *Mary* (2016), both of which were specifically produced for permanent installation in Saint Paul's Cathedral, London.

For Bill Viola, water has a profound significance. It is an image that runs through his work and appears in the form of rivers, waterfalls, lakes, ponds, oceans and seas. It can take on a peaceful form, as water flowing from a fountain spout or, the complete opposite, appear as a threatening storm that destroys everything in its path. Viola also sees water as a metaphor for numerous life experiences that can represent birth, alluding to amniotic fluid, or death by drowning.

One of the events in the artist's life that had the greatest impact on him was the death of his mother, Wynne Lee Viola, in 1991. This came three years after the birth of his first child, Blake Viola, that led Bill to understand the full gamut of the human experience, from birth to death. As he explained, "the two processes are, in fact, very similar. Both represent the transition from one world to the next. The birth of my son was a journey from the invisible world to the material, while the death of my mother was a transition from the material, earthly world to the spiritual. At that moment I saw the entirety of humanity's vast reserves, from those who are yet to be born to those who have died." This revelation was the starting point for *Nantes Triptych* (1992), an installation projected onto a triptych of three screens. On one side a woman is in the final stages of giving birth, on the other side portrays shows Viola's mother dying, while in the centre we see a body submerged in water, symbolising transition.

"I deal with subjects that are universal and which do not use any language [there is neither dialogue nor text], making my work accessible to people from very different cultures. The most important thing for me is that these works allow viewers to reflect on the subject matter and spend some time not only in the company of my work but also in their own company."

Bill Viola

05. WORKS IN FOCUS

5.1 *The Reflecting Pool* (1977-79)



"A man emerges from the forest and stands before a pool of water. He leaps up and time suddenly stops. All movement and change in the otherwise still scene is limited to the reflections and undulations on the surface of the pond. Time becomes extended and punctuated by a series of events seen only as reflections in the water. The work describes the emergence of the individual into the natural world, a baptism into a world of virtual images and indirect perceptions." Bill Viola.

"The Reflecting Pool (...) uses varying styles and techniques to advance the theme of the collection: the progressive stages of the personal journey from birth to death, described through images of transition - from day to night, object to reflection, motion to stillness, time to timelessness." Bill Viola

This piece is a reflection on the calm that can exist in movement. Through it, one of his first works which is still highly recognised and appreciated, Viola is exploring what separates video from photography and even from the world of cinema. Video's electronic imagery freezes Viola's dive (he was still appearing in his videos at this time) and blurs it, with form and colour out of focus. This technique is employed by the artist to gradually merge the dive, frozen in a foetal position (something which is no coincidence), into the background foliage. The pool, however, takes on its own life. From the earliest days of Viola's career, water has been one of his central motifs,

with the movement of the body through space and on and through water becoming key to representing the passage of time from the past to the future, the changes that occur through life, rebirth and a union with the natural world. As Kira Perov points out, despite this being a piece that dates back to 1977, the audience is still surprised by the effect of water in movement while the rest of the scene remains still. To do so, Viola recorded various shots of the forest pool, to be edited later in order to cut them into the rest of the scene. Nowadays, with the advent of digital editing, this effect is a simple one within anybody's reach. However, in those days, this was an idea that was very much ahead of its time and which required the forcing of the medium's potential as far as was possible.

DID YOU KNOW...?

Video artists from the 1970s experimented with the form and subject matter that video offered them while music videos became a defining element in popular culture in the 1980s. Many video artists worked in this new genre, while others adopted the resources that artists such as Bill Viola had first explored. Although today music videos like *Take A Chance on Me* by Abba (directed by Lasse Hallström in 1978) seem more comical than artistic, they nevertheless are full of visual effects that were very innovative at the time.

5.2 Catherine's Room (2001)



“*Catherine's Room* is a private view into the room of a solitary woman who goes about a series of daily rituals from morning until night. The woman's actions are simple and purposeful, and appear simultaneously in parallel across five flat panel screens arranged in a horizontal row. Each panel represents a different time of day—morning, afternoon, sunset, evening and night. In the morning she is seen preparing for the new day by doing yoga exercises. In the afternoon she mends clothes as sunlight pours in through the window. At sunset, she struggles to overcome a block with her intellectual work as a writer. In the evening she enters a reflective state by lighting rows of candles to illuminate her darkened room. Finally, at night she prepares for bed: she puts out the lights, removes her clothes, and slowly drifts off to sleep, alone in the still dark room. A small window in the wall reveals a view of the outside world where the branches of a tree are visible. In each panel the tree is seen in successive stages of its annual cycle, from spring blossoms to bare branches. The world outside the window represents another layer of time, transforming the scene from a record of one day into the larger view of a life bound to the cycles of nature.” Bill Viola.

With the new millennium, Bill Viola began work on a series of projects in which he sought to reflect upon the importance of knowing ourselves and our place in the world, in order to be able to define ourselves before others. Although he experimented with the video's electronic imaging possibilities, he began to use traditional cinema techniques and the pictorial medium with greater awareness. The subject matter and conventions of religious painting from the late Middle Ages and renaissance now take on greater importance, mainly in the “Passions” series, albeit freed of any specific religious elements, allowing Viola to focus on spirituality and connect with everybody, regardless of their context.

In this particular piece, Viola was inspired by the predellas on medieval altars: "Predellas have always fascinated me. They depict small scenes, smaller than those on the central part and sides of the altar that (...) traditionally represent a person's ideal, eternal state. Predellas, on the other hand, show a chronological sequence, dividing the passage of time into individual scenes, each of which tells of an important aspect of the saint or person that it depicts." *Catherine's Room* specifically stemmed from Viola's fascination with the predella from the *Saint Catherine of Siena* altarpiece from the late 14th century, in the collection of Gallerie dell'Accademia de Venecia.

"When you think about eternity, it doesn't mean thinking about being here 1.000 years from now. It means thinking about what you're doing now, because what you do matters. It's part of the fabric of the present moment and always will be. When you think about eternity, it doesn't mean that you will be here for a thousand years more. It means thinking about what you are doing now, because what you do is important. It's part of the fabric that makes up the present moment and always will be." Bill Viola

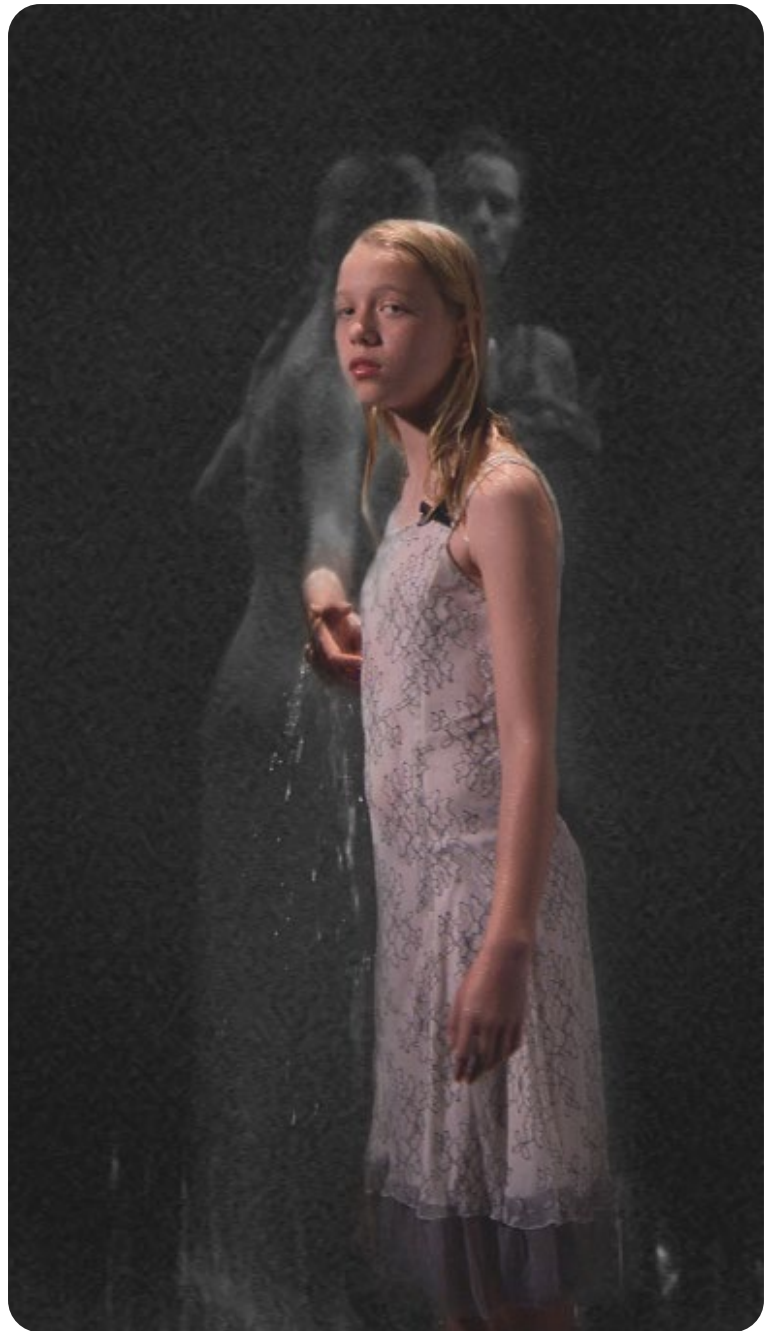
5.3 *Three Women* (2008)

Three Women is part of the “Transfigurations” series, a group of works that reflect on the passage of time and the process by which a person’s inner being is transformed. The medieval mystic Ibn al’ Arabi described life as an endless journey when he said, *The Self is an ocean without a shore. Gazing upon it has no beginning or end, in this world and the next.* *Three Women* expresses this profound vision of the eternal nature of human life.

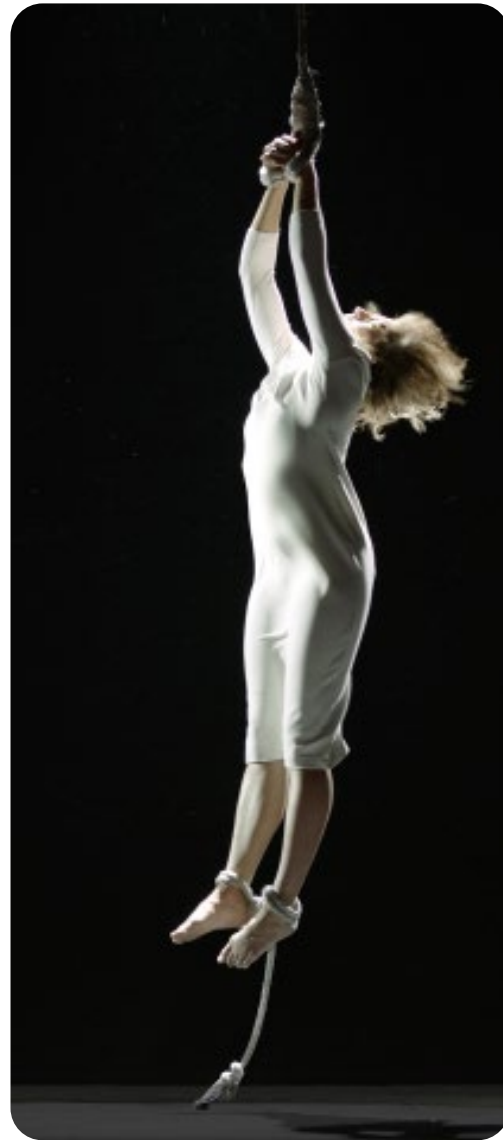
In the dim, ghostly gray of a darkened space, a mother and her two daughters slowly approach an invisible boundary. They pass through a wall of water at the threshold between life and death, and move into the light, transforming into living beings of flesh and blood. Soon, the mother recognizes that it is time for her to return, and eventually her children slowly follow, each tempted to have one more look at the world of light before disappearing into the shimmering, gray mists of time.” Bill Viola.

The “Transfigurations” series began with *Ocean without a Shore* (2007), created for the 52nd Venice Biennale. Viola describes these pieces as “a series of encounters at the intersection between life and death.” The characters in “Transfigurations” pass from darkness to the physical world, only to realise that their time is finite and they have to return. The transition between the two worlds is represented by the passing through a transparent wall of water. According to Kira Perov, the way to understand life as a cycle in which birth and death take place without the solution of continuity stems from Buddhist philosophy: human beings exist in a wheel of time and life, constituting a single, balanced living thing.

In an interview he gave to *Art in America*, Viola explained the technique he used to achieve the hypnotic effect in “Transfigurations”: “I worked with two innovative technologies. We created a wall of water that was 10 feet wide and 8 feet high. Water was pouring over a specially designed laser-cut razor edge. It took us three days to make it completely level and precisely aligned, so the water was like a sheet of glass. The other was an optical device specially designed for this project by a group called Pace. They created a mirror/prism system to align the latest high-definition video camera with my 25-year-old black-and-white surveillance camera. Through this optical system, the two images were superimposed in the editing room.”



5.4 *Earth Martyr, Air Martyr, Fire Martyr, Water Martyr* (all 2014)



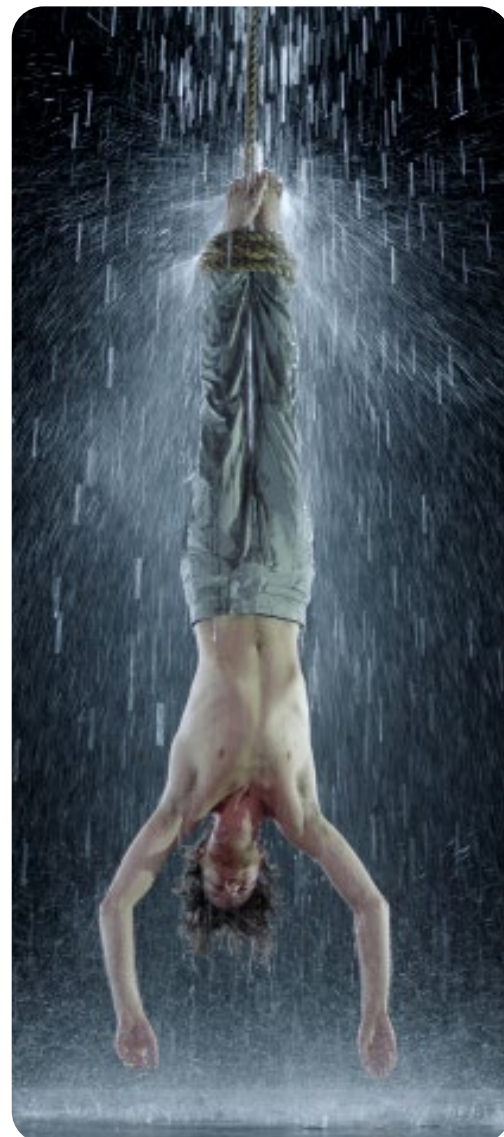
“*Earth Martyr, Air Martyr, Fire Martyr, and Water Martyr*, are four works that are derived from the permanent large-scale video installation *Martyrs (Earth, Air, Fire, Water)*, unveiled at St Paul’s Cathedral, London in May of 2014. The separate works are shown together in a square room, one on each wall.

As the works open, four individuals are shown in stasis, a pause from their suffering. Gradually there is movement in each scene as an element of nature begins to disturb their stillness. Flames rain down, winds begin to lash, water cascades, and earth flies up. As the elements rage, each martyr’s resolve remains unchanged. In their most violent assault, the elements represent the darkest hour of the martyr’s passage through death into the light.

The Greek word for martyr originally meant “witness.” In today’s world, the mass media turns us all into witnesses to the suffering of others. The martyrs’ past lives of action can help illuminate our modern lives of inaction. They also exemplify the human capacity to bear pain, hardship, and even death in order to remain faithful to their values, beliefs, and principles. This piece represents ideas of action, fortitude, perseverance, endurance, and sacrifice.” Kira Perov, Bill Viola.

The figure of the martyr is present in all religious beliefs as an expression of the believer's resistance to intolerance, repression and violence. These tortured saints embody the dignity of the human spirit, overcoming and transcending physical humiliation. In Christianity, the visual representation of martyrdom is a significant part of art history. In fact, throughout history and all over the world, human beings have had to face persecution for their religious or political beliefs. The use of the four elements – Perov's idea – resolves the symbolism associated with Christianity, creating a universal declaration of the suffering and transcendence that has had such an impact on all cultures and beliefs.

The original piece in the series, *Martyrs (Earth, Air, Fire, Water)* has been permanently installed since 2014 in the south choir aisle of Saint Paul's Cathedral in London since 2014. Previously, the same space had hosted a series of paintings representing the iconography of the Virgin Mary and a number of martyrs, although Viola was given total freedom in terms of subject matter. The installation is the result of over ten years work by Viola and Perov and its location, in the part that is furthest from the cathedral entrance, is no coincidence. According to Viola, the aim was to "provoke in viewers the sensation that, the further they walk down the nave, the more they become involved in the space that requires a different kind of behaviour, one which is more reflective."



06. SUGGESTED ACTIVITY



Bill Viola, *Anima* (2000).

Anima is a study of four primary emotions, joy, sorrow, anger, and fear, as they unfold in extreme slow motion on the faces of three individuals. Photographic-style portraits showing two women and one man are presented as individually frames pictures mounted in a row on the wall. Recorded in a single take, each performer moves through the four emotions in a continuous gradation of expression. At first glance, the three images appear to be still photographs, but subtle shifts in expression and small movements like eye blinks reveal that the subjects are in fact moving. Most of the facial movements, extended from the original one minute of recording to over eighty-one minutes of playback time, are too slow to be visible to the human eye. The piece is best observed by looking away for some minutes and then returning to see what changes in expression and position have occurred." Bill Viola.

Just as Bill Viola slows his videos down so much that they resemble photographs, there has been a recent creative development in which the opposite is true: movement is added to photographs. Cinemagraphs (the word is a portmanteau of "cinema" and

"photograph") are photographic images in which an element or action features a subtle movement which has been added as a loop. Its origins can be found in the American photographers Kevin Bug and Jamie Beck, who began using this technique in their fashion and news photography in early 2011. These pieces are created by recording a short video clip and then selecting which the parts of the will be still and which one will be and moving images to be used, generally using advanced photo and video editing software. The cCinemagraphy, which can only be seen on digital media, is then exported as a GIF.

It is also possible to replicate the effect of cinemagraphsy in an easier, fun way by using any one of a number of mobile phone apps. You only need to have a good idea before you use the app to select what parts you want to be static and which are to have the hypnotic effect of movement. You can use the Cinegraph Pro app (https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=cinemagraphproapplingphotoscineshot.cinemagraphproapplingphotoscineshot&hl=en_US), which allows the user to make cinemagraphs from videos, or PixaMotion Loop Photo Animator & Photo Video Maker (https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.pixamotion&hl=en_US; <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/pixamotion-loop-photo-animator/id1461756384>), which takes photographs to which the effect of movement can be added to the sky, water, clothing etc. Have a look around, you're bound to find further options to suit your needs and preferences. The most important thing is to experiment with the image and its suggestive possibilities. Get creative!

07. RESOURCES

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Bill Viola

Mirrors of the Unseen

Practical Guide

