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HI-TECH ZEN

The Video Art of Bill Viola

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Video Art
And
TECHNOLOGY

The Crossed Wires

In 1965 the Sony Corporation began marketing its newly developed consumer grade portable video camera / recorder in the United States. The Korean born artist Nam June Paik rushed out to buy a machine from the first shipment. On his way home from the store his cab got caught in a traffic jam caused by a procession to greet Pope Paul VI, who was visiting New York. Paik made an instantaneous video tape of the event, which he showed later at the *Café a Go-Go.*

(Tamblyn, Christine, 1987, p. 33)

As pointed out by Martha Rosler during a panel discussion sponsored by the College Art Association in 1985, video art like the major religions of the world has its own myth of origins shaped by numerous retellings. The introduction of video technology into artistic practice however was far less instantaneous than might be imagined. Video technology did not continue a mere extension of the numerous tools already available to artists at this time, instead the general cultural climate in the 1960's was important in fostering the early development of video art, and its reputation as a 'democratic medium'.[1]

The 60's were years of social activism with institutions of the establishment being challenged by the Civil Rights Movement, Feminism and Anti War Protests. At this time, video was seen as a relatively inexpensive way for various communities to assert themselves by gaining access to the communications media. With this in mind a number of video collectives formed including, Peoples Theatre, Global Village, The Video Freex, Raindance, Optic Nerve and T.V.T.V..

Concurrently several related trends in the art world also paved the way for the introduction of video as an art form. Conceptual artists demonstrated that art could function as an idea, rather than a commodity, and saw video as having a unique intangible quality that could neither be bought nor sold. In short videos impermanence and reproducibility represented, for many artists a denial of art as a precious object.

Private collectors were sceptical as to whether such a technically reproducible object was worth collecting and subsequently questioned whether this 'new' art form required a new form of patronage.

Hence video art maintained an uneasy relationship with the Art establishment, and its reception and distribution of Avant-garde art. However the gallery was not the only possible site for video art dissemination. A growing number of video artists considered the craft skill oriented production of high art with its implied exclusivity and elitist domination of the field of 'High Culture' as inherently retrograde, therefore the circumnavigation of the gallery was then seen as a necessary step away from the production of what seemed to be redundant art baubles, and into the realm of mass culture and television.

This media optimism led to the belief that access to broadcast television would enable video artists to turn the instrument of television around from being the most powerful social institution of 'manipulation and control' into becoming an instrument of self determination, two way communication, exchange and learning.[2] Hence the promise of video technology was to be a progressive transformation both of the traditional fetishistic apparatus of the high-art institution and of the quasi-totalitarian conditions of the consciousness industry in television, advertising and movie production.

One of the major criticisms of this move of video art into the realm of mass media has been that 'although this movement was certainly quite advanced with regard to its reflections on audience conditions, paradoxically it is also one of the most limited' *(Benjamin, H. D., 1985, p. 219)*. It was assumed that the 'general' television audience would be interested enough to submit themselves to a radical procedure of deconstruction and demystification during their regular dosage of news mythology in order to recognise their own condition of ideological containment. Another criticism that followed was that many such works might have functioned better as theory, appealing to those who were willing to sacrifice an evening of entertainment in order to interpret the complex decoding of the naturalisation of ideology.

Viola's *Reverse T.V.* broadcast over WGBH-T.V., Boston in 1984 owed a large amount to this interest in engaging with a more public audience, however in *Reverse T.V.* Viola aimed to make the viewer aware of the particular trappings of television watching, without resorting to a level of theoretical deconstruction which may serve to further the distance between art and T.V. audiences, *Reverse T.V.* comprised of a series of portraits each lasting thirty seconds, of viewers sitting in their sitting rooms watching television

from the vantage point of the set itself, which punctuated normal programming as would advertisements on commercial stations.[3]

Fig. 1 : Reverse T.V., 1984.

In *Reverse T.V.* Viola questions the notion of a 'general' T.V. audience, and the way in which the viewer is connected in simultaneous collective reception only as he / she is separated by the apparatus itself.

> *We were altogether once... and kind of stuck. We thought we*
> *had another condition for 'simultaneous collective reception' in*
> *television. After all we were all glued to the set, but the actual*
> *experience was different we were separated..... but still stuck,*
> *wanting it, something, but what was it ?*

(Barry, Judith, 1992, p. 73)

With our remote control devices, we ceaselessly change channels, looking for something, rarely stopping. Judith Barry in her essay on *Wilful Amnesia* [4] relates this behaviour to Metz's *Imaginary Signifier*, whereby the televised image works on the masses when, the spectator lapses into in a certain kind of insentient tranced state brought about by the sixty - decibel hum emitted from the set, causing the brain to relax into an alpha mode. In

addition the televised image demands that a certain fealty be extracted, 'the nature of this fealty is a hunger, so powerful that it creates in spectators the desire not only for more images, but for that state of mind produced by the images themselves', the viewer thus evolving into what Barry distinguishes as a *vampiric consumer.*

Like the vampire the spectator cannot recover by consuming images, or by avoiding them either. The vampire cannot come back to this life as it was before, he sucks life through the blood-kiss, yet cannot bleed except after feeding, he cannot experience pleasure because he is no longer human, living outside time and as such has neither history nor memory. He must spend his time watching the lives of others who irrevocably remain separated from his existence.

Barry equates this state with that of the unrelieved desire of the viewer 'stuck' in a trance state of passive consumption, unable to establish some measure of control over the situation, unable to exist on the other side of the screen, like the vampire 'unable to stand the sight of his own reflection because it reminds him of his own situation'. *(ibid).*

In *Reverse T.V.* we are confronted by a situation possibly similar to our own, in the channel search for something, anything; we find ourselves being viewed by a viewer like ourselves. The image on the screen looks disturbingly conscious of ones presence thereby evoking a self consciousness within the viewer that may serve to awaken from this trance state into an awareness of his / her own circumstance.

This interest in awakening the viewer, is further explored in Viola's *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House* (1983). In *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House,* a monitor faces a crudely built chair to which are attached old fashioned headphones. The installation conjuring up a setting of torture or execution. A fatigued Viola gazes out from the monitor seated in the same chair and engaged in eye-to-eye contact with the viewer. The overall effect is of staring into a mirror, however, the viewer has seemingly exchanged identities with Viola. The viewer whilst sitting in the chair and wearing the headphones, hears a muted, rambling monologue presumably from the figure (Bill Viola) on the screen whose consciousness we are invited to enter. As the perceptual boundaries between self and other are disintegrated, a figure emerges from the darkness and suddenly strikes Viola in the head. The spectator experiences the trauma of this blow viscerally ;

amplified sound reverberates in the room as well as in the head set to the extent that it aurally assaults and disorientates the viewer.
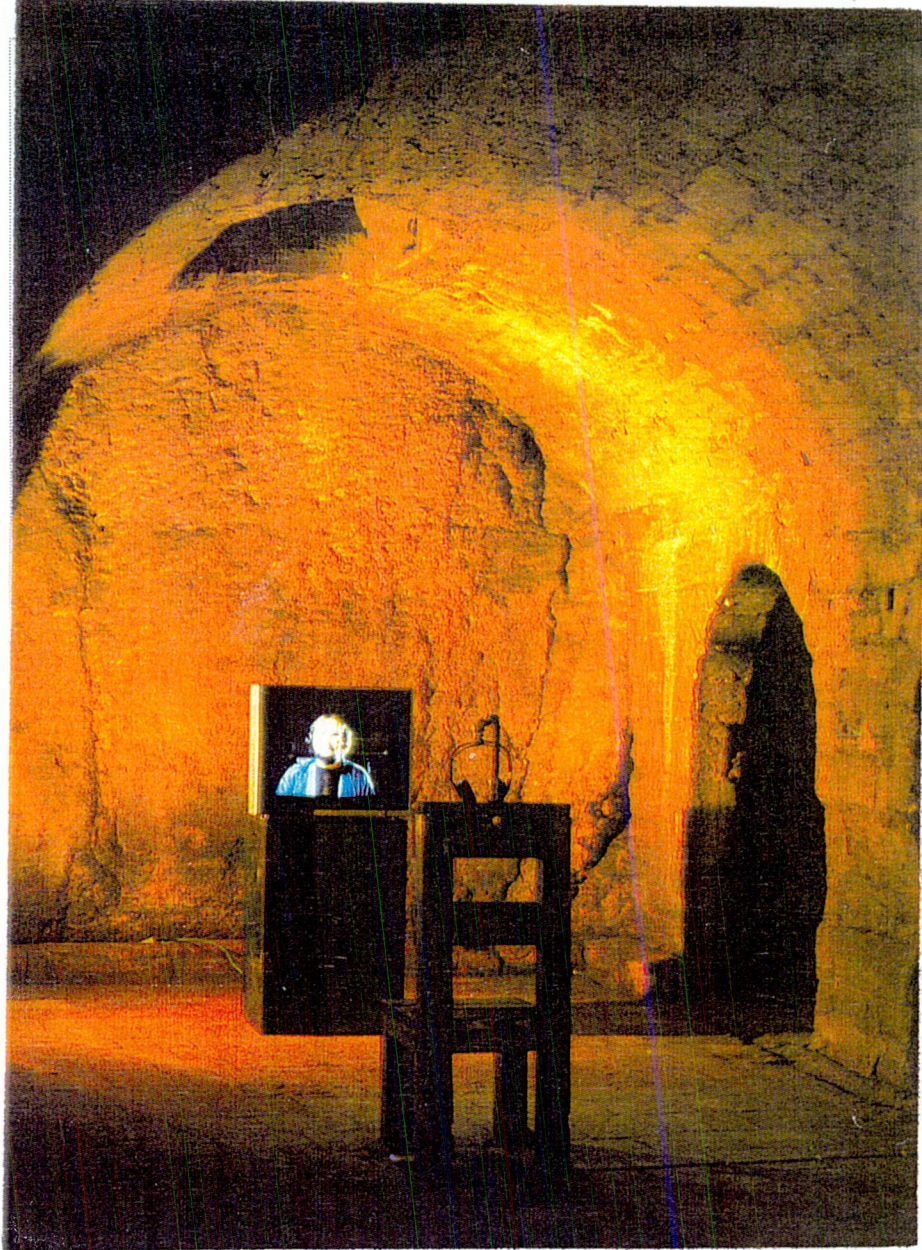
Fig. 2 : Reasons For Knocking At An Empty House, 1983.

This occurrence refers to the Custom of the Zen Master in giving his disciple a blow to the head with a stick when he / she becomes inattentive during meditative practice. The effect of this physical or aural assault is disturbing, and aims at jolting the casual viewer out of his / her cycle of vampiric consumption and insentient paralysed trance.

Viola's link between awakening, jolting the viewer out of a state of inertia, and Zen Buddhism practice in *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House* is not incidental but

rather refers to the greater interest Viola maintains in the customs of Eastern religions, and in particular Zen Buddhism. Awakening is in 'essence' the heart of Buddhist practice. "Buddha" means "awakened one" and one through whom everyone can awaken. [5] Through awakening, the dream of being a separate isolated individual with its attendant fear and frustration, fades, while wisdom and compassion inherent in us all is said to develop naturally. [6]

> *The attendants poured hot water according to the rule, it splashed on my hand. The teacup fell to the ground and broke to bits with a loud noise, suddenly the roots of doubt were cut. In my whole life I had never felt such joy. It was like waking from a dream.*

> **(Welsh, Holmes, 1967, p. 82)**

Viola's first introduction to Eastern religions took place while he was studying experimental video, visual and performing arts as well as electronic music at Syracuse University, New York. Until 1975 Viola's tapes were in his own words, 'didactic their content was the medium' *(Viola, Bill, 1994, p. 201),* as they merely explored all technical possibilities and were predetermined by the structures of video technology and those of human perception. During this time Viola had allied himself with the 'Video structuralists' who emphasised the formal qualities of video, thereby linking themselves to the legacy of a formalist ban on subject matter and subjectivity (as Greenberg had demanded it had to be 'avoided like the plague').

Viola after disengaging himself from the 'video structuralists', did not, however, then associate himself with the affore mentioned artists that were interested in mass media. *Reverse T.V. (1984)* and *The Passing (1991)* are in fact the only two video tapes Viola ever broadcast on television. Instead Viola developed a greater interest in the holistic issues of existence, which he believes to be more crucial to current debates regarding 'the self';

> *The larger struggle we are witnessing today is not between the legal system and individual freedom or between nature and technology; it is between our inner and outer lives, and our bodies are the area where this belief is being played out.*

> **(Viola, Bill, 1992, p. 4)**

The extent to which Viola took his bearings from his interest in Eastern religions, increased following his visits to the Solomon Islands and to Java (in 1976 and 1977). In 1976 Viola made his first visit to Japan, where he was later to live with his wife Kira Perov for eighteen months, after being awarded a Japan / U.S. creative arts fellowship.[7] During this time Viola studied both Japanese culture and their new developments in technology. Viola became particularly drawn to Zen Buddhist philosophy and the Japanese relationship with nature. In 1977 Viola and Perov began to practise Zen meditation with the guidance of Shiatsu and Zen, and Master Shuya Ibe, and also began a long term relationship with Zen priest and painter Daien Tasaka.

When Viola came back from Japan, he began to intensely study people like the great Japanese Zen scholar Daisetz Suzuki, and Anna Coomaraswamy the Sri Lankan art historian and scholar, who redefined how Asian art was discussed and analysed. Both Suzuki and Coomaraswamy were raised in the East, yet spent their later years in the West for the most part America. Whilst living in America Suzuki, Coomaraswamy and a number of other Asian intellectuals, began to study Western history, drawing out connections between Eastern and Western religions and philosophies. They began writing about people who were previously unfamiliar to Viola, yet undoubtedly inspired his work in subsequent years. These people included Meister Eckhardt, St. John of the Cross, William Blake, Hildegard Von Bingen, Plotinus, Plato, Aristotle, Heidegger, and also a large number of metaphysical and transcendental poets and philosophers.

> *They recognised these people not as individuals, but as part of*
> *the other side of the Western tradition, a tradition that was*
> *carried on in the East and developed beyond the advent of*
> *rational positivistic thinking (which took over in the West)*
> *right into the twentieth Centuary.*

(Viola, Bill, 1994, p. 156)

Viola also began reading about early Christian beliefs, and the Desert Fathers from the Nile Valley and Syria who went out in the wilderness akin to Zen Monks on a spiritual retreat with their spiritual masters.

From this time on Viola's approach to his work in video begins to move from structural editing to what has now been coined as his intuitive 'Visionary' Video style.[8] In the following chapters, the influence of Zen Buddhism on Bill Viola's work will be discussed

firstly in his relationship with technology and secondly how this relationship ties in with the role of the artist as Passeur whose function I have only touched on briefly as yet, but which I will later discuss with regard to Viola's aspirations not only to awaken the viewer, but also dissolve subject/object dualisms, and therefore possibly cleansing the senses of the (tranced) Western subject. This cleansing will lead him / her to a possible state of revelation whilst also redressing the imbalances supposedly caused by the rational positivistic approach to knowledge that that has dominated Western thought since Descartes informed us that one thinks therefore one is / *'I think therefore I am'*.

Video Poetics - Technological Revelation

Viola's approach to video technology has been likened to that of a poet or musician.[9] In *Technologies Imaginares*, 1990, Viola further explained that his video tapes are 'visual poems' open to many *interpretations (Viola, Bill, 1990, p. 16)*. Viola, uninterested in the 'didactic' use of technology for its own sake, leans toward a more poetic and intuitive use of technology that goes against the grain of a appropriating technology for Materialist ends.

Heidegger in his 1954-5 essay *'Die Frage Nach Der Technick'*, (The Question Concerning Technology)[10] questions the 'Wesen' (essence in loose translation) of technology - essence in the Heideggerian sense does not indicate in essentialist category but rather implies an exploration of how a term like technology 'endures' and 'pursues' its course through history. In more contemporary terminology, how is a term like 'technology' located within the discursive categories of nature, art, and subject - object relations.

Heidegger concludes that the 'essence' of technology is not in itself technological but rather connotes the particular way in which subject and object are related in and through technology. The essence of technology is then understood in the Heideggerian sense as a 'mode of revealing' whereby the technical apparatus brings forth objects and reveals objects to subjects. Heidegger breaks this relationship down into the two antagonistic forms of revealing, 'enframing' *'Ge-stell'* (enframing) and *'poesis'* (from the Greek conception of poetry, and the art of making).

According to Heidegger *'enframing'* represents the essence of modern techno-science, and *'poesis'* forms the latent or subordinate essence of technology.

> *The essence of technology lies in enframing. Its holding sway*
> *belongs to destining. Since destining at any given time starts man*
> *on a way of revealing, man, thus under way is continually*
> *approaching the brink of the possibility of pursuing and pushing*
> *forward nothing but what is revealed in ordering, and deriving all*
> *his standards on this basis.*
>
> **(Heidegger, Martin, 1954, p. 26)**

In this mode of revealing the world is seen as a 'standing reserve' and nature as 'a totality of calculable forces which are at the disposal of man to be tamed, mastered, ordered and exploited'.[11] *Enframing* ('ge-stell') is the essence of a technology that orders the world and produces the order of the world.

In short Enframing is to be understood , according to Heidegger as the use of technology as a way in which to order, and scientifically calculate or break down 'the world' in a positivistic sense . The translation of 'Wessen' as enframing may be thought of in terms of a 'frame' which formally separated a certain squared area from the larger picture for examination and ordering .

Viola on the other hand (as already mentoned) uses technology in a poetic sense, and equates the above mentioned positivistic use of technology as being symptomatic of the kind of scientific materialism thet Blake first coined as 'Newton's sleep . Viola believes that since the Enlightenment Viola believes that since the Enlightenment Western society has been preoccupied with the 'how' questions of existence. In Isaac Newton's case the question of how the apple falls (that is by the force of gravity) and has been ignoring the 'why' questions. In this sense Viola shares along with Pascal, Goethe, and in particular William Blake, a disdain for positivism.[12]

> *I relate my role to that of the Mystic, .. in the sense of*
> *following a Via Negitiva-of feeling the basis of my work to be*
> *in the **cloud of unknowing**, in doubt, in being lost, in*
> *questions answers- and that recognition that the most*

important work that I have done has come from not knowing

what I was doing at the time I was doing it

<div align="right">

(Viola, Bill, 1995, p. 88)

</div>

Viola maintains a philosophy of 'Via Negativa' in relation to his work, he turns to technology not as a template with which to re-order the world but rather sees the new technologies of time and image as having an even greater potential to address the deeper questions and mysteries of the human condition.[13]

This *cloud of unknowing* refers to an anonymously written mystical treatise from fourteenth centuary England, which explores the contemplative practices of the fourteenth Centuary gnostics. Dionysius and Plotinus also refer to a *Via Negitiva* mystical practice, wherein the mystic is plunged into the *'Darkness of the Unknowing'* and is *'Wholly absorbed in him who is beyond all'*.[14] In his *Mystical Theology* Dionysus writes of the 'Mystic way' of ascending from the particular to the universal, venturing beyond all the positive divine attributes so that 'without veil, we may that unknowing which is shrouded under everything that is known or can be known , and that we may contemplate that superessential darkness which is hidden by the light that is in existing things'.[15]

Via Negativa is not dissimilar to the two *tendencies*, that, according to Starobinski, formed an antidote to the engulfing rationalist, empiricist and utilitarian order that was reshaping the framework of social life at the turn of the eighteenth centuary.

The first of these two tendencies was the revival of a neo-platonic desire for beauty that could not be perceived with the normal eyes of mundane observation.

> *A thirst for an intelligible beauty, a reflection of the unity of*
> *beauty re-emerged strongly everywhere - in reaction ...*
> *against the corrupting seduction of sensual pleasure. People*
> *aspired to an art that would no longer address itself to the eyes*
> *alone, but instead, through the inevitable mediation of sight to*
> *the soul.*

<div align="right">

(Starobinski, 1789, p145)

</div>

The second was a new valorisation of darkness, as a necessary complement, and even a source of light. The metaphor of night as a companion to the enlightened day, played an

important part in the poetry of the British and German Romantics of this time - Novalis`s 'Hymns to the Night' being one of the many possible examples.[16]

This valourisation of Darkness, in its rejection of the positivist Enlightenment notion, that phenomenon can be reduced and studied in light of what is enframed, and furthermore supported the Romantic notion of that which is infinitely unresolvable.

> *If the doors to perception were cleansed everything would*
> *appear as it is; infinite.*
>
> *(Blake, William)*[17]

In Zen Buddhism this link between darkness, mysticism, and infinity is also significant. Zen Enlightenment differs greatly from that of the Western notion of Enlightenment. Zen Enlightenment and awakening, occurs in a moment of exaultation and 'Oneness' that is not necessarily tied to the metaphor of light;

> *Lung-t`an was once visited by Te-shan, who, seeking*
> *further and further education remained until it grew late.*
> *Lung-t`an finally said, "The night deepens, why don`t*
> *you retire ?*
>
> *Te-shan, taking his leave, raised the bamboo blind and*
> *went out. Seeing the intense darkness without, he turned*
> *and said,"it is dark outside". Lung-t`an then lit a lantern*
> *and offered it to Te-shan, just as Te-shan was about to*
> *take it, Lung-t`an abruptly blew it out. With this, Te-shan*
> *suddenly attained enlightenment, where upon he bowed.*
>
> *(Hisamatsu, Shin`ichi, 1979, p12)*

Fig. 3 : From Pneuma, Girl Blowing Out Lantern

Viola associates Western society`s desire for enlightenment and order, with the fear of its opposite, the darks disorder, the unknown of nothingness, of night and of death. *'I've often thought how we have built entire cities of artificial light as a refuge from the dark',* *(Viola, Bill, 1996, p. 256)* Instead of providing a refuge in light, Viola explores the corners of infinite darkness, in *Stations* (1994), (also titled *the Falling*), as well as '***Black and the mortality of the image' (1990)***, *where in black becomes a bright light on a dark day..., there is nothing but black..., everything seems to be closing down to a small opening just around my face..., outside this small area ... the oblivion of nothing, finally I let that go and feel myself submerged in a great comfort of the senseless weightless void'* (Viola, Bill, 1996, p. 210).

Fig. 4 : Stations

Viola, in his exploration of darkness, probes into an 'emptiness', into obscurity, and allows our minds to project into a world that seeks new correspondences between technology and poetry. This 'gap' in Viola's work, or area of darkness, allows for the possibility of dynamic association, which Robert Bly refers to as 'leaping poetry', in which dramatic shifts in levels of experience and qualities of perception occur through the unfolding of the poem over time, hence duration is to consciousness as light is to the *eye'* *(Viola, Bill, 1996, . p210)*.

Viola's use of video technology, rather than revealing the visual order of the world as in Heidegger's *'age of the world picture'*, explores its possibilities for revelation. The extended duration of a single image becomes the process of revelation. Similar to the way in which prolongued meditation on a single object (or Mu` which means nothingness) heralds awakening within the Zen disciple. In *'I do not know what it is I am like'* (1987) Viola sustains close ups of an owl's eyes, holding the image long past the point of surface recognition, right up to and then past the threshold of boredom, until a shift of perspective occurs, revealing new contents within the image in a dynamic interplay of the viewer's imagination.
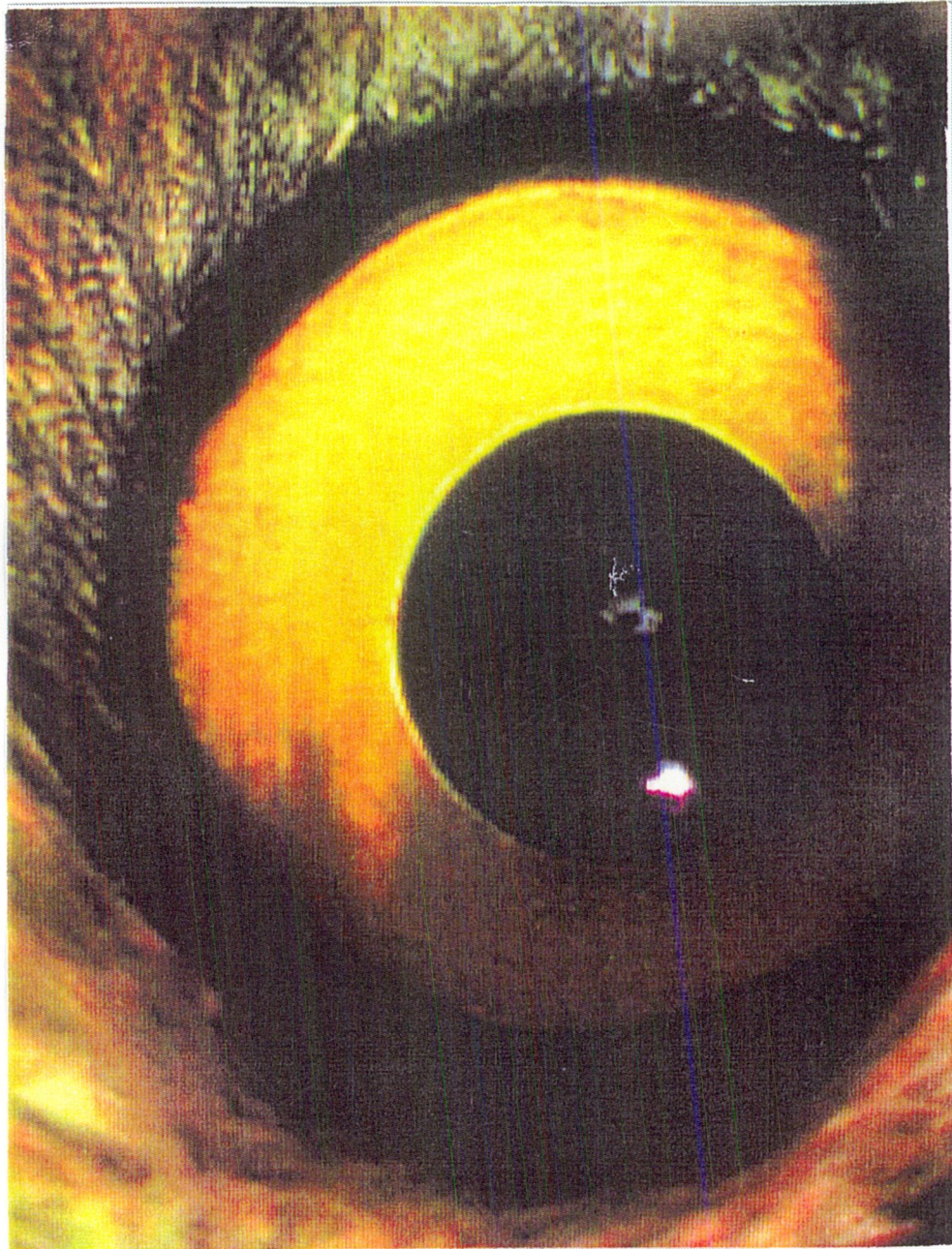
Fig. 5 & 6 : I do not know … I am like

Viola has said that 'video treats light like water', and accordingly his video tapes have an certain fluidity, or stream of consciousness in their unfolding. His poetic use of light and duration eschews a literal structure, or narrative, in favour of the 'texture' of a more open form that is also closely associated with theTransendental and the Beat movement (both of which were influenced by Zen Buddhism and Japanese Haiku poetry) that led to a renaissance in American Poetry earlier this century.[18] Running throughout the thinking

and writing of these 'New American poets' is the recurring expression of emptiness, desire and vision, that will *become* the poem finding the form it needs :

> *Obviously it is the poem that is or is not the only possible*
> *justification for any form, however theory runs ... the*
> *consideration of the evolution of forms belongs largely to*
> *history and method. The visitation that is going to be the poem*
> *finds the form it needs in spite of both.*
>
> **(Merwin, W. S, 1976, p229)**

It is in this regard that, the poetic re-asserts itself in the Heideggerian Enframing / Poesis coupling. In other words the openness of the poetic form countracts the enclosing essence of Enframing, thus furthering the possibilities for technology as a revelationary, 'visionary' medium. In seeking the poetic in technology, Viola opens up a greater discursive space for technology that is drastically different from that of instrumentality, efficiancy, mastery and control.

Ironically, however, it is precisely Violas' mastery' of video, to the extent that it becomes intuitive, that makes its enframing less apparent and therefore allows poetic to resurface as an integral element of the enframing/poesis coupling.

The Soft Machine

> *As the eye, so is the object*
>
> **(Blake, William,1995, p250)**

The enframing essence of Technology was problematic for Heidegger in the sense that it carried for him an extreme distancing of subject and object, and arrogant human domination of the world as *standing reserve,* which had come into its own in modern philosophy with Descartes.[19]

> *Only the modern age had allowed what Heidegger called*
> *Enframing (Ge-Stell) to gain full sway in turning the world into*
> *a standing reserve for arrogant human domination. What such*
> *an attitude forgot was that the 'world' is never an object that*

stands before us and can be seen. The world is ever non-
objective to which we are subject as long as the paths of birth
and death, blessing and curse transport us into being.

(Jay, Martin, 1993, p. 272)

Heidegger bemoaned the loss of wonder in the Western technological world view, caused by the transformation of the Greek concept of *in theoria* into *contemplatio*, wherein, he wrote 'there comes to the fore an impulse, already prepared in Greek thinking of a looking at, that sunders and compartmentalises. *(Heidegger, 1954, p.166)*

In contrasting the early Greek attitude of wonder which let things be, with that of curiosity,which is based in the desire to know how something functions, Heidegger emphasised the hegemonic distancing tendancies of a technological world view. He also believed that technology draws on the mode of relating to being in what he called *Vorhandenheit* (present at hand), which poisted something in front to be seen, as opposed to *Zuhandenheit* (readiness to hand) which meant using something practically without visualising it first. [20]

Viola believes in using technology intuitively, with the readiness of the *Zen-Ga* painter who picks up the brush only when he already knows the results of his painting, or else he could not paint. [21]

For Viola his earlier work involved a curiosity with the gadgetry of video technology, the technical had a direct effect on the content of his work..."that twenty one year old part of me who was struggling with composition and lighting is now somewhere deeper, and has migrated out to my hand, so that the centre of consciousness has moved from my conscious mind to my hand. My hand now 'knows' where to put the camera, which I do quite naturally when I encounter a new location ... like the pianist who has to 'think' with his or her hands"*(Viola, Bill, 1995, p. 78)*

In fact Viola rejects the label "Video Artist" preferring that of "Artist". Many of Viola's installations and writings express a desire to interlink subject and object, his eye and that of the video camera. The camera like the statue of Buddha becomes an aid in meditation, but also a way to transmit that experience. In *Chott el Djerid (1979)*and *Reflecting Pool (1980),* the intense unrelenting camera vision can be compared to concentrated meditation

which heralds a shift in consciousness...'the sense of seeing - or seeing the sense of an object .... I want to look so close at things that their intensity burns through your retina and onto the surface of your mind, the video camera is well suited to looking at things, elevating the commonplace to higher levels of awareness ... I want each image to be the first image, to shine with the intensity of it's own first being'*(Viola, Bill, 1995, p. 80).*

Historically, Zen practice and other meditative disciplines have sought to resolve the subject/object dualism by emptying the object of all it's material content with only it's soul remaining. For example practising *'Mu'* (literally means 'nothing' or 'no') or contemplating *koâns* dissolves the boundaries between subject and object leading to a state of *'Samadhi' or 'blissful awareness'.*[22]

The word *Samadhi* has for its roots *'Sam'* and *'dhi '.'Sam'* means to combine, mix or mingle, whilst, *'dhi'* is somewhat more difficult to translate in that it means a pledge towards or a commitment, yet also means a conception. In Zen practice *'Samadhi* 'most often refers to an active, ethereal mergence of subject and object. *'Samadhi'* is not a placid or flacid state, rather it is one of perfect balance without violence or tension.

> *Suddenly I stood still, filled with the realisation that I had no*
> *body or mind. All I could see was one great encompassing*
> *whole, omnipresent, perfect, lucid,and serene.*

> **(Chen-chi, chang, 1960, p. 93)**

In this state of *'Samadhi'*, objectivity is no longer troublesome, and a level of union is reached ...'I am about to ask an object a question and then listen'*(Viola, Bill, 1995, p. 92).*

The object of technology is equally etherialised in Viola's audio visual installations, to the extent that technology 'conceals revealing itself'. For example *'Pneuma'* (1994) realises the embrace of surround cinema, 'whereby the movie is particularly suited to make manifest a union of mind and body, mind and the world and the expression of one in the other'*(Ponty, Merleau, 1995, p. 58).*

The video monitor, however, unlike the film screen cannot be seen as a window through which stored information comes to the viewer. Video, as realised by *Testimo Kogana,* is a

"transmitter" makes "information objects" move through the air from on place to another, from "sender to receiver". This does not imply that parcel of information passes coherently from "sender" to "receiver" but rather :

> *The 'sender' sometimes sends nothing, while the 'receiver' may*
> *receive much more than the 'sender' sends...thus*
> *communication always occurs, or mutates as a holistic event.*
> **(Kogawa,Testsue, 1996, p. 56)**

In this regard video does not contain original source material, but *relays* something that is both different and similar to it's source material. The monitor/screen becomes then an access point for unlimited relayed connections and resonances … whereby 'the monitor should be understood as a node of video resonances' *(Kogawa, Testsue, 1996, p. 56).*

For Viola, this process relates to the *livelihood* of the video image, that cannot be tied to the object of technology that transmits it, nor the sender that sends it, thus the emphasising the applicability of video technology to the Zen notion of holistic interaction between subject and object. Viola calls this 'life as the "Rorshach test", the projection by the spectator and the reception of the transmitted image are equally important elements in the activity of seeing. One current theory in visual perception research, complicates this exchange even more, further proposing that 'high levels trigger units, *'Cognons'* integrate and store mental representations, and later fire images at the targeted sense stimulation in order to give unitary perceptions their exterior quality', *(Viola, Bill, 1989, p. 16)*

Two thousand years later, the quest for interactivity between subject and object is remarkably close to the Greek theory of visual fire streaming out of the observers eye, and engaging with the opposing transmission of the audio visual image.

Viola's interest in the interactive audio visual experience, is to take the viewer beyond observation towards a state of Zen like readiness wherein nothing must come between subject and transmission at this critical moment of union.

FOOTNOTES

1. See *Video Histories in illuminating Video* (Hall, Fifer, eds.) 1990, pp. 18-25.

2. Ibid.

3. Reverse T.V., discussed in J. Hoberman's essay, *The Reflecting Pool, Bill Viola and Visionary Video, in Bill Viola, Survey of a Decade,* 1988, pp. 70-71

4. See *Wilful Amnesia in Public Fantasy* (Judith Barry) 1992, pp. 73-81.

5. This topic is further discussed by Albert Low, *in The Iron Cow of Zen,* 1985, p12.

6. Ibid., p. 13.

7. Biographical information sited in the catalogue *Bill Viola, Exhibition Salzburg, Austria, 1994, p. 249.*

8. This term was used by Charles Guilliano, in *Visionary Video*, 1985, p. 11.

9. See *Bill Viola ; The Poetics of Light and Time,* Barbara London, in *Survey of a Decade, Marilyn Ziethan (ed.),* 1988, pp. 9-21.

10. Heidegger, Martin; *The Question Concerning Technology,* Heidegger theory is also used to discuss audio and tele-visual technologies in Tony Fry's, *Heidegger and the Television, (*Sydney Power Publications, 1993) Poesis is nevertheless only discussed in passing.

11. Ibid.

12. Cited in Otto Neumaier's interview with Bill Viola, *Putting the Whole Back Together,* in exhibition catalogue, ed. Alexander Puhringer, Salzburg, Austria, 1994, p.138.

13. Ibid., p.152.

14. Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, chap. 1&2, discussed in *Mysticism in the Worlds Religions,* Geoffrey Parrinder, 1995, pp. 10-12.

15. Ibid.

16. As discussed by Martin Jay in *Downcast Eyes,* 1993, p. 108.

17. William Blake Quoted by Bill Viola in *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House,* 1995, p. 200.

18. The influence of Zen Buddhism, mysticism, and Romanticism on these movements is discussed at length in *Big Sky Mind, Buddhism and the Beat Generation,* Carolyn Tonkinson (ed.) .

19. This argument is further discussed in, *Downcast Eyes,* Martin Jay, 1993. pp. 271-5.

20. Ibid. p. 271.

21. Intuition as linked to Zen, is discussed by Bill Viola in *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House,* 1995, p. 224.

22. See *The Iron Cow of Zen,* Albert Low, 1991, pp. 91-5.

Chapter 2

Beyond

Observation

Artist as 'Passeur'.

... Most of today's art bears no functional relationship to the communities it is being presented in, at least not in the way science and technology are perceived to... it is no coincidence that the two fields that speak directly to the individuals inner life, art and religion, show the same problems in this regard...

(Viola, Bill, 1995, p. 210)

Viola relates his role to that of a mystic or Shaman, and believes that artists have a 'responsibility' to society to bridge the gaping abyss between the dichotomies that have run through western thought since the Greeks split the world into 'reality' and 'semblance'. Further more, Viola adds that artists like Shaman require time away from everyone else "out in the great loneliness" as the Inuit say. Ultimately this time in solitude 'yields results that benefit society'. In this regard Viola's link between artist and Shaman, echoes Certeaus use of the term 'passeur' to describe his colleague, Michael Foucault as 'a man of passage', a person who uses his power in the service of others, 'to move people or things into forbidden zones'. Stuart Morgan in his catalogue introduction for the 'Rites of Passage' exhibition (in which Bill Viola exhibited *'The Passing', 1991*), discusses the role of the 'passeur' in relation to art at the latter end of the twentieth century. Artist as 'passeur' adopts the role of priest or Shaman as opposed to the modernist (and predominantly urban figure of the flaneûr) Morgan proposes that artists have an important role in society : 'that they be considered 'priests' perhaps of that secular religion that art has become'*(Morgan, Stewart, 1994, p.11)*.

In order to understand what this role of the mystic Shaman involves in the context of Viola's work, it might prove beneficial to understand what this role is not i.e. that of the modernist 'flâneur'.

The figure of the 'flâneur' as in the writings of Baudelaire, Benjamin, and George Simmel, refers to the 'strollers' or 'loiterers' of mid nineteenth century Paris who tried to withstand the increasingly frantic pace of urban life. The Parisian 'flâneur' a disinterested yet engaged observer of all that surrounded him, sought a new aesthetic, and perceived a novel kind of beauty in the trivial, fragmented aspects of street life [1].

This growing urbanisation, as pointed out by Fournel in 1858, led to a weakening of the senses of the urban viewer. The figure of the 'Flanêur' with his 'self possessed' observing skills, was to be gradually replaced by the 'badaud' the mere gaper taken by what he sees.

> *The simple flanêur... is always in full possession of his*
> *individuality, whereas the individuality of the 'badaud'*
> *disappears. It is absorbed by the outside world ... which*
> *intoxicates him until the point where he forgets himself. Under*
> *the influence of the spectacle which presents itself to him, the*
> *'badaud' becomes an impersonal creature; he is no longer a*
> *human being, he is part of the public, of the crowd.*

(Fournel, Victor, 1858, p. 263)

Both descriptions of the 'flanêur' and the 'badaud' imply an impaired vision or insight, and dehumanisation that was abetted by the growing commercialisation of the city's landscape. George Simmel in his classic study 'The metropolis and mental life', attributes this numbing of the senses to a radically new kind of sensory overload, caused by an uninterrupted onflux of outer and inner stimuli to the nervous system. As a protective reaction the metropolitan develops a blasé, matter of fact attitude to his/her surroundings, and an attitude of reserve or antipathy towards his/her fellow metropolitan. Simmel's metropolitan thinks with his/her head and not with his/her heart, thereby excluding the emotional, irrational, and instinctive mode of life within.

> *The modern mind has become more and more calculating ...*
> *the calculative exactness of practical life which the money*
> *economy has brought about corresponds to the ideal of natural*
> *science, to transform the world into an arithmetic problem, to*
> *fix every part of the world by mathematical formulas ...*
> *punctuality, calculability, and exactness are formed upon life*
> *by the complexity and extension of metropolitan existence ...*
> *without the strictest punctuality in promises and services the*
> *whole structure would break down into inextricable chaos.*

(Simmel, George, 1850, p. 446)

Viola's role as 'passeur' or Shaman is to recapture elements of sensibility that become lost in this equation. Rather than 'merely observing' in the case of the flanêur, or

'gawping' as in the case of Badaud, Viola seeks to reconcile the rift caused by the abjection of the irrational, emotional and instinctive.

Fig. 7 : The City of Man by Bill Viola

Catastrophe and chaos, rather than being threatening to the overall structure of things, play an important part in the overall rhythm and texture of Viola's work. Viola's video tapes are 'abyssal alembics'[2], in which all kinds of images are edited together erratically, yet are bound together by their common factor of fragmentation and catastrophe.

In recognising a paradoxical harmony in the chaotic, Viola's work allows for a 'catharsis of psychosis', whereby that which has been considered dirty and abject thus endangering the 'structure', is re-admitted. In looking at this irrational, emotional chaos, the viewer becomes aware of his/her own alienation and strangeness, 'they see their own regressions, their own abjection's, and at this moment what occurs is a veritable state of communion'(*Kristeva, Julia, 1996, p. 23*)

It is in this regard that Viola's opus becomes Shamanistic, having a quasi-religious effect. Viola has said that his work is religious but in the original sense of the word religion, the

etymology of the word going back to 'Religiare', to bind, to make a community. In Viola's work the 'community' does not limit itself in the social sense of the word, but points also to a union with the divine, 'that it is possible for the individual to directly connect his or her spirit to the Godhead'(*Viola, Bill, 1995, p. 156*).

Through a cleansing, of the impaired senses, as implied in Viola's *Il Vapore* (1975), all become capable of having visions and being in contact with the divine imagination.
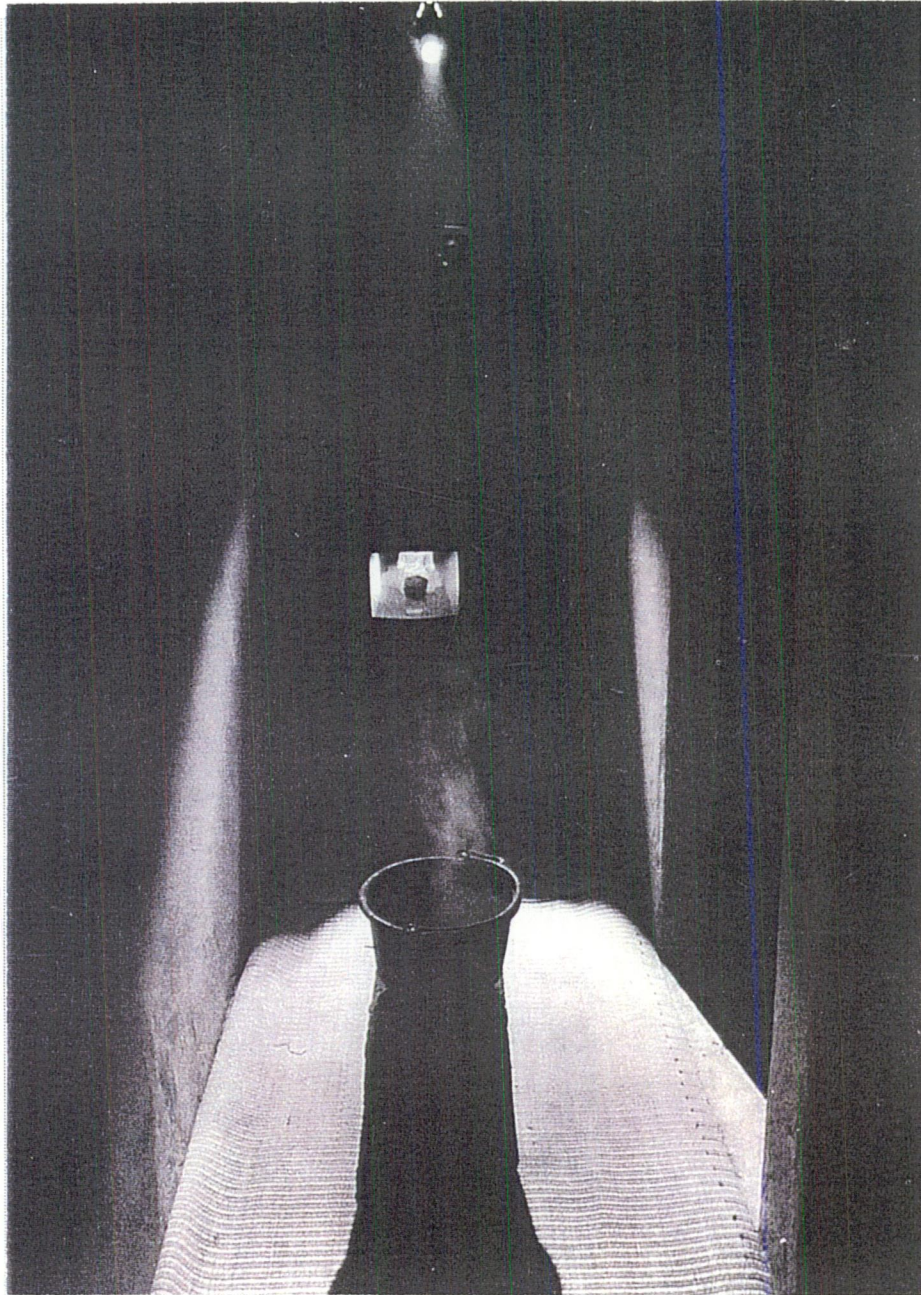
Fig. 8 : Il Vapore

Video Haiku

There are image symbols which can be barely articulated. They belong to the domain of visual memory. Committing them to words rapes them of their secrets. Working only from the intangible puts great pressure on thought forms.

To remember only. To learn rearrange. Can't pick it up, can't hold it, can't see it all at once, **video haiku.**

A set of pattern frames.

(Viola, Bill, 1995, p. 79)

Andre Bazin identified two types of film director, those with "a faith in reality" and those with "a faith in the image". In the age of video and the hyper media, where image and reality are collapsed in the idea of simulacrum Viola implicitly revives "a faith in the image". Viola's faith is close to that of Bazin in attributing to the image an ontological status, that has otherwise been compromised. For Viola this faith can be restored in finding: an image that is not an image. He is not interested in the image that exists in the phenomenal world, but rather in image as artefact, result or imprint, or even wholly determined by some inner realisation. Images that are not images implies a use of images in other ways than their reproduction for appreciation of the visual physical world. Viola pursues irreducible moments of awareness and intense emotion which are the unit points of the communicable.

Mortality is omnipresent in Viola's video tapes. In 'Tiny Deaths' (1993) the viewer enters a black space, 'nothing' is all that can be seen, and incoherent mumbling is all that can be heard. Only a desire for the meaning and the anticipation of incident keeps the viewer involved. Then one of the screens bursts into sense. A person materialises, a man in a baseball cap, pensive, his gaze averted, a woman who is equally involved in her own thoughts. The images gain in power and focus, but as this happens they flare up and disappear at the very point when we want more of our new acquaintances. All that is left is afterimage or imprint in our minds of what is past.
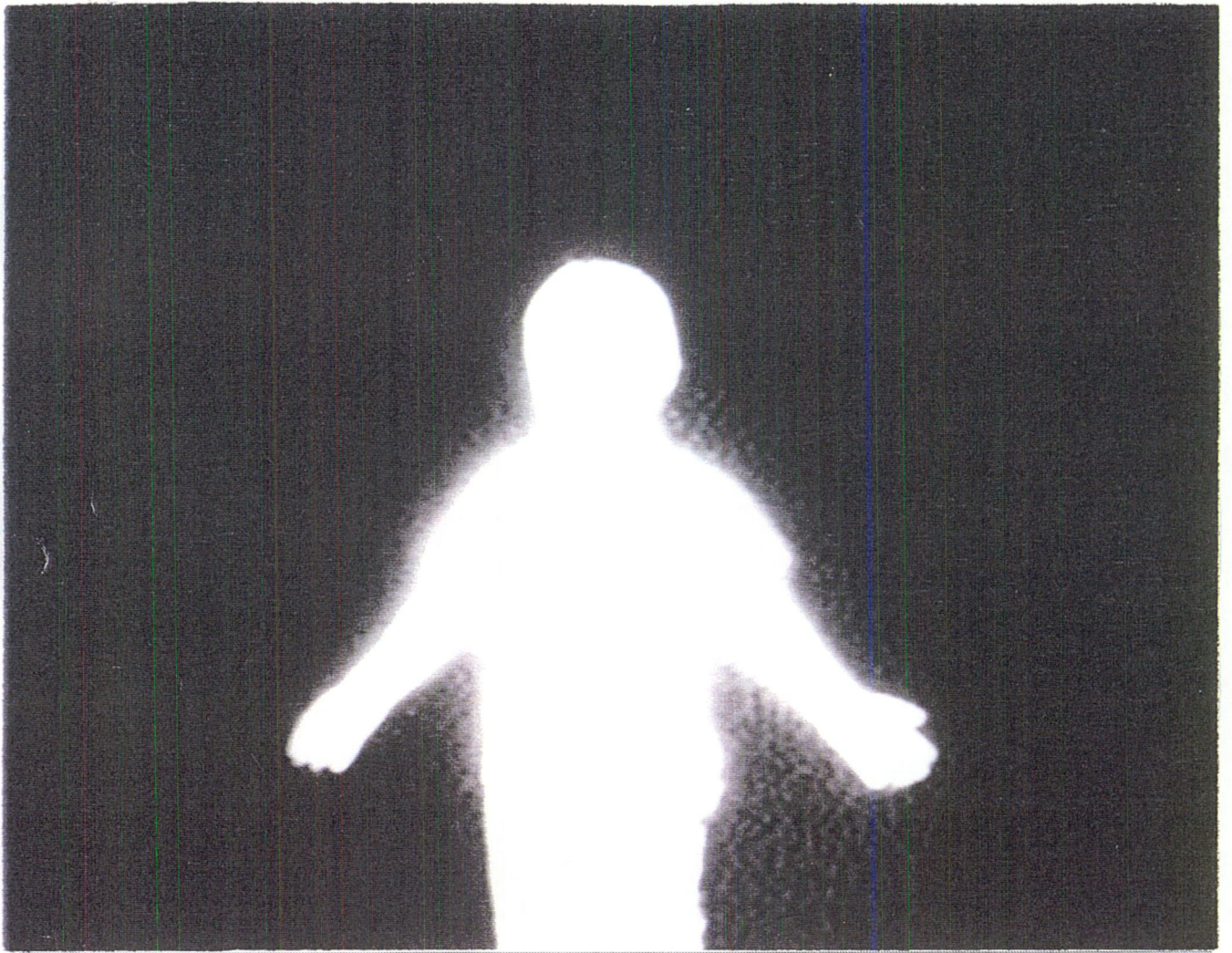
Fig. 9 & 10 : Tiny Deaths

This 'passing' is re-addressed on a more personal level in Viola's installation of the same title. 'The Passing' (1991) collapses life and death, into a fifty-four minute dreamlike sequence provoked by the mourning of his mothers death in 1991 and the birth of his second son nine months later.

Fig. 11 : The Passing

At the centre of the tape are senses of bereavement and mortality and loss. The 'hallucinatory' qualities of the tape allude to the artist's effort to make sense of his emotional turmoil. According to Gadamer the act of mourning the dead brings about a spiralling 'out of the order of nature and a turn against the natural vital instincts of survival'. The rituals of mourning mark a refusal to accept the finality of another's death, and an insistence on the continuity between the dead and living. Hence in mourning the after image, the cultural privilege afforded to closure, coherence, and autonomy is denied. Death propels the beholder into the realm where coherence serves little or no purpose.

For Barthes death was the *eidos* of the photographic image. The 'having been there then' as opposed 'to the being here now' was what made the recorded image so necrophilic for him. In Camera Lucida, Barthes speaks of the personal loss he experienced with his mother's death, and his search for an image whose 'Punctum' would reactivate his connection with her. In describing, Barthes explains that '...what I have here is not a

figure, but a being, and not a being, but a quality (a soul) : not indispensable but irreplaceable'*(Barthes, Roland, 1963, p. 75).*

Barthes distinguished between what he called the "Studium" and "Punctum" of images. The former is the 'publicly available meaning of the image, is connotatively charged subject matter determined by the cultural context in which it is received' in short the 'Studium' of the image can be read and decoded by semiotic analysis. In this regard an images 'Studium' can yield only the limited pleasure of recognition, and observation . In contrast the 'Punctum', similar to the Japanese Haiku, unleashes a higher order of emotional intensity, '… In *Punctum* an unexpected prick, sting or cut disturbs the intelligibility of the culturally connoted meaning'*(Barthes, Roland, 1963, p. 75).*

Zen Hiaku poetry was considered in Japan, to have the ability to touch the deeper regions of the mind, extending awareness into a region beyond words. The verse of the Hiaku is open ended and is considered to create a reverberation of images in the mind. There is no comment or coherence, rather images are thrown together by the Hiaku poet who "… must disengage, if only for an instant, all his interpretative faculties and rationalistic analysis. His mind becomes at one with the world around him, allowing his craft to operate instinctively in accordance with the image he perceives"*(Hoover, Thomas, 1941, p. 207)* . The deceptively simple lines of the Hiaku poem aim to capture an intersection of the timeless and the ephemeral and it is in the experience of this moment that the beholder feels the sting of the Hiaku Poem, "*(Hoover, Thomas, 1941, p. 208)* .

Viola shares with Barthes a belief in the possible 'Punctum' of the image, that is not an image. It is trace or imprint of what has passed, that is sought. Almost like Balzac *'with his bizarre fear that photographs dangerously remove the outer spectral layers of the subjects body'.* [3] Viola and Barthes believe in an objective *trace left behind.*

Barthes questioned, however, the ability of this 'Punctum' to reach someone who was unfamiliar with the circumstances of the images mourning. Barthes sought to discover what he called 'the Ariadne thread' that would lead him through the labyrinth of the world's images in order to find the *essence* of what caused this emotional sting.

Viola's *'interests in the various image systems of the world, involving a search for an image that is not an image'* continues Barthes quest.

Viola's Pneuma (1994) explores the possibility of an 'Ariadne's thread'. Pneuma is the classical Greek expression for soul. Pneuma also refers to 'breath' or a gentle 'breeze' of life which on one hand underlies all living things, but on the other hand is transitory. Pneuma, or breath is in constant motion, 'It is form of air that is somewhat invisible to sight, but is revealed by the cold and the hot and by damp and by movement'*(Puhringer, Alexander, 1993, p. 224)*
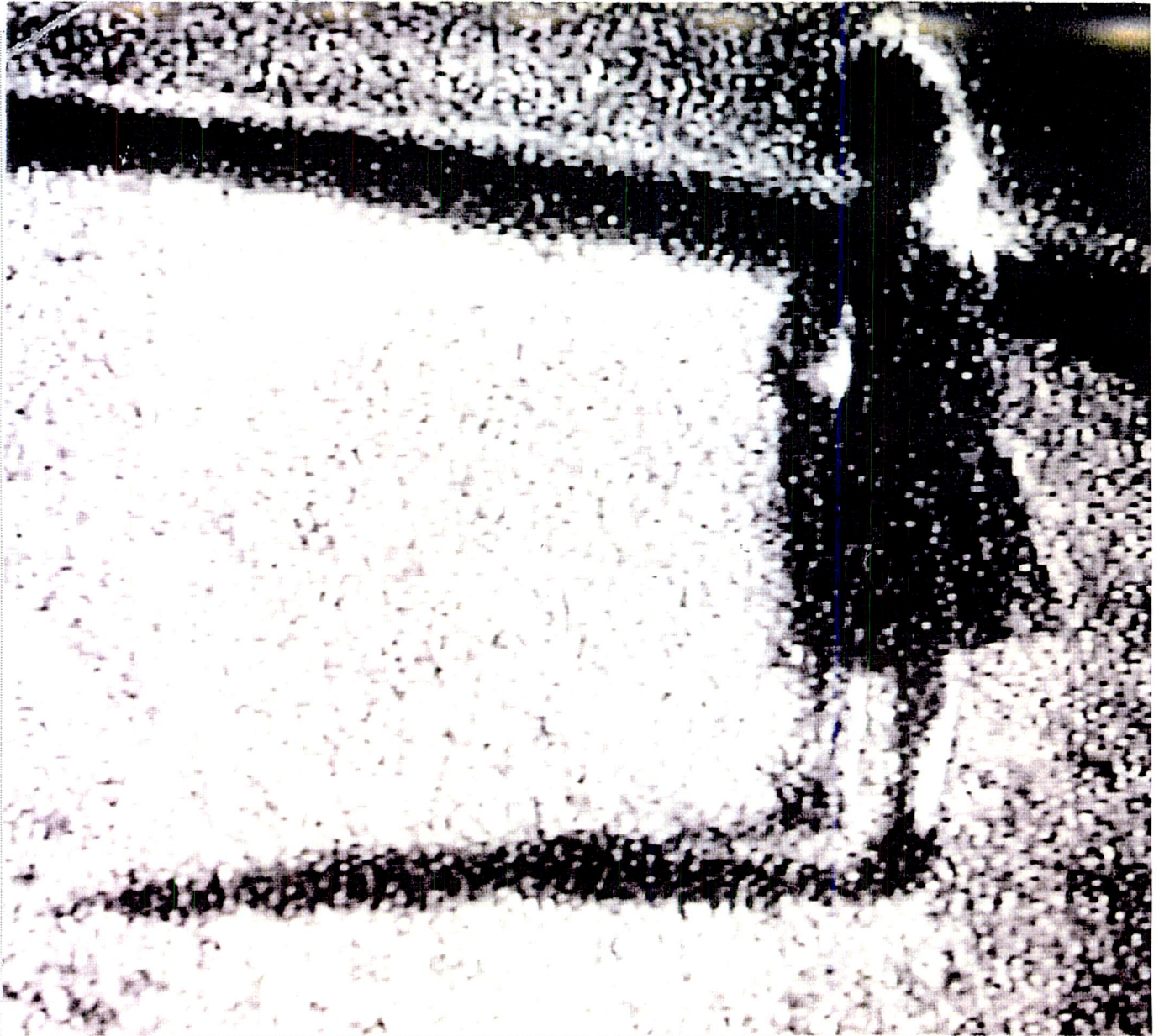
Fig. 12 : Pneuma

Those who enter 'Pneuma' enter a dark room filled with noise. This is white because all kinds of information that could possibly be transmitted acoustically come together and cannot be separated from one another. Then, as in 'Tiny Deaths' images materialise

momentarily from a cluster of swarming dots. The images that can be recognised most clearly are those of children, that seem to have strayed from someone's family album. The images themselves are still unclear, and are difficult to register. We become aware of how our memory strains to recollect, the image that is only dimly visible. This strain brings to mind the way in which the relationship and motivations that anchor meaning in even the most banal of family albums die away, and the images let slip from their anchorage in the family's own idiolects, becoming a form of allegory. The faint image of the child's face becomes a cypher, both an iconic image of someone and a sign. Viola gives us glimpses of (possibly his own) family album, yet at the same time rejects its traditional complement in the form of commentary (this is Mable at the seaside) and thereby fails to make the closure that would allow the artist and the viewer to share the same frame of reference.

In this the autobiography of the artist in relation to the viewer becomes loosened, thus opening up a greater possibility for an 'Ariadne's thread'. Viola sees this as the ability of an image to resonate, and evoke *compassion* within the viewer, bringing them beyond observation, into an empathetic union.

The Minds Landscape

Landscapes can exist as a reflection on the inner walls of the mind, or as a projection of the inner state without. Flat open vast space lend itself to a clearer monitoring of the subjective inner world. Contemporary inner spaces talk to you incessantly - signs call out, try to grab you, programmed general consensus signals determine where and when you walk, the intercepting spheres of psychic perceptive space of others in too close proximity creates confusion and imbalance. The 'stillness' of a sleeping apartment building of one hundred and fifty families is not stillness at all. Removing all cues, from the outside, the voices of the inner state become louder and clearer.

(Viola, Bill, 1995, p. 53)

For Viola the desert is such a vast space that allows him to reach this inner state. Viola sees the desert as a place where one can discover 'the deep common roots of beauty, pain, sensitivity and death'. It is a physical description of the extremes of the human condition,

of loneliness, isolation, and solitude. In its severe minimalism, the desert enables perceptual reorientation and reintegration.

In his notes and writings Edgar Varèse (1883-1965) describes a similar approach to the desert landscape. Varèse saw the desert not only in its physical aspects, but the concept of the desert as infinite extended beyond its terrain into the cosmos, as well as its psychological dimension in the interior of the individual.

> *For me 'deserts' is a highly evocative word it suggests space, solitude, detachment. To me it means not only deserts of sand, sea mountains and snow, of outer space, of deserted city streets, not only those stripped aspects of nature that suggest bareness and aloofness but also the remote inner space of the mind no telescope can reach, a world of mystery and essential loneliness.*
>
> **(Varèse, Edgar, 1954)**

In 1994 Viola exhibited a piece entitled *Deserts at the Venice Biennale*. The visual composition of Deserts arose from Varèse piece of music of the same name, composed in 1954. Varèse composed *Dèserts* after a sterile period, a twenty year silence. The result of this creative bareness, Viola believes was a revolutionary breakthrough ; one of the first works of electronic music, one of the first works to incorporate found sound. Furthermore Viola adds, that had Varèse not been wandering in a desert of his own emotional and intellectual making it is unlikely that he would have been as revolutionary as he was.
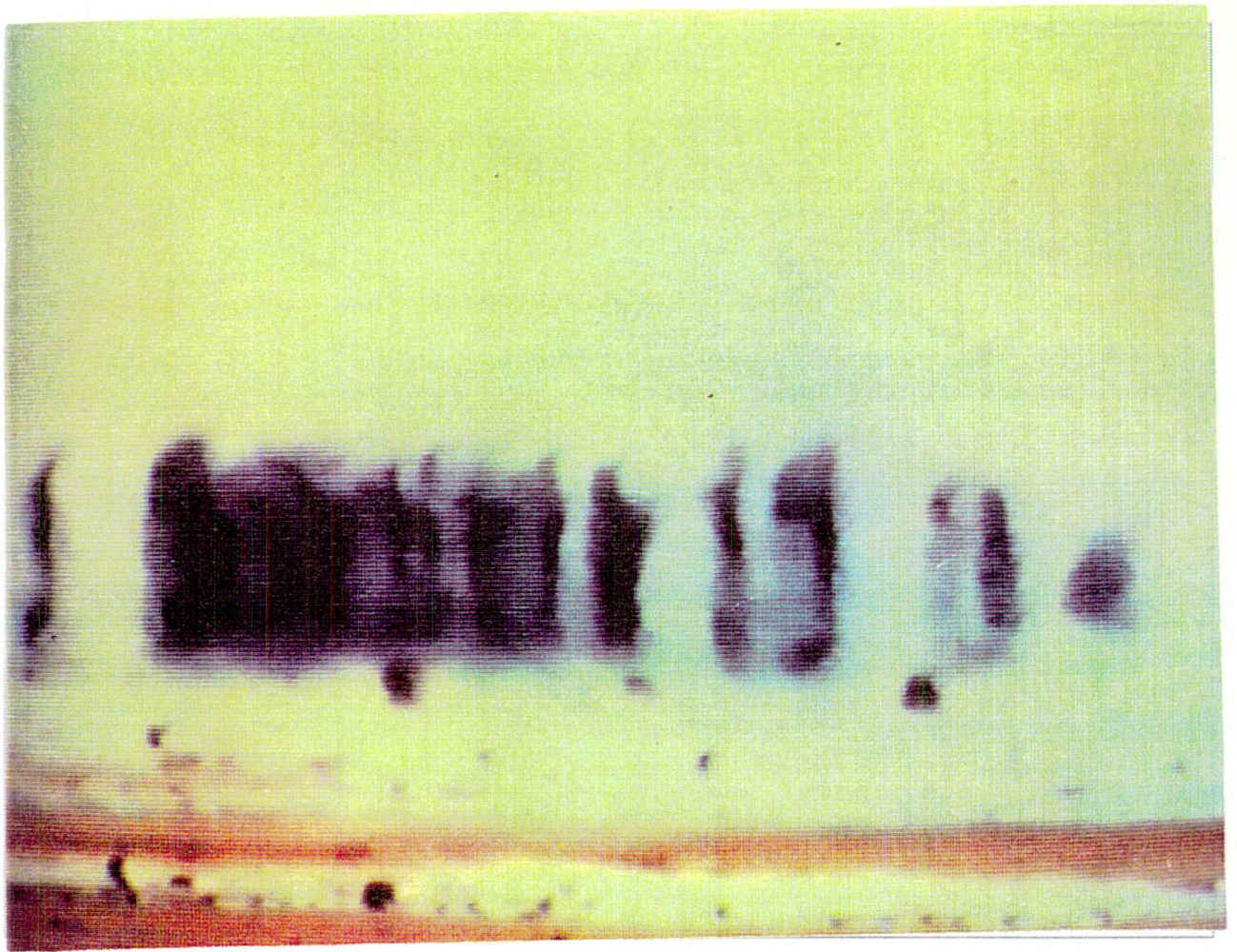
Fig. 13 : Deserts

Electricity was Varèse's model for Dèserts, it moves without nodal points unlike those of the western scale, 'this electronic music has no durable markers, for the sound drifts like the desert sand, changing configuration with the slightest current of wind - or mood' *(Viola, Bill, 1995, p. 265)*. Varèse's Dèserts is in perpetual transition, the result being an 'erratic flow of auratic hallucinations that at certain moments transcend the auratic stream into an ecstatic anger' *(Viola, Bill, Ibid.)*. Viola's Deserts has a similar continuum of dissolving mirages, in which all sense of structure sequence is lost. For Viola these moments straining to realise invisibility, are traces of the 'Deus absconditus' the absent God. Yet it is this abyss that generates a union with the divine.

Hence for Viola the extreme 'nothingness' of the desert is an ascetic mystical strategy, as in the case of the *Desert fathers and Shaman*, it is means towards visionary merger with the Divine. It becomes a contemporary site for vision and revelation, where one can achieve a sense of the numinous, a higher consciousness, transcending ordinary

observation. In Zen teaching wandering in the 'desert is the Promised Land ... we survive living through dryness and thirst, in order to achieve awareness of Buddha, nature and enlightenment ... This wandering ... is in fact the face of God !'*(Beck, Charlotte Joko, 1993, p. 267).*

Fig. 14 : Chott el Djerid

In 'Room for St. John of the Cross' (1983), Viola pays homage to a visionary who was imprisoned for his belief in such a direct communion with God. The piece was inspired by St. John's poetry which he wrote, as in the case of Varèse, during a period of confinement and isolation. St. John of the Cross, Spanish mystic and ascetic reformer, was tortured for his alliance with St. Teresa in her belief in unmediated communication with the Divine. For nine months in 1577 he was confined to a tiny windowless cell, where he wrote the transcendental poetry for which he is known. The imprisonment functioned to liberate St. John, so that the isolation and compression of his life into a narrow space forced him inward to contact new capacities. He abandoned himself to mystical experience and expressed its 'boundlessness' in poems that signal the intensity of his state of mind. Images of a mountain, and a hawk in flight inspired from St. John's text, are used by

Viola to evoke this 'boundlessness'. Both refer to the hallucinatory revelations St. John experienced by way of sensory deprivation. The soaring images, in which the saint is identified with the hawk, are suggestive of levitation as well as sexual climax. Spiritual ecstasy is linked with a communion with the Divine.

> *The soul longs for God, and desires him with impatience. Great*
> *is the eagerness of the soul to embrace, and be united to the*
> *beloved ... when the soul has ascended. it runs swiftly to God*
> *from whom it receives many touches, and hope too runs*
> *without fainting, for love that has made it fly rapidly.*

(St. John of the Cross, 1577, p. 8) [4]

Fig. 14ᵃ & 15 : St. John of the Cross

For St. John it was the austerity and turmoil of his experience, and his closeness to death 'through torture' that led him to a union with God. In the Renaissance death was similarly equated with spiritual ecstasy and eroticism. However, for St. John death did not necessarily confine itself to a physical death. St. John and St. Teresa both believed through the death of materialistic values the pious could behold the sublime. With this in mind St. John and St. Theresa set out to reform the Carmelite Order, attempting to rid it from its pursuit of secular wealth and to direct its attention to contemplative practice.

In order to arrive at having pleasure in any thing,
desire to have nothing,
In order to arrive at possessing everything,
desire to possess nothing,
In order to arrive at being everything,
desire to be nothing,
In order to arrive at knowing everything,
desire to know nothing

Asceticism, and the disdain for materialism form an important link for Viola, between Zen and the early Christian desert fathers. In his own work process, Viola often goes through rituals of fasting and confinement in order to transcend ordinary vision and experience a communion of mind/body/landscape leading to the Divine.

Fig. 16 : Reasons for Knocking 1983.

Footnotes :

1. The figure of the flâneu⟩ is further described *The Sphinx in the City*, Elizabeth Wilson, 1991, pp. 5-10.

2. The use of the term *abyssal alembics* to describe chaotic style of editing is cited in Donald Kuspit's article *Bill Viola ; Deep .T.V.* (1995, p. 87).

3. Viola, Bill in *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House*(1995, p. 262).

4. This is further discussed in *Mysticism in the World's Religions, Geoffrey Parrinder,*(1995).

Chapter 3

Grounding

Zen

Communion ; In The White Cube

After communing mind / body / technology and 'nature' ... where do we stand ? ... in the Art Gallery as it so happens ... in a blissful state of Samadhi ... not that we know that this is the term for what we are experiencing ... or maybe we were unable to reach this state, remaining in one of studium, merely observing ...or consuming our weekly dose of emotion ... that is if we were bothered in going to the gallery at all.

Viola's move away from the didactic use of technology towards a 'more serious' concern for the *Conditio Humana*, as already discussed in chapters one and two is a move that is also reflected within the Art Gallery. Virtually absent from *Passages de L'Image* (1991) is the 'kind of razzle dazzle that often surrounds museum presentations of video and multi media art'*(Philips, Christopher, 1991, p. 106)*. In fact the curators in their own words 'went out of their way to avoid a Nam June Paik style extravaganza with stacks blinking monitors', nor did they have any interest in proclaiming the triumph of 'exuberant young technology' over 'Moribund artistic tradition'. The curators of this exhibition, reproachful of today's hi-tech, mass media culture, and the kind of post modern art that feeds on it ;

> *... pinned their esthetic hopes for cinema, video and*
> *photography on a refurbished art of difficulty and high*
> *seriousness. More than anything the shows real goal is to chart*
> *an esthetic North -West Passage that will somehow connect the*
> *camera mediums back into the fine art tradition.* art'

(Philips, Christopher, 1991, p. 106)

The radical anti-establishment beginnings of video art, and its desire to reach a wider audience is thereby 'tamed', subsequently settling down as a respectable citizen in the Museum. Viola's move away from the ready made T.V. set, towards audio visual installations, thus into the gallery, constitutes an embrace not of the community at large, but rather the 'community of the gallery goer' thereby separating the two.

The early aspirations for video technology, as a democratic and emancipator medium, 'serving as a vehicle for a kind of liberating collective experience', have been problematised by the growing practice of artificially limiting video tape editions, whereby it is now possible for the collector to purchase a one of a kind video tape by Bill Viola. As

we already know, that collecting in most cases, is motivated, not by the desire to **communicate,** but instead by the need to posses.

Enframing is something which does not solely operate within the enframing / poesis coupling of the technologically produced artwork, it also operates to a larger extent within the Art Institution. The need and competition for funds, sponsoring and access to equipment and information, provided by public or private bodies and institutions reinforces enframing in a most blatant way. Thus in exhibiting his work in the gallery context. Viola's interest in the resurgence of the poetic and the instinctive in the aforementioned Poesis / Enframing coupling becomes far more complicated than previously imagined, as does his advocation of 'oneness' and 'communion'.

Videos early attraction was its low cost which fits in perfectly with the idea that everyone could afford to be a producer. However since public television and museums have put an emphasis on production values, and professionalism, video has become more expensive to access thereby strengthening the influence of funders and exhibiting institutions such as *New York State for the Arts.* Since the mid 1970's the *New York State for the Arts* began to veer away from financing community information orientated works, and became more interested in funding 'Video Art'.

The centrality of *production values* and *professionalism* in institutional discourses regarding *video art* are closely connected with establishing the kind of hierarchical structures that have been repeatedly criticised in the past for excluding marginalised groups and communities.

Therefore in placing his work in the Gallery context, Viola's desire for 'oneness' and 'communion' is subverted. The Shaman's pilgrimage, out into the great boundlessness of the Desert, which was previously said to ultimately 'yield results that benefit society as a whole' becomes questionable. This pilgrimage when recorded and transmitted in a 'professional' manner within the art institution, serves to separate and marginalise (whether voluntary or involuntary) communities rather than to bring them together. therefore oneness becomes an impossible absolute.

Virtual Subjects - Virtual Trauma

According to Viola "we have no more ritualised structures for legitimate emotion ; religious and spiritualised rituals are gone. These have been replaced by profane economic gestures like paying the rent, and connections with our community and some greater cosmic significance are missing. They get channelled into sappy emotion, into things like T.V. soaps, that trivialise and make us doubt and discount authentic feeling all the more"*(Viola, Bill, 1995, p. 62)*.

Much of Viola's work deals with the idea that basic psyche would get obscured by western positivism so that intensely human moments - of birth, death, pain, pleasure, isolation, and ecstasy fall through experiential cracks.

Arnold Van Gennep in his book '*The Rites of Passage*' describes these experiences as necessary transformative 'life crises' which involve the three stages of separation, transition and incorporation. These are '*Liminal States'*, limin being Latin for threshold, in which the individual is neither in nor out of society. The liminal involves a revision of a sense of individuality, which is most intense at the point of birth and death. Although these are particularly intense personal experiences, *Van Gennep* adds, they are at the same time social and 'the significance of the transition derives from collective understandings that accumulate around the performed acts…those acts are often focused on the body and in many societies the skin may be painted, scarred, or tattooed, alone, the participants may be expected to wander in the wilderness or to eat special foods or to chant certain phrases'*(Van Gennep, Arnold, 1994, p. 23).*

For Viola mysticism always begins 'with such suffering ; a suffering that is ever-present n his work ; in *Room for St. John of the Cross (1983),Chott el Djerid (1979)* and *I do not know what it is that I am like (1986).* While we cannot fail to be to be strongly affected by his representations of birth and death in their intense liminal states, his more personal and autobiographical works, for example '*The Passing*' place the viewer in a position similar to watching somebody else's home movies. The 'The Passing' and 'The Nantes Triptich' particularly problematic; after watching the video tape one is left questioning the

readiness with which Viola has appropriated such private moments as his mother's death, a wife's labour in such a spectacular and voyeuristic way.

Fig.17 : Nantes Tryptich

Rather than being engaged in an inter-subjective experience, one may lapse into a kind of schizophrenia, allowing us on the one hand to engage in the 'The Punctum' or resonance of the experience, but on the other hand it is possible to maintain a distance, never becoming actors in it and never having to assume subsequent responsibilities.

> *Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger,*
> *grander and more sweeping.*
>
> **(Robbins, Kevin, 1996, p. 94)**

A seeming confrontation with reality and chaos can actually become a way of evading mortality rather than becoming aware of it. The greater the lack of emotion the greater the need to consume it, his mother audio-visually dies, for viewer after viewer. The chaos and emotion to which we are subjected is in a sense controlled by the institution that contains it. This chaos is mediated rather than completely open or direct. What may result in the experience of this mediation is a substitution of *le vécu* for *le vivant*, where *le vécu* amounts merely to a simulation of someone else's experience .

Unlike *'Pneuma'*, and *'Tiny Deaths'*, in *'The Passing'* Viola's subjects, are less abstracted and unlike his other rebuslike musically or poetically inspired video tapes, the recording of these liminal moments, seem to be intrusive. Furthermore the symbolic implications of the *Nantes Tryptich* put forward a rather stereotypical view of women in society, i.e. that of the nurturer. In the *Nantes Tryptich,* the left hand side of the screen

depicts Viola's wife Pirov giving birth, in the central screen Viola is seen floating in what seems to be amniotic fluid, and to the right we see his Mother dying a slow death. Ultimately two women are shown enclosing the life of a son.

At times it is questionable as to whether Viola's use of somewhat obvious symbolism (such as water for purification and baptism) risks a hermetic closure of experience.

Conclusion

Although Viola's project raises many problems with regard to his quest for oneness and communion he nevertheless also raises important questions in relation to the ostracisation of the irrational and emotional from Western capitalist society, and the level to which this ostracisation has effected the psyche of the post modern subject. In the case of George Simmel's metropolitan and Judith Barry's vampiristic consumer, to what extent does the ever quickening three minute culture of the West bring about a numbing of the senses and a distancing of the subject? Is alienation and dehumanisation a result of Western positivism, capitalistic materialism or is it possibly a result of the deeper cultural or existential imbalance? What part does Zen Buddhism play in this imbalance? What function does the artist as 'passeur' in this circle of circumstances? And what function can his / her art have in the community? What is at risk in adopting a *'Via Negitiva'* approach to perceiving the World, or is it precisely the fear of risk that is the cause of this imbalance in the first place and also more importantly what could be gained by a more intuitive use of technology as we progress into a culture that is growing more and more dependant on emerging technologies?

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