

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

From March 5 to July 21, 2014, the Grand Palais in Paris presented the largest retrospective ever dedicated in France to the American artist Bill Viola, one of the most important pioneers in video art creation, whose work has been showcased in many of the world's foremost museums.

Moreover, that was also the first exhibition dedicated to video art in the history of the Galerie nationales du Grand Palais, a huge site for cultural commemoration, preservation and canonized art that on this occasion turned into a spectacular context to show what the medium video is through the production of one of the greatest contemporary videomakers. Almost forty years of Viola's videoproduction have been retraced, from 1977 to 2013: a span that, apart from the Sixties, represents the historical development of videoart. From single channel videos, passing through videoscultures, videoinstallations, videoprojections, sound environments and landing at last on the surfaces of plasma displays, the retrospective depicted what may be called the Bill Viola's spiritual journey through the electronic medium.

The exhibition itinerary has been conceived as an emotional path itself: submerged in the dark, the public was meant to step into a contemporary version of the Plato's cave. A dark and silent space, with a hushed atmosphere that recalled a house of prayer, where the visitor was invited to establish a deep visual and spiritual connection with each Viola's works of art, flowing in a kind of initiatory journey. As Jérôme Neutres, curator of the exhibition, writes: 'The artist's intention is to create conditions that enable the public to *immerse* itself in the image - a symbol expressed by the recurrent metaphor of a body plunging into water.'¹

And in fact, as Valentina Valentini says, in Bill Viola's exhibitions the visitor is not only a mere spectator, someone wandering distractedly around, because Viola's oeuvres are not just containers of multiple and different things.² His artistic creation aims to arrange perceptive itineraries, composed by rhythms and movements, which asks the spectator to take the same breath and dynamics, falling into a contemplative and estatic empathy.

At the Grand Palais the invitation to a personal and intimate journey was marked at the beginning of the visit with an opening quotation by the soufi Ibn Arabi: 'If you engage the travel, you will arrive'. Divided into three ideal chapters connected to three metaphysical questions, the retrospective asked the public to confront about some common and fundamental issues to the human condition, questions that have been largely investigated in Viola's research – *Who am I? Where am I? Where am I going?* In this perspective, the artist's desire was to trigger into the viewer both an aesthetic experience and a spiritual confrontation thanks to an intimate encounter with his works of art. The cycle of life from birth to death, the practice of introspection, the relationship between landscape and mankind, the ideas of transcendence and transfiguration: these are the great themes that Viola presented in this exhibition, trying to strike the public's intellect as well as the inner emotions. Although the retrospective began with the grainy and trembling projection of *The Reflecting Pool* (1977-1979), one of the first Viola's work, and ended with the perfect images of the seven high-resolution screens of *The Dreamers* (2013), the twenty works of art presented in between were not in chronologically order.

On the one hand the metaphorical beginning of Viola's videoart, an entrance with a proactive jump into the water and all the possible temporal manipulations of that bounce: frozen image, slow motion, appearance, disappearance. On the other hand a closure with the apparent stillness and peace of seven individuals submerged underwater.

Water in both cases, as in most of Viola's productions. As Maria Rosa Sossai writes, the presence of

water

'is an acknowledgement of the crucial role this element plays in the iconography of the great masters of painting, and of its value as a dynamic natural force. In its flowing, water stands in relation to passing time [...] or, as Viola recalls, the flow of electrons. In its complex symbolism, water may be seen as a celebration of the ritual of purification through which ordinary gestures turn into something unprecedented.'¹³

As the protagonist of *Ascension* (2000) that suddenly plunges into the water from above as if involved in a contemporary and choreographic baptism (another Viola's piece presented in the exhibition), in this retrospective the spectator was given the chance to drown into a spiritual itinerary, to breathe and to take his time: time to slow down, to stop, to think, to meditate, to understand and, at last, to accept or refuse life's great mysteries. As Viola says, 'the artist must immerse himself in a world so intimate and private, with the aim to create something that may be shared with many and different people.'¹⁴ At the Grand Palais, Viola and his public met in this common interior immersion.

Time, however, is another great and crucial issue in the entire artist's production. As a sculptor of time, as Viola likes to define himself, his work is totally based on the manipulation of speedness of the electronic flux, slowing down the movement, slowing down the gestures, using repetitions, always maintaining technical and aesthetic perfection. 'In Viola's tapes we sense that he is manipulating the instantaneous – stretching it or exaggerating its effect of momentariness.'¹⁵

Although there is no stillness in Viola's production, his basic idea of expanded time is meant to calm down the spectator in order to purify his capacity to look outside and inside himself and to give him the chance to look at the world in a more attentive way, trying to see with a inner light made of emotions and feelings. As Valentina Valentini writes, 'what is required is a religious vision, not a distracted and fast mass consumption [...] to enter the vision of Viola's works of art it's necessary to dive into a bath of darkness, to purify our eyes as the ancient icons' makers [...].'¹⁶

So, in Paris the visitors have been engaged in a kind of meditation training, pushed to research something that was both mental and physical: a hidden place inside themselves where to embrace a holy sense of infinite. That was the alchemy created by the second piece presented in the retrospective, *Heaven and Earth* (1992), a videosculture formed by two exposed monitors facing each other, each one showing a black-and-white video image: the upper monitor presents the image of an old woman close to death, the lower screen shows the close-up of a new born baby. The two images reflect and blur into each other, because of the glass surface of each monitor. In this Viola's touching installation, as in the Buddhist philosophy, the concepts of birth and death melt together, since birth is not really a beginning and death is not really an end.

With *Four Hands* (2001), a black and white video polyptych on four LCD panels, Viola has offered the public the chance for another intimate and symbolic reflection about the mysteries of our origins and the cycle of life: in this work, four pair of hands, those of a young boy, those of a middle-aged woman and a man, and those of an elderly woman perform a series of gestures, influenced by Buddhist mudras and ancient English chirolgia tables.

In Viola's production the idea of passage of time is strictly connected to the important issue of the body, which is not only expression of physical and mental decay, but also expression of soul and passions. In *The Quintet of Astonished* (2000) inspired by Bosch's *Christ Crowned with Thorns*, another videoinstallation presented in the exhibition, a group of five people are shown as they are afflicted by an intense emotion. The slow motion stretched to the extreme allows the spectators to catch the smallest details of facial expression, not knowing the reason of such deep pain. If many of Viola's works have been inspired by religious painting realized by Giotto, Pontormo, Durer, etc. it's important to understand how much he is not interested in a specific religion or god and how much he is fascinated by people's emotions, their surprises, their fears, their pains: feelings that Viola wants to represent always in a meticulous and overemphasized way, as Anne-Marie Duguet says during an interview included in Jean-Paul Fargier's video *Bill Viola, esp erieence de l'infini*, realized

on the occasion of Viola's retrospective.

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

The final part of the exhibition was dedicated to those works connected to the ideas of rebirth and transcendence. Besides the already mentioned *Ascension* and *The Dreamers*, the two first works opening this section were the haunting and immersive installations extracted from Viola's creation for Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*, directed by Peter Sellars: *Tristan's Ascension (The Sound of a Mountain Under a Waterfall)* (2005) and *Fire Woman* (2005). On the one hand a projection onto a tall, vertically oriented screen where the soul of the literary hero is awakened up after his death and raised to the sky through a spectacular waterfall. On the other hand and by contrast, a second tall projection presented the vision of a woman standing up against a wall of fire and then falling into the water.

After these two mythical and mystical apparition, the public at the Grand Palais was invited to step back into the more concrete and fleshly human body in the diptych *Man Searching for Immortality/Woman Searching for Eternity* (2013), where two naked human figures of seniors projected on large vertical slabs of black granite, as if they are carved out over their graves, explore their skin with a small light, trying to capture diseases or corruptions as in a careful search to escape death. At last, the seven submerged bodies of *The Dreamers*, suspended between life and death, closed the exhibition and the public's spiritual journey.

Inspired by the great masters of painting, and with a deep knowledge of Zen Buddhism, Christian Mysticism and Islam Sufism, Bill Viola's art, as Chris Townsend writes, is 'an art of affect rather than distanced appraisal [...]; an art of duration and absorption rather than an immediate satisfaction and revelation'.⁷ Viola's art it's an art for everyone, that talks to everyone, engaging the public in a vision that passes through the eyes, as much as through the heart.

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1 Neutres 2014, p. 5.

2 Valentini 1993, p. 11.

3 Sossai 2012, p. 25.

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- 4 Viola, 165
 - 5 Kuspit, p. 73
 - 6 Valentini 1993, p. 11
 - 7 Townsend 2004, p. 9