

DALLAS MUSEUM OF ART

Icons of the Collection: Bill Viola

Bill Viola

March 4, 2004

Duration: 92 Minutes.

Jack Lane: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen! I am Jack Lane, the Director of the Dallas Museum of Art. I am very happy to welcome you here for this evening's event. We are delighted that Bill Viola is back in Dallas. I think a lot of you know that he is a pioneer in the medium of video art--a person whose work explores the spiritual and perceptual side of human experience. He was born in New York in 1951 and found himself at Syracuse University between 1969 and 1973.

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This for any of us who are interested in New Media is ground zero. There was an extraordinary department of experimental studies there and the Everson Museum in Syracuse was the first museum in America to have a serious media arts or video art program. And its curator was David Ross, who eventually was the Director of the Whitney Museum, and then was my successor at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and is one of the great curatorial figures in America and in international contemporary art circles for the advancement of media arts.

Bill served as his assistant and preparator at the Everson Museum and one of the projects that he was involved with was a show with Nam June Paik, who I think a lot of us regard as the true grandfather of New Media.

After Bill graduated in 1976-1977 he had visits to Japan and to the islands of Java and Bali in Indonesia. These experiences in Asia had a big impact on his thinking about spirituality and humanity. He is the recipient of numerous awards and honors including in 1989, MacArthur Foundation Grant. He has created over 125 video tapes and multimedia installations since 1972 which were shown at art museum's galleries and on public television worldwide.

In 1997 the Whitney Museum organized a 25 year survey of his work that traveled to major museums in the United States and Europe. This is a show that was curated by David Ross and the great designer, Peter Sellars.

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It was shown not only at the Whitney but at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, at Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

In 2002 Bill Viola completed his most ambitious project *Going Forth by Day*, a five-part projected digital fresco cycle in high-definition video. Following a

completion of a four-month exhibition at The J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, *Bill Viola: The Passions* traveled to the National Gallery in London this past fall.

If Paik is the grandfather of New Media, I think it is arguably true, I would propose it is true that the foremost artist of New Media's maturity is Bill Viola. I think we are uncommonly fortunate in Dallas that the museum has in its collection the work *The Crossing* [1998.190.A-P] of 1996 which the museum acquired in 1998 at the encouragement of our curator of contemporary art, Charlie Wylie. That piece, *The Crossing*, is one of the 100 treasures that is in our Centennial show right now and the occasion for this Thursday night event is a continuation of a series that we call, "Icons of the Collection", in which we focus on some of the museum's greatest works that cross all boundaries of time and geography.

So, it's a real pleasure and a privilege and an honor to have Bill Viola here tonight to talk about technology and revelation. Bill Viola.

[00:04:38.02]

Bill Viola:

Thank you very much Jack, and I have so many notes here, I don't know what to do. It's good thing I am an artist or else this could be scary, just throw them wherever you want, wherever they land, that's what you say.

Thank you, Jack. I want to thank everybody here for not only having me but having my piece in the collection. This is an extraordinary museum as you all know. It's a treasure. The exhibition that's up now is one of the greatest things I have seen in a long, long time. To see an Indonesian funerary figure, same line-of-sight as a Nicosia photograph and a woman from ancient Rome right next to a Papua New Guinea male fertility figure was pretty extraordinary. And that's really what it means isn't it, to live in the Internet world where everything is connected, past, present, future, north, south, east, west. So, that's exciting.

And I want to thank everybody who was involved in that acquisition. I know in a museum as exciting as Dallas, that still was a big step to bring a large scale media piece into the collection. So, I am very, very grateful, and I am very happy for that.

Tracy Bays sent me an e-mail about this lecture and she said, "we want you to talk about Cosmology." When I was young, the term "cosmic" didn't necessarily refer to the sky, it would refer to people. And that's what I want to talk about actually, is the connection we have to the Heavens.

So, I took that request quite seriously and I am going to tell you about some of the things as many of you know, I have been for many, many years really involved very seriously with not only spiritual practice in the form of Zen Buddhism. But primarily reading and studies in a lot of different areas of what we might call traditional science, or sacred science, it is a science.

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And I am going to share some of those things with you tonight in the context of Cosmology. So, I want to start first with a video, if we have that first video up there, Ryan. We can lower lights. I just want to start with an image: a silent piece, there is no sound to this one. It's called *Memoria*, it was created in 2000. So, let's look at a few minutes of this.

True to cosmological theory we are starting with nothing. There we go.

[Audio Gap: 00:7:21 – 00:09:45]

Okay, Ryan we can stop that now, please. So, 30-minute piece called *Memoria*. That's John Malpede, he's quite an extraordinary performance artist, an actor who I worked with. He was performing in the dark, completely black space with an infra-red night-vision camera.

I want to show you that because I want to start with us, with individuals, in talking about the greatest scale that human beings can possibly comprehend and discuss, and that is the scale of the cosmos. Because it's a place that we all start. The "being" in human being refers to another area of study that I have been very interested and which is ontology, which I'd say when Tracy asked me to do is, I was so excited because surely ontology, being, and cosmology, the universe, that are the two things in my work that really drive almost everything I have ever done.

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And human being, the being is an active state, it's a movement. Just sitting and doing nothing is a movement. In today's world of individualism, especially in America, the country of individual freedom, of individual rights, this idea of the individual has taken on quite extreme proportions. So, it's very appropriate to talk about this and think about this in our world.

We live in a world of technology and commerce with pull-down menus tailoring instruments that we use to the finest degree just to suit our personal preferences. We have narrowly focused marketing that wants to sell us products in the most narrow slices of demographics possible.

Walkmans, stay in your own world when being in public. Cell phones, carry on a conversation with a loud-mouthed voice in a restaurant with someone who is not even there.

So this is really where we are kind of slipping into a second layer of reality, displaced in space, but synchronous in time. And that's pretty interesting, frightening, disturbing, and everything else you want to call it, but it's our world. So it's not unusual that people today say they feel disoriented. They feel overwhelmed or uncentered, unfocused, lost at sea.

So the first thing to discuss in terms of cosmology and the individual is the idea of *orientation*. And the term *Orient* which doesn't necessarily mean the east, as I'll explain in a minute. So let me simplify this and give you an image.

Think of the Bonneville Salt Flats, okay? The most simple, primal state of existence on the planet of the earth.

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That place and places like it consist of nothing more than an everything included in simply earth and sky: flat plain infinite to the horizon all around you--360 degrees, the dome of the sky above, and you. So here is heaven and earth with a very distinct clear boundary line, which we call the horizon, which is not on any map dividing the two.

The only thing in that space is the body, your body. It's the only vertical object from miles and miles around. I've been in these places.

So the first thing you notice, first thing that happens in that situation is the notion of scale becomes real clear when you are there. Things like big or small, long or short, fast or slow, hot or cold, old or new, is entirely and only made possible by the human body. Those are completely relative terms that have nothing to do and really no existence out in the universe at large. That's only the result of us being in the world. Architects know that very well-- that's their art to understand that equation.

So you look around this space and standing there within the confines of the beautiful symmetry of the human body, another kind of horizon. The next division or orientation happens and that is the four directions, alright?

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Those cardinal points on the compass: north, south, east, and west. In our terms they are front, back, left, and right.

So that's a very, very primal orienting point because guess who is at the center of that compass. Every time you pull out a compass when you are hiking you are in that little center with the needles fixed to the body of the compass, that's you the unmoved space, the center of everything around you. You carry that center. That's what's most astonishing to me. There are as many centers in this room as there are people right now. That's pretty incredible.

But in my studies and readings with these traditional texts and religions I found mentioned consistently between Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, Judaism, Christianity, consistently mentioning a fifth direction. One that is absolutely crucial to our identity. So when you are standing out there, very natural to look up. When you look up you are aligning yourself with your body which is the only vertical form for miles around and therefore the vertical axis, which is actually two directions really, it's up and down, heaven and hell.

That creates this vertical pull, which comes up in almost every culture on the face of the earth. It's been called the axis mundi, the center of the world. It's the connecting line between past, present, and future. Time's going horizontally, you put a vertical line through it, you connect, burrow down,

digging down into the earth, you are going through time. It's the eternal present moment.

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And that's the main orienting point and its representation in the natural world because all spiritual things have reflection in the world.

These things just don't come from someone's imagination. They are real, they come from our existence on this earth, and so they are all tied to, in some religions more than others, but they all make mention and note the Pole Star, the North Star.

When you're standing out there, especially at night when the stars come out. When the world is as we know it is no longer visible, so we are in the invisible world where these things don't work anymore, but this does and this does, and (someone's working out there. He is listening, good, 'She', I should say 'She'.)

Anyway, so this idea of night orientation in the invisible world. So, the North Star is the still point in the turning world, literally. So, you look up in the night star. It's the unmoved mover; it's the only thing that's not moving. You see those time lapse images of the celestial dome at night, and you see all the stars they do lapses so they all have blurred their lines around a fixed center, of course that's the axis of the earth at the same time where the star approximately sits over. It's a very, very powerful image-- that there is something out there that is fixed and constant, the true orienting pole.

And of course as anyone knows, in traditional cultures that proceeds inward. It's not about necessarily up and down spatially, it's outward and it's inward in here, in some non-physical place. So, there we are looking up into the sky, see all those stars. It still blows my mind that the light from a star that left hundreds of thousands of years ago is reaching your eye at that moment in an unbroken line from across the galaxy and beyond.

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That just, I think, is absolutely astonishing.

But patterns, cycles, and ultimately mathematics, music, all derive a good part of their practice and form from the sky. And its movement and motions and trying to figure out what that is. So, cosmology is absolutely fundamental to who we are.

If you look at the traditional sciences and these universal systems you'll find that they are composed of primarily four things. There are four elements that are very common that come up in lots of different cultures, visions of the nature of our existence, and that is metaphysics which talks about the principles and nature of the things around us.

Cosmology talks about the structure of the universe. Psychology, which in traditional terms is known as the science of the soul. The contemporary version of that that we have is really just a caricature of something very deep and profound that included and dealt with primarily with the soul and very deeply internal, interior and infinite things.

And eschatology, which is final things, the end terminus of man and the universe and the whole notion of what they call post-unus becoming, that it continues on. So, the cosmological systems of east and west have common origins. If you look at Aristotle, and I didn't bring any slides or anything with me, but you'll know this when I tell you about it.

Have you ever seen an armillary sphere, do you know what that is? Have you ever seen--sometimes in older paintings, pictures and they still exist today--they look like globes except they are composed of rings, concentric rings around the center. That's something that goes back to the ancient Greeks and it's the idea of the ancient view of the world, which held that our existence was sheaved in a series of concentric spheres all oriented around a center, the center that I talked about, the place of man, of human beings on the earth. Earth is the center of the universe, remember those theories, and then you have these concentric spheres, going out to the far reaches of the heavens. Typically in a lot of systems there were seven. That's where we get the idea of the seven heavens, seventh heaven.

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It's why you look up in the night sky night you call it The Heavens, plural, because there were literally concentric heavens which proceeded from the material, which is where we are, in increasing layers from gross to very subtle elements, getting more and more defused, more and more subtle, more and more immaterial until you finally reach the outer layer. The outer layer was -- the seventh heaven was the border between this world and the divine, the spiritual realm, and it had -- there's a lot of images for it. One of the ones I loved was it's painted black and there were chips on the paint.

Maintenance is one of the things that in God's domain and in our domain you have to have it. I mean, there's got to be maintenance. Someone has got to get up there and change the light bulb. So, there are these chips on the paint and what you're seeing when you look at the stars are the light from the divine realm that penetrates through in the form of these little pin-pricks letting the divine illumination in. So that idea that when you reach that outer level, there is no more matter anymore. It's absolutely finished, there is no space, there is no matter, there is only divine presence, illumination, pure light-- what we call infinity.

And that's a pretty powerful system of these, what they call the Celestial Hierarchy, the levels that the universe is comprised of.

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Now, this system you'd think by our standards--we have a different system today which I'll talk about in a second--but it's not really a confined prison. It seems kind of so unbelievably remote to even think of touching that space. And yet it's such a powerful image. It's intuitive because that's why images like mandalas appear in so many forms in the history of art throughout the world. This system was an icon to be contemplated, because the way out of that system was, in fact, in.

So, the outward ends up in a place that becoming immaterial ends up becoming the deepest level within yourself. And that is the traditional notion of what's called the microcosm, macrocosm. That's where astrology comes from and anything that has to do with the idea that what we do, who we are, what we are composed of, is a reflection, a form, a connection of a micro-version of a macro-version that exists all around us in the form of the universe and the cosmos.

So that connection between our little tiny cells on this earth and the biggest thing you can imagine the universe has always been there for human kind. It's always been essential until very recently.

Here is who I've been reading a lot, named Seyyed Hossein Nasr. He is one of our great living scholars about traditional culture. He is an Islamic writer, fled Iran when the fundamentalists took over and he has really kept--with actual personal experience--kept these traditional ideas alive and he is so knowledgeable. I just want to share with you, just a little quote from him, where he says, talking about this multi-layered model of the world, "thanks to its symbolism--the concentric spheres acting as a most powerful and efficient symbol for the states of being which man must traverse to reach Being Itself..."

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So, you have concentric spheres. They are not a prison, they are steps and stages. And they are the steps and stages going on in here as well as out there. "...the content of this cosmos was infinite and its finite forms like the forms of religion that interpreted it led man to an inner content which was limitless."

And here is the key for our world because I know this is sounding really pretty far out in "what is this ancient knowledge?" and "what does that have to do with today because we have science and they've told us all the stuff that doesn't have to do with concentric spheres and chips of paint?"

So here he goes, he says, "Modern science since Giordano Bruno has broken the boundaries of the cosmos and hence destroyed the very notion of 'cosmos', which means literally 'order'. The Universe has become limitless outwardly. But precisely due to the lack of the metaphysical or theological nature in the West, the symbolic meaning of this new vision of the Universe has not been made generally known, because modern science leaves aside the symbolic significance of things, the content of this outwardly infinite Universe remains finite. It is bound to the purely material level of existence.

In a sense, the situation has become the reverse of what existed in traditional sciences. There, the cosmos is outwardly finite, but with an inner content that leads to the infinite, whereas in modern science the Universe is outwardly infinite but inwardly finite.”

So, that's pretty interesting. So then I started saying, okay well, what are our cosmologists saying about all this? What are they actually saying? I came across something pretty interesting because Aristotle's systems of the prime mover, the immovable mover, and the seven heavens is long gone in our edge of scientific knowledge.

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So I came across this quote by Einstein which is pretty interesting, I want to share it with you. It was part of his Principle of Relativity in 1905 where he said, “nature is such...” -- and Einstein is a cosmologist if you want to know who cosmologists are today. Einstein is a cosmologist, the people that study the very, very big things that are out there in nature.

So Einstein said, listen to this, “Nature is such that it is impossible to determine absolute motion by any experiment whatsoever.” Absolute. These were after a whole series of experiments in Europe to establish a standard of absolute rest for 10 or 20 years before Einstein and in the end none was found. There is no point that you can stand on and measure everything from because all science is based on measurement. So where are you going to be when you take these measurements? In the universe of Einstein, there is no point of rest.

Isaac Newton in the early 18th century said, “It follows that absolute rest cannot be determined from the position of bodies in our regions.” He was dealing with the same issue back then. Now that's pretty interesting. There is no solid ground you can stand on. There is nothing to reference things from, there is no reference point.

Now that to me sounds a lot like our world, doesn't it? If you want to know what the cosmologists do that have to do with my daily life, there it is. This crazy life we're living in, this common complaint people have of not being able to plant their feet. They can't get their hands on something that feels stable because everything is changing and moving fast and faster. So this idea of orientation for us becomes a big issue. What is our place in this world that has no fixed points anymore? And what's the place of art and artists?

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So here is the African writer Ben Okri, he is one of our greatest living writers. Nigerian born, traditional culture background, moved to the West, lives in London, flees for his life from a repressive regime that was going to kill him the next day. He got advanced word, he was on a plane to London that night, left his family and he is still living there. Here's what he says about this

dilemma we have of where to be because we are between heaven and earth literally.

He says, talking about art in his book *A Way of Being Free*, he says, "In heaven there could be no poetry. The same is true of hell. It is only on a sphere where heaven and hell are mixed into the fabric of the mortal frame that poetry is possible." Wow!

So that guy standing out there between heaven and hell below, between heaven and earth, that's us. Where you've got aspirations above, avoidance of things below, our place is precisely to be between heaven and earth, between this luminous world and the base level of earth, part divine, part mortal, part clean, part dirty--whatever you want to call it, corrupt, pure--we are right in the boundary. That's where art is. That's what artists are. That's who we are. That's who we are.

And Nasr again says about that, talking about the outward face of things that my generation very clearly late 60s, early 70s, reacted very strongly against materialism.

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And I do think it's become even worse. I think we are living right now in probably one of the most violent and material times in human history and the scale of suffering is unprecedented right now than any other time in human history.

And we would think about, when I started studying eastern philosophy, you really come across this idea of all this as an illusion, that it's just the facade, it's not the real stuff. Here's Nasr who I am reading later in life, and he is saying, "The outward face of things is not sheer illusion. It has a reality on its own level. To live in the outward, our place, is to possess already the blessing of existence, to be more than nothing."

So, that's reassuring. Just by existing we are blessed to be more than nothing. So that's what makes our time so precious--when you stare up there in the sky and you think about being as perfect as that thing that we had nothing to do with creating.

Now I want to show you another video in a minute. My Zen teacher in Japan--my wife and I lived in Japan in 1981 for almost two years, and we met a really extraordinary guy by the name of Tanaka Sensei. He was the Zen Master and he taught us how to meditate. He is just an extraordinary figure, he is an artist, a painter.

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And one day when we were with him he just blurts out of nowhere, which he had a habit of doing in general.

He just said, "Buddha was not perfect." Kira and I were shocked. I mean, if he was Christian and that was the Middle Ages they would have burnt him at the stake. That's a pretty powerful thing to say. Buddha is not perfect. I thought about that and I didn't know what I know now at the time, but I kind of sense what he was getting at. If you look at Buddha's life, you realize he was a failure. He left home at 29-years-old, grew up in his dad's rich palace, Beverly Hills mansion, had everything he needed, all his material pleasures were taken care of, material needs were taken care of. He was in line to become Chairman of the Board, CEO of one of the largest corporations in the country. He was the perfect son with a perfect wife and a perfect child in a perfect world.

Then he left his father's palace one night. The famous story is he went out four nights in a row. He went out and he saw an old man, he saw a sick man, he saw a dead man. He had never seen anything like that before. He secretly snuck out and then on the fourth night, he saw an ascetic, or wandering mendicant who was searching for spiritual enlightenment. That's when he knew what he had to do and the next night, in the middle of the night, he left the whole thing and went out and just lived like a homeless guy with plastic bags and sleeping under the freeway for years trying to become enlightened and figure out what this thing is and luckily he broke through and he made it and changed the world.

So he was not perfect, so our imperfections make us whole, and the state of separation that we feel from the ultimate reality that we can all sense, which can torment us, nobody is perfect, right?

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It can torment us at the same time, that's what makes us who we are. So let me show you a piece I did in 2001 called *Silent Mountain*. It's also a silent piece. So Ryan, could we play that please?

[Audio Gap: 00:35:04 – 00:40:21]

When I was with Tanaka in Japan really for the first time in my life and my wife's, as Americans, she is Australian, we came face-to-face with tradition.

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It was a very extraordinary thing to be in a room with him and look at him and realize that he was getting what he was giving to us from his teacher who got it from his teacher, who got it from his teacher in a direct line, an unbroken chain from master to disciple right back to the time of the Buddha 2,500 years ago. That was quite profound. These artworks that he'd make, which sometimes he'd make very spontaneously wherever we were, were so extraordinary because they looked like the pictures that I had seen in books 200, 300, 400-year-old ink painting, which is another function of tradition which in this world of individual innovation can make us feel very uncomfortable to be in that situation where things are prescribed in terms of the images you can make.

But I have to say seeing him work, even though the pictures looked old, they didn't feel old. And it wasn't only because I saw them being created, but that has a lot to do with it. It was that, just like the stuff he was telling us, the images he was making, were products of the present moment. In fact, there is one way to look at those kinds of traditions where knowledge is passed down as much through being present as it is through knowledge, head knowledge, reading text, and memorizing things, learning techniques, is you can look at those tradi--

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Well, in this case it was about bringing this thing to life, and that's when I realized it didn't matter if it looked old. It looked like a 400-year-old style of painting, because it was about bringing it into the present moment, as a living thing, that was very powerful. So in these systems of trying to figure the way out of this dilemma I just described of us in between heaven and earth, earth and sky, physical and metaphysical, which is what a human being is. How do you get out of that? That's what these traditions are trying to teach us.

So one of the ways is through the eternal present, the living moment of right now. Buddha has a great line about that, he said, "You are what you have done and what you will be is what you do now."

And the other way is the idea of this, getting back to cosmology, this connecting pole, this ladder, those levels of heavens are steps on a ladder.

Rumi, the Persian poet from the 13th century, has a wonderful part of a poem, a statement about that where he says, "From the moment you were born into this world off to the side there stood a ladder to which you could aspire." So the traditional symbol of the ladder, the way up, Jacob's ladder, or even as translated through Christian iconography the ladder in the deposition that they take Christ down, which is really about going up.

So that's very, very powerful. And here is -- let me just read you this one another quote from Nasr and I want to talk a little bit about *The Crossing*, I am going to have to conclude.

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So here is Nasr again, "The cosmos itself continually reveals to man the eternal message of the Truth. Its finite forms reveal traces of the Infinite."

So there is a way in to all these things. That's why in the digital age, what's going on right now, where perception's being turned into knowledge is very profound, because all of these things are icons, or portals, or entry points, click "curtains" into your search engine and you go into this giant web of connections, everything is connected.

So the finite forms revealed traces of the infinite. There is no -- I mean I've been working in video for 30 years and it just hit me like a ton of bricks, as I got on, because I was interested in this stuff, and I was interested in technology to realize that these tools are so connected with these old texts I was reading. I was just astonished and I continued to be astonished.

Your VCR, your camcorder, the fact that you could record experience and then reinsert this moment into a future moment, to keep the past alive in the present moment like I said, there are so many parallels with what's going on in technology.

So Nasr says, "To gain this awareness, this knowledge of those connections man has need of revelation, which like the cosmos comes from the infinite and the absolute, but in a more direct sense and hence serves as a key for unfolding the mystery of man's own being as well as those of the universe." So study that and you get to this; study this, you get to that, same thing. "Revelation is itself a gift." We say artists have a gift, creativity is a gift, exist outside the economic system, which is the paradox and dilemma.

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And sometimes torment of being an artist, how do you put a price on these things? It's ludicrous. They are not yours to begin with.

"Revelation is a gift to enable man to pass beyond the finite to the infinite. It is only by virtue of the beatific vision, which artists share with saints, he is able to see the cosmos as reflections of the spiritual world in the mirror of the material and the temple. "Everything is a portal, everything is an opening.

So artists are here at the source of these images, we can create things. Anybody ever had a good idea knows that it just comes into you from somewhere else.

Let's start the last tape. We're going to run out of time if we don't. You can watch this while I am talking. So this is also why artworks live forever. They seem to exist outside of time. The treasures you have in this museum--it's astonishing to me to walk into an art museum and get moved by an image 500-years-old from a time that I know nothing about, from a place, a person who I know nothing about, whose customs, language, daily life that are in no way connected to my life, and somehow inside there is a connection. And that, I think, is the most profound thing about images is that they live. They live longer than we do. Our actions matter and they last longer than we do.

So let me just talk a little bit about *The Crossing* [1998.190.A-P], because people wanted to hear a little about that. I am very honored actually that it has been acknowledged and presented in this way.

[00:48:47.18]

Those images in my mind came from, I don't know where, I don't care where. One day I just got an image of a man on fire. We are antennas. I set out to make the piece over a course of about three years. The image evolved in my notebooks, very unconsciously. I didn't even realize sometimes some entries of -- six months later were connected to this piece and so I started going back and reading it and seeing a thread there. And water came along later and then it became fire and water and centered on the image of a man, a person, human body. And then from a certain point on it becomes technical.

This image which has driven you, which comes into your life from there, who knows, takes over and then forms itself and that's when you know you're ready to make a piece. That's when you even know you can even share it with someone, and even someone you love. My wife Kira is a really great foil for me in a way because the first thing I'll do before any human being on the planet knows what I am thinking, she is the first one and I'll kind of show her things and talk to her. And she sees the first time, it's sort of gotten out into the world, and then it comes a point where it's ready to be made.

So now I've got to figure out how to have a man on fire and a man getting inundated with water. So then I bring in some technicians and artists who I work with, cameraman Harry Dawson, and art director Wendy Samuels, and a bunch of people I've been working with for more than 10 years, 12 years. Then I'll present it to them, and then we'll talk about how to -- and then all of a sudden you are in the material world.

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It's not this kind of vision that you had in your brain. It's like, how do we bring this into the earth, that's really what the art of film-making is. The art of film-making is how to create things that you see inside yourself, or any art form really, but film-making especially, because if you're working with a camera, you have to go out into the real world. You have to find a place to make it happen, physically, as an experience.

So then we'll go into a technical mode, but in the end the image just lives on its own. It just exists and a lot of people have seen that piece and think of it as a negative thing. I think in the age of cameras and media what's been hard for me is how to walk this fine line between having a faith in images on the one hand and yet having a distrust with them at the same time. Because they don't tell the truth always, but then, part of them does and what part, it's really tricky.

So I think the fact that I see them as a surface to something else, for me I don't consider what I do is being ultimately visual. It's operating on another level. That's when I know if something works, it doesn't -- the visual surface is one thing, but what's going on underneath it is the reality. So this is coming together.

So that negative feeling that people see when they look at *The Crossing* and see a guy burning, they see death, I see transcendence. I see leaving this world, I see transformation, transfiguration, and ultimately liberation. That's really what the piece is about.

So let me leave you with this one piece, this is called *Creation Angel*. It starts out looking like an astronomical image, and let's just watch the rest of it and then we'll finish. Can we turn up the sound?

[Audio Gap: 00:52:29 – 00:54:05]

So there we go, we've created something out of nothing. So thank you very much. Thank you! Someday I'll get to finish the rest of the lecture. Anyway, but it was fun going into some of these ideas which have been around for a really long time.

[00:54:40.20]

I know it's late and I know we kind of started a little late but do you want to do any questions? Few questions? Okay. Any questions, comments, thoughts, anything at all? Yes.

Audience Member: Can you comment on the role of sound?

Bill Viola: Okay, the role of sound, well that's an interesting question because since 2000, I've been making primarily silent pieces. I've made -- Jim might know the answer to this--but I made maybe two or three pieces with sound and a whole bunch, 20-25 pieces, with no sound.

Sound is a vibration and it's magic even if it's not formed into words that you can comprehend like what's happening right now. But the notion that physical pressure waves can leave the body--one time I was in Tokyo and I was walking down those narrow little alleys they have. It was really quiet one morning and I was going over something in my mind from the night before, where I kind of said something real stupid and kind of insulting to someone and I didn't know it at the time and I was going over the memory, in instant replay and I realized what a jerk I was. And I was walking and it was a completely quiet morning and I just went, "uh..."-- this sound just came out my mouth and I shocked myself.

It was like an invasion of this beautiful tranquil summer morning, and it was just like a thing was there that wasn't there, and it was just some utterance that came totally uncontrolled out of my inner being, kind of an anguished sigh. And that was real shocking, and I think sound has this amazing ability to transmit itself across time and space.

[00:56:45.12]

That's why when radio started in the early 20th century, it really wasn't that far out. It wasn't that unprecedented because we had been talking over the

hill around the corner, behind your back, for thousands and thousands of years.

So sound is also very significant in the Hindu religion, which is one of the mothers of all religions, where they talk about the cosmic vibration, that the world was literally created through sound. That beautiful Shiva you have here in this museum, one of the best ones I've ever seen with the drum, sound of creation. And that sound can also destroy. You can destroy a glass with sound, a physical object with sound.

So sound has one foot in the material world, you can kill someone with it. One foot in the metaphysical world, you can enlighten someone with it. And it is a very special thing and it is about as spiritual as I can think of. That's why music is held to be one of the highest arts. Music is fundamentally so abstract, yet, at the same time it's so real. Yes.

Audience Member: [inaudible]...how much direction to you give your actors?

Bill Viola: Quite a bit but not in a traditional kind of way. They have told me that when I was working with them, it reminded them of being in acting school where they were given kind of exercises. In that particular piece, I had them become a diamond under the earth when it was still a piece of carbon being crushed by rock and the image they carried with them was suffocating in a place of absolute darkness, in mounting pressure, that was building to the point where it was that close to annihilating them.

[00:58:45.09]

I had to as a director sit with them; I sat right under the camera for most of the shots I do with performers, instead of looking through the camera.

And I had to know them and be connected with them enough to know when that pressure got to that close to the edge to let them go, give them the cue I'd call out when it was time to let loose.

And at the same time, which I love, it's very tense but I am on an absolute rigid timeline with a big clock counting seconds because I had exactly 110 seconds which was the time it took for a 1000 foot mag of 35 mm film to run through the camera at 240 frames a second.

When it ran out, the image is over and each -- since it was about ten times slower than normal, if they did something one second late, it's 10 seconds late. If they did something three seconds late, it's 30 seconds late in terms of shaping the timeline, the time-form of the piece. So it's very tense, you've got this hard out, this complete rigidity, you have this completely organic thing that has to happen naturally. And that's the art piece to try to balance those two things. But I don't work narratively or with characters or any of that stuff with them. Yes.

Audience Member: Talk about the use of slow motion.

Bill Viola: Well, slow motion is a way to see deeper. The human mind has an operating frequency which is relatively narrow compared to the universe.

[01:00:39.01]

You have to realize that, getting back to cosmology, as Henri Bergson the French philosopher said, the human senses really can be looked upon as limiters, not windows to the world. In other words, they are masking out and screening out 99.9% of all the energy in the Universe. We know we can't see infra-red, ultraviolet, all that stuff. And if you could experience all that stuff at once you'd probably be annihilated. So the senses are actually our windows in the same way a camera is a limiter, and that's been used to very effective political uses in the last century and beyond now. When the camera is pointing here, it's not pointing there where the truth is, or vice versa.

So this idea of the human being has this narrow slot which we can experience, hopefully if it works, infinity. My favorite shape is the hourglass. Ideas start in my mind in the maximal form possible, and I have to get them down to this in a tiny little ridiculous aperture which might be a camera or it might be a pencil in my hand on a piece of paper or this thing here. And if I am lucky what happens on the other side is that thing opens out again when you receive it and it gets as big as it was before it went in. That's the artistic equation.

And so slow motion is a -- cheating maybe in a way. I mean, the ancient Greeks, the word *techne* which is the root of our word 'technology' which means 'trick' in ancient Greece. It comes from Prometheus who stole fire from the gods. So he stole a thing that the gods had that immortals didn't have, and he tricked them with a *techne*. Brought it back to earth, said, hey, here's fire! Fantastic! People could cook their food, heat their houses when it's cold. This is like the greatest trick, gizmo that we've ever had.

[01:02:41.02]

But what he didn't realize was, because was gotten by ill-gotten means that you can also burn your house down with it. That's why we have a love-hate relationship with technology.

So, slow motion is one of my favorite technologies and it's, in a way for me, very pure because what it actually does with that hourglass is it lets you see more of what's contained in the moment that this guy couldn't catch up fast enough with while it was happening.

So you play it back in slow-mo and all of a sudden there is ten times more time to see a little flicker in an eye or a little curl of the lip or sunlight, a flash of something falling. So I see it all as shifting forms of consciousness. Yes.

Audience Member: [Inaudible]

Bill Viola: No, that's a good point. *Silent Mountain* is a little bit different from other things I have done with actors and emotion, because it really -- I only had one, really one chance. We did two takes with those guys, but it was so intense that really the second take really didn't -- which -- we waited a couple of hours but it really didn't have the same intensity as the first one.

I have done other things which are the opposite. An ensemble of five people going through this emotional wave and those where three, four takes and maybe number three was good or number one was -- you didn't know. But however, once it's shot then the film goes into a studio.

[01:04:39.24]

I work in a studio with editors and in a film transfer room and then the real work starts. It took two days, 10 hours a day to edit what you just saw.

What's going on in there which you don't know is, of course, there are no cuts. I haven't made a piece with cuts in it since, well, I did a short thing with *Nine Inch Nails* in 2000. But before that it was 1994, it was the last true montage piece that I did. None of my pieces anymore have any cuts in them. They are continually evolving images or actions I should say.

So what happens then is I'll have the ability to slide the person in the frame, because when those people were leaning and twisting, they would go out of the frame. So the film frame is bigger than the video frame, so I could slide it imperceptibly. I could zoom in. I framed it just right.

There is about, maybe 100 edits in that piece that you don't see, illuminating the shadow in an eye like with the equivalent of a moving image Photoshop thing, which tracks the eye everywhere it moves, shifting the color on their clothes.

So anything a painter does really, it's a lot like painting. I was doing this with guys that work in a commercial world in Hollywood and I went through lots of people before I got a guy that could sit there and work on an eye for two-and-a-half hours. Because these guys want to -- time is money. They want to cut those cars and move those Toyotas.

So I had to find the real boring, quiet guys who could like sit with me all night and just work on it. A postage stamp size of the image-- like Vermeer.

Yeah, one more. No? Okay, that's it. Thank you very much! Thank you! Thank you!

Audio File: IconsBillViola_01_public.mp3