

## INTRODUCTION

# CALL ME OLD-FASHIONED, BUT...

Meaning, Singularity and Transcendence in the Work of Bill Viola

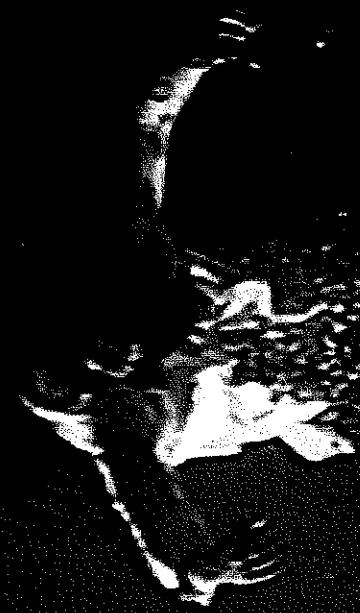
CHRIS TOWNSEND

'We do no harm in wishing to show the invisible by means of the visible.'

Gregory the Great, Lib. IX, Epistola LII Ad Secundinum

There is a story about Bill Viola's installation of *Five Angels for the Millennium* (1) at Anthony d'Offay Gallery in 2001 which, whether or not it is apocryphal, is revealing of the artist's singular popularity. Seeing the crowds who had flocked into the complex of spaces just below London's Oxford Street that made up the gallery at that time, d'Offay is alleged to have said: 'I shouldn't be putting this on, this is the Tate's job.' The numbers attending that show may be as difficult to confirm as the story, but former d'Offay employees estimate as many as 40,000 in a couple of months: a quite ridiculous number of visitors to a commercial exhibition, and a figure that most curators in public institutions would yearn to achieve. From my own visits, I would attest that people were often sitting three or four deep in front of some screens, and that many of them appeared to have come to spend a considerable amount of time in the exhibition. That is, the duration of their attention to the work at least reflected the duration of those works: they had not come for a quick glance at an image.

Anthony d'Offay was quite right (and during 2002 the Tate, in partnership with the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Whitney Museum of American Art, indeed purchased *Five Angels*); he needed only four hundred visitors to his space, provided they were influential critics, curators or collectors. No matter that they are often a useful window on the work of artists who have yet to receive institutional approval, commercial galleries are not established to sate a general public appetite, nor are they usually in a position to provide the kind of scholarship that 'explains' works of



art to a public. That there is, and has been for nearly two decades, an enormous appetite for Bill Viola's work at galleries throughout the world is a given fact. What is a more intriguing aspect of that fact is the extent to which Viola's works both resist and, I'd suggest, don't necessarily need, the kind of explanation that art institutions feel obliged to provide. This is not to suggest that the artist's works are simplistic. The essays that follow suggest an extraordinary degree of depth, of rich complexity and of compositional sense, both in the individual work and in the oeuvre as a whole, that would undermine such a proposition. However, these are works that connect with their audience in ways that are as much visceral or emotional as they are intellectual. If anything, it's the sedulously modulated, often banal, explanations offered by what Dave Hickey categorizes as 'the therapeutic institution' that are inadequate to the work at hand.<sup>1</sup>

Viola's art, if it is anything, is an art of affect. It is rare, at least in the kind of museums and galleries that I visit, to witness anyone weeping before a work of art. Yet at almost every Bill Viola exhibition that I have visited I have seen either someone in tears, or else so profoundly moved that, but for the mores that bound crying in public in Northern Europe, they might as well have been. And crying (at least on those rare occasions I have experienced it as an adult: Colline's farewell to his old coat in *La Bohème*, which gets me every time; learning that my dearest friend – a woman with whom I endured the direst production of that opera – had survived 9/11) seems to me the corporeal consequence of a complex set of emotional and intellectual stimuli that can no longer be readily accommodated within those registers. For all its obsession with 'liminality' and 'transgression', modern art rarely takes us to such limits, far less exceeds them. Cynthia Freeland, no stranger herself to weeping in front of Viola's 'The Passions', introduces the now rather unfashionable philosophical category of the sublime as a means of appraising the artist's oeuvre. For Freeland, there is in Viola's work a quality of 'aboutness', a sense of force and presence, that engulfs our faculties, but which nonetheless stimulates other sensibilities. The sublime is not simply a terrifying phenomenon, but rather one that moves and uplifts us even as it puts us in awe of its spectacle. This relationship to the sublime is something that gives Viola a commonality with those mid-twenti-

eth-century American painters such as Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, who sought similar effects. And there is something about Viola's art, despite its appeal to universal spiritual values, that is distinctively 'American': something that is recognized, perhaps with a degree of ironic naivety, by the young Russian artists described here by Antonio Geusa in their initial encounters with his oeuvre.

We might characterize Bill Viola's work, therefore, as 'excessive': not only does its scale of presentation increasingly tend towards the grandiose, but the effects of encountering it may exceed our capacity to contain our responses. His, then, is an oeuvre that challenges two tendencies in contemporary art: firstly the refusal of emotion and a concomitant privileging of intellectual response; secondly the careful regulation of portion-controlled 'meaning' that is often doled out to art's audiences. (And yes, I'd go so far as to say that this volume, even in its 60,000 words or more, remains limited in its response to Viola's work.) If it undermines one pole of that simple binary between emotionalism and intellectualism, if at first it seems to resist critique, Viola's work nonetheless sustains careful and even difficult analysis.

There has been an insistent, if subordinate, strain in modern art – most often manifested in less satisfactory depictions of bohemia than that of Puccini, Giacosa and Illica, I'd suggest – which succeeds largely through the solicitation of pathos and for its subjects. Consider, for example, work as diverse as the sad saltimbanches and harlequins of Picasso's Blue Period; the left-bank habitués of Ed van der Elsken; the East Village denizens of Nan Goldin's work from the late 1970s and early 1980s; and that entire body of contemporary 'pity me' art, so often autobiographical, so often body-centred, so often 'political', that is equally so wonderfully debunked in the work of Cary S. Leibowitz (a.k.a. Candyass). This is art that depends upon the viewer's sympathy, the 'movement' of its audience, as much as any genre painting by Jean-Baptiste Greuze elicits a 'dangerous communion' with the suffering but seductive body of the other.<sup>2</sup> Greuze's *La Pitié filiale* of 1763, did, after all, move its audience to tears.<sup>3</sup>

Viola's work clearly rises above this ontology of pathos. Even with a series such as 'The Passions', as Freeland observes, what motivates empathy in the spectator here is not the imaginary bridging of difference, but rather a recognition of mutual experi-

instead, since it's clearly not concerned with either visual pleasure or the elevation of technique for its own sake, nor even with an effective critique of history.) Dave Hickey suggests that prior to the decisive rhetorical displacements of modernism, 'pictures were made primarily for people, not against them'.<sup>5</sup> In the age of bourgeois capitalism that turn might have been justified, but Viola's work, in the response it generates from its audience as well as in the rhetorical forms it deploys, suggests it is an art for people; a project counter to the modernist endeavour. Yet, despite this 'conservative' strain, Viola's art is produced within the most innovative, most contemporary of media. The technological apotheoses of modern image-making – video, the plasma screen, sophisticated recording, and relation of sound and image – are put to use, in part, against what are apparently the prevailing intellectual and artistic traditions of the last one hundred and fifty years. Viola's success in this project suggests that human beings are perhaps older, wiser and slower than their technological innovations, or indeed their art movements; suggests that despite all that change which art sought to justify, represent and allegorize, we've changed less than we imagine. (Or if you are an ideological cynic, you might suggest that 'we' (itself a questionable collectivism) have evolved the kind of constraints that allow 'us' to disavow change, even as 'we' make it).<sup>6</sup>

Viola's strategy here, with its emphases on affect, on pleasure in looking and on the pursuit of profound spiritual meanings, is largely at odds with the dominant tenets of the institutional forces – such as museums, universities and art colleges, and governmental organizations – that have increasingly shaped the public reception of art in the West for half a century. But this has not undermined Viola's enormously popularity, both with a general audience, and with museum directors and curators. This is art that escapes those institutional forces that seek 'to neutralize the rhetorical force of contemporary images',<sup>7</sup> and nonetheless is enthusiastically endorsed by those institutions. One purpose of this book is, however tangentially, to explain this dichotomy through examinations of content, technique and historical context.

To understand the degree to which Viola's work runs counter to the temporal and absorptive characteristics of art, and of a wider domain of visual imagery, since

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nothing more than intellectual appraisal, an art whose apprehension is perhaps only fully achieved in critical activity and which therefore is restricted in its appeal to those with enough time on their hands, such as academics, to realize its implications. There are some works of art that are better written about than seen, though that writing may be only marginally more or less accessible than the art in question. There is a great deal of contemporary art where, through the cultural attenuation of its capacity to apprehend images, to understand historical contexts, to think critically for itself, an audience is thrown back upon the hermeneutical activity of specialists who tell it what to think, how to feel. Without wishing to undermine the activity of the contributors to this volume – whose essays, precisely because they do not tell you what to think or how to feel, will enrich your encounter with Viola's art – I would say that one of the joys of Bill Viola's work is that it is capable of grabbing its audience's attention without platitudinous explanation: it works on you at a visceral level. You have to see it.

Viola's is an art for 'everyman', rather than for cognoscenti; an art of affect rather than distanced appraisal, but not an art of pathos; an art of duration and absorption rather than of immediate satisfactions and revelation; an art that refuses the spectator control over the image, but which embeds its audience within its structures – an art, then, that refuses transcendence to the spectator, but which attracts us by its own inquiry into transcendence. As several contributors to this volume stress, Viola's is an art that addresses 'big issues' – that life, death, 'why are we here?' stuff – and addresses them without the kind of embarrassment or self-referential sense of parody manifested by this sentence. But those are, of course, the kind of questions that 'everyman' continues to ask up to death.

In general, then, aspects of Viola's work run counter to the dominant tendencies not just in Western art history since the mid-nineteenth century, but, I'd argue, counter to the dominant tendencies in the relation of spectators to visual subjects in general, over much the same period. Viola is concerned with the meaning of art, or more strictly with the role of art in life's continuing, and never satisfied, search for meaning. It's no longer fashionable to look for meaning in art, apparently.<sup>4</sup> (A situation that solicits the question of what much contemporary art might be providing

the early nineteenth century, we need to return to those members of the audience in Anthony d'Offay's gallery in July 2001, who had brought coffee and sandwiches with them; who had, in some cases quite literally, settled in for the duration. So riddled with contradictions and paradoxes is this historical trajectory – that of the nature of attentiveness – that it is not easy to elucidate it within a single book, far less a single paragraph. However, we might argue that one feature of the culture of modernity is a lessening of critical attentiveness, and that this diminution of attention goes hand in hand with the emergence of spectacular technologies that not only substitute for real experience in the perceptive capacities of the individual, but which promise him or her transcendence over that reality. Putting it bluntly, we're a lot less prepared to spend time scrutinizing or experiencing phenomena when their analogues are on offer. The matter is far more complex than that, and we can argue, as Jonathan Crary does, that 'modern distraction can only be understood through its reciprocal relation to the rise of attentive norms and practices'.<sup>8</sup>

We can characterize the post-Enlightenment evolution of visual modes within culture in terms of spectacle. (Things get bigger: consider the shift from the Panorama in the 1800s through ever larger cinema screens up to the IMAX; consider also the ever growing width of the TV screen – it's no longer a box in the corner, now it's half a wall.) We can at the same time understand this schematic history in terms of verisimilitude. (Things get realer: a Panorama may look real, but it cannot make the same claims on the recording of presence as the photograph or the film.) We have not yet, and hopefully never will, reach the state satirized in *Brave New World*, but Aldous Huxley's 'feelies' are a chilling reminder of the blind aspirations of mediation within modernity: the substitution of its wholly convincing analogue for reality, with the added guarantee of spectatorial control. In such a scenario, you witness the world without really experiencing it; and though you may be absorbed by this world, you do not pay critical attention to it.<sup>9</sup> Crary suggests that 'spectacular culture is not founded on the necessity of making a subject see, but rather on strategies in which individuals are isolated, separated, and inhabit time as disempowered'.<sup>10</sup> In the same moment as the mode of seeing promises you transcendence (you believe you're in control), it removes your critical faculties (believe

me, you're not). Attentive in one place, whether the factory or the office; elsewhere you need only be absorbed by spectacle.

Viola, however, seems to proffer an archaic mode of visual engagement – you have to spend a long time looking at many of his works for them to be properly apprehended, even if he does not necessarily offer a new model of critical apprehension, and even if, as we'll see, he persistently makes his works spectacular. As Otto Neumaier points out in his essay, a work such as *To Pray Without Ceasing*, 1992, 'is impossible to grasp... in its temporal totality because, as a matter of practicality, no one will devote twelve hours to watching an entire projection cycle'. Yet Viola's mode of engagement is effected with precisely that technology that promises the most authentic simulacrum of reality and, therefore, perhaps the least attentiveness from its audience. His media are the most sophisticated products of that technological impulse to arrest and replicate the world, which first manifests itself in the camera obscura, and which evolves through photography, sound recording and film. Central to his project, then, is the use of the technology of spectacle against one of its historically manifested aspirations. Again, we might cite *To Pray Without Ceasing* as an example: a work whose 'visual perceptibility (the very feature we primarily expect from the medium of video) is reduced to almost zero for much of the time'. Perhaps more than any other artist who has used video as their medium, Viola is conscious of the subversive effects of temporality against the post-Enlightenment tradition of immediate satisfaction. In his own essay 'Video Black', he writes of 'a video camera that has not been shut off for the last twenty years... In another society, this camera, with its accumulated existence would be graduated to an object of power to be venerated and reciprocated'.<sup>11</sup> Within Viola's art you cannot only be absorbed; the work demands your attention, although at times the work deliberately seeks to counter absorption. The organization of time and space is crucial to this activity, as Neumaier demonstrates in his overview of their treatment in Viola's oeuvre.

Bill Viola's installations have been hugely important in the emergence of video art as an international art form. One might, in the terms of Jonathan Lahey Dronsfield's critique, see the euphoric institutional reception of Viola as a recuperation of video art's critique of art as object – another aspect of that embrace which

has institutionalized Marcel Duchamp's and Piero Manzoni's critiques of art's institutions together with 1960s Conceptualism. Those media and strategies that sought to subvert the dominant politics of exhibition have been brought back under the aegis of the institution through their presentation as spectacle or as object of specialized knowledge. We might understand Viola's work as part of this process. His recent works are spectacles: the result of work by large-scale production teams, with experience in other fields of spectacular culture. A Viola work involves not only 'the artist', but cameramen, lighting operators, production designers, wardrobe assistants and production managers: all the logistical support of the feature film. Viola is not alone in this of course; nor is he the only video artist whose recent scale of production has been the singular, epic installation. We might compare the logistical organization of his output to that of Doug Aitken, Pipilotti Rist, or Isaac Julien. What differs is that Viola offers a radically different content – a profound spiritual reflection – from any other contemporary artist working in this way. The form seemingly remains the same, but the message is changed. What all these artists do seem to be doing, however, is re-investing the work of art with presence, with what Walter Benjamin called 'aura'.<sup>12</sup> You have to see and feel installation art: its effects, its affect, cannot be mediated in secondary forms; it cannot exist beyond the singular work, or at most the limited edition. Benjamin believed that what vitiated 'aura' was the invention of mechanical reproduction of the image – there could be no 'aura' for a film or photograph, infinitely reproducible. First generation video artists celebrated this removal of the veil of 'presence': an installation such as Richard Kriesche's *Wirklichkeit gegen Wirklichkeit*, 1977, for example, both literalizes it and ironizes it as the artist stands reading a copy of Benjamin's essay beside a TV monitor that shows him reading Benjamin's essay. But current artists of video and installation achieve an aura for art which is made in exactly those media, and their evolutionary forms, that Benjamin saw as subversive of such an effect.

If Viola wants us to revert to an older way of seeing and experiencing art, such a step backwards does not in itself bring a challenging way of thinking critically about the meaning and context of images. The auratic affect of the work may overwhelm any other response except awe (a point elucidated in this volume in Jonathan

Lahey Dronsfield's perceptive critique of the artist's work). In Viola's case, however, I'd suggest that it is the very act of seeing in this way, of experiencing auratic effects, of connecting artistic representation to questions of spirituality, that is itself critical and, strangely, 'political'. Even allowing for a recent resurgence, the representation and examination of the 'spiritual' has been largely off-limits to artists since the deaths of Kandinsky and Rothko, and, despite a few exhibitions lately, I'd suggest that there is a corresponding critical interdiction on the topic. To create works that have a spiritual affect, at a time when the institutionally approved styles of contemporary art have been almost wholly directed towards secular and cerebral discourses, seems to me not only subversive but extremely brave.

For Jonathan Lahey Dronsfield, 'bravery' is perhaps not enough. This is a sharp challenge to Viola's work, undertaken in the context of a debate over responsibility in art that is his wider project. Lahey Dronsfield astutely diagnoses that Viola's return to an art of aura and symbolic values is not necessarily a responsible critique of the language of art that he abandons. Viola, he asserts, substitutes one language for another, reverts back to an older rhetoric, emphasizing its 'truth' to the human condition rather than analyzing the search for truth as an aspect of that condition. To assert the spiritual in this way, according to Lahey Dronsfield, is to foreclose the possibility of the spectators' participation in the artwork. You may be witnessing a spectacle with a rhetorical form that is radically different to the one proposed by the dominant discourses of contemporary art, but it is nonetheless a spectacle that takes your breath away, and, perhaps with it, your critical faculties.

For David Morgan, like Lahey Dronsfield, the issue of the body – the one seen and the one doing the seeing – is vital to video art. At first, it seems as though the one aspect of Viola's work on which the two might agree is its fascination with what Morgan calls 'the epic sandwiched in the ordinary'. But ultimately both agree on the theatricality of Viola's work: for Morgan 'much of [the] oeuvre is best described as Baroque'; elsewhere he examines debts to the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* and Romanticism. Morgan, though, diagnoses a different intention at work in the installations. As he puts it, Viola 'is intrigued by the power of estrangement to illuminate'. The act of estrangement is to take the spectator out of the world and put him not

in a helpless passivity where no questions are ever asked, but rather in a place where he may meditate. Viola, then, seeks to 're-pristiniate' secular culture through work that is, at its core, redemptive. It offers us a second chance, another way to see the time and space in which we live.

Perhaps one of Viola's most distinctive and spectacular effects in recent years has been his use of extreme slow motion. In her essay on *The Greeting*, 1995, Jean Wainwright shows how this extension of the moment works against the climate of brevity and temporal verisimilitude that characterized industrial modernity, despite the attempt by modernism – at its best in the works of Proust and Joyce – to vitiate the notions of a standard structure and mode of time. Time in the nineteenth century, before the interventions of Einstein and Bergson, was imagined as uniform in its direction and constant in its pacing.<sup>13</sup> Even now, for most people, most of the time, that's how we still experience it, whether it's in the TV schedules or the requirement to be at work or, if you're lucky, to catch a train at a particular hour. It's worth remembering that in order to achieve a high-quality image at slow projection speed, Viola shot *The Greeting* on high-speed film, rather than video. However, that technical demand might, in the context of the work, be understood to have a symbolic value. Film emerges from a discourse that stresses the atomist theory of time, where it is understood as composed of infinitely small yet consistently sized units. With its insistence on a regular division of time into representational space, whether 16 or 24 frames per second, we might understand film as having a one-to-one correspondence to such units. But in *The Greeting* Viola is, once again, working with the materials of modernity against the very notions that both spawned his media and towards which their sense of reality has contributed.

Modernity's conception of linear, uniform time is anathematic to Viola's practice, and to his ideas of human spirituality. What we see in *The Greeting* is the extension of the significant moment: where the density of life so sediments the flow of time that it slows to an almost imperceptible process. Paradoxically, Viola could not so easily achieve this reversion to what is, more or less, a medieval idea of time, without using film. As Wainwright points out, if, in works such as Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* or Balla's *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash*, modernist

painters sought to translate the dynamic effects of film into painting, Viola seeks to translate the stasis of painting into film.

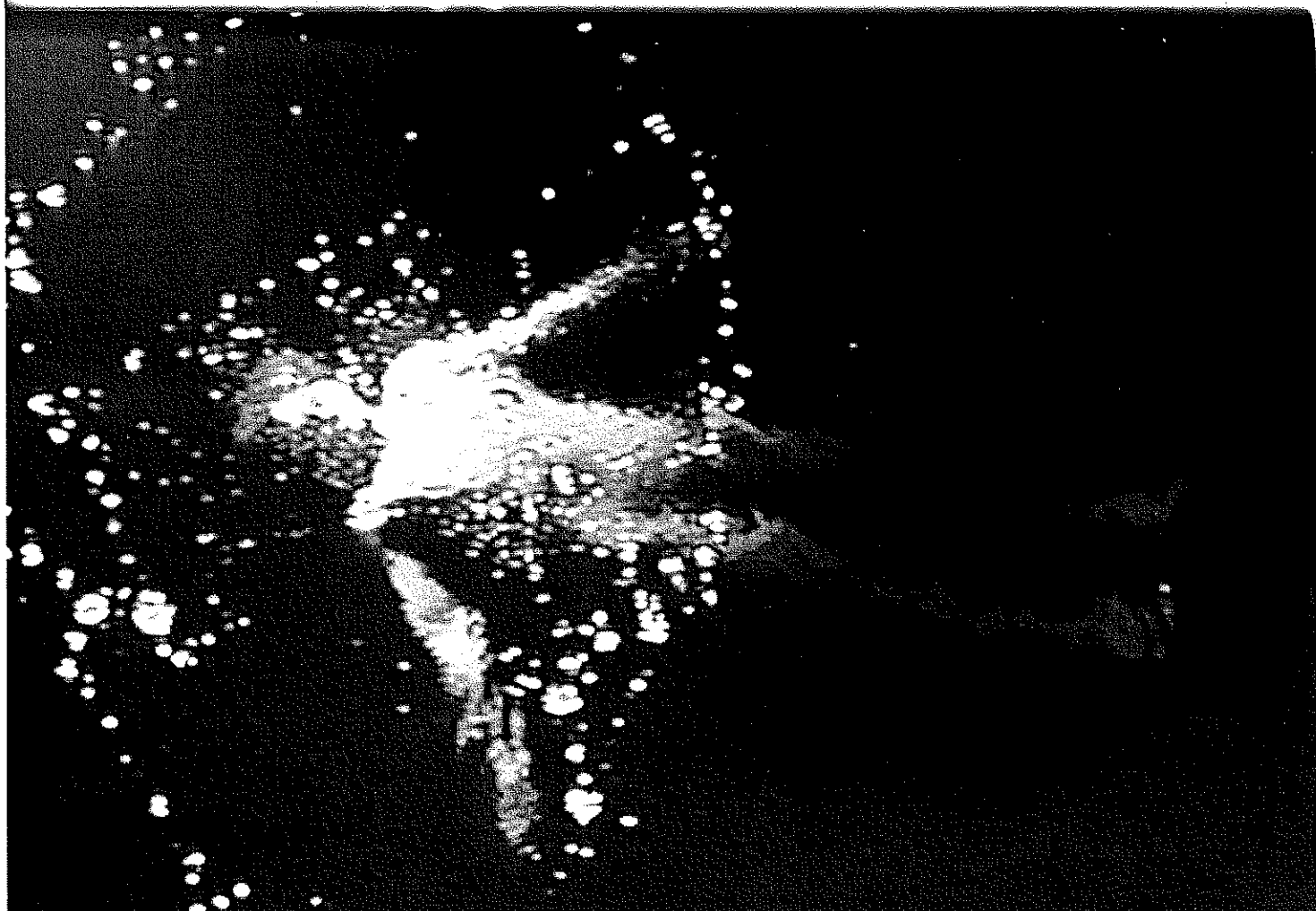
The complexity of space in Viola's work is the subject of Chris Townsend's detailed consideration of *Room for St. John of the Cross*, 1983. Here, Viola uses space as a narrative element to confuse the apparently straightforward polarities of private and public domains, interiority and exteriority, and, one might add, private religious faith and its public manifestation. Comparative studies of video works that stress their affinities to a tradition of practice within the newly emergent medium are still rare. Central to Townsend's argument is a discussion of the way in which Viola puts to work the self-reflexive acknowledgment of space and time, a staple theme within the post-minimalist use of video in the late 1960s and early 1970s. There, the most important task for this strategy is the highlighting to the spectator of their role in the artwork. In *Room for St. John*, however, Viola skilfully embeds this critique of the relation of spectator to art within a narrative space, one in which the elements have symbolic values. This occlusion allows Viola to 'move' the spectating subject within the narrative of the work, as well as 'moving' them through identification with the ostensible subject of the piece.

Just how Viola works through such carefully thought out strategies, the rhetoric of the installation, becomes the topic of Rhys Davies's essay on the use of sound. Davies isolates a single component in a complex mix. As a young artist Viola emerged in an era when video, as a nascent art form, was often limited by its technology, as much as by any necessarily self-reflexive acknowledgment of 'realism' within low-grade production values. One strand of thought by artists of this era concerned video's inherently democratic, anti-authoritarian potential: video could subvert both the unique status of the art object and the controlling effects of mass culture through its capacity for reproducibility and broadcast, whether in the multiple copy or the local and alternative TV station. (As Nam June Paik put it so succinctly: 'Television has been attacking us all our lives, now it's time to attack it back.') That ethos led to a type of video production – beginning with the work in Howard Wise's 1969 exhibition 'TV as a Creative Medium' – that was immediate and cheaply made, and that aimed to use television for the dissemination of

utopian artistic provocations, rather than for the social pacification which seemed its principal role within mass culture. (As Paik asked in the 1970s: 'How soon will artists have their own TV channels?')

That utopian political aspiration has long since dissipated. In its wake, rather than utilizing the same type of established channels of broadcast for video art as were used by TV productions, artists successfully negotiated a niche for the broadcast of their work in the very institutions which had seemed least capable of that dissemination: art galleries. Part of the price of that negotiation has been a radical distancing of much video art from the utilitarian ethics and aesthetics of the 1970s. As Davies points out, the break with the two dimensions of the TV screen in the 1980s and 1990s was made possible by developments in video projection and high-definition imaging. So it is that we now look to video for the properties traditionally associated with painting and sculpture. This situation perhaps receives its ultimate acknowledgment in the National Gallery in London installing an exhibition of Viola's 'The Passions': Viola the first living artist to receive such an honour, his work equated to that of the Old Masters, both in its aesthetic content and emotional effects. That paradox depends upon another paradox: that the attainment of the auratic properties of the individual artwork – which include both those characteristics of the work and the audience responses, observed, in particular, by Cynthia Freeland – in the medium least likely to manifest them, involves a level of sophistication in the medium similar to that found in mass culture. Davies notes the parallel paths of sound engineering followed by George Lucas (with his Star Wars films) and Bill Viola – the one making works for mass audiences, the other seeking to affect the spectator's experience through their being in the presence of a unique work of art. Yet, as Davies writes: 'By 2003, Viola had reached the point where his tools – if not his budgets – were much the same as those employed by Lucas in *Attack of The Clones*, 2002, namely Hi Definition Digital Video and hard disk-based editing systems.' And, like a Hollywood director, Viola now, when appropriate, uses a professional sound design team, who introduce a vast array of sounds in the post-production process.

Viola's concern with the totality of things is reflected in his attention to detail in that sound-palette: sound is as vital to the experience of his work as the image, or



the temporal and spatial structures of the artwork. And what is generally true of Viola's recent approach to the visual (in an installation such as *Five Angels for the Millennium*, for example) – that if you take an image and reduce or magnify it to the point where cognitive recognition is no longer possible, then it becomes visually abstract – is true also of the use of sound in his work. That abstraction of the sound is an aspect of Viola's work which again suggests an aesthetic affinity to those earlier practitioners of an American visual sublime – Aaron Siskind springs to mind. Given this common concern, it's no accident that Davies should write about the archetypal sound as vital to Viola's art. Rothko and Newman, in particular, were seeking to touch some primal condition of experience through painting that transcended the spectator's complete control, at the same time as their critical boosters, and indeed Newman himself, were talking up Abstract Expressionist imagery in terms of the Jungian archetype.<sup>14</sup>

Davies demonstrates not only how sound amplifies the effect of Viola's imagery; he illustrates how much of the sound is carefully designed to complement the images we see, rather than being naturally associated with them. Even in an early work such as *Migration*, 1976, what at first seems 'natural' – the chime that accompanies a drop of water falling – is in fact a substitute for the natural sound. By the time he makes one of his first masterpieces, *Hatsu-Yume (First Dream)*, 1981, Viola is using treated and designed sound in highly sophisticated ways, so that it becomes a creative statement in itself. This production of sound does not, of course, draw attention to itself; rather it contributes to the overall effect of the work. But what seems natural, simple and obvious is, in fact, fantastically complex; and all that effort, that complexity of the work is elided in its affect. We might say that the thematic paradox at the core of so much of Viola's work – what we could, following the poetry of St. John of the Cross, diagnose as 'lose to find' – is also a technological paradox. The complex work cannot easily be examined critically; cannot be taken apart, because its structures are lost behind the simplicity of its effect.

Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis offers a detailed study of Viola's relationship to one aspect of spirituality that repeatedly surfaces in his art – his use of Eastern, and in particular Buddhist, art. Ten Grotenhuis traces the debt Viola owes to the thought

of D. T. Suzuki and Ananda Coomaraswamy, a debt that oddly includes the introduction of Western medieval mysticism in the form of Hildegard of Bingen and Meister Eckhart. These were figures with whom both Suzuki and Coomaraswamy discovered affinities while studying in the West. Viola's spiritual pursuit is perhaps to further develop those affinities, seeking a synthesis of religious impulses from around the globe. Although he relies heavily at times on the motifs of Western art (especially that of the early Renaissance) and of a wider Christian culture in general (for example in *Five Angels for the Millennium*) Viola eschews traditional Christianity as a personal belief. Viola certainly seems to share a philosophy of 'pure seeing' that has much in common with Suzuki's Zen Buddhist thought. Ten Grotenhuis, however, is concerned to point out that what we see as 'Zen' art, as a consequence of Suzuki's popularizing activity, strips away a wider, richer culture in Japanese art, and appropriates the art of non-Zen traditions, such as Dao, to an ill-defined category whose terms of construction are wholly Western, even as they apparently avow Eastern philosophies. That generalizing effect has been typical of the Western cultural encounter with the East in the last fifty years – we see it most obviously in the influence of someone like Alan Watts on the Beats and sixties counterculture. At this point ten Grotenhuis might seem to share Lahey Dronsfield's scepticism towards Viola: that he co-opts the 'authenticity' of others in the quest for a universal, but personal, truth. However, she goes on to point out that it is Viola's credit that his appropriations are 'creatively misunderstood' rather than reproduced in a half-baked form: they become the basis for further creative activity, for synthesis, rather than the unproblematic embedding of the artist in an alien culture.

One consequence of Viola's spiritual synthesis is that he is, to an extent, alienated from all religions that proclaim a singular tradition. David Jasper's essay on *The Messenger* (2), installed in Durham Cathedral in 1996, looks at how one major work fitted into a distinctively Christian architecture. That fit was into both a space and a topos of ideas: Christian theology. As Jasper acutely observes, the installation, not directly subscribing to the demands of faith and yet responsive to a sacred tradition, highlighted a wider ambivalence about the function of architectural space. Far from being a work that placated or entertained its spectators, *The Messenger*



as 'scandal' (both theological and, briefly, moral) raised important questions about the institutions and structures of faith, and their social implications. In the end, 'the venerable space of Durham Cathedral extended to art a hospitality which, it seems, our theologies and established moralities have barely begun to recognize, let alone understand'. The dream-like experience of watching *The Messenger*, Jasper rightly reminds us, called forth another dream. Perhaps this is the nub of Viola's work: the significant content behind the synthesized spirituality, and lavish visual and aural effects. It is the small voice of inherent possibility, the subtle prompting of 'something outside the limits of the imagination to which our eyes and ears are closed', as Jasper puts it. In his art of the spectacle Viola makes dream-works, and yet, unlike the Spielberg or the Lucas movie, he dares us to dream, to venture beyond what's on offer.

Hollywood movies are sold all over the world, mostly to the detriment of national cinemas. In the last decade 'installation art' has become a kind of international standard in the artworld, the touring exhibition of work on the grand scale that progresses from New York to London to Paris or Berlin. It is, as I've suggested, often work that appeals to the same aesthetics, the same spectatorial responses as the blockbuster movie, and work that often employs the same personnel. There is a blending of borders, a loss of national distinction as the same artists, and the same works, are shown in one country after another. Antonio Geusa's closing essay examines the impact of Viola's reception in a country in which 'videart' was an unknown concept only a decade ago. Works by Viola were among the first to be shown in post-Perestroika Russia, the first that might influence young Russian artists. That importation brings Russia into the circuit of international art exhibition and, perhaps eventually, into the circuit of the international art market. But whilst it is part of that circuit, Russia - with a tradition of religious art that is being actively revived in the post-Soviet era - produces videos that manifest little affinity with Viola's work, even as that work is profoundly admired. Russian video artists seem instead to sit at an earlier point on an evolutionary trajectory, making works that scrutinize the rhetorical capacities of the medium, through the medium. In a culture where the language of the installation has still to be learned, the installation that offers transcendence

and singularity, the installation that is charged with 'meaning', generates neither fresh attempts at spectacle nor recalls of an abandoned rhetoric.

It may be that Viola himself is a unique artist. Although he uses the forms of contemporary installation art, and seems to refine to a new peak, in a new place, the tendency for spectacle manifested by mass culture for the last 200 years, the content with which he endows that spectacle is in revolt against its form. The meaning of the art is at odds with the medium that bears it. One might say that Viola's art is different *because it imagines it has meaning* - it continues that utopian strain of art that speaks of a world as it might be. This is an art at odds with much of the installation art it might superficially seem to resemble, and that conflict might explain its popularity: it seems to work with its audience, rather than against it. With the media of the modern world, Bill Viola gives us an art that is 'old-fashioned': it is singular in the age of the reproduction and the multiple; it seeks profundity rather than glib entertainment; and it towers over us, transcendent, when we would seek to control all that we see.