

GUGGENHEIM BILBAO **XX** 1997
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Press release



BILL VIOLA

A RETROSPECTIVE « 6-30-17/11-9-17 «

Sponsored by



Iberdrola is delighted to join the celebration of the 20th Anniversary of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao—which has counted on us as a Strategic Trustee since the Museum was founded—by sponsoring a major exhibition devoted to the figure of Bill Viola, one of the most prominent contemporary artists in the world.

The show spans the works that Viola created in the 1970s—the period when he embarked upon his relationship with video—as well as some of his monumental video installations from the past decade, thus allowing viewers to learn about the different themes that have appeared throughout his entire output.

The show also reveals the evolution of his oeuvre over the course of 40 years, which dovetails with the revolutionary development of audiovisual technologies, whose advances he has incorporated into his work and into art in a pioneering fashion.

Through his intriguing iconography, Viola examines universal human experiences ranging from birth to death. The sources that feed his art span the history of humanity and our different cultural expressions, mainly taking into consideration the different mystical traditions.

Iberdrola's support to bring the exhibition on this American artist to fruition is part of our close partnership with the Museum, as well as our commitment to disseminating art and culture in the regions where we operate.

I would like to congratulate the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao for its first 20 years of life and for organizing this amazing exhibition. I am convinced that visitors will thoroughly enjoy Viola's extraordinary works and that they will be welcomed with the same fascination that they inspire all over the world.

Ignacio S. Galán
President of Iberdrola

Bill Viola: A Retrospective

- Dates: June 30 to November 9, 2017
 - Curator: Lucía Agirre
 - Sponsored by Iberdrola
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- Already in his early single-channel videotapes, Bill Viola's works were addressing such large questions as the notion of time, the meaning of our existence, and our place in the world.
 - With the arrival of the new millennium and the advent of high-definition technologies, Viola was able to create monumental installations such as *Going Forth By Day*, in which five large wall projections sharing the same space invite viewers to enter the light and to reflect on their own lives and that of our human existence.
 - In the last decade, Bill Viola has continued his meditations on the transitions in life, the cycle of birth-death-rebirth, and the space in between, as seen in his seven-channel installation *The Dreamers* (2013).

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao presents *Bill Viola: A Retrospective*, a thematic and chronological survey of the career of Viola, one of the leading artists of our time and a pioneer in the development of video art. Organized by the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao and sponsored by Iberdrola, this ambitious exhibition offers a comprehensive overview of Viola's oeuvre and the evolution of media art as an art form.

Bill Viola (b. 1951, New York) began to experiment with video art in the early 1970s through his participation in the Experimental Studios program at Syracuse University (New York) directed by professor Jack Nelson. In Syracuse he met David Ross (curator of video art), and assisted such iconic figures in media art like Peter Campus and Nam June Paik at the Everson Museum of Art.

With his interest in Eastern and Western mysticism, philosophies and poetry, Viola used the technical potential of video as a tool for a lifelong inquiry into the human condition, including birth and death, and the processes of change, rebirth, and transformation, all of which are prominent themes in his work.

The exhibition *Bill Viola: A Retrospective* reaches back to his early days in video art and includes Viola's single-channel videotapes *Four Songs* (1976) and *The Reflecting Pool* (1977-79). Their profoundly poetic content addresses such important questions as the notion of time and its deconstruction, the meaning of our existence, and our place in the world.

In his works from the 1980s, after Kira Perov (his wife and long time collaborator) began to work with Viola, his focus was on gathering footage for use in broadcast pieces. He used the camera and

special lenses to capture the landscape and record images normally beyond our perception. This period also served as a transition toward his whole room installations of the 1990s that immerse the viewer in images and sound. He also began adding physical elements to his works. Viola's continuing interest in spiritual themes can be seen in sculptural objects like *Heaven and Earth* (1992) and in large installations like *Slowly Turning Narrative* (1992).

With the arrival of the new millennium and the advent of high-definition flat screens, Viola began producing small and medium-sized pieces in a series he titled the Passions, a study of the emotions in slow-motion, such as *Surrender*, or that depict the passage of time and generations, as in *Catherine's Room*, and *Four Hands* (all 2001). These intimate works were followed by the monumental installations *Going Forth By Day* (2002), in which five large wall projections sharing the same space invite viewers to reflect on their own lives and our human existence.

Over the last decade, through a variety of media and formats, Viola has continued in his work to depict the fundamental experience of life. This is eloquently illustrated by his use of water in works such as *The Innocents* (2007), *Three Women* (2008), and *The Dreamers* (2013)—and his journey through the cycle of life that begins in this exhibition with *Heaven and Earth* (1992) and ends with a rebirth in *Inverted Birth* (2014).

TOUR THROUGH THE EXHIBITION

Gallery 204

This gallery features *Four Songs* (1976), “a collection of four musical stories in allegorical form. Images and sound are composed into audio-visual rhythms based on the psychological/emotional dynamics of the individual interaction with the environment.” Many of the characteristic features of the artist's oeuvre can already be seen in these early single-channel videotapes in his use of repetition, of slow motion, and of long dissolves. *Junkyard Levitation* is a visual play on “mind over matter,” while *Songs of Innocence*, a title borrowed from William Blake's poems, evokes a visual relationship between memory, the setting of the sun, and death.

The Space Between the Teeth is an exploration of how his unique editing technique can create tension using image and sound when they are frequently interrupted, and in *Truth through Mass Individuation*, whose title alludes to Carl Jung's writing on the individual and the mass, the artist himself performs unexpected—and at times aggressive—actions against the environment, seen slowed down to a stop, that spark a reflection on that moment when a minor act changes everything.

Gallery 205

In this space, visitors can view three works in which Bill Viola draws from a wide range of mechanisms to lead viewers to confront their perceptions and their very existence. In his early work *The Reflecting Pool* (1977–79), the artist generates tension between arrested and continuous motion, a contrast between photograph and film, “describes the emergence of the individual into the natural world, a baptism into a world of virtual images and indirect perceptions.”

In *Slowly Turning Narrative* (1992), a rotating screen with a reflecting surface on one side and screen material on the other, situates the viewer at the center of the scene while two projections depict from one projector a close-up of a man's face, his voice heard chanting, and on the other, a series of color images. Both are distorted as the screen rotates, the mirrored side reflecting images of the projections and our own reflection. "The entire space becomes an interior for the revelations of a constantly turning mind absorbed with itself."

Heaven and Earth (1992) examines the life cycle and the indivisibility of birth and death. Consisting of a sculptural object made of a wooden pillar and two small stripped down monitors facing each other, two images are reflected in each other's surface: the artist's mother in the last week of her life, and his son a few days after his birth. In this work, "life and death reflect and contain each other."

Gallery 206

A desert landscape in extreme conditions is a feature of the works presented in this gallery. In *Chott el-Djerid* (1979), Viola works with telephoto lenses adapted to video to overcome the limits of our sight and record the mirages generated by heat waves in the landscape, which are usually attributed to the illusions created by our own brain. The human presence is essential in the Mirage series, which includes *Walking on the Edge*, *Lifespans*, and *The Encounter* (all 2012). Recorded in high-definition, the subtle changes of color and light of the desert serve as the backdrop of a shimmering scene where we watch as relationships are forged, or torn, between the characters on their long slow journeys through this vast hallucinatory landscape.

In *The Veiling* (1995), part of the exhibition *Buried Secrets*, at the US Pavilion, 46th Venice Biennale, nine thin layers of translucent cloth hang in parallel from the ceiling. The images are of a man and a woman in various nocturnal landscapes. Projected from opposite sides, "their images never coexist in the same video frame, it is only the light from them that intermingles in the fabric of the hanging veils." The artist seems to have turned the veils painted by the great Renaissance masters into objects of movement, light, and life.

Gallery 207

With the new millennium and the development of flat panel displays, Viola began producing small and medium-sized pieces in a series he titled the Passions, and the detail afforded by this high-definition technology can be seen in works such as *Catherine's Room*, *Four Hands*, and *Surrender*, all from 2001.

Catherine's Room drew inspiration from the five-part predella that 15th-century Siennese painter Andrea di Bartolo Cini devoted to the figure of Saint Catherine of Siena praying. In his work, Viola uses five panels to present the daily rituals of a woman at different times of day, as we see a different season through the window of each room, "transforming the scene from a record of one day into the larger view of a life bound to the cycles of nature."

In *Four Hands* "the symbolic patterns of the motions of three generations of hands—son, mother and father, grandmother—describe a timeline that encompasses both the parallel actions of the

individuals in the present moment and the larger movements of the stages of human life.” Arranged over a wooden shelf with stark chiaroscuro, the screens in *Four Hands* resemble anatomical studies from the Renaissance. In *Surrender*, the vertical arrangement of the two screens creates a merger of images suggesting a mirror reflection of a man and a woman. However, their prostrations reveal the presence of water and “their visual forms disintegrate into abstract patterns of pure light and color.”

The images for *Night Vigil* (2005/2009) are derived from a production of Richard Wagner’s opera *Tristan und Isolde* in 2004–05. In this rear-projected diptych, a man and a woman, separated by the darkness of night, are drawn to each other following the light that illuminates their desire.

Another work being presented from the exhibition *Buried Secrets* in Venice in 1995 is *The Greeting*. For the first time, Viola constructed a set, hired a professional crew and actors to create a scene inspired by Pontormo’s Mannerist painting *Visitation* (1528–29). As in the paintings, Viola adopts a vertical format, and employs extreme slow motion portray the details of the body language of the three women, their emotions, and the subtle movements of their clothing caused by the wind, in a scene that contains subtle changes in light.

Gallery 209

The two works in this gallery, *Tristan’s Ascension (The Sound of a Mountain under a Waterfall)* and *Fire Woman*, both from 2005, were originally created to accompany a spectacular staging of Wagner’s opera *Tristan und Isolde*. These scenes were re-edited and sound added so that they could stand alone as independent works of art. *Fire Woman* “is an image seen in the mind’s eye of a dying man. On a large screen, a female is silhouetted in front of a giant wall of flames; as she moves forward she opens her arms and falls into her own reflection...the reflecting surface is shattered and collapses into its essential form—undulating patterns of pure light.” *Tristan’s Ascension*, in turn, “describes the ascent of the soul in the space after death.” The body of a man is lying on a cold stone slab. Small drips become visible as they rise, increasing in intensity, soon becoming the roaring deluge of an inverted waterfall that lifts the body until it disappears above.

Gallery 203

Made up of nine screens in three horizontal rows, *The Chapel of Frustrated Actions and Futile Gestures* (2013) leads viewers to reflect on the actions we perform repeatedly, day after day, and on our need for rupture or change. On one of the screens, the artist includes a reference to Albert Camus’s philosophical essay on the Greek myth of Sisyphus, whom the gods condemned to perpetually push a giant stone up a mountain, only to see it roll down again, with the consequent sense of frustration that all futile acts generate.

Water, an element that appears in *The Innocents* (2007) and *Three Women* (2008), is used as a threshold between life and death, between reality and dream, and its purifying property is harnessed to transform shadows into living beings of flesh and blood who must return to the gray world from which they came.

In *The Dreamers* (2013), each of the seven vertical screens portrays a person submerged in a riverbed with their eyes closed and appear to be at peace. "Water ripples across their bodies, subtly animating their movements. The sound of running water permeates the space as dreams filter through the room." In contrast, rest never seems to come to the two figures in *Man Searching for Immortality/Woman Searching for Eternity* (2013), whose naked forms are projected onto two granite slabs. "They carefully search their bodies with a small light, looking for evidence of disease or corruption."

Gallery 202

Going Forth By Day (2002) is a monumental work commissioned by the Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin. Made up of five large high-definition video projections, it explores a range of themes related to human existence, including individuality, society, death, and rebirth. Its title derives from the literal translation of the Egyptian book of the death, "The Book of Going Forth by Day," a guide to help the soul emerge into the light of day once it is freed from the darkness of the body. The five parts of *Going Forth By Day*—"Fire Birth," "The Path," "The Deluge," "The Voyage," and "First Light"—are projected directly onto the walls, and are influenced in part by the fresco cycles of the Italian Renaissance artists Giotto (Scrovegni Chapel in Padua) and Luca Signorelli (San Brizio Chapel, Orvieto).

The production was the largest that Viola had attempted to date, requiring a team of professional collaborators: director of photography, producers, special effects, lighting, art directors, wardrobe stylists, stunt people, sound engineers, editors, and many extras. Using the latest high-definition moving image technology, Viola's vision displays, in the medium of video, a story that reflects the most essential human themes, extensively represented throughout art history.

Gallery 208

Inverted Birth depicts five stages of awakening through a series of violent transformations. Viola describes the piece: "A man stands in the darkness, drenched in black fluid, the sound of drips punctuating the hollow sound of an empty space. Gradually the fluid begins to rise and as the movement escalates, the flow upward becomes roaring deluge. The dark despair of black turns to fear as the liquid changes to red but the man remains strong. With the flow of white liquid comes relief and nurturing, followed by the purification of cleansing water. Finally, a soft mist brings acceptance, awakening, and birth. The fluids represent the essence of human life: earth, blood, milk, water, and air, and the life cycle from birth to death, here inverted into a transformation from darkness to light."

* Sentences that are in quotes are by Bill Viola.

DIDAKTIKA

The Didaktika project, sponsored by BBK, offers visitors the chance to complement the contents of the exhibitions with educational contents and special activities, and it provides tools and resources to assist in the appreciation and understanding of the works displayed.

Didactic space

In the space associated with Bill Viola entitled *A Life of Images*, visitors can find more information on the artist's career, from his earliest experimentations with music and video as a student at Syracuse University, New York, to his more recent partnerships in projects outside museums, such as churches, historic sites, and theaters. An example of his Notebooks, the fountainhead of his works, will also figure prominently in a space that was designed in conjunction with Kira Perov, executive director of Bill Viola Studio.

This additional information, which is found in the corridor on the second floor and in gallery 201, includes a digital file of the Notebook on the *Going Forth By Day* project, excerpts from interviews with the artist, and musical projects such as the opera *Tristan und Isolde* directed by Peter Sellars, for which Viola created an impressive audiovisual production. It also contains explanations of selected works and photographs from the artist's personal archive that support the quotations and educational texts.

Activities

- Screening and colloquium of the documentary *The Passing Times* (September 29)
Directed by artist Isabel María in 2014, Bill Viola collaborated in this documentary which recounts the creative process of his work *The Passing* (1991), in which the artist talks about his mother's death, a turning point in both his life and his art. The screening will be preceded by an introduction by the director and followed by a colloquium with the audience.
- Lecture by John Hanhardt (October 26)
John Hanhardt, Curatorial Advisor on Film and Media at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, curator of exhibitions on the pioneers of video art, and author of the book *Bill Viola*, will talk about the artist's work and creative process and on the evolution of video art and the moving image from its origins until today.
- Creative session. Experimenting with the moving image (October 28 and November 4)
Experimental workshop on the moving image in which youngsters will manipulate and edit their own recordings, in addition to learning when, where, and who the first artists to do so were, such as Bill Viola and Nam June Paik back in the 1960s and 70s.
- Screening of the opera *Tristan und Isolde* performed at the Teatro Real in 2014. (October 28)
The screening of this Richard Wagner opera will be offered as a program tangential to the Bill Viola exhibition. This production was directed by Peter Sellars with a four-hour video by Bill Viola. The fully staged version premiered at the National Opera of Paris in 2005. Installation works derived from the video for this opera such as *Tristan's Ascension* and *Fire Woman*, can be seen in the Museum.
Recording material and projection courtesy of the Teatro Real.

Shared reflections

These reflections offered by Museum professionals allow audiences to learn about the ins and outs of the set-up and other interesting details about the exhibition.

- Curatorial vision: with Lucía Agirre, Curator of the exhibition (September 20)
- Key concepts: with Luz Maguregui, Education Coordinator (September 27)

Sponsored by the Fundación Vizcaína Aguirre

Express tours

These express tours aim to help convey the art contents in a dynamic way by focusing on specific topics.

Catalogue

The exhibition is accompanied by a monograph edited by Kira Perov with text by John Hanhardt. The book charts the artist's career, drawing at length on Viola's own descriptions of his work and outlining the key visual, literary, and spiritual influences on his artistic practice. Woven into the text, the volume includes numerous illustrations of Viola's most significant pieces as well as reproductions of his sketches and notebook entries that bring his working methods to life.

Cover image:

The Dreamers, 2013 (detail)

Video/sound installation

Continuously running

Performer: Madison Corn

Courtesy Bill Viola Studio

© Bill Viola

Photo: Kira Perov

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These press images should be used:

- Only in connection with articles on the exhibition
- In full, with no cropping, overprinting or manipulation
- Caption and photo credit must be correctly listed as written.

For further information, please contact the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao Press Department:
tel. +34 944 359 008 and email: media@guggenheim-bilbao.eus

1. *The Space Between the Teeth*, 1976

From *Four Songs*, 1976

Videotape collection

Color, mono sound; 33:00 minutes total

Courtesy Bill Viola Studio

© Bill Viola

Photo: Kira Perov



2. *The Reflecting Pool*, 1977-9

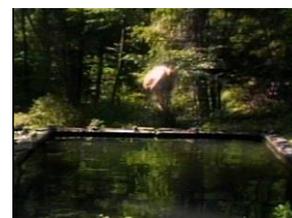
Videotape, color, mono sound; 7 minutes

Performer: Bill Viola

Courtesy Bill Viola Studio

© Bill Viola

Photo: Kira Perov



3. *Chott el-Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat)*, 1979

Videotape, color, mono sound; 28:00 minutes

Courtesy Bill Viola Studio

© Bill Viola

Photo: Kira Perov



4. *Slowly Turning Narrative*, 1992

Video/sound installation

Continuously running

Courtesy Bill Viola Studio

© Bill Viola

Photo: Gary McKinnis



5. *The Greeting*, 1995

Video/sound installation

10:22 minutes

Performers: Angela Black, Suzanne Peters, Bonnie Snyder

Courtesy Bill Viola Studio

© Bill Viola

Photo: Kira Perov



6. *The Veiling*, 1995

Video/sound installation

30:00 minutes

Performers: Lora Stone, Gary Murphy

Courtesy Bill Viola Studio

© Bill Viola

Photo: Roman Mensing



7. *Catherine's Room*, 2001

Color video polyptych on five flat panel displays

18:39 minutes

Performer: Weba Garretson

Courtesy Bill Viola Studio

© Bill Viola

Photo: Kira Perov



8. *Surrender*, 2001

Color video diptych on flat panel displays

18:00 minutes

Performers: John Fleck, Weba Garretson

Courtesy Bill Viola Studio

© Bill Viola

Photo: Kira Perov



9. *First Light*, 2002

Panel 5 of 5 panels from *Going Forth By Day* (2002)

Video/sound installation

34:30 minutes

Performers: Melina Bielefeldt, Hector Contreras, Weba Garretson, Dan

Gerrity, John Hay, Michael Eric Strickland

Courtesy Bill Viola Studio

© Bill Viola

Photo: Kira Perov



10. *Tristan's Ascension (The Sound of a Mountain Under a Waterfall)*, 2005

Video/sound installation

10:16 minutes

Performer: John Hay

Courtesy Bill Viola Studio

© Bill Viola

Photo: Kira Perov



11. *Fire Woman*, 2005

Video/sound installation

11:12 minutes

Performer: Robin Bonaccorsi

Courtesy Bill Viola Studio

© Bill Viola

Photo: Kira Perov



12. *Chapel of Frustrated Actions and Futile Gestures*, 2013

Video/sound installation

Continuously running

Performers: Tomas Arceo, John Brunold, Cathy Chang, John Fleck, Joanne Lindquist, Tim Ottman, Kira Perov, Valerie Spencer, Ivan Villa, Bill Viola, Blake Viola

Courtesy Bill Viola Studio

© Bill Viola

Photo: Kira Perov



13. *The Dreamers*, 2013 (detail)

Video/sound installation

Continuously running

Performer: Madison Corn

Courtesy Bill Viola Studio

© Bill Viola

Photo: Kira Perov



14. *Man Searching for Immortality/Woman Searching for Eternity*, 2013

Video installation

18:54 minutes

Performers: Luis Accinelli, Penelope Safranek

Courtesy Bill Viola Studio

© Bill Viola

Photo: Kira Perov



15. *Inverted Birth*, 2014
Video/sound installation
8:22 minutes
Performer: Norman Scott
Courtesy Bill Viola Studio
© Bill Viola
Photo: Kira Perov

