

## Bill Viola: Preparing For The Venice Biennale

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## BILL VIOLA: PREPARING FOR THE VENICE BIENNALE

## An Interview with Melissa Harris

“Sempre dritto” is what Venetians often will say when asked for directions. However, it’s almost impossible to go straight for any distance in Venice—though you might imagine you are, since it’s more reassuring than acknowledging you’re lost. It seems to me that Bill Viola may have had this in mind while he was creating “Buried Secrets” for this year’s 46th Venice Biennale. Not that the work has anything to do with Venice directly; one’s movement through the United States Pavilion is tightly orchestrated—*sempre dritto*—but here, too, the experience, the possibilities, are layered and open-ended. I spoke with Viola last spring while he was working on “Buried Secrets,” and he was kind enough to share his ideas about the project—in process.

MH: What are you planning for this year’s Biennale?

BV: Well, with the project for the Venice Biennale, like many of my other projects, there’s always a kind of dance between the idea, which is coming from myself— independent of where I am and what’s involved materially—and the specific space. The project for the Biennale actually is five pieces, one work in each of the five spaces of the pavilion, and they’re all connected. It’s really the first time I’ve ever been able to work on a show of this size, creating five new large-scale pieces all at once.

The title of the show, “Buried Secrets,” comes from from a thirteenth-century Persian poet by the name of Rumi. He has been one of my great sources of inspiration. He has this beautiful quotation: “When seeds are buried in the dark earth, their inward secrets become the flourishing garden.” What he’s talking about is that you come into the garden, and you admire it and experience it as it is, but in fact the reality of that garden is caused by what is hidden in the seeds. And in the same way we, as complete beings, need dark spaces, and need secrets, and inac-

cessible places. The five pieces all relate in some way to that general theme of buried secrets.

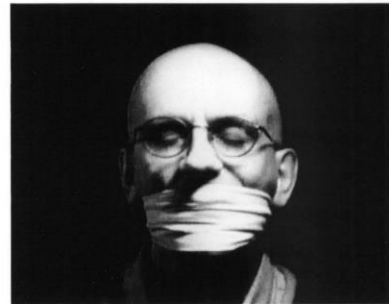
The first piece is called *The Hall of Whispers*—it’s a series of ten projections of life-size human heads of people with their mouths bound, tightly bound, and their eyes closed, and they’re trying to speak. The room is filled with the babbling, incoherent mumbling of these ten people.

The second piece is called *Interval*, and it’s a room with two large, alternating projections on the walls that the viewer must pass between. The projections alternate on an ever-increasing cycle, up to thirty images a second. One projection is very peaceful and calm; the other one is very violent, loud, and intense. Eventually, they alternate at frequencies that begin to exceed the human eye’s ability to discern individual images, and they merge and blur in the room.

The domed, central area of the pavilion is a voice-focused piece. We’re putting the speaker up at the focal point of the dome, and focusing a beam of sound down onto the floor that you can only hear clearly when you stand in it—it’s only wide enough for one person. There’s a series of voices, recordings of people—three to eighty years old—who are whispering secrets that they’ve never told anybody before.

There’s also a piece called *The Veiling*, which is a series of fourteen-foot-wide translucent scrims, which are hung in a row in the center of the room, while two video projectors send images of figures into the scrim layers. As the image enters it becomes less and less bright, but it also becomes larger. The two images blend into each other, crisscrossing.

The last room is called the *The Greeting*. It’s a piece based on the Visitation, a classical theme in Christian religious art, where Mary comes and meets her sister Elizabeth and realizes she’s pregnant. So there are three women, two of whom are greeting each other, and what we’re doing



Bill Viola, *Hall of Whispers*, 1995 (details)

All images on pp. 74–76 are video stills from the installation “Buried Secrets,” United States Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 1995; photographs by Kira Perov

is making a set in an airplane hangar of an industrial courtyard that’s based on pre-Bruneleschi, pre-Renaissance vanishing-point perspective. So the geometry of the buildings is sort of strange, but not overly so, and the figures are a little bit too large for the buildings, but it all works together. We’re shooting it with a full crew and high-speed film, so that the typical act of two women talking and one



Above and below: Bill Viola, *Interval*, 1995 (details)

entering and greeting—about forty seconds of real time—will take about fourteen minutes to occur.

**MH:** How much room is there for serendipity—for the viewer to have a private experience?

**BV:** I've realized after many years that one of the things I've been doing in my work, unconsciously, is respond to the metaphor of traditional religious spaces. And when you think about it, when you go to the church or a temple, you're in a public situation, but one that is designed to evoke a private experience. And I find that really interesting. The Internet is a perfect example of a public space that's accessed privately. Anyway, if I'm successful, there is a public experience, but ultimately, each viewer has his or her own relationship with the work. It becomes a very personal kind of thing.

**MH:** Does ritual, then, play a part in this?

**BV:** Everything we do that has a regular aspect to it becomes a kind of ritual, and I think one of the crisis points we're at in our society arises from

the fact that a lot of the rituals in our lives today are essentially meaningless on a larger scale—that is, in connection with nature and with the deeper side of life.

**MH:** Are you hoping somehow to get back to a more primal sense of ritual or a more primal sense of connecting with the natural world or with other people in your work?

**BV:** Well, yes in a way. Of course, the technology that I'm using is anything but most people's idea of natural. But in fact, I've found that when you create spaces that are physically separate from the everyday, outside world—a dark, separate

space with, let's say, a glowing image on the wall that's moving and changing in time—you've actually arrived at one of the most internal and private spaces that we have, which is the inside of our minds. You're living with your images of your life.

**MH:** Isn't there also a sense of discovery in that kind of experience that goes beyond your expectations?

**BV:** Exactly. That's really, really important. When I started working with this medium, which again seems almost entirely intellectual, but is, in fact, a very physical medium, I realized that I was relating more to my body than to my mind.

**MH:** How so?

**BV:** Because I'm working with sound and light, and movement, and time . . .

**MH:** . . . and space.

**BV:** What else is there? Cold, hard, black stillness? That's about the other side of it. So when you're working with these elements as your materials, you realize that you've got to control the whole environ-





ment, and you get into the physical world very quickly. As for the viewer, you're in that room, and your reaction to darkness, to an environment that's very different from where you've just been, is almost encoded in your body. There are all sorts of reflexes and responses that come out of that situation.

**MH:** Which also changes when other people enter that space.

**BV:** Some lady once came up to me in one of the lectures I gave in New York. She introduced me to her husband, and he said they met in one of my pieces; he held her hand when it was dark, and she was a little frightened, and he put his arm around her, and then they started kissing, and then they got married six months later! Functional art, you know!

But all this becomes very physiological, so it is important to break habits, to break expectations, to break common ways of thinking. If you look at religious rituals in traditional societies—fire walking for example—they are very often connected with some kind of direct, physical effort on the body. There are very physical experiences that push you to the limits, and the change is not that you're

suddenly able to walk on fire, so that you've become the master barbequer or something, but, rather, your very being is changed, your inner self is changed. So there's that connection between the physical, and the internal, metaphysical, psychological dimension.

**MH:** Has the piece changed in its process of evolution, or are you very near where you started in your original proposal?

**BV:** No, I've actually moved away from the proposal quite a bit. I don't think in spirit, but in form, yes. And that's kind of a wonderful thing about the creative process. It's about change.

*Right:* Bill Viola, *The Greeting*, 1995 (detail)

*Background:* Bill Viola, *The Veiling*, 1995 (detail)

