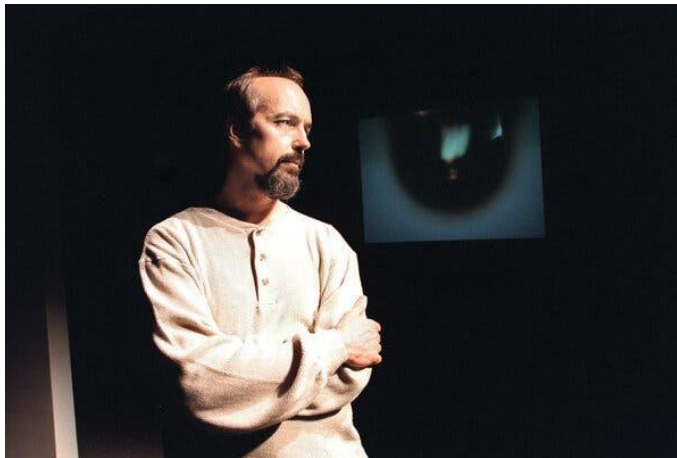


Bill Viola, Celebrated Video Artist Who Played With Time, Dies at 73

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Inspired by Renaissance painters, he explored life's passages — birth, death, romantic love, redemption and rebirth — in often moving, often thrilling exhibitions.



The artist Bill Viola in 1997. In much of his video work, often slowed down, he explored the power of human consciousness. Credit...Monica Almeida/The New York Times

Bill Viola, an artist who brought a timeless-seeming sense of beauty and age-old spirituality to the newfangled genre of video art, becoming one of the medium's most influential and popular artists, died on Friday at his home in Long Beach, Calif. He was 73.

The cause was complications of early onset Alzheimer's disease, said Kira Perov, his wife, studio director and artistic collaborator.

When artists were just beginning to work with video in the early 1970s, Mr. Viola quickly earned a reputation as a technical wizard adept at the new recording and editing methods. Many of his early works reflected a fascination with special effects, including input-output feedback loops to fill a screen with visual distortions and closed-circuit surveillance installations. He gained experience in the technology through jobs as an audiovisual assistant in museums and galleries.



A woman watches Mr. Viola's "Mary" inside St. Paul's Cathedral in London in 2016. He found inspiration in old master paintings, making triptych videos that look like modern altarpieces. Credit...Justin Tallis/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Increasingly, his interest in Zen Buddhism, Islamic Sufism and Christian mysticism shaped his choices as an artist, and the exhilaration of tinkering with technology gave way to using video, with its illusion of a perpetual present tense, to explore the power of human consciousness. Many of his most powerful works slow down the passage of time so that viewers become keenly aware of their own physical presence and thoughts.

Mr. Viola sometimes took on explicitly religious subjects. In 1983, he created an installation, "Room for St. John of the Cross," with video and sound that evoke the tiny cell where John, a 16th-century Spanish mystic, wrote ecstatic poetry despite being tortured for months.

Elsewhere, Mr. Viola turned to the revelations of nature, as in the 1986 video "I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like," which features tender footage of a newborn chick hatching.

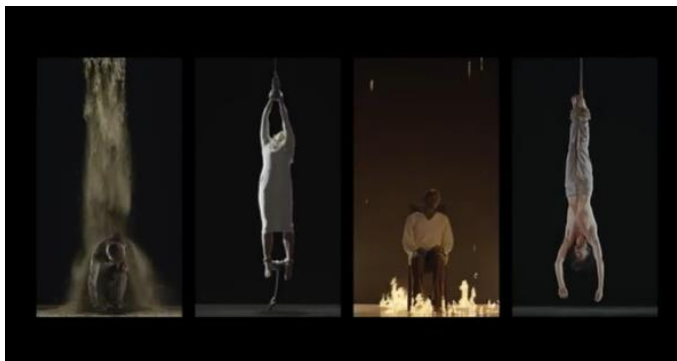


Mr. Viola's 1986 video "I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like" captures the birth of a chick. Credit... Bill Viola Studio

Occasionally he captured the rhythms of the city, as in the 1983 video "Anthem," in which he recorded an 11-year-old girl standing in Union Station in Los Angeles as she emits a single piercing scream. He manipulated her cry so that it stretches over multiple octaves and several minutes. It provides a soundtrack for a montage of both sunny and ugly scenery (including hellish-looking oil refineries of port cities nearby), which collapses space and time to create a sense of "simultaneity," a technique that became popular with younger video artists such as the American Doug Aitken and Pipilotti Rist, of Switzerland.

Mr. Viola's work took a more personal turn in the early 1990s, when the death of his mother followed the birth of his second son. He made "Nantes Triptych" in 1992 using three video panels: one, on the left, showing a woman in natural childbirth; another, on the right, depicting his mother on her deathbed in a nursing facility (an early use of his own home-video footage); and the other, in the center, showing a fully clothed man floating in water as if caught, Mr. Viola said, in "an indistinct, shadowy space, suspended between birth and death."

In subsequent works, mainly using actors, he continued to explore major passages in life: birth, death, romantic love, redemption and rebirth. His imagery grew increasingly ritualistic, depicting individuals moving through, consumed by or ecstatically transformed by the elements, as with his 2014 commission for St. Paul's Cathedral in London, "Martyrs (Earth, Air, Fire, Water)."



Mr. Viola also found inspiration in old master paintings, making triptych videos that look like modern altarpieces and deeply empathic video portraits of individual men and women. Critics noticed the connection. Laura Cumming, writing in *The Guardian* in 2001, described visitors to Mr. Viola's London gallery as being moved to tears; he was, she said, "using the newest technology to stir the oldest of emotions."

She called him "the Rembrandt of the video age, an artist who has done more than any of his contemporaries to advance the emotional and aesthetic content of his medium."

Others have made connections to Michelangelo; in 2019, the Royal Academy in London displayed that Renaissance master's drawings alongside Mr. Viola's videos. Some reviewers slammed the exhibition, calling it preachy, pompous and grandiose — the most persistent criticism of Mr. Viola's work over the years.



Mr. Viola's "Ascension" (2000). His work often reflected his longtime interest in rituals and imagery involving water. Credit...Kira Perov via James Cohan Gallery

His pieces have been shown and acquired by the largest museums in New York and Los Angeles, including the Guggenheim, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Getty Museum, which rarely shows contemporary art besides photography but made an exception for its 2002 exhibition "Bill Viola: The Passions."

William John Viola Jr. was born on Jan. 25, 1951, in Flushing, Queens, and raised there with an older sister and younger brother. His father, a manager for Pan American Airways, was the son of Italian and German immigrants. His mother, Wynne (Lee) Viola, had moved to the United States from England.

His mother, an Episcopalian, raised her children in the church, but the early spiritual awakening that Mr. Viola remembered most stemmed from a near drowning.

After falling from a raft on a lake when he was 6 — and before being rescued by an uncle — he viewed under the surface “probably the most beautiful world I’ve ever seen,” he recounted in an interview series for the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art.

“It was colorful, and there was light, and these plants were moving,” he said. “I see it regularly, almost constantly, in my mind and my mind’s eyes. It was a kind of paradise. So I felt that was the real world.”

He went to Syracuse University for his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, taking a mix of classes, including perceptual psychology and art. One teacher was Jack Nelson, who established a new program called Experimental Studios. Another mentor was the composer and pianist David Tudor, who led a summer electronic music workshop in New Hampshire that Mr. Viola attended

After David Ross was appointed the first curator of video art at the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse in 1971 — the first such curator anywhere, he has maintained — he hired Mr. Viola to be an audiovisual assistant. Mr. Viola helped set up exhibitions by the video artists Nam June Paik, Peter Campus and others.

He showed his own new video works at the Everson in 1973, when he graduated. The next year, Maria Gloria Conti Biccocchi invited him to be technical director of her video art studio Art/Tapes/22 in Florence, Italy. He worked there for two years with artists including Mario Merz, Vito Acconci, Jannis Kounellis, Chris Burden and Joan Jonas.



Mr. Viola and his wife, Kira Perov, in 2017. He credited her as a close collaborator as well as director of the studio they set up in Long Beach, Calif. Credit...Tiziana Fabi/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Recounting a visit to the Prado in Madrid, he once said: “The old masters hit me with full force on that trip. I barely got out of the room that showed Goya’s Black Paintings alive.”

He met Ms. Perov, the director of cultural events at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia, in 1977, when she invited him there to show some of his videos. They married in 1980, spent over a year in Japan studying Zen Buddhism and ultimately moved to Long Beach, where they set up a studio.

In addition to Ms. Perov, Mr. Viola is survived by their two sons, Blake and Andrei; a sister, Andrea Freeman; and a brother, Robert.



Mr. Viola's installation "The Raft" (2004). Credit...Kira Perov/Bill Viola Studio, via James Cohan Gallery, New York and American Federation of Arts

Mr. Viola and Ms. Perov worked together closely. In later years he credited her as his collaborator; she curated or helped curate several of his exhibitions. "Over time she has become like a midwife to the work," he said, "checking how the baby is doing, as well as handling all the practicalities of delivery."

Honors began accruing to him. In 1989, he received a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship — a prize of \$245,000 (the equivalent of about \$635,000 today) — at a time when he was living in a rented bungalow with secondhand furniture.

The couple had just had a baby and were without health insurance. "Our existence was that fragile," he told *The Sydney Morning Herald* in Australia.



Mr. Viola's "The Greeting" (1995) evoked the Pontormo Renaissance painting "The Visitation," depicting a pregnant Mary greeting her pregnant cousin Elizabeth in the Gospel of Luke. Credit...via James Cohan Gallery

He began working with James Cohan as his gallerist in 1992. Six years later, he was chosen to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale, where he showed a group of five videos, including "The Greeting," one of Mr. Viola's most memorable works.

It was inspired by the Florentine Renaissance painter Jacopo Pontormo's "The Visitation," which depicts Mary, pregnant with Jesus, encountering her cousin Elizabeth, pregnant with John the Baptist, as described in the Gospel of Luke.

The action, which was shot in 45 seconds but slowed to 10 minutes in Mr. Viola's video, consists of two women greeted by a third. "The intensity of the colors, the mysteriousness of the content, the uncanny steadiness of the image and the almost incredible beauty of the composition give you the feeling that you are watching a painting that moves," Andrew Solomon wrote in a 1998 profile of Mr. Viola in *The New York Times Magazine*.



Mr. Viola's installation "Chapel of Frustrated Actions and Futile Gestures" (2013).Credit...via Southern & Partners, London

As Mr. Viola himself put it in a 2001 interview with John G. Hanhardt, published in the catalog "Going Forth By Day": "The great hidden tradition in painting is time, and art historians miss it consistently — time and the unfolding of awareness. The movement of consciousness is the real subject of a lot of old master paintings."

A canvas, he said, can capture fluid scenes such as "the last light slipping from the landscape" or "the fleeting glance of a person at a moment of realization."

A midcareer survey organized in 1997 by the Whitney Museum traveled extensively, with stops in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Amsterdam and Frankfurt, Germany. For most of the museums, it was their first major video art show. For thousands of visitors, it was their introduction to the art form. The show's curators were the theater director Peter Sellars and Mr. Ross, who by this time was director of the Whitney.

Mr. Sellars designed an immersive exhibition installation, featuring dark spaces lit either by the artworks themselves or by the guards' occasional flashlights. The critical reaction was mixed, with some finding the presentation funhouse-flashy. Roberta Smith of The New York Times suggested that "Mr. Viola is better in small doses, in situations where you can contemplate his work without having to walk into another Viola."



Mr. Viola in an undated photograph.
"Birth is not a beginning; death is not an end," he was fond of saying.Credit...via
James Cohan Gallery

Mr. Viola and Mr. Sellars later collaborated on an opera, creating an otherworldly video installation and set for the Paris Opera's staging of Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde" in 2005. (The Los Angeles Philharmonic had performed a concert version at Disney Hall a year earlier.)

The footage includes mesmerizing images of water, with some clips played in reverse so that bodies plunging into water appear to be emerging instead. Shot in a public pool near Long Beach, these sequences betray no traces of their pedestrian origins but appear as archetypal images of rebirth.

The opera culminates with images of Tristan, after his death, ascending through a rush of water. As Mr. Viola liked to say, quoting the Taoist philosopher Chuang-tzu: "Birth is not a beginning; death is not an end."