

Remembering Bill Viola, the artist whose video work expresses the heights and depths of human emotions

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The influential American pioneer produced a ground-breaking body of work in partnership with his wife, Kira Perov, over more than 45 years



Bill Viola

Photo: © Kira Perov

Bill Viola, a hugely influential artist who, over the past 45 years, with his wife and close collaborator Kira Perov, turned video into a questing, powerful art form, has died aged 73. Viola pushed the dramatic and philosophical boundaries of video as a genre and, through his thoughtful, sincere and imaginative approach, transformed its critical and popular reception.

The New York gallerist James Cohan, who had represented Viola since 1992, said: "Using video and film—the moving image—a medium which we all take for granted, to plumb the depths of human emotion will be Viola's lasting contribution to art history." Cohan described how encountering Viola's work at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA), in 1987 and at the 1991 edition of the influential exhibition *documenta* left him "awestruck by his ability to marry technology with a deeply felt poetic, one that addressed the essential experience of life and death." He added: "Bill's work speaks to the informed viewer as much as the uninitiated."

Writing in *The Art Newspaper* in 2019, when 12 of Viola's works were shown together with 14 drawings by Michelangelo at the Royal Academy of Arts in London (RA), Sarah Crompton said: "The intensity and directness of his appeal to the emotions has made him one of the few contemporary artists to be genuinely popular with a wide public." In 2006, Viola's exhibition *Hatsu-Yume* (First Dream) at Mori Art Museum in Tokyo attracted more 340,000 visitors. In 2017 a retrospective of works ranging from 1976 to 2014 at the Guggenheim Bilbao drew 710,995 visitors.

Viola's *The Greeting* (1995) was the first video work to enter the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York—25 years into Viola's work in the genre and 12 years after the introduction of the JVC Sony portable camcorder in 1983 had brought mass adoption of the format. In 2002, Tate in London, the Whitney Museum in New York and the Centre Pompidou in Paris came together to jointly purchase Viola's *Five Angels for the Millennium* (2001).

'I've always been drawn to slowing things down'

Viola's mature works of the past three decades focus on the elements (fire and water in particular), on matters of life and death, and present actors in slow-motion, high-definition passages that generate absorbing, thought-provoking effects. "Video is meditative because it's this narrow tube just focused on this one thing, you can use it like a laser, like an X-ray to go inside," Viola told *The Art Newspaper* in 2006. "It's about really seeing, not just stopping at the surface."

In July 2022, when the Museum der Moderne Salzburg presented Bill Viola's first solo show at an Austrian museum, the philosopher Otto Neumaier wrote: "Many of Viola's works refer to [the] difficult-to-access 'inner space' of human experience, to what is 'sleeping' at the bottom of our souls and makes our lives what they are. To varying degrees, his works let us come closer to this space."

In 2006, Viola told *The Art Newspaper*: "Just by my nature I've always been drawn to slowing things down, really out of a desire to see things more completely, to quell the clutter and the agitated stream of stuff that's coming at you constantly, so you can feel yourself living, thinking, breathing." When the Grand Palais in Paris staged the then largest retrospective to date of Viola's work in 2014, it showed that Viola could get that wish: an audience survey found that visitors had spent an average of two and a half hours each in the exhibition.



Text-based research

Viola often started with sketches—with a recurrent focus on water as a vessel of immersion, purification or suspension (of time and space)—and conducted deep, text-based research, some of it in the abundant, book-lined, study of the home he shared with Perov in Long Beach, California. “It is all questions, there are no answers,” Perov told *The Art Newspaper* in 2019. “A single line from the [13th-century Persian] poet Rumi, or a particular Renaissance painting, can inspire an image or an entire piece. Bill learns from his experiences or his readings. These questions don’t belong to Bill or me—they belong to everybody.” Rumi was often cited by Viola as an inspiration. As were the poet and artist William Blake and the Spanish giants Diego Velázquez and Francisco Goya.

In a 2006 interview with *The Art Newspaper* Viola discussed the two-year process that had led to his *Love/Death*, a show at Haunch of Venison, in London, for which he reworked elements from a production of Richard Wagner’s 19th-century music drama *Tristan und Isolde*. (The director Peter Sellars then developed it first for the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles and then at the Opéra Bastille in Paris.) Viola told *The Art Newspaper* how, as preparation, he transcribed sources “myths of the middle ages, Tantra, Sufi concepts... 20 pages copied out by me from this text on *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*”, which are mixed in with mind-clearing sketches. “Then usually what happens is the drawings increase and the writing dwindles, I start making charts that list all the possible visual elements.”



Tristan is the subject, 20 years on, of a book—*Bill Viola. Love/Death. The Tristan Project* (2024). It offers a behind-the-scenes account by Kira Perov of the complex production that enabled Viola to create four hours of video for the visual component of the production, as well as Viola's own "personal journey through the development of the project".

"The one thing I am aware of is that for me images are fundamentally non-visual," Viola told *The Art Newspaper* in 2006. "The visual part of an image is just like the tip of the iceberg. Art historians work backwards from the tip of the iceberg to describe the hidden substructure that goes out into culture and history, time and space. What artists do is actually work in the opposite direction, where they're unconsciously moving around in these spaces, and things are coalescing and then they realise they can break the surface, and here's the piece. So for me writing is the best way to enter this work; I end up writing what something feels like to experience, rather than what it looks like."

Once he had “broken surface” to work in video, he said in 2006, the work was more about the editing than the filming. “It’s the editing. The filming is like a sculptor gathering trash or going into nature and finding stones, bringing back the marble; that’s a vital step. Then it’s in the room with you and the real creative stuff begins. It’s like a chess game; I figure out as many of the moves as I can inside. When I’m absolutely sure of what I want to do, I start working.”

A son of New York

Bill Viola was born in New York City in 1951, the son of William John Viola Senior, himself a manager at Pan American Airways and the son of Italian and German immigrants, and the English-born Wynne Lee, who raised Bill in the Episcopalian church. In a 2011 interview with Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Viola recalled that he was a shy and introverted child. “The world in my mind and heart and body was more real than the immediate world of my family, my school, my friends,” he said. “I would go home some times after school, and go to my room and draw all afternoon. The main place I make my art is my study. I have kept a constant dialogue with myself since I was maybe 12 years old. For me that is the centre of my life.”



On one childhood family holiday the six-year-old Bill Viola nearly drowned in a lake. What he saw and felt in the (brief) time at the bottom of the lake, before he was saved by his uncle, had a lasting, recurring, effect on his life and work. "It was colourful and light," he said in 2011. "I saw these plants. It was a kind of paradise. I felt that it was real life. I was shown that the real thing is *under* the surface."

The memory of the lake, which at first faded in adulthood, was revived when Viola was doing an interview in his early thirties. He told the interviewer the story, he recalled, "And the interviewer said perhaps that is why you use water in your work. 'Of course!'"

A first encounter with video

Viola's first encounter with a video came during his final year at high school, in 1969, when a visitor brought a bulky early video camera of the Portapak type (with a camera attached by a cable to a recording device) to the classroom. He got to push a button on the camera. "All of a sudden," he later remembered, "a blue light appeared. I thought 'Ohhh. That is what I remembered from the water.' I almost got nervous after they turned it off."

When he arrived at Syracuse University, New York, later in the same year, to study fine art, he found a video workshop listed as an extra. His first video, shot with a classmate, was of Lipizzaner stallions, pictured in the country outside Syracuse. In his second piece, *Tape I* (1972), he addressed some of what would become his abiding preoccupations—a piece about "going inside myself", working with self-knowledge, and the idea of reflection. For *Tape I* he found a dressing room at the back of a dance arena, where he mounted his camera on a tripod and pointed it at the mirror, with the entrance door behind. With the camera running, he came back through the door and walked in, transferring the shot as he walked into the room from mirror image to direct view.

At Syracuse, he worked with video in the Experimental Studios programme, trying out different techniques in the medium. He was hired as an audiovisual assistant by David A Ross, the first curator of video art at the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse in 1971 and assisted on several projects run by a great innovator of an older generation, Nam June Paik. "It just so happened that this technology came along, the video camera," he told *The Art Newspaper* in 2010, "that I latched onto as a way to see between the cracks, to point my camera at things people don't normally film, to see beyond into a darker place."

After graduating in fine arts in 1973, Viola showed his own video work at the Everson before moving to Florence, in Italy, to work as technical director of the video studio art/tapes/22, which brought him into contact with artists including Joan Jonas and Chris Burden. He showed his first substantial installation in Florence in 1975, and, from 1976 to 1980 was artist-in-residence at New York's WNET Thirteen Television Laboratory. Viola's *He Weeps for You* (1976), an installation with a live camera magnifying an image within a drop of water, was presented at Documenta 6 in 1977 and at MoMA in 1979.

Marriage and artistic collaboration

In 1977 the 26-year-old, Australian-born Kira Perov, then the director of cultural activities at La Trobe University in Melbourne, invited Viola to Australia to take part in a video art show. The two hit it off from the start and in 1978 Perov moved to the US to be with Viola, where she worked at first as a photographer. These were the years in which Viola produced a defining early series of five works, under the *title The Reflecting Pool—Collected Work 1977–80*. In the first of the series, *The Reflecting Pool* (1977–79), a man (Viola himself) stands by the edge of an oblong pool, immersed in his own reflection and that of the forest around him, gazing both inwards and outwards. All of a sudden, he leaps into the air, lets out a cry, and, fetus-like, clutches his legs to himself. He is suspended mid-air, ready to fall in this "bomb" pose into the still of the pool, but instead remains suspended, static, floating, before his figure fades away and is later shown emerging from the water.



By 1979 Viola and Perov were working together, filming mirages in the Sahara desert and the winter prairies of Saskatchewan, Canada. They moved to Japan in 1980, the year of their marriage, for 18 months, studying Buddhist philosophy while Viola worked as artist in residence at the Sony laboratory. After this encounter with Japanese culture, which Viola told *The Art Newspaper* in 2010 “changed life completely” they settled in Long Beach, California, working in a studio, latterly with four or so assistants, with their house nearby.

“I was assisting him. He had ideas and he would make short lists of things he wanted to get and I would help organise them,” Perov told *The Art Newspaper* in 2019. She had, early on, started photographing his work, and later organised exhibitions and managed his studio. Over the succeeding four decades their collaboration became ever broader and more profound. “I help the pieces get born,” Perov said in 2019. “Traditionally Bill would lock himself away in his study and he would read and write and work on new ideas and then at some point I will come in and say: ‘OK, time’s up, enough sitting, writing and reading, what are we going to do?’ Then we would go over the ideas together and some would jump out at me. He would come up with hundreds of ideas for pieces, and we would choose the ones that spoke to the situation or what was next in his development. I was a sounding board.”

In 1985, the curator John Hanhardt—who had previously mounted an exhibition of Viola's videotapes in 1982—invited Viola to take part in the Whitney Biennial with a new commission, *Theater of Memory*, the first time-based, media work to be shown alongside paintings and sculpture at a biennial. In 1997 David A Ross and Peter Sellars, with Kira Perov, curated *Bill Viola: A 25-Year Survey* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. It was made up of 16 installation works and travelled over two years to six museums in the US and Europe including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Art Institute of Chicago and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

Evolving with technology

Viola's work evolved with technical improvements in consumer camera and screen technology. "The electronic image, in the form of video, was the first technology in the history of art that appeared more or less simultaneously on all continents on earth [the bulky Portapak systems in 1967, the first fully portable commercially available camcorders in 1983]," Viola told *The Art Newspaper* in 2010. "It wasn't like the Van Eyck brothers perfecting oil painting in the 15th century before anyone else, and then watching it very gradually spread. Video was based on a commercial device invented by Sony—the portable video recorder—and the company's global sales and shipping network allowed the device to be simultaneously marketed at Sony showrooms around the world."

The introduction of a motion-picture like slow-motion function on video camcorder was transformational, as was the introduction in the mid-2000s of high-definition flat screens. Perov told *The Art Newspaper* in 2019 that flatscreen technology had enabled Viola to move into close-up portraits such as those in the *Passions* series (2000-03)—Old Master-like painterly groups of five figures in the grip of powerful emotion, reacting almost imperceptibly in super slow motion. "In my 38-year career in media art," Viola told *The Art Newspaper* in 2010, "it has only been in the last few years that I have had the full range of my medium at my disposal with the arrival of the high definition format. Now for the first time, it is my artistic choice, and not the limits of some commercial product, whether I use the lowest, most primitive image quality or the highest. It has taken a lifetime to get to this point."

His work also matured through matters of family mortality. The death of his mother in 1991 and his father in 1999 each had a profound effect on his output. In 1991 he had filmed his mother in hospital in the days during her final illness, as a family project, one that later found its place in the *Nantes Triptych* (1992), a work that is considered by many to be his masterpiece.

The triptych, which was acquired by Tate in London in the same year, had been designed to hang in a chapel in France, and consists of three screens. In the left-hand screen a woman gives birth, in the centre a besuited body floats in water, as if suspended between life and death, while, on the right, a woman (Viola's mother) is in the last days of her life. In 1992, Viola produced nine installations— a series of works on the themes of sleep, death, birth, and mortality—for institutions around the world.

His early work had been all about himself, but there came a time, as he told the *Guardian* in 2014, that he realised he was "constantly hitting some sort of wall and I finally figured out that I should be on the other side of the camera... Doing it this way, it became not about one person but about everybody."

The power of "The Greeting"

In 1995, Viola was chosen to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale. One of the pieces he showed was *The Greeting* (1995), loosely based on Jacopo Pontormo's surpassingly tender *Carmignano Visitation* (about 1528-1530)—a painting which depicts the scene of the Annunciation as the young Virgin Mary, pregnant with Jesus, is greeted by her older cousin Elizabeth, pregnant with John the Baptist. (Viola always stressed that he was never interested in "restaging" Old Masters in his work but in "what happens when these images go into us". He also said, of working with Christian iconography, that Christians did not own the meaning of these images. "These are elements of human life, human existence that have been utilised by all great [religious and cultural] traditions on the planet since the beginning of time. Those elemental forms have been hard-wired into this system. That's in our operating system.")

The Greeting was shot in 45 seconds at 300 frames per second and played back over 10 minutes 22 seconds, in super slow motion. "When I went to see *The Greeting*, something changed for me," John Walsh, director emeritus of the J. Paul Getty Museum, said in 2012. "It happens in extreme slow motion, so that you see something that is neither quite a still nor a movie. And it gave you a chance to look and feel the shifting relationships between the figures which a painting doesn't let you do in quite the same way."



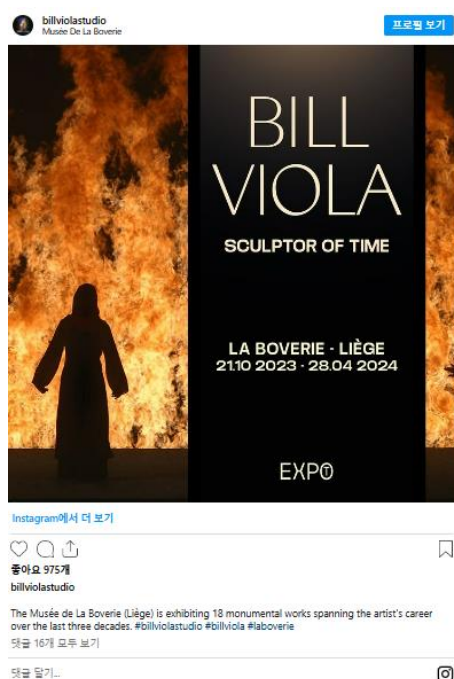
Walsh was also struck by the fact that there are no narratives in Viola's *Passions* series (2000-03). "Each [work] is emotive and sometimes emotionally quite gripping. But for reasons that are often mysterious. What is also unfamiliar is that we get a very long, slow lingering look at the comings and goings of these feelings and the expressions. We realise how much we have been fixated by stills or conditioned by movies to think of film time as the same as our time." Viola elucidated his approach in 2012: "When I started working with the *Passions* series... the motion I was after was the motion of the continuity of an emotional wave that comes up and passes through a person and subsides."

“Painting with video”

Viola’s works of the early 2000s were enormously ambitious, requiring a large crew of creatives working for weeks in long, focused takes. In *Five Angels for the Millennium* from 2001, a man repeatedly jumps into a deep pool. In *Tristan’s Ascension* (2005) a body is awakened and drawn upwards in a backwards-flowing waterfall. In *The Raft* (2004), a commission for the 2004 Olympics in Greece, a group of people standing fully dressed in an orderly group become gradually aware of columns of water entering in super slow motion from either side. The columns increase in intensity until they become torrential, enveloping this once dignified crew and bowling them, soaking, into an untidy pile of humanity.



“We are painting with video, basically,” Perov told *The Art Newspaper* in 2019. “We allow things to evolve and then the piece creates itself. It is just an extraordinary experience. You just keep working, working, working and all of a sudden everyone gets it. Everyone goes quiet and then the piece happens.” Perov’s main concern, she said, “would be not to go off the track. To make sure Bill’s idea was going to be created the way it should be.” From 2017, Viola suffered increasingly from poor health and it fell to Perov to curate, travel and represent the Viola studio at the international exhibitions of Viola’s work that took place regularly around the world.



In recent years, *Bill Viola: Icons of Light* was presented at Palazzo Bonaparte, in Rome, in 2022; Viola's *Inverted Birth* and *Five Angels for the Millennium* were shown at Dark Mofo festival in Hobart, Tasmania, in June 2022; the Palazzo Reale in Milan hosted a Viola exhibition in the first half of 2023. Most recently, *Bill Viola: Sculptor of Time* was held at the Musée de La Boverie (Liège), from October 2023 to April 2024 showing 18 works spanning three decades of Viola's career.

For *Bill Viola / Michelangelo: Life, Death, Rebirth* at the RA, in London, in 2019, Kira Perov told *The Art Newspaper*: "You sense with both artists the notion of rebirth. There is always resurrection, transformation, transfiguration. They are both asking: 'What is this life? How am I going to pass through it? And how will I end it?'".

Viola was much preoccupied with immortality, with life after death. "There's another world out there just beyond the world we're in," he once said. "It's just on the other side of that translucent, semi-transparent surface."

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