

Remembering Bill Viola (1951–2024)

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Page 1 of 5

A trailblazing curator remembers a trailblazing video artist.

As a young curator at The Museum of Modern Art, I first met Bill Viola in 1974. We both were attending a conference hosted by the Everson Museum of Art, where the young, affable Syracuse University undergrad presented several impressive videos he had just made. A year later, I was delighted when he phoned and made an appointment to stop by my office shortly after he returned to New York from Florence. He described his single-channel videotapes, explaining that he made them both as “songs” and as “visual poems”—allegories in the language of subjective perception. He effused about the spiritual dimensions he perceived in religious frescoes of the late-Middle Ages Florentine painter Giotto, which he had seen for the first time in Padua, and about the mystical poetry of the 13th-century Persian Sufi Jalal al-Din Rumi, which he had just started to read.

Viola would often pace his video edits to the rhythm of a heartbeat and elicit an unwitting response from his audience.

As I got to know him, I was amused that Bill liked to clown around and tell funny stories, especially jokes about himself. His playful demeanor often became serious, as it did early in our friendship when he told me about a powerful childhood memory of nearly drowning after falling out of a rowboat. The nightmarish experience may be what led to death becoming a predominant theme in his art, coupled with the influence of his family’s church attendance. Of equal significance is the fact that he played drums in his high school band. As a result, he would often pace his video edits to the rhythm of a heartbeat and elicit an unwitting response from his audience.

In the late 1970s, when he lived in Manhattan, we met regularly to share information, often near Columbus Circle at the Cosmic Coffee Shop, its name well suited to his interests in the metaphysical implications of consciousness. Over a slice of apple pie, he would describe his efforts to begin each video with a mental image, assiduously matched to the perfect setting and precise time of day. *A Million Other Things* (1975) captures the changes in light and sound at the edge of a pond during an eight-hour period, from day to night. When the sun sets towards the end of the four-minute work, an individual standing in the distance remains the only visible object, illuminated by a single electric lamp suspended overhead.



Stills from Bill Viola. *Hatsu Yume (First Dream)*. 1981. Video (color, sound), 56 min. Images courtesy and © Bill Viola Studio

Bill's early work drew upon Japanese aesthetics, in particular the culture's respect for nature. I associated Viola with *Kachou Fuugetsu* (四字熟語), the idiom that literally reads "Flower, Bird, Wind, Moon," but means "Experience the beauties of nature, and in doing so learn about yourself." In 1979, Viola went to Japan on a US/Japan Creative Artist Fellowship. He and his new wife, Kira Perov, spent 18 months based in Tokyo, where they engaged with every imaginable artist, composer, writer, curator, Buddhist priest, and corporate executive. Viola became the first artist-in-residence at the Sony Corporation's Atsugi research laboratories. *Hatsu Yume (First Dream)* (1981), which he created there, is a reflection on the complexity of nature, representing both its glorious bounty and its terrifying power.

Traditional Japan, with its pared-down simplicity and attention to craft, suited Bill's mode of operation at the time, his use of ultra-slow motion so that the viewer might sink into an image and connect with meanings contained within it. He also relished the opposite tendency in Japan, what to Western eyes appears as a garish environment where kitsch and tastefulness coexist side by side. When I visited Japan, he took me to his favorite Mr. Donut coffee shop, rather than to a rarified tea house.

Over the years I worked closely with Bill as I organized exhibitions of his work, including his installation *He Weeps for You* (1979); the survey exhibition *Bill Viola: Installations* (1987) with *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House* (1982), *Room for St. John of the Cross* (1983), and *Passage* (1987); and *Slowly Turning Narrative* (1992), which I featured in the 1995 survey *Video Spaces: Eight Installations*. To the MoMA collection we added all his single-channel videos, which he defined as “visual poems, allegories in the language of subjective perception.”



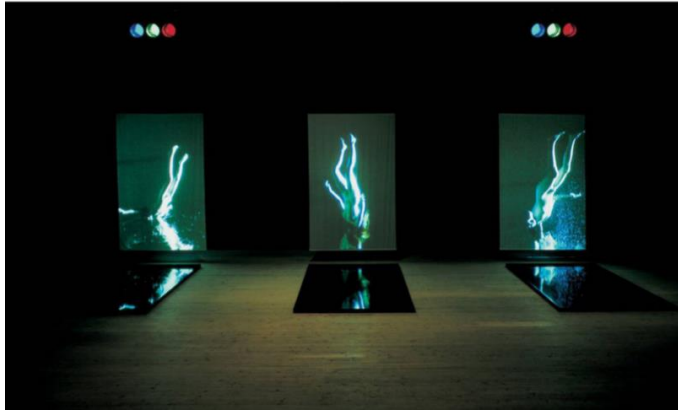
Bill Viola. *Passage*. 1987. Installation view, *Bill Viola: Installations*, MoMA, October 17, 1987–January 3, 1988. Photo: Kira Perov. © Bill Viola Studio



On location for *Room for St. John of the Cross*, recording Sierra Nevada mountains near Lone Pine, Owens Valley, CA, April 1983.

Photo: Kira Perov. © Bill Viola Studio

Then, as the artist went on to focus on installation, the Museum acquired *Stations* (1994), a work that explores the phenomena of sensory perception as an avenue to self-knowledge. Each of the five video projections displays a nude figure suspended in water, accompanied by a lulling soundtrack of underwater hums and deep basal drones. The reflections in the polished slabs of granite placed at the foot of each screen give the impression of figures swimming in pools of dark liquid. The poet Rumi proclaimed, "With every moment a world is born and dies. And know that for you, with every moment comes death and renewal." Similarly, in *Stations* there is no beginning or ending.



Bill Viola. Stations. 1994. Five-channel video (color, sound), five granite slabs, and five projection screens

Bill Viola opened my eyes and touched my soul with his infectious sense of wonder. I learned so much from him: how video is as much sound as image; that an installation is a finely tuned environment; and that an artist's aesthetics determine how an installation exists in the present and lives on in the future. He was a genius who helped to raise video's overall status. He is sorely missed by me and so many others.