

AR592 Art History Seminar  
Research Paper

BILL VIOLA: REACHING THE SUBCONSCIOUS

Submitted by  
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I am transported from my conscious state to my subconscious, and feel like a stranger there. The room is scary but inviting, out of control and overwhelming but, at the same time, calm and safe. I am enveloped by the installation. Faint and static-blurred dream images of landscapes and interiors fill and move lazily across the square room's walls. The sound of static surrounds me. The images culminate into a child's face, projected across a wall, blowing out a candle as the room goes black and silent.

*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 1994 (figure 1), a piece in the Denver Art Museum exhibition, *Visions of America: Landscape as Metaphor in the Twentieth Century*, was the first video installation I experienced by artist Bill Viola. It caused a reaction within me. I was and still am unable to clearly define the effect in words; I can only say that it was very powerful. I was overwhelmed by it. As I exited the installation I realized that I had not just seen images and heard sounds, but had felt the piece emotionally and physically.

The second Bill Viola piece I experienced was at the Museum für Modern Kunst in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. *The Stopping Mind*, 1991 (figure 2), is an installation of four life size screens, oriented to make a square, surrounding viewing space. On each of these screens one sees color video images slowly panning across colorful fields and landscapes as whispered words come through the speakers, “. . .there is nothing but black. There is nothing but silence. I can feel my body. I am lying in a dark space. . .”<sup>1</sup> The viewer is submerged in calmness. Then, without warning, the video images accelerate into

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<sup>1</sup> The text of this piece was printed on a museum handout, titled “Bill Viola: The Stopping Mind (1991).” See figure 3.

high speed and the sound becomes a loud static roar. Everything is heightened into frenzy for a moment, only to return to the peaceful meandering screen and accompanying whispering voice a short time later.

Marcel Brisebois, director of the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, speaks of Viola. "We have no choice but to recognize that Viola's work is disconcerting." He goes on to explain:

Without a doubt, it initially seduces the viewer through its formal qualities, its ability to instil [sic] each piece with a special atmosphere and internal dynamic. But even more, it awakens in us the existential questions posed by Gauguin in his work: *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?* These questions, while metaphysical, are not all that abstract. They take on, depending on the circumstances, a particular weight, an internal necessity.<sup>2</sup>

I was affected by the work in this existential way, without being aware of it or able to describe it at the time I saw it. These pieces were compelling for causes initially unknown, but apparent now.

The reason for the power in Viola's work is the experiential content made personal to each viewer. This content comes from the artist's personal inspirations and the elements of time and primal subject matter. Viola's inspirations are mystical writings and a sense of self-knowledge influenced by his studies of Eastern religion; he has investigated many religious and ritual structures, including Indian Hinduism and Zen Buddhism. He draws motivation from the writings of, among others, thirteenth century Persian poet Jalaluddin Rumi, William Blake, Rainer Maria Rilke and Walt Whitman. A time parallel is set up between the artist, the video camera, and the viewer. His subject matter remains simple

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<sup>2</sup> Josée Bélisle, Bill Viola (Montréal: Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 1993), exhibition catalog. Introduction by Marcel Brisebois.

and direct, including topics of birth, life, death, consciousness, ritual, renewal and nature. Through this vital combination of elements, Bill Viola achieves a universal content in his installation pieces that enters the soul of the viewer, not just the eyes and ears. Combining effective imagery, sound and surroundings, Viola has transcended the ordinary in art to create installations that cause unavoidable physical and psychological viewing experiences.

Viola was introduced to video as a Syracuse University student in 1970.<sup>3</sup> Video as an art medium emerged in the mid-1960s when portapak cameras became more readily available in the United States. Barbara London, in her introduction to the MOMA show, *Video Art: The First 25 Years*, states, "...many artists appropriated video cameras as tools for pioneering new fusions of perception and technology and exploring the impact of popular culture on individual identity."<sup>4</sup> When Viola entered the scene, video equipment had become more accessible and refined. The new medium was an alternative to traditional artists' materials, in opposition to art as commodity object and against banal and conventional broadcast television. Since its beginnings, video art has received the gamut of reaction—from unconditional acceptance to stubborn contention.<sup>5</sup> It has been put on display in museums and included in university art programs, but has also been widely criticized. For example, Calvin Tomkins, in his 1981 essay entitled "To Watch or Not to Watch," states:

Museum-going is a tiring business, granted, but nothing brings on a nap quicker than a semi-dark room, a sofa, and a little video art...The notion of using video as a purely visual medium seems like a wrong notion to me,

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<sup>3</sup> He graduated from the Experimental Studios at the College of Visual and Performing Arts at Syracuse University, receiving his BFA in 1973.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara London, *Video Art: The First 25 Years* (New York: The American Federation of Arts, 1994), exhibition brochure, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Deirdre Boyle, "Video Art: An Introduction," presented by the Department of Art and the Guest Scholars Committee, A202 Clark, Colorado State University, 3/23/96.

for the simple reason that video takes place in time. Visual artists, who are trained to deal with space, often have a very uncertain grasp of time and of the importance of time-defined arts such as theatre...Video art asks for the kind of concentration that we are expected to give to painting and sculpture, but it also asks us to give up our time to it. Nothing I have seen to date comes anywhere near to justifying those demands.<sup>6</sup>

In reference to this essay, Edward Lucie-Smith, in his book ARTODAY, conditions Tomkin's assertion by mentioning that most early video artists dropped out of the medium of "pure video" early on, and the work of those who did not was swallowed up by the commercial mainstream.

A majority of Viola's video work from 1971 to 1979 fits into this category of "pure video" that Lucie-Smith mentions. When he started college in 1969, Viola's first interest was electronic music. His professor, Jack Nelson, encouraged him to experiment with Super-8 film and black and white video, which opened up a visual tie-in to his audio interests. "Until 1975, Viola's tapes were, in his own words, 'didactic, their content was the medium.'"<sup>7</sup> These early pieces were the derivatives during the time Viola was exploring the limits and possibilities of the technology. Once he had initially mastered the medium, he started to concentrate more on the content of his work.

Viola's 1970s work showed the influence of late 1920s structural film, including that of Michael Snow, which emphasized "either the mechanics of perception or the properties of the medium itself."<sup>8</sup> Another influence during this time, which would become very important in later works, was the Body Art movement, in which artists such as

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<sup>6</sup> Reprinted in Calvin Tomkins, "To Watch or Not to Watch," Post- to Neo-: The Art World of the 1980s (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1988), 93, 96-97.

<sup>7</sup> Marie Luise Syring, ed., Bill Viola: Unseen Images (Düsseldorf: Verlag R. Meyer, 1994), 135.

<sup>8</sup> Chris Darke, "Feelings along the Body," Sight and Sound 4, no. 1 (January 1994), 26.

Vito Acconci and Bruce Nauman were involved. Body artists made use of their own bodies as subjects of performance art pieces. Something made sense to Viola in these works—the idea of including oneself in the artwork. Many of his works include himself as subject, and incorporate the viewer into the piece as well. “ ‘Working with video, I found I started to connect intuitively with the body. And then when I began to work with installations, putting images in rooms and having the whole room be part of the piece, the physical presence of the viewer became part of the way the work functioned and I realized I had to study our bodies.’ ”<sup>9</sup>

In 1979, Viola created the video *Chott-el-Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat)* (figure 4). This color videotape (28:00 minutes) combined his structural film influence with psychological factors. By showing the viewer scenes of light hitting the landscape in extreme hot and cold weather conditions, he tried “to blur the boundary between reality and illusion, between physical and mental landscapes...Viola suggests that perception is governed as much by psychological processes as by physical phenomena.”<sup>10</sup> This work was a turning point for him, after which he developed more video/sound installation pieces, which offered a more encompassing experience to the viewer.

Also, he began to incorporate his personal influences, a critical component of his content. The extensive research he had been doing on mystical writings and Eastern religion brought a more inward and meditative quality to the work. He used some of these sources as themes for artworks. For instance, *Room for St. John of the Cross*, 1983 (figure 5), is a video/sound installation that shows the dichotomous and universal content

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<sup>9</sup> The artist quoted in Darke, “Feelings along the Body,” 26.

<sup>10</sup> Lucinda Furlong, “Bill Viola,” in Mildred Friedman, ed., *Visions of America: Landscape as Metaphor in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994), exhibition catalog, 182.

of nature and how the human mind can use it to rise above suffering. In the sixteenth century, the mystic St. John was imprisoned to a small constricted room. In this room he had ecstatic visions, about which he wrote poetry. On the back wall of the installation room is a large projected image of mountains ranges. The viewer hears loud and oppressive whistling wind as the camera's eye moves erratically across the scenery. "These video images shake and vibrate and seem to whirl through space."<sup>11</sup> In front of the big image is a small cubical cell, not big enough to stand up in. One looks through a small window in a wall of the room to see a serene, lighted interior containing a table. On the table can be seen a pitcher and water glass and a tiny television monitor, its screen showing realtime footage of a distant mountain scene. One can barely hear a soothing voice reciting St. John's poems in Spanish, "which tell of love, humility, spiritual ecstasy, and flying over walls and mountains."<sup>12</sup>

An important influence for Viola is the concept of Via Negativa, a way of approaching the concept of God in Western religion; the same concept is called enlightenment in Eastern religion. " '...God cannot be grasped by the human intellect, cannot be described in any way...when the mind faces the divine reality, it becomes blank. It seizes up. It enters a cloud of unknowing.<sup>13</sup> When the eyes cannot see, then the only thing to go on is faith, and the only true way to approach God is from within.' "<sup>14</sup> The images and sound that fill the installations, and the way Viola presents them to the viewer, stem from this concept. Viola says, " 'I relate to the role of the mystic in the sense of following

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<sup>11</sup> Craig Adcock, *Dispossessed Installations* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Gallery and Museum Press, 1992), 16.

<sup>12</sup> Furlong, "Bill Viola," 184.

<sup>13</sup> The title of his work for the *Landscape as Metaphor* exhibition comes from this explanation of Via Negativa.

<sup>14</sup> Jörg Zutter, "Interview with Bill Viola" in Marie Luise Syring, ed., *Bill Viola: Unseen Images* (Düsseldorf: Verlag R. Meyer, 1994), 103-104.

a Via Negativa—of feeling the basis of my work to be in unknowing, in doubt, in being lost, in questions and not answers.’”<sup>15</sup> From the Eastern point of view, knowledge of the self is the highest ideal that one can obtain. Viola lives by this inspiration and strives for it to be conveyed in his artwork. “The notion of self is so tied up with individualism that we get a little bit lost in understanding the true nature of what is meant by knowledge of the self...knowledge of the self is really knowledge of all...all of my work in some way has to do with the nature of the self and its relationship to the world.”<sup>16</sup>

Time and its interrelationships within the work are important aspects of Viola’s content. “The way Viola’s use of time makes the viewing experience physical, something to be felt, is a key feature of his work.”<sup>17</sup> In contrast to the preceding statement from Tomkin’s essay, Viola explains that time is a primary benefit of the medium. Referring to the time during which a painter, for instance, is painting a subject, Viola says,

Video takes *that* time...and that time becomes part of the essence of the very fabric of the medium itself...The experience of being there is a fundamental part of making the work that I’m making, a physical part of making it. The camera is experiencing it too, parallel kind of experiences, and that for me is very profound.<sup>18</sup>

The experience of the artist becomes the experience of the viewer when the installation is complete, and this simultaneous time experience becomes an aspect of what makes the work so intense. This is evident in *Slowly Turning Narrative*, 1992 (figure 6). This installation consists of a revolving screen taking up most of the space in a room. One side

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<sup>15</sup> Charles Pickstone, “Concerning Apophatic Images and Modern Mystics,” *The Month* 255, no. 1514 (February 1994), 72.

<sup>16</sup> Josée Bélisle, *An Interview with Bill Viola*, recorded in conjunction with the *Artiste et Société* series, produced by Direction de l’éducation, directed by Louise Mondoux (Montréal: Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, 1993), 1/2 inch VHS format, 28:00 minutes.

<sup>17</sup> Darke, “Feelings along the Body,” 26.

<sup>18</sup> Josée Bélisle, *An Interview with Bill Viola*, 1993.



of the screen is white, while the other side is a mirror. Two projectors, each on opposite sides of the room, throw images onto the revolving screen. One projector shows a close-up portrait of a man's face who whispers human states of being, "...the one who forgives the one who hates...the one who lies the one who agrees ...the one who rests the one who dreams..." The other projector shows scenes of life occurrences, like a car crash, a wedding, a house on fire, and a thunder storm, all with respective accompanying noise. Each time an image hits the mirror, it is reflected out onto the walls of the room. The mirror includes the viewer in the time of the piece through its reflection, another aspect of reflecting the self in Viola's work.

*The Sleep of Reason*, 1988 (figure 7), is another example of Bill Viola's work that shows the significance of the time component. This work alludes to an etching and aquatint by Francisco Goya in his series, *Los Caprichos* (The Caprices), called *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, c. 1794-1799 (figure 8), which shows small winged creatures surrounding a man, whose rational thoughts are gone because he is asleep. In Viola's version, the viewer walks into a stark room with a dresser against one wall. On the dresser are a vase with white roses, a small lamp, a digital clock and a television monitor with footage of a person sleeping. One can hear the soft noises emitted by the sleeper. At random intervals and for random durations, the room and television go dark, and an ominous moving image is projected onto three walls, with accompanying loud hissing noises. The image is different at each interval—at one point it is a white owl flapping its wings, at another it is an x-ray machine scanning a human skeleton—and shows topics that the viewer (or the sleeper on the screen) might dream about. "Viola has described them as

sudden image seizures from some incurable schizophrenic affliction.”<sup>19</sup> The quality of time in *The Sleep of Reason* is sporadic and electrified by its uncontrollability. As a participant in this piece, one becomes the symbolic sleeping man, one’s reason overpowered by the arbitrary image scenes. Viola describes the experiential time in his installations as not controlled. “They’re like going through a garden. There is a present moment while the viewer changes as the image changes...the essence of it is experience. The viewer is living the experience, too. The viewer’s body is present...everything is heightened.”<sup>20</sup>

Universal subject matter is a third facet of the content of Viola’s work, which, combined with the elements of time and artist’s inspiration, make the video/sound installations profound experiences. One recognizes the everyday props in each space, like the television and the pitcher and water glass in the cubicle in *Room for St. John of the Cross* (figure 4). From that perception, one can then identify inwardly with the piece, with watching a television set and drinking a glass of water, and the encounter becomes personal. The projected images on the walls of Viola’s installations are also familiar and assimilative scenes. One sees trees and sky, windmills and traffic signs, buildings and landscape in *The Cloud of Unknowing* (figure 1). The quality of these visual emissions, whether clear or static-blurred, might remind the viewer of being in a dream or subconscious state. As it was Viola’s first interest, the sound in each of his pieces remains perfectly planned out and controlled. The participant identifies familiar sounds, and experiences various volumes and intensities at different locations within the space. The

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<sup>19</sup> William D. Judson, “Bill Viola: Allegories in Subjective Perception,” *Art Journal* 54, no. 4 (Winter 1995), 33.

<sup>20</sup> Josée Bélisle, *An Interview with Bill Viola*, 1993.

visual and aural subject matter within the installation environment transports the viewer into memories and associations.

Viola uses evocative images that come from life experience. Sometimes the images are easily recognizable, but have been personally suppressed by the viewer. They are contained but hidden within in one's mind because they are too fearful or uncomfortable. For instance, in *The Sleep of Reason* (figure 7) there is footage of a Doberman coming toward the camera/viewer in an angry attack. A house on fire may stir up connections that have been excluded from the viewer's consciousness. Viola faces these events and presents them in his work with little editing or alteration. This direct offering of subject matter gives an honest quality to his work, making the reaction more inward and private for each viewer. We see what the artist and camera saw at the time it was filmed. Without being confrontational, these installations show genuine themes of life and its elements. The topics are timeless, in the sense that they are not trendy or fashionable. For example, the natural hillside landscapes in *The Stopping Mind* (figure 2) will not lose value over time. The subject matter speaks for itself.

The technology used to capture the images may be constantly improving, but regardless of what system is used, the tools remain transparent in Viola's work. "Some of [the works] might seem complex to some people; some of them might seem very simple and austere. Some people might recognize some of the technology I work with as very complex and sophisticated. On the other hand there are some things I use that are no more sophisticated than a common camcorder."<sup>21</sup> Outside of the expert use of equipment, the strength of his work comes from thoughtfully and gracefully combining content elements

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<sup>21</sup> Josée Bélisle, *An Interview with Bill Viola*, 1993.

that are important to him. His philosophical studies provide a basis for his work; he integrates his life beliefs and practices into his video installations. He incorporates himself into them. Because of this, when viewers experience a Viola installation, they are able to capture their own inward and powerful feeling, a piece of themselves. The subconscious is affected by the content and time elements. Viola uses meaningful and boundless, yet simple and direct topics. His creations are amazing. In reference to his art, he says, “You’re left with a white blank screen. What are you going to put on the screen? What you’re going to put on the screen is you...It’s who you are in a very deep, fundamental way...In terms of what I’m trying to do and trying to say, it’s very simple. It’s about living. It’s about what it means to be alive.”<sup>22</sup>

Encountering Bill Viola’s pieces, I felt compelled to explore my reaction to his work and, therefore, explore myself. The content—what I saw, heard and processed—caused a self-exploration reaction. The underlying essence of Viola’s personal inspirations within his work, and the poetic and parallel use of time in his pieces makes the event private and introspective to the partaker. His subject matter is timeless and avoids mainstream postmodern trends. It embraces life and the universe. “Functioning as video shaman, mystic, psychotic, and artist, Viola drives his audience to the brink of awareness...he struggles to transcend physical, mental and artistic limits, demanding his viewer join him by total identification with his experience.”<sup>23</sup> After looking and listening outward to see and hear Viola’s work, I then look within myself to stumble farther up the path to my own self knowledge. His work evokes personal discovery.

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<sup>22</sup> Josée Bélisle, *An Interview with Bill Viola*, 1993.

<sup>23</sup> Deirdre Boyle, “Bill Viola: Womb with a View,” *ARTnews* 87, no. 1 (January 1988), 160.

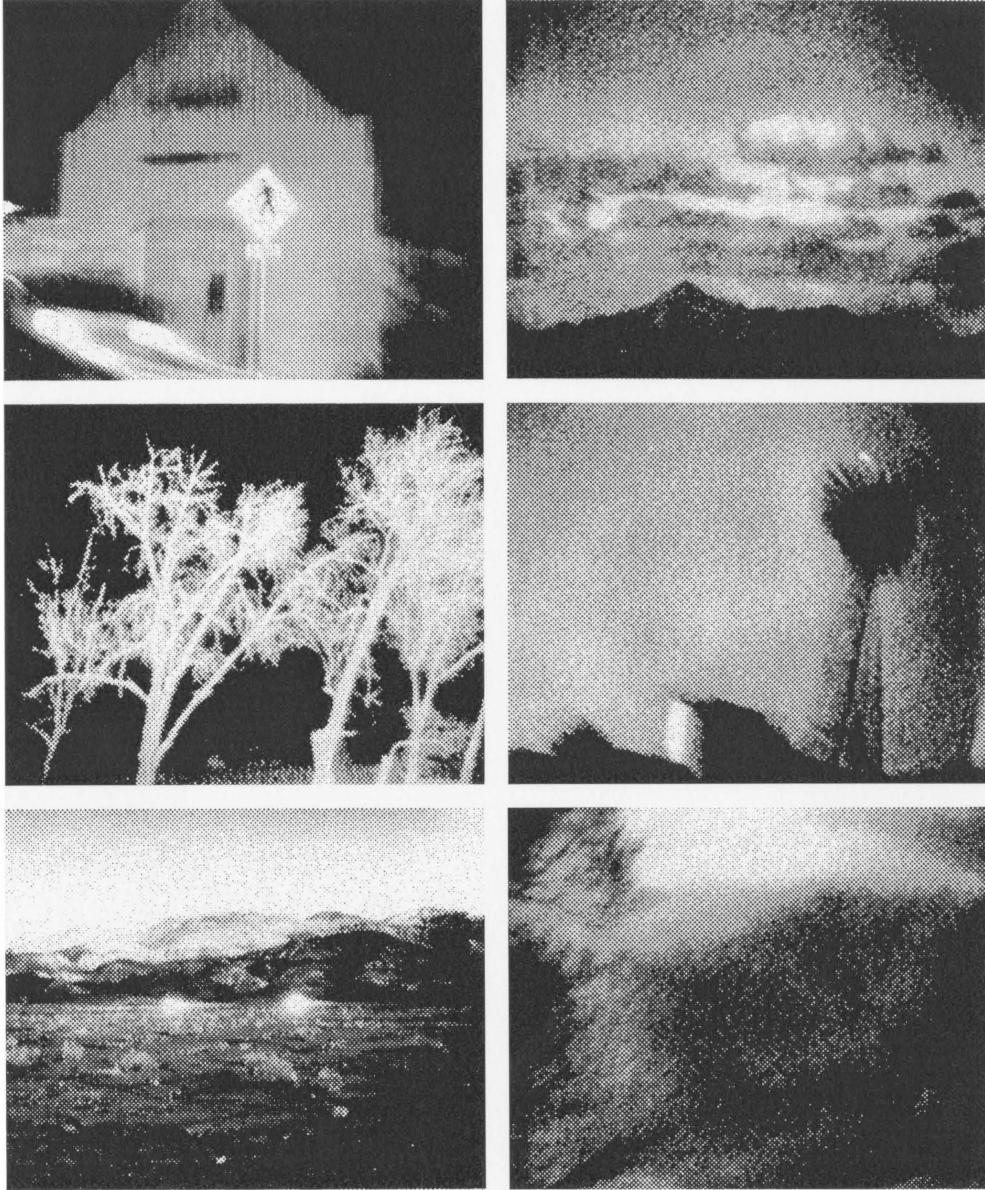


Figure 1: *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 1994, video installation  
Mildred Friedman, ed., *Visions of America: Landscape as Metaphor in the Late Twentieth Century*  
(New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994), exhibition catalog, 237-239.

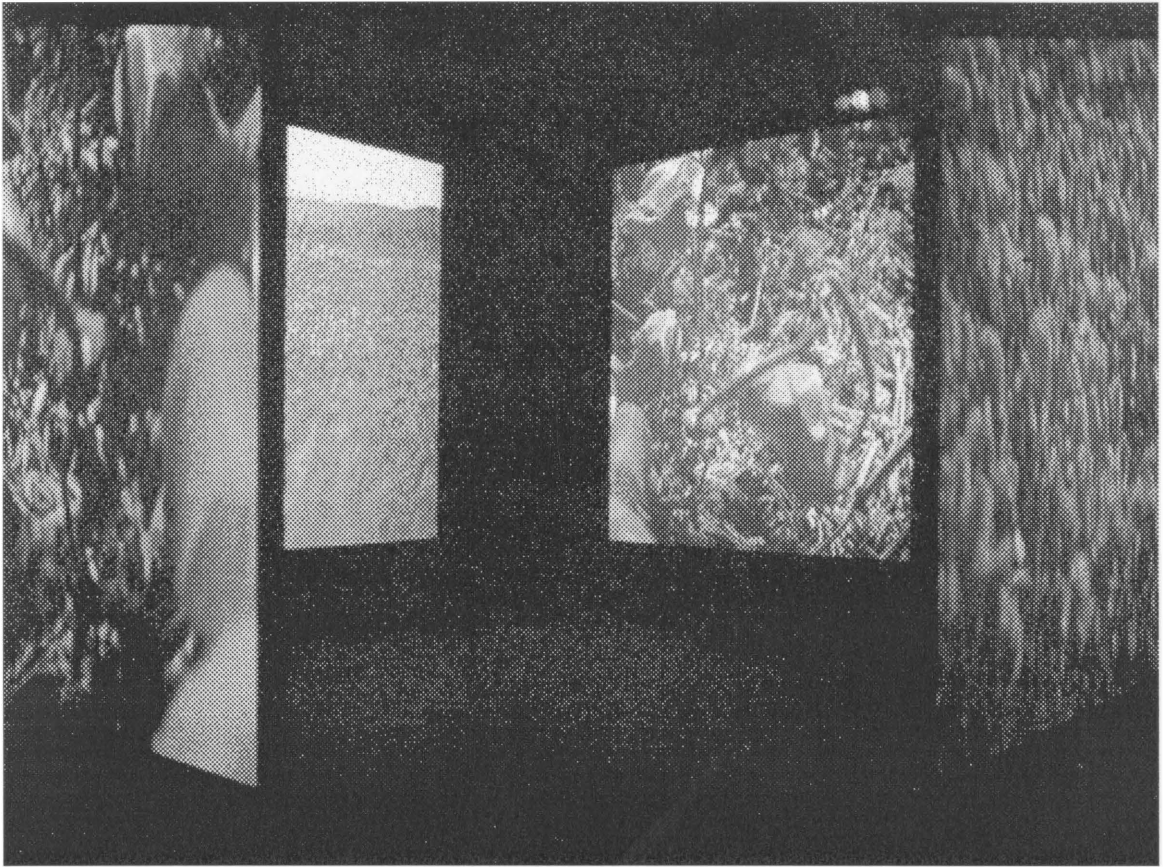


Figure 2: *The Stopping Mind*, 1991, video/sound installation  
Craig Adcock, Dispossessed Installations (Tallahassee: Florida State University Gallery and Museum Press, 1992), 55.

## **BILL VIOLA**

### **The Stopping Mind (1991)**

Text:

"...there is nothing but black. There is nothing but silence. I can feel my body. I am lying in a dark space. I can feel my body lying here. I am awake. I feel my breathing, in and out, quiet and regular. I can feel my breathing. I move my body. I slowly roll over and look up. I see nothing. There is nothing. There is no light. There is no darkness. There is no volume. There is no distance. There is no sound. There is no silence. There is the sensation of space, but there is no image. There is the sensation of my body with its extension and the weight pressing down. I can feel my body pressing down. And there is this silent voice ringing in the darkness. A voice ringing in the blackness. I bring my hand up to my face. I move my hand but there is nothing. I move my hand back and forth and I feel the slight movement across my cheek. The air moving across my cheek but I see nothing. Nothing in the blackness. My body does not move. I lie completely still. I don't move. I don't move my body, not even to swallow. Slowly I become aware of the loss of sensation in my limbs. The loss of sensation of my body. I don't know how long I have been lying like this, I don't know how long I've been lying here. Lying in the silence. I imagine the black space. I imagine the silence. The darkness of no image. The silence of no sound. I imagine my body. I imagine my body in this dark space. The space is like a large black cloud of soft cotton; silent and weightless. A soft black mass slowly pressing in around my body. I can feel it slowly pressing in around my body. Pressing in around me. Everything is closing down. Closing down around my body. It's closing down around me until only a small opening remains. A small opening around my face. Only a small opening around my face remains. Outside of this - the oblivion of nothing. The oblivion of nothing. Outside of this there is only darkness. There is only blackness. There is nothing. I am like a body underwater breathing through the small opening of a straw. A body underwater breathing. Breathing through a small opening. Finally, I let that go. I let it go. I feel myself submerge. Submerging into blackness. Letting go. Sinking down into the black mass. Submerging into the void. The senseless and weightless void. The great comfort of the senseless and weightless void, where..."

Figure 3: Handout from Museum für Modern Kunst, Frankfurt am Main, Germany, 1995.



Figure 4: *Chott el-Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat)*, 1979, color videotape, 28:00 min  
Mildred Friedman, ed., *Visions of America: Landscape as Metaphor in the Late Twentieth Century*  
(New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994), 181.



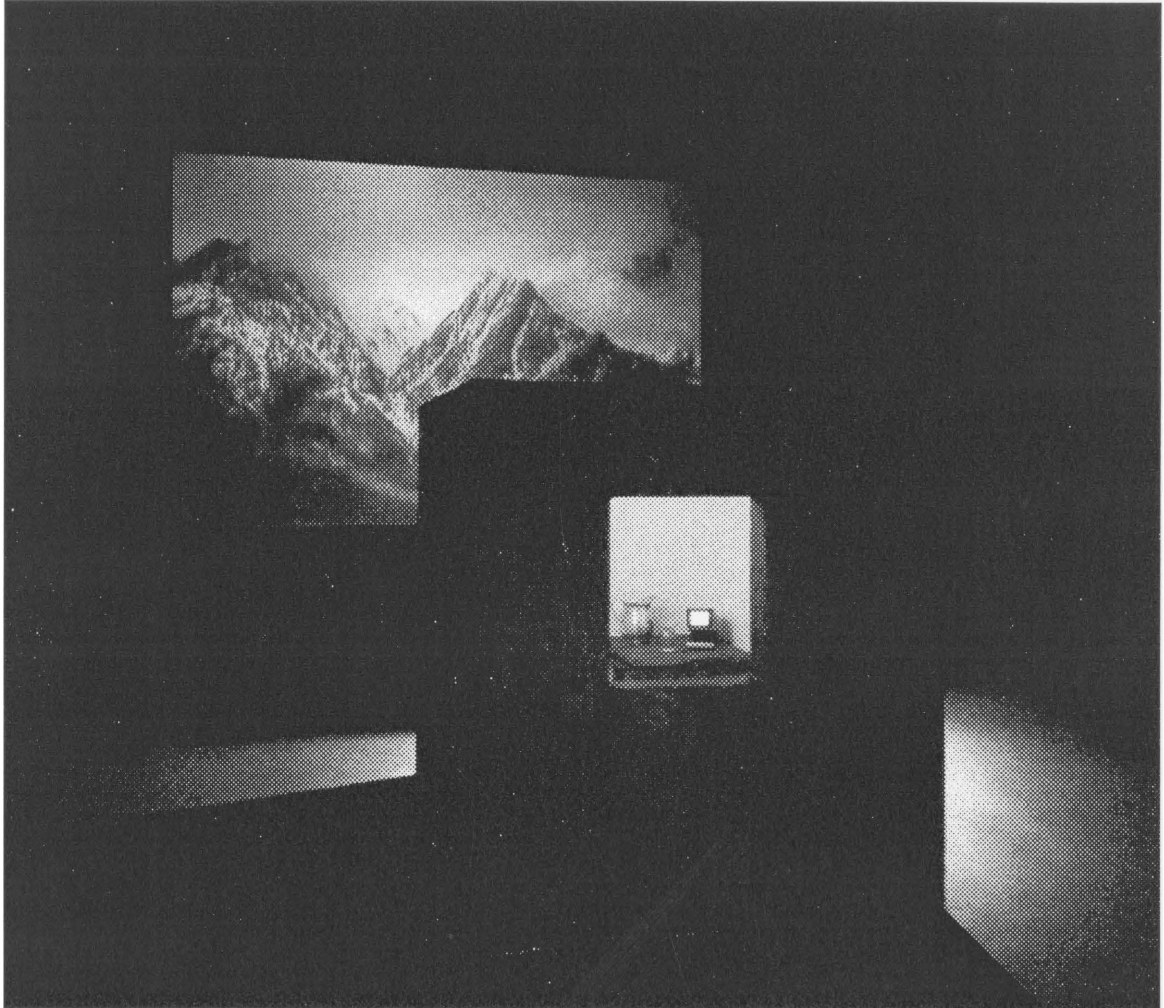


Figure 5: *Room for St. John of the Cross*, 1988, video/sound installation  
Craig Adcock, *Dispossessed Installations* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Gallery and Museum Press, 1992), 53.



Figure 6: *Slowly Turning Narrative*, 1992, video/sound installation  
Tina Yapelli, Bill Viola: Images and Spaces (Madison: The Center, 1994), exhibition catalog, 19.

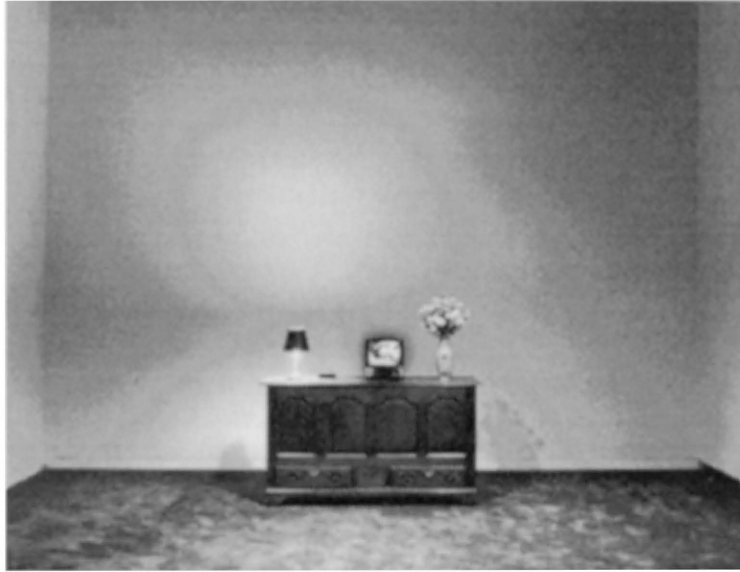


Figure 7: *The Sleep of Reason*, 1988, video/sound installation

H. Ashley Kistler, Bill Viola: Slowly Turning Narrative

(Philadelphia/Richmond: Institute of Contemporary Art/Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 1992), exhibition catalog, 25.

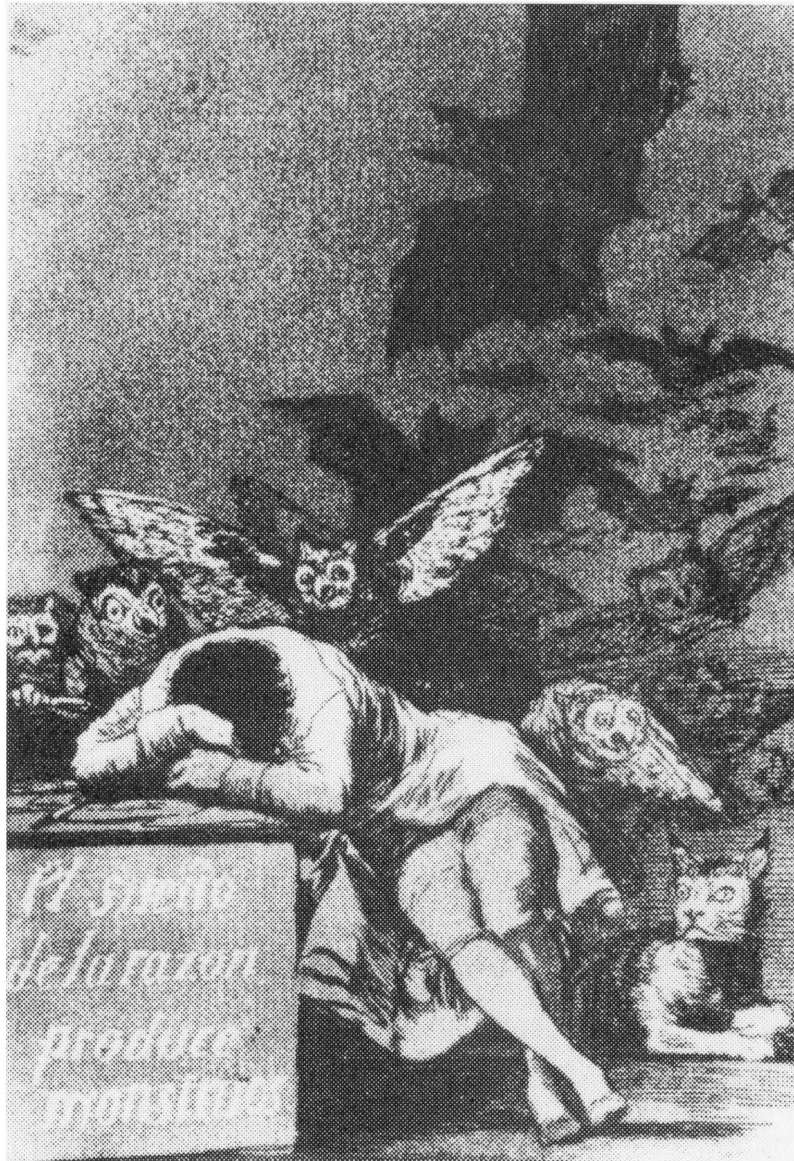


Figure 8: Francisco Goya, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*  
from *Los Caprichos* (Plate 43)

c. 1794-1799, etching and aquatint, approximately 5 x 8 inches

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Chrissie Iles, "Bill Viola," Art Journal 54, no. 4 (Winter 1995), 97-101. A review of his work in the Venice Biennale 1995, 97-101.

Paula Tin Nyo, "The Language of Modernity: Videos by Gary Hill and Bill Viola at Oakland Museum," Artweek 21, no. 36 (November 1, 1990), 18.

### Videotapes

Josée Belisle, *An Interview with Bill Viola*, recorded in conjunction with the *Artiste et Société* series, produced by Direction de l'éducation, directed by Louise Mondoux (Montréal: Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 1993), 1/2 inch VHS format, 28:00 minutes.