

BILL VIOLA'S VIDEO VISION

By John Minkowsky

Bill Viola has often referred to his videotape works as “songs.” They are, for the most part, personal lyrical statements, articulated through symbolic imagery and gesture, shaped and enhanced with video “effects” – and which further incorporate elements of performance, narrative and documentary technique. The importance of sound in Viola’s work is also evoked by the use of the word “song” as a descriptive term: trained as a sonic as well as a visual artist, he is attentive to both the rhythmic structuring of aural and visual materials.

Viola’s tapes are built from images and sounds of “the real world” – of people, objects, environments, and events. Through a variety of editing and other post-production strategies and techniques, these images and sounds are transformed into poetic meditations about man’s relationship to the world, in both its physical and spiritual manifestations.

Three general themes are central to Viola’s work and recur throughout. The first is the artist’s interest in and exploration of the ways in which video may be used to heighten our awareness of natural phenomena and extend the range of human perception. The second theme is social in nature, and is reflected through poetic works about the integration of the individual into society. The third, and most personal, of Viola’s concerns is spiritual, and, to that end, he uses video to articulate a vision of man’s place in physical and metaphysical realms, and of his enlightenment. It is important to note that this “progression” – from materiality to metaphysics – is not reflective of a chronological development in Viola’s work, but rather that all three (as well as other) themes appear throughout and are simultaneously operative within individual works. Moreover, and more importantly, the themes as stated are all part of a more general concern with the expansion of vision, in its many senses – and, therefore, with a greater unification of the individual with natural, social, and spiritual “environments” – whether to use video to look more closely at events within the range of our normal perception, or by creating new perceptual experiences with videotape which are suggestive of altered states of consciousness.

In Detail and Closely: Phenomena and Perception

Viola’s audio/visual compositions have frequently exhibited a concern with very fundamental aspects of experience: the operations of the phenomenal world and the nature of human perception – or, how light and sound behave and how we perceive visual and sonic activity. Video is a mediator of direct experience; in Viola’s hands, it is often the means by which the viewer is brought to recognize events in the physical domain which are *within the range of human perception* but which, because of their scale, duration, or location, may exist *beneath/beyond the range of normal human awareness*.

These concerns may be traced through much of Viola's activity, but are best exemplified in the tapes *Migration* (1976) and *Chott el-Djerid [A Portrait in Light and Heat]* (1979) – two quite different observations of naturally occurring optical phenomena.

The setting of *Migration* is simple: Viola sits at a table before a metal bowl into which a spigot is slowly emitting drops of water. Through a series of dissolves, the viewer is brought, to quote the artist, on a “slow continuous journey through changes in scale” to observe “the nature of the ‘detail’ of an image.” The image-detail is the water droplet itself, the reflective and lenticular properties of which are revealed; each tiny drop is a lens in which can be viewed Viola's distended, inverted face, suggesting metaphorically the containment of worlds even within the smallest particle. *Migration*, moreover, is a work about visual acuity both in the specific contexts of perception and representation (as regards the limits or resolution, or image definition, on the video screen) and in the more general sense of limitations of human awareness of and sensitivity to subtle, yet everpresent, phenomena of the observable world.

In contrast with the minute lenticular water droplet of *Migration*, Viola's recent work, *Chott el-Djerid*, presents a landscape that is vast in scale and exotic in its depiction of image “distortions” which occur as a result of atmospheric conditions in the snowy plains of central Illinois and Saskatchewan, and in the feverish Tunisian Sahara. “A Portrait in Light and Heat” in “visual symphonic form,” *Chott el-Djerid* is a departure from the artist's earlier short allegorical songs and is his most complex work to date. The nature of the images and their organization involve the viewer in considerations of perceptual illusion and reality (and, perhaps, the ephemerality and illusory nature of “reality”), and their compositional and textural qualities suggest, among other things, “traditional Islamic art” and a “moving impressionistic painting.” Viola refers to these extraordinary mirages that he has captured with a telephoto lens as “hallucinations of the landscape,” yet these portraits of people, vehicles, and architecture, conducted through the media of extreme heat and light, are extremely real images of natural optical events. And in their abstracted forms, ambiguous space and intense, non-naturalistic color, they also seem to refer to types of synthetic imagery unique to the medium of video and which are produced with video synthesizers, colorizers, computers and other machines designed to electronically *generate* images and to *alter* real images recorded by a video camera. This suggestion of the synthetic video image and its attendant technology serves to further distinguish these phenomenal landscapes from those ordinarily observed, and to reflect an artistic sensibility attentive to types of imagery characteristic of, and best represented in, the electronic medium of video.

Technology, Time and Songs of Experience

Bill Viola's first video works (made over a decade ago while he was still a student at Syracuse University) were, in fact, electronic image and sound compositions created with video and audio synthesizers. But the videotapes for which he is generally known were produced using state-of-the-art technology of a different sort. Since 1976, Viola has been a pioneer in the artistic applications of sophisticated video post-production facilities –

facilities that provide degrees of control in videotape editing previously unavailable to artists.

Unlike film, which has always allowed for the physical assembling of diverse image/frames into longer, complex sequences, precise structuring of small-format, artist-affordable video has, until recently, been nearly impossible. The technological limitations of available video equipment had aesthetic implications in the early development of video art. Many artists chose not to (or were unable to) edit and instead composed their works as long takes and focused their interests upon “real time” (unedited time) processes, as the medium of video seemed best suited to represent.

Prior to 1975, Viola’s work reflected this real-time aesthetic. In that year, however, he made RED TAPE, a collection of five short works of which two, *A Million Other Things [2]* and *Return*, made extensive use of manual editing as a means of achieving temporal discontinuity and condensation. In *A Million Other Things [2]*, brief sequences of a static landscape, recorded from morning to night, are reassembled out of order, and the resultant “jumbling” of time affords perception of shades of environmental change in light and sound that occur slowly, beyond the grasp of conscious attention, in the span of a day. In *Return*, the first work of Viola’s to suggest the influence of Eastern philosophy, the artist slowly approaches the camera and, with each measured step, rings a bell. By inserting into the decay time of each chime very brief sequences, in reverse order, of all previous soundings of the bell from all prior positions, Viola creates a metaphoric depiction of a cyclical time and of the containment of all past moments within the present. Both *A Million Other Things [2]* and *Return* previsioned the themes and techniques of works to follow, as well as capabilities toward which video artists *and* video technology were headed, and they were the basis by which Viola was chosen to be an Artist-in-Residence at WNET’s Television Laboratory in New York City, where he was the first artist to use the Lab’s new computer-controlled post-production facility in 1976.

The precise, controllable state-of-the-art post-production technology of the TV Lab enabled Viola to construct complex statements in time through the juxtaposition of diverse materials with great rhythmic flexibility. In addition, through the use of this new technology, video time itself – once inflexibly linear – became malleable and could be reordered, sped up, slowed down. The plastic manipulation of time, with the diverse expressive possibilities it offered, became both a technique and a theme in Viola’s work: a structural device, a metaphor for alternative perceptual states and a means of representing spatiotemporal relationships distinct from our common modes of vision and thought.

The Space Between the Teeth and Truth Through Mass Individuation from FOUR SONGS (1976) use related techniques of temporal manipulation (condensation through editing and distention via videodisc) in the poetic expression of a general theme: the (re)integration of the isolated individual into society.

In its structuring of gesture and symbol, *The Space Between the Teeth* is about unsticking the stuck: a process or purgation or catharsis. The interdental space referred to in the title is of two types: the space between adjacent teeth – a mere crevice in which things get trapped – and the space between sets of teeth – a boundary between an internal passageway, from which emanate Viola's series of cathartic screams, gestures at once literal and metaphoric, and the long bone-white corridor down which these screams reverberate. The artist's screams down the corridor are increasingly compressed through sequences of two-frame edits which literally propel the viewer up against, into, and even beyond the space between Viola's two front teeth, and this compression acts as the structural equivalent of gradual cathartic dissipation. Gradually, the violent imagery is replaced by that of a kitchen with a running faucet, a scene which signifies the reinstatement of the subject into a familiar setting in which the process of "cleansing" is one, among many, ongoing activities.

The use of slow motion in *Truth Through Mass Individuation* functions in a way analogous to the rapid editing in *The Space Between the Teeth*: through temporal distention, each of the protagonist's aggressive gestures is made graceful and unthreatening and represents, ultimately, a stage toward his integration into society. In the first three sections, the isolated figure performs actions, each successively more violent (and, in a sense, more technological) in a setting less natural, and all of them slowed down via videodisc. In the first he dives screaming from a large rock in the middle of a body of water spanned by a huge suspension bridge; in the second, he drops a cymbal in Washington Square Park in New York City, summoning into agitated flight a flock of pigeons. In the third section, Viola fires a rifle several times on Wall Street, each gunshot rendered less intense by a regression of the camera and a deceleration of image and sound. The final gunshot is transformed into the roar of a crowd, and *Truth* concludes as the protagonist "...passively surrenders and is absorbed into a screaming mass of 40,000 people at a night baseball game in Shea Stadium..." – a gesture not without its air of triumph as the spotlight figure treads forward into the cheering throng.

Sweet Light, from MEMORY SURFACES AND MENTAL PRAYERS (1977), is Viola's most ambitious "song" in its juxtaposition of dynamically diverse materials and its use of a complex of structural and symbolic motifs. The work is in three sections: The tranquility of the first scene, depicting insects on a windowsill, a sleeping dog, and the artist writing at a desk, is interrupted as Viola violently crumples and tosses a sheet of paper. A series of brief edits zoom in on the wad of paper, from which emerges a moth, its wings visibly singed by an unseen artificial light. In the second section, the camera "imitates" the semi-erratic circular flight of a moth around a candle flame, as it views a conversant group seated around a table. Inserted, periodically, into these dizzying observations, are brief, searing portraits of Viola's face in close-up, accompanied by a hiss like that of frying meat. In the final section, the irregular movement, the irregular movements of real moths is displayed as irregular lightlines – afterimages of contrails of their flight illuminated by an intense floodlight in an open field at night. As smoke rises from the bottom of the screen, the artist, spotlight by the artificial light, approaches the camera, and the tape concludes with a final overexposed close-up of his face, a final sizzle of sound.

The title of *Sweet Light* itself contains a certain irony, as the compulsion of both moths and men towards the sources of illumination, in both physical and metaphysical senses, is most compellingly depicted by images of annihilation: the smoke of moths drawn too near and literally burning in the pyre of an incandescent floodlight, and the brief, intense searing of the artist's face upon the camera and the viewer's eye. Viola symbolically conjoins the phototropic moth (represented as image, camera motion, and pure light) and the human/artistic activity/spiritual questing, and through the conjunction, *Sweet Light* becomes a forceful meditation upon the compulsion for the all-consuming moment of inspired, transcendent illumination and its relation to the creative act.

Sweet Lights and Spiritual Journeys

Whereas *Truth Through Mass Individuation* and *The Space Between the Teeth* dealt primarily with the integration of the individual into a social community, the culmination of *Sweet Light* suggests, albeit with some ambivalence, a kind of transcendence, a merging of the individual with even greater forces, a joining of souls with the World Soul.

At the core of Viola's work are spiritual concerns, and ones which seem informed by the tradition of Romanticism (another of the FOUR SONGS is *Songs of Innocence*, with its intimations of mortality imposed upon images of childhood joy is an homage to the poetry of William Blake) by a commonly shared sense of individual isolation and alienation in contemporary Western society, and by the artist's interest in non-Western religions and philosophical thought – and especially that of Buddhism and Sufism – regarding man, his place in the physical and spiritual world, and his enlightenment.

Viola prefaces descriptions of his videotapes with the familiar line from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* by William Blake: "If the doors of perception were cleansed, every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite." Viola also cites the philosopher Henri Bergson's proposition that the human senses act as "limiters" of the total range of energy/information that exists, and further suggests that "the television medium, when coupled with the human mind, can offer us sight beyond the range of everyday consciousness." Video, as a surrogate perceptual system, can be a key to "the doors of perception."

This essay has considered Viola's use of video to "observe" natural phenomena and, in part, suggest the limitations of observation through the senses. It has also considered his use of video to construct audio/visual poetic works, a theme of which is the integration of the individual into society. But video is, for Viola, also a means to express metaphysical and spiritual concerns. The use of video post-production techniques represent a liberation of the senses from accustomed modes of vision and suggest a glimpse into the "infinite" – into a vast, complex, non-linear consciousness to which man's own consciousness may be connected. These concerns, already in *Migration*, *Chott el-Djerid* and many other

works, are far more explicit in Viola's 1977 tape, *The Morning After the Night of Power* (from MEMORY SURFACES AND MENTAL PRAYERS).

The title of *The Morning After the Night of Power* is a reference to the 97th chapter of *The Koran* which describes the night (also described as "the Night of GLORY") on which the Koran is sent down and on which "descend the angels and the Spirit by permission of the Lord (with directives) in respect of every affair, And it is all peace until the break of morn." In part, Viola's tape represents a liberation from or transcendence of the constraints of linear time through divine inspiration.

The Morning After the Night of Power develops directly out of *A Million Other Things* [2], the first of Viola's works in which he used extensive editing. Unlike the landscape setting of the earlier work, however, *The Morning After* is a still life of a vase on a table in a room with windows, upon which the camera remains fixed through a series of dissolves between scenes recorded at different times of the day and representative of various ambient activities. As such, *The Morning After* is about change over time and the "million other things" that continually escape or remain at the edge of consciousness. Viola describes the image as "fovea-attenuated" – that is, all movement and change occur at the periphery of the frame, continually drawing on the viewer's gaze off the central (or foveal) object – a ceramic vase on a polished wood table."

In considering this visionary work, no commentary seems more appropriate than an analogy drawn by Alan Watts in *The Art of Zen*:

For we have two types of vision – central and peripheral, not unlike the spotlight and floodlight. Central vision is used for accurate work like reading, in which our eyes on one small after another like spotlights. Peripheral vision is less conscious, less bright than the intense ray of the spotlight. We use it for seeing at night, and for taking "subconscious" notice of objects and movements not in the direct line of central vision. Unlike the spotlight, it can take in many things at a time.

There is, then, an analogy – and perhaps more than mere analogy – between central vision and conscious one-at-a-time thinking and between peripheral vision and the rather mysterious process which enable us to regulate the incredible complexity of our bodies without thinking at all.

In the final moments of *The Morning After*, the seemingly constant, immotile vase suddenly drifts out of the window, with the aid of video special effects, and is filled with water. The regenerative event even further suggests the transient nature of physical entities and a liberation through revelation from the laws which govern the material world.

Viola's most recently released work is THE REFLECTING POOL (1977-80), consisting of four parts of a quintet-in-progress. (*Sodium Vapor*, the planned fourth work in this sequence has not yet been completed, nor has a brief epilogue.) While each of the five short pieces may be viewed separate from the others, they collectively represent Viola's most ambitious and extensive undertaking – a single body of work "representing the

stages of a personal journey from birth to death to rebirth.” The main stages, as articulated by the artist, are “a spiritual birth of the individual into the natural world, a kind of baptism” in *The Reflecting Pool*; “an expression of the feminine principle, a set of images relating to the concept of woman, or from the perspective of the collection, of mother” in *Moonblood*; actual birth – “the first images” – in *Silent Life*; “the dark side of the earth – the night underworld of perceptual darkness” in *Vegetable Memory*. (The minute-long epilogue would, according to the artist’s notes, represent “the positive force of re-birth and the afterlife.”)

Of this quintet, two tapes – *Silent Life* and *Vegetable Memory* – form a complementary pair, and the former of these, Viola’s portrait of newborn babies is, like *Chott el-Djerid*, something of a departure from the artist’s earlier “songs.” Both *Silent Life* and *Chott el-Djerid* resemble straight documentaries, unadorned by elaborate post-production effects and techniques. Viola rightfully trusts in the inherent power of his images of the newborns: they are at once mysterious and familiar “soulsapes,” the infants’ faces outward manifestations of the first signs of consciousness, upon which play a range of human expressions and emotions as subtly as the mirages shift and dance upon the Tunisian landscape. The images in *Silent Life* are ordered in a linear progression and, among other things, a ten-minute-old baby is shown up until his admission into the hospital nursery – his first society, to echo an earlier theme. “One of the things I realized while we were at the hospital taping,” writes Viola, “was that probably this was very close to the way in which I myself and many of us were brought into the world. ... In a very real sense, these are the first images.”

In *Vegetable Memory*, Viola offers the antithesis of *Silent Life* – the last images of corporeal life, of brute carrion, unregenerate flesh. A sequence of shots depicting the preparation and packaging of tuna in a Japanese fishmarket is repeated numerous times, decelerating with each looping through, winding down from high speed to virtual stasis, immobility, death. Viola describes *Vegetable Memory* as “...representative of a common, currently held belief in industrialized Western societies, particularly by the young, that ... we do not have a soul to pass on to the next world, instead our physical life functions simply cease and our bodies just disintegrate like any other physical material. There is no afterlife.”

As much as by his innovative technique, his attentiveness to structure and detail, and by an unerring poetic sense, Viola’s work has been distinguished by an intensely personal vision – simultaneous and interconnected concerns with the material and the immaterial, with sensory experience and a liberation, through video, of the senses, and with the unification of the individual with social as well as higher spiritual orders. At the age of 30, Viola has already produced a singularly impressive body of work in video, and his quest for artistic and personal growth has taken him, during the past 18 months, to Japan, where he resides close to the sources of both Eastern thought and the latest video technology. We may assume that his evolving mastery of the medium will continue to bring forth – in his own words – work of “personal creative expression ... organized along the structure of our personal subjective worlds – perception, cognition, imagination, dreams and memory.”

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