

# The Museum of Modern Art

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## BILL VIOLA

October 17, 1987 - January 3, 1988

The work of American artist Bill Viola is the subject of a major exhibition opening at The Museum of Modern Art on October 17, 1987. Organized by Barbara London, assistant curator, Video, Department of Film, BILL VIOLA features three video and sound installations, Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House (1982), Room for St. John of the Cross (1983), and Passage (1987), and an extensive program of videotapes (see attached list).

On view through January 3, 1988, the exhibition has been made possible by the generous support of Celeste Bartos, John and Margot Ernst, the Contemporary Arts Council of The Museum of Modern Art, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Sony Corporation of America, J. Walter Thompson USA, Inc., Leader Instruments, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the New York State Council on the Arts.

Viola's video works, though technologically complex, are deceptively spare. They contain references to specific experiences and places encountered on travels around the world. Viola is concerned with how his images exist in the viewer's mind, interacting with memory and the subconscious. In Room for St. John of the Cross, for example, viewers enter a dimly lit environment including two forceful images. Projected onto the wall and accompanied by the recorded sound of wind is a grainy, black-and-white videotape of the snow-covered Sierra mountains. Near the middle of the room is a tangible but

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inaccessible cubicle containing an interior tableau of objects on a table. A miniature television monitor reveals an image of a verdant mountain range, while the poetry of St. John, whispered in Spanish, suggests a human presence.

In the catalog accompanying the exhibition, Ms. London writes, "Bill Viola is constantly searching for greater understanding of the spiritual heritage of humankind. . . . For nearly two decades he has seriously followed his poetic vision, working consistently and forcefully with tremendous freedom on the fringes of both the art and commercial television worlds, gaining increasing international recognition for his beautifully crafted and distinctive work."

Bill Viola, who was born in 1951 in New York, has been working in video and sound since 1970. He received a BFA degree in 1973 from the College of Visual and Performing Arts, Syracuse University, where he also helped to set up Synapse, a two-way cable system and a one-inch color-video studio. This was one of the first "alternative" media centers in New York state. At Synapse, Viola learned how live television works and how to use a video switcher to do live editing.

Viola met "new music" composers Alvin Lucier and Robert Ashley in 1972. The following summer he had contact with composers David Tudor, Gordon Mumma, and David Behrman at an experimental music workshop in Chocorua, New Hampshire. He formed the Composers Inside Electronics Group with musicians David Tudor, John Driscoll, Linda Fisher, and Phil Edelstein. Over the next few years, Viola performed his own compositions as well as Tudor's sound sculpture Rain Forest.

In 1975, while he was technical director of Art/Tapes/22, an informal consumer-format production studio for artists in Florence, Viola became interested in cathedrals as rich, acoustic spaces, and began audiotaping local

masses. The next year he returned to New York as artist-in-residence at WNET/Thirteen's Artists' Television Laboratory. With his access to broadcast-quality computer editing equipment, he was able to develop his videotape projects at the conceptual level. He worked with John Godfrey, WNET's engineer who in the early seventies adapted professional editing equipment to an artist's unconventional vision. Viola's first WNET production, Four Songs (1976), was a series of short works centered on particular locations, sounds, and actions.

Viola and Kira Perov, an Australian photographer who has been his long-time collaborator, lived in Japan for a year and a half, beginning in 1980. There they studied the language and the Japanese traditions of architecture, calligraphy, Nō Theater, and Zen Buddhism. Viola presented his videotapes in museums and alternative media centers throughout the country, and frequently met with younger artists. The Sony Corporation allowed him to work over a four-month period in its editing facility near Tokyo, where he completed his twelve-minute, four-part video Ancient of Days (1979-81) and edited his fifty-six-minute Hatsu Yume (First Dream) (1981). In 1981 Viola and Perov settled in southern California, continuing their travels to Northern India, Fiji, Canada, and, most recently, the American southwest.

Viola has been included in numerous group exhibitions, such as the Whitney Biennial (1985 and 1987) and documenta 6 (1977) and 8 (1987) in Kassel, West Germany. His works have also been represented in video and film festivals, as well as on public television both here and abroad. Among his many awards and prizes, the artist has received a Guggenheim Fellowship in Video (1985/86), an Independent Filmmaker Grant from the American Film Institute (1984), and the Japan/U.S. Creative Arts Fellowship (1980/81). The 1983 installation, Room for

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St. John of the Cross, was recently purchased by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

A symposium, which takes place on Monday, October 19, at 6:30 p.m., in the Museum's Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 1, focuses on Bill Viola as experimental videomaker and contemporary artist. Participants include Gene Youngblood, professor, California Institute of the Arts; Donald Kuspit, professor, Department of Art, State University of New York at Stony Brook; Raymond Bellour, director of research, Centre National des Recherches Scientifiques, Paris; and Barbara London. Tickets are \$8, Museum members \$7, students \$5 and are available at the information desk or by sending a check and a stamped, self-addressed envelope to the Department of Education, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, NY 10019.

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\*Publication Bill Viola. Essays by Barbara London, J. Hoberman, and Donald Kuspit. Commentaries by the artist. Chronology; documentation of videotapes, installations, and sound events; and selected bibliography. 45 color and 55 black-and-white illustrations. 92 pages. Published by The Museum of Modern Art. Paperbound, \$12.50.

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