

# **Bill Viola : installations and videotapes**

**Essays by Barbara London, J. Hoberman, Donald Kuspit, selected writings by Bill Viola, edited by Barbara London**

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# BILL VIOLA

The Museum of Modern Art, New York



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# **Bill Viola**

INSTALLATIONS AND VIDEOTAPES





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*Essays by*

BARBARA LONDON

J. HOBERMAN

DONALD KUSPIT

*Selected Writings by*

BILL VIOLA

*Edited by*

BARBARA LONDON

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Published on the occasion of the exhibition

*Bill Viola*

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Department of Film

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Frontispiece: Bill Viola on location for *Room for St. John of the Cross*, Sierra Nevada Mountains, California. 1983.

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Following the Museum's more than decade-long commitment to its experimental video program with regular screenings, expanding archive, and study center, "Bill Viola: Installations and Videotapes" is the Museum's first major exhibition to feature an artist who works primarily with video and sound. Carefully planned and organized over the last three years, the show has been a challenging and rewarding endeavor, a stimulating experience heightened by the perspicacity and wit of Bill Viola himself. At every step of the way, many friends have generously given their time and consideration, making the project possible. We are most grateful to the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art for lending its new acquisition, Viola's *Room for St. John of the Cross*.

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helped sustain a calm equilibrium to the video program.

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B. L.





# Bill Viola: The Poetics of Light and Time

BARBARA LONDON

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For more than sixteen years Bill Viola has consistently used the most contemporary electronic technologies to create deceptively spare, provocative videotapes and video-and-sound installations that pursue an ancient theme: the revelation of the layers of human consciousness. Although based on realistic images, his projects go beyond representation to challenge the viewer's preconditioned expectations and viewing patterns. His work, which derives from a combination of the highly rational and the deeply intuitive, probes many levels of experience. "The real investigation is of life and being itself," Viola has said. "The medium is just the tool in this investigation."<sup>1</sup>

Viola gives painstaking attention to his subjects, both natural and man-made, so that the results invariably have a resplendence, depth of spirit, and intensity that make them indisputably his. He handles his recorded images in a straightforward manner; the primary special effects he employs involve slowing down, reversing, or speeding up time. This directness extends to his editing, which is as concise as it is precise: nothing is extraneous and very little is left to chance. Although his works reflect his extraordinary control, during recording he will accept the serendipitous action occurring in front of the camera, which heightens the energy of the completed piece. Because Viola is exceptionally skillful with and knowledgeable about broadcast-quality video equipment—to the extent that he operates the hardware with what appear to be reflex actions—he is free to be creative during production. He works alone,

without needing the assistance of a technical middleman, so each project remains an expression of his personal vision.

Viola's primary subject is the physical and mental landscape, and the connections and interplay between the outer world and the inner realm. He is concerned with exploring the interaction of his images with the viewer's memory, as well as with the subconscious and its dreams and imagination. He is particularly interested in that moment of exchange between the viewer and the art work when energy is released and the viewer achieves a new awareness. "In a way my work is very literal, but it has more to do with the after-experience than the actual experience in itself," he told an interviewer. "As if memory were a sort of filter, another editing process. In fact the editing is going on all the time. Images are always being created and transformed . . . I think memory is as much about the future as it is about the past . . . I'm interested in how thought is a function of time. There is a moment when the act of perception becomes conception, and that is thought."<sup>2</sup> For Viola the image is merely a schematic representation of a much larger system, and the process of seeing is a complex process that involves far more than surface recognition.

For many years Viola has been drawn to the numinous aspects of nature. He travels great distances to experience particular sacred locations, which become sources of personal inspiration as well as provide subject matter. He has made an effort to explore the myths of other

cultures, and over the years has sought out remote locations revered by native American, Near Eastern, Asian, and Pacific island peoples. Thematically he draws from the rituals of his own Christianity, as well as from Buddhism and shamanism. His studies have included the literature of primitive mythology and of Greek philosophy, Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, Judeo-Christian mysticism, and Sufism. He subscribes to the Eastern philosophies that place man in the context of nature's ongoing cycle; that see an infinite, eternal entity as being embodied in all animate and inanimate things; and that recognize the whole as being represented in its parts.

Viola's approach to his life and work has been greatly influenced by the East, which is key to understanding his art. Having as much esteem for the circulatory system as the circuit board, he is constantly exploring the larger system as it is expressed by the smallest part. Respecting nature's power, he sees the world as composed of interacting opposites—light and dark, spiritual and physical, life and death—as reflected in the Chinese concept of yin and yang. Although he does not adhere to any formal religion, he respects the significance of tradition and ritual in all systems of belief.

Born in 1951, Bill Viola grew up in Flushing, New York. While in public school he discovered he could escape into his own creative world through drawing. Playing drums with a local rock band, he became committed to music, later recognizing how important it had



been to learn the discipline required to develop a skill. Like other teenagers at the time, he was indirectly affected by the social upheaval of the 1960s, and the questioning of many traditional, middle-class values.

Viola studied art at Syracuse University, graduating from the College of Visual and Performing Arts in 1973. Not interested in pursuing more traditional art mediums, he spent time in the "experimental studio" of the art department. He explored performance art—responding to the intensity of working with the manipulation of the self in a live situation—before looking into experimental film. With friends he would analyze the image, camera, and structure of films by such artists as Michael Snow, Ken Jacobs, Hollis Frampton, and Stan Brakhage. Around the same time, during his sophomore year, his professor purchased an early Sony portable, black-and-white camera and simple reel-to-reel recorder for the "experimental studio." At the same time Viola was studying electronic music. In an interview he described the connection between the two mediums:

The crucial thing for me was the process of going through an electronic system, working with these standard kinds of circuits which became a perfect introduction to a general electronic theory. It gave me a sense that the electronic signal was a material that could be worked with. This was another really important realization. Physical manipulation is fundamental to our thought processes—just watch the way a baby learns. It's why most people have so much trouble approaching electronic media. When electronic energies

finally became concrete for me, like sounds are to a composer, I really began to learn. Soon I made what was for me an easy switch over to video. I never thought about [video] in terms of images so much as electronic process, a signal.<sup>3</sup>

Viola began working full-time with video, which unlike Super-8 film, allowed him to view the image both before and during recording. He began by creating exercises that deliberately explored structure and form. "When Marshall McLuhan wrote his famous manifesto 'the medium is the message,' he was saying that communication is transmitted by the very form of the medium itself."<sup>4</sup> He was influenced by Gene Youngblood's book *Expanded Cinema* (1974), in which he described the technical processes of video as being key formal elements of the aesthetics of the medium. At first Viola saw his raw material as being only the technology, but then came to understand how important the other half of the art process is: the viewing experience, those moments of dynamic interaction called perception. Inspired also by the video and performance pieces of artists Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci, Viola set up problem-solving situations, working with the physical aspects of both electronics and architectural space. He was dealing conceptually with video's properties, and emotionally with the representation of personal experience.

In the United States this was a period of broad experimentation with alternative forms of expression: standard art materials and venues were being challenged, and for many artists the act of

*experiencing* art took precedence over the production of tangible, salable art objects. Considerable artistic activity explored the environment in the Southwest, with its vast, open desert spaces and provocative traces of Indian culture. In this setting such artists as Nauman, Robert Irwin, and James Turrell broke away from the restrained concerns of the then popular Minimalism to develop their subjective, process-oriented, spatial pieces that explored individual perception. At the same time Peter Campus was carefully investigating the characteristics of "live" video. Campus wrote that "the video camera makes possible an exterior point of view simultaneous with one's own. This advance over the film camera is due to the vidicon tube, similar to the retina of the eye, continuously transposing light (photon) energy to electrical energy. . . . It is easy to utilize video to clarify perceptual situations because it separates the eye surrogate from the eye-brain experience we are all too familiar with."<sup>5</sup>

After graduation Viola attended a workshop given by Campus. Viola respected Campus's intensity of vision and the aggressive way he dealt with issues of self-confrontation, and he responded to the overtly emotional tenor of his carefully controlled, ominously lit installations. Today Viola believes Campus to be "one of the most important artists."<sup>6</sup> At that time Viola quickly advanced when, with other students, he helped set up Synapse, a two-way cable system and a one-inch color-video studio, at the University. This was one of the first "alternative" media centers in New York state.



*Rainforest* by David Tudor. Installed and performed at Drexel First National Bank Building, Philadelphia, April 1979; organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia.



Training as a studio engineer, he worked intently at Synapse on projects by other students and invited artists, gaining first-hand experience with a three-camera, broadcast-quality studio situation. He learned how live television works, and how to use a video switcher to do live editing independent of, but simultaneous to, recording in the manner of low-budget, television soap-opera productions.

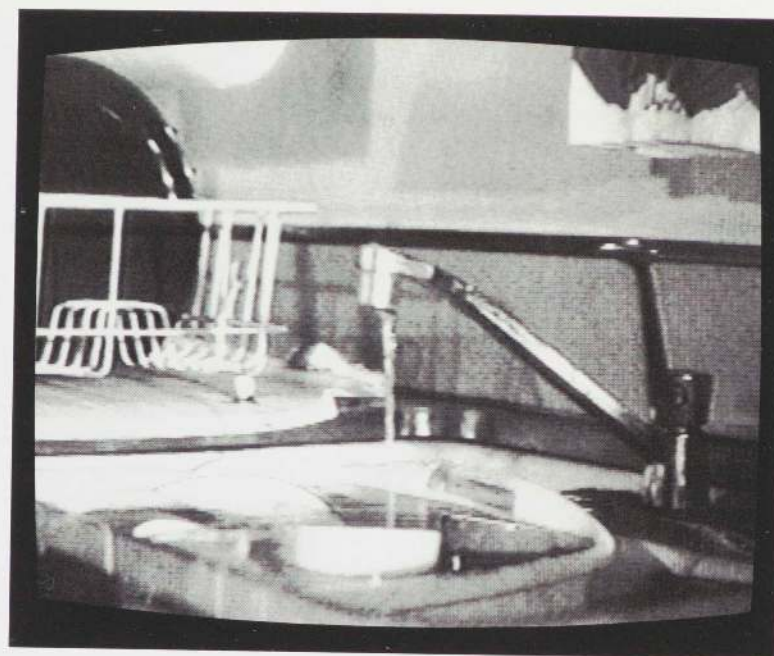
Viola met “new music” composers Alvin Lucier and Robert Ashley at Syracuse

in 1972, and during the summer of 1973 he came into contact with composers David Tudor, Gordon Mumma, and David Behrman at an experimental music workshop in Chocorua, New Hampshire. These three weeks heightened his awareness not only of electronic theory and circuit design, but also of sound as a malleable, sculptural material. For the first time he became aware of how integral sound is to the perception of space. After this experience his projects developed from discrete exercises

to focused works.

That summer at Chocorua he and the musicians John Driscoll, Linda Fisher, and Phil Edelstein formed the Composers Inside Electronics Group; over the next few years they performed their own compositions as well as Tudor’s sound sculpture *Rain Forest* (conceived initially in 1968 for a dance by Merce Cunningham). In this environmental installation transducers were attached to such “found” objects as metal box springs, lawn sprinklers, and oil drums,





Left and right: *The Space Between the Teeth*. 1976. Videotape.

which were suspended from the ceiling of the performance/exhibition space. The transducers drove prerecorded sounds through each object, which acted as resonators and filters to enhance or subdue frequencies in the acoustic source. The musicians chose sounds that worked with each particular object. Viewers experienced the installation by moving randomly through the space, a tactile composition of resonating materials and sounds. This structured situation, which also allowed for spontaneous interaction, appealed to Viola and influenced his work.

Two years later, 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 spent his limited free time audiotaping local masses. He saw the cathedral as a functioning, living system, as well as a three-dimensional model of historic ideologies, a concept that later enriched his installations.

The following year he moved back to New York. When David Loxton and Carol Brandenburg invited Viola to be an artist-in-residence at WNET/Thirteen's Artists' Television Laboratory, Viola had sustained access to broadcast-quality computer editing. This allowed him to bring his videotape projects up to his conceptual level technically and to manipulate time more precisely. He worked

with John Godfrey, the TV Lab's visionary engineer who in the early 1970s adapted professional editing equipment to an artist's unconventional vision. Viola developed his ideas about using carefully recorded, realistic images, merging actual and imagined time in the short works collected in his first WNET production, "Four Songs" (1976). Assembled in much the same way a musician arranges individual songs on a record album, each of these short works is centered on a particular location, sound, and action. As with his other early work, the pieces revolve around himself—he is the initiator of the feelings and ideas, in addition to being the intense subject/performer. At each site he worked with the "live" camera/monitor to select and compose his imagery, treat-



ing each location as his raw material. In these tapes Viola is there to engage the viewer, whose own involvement is essential to completing the spare piece.

Travel has always been an integral aspect of Viola's work. His urge to travel began as a strong desire to record outside of the professional studio, with its heavy, immobile color cameras. Initially this was the only place artists could have some control of their imagery. The advent of portable and flexible broadcast-quality color cameras in the mid-1970s meant it was finally possible to videotape with a degree of precision in outdoor locations. Viola was committed to experiencing first-hand those remote places that through photography, television, and literature have become so familiar. Whereas it took Gauguin tremendous time and effort to work in remote Tahiti, "today it's almost a given that you can select any geographic position within any culture and there set up your camera and microphone."<sup>7</sup> For Viola travel has become an important way of life—a means of seeing the vulnerable self mirrored through the eyes and responses of another people, and of exploring the ways that one's culture defines one's being. His choice of a location grows out of unconscious needs; once he selects a setting, as a preparation for his journey, he immerses himself in its culture and history. "My work is about finding those places on earth where I need to be to have those ideas I'm carrying with me best be expressed."<sup>8</sup>

Viola's 1979 videotape *Chott el-Djerid* (*A Portrait in Light and Heat*), which

openly expresses his transcendent world view, reflects a change in his subject matter and his approach to it. In this work he moved away from action events in which he is the performer and entered a more ambiguous, imaginary realm. *Chott* magically captures the optical and acoustic distortions caused by the natural elements that result in, for example, desert mirages. After doing preliminary research on optical illusions created by the desert sun and the effect of a telephoto lens, Viola made a trip to the Sahara Desert in Tunisia with Kira Perov, an accomplished photographer from Australia who has collaborated with him on all subsequent projects. They traveled through the salt fields in a rented car; struggling with the intense heat and harsh wind that filled their lungs with

sand, they experienced an environment similar to those into which Jewish, Islamic, and early Christian mystics exiled themselves.

The first work that Viola began without meticulously formulating its structure beforehand, *Chott* was also the first project in which the landscape was the principal subject. Viola is unusual in that he approaches each frame of a piece much as a still photographer. Working only with Perov, and briefly with sound engineer Bob Bielecki, Viola used one video camera set on a tripod, and from a fixed vantage point he meticulously framed his subject. After waiting for up to several days for what he considered ideal atmospheric conditions, he recorded the image, at times moving his camera only a few inches from one shot to the next,



*Chott el-Djerid*  
(*A Portrait in Light and Heat*). 1979.  
Videotape.



planning so that later, during the editing process, he could fabricate a "zoom." Drawing upon the associations a particular site evokes and instinctively searching for its archetypal symbols, Viola slowly discovers the distinctive character of a place, probing the power and the energy of each space. On the desert this was the pastel-colored mirages floating mysteriously near the horizon.

Back in his New York studio Viola laboriously made his "rough edit," carefully developing the rhythm of this cinematic, nonverbal narrative of ordinary events slowly moving in real time, then made the "final edit" at WNET/Thirteen in New York. The beginning of *Chott* focuses briefly on the snowy midwestern American plains, then abruptly switches to the arid Tunisian desert using carefully matched horizon lines of each scene. Capitalizing upon video's jewel-like luminosity, Viola's atmospheric images recall Delacroix's radiant watercolors of the same arid area. Maintaining the recorded, ambient natural sounds, *Chott's* other-worldliness remains grounded in reality acoustically: recognition of distant objects, such as an oncoming pair of motorcycles, comes first through aural rather than visual cues. Real time appears to be aggressively extended, compelling viewers to assume Viola's mind set. It is a dream state of suspended animation, recalling the hallucinogenic, counterculture days of the 1960s and early 1970s. Even while working within the artists' programs of Public Television, Viola has never paid attention to entertainment timing—a major concern of his television producers—

and has instead conscientiously adhered to his own unique vision.

Viola concurrently pursues both his videotapes and installations, exploring similar themes in them. The hiatuses between productions derive from his need for time for planning, and from waiting for the right opportunities. Viola's environmental installations are symbolic, emotional arenas where components drawn from the everyday world are juxtaposed and conceptually merge—elusive video/sound images are given palpable existence, and tangible objects are endowed with strong mental and emotional associations. Viola's evocative distillations simultaneously take on the solemnity of a devotional setting and the disturbing sense of being on the edge of a storm. More diagrammatic and less about representation, his installations are emotional, and function as gateways to areas as profound and as challenging as the viewer's receptiveness permits. In discussing what he is striving to achieve, Viola frequently quotes William Blake: "If the doors of perception were cleansed, man would see everything as it is, infinite." Viola has long been absorbed with how, during the eighteenth century, Blake was constructing a symbolic model of the universe that was freed from empirical observation. He has been particularly drawn to Blake's method of representing the world through symbols, ideas, and spiritual phenomena.

Viola's schematic installations function as metaphors for our subconscious landscape, and acknowledge the turbulent activity constantly occurring

there. Beginning with *He Weeps for You* (1975), his work has depicted increasingly overt expressions of violence. The artist's logic and restraint, his careful control of the cool, formal constructions, sharply contrast with the agitated, potentially volatile content, resulting in an underlying brittle tension.

Viola is attentive to the overall spatial design of each installation as well as to the minute details. Upon entering *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House* (1982), viewers immediately perceive Viola's dimly lit, multifaceted environment as a rich conceptual realm. We enter his world of darkness, which represents the nonverbal, more profound areas of irrational consciousness generally associated with night. Viewers become active participants, moving at their own pace through the long, harsh room, randomly discovering the integrated elements of this spare work that resembles a stage set. At the center of *Reasons for Knocking* is a monitor depicting the artist as a vulnerable presence (the same unassuming performer that is found in his separate 1983 videotape of the same title). Not having slept for three days, he is there alone, confronting his nonstop, subconscious thoughts.

Through a carefully calibrated acoustic system, the space periodically fills with an aggressive, sonorous boom triggered by the gentler second sound track, which can be heard only by the viewer occupying the one available spotlight seat at the center of the gallery. This is the same crude, interrogation-like wooden chair the artist sat in to record the videotape. Seated, the viewer faces a monitor and is



confronted with the prerecorded image of an exhausted, immobile Viola, who stares intently ahead. He establishes the same direct relationship with the audience that home television viewers have with news personalities. Viola's attention keeps drifting off, but he is prevented from dozing by a hand that ominously and regularly appears to rap him on the head with a rolled-up magazine. The viewer wears clumsy, old-fashioned headphones and hears Viola's every gulp, snuffle, and loud rap on his head, which had been picked up during videotaping by microphones placed in his ears. This unedited, forty-five-minute recording was mixed with a soft, separately audiotaped stream-of-consciousness monologue about his boyhood reminiscences, so that the combined sound track gives the distinct feeling one is physically and mentally inside the artist's head. Seen and heard at such close range over an extended period of time, the work strongly evokes the artist's physical presence and demands a response. Viewers are either intimately involved participants, sharing the experience as much as they are able, or else peripheral observers. Both are kept off-guard in anticipating the irregularly occurring loud boom. The tightly focused work addresses issues of identity and explores as well various states of consciousness. The

*Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House.*  
1982. Video/sound installation, National Video Festival, American Film Institute, Los Angeles, 1982.





*Room for St. John of the Cross*. 1983. Video/sound installation. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1985.

length of the videotape invokes the states both of waiting for inspiration and of sublimated fury.

At the entrance to the installation, Viola tells the story of Phineas Gage, a nineteenth-century railroad employee who miraculously survived a work accident in which a metal rod went through his head, destroying part of his brain and altering his personality. Still rational and somewhat social, Gage and his rod trav-

eled with a road show, and he became a subject of scientists interested in the functions of the brain. For Viola Gage is a metaphor for the complexity of the mind.

Viola reached a new level with *Room for St. John of the Cross* (1983), in which he metaphorically depicts the interchangeability of the subconscious with the conscious. *Room for St. John of the Cross* is dedicated to the sixteenth-cen-

tury mystical Spanish poet who was a follower of St. Theresa, the radical Catholic prioress who sought to return the Carmelite order to austerity, prayer, and contemplation. For six months in 1577, when St. John was confined to a miniscule, windowless prison cell and regularly tortured for his heretical beliefs, he composed his ecstatic poetry, which repeatedly speaks of profound love and nature. St. John and his poetry are refer-



ence points for Viola's dramatic metaphor about solitude and anguish being valuable sources of strength. Unlike the always-changing external world, the rich, internal realm is always there, becoming more accessible with curtailed physical activity and heightened concentration.

The work occupies a dark 30-by-40-foot room, and contains two forceful images. One is a large, grainy, black-and-white videotape of the craggy, snow-covered Sierra mountains projected onto the wall opposite the entrance. Shot with a hand-held camera and telephoto lens from a moving car, the jerky movements of the tape become dizzily exaggerated in projection. The space reverberates with the abrasive sounds of wind against the microphone during the recording. The other image is sculptural. Near the middle of the room is a tangible but inaccessible 5-by-5-by-6-foot dirt-floor cubicle. Visible only through its small, glowing window is a well-lit interior tableau: on top of a tiny wooden table sits a metal pitcher, a glass of water, and a miniature television monitor. On the screen is a small, clear video image of a verdant mountain range, shot in long still takes with a stationary camera on a tripod. A ghostly human presence permeates the empty cell in the form of the barely audible poetry, gently whispered in Spanish, of St. John. Tension is established between the intangibility and temporality of the video, sound, and light, and the materiality of the room with the contents of the carefully placed cell. As the center of attention the pitcher and water glass assume signifi-

cance and seem to resonate with energy.

*St. John of the Cross* is a cumulative experience: temporal like the theater, the whole cannot be grasped in one instant; and multidimensional like sculpture, the work cannot be seen from just one spot. It contains contrasting concepts of time: the past, which is recalled through a specific period in St. John's life; the present, with the viewer interacting with Viola's prepared environment; and an eternal timelessness, which is reflected in nature's ahistorical, regenerative cycles and the unchanging mountain. The most important place his work exists is in the memory of the viewer, where time becomes more fluid and blends with the imagination.<sup>9</sup>

Viola made a major leap both technically and conceptually during the time he and Perov lived in Japan for a year and a half, beginning in 1980. Since the

mid-1970s he has been traveling to the Pacific, initially to attend a festival in Tokyo, then to the Solomon Islands to produce one of the first color-video field recordings of indigenous music, dance, and ritual, *Memories of Ancestral Power (the Moro Movement in the Solomon Islands)* (1977-78), and later to Fiji. He has been closely drawn to Japan, with its venerable culture that perceives life as a continuum and nature as an acknowledged source of poetry and power. Despite its reverence for nature, the culture maintains a safe distance from the potentially destructive forces by metaphorically portraying nature's pure and beautiful but melancholic side in the form of the rock garden and flower arrangement. The highly refined icon then assumes more importance than reality. This is related to Viola's interest in Blake's emblematic graphic style, which is medieval more than post-Renaissance,

String instrument constructed by Bill Viola for *Tunings from the Mountain*, for performance in Fujiko Nakaya's *Fog Sculpture—A Fog, Sound, and Light Festival*, Kawayi Onsen, Japan, November 1980.





and not unlike Oriental painting.

Based in Tokyo in a tiny studio apartment, Viola and Perov actively explored the Japanese traditions—language, architecture, calligraphy, Nō theater, and zazen (meditation). They studied Zen Buddhism with the free-spirited priest Daien Tanaka, meditating daily and often informally meeting with him afterward in a Mr. Donut coffee shop. Viola pre-

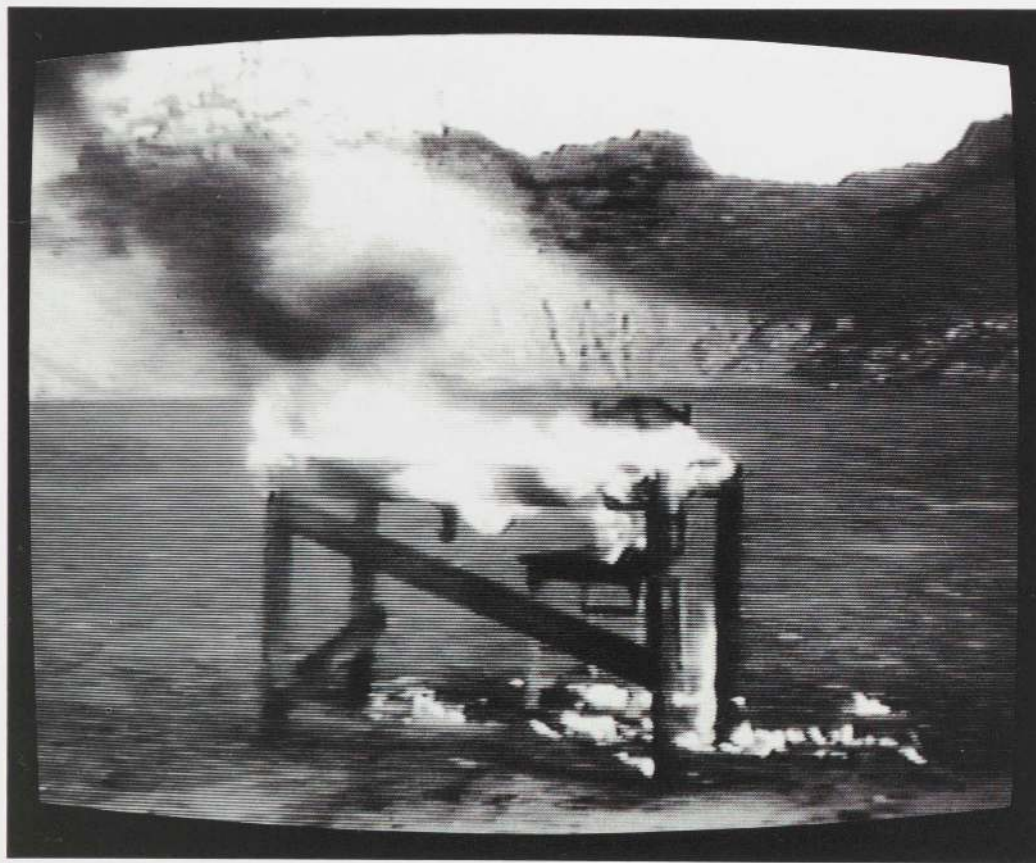
sented his videotapes in museums and alternative media centers throughout Japan, and frequently met with younger artists. He collaborated with sculptor Fujiko Nakaya and produced *Tunings from the Mountain* (1980), acoustics for her outdoor *Fog Sculpture—A Fog, Sound, and Light Festival* in Kawaji Onsen. In this outdoor piece he modulated and amplified ambient natural sounds, per-

forming live with a traditional Taiko drum group.

The Sony Corporation allowed Viola to work over a four-month period in a professional, one-inch-video editing facility at the company's broadcast and developmental engineering headquarters in Atsugi, just outside Tokyo. Viola found this a stimulating environment, for it allowed him to informally discuss his complex technical needs in theoretical terms directly with the inventors of the equipment. At Atsugi he completed his twelve-minute, four-part video fugue about natural, cyclical transition, *Ancient of Days* (1979-81). The carefully calibrated first sequence, in reverse of actual time, zooms in on a burning table that reconstructs itself from its own ashes and flames, and concludes with Viola hammering at the intact table.

At Sony Viola edited his fifty-six-minute *Hatsu Yume (First Dream)* (1981), which he shot with a broadcast-quality camera lent by the company. It was the culmination of his long stay in Japan. The title *Hatsu Yume* comes from ideas about regeneration and the Japanese concept that the first dream during the eve of January 1 not only presages the New Year, but also repeats generations of history. The work is a reflection upon the complexity of nature, representing both its glorious bounty and its terrifying power. The tape opens with the sunrise and the ebb and flow of ocean waves on shore. It continues with Mt. Fuji, then goes on to a mysterious bamboo grove, verdant rice fields, a boulder with small rocks precariously set along its top, and a hot spring disgorging steam at a mountain

*Ancient of Days.*  
1979–81. Videotape.





shrine. In Tokyo's bustling fish market, Tsukiji, the sea's bounty is sorted into species for bartering. On the deck of a brightly lit night-fishing boat, with mechanized lines slowly coiling and uncoiling like a monster, a solitary captain gazes out to the horizon, while near his feet rejected squid lie dying. The camera moves aggressively through the dark night toward another boat before going to calmer waters where ceremonial candles float. Through the harsh, nocturnal lights of Tokyo streets, a lonely figure approaches the camera and strikes a match, the flame suddenly filling the frame before he lights a cigarette. Rain cascades down a car windshield, through which shine the abstract, kaleidoscopic colors of the city. As with other works, Viola either set the camera in one fixed position on a tripod; or he made sensuous, fluid, 360-degree horizontal pans; or, especially in night scenes, he moved a hand-held camera freely and randomly, so that it darted like the mind can, with a frenzied effect. Each of the images and settings in *Hatsu Yume* has a separate symbolic meaning for the Japanese, but seen collectively they provide the Western viewer with a profound, almost intuitive sense of the culture.

For Viola time is an integral, material aspect of video, and has been a major theme and preoccupation. He studies his subjects intensely, and leaves images on the screen long enough to be unsettling and to challenge viewers' expectations. His intention is to move the viewer on a very direct level, to the point that he or she will relive his experience. Such close



*Hatsu Yume (First Dream)*. 1981.  
Videotape.

involvement is a form of control, and expanding time is central to this process of drawing in the viewer. In *Hatsu Yume* Viola alternates between the pace of material as it was recorded and sequences extended in slow motion, so that a hiker's walk becomes a graceful, primal dance. Only in editing does he manipulate the image, extending or compressing time. Viewers lose track of these tem-

poral changes unless they are paying attention to the ambient sounds of insects, birds, human voices, and motors, which when expanded become deeper and more substantial. In discussing his work Viola often talks about the "Z-axis" as being the axis of attention, saying that by nature we are tied into a certain window of perception or rate of thought. Taken outside of that, we begin to see





*I Do Not Know What It  
Is I Am Like.* 1986.  
Videotape.

things we would have been totally unaware of in a normal rate. Slow motion is a means of forcefully holding the viewer's attention. He thinks about the Z-axis not only in visual but also in temporal terms; time opens up and reveals something new inside of a moment:

In the conceptual realm, the Z-axis relates to the depth of thought that an image triggers, trains of thought that run off of that so we go

into deeper levels of meaning. Studying is like the Z-axis: something that initially was a brief thought becomes richer. All of these processes are mirrored in the evolution of technology. The video disc and computers provide the technological metaphors, or representations of these aspects of our lives. The time element of the Z-axis is time expansion and compression, but differs from the visual, which if blown up has noise and grain, so that the resolution becomes grainy. You can

make an intellectual jump in acknowledging the blow-up to be as interesting as the initial image in the photograph. When you expand rather than reduce time it becomes as complex as the "real" time or normal rate it was expanded from. It keeps opening up. Also in terms of shrinking time, something is always being compared back to the time it takes the viewer to watch or experience a phenomenon happening. It is important to realize the difference between the experience and the memory of the experience—the residue of the experience in time.<sup>10</sup>

In 1981 Viola and Perov settled in southern California to be near the austere desert landscape, which he feels has had a considerable effect on contemporary American art.

The power of the desert is that it reduces the size and importance of the individual, until you're just a little black speck. The senses seem ridiculously inept at dealing with an environment that's so overwhelmingly greater. Death is everywhere; you are aware of your mortality. You place value on those experiences and discuss them in a hierarchical way. But you can't talk about the mechanics of that experience. It's a different spirituality than the one you read about in books. You feel it but you can't talk about it. It's so strong . . . What happens, for me, when I get outside of the man-made world in that dramatic a way is that I have experiences that up until that point I had identified with art and what art should do for my life. To see art as part of this larger context is to realize it is only a small part of a larger picture. The first time I went out there was very important in that it broke down the boundaries of thoughts that held me within the art world itself. It's like a figure/ground reversal. I saw the art world as this little category that we've made a space for in the larger cultural structures that we've created.<sup>11</sup>



In 1982 Viola and Perov visited Ladakh in Northern India to experience Tibetan Buddhist monasteries. They traveled by jeep, staying in rustic dwellings, compelled simply to "be in that space, feel the energy, breathe the air."<sup>12</sup> In 1984 they returned to Fiji to observe Hindu fire-walking ceremonies of the South Indians in Suva. Material recorded in Fiji as well as in the American Southwest and Canada has been integrated into *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* (1986), the title drawn from song 1.164 of the ancient Sanskrit *Rig-Veda*. Viola edited this eighty-nine-minute videotape over a six-month period in his studio on recently acquired professional equipment. His unlimited access to this state-of-the-art system has allowed him the luxury of developing his editing ideas more deliberately.

*I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* reflects Viola's longstanding interest in death and in animal mythology, particularly in shamanism, in which animals function as power sources and serve as the shaman's guide on missions through the spirit world. Viola punctuates the work with the ceremonial Hindu drumming, which he uses to stress the importance of the beating heart as the center of the life force, the individual's universe. The tape's disconcerting climax is the becalmed trance state that is reached during the fire-walking ceremony when, through extraordinary control, mind and body function as one. Drawing from the dark side of nature, this epic study of transcendence shows how we have grown out of touch with these valuable, always present, primor-



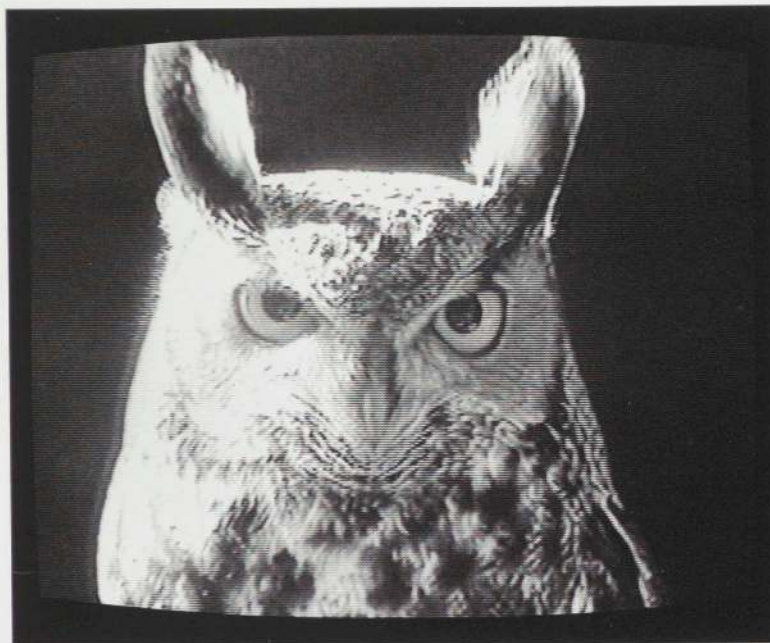
*I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like*. 1986.  
Videotape.

dial experiences and feelings. Confronting "pure existence" we can intuitively know what cannot be deduced logically, "know thyself" being central to spiritual awakening.<sup>13</sup>

Viola's objective always is to reach out and touch the voice of nature that exists within each of us below the surface of our consciousness, which he does in his most recent installation, *Passage* (1987),

again by manipulating time. A two-year-old's birthday party is the ostensible subject of the twenty-minute tape, which is dramatically slowed down to such an extent that it moves from frame to frame in suspended animation, playing through only once during the day. As a luminous, rear-screen video projection, the tape fills the large 11-by-16-foot gallery wall opposite the 20-foot-long





*I Do Not Know What It  
Is I Am Like.* 1986.  
Videotape.

entrance corridor. Physically and temporally magnified to a scale that overwhelms viewers, the spontaneous actions of the ritualized event are symbolic of passing time and seem to be choreographed and almost tactile. The tremendous scale of the image refers to the monumentality of childhood memories, which over the years assume mythic proportions.

Bill Viola is constantly searching for greater understanding of the spiritual heritage of humankind, looking beyond individual limitations toward a more collective, universal mind. 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 com-

mercial television worlds, gaining increasing international recognition for his beautifully crafted and distinctive work. Through the rich vocabulary of his highly developed imagery, Viola probes that elusive area inbetween the physical present and the timeless world beyond.

### Notes

1. Raymond Bellour, "An Interview with Bill Viola," *October*, 34 (Fall 1985), p. 101.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 103, 111.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 92–93.
4. From an unpublished interview by Barbara London, June 1, 1985.
5. Peter Campus, *Peter Campus: Closed Circuit Video* (Syracuse, NY: Everson Museum of Art, 1974), unpaginated.

6. London interview.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. Michael Nash, "Bill Viola's re-visions of mortality," *High Performance* 37 (Los Angeles) pp. 63–64.
10. London interview.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. Released on laser video disc, the work can be experienced like a book of poetry. Viewers have more control over the material, and can change the order in which they view the sections or can review selected passages at different speeds.

# Selected Works and Writings

BILL VIOLA

| 23

*Information.* 1973

*Il Vapore.* 1975

*He Weeps for You.* 1976

*Migration.* 1976

*The Tree of Life.* 1977

*Chott el-Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat).* 1979

*Hatsu Yume (First Dream).* 1981

*Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House.* 1982

*Room for St. John of the Cross.* 1983

*Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House.* 1983

*Science of the Heart.* 1983

*Anthem.* 1983

*The Theater of Memory.* 1985

*Heaven and Hell.* 1985

*I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like.* 1986

In the following section, Viola's description of his work is in roman type; more interpretive commentary and relevant quotations appear in italic.



# Information

1973

*Information* is the manifestation of an aberrant electronic nonsignal passing through the video switcher in a normal color TV studio, and being retrieved at various points along its path. It is the result of a technical mistake made while working in the studio late one night, when the output of a videotape recorder was accidentally routed through the studio switcher and back into its own input. When the record button was pressed, the machine tried to record itself. The resulting electronic perturbations affected everything else in the studio: color appeared where there was no color signal, there was sound where there was no audio connected, and every button punched on the video switcher created a different effect. After this error was discovered and traced back, it became possible to sit at the switcher as if it were a musical instrument and learn to "play" this nonsignal. Once the basic parameters were understood, a second videotape recorder was used to record the result. *Information* is that tape.

*While I was at Syracuse University, the only time I had to do my own work in the studio was in the middle of the night—the graveyard shift, from midnight to dawn. At times it was very strange to be there alone in the large television studio. One night I was having color-shifting problems with one of the monitors, so I went to the closet and pulled out the degausser. A degausser is a strong electromagnet in the shape of a large, flat doughnut that is used to neutralize any magnetic buildup on the TV screen (and it can even erase tapes in the vicinity if one is not careful). That night I had the idea that it might be interesting to see what would happen if I placed the degausser around my head and turned it on. The brain works on some electrochemical process, I reasoned, and therefore the degausser should be capable of some consciousness-altering effects. I raised the magnet and put my head inside. Then I thought, "No, here I am alone. What if something weird happens? What if I become immobilized? What if my central nervous system starts going haywire? Will they find me slumped on the floor like an overcooked french fry?" And the most horrific thought of all, "What if my consciousness is permanently altered? What if the pulse in my brain's neurons are scrambled into an entirely new pattern? How would I know that a change had taken place? Would I remember who I was?" I waited a long, long time, magnet in hand. Finally, and I have never understood why, I decided to do it. I pressed the switch, and the degausser made that familiar buzzing sound. I thought for a*

*moment that I felt extremely light-headed, but that could have been my imagination. I turned it off. Nothing happened. I looked around the room. Still the same. I rushed off to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. Everything looked okay, no weird, permanently frozen facial contortions. I walked back to the studio, and soon began feeling the tiredness of the hour. I had forgotten what I wanted to do in there anyway. I went back home and went to sleep. Everything has been normal ever since.<sup>1</sup>*

*Information*, 1973.  
Videotape.





# Il Vapore

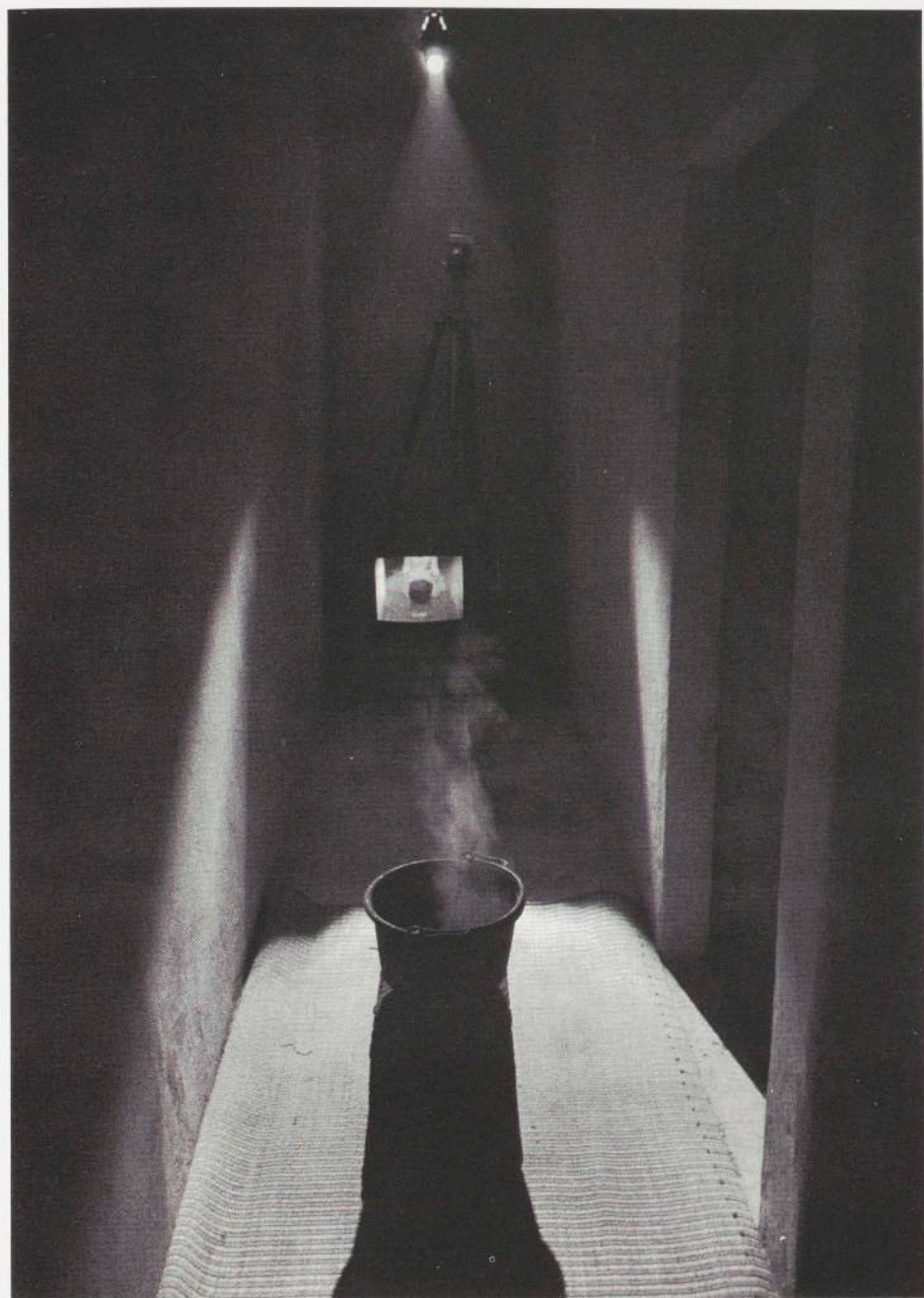
1975

In a small, raised alcove at the back of a large empty room, eucalyptus leaves are boiling in a metal pot of water. The area is spotlit, and the vapor can be seen rising into the air. The strong smell of the eucalyptus permeates the room. The pot is resting on a straw mat. Behind this, at the rear of the alcove, is a nineteen-inch black-and-white monitor with a video camera, and a spotlight high on the wall. The camera is focused on the area around the metal pot, with some of the larger room behind it in view. The live image of the boiling pot is mixed with a videotape made from the same camera at a previous time. This is visible on the monitor screen. The videotape is of a single person kneeling behind the pot, slowly transferring water from a bucket with his mouth, gradually filling the pot

over a period of one hour. The sound of the water pouring can be heard from a small loudspeaker. Viewers entering the space witness the empty alcove with the boiling-water pot, while on the monitor they can see their own live image coexisting with that of a second person who appears to be kneeling at the pot in front of them. Both merge as ghostlike images inhabiting the present moment.

*Il Vapore*. 1975 Video/  
sound installation,  
Zona, Florence.



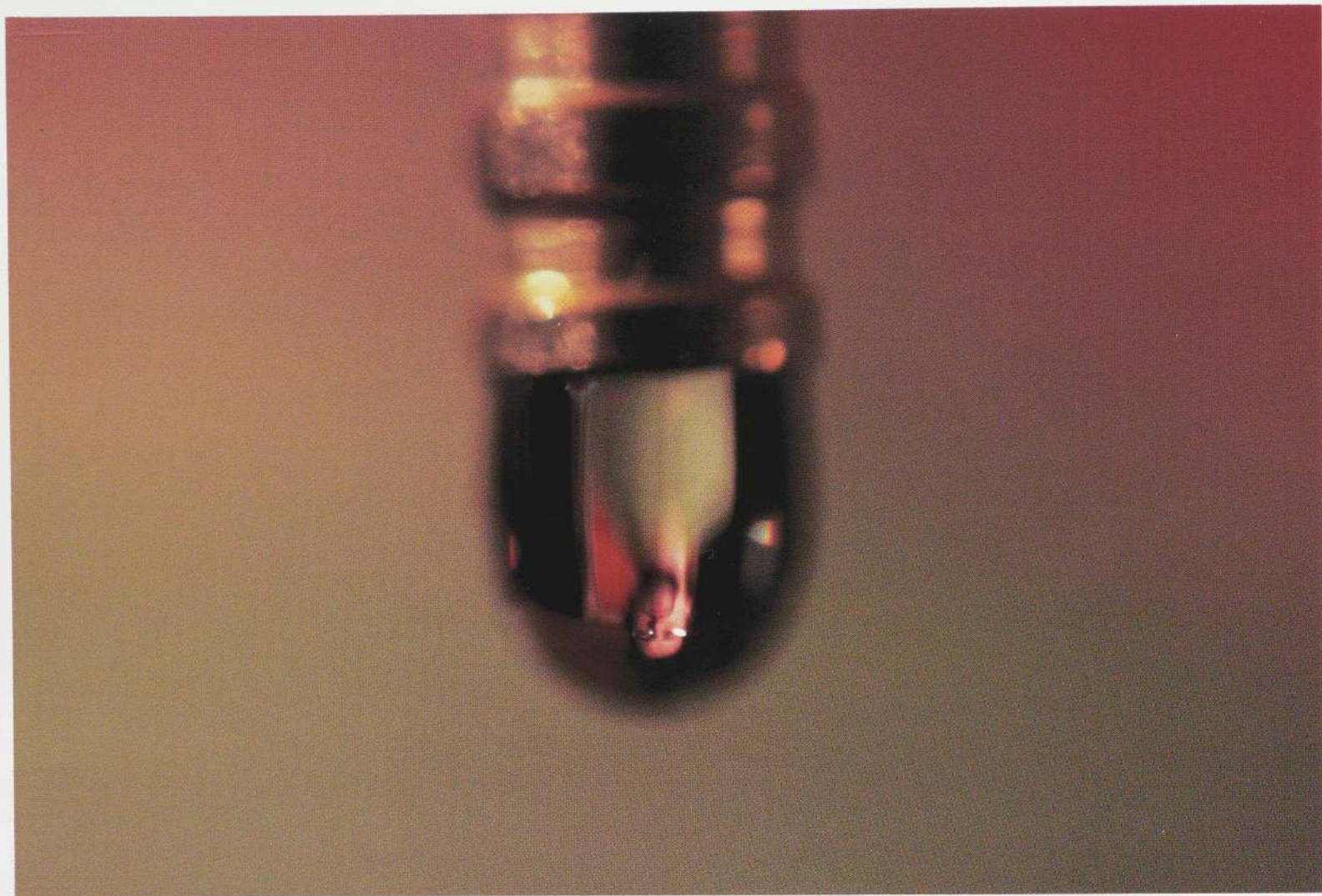


*Though water be enclosed in a reservoir  
Yet air will absorb it, for it is the  
supporter;  
It sets it free and bears it to the source,  
Little by little, so that you see not the  
process.  
In like manner, this breath of ours by  
degrees  
Steals away our souls from the prison  
house of earth.<sup>2</sup>*

—Jalaluddin Rumi (1207–1273)

# He Weeps for You

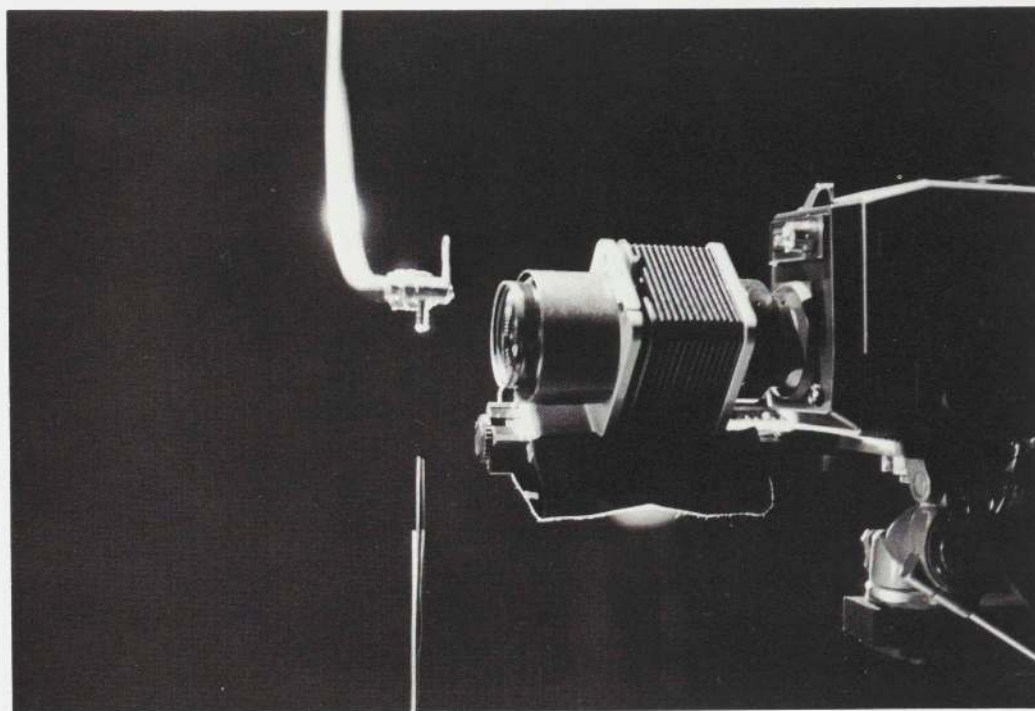
1976



*He Weeps for You*  
(detail). 1976. Video/  
sound installation. The  
Museum of Modern  
Art, New York, 1979.



In a large, darkened space, a copper pipe runs down from the ceiling, terminating in a small valve from which a single drop of water is slowly emerging. A color video camera, fitted with a special lens and a bellows attachment used for extreme close-up magnification, is focused in on this drop. The camera is connected to a video projector that displays the swelling drop of water on a large screen in the rear of the space. The optical properties of the water drop cause it to act like a fish-eye lens, revealing an image of the room and those within it. The drop grows in size gradually, swelling in surface tension, until it fills the screen. Suddenly it falls out of the picture and a loud resonant "boom" is heard as it lands on an amplified drum. Then, in an endless cycle of repetition, a new drop begins to emerge and again fill the screen.



*He Weeps for You*  
(detail). 1976. Video/  
sound installation. The  
Museum of Modern  
Art, New York, 1979.

*One of the foundations of ancient philosophy is the concept of the correspondence between the microcosm and macrocosm, or the belief that everything on the higher order, or scale, of existence reflects and is contained in the manifestation and operation of the lower orders. This has been expressed in religious thought as the symbolic correspondence of the divine (the heavens) and the mundane (the earth), and also finds representation in the theories of contemporary physics that describe how each particle of matter in space contains information about the state of the entire universe.*

*The ensemble of elements in this installation evokes a "tuned space," where not only is everything locked into a single rhythmical cadence, but a dynamic interactive system is created where all elements (the water drop, the video image, the sound, the viewer, and the room) function together in a reflexive and unified way as a larger instrument.*

*The traditional philosophy of the microcosm/macrocosm has been profoundly expressed in the Islamic mystical tradition of Sufism. The Persian poet Jelaluddin Rumi (1207–1273) developed these concepts with subtle variation in the course of his life's work. He wrote:*

*With every moment a world is born and dies,  
And know that for you, with every moment come death and renewal.<sup>3</sup>*

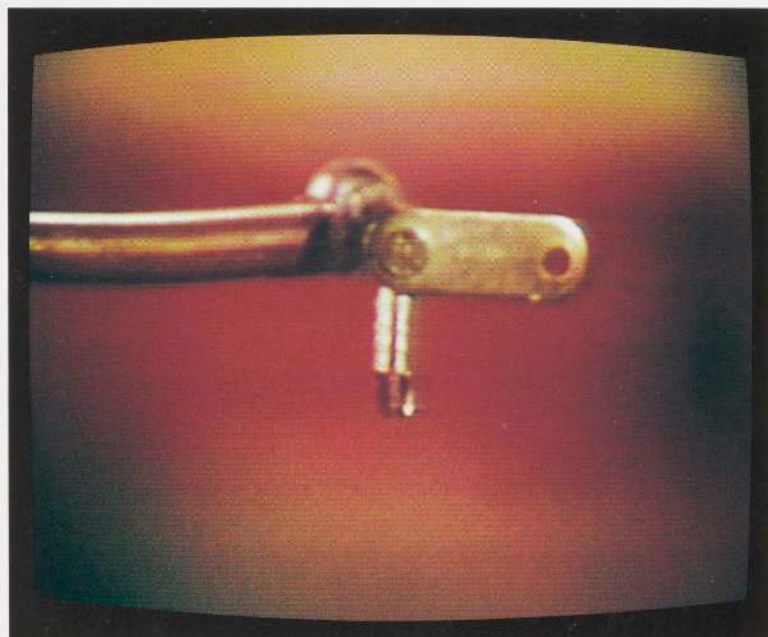




*He Weeps for You.*  
1976. Video/sound in-  
stallation, The Mu-  
seum of Modern Art,  
New York, 1979.

# Migration

1976

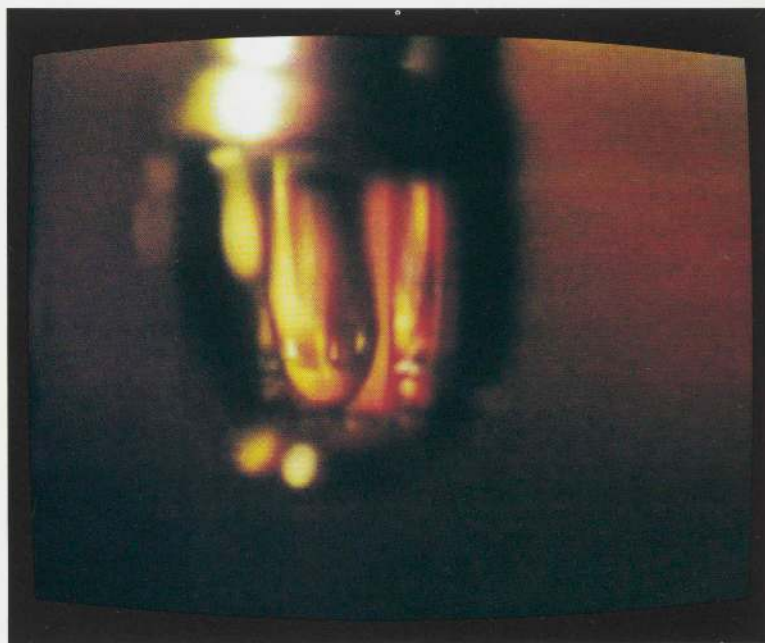




*Migration*. 1976.  
Videotape.

A slow, continuous journey through changes in scale, punctuated by the sounding of a gong, the piece concerns the nature of the detail of an image. In visual terms, this is known as “acuity” and is related to the number of photoreceptors in a given surface area of the retina. In television terms, detail is referred to as “resolution,” and is a measure of the number of picture elements in a given horizontal or vertical direction of the video frame. Reality, unlike the image on the retina or on the television tube,

is infinitely resolvable: “resolution” and “acuity” are properties only of images. The piece evolves into an exploration of the optical properties of a drop of water, revealing in it an image of the individual and a suggestion of the transient nature of the world he possesses within.



# The Tree of Life

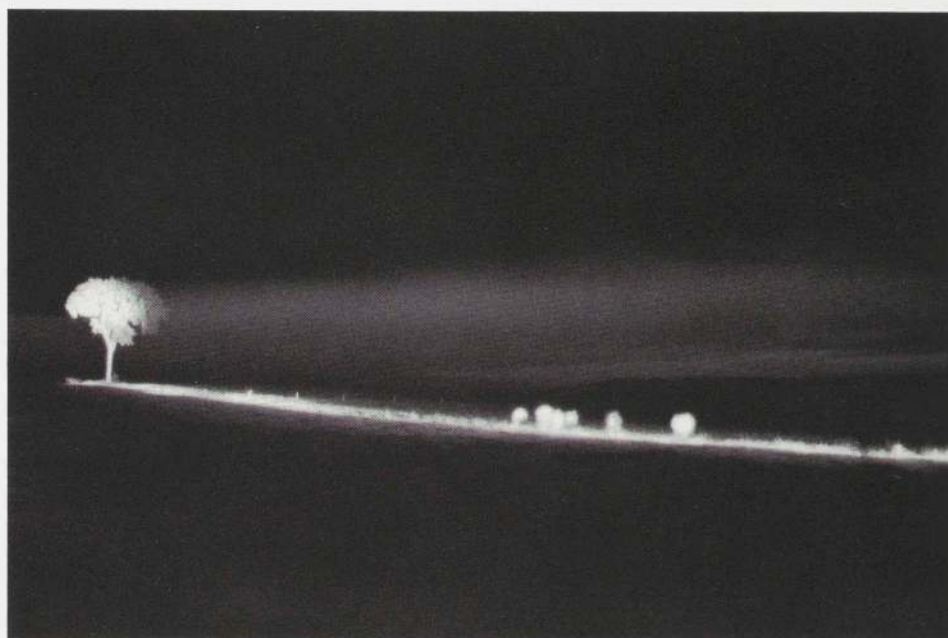
1977



*The Tree of Life.* 1977.  
Sculpture/event, Fort  
Edward, New York.



A large oak tree standing alone in an open field was spotlighted by a high-powered searchlight beam positioned a quarter of a mile away. The searchlight was turned on in late afternoon. As the daylight faded, the beam gradually became visible and the tree glowed with luminous intensity into the night. A negative shadow of its dark form was cast out across the valley, visible for several miles. The moon was also seen at times coming through the clouds behind the tree. The beam was turned off several hours after the sun had set.





# Chott el-Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat)

1979

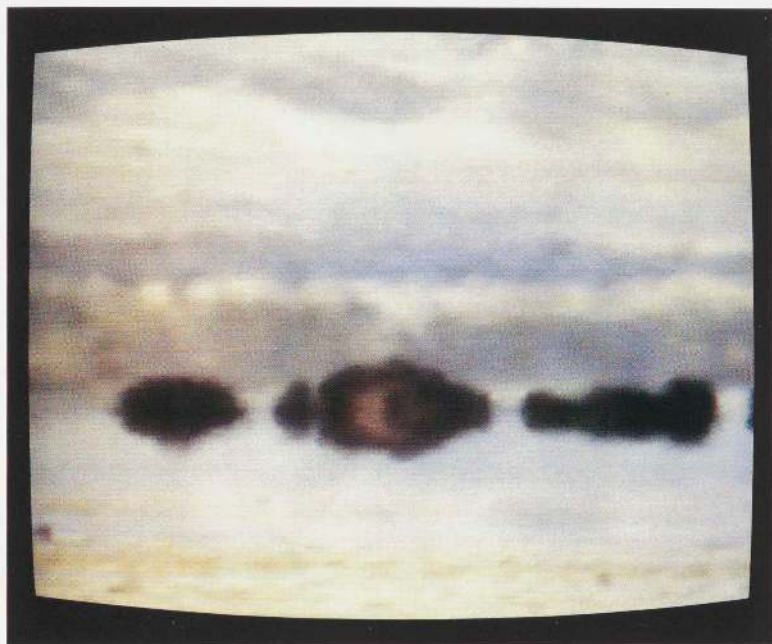




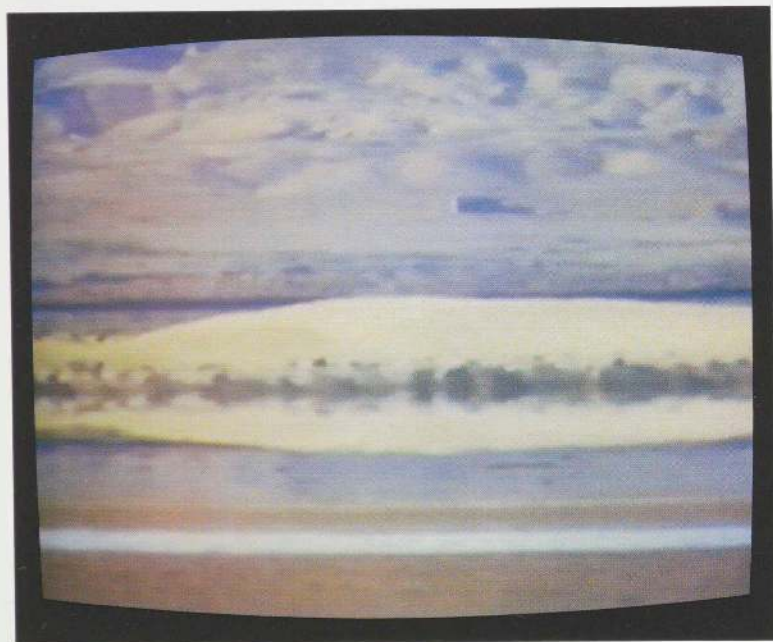
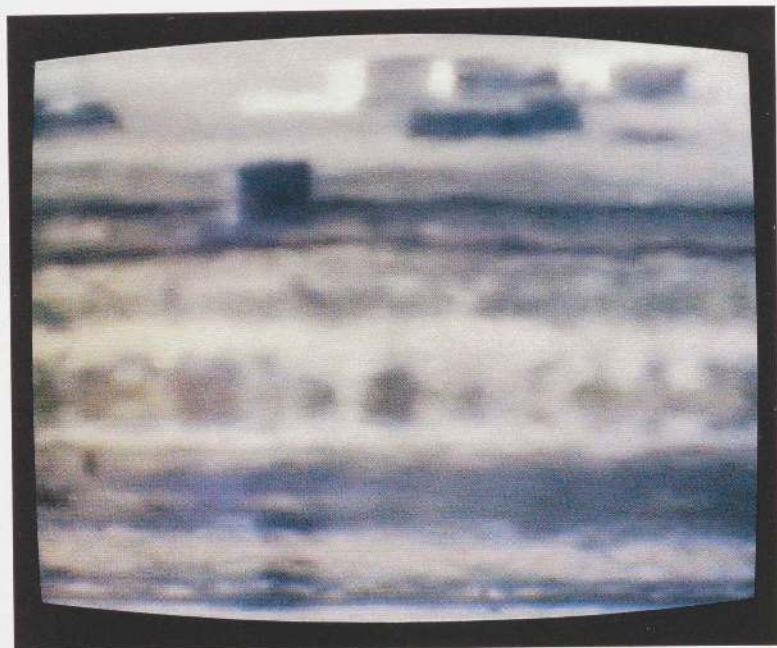
*Chott el-Djerid*  
*(A Portrait in Light*  
*and Heat), 1979.*  
 Videotape.

Chott el-Djerid is the name of a vast, dry salt lake in the Tunisian Sahara Desert where mirages are most likely to form in the midday sun. Here the intense desert heat manipulates, bends, and distorts the light rays to such an extent that you actually see things that are not there. Trees and sand dunes float off the ground, the edges of mountains and buildings ripple and vibrate, color and form blend into one shimmering dance. The desert mirages are set against images of the bleak winter prairies of Illinois and Saskatchewan, Canada, some of them recorded in a snowstorm. The opposite climactic conditions induce a similar aura of uncertainty, disorientation, and unfamiliarity.

Through special telephoto lenses adapted for video, the camera confronts the final barrier of the limits of the image. At what point does the breakdown of normal conditions, or the lack of adequate visual information, cause us to reevaluate our perceptions of reality and realize that we are looking at something out of the ordinary—a transformation of the physical into the psychological? If one believes that hallucinations are the manifestation of some chemical or biological imbalance in the brain, then mirages and desert heat distortions can be considered hallucinations of the landscape. It was like physically being inside someone else's dream.









# Hatsu Yume (First Dream)

1981

| 39

*I was thinking about light and its relation to water and to life, and also its opposite—darkness or the night and death. I thought about how we have built entire cities of artificial light as refuge from the dark.*

*Video treats light like water—it becomes a fluid on the video tube. Water supports the fish like light supports man. Land is the death of the fish. Darkness is the death of man.*

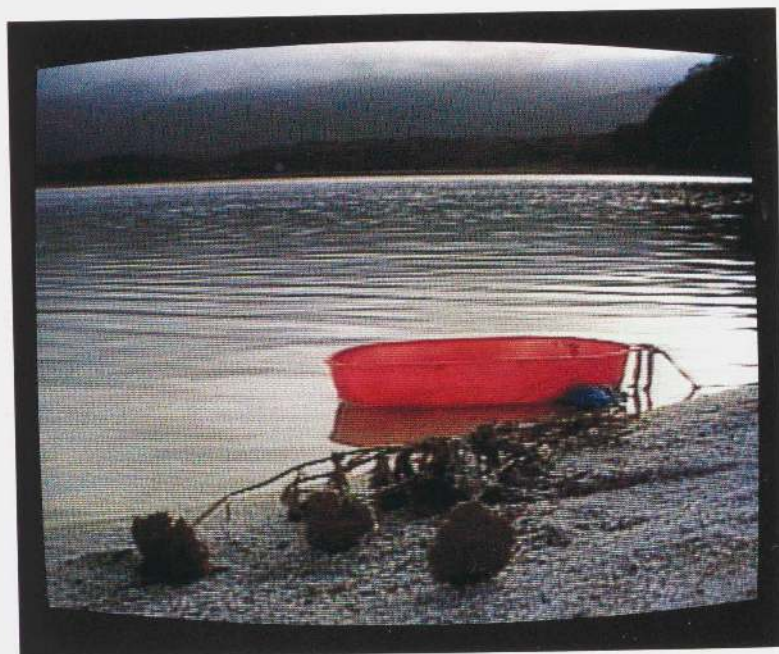
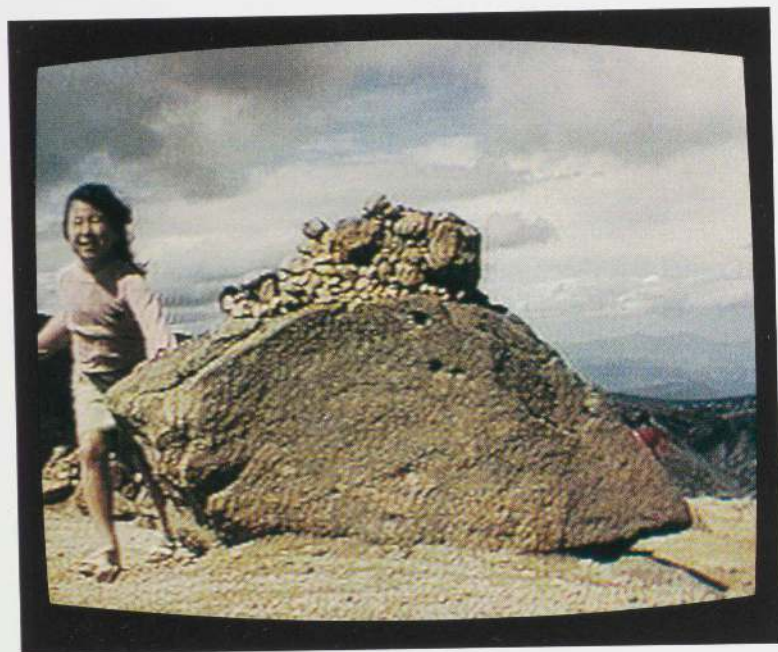
*When recalling a scene or describing a dream, we usually do so from a mysterious, detached, third point of view. We call it the "mind's eye." We "see" the scene, and ourselves within it, from some other position, quite often off to the side and slightly above all of the activity.*

*This is the original camera angle. It existed long before there was even such a thing as a camera. It is the point of view that goes wandering at night, that can fly above mountains and walk through walls, returning safely by morning. The notion that the camera is some surrogate eye, a metaphor for optical vision, is not enough. It only grossly resembles the mechanics of the eye, and certainly not normal human stereoscopic vision with integration to the brain. In function it acts like something more akin to what we term consciousness, and its existence in the world of material objects belies its true nature as an instrument for the articulation of mental space.<sup>4</sup>*

*Hatsu Yume (First Dream), 1981.  
Videotape.*













# Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House

1982



*Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House.*  
1982. Video/sound installation, La Chartreuse, Villeneuve-les-Avignon, France, 1986.



At the end of a long, dark space, a large, heavy, wooden chair sits spotlighted before a TV monitor. On the screen appears a close-up of a man's face. He looks extremely tired, yet he is staring intensely at the camera. Every so often, a figure enters through a lit entranceway in the background and approaches the man from behind. Suddenly he strikes the man over the head with a rolled up magazine, and turns and walks away.

This is what appears on the video monitor. The viewing room is silent, the chair empty. A set of stereo headphones is mounted on the chairback, inviting the viewer to sit down. The headphones reveal an area of inner stereo sound space. The sound of every movement of the man on the screen is audible, even exaggerated—his sniffing, his swallowing. Voices and vague murmurings are barely heard beneath these sounds. The voices whisper in continuous dialogue. When the man is struck from behind, the speakers in the room emit a loud burst of pre-recorded clamoring sound. The outer room immediately returns to silence, and the voices in the headphones begin again.

*This installation is dedicated to the memory of Phineas P. Gage.*

*In 1848 a twenty-five-year-old foreman named Phineas Gage suffered a terrible accident while working on a Vermont railroad. A blasting charge went off prematurely and sent a 3½-foot, 13-pound iron bar through his left cheek and out the top of his forehead, leaving a large gaping hole where the front of his brain had been. A few minutes later however, Gage was conscious and able to speak. The local doctor reported that his senses and memory seemed unimpaired, and he was alert and conversant when arriving for treatment.*

*After several weeks, Gage had recovered sufficiently to return to work. Although he seemed physically fit, friends said that he had changed. The former likable and efficient foreman had now become foul-mouthed, bad-tempered, obstinate, impatient, and irresponsible. Doctors who examined him stated that "the balance between his intellectual faculties and animal propensities seems to have been destroyed." Unable to hold a job, Gage drifted around the country exhibiting himself and the iron rod as a sideshow attraction. His skull and iron bar are still on display to the public in the museum of the Harvard Medical School.*

# Room for St. John of the Cross

1983



*Room for St. John of the Cross.* 1983. Video/sound installation, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1985.

*The Spanish poet and mystic St. John of the Cross (1542–1591) was kept prisoner by the religious establishment for nine months in 1577. His cell had no windows and he was unable to stand upright. He was frequently tortured. During this*

*period St. John wrote most of the poems for which he is known. His poems often speak of love, ecstasy, passage through the dark night, and flying over city walls and mountains.*



A small black cubicle (6 by 5 by 5½ feet) stands in the center of a large, dark room. There is a small open window in the front face of the cubicle. A soft glow of incandescent light emerges. Behind the cubicle on the back wall of the space, a large screen is showing a projected black-and-white video image of snow-covered mountains. Shot with an unstable hand-held camera, the mountains are rapidly moving in wild, jittery patterns. A loud roaring sound of the wind and white noise saturate the room from two loudspeakers.

The interior of the cubicle is inaccessible and can be viewed through the window. The inner walls are white. The floor is covered with brown dirt. There is a small wooden table in the corner with a metal water pitcher, a glass of water, and a four-inch color monitor. On the monitor is an image of a snow-covered mountain. Shot with a fixed camera, it is presented in real time with no editing. The only visible movement is caused by an occasional wind blowing through the trees and bushes. From within the cubicle, the sound of a voice softly reciting St. John's poems in Spanish is barely audible above the loud roaring of the wind in the room.

*To reach satisfaction in all,  
desire its possession in nothing.  
To come to the knowledge of all,  
desire the knowledge of nothing.  
To come to possess all,  
desire the possession of nothing.  
To arrive at being all,  
desire to be nothing.*

*To come to the pleasure you have not,  
you must go by a way in which you  
enjoy not.  
To come to the knowledge you have not,  
you must go by a way in which you  
know not.  
To come to the possession you have not,  
you must go by a way in which you  
possess not.  
To come to be what you are not,  
you must go by a way in which you  
are not.*

*When you turn toward something,  
you cease to cast yourself upon the all.  
For to go from the all to the all,  
you must leave yourself in all.  
And when you come to the possession  
of all,  
you must possess it without wanting  
anything.*

*In this nakedness the spirit finds its rest,  
for when it covets nothing,  
nothing raises it up,  
and nothing weighs it down,  
because it is in the center of its humility.<sup>5</sup>*

—St. John of the Cross

*Room for St. John of  
the Cross (detail). 1983.  
Video/sound installation. The Museum of  
Contemporary Art, Los  
Angeles, 1985.*



# Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House

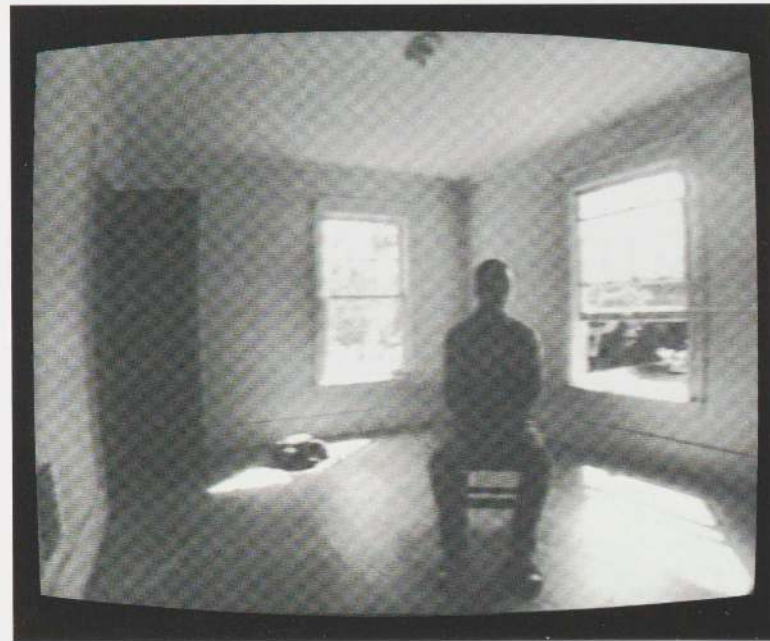
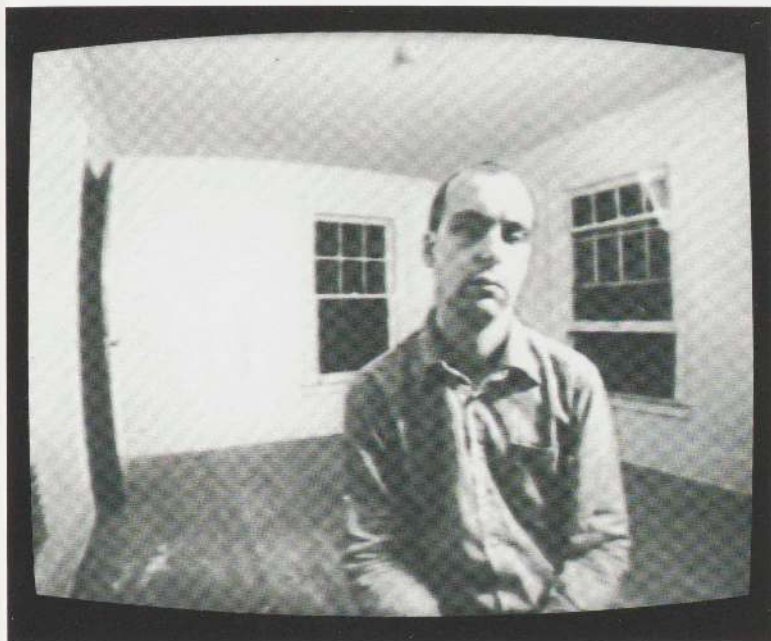
1983



*Reasons for Knocking  
at an Empty House.*  
1983. Videotape.

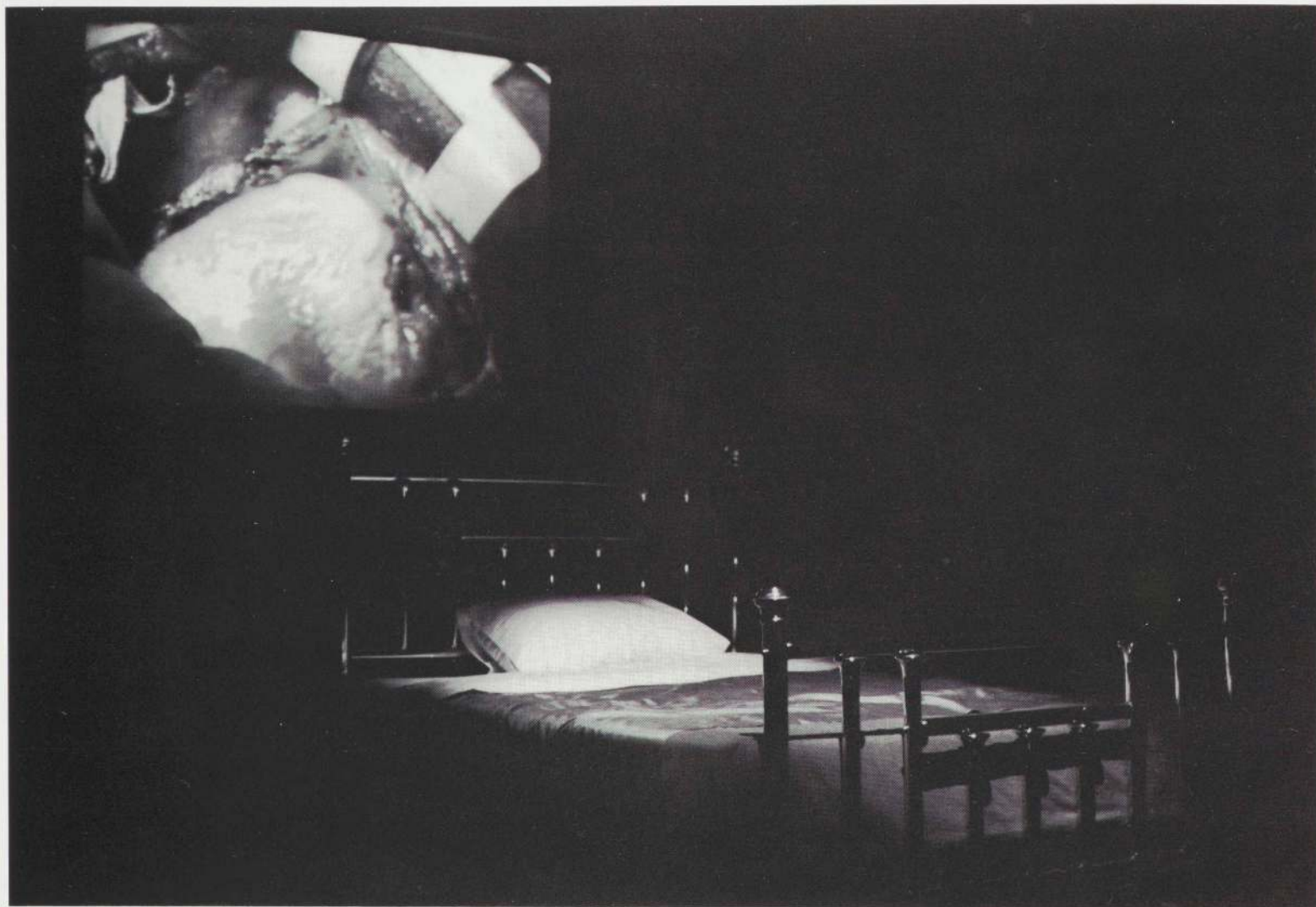
An attempt to stay awake continuously for three days while confined to an upstairs room in an empty house. Recordings were made from a stationary black-and-white camera to chronicle the effects of the relentless passage of time on a solitary individual. The space becomes increasingly subjective as events slide in and out of conscious awareness and duration becomes more and more brutal.





# Science of the Heart

1983



*Science of the Heart.*  
1983. Video/sound installation, Video/  
Culture Canada festival, Harbourfront  
Gallery, Toronto,  
Ontario, Canada.

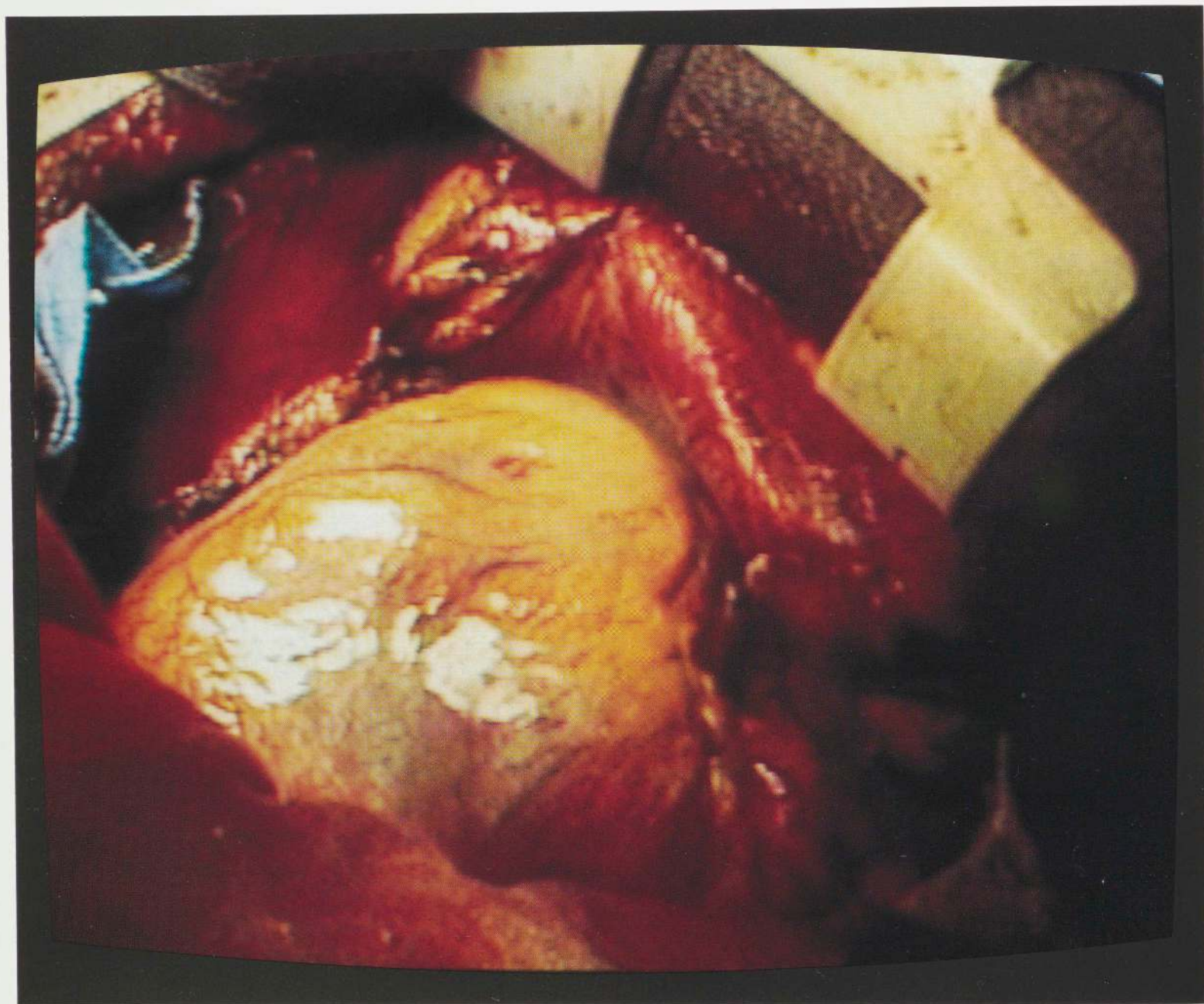


An empty brass bed sits in a large, dark room. It is illuminated by a small overhead spotlight. A few feet behind the headrest, floating above in space, is projected a color video image of a beating human heart. The sound of the pounding heart fills the room. The videotape of the heart beating has been manipulated in time so that it gradually speeds up to a high-pitched intensity of about twenty times normal speed, and then slows down through real time to extremely slow single beats, finally coming to rest in silence as a still image. After a long pause, the heart begins beating again and another cycle is initiated, continuing in this manner in endless repetition.

*The bed is a powerful symbolic image, simultaneously representing birth, sex, sleep and dreaming, illness, and death. The heart is an image of the rhythm of life—the human pulse, clock, and generator of the life force. Stillness can simultaneously be pre-birth and death. It is the transition from stillness to motion that recalls birth, the transition from motion to stillness that recalls death. The basic pattern of crescendo—peak—decrescendo is the basic rhythmic structure of life itself, and reflexively of many of our activities within it. The moment of peak intensity becomes the climax—the peak of life's actions or, as extreme physical exertion, the orgasm. The places between "beginning" and "ending" are subjectively determined by the viewer's entry into the space. The alternations of intensification and slowing are structured in a loop, and become only turning points along a larger, never-ending cycle of repetitions.*

# Anthem

1983

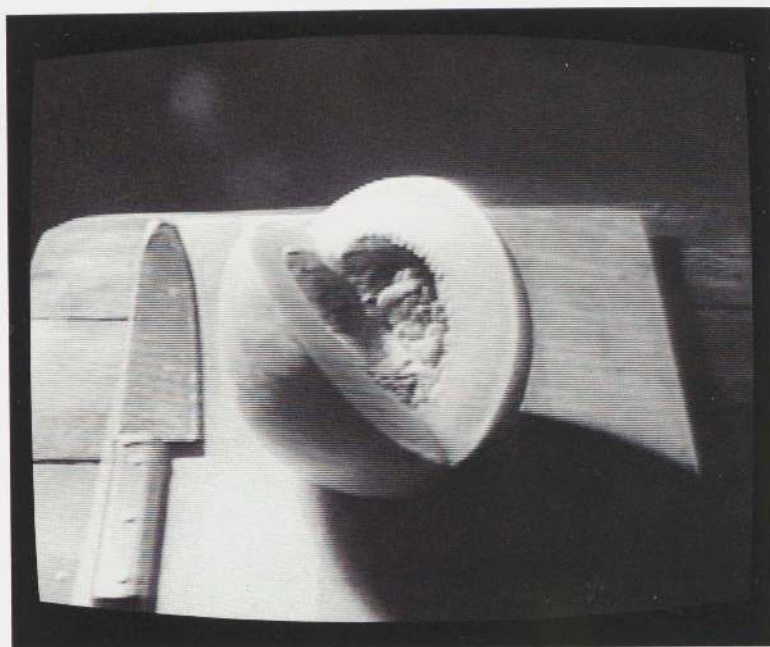




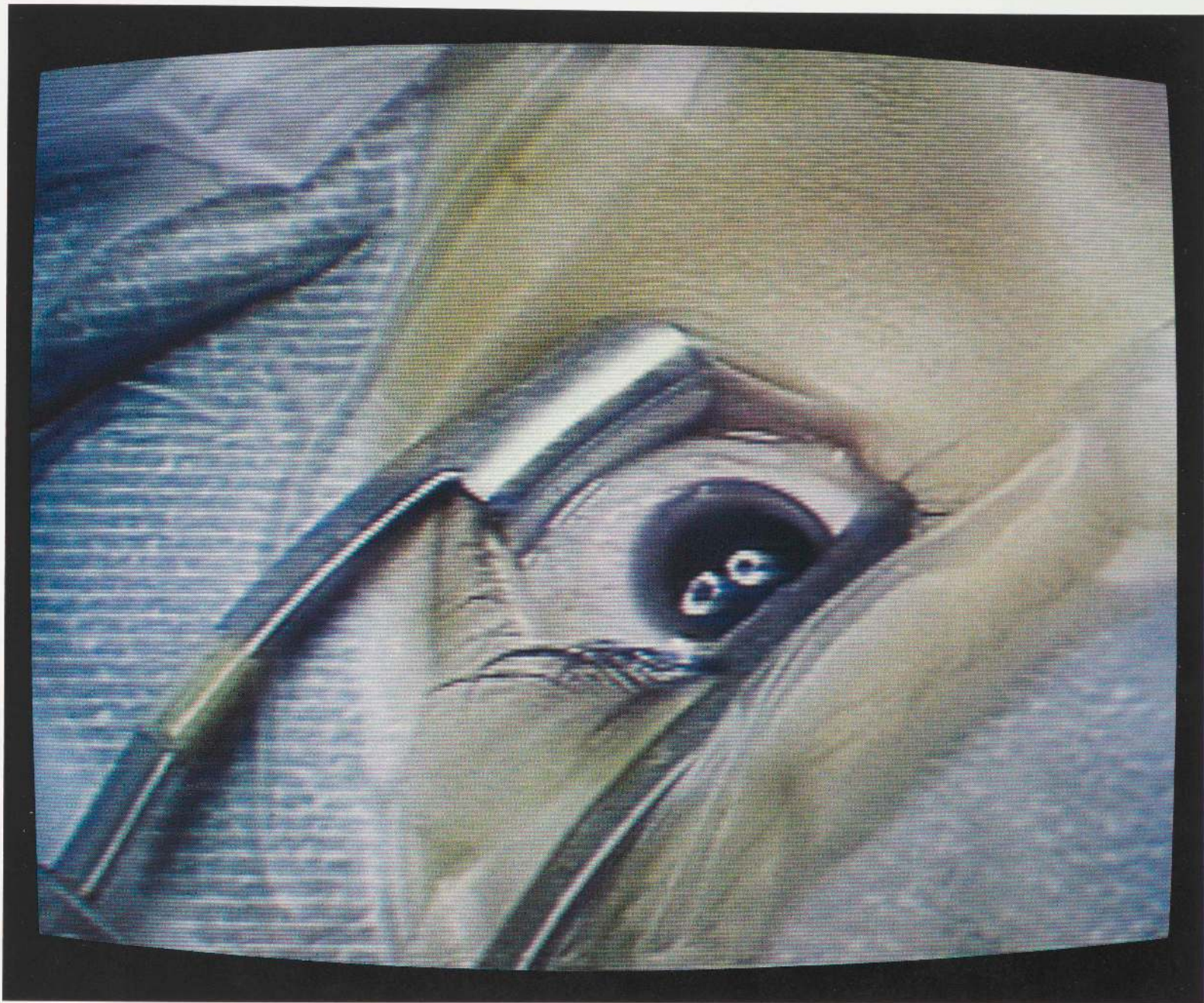
*Anthem* originates in a single piercing scream emitted by an eleven-year-old girl standing in the reverberant hall of Union Railroad Station in Los Angeles. The original scream of a few seconds is extended and shifted in time to produce a primitive "scale" of seven harmonic notes, which constitute the soundtrack of the piece. Related in form and function to the religious chant, *Anthem* describes a contemporary ritual evocation centered on the broad theme of materialism—the architecture of heavy industry, the mechanics of the body, the leisure culture of southern California, the technology of surgery, and their relation to our deep primal fears, darkness, and the separation of body and spirit.



*Anthem*. 1983.  
Videotape.









# The Theater of Memory

1985



*The Theater of Memory*. 1985. Video/sound installation, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1985.





A large, dead tree, with bare branches and exposed roots, leans diagonally across the floor to the far upper corner of a large, dark room. Fifty small lanterns are hung on its branches, and flicker in unison as if short-circuiting. A large color video image is projected on the rear wall. The picture is dominated by electronic noise and static patterns, and images are sometimes recognizable but never seem to come in clearly. Loud bursts of static and noise come from the

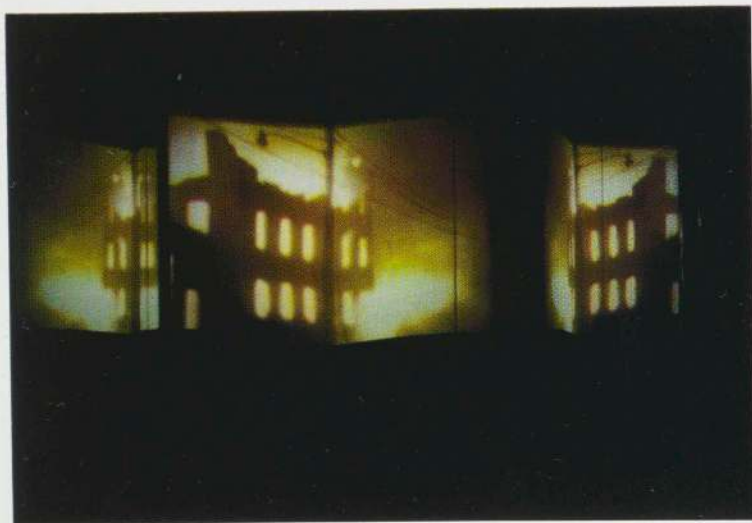
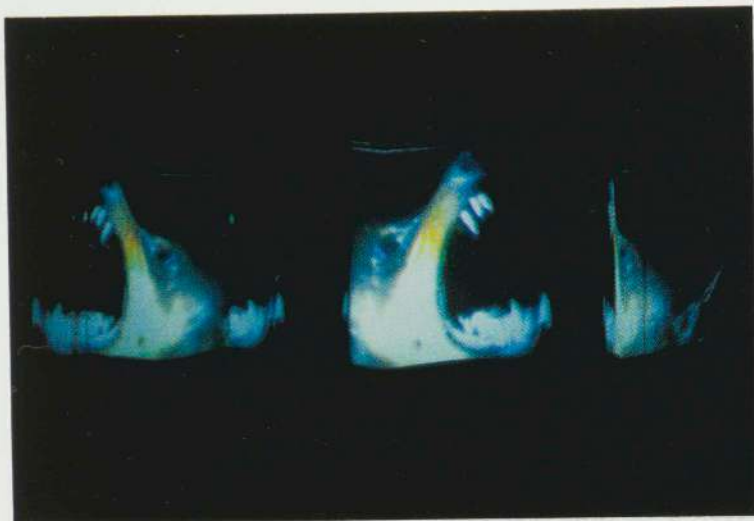
speakers. There are long silences between the bursts of noise. The only light in the room comes from the lanterns and the glow of the video image, and the only continuous sound is that of a small, delicate wind chime on the tree, blown by the wind from a concealed fan.

*I remember reading about the brain and the central nervous system, trying to understand what causes the triggering of*

*nerve firings that recreate patterns of past sensations, finally evoking a memory. I came across the fact that all of the neurons in the brain are physically disconnected from each other, beginning and ending in a tiny gap of empty space. The flickering pattern evoked by the tiny sparks of thought bridging these gaps becomes the actual form and substance of our ideas. All of our thoughts have at their center this small point of nothingness.<sup>6</sup>*

# Heaven and Hell

1985



*Heaven and Hell*. 1985.  
Video/sound installation, mirrored room.  
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.



Two identical octagonal rooms stand adjacent, their separate entrances indistinguishable from each other. One of the rooms has white walls and contains an easy chair, floor lamp, carpet, and a television on a small table. The room is illuminated by the single floor lamp. A large color wall panel of a nature scene hangs on the wall behind. An FM radio station can be heard softly in the background playing "easy listening" music. A videotape is playing on the television.

The other room has black walls and is completely dark. A large projected video image displays the videotape across two of the eight walls. All of the other walls

are covered by large, full-length mirrors that reflect and cascade the image around the room into optical infinity. The loud roaring sound of wind, water, and animal cries from the videotape fills the room from two speakers mounted above.

The image appearing in both rooms is of the same tape playing back from a single videotape machine. Primarily shot at night with a constantly moving handheld camera, the images embody forces of destruction, animal intensity, and physical energies.

*All Bibles and sacred codes have been the causes of the following Errors.*

1. *That Man has two real existing principles Viz: a Body & a Soul.*
2. *That Energy, called Evil, is alone from the Body, & that Reason, called Good, is alone from the Soul.*
3. *That God will torment Man in Eternity for following his Energies.*

*But the following Contraries to these are True:*

1. *Man has no Body distinct from his Soul for that called Body is a portion of Soul discerned by the five Senses, the chief inlets of the Soul in this age.*
2. *Energy is the only life and is from the Body and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy.*
3. *Energy is Eternal Delight?*

—"The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,"  
William Blake, 1793



*Heaven and Hell*. 1985.  
Video/sound installation, living room. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

# I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like

1986







*A bolt of lightning jumps the gap between sky and ground in a time narrower than our tiniest thought, yet the image of lightning, in addition to leaving a momentary afterimage on the retina, is forever imprinted in the mind's eye of all who have ever experienced an electrical storm. . . . The axis of the lightning bolt is the vertical, it travels along the line connecting heaven and earth. It is the same axis on which the individual stands when he or she walks out onto the great plain under the dome of the sky. It is the line that connects the ground they stand on to the deepest layer of time-lines in the geological strata of the earth*

*I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like.* 1986.  
Videotape.

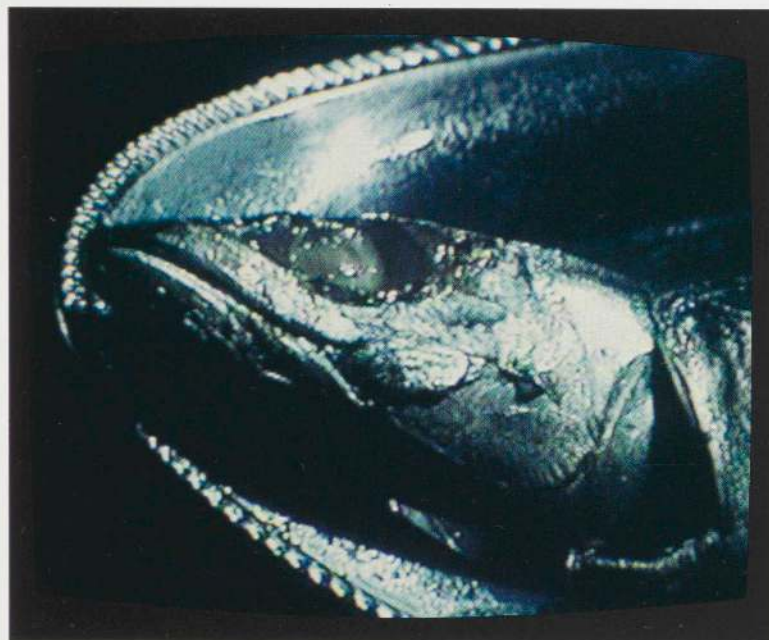
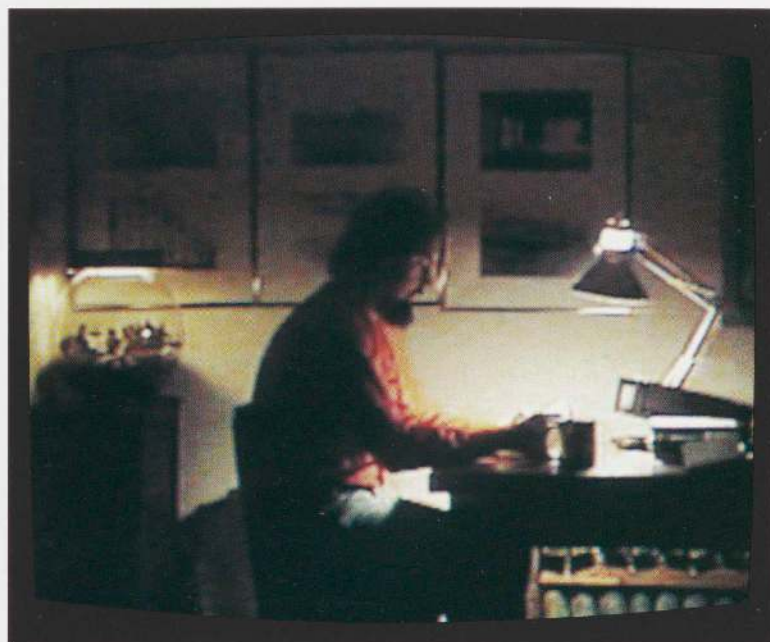
*far below, visible in the slice of the canyon wall. It is the path that the tree reveals as it stands and that is already contained in its seed. It is the same path along which the tree at the center of the world grows, the "axis mundi" described by Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell, and others in their researches and reintroductions of that which we already have known into our newly conscious contemporary minds.*

*In our horizontal models of time and movement, our image of the sediments of time, our expressions of "down" through history and "up" through evolution, the vertical pole becomes the continuous present, the connecting thread, the simultaneous, perpetual "now" that we are living at this instant and have always lived. It is the single point that when*

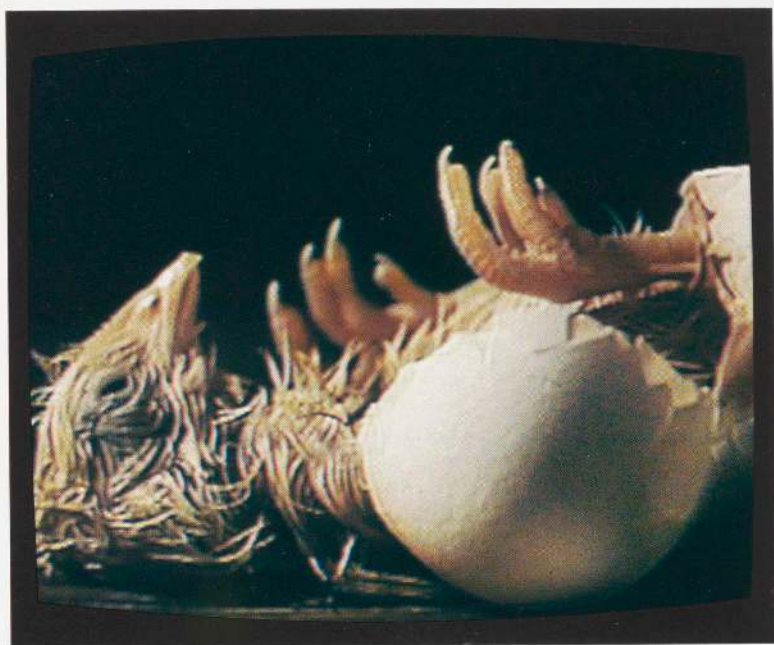
*displaced becomes the line, becomes the surface, becomes the solid forms of our world and minds, and that without the imparted energy of movement (time) or the direction of movement (space), becomes the point once more, a process incremented by our breath as we each recapitulate its great form in the course of our individual journey.*

*There was a moment in pre-history when a large animal slumped down with its last breath and thoughts to leave its bones in the earth that the researcher is carefully sifting through in the fossil pit. There was a moment when the Cro-Magnon artist lifted the pigment-dipped natural-fiber brush to the walls of the cave that one now enters with electric light to view the image of the ancient bison on its walls. There was a moment when your*











father died, and his before that, and the same moment when the impulse and attraction between two human beings fused into the one that is yourself, as you will do/have done so many times in the past. There is a moment when the newborn first lets out a cry into the dry air, when the pressure of light first falls on the virgin surface of the new retina and is registered by some pattern of nerve impulses not yet fully "understood." There is a single moment when the flash of insight bursts into your unguarded mind, when all the pieces fall together, when the pattern is seen or the individual element uncovered . . . when the breath of clarity opens the mind and you "see" for the first time in a long while, remembering what it was like again as if suddenly jolted from sleep. There is a moment when a single neuron fires in the darkness within the brain, when a threshold is reached and a tiny spark jumps the gap that physically separates one cell from another, doing the same shimmering dance when the heat of the flame touches the skin or a deep memory replays on the surface of the mind. There is a moment, only truly known in anticipation before it happens, when the eyes close for the last time and the brain shuts down its circuits forever (the end of time). There is also the moment of recognition, the return of the familiar, the second-time perception that releases the latent energy and excitement of the first. It can be in a face, in a landscape, in a desire.

Then there is the moment of awareness of the other, embodied in the physical separation of mother and child, and re-

stated from the first conceptualization of persons and objects in a space outside the skin, to the first encounter with an animal. The power of the gaze crystallizes these moments, and the eyes become the conduits of the exchange of energies between the organism and the environment, between the observer and the observed. A line of sight can just as easily slice through the separation between subject and object as it can define it.

As the gateway to the soul, the pupil of the eye has long been a powerful symbolic image and evocative physical object in the search for knowledge of the self. The color of the pupil is black. It is on this black that you see your self-image when you try and look closely into your own eye, or into the eye of another . . . the largeness of your own image preventing you an unobstructed view within. It is the source of the laughter that culminates the staring game that young children play, and the source of the pressure that a stranger feels on their back in public as they turn to meet the eyes they know are there. It is through this black that we confront the gaze of an animal, partly with fear, with curiosity, with familiarity, with mystery. We see ourselves in its eyes while sensing the irreconcilable otherness of an intelligence ordered around a world we can share in body but not in mind.

Black is a bright light on a dark day, like staring into the sun, the intensity of the source producing the darkness of the protection of the closed eye. It is the black we "see" when all the lights have been turned off, the space between the

glowing electron lines of the video image, the space after the last cut of a film, or the luminous black of the nights of the new moon. If there is a light there, it is only the light searching in the dark room, which, limited by the optical channel within its beam, assumes there to be light everywhere it turns.<sup>8</sup>

## Notes

1. Excerpt from "Sight Unseen: Enlightened Squirrels and Fatal Experiments," *Video 80*, no. 4 (Spring/Summer 1982).
2. *Teachings of Rumi—The Masnavi*, trans. E. H. Whinfield (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1975), p. 16.
3. *Teachings of Rumi*, p. 16.
4. Excerpt from "Sight Unseen."
5. *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kiernan Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1979), p. 67.
6. "Bill Viola: Statements by the Artist," ed. Julia Brown, *Summer 1985* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1985).
7. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David Erdman (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1982), p. 34.
8. Excerpt from *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like*, Videodisc (New York: Voyager Press/The Contemporary Art Television Fund, 1986).



# The Reflecting Pool: Bill Viola and the Visionary Company

| 63

J. HOBERMAN

Neither avant-garde nor mainstream, Bill Viola's videotapes are a site where numerous cultural forces converge. His work draws procedures and thematics from advanced technology and the Romanticism of the counterculture, from the aesthetics of John Cage and those of William Blake, from psychodrama and Zen, from the modernist strategies of self-reflexive, structural filmmaking and the genres of broadcast television. Indeed, Viola has tacitly assigned himself the task of providing an alternate iconography to that offered by the ubiquitous secular religion of American television.

Viola's career has evolved in tandem with the development of his medium. A member of the generation that grew up with television, he is among the first artists to work in video without first having served an apprenticeship in some older field. (Nam June Paik, for example, was originally a composer of electronic music.) Viola's intermittent exercises in visual anthropology, his studies of foreign cultures, recapitulate his own development. As Howard Gardner prophesied in an essay entitled "Cracking the Codes of Television: The Child as Anthropologist," it is "quite possibly those whose 'native tongue' is television [who] will eventually become its greatest poets."<sup>1</sup>

Accomplished as he is, Viola is among the least technocratic of videomakers. The images in his tapes invariably evoke more astonishment for themselves than

for the process, however complex, that produced them. Evolving from a pragmatic structuralism through more romantic constructs and visionary documentaries to tapes that attempt to directly engage the audience as individual viewers, Viola's work is primarily a quest for the self—a desire to "personalize a technology which is economically and politically a corporate institutional medium."<sup>2</sup>

Viola terms his early tapes—those made prior to 1975—"didactic," and

compares them to structural film: "The content was the medium. . . . the act of making a tape became a process of discovering and demonstrating something about video."<sup>3</sup> There is a provocative, Dada-like quality to these tapes appropriate to video's raw, wide-open status as the newest of art forms. In *Passage Series* (1973), for example, Viola contrasts zooms and dollies, at one point emphasizing the moving camera's forward motion by noisily scraping its side against a wall. In *Cycles* (1973) he creates a kind of



*The Space Between the Teeth.* 1976.  
Videotape.





*The Morning After the Night of Power*. 1977. Videotape.

crude strobe by putting a fan in front of a monitor broadcasting daytime television. Viola's early tapes are pragmatic in the extreme: that most of them use "real time" seems, at least in part, a function of the difficulties he would have encountered editing videotape in the early 1970s.

The New American Cinema—a challenge to Hollywood's stylistic codes, the-  
matic concerns, means of production, and mode of distribution mounted by artists as disparate as Stan Brakhage, Andy Warhol, and Michael Snow (to name but three)—was at the height of its prestige when Viola began working in video, and his early tapes employ a number of avant-garde film strategies. Among these is the use of a single, strongly articulated visual idea or a read-

ily apparent overall structure. The major image in *A Non-Dairy Creamer* (1975), for example, is Viola's reflection in a cup of coffee—clearly the tape will end when the coffee is finished. The fixed-camera position and achronological, time-lapse photography of *A Million Other Things* (1975) are strongly suggestive of Ernie Gehr's *Wait*. Similarly, the staccato, headlong motion of *The Space Between the Teeth* (1976) locates the tape in the "structural" tradition of Gehr's *Serene Velocity* and Snow's *Wavelength*.

But if Viola's first tapes are akin to structural films in focusing upon the mechanics of perception and representation, the sensibility they reflect is far closer to the visionary Romanticism of a filmmaker such as Stan Brakhage. Less

literal than structural films, the tapes Viola refers to as "visual poems," "songs," or "allegories" are highly metaphoric, charged with archetypes and symbolic transformations. (Specific titles such as *Truth Through Mass Individuation* and *Songs of Innocence*, both 1976, evoke Carl Jung and William Blake.) The tapes are not necessarily ends in themselves, but guides to a transcendent vision. Viola, like Brakhage, is a seer, and associates transcendence with the creative imagination, seeking a reality beyond reason or the senses. Video, he maintains, is "sensitive to far more than what the camera 'sees' and the microphone 'hears.'"<sup>4</sup> And again like Brakhage, Viola founds his "poems" upon a denial of language: "Any spoken words in my work have just been part of the sound landscape."<sup>5</sup>

This dialectic of sight and imagination (or nature and consciousness) is most pronounced in the tapes Viola produced between 1976 and 1979. *The Morning After the Night of Power* (1977)—the title is derived from the Koran—is a stage-managed epiphany. As rigorously designed as any of Viola's structural tapes, the piece offers a homely still life as a kind of found mandala: A static camera records the shifting light in a room with a window that looks out onto a suburban lawn. Off-screen space is dramatized by various sounds and reflections; most actions are restricted to the periphery of the frame, thus emphasizing the static ceramic vase at the center of the composition. Toward the end of the tape the vase takes on a slight glow and a heightened definition, as if charged by our



concentration. Finally, the zoom lens changes focal-length to extreme telephoto, focusing on the lawn outside the window. The position of the vase, however remains fixed so that it seems to fly out of the room.

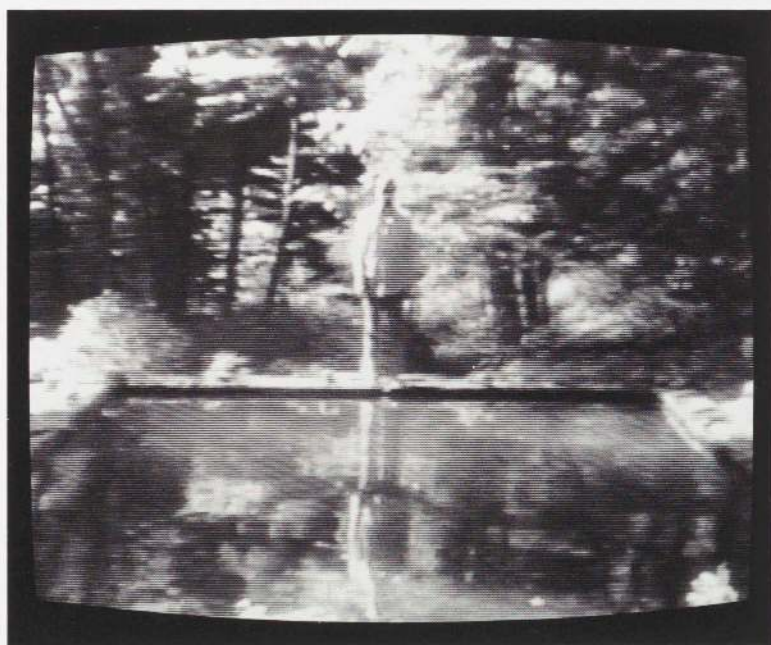
Similarly, the tapes of "The Reflecting Pool" cycle (1977-80) dramatize the mystic contemplation of space that characterize structural film while employing video special effects with an unusual degree of restraint. (Viola's self-discipline in the face of video's "f/x"—special effects—cornucopia reproaches Harold Bloom's observation that "every Romantic has a tendency to drink unnecessarily from the Circean cup of illusion."<sup>6</sup> The tape that gives its name to "The Reflecting Pool" cycle is at once an image of rebirth and a metaphor for Viola's art.

A static camera frames a sylvan pool. Standing at the water's edge, Viola suddenly jumps out over the pool and is frozen in midair. Meanwhile the water surface continues to ripple, reflect non-existent people, and otherwise function as an electronic mirror. Viola's motionless body gradually dissolves, but at the end of the tape, he climbs naked from the pool and walks away.

Since 1976, when Viola gained access to sophisticated post-production facilities, virtually all of his tapes have been of broadcast quality. He has written that computer editing gave him a holistic, rather than linear, sense of composition.<sup>7</sup> Certainly it freed him from the constraints of working in real time. On one hand, this allowed him to explore subjective temporal states—as Mircea Eliade

has pointed out, sacred time is not homogenous but rather discontinuous in intensity, "hierophanized" by various rituals or the rhythms of nature.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, computer editing allowed Viola to challenge the conventional nature of the video present—an immediacy predicated on the continuous quality of the electronic signal, yet rendered spurious by the paradox of instant feedback.

In the individual tapes that make up "The Reflecting Pool" cycle, Viola used computer editing to work within the individual frame as well as from shot to shot. In *The Reflecting Pool* itself, he explained, "the frame is broken up into three distinct levels of time—real time, still, and time lapse—and reconstructed to look like a complete image of a single space," terming this form of electronic photomontage "sculpting with time."<sup>9</sup> Viola's phrase is virtually identical to that used by the Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky: "Time, printed in its factual forms and manifestations [is] the supreme idea of cinema as art. . . . Cinema, like no other art, widens, enhances and concentrates a person's experience. . . . What is the essence of the director's work? We could define it as sculpting in time."<sup>10</sup> (Viola would probably subscribe to another of Tarkovsky's statements: "The goal for all art—unless of course it is aimed at the 'consumer,' like a saleable commodity—is to explain to the artist himself and to those around him what man lives for, what is the meaning of his existence on this planet; or if not to explain, at least to pose the question."<sup>11</sup>) In the most ambitious of Viola's temporal

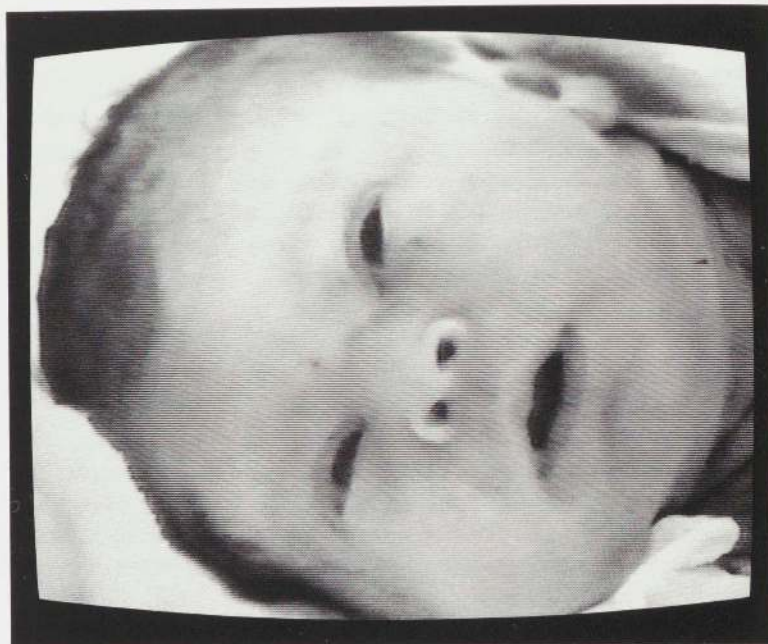


*The Reflecting Pool.*  
1977-79. Videotape.





*Moonblood*. 1977–79.  
Videotape.



*Silent Life*. 1979.  
Videotape.

constructions, *Ancient of Days* (1979–81), duration becomes the major plastic element: here the use of slow and reverse motion, as well as time-lapse videography, have the precise effect of making time tactile; it becomes a medium in itself.

The five tapes that make up “The Reflecting Pool” cycle are the most self-consciously archetypal in Viola’s oeuvre, evoking birth, rebirth, the feminine principle, the underworld, and death. But the cycle itself seems a transitional work, composed of three temporal constructions—*The Reflecting Pool* (1977–79), *Moonblood* (1977–79), and *Ancient of Days*—and two (originally three) tapes

that might be termed “visionary documentaries.”

*Silent Life* (1979), the first and most conventional of these, was shot in the infant nursery of Long Island Jewish Hospital and consists mainly of static close-ups of newborn babies. Despite Viola’s quiet camera, his obsessive, selective visual interrogation of a highly charged institutional setting suggests Brakhage’s “Pittsburg Trilogy” (film-investigations of three municipal institutions—a police station, a morgue, and a hospital). The videomaker’s ambiguous point of view, and Brakhagian desire to break through cultural conditioning to grasp some primal level of perception,

is further suggested by his remark that, “in a very real sense, these are the first images.”<sup>12</sup>

No less straightforward, *Sodium Vapor* (1979) is a nocturnal study of street lamps and traffic lights in Viola’s lower Manhattan neighborhood. If *Silent Life* proposes itself as a vision of primordial innocence, *Sodium Vapor* (which was originally included in “The Reflecting Pool” cycle) is an Orphic descent. For Viola the tape “represents the dark side of the earth—the night underworld of perpetual darkness.”<sup>13</sup> Paradoxically, this darkness is what permits Viola his most intense meditation on the quality of video light, as diffused in the mist, as

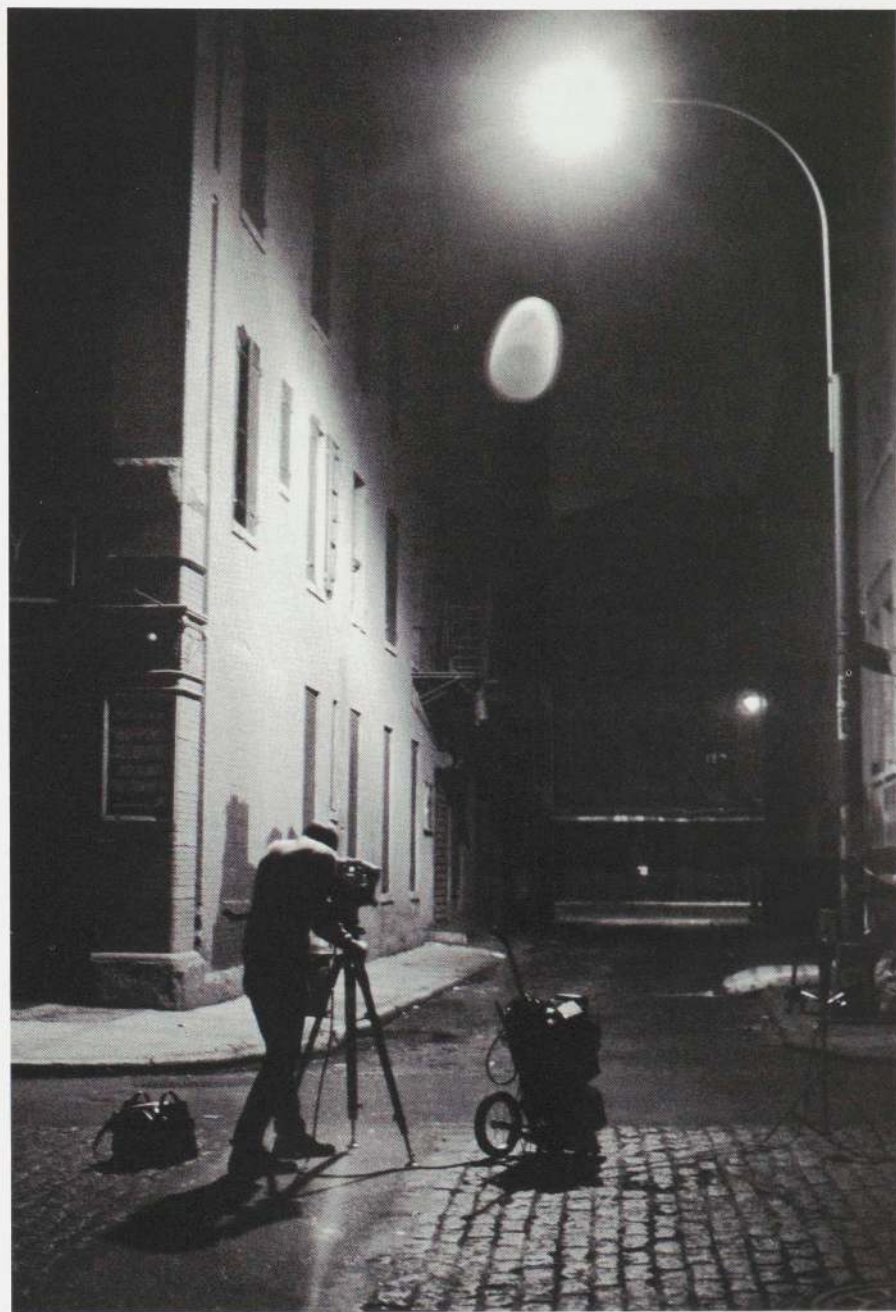


reflected in puddles, or as burning after-images on the screen.

Although the material for *Vegetable Memory* (1978-80) was recorded before *Sodium Vapor* and *Silent Life*, the tape was not completed until afterward. Viola considers this his first documentary in the sense that it had no predetermined script but was shot spontaneously, with a Betamax camera in Tokyo's Tsukiji fish market. (The raw material was then edited at the Television Laboratory at WNET/Thirteen in New York.) Although the opening image—a backward (and upside) dive out of the water and into the air—recalls and reverses that of *The Reflecting Pool*, *Vegetable Memory* is a far less contemplative, more kinetic work.

Still, for all its sensuous imagery and apparent *verité*, *Vegetable Memory* is the most rigorously organized of Viola's tapes. Using the crude "chroma noise," or graininess of the Betamax image, as a formal element, he repeats the same sequence eight times, varying the speed from frantic pixillation to exaggerated slow motion to create "a kind of temporal magnifying glass."<sup>14</sup> But the structure is, initially at least, overwhelmed by the fantastic drama it depicts—the assembly-line process in which huge frozen tunas are hosed down, hacked apart, and packaged for shipping. That Viola saw this procedure in metaphysical (if not metaphoric) terms is suggested by his description of the tape as "a vision of the afterlife in a God-less world."<sup>15</sup>

Bill Viola on location  
for *Sodium Vapor*,  
New York, 1979.





In the course of completing "The Reflecting Pool" cycle, Viola taped the most celebrated of his visionary documentaries, *Chott el-Djerid* (1979). Named for the dry salt lake where most of it was shot and subtitled *A Portrait in Heat and Light*, *Chott el-Djerid* is Viola's most sustained contemplation of a landscape, a half-hour documentation of mirages, heat angels, and fata morganas in the Tunisian desert. The tape opens on a snowy midwestern plain. A tree emerges out of a white field, an isolated farmhouse appears to undulate in the wind and the cold. After a black dot crosses the horizon of this forbidding tundra, Viola cuts to a matching vista in the middle of the Sahara—a brilliant blue sky over golden sands.

Keeping the horizon low in his com-

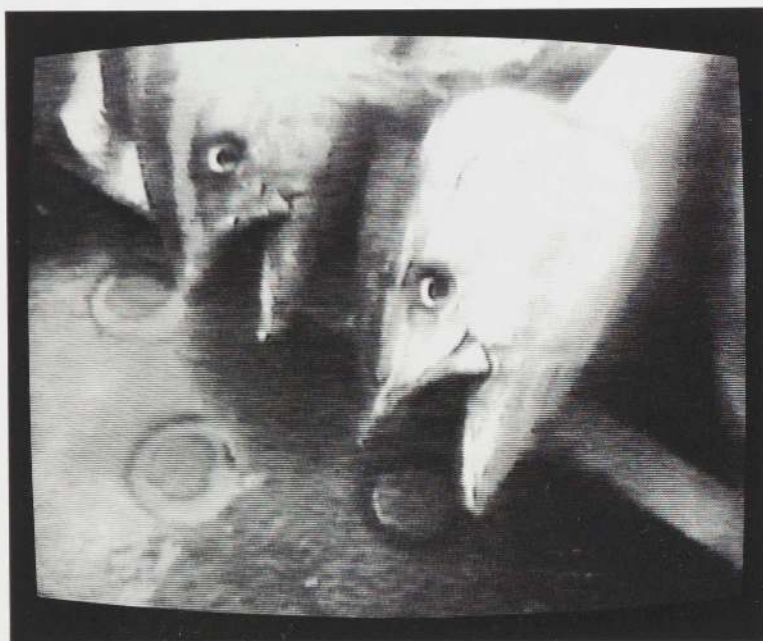
positions, Viola employs an extreme telephoto lens to isolate distant bits of the landscape, miniaturizing objects in a flattened, epic space. Bleached mosques seem to flutter like flags, shimmering buses are reflected in the road, mysterious purple poles dance against the horizon, forms merge as if seen underwater, vistas melt into fantastic Jovian striations. *Chott el-Djerid* is as otherworldly as a NASA documentary; its sherbet-colored images suggest a marvelous synthesis of Claude Monet's haystacks and Kenneth Noland's stripes. (Taping in the desert, Viola has written, "was like physically being inside someone else's dream."<sup>16</sup>)

*Chott el-Djerid* coincided with a new interest in landscape shown by avant-garde filmmakers, many of them self-

consciously moving beyond structural film. In a 1979 article published in *Millenium Film Journal*, Paul Arthur wondered whether the rural landscape had replaced "the windowed interior spaces so favored by previous avant-garde modes." Arthur associated this new tendency (which had "little or no precedent in film history") with recent works by James Benning, Larry Gottheim, and others, arguing that the landscape film offered "a 'way out' of an increasingly impacted—and evasive—impulse to denature the photographic event by processes such as optical printing and superimposition." At the same time landscape remained receptive to the vocabulary of structural film, providing "a relatively depersonalized pro-filmic space still open to extensive foregrounding of material relations—light, grain, the support, temporal duration."<sup>17</sup>

In a similar way *Chott* represents a break in Viola's work—a way out from the constructed image, if not an absolute revelation. Having discovered an actual imaginary landscape, the videomaker is free to simply document this paradox: "If one believes that mental hallucinations are the manifestations of some chemical imbalance in the brain, then mirages and desert heat distortions can be considered hallucinations of the landscape."<sup>18</sup> Thus *Chott* is filled with natural or found "processed imagery." Moreover, these mirages simply represent themselves. For the first time since his earliest tapes, Viola eschews metaphor and allegory; as Harold Rosenberg once noted, "to find art in nature makes art superfluous."<sup>19</sup>

At the same time, *Chott* has a spiritual



*Vegetable Memory.*  
1978–80. Videotape.





*Chott el-Djerid*  
(*A Portrait in Light*  
and Heat). 1979.  
Videotape.

quality largely absent from the landscape films described by Arthur. As the Koran and Old Testament amply indicate, the desert is an incubator of visions—not to mention world religions. If *Chott* dovetails with a contemporary trend in the New American Cinema, the tape's austere symmetries, jewel-like precision, and virtuoso arrangement of "emptiness" have a marked but unforced affinity with traditional Islamic art. *Chott el-Djerid* and its successor, the 1981 *Hatsu Yume* (*First Dream*), exemplify the confluence between electronic technology and rapt anthropology—"the more primitive dimensions of experience"—that the Italian aesthete Mario Perniola sees as the salient characteristic of post-television art, "an art that is no longer seen in terms of style or the avant-garde,

but as a network and a rite."<sup>20</sup>

No less exotic than *Chott*, *Hatsu Yume* was produced during Viola's unprecedented artist-in-residency at Sony's Atsugi plant. The longest and most complex of his tapes up to that point, it is characterized by the absence of any special effects other than slow motion. Although Viola considers *Hatsu Yume* his "least literal" work, his symbolism here is far more integrated than in "The Reflecting Pool" cycle.<sup>21</sup> The tape's first movement suggests a metaphoric birth of the world—slow, deliberate images of the sunrise, the sea, a bamboo forest, a windswept mountain, a fishing village, and a Shinto shrine. The images are striking not only for themselves but also for their clarity and unusually high definition. *Hatsu Yume* was shot with the

Sony BVP 300A, a professional broadcast camera; rarely has any video artist had the opportunity to demonstrate what this standard piece of industry hardware can do.

Much of *Hatsu Yume* was taped at night or under extremely low light levels, including one scene illuminated by the glow of a single match. Viola expands upon the method of *Sodium Vapor* but to far different effect: *Hatsu Yume's* nocturnes contain a virtual surplus of naturally processed imagery. The first night scene, shot aboard a fishing trawler, is as hallucinated as the arrival of the ocean liner in Fellini's *Amarcord*. Red, blue, and yellow lights are smeared by the lens and reflected in the water. Glistening pink-orange squid writhe on deck in extreme close-up; a fisherman smokes a cigarette and flicks it into the sea in molasses slow motion. At times the fantastic interplay of the slatted, floating traps and their reflections suggest the video equivalent of Monet's lily pond.

Later taking his camera into downtown Tokyo, Viola shoots from a moving car and makes deliberate use of image lag. Its motion retarded, the traffic becomes a blur of forcelines, headlights burning visceral afterimages onto the screen. By taping through the windshield during a heavy rain, Viola produces a fantastic deluge of neon blue, iridescent green, and electric mango. After a few sumptuous minutes this surge of churning refractions—a reflexive metaphor for any camera-based art (not to mention processed video)—resolves itself through an invisible cut into



*Reverse Television—  
Portraits of Viewers.*  
1983. Broadcast project  
with WGBH-TV  
Boston.

macro close-ups of a pool filled with gold and red carp. This is the most ecstatic of Viola's many invocations of water as the primal fluid: "Video treats lights like water—it becomes a fluid on the video tube," he wrote in his notes for *Hatsu Yume*. "Water supports the fish like light supports man."<sup>22</sup>

Viola's recent tapes seem to engage more directly the idea of broadcast television. *Anthem* (1983) is a metaphoric portrait of the modern world akin to, but less assimilable and more ambiguous than, Geoffrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi*. Viola's images include industrial landscapes, street scenes, and assorted surgeries, establishing a dichotomy between nature and culture and the body and the city. As the title suggests, the piece has a musical structure: Viola takes a shot of a young girl screaming beneath the arc of a vast rotunda and slows it down to derive a scale of seven harmonic notes. Ranging from Tibetan growling to a high-pitched whine, these structure the tape as well as provide its soundtrack. Viola has indicated that he sees *Anthem* as a combination religious chant and music video, centered on themes of "primal fears" and "darkness."<sup>23</sup>

More compelling, the austere black-and-white tape *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House* records the video-maker's attempt to stay awake for seventy-two hours while confined to the upstairs room of a deserted building.



(As Viola himself is the subject, the tape involves another sort of "sculpting with time.") The camera never moves and the raw footage has been distilled to nineteen minutes, linked together with dissolves. Despite this psychodramatic premise, however, *Reasons for Knocking* is mainly an exercise in perception and can be seen as a brilliant reworking of Viola's earliest tapes.

Like those, *Reasons for Knocking* has a strong connection to *Wavelength*, Michael Snow's forty-five-minute zoom

shot from one end of a downtown loft to the other: there's a comparable emphasis on subtle changes in light and sound, on the room's windows as frames-within-the-frame, and on the spatial ambiguities of the two-dimensional image. Instead of a zoom, however, Viola uses a wide-angle lens to create a compelling, boxlike space. Three walls, the floor, and the ceiling are all visible, and there are no parallel lines. Again Viola demonstrates that for producing special effects, a simple camera is often enough. As Amy



Taubin has pointed out, this distorted perspective matches the shape of the cathode ray tube: "*Reasons for Knocking* uses the optical bend produced by the wide-angle lens to resolve the image and the curved shape of the screen into a single architectural space."<sup>24</sup>

With this video-specific representation of deep space, *Reasons for Knocking* directs attention to the nature of the TV monitor as insistently in its way as Joan Jonas's *Vertical Roll*. Perhaps this is what Viola meant when he told an interviewer that *Reasons for Knocking* "makes directly visible the nature of the viewing experience. It's very long and difficult to watch, people squirm in their seats; it's a sort of confrontation."<sup>25</sup> It follows that Viola's next project would be *Reverse Television*—a series of thirty-second portraits of viewers sitting in their living rooms and staring at the camera as though it were their television set. Broadcast over WGBH-TV, Boston in 1984, these portraits punctuated normal programming the way advertising spots would on commercial stations.

However deadpan, this dispersed, cumulative work subscribes to that aspect of Romanticism that calls for revolt against mental limitations and social conditioning.<sup>26</sup> Here Viola deranges the television system to challenge his viewers. For him *Reverse Television* is another form of piercing the veil—it is as if the broadcast network suddenly reveals itself, person to person. "I never thought about [video] in terms of images so much as electronic process, a signal," he told the interviewer. "I slowly began to consider video as a total living system. . . .

The missing element was, of course, the viewer."<sup>27</sup>

*Reverse Television* bids to complete the circuit, to enlist the spectator in Viola's attempt to claim television as sacred space: "The television medium, when coupled with the human mind, can offer us sight beyond the range of our everyday consciousness," he has declared, "but only if it is our desire, both as viewers and as creators to want to do so."<sup>28</sup>

In 1986 Viola completed his most ambitious tape to date, the lucid and transfixing *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like*. As its title—taken from the *Rig-Veda*—indicates, the piece is a drama of religious faith (albeit one with an unabashed love for disorder) that expresses a yearning for a reality beyond the senses and outside history, even while suggesting the impossibility of grasping such a reality.

In some respects, *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* is a series of zoological observations, cast in the mode of a heroic quest. The ninety-minute tape is divided into five sections, each, according to Viola, "a different consciousness representing the world."<sup>29</sup> A plunge into a lake and a brief exploration of a cavern filled with startlingly organic stalactites gives way to "Il Corpo Scuro (The Dark Body)," which opens with a congress of flies swarming over the carcass of a dead buffalo. For the next fifteen minutes or so—long enough to establish a sense of brute, prehistoric existence—buffalo tranquilly graze on some shimmering prairie. Viola periodically zooms in on

one ancient, reproachful eye, flooding the screen with inexplicable, reproachful being.

Viola's mode of address is strictly species-to-species; he turns himself into a creature as well. The artist is first glimpsed reflected in the pulsating pupil of an owl's eye, then—in the third section, "The Night of Sense"—seen at his desk, taking notes as he studies his footage on a tiny monitor, and finally shown eating his solitary dinner. There is a baroque gloom to this midnight repast, rendered unexpectedly cruel by huge close-ups of the artist's knife and fork dissecting a fish.

This violent onslaught is followed by that of "Stunned by the Drum," in which the camera appears to be attacked by a German shepherd, precipitating a rush of stroboscopic imagery. The tape's ultimate sequence is a theatrical account of Hindu fire worship—a flamboyant, masochistic display involving needles and hot coals—shot in slow motion and accompanied by wailing bagpipes. A coda returns to the mountain lake where the tape opened; in a single bit of special-effects wizardry, a fish appears to fly like a bird before decomposing on the shore. Although the tone of *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* is unsentimental and straightforward (a corrective to every nature documentary ever televised), the religious pageantry, images of baptism and immersion, mystical communion, and sacred ingestion, suggest an undercurrent of Catholic imagery in Viola's otherwise flinty Zen world view.

Just as *Hatsu Yume* restricted its special effects to slow motion, and *Reasons*



for *Knocking at an Empty House* limited itself to the distortive effects of a wide-angle lens, so *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* takes the close-up as its operative principle. The strategy is most dramatically elaborated when Viola leaves the animal kingdom to lock gazes with assorted fish and birds—their “faces” at once comically human and terrifyingly Other, the videomaker’s reflection in their alien eyes becoming increasingly evident.

As in *Reverse Television*, although to even more disquieting effect, these staring creatures seem to hypostacize Viola’s sense of video as a “living system.” Viola reminds us that, unlike film, video is essentially dematerialized. Thus *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* is more a process than it is an object, a transmission rather than a representation: “The most important place it exists,” Viola has said, “is in the memory of someone who has seen it.”<sup>30</sup>

## Notes

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6. Harold Bloom, *The Ringers in the Tower: Studies in Romantic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 4.
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14. *Bill Viola*, p. 31.
15. Viola, *Proposal*, n.p.
16. *Bill Viola*, p. 29.
17. Paul Arthur, “Structural Film: Revisions, New Versions, and the Artifact, Part Two,” *Millennium Film Journal* 4/5 (Summer/Fall 1979), pp. 127–28.
18. *Bill Viola*, p. 29.
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21. Deirdre Boyle, “Interview with Bill Viola,” *Bill Viola*, p. 13.
22. *Bill Viola*, p. 33.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
24. Amy Taubin, *Press notes: Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House* (New York: The Kitchen, 1983).
25. Bellour, p. 108.
26. See Bloom, p. 324.
27. Bellour, p. 94.
28. *Bill Viola*, p. 4.
29. Michael Nash, “Bill Viola’s Re-Visions of Mortality,” *High Performance*, No. 37 (1987), p. 63.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 63.



# Bill Viola: Deconstructing Presence

DONALD KUSPIT

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*Usually, in recalling a scene or describing a dream, we do so from a mysterious, detached, third point of view.*

—Bill Viola

The issue of presence, which informs all of Viola's work, and which video is peculiarly suited to address, is already stated in Viola's first tape, *Wild Horses* (1972). Images of highly trained horses alternate with images of violent, wild horses, then interlock. This doubling leads to a flattening, a blurring and abstracting. An image of a primitive horse from one of the prehistoric caves emerges and eventually dissolves. The regression from the civilized to the primitive to the archetypal continues into infinity. What appeared to be real has become just an appearance—an illusion—but is all the more psychologically significant for that. It is this transmutation of reality into appearance, and appearance into reality—the ambiguity and uncertainty of which is which, and the generally dialectical character of their relationship—that is the substance of Viola's art.

In Viola's tapes we sense that he is manipulating the instantaneous—stretching it, or exaggerating its effect of momentariness. An instantaneous appearance is transformed: it is either extended through slow motion, so that it seems unendurably long and becomes a duration, ultimately unconceptualizable, immeasurable—a moment that seems to last an eternity, to transcend every other moment, and to obviate the very notion of moment it grows out of; or it is speeded up, until it seems to occur with greater instantaneity than the tick of a

clock, yet is never so irreducibly instantaneous that it cannot be further "momentized." Viola plays with our sense of time, blending our contradictory experience of it as duration and perspective or tense.<sup>1</sup>

His sophisticated use of space restores our most primitive sense of time. The philosopher Henri Bergson has said that we conceptualize time in terms of space, but Viola uses the terms of space—velocity, simultaneity, and succession—to recover an experience of time that is inseparable from primitive affective experience and outlook. It is the child's sense of time, built "on the perception of subjective reality in terms of tension-arousing, libidinal, or aggressive drives,"<sup>2</sup> that is, "on perceptions and personal displacements or object movements,"<sup>3</sup> especially the movement of beings important to the child's existence—beings who because they are caught up in the child's affective field become part of its experience of time. This is the way the objects and persons in Viola's video function. Viola alternately softens or hardens the image so it seems "driven," an affective field of completely fluid time that is so Heraclitean the same object never appears in it twice; it becomes like time itself, in Bergson's words, "a continual invention of forms ever new."<sup>4</sup> He in effect restores what Piaget called the "magico-phenomenist" concept of causality, wherein the child regards himself as the cause of the phenomena that constitute the world.<sup>5</sup> It is a world unrepresentable apart from the child's representation of itself, which is what, finally, Viola gives us: a world of

internal objects, existing in a timeless space of ceaseless transition.

Viola recreates what Winnicott called the "moment of illusion."<sup>6</sup> It is the magic moment when the infant imagines it has created the object of its desire because desire for that object and possession of it seemed simultaneous. There was no postponement of gratification: the particular object was magically there when the infant wanted some object, or rather, wanted its instinctual needs to be satisfied and, lo and behold, this particular object miraculously appeared. The infant's desire represents itself through fantasies, hallucinations; when real objects capable of satisfying desire correspond spatio-temporally with the hallucinated objects, the infant believes it has conjured the real objects. It experiences the power of a god, enjoys a grandiose feeling of reality existing for it. Actually the infant has no ability to distinguish between reality and illusion, or rather, it sees reality through illusions—fantasy. Viola's best work puts us on the infant's primitive level of comprehension. To return us to this ecstatic infantile state of perception is not only to realize the great romantic dream of childlike vision, but to deconstruct presence. It is to put us on a level of experience where "time and affects interdigitate,"<sup>7</sup> and where objects self-deconstruct—lose their ordinary, obvious presence to become extraordinarily present.

Viola is a master of showing the hallucinatory underpinnings of our sense of reality, of making manifest our inherently fantastic sense of it. It seems both eternally timely in its givenness—given



with all the energy of the subject who desires it to be given, and thus given with a special substantiality—and a mirage or empty appearance once it is clearly there, that is, once it has given satisfaction. He has shown the profound subjectivity that goes into the experience of “objective” presence.

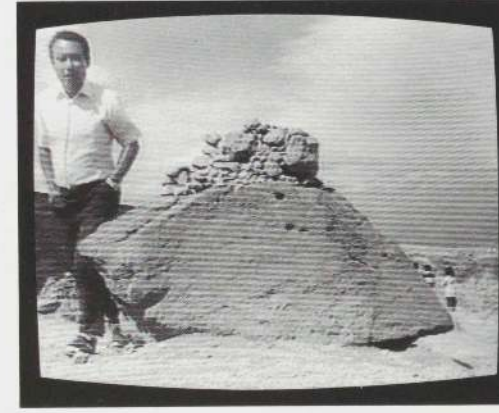
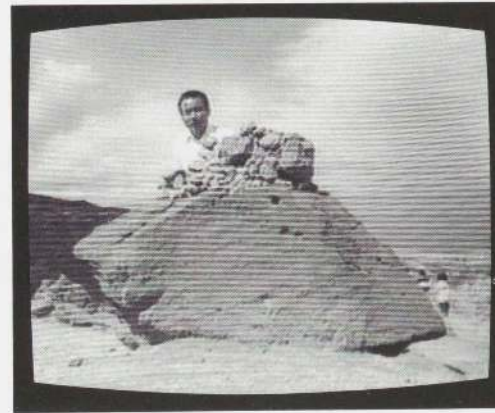
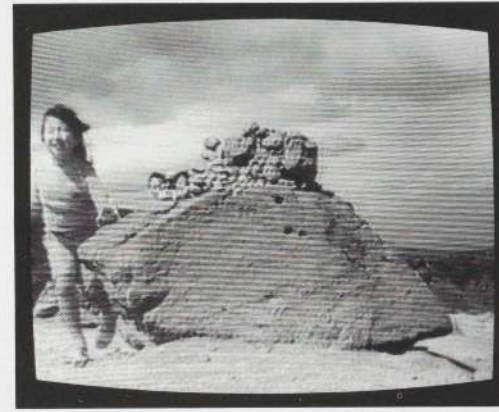
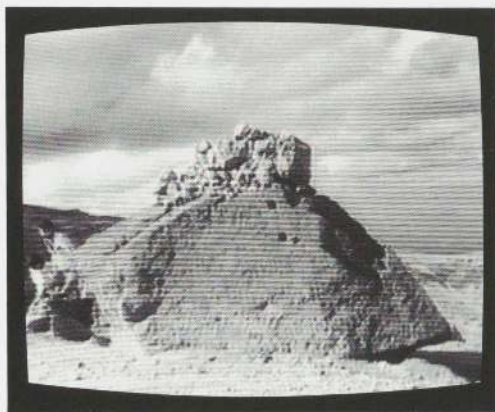
From the start, then, Viola was preoccupied with the way things had presence, wanting at once to articulate presence and to dissect it. Viola asserts that “imagination is our key to the doorway of perception” and makes Blake’s project his own: to cleanse “the doors of perception” so that “everything would appear to man as it is—infinite.” The infant sees everything in its infinitude. When a thing appears infinite rather than finite its presence has radically changed. It can no longer really be said to have presence—to be given—in the conventional sense, but rather to inhabit what has been called the specious present. When a thing is perceived as infinite its presence self-deconstructs. In a sense, when something deconstructs it reveals that it is not finite in its construction. When one sees eternity in a grain of sand, as Blake apparently did, one is seeing that grain of sand as either an infinite duration or an infinite continuum of instants. Both reveal the moment of presence of the grain of sand to be inexhaustible. The momentary presence of the grain of sand is not what it seems to be. It is at once more intense in its objectness and more extensive in its temporality—complicatedly given—than it appears to be to uncleaned perception.

In *Hatsu Yume (First Dream)* (1981) Viola seems to reinvent the Blakean experience of seeing eternity in a grain of sand, or rather, in its equivalent, a group of stones. They become sacred, acquiring a Zen sense of infinite immediacy as a result of the changes our perception of them undergoes. (Viola pursues Buddhist enlightenment, showing freedom from attachment in the very act of disclosing the primitive desire that creates attachment. It is the freedom that comes from selflessness, which allows experience of the illusoriness of things as well as their infinite immediacy.) Seen by themselves, the stones loom mountainous and infinite. They abruptly become finite when measured by the human figure—brought down to banal earth by the human presence. Yet they remain peculiarly infinite; slow motion makes them speciously present, transforms them into duration. In Viola’s hands video becomes the instrument privileged to reveal the infinity that constitutes the givenness of things; this infinity breaks down the apparent spatial finitude of their givenness, showing it to be less irreducible or indivisible than expected. Presence is more illusion than reality, or rather, it is both. Once perception is cleansed, the illusoriness of finite presence and the reality of infinite presence are experienced simultaneously. Viola shows not only that the state we are in when we perceive “reality” is responsible for our sense of it, but what Reality would be without human presence. He implies that human presence is an unnecessary intrusion on Reality, undermining its eternal verity.

It often takes some time to conceptualize what is going on in a Viola tape, that is, what is occurring according to the standards of ordinary, uncleaned perception. Thus in *Junkyard Levitation*, one of “Four Songs” (1976), it only slowly dawns on us that the abstract scene we are watching is really a magnet picking up metal. The scene may be an illusion in the mind of the meditating figure seated cross-legged by the railroad. In the second tape, *Songs of Innocence* (explicitly alluding to Blake’s poems of the same title), Viola uses one of his major, habitual, ready-to-the-eye means of showing the illusion and infinity of everything: the change of light as the day passes. Light changes, but it is timeless. It is the form of Plato’s time, the “moving image of eternity.” (Illusion and the infinite are experienced as simultaneous, because seen as infinite, a thing is revealed as an illusion.) Dusk and dawn come and go, obliterating and restoring the singing children, showing them to be at once illusion and reality. The progress of light functions as the space of reflection in which the illusory and the actual differentiate, but also lose their distinctiveness. Emblematic flame and flowers are also shown, epitomizing the process—as well as signaling its naturalness. They are short-lived yet regenerate, and so in a sense eternal. They symbolize the experience of the eternal Viola is trying to evoke; this is essentially a borderline, abstract experience in

*Hatsu Yume (First Dream)*. 1981.  
Videotape.









which we seem to exist on the boundary between the actual and the illusory, almost so they can no longer be clearly differentiated—so that we can find no criterion for firmly grounding their difference—which leads us to recognize the superficiality of the reason they were differentiated in the first place. When the actually enduring and the transient (and thereby seemingly illusory) can no longer be clearly separated, one of the fundamental ways one discovers and experiences the difference that presence

makes has been undercut. It is replaced with a sense of undifferentiated—infinite—presence, which is far from the same thing. One comes to float in Viola's sea of images, experiencing the undifferentiated duration of one's own presence the way Bergson metaphorically said one did: as though listening to music with one's eyes closed, "allowing for the difference among the sounds to disappear, then losing track of the distinctive features of the sound itself, except for the sense of an incessant tran-

*Junkyard Levitation.*  
1976. Videotape.

sition . . . a sense of multiplicity . . . and of succession without separation."<sup>8</sup>

In *Migration* (1976) a kitchen scene slowly comes into being. When it at last *is*, it seems representational, realistic; when it is still in the process of becoming, it seems abstract, unearthly. Both ways, it is wondrous. The passage from becoming to being is accompanied (to the primitive mind caused?) by the ring of an invisible gong. Is this sound emblematic of Viola's "mysterious, detached, third point of view"—the mind within the mind, the solipsistic consciousness that seems to create being, but that also knows it is an illusion? Viola is demonstrating Maya, the experience of the illusoriness of it all. Yet that experience of illusoriness signals the sovereignty of consciousness, its delusion of mastery of the world of appearance through perception. Through its reduction of the world to illusion it objectifies its sense of omnipotence, its primitive feeling of being in control of appearances—that the world exists for it through its perception. When, in *Migration*, a figure emerges, it quickly becomes a reflection—an empty perception—a face in the bowl of water on the table. The tape ends with perception closing in on water dripping from a small spigot. As we come close the dripping slows down. The closer—more immediate—our perception, the more timeless it seems. We are experiencing water as we would in the unconscious, as though it is eternal. Freud has said that "impressions



... which have been sunk into the id by repression are virtually immortal; after the passage of decades they behave as though they had just occurred."<sup>9</sup>

We experience water, here and elsewhere in Viola's work, as though it has just occurred, yet is eternal. We are recalled to time by entering into the flow of the water, where the figure is suddenly clearly reflected, but upside down—a sign of its illusoriness, going against the grain of our experience of it as real. The clear and the unclear, and right-side-up and upside-down, like the smooth and the rough, are textures of perception that ambiguously enhance and undermine our sense of the real, reversably conveying illusion and reality. The sense of what is illusion and reality in a Viola work is complicated by the fact that what is eternal appears to be an illusion because it is recovered from an unconscious depth.

What is reality and what is illusion? In *Chott el-Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat)* (1979) the question of the difference becomes agonizing, without being answered; for it is an unanswerable question, one that relates to our state of mind as we perceive. We are initially in a white Northern winter, with a figure and farm buildings coming out of the snow. With the passage of time we perceive a figure walking laboriously and silently in the snow, and finally falling. The issue is not man against the elements, but rather the place of the figure in the field of perception, as a marker of

its process—of the ambiguity between its own sense of its becoming and what its becoming brings into being—of its inability and its ability to differentiate between itself and its objects, and of the uncertain necessity of doing so. The differentiation just happens. Even when we shift season and world, go into the shimmering desert, where mirage and real confuse, the perception of difference remains poignantly problematic. One has a sense of the concreteness of visibility, but also of the concreteness—the vis-

ibility—of the invisible. That is, difference—between snow and desert, winter and summer, cold and heat, mirage and fact, this and that kind of white light, and between the raw world of nature and the civilized world of human habitation, the unconfined outdoors and the confined indoors—exists, but the differences do and do not reconcile. It is concreteness of difference as such that counts—illusion and reality being the ultimate difference for Viola—not the preference for one or the other.



*Songs of Innocence.*  
1976. Videotape.



What is present on Viola's screen is defined by what is absent, if inevitable with time. What is present is never simply given, an elementary fact, with the authority of the self-evidently and autonomously present, but an effect of and part of a process of difference. A deconstruction theorist wrote, "the notion of presence and of the present is derived: an effect of difference. 'We thus come,' writes [Jacques] Derrida, 'to posit presence . . . no longer as the absolute matrix form of being but rather as a "particularization" and "effect." A determination and effect within a system that is no longer that of presence but of difference.'"<sup>10</sup> Viola's deconstruction of presence involves a radical demonstration of perceptual differences—of perception as a process of differentiation that uncovers the root differences that constitute it. They are the source of the seeming "presences" that it uncovers, presents as self-evidently the case. Viola not only "designates . . . a 'passive' difference already in place as the condition of signification" and creates "act(s) of differing which produce differences"<sup>11</sup> through "deconstructive reversals, which give pride of place to what had been thought marginal"<sup>12</sup> in perception—the abstractly blurry, the accidental or contingent, that is, all that can be experienced as illusory—but is representing "*différence*."

I think this occurs especially in the scenes already mentioned in which figures move in slow motion by a grouping of stones that becomes smaller when it is measured by them than when it exists alone. This kind of change of scale is one

way of representing *différence*. Viola's manipulation of the tension between our sense of empathic intimacy with and settled distance between things (Viola unsettles both as part of his deconstruction of presence)—operating especially in Viola's numerous water and light scenes—is another way in which *différence* is represented.

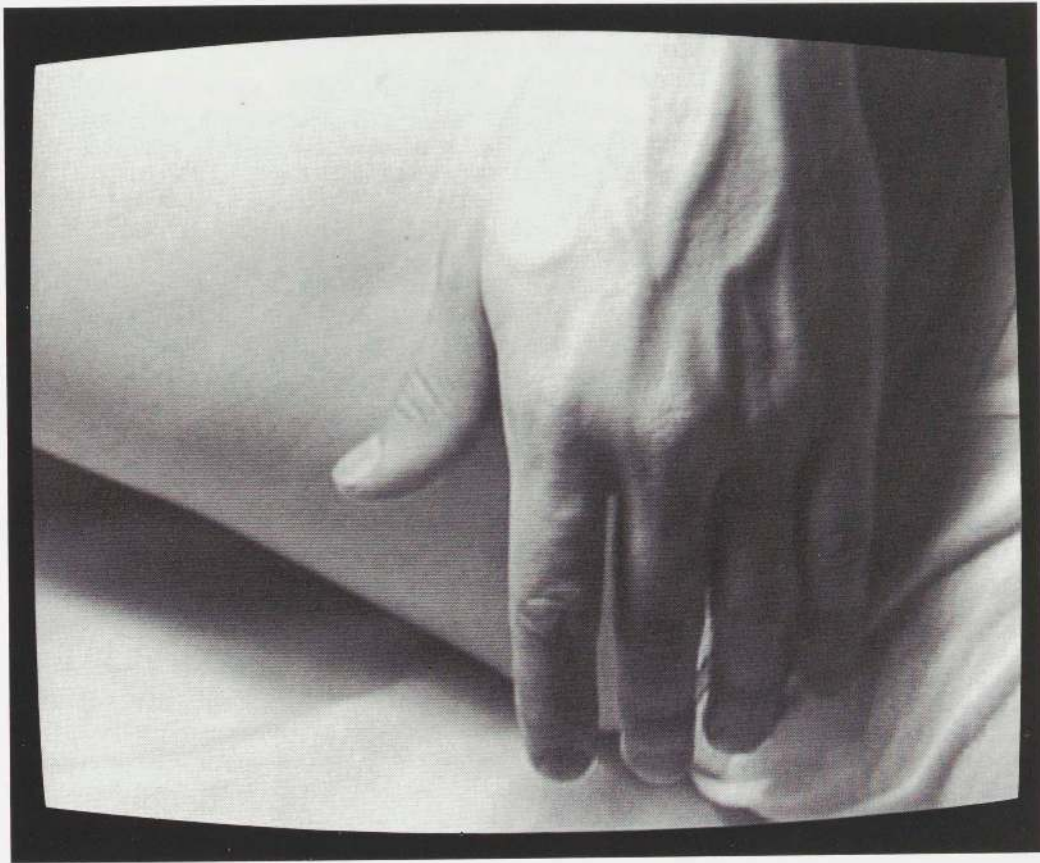
Viola's objects are presences that become markers of difference—especially his figures, which represent our sense of the difference we make in the perceived scene. This is inseparable from our sense of the difference we make to ourselves, that is, our sense of our differentness to ourselves over time. Viola deals with this directly in *Reasons for Knocking at any Empty House* (1983), where we watch him attempting to stay awake alone for three days and nights. In that work the experience of self that is the basis of perception becomes explicit. The changes in light correlate with changes in mood as Viola struggles against his desire for sleep, a natural, instinctive human activity. (This work, like many others, conveys a veiled social commentary on the disturbing unnaturalness—distance from the cosmic and instinctive rhythms of being (which correlate)—of civilized life. Viola reveals the discontents of civilization as much as he reveals the pleasurable rhythms of natural being—of being natural.) This correlation dedifferentiates figure and scene. The house of heaven, in which the changes in light occur, becomes one with the house of the self, in which the changes of mood occur. They seem tied to each other, with no priority assigned.

*Room for St. John of the Cross* (1983) also makes clear the correlation of the self with its space. The events that transpire in the one or the other are indistinguishable.

Viola's deconstruction of presence leads, then, to the unconscious discovery and experience of time—an essentially traumatic event. It is through the articulation of trauma that the sense of self most directly emerges in Viola's work; the trauma of time and the discovery and conscious experience of self correlate. It is through the sense of trauma Viola communicates that the opposite sides of his work—the ambiguity as to whether it is reality or illusion that is experienced, and the ambiguity as to whether the self is autonomous or a mirror reflection of its environment—converge. As in *Room for St. John of the Cross*, *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House*, and *The Reflecting Pool*, among other works, a figure or implied figure is put in a position of being unable to differentiate between illusion and reality because of its isolation. This isolation, necessary for its self-discovery, leads it to the discovery of itself as lived time—the realization that it is living time. It is a traumatic discovery; the sense of self forms around this experience of trauma, essentially the recognition of time.

This sense of trauma is articulated through the primordial scream that recurs throughout Viola's work—an essentially expressionist scream.<sup>13</sup> The scream first occurs in *Tape I* (1972); a choked-back scream is implicit in *Vidicon Burns* (1973); silence becomes an invisible scream in *Silent Life* (1979); the ticking





*Anthem*. 1983.  
Videotape.

clock in *Ancient of Days* (1979-81) and the plucking sound in *Migration*, accentuating the silence, seem disguised, muted, or symbolic screams. The dialectical differentiation of silence and scream is central to Viola's work. In *Parables* Franz Kafka wrote: "Now the Sirens have a more fatal weapon than their song, namely their silence. . . . Someone might possibly have escaped

from their singing; but from their silence, certainly never." No one escapes the traumatic silence of Viola's scream, or the traumatic scream that Viola's silence is. It is in *Anthem* (1983) that the most powerful scream occurs in Viola's work—powerful because it explicitly fuses silence and scream. Both are traumatic, bespeaking disillusionment, that is, the sense of the real as illusion (as

nothing), and the self-recognition this forces upon one, backs one into, involving awareness of the possible nothingness—illusoriness—of oneself, because one exists in and through time. *Anthem's* scream cuts through the scenes of the body's pleasures and pains (beach and operating room scenes), the dubious glories and magnified banalities of American life. The scream represents the anguished experience of time, the sense of being thrown in time; for Heidegger this was the central feeling of being human, the feeling through which one discovers one's humanness. It is the most deeply rooted feeling in the unconscious.

The concept of a specious present was coined by E. R. Clay (1882). "The present to which the datum refers is really a part of the past—a recent past—delusively given as a time that intervenes between the past and the future. Let it be named the specious present, and let the past, that is given by being past, be known as the obvious past."<sup>14</sup> Every image exists in a specious present; more precisely, the specious present is inseparable from what William James called the "penumbra" or "halo" of the image, "the dying echo of whence it came to us [and] the dawning sense of whither it is to lead."<sup>15</sup> Agonizing awareness of time is inseparable from the experience of the present as completely specious—an image always in transition, always belonging to the past. Coleridge sharply distinguished between the images of "primary imagination" and those "emancipated" from memory—images that had "esemplastic power" in contrast to those that were



merely "aggregative and associative."<sup>16</sup> Esemplastic imagery conveyed the "eternal act of creation."<sup>17</sup> Viola seems to be working through memories toward an experience of esemplastic images of primary imagination, images that articulate the traumatic recognition of time as an eternal act of creation—and of destruction. Viola demonstrates that, in Freud's words, "visual impressions remain the most frequent pathway along which libidinal excitation is aroused," in part because "seeing is ultimately derived from touching."<sup>18</sup> In addition, he shows that, as Melanie Klein asserted, throughout our life we are possessed by and can be said to live a second life of unconscious fantasy, perpetually creating, destroying, and recreating (repairing) objects—internal representations of objects that have some relation to reality but also bespeak the process of our own anxious existence in time.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps nowhere does Viola so much appeal to our unconscious pleasure in seeing as in the fishing scenes in *Hatsu Yume* and the manipulation of mirage/reality in the desert scenes of *Chott el-Djerid*. But these scenes finally become so absurd, as images—that is, independently of the dialectical structure of difference between the raw and the cooked, the primitive and the civilized, they articulate—that we realize their essentially esemplastic quality. By lifting the repressions on perception, allowing us to experience every appearance ambivalently and as inherently ambiguous, Viola is able to make manifest how essentially fantastic perception is. In the end Viola convinces us that perception is more a

projection of unconscious representations, in a process of endless transition to an unknown goal, if any, than a recognition of stable reality. Viola shows us that perception operates not only according to the pleasure principle and the reality principle, but according to indwelling fantasy. Through it we experience ourselves as a temporal process, in the end not simply constructive or deconstructive, but self-destructive—ecstatically changing.

## Notes

1. Peter Hartocollis, *Time and Timelessness: The Varieties of Temporal Experience, A Psychoanalytic Inquiry* (New York: International Universities Press, 1983), pp. 8-11.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 23.
4. Quoted by Hartocollis, p. 21.
5. Quoted by Hartocollis, p. 27.
6. For a discussion of Winnicott's conception see Jay R. Greenberg and Stephen A. Mitchell, *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 192.
7. Hartocollis, p. 34.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
9. Quoted in Hartocollis, p. 6.
10. Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction, Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 95.
11. Culler, p. 97.
12. Culler, p. 160.
13. See my essay "Chaos in Expressionism," *Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Art* (Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press, 1985), vol. 1, pp. 69-70, for a discussion of the expressionist scream from Kokoschka to Newman.
14. Quoted in Hartocollis, p. 3.
15. William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), vol. 1, p. 246.
16. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*

in I. A. Richards, ed., *The Portable Coleridge* (New York: Viking Press, 1950), pp. 513-14.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 516.

18. Sigmund Freud, "Three Essays on The Theory of Sexuality," *Standard Edition*, vol. 7, p. 156.

19. For a discussion of Klein's conception of fantasy see Greenberg and Mitchell, p. 124.



# Comprehensive List Of Works

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## 1972

**Wild Horses** (videotape), in collaboration with Marge Monroe. Black and white, mono sound, 15:00 minutes, recorded and mastered on ½" open-reel tape. Produced in association with Synapse Video Center, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York.

**Tape I** (videotape). Black and white, mono sound, 6:50 minutes, recorded and mastered on ½" open-reel tape. Produced in association with Synapse Video Center, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York.

**Instant Replay** (video/sound installation). Small, private room with live black-and-white videotape-delay system using two monitors and one camera. Experimental Studio, School of Art, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York.

**Instant Replay** (videotape). Black and white, mono sound, 20:00 minutes, recorded and mastered on ½" open-reel tape. Produced in association with Synapse Video Center, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York.

## 1973

**Passage Series** (videotape). Black and white, mono sound, 7:50 minutes (excerpts from 90-minute original), recorded and mastered on ½" open-reel tape. Produced in association with Synapse Video Center, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York.

**Composition 'D'** (videotape). Black and white, mono sound, 9:42 minutes, recorded and mastered on ½" open-reel tape. Produced in association with Synapse Video Center, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York.

**Hallway Nodes** (sound installation). Two channels of sine waves tuned to a twenty-

two-foot hallway. Synapse Video Center, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York.

**Vidicon Burns** (videotape), in collaboration with Bob Burns. Color, mono sound, 8:02 minutes (excerpts from 30-minute original), recorded and mastered on ½" open-reel tape. Produced in association with Synapse Video Center, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York.

**Information** (videotape). Color, mono sound, 30:00 minutes, recorded and mastered on ½" open-reel tape. Produced in association with Synapse Video Center, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York.

**Polaroid Video Stills** (videotape). Color, mono sound, 2:36 minutes (excerpts from 10-minute original), recorded and mastered on ½" open-reel tape. Produced in association with Synapse Video Center, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York.

**Level** (videotape). Black and white, mono sound, 8:28 minutes, recorded and mastered on ½" open-reel tape. Produced in association with Synapse Video Center, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York.

**Cycles** (videotape). Black and white, mono sound, 7:07 minutes, recorded and mastered on ½" open-reel tape. Produced in association with Synapse Video Center, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York.

**The Breathing Space** (sound installation). Four-channel reconstruction of an outdoor sound environment, based on varying patterns of microphone placements. Synapse Video Center, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York.

**In Version** (videotape). Color, mono sound, 4:24 minutes, recorded and mastered on ½"

open-reel tape. Produced in association with Synapse Video Center, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York.

**Sound Field Insertion** (sound installation). Live, four-channel outdoor spatial displacement where the sound field registered by four regularly spaced microphones is reproduced at a second remote location by four correspondingly placed speakers. Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York.

**Walking into the Wall** (video installation). Live black-and-white, closed-circuit video projection on free-standing half-wall. Synapse Video Center, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York.

**Localization** (video/sound installation). Live video and audio interchange between two indoor locations through two-way, black-and-white, cable television system. Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York.

**Quadrants** (video/sound installation). Bank of four black-and-white monitors and two cameras in closed-circuit system with feedback and delay; amplified floor. Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York.

## 1974

**Bank Image Bank** (video installation). Two banks of six monitors with eight black-and-white cameras in closed-circuit system with feedback; two escalators. Lincoln First Bank, Rochester, New York.

**Decay Time** (video installation). Live black-and-white, closed-circuit video projection in dark room with timed strobe flash. "Bill Viola: Video and Sound Installations," The Kitchen, New York.

**Peep Hole** (video installation). Live black-



and-white, closed-circuit video projection with camera mounted inside free-standing wall. "Bill Viola: Video and Sound Installations," The Kitchen, New York.

**Mock Turtles** (video installation). Live black-and-white, videotape delay system with three box turtles. "Bill Viola: Video and Sound Installations," The Kitchen, New York.

**Moose** (sound installation). Four channels of live amplified mice. "Bill Viola: Video and Sound Installations," The Kitchen, New York.

**Eclipse** (videotape). Black and white, European standard, mono sound, 22:00 minutes, recorded and mastered on ½" open-reel tape. Produced in association with Art/Tapes/22, Florence, Italy.

**August '74** (videotape collection). Color, mono sound, 11:22 minutes total. Includes:

**Instant Breakfast**, color, mono sound, 5:05 minutes.

**Olfaction**, color, mono sound, 2:34 minutes.

**Recycle**, color, mono sound, 3:00 minutes. Recorded on IVC 1" tape, mastered on 2" tape, produced in association with Synapse Video Center, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York.

**River** (sound installation). Two channels of heterodyning sine tones with water-worn stones and spotlight. Presented at artist's studio, Syracuse, New York.

**Sunrise Semester** (sound event). Reprogramming of bird wake-up time, training birds to wake up five minutes earlier each morning through audiotape playback, over one week. Tree outside artist's studio, Syracuse, New York.

**The Amazing Colossal Man** (video/sound in-

stallation). Single-channel, black-and-white, rear-screen video projection with amplified stereo sound, visible through window. Unannounced one-night event at artist's studio, Syracuse, New York.

**Separate Selves** (video/sound installation). Live black-and-white video projection of a composite image mixed from three cameras (two on automatic-scanning motors), with three heterodyning sine tones. Synapse Video Center, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York. Video component presented only with Alvin Lucier's sound performance *Moving Lines of Silence in Families of Hyperbolas*, Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts.

**Trapped Moments** (video installation). Live black-and-white, closed-circuit video system using camera surveying a set mouse trap in basement, shown on monitor in gallery above. "Impact Art Video Art '74", Musée des Artes Décoratifs, Lausanne, Switzerland.

## 1975

**Gravitational Pull** (videotape). Black and white, European standard, mono sound, 10:00 minutes, recorded and mastered on ½" open-reel tape. Produced in association with Art/Tapes/22, Florence, Italy.

**A Million Other Things** (videotape). Black and white, European standard, mono sound, 8:00 minutes, recorded and mastered on ½" open-reel tape. Produced in association with Art/Tapes/22, Florence, Italy.

**Free Global Distribution** (performance). An attempt to secretly stand in as many tourists' photographs as possible in one day on the streets of Florence, Italy. Photo documentation by Enzo Stella.

**Hornpipes** (sound performance), with Alan

Sondheim. Two performers generate continuous tones blowing through aluminum pipes cut at specific lengths to produce frequencies in resonance with the architecture of the room. Art/Tapes/22, Florence, Italy.

**Il Vapore** (video/sound installation). Live black-and-white camera mixed with previously recorded action performed in the same space, with a large metal pot of boiling eucalyptus leaves. One-day installation, "Per Conoscenza" exhibition series, Zona, Florence, Italy.

**The Sound of Tiny Fish Jaws Opening and Closing** (audio tape), with Bobby Bielecki. A series of environmental sound recordings made at one-hour intervals for twenty-four hours to produce a time map of the underwater acoustic space in pond. ZBS Media, Inc., Fort Edward, New York.

**Red Tape (Collected Works)** (videotape collection). Color, mono sound, 30:00 minutes total. Includes:

**Playing Soul Music to My Freckles**. Color, mono sound, 2:46 minutes.

**A Non-Dairy Creamer**. Color, mono sound, 5:19 minutes.

**The Semi-Circular Canals**. Color, mono sound, 8:51 minutes.

**A Million Other Things (2)**. Color, mono sound, 4:35 minutes.

**Return**. Color, mono sound, 7:15 minutes. Recorded and mastered on ½" open-reel tape. Technical assistance Bobby Bielecki. Produced in association with ZBS Media, Inc. Fort Edward, New York, and Inter-Media Art Center, Bayville, New York. Remastered on 2" tape at Synapse Video Center, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York.

**Origins of Thought** (video/sound installation). Amplified drop of water falling from ceiling onto 170 brass water bowls reflecting



optical wave patterns onto wall; moving candle on mechanized track; single-channel, black-and-white videotape playback on monitor. Vehicule Art, Montreal, Canada.

**Rain** (video/sound installation). Amplified drop of water falling from ceiling onto metal tray reflecting optical wave patterns onto wall; black-and-white video projection of live camera mixed with previously recorded action; water-worn rocks with heterodyning sine tone and heat lamp. Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York.

## 1976

**Migration** (videotape). Color, mono sound, 7:00 minutes, recorded on ½" open-reel tape, mastered on 2" tape. Produced in association with Synapse Video Center, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York.

**He Weeps for You** (video/sound installation). Water drop from copper pipe; live color camera with macro lens; amplified drum; video projection in dark room. Synapse Video Center, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York.

**Four Songs** (videotape collection). Color, mono sound, 33:00 minutes total. Includes

**Junkyard Levitation.** Color, mono sound, 3:11 minutes.

**Songs of Innocence.** Color, mono sound, 9:34 minutes.

**The Space Between the Teeth.** Color, mono sound, 9:10 minutes.

**Truth Through Mass Individuation.** Color, mono sound, 10:13 minutes.

Recorded on ¾" tape, mastered on 2" tape. Technical assistance Bobby Bielecki. Produced in association with WNET/Thirteen Television Laboratory, New York. Portions produced at Synapse Video Center, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York.

**Olfaction** (video/sound installation). Black-and-white video projection of live camera mixed with previously recorded action; high-back easy chair with concealed speakers; brass bell. "Change: Beyond the Artist's Hand," Art Gallery, California State University at Long Beach, California.

**Gong** (sound performance) with Linda Fisher. Exploration of material resonances of large metal gong suspended from ceiling, amplified by a contact microphone and sent to various speakers in space and adjoining room. "Festival d'Automne," Musée Galliera, Paris.

## 1977

**The Tree of Life** (sculpture event). High-powered searchlight illuminates a single large tree from afternoon to night. Five-hour event, Fort Edward, New York.

**Memory Surfaces and Mental Prayers** (videotape collection). Color, mono sound, 29:00 minutes total. Includes:

**The Wheel of Becoming.** Color, mono sound, 7:40 minutes.

**The Morning After the Night of Power.** Color, mono sound, 10:44 minutes.

**Sweet Light.** Color, mono sound, 9:08 minutes.

Recorded on ¾" tape, mastered on 2" tape. Technical assistance Bobby Bielecki. Produced in association with WNET/Thirteen Television Laboratory, New York. Recorded at ZBS Media, Inc., Fort Edward, New York.

## 1978

**Memories of Ancestral Power (The Moro Movement in the Solomon Islands)** (1977-78) (videotape). Color, mono sound, 35:19 minutes. Recorded on ¾" tape mastered on 2" tape at Synapse Video Center, Syracuse

University, Syracuse, New York. Produced in association with International Television Workshop, New York.

**Palm Trees on the Moon** (1977-78) (videotape). Color, mono sound, 26:06 minutes. Recorded on ¾" tape and super-8 film, mastered on 2" tape at Synapse Video Center, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York. Produced in association with the International Television Workshop, New York.

**Olfaction** (video/sound performance). Black-and-white video projection of live action mixed with videotape of previous event; boiling pot of water; toy xylophone; two channels of amplified sound. International Open Encounter on Video, organized by Centro de Arte y Comunicación, Sogetsu Kaikan, Tokyo.

## 1979

**Chott el-Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat).** Color, mono sound, 28:00 minutes. Recorded on ¾" tape, mastered on 2" tape. Production assistant Kira Perov, technical assistance Bobby Bielecki. Produced in association with WNET/Thirteen Television Laboratory, New York.

**The Talking Drum** (sound performance) with Ralph Jones. Performer pounds large bass drum in an empty indoor swimming pool to excite and interact with room reverberations, with prerecorded natural sounds electronically gated by and concealed within the live drum beats. Part of "Dry Pool Soundings," one-week acoustic research and a concert with three other composers, Media Study, Buffalo, New York.

**Sodium Vapor (including Constellations and Oracle)** (videotape). Color, stereo sound, 15:14 minutes. Production assistant Kira Perov. Pro-



duced in 1979, in association with WNET/Thirteen Television Laboratory, New York, and WXXI-TV Artist's Television Workshop, Rochester, New York. Reedited and released 1986.

**Moving Stillness (Mt. Rainier 1979)** (video/sound installation). Color videotape playback with rear projection reflected off water surface of a pool in a large, dark room; aquarium aerator with timing circuit; amplified stereo sound. Media Study, Buffalo, New York.

## 1980

**Event Horizon** (videotape). Color, mono sound, 7:42 minutes. Recorded on ¾" tape, mastered on 2" tape. Production assistant Kira Perov, technical assistance Bobby Bielecki. Produced in association with WGBH New Television Workshop, Boston, for inclusion in "Dreamworks," a program in the series "Frames of Reference."

### The Reflecting Pool—Collected Work

**1977–80** (videotape collection). Color, stereo sound, 62:00 minutes total. Includes:

**The Reflecting Pool** (1977–79). Color, mono sound, 7:00 minutes.

**Moonblood** (1977–79), with Kira Perov. Color, stereo sound, 12:48 minutes.

**Silent Life** (1979). Color, stereo sound, 13:14 minutes.

**Ancient of Days** (1979–81), color, stereo sound, 12:21 minutes.

**Vegetable Memory** (1978–80), with Garry Berteig. Color, mono, sound, 15:13 minutes. Recorded on ¾" (except for *Vegetable Memory*, ½" Betamax). Production assistant Kira Perov, technical assistance Bobby Bielecki and Yasuo Shinohara. Produced in association with WNET/Thirteen Television Laboratory, New York, and WXXI-TV Artist's Television Workshop, Rochester, New York. Remastered on 1" at Sony Corporation, Atsugi, Japan.

**Tunings from the Mountain** (sound performance). Constructed an eight-channel sound instrument and performed with prerecorded tape, eight audio transducers with tuned resonant strings and a traditional Japanese Taiko drum group. Composed for Fujiko Nakaya's outdoor "Fog Sculpture—A Fog, Sound and Light Festival," Kawaji Onsen, Japan.

## 1981

**Hatsu Yume (First Dream)** (videotape). Color, stereo sound, 56:00 minutes. Recorded on ¾" tape, mastered on 1" tape. Production assistant Kira Perov. Produced in association with Sony Corporation, Atsugi, Japan, and WNET/Thirteen Television Laboratory, New York.

## 1982

**Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House** (video/sound installation). Color videotape playback on 25" monitor, custom-designed wooden chair with built-in stereo headphones, two stereo audio channels, in large raw space. Production assistant Kira Perov. National Video Festival, American Film Institute, Los Angeles.

## 1983

**Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House** (videotape). Black and white, stereo sound, 19:11 minutes. Recorded on ¾" tape, mastered on 1" tape. Production assistant Kira Perov. Produced in association with WNET/Thirteen Television Laboratory, New York.

**Room for St. John of the Cross** (video/sound installation). Black cubicle with single illuminated window and color videotape playback on 3.7" monitor in a large, dark room with black-and-white videotape projection on wall screen and three channels of ampli-

fied sound. Production assistant Kira Perov; reading by Francesc Torres. "Video As Attitude," Museum of Fine Art, Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe. Collection of Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

**An Instrument of Simple Sensation** (video/sound installation). Color videotape playback on 17" monitor reflected in a stainless steel water bowl; large stone; small vase with its optical image projected live through magnifying glass; vibrating amplified wire; two channels of amplified sound. Museo Italo-Americano, San Francisco, in cooperation with San Francisco International Video Festival.

**Anthem** (videotape). Color, stereo sound, 11:30 minutes. Recorded on ¾" tape, mastered on 1" tape. Production assistant Kira Perov. Produced in association with WNET/Thirteen Television Laboratory, New York.

**Science of the Heart** (video/sound installation). Color videotape playback with video projection; suspended screen; brass bed in a large, dark room; two channels of amplified sound. "Video Culture/Canada Festival," Toronto, Canada.

**Reverse Television—Portraits of Viewers** (broadcast television project). Color, stereo sound, 44 portraits, 0:30 seconds each. Broadcast in between programs as unannounced inserts. Recorded on ¾" tape, mastered on 1" tape. Production assistant Kira Perov. Produced in association with WGBH New Television Workshop, Boston.

## 1984

**Reverse Television—Portraits of Viewers, Compilation Tape** (1983–84) (videotape). Color, stereo sound, 15:00 minutes. Recorded on ¾" tape, mastered on 1" tape. Production



assistant Kira Perov. Produced in association with WGBH New Television Workshop, Boston.

## 1985

**The Theater of Memory** (video/sound installation). Color videotape projected on large screen; thirty-foot, uprooted dead tree in dark room with 50 electric lanterns; windchime; amplified stereo sound. "1985 Biennial Exhibition," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

**Figure and Ground** (video/sound installation). Color videotape playback on monitor; twelve-foot black cube in a large, dark room; two loudspeakers sealed inside cube. Production assistant Kira Perov. "TELE-VISIONS," Nexus Contemporary Art Center, Atlanta, in association with IMAGE Film/Video, Atlanta.

**Heaven and Hell** (video/sound installation). Two identical octagonal rooms, with monitor, easy chair, floor lamp, and FM radio in one; large video projection, mirror-lined walls, and stereo sound in the other; with single color videotape playing back in both. Production assistant Kira Perov. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco.

## 1986

**I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like** (videotape). Color, stereo sound, 89 minutes. Recorded on  $\frac{3}{4}$ " and  $\frac{1}{2}$ " VHS tape, mastered on 1" tape. Production assistant Kira Perov. Produced in association with the American Film Institute, Los Angeles; The Contemporary Art Television (CAT) Fund, a project of the WGBH New Television Workshop, the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; and ZDF, Mainz, West Germany.

## 1987

**Passage** (video/sound installation), color videotape, slow motion 1" playback on large rear screen projection, small room with 20-foot corridor, amplified stereo sound. Production assistants Kira Perov and Laurie McDonald. "Bill Viola," The Museum of Modern Art, New York.





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Videotapes by and information about  
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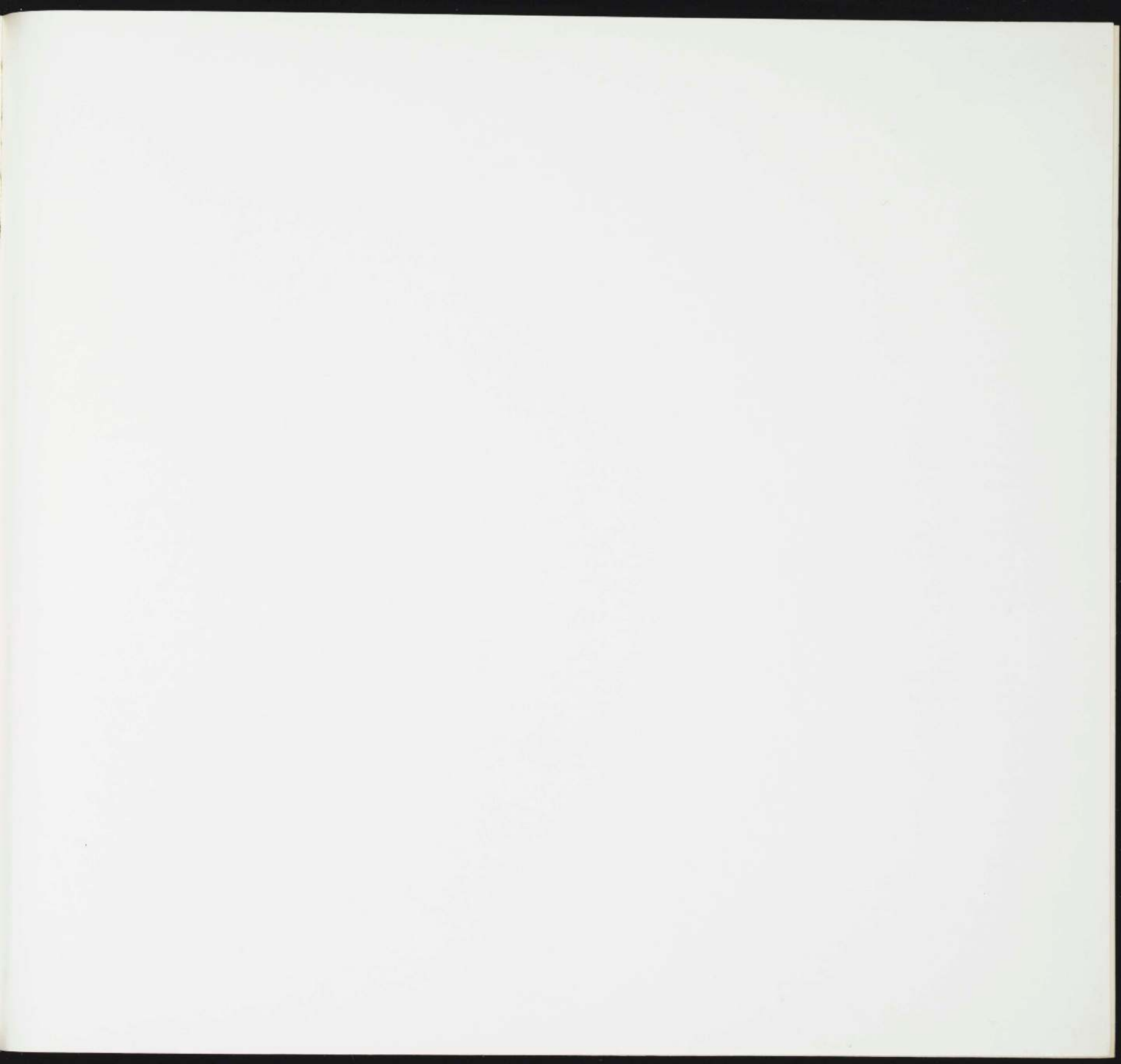
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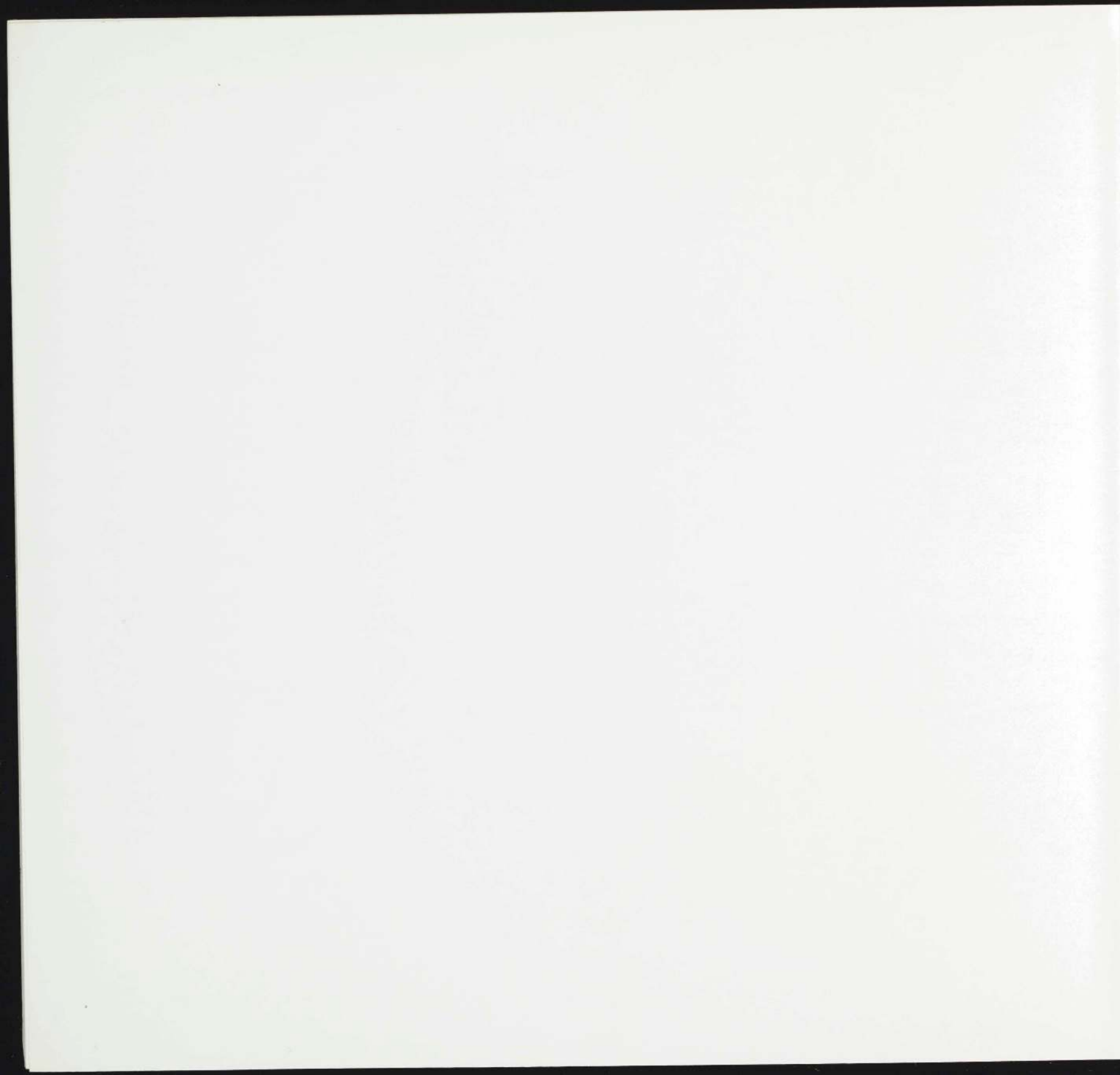
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# Bill Viola

INSTALLATIONS AND VIDEOTAPES

Edited and with an introductory essay by Barbara London, with essays by J. Hoberman and Donald Kuspit, and commentaries by the artist.

At thirty-six, Bill Viola is one of the preeminent video artists in the United States. Among the first to experiment with this new art form, since 1972 he has produced an internationally acclaimed series of videotapes and video and sound installations. Viola uses state-of-the-art electronic technology to explore an ancient theme: the unfolding of the layers of human consciousness. "The real investigation is of life and being itself," he has said; "The medium is just the tool in this investigation." In this book, published to accompany an exhibition at The Museum of Modern

Art, Hoberman, film critic for *The Village Voice*, and Kuspit, art critic and Professor in the Department of Art, State University of New York at Stony Brook, discuss the work from cinematic and art-historical viewpoints. London, Assistant Curator of Video in the Museum's Department of Film, interweaves biographical information on the artist with a discussion of his work; and Viola offers comments on his pieces. Illustrations include color series from *Hatsu Yume (First Dream)* and *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like*, as well as photographs of *Room for St. John of the Cross* and other installations. The book contains a comprehensive listing of the artist's videotapes, installations, and sound events, and a selected bibliography.

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