

Presence and Absence

Vision and the Invisible in the Media Age

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BILL VIOLA is considered a pioneer in the medium of video art and is internationally recognized as one of today's leading artists. He has been instrumental in establishing video as a vital form of contemporary art, and in so doing has helped to greatly expand its scope in terms of technology, content, and historical reach. The recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship and numerous other awards, Viola received his BFA in Experimental Studios from Syracuse University in 1973. For thirty-eight years he has created videotapes, architectural video installations, sound environments, electronic music performances, flat-screen video pieces, and single-channel videotapes that have been shown in museums and galleries worldwide and are found in many distinguished collections. Bill Viola lives and works with Kira Perov, his wife and longtime collaborator, in Long Beach, California.

Good evening. Tonight I will be telling you about some of my personal thoughts and experiences regarding art making and electronic media, but first, I want to start with something I know best—an image. It is from a video installation that was created from material shot for a new production of Richard Wagner’s nineteenth-century opera *Tristan and Isolde* in 2004–2005. My wife and creative partner, Kira Perov, and I worked with director Peter Sellars and conductor Esa Pekka Salonen on the project. Specifically, this sequence is from the extraordinary third act of this opera, which chronicles the death of Tristan. Therefore, it is an image—actually the *last* image—seen in the mind’s eye of a dying man.



Bill Viola: *Fire Woman*, 2005. Video/sound installation. Photo: Kira Perov

As we watch the aftermath of the woman’s sudden fall continue to unfold, there are a few things to point out. First is that she has fallen into her own reflection. In other words, from the moment we first saw her on the screen she existed only as a reflection. The performer, Robin Bonaccorsi, stood at the end of a large pool, and the camera was aimed down at her image reflected on the surface of the water, which was completely still when the shot began. Second is that her fall disturbed that reflection, revealing its presence and undermining the validity of the original image. From this point on, the piece becomes simply a document of the gradual disintegration of familiar reality into its core components—in this case, a set of undulating, abstract wave patterns, eventually leading to darkness.

I hope that this image will help you to recognize that there is always more to the world than meets the eye, and that life itself, as we commonly perceive it, is about as stable as that surface reflection. For millennia, spiritual traditions, each in their own way, have attempted to teach us how to read beneath the surface. This goal has also been the overarching theme of my life's work, despite the fact that I use perhaps one of the most ubiquitous and apropos visual media for capturing the *surface* of today's world—the video camera. However, I also want to point out that I do not utilize the video camera in the standard ways. I am an artist, and I have been for just about my whole life. I had my first public exhibition fifty-one years ago, in kindergarten. On the first day of school at P.S. 20 in Queens, we were making finger paintings when the teacher, Mrs. Fell, came up behind me and held up my picture of a tornado to show the class. I became embarrassed and tried to hide under the table. She put it up on the wall. Since then, I have been making art and working in arts institutions my entire life. In the process I have learned a lot about myself—about my creative abilities, and my limitations as well; about our experience of the world; and, of course, about art, culture, and history. But probably the most lasting impression I am left with after all of these years of being in museums is the power, affirmation, and significance of the human presence that lies within the things we make.

Although I was always deeply engaged with art, and appreciated all facets of it, I didn't really start thinking about this inner aspect until later in life. And, as life's lessons usually teach us, it wasn't until I experienced my own tragedy and loss in the form of the death of my mother in early 1991 that the secret life of material objects became fully known to me. About a year after my mother's passing, I was pulling some things out of the upper cupboard in the kitchen and rediscovered a ceramic bowl that she had given Kira and me when we were in Japan together twelve years earlier. As I held the small green and white bowl, a flood of memories and emotions suddenly washed over me. I could feel her hand and see her face, vividly, as she handed it to me that day. At that point, my relationship to material objects changed—completely and irrevocably. That this insight didn't arise from the unique, precious objects in our museums is, I think, significant. I already knew that *they* were special, but this insight was deeper and more profound. It came from my body, my whole being, not my rational mind. After that I looked around and realized that *all* of the things I was encountering were like this. They each contain the presences and desires of their makers. These chairs, the tables, this room, the

lightbulbs, our cars, this podium—all contain thoughts and impulses of the person who made them.

In 1987, Kira and I spent a lot of time here in Utah and surrounding environs exploring and photographing the magnificent landscapes of the Southwest. The Anasazi ruins in particular captivated us. Approaching them on foot from afar was like a gradual zooming in, a continuous magnification that unfolded layers of detail. One day, arriving right at the walls after a long hike, we looked closely between the mud bricks at the mortar, and realized that we could see thumbprints there of the people who made them. Stepping back, we saw that other rows had thumbprints too. There were hundreds of individual imprints. On another occasion I remember seeing an exhibition of Paleolithic tools. One of the objects was an antler with two inscribed parallel marks, each several inches long. That is all—an old bone with two notches, just two little marks. I imagined the archaeologist searching on the ground and finding that. There are hundreds of antlers one could pick up, but the one with the two marks, that's different—*special*. As soon as you see those two marks, the human presence is there, twenty-five thousand years later, speaking to us, brazenly attempting to defy death. This is the connection we all have to the physical things we make.

Of course, these presences are so easily overlooked in this age of mass-produced objects, but one final experience clarified this. It is a situation many of us will at some point find ourselves in—having to clean out a loved one's belongings after they have passed away. In my case it was several years after college, and it involved my uncle. My aunt sent me into the bathroom, and there were his toothbrush and his hairbrush—with hair still in it—and I had to put it all in a shopping bag. I looked at that brush—a \$2.95 plastic hairbrush from Thrifty drugstore. At that moment, the brush took on a depth of meaning and emotional charge unlike anything I had ever experienced. It far transcended what that piece of plastic, that mass-produced object, was worth in everyday life. At that moment it was the most valuable object on earth, for my aunt and for myself as well.

This was when I realized why art objects are usually priced at a level that far exceeds their material value. I used to be angry and resentful at that when I was a young artist starting out and everything seemed so out of reach. But when you start to gain insight from the passage of time itself—when you see the life stream accumulating through the course of human history—then you begin to understand why these things are valued in a different way, and why this “secret life,” this presence inside, is the driving force behind museums like the one we are in now.

But there is another vital element in the equation of human value that we are neglecting, and that is *inspiration*. This is the catalyst, the fuel in the fire, the essential element that ignites a spark in the human heart that can eventually move mountains. Inspiration can strike dramatically, on the grandest scale—the “Eureka!” moment—or it can subtly slip in the back door, accumulating quietly and unnoticed, like a slowly dripping faucet that becomes a river. Sometimes it takes only a few simple words to trigger a cascade of connections and openings. Huston Smith, our great scholar of world religions, did that very thing for me some years ago in the introduction to one of his books. There he stated that the two forces that have done the most to shape who we are as human beings, both inside and out, and throughout history, are *Technology* and *Revelation*. That sent a shudder up my spine. Those two incisive words brought two disparate parts of my life together for the first time, in a flash. Words that had seemed irreconcilable up until that moment were inextricably linked. Think: physical and metaphysical, mind and matter, body and soul, or whatever you choose to call this fundamental duality that defines the human condition.

Huston Smith’s words came at a key point in my life and greatly helped me to understand the fundamental nature of this new medium of video I had chosen to work with, a medium that seemed absolutely real and physical and mechanical, on the one hand, yet fundamentally immaterial, ephemeral, and fleeting, on the other. I thought a lot about those two terms, *technology* and *revelation*—how they interrelate and depend on each other, like the famous Taoist symbol of the union of opposites, the yin and yang. Over the years, they have become guideposts on my life’s journey, and I am going to loosely weave some lines of thought around them for you here.

First, let’s talk about where we are right now. Today we live in unsettled and uncertain times. Many people sense this. The flash points of conflict in our world are both *external* (economic and physical competition for limited resources and land) and *internal* (cultural, religious, spiritual battles over the true God). Currently, and perhaps not coincidentally, it is the children of Abraham, the three great monotheistic religions, who are the source of some of the most violent and volatile collisions, both on earth and in heaven. I believe that this instability stems from the collision, or the confluence, between the material and the spiritual in the new century. That is where both the danger and the promise of our collective lives, and future, lie.

Today, cultures, races, classes, ideologies, theologies, and worldviews are being thrust up against each other with unprecedented frequency and magnitude. At the focal point of this is the medium I work with: electronic information moving at the speed of light—the images, sounds, and texts of digital technology, or, more precisely, *communication* technology. Ironically, the flash point I'm talking about is being both exacerbated and quelled by the unprecedented connectivity we have right now. People are living in closer proximity than ever before, much of it in the form of artificial electronic images. We are pushed right up against each other, face-to-face, like it or not, and, more seriously, we are at the mercy of the ones creating the images to determine whether the pictures are telling the complete accurate story or not. All of this is the cause of a lot of stress and suffering—physical and psychological, individual and social.

However, I see another side to this as well. I see that media technology is not at odds with our inner selves, but in fact is a reflection of it. These technologies are extending our senses out into the world, literally, across space and time. They function as out-of-body experiences, and represent a set of phenomena that until relatively recently were classified as psychic manifestations or shamanistic acts. To be able to successfully contact your mother halfway around the world, at the instant you have the desire to speak to her, would formerly have been described as ESP, extrasensory perception, or perhaps a divine blessing, yet today we do it regularly, without thinking. So, these technologies are being modeled not on the material world of the stones and trees and physical objects—all of the stuff that traditionally has constituted our creative visions. No, the templates of our electronic and digital technologies come from the functioning of our inner selves—the electrical impulses in our brain and central nervous system, the visual receptors in our eyes, the sound-sensitive membranes in our ears, the vibrations of our vocal cords, and, most intimately, our desires, feelings, visions, and our need to touch each other, no matter where we are. And this is very, very powerful. It gives these electronic media tools a very special place and relation to our personal lives, and possibly to our future evolution.

At this juncture I think it would be useful, particularly for the media artists present, to take a moment to describe the technological lineage behind what we mean when say “visual media.” The first instrument of artificial vision, the camera obscura, has been around for several millennia. In the fourth century BCE in ancient China, there are fragmentary descriptions of an optical system involving a closed room and a pinhole

that projected a large-scale high-resolution color image of the outside world onto a wall—the first projection installation! But it wasn't until the fifteenth century that optics became the dominant mode of describing and representing the world around us. In the Renaissance, to *see* was to *know*, an equation that holds a special place for visual artists to this day. The more recent history of artificial technologies of vision starts in the late sixteenth century, when lenses were being perfected in northern Europe. This work gave rise to the telescope and the microscope in the early seventeenth century, instruments that for the first time allowed human beings to see things beyond the range of the senses. These developments were followed by centuries of refinement that ultimately led to magic lanterns, photography, stereoscopic slide viewers, cinema, television, video, and digital imaging. All of these instruments are an evolution of this need to touch, to know . . . to be in constant intimate connection with all dimensions of the world, from the outer edges of the known universe to the subatomic realm of shimmering particles, and of course to each other.

If you trace the path of optics right up to the present day, you will realize that when you hold a camera in your hand you are holding not only Louis Daguerre, the nineteenth-century father of photography, but Filippo Brunelleschi as well, the creative genius of the early Renaissance, standing there in the morning light in Florence in 1415 in front of the cathedral. He had with him a wooden construction consisting of a painting of the building across the piazza, a small hole, and a mirror that allowed his gathered friends to experience the first painted image that coincided perfectly with visual perception. A revolution in visual art, vanishing-point perspective, was born. The most important element in Brunelleschi's contraption was the hole, the fixed point of view. Five hundred fifty years later Ansel Adams would describe a good photograph as "knowing where to stand." Of course, anyone who has ever used a camera knows that this is a large part of it—finding the place. Not just any *place*, but your place . . . defining where you are at one specific moment, in one specific place—the *unique, singular* point of view. And that, of course, is always the *individual's* point of view. This was a radical change in the history of image making. The fundamental basis of images had begun to shift from the eternal, infinite, invisible, metaphysical realm to the specific, temporal, measurable, material domain of optics and visible light—in short, from the inner heart to the outer eye. However, the dance between technology and revelation would go on.

English scientist Robert Hooke (1635–1703), one of history's greatest experimental scientists, is one of the key people in the development of

instruments of vision. He significantly improved the microscope, publishing his observations in 1665 in his magnificent book *Micrographia*, a work as sensitively aesthetic as it is rigorously scientific. Possessing this new, unprecedented instrument, what exactly did he choose to see? One of the first things he looked at was a living thing. After carefully slicing a thin layer of cork, he observed neat little rows of tiny boxes in the plant material. This organized structure startled him, and he named the units “cells,” since they reminded him of the rows of monks’ cells in the monastery. So, one of the groundbreaking discoveries made possible by the microscope is described with a spiritual metaphor. We still use this word today.

Hooke was one of the first human beings to see directly into the invisible world. Today we take it for granted, but the example of Robert Hooke gives us a very important insight into probably *the* most significant aspect of these new technologies. And that is the fact that today, 350 years later, we don’t have to keep carrying microscopes around to verify that these cells and tiny organisms exist. This is because the purpose of these instruments is to gain knowledge. The act of using them, as exciting as it may be, is secondary. Like musical instruments, they are the means, not the ends. So today, when you look up in the night sky and see the bright star that is the planet Jupiter, you don’t question whether the four moons that Galileo first saw through his telescope in 1609, invisible to your eye, exist.

I am reminded of a story that the Buddha constantly told his followers after he became enlightened. He immediately sensed the danger in trying to impart this new knowledge to the people who came to him for answers to their problems. He was telling people about a completely new way of being in the world, of living life in the deepest and most honest way possible, and he was worried that they would seize on his discoveries too rigidly and lock onto the outer form, not the inner essence. That is often what we human beings do—we grab on to good things and never let go, sometimes smothering them. So over and over he called his teachings a “vehicle.” He said, “My teachings are like a raft. Please use them to get to the other side of the river. After that, only a fool would keep carrying the raft around!” This is a beautiful way to teach the fundamental Buddhist concept of “letting go,” to discourage grasping and the striving for end-all solutions. Another thing he told them was “Don’t take my word for it—ever!” He said, “I am going to give you these teachings, but you must verify them and test them against your own experience.”

Reading texts like these over the years has deeply affected my thinking about technology and helped to better define the creative pathways

illuminated by these artificial eyes, and ears, and electrical sparks. The teachings and life examples of the so-called mystics in all major traditions have probably taught me more about art and the nature of technology than my experiences in art school. To be fair, though, the one essential thing that did stay with me from art school, and allowed me to make the rapid progress I did with electronic media, was the work of twentieth-century masters like Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage, and his collaborator, David Tudor, with whom I performed for eight years in the 1970s. Their breakthroughs made possible a world in which so-called mistakes, accidents or flaws in the media at hand, could be considered positive and even essential elements in the work. In short, the lack of control became an accepted technique for the creation of a work of art, echoing a central concept of Zen Buddhist art.

In this light, the teachings of Buddha and other spiritual masters on the practice of “nonattachment” and “seeing things as they really are” became especially helpful in dealing with an unwieldy, highly mutable, time-based medium like video. I never felt, even to this day, that I was fully invested in the ontological and material certainty of the electronic image, which was, after all, just a momentary vibrating pattern of flickering light and agitated electrons. One could not help feeling unattached to it. My personal path and artistic process seemed to be leading me past the material form and into some other intangible essence that was real in the way, say, music is real, as opposed to paint and canvas. These issues have never really gone away, and I still feel the remnants of odd, unresolved sensations about the existential nature of the image every time I have to physically turn off my work. For me, the electronic image has always existed on the border between light and darkness, between existence and oblivion—neither fully one nor the other. It felt partly alive and partly dead. When the museum here shuts down for the night, there is currently only one picture hanging in the halls of paintings that will not be there after six o’clock, and that is my video piece *The Quintet of Remembrance*. When the guard pushes the power button to “off,” it’s gone. Poof! The screen is black . . . cold . . . inert. The paintings are still there in the dim light at 3:00 A.M., but my image is not. So where did it go? Is it “only sleeping”?

From the first time I encountered this ontological dilemma I knew that there was something fundamentally different about the medium of video. In the early years, I was thinking a lot about seeing, about cameras, about human perception, and I spent a lot of time trying to get to the bottom of the image, trying to figure out what it actually was. After a lot of technical

investigations and formal explorations, I still didn't feel any closer to a full answer, and I had the nagging feeling that I had missed something essential. Then, one day in the Louvre in Paris I saw an extraordinary painting by Giotto—*St. Francis of Assisi Receiving the Stigmata*.

In the early thirteenth century, Francis would go on retreats high up on nearby Mount Averna, fasting for days or weeks on end, praying and meditating. Giotto's painting depicts Francis at one of the most sublime and extraordinary peaks of human experience, the moment when faith and feeling are made manifest in the material flesh of the body. Francis is standing with his hands and arms outstretched, receiving the rays of the rising sun—what yoga practitioners call the “Sun Salutation”—viscerally experiencing the light with his body. Giotto paints five vivid, perfectly straight lines of light, incised into the surface of the painting with a straight edge, that descend from the sky out of a flaming sun angel to pierce the hands, feet, and side of Francis's body. These are the stigmata, the five wounds on Christ's body, and they are received by the saint in a vision during a variation of an ancient, universally practiced ordeal of fasting and deprivation designed to push the body and mind to and beyond its limits. In life, Francis was apparently bleeding from his wounds.

I looked at the image of Francis standing there, with these straight lines slicing diagonally across the picture from a common source, and I said to myself, “That is perspective! Those are lines of sight!” Giotto and his fellow artists in the early fourteenth century had been struggling to create an optically based geometry of light to define space and volume in a two-dimensional picture, and it seemed logical that he would construct a visual motif like this. But then, I thought again. Saint Francis had experienced those five sharp lines piercing his body at the height of ecstasy. He wasn't being touched by anything physical. The thought occurred to me—“What was he looking at?” And then, being a video artist, I immediately said to myself, “Can I record it?”

At that point, I began to doubt what I was doing when I was taking an image. Was this seeing? The whole process of visual perception suddenly seemed dubious. Since then I have come to firmly believe that reality is not what we are seeing right now, that when you record *this*, the light and sound streaking through this room, it is not an accurate record of what we are experiencing at this moment. The idea of an image being “out there,” something to be “taken,” “shot,” or plucked like ripe fruit, and that it can be “faithfully reproduced,” doesn't describe the whole picture. It certainly doesn't describe what Saint Francis and his colleagues were seeing.

At this point, I want to talk more specifically about this technological age we live in because, like the fish, I think it is vital for us to understand the nature of this water that we are so deeply and unconsciously immersed in. One of its most striking aspects, as I have said, is that it is both physical and metaphysical. Human beings have never lived in any situation like this before. The fundamental infrastructure of the society itself is changing before our very eyes as more and more personal interactions, probably by now the majority of them, are being conducted incorporeally, through technology. Furthermore, the very nature of a human being is being transformed—*retranslated* is perhaps a better word—into a code, a configuration of information, a kind of biological “source code” in the form of a double helix. It is no coincidence to my mind that, in a world where the computer is fast becoming the dominant instrument of human interaction, the very definition of a human being, once described in the language of physics and mechanics, is being reformulated as a code, as software.

Over the past thirty-six years that I have been doing this work with technology, the technological landscape has radically transformed. The root of the digital revolution now sweeping through all levels of society derives from the harnessing of flowing, vibrating electrons and its application to the transmission, reception, and manipulation of coded information. The key to the media world today is time, not space. The thrust of innovation lies in the interaction between real-time processing (instantaneous connections) and asynchronous communication (information stored for later retrieval)—in other words, the interaction between perception and memory. The current revolution is not about maintaining something that’s fixed and unchanging—it’s about flow and movement and instantaneous change. Nor is it necessarily about unprecedented tools—the idea for the fax machine, for example, originated in the late nineteenth century. The essence of it, rather, is the creation of a standardized code to symbolically represent the things and processes of the world, and the instantaneous proliferation and multiplication of this coded information by computers via discs, cards, cables, or, now, wireless. We call this the virtual world—intangible but ever present. Real, yes, but in another way, like the medieval worldview that describes the divine maker as “a sphere whose center is everywhere but whose circumference is nowhere.” You are always connected. You can send and receive anywhere, anytime. You can send it to a billion people. You can send it to one. This is the world we are living in.

It is really striking to me that this information is now being exchanged on the most intimate, personal level. This has gone way beyond television—the family sitting together in the privacy of their own home watching the same screen. It has now arrived at the smallest social unit—the isolated individual (which, ironically, is also the essential unit of all spiritual practices). Beyond even the laptop computer, access has come down to the iPod and those seemingly innocuous little “ear buds.” Every time I look at those things, I shudder and think, “They’re like IVs!—intravenous information-delivery devices!” And the iPod at the other end is the plasma bottle. Its messages are being pumped right into you, below skin level and directly into your ear canal. They now have access to you *beneath* your skin. Think of that. I do not know what’s next—will we all be shooting up CNN?

What I find sadly ironic is that the same technology that connects us, that links individuals to the whole world on the grandest scale imaginable—“*everything is at your fingertips!*”—is also, in practice, insulating us from those closest to us. Think of the teenager sitting at home linked to the world via the Internet with headphones on while the family is talking in the other room, or a group of friends at a café sitting in silence, glued to their laptops or cell-phone screens with that faraway look in their eyes. It’s become an odd world indeed when half of our being is usually off somewhere else. The ironic twist is that the very thing that connects us to each other is actually isolating us at the most intimate social level: our friends and family. This is odd. Just look at that famous, hugely popular Web site MySpace. Why didn’t they call it “YourSpace,” or “OurSpace”? It is like, “MY Space, dude!” Today is certainly the Age of Individuals. Pull-down menus, custom settings, individual ring tones, personalized messages, microdemographics, individualized marketing. Have you seen that *New Yorker* cartoon a few years back that showed two dogs sitting at a computer? One dog is showing the other how to use the keyboard, and he says, “And the really great thing about the Internet is they don’t even know you’re a dog!” Very funny . . . but, politically and socially, I find that very disturbing. I *want* to know if you are a dog or not.

As you can tell, I feel very ambivalent about the tools that I use. My medium is responsible, directly or indirectly, for the untold suffering, manipulation, dummied-down, and intentional deception of millions of people around the world. And the camera—the most precious tool that I use to make my art—is in practice one of the most dangerous political weapons we currently have. Narrowly focused vision—*that* is dangerous.

Right now I could take my camera and record an image of all of you sitting there in your seats, or I could take that same camera and point it behind me, over here in the corner, and no one would know you were even here. Ever. If you are not on the screen, you do not exist.

These are the kinds of things I fret about when I go to sleep at night. I think of computers, and I worry about the fact that they are based on the fundamental distinction of a “yes” or a “no,” expressed mathematically as a one or a zero. Did you ever have a friend who responds only with a “yes” or a “no”? I bet you wouldn’t be friends with that person for very long. As you know, I am an artist, and, please excuse me, but I am a “maybe” kind of guy. “Yes or no” is not an option for me. Where are the “maybes” in this technology? Poetry would shrink if it were only about a “yes” or a “no.” Painting does not come out of a “yes or no” approach to the world. Art *thrives* on “maybe.” I prefer twilight to high noon or midnight. I like a vague inkling better than a completed thought. I think that an undecided question is much better than a final answer. This digital medium is so damn absolute. A single keystroke, and something you did not want to send is gone—and you cannot take it back. “Can I please take it back?” “No!”

Here’s something else. Do you want to see the most lethal weapon currently in existence? I have it right here. It’s my finger, the so-called pointer finger. With this finger, one keystroke, I can destroy the entire population of St. Petersburg, trigger a roadside bomb, take a human life from three hundred yards away through a sniper scope, initiate an executive order responsible for the suffering of millions of innocent people, allow an individual to die from a medical condition, make a family destitute, or destroy a relationship. Think of everything you can do with this innocent, small, minor muscle of the human body in the computer age. That is the empowerment that a single individual has in our society today. With that same finger we can stroke the tummy of a newborn baby, gently dress a wound, teach a child the number one, caress the body of a lover, tickle a friend, massage the pain away—all with the same finger. *This* is the world we are living in. The individual today has never been more empowered than at the present moment. One individual can bring down an entire group of people. And furthermore, our privacy and individuality have never been more in danger than they are right now at this particular moment in history.

Another thing that troubles me about this so-called communication age of ours is that we are doing most of the communicating without eye contact. One of the main ways we traditionally have been able to tell

whether someone is lying is to look them in the eye. The subtlest mysteries of the human heart get transmitted through the eyes. The glance was the way that the deepest knowledge was passed from master to pupil, from mother to child, between a man and a woman, a human being and an animal. This precious pathway has been known to human beings for millennia. There is an ancient Hindu tradition called Darshan, which roughly translated means “Seeing and being seen by God.” We all have encountered this state of being, whether consciously or unconsciously. It is the other presence you sometimes sense when you are alone in a room. Within the circle of Darshan, the room is never empty. You are never alone. And when there is someone watching, there is less chance of falling into error. When there is nothing to hide, there is less chance of lying, deceiving, hurting, or any type of unethical, harmful activity. When there is a constant, conscious presence there, it is more likely that moral, selfless action will arise in that place.

In December 2005, Kira, our two teenage boys, and I had the great fortune to visit privately with the Dalai Lama at his residence in Dharamsala, India. I raised some of these issues about the suffering present in our technological world, and our teenage son Blake asked him about the nature of violence. His Holiness told us that the most essential point of any action lies in the true intentions of the person committing the action, not in the instrument of that action. I thought about this for a long time. It was a very important lesson for someone who uses technology in his life’s work. The Dalai Lama was saying that the right or wrong is in the person. We all too often blame the tool, the technology, as the source of the problem. If I have loving kindness in my heart, then I will feed you with my fork—if I have hatred in my heart, I will kill you with it. In this day and age, individual intent—what is contained in the heart, not just the head—is *the* most important aspect governing the uses of technology. At a time when we are all intimately connected to each other, it is what you are *feeling* at the moment you do something that determines the character and lasting effects of that action.

In practice, of course, this is hard to keep in mind, one of the reasons being that we no longer have adequate social safeguards to hold things in check. Many of our established institutions that traditionally have provided the necessary moral and ethical framework for society—family, church, and state—have become dysfunctional, corrupt, or have atrophied from disuse. Their job has traditionally been to make us aware of the larger reality outside of “myself,” but, as I said, the individual of today

is immersed in a self-reflecting media world and has become a society of one. Marketers and politicians have become media savvy and have developed a “divide-and-conquer” strategy, reaching us personally, one on one, while we are outside the group—all of it occurring in the reassuring, solitary isolation of your own screen. The social and political consequences of this are, in fact, very serious. Few of those on the outside have your best interests in mind, and chances are none of the few who do will be there to remind you of the right choice when the decision needs to be made. With the familiar communal guideposts for the most part gone, the need for individual discernment has never been greater, and therefore the need for comprehensive objective knowledge on the part of the individual has never been more critical.

Here’s another story from the Buddha. On the night of his enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree about twenty-five hundred years ago, Buddha declared, “I am not leaving this tree until I am enlightened.” He found the so-called immovable spot where previous Buddhas had sat, the only place that did not feel unstable or shift when he stepped on it. He sat there completely alone, obstinate and determined to pursue his desire to become enlightened. Even the gods didn’t help, but came only to watch. Okay, artists, how many times have you told yourself, “I am going into that studio, and I am not coming out until I finish this piece”? This is the same thing. Force of will—going one-on-one with yourself—banging your head against the wall. Obviously, in the end Buddha succeeded.

Several things impressed me about the story of Buddha’s enlightenment when I read it most recently in Karen Armstrong’s exceptional biography *Buddha*. First is that he did all of it alone. The magnitude of willpower, determination, and honesty, as well as the emotional and physical strength required to accomplish what he did, is staggering and inspiring. Second, he did not expect or ask for help from the gods. This was because Buddha knew that, in his battle with Mara, the Lord of Illusion, the fight was not with some external opponent but with himself—with his conditioned mind, full of delusions and misconceptions about the true nature of reality. As if at a spectator sport, the gods applauded and rejoiced when at dawn he finally came out victorious.

The thing I love about these traditional stories is that they evoke vivid images. Artists, please remember—this is one of the most important things that we do: give the world its images. Every once in a while, whether intentional or not (it is usually not), you put an image out there and it sticks. It becomes a part of the fabric of the culture and of people’s lives in

a very deep way, not just on the walls of the museum but in people's minds and hearts. The iconic image that comes to mind as an emblem of Western culture over the past six hundred years is Michelangelo's extraordinary marble sculpture of David. It is the image of a young man standing alone, strong and fearless, with a weapon. He is about to slay the giant brute Goliath. The striking aspect of this image of David is his single-minded focus. The intensity and determination of his gaze are palpable. I think of the fact that Michelangelo's was the time that gave us vanishing-point perspective, with its dynamic lines of sight that converge on a single point, and there is nothing more striking about this masterpiece than the hero's acutely focused eyes, shooting out like two laser beams. The message emanating from this statue is that single-point focus, deriving from a one-to-one relationship with an opponent and channeled through the eyes, is the way to successfully engage the world.

However, in my opinion this image no longer works for us as a representation of our time. This mode of engagement is not our life—it is not our world. To my mind, a far more accurate image for the media world—the age of networks, multitasking, simultaneous multiple points of view—is not the Judeo-Christian image of David but rather the multi-armed, multiheaded Bodhisattva of Buddhism. A Bodhisattva is someone who was able to achieve enlightenment and therefore be released from the eternal karmic cycles of suffering, only to decide out of compassion to return to the world in order to help all beings to become free from suffering. One of the most famous Bodhisattvas in all of Buddhism is Avalokiteshvara (in Japanese, Kannon), also known as the God of Compassion. He has a thousand arms to reach out and touch all the suffering beings in the world, and a thousand eyes, one in every hand, to see all of the suffering in the world. Originally, he had only one head, but it eventually burst open from witnessing so much suffering, and so the gods intervened and gave him nine new heads. Thus, now we see Avalokiteshvara depicted with a tower of heads stacked on top of each other on his shoulders in order to look out in all directions. Sounds a lot like us today, doesn't it? Multiple arms, multiple eyes, multiple heads, multiple screens, multiple TVs, radio, Internet, computers, cell phones, digital cameras, video recorders, text messaging, e-mailing, voice mailing, Blackberrying—especially the part about the head exploding.

Actually, I think this image is very moving—compassionately seeing into all corners of the world, connected to everyone, comforting them, deep sensing things like a mother with a child. In fact, in China the God

of Compassion began transforming into the *Goddess* of Compassion, or “Kuan-yin,” the commonly seen female form, by the eighth or ninth century. The Chinese obviously recognized that who better than a woman to take in all of that suffering and pain and make it right—to know how to manage it, to nurture, to help heal. I think it is quite appropriate for our age that an important deity like Avalokiteshvara has been transformed into a female. As we witness the slow, painstaking shift in cultural attitudes toward greater equality for women, I firmly believe that the growing power of women’s roles will be one of the hallmarks of the new century, and greatly affect the world in a very positive way.

At this juncture, I would like to show you another video piece. This one is called *Memoria*. Originally, this image was projected onto a piece of silk hanging freely from the ceiling of a small, dark alcove. Here we will see it as a large screen projection.

The term *memoria* obviously refers to memory, but what you might not know is that in the Middle Ages it was a technical term defining the function and specifications of a particular set of images intended for devotion, in this case, the remembrance of God, what the Sufis call *dhikir*. *Memoria* was the third category of images designated by the various church councils, the first two being “*Historia*,” a set of images that tell a story or describe a sequence of events in chronological time, such as the life of a saint, and “*Imago*,” the unchanging presence of a holy person, typically a full-length portrait, depicting their eternal being as it exists for the ages, outside of time. Although it may seem remote and abstract, “*Imago*” continues to exist in secular form for us today in the guise of the mantelpiece portrait of a grandparent that adorns many homes. In fact, the common

Bill Viola: *Memoria*, 2000. Video installation. Photo: Kira Perov



photograph is pure Imago, and the state it evokes, an act of remembrance, is one of the most important universal traditions that human beings have.

However, Imago is not only relegated to artificial images. I was attending to my father near the end of his life in a nursing home, and one morning I was helping him wash and brush his teeth. His health had been failing, and we had just taken out his dentures. Quite frankly, he looked like crap. I watched him stare long and hard at his face in the mirror, trying to reconcile the image he was seeing with the person he knew himself to be. After a long silence, he said to me, “Bill, you know . . . you always feel like you.” This was Imago.

As a video artist, discovering the tradition of Memoria helped me to better understand the nature of the medium I was working in. I had originally been focused on the idea of cameras and microphones as surrogates for perception, being completely absorbed by the “live,” instantaneous aspect of the medium. But now I was beginning to feel that it was more accurate to describe them as instruments of memory. Memories, as we all know, are records of experiences, but as we also know, they are not fixed. They are inherently unstable and therefore changeable. You can modify them, replay them, edit them, fast-forward through them, rewrite them, and even erase them forever. So this model has a lot of relevance to the medium I was using, in terms of both the creative artistic potential and the sociopolitical danger. But most important, the step into the domain of memory was extremely vital for me in another way—it provided a foundation for making images that did not rely on light. I felt freed from the confining lines of linear perspective, and closer to capturing what all the saints, mystics, and visionaries were seeing with their eyes closed.

In the spring of 1980 I received a grant from the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission to live and work in Japan, and Kira and I immersed ourselves in Eastern culture for the first time. Japan had never experienced the Renaissance, but leaped directly into the modern age in the late nineteenth century. With a burgeoning field of advanced media technology, a healthy community of video artists, and traditional art forms still active, it was the perfect place to be. Kira and I soon found a Zen teacher, Master Daien Tanaka, who, with great compassion



and generosity, took two novice *gaijin* (Japanese for “foreigner”) under his wing, thus providing the missing and necessary complement to the years of book learning, practice, that is, that increasingly rare commodity—*direct experience*.

Over time, as is typical of the embedded cultural matrix that is Japan, worlds began opening up. I learned about historical spiritual masters like Dogen (1200–1253), founder of the Soto school of Zen Buddhism and author of a great compendium of teachings, *Shobogenzo: The Eye and Treasury of the True Law*. In a chapter titled “Uji,” or “Being Time,” Dogen asks us to “see each thing in this world as a moment in time.” He also states, “The way the Self arrays itself is the form of the entire world”—insightful words for the young video artist. During this time I also discovered Takuan (1573–1640), Zen master and sword instructor to the samurai. In texts like *The Mysterious Record of Immovable Wisdom* he discusses the dangers of “the stopping mind,” the mind that is seized or “caught” by something during the course of an action. His teachings emphasize the importance of knowing where to put the mind in any encounter, and stress the need to keep the stream of conscious awareness fluid, flowing, and flexible. In all my years of art training no professor ever told me, or even mentioned the notion of, where to put the mind while making works of art. This became one of the most important teachings on art making I have ever received.

Then there is the Zen poet and recluse Ryokan, who lived from 1758 to 1831, almost exactly parallel to one of my other personal heroes, the English poet and artist William Blake. Son of rich parents, Ryokan was a playboy in his youth, drinking and frequenting geisha houses, and positioned to succeed in his father’s footsteps, but gradually he became withdrawn and uninterested. His spiritual crisis led him to leave home and join a monastery, where he took the whole thing seriously and became a great Zen master. Eventually, he realized that he wasn’t cut out for temple life either, and so he left and returned to the area near his home in present-day Niigata—mountainous, remote, and bitter cold in winter. There he lived alone in a hut on the side of a mountain for thirty-five years, begging for his food in the villages below and writing some of the most poignant, moving poetry I have ever read.

Why are his poems this way? Because his poetry was not a fanciful vision of some faraway land, memoirs of his youth, or virtuosic linguistic gymnastics. His poetry was about *Now*—which, in his case, was just an old man sitting in a small, cold room, with the last lump of charcoal that was going to keep him warm on a winter’s night smoldering in the fireplace,

ink brush and paper at hand, and writing about the very situation and his inner state at the moment he was experiencing it. His poems, the remnants of these solitary moments, are touching, profound, sometimes humorous, and heart-wrenching.

But the most special thing about them, and so easily overlooked, is that the inspiration and the action, perception, and reflection are one. Ryokan is letting us come into that tiny room with him, with incense burning and tea simmering, and sit there as the thought unfolds. What a privilege! Like the artist's studio, another place with rarified air where people long to be the proverbial "fly on the wall," the true nature of Ryokan's situation is often misunderstood. For many of us who feel mired in stress-filled, meaning-deprived, overly busy modern lives, leaving everything and moving to the mountains to meditate and write poems sounds like paradise. We hear coworkers say, "I think I'll go live on a mountain," as if it is some kind of ideal state, that it would be the answer to all their problems. But remember, in our society being alone for an extended time is also one of the most cruel and inhumane forms of punishment in our prisons—solitary confinement—yet it is what thousands of monks do every day. The mental strength required to live alone with the self for extended periods of time, doing "nothing," apparently requires not only deep patience but, as it turns out, superhuman stamina and strength. This fact speaks volumes about our nature as human beings.

Ryokan's hut on the mountainside was indeed a kind of "paradise," but it was not free of pain and suffering. There was a lot of it. Yes, he was far from the withering complexity and snares of the human world, but as a Buddhist, was he ever truly "free"? The poems *are* liberating and fresh, but, as one soon discovers, tears are never far away, as in this one:

Sometimes I sit quietly,
 Listening to the falling leaves.
 Peaceful indeed is the life of a monk.
 Cut off from all worldly matters.
 Then why do I shed these tears?¹

Or this:

I watch people in the world
 Throw away their lives lusting after things,

1. John Stevens, trans., *Dewdrops on a Lotus Leaf: Zen Poems of Ryokan* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1993), 70.

Never able to satisfy their desires,
 Falling into deeper despair
 And torturing themselves.
 Even if they get what they want
 How long will they be able to enjoy it?
 Binding themselves more firmly to the grindstone.
 Such people are like monkeys
 Frantically grasping for the moon in the water
 And then falling into a whirlpool.
 How endlessly those caught up in the floating world suffer.

Let me pause here for a moment. There are two more lines to go, but we have come to a vital “fork in the road.” We sometimes find ourselves at one of life’s junctures looking down on others around us. These words could have come from the mouth of a recently retired multimillionaire who did buy that palace on the mountain and got away from the rat race, smugly looking down on us from on high. After all, Ryokan *does* call us monkeys. But the difference, an essential one, is in these last two lines:

Despite myself, I fret over them all night
 And cannot staunch my flow of tears.²

So that’s what he was doing up there in paradise—crying for the rest of us. After reading Ryokan, I did some small research about crying in Buddhism and discovered many, many examples like the ones I’ve just shared with you. As the masters tell us, tears are one of the purest expressions of the Buddhist ideal of compassion.

Ryokan also said, “There are three things I dislike: Writing from a calligrapher, food from a chef, and poems from a poet.” As I believe you are beginning to understand, I am a visual artist who does not trust visual experience, a video maker who is deeply suspicious of the video camera, an incessant planner who leaves things to chance, and an active observer who is most comfortable engaging the world by sitting in silence with his eyes closed. Sometimes I can’t believe that I’ve survived in this culture for this long. But, there are reasons.

In 1980, while Kira and I were living in Japan, I was given a book by the African American painter James Coleman, also in Japan on the same fellowship. It was called *The Transformation of Nature in Art* and was writ-

2. Ibid., 69.

ten by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947), the great art historian, cultural philosopher, and metaphysician. He became one of my greatest sources of inspiration and knowledge regarding the nature of art. Coomaraswamy, son of a Sri Lankan father and English mother, embodied the meeting of East and West. He grew up within Hindu culture in what was then Ceylon, studied geology at the University of London, and later became one of the leading authorities on Hindu art and architecture, which he expanded to include Buddhist and medieval Christian traditions. He noted that “prior to the Renaissance, East and West stood on common ground.” In his later years, he established the first collection in the United States of Indian art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and there radically revised and corrected the way Hindu and oriental art was physically exhibited and understood. Defining and bringing together individual objects and sacred sculpture in their proper orientation and traditional alignments, Coomaraswamy was like someone who dismantled an exhibition about computers where the keyboard, screen, mouse, and processor were displayed in separate rooms, and then brought them together, wired them up, and turned them on so they could function in the way they were intended to. He honored the aesthetics, but emphasized the works’ invisible power and spiritual function. He once described museums as the places where we put the things we forgot how to use.

From Coomaraswamy, I learned that, despite the term *visual art*, all art represents invisible things. I thought about that for a long time. It didn’t make sense at first, but I have come to see that it is true, and not just for art objects. If you cannot see how the invisible world could be the primary, most pervasive aspect determining the nature of our lives and experience, then let me give you some common examples of invisible things:

The face of your mother. This exists for me right at this moment. I can see her clearly—you cannot. But each of you possesses your own image of an absent loved one, at times vivid, at times faint.

Photography. Can someone show me right now where a five-hundredth of a second is? Does anybody see it? How about a tenth of a second? Where is the so-called frozen moment that photography claims to capture?

Your life savings. Exactly where is it at this moment? It’s totally virtual—just a series of ones and zeroes, electromagnetic impulses sitting in some institutional computer somewhere. You didn’t bury it in your

backyard as the old ranchers used to do. They did that because they wanted to know where it was, so they could get their hands on it. Even in its most physical form, though, your savings are only a promise.

A Narrative. This is definitely invisible, but does it exist? Think about it. If you are climbing a mountain, and you are halfway up—there's no narrative. Halfway down—no narrative yet. Get to the very bottom—still no narrative. So, where is the narrative? It is there only after you're back at the lodge, or even years later, telling your story. It is only when the conductor lowers the baton and Beethoven's Ninth finishes that the symphony as a whole exists. It is made manifest in absentia, when it is over. Narratives are incomplete when you are in them, and they only fully exist when they stop existing, that is, when the action that evoked them is finished.

The face of the announcer on the radio. This one is particularly interesting. Have you ever had the experience of finally seeing a photo of that particular announcer in the newspaper? It's devastating, isn't it? "That's not what he or she looks like!" you think. From then on, the familiar voice that accompanies you as you drive to work has been paired with this wrong-looking, mismatched face. Well, please know that you were not really wrong. Six hundred years of images based on optical realism have convinced you that the way something appears to the eye, especially the mechanical eye of the camera, is a "true likeness." The image in the newspaper is merely the imprint of reflected light off the person's head—no more, no less. Your inner image of the person, however, is the invisible "heart image," the mental and emotional impression of his or her feeling presence, their being. In terms of the whole person, it is in many ways a more accurate representation than the optical image. This invisible unconscious process, and the subtle channels of transmission that further deepen and expand the inner image, is what formulates your true image of that person, not merely the visual appearance. Please don't mistrust or disregard this process.

Here are a few more examples:

Time. Time lies completely outside the realm of the senses. We can only witness its effects. In fact, some scientists doubt it even exists. While doing his fieldwork on local religious beliefs in Java, anthropologist Clifford Geertz was admonished by an old woman when he

expressed doubts about some of the practices of the local sorcerers. “You can’t see Tuesday, can you?” she said.

Light. Yes, light is invisible. Sounds strange, but I learned this in my eighth-grade science class. The teacher brought in a black box with a hole in the right side panel, through which he pointed a spotlight. A small glass window was mounted into the front side facing us, and there was another identical hole on the left side. Outside this hole was a white card. Our teacher turned on the spotlight, and it shone into the box, past the window, and out the other side, brightly illuminating the card. The only thing was, there was no light visible in the box. It was black inside. Unless light strikes something, like myself standing here in these spotlights, light is completely invisible. This is why outer space is black. Right now, the space between you and me, between each of us in this lecture hall right now, is filled with light. But it cannot be seen unless some object blocks its path, which you do when you move your head, even slightly, to get a different view.

Painters like Giotto in the late Middle Ages realized this too. When I read that I got goose bumps. In their quest to make images spatial, Giotto and his colleagues turned their attention to the three-dimensional art of sculpture, and particularly how light behaved when it struck a multifaceted object. Through this research, they became aware of directional light and how it illuminated some things and cast shadows from others, and especially, as art historian Paul Hills has described, how it traveled invisibly between objects. The existing field of optics gave some framework for this, having been reinvigorated by the Arab scientist al-Hazen (al-Haitham) in the eleventh century and further expounded in the thirteenth by people like Robert Grosseteste and John Pecham, but much of it must have come from the artist’s own experience and observations. They *knew* that the entire piazza was filled with light, and that it inscribed a complex invisible geometry. Of course, for them, this was not only an important technical or aesthetic realization; it was the affirmation of the divine presence.

Add to these examples the most primary, dominant element that constitutes the invisible world around us, the presence of the dead, and it becomes evident that the invisible far outweighs the visible in our individual lives and the world around us. This fact was confirmed for me in a more dramatic way when I first visited the great cathedrals of Europe. I was of course impressed and overwhelmed by the scale and enormity

of the spaces, as well as the technical and aesthetic achievements of the builders. After visiting many sites, I became acutely aware of one consistent aspect—that all of these great halls were empty. This is also true of the majority of our synagogues, mosques, temples, and other religious spaces. I then realized that this emptiness must be proportional to the space required to hold the cosmic presence, and to allow our infinite inner presence to join with it. It is also why a small-scale image, a revered icon of a holy figure, for example, can sit modestly in a side alcove and still command the entire building, charging that vast volume of empty space with meaning and power. This is a great lesson for artists.

Finally, I would like to conclude tonight's talk by showing you a projection piece from 2004 titled *The Raft*. I was asked to make a work for the Athens Olympics of that year, and as with everything that Kira and I decide to undertake, I took the assignment very seriously. I thought about the context and the occasion of the Olympic Games, a convening of individual athletes from nations all over the world. The event was a cross section of humanity in the broadest view—multinational and multicultural, including all the international tourists and spectators who would pass through Athens during that time. And I thought about all of us here together on this earth, sharing this moment. I thought about how we are all made of the same stuff, the same material, and that we ultimately have the same inner essence and experience the same range of hopes and fears, joys and sorrows.

I knew I wanted to make a piece about our contemporary life, because these are very disturbing times. Most of us live in a world where we no longer feel at home. Things feel unstable, uncertain. We no longer feel safe, and we've become suspicious of strangers, even our fellow citizens. Many people, consciously or unconsciously, feel that their lives are out of balance, out of control. There are forces affecting us that we cannot see or touch. This is the most disturbing part. Whether political, economic, social, or religious, these forces are usually anonymous and make us feel helpless and powerless. Lives are ruined by some invisible decision made by an invisible person somewhere else. And, of course, as is usually the case, it is the innocent who suffer the most.

I was thinking about these invisible forces when I had originally titled the work *Unseen Foe*, but after we finished it I changed the title to *The Raft*. Being a positive person, I felt that if I was going to make something about human suffering, and this onslaught, I would have to make it in such a way that everyone survives—that no one is lost. And that's exactly what we did. I truly believe in the human capacity for survival—that life



Bill Viola: *The Raft*, 2004. Video/sound installation. Photo: Kira Perov

will always find a way to go on, that these events, these crises, whether natural or man-made, will in the end serve to transform ourselves and to cause us, individually and socially, to transcend who we are and what we can be. In this, I am sure. So here is *The Raft*.

Finally, I want to say that I am very happy and honored to be here to speak with you, and to share my work. And I also want to thank the Tanner Lectures for including art and artists in this important program. I am very concerned, in a world that seems to insist that our salvation lies solely in science and math, that the traditional place of the humanities, the curriculum that the prewar generation grew up with, has been diminished. The fact that poetry is no longer part of our national consciousness is very troubling, because what is missing is not the numbers and the technology but the moral, ethical, and spiritual dimensions that determine how we conduct our lives and how we use the things we have created to benefit all. And this information traditionally is transmitted by the great human stories, that is, through Art.

I am eternally appreciative of the gifts that art has given me over all these years. Seeing a seven hundred-year-old painting in a museum in New York that still has the ability to move people across the gulf of space and time—to know that an image from a distant culture that we barely understand is still alive and speaking to us—is deeply inspiring and life affirming. In today's world, where the lack of a truly universal human language has spawned the conflicting babble that lies at the center of the suffering and violence we see every day on TV, my conviction is that we need Art more than ever. Let us help to make it so. Thank you very much.

NOTES

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