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## Works of Bill Viola on the Relationship Between Art and Technology

Saime Uyar

Dr., Ministry Of Education, Ankara, Turkey

### ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the works of Bill Viola, one of the important representatives of video, one of the important art disciplines, in which he presents the ideas behind basic human experiences such as birth, death and consciousness aspects to the audience through video. In addition to the visuality offered by video art, his works that draw the viewer into both sound and image and allow the listeners to get in touch with their emotions, allowing them to feel the adventure within the time period of death and life, have been examined.

American artist Bill Viola, who has an important reputation with his video works in world art, mostly deals with universally accepted issues of birth, death, gender, destiny and spirituality. The death of her son and mother, who were born simultaneously in 1988, deeply affected Viola. These two accidental events deepened the artist's spirituality and led him to work on life and death-oriented subjects.

Art, which has a positive effect on the mood of the individual, can also be inspiring in producing new things. Through various artistic forms such as painting, sculpture, and music, people can create reactive creations in the face of events they are affected by. Artist Viola conveyed the deep feelings she experienced in her life with video, a form of contemporary art. Having a major role in the use of video as an art form, Viola focuses on questioning cognitive processes by using image and sound in an impressive and complex way in her works.

Creating works that question life events through a contemporary production form, Viola reveals visual and emotional tendencies. Touching on the effects of existence and extinction on human life, the artist leaves a questioning effect on the audience with his artistic performances.

**Keywords:** Bill Viola, Art, Video, Painting, Installation

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Video art, which is among the new disciplines of contemporary art, is a kind that is difficult to understand and unusual. Video art, which generally started to be seen in the biennials, is among the important changes and developments of 20th century modern art. Basic factors such as globalization and technological advances have greatly influenced art disciplines and social networks of art.

Video art, which is much more than just offering a visual feast to the audience, is among the contemporary art disciplines that have an analytical feature that prompts the individual to think and question.

When Henri Bergson evaluates the basic philosophy of video and how the mental systems of image production function, he proposes to think in another order beyond the representative aspects of image. For Bergson, memory is a kind of accumulation of time and necessity. In his theory, he mentions two features about their capacity to accumulation of and preserve time. These are; the power of memory that creates a range and an action that can be called a delay, will, intuition, comprehension or memory and habit that is covered within the range and used and exploited by another force, and the moments of transgression between opposing and counteracting. These two features are, similarly, very important for some technical functions of video technology. The video works as an input-output system that evokes shrinkage and expansion in the flow of light waves. This means that the camera image is produced thanks to repeated and automated written outputs of time intervals (Melitopoulos, 2017).

It is possible to say that the ability of video art to directly convey the moment to the audience also increases the influence of social events on the general audience.

To give an example from the opinions of artists and writers who claim that the video is an action; Digital image simultaneously presented the image of war to human consciousness with a live broadcast from the Al Rashid Hotel in Baghdad in 1991, when the media was on the verge of a new era. CNN's immediate access to the Gulf War was the crystallized state of television's decisive role in directing the war and the political power struggle woven around it. How international events are created on television has been decisive for building policies that will force governments to act. For the first time, the whole world witnessed destruction at the same time you (Uslu, 2017).

Despite many media elements, it is possible to see that video art will continue to exist as a long-term art discipline thanks to the unique combinations in its structure (Almeida, 2019).

In this study, some works of Bill Viola, one of the important representatives of video art, are emphasized (Almeida, 2019).

Bill Viola, one of the important representatives of video art, is one of the important names that develops works that explore the different possibilities of this technology such as single-channel and closed-circuit videos and installations and ensures that video art is included in contemporary art disciplines (Almeida, 2019).

American video, digital, and sound artist Bill Viola was born on January 25, 1951 in New York, USA. Viola spent her childhood in Queens, Westbury, and New York. In 1973, he graduated from Syracuse University with a bachelor's degree in Fine Arts. After graduation, he first worked at the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse (Wainwright, 2021).

Viola, one of the pioneers of generations using video art in the 1970s, made impressive pictures with new digital media in room-sized environments that covered audio technologies, viewers with sound and hosted multiple screens of moving images (Wainwright, 2021).

From 1974 to 1976, the artist, who had long intertwined with music, continued to work in Florence at Art/Tapes/22, an independent art video production facility in Florence. Between 1973 and 1980, Viola performed with composer David Tudor in a group called "Rainforest" (later called "Composers Inside electronics"). From 1974 to 1976, he worked as a technical director at Art/Tapes/22, a leading studio in Florence, Italy. Here, he met video artist Nam June Paik, Bruce Nauman, and Vito Acconci. From 1976 to 1983, he was a guest artist at the WNET Thirteen Television Laboratory in New York (Wainwright, 2021).

After his trip to Japan in 1976, he included especially Eastern cultures in his works. It informs most of his aesthetic sensitivity, and many of his works reflect the role of art in prayer, meditation, and healing (Wainwright, 2021).

Viola's installations often include a figure intertwined with nature, such as drowning in the water, hitting flames, aging in slow motion, or giving birth. Ruminating on life and death is the acquisition of mind/body dialectics, the nature of perception, and transcendence.

The artist, who chooses his works from the subjects inspired by real life, shares these topics with his audience (Wainwright, 2021).

In the works of Bill Viola, it can be perceived an atmosphere that imitates the style of impressionist artists in the late 19th century. We can understand it from his ingenuity in using the light (Wainwright, 2021).

Viola, who represented the United States at the 46th Venice Biennale in 1995, was often featured on various sites outside the museum, in a context that can be found in the world, such as churches and temples (Wainwright, 2021).

In 1997, the Whitney Museum of American Art presented a large retrospective of Viola's work. His wife worked with producer Kira Perov; avant-garde director Peter Sellars premiered Richard Wagner's new production *Tristan and Isolde* and orchestra conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen in 2005. Viola received the Japan Art Association "Praemium Imperiale" award (Wainwright, 2021).

Viola, who began to see her work in 1977, was invited to present his video work by cultural art director Kira Perov at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia. The romantic relationship between Perov and Viola led to their marriage after a while. There have been personal and professional collaborations over many years involving both travel and collaboration (The Art Story, n.d.).

The couple went to different regions and discussed the artistic features of those regions. While residing in Japan, they worked in Zen Buddhism and then photographed Indian rock art sites in the Southwest United States (The Art Story, n.d.).

Nature can sometimes play the most active role in the creation of art from where it stands. Just like this unforgettable experience that deeply affected Bill Viola's life when he was six years old; he fell from a raft on which he had been playing with his cousins and sunk deep into the lake waters below. While submerged, he opened his eyes and observed the beautiful shafts of light coming down through the water, illuminating the organisms floating beneath the surface of the lake. His uncle pulled him from the water to safety but the experience inspired the small boy to consider what lay beneath the surface of life itself and also likely prompted his lifelong preoccupation with water (The Art Story, n.d.).

Then, in 1988, Viola and Perov's first son was born and simultaneously his mother suddenly fell ill. She died a few years later, in 1991, right around the time that the couple's second son was born (The Art Story, n.d.).

It is also possible to see the unplanned outflows of life in guiding art in Viola's art. Those two coinciding events affected Viola in a profound way and ultimately sparked a new period of artistic creativity and deepened spirituality. His focus turned to sorting through home videos and using them to produce some of his most important work of the period, video pieces that focused on the subjects of life and death (The Art Story, n.d.).

Initially, Viola had no intention of incorporating the videos he had made of his mother into his professional work. In fact, he kept the personal videos separate from those he produced for his artistic career; that is, until after his mother's death, at which time, he explained: "I realized I was an artist and I should do what I was set up to do, so I took all my home movies into the studio and I finished the next piece of work. I was like on fire and asked myself why I hadn't done this before." A video he produced during that period following his mother's death, Nantes Triptych (1992), which was eventually purchased by the Tate, features images of Viola's dying mother as well as a man underwater and a woman in labor (The Art Story, n.d.).

Viola, who experiences the coldness of death with the loss of her own parents, tries to examine the despair she experiences through artistic depths in which he realizes what death and existence really mean as a consolation (The Art Story, n.d.).

The ease of video technology has attracted the attention of photographers, filmmakers, performance artists, conceptual artists, voice and process artists. The advent of digital recording technologies in the 1990s and beyond has further extended the possibilities of modern video art (Yood, 2014).



**Image 1.** Bill Viola, Hafiza Tiyatrosu, 1985, Country Museum of Art

The tree image, which has an important place in representing life, has often been important for many artists. In this work titled "Theater of Memory" (Image 1), in which he integrates emotions and ideas, Viola used the tree as the main subject. In his text about this work, the artist said: "A large tree with bare branches and exposed roots, leans across the floor to the far upper corner of a large, dark room. Fifty small lanterns are hung on its branches. A large color video image is projected on the rear wall. The picture is dominated by electronic noise and static patterns. The images are sometimes recognizable but never seem to come in clearly. Loud bursts of static and noise come from the speakers, it was almost as if a loud voice was coming. There are long silences between the bursts of noise. The only light in the room is comes from the lanterns and glow of the video image. 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 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 though 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. (Texts from Bill Viola. Photos: Kira Perov) (Furniture Design Ideas, n.d.).



**Image 2.** Bill Viola, Tree of Knowledge, 1997

Bill Viola, in his own words, carried with him the idea of a tree that had grown under the influence of the audience for more than 15 years. He tried the visual work of a real tree, but saw the desperation of having to wait decades to complete the project. The idea, which took place for the first time with the possibilities offered through plant modeling and computer, began to emerge.

Summarizing that life is trapped between a starting and ending line, the artist describes it through the phases of a tree's life adventure.

Bill Viola, who became known through his many video installations, works in his art on the phenomenon of time in all of its experienced aspects: the absolute artworks about time and the mental time, the time during sleep, in hectic activity, and during rest. In the installation "Tree of Knowledge" (1997), the tree runs through different types of time. The lifetime of the tree itself, its youth, its strength, and its death. While the viewer walks down the hallway, the tree experiences spring and the growth of leaves; it blossoms in the early summer, bears fruit that fall in late summer, and in the fall the tree sheds its leaves. It runs through the cycle of one year.

It is possible to identify the changes of the phases in Viola's Knowledge Tree in the process with the phases in human life.



**Image 3.** Bill Viola, Sequence from "Tree of Knowledge", 1997. Source: <http://jfjm100.com/digital-design-of-nature/bill-viola-tree-of-knowledge.html>

**Figure 12.19**

**Continued sequence from "Tree of Knowledge"**



**Image 4.** Bill Viola, Sequence from "Tree of Knowledge", 1997. Source: <http://jfjm100.com/digital-design-of-nature/bill-viola-tree-of-knowledge.html>

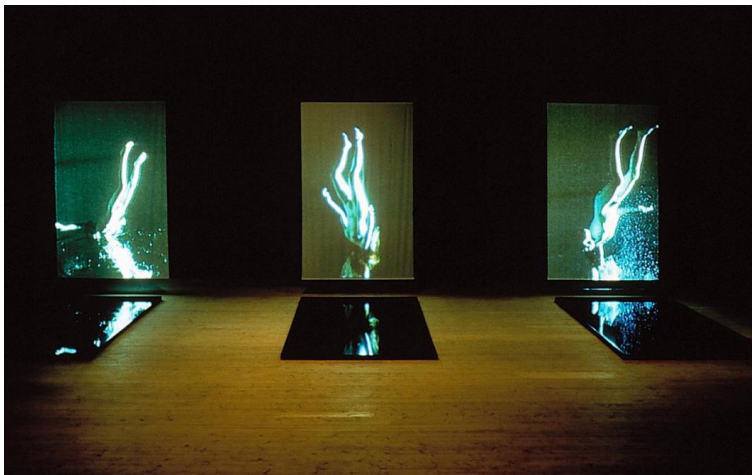
At the end of the sequence, the roots bury themselves into the ground: like an old man the tree finds its place. The tree becomes in such a way our projection and a mirror. For the animation of the growth, the budding, and the ripening of the fruits, the embedded keyframing described in 7 chapter was utilized. The sequence was rendered using an



integrated raycasting algorithm. The animation sequence was realized at the ZKM Institut für Bildmedien using the Xfrog modeling system.

The basis was 20 photographs of different trees taken by Bill Viola in Huntington Gardens, out of which the idealtypical tree was chosen. The total time for modeling, timing, adjustment of the temporally variable textures etc., amounted to approximately three months. Tree of Knowledge was shown in 1997 at the ZKM in Karlsruhe and in 1999 at the Whitney Museum in New York.

In this artwork, the viewer enters a 16-meter-long hallway and then opens the view freely to a large 2.4×3.2 meter rear-projected canvas, on which the picture of a tree can be seen. If the viewer enters the hallway and moves forward, the tree begins to grow, and keeps growing until the viewer stops; then also the tree stops growing. The viewer notices that her/his position is coupled on the way with the picture of the tree in the video sequence. If he/she reaches the end of the hallway, the tree loses its leaves, becomes old and dies. Bill Viola, who became known through his many video installations, works in his art on the phenomenon of time in all of its experienced aspects: the absolute artworks about time and the mental time, the time during sleep, in hectic activity, and during rest.



**Image 5.** Bill Viola, Stations. Source: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81737>

This work by the artist called Stations comprises five video projections, each displaying a nude figure suspended in water. Floating heads-down, the figures drift slowly out of the image frames. Their reflections in the polished slabs of granite placed at the foot of each screen give the impression of figures swimming in pools of black liquid. The thirteenth-century Persian poet Jahal al-Din Rumi, a favorite author of the artist, proclaimed: "With every moment a world is born and dies. And know that for you, with every moment comes death and renewal." Likewise, in Stations there is no ending or beginning. Every instant is a meditation on the continual cycles of life, death, and rebirth.

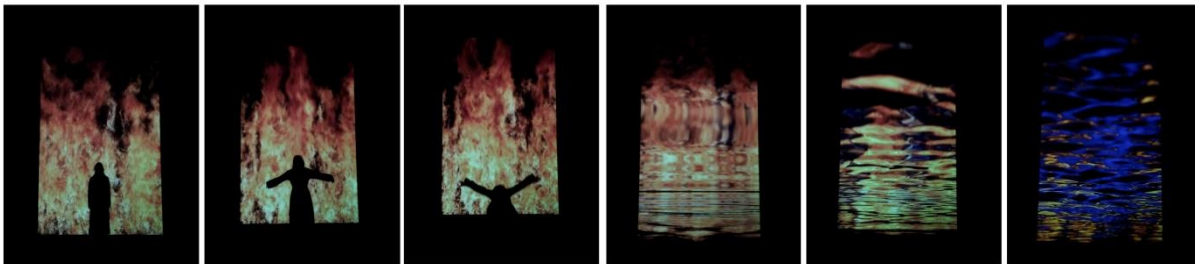
Viola has produced works containing electronic, audio and image technologies in the field of new media. His works focus on the ideas behind basic human experiences such as birth, death and consciousness aspects.

Viola's art, which pushes to capture the essence of emotion with the recording of the show in his video installations, has a profound aesthetic and emotional effect. The artist, whose works have human value, establishes a connection between the themes he chooses from within life and the audience.

His video works also exhibited the image quality with slow motion techniques created with new technology and allowing the viewer to embrace the image.



**Image 6.** Bill Viola, Fire Woman, 2005



**Image 7.** Bill Viola, Fire Woman, 2005

In this work named “Fire Woman”, he reveals the reality of death and the inevitability of extinction distinctly with the art of performance, which theorizes the body as an art tool.

"While watching this video of the artist for the first time, it is possible to experience many mixed emotions such as spiritual and religious feelings, the end of existence, the helplessness of the human body and soul in the face of death, the imaginary shaping of the perception of hell in the mind, and the end of life. At the same time, at the end of the video, the relieving sound of water accompanying the moments of the destruction of the body gives the feeling that there is a new beginning after death. This work of Viola, which consists only of images, sounds and movements, is an extremely impressive and disturbing work that draws the audience deeply and allows them to experience the moment” (Saime Uyar). (Goldberg, 2004; Raz, n.d.).



**Image 8.** Bill Viola, Sleepers, 1992. Source: <https://www.itsliquid.com/featured-artist-bill-viola.html>

In this study titled "Sleepers" (Visual 7), one of the works that the artist bases on life, it is thought that it creates the impression that people who investigate life and death and stand in the forefront evoke rebirth in the flow of water.

Viola said about the video's symbolism: "Water supports the fish like light supports man. Land is the death of the fish - darkness is the death of man." (Itsliquid).

His video work has contributed greatly to his contemporary artist identity by exhibiting in key venues such as the National Gallery, London, Guggenheim Berlin, Guggenheim New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, Getty Los Angeles, California, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Itsliquid).



**Image 9.** Bill Viola, *Tristan's Ascension (The Sound of a Mountain Under a Waterfall)*, 2005, Image: Courtesy of David Parry / Royal Academy of Arts

It is thought that artist, known for his stately video installations, mostly featuring angel-like drowning figures in slow motion, makes no secret of his admiration for his Renaissance ancestors

Viola, which combines physical mobility with water and presents it to the audience in its spatial composition, in this work titled "Tristan's Ascension (The Sound of a Mountain Under a Waterfall)", it is possible to think that death, which points to eternity in the water that makes life alive, reflects the dominance over the body.



**Image 10.** Bill Viola, *The Fall Into Paradise*, 2005. Source: <http://www.radikal.com.tr/kultur/garibaldide-bir-hareketli-tablo-1073556/>

Viola's work titled "The Fall Into Paradise" is a 10-minute video work from 2005. It is presented to the audience as a moving description of a story that extends from birth to death. He describes the transformation of the individual in the process between life and death. The water used by the artist in "The Fall Into Paradise", which is closely related to his previous works, differs from his previous works in terms of its intended use. The artist stated that he used the water here to explore the theme of 'being expelled from heaven and falling to earth'. The artist, who emphasizes the importance of water on life, states that he allows them to experience the atmosphere by sharing it with the audience in this performance he offers (Ekinici, 2011).



## 2. CONCLUSION

Bill Viola, one of the first visual artists by using new video techniques in the early 1970s, has been one of the important artists in contemporary art, influencing the establishment of video art. Considered the pioneer of new media art, Bill Viola creates common surrounds by combining images in films with music.

It focuses on the themes of birth and death, which are the unchanging reality of life, by taking advantage of developing and changing technological advances and using video art. It is possible to see the effect of the coldness and depth of death experienced by the artist, who draws attention to the limitation of the time period between these two phenomena, especially after the loss of his parents.

It is possible to state that Viola, who uses the themes of water, air and fire as an important part of his works, creates a kind of reaction to the anxiety of being aware of the concept of death by editing and rendering his video works extremely slowly.

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