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THE VIDEO IMAGE AND ITS DIMENSIONS:
BILL VIOLA'S 'THE REFLECTING POOL' AND 'MIGRATION'

Translated from Polish by Kamila Rymajdo
Перевод с польского Камилы Римайдо

In the 1970s, Viola created two pieces, which can undoubtedly be read as the artist's personal manifesto. In these works, he defined the parameters of video, dividing them into two main dimensions. 'The Reflecting Pool' is a contemplation on the relation between the electronically generated picture (then only analog video) and cinema. Viola expresses the belief that video is an autonomous medium, whose link with cinema is, to a certain degree, superficial. The new medium has its own set of rules. Although in 'Migration' he also touches upon the relationship between video and film, here he explores the inner structure of video and the possibilities resulting from linear projection, revealing both its similarity to film and its uniqueness.

Key words: *video image, Bill Viola, medium, film*

Видеообраз и его измерения. «Бассейн» и «Перемещение» Билла Виолы

В 1970-х годах Билл Виола создает две работы, которые без сомнения можно считать выражением его персонального credo. В них он определяет параметры видео в двух важнейших измерениях. «Бассейн» - это изучение отношений между электронным изображением (даже если это только аналоговое видео) и кино. Виола выражает надежду в том, что видео – это самостоятельный медиум и его сходство с кинематографом поверхностно. Этот новый медиум имеет собственный набор установок и правил.
В «Перемещении» он также разбирается во взаимоотношениях между видео и кинематографом, показывая внутреннюю структуру видео и возможности линейной проекции, напоминающие как о фильме, так и об уникальности видеоизображения.

Ключевые слова: *видеоизображение, Билл Виола, медиум, медиа, фильм*

Bill Viola is without question one of the artists who are defining video as an autonomous form of artistic expression. Currently, only apparently forgetting about the experimental pieces of the 1970s he is still acutely aware of the tools he uses. These are the works which will define him as one of the most important artists of the 20th century and are also of great importance for the artist himself, who uses them as a constant point of reference. Although Viola looks for inspiration outside of the realms favoured by conceptual artists, his work still relies on an awareness of the uniqueness of his medium.

Viola earns his living from a variety of projects, for example single-channel video pieces, but also installations where what is shown on the monitor is only one component of a larger piece. There is also a sense of continuity in his work, as his stand-alone video pieces often end up having an extended life as part of larger artworks.

In the 1970s Viola created two pieces, which can undoubtedly be read as the artist's personal manifesto. In them he defined the parameters of video in two main dimensions. 'The Reflecting Pool' is a contemplation on the relation between the electronically generated picture (then only analogue video) and cinema. Viola expresses the belief that video is an autonomous medium and its link with cinema is to a degree superficial. The new medium has its own set of rules. Although in 'Migration' he also touches upon the relationship between video and film, here he explores the inner structure of video and the possibilities resulting from linear projection, revealing both its similarity to film and its uniqueness.

'The Reflecting Pool', despite its modest size possesses perhaps the most beautiful and coherent declaration of the artist's intent. Here Viola discards narrative. His choice to use video is not only a rejection of traditional storytelling, but a promise of much more possibility, as artists soon realised its potential on an ontological level. Film is, metaphorically speaking, a medium of the past, generating images and worlds gone by, mediated by the rules of representation. Video, on the other hand, is a medium of the present, it

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presents, rather than represents the world. This is precisely why the medium gained popularity amongst performance artists wanting to record their work and Viola used it for this purpose too, but soon he was also exploring the possibilities created by editing, rejected by artists such as Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci. 'The Reflecting Pool' is a piece which owes much to cinema, however, ultimately it supports the theory that the medium of video is different, closer to audio recording than filming:

Film is descendent from photography since it is made from the recording of many still-frames which create the impression of a continuous flow of images in motion (and therefore existing only during a projection), while video registers the continuity of our vision: it is a fluid image, not divided into single frames which are composed into a whole during projection. Bill Viola is perfectly aware of these differences. He also compares the recording of a video image with audio recording and the techniques of recording using a microphone, and thus in many ways seems closer to the techniques of sound and music recording than to film. He calls video simply "life", amongst other reasons, on account of the unity and equal duration of recording and real action. The word *video* thus precisely expresses the nature of the medium[1].

The analogy between creating video and recording sound here is presented as fundamental. In cinema, the various techniques of the process create the impression of a modal frame. The moving image in film is always created by the rule of *pars pro toto*. Audio recording adheres to a different set of rules. The recreated sound is ontologically the same as the real sound, recreated by a wave which is not limited by any factor. Derived from Viola's theoretical works, Maria Brewi ska's view must to a certain degree be understood metaphorically. Video does manifest a modal framework, but it is apparent only at the transmission stage. The recording process is uninterrupted by division into frames. For an electronic image to be created there needs to be a continuous scanning.

Film is also continuous, but on a somewhat different level. Shots are sequential, building a structure which takes place in time. Video can create similar structures, but it also offers more, being an electronic page on which it is possible to place several elements by the rule of *mise en page.*

In a different variation, video also exists without the process of recording. It is able to show what is happening live in a distant place. At the same time, the video image is different from that of film in that it lacks a material base. This is the paradox of the new medium. Video marks its presence by its technology being visible, but operates outside the analogue matrix, and is able to show that which does not exist in material terms. This brings to mind the experiments of Nam June Paik, which consisted of creating images from sound generators and magnets interfering with video monitors.

The opening frames of 'The Reflecting Pool' are a classic example of film-like representation. The first setting is a swimming pool. Behind it, trees, amongst which is a man, wanting to jump into the water. The scene looks real. However, the situation is soon transformed and the cohesion of the representation is disturbed. The man does not fall into the pool, but hangs suspended above the mirror of the water. But this is no consequence of a simple freeze frame, everything around him carries on as before, only he is stopped in his tracks. The water no longer reflects his body, which soon disappears as a result of dissolving and fading out. The visual transformation and resolute split continues in the following part of 'The Reflecting Pool'. The reflection in the water begins to show features of people not existing in the natural world. With this Bill Viola shows the fundamental difference between the mechanics of cinematography and the making of video. The beginning of 'The Reflecting Pool' reminds us of the order we know from cinema. The scene is realistic, it shows us what we are familiar with. But in time its various dimensions show that they are autonomous, and the reflection in the water, here used as a metaphor for the electronic screen begins to show images only existing in the world of video projection. Through watching a film we partake in the transformation of the real object that is the film reel into a projection. Video lets us watch images which are entirely independent of reality.

The use of specific subjects such as the swimming pool, trees and the man jumping into the water are for Bill Viola only a pretext for stating his point. It is possible to imagine them exchanged for others and for the artist to just as skillfully express his meaning. In a way his chosen method is not dissimilar to that used by conceptualists, though Viola is not a typical example of this movement.

In the parameters of conceptualism we observe the division of an artwork into two separate objects.

The first object is created from various elements forming an order created by the artist (etchings, drawings, photographs, films, video, the written word, sound, etc). In the aesthetic order it has only one function, that of a point of departure, or context from which the viewer should see the second, semantic object, the text. The first object we will refer to as the artifact, and the second the artwork. If we refer to Joseph Kosuth's classic maxim, 'art is the definition of art' then we can say that the artifact plays the part of explanation while the art is what is to be explained. For this reason it must also be stated that despite their different ontological status and function they both belong to the realm of art traditionally understood. Referring to them as a one I will simply refer to them as artwork[2].

The world represented in 'The Reflecting Pool' must therefore be interpreted not in the context of what it shows, but rather with an understanding of the relation between objects and their metaphorical meanings. Ryszard Kluszczyński further notes:

Not only the artifact can be seen as a reference point in relation to the artwork or text. The artwork is also defined by its specific, intentional character and is therefore metadiscursive. Initiated by the artifact and the viewer's contemplation on art as such, the character of a given medium and the nature of communicating through art, the conceptual piece is inevitably part of the discussion, and eventually leads the viewer back to its source, the artifact. It therefore ceases being an object which explains and gains the status of an object to be explained. It thus becomes the source of an abstract metaartistic reflection. So one can say that these two-way relationships are at the core of this duality[3].

[1] Maria Brewińska, *Świadomość medium* [in:] *Bill Viola*, edited by Maria Brewińska, Warszawa: Zachęta Narodowa Galeria Sztuki 2007. P. 78–79.

[2] Ryszard Kluszczyński, *Od konceptualizmu do sztuki hipermediów* [in:] *Piękno w sieci. Estetyka a nowe media*, edited by Krystyna Wilkoszewska, Kraków: Universitas 1999, p. 80.

[3] Ibidem, p. 80.

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The artist's first signal is the difference between the two worlds, that which rules the laws of nature and that which is controlled by technology. The prominence of the body falling into the water and its suspension in the air is enough of a sign that this piece is going against the laws of narrative fiction and confirms what kind of work we are dealing with. That a man who is supposed to fall into the water is suspended above his reflection is possible only because of the technology used, allowing for the various components of the scene to be arranged and manipulated into what the artist wants. It is a similar case with the moment of registration, as Bill Viola showed in 'Information'[4], amongst others.

Even in a situation where video reflects certain reality, the relation between the viewer and the image is different from that known from classical cinema. Tape, or more recently a DVD is not a matrix in a physical sense. It possesses only a signal which needs to be read by apropriate electronic equipment so that the image, filmed by a camera or otherwise produced can be seen.

Bill Viola is aware of the change which occurred when the new technology became available to artists. However, in his work he tends to ask questions rather than provide definitive answers. Although he uses the video monitor as a type of canvas, which allows the artist to create images almost *ex nihilo,* he is aware that the camera lens can also observe what is real. In this way it acts as a collector of data, which then becomes an element of what Pascal Bonitzer describes as 'cut and paste'. Not coincidentally, towards the end of 'The Reflecting Pool' emerges from the water a man who we did not see fall into it. This time he is also naked, despite the fact that the last time we saw him he was clothed. His body has undergone a transformation, not in the real world, but in the world of electronic images electronic which paradoxically seem tangible.

An interesting afterthought to the 'The Reflecting Pool' is the work entitled 'Migration', a variant of the installation 'He Weeps For You'. The video is less of a technological feat, however it is an extension of Viola's reflections on the slightly different dimension of the electronic image. In this single screen video we see a figure sitting in front of a container into which fall droplets of water. Each shot is a close-up, the first of which discloses the technicalities of creating close-ups in video. The screen is divided into lines which show how an image is generated on a monitor. This is not entirely precise as the lines on the monitor remain horizontal. However, Viola rotates the image by 90 degrees, perhaps to better illustrate the effect, which with the correct angle maintained, could melt into the linear image generated by the actual monitor. The soundtrack consists of a beating of a gong, which does not imitate the sound made by falling droplets of water, but is reminiscent of the intense sound heard in the aforementioned installation.

The video and installation explore issues surrounding visual representation and audio recording. However, as I already mentioned, there is more to them than that. They raise a question about amplification and magnification, which are to a degree complementary techniques. The first concerns audio, the second video. Viola observes an interesting correlation, the processes of amplification and magnification are revealed to be processes belonging to both spheres of nature and technology. The amplification of sound is subject both to the laws of acoustics, but also electronic manipulation. Similarly, an image can be magnified through a specific way of looking, but also with the help of technology, which allows us to see distant objects in ways not possible with the naked eye.

Images in 'Migration' are edited in a style similar to that used in cinema. Viola resigns from creating a 'video page' and instead builds a sequence consisting of successive scenes. In cinema such a structure is used to bring to attention particular details. Going from a wide angle to a close-up there is an encircling of the space in which a given scene is taking place as well as directing the viewer to a particular aspect, thus making the choice for him/her. In this kind of set up there is never any disruption to the continuity between reality and representation. The manipulation of the camera lens does not cause a change in resolution, which can be altered and depends on the sensitivity of the material used, as discovered by the protagonist of Antonioni's 'Blow-up'.

In video we are dealing with a hybrid, which is more obvious now that recorders offering 'digital zoom' technology are pretty common. This does not only offer us a better understanding of what is in front of the lens, but a better grasp of the structure of the video image, which in contrast to classical cinema derived from photography is defined by the power of resolution as manipulated by technology. Today, in the age of high definition, the bar is set much higher. However, it is still a technique which it is not easy to manipulate smoothly.

'Migration' once again marks the separation of video from film, although it highlights a different point. In 'The Reflecting Pool' Viola marked the tension between continuity and atomization which occurs in cinema on the level of representation and technology. Here he shows the paradoxical discontinuity of the electronic image, which in a surprising way is the consequence of the continuity of scanning. The image is created as a result of individual points coming alive, whose size and number are determined by specific parameters.

The videos discussed here illustrate Bill Viola's beliefs in regard to the specificity of video. He analyses the possibility of structuring shots, as well as the meanings of linear arrangements, resulting from sequential arranging of scenes. The results prove an interesting point of departure for the artist's further studies, who in the 1980s and 90s became fascinated with non-Western philosophical systems, as well as possibilities born of 'electronic' reinterpretation of cultural and aesthetic traditions. The 1970s were for him a period of not only defining the character of video, but also his own position in relation to the possibilities offered by the new medium. A medium, which in later years would serve other means, such as introspection and even meditation.

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[4] The work was made with the use of two video recorders working in a feedback mode. The signal generated by one of the devices was recorded by the other and then played back. The piece is a single channel video tape, but the process of its creation resembled live musical performance rather than audio-visual recording.