Dis-continuities: The role of religious motifs in contemporary art
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Chapter 4
The Video Veronicas of Bill Viola
Miracles and Instants

Religious themes and motifs are present throughout the different periods of the work of the American video artist Bill Viola and appear in a variety of ways. He himself states that he does not practice any particular form of religion, but is very interested in religious art and spiritual experiences related to different religious traditions, and mysticism in its different versions: Islamic, Christian, Hindu and Buddhist. Usually his installations invite viewers into immersive environments of sound and image, charged with emotional intensity, centred upon such threshold moments of human existence as birth and death, or overwhelming emotions. Starting in the late 1990s, Viola created a series of video installations that refer to or even closely restage well-known religious paintings. His work makes an interesting case as it seeks to define the conditions of spiritual experiences in the space of the contemporary museum or gallery. Next to being a means of reflecting on the human condition, and such themes as the impossibility of transcendence, Viola’s engagement with religious art can be read as an attempt to reflect on the history of the relatively young medium of video, which only has existed for a few decades and which is particularly suited to re-cycling other existing film footage or re-mediating other images.

A number of Viola’s pieces re-work the motif of the *acheiropoietic* image. This motif is present not only on the level of a more direct visual reference to the veil of Veronica as in the installations *Memoria*, 2000, or *Unspoken: Silver and Gold*, 2001, but in the way Viola works with the possibilities of the medium of high-definition video (Figs. 50 and 51). His usual strategy of using extreme slow motion, present throughout different periods in his work, culminates in the series of portraits of different emotional states in the exhibition *The Passions*, 2003, mostly showing flat-screen video-tableaus that closely restage known religious paintings. Contemporary looking personages go through a range of emotional states, and the image is in extremely slow motion.

Fig. 50 Bill Viola, *Memoria*, 2000

Fig. 51 Bill Viola, *Unspoken. Silver and Gold*, 2001
These portraits claim to render truthfully and extremely exhaustively the detail of the fleeting emotional states thus building a spectacular situation of display, which invites its viewer to contemplate and identify with the image on an emotional level.

Next to the iconic citations of the motif of Veronica’s veil, the “true image” becomes a motif related to the question of the inherent tension between the veracity of images and their artificial, mediated nature. The use of this motif by Viola is not accidental; it is a way to reflect on the status of a technical medium of video and the images it produces. Viola returns to the issue of the truth that images can reveal, and the ways they can be considered as true, posing it as a historical question. His interpretation of the motif of Veronica’s veil is a symptom of his desire to reflect on the status of the image. But he also interprets this motif as related to a specifically human history of emotions; he insists on strongly emphasising the interpersonal moment by addressing the viewer on an emotional level. Visually the face becomes a plastic mask that pretends to show the truth of emotions. Yet this is a highly constructed, mediated image, which contradicts the truth claim of the hyperrealism of the slowly moving video-image. The miracle, or the spiritual moment, is constructed by Viola as a media effect.

In the contemporary medium of video this question plays out in an intriguing way, as video is a technical medium that reduces the role of the hand of a maker, and produces an allegedly true picture of reality. With the high definition video and high-speed cameras that Viola uses, this claim of a true picture of reality is enhanced. The outcome is a highly manipulated, constructed image. His work is closer to a painter whose images are creative inventions. Viola recognises this; in his words

[...]the medium reflecting the face was capable of visually transforming that face into the extreme emotion that it was experiencing at that instant... it also connected me to painting in a new way, because it is exactly what painters do - manipulate and shape the fluid surface of the paint so it becomes the emotion.5

Yet he presents the image in such a way that it claims to show the invisible, the true way things are, thus inviting the viewer to believe and to identify with the image, to experience a spiritual moment. In this sense, for Viola, the motif of the true image is used not as a critical tool, but as a means to express a spiritual moment. He uses references to formats and existing painting but re-enacted with contemporary characters. This strategy has two effects. It does not allow his works to be seen as blasphemous, or iconoclastic insofar as the religious motif or story is not directly present in the work. On the contrary, the use of contemporary looking characters imbues the present mo-

5 Ibid., p. 207.
ment with a spiritual one that characterises the religious art Viola is quoting. Next to that the high-quality image claims to deliver a state of hyper-visibility, to reveal the invisible texture of emotions, addressing the viewer in a very direct manner.⁶

Many of Viola’s works refer to religious images, but his strategy is to substitute the religious personages with anonymous contemporary ones, and to focus on the sense of human tragedy or emotion. In this sense, his work resonates with artists whose work focuses on positive expressions of spirituality and the experience of the sublime. The paintings of Caspar David Friedrich or Barnett Newman articulated, in their respective times, the conditions of the overwhelming experiences conveyed by vast landscapes or overwhelming scales and saturated colour. What situates Viola close to those artists is most evidently his focus on the experience of tragedy and emotional intensity, but also the extreme attention to detail, and his way of working with the temporality of the image. The viewer of a video-installation by Viola is literally immersed in a saturated audio-visual environment that addresses more than one sense. Such experience of feeling overwhelmed yet at a safe distance is the contemporary definition of the experience of the sublime in the environment of works of media-art. Its main site and subject is the body.⁷

_The Reflecting Pool, 1977-1979, _explores the different aspects of the relationship between the highly mediated nature of video-images, and their capacity to create the conditions of spiritual experiences (Fig. 52). Video offers many possibilities for manipulation of the image, creating a sense of wonder related to (special) effects. The seven-minute video is a steady shot of a swimming pool, surrounded by forest; its calm surface reflects the trees. A man, Viola himself, walks out of the forest, stands by the pool and suddenly jumps up. His figure is reflected on the water’s surface. At this precise moment he is frozen in time, and suspended over the pool. The water surface still moves and we see a series of events, but only as reflections, while the suspended body is deprived of its reflection. The ambient light changes from light to dark and dark to light, while the image of the suspended body gradually disappears, blending with the trees behind it. This gradual disappearance is accompanied by the appearance of a reflection of the man on the water’s surface, while there is no one walking around the pool.

⁶“We know the ordinary-looking people on the screens to be actors, and we know their powerful emotions are feigned, or at least produced at will; yet their appeal is apt to be stronger than we imagine possible. We are seeing high emotions that we recognize from our own lives and from TV and the movies, nearly always produced by causes we cannot account for; here they are enacted without any explanation or incident or story. Viola’s pieces, in short, are charged with the peculiar energy of consistent contradiction.” John Walsh, “Emotions in Extreme Time,” _The Passions_, p. 61. ⁷Hal Foster, _Art in the 1900s: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism_, Ed. Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois and Benjamin Buchloch (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004) p. 656.
Then a naked man appears from the water and walks back into the forest. The work refers to the pre-lapsarian naked state of man in nature. But its central point is to address the condition of video as a technical medium that allows image-manipulation to achieve “miraculous” effects. This reflection on a technical capacity of the moving image, or video, is done through an image that refers to religious motifs – the mythical state before the fall, but also to baptism. This defines two types of questions that Viola engages with in a great length in his later works: the reflection on the technical and the spiritual capacity of the medium.

The installation *Heaven and Earth*, 1992, consists of two television screens on wooden pedestals attached to the floor and the ceiling (Fig. 53). The screens’ surfaces are very close to each other and the image shown on one screen is reflected on the other. The top screen shows a dying woman and the one below a very young baby, Viola’s newborn son and dying grandmother. The television screens used in a sculptural manner obstruct the conditions of viewing and make the physical reflection of the image shown on one screen on the surface of the other a significant element of the piece. Viola addresses birth and death, the two defining events of human existence, and inscribes them in the technical environment of the medium.

While *The Reflecting Pool* explores the possibility of video to stage as a “miraculous” event, his series of later works explores further the possibility of articulating a spiritual moment within the environment of video-installation. *Room for St. John of the Cross*, 1983, is a contemporary reflection on the poetic visions of the sixteenth-century Spanish poet; *Nantes Triptych*, 1992, is a piece consisting of three large panels showing scenes of birth, death and a body floating underwater. *The City of Man*, 1989, also uses the triptych format and shows scenes of contemporary life, peaceful cities, meetings in conference rooms and burning buildings, as allegories of paradise, life on earth and hell. The cycle *Five Angels for the Millennium*, 2002, consists of several works, all of them projections of a dark indefinite space under water, and a human figure lit by a different colour of light falls “upwards” accompanied by the sound of rushing water. Another group of works developed largely around the exhibition *The Passions*, 2003, but starting earlier with *The Greeting*, 1997, uses well-known pieces of Renaissance painting to “frame” the characters and the situations in the works (Fig. 54). A number of Viola’s installations were shown in churches. *The Ocean Without a Shore*, 2007, is a group of works, of videos shown on flat plasma screens created for and installed in the altars of the Church of San Gallo in Venice during the Venice Bienniale. They show contemporary looking personages slowly moving in an endlessly repeating cycle from dark to light crossing a threshold or a “veil” of water and transforming from black and white into a colour image, and then withdrawing back behind an otherwise invisible and thin layer of water. The works, in Viola’s words, are “about the presence of the dead in our
Fig. 52 Bill Viola, *The Reflecting Pool*, 1977-9

Fig. 53 Bill Viola, *Heaven and Earth*, 1992

Fig. 54 Bill Viola, *The Greeting*, 1995
lives", the altars redefined as portals through which they pass crossing through into presence and then silently withdrawing.\textsuperscript{8} Many of Viola’s pieces borrow formats from religious art: \textit{Catherine’s Room}, 2001, consists of five small screens placed next to each other like a predella; a number of pieces are structured as triptychs such as \textit{The City of Man}, or a small folding altarpiece, as in \textit{Dolorosa}, 2000.

This strategy, in Viola’s own words, is a way to reflect on the human condition as something that shares its main aspects throughout history. The main events of birth, death, suffering or ecstasy, the subject matter of many paintings, are something that human kind experiences universally. The use of the old image to frame the contemporary personages in Viola’s works, should remind us of that continuity throughout time.\textsuperscript{9} These images are borrowed as models of media that had a spiritual function, to be translated in a medium that is not only contemporary, but also usually perceived as offering an “objective view” of these central moments and experiences. All these works create visual environments charged with spiritual energy.\textsuperscript{10}

Viola reflects on the human condition through building a dense symbolic language, drawing on different religious traditions. These symbols and motifs acquire new meaning, which can be understood only if the different elements are considered in the context of his whole work. Several lines can be identified within Viola’s symbolic vocabulary. In \textit{The Ancient of Days}, 1979-81, time goes “backwards.” This reversal of the normal flow of events relates to the cyclical structure of creation stories outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Next to the inversion of the direction of time, another line of meaning is created by the use of extremely slow motion, which makes the viewer aware of her own act of viewing and its duration, as well as of the temporality of life, of the living body, and the ability to experience ourselves in time.\textsuperscript{11} The portrayal of temporal cycles, both human and natural, allows Viola to inscribe human existence, and the main events of life – birth, death in a greater unity – nature.

\textsuperscript{8} Interview with Bill Viola, http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/venice-biennale-new-work-bill-viola, accessed 13 June, 2012. \textsuperscript{9} As he explains: “by viewing painted images, we are inclined to see them as subjective views...since ‘they have been depicted many times in history.’ By comparison, modern media ‘have a very high accepted truth factor in our society’ and can thus perform the same function as panel paintings in earlier centuries.” Otto Newmaier, citing Viola, “Space, Time, Video, Viola” In: \textit{The Art of Bill Viola}, p. 69.\textsuperscript{10} “If Viola wants us to revert to an older way of seeing and experiencing art, such a step backwards does not in itself bring a challenging way of thinking critically about the meaning and context of images. The auratic effect of the work may overwhelm any other response except awe.”, Ibid., p.14. \textsuperscript{11} Ibid., p. 63-67.
Painting Emotions in Video

*The Passions* is an exhibition that Viola developed at the Getty Museum starting in 2000. It includes a series of works that explore human emotions. The exhibition was shown at the Getty Museum in 2003 and later travelled to several locations in Europe. Viola’s research at the archive of the Getty Institute resulted in creating works including references or being inspired by images and texts belonging to such different religious traditions as Islam and Buddhism, besides the distinct presence of Christian imagery. The exhibition consists mainly of works on flat video screens, which borrow the format of the panel painting, compositional techniques characteristic of portrait and devotional painting. Religious works of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were a major source of inspiration. Viola chose the digital flat panel screen, not only because it gives a bright, sharp picture, but also because it is portable and thus suitable to be displayed on the wall of a gallery space like a painting, like the pieces of religious art from which he drew inspiration. He worked with actors who were given the task to perform different emotional states, and filmed them using high-speed 35mm film, at 210 frames per second, almost seven times normal speed. This allowed the image to be rendered in extremely slow motion without fragmentation or loss of continuity. The chosen take was transferred to high-definition digital video and significantly stretched in time.

Viola’s desire is to isolate the “pure” texture of the main events in human life as abstracted portraits of universal experiences. Such a strategy, however, can be viewed from a different perspective. The image that Viola creates is not a “true”, or objective view, but in fact a highly staged, spectacular image that presents itself as true. Viola’s video works retain distance to both narrative film and documentary mode of representation. They usually have very general, open narratives, or focus on the micro-texture of events, and are highly staged, with every element from the acting to the light conditions, carefully controlled. This creates a highly artificial image, whose mode of fiction is closer to painting, which is the central medium that Viola refers to. Such a strategy poses a different question compared to the media critique that makes visible and reflects upon the conditions of a new medium, through referring to, or re-using the conventions of an older medium. Viola’s approach builds an image that tries to convey general, ahistorical

12 Hans Belting and Bill Viola, “A Conversation,” *The Passions*, p. 200. 13 John Walsh, “Emotions in Extreme Time,” *The Passions*, p. 37. 14 “Viola works to virtualize his space and to derealize his medium: so that his ahistorical vision of spiritual transcendence can be effected – that is, it can come across as an effect.” *Art in the 1900s*, p. 656.
time, which is the condition or the backdrop of visions of spiritual transcendence.\textsuperscript{14}

\textit{Christ Mocked}, ca. 1490-1500, by Hieronymous Bosch inspired in Viola a group of four works: \textit{The Quintet of the Astonished}, \textit{The Quintet of Remembrance}, \textit{The Quintet of the Unseen} and \textit{The Quintet of the Silent}, 2000.\textsuperscript{15} All of them are colour video projections on a flat screen in a dark room. In \textit{The Quintet of the Astonished} a group of five people stand together as a group (Fig. 55). At the beginning their expressions are neutral and later slowly change into different emotions for each person in the group. Their intensity increases to overwhelming states. The characters are placed against a dark background and lit from a source in the upper left corner. \textit{Man of Sorrows} and \textit{Dolorosa} refer to small late medieval folding altarpieces, and in particular to \textit{Mater Dolorosa} and \textit{Christ Crowned} with Thorns by the Workshop of Dieric Bouts, ca. 1490. Dolorosa consists of two small flat screen panels showing on the left a woman and on the right a man, both crying. The two screens are attached to each other, like the pages of a book. The faces are illuminated from the right side and the image is of a very high quality rendering visible minute details. They are dressed in an ordinary, but contemporary way – the man in a blue shirt and the woman in a red dress with a black pattern and a scarf. The couple refers to portraits of Mary and Christ as a man of sorrows. With this work Viola drew a parallel between the small format privately owned devotional images, and such contemporary items as laptops, which can be taken travelling and provide the conditions for viewing images.\textsuperscript{16}

\textit{Catherine’s Room} consists of five video-panels displayed on the wall, and borrows the format of a predella painting (Fig. 56). Five screens show separate moments of the daily routine in the life of a woman called Catherine. The work has evident par-

\textsuperscript{15} Viola explains his fascination with the painting: “This painting has always fascinated me. The idea of the calm center in the chaotic, threatening circle of the world is something that I have been preoccupied with for a long time. One way that you can look at religious practice is the sense of perfecting the individual so they can stand calmly and securely in whatever turbulent situation they might find themselves in ... The extraordinary thing about that image is Christ staring right out of the picture. And who is he looking at? Us...he is looking right into our eyes.” \url{http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/viola/quintet.html}, accessed 14 June, 2012

\textsuperscript{16} Viola “I’ve been looking at the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, when making art drastically changed. You not only had the development of vantage-point perspective, but you also had a population that was becoming increasingly mobile thanks to the money generated by a rising merchant class. People were also hitting the roads, and all of a sudden there was a demand for private, devotional illustrated prayer books. So artists started making little panel paintings that were latched and hinged, that you could open and close and take with you. When you got to your inn, you could open it up and do your prayers; it was like everyone getting their own laptop, basically.” \url{http://nga.gov.au/viola}, accessed June 14, 2012.

\textsuperscript{17} A predella is a small narrative painting below the main altarpiece, consisting of three to five small panels. When shown in museums, predellas are normally separated from the main body of the altar.
Fig. 55 Bill Viola, *The Quintet of the Astonished*, 2000

Fig. 56 Bill Viola, *Catherine's Room*, 2001

Fig. 57 Régnard, photograph of Augustine (*Attitudes passionelles; Ecstasy*), *Iconographie photographique de la Salpetriere*, vol. II, 1879-1880
allels with the predella *Catherine of Siena Praying* by Andrea di Bartolo, 1393-1394.\(^{17}\) *Catherine’s room* has a small window, and the time of day is indicated by the light coming through the window, while the way the tree branch changes, indicates the seasons. The five scenes are set in the same room, but each with a different setting. In the morning “Catherine” does yoga, in the afternoon she mends clothes, in the early evening she sits at a desk and tries to write, while the fourth scene shows her lighting candles set at a table, and the fifth shows her sleeping. The scenes are serene and meditative and run in a loop in parallel, so the viewer can witness simultaneously these scenes of different moments in her day, year or life.

Viola substitutes the narrative aspect of religious painting, its story, with an ambiguous micro-narrative. A significant part of the effect of those images emerges precisely from their anti-narrative nature, which is a result of the artist’s decision to show highly emotional states while leaving the sources of all these strong emotions unexplained. They represent passions without cause, beginning or end. Viola himself says that he was interested in the logic of the emotions as such:

> So I had the strong desire to get rid of the story, to discard the plot, the narrative, and just deal with the emotions. I suppose it’s similar, in a way, to a painter who wants to go into Red as the experience of pure colour, not as a part of the pictorial illusion of a rose.\(^{18}\)

The series of works included in the exhibition *The Passions* show illuminated faces, suspended in slow motion and captured in the intimacy of moments when the strong feeling changes the surface of the face. Viola himself points out that this is an important aspect of the concept of exhibition:

> The subject I was working with – the passage of an emotional wave through a human being – is fleeting and in a constant motion. I realized that these pieces had to be shot as single takes with no editing, since the movement was created by the emotion itself, *and the medium for this emotion, its constant base, was the person.*\(^{19}\)

Another important aspect of the way these images were created is the highly choreographed performance of the actors, who had to express highly emotional states. They were generally instructed to overact, in order to allow the video camera to register the minute details of the movement of their faces. The apparent spontaneity in the image was the outcome of a series of highly controlled situations. The face becomes a living mask, a medium for the emotion. As one actor explains:

Bill’s effort was to achieve what he was calling ‘the arc of intensity. ... Each of us, even though we were feeling different emotions – joy, sorrow, anger, fear – were following the same arc of intensity, so the piece had an emotional and physical shape.\textsuperscript{20}

The video panels, no matter how strongly they borrow the compositional techniques typical for the portrait painting, appeal to the eye in a different fashion. They invite the viewer to see a still and a moving image at the same time, where the surfaces of the screen, of the face, are simultaneously the still surface of the painted image and the fluid, expressive one of the face. The faces on the video screens are themselves fluid surfaces. As such they refer to, but do not coincide with the portrait as objectifying a representation of a person, or devotional painting in its characteristic expressiveness. Their anonymity reduces them to sensitive and expressive surfaces. The face is defined as a medium, a surface where the spontaneously created image of emotional state appears, one could say, created without the hand of an artist.

In contrast to artists who borrow religious motifs precisely as religious, and keep the identity of the image to modify it, usually to make a critical statement, Viola restages known religious paintings but as anonymous present-day scenes. This imbues the anonymous contemporary personages with the spirituality of the gestures of their religious counterparts. Viola’s works do not create an environment that questions the viewer’s position and various positions and clichés of spectatorship. It leaves little to the viewer who is placed in the passive position of admiration of the miraculous image.

The materiality of video art is determined to some extent by the artist’s way of use of the medium to create a mirror for her body, experience, or self.\textsuperscript{21} Viewing a video is a bodily experience involving sight and hearing, and a heightened awareness of one’s position in space. Many works of video art often explore and problematise different aspects of embodied experience. One reason for that is the fact that video was initially used as a means of documentation of performance and body art works, in most cases involving the body of the artist; the second, more complex one is the “narcissistic” nature of the medium. According to Rosalind Krauss’ well-known observation, video has a problematic relationship to materiality; its lack of object necessitates the transformation of the subject of making, or the artist, into an object of reflection, thus defining video art works in many cases as a narcissistic mirroring of the body of the artist.\textsuperscript{22}

In the works included in \textit{The Passions}, Viola himself does not feature; he uses existing images to frame the bodies of the actors who perform emotional states in an exaggerated manner. His focus is on the spiritual power of the old image, quite precisely

\textsuperscript{21} Belting, \textit{Art History After Modernism}, p. 87.

superimposed on the faces of the contemporary characters. He creates the image of an abstract, archetypal body usually exposed to various overwhelming forces, water, fire or emotions. It is not presented as a personage with a particular identity, not as this body, but as the body. In this sense it is removed from its role as a personalised presence, and becomes a medium, a sensitive canvas-like surface moulded by emotions, or often extreme, mental experiences. The representation of emotional states is in fact the outcome of acting out an emotion, performing the event for the camera.

This aspect of Viola’s method of inventing ways to portray human emotions resonates with some of the observations of Georges Didi-Huberman, who analysed the invention of hysteria as a clinical category in the late nineteenth century.23 His *Invention of Hysteria* is a study of Jean-Martin Charcot, Freud’s early teacher, and the way he used photography to “record”, or in fact to systematically stage the female patients of the Salpêtrière hospital to perform a mental illness. *Invention of Hysteria* is a deconstructive history of an invention of a particular type of body through fixing it according to images, or forcing the dynamic and open entity of the symptom into an idea, the very idea of hysteria. For Charcot the symptom acted out by his female patients was a legible entity that could be recorded by the “objective eye” of the camera. This paradoxical episode of invention of madness was based on the assumption that the image is a transparently legible entity and that the body will display its symptoms in a clear manner, as if acting out of a vocabulary – the so-called tableau (Fig. 57).24 A photograph, however, is never a transparent and truthful registration of the world as it involves a complex constellation of procedures of framing and manipulation that tend to stay in the background, in order to remain quasi-invisible. Its very apparatus supports the “fantasy that it has an objective access to knowledge,” which allows for using the photographic image as an instrument of power.25 As Didi-Huberman remarks: “photography was in an ideal position to crystallise the link between the fantasy of hysteria and the fantasy of knowledge.”26

The video-tableaus in *The Passions* are far from being a direct registration of the event they claim to represent. They are staged according to well-known masterpieces. Viola’s strategy bears resemblance to some aspects of the way Charcot produced and used the images of hysterical women. The video-tableaus, too, claim a level objectivity and make visible the imperceptible texture of emotions, or of transforming the symptom, the expressive surface of the face, into a symbol that can claim to represent an emotional state. While Charcot’s practice claimed to be scientific research, Viola’s work is art. Yet, in both instances, an apparatus of technical reproduction is

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Fig. 58 Jacopo Pontormo, *Visitation*, 1528-9
used that allegedly produces images close to reality in conjunction with existing iconography of art-images, which are not invested with expectations of veracity. The result is a highly spectacular image that presents itself as true and immediate, but in fact involves a great degree of artifice. Viola, of course, is aware of the effects of the strategy he uses. He does not state that the works included in *The Passions* are objective. Yet one of their central claims is to reduce the open meaning of the symptom to a symbol, a transparent representation of a passion in a “pure state.” He uses paintings as presentational devises, to borrow De Duve’s term, whose role it is to invent the truth of the presented subject.²⁷ Viola believes that they express universal human truth. To use the cited painting critically would imply foregrounding the constructedness of these “truths.” This highly mediated image that claims to be true then structurally resembles the *acheiropoietos.*²⁸

It is worth mentioning another installation that closely restages painting; in fact, it is one of Viola’s most famous works. *The Greeting,* takes Jacopo Pontormo’s *Visitation,* 1528-29, as its visual model, but transforms the scene into a contemporary one with a “secular and ambiguous” storyline – the every-day situation of three women meeting (Fig. 58).²⁹ The video was made from a single take of an event that lasted 45 seconds with a fixed camera position. The high-speed camera allowed for a significant slowing down of the video without any loss of quality, so the length of the piece is ten minutes. The video, which runs in a loop, is projected onto a large screen and installed in a darkened space. It shows a meeting between three contemporary looking women. Central to Pontormo’s painting is the effect of motion, with the intertwining garments and arms of Elizabeth and Mary who exchange greetings with delicacy and warmth. The two central figures are in stark contrast to the expressionless faces of the two onlookers, their servants. The painting is composed of contrasts between the dark background and the saturated colour of the clothes, the emotionless faces and the highly affectionate faces of the two women. The frozen motion in *Visitation* is translated into a very slow flow of time in *The Greeting.* The lighting and the colour combinations are also strongly reminiscent of the painting. The background is similar in terms of the city space, but in the video it is much darker. In the video there are only three women and two men talking in the background. The clothes of the women are contemporary, simple wide skirts and dresses and sandals. The sound accompanying the video is the slowed down sound track to the original scene; it becomes heavy and atmospheric and the words uttered by the characters are indiscernible. The younger woman who is pregnant, whispers something in the year of the older one. The third

one regards the scene without expressing much emotion. The image is carefully framed with the composition of the older image, which functions as an internal frame of the micro-texture of the meeting with its emotions and gestures, the exchange of looks and greetings.

The video translation of the motif of the visitation: “The breeze that flutters hair and clothing (for both Viola and Pontormo) is also a symbol of the Holy Spirit: it is pneuma, the breath of God.” Translating this scene in contemporary and human terms spiritualises the present through building dramatic theatrical images. The separate elements of the scene – the gesture, the colour, the motion of garment – take on a visual significance in a way separate and abstract from the scene. No matter that the image is over-realistic, the slow motion creates an uncanny effect. The elements of an otherwise narratively structured scene are disjointed, making it an almost abstract image.

By staging the contemporary scene as Pontormo’s painting, *The Greeting* places this situation as if into a trans-historical time, thus claiming that the simple truth of the event of this every-day scene is universally valid. Simultaneously, the events in the video unfold in a much more complex way than we would usually perceive the fleeting moment of a greeting. Time does not flow in a linear manner; it is the time of experience, flowing in different directions and depending on the experiential significance of events, slower or faster. This way of working with time indicates a desire to trace some continuity between media situated even in very distant moments in time.

Different media construct their own version of temporality. The time of painting is that of a frozen moment or eternal fixed figure, within photography it is the instant, and in film there is the possibility of a montage in time. But in order to reveal the type of temporality specific to a particular medium, it has to be confronted with another one. The citation of painting, among other effects, reveals something about the specific temporality of video. If painting is a still-image medium, and has to convey the flow of time or the unfolding of an event in different ways, in this case an isolated “frozen” moment, then it stands for the whole scene, a figure that compresses an entire sequence. Time-based media, evidently, can show the whole event by recording a se-

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31 “For it seems to me that the work not only appeals to a pre-Enlightenment imagination of temporality, but through the deployment of that imagination in a reworking of an Old Master painting it makes a plea for a continuity between media, across time.” Ibid., p. 111.
32 “Modernity, it seems can only be critiqued and analyzed through an older medium. In the works of Balla (*Dynamism of Dog on a Leash*, 1912) or Boccioni (*The City Rises*, 1910-11), we might say that painting aspires to the status of film by introducing a mobility that is, because of the limitations of the medium, wholly static. We might say of *The Greeting* that it is film that aspires to the status of painting ...in its attempt to restructure the temporality of the medium it appropriates.” Ibid., p. 119.
quence. Viola’s strategy of slowing down the image of time, attempts to “implant” a temporality specific to painting in that of video.\textsuperscript{32} This is an attempt to articulate another way of experiencing time closer to painting. The desire for truth here is a desire for transcendence within the very texture of the visible world achieved in the suspended now of the instant.

Visibility and Display

Viola’s luminous slow-motion video-tableaus claim to offer auratic experiences to their viewers. In the context of video installation the materiality of the image is substituted by a projection with a different mode of presence. In Walter Benjamin’s well-known formulation, the aura is the “phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be”, directly related to the cult value of the work.\textsuperscript{33} The separation of the object from its original situation, that of a cult, or a ritual, and the process of “overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction” emancipates the image, but also transforms its status.\textsuperscript{34} Viola re-examines, and tries to redefine precisely the conditions of viewing as an experience of an object with an aura that can offer a contemplative moment within the space of the museum or the contemporary art gallery. The aura becomes an effect of installation environments that invite the viewer to enter a darkened space with luminous projections in many cases referring to religious painting and portraying spiritual experiences inscribed in the rhythm of an endless loop. The film viewer according to Benjamin has lost touch with the contemplative experience of the cult object, which is substituted by the speed flow of images in film.

Viola’s agenda is to provide an individual contemplative space of viewing a moving image. While the still image leaves it up to the viewer to decide how to view it, the moving image demands that the viewer spends time with the artwork. In this case the aura is re-created by means of imitation or reference to a religious context of image appreciation. The adherence to already canonic images, which in most cases are religious art, seeks to situate the contemporary image in a historical context. On another level technology is used in such a way that it attempts to amplify the emotional

\textsuperscript{33} In an important note to the essay Benjamin writes: “The definition of the aura as a ‘unique phenomenon of a distance however close it may be’ represents nothing but the formulation of the cult value of the work of art in categories of space and time perception. Distance is the opposite to closeness. The essentially distant object is the unapproachable one. Unapproachability is indeed a major quality of the cult image.” Walter Benjamin, \textit{Illuminations}, Trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), note 5, p. 243. \textsuperscript{34} Ibid., p. 222-3.
intensity of the image through use of extreme slow motion. “Aura” in this context is an effect produced precisely by complex technical reproduction, of creation within the context of the museum space, the conditions of a spiritual experience of contemplation and compassion, or wonder.

Placing a piece of religious art in the “neutral” space of the museum assigns to it new function, as well as a new way to be seen. Benjamin argues that the ritual function of the object is strongly tied to its presence, but not to its visibility. A cult object has a great public significance, but is not intended to be seen. Once it is placed in the museum collection, the artwork becomes an object of a different type of appreciation. It is an object that can be accessed and viewed by its audience in a way very different from the cult object. Placed in the public space of the museum it becomes an object of scholarly research and acquires an exhibition value. In the words of Hubert Damisch:

> Once it is relegated to the status of an object of a collection, if not to that of an exchange commodity, the work provides material for an essentially nominal and scholarly knowledge, and makes no real theoretical or critical impact, subjected as it is to the imperatives of property and speculation.

It would be simplistic to state that Viola had achieved repairing the lost aura of the image. He considers the possibility to carve a space of contemplation precisely within the context and with the means of advanced visual technology. Yet, he adheres to highly spectacular and manipulative forms of imagery – intense emotional states and overwhelming forces. In this respect it is symptomatic that he refers to both religious formats and imagery as they traditionally mediate such experiences. Viola’s gesture consists in finding the place of a video work “back” in the museum space through the appropriation of types of framing and compositional techniques from painting. But next to rendering the video image in the frame of painting, he defines the video projection as an auratic image that exceeds the exhibition value of the image, and within the public space of the museum tries to return to a cult aspect of the shown image.

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35 “A painting’s value as representation is often wiped out as a result of the work being removed from its original context and presented in conditions that impart new functions to it. A work of art is not necessarily designed to be contemplatEd. […] Walter Benjamin has shown that the assignation of a ritual function to images implies that their presence is more important than their visibility, or even contradicts it […] quantities of Christian relics and treasures were kept locked away, except on the rare occasions when the faithful were permitted to glimpse them […]” Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of Cloud*, Trans. Janet Lloyd (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 64-5.
Video Veronica

Memoria, 2000, and Unspoken, 2001, included in the The Passions, are two installations shown in dark, enclosed spaces. The video for both was shot with an old surveillance camera. Memoria consists of a black and white video played in slow motion and projected onto a white cloth suspended from the ceiling. The projection is a grainy image of the face of a man who expresses anguish, suffering and sorrow. The image oscillates between being clearly visible or becoming increasingly grainy and withdrawing into the white noise of the projection. The face expresses eternal suffering without a source, and without a beginning or end. The floating surface of the silk cloth gives the image an airy, ghostly quality. In a similar way to other video works by Viola, Memoria does not reveal the source of the emotion. The slow motion image played in a loop suggests eternal repetition.

Unspoken is exhibited in a dark room and consists of two plates of silver and gold used as screens on to which the black and white image of the faces of a man and a woman are projected. The images are blurry, at moments barely visible through the shiny silver and golden surfaces. The faces express suffering and anguish and in a similar fashion to the other works in the exhibition their movement is suspended in slow motion, so that the changes and the development of the emotions are barely perceptible. The patterns of movement in the two projections correspond to each other, although they are clearly two separate loops. At some point, the faces gradually fade away and dissolve into "visual noise," to appear a few moments later into what seems to be a repetition of the cycle of movement. The quality of the two black and white images is intentionally low. The faces appear as if they are coming, or pushing through a surface that they cannot break, and their dark background invokes associations with a deep, threatening space, so they resemble ghosts.

While Memoria literally uses a veil and clearly refers to the motif of Veronica’s Veil, the gold and silver screens of Unspoken allude to the gold and silver used in Christian icons. In this context the motif of the acheiropoietos indicates an awareness of the history of a religious image with a special status in the history of Christian art, but also of the conditions of the very medium. While the acheiropoietic image is a material object and is associated with a material trace of divine origin, the video-image is its almost precise counter point – it is an immaterial projection. In Memoria the image exists at the threshold of visibility; its blurriness makes it visually resemble an imprint, a material trace on another level on which it refers to the veil of Veronica. Video works resist any form of successful reproduction, thus delegating a crucial part of their meaning to a live act of viewing, and even until the present moment there is no suffi-
Fig. 59 Francisco de Zuhbarán, *The Veil of Veronica*, 1631
ciently good form of documentation for works of video art. In that sense Viola’s pieces indicate a desire to regain the auratic experience of the image lost with the process of mechanical reproduction.

The motif of Veronica’s veil has a plethora of interpretations. Throughout the fifteenth century, artists reclaimed this motif, claiming the link between the spontaneously created image and their own art. Jan Van Eyck’s interpretation of *The Holy Face*, 1438, transforms the surface of the cloth into a uniform background, making it much closer to a portrait (Fig. 3):

[...]this space will join our world to the fictive domain of the portrait, assuring us that the laws of objects abiding with us will be followed also beyond the frame, and convincing us therefore that what we see is one specific body of one specific person: not the face, but this face.

This visual motif is used to legitimate the redefinition of the image as a fictional space, a result of the work of an artist, and as a portrait depicting a particular human face. The multiple interpretations of these motifs in the Renaissance painting redefine it as a portrait of God in art. In Van Eyck’s painting the use of various framing devices clearly renders the image as a fictional space, “a self-contained totality” that constructs “an opposition between work and world ... signified and signifier.” Yet, artistic autonomy is affirmed precisely through the prototype of the *acheiropoietos* by claiming it as an artistic invention, and by transforming it into a portrait. In Francisco de Zurbarán’s *The Holy Face*, 1631, the face does not exactly coincide or sit on the surface of the cloth, but hovers above it (Fig. 59). Renaissance painters depicted the face of Christ floating above the cloth, transforming it into a miraculously alive one. In this way the painter created a miracle, but precisely with aesthetic means. In the hands of artists: “…the image not made by human hands has become an occasion for displaying the mythicizing power of the human hand to conceal altogether its means and its labor.”

In Viola’s *Memoria* the projected image of the anonymous face expressing anguish and suffering appears as floating above, detached from the surface of the cloth. Undoubtedly, *Memoria* is a portrayal of the emotional state of anguish and suffering, and its effects are intentionally sentimental. On another level there is a desire to place the contemporary video-image into the context of a much longer history. This citation is a way to ask the kind of questions posed by the legend of Veronica’s veil and its interpretation in painting, which pertain to the figure of the artist and the infrastructure of the medium. The title *Memoria* could be read as indicating not only personal memories, but also the memory of images themselves, the re-inscription of the video-image within the history of interpretation of the true image. The hyper-realistic slow motion
video portraits included in the exhibition *The Passions*, together with *Memoria*, allow for a comparison with the moment of the transition from the Holy Face to the portrait as a genealogy of artistic autonomy. Could that indicate Viola’s desire to redefine the autonomy or the status of his art? The power of these video-portraits of emotional states lies in producing emotional or spiritual effects in its viewer. The question of artistic autonomy is reversed here. The religious image as a medium is “invited” into the space of video installation, a field of art practice. While Van Eyck’s insistence on various infrastructural devices as the frame in his interpretation of the Holy Face makes visible the mechanics of representation, with Viola, there is the reverse moment – the infrastructure is hidden and the motif of image-origin is borrowed to create an emotive spectacle that leaves in the background the fact that image is a fictional, mediated entity.

**Suspended Instants**

The video-portraits of passions give visual access to a micro-texture of emotions and open up a possibility to affect the viewer, inviting her not only to witness but also to share in experiencing the emotion portrayed. They are redemptive and spiritual – Viola compares their effect to the effect that a devotional image had on its viewer. Such artists as Douglas Gordon and Martin Arnold use existing film footage to manipulate it and slow it down significantly. They do so to intensify a traumatic moment leaving the viewer without any resolution. Viola uses a structurally similar strategy, but to a very different effect.

The saturated environment of the video installation has the power to invoke what Kant has defined as the experience of the sublime: “the viewer is overwhelmed,
even shattered by an awesome sight and/or sound, followed by a second moment in which he or she comprehends the experience ... and feels a rush of power.” While Gordon and Arnold privilege the first shattering moment, Viola focuses on the second, redeeming one. He works with a specific dimension of the experience of the sublime. The viewer is allowed to realise that she is at a safe distance, which creates a possibility to experience a release and a way to relate the dramatically slow motion, which conveys the pulse of the universal time of life with its main events.

The immersive environments of video installation can be called spiritual in two senses. Video installation directly engages the viewer through creating a contemplative space in which she has to step in and spend time viewing the work. Next to that, video installations offer an image that is “thoroughly mediated yet seemingly immediate,” a miraculous event. Viola’s pieces demonstrate a particular awareness of this capacity of video installation and invite the viewer to experience a mix between contemplation and being overwhelmed, a contemporary version of the experience of the sublime.

A central theme in Viola’s art is the portrayal of the epic moments in human existence. His work shares an affinity with the painting of Friedrich and much later Newman, who defined their art as a spiritual practice, centred upon conveying the experience of the sublime. The moment of the sublime is articulated through re-thinking and deviation from existing conventions of a genre. Friedrich deviated from the conventions of landscape painting and articulated a powerful, direct mode of address depriving the viewer of a comfortable ground of viewing a scene. As Koerner observes this indeterminacy is the visual translation of the experience of the sublime, which according to Kant’s definition occurs in the moment of collapse of representation and allows the viewer to form an “intuition of a transcendent order.” Friedrich constructed the possibility of experiencing a feeling of the sublime not only with what his painting showed, but also with how it showed it.

42 Art in the 1900s, p. 655. 43 Ibid., p. 655.
44 This issue is thoroughly discussed by Robert Rosenblum, Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition. Friedrich to Rothko. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), Chapters One and Eight. 45 As Koerner observes, in Friedrich’s painting: “With neither a firm ground on which to stand, nor a stable horizon on which to fix our gaze, we thus encounter Friedrich’s crucifix within an anxious state of visual disequilibrium.….from another perspective, that of the aesthetics of the sublime, this indeterminacy can constitute the experience of transcendence. For Immanuel Kant as for his Romantic heirs, sublimity in art occurs at the moment of representation’s collapse, when the mind, seeking to comprehend its object, fails and attains thereby an intuition of a transcendent order….the artist’s deliberate disruption of the conventional ‘system’ of landscape, becomes a symbol of our relation to a transcendent order.” Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape (London: Reaktion Books, 1995), p. 100. 46 Ibid., p. 100
The motif of the sublime is co-present with the motif of the *acheiropoietic* image in Friedrich’s painting. The work of the artist resonates with, or imitates, the divine creation and the spontaneously created “true image.” The artistic claim of *theomimesis* is expressed through erasing the traces of manual production of the surface of the painting as present in Friedrich’s manner of depiction of fog or clouds.\(^{47}\) The motif of theomimesis in the work of Friedrich, and in a different vein with Newman, implies an articulate understanding of, and a concern with, the conditions of representation and the status of artistic creation. In Friedrich’s painting the experience of the sublime is conveyed through the choice of vast landscapes, and is expressed precisely through working with and redefining two important aspects of the image, creating “visual disequilibrium” through deviating from the conditions of the genre of landscape painting. In his works the religious image itself becomes a subject of artistic contemplation.

The painting of Newman reiterates some of these central elements in its own way. The sublime is associated with the collapse of representation in a more direct way and rendered as an abstract canvas of an overwhelming scale saturated with colour, thus creating the conditions of an overwhelming experience. Religious motifs reappear in Newman’s titles, yet they refer to specifically human and not religious experience or tragedy. In his painting the experience of the sublime is situated in the instant of the now of viewing, and the presence of the viewer is mirrored and amplified by the structurally simple but powerful address of the vertical “zips.” Newman erased representation altogether as a means to create the conditions of the instantaneous experience of a profoundly tragic and spiritual “now.” The way in which he redefines the conditions of representation in order to achieve the expression of sublimity resonates with Friedrich’s strategy.

A particular detail that can reveal a deeper relationship between the aesthetic programs of Newman and Viola’s work can be found in the concept of the instant. In Newman’s work the instant is related to presence and duration, but also to the very conditions of the making of the image. His approach in painting evidently does not require very elaborate technical skill in the way a painting by Friedrich does, and in this

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\(^{47}\) The emerging landscape of Friedrich’s *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, balanced between determinacy and indeterminacy, chaos and particularity, evokes that primal moment and forges thus an analogy between God’s origination of the world through a fog and the painter’s production of the work of art through paint. Moreover in the specific painterly manner necessitated by the painting’s fog, which works to conceal all evidence of brushwork, the manipulation of paint, and the temporal process of manual labour, Friedrich assimilated his own act of making to the model of divine creation. For traditionally what marked off God’s work from man’s was that He created the universe instantaneously and ‘without hands’ – in Greek *acheiropoietos* – whereas we labour manually, in time, and by the sweat of our brow.” Ibid., p. 192.
sense the artist’s gesture of creation is not erased from the surface of the canvas to give way to a “true image.” Instead, the experience of the instant acquires much larger experiential significance related to the very act of creation, which itself is a central motif for Newman.  

The instant, in a broader sense, signifies a central dimension of the mode of image production by media of technical reproduction as film and photography, which are traditionally defined as indexical media. The image is a result of a very brief exposure, in an instant of time, of the sensitive surface of the negative to light, which registers a scene in the real world. Discussing the concept of cinematic time, Mary Ann Doane points out that Charles Peirce, the philosopher who articulated the concept of indexicality, was himself critical of the term instant. In his view there is no such thing as an absolute instant, because each unit of time can be subdivided further. The instant itself is a flexible category. Yet the category of the index is the closest to the instant. In photography the fact that an image is made instantaneously and is indexical is presumed to guarantee its veracity. Simultaneously, the instant could be understood as playing the role of a screen that masks the fact that images are elaborately mediated entities and never spontaneously created ones.

In Newman’s poetics, the motif of the instant is not associated with manual work or its erasure, but with the question of creation, which is “not an act performed by someone, it is what happens (this) in the midst of the indeterminate.” It indicates the fact that there is; “the artist has a professional duty to bear witness that there is.” His canvases are testimonies to this “now”; it is annunciation, but it announces nothing but itself. His paintings address the presence of the viewer, thus signifying a large existential now. “The message is the presentation, but it presents nothing: it is, that is presence.” The realism in Friedrich’s painting is associated with the erasure of the manual trace of labour from the surface of the image. This establishes a connection between the divine acheiropoietic creation and the artistic one. This claim of realism resonates with photography as a medium, which claims to produce true images insofar as it eliminates the role of the hand of the image-maker. In Newman’s painting the instant signifies the operation of creation; in a similar way in Friedrich’s art, it invokes the model of spontaneous creation.

Such constellation of aspects of the image, related both to the feeling of sublimity and the tragic, and to the very operation of making the image and using the capacity of the medium of video, could be found in Viola’s installations. It is not by chance that in his work we can find a particular interpretation of the motif of the acheiropoietic image as closely restaged on a visual level in works as Memoria. Viola articulates the conditions of the experience of the sublime by using the specific possibilities of his medium. Immersive environments host large-scale projections that show personages who stand against a great pressure, and are exposed to water or fire, or overwhelmed by emotions. This way to convey the experience of the sublime is supported by video as a time-based medium and its capacity to render images in extreme slow motion, a strategy consistently used by Viola. His use of extended instants constructs an over-saturated, hyper-realistic image with smooth uninterrupted details. This resonates with Friedrich’s painting in the way he renders detail of fluid entities as fog or clouds, and the luminous presence of his pictorial surfaces. It also resonates with the temporality of the instant as addressed by Newman, by creating an image that makes the viewer aware of the duration of her act of viewing. While Newman’s sublime is articulated as the instant of presence, in Viola’s works the body itself is transformed into an image and placed in a suspended instant. His interest in highly charged emotional states places his work in line with Newman’s interest in expressing the tragic.

With Viola the instant is stretched in time and the image acquires the visual quality of being a liquid-like, plastic entity. This aspect of his installations, besides building a very spectacular image that invites the viewer to experience the sublime, can arguably be seen as a comment on the operations of image-making and the capacities of the technical medium of video. In Viola’s work, in a similar vein, the suspended instant is intricately related to both the veracity of the image, and to the miraculous, spontaneous nature of the image, two aspects that Viola is particularly interested in. In his approach the manipulation of the instant of time does not have a reflexive intention. He is not concerned with revealing how the image is made, but with creating the conditions of a spiritual, auratic experience of the miraculous appearance of the invisible, hidden texture of events.

It is not a coincidence that Viola, among other references to religious art, cites Veronica and engages with the complex history of interpretation of this motif, and

52 Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux has observed that the strategies of representing the instant of metamorphosis in ancient Greek art, besides the miraculous event, are intricately related to the operation of image-making. Insofar as depicting metamorphosis and hybrid animal-human bodies opens up a way to explore plastic possibilities in painting it also indicates the skill of the image-maker. L’homme-cerf et la femme-araignée (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), pp. 78-93.
combines it with a theatrical replay of states of extreme emotional tension. This makes his works “video-veronicas” presented as works of art to create an image that claims a cult moment. The motif of the “true image” as related to realism is translated in Viola’s video-installations into a desire for an extreme realism, of creating a true image that literally shows the invisible. But if the twentieth-century artists gradually understood and located the desire for sublimity and transcendence in the abstract image, Viola works with imagery that is far from abstract. His works are excessively visual and offer a new mode of visibility made possible using advanced visual technology. While for Friedrich the landscape is the site of profound spiritual experience, and precisely not the religious motif as such (the only remainder of religion is the church ruin), in the work of a later painter such as Newman that overwhelming experience of nature transforms itself into an experience of scale of the canvas. Instead of indicating the failure of representation in the experience of the sublime, Viola presents the body as the site of this experience. He employs the mode of presentation that conceals the gesture of the maker, draws attention to a spectacular, if not emotionally manipulative aspect, and draws its viewer into a mode of either losing herself in the landscape or co-experiencing with the emotional states in Viola’s works. And the mechanism of identification invites us into the image, and thus occludes the visibility of its infrastructure – the what or who places it on display.

The body in Viola’s work is not personalised, it becomes a medium used as a canvas of its emotions; it becomes abstract in a sense. Surrender, 2001, also part of The Passions, consists of two flat screens placed vertically in a symmetrical, mirror-like configuration (Fig. 60). They show the upper part of the bodies of a man and a woman in simple cotton clothing. Their faces express overwhelming sorrow, and the image, in a similar way to the other works in the exhibition, occurs in very slow motion. At the moment that the two figures bend over as if wanting to embrace each other, the characters encounter the surface of water. When the images start to break up into wavering forms, the viewer realises that she was looking at the reflections of the characters on the water’s surface. The video image of the reflections of the two bodies becomes more and more dramatically distorted each time they enter the water, until the development of the emotions reaches its climax and the surface of the water dissolves the two faces into abstract forms of light and colour.

Central for the piece is the use of the surface of water that is both a natural mirror, and as Viola phrases it: “a pool filled with the tears of everyone who has ever cried.” The three mediating surfaces – of the face, as a medium of the emotion and its movement, of the water as a mirror, and of the flat video screen framing the two
Fig. 60 Bill Viola, *Surrender*, 2001
bodies – coincide. The intensity of the emotion, which moulds the face, coincides with
the movement of the water’s surface. There is no stable body of the image; instead it is
presented only as rippled reflections, which, like the emotions, have their own power
to distort and re-figure the surface. In that situation the water becomes an expressive
surface similar to the expressive surface of the face. The passion is translated into an
intensity of the surface.

In this installation the motif of the sublime is related to the body and the rep-
resentation of overwhelming emotional states indicate the (im)possibility to tran-
scend its limits. The video-panels show images without an exit, eternally suspended
in the localised tension of the emotion. Viola’s version of the sublime and the way he
constructs the temporality of the image share some proximity with those of Newman,
yet they could also be understood as their mirror image. The body as the very site
of the “negative pleasure” of the experience of the sublime is the main subject mat-
ter. The presence of the viewer is addressed insofar as the video invites identification
with the characters’ emotional states. The instant, however, is not a moment but is
stretched in time. Viola’s medium is a medium of duration.

Viola’s works, especially in the exhibition The Passions, borrow from a variety of reli-
gious images, from the legend of Veronica’s veil to the important examples of Renais-
sance painting. This historical interest can be read as a symptom of the desire to reflect
upon the conditions of his medium, which has a relatively short history. The choice of
religious images is not accidental. There is an intrinsic capacity of the medium of video
that can create overwhelming experiences and spiritual effects. In would be too easy to
qualify Viola as a religious artist who has a desire to articulate spiritual experiences. His
interest in spiritual motifs can be understood as a concern with the intrinsic capacity
of the medium of video. As a whole Viola’s oeuvre of work cannot be seen as a critical
commentary, as he borrows religious formats and iconic masterpieces of religious art
in which the religious figures are substituted with anonymous contemporaries. The im-
ages function as an embedded frame, thus more as a device than as an image.