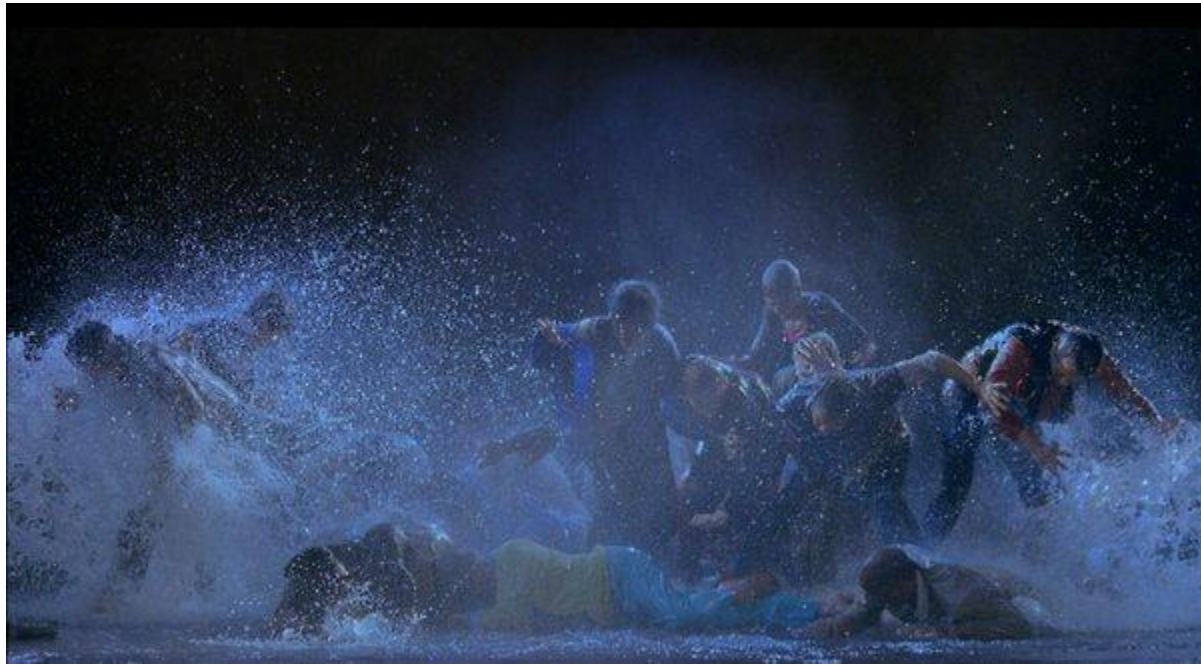


Sheets, Hilarie M., "A Sea of Solitary Islands, Coming Together," *The New York Times*, October 26th, 2012.
Accessed online: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/28/arts/artsspecial/bill-viola-retrospective-explores-isolation-and-communion.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&

A Sea of Solitary Islands, Coming Together



SURVIVORS in "The Raft," Bill Viola's 2004 video installation, people struggle in an onslaught of water, a metaphor for the collective experience of natural disasters and acts of war.

By HILARIE M. SHEETS
Published: October 26, 2012

IN Bill Viola's 2004 video projection "The Raft," 19 people of varying age, race and sex gradually accumulate in tight physical proximity, as though waiting for a bus or cramming themselves into a subway car. Anonymous to one another, they look bored, lost in thought, sometimes annoyed — the flickers of their expressions accentuated by the extreme slow motion of the video. Without warning, a gushing onslaught of water from the wings knocks them into one another and down to the ground, obscuring individuals in one churning, flailing mass. Eventually, as the water subsides, the bewildered survivors look around and reach out to help each other, some embracing.

The piece is a stark, visceral metaphor for the collective experience of natural disasters and acts of war that feels both acutely contemporary in the video and timeless. "The world is fine and everything is normal and then, bang, you just get bowled over by the wrathful deities somehow," said Mr. Viola, 61, who is based in Long Beach, Calif., and has been widely recognized as a pioneer in the medium of video art since the 1970s. "That happens in very small ways and

Sheets, Hilarie M., "A Sea of Solitary Islands, Coming Together," *The New York Times*, October 26th, 2012.
 Accessed online: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/28/arts/artsspecial/bill-viola-retrospective-explores-isolation-and-communion.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&

happens in very large ways when you have a major conflagration in the world. It's another cycle of existence of human beings."



"The Raft" is one of 11 large-scale video installations in "Bill Viola: Liber Insularum" ("The Book of Islands") going on view Dec. 5 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami as the art world descends on Miami Beach for Art Basel, which opens the next day. The exhibition curator Roc Laseca used a 15th-century Florentine ecclesiastic text of the same name as a departure point to look at spiritual isolation in the context of Mr. Viola's art and the 21st century.

"The works in the show have the common theme of transformation, transfiguration, transcendence — how we retain ourselves as an individual island and what brings us together in communion," said Bonnie Clearwater, director of the museum. In recent years, she said, she had witnessed an increased exploration of spiritual and emotional themes in art, something she noted that Mr. Viola had done for most of his career. "Cataclysmic events have made us crave connection," she said. "Even in myself, I see a new receptiveness for his work."

EMOTIONAL DISPLAY In Bill Viola's "Observance," people walk up to the camera and react with grief to something in front of them.

The artist, who grew up in Queens, remembers seeing the first portable video camera, with its unwieldy spools of tape threaded through the heavy machine, as a freshman at Syracuse University in 1969. "I was hooked," he said in a telephone interview, recalling actual fistfights in Lower Manhattan between video makers and filmmakers who scoffed at the medium in the early days. "It was a revolution. It was like a cult."

While he immersed himself in the mechanics of this evolving equipment, his work always dealt with interior states of mind, often using water (the artist almost drowned as a young child, an experience he described as "the most peaceful moment of my life"). Both his technical and poetic inventiveness are evident in "The Reflecting Pool" (1977-79), the earliest piece in the exhibition, in which the actions of a man moving above a pool surrounded by woods do not mirror the reflections seen on the water, suggesting alternate levels of consciousness.

An altar boy as a youth, Mr. Viola, while never particularly religious, was attracted to the rituals and imagery of the church. In 1980, he went to Japan on a cultural exchange fellowship with his wife and collaborator, Kira Perov, and he found a deep connection with Buddhism. "I use the term spiritual, which I know makes a lot of people cringe," said the artist, whose works blend

Sheets, Hilarie M., "A Sea of Solitary Islands, Coming Together," *The New York Times*, October 26th, 2012.
Accessed online: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/28/arts/artsspecial/bill-viola-retrospective-explores-isolation-and-communion.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&

aspects of eastern and western religious traditions. "You can call it anything you want, but it's an awareness of your place in a larger whole." The stakes changed for Mr. Viola, though, after the loss of his mother in 1991, the same year his second son was born. "It affected my art dramatically," he said. "It wasn't about aesthetics or technology. It was real. It was about life and death."

In his work since then, the artist has found simple and startling ways to approach the unknowable. In the 2002 video "Observance," a stream of people walk one by one toward the camera, each reacting with unbridled grief to something in front of them unseen by the viewer, before turning away. Such extreme and unironic facial gestures in vivid color and high resolution, not out of place in religious paintings from the Italian Renaissance that directly influenced the artist, are initially disconcerting and not often seen in contemporary art. When "Observance," which will be included in the North Miami exhibit, was first shown at the Anthony d'Offay gallery in London, Mr. Viola was surprised to see viewers breaking down in tears. "I flipped out," he said. "I made a piece where someone cried. If I were younger, it would have been sacrilege to even think of doing that."

Ideas and images gestate sometimes for years in his mind and in handwritten notebooks he keeps (an early technology nerd, he interestingly doesn't like to use computers). Once he has established his parameters, Mr. Viola will give his performers just enough information so they have their bearings but not enough to fill in all the blanks. For "Transfiguration" (2007) and "Three Women" (2008), two pieces in the exhibition, he directed the participants to walk 20 feet forward in darkness — and not to stop when they encountered water — toward a light and then turn back again. He used a black-and-white infrared surveillance camera to capture their tentative journeys forward in what looks like a grainy, spectral netherworld. As they move through a transparent veil of water that cascades over their bodies, they emerge into light as the camera shifts seamlessly to digital, recording their gasping reactions of astonishment or euphoria in brilliant color, before they slowly return through the threshold of water.

"Any thought that they had of what they were going to do when they got on the other side went out of their minds — it just takes your breath," said Mr. Viola, who joked that he could have made a fortune using the water wall for group therapy sessions.

"I created a situation of birth and death," he continued. "It's effortless to go through water, there's no resistance. That's the most special thing about us, that we are put on this earth for a specific amount of time — most people think it's not enough — and that's what we're given."