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**Private Paths in Public Places: Bill Viola’s *Passions* Series**

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In the summer of 1995, Bill Viola’s exhibition *Buried Secrets* took up all five rooms of the American Pavilion at the Venice Biennial. In the last room, on a large plasma screen, *The Greeting* focused on the episode of the New Testament when Mary tells Elizabeth that she is with child. Viola here showed a group of two and then of three women and captured, thanks to a specific slow motion technique, the most minute details of their changing expressions. *The Greeting* was the starting point of a project Viola called *The Passions* series. The twenty odd works which make up the series were on display at the J. Paul Getty Museum (January 24<sup>th</sup>-April 27<sup>th</sup> 2003), at the National Gallery in London (October 22<sup>nd</sup> 2003-January 4<sup>th</sup> 2004) and in Munich last spring.

The works in *The Passions* series were a departure from Viola’s former installations. From a technical point of view, first of all:

- a) Viola showed his videos on plasma screens.
- b) Having formerly earned a reputation for his very elegant editing, Viola put together narrative works that he had shot at high speed and then slowed down considerably (*The Greeting*, for instance, was shot at 300 frames a second—12 times normal speed—and shown at 30 frames a second).
- c) We had grown accustomed to seeing Viola perform in his own videos but with *The Passions*, he was suddenly put in charge of a team of actors with all the script, make-up and costume considerations this entails. Viola thus became a stage director, writing story-boards and helping his cast get into character.

But from an inspirational point of view, the videos of *The Passions* series also broke with Viola's work in the past: to put together these much more intimate and silent works, Viola traveled back in time, drawing inspiration from the Old Masters, exploring the challenge of depicting and arousing emotion.

Interestingly enough however, throughout the exhibition and in order to bring the spectator in close contact with his art, Viola chose to reveal extremely intimate episodes of his personal life, as if only private anecdotes could move the visitor in public places such as a museum. Viola's project therefore could be viewed as a strategy to fight the slow decay of the museum as a place that can only produce indifference. But, for Viola, arousing emotion in the visitor not only implied connecting him to the artwork, it also meant provoking a collective form of reaction. Could this newfound connection be the prelude to bringing the museum as a public sphere back to life?

### **I. Viewing Art in Museums: a Solitary and Unemotional Experience**

Insofar as it is fraught with comments on and reproductions of the Old Masters' paintings, Viola's exhibition clearly highlights the extent to which the public has lost touch with the art shown in museums all around the world. Devotional works that were originally painted to arouse emotions on the part of the viewer, seem incapable of moving the contemporary visitor of museums. Could this be because we have lost touch with the Christian religion (the story we all once knew)? Or, from a more artistic viewpoint, could it be that the objective of Classical painting that strove to rival Nature has rendered it obsolete insofar as it is incapable of competing with the life-like images of today?

More generally speaking, it would seem that, despite the ever increasing number of visitors flocking to museums every year, we are losing touch with art as it is displayed in museums in general. Paintings appear to be alive in the context they were intended for (in churches and, in the case of the huge mural she had commissioned from Jackson Pollock, in Peggy Guggenheim's front hallway, for instance), but between museum walls, they become "works of art" and partake of art history. Torn from the context that made them come to life, we are made to see these works of art as self-sufficient and the individuals who painted them as mere faceless beings whose hands were "guided from the start by fate."<sup>1</sup> Gone are the secret circumstances of the painting's birth; the museum transforms the "living historicity" of painting into "official and pompous history."<sup>2</sup> To put it bluntly, museums are looking more and more like a burial ground for art.

In the museum's "mournful light,"<sup>3</sup> art works all appear to be disembodied, thus condemning the visitor to a uniquely solitary experience. The experience is all the more painful in the case of modern art: if we accept the cliché and consider modern art as born out of the crisis of representation, how can one hope to connect with a modern painting which no longer refers to nature when this painting has been torn from the context that led to its creation? To quote Merleau-Ponty, "henceforth expression must go from man to man across the common world they *live*, without passing through the anonymous realm of the *senses* or of Nature."<sup>4</sup> Only finding this "common world" can stop the decay of the museum as a public sphere and turn it back into a place of "living historicity" in tune with its visitors.

The Louvre in Paris may not be the first European museum, but the history of its creation testifies to the museum's fundamentally public role. The Louvre was actually opened to its visitors on November 18, 1793, in the wake of the French Revolution and under the

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 62.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 51.

pressure of the people's political representatives who were voicing their expectations concerning this new public space. It is in this revolutionary context that the democratic mission of museums as we consider them today was established: the French government had seized the former headquarters of the monarchy, a highly symbolic place, and confiscated the collections of the royal family, of the aristocracy and of the Church to grant the public access to art.

This democratic quality should very much be alive in the museums of today if we refer to the last description the International Council of Museums<sup>5</sup> (I.C.O.M) gave of the museum's mission:<sup>6</sup> museums are non profit organizations and have the public's interest at heart (they can be private institutions, as is the case in the U.S.A,<sup>7</sup> provided they do not lose touch with their social obligations), they are open to the public (a private collection is not a museum) and they must organize their collections in order to introduce them to the general public (hence the educational mission of the museum).

However, despite these lofty ambitions, museums have been neglecting their visitors for too long to the point that these visitors have even been considered as a threat to the treasures kept within the museum's sacred walls. More generally, museum curators deal with the artworks they are in charge of as if those artworks were part of a private collection that we should feel fortunate enough to get to see. Rather than trying to reach its visitors, the museum is happy just putting the works on display, which inevitably condemns us to the solitary viewing experience we described earlier.

Searching for a common ground capable of bridging the gap between the visitor in a museum and the paintings on the wall is a highly important task in the age of increasingly

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<sup>5</sup> This non-governmental and non-profit organization was created in 1947. It has 17,000 members (institutions and individuals) belonging to 143 countries and is linked to UNESCO.

<sup>6</sup> This definition appears in the Statuts de l'ICOM that were ratified by its 16<sup>th</sup> general assembly on September 5, 1989, and have not been modified since.

<sup>7</sup> The Metropolitan Museum of Art (1869) and the American Museum of Natural History (1871) departed from the European model and created private institutions administered by a board of trustees.

technological art when the artist can almost be perceived as an engineer. How indeed can we hope to connect with the almost frighteningly disembodied images of video art for instance? Meanwhile, this fiercely contemporary form of art strikes us as being at odds with the almost sacred retrospective mission of the museum and accordingly, curators hesitated a long time before throwing museum doors open and welcoming video artists' work.

## **II. The Viewer and the Participant, Arousing Emotion in the Museum Visitor**

The time gap between the museum and video art is made painfully clear in Bill Viola's *The Passions* series. Viola, the son of American modernism, has been looking back upon European art and drawing his inspiration from the study of the Old Masters' paintings: Hieronymus Bosch's *Christ Mocked (The Crowning with Thorns)* or Dieric Bouts's *Crying Madonna* appear as the starting points of a reflection on our relationship to art. Early on in the exhibition, it appears very clear that Viola's aim was not to summon scholarly references but precisely to go beyond the detached critical reading we have grown accustomed to exercising in museums in order to recapture our almost "carnal," intimate knowledge of art.

This objective of Viola's is made very clear from the very beginning of the exhibition when, in his introductory video to the show, he gives us his interpretation of Dieric Bouts's *Annunciation*:

This is one of the most special moments that has ever been represented and that is the moment when the angel Gabriel comes to Mary to tell her that she's pregnant. But what it really is about is the time we know something in the place before words and before language. Because this kind of conversation that is going on here is not the conversation that we are having now. This is a

conversation on a different dimension, the way that a woman inside knows that she's pregnant, it's an inner knowledge in a way that isn't about verbalisation. It is therefore our predominantly verbal—or intellectual—relationship to artworks that Viola wishes to alter. When evoking the Old Masters' paintings that inspired his exhibition, Viola clearly states the fact that he was departing from the formalist training he had received at Syracuse University from 1969 to 1973 and looking for a spiritual and emotional connection with devotional painting (rather than focusing on mere formal organization):

The old pictures were just the starting point. I was not interested in appropriation or restaging—I wanted to get inside these pictures... to embody them, to inhabit them, to feel them breathe. Ultimately, it became about their spiritual dimensions, not the visual form. As to my concept in general, it was to get to the root source of my emotions and the nature of emotional expression itself. In my art training in the 1970s, that was a place you did not go, a forbidden zone. This is so even today. But from my own life experience I found myself completely taken over by this wonderful emotional force, and it was much deeper than the mere sentimentality I was taught to avoid. I felt that as an artist I needed to understand this better.<sup>8</sup>

In this search for the lost carnal knowledge capable of abolishing our detached relationship to art and of connecting us intimately with it, Viola has been showing his images on plasma screens, thus giving them an almost physical presence. Peter Sellars commented on this technological innovation of Viola in the catalogue to the exhibition: “The arrival of the plasma screen (what a name!) invites the previously disembodied projected image to inhabit flesh.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> “A Conversation: Hans Belting and Bill Viola,” *The Passions* exhibition catalogue (National Gallery London, October 22, 2003-January 4, 2004), 199.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Sellars, “Bodies of Light,” *The Passions* exhibition catalogue, 162.

In another departure from his university education, Viola chose to reveal all the commonly hidden context of the artwork, thus going against the formalist idea that the artwork had to be stripped of all outside references in order to prevent its viewer from being deterred from the contemplation of its formal organization. *The Passions* brings Viola's private life to the fore, the show opening with a video whose narrative style puts the visitors in close contact with the more personal moments of the artist's life: the visitors learn very early on in the show that the artist suffered twice from "artist's block" after the death of his mother and that of his father. In 1988, while he was spending a year at the Getty Research Institute and following a weekly seminar on the subject of "Representing the Passions," Viola's father was dying.

This painful experience eventually combined with artistic considerations and after a very moving encounter with a fifteenth-century painting, Viola was to redefine his relationship to art:

During the entire time I was at the Getty my father was dying slowly, inexorably. This was the whole experience with my mother happening again, but in a different way—extended in time but just as intense. I spent a lot of time crying that year. While he was still alive but fading, I was at The Art Institute of Chicago for a planning meeting about an upcoming show, and I walked into the gallery of fifteenth-century paintings. There was Dieric Bouts's *Crying Madonna* all by herself, eyes swollen and red in the excruciating detail of Northern painters' hard-core realism, with tears streaming down her face. I began sobbing uncontrollably. I couldn't stop [...] the function of an art work changed dramatically for me at that moment. My training in art school was all about responding to art works from an intellectual, perceptual, or cultural way—in other words, as a viewer, not a

participant...It certainly didn't involve a bodily fluid coming uncontrollably out of my eyes!<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, just like the cast he was in charge of who summoned past experiences to act in the videos, Viola drew on his own artistic references and his own experience of loss to set up *The Passions* exhibition.

For acting techniques could well be the paradigm of empathy. Viola admits himself to having reflected on an art he once discarded as mere artificiality:

This empathetic property of the emotions became clear to me when I began this project and had to learn to work with actors in a direct and very personally intensive way. They unlocked the hidden world of their private innermost emotional lives and invited me in, artist to artist. [...] I was very uncomfortable at first. [...] The depth and reality of this world startled me. It completely overturned my preconceptions about acting, which, coming out of performance art and verité video, I had always classified in the domain of artificiality, of conscious public presentation, emulation and simulation. But here were these very real emotions, coming from the residual effects of real experiences within the person. I realized that the artificiality I was coming to terms with was not in the emotion itself, but in the context for that emotion.<sup>11</sup>

*The Passions* thus establishes the paramount importance of autobiographical material insofar as it is the medium thanks to which we can summon our past experience to relate to the work in front of us: like Viola's actors drawing on personal experience,<sup>12</sup> our personal history enables us to react with empathy to the artwork on the wall. Viola's autobiographical

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<sup>10</sup> Sellars, 198.

<sup>11</sup> "A Conversation: Hans Belting and Bill Viola," 210.

<sup>12</sup> This would be in keeping with actors' studio methods based on the Stanislavski technique adapted by Lee Strasberg. Moreover, the importance of autobiographical material can be found at every level of the show, as, for instance when the visitor learns that John Fleck, the actor of *Man of Sorrows*, was losing his mother to Alzheimer's disease when shooting the video.

material, like the stage directions written for his actors, would thus be a means to inhabit, to embody<sup>13</sup> the work of art. Having served their purpose, Viola's intimate references then fade away—like the stage directions, once again—to let our private recollections emerge.

### III. The Companion Piece: Provoking Collective Empathic Response

It is worth noting that using autobiographical material was by no means a novelty for Viola (although he had never evoked his own life in such detail before). After his mother's death, Viola was incapable of finding the energy to work although he was already far behind in a project he had agreed to do for the German television. Obsessed with his mother's image, he locked himself up in his studio and started reviewing the tape he had shot of his mother deep in a coma on her death-bed. A fortnight later, he had completed *The Passing* (1991), a very autobiographical piece with pictures of his dying mother and references to an early episode of his life when he almost drowned as a child.

Already then had Viola lent his voice to the usually secret material surrounding artistic creation. Already had he discarded the formalist ethic that prevents the artist from transposing narrative content in his work. Already had he lent his voice to the “living historicity” or the “silent voices”<sup>14</sup> of the work of art.

However, the autobiographical material of *The Passions* is different from that of *The Passing* insofar as it is intimately linked to the artworks of the past, these works having offered a kind of solace in times of trouble. By unveiling the “living historicity” of his art, Viola is doing more than just connecting us to his videos. He is linking past and present: the “living historicity” of the artist is no other than the moment when he links the history (artistic tradition) he comes from with the tradition he is setting.

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<sup>13</sup> I am deliberately using Viola's own words quoted earlier.

Hence the idea that these works are all “companion pieces,”<sup>15</sup> not separate and indifferent pieces that bear no relationship to the art that was being created long ago: just as we are no longer solitary viewers of the artwork but participants caught in a collective form of empathy, the art of the past is recaptured and linked to the present and our heritage brought to life before our very eyes. In a meaningful dialogue between the painting of the past and the technology of today, visitors to *The Passions* end up experiencing a form of collective emotion linking past and present. This meaningful psychological, spiritual and artistic heritage that Viola has brought to life acts as the “common ground” that we are looking for when contemplating extremely contemporary works of art. The paradox of Bill Viola’s exhibition is that we need to travel through private paths in order to uncover common ground.

The *Quintet of the Astonished*, a video shown in *The Passions* exhibition, could act as a metaphor of this paradox. The work is based on Hieronymus Bosch’s *Christ Mocked (The Crowning with Thorns)* which is at the National Gallery in London. The five characters in the video start off with a relaxed kind of expression and then run through a whole range of conflicting emotions such as fear, anger, pain and joy. In order to shoot the video, Viola told his actors to let the emotion build up to a climax and overwhelm them. Each character was given a specific emotion to portray and did not know what other emotions the rest of the cast was going to express. At first, the five actors experience the build up of their emotion independently and the viewer senses no interaction between them. At this stage of the video, what strikes us is the fact that the characters never acknowledge one another, the way, we cannot help noticing, we never interact with fellow museum visitors.

But in a later stage, some form of harmony seems to emerge between the characters after all: the extremely subtle nuances of expression become visible with the slow motion playback and show the actors interacting in a formerly invisible and unexpected way. Like in

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<sup>14</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 81.

the original Bosch painting where the dramatic conflict brought about by the wicked expressions on the faces of Christ's tormentors is resolved by composition (Christ's gaze is looking directly at us), harmony is maintained, and *Quintet of the Astonished* creates a mutual psychological and private space for actors and viewers to occupy. We are no longer alone, absorbed in a solitary contemplation of an artwork; we are connected both to the work and to other visitors of the museum, the way the five characters are connected on the screen.

## Conclusion

In the United States alone there are today 3,500 art museums which are visited by over 68 million adults a year. It is therefore quite ironic that one should question museums' credibility given their tremendous popularity. Nonetheless, recent exhibitions have shown that museums have a tendency to stray from their democratic mission, absorbed as they are in competing fiercely with each other. Was the Brooklyn Museum of Art acting as a public place when it resorted to the "marketing tactics of a major movie studio"<sup>16</sup> and accepted Charles Saatchi as a major financial donor to the *Sensation* exhibition showing Saatchi's collection of young British artists? Similarly, is the Guggenheim in New York being true to its mission of preserving and presenting the property it holds on behalf of the public when it engages in the very lucrative activity of setting up satellite art museums and when Ben Hartley, its former director of communications and sponsorship declares: "We are in the entertainment business and competing against other forms of entertainment out there. We have a Guggenheim brand that has certain equities and properties. By doing these cross fertilizations (with the fashion industry) we get a crowd that perhaps doesn't typically come

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<sup>15</sup> As Peter Sellars describes them in the catalogue to the exhibition.

<sup>16</sup> Glenn D. Lowry (Director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York), "A Deontological Approach to Art Museums and the Public Trust," *Whose Muse? Art Museums and the Public Trust* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

to the Guggenheim openings, but if they are here for a party and happen to look at the art and come back again, that's valuable to us"?"<sup>17</sup>

Museums have a fundamental mission, that of preserving the artistic legacy of the past and making it meaningful to the broad public of today. Only by bringing past art to life can they hope to fulfill their educational mission and preserve our cultural heritage. The purpose of a museum is not to show individual works of art but to show how meaning circulates through paintings of different periods. Similarly, in an exhibition such as Bill Viola's *The Passions* series, meaning gets to circulate among visitors who are no longer solitary viewers but participants. Only by encouraging their visitors to participate in the life of the museum can curators hope to identify and recognize the public's needs, a significant challenge in the days of globalization.

For museums are also meant to be places of social activity, a public sphere indeed.

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<sup>17</sup> Ben Hartley quoted by Glenn Lowry, "Dinner, Dancing, and Oh, Yes, Art," *New York Times* (March 14, 1999), sec. 9, p.1.