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Transcultural Art of Bill Viola

Two extensive monographs devoted to the oeuvre of Bill Viola, one of the greatest contemporary video artists, were almost simultaneously published in the United States and Poland. Both books discuss not only his early works from the early 1970s, but also his latest installations presented recently in Venice, Berlin and London. The first book was prepared by John G. Hanhardt¹, a famous art critic and curator of many exhibitions who works with the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, while the second book was written in Polish by Andrzej Pitrus², who for more than a decade has been studying new media art and has published numerous articles on Bill Viola. The American monograph is more like a catalogue of the exhibition, due to its large size and wealth of illustrations (350 altogether), while the Polish one—much humbler in this respect—focuses primarily on the interpretation of the artist's works and tries to place them in a broad historical, cultural and artistic context.

In fifteen chapters, Andrzej Pitrus reconstructs Viola's artistic career in essentially chronological order. The subsequent chapters present how particular threads developed in the successive stages of Viola's career and consistently place them in the context of his entire oeuvre. From the beginning, Pitrus draws attention to Bill Viola's penchant for specific topics and ways of artistic expression, and proves that even in the earliest works his artistic strategy was based on manipulating the course of time in order to initiate a reflection on the nature of perception.

Andrzej Pitrus concentrates on the issues that I personally also find crucial. These include the artist's inclination to experiment with sound, which can become a factor that shapes the structure of a visual layer when it undermines the dominant system of the opposition, in which the image dominates the sound. This approach stems from Viola's belief that video images can be treated as "variants of a musical tradition of the East regarded as an alternative to a tradition of the West"³. Here

¹ John G. Hanhardt, *Bill Viola* (Thames & Hudson) (2015).

² Andrzej Pitrus, *Zanurzony. O sztuce Billa Violi* (Krakow: Jagiellonian University Press) (2015).

³ Andrzej Pitrus, p. 31.

another interesting interpretive trail emerges, namely the relationship of the artist with the philosophical and religious systems of the Middle and Far East, such as Sufism, Hinduism, Tibetan Buddhism and Japanese Zen, which appear inexhaustible sources of inspiration for many of his works.

Pitrus convincingly justifies a thesis that for Viola video art is by no means a way of recording reality, nor is it a medium for storytelling (similar to the cinema); on the contrary, it becomes a tool for experimentation and reflection on the nature of human perception. This is evident in the analysis of such early works as *The Wheel of Becoming*, where the video is “a tool which, on the one hand, mimics the *fragmented* perception of the world revealing itself to man through the senses, but, on the other—in its deep structure—is capable of restoring its proper consistency”⁴ (49 - 50). This awareness of differences between the cinema and video art also helps one realize a close relationship between a video recording and an audio recording, which may be fully seen in one of the most famous works by Viola: *Reflecting Pool*. This sensitivity to the acoustic layer could also be seen later when the artist cooperated with Trent Reznor, for whom he prepared a visual illustration for three tracks from the album entitled *The Fragile*.

However, this does not mean that the American artist totally ignores the issue of “reproducing” reality. It is suffice to mention a series of films made for the Samoan Islands, a unique collection of ethnographic documents in the spirit of Jean Rouch, rising from the concept of participatory cinema, making it possible to cross the boundaries between the director and the film protagonist. The main subject of these films was the problem of the appropriation of the authentic culture of the indigenous people of the islands by Western civilization, but it seems that the reflection on the technological constraints in trying to show that intercultural meeting was equally important.

An encounter with Japanese culture and visits to the Land of the Rising Sun clearly played an important role in shaping of Bill Viola’s artistic sensitivity, which can be seen especially in the works that date from the late 1970s and 1980s (including *Vegetable Memory*, *Hatatsu-Yume*). For Pitrus Viola’s works of this period do not only reveal a fascination with the aesthetics of Zen, but are also clearly inspired by the traditional landscape painting of the Edo period, especially with regards to a peculiar understanding of the relationship between nature and art. Other points of reference that consistently appear in the works of Viola include Arab poets (Rumi), Christian mystics (Saint John of the Cross), and Taoism.

Andrzej Pitrus argues that almost all works of the American artist may be interpreted in the context of multiculturalism, though perhaps a more accurate description would be the notion of transculturalism, in the way it was understood by the German philosopher Wolfgang Iser. Although Pitrus regards intertextual references as an important key for interpretation, he also follows other threads. He

⁴ Andrzej Pitrus, pp. 49-50.

devotes a lot of space to autobiographical references, which occurred both in the early period of Viola's career (e.g. in *Moonblood*, dedicated to his wife) and in the mature works, the most interesting of which seems to be *The Passing*, a single-channel video dedicated to his sick mother and covering the mourning after her death. What is crucial here is evoking memories and subordinating them to the logic of a dream. This method enables the artist to bring together apparently "random" shots.

In the last chapters of the book, Pitrus emphasizes Viola's inspirations that he seeks in the works of great masters of painting, and in religion. The latter seems to be particularly important for Viola, both in terms of the form (the artist is extremely fond of diptychs and triptychs), and with regard to the sacred character of the places where he has presented his installations. However, what Pitrus finds particularly interesting are the two original projects: one of them was produced in collaboration with Peter Sellars, a prominent theatre director, for whom Viola prepared a video as the major component of the staging of Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*, while the other means something totally different than the artist's previous areas of interest; namely, a computer game project for Sony PlayStation.

Andrzej Pitrus's extremely erudite book, which proves both his thorough knowledge of the subject and the skill of writing in such a way that will definitely encourage readers to learn more about contemporary art, ends with an interesting interview with Bill Viola himself. If I were to mention what I miss in the book, it might be a comprehensive introduction that could help readers better understand the context of the art of new media and which would generally characterize Viola's achievements. Finally, a list of works at the end of the book as a kind of artistic calendar might be useful. Even though Viola is such a prolific artist, most of his works are not known to wider audiences.

Andrzej Pitrus, *Zanurzony. O sztuce Billa Violi*, (Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press) (2015), 214 p.