An Interview with Bill Viola

Raymond Bellour; Bill Viola


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RAYMOND BELLOUR

Bellour: You started doing video when it was brand new. Why were you first drawn to it?

Viola: Probably for a lot of the wrong reasons in the beginning. I was in art school at Syracuse University, and I was one of the worst painters in the class. The school was very traditional; we had to sit all day and draw apples and oranges on a table, or nude models, like in the seventeenth century. Abstract painting wasn’t even being taught yet. There was an explosion of media, process, and information all around us, but at the school there wasn’t even a hint of this new “software” approach. As with most art schools, the approach basically revolved around a notion of art classes as shop classes, as building things.

Bellour: Like carpentry?

Viola: Yes. So I would try to make a square box and the corners would come out one sticking up over the other, or I’d make something with a drawer that you couldn’t close. I just had no physical connection. I was really doing badly, and was about to leave the school when one of my teachers, Jack Nelson, saved me. He created a department for all the students who didn’t fit into the other departments, sort of an orphans’ home. It was called the experimental studio, and it was a totally free space. Nelson was the one who introduced super-8 into the school, and later brought in video. He didn’t even know how video worked at the time, he just thought we should have it, and that the students would figure out how to use it— that’s the kind of rare, open-minded teacher he was.

Bellour: When was this?

Viola: 1970. Until then the only thing I had really connected with was music. It’s still very important to me.
Bellour: Did you study music?

Viola: Not formally. I started playing drums in a rock and roll band when I was in high school, and continued into my university days. That was the real focus of my life. It was the first time I really had the experience of practicing and developing something, perfecting a skill—of pushing it beyond an initial stage. This has always stayed with me and helped me develop my video work.

Bellour: And that's what gave you the strong connection with sound that you've shown from the very beginning.

Viola: Yes, in the university I also took classes in electronic music. We had one of the first of the early music synthesizers, the Moog; working with it was like doing sculpture. I had always liked tape recorders, microphones, and so on, and this took me even further into electronics and technical things.

Now I always advise my students to take a class in electronic music, because a lot of video technology was predated by electronic music technology, which was itself predated by the telephone. In fact, much of media comes from the telephone, which ties everything back to communication.

Just an example: John Cage, in the late 1950s, before electronic synthesizers, used one of the first electronic music circuits, called a ring modulator. It's a simple circuit invented by the phone company to send long-distance telephone calls. It takes the normal speaking voice and transposes it up to a frequency which can carry much further—this process is called modulation. Then the circuit demodulates it at the other end—subtracts the carrier frequency so that you're left with the original voice signal. What Cage and others did was to modify the circuit so that once the voice has been modulated up to the special carrier frequency, it was kept there and never demodulated down to a normal voice. And that's the familiar sound that everyone recognizes now—it's a classic electronic music cliché. In the scene on the boat in my tape Hatsu Yume, when you hear a strange voice, that's the sound. It's the boat captain talking on the CB radio.

Bellour: So, for you, the technical aspect of electronic music was the most important?

Viola: Yes. At the time I was seriously trying to compose music, but when I look back I realize that the work I was doing was not really good. The crucial thing for me was the process of going through an electronic system, working with these standard kinds of circuits which became a perfect introduction to a general electronic theory. It gave me a sense that the electronic signal was a material that could be worked with. This was another really important realiza-
tion. Physical manipulation is fundamental to our thought processes—just watch the way a baby learns. It's why most people have so much trouble approaching electronic media. When electronic energies finally became concrete for me, like sounds are to a composer, I really began to learn; as I said, it all became a primary process again, like sculpture. Soon I made what was for me an easy switch over to video. I never thought about it in terms of images so much as electronic process, a signal.

Bellour: And even though there was super-8 in the department, you weren't interested in it right away?

Viola: No, I was too impatient. I'd shoot it and then want to see it immediately. When I first saw video, first touched it, that was it. There was no question.

Bellour: And from that point, making video became a regular activity for you?

Viola: Yes, I did more tapes in 1973 than I ever have in any other year.

Bellour: Could you compare those early tapes, which I don't know, to your later tapes? Could you describe them briefly?

Viola: Red Tape, from 1975, was a sort of bridge. Before that, the tapes were didactic, the content was the medium, like structural film in a way. For all of us, I think, the whole focus was on the medium. We were all learning what it could do. So the act of making a tape became a process of discovering and demonstrating something about video. When I look back now I realize that what I was doing was solving a series of problems I had posed for myself.

Bellour: Do you mean that every tape was about one specific problem?

Viola: Yes. For example, I made a tape in 1973 called Passage Series. It's a series of three or four pieces, and each one has a different problem. In one, for instance, I saw that there was a huge difference between a zoom and a dolly (the zoom being, I think, still today the most overused thing in video; video cameras all come with zoom lenses so everybody just does it, like Pavlovian training). If you look down a hallway you see a perspective, the classic Renaissance vanishing point. I experimented with walking down the hall in a way that looked like a zoom, and zooming in a way that looked like a walk. Finally I took the camera and I put it against the wall of this very long hall and scraped it all the way down and back along the walls. You see the wall scraping past at the side of the frame. The sound was very strong.

Bellour: It sounds like an exercise, a total training.
Viola: Yes, a physical reexperiencing of that hall, a translation, so that instead of becoming an image the hall became tactile—a physical thing. A lot of these problems and exercises came from my studies in perception and experimental psychology, which I was introduced to through McLuhan.

During my first few years with video, I was totally into electronics, using synthesizers, image processing, building little circuits, wiring things myself. Then—again in 1973—I made a tape called Information. I was making a copy between two machines and by accident I plugged the output into the input of the same machine, pushed the record button, and suddenly there was this strange feedback, a signal that was no signal at all. But since it was routed through all the equipment in the studio—the switcher, the chroma keyer, all the monitors—every time I pushed the button it did something different. That was the best tape I'd ever made, at that time. (Laughs) And I felt that if the best thing I'd ever made was a mistake, I needed to understand things a little better.

Up until that point I thought that the raw material in video was the technology, and then I realized that was wrong, or only half the issue. The other half was the human perception system. I began to realize that I needed to know not only how the camera works, but how the eye functions, and the ear, how the brain processes information, etc. This investigation brought me into a whole new area in my later work. I slowly began to consider video as a total living system.

Bellour: In practical terms, how did this affect the way you used the technology?

Viola: I began to rely on it less. I got a sense, which grew stronger through all my later works, of an unseen presence or missing element "out there" all the time, which it was necessary to contact in order for the work to live. It was something not yet manifest, and so it made the immediate work—the recording—incomplete in a sense. This missing element was, of course, the viewer, or the viewing experience—the other half of the system. It's the dynamic interaction between these two systems, not just the technology and language of video alone, that is the fundamental nature of the medium.

Bellour: Were you influenced by other work being done in video then?

Viola: I should say first that this was really a unique time for video and I was very lucky to be a student just then. While still in school I was showing in exhibitions with people like Nam June Paik, Bruce Naumann, Richard Serra, Peter Campus—all the leading early video artists. No one had made any more tapes than anybody else at that time. Video was still really new; we were all discovering it together. My influences, initially, were more from the art world. I was interested in performance art, which was just beginning then, and a little later
in experimental film. A friend of mine took me to see work by Michael Snow, Ken Jacobs, Hollis Frampton, Stan Brakhage, etc.

Bellour: Did you feel a connection between those films and the immediate feeling you had for video?

Viola: Well, even in those days I didn't think of film and video as being that different. When my friends and I discussed film, we were really discussing images, camera, and structure; we would think about them in video terms later.

But getting back to the question of influences, one thing that was very important for me was Gene Youngblood's book Expanded Cinema. This was mainly because he devoted part of the book to describing some of the technical processes of video as key formal elements of the aesthetics of the medium. He decided what the basic elements were and listed them. It was very clear. No critic had done that; many still don't because they don't understand the technology. By doing this he also demystified the medium to some extent, since in those days technology like chroma key was only available at TV stations and very difficult to access. Our main problem in the early days was how to get to these tools, and then how to have enough time using them so that they became part of ourselves. This is still one of the primary difficulties for artists coming to video—how to personalize a technology which is economically and politically a corporate institutional medium.

Bellour: To situate your work a little better, I'd like to concentrate on the series of tapes called The Reflecting Pool (1977–80), and particularly on the title piece, which lasts seven minutes. Here is the way I would roughly describe the tape, having seen it a few times and taken notes on the last viewing.

The camera is still. In the foreground there is a pond, or pool, and in the background a forest. Throughout the tape a kind of windlike sound of varying intensity covers the soundtrack. A man (you) emerges from the forest, walks up to the edge of the pool. We see his reflection in the water. He stays there for a long time, and then suddenly jumps, but his body freezes in midair above the water. In the pool the light changes, the water is animated by various movements. The reflection reappears. The frozen figure gradually fades into the landscape. More movements in the water, this time in backward motion. Then the reflection alone. The water turns black, then back to its original color, and suddenly a man, the same man, emerges from the water naked, his back to us, climbs onto the edge of the pool and disappears, in small fragmented movements, into the forest.

First: how was all this done technically?

Viola: It's actually fairly primitive as far as video effects go. It would be easier to do today than when I did it a few years ago. The key element of the piece, as in
a lot of my other work, is the stationary camera. Keeping the camera in the same place automatically means that any objects that have not moved between different recordings can be registered (aligned) again, broken up and put together, and reconstructed to make a whole image. So the final image seems like a complete coherent space, although I've actually cut specific areas of the frame into different sections of time. It's something I've been trying to work with for a while: recombining levels of time within the frame, times which are not strictly dependent on the sort of absolute time of the running of the videotape machine.

I had three elements in the piece, three separate recordings (or series of recordings). First: a series of recordings of all the things happening within the pool. Second: a recording of the scene where I come out of the forest and jump into the water. Third: a recording of the scene completely empty, with no one in it at all.

The final edit was done in stages. I first combined all of the different spontaneous actions that I did to the pool, like throwing things in the water, walking around the edge to show my reflection, and so on, and made a submaster. This is a preedited tape; it was edited using very slow dissolves to link each of the pool actions to create the appearance of continuously merging activity. That became source number one. Source number two consisted of the walking out from the forest, jumping into the air, and freezing the videotape frame at that point. The primitive part is next: I first measured out on the monitor screen what the shape of the pool was in the frame. Then I made a card, a black and white graphic design where the pool shape was white and the rest of the frame was black, and I put that on a stand in the studio. (This could be generated electronically today, but when I did it a lot of studios were still using graphic cards for titles.) I pointed the video camera at the card and with the zoom I lined up the shapes on the black and white card with the image in the original shot as precisely as possible. Then we did what's called an external key.

Bellour: Could you briefly explain what that is?

Viola: In video there are two kinds of keys that allow one image to be matted onto another. A key can be determined either by differences in brightness between two parts of the picture (luminance key) or by differences in color (chroma key). In the key that is normally used, a camera is pointed at one object, for example a newscaster in front of a blue background; then his shape is electronically "cut out" by dropping out of the picture anything that is that particular blue color. Then another source is inserted in place of the blue area behind him. The external key is done the same way, except that the newscaster shape is also filled in with a different second source, so that the only thing remaining from the original image is his shape. You don't see his face anymore, there is another image inside him and a second image around him.

This is what I used; the card itself disappeared and just became the two
different levels of brightness, black and white, necessary to cut the external luminance key. It defined the pool and the background. Inside the pool I inserted the submaster that I made first, with all the changes and the actions. I used a “soft” key to cut the edge — where the edge of the shape that is being matted is softened and blended in with the background. I combined the other two recordings — of my walking out, jumping, and freezing in midair, and the shot of the empty space in real time — by doing a slow fade, about three or four minutes, from the frozen figure background to the empty background. The figure appears to disappear into the landscape. All the while, the pool activity sequences are only visible within the cut-out pool shape and appear as reflections and ripples on the surface of the water in an otherwise still or empty scene. Finally, I did one last dissolve from this whole compound image of my climbing out of the pool and walking away into the woods. So the frame is broken up into three distinct levels of time — real time, still, and time lapse — and reconstructed to look like a complete image of a single space, since the lines along which it was divided match the geometry of the original scene.

**Bellour:** It’s far more complicated than what one can imagine on first viewing, a simple division, a split screen between the bottom and top of the image.

**Viola:** It is more complicated: like sculpting with time.

**Bellour:** What ideas were you trying to get across with the piece?

**Viola:** I was trying to get at the original notion of baptism in a way — a process of cleansing or clearing away, and the idea of breaking through illusion. Water is such a powerful, obvious symbol of cleansing, and also of birth, rebirth, and even death. We come from water and in a way slide back into its undifferentiated mass at death. There is the emergence of the solitary figure — the process of differentiation or individuation out of an undifferentiated, natural ground. There is also the suggestion of the events of this world’s being illusory, or transient, since they are only visible as reflections on the surface of the water. The direct reality is never perceived — like Plato’s cave.

**Bellour:** And then you come out of the water.

**Viola:** Yes, I come out of the water. The key element in the piece is the frozen action. There is a transformation that’s all based on the original decision to give up; I think it relates to death in some way, or letting go of the things that you know, just releasing everything. The image I have is of a cliff, you’re right at the edge, and you have to decide to go ahead or go back. I think we must jump.
Photographs by Kira Perov.
Bellour: The Reflecting Pool is one of five in a series of tapes.

Viola: Yes. When I started doing the early tapes I would put a lot of pieces on one reel, just to have them on one tape. Then I began to realize that this obviously made them affect each other and that I could make a sort of metapiece which had discrete parts, yet could be considered a single work. I thought it would be like a record album; you could take one song from it and play it on the radio or you could listen to the whole thing. I first did this in Red Tape and most recently in The Reflecting Pool.

Bellour: Your tapes are often very abstract, paradoxical, illusory, in terms of perception and the experience of time, and part of this comes from editing, special effects, and so on. What impresses me is that unlike a lot of video artists who use effects to get away from realistic images, real time, etc., your tapes almost give an impression of "reality," of a spatial and temporal continuity.

Viola: Yes, I think this ultimately comes from the realization that for me all of video has its source in the live image. When I broke away from all the image-processing stuff and started working with real situations again, the first thing I did was begin stripping away all unnecessary elements to try to get back to the basics. For several months I ended up exploring the most fundamental unit in video—the camera and the monitor. In film, recording is the inseparable essence of the medium. In video, it is the secondary stage. You don't need a recorder to have video. You turn it on, and the circuits are all activated—it's humming, it's going. It's more related to sound than to film or photography because it's exactly the same as the microphone/speaker relationship. We have a microphone here and all of a sudden your voice is coming out across the room, it's all connected—a living, dynamic system, an energy field. There are no frozen, discrete moments.

When you make video you're interfering with the ongoing process which exists before your intention to use it—that's the biggest difference between video and film. It's sort of like a light is on when you come into the room. It's all there already. It's a different sense of creating something. The decision to record is to turn on the video recorder, not the camera. The camera is always on, there is always an image. This duration, this always-there, can be said to be real time. You're working with the image—I don't want to say creating images because the camera is creating the images—and it's synchronized with your experience at the moment you're there. That's what I meant when I said I was impatient with super-8—the image would come tomorrow.

Bellour: Do you always have a monitor with you when you work?
Viola: Yes, everywhere, so that I'm always seeing a color image. People sometimes look at my work and say I must have studied lighting. I've never read a single book on lighting, but I have done a lot of tests on my own, just changing lights, until I got what I wanted—creating space, destroying space. It's so clear that way; it becomes a physical skill. You see the effects of your actions on the image while you are carrying them out.

Bellour: And this is what you mean when you say: "I'm thinking with my hand instead of with my head"?

Viola: Yes: thinking with the hands, images in the hands. When I teach workshops in video, one of the first things I do is cover the viewfinder in the camera. That way you're pointing the camera in one direction and your head's turning in the other, looking five meters away at your image on the monitor across the room; it's really a disembodied kind of situation. That's why I like the la paliuse mini-camera: it teaches you that the image is in your hand, it's not in your eye. It's like those incredible animals, certain crabs and so on, that have their eyes at the end of little rods. That kind of linking to your sensory experience via a remote "image arm" is so wonderful. Video was first used for remote sensing—all TV was live. Closed-circuit surveillance systems are a major part of video history.

Bellour: So in other words we really have three separate "times." First the continuous time which involves just you and your perception of reality as it appears simultaneously on your monitor. Then the recording time which makes a selection from that continuum, and finally the time of the finished, edited piece which creates the illusion that the second time, the separate recording, possesses the continuity of the first.

Viola: Exactly. For me the most important thing to be developed in making video is the ability to sense these "other times" as they are contained in the primary time of experience. The act of recording as an experience for myself and the transformation of that recording as it becomes a part of a future event—both are real and both must exist at the same moment when I make a work.

I've learned so much through my video work—far more than what I need to practice my profession. The real investigation is of life and being itself; the medium is just the tool in this investigation. You can see many parallels in ancient Eastern disciplines of mind and spiritual training. There the skill of the master, for example, is considered to be not so much the accumulation of knowledge or even the acute awareness of the present. Rather it is seen as the knowing how a present action will be transformed into the future. This is an incredibly difficult thing to do. It's not a matter of future prediction, but of future knowledge. "It is much easier to pick up an acorn than to move the tree," the Chinese saying goes. In meditation training you are given exercises which don't
make sense or are unpleasant and even painful. You protest and maybe even refuse to do them. But if you go through with them, a change occurs, and only later does the real value of the experience become clear and possibly indispensable.

Bellour: And how do you connect that, practically, within the elaboration of your work?

Viola: I think this has to do with the relation between spontaneous inspiration and calculated, rational thought. I sometimes think of my work as “rational inspiration.” I don’t like the way things are done in films: an inspiration gets written up and set out as a sort of blueprint. The act of shooting the film becomes a matter of following the blueprint and reconstructing the original inspiration. Even though some of my work is precisely predetermined down to the individual shots, the experience I’m having while recording is still connected with the work. It’s really the reason why I do it, ultimately. It is important for me not always to know what I am doing. If I can sense the experience strongly enough while I’m recording, then I think it comes out in the final work.

Bellour: Isn’t there a contradiction between this preplanning of every shot and the powerful experience you’re trying to get at the moment of the shooting?

Viola: No, because the knowledge that I have of what the piece will be is not necessarily literal. When I look at the finished work, it’s like déjà vu. We are here talking and all of a sudden I think, “This has happened before,” but it’s not a visual image, not in the sense that you have the same sweater on, or your hair is the same, etc. It’s more a feeling inside that the same thing is happening.

Bellour: Then where does the element of planning come in?

Viola: For me it’s always been a matter of fighting for control. When I started in video, there was barely any control at all. It was like driving downhill with no brakes: you could turn but you couldn’t stop. You couldn’t edit an individual frame in 1970—the frame existed, but it was inaccessible until the introduction of computer editing in 1973. You couldn’t shoot in color outside a studio, and you couldn’t shoot and record in color unless you had a really large, professional two-inch videotape recorder. So we all used black and white. At the same time that my work was developing, new technology kept coming out, allowing more and more control. The turning point was the introduction of the portable color camera, which I used for the first time in 1975 for Red Tape.

When I finally got outside, the studio had already turned into an incredible limitation for me, even though it was so important in the beginning. I was determined not to just shoot at random. I never liked the early documentary video style or guerrilla television stuff where you shot everything all the time.
and just put it together later. I always thought you had to start with an idea, but when I got out into the real world I found that you could never totally pre-
determine things. There are some incredibly beautiful moments in some of my
tapes that were totally unplanned. The most striking one is at the very end of
The Space between the Teeth, when the photograph falls into the water.

My plan was that the photograph would sink into the water (I'd mounted
it on a piece of sheet rock), but just as we were ready to drop it, I saw a boat
coming up the river, and so I told my friend to wait and when he finally let the
photograph go, the wave from the boat submerged it.

Bellour: It's very strong—the moving image suddenly turns into a photograph,
and we get the feeling that the whole tape gets carried off by a wave.

Viola: Yes, and this kind of thing happens again in Sweet Light. There's a scene
in which I throw a piece of paper down and a moth comes out of it, totally by
chance. I was making a tape about phototropism—about insects blindly driven
on toward light—thinking about it in relation to fanaticism and so on. I had
started at ten in the morning, working alone almost continuously, performing
this tedious process of moving the camera down in a predetermined path, thirty
different camera positions to get a sort of simulated zoom. By the time I got
down to the floor, it was night. I had two thousand-watt studio lights, and the
bugs started coming into the room, going crazy. One actually went straight into
the light and landed right in front of the camera with its wings burned. My God!
That's what my tape was about! In my more recent work this whole process has
been snowballing. You wonder after awhile who is controlling whom. It's like
that principle of quantum physics—the presence of the observer always affects
and becomes inseparable from the result of the experiment.

Bellour: What's really striking is that the reality that unfolds in your tapes is also
a constant flow of mental images. We're always brought back to the inside and
the outside of the representation. As if you were able to project into exterior real-
ity the images that go through your mind, since reality has left its mark there.

Viola: Certain experiences keep reappearing as images; those images, for me,
are crucial, the basis of all my work. In a way my work is very literal, but it has
more to do with the after-experience than the actual experience in itself. As if
memory were a sort of filter, another editing process. In fact the editing is going
on all the time. Images are always being created and transformed.

Bellour: So for you memory is a constant reworking . . .

Viola: Yes, it is an active sense, not a past sense at all. I think memory is as
much about the future as it is about the past.
Bellour: You talk about your work the way certain writers describe their relationship to literature. You often choose to use yourself as "actor," as if to show that it's really your experience, your body, that's at stake. It seems to me that when making video involves so much subjectivity, such a direct and solitary relationship to the act of creating, representing things, and developing them in time, it becomes very much like writing.

Viola: Yes, exactly. The work comes from a very personal place for me and it's always a matter of keeping it as close as possible to that source. This is what makes me feel that there is no difference between what I'm doing and what a writer does. In the beginning I had to teach myself the language, how to write. Now I know enough of this technology to do things on my own, so it's becoming even more personal than before.

Bellour: What's your relationship to fiction? In your articles you talk a lot about landscapes, objects, nature, but in your tapes these images always happen to somebody, in one way or another.

Viola: There are shots in my tapes which are just landscapes without people, but you're right, they always come back to a human presence, at least as a point of identification. In Chott-el-Djerid, when a little black dot walks across the screen you know it's a person, it's not some animal or little rolling stone or something like that. All my images, as you say, feel more inner than outer; they are all personalized.

I think that all my works are narrative, they all have to do with drama. Chott-el-Djerid is phenomenal in this respect. I can show it in a room with fifty people where the monitors are not so big, the black dot on the screen might be four or five video lines high, a speck, really, yet it has a personality. Everyone in the room is watching a black dot a quarter of an inch high, travelling across the square. It's like composing for the retina, for the eye, knowing for almost every frame exactly where someone's eye would be. The meaning that is there is revealed through some kind of action, or resolution of the scene. Narrative structure, I think, is part of our central nervous system; it is biological in origin and I am interested in approaching that origin. That's why I'm not interested in constructing things the way you would for a movie where it is a matter of a simulation of a situation.

Bellour: So there's a limit for you, one that you don't want to cross, between the way you work with narrative and more traditional ways of telling stories, as in cinema, with actors and so on.

Viola: Well, I haven't necessarily decided not to cross it, you know. (Laughs) If someday I feel I need to use professional actors, to create a situation which is
very much like cinema where I want to reconstruct an event with people, I'll do it. Nor do I have any objections to using words or text. I haven't used them so far — any spoken words in my work have just been part of the sound landscape — but it's not a boundary line that I set up and decided I wouldn't cross.

Beilour: Yes, but there does seem to be a line (and this has been very powerful in American culture) which puts experimental and research work on one side, and mainstream, narrative movies on the other. What's your feeling about this strict separation?

Viola: I think it's unnatural, even dangerous, and it's as much the fault of the artists as the public. But I also think it's unfortunate that the larger public feels it needs a story with actors, a dramatic story in order to feel it's had a satisfying viewing experience. Every once in a while, people from the Hollywood industry will invite me to show my work or will come to one of my shows, and I get the feeling that what they're thinking is: if he really knew what he was doing, he'd be able to tell a good story, he'd be trying to work with the system and break into Hollywood.

Beilour: If Hollywood came to you and asked you to make a film, would you do it?

Viola: It depends. If I were given a dream opportunity to have complete creative control, I would do it. I've been approached on several occasions by Hollywood
producers, but they all looked at my work from the point of view of how it could help them. They look at the ways I've edited something, the kinds of shots I used, as a way of finding new techniques to use in their work. For me, obviously, the work is not about special effects: all the effects and techniques are there in service to an idea. But the people in the industry refuse to acknowledge those ideas, since they're not part of the traditional story-telling mode.

Bellour: But in order to serve your own ideas, you more or less depend, like most video artists, on foundations, museums, universities, and a whole system of grants. You don't really enter into the laws of the market, which presupposes a minimum audience.

Viola: That's true, although I am subject to the laws of the video art “market” or field, as different and disconnected from the mainstream as that might be. I think in some ways advancing into the mass market would be a lot healthier and potentially a more democratic way to determine the life of a work than the fashion-oriented, isolated art-world system. But I still feel that a large part of the work of an artist, a scientist, any creative person, always exists independent of the system that disseminates it. The success and popularity of a work is not necessarily related to its eventual importance in the history of ideas. The most important thing for an artist is to keep working.

I do think, however, that the mass-audience situation and our relation to moving images is changing dramatically right now—with cable TV, home video, video games, etc., the whole video “revolution.” Historically, I think the first big break with convention came with the introduction of video games in the mid-'70s. That was the first time the general public could conceive of a television set as useful for something other than watching TV. It became something that people could interact with. It's fascinating that people became so captivated with these extremely primitive images—flat little squares and simple line drawings that don't even give the illusion of three-dimensional space. And yet kids are more interested in these than in Dallas.

Bellour: Because they manipulate them themselves.

Viola: Exactly. Then the next big change was the home video recorder which allowed you to record TV at any time and make your own tapes. And now more recently you have music television which is very interesting because . . .

Bellour: You mean what we call “video clips” . . .

Viola: Yes, in the U.S. there's an entire cable channel with twenty-four hours of nothing but “video clips.” I think it's really a visual interpretation of AM radio, visual junk food, but every once in a while you'll see something that's quite in-
teresting. And of course the main genre that they've been drawing on for these things is the commercials, which themselves have always drawn on experimental film and video. I've seen the work of Peter Campus, for example, reproduced in a clip by some producer in Hollywood last year. This is now the most popular form for teenagers. When these kids mature, this will be their experience. Three-minute clips, along with home video and computers.

Bellour: And so you think this will change the way we relate to sounds and images in general?

Viola: Yes, because some kid is going to take that music video experience and really turn it into something profound. As Cage stressed over and over, the most important thing is not to make value judgments, but to promote curiosity and awareness. As you yourself mentioned, that's the mistake the avant-garde has made: sticking so rigidly to its position as avant-garde that it has had to downgrade things like TV commercials—some of which are fantastic in themselves, and better than many experimental works—or else insisting on an antinarrative approach, like Brakhage and a lot of other filmmakers. It's always a divisive position rather than an expansive one.

Bellour: This brings us to the problem of getting video art shown on TV. What has been your experience?

Viola: Well, as you know, I've been artist-in-residence at Channel 13 in New York since 1976. I'm sure a lot of people in Europe know about the experimental laboratories that were set up in the public television stations in the States. Actually, the first experimental work was done at WGBH-TV in Boston, in the late '60s—1967 or so. They started broadcasting experimental programs made by the producers of the station, but they were very innovative and used a lot of new video techniques. That led to the first television lab, which was created around 1969-70 in San Francisco, at KQED. Very soon after, WGBH in Boston and Channel 13 (WNED) in New York also created television laboratories where they would invite artists-in-residence to use the tools of broadcast television. That was the main idea: not necessarily to have artists use portapaks or that sort of thing, but to have artists use the production tools of the mass media to create new work. As usual the first years were the best, the most open and innovative, before things gradually changed and became fossilized. I believe that WGBH still maintains a weekly Sunday night program of artists' works, the longest running experimental showcase, since 1975 or '76. It's the last program on the air and it's always artists' work. Their works are any length—five minutes to an hour.
Bellour: And is there a real public for that?

Viola: Oh, yes, by now they've generated an audience, not a large one, of course. Channel 13 tried another approach: they made a shorter series and publicized it as much as possible. The Video and Film Review series runs for ten weeks during the summer, again on Sunday night at 11 p.m. (one of the least popular viewing times). It's really gotten quite a good response, although unfortunately they're stopping it this year. All my tapes since 1973 have been broadcast on public television in the States, mainly Channel 13 in New York.

I don't want to work specifically for broadcast, however, and I've been criticized on that point by the producers at Channel 13. They say: "You should really acknowledge that you're dealing with a mass audience; you can't hold these shots on the screen for two or three minutes," and so on. But I don't believe in stylistic limitation and the dominance of packaging in broadcast TV. I think that there are some universal elements, in the sense that all human beings have two eyes, two ears, and a brain, they have the same machinery—even if a given culture drastically determines consciousness and even perception. We all share the same basic conditions of life—birth, growth, death—and can even have the same aspirations. This has been my model for thinking about the mass media and I have tried to get in touch with that part of everyone. So, even though I haven't been making works specifically for broadcast, I do feel I'm making work for a larger number of people than the specialized audience of the art world.

Bellour: Speaking of which, could you talk a little about this recent series of spots you did, to which you gave the very ambiguous title Reverse Television? It seems to be directly connected with this audience problem.

Viola: That's true. I think it's like my videotape Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House, which is also related to that problem because it makes directly visible the nature of the viewing experience. It's very long and difficult to watch, people squirm in their seats; it's a sort of confrontation.

Bellour: An appeal to people, to spectators.

Viola: Yes. Reverse Television is related even more to that and is the only piece I have done specifically for broadcast. The idea was to use the space between programs where publicity would normally be. In American public TV there are no commercials, so they tend to publicize themselves: "At eight o'clock, watch this show," etc. It still has the feeling of a timed, rhythmic device that breaks up the programs, frames them, and leads the viewer to the next one. So it's like what's known in computer terminology as "down time." Down time is
the space between the programs; that's what makes the commercials so powerful—once again that figure/ground relationship. I look at my father watching TV; as soon as the show is over, he relaxes. And just when he's the most relaxed—boom, the ad comes on. It goes right in. It's really smart.

I'm interested in that space and also in the idea of broadcast scheduling as a sort of field to be used, so that the process of scheduling becomes related to editing. It's just like montage. Each shot follows the other, but it takes two weeks instead of five minutes for them all to complete themselves. I call this a television "micro-series." For Reverse Television, I went around to about forty people in the Boston area; I went right into their homes, and had them sit in the most comfortable chair in their living room. I framed it so that you could see their whole body and part of the room where they lived. They were just sitting and staring at the camera in silence. When the normal program is over, the publicity comes on and then bang!, there's this image of a person sitting in silence. You hear them breathing because I had the microphone up very loud, you hear cars driving by outside their window, whatever, and the person is just staring at the screen. And then they go off. There is no label, no title, or anything attached to it at all. Then the next hour there is another one. This lasts for a two-week period.

Bellour: Was this the formula which was not accepted by the station?

Viola: Of course. You already mentioned the title, which does in fact have a sort of subversive ring to it; they felt that right away. Television is essentially the art of packaging; everything has to be framed. My piece really had to appear to be from the ground—like that space in the computer, the data field (the ground), which exists only for things (the figure) to happen on. Or the notion that under all of us, there is some kind of continuum. In television I was always fascinated by the fact that at any moment there are millions of people sitting in their own homes individually watching the same image. My piece arose from a very spatial idea, as though there were a sheet over something and every once in a while it parted and revealed the ground or field that's always there underneath. You just see it for an instant and then it's gone.

But the TV people really had problems with the notion and it finally came down to a confrontation with the director of the station, who would not let anything go on without a title. I refused to put a title at the beginning since it would have really destroyed the piece, but was forced to put one at the end. They wanted it to be a whole description of what the piece was, because again you have to describe in words what everyone's seeing. I finally got away with just having my name and the date, which was sort of ridiculous.

Bellour: So it was the signature that isolated it as just the provocation of an artist.
Viola: Yes. I didn’t like that, but it was the only way it could go on the air. Also they couldn’t give me a minute for every hour; they only scheduled the pieces five times a day and they wanted each spot to last just fifteen seconds. For me this was too short, because my idea relied on breaking with the viewer’s expectation, this habituation to television as words. Someone appears on the screen, and people are expecting him or her to talk, and when he doesn’t, people think it’s a mistake, that the announcer forgot to signal someone to start. So, for the first ten or fifteen seconds, you’re grappling with the problem that this person isn’t speaking, and you have to get beyond that point. I think a lot of my work deals with the notion of getting beyond, breaking some sort of expectation or patterning, reaching a point where you have to just give up and reevaluate what something is, and come to it a second time.

Bellour: And one way you try to do this is duration.

Viola: Yes, because thought is a function of time. That’s why Hatsu-Yume, for example, is so long. I really wanted to go beyond desire in that piece, and the same with the portraits I just mentioned. But in television duration is a luxury. Time is money, and when something lasts a long time, those producers just see the dollar signs rolling. That’s why everything is cut quickly as well. In the end we compromised with thirty seconds for each portrait, which for me was still too short.

Bellour: I’d like to talk about another project you have, one involving video disc, and about the video disc phenomenon in general.

Viola: The video disc is the biggest change in moving image technology in the last forty years. It puts the process of editing in the control of the viewer.

Bellour: In what way?

Viola: Literally. When you sit down to play back a video disc, you’re editing. So the whole notion of editing takes on an entirely different meaning. To me it’s part of a development that began with computer editing systems where you have time codes put on the frames and you’re actually writing a computer program or “score” to edit the piece.

Bellour: And what exactly did computer editing change for you, besides the precision factor?

Viola: Previously editing was always a linear process. I don’t mean just laying
shots back to back, but that every cut follows every other cut. The computer taught me that you can finish your tape before you actually edit it.

Bellour: Meaning?

Viola: You do all your rough editing on a lower format system. You write down frame numbers and so on, and then you make your list which becomes the computer program to do your final edit. Of course you have to do it this way because you are an artist with no money and you only have four hours to do an edit in an expensive studio. But for me, conceptually, what happened was that I began to see my pieces as something that could exist all at once, as a whole, rather than being put together bit by bit. Like a word processor: write out the whole text and then make your changes in the software. The final step is printing it out; this is different from writing at the typewriter, where the first step is the printing.

Bellour: And how is all that related to video disc?

Viola: The thing that fascinated me about computer editing was that there was a field or ground which had to exist before the computer could do anything. By entering into the computer the list of shots, you're describing the space the computer works in. On the video disc itself you're laying out programmed information. There are 54,000 frames on each side of a video disc; the way the material is laid out is called the information geography or disc geography.

Now there's no reason why you have to play those 54,000 frames in the order in which they've been recorded. Theoretically, you could play frame number 1, then number 50,000, number 4, number 1700, and so on, at the same frame rate, thirty frames a second in the American standard. That means you can jump anywhere.

Bellour: What kinds of effects do you imagine this can produce?

Viola: As a starting point, let's take a familiar example from film. In standard cinematic language you have three basic shots: long shot, medium, and close-up. The process of editing reconstructs the illusion of "real time" from these separate parts, as if you're jumping from these different spatial points in the room in step with the real time in the scene. With the video disc, it's possible to record all of those different camera positions at once and always have them there. You could record more—ten, twenty, a hundred. It's like an audio recording if you have a ten-track audio recorder: ten microphones in the room, ten people talking. And when you play it back you have those ten microphone
positions all playing back in real time. It’s possible to jump over to any one you want while the tape is rolling.

Bellour: So this is your video disc project . . .

Viola: One of them. It’s the idea of having parallel camera points of view, in terms of traditional cinema. So, for example, if you want to watch a conversation from across the room for the whole time as a long shot, you can; or if you want to go right in toward the guy who is talking, you can do that, too. The important idea is that the other points of view still exist, whereas in cinema they’re on the editing room floor. With the video disc, the process of viewing becomes editing.

This is why the video disc is a newly emerging art form. It’s the art of interactivity. One of the areas where we really need new skills is in deciding what our scheme for interactivity is. That’s the whole notion of “menus.”

Bellour: It’s difficult if you have 54,000 frames.

Viola: It’s incredible. It becomes more like a book than a movie. With a book you have a sense of the whole before you actually get into it—there is the physical book in your hand, as well as the table of contents and index. With the disc, the trick is to have a menu or some sort of metadescription to present what’s going on to the viewer. It’s all there, but the viewer has to know what to access, to know it’s possible to go to another camera point of view and so on. The question is, how do you mechanically, physically, and conceptually work out this process of interaction so as to make it as natural as possible?

Bellour: Have you found a way to work this out for your own project?

Viola: No, that’s part of my excitement in doing it. I really think there are better ways than what’s been tried up til now. Rather than just putting a list of words on the screen, saying number one is such-and-such and pushing number one you can go there, etc., I’m looking for ways to make it arise naturally out of the images themselves. Just the images telling you what to do, coupled with the viewer’s desire. Part of the work of composing the piece becomes composing for this other level. To be able to build pieces from within a piece, so that you and I could sit down at the same disc and see completely different things—there would be parts I would see that you would never even reach. It becomes a lot more like exploring a territory, and that’s why I think the whole process of recording is becoming a lot more like mapping.

Bellour: You mean now that computers are involved in the process?
Viola: Yes. The video disc actually represents the merger of two of the most powerful media in this century—video (and by proximity cinema) and the computer. The computer is becoming more and more integrated into all these different areas. As Youngblood puts it, the computer will contain and become all media, all the other individual systems that we have. They will retain their individuality but all of them, including photography, cinema, and writing, will have as their base some digital code. In that sense the notion of translating takes on tremendously new possibilities, because everything is written in the same code.

Computer graphics will ultimately replace what we now call camera images. I'm waiting for that, I think we'll be able to see that in our lifetime. The end of the camera! I think I'm going to buy a big bottle of champagne while I'm in Paris and save it for that day—ten, twenty, thirty years from now—when the camera will end. I'll pop the cork, not to celebrate a demise, but because it's going to be one of the major historical shifts in imagery. I think it could be compared to the development of illusionistic Renaissance perspective in art.

Bellour: And what makes it so revolutionary for you?

Viola: From the camera obscura onward, the prerequisite of all images has been light, and that's going to end. We will soon be able to make complex, realistic images without relying on light, and once you have an image which does not use light as its primary source material, then you're in the domain of conceptual space.

Bellour: Yes, but is it really different for the one who's seeing the image, since in either case he/she is seeing the same effect of light?

Viola: The important difference is in the process of making the image. The real nature of a situation is not the visual image, but the information model of objects and space that the brain creates from visual impressions. The image is just the source, the input. Now, if you're talking about creating entire images that don't rely on light anymore, about building images from the point of view of conceptual space, then the mapping aspect comes out again. For example, the last thing in the process of making a three-dimensional computer graphic image is positioning the point of view.

Bellour: Which in a camera is the first step.

Viola: Exactly. So if you wanted to make a computer graphic image of this room, you wouldn't take a camera and shoot it; you'd measure everything in centimeters, or in millimeters, where all the objects are. Then you'd enter that into the computer and you'd have the room.
Bellour: And what happens to the point of view?

Viola: The room is in there, everything—the bottom of the table, the top of the table, all your books—and it's not an image, it's an informational pattern. Then the last thing you say is: now I want the point of view. Even in computer graphics they call it "the camera," even though it doesn't exist. Like the movie Tron that Walt Disney Studios produced a few years ago. A terrible movie, but it was fascinating to see traditional cinematic camera gestures—that sort of grand, sweeping panoramic shot and the crane shot—transposed into this computer program which didn't have to do that at all. But they still did it! Incredible! Human conventions, not technology, are always the limiting factor. But getting back to the example of this room, to get an image you say: OK, let's put the point of view one meter from wall A and two meters from wall B, and half a meter high, aiming in this direction, etc., describing it all mathematically. Then lenses become mathematical algorithms, equations. Of course, that's how they originally make lenses, with the mathematics of optics. What happens in a computer, then, is that the mathematics of optics doesn't describe the building of a physical object called the lens, but the behavior of light in that space. So a wide angle lens becomes a certain equation, and once you have the point of view, you type in that equation and there it is. The laws of optics are entered into the computer data base first, the images of objects come later.

Bellour: But the computer images we see today are so simple and primitive—like cartoons.

Viola: Yes, of course, but the next generation of computers will produce images that are equal to camera images. The camera, today, still remains the best way of generating "realistic" images. And it will continue to be so for a long time. But once the computers come up to a very high level of resolution and information content in the image, you won't be able to tell the difference. And at that point it won't matter. The whole notion of what a camera physically is might change, too.

Bellour: For example?

Viola: You could derive enough information from this room to make a fairly decent computer graphic image from sonar, you know. That's what submarines do: they send out sound waves which bounce off objects, come back, and create a sound impression. You could put a sonar "camera" here and it would send out waves all over the room, hit all the objects, and come back and be registered. That's not a visual recording process at all, it's acoustic, sound mapping. That's how they map the ocean floor and it could be a perfectly valid way of creating an image of this room with a computer.
Bellour: I noticed, in one of your articles on this whole issue of evolving technology, that you made many references to Oriental culture. Also, the presence of Eastern imagery and ideas is very strong in many of your tapes. Could you say something about the connection you see there?

Viola: I've been realizing that there is a strong link, or a potential link, between what's happening with technology now and the artistic traditions of the past in Oriental culture. Or even the traditions of Western culture before the Renaissance, when the East and the West were really connected in terms of cultural patterns. Oddly enough, one of the main breaking points between them was the whole restructuring of the image through perspective—Brunelleschi and the formulation of illusionistic space. I think that in a funny way this breaking away from the light basis of images will lead back to certain aspects of the older tradition, to the way that images were created in the Middle Ages in Europe, and still are in the East. The image is not considered to be a frozen moment or an arrested action or an effect of light or anything like that. It's really conceived as existing within the spectator. The image is a projection of the viewer and the whole point is the interaction of the viewer and the image. The image itself becomes related more to a diagram. A mandala, for example, is really a diagrammatic or schematic representation of a larger system, not necessarily the depiction of how an object appears to the eye . . .

Bellour: To the outside eye . . .

Viola: Yes, that's really fundamental. And I see the technology moving us toward building objects from the inside out rather than from the outside in.

Bellour: So—if I understand correctly—you find in the technology itself, first, a return to a whole series of human traditions, and second, a sort of universal link.

Viola: Yes, I think it is a historical necessity that at this time we have been discovering so much more about the past. We are moving into the past as well as into the future. It's an organic progression, like the way a tree grows—a tree doesn't grow from bottom to top, becoming taller. It radiates out from the center, expanding concentrically. Slice a cross section and you see concentric circles. That's how a person grows.

Technologically, I can see, for example, the way video reached back to touch painting once artists made the breakthrough and developed the ability to manipulate line and color electronically. This was the first stage—the first video images made without a camera. Soon images will be formed out of a system of logic, almost like a form of philosophy—a way of describing an object based on mathematical codes and principles rather than freezing its light waves in time. This is the intrinsic reality of objects in traditional Asian art.

Bellour: So, at that level, it becomes almost essential for any artist who wants to manipulate images in the future to have a deep technological knowledge.

Viola: Yes, but I think that has always been true, in the same way that if you want to be a good pianist, you need to know the mechanics of your piano in order to play it. That's mandatory. I think that this has been a problem in video because the technology is expensive and exclusive. It's not always accessible, and there's a big gap now which has developed between high and low technology. A piece like Hatsu-Yume, for example, which was done at Sony in Japan, could never have been done with most of the video systems that were available to me in the States. Economics has to be taken into account whenever we discuss
video because it's a huge factor. It's like the piano—unless you spend a lot of
time with the medium, you're still fumbling around with the individual notes,
you're not really thinking about music.

Bellour: Yes, but in this case the object itself is so phenomenally complex.

Viola: For us, yes, but just watch the young kids playing computer games. The
kind of skills that we need today—not only to make images with video, but
really to do many day-to-day things—have less and less to do with the skills
we're born with. From birth our whole system functions on a level of manipula-
tion and this structures all our thought processes—it's hand to mouth to eye.
Our thoughts are based on this physical relation to reality, like that of burning
your hand in the fire or working with some clay. We’ve all developed a very high level of physical intelligence. But working with a computer today is so incredibly tedious, because at the moment it’s still an intellectual tool, not an intellectual-physical tool. Mind and body become separated. If you want to make something red, you type M-A-K-E R-E-D, because the computer abstracts everything to the level of the written word symbols. But if you have a red pen or a red brush you just go pffiff. . . . That’s such a direct, instantly understandable experience. Instead of pushing the edit button and typing in frame numbers, I would much rather move an object with my hand. That’s what they mean when they say “user-friendly”: making the computer more integrated into people’s natural tendency. As time goes on, computers are becoming less intellectual and more physical. This is the evolution of technology. The image I get is more like a monkey manipulating some kind of tool.

Bellour: So in a way we’ve come back to those first tapes you made: for example, the experience of physically scraping the camera back and forth along a hallway wall.

Viola: Yes, it’s always a circle.

Postscript: Since the interview, Bill Viola wrote to me, “I just received a grant from the American Film Institute to do a new tape about animals. I’m trying to become artist-in-residence at the San Diego Zoo.”


Bellour wishes to thank Lisa Kruger without whose aid this English version of the text would not have been possible.