

# WHISPERS AND CRIES: Bill Viola At AFI

## REVIEW/ Hunter Drohojowska

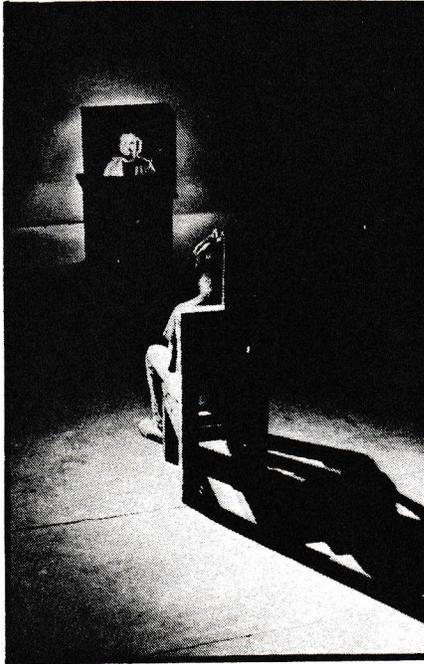


Photo: Kira Perov

*Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House*, video installation by Bill Viola at the National Video Festival, AFI Campus, Los Angeles, June 24-27, 1982.

This remarkable work effectively sets television's seductive capacity for mind control in opposition to man's ultimate ability to control his own mind. The viewer is bombarded with information from the television only to be returned repeatedly to a state of self contemplation. The work is structured technically to reinforce its conceptual implications. The viewer experiences a chattering dialogue of voices from outside and inside the mind. To take part requires an act of deliberation. One must place oneself "inside" or remain "outside" the piece, both mentally and physically.

A dark concrete room contains a high-backed wooden chair facing a video monitor where Viola's image looms large. The spartan arrangement is reminiscent of an interrogation cell. When one sits in the chair, one realizes that the t.v. picture duplicates the viewer's situation, for the artist is sitting in the same chair in the same room.

Donning a pair of headphones attached to the top of the chair, one actively enters the piece. The initial sounds heard are soft and rhythmic, the sounds of Viola's body functions recorded through a pair of tiny microphones placed in the artist's ears. As one listens to the swallows, stomach rumbles, and steady breathing, one also watches Viola's mute face as it twitches, blinks and occasionally yawns. One becomes locked in Viola's gaze, not only identifying but actually becoming unified with the image. This occurs both psychologically and physiologically, making it uncomfortably difficult to swallow or breathe except in tandem with the artist.

The tape is one hour of unedited footage, originally performed live, so one watches the fatigue and deterioration as the artist struggles to retain concentration. Whether viewing for a few minutes or for the entire piece, the viewer is involved in the temporal structure as experienced by the artist, which further contributes to the sense of identification. In these ways, the separation between art and viewer is denied, a marked contrast to the typical video-viewing situation.

The installation's effectiveness as an almost hypnotic mind control initially obliterates the viewer's awareness of a second sound track. This busy buzz of whispering hectic voices is quietly scrambled in a tone that frustrates the ability to make out a single statement. The whispers slowly graduate in volume until all of one's attention is absorbed in trying to extract a meaning and one is drawn to the limit of patience. At that precise moment, an unidentifiable figure would swiftly approach Viola from behind and strike him on the head with a stick. The blow registers in the microphones in his ears, forcing the volume level of the audiotape over the limit of "0 VU," and passing through an audio "gate" to be amplified as a violently loud metallic "gong." The blast of sound emits from a pair of speakers placed high up at diagonally opposed corners of the room. This is the only time the sound from "inside" the work is forced through to the outside. Others viewing the installation would *only* hear these repeated "gongs." Although the sound doesn't come through the headphones, it

could be heard and each blow was startling to the viewer, as well as to Viola himself, who never knew when to expect the next strike from behind. The conditioning is such that viewers would be looking behind them in nervous anticipation of the next hit, even though the action was localized on the monitor.

After each blow, the whispers quieted and again attention returned to Viola's body sounds, when the whole process would start again. This cycle of whispers climaxing in a deafening gong continues for the duration of the one-hour tape.

Throughout the tape, the viewer's mind undergoes an initial saturation of information from the outside that is so intense, the mind actually loses control and concentration, until the gong. Symbolically and literally, the loud gong and the clearing of noise from the mind represents a reassertion of control. The chattering voices are hushed and the mind concentrates on the deep silence from which ideas are allowed to reveal themselves.

Viola, who has spent considerable time in the Far East, has borrowed an ancient practice of Zen Buddhism here. When novice monks learn to meditate, if the Master suspects that they are distracted in "thought," as opposed to "non-thought," they receive a sharp rap on the head with a stick. This abrupt direction reminds them to return their attention to an inner quiet where the whispers have subsided. In other words, the subject is to gain control of the mind, rather than to be mind-controlled. In Zen Buddhism, meditation, and this plateau of controlled consciousness, is meant to lead to a spiritual enlightenment.

Within the subtle structure of his installation Viola has employed superimposition, one of the earliest of video's technical achievements; and mind control, one of the earliest of television's technical achievements. Simultaneously, the artist has indicated that by distancing oneself from such stimulation, one "will come to inhabit (one's) own self, forming a feedback loop." It's a process of going in and out of consciousness. As Viola notes in the exhibition's catalogue "There are always reasons to go knocking at empty houses."