

Introduction to an exhibition at two locations

Kathleen Bühler

The title of *Bill Viola: Passions* has been given to an exhibition of nine videos at the Kunstmuseum Bern and at the Cathedral of Berne by this renowned American artist, presenting an exemplary cross section of his work to date. Whereas the solo exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris (from March 5 to July 21, 2014) takes a broad look at the more recent art of the 63-year-old image wizard, the Kunstmuseum Bern has taken the opportunity of giving its audience profound insights into individual aspects of Bill Viola's work.

Born in 1951 in New York, Bill Viola is generally seen as one of the current leading international representatives of video art. For over forty years he has been working with video tapes, video installations, sound environments, electronic music performances, and TV productions. His works have been presented over the entire world, he has received many awards for his art, and in 1995 he represented the United States at the Venice Biennial. Martin Brauen and Kathleen Bühler are the curators of the exhibition, which is showing at both the Kunstmuseum Bern and the Cathedral of Berne. It comprises a selection of works from 1977 to 2008 and palpably illustrates Viola's ever-growing interest in existential issues. While the Cathedral of Berne showcases the more recent videos addressing spiritual content, the Kunstmuseum Bern is presenting early works of the artist from its collection with a focus on theoretical questions related to perception and video art.

Like many other artists during the 1970s and 1980s, Viola too investigated disparities existing between film representation and sensory perception, scrutinizing how the medium affects our awareness and experience of time. Since the 1990s we can trace how Viola's art began to increasingly examine universal human experience and spiritual questions. This may seem an exceptional interest for contemporary art, but it is in fact the logical consequence of Viola's exploration of time perception. Every investigation of temporal experience leads, sooner or later, to reflection on mortality. In addressing this topic, Bill Viola draws on the great masterpieces of Western painting that took up the topic of transience of life. Thematically he engages with birth, memory, death, as well as different states of consciousness. In doing so he appeals to the opinions of mystics and thinkers from miscellaneous cultures and religions, in the knowledge that people, deep down, are driven by similar existential issues regardless of their culture, histories, or religion.

The very impressive building of the Cathedral of Berne provides the stage for an intensive and sensitive encounter between Bill Viola's lyrical short videos and traditional Christian art in stained glass windows and sculptures. But the American artist certainly does not just allude to Christian motifs and reproduce them with their customary signification. His video sequences are unpretentious representations of worldly experiences, which in dialogic confrontation and within a religious context reveal profound insights into life and human nature. Thus, in *Three Women* (2008), shots of three females of different ages appear in succession—a mother with two daughters—underscoring the cyclic nature of the progression of human generations. In turn, each of the women steps out from behind a curtain of water into the light, to retreat back later into the dark in the same sequence.

It is just as if each generation hands off the baton to the next and so on. In *Tempest (Study for the Raft)*, (2005) we can follow the actions of a group of people who have unexpectedly come under fire. Masses of water suddenly surge in, forcing a medley of individuals to find safety within the group. Conceived after 9/11, this artwork can be read as metaphorical description of what people experienced subsequent to the attacks targeting the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York. Bill Viola's representations bring us closer to the heart of spiritual experience as they partake in a kind of dialogue with traditional Christian images of threat and suffering in the Cathedral of Berne, such as in the Isaiah Window flanking the aisle or in the Pietà standing in the Bubenberg Chapel. His videos present updates of timeless sensations and emotions that in traditional Christian art have become incomprehensible for many. The encounter between the genres of visual art at the Cathedral of Berne provides a unique opportunity:

KUNSTMUSEUM BERN

MUSÉE DES BEAUX-ARTS DE BERNE
MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS BERNE

HODLERSTRASSE 8–12 CH-3000 BERN 7
T +41 31 328 09 44 F +41 31 328 09 55

INFO@KUNSTMUSEUMBERN.CH WWW.KUNSTMUSEUMBERN.CH

MEDIEN-SERVICE

SERVICE DE PRESSE / PRESS OFFICE
T +41 31 328 09 19/44

PRESS@KUNSTMUSEUMBERN.CH

while it shows how contemporary art probes a long tradition of figural representation and the spiritual dimensions of human life, it simultaneously makes this tradition accessible again to a modern audience and rejuvenates it by introducing new narratives. The exhibition title's reference to the Passion—as the archetype of Christian experience—not only alludes to the opening of the show taking place at Lent but also to the fact that humanity first becomes manifest when having to deal with pain and suffering. Every religion and civilization finds its own answers to this immutable challenge, and that is why the word "passion" is written in the plural form and not the singular in the exhibition title.

As a video-art pioneer, Viola made a significant contribution toward establishing it as a key medium of contemporary art, expanding its scope tremendously in regard to both technology and content. The Kunstmuseum Bern very fortunately purchased works by Viola already in the 1990s and thus firmly secured this pioneer of video art in its collection. From its rich fund of holdings, the Kunstmuseum Bern is augmenting the selection of artworks at the Cathedral of Berne, palpably illustrating how content and style developed in Bill Viola's early work through to his most recent art. Both stops of the show together present a unique encounter—for the first time in Switzerland since the retrospective 1993 in Lausanne—with the extensive oeuvre of this American artist.

Such a large undertaking alongside the usual museum and church routine was only possible through the dedicated commitment of all participants. Martin Brauen—ethnologist and former head curator of the Rubin Museum of Art in New York—had the brilliant idea of organizing a presentation of works in the Cathedral of Berne. And he found an enthusiastic accomplice in me. I decided that this would be also a wonderful opportunity of finally being able to again show the works we have in the collection at the Kunstmuseum Bern. Further catalysts for the project were also Daniel Eicher (†) and his close associate Christian Beck (ABC-Verlag, Schönbühl), who actively supported us from the very beginning. It goes without saying that we are deeply indebted to our contacts at the Cathedral of Berne in the person of Verena Furrer (management commission) and manager Felix Gerber for their motivation and willingness to contribute to the success of the project. To them we would like to voice our sincerest thanks. We would also like to thank our sponsors for their generous support in funding the enterprise and for their enthusiasm for the venture of organizing an exhibition outside the walls of the Kunstmuseum Bern: they include the Burgergemeinde Bern, the GegenwART Foundation, the Rudolf and Ursula Streit Foundation, Berne, the Pro Scientia et Arte Foundation, Die Mobiliar, as well as the other beneficiaries who do not wish to be mentioned by name.

We would like to express our warmest gratitude to our team at the Kunstmuseum Bern, especially Sarah Merten (assistant, Contemporary Art) and Brigit Bucher (Corporate Public Relations), Marie Louise Suter for the design and layout of the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, as well as to the entire staff of our Department of Communication headed by Ruth Gilgen. And I must likewise voice my deepest thanks to my colleague Magdalena Schindler, who, together with the team at the Cathedral of Berne, organized the accompanying program and took on the complicated task of coordinating it. The company 235 Media Köln, together with the Kunstmuseum's own team of technicians (Mike Carol, Roman Studer, Raphael Frey, Andres Meschter), commendably mastered the technical challenges of the enterprise, headed by René Wochner together with our video conservator Agathe Jarczyk. Bobby Jablonski from Bill Viola Studio has been our guarantor for the faultless presentation of the artworks. She thoroughly deserves our plaudits for her tenacity and patience—especially in consideration of the simultaneous extensive preparations for the exhibition at the Grand Palais. We would also like to thank Christen Sperry-Garcia, curatorial assistant at Bill Viola Studio, for her help. And ultimately we must thank the artist Bill Viola and his life partner and collaborator Kira Perov for their support, their concern, and their willingness to honor our exhibition with their presence and make it an unforgettable experience.

KUNSTMUSEUM BERNMUSÉE DES BEAUX-ARTS DE BERNE
MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS BERNE

HODLERSTRASSE 8–12 CH-3000 BERN 7

T +41 31 328 09 44 F +41 31 328 09 55

INFO@KUNSTMUSEUMBERN.CH WWW.KUNSTMUSEUMBERN.CH

MEDIEN-SERVICE**SERVICE DE PRESSE / PRESS OFFICE**

T +41 31 328 09 19/44

PRESS@KUNSTMUSEUMBERN.CH