

## A Close Look at Human Emotions: Bill Viola at the Kunsthalle Bremen

Bill Viola is one of the most renowned video artists of our times. On the occasion of NORD/LB's *Kunstpreis 2005* awarding, the Kunsthalle Bremen is presenting a significant selection of his works.

The artist has always concentrated on forms of expressing basic emotional states. He has reflected deep passions or vital events such as birth or death in often large-format video productions. The fascination of the selected pictures now on exhibition at the Kunsthalle Bremen emanates from their impressive clarity. Many of them allude to medieval or Renaissance paintings.

### Ascension (2000)

The stillness of an underwater landscape is broken when a fully clothed man suddenly plunges into the water from above. Accompanied by a roar of sound and a luminous explosion of bubbles and turbulence, he slowly sinks with arms outstretched, his body limp and motionless. Shafts of light undulate as streams of glowing bubbles ascend to the disturbed surface. Midway down, the man's descent slows and finally stops, and his body remains suspended in space. Slowly he begins to rise again, eventually reaching the surface. There, air bubbles emerge from his mouth and he begins his involuntary descent again. This time he sinks into the depths and his body soon disappears into the darkness below the edge of the frame, allowing the landscape to return to its undisturbed state.

### Surrender (2001)

Surrender is a diptych composed of two flat panel screens mounted to the wall in a vertical configuration, one over the other. The image of a man and a woman appear separately on each panel, and their positions alternate from upper to lower screen with each repetition of the playback cycle. The figures are viewed cut off at the waist, with the figure on the lower screen being shown upside-down, suggesting a mirror reflection of the upper image.

The man and woman perform three synchronized prostrations of increasing emotional intensity and duration. At first, this appears to bring them physically closer to each other as if to embrace or kiss. However, their actions reveal the presence of water surface below at the edge of the screen, and they physically penetrate this surface face-first. As they emerge, their sorrow and anguish appear to increase along with the undulating disturbances on the surface of the water that they have caused. When the images of their bodies themselves begin to break up into rippling wavering forms, it becomes apparent that we have been looking at

their reflections on the surface of water all along, not the actual bodies. This "image of an image" becomes more violent and distorted each time they enter the water, until finally their extreme emotional and physical intensity peaks and their visual forms disintegrate into abstract patterns of pure light and color.

### Emergence (2002)

Two women are sitting on either side of a marble cistern in a small courtyard. They wait patiently in silence, only occasionally acknowledging each other's presence. Time becomes suspended and indeterminate, the purpose and destination of their actions unknown. Their vigil is suddenly interrupted by a cistern. She then watches in disbelief as a young man's head appears, and then his body rises up, spilling water over the sides and out onto the cistern's base and the courtyard floor.

The cascading water catches the older woman's attention, and she turns to witness the miracle. She stands up, drawn by the young man's rising presence. The younger woman grasps his arm and caresses it like a long lost lover. When the young man's pale body reaches its fullest extension he totters and falls. The older woman catches him in her arms and, with the help of the younger woman, they struggle to gently lower him to the ground. Lying prone and lifeless, he is covered by a sheet. Cradling his head in her lap, the older woman finally breaks down in tears as the younger woman, overcome with emotion, embraces his body for the last time.

### Observance (2002)

A steady stream of people slowly moves forward towards our view. One by one they pause at the head of the line, overcome with emotion. Their gaze is fixed on an unknown object just out of sight below the edge of frame. An air of solemnity and sorrow pervades the scene. Individuals sometimes touch each other gently or exchange brief glances as they pass. Couples comfort one another in their shared grief. All are unified by their common desire to reach the front of the line and make contact with what is there. Once their solitary moment is fulfilled, they move to the back of the line to make way for the others.

Kindly supported by NORD/LB.

### **Bill Viola - *Video***

16 April to 27 August 2006  
Kunsthalle Bremen

**Lecture with Bill Viola: 24 June 2006, 6 p.m.**

**Award of the prize: 25 June 2006, 11.30 a.m.**

**Further information:**

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