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HOW VIDEO BECAME ART: BILL VIOLA AND DAVID ROSS RETURN TO THE EVERSON MUSEUM

“Will we have time to talk about *The Passions*?” asks Bill Viola. It’s not surprising that we didn’t hear it at the time, occupied as we were, already several minutes into the fourth video clip that Bill Viola would show that evening during “A Conversation with Bill Viola and David A. Ross.” But it’s there, unmistakably, a whispered exchange picked up by their mics and resurrected at the tail end of the recording. Conducted last October before an overflow audience in the Everson Museum’s Hosmer Auditorium, the event on stage between these two friends and collaborators of four decades had already run well over an hour. “I think we should maybe stop after this,” answered Ross.

There was still a reception ahead and, after that, a ten o’clock dinner at the home of Everson director Steven Kern. Outside, projected onto the museum’s north façade, whose size is almost that of an average IMAX screen, Viola’s *The Quintet of the Astonished* (2000) had been up for two weeks—Kern’s first cell phone photos, excitedly posted on Face Book, had drawn comments from around the country in minutes.

Quintet is the first work in *The Passions* series, which grew out of Viola’s year-long residency in 1998 at the J. Paul Getty Museum’s Research Institute in Los Angeles, during which he participated in a project probing the way visual art has depicted emotions since medieval times. Putting up the monumental *Quintet* inaugurated the Everson as the third participating site of the outdoor Urban Video Project (UVP) and was the most overt step announcing that the museum which had, in 1971, hired the first video curator anywhere—David Ross, who in turn hired a young Bill Viola as his “AV guy”—was back on the video playing field. A grant from the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA), first announced in December 2010, has begun the quieter, long-gestating project of more than a decade to catalogue and restore the museum’s video collection. Fittingly, the first seven tapes sent out were early Violas; one of these played in the sculpture court during the reception. And the next day Viola would receive the George Arents Award, the highest alumni honor that Syracuse University bestows.⁽¹⁾



Photo: Kira Perov. Courtesy of Light Work, used with permission.

BILL VIOLA, *The Quintet of the Astonished* (2000), video installation. Performers: John Malpede, Weba Garretson, Tom Fitzpatrick, John Fleck, Dan Gerrity.

Meanwhile, the eight-minute-long *Three Women* (2008) loomed in the darkness, a breath-stopping rendition in extreme slow motion of three figures who cross a shimmering barrier of water and light from, presumably, death into life and back again. *Three Women* is part of *Transfigurations*, a set of thirteen video installations that itself grew out of *Ocean Without a Shore*, Viola's offering for the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007. *Ocean* was presented in a 15th-century private Venetian chapel, the Church of San Gallo, on three plasma screens set on the original stone altars—already traditionally conceived, Viola noted, as “portals” to another dimension—depicting figures crossing a similar watery threshold and returning.

Viola lost both parents in the decade of the 1990s, and has subsequently said he sensed the presence of the dead in Venice, both in the chapel and the city, especially when alone. He took the work's title from the writings of Sufi mystic Ibu al'Arabi (“The Self is an ocean without a shore...”) and also cited Senegalese poet and storyteller Birago Diop's haunting work, “The dead are never gone.”

...they're in the breast of a woman,
they're in the crying of a child,
in the flaming torch.
The dead are not in the earth:
they're in the dying fire,
the weeping grasses,
whimpering rocks,
they're in the forest, they're in the house,
the dead are not dead.

Viola achieved his effects in the *Ocean* and *Transfigurations* series by using both a twenty-five year-old black-and-white analogue security surveillance camera for “there” (behind the clear sheet of water that we only see as it is breached) and high-definition color video for “here.” After the Biennale, Viola revisited remaining material he’d shot for *Ocean* and decided to use more of it with some differences in treatment and editing.⁽²⁾

The central question of the Getty residency was “how the extremes in emotion—in which the ability to reflect is actually lost—can be represented.” In approach, *The Passions* series has roots in Viola’s *The Greeting* (which also employed costumed actors and referenced a 16th century Italian painting), one of the installations that he created for his first Venice Biennale in 1995 (the same year he received his honorary doctorate from Syracuse University). Since 1973 Viola has sometimes used slow motion and time lapse and in 1992 he began using high speed 35 millimeter film in some projects; for *The Greeting* he combined the two. Shooting an initial take of just 45 seconds on the high speed film allowed him to stretch the duration without distortion to about ten minutes and then transfer that to digital video for final edits. A fortuitous advance in technology further altered the course of *The Passions* and expanded Viola’s visual vocabulary. In 1998 video engineer Tim Piglin introduced Viola to the new generation of LCD flat-panel display screens, which were modified especially for *The Passions* project.

Now, previously Viola had often created physically enveloping installations, sometimes with multiple projections of large images combined with sound that, in his words, “washed over your body” to achieve

“immersion.” (One look inside of the church at Assisi with the Giotto frescos that Viola so admired and it’s easy to grasp how much his large-scale installations resemble Italian churches of that era, with their similarly enveloping frescoes covering walls and ceilings.) It’s neither unusual nor new that some artists aim to provoke an experience of joined or merging senses—synaesthesia—and Viola has also long explored corresponding underlying unities among art forms themselves. In essays such as “The Sound of One Line Scanning” (1986), which he begins by discussing the acoustic properties of sacred architecture, some of Viola’s most provoking early explorations had to do with his insight that the video image—whose constantly moving pixels may only provide the illusion of being still—is actually more akin to sound waves (and to radio broadcasting) than to cinema, whose moving images are the result of another illusion, that created by viewing rapidly moving still photographs⁽³⁾.

Viola’s interest in the technologies of both perception and video—and his numerous projects having to do with music—lay in making art that would enter the viewer’s whole body. (For instance, he told me—something he’s often said elsewhere—that instead of imagining his audience as a culture or a community, “I think of one human being who is going to take into themselves, through the portals we’ve been given—what the Taoists called ‘the five gates,’ all the orifices of the body—that is the destination of my work.”)

The new LCD screens Piglin showed him liberated Viola in several ways. In *The Passions* catalogue, he describes their image as having such brightness, detail, softness and photographic depth that now the quality of the image—and not simply its scale—could achieve the same kind of immersion he was after. He didn’t stop making large installations—some of the most powerful and monumental have come since—but he had greater choice about size and presentation.

As part of the Getty residency, Viola was looking at late medieval and early Renaissance devotional art, some of which had particular innovations in format because of the society of the times. In a June 2002 conversation recorded for *The Passions* catalogue, Viola told the art historian Hans Belting (who has written extensively about the religious icon as image), that by the mid-15th century artists were responding to the need for “more portable art” with small hinged devotional paintings and altarpieces that folded and could be latched shut.

“When you got to your inn, you would open it and set it up on your table and say your prayers,” says Viola of such portable devotional art. “It was like a laptop computer, basically.”

The LCD screens—about the size of a large art book when Viola first saw them—prompted another link between eras. Together they inspired a number of *The Passions* pieces that are presented as hinged diptychs and as predellas (sequences of small narrative panels, such the five panels that comprise *Catherine’s Room*). Many of *The Passions* pieces look more painting-like; Viola’s project notes also include his realization that some of the Getty paintings he studied really depicted an arrested instant of movement. Thus did painting and video each take a step closer together, nudged by his synthesizing eye.

Viola’s comments to Belting about the method of those painters are also marvelously instructive about how his own slow-motion images, so revelatory of usually overlooked nuances of gesture and expression, may evoke those painters’ quest to look beneath the surface of everyday objects.

“One of the things that the camera taught me was to see the world... in its metaphoric, symbolic state,” he goes on. “If you are a painter working in the tradition of the optical image, as the old masters were, then because of the demands of hand-rendering that world in all its meticulous detail, you had to take the time to linger over and ponder each object. This, plus the dominance of religious and spiritual realities in daily life, allowed these artists to see through the material surface of the object to the symbolic layers underneath... Also, if I hadn’t been studying the traditions of the poets and mystics at the time I started with video, I don’t think I could have made as much progress. These individuals gave me a language to understand what I was really seeing... If you get caught by the surface, then you stay on the surface.”

In the Everson talk, Viola elaborated on how the 13th century Persian mystic and poet Jallaludin Rumi, long his mainstay and “supreme source of inspiration,” reinforced what he learned from the old masters.

“He had a way of talking in metaphors about the world—everything he saw was a metaphor, every single object, every single thing was a portal to go to some much deeper place. And that gave me a model of making video with my camera that I never realized.”

For example, *The Passions’* excellent catalogue illustrates that some of the Getty’s old master works Viola saw were multiple studies of single individuals

and the range of their responses to encounters or transcendent experiences that always occur outside the picture's frame. In this way human emotional response is the entry to the indescribable. Intriguingly, many of us share an enduring familiarity with this method whether we're interested in art history or not. Modern popular cinema has often used the same technique to great effect—think, for example, of the moment of horror in that classic Western, *The Searchers* (1956), when John Wayne's character peers into the burned cabin to find his sister-in-law's mutilated body, shot from inside the cabin so that what we see is Ethan's face and not what he saw.

Viola's explorations in this regard go well beneath the surface of technique. He tells Belting that he was "startled" to discover, while directing the performance artists for the scenes that comprise the series, that what we dismiss as "acting" in conventional movies can be something else.

"I was very uncomfortable at first. When we first did crying, I felt like I was the cause of the very real suffering and anguish I was witnessing. I rushed to comfort her," Viola says of Weba Garretson, the silver-haired woman in *The Quintet of the Astonished*. "It completely overturned my preconceptions about acting, which...I had always classified in the domain of artificiality—the world of theatricality, of conscious public presentation... But here were these very real emotions...I realized that the artificiality I was coming to terms with was not in the emotion itself, but in the context for that emotion—in other words: the story or the plot...So I had a strong desire to get rid of the story, to discard the plot...and just deal with the emotions. I suppose it's similar, in a way, to a painter who wants to go into Red as the experience of pure color, not as part of the pictorial illusion of a rose."

Twenty works came out of the Getty residency. The Getty-organized exhibition titled *The Passions* included twelve of these (plus a more classic Viola, the large, five-channel projection called *Five Angels for the Millennium*). After Los Angeles, the show traveled to London's National Gallery, to Madrid and to Canberra, Australia.

The Quintet of the Astonished (one of four *Quintet* pieces) was a commission from London's National Gallery in 2000 to produce a work based on an older painting in their collection for a group show titled *Encounters*. Viola chose the National Gallery's Hieronymous Bosch painting *Christ Mocked* (c. 1490-1500), in which four figures surround Christ, who, in Viola's words, serenely "looks right out of the picture into our eyes." Viola's experience on viewing the Bosch painting, that Christ seemed to have "found a way

out of the painting”—as if breaking the fourth wall—echoes in his reaction to first seeing *Quintet* footage back from the lab on the flat-screens: “I was so shocked. I felt that I was too close to these people in their most private moments, that there was no image surface, no safe zone, between us—but I couldn’t stop looking.”

But Viola had also seen Andrea Mantegna’s *Adoration of the Magi* (c. 1495–1505) at the Getty. It was on this painting and other later northern Italian work that he based his composition for *Quintet*: half-length figures lit from the upper left against a dark background. It’s not surprisingly that some members of the Syracuse Public Art Commission, when shown a clip of *Quintet* last summer by the Urban Video Project, would think of Caravaggio. There’s been ample attention in the past year to the 400th anniversary of Caravaggio’s death. Viola had work displayed this past January in Naples in honor of Caravaggio and also figures prominently in the January *ARTNews* article, “A Case of Caravaggiomania.” As he tells writer Ann Landi, “The thing I really love is his darkness. The darkness is palpable, like a physical substance. You can feel it in the space the people are in. It’s a kind of organic and ontological force, and that’s really strong for me because video is all about light and dark. It wasn’t until my mother died...that I really understood what these pictures are all about. They’re about life and death and beyond.”

The Everson’s Steven Kern first encountered *The Quintet of the Astonished* in 2003 when he saw *The Passions* exhibition at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. Kern says seeing *The Quintet of the Astonished* was one of those transformative moments that changed the way he looked at the world, that convince him anew each time that we are “hard-wired for the arts and if we don’t appreciate the arts, then we’ve just forgotten.”

“I had one of those moments in the Getty galleries,” Kern told me shortly after *The Quintet of the Astonished* first went up at the Everson. “And I’ve spent much of the last six or seven years trying to figure out how I could get Bill Viola interested in the museums that I was working in.”

Like the larger convergence that Viola’s appearance in Syracuse represents, Kern’s enthusiasm has multiple sources.

“These videos used old masters’ paintings, the power of these paintings, as a springboard to communicate,” Kern said. “And the great thing about the Getty was they were able to show the paintings alongside the videos. Am I a

video historian? No. But I was always interested in bridges, in these periods in media—these eras—that communicate with each other. I’ve done a lot of work with Toulouse-Lautrec, for example, and how lithography, which had been a commercial medium, was then exploited by artists.”

Kern arrived here in the summer of 2008 as the Everson’s new director with an already-formed desire to display moving images on the outside facades, especially next to the north side’s plaza and reflecting pool. This was partially a result his experience at the San Diego Museum of Art, where he launched what became a highly successful outdoor feature film program by pairing Jules Dassin’s 1964 heist movie *Topkapi* with an exhibition inside of treasures from the Ottoman Empire. This included the emerald-encrusted dagger from Istanbul’s Topkapi Museum that Kern says was the real star of both the film and the exhibition. Kern also had a particular goal for architect I.M. Pei’s first art museum, which had captivated him since a 1983 visit to Syracuse.

“And when I first came here as director, I was really interested in curating our building itself as a work of art—curating the exterior spaces just as we do the interior spaces.”

Further, Kern sees a partnership with the Urban Video Project in using that north façade as the perfect fit, given the Everson’s role in the history of art video.

“It was our desire at least a year ago in talking with the UVP partners in the Connective Corridor, with Jeff Hoone of Light Work, Ann Clarke at the University [dean of Visual and Performing Arts], and then the City’s Public Art Commission and others—the County has been very helpful too—that there really be a sense of curation in these UVP pieces. As a pioneer in video as an art, perhaps it’s an overstatement, but we stepped in as, you know, the Lorax. ‘We speak for the trees,’” said Kern, citing Dr. Seuss’ 1971 fable. “Not as a savior or protector, but because the Everson has a responsibility in the community when it comes to video. It’s such an important part of our history that it really can’t go unrepresented. And Bill Viola—I can’t think of anything more successful in articulating collaboration in the community, history of our institution, and a personal desire to see more work by this artist. So everything comes together.”

Finally, Kern relied on the striking experience he’d had at the Getty and his deepening conviction that we are “hard-wired for art.” Kern often cites the work of V.S. Ramachandran, the University of California/San Diego

neuroscientist whose work he has followed in books such as *Phantoms of the Brain* (1999) and, more recently, this year's *The Tell-Tale Brain*.

"The reality is, not everybody loves art in the same way," Kern added. "But as Ramachandran would say, we all respond to pattern, we all respond to rhythm, we all respond to surprise, not because we are human beings who are very clever, but because we're mammals. In the old curatorial days, you would become a specialist very fast. Now there isn't that time. But ultimately—something I don't think you've ever heard me say—the project speaks for itself. There are no inside jokes. I mean, it's good if you know about the old masters, but you don't even need that with *The Quintet of the Astonished*."

"It's like total recall, isn't it?" I asked him. "It's like, come on, you know this! You just have to remember."

"Yes," Kern said after a pause. "Exactly."

As an institution, the Everson Museum has been engaged in its own Act of remembering. In early 2010, the Everson announced that the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) was awarding it one of seven \$25,000 Save America's Treasures grants to preserve or conserve nationally significant collections for the museum's video archive. Due to the last several years of economic turmoil, the money didn't actually come through until the early fall of 2010, when the Everson sent out the first batch of seven videotapes for cleaning and transfer—half of the fourteen Bill Viola tapes in their collection.

Debora Ryan is the Everson's senior curator, originally hired in 2000 to help build the photography collection. But she says one of the first things then-director Sandra Trop asked her to do was "revive" the video collection. Trop was already part of the Everson in the early 1970s when director James Harithas hired David Ross as the first museum video curator. Trop remained there until she became director herself in 1995 after Harithas' successor, Ron Kuchta, left the museum.

Trop had been supportive of video in her previous positions at the museum, and her attention to the Everson's video collection as director during the 90s included a start on cataloguing, restoration and even the first-time accessioning for some works. In October 1998 the Everson was a major partner of *Video History: Making Connections*, a two-day conference held on

campus at Syracuse University that hosted over two hundred fifty people and was billed as a celebration of art video's thirtieth birthday. The conference presented videos from the collections of twenty organizations, including the Everson, and David Ross gave the keynote address, "The Success of the Failure of Video," which has endured as a landmark summarizing statement of video at that juncture.

What Ross called video's "failure to construct a real community to directly communicate with people in their homes" spoke both to early video's debt to television and to how many pioneering video artists saw within their grasp the potential to establish a direct artistic presence through cable TV⁽⁴⁾. However, even as early as 1951, the Argentine-born Lucio Fontana delivered (and had largely authored) the manifesto of the artists' collective Spatial Movement on the subject of using television for experimental art on Italy's RAI television station. (Since this was broadcast live before the advent of video recording, sadly there exists no videotape of that event.) So the move to use this new commercial medium for artistic ends came very quickly indeed. But in 1998, Ross was looking back to see that many US cable companies had to a large extent eventually thwarted that goal in favor of more commercially lucrative programming, and in so doing thrust the development of exhibiting art video back on galleries, museums and universities.

Viola had long shared this perspective. In 1984, his essay "History, Ten Years and the Dreamtime" was included in the exhibition catalogue for *Video: A Retrospective, Long Beach Museum of Art 1974-1984*.

"Right from the start," Viola insisted, "there were at least two different clearly isolated streams" of video practitioners: "the video groups that emerged in the communal context of late sixties politics and individual artists," many of whom began working in other media and art forms before they tried video. Detailing who fell where at some length, along with their early landmark exhibitions and gatherings, Viola noted that museums and university media programs "became the neutral ground" for "the catch-all umbrella of 'video art'" throughout the 70s; by the time he was writing this in 1984, "they have remained the only real showcase for all the diverse work in the field" ⁽⁵⁾.

The promise of direct access to the public through TV was an enormous impetus to early video artists who shared, despite differences in degree, an activist agenda with the politics of the 1960s. Viola returned to this theme

in the Everson talk, recalling the early excitement over the liberation such a prospect represented. And as we shall see, the failure locally to strike a bargain between early Syracuse University student video enthusiasts and the local PBS station, WCNY, to broadcast of student-produced series, is what prompted the student-run University Union to seek a wired campus for its own cable TV. This led to the creation of Synapse Video Center, with its studio in Watson Hall (where Citrus TV remains to this day), its partnership later in the 70s with the Newhouse School's computer editing for video, and its visiting-artist-in-residence program funded by the New York State Council on the Arts. (That AIR program, in fact, brought Viola back to Syracuse in 1976, after a year and a half in Florence, to make *The Space Between the Teeth* in Newhouse's basement). These developments—along with the Everson's video department and a wealth of video activity in central and western New York—made Syracuse such a Mecca for video artists throughout the decade of the 70s.

But in 2000 there was still a great deal for Ryan to do.

"It all had to be digitized," she said. "We had hand-written lists of what we had and each tape could include three, four, five different videos and different artists. Just trying to sort through what we had took about two years. Okay, now we have a list of what we have, what's been conserved, what's transferred, and I have a list to present to David Ross. So we received a small travel grant from the Experimental Television Center, I think in 2004, so that Pam McLaughlin, our education curator, and I went to New York City. David Ross looked at my list and started scribbling all over it. 'This is really important!' 'This is really, really, really important!' 'This is the only copy anywhere!' A lot of them had his name on them and he'd start laughing. He had initiated a lot of interviews of artists too."

Out of that meeting with Ross, Ryan and her colleagues—including Tom Sherman from SU's Transmedia—were able to come up with a list of about four hundred titles. Some were originals, some duplicates, some were compilations put together for exhibitions. They were all on half-inch reels or three-quarter-inch cassettes, which meant they hadn't been shown in that format since the mid-80s, when Richard Simmons, who succeeded David Ross as video curator, left.

"As much as I credit David Ross," Ryan added, "Richard really carried that program for another decade. He contacted me a couple years ago and he came in and we met for the first time."

Ryan went on, “So the scope of the project is giant. We’d had survey grants before, but conservation grants are very tricky. So about two years ago we finally wrote the NEA grant. We got the money about a month ago and we put the ones by Bill Viola at the top of the list to get them ready for October. Those tapes are gone right now to be cleaned and transferred. The first one we had done was *Instant Replay* and we were going to show that in the sculpture court, but in the last moment Bill grabs the mic and says, ‘Fuck you!’ and walks out, so we were a little . . .”

Ryan laughed. “So to have that playing every half hour in the sculpture court, where it would echo—we thought, okay, maybe there’s a different one we can use for the reception after their talk.”

The Everson has kept an on-going artist file on Bill Viola that contains notes and diagrams for early Everson installations, exhibition brochures, some early correspondence—he’d sent postcards to Richard Simmons from Italy, where he’d gone to work in the video studio Art/Tapes/22, about returning to Syracuse on a visiting artist grant, in which he worried over the label “‘artist’ after being a Synapser for so long”—and forty-some articles, clippings and reviews of his work over the years.

About the same time the NEA conservation grant was in the works, there was another major resurrection, thanks to the services of a summer volunteer, in the form of the other archives that go with the video collection: exhibition files, original correspondence, contact sheets of the exhibitions, dozens of copies of publications that Ryan had thought the museum no longer had.

“I think all of us know we should have somebody twenty-four-seven to take care of it,” she told me. “I have people contact me and typically they’re not from here. They want me to copy stuff and send it to them—Juan Downey, who was from Chile, has come up several times because now people are starting to revisit his work—and we don’t have the resources to handle those requests. We have an amazing ceramic archive and no ceramic curator either.”

The decade of the 90s saw the rise of many efforts like the 1998 Syracuse conference as many organizations that began as media access centers and exhibition facilities added an historical component. The Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA), a network that began meeting informally in late 60s, formalized in 1990. The Experimental Television Center, located

in the Southern Tier village of Newark Valley outside Binghamton, was founded in 1970 from a media access program started by Ralph Hocking in 1969 at Binghamton University; then in 1994 ETC launched its own extensive, online Video History Project ⁽⁶⁾.

ETC is one of the few access centers from that period still going and its residency program is unique in that it offers new media technologies plus older analogue tools so that one can patch back and forth. Even so, in January ETC announced they would have to curtail some of their services. Shortly before the Everson talk, Sherry Miller Hocking spoke by phone about the creation of ETC and Synapse.

“At the same time there was an increase in New York State money for the arts, and a bigger interest in video on our state arts council. This affected New York State being the leader, because the state arts council was mandated to furnish a certain level of that funding upstate,” she said. “The Everson was so important in those early years—revolutionary, I don’t think is too strong a word.”

Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), started in 1971 as an editing and post-production facility in New York City by Howard Wise (after he closed the gallery where he’d hosted the 1969 exhibition *TV as a Creative Medium*), has an extensive online historical archive too. Independent Media Arts Preservation (IMAP), first an extension of the Media Alliance of New York State begun in 1999, incorporated in 2002. Rochester’s Eastman House, which has an enormous film, photo and video preservation program, in 2007 hosted the annual five-day AMAI conference that included a day-long IMAP symposium on preservation.

“Sherry Hocking and I were on a panel at IMAP that year,” said the Everson’s Ryan. “She’s just an amazing advocate for video. We were all talking about the challenges of conservation to institutions like ours, SU, the Television Center, Hallwalls in Buffalo. A small grant did come out of that but it was more beneficial to Hallwalls.”

Then Ryan asked, “Do you want to see it? I think you would appreciate more and get a sense of what we’re dealing with.”

With that, we rose from Ryan’s well-lit office and went through what looked like a nondescript coat-closet door into a cavernous, workshop-like room behind her office. Beyond that, there was a locked closet with metal cabinets. The shelves of the metal cabinets were lined with rows at least two deep of videotapes.

“According to all museum standards, the best way to keep them is in their original casings. They’re in a metal cabinet, the climate is perfectly steady and there’s no better way of storing them right now. Some are deteriorated so far that the cleaning isn’t going to help, not because of preservation but because they were played so many times to begin with.”

In the mid-90s there were suggestions, Ryan says, to give the Everson video collection to a larger institution that could take better care of it. Syracuse University had possession of the collection for a period but could not secure resources to do a proper job of restoring the collection and so it was returned to the Everson. The other suggestion involved the Getty Museum in Los Angeles.

“They had a big initiative,” said Ryan. “They actually took the Long Beach Museum video collection, which is where David Ross went after he left here and started their video program. There are two camps. One says if you don’t have the money, give them to someone who can take care of them, and they give you back copies. The other camp says, well, the physical objects, you should never part with them. I’m torn because I’m attached to the physical objects and I would never want to just give them away. The tapes themselves are part of the history and if all I have left is a flash drive or a server, it’s not the same. I wouldn’t be able to show you what I’m showing you now. So I’m keen on doing whatever we need to do to keep them here.”

Those visiting downtown Syracuse before the Everson event and the arresting display of *The Quintet of the Astonished* on the museum’s north face could see a second Viola video installation last fall too, on the outside wall of the Onondaga Historical Association (OHA) building on Montgomery Street, courtesy of the Urban Video Project. Like the fourth video clip screened at the Everson event, also from the *Transfigurations* series, *Two Women* (2008) runs just shy of ten minutes, but it went up with considerably less fanfare than the Everson video. OHA’s southern wall, which looms above another building, over the parking lot adjacent to the old downtown Carnegie Library, was already a UVP site.

Jeffrey Hoone managed much of the actual daily schedule when Viola and his wife and collaborator Kira Perov were here last October. Hoone has directed Light Work/Community Darkrooms since 1982—where the Urban Video Project now fittingly has its home—and he also directs



© Bill Viola. Photo: Kira Perov. Courtesy of Light Work, used with permission.

BILL VIOLA, *The Quintet of the Astonished* (2000), video installation. Performers: Weba Garretson, Pam Blackwell.

Syracuse University's more recently formed CMAC (Coalition of Museums and Art Centers). Light Work/Community Darkrooms comes out of the same era and impulse as Synapse. Phil Block (now director of programs and education at the International Center of Photography in Manhattan) and Tom Bryan founded Community Darkrooms in 1972 and Light Work the next year to provide public access photo with a social change agenda. By 1976 Light Work/Community Darkrooms had established its own artist-in-residence program, exhibition series and collection, as well as started publishing *Contact Sheet*.

Hoone described to me what he witnessed after *Two Women* went up downtown on the OHA site.

“I’m down there, I’m standing there just looking at the screen and making sure it’s doing what it’s supposed to do, and it’s right across the street from the YMCA,” he said. “About nine o’clock at night and there’s a lot of activity, people coming and going, and these two women come walking across the street and through the parking lot and they look up. And then they look back down. And then they look up. They both stop and say, ‘That woman up there is moving!’ And that was enough, you know, being in this public place. It’s something that’s not an advertisement and it’s not a sign. And because it’s a piece that moves it has great power to draw your attention.”

In its present incarnation, Hoone says, the Urban Video Project grew out of the Connective Corridor, a University initiative of Chancellor Nancy Cantor to connect the campus with downtown that would, along with environmental concerns and urban revitalization, emphasize and create space for the arts.

But UVP was actually started earlier, in 2007, by Blake Carrington, Christopher Gianunzio and Colin Todd, graduate students in the Department of Transmedia in VPA, calling themselves the Avalanche Collective. The Avalanche Collective was independently conducting monthly video projections in various locations throughout downtown Syracuse when this activity caught the attention of Eric Persons of the Connection Corridor; UVP subsequently received funding for a period through Chancellor Nancy Cantor’s Office of Engagement Initiatives.

TimeWarner Cable now supplies UVP’s hardware—the current projectors were placed atop buildings with cranes—although a Philadelphia company called Educated Guesswork, which Hoone says was doing “industrial strength” video installations, supplied the original technology. The city’s Public Art Commission, itself new, also became involved early on in discussions about outside video projections as public art ⁽⁷⁾.

“One of the things I was able to help with,” said Hoone, who joined the project as it took shape, “was to create a mission and a vision for what it could be around the idea of public art. I really saw it as not a new form, but as a way to present public art electronically. I’ve always looked at it as these electronic exhibition sites and once we established that, we could start thinking about artists. So this really is the future of public art.”

UVP is now set up so that guest curators select specific projects that are presented for approval to the Syracuse Public Art Commission. Each UVP site has some unique features. The oldest site at OHA has a directional audio

system that aims pin-points of sound to spots on the street that passers-by walk through—something like swimming through a cold spring in a lake—without blasting the entire block. While the Everson and OHA sites present high definition video and digital images, the Syracuse Stage site on the corner of East Genesee Street and Irving Avenue comprises a 300-square feet curtain of 16,000 LED light bulbs across the front glass façade of the building for graphic works, such as the specially commissioned *For Syracuse*, the scrolling text work by Jenny Holzer that went up in December. The UVP offers continuous, commercial-free video art year-round, among the first permanent public art video projects in the county.

Although not every detail is yet in place, beginning in June and running through August, UVP and the Everson will present the first annual retrospective—Summer Review—of the previous year’s public art videos, running from dusk until eleven o’clock on Thursday through Sunday evenings.

Hoone said the question of curation and identifying artists UVP would want to work with led obviously to Bill Viola.

“About a year ago I went out and visited him in California and started to talk with him—not just about the UVP but about the idea of trying to do something with his work in a meaningful way. We built the Warehouse Gallery downtown as a new contemporary art space designed to work with electronic media and with the formation of the SUArt Galleries in Shaffer Hall as a more cohesive exhibition site we were able to start thinking about what we could do with an artist like Bill Viola at his scale.”

Sherry Hocking of the Experimental Television Center told me she thinks she remembers Viola projecting some video on the outside of buildings as early as the 1970s. Some years ago David Ross engineered a Viola video projection on the wall of a Los Angeles parking garage, and Viola has made a number of video projections for cathedrals and chapels. Despite Viola’s pioneering in this area, Hoone says most video work is still shown inside galleries and museums at this point.

“But advances in technology expand what artists think about their work,” he noted. “I think you’ll see more and more of this, just like the way UVP started. Now I can hold a projector in my hand and point it anywhere. They became more portable so artists figured out a different way to use them. There’s always going to be that pressure, that when technology makes something possible, artists are going to use those ideas. And the power of Bill’s work in general is that you can put it at that scale.”

II.

There are of course any number of writings over the last few years that hail from the same neighborhood as Steven Kern's notion that we are "hard-wired for the arts"—works that pose an innate response to aesthetics that (even when frayed and blunted) can be restored, art as the pursuit of self-knowledge rather than mere entertainment or conventional "education," and art as a better investigator of reality than science—Ellen Dissanayake's *Homo Aestheticus*, Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just*, Jonah Lehrer's *Proust Was a Neuroscientist*, to name a few. David Ross says Viola is really an artist with that particular relation to the community that Lewis Hyde means in his classic *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World* (1979). One of the best writers on these subjects is Bill Viola himself, whose catalogue essays, notebook entries (which formed the entirety of exhibition text for the Whitney's massive mid-career retrospective in 1997), and collection of writings spanning 1973–1994, *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House*, are lucid, accessible and absorbing.

There's a wide range of ways to encounter Viola's work. Many of the individual videos are now available online in excerpted clips or entirety on YouTube. Since 2004 a number of his videos have been released on DVD, the latest last July, *Bill Viola: Selected Works*, a compilation of four early works⁽⁸⁾. His web site and those of many galleries and museums where he's shown carry catalogue excerpts and clips of the room-sized, enveloping video and sound installations, the monumental scale projections and the smaller, painting-like plasma flat-screen projects of recent years. Last year he even began working on an interactive video game. But whatever the venue or format, that particular quality about Viola's work to which Kern alludes seems to allow viewers to vault over their hesitations. Jeff Hoone of Light Work and UVP says, "You just sink into his images."

Several weeks before the Everson talk, David Ross spoke vividly about witnessing such responses. He recalled standing in the National Gallery in London when *The Passions* opened there.

"People were just crying, openly sobbing in an art gallery. Publicly, English people don't do that kind of thing. Of course, I know people—critics in particular—who think that's a sign of Bill's work not being that important, or less important, that it plays on those kinds of emotions, or exploits that aspect of human response to imagery—the melodramatic. Bill

is always confounded by that kind of approach, because he's just simply dealing with what he thinks are the most profound issues in the world, which are life and death. So [his work] transcends its means of production. When you're looking at it, you're not thinking, 'I'm looking at a video.' You're looking at it. And of course that's a sign of any important work of art, is that you're not thinking, 'I'm looking at a painting,' you're in the painting—the mindset of the artist."

At the Everson talk, Ross and Viola discussed an installation called *Heaven and Earth* (1992), one of the works, along with *The Passing* (1991) and *Nantes Triptych* (1992), which came out of the previous year's events in Viola's life, when his mother died and, about a month afterward, his second son Andrei was born. Viola had videotaped his mother during her final illness—he was adamant that he didn't record her death, as some references still claim—and used close-up images of her in the hospital presented on a disassembled cathode ray tube, which exposed its curved glass monitor, about two and a half inches above another cathode screen showing images of Andrei's birth. (Each was mounted on the end of a vertical wooden post, one attached to the ceiling and the other to the floor.) The cathode ray tube's image, though black and white, has a faint bluish tinge, and during the Everson talk Ross and Viola agreed that its curvature resembled a flower. While Viola's mother and second son never met in life, their light-filled images face and reflect off each other because of the glass. In Viola's words, "They just speak to each other all day long like that."

"I remember at the San Francisco Museum when we showed that work," Ross told Viola. "The guards were primarily Philippine women and they would trade so that they could be in that room. They would take an extra shift if they could stand next to that work. It was quite a wonderful thing, the level of protectiveness that they felt for that work."

The quality of immediate connection available in Viola's work is no accident, either by his own design or in the rise of video art in general, and the trait of immediacy, of being in the present moment, quickly emerges as key from whatever angle one examines video art.

Viola's writings and interviews are peppered with statements of his long-held convictions that viewers' conscious aesthetic connection, given the right conditions, would be widespread, even commonplace. In 1988, he

spoke on a panel in Los Angeles about whether contemporary art can be explained and interpreted; these remarks have since been printed in essay form as “Interpreting a Broken Wine Glass.” Seeming a tad irritated at the question’s very limitations, Viola said, “[T]he further afield from Western industrial culture’s ideas of art we go, ... [the more] the need for ‘explaining’ art, and the complementary condition of an alienated and bewildered public, disappears. So ‘explaining’ contemporary art and educating the public can be seen as a particularly modern problem.”

Early television and its tool, video, were developed as broadcast media. That is, video recording came later, in response to television’s original reliance entirely on live transmission. In the 1950s, the magnetic tape used to record sound waves for radio transmissions in the previous decade was adapted for video images in broadcast television. According to the Experimental Television Center, the first commercially available videotape, two-inch open-reel Quadruplex, was introduced at a trade show in 1956. A year later the three major networks were recording their nightly newscasts for delayed broadcast. In his 1981 essay, “The Porcupine and the Car,” Viola insists that this gap between the advent of live broadcast (“simultaneous with experience”) and the later development of video recording established that immediacy as the persistent “underlying characteristic of the medium” and still the chief difference between the aesthetics of video and film.

Early in the Everson talk, David Ross observed that as young men he and Viola had “lived through a period that is actually very rare, a period in which a new medium was invented from scratch and emerged in our lifetime.”

Viola’s answer, even looking back four decades, carried the enthusiasm of a young man’s fresh discovery.

“It was a personalized medium right away. When I did a little research on this I was really amazed to learn that video was the first image-making device that presented the image of what’s happening right now—simultaneous reality—shared space in time, right now.... It’s the first medium to do that since the early centuries after Christ, when the Chinese developed camera obscura.”

Because SONY was a global corporation, Viola continued, video was perhaps the first medium to appear simultaneously on all six continents, rivaled only by the rapid spread of photography in the 19th century. And at Syracuse University, having access to Synapse (the student-run system

launched in 1971 that wired the campus for cable television, provided a color studio in Watson Hall and later in the 70s had access to the Newhouse School's computer editing for video) meant that Viola was one of a group of artists who grasped the potential to directly reach their audience. Viola often points out—he did at the Everson talk too—that by the time he was twenty-nine, more people had seen his work on public television than in galleries or museums.

“We were this close, we all realized,” he said, holding up his thumb and forefinger for emphasis. “Not just to being able to have a show—putting work out in the world in our immediate communities—but we were that close to sending works around the world.”

The next morning, sitting on the edge of a couch in the Sheraton Hotel lobby before the Arents Awards luncheon, Viola talked again about using Synapse. He described a piece called *Localization*, comprising a monitor and a camera set up in Watson, linked to another monitor and camera set up the foyer of Gifford Auditorium, halfway across campus.

“The thing was,” he said, leaning forward, “the camera in Watson Hall was showing us an image being sent from Gifford [and vice versa], so that it was like an exchange of spaces. So people would come in and this thing's set up and of course people are curious so they just look at what it is. Then they realize they were seeing an image of a room—not the room they were in—but in the middle of this room, on a table, was a monitor and the monitor was showing them themselves”—here Viola laughed—“in the other space.”

One might think of the 1969 moon shot, during which from Earth we watched astronauts looking down on Earth. This had occurred to Viola too the previous evening, in one fleeting allusion. Eventually, his curiosity about the many facets of the technology's immediacy took on spiritual overtones.

“The word that comes to mind is ‘self-knowledge,’” he said to Ross about those early years. “Again, it was the Vietnam era and we were wanting to push through a new way of being in the world. What made that possible and enhanced that, I think, was this medium, which shows ourselves—the self—in real time.”

It was not such a long jump for an artist to see the video image as a metaphor for the soul, perhaps the animating spirit in the human machine.

Again at the Everson, Viola said, “One day your grandfather's living with you in the house, the next day he's gone. Where did he go? So those kinds of questions were coming at me and I had in my hands the tool to exactly

deal with those issues in this medium, because when you push that little red button on your camcorders and you send a little image out and you look at it on your little screen and then...you turn it off, the image is gone. Gone! When I have video shows in major art museums like the Getty? When we go home at night, if you push the red buttons, guess what? All my pieces go off. You touch them after you push the red button, they're warm. Come back five minutes later, after closing up, make sure all the doors are locked, and they're cold. The screen is cold, just like us."

There is a moment in Mark Kidel's film *Bill Viola: The Eye of the Heart* (2003), made for the BBC in London as a companion to that city's opening of *The Passions*, in which Viola stands in the Basilica di San Francesco in Assisi, Italy. He is discussing Giotto's frescos and the "totality of the space," the way in which they cover the walls and envelop the viewer (much like some of his own video installations). Then Viola says suddenly, "The thing that you have to understand about the 'old masters' is that they were all 'young Turks'!"

Fast forward to early video art.

"From the very beginning it challenged the notion of the need for the institution [of the museum] because the artist could just reach out directly," said David Ross at the Everson. "Of course to have a wall like this or a projector like the one here is an expensive and very complex thing, but [it's] the idea of moving back out into the world and short-circuiting that idea of how the museum had to play a role of gate-keeper and explainer and provider and producer."

As director of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City, Ross presided over the two-floor, mid-career retrospective, *Bill Viola: Selected Works 1972-1996*, which he co-curated with artist and opera director Peter Sellars, a long-time friend and associate of both men. Sellars and Viola had become close friends as MacArthur Foundation fellows (Sellars received his in 1983, Viola in 1989), so Viola suggested bringing Sellars into the Whitney retrospective to organize its flow and setting as he might an opera (this led to further joint efforts such as the Tristan Project and Sellars' major essay for *The Passions* catalogue).

Over that morning coffee two weeks before the Everson event, Ross had also talked about the demands such a retrospective created and the questions it raised.

“One of the first things we realized was that when you brought together—I think there were maybe nine of his major installations—when you brought more than two of them together, you created a different work of art. It would be the same with ten paintings too. But video in particular because of the imposition that it makes on people’s time, where you’re expected to come and stand twenty minutes, stand thirty minutes. You know, per installation. It’s not the way people normally go to museums. They should go to museums this way, but it’s not the way they normally walk through a painting show.”

Ross went on, “I always credit Peter with one of the great revelations that made me think twice about the unexplored assumptions of museums, because at one point I said, ‘Well, now we have to deal with the educational aspects in terms of, you know, wall labels and things. Some of this work is complicated!’ And Peter said, ‘No. Have you ever been to Disney World? Did you read a wall label before you got on the Matterhorn ride?’ I said, ‘What?’ He said, ‘People don’t need labels. Just let ‘em take the ride. Because the work speaks for itself.’ And I said—I was very embarrassed—I said, ‘You’re absolutely right.’”

Ross said he’d taken Sellars to visit the Everson on a recent trip to Syracuse just weeks before, when Sellars was a guest speaker for the year-long graduate seminar on art and civic engagement that Ross has been co-teaching with Carrie Mae Weems at Syracuse University.

“Peter even said, ‘This is the right scale for a museum,’” Ross told me. “It’s not large, but I’m against museums being large. I love the Met, don’t get me wrong, but when I go to the Met, it’s so much overload that I basically go to look at one picture. Or maybe one exhibition. People get exhausted, especially tourists, when they spend seven hours slogging around every room and they wind up with this kind of fatigue that is not necessary or intentional. It’s because people don’t know how to use museums and also because they’ve gotten so big. Even MoMA now, the lines and crowds and scale of it all. It’s antithetical to the experience of art. When you’re in junior high you’re taught to use the library and it’s always a really important class. But imagine walking into a library and saying, ‘Now what do I do? Do I just start walking through the aisles and picking things out and reading them all?’ For most people a museum is that kind of experience. It’s something I’ve

thought a lot about. There's not that course in junior high school, 'How to Use a Museum.' But the Everson is a perfect-scaled museum to use in a real and beautiful way."

If video's challenge led to a re-imagining of the museum itself, it might look remarkably like a particular kind of museum, supremely user-friendly, manageably-sized and accessible, that had served as a near-perfect incubator for the infant art of video. If we still doubt the challenge that video has been to the museum-as-citadel, think only of Gutenberg's press and how that made the Bible widely accessible, in vernacular tongues rather than Latin, and allowed for a more direct experience of faith, unmediated by clerical interpretation or church hierarchy. Another enabling, new technology simply set Bill Viola on a similar path.

For the Whitney retrospective catalogue, Viola and cultural critic Lewis Hyde (another MacArthur Foundation connection) recorded two conversations in early March 1997. Hyde wanted to explore what, for Viola, gave a work spiritual authority; at length, Viola arrived at the question of artistic traditions.

"It took me the longest time to realize I was even working in a tradition," he said. "I happen to be working at a point in historical time where the 'tradition' is to break with tradition—the avant-garde... Video was ideal because it was a radical tool, the newest of the new, without any tradition... [But] over the years, I began to be aware of a deeper tradition, an undercurrent stretching across histories and cultures. The deeper current I'm talking about is the ancient spiritual tradition concerned with self-knowledge... Then I began to see the idea of the avant-garde not as a break with tradition, but as a revival of tradition—the tradition of direct experience."

What that might look like, suggested Hyde, was that "the person who is of use to the community is the person who has a kind of vernacular knowledge and is able to make it new in the sense of restating the old wisdom in the vernacular tongue alive at the present time, so the people can hear it again and so that it fits present conditions."

How would people hear that in our age? In recent years, Viola has become dismissive of the term "video artist," saying that he works in that medium simply because he happens to be living in this era. But part of what is so appealing about both Ross and Viola is the candor each has about the sources of his own breakthroughs. There is frequent, generous and often meticulous acknowledgement of others from both men. Moreover,

each tends to couch his achievements as the outcome of some struggle with his own short-comings, instead of personal brilliance. Ross could be “embarrassed” by Sellars and also tell you about that, and when he described being hired as the world’s first museum video curator in 1971, he added this piquant aside: “[James] Harithas offered me the job because he knew I was a total tabula rosa. I was a blank slate. So having someone as arrogant and empty as I was, was perfect for him!”

Two turning points in Viola’s career stand out from the Everson conversation, tied to particular work that emerged from a crisis and, in transcending that crisis, made his work more widely available and accessible. The first concerns what you might call his spiritual “coming out,” the 1983 installation titled *Room for St. John of the Cross*. Soon into their Everson conversation, Viola answered Ross’ prompting about the more explicit political implications of his own early work with perception and self-knowledge.

“Everything did, at that time, have political implications,” he agreed readily. “I mean, the whole world was not working—very much similar to today.”

In the early 80s, Viola came to a crossroads and, with this installation, as Ross put it, “a transformation that made the leap and allowed your work to be seen by people who had no idea what video was or even cared about what art was, quite frankly.”

It was clear Viola was “crossing a line,” said Ross, “taking a stand that some critics could not abide—that art can create a transcendent space.”

Viola’s own extensive spiritual work began many years before this. He started reading Rumi in college. Arriving in the Italian city of Florence in 1974 to take a job in the video studio Art/Tapes/22 for eighteen months, he became acquainted with the larger Sufi tradition from which Rumi emerged. Viola also responded to the religious imagery of abounding public art in Florence, though he was not conventionally religious as a child. Ross told me that Viola now credits his time in Florence and his interaction around art history with Syracuse University professor Larry Bakke (about whom more later) as “setting him on that path.” Over the years since he has also made extensive travels to spiritual sites around the world. An early cluster of such pilgrimages were concentrated in the years 1976–81, when he had a video residency at WNET/Thirteen TV Lab in New York City and he made trips to the Solomon Islands, Java, Bali, Indonesia, and Australia

(where he met Kira Perov in 1977). In 1980, Viola and Perov, now married, went to Japan, where they formed a long-term relationship with Zen priest Daiju Tanaka and Viola made the video *Hatsu-Yume/First Dream*.

By 1982, Viola was living in California. By chance he picked up a book of the mystical poems of San Juan de la Cruz, the reformer priest imprisoned for nine months in 1577 by the Spanish Inquisition. Recalling that discovery at the Everson, Viola described to Ross “practically crying” in the bookstore as he stood reading in the aisle, and how the poems became a “cornerstone in my life.”

“Here was the exact answer that I needed,” said Viola. “So this is my Vietnam era guilt sort of being erased when I read the story of this man’s life. He was taken away in the middle of the night, the classic thing that’s going on today—our country is actually participating in it as well—it just happened, it’s still happening. So he was one of those guys, taken away by a really oppressive regime, sponsored by the Catholic Church at the time, and he was put in a little cell.”

Viola described the daily torture the priest endured before his escape, concluding, “The most amazing thing about him was while he was in prison, subjected to these horrible things, he was writing poetry. In his mind he was composing these poems. What kind of poems were they? They were love poems.”

Viola paused, looked into the audience.

“In other words, for you artists, he’s making art.”

Viola turned back to Ross. “In that situation! And when I read that, I understood what was going on, why I was having this big conflict in the Vietnam era—should I just stop making anything that’s artistic and just focus on this social, political stuff? And here this guy just brought those things together right in front of me... And that set me on this path to know that you could go into the deepest spiritual realities and you could bring people along with you.”

A significant portion of the art world has come around to this perspective since that time. In the February 2006 issue of *ARTNews*, Kay Larson’s article “Keeping the Faith” (part of a report on “Top Ten Trends”) put Viola in the company of artists such as Marina Abramovich, Laurie Anderson and James Turrell, whose diverse work links art and spirituality, and further noted collaborations such as *The Five Faiths Project in Chapel Hill*, and *The Missing Peace: The Dalai Lama Portrait Project*, which involves over seventy artists.

But doing a work based on the life of a Catholic saint wasn't, as Viola put it, "very cool in the early 1980s in the art world."

"I felt, in my own way, I took a stand," Viola said. "I remember sitting in my room the day before the opening. I don't have a title. So a little voice popped in the back of my head—I was tired, I was at my writing desk, I had all these titles crossed out—and it said, 'You know, you really believe in this guy. Why don't you just write down what it is, tell everybody what it is?' I was so beat, I just said okay. Also I was avoiding the fact that for years I was reading all this spiritual stuff and titled my pieces other kinds of things. And so this was the first time, right in front of everybody, I just said, 'You know, this is my piece, I made it, and it's about St. John of the Cross from the 1500s. And this is what it is.' I'm so happy I did that."

A second profound shift in Viola's work came out of the months surrounding his mother's final illness and then in early 1991 her death. From this loss came such works as *The Passing* later that year and in 1992, *Nantes Triptych* and *Heaven and Earth*—works that included video Viola shot of his mother while she lay comatose.

Just as *Room for St. John of the Cross* had, this early '90s work has provoked immense response among viewers. At the Everson, Viola framed this shift by going back to the roots of the new body of work, well before its achievement was established, to a commission in 1987 from ZDF German television that he'd been paid for in advance but had never finished.

"I had a writer's block," he began, "one of the worst I've ever had, in the late '80s. '88, '89, were horrific. I don't even want to go back there and I've had several of these since. I just get—I feel paralyzed. Those of you who go through this, you know, you feel paralyzed and helpless and all washed up, it's all over. It was really, really hard. But I kept shooting things and I had been making work from a store of ideas that I had already assembled and worked out from previous years, so I was kind of covering my tracks a bit."

Then, Viola's mother was suddenly hospitalized. He embarked on three months of travels back and forth between Long Beach and Miami. During one of his last trips, he took his video camera because, he told Ross, "I just needed to have those last images." A month after his mother's funeral, when he had stopped working completely, Viola again heard from ZDF about the work they had commissioned several years before.

“The piece that I had the original block on... they still didn’t have their piece and I was frozen, creatively. I get this call: ‘If you don’t finish this thing, we’re gonna take the money back.’ So I had to go back into the editing room and work—exactly where I didn’t want to go. I had to get out those tapes of the dessert. So I’m looking at all these things, trying to see if I can put something together, crying half the time.”

Gradually Viola also began to watch parts of his video images of his mother’s final illness. “And then I get to a point where I bring them into my studio and put them on the big shelf where I keep all my art. And for the first time in my life,” he said, “my home videos and my art met. And they met over my dying mother.”

Initially controversial—many people believed Viola had shot his mother’s moment of death—these works continue to provoke response, some more conflicted than that of the museum guards who switched shifts to be near the *Heaven and Earth* piece. Viola told Ross that he knows they are “very hard to watch,” but added, “You know, this is human experience.”

“I think today we live in a visual culture and we don’t know how to see,” said Viola near the end of the Everson conversation. “We’re being inundated by all these images and they’re functioning not as useful information—they’re functioning as a kind of pollution. So I think part of the job of an artist today is to re-teach us how to see. The eye is only the mechanism that gets the image to you. [Then you need to] get underneath the surface of it. And then your heart will tell you what it’s doing.”

III.

“I think I can recognize a Renaissance when I see it,” said Syracuse University Professor Gary Radke in introducing Bill Viola and David Ross at the Everson. Radke co-chaired last year’s Orange Central, the University’s annual week-long event that has grown out of Alumni Weekend; a good portion of the crowd that night were alumni. By happy coincidence, Radke is also an expert in Renaissance art.

“There are times when creative people come together,” he went on. “The early 16th century in Rome with Michelangelo and Leonardo, Raphael and Bramante, made something special happen. The 1860s in Paris, when a new vision of how art could be out in the streets, in the *plein air*, that

could show us ourselves and the world around us. The 1950s, of course—New York became the new center of how to be expressive, how to take the most minimal amounts of information and make them powerful. And, I’m going to claim, the 1970s here in Syracuse.”

Viola later picked up the thread of Radke’s analogy. After graduating in 1973, Viola stayed in Syracuse another year. Except for a trip that summer to New England to see composer David Tudor of Rainforest, he was “flipping burgers” at the old Jabberwocky Café across the street from Synapse on Waverly Avenue, teaching some video workshops at Syracuse University and at the Everson too, simply because staying here gave him access to equipment that very few other schools had.

“We were so far ahead, at least five years,” he told the Everson audience. Following his habit from undergraduate days, “I was living for the nights when I could go into that studio and make my work.”

Viola said he never felt he needed to pursue graduate school. Instead, Ross had already hired him as video preparator at the museum.

“What’s a video curator, right?” asked Ross at the Everson talk. “In fact I was clueless about plugging any of those things in. I could always turn to you and say, ‘We’re doing an exhibition with Nam June Paik—would you come and help him install it?’”

“It was like studying with an old master,” observed Viola. “It was really the Renaissance all over again, because in the Renaissance you didn’t go to art school, you apprenticed to an artist’s studio. You came, you swept the floors and you worked your way up.”

Viola is candid that this perspective came later. The next morning, talking about Larry Bakke, who taught a year-long course in art history and used Janson’s classic *History of Art*, he said, “Oh man! That was difficult for me, because everything smacked of gold leaf or Romanesque blah-blah-blah! I was like, so not there! I was not there! I was doin’ video, man! It was like, so new! It was like, the future! It took me a decade and a half after that to finally come to realize that the Renaissance is more like today than any other period in art history. So Bakke was this very articulate, very intelligent human being and he had a way to bring in contemporary art that was his genius.”

Viola also studied painting with Bakke—“He would tell you if he were around today that I was not a very good painter!”—but other truly valuable interactions occurred outside class. Viola said he and his friends, Pam Shaw and Bob Edgar, invited Bakke to the Synapse Video Center in Watson Hall.

“We were really, seriously, intellectually engaged in video and trying to figure out what it was. We’d show our pieces. I was so privileged to be with three students and Larry Bakke. And then he started coming once a week to talk with us.”

At the Everson talk, Viola offered two examples of such Renaissance-style interactions during his early days at the museum. In one case he’d almost electrocuted video pioneer Peter Campus during an installation set-up. The other concerned the now-legendary Korean-born Paik, whose first American museum retrospective, *Videa ‘n Videology*, occurred at the Everson in 1974.

“We were staying up really late at night and he had just finished *TV Garden*, which was this amazing piece as big as a room, filled with tropical plants of all types, and in the foliage are these monitors, face up,” said Viola, describing how he stood with Paik and Paik’s regular assistant, looking down from the atrium bridge as the “first audience” for “all these flickering images. It was all this high speed thing that was so much like today. He was so advanced. You can imagine what this is like as a young artist looking down at this thing. And I look up at the ceiling—right above us is a skylight and the rain had stopped and the full moon was out, coming through the clouds. So like, I elbowed Nam June. I said, ‘Nam June, look at this! Look at the moon!’ Because he loves the moon. And he said, ‘Ah! That?’ he said, ‘That’s high art. My work is low art.’”

Viola laughed softly.

“That was so beautiful.”

What allows for such luminous moments?

“It was Jim who understood what I meant when I told him his museum would become obsolete if it didn’t become a television station. I mean, I was just trying to get a rise out of him. I wasn’t trying to get a job.”

Ross was telling me over coffee about meeting Everson Museum director James Harithas for the first time. Harithas arrived in Syracuse in 1971 for a stay of only three years. He succeeded Max Sullivan, who became director in 1960, the same year the board decided to construct a permanent downtown museum, which then opened in 1968. Harithas came to Syracuse after a brief hiatus from museum work, teaching art history in New York City at Hunter College and the School of Visual Art. Before that he was director of the Corcoran in Washington, D.C., and during his three years at

the Corcoran he met and began working with video artists Juan Downey and Nan June Paik. So Harithas came to the Everson with two agendas: to develop a video and television component in the museum setting and to open up the museum to all parts of the community, or—as Ross phrased it in the Everson talk—to use the museum as a “social instrument.”



Photo © Stephen Sartori/Syracuse University, used with permission of Light Work and Everson Museum.

BILL VIOLA'S *The Quintet of the Astonished* on the Everson Museum's north facade, October 2010.

“I just thought he'd get angry at me when I said that to him,” Ross went on, “and I could get the photo I needed for the museum. Do you remember Jacqueline Dedell? She was married to Ivan Powell, a Black man and a very important graphic designer. She was a tall, willowy, beautiful blond and really sweet. We were good friends and she asked me to come and take a picture of Jim for a hundred dollars. This was 1970, 71, and that was a month's rent on my house on Westcott Street. So that's when I met Jim and then of course Bill and I had already been working together, in [Experimental] Studios with Jack Nelson [at Syracuse University], which was my safe haven after I became disillusioned with the journalism school.”

David Ross came to last fall's Everson event as an advisory board member of the Newhouse School's Goldring Arts Journalism masters program, as a visiting professor invited to Syracuse by the Chancellor for the year-long graduate seminar he's been teaching with Carrie Mae Weems on the artist's role in society and the university's role in preparing the artist, and as chair of the newly formed interdisciplinary MFA program in art practice at the School of Visual Arts in New York City (which both Harithas and Weems regularly visit). After being appointed the first museum video curator anywhere right out of college (he has a public communications degree from Newhouse), Ross went on to serve as deputy director and curator of video art at the Long Beach Museum of Art, curator at Berkeley Art Museum, and director of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, the Whitney Museum and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. By the mid-70s, the Newhouse School had acquired the computer video editing capacity that it shared with Synapse and what quickly became an international roster of visiting video artists. But before any of this happened, Ross recalled a sharp rebuff in the late 60s.

"When I approached them about the implications of this new portable video for the future of journalism," he recalled, "they just brushed me off. 'Those are toys, we're not interested in playing with toys. The art school—that's where they play. We don't play, we're a professional school. If you want to go to television school, you can do that—but don't come to us and talk about these toys.' At that moment the journalism school was going through a very conservative retrenchment, I guess. In retrospect, I recognize that now."

Twenty-two when Harithas hired him, Ross eventually acquired for the Everson some two hundred works by eighty-five video artists, documented lectures and artist interviews on video, and arranged some video broadcast on local cable television. In 1972, about six months after his appointment, Ross established a video department at the Everson with funding from the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) and hardware provided by the local Gifford Foundation. Ross developed an exhibition format and archive, a community-oriented education program, and provided local and visiting artists access to the new video form. Synapse partnered with the Everson to provide post-production space and equipment. Whether these artists were Syracuse University students or there on Synapse grants, their videotapes often went into the Everson collection.

If video challenged the traditional museum's role, together Harithas and Ross also lent the museum's traditional gravitas to video. As ETC's Video History Project notes, they simply moved ahead with video-as-art and didn't wait for other institutions to establish standards of judgment and quality or articulate video's aesthetic theory. (It was precisely this unhesitating approach that Harithas' successor, Ron Kuchta, found fault with later in the decade when Harithas and Ross were gone, even though Ross' successor, Richard Simmons, protectively and proactively maintained the video department for another decade.)

Harithas' tenure saw a string of important firsts with work by Yoko Ono, Joan Mitchell, Nam June Paik, Norman Bluhm, Hermann Nitsch and others. There were also ground-breaking video exhibitions with Frank Gillette (his massive *Video: Process and Meta-Process* occupied all four of the museum's upper galleries), Ira Schneider, William Wegman, the Videofreex, Juan Downey, Douglas Davis, Charlotte Moorman, Jaime Davidovich, to name a few.

Harithas' conviction that the museum should be open to the entire community set a tone and manifested broadly in docent training to make the museum more user-friendly locally, art workshops for psychiatric patients at the state's regional Hutchings Psychiatric Center a few blocks away and for prisoners at Auburn Correctional Facility west of Syracuse. Under Harithas, the Everson hosted exhibitions of the region's Native American art (Syracuse sits in the heart of traditional lands of the five nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, a.k.a. the Iroquois). There were exhibitions of Ukrainian art, Haitian art and, in *Three in One*, the work of three local Black painters who were brothers, Amos, Richmond and Truman Johnson. Under Harithas, the Everson hosted a Freedom Festival with civil rights attorney William Kunstler, activist-scholar Angela Davis, and the Syracuse-born Jesuit anti-war activist Daniel Berrigan. For the museum's exhibition of Sandinista art, Harithas and video artist Juan Downey flew to Nicaragua and met with rebel artists.

The prison arts program Harithas initiated at Auburn ran two nights a week for two years and included painting and art history classes, resulting in the exhibition *From Within*. Harithas took David Ross with him to Auburn for those classes.

"It was an amazing class and is worthy of its own bit of research," Ross told me. "We did an exhibition of the Everson that also went to the National

Portrait Gallery. It had its own catalogue and even a number of [inmate artists] coming down on a special bus for the opening. When some of them got out, we gave them jobs at the museum, as guards or in the education department. That was part of Jim's philosophy."

Two of the Auburn alums set up a store-front museum for nine months in the housing project near the Everson, and the prisons arts project survived beyond Harithas' tenure under the painter Jack White, the only Black member of the Everson's board at that time, who expanded it to include the county's penitentiary at Jamesville. The Auburn project also yielded Richard Simmons, one of three parolees who went to work at the Everson. Simmons also painted there on an artist-in-residence grant for six months, got a degree in painting from Syracuse University—Simmons told me he was "the only person who ever aced Larry Bakke's final" in art history—and succeeded David Ross as video curator.

Harithas quickly ran afoul of some conservative segments of Syracuse for his left-leaning politics, his choice of constituent emphasis and his often provocative artistic choices. Harithas' first major show occurred in October 1971, conceptual artist Yoko Ono's *This is Not Here*. David Ross opened his own remarks at the Everson talk by recalling this event, whose thirty-ninth anniversary coincided with his and Viola's appearance. This was the first large Everson project that Viola assisted. It was also Ono's first museum exhibition anywhere, comprising some eighty works (including those of fifty other artists she invited to participate) and seen by a record 5,000 visitors. Andy Warhol's *Water Piece for Yoko* came out of that show, the first piece in the Everson's newly inaugurated video collection.

Not everyone liked the atmosphere surrounding the show. Besides Ono's husband, rock star musician John Lennon, to whom the show was dedicated as a birthday gift, two other ex-Beatles were in town for Lennon's birthday, and Lennon joined a protest south of the city against the construction of Interstate 81 across Onondaga Nation land, invited by the Nation's faithkeeper, Oren Lyons. A vigorous battle of opinion ensued in the local newspapers, hinting at fears that slick outsiders were trying to hoodwink Syracuse, with the publication of a letter titled, "Art or Hokum?"

In 1972, an already disconcerted American Legion criticized the lack of a flagpole to fly the American flag in the new museum's plaza during the Freedom Festival. The John DeAndrea sculpture displayed in the main sculpture court, depicting two young naked soccer players, one Black and one white, raised objections.

“Jim handled that,” Ross told me about the DeAndrea sculpture, “but then we did the Hermann Nitsch Orgiastic Mystery Theatre performance, and that was slightly problematic. Of course Nitsch is now recognized as one of the key great innovators of European art of the late 20th century, but back then it was pretty intense.”

Viennese by birth and one of that city’s practitioners of “actionist” or “direct art,” Nitsch was an abstract painter who gradually replaced red pigment in his massive canvases with animal blood. His performance art employed “controlled violence” and borrowed elements from ritual animal sacrifice.

“I left after Jim left,” Ross told me simply, “because the welcome mat was no longer out.”

“The Everson became a different place quickly because that’s what they wanted,” says the painter and sculptor Darryl Hughto, who taught painting at Syracuse University at that time and now lives and works in Canastota, twenty-five miles east of Syracuse. “They wanted quiet. Killing goats in our museum! But that moment—it wasn’t just the Everson, it was everywhere. Things were going great guns. And some video artists kept it going for a time at the Everson too. There were lots of other art forms that were just as vital at the same time.”

“This was not a one-pony race,” agrees the painter and sculptor Susan Roth, who is married to Hughto. “Jim [Harithas] felt that the times required it. His aesthetic was, ‘Put them all out there. The best will out.’ You know, the Olympics. Put them all out at the start and see who finishes. That’s what life’s about. Any community that wants a Renaissance—it can happen at any time that leadership allows, sort of takes the lid off the pot and sees what comes up.”

Harithas, now almost eighty, has been in Houston since he left Syracuse in mid-1974, where he now directs the Station Museum. Ross says, “He was my mentor and I still take him so seriously. We speak as often as I can.”

Despite leaving Syracuse that year, in what might be viewed as a passing of the torch, Harithas and Ross generated a major video conference at the Everson with involvement of the New York State Council on the Arts and the Rockefeller Foundation. This gathering was key in furthering NYSCA’s efforts to attract more video funding proposals through the 70s, which continued to bolster projects locally. The Rockefeller Foundation also supported the growth of video art around the country.

“It was all because of Nam June Paik,” Ross told me of the Rockefeller Foundation’s interest in video and television. “He pulled everything together, really.”

Once in Long Beach, Ross secured a Rockefeller grant for \$50,000 and immediately set up another video program, bought editing equipment and invited artists to come in and make work.

“It was free and any artist could come and work,” Ross says. “Pretty soon we started building up a collection too. Then we had an exhibition program and back then if an artist got a tape in a show they didn’t expect it back. By the time I left for Berkeley, we had several hundred tapes. Kathy Huffman took over after me and continued to build that collection, really build it.”

Despite the distances, the relationship between Ross and Viola remained fruitful for both.

“I made the connection in Florence with my friend Maria Gloria Bicocchi,” Ross told me about Viola’s eighteen months at her Art/Tapes/22 studio, and Huffman had come to the Long Beach Museum when Ross started the video program there. “Kathy had been at the California state university of Long Beach as a graduate student, was doing her masters in video and spent a lot of time with me at the museum, so she saw a lot of Bill’s work and became enamored of it, was doing work with him and invited him out. He moved out to Long Beach about the time I was leaving, where he lives today.”

At that time, the Long Beach Museum was located on a bluff overlooking the Pacific, an irony not lost on Ross. From the start, Ross learned to be concerned about video storage in a city as rainy as Syracuse. Even slightly damp conditions affected the oxide coating on half-inch open reel tape, so much early video was lost. (Just as an estimated ninety percent of early cinema was lost too, viewed as cheap, transitory entertainment not worth saving, until New York City’s MoMA undertook its preservation, an important role in the re-definition of film as an art form.)

“It’s doesn’t take much when you have flat, horizontal glass on the roof sealed next to stone,” Ross told me of I.M. Pei’s first museum. “An eighth of an inch settling difference and all of a sudden you’ve got cracks. Then water gets in and moves around and it’s like a cancer in a building. And again, at Long Beach—hello, let’s be really clever about where we store video. How about out on the Pacific, a block from the water?”

For Long Beach, the Getty Museum’s video restoration project was eventually the answer, securing the originals and providing Long Beach

with digital copies. The Everson has not followed that path with its video collection, though Ross says he tried to get Kern's predecessor, Sandra Trop, interested. Another Ross contribution, if seemingly less tangible, has endured. There is a hint of it when Carrie Mae Weems, relating her experience in the classroom with Ross this past year, says simply, "David has a deep and abiding commitment to art and to artists. So students hear him in a different way."

Ross has also been active in the new Artist Pension Trust (APT) that formed in 2004, a plan to provide artists with income from their work in later years, but he was paying attention forty years ago at the Everson. Richard Simmons told me, "Of course I learned the ropes from David and David had all the right ideas. He told me early on, 'These people don't have a way to make money unless you make it for them.' So that's what I did. I made sure that a lion's share of every dollar that came in went to the artists. And it worked out very well. Some very bright people got a chance to produce a lot of work and they're still at it. And I'm happy about that and glad I took part in it."

"Richard is a true American original," says David Ross, who hired Simmons first as the video program's weekend "tape jockey" for exhibitions a couple years before his departure, while Simmons had his painting residency at the Everson. He worked in what is now the ceramics court in the basement, a few steps from Ross' office.

"Every time David got some new information, if a video artist came to show him something, he'd come to the painting studio and get me and give me the tape to have a look. I was already very interested in it. So he hired me—if he had to go somewhere for a week, I had to be the tape jockey. And I volunteered a lot of time helping Peter Campus and Frank Gillette put up their shows," Simmons told me last fall in his kitchen. "Once I went to Boston to help Howard Fried take a show down when David was curator out there later."

(Fried attended Syracuse from 1964–67, but finished his BFA at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1968, and later founded the New Genres department for video and performance there. Fried's ties with Syracuse continued; Simmons says he visited the University only a few years ago and they spent time catching up.)

Simmons and his wife Jane still live on the city's West side in an older family home, though they spend part of the winter in Port St. Lucie, Florida. Their second-floor flat and its long stairwell are lined with his large abstract paintings. That afternoon, a week before the Everson talk, a shiny Harley leaned on its kick-stand on the shady front walk.

"Did you bring your guns?" growled Simmons. He meant that his neighborhood has a reputation off the West side.

"No, but I've still got a helmet and it's in my trunk now," I said.

Simmons has been riding bikes since he was sixteen. Many of his friends still call him "Hairy" (and in postcards from Florence, so did Bill Viola). This is short for "Nazi Hairy," the club name he says was "created during a comedic moment" when he was with the Outlaws biker gang. For several years he has been working on a memoir that he says he hopes would explain his involvement in art to other bikers. David Ross, who first encountered him in the Auburn prison painting class, began grooming him in what might seem a casual, low-key way for the video program, but Simmons was not exactly thrown into the deep end of the pool.

"It was just my natural interest," he told me. "I left the Outlaws in Florida to move to New York City to go to art school. I only lasted in that school three months. Their brochures could talk the talk but once I got there, there was nothing authentic about them. So I did my own research. For two years, every avant-garde event, every showing of modern cinema, I was there. So when I came to the Everson I already had lots of hours logged into watching irregular stuff. And I was good at it."

Though Ross had hired Simmons, there was a hiatus after Ross left when a graduate student briefly took over curating video at the Everson. Then one day Sandra Trop, who emerges as an unsung heroine in this saga, telephoned him. She was then interim director before Kuchta got here. "She said, 'Do you still want the job?' I said, 'Certainly.' 'Well come on down,' she said. 'The deal is, I want you to go back to school at the same time, I'm going to pay you peanuts and I'm going to buy you a briefcase—and a watch.'"

Simmons laughed at that.

"I got a lot done. Nam June always referred to me as 'the artist curator.'"

In his first two years alone as video curator, Simmons curated seventeen video exhibitions. In 1976, he curated the retrospective *Everson Video '75*. This was now early in the tenure of director Ron Kuchta, who left the Everson in 1995 and has since become editor of *American Ceramics Magazine*.

Kuchta supplied a preface to the catalogue to *Everson Video '75* (available at the ETC's Video History Project), in which he laid out his reservations about video as an art form.

"Video's place in the art museum is still problematical," Kuchta began, before itemizing practical obstacles such as conservation, the fast disintegration of video tape, the cost of hardware, high maintenance and restrictions on use by some artists. But, Kuchta went on, "An even more fundamental question to its relevancy in the Museum is video's lack of history and its obsession with the present tense—its lacking perspective, context or heritage...gives us little sense from whence we came. Few reputations of video artists precede this decade."

Kuchta perhaps represented the tip of another one of those icebergs, this of less than receptive opinion about video. Many now agree that the moving image technologies are merging, and certainly Bill Viola for one was extremely interested in the explorations of some filmmakers. But early video artists, even those who had come to video from other art forms, saw video and cinema as having very different roots, aesthetics and concerns.

"I think initially in the early days of this form, it was quite competitive," Tom Sherman told me. "We never really were in dialogue with the feature film industry and the experimental film scene, which was significant and had a big influence in the late 60s, early 70s, those people wouldn't give us the time of day. They looked upon our medium as shabby and they didn't need a new group of people, you know, taking part of the resources. And of course, we were very young and quite full of ourselves and believed that what we had was the future. Art scenes are not always cooperative."

Simmons nevertheless persisted. For example, *The Everson Video Revue* (1979) comprised work by more than fifty artists. Simmons told me this exhibition required about thirty hours to watch in entirety, and that he also produced a catalogue, selecting an image from each video and providing accompanying text. In 1985, Barbara London's "Video: The Reflexive Medium" in *Art Journal*, a selected chronology of major events in US video between 1963 and 1983, highlights this exhibition, which then traveled to Chicago, Berkeley and La Jolla over the course of two years.

Simmons recalled that Bill Viola—"BV"—"lived in the Everson every single day, too. Every day I was there, he was there. It was always enjoyable for me, and it was very enjoyable a few years later to bring him back to do that show, *Rain*. Oh, he has a wonderful sense of taste, very inventive, and

a great sense of humor. *Rain*, it was wonderful, wonderful! ‘What do you need for the show, Bill?’ ‘I need a thousand pounds of sand, I need the lid from a 55-gallon drum, a spotlight and a guitar pick-up.’ ‘Okay!’”

Successful with funding proposals, Simmons largely kept the video program alive, even securing a grant to cover his own salary the last year he was there. Off-setting Kuchta’s antipathy for museum video, Simmons allows that perhaps he developed a perspective that he really worked for the New York State Council on the Arts, the NEA and the artists. He says he left “under some duress” during a dispute with Kuchta over funding for an anniversary video show. At that point he had his own video collection; some were copies, some tapes artists had given him or told him to take with him, and he has accumulated more from other curatorial work.

“I could’ve maintained the career I had but of course not at the Everson,” he says. “It would’ve required that I stay in San Francisco or move to San Diego. I had two offers, but I had two small boys growing up here in Syracuse. I did a show in Rochester for the Visual Studies Workshop and I collected tapes for that. And artists continued to send me stuff, just to show it to me and because they thought I might be a resource to them. So I’ve got some very strong stuff.”

In late February Simmons and Jane left for Florida and stayed seven weeks. When they got back, he began cleaning out a spare room that needed painting, where he also kept his video collection. As he boxed them up, he says he got to thinking, “They deserve to be in the museum and to be seen.”

“When Bill and David were here last fall,” he told me, “I listened to what Steven Kern said that night when he introduced them, how seeing Bill’s work had affected him and how he wanted to bring Bill to his museums. This guy Kern is something. And I had gotten acquainted with Debora Ryan. So I decided I should do this now.”

Last fall he said, “I wish I could go down to the Everson and just say, ‘I’d like to see this now.’ There’s one particular tape there that I haven’t seen in thirty years probably and I want to see it again. It’s called *John Baldessari Sings Lewitt*. It simply gives rhyme and melody to some of the things that Sol Lewitt has done. I mean, you can’t watch it without it just filling you with smiles.”

So Simmons called up Debora Ryan at the Everson and told her she could come and get his video stash.

“She’s going to be surprised,” he said a few days before the appointed time. “She’s going to need some help to carry them.”

IV.

The Everson's projection of *The Quintet of the Astonished* is actually the second time that a work from *The Passions* series has come to Syracuse. In 2004, Nancy Cantor sought work by alumni in an array of art forms to celebrate her November inauguration as Syracuse University's new Chancellor. For visual art, Cantor too liked Sol Lewitt ('49), and his curling sculpture *Six Stone Walls*, at once massive and sinuous, rises from the slope below Crouse College. She also chose Bill Viola. From *The Passions*, his *Surrender* (2001), a work comprising two vertically oriented flat plasma screens whose images of a man and a woman appear to mirror one another in their gestures, was exhibited in the Light Work gallery.

When she came to Syracuse, Cantor also requested a summary of the history of video art here. Tom Sherman, who heads the video program in Transmedia, drew up a time-line and report. He noted that Syracuse native Aldo Tambellini, himself a pioneering video artist and photographer, had founded the Black Gate Theatre in New York City in 1968, an important outlet for experimental film and video art. (Tambellini visited Syracuse mid-decade as guest of the Syracuse International Film Festival to receive a lifetime achievement award.)

Sherman's summary is succinct, tracing in less than two pages how Synapse began in 1970 (supplemented later by Newhouse's computer editing system), the Everson Museum video department the next year (particularly highlighting the ground-breaking work and subsequent accomplishments of Bill Viola and David Ross), and concluding with the several incarnations of the video academic program at Syracuse. He notes that Jack Nelson—an important mentor to both Viola and Ross—taught the first video art courses at SU “under the guise of ‘Image Research’” within the new Experimental Studios in the College of Visual and Performing Arts. In 1976 John Orentlicher joined VPA to teach video art and in 1981, as that program first gave BFA and MFA degrees in video art, it became Art Media Studies. Viola's honorary doctorate from Syracuse in 1995 (his first of nine altogether) was the first conferred on a video artist anywhere in the world. By 2006, Art Media Studies had evolved into the Department of Transmedia, an interdisciplinary digital arts program whose video component Sherman continues to lead after Orentlicher's retirement in 2008.

Last fall, Sherman said he's now convinced that the student-run Synapse Video Center and its symbiosis with the Everson was the real key to the extent of video combustion that occurred here in the 70s. Sherman wasn't here when it started—he first visited Syracuse in '76 or '77 when both Ross and Viola were gone—but Carl Geiger has been here all along.

Scratch even a tiny corner of the surface of the early Syracuse days of Ross and Viola and it becomes blazingly obvious that they were the tips of a large iceberg even then, well before February 1998. That was when art critic Roberta Smith would write in her expansive and lushly illustrated cover piece for the Sunday *New York Times* art section, "Art of the Moment Here to Stay," that the two-floor mid-career Bill Viola retrospective opening at the Whitney was "only the most prominent indicator of the medium's pervasive presence."

Last October, artist Carl Geiger sat on the steps in front of the exit doors that line the left side of Hosmer Auditorium at the Everson during Viola and Ross' talk, along with his friends Courtney Rile and Michael Barletta, two young video artists who recently formed their own company, Daylight Blue Media. He's a frequent presence at Spark Video, a robust collective artists' storefront space north of campus on East Fayette Street, and at events at Point of Contact on East Genesee Street, the university-supported gallery and publication directed by Argentine professor Pedro Cuperman (whose collection includes drawings and videos by his long time friend Paik and whose recent shows have included videos by Jaime Davidovich and Tom Sherman).

As a Syracuse University undergraduate, Geiger was a founder of Synapse Video Center and one of the major campus artist-activists here. For a time Viola liked to project videos on the ceiling of his off-campus attic apartment and open the windows, and Geiger remembers sitting on a couch with Viola watching the reactions of passers-by on the street outside. He also remembers that Viola, whose father was an airline executive, could get on a plane pretty much at will—he'd go to the Venice Biennale "for the weekend," Geiger recalls—and he's convinced this was crucial to forming Viola's global perspective. "His peacefulness—it was always, always in his personality," said Geiger. "I was strongly reminded of this when I got to see him last week. His youthful wonder at the world is still there."

For years Geiger has run The Creamery, which is located in an actual old creamery, a former hub of local dairy distribution down a steep dirt road and next to an old railroad stop outside the village of Lafayette, south of Syracuse.

Geiger has continued to make video and combine it with music, photo, dance and other performance art. Like the Everson, he has a closet with metal cabinets lined with video cassettes—the only locked portion of his home—and in the basement there’s the analogue video synthesizer that he built. The Creamery has several live-work spaces that he rents to local artists, and he hosts a variety of art-related events: weekly potlucks, holiday parties, sculpture gardens, a greenhouse. Geiger also adapts computers for people with disabilities to pay the bills. Geiger and his tenants all have their own entrances and their own bathrooms; otherwise, he’s based The Creamery on the rambling, commune-like house in the eastern suburb of Fayetteville where he lived as an undergraduate with other student video artists/activists.

Like Viola with his two-site video installation *Localization*, Geiger was fascinated with video’s capacity to stream images of simultaneously-occurring events. Sitting in his living room one Saturday evening last fall after Viola and Ross had come and gone, Geiger described his *Multi-origination Dance Piece*.

“I had dancers in five different locations around campus, so this dancer would move and the next dancer would see it and respond and the next dancers would see that, and so on. We would do all different set-ups like that, and we also built plastic inflatable modules that you could plug in. That was about the time we shut the University down because of the war [in Vietnam] and they did not want us to assemble. They would say there wasn’t a room available, so we had a UU [University Union] van and we would plug it in and kick it out the door onto the Quad and all of a sudden you had a big room where you could have a meeting. And we designed and actually built the cable system.”

As Viola noted in “History, 10 Years, and the Dreamtime,” there were two distinct streams of video practitioners “from the start,” the video groups and individual artists. Certainly he long had a foot in both streams and that contributed to the personal struggle and shift that culminated in *Room for St. John of the Cross*. But he was keenly aware of this tension early on.

“Artists,” he continued in that essay, “have always been solitary individual characters. Bruce Nauman began using video alone in his studio in 1968.” He noted others who quickly followed—Les Levine, Keith Sonnier, William Wegman, Richard Serra, Vito Acconci, John Baldessari, Paul Kos, Joan Jonas, Peter Campus—“all began making highly personal, individual tapes, most commonly characterized by the presence of the solitary artist on the screen,

often in his or her studio, performing some activity.” He distinguished the video groups coming out of the late-60s as concerned instead with “communications.”

Many of Geiger’s recollections of the early days are about contact with those video groups. Speaking about the Fayetteville house, he told me, “We’d have great dinners and great gatherings because video artists from around the region were always coming around. The Videofreex from Lanesville would come up and Hog Farm stayed with us for a month one summer. People from New York, people from Buffalo, the Ant Farm. There was just a constant flow of people. We didn’t know how anything was going to work out or its importance, but we were passionately into it.”

The Videofreex is a case in point. The Everson video collection contains work by Videofreex and the group’s founder, Perry Teasdale, writes their history in his book, *Videofreex: America’s First Pirate TV Station and the Catskills Collective That Turned It On* (1999). Teasdale later became editor of the *Woodstock Times* newspaper, but Videofreex focused on documenting cultural and political activism of the day such as the Woodstock Festival, anti-war protests, the Black Panthers and the trial of the Chicago 7. And over six years, from 1971 to 1977, Videofreex transmitted more than 250 unlicensed television broadcasts from their broadcast studio in an old boarding house in Lanesville.

A wealth of material exists about such pioneering video activism and their aspirations to use television to reach new audiences directly: Michael Shamberg’s *Guerilla Television* (1972), Deirdre Boyle’s *Subject to Change: Guerilla Television Revisited* (1997) and, since 2004, two books about and a video anthology from the Ant Farm alone; the radical architecture collective operated between 1968–78, also made videos and perhaps inspired those inflatable structures on the Quad that Geiger recalls. The founders of Synapse Video Center were also well aware of Gene Youngblood’s *Expanded Cinema* (1970), and Frank Gillette’s Raindance Corporation magazine *Radical Software*, which published from 1970–74 largely under the guidance of Beryl Korot, Phyllis Gershuny and Ira Schneider, and is available online (with an introduction written for its 2003 launch by David Ross), at Davidson Gigliotti’s excellent archive, radicalsoftware.org.

One of Synapse’s first major projects involved bringing Marshall McLuhan to campus to speak over a weekend that also included a Jefferson Airplane concert, and a marathon music and video event at Manley Fieldhouse; this

resulted in their first video production, *The Manley Edit*. But early in its young life, Synapse Video Center also formed a non-profit corporation, Inner Visions Media Systems, in order to operate in a way that Geiger says allowed them greater access to grant funding and greater freedom within the University. (“Community Darkrooms did the same thing,” Geiger told me. “They started Light Work, their own non-profit outside the University where you could write your own check.”) Geiger was on the original board, along with Henry Baker, Jay Bush, Bob Burns, Pam Shaw, Gail Waldron and Lance Wisniewski. Also important were Robert Charron, Bob Edgar, and Bill Viola.

One key to the era’s explosion was the work people did between disciplines, work that didn’t fit in single academic silos and which brought them into contact with one another. Like Viola, unhappy in the advertising program that his father wanted him to take, and Ross, unhappy with Newhouse’s apparent rejection of his predictions for video’s potential, Geiger was unhappy academically too.

“I was interested in photography and the only place I could do it [in those days] was Newhouse,” he said. “I sort of had an agreement with them. They would say, ‘Okay, if your work is technically alright I will accept it and grade you on that, because your aesthetic is not the aesthetic of what we’re trying to do in journalism.’ And Lance [Wisniewski] was doing the same thing. He was doing video but he was not interested in making broadcast TV game shows, news and weather.”

Geiger has one of the four original copies of Wisniewski’s history of Synapse Video Center; Bob Burns and Gail Waldron and of course Wisniewski have the others. (There are also the two copies floating around that Geiger made and gave to SU’s Bird Library; both have disappeared and last fall he was contemplating how best to provide them with another replacement, perhaps on PDF.) Thumbing through his copy, Geiger pointed out to me each youthful figure in photos and clippings of the Synapse group.

Wisniewski produced his thick history, illustrated with photos, clippings and copies of original documents, because Newhouse professor Richard Barnhill insisted on “a paper” to satisfy an experience credit requirement so he could finally get his Newhouse degree in 1980. He was living in Rochester then, almost three years after he’d left Syracuse, and a decade after he returned here from a period on the West coast to resume his studies by transferring into the television-radio track in Newhouse. Wisniewski

credits Barnhill as the first Syracuse University faculty to support “the new video experiment,” though chances are that simultaneous others such as Jack Nelson simply weren’t known to him yet.

In 1969, Wisniewski left Syracuse University at the end of his sophomore year, “deeply taken” with Marshall McLuhan’s predictions about the consequences of television in *Understanding Media*, published six years previously. Already a student activist who had helped elect David Ifshin president of the University’s student government⁽⁹⁾, Wisniewski writes of his conviction during late 60s turmoil that, “In a time when every social norm was questioned, it became evident to me that no political changes could take place until there were vast changes in our mass media.” He went to San Francisco to learn directly about the “counter-culture” and how he might be part of restructuring television and, while there, helped organize the Bay Area Filmmakers Workshop.

Gone just a few months, Wisniewski had trouble making ends meet and decided he needed to finish school. He was back at Syracuse by the spring of 1970 and changed his major to television-radio at Newhouse. He writes that he “came back with the goal of building a student-run cable television system.” Wisniewski had friends in the student University Union—Gail Waldron and Stew Hesch among them—and was elected UU program director just several weeks before the US invasion of Cambodia on April 30th, which was followed by the National Guard shootings of several students at Kent State University in Ohio during demonstrations.

With \$20,000 allocated by University Union for electronic media and Newhouse’s Richard Barnhill as advisor, Wisniewski and Jeff Chard of WAER (then a student-operated campus radio), set out to produce a three-month series of twenty half-hour television programs on contemporary culture and politics in collaboration with the local public television channel WCNY. They expected to produce and direct it themselves, and were stunned when WCNY returned the budget sheets, which had WCNY consuming the entire amount without a penny left for developing student content and paying student talent.

“We ended the talks right there,” writes Wisniewski. So WCNY’s expectations led them “directly back” to the ambitious goal of creating the first campus cable television system. Thus the founders of Synapse Video Center had their own vivid experience of what David Ross would later call “the success of the failure of video” on commercial cable TV.

Wisniewski later worked for some years for New York's Department of Environmental Conservation, following the toll of DDT pesticide spray on bald eagles. The DEC project brought baby eagles from Alaska to Montezuma Swamp, and Wisniewski built the video surveillance systems that kept watch over the birds. Now Wisniewski and Bob Burns are in the Boston area and produce documentaries for public television at Cambridge Studios. Gail Waldron went to the Bay Area and has remained involved, says Geiger, with women's video projects. Pam Shaw's in Jersey City and Henry Baker, who went on to do graduate work in synaesthesia, is in the DC area. Geiger has stayed in touch with Wisniewski and some of the other "Synapsers," commenting last fall that he'd seen Wisniewski only a few weeks before at an area wedding.

Like Wisniewski, Geiger graduated later.

"I went to school here for eleven years and taught here for five," he said at a gathering to celebrate that event after the University's May commencement, held that rainy Sunday at the Gandee Gallery in the tiny hamlet of Fabius in the hills southeast of Syracuse. But he had just three credits to clear up, and after Viola's visit he set about doing that.

Wisniewski completed his Synapse Video Center history in April 1980 just as the actual fortunes of Synapse were waning. In 1981 the University dismantled Synapse although a portion survived as the still-operating Citrus TV. Tom Sherman sketched the life span roughly.

"I don't think initially it was very big," he said. "A few people were interested. By about '72 they were getting some resources from the University to cable the campus. I know Bill remembers this, actually pulling cables and going down man-holes. Then about '74 they applied to NYSCA to fund a post-production facility for artists. They were doing their own production, had their own equipment and a studio in Watson. Then Newhouse had a television studio—it was under-utilized but pretty good for the time. Video editing was very problematic until around '75, '76. Newhouse had one of the first computer-controlled editing systems, so artists really wanted to get their hands on that. So around '74 to '76 that's when Synapse was a fairly significant non-profit using Newhouse facilities too. So people like Les Levine—he was really important at that time—Les would fly into Syracuse, do a video shoot, use the computer controlled editor, produce a work, do a visiting artist gig and do something at the Everson. That lasted through the 70s. It really had its vital period from about '74 to '80."

Sherman has a set of the Synapse collection; the original half-inch and three-quarter-inch videotapes were transferred to Beta-cam and DVD in 2007. When Synapse folded in 1980, John Orentlicher, then-Chair of Art Media Studies, inherited the Synapse collection and stored it in the video lab of the Art Video BFA and MFA programs.

“I use it for teaching video art history,” he told me. “It’s uneven, but there’s some stuff that’s pretty remarkable.”

Sherman, who at one point was asked to make a lead call to David Ross about an invitation to VPA, spoke similarly of him, saying, “You know, he really has done some very significant work with great integrity. He really digs down when he does curatorial work. I just did some research on some early video and pulled a dozen books and maybe four were anthologies he had edited, with really significant interviews. Not to mention the institutional work. I don’t know how you’d ever put together a resume for him—just a really crazy amount of energy and precision.”

V.

A quiet man not given to hyperbole, Sherman has a vantage point from which to speak of what’s remarkable. In March of last year Tom Sherman was recipient of the Governor General’s Award, Canada’s highest national honor to its artists, in Visual and Art Media; in 2003 he received Canada’s prestigious Bell Award in Video Art. A native of Northern Michigan—he and Experimental Studios professor Jack Nelson later discovered they grew up in small towns about nineteen miles apart—Sherman emigrated to Canada when he was twenty-four. One can discern some important resonances between his career and that of Bill Viola, both in their range of concerns and interest in varied art forms, and as an illustration of how widespread video activity was during the decades of the 70s and 80s.

In the prologue to his 2002 book, *Before and After the I-Bomb: An Artist in the Information Environment*, Sherman writes that his “perspective, though global in scope, is North American in reality...Disillusioned with the American culture of Vietnam and Watergate, I emigrated to Toronto in 1971, where I fell in love with the ideals of Pierre Trudeau’s Canada. I spent the next twenty years in Toronto, Ottawa, and Nova Scotia, returning infrequently to

the States, usually to visit my parents. In 1991, I was not-so-gently prompted by a severe recession in Canada to take an academic position at Syracuse University, where I became half-American again, residing and working in upstate New York during the academic year. For the past decade, I have migrated back and forth from Syracuse to my home on the South Shore of Nova Scotia.”

In Toronto, Sherman co-founded the organization A Space Video in 1973 and in 1978 was a founding co-editor *Fuse Magazine*. He represented Canada at the Venice Biennale 1980. Sherman produced some of the first music videos ever broadcast, contributed to CBC national radio, and wrote for TVOntario’s ground-breaking *Fast Forward* series. He moved to Ottawa in 1981 and in 1983 the National Gallery of Canada mounted *Cultural Engineering*, a ten-year retrospective of his work. He became founding Head of Media Arts section of the Canada Council for the Arts from 1983 to 1987, again an international commissioner for Venice Biennale in 1986. He co-founded Nerve Theory, an international performance art/recording collaborative 1997. In 1991 he came to Syracuse University as director of the School of Art and Design in 1991; several years later he nominated Viola for an honorary doctorate.

“I had been a curator at the Venice Biennale in 1986,” he said, “When I was an international commissioner, we included Viola’s *Room for St. John of the Cross* in the Italian section of the Biennale. I knew Bill before that. I met him in the late 70s. He was over for dinner at Susie Lake’s house. Lake’s a conceptual photography person, but she’s from Detroit originally. She immigrated to Toronto like I did. So—I knew Bill already and we had been in shows together.”

When we spoke last fall, Sherman had recently had an exhibition at the National Gallery in Ottawa in connection with his Governor General’s Award (and had another show was scheduled in late October at Hallwalls in Buffalo and then in January at Point of Contact here in Syracuse). Acutely aware of video preservation issues that museums like the Everson are facing, he explained to me in some detail the delicate process of “baking” worn videotape to soften the coating and get one more good play for reproduction purposes. Only a few museums own the equipment needed for this (the Everson does not and is sending its video out in batches).



Photo © David Broda/Syracuse University, used with permission

Bill Viola (left) talks with fellow video artist Tom Sherman at the Everson event. Behind them is an early Viola video, newly restored, from the museum's collection, featuring a much younger Viola.

“There were some works that had deteriorated in our collection and we were able to find them in another collection,” he said of the National Gallery show. “They had to re-constitute eight tapes, so that’s how most people are doing it. Only people as concerned and as well off as Bill Viola have a technical supervisor who’s moving their material. And it’s actually becoming expensive now for museums to collect video. I’ve lost a lot of my stuff and I’ll tell you quite honestly, when I did it was not a big concern. I think artists are often like that—they’ll get rid of work, say they sold it and don’t know where it is now, and so on. Early on artists are not necessarily concerned with preservation.”

The National Gallery collected Sherman’s work over the years and purchased the rights to video for the life of the tape. Sherman says this is how most people license their work, and when videos are displayed, the National Gallery would have the right to duplicate the work on the point of display. Sherman and other Governor General recipients were honored at a gala.

He had to make three speeches, which his wife Jan Pottie documented; two can be found on YouTube. He says he understands exactly how important Synapse was for the young video artists here in Syracuse.

“I thanked the artist-run network that I grew up in,” he said. “I went to Toronto in 1971, during the early stages of the artist-run centers like Art Metropole in Toronto—this was like Synapse, only I was doing it there. I paid homage to that network and how that’s where I got my start. And I complimented the Canada Council on provincial and federal agencies that kept that system in place. It’s tremendously productive. For me it was very important, you know, to give back, at least in sentiment. There’s a local artists’ scene that was there in the audience. You know, they felt good about themselves. So it was important to say that.”

Bill Viola’s honorary doctorate in 1995 occurred at an important juncture in his career. He went to the Venice Biennale, he and David Ross began planning for the Whitney retrospective. The honorary doctorate also began an era of more contact between Viola and the University.

“Then a year afterward I think he came in and did the convocation for the College of Visual and Performing Arts. And maybe a year after that he even did a little bit of teaching for a week or so with me. He gave us some equipment and a collection of his work, things like that. It was really just a question of thanking him and acknowledging what had occurred. Now some of the graduate students make a trip to Los Angeles and two of my students were able to spend the whole day at Bill Viola’s place. Ross has done the same kind of thing. Jack [Nelson] went to the honorary doctorate and we had a big dinner and all that. Jack was very proud because this was his protégé. And then Jack died ten months later.”

There’s a photo of Jack Nelson, who taught the first video course at Syracuse as “image research” in Experimental Studios, in which he’s wearing a wool plaid Christy’s cap over his longish hair, sports a goatee and peers wittily over the top of a large soap bubble he’s blowing through a child’s looped wand. It’s the same photo of Nelson that sits on a shelf in Viola’s office in one scene from Mark Kidel’s documentary. The story of how Nelson saved Viola from what he considered a dismal fate in advertising design after his first couple years at Syracuse has been told often with minor variations and embellishments in the details. I heard it from David Ross (who also got significant support from Nelson), from Tom Sherman and from Viola himself. It involves Viola seeking out Nelson to sign off on a

change of major. Nelson was in the basement of Smith Hall, where he had patched together a papier mache moon and was projecting Super8 film of wind blowing around high grass through a toilet paper tube, chanting, “There’s a wind storm on the moon!” when Viola came across him in the dark. Viola concluded his telling to me by saying, “I was home.”

Sherman also spoke about Larry Bakke to me, as well as during his recorded voice-over remarks on video at the Arents Award event the day after the Everson talk.

“I’d never met Bakke, because I didn’t come here until after he had died suddenly,” Sherman told me. “He came from Vancouver. He was Canadian and very much into McLuhan. He and Karen [Bakke, who still teaches at Syracuse] met in Berkeley. He ends up teaching in the Foundation program in the School of Art and Design, a year-long seminar on art history that has two hundred and fifty students registered and often almost that many more crowded in to hear his lectures. Bakke would just soar, apparently—an endless lateral thinker and very entertaining and, according to Karen, very easily able to relate things to the students. So Bill went into that and it just blew his mind. Karen says that Bill would come over to the house like three nights a week—kind of stumbling in without announcing himself and end up having dinner or dessert—and he would stay through the early evening and he and Larry would argue. They took great pleasure in this. So this was pretty significant for a young person. And as crazy as Jack was, he was a stickler for details and a really good designer, so between the two of them that was the foundation.”

Discussing how both Viola and Ross have been generous with students, Sherman said, “Yes, it’s like a direct transfer. They got it from Jack and Bakke and they’re giving it back. Well, the moral of the story is the institution is the people.” ■

May 2011

Special thanks to Tom Sherman.

Nancy Keefe Rhodes writes about film, photo and visual arts. She is a member of the Syracuse Public Arts Commission and recently curated “Hand-in-Hand: Artist and Public in Depression-era America” for SUArt Galleries. She teaches film theory and criticism in Transmedia at Syracuse University, and edits the Moving Images section of Stone Canoe.

ENDNOTES:

1. Syracuse University's George Arents Awards were presented to four alumni in 2010: Suzanne de Passe ('68) for Excellence in Entertainment, Brian McLane ('69) for Excellence in Social Activism and Disability Rights, Bill Viola ('73) for Excellence in Video Art, and Karen B. Winnick for Excellence in the Arts and Literacy Advocacy.

2. Viola showed three other video clips during the Everson event. In his first remarks, Viola said, "What I thought we would do—which I always do when I give talks, large or small—is I'd like to start with an image."

Fire Woman (2006) was originally part of the Tristan Project that Viola re-cast as a stand-alone piece using his own sound, a large vertical projection of a woman standing before a wall of flame and collapsing into her reflection in a pool of water. In 2004 Viola began a collaboration with opera director Peter Sellars and Los Angeles Philharmonic conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen to mount a new production of Richard Wagner's 1865 work of four-and-a-half hours, *Tristan und Isolde*, a medieval story of consuming love. The new work premiered in concert form in Los Angeles in 2004 over three evenings, each act accompanied by a 20th century music work influenced by the opera. The opera itself had its fully staged premiere in April 2005 at the Opéra National de Paris, Bastille, and was again performed at Lincoln Center in New York City in 2007. After the 2005 theatrical performances, excerpted portions of the video material and other footage were re-worked as *LOVE/DEATH: The Tristan Project* for gallery and museum situations and have toured extensively in various combinations.

Memoria (2000), also part of *The Passions*, is a grainy, black-and-white surveillance video image of a man's face projected on a loosely hanging silk cloth in a darkened room. At the Everson, Viola said, "It's about memory and the fragility of remembering and this face that keeps coming in and going out of focus." In 2000, David Frankel wrote in *Artforum* that it seemed to him "inspired by the veronica, the cloth said to hold the last impression of Christ's face." Viola has projected work onto hanging fabric before, notably through successive layers of translucent cloth hung parallel in *The Veiling* (1995).

Passage into Night (2005) is sometimes shown with portions of the Tristan Project; Viola screened the first few minutes at the Everson. A robed woman walks toward the camera on a desert plain through intense heat that distorts the air (recalling his 1979 work on the instability of perception, *Chott el-Djerid*, in which winter blizzards in Illinois and Saskatchewan contrast with heat mirages in the basin of a dry salt lake in the Tunisian Sahara). Viola said at the Everson of this work, "It took her twenty minutes walking toward the camera to completely cover the camera with her robes—therefore, passage into night. I slowed it down I think three times or so, so it ended up being fifty minutes long."

3. "The Sound of One Line Scanning," first published in 1986, is reprinted in *Reasons for Knocking on an Empty House: Writings 1973-1994* (1995).

4. The Experimental Television Center (ETC) Video History Project contains detailed documentation of this conference as well as the text of Ross' keynote speech, which has been published elsewhere as well. Go to experimentalvcenter.org/history.

5. “History, 10 Years, and the Dreamtime” is reprinted in the collection *Reasons for Knocking on an Empty House: Writings 1973-1994* (1995).

6. The Experimental Television Center also provides a list of artists represented in the Everson Museum’s collection: Vito Acconci, David Atwood, Henry Baker, John Baldessari, Ros Barron, Fred Barzyk, Gregory Battcock, Bill Beirne, Stephen Beck, Lynda Benglis, Dan Berrigan, Cynthia Ann Bickley, Phil Block, Norman Bluhm, Skip Blumberg, Joseph Bodolai, George Bolling, Dan Boord, Jack Bowen, Robert Bowers, Joseph Brenmann, Drew Browning, Lenny Bruce, Barbara Buckner, Chris Burden, Don Burgy, Bob Burns, P. Buscemi, Michael Butler, Gerald Byerly, Nancy Cain, Colin Campbell, Peter Campus, Tobe J. Carey, Frank Cavestani, Laura Cavestani, Carl Chew, Circuit Catalog, Josephine Clare, Elizabeth Clare, Robert Edgar, Dave Duff, David Cort, Stephan Cruise, Jaime Davidovich, Gigliotti Davidson, Doug Davis, Decker, Tom DeFanti, Gary Demos, Dimitri Devyatkin, Ken Dominick, Juan Dos Santos, Juan Downey, Jean Dupuy, Eckankar, James Edwards, Edward Emshwiller, Bill Etra, Louise Etra, Kit Fitzgerald, Richard Foreman, Rod Fountain, Terry Fox, Hermine Freed, Howard Fried, Bart Friedman, Dieter Froese, Carl Geiger, Henry Gernhardt, Frank Gillette, Jean Guimmi, Joel Glassman, Michael Goldberg, Ron Gorchove, Carol Goss, Cynthia Grey, Clement Greenberg, Ernest Gusella, James Harithas, Michael Hayden, Noel Harding, David Hays, Ron Hays, Mortimer Heller, Gary Hill, Kay Hines, Ralph Hocking, Jeff Hudson, Geoffry Igbal, Taka Iimura, Ithaca Video Co-op, Charles James, J.D. Jarvis, Paul Jeffers, Paul Jenewein, Johnny Video, Joan Jonas, Gunilla Mallory Jones, Mitsura Kataoke, David H. Katzivz, John Keeler, Fred Kessler, Paula Kim, Richard Kline; Tom Klinkowstein, Ken Knowlton, Steven Koplan, Beryl Korot, Marlene Kos, Paul Kos, Mitchell Kreigman, Shigeko Kubota, B. Kunstler, Beth Latham, Les Levine, Donald Lipski, Barb Lloyd, Jane Logemann, Mary Lucier, Machlin, Magic Video Softmachine, Eva Maier, Christa Maiwald, Phillip Mallory, Andy Mann, John Manning, John Margolis, T. Marshall, Bruce McCurdy, Laurie McDonald, John McEwen, Patricia Moella, Linda Montano, Jose Montes-Barquer, R. Moreira, James W. Morris, Antonio Muntadas, Rita Myers, Ronald Nameth, Jack Nelson, N.E. Thing Co., Terry Noel, Florence Nyland, Nimmer Amenoff, Dennis Oppenheim, John Orentlicher, Raphael M. Ortiz, Paul Ott, Tony Ousler, Nam June Paik, Leonard Patterson, I.M. Pei, Tom Phillips, Patti Podesta, Norma Pontes, Michael Portis, Anthony Ramos, Ed Rankus, Bill Ritchie, Judson Rosebush, D. Ross, Michael Rothbard, Ruth Rothko, Susan Russell, John Sanborn, Dan Sandin, Joseph Scala, Patsy Scala, Peter Scheer, Van Schley, Ira Schneider, Lillian Schwartz, Penny Schwartz, Seidenberg, Eric Seigle, Richard Serra, Owen Shapiro, Willoughby Sharp, Tom Sherman, Michael Snow, Tom Snyder, N.R. Sobel, Keith Sonnier, Lisa Steel, Lisa Steele, John Sturgeon, Skip Sweeney, Elizabeth Sweetham, Barbara Sykes, Aldo Tambellini, The Review, F. Torres, Bob Tuvis, Stan Van Der Beck, Peter Van Riper, Woody and Steina Vasulka, Videoball, Videofreex, Video Repertoire, Bill Viola, Ruth Volmer, Willie Walker, William Wegman, Lance Wisniewski, Jane Wright, Walter Wright, and Jud Yalkut. Also included in the collection are the Experimental Television Center’s Binghamton Audio Visual #1, #3, #4, #5 and #6, Iowa City Series #1-6, the Everson’s St. Jude Invitational tapes: the 12th Annual Exhibition, tapes #1-3 and #5-9.

7. Full disclosure: the author is a member of the Syracuse Public Art Commission whose appointed term began in October 2009.

8. *Bill Viola: Selected Works* (2010) includes *Migration* (1976), *The Reflecting Pool* (1977–79), *Ancient of Days* (1979–81), and *Chott el-Djerid* (1979). *Hatsu-Yume* (1981), whose title is Japanese for the first dream of the new year, had a VHS release in 1998 and then in 2006 on DVD for the occasion of its exhibition at the Mori Museum in Tokyo. *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* (1986) and *The Passing* (1991) also came out on DVD in 2006. The three DVDs released in 2006 are available at Netflix. Mark Kidel's 2004 documentary, *The Eye of the Heart*, broadcast by the BBC for *The Passions'* exhibition in London's National Gallery—the first solo show there of a contemporary artist—was also released on DVD in 2005.

9. Wisniewski's Synapse history includes a clipping dated April 11, 1978, from the *Daily Orange*, in which the campus paper printed material dated January 1971 and obtained by FOIA request from the CIA about their view of radicalism on campus, beginning with protests on campus in 1967 against Dow Chemical Company (manufacturers of the napalm used in Vietnam) and the CIA (for its spying on the National Student Association), the explosion of "several small bombs on or near campus" in 1969, protests against the ROTC in 1970, and then focusing on David Ifshin. Ifshin was also elected to the presidency of the NSA, supported a march on Washington that was upcoming at the time of the report, and had just returned from a trip to North Vietnam with other students radicals. Ifshin also went west, getting his law degree from Stanford in 1977. He died in 1996 after a professional career as an authority on campaign financing, sometime lobbyist, and general counsel in upper level Democratic Party politics.