

Bill Viola *Naissance à rebours* *Movements*



Movements is a tool designed by **DHC/ART Education** to encourage in-depth explorations of key concepts evoked by the works presented in *Naissance à rebours*. By highlighting these points of conceptual departure through the document *Movements*, **DHC/ART** educators intend to inspire dialogue about the exhibition and encourage visitors to elaborate on the proposed themes through their personal interpretations and reflections. Over time, these traveling concepts¹ are subsequently enriched as they inform new contributions to our evolving conversations about art.

Movements also serves as a reminder that an aesthetic experience engages the body—its senses and its movements—as much as the intellect. The body’s physical, emotional, and perceptive gestures are intimately linked as we move through the exhibition space and our senses are awakened. The rhythm of our trajectories and changing perspectives also mobilizes our vision; images take shape as our memory and imagination are touched by the emerging aesthetic landscape. *Movements* is thus an invitation for the visitor to become immersed—mind and body—in **DHC/ART** exhibitions, thereby developing a rich and dynamic understanding of the works.

1. **BAL, Mieke** (2001). “Concept”. *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Composition: *Suspending and Bending Time*



Bill Viola, *Walking on the Edge*, 2012. Courtesy of Bill Viola Studio

*And who are you? Time who subdues all things.
Why do you stand on tip-toe? I am ever running.
And why do you have a pair of wings on your feet?
I fly with the wind.
And why do you hold a razor in your right hand?
As a sign to people that I am sharper than any sharp edge.*
- Posidippus of Pella¹

The ancient Greeks had two words for time: *kairos* and *chronos*. In mythology, Kairos, the youngest divine son of Zeus, was the personification of opportunity and the perfect moment. Portrayed as a young and handsome naked man, with a bald head except for a lock of hair on his forehead, he could only be grasped if met face-to-face. Whereas *chronos* indicates the notion of sequential time – that which can be measured – *kairos* is the suspended moment when all things are possible². The sudden instant of connection with one's self and with the other, being confronted by overwhelming beauty, truth – but also trauma and despair – all happen within this frame of time outside of time. Due to *kairos*' very subjective nature, how can we share these rare moments of self-awareness?

The art of Bill Viola addresses notions of temporality through meditation and the materialization of time itself. Time is his medium, and the essence of his oeuvre, as he raises questions about the cycle of life and death, consciousness, transcendence and memory. In fact, Viola refers to video as a way of “sculpting time,”³ which he bends, stretches, shortens or reverses, inviting us to expand our sensorial perceptions.

Ancestors (2012), *The Encounter* (2012) and *Walking on the Edge* (2012) are part of the *Mirage* series, set on a long dry lake bed in the Mojave Desert, California. Using the desert as a metaphor for the quest of self-knowledge, he asks us to reflect on the physical and metaphysical aspects of consciousness.

The Encounter suggests a rite of passage. In the hazy desert, two women walk towards the viewer on opposite sides of the screen. They turn toward each other and pause. In a gesture of generosity, the elderly woman solemnly hands the younger woman a gift – a secret, sacred knowledge? During this brief encounter, both characters are transformed and continue on their journeys, as they retrace each other's path. The juxtaposition of old and new as well as their circular trajectory evokes cycles of nature, as well as questions regarding connection, beauty, fear and mystery. And through this journey we are brought in to the now: “the present moment, with all its uncertainty and promise.”⁴

Bill Viola is often credited with addressing the universal human experience. If any, what are some of the universal questions presented in the exhibition? In your opinion, how do certain groups benefit from this notion of universality?

*In a consumer capitalist culture where time is considered a commodity, slowing down can be seen as a transgressive act. Given some of our considerations about the notions of time, what are some of the ways that *Ancestors* and *Walking on the Edge* make you aware of the present moment and of your body in space? What happens if you move closer to the screen, hold your breath for a few second or find a more comfortable position? How does it change your reading of the works?*

¹ Epigram to the bronze statue of Kairos by Lysippos quoted from COHEN, Simona (2014). *Transformations of Time and Temporality in Medieval and Renaissance Art*. Leiden-Boston: Brill.

² GIBBS, Laura (ed.) (2002). *Aesop's Fables*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³ MARLOWE, Lara (2014). “Moving images that freeze time”. *The Irish Times*, March 24 edition.

⁴ HANHARDT, John G., Kira PEROV and Bill VIOLA (2015). *Bill Viola*. London: Thames & Hudson, pp. 231.

Content: *Materiality*



Bill Viola, *Inverted Birth*, 2014. Courtesy of Bill Viola Studio

There is no question that Bill Viola's large-scale works – and the power that they emit – provoke thought and contemplation. It is like stepping into an out-of-body, spiritual, and transcendental experience. Beyond this, there is a kind of visceral reaction that the presence of his works demands. We are reminded of our bodies in the presence of other bodies, of our physicality, of our skin, its sensitivity, the feeling of a touch – and the weight that Viola's subjects can endure. But the deluge in *Inverted Birth* (2014) is reversed: it is an upward downpour, and presents the idea of a life cycle that doesn't necessarily begin with birth and end with death. Viola has described *Inverted Birth* as depicting “five stages of awakening”¹ which are represented by physical elements that make up our lives, including earth, blood, milk, water and air.

Reflections and reactions abound when experiencing *Inverted Birth*. Making sense of these in a sequential manner is not always an easy task. Perhaps the only way to approach an understanding of one's own reactions to the work is in a way that allows for a fluctuation, that can be copied and pasted, edited and deleted. A subversion, rather than an inversion, of the orderly text. No intro, body and conclusion. Just words born from the senses.

Here are some of mine:

- Passages in states of being, in thoughtfulness, in awakening, moving from one state to the next in a fluid motion – the violence of it, the beauty of it.
- The materiality of a work that is video, that holds a performance, that is unattainable, but is something that we can relate to and understand on many levels.
- The presence of the work, of recognizing something that we can all imagine feeling, in a physical sense.
- The body and what it can sustain, survive, overcome, experience, take.
- Patience of the viewer. The work unfolds slowly. It takes its time.
- Time, nonmaterial, but so tangible in slow-motion works... it's like you're holding on to time as you watch this process unfold before you.
- Unnatural movement of the water, an upward deluge, defying gravity.
- The supernatural.
- The idea of a cycle – birth and death and rebirth – as opposed to separate ends of a linear system.

Note some of your own reflections on another of Viola's works. What do you notice after this exercise? How did you organize your thoughts? How did the experience of making a list affect your experience of the work?

How does your understanding of Viola's work balance the spiritual versus the material quality? Do you feel that they are in opposition to each other, or do they co-exist harmoniously?

¹ HANHARDT, John D. (2015). “2000s : A Humanism for Our Times.” *Bill Viola*. Paris : Réunion des musées nationaux, pp. 239.



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