CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Bill Viola's figures of submersion as techniques of transindividual affect
Authors	del Río, Elena
Publication date	2022-07-15
Original Citation	del Río, E. (2022) 'Bill Viola's figures of submersion as techniques of transindividual affect', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 23, pp. 52-72. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.23.03
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.23.03
Rights	© 2022, the Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/
Download date	2026-11-07 12:53:24
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/13368



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media
no. 23, 2022, pp. 52–72
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.23.03

Bill Viola's Figures of Submersion as Techniques of Transindividual Affect

Elena del Río



Figure 1: Bill Viola, *Nantes Triptych* (1992).
Video/sound installation, 29:46 minutes. Photo: Benny Chan.

Abstract: *This article seeks to establish a fundamental continuity between distinctive periods in Bill Viola's work. Examining two relatively early works—*The Reflecting Pool *(1977–79) and* The Passing *(1991)—and the more recent piece* Self Portrait, Submerged *(2013), I consider the artist's physical presence as a catalyst for an inherent continuity between early formalism and the intense affectivity of the later period. Affect and its transindividual energies were present in Viola even before they came to acquire a more explicit articulation in the 2000s and beyond. We see in Viola's work a merging of artist and artwork which drastically departs from traditional notions of authorial autonomy and mediation, giving rise instead to an event of transindividual affect. I consider the merging of artist and artwork here in light of Gilbert Simondon's philosophy of individuation, a process-oriented ontology remarkably resonant with Viola's art. I rely on Simondon's concepts of the technical object, the preindividual and the transindividual, to examine: first, Viola's immanent, transductive relation to his medium as*

© Elena del Río
This article is published as Open Access under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial Licence (creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0) which permits non-commercial use, distribution and reproduction provided the original work is cited

illustrated in The Reflecting Pool*; second, the way in which the artist's participatory witnessing of technological ontogenesis transmutes into a directly affective experience in* The Passing*; and finally, the confluent affectivity of artist and spectator in* Self Portrait, Submerged*.*

In a career spanning over four decades, video and media artist Bill Viola has featured himself in many of his works. In these instances, his physical presence serves to enhance the confluence of technology and nature. In enacting the concept of a techno-ecology, Viola suggests that technology springs from nature's own tendencies to extend itself beyond the given. A techno-ecology is the milieu in which the human naturally and of necessity relates to himself and to other human and non-human beings. Viola's work thus affirms the becoming/belonging together of living beings and technical beings. But through this consistent affirmation, the artist's self-inscription in his work has taken many diverse forms. Viola's diversity is indicative of his gradual shift from a fascination with the perceptual capacities of video as medium to a fascination with its affective potential.

The purpose of this article, however, is not to fixate on a rigid divide between Viola's early formalism and the intense affectivity of the later period. Focusing on two relatively early works—*The Reflecting Pool* (1977–79) and *The Passing* (1991)—and the more recent piece *Self Portrait, Submerged* (2013), I will instead examine the artist's presence as a catalyst for the inherent continuity between formalist and affective concerns. The earlier examples illuminate the extent to which affect and its transindividual energies were already present in Viola even before they came to acquire a more explicit articulation in the 2000s and beyond. Viola's physical engagement with the work produces a merging of artist and artwork which drastically departs from traditional notions of authorial autonomy, subjectivity and mediation, giving rise instead to an event of transindividual affect. It is the artist's physical presence—with its endless material transformations—that consolidates an incipient sense of transindividual affectivity, an affectivity that is also channelled within the works. In what follows, I will consider the merging of artist and artwork in Viola's video works in light of Gilbert Simondon's philosophy of individuation, a process-oriented ontology remarkably resonant with Viola's art.[1] In particular, I will rely on Simondon's concepts of the technical object, the preindividual and the transindividual, to examine: first, Viola's immanent, transductive relation to his medium as illustrated in *The Reflecting Pool*; second, the way in which the artist's active/participatory witnessing of technological ontogenesis transmutes into a more directly affective experience in *The Passing*, and finally, the confluent affectivity of artist and spectator in *Self Portrait, Submerged*.

Viola's Work in the Light of Simondon's Philosophy of Individuation

Before I begin to examine the videos, I would like to offer a few general remarks to consider the way in which Simondon's understanding of individuation (as it pertains both to the technical and the human being) also figures prominently in Viola's philosophical practice of his medium. For Simondon, the primary concern is not the individual, but the perpetual process of individuation that individuals go through. In shifting attention from fixed substance to open process, the concepts of preindividual and transindividual gain priority over notions of the individual subject. Both of these concepts speak to the need to theorise a *more-than-individual*, that is, to account for the changing and indeterminate boundaries of the individuated individual

at any one point. As Brian Massumi puts it, evincing the need to deform language in order to convey the singularity of Simondon's ideas, "There is no 'one' but always a one *moreness*: a 'more-than-one', everywhere energetically in potential" ("Technical Mentality" 33). Preindividual thus designates the reservoir of potential that serves as fuel or engine in the process of individuation, a "*reserve of being* as yet nonpolarized, available, awaiting" (Simondon qtd. in Combes 49). Preindividual is not a definitive or personal form, but a diversity of shared potentials and impersonal forces that drives the changing individuations of forms and individuals.

Consonant with the preindividual, the transindividual prioritises relationality over the individual terms of a relation. It designates a way of being that is purely affective, that is, open to a collective becoming that puts into question the reality and consistency of individuality itself. The concept of the transindividual responds to the necessity for humans to be less human-centered and more world-connected. For Simondon, reaching the transindividual is not a fait accompli. As he explains, the transindividual is only discovered "at the end of the ordeal [that the subject has] imposed upon itself [. . .] an ordeal of isolation" (qtd. in Combes 35). From a substantialist perspective that regards individual and collective as binary terms, the discovery of transindividuality through isolation is certainly a paradoxical proposition. But for Simondon the latency of the collective lies most insistently in solitude, a kind of solitude that in fact emerges as "a milieu densely populated with relations" (Combes 37).

Most striking about Simondon's philosophy of individuation is that it pertains equally to human and technical beings. Like humans, technical beings are given a certain autonomy and indeterminacy, qualities which allow them to evolve and undergo their own processes of individuation. Through increasing concretisation and independence from its human support, the machine develops its own capacities and possibilities beyond a merely utilitarian function, joining other machines and forming new technical ensembles. In the kind of technological milieu envisioned by Simondon, the human does not keep the machines in a subservient position. Rather, the human acts in their midst as a sort of facilitator and transducer of the machines' autonomous capacities, serving as an interpretive relay among them.

Viola's working methods, inclusive of his own physical signatures and traces, strongly align with Simondon's concept of individuation. As we shall see, Viola's enactments of individuality through his own physical body and actions and through his embedded relation to the technology similarly turn away from a focus on the individual as stable identity and toward a focus on individuation as a process that gives rise to successive and different iterations of individuality. As in Simondon, these successive iterations are made possible by energetic exchanges with one's milieu. In Viola's case, as in Simondon, there is a synthesis of natural and technological elements without a sense of boundary or hierarchy. In Viola's videos, human individuation crystallises from a collective share of preindividual potential, reaching a level of transindividuality that dismantles the very opposition between individual and collective, between intimacy and impersonality.

When he appears in his own work, Viola in fact adopts a point of view that lies somewhere between intimacy and impersonality. As John Hanhardt has noted, "Viola's early videotapes and installations, although focusing on the body, possess an impersonal quality and

do not convey the emotion and feeling of the later work" (80). Although Hanhardt seems to offer a counterargument to my insistence on a basic continuity between Viola's major periods, his words merely suggest an opposition between impersonality and emotion, not necessarily one between impersonality and affect. Hanhardt's statement unwittingly serves as a reminder of the distinction between emotion and affect, helping to consolidate the idea that affect is in fact not absent from Viola's early works. In other words, the impersonal quality Hanhardt attributes to Viola's early period may be an impediment to emotion, but not to affect. As an energetic process of activation and transformation of emotions, affect is not limited to or exhausted in a specific kind of emotion. Nor is it associated with a single body, or a personal psychological configuration. In fact, affect is not individual but "transindividual". As such, it fits rather smoothly with the understated, low-key performativity of Viola's appearances in work of the 1970s and 80s. These appearances are traversed by a sort of anonymity that renders the individual body almost transparent or imperceptible. Yet, as we shall see, its force lies in conveying a strong sense of transindividuality.

Yet another major affinity between Viola and Simondon concerns the artist's position in relation to the technical apparatus. In this regard, the style and methods Viola employs in figuring his own presence in his work do not fit into an artist/subject versus work/object schema. Instead, an immersive experience places him in an absolutely immanent relation to the world, to the milieu he himself invents and brings to life. This immersive, immediate experience completely displaces the representational schema of perceptual mediation, becoming instead an instance of immediation. While mediation maintains a sense of the separation and individual identity of subjects and objects involved in the experience—a sense of two different realities separated off by the mediating agent—immediation removes any sense of separate, distinct individualities coming into the process. Immediation takes process itself as a multi-causal event in which a diversity of components and forces, divested of hierarchical order or centre, equally contribute to the movement or emergence of something new.[2] This notion very smoothly fits into the process of transduction and transformation that takes place in Viola's figures of submersion, in which the artist is definitely a key transductive agent/force, yet by no means the only one. As we shall see later, it is precisely Viola's attraction to an experience of fusion with technology and water that decisively makes the idea of mediation untenable in this case.

Viola's work breathes a sense of total ease and even love towards the formal and technical mechanisms he employs. Hanhardt accurately describes Viola's presence in his early work as uniquely positioned among his contemporaries, consisting of "an incisive and all-encompassing openness to technological developments in the medium" in contrast with "the reductive conceptual and performative strategies of the art of [the 70s]" (80). For Hanhardt, the purpose of Viola's self-exposure is "to test himself and his medium" (80). This is certainly an accurate description of the artist's performative activity in *The Reflecting Pool* and many other early works. Yet, as we shall see later, Viola's presence in *The Passing* goes well beyond a testing of himself and his medium to suggest an intense opening onto affective motifs. A meditation on birth and death in this work is triggered by personal events in the artist's life. At the same time, its themes allow for wide transindividual resonance. When compared with the later Passions series, affect in *The Passing* is not primarily channelled through the body and the face, however. Rather, it is integrated into the creation of an all-enveloping affective atmosphere. In this way, I will suggest, *The Passing* may be read as a transitional point between the more

austere technological self-reflexivity of the early period and the foregrounding of affect in Viola's later work. Finally, *Self Portrait, Submerged* stands as a consummate example of Viola's attempt at drawing the viewer into an experience of transindividual affect, an experience that transcends any clear narrative or personal motivation.

Submerged in the Tools of His Trade: Viola in *The Reflecting Pool*

In *The Reflecting Pool*, Viola emerges from the woods and walks up to the edge of a pool. The surrounding greenery is brightly reflected in the living, changing surface of the water. After a few long moments, he suddenly propels himself forward and upward to plunge into the pool. In the midst of this action, his body freezes in mid-air in a fetus-like position. We soon notice that the body's stasis is deceptive. Inhabiting another dimension and moved by a different speed, the suspended body begins to undergo a change that slowly blends his form into the surrounding milieu.



Figure 2: Bill Viola, *The Reflecting Pool* (1977–79). Videotape, colour, mono sound. Projected image size: 84 in. x 63 in. (213.5 x 160 cm). 7 minutes. Performer: Bill Viola. Photo: Kira Perov © Bill Viola Studio.



Figure 3: Bill Viola*, The Reflecting Pool* (1977–79). Videotape, colour, mono sound. Projected image size: 84 in. x 63 in. (213.5 x 160 cm). 7 minutes. Performer: Bill Viola. Photo: Kira Perov © Bill Viola Studio.

Alongside the body's gradual disappearance, the pool and its reflected images continue to change. The brightly shimmering light cast upon the green shapes reflected in the pool is reminiscent of an Impressionist canvas, brought under the magical spell of video technology. On this video canvas, a three-phased event of impact, propagation and change repeats itself three consecutive times: as a single drop of water falls on the surface, a rippling effect starts from the centre and propagates itself towards the edges. When the rippling movement settles, the surface becomes a limpid mirror projecting a quasi-photographic image of the surrounding trees. When the surface is disturbed by the rippling effect, the reflected image becomes indistinct.

In the next phase, the pool's surface starts generating its own fabulations: the man's body is reflected in the pool without an actual body outside it. Something like a pebble stirs the surface, sending out ripples again. As the movement settles, the reflected figure becomes clearly visible, only now a woman has joined the man/Viola. By this time, his (double) suspended body has totally disappeared into the lush surroundings. A reverse ripple effect is set off on the surface of the water. The effect begins with a wide circular wave working its way towards the centre, resolving back into the splash of water that triggered its movement. Immediately after, the pool's surface becomes uniformly dark, giving rise to another fabulation: a human torso is obscurely

glimpsed in its waters. The pool finally goes back to reflecting the lush foliage. An actual body, now naked, emerges out of the water in real time. With his back to the camera, Viola walks away and disappears into the woods.

The video's theme of submersion, the sound of running water, the uncertain sense of reality that accompanies the body's inhabitation of various fluid, virtual milieus—the combination of all of these elements produces a powerful, immersive experience. The dramatic/narrative structure of the piece looks deceptively simple: plunge, immersion and emergence, we might say, are the video's three acts. Yet, the interrupted plunge, the unexpected final emergence, the pervasive reflections and distortions of reality and their hypnotic effects were achieved through a deployment of video effects which, although appearing rather intricate, Viola describes as "fairly primitive" (qtd. in Bellour 95). In response to Raymond Bellour's question as to how *The Reflecting Pool* was technically produced, Viola explains that, "The frame is broken up into three distinct levels of time—real time, still, and time lapse—and reconstructed to look like a complete image of a single space, since the lines along which it was divided match the geometry of the original scene" (97). Viola speaks of "cut[ting] specific areas of the frame into different sections of time […] recombining levels of time within the frame", having "three separate recordings" and matting one image onto another (96).

On one level, *The Reflecting Pool* is a measured exercise in technical experimentation, combining "spontaneous inspiration and calculated, rational thought" (102). Viola here expresses his fascination with the ways that video manipulation can make discontinuous spaces and times appear absolutely and impossibly continuous. *The Reflecting Pool* takes pleasure in the juggling of a diversity of spatiotemporal flows, juxtaposing heterogeneous milieus. It consists of "heterogeneous blocks of spatiotemporal duration" (Sauvagnargues 134). The work traces the flow of time along different lines or vectors (real time, still, time lapse), opening onto unexpected twists that provide specific resolutions to these temporal flows without foreclosing further possibilities.

The fascination with endless perceptual possibilities that drives *The Reflecting Pool* might lead us to assume that the artist here has taken a certain controlling distance from his work—that he uses video as a kind of mediating presence effecting a separation between perceiver and perceived, apparatus and representation.[3] Yet, a closer look at *The Reflecting Pool*, and the artist's physical presence in it, calls for a more nuanced interpretation. Indeed, Viola's body in the piece becomes the site of a rather disorganised, indeterminate experience. The artist's lack of absolute control over the work is reinforced by his own affective, rather than exclusively cognitive, relation to it. "Even though some of my work is precisely predetermined down to the individual shots", he says, "the experience I'm having while recording is still connected to the work […] It is important for me not always to know what I am doing" (qtd. in Bellour 102). Viola's presence in *The Reflecting Pool* is affective not in the sense of triggering a subjective, emotional experience, but as a catalyst for impersonal, material forces that put him/us in touch with non-human movements and rhythms. With his physical and mental immersion in water, time and technology, Viola invites us to be affected by our own immersion, certainly embodied if not literally physical like his own. Such an experience mobilises affect in the radical sense that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari understand it: affect arises independently of organised living bodies and their subjects, as circuits of material forces that disorganise and shock, rather than

stabilise, the embodied subject. In this sense, as Claire Colebrook understands it (in line with Massumi), the autonomy of affect refers to "somatic responses that not only exceed the cognitive but also the level of feeling and emotion" (90).

In *The Reflecting Pool*, the demarcation of observer and perceptual field is not stable or consistent, instead conveying a sense of affective immediation/immediacy in the relationship between artist and work. The observer's immersive point of view is inscribed through three major conceptual figures that are evocative of Simondon's thought: first, the open process of individuation staged through several iterations of Viola's body; second, the state of bodily immersion figured through the media of water and technology and finally, in connection with the latter, the reciprocal immediacy established between artist-technician and work. I will now examine each of these three aspects in detail.

For Viola, "the key element in the piece is the frozen action" (qtd. in Bellour 97). The suspended body in *The Reflecting Pool* exists at a unique speed that seems to isolate it from its milieu. This body's simultaneously frozen and changing status spins a multiplicity of possible symbolic meanings: the body seems immersed into a virtual dimension, a kind of mental or spiritual incubation. We may regard its suspension as a separation from life, borne out of its own narcissistic proclivities. Alternatively, perhaps the body's isolation might eventually be repaired by its gradual dissolution into the environment. In any case, the suspended body is the site of time and change, hence a unit undergoing individuation. Viola, too, refers to *The Reflecting Pool* as a metaphor for change. He envisions himself (you, us) at the edge of a cliff making the decision to jump. For him, the piece "relates to death in some way, or letting go of the things that you know, just releasing everything" (97). The suspended body's unique speed creates a difference and enters into a productive "disparation" with the other temporalities in the surrounding milieus (the pool, the woods). [4] The body undergoes a literal process of individuation, as it differentiates from itself out of an undifferentiated ground (97). As in Simondon, individuation here is not a final goal or outcome, as it is immediately paired off with a dissolution of boundaries, followed by further changes. The individuated self appears to exist as a mere phase in an unfinished process that proceeds on to the next phase, as shown in the subsequent reflective shapes in the pool's surface and in the final body that emerges. The kind of reflexivity produced here, "far from the reflexivity of consciousness or […] the mirror stage", consists of "a circuit of displacements where that which will be reflected (the self) is not given as a point of departure" (Sauvagnargues 131–2). Other formal and visual elements of the piece reinforce its conceptual ties with Simondon's philosophy of individuation: for instance, the milieu's dynamic of metastability (a fragile, provisional equilibrium, open to modification) and the role of transduction in the process of individuation (the propagation of energetic information throughout a system). In *The Reflecting Pool*, the rippling effects on the pool's surface literally enact a transductive movement, as they play upon the continuous negotiation between the system/milieu's structural conditions (forms) and its energetic conditions (forces).

The body emerges out of the water as yet another individuation, perhaps the primary and final one, since it signals a dramatic resolution of the body's frozen state. As in so many of Viola's works, water functions here as a milieu of individuation. Viola describes the images appearing on the water's surface as a "world of virtual images and indirect perceptions" (qtd. in Walsh 46). The illusions and distortions experienced by the individual in the state of immersion

are like so many partial, temporary perspectives one sheds along the way towards reinvention. In a narrative and visual sense, water provides the preindividual potential for the individual to take on a new form. The exchanges between body and water generate an "energetic materiality in movement" (Deleuze and Guattari 408), providing an example of Viola's immanent, transductive relation to the medium of water, and by extension, technology. In its interactions with water, Viola's body acts as a site for the propagation and conversion of energy. Yet, water is only the more readily visible milieu of individuation in *The Reflecting Pool*. At its core, the true milieu of individuation is the video technology itself. The image of Viola suspended in mid-air speaks to the artist's wilful surrender to the technology, an expression of his desire to fuse with the work's technicity. Video rewrites the laws of nature and transports the body into an impossible spatial and temporal configuration. Arrested by the capacities of video, the body is forced to transform. Like water, video technology becomes a material means by which to express the inexpressible. Like water, video breaks down the separation between body and milieu/environment. Like water, video is force and process, information that impacts the body with a preindividual share of potential that can activate its change.

The artist's position of immersion/immediation here is also closely related to Viola's own practical knowledge of, and respect towards, his tools. This pragmatic ease fits in with the coexistence of humans and machines proposed by Simondon: in a technical milieu immediation entails the act of living and working *in the midst of* machines, a collaboration with technologies in the creation of worlds. In this sense, Viola is Simondon's accomplished technician. As an artist-technician, he "interprets and translates the machines [he lives with] so as to construct better technical ensembles […] and 'techno-geographical milieus'" (Lindberg 302). Importantly, the artist-technician does not direct machines as in a dominant position from above, but "takes charge of the relation between [machines]" out of an intuitive understanding of their capacities (301). The relationship involves a reciprocal immediacy between the work as event and its participant, an immediacy that is visibly enhanced through Viola's physical presence. Here, body and milieu are both form and matter impressing themselves upon each other and entering a relation of mutual affectivity and modulation. Observer and medium are not isolated, but they become (other than they are) with each other. In *The Reflecting Pool*, as in all of his work, Viola observes and facilitates the effectuation of the powers and possibilities of an array of video and audio technologies.[5] He orchestrates the coming together of their various capacities to produce a work whose technological imprint is absolutely unique and unrepeatable (a new technological/technical individuation). At the same time, these technologies further and facilitate his self-invention and reinvention, in short, his own individuation—not only by materialising the images of himself we see in *The Reflecting Pool*, but also by contributing to the many ways in which this work specifically changes him as an artist and a human being. The human observes and manipulates the medium while the medium draws the observer within it, making them part of its perceptual and ontogenetic operations. Elegantly and precisely, *The Reflecting Pool* thus affirms the indivisibility between technical mentality and the human mind.

The Intimacy of the Common: Affective Dissolution in *The Passing*

In *The Reflecting Pool*, the literal dissolution of Viola's body (in its surroundings, in the image, in the apparatus) constitutes a technical experiment, a gesture of abstract formalism. *The*

Passing does not forego, but rather intensifies, the exploration of individuation, shifting its focus towards a more radically transindividual affective experience. We may say that here Viola's individuality achieves another kind of dissolution, as real events in his life (his mother's passing, his son's birth) propel him into the domain of transindividuality. At this level, he undergoes a transformative experience that is both intimately personal and of incalculable collective significance. As the thresholds that we cross upon entering and exiting this world, birth and death are primary events in our lives. But just as we do not keep a conscious memory of the former, we do not dwell much on the latter. In *The Passing* Viola invites us to look at these events and at himself, "under the effects" of the extreme affects provoked by his mother's death and his son's birth (events that took place within a period of four years). I say "under the effects" here because the experience feels like one of total submersion within and abandonment to the power of these affectively charged events. Contrasting the 7-minute duration of *The Reflecting Pool* with a 54-minute running time, *The Passing* is far less structured into clearly defined segments, hence more difficult to describe as a narrative unit. A marked sense of interiority contributes to its stream-of-consciousness flow of images and sounds—dreams, memories, images that the mind keeps revisiting after experience has left its mark. *The Passing* exactly renders Bellour's reference to the mental reality of Viola's work. As Bellour states, Viola is "able to project into exterior reality the images that go through [his] mind" (103).



Figure 4: Bill Viola, *The Passing* (1991). In memory of Wynne Lee Viola. Videotape, black and white, mono sound, 54:22 minutes. Performer: Bill Viola. Photo: Kira Perov © Bill Viola Studio.

To provide a sense of what *The Passing* feels like, I will just mention a few of its most recurrent images and sounds. In this video, parts of Viola's face are often seen while lying in bed at night. The camera's exaggerated proximity to his face features extreme close-ups of the eye. Together with the rather loud accompanying sound of his breathing, the formal composition of the work places us in his perspective—a perspective without perspective, we might say. The piece's images are also inflected by the haptic sense, evoking an experience of interiority that minimises the possibility of aesthetic distance or cognitive control. Viola's images of the face often precede or follow moments that are inscribed as mental images or dreams (the recurrent image of a man submerged in water, sometimes appearing to be drowning, sometimes floating adrift), creating a sense of being between wakefulness and sleep. Significantly, the video's closing image is the only one featuring Viola himself submerged, lying on his chest at the bottom of a body of water, seemingly serene and content. This image of the artist closely anticipates *Self Portrait, Submerged*, which will be discussed in the following section.

The two other central protagonists of *The Passing* are Viola's mother and his second son, filmed at birth and as a toddler on a beach surf and various other places. For obvious reasons, the images of the mother in a coma elicit the most powerful feelings. Although the idea of filming a dying person is not unique to Viola's work, using the camera to engage with real death raises all sorts of ethical and representational questions.[6] Such questions derive from the camera's own potential for objectification and from the very impossibility of us visually grasping the event of death. The position of interiority adopted in *The Passing* ensures that no such objectifying attempts will be made on the images of the mother. Instead, Viola's images invite us to participate in a gesture of love and a living through of loss. But the piece goes well beyond death and the dying. By deliberately approximating the extremes of birth and death, the video is equally and very precisely engaging the two polarities with each other. *The Passing* is about life, which dances as if held between the two extreme points of birth and death. Viola is placed between the coming and the going and so are we.

The desert landscapes featured in *The Passing* (from California, Utah, Arizona and Nevada) become eerily beautiful passages that echo the spaciousness of the film's point of view. An intense subjectivity is oddly at ease with the piece's capacious impersonality, permeating the mind's inside as well as its outside. The landscape extends the human subjectivity into a non-human domain, thus positioning the human at the core of a non-human/more-than-human nature where it arises and draws its strength. Whether filmed at night or in daylight, these landscapes are both real and profoundly transformed: by the black-and-white cinematography, by an array of different cameras and by Viola's manipulations of both natural and artificial light sources.[7] For example, in some nocturnal scenes, the desert vegetation is surprisingly lit up as if from the inside, recalling oddly expressionistic shapes. In other scenes, a peculiar manipulation of lighting effects is used while filming the movement of cars in the distance. The headlights appear to be transformed into balls of fire that consume the car in its entirety; these fireballs traverse the landscape and collide like otherworldly beings battling each other on planet earth. Sometimes, natural sources of light blend with artificial sources—a beam of sunlight may fuse with a car's headlights—as if there was no substantial difference between them.



Figure 5: Bill Viola, *The Passing* (1991). In memory of Wynne Lee Viola.
Videotape, black and white, mono sound, 54:22 minutes. Photo: Kira Perov © Bill Viola Studio.

But despite the force of the images in *The Passing*, it is the sound of the breath that strings the entire edifice of the piece together, lending it its strongest sense of transindividuality. As life force, the breath is a human being's most intimate, private possession. Breath is also something that we all share in common, regardless of social or cultural differences. It is the engine of life detached from the personal markers of individual subjectivity or even human specificity. In *The Passing*, Viola's breathing makes his presence a most fitting instance of transindividuality. His breathing connects with those who have just arrived (like his son), those who are about to depart (like his mother) and definitely those who (like himself and the spectator) are still living. The sound of the breath in *The Passing* inaugurates a new mode of perception for the spectator, decisively contributing to the emergence of a specific affective atmosphere of love, loss and ultimately a form of creative abandonment to these feelings—creative very much in its literal sense of eschewing self-destruction. As Davina Quinlivan has noted with reference to the medium of film, the foregrounding of the breath "has the potential to shape our viewing experience" (6). In *The Passing*, for much of the video's duration, the sound of breath provides the point of view that anchors our experience of the images. (In scenes where breath is not heard, other sounds play a similar role such as the sound of crickets, the crunching sound of steps on the ground, etc.). Here, the exaggerated sound of the breath places us in Viola's interiority, which is actually a threshold into our own. As Quinlivan puts it, "the *inside* of the body […] is visible onscreen" (6). This is an absolutely intimate position and at the same

time it involves an absolutely collective, transindividual state of belonging. The interiority the breath takes us into is not opposed to the external world, but continuous with it—a realm of immanence that erases dualistic oppositions. The world of breath encompasses several domains without borders or walls—from the sensory and the contemplative to the spiritual, the environmental and the communal sense where we live "within a shared space of air" (10).

Through an ordeal of isolation brought on by the events of birth and death, Viola reaches a state of transindividuality. Hanhardt describes this ordeal as not just "'living through' [an] hour of decision", but being able to "watch [oneself] in the process", becoming a "witness of [one's] own reactions" (79). The transindividual gift offered in *The Passing* does not consist of a series of opinions or even emotions triggered by death and birth. It is an invitation to understand the power of existence as it pulses in the anonymity and indiscernibility of the breath. I would say that Viola's breathing body is a pure instance of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of becoming-indiscernible/imperceptible. Their concept undoubtedly resonates with Simondon's take on the transindividual:

> [T]o be like everybody else […] if it is difficult […] is because it is an affair of becoming. Not everybody becomes everybody […] [It] requires much asceticism […]. sobriety […] creative involution […] eliminate the too-much-to-be-perceived […] eliminate everything that roots each of us (everybody) in ourselves, in our molarity. (279)

Both the transindividual and the concept of becoming (in particular, becoming-imperceptible) bring about a surplus of being—a sense of participation in an event where beings are surpassed as individuals, becoming more-than-individuals through their loss of rigid molarity. Transindividuality is achieved by eliminating everything superfluous, even down to those inter-individual relations based on a commonality of interests, tastes or political opinions. That still smacks of too much narcissistic entrenchment within ourselves and our egos. Transindividuality is the very opposite of a collection of egos. It involves neither "personifying" nor "individualising", but a line of becoming that traverses all: what Massumi calls a "mutual imbrication with each other in a more-than-human world" (*Quarantine Files*). Similarly, the combination of intimacy and impersonality embodied by Viola's performances is the very signature of transindividuality: an "impersonal zone of subjects that is simultaneously a molecular or intimate dimension of the collective itself" (Combes 52). Transindividuality becomes a reality when a choice is made to live a life that prioritises an awareness of those conditions that we share with others—birth, life and death—not just other humans but all other life forms. Transindividuality is the intimacy of the common. It brings beings into an intensity of potential in togetherness, thus going beyond the forms and substances where beings remain separate.

In *The Passing*, the transindividual potential of the breath reaches an astoundingly literal level. Deleuze and Guattari talk about becoming everybody/everything as a process that pairs things down to an "abstract line" (280). Reaching this point of simplicity and abstraction is not a self-indulgent act, but a necessity if one wishes to create a world where things do not become sterile in themselves and instead continue living into other things. As they write, "[i]t is by conjugating, by continuing with other lines, other pieces, that one makes a world that can overlay the first one, like a transparency" (280). Such is the affective dissolution taking place in *The*

Passing—dissolution not in the sense of disintegration, but in the sense of intensive distribution, extension, propagation. This is affect potentialised many times over by its own distribution across a multiplicity of beings. In *The Passing*, the sound of Viola's breath overlays the image of his mother as she struggles to breathe. A close-up of the mother's neck and mouth shows the mouth open as if striving to breathe, while the sound of Viola's breath is exactly matched to the movements of her mouth slightly opening and closing. Viola's breath thus seems to form a continuous, uninterrupted vital thread with his mother's, again emphasising the film as a gift, an act of love. This synchronisation of sound and image brings to our attention "the shared breath between mother and child", as Quinlivan puts it, "an intrauterine sharing of oxygen that occurs […] before birth" (29). The son now symbolically returns the gift of breath to the mother.

In *The Passing*, panning shots of the interior of the family's home no doubt play a significant role in building a sense of transindividual affect. The home, with all of its memory-charged objects, furnishings and spaces, stands in for the mother's body. This occurs so literally in fact that, at one point in the work, when the camera is about to complete a 360-degree pan of a series of rooms, it unexpectedly and seamlessly continues panning into the mother's hospital room. Besides featuring other elements that recur in Viola's *oeuvre* (the affective importance of ordinary, daily objects, the everyday sounds that would normally go unnoticed such as a clock-ticking, a dog barking), this moment speaks to a desire for the mother's body, a longing for a return to the womb, which is also doubled by the images of immersion in water so prominent throughout. I would like to point out, however, that despite the very personal tone and desire enacted in these images, *The Passing* still operates at a level of transindividuality, thereby making the overarching issue of relation/connection far more relevant than the individual terms that are therein related. The work's transparency allows each viewer to inhabit those images in their own way, subtracting or adding, becoming witnesses of their own reactions, just like Viola does. Writing about *The Passing*, Sean Cubitt has fittingly described the kind of communication established in this work as "the play of the species […] a secular open field that goes on despite our deaths" (129). Echoing the sense of transindividuality I ascribe to this piece, Cubitt says that "the process of infinite reflection […] in Viola's work […] is not adduced as the property of the individual subject, but of the social" (129). Once upon a time a being was born, and for a time it was given the opportunity to exist. That is my story, but it is also your own: the intimacy of the common.

The Furthest Ring in the Circle: *Self Portrait, Submerged*

Looking at *Self Portrait, Submerged* in relation to Viola's previous work completes a panoramic view of the way his art has grown. Its trajectory is not linear; rather, it expands by picking up on earlier figures, images, or motifs and by casting the past in a new iteration. It thus engages both the past and the future simultaneously. Viola describes it as "an organic progression, like the way a tree grows—a tree doesn't grow from bottom to top […] It radiates out from the center, expanding concentrically. Slice a cross section and you see concentric circles. That's how a person grows" (qtd. in Bellour 116). Examining *Self Portrait* as a further elaboration of figures of immersion featuring Viola himself, one is immediately struck by the accentuated simplicity of this latter piece: its elemental sense of duration and stubborn presence

and its paring down of narrative to a single, non-narrative image that is continuously subject to change yet paradoxically self-persistent.



Figure 6: Bill Viola, *Self Portrait, Submerged* (2013). Colour high-definition video on flat panel display mounted vertically on wall; stereo sound. 47 3/4 x 28 1/2 x 3 1/2 in. (121.2 x 72.4 x 9 cm), 10:18 minutes. Photo: Kira Perov © Bill Viola Studio.

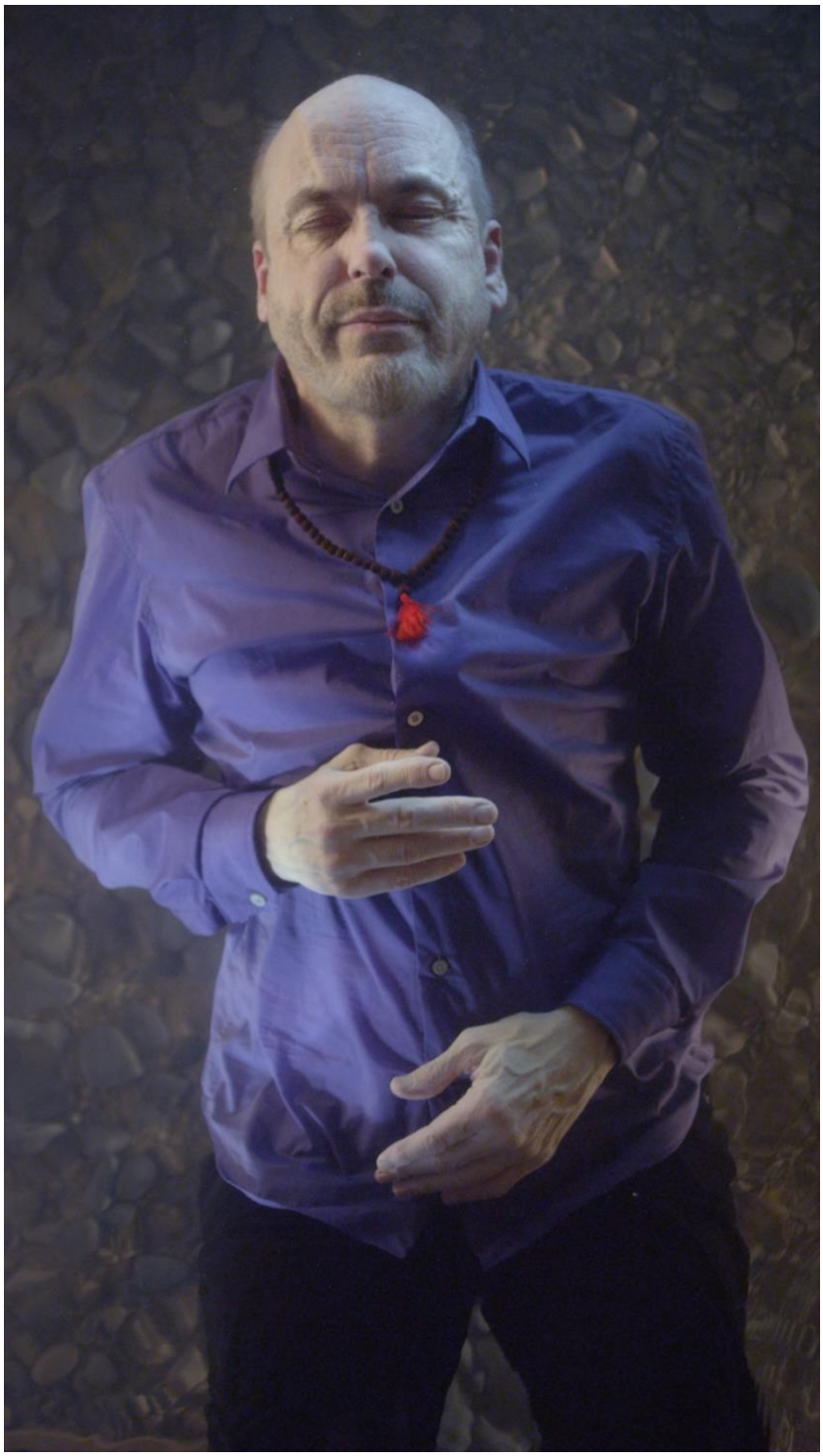


Figure 7: Bill Viola, *Self Portrait, Submerged* (2013). Colour high-definition video on flat panel display mounted vertically on wall; stereo sound. 47 3/4 x 28 1/2 x 3 1/2 in. (121.2 x 72.4 x 9 cm), 10:18 minutes. Photo: Kira Perov © Bill Viola Studio.

In contrast with the submerged body lying on its chest in *The Passing*, here Viola's body faces us frontally and openly, presented from the mid-thigh up. It is stripped of the power

dynamics that we usually associate with such bodily positions in the cinema: inwardly drawn, his gaze does not reciprocate us with the recognition of a shared external narrative. The action is synonymous with a single gesture that, much as in *The Passing*, resembles a gift: the body's own extended presence and duration, containing minimal yet continuous changes. The image is almost static, save for the slight movement of Viola's hand or the occasional air bubble, emerging from out of his nostril. Yet the image is in fact constantly subjected to the ripple effect of water, an effect that sends waves of energy through the submerged body as well as our own body and brain. *Self Portrait* shows the way in which time/duration and attention to nuance have become essential components in Viola's directly affective explorations as well as in the viewer's engagement with his work.

The rippling effect of water sends us back to *The Reflecting Pool*. In the earlier piece, it is a means of apportioning time through repetition and variation—there, the three phases of impact, propagation and changed configuration occur as isolated instances. For the most part, they remain quite independent of the human body. Through formalist experimentation, the body has been separated from its milieu and only further experimentation can repair this isolation. In *Self Portrait*, water visualises the single continuous flow of life that runs through the body. Here, we get to see a direct, literal image of water as a milieu of individuation: what moves is neither the water nor the body in isolation but body and water together, becoming an undulating surface that ceaselessly expands and contracts. The Viola we see in *Self Portrait* might be understood as a visualisation of the submerged body that we never get to see in *The Reflecting Pool*—a body in a mental, dream-like state of incubation whose state of interiority, as in *The Passing*, persists in drawing us into our own interiority. In contrast with the figure of submersion in *The Reflecting Pool*—where submersion is connected to formal/technical abstraction—and in *The Passing*—where submersion is an emotional/mental experience triggered by existential events, the figure of submersion in *Self Portrait* lacks external motivation. It is no longer self-reflexive, but extraordinarily auto-affective.

Self Portrait is a piece within the Water Portraits series, which also includes *The Dreamers*, a seven-channel work that features the bodies of many non-professional actors. Even in their apparent self-containment, each figure within the work signals to a collective gathering of bodies—a preindividual zone of gestures that speaks to a transversal commonality. While each of the protagonists of *The Dreamers* is absolutely unique, they all share a series of elements that are strongly evocative of transindividuality: their inward gaze, the visible threads of liquidity and duration, their power to affect and be affected through subtle changes in their milieu. A simple reverie made of the simplest elements, *Self Portrait* joins water and breath together to create a world that is, like so many of Viola's pieces, intimately vast.

In the last couple of decades, the increasing turn towards the staging of emotions and affects in Viola's art has led to a decrease of his visible presence within it. As Viola's work has taken on many of the characteristics of cinematic productions (especially the use of actors and a heightened attention to affective-performative components), his onscreen presence has dwindled considerably. In this last period, Viola has relinquished his own presence in exchange for the presence of many others. These others, both professional and non-professional actors, have not only supplied a performative nuance (and in some cases, a physical dexterity) essential to an explicitly affective orientation. The new abundance of bodies in Viola's work has also rendered

more explicit the transindividual dimension that was already vital to his earlier pieces. This intense sense of collective energies palpably connects with the systemic global crises that affect all living beings today.

Besides *Self Portrait*, the only work from the 2000s that features Viola's own body is *The Voyage*, one of the five channels in the work *Going Forth By Day* (2002). In *The Voyage*, Viola sits outside a cabin by a lake, keeping vigil over a dying man who will soon rejoin his departed wife. Filmed in an extreme long shot, his role in *The Voyage* is extremely understated, limited to witnessing a momentous, yet intimate event. Regardless of superficial differences between periods based on technological choices or even thematic approaches—what I referred to as formalist experimentation versus transindividual affect—Viola's non-dramatic presence in *The Voyage* signals an astounding continuity with his equally transparent, anonymous appearances in his earlier work. We see throughout an affinity with the transindividual that is born of a successful conjugation between an all-consuming passion for life and a detached stillness that can only be won through time and solitude.

Notes

[1] In this article, Simondon's work is quoted from Muriel Combes. The original texts include *L'Individuation psychique et collective* (1989) and *L'Individuation à la lumière des notions de forme e d'information* (2005).

[2] Brian Massumi refers to our situation in the midst of the current climate crisis as one characterised by immediation. He writes: "It's a very unstable, quasi-chaotic situation. And there's no vantage point from which to understand it from the outside. We're immersed in it […] it has become imm*a*nent [*sic*] to our field of life. That imminence-immanence is a mode of contact, of direct affective proximity […] before we're able to step back and try to rationalize [*sic*] the experience [it] is more an immediate in-bracing than a mediation in the traditional sense". See Massumi (*Politics* 114–15). Note the close semantic proximity between immediation, imminence, immanence and immediacy. "Immediacy" in this context does not simply have a temporal sense. It involves an ontological mode whereby the component forces in a process relate to each other without distance, dualistic distinction or hierarchy.

[3] In fact, my own earlier analysis of this piece discerned a starker distinction between Viola's earlier experimental formalism (identified with perceptual distance/mediation) and the later position of affective proximity/immediation (del Río). Although it seems rather unorthodox for a single author to provide different readings of a single work, I think this is still a valid and productive exercise that shows the relevance of nuance and context.

[4] Simondon borrows the term "disparation" from the psychophysiology of perception, where it refers to the idea that vision takes place as the resolution of two disparate, asymmetrical retinal images. Disparation, as Sauvagnargues explains, involves "an inventive construction that adds a new dimension that the isolated retinal image does not contain" (63). Disparation is thus a creative resolution of difference. For Simondon, it is an operation that extends to the production

of individuation as a whole: “Any singularity is produced through problematic disparation”, a process that takes difference itself as the basis for creative amplification (Sauvagnargues 64).

[5] The production process is immensely significant in Viola’s work. As Viola’s life-time partner and collaborator Kira Perov suggests, there is an indivisibility between ideas, the images that Viola begins from in his own head and his dynamic, ever-changing use of video and audio technologies. While sometimes his ideas “were based on what video could actually do”, he also often pushed “technology to its limits” in order to achieve physically “impossible” effects that correspond to invisible, virtual movements of the affects. Because the artist’s idea lives in the realm of the virtual, it is technology’s indispensable task to transmute that virtuality into something that we can see, feel and experience in the physical world.

[6] In *Lightning over Water* (1980), for example, Wim Wenders’s collaboration with Nicholas Ray involved filming the latter’s last days as he battled cancer.

[7] According to Rolf Lauter, three special cameras were used in this piece: “night camera, more light-sensitive than a standard video camera, a super-low-light camera, employed especially in moonlit conditions, and an infra-red camera […] to record at night without any light” (68).

References

Bellour, Raymond, and Bill Viola. “An Interview with Bill Viola.” *October*, vol. 34, 1985, pp. 91–119. https://doi.org/10.2307/778491.

Colebrook, Claire. “Earth Felt the Wound: The Affective Divide.” In *Death of the Posthuman: Essays on Extinction*, vol. 1, Open Humanities Press, 2014, pp. 73–95. https://doi.org/10.3998/ohp.12329362.0001.001.

Combes, Muriel. *Gilbert Simondon and the Philosophy of the Transindividual*. Translated by Thomas Lamarre, MIT Press, 2013.

Cubitt, Sean. “On Interpretation: Bill Viola’s *The Passing*.” *Screen*, vol. 36, no. 2, 1995, pp. 113–30. https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/36.2.113.

del Río, Elena. “Bill Viola with Gilbert Simondon: Collective Individuation and the Subjectivity of Disaster.” *Angelaki*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2019, pp. 57–75. https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2019.1684700.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi, U of Minnesota P, 1987.

Hanhardt, John G. *Bill Viola*, edited by Kira Perov, Thames and Hudson, 2015.

Lauter, Rolf. "*The Passing*: Remembering the Present, or Pain and Beauty of Being." In *Bill Viola: Unseen Images*, edited by Marie Luise Syring (with contributions by Bill Viola, Marie Luise Syring, Rolf Lauter, and Jorg Zutter), Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 1992, pp. 65–70.

Lindberg, Susanna. "Being with Technique—Technique as Being-with: The Technological Communities of Gilbert Simondon." *Continental Philosophy Review*, vol. 52, 2019, pp. 299–310. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11007-019-09466-9.

Massumi, Brian. "'Technical Mentality' Revisited: Brian Massumi on Gilbert Simondon." With Arne De Boever, Alex Murray, and Jon Roffe. In *Gilbert Simondon: Being and Technology*, edited by Arne De Boever, Alex Murray, Jon Roffe, and Ashley Woodward, Edinburgh UP, 2012, pp. 19–36. https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9780748677214.003.0002.

---. *Politics of Affect*. Polity Press, 2015.

--- et al. *The Quarantine Files: Thinkers in Self-Isolation*, curated by Brad Evans, Los Angeles Review of Books, lareviewofbooks.org/article/quarantine-files-thinkers-self-isolation. Accessed 6 July 2020.

Perov, Kira. "Bill Viola Behind the Scenes." Zoom-talk for Stavanger Art Museum, 17 June 2021. vimeo.com/566527853. Accessed 3 July 2021.

Quinlivan, Davina. *The Place of Breath in Cinema*. Edinburgh UP, 2012. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748649006.

Sauvagnargues, Anne. *Artmachines: Deleuze, Guattari, Simondon*. Translated by Suzanne Verderber with Eugene W. Holland, Edinburgh UP, 2016. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474402552.

Simondon, Gilbert. *L'Individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information*. 1957. Millon, 2005.

---. *L'Individuation psychique et collective.* 1958. Aubier, 1989.

Viola, Bill. *The Dreamers*, 2013, video/sound installation, seven channels of colour high-definition video on seven flat panel displays mounted on wall, four channels of stereo sound. Performers: Gleb Kaminer, Rebekah Rife, Mark Ofugi, Madison Corn, Sharon Ferguson, Christian Vincent, Katherine McKalip. Continuously running.

---. *Going Forth By Day*, 2002, video/sound installation, a projected image cycle in five parts, five high-definition colour video channels projected onto walls in dark room; two channels of stereo sound for four panels, one panel with four channels of spatial quadraphonic sound, 34:30 minutes.

---. *Nantes Triptych*, 1992, video/sound installation, colour video triptych, 29:46 minutes.

---. *The Passing*, 1991, videotape, black and white, mono sound, 54:22 minutes.

---. *The Reflecting Pool*, 1977–79, videotape, colour, mono sound, 7 minutes.

---. *Self Portrait, Submerged*, 2013, colour high-definition video on flat panel display mounted vertically on wall, stereo sound, 10:18 minutes.

---. *The Voyage*, 2002, panel 4 in *Going Forth By Day*. Performers: John Fleck, Lois Stark, Ernie Charles, Butch Hammett, Willie Jackson, Valerie Spencer, Richard Stobie, Bill Viola.

Walsh, John. *Bill Viola: The Passions*, with Peter Sellars and Kira Perov, J. Paul Getty Trust, 2003.

Wenders, Wim and Nicholas Ray, directors. *Lightning over Water*. Road Movies Filmproduktion, 1980.

Suggested Citation

del Río, Elena. "Bill Viola's Figures of Submersion as Techniques of Transindividual Affect." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 23, 2022, pp. 52–72. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.23.03.

Elena del Río is Professor Emerita of Film Studies. Her essays on cinema and philosophies of the body in the areas of technology, performance, and affect have been featured in edited collections and in journals such as *Angelaki*, *Camera Obscura*, *Discourse*, *Studies in French Cinema*, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, *Film-Philosophy*, *SubStance*, and *Deleuze Studies*. She is the author of *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance: Powers of Affection* (Edinburgh UP, 2008) and *The Grace of Destruction: A Vital Ethology of Extreme Cinemas* (Bloomsbury, 2016). She is currently working on a monograph on video artist Bill Viola and the philosophy of Gilbert Simondon.