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Hasan Daraghmeh

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MA Essay

Oslo National Academy of the Arts
The Academy of Fine Art

Ramallah. Spring, 2012, around noon. A sunny day.

Sitting at my desk, waiting for the guest teacher to have a tutorial with her. I could not clean up my desk. There are a lot of papers and other material.

After a long and thought-provoking conversation, right before leaving, she told me: “ You should have a look at Bill Viola works “.

It was the first time I heard the name “Bill Viola”. I wrote down the name on a piece of paper, and soon after, I started to research his name on the Internet. I read some articles about him and I could find a lot of pictures, and even few clips. But none of them could be called or even related to the original artworks. I was only experiencing traces of the original works, copies of video works, potentially subject to infinite reproduction and dissemination.

Living in Ramallah could not offer any other opportunity than experiencing copies of seminal art and masterpieces. The gap between the “Original and Copy” was the only site from which art could be approached. Since then, Viola’s work has encapsulated my reflection on the reproductive nature of video as an art practice.

In 2014, when I moved to Oslo as a MA student at KHIO, standing physically in front of original art works became part of my everyday life; while before, experiencing art was essentially tied to a computer screen and an Internet connection.

Soon after, a friend living in Paris informed me about a Bill Viola exhibition opening there soon. This was the opportunity I was waiting for. I’m in Oslo, and from here Paris is not that far. For some reason, I couldn't manage to go to Paris, and missed my first chance to see Viola’s work.

End of 2015. I finally got the chance to see a piece by Viola: *Walking the Edge* (2012).

This work is one of the four works from the *Mirage* series, along with *Ancestors* (2012), *The Encounter* (2012), and *Inner Passage* (2013). All of them were filmed at El Mirage Lake, a dry lakebed in the Mojave Desert of San Bernardino County, California. The films were shot on 35mm and dramatically slowed down. After being transferred to High Definition video, the works are exhibited on plasma displays mounted on the wall in horizontal and vertical formats. The series portrays distant figures through the distorting haze of a mirage, becoming increasingly visible as they walk towards the camera; where the vast arid landscape takes Centre stage.



Walking the edge, 2012, 12:33 min

Video/Film, Color High-Definition video on horizontal plasma display mounted on wall.

Size: 92.5 x 155.5 x 12.7 cm. (36.4 x 61.2 x 5 in.)

Walking the Edge:

The work begins with 5 seconds of fade-in. You find yourself standing in front of a static shot of a vast arid landscape in which you see two men; tiny figures on opposite sides of the frame, in the distance, blurred because of the heat, almost liquefied, they could be a mirage, or the reflection of each other. After few seconds you recognize that they have begun walking towards us in a very precise, choreographed formation, becoming clearer as you continue watching.

Two isolated figures in an extraordinary and ambiguous space where the mirage line lies in the middle of the frame, between fluidity – their legs distorted in that mirage line – and the solidity of the hard ground on which they walk.

Walking toward us, following a trajectory taking them closer to each other, until they are meeting in the center of the frame. They continue walking side by side.

Their shoulders, their hands can now touch each other. They look at each other and acknowledge each other's presence. Now they cross each other. But the distance between them grows again, until they leave the outer edges of the frame.

Watching them, from your position as a viewer, you engage with the micro-narrative suggested by the work, attempting to expand it, filling it with your own narrative. In this dialogue, frame and scale play a major role. In the choreographed walk you perceive a series of subtle signs compelling interpretation: closer and closer still, you realize that they are of different age, and have a relationship. What appeared first as a formalist proposal reveals an ambiguous and open narrative, embodying its own contradictions. In real life, both characters are father and son. But would it mean that in film, they embody the same roles? Could they not be partners, siblings, neighbors, friends, or many other forms of relationship?

Nevertheless, beauty is still at stake. And within this context, beauty is in the expression of the unexpected power of the natural as embodying images of time: clouds starting to fall and moving in and out the frame, the continuous change of light, a bird faraway in the background crossing the frame, and there's the mirage that makes the image change from one shape to another, constantly. The desert, the sky, the wind, the mirage, the light and the bird combine to produce the counter-shot to the brief encounter of the protagonists. The natural becomes visual forms eventually producing pure images of time.

Realism is not at stake anymore, opening up to an ambiguous space, in which even the edges generate instability.

The comfort of the viewer's site is lost. The perception is now unstable, conducting an interrogation on the nature of the image. Mirage is now infiltrating the viewer's gaze.

But the mirage is not the result of a magical operation. It rather relies on cinematic language and technique: the precise framing that embodies the essential impossibility of restraining the world in a single frame, though incorporating signs that express vastness. The bodies of the unknown protagonists remind us of the fragility of the framing: standing at the edges, they permanently risk disappearing in an unknown and infinite off-screen zone.

The use of a 800mm lens increase the sensation of instability and ambiguity, producing distortions in a space where the perspective has disappeared: flatness and depth are now merged, to affect even the scale of the perception: the human body is not the scale of the world anymore. The landscape now becomes the main protagonist.

They are coming closer. They are no longer trembling and fragile silhouettes exiled at the limits of the frame, but solid bodies, perfectly fitting the height of the frame. They can even be seen and identified: both are tall, black men, with a great sense of elegance.

Minute 11: a window pops up on the left side of the image. QuickTime player informs me that this is the end of the video. It stops there, on that very frame, while the original duration of the video is 12 minutes and 33 seconds. I am missing the end of it, and am suddenly reminded that I am not in an exhibition space, experiencing an artwork the way the artist had envisioned his audience should relate to his work.



I am again sitting in my studio, gazing at my 17-inch computer screen, and realizing what I have seen is not just a long excerpt of “Walking the Edge”; but a copy of a copy of a copy.

That copy found on the Internet was the screen capture of a filmed screening organized within the framework of what seemed to be a real time streamed lecture on Bill Viola’s work. Or in other words, a pirate copy made by a virtual attendee of an online, streamed lecture, later uploaded on the Internet.

Because I could download only the screen capture, I don’t know if the video during the lecture was originally framed to match the screening, or if it was later cropped to focus only on the video projection.

One more layer of damage committed to that artwork, which paradoxically could give me the opportunity to experience it.

However, it does not change the fact that the original film was produced with a 35mm camera, to be transferred in High Definition, with a resolution of 1920 x 1080, and shown in art spaces on a plasma monitor. But isn’t it already a degradation of the artwork operated by the artist himself?

What is the meaning of filming with a now almost abandoned film print to migrate to the most commonly used technology in art and cinema? In that migration to technology the work is already losing its integrity: millions of pixels disappeared. And from the screening at the lecture to its capture from a computer, until my own computer screen, more millions disappeared too. Within that context what remains of an artwork that is essentially subject to infinite copies and multiple forms of dissemination. When the original screen ratio, the original resolution, the original colors and sound, cannot be reproduced, what survives throughout those multiple migrations from one platform to another, how can those fragmentary traces still participate in the experience of an art work?

But would it be different if the same film was shown within the framework of an exhibition in an art space, but displayed with the wrong monitors, not matching the technical requirements of the video?

Just as an example, or rather as a hypothesis:

I eventually had the opportunity to attend an exhibition, here in Oslo, where "Walking the Edge" is exhibited.

The artist or his gallery had communicated the technical requirements. But for some reason, the piece is shown on a small 4/3 monitor. The work is indeed physically there. For the organizer(s) of the exhibition, the piece is part of their show. The audience had the opportunity to see a work by Viola's. But for those who know his work, the piece is absent. What is being exhibited is a "copy" of its original display, a trace, or maybe only a documentation of his work.

But isn't it the destiny of video art works to rarely resemble to what they were meant to be? Is the way they are experienced not often the result of multiple arrangements, misunderstandings, or compromises? Is video not only and always a pale reflection of its original format, in which loss, migration of format, and degradation are always at stake?

Therefore, could it be that video cannot be experienced the same way as a painting or sculpture not because of the difference of medium, but because video and film in the way they are displayed necessarily suffer of multiple compromises?

From that perspective, watching a copy of a copy of a copy on the Internet and experiencing a wrong display in a physical space of the same artwork are the same thing.

Or could it be that watching a copy of a copy of copy on a computer is a more honest experience, paradoxically more respectful of the artwork, than a display presenting itself as an exhibition of the work while it is not respecting its technical requirements.

In front of my computer screen I know that I'm not experiencing Viola's work, but collecting traces of it, which potentially helps me to mentally and in imagination picture the original, and even capture its specific highly technical details.

The essential limitations in experiencing video art works, and the way I had myself experienced video works on computer screens had strongly influenced my own practice, interrogating the nature of the video image: what makes a video image? How can that combination of pixels fabricates an image? What is a pixel with regards to perception?
In my piece entitled "Static No 1 (Waves)"



Single channel HD video, 02:30 min, 16:9 silent, 2015

I filmed the landscape from the roof of my house in Ramallah. It is a familiar landscape, but the way I filmed it turned it into an unstable space, in which the hills progressively start to resemble to sea waves, producing a perturbation of perception.

The video embodies the result of the degradation of the original footage. Or rather the degradation that I voluntarily applied on the video is paradoxically the necessary conditions for its production.

Degradation is the core of my production process. Raw material and realistic capture cannot reflect anymore my own connection to the reality, also because reality is now the result of the proliferation of images.

Paradoxically, to return to the sensation of reality: a trembling, and unstable world can reflect only through a process of degradation.

The same way I can experience video art works, even the more beautiful ones such as Viola's piece, only as damaged reproductions.