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DOSSIER

ART MOVES: PERFORMATIVITY IN TIME, SPACE AND FORM

by Mieke Bal

EL ARTE (SE) MUEVE: PERFORMATIVIDAD EN EL TIEMPO, EL ESPACIO Y LA FORMA

por Mieke Bal

DOSSIER

TECHNIQUE: «MISTAKES» AS MOVEMENT

THE MOVEMENT OF MIRACLES

EL MOVIMIENTO DE LO MILAGROSO

Amparo Serrano de Haro¹

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Resumen

Este trabajo pretende ofrecer un análisis de la obra de Bill Viola «Emergence» y de la obra en la que se basa una «Pietà» de Masolino. Ambas obras serán analizadas en detalle, desde el punto de vista formal y narrativo para (intentar) seguir la estela de praxis artística establecida por Mieke Bal.

Palabras clave

Pintura Renacentista; Masolino; Video-Arte; Viola; Resurrección; mirar / contemplar.

Abstract

This text endeavours to offer an analysis of Bill Viola's work «Emergence» and the painting it is based on, a «Pietà» by Masolino. Both works will be submitted to a formal and narrative «close reading», in an attempt to follow the path of practice established by Mieke Bal.

Keywords

Renaissance painting; Masolino; Video-Art; Viola; Resurrection; to look / to contemplate.

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Thou foster child of silence and slow times...

(John Keats)

THE TRANSFER/TRAFFIC OF IMAGES

As an historian of contemporary art I have always been interested in the «translations» that art in the second half of the twentieth century (or «art after the avant-garde») has made of the works of art of the past.

In the history of Western art there has always been a «transfer» of images, old images being used to guide the process of learning, therefore becoming a subject of copy and emulation; and this transfer implies, of course, the desire to surpass them (a subject that has been developed by many theorists, the most well-known one is maybe literary critic Harold Bloom, with what he defined as «the anxiety of influences»²).

However, in the postmodern culture in which we find ourselves, where notions of virtuosity and manual skills are definitely seen as secondary in the creation of the work of art, and where even the concepts of originality and authorship have been seriously compromised; when really everything seems to be an ironic and desolate «quote» of another time, artist, or previous work, the issue of the transfer of images regains its importance.³

To my knowledge, this is the question that defines the artistic production from the 80s, coinciding with the end of the Cold War and its didactic paradigm of a world divided in a Manichean fashion. The various images of the artistic past, be they mass culture, kitsch, or the «high art» of the museums, are now an alphabet, a code «prêt-à-porter», that serve as messages of the artist's social and personal intentions, and therefore are seemingly obvious, yet at the same time deeply ambiguous.

Both the certainties and fears that made up the prevalent bi-polar worldview since World War II until the 80s have now been lost. Moreover, with contemporary art becoming an investment vehicle for the wealthy, art has become a sense-making horizon, even an instrument of social and spiritual atonement, a new morality, a new humanism. In all this, the visionary power of art, like the spirit of Cassandra, is ominous, turning towards the past for inspiration, exploring it for references, since, as a civilization, we have stopped believing in the possibility of answers.

2. BLOOM, Harold: *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1973.

BRYSON, Norman: *Tradición y Deseo. De David a Delacroix*. Akal. Madrid. 2002. p.22-23.

3. As for example in this quote of popular art-critic Jerry Saltz: «All great contemporary artists, schooled or not, are essentially self-taught and are de-skilling like crazy. I don't look for skill in art...» SALTZ, Jerry: «Seeing Out Loud», www.artnet.com, December 20, 2005.

MASOLINO/VIOLA

Precisely with these issues in mind I want to analyse a work by American video artist Bill Viola (b. 1951). It is a production from 2002, entitled «Emergence», i.e., something that arises or emerges (from water, darkness), something that is a sudden and unexpected apparition.

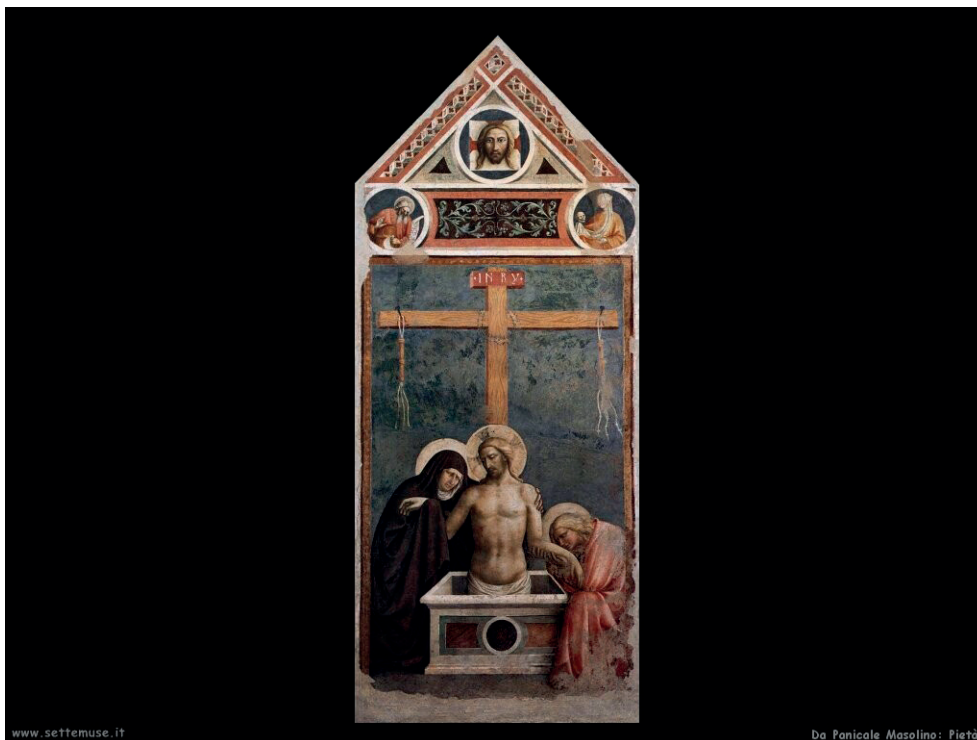


FIGURA 1. MASOLINO. PIETÀ.1424. EMPOLÍ. Museo della Collegiata.

This work is based on a painting by an Italian artist of the early Quattrocento, not a well known one, but a minor painter named Tomaso Masolino da Panicale (1383/4-1440), whose claim to fame was, for a long time, that he was considered Masaccio's teacher, or at least collaborated with Masaccio on a series of frescoes, most famously in the Brancacci Chapel in Florence's Santa Maria del Carmine.⁴

The painting chosen by Viola as a model for his video «Emergence» is a «Pietà» by Masolino, which is now in the Museo della Collegiata di Sant'Andrea in the city of Empoli, a city in Tuscany, located about 30 km from Florence.

4. The Brancacci Chapel is a traditional exam topic for students of Art History; and it is customary to contrast the style of Masolino, a floral late Gothic, commonly associated with the Sienese school of Simone Martini, to the Renaissance style of Masaccio (1401-1428). Masaccio is considered one of the towering figures of the Tuscan Renaissance, which in painting terms means that he achieved corporeality, volume, a spatial sense, and, therefore, came close to rendering the third dimension, which Masolino didn't. This is the traditional approach to the Italian Renaissance, based on the formalist theory of «stylistic progress» in a tradition that goes from Berenson to Longhi and Argan.

I will try to study these two images in relation to Mieke Bal's proposal: performativity in time, space and also form. However the «time» aspect of this proposition will be the prevalent one in this paper, mainly how the perception of Masolino's work is modified by Viola's artistic translation, and how Viola's work re-states and renovates the scene of the Resurrection of Christ, following the potent yet invisible «narratives» and pre-conceptions of our own time. That is to say that my interest in this analysis is to elucidate which elements in Viola's vision differ from that of Masolino (his direct, expressly stated inspiration), and in what sense we can identify those elements as being characteristic of the culture and *zeitgeist* of the 21st Century. This approach of seeking to see the way the work of Viola modifies or extends our understanding of the work of Masolino, is of course, in reference to the «time-reversal paradigm» established by Mieke Bal, which suggests that all works of the past can and must be read in the present, and by her interest in analysing the work in itself, rather than by the classical «cause and effect» lineage that is still frequent in art-history's studies.

The painting by Masolino is, of course, much more codified, more linked to the beliefs of his day (both pictorial and religious) than the work by Viola. It is interesting to try and guess why some of the iconographic characteristics of this work, be it for their clumsiness or ambiguity, or for their unexpected «modernity» or insight, have drawn the attention of an artist like Viola.

In the first place, there is the representation of the coffin, or funeral casket. The artistic difficulties encountered by Masolino when representing it, his incapacity to foreshorten it, or render it correctly applying the then-unavailable laws of perspective, turn the elongated rectangle into a square. This result is an error (of perspective). The awkwardness in the geometric representation of the burial box is undoubtedly (in my modest opinion) at the beginning of Viola's inspiration, since the square (consciously or unconsciously) leads to the only physical object in religious liturgy that bears that shape: the baptismal font (which can also be round, or sometimes octagonal). And as we know, and will come back to, Viola is an artist very interested in the symbolism of water. By providing the coffin of the work of Masolino with a continuous flow of water, Viola adds the sense of a «baptismal» source to the shrine.

Another element of this work is that it narrates the process of the emergence of Christ, Christ rising from the dead, Christ being resurrected. Masolino paints a moment of transition, in which only the torso is revealed, not a fully risen Christ, but instead the «process» of resurrection itself. Contrary to the usual representation, Masolino's painting describes the process half-way through. It is not a «fait accompli», something that has already happened and is exemplary, but a unique situation that is unfolding before our eyes. Normally, in representing the sacred, the art of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance is rarely interested in «processes» (except the «processes» of conversion of the saints). The sacred is immutable, appears as a «protomos» or «totem», suddenly and fully formed. We do not see it, therefore it is not, and suddenly we see it, it is there, and its very existence demonstrates that it has always been there, it has always existed, but we were not able to see it.

Since the Renaissance, and throughout the long journey of Western figurative art up to the present and including current photography, the most representative ambition has always been to be able to capture the «key moment» in which the past and the future of an action or event merge into an image-act that collects and unites them both in a continuous present: a unique moment, sometimes fleeting, yet eternal. (An example of this is the painting «Las Meninas» by Velazquez, or Robert Doisneau's photography «The kiss in front of the Hotel de Ville, Paris»). This would lead us to consider the process of «seeing» as a religious process in itself: we knew something, but suddenly we «see» it, and the certainty of what we «see», urges us to «believe», in what our eyes translate to our spirit or our brain.

Masaccio, in the Brancacci chapel, makes such a temporal analysis, in this case a very concrete one, and he narrates one very specific moment: the moment when Adam and Eve are expelled from Paradise: their shame and despair of knowing themselves naked (literally and metaphorically: stripped of the grace of God) is what this painting tells us. Not what comes before or after. And yet in so doing hints at the before and after of the sequence. At the same time, in the same chapel, Masolino confronts us with an «eternal» Adam and Eve, in the clear outline of their beautiful bodies, prototypically perfect, and between them a snake with the face of a devil. It is a naive image, a static image, closer to medieval imagery than to Renaissance vision.

So it should be noted that the «modernity» of Masolino in this work of the Pieta of Empoli, is unusual. While Masaccio is able to give his Adam and Eve a more corporeal image through chiaroscuro and the third dimension, and by what B. Berenson has called «tactile values», he is also interested in the temporality of the image: to represent a particular moment, stopping the flow of time. Masolino is not aware of this. However, the fact that in the Pieta of Empoli the body of Christ is «in the process» of resurrecting from the grave is a curious case. This «temporary» element in the static manner of painting that characterizes medieval and most Renaissance art (since movement is a more Baroque ambition) is the decisive factor, in my opinion, that has brought the painting to the attention of Viola, a video artist who, of course, works with time.

It would have been very nice to find (and defend) in the «poor» Masolino a painting (the Pietá of Empolí with his Christ «in process» of resurrecting), unnoticed and overlooked, that would prove his (Masolino's) contribution to the theory of the Renaissance «stylistic progress», via his interest in time and maybe change his reputation of being a minor artist unaware of the Renaissance revolution occurring around him. However, the discovery by Paul Joannides of a source for Masolino's painting in a «Pieta» (1404) by Lorenzo Monaco, a panel in tempera and gold leaf, currently at the Academy of Florence, negates that possibility. And in so doing it also invalidates any option to think that the error in the perspective of the coffin was (maybe) not one, but an iconological invention of Masolino's, that by stressing the resemblance of the coffin to a baptismal font, would have created an unprecedented and new interpretation: indeed, the Resurrection of Christ could be read as a re-birth, and hence a Baptism.

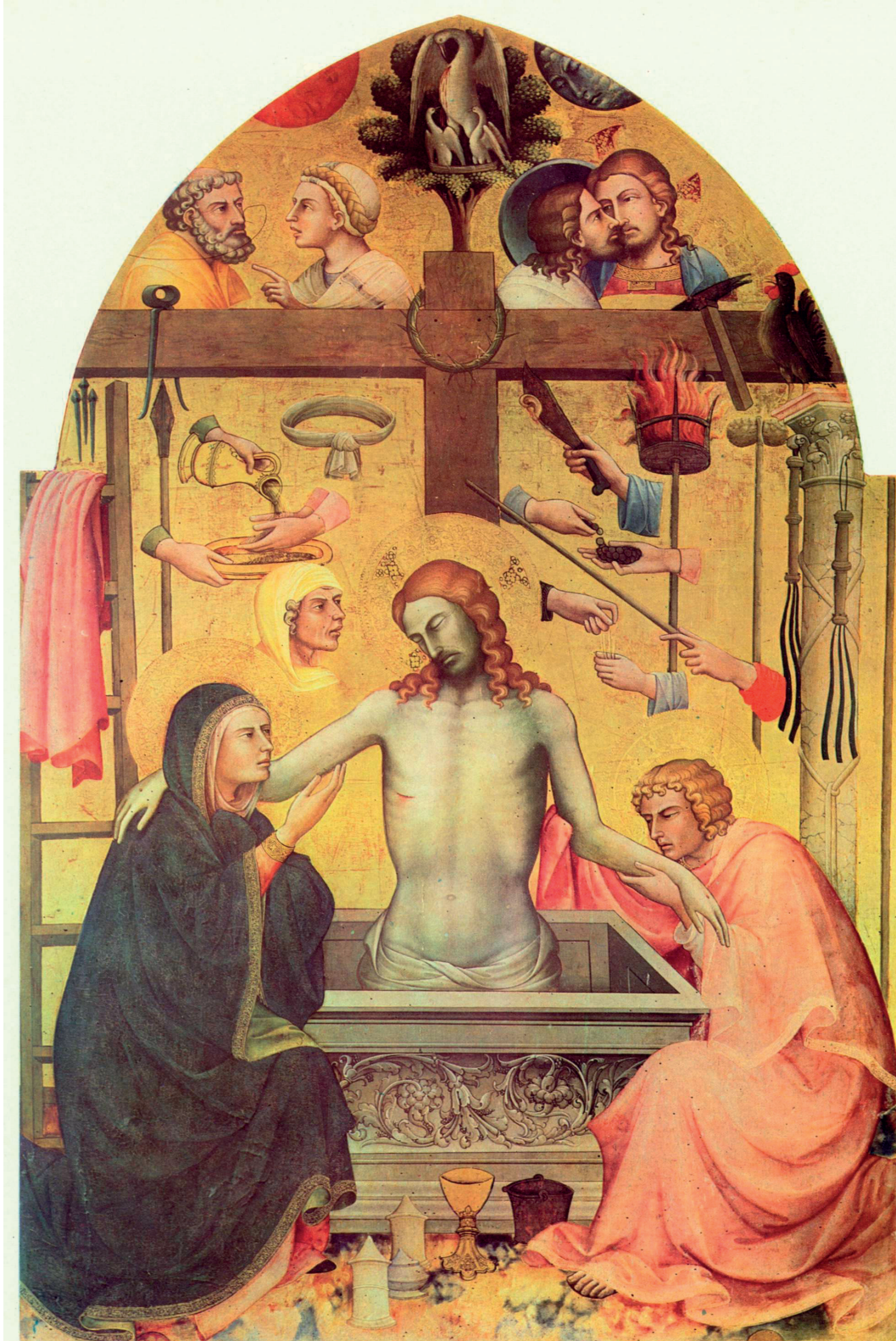


FIGURA 1. MASOLINO. PIETÀ.1424. EMPOLÍ. Museo della Collegiata.

It is clear that Monaco's conceptual representation is the precedent of the work by Masolino, though it should be noted that Masolino's painting is a step towards greater realism. Both seem to work with the Byzantine archetypal image of Christ as «man of sorrows» and its conceptual reality but instead of maintaining it as a fetish or totem, they actually «force» the image into a scene.

And in Masolino's case into a scene with «visual reality» factors of time and place.

The byzantine iconology of Christ as «man of sorrows» was introduced in the German religious painting tradition as well. This typology is constituted by the torso of Christ, white and bare, with the instruments of martyrdom surrounding him. (The image of the face of Christ or Veil of Veronica at the top of the work of Masolino, one of the most popular Byzantine images, can help to support my Byzantine hypothesis). Both artists (Monaco and Masolino) use the image of Christ as a naked torso and try to introduce it into the scene of the Resurrection, placing it (rather awkwardly) in the casket-shrine (lavishly decorated by Monaco with acanthus leaves, and with a more simple geometric design in Masolino: a circle that we can read as a sign of eternity). Of all the signs that refer to Christ's torment (all included in Monaco's painting) Masolino only leaves the whips and the (barely visible) crown of thorns hanging on the Cross.

It is clear that Masolino struggles to transform into «human» experience and «narrative form» that which in Monaco's painting is mainly conceptual and devotional. And he does so by eliminating the golden background and submitting objects and people to the reality of weight and wear.

Moreover here Masolino places the protagonists in a specific time: nightfall rendered by a dark greyish blue. The Cross that is present in Masolino's painting seems, at first sight, to have disappeared in Viola's work, probably to allow other interpretations of the work that are not necessarily Christian. However, on close scrutiny we see that the cross remains, only that it has abandoned the main space in the background to be added as an element of the base relief of the coffin where it joins the circle.

As for the image of Christ by Masolino, following Monaco and the Byzantine culture, we find that he is represented as a young man of Apollonian beauty with no visible wounds, and his eyes almost closed – as befits his extreme situation between life and death. This young man with his bare and powerful white torso remains exactly the same in Viola. The only difference is the absence of nimbus. We may also concede that this whiteness is linked to a Byzantine chryselephantine beauty (rather than to classic marble: which will come later on in Renaissance art), and that in the work of Viola this «imago» rejoins the somewhat morbid and romantic typology of the nineteenth century beauty of the drowned (Millais' Ophelia and more), or the twentieth century's notion of the self-destructive beauty of singers and actors killed in youth by overdose or violent acts (James Dean, Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain) and leaving «beautiful corpses».

Finally I would like to draw attention to the two women in the picture. While in Monaco's work it is the representation of the Virgin Mary and Saint John, in Masolino's painting, the representation of Saint John is so «feminine» that it can be debatable whether John has been replaced by Saint Magdalene. Although without

following Masolino's color-coding: dark blue for the Virgin and reddish orange for the Magdalene, this element (the two women) of the painting is integrated without further processing into the work of Viola. We could say that the transition from one work to another is achieved without a problem. However, I find that lack of problem is in itself a problem. The artist Bill Viola is a man who has never shown any particular interest in gender issues. But I am interested in gender issues, and therefore I will discuss something that catches my attention. As we know from the Scriptures, Christ appeared to a group of women and two men, among whom were the Virgin and Saint Magdalene, who went to bury him decently. It is logical that some painters have reduced that group to only the two leading women. First, because the Renaissance artists work with the idea and the ambition to paint individuals, not groups. In fact, for a long time, when artists painted groups, what they actually represented was a group of «individuals» (I think that the notion of painting «masses» comes with the city views of the second half of the 19th century, from Impressionism onwards). Second, the Virgin and Saint Magdalene are the protagonists and both are necessary to be able to speak of a plural «testimony» of the Resurrection.

All this is true. However, it is also true that the two women are «necessary» for a complete representation of what a woman is in the Renaissance, and in general in Western painting for a long time (and until today), from a purely male-oriented vision. They represent the mother and the lover. The two kinds of love in the life of a man, the two types of function that a woman has in his life. Selfless love in blue, and carnal love marked by its reddish hue. Of course it also implies an age question: young woman (fertile) and the older woman (mother figure). So while this division characterizes the representation of women as necessarily being two, just one man suffices. It is shocking to find this is still a normal device that is followed un-problematically in our days.

BILL VIOLA'S, «EMERGENCE»

It is necessary briefly to consider the characteristics of the work of Viola and the place «Emergence» has in his career. From the beginning of his career, Bill Viola has been a video artist, using video as a means of expression. Video as an artistic medium is as natural to him as drawing and painting was to Masolino. It should also be noted that Viola, just like Masolino, works within a «tradition of art», but the tradition in which he works is flexible, personal, subjective, while for Masolino, art was a strict and codified affair, since from the beginning (and normally through a contract) there was a series of specific demands to be met by his painting so as to be accepted from his patrons (normally a Church or Monastic order).

Both however work in a time of change: Masolino's art world was undergoing a profound change (from Gothic to Renaissance), while Viola is also at the beginning of a new «style», and the new art of his time finds a new form: video-art. Moreover, for Viola, «Emergence», is also the result of a change in his own evolution as an artist. From the beginning, Viola followed a very unique and personal way of

video art. His work soon focused on the analysis of the great themes: death, life, emotions and self-knowledge. All this with himself as the subject, but a subject that is not necessarily present on screen. In his work there is an intra-diegetic narrator (but not necessarily a homo-diegetic one).⁵ In 1995 with his work «The Greeting», and especially in 1998, when he was invited by the Getty Research Institute, his work experienced two significant changes: it turns to the study of the paintings of the past, and its narrator becomes extra-diegetic.

But there the similarities end: Masolino is firmly inserted into the artistic and religious traditions of his time, and represents a well-known story: the Resurrection of Christ, and in terms that he has inherited (although, as we have seen, it can be argued that he innovates, in certain aspects, with respect to this tradition). But Viola works in his own tradition and keeps his distance, even as he is certainly interested in, and excited by, the known story, which is transformed through his telling. In Viola's work, if we accept that what he is telling us is related to the Resurrection of Christ, the miracle is not the end of the story, promoting the epistemological twist that defines it as a miracle. Instead it is placed at the beginning: a young man emerges from a well, fountain or baptistery, one that is endlessly flowing with water, he is then helped out of the water and laid to rest with the two women that assist him, without it being certain what the outcome is or whether he is dead or alive.

The video starts with the well and two women at its right and left, they seem to be waiting. They rejoice in seeing the young man; he is lifted out of the water by the two women (who then take the same position as in Masolino's work) the man emerges from the waters slowly and is then deposited on the ground by them. The man could revive, or not, but he never gets to open his eyes. The young woman starts covering his body with a sheet or canvas, and finally the older of the two women embraces him in a posture similar to that of the Pietá of Michelangelo.

This was the first version I saw of this work, (in 2002), and the La Caixa catalogue confirms that sequence in writing and in pictures, but it does not include the last image of the series: the elderly woman hugging the young man. John Walsh, states «the older woman finally breaks down in tears as the younger women, overcome with emotion, tenderly embraces his body».⁶

Viola reverses the sequence of the story as we know it, one that goes from death to resurrection, and makes the protagonist go from resurrection (or re-birth) to death. The first time I saw it, I thought that more than a «religious» story, it was essentially an «artistic» one, re-tracing an iconographic-historical journey that went from the «innocence» of the early Renaissance (Masolino/Masaccio) to Michelangelo and, therefore, the value of the work was more of an aesthetic than an emotional

5. BAL, Mieke: *A Mieke Bal Reader*. Chicago and London. The University of Chicago Press. 2006. p. 6-7: «The narrator who is present in the story he tells is «homodiegetic»; the narrator who is absent (invisible) or who tells at a higher level a narrative from which he himself is absent is «heterodiegetic». Among homodiegetic narrators, we can distinguish in terms of the degree of presence: some homodiegetic narrators tell story in which they are the main character (in which case they are «autodiegetic»), while other homodiegetic narrators are merely witnesses. So with any narrative we can define the status of the narrator both by his narrative level and his relationship to the story he tells: He is always extra-,intra-,or metadiegetic; at the same time he is always hetero- or homodiegetic.

6. WALSH, John: *Bill Viola. The passions*. Los Angeles. J. Paul Getty Museum. 2003, p. 140.

nature. This lack of a clear «ending» for which the author seems to have settled, is the key to understand the full meaning of his work. Viola's words about this work are that it depicts «a birth» and a death. Both contradictory meanings are present.

To all these layers of symbolic meaning it is necessary to add a biographical reference, told by the artist himself; one that has been mentioned in several books and catalogues, and is included in almost all documentaries about him. Viola tells how as a small child (6 years), he fell into the water and opening his eyes he seemed to have entered a strange and wonderful parallel universe, but he could not swim, and was saved from drowning by a relative⁷. That ambivalence about water as something magical, wonderful, yet lethal, is present in many of his works: from «The Reflecting Pool» (1977-1979) to his latest work «Martyrs» (2014), through works such as «Tristan's Ascension» (2005) and «Ocean Without a Shore» (2007).

Returning to Viola's «Emergence», the man who emerges from the well does not beat death; it is not clear whether he revives or not. If he doesn't, then the male figure merely goes from one death to another. At first view it seemed to me that Viola's work was a (beautiful) failure, because of his incapacity to find «an adequate other «ending» to the traditional story. Or simply because an «ending» with «miracle» is impossible, and reflects the contemporary religious disbelief of the Western world. Also since the work is displayed in a «loop» format when viewing it in a museum, we might consider that both ends of the video could be (to a certain degree, since there is a «fade-out» in between the end and the beginning) interchangeable.

Viola has often expressed his religious feeling, one not associated exclusively to Christianity, but with all types of religions. And his approach could also be interpreted as a way of re-framing a familiar story, one whose repetition had annulled its effect, back to its original complexity and wonder. Then we could say that the «disturbance» produced by the uncertainty of the outcome makes the religious symbol become more «alive». To this end, Viola had to break the sequence of events in order to highlight the miraculous as a potential, and not as a (well-known) ending.

The character of «epiphany» that the story of the Resurrection has in Viola's work is thus very different from the character of «protomes», of «totem», it has in traditional religious painting. That is, in Viola there is an «appearance», the appearance of a possibility, but due in part to the medium in which he works, video, which needs time and movement, the story cannot be reduced to a stable and fixated «fact», «truth» or «dogma». The «ending» of Viola's video lays in the eye of the beholder who has to decide on the «narrative» destination. The epiphany can fade, disappear, or be refused, or it can stay and «revive» as an act of faith, religion, or simply love for Life. Belief in the Resurrection of Christ can only exist if the viewer is willing to «read» the story of Viola in that key (but the author's opinion on the matter is absent). In the work of Masolino, extraordinary events are reflected, a transformation takes place and thus a miracle is imposed on the viewer

7. Even if Bill Viola states his opinions and has been recorded many times, explaining his works, I have tried to keep away from «a criticism of the work that tends to reiterate simply what the artist says it means» BAL, Mieke. *Louise Bourgeois Spider: the architecture of art writing*. Chicago and London. The University of Chicago Press. 2001, p:37.

(there is a dialectical transformation of opposites, as death becomes life). In Viola, the miracle as such does not take place, but strange things happen, and it is suggested that something like a miracle has taken place, but the ending, and the sense of the ending, is left for the viewer to decide.

However, it is also important to comment briefly on how the story is told. Viola uses through the whole video, the same fixed frame, the same distance, the same uniform light, and all action is in slow motion, carrying us through the beginning, middle and finish of every gesture. Viola had already stated, in relation to his work of that period, his intention to analyse the «arc of intensity» of an emotion.⁸ In total, the work lasts 12 minutes, yet the average time the average person spends looking at a painting in a museum is much less (I would guess seconds). It is through the leisurely pace of the movement, and the silence, that the feeling of «miracle» occurs – even if what the miracle *is* isn't clear. I think in this work, Viola induces the viewer to «see» his video, in the same way as people used to admire static works of art in a museum or in church, before people got used to the moving image. Now the process of «watching», sometimes very fast (film, video-clip, and other instruments to translate images), has become a «standard» for how we look around us, and that has caused the end of the capacity for another way of seeing, the looking-contemplation type that belongs to the past.

The sustained looking, the contemplation, is now an activity only practised by, and normal for, art historians and mystics. It is Viola's way of presenting the story that leads to the feeling that we have witnessed something sacred; and although the reference to religion accentuates this feeling, it is only partly responsible for its manifestation.

CONCLUSION

From the standpoint of orthodox and formalist Art history, it's traditional artistic canon, and the institutional Christian religious belief, Masolino's work has two major flaws: the error in the foreshortening of the coffin, and the fact that the figure of Christ is incomplete (not presented as a whole body). Christ because of his importance in the hierarchy of the Catholic dogma cannot be represented as something incomplete because this detracts from perfection. Perfection requires a full representation, in both senses of complete and whole. These two «details» help to explain the lack of importance Masolino has in the hierarchy of Renaissance artists, and the forgotten status of his work (both in physical location and bibliographical status).

However, it is precisely the ambiguity of the work by Masolino why Viola chooses him. It is his «mistake/awkwardness» which permits the double reading of his work, allowing Viola to turn the coffin into its opposite: a baptismal font where newborns

8. VIOLA, Bill: *Reason for knocking at an empty house: Writings 1973-1995*. Cambridge Massachusetts. The MIT Press, 1995. p. 36



FIGURA 3. VIOLA. EMERGENCE.2002. Paul Getty Museum.

(or non-Catholic adults) are initiated and born into the Catholic religion. We can accept that Masolino's error of perspective leads to an interesting interpretation and to underlining the deep contradictory sense of the symbol: in his re-birth to life, Christ conquers death and gives re-birth to the eternal life for all Christians.

It is precisely the incompleteness of the figure of Christ in Masolino's painting, which gives his work that sense of movement that seems so «modern» and so different from the static and fixed appearance images have in the early Renaissance. The two «errors» of Masolino can perhaps today be considered to «widen» the symbolic meaning of the work, but they were probably not understood at the time, since they formally endangered the «code» of common Christian representation; and clearly they did not fit the criteria of «stylistic progress» with which the Italian Renaissance has been studied for a long time. Therefore, it is possible to speculate that the reading we can do now of his work, and, actually, the reading Bill Viola made

of Masolino's work, is fundamentally different from the standard reading that he has been receiving from the «classic», mainstream art historians of the Renaissance.

For me, it is clear that Bill Viola, at some level, noticed Masolino more for his «mistakes» than anything else, like holes or absences in which to introduce new elements and therefore provoke a new narration. Masolino's «mistakes» permitted a different «reading» of the traditional story, and allowed for Viola's re-working of the Resurrection image. Moreover, «Emergence» is a beautiful work, formally accomplished, although its symbolic meaning is ambiguous and does not seem to correspond to the Christian story, or to any other known account, since it has an open ending that lends itself to be finished by the viewer. Masolino works within a pre-set code of symbols and tries to present them (and renew them) through formal developments. Viola works within a vocabulary of religious images and signs, but he assembles them in a different way than the Christian church dogma, a different way than what is expected, and although he gives us the experience of a miracle, it is not defined and determined by a canonical Christian story.

However, both provide imagery of the miraculous in movement. Masolino achieves it haphazardly because he lives between two artistic traditions and, therefore he mixes old (Byzantine) and new (Renaissance) stereotypes. He achieves the sense of movement (unintentionally) when he introduces the Byzantine image into a Renaissance context and thus creates a «bizarre» combination that seems to indicate movement (the use of fragmentation as a means of indicating movement will later become a common resource in Impressionism and other avant-garde approaches at the turn of the 20th century). And movement is the most obvious feature of life. By adding the semblance of movement to the image of the risen Christ, Masolino adds life.

Viola has the wisdom to understand that a miraculous or extraordinary event, must be separate from normal movement, and breaks with the actual experience of time, creating in his video, by the use of «slow motion», an «unreal» time, in which every gesture, every action seems transcendental. So in his video we also find temporary fragmentation using «slow motion». The slow, rhythmic flow of this time creates the religious feeling. Both transform the act of seeing into contemplating, and contemplating is in itself a spiritual experience.

But there is another major difference in the narration their work imposes on the viewer: for Masolino the interest is in the ending, which is in accordance with the teleological reasoning that characterized his time. In Viola's work, however, it is the beginning more than the ending that is prevalent. The moment of the «re-birth» of the Christ like figure when he emerges from the fountain is the high-note of his video. As Marc Augé points out: «A beginning is the purpose of ritual. A beginning is not a repetition. People sometimes say: «Look it is starting all over again» meaning that there is no change. The important element in that is starting. Starting again is living through a new beginning, a birth».⁹

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