

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

September 27, 1999

**CONTACTS:** Eileen Harakal  
John Foley Hindman  
312/443-3626

**ART INSTITUTE PRESENTS 25-YEAR SURVEY OF TODAY'S LEADING VIDEO ARTIST**

**BILL VIOLA LARGEST ONE-PERSON VIDEO EXHIBITION EVER ASSEMBLED**

**On View in Rice Building, European Painting Galleries, and Two "Off-Site" Locations**

**October 16, 1999–January 9, 2000**

A landmark exhibition of the work of today's leading video artist is on view this fall and winter at The Art Institute of Chicago—as well as two other locations in the city.

*Bill Viola: A 25-Year Survey* is the first full-scale overview of the California-based artist's work. It is also the largest exhibition ever devoted to the output of a single artist working in the field of video and installation art. Organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, the main part of this massive undertaking will be shown in Regenstein Hall, the Daniel F. and Ada L. Rice Building, with one work installed in the Art Institute's European Painting galleries (G. 211), and two others in locations downtown and on the campus of the University of Chicago. A fourth off-site location is also under consideration—details will be released when confirmed. The exhibition will be on view October 16, 1999–January 9, 2000.

*Bill Viola* presents 19 moving image and sound installations and 22 single-channel videotapes created during the period between 1972 and 1996, affording viewers an overview of Viola's powerful aesthetic and his influential use of video images and amplified sound. The exhibition also includes a selection of personal notes and working drawings from the artist's notebooks that provide intimate insights into his creative process.

Viola created the exhibition's architectural floor plan based on the idea of a journey through its successive and interconnected parts, linked in darkness, forming a meta-artwork that leads the viewer through a range of emotional states. Viola's works often depict everyday events—children at a birthday party, women greeting one another in a plaza, individuals asleep—which are slowed in time or transformed in scale and focus to achieve heightened

## Bill Viola at the Art Institute

### Page 2

states of subjective intensity. There are evocative sounds and images—the cry of childbirth, fruit falling from a tree, a silhouette of a man emerging from blackness into blinding light, two figures moving haltingly through a nocturnal landscape—in darkened galleries that evoke strong emotional responses within the viewer. Also, there is an element of surprise present in nearly all of the installations—objects that appear to be one thing turn out to be something else, and unexpected, startling images and sounds occur without warning, provoking shock, humor, wonder, and even fear.

Widely acknowledged as the most important video artist working today, Bill Viola has, throughout a more than 25-year career, successfully married art and technology to produce a body of work that deals with such profound matters as birth and death, spirituality, and human consciousness. Demonstrating that the sophisticated tools of video and computer equipment can be used brilliantly but simply and gracefully in the service of art, Viola's approach transcends technology so that each piece becomes a direct personal experience for the viewer.

Bill Viola began experimenting with video—the “child of television” and an art form then in its infancy—while studying art at Syracuse University in the early 1970s. He was initially influenced by such early masters of the medium as Nam June Paik, Peter Campus, and Bruce Nauman. At odds with the burgeoning cynicism of the times, Viola developed his own distinct visual vocabulary and innovative approach to video based on a set of spiritual values that has had a profound and continuous impact on his development as an artist.

While Viola's installations are realized with cutting-edge technologies, ancient and universal themes appear consistently throughout his work. The artist draws creative inspiration from a diverse range of disciplines, cultures, and epochs: Zen Buddhism and early Christian mysticism; the physics of optics and the mechanisms of perception; the Islamic lyric poetry of Sufi masters like Jelaluddin Rumi and the distinctly American verse of Walt Whitman; and the aesthetics of Italian Mannerist painting.

## Bill Viola at the Art Institute

### Page 3

One particular piece has come to occupy a singular position in the Viola's conception of the exhibition installation: *The Crossing* (1996), a monumental achievement in the history of video art, is placed at the entrance to the exhibition. Projected simultaneously on both sides of a large, two-sided screen in the middle of a darkened room, the sequence begins with a distant figure of a man walking in slow motion toward the viewer. Drawing close, he stops and faces the viewer as his body appears to be slowly consumed—by flames on one side of the screen and a torrent of water on the opposite side. Accompanied by roaring sounds of raging fire and cascading waters, the overwhelming image is of the annihilation of a single figure by opposing natural forces. What the artist profoundly and simply conveys, however, is how these destructive primal elements also simultaneously manifest purification, transformation, and regeneration.

The exhibition is accompanied by a 216-page, full-color catalogue of the same title—available in The Museum Shop of The Art Institute of Chicago—published by the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, in association with Flammarion. Included are a foreword by exhibition co-curator David Ross; a conversation between Bill Viola and author, poet, and cultural commentator Lewis Hyde; descriptions and images of principal works; and an exhibition history, bibliography, chronology, and checklist.

### Off-Site Installations

In addition to the 16 video installations, daily changing programs of videotapes, and selection of the artist's working notes and drawings shown in Regenstein Hall, the Art Institute is presenting three major video installations by Bill Viola "off-site" as part of the exhibition:

1. *The Greeting* (1995), inspired by *The Visitation*, a painting by the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Italian Mannerist artist Jacopo Pontormo, will be installed amidst a group of Italian Renaissance paintings in one of the **Art Institute's European Painting galleries (G. 211)**.
2. *The Arc of Ascent* (1992), a huge video/sound installation depicting a human figure plunging into water, is being shown in the **City of Chicago Official Visitor's Center**,