EDUCATION NOTES
INVESTIGATING ARTWORKS IN THE GALLERY
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ART
GALLERY
NSW

40 YEARS
KALDOR PUBLIC
ART PROJECTS

2008
BILL
VIOLA

2008
BILL
VIOLA

PROJECT

The Tristan Project

Fire Woman
Tristan's Ascension (The Sound
of a Mountain Under a Waterfall)

9 April – 23 May 2008
St Saviour's Church, Redfern, Sydney

I don't like the label 'video artist.' I consider myself to be an artist. I happen to use video because I live in the last part of the 20th century.

Bill Viola, *Reasons for knocking at an empty house: writings 1993–1994*, MIT Press, in conjunction with Anthony d'Offay Gallery, Cambridge Mass/London 1995, pp 149–52

BILL VIOLA

Fire Woman 2005, part of the series
The Tristan Project, installed in St
Saviour's Church in Sydney in 2008

Video/sound installation, colour high-definition
video projection; four channels of sound with
subwoofer (4.1); screen: 580 x 326 cm

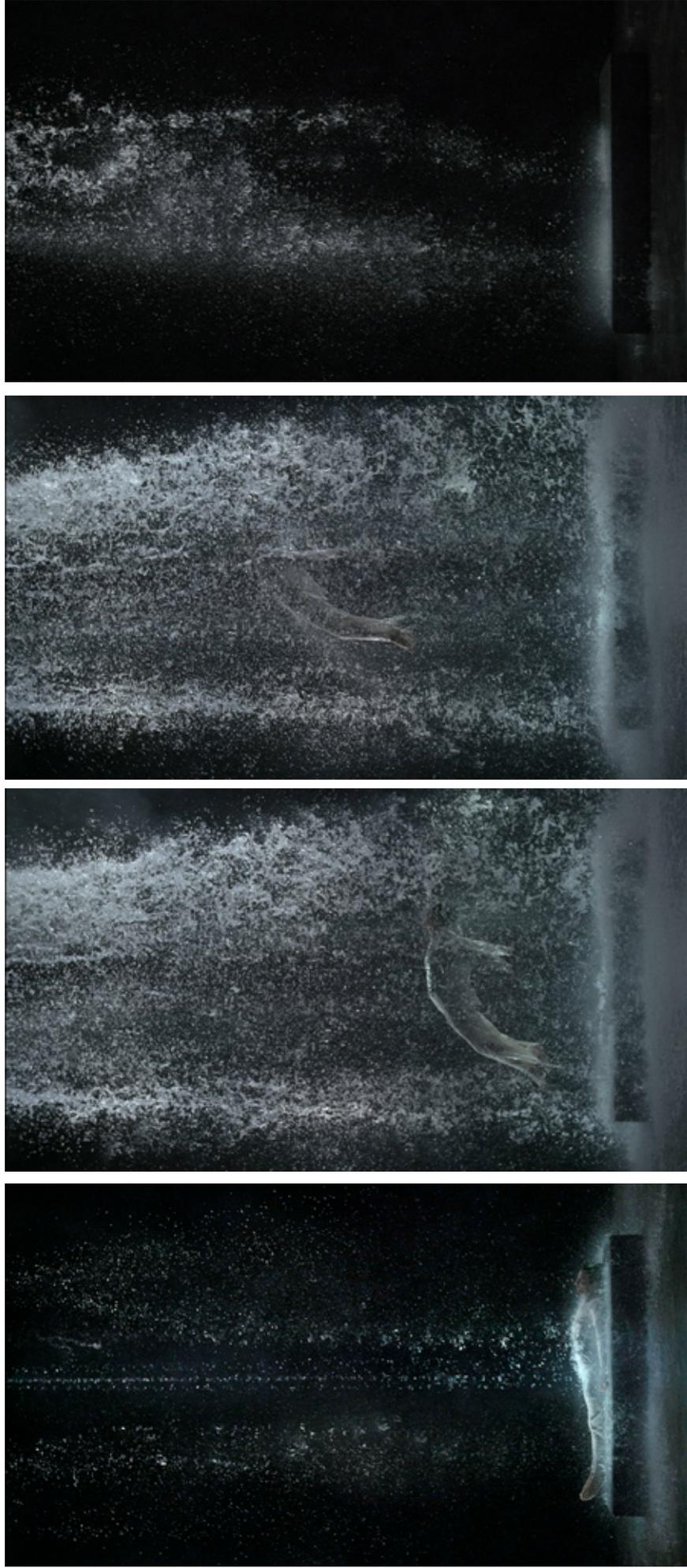Photo: Kira Perov © Bill Viola

BILL VIOLA

Tristan's Ascension (The Sound of a Mountain Under a Waterfall) 2005, part of the series *The Tristan Project*, installed in St Saviour's Church in Sydney in 2008

colour high-definition video projection; four channels of sound with subwoofer (4.1); screen: 580 x 326 cm

Photo: Kira Perov © Bill Viola

2008
BILL
VIOLA

INTRODUCTION

A pioneer in the development of video as a serious artform, Bill Viola is now considered a major artist in the contemporary art field. For over three decades he has expanded the language and scope of a medium, which is generally considered populist and commercial, to conjure powerful acts of the imagination that manage to confront those elemental mysteries of birth and death, and the interior silence of subjective consciousness. While employing state-of-the-art technology to address art's time-honoured poetic aspirations, Viola's work generally avoids noisy special effects, choppy and disjunctive editing, music and dialogue. With simple means (slow-motion playback while inverting the image, three-dimensional sound, seamlessly looped dream-like transitions), the viewer feels enveloped and weightlessly transported to a paradoxical place, somewhat like the afterlife, where past and future are gathered, and where, in defiance of the laws of physics, it is difficult to tell whether something is rising or falling, arriving or leaving, moving or still. Such was the experience for visitors to a darkened church in Sydney in 2008 where, at the invitation of John Kaldor, Viola screened two works from *The Tristan Project*.

ARTIST

Bill Viola
born 1951 in New York, USA
lives and works in Long Beach, California, USA

Born into an Italian American family, Bill Viola studied electrical engineering, literature and mysticism at the Experimental Studios of Syracuse University before receiving his bachelor of fine arts. There's an autobiographical thread through some of Viola's work and one incident – an early near drowning – has played a part: Viola was captivated by this magical but potentially lethal submarine world which continues to find form in some of the mesmerising video images he creates.

For 18 months in the mid 1970s, Viola lived in Florence, Italy, working in one of the first video art studios in Europe as technical director of production. In those days, these places were homespun, lab-like and experimental, attracting non-specialists and encouraging collaboration. From there, Viola journeyed to the Solomon Islands, Java, Bali and Japan, absorbing the traditional performing arts of those cultures. He was a member of David Tudor's radical Rainforest ensemble for seven years, where they used eight channels for a sound system that surrounded the audience, and also assisted Nam June Paik with exhibition installation. From 1976 to 1980, he created a series of intensely personal single-channel videos as artist-in-residence at the public television laboratory Channel 13 in New York.

In 1977, Viola was invited to Melbourne's La Trobe University by its cultural arts director Kira Perov, whom he subsequently married. They have since worked and travelled together: including studying Buddhism with a Zen master in Japan and animal consciousness at the San Diego Zoo; and recording shimmering mirages of Chott el-Djerid in the Sahara desert, nocturnal desert landscapes in the American Southwest and prayer blessings with the Dalai Lama.

PROJECT

At the invitation of John Kaldor, Bill Viola presented two works from his 2005 series *The Tristan Project* in the darkened space of St Saviour's Church in Redfern, Sydney, in April and May 2008. Viola's installation amalgamated the shadowy architectural setting with a six-metre, high-definition colour projection screen, five-channel sound and an enveloping operatic narrative.

Viola has used these sacred settings in the past to make some of the finest church art of our time, including *The Messenger*, which was first shown in Durham Cathedral in England (and later, in 1999, at the Art Gallery of NSW), and *Ocean Without a Shore*, which used the three stone altars of the 15th-century Church of San Gallo during the Venice Biennale.

The Tristan Project was begun in late 2004 as an evolving backdrop to a production of Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, directed by Peter Sellars. It was presented in project form in Los Angeles in 2004 and the complete opera premiered at the Opéra National de Paris in France in 2005. The two pieces presented in Viola's Kaldor project – *Fire Woman* 2005 and *Tristan's Ascension (The Sound of a Mountain Under a Waterfall)* 2005 – were part of the sequence at a climactic section late in Wagner's narrative.

In *Fire Woman*, a female figure is silhouetted against a wall of flame. After some moments, she moves forward, opening her arms, and then she falls into her own reflection. *Tristan's Ascension* is the ascent of the spirit in the time after death as it is re-awakened and uncannily drawn up in a backwards-flowing waterfall.

The references for these images extend well beyond Wagner. Dealing with the ultimates of human experience – the kind of metaphysical territory and emotional range that we find in TS Eliot's poem *Four quartets* – Viola also brings to mind the Tibetan Bardo states of passage through death to another stage through a kind of waterfall.

At the same time as *Fire Woman* and *Tristan's Ascension* were presented as a Kaldor project at St Saviour's, the Art Gallery of NSW showed another work from *The Tristan Project*. *The Fall into Paradise* 2005 begins with a tiny speck of light in a black field which gradually resolves into the entwined bodies of two figures. Slowly they drift upwards until they break the surface to float suspended as silhouettes on a luminous blue field.

What marks out Viola from other video art luminaries like Nam June Paik and Bruce Nauman is his interest in filling the emergent medium of video with subversive ethnographic discourses – Gnostic belief systems, Eastern spiritual disciplines, Renaissance memory protocols, shamanic trance practices – when it was still an open symbolic channel …

Steve Beard, *Aftershocks: the end of style culture*, Wallflower Press, London 2002 p 91

WORLD EVENTS: 2008

_ World stockmarkets plunge, fuelled by the US subprime mortgage crisis

_ Activists in Egypt use Facebook to rally for democracy

_ Rising food and fuel prices trigger riots in the Third World

_ Release of *WALL-E*, Pixar's ecologically-minded animation

_ Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivers a formal apology to the Stolen Generations

_ MySpace Australia holds its first art competition

_ Artists resale royalty right scheme introduced in Australia

_ Police in Sydney confiscate artist Bill Henson's photographs, sparking debate on censorship

_ Biennale of Sydney, *Revolutions – forms that turn*, artistic director Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev

_ Gift of the John Kaldor Family Collection to the Art Gallery of NSW announced

_ **17th Kaldor project:** Two works – *Fire Woman* and *Tristan's Ascension (The Sound of a Mountain Under a Waterfall)* – from Bill Viola's *The Tristan Project* installed at St Saviour's Church in the Sydney suburb of Redfern

_ **18th Kaldor project:** Martin Boyce creates the installation *We are shipwrecked and landlocked* in the grounds of Old Melbourne Gaol

THEME
Video art

The video format has had to clarify its autonomous nature: is it film or is it TV? The video monitor's physical resemblance to the household TV set, whether as a solo box or as part of an installation, tends to perplex the viewer, as if it were merely some educational tool, or even a domestic appliance suitable for low culture but antithetical to fine arts.

Derided by intellectuals as an idiot-box, television was remade into an artform by Nam June Paik, playing fast and loose with the temporal image. Paik's 'prepared' TVs altered the networks' transmissions – much as John Cage had done with pianos and radios – while his physical manipulations of the TV sets themselves made them into a new kind of sculptural object.

In his January 1981 essay 'The porcupine and the car' for *Image Forum*, Bill Viola maintained that the difference between film and video has to do with the technical evolution of the two mediums: film as motion pictures is a succession of film stills creating the illusion of movement; while the video camera ceaselessly scans lines and thus 'stillness' is the basic illusion. 'Looking at the technical development of both video and film, we immediately notice a profound difference: as film has evolved basically out of photography (a film is a succession of discrete photographs), video has emerged from audio technology. A video camera is closer to a microphone in operation than it is to a film camera; video images are recorded on magnetic tape in a tape recorder. Thus we find that video is closer in relationship to sound or music than it is to the visual media of film and photography.'

For Viola, the alliance of video to sound, and thus to the passage of time, makes the experience more existential, more real, and hence likely to connect to more emotion in what is otherwise today's highly visual objective culture.

Compared to the great moments in film, we don't often think of video as haunting the mind or leaving after-images in the same way. Perhaps it has to do with the flypaper attraction of the cinema rectangle – its scalelessness – that hypnotic enveloping plane in the big movie house. Video, with its original amoeboid shape, is like an object in the room that you can see past. Also the video image, unlike the incremental frame of film, tends to fall apart with nothing to see but raster lines. What's more, video art demands a shift in your usual viewing patterns; unlike the way we take in a painting or a sculpture, video is a time-based medium. The all-encompassing glance of a fixed image or object doesn't work for video art, which asks you to be stationary (though less so for multiple-monitor installations). Paik took those limitations as spurs to his creativity, and the frameless continuous nature of video – as with the Paik–Abe colour video synthesiser – allowed him to expand and contract the image like a concertina.

Since the 1990s, video projection has come to replace the monitor as the central means of display in public settings. In the early 1970s, its low-resolution and costliness made it a less-than-reliable medium. The electronic arts – video and TV – have long been regarded as film's poor relation, and despite the advances in technology that have rendered most of the negative comparisons invalid (lack of clarity in sound and image, for example), the condescending attitude persists. Yet in those early years (the 1960s and '70s), video was a part of conceptual art and the related practices of performance art and process art, and video used those limitations – black-and-white picture, crude editing and finish – as a badge of cutting-edge radicalism.

In the 1980s, Paik began using video projection with lasers and sculptural forms to push the medium forward. By the late 1980s, improvements in the technology gave it the edge over monitors, and a new generation of artists welcomed the high-production values of cinema, often using film and video in combination. Shirin Neshat, Doug Aitken and William Kentridge, for example, shoot on 16mm film and then transfer to video; while Viola has used special high-speed 35mm film cameras to make his slow-motion video installations. They have broken out of the box of the monitor and effectively compete with other media for the attention of viewers and collectors.

So, why isn't video art today, with its time-based moving images and often darkened rooms, just cinema without seats? As it happens, distinct visual languages have grown up: not just formal and technical (how they record and display information, how they frame time and space) but historical. Just as early

video artists such as Vito Acconci and Bruce Nauman made a point of highlighting the viewer's identity, as opposed to the tranced complacency of the commercially-driven boob-tube, cinema has challenged the conditions of its spectatorship.

In the 21st century, we've witnessed a vast migration of images from movie-projection houses towards exhibition spaces, all made easier by the digital revolution. Cinema has been redefined within these new parameters: outside traditional film history and within the larger orbit of art history.

COLLECTION CONNECTIONS

Relevant works in the Art Gallery of NSW collection
www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection

• **Anselm Kiefer** (Germany; France, b1945)
Von den Verlorenen gerührt, die der Glaube nicht trug, erwachen die Trommeln im Fluss 2004
oil, emulsion, acrylic and sand on canvas with concrete staircase; 420 x 560 cm
Purchased with funds provided by Geoff and Vicki Ainsworth and Catriona and Simon Mordant 2006 59.2006

The broken stairs in this work correspond to the broken propeller suggesting the dream of climbing above the horizon and yet it is a dream that is doomed to fail. This ambivalence towards transcendental aspiration is common to much art of the late 20th and early 21st century. The floor installation belongs to a body of works that reverse the passage between heaven and the earth. This is often represented by emanations from above, sometimes in the form of poured lead attached to a painting or hanging in space like the finger of God.

• **Patricia Piccinini** (Sierra Leone; Australia, b1965)
Swell 2000
3 channel DVD video installation; 4 min loop
Contemporary Collection Benefactors' 2005 with the assistance of Natalia Bradshaw, Andrew Cameron, Mark Flitcroft, Richard Frolich, Leslie & Ginny Green, Amanda Love, Roslyn & Tony Oxley, Stuart Quin, Reg Richardson, Penelope Seidler, Vivienne Sharpe, Ray Shorrocks, Stephen Solomons, Corrinine & John Young 266.2005

In *Swell*, the immersive visual experience elicits a strong physical and psychological response, making it hard to keep a balanced view of this potentially anxiety-causing, frontierless new world.

• **Ron Mueck** (Australia; England, b1958)
Untitled (old woman in bed) 2000–02
mixed media; 25.4 x 94 x 53.9 cm
Purchased 2003 9.2003

The woman in this, one of Mueck's most poignant works, seems only to have a tenuous hold on life as she shrinks from this world into whatever comes next. It is imbued with the pathos of our own experiences of the death of elderly friends and relatives just as it foretells our own inevitable demise.

• **Susan Norrie** (Australia, b1953)
Undertow 2002
6 channel video installation with sound, projection boxes
Purchased with funds provided by Clayton Utz 2003 266.2003

This is one of Norrie's most ambitious video installations and the culmination of several years of experimentation. Through projected and screen images, sound and sculptural objects, it portrays the world in a state of both beauty and corruption, shuddering with natural and unnatural events that verge on the catastrophic.

• **Ken Unsworth** (Australia, b1931)
Suspended stone circle II 1974–77, 1988
103 river stones, wire; 400 cm diameter
Purchased 1988 356.1988.a-yyyy

In many of his early body art pieces, Unsworth held his body in suspension as if levitating between consciousness and unconsciousness, between the material world and the immaterial. The figure seems trapped, pinioned or bound. These works are not only about equilibrium, balance and formal relations; they are also violent and claustrophobic experiences and many of his sculptures continue this theme. *Suspended stone circle II* is one of his levitation works with 103 river stones, each weighing around 15 kilograms and held in place by three wires tied to three rings secured to the ceiling structure. The stones form a suspended disc, with each one held as if in a force field. The stones are hung so that their centre of gravity falls exactly on the central axis of the disc and each stone is equidistant from its neighbours. The three sets of wires create three cones, suggesting the force field which they literally constitute.

• **Yves Klein** (France, b1928, d1962)
Portrait relief PR3 (portrait of Claude Pascal) 1962
dry pigment in synthetic resin on bronze mounted on primed and gold-leafed board; 176 x 94 x 35 cm
Purchased with assistance from the Mervyn Horton Bequest Fund 1990 64.1990.a-b

This work belongs to a project Klein started in 1962 to record himself and his circle of intimates in a quartet of body casts. The portrait is cast from the poet Claude Pascal's body and coloured in International Klein Blue pigment. Seeming to levitate in front of its golden field, the figure re-enacts Klein's *Leap into the void*. Klein himself was to have been represented, conversely, in gold against blue but he died before making the cast.

Bill Henson (Australia, b1955)
Untitled 1995/96 from the series *Untitled* 1995/96
diptych: 2 type C photographs, adhesive tape, pins, glassine
Purchased 1996 283.1996.a-b

SELECTED REFERENCES

_ *Bill Viola*, exhibition catalogue, Kukje Gallery, Seoul 2003

_ *Bill Viola*, exhibition catalogue, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris 1983

_ Sophie Forbat (ed), *40 years: Kaldor Public Art Projects*, Kaldor Public Art Projects, Sydney 2009

_ *Tristan und Isolde: Opéra en Trois Actes*, program notes, Opéra National de Paris, Paris 2004

_ Bill Viola, 'Video black: the mortality of the image' in Doug Hall & Sally Jo Fifer (eds), *Illuminating video: an essential guide to video art*, Aperture, San Francisco 1990

_ Bill Viola, 'The porcupine and the car', *Image Forum*, vol 2, no 3, Jan 1981, pp 46–55 republished in Bill Viola, *Reasons for knocking at an empty house: writings 1993–1994* MIT Press in conjunction with Anthony d'Offay Gallery, Cambridge Mass/ London 1995

Websites

_ Bill Viola
www.billviola.com

_ Kaldor Public Art Projects
www.kaldorartprojects.org.au

_ Kaldor Public Art Projects Explorer, Art Gallery of NSW
www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/kaldor_projects

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

Bill Viola considers himself an artist, not a video artist. Investigate what he regards to be the difference between the two. Why is this differentiation significant to Viola? Locate another Kaldor project artist who identifies as a video artist, and contrast their practice with Viola's. Outline the directions in which both artists have developed video as an element of their bodies of work.

You have been employed as Viola's assistant. He is about to embark on a big project and has asked you to prepare for him his artist's palette. Outline what an artist's palette is and what it may be in relation to Viola's practice. Is this the same as an artist's language, vocabulary or vernacular? Does Viola have a 'signature' that can be consistently read across his works? If so, discuss what elements make up that signature.

Suggest the key themes that underpin the subject matter of Viola's art. Are these particular to Viola or more universal? Examine other artists who have worked with similar ideas and identify their times, contexts and mediums. In terms of his interests within his practice, would you consider Viola to have more in common with his contemporaries or those from art history working in other mediums? Propose some examples of artists you think share similar interests and make a case for the inclusion.

Pinpoint experiences in Viola's life that may have influenced the nature of his practice and the issues he explores in his work. Identify artworks that could be linked to his personal story and discuss how an artist's practice cannot be isolated from their personal world.

Viola integrates both state-of-the-art digital technology and low-tech analogue equipment in the production of his work. What effect does this have on his art-making, both materially and conceptually? Viewing a Viola work, is it easy to identify this collage of technologies or is it resolved so seamlessly that it is undetectable? Give specific examples by visually analysing an aspect of one of his works and the role the technology has played.

Research the origins of video and of film as mediums for art. Discuss the characteristics of both, particularly in terms of the audience experience. Why has video been associated with amateur, low-fi culture? What appeal might this have for Viola? Investigate the equal importance Viola places on sound and image within his video works. Discuss the relationship between video and sound recording, and the roles they play in our lives. Describe the alliance of sound and video in a Viola work, and the effect this has on the viewer. Debate whether you would consider a Viola work a passive or an active experience for a viewer.

In 2008 Bill Viola presented two works from *The Tristan Project* in a Gothic revival church in a Sydney suburb as a Kaldor project and an additional work at the Art Gallery of NSW. Consider how the different sites may have affected the reading of the works. Compare *Fire Woman* and *Tristan's Ascension* to an altarpiece like *The Ghent Altarpiece* by Jan and Hubert van Eyck from the 15th century. What language and cues has Viola taken from artworks of this nature? Research the role they fulfilled in their time for audiences. Is Viola attempting similar things with his works today? Analyse the issues Viola deals with in this work. Is he consistent in his interests? Consider issues such as gender, the afterlife, spirituality, consciousness and metaphysics.

The Tristan Project is a collaboration between Viola and the performers. Discuss the importance of collaboration in Viola's work. In what ways does Viola's work as an artist blur with that of a director? Investigate his process and involvement with the actors. Consider other Kaldor projects: is this role of the artist and the theme of collaboration underpinning most of them?

Assess how *Fire Woman, Tristan's Ascension* and *The Fall into Paradise* were made and the video effects used to make the action possible. Examine the discourse between Viola's performers and the audience. What differentiates his works from films at the cinema?