

## Artist's Description

Bill Viola

*Anima*, 2000

16 x 75 inches

(41.28 x 190.5 centimeters)

Color video triptych on three small vertical LCD flat panels framed and mounted on wall

### Overview

The following notes by Bill Viola regarding his original artwork titled *Anima* describe the aesthetic intentions and physical attributes of the work, the parameters of possible contexts for its presentation, and an outline of concerns for the ongoing life of the artwork.

*Anima* is an artwork dependent upon various technological apparatus for its full realization. It is recognized that the life span of these hardware devices is finite, and that in the future, these supporting vehicles (e.g., image storage methods, projection devices/monitors) may have to be augmented or replaced. Although the core creative intentions of *Anima* are timeless, future technological developments may also provide desirable opportunities to enhance the presentation (and preservation) of the artwork. These notes attempt to anticipate these possibilities and to circumscribe the boundaries within which the integrity of the artwork itself can be truly maintained. Ultimately, curators, registrars, conservators, scholars, individual collectors, and other custodians of the artwork will want to review the evolving body of descriptions for all the artist's works to gather the fullest possible guidance and understanding.

### Aesthetic Context

The primary aim of *Anima* as a creative exploration was to push the video medium as far as technically possible to turn active emotion into near stillness. Like the movement of the hands of a clock or the life of a natural rock formation, there are aspects of life that evolve more slowly than human perception can register. The constancy of change was a central idea circulating through the production of this artwork. Emotional states, which are generally considered rather fleeting aspects of human life, are here slowed to the pace of "nature time."

The footage for *Amina* was shot in high speed 35mm film at 240 frames per second. Each of the actors (more than three were filmed originally) was instructed to perform four emotions sequentially—joy, sorrow, anger, and fear—within a similar time frame of approximately 60 seconds, allowing intervals of approximately 12 seconds for each emotion. The actual raw footage used in the work was not edited.

The film was transferred to video using a teleciné machine, which allows playback at different rates of speed. For *Anima*, the film transfer was slowed to the lowest possible levels. To avoid the “stepping” that often disrupts the quality of image progression in such extremely low transfer rates, a digital noise reduction filter was used to “trick” the machine’s own process to blend over any unevenness. Consequently, the film was able to be transferred at three frames per second, turning one minute of real performance time into 81 and one half minutes of screen time. For the most part, the image was brought below the threshold of visible change. The effect of knowing that visible change is occurring without being able to actually identify the moments of change visually is a haunting mental realization. *Anima* transforms a perceptual occurrence into a conceptual event.

Although *Anima*’s triptych arrangement alludes to a common historical format for religious altar pieces, it does not adhere to the latter’s purposeful spatial arrangements (e.g., heaven-earth-hell). Here the frames are, instead, equal, and comprise a triptych only in the sense that there are three panels. Their order, while not arranged to convey a specific reading, was determined by personal and aesthetic reasons of the artist and should not be re-arranged.

### **Physical/Technical Attributes and Parameters for Presentation**

*Anima* is a 3-channel video work presented in a triptych format on three 17”-diagonal, liquid crystal display (LCD) flat-panel monitors that have been disassembled from their manufacturer’s housing as originally purchased. The screens and their elements (circuit boards, etc.) have been reconfigured in custom-designed frames that are mounted side by side by side on a wall. All general operations, however, remain the same. The aspect ratio for the image display is “4:3” (since the panels have been turned on their sides, however, the ratio in this case is more accurately “3:4”). The image display of *Anima* is based on standard, universally accepted adjustment procedures, including use of test patterns (e.g., color bars), etc.

The video in this artwork is presented on digital video disc (DVD), but exists in its most essential form as a Digital Betacam master (see additional notes following

under “Guidelines”). The work should always be shown at its full length and never cropped visually or edited in time (for more on this point, please see notes below under “Guidelines”).

*Anima* has no soundtrack or audio components.

The physical composition of *Anima* is integral. The work is conceived as a triptych that is installed/shown on a wall. The work should never be presented any other way (e.g., with the panels propped up on a tabletop surface or leaning against a wall on a shelf or ledge). The monitors should always be spaced, and the orientation of the figures arranged, as noted in the technical instructions. In all public presentations of *Anima*, the playback hardware must always be concealed to allow the most direct interaction with the image itself.

*Anima* can be shown in a room with some ambient lighting and with other artworks; it does not require a solitary, darkened environment. Although the LCD panels offer the brightest projection possible, excessive light levels will distract from the work. The work has its own luminous quality and should never be lighted directly or spotlighted as an object or shown in a room with direct sunlight or high levels from windows or skylights.

### **Guidelines for the Ongoing Life of the Artwork**

It is critical to maintain the scale and physical dimensions of this artwork as much as possible. If necessary, the dimensions of the projection screens used in the work could be expanded, but to no more than a 21” diagonal surface. If this must happen, the dimensions of the frame elements and the mounting space between them should be expanded correspondingly. In no case should the work be reduced in scale. If thinner projection devices are ever installed, the depth of the framing element should not be reduced. If, in the future, image storage and playback devices become so efficient that they can be mounted within the frames of the panels, that would be desirable. The current system for DVD operation (with external wires running to a concealed playback device) can be abandoned under these circumstances. The silver/gray color of the frame should not be changed.

The 4:3 ratio aspect of *Anima* is consistent with the ratio aspect for television since its inception in the 1930s. Beginning in the mid-1990s, a second aspect ratio, “16:9” (wide screen), has emerged. There are some indications that the 16:9 aspect ratio, which is much closer to the aspect ratio for 35mm film, may replace 4:3 devices. Consequently, 4:3 aspect ratio display devices could become as rare as early cathode-ray televisions are now in the early twenty-first

century. Programs created for 4:3 will most likely be shown in a “letter-box” format on 16:9, with darkened margins on the side. If 4:3 aspect ratio equipment does become obsolete among manufacturers, the most desirable future for *Anima* would be to custom fabricate 4:3 devices. *Anima* is not to be shown at a 16:9 aspect ratio or in any sort of letterbox format.

Another essential piece of equipment that directly contributes to the image quality is a line doubler. This increases the apparent visual resolution and practically eliminates visible scan lines, contributing to the effect of the image as a slowly moving photograph – an unusual technical and aesthetic quality for video in the late twentieth century. In addition, the LCD panel in combination with the line doubler, presents the image very close to full frame, which is the way the artist composed it. Extra care should be taken in the future if the work is to ever be shown in a different technical format or on a different display device so that only the most minimal amount of the image is cropped.

The Digital Betacam master of the imagery for *Anima* is the essential aspect of the work. In the future, it is likely this master will be transcribed, re-recorded, or cloned to a different format as they evolve. Be it a hard disk system, solid state memory, or any other future kind of system, the existing quality of the image and its technical specifications as they exist should be measured and preserved in this transfer (even if the transfer were capable of achieving higher resolution, detail enhancement, etc.). Equally important, any future transfer from the film or Digital Betacam master must occur at the same rate—that is, the duration of the transfer should always be 81 and one half minutes.

Likewise, the quality of the DVD playback leaves room for future improvement and is regarded as a temporary platform for the artwork. As playback technologies evolve, this format will most likely change. The MPEG2 encoding compression that is currently used for DVDs is not as desirable as the image quality on the digital beta cam master. The latter should always be used as the standard for the image quality of the artwork, not the DVD.

The image content of *Anima* should never be separated from its physical configuration and projected or shown in any other kind of context as an independent presentation, including distribution of these images to any remote sites via the Internet or any other mode of transmission or replication. An exception to this would be where a secure transmission on a network was used to deliver the images to display devices of the same specifications and in a situation identical to the one described in this document. Furthermore, this edition of the work is considered a unique object and it cannot be shown and/or distributed simultaneously to more than one location. An exception to these guidelines would be for educational purposes, in which a still or moving projected

image (or other format) might be used to illustrate the work for a lecture presentation or conference. Ideally, any such presentation would also include an image of *Anima* as an installed object to provide the fullest understanding of the artwork.

Bill Viola, April 12, 2001