

Bill Viola

(New York, 1951)

An unexpected din accompanies the image of a woman's body that rises upward. Inert and lifeless, the body ascends with lightness, as if it had entered a new dimension, possibly the introduction to a superterrestrial world. The body leaves behind a luminous trace, an infinite number of points that seem like stars in the sky. The event repeats cyclically, and its occurrence is preceded by the serene vision of a surface of water traversed by a beam of light. Projected on a vertically mounted plasma screen, *Isolde's Ascension* (*The Shape of Light in the Space after Death*), 2005, was conceived as part of *Love/Death: the Tristan Project*, a series that Bill Viola initially created for the theater, on the occasion of a recent production of Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*. Without indulging in narrative evocations, Viola's interpretation dwells on the moments of greatest dramatic intensity and transcendental value that characterize the tragic love of the two protagonists. *Isolde's Ascension* coincides with the so-called *Liebestod*, Isolde's love-death scene that represents the apotheosis of Wagner's opera and the German composer's response to the writings of Schopenhauer. To allude to the philosophical concept according to which death can coincide with liberation from individuality, thus leading to the attainment of total union with the beloved, Viola sets Isolde's ascent in a swirling dimension reduced to tones of blue and ignited by intense contrasts of light and shadow. The composition can be reminiscent of *The Assumption of the Virgin*, the altarpiece by Titian that Wagner saw in Venice while composing his opera.

In his work, Bill Viola, one of the pioneers of video art, investigates fundamental experiences tied to the life cycle, in the belief that it is possible for it to be more profoundly understood through art. (MB)