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## Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester is first and only US institution to acquire Bill Viola's *Martyrs (Earth, Air, Fire, Water)*

Exhibition open October 11 through July 2018



**Bill Viola**, *Martyrs (Earth, Air, Fire, Water)*, 2014, Color high-definition video on four flat-panel displays, Each display 49 inches, Duration: 7:10 minutes, Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 2017.1, Photos: Kira Perov

Rochester, NY, August 14, 2017 — The Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester (MAG) is pleased to announce the latest acquisition and exhibition in its three-year “Media Arts Watch” program, [Bill Viola: \*Martyrs \(Earth, Air, Fire, Water\)\*](#). MAG is the only institution, public or private, in the U.S. to own this ambitious installation, which is regarded internationally as one of the artist’s most powerful and significant works to date. *Martyrs (Earth, Air, Fire, Water)* will open October 11<sup>th</sup> and remain on view through mid-July 2018.

Originally commissioned by London’s St. Paul’s Cathedral and unveiled in 2014, *Martyrs (Earth, Air, Fire, Water)* consists of four high-definition flat-screen monitors, each featuring a single figure who sustains the impact of one of the four classical elements. The four moving images are synchronized and unfold together to create a coherent whole.

*Martyrs* is overtly rooted in art historical and religious iconography. Viola said: “The Greek word for martyr originally meant ‘witness.’ In today’s world, the mass media turns us all into witnesses to the suffering of others. The martyrs’ past lives of action can help illuminate our modern lives of inaction. They also exemplify the human capacity to bear pain, hardship, and even death in order to remain faithful to their values, beliefs, and principles. This piece represents ideas of action, fortitude, perseverance, endurance, and sacrifice.”

John G. Hanhardt, MAG's consulting senior curator of media art, is renowned as an expert in the work of Viola. According to Hanhardt, "Bill is a pioneer of the video medium and one of the most important artists in the world today." He continues, "To be able to bring one of his most extraordinary works to Rochester is a privilege and an honor."

*Martyrs* has received wide acclaim in the U.K. In response to its installation at St. Paul's Cathedral where it is permanently located above the tomb of the cathedral's architect, Sir Christopher Wren, Ben Luke of the *London Evening Standard* writes, "That the films are touching rather than unsettling is also down to their sheer beauty. The dust that rises in slow motion from the man immersed in earth is lit in such a way that it glisters—a form of alchemy, as base material becomes almost celestial" (May 21, 2014). In the

*Financial Times* of London, Rachel Spence writes, "We identify on a visceral human level with his protagonists' trauma. Both their suffering and their epiphany is ours" (May 9, 2014).

"*Martyrs* is a destination work of art—it's worth making a special trip," says MAG's Mary W. and Donald R. Clark Director, Jonathan P. Binstock. "It communicates directly, simply and with great intensity to

people of all generations and backgrounds." He further stated, "*Martyrs* makes an especially resonant addition to MAG's encyclopedic collection, bringing our narrative of 5000 years of artistic creativity into the present in exciting ways."

## NOTES TO EDITORS

### About the Artist

Widely recognized among the pioneers of video art, Bill Viola (American, b. 1951) has earned international acclaim for his visually stunning productions, which often employ extreme slow motion as a means of linking his moving images to the measured experience of observing paintings. Viola's video installations—total environments that envelop the viewer in image and sound—employ state-of-the-art technologies and are distinguished by their precision and direct simplicity. His works focus on universal human experiences—birth, death, the unfolding of consciousness—and have roots in both Eastern and Western art as well as spiritual traditions, including Zen Buddhism, Islamic Sufism, and Christian mysticism. His honors include a MacArthur Fellowship, Spain's Catalonia International Prize, and the Japan Art Association's Praemium Imperiale. His works have appeared in museum exhibitions and biennials around the world, including solo exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art and Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, the National Gallery, London, and the Mori Art Museum, Tokyo. Viola is the subject of a retrospective exhibition at the Guggenheim Bilbao, on view through November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

### About "Media Arts Watch"

"Media Arts Watch" is a three-year initiative to introduce the art of the moving image into the curatorial program and permanent collection of MAG. Media art is art that explores the technologies and aesthetics of film and video as well as the emerging tools and practices of computers, virtual reality, the internet, software, and mobile devices.



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500 University Ave., Rochester, NY 14607-1484  
585.276.8900 · [mag.rochester.edu](http://mag.rochester.edu)



## About John G. Hanhardt

John G. Hanhardt is MAG's consulting senior curator of media arts. Hanhardt began his museum career in the department of film and video at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, and from there went to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis to establish its film program and film study collection. From 1974 to 1996 he was curator and head of the film and video department at the Whitney Museum of American Art. He was the senior curator of film and media arts at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum from 1996 to 2006. He joined the Smithsonian American Art Museum's staff in 2006, and was a consulting senior curator of film and media arts there until 2016.

As a native of Rochester and University of Rochester alum, Hanhardt was inspired by photography, film, and media arts during frequent visits to the George Eastman Museum and by the programming of the

Visual Studies Workshop. Hanhardt recently wrote a monograph on the artist, published by Thames and Hudson (2016), and is now working on an exhibition of his art for the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia.

Press enquiries, please contact:

Meg Colombo

[mcolombo@mag.rochester.edu](mailto:mcolombo@mag.rochester.edu)

Tel (585) 276 8934

[mag.rochester.edu](http://mag.rochester.edu)



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