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DOUBT,  
DRY SPELLS  
AND DAYS IN  
THE DESERT

By ALAN RIFKIN

ONE SATURDAY at his Signal Hill studio, where it's so quiet you can hear the oil derricks churn 200 yards away, Bill Viola speaking to 20 undergraduates from Art Center. The weather outside is soft and smoggy, and the light is druggy-tropical—a good day for some students in Converse sneakers to plop down on pause before their real careers begin. And it's sort of beautiful, anyway, to hear Viola talk—this celebrated modern artist (“arguably the only video artist of whom it may be said that the label is not a contradiction in terms”—Wall Street Journal) who would be within his rights if all he did today was brag to the young, or wrap himself in gaudy royal thespian humility. Almost every story Viola can tell, after all, he's told some audience before.

But this is where Viola—tonsured, goateed and bespectacled, in plain dark T-shirt and plain dark overshirt, the Zen concessions to aging—might be compared to one of his videos: Something you might have seen or heard countless other times has suddenly become a little miraculous. Slumped against a stool, with a folder of notes he manages never to open, Viola sounds as if he's giving not just a talk, but something like *the* talk, the one the students should play back at crucial moments in later life . . . the Master Tape.

For instance, he informs them that creativity does not belong to them as artists: “It's a principle of the universe.” He warns them that the voice within each of them must be protected and nurtured, so that it enters the world in an original, unguarded way. He cites Thomas Merton, the Upanishads, Marcel Proust, Primo Levi, the Dalai Lama and John Cage, plus a 14th century Japanese treatise on acting, which asserts that the artist's consciousness is a sea gull and the outer chaos is wind, and the right alignment of the two results in effortless flight.

“The honesty of that presence inside you,” Viola says, “will determine the quality of your work—not ego, filling a market or filling a niche. There is something higher than art.” And the students are paying very deep attention.