

Featured Artist: Trinh T. Minh-ha (藝術家特寫：鄭明河)

Don' t Stop in The Dark

(Artist's Statement)

Trans-event, boundary event: perhaps this is how I could situate my work. For me, what is cinematic, poetic and political *thrives* at the boundaries of cinema, poetry and politics. Yet few art works deal with the boundaries of art rather than constituting a mere instrument for self-expression or for information.

Films and installations are all experiences of limits—or of the boundless within the bound. Each is realized at the borders of several cultures, genres, or realms (visual, musical, verbal, for example); each constitutes in its own way a questioning of these borders.

The Politics of Forms and Forces

Power relations lay at the core of normative representations. The politics of form can neither be reduced to the series of "-ism" that mark social and artistic movements, nor equated with questions of genres, styles and composition, or representation. Form in its radical sense should address the formless as it ultimately refers to the processes of life and death. Affirming form is recognizing the important contribution of each vibrant life as a continual creative process. All the while, letting form go is acknowledging our own mortality—or the necessity to work with the limits of every instance of form.

In these times of ending and returning postcolonial struggles, postmodern recovery and "green sustainability" (to use some trendy terms), artists working in third intervals, at the margins of mainstream productivity would have to be at once very primitive and very cultured. Awkwardly, efficiently "low" and competently, unfittingly "high"; shuttling effortlessly between the *avant-* and *arrière-garde* and surfing in and out from the middle, between all fixed extremities. Socially marginalized groups could thus be both provocatively high tech, and defiantly vernacular.

"Remember the rules of night passage. Don't stop in the dark or you'll be lost. Move to the rhythm of your senses. Go where the road is alive," said a character in *Night Passage*, a feature film I co-directed with Jean-Paul Bourdier in 2004. The crossroads are where the dynamics of film events lies. They are empty centers thanks to which an indefinite number of paths can converge and part in a new direction. Inter-, multi-,

post- and trans-: these are the pre-fixes of our times. They define the before, after, during and between of social and ethical consciousness. Each has a history and a seemingly precise moment of appearance, dis-appearance and re-appearance. Although bound to specifics, they are, in fact, all related as trans-event.

In ancient African and Asian “arts,” if composition, legibility or resemblance never really constitutes the criteria for true artistic work, it is mainly because rather than abiding by form or content, emphasis is laid on the “breath” that animates a work and brings it to life. In my practice, such a work remains attentive to its own “nature,” to the movement of its unseen undercurrents, and to its continual processes of formation and de-formation. Highly attuned to moments of transition and to the transience of visible realities, it is free to move between genres, between the photographic realism of mainstream films, the antirepresentative materiality of experimental films and the anti-photographic of virtual reality.

As it is known from analyzes of the film world, there are two distinct Western avant-gardes: one based on the tradition of the visual arts, and the other, on the tradition of theater and literature. Working at hiding the stage, mainstream narratives are all theater; and it is with money power (in buying locations and expertise) that they naturalize their artifices. (It suffices to listen to these narratives without looking at the pictures to realize how much they remain entrenched in “acting” and theatrical delivery.) Whereas experimental films borrow so heavily from painting and plastic arts that they’re often conceived in negative reaction, against anything considered to be impure to their vision—such as the verbal dimension and other non-visual concerns.

In playing with both traditions of the avant-garde, my work continues to raise questions about the social and political dimension of form. Not only it is at odds with classifications such as documentary, fiction, or film art, it also explicitly explores the fluid relation to infinity within the finite. To use an image, it is not only the shape or the flowers and fruits of a plant that matter, it’s the sap that runs through it.

Every visual manifestation is experienced as being at once definite in its structural condensation and indefinite in the fluidity of its spirit. In the tuning in with the forces of a life event, one can say that form is attained only to address the formless. Working with an ear and eye for the empty field of possibilities and potentials allows one to remain in touch with the infiniteness of a form that is also no form. Rather than merely speaking of production of images or of meaning, one can approach image

making as a net of under- and crosscurrents— a manifesting of forces.

When reality starts speaking to us differently, it leads to what I've called *an elsewhere within here*. My films and installations are made to shift our perception of reality and experience images as immersed in the whole of our body. This is aesthetics 'radical force. Indeed, without an awareness of its social and existential dimension, aesthetics remains largely conventional and normative. In realizing an installation or a film event, I work less with digital perse than with the way of the digital. It is not a question of producing a nonhuman, automated vision, nor that of turning every live action image into data for manipulation and special effect purposes. Understanding what is radical to digital imaging allows one to work differently with the experience of film and imaging, while soliciting from the viewer *a new seeing*.

Seeing Sounds Hearing Images

Experimenting with words, images and sound I find myself constantly struggling with the limits of both language and image. Certain viewers have related to my films and installations as to musical scores, others have repeatedly used the terms "poetic," "sculptural," "spatial and architectural" to describe them. The film *Naked Spaces - Living is Round* has, for example, been compared to an Indian musical raga, while *Reassemblage* was said, in its use of silences, to induce in the viewers a state where "they see sounds and hear images." Form and content are inseparable in my work, for they are *both* equally historical and plastic. Here, reality in its social and historical dimension is not a material for artistic reflection or political commitment; it is what powerfully draws one to cinema and yet cannot be captured without dissolving itself in its fragile essence when one approaches it without subtlety and vulnerability. As stated in *Reassemblage*, but realized in all aspects of my film practice, "I do not intend to speak about, only [to speak] near by."

The making of each work transforms the way I see myself and the world around me. Once I start engaging in the process of making a film or in any artistic excursion, I am also embarking upon a journey whose point of arrival is unknown to me. The work here is a gift. Whether it is worth passing it on or not depends on whether it succeeds in taking me elsewhere than where I started out.

Because my work has often proven to be disturbing in the way it unsettles old viewing and thinking habits, and because of the ensuing hostility it has encountered, I have had to learn to speak lucidly about it. But, for me, intentions and preconceived ideas have a very limited role in the creative process. Most fascinating are the impasses, the

blind procedures, the magical accidents, the unwanted discoveries, as well as the time wasted, the useless moves, the resonances generated despite one's wishes and unknown to oneself in advance, hence unforeseeable to the performers and to the viewers during the unfolding of time on screen (film or video).

In these works where the boundaries of either film or art are pushed, viewers often find themselves at a loss--in a foreign land that puts them in a state of heightened uncertainty as to what they are *really* seeing or hearing. For example, time, spatial relations, voice, and rhythm, are for me some of the most revealing elements in image and sound work. Whether one is conscious of it or not, rhythm marks one's experience of film. A commentary, a dialogue in film is first viewed and felt as a rhythm, a sound and a color before it takes on a meaning. So in conceiving an image, a shot or a sequence, one is above all working with rhythm. However, for me, rhythm is also not synonymous with action or editing, nor is it a mere aesthetic device. Gertrude Stein wrote about acquiring the rhythm of a person's personality by listening, seeing and feeling. Rhythm is what determines nonverbally the quality of a relationship—between and within each component of the sound image. It should convey a multiplicity of experiences between what is seen and what is heard; experiences in which neither the word is ruled by the image, nor the image by the word; and hence experiences which can continually shift one's ground in one's perception of people and events.

Multiplicity and The Transcultural

In the process of visualizing reality, if cultural as well as gender, sexual and racial diversities have always been an important part of the criteria for selecting crew and cast, story and subject, location and geopolitical context, they were not upheld for their own sake. What I find infinitely more challenging is to work on and from multiplicity. The term, as used here, should be neither equated with liberal pluralism nor confused with multiculturalism as taunted by the mainstream media. In normalizing diversity, multiculturalism remains deceptively color-blind and utterly divisive. Its bland melting-pot logic denies the racism and sexism that lies at the core of biopower and biopolitics. Rather than having difference treated as mere conflict, in my work difference comes with the art of spacing and is creatively trans-cultural.

Here *trans-* is not merely a movement across separate entities and rigid boundaries, but one in which the traveling is the very place of dwelling (and vice versa), and leaving is a way of returning home—to one's most intimate self. Cultural difference is not a matter of accumulating or juxtaposing several cultures whose boundaries remain

intact. The crossing required in the transcultural undermines fixed notions of identity and border, and questions “culture” in its specificity and its very formation.

Multiplicity further defines the time-space in which the different elements of the visual and sonic fabric (images, graphics, words, music, and environmental sounds) are woven. Their expansive relation in my works is not one of domination and subordination. Ear and eye, for example, never duplicate one another. They interact in counterpoints, syncopations, off beats, and polyrhythms—to borrow some musical terms. Rhythm is the base from which form is created and undone. It determines both social and sensual relationships. In the play of hear and see, silence and sound, stillness and movement, the hearing eye and the speaking ear are constantly at play, and form and formless are the two facets of a single process—or of life and death.

The Seismographic Needle

A creative journey cannot in any way be repeated. This is the impasse I've always faced with each project. One experiences a micro-death with the completion *and* the birth of each work. And it is this death that allows one to go toward things always as if for the first time.

Aside from wishing to transform and to be transformed in creating—to sensitize people to other ways of experiencing film and art, and hence of letting reality speak—I also hope that the circulation and exhibition of my work will contribute to redefining the notion of “audience,” by which people tend to confuse marketing power and standardization of needs with the ability to speak across boundaries of language, class, gender, and culture, for example. For people working in media networks, the notion of the “general public” has no reality; all is a question of audience targeting in the process of commodification. There is, therefore, more than one way to understand what a “wide audience” is: in terms of quantity (according to sales opportunities) or in terms of ability to offer different experiences to different social groups among viewers, for example. It is the latter that I continue to explore, for in the context of experimentations, to know or not to know whom one is addressing one's work to can both leave one trapped in a form of escapism; despite one's resistance to the mainstreaming of art, one cannot continue to protect oneself by remaining safely within identified limits.

Each work made is, for me, a bottle thrown into the sea. By threading the limits of known and unknown audiences, I am bound to modify these limits, whose demarcation change with each work and remain unpredictable to me. Unlike

commercial work or straight oppositional work, critical artistic work offer neither immediate solution nor immediate gratification. They are not immediately useful or effective and but can act in the long term, haunting their viewers, changing their perception of life. As filmmaker Robert Bresson nicely put it, "to be original is to wish to do like everybody else without ever succeeding to do so."

It is said that the artist is like a seismographic needle--one who feels with acute intensity the slightest changes that occur around him/her, one who remains keenly alert to what tends to go unnoticed or to be taken for granted in daily life. Artists are often threatened by the common opinion that a society can very well do without art and that their activities in urgent political situations are of little value. But throughout the course of history, across cultures and nations, one also knows that the artist's activity is considered suspect because it disturbs the status quo or the comfort and security of stabilized meanings and normalized practices.

I believe one should struggle at the front where one is best. Art is a form of production. Aware, however, that oppression can be located both in the story told and in the telling of the story, an art critical of social reality neither relies on mere consensus nor does it ask permission from ideology. The works I have been producing can be viewed in general as different attempts to deal creatively with cultural difference (the difference both *between* cultures and *within* a culture). They seek to enhance our understanding of the heterogeneous societies in which we live, while inviting the viewer to reflect on the conventional relation between supplier and consumer in media production and spectatorship.

Surname Viet Given Name Nam

The title, taken from a gendered context of recent socialist tradition in Viet Nam, suggests both a personalization of the country and a differential construction of the culture from within. It can also be read in the film's framing, as a feminist necessity to rethink the questions of community, nation, and identity, and to challenge nationalist assumptions of cultural mastery. On the one hand, *Viet* is the name of origin of the land and the ancestors of the Vietnamese people whom it is said migrated from meridional China, while *Nam* designates their further southern relocation in relation to China—whose historical domination of Vietnam continues bitterly to mark popular memory. On the other hand, Vietnam as a name stands for the nation's (feminine-masculine, north-south) totality: to the question "Are you married yet?" of a man who makes advances to her, an unwedded woman would *properly* imply that

she is at the same time engaged and not engaged by answering, “Yes, his surname is Viet and his given name is Nam.” It requires wit to reply that one is married to the state; but such wittiness speaks volumes for both what it is supposed and not supposed to say on the question of gender and nationalism. And the risk incurred in this form of feminine-nationalist in/directness is, for me, the same risk taken in simultaneous filmic construction and deconstruction of the first person interview in documentary practice.

In the making of the film, the politics of the interview emerges fraught with uneasy questions. The first part of the film deals with interviews that set out to be first person witnesses to women’s condition, but then as they unfold, it is also more apparent that not only their materialization borders the dialogue and the monologue, but it also fundamentally raises the question “Who is speaking?” Although the interviewee does address an ambiguous “you” (a “you” that is directed not only at the original interviewer and filmmaker, but also at the English-speaking viewer, including here the Vietnamese viewer in exile), what is offered to the viewer in this part art long socio-autobiographical criticisms whose unconventional length and use of spoken language allow each woman her own space. It is, for example, at the difficult pace of her English utterances that the story of her life is unrolled, and the film structured. Lighting, setting, framing, camera movement, shot duration, and the use of visualized words are other strategies indicative of the carefully constructed nature of the interviews. The attentive viewer is bound at one point or another to puzzle over the voice of the film. -- Excerpt from: Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Framer Framed* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992)

Old Land New Waters

Water has always played a vital role in Vietnamese culture. Its life-sustaining power is evoked in the widest range of mythical stories as these act on people's daily lives. Thank to it, Vietnam in ancient times was named *Dât nuoc van xuân*—the land of ten thousand springs.

Old Land New Waters is conceived as an installation composed of two video sequences to be projected simultaneously and continuously. One sequence (Dât) (part I, 7mins) features the earth element and the other sequence (Nuoc) (part II, 11mins) features the water element with images of the people and their related activities accordingly distributed. The two sequences are meant to unfold spatially as a kind of dialogue and encounter between land and water—the two elements that underlie the

formation of the term "country" (dât nuoc) in Vietnamese. Ideally, the size of the image projected should be large so as to allow the viewer to experience the light and the sensuality of land and water as an environment.

One of the myths surrounding the creation of Vietnam involves a fight between two dragons, whose intertwined bodies fell into the South China Sea and formed the country as we know it today with its curving "S" shaped coastline. Legend also has it that our ancestors, the Hundred Viet (Bach Viet; "*con rong chau tien*") were born from the union in 2800 BC of a Dragon King, *Lac Long Quan* (or King of the Under-Sea) and a Fairy, *Au Co* (or daughter of a Mountain Immortal). This was how Vietnam as a nation was said to have been founded, the home to both people from the flatlands and people from the highlands, whose common origins is recalled in the term *dong-bao* ("born of the same pouch") used for "people."

Throughout the four thousand years of its eventful history, marked by destruction, wars and natural calamities, Vietnam still preserves many of its ancient faces and practices. Following China's leap of great changes, Vietnam after the war has emerged both as a fast-growing economy and a booming tourist destination. The people has learnt fast how to thrive in the age of globalization, and Vietnam is now paradoxically reverted to its classic images of: soft sandy beaches, women on sampans, straw conical hats, paddy-fields, water buffaloes, lotus-ponds, Ha Long Bay and fishermen's boat in deep turquoise sea—all connected with water, the lifeblood of the country. The "Vietnam fever" has spread wide among vacationers of east and west. Some 2.9 million foreigners—with the biggest group coming from China, and nearly 300,000 Americans (war veterans and ex-refugees)—visited the country in 2007. In the current atmosphere of terror, Vietnam, ironically, is found to be one of the safest places a traveler can go—the safest in all of Asia, according to Hong Kong's Political and Economic Risk Consultancy.

The name of Vietnam has returned in American vocabulary as history seems to repeat itself and wars that would not end continue to divide the world. On the interface of memory, we are being reminded that victory, which comes in more than one form, is not necessarily the prerogative of the most powerful. On the interface of time, however, the question that often arises among those who return to Vietnam twenty or thirty years after the war ended is: What is left? What can one see? The images I am offering of Vietnam focuses on the daily contributions of women to the well-being of a rebuilding society, as well as on some of the markings of old and new in Vietnam's everyday. They also raise questions concerning the way, as consumers and suppliers, we look, capture the ordinary and travel with images.

The everyday is usually thought of as the banal, the familiar and the static—something we are so used to that it tends to go unnoticed. But there is always the possibility of the everyday turning into a suspect and of everyday activities turning into political activities, as exemplified by the struggles of women and marginalized peoples around the world. The everyday is difficult to show and pin down, because everyday happenings allow no hold, and almost no control. Thus, one often travels in order to see and to experience anew what tends to be taken for granted in the daily and the ordinary, forgetting that the everyday can be dangerously creative.

* The installation has been conceived for and exhibited at the following events:

1) the opening of the new Prefecture Museum and museum of Fine Arts of Okinawa in Japan (November **2007**); 2) for the traveling Chechnya Emergency Biennale which will show in San Francisco (Jan 25 to mid-February, **2008**, invited by Global Commons Foundation as a main event of the World Social Forum); and 3) for the Third Guangzhou Art Triennale at Guangdong Museum, China (Sept 6 – Nov 16, **2008**). 4) “Migrations and Expressions,” Prefecture Museum and museum of Fine Arts of Okinawa in Japan (Jan 31- March 29, **2009**).