

A portrait of Trinh T. Minh-ha, a woman with long dark hair and glasses, looking slightly to the left. She is wearing a dark, textured top. The background is dark and out of focus.

Trinh T. Minh-ha at an
Afternoon Filmmaker Tea
during the 66th BFI London
Film Festival at the Mayfair
Hotel, Oct. 14, 2022.

Trinh T. Minh-ha's twofold commitment to film
reveals worlds open for discovery.

by **Tausif Noor**

Two to Tango

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his past spring, I sat in an auditorium at the University of California, Berkeley, and waited as a group of people on stage struggled with the settings of the

overhead projector so that we could begin the screening for which we had gathered. As an innocuous pause turned into an increasingly awkward delay, diagnosis of the problem worked its way around the room, in hushed tones: *wrong aspect ratio*. Those three words could be enough to chill the blood of any film aficionado, and especially Trinh T. Minh-ha – the exacting, seasoned filmmaker whose latest work, *What About China?* (2022), occasioned our presence.

Jointly commissioned by Shanghai's Rockbund Art Museum and the Whitney Museum, where it was a focal point of last year's Whitney Biennial, *What About China?* is a 135-minute tone poem that dwells on the idea of harmony within society, nature, and the self as it has manifested in rural south and southeastern China. Set to an operatic score, the film deploys a narrative



Two stills from Trinh T. Minh-ha's film *What About China?*, 2022.

that begins with original footage, shot by Minh-ha on Hi8 between 1993 and 1994, of the Hakka Roundhouse, a large, circular multifamily home in the Fujian province. From this domestic space, the film travels outward to various mountainous and riverine landscapes to examine the effects of China's rapid industrialization on its sizable peasant population. As it goes on to incorporate still and moving images taken closer to the present, three decades later, *What About China?* takes up binaries found in Sinosphere traditions – ying and yang, masculine and feminine, solidity and liquidity, mountains and rivers – and juxtaposes them to draw out their overlapping and contingent natures.

Priming her audience for a conversation she would have with artist Simon Leung after the screening, Minh-ha introduced *What About China?* by noting that her cinematic works are often at odds with the staid categories of documentary and fiction. She explained that, in an East Asian artistic context, sensual experiences are not quite so compartmentalized as they are in the West. Instead, she suggested, we ought to think of the film as an experience involving the entire body, one that mobilizes the "hearing eye" and the "seeing ear." In lesser hands, such terms might feel forced, if not nonsensical. In the context of her most recent directorial effort, however, they jibe with the mix of voiceovers, cascading music, long pans, and tight zooms that comprise her evocative rendering of China – which, as the title suggests, is presented as more an open question than a definitive answer.





This page, stills from *Reassemblage*, 1982.



As Leung discussed in the post-screening discussion, the film favors multiple points of entry: We begin as viewers within the family dwelling, but after traversing a series of wide-ranging landscapes, are ultimately left unsettled, bereft of an “authentic” image of China that we can walk away with or readily retrieve.

Exposing the fraught nature of authenticity is but one major through line in Minh-ha’s eclectic and expansive practice as a filmmaker, composer, feminist scholar, and literary theorist. Born in Hanoi in 1952, Trinh T. Minh-ha studied piano and composition at the National Conservatory of Music in Saigon before migrating to the United States during the Vietnam War, in 1970. She pursued a PhD at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, where she studied music composition, ethnomusicology, and French literature, and her resume includes teaching positions at Cornell, Harvard, and Smith, along with stints at institutions in Dakar, Seoul, and Tokyo.

The screening of *What About China?* in Berkeley kicked off a two-day symposium dedicated to Minh-ha, who was feted by her colleagues and students past and present in the Berkeley Department of Gender and Women’s Studies, where she has been a professor since 1994. (In 1997 she was jointly appointed to the Department of Rhetoric.) The capacious nature of these fields has been conducive to Minh-ha’s creative practice and academic pursuits: in interviews, she has repeatedly lamented academia’s tendency to compartmentalize knowledge in the guise of “expertise,” preferring instead to understand learning as a process of understanding oneself in relation to others.

However ambivalent she might be toward academia, Minh-ha’s contributions to scholarly discourse are significant. Paola Bacchetta, a professor in the Department of Gender and Women’s Studies at Berkeley who has known Minh-ha for more than two



decades, described the symposium as an occasion for “renewed encounter,” and said she has “learned immensely from [Minh-ha’s] writing, films, approach to teaching, her relationalities and her way of being in the world.” That sentiment was echoed by others who spoke during a series of panels, and remarked on Minh-ha’s films and scholarly output, which include academic books that touch on subjects such as digital film, gender and postcoloniality, and the plight of refugees.

A few days after the symposium, I met with Minh-ha at a café to try to better understand the arc of her career as both artist and academic. Unassuming, with a quiet, lilting cadence, Minh-ha is also direct and forthcoming. I was particularly curious about her approach to teaching, given the wide range of work many of her students had gone on to pursue. “What I do in my films or what I write in my books is also what I teach and





This page, stills from *A Tale of Love*, 1995.

is also the way that I teach,” she said. “It’s not mere knowledge – it’s not something that you simply transmit.” Her approach is somewhat Socratic, she said, geared less toward content than to the process of knowing itself. “Whenever we were in class having discussions, my students threw out brilliant ideas, and, of course, they used brilliant words. I would go into it and say, ‘What do you mean by this word?’ They were very surprised, because they thought everybody knew – why do they have to define it again?” Minh-ha urges her students to reach within themselves to figure out how best to approach their projects on their terms, whatever those projects and terms might be. “They all go in directions that are integral to their own lives, their own background or knowledge,” she told me. That helps take the emphasis away from how much they know and shifts it instead to *how* they know.

At the core of Minh-ha’s work, as a teacher and an artist both, is determining, through visual means or by way of text, the limits we place around notions of self and how we come to know these limits. Thinking of the self as relational – thoroughly examining one’s own positionality, resisting the urge to subsume or speak for the other, and instead speaking *nearby* the other – is one of Minh-ha’s most canonical concepts. She first introduced the idea in her debut film *Reassemblage* (1982). Shot on location on 16mm film, the work is an essayistic depiction of women’s lives and





Trinh T. Minh-ha (behind the camera) on the set of *A Tale of Love*, 1995.

quodidian rhythms in rural Senegal. Minh-ha lived in Dakar for three years (between 1977 and 1980), where she taught at the National Conservatory of Music; braiding the sounds and music of the Senegalese environment, her film is also striking for its abrupt, disarming silences. These moments of quiet are a clear rejoinder to the authoritative voiceovers of anthropological documentary films, marking *Reassemblage* as what film scholar Erika Balsom described as a work of “anti-ethnography.”

Reassemblage was the entry point for many to Minh-ha’s kaleidoscopic practice, and it remains remarkable for its rerouting of sound and image to form a novel rhythmic register that propels the film forward. Jeanne Gerrity, interim director of San Francisco’s CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, told me about how an encounter with *Reassemblage* and Minh-ha’s “unorthodox and influential theoretical writing” in a feminist art history class still resonates deeply within her own work. Gerrity helped organize a yearlong research season on Minh-ha from 2019–20, the findings from which were published in 2021 in *Why Are They So Afraid of the Lotus: A Series of Open Questions*, an eclectic reader from Sternberg Press; it contains excerpts from Minh-ha’s own texts alongside the work of Frantz Fanon, poetry by Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, and a host of other writings, including an original text titled “Asian futures, without Asians” by Bay Area-based artist Astria Suparak.

One participant in the Wattis program

was photographer and video artist Hồng-Ân Trương, who was then in residence at the nearby Capp Street Project. Directly engaging Minh-ha’s terminology in its title, Trương’s *We Listen Nearby* is an online storytelling and sound project created at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in response to anti-Asian sentiment and Black Lives Matter uprisings; the conversation alternates between various speakers and listeners, creating an overlapping soundscape that held true to Minh-ha’s call to attempt understanding through proximate, rather than subsumptive, relationships.

As a fellow member of the Vietnamese diaspora, Trương found in Minh-ha’s endeavors a kind of permission. “Minh-ha’s work validated what had always been a part of my life, which was my desire to hear stories from my own family and my own diasporic history,” Trương said. “Her work defies all categories—even in the Vietnamese diaspora she eludes generational classification. The fact that she didn’t fit neatly into my understanding of Vietnamese women of her generation, which is my mother’s generation, erupted my thinking about identity. She writes and tells stories from this *neither-here-nor-there* place, which allows for you to be in this constant state of movement between knowing and not knowing, recognizing differentiation but never having to hold fast to those divisions.”

The divisions and differentiations



A Tale of Love, 1995.

engendered by diaspora would be the focus of Minh-ha's next major cinematic study after *Reassemblage*. Thinking back, she recalled how that work, *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989), was first met with ambivalence and then confusion by Asian and Asian American communities, who wondered why she hadn't made a film about their shared experiences. Shot on 16mm, the work was in some ways a response to such criticisms, but in Minh-ha's characteristic fashion, the film is not so much about the condition of being from Vietnam as it is a deconstruction of the very notion of "Vietnam" as a stable marker of nation or culture.

The film opens with a slow-motion shot of Vietnamese dancers paired with sounds of lightning, rain, and flowing water before unpacking aspects of Vietnamese identity through first-person interviews with women in Vietnam and its diaspora, who discuss their experiences working, raising children, and living through wartime, as well as attending Communist reeducation training and finding ways afterward to assert their own agency. Interspersed throughout is 1970s documentary footage of the Vietnam War, with running metacommentary on the nature

The twofold commitment is Minh-ha's antidote to the problem of binary thinking. To her mind, one should always think in conjoined "twos."

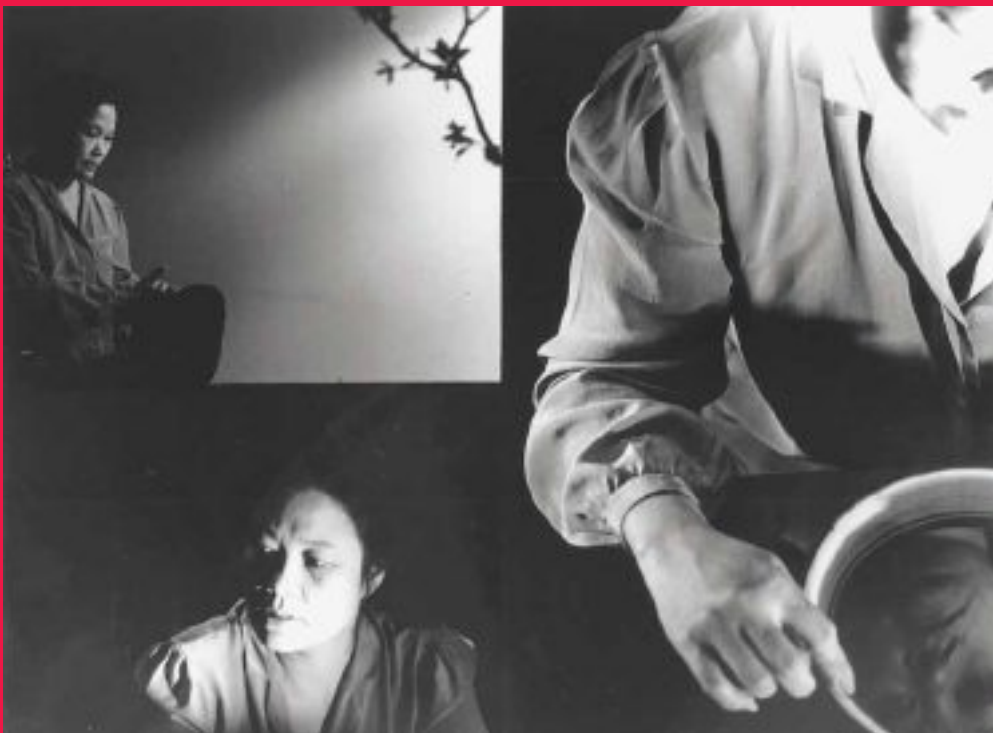
of interviews, which are described as an "antiquated device of documentary" wherein "truth is selected, renewed, and displaced, and speech is always tactical."

From the perspective of the women Minh-ha surveyed, Vietnam is presented as a product of historical forces of consolidation

and colonialism, war and resistance. And this reflexive film would not be Minh-ha's final word on the subject. She further explored Vietnamese diasporic identity in narrative works such as *A Tale of Love* (1996). In *Forgetting Vietnam* (2015), her most visually arresting and conceptually engaging film, Minh-ha delved fully into the gaps between history and the present. As with *What About China?*, *Forgetting Vietnam* is a hybrid of footage (this time, from 2012) spliced with long tracking shots of the landscape and its attendant mythologies to consider the effects of contemporary globalization on the country and its citizens. The mixing of these different formats is for Minh-ha a formal demonstration of how Vietnam has struggled to preserve its ancient traditions while undergoing the process of modernization, which demands constant technological innovation and renders even relatively recent technologies obsolete.

Minh-ha juxtaposes the rapaciousness of modernization against the timelessness of the landscape. In *Forgetting Vietnam*, the flow of water functions as a sonic and visual motif that links geography and politics to mythology and culture. Rivers and seas make up much of Vietnam's geography and, in turn,

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Surname Viet Given Name Nam (still), 1989.



Trinh T. Minh-ha on the set of *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, 1989.



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Forgetting Vietnam (still), 2016.



It's a multiplicity of twos that you are always dealing with, a multiplicity of binaries that you have to work with."

As I've watched and rewatched Minh-ha's oeuvre and read over her various academic texts, her exhortation to hold multiplicities together has replayed constantly in my mind. On one hand, the Berkeley symposium in tribute to her left me wary of how the structure of academic advising and scholarship engenders a very particular understanding of a person's work, especially in instances where critical theorists often function as scholar-celebrities who form cults of personality.

On the other hand, watching her films and reading her astute and evocative writing on postcolonialism and gender, I came to recognize all the more that, for Minh-ha, the idea of the personal-as-political is not a mere catchphrase but a philosophy of existing in a world defined by colonialism, imperialism, and military occupation. For Minh-ha, the self and the notion of personality are open questions. In her 1989 book, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, a series of texts that reflect on anthropology and Third World feminisms, she discusses the problem of self-expression in the context of writing. Conventional wisdom, Minh-ha suggests, would stipulate that self-expression is a given in art, something that can be readily uncovered or understood. "Yet," she continues, "I-the-writer do not express (a) reality more than (a) reality impresses itself on me. Expresses me."

She repeated that assertion in somewhat different terms during our conversation, remarking that self-expression is a limited form – that the self ought to be regarded as a beginning rather than an end. "Each one of us is like a vibrant form and force, and each life is a vibrant force," she said. "But at the same time, you take it as a point of departure, and you open out and you enrich yourself and you are whatever you approach."

That much is apparent in the winding fluid nature of Minh-ha's work and the range of subject matter she engages in an effort to seek more ways of understanding. At their best, Minh-ha's films evocatively destabilize the need for staking out a single perspective without eradicating any one personality or mode of political and social commentary. Whereas most filmmakers tend to work from a center and with a specific subjectivity, "in my case," she said, "there is no centralized place. It's more like a tapestry made of many crisscrossing threads – if you pull out any thread, I'm in it." ●

shape its contemporary economic relations. But the influence of water goes back further: In one Vietnamese creation myth, a celestial tussle between two dragons that fell into the South China Sea established the nation's sinuous coastline. Minh-ha's film pries apart discourses surrounding her "so-called native land" through what she terms the "twofold commitment" – another critical concept in her arsenal that also serves as the title of her latest book, published by Primary Information this past May, which gathers interviews between Minh-ha and various scholars alongside stills from and the script of *Forgetting Vietnam*.

The twofold commitment, Minh-ha explains, is her antidote to the problem of binary thinking. To her mind, one should always think in conjoined "twos," in terms of pairs such as sea/land, self/collective, ancient/modern, or content/form. For her part, Minh-ha's twofold commitment is her dedication to the subject of her work – what appears on the screen – and to the many other dimensions of film itself and how they emerge through collaboration.

The idea grew out of Minh-ha's recognition of how feminist politics has informed her work. "In a struggle, like the feminist struggle, you are not asking for mere difference, or mere sameness," she said. "You don't want to move into the same position as the master. You always have to work with two at the same time, and one 'two' leads to another 'two.'