

Trinh T. Minh-ha's *The Twofold Commitment*

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The Twofold Commitment

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Combining found archival footage, Trinh T. Minh-ha's lyrical film *Forgetting Vietnam* (2015) examines the intersections of official and unofficial histories that have emerged in the wake of the Vietnam War. Overlapping narratives unfold as dialogue between bus drivers, taxi drivers, and passengers traveling across Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City intersperse with song lyrics, activist quotes, and statistics alongside excerpts of popular mythologies. A new artist book, *The Twofold Commitment* by Trinh T. Minh-ha, takes as its point of departure Trinh's lyrical film *Forgetting Vietnam* (2015). Commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War, the film examines both public and private memory and the official and unofficial histories that emerge in the wake of traumatic events. *The Twofold Commitment* translates this film to the page: the first section, "Seen Yet Unseen," features the film script illustrated with stills and the second, "Say to Unsay," brings together republished interviews conducted from 2016 to 2022 with the artist that delve into her literary and cinematic practice, ending with a bibliography and index of key concepts relevant to her practice. *Forgetting Vietnam* serves as a rhetorical anchor throughout the book, which documents Trinh's implicit and explicit reflections on exclusion, marginalization, and erasure, offering a way of understanding her process of re-remembering unofficial histories, of contemporary crises born out of historical wounds.

The book begins with a series of still images of Vietnam from the film interspersed with textual fragments of mythical allegories and testimonials about the war. Trinh reveals convergences of individual and collective memories, all of which foreground the connection between land and water that situates the country in time and space. The script revolves around the creation myth of Vietnam, in which two dragons engage in a fight that leaves their bodies inextricably intertwined; they fall into the South China Sea, forming Vietnam's distinctive S-shaped coastline. Another myth speaks of a union between a "Dragon King" and a "Fairy or Mountain's Daughter," whose tears formed Vietnam's rivers and recurring floods, "the land's way of remembering her." Trinh brings these legends into the present; images of lively communal spaces such as riverside markets, rice paddies, and floating temples portray a "fragile equilibrium between land and water." Trinh reveals etymological connections

between earth, water, and the unique formulation of Vietnam (Nước: water/country, Đất: land, Đất nước, land water/country) that demonstrate how the history, trauma, and memory of a landscape is inseparable from that of its people. Testimonies from survivors of the war detail violence and loss along riverbanks and a mass exodus by land and sea, reflecting the East-West ideological, cultural, and economic divides that continue to reverberate in the country today.

Through the interviews that follow the script, the artist elaborates on the ways in which histories are created, resurrected, manipulated, and manufactured. The color green is used as an annotative device, with illuminated quotes by Trinh and highlights on the sides of each page woven throughout without a clear indexical link. In “Nonbinary: The Many Twos,” an interview with Patricia Alvarez Astacio and Benjamin Schultz-Figueroa, she discusses through lines between *Forgetting Vietnam* and an earlier film, *Suriname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989), both of which center on the “inappropriate” (that which cannot be appropriated) aspects of daily life—conversations had and overheard in the popular spaces. The aesthetic of her films, often populated with long takes and fragmented text, image, and sound, inform the design and pacing of the book, with film stills slotted throughout the extended conversations. Another interview, “Reality is Delicate” with Erika Balsom, considers “speaking nearby,” a practice of knowledge formation built on proximity and admitted misunderstanding. “Wartime: The Forces of Remembering in Forgetting” with Lucie Kim-Chi Mercier and “In the Realm of Silence” with Xiaolu Guo introduce other earlier films such as *A Tale of Love*, *Reassemblage*, *Lovecidal*, and *The Fourth Dimension*. Certain films may focus on specific cultural references, but Trinh emphasizes unifying themes of labor, sacrifice, and the nonlinearity of the “post” colonial. She discusses this further with Irit Rogoff (“For the Feminist Viewer”), observing that “Feminist films” are not only films about women, but another way of understanding society, its progressive and regressive tendencies, through the remembered histories of the people who are often made to bear the brunt of its well-being. Trinh furthers this idea in her anthropomorphizing of Vietnam: “People go to Vietnam to forget as much of what they knew and recalled of Her, for only in disremembering can they continue to be and let Her be. However, it may be more adequate to say that Vietnam today is forgetting them.”

In “Soundscapes of Multiplicity” with Stefan Östersjö, Trinh speaks to the “aural identities” of cities. Returning to *Forgetting Vietnam*, Trinh observes that a soundscape locates a city not only geographically, but temporally. These “sonic imprints” fluctuate from the old district to the new, the city to the rural landscape, again exhibiting the nonlinearity of postcolonial time and space. The final interview of the book, “In the Spiral of Time” with Domitilla Olivieri, unpacks modes operating in binary disciplines as the “inappropriate other.” In undoing binary opposites—“Mountain and river; solid and liquid; stillness and movement”—Trinh’s use of genre becomes fluid and malleable, a space for the “in-between,” or what she often refers to as “the third space,” the interval. In each interview, Trinh observes the particular poetics

embedded within incompatibility—between high and low tech, individual and collective memory, first and third world. She reveals felt experiences of postcoloniality, the feeling of a personified homeland drifting away from its inhabitants, carrying away its collective memories, as a metaphor for reckoning with the past through conscious and unconscious forgetting.

Though the book revolves around Trinh's multidisciplinary, one might wonder whether a retrospective reflection by the artist herself might have tied these various dialogues together. But ultimately, the book succeeds in pointing to other entryways and areas of research that have gone untapped in this artist's genre-bending practice.