

Trinh T. Minh-ha and Ute Meta Bauer in Conversation on *What about China?*

Presented by ELLA RAIDEL

Trinh T. Minh-ha was born in Hanoi, Vietnam, and migrated to the United States in 1970. She is Professor of Rhetoric and Professor of Gender & Women's Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Originally trained as a music composer, she has, as an artist, filmmaker, composer, feminist and postcolonial theorist, charted a constellation of discourses on gender, colonialism, migration, and film poetics. She has received many awards for her films which include *Forgetting Vietnam* (2015), *Night Passage* (2004), *A Tale of Love* (1995), *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989), *Naked Spaces* (1985), *Reassemblage* (1982). Her latest filmic work-in-progress, *What About China?* (Part I of II, 2020–21), initiated and co-produced by NTU Centre for Contemporary Art (NTU CCA) Singapore, was a component of the first large-scale solo exhibition of her work in Asia.

Taking the notion of 'harmony' in China as a site of creative manifestation, *What About China?* focuses on Chinese culture and identity through its artistic and rural architectural practices as well as through everyday village activities. In the foreseeable demise of China's peasantry as a class, Trinh is asking again: what exactly is disappearing? Situating the film in the realm between ancient wisdom, avant-garde experiment, and popular folk acumen, Trinh creates a work that is interrogative and reflexive by nature; one that exposes the naivety of a cinematic technology and ideology that claims increasing unmediated access to reality.

Ute Meta Bauer, born in Germany and educated at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Hamburg, is Professor in the School of Art, Media and Design at Nanyang Technological University and the founding director of NTU CCA Singapore. She has been Dean of Fine Art at the Royal College of Art, London, UK, and Associate Professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, USA, where she also served as Founding Director of the MIT Program in Art, Culture, and Technology. An international curator, her exhibitions and presentations on

contemporary art have been held in many places including Berlin, Tijuana/San Diego, Venice, Barcelona. She is one of three co-curators appointed to the forthcoming 17th edition of the Istanbul Biennial. Among her co-curatorial projects is the exhibition *Paradise Lost* with Anca Rujoiu which inaugurated NTU CCA in 2014. The Centre is a platform, host and partner creating and driven by dynamic thinking that intersect the present and histories of contemporary art with other fields of knowledge.

The conversation between Trinh T. Minh-ha and Ute Meta Bauer which is reproduced below took place online at the opening of the solo-exhibition *Trinh T. Minh-ha. Films* at NTU CCA on 17 October 2020 to 28 February 2021.

Ute Meta Bauer: Minh-ha, you have stated that ‘the making of each film transforms the way you see yourself and the world. Once you start engaging in the process of making a film in any artistic excursion, you are also embarking upon a journey whose point of arrival is unknown to you.’

We started our conversation when you were here for the premiere in Singapore of your film *Forgetting Vietnam*. That would’ve been in 2017. At that time, we had Ulrike Ottinger’s exhibition, ‘China. The Arts – The People. Photographs and Films from the 1980s and 1990s’, on display at the Centre. Since then, three years of intense work have passed. We are here now to continue our conversation with reference to the first presentation in Asia of *What About China?* (Part I). In making the film, how did you approach your footage from the 1990s from the perspective of today?

Trinh T. Minh-ha: It is just so amazing how things get decided. I had at least seven film projects awaiting funding for completion. When you first expressed your interest in supporting one of these projects, it reminded me that we (Jean-Paul and I often work as a team) did some architectural research on China’s rich traditional vernacular houses in the mid-1990s. China is so huge, there is no way that one can capture its diversity. We were focusing on the old villages, where the traditional architecture was still alive, like in Zhejiang, Anhui, Fujian, Guangxi and the Hunan region. Among others, we studied these unique Hakka villages, whose architecture is very different – part of what is considered the cradle of Chinese culture, but of course when you look closer into ‘What is Chinese’, it always remains an open-ended question.

When showing the culture of a country, you don’t always have to focus

on a conflict or a problem as the conventions of documentary dictate. You can, for example, just look at the architecture, appreciate it, and let possible factors that define ‘What is Chinese?’ come to you. It surprised me that you were interested in China, Ute, and our exchanges were quite stimulating because they led me to return to these old footages. Today, although similar in appearance, the Hakka villages are quite different from how they were. You can see them used as background in Disney’s fantasy live-action *Mulan* (2020), although the Hakka houses do not belong to the time of *Mulan*. The film was widely criticized. If you take a virtual trip and go online to look at the Hakka dwelling today, you will be led into a compound well-sanitized and well-decorated with well-rehearsed interventions from a representative elder; in other words, the perfect backdrop for a Hollywood film production. But what remains of the villages? Where are they now?

Looking at my footage brings back all the life that once inhabited these houses. At the time, large families were living in them, while today they are occupied mostly for the sake of tourists. The ‘full-of-life’ aspect of this architecture is part of what my film contributes. Working with the filmed material from our 1990s journey in today’s perspective raises the question: What is it exactly that has disappeared?

UMB: In *What About China?* you juxtaposed the images of village life in a Hakka Roundhouse with a reading of the Chinese author and filmmaker, Xiaolu Guo, taken from her autobiographical *Nine Continents: A Memoir In and Out of China* (2017). Guo draws a completely different picture of what it meant to live in a rural area in China in the time of her youth. And you bring in the dissonances in a very careful way. But how did you choose to work with Xiaolu Guo?

TTMH: I first met Xiaolu in London. When I read her book, I was so struck by her writing. It is very moving because it tells us something different about the years 1993–94 in China from how I experienced it. She goes even further back in history, elaborating from the time around 1978 in China to her relocation to the UK. I was drawn to the candid and merciless tone of her autobiographical voice. It’s not at all romantic, it brings out exactly what one can call the ‘justness’ of a situation. The way she sees it. She’s not trying to decorate, to excuse, or to blame anyone. She finds the exact tone for how things were then, which is the beauty of the book. It’s merciless, but true to herself. I really love the way her writing retains the innocence of beginnings.

I weave together Xiaolu’s voice with other voices in my film: so, you

have her voice reading from her memoir; you have Xiao Yue Shang's voice reading from her book of poetry; you have Yi Zhong's voice giving information from Chinese sources; and you have my voice – the outsider's inquisitive voice of reflection. Xiao Yue, for example, situates herself as having a difficult relationship to her native China, and yet China remains her muse. The same is true of Xiaolu, as we'll see in the second part of the film that I am working on now. We can say that all these voices are 'autobiographical' and thereby recognize the richness of the autobiographical format. It's not just the mere telling of your life. Everything about memoir or autobiography is collective in this sense. It's always the personal collective rather than the personal individual subjective.

Decentralizing and diversifying the processes of voicing is what I try to bring about with multivocality. Except for Yi, who performs the voice of information, all three of us speak in the first person 'I'. Who is 'I' in this film? The 'I' can only come in with multiplicity. We are talking about different trajectories in different periods, different parts of China. Even Vietnam's ancestral culture – *my* ancestral culture – is part of our Chinese inheritance, and we Vietnamese try as much as possible to resist this colonial legacy from China. In short, we are all positioned with varying degrees of insideness and outsideness. And we all have different but overlapping roles: the novelistic, the poetic, the informative and the theoretical. Both consonances and dissonances can be found in these voices as they link up in the present.

UMB: The first time I saw your film oeuvre as single screen installations was in an exhibition at the Secession in Vienna (2001). Several of your films were juxtaposed with each other in small theatres that one could attend individually, and also roam between the films. At that time it was such a different experience of viewing cinematic work, to be able to walk in and out of each film and experience the conversations that unfolded between your films, between their voices and their images.

For long I had the wish to make the exhibition of 2001 at the Secession accessible to an audience of today, especially to an audience here in Southeast Asia. We live next to each other, separate narrations intertwine through sounds, voices that spill over from next door. There cannot be clear-cut separations between nations, and nor can one national history overwrite that of the neighbouring country. The exhibition at NTU CCA is created like a *deja-vu* of the show at the Secession. We mounted five small theatres and you can enter each film and each of its world, then move to the next one by your own timing. What also becomes obvious

that way is that the film enters the digital world and there are more technological ghosts. You called these film images 'phantom images'. Could you say something more about them? Which ghosts are wandering through the space of this exhibition?

TTMH: Talking about ghosts and phantom images – in my itinerary as a filmmaker, I have gone from 16m to 35m films and then to Hi8, SD, HD and further to 2K and 4K with the more recent work. I have been struggling quite a bit with the format of *What About China?* Because the mercantile mind, the Corporate, Market mind, make sure that the old and the new remain incompatible with one another, and mainly for consumption purpose. Whenever you work with old technologies, you have to put in so much effort, and undergo so much frustration, because you have to work on so many hidden and unexpected incompatibilities between old and new. And this speaks volumes to the mind of our society – how we deal with the ancient and the modern, how we remain attuned to a throwaway mentality and a linear Waste economy.

Returning to the question of ghosts, the images of this film have gone through a complex process of digitalization. They are phantom images, not only because the initial Hi8 image of the 1990s is used as an index of the disappearing and the disappeared – 'in tune with the dirt of life' (a line from the film) – but also because film and video images are by nature ghostly, and their digitization only intensifies this. These also point to an aesthetics of disappearance that underlies the film which I mentioned earlier with regards to transitions and the transience of reality, and how these images, that are often taken for physical reality, should be taken as what they are. And they aren't just a projection of light, they are projections of speed, of time, of memories. Every time I work with a different medium, I would try to bring out the properties of the tools of creativity, rather than simply use them to illustrate our feelings or thoughts.

UMB: In 1993 I was for about a month in Beijing, and saw something of the city as well as some rural areas nearby. Experiencing China then is entirely different from experiencing today's China. But I still have this memory of the old parts of Beijing, the endless labyrinth of hutongs, the public toilets, and the myriads of foodstalls on every street. These images still show up in my memory each time I visit China, and I am not sure if these are the ghosts of the place or my own ghosts that appear in these moments. In indigenous traditions, the ghost of a place, linked to a moment in time, is both a projection of what is no more visible, like an afterimage, and yet it is subjective as it co-exists within the ocean of our

own memory. When you stated earlier that ‘there is no such thing as documentary’, you pointed also to the way we see and understand ‘reality’ from a certain distance, as the curious eye observes differently from those within a situation, a context. Do you want to add to that?

TTMH: As I pointed out before, the personal is political. The voices in the film speak in the first-person. But, rather than being merely subjective, or merely personal, here the personal is collective. It’s an ‘I’ which many people can inhabit. When you write ‘I’ it’s not just yourself. You want it to be vibrantly yourself, but you also want everyone to come in and dwell in that ‘I’. This is a very different kind of situation, where the collective, or the communal, is never opposed to the personal. They always go together.

When you look at all the films that are done on ghosts, most of the time the ghost is somewhere out there. It’s always malevolent, always trying to haunt us and harm us. But in spiritual Asian contexts, for example, it’s very important to deal with ghosts in a considerate manner, precisely because they would always come back up when we cast them out rather than befriend them. In the kind of conflict situation we create for ourselves with ghosts, we forget ghosts couldn’t be without us. But here I’m also talking about the ghosts of the images in films, just like the traces of history. As the images come back to haunt us, we also realize how they pertain to our own realm of subjectivity, and the way they haunt us tells us something about ourselves. The notion of ghost here is very much related to the notion of self and other and how we live them.

UMB: What I learnt from living in Southeast Asia, but also from working in other parts of the world, is that through our projects, through our work, we can befriend our inner ghosts. What I’m also interested in is to learn more about the various ethnicities and their rituals. A collective dealing with those ghosts unfolds a degree of wisdom, but it can also create antagonism, even agonism, in which case it may lead to a peaceful co-existence, to accepting the ghosts as part of life. It is interesting to see the variety of rituals that unfold throughout and across your films, whether it be in China, Japan, or Korea.

TTMH: I think the difference, and here is what we also learn from the feminist struggle, is that if, for example, you are not intimately experiencing everything that you are saying and how it impacts your own life in your daily activities, then it just remains what it is. Just pointing your finger at someone else. This is the nature of the town hall lecture as a viewer asked me earlier during our conversation. Such a lecture can be done any time. But to work on the intimate in a way that is not just

personal or individual but is rather collective and communal, self and world at the same time – the multiplicity of ‘I’ – this is the challenge.

In *Forgetting Vietnam*, I was also working with the ghosts of war. To forget, you have to remember exactly what you want to forget so the pair of memory and forgetting could never be an oppositional binary. People often think about something that happened in 1993 or 1994 as the past. But, for me, there’s no such thing as the mere past. When you talk about memory, memory is always now. Memory as you construct it is neither merely present nor past. It’s an in-between reality.

UMB: What we tried to highlight through the spatial juxtaposition of your films is the possibility of multivocality that is generated by moving from one film to another. It is so interesting how you yourself are in a conversation with the cinematic, but also what can be said through music, through sound, and through voice, and how these voices correlate with your writing, an orchestra of ‘instruments’ corresponding to each other. A poet responds differently from how a journalist does to what happens, to current events. This understanding that there is an existence beyond historical time, different temporalities that overlap through these voices, interweaving a multitude of narratives, and through that something so special is revealed, making visible what we otherwise don’t see. It’s a different kind of correspondence.

TTMH: You have encapsulated some of the governing aesthetic principles in my films, Ute. Let me add to that. Yes, for me it comes down to the love or the passion you have for your subject. Even when I am at my most critical, I’m still very much loving my subject. You can’t have a kind of oppositional stance where you show China only to praise or blame or bash her. You can’t criticize in a black and white way. On the contrary, criticism for me is also creative – like yet another track of creativity that fares along with the visual and musical tracks.

The critical, like the political, is never content with black and white oppositions. So, to connect, first of all, you would have to love your subject and, second, you would have to be very careful not to simply speak about your subject which is a challenge taken up in all of my films. You cannot speak for or on top of. You cannot simply speak about the other as if they were absent. You can speak to, with, or nearby, and sometimes people don’t know what I’m saying when I say ‘nearby’, but it’s very concrete.

It means the way you speak would have to change subtly, because you position yourself nearby, leaving a non-occupied gap; and you are not pointing safely from far away and saying this is what China is all about. The title ‘What About China?’ questions this speaking ‘about’ and could

even connote a certain defiance or resistance to any simplistic closures. In the United States we are seeing a lot of hostility towards Asian Americans because of the situation of the pandemic ... you try to put the responsibility for your shortcomings on someone else, when the worst situation is right where you are – here in the States. Rather than dealing with it, we're trying to put the blame on China. We try to run away from the rain only to end up falling into the river; this is what is happening to us in the US, and this is also what I want to bring up when I talk about the necessity to always speak nearby and not about, for, on top, or on behalf of. So hopefully these are some of the many threads in my work that could be pulled up in response to the question on how to stay interconnected with people.

UMB: Thank you, Minh-ha.