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THE 1991 MAYA DEREN AWARDS
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INDEPENDENT FILM AND VIDEO ARTISTS
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TRINH T. MINH-HA

One of the most distinctive features of independent film and video of the 1980s is the attempt to rethink, fracture, or otherwise break down oppositions that force of habit has hardened into abstractions. I can think of no other artist whose work so consistently engages the difficult terrain of dualism and its discontents than Trinh T. Minh-ha. In assessing Trinh's work, it is impossible to use conventional distinctions, like "theory versus practice" or "poetry versus criticism" (she is a poet as well as a filmmaker, and a theorist as well as an artist), or even more politically charged distinctions like "First World" versus "Third World" (born in Vietnam, Trinh has lived in France, the Philippines, Senegal and the U.S.).

Present in all of her films and her writings is the preoccupation with borderlines, with boundary crossings, with the new spaces of inquiry that emerge when apparent opposites are held in tension. Or as Trinh herself puts it: "Borderlines remain then strategic and contingent, as they constantly cancel themselves out. This 'new' ground, always in the making, is what interests me most in everything I do."

Trinh's first two films, REASSEMBLAGE (1982) and NAKED SPACES - LIVING IS ROUND (1985), evoke the new ground that emerges when the conventions of documentary cinema in general, and ethnographic filmmaking specifically, are stretched and challenged. Both films explore African village life, but there is no seamless unity of observer and observed, and no easy continuity of frames and spaces. Rather, both films engage their viewers in a meditative and critical process of seeing, hearing and listening. Voice-over commentary at times blends with, and at other times clashes with, the sounds of everyday African life, and the voices (including, literally, Trinh's own) question not only what is seen, but what it is possible to see.

While the two films differ in scope (NAKED SPACES is longer and more detailed), they share a common resistance to the easy assimilation of the so-called primitive "other" to the conventions of a genre. While the most obvious such genre is documentary, REASSEMBLAGE and NAKED SPACES are not best described as "reflections upon," nor even "critiques of" the documentary film. Rather, the very dynamics of representation, documentary or otherwise, engage Trinh's attention, and in particular what occurs when one makes another, and/or is made in turn, the object of a view.

In SURNAME VIET GIVEN NAME NAM (1989), Trinh turns to examination of the layers of myth and history that have shaped the perceptions of Vietnamese women, and most specifically to the "new ground" exposed when the conventions of the filmed interview, of performance and of oral history are prodded. Central to SURNAME VIET GIVEN NAME NAM are a series of interviews, both "re-enacted" and "real," that foreground both the possibilities and the limits of film as a storytelling medium.

Storytelling in all of its forms, and particularly in relation to the lives of women, is central to Trinh's work. The final section of her 1989 book, *Woman, Native, Other*, entitled "Grandma's Story," explores the significance of oral traditions of storytelling for women artists of color. "She who works at un-learning the dominant language of 'civilized' missionaries also has to learn how to un-write and write anew," she writes (p. 148). Trinh T. Minh-ha's cinema is theoretically rigorous and intellectually demanding, certainly; but hers is also a cinema of great beauty, where the edges of difference rub against each other in stunning and challenging ways.

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