

Los Angeles Filmforum presents
***What About China?* With Trinh T. Minh-ha in person**
Sunday December 15, 2024, 7:00 pm
At 2220 Arts + Archives

Los Angeles Filmforum is the city's longest running organization dedicated to weekly screenings of experimental film, documentaries, video art, and experimental animation. 2024 is our 49th year. www.lafilmforum.org

Los Angeles premiere!

Conversation after with Trinh Minh-ha and Diego Robles

Nearly a half century after the Cultural Revolution, images of the Asian superpower as friend or foe to a beleaguered, industrialized West belie a mercurial nature that fascinates in this latest video essay by esteemed UC Berkeley professor and experimental filmmaker **Trinh T. Minh-ha**. Similar to *Forgetting Vietnam* (2015), low-res video footage shot 30 years ago of Chinese rural life centering on women, children, labor, and family is reanimated and reframed through photomontage, oral histories, travelogues, poetry, and folk songs in order to interrogate what China has been, is, and could be. The generational transmission of values and ideas weighs heavily, impacting identity formation at home and in diaspora. Like influential works *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989), *Shoot for the Contents* (1991), and *Forgetting Vietnam* (2015), the materiality of texts (video, sound, this film) captures the effect experienced by global citizenry. – Courtesy of SFFILM, written by Lindy Leong, <https://sffilm.org/event/what-about-china/>

Inquiring with Trinh T Minh-ha about China: A Renewal
By Diego Robles

The moment one is immersed in Trinh T Minh-ha's 'What about China?', a chamber of possible corridors and roles we may play while being spectators to the film, arises. The film focuses on a disappearing countryside. The contrasting grand urbanity isn't present, but it isn't absent entirely. Perhaps, we are invited to sit a while, suspend what we know - or better yet, keep what we know, and bring a beginner's mind to what we are seeing. The film does not focus on the way the Chinese countryside has been utilized in the past, by both Chinese costumes and governmental operations on its city-dwelling civilians - yet this isn't entirely absent either. Topics are both acknowledged and coupled. For example, urban-dwellers around the world frame the countryside yesterday and today, a divide not uncommon to us here now. The film's inquiry into China includes misunderstandings that may already be about our understanding of the Chinese countryside, and broader contemporary culture. We may even say, world culture.

"Reality is musical" Minh-ha says - offering various perspectives of China and experiencing those perspectives. The past, the future, all in the present - in poems, in music, in documentary footage, overlapping and wrapping into our eyes and ears, the film summons our creativity and imagination. "Framing the visible to entice the invisible into action", Minh-ha says. "The question is not what have we seen, what are we seeing...but what has caught China's eye", Minh-ha says. The film spirals from navigating the history and present of rural landscapes and their architecture, painting, music, and poetry. Like Minh-ha's own cinema, her photography and video documentation spotlights the fluidity between the role of women, of indigenous Chinese dwelling cultures, of governmental stances, of internal Chinese displacement, and global migration. Various voices in the film share stories about the relationship between these topics, and the people that lived them. The people, the mountains, the trees, all presence that questions that inhabit our present. Are the people in the film expressing the question the film poses? If the mountains and trees could speak, would they ask it as well? We are not strangers to these images, we are made to estrange ourselves from them, yet the film draws us out of ourselves and away from our estrangement. Like a mask, we can change, alter - take on and off meanings - while listening in on Minh-ha's observations about a past-lived-in-

the-present via video documentation from a time not too long ago, from architecture made much longer ago, and a natural landscape that has seen it all - and then some. The landscapes bring awareness to our ambiguity, to our border consciousness, and to our mediatic urge to identify with a character or place on the one hand, and with the film and filmmaker on the other. The corresponding spaces overlapping with voices are shown and described intimately throughout the sequences, and like a river, they recreate, interpret, and translate how we know ourselves, and our epistemological streams of knowability - we witness and reserve our own performance of meaning while seeing the film drift away in our memory.

The film is a crowd of simultaneity - “Why is China calling me now?” Minh-ha asks, her presence illuminates paths to engage not only our own thoughts, memories and knowledge, but also our own future-making activities. Doors close on us, people are framed by doors, and windows shed light into worlds these corridors and roles inhabit. Singing wakes us, to let us absorb, and from being absorbed. The film begins to return us to another present, with Minh-ha saying that “As technology replaces and expands the possibilities of humans, it is the human that disappears”. In the future lived now, imagining ourselves in the words, images, and sounds of our own existence becomes increasingly challenging, but we must keep asking the questions - and listening to people, and what the mountains and trees may have to say about all this.

Special Thanks to Mark Toscano, K.J. Relth-Miller

Filmmaker, writer, composer **Trinh T. Minh-ha** is a Distinguish Professor of the Graduate School at the University of California, Berkeley. Her work includes: 1) nine feature-length films (including *What About China?* 2021, *Forgetting Vietnam* 2016, *Night Passage* 2004, *The Fourth Dimension* 2001, *A Tale of Love*, 1996, *Shoot for the Contents*, 1991, *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, 1989, *Naked Spaces*, 1985, and *Reassemblage*, 1982) honored in some sixty-nine retrospectives around the world; 2) several largescale multimedia installations, including *In Transit* (Manifesta 13, Marseille, 2020) *L'Autre marche* (Musée du Quai Branly, Paris 2006-2009), *Old Land New Waters* (3rd Guangzhou Triennial, China 2008, Okinawa Museum of Fine Arts 2007), *The Desert is Watching* (Kyoto Biennial, 2003); and 3) numerous books, such as *Lovecidal. Walking with The Disappeared* (2016), *D-Passage. The Digital Way* (2013), *Elsewhere, Within Here* (2011), *Cinema Interval* (1999), and *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (1989),

Her latest film, *What About China?* has received the 2022 New:Vision Award at CPH:DOX Film Festival in Copenhagen; The 2022 Golden Gate Persistence of Vision Award at the San Francisco Int. Film Festival and the Prix Bartók at the 2022 Jean Rouch Film festival, the Inspiration Award at Viet Film Fest, a Special Commendation at the BFI London Film Festival and the Presidential Award at the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland Film Festival. The film script of *What about China?* as well as writings and related interviews are published in her recent book, *Traveling in the Dark* (Milan, Italy: Mousse Publishing, 2023).

Diego Robles is an educator, artist, and filmmaker. Originally from the San Diego/Tijuana Border, Diego has been based in Los Angeles since 2002. He attended the UCLA School of Theater, Film, and Television where he was Assistant Programmer for Melnitz Movies. At Cal Arts' School of Film/Video and School of Critical Studies, he earned a Dual MFA and curated student-led Film Festivals and film/video screenings on Chicax and Latinx Cinema. As a researcher, Diego has engaged the REMAP Center at UCLA, and the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts Sciences' Oral History Projects. He facilitated classes at Self-Help Graphics, the CAP Program at Cal Arts, the Summer Discovery Program at UCLA, the Los Angeles Unified School District, the LA County Office of Education, and artworxLA. He currently lectures in the California State University at San Bernardino and San Diego.

Screening:

What About China?

China, 2022, Digital, color, sound, 135 minutes

Director, Writer, Editor, Camera: Trinh Minh-ha; Music/Sound: Wu Wei, Cao Xiyun, Liz Lui, Ming Bo, Qin E

Drawing from footages shot mostly in 1993–1994 in villages of Eastern and Southern China linked in common lore to the remote origins of China’s civilizations, the film takes the notion of harmony in China as a site of creative manifestation. Highly valued as a virtue and a guiding criterion in ethics, harmony has played an important role in the lives of Chinese people since ancient times. It encompasses the fundamental principles of nature, society and humanity, summing up three main relations: harmony with society; harmony with nature; and harmony with oneself.

In the film, "harmony" involves not only the way music fundamentally defines reality, or the way space takes shape and structures daily life, but also the dynamic agents in the ongoing process of safeguarding the "roundness" of a world of social equity. Offering a journey into the wealth of China’s traditional architecture while exploring the hinterlands of self and other in their encounter, the film addresses the process of "harmonizing" rural China, due to the country's Great Uprooting. It seeks to engage the viewer further by asking: What exactly is disappearing? And how?

The viewer is invited to fare between ancient wisdom, avant-garde experiment and popular folk acumen as the film taps on the rich realm of affect, featuring a multiplicity of voices and narratives embedded in a rhythmic conversation between the still image and the moving image. Like the ancient painter who dreams of windows, the film and video maker devises mobile windows with passageways where the real and the imaginary converge on the light canvas.

“Trinh’s reflexivity can be subtly felt throughout the film, a gentle reminder that history is a construct, one in which she is taking part. Her zoomed-in camera roves slowly through Guo Xi’s paintings, bringing the viewer deliberately close, before zooming out to present the full work, the bigger picture.” -- Casey Wei, Reissue

This program is supported by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors through the Los Angeles County Arts Commission and the Department of Cultural Affairs, City of Los Angeles. We also depend on our members, ticket buyers, and individual donors.

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