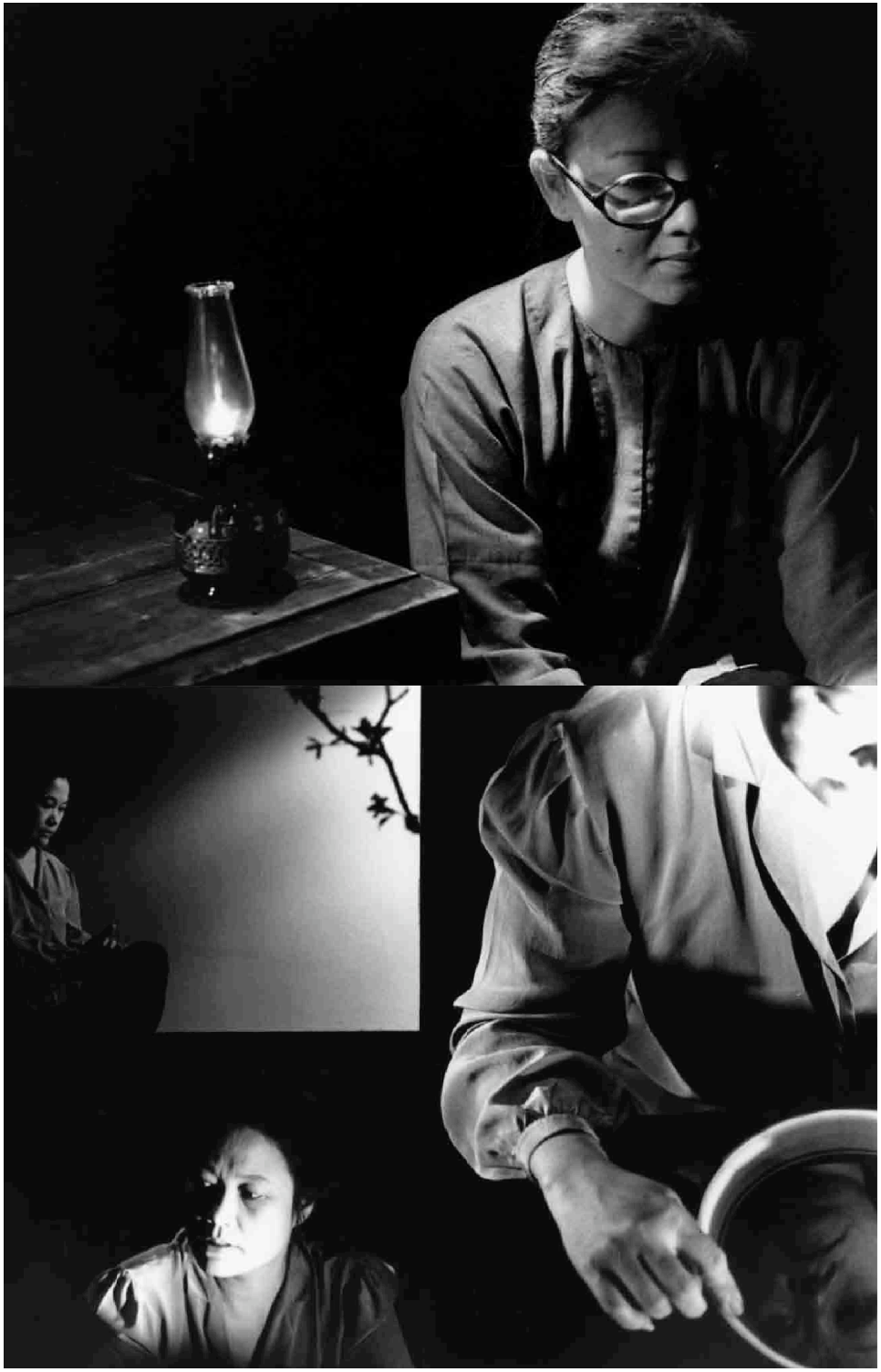

Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, 1989, 16mm film, 108min, stills. Courtesy Moongift Films

Indirect Flow Through Passages: Trinh T. Minh-ha's Art Practice[1]

– An van. Dienderen

Film-maker An van. Dienderen uses the ideas of the 'interval' and plural authorship to situate Trinh T. Minh-ha's films and books within the many worlds — post-colonial, feminist, independent film, artistic — into which her works cross over.

On the occasion of the inauguration of the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, Trinh T. Minh-ha was invited to develop a video installation for the museum. The piece, *L'Autre marche* (*The Other Walk*, 2006), which she realised in collaboration with Jean-Paul Bourdier, was located on a long, winding, serpentine-like ramp leading visitors to the exhibition spaces of the ethnographic museum, with video images projected on the floor and on two walls of the ramp, and shifting aphorisms in twelve different languages intermittently appearing and disappearing. Trinh created the images during twenty years of film-making in several continents. But more than the varied content of the images and its questioning of Eurocentric categorisation, it is the architectural setting – the fact that the piece sits in between spaces – that marks Trinh's artwork. She describes it thus:

> *The passage of the other into oneself, the course taken between sounds, images and aphorisms, or between the said and the seen along the ramp is an initiation walk that spans across several cultures of Asia, Africa, Oceania and America. With each step taken, relations between passage, passers-by and passing time are mutually activated. Questions raised through sensual experience could incite the visitor to reflect on his or her present activities as spectator-researcher-visitor. Meaning moves with walking and with the coming and going, appearing and disappearing of the lit aphorisms. The strolling along the ramp could turn out to be a 'rite of passage' whose fluid movement in three phases, 'Transition', 'Transformation' and 'Overture' is suggested accordingly through sounds and visual rhythms.*[2]

The Vietnamese-American film-maker, artist and theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha is an influential and articulate voice in independent film-making, film studies, cultural studies, post-colonial theory and gender studies. Produced at the intersection of creative and critical practices, Trinh's work can be situated in diverse intervals: between art and theory, between poetry and politics, between fiction and documentary and between truth and performance, inviting the reader and viewer to take part in a reflective and sensual process of co-production, both conceptually as visually. Indeed, the notions of 'interval', 'the space between' and 'the third term', emerge consistently in her written work in an attempt to expand conventional classifications.

Her work could be characterised as a fusion of passages that invites a notion of difference, as she explores anything from the materiality of film, West African cosmology and the significance of dwelling, or the many meanings of 'the marginal' via Asian, African or French texts. Trinh politicises the aesthetic experience by challenging the habits of consumptive spectatorship and representation, questioning this representation in relation to gender, ethnicity and cultural differences. Because of this, her work defies not only the clear distinction between disciplines such as anthropology, post-colonial studies and film theory, but also the practices, methodologies and intentions typical to disciplines.

1 This article is based on an analysis of Trinh T. Minh-ha's films and books, on the collaboration for her film *Night Passage* (2005), email correspondence and an interview that took place in Berkeley in September 2005.

2 Information on *L'Autre marche* is under 'Installations' at http://www.trinhminh-ha.com (last accessed on 9 November 2009).

Trinh's first film, titled *Reassemblage* (1982), was shot in rural Senegal. For forty minutes the film shows her exploration of a village and her encounters, mostly with women. The images probe the borders of the frame, zooming in on half a face, on a nipple or on the mosquitoes feeding off a bull's corpse. The camera investigates windows, fire, children's laughter, women gathered together to work, chatter or prepare food. These images create a network of dense sensual and sensorial impressions of rural Senegal in which viewers are invited to immerse themselves. Trinh narrates the film, and her words make the viewer complicit in her interactions with these women, and simultaneously in her reflections on documentary film-making and ethnographic representation of culture. By means of disjunctive editing and unexpected cuts in sounds, and the repetition of sounds and sentences in the film's narration, she draws attention to the process of making the documentary, questioning the typical authoritative stance of ethnographic films and bringing to the fore her presence as a film-maker both in the village and in the film. Although images like those of the nude breast and the dead animal might suggest an exotic representation of Africa, Trinh turns them against the colonising eye by breaking away from the idea that an all-encompassing truth can be filmed or produced. As film

Trinh T. Minh-ha, *L'Autre marche* (*The Other Walk*), 2006, video installation, installation view, Musée du Quai Branly, Paris. Courtesy Moongift Films

theorist Catherine Russell points out: '*Reassemblage* does not "subvert" the gaze [...] but deconstructs the apparatus of power that informs the will to knowledge. Formal techniques are generated by the demands of the content, in that they foreground the ambivalence and unknowability of the Other.'[3] The film's unexpected framing, its rhythmic, almost musical edit and the manner in which the content of the narration is accentuated by Trinh's pronunciation – she does not hide her accent – successfully unsettle Western expectations of a film 'about Africa', or generally about the 'other'. Notorious and often quoted is her line in the film that 'she does not speak about, but she speaks nearby', which summarises what she formally constructs through images, sounds and editing.

Reassemblage was both influential and contested when it first appeared, as have her subsequent films. Jay Ruby, a visual anthropologist, regarded them 'as uninspired derivatives of 1960s US experimental film and her "criticisms" of documentary film and anthropology uninformed by the tradition of self-criticism easily located within both fields'.[4] He further stated that 'Trinh, like Bill Nichols and Fatimah Rony, attempts to be critical of anthropology and ethnography without having sufficient knowledge of either'.[5] Anthropologist Alexander Moore suggested that 'the empress may have no clothes'.[6] So fierce was the criticism she received that she seemed to be shunted outside the disciplines of ethnographic or filmic critique. In time, however, the politicisation of the aesthetic experience through a critical and often ironic subversion of Western categorisation that *Reassemblage* put into practice made it a pioneering work in experimental documentary and post-colonial studies. As Russell writes, Trinh's work 'has been a catalyst in the rethinking and renovation of documentary practice'.[7] The inclusion of Trinh in the narration and its undermining of traditional representational strategies was not only directed against ethnographic film conventions, but also the thinking that underlies them. Trinh wrote about ethnographic filmmaking in *The Moon Waxes Red* (1991), a book that challenges Western regimes of knowledge:

> *What is presented as evidence remains evidence, whether the observing eye qualifies itself as being subjective or objective. At the core of such rationale dwells, untouched, the Cartesian division between subject and object which perpetuates a dualistic inside-versus-outside, mind-against-matter view of the world.*[8]

Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Reassemblage*, 1982, 16mm film, 40min, still. Courtesy Moongift Films

Though her films are conceived as independent works, they resonate with the texts she writes on feminism, Third World art, political resistance, autobiography and representation. (She often includes, among other things, her film scripts in her books.) The term 'resonate' is deliberately chosen here, since she explicitly offers a non-linear, non-encyclopaedic and non-academic account of these concepts, crisscrossing different disciplines, themes and styles so as to present relations between them. This is both her subject and method: in her book *Woman, Native, Other* (1989), which critiques the category of anthropology as a 'scientific conversation of man with man', she plays with

3 Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*, Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1999, pp.124–25.

4 Jay Ruby, *Picturing Culture: Explorations of Culture and Anthropology*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000, pp.288–89, and 'Speaking For, Speaking About, Speaking With, or Speaking Alongside: An Anthropological and Documentary Dilemma', *Visual Anthropology Review*, vol.7, no.2, Fall 1991, p.62.

5 J. Ruby, *Picturing Culture*, *op. cit.*, p.283.

6 See Alexander Moore, 'Performance Battles: Progress and Mis-steps of a Woman Warrior', *Society for Visual Anthropology Review*, vol.6, no.2, 1990, pp.73–79.

7 C. Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*, *op. cit.*, p.5.

8 Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics*, London and New York: Routledge, 1991, p.35.

the (typography of the) words.[9] She refers, for instance, to Bronisław Kasper Malinowski (commonly considered as one of the most important twentieth-century anthropologists), whom she identifies as the Great Master in contrast with what she calls 'the I/i'. This typographic play, which she exercises throughout the book, questions presumptions about identity, a central theme in her work. Trinh points out that the 'self' is situated in a veiled game of ideology and power, essentialised by virtue of its being paired with its binary opposite, the 'other'.[10] As a consequence, the 'other' is never allowed to have a self, because he or she is located in a place different from the centre of the 'self'. By contrast, the 'self' that Trinh offers consists of a broad range of subjectivities: instead of envisioning the 'self' as an essence with a clear core, she creates a layered and dynamic complex, which cannot be reduced to simple definitions.

> *'I' is, itself,* infinite layers. *Its complexity can hardly be conveyed through such typographic conventions as I, i or I/i. Thus, I/i am compelled by the will to say/unsay, to resort to the entire gamut of personal pronouns to stay near this fleeing and static essence of Not-I.* [...] *Despite our desperate, eternal attempt to separate, contain and mend, categories always leak. Of all the layers that form the open (never finite) totality of 'I', which is to be filtered out as superfluous, fake, corrupt and which is to be called pure, true, real, genuine, original, authentic?*[11]

In *Woman, Native, Other*, Trinh introduced a concept linked to the theme of identity, as an alternative to the self/other dichotomy, that she called the 'Inappropriate(d) Other'. At the same time 'self' and 'other', this figure cannot be appropriated and refuses the position of otherness, as it is in itself inappropriate. An Inappropriate(d) Other has agency, claims and negotiates her own identity. The Inappropriate(d) Other 'is necessarily ... both a deceptive insider and a deceptive outsider'.[12] This figure appears in the work of many contemporary artists, who in one way or the other practise what anthropologists would term 'auto-ethnography', a method characterised by a 'essayistic' impulse in which the director or writer is the subject of the film or the text, commenting on the world in an uncertain, tentative and speculative way.[13] Auto-ethnography can be found in the work of Jonas Mekas, George Kuchar, Omar Amiralay, Juan Manuel Echavarría, Kidlat Tahimik, Chris Marker, Renzo Martens, Mona Hatoum, Ho Tzu Nyen, Mekhitar Garabedian and many others, in which the questioning of (self-)identity is articulated by means of experimental formal styles. On the basis of this approach, Laura U. Marks labels them as 'intercultural artists', artists who in her view 'are in a position to interrogate the historical archive, both Western and traditional, in order to read their own histories in its gaps, or to force a gap in the archive so that they have a space in which to speak'.[14]

Trinh indeed can be regarded as one of the key figures of the 'ethnographic turn of contemporary art', a notion introduced by Hal Foster in an article titled 'The Artist as Ethnographer?' (1995).[15] Since the 1990s a challenging wave of art events emerged, showing significant similarities with anthropology in its theorisations of cultural difference and representational practices. Okwui Enwezor's Documenta11 (2002) questioned how contemporary art might be able to develop in a dialectic relationship with the entirety of global culture, while numerous recent exhibitions have thematised migration or cultural identity. Artists such as Lan Tuazon, Nikki S. Lee, Jimmy Durham, Sophie Calle and Lothar Baumgarten share a concern with anthropologists for the 'politics of representation'.[16] In the words of cultural anthropologists George Marcus and Fred Myers: 'Art has come to occupy a space long associated with anthropology, becoming one of the main sites for tracking, representing and performing the effects of difference in contemporary life.'[17]

9 Trinh T.M., *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989, p.47.
10 See Trinh T.M., *Cinema Interval*, New York and London: Routledge, 1999, p.63.
11 Trinh T.M., *Woman, Native, Other*, *op. cit.*, p.94.
12 Trinh T.M., *When the Moon Waxes Red*, *op. cit.*, p.74.
13 See C. Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*, *op. cit.*, p.277; and Michael Renov, 'The Subject in History: The New Autobiography in Film and Video', *Afterimage*, vol.17, no.1, Summer 1989, pp.4—7. A special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* (vol.35, no.4, August 2006) contains several articles on the diverse definitions and uses of auto-ethnography.
14 Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*, Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2000, p.1.
15 Hal Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer?', in George E. Marcus and Fred R. Myers (ed.), *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995, pp.302—09.

As well as being part of this 'ethnographic turn', Trinh also writes about the terms of this engagement; she is a key figure of post-colonial theory and a major theorist of intercultural cinema, together with Julio García Espinosa, Coco Fusco, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, Teshome H. Gabriel, Kobena Mercer and Hamid Naficy, each of whom are writers 'who describe the ways that cinematic form cultivates a politics and poetics by which to represent the experience of racial minorities and diasporic peoples'.[18] Because of the resonances that she creates between her art practice and theoretical essays, it is typical for Trinh to appear as being part of several circles and disciplines. But categories often 'leak'[19] (and over-particularise): terms such as 'auto-ethnography', 'intercultural cinema', 'post-colonial theory' and 'ethnographic turn' might serve to contextualise some aspects of Trinh's work, but do not suffice to fully describe it.

Trinh herself often uses images of spirals to refer to her practice of film-making, writing and installation – an image that suggests the lack of specific beginnings or endings in her work and its openness to a multitude of interpretations. Her approach is indirect and understated, lacking in logical structure. The reader or viewer is free to approach any of her works with specific topics or interests in mind, and these precise interests will engender surprising associations.

> *In the spiralling movement, you never come back to the same, and when two spirals move together in a space, there are moments when they meet and others when they do not. Trying to find a trajectory that allows the two movements to meet as much as possible without subsuming one to the other is also how I see the process of translation.*[20]

The subject of the film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989), for instance, is the experience of women in Vietnam and in the US. Yet the film also touches on the artificiality of interview techniques normally used in documentaries. In the first part of the film, Trinh interviews women we assume to be Vietnamese; in the second part of the film we discover that these women are not 'real' Vietnamese, but Asian-American actresses living in the United States. Trinh's subversion of the conventions of (documentary) film-making here is given the subtler sheen of problems of translation and themes of dislocation and exile, emphasising the politics of knowledge as well as its complexity, while refusing to reduce it to a discourse of authenticity.

Surname Viet Given Name Nam was Trinh's third film with international distribution, and it keenly demonstrated her interest in exploring the illusion of 'truthfulness' in representation. This issue reappears in both her book and film work, drawing attention to the performance of writing and the theatricality of the film process. She never hides as an author, as a woman or as a person behind the construction of words. In her films there is a constant flow between fact and fiction, where fiction not only refers to the 'story' but also to the construction of a story and its relation to a larger reality.[21] Despite the strong conceptual and theoretical framework of her films, they evoke rather than represent; they suggest rather than describe, sense rather than observe. Her universe is one of poetry, of striking visual imagery, and she raises the quality of evocation to fascinating heights. In Felicia Feaster's words: 'Trinh's films express feminist thought not as an abstract theoretical construct, but as a living, breathing commitment to portraying women's lives on film.'[22]

THE AUTHOR AS A PLURAL SITE: *NIGHT PASSAGE*

In her films and books, Trinh adopts as a subject the creative element that is part of the production process of her work, attempting to both veil and reveal what happens during the act of creation: 'film-making is a complex form of veiling. So rather than

16 Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright, *Contemporary Art and Anthropology*, Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006, p.19, and Alex Coles (ed.), *Site-Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn: De-, Dis-, Ex-*, vol.4, London: Black Dog Publishing, 2000.
17 G.E. Marcus and F.R. Myers (ed.), *The Traffic in Culture*, *op. cit.*, p.1.
18 L.U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, *op. cit.*, p.11.
19 See Trinh T.M., *Woman, Native, Other*, *op. cit.*, p.94.
20 Trinh T.M., *When the Moon Waxes Red*, *op. cit.*, p.187.
21 'A documentary aware of its own artifice is one that remains sensitive to the flow between fact and fiction.' Trinh T.M., 'Documentary Is/Not a Name', *October*, vol.52, Spring 1990, p.85.
22 Felicia Feaster, 'Glowing with Vivid Intensity', *Art Papers*, vol.28, no.3, May/June 2004, pp.28—33.

simply condemning the veil, we also have to deal with the power of its attraction as with desire in love relationships.'[23] It is precisely because of this discourse on (un)veiling her work in the 'interval' – which she describes as a place between moments, spaces and passages, combined with a sophisticated poetical indirectness – that I have chosen to explore the production process of the film *Night Passage* (2005), for which I was assistant director.

Trinh describes *Night Passage*, which she made in California in collaboration with her partner Bourdier, as a film on friendship and death.[24] The film is a homage to Kenji Miyazawa's novel *Milky Way Railroad* (1927), and it tells the story of three young friends travelling, during the night, on a train into and out of the land of 'awakened dreams', between life and death. At each stop of the train, the characters encounter events and people that are at the same time familiar and strange.

In *Film Process as a Site of Critique* (2008) I argued that researching art processes rather than the final 'art product' is of crucial importance in order to examine the way (cultural) identity and visual representation are intertwined. With this in mind, I analysed the mediated interactions between the 'author' (Trinh and Bourdier), the 'viewer' (the notional audience) and the 'other' (the cast and crew) in their plural and variable agencies during the preparatory phases of art processes.

The universe of Trinh T. Minh-ha is inspired by a very precise concept of authorship that breaks away from Western, nineteenth-century romantic individualism. She thinks of the 'author' as a conceptual site, where personal interests and desires are only relevant insofar as they can be politicised. The author for her is a plural site, where 'one exists simultaneously with the work; one is only this empty vehicle through which the work is taking shape. Fragments in my context are not opposed to the whole. A fragment is a fragment when it contains the whole and vice versa.'[25] Authorship is understood as a site for an encounter with and an exploration of a film set, rather than an execution of a plan. In contrast with mainstream fiction film-makers, for whom the script is the main point of reference for the shoot, in which all the scenes are described in more-or-less detail, Trinh works without a storyboard or planned sequence of scenes. Considering her take on authorship, it was no surprise that Trinh refused to have an interview with me until after *Night Passage* was edited: 'There's not much to say when one exists simultaneously with the work. The more one talks then, the more it runs away from oneself. The work does not exist before the making, even if there's a script with which one works.'[26]

For the filming, several breathtaking locations were chosen. The film-makers let the crew know how these locations were to be filmed in two ways: a visual device (sketches that were made by Bourdier to inspire the crew), and a conceptual one (each set was to be filmed in one take, mostly using a 360-degree camera movement). The use of elements such as frame, focus and light in unconventional manners is very dear to both Trinh and Bourdier, as they create an idiosyncratic language that is as significant for the film as the 'story' or the performances of the actors. As Trinh points out:

> *The elements of encounter (culture, personal, object) form the space of subjectivity. If I start working on the colour green, green dictates what comes next to green. Can we then talk about authorship? There is my logic next to the logic of colour, which stands on its own. This is what I mean with structure that stands on its own. They are not serving anything: not a feeling, an emotion. Green is not serving peace. It is there as a colour. Authorship is a field of energy, its unique because of the combination, but not because it belongs to an individual.*[27]

Often, during the filming, rays of coloured light filtered onto the sets and shed red, blue or green light on the actors when they crossed these beams. These beams, like the 360-degree pan, were as important for Trinh and Bourdier as the costumes of the actors, their dialogue or even the way they performed. The actors became elements in a décor rather than psychologically driven characters. As Marks has written, 'The agents of intercultural cinema are what Deleuze calls "intercessors", real characters who make up fiction. These are not the docile informants of documentary, but resistant characters who dispute the film-maker's construction of truth at every turn: Jean Rouch's characters with their own stories to tell, Trinh's evasive interlocutors.'[28] This equality of formal and figural elements matches with her break from Romantic notions of authorship and movement towards the understanding authorship as a formal site: actors are formal figures, just like the frame of the camera, the composition or the sound. Trinh decides on the formal patterns, but these also have a set of rights of their own, and often dictate the decision she will take during the editing.

Trinh and Bourdier encouraged crew members to go beyond the script and conventional ideas of lighting and design, and instead to invest in particular aspects of the encounter with the space, location and actors. They were invited to improvise; to create a light setting based on a sketch made by Bourdier; to define specific camera standpoints; to come up with imaginative ideas for costumes, etc. One of the crew members compared this way of working to jazz, with a similar mode of improvisation based on a loose structure.

A result of this particular approach to authorship and its formal relationship to the elements that cinema is 'made of', *Night Passage* consists of a series of sensual, dream-like images and sounds. In it, form and content are interwoven in such a way that the netherworld between life and death can be seen as a composition of colour, light, shadow, framing and sounds. By approaching the film set in an indirect way, stimulating its exploration as a zone in between performance and reality, Trinh points to the way the medium of film creates interactions between the main agents involved in it, and hence at the complexity of the politics of knowledge that are at play within it. Authorship in *Night Passage* – and, by extension, the rest of Trinh's work – consists of the creation of passages, resonances and intervals between form and content, between crew and lighting, between camera and dialogue, between the 'I' of Trinh and Bourdier and the 'you' of the viewer as a circulating twirl. And with this image we find ourselves again at the ramp of the Musée du Quai Branly. Not by means of a circle that closes off, but through a spiralling movement, returning to a space in order to reopen it. As Trinh would put it, 'as a continuum in which everything is linked and in constant motion'.[29]

Trinh T. Minh-ha and Jean Bourdier, *Night Passage*, 2005, digital film, 98 min, still. Courtesy Moongift Films

23 Trinh T.M., *Cinema Interval*, *op. cit.*, p.197.
24 Unpublished notes, distributed to the crew during the shoot.
25 Email correspondence between the artist, 2004.
26 *Ibid.*
27 Conversation with the artist, September 2005.
28 L.U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, *op. cit.*, p.68.
29 Trinh T.M., Cinema Interval, *op. cit.*, p.257.