



The I and the We

Artists: Arnait Video Productions,
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Curator: Zoë Chan

Vidéographe

A world of new possibilities opened up to documentary cinema when portable film cameras and more sophisticated audio recording devices emerged in the 1950s. Previously, filmmakers had depended on the use of intertitles, music, and separately recorded voice-over to contextualise footage; now, they could record picture synched with sound *in situ*. Early twentieth-century ethnographic documentary, with its didactic commentary explaining to viewers the imagery on the screen, is paradigmatic of the older expository mode of filmmaking. This authoritative, omniscient framing typically presented a primitivizing European perspective on the non-European other. Although filmmakers did not entirely abandon such techniques, they embraced the potential of new audiovisual technologies to capture subjects speaking for themselves. Especially given the colonialist roots of documentary film, this was a profound representational shift, one "where the body is transformed from object to agent."¹

Continuing advances in audiovisual technology have facilitated the expression of an expanding diversity of voices in documentary²; still, filmmaker and subject do not necessarily stand on equal footing. Reflecting on the function of the filmmaker, cultural theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha writes, "In the context of power relations, speaking for, about, and on behalf of is very different from speaking with and nearby."³ This reminds us to examine the roles and relationships of those involved in making the film, and the working methods employed.

Produced using collaborative and participatory approaches, the videos of *The I and the We* implicitly repudiate early ethnographic documentary methodologies: straddling social practice and documentary, these works highlight a multiplicity of voices rather than a single dominant perspective, and feature subjects who often help shape both style and content. Many of the artists are intimately linked to their subjects through culture, experience, history, age, gender, neighbourhood, and other embodied or shared connections. They do not subscribe to the colonialist notion that

¹ Thomas. J. Csordas, *Embodiment and experience: The existential ground of culture and self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, reprint 2003), 2.

² This change of course is ongoing and in constant flux, with new impacts that continue to be felt and negotiated with the rise of videotape, digital video, the Internet, smart phones and other personal audio visual devices, social media, and so on.

³ "Vietnam/USA: Trinh T. Minh-ha in an interview by Eva Hohenberger," Gail Pearce and Cahal McLaughlin, eds., *Truth or Dare: Art and Documentary* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2007), 118.

their subjects need an intermediary to tell their stories or to explain their identities. Nor do they create sweeping narratives with pretensions of telling the definitive and universal truth about a group or community; rather, their focus is often modestly micro with a foregrounding of first-person-singular perspectives. *The I and the We's* artists do not attempt to capture their subject-collaborators off guard; instead, they seek to represent their subjects on their own terms. Indeed, each video presents scenarios that its subjects chose to participate in, instigated, or helped develop.

Foregrounding a range of individual voices, these works present their subjects as compelling communicators while highlighting the creative possibilities of various modes of vocal expression. *The I and the We* depicts individuals who reflect, recount stories, teach, improvise, act, and even sing. In these ways, the subjects substantially shape the content of the works. Through the portrayal of people speaking for themselves, these videos enter the realm of the deeply subjective—thus rejecting the conventional positioning of documentary as a purportedly impartial mode of representation.

The exhibition also includes works where the voice is obscured, withheld, or unexplained through creative measures of *opacity*—advanced by writer Édouard Glissant as a powerful strategy to thwart the reductive Western tradition of insisting on transparency in order to apprehend difference. By eschewing what Glissant calls the “requirement for transparency”⁴ found in Western thought (and particularly in ethnographic practices), these artists aim to shelter their subject-collaborators from being commodified as exotic “others”—where their knowledge, culture, or experiences would be neatly packaged, circulated, and consumed.

Permeated with warmth, affection, and care, in tandem with a vibrant interplay of sound and image, these documentary-inflected videos invite the public to witness vivid representations of individuals articulately speaking on their own terms. Expanding from Minh-ha’s argument that it is the responsibility of the filmmaker to *speak with and nearby*, *The I and the We* prompts us to consider our own responsibilities as citizens: When should we speak and when should we listen? How can we better hear those with and nearby us?

⁴ Édouard Glissant, “For Opacity,” *Poetics of Relation*, tr. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 189.

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