Remembering Otherwise:
Video Art and Collective Memory in Vietnam

Lan-Chi Nguyen

Swinburne Vietnam, FPT University

Ngoc-Chau Pham

Swinburne Vietnam, FPT University

ABSTRACT

In contemporary Vietnam, where the government maintains tight control over cultural representation and historical narratives, video art has emerged as a potent site for contesting dominant memories. This article investigates how Vietnamese video artists brings suppressed memories—those of women, queer individuals, ethnic minorities, and immigrants—into visibility, thereby disrupting homogenous collective memories. The research focuses on selected video artworks by two internationally acclaimed artists—established video artist Nguyen Trinh Thi and multimedia artist Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai—whose recognition comes primarily from global institutions rather than official state honors in Vietnam. Employing a qualitative methodology, this study utilizes textual and discourse analysis of the artworks, contextualized by a review of Vietnam's socio-political landscape and theories of collective and ethical memory. We argue that rather than directly confronting or rejecting state-sanctioned narratives, the artworks analyzed intervene by inserting marginalized personal and communal memories into public discourse. This fosters a "double ethical memory," compelling audiences to acknowledge forgotten or excluded perspectives. Key findings reveal that the artists employ distinctive narrative strategies (grounded in absence), alongside visual techniques (cinéma vérité and non-narrative composition) to give agency to silenced voices within a censored media environment. This study underscores the significance of video art as an independent medium for fostering more inclusive and nuanced cultural representation in Vietnam and offers implications for understanding art's role in social critique and memory work within Southeast Asia.

Keywords: collective memory, marginalized voices, social intervention, video art

INTRODUCTION

In an era defined by the global circulation of images, the power to shape a nation's memory is fiercely contested. States, markets, and media institutions construct dominant narratives that often serve to legitimize and unify national identity, frequently at the cost of erasing inconvenient histories (Olick 2013). Within this context, contemporary art has emerged as a critical site for intervention, where artists challenge official histories and create spaces for alternatives forms of remembrance. This is particularly potent in Southeast Asia, where artists increasingly use their practice to navigate and critique the complex legacies of colonialism, authoritarianism, and rapid modernization (Flores 2017).

This dynamic is acutely visible in contemporary Vietnam, as it maintains one of the world's most restrictive media environments and actively censors cultural products deemed politically sensitive (Altman-Lupu and Swanton 2025), a significant gap exists between state-sanctioned representations and the lived realities of its diverse population. Mainstream media as a tool for forging a national imaginary often aligns with these official narratives, leaving vast areas of the Vietnamese experience unseen and unheard.

Against this backdrop, this article investigates how memory is contested in contemporary Vietnam by focusing on video art as a site of negotiation, drawing on the works of two internationally acclaimed artists: Nguyen Trinh Thi (hereinafter referred to as Trinh-Thi) and Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai (hereinafter referred to as Thanh-Mai). Both artists are recognized primarily through global art institutions rather than state-sanctioned honors, a positioning that shapes the critical autonomy of their work. Trinh-Thi, an established video artist and founder of Hanoi DocLab, is a recipient of numerous accolades, including the prestigious Prince Claus Impact Award in 2024 ("Nguyen Trinh Thi Was Honored With the Prince Claus 2024 Impact Award" 2025). Thanh-Mai, a multimedia artist, has been recognized with awards such as the Pollock-Krasner grant ("Thanh-Mai Thi Nguyen—Nguyen Art Foundation" n.d.). Drawing on their work, this article argues that these artists engage in a form of cognitive activism, using' video art's aesthetic strategies not to replace official narratives, but to foster a "doubled ethical memory" (Viet-Thanh Nguyen 2013, 7) by giving agency to suppressed vices and revealing the voids within Vietnam state-sanctioned collective memory.

The article first establishes the theoretical framework of memory, resistance, and video art in Vietnam, highlighting the connections between video as a medium, memory, and practices of social resistance. It then introduces the first author's positionality and explains how this standpoint shapes the research direction, before outlining the research questions and methodological approach. Building on this foundation, the study conducts a textual and discourse analysis of the selected works to examine how these artists give agency to suppressed memories. Finally, it analyzes the narrative and stylistic strategies employed to voice the unseen, and concludes with a discussion of the critical paradox that shapes the social impact of their work.

CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK

Art as Resistance in a Landscape of Contested History

Contemporary art in Southeast Asia has increasingly become a site of social and political intervention. Since the 1990s, a period of significant economic growth and socio-political change, artists across the region have used their work to challenge established power structures (Lenzi 2011). This movement is particularly potent in undemocratic nations where freedom of speech is restricted, allowing art to function as a space for developing a civil society and exploring personal identity (Lenzi 2011; Musikawong 2023). A recurring and central theme in this artistic movement is the contestation of history and memory, with critique often aimed at the state and its use of official nationalism to justify authoritarianism (Peleggi 2019). Artists frequently comment on histories that have been deliberately forgotten in state-approved narratives and reflect on the ownership of national history, giving voice to suppressed groups like women, queer individuals, and ethnic minorities (Lenzi 2013).

This regional trend is acutely visible in Vietnam. The nation's media is among the most strictly controlled in Asia, with the state owning or influencing nearly all television, radio, and print outlets (Huong-Thien and E.M. 2023; Reed 2024). Journalists and bloggers who raise sensitive topics or criticize the government face harsh persecution (Ghani 2019). This creates significant gaps between state-approved representations of Vietnam and personal, lived experiences, particularly concerning the Second Indo-China War and its aftermath.

In the arts, the Vietnamese government officially supports traditional work aligned with socialist realist principles, censoring art that unfavorably portrays the Communist Party or its leaders (Thuc 2017). However, artists have found ways to navigate this strict censorship through subtlety, abstraction, and by exploiting systemic weaknesses like corruption (Libby 2011). This context has fostered "a sense of urgency dominating the contemporary Vietnamese art scene—the urgency of the need to rewrite history, to bear witness, to educate and make a population aware" (Thuc 2017, 64). The struggle for expression itself has become the primary framework for understanding the role of Vietnamese contemporary art, with artists striving to produce new, multi-perspective narratives that challenge the state-sanctioned history.

The Politics of Memory: Collective vs. Ethical Remembering

This artistic intervention is fundamentally a battle over memory. The popular representation of Vietnam is often recombined stories shaped by powerful forces. These include the American-dominated memory of the Second Indo-China War in global cinema (Cohen 2021), an international art market that favors exotic and romanticized themes (Carlos 2025), and the state's own narrative, which promotes a sanitized image of the government's leadership while repressing dissent (Khac-2025).

These dominant portrayals create what sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992) termed "collective memory"—a shared pool of knowledge that can feel authoritative but is often selective and exclusionary. This "industry of memory," as writer Viet-Thanh Nguyen calls in *Nothing Ever Dies* (Viet-Thanh 2016, 14), determines who controls which stories are told, and which ones are

forgotten. Personal memories that cast doubt on or mark the voids in these popular recombinant stories are rendered invisible, evidence of the perspectives that have been left out.

This raises an ethical question: how can a country be remembered in a way that does justice to the forgotten and the oppressed? Ricoeur (2004) proposes that "the duty of memories is the duty to do justice, through memories, to the Other(s) rather than the Self" (99). Building on this, Viet-Thanh's (2013) concept of a "doubled ethical memory" holds that an ethical memory must recall one's own history while simultaneously recalling the history of the Other. It acknowledges its own forgetting and remains "open-ended and in flux," (7) resisting the comfort of a single, conclusive story. This framework is the lens through which the interventionist attribute of Vietnamese video art can be understood. The artists in this study do not seek to erase collective memory but to complicate it by adding alternative perspectives, thereby helping to construct this doubled ethical memory of Vietnam.

Cinema as Cultural Archive

Cinema aids in the construction, negation, and preservation of collective memory as a mass medium, its immersive and embodied nature, and its capacity to generate personal experience. By disseminating historical narratives, images, and interpretations to millions of viewers simultaneously, films not only create a shared cultural touchstone foundational to a nation's self-perception (Kuhn et al. 2017) but also provide a common vocabulary and visual repertoire for discussing the past (Fluck 2003). In that capacity, the entire corpus of a nation's cinema functions as a vast and complex cultural archive which preserves the ideologies, social anxieties, aesthetic sensibilities, and cultural attitudes of the periods in which the films were made.

The true potency of cinema as a 'medium of memory' lies in its unique immersive power that allows viewers to integrate a mediated memory of a past event—one they did not live through—into their own personal experience. Through the synthesis of moving images and sound, cinema does not simply tell audiences about the past; it generates an experience of the past, installing memories that viewers "both possess and feel possessed by," which is conceptualized as 'prosthetic memory' by Alison Landsberg (as cited in Kuhn et al. 2017, 4). This experience is also amplified by the phenomenon of 'psychological transportation' in which viewers are transported into the story world of the film and persuaded by its compelling narrative. Therefore, when immersed in a film, viewers are less likely to engage in "counterarguing" or to notice historical inaccuracies, making them more susceptible to the film's ideological perspective (Plantinga 2021, 123). In sum, the ability of cinema to simulate real-life experience by fusing multimodal perception (sight, sound) with emotional and cognitive overtones make it an unparalleled tool for embedding historical narratives into the personal memory of its audience.

Video Art as a Site to Explore the Unseen

While cinema is a primary apparatus for shaping a nation's self-perception, this study focuses on video art, which was introduced in the early 1960s, as a distinct but related site for memory work. The rationale for this focus is threefold, as video art is a medium for critical intervention that leverages, subverts, and transcends the cinematic language it borrows.

First, video art creates a crucial bridge to the study of memory by directly appropriating the cinematic grammar, namely narrative structure, cinematography, editing, and sound design as its raw material (Colman 2014). By adopting these cinema language features, artists can engage with and deconstruct mechanisms of historical representation (Meigh-Andrews 2014). This shared vocabulary allows video art to enter into dialogue with the prosthetic memories that cinema installs in the public consciousness.

Second, video art has its own independent production, exhibition context, and relative freedom from censorship, which is potential for the exploration of the unseen. Whereas state-sponsored cinema often works to forge a unified national imaginary (Shehab 2023), video art emerged as an opposition by creating works that display hidden aspects of the society unpopular on mass media (Tate n.d.) and through bypassing the utilization of professional equipment that used to be available only within the cinema industry (The Art Story n.d.). Additionally, video art is usually exhibited in galleries or museums with physically mobile viewers who actively navigate the space, choose their own vantage points, determine the duration of their engagement and often encounter the work without a clear beginning and or end (Charleson 2011), in contrast to the cinema's black environment with seated and immobile viewers for focused and passive immersion. This spatial and temporal freedom enabled in video art fundamentally alters the viewing experience, shifting the emphasis from narrative absorption usually found in films to conceptual and phenomenological engagement (Sutton 2005). This distinctive exhibition context of video art makes this medium a place where strict censorship laws could be somewhat circumvented, especially in the Global South (Minh 2023).

Finally, video art, in contrast to mainstream cinema, frequently embraces non-linear, fragmented, and abstract storytelling (TAI 2024). This is not merely an aesthetic preference; it is a conceptual strategy to represent the way memory functions, not as a chronological film, but as a disjointed collection of images, sensations, and emotional traces that are constantly being reassembled in the present. Its emphasis on an active and embodied viewership transforms the act of viewing into a metaphor for the work of memory itself. Therefore, a focused analysis of this medium is essential for understanding the more complex ways a society remembers, forgets, and contests its past.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Before outlining the methodology, it is important to reflect on the first author's positionality and experiences as the primary lens shaping the direction of this inquiry. As Bukamal (2022) notes, positionality involves understanding how one's contextual background forms an identity that "will affect the way that the social world is seen and understood" (328). This section uses Berkovic's multi-dimensional framework—encompassing ontology, epistemology, axiology, and more—not as a mere autobiographical note, but as a critical account of how a particular worldview has shaped this inquiry (Ayton et al. 2023).

The first author's ontological starting point was an unlearning process. For years, their perception of Vietnam was a product of the state-curated education system, which fostered a prosthetic memory of a heroic, unified nation with little room for alternative narratives. This

worldview began to shift in 2010 after a formative encounter with a contemporary art exhibition in Hanoi. The deeply personal, ironic, and fragmented works on display were a radical departure from the state-sanctioned art seen in school textbooks. This experience catalyzed an epistemological shift, planting the belief that art is a critical space for questioning what we are taught not to question.

This belief informed the first author's academic and professional path. Subsequent work as a communication officer in contemporary art spaces in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City provided direct experience with the unpredictable nature of state censorship. This lived experience—of witnessing how exhibitions aligned with official narratives were approved while others faced obstacles—solidified the understanding that collective memory is not a natural or neutral phenomenon, but a product of power, curation, and control.

These formative experiences directly shape the study's axiology—a value commitment to art's potential for resistance, re-imagination, and care for underrepresented narratives—and its methodology. The selection of video artworks is consciously focused on pieces that perform social intervention by disrupting or re-examining collective memory. The first author, therefore, acts not as a passive observer but as a researcher-as-instrument, attuned to the provocative and critical qualities of the art. This study adopts a hybrid "insider-emic" and "outsider-etic" communication stance (Ayton et al. 2023, 283-284). Having worked in the field, the first author possesses insider knowledge, yet as neither an artist nor a curator, they maintain a critical distance. This in-betweenness allows for an analysis that considers both artistic intention and the broader political economy in which the work circulates. Because the data consists of artworks as opposed to human subjects, this positionality primarily affects the interpretation of findings rather than the production of data.

In the following sections, this article investigates how the video art works of Trinh-Thi and Thanh-Mai can be considered a form of social intervention. The analysis is guided by two central questions: 1. Representation: How do the selected works represent silenced memories in Vietnam? 2. Strategy: What aesthetic and narrative strategies enable these works to intervene in dominant narratives and foster ethical remembering within a tightly controlled cultural landscape?

To answer these questions, this study first employed a purposive case selection process to identify the artworks for analysis. Following a contextual review of contemporary video art in Vietnam, the study narrowed its focus to a thematic concern with silenced memories, with particular attention to those of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. In the scope of this article, the concept of silenced memories refers to how "oppressing political regimes across history and cultures erase and delete ideas, identities, and [how] dissonant narratives have employed silence" (Santos 2023, 22). Based on this framework, the analysis centered on the representation of four key marginalized groups whose experiences are largely absent from state-sanctioned narratives: women, queer individuals, indigenous peoples, and immigrants (Social Protection-Human Rights n.d.). The works of Trinh-Thi and Thanh-Mai were selected as they are exemplary in their sustained artistic engagement with these specific communities.

The study at hand then employed an interpretivist qualitative methodology (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017), grounded in a close analysis of the selected artworks. The analytical approach is twofold.

First, we conducted a textual analysis of each artwork, examining its formal properties and cinematic language. This includes a systematic analysis of narrative structure (or its absence), cinematography, editing techniques, and sound design to understand how specific artistic choices generate meaning and affective power (Bordwell et al. 2019). Second, we complemented this with a discourse analysis that situates these formal qualities within their broader socio-political context. This involved connecting the themes and representational strategies identified in the textual analysis to the dominant discourses of state-sanctioned nationalism, the official memory of war, and prevailing social norms (Rose 2016). The synthesis of these methods allowed us to identify the specific strategies of social intervention through which these artworks reclaim the "silenced memories" of marginalized groups—not as an act of erasure, but as a reflective space to confront what is absent in the collective narrative—thereby contributing to the construction of a "doubled ethical memory."

VIDEO ART AS SOCIAL INTERVENTION IN VIETNAM—GIVING AGENCY TO SURPRESSED VOICES

This section analyzes how the video works of Trinh-Thi and Thanh-Mai perform social intervention by giving agency to suppressed voices. In the context of his article, suppressed voices or silenced memories refer not simply to marginalized communities, but to the specific historical experiences and personal memories that are actively excluded from the state-sanctioned "industry of memory" by Viet-Thanh Nguyen (2016). The art of giving agency, therefore, is not about providing a political platform in a traditional sense but is an aesthetic process. Following the political philosopher Jacques Rancière (2006), art intervenes by disrupting the "distribution of the sensible" (1), that is, it makes visible what was unseen and makes audible what was unheard. In these artworks, agency is conferred through specific cinematic strategies: (1) shifting the gaze, which transform subjects from the objects of a narrative to its primary observers; (2) providing narrative authority, where unscripted, personal testimony replaces official history; and (3) humanizing through vulnerability, which dismantles stereotypes by presenting raw, individual experiences. The social intervention of these works, then, is not a call for direct political action but a form of cognitive activism. These works reconfigure public perception and create the empathetic space necessary for a "doubled ethical memory" to emerge.

With the ruling government seeking to craft a homogenous narrative of the country, many Vietnamese artists have strived to resist this representation using video as their medium. Despite the state's attempts to repress artistic activism, a stress on exploring sensitive subject matters, such as the ownership of history, the despotic political system, and environmental issues. This runs strong in the local video art scene. Through their work, the artists not only represent their personal memories of Vietnamese society but also mark the voids in the collective memory, beckoning the audience to question the state-controlled and commercially driven narratives they have been exposed to. This artwork, therefore, should be seen not as a downright rejection of existing memories, but as an invitation to foster awareness of what has been disremembered, contributing to the construction of "doubled ethical memory" of Vietnam. This analysis explores the interventionist attribute of Vietnamese video art through the mode of giving agency to suppressed voices.

The focus thus lies on works by artists like Trinh-Thi and Thanh-Mai. While their interests vary from Trinh-Thi's focus on "unveiling the hidden, displaced or misinterpreted histories" (Trinh-Thi, n.d.) to Thanh-Mai's concern with the rights of women and migrants (Goethe Institut n.d.), their practices converge on the shared subject of suppressed voices in Vietnam.

Reclaiming the Gaze: Female Agency and the Deconstruction of War Memory

According to Trinh-Thi, the depiction of women in traditional Vietnamese cinema, especially during the war and socialist eras, was often manipulated for propaganda purposes (Magiera 2016). Looking at the permanent exhibitions of the Vietnamese Women's Museum (n.d.), one can see how women are represented primarily through their social functions. The museum is organized into two main branches: 'Women in Family' and 'Women in History.' The Women in Family section highlights three sub-categories—marriage, childbirth, and domestic life—framing women as wives and mothers responsible for maintaining family order and transmitting traditions. Meanwhile, the Women in History section follows a chronological narrative, telling stories of heroic women who contributed to the nation during different historical periods. This exhibit not only highlights their participation in resistance wars, but also portrays their everyday struggles, feats with weapons, and sacrifices as glorious contributions to the country's reunification. Such portrayals produce a form of patriarchy that confines women to a limited space under the control of social expectation. Even in the 21st century, mass-market cultural products often fall into a simplistic binary, representing women as either victims or rebels, a portrayal that overlooks individual needs in favor of a new heroic female stereotype.

In this context, media artist Trinh-Thi intervenes to tell another story. In *Eleven Men* (Trinh-Thi 2016), she gives women the chance to observe and speak for themselves, switching their role from the represented to the representative of themselves. The artist stated: "The most important gesture in this work is that of giving a woman a chance to speak. The voice of the film is hers. It's the main thing. What the men are and who they stand for is secondary." (Magiera 2016)

Eleven Men is composed of scenes from classic movies produced by the state-owned Vietnam Feature Film Studio, all featuring the celebrated actress Như Quỳnh. Trinh-Thi remixes this found footage and overlays a new narrative adapted from Franz Kafka's short story *Eleven Sons* but changes the narrator from a father to a woman speaking of her male partners. The film opens with the woman stating, "I have eleven men" (Trinh-Thi 2016, at 00:18-00:21), a direct subversion of the Confucian expectation of female fidelity (Vo 2024). She proceeds to critically describe the men, making ironic comments on their character, such as of the first man: "His mental processes seem to me to be too simple" (Trinh-Thi 2016, at 00:58-01:00). This way, Trinh-Thi not only questions the norm of female submissiveness but also challenges the inferior status of women in society. The male characters are given almost no voice, creating space for the woman to unveil her thoughts on her sexuality and subjectivity, filling a significant gap in on-screen collective memories where the female voice typically serves only the interests of the nation and male characters.

This empowerment is also central to Trinh-Thi's *Songs to the Front* (2011), which uses found footage from the 1973 war propaganda film *Bài Ca Ra Trận* (Trinh-Thi, n.d.). Trinh-Thi removes the original dialogue, sets the scenes to Igor Stravinsky's The Rite of Spring, and critically shifts the

narrative agent from a male soldier to the female nurse who observes him. The artwork zooms in at the moment when the soldier is hospitalized and temporarily blinded. He appears weak and dependent, only returning to his traditional masculine, heroic image in the final scene where he fires his gun in an erratic manner. The female protagonist is a silent witness, yet her gaze dominates the narrative. Through her eyes, we feel not admiration for his glory, but sympathy for his suffering and doubt about the nature of extreme patriotism. This feeling is intensified by non-diegetic music, which tells the story of a young girl who dances herself to death in a pagan sacrifice ritual. As noted by Alexievich (2017) in the film *The Unwomanly Face of War* women's memories of war often lack the "heroes or incredible feats" of male accounts, invoking a different reality of war with "its own range of feelings." By placing the male soldier under the female gaze, Trinh-Thi deconstructs the political elements of the original film and challenges the male-dominant collective memory of war, compelling the audience to reconsider the human cost of nationalism.

Contesting Invisibility: Queer Expression and Indigenous Religion as Counter-Memory

Queer individuals in Vietnam has historically been subject to what Nualart (2016) calls a "reification of queer invisibility," where a lack of laws against homosexuality served to "deny the possibility of its existence" (2). Before 2000, it was illegal for gay couples to live together, and homosexuality was included in the nation's official list of mental illnesses (Mann, 2014). Even into the 21st century, mainstream media representations have been overwhelmingly negative. Queer identity has often been associated with prostitution and social disease or dismissed as an anti-nationalist fashion trend from the West (Faludi 2016). In the nation's collective memory, which centers heterosexual love and identity, queer life is either excluded or aggressively defamed (Nualart 2016).

Trinh-Thi's documentary *Love Man Love Woman* (2007) is an early intervention against this erasure. The film's Vietnamese title—*Ái Nam Ái Nữ*—is a term often used for mockery, but Trinh-Thi's work reclaims it, portraying the main character not as a caricature but as an individual whose struggles are deeply relatable. The film explores how effeminate and gay men have found a space for community and expression in Đạo Mẫu (Mother Goddess worship), a popular folk religion in Vietnam dating back to the 16th century (Trinh-Thi, n.d.; Tham and Springer 2018). The documentary opens with a poetic song, setting a mysterious and religious tone: "The Princess has a round face, and such a graceful neck / She wears rouge on her lips, and powder on her cheeks / [...] / At the waterfall she sits, / She reigns where the three rivers meet / Up and down stream / The boats are grateful for her protection" (Trinh-Thi 2007, at 00:10-01:00).

The film centers on Luu Ngoc Duc (hereafter referred to as Ngoc-Duc), a master spirit medium who, in the practice of Mother Goddess worship, performs rituals for deities to possess him to communicate with the living. While mediums in fact can be of any gender or sexuality, "đồng cô" often refer to male mediums who channel female deities, whereas female mediums who connect with male deities are called "bóng cậu" (Tran 2022, 716–717). This concept lends a mystifying and deferential mode to the mediums, most of whom are homosexual, allowing them to find respect and acknowledgement for their sexual orientation within this specific cultural space.

Trinh-Thi's documentary situates homosexuality within one of Vietnam's most indigenous religions, directly challenging the deep-rooted view of queerness as abnormal or anti-Vietnamese.

However, the film derives its analytical power from the stark contrast between the liberation found within this religious context and the prejudice faced outside of it. While performing rituals, Ngoc-Duc is vibrant, celebrated, and able to fully express his femininity. Yet, in his daily life, he is haunted by societal judgment. He confesses his inability to escape the feeling that he is living "against nature's law" and "against the morality of society," a conflict forcing him and others to lead a troubled double life (Trinh-Thi 2007, at 12:20–12:40). This agony is palpable when he states, "I have to live as a-two-person, and the fake has to live more than the true person" (Trinh-Thi 2007, at 33:15-33:30). Recalling his forced marriage due to family pressure, he quotes a famous line of poetry by Nguyễn Du: "She resigned herself to take the step with her eyes closed, to see how far fickle fate would guide her destiny" (Trinh-Thi 2007, at 39:35–40:10).

The film's intimate, conversational style makes the viewer feel like a participant rather than a detached observer. Near the end, the camera focuses on a dimly lit alley as Ngoc-Duc confesses his profound loneliness: "I was born by heaven, like every other man… but why did heaven torture me like this, by giving me this disease… When I'm alone by myself… Holding a piece of private love… Just myself and I… then I feel sad" (Trinh-Thi 2007, at 47:30–48:55) By presenting this raw vulnerability, *Love Man Love Woman* performs a crucial act of social intervention. It replaces the hateful stereotype in the collective memory with a humane, complex portrait of an individual, forcing the audience to confront the real human cost of social exclusion and queer invisibility.

The Colonizer Within: Unsettling National Memory in Panduranga

While Vietnam's national collective memory is profoundly shaped by its history as a colonized nation, it largely omits the narrative of Vietnam itself as a colonizer of ethnic minorities within its own borders. The Indigenous Cham people, as Gleeson and Taylor (2015) noted, have been subjected to a colonialist discourse presenting them as "an inferior race, diluted by foreign cultural influences, inauthentic" (57) and are often treated as a mythical place in official history curricula rather than an independent civilization. As a result, their descendants face the material and historical erasure of their cultural heritage.

Trinh-Thi's essay film *Letters from Panduranga* (2015) is a direct intervention into this historical amnesia. The film is a poetic commentary on the Vietnamese government's plan to build its first two nuclear power plants in Ninh Thuận, the former heartland of the Cham kingdom known as Panduranga. The construction would be situated at the spiritual core of the Cham indigenous community, yet they were given little to no say in the decision. The film unfolds as a travelogue in the form of a letter exchange between a man and a woman, intentionally blurring the lines between myth and reality, documentary and fiction, past and present. This ambiguity is established from the opening lines, spoken by the female narrator: "I'm writing you this letter from what seems like a distant land. She was once called Panduranga" (Trinh-Thi 2015, at 00:35–00:45).

The film contains self-reflexivity on the ethics of representation. The narrators grapple with their position as outsiders, with the woman admitting she "does not want to speak on behalf of others" and struggles to find the way in (Trinh-Thi 2015, at 03:52–04:00). This vulnerability preempts a simple, extractive documentary gaze. The film further critiques power dynamics by analyzing a trope in National Geographic photography, where "those who are culturally defined as weak… are

more likely to be depicted facing the camera while the more powerful... are represented looking elsewhere" (Trinh-Thi 2015, at 15:00–15:42). Yet, in the images presented in the film, the Cham subjects are often tiny figures lost in the landscape or looking away, suggesting not empowerment but a broken contact, a boundary between subject and filmmaker, past and present.

Trinh-Thi uses this critical distance to draw tragic parallel. The man in the film describes the famous Cham temples at Mỹ Sơn, a UNESCO world heritage site, as a "covert evidence of an Asian civilization that no longer exist," noting that you don't even see a Cham face there anymore (Trinh-Thi 2015, at 13:55–00:45). He then wonders if the living Cham people in Panduranga are also simply "evidence of that extinction" (at 08:55–09:16). The female narrator affirms his view by calling Mỹ Sơn a "beautiful dead museum," yet adds that "it's strange to imagine those ruins from here," for while the Cham temples where she stands with priests are "living temples," they remain sites where the monuments are recognized but the voices of their people are not (at 09:27–09:40). She then points to the vulgarization of culture happening in Ninh Thuận, where tourism is a new form of domination: "In the past, no one was allowed to go inside the temples, except for the priest... Now, Cham priests have to ask the local authority for permission to close the temples from tourists, so that their temple-opening rituals will not seem so absurd" (Trinh-Thi 2015, at 10:00–11:00).

By weaving together these threads of history, ethical doubt, and cultural critique, *Letters from Panduranga* performs a profound act of social intervention. It challenges the simplistic, heroic self-image of Vietnam as solely a victim of colonialism. The film compels the viewer to confront an uncomfortable internal history, thereby shattering a selective collective memory and working to construct a more difficult, honest, and double memory of the nation as both the colonized and the colonizer.

Voicing the Stateless: Personal Testimony as a Political Act

Also touching on the theme of marginal groups, Thanh-Mai's *Day by Day* (2014) does not focus on those within Vietnam but shifts attention outwards to Vietnamese immigrants living in Cambodia. Although Vietnamese migration to Cambodia can be traced back to the early 19th century, recent studies have shown that this community, particularly low-income fishing families, have long faced difficulties in terms of inter-ethnic relations with the local population (Ang, Weill, and Chan 2014). Their precarious status cannot be separated from the Cambodian–Vietnamese War (1978–1989), a conflict rarely acknowledged in Vietnam's mainstream media. In Vietnamese collective memory, it is often framed as a war of justice to liberate Cambodia from the Khmer Rouge (Doyle 2014; VUFO 2019). In Cambodia, however, collective memory takes a quite different form: Vietnamese troops are frequently blamed for the worst violence of the period (Kelliher 2022), and Vietnam's installation of the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party in power has reinforced longstanding anti-Vietnamese sentiment and fears of territorial encroachment (Sokvy and Zeiner-Morrish 2025). These hostilities, rooted in border disputes and historical mistrust, culminated in 2014 when violent attacks against Vietnamese communities flared once again. According to art curator Roger Nelson, this subject is so sensitive that "to discuss their circumstances... is taboo—and perhaps even risky in both Cambodia and Vietnam." There is a profound absence of their stories in both artistic and scholarly work (Nelson 2015).

Thanh-Mai's documentary *Day by Day* (2014) is a direct and courageous intervention into this silence. The work, part of a larger multimedia project, explores the situation of Vietnamese who have migrated to Cambodia, with filming done near the border in Vietnam and on the Tonle Sap lake in Cambodia. The title itself comes from the term the people repeatedly used to describe their lives, which are lived without any certainty for the future (Vietnam Contemporary Art Database n.d.). The film takes the form of an intimate conversation, and with no voice-over, the artist gives the people space to unveil their own personal memories of the past and their struggles in the present.

The core analytical thread of the film is the reification of identity and human rights in the form of legal papers. The people featured, whether recently arrived or settled for generations, share the same issue of not having any legal identity. As a result, they have little access to education, healthcare, or stable income, and are forced to compromise with bribery and corruption to survive (Vietnam Contemporary Art Database' n.d.). *Day by Day* captures this reality through the testimony of a former emigrant who, despite years of petitions to the local People's Committee, was unable to secure citizenship or birth certificates for his children or even official papers for himself. Although he possessed a full set of legal documents in Cambodia, written in Khmer, Vietnamese officials refused to recognize them, leading him to lament: "When my children get old enough to go to school, if they are not accepted by any school, they will end up selling lottery ticket" (Thanh-Mai 2014, at 16:00–18:00). Near the end of the film, a woman in Cambodia echoes this sentiment, commenting on her children's inability to attend school due to their lack of a birth certificate, adding with resignation: "We ourselves don't even have them, not to mention the kids" (Thanh-Mai 2014, at 47:32–47:52).

The interventionist nature of *Day by Day* is reinforced by the context of ongoing anti-Vietnamese sentiment and the artist's own experience of facing "varying degrees of surveillance and intimidation from local authorities while conducting her research" (Nelson 2015, 8). Yet, the film is not solely a critical documentary; it does not aim to place blame but rather focuses on the intimate stories of the villagers. Despite the memories of past tragedy and the uncertainty of the future, a sense of hope for a better life emerges as almost irrepressible. The film opens and ends with the sound of children practicing spelling, a simple act that symbolizes their dreams for a better life.

Thanh-Mai's *Day by Day* is thus a significant act of social intervention. It marks a profound void in the collective memories of two nations, making a forgotten and politically inconvenient community visible. By archiving these personal stories of struggle and hope, the artwork challenges the collective forgetting and forces the audience to reflect on the reasons for such exclusion.

STRATEGIES OF INTERVENTION AND AFFECTING SOCIAL CHANGE

This study began with the hypothesis that video art in Vietnam operates as a form of social intervention that complicates dominant collective memories. The analysis, guided by Viet-Thanh Nguyen's concept of a "doubled ethical memory" revealed two dominant strategies that enable the selected artworks to intervene within the constraints of Vietnam's tightly controlled cultural landscape.

Narrative-wise, the selected works intervene not through direct confrontation or outright rejection of the memories featured on mainstream media but by unveiling what has been

overlooked. Rather than launching explicit social critiques, the artists construct narrative spaces where marginalized voices and silenced experiences can emerge. This mode of intervention functions less as an act of accusation against state-sanctioned narratives and more as an invitation to reflect on what has been forgotten in relation to the Others—specifically women, queer Individuals, migrants, and indigenous communities.

Style-wise, the cohort employs two primary modes. The first is cinéma vérité, evident in *Day by Day* (Thanh-Mai) and *Love Man Love Woman* (Trinh-Thi). This style is characterized by observational, documentary-like footage that captures spontaneous events with little to no scripted narration or official sit-down interviews. Rather than shaping the narrative in advance, the filmmaker follows subjects over time, letting the story unfold naturally and later discovering the narrative in the editing room (Alkana 2001, 61).

The second is a non-narrative or essayistic approach that leverages fragmentation, ambiguity, and an "audiovisual and narrative disjunctive practice" to disrupt fixed interpretations (Rascaroli 2017, 23). This style often features an absence of dialogue, a lack of linear narrative, and no central "event" (Aumont 1992, 71). These stylistic approaches are central to how the artworks intervene in dominant memory. However, it is worth noting that the stylistic reading is drawn primarily from the works of a single artist, Trinh-Thi. This was not a curatorial decision based on artist identity, but an outcome of the selection criteria, which prioritized works engaging with overlooked or displaced memories—themes central to Trinh-Thi's practice. Consequently, while the strategies discussed here may resonate with broader tendencies in Vietnam's video art scene, further research is needed to evaluate their generalizability across a wider spectrum of practitioners.

The narrative and stylistic strategies employed by these artists create an affective force. Through subtle disruption, their work aims to "reveal reality" and "alter perception" (Duncombe 2016, 122). This enables them to engage with the notion of a "doubled ethical memory" by troubling the completeness of official narratives rather than rejecting them outright. To further highlight the art works' social intervention, however, this focus on affect should have been enclosed by the analysis of the works' tangible social effect which concerns what an artwork "does in the world, how it is received, understood and acted upon," as noted by Duncombe (2016, 128).

A full analysis of social effect requires a detailed map of a work's production and circulation, the acquisition of which marks a limitation of this study. Data is not systematically archived, making a comprehensive overview difficult. For instance, while it is known that Thanh-Mai's *Day by Day* was screened at independent venues (Hanoi Grapevine 2015; Saigoneer 2015), its full exhibition history is hard to trace. Similarly, Trinh-Thi's works circulate primarily through international biennales (Trinh-Thi n.d.) and are supported by non-state grants such as the Asia Pacific Breweries (APB) Foundation and Singapore Art Museum (Hanoi Grapevine 2014), the Han Nefkens Foundation (Han Nefkens Foundation 2021), the Cultural Development and Exchange Fund (Vietnamnet 2012), and the British Council's Famlab (British Council Vietnam 2019).

This reliance on non-state and international platforms provides the artists with autonomy necessary to question dominant narratives, especially within a media landscape as tightly controlled as Vietnam's. This context, however, raises a pressing question: if these video artworks are affective, can they still be considered socially effective when their circulation makes them

largely inaccessible to the national audiences it should have aimed to engage? This points to the central paradox of contemporary video art in Vietnam. While acknowledging the limitations of this study in fully mapping these funding and distribution networks—a gap that future research through artist interviews could address—the evidence suggests that the very conditions of enabling artistic freedom may also circumscribe its social reach. What allows these works to intervene artistically may, in turn, constrain their capacity to intervene socially.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we have demonstrated that contemporary video art in Vietnam functions as a crucial site for social intervention, challenging a homogenous and state-sanctioned collective memory. By focusing on the works of Trinh-Thi and Thanh-Mai, we have identified the key narrative and stylistic strategies—namely the unveiling of overlooked stories and the use of cinéma vérité and non-narrative forms—that allow their work to function as cognitive activism. These artistic practices give voice to the unseen and insert marginalized experiences into public discourse, thereby performing the ethical work of fostering a more complex, doubled memory of the nation.

The analysis further revealed the central paradox confronting this mode of artistic intervention. The conditions that enable the artworks' critical power and affective force—their autonomy from state funding and their circulation through independent and international platforms—simultaneously circumscribe their social effect by limiting their accessibility to a broad national audience. What allows the art to speak freely may, in turn, limit who is able to witness it.

This dynamic is not unique to Vietnam but resonates with broader debates about the efficacy of digital and media-based activism in the 21st century. The creation of alternative narratives on platforms outside of state control can foster affective publics among those already inclined to listen, but it also risks creating echo chambers that do not penetrate mainstream consciousness (Papacharissi 2015). The challenge for a globalized art world is to find ways to bridge this gap, moving from affective potential to tangible social effect.

While this study has offered a framework for understanding these interventions, its conclusions are shaped by two key limitations that point toward avenues for future research. First, the stylistic analysis is drawn primarily from the works of two artists, Trinh-Thi and Thanh-Mai. Consequently, while strategies discussed here may resonate with broad tendencies in Vietnam's video art scene, further research is needed to evaluate their generalizability across a wider spectrum of practitioners. Second, a full analysis of effect requires a detailed map of a work's production and circulation, the acquisition of which marks a limitation of this study. Future research should expand upon these findings by broadening the scope to include a more diverse range of Vietnamese video artists. Furthermore, as this study has noted, a significant limitation is the difficulty in tracing the full circulation and reception of these works. Qualitative research involving artist and audience interviews is essential to move beyond textual analysis and begin to map the real-world impact, i.e., the effects of these interventions. Ultimately, the works analyzed here stand as a testament to the enduring power of art to bear witness, to question, and to insist that a nation's memory must have space for all of its stories.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

LAN-CHI NGUYEN is a full-time lecturer in the Department of Media and Communication at Swinburne Vietnam, an Alliance Program with FPT Education. She graduated from RMIT University with a BA in Professional Communication and later pursued her master's degree in Media Arts Cultures at IMC University of Applied Sciences in Krems (Austria), Aalborg University (Denmark), and University of Lodz (Poland) under the Erasmus+ program. Her research interest lies in audience experience, specifically with social media platforms, pop culture, and new media art forms in Vietnam.

EMAIL: lanchinguyen@swin.edu.au

NGOC-CHAU PHAM is a full-time lecturer in the Department of Media and Communication at Swinburne Vietnam, an Alliance Program with FPT Education. He holds an MA in Communication Arts from Bangkok University, Thailand and an MA in TESOL from The University of Melbourne, Australia. His research interests include curriculum development, quality assurance, media studies, identities and representations on social media, and digital inclusion.

EMAIL: cnpham@swin.edu.au