

journal of visual culture



The Image and the Void

Trinh T Minh-ha

Abstract

This article addresses an expansive approach to the 'visual', including discussions of the forms of invisibility generated within the visible, the power of the unseen, or of blanks, holes and chairs kept empty.

Keywords

absence • activism • Fukushima • invisibility • presence • resistance
• Tibet • visibility

At a time when smartphone cameras have been making a transformative impact on citizen journalism and when, putting to use the power of the image, video witnessing succeeds in galvanizing the nation and the world into protest, it seems also necessary to recall how much more there is to the conventional claim of making visible the invisible. Such a claim not only thrives on the binary opposition between visibility and invisibility, overlooking the complex interrelationship of seeing and not seeing. It also abides by the optical imperative that conventionally determines our approach to events and induces us to think and act according to the measure of the visible.

In a consumerist context where the eye is a dominant organ, to create is to give form to the seen. Thus, acts of recording, informing, and revealing are often subordinated to sight – or to what one can see – while writing, filming, and video-making, for example, are reduced to producing what remains legible to the eye. Whether a work is explicitly visual or not, the claim to 'making visible' is ubiquitous. It continues apace with today's new technologies for seeing faster, all at once, and always more – even at night

and through opaque surfaces – and furthermore, in absentia, as with drone warfare. Such an optical imperative has, in the past, led many rationally enlightened Western researchers to view traditional societies regulated by the power of the spoken word as ‘ahistorical’, or having no history, because for these Westerners, history is typically built on and defined by *written* or tangible records. Such is the violence civilizations dominated by quantifiable materiality and the written word carried out in their civilizing mission. And perhaps, for this reason, memory and the archival have become an all-embracing topic among today’s researchers.

What one sees in an image is a manifestation of how one sees it. In research and exploration, as well as in political dissidence, the question is not merely to gain vision and visibility, nor is it to vainly oppose the ear to the eye, or the other senses to sight, for example. On the contrary, invisibility is built into each instance of visibility, and the very forms of invisibility generated within the visible are often what is at stake in a struggle. The two are inseparable, for each is the condition for the advent of the other. With this in mind, and with an expansive approach to both ‘activism’ and the ‘visual’, what follows are a few examples of the work of multiplicity in resistance – via the seen, the barely seen, and the unseen; in the between, the margins, and the borders of visible reality; and through the power of blanks, holes, silences, and empty spaces.

11 March: ‘What if ...’¹

On the day the earthquake was said to have moved Honshu some 2.4m east and shifted the earth on its axis by an estimate of 10 to 25 cm, I was on my way back to the States from Tokyo, having boarded what turned out to be one of the last flights out of Narita International Airport. Barely had I reached home when I intuitively did something unusual: I went online to check the news. Why I suddenly felt the need for information on world events right after an exhausting travel abroad still remains puzzling to me today.

The very first images I then saw were the bird’s-eye views of the tsunami unrelentingly swallowing up everything in its passage in Tohoku’s Iwate Prefecture and the Sendai area. Fear struck my heart and I *quaked* in silence as I watched the water unleashing its massively destructive force on such an unimaginable scale. Cars, houses, boats, buildings, seawalls, and fields – all signs of man’s material achievement turned into mud and *refuse* at high speed. The *shock* left me speechless, sleepless, frazzled, and strangely dysfunctional. The next few days were spent in a frenzy of email writing in attempts to reach out to friends in Japan. Amid the more reassuring replies that trickled in, stories of the missing and the disappeared emerged as joy and grief mingled in *floods* of tears among those directly affected, raising the alarm about the dire conditions of the Fukushima victims (‘we couldn’t stop crying. We had never seen anything like this before’).

The 11 March events have come to be known as the Triple Disaster, whose rippling effect spreads far beyond Japan and whose radiation impact continues today to raise alarm among the populations involved. The naming at first seems to say it all: the quake, the wave, the meltdown, then the cloud, the emanation, the contamination. But as survivors often insist, the truth is always beyond what can be said about it. Names are first and foremost guests of reality. Whether in daily actions or in situations of calamities, infinite are the manifestations of these basic elements of ancient cosmology – earth, water, fire, and air. No definite boundary could be set up between the internal and the external, the individuated body and the world. The line between what is natural and what is man-made continues to be vigorously contested among environmental and political analysts. (Certain Japanese experts raised questions as to the nature or the cause of the colossal earthquake, also called ‘the 3/11 seismic terror’, which they had gone to great length to prove suspiciously ‘unusual’.) Fear has given way to bitter frustration as the disaster draws out with no happy ending.



The perspective of the northeastern coast of Honshu being pulverized and the sight, for hundreds of miles, of towns and villages being engulfed, devastated, and washed away may remain engraved in our memories, but what turns out to be most perturbing are the *barely visible* details on the side, *in the margins* of media coverage and the largely invisible (or not-yet-not-fully-becoming-visible) scope and consequences of nuclear threat. In the footage of the tsunami sweeping across properties and fields shot from the height of a helicopter, what, for example, sets this viewer on edge every time she returns to it are not only the core content of the images as described above, but also the details caught on camera at the edge of the image, in the border zone of the screen – the *boundary events*, both in time and in space.

While, like a beast, the humongous wave ravages everything in its course, one catches a glimpse, at the margins of the frame, of the nearby traffic still rolling unknowingly *as if* nothing is happening; or of the cars freezing in the middle of a street, then in a futile gesture, attempting to escape by speeding abruptly right or left, making crazy choices and driving toward their own demolition. One also sights the tiny silhouette of a man standing still on a bridge, looking at the violent flow of destruction right by and beneath him *as if* he were too stoned to react, *as if* he were on safe ground, *as if* the bridge were not going to give way ... all the while, another man driving a truck suddenly stops, gets out of the car, then walks with growing agitation from one side of the bridge to the other, apparently helpless as to what to do, where to go ...

These were some of the banal and yet most poignant instances of endangered humanity caught unaware and at a loss for adequate action. The magnetism of the images results from their being at once surreal and hyperreal – always already reproduced (as in the apocalyptic scenes that

populate Hollywood films). And yet, their affective impact lies *elsewhere*, *within* the unsettling power of the small, utterly *real*, *ordinary* details at the fringes. What happened then and there *when* the camera turned away or *where* it cut off? Like the man on the bridge, the viewer is made to assume the miserable position of the one who sees but cannot say, who scans wide but remains helpless as to the details at the outer edge, and who knows through the godly camera-on-helicopter eye but is voiceless, despite the desperate urge to yell out to these passersby about to disappear (from the screen): IT'S COMING AT YOU!



It's coming at you ... The warning has taken on a planetary scope with the turn of events related to the Triple Disaster. Too early, too late: measures and counter-measures always seem more reactive than proactive. The deadly effects of the radiation released from the meltdowns will be slow to reveal themselves. The overnight uprooting of entire communities has brought about a host of figures well known to our times: the displaced, the unroofed, the homeless, the evacuee, the migrant, the exile, the refugee in his or her own land, and last but not least, the *refused*, the jobless, the discriminated against. Reappearing more specifically in relation to those caught in the radiation zone and the prejudices they have been facing is the figure of the *burakumin* – ‘impure, excluded’ – treated *as if* from the outside: *the stranger within here*.



Several years on, as the clamor from the media subsided, the fate of those who lost their houses and livelihoods and their continuing struggle seem to have fallen out of public attention. With the eroding sense of safety prevailing among and beyond the direct victims, the critical notions of home, nature, and security, on the one hand, and those of displacement, travel, and uncertainty, on the other, take on another new lease of life, growing inwardly global without losing their local colors.

The myth of remarkable resilience in the face of calamity has been widely attributed to a country and a people whose experience with repeated natural disasters is historically known to the world. But the public faith in authorities has taken a toll and, aside from living with the multiple faces of acute stress disorder, many citizens are disillusioned with their inability either to get help from the government or to rely on it for accurate vital information. Survivors' accounts are full of memory blanks and of regrets for what they could have done (*'what if ... what if ...'*), and as one of them puts it, 'For others, the disaster may be becoming a thing of the past, but for us, it is still our reality today.'

Linked to the growing distrust for the administration and the 1 percent is the existential question of how to cope with a reality in which the lack of grounding has become the dominant mode of surviving. Well covered is the witnessing of houses and properties becoming waste; of protective walls

hopelessly giving in (Japan's sophisticated, extensive system of seawalls did not help; even a huge concrete sea barrier built some 10 feet thick at the base got 'knocked out like a loose tooth'); of water as source of life (it is from the ocean that the coastal villagers obtain their living) turning deadly; and of land as nurture rendered useless with sea salt, pollution, and radiation. Perhaps less well known, however, is how, with the continued effects of more than one kind of 'aftershock', the tremor has become surreptitiously all-pervading – outside in and inside out. As a witness of 11 March blogged: 'It's gotten to the point where I don't know whether it's me shaking or an earthquake.'

The grieving goes on. 'In the end we were too late', a woman survivor sadly reckoned. And yet, rising from the ruins in the aftermath of 11 March: the figure of the female protester in the making. Largely ignored by their own media, local women continue boldly to protest the deafening silence of the Japanese government. The nuclear threat, which extends well beyond Fukushima and Japan, has led to some of the largest demonstrations in the country since the US–Japan security treaty protests of the 1960s and 70s. Although not as large as the anti-base movements in Okinawa, the newly founded (since April 2011) movement to Occupy Fukushima, more accurately known as the 'Women of Fukushima Against Nukes' movement, has become a source for new alliances and civic empowerment with a broader social base throughout Japan. And, although not exclusive, women's substantial presence in these demonstrations speaks to the potentials of new forms of resistance, which not only manifest through focused, determined, and organized political activism, but also through passionate appeal to life-nurturing praxis, thereby enabling the merging of several existing movements – anti-nuclear/peace, anti-base, and Greenpeace, among others – while bridging civic voices across generations through the use of new social media.

The Underground ID²

On the 52nd anniversary of the 1959 Tibetan uprising, human rights activist and analyst Ngawang Sangdrol came to Berkeley, California, to give a talk. A former monastic and China's longest female political prisoner, she was known for the musical protest work she carried on with her fellow inmates – or what has come to be known as the 13 Singing Nuns – in Drapchi Prison. Jailed at age 13 and later sentenced to a total of 23 years of imprisonment, she was also one of the youngest political prisoners. Among the stories she told her Berkeley audience was a memorable little anecdote; this rather banal and yet strikingly moving anecdote has been heard before from other prisoners, but her cohesive account could relevantly be shared again in this context.³

Sangdrol recounted how sometime long ago Tibetan prisoners were shown newspapers by Chinese guards that included articles exposing the West in its keen support for the Dalai Lama and Tibet. The guards would share the

articles as evidences of what they saw as the West's 'brainwashing' efforts, intending to subvert the high-minded agenda of China's Communist Party. But as time passed, the guards realized that, rather than being convinced of the West's degeneracy and China's superiority, their Tibetan prisoners were utterly elated upon reading these articles. So the guards performed their own brand of censorship and started delivering newspapers with missing stories – any article mentioning Tibet favorably was transformed into a *hole* cut into the page. However disconcerting this might have been, it did not deter the Tibetan prisoners from rejoicing upon seeing those *glaring holes*, for they knew each one represented something good someone was saying about Tibet. A *lack* thus loses its negative connotation to become an affirmation, and an *absence* is received as a much-anticipated presence. Fullness and emptiness yield similar results in their representative functions; whether granted for viewing or censored from view, the articles had the same effect on the prisoners.

The same applied when, after Beijing dubbed the Dalai Lama a separatist, Chinese authorities ordered people to remove photos of the popular red-robe clad figure. The campaign to erase the exiled leader's image from public life – governmental offices, monasteries, institutions, hotels, restaurants, and cultural events – as well as from private life has had its intense and shallow moments. (The governmental ban was imposed in 1996 not merely on the public display of His Holiness's image, but more pervasively on its possession.) There have been several instances when what appeared to be a policy shift and a relaxation on the ban was immediately followed by a period of intensified reinforcement of the ban: while in certain towns Chinese authorities used the carrot-and-stick policy to forcefully lure Tibetans into having their leader's pictures on display, in other parts of the region Tibetans were given lengthy jail terms for possessing such pictures, with the authorities placing further restrictions in the private realm – for example, stopping all vehicles owned by Tibetans in the Yulshul area for roadside checks, and burning in Tongkhor some 18 sacks of photos of the Dalai Lama.



'Why are they so afraid of a picture?' asked a monk from Rongwu, referring to the Communist Party that supposedly doesn't believe in anything, and not in the least the power of a mere image. The campaign to obliterate by force the picture of a people's spiritual leader has given rise to numerous absurd censorship stories, such as the one concerning the censor at a local TV station in Beijing who lost his job after a picture of the Dalai Lama inadvertently aired in a documentary on Tibet. The censor's defense, which would have inevitably induced laughter if it weren't so tragic, was that he didn't know what the Dalai Lama looked like. He had never seen his picture because it never appeared in the Chinese press (as reported by Schechter, 1998: 21). The paranoia ceaselessly caused in the minds of the authorities by His Holiness's image bears witness to the creative way in which the Tibetan struggle, constantly in silent action, imperceptibly remakes itself with every new repressive situation that arises.

The affective need to keep a picture of one's beloved leader may speak of a nostalgia for a 'long-lost love', but in the context of a political struggle against oppression, such a picture may quickly become what could be called an *underground ID card*: a sign of solidarity, if not of defiance in the face of censorship – a way of identifying oneself as Tibetan and of affirming one's belonging to an endangered, disappearing civilization. Needless to say, harsh punishments, insults, and threats did not diminish people's quiet devotions; on the contrary, these illicit visceral responses end up intensifying their unflinching loyalty to their 'lifelong lamp'. The more fanatical the campaign and the interdiction, the more fervent the trust and pining for the long-lost love. Says a post in response to the campaign to erase the Dalai Lama's face: 'They can physically make Tibet devoid of HHDL, but HHDL resides in the heart of 99 percent of Tibetans in Tibet.'

The Empty Chair⁴

Love is the minimal form of communism
... for love to last, one has to reinvent oneself (Alain Badiou)

Whenever Tibetan monasteries were ordered to remove the image of the 14th Dalai Lama from sight, rather than simply removing it and filling the gap left on walls and altars, for example, people kept its space empty, leaving a lacuna in between the photos of other Tibetan spiritual leaders or ancestors. Or else they replaced the image with a blank sheet of paper, thereby marking the Dalai Lama's absence with a visible interval in appearances. To the Chinese authorities' great annoyance, no matter how severe the censorship, the lack of a figurative image of His Holiness has not really succeeded in preventing people from continuing to love him. Constantly evoked via the indirect, that 'face far, far away', that long-lost love, continues to be the lifelong lamp. Whether materially or immaterially manifested, the blank space remains alive with indefinite possibilities. It could be indicative of a profound determination not to forget, a means to leave evidence of repression, a tacit gesture to honor an absent presence, and hence, could serve as a constant reminder of both the censoring and the censored at the site of worship.

Every day, well over 1,000 Tibetans undertake a tour of the Potala Palace, also known among the people as the 'Peak', *Tse Potala* – or what in Lhasa continues to be the symbol of Tibet and of the Dalai Lama's home. Every day, hundreds of *khadas* (traditional silk scarves) heap up as offerings before the empty throne in the Dalai Lama's meeting room, once known as the Chamber of Golden Radiance. The sight of pilgrims repeatedly falling to their knees and lying flat on their stomachs in full body prostrations before the vacant seat never failed to bring up questions among tourists. But, when Chinese tour guides were asked who these pilgrims were praying to with no one there, the guides uniformly hastened to reply: 'They are praying to the previous Dalai Lamas.' Again, in the vacated living quarters

where the current Dalai Lama resided before he went into exile, pilgrims were said to whisper among themselves at their sight and to fall into fervent prayers, rubbing their beads and scarves over any surface they could reach for benediction. Spared from destruction for having served as a backdrop for the Cultural Revolution, turned into a state museum, and dispossessed of its historical documents, scriptures, precious art objects, and treasures, the magnificent Potala Palace has itself become an empty shell for 'unlimited commercial opportunities', as described in today's China advertisements.



In the history of stage symbolism, the empty chair may be a common way of handling grief: as a sign of absence or loss – of a murdered victim, a missing beloved, an invisible guest, or someone who never shows up. It may also be a symbol of absurdity, longing and loneliness. Sit and wait, wait in silence. (Among many examples are those of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Eugene Ionesco's *The Chairs*, or even Vincent van Gogh's personifying chair paintings that have inspired a wide range of artists and designers.) But in today's times of trouble, this empty chair emerges as a site and a 'material evidence' of enforced absence. It has often taken on the political role of exposing, as well as defying *in absentia*, the abuses of power and its diverse mechanisms of subjection via censorship. In the context of China, it sits snugly within a chain of suppression and elimination devices aimed at 'harmonizing away' (wiping clean) all 'sensitive cases'. Worth noting is the recurrence on the world stage of such features as the lone chair and the unoccupied seat; the blank page, blank space, bland sign; the screen gone white, with no content; the empty frame or the frame with no art; and last but not least, the interval of silence – all potentially endowed with a powerfully haunting effect.

Memory recalls, among other well-known cases, how the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize was given to an empty chair and the award statement also read to this iconic chair, highlighting the absence of imprisoned Chinese literary scholar and dissident Liu Xiaobo. Honored with diploma and medal, Liu's vacant seat at the podium was said to resonate powerfully with the distinguished international audience attending the award ceremony, despite a campaign by the Chinese government urging representatives from diverse nations to boycott the event. Unable to attend and to designate a family member or a representative to receive the award in person, Liu did not apparently become 'the Forgotten Nobel' (*Le Nobel Oublié*), as French journal *Le Figaro* feared. The Peace Prize winner is not only evoked at every annual commemoration of the 4 June massacre (in Hong Kong and elsewhere, through the publication of his 'June 4th Elegies' anthology, and especially his 'June 4th in My Body' poem); both he and legal scholar-activist Xu Zhiyong have also been recently honored, still *in absentia*, with the 2014 National Endowment for Democracy Award. As expected, shortly after Liu's Nobel Prize ceremony, the term *empty chair* itself became a *sensitive* word banned in Chinese cyberspace. It featured as Word of the Week in China Digital Space's Grass Mud Horse Lexicon, a glossary created by Chinese netizens

of terms often encountered in online resistance discourse and widely used to mock, mimic, or subvert the official language around censorship and political correctness.

Empty chairs have repeatedly haunted China lately. Worth noting among several other prominent cases was the empty chair at the 2013 International Women of Courage Awards. This time, the vacant seat among occupied others stood for Tibetan writer and poet Tsering Woeser, who sat under house arrest in Beijing while the US State Department (via John Kerry and Michelle Obama) honored her in Washington, DC. A daughter of Communist Party members, whose father served as a senior officer in the People's Liberation Army, Woeser was not only considered to be the first Tibetan public intellectual in China, she was also widely known as one of China's most respected writers on Tibet. Already barred by Chinese authorities from leaving for Oslo to accept the Norwegian Authors' Union 2007 Freedom of Expression Prize given at their annual meeting in 2008, she was again denied the opportunity to receive the 2010 Courage in Journalism Award from the International Women's Media Foundation, as well as the 2011 Prince Claus Award. Much sought after for their outspoken, well-grounded voice against Beijing's repressive, discriminatory policies, her published works – including her volume of poetry, *Tibet's True Heart* (2008), or more recently the book *Immolations in Tibet: The Shame of the World* (2013) – are banned in China, and her blogs shut down by decree. The list goes on for other well-known cases of empty chairs. Religious figures from every region of Tibet have been forced into exile, and for Tibetans, the number of empty chairs is particularly difficult to keep track of. As posted by journalist John N in the *Tibetan Political Review* (2013):

The chairs kept empty by Beijing have their own diversity ... They include bloggers, poets, lecturers, artists, bookstore owners, devoted wives, and beloved lamas. One thread that ties them together is their willingness to speak the truth despite the steep price Beijing extracts from them.

Acknowledgements

This article is based in part on a keynote lecture delivered at the Visual Activism Symposium, organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the International Association for Visual Culture in March 2014.

Notes

1. This section is a shortened version of the preface written for the Japanese edition of Trinh T Minh-ha (2014[2011]).
2. Parts of this section and the following section (The Empty Chair) were excerpted from Trinh T Minh-ha (2016).
3. Special thanks to Tenzin Mingyur Paldron, who passed on this anecdote and shared much information related to the Tibetan struggle.
4. Parts of this section were excerpted from Trinh T Minh-ha (2016).

References

- John N (2013) Another Empty Chair. *The Tibetan Political Review*, 26 March. Available at: <http://www.tibetanpoliticalreview.com/articles/anotheremptychair> (accessed 17 September 2015).
- Schechter D (1998) Introduction. In: Phillips P, Project Censored (eds) *Censored 1998: The News That Didn't Make the News*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 21–25.
- Trinh T Minh-ha (2014[2011]) *Elsewhere, Within Here: Immigration, Refugees, and the Boundary Event*. New York: Routledge.
- Trinh T Minh-ha (2016) *Lovecidal: Walking with the Disappeared*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Trinh T Minh-ha is Professor of Gender and Women's Studies and of Rhetoric at the University of California Berkeley, as well as a renowned filmmaker, writer, and music composer. Her works include numerous books (most recently, *Lovecidal: Walking with the Disappeared*, Fordham University Press, 2016; *D-Passage. The Digital Way*, Duke University Press, 2013; and *Elsewhere Within Here: Immigration, Refugees, and the Boundary Event*, Routledge, 2011); eight feature-length films (including *Forgetting Vietnam*, 2015; *Night Passage*, 2004; *The Fourth Dimension*, 2001); and large-scale installations (more recently, *Old Land New Waters*, 2008; and *L'Autre marche*, 2006–2009).

Address: University of California, Berkeley, 630 Barrows Hall, Berkeley, CA 94720-1070, USA. [email: trinh@berkeley.edu]