

# The collaborative indigenous cinema of *Video nas Aldeias* and the Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Website: <http://www.videonasaldeias.org.br>



Still from *Tava, A Casa de Pedra* (Ariel Ortega to the right)

The project *Video nas Aldeias* (VNA) was created in Brazil in 1986 with the objective of supporting the struggle of indigenous peoples to strengthen their cultures and identities through the use of audiovisual resources. Since 1997, VNA has become a school of indigenous filmmakers, although the spirit of collaboration has been maintained, especially during the review of the footage, translation and editing phases. This paper analyses some case studies in order to reflect on the relations between collaborative cinema and heritage in the context of indigenous peoples in Brazil and advocates that this is not a technique or methodology but rather a political, ethical and aesthetic attitude that has to be available for the potential of the becoming and the radically new.

**Keywords:** indigenous cinema, collaborative cinema, intangible cultural heritage, *Video nas Aldeias*.

*Video nas Aldeias* (VNA) is a collaborative cinema project<sup>1</sup> based in Brazil, operating for more than thirty years and whose mission is "(...) to support the struggles of indigenous peoples to strengthen their identities and their territorial and cultural heritage,

through audiovisual resources and a shared production with the indigenous peoples".<sup>2</sup> VNA's history can be divided into two stages. During the first decade, non-indigenous filmmakers responded to the demands of indigenous communities, but it was the

<sup>1</sup> From 1986 up to 2000, the VNA was part of the NGO *Centro de Trabalho Indigenista* (CTI). As of that date, the VNA became an independent NGO.

<sup>2</sup> VNA website: <http://www.videonasaldeias.org.br/2009/vna.php?p=1>, accessed September 10, 2018.

former who filmed and signed the films. Indigenous people were mainly interested in raw footage and the documentaries produced were aimed at colonial society as a form of "talk back" (Ginsburg, 1993) and as a means of raising the ever-scarce international funding. Since 1997 VNA has been transformed into a school of indigenous filmmakers, which organises filmmaking and editing workshops in the villages.<sup>3</sup> The works are filmed and performed by the indigenous people, although the spirit of collaboration remains, especially during the review of the footage, translation and editing. Cultural traits and aspects of the Amerindian *ethos* are the main themes of these films.

In this sense, the paper examines over thirty years of VNA's work with indigenous peoples in Brazil, though the analysis of some case studies, with the objective of reflecting on the relationship between collaborative cinema and heritage, while advocating that it is not a technique or methodology, but rather a political, ethical and aesthetic attitude that has to be available to the potential of the future and the radically new. In methodological terms, the paper is based on ethnographic research conducted with VNA, which included participation in workshops with the Juruna, Ashaninka and Mbya-Guarani peoples, recorded interviews with Carelli, other NGO collaborators and indigenous filmmakers, including Ariel Ortega, as well as testimonies of indigenists and natives collected by others and duly indicated in the bibliography and in the film analysis.

### The first decade

*A Festa da Moça* (1987) is the first VNA film and its production process is almost an origin myth that revealed the political-cultural power of collaborative cinema. In 1986 Vincent Carelli, one of the main founders of the project and its current coordinator, visited some Indigenous friends who were working with a Nambikwara community in Mato Grosso. Shortly before Carelli had acquired a VHS camera and began filming the rituals and political encounters of the Nambikwara. However, the video was quickly appropriated by the natives, namely by their leader, *capitão* Pedro. As the filmmaker explains: "*He [capitão Pedro] ended up taking us to the places, talking, speaking. He did not even care if I was understanding. (...) But since they were going to watch, they actually did it for themselves. He knew I did not understand. Except for the gestures*".<sup>4</sup> When Carelli showed the Nambikwara the filming of the female initiation ritual, known in Portuguese as *feita da moça*, they were displeased with its far too Western imagery and decided to redo the celebration with fewer clothes (but still wearing shorts and brassieres) and recovering the paintings and adornments of their people. In the end, at a time of catharsis when they were bathing, they decided to resume the masculine ritual of piercing the nose and lip that they had not performed for 20 years. According to the voice-over in the film, "Every indian demanded that the image of his piercing should be recorded." The reflexive impact of the "mirror image" (Cauby Novaes, 1997 [1990]) led to the establishment of VNA and Carelli's life dedication to this project.

<sup>3</sup> Occasionally, editing workshops take place at the VNA headquarters in Olinda (PE).

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Vincent Carelli, September 15, 2015.



Figure 1 - Still from *A Festa da Moça* (The Celebration of the Girl)

After the first film, Carelli and other VNA collaborators were invited to record rituals and various cultural and/or political events, with different indigenous peoples. The films resulting from these experiences include several testimonies from indigenous leaders about the importance of recording and archiving their culture on video in the view of the past and present genocide and epistemicide as a result of the shock with colonial society. In *Morayngava* (1997) one individual of the Assurini people regrets that the ancestors did not register the ritual of initiation of the *pajé*, threatened at that moment. Similarly, Waiwai of the Wajãpi people stated in *Espírito da TV* (1990): "When I die, my grandchildren will see me on television. I did not have pictures of my grandparents. Now the young people can watch me on TV". The most striking example is found in *Pemp* (1988), which tells the story of the human and cultural devastation of the Gavião /Parkatêjê people since the "contact" with the attraction post of the Indian Protection Service (SPI – *Serviço de Proteção aos Índios*) in the 1950s. Kokrenum, the leader responsible for the process of cultural and political reorganization and also a distinguished singer, speaks in Portuguese for the camera:

*"We almost ended. That's why I want to do it very well ... for everyone to learn because today there is no old man to tell the right things to the people. Only I explain a little because I saw a part. (...) This film here, let's see if the community can record it... in their head to remember it all the time. If someone is interested in singing like me, he sees it on television and says, 'I know how I'm going to do it, I watch it on television, I do it.'"*

Thus, despite the fact that the category of intangible cultural heritage has gained a greater prominence in recent decades due to its institutionalization within organizations such as the National Historical and Artistic Heritage Institute (IPHAN- *Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional*) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), it is important to note that it had already acquired importance for the indigenous peoples due to their shock with colonial society and the ethnicity processes associated with the demarcation of indigenous lands, among others.

### The film making workshops

Beginning in the late 1990s, VNA started holding workshops in indigenous villages. The first occurred in the Xingu Indigenous Land (TIX – *Terra Indígena do Xingu*) and brought together thirty people from different indigenous populations with different levels of experience. Following, the project organized a regional workshop in the Acre's state, which gathered in an Ashaninka village trainees from this community and indigenous Huni Kuin. Finally, VNA concluded that the best model consisted of workshops held with only one community of indigenous people in a single village due to linguistic issues and because the students already knew the space and the people, in this way facilitating initial exploration with the camera.

Typically, the VNA training team consists of two people, sometimes one more experienced than the other. It is becoming more common that one of the trainers is also indigenous, such as the filmmakers Divino Tserewahú and Kamikia Kisedjê. Trainers are always lodged in the village (at someone's house, in an empty house, at the school, etc.) and attempt to enter into the community relations network by eating together with a family, playing football or participating in other activities. Inclusion is not necessarily easy and differs from one community to another. In this sense, it is possible to argue that the VNA's elements have to be transformed, through processes of Amerindian conviviality (Overing & Passes, 2000), into akin (Viveiros de Castro, 2002). That is to say, by ways of being transformed from a distant Other into a closer Other, thus preserving the productivity of otherness.

While not having a direct influence on VNA's work, Joseph Jacotot's teaching experience is relevant to the ongoing analysis. According to Jacques Rancière (1991), Jacotot's work was based on an equality based on "differentiated ignorance". When Jacotot had to teach French in the Flemish part of Belgium without knowing the Flemish language, he used a bilingual book to learn Flemish at the same time that his students were beginning to use French. In the case of VNA, the trainers, despite their degree in social sciences, do not usually do an exhaustive

ethnographic survey of the people with whom they work. Thus, non-indigenous trainers come to the village with relevant technical and artistic training, but also with a high-level of ignorance regarding the world of the students. On the other hand, the latter still know little or nothing about cinema, but they have a far superior knowledge than the trainers about their own culture and way of life (even if more empirical than reflective). Consequently, the learning process and the production of the film (from the projections and conversations regarding the recording process, through the discussions in the translation phase, during which student and teacher struggle in search of "controlled equivocations" [Viveiros de Castro, 2004], up to the edition phase) is constituted by this interlaced learning process in which students become trainers that after become students and trainers become students who are again trainers. Moreover, when the trainees try to explain their culture through words and images, they develop a reflective attitude about their world with pertinent political consequences, as proposed by Paulo Freire (1987 [1970]).

Usually, the workshops last for a period of three weeks: during the first week a more technical learning process takes place in which beginner mistakes are made; in the second week, they start shooting with more confidence and get their best shots; in the last days - already exhausted - they conclude some narratives and tie up loose ends. Classes are run on a daily basis and are essentially practical, encouraging experimentation. In the morning or during the day students record on their own and in the afternoon or in the evening, they watch the material recorded along with the trainers and sometimes with the whole village. In these moments, the trainers make some corrections (for example: trembling camera, tilted horizon, backlight that does not allow one to see the face, etc.). However, beyond this technical level, trainers urge the students to go further, to search, to ask more, etc. For example, during the shooting of a multi-day ritual, trainers may propose them to discover where that cultural trait comes from, what goes on behind the scenes, etc. This is basically an



encouragement for enabling new relationships within the community and providing subjectivity to the film work.

Despite the emphasis on experimentation, there is a set of "rules" that trainers propose at this early stage. One of them is the prohibition of using the zoom. On one hand, there are technical reasons for this option: zooming makes it harder to stabilise the image when the camera is hand-operated and since the audio is usually captured by a microphone attached to the camera apparatus, it is important to stand next to the person so that the sound quality is reasonable. But above all, the non-use of zoom forces filmmakers to get closer to their characters and thus to be clear and honest about their ethical position and relationship

with the person. As one of the former trainers of VNA, Mari Corrêa (2004: 10) argues, *"(...) from the ethical point of view, it is not valid to steal anyone's image. Go and create a relationship with the person ...so that this person allows you to film. I'm not going to stay here on the left side of the river bank and secretly record the guy on the other side."* In a parallel but more synthetic way, Carelli once mentioned that *"it's not filming sideways. It's filming head-on."* That is, it's not just about being close to the person and establishing a relationship with him. It is, above all, to establish a "head-on", eye to eye, open relationship. Open to confrontation and engagement, as well as available to getting involved with the person, the situation, the community, the network of social and historical relations of the village, the becoming.



Figure 3 – Still from *Já Me Transformei em Imagem* (I've already become an image)

Another important "rule" is the proposal for the students to accompany a person in their daily life. When he receives a camera, the beginner can be ecstatic with the number of situations and people that can be filmed in the village and it may take some time for him to understand that making movies is about having the courage to choose, to select, to go in one direction among thousands of options. In a strictly

practical sense, this approach forces and helps the student to create a focus. The character is the vector of the footage and, consequently, of the narrative of the film. In addition, this focus allows establishing and, above all, developing a relationship. Thus, in the first days, the person can show some shyness in front of the camera or, on the contrary, an excess of performance. But over the next few days, a

relationship starts to be established (or rebuild) between the filmmaker, the character and the camera, which, as in "real life", allows for greater intimacy and affection. It is not only the person who opens up more, it is also the camera that begins to film better, with more affection, attention, almost as if it was touching and cherishing the character (Marks, 2000).

In addition, since a workshop consists of six to eight students chosen by the community and each of them follows at least one person, the film is constructed from these various narratives and relationships that often intersect and give rise to an inner picture of the community and the village. As Ashaninka Isaac Pinhanta told me about his experience, he was accompanying a character who, due to his life and responsibilities, often encountered the characters of other students in the workshop, resulting in a joint film called *Dançando com Cachorro* (2001). On the other hand, the film *Shomõtsi* (2001) carried out during the same workshop, accompanied another character who, as a result of his characteristics (one of the elders, who was extremely funny, etc.) and history, resulted in an independent film, also illustrating the village. In short, the picture of the community is not obtained through a general plan of the village, interviews with people and one or another frame of children playing and women cooking, but through an immersion in the paths that constitute the social relations network of the village.

In addition to projecting students' footages, the VNA team also strives to organise projections of films that the project has produced with other indigenous peoples. These situations have several goals. Firstly, they aim to present the work of VNA and display examples of film products obtained in other workshops. In addition, the viewing of other indigenous peoples' images encourages comparisons and reflections on their own community. Some reactions are perhaps extreme. For example, the Ashaninka, who are not accustomed to see naked indigenous people since they traditionally wear a kind of *kusma*, at first abandoned the projections of the

Xingu peoples' documentaries. Finally, these other films awaken in the filmmakers a curiosity to try similar devices. For example, in a workshop with the Juruna da Volta do Xingu, the use of archive images in the films *Já me transformei em imagem* (2008) and *Sangradouro* (2009) led some of the students to look for equivalent material about the history of their village.

At the end of the day, the footage produced is projected for the rest of the students, trainers and often people in the village who therefore establish a relationship not only with the cameramen, but also with their own image. As Ashaninka Isaac Pinhanta explains:

*"(...) what struck me most was when we began to watch the recordings we made. Looking at the image and discovering things and situations of our people that are there in your day to day and you do not see. The community too. The whole village came to see their image, the things that they themselves had said. They discussed what they saw, what they had done. That's when I understood the importance of this work. (...) I realized then that the video could serve to discuss our culture, to organize our school, to think about our way of life"* (Pinhanta apud Carvalho et al., 2011: 72-73).

In any case, it is important to emphasize that the number of daily and weekly work hours and the exercise of discussion, questioning and continuous reflection, produces a break in everyday life (and even the sense of "well-being" of the Amerindian *ethos*) which nevertheless appears to be a catalyst for creative forces. It is therefore possible to argue that the workshops constitute an event (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988 [1980]), that is, a plateau of intensity in which the immanent is not the evident consequence of a set of previous elements, but the exploitation of the potential of the future and the radically new. For this reason, a workshop can never be fully prepared or previously thought out. It can only be experienced. As Carelli explains:

*"Filming in a village creates a special moment during the workshop, breaks with the day-to-day life, establishes new communication channels within the community and values forgotten themes. There is no more exciting moment for us, participants in this work, than to see a group of young people interviewing an old man - happy to be questioned - who amazes them with unknown stories, even demanding of the old man: 'why didn't ever you tell us this story?'; and the old man responding: 'because you never asked'" (Carelli apud Carvalho et al., 2011: 49).*

In this sense, in light of the contributions of Rodney Harrison (Harrison, 2013, 2015), heritage is not something that pre-exists filming, but rather the product of what is identified, selected and objectified during the dialogic and relational process of research and film production. In the ethnographic context in question, eventually in all, the heritage assembly is constituted by humans, but also by nonhumans, as gods and spirits-owners (Fausto, 2008), and still by the camera, sound equipment, etc. Thus, as Harrison advocates:

*"Heritage is not the inscription of meaning onto blank objects, places and practices that are produced in this process, but instead is produced as a result of the material and social possibilities, or 'affordances', of collectives of human and non-human agents, material and non-material entities, in the world. It is not primarily an intellectual endeavour, something that exists only in the human mind, but is one that emerges from the dialogue, or practices of people and things" (Harrison, 2013: 217).*

### **Institutional Heritage Films**

In 2000, shortly before the adoption of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, Brazil initiated the National Intangible Heritage Program (PNPI – *Programa Nacional do Patrimônio Imaterial*), which establishes the Register of Cultural Property of Intangible Nature and the National Inventory of Cultural References (INRC – *Inventário Nacional de Referências Culturais*) as a methodology for mapping those assets. IPHAN's

superintendents were invited to start implementing the program in their respective States.

VNA participated in several institutional heritage processes (Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013) of cultural goods in collaboration with IPHAN and UNESCO, such as: Waterfall of Iauaretê, *Yaokwa* ritual (IPHAN and UNESCO) and *Tava, Lugar de Referência do Povo Guarani* (*Tava, Place of Reference of the Guarani People*). The VNA also produced the film *Kene Yuxi, As voltas do Kene* (2010), directed by the Huni Kuin filmmaker Zezinho Yube, which is part of the not yet completed heritage process of the *Kene*, traditional paintings of this people.

The films made for IPHAN reveal different levels of participation of the filmmakers and indigenous communities, although they are all associated with a collaborative work developed over several years and even decades. The registration of *Tava, Lugar de Referência do Povo Guarani* is an example of a more collaborative and complementary work. Due to the confluence of several factors that cannot be explained here, in 2004 the IPHAN Superintendence of Rio Grande do Sul initiated the application of INRC among the Mbya-Guarani who sold handicrafts in the ruins of the Jesuit-Guarani Missions in São Miguel das Missões. These structures had previously been classified as heritage in the State of Rio Grande do Sul (1922), the nation state (1938) and Humanity by UNESCO (1983). The anthropologists of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul responsible for the INRC warned that the Guarani are a very reserved people, yet in previous years they were conducting a gradual and careful opening movement to the Brazilian civil society and, in this sense, the project was conducted at an appropriated time. On the other hand, some Mbya complained that the "heritage" category was one more word invented by the *jurua* (non-indigenous) as part of the governmentality process that separates vectors of life that are inseparable from indigenous peoples.

During the INRC process, some Guarani leaders expressed interest in receiving training in filmmaking.

In order to respond to the demands of the Mbya and encourage participation in the heritage process, IPHAN preceded some safeguarding actions, namely financing of a VNA-oriented film making workshop. This experience originated more than 100 hours of footage and the documentary *Duas Aldeias, Uma Caminhada* (2008), by the filmmakers Jorge Ramos Morinico, Germano Beñites and Ariel Kuaray Ortega, edited by the non-indigenous and trainer Ernesto de Carvalho, who reveals that the ruins of the Jesuit-Guarani missions are a dissonant heritage (Ashworth & Turnbridge, 1996; Smith, 2006) for the Mbya. That is, while the Brazilian society views the ruins as a symbol of a peaceful and productive encounter between European and indigenous civilizations, for the Guarani the ruins are a past and present stage of colonial violence (see Lacerda, 2018). Shortly thereafter, the filmmaker Ariel Ortega became *cacique* of the Tekoa Koenju, the indigenous village closest to the ruins.

In 2007, after the conclusion of the INRC, IPHAN-RS in partnership with the Regional Centre for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Latin America (CRESPIAL, *Centro Regional para la Salvaguardia del Patrimonio Cultural y Inmaterial de America Latina*) organized the “*International Encounter for the Valorisation of the Guarani Cultural World*” with the purpose, among others, of the Guarani selecting a cultural asset to be registered as an Intangible Cultural Heritage. In the end, a Guarani representative from Paraguay and 12 representatives from communities in six Brazilian states (Rio Grande

do Sul, Santa Catarina, Paraná, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Espírito Santo) requested the nomination of the ruins of São Miguel das Missões as Guarani heritage. The INRC team continued the research, now focused on that asset, but found even more difficulties in obtaining information from the Guarani than in the previous stages, namely because they consider it to be dangerous to share “spiritual” knowledge with the *jurua*.

Trying to get around these adversities, IPHAN-RS again contracted VNA in order to produce the documentation film, which in this case would also be a constitutive and essential part of the research. The final work *Tava, A Casa de Pedra* (2012) is signed by non-indigenous Vincent Carelli and Ernesto de Carvalho and by Guarani Ariel Ortega and Patrícia Ferreira (a teacher at the indigenous school and Ariel’s partner). Ariel’s participation was fundamental because besides being a charismatic Mbya who knows how to listen and speak with the *xeramoĩ* (knowledgeable grandfather), he is also the grandson of one of the most important chiefs in Argentina, known by all the Guarani. Undoubtedly, this was representative to obtain the various statements on the different ontology of the ruins for the Guarani and their cosmological importance which were largely unknown to non-indigenous and even to a significant part of the natives (see Lacerda, 2018). Following this long process which lasted a decade, in December 2014, IPHAN registered the ruins of São Miguel in the Book of Places of intangible cultural heritage as “*Tava, Lugar de Referência para o Povo Guarani*”.





Figure 4 - Still from *Tava, A Casa de Pedra* (Ariel Ortega to the right)

#### Final considerations: participation and mediators

The official texts on intangible cultural heritage are embedded in concepts and terms concerning collaboration, such as "community" and "mediator", which have been widely criticised (Noyes, 2006; Blake, 2009; Leal, 2015). For example, the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage stipulates that national states shall "ensure the widest possible participation of communities and groups and, where appropriate, individuals who create, maintain and transmit such heritage [intangible cultural], and to involve them actively in its management" (UNESCO 2013). INRC also values the involvement of communities, but it is, however, little problematized. Cecília Londres (2000: 19) admits that this process can lead to different or even contradictory readings and interpretations since a community is not homogeneous, but advocates that "the recognition of this diversity does not mean that one may not evaluate, differentiate and hierarchize the knowledge produced. There will always be references that will be more evident and/or significant, either by their material value or by the symbolic value involved." The same document, with an unidentified author (IPHAN, 2000: 35), argues that "(...) since INRC is an instrument of cultural policy, it will be essential, for various reasons, to involve the local population in these

surveys", but suggests at the same time that this involvement should be carried out preferentially by "people who have a thorough knowledge of the local culture". In addition, it strongly recommends that these people should be included in the team of experts and technicians in order to "be the future IPHAN interlocutors in the maintenance and feedback of these information collections" (IPHAN, 2000: 35). However, the same author eventually recognizes that:

*"The main criteria for the choice of assets to be identified, so to speak, balance a quantum of representativeness for the community, with technical criteria built on previous knowledge of the reality or region inventoried"* (IPHAN, 2000: 35)

That is, despite the rhetoric of community involvement, knowledge continues to be managed by a narrow group of people (a kind of "local experts") and is later filtered by "scientific experts", perpetuating the logic of governmentality of the institutional heritage (Smith, 2006). In summary, although there is an effort to involve the community and to recognize that it is heterogeneous, problems are considered to be contrived and easy to solve. In addition, the documentation ignores other difficulties, such as the definition of community and the role of

technicians that are mentioned through the seemingly neutral term of "mediators."

This paper only presents some of the innumerable experiences carried out by VNA with indigenous peoples in the past thirty years, but it raises certain questions about the role of mediation and collaboration. First, the community must feel and be effectively involved in the process of producing and researching its own heritage. The role of mediation is to instigate dialogue, recognise ignorance, listen, learn, and be willing to change in the face of new issues that emanate from the process. That is, it is not the indigenous that collaborate with VNA, rather it is VNA that collaborates with the indigenous and is available to support them in what they consider to be important. In any case, most people are probably not interested in participating. As the INRC team emphasized in relation to the Guarani, they were persecuted for hundreds of years by the coloniser society and prefer to keep a distance from the "rabid" and "envious" *jurua*. The relative change of attitude of the Brazilian state after the approval of the 1988 Constitution gave rise to other problems, such as the excessive presence of teams from governmental projects, NGOs and artists (Albert, 2000), which are temporary situations, do not benefit in the long-term the most important issues of indigenous peoples and keep them away from spiritual work, from working in the fields, hunting and fishing. In this sense, it is important to keep in mind that not collaborating is also a form of participation (Milne, 2012).

On the other hand, VNA's experience of more than thirty years seems to indicate that it is essential that there should be leaders who recognize the importance of the process and lead it (such as capitão Pedro with the Nambikwara, Waiwai with the Wajãpi, Kokrenum with the Parkatêjê or Ariel Ortega with the Mbya), appropriating and indigenizing the instruments of modernity. These filmmakers are not necessarily the keenest camera operators or those who best know their culture, but they are those who recognize film as a political device to "talk back" to colonial society and a device for internal cultural reflection. In this sense, collaborative projects can denote and reveal political and social tensions within the community. For example, the Mbya Ariel Ortega was criticized by Jose Cirilo Morinico, general-*cacique* of Rio Grande do Sul, for not having talked to him and other Guarani before going to speak to the *xeramoĩ* of distant villages and to have revealed the divergent conceptions on the *tava* to *jurua* (see also Turner, 2002).

In short, collaboration is not a technique, it is not even a methodology. It is, above all, an aesthetic-ethic that relies on human (and non-human) relationships, including affections and dislikes, and openness to new situations and proposals. In this sense, collaborative cinema is an imminently political attitude that can be dangerously used as an instrument of governmentality and a catalyst for friction or, as the indigenous peoples have demonstrated in collaboration with the VNA, as an arena for reflection on the past, present and future.

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