



*Valerie Soe received her BA from UCLA and her MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) in the 1980s. She is the product of Asian American studies and activism at UCLA, a student of Kate Horsfield and Lyn Blumenthal at SAIC, and is currently a teacher of high school and college students, as well as an accomplished and prolific videomaker. In single-channel videos and video installations, Soe explores the experience of Asian American women in American culture. For instance, her first video, "ALL ORIENTALS LOOK THE SAME" (1986), takes this common misperception and turns it on its head by showing, in quick flashes, the distinct and diverse faces of countless people of Asian heritage. In *Picturing Oriental Girls* (1992) Soe catalogues a visual compendium of orientalist and exoticizing representations of Asian women snatched from American film and television. And *Mixed Blood* (1992) presents a personal view of interracial relationships in the Asian American community.*

*Yet even as she was producing these and other works exploring contemporary identity, Soe acknowledges that she was at the same time a cultural heir to Reagan- and other Republican-sponsored initiatives that systematically threatened and dismantled the very progressive arts and cultural institutions (affirmative action, the NEA, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, abortion rights) that had allowed her this lively, youthful, feminist career—a schizophrenic position to be sure. Added to this, Soe explains that she is heir to '80s "multiculturalism," another you-win-some-you-lose-some type of proposition. While a newfound cultural commitment to ethnic diversity facilitated certain aspects of Soe's career, as she was consistently supported to make work about her Chinese American identity, it has also limited her in that her fascination with formalism has been forced to take a backseat to her more easily fundable "identity" work. However, the subsequent backlash against multiculturalism, felt particularly hard in*

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California, has created another schizophrenic impasse where Soe's "identity" is at once celebrated and demonized by different factions within the same broader culture.

As is true for many of the women in this study, Soe lives a hand-to-mouth artist's existence by cobbling together what she calls "contract work." She teaches video production at institutions like California State Summer School for the Arts and San Francisco State University, she receives grants and commissions to make new work, she writes film criticism for independent film magazines, and she follows in her parents' footsteps and lives frugally. Perhaps as a function of her age (Soe is in her mid-thirties), while she admits to a certain amount of anxiety about paying the bills, she interprets her choice to live in this manner in much the same spirit as did the women "on the edge" who began this study: as a snub to the values that drive bourgeois capitalism. While most of the women discussed previously seem to have risen to a relatively stable middle-class income and lifestyle (mostly as a consequence of taking teaching positions, and in a few instances due to winning grants or through film/video sales/rentals), Soe seems set for now in her economically marginal, if artistically productive, existence. She makes her work "by any means necessary," adapting her ideas and goals to the technological systems her budget will afford.

This is by no means to say that her life or career has been easy, although she readily acknowledges that the cogs were greased by the earlier feminists and others who created the art video community in which Soe currently works. For she also speaks of a profound sadness and even apathy that underline her sense of her life and career. She feels a deep nostalgia for the purported community, social progress, and political consciousness of the '60s, which was so quickly lost to the individualism, greed, and indifference that defines her experience of the '80s and '90s. Contradiction infuses Soe's situation. She makes her work as a way to ensure her agency even as the very mechanisms that made it easier for an Asian American woman to be an artist are systematically dismantled. Her work self-consciously continues the legacy of her teachers and role models even as the broader culture depicts a vision of culture devoid of such commitments. Like many of the women who precede her in this study, Soe lives by a social/economic critique of corporate American society that privileges personal and societal growth over individual financial gain. She says that her life as an artist is organized around the "'60s values" she learned from her teachers. But the intellectual and political climate that supported this analysis has been replaced by a new economy, even as traces of the '60s and '70s remain. Michelle Sidler highlights the contradictions of economic possibility and impossibility that mark the careers of third-wave feminists like Soe: "Second wave feminism's identity

politics gave twentysomething women the opportunity to enter the workforce and empowered us to create our own agenda, but with the rise of class instability we face a new playing field complicated by facets such as unemployment, debt, and technology. In short, third wave feminism needs a new economy."<sup>1</sup>

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## Video

*Will you tell me about your history with video?*

When I was an undergraduate, almost fifteen years ago at UCLA, I was really involved with the Asian American community there, and I was also interested in journalism. But UCLA had neither a journalism department nor an Asian American studies department, so I couldn't major in either of those things. They do have a film school, but the film school was impacted. You couldn't get in unless you had a really good grade point average. Actually, that turned out to be just as well because I found out that they had video cameras in the art department. I figured, "I'll learn how to use the video cameras over there, and then I'll make movies, right?" So then I became an art student. Then I found out that the video cameras in the art department—this was around 1981—were those black-and-white things they use in banks for surveillance cameras. That kind of dashed my hopes for feature filmmaking. But it turned out really well because I found that I liked being in the art department more than I would have liked the film department because it was more experimental. You didn't have to stick to strict forms. So I started to make really short videos. I could bring my political beliefs into my work. I could make videos about the stuff I was doing with the Asian American community, about racism, and all that stuff. So it worked out well. I haven't gone back to trying to make feature films, and I'm really glad.

*So you started at UCLA, and you were making videos with little surveillance cameras. What were they like and what did you do after that?*

Mostly the work started out being autobiographical, and a couple of the pieces that I made there are still in circulation. "ALL ORIENTALS LOOK THE SAME" is one of the first videos I ever made. It was done with two slide projectors and a dissolve unit and a camera that was set up pointing at the wall, and that's why it looks more filmic than most videos. And then the autobiographical stuff was easy because when you're twenty-one years old, you don't have a lot of worldly experience outside your own little life. So that's what I started to talk about.

Also, I knew as a Chinese American that the images of Asian Americans that I saw on television and in mainstream films were nothing like the people I knew in my family and my community. They were really stereotyped. So it was a way for me to bring a little truth of representation into what was being shown. And I think that has stayed with me—trying to counteract some of the incredible ignorance and stupidity that’s in mainstream film and television, especially when it comes to people of color.

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#### A More Realistic View

*Can you talk about how you do that?*

I’m trying to present a more realistic view, not necessarily a “positive image.” I’m not interested in heroic figures. With them you’re just substituting one stereotype for another, right? I really like having people with personalities and interesting stories in my work, like my weird family and my weird background. Growing up in suburbia as this Chinese American kid is a contrast in itself to those one-dimensional things you see on TV.

*Can you talk more specifically about a work in which you did that?*

One of the first really autobiographical pieces that I did was *New Year*, which is in two parts. It was actually an installation in which I had two monitors running at the same time, which is something I still do sometimes for the hell of it. On one of the monitors was found footage, recontextualized images from mainstream film and television that contained stereotypes of Asians and Asian Americans. It was some really great stuff: from Charlie Chan, Mr. Moto, Kung Foo—what’s that guy?—Rambo, shooting down the Vietnamese. That was all edited together so you get this barrage of horrifying stereotypes that you usually see only in little snips. You see a weird image in a movie, and you forget about it. But when you put it all together, it’s more disconcerting, especially if you’re Asian American.

I wanted to do that because it reminded me of when I would go to a movie and I’d be really enjoying myself. Like you’re watching *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* or something. And all of a sudden this hideous caricature comes on, like Mickey Rooney playing this Japanese guy with these fake teeth, and it totally destroys any kind of pleasure in the film. And you feel really uncomfortable and attacked and personally reviled. Just this sensation of, “Oh, my God, I’m being treated in this foul and horrible way by people who don’t even know that they’re being offensive.”

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#### Feminist Film

*Tell me about your experiences after college. Where did you go and what did you do?*

After college I went to grad school at the Art Institute in Chicago. I got my master’s in photography and in video. I decided after that, that I didn’t ever want to live in the Midwest again. I had come straight from Los Angeles and had lived on the West Coast all my life. So to go to the Midwest, where it was cold and much more monocultural—well, it was very cold. So I went back to San Francisco, even though I didn’t have any kind of job prospects. My parents lived there. I actually stayed at my parents’ house for three months until I found a job. I just knew that I would much rather be unemployed in San Francisco than working in some other part of the country where I didn’t feel there was a culture that I could relate to. I’m not enough of a pioneer to go out there and forge ahead into unknown territory.

*Did you find then, or do you find now, influences from feminist film theory or production?*

Yeah. Anytime you deal with images from media, you need to think about representation and the male gaze. I took classes with Lyn Blumenthal and Kate Horsfield. They team-taught back then. They were good at talking about how videomaking came out of a social movement. It was part of the antiwar movement, the civil rights movement. It had that ’60s sensibility of trying to change the system through the use of media technology. It wasn’t just something you’d do for yourself. That teaching was really useful. It tied in with what I’d done at UCLA.

*I was a student at the same time. I think we were a sort of a second generation.*

I do think it’s a second-generation kind of thing. I definitely wasn’t part of the first wave. I also wasn’t just in video; I did work in the other visual arts. Postmodernism was very important at that time; the idea that there is no such thing as the original image was very resonant in my work. If there was a conflict with the previous generation, it was in the fact that there wasn’t much work specifically about racial issues. It was much more like white people talking about this stuff, and usually middle-class white people. Well, definitely middle-class. There weren’t that many people of color making work that I saw then.

*Do you consider yourself a feminist videomaker?*

Yeah. That means having political consciousness of how art, politics, social change, media, representation, and all that stuff go together. There's no way in which you can avoid dealing with feminism . . . unless you're Phyllis Schlafly. What it means is that the work is made about women's experiences by a woman. It means trying to affect or reflect the social milieu it comes from. To work for social change. To have an awareness of connections to other aspects of the world besides the art world. To have a holistic worldview, I guess, which is a '60s term. To know that what I do affects other people besides myself, and sometimes only in subtle ways.

*What provided the groundwork for you to become a feminist?*

Well, the women's movement, of course, the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, the '60s. My family letting me do what I was doing instead of sending me to pharmaceutical school. Just being lucky enough to grow up in a time where women could decide what they wanted to do. Also growing up in a time during which there was enough economic prosperity in this country and I didn't have to think so much about making a living. I could be a bit more cavalier. Do you want me to talk about Ronald Reagan now?

*Sure! I'm waiting for you to throw him in!*

I love feminism. I think it's really great! But when I hear older women who were involved with feminism in the '70s talk about things like consciousness-raising groups and the joy of learning to empower themselves for the first time, then I think that I'm very lucky because I don't have to think about not having that choice. But at the same time I think that my life has been ruled less by hope than by despair. It's a general despair about the shrinking possibilities for myself and the world. The environment is going to hell. The Republicans are taking all the money away from everybody. People are becoming more paranoid and selfish—or being told to be more paranoid and selfish.

A lot of that comes from coming of age during the Reagan administration. Growing up as a child in the '60s and '70s, I remember this as an incredibly optimistic period. People thought that they could be whatever they wanted—you know, a potter, a sculptor—nobody wanted to be a banker in the '70s. Then in the '80s, *everybody* wanted to be a banker. So all the gains and promises of social progress that came about in the '60s and '70s have been reversed. For me, it's been depressing to see how people have been forced to think more about survival rather than being allowed to expand their idea of what they want to do, to dream about something besides just making a living and having children, or making car payments. It's like we've gone back to the basic sustenance level.

## Money

I have anxiety, too. I'm living hand to mouth in a much more prosperous way than someone on the street is, but I'm still wondering where that next paycheck is coming from. I'm being distracted by basic survival issues. In my paranoid moments I think that's what multinationals and the Republicans want. They want you to be so preoccupied by thinking about how you're going to make a living that you can't think about things like social justice, freedom, art, equality, or anything like that, because you're too busy trying to put food on the table. It's an insidious strategy that we all know about because we're all conspiracy theorists, right?

*What kind of work did you do after you finished grad school?*

I had a regular job for a couple years. I worked at a postproduction house. I worked there and saved my money, and then I quit right after the earthquake. I started to do whatever I had to do in order to make money. I had a couple of part-time teaching jobs, teaching kids art at a private school and teaching senior citizens to use video, so my students covered a span of years. And then I was doing apartment building management and writing art reviews for different magazines. Gradually, I started to get more teaching jobs at the university level. Right now, I do contract work. Next semester, I have no idea what I'm going to do. It's been a matter of patching together a living. But, as I said, it's much better to be where I am than to be someplace where I'd be cut off from cultural stimulation.

*So why do you patch together a living instead of doing what most Americans do, which is run out and find a living wage? I ask because in this documentary often the idea of women's video and film falls away and the idea of being independent women doing their work rises. It's rare that we hear of that.*

Why do I do it? It's really stressful, but you have the freedom to do whatever you want. If you need to take a month off to work on a project, you don't have to explain it to anybody. You don't get paid for it, but you're making your work, and that eventually pays off in some way or another. You have the satisfaction of doing something besides a nine-to-five job that's meaningless to you. Why else? I do it because I can. Because I've been privileged enough to get jobs that allow me to work part-time and make enough money to pay the rent. Because I like to sleep late. I don't know—attention deficit disorder? Because there's no such thing as real jobs anymore. Why spend your life working for a company that you don't like, if they're going to fire

you? Also, because I don't want to support the corporate economy, because I think it's disgusting. Mainly, because I can.

*How do you fund your work?*

When I was in school, and throughout the rest of my film career, access to equipment has always been questionable. I don't have a "real" teaching job where I might have access to an editing studio, where I can use the same edit system over and over again, or the same camera. So I try to make my work as concept driven as I can. Not relying so much on technology and not killing myself if I can't get it. If I can't afford to use Betacam, then I just use Hi-8 or whatever—VHS for all I care.

The economic crisis in this country has been bad for funding work. Right-wing paranoia—backlash—is a big obstacle. I was really, really anxious about a year ago, in the mid-'90s, because things were so bad out there for making work. In the early '90s it seemed as though there were so many opportunities for funding one's work and for exhibition. People were seeing stuff; there was a dialogue going on. Now that seems to have been systematically shut down. We've had the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] problems, the ITVS [Independent Television Service], CPB [Corporation for Public Broadcasting]—all these things being threatened. People are getting more and more paranoid. California's Proposition 13 was an example of that.<sup>2</sup> People are panicking about something—or being incited to panic by the powers that be. Too much unity among us working-class stiffs is not a good thing for the ruling class.

My mom and dad are frugal. They clip coupons and stuff. I really learned growing up that a penny saved is a penny earned. I drove with my dad to L.A. to install my last show. Six hours in the car with your dad, right? So, he's telling me, "You've got to go to the stores and look for the specials on beef," or whatever. And "Look for two-for-one coupons!" I think that's really been imbued in me, the idea that you need to make the most of what you have. I try to be as realistic as I can about what kind of expectations I can have with my technology.



#### Identity Politics

I've made close to a dozen pieces, and most of them are in distribution. The ones that are most popular—and I'm not sure if distributors pick them up because they think they're the better pieces or because they're the ones that will sell the most—are the ones that deal with identity issues, such as *Mixed Blood* and *Picturing Oriental Girls*. The ones about broader topics don't

get picked up as much. I don't know if that's because when people think about Asian American makers, they think that they have to do stuff about identity politics. I want to expand what identity politics can encompass.

People who oppose multiculturalism call it reverse discrimination. That's untrue. Ninety-seven percent of upper-management positions are held by straight white men. That's a lot! It's the same thing in colleges with regard to management and professorships: huge percentages of those in power are white men. The fact that some people are becoming so paranoid when there's tiny incursions or attempts to rectify these imbalances is inexplicable to me. It's like, "What are you guys talking about? I'm not making out that much from this!" Other people I know are not. At the same time, being an Asian American woman has been useful because people are aware that they need to diversify. That can be seen as a really simplistic solution, but I know that when I talk to Asian American students or other nonwhite students and they see my work, they're so amazed. They say things like, "I've never seen anything like this before that I can relate to so personally." To me, that makes all the difference in the world.

I had an experience with one of my tapes, *Black Sheep*, about my uncle who had a nervous breakdown. It's basically just talking heads, me talking about my bizarre family and their various strangenesses. Anyway, this tape aired on a local PBS station at something like 11:30 on a Sunday night. The next day, my Aunt Vivian called my mom. She said, "I saw Valerie on television last night. She was talking about Joe!" She was really excited. She said, "I was just flipping the channel and I saw a Chinese face, and it was so different from what I've seen before, and then I realized it was my niece." But the main thing she was excited about was that the Asian face on TV didn't have an accent, was not doing kung fu, and was not wearing a kimono. So it's not just about me blabbing about my personal life.

Another response I received about that same screening was from a friend of mine, a white male, who said, "Why are you always making these projects about yourself? Why are you always talking about yourself?" He doesn't realize that seeing someone on television who looks like you, if you're not him, if you're not a white male, is so revolutionary, so amazing, that you will stop flipping the channels and watch it. That's one of the reasons that I enjoy making this kind of work. There are a lot of people out there who don't have the ability or the opportunity to tell their own stories. If I can make my story clear enough or make it relate to them in some way, then they'll feel a little bit better about themselves; they'll understand that they exist. They're vindicated by being on TV.

*What are you working on now?*

There's a project that I'm supposed to be working on, called the *House of Ong*, for which I actually got pretty good support. It's a continuation of the piece about my crazy uncle, except that it's now about my entire crazy family. They are these Chinese people who live in Phoenix, Arizona, and they really like it there. And Phoenix is not the best place in the world to live. It's really hot, it's really flat, it's ugly suburban sprawl, really hideous. But for some reason, my grandfather moved out there at the turn of the century and planted his family, and they've thrived.

What has happened is a cross-cultural hybrid. My uncles all speak Spanish, and Chinese, and English, and Spanish was the first language a lot of them learned. My aunts heat up tamales in the rice cooker and my grandmother used to make really excellent flour tortillas. They listen to country music and wear those little bolo ties. Southwestern Chinese people. . . . So I want to talk about that a little bit, this culture that exists completely outside of the black/white dichotomy, which seems to be the only way that some people can think about race relations in this country. Or the white/other dichotomy that fills up the rest of the world. This is an Asian/Latino or Asian/Native American kind of culture.

*What kind of critical response has your work received?*

Pretty good, I think, because it kind of caught the wave when a lot of people were interested in multiculturalism, and I think they still are. Younger people seem to like it a lot because it talks about stuff they want to talk about like identity issues. It's as though I had made a coming-out tape if I were gay. Establishing a reputation on that level is allowing me to move off to other stuff. I want to do Stan Brakhage kind of stuff, like drawing on film stock or something. Just to see what kind of response it'll get from people who are used to seeing me talking about issues with a big *I*. Actually, I adore formalism.

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#### **Influences and Advice**

*What was it like studying with Lyn Blumenthal and Kate Horsfield? Did you have any other role models?*

They led by example. They weren't overtly dogmatic. Well, yes, they were. They were running the Data Bank, they were teaching feminist history, and they were really strong, together people. They were dedicated to their craft, their community, to changing the world, to being an alternative to the mainstream. I think that just having role models like that was exciting.

*What were the politics they presented?*

I can't remember. Just all of the above. They had short hair and groovy clothes. I think that my mom was a strong role model, too. She's a career woman. My father does all the cooking, and my mother goes out and makes money. Actually, my dad works, too. But having two other strong role models was nice. It kind of fit in my head. I guess I'm from a matriarchy.

I love Marlon Riggs. He was a brilliant technician, and he was also a brilliant theorist. And he could make engaging work from personal experience that other people could relate to. And he also broke down boundaries. He was not just a black man. He was a diva, a filmmaker, a political activist, a writer—all of these different things. I think his work is an incredible legacy, and his loss was one of the worst things to happen to this field in a long time. It's devastating to see someone so bright and prolific, taken. I think that all the rest of them are men, I'm afraid.

*Why would you tell a young girl to be an artist?*

The act of creation is satisfying and rewarding, and coupled with that is the feeling that you're contributing to society at large, that you're somehow acting to advance the human race. You're not just a victim of the horrible things in our society. You feel as though you're doing something useful and having fun, too.

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VALERIE SOE

*Video Work*

- 1986 "ALL ORIENTALS LOOK THE SAME," ¾" video, 1:30 min.  
1987 *New Year, Parts I and II*, two-channel video installation  
1990 *Black Sheep*, VHS, 6 min.  
1990 *Diversity*, three-channel video installation  
1991 *Destiny*, VHS, 6 min.  
1992 *Picturing Oriental Girls: A (re) Educational Videotape*, VHS,  
12 min.  
1992 *Heart of the City*, site-specific video installation  
1992 *Mixed Blood*, Betacam, 20 min.  
1992 *Twenty Questions* (with Lawrence Andrews), two-channel  
video installation  
1994 *Walking the Mountain*, SVHS, 2:30 min.  
1995 *Binge* (with Amy Moom), video installation  
1997 *Beyond Asiaphilia*, digital Betacam, 14 min.  
1998 *La Vida Povera De San Pancho* (with Erika Olsen-Hannes),  
video installation

*Distribution and Contact Information*

NAATA Distribution, 346 Ninth St., San Francisco, CA 94103;  
www.naatanet.org; (415) 552-9550

Video Data Bank, 112 South Michigan Avenue, #312, Chicago, IL 60603;  
(312) 345-3550

Women Make Movies, 462 Broadway, #500, New York, NY 10013;  
(212) 925-0606

Or from the artist's Web site: [www.sirius.com/~sstark/mkr/vs/vs-bio1.html](http://www.sirius.com/~sstark/mkr/vs/vs-bio1.html)