

AHL Foundation

Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA) Interview

- Interviewee: Valery Jung Estabrook
- Interviewer: So-Rim Lee
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- Recorded and transcribed by Suzy Taekyung Kim (AKAA Research Fellow 2018-2019)
- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
- Open for research use

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So-Rim Lee (SRL): Such a pleasure and honor to sit down and talk with you! Ever since I have gotten to know your work I became a big fan of yours. I will start with this question, what three words would you use to describe yourself as an artist?

Valery Jung Estabrook (VJE): The way I describe myself is interdisciplinary, interactive, and unacceptable (laughter) probably social.

SRL: Would you briefly introduce yourself? For instance, where are you from?

VJE: Yes! My name is Valery Jung Estabrook and I am biracial, Korean and American. Born in the United States and grew up in the American South in a rural area. I have been making visual art for as long as I can remember.

SRL: What was it like growing up in a farming area in Southwest Virginia? What was it like to grow up as a Korean American?

VJE: It was an interesting childhood. I grew up not only in a non-Asian community but also our family lived on a farm. I didn't have any neighbors. I didn't grow up in a suburb where I could just walk down the street and talk to people. My older brother and I spent a lot of time on the farm. Growing up in a rural area, we found ways to amuse ourselves. My brother is also an artist and we talk about this sometimes. Maybe our upbringing made us become artists and creative in so many ways. The constraints of not having a lot resulted in us making up our own stories. Socially, as a Korean American person in a rural area, I felt disconnected from the community in which I grew up. I didn't have a Korean community when I was younger. In addition to not really feeling accepted by the larger community in which I grew up, I felt distanced and discounted too much from the Korean community because I didn't know what they meant. I never knew any Korean people other than my own family. That was a very abstract thing that I didn't really have experience with, knowing what that meant and being part of that.

SRL: I can see and am touched by how art comes organically from nature. Whenever I encounter your work, it touches me deeply and on a more human level. It makes me stop and watch it, engage it for a while. What was the first time you remember making art and calling yourself an artist?

VJE: As long as I remember, I was always creating visual things. Even when I was a small child, I made a lot of drawings. It's common for a lot of kids but one thing is I am lucky to have grown up in a family who was extremely supportive of my talents. My brother was the same way. As soon as I picked up the colored pencils to draw, my parents were getting me better colored pencils and sketchbooks. I started getting those as gifts for birthdays and Christmas. Sometimes I would receive painting sets and easels. I always liked working with my hands and building things too. I inherited these

traits from my father. He was an engineer and was not a visual artist in a traditional sense, but he created things. He designed the buildings and built them completely by himself. He designed the systems I saw him building when I was growing up. I found that endlessly fascinating. I didn't have a lot of talent for making things, but I had talent for taking things apart, which I think is the first step before building things: deconstructing things. One thing I did a lot of is that I would take apart my dad's watches or clocks and see if I could put them back together. And sometimes I could, and sometimes I couldn't. But yes, I always liked knowing how things were built and how to make something. Not from a drawing or an art rendering perspective, but in my studio I'm building objects. Sometimes I think of myself more of a builder than an artist.

SRL: It was very fascinating that out of all the objects, you wanted to deconstruct clocks and watches. You use time-based media. How did you get from sketching and painting to becoming curious about machine systems and taking things apart, and then to engaging with the time-based media? You use video in your work but you also create an environment. In "Hometown Hero," you are basically creating a world. I am so fascinated with the trajectory. What got you in the time-based media?

VJE: When I was a young adult, during my teenage/college years, I really wanted to be a filmmaker. I was very interested in telling stories. I had theater and had too much stage fright to be a performer on stage in the theater, but I really like the idea of being able to tell human stories. To be able to truly express cathartic emotions through visual narratives, that is what I liked about film in particular. Film and cinema are a huge collaborative effort. When I started making independent and experimental films, technically they were videos. That's how I started working with videos. Just to see how the camera works, and more and more I worked with a camera, I fell in love with videos. There are some similarities in films and videos and they are both time-based and moving images. But they have different histories. And we have different relationships with them too. I still love cinema and would like to be able to create a film at one point in my life. To describe the difference, films are where you sit in the dark theater, and there is certain etiquette and reverence we give to cinema when we go see the film. Video is much more instantaneous. People want something immediate when they are watching video. And I think that comes in part from our relationship with television. When I was growing up, I watched a lot of television. Partially it was our generation and partially it was the culture. It is a very American part of me. Every Saturday morning, I sat and watched cartoons on TV.

SRL: It seems like it was a readily accessible portal to the world.

VJE: In some ways I feels like I have a closer relationship to TV screen than I do with cinema because it lives in my home and I use it in my artforms. When I think of why I like video, I think there is a very interesting relationship to explore; the way people respond to video differently than they do to film. Likely because of the early experience

with TV and smaller screens. My dad always called it an idiot box. Not necessarily something that is good for us, but as a visual artist and using it as a medium, it has a lot of potential to express human emotions. What I am trying to get at as an artist is what connects us and the threads that we all share, and I always try to begin with something specific for myself as a starting point. Even when I'm trying to find threads that are connecting a larger group of people outside of myself, I always use my personal experience because I can speak most confidently and specifically about what I have lived and known. We can never truly know another person's experience, so I don't want to speak for anybody else, but I try to speak for myself. The most fulfilling conversations I have had are when people tell me they connect to my work. I can feel I am connected to other artists too. Connecting with the rest of the world through objects or images is what makes us human.

SRL: I'm intrigued by your work. Video is art and is very approachable and an assuming medium in a way but when I watch your work, it has a lot of portability to it too. I can carry it in my hands and at the same time there is something very immersive about it too. What can you tell me about this specific piece, 522 (EFA Project space)?

VJE: Right now, it's installed with 25 tablets as a part of an ongoing series. Each tablet is numbered individually, and each video starts with daily meditations, where I will sit in front of the camera. My father had recently passed away and I wanted to make a work about that because it was a very affecting moment for me. My dad passed away from cancer and I spent the last three weeks with him documenting that entire experience on video. I don't know if I will ever make artwork from that specific footage. It is extremely challenging footage to watch. After he passed away, I wasn't sure if I could use it and I still had those events in my head. In particular, I was thinking about the relationship I had with my father when he was dying. It was a very unique experience. I didn't grow up with a huggy family and touchy feelings and we didn't have much physical contact. When he got really sick, there was a very different dynamic. He was always a parent who was looking after me. When he started dying that dynamic shifted where he was the person who was ailing and my brother, my mother, and I were his caregivers. That was an extremely physical relationship. I'm still to this date, surprised how quickly I assumed that role. It really tells you how much you love a person when you realize they need your help and you don't ask questions, you just act. Those difficult moments, helping him take a shower as a daughter, I wasn't sure if I could do until I had to do it. But no questions asked, you are going to help this person. You will just do it. I think about how vulnerable we are, on both our ends, as a father and as a daughter, to be in those roles of physical touch, healing, caring. When the person is dying and they are terminal, there is a palette of care. This type of care is not therapeutic in the sense of wanting to cure a person. It's an end of life comfort. I thought a lot about how actually the biggest conformity of the notion of comfort is coming from wordless acts. What can you say in a situation like that? I thought so much about touch and how after he died that was something I couldn't have. I had video and footage of him and records of him

talking, photographs from years passed. When someone dies, they are physically gone. One day you had a physically centered relationship and the next day never having that ever again. It's very disruptive. My thoughts were coming from touch and comfort. Also, from this grieving, physical care and touch became so important for me. Just to be able to hug. An integral part of the human experience is touch. When I was little, as I was getting older, whenever I was sick with a headache or stomach ache, my mom would always put her hands on my belly and tell me "My hands are medicine!" (내 손이 약손이다. [ne-sohn-e-yak-sohn-e-da]) I was thinking a lot about that phrase. It's just a calming phrase growing up and it became more important to me. Human touch is the medicine that we need. Take away all the pain killers and medicine that can't save you. What you really want in life is true love from another human being.

SRL: There is some kind of magic and there is some kind of transference. Just by looking at your work, there is something transferring back to me. I feel touched literally. Touched in the heart too. Every single video has a different mode of touching. There is a touch of humanness. There is meditative touch and there is transferring as well..

VJE: This piece in particular is very different from my other works. With my other works I had a clear idea in my head of what I wanted and executed. I hermit in my studio for a couple of months and finish what I had in my head. And present it. This was a free form mode of creation. I wasn't sure what footage I was going to have and which imagery I was going to use. Part of what I learned was that I created first having intention and my dad in my head acting towards the camera. And then I realized I watched the footage as if speaking to myself in many ways. There were multiple layers of transferring that you described earlier I didn't even anticipate when I first began this project.

SRL: I think it's the hardest thing to be a human being and to face life and mortality. Your work gets me to encounter that and transfers those feelings to me. I am also intrigued by your use of material in every aspect of your work.

In your early work, you used eggs, you also used pantyhose to build dresses, and last year, you used and played upon cosmetics—something portable you carry in your hand. Here, you are using kindles and objects that are ubiquitous and found in everyday life. You have turned these found objects into something else with a different function. Here, I envision myself watching kindles this way and becoming touched by something that I am not reading in a book. What motivates you to use different materials? when you use certain objects, are you giving them another life? Or do you think they function as building blocks for something you are building in an architectural way.

VJE: I love using and playing off objects that we have relationships with, so my choice of material changes from project to project. Material is very important and also speech. It's not about building a purely physical thing that you are going to see and photograph. It is going to be interactive too, such as the hand-held objects you described. Their

form is absolutely referencing cosmetic jars and boxes and packaging, but the material is soft silicon. It has the most skin-like texture and I wanted to feel alive. They also interact in a way that it can be hand held but they also don't play until they are held, so I really wanted them to have this one-on-one experience with the person. It is single channel art where it is almost like cinema. It is projected on a large wall and the only difference is that it is projected and shown in the gallery vs. a sit down theater. I like this mode of work as well. After I created the formal installation, I wanted to scale it back. Instead of having an experience where you have 10 people come into the room and you can have it all at the same time, it's more like a secret. As an artist, you will always have to ask yourself, how much can I ask the audience to do until it's too much and push that further and further. While I like showing everyone everything at once, sometimes I like having this little award at the end. If you actually pick up the object rather than walking by, you get a little surprise. And there is something magical in those surprising things in art. That's something I would like to explore more, almost like Easter Eggs.

SRL: In panty hose masks, that's something I didn't expect to wear. Something I cannot imagine wearing are the panty hose. It's a very playful way of using the material and the audience can really interact with it as well.

VJE: Actually, pantyhose is a material I have used multiple times in the past and partially because it is a "feminine" material: It's supposed to enhance the female form as well as skin, as if our leg skin isn't good enough. So it carries a lot of meaning. Part of me is always saying that it is great material. It already has a loaded background and I like twisting and bending that meaning in my work. From the masks, pantyhose are actually the first iteration of that, I was really thinking about cosmetics and make up in particular. The first iteration was thrown away but faces were painted on my face with make-up. I wanted to have something that I can take off and throw away and still exist. Somehow extracting but not in a schizophrenic way, like that person is part of me and cannot be part of me. I wanted to extract those characteristics from those experiences of my life. I wanted them to exist outside of myself. I didn't want my face to be painted and performed in front of the camera, but I wanted it to be actually and physically separated from myself. So that's why I was able to put it on one moment and take it off the next.

SRL: It is almost like deconstructing yourself. There is a sister in me and daughter in me and these are your identities.

VJE: Another interesting thing about identity is partially fulfilling each role, but not really as a Korean or American. I am never quite encompassing both of those worlds, never fully at the same time. When I talk about identity there is racial identity and gender identity and there are many expectations from other perspectives that have informed the narrative of what I call myself. The idea of the self is just the story we tell ourselves who

we are. And other people have told us who we are, whether we like it or push back. How much we can inform a child of who she is by telling her who she will grow to be. Every interaction we have with other human beings informs us of who we are and our own sense of self. It is not just the critique of that. It is something to pull apart into and self awareness is important.

SRL: It is part of realizing the multiple roles you are playing. It makes me realize I have a lot of roles too. You also have Impeachment project coins. How did you start on this project?

VJE: The Impeachment project is an aesthetically different mode of work. It started out with a different mode and style. When Trump became president in 2016, it shattered my world a little bit. I tried to make work that was political and expresses how I feel about this current administration in non-obvious ways. I wanted to go beyond that, so it was commemorative coins. They were first inspired by the commemorative coins that the white house released, commemorating the first peace talk meeting with Kim Jung Eun that actually didn't happen. But they went ahead and released the coins. They were releasing hypothetical things. For me, the most upsetting thing about the political atmosphere is the separation from reality and truth and fact. Instead of making works that reflect my own opinions, I made coins based on true events that really happened, and I only used bare facts, dates, places. If there are writings on the coins they are direct quotes taken from people featured on the coin. That is what really needs to be commemorated. There are so many things that are happening. We live in the age of cable news and the 24-hour news cycle and something happens and the next day another thing happens and is replaced by the next thing. I am making work that makes a record of what is happening but also reiterating what is truly going on. The facts as well as creating a record of it. Those are the things that are lost and it's a very unfortunate time period in the media. This coin series is a protest against the current administration's lack of respect for reality and truth and acknowledging that we are living in a time where some of the media financially benefit from it as well. I find it very upsetting.

SRL: This work is made for people to engage in it by also buying it online.

VJE: I got the funding from kick-starter. That was the first engagement.

SRL: It became an art object.

VJE: They are all signed, numbered, and dated so they are art objects.

SRL: They are art objects and it resonates in your heart. In that sense it destabilized the meaning of money. Coin as an object. Also, it's ubiquitous.



VJE: That is another thing that I wanted to explore. How do we value things when the white house is still producing these commemorative coins? Our current president is almost like a cartoon money bag man. For me to create coins while he is creating coins, I am playing with the value of that and I wanted to tap into that issue.

SRL: I think that was the wittiest project. It also emulates and takes the audience through that shopping as a fun thing to do. I am interested in you using your body as a way through your work. You are using your body to go around. For instance, in the work "Hometown Hero," you are going around and putting things in place. Also, in the current work you are present and earlier work as well. You will be with the video and be present within the video. As an audience member, I observe different modes of using your body that allow me to engage with your work and bring in more human connotations. What kinds of decisions do you make when using your body?

VJE: In part, it's born out of the need to express something more personal. In parts of the video, I am a performer and share those personal moments. I thought about working with other performers or actors but for me, it gives nuance to movement and expression in the performance. I am not sure how to communicate with the audience and other people. Even if they could become perfect puppets and literally do what I want them to do, when I am talking about something so personal and specific, I want the audience members to know it's personal and specific in subject and content. The best way to do that is to allow them to be aware that the artist is in the work and so they realize that I am talking about my specific personal story and background.

SRL: That is the actually the feeling and the sense I get from engaging your work. It's brutally honest and it's a part of you that you are showing that would not come through using another performer.. What made you create the immersive works where the audience can move around and engage the work?

VJE: The presentation of the work is extremely important, just as important as the work itself because that is how the audience member will experience it. Every solo show I have had I make sure the space is treated in some way that isn't just white walls. I had a solo show at Auxiliary Gallery with hand held videos as objects in a similar way to my work at EFA project space. I wanted to treat the space as a retail cosmetic space so it's not just a gallery. The walls are shades of pink and cool blues. I was able to find previously used cosmetic displays from Barneys and Saks Fifth Avenue and I took those apart and repurposed them.

SRL: They look like Korean cosmetics.

Valery: I love catching people off guard and what I really wanted was a couple of people to walk into the gallery and not realize it was a gallery inside. I love giving people an art experience when they are not expecting it. That is when you get the most honest



reaction. When you talk about the relationships we have with TV and objects. When it comes to art, there is a tendency to overintellectualize it. It's so valuable and people can't touch it. It's so revered and precious that you can't have a relationship with it. I want to break that down as much as possible.

SRL: That is what I get from your work! It is not didactic and doesn't try to teach me something. Rather than trying to give knowledge, it's more like you have a sense of what you feel and that is all. I feel like there is over intellectualization in a lot of artworlds these days. They are trying to teach me something and I kind of want to run away in a lot of ways.

VJE: If your goal as an artist is to connect with other people outwardly, and connect people to each other -- I mean, that is my goal ultimately as an artist -- How can you begin to do that if people don't feel comfortable? That's why I used hand held objects. I wanted people to pick them up and touch them.

SRL: When you pick one up and touch it, it starts playing. I don't think my work is especially experimental in any way. I also think that you are shifting the paradigm, you are changing ordinary mundane objects, what they do, and it's enjoyable and soothing in a way. I think community is very important to everything you do. You are also a curator. Can you tell me more about your curatorial practice?

VJE: I was born out of the awareness that people aren't seeing enough in a gallery and should be shown more. That is my first desire as a curator to say, these are the artists that are amazing. And they are kind of talking about the same thing. There is a conversation that is going on that artists don't realize or don't know each other's work. In some ways, the works that I am attracted to are the ones that are not looking down on anybody or condescending. I like a sense of humor and work that is not elite but at the same time intelligent. Most recently, I curated a two person show at the Spring/Break Art Fair in Los Angeles. That was a two person show with sculptors, Corey Escoto and Rose Nestler. They work with paper. Rose makes soft sculptures. She's inspired by feminine clothing and forms. They reconstitute power in a soft form with daintiness. She also, like myself, makes videos that pair with her objects. Corey made artworks based on texts and it was his first time showing this body of work. They are Kleenex boxes and many of them have words and texts on them that are recharged and subversive. They are working with reinterpreting objects that have relationships with the home, bridging design and sculpture and using objects with functional purposes. With Rose's work, she is creating things that are clothing forms, but they are also sculpture. Again, we all wear clothing and because of that we have a relationship with fabric and textiles, and this draws people in and makes them feel more comfortable. This is almost first-time seeing people just touch the work. Normally, one shouldn't touch the art, but the work broke these barriers and that is when people connect, when work is invitational and welcoming. The audience is meant to have a relationship with it.

SRL: What future plans do you have with your work?

VJE: This particular piece, I am planning to expand it. Instead of only featuring myself in the videos, I would like to work with other people who have experienced loss. Right now, I am connecting in care and hospice organizations with people with terminal illness. Working with people and inviting them to make their own videos. So the next iteration will be a different person on every screen and then to expand outwards as far as possible so there is actually a formal space [for grieving people to visit] with tablets on every side. [And each would be playing a video] so that there would be a hundred or more comforting gestures from people installed in a space where people can meditate. Giving over the space to people who have lost loved ones so that they can be comforted as well.

SRL: You are not only having a relationship with work but also people behind it. I didn't realize that I was using my eyes to be touched and that was the way of seeing. It is very haptic and tactile persuasive communication of the work.

VJE: Something I'm really interested in right now is ASMR. It was a huge inspiration for the aesthetic [of the multi-tablet video], and just the phenomenon of touch without being touched; it communicates the idea of care. I have always been fascinated by different brain functions. I love reading books written by scientists for non-scientists, and my favorite topic is neuroscience. Oliver Sacks is hugely influential in my visual process, he is partially why I wanted to become an artist. He wrote about brain disorders. People seeing images that aren't there, that are not real. The mechanics of the visual system is that we see things that we want to see, and the brain creates that. It's not just the lens, the light coming in, and hitting the surface and the back of the eyeball. It's not like that at all. There is information coming into your eyes and then the brain interprets it. As a visual artist, I work off that system. There is always the possibility that people see things that I am not seeing when they are looking at my work. This is something that I keep in the back of my head when I work. Visual art can be a very subjective experience in itself. This idea that you can have a physical and haptic response from what is purely visual. This is something that I want to explore, triggering other senses.

SRL: Going back to the first question, three words to describe you as an artist: experiential, relational, and humorous!