

# MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE

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## MoMI presents 24-film screening series **Personal Belongings: First-Person Documentary in the 1990s**

September 20–29, 2024



Pictured: Roszi Bognar in *Personal Belongings* (courtesy of Steven Bognar) | [Press Gallery](#)

Astoria, New York, August 22, 2024 — Alongside the explosion of American independent narrative cinema in the 1990s, a vital strand of personal documentary flourished. Museum of the Moving Image will present a 24-film screening series that gathers, for the first time, a diverse collection of feature, mid-length, and short works by filmmakers including Marlon Riggs, Camille Billops, Richard Leacock, Su Friedrich, Deborah Hoffman, Robert Frank, Ruth Ozeki, Alex Rivera, Sadie Benning, Jan Oxenberg, and many others who experimented with form and pushed the boundaries of turning their cameras on their own lives and those close to them. [Personal Belongings: First-Person Documentary in the 1990s](#), programmed by guest curators Asha Phelps and Jeff Reichert, runs September 20–29.

This spate of first-person films—made on both coasts, as well as in flyover country—looked at white, non-white, mixed-raced, straight and queer, homegrown and immigrant stories, and took advantage of new affordability and access to recording and editing equipment. These filmmakers produced work of deep intimacy and invigorating formal

playfulness, taking the leads of more recognizable documentarians like Ross McElwee and Alan Berliner, and finding homes in major festivals and on the newly created PBS series *POV*.

The series opens with *Personal Belongings*, the 1996 debut feature from Steven Bognar (Academy Award–winning co-director of *American Factory*), for which the series is named, presented in a new restoration making its world premiere at MoMI with Bognar in person on September 20 and 21. Additional filmmakers appearing in person include Rob Moss with *The Tourist* (Sep. 21), Doug Block with *Silverlake Life: The View from Here* (Sep. 21), Su Friedrich with *Sink or Swim* (Sep. 22), Janice Tanaka with *Who’s Going to Pay for These Donuts Anyway?* (Sep. 28), Alex Rivera with *Papapapá* (Sep. 28), Sandi DuBowski with *Tomboychik* (Sep. 29), Jeanne Jordan and Steven Ascher with *Troublesome Creek* (Sep. 29), Julia Loktev with *Moment of Impact* (Sep. 29), and others to be confirmed.

For full descriptions, schedule, and advance tickets, visit [movingimage.org](http://movingimage.org) or see below.

SCHEDULE FOR ‘PERSONAL BELONGINGS: FIRST-PERSON DOCUMENTARY IN THE 1990S,’ SEPTEMBER 20–29, 2024

All screenings take place in the Sumner M. Redstone Theater or the Armand and/or Celeste Bartos Screening Room at Museum of the Moving Image, 36-01 35 Ave, Astoria, NY 11106.

Friday, September 20, 7:00 p.m.

***Personal Belongings***

**And conversation with Steven Bognar and *POV* founder Marc Weiss**

Dir. Steven Bognar. 1996, 63 mins. U.S. DCP.

***Papapapá***

Dir. Alex Rivera. 1995, 26 mins. U.S. Digital projection.

The debut feature by Academy Award–winner Steven Bognar (*American Factory*) casts a wry, unflinching lens on his complicated father, Bela, a Hungarian émigré adjusting to life in the suburban midwestern United States. Bela participated in the 1956 Hungarian revolution, and the legacy of that struggle hangs heavy over him, his marriage, and his children. His announcement of a sudden return trip to his homeland sparks his son to pick up a camera and document the journey—and ensuing fallout. Paired with *Sleep Dealer* director Alex Rivera’s first short *Papapapá*, a movie- and pop culture–soaked essay in which he wrestles with the long shadow of Incan history as a first generation Peruvian American in NYC. The two films toured theaters together in 1996 under the banner “Papapalooza.”

Saturday, September 21, 1:15 p.m.

### ***The Present***

Dir. Robert Frank. 1996, 20 mins. U.S. Digital projection.

### ***Personal Belongings***

**With Steven Bognar in person**

Dir. Steven Bognar. 1996, 63 mins. U.S. DCP.

Who says you can't teach old dogs new tricks? In Robert Frank's *The Present*, the acclaimed photographer humorously searches through the lens of his new camcorder for stories, but he can't seem to escape troubled familial histories that haunt him. Paired with an encore presentation of Steven Bognar's *Personal Belongings*.

Saturday, September 21, 3:30 p.m.

### ***Silverlake Life: The View from Here***

**With Co-Producer Doug Block in person**

Dirs. Tom Joslin, Peter Friedman. 1993, 99 mins. U.S. DCP.

### ***If Every Girl Had a Diary***

Dir. Sadie Benning. 1990, 8 mins. U.S. DCP.

### ***Jollies***

Dir. Sadie Benning. 1990, 11 mins. U.S. DCP.

In his last year of life, filmmaker and professor Tom Joslin began a video diary that would capture the minutiae of living in the final stages of AIDS. He enlists former student Peter Friedman to finish the "tape" in the event he is unable to, and brings his partner Mark into the project as well. The result is a pivotal text of 1990s New Queer Cinema that won the Grand Jury Prize at the 1993 Sundance Film Festival, an elemental, shattering work of filmed autobiography, almost unbearably intimate, yet bursting with life and love and hope. Preceded by two early shorts by acclaimed artist Sadie Benning, which similarly brim with the possibilities afforded by turning the camera on one's own life.

Saturday, September 21, 6:00 p.m.

### ***A Healthy Baby Girl***

Dir. Judith Helfand. 1997, 60 mins. U.S.

### ***The Tourist***

**With Robb Moss in person**

Dir. Robb Moss. 1991, 60 mins. U.S.

In Robb Moss's poetic, reflective *The Tourist*, a filmmaker approaching middle age ponders his life as a cinematographer traveling the world and the ethics of capturing images; on the homefront he and his wife struggle with fertility issues. Judith Helfand, meanwhile, was initially the subject of a documentary about children who contracted cancer from a popular fertility drug, before taking over her own story and making her debut *A Healthy Baby Girl*. Both films wrestle with humor and empathy over questions of what should and shouldn't be captured on camera and the place of the filmmaker in relation to their images. What elements of our personal lives are fair game for the camera, and what is better left unfilmed?

Sunday, September 22, 1:15 p.m.

***Halving the Bones***

Dir. Ruth Ozeki. 1996, 70 mins. U.S. Digital projection.

***Banana Split (25 Stories)***

Dir. Kip Fulbeck. 1991, 38 mins. U.S. DCP.

Before establishing herself as an acclaimed novelist, Ruth Ozeki premiered *Halving the Bones* at Sundance in 1995. Five years after attending the funeral of her maternal grandmother, Ozeki still holds onto a portion of remains meant for her mother. The film tracks with levity and some imaginatively staged recreations her attempt to divest the bones while questioning what is ultimately more “halved”: her deceased grandmother or the multiracial identity of the filmmaker herself. Kip Fulbeck’s *Banana Split (25 Stories)* employs playful editing and fast-paced narration to cruise through critiques of attraction, media representation, and multiracial self-identification.

Sunday, September 22, 3:30 p.m.

***Vintage: Families of Value***

Dir. Thomas Allen Harris. 1995, 72 mins. U.S. 16mm.

***Tongues Untied***

Dir. Marlon Riggs. 1989, 55 mins. U.S. DCP.

Marlon Riggs’s *Tongues Untied* is an unclassifiable masterpiece that breaks formal boundaries in an attempt to express an exuberant, joyous, angry, irreducibly complex Black gay identity. Riggs was diagnosed with HIV during filming, and his essay legendarily sparked a national blowback from the conservative Right before its airing on POV. It’s now correctly viewed as one of the essential films of the era. Riggs collaborator Thomas Allen Harris’s similarly formally adventurous *Vintage: Families of Value* uses video and film to depict three sets of Black queer siblings (including himself and his brother), resulting in a raucous collection of portraits that expand the meaning of American family.

Sunday, September 22, 6:00 p.m.

***Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter***

Dir. Deborah Hoffman. 1994, 44 mins. U.S. Digital projection.

***Sink or Swim***

**With Su Friedrich in person**

Dir. Su Friedrich. 1990, 48 mins. U.S. DCP.

These films see their makers using the personal documentary format to fracture and restructure their relationships with their parents. In *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter* (Academy Award Nominee, Best Documentary Feature, 1995), Deborah Hoffman casts herself as her main interview subject as she relates, with humor and humanity, the story of caring for a mother with Alzheimer’s disease. In *Sink or Swim* (inducted into the National Film Registry in 2015), Su Friedrich examines her relationship with her distant father from childhood using text and 26 short vignettes, building to an overwhelming depiction of the impact a parent has on a child.

Friday, September 27, 7:30 p.m.

***The Devil Never Sleeps***

Dir. Lourdes Portillo. 1994, 84 mins. Mexico/U.S. Digital projection.

When filmmaker Lourdes Portillo receives a call informing her that her beloved uncle Oscar Ruiz Almeida has been shot, she heads back to her hometown of Chihuahua, Mexico. Officially Almeida's death was ruled a suicide, but as Portillo probes her family, further troubling secrets arise. Inspired by Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line*, the film unspools in an intimate yet formally adventurous assemblage that makes room for dramatic recreations, archival footage, and essayistic contemplation. Portillo passed away in April 2024, and we honor her contribution to nonfiction filmmaking here with a screening of her greatest work.

Saturday, Sep 28 at 1:00 p.m.

***Les oeufs à la coque de Richard Leacock***

Dir. Richard Leacock, Valérie Lalonde. 1991, 84 mins. U.S. DCP.

***Papapapá***

**With Alex Rivera in person**

Dir. Alex Rivera. 1995, 26 mins. U.S. Digital projection.

Richard Leacock (working with his partner Valérie Lalonde) was one of the earliest practitioners of cinema vérité style. In *Les oeufs*, he uses his new Hi8 camera to push the bounds of this aesthetic, creating a kaleidoscopic, humorous, and inquisitive record of his daily life in his adopted France, which comes closest of his works to realizing the cinematic ideal of his 1950s compatriots. Paired with *Sleep Dealer* director Alex Rivera's first short *Papapapá*, a movie- and pop culture-soaked essay in which he wrestles with the long shadow of Incan history as a first generation Peruvian American in NYC.

Saturday, September 28, 3:30 p.m.

***Who's Going to Pay for These Donuts Anyway?***

**With Janice Tanaka in person**

Dir. Janice Tanaka. 1992, 58 mins. U.S. DCP.

***Finding Christa***

Dirs. Camille Billops, James Hatch. 1991, 55 mins. U.S. Digital projection.

Janice Tanaka and Camille Billops embark on journeys to reunite separated families. Tanaka seeks a father lost to mental illness following a stint in the WWII Japanese internment camps; Billops reunites with a daughter she gave up for adoption 20 years earlier. Through their stories, each filmmaker redefines the dynamics between parent and child, and explores the unsettling bond of generational trauma that defines many lives in marginalized America. Both films employ unconventional forms and artifice to bring viewers closer to family tragedies. *Finding Christa* won the Grand Jury Prize at the 1992 Sundance Film Festival.

Sunday, September 29, 1:00 p.m.

***Thank You and Good Night***

Dir. Jan Oxenberg. 1991, 83 mins. U.S. DCP.

### ***Janine***

Dir. Cheryl Dunye. 1990, 9 mins. U.S. Digital projection.

### ***Tomboychik***

#### **With Sandi DuBowski in person**

Dir. Sandi DuBowski. 1993, 15 mins. U.S. DCP.

In her sui generis, recently rediscovered, deeply hilarious *Thank You and Good Night*, Jan Oxenberg pulls focus on her grandmother, playfully approaching memory and mortality by using cardboard cutouts to recreate scenes of her childhood and other candid family memories. It's an utterly unexpected treatment of a close-knit familial unit realizing and reckoning with the imminent loss of their matriarch. Preceded by Dunye's meditation on a friendship lost to time and the filmmaker's own coming out and DuBowski's intimate exploration of struggles with gender and sexuality, made in playful collaboration with his grandmother.

Sunday, September 29, 3:30 p.m.

### ***Troublesome Creek: A Midwestern***

#### **With Jeanne Jordan and Steven Ascher in person**

Dirs. Jeanne Jordan, Steven Ascher. 1995, 88 mins. U.S. Digital projection.

### ***Family Gathering***

Dir. Lise Yasui. 1989, 32 mins. U.S. Digital projection.

*Troublesome Creek: A Midwestern* and *A Family Gathering* (both Academy Award nominees) catalog family stories to provide foundations for reframing the filmmakers' own personal histories. Lise Yasui dives deep into the family trauma of her ancestors affected by internment during WWII, while Ascher and Jordan follow the contemporary economic collapse affecting farming families, predominantly through the lens of Jordan's struggling family farm in Iowa.

Sunday, September 29, 6:00 p.m.

### ***Moment of Impact***

#### **With Julia Loktev in person**

Dir. Julia Loktev. 1998, 115 mins. U.S. 16mm.

Filmmaker Julia Loktev explores the ripple effect of change and loss in her family's life nine years after her father, Lenny, is struck by a car while passing between garage sales on a busy street. Her mother, Larisa, becomes a primary focus of the film as Lenny's caregiver and medium, providing translations of his silence to Julia, who grapples with bringing to the surface more of his former self. *Moment of Impact* is a poignant exploration of what it means to live and to grieve loss before death, as the three Loktevs move both together and further apart. Loktev's unsparing eye won her the Best Directing Award at the 1998 Sundance Film Festival.

Museum of the Moving Image (MoMI) is the only institution in the United States that deals with the art, technology, enjoyment, and social impact of film, television, and digital media. In its stunning facility in Astoria, New York, the Museum presents

exhibitions; screenings; discussion programs featuring actors, directors, and creative leaders; and education programs. It houses the nation's most comprehensive collection of moving image artifacts and screens over 500 films annually. Its exhibitions—including the core exhibition *Behind the Screen* and *The Jim Henson Exhibition*—are noted for their integration of material objects, interactive experiences, and audiovisual presentations. For more information about the MoMI, visit [movingimage.org](http://movingimage.org).

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[Press images are available here.](#)

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