



# INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL ROTTERDAM

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## **Reality is stuck here with people like you**

Essay by Miko Revereza

In his senior year, Sokly Ny, A.K.A. Don Bonus, was inseparable from his camcorder. He would film the commute between Sunnyside Housing Projects to Galileo High; two long bus rides across the city. Moving through the hallways lined with lockers his classmates would stick their heads into the frame posturing tough for the camera. The guidance counsellor explains to Bonus the tall task of catching up on credits to graduate that year. Ms Shaffer, the English teacher, already lost hope, calling him a vegetable that only stares out the window. The family would provide no assurance to Bonus, who were all occupied by their own personal ordeals. He would turn to his camera that year, to confide his inner thoughts which might've otherwise remained silent or lost in translation. To say the least, A.K.A. Don Bonus is a video diary of one difficult year.

A shaky handheld image captures the details of a desolate apartment at night. There are empty beds with piles of clothes, hangers on the floor, and bright fluorescent ceiling lights left on. These remnants of human activity make the absence of his family all the more felt. Another night of being left home alone. Years ago they fled from a war-torn Cambodia. Bonus recalls being carried on his brother Chandara's back through the jungle, now lamenting that in America they were all growing distant from each other. As if the camera's zoom was his only means of pulling them closer, what he captures through the lens contains a sense of mourning and longing, a gaze that seems to hold back tears while looking. A.K.A. Don Bonus was filmed in 1993 in San Francisco, the same year my family and I moved from Manila to California on tourist Visas. Back then, I was too young to understand what Visa meant, or that in the following year those Visas would expire and leave us undocumented for what turned into 26 years. Throughout those first years, my dad also

made home videos of our activities which included a backyard BBQ, the dance floor at a wedding reception, a day trip to Golden Gate Park, and a fireworks show on the 4th of July, all documented on one VHS tape. A mundane yet overall favourable portrait of our American lives in the making, save for the bureaucratic complications invisible at the surface. Though we were living inside America, it's systemic borders were still keeping us out.

It was a revelation for me to later discover A.K.A. Don Bonus whose first foray into video-making would already demystify that portrait so precisely. I felt an instant affinity for this film, having also grown up in the Bay Area. The project was facilitated by the vision of director Spencer Nakasako. It was through this extremely collaborative approach towards documentary that made Don Bonus both the subject and author of depicting his reality his way. With the minimal training he was given, he seems to always have the camera ready during his family's most vulnerable moments. These images sometimes waver in and out of focus as if the images themselves are as precarious as their existences. They carry a personal truth so telling they would pierce through the disparaging myth of an Asian model minority, depicting the insidious trappings of bureaucracy at the margins of housing and education. By making this struggle visible and personal, had opened the lid to an intergenerational silence. The histories of global conflicts and borders had become implicated through Bonus' lens.

At a crucial moment in the film, his brother Thou expresses his awareness and disillusionment, connecting these histories of war with their current situation. "It's the whole stupid system of this world. If Nixon hadn't bombed a country we wouldn't be here in the first place... This fucked up country sell weapons, make weapons, sell to each other, kill each other and as a result, everybody is fucked up like this," a commentary that resonates in 2020, as it did in 1993, as it did in 2003. We had lived in a nation where a backwards idea of security meant the destabilisation of others. Yet the promoted freedom upon countless invasions seems not to apply when the displaced are then seeking refuge. Watching Bonus' family, I am reminded of my own and how we internalised a post 9/11 era after our petitions for green-cards were suddenly rejected. In relating our upbringings, note that the absorption of American wars has always been unevenly distributed among its citizens.

The timeless effect of A.K.A. Don Bonus to reach far past its generation can be attributed to its profound sense of humanness. It is not an aesthetically pleasing picture to look at, as you can see the limitations of its production value. Within those means, a voice emerges with

unrelenting urgency. There is no climax or resolution to the film, no pretence of overcoming adversity or a false sense of relief and escape for the audience. Sometimes all you get is a nice day at the park before returning back to reality. A.K.A. Don Bonus provides no closure as reflected by his brother Thou, "This is reality, it's not in a movie. After 30 seconds you'll resolve the problem. This goes on 24 hours a day." "What is reality?" "Reality is stuck here with people like you."