

# Godzilla 10

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## Interviews

May 03, 2021 • Godzilla 10 members on community, collaboration, and rupture



**View of *Word Gets Around*, 1995, a community mural made in collaboration between Godzilla Asian American Arts Network Archive, Arkipelago, and CAAAV.** Photo: Photo: Fales Library and Special Collections, NYU.

*In 1990, Godzilla: Asian American Art Network formed to stimulate visibility and critical discourse for Asian American artists, curators, and writers who were negotiating a historically exclusionary art world and society. Founded by Ken Chu, Bing Lee, and Margo Machida, Godzilla produced exhibitions, publications, and community collaborations that sought social change through art and advocacy. Expanding into a nationwide network, the group confronted institutional racism, Western imperialism, anti-Asian violence, the AIDS crisis, and Asian sexuality and gender representation, among other issues. A forthcoming anthology of materials that I have edited, *Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network 1990–2001 (Primary Information)*, details the critical genealogies embodied by the group and its collective work.*

*Earlier this year, nineteen artists withdrew in protest from a Godzilla retrospective slated to open in May at the Museum of Chinese in America, citing its “complicit support” for a New York City plan to construct a new jail in Chinatown (despite unified community*

*resistance) and its acceptance of a \$35 million concession for its cooperation. The artists' withdrawal of nineteen Godzilla artists from the subsequently canceled exhibition is one of many recent artist protests and strikes against museums, foregrounding concerns such as institutional transparency and commitment to social justice, the ethics of philanthropy and cultural funding, gentrification, and the aestheticization of politics. The following interview with G10—Tomie Arai, Todd Ayoun, Shelly Bahl, Alexandra Chang, Arlan Huang, Sowon Kwon, Paul Pfeiffer, Kerri Sakamoto, Chanika Svetvilas, and Lynne Yamamoto—represents the core configuration of members that presented MOCA with a final list of demands. It communicates the active legacy of Godzilla and gives rare insight into the mechanics of dissent in the art world today.*

*This is the first installment of a series of interviews with members of Godzilla.*

**THERE HAS ALWAYS** been an arm of Godzilla: Asian American Art Network that aimed to take critical stances. In the early years, our group activities addressed the lack of visibility of Asian Americans in the field of contemporary art. If the 1990s were in part a time of reflection on political and artistic representation in the art world, Godzilla rallied to be embedded in that multicultural discourse of inclusivity. This latest action directed at the Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA) by Godzilla members resists the attempt to frame an unwieldy entity like Godzilla into a limiting context of a historical exhibition, “Godzilla vs. The Art World: 1990–2001,” in which the oppositional politics of the group were to be presented as aesthetic artifacts.

Framed as a retrospective on the legacy of Godzilla, the exhibition became an opportunity for members to connect with the early formations of Godzilla and to understand why an Asian artists' advocacy network was needed in the 1990s. As a group, we have always considered the context of institutions in presenting art and culture and have intervened to broach conversations in different forums. This includes the 1991 open letter to the Whitney Museum decrying the historical absence of Asian American artists in its biennial and an earlier protest against the degrading placement of a Wifredo Lam painting in the coatroom hallway of the Museum of Modern Art. Thirty years later, the institution of concern is our very own cultural museum, MOCA. Originally the New York Chinatown History Project, MOCA emerged from the Basement Workshop (1970–86), an important progressive community organization that focused on political and art activities in Chinatown as part of the Asian American Movement on the East Coast.



## Godzilla Newsletter, “Community, Collaboration — Rupture,” Winter 1997. Courtesy Godzilla.

Godzilla members Arlan Huang and Tomie Arai were involved in the Basement Workshop and the shaping of the Chinatown History Project and MOCA’s early exhibition programs. Their forty-year commitment to these progressive histories motivated their initial inquiry into MOCA’s acceptance of a \$35 million city grant in exchange for supporting the construction of a new jail in Chinatown detailed in the 2019 Borough-Based Jail Plan Points Agreement. The Chinatown community has overwhelmingly opposed the building of a new jail in their neighborhood and entanglement with the carceral state. In late 2019, Arlan and Tomie drafted a letter to the director of MOCA, Nancy Yao Maasbach, inquiring into the connection between the unwanted jail in Chinatown and the planned purchase of a building for the museum’s new permanent home. These positions are well documented by the community organization Neighbors United Below Canal (NUBC). By January 2020, citing evasive responses from MOCA, both artists had withdrawn from the exhibition; they were joined by Byron Kim and Chanika Svetvilas.

Given the ensuing social and political emergencies of the pandemic and the urgent calls for reckoning from the Black Lives Matter movement—defunding the police, abolishing the prison-industrial complex, exposing institutional complicity with toxic agents, etc.—the jail plan took on higher stakes for a growing contingent of Godzilla members. As MOCA began trying to secure permission to include our protest letter in the exhibition, six members (G6) assembled to facilitate internal discussions and demand accountability from the museum. G6



originally consisted of artists Todd Ayoung, Shelly Bahl, Sowon Kwon, Paul Pfeiffer, Kerri Sakamoto, and Lynne Yamamoto, and grew to include art historian Alexandra Chang and curator Amy Sadao.

We strongly felt that instead of approaching discussions with MOCA as individual actors, it would benefit everyone concerned with the museum's relationship to the proposed jail to negotiate with the museum collectively. The group discussed approaching any exchange with the museum from a place of "repair and healing" and offered to provide concrete steps by which the museum could turn the situation around. So we organized a series of remote conversations, town-hall-style talk-backs with the larger Godzilla network, and sometimes with MOCA, to clarify the museum's involvement in incarceration and gentrification and its apparent disconnect from the Chinatown community. This culminated in a groupwide Godzilla discussion in December 2020, with an information session led by veteran Chinatown community leader Amy Chin.

It precipitated a letter from a wider Godzilla contingent to the museum asking for accountability in its role as a community cultural institution. The first actionable step we proposed to MOCA was to restore some measure of goodwill with residents of Chinatown by apologizing publicly for its lack of engagement with the community. Other demands included clarification of the museum's involvement in the Jail Plan and use of this opportunity as a teaching moment to work alongside Chinatown stakeholders to address racism, policing, and the criminal-justice system through the exhibition. Asking MOCA to oppose the jail plan offered the museum a way to refuse complicity in the pain and suffering that mass incarceration has caused to Black and brown communities. These were all proposed in the spirit of collaboration and care.



\*G10. Top left to bottom right: Kerri Sakamoto, Tomie Arai, Todd Ayoung, Shelly Bahl, Lynne Yamamoto, Sowon Kwon, Arlan Huang, Chanika Svetvilas, Paul Pfeiffer, and

Alexandra Chang. Courtesy Shelly Bahl.

After five weeks of unsatisfactory and barbed responses from MOCA, the museum posted an obscure, misleading statement about its opposition to the jail plan without addressing the concession money it received from the city. (If MOCA had indeed always been “unalterably opposed” to the plan, it has remained passively so, even as Con Ed breaks ground on the site today.) In addition, the director dismissed our call to hold open town-hall meetings about the institution’s community relations, claiming that it was unnecessary. It became clear that all demands from the group letter were not addressed in good faith by the museum. All this occurred against the backdrop of the March closing of Jing Fong restaurant, a Chinatown stalwart and the neighborhood’s only unionized restaurant. The position of the restaurant’s landlord, Jonathan Chu, a cochair of MOCA’s board of directors, was a last straw for the group.

On March 5, nineteen Godzilla (G19) artists signed a letter of withdrawal from the exhibition, stating: “We cannot, in good conscience, entrust the legacy of Godzilla as an artist-activist organization to a cultural institution whose leadership ignores and even seeks to silence critical voices from its community. Differing viewpoints serve to strengthen an organization and allow it to evolve in healthy and necessary ways. How can we exhibit our work within the walls of an institution when the values of its leadership betray our own founding principles?” Rather than address community demands for accountability, including from the very artists invited to the museum, MOCA instead decided to cancel the exhibition.

This unfortunate rupture raises a bigger question about the politics of inclusion for Asian Americans and the different goals that have existed from the inception of the movement. For many, Godzilla’s original demands for visibility and representation in the ’90s were part of a larger project of social and political transformation through intersectional allyship and solidarity. For others, multicultural discourse was primarily a vehicle for participating in the established capitalist system instead of a tool for challenging it.

— As told to Howie Chen

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