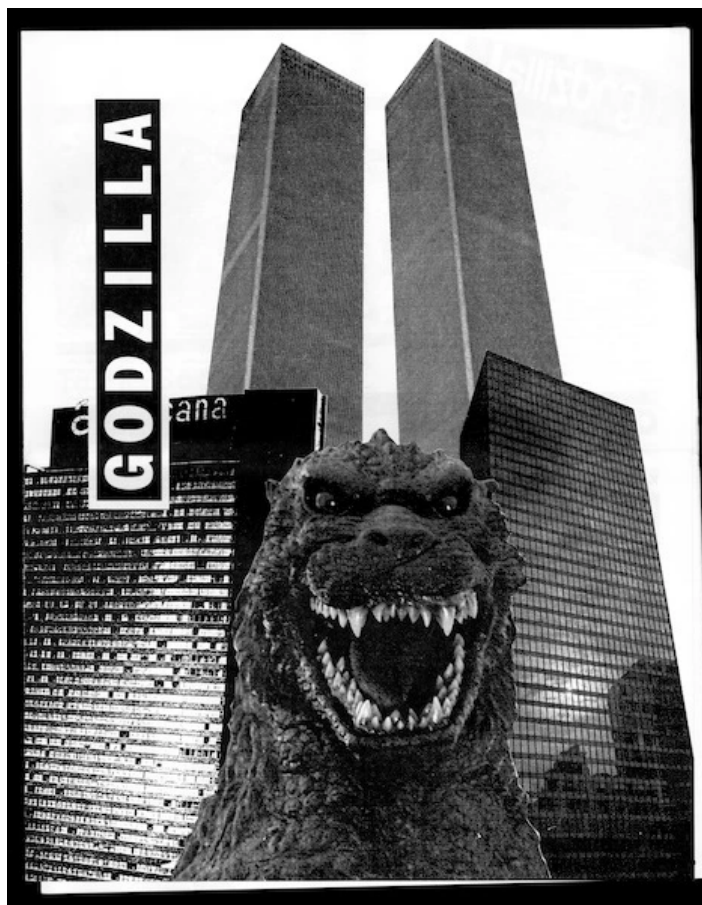


# Destroy All Prejudice: The Godzilla Group's Art World Mission

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*Godzilla Newsletter 2, no. 2, Winter 1992, internal spread. All images courtesy Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network and Primary Information*

*Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network 1990–2001* is the first anthology of writings and contextual materials chronicling the eponymous collective's extensive art projects, curatorial activities, and critical discourse. Formed in New York in 1990 by artists Ken Chu, Bing Lee, Margo Machida, and others, and eventually growing into a national network of some 2,000 members, Godzilla brought a spirit of urgency to a late twentieth-century art world woefully lacking in opportunities for artists of color generally, and largely blind to Asian Americans as art-makers, critics, and cultural producers.

The volume's editor, Howie Chen—an independent curator who also coauthors *Art in America*'s satiric Hard Truths column—began collecting materials for the book during the early days of the pandemic, when Covid-19 brought to the forefront a number of persistent social fissures of the sort that Godzilla worked for more than a decade to remedy, until its

unofficial dissolution in 2001. Therefore, Chen notes in his preface, all the pieces in this collection pertain to the group's work in relation to "institutional racism, Western imperialism, anti-Asian violence, the AIDS crisis, and representations of Asian sexuality and gender, among other issues." His essay "Godzilla: Critical Origins," which immediately follows the preface, encompasses storytelling, critical genealogies, politics, notable Godzilla actions, and their ramifications today. Thus readers learn, even before arriving at the primary resources, that their painful lack of art world presence did not mean Godzilla's members came from a cultural vacuum or were short on organizing experience.

This legacy-building is closely aligned with the ethos of the group, which saw itself as part of a broader activist groundswell that had begun in the 1960s. Participants were not only students of their own cultural inheritance, but also fluent in the language of the era's racial politics. In the New Museum's "Urban Encounters," a 1998 exhibition documenting half a dozen art activist collectives such as the Guerrilla Girls and ABC No Rio, Godzilla's contribution included a timeline of the Asian American cultural scene in New York City. The timeline began with the Basement Workshop, an art advocacy group formed in 1970, and went on to identify many activist events and organizations discussed in early Godzilla meetings. It was this historical awareness that prompted founding member Tomie Arai to assert, in Godzilla's second brainstorming session, that the collective should not "duplicate the work or functions of already existing groups." From the outset, Godzilla was less about generating a new type of discourse than about analyzing and promoting the current activities of Asian American artists. As founder Machida mused, naming the group for a gigantic sci-fi reptile known for its anarchistic disruption of everyday life signaled an intention to forcefully intervene in the existing art world. Even the Godzilla newsletter, the group's longest-lived and most consistent cultural production, disseminated news in a tone of radical earnestness—listing opportunities, reviewing works by Asian American artists then on exhibition, and publishing essays, reports, and literary pieces by members. The structure of the book, built around sections titled by year, is a direct nod to Godzilla's concern with timely action, genealogy, and archiving.

While the collective remained open and nonhierarchical, it was also savvy, sophisticated, and serious. These qualities are evident in one of its early actions, an open letter to the Whitney Museum's then director, David Ross, criticizing the 1991 Whitney Biennial's meager diversity and the absence of Asian Americans not only from the exhibition but from the museum's overall curatorial program and professional staff. In response, Ross invited a contingent of Godzilla members to discuss their letter in a private meeting at the museum. If the matter



*Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network 1990-2001*, ed. by Howie Chen, New York, Primary Information, 2021; 552 pp., \$30 hardback.

had ended there, one could simply dismiss the conclave as a publicity stunt on the part of the museum, an easy way to appease protesters. Instead, Godzilla regarded it as proof of the viability of unmasking institutional flaws and making real change. The subsequent biennial, in 1993, tackled issues of race head-on and included a record number of Asian American artists. In 1994, Godzilla member Eugenie Tsai became a curator at the Whitney Museum.

However, the most revealing portions of the book do not concern outward-facing actions, but the members' self-scrutiny and reflection. A 1993 newsletter featured vivid, often opposing, answers to a questionnaire about Asian Pacific American group shows—what their positive and negative aspects are, how to format them, whether greater visibility justifies their problematic existence, etc. For example, Filipino writer and critic Luis H. Francia complained that “The New World Order III: The Curio Shop,” a Godzilla-curated exhibition at Artists Space, had no “strong distinct point of view” and (despite featuring forty-eight artists) failed to represent “the variety of groups within the Asian American spectrum,” relying too heavily on Chinese American and Japanese American artists.



Group portrait for the cover of *Godzilla Newsletter* 1, no. 1, Spring 1991. Back row (L–R): Byron Kim, Bing Lee, Eugenie Tsai, Karin Higa, Arlan Huang, Margo Machida, Charles Yuen, Janet Lin, Helen Oji, Colin Lee, Tomie Arai. Front row (L–R): Ken Chu, Garson Yu.

That uncompromising standard for self-criticism stems from a fierce sense of communal responsibility. Meeting notes often show members willing to absorb costs, serve as liaisons to other organizations, or share their personal networks and knowledge. Throughout the book are multiple astute voices worthy, as the preface suggests, of some “future companion publication.” But their brilliance is always laced with a tenderness for their friends and community.

The newsletter issue featuring the letter to the Whitney Museum also contains a tribute to Lin Lin, a Chinese artist who was shot and killed on the street; following it, an obituary for artist Win Ng, written by Ken Chu, merits study as a finely written cultural artifact, examining the lesser-known community of queer Asian American artists of that time. Eugenie Tsai’s report on Godzilla committee proceedings begins with her childhood

memories of Hong Kong, where her parents and their friends would play mahjong and eat watermelon on hot summer nights; and the late curator Karin Higa's essay "Origin Myths: A Short and Incomplete History of Godzilla," which appeared in the catalogue of the 2006 Asia Society exhibition "One Way or Another: Asian American Art Now," testifies that a symbiosis of friendship and accountability wove Godzilla together and gave it momentum. The volume is dedicated to Higa.



Invitation card for "Why Asia," 2001, a public art project by Godzilla for Art in General, New York, Arlan Huang (top) and Charles Yuen (bottom).

In the July/August 1995 issue of the magazine *New Observations*, guest edited by Godzilla, artist Todd Ayoung wrote: "like all fledgling groups Godzilla has had its Utopic ambitions. Ken Chu dreamed of starting an Asian American Contemporary Art Museum, Margo Machida hoped to have a National Forum Network to share information on the latest in Asian American Art and Bing Lee wanted to begin an Asian American Art History Archive [that would include] people from many backgrounds and professions." Ayoung probably did not intend to characterize Godzilla's members as in over their heads, but his use of the word "utopic" does suggest a kind of disbelief in the attainability of these goals. When talking about Godzilla, there is a temptation to use language tinged with loss. Even the news this past March that nineteen out of thirty-three artists had withdrawn from the group's long-anticipated and well-deserved retrospective at the Museum of Chinese in America, "Godzilla vs. The Art World: 1990–2001," due to the museum leadership's complicity in the construction of a new jail in New York's Chinatown, elicited a degree of sorrow over the show's cancelation.

While Godzilla's tactics remain uncompromising and anarchistic, its ends are not unrealistically utopic. The anthology ends with a February 2021 call for the removal of Leon Black from the Museum of Modern Art's board of directors, over the mogul's business dealings with sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. The statement's last sentence signals neither disillusionment nor defeat, but a highly ambitious resolve: "We urge our cultural institutions toward systemic and structural change in order to support new political models of what we as a society hope to build."

# **Art in America**