

# Art Monsters

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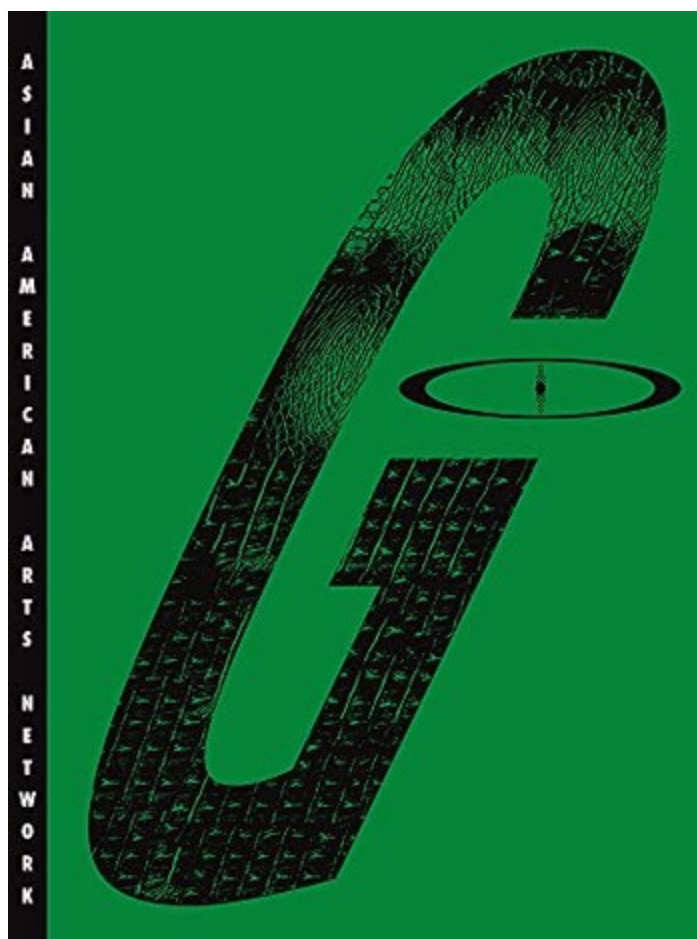
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A new anthology documents the pioneering 1990s art group Godzilla

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**Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network** edited by howie chen. brooklyn, Ny: primary information. 552 pages. \$30.

**FOUNDED IN 1990, GODZILLA** was a New York–based collective of visual artists and curators that sought “to contribute to change in the limited ways Asian Pacific Americans participate and are represented in a broad social context.” Early in the new anthology *Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network 1990–2001*, there’s a spread of contact sheets showing outtakes for a group picture taken in 1991 for the collective’s first newsletter: we see bodies shuffling, awkward hand placements, ill-timed smiles, and aching cheeks. The sequences illustrate the momentary coalescence—flash!—and then the release, the laughter as the image crumbles back into the disorder of life. I’d seen the original before, in all its grainy, blazer-filled 1990s chic, but the rejected shots give this legendary moment in Asian American art history a pulse—renewing the group’s original unruly energy.



From the beginning, Godzilla had a shrewd outlook on the relationship between the world of symbols and material reality. While it could be critical of representational politics, it was also pragmatic, supporting Asian American visual artists in exhibitions, programs, commissioned writing, and events. By the time the group disbanded in 2001, it had accrued a near-mythic status, its legacy distilled into a metonym of rebellion in one iconic newsletter photograph.

When I moved to Brooklyn in 2017, I found myself in another cultural renaissance made by queer, POC creators, many of them Asian American. This is when I first learned of Godzilla. The ideas of the collective were part of the ambience—like a low rumble—symbolizing an era before the current moment’s cultural politics. Part of looking forward is looking back, and so, just as we now turn to Godzilla and the 1990s, Godzilla had turned to the Asian American movements of the 1960s and ’70s. A time line by artist and Godzilla member Arlan Huang in the anthology’s first section, “Origins,” tentatively constellates this lineage. The largest node starts with the 1970 founding of Basement Workshop, a New York City political and artistic collective, but the diagram then branches off into organizations such as the 1974 Asian American Dance Theatre and the 1980 New York Chinatown History Project, and more-abstract references like “Late 1960s, Increasing Political Awareness” and the “Japanese Christian Church.” In the introductory essay, “Godzilla: Critical Origins,” editor Howie Chen further develops Godzilla’s connection to groups like Basement Workshop and the Kearny Street Workshop. Both aimed to link “political struggle with art production,” and were influenced by Third World internationalism, the Black Power movement, the Chicano movement, and the antiwar, labor, and feminist movements. Even this early on, you get a snapshot of the existential anxiety in trying to build an organization around a term like “Asian American”: Who does it apply to? Is there enough shared experience to mobilize under it? The doubt comes off as productive self-criticality, which pleasurably erodes the sureness with which that term gets thrown around today.

A typewritten set of notes from July 25, 1990, marks the true beginning of Godzilla. The idea of an “Asian American arts institution that would begin to address the emerging needs of contemporary Asian American visual artists” began to take shape in discussions among Ken Chu, Bing Lee, and Margo Machida. That led to the first official meeting, building off conversations at the Tuesday Lunch Club, an informal artist group that had been meeting in Chinatown restaurants. The rest of these meeting agendas (meticulous or scattershot), taken over the course of a decade, compose the core of this anthology. There are also posters, installation photographs, flyers, articles, reviews, and exhibition ephemera. Each of these documents is reprinted in its original format, preserving much of its charm and submerging the reader in the era’s visual language. You get a feel for Godzilla’s shifting ideas and the cobbled-together nature of their resources as the typography, logos, and letterheads change—sometimes abruptly—over time.

What comes through most immediately is the fact that Godzilla were friends who just decided to take each other seriously. At the end of the meeting minutes from the second official meeting, on September 14, 1990, a note for the next gathering reads: “Ken and Byron volunteered to cook, the rest of us can bring drinks and/or edible ‘supplementary materials.’” These sweet notes dovetail with more public documents, such as “A Clash of Symbols,” Machida’s 1991 article about Ken Chu’s artwork, which originally appeared in *A Magazine*. While these documents were written asynchronously, you get a lovely moment of narrative,

as if Machida went, energized, from the meeting directly to her desk to write out the thoughts that were bubbling in her head. (This social network feels even more poignant considering the early deaths of Alice Yang and Karin Higa, two key voices.)



**Tom Finkelpearl's contact sheet of Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network group portraits, 1991.** Courtesy Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network Archive/Fales Library and Special Collections, NYU.

Also included is a now famous 1991 letter Godzilla sent to David Ross, the then-director of the Whitney Museum of American Art. “As discussed, the regrettable absence of Asian American visual artists in the last Whitney Biennial remains symptomatic of a larger issue,” begins the letter. That larger issue—a lack of Asian American and minority voices at the curatorial, executive, and trustee levels—has alleviated somewhat since 1991, but it’s hard to imagine that Godzilla would have been satisfied by the performative language of diversity and inclusion that’s currently in style. And there’s more déjà vu with Ken Chu’s letter to the avant-garde art-theater venue Franklin Furnace Archive that same year, protesting the show “A Million Menus: Chinese Takeout Food in America” for the way that it “perpetuates stereotypical images” and “encourages harassment and violence towards a nationality group.” The letter is scanned and reprinted in its original form, but the topic also appears as an agenda update in the two Godzilla meetings that follow the letter. Together, these

documents feel like a quiet representation of the way individual injustices can be validated and elevated through collectivity. And the familiarity of these letters, as institutions face their own reckonings today, felt like an unearthing of activist histories, some that have been submerged as museums have made few changes to the narrative since Godzilla's heyday. The anthology then becomes not only a history of a movement, and of a style of institutional critique, but also of the ongoing amnesia of large arts organizations.

Ultimately, *Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network 1990–2001* reads as a cross between an art object, a manual, and a case study on radical institution building. Like many artist-run mutual-aid organizations that have sprung up during the pandemic, Godzilla was resistant to existing nonprofit structures—it was decidedly nonhierarchical and considered anyone who attended public meetings a voting member. This approach worked: by 1995, the group, which started with sixteen founders, would have more than two thousand members nationwide. But even as Godzilla resisted becoming like other art institutions, some individual members began finding work in more mainstream venues. As Chen recounts in the framing essay, “The tension between a desire for legitimacy within an institutional system and a deep ambivalence toward museums and professionalization would become an enduring dynamic in Godzilla.”

Paging through the documents, you get the sense that Godzilla wanted to be separatists (with talks of creating their own museum for Asian American artists) but ultimately became something more like integrationists—fighting from inside the system. Eugenie Tsai became a curator at the Whitney, then the Brooklyn Museum; Margo Machida an academic at the University of Connecticut; Alice Yang a curator at the New Museum, before her untimely death; and so on. I imagine some of the members stopped coming to the meetings as their museum day jobs became more pressing or their studio careers took off. Many succeeded in becoming prominent artists, curators, and academics within the institutions they once protested. Chen cites a 2019 study that the representation of Asian Americans in museum collections, administrations, and exhibitions is now close to parity with national demographics, while other nonwhite racial groups remain severely underrepresented. Is the story of Godzilla ultimately an assimilation narrative, even if its roots were separatist?

As the organization began to achieve some of the goals of its founding, it became clear that representation-based politics was a necessary but insufficient engine. On the internet, we can “coalesce” over any kind of identity in just a few moments. But we are pulled apart just as easily as we are held together. The legacy of Godzilla is that it stuck together *despite* everything that tried to pull it apart. The members came from very different backgrounds and geographies but managed to organize under the phrase “Asian American,” a temporary suspension of identity's complexity, which proved useful for getting stuff done. Today, those mainstream art organizations seem too rotten to be saved, which is part of what makes Godzilla's initial separatist energy so exciting to see in these pages. I've always wondered

what would've happened if the group had stayed true to the messy, defiant spirit evident in those scattered contact sheets. But it seems like Godzilla has passed the baton, and it's our turn to see where that insurgent spirit can take us.

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