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Anarchic Archive: Godzilla Roundtable

with Tomie Arai, Dawn Chan, Howie Chen, Ricky Ruihong Li, Lauren O'Neill-Butler, and Paul Pfeiffer

TA — Tomie Arai Godzilla: Asian American Art Network formed
DC — Dawn Chan in 1990 to combat historical and ongoing
 forms of exclusion and systemic racism
 through art and advocacy. Founded by Ken
HC — Howie Chen Chu, Bing Lee, and Margo Machida, the
 nationwide network of artists, curators, and
RRL — Ricky Ruihong Li writers produced exhibitions, publications,
 and community collaborations. The anthology
LO-B — Lauren O'Neill-Butler *Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network, 1990-
 2001*, edited by the writer and curator Howie
PP — Paul Pfeiffer Chen and published by Primary Information,
 presents ephemeral materials—including
 meeting logs, correspondences, newsletters,
 exhibition proposals, open letters, and critical
 essays—from the archives of the amorphous
 coalition. For this roundtable, November
 editors Dawn Chan, Ricky Ruihong Li, and
 Lauren O'Neill-Butler sat down with Godzilla
 members and artists Tomie Arai and Paul
 Pfeiffer, and Chen to discuss the collective's
 impact.

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N novembermag.com/content/godzilla-roundtable

RRL

Howie, how did Godzilla's archives emerge as urgent materials to be anthologized?

HC

At the beginning of the pandemic, when things were in lockdown in New York, I found myself at home and online, speculating what might happen. This was during an anxious period when stories of scapegoating anti-Asian violence were beginning to emerge along with other simmering tensions before the Black Lives Matter uprising. The streets were empty and each time I went outside I had to mentally prepare myself. I often found myself thinking about the strange perils of visibility in America as I left the house masked.

Around then, I came across an exhibition listing for a Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network survey exhibition scheduled to open Spring 2020 at the Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA) in New York, which seemed impossible given the depths of the pandemic. I was familiar with the history of the collective because I've known Godzilla members such as Karin Higa, Eugenie Tsai, and Lydia Yee over the years as I worked in the art field. I also knew the important legacy of Godzilla was their success in bringing visibility to Asian artists during the 1990s alongside other struggles for institutional representation.

After seeing the exhibition announcement, I became fixated on the two different types of visibility at hand—a visibility that you seek and one that you avoid. The tension between these modes have always existed in everyday life but the pandemic heightened it to an extreme. It got me thinking about the visibility that marginalized people struggled for, and the actual representations dealt to them in American society.

I began developing a long-form think piece weaving these ideas, using Godzilla's history and involvement in visibility politics as a jump off to think about our current condition in the U.S. I pitched a few art magazines but was not getting much traction for an expansive article—maybe no real violence had registered yet for magazine editors to actually take notice.

Luckily by coincidence, I was catching up with my friend James Hoff who I've known for almost 20 years and also is the executive editor at Primary Information and had mentioned these thoughts kindled by Godzilla. Long story short, he had also been interested in Godzilla's history for some time and it was perfect timing—he asked me to edit a book chronicling the collective

Working on this anthology gave me the opportunity not only to do a deep dive into a specific history with Godzilla but also to think about the qualities of visibility at stake when we talk about representation in America. I mention this in my introduction: it is the difference between being in control of one's self-disclosure and being the object of another's gaze. It often gets conflated by liberal institutions as the same kind of agency. With this book, I wanted to highlight that there is a context and

history for this condition stemming from the late 1960s to the present. It is also a way to critically assess the current tangle of Asian American representation and anti-hate efforts in cultural spaces, whether their demands are indeed progressive or unfortunately reactionary.

LO-B

Could you speak about the process of collecting the material for the book?

HC

The process was very much like piecing together a puzzle without a full reference image. Through interviews with many Godzilla members and synthesizing past research, I sketched out the history, context, and significant events for the group. Since everyone was involved at different times and in different roles, I assembled a chronology from the fractalized views I gathered. The actual materials for the book were all hand-scanned from individual archives of Godzilla members and the indispensable official archive at Fales Library and Special Collections at NYU—I am grateful for everyone's contribution to this task. Once I had the chronology, I gathered critical writings and contextual material to punctuate important discursive moments in the timeline.

RRL

Howie's introductory essay "Critical Origins" traces the political and intellectual genealogy of Godzilla back to the radical coalition of the Asian American Political Alliance on the West Coast in the late 1960s and its ripple effect across the country. Basement Workshop emerged in New York's Chinatown as a progressive nexus converging Asian American artistic expression and political activism as early as 1970. It was considered a remarkable chapter on the East Coast in the nationwide Asian American movement in terms of art and community services. Tomie, you participated in Basement well before Godzilla. I am curious how that milieu felt to you. How did Basement lead up to Godzilla?

TA

Before I answer that, I just wanted to thank Howie, one more time, for the staggering amount of work that you put into this book. I'm still trying to wrap my arms around all the material that you gathered. I know that a strategy was probably to let the materials speak for themselves, but I do feel like the way you bookended the preface and the "Critical Origins" essay really tried to address the unrelenting present. You wrote about how you saw this project evolving through the lens of the pandemic and ended with a series of events that led to the withdrawal of Godzilla from the show at MOCA. It really seemed to tie together so much of what we've been talking about as the legacy of activism that we wanted people to remember Godzilla by. (Editor's note: On March 11, 2021, MOCA canceled an exhibition of work by Godzilla, after nineteen of the group's members withdrew in protest of what they contend is the museum's support for a large new jail in Chinatown, where the institution is located.)

I do feel like you may think you approached it as a curator, but I actually saw you as bringing an activist agenda to the way you approached not just the subject matter but trying to dig into the meanings of it. I really feel like for those of us who didn't know what you were going to say, it was, as you said, a discovery and even a bit of detective work. There was so much sharing of information, timelines, dates,

and, of course, our feelings—our emotional reactions to what was happening at the moment. But I don't think we knew how this was going to end. It was like a story that was kind of a mystery until we held the book in our hands.

Regarding the question about Basement, I just spent the whole day with researchers, oral historians, and other members of Basement who were trying to recap this early history of Asian American artistic collaboration. And it's very uplifting and encouraging to me. I'm at least very happy to see that there are so many people—younger artists and a whole other generation of people that are interested and trying to archive this moment in the 1960s and '70s when Basement Workshop was conceived, and the program came together.

But it's very hard to go back almost 50 years and to remember what happened and then try to draw this through-line from that point to this point. It's not really a clear trajectory. Howie, I appreciate that you talked about in the book that we had roots in a lot of different organizations, diasporas, and movements that we were all engaged with. I think they're just going to be a lot of different versions of what happened and of what brought us to this point.

PP

I always enjoy listening to you, Tomie, and I echo everything you say in appreciation of the book and what it has the potential to do. In the meetings we've had over the past months—G10, or the various ad hoc groups of Godzilla members that came together to figure out what to do with the MOCA show, and how to think about the historical citation of Godzilla in the context of current debates playing out in real-time—Tomie and Arlan and others helped to frame the discussion by making us aware of community organizing efforts going on in Chinatown. They introduced us to people leading the movement to oppose de Blasio's jail plan, who in turn shed light on MOCA's entanglement in the plan, and also helped to locate the story in a larger context of anti-gentrification organizing in Lower Manhattan. It was enlightening to realize that these organizing efforts and debates preceded MOCA's invitation to historicize Godzilla in an exhibition, even as this larger context had been downplayed. It became clear that dissenting voices were being silenced, even demonized. I hear what you're saying, Tomie, about how encouraging, or maybe just revealing, it is that a new generation is hungry to connect with the lineage of community organizing work that Basement Workshop represents, to learn what came before.

I wasn't in New York during Basement Workshop days. My own version of what brought us to the present has different roots. I moved to New York in 1990, and right away found myself in ACT UP, Godzilla, and other groups, like Youth for Philippine Action, which was an East Coast Filipino activist network. These were hubs of information and group activity in the 90s. In a way, they were my introduction to New York City. The conversation and debates within these groups served to politicize daily life in the city. As I remember it, I had a marginal position in Godzilla, mostly listening and learning, though there was a lot of space to contribute as I did. It was an open and engaging scene.

At the same time, there was something foreign to me about identitarian discourse on the East Coast in the 90s. The framework of identity politics and the politics of visibility at that time always seemed a bit manufactured, having grown up in Hawaii and the Philippines where hyphenated American identities were not a thing.

I came to New York for the MFA program at Hunter College, and was a grad student at Hunter during my involvement with Godzilla. One thing that shaped my thinking at that time was a class in African-American aesthetics taught by Sherry Turner DeCarava, partner of Roy DeCarava. In the new Godzilla book, Howie includes a short essay I wrote for a public roundtable at Hunter on Asian-American aesthetics, later published in one of Godzilla's newsletters. A lot of what was in that essay was stuff I was channeling from Sherry Turner DeCarava's class—insights about the roots of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement of the 60s and 70s.

That was my entry point to Godzilla. Then, after finishing at Hunter I left New York to do a Fulbright Fellowship in the Philippines and spent the next year and a half there. Leaving the context of multiculturalism in New York and landing in Manila, where East Coast identity politics didn't compute, the edges of the discourse became self-evident. There were different debates in the Philippines around national identity, legacies of colonialism, land and labor organizing.

The experience of moving between different contexts amplified, for me, the constructed nature of identity politics, and also its limitations. A desire on my part as an artist is to develop visual strategies that would disrupt the logic or resist fitting neatly within an institutionalized way of reading things. In the current events regarding MOCA, what seems interesting to me is how a politics of visibility has become a wallpaper that can be used as a background for very different types of projects. It is the slipperiness of it that we grappled with at the MOCA show.

HC

That's why I pose the book as a project of mapping of critical genealogies and how Godzilla embodied them through their different activities. I also wanted to narrate how demands that emerged from radical social and artistic critique in the 1960s—collective recognition and individual autonomy respectively—become institutionalized over time, especially downstream through multicultural and diversity regimes. For marginalized people, this process tends to naturalize and reproduce hegemonic identity formations instead of working on contesting the grounds of its production.

I am thinking about Paul's story about how when he arrived on the East Coast, the dominant conversation and identity politics he found was different from his experience. When he went to Manila, he gained another perspective that decentered an American identity discourse he had encountered earlier and brought insight into its construction.

This is the type of critical consciousness and dissonance that I wanted to revisit by looking back at the roots of the Asian American Movement. It began with the self-construction of "Asian American" as a political identity by activists who were working from an internationalist third-world view in the 1960s. For these activists, it was a tactical move at the time. They were aware of the political agency of this identity but also its potential limitations particularly when things get baked into society. For that reason, as a bulwark against identity essentialism, pioneers of racial formation theory (including Marxist Asian and Black theorists) viewed race as part of a historical process and social practice instead of determined by biology or geography.

I think this also relates to the recent heated Twitter debate over the relevance of the radical roots of the Asian American Movement in the Asian American experience today. It seemed to pit academic Asian Americanists against those who have a multitudinous and discontinuous view of Asian identity that is not overdetermined by one specific history. What's special about Godzilla is that it offers another way

that doesn't exclude either position. Perhaps, it is because it existed at the unique intersection of politics and aesthetics. Instead of disavowing any of these positions, it was more important to interrogate them. The early Godzilla newsletters and writings reflect this activity.

TA

Yes, there are currently a lot of debates on how useful the construct of Asian American identity is now, when our communities are so diverse. Asking whether the term is politically outdated or useful at this moment in time is a valid question. The core of these debates, however, seem to center around the notion that identity politics 'isn't working for Asian Americans' and calls into question whether we have ever truly shared a collective identity as Asians in America or as people of color. As they keep going back to the 1960s as the origin of the term, I think it's important to point out that it was militant organizations like the Black Panthers and the Young Lords that inspired Asian American activists to organize around identity and across class differences. The Black Power movement started by the Panthers showed our communities how important it was to mobilize around a common goal. Our shared experiences—the shared histories of racism and discrimination in the US—were conditions that united, not divided us.

It's also important to point out that Basement was never an exclusively Asian American organization, but from the very beginning, its roots were deeply planted in a sense of Third World solidarity. This was largely due to Fay Chiang, and under her directorship, there were always African American, Latinx, pan-Asian, queer, and working-class people from the community walking through Basement's doors. This porous relationship with Black, Brown, Indigenous, feminist, and global movements inspired us to go out, to be on the streets, and to be actively involved in community campaigns. To trace this lineage of intersectional solidarity from Basement in the 1970s to the present allows us to critically consider current events, including the withdrawal of G19 from MOCA and the reaction to the 2016 Whitney Biennial and the controversy around Dana Schutz's painting of Emmett Till. The refusal by Asian American curators from both institutions to acknowledge the damage that their choices were having on African American communities, propelled groups like the Chinatown Art Brigade and members of G19 to respond publicly. Needless to say, conceding terms that favor mass incarceration by a cultural institution and contributing to the pain that African American communities experience on an almost daily basis, is totally unacceptable and immoral.

There is a committed desire on the part of many Asian Americans to inform and reconsolidate around Black and Asian solidarity and uplift the long history of Asians in America and African Americans working together towards change. We can't afford to be pitted against each other.

RRL

It is indeed important to be constantly reminded of the fact that the Asian American movement stemmed from the radical solidarity with not only the Black Panthers but the Third World Liberation Front in the 1960s. From the very beginning, Asian American identity was conceived as a racially and globally intersectional project. Without this lesson, we fail to discern how its critical edges and radical potentials for change were later dissolved into or co-opted by the liberal project of multiculturalism in the 1990s. It was precisely at that moment when the radical, belligerent banners of non-aligned

liberation, let's say, were swapped by the genial, happy posters of cultural difference. Situated in this milieu, Godzilla seemed to be a tight-rope walker who took up the tasks of revitalizing the old project of empowerment-via-representation without falling into the multicultural abyss of self-essentialization.

Howie, in "Critical Origins," you point to the strategic use of "Asian American" identity in Godzilla's organizing. Karin Higa, to whom your book is dedicated, used the term "pragmatic organizing principle" to describe a similar thing. This productive ambiguity with identity politics, which you and Higa attend to, seems to make Godzilla accessible for different shades of subjects, and legible within a wide-ranging spectrum of politics. It is perhaps this strategic ambivalence and interpretive openness in its constitution that Godzilla from within was perpetually charged with tensions and dissonance.

I think of your letter, Paul, "Beginning at the End: The Road to the End House Art Center," which is reprinted in this anthology. What I found resonating in your experience as a Fulbright scholar in Manila, and later in Dumaguete's Silliman University, was the sense of frustration that "Asian American" identity may encounter in the attempt of fostering progressive solidarity in the very locales of the so-to-speak global peripheries. "Stop this Asian American nonsense," you wrote in 1990. I find it refreshing. The identity politics of Asian America often struggled to amass traction in the global context because, after all, it was a parochial tool for visibility engineered within a very specific context, namely the American society.

HC

That was from the unpublished newsletter "Community, Collaboration, and Rupture" (1998). It was a series of exchanges between curator Edwin Tangonan Ramoran and you about your travels. It's a really good example of confronting American racialization and identity in a postcolonial context.

PP

Silliman University is a flagship university in Asia promoting American education. It was founded in 1901 with money from the east coast. The same benefactors who created Hamilton College in upstate New York created this university that remains in the Philippines. It was founded a year after the end of the Philippine-American War. This larger history of America's global involvement was my own family's beginning in a funny way. And I don't know. In 1994 and 95 when I was there, I was just trying to figure out what I was experiencing. Just to jump to the current moment, it seems to me that in a way the issue is that the framework of representational politics in a way is always going to be more limited than the complexity, the actual depth of radical politics, and forms of socialization. We need to learn from the Black Panthers and the alignment with the Global South and anti-colonial movements. There's an issue about whether the legal or historical framework is based on a western-centric worldview, and whether a certain kind of institutionally biased mindset can do justice to the aesthetic and social reality of the non-western context, which we need to tap into now.

I'm thinking about where I was in 1994 and trying to make sense of why I said "Asian American nonsense" in that context. In some ways, I feel like that was a mixed-up thing to say, because I certainly didn't mean to dismiss the importance of all forms of organizing that go on, and didn't mean to relativize these struggles as being purely a construct. I appreciate Howie, or if it was Tomie, talking about the strategic or tactical value of using the Asian American identity that we have available as a framework of organizing, critically.

My own involvement with Godzilla lately around MOCA had to do with appreciating, well actually not even appreciating, but seeing the necessity to really draw connections back to the roots of things and to examine the current fate of an organizing effort. It is by seeing this necessity that one understands the Museum of Chinese in America is really in question. The start of the involvement really came from when Tomie and Arlan Huang really brought it to the table. A few of us almost just like spreading a rumor, you know, “what's going on?” And then we became aware of the larger organizing effort, such as Neighbors United Below Canal, which had been going on for a couple of years and we literally knew nothing about. Here, we were asked by the Museum of Chinese in America to be involved in an act of narrating and history-making around a group that we were engaged in.

In some ways, we were being given this one framework and it was being presented as though that's all there was. And when Tomie and Arlan came in and said, actually, there's a bigger framework going on here. There's the abolitionist organizing. There's a large convergence of organizations, labor unions, and Individuals in Chinatown, which are being erased, if not demonized as outsiders trying to ruin things for the community. It's really perverse. It exemplifies how easily the skillful PR of one framework telling the story can do a lot of damage to, if not altogether erase and deny the existence of, something much deeper and bigger.

HC

Ricky, I was listening to your dissertation on oceanic thinking, using the spatiality of water as a metaphor for interdependent ecological perspectives. It's an expansive way of reconciling unresolvable bodies, knowledge, boundaries, and temporalities. The history of the Asian American Movement is usually thought of as a linear trajectory from 1968 to the present now, but I think it's also important to think horizontally about overlapping political struggles and socialities that exist and that are often encroaching on each other. That's why in the book it was important for me to represent all the different affiliations of Godzilla members, so it doesn't sustain the myth that they were all banking on the Asian American identity to launch us into a specific position. Instead, ideally, we can organize around contingent and anarchic identities—always reconfiguring without hierarchies.

With the Whitney Biennial and MOCA controversies, it demonstrates an agonistic ecology in which we're all calibrating, signaling, and even combining collectivities to amplify resistant positionalities. In these cases, we are working against manifestations of institutional violence whether it is symbolic, economic, or carceral.

DC

Howie, I was curious to hear your thinking behind your decision to present only primary documents. You could definitely imagine someone who was working on a parallel project that was less archival, and perhaps included instead interviews with people who were part of Godzilla. It is your decision of prioritizing archives over oral history that struck me, especially because you've clearly spoken with so many members of Godzilla behind the scenes, in the making of this book—I am curious what led you not to go the route of including interviews.

HC

It's quite intentional. The quick answer is that I wanted the documents to speak for themselves. Archives are always subjective. With Godzilla's history, there are multiple layers of subjectivities at play. That is why I begin the chronology with Arlan Huang's timeline of the Asian American movement to signal that these are all different versions of a shared history, including the Godzilla book that I assembled. I used spaces like the preface, the scope of the chronology, and contemporaneous material to set the stage for understanding the conditions of Godzilla's activities and for the book itself.

I think the oral history method has been well covered by different types of Asian American art historians, like Margo Machida. She has pioneered that approach by letting the artists lead the narrative. That's one way of doing it.

I wanted to approach it perhaps more ecologically, thinking about the kind of enmeshment of subjects and materials. My interpretation of the archive is an assemblage of ideas, actions, and positions drawn from different fields, e.g. critical theory, art history, sociology, cultural studies, and social activism. For example, while I was editing the book, I had one research pile of books on my desk that included Lisa Lowe's *Immigrant Acts and The Intimacies of Four Continents*, Stuart Hall's *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields's *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*, and Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*.

TA

Yes, Howie. I appreciate that you brought your own voice to this project because, quite frankly, I don't think a lot of artists are that self-aware of their intentions—I can only speak for myself. But I certainly feel like maybe my job is just to point to the things in the world that need changing. I don't really always know what kind of change needs to happen. And I remember very early on, Paul, you were one of the first people to say: "We really need help. We really need to work with the community because we're just a bunch of artists, and we've seen what's possibly a problem. We're trying to open up a dialogue, but it's not moving." I think you were the one who used the word "impasse." We were at an impasse, and MOCA was not responding. And, it was clear that we needed to connect to all those external forces that were out there. It was this outside pressure that was pushing us in this direction. We could call it coalition building or acknowledging and honoring people in the community who have been doing the work on the ground, around issues like abolition, gentrification, mass incarceration, and the closing of Rikers Island but we knew at that moment that we couldn't act alone. The artists were just the beginning of that process, a part of the larger momentum that was building around the issue. We as artists only pointed to the problem. In fact, I often say that we were only the messengers that MOCA chose to shoot. But now they're in so deep. They can't avoid having to deal with the problem.

PP

I agree with you that it seemed very generative and important at the point that the group of Godzilla members made a connection to Neighbors United Below Canal. And just the understanding that you know, in a way there was work being done that wasn't part of the conversation because it wasn't artists and that there was a kind of line being drawn around Godzilla as a group of artists that could be made to represent a history in a way. What was missing is how it fits within a larger history of work being done. It is MOCA's insistence to separate the art historical existence of Godzilla from the bigger social

and political history that I wanted to address. It felt specifically generative in this moment for artists to choose to connect with people in other fields doing work that is related but not being acknowledged within the kind of art-historical framing, or the world of contemporary art, let's say.

HC

It's important to link these protest situations to larger political frames—i.e., through these particular struggles and their limits we can imagine universal political desires and wider emancipatory projects. For example, we should think about the MOCA controversy as something embedded in the BLM moment and other related uprisings. It's not just something that's just happening in an ethnic neighborhood or just an endemic Asian American issue. If you pull the camera back, we're talking about an overall crisis of liberal cultural institutions, cultural funding, community representation, racism, and economic inequality.

LO-B

Just to go back to your essay, Howie: in the section called "On the Menu," you talk about "Godzilla's signature action," which is the open letter sent to the Whitney Museum in 1991, prompted by the critical chatter about the lack of diversity in previous Whitney Biennials and the absence of Asian American artists in that installment of the exhibition. You write that Godzilla issued a letter to the museum's director, David Ross, in which the group highlighted the lack of Asian American representation in the museum, exhibitions, collections and the executive boards. You also speak about the working group who wrote it—Byron Kim, Margo Machida, Yong Soon Min, Paul Pfeiffer, and Eugenie Tsai.

Paul, we've talked about coalitional politics, which I think is great and interesting, and the potentials and pitfalls of connecting back to earlier historical movements. We've talked about the 1960s quite a bit. I was curious: in the formation of writing that letter, did you look at historical models, for example, Women Artists in Revolution, who protested the Whitney in 1969 through a similar kind of letter about the Biennial, or the BECC, the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, in 1971, who also protested the museum using a similar letter-writing campaign, and met with the director and curators of the museum. Was the group aware of that history? Was anyone talking about it at the time that you wrote the letter in 1991?

PP

Was that 1991? Wow. Before the 1993 Biennial! Well, it was the lead-up to 1993. That is telling. All I can say is that at the time I was marginal to the group who wrote the letter. If I'm not mistaken, Margo Machida was a faculty member with whom I was working as part of my graduate studies. She was an advisor for a project that I was doing, which was a bibliography of Asian American artists. She suggested it, and I took it on. I felt like very much a junior just wanted to be at the table as this was going on.

To put it in the context of what played out in the 1993 Biennial, I just remember the debates over that Biennial but I should just speak for myself. It had to do with things like Lucy Lippard's book, *Mixed Blessing: New Art in a Multicultural America*, which I'm sure makes reference to the thing that was in the forefront of everybody. My perception of things that were playing out at that moment had to do with

the prioritization of getting more folks who were being opted out to the table. Connecting to previous movements was just a less palpable thing than other conversations that were so much in the forefront at that moment.

LO-B

Relatedly, you mentioned that you started going to ACT UP meetings when you arrived in New York. Was there an intersection between ACT UP and Godzilla for you?

PP

Totally. I was specifically a part of the Asian Pacific Islander Caucus of ACT UP, which was one of several subgroups. Not all, but some of the members of Godzilla, like Ken Chu and Ming Ma. It was primarily people coming out of art schools, such as Cooper Union and so on, who were involved in the Asian Pacific Islander caucus. Now we talk about intersectionality. All I can say is that, at that moment, there was a real tension between the very dominant primarily white voices and other voices in ACT UP. The focus of the Asian Pacific island caucus was to translate materials of HIV prevention into Asian languages and, considering cultural specificities, to come up with ways to support folks who encountered juridical obstacles in being visible and legible. These were things that ACT UP as a whole was advocating for as its style of activism, providing a basis of support that they might need, however little.

Imagine if you were a first-generation immigrant, you would be potentially dealing with the prospect of deportation as well as ostracization. At that moment, it was more of a monocentric conversation that we were having compared to the conversations that we now find ourselves in in the fractal era of social media. It's like a different animal now. If anything, the problem is the tendency for bubbles to form, and for it to seem like you're talking to a lot of people when actually you're just in an echo chamber. Back then, there was a very clear sense of the mainstream conversation and everybody else that was being left out of it. And that's what the action taken against the Whitney Museum was about. In some ways, I feel like the landscape has transformed so much now.

DC

Absolutely! I have so many questions about that. What you said resonates with me. The landscape has changed so much. I think what Howie calls the "signature gesture"—that open letter—was certainly very formative to so many younger Asian American curators, writers, and artists. I've often thought about how such a gesture would make sense now, and what form it would take. Certainly, what the letter was calling out, the absence of Asian American artists, is something that still could be called out so widely and for so many institutions. And yet I also feel that because so many of us are grappling with the "impasse," to use your words, that we've reached with representational politics, along with the complexities and limitations of it. I often find myself wondering, What would the form of an act take, say an open letter in 2021, that not only points to this ongoing absence of certain artists, but that also encompasses the limitations we're all grappling with, here and now, when it comes to representational politics, identity politics, and so forth.

HC

That's why I really wanted to print both the letters—the protest letter and its follow-up. Because there are so many details that are lost when people invoke this protest. Generally, yes, it was about getting more people—names and bodies—into museum exhibitions. But if you look closer, it is about a real concerted effort to reform the institution on the level of knowledge and administration. It was crucial for them to point out gaps in understanding and also how they affected the way artists are valued and considered.

David Ross' comment that curators can't choose Asian American artists if they're not on the menu is revealing because, in the end, it's not about just getting on the menu. The real problem is with the menu itself both in its constitutive structure and metaphor: people for a la carte consumption. Of course for Godzilla at the time, getting on the menu was important in the short-term because it meant visibility in the existing museum and market system—being seen.

A letter now I think would still have to deal with the same problems but would have to make an additional case for complexity beyond the goal of just wholesale representation. In liberal institutions today, sheer visibility often appears as just a name and a body, but what is at stake for marginalized people is the quality of visibility and the complexities that enable people to have control over their appearance in public. As it stands, institutional inclusion often is experienced as being tokenizing and extractive. Identity in this context feels and appears like a socially authorized container and object, rather than something unbounded and free. A more radical letter would call for the abolition of the menu logic and system in favor of new forms of self-presentation and participation.

TA

I would certainly hate for Godzilla's legacy just to be the letter to David Ross. It wasn't just the letter. I remember going to that meeting and I remember that he only wanted to meet with two people. I don't know if that was the exact number, but we had insisted that he meet with the group. There were at least 12 of us who showed up and we were all totally intimidated. I remember that he brought us into the back of the museum and there was this long conference table. Were you there?

PP

Yea.

TA

Most of us didn't say anything. I can't even remember who spoke. It's probably Ken and Margo. It was the fact that we were there and we didn't back down, so he had to meet with all of us or none of us.

And he agreed. There was something very powerful about that. I remember thinking, "wow, we got this far!" It was really something that had an enormous impact on me, even though I wasn't a principal player in that meeting. All along the way, in terms of Godzilla's advocacy and all the things that we managed to do collectively, there was this feeling that we were in it together. We were building a kind of cultural power together that would live with us for the rest of our lives. It totally impacted me.

PP

Just remembering that meeting and thinking about the 1993 Biennial, I just want to mention really quickly that Studio Museum in Harlem just hosted a gala a couple of days ago. There were speeches given about the designation of cultural institutions. I forget what it's called, but the Studio Museum in Harlem became one of the institutions that have this particular designation putting them in the pipeline for major funding from the City. And this is the thing that the Museum of Chinese in America has been fighting for a long time. There is no Asian American institution in New York, if not in the entire US, that has this designation. From a certain perspective, this is the agenda that has led to the hardball that institutions play.

Remembering the logic gets us to the table so that we can get in the pipeline to have that sustainable base on an institutional level, acknowledged by the existing power structure. Something that is within the institutional framework can represent Asian America. What I hear Dawn asking makes me think that whatever that gesture is has to be true to the radical agenda. That's the lineage that we seek to connect with. What does that look like now? It seems we're talking about the rethinking of the aspirational logic to go through the proper channels in order to achieve a sustainable institution, institutionalizing the 20th-century radical legacy, particularly that of the 1960s in our case, into a kind of administrative system.

In the Philippine context last month, the Nobel Peace Prize was given to a media activist named Maria Raza, who came out of CNN and then founded perhaps the biggest and most aggressive kind of critical journalism platform in the Philippines. They've been going after Duterte, the war on drugs, and extrajudicial killings. One thing about her that is amazing to me is the message that she is, in a very focused way, delivering. She says, what's going on in extrajudicial killings and human rights violations in the Philippines is not just a domestic political issue. It's happening in the Philippines through Silicon Valley. She points to the political structure behind social media platforms that have been preempting previous forms of communication, distribution, and therefore power structure.

There's a literal revolution in that new platforms that are totally changing how politics is done. When I was reading your thesis research, Ricky, I thought that what's happening in the South China Sea is, in a way, a similar story. It's all rolled into geopolitical things that are going on that have a very interesting PR dimension to it. We somehow have to not just critically point to these new operations, but really use them. The forums of actions and of narrating to each other and projecting out what we did are also taking new forms. Seizing the way in which global capitalism is adapting to this emerging mediatic condition is a very real project, an opportunity for us to take advantage as the landscape is changing.

RRL

Many things are spinning in my mind listening to everybody. Howie was teasing me with his horizontal plane as a substitution to a particular lineage of politics in thinking about Asian America. For me, the significance of this horizontal plane lies in the ecological primal scene where races, ethnicities, and other forms of categorical markings of people were, and continue to be, negotiated in settler-colonial America. Since my graduate research, which was a kind of archaeology of maritime media, I've been thinking about the ocean—the figures it casts as well as the materialities it inhabits. Indebted to Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*, where he renders the ecologically expansive Black experiences spanning across the atrocious routes on the Atlantic Ocean, I can't help but envision the vast oceanic space of movements and disruptions, appearance and disappearance to be the horizontal plane of Asian American politics.

I am thinking about the Pacific Ocean in our case. What does it mean in the Asian American imaginaries? The Asian American identity, at least the critical version of it, was often remembered within the historical lineage of the civil rights movement since the 1960s. Rarely has it been contextualized under the backdrop of the postwar establishment of Asian Studies in American academia, with funding from Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, and other US corporations that took interest in an expansionist foreign policy. As a branch in Area Studies, Asian Studies predicated on the rationale that the postcolonial world order required the arbitration, if not the supervision, of American expertise. This neo-imperial episode of the American turn to the globe with the emergence of Area Studies and Asian Studies, in particular, seems to catalyze a very interesting chemical process with the manifold diasporic sedimentations in the United States whose ancestral arrival was mediated by the Pacific Ocean. The concept of Asia, even though it has an etymological root in antiquity, was recast and propagated anew in postwar America as a continental counterpart across the planet's most expansive waters. This terrestrial unity lent itself to a coarse, monolithic pan-Asianism that was proven effective in the identity-based coalition, but it also flattened many Asias that are perhaps more archipelagic and oceanic than continental.

In turn, the absence of the Pacific Ocean in contemporary Asian American imaginaries is perhaps a ramification of a new era when the transoceanic mobility of capital was increasingly waterproof. If Peter Sloterdijk was right in pointing at a global interior as the spatiality of capitalism, this interior is terrestrial and very dry. Dawn was asking how the new oppositional politics of Asian America would look like today. For me, it has to, in an ecological dimension, deal with the material substrates of the American arrivals from multiple Asias, be they first-generation or ancestral. It would also need to untie the identity-based framework of representation, which seems to have run out of steam, and to activate the political from the leakages and cracks in the enclosure of the ocean. Asian America is wet.

PP

I have to say, it's attractive the way your thesis talks about the ocean as something that is constantly resisting the enclosure of the nation-state. The nation-states are seeking to create maps and other visual representations of geographies in order to tame them as territories, yet ecologically speaking, or in a bigger sense, the ocean is reclaiming the land in ways that are beyond the control of these attempts to create boundaries and so forth. There is this constant race to control flows that are happening on such an expansive and huge scale. It really made me think about what it is that we are talking about when we invoke a connection to someone like the Black Panthers? It is the ocean. It makes me think about the way that Fred Moten and others invoke the idea of the greater Caribbean as something that extends beyond the Caribbean and into the Mississippi Delta. Eventually, if you think of it musically, where this idea is reaching is profound. In terms of Paul Gilroy, for me, the big takeaway of the Black Atlantic is that there are ways of narrating histories that can serve to be in solidarity with the ocean and to undermine the attempts of the nation-state to control the flows. These histories can actually show that the ways people have moved, immigrated, been forced into exile, and displaced are infinitely more complex than the story that can be told within the framework of the nation-state, which is historically speaking and in this case, the white nation-state.

I completely agree with you in the same way that I think that there's an emerging ontology of Caribbeanism, that's not just geographic, but aesthetic. It can be, or rather must be traced through all forms of media—music, art, and language—in order to radically change the picture. I think that there's an opportunity because of the impossibility of unifying all Asian America to tell and accept this single

story. It can't be just about Asian America. I mean, Asian America is important, but that's too limited. I am not here to discount Asian America and the history that it connected to the important struggles that have been influential globally. But there's an opportunity. How could we not seize the opportunity to invent a show that connects young people doing relevant and urgent work, not only Youth Against Displacement but also practices and actions in Manila, for instance? It is an opportunity to forge a new kind of extraterritorial network, one that goes beyond the nation-state, the thing that Paul Gilroy points to in the Black Atlantic.

TA

Yeah. But at the same time, I think when you are talking about social and political accountability, it's very local. I mean, you can't ignore the reality around you, or the world around you. I feel like that's something that we need to remind ourselves of all the time.

HC

These ideas of enclosure and uncontainability are helpful in thinking about how we can account for the specificities of the local without foreclosing on other possible connections and perspectives.

For instance, during my research for this book, I became aware of what I would call new internationalist efforts from East Asia to connect Asian American art history into its own diasporic narrative. It is an interesting decentering of the American version of Asian cultural production and it recasts Asian American identity as a continuous extension of Asian history through nationality and migration. It's a different kind of internationalism compared to the radical 60s, especially after our passage through global capitalism.

For instance, Korea has been doing a lot of archival scholarship to understand diasporic Korean artists in America and has been mounting exhibitions connecting Godzilla artists such as Yong Soon Min, Mo Bahe, and Sung Ho Choi to native artistic movements and discourse. M+ museum in Hong Kong, as an aspiring Asian counterpart to MoMA, has been methodically building its own canon through its collection that interestingly claims diasporic artists including Asian Americans into that history. There is also an exhibition scheduled at the Mori Art Museum next year that Alexandra Chang is curating documenting what they're calling the Asian American Art Movement from the 1960s to the present.

Now there are now multiple lenses to view "Asian American" art and identity. Of course, they are all subject to new and different forces and interests such as nationalism, capital, culture, art market, etc. In this way, art is well situated to reflect these developments as both an object and symbol in circulation.

PP

I'm super fascinated to hear about these shows you're mentioning, Howie, in Mori Art Center, M+, and so on. Some of our friends, right? Alexandra, one of the G10. I just want to jump back to a moment when we had one of our first meetings at Independent Curators International (ICI) in the early or mid-stages of the organization of the show for MOCA. Tomie, you were one of the speakers. I remember you saying in one gathering at the offices of ICI invoking the internationalism of Godzilla—the number of people for whom English was a second language. That stuck in my mind.

And there was this mix. So, but then what you're saying now about not forgetting the local is an interesting contrast to the acknowledgment of the internationalism of Godzilla. Both you and I have been artists and teachers at Project REACH in Chinatown in the 1990s. I was thinking about the mix of young people that walked through the doors at Project REACH, like the youth empowerment organization in Chinatown run by Don Kao. It was very mixed: Asian, Black, Caribbean, Latinx, queers, and trans, majorly inflicted with first-generation immigrant kids. It needs to be unpacked what the local means in a place like the lower east side and Chinatown, which is profoundly global and working class. They are not the aspirational kind of globe-trotting subjects tethered to global capital but the displaced and émigré.

TA

Exactly. It shouldn't actually be in conflict, the local and the global. You're absolutely right. Displacement, gentrification, and dislocation. It has created these global communities all around us. When I was saying that it's local, I was thinking about MOCA and its relationship to Chinatown, which has always been a call for some kind of accountability to the people outside the institution's walls. But, of course, that's true for all cultural institutions. How they need to exist in our world. How we need to have some kind of voice and how they represent us and act on our behalf. I mean, ironically, I feel like a show about Asian America at the Mori in Japan would be very global because they have no idea what Asians in America, or particularly Japanese in America, do, who they are, and their histories. This would be totally exotic for them. It's flipping it in an interesting way.

DC

I'm so fascinated by thinking through how by necessity we have to respond to the local while pairing that response with the sort of internationalism that Howie was picking up on, and this question of how shows thinking through specific constructs of identity that are very locally oriented—how they might register, or absolutely not register in other places. For me, recently, I've been thinking so much about Singapore. I'm no expert in the identity categories in Singapore, but my understanding is that, in Singapore, there's a sort of broad categorization of people into four groups: Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Other. By necessity, artists working with identity and who they are, in that context, will have to respond to these categories that are recognized by the government.

Things such as housing and hiring equality, for instance, are measured by these categories. Quotas! Yet those categorizations from the perspective of America would seem very foreign to us: arbitrary divisions. People from all of these groups—understood to be very demographically distinct in that context—would ostensibly be understood as Asian American here! I keep going back to that to try to decipher how, conversely, the ways we sort, construct, and think about identities that have come to feel essential to Asian people in America—whatever that means—register elsewhere. I guess, for me, I find myself toggling back and forth between the categorization of ethnicities in America and Singapore to understand how what we're doing here might be very unreadable or even absurdist in other contexts.

HC

I think one thing to be careful about is exporting a type of identity politics and social relation that not only doesn't apply but is also hegemonic—Western and American. As we have seen, these types of politics can be institutionally instrumentalized as part and parcel of imperialist projects.

I'm thinking for example, with the recent US military withdrawal from Afghanistan, we became acutely aware of how Western feminist discourse was being employed to justify the occupation over the years and a measurement of progress. Of course, we want to participate in feminist causes on a universal level, however, in this situation, there is a colonial overlay obscuring local feminist efforts on the ground. It's very complicated but related to the particular and universal registers we have been intimating.

PP

I totally agree. Bottom line. If you accept the notion of the nation-state as the privilege category of differentiation or of mapping, it's just a very particular kind of object. It's a relatively simple one, it's a simple geometric object. From that perspective, the displacement of millions of people right now who do not fit within those sovereign shapes. It appears like an anomaly, but is it really an anomaly? Thinking spatially, there seems to be an insistence to think in terms of the basic geometric shapes. There are things that are in view now, such as the exponential growth of visualization tools which show us that through different filters space looks completely different. It looks like particles in one filter, and it looks like it flows in another filter.

We can flip these filters constantly to get a very accurate map that exceeds the accuracy of any one filter. The way of describing space now is about cognitively moving between different filters. It just defies the older idea and medium of reducing all space into these simple geometric forms that we call nation-states. How do we think of a construct for either narrating, exhibition-making or art object-making that can visualize and reveal that complexity seems like what we're trying to achieve. I can see why, Howie, you just put together all of the documents. It's super cool because it's like a time capsule. It's just like opening up an archive so that people can do many different things with it. It's not trying to tell the story per se.

RRL

I enjoyed the way you described the nation-state as a kind of media project, Paul. The space of the nation-state is perhaps the stickiest and most hegemonic form of geographical imagination since WWII. The map is indeed a representational technique set up to capture the imagination of territorial sovereignty. However, with new modes of visualization, we increasingly discern forms of deterritorial existence that fail to be at peace within the cartographical boundaries: the map and its discontent! Just as the map is a medium of the Nation-State, the archive seems to be a medium of History—it is only by emitting and remitting the archival that the historical can be surfaced by the retrospective urge in the many futures.

Tomie, at the book launch, you disclosed to me that you worked as the first librarian for Godzilla, and dealt with many archival errands related to the group in its early formation. Would you mind telling us what it was like? What did you have to deal with the letters, posters, flyers, notes, and other paperwork? Howie, you undertook the task of anthologizing a group that was active thirty years ago. In recourse to its archives, you did not use them as mere materials to knit a concise, linear history. Instead, as Dawn singled out, you expose them in their bare archival forms. There is a kind of crudeness or the laying bare of the infrastructure of the historical that fascinates me. As we know, archives have often been

configured as systems of storage and retrieval that produce historical value and cultural capital. What are the stories behind anthologizing its papers and celluloid that have completed the archival economy of Godzilla?

TA

My mother was a librarian—a card cataloguer and a reference librarian, so I find it ironic that I was Godzilla’s first librarian and put in charge of the archives, which included a slide registry, mailing lists, press coverage, reviews, publications, catalogues and contact information for all our members.

At the time, I wasn’t thinking about the historical importance of preserving these artifacts; I was just thinking that documentation could validate our work and could serve as a resource for the group, as we began to build our own art spaces and curatorial networks, and as important voices began to write about our careers. We could use the registry to argue for more representation and advocate for the field of Asian American Art, even if many of us weren’t entirely convinced that Asian American art, as a field, actually existed.

Howie’s use of the historical archives to unpack the story of Godzilla has made me think about longevity and the life cycle of organizations. The archives can live on, but sometimes there isn’t always a need for an organization to exist forever. The end of an organization isn’t necessarily the end of the story. Organizations can breathe life and possibility into what we do together, but they don’t need to outlive us.

In terms of Godzilla and the Museum of Chinese in America, I wonder if it’s okay to let go of our ideas about preserving and institutionalizing the past. What if we spent more time thinking about the future? What can we creatively imagine will grow out of this confrontation with MOCA and our demands for more accountability? What lies beyond this?

I joined Godzilla because I wanted to belong to something larger than myself. And it’s that same sense of excitement and purpose that has brought me to G19, the [Chinatown Art Brigade](#), and all the cultural collectives that are currently in formation. I do feel like the spirit of Godzilla can live on, but I’m perfectly willing to let Godzilla—and MOCA—take their place in history. If we’ve reached the end of this historical arc, we have no choice but to move on to something new.

HC

Your comments made me think about the archive from a psychoanalytic point of view. “Asian American” identity may be a construction but the social and psychic life of racialized people in America is very real. Both Anne Anlin Cheng (*Melancholy of Race*) and David Eng/Shinhee Han (*Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*) have deeply explored how we experience loss as part of the psychic and material processes of immigration, racialization, and assimilation of Asians in America, especially those resulting from war, economic displacement, and political oppression. Their writings and research influenced the way I approached this project and I found it meaningful to think about gaps in knowledge, images, and information we have.

Because of the fragmentation, displacements, and discontinuities in our histories, I think an archive can function as a set of materials to piece things together and narrate ruptures that have occurred. The archive is not there to make things whole or definitive—and we know that to be a fantasy. However, if

one of the goals in analysis is to gain a historical consciousness for your memories, feelings, and relationships, the archive can certainly facilitate that. The process of assembling this Godzilla archive has given me that perspective—to be able to account for my encounters along the way.