

# Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network 1990-2001

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By DANIELLE WU

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*“Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network 1990-2001” ed. Howie Chen was published by Primary Information at the end of 2021. The book is a comprehensive anthology of writings, art projects, publications, correspondence, organizational documents, and other archival ephemera from the trailblazing Asian artist collective “Godzilla”. The following is a Q&A between Offing contributor Danielle Wu and Chen, who is a New York–based curator involved in collaborative art production and research.*

**Danielle Wu:** The first question I had was, why now? I saw that you first began compiling material for this in 2020. And why in the format of an archive? Whenever anyone gets the book in person, they almost always comment on the size of the book. It’s like a tombstone.

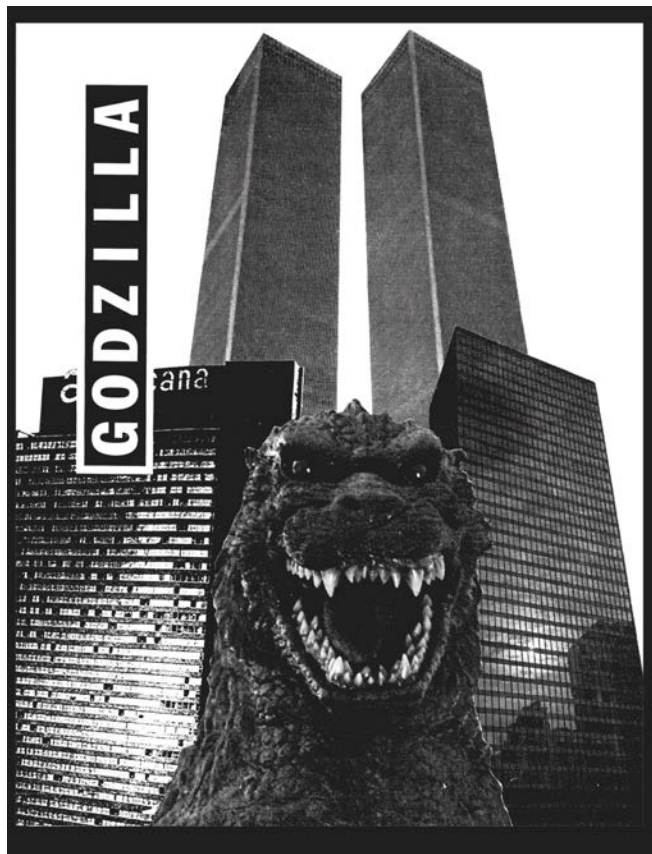
**Howie Chen:** During the depths of the pandemic lockdown last year in NYC, the stoppage of everyday activity gave me room to take stock of things. I found myself thinking about my involvement in the arts, pathways, and people I encountered.

At the time there was an overwhelming anxiety about the future, and it was also the beginning of the Black Lives Matter uprising. At the onset of the pandemic, people in our community had a heightened awareness of how COVID-19 as a virus was being racialized as an Asian contagion.

Looking back, I guess I wanted to reconcile this type of radioactive visibility in the public sphere that draws violence with the type of visibility that marginalized people have struggled for in the U.S.

When I came across information about a planned “Godzilla: Asian American Art Network” exhibition at the Museum of Chinese in America, it gave me an opportunity to think about this issue through the lens of a particular history within the arts — one that I feel like I may be a beneficiary of in some way. Here we have a group who successfully advocated for visibility and discourse in the cultural sphere, and I wanted to know more about it. So, my interest in Godzilla comes from these different political and personal registers.

The form of the project as a book followed this inquiry and research. Godzilla was active for a decade, so naturally there was much to include and highlight in the publication, especially since very little material has been available to study in any form.



Godzilla Newsletter 2, no. 2 (Winter 1992). Courtesy of Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network and Fales Library and Special Collections, NYU.

**DW:**

I suppose a good segue to Godzilla is how their co-optation mirrors other patterns in politics — for example, the enactment of the Hate Crimes Bill that just funneled money into law

enforcement in response to anti-Asian hate crime. Like, how much cultural cache does adding individual Godzilla members to institutional collections and programs actually give them?

In MOCA's case, many people called their exhibition about Godzilla "artwashing," as they accepted money in exchange for staying silent on the local jails being built. Even now, they continue to mount exhibitions about Asian American protest while turning a blind eye to the protests happening in real time outside their doors.

**HC:**

That disconnect seems to pervade all museums right now. The Godzilla and MOCA situation is a particular manifestation that speaks to the problems of the aesthetic representation of politics, curatorial negligence, problematic cultural funding, structural racism, and imbrication with carceral state. It's a crisis of liberal cultural institutions that we are confronting.



Selections from "From Basement to Godzilla"  
Portfolio Project for URBAN ENCOUNTERS at  
The New Museum, 1999. Courtesy of Godzilla: Asian  
American Arts Network.

**DW:**

My next question is about that fraught relationship with visibility within the generation that Godzilla emerged from, which is to say just a quarter century after the term "Asian American" even entered common nomenclature. It seems like politics play out in the art world with an extreme emphasis on visibility, which can ultimately be very abstract. Can we still advocate for visibility in a world where lukewarm inclusion is more easily granted than real structural change?

**HC:**

This is something I wanted to frame in my introduction, which aims to give a historical and critical dimension to the conditions you are describing. I wanted to trace how radical demands within the short history of the Asian American Movement starting from the 1960s were institutionalized and in turn neutralized to yield the type of politics of representation

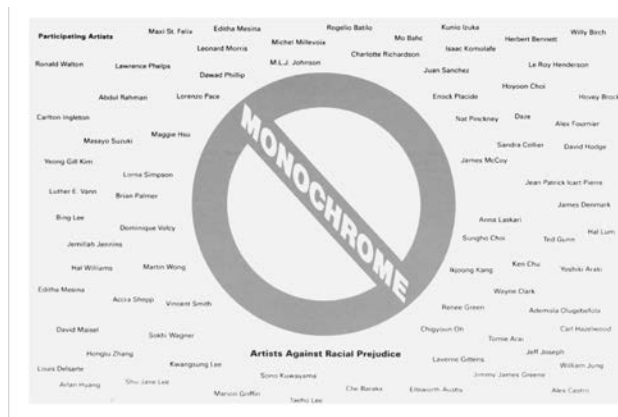
we see. The normalization of racial identity as essential to our subjective experience has had policy effects in institutions and their programs. What began as an insistence on participation in the public sphere on a political level now has a fate in the wholesale visibility politics we see today.

With Godzilla in the 1990s, visibility was an important initial step to secure basic resources and funding for Asian American artists and also to insist on the value of their cultural production within the contemporary art landscape. This problem still exists; however, the stakes have become more complex than box checking and headcounts. There is a demand for complexity and real institutional transformation that is not being registered in museums, galleries, and the market.

I wanted to show that there were a multitude of positions embodied by Godzilla that emanated from different subjectivities and politics. It was important to include material regarding institutional racism, Western imperialism, anti-Asian violence, the AIDS crisis, and representations of Asian sexuality and gender. These issues intersect with different subject positions and not necessarily under one racial identity — they cut across different social categories.

I think in terms of how critique is neutralized via institution. It would have to begin with a discussion about how liberal cultural institutions invoke radical positions but do not come to embody the politics.

We see this time and again at the level of nonprofit spaces to big box museums. They are ready to tell the story of radicality and reify its politics as aesthetics, but they are increasingly unable to manage the contradictions in their own house.



“THE MOSAIC OF THE CITY” presented by Artists Against Racial Prejudice and The Center for Art and Culture of Bedford Stuyvesant, Inc., 1990 Courtesy of Sung Ho Choi Collection.

**DW:**

Maybe we can zoom a little on institutionalization and nonprofit spaces by looking at MOCA, which you end the book on. As much as we have already rehashed what’s going on, I

found it painful to look at the collapsed timeline you assembled. In the first pages of the book, you have Margo Machida and Ken Chu declaring that an Asian American institution would be a dream that has uniquely not been achieved by Asian Americans (for example, African Americans have the Studio Museum in Harlem). In the last pages of the book, the enemy they face is their own institution.

**HC:**

I can see how this can be a tragic narrative, especially with a cultural institution that emerged from the culturally vibrant and critically rigorous space of the Basement Workshop. I also understand that a lot of community effort went into building an institution like MOCA to embody the hopes and desires of a national museum.

At the same time, I believe that the recent crisis with MOCA and the rightful protest over its involvement in the Jail Plan is productive not only for discourse and understanding of the stakeholders' positions in the community but also as an important moment to confront what we want from a cultural museum. It lays bare and escalates people's positions and commitments. It would be great to have our "own" national museum; however, if it is not accountable to its immediate community and the wider public, we must demand transformation. Otherwise, there is no need for a cultural museum . There are others doing the job right that we should elevate and support instead.

**DW:**

You had also mentioned that you see yourself as a beneficiary of their legacy, and you and I both have stakes in Godzilla's decision-making even though we were not part of the original group. In many ways, it was about the integrity of their original values, too.

**HC:**

Yes, what I was referring to is that I feel that we all benefit from past social struggles, including Godzilla's efforts. Progress is not just about professional placement. The dominant narrative of Godzilla privileges the success of specific curators and artists that became institutionally recognized; however, I think the lasting legacy and value of their efforts is in the critical engine and community they built and how it continues to be generative 30 years after its founding.



Group portrait of Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network, 1991. Photo by Tom Finkelpearl. Courtesy of Tomie Arai.

**DW:**

It's interesting that you call it a narrative, because I found that this book disrupts the common narrative that Godzilla achieved progress, that they were successful because a few of their artists got into museum collections. Are there any moments that stood out to you as surprising?

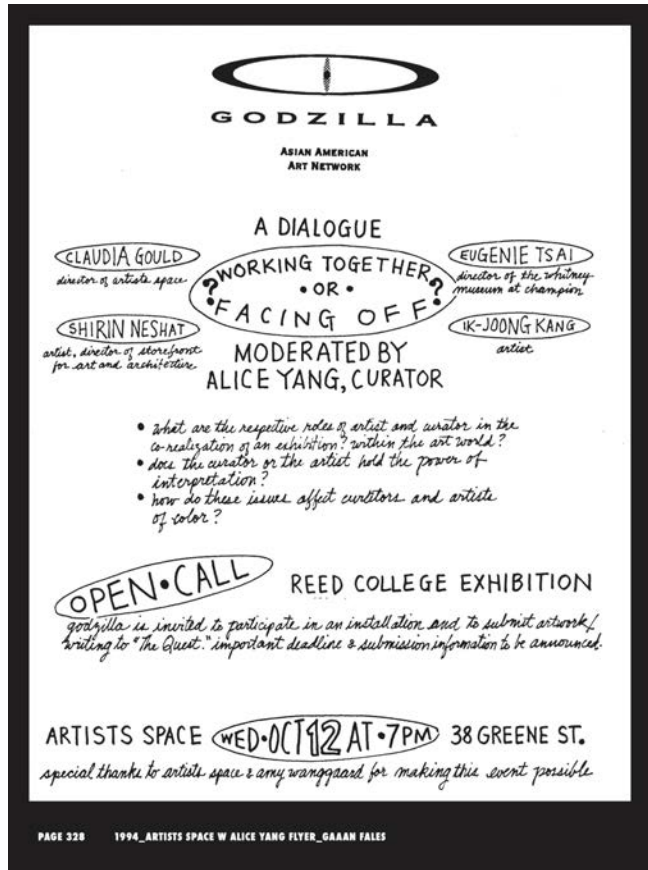
**HC:**

I'm drawn less to moments in Godzilla history than to the consistent resistance demonstrated in correspondences and letters of protest included in the book. This includes ones addressed to the NEA, Franklin Furnace, Whitney Museum, Artists Space, Broadway, and so on. The mechanics of protest are what interests me in the material.

I was struck by these documents and how these letters were very much a public address. They cc'd everyone from co-workers, press, other institutions, museum directors, and Godzilla members. This tactic was imported from Ken Chu's days in Act Up and other feminist organizations members were involved in during that time. For Franklin Furnace and the Whitney Museum, there was a positive resolution to the forceful correspondence in each case. Those actions were aimed at awareness and reform, which they achieved. We are continually reminded of the power of open letters, including the ones protesting the Whitney and MoMA's funding in the recent past.

**DW:**

Another type of archival material that struck me as odd were these records of panel discussions or reviews of artist talks that involved anyone from bell hooks to Thelma Golden from the Studio Museum in Harlem. Now that most people rely on recordings or corporate social media platforms, you don't have many critical perspectives digesting and publishing those minutiae anymore. For example, I loved Paul Pfeiffer's review of "Out in the 90s," a panel of artists, writers, and critics at the Whitney Museum on November 3, 1991. You get to read about audience reactions in addition to general disappointments {WC?} launched at the speaker, who seemed to imply that identifying as gay would discredit his voice.



Courtesy of Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network and Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network Archive; MSS 166; Fales Library and Special Collections, NYU.

**HC:**

I agree. I was similarly impressed by the cross-pollination of these panels — maybe it was a multicultural moment compared to the particularized silo programs we have today. An amazing example is the “reORIENTING: Self Representations of Asian American Women Through the Visual Arts” symposium (1991), in which Tomie Arai is in dialogue with bell hooks and Eunice Lipton on the topic. What a line up!

As for the Godzilla newsletters, they were platforms to amplify conversations and to materialize discourse in an urgent manner — because it didn't exist anywhere else.

In Godzilla's archive, I particularly like Alice Yang's review and short thinkpiece, "Asian American Exhibitions Reconsidered," (1993) on *The Curio Shop* exhibition at Artists Space — it ends with a concern about the sustainability of Asian American exhibition strategies, as a productive critique concerning marginalized people in the age of multiculturalism.

I find that kind of critical "calling in" missing today, especially with social media mediating and isolating everyone. For instance, in Asian American art discourse, different projects on the political spectrum — ranging from Stop DiscriminAsian or Gyopo to Godzilla 11 or Chinatown Art Brigade — don't really cross paths in terms of debate or staking points of possible solidarity.

**DW:**

Yes! Let's talk about Alice Yang's *Curio Shop* review. She makes a pretty bold claim in her question "Can the link between race and artistic practice be conceived beyond the logic of simple negation or illustration?" Why are we still asking the same question today?

**HC:**

I think this is an extremely prescient question and it continues to apply to all people being "represented" by exhibitions. Rarely do you ever get other artistic modes to work with. Although today we are seeing tons of allegorical artwork standing in for identity, which is kind of like the craft IPA beer of negation and illustration.

Yang ends her incisive essay with this amazing line: "The task at hand is not to hegemonize the category of race but to decenter it."

**DW:**

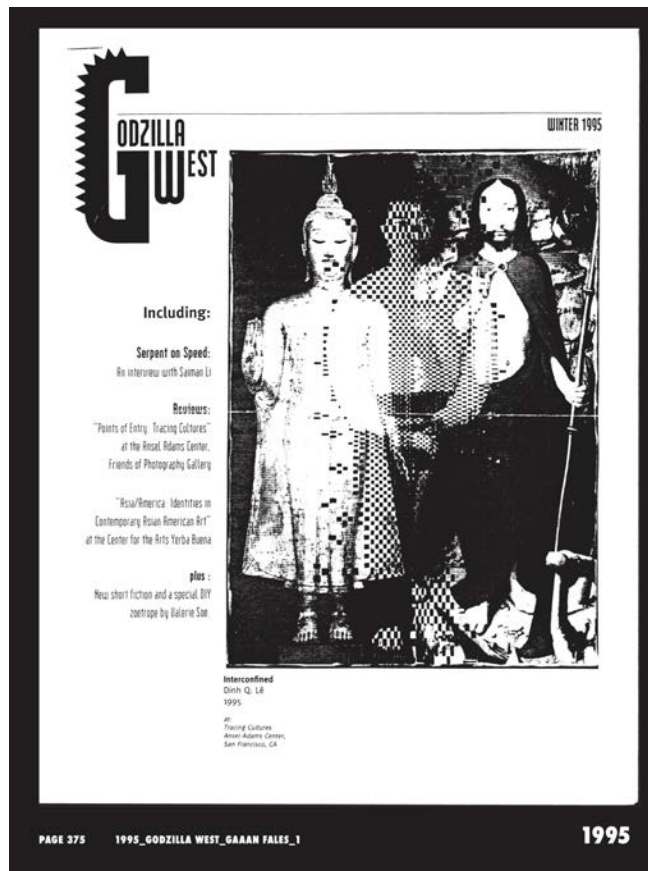
I found it interesting that their stated mission at first was "documenting and supporting" and serving as a "dynamic forum"; then by 1997, Godzilla's mission was refashioned into "increase the visibility and opportunities of its constituents."

**HC:**

There are a few different versions of the Godzilla "mission" in their 10-year history and I also found this evolution interesting. It might be reflective of the change from an initial goal of creating autonomous institutions, creating art historical knowledge, and producing information to a more professional advocacy and social forum role, a change that members shared in interviews and research accounts.

My take is that it is in conjunction with the quick adoption of institutions to satisfy some demand for visibility and representation, and also the growing fatigue of American multiculturalism which ceded to globalism in the millennium. It eclipsed a lot of local demands in a new Neo-liberal market order of internationalized art and consumption — toward the big-tent biennial format with cosmopolitan participants.





Courtesy of Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network and Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network Archive; MSS 166; Fales Library and Special Collections, NYU.

**DW:**

I wanted to touch upon the fact that Godzilla was a product of its time, of physical proximity and community, before artists were priced out of certain neighborhoods due to gentrification. Ken Chu even organized the exhibition “Artists Against Racial Prejudice” at the Center for Art and Culture in Bed-Stuy. This is something you don’t see nowadays, except for maybe in the case of Betty Yu and Tomie Arai with Chinatown Art Brigade and Margaret Lee with N-MASS. If the social progress of multiculturalism resulted in so many Asian faces in prestigious institutions, where are they in these more local protests?

**HC:**

For me, these community crossovers and involvements were important to highlight in the book. I was lucky that a Godzilla member, Sung Ho Choi, had this material in his archives, and my conversations with members during that moment continue to believe that intersectional and coalition-based organizing was the key to emancipatory goals. Especially with the AARP show and Monochrome exhibition, it was responding to community racial tensions and also creating a shared space for artists of color. I believe “Mosaic” was organized partly in response to the Family Red Apple Korean Deli boycott in Brooklyn. Just

looking at the list for the “The Mosaic of the City” exhibition, you have artists like Martin Wong, Ken Chu, Bing Lee, Arlan Huang, Tomie Arai, alongside Renée Green, Lorna Simpson, Juan Sanchez, and so on.

As for today, one of the important tasks is to link these particular situations and protests to the shared struggle over inequality, displacement, structural racism, state violence, and the transformation of our cultural institutions to serve the public.

Or maybe, we need more BTS army and less Shangchi — or perhaps we can join them too.

**DW:**

Are you referring to the time that they flooded the Blue Lives Matter hashtag with fan cams?

**HC:**

Yeah haha

**DW:**

And finally, I wanted to ask what you think about the value of Asian American organizing now, because as you mentioned, one of the dangers of narrativizing Godzilla’s story as necessarily a tragedy or victory that happened long ago is to portray the issues they raised as already tidied up or rather minor. To be honest, I think no one is as dismissive of or embarrassed by this identity as Asian Americans themselves, who have learned how easily they can be co-opted and so don’t want to even begin the struggle from that foundation.

**HC:**

Just like how Godzilla collaborated with the Basement Workshop and its politics to demonstrate the continuities of AA organizing, I organized the timeline leading to the present to show the long tail of politics that begun in the 1960s. I think the future of AA organizing can still look like the multiple and overlapping relationships represented in the book. I listed the different affiliations of members in addition to Godzilla and also included material from other organizations to punctuate this.

For instance, today, we are seeing strong overlaps with anti-gentrification, labor, prison abolitionists, and artist activists in New York. I feel that AA organizing right now is emboldened and that we should continue with the momentum along with others in the fight.

