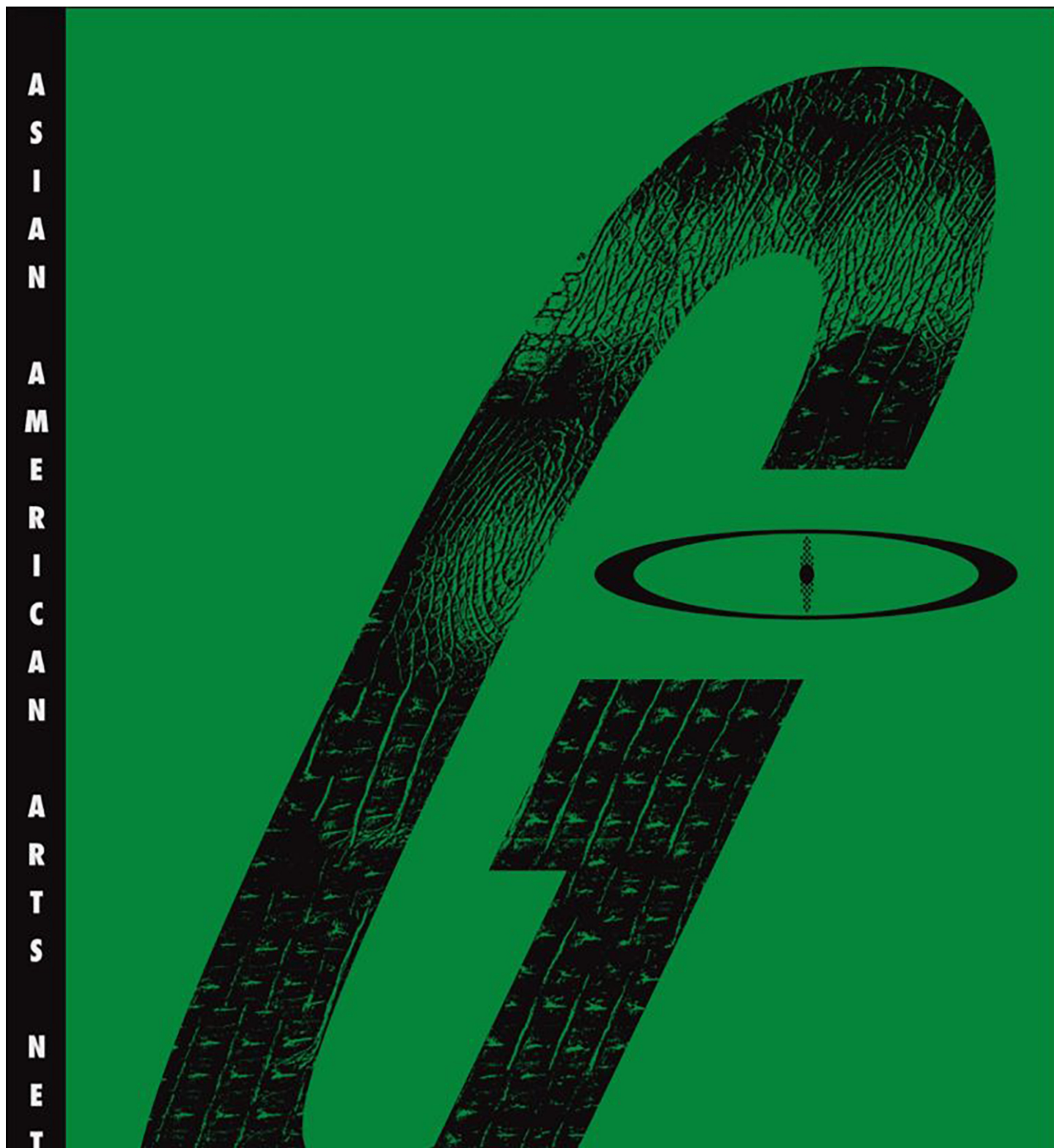


Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network 1990-2001

Lucy Lippard ∴ 4/5/2022





An extraordinary compendium of meeting notes, announcements, protest letters to institutions, and essays tracking the evolution of Asian American identity and beyond.

Edited by Howie Chen

Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network 1990-2001

(Primary Information, 2021)

In July 1990, Ken Chu (aka “the Lizard King himself”), Bing Lee, and Margo Machida got together to consider founding an Asian American art museum, or an exhibition, or an organization, or a publication, or a “guerrilla-styled” library. Mo Bahc, Carol Sun, and Tomie Arai to the next meeting and soon a lively group formed, eventually arriving at the collective name Godzilla, “the Anarchistic Lizard,” or “a monster that threatens to topple everything in its way.” Translated from the Japanese *Gojira* after the initial 1954 horror movie, which spawned the 1960s Godzilla sequels and may have had a hermetic political message, the audacious name endowed the “model minority” with street cred and a mythical pop-culture power which never failed to impress.

Now the collective’s decade of hard, intelligent work on behalf of the Asian American artists’ community has been immortalized in a tome of 550 pages. *Godzilla* was heralded as a “Best Book of 2021” by the *Brooklyn Rail*, where Louis Block wrote that reading it “is a reminder that community building is itself a form of resistance.” The book is an extraordinary compendium of meeting notes, announcements, protest letters to institutions, other miscellany, and most notably some meaty essays tracking the evolution of Asian American identity and beyond. Indicative of evolving identity politics, in 1995, halfway through its decade of activism, the group’s subtitle—*Asian American Art Network*, was changed to *Asian American Pacific Islander Art Network*. (Sadly, its appealing informality allowed for no index, though it would have been a Godzillian task.)

GODZILLA
Asian American Art Network
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New York, NY 10013-0864

Godzilla is a New York-based group of Asian American visual artists and art professionals whose goal is to establish a dynamic forum that will foster information exchange, mutual support, documentation and networking among our expanding numbers across the United States.

With the influence of Asians & Pacific Islanders in this society rapidly growing, visual artists are also emerging as a strong presence with voices that must be recognized. Godzilla was formed in the summer of 1990, impelled by a shared belief that we must develop forums capable of addressing our needs as artists. They include:

- The need for publications, exhibitions and programs that highlight Asian American artists and issues;
- The need to produce critical writing and provide forums where writers can focus on Asian American visual artists;
- The critical need to document contemporary artists to create a unique Asian American art history; and
- As a means of mutual support and empowerment, the need to investigate what other Asian American artists are doing, on a national level.

For further information, contact Ken Chu at 718/855-8385.

PAGE 164 1991_GODZILLA DESCRIPTION_STEFANI MAE



Group portrait of the members of Godzilla Asian American Art Network, taken in 1991 for the cover of Godzilla Newsletter 1, No. 1 (Spring 1991). Back row (l-r): Byron Kim, Bing Lee, Eugene Tsai, Karin Higa, Arlen Huang, Margo MacKillop, Charles Yuen, Janet Lin, Helen Oh, Celia Lee, Tommie Arai. Front row (l-r): Ken Chu, Garson Yu. Photo by Tom Finkelpearl. Courtesy of Tommie Arai.

PAGE 165 1991_ICONIC GODZILLA PHOTO TOMIE ARAI

1991

Courtesy Primary Information. Photo: Naoko Maeda.

My notes from the book are longer than this review. It makes for engrossing reading for art activists, and must-reading in these days of (temporary?) focus on “diversity.” *Godzilla* includes ongoing discussions about whether to take a Pan-Asian approach or to highlight the specific identities of a diverse array of homelands and backgrounds—Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Filipino, East Indian, and so forth. These mixtures have spawned some significant artworks in a broad span of mediums and styles, most by Godzilla members, that were eventually recognized by the mainstream art world. While a collection of scans is not set up to feature specific artists or artworks, to those in the know, the underlying span of aesthetic styles and

intentions is huge, ranging from Yong Soon Min's conceptual based work, Tomie Arai's murals and photoworks, Bing Lee and Byron Kim's content-oriented abstractions, Mel Chin's environmental projects, paintings by the late lamented Hung Liu, and many other (now) well-known names. The book is dedicated to Karin Higa, the charismatic senior curator at the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles, who started out in New York and tragically died of cancer far too young.

I often recall a curator from a major New York museum asking, when my book *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* came out in 1990, "Where did you find all these people?" As though the Basement Workshop, American Indian Community House, Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art had not been active for many years. (And that was just in New York.) Godzilla emerged to challenge such willful institutional ignorance that had marginalized Asian American art from the mainstream menu. Socially involved organizations like Group Material, PAD/D, CoLab, and others were better informed, but never well enough.

The book begins with "Seeing Yellow," artist/scholar Margo Machida's brilliant essay for *The Decade Show* in 1990, the first high-profile New York exhibition to acknowledge and explore multiculturalism. Exposing the multiple and heterogenous Orientalist stereotypes emphasizing the folksy and traditional (and racist) that continue to plague the contemporary Asian American arts community, Machida wrote:

America is neither "melting pot," "orchestra," nor "salad," but a loose confederation of autonomous subgroups in dynamic interaction. [...] In developing interethnic interpretations that limit Eurocentric assumptions, it is necessary to establish a body of knowledge based on local description—both in the societal context in which distinctive Asian American artforms are produced and in understanding their functions as symbolic constructs and worldly objects.

Alas, her analysis remains relevant some thirty years later, as does the explosion of outrage in 1982 at the murder of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American mistaken for Japanese by two white autoworkers during an economic downturn blamed on Japan. Given the recent rise in violent hate crimes against Asian Americans, Godzilla's empowering activist approaches are significant.

Godzilla had significant predecessors, from which some of its members emerged. The Basement Workshop was the first Asian American activist art collective, founded in New York's Chinatown in 1970 to highlight cultural/political issues and grassroots community mobilization. The Chinatown History project was another inspiration, as was the 1982 founding of the Chinese American emigré-focused group Epoxy. In 1998, the New Museum included in its *Urban Encounters* show an installation titled *From Basement to Godzilla*, tracing this impressive trajectory, which had also spread to the Bay Area with Godzilla West.



Courtesy Primary Information. Photo: Naoko Maeda.

In Artists Space's 1993 *New World Order* series, Godzilla offered *The Curio Shop*, its "first collective installation project," targeting stereotypes, which Homi K. Bhabha has called "arrested forms of representation." Godzilla, as Lawrence Chua put, was the "Bull in the China Shop." Pamela Lee's text focused on "Asian Fetish"; the fetishizing of Asian women was an ongoing issue for feminists. Within every ethnic constituency, feminist responses are often culture specific, a fact that had escaped most of us earlier second-wave activists. As Machida wrote in 1991, Asian American women's relationship to mainstream white feminism is "conflicted," because the mainstream "remains primarily associated with a gender focus,

whereas women of color” must see themselves in the light of race, sexuality, immigration history, and class as well.

Godzilla was not free of the controversies around identity politics with its own community. California artist/curator Betty Kano wrote a critical review of Machida’s 1995 exhibition *Asia/America*, noting “the claustrophobic effect of focusing on identity” and the “largely upper-class” origins of many of the artists. Godzilla member Carol Sun, raised in an Irish/Italian neighborhood in the Bronx, recalls bullying, sexism within her own ethnicity, and the all-too-common question, “Where are you *really* from?” Lurking in all of these issues is what Higa called “the flimsy and scientifically unsupported notion of race [which may] make any race-based alliance suspect,” but Godzilla’s openness and “non-judgmental stance [...] accommodated critique at the same time it strategically accepted notions of race as a pragmatic organizing principle.”

Godzilla regularly took on mainstream institutions, most notably in 1991 when they challenged the Whitney Museum’s omission of Asian American artists in the Biennial. The group rose again, post-mortem, in 2020, when many of its former members opted out of a planned retrospective (*Godzilla vs. The Art World*) at the Museum of the Chinese in America, another Basement offspring, to protest its support for the construction of a local jail and suspect city funding for the museum.

Godzilla had no official end, “just slowly petered out” in 2001, as Higa put it. Its official “last exhibition,” *Why Asia?*, was dedicated to the active writer/curator Alice Yang, who died in 1997. However, it can be argued that Godzilla actually had no end at all. Despite its historical success, it continues to be a necessary model for contemporary ethnic activism, and this book will amplify its influence. In a 1992 newsletter, Augie Tam wrote from California: “May Godzilla stomp and wreak havoc on the American bastions of cultural elitism!”

[edit](#)