ENVISIONING DIASPORA
Asian American Visual Arts Collectives
FROM GODZILLA, GODZOOKIE, TO THE BARNSTORMERS

Alexandra Chang
BASEMENT HAD ENDED, but the feeling of the need to unify in support of Asian American art remained, especially amid a surge in the Asian immigrant population during this time that began to see the immigration of Southeast Asian and South Asian nationals. Concurrently, from 1980 to 1990, the total Asian Pacific American population grew 95 percent. The communities with the largest growth included Indian, Korean, and Vietnamese with 125 percent growth. The Chinese and Filipino communities would round out the top five ethnicities by population increase, with 104 percent and 82 percent growth, respectively. In addition, according to the Immigration and Naturalization Services Public Use Files, from 1990 to 1997, the top 20 new immigrant groups to come to New York City included those who hailed from China (8%), the Philippines (3%), India (3%), Bangladesh (2%), Pakistan (2%), Uzbekistan (2%), Korea (1%), and Hong Kong (1%).

Meanwhile, East Asian art had already gone through a century-long process of being led into mainstream institutions, ushered in by New York City elites who wished to build a cosmopolitan city that could compare to other international cities such as Berlin, Paris, and London. Fledging Asian American art was still at arms, struggling for visibility in the art world.


4. John S. Baik, “Reorienting Culture: New York Elites and the Turn Toward East Asia,” Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University, May 1998, 2. “In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a number of New York institutions made China and Japan a priority, marking a reorientation of the city’s high culture to include East Asia. In some cases, elite interest in the East sparked the founding of new organizations, while in other cases, established institutions shifted or expanded their traditional areas of concern to include East Asia. These included established institutions such as Columbia University, the American Museum of Natural History, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as well as newly-created institutions such as the Rockefeller Foundation and the Japan Society.”
In the late '80s, artist Yong Soon Min helped to form the first board for the umbrella nonprofit organization the Asian American Arts Alliance. Although Fay Chiang's main intention had always focused on forwarding the interests of Asian Americans and the formation of an Asian American identity, for Min, Basement Workshop was encouraging, but also heavily Chinese and Japanese, observing:

Especially with Basement, because it was located in Chinatown, it reflected the early formations of and make up of the Asian American movement in the early days. It was so heavily Japanese and Chinese. That was the core basis of the Asian American movement in the early stages, so I don't think that it was really able to reach out to a broader spectrum of Asian Americans….I don't think there was a sense of identity and ownership of Basement, what they were doing, really from the broader segments and also the newer immigrant community.

Third generation Asian American from Hilo, Hawaii, Margo Machida had moved to New York City's Chinatown in 1988 to become a writer and fell into the membership of Basement Workshop, which included writers such as Jessica Hagedorn as well as Chiang. After Basement, Machida met artist Ken Chu and was his first studio visit in Brooklyn since his move to the East Coast. The two also worked together as artists-in-residence at the Asian American Arts Centre at 26 Bowery in Chinatown that was an outgrowth of Basement. In December 1988, Machida curated "Invented Selves: Images of Asian-American Identity," at the Arts Centre, which included Chu as one of the three participating artists. The exhibition examined how these artists used "self-imaging to investigate their sense of Asian-American identity" and "reject facile, stereotypic representations of Asians." The brochure text continued: "Alternatively, these artists do not invent heroic or idealized models to compensate for the unsettling and persistent feelings of dissonance and displacement which often confront racial minorities when positive images of the dominant ethnic group represent the norm." The exhibition's identity-based political tone was representative of the positivist-orientated exhibitions of the pre-Godzilla 1980's that also included discussions on diversity and multiculturalism.
But, Godzilla was able to avoid the trap of remaining within guidelines or the views of a board of directors. Instead, even the goals of the members of the group would differ and there was no one voice that could iterate the exact goal of the group at any particular moment. Although he was often sought after to play spokesperson for the collective, Chu avoided serving as the voice for the group. Instead, Godzilla would form committees of about eight to ten people that would lead certain projects such as the newsletter or an exhibition, and these committees would change up with each new project. Also, for funding, the group would solicit funds from individuals as well as in-kind donations. On the newsletters, flyers, and exhibition programs, long “thank you” lists named individuals for donations of time and funding. While the group did receive a grant from Art Matters as well as MCAF to help fund the newsletter and other small grants such as from the North Star Fund, they did so as an artist collective rather than as an institution with the fiscal sponsorship of the Asian American Arts Alliance, then under the leadership of June Choi and later Lillian Cho, and then directed by Holly Block. Instead of a paid staff, the membership’s committees were volunteer-based, paid perhaps only by the annual Zilky awards to honor those who had dedicated themselves above and beyond for the collective.

There was a conscious attempt to distance itself from a specific activist agenda, save for its goals for visibility for artists. The many different voices of the collective were unified within the group due almost solely to issues pertaining to the practice of visual art, and for the most part were not driven by other political issues. Although, many affinities did intersect for some. Tomie Arai explained:

I remember Yong Soon, at the time the Gulf War was going on and she wanted Godzilla to take a stand against the Gulf War and there was a publication that Godzilla was publishing and there was a discussion about that if people wanted to as a group make a political statement. I think that it turned out that Yong Soon wrote an editorial, but there was a bit of a hesitancy about everybody coming together to make a unified statement, only because it was just too diverse a group. I mean there wasn’t even a majority of Asian Americans in the group.\(^{23} \)

Alternative Worlds
At this time in which political identity discourse was heightened in the art community, the alternative minority art community was pushing for recognition within the mainstream as well as creating its own avenues for exposure. “The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980’s.” (1990) was a perfect example of the kind of conversations happening in the alternative art community. The exhibition consisted of a collaboration between the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, and The Studio Museum in Harlem and presented artists from Godzilla and other groups including Epoxis, the Guerrilla Girls, Gran Fury, Group Material, and Tim Rollins and K.O.S.

Machida served as a consultant to the ambitious exhibition that significantly included several Asian American artists, whose works she would also document within the show’s catalogue essay “Seeing ‘Yellow’: Asians and the American Mirror.” These artists included Martin Wong, Tomie Arai, Yong Soon Min, Ken Chu, Epoxis, Y. David Chung, Pok-Chi Lau, and Tom Nakashima.  

The Director’s Introduction for the catalogue explained the intentions of the three museum directors through a written dialogue. Marcia Tucker, the late founding director of the New Museum of Contemporary Art wrote: “My idea included work of people who were invisible in the mainstream but who seemed to be really critical to an understanding of the period.” Nilda Peraza, founding director of the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, which closed shortly thereafter in 1991, underlined the infused political nature of the artwork in detailing: “Today, as a result of what was built up in the eighties, there is a definite sense of a politically conscious field [...]” She continues “[...] I felt that the decision we took, that collaboration be issue-oriented rather than one of pure aesthetics or formal concerns, was critical.” While The Studio Museum’s Kinshasha Conwill explained: “A real value of this exhibition is that it is integrally part of a critical look at the artists [...] Not necessarily in some kind of ranking, but to see how their issues are engaged or not engaged with the issues of other artists.”
The curatorial perspective of the decade was based upon issues dealing with artists who were alternative to the mainstream, and shellacked onto the artist's work and the artist formations—such as African American art or Latino art or Asian American art or alternative art. Necessarily, the discourse apropos of Asian American art, artists and collective formation was inherently infused with the language of what Peraza calls "parallel aesthetics." According to Peraza, "parallel cultures' has very much to do with the issues of exclusion and alternative aesthetics. Out of those social forces, the artistic orientation of the artists of our community developed, apart from the primary concerns of the mainstream."

While the term Asian American was imbued with empowerment during the post Civil Rights era of the mid-'70s and '80s, the term's conscious appropriation was reflected in the term "Asian American art." But slowly in the '80s, the term was again reincorporated into mainstream categorization through the institutionalization of multiculturalism. By the early '90s, there was already a backlash against multiculturalism as evidenced by the controversial process of the NEA's awarding of a grant to artist Mel Chin. Artist Byron Kim, an avid contributor to the Godzilla Newsletter, wrote an article titled "NEA Chief Reverses Denial of Grant to Mel Chin." Kim described how in August 1990, artist Mel Chin was granted $10,000 and then had the award rejected by then NEA head John Frohnmayer "unilaterally" without a peer panel. He continued: "In December, Frohnmayer asked Chin to redraft his application for resubmission for reconsideration and in February 1991, Chin was awarded the grant under pressure." Kim quotes The New York Times as citing that "the painter Helen Frankenthaler 'questioned whether the demand for cultural diversity and social consciousness in grant giving was subverting the criteria for artistic excellence.'"
“Quality” was another issue that emerged in relation to work created during this time. Critic Roberta Smith wrote in her review of “The Decade Show” for the *New York Times* in 1990: “But it must also be said that much too often the art in this exhibition nourishes the heart and mind more than the eye. Sincerity, alienation and just causes don’t necessarily make convincing artworks. Regardless of questions about individual artworks in this rangy exhibition, ‘The Decade Show’ confirms that visual quality is a many-splendored thing that emanates from all sectors of America’s multicultural society.” 34 What exactly this slippery notion of “quality” meant when discussing art was debated in the article “Notion of the Q Factor” in the *Godzilla Newsletter* in Summer 1992, questioning the development of alternative viewpoints on which standards are created and on which a work of art can be judged. 35


35 “Notion of the ‘Q’ Factor,” *Godzilla Newsletter*, Summer 1992, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2. Artist Dorothy Imigre’s notes from her slide presentation during a Godzilla meeting and open panel discussion co-facilitated by Tomie Arai and Kenji Sakamoto at Art in General on March 23, 1992 are transcribed in this unsigned article, which notes in reference to Homi Bhabha’s view on the question of setting standards and quality: “The work that addresses issues of cultural identity—Asian American—has not really been addressed before. We do not have a guide or standards for this yet. (Standards for work by Asian Americans which address mainstream genres, themes, styles will be judged by those already established values. The mistake occurs when work that does not address mainstream issues is judged by those standards.) As we continue to show, write, and talk about work addressing Asian American issues, we will begin to form ideas about standards. It will perhaps occur to us after the fact that we did construct the standard, but as Bhabha says, it will not be from scratch in a logical order.”
YONG SOON MIN
GODZILLA

Known for her involvement in decolonialist art activism and her interactive performances in collaboration with her husband and artist Allan deSouza, Yong Soon Min is a dynamic multimedia artist creating work from video to sculpture to staging “bed-in” protests for peace.

Min was born in a small village south of Seoul in a war-torn Korea in 1953. She was initially raised by her grandparents while her mother and brother lived in Seoul, where her mother found work on a U.S. army base. Her father had moved to the U.S. two months before through the assistance of an army officer he worked for as a translator. At the time, her father majored in English and was completing his college education in the U.S. with the eventual plan of bringing his family to the U.S. But the Syngman Rhee regime prevented her family’s emigration from Korea.

When Min turned six, she joined her mother and brother in the city. At seven, she witnessed the successful April 19, 1960 people’s movement that overthrew Syngman Rhee. At age ten, her family immigrated to the U.S. to begin a new chapter in her life with her father in the idyllic setting of Monterey, CA. This early family history would come to penetrate the core of her artwork as an adult.

In high school, entranced with the romance of French impressionist painters Modigliani, Toulouse-Lautrec, and other circurou-y-clad Absinthe-sippers, Min was also deeply involved with the arts program and served as the president of her school’s art club. However, she led a double life of sorts. “My parents didn’t realize the extent to which art had taken over my life because I kind of kept that from them. I was afraid that they wouldn’t approve, so my room was my secret room that they never entered, and that was my atelier,” smiled Min at the recollection.

Despite her parents’ alarm at her decision to go to art school, Min was able to attend the University of California at Berkeley in 1972, after the intensity of the People’s movement had subsided. She studied painting, but by graduate school, she had given up on painting and became more curious about conceptual art. Influenced greatly by the film archives at Berkeley and French New Wave filmmakers, such as Godard and Truffaut, and the film theory they generated, she entered the Whitney Independent Study Program in 1981, where neo-Marxist theory and art criticism meshed with where she found herself intellectually. Throughout her career, she would balance scholarship, writing and critical theory along with her personal artwork, teaching at University of California at Irvine as well as curating exhibitions.

After teaching printmaking for a three-year stint in Ohio, she came back to New York in 1985 and took on a part-time job as the administrative coordinator of the then-freshly minted Asian American Arts Alliance. “In terms of my own development, I think the work for the Asian American Arts Alliance was a catalyst for that...prior to the Asian American Arts Alliance [I] had no Asian American identity. I wasn’t aware of that,” explained the artist. After her work at the Alliance, she became involved with Young Koreans United, a Korean organization based out of Jackson Heights, Queens. Min recalled: “They did multifaceted work, service to communities, immigration issues, after school programs, and they also had a very radical political base as well, where they were aligned with the student labor movement for democratic change and re-education, and that organization was formed by a political exile from Korea.” It was there that Min learned a revisionist history of Korea.

In 1984-85, her interest in Korean history and her identification to Korea as a “cold war baby” helped to formulate her first works that dealt with her personal history in relation to Korea, the early black-and-white drawings Back of the Bus, 1953 (1984) and American Friend (1984). Back of the Bus, 1953 is based on an old family snapshot of her mother sitting in a bus she would take to commute back and forth to her job as a coffee girl on a U.S. base. The bus is filled with riders including U.S. soldiers as well as Korean bus riders. At the bottom of the drawing, a filmstrip-like series of
images of the artist's profile and full head shot slowly turns to face the viewer. "It's to integrate myself into that story, so that I'm not just the narrator now, but I'm actually invested in this history that my mother was sitting at the back of the bus," said Min. "And it's sort of in Back of the Bus, I faced my civil rights." Her installation deColonization (1991) was a direct response to a packet Min received from the U.N. that declared 1990 as the "Decade of Decolonization." For the installation, she strung out a Korean traditional dress on which she wrote the words to a poem by Korean American poet Won Ko called "Home." The poem alludes to colonization as residing within the individual—united in place and time. Min has since ceased to use the traditional dress within her works. Min to signify Korean female subjectivity, they have been taken by some critics, unaware of her intentions, as an exoticization of Korean women. The artist explains: "I've also been a little concerned about the reception of these pieces because in many respects these pieces are the ones I've been more identified with, and I'm afraid of an essentialization that goes on in the way these pieces are received." Her installation The Bridge of No Return (1997) references the now non-operational bridge that crosses the military demarcation line between North and South Korea. Until 1953, POWs used the bridge and chose whether to return to or remain in either country, but never to cross back again. The installation consisted of a chain-link fence separating the gallery space in a serpentine yin-yang. On either side of the fence were placed pale pink commercial images facing one way, representing the South Korean partition; and pale blue propagandist clippings facing the other way, calling forth images of the propagandist recordings at the DMZ (Korean Demilitarized Zone) emanating from North Korea. Min's work contemporizes and brings the harsh currency of 1953's history into the gallery.

On a trip to the Havana Biennial in 1989, Min met photographer and conceptual artist Allan deSouza, who was in a group show of black artists from Britain and was staying at the same hotel. "We kind of gravitated toward each other. We were interested in sharing information about the Black British movement and the multicultural movement in the U.S." The artists exchanged addresses and during the "Interrogating Identity" exhibition at the NYU Grey Gallery in 1991 that called deSouza to New York, Min brought deSouza to present his work at a Godzilla meeting. "And it was at that meeting that I realized that, my goodness, he's really a terrific artist, and I really liked his work. So we really connected after." After a long distance relationship, deSouza moved to the U.S., and they were married and have since created more than half a dozen collaborations. "We share a lot of similar world views and interests...The content of our works are similar, but he's now focused in photography more and I've always been much more all over the place in terms of sculpture, installations and now, we're doing these interactive performances together," explained Min. In their installation after idaho-performance piece at CameraWork (1994) in London, the two artists questioned the notion of "native informants," highlighting the practice of anthropologist/ethnographers, who would call on "native informants" to explain their cultures. The Natural Museum-fieldwork-like quality of the show extended into the installation of a tent in the gallery. Around the gallery the artists lined prints of photos of native peoples taken straight on in negative, as if specimens of scientific documentation. Viewers were asked to use flashlights and enter and "discover" the tent and gallery space. The exhibition also included large-scale images of the couple wearing black T-shirts with either the word "Native" or "Informant" on the front and back. They are both posed within different backdrops throughout L.A., such as Mann's Chinese Theater or a car dealership with a marquee indicating "Domestics" and "Imports." Together the two playfully engage the gallerygoers, while luring them to tackle serious lingering questions of postcolonial modernity. Their joint project will "For Peace," first performed at the Mezzanine Gallery at the University of Minnesota in 2002 and then at Obozo Gallery in Montreal in 2003, recreated the famous Bed-In for Peace that newlyweds Yoko Ono and John Lennon staged in 1969 to protest the Vietnam War. For Min and deSouza, their Bed-In served as an unexpected environment to raise contemporary issues. Min recalled: "We really had so many misgivings about Bush's war against terrorism, so it was really a platform for us to talk about current issues." Visitors enter rooms in the gallery, greeted initially with a pillow, a metronome and a long wig, similar to Yoko Ono's long black hair. A room is filled with incense poised vertically in a grid around the floor, and a video is projected on the wall. The video is a mirrored projection of the artists in the final room, where they are conducting the Bed-In in the gallery space. Upon reaching the bed, gallerygoers are asked to cut the long black wigs worn by both Min and deSouza, referencing Ono's Cut performance. They are also invited in conversation with the artists and asked to add quotes to the wall filled with cutout thought bubbles. For Min, her homage to Yoko Ono was one she was able to perform only after working through many issues. "Her influence really grew on me because I always wanted to do something on Yoko, because when I was growing up, people would call me Yoko.


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Ono as a racial slur... this is the late '60s when she first came on the scene and became known to the majority of the people [as] that Asian bitch who broke up the Beatles, or something, you know?" explained Min. "First of all, I thought: I'm Korean. I'm not Japanese, you can't even tell us apart," and I know it was meant to be a derogatory racial slur. It was outing me as an Asian when at the time, I wasn't ready for it. I wanted to just be like everybody else. I was on an assimilationist mode... But, as I matured in my artistic knowledge, I grew to appreciate her work and really to respect what she did as an artist, and also in her personal life as well. The kind of creative relationship she was able to forge with John... I mean collaborations from music to this amazing interactive performance work and it was really radical."

Min and deSouza continue working on collaborations as well as curatorial projects that break the mold. For deSouza, the collaborations are an important "model for a politicized art practice." In their "XEN: Migration, Labor and Identity" (2004) exhibition at Ssamzie Space in Seoul, South Korea, Min combined an interactive video installation that asked the viewer to look through the viewfinders of a number of video cameras placed in abbreviated "sets," staged to position the viewer in the place of the artist conducting the interviews. The footage of interviews with several immigrant workers was played from the cameras. Also part of the exhibition, a video titled "Moving Target" exposed the vulnerability of migrant laborers protesting on the streets in Korea.

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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
Yong Soon Min, Moving Target, video still, 2004.
Courtesy of the artist.

Yong Soon Min and Allan deSouza, from 1994 installation entitled, "Alter Idem/PerformingPersona".
Courtesy of the artist.
respectively. However, the artist has left remnants from his everyday contact with these images, leaving traces of hair, dust, and debris marking the images. While the photographs’ details are obscured, they have gained another dimension, of the artist’s lived experience in the present tense.

It was not, however, until deSouza came to the U.S. that he would begin his photographic work. While in England, during his undergraduate experience at Bath Academy of Art and then Goldsmiths College in London, he painted. Later, he became involved in theater and political street performance. During this time, deSouza was also active in the Black Arts Movement. Influenced by the alternative art scene that was highly motivated by the anti-establishment punk movement, the artist squatted in abandoned buildings and put up art exhibitions, and as part of the collective Community CopyArt, taught other artists how to use photocopiers for artwork, flyers and other projects. deSouza was also a founding member of the artist collective Panchayat Arts Education Resource Unit, which he helped start in 1988. His writing and art practice constantly overlapped, composing and editing fiction and criticism for journals such as Antrage, a London-based art magazine published by the alternative nonprofit organization Minorities Arts Advisory Service, and Bazaar, a London-based magazine that featured South Asian Contemporary art.

In 1991, deSouza exhibited his work at Gray Art Gallery in the exhibition "Interrogating Identity," and it was then that he was asked by his future partner Yong Soon Min to speak at his first Godzilla meeting about his work (see text box on Yong Soon Min for more on the pair’s collaborative work). deSouza would come to guest edit and write for the Godzilla Newsletter. The themes of collective visibility and combating of a postcolonial past that inhabited the world of the Black Arts Movement seemed to run parallel to the Asian American art movement’s efforts in the U.S., tying the two artists into collaboration, as well as naturally bringing deSouza into the Godzilla membership. He observed: “I had already been involved with art collectives in London, and thought they were a necessary part of my artistic engagement with political and social questions. Godzilla was an obvious overlap with my own interests and social positioning.”

His work continues to engage the viewer with contemporary socio-political issues. In his photo colleges in the Divine series, deSouza has taken aerial photos from his airplane window on the many journeys between his home in L.A. and his teaching position in San Francisco. While images of clouds, the sky, and the sea soon become commonplace in their repetitive viewings through his window, like a Rorschach inkblot, they take on a new interest as deSouza mirrors and patterns them with his computer. Similarly, in his UFO series, he combined segmented images of airplane and runway sections to create monumental totems resembling rockets or spaceships. The viewer questions what they are seeing. Again, he creates a fiction through everyday items, colored more vibrantly than how they might have been originally perceived. An additional narrative is layered onto these photographs. The title of his January 2008 exhibition at TaiWai Gallery in New York City read: “(I don’t care what you say) Those Are Not Tourist Photos,” a direct quote aimed at deSouza by a fellow passenger from the U.S. who, living in a panic-driven code–orange ether, profiled deSouza as a terrorist.

1 From the pre-print document from Allan deSouza for “My Mother’s Life: Sight,” The Oldest Marv I’ve Ever Seen: Maui Lawn (University of Arizona Press, March 2008).

2 Allan deSouza, email interview by the author, January 6, 2008.

3 Ibid.