GLOBAL CONTEMPORARY ART BY WAY OF CHINATOWN: CHINESE AMERICAN ART IN NEW YORK CITY, 1970-2000

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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New York City, a major capital of the art world since the mid-20th century, has long been an important center for site-specific contributions by avant-garde artists interested in activism, identity, and collectivism. This dissertation investigates the transnational praxis of artists working in New York City's Chinatown at the end of the 20th century. This time frame encompasses a key period of rapid global, political, and economic transformations, perhaps nowhere more so than the People's Republic of China (PRC). Following the end of Maoist rule in the PRC (1949 – 1976) and repeal of the Immigration and Nationality Act (1965) in the United States, many artists from East Asia emigrated to cultural centers like New York. Manhattan's Chinatown, where many artists settled, witnessed a rise in activism, artist collectives, and non-profit gallery spaces because of increased immigration and heightened understandings of global events, including the Vietnam War (1955-1975), Student Protests of 1968, and the Cold War (1947 – 1991). My dissertation examines the visual cultures and oral histories of four Asian diasporic and Asian American artist spaces and collectives in Chinatown to emphasize the importance of site-specific understanding of global contemporary art. My primary case studies are the Basement Workshop, an Asian American artist-activist space (1971-1986); Epoxy Art

Group, a Hong Kong artist collective based in New York (1982-1992); the artist collective Godzilla Asian American Art Network (1990-2001); and the Asian American Art Centre, a non-profit exhibition space in Chinatown, founded in 1983. I unearth phenomena integral to global contemporary art history including cross-cultural understanding, nationalism, institutional critique, and methods for expanding the art historical canon. I suggest that global contemporary art produced during the late twentieth century is best understood through site-specific case studies that demonstrate the local impact of these phenomena. I conclude by proposing oral history as a method for global contemporary art history. I argue that the benefits are twofold: first, to empower marginalized artists, including those working in artist spaces and collectives in late 20th century Chinatown, to voice their own stories and, second, to account for local perspectives and site-specific contributions within an increasingly global art history.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
INTRODUCTION	1
Artistic Networks in Chinatown	4
Methodology	7
Identity and Global Contemporary Art History	12
Global Contemporary Art by Way of Chinatown	13
Episodes in Chinatown's History	18
I. FRAMING DOWNTOWN: THE BASEMENT WORKSHOP AS ALTERNATIVE ART SPACE	23
Foundations	24
Constructing Alternative Space	30
Intersections of the Local and Global	36
Developing an Alternative Art Aesthetic	41
Legacies of the Basement Workshop	44
II. EPOXY ART GROUP: PROJECTING IDENTITY IN CHINATOWN	48
Works on an Apartment Wall	54
Erotic Projections	55
36 Tactics for Artmaking	59
III. GODZILLA ASIAN AMERICAN ART NETWORK VS. THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART	64
Collective Foundations and Rising Internationalism	65
Critiquing the 1991 Whitney Biennial	69

"A Scapegoat for the Ills of Art" 76
Identifying the Local within International Exhibitions 78
The 1993 Whitney Biennial 80
The 1993 Whitney Biennial in Seoul 82
IV. GLOBAL CONTEMPORARY ART AND ORAL HISTORY AS METHOD 86
Collecting Oral Histories and Proposed Methodology 95
The Asian American Art Centre 97
Case Study: Oral History with Bob Lee 100
Exhibitions in Discussion 100
Process for Gathering Oral History 101
Recording the Oral History 104
Transcription the Oral History 105
Oral Art History: Remaining Considerations and Summary 106
CONCLUSION 111
CODA: GODZILLA RETURNS 119
APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPTION OF ORAL HISTORY WITH BOB LEE 124
BIBLIOGRAPHY 157

INTRODUCTION

> What I knew was that I would always carry around with me some of the city's ethos.
> Ai Weiwei on New York City[1]

Chinese artist Ai Weiwei 艾未未 (b.1957) is one of the most recognized global contemporary artists working today. Ai is known for political performances and installations that comment on global crises. Now established in the international contemporary art world, Ai spent ten years in New York City before his rise to world-renowned fame (1984 -1995). Like many diasporic artists, Ai first came to New York in the 1980s as an art student. There, he was exposed to conceptual and performative artistic practices that shaped his method of working to include socially-engaged works. Ai documented much of his life through photography, eventually earning him comparisons to American contemporary artists like Andy Warhol (1928 – 1987).[2] His New York photographs, first exhibited in 2010 by Three Shadows Gallery in Beijing, were some of the first public depictions of Ai's experience in New York.[3]

A sense of displacement in new locations is a familiar, universal story. However, Ai's feelings of isolation were inflected by a specific set of historically situated social

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[1] Ai Weiwei, trans. Allan H. Barr, *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows: A Memoir* (New York: Crown), 2021, 195.

[2] See Mark Stevens, "Is Ai Weiwei China's Most Dangerous Man?" *Smithsonian Magazine* (Washington D.C.), September 2012, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/is-ai-weiwei-chinas-most-dangerous-man-17989316/.

[3] Ai selected and exhibited 226 photographs from his New York days at Three Shadows Gallery in Beijing in 2010. See Ai Weiwei, et. al., *Ai Weiwei: New York 1983-1993* (Berlin: Gestalten, 2011). Additionally, Ai edited the *Black* (1993)*, White* (1995)*, and Grey* (1997) *Cover Books* to document the development of Chinese art in addition to taking thousands of photographs. Ai edited *Black Cover Book* with artists Xu Bing 徐冰 and Zeng Xiaojun 曾小俊, and editor Feng Boyi 馮博一. *Black Cover Book* was heavily influenced by Ai's life in New York, of which Tung writes that "[a] sense of dislocation had been a main feature of Ai's life in New York up until [the publication of *Black Cover Book*]." See Stephanie H. Tung, "Black, White, and Grey: Ai Weiwei in Beijing, 1993-1997," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 16, no. 6 (November/December 2017), 55-64.

conditions: the American response to the Vietnam War, Cold War fears, reports on China's Cultural Revolution, and Ai's jolting move from an authoritarian regime to a more cosmopolitan, yet fractious, one. Ai's unique sense of displacement in New York is documented within extant literature, such as the 2011 exhibition catalogue *Ai Weiwei 艾未未: New York 纽约 1983-1993*. Ai felt "a little bit…left out?" of the New York art scene.[4] These feelings of isolation were shared by Asian diasporic and Asian American artists working in New York and were exacerbated by Orientalist stereotypes ingrained in American culture.[5] However, I argue that Ai's conceptual photographs, many of which were produced after his arrival to the States, are not predicated on national identity. Instead, I suggest that art created in New York by diasporic artists is better understood in comparison to local contemporaries; diasporic artwork serves as evidence of conceptual trends specific to downtown New York, not just to Chinese and Asian diasporic artists in Chinatown. This perspective frames diasporic artists' experiences as extensions of their local environment instead of reflections of national identity.

This dissertation intervenes in the field of global contemporary art by way of Chinatown. I detail stories such as Ai's to call for a site-specific understanding of art history. In the field of art history, efforts to internationalize and diversify the art historical canon coincided with related economic and global phenomena. Notions of globalism are pertinent to the field of contemporary Chinese art history, the area of study my project

[4] Stephanie H. Tung, "Black, White, and Grey: Ai Weiwei in Beijing, 1993-1997," 57.

[5] The word "Orientalist" is a reference to Edward Said's seminal text, *Orientalism*. In *Orientalism*, Said argues that representations of the "Orient" in art and literature (Asia, but specifically the Middle East) by the "Occident" (Europe) perpetuate a power relationship rooted in colonialization. The term also reflects stereotyped representations of East Asian culture. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

originated in, because perhaps no nation has expanded as rapidly as China in the late twentieth century. Alongside this unprecedented economic growth, Sino-American relations became fraught. These shifts are reflected upon in the field of global contemporary art and account for the fact that many of the phenomena related to globalization occurs in urban areas. Art historians like Jenny Lin, Meiqin Wang, Reiko Tomii, Meiling Cheng, and Sasha Welland have contributed to the field with urban-oriented contemporary Chinese and Asian art studies that consider how globalization is reflected in specific communities.[6] I follow in line of these thinkers: for us to comprehend global, we must direct attention to local. Where I differ, however, is that I consider the phenomena of artists working transnationally and ideas of diaspora as the element most integral to global contemporary art. Additionally, site-specific investigations reveal networks of community-based art that interpret globalization's forces. Here is where I find global contemporary art reflected at its best. Global contemporary art is rooted in local contexts worth further investigation.

Returning to Ai, it is evident that his rise to global fame would not have been possible without the community of artists working alongside him in Chinatown and downtown New York. Though artists Warhol, Keith Haring (1958 – 1990), and Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960 -1988), among others within the downtown New York scene, are recognized as integral to the development of contemporary art, Chinese and Asian

[6] See Jenny Lin, *Above Sea: Contemporary Art, Urban Culture, and the Fashioning of Global Shanghai* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019); Meiqin Wang, *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art* (New York: Routledge Press, 2016); Reiko Tomii, *Radicalism in the Wilderness: International Contemporaneity and the 1960s Art in Japan* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016); Meiling Cheng, *Beijing Xingwei: Contemporary Chinese Time-Based Art* (Chicago: Seagull Books, 2014); and Sasha Su-Ling Welland, *Experimental Beijing: Gender and Globalization in Contemporary Chinese Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

diasporic artists and collectives are often omitted from dominate narratives.[7] Ai collaborated and exhibited, albeit limitedly, with Chinese, Asian, and Asian-American collectives, and artistic spaces, including the Basement Workshop and the Asian American Art Centre, in Chinatown.[8] While Ai's career is well-chronicled in extant literature, little attention is given to the community-run organizations from which he and others of his generation emerged.

Artistic Networks in Chinatown

In this dissertation, I investigate artist-run spaces and collectives in Chinatown that helped catalyze many careers. In fact, one of Ai's first documented group exhibitions in the United States was *Ten Chinatown: First Annual Open Studio Exhibition* at the Asian Arts Institute (now Asian American Art Centre) in 1985, where he exhibited multiple paintings produced while a student at Parsons School of Design.[9] Though the physical paintings exhibited at the Asian American Art Centre do not exist anymore, the Asian American Art Centre (AAAC) has slide records of Ai's contributions.[10] One

[7] For example, the 2019 rehanging of New York's Museum of Modern Art's (MoMA) permanent galleries includes a room dedicated to the downtown New York art scene (gallery 202). Exhibitions centered on New York's urban influences have become increasingly popular in recent years, especially in New York City establishments. The Whitney Museum of American Art, also in New York, exhibited *Around Day's End: Downtown New York 1970 – 1986* in 2020, a show which examines the elusive intersections of architecture, urban design, public art, and their peripheries within the city. Additional exhibitions include dedications to clubs integral to New York's art history: the MoMA hosted *Club 57: Film, Performance, and Art in the East Village 1978-1983* in 2018; the Brooklyn Museum opened *Studio 54: Night Magic* in late 2020.

[8] Asian American Arts Centre director Robert Lee stated: "I recall Ai Wei Wei rarely came by, only once or twice did I see him hanging around and only later, in 1985 when he participated in an exhibition and helped finalize a poster for the show." Asian American Arts Centre, "Taiping Tianguo Revisited," Asian American Arts Centre, March 28, 2014, http://artspiral.blogspot.com/2014/03/taiping-tianguo-revisited.html.

[9] Asian Arts Institute, *Ten Chinatown: Second Annual Open Studio Exhibition* exhibition brochure, 1985, Asian American Art Centre Archives.

[10] Ai recalls throwing away most of the artwork he created in New York. See Ai Weiwei, *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows: A Memoir,* 187-8.

example, *Either, Neither,* which dated 1984, is massive, measuring 72 inches tall and 128 inches wide. Two life-sized outlines of female torsos are painted on top of a pink and red gridded background — one in black, one in white. The painting matches a description of a different but related artwork Ai produced at Parsons, now lost, which he describes in his memoir: "In my first class, I laid on the floor a large sheet of rice paper—the size of a twin bed—and with a Chinese writing brush I effortlessly outlined a life-size human figure."[11] It is unclear if *Either, Neither* was produced at Parsons. It does, however, reflect involvement with grassroots organizations in Chinatown such as the AAAC that shaped his career.

Ai, of course, was not the only Chinese artist to seek refuge in New York, and the remainder of my dissertation focuses on other, lesser-known artists in Chinatown. Following the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, several Chinese citizens, primarily from Southern China and Hong Kong, immigrated to New York City in search of economic opportunities.[12] Most immigrants to New York arrived from Hong Kong prior to the end of Moist rule 1976. Hong Kong was under British colonial rule and therefore much easier to emigrate from.[13] Included in this wave of immigration to the

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[11] Ai Weiwei, *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows: A Memoir,* 170-1.

[12] The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 formally eliminated Chinese immigration restrictions. Chinese immigration to the United States was illegal under the Chinese Exclusion Act, which was passed in 1882 and upheld until 1943, when it was repealed. The 1943 Magnuson Act implemented yearly quotas for Chinese immigrants. The 1965 immigration and Nationality Act eliminated quotas. See Michael Teitelbaum, *Chinese Immigrants* (New York: Facts on File, 2005).

[13] Many people from Mainland China who opposed Maoist rule first fled to Hong Kong from Shanghai in the mid twentieth century. See Helen Zia, *Last Boat out of Shanghai* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2019). There were protections afforded to Hong Kongers that those from mainland China did not have during this time, thus complicating the narrative that all immigrants from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan fled to the United States to escape communist rule. These distinct histories are explored in my dissertation.

United States were artists seeking an audience for experimental and political art otherwise forbidden in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.[14] While it is true that some artists fled the People's Republic of China's (PRC) oppressive governmental structure, this is often an overgeneralization that reinforced America's fraught relations with China.[15] For example, many of these artists, such as Ai, traveled to the United States to enroll in art schools abroad, like Parsons and the Art Students League.[16] In her book *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside of China*, Art Historian Melissa Chiu explains that Asian diasporic and Asian American artists often formed lively networks of Asian diasporic and Asian American artists in New York.[17] I suggest that the downtown New York art scene in the late twentieth century was far more integrated than has previously been described, which allowed for the development of collaborative artistic spaces and collectives to develop in and outside of Chinatown. As pointed out by Chiu, artists like Ai, who returned to China amidst their rise to global prominence at the end of the twentieth century, came to reflect contemporary Chinese diasporic art in art historical discussions.[18] I emphasize local contributions, such as Ai's participation in exhibitions like *Ten*

[14] New York's Chinese immigrants primarily hailed from the Canton region in southern China. Hong Kong is part of this region.

[15] Melissa Chiu discusses this topic in her book *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside of China*. See Melissa Chiu, *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside of China* (Milan: Charta, 2006), 8.

[16] In *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside of China,* Chiu quotes Chinese artists Ni Haifeng: "People always assume that I was repressed in China, but in fact I just kind of followed gravity. People are moving all the time." See Ibid.

[17] Maysching Kao, "Chinese Artists in the United States: A Chinese Perspective," in *Asian American Art: A History, 1850-1970* edited by Gordan Chang, Mark Johnson, and Paul Karlstrom (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 224. See also: Xinyang Wang, *Surviving the City: The Chinese Immigration Experience in New York 1890-1970* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Litchfield Publishers, 2001).

[18] Melissa Chiu, *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside of China*, 8.

Chinatown: First Annual Open Studio Exhibition, to integrate local histories within understandings of global contemporary art.

Taking inspiration from Chiu, who was the first to study Chinese diasporic art within the field of global contemporary art, this project investigates the activity of Chinese diasporic, Chinese American, and Asian American artists living in New York City in the late 20th century.[19] I focus my research on artist spaces, collectives, and cultural figures central to the development of New York-based diasporic art: the Basement Workshop, an Asian American artist-activist collective active from 1971 to 1986; Epoxy Art Group, a Hong Kong artist collective based in New York from 1982 to 1992; and the Asian American artist collective Godzilla Asian American Art Network, active from 1990 to 2001.[20] I seek to dismantle the "Otherness" that pervades current literature about New York City's artistic communities through the exploration of both foreign-born and American-born artists. Amidst fraught Sino-American relations, it is notable to deconstruct ideas of "China" in Chinatown as a symptom of American Orientalist beliefs and prejudice against Chinese peoples that extends to those from East Asia. In short, Chinatowns, though they signify China to Americas, are symptoms of generalization of Asia and East Asia more broadly.

Methodology

[19] Melissa Chiu, *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside of China*, 8.

[20] Participating artists in these collectives interacted and overlapped with each other and with other New York City-based groups during their tenure, including their offshoot group Godzookie, and the Barnstormers (still active, based in New York and Tokyo). See Alexandra Chang, *Envisioning Diaspora: Asian American Art Collectives: From Godzilla, Godzookie, to the Barnstormers* (Beijing: Timezone 8 Limited, 2008) and Margo Machida, *Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imaginary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

My dissertation coincides with the increased interest in contemporary Chinese art history. Exhibitions such as *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* (1998), hosted at the Asia Society in New York City and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, documented China's artistic rise amidst rapid socioeconomic change.[21] China's unprecedented economic growth also inspired exhibitions on Asian American art in the United States, including *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art* at the Asia Society in 1994.[22] Chiu describes a division in scholarship between artists working abroad and in Mainland China and argues that current literature on the topic does not intersect.[23] I join in this discussion of diasporic art by offering a *site-specific* understanding of Chinese diasporic artistic communities in New York to bridge this division. My three case studies include artists with varied cultural identities. I do not intend to conflate distinctions between diasporic and Asian American identities. Instead, I intend to highlight how cultural identities formed and shifted in relation to specific sites.[24]

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[21] See Gao Minglu, ed. *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Another recent exhibition includes *Art and China After 1989: Theater of the World*, held at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City (October 2017 – January 2018), the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao (May – September 2018), and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (November 2018 – February 2019). See Alexandra Munroe, ed., *Art and China After 1989: Theater of the World* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2017).

[22] See Margo Machida, Vishakha Desai, and John Tchen, *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art* (New York: Asia Society Galleries, 1994).

[23] Ibid. There is also remarkably little scholarship on Asian American art history, except for one textbook: Gordan Chang, Mark Johnson, and Paul Karlstrom, eds., *Asian American Art: A History*, 1850 – 1970.

[24] Here, I will address that my site of emphasis, New York's Chinatown, predominantly consists of artists identifying as Chinese, Hong-Kongese, or Chinese American, though artists identifying as Asian American, Japanese American, and Korean American also were part of the Basement Workshop and Godzilla. Epoxy Art Group consisted of artists from Hong Kong. My dissertation explores the intricacies of these identities.

"Site-specificity" in art history refers to art that derives meaning from, and is contingent on, the site of production. Art historian Miwon Kwon writes about the rise of site-specific art after 1960 in her book *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*.[25] Kwon considers site-specificity alongside the rise in public art, performance, and institutional critique, practices that challenge distinctions between the art object, the artist, the audience, and the site of production. I suggest that Kwon's ideas of site specificity can be used in studies of global contemporary art, especially as artists are increasingly mobile. Kwon alludes to this expansion of site-specific art, stating:

> Thus, if the artist is successful, he or she travels constantly as a freelancer, often working on more than one site-specific project at a time, globetrotting as a guest, tourist, adventurer, temporary in-house-critic, or pseudo ethnographer to São Paulo, Paris, Munich, London, Chicago, Seoul, New York, Amsterdam Los Angeles, and so on.[26]

Kwon's sentiment criticizes the temporary nature of these situations because mobility changes references to, and therefore the meaning of, site-specific works. I suggest otherwise; I argue that the amalgamation of global influences in works by artists working abroad offers an opportunity to reframe site-specificity as reflections of multiple influences and ideas of place within one artwork. This is meaningful because it allows for multiple perspectives and sites of artistic importance to emerge within the art historical narrative. Kwon's recent work on contemporary Korean Artist Do Ho Suh echoes this point. She writes of Los Angeles County Museum of Art's (LACMA) 2009 exhibition *Your Bright Future: 12 Contemporary Artists from Korea* sacrificed

[25] See Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002). Art Historian Lucy Lippard has also written on site-specificity. See Lucy Lippard, *Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: New Press, 1998).

[26] Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity,* 46.

> a rare opportunity to cut through the fragmented and homogenized terrain of contemporary art, which is propelled by the hegemony of the market, to delineate for their audiences' specific lines of artistic inquiry developing in and through Korea in recent years[27]

In unearthing accounts of the Basement Workshop, Epoxy Art Group, and Godzilla: Asian American Art Network, I looked to a variety of visual evidence for these site-specific exchanges, including architecture, documentary photography, posters, zines, community projects, pedagogical experiments, installation, and performance. This wide variety in medium throughout my analysis reenforces ideas of collaborative artistic praxis that bridged art and life in late-20th century New York, establishing a distinct artistic worldview. My approach is grounded in scholarship on material culture as key determinates of style and cultural values; the range of visual material I discuss are therefore often termed "artifacts" rather than "artworks." However, according to art historian Jules David Prown, there is little semantic distinction between art and artifacts. Prown proposes an "inclusive approach" to material culture studies, stating that "The inclusive approach asserts that just as the word *art* is incorporated in the word *artifacts*, so too are all works of art, as fabricated objects, by definition artifacts."[28] Prown also suggests that material culture is less mediated by scholars, and is therefore a more honest reflection of what society values. By including a range of mediums in this dissertation, I suggest that material culture should be discussed alongside artworks in studies of global contemporary art. Global contemporary art research hinges on expanding the canon to

[27] Miwon Kwon, "Flash in the East, flash in the West," in *The Migrant's Time: Rethinking Art History and Diaspora*, edited by Saloni Mathur (Williamstown: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2011), 199.

[28] Jules David Prown, "The Truth of Material Culture: History or Fiction?" *in History from Things: Essays on Material Culture*, edited by Steven Lubar and W. David Kingery (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2013), 2.

include underrepresented voices; it is therefore necessary to expand understandings of the art object alongside these discussions.

Noted documentary photographer and activist and Basement Workshop member Corky Lee (1947 – 2021)'s 1975 image of Peter Yew is an example my approach; it illustrates how material culture can reflect society's socio-political values. In this photo, Chinese American Peter Yew, dressed in slacks and a blazer, stands between two white police officers, his face bloodied. A man yells over the should of the left-most police officer, gesturing towards Yew, who pushes his hair out of his face. A group of Chinese Americans walk behind Yew and the officers with concerned looks. The photograph, which was published in the *New York Post*, inspired a series of protests in Chinatown against police brutality.[29] Interestingly, Lee's work, which was frequently relegated to material culture studies, is only now just earning recognition in contemporary art history. This suggests a shift in global contemporary art to include investigations of locally produced art within current literature. Lee's practice also demonstrated artmaking trends within the downtown New York scene. It was common for artists at the time to document life in New York as part of their practice, which included protests. Ai Weiwei, for example, photographed countless protests in Tompkins Square Park.[30] Those images are recognized in his artistic repertoire and were highlighted in exhibitions on his photography, including the exhibition at Three Shadows Gallery in Beijing, highlighted previously in this chapter.

[29] Hua Hsu, "Corky Lee's Photographs Helped Generations of Asian Americans See Themselves," New York Times (January 30, 2021), https://www.newyorker.com/culture/postscript/corky-lees-photographs-helped-generations-of-asian-americans-see-themselves.

[30] It is unclear if Ai knew of Lee's work.

Identity and Global Contemporary Art History

It is unsurprising that Corky Lee's image went largely unrecognized for decades. Bob Lee, director of the Asian American Art Center, reflects that it often felt as if the New York art world welcomed Asian aesthetics but did not make room for Asian artists. However, Bob Lee suggests that Asian diasporic artists working in New York in the late twentieth century had opportunities to alter the art historical narrative to include Asian and Asian American representation. He said in a 1985 article:

> We'll take your culture, but not you. Being an Asian impedes one's career and has a bad effect not only on artists but on U.S. culture. Yet these artists are in a unique position: they are pioneers of a new art that has important implications for people in Asia as well. They can gain insight into possible directions of cultural change in their own societies as they are inevitably influenced by the worldwide dissemination of Western ideas and values.[31]

Artists like Corky Lee used their art to amplify similar sentiments. Take for example Corky Lee's 1993 image of Manhattan's Chinatown**.** In the center of the black and white photograph, a hand holds a postcard of Chinatown depicting the intersection of Mott and Pell Streets, taken at an unknown date. Likely purchased in a souvenir shop, the postcard reads: "Greetings from Chinatown – New York" in a banner across the top of the postcard. The postcard is held in front of the camera lens by the photographer, who stands in the same spot as depicted in the postcard. The postcard serves as a comparison: Wing Fat Company, a pharmacy still in operation, features updated signage. A now-defunct Baskin Robbins overshadows signs for Mon Fong Wo Co, a grocery store still open today. People drift in and out of the shops in both images. When paired together, the

[31] Lippard, Lucy R. "Re-orienting perspectives by Asian American artists," *In These Times* 9, no. 29 (July 10-13, 1985), 21.

two images reveal nuances within Chinatown's urban environment and a changing landscape. Further, the visible hand in the photograph personifies the image and metaphorically suggests Lee's narrative control over what is often considered a site for tourism.[32]

The documentation of contemporary Asian and Asian American art exhibitions in the late twentieth century was equally sparse. Critic Lucy Lippard, herself working with the artist collective Art Workers Coalition (AWC) in downtown New York, was one of the only critics to write about Asian and Asian-American artistic contributions to New York's art scene. She notably reviewed Epoxy Art Groups' 1985 exhibition *Myths* held at Chinatown-based Basement Workshop for *In These Times*, in which she praised the artwork as a redefining Asian American art.[33] Artwork created within Chinatown's borders was also rarely shown by New York-museums, though the New Museum included work created by Epoxy Art Group in their ambitious *Decade Show* in 1990, which was jointly hosted by the New Museum, the Studio Museum, and the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art.

Global Contemporary Art by Way of Chinatown

[32] Most global contemporary art scholars have overlooked Chinese diasporic artists' collaborations with other New York artists in the downtown art scene, with a few prominent exceptions. Hong Kong-born artist Tseng Kwong Chi 曾廣智 (1950-1990) has been recognized for his photographs of popular American artists including the aforementioned Haring, Warhol, and Basquiat. See Joshua Chambers-Letson and Alexandra Chang, *Tseng Kwong Chi: Performing for the Camera* (New York: Chrysler Museum of Art/Grey Art Gallery/Lyon Artbook, 2015). Taiwan-born Tehching Hsieh 謝德慶 (b. 1950) is celebrated for his contributions to the global development of performance art, namely through his *One Year Performances* (1978 – 2000). Chinese American painter Martin Wong (1946-1999) has also garnered attention for his painted depictions of life on the Lower East Side. See: Dan Cameron and Carlo McCormick, *Sweet Oblivion: The Urban Landscape of Martin Wong* (New York: Rizzoli, 1998).

[33] Lippard, Lucy R. "Re-orienting perspectives by Asian American artists," 21.

This project focuses on the overlooked and under-studied community-based artistic practices of Chinese diasporic and Chinese American artists in New York as related to the field of global contemporary art history. Ideas of global contemporary art are pertinent to this topic because Chinatowns are in and of themselves a phenomenon of globalization and a hub for diasporic communities.[34] The rise of Chinatowns around the world mirrors immigration trends and reflects economic and legal changes: concepts related to increased internationalism.[35] This project was originally conceptualized as a transnational intervention into the field of Chinese contemporary art. Derailed by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent ravel restrictions, I too focused my research locally, in turn unveiling how ideas of global contemporary art manifest on a community level. Noting my initial research trajectory, I address this project as Chinese American instead of Asian American, though I consider art by artists of a variety of backgrounds.

Scholars have yet to identify a global methodology that adequately rebukes the essentialist or universalist debates that pervade contemporary art history.[36] Global art historians such as Terry Smith have made preliminary attempts to "globalize" art history by revising the established contemporary art canon to include underrepresented, primarily non-Western, voices through methodologies that explore art historical similarities.[37]

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[34] Today, there are even numerous international art galleries in New York's Chinatown.

[35] Deng Xiaoping, leader of the People's Republic of China from 1982 – 1987, oversaw the opening up of China after Maoist rule, in which the nation was largely closed to outside influence. Paired with the establishment of Special Economic Zones in China and eased immigration regulations in the United States, many people began traveling between nations. See Aiwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

[36] Scholars including Keith Eggener have noted contradictions in this approach. See Keith Eggener, "Placing Resistance: A Critique of Critical Regionalism, *Journal of Architectural Education* 55, no. 4 (March 2006): 228 – 237.

[37] Terry Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents,* Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2011: 8-11.

However, this approach emphasizes the Western-centric canon instead of critiquing the aesthetic qualities of global art. Further, this methodology hinders discussions of dichotomies that extend beyond just East/West divides, including urban/rural, global/local, and individual/collective paradigms.

This methodological debate is especially pertinent to diasporic art histories because, as discussed earlier, artists are increasingly mobile amidst globalization, in which people reconciled with technological advances, social and economic changes, and increased connectivity.[38] This shift resulted in tensions of how to approach artists that are traversing borders and working beyond national traditions. Diaspora, a term originally used to describe Jewish people expelled from modern-day Israel, has been adopted into a variety of academic contexts to explain cultural production amidst migration, forced or otherwise. Since the term's inception, diaspora has been appropriated into a variety of academic contexts to describe a people's migration from their country of origin to multiple new locations, contradicting nation-based discourses. However, current perceptions on diaspora often suggest a stagnant divide between one's home country and country of residence and does not account for the shifting forces of globalization.[39] This phenomenon is reflected in contemporary Chinese art historical scholarship, in which there is large division in scholarship between artists working in Mainland China and abroad.[40] My dissertation avoids this reductionism by investigating diasporic artists

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[38] Sources such as Andreas Huyssen, ed., *Other Cities, Other Worlds: Urban Imaginaries in a Globalizing Age* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008) informed my ideas of globalization.

[39] There are notable exceptions to this, including Ananya Roy and Aihwa Ong, eds. *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2011).

[40] Melissa Chiu, *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside of China*, 8.

beyond the trope of "outside looking in" to further account for the site of artistic production and community-art to detail how ideas of transnationalism were interpreted.

Instead of a reductive comparative analysis, my project utilizes an episodic approach that investigates three events as reflections of global contemporary art in late twentieth century New York. Art Historian Peggy Wang uses a similar methodology, termed "microhistories," in her book, *The Future Histories of Contemporary Chinese Art*.[41] Wang presents a "zoomed in" view of contemporary Chinese art by selecting case studies that "provide new visibility to details of how [Chinese artists] saw the world and themselves within it."[42] I expand on this approach by incorporating material culture alongside my case studies.

I focus my attention exclusively on artists who are largely unrecognized in Asian or Asian American art historical scholarship. This follows in the steps of Chiu, who is well-regarded for providing a platform to unknown contemporary Chinese artists. In *Breakout,* Chiu writes about fourteen previously unrecognized artists living in New York, Paris, and Sydney. Chiu mentions the existence of the Basement Workshop in her chapter on New York, but focuses her analysis artworks produced after 1990, which offers opportunity for further analysis of Basement Workshop's and Epoxy Art Group's activities.[43] Another art historian highlighting artists after 1990 is Margo Machida, whose book, *Unsettled Visions*, presents oral histories of ten Asian American artists. The only other text written specifically about Asian American artist collectives in New York City

[41] Peggy Wang, *The Future History of Contemporary Chinese* Art (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 12-16.

[42] Ibid., 12.

[43] Melissa Chiu, *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside of China*, 55-114.

is *Envisioning Diaspora,* by Alexandra Chang. *Envisioning Diaspora* focuses on the histories of the Basement Workshop, Godzilla, and two Godzilla-offshoots: Godzookie and the Barnstormers. Chang explores identity politics amidst shifting definitions of diaspora to argue for the group's inclusions into broader discussions of multiculturalism. Chang's work offers an opportunity for further analysis to include these groups within global contemporary art discourse.[44] I therefore contend that extant scholarship on art of the Chinese and Asian diasporas opens further discussion in two ways: first, it allows for continued exploration into artistic exchanges beyond Chinatowns; second, it offers opportunity to reconsider artists at the onset of globalization and before 1990.

My project also engages with debates surrounding Chinese American and Asian American art history as distinct fields of study. In *Unsettled Visions,* Machida calls for an Asian American art history that is distinct from global and/or American art histories. Machida details her fear that adopting Asian American art into the global consciousness would deemphasize important debates of identity and local contexts.[45] Because Machida herself was a member of Basement Workshop and Godzilla, *Unsettled Visions*' anecdotal approach creates opportunity for other scholars outside of the network to engage in the material. By focusing on diasporic Chinese and Chinese American artists working in New York, I suggest that discussions of Asian American art should in fact be included in

[44] See Alexandra Chang, *Envisioning Diaspora.*

[45] Margo Machida, *Unsettled Visions*, 40.

global contemporary art discourses to enrich both subfields, especially in the context of New York City.[46]

Episodes in Chinatown's History

This dissertation is organized around three New York-based case studies. Chapter 1 explores how the architecture and visual culture of nonprofit art spaces and community organizations contribute to site-specific understandings of global contemporary art. My case study for this chapter is the Basement Workshop, an artist-activist space based in Chinatown from 1971 to 1986. Named in honor of their first basement studio, the Basement Workshop was founded amidst intense cultural shifts in New York City caused by Cold War (1945-1990) tensions, Vietnam War (1955-1975) protests, the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968), and the 1968 student uprisings around the world. Basement Workshop founder Danny Yung intended for the collective to provide space for Asian American artists to create and exhibit art celebrating their cultural heritage.

Beginning in the 1970s in lower Manhattan, several nonprofit exhibition spaces emerged in non-traditional venues, such as warehouses, factories, and lofts. These sites inspired radical artist-activist movements outside the established art scene because they operated without the institutional constraints of museums and galleries. I analyze Chinatown's architecture and the visual production at Basement Workshop, including

[46] My research is focused on New York art spaces and artist collectives, which are often overshadowed in contemporary art historical scholarship. An artist collective is typically defined as a group of artists working together to form a network of artistic exchange and work on a collaborative project, often with a common goal or message in mind. Artist collectives can operate internationally, such as Fluxus, or locally, such as the Art Workers Coalition. I suggest an expansion to the definition of an art collective to include not only participating artists, but also all influences on artistic production, including local politics, academic institutions, and shifts in dominant art practices such as the turn to socially-engaged art.

posters and the artist book *The Yellow Pearl* (1972), and suggest that more attention should be placed on site-specific art and architectural histories to better understand local ramifications of global events.

Chapter 1 also reveals political tensions within artist-activist spaces. Though the Basement Workshop included Asian American members with ancestry across Asia, political motivations and aesthetic inspiration came primarily from China. The Basement Workshop included many Maoist members who believed art to be inherently political. In fact, Basement Workshop's mission is said to be inspired by Mao Zedong's infamous "Talks at the Yan 'an Forum on Literature and Art."[47] Because of the early emphasis on pro-China political leanings and limited artistic production, Basement is largely unrecognized amongst New York art critics. The chapter reveals the importance of including nonprofit art spaces within the art historical narrative as a crucial component of New York's artistic climate in the 1970s, as well as present-day discussions of global contemporary art.

Chapter 2 considers how the use of nontraditional materials in urban contexts expands ideas of collectivity and identity within Asian diasporic artist collectives in New York City. My case study for this chapter is Epoxy Art Group, active from 1982 to 1992. In contrast to Basement Workshop's fluid membership list, Epoxy consisted of just six members: Ming Fay (b. 1943), Jerry Kwan (1934 -2008), "Frog King" Kwok Mang Ho

[47] Mao's "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" dictated that art should always serve a political purpose. See Mao Zedong, "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art," in *Mao Zedong and China's Revolutions: A Brief History with Documents*, edited by Timothy Cheek (Boston and New York: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2002), 112-116.

(b. 1947), Bing Lee (b. 1948), Kang Lok Chung (b. 1947), and Eric Chan (b. 1975).[48] All of Epoxy's members were born in China or Hong Kong before emigrating to New York City, but Epoxy members still considered their artwork to be uniquely inspired by New York City.[49]

In this chapter, I analyze three different media utilized by Epoxy that are considered nontraditional in art historical scholarship: apartment installations, slideshows, and xeroxes. I argue that Epoxy adopted alternative modes of artmaking to emphasize both individual and collective artistic voices. Though their materials and approach were unique, Epoxy's experimental art was also in line with mainstream contemporary art aesthetic trends, with work involving photography, sound art, and collaboration with other contemporaneous New York artists. The aesthetic similarities between Epoxy and other New York artists are therefore more apparent than the other two groups discussed.

Chapter 3 expands on ideas of institutional critique to call for inclusion of localized movements within large-scale national and international exhibitions. My case study for this chapter is Godzilla: Asian American Art Network, active from 1990 to 2000.[50] Godzilla was founded by Ken Chu, Bing Lee, and Margo Machida. All three

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[48] Esther Liu, Cissy Pao (b. 1950), Andrew Culver (b. 1953), and Zhang Hongtu (b. 1943) also collaborated with the collective. See "Art Across Archives: Postcards from Chinatown," *Think!Chinatown*, accessed April 30, 2022, https://www.aaa-a.org/programs/art-across-archives-postcards-from-chinatown.

[49] Margo Machida, *Unsettled Visions*, 29.

[50] Godzilla dissolved into Godzookie and the Barnstormers, neither of which will be discussed in depth in my dissertation. See Alexandra Chang, *Envisioning Diaspora*, 73-84.

founders were members of the Basement Workshop and/or Epoxy Art Group.[51] Specifically, I argue that Godzilla's interventions at the 1991 Whitney Biennial critiqued institutional claims of representing alternative voices, leading to institutional changes for the 1993 Whitney Biennial. I compare Godzilla's intervention with examples of socially-engaged art, including Hans Haacke's *MoMA Poll* and Group Material's *AIDS Timeline* (1991), to discuss the limitations of this art form concerning ideas of identity, collectivism, and institutional representation. Finally, I argue that the 1993 Whitney Biennial's traveling exhibition to Seoul, South Korea articulates the significance of institutional critique in large-scale national and international exhibitions.

Far larger than either Basement or Epoxy, Godzilla's aesthetic output was less unified. Considering trends towards relational art used in large-scale national and international exhibitions, this chapter explores how Godzilla's collective activism in New York art institutions can be considered part of the group's artistic practice. I relate these changes to analogous trends in the broader New York art scene to argue that the city consistently influenced all three of my case studies and shaped understandings of global events. In so doing**,** I do not aim to conflate American and Asian art histories. Instead, I intend to use this evidence to argue for the importance of framing artistic production in relation to local geographies.

My dissertation concludes by proposing a methodology for continued research. Chapter 4 incorporates scholarship from the public humanities to theorize ways in which my dissertation research can be distributed to a public audience via oral history. This chapter is complementary to my research on the Basement Workshop, Epoxy, and

[51] The original members of Godzilla were Ken Chu, Bing Lee, and Margo Machida, See Alexandra Chang, *Envisioning Diaspora*, 36.

Godzilla because their artistic practices relied on public participation. Though my dissertation focuses on the creative activities of Asian American diasporic artist spaces and collectives, this chapter offers an opportunity to apply my research to contemporary debates of how to account for local histories within the field of global contemporary art more broadly. I survey current literature on oral history and compile strategies for gathering interviews with curators and artists using best practices. I also suggest that using oral history as a method in global contemporary art research empowers marginalized artists to share their own stories, which provides a nuanced understanding of local issues within global contemporary art history. This argument is illustrated with a detailed account of my process of performing and transcribing an example oral history with Bob Lee, director of the Asian American Art Centre in New York. The chapter concludes with an appendix that contains the entire oral history transcript.[52]

[52] There are issues at stake when conducting oral history. In recalling events, people create narratives of events that were once disparate, in turn omitting, forgetting, and justifying specific stories. See Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) as one example of recent literature on memory, which complicates oral history research. I suggest that oral history should be used in addition to other sources to account for these contradictions.

I. FRAMING DOWNTOWN: THE BASEMENT WORKSHOP AS ALTERNATIVE ART SPACE

In 1969, artist Danny Yung and eight classmates, then students at Columbia University's Urban Center, compiled an intensive study of Manhattan's Chinatown.[1] The self-identified Chinatown Study Group completed the survey in December 1968, dedicating the final product to residents of New York's most famous cultural enclave. There was a need for this research: the Chinatown Report sought to identify overlooked needs of residents in anticipation of the 1970 Census.[2] However, the authors also intended to use this research to catalyze more immediate improvements in quality of life for those in Chinatown, namely, a cultural center specific to Chinatown.[3] In addition to revealing a dearth in understanding between Chinatown's residents and the New York City government, Yung's project, by gathering qualitative and quantitative data on Chinatown's residents, suggested that urban design, cultural programming, and activism were inexorably linked.

In 1971, Young founded the Basement Workshop in Chinatown as a site for activists and artists to gather. From 1971 to 1986, members hosted community events,

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[1] Columbia University's Urban Center sponsored urban research and community programs with funds from the Ford Foundation from 1967 – 1973. The Center's programs were later absolved by other departments after its' disbandment. Former director Lloyd A. Johnson said of the Center: "Some of our programs were very successful, and some not. Columbia cannot be a poverty program for any community." See Murray Schumach, "Columbia Closing Its Urban Center But Seeks to Replace It With New Minority Program," *New York Times* (New York, New York), July 1, 1973.

[2] Motivations for this study could also relate to immigration reforms in 1965, which repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act, thus allowing for more Chinese people to immigrate.

[3] The report states: "The study was initiated because of...the absence of 'hard' quantitative data adequately describing the nature and extent of conditions in New York City's Chinatown and with the hope of providing a foundation for the initiation of action programs, primarily of a long-term nature, by Chinatown residents and community organizations." See Chinatown Study Group, "Urban Design in Chinatown New York" (December 1968), in the private collection of Bob Lee and Eleanor Yung.

protested, and created art. This chapter explores the local and global artistic contexts informing the Basement Workshop's activities during its tenure from 1971 to 1986. I suggest that the Basement Workshop is integral to New York's alternative arts movement, which is characterized by the proliferation of alternative gallery spaces and collectives in Lower Manhattan beginning in the 1970s.[4] In this chapter, I begin by detailing the local architectural environment surrounding the Basement Workshop's founding as an alternative space unique to Chinatown. Then, I discuss the broader history of alternative spaces of 1970s New York to suggest that Basement fits within a wider artistic context than previously established. Finally, I consider artistic contributions of the Basement Workshop that reflect localized interpretations of political events, specifically the artist book *Yellow Pearl* (1972). I suggest that it is important to include nonprofit art spaces within the art historical narrative to better understand New York's artistic climate in the 1970s, as well as present-day discussions of global contemporary art. This chapter scaffolds my dissertation by discussing an important site of Asian American and Asian diasporic artistic activity. I build my argument by looking to architecture and posters to emphasize Basement Workshop as an exemplary site within global contemporary art scholarship.

Foundations

Yung founded Basement Workshop amidst cultural reckonings in New York. Of the 565 Chinatown residents interviewed in the Chinatown Study Group, 161 interviews said that the first member of their family to arrive in the United States, almost certainly

[4] For a comprehensive list of alternative art spaces, see Lauren Rosati and Mary Anne Staniszewski, *Alternative Histories: New York Art Spaces: 1960 – 2010* (Cambridge and New York: Exit Art and MIT Press, 2012).

from China, arrived between 1960 and 1969. The number arriving during the 1960s was equal that of the two decades prior, largely due to the 1965 Immigration Reform reforming the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and subsequent 1943 repeal.[5] Stemming from this history was the development of Chinatowns that offered new residents' cultural refuge amidst anti-Chinese sentiments in the United States. Scholars including Erika Lee argue that this history resulted in many feeling that Chinese people "were residing *in* the United States but were not *of* the United States."[6] Indeed, contemporary ideas of diaspora often enforce stagnant ideas of national identity idea that do not account for the shifting forces of globalization. This phenomenon is evident in Chinese art scholarship, in which there exists an implied division, both in art and its surrounding scholarship between artists working in Mainland China and abroad. While I do not want to dismiss ideas of national identity, I aim to complicate understandings of identity by detailing a site where artists identifying from multiple places around the world mingle and create art. This allows for a multifaceted identity to emerge alongside the call for a Chinatown center for art and activism.

Additionally, more nuance is needed to understand the multiplicity of identities in the Manhattan enclave and how identity informs artistic production. One way this is evident is through language: of the interviewees, 62.5% responded that they spoke Cantonese at home, 56.3% indicated that they spoke Toisen (Taishanese, closely related to Cantonese, from the Guangdong province). Only 8.3% indicated that they spoke

[5] Chinatown Study Group, "Urban Design in Chinatown New York" (December 1968), in the private collection of Bob Lee and Eleanor Yung.

[6] Erika Lee, "Both Chinese and American: The Chinese in America During the Exclusion Era," in *Chinese Culture within the American Context,* edited by Lorraine Dong (San Francisco, CA: The Chinese Culture Foundation of San Francisco, 1990), 13.

Mandarin, the standardized language of China since 1911, at home. The differences in language alone certify the need for a site-specific understanding of Chinese diasporic communities. The diversity within Chinatown's population compounds when considered alongside a tenuous Chinese and Asian American history. Chinese immigration to the United States, specifically to California, began in earnest during the nineteenth century with the gold rush and transcontinental railroad construction.[7] Even though few struck gold, many Chinese immigrants remained in California and later settled elsewhere around the country. Many were willing to work under poor conditions and for low wages, providing a significant work force for large-scale American projects like the Trans-Continental Railroad. Though many Chinatown residents arrived after 1965, many of the Chinese Americans they interreacted with were second, even third, generation citizens. This contentious history significantly differs from other (often equally contentious) sites of Chinese settlement, including Australia, France, England, and Canada. Today, New York is home to one of the largest populations of Chinese people outside of China.[8]

Geographic and sociopolitical circumstances greatly influence artistic motives and aesthetics, which impact the built environment.[9] Often, the built environment reveals cultural and societal phenomena integral to understanding global contemporary art history. Noting this, I argue that more attention should be placed on the art and architectural history of the site of production.

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[7] The Chinese name for San Francisco (*jiujinshan* 旧金山) translates to "golden mountain."

[8] "Overseas Chinese" translates to 华侨(*huaqiao)*, with "华 (*hua*)" used to described Chinese denizens (e.g., 华裔 huayi, or foreign national of Chinese descent), and "侨 (*qiao*)" translating to person living abroad.

[9] Melissa Chiu's *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside of China* discusses some of these sites. See: Melissa Chiu, *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside of China* (Milan: Charta, 2007).

Chinatown's unique built environment informed Basement Workshop beyond the space's naming. Architectural distinctions visually reflect the reasons why the group is omitted from art historical records while also revealing the unique circumstances associated with living in New York. For example, the Manhattan Chinatown, as one of the oldest Chinese enclaves outside of China, differs aesthetically from those around the globe.[10] A typical entrance to a Chinatown is marked by a gate.[11] Though Manhattan's Chinatown is one of the most populous Chinese ethnic enclaves outside of China, the New York neighborhood does not host the iconic gate that often identifies Chinatowns around the world. Instead, New Yorkers enter Chinatown via the Manhattan Bridge.[12] The Manhattan Bridge is a suspension bridge made of steel, with two towers holding the draped, suspended cable above the East River's current. The towers, now blue in color,

[10] It is worth noting that today both the Flushing, Queens and Sunset Park, Brooklyn Chinatowns outsize Manhattan's Chinatown in population and size.

[11] San Francisco's Chinatown is often discussed as a more "typical" Chinatown, in that its built environment signifies "traditional" Chinese architecture —including a gate. Scholars including Hongyan Yang have explored how the built environment of San Francisco's Chinatown does not display markers of China, but instead of Americanized understandings of "Chineseness." Manhattan's Chinatown differs, in that it more closely resembles that of other neighborhoods in lower Manhattan. See Hongyan Yang, "Toy's Chinese Restaurants: Exploring the Political Dimension of Race through the Built Environment," in *American Chinese Restaurants: Society, Culture and Consumption*, edited by Jenny Banh and Haiming Liu (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2020), 285-300.

[12] The Manhattan Bridge is one of 21 bridges connecting to Manhattan Island. Completed in 1909 and designed by architect Leon Moisseiff, the Manhattan Bridge crosses the East River to connect Lower Manhattan to Downtown Brooklyn via Canal Street – the main street of Chinatown. See Thomas R. Winpenny, *Manhattan Bridge: The Troubled Story of a New York Monument* (Pennsylvania: Center for Canal History, 2004) for a history of the circumstances surrounding the construction of the Manhattan Bridge. While there is limited scholarship published exclusively on the Manhattan Bridge, there is much scholarship written about the Brooklyn Bridge, a neighboring suspension bridge connecting Brooklyn and Manhattan. See Alan Trachtenberg, *Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); Richard Haw, *Art of the Brooklyn Bridge: A Visual History (*London: Routledge Press, 2008); David McCullough, *The Great Bridge: The Epic Story of the Building of the Brooklyn Bridge* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983). For a general history on bridges in New York, see Sharon Reier, *The Bridges of New York* (New York: Dover Publications, 2012). For a general history on suspension bridges see Kawada Tadaki, *History of the Modern Suspension Bridge: Solving the Dilemma between Economy and Stiffness* (Virginia: ASCE Press, 2010). For a history on bridges in America, see Richard L. Cleary, *Bridges (Library of Congress Visual Sourcebooks) (*New York: W. W. Norton Co., 2007).

feature a colonnade of crisscrossed beams on either side, topped with a series of four circular sculptures attaching the cables to the tower. The Manhattan entrance of the Manhattan Bridge features a triumphant arch and colonnade, with a design inspired from Porte Saint-Denis in Paris and the colonnade in St. Peter's Square in the Vatican City.[13] This gateway, which points in the direction of the Atlantic Ocean, opens to the heart of Chinatown.

Instead of a gate, other buildings have served as icons for Chinatown through the neighborhood's history. For example, Confucius Plaza is located at 17 Bowery Street. Confucius Plaza is a housing cooperative that was built in 1975; the 44-story brick building towers over Chinatown's Chatnam Square and was one of the first public housing projects for primarily Chinese American citizens.[14] Confucius Plaza features a statute of Confucius himself, designed by artist Liu Shih in 1976. Made of bronze, it stands atop a stone plinth near the housing cooperative. The sculpture depicts Confucius standing upright with his arms clasped in front of him, his body donning scholar's robes. A plaque on the front of the sculpture features one of Confucius' writings in both Chinese and English that reads:

> When the great principle prevails the world is a commonwealth in which rulers are selected according to their wisdom and ability. Mutual confidence is promoted and good neighborliness cultivated. Hence, men do not regard as parents only their own parents nor do they treat as children only their own children. Provision is secured for the aged til death, employment for the able bodied and the means of growing up for the young. Helpless widows and widowers, orphans and the lonely, as well as the sick and the disabled, are well cared for. Men have their respective occupations and women their homes. They do not like to see wealth lying idle, yet they do not keep it for their own gratification. They despise indolence, yet they do not use their energies for their own benefit. In this way,

[13] New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, "The Arch and Colonnade of Manhattan Bridge Approach," (November 25, 1975).

[14] See David Ostrow, *Manhattan's Chinatown* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2008).

> selfish schemings are repressed, and robbers, thieves and other lawless men no longer exist and there is no need for people to shut their outer doors. This is the great harmony.

These architectural markers within Chinatown suggest that the cultural enclave is neither typical of surrounding neighborhoods in Lower Manhattan, nor of Chinatowns around the world. Instead, Manhattan's Chinatown reflects a built environment distinct to Manhattan. It is in this setting that artist groups and collectives such as Basement Workshop operate as alternative spaces for art and cultural production, both in Chinatown and the New York art scene more broadly.

Considering the built environment as distinct to New York, there is a clear need for further consideration of artist-run spaces such as Basement Workshop as driving forces of local art movements. Though diaspora scholarship considers groups over individuals, art historical analyses frequently focus on one artist. This is an unfortunate oversight because, as simply stated by Cultural Historian Alan W. Moore, more artists work in groups.[15] This is especially true of late twentieth century Manhattan. Moore argues that the political climate post-1968 made it possible "…for the collective to emerge as a vital actor in the world of art," in New York City, especially.[16] Scholars such as Alexandra Chang have rethought definitions of diaspora to include a collective component; she defines her defining the term as "the formation of communities of affinity through the practice of active linkage and connection including performative interaction and cultural production."[17] Diaspora scholar Stuart Hall also argues that a

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[15] Alan, W. Moore, *Art Ganges: Protests and Counterculture in New York City,* (Brooklyn: Automedia, 2011), 1.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Alexandra Chang, *Envisioning Diaspora* (Beijing: Timezone 8 Editions, 2008), 2.

person's identity is bound to location: "It is located in a place, in a specific history. It could not speak except out of a place, out of those histories. It is in relation to a whole set of notions about territory, about where is home and where is overseas, what is close to us and what is far away."[18] Melissa Chiu, referencing Hall's sentiment and applying it to art history, argues that what is marked by Chinese diasporic art are the references to China, which vary in interpretation depending on location. This study combines these scholars' sentiments by inserting the collective practices of a diasporic, site-specific artist group into global contemporary art history.

Constructing Alternative Space Underground

In 1971, Yung, along with his sister Eleanor Yung, Frank Ching, and Rocky Chin began meeting in a basement unit at 54 Elizabeth Street. The Basement Workshop's goals were threefold: they presented New York with an accurate telling of Asian American experiences, worked with other community-based organizations, and made the public aware of issues impacting Chinatown. The group functioned as an umbrella organization with four primary branches. Basement also housed the Amerasia Creative Arts, which championed poetry, graphic art, music, and other forms of artistic media produced by Asian Americans. The Community Planning Workshop acted as a line of communication from Chinatown citizens to the organization, while the Resource Center Library contained documents telling the history of Asian America that were available to the

[18] Stuart Hall, 'The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity," in *Cultural, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, edited by A.D. King (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 21-22.

public.[19] These wide-ranging branches and goals of Basement illustrate the group's function as an alternative art space in New York.

The Basement Workshop was one of many alternative art spaces in New York in the 1970s. Framed as "guerilla gallerizing" by critic Peter Frank, hundreds of alternative spaces emerged around the city beginning in the 1970s, primarily in Lower Manhattan.[20] Theses spaces were frequently funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and/or the New York State Council on the Arts. Alexandra Chang notes this history as central to Asian American art historical development: "In the 1970s, the NEA provided funding for its alternative art space initiative, which allowed for an abundance of grassroots organizations to emerge, including Artists Space in 1972, The Kitchen in 1971, The Franklin Furnace in 1976, Asian American Arts Centre in 1974, ABC No Rio in 1980 (which grew out of a CoLab Projects exhibition Real Estate in 1979), The Studio Museum in 1968, and the New Museum of Contemporary Art in 1977."[21] Most alternative spaces housed activist sentiments and also produced community-oriented programming. The Basement Workshop shared the ethos of other artist/activist spaces in creating a site that was distinct to Chinatown but recognizable within the City's broader art scene.

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[19] Alexandra Chang, *Envisioning Diaspora*, 24. Additionally, Basement Workshop organizational documents are housed in the Fales Library and Collections at New York University.

[20] Julie Ault, "For the Record" in *Alternative Art New York, 1965 – 1985* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 6. *Alternative Histories: New York Art Spaces 1960 to 2010,* edited by Lauren Rosati and Mary Anne Staniszewski of Exit Art, serves as a preliminary directory to over 130 art spaces. Julie Ault's edited volume *Alternative Art New York, 1965 – 1985* also provides a chronological history for some particularly salient alternative sites. See Lauren Rosati and Mary Anne Staniszewski, eds. *Alternative Histories: New York Art Spaces 1960 to 2010,* 92-386 and Julie Ault, ed. *Alternative New York, 1965 – 1985,* 17-76.

[21] Alexandra Chang, *Envisioning Diaspora*, 22.

The sociopolitical and cultural climate of the 1960s and 1970s led to the emergence of alternative art spaces. For Julie Ault, there were several reasons for the proliferation in activist art spaces:

> A convergence of socioeconomic factors fostered cultural production in New York City. These factors included an abundance (some would say over abundance) of artists; a culturally, racially, and ethnically diverse urban population in flux; the political context of various civil rights and liberation struggles; the availability of affordable residential and commercial rents; a plethora of neglected or underutilized urban sites – spaces and places in transition; an unrestricted public sphere (as compared to the present); the growth of public funding for culture; and the city's status as a powerful art center.[22]

This unique set of circumstances resulted in opportunities for artists that did not previously exist.

Alternative art spaces are now recognized as integral to the development of New York's downtown scene. However, as argued by Brian Wallis in his essay "Public Funding and Alternative Space," historical accounts often forget "…the radical transformations that took place in the alternative space movement as a result of public funding," suggesting that this was a "radical, utopian effort to circumvent the commercial gallery system, especially its social exclusivity and economic prerequisites."[23] Wallis' observation is significant because of New York's status as a global artistic center. The implications of this statement suggest that local politics and alternative movements informed and significantly altered the trajectory of global contemporary art history. In this way, the local impact of alternative art spaces like Basement Workshop could be said to carry global ramifications.

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[22] Julie Ault, "For the Record" in *Alternative Art New York, 1965 – 1985*, 6.

[23] Brian Wallis, "Public Funding and Alternative Space," in in *Alternative Art New York, 1965 – 1985*, 164.

The terms "alternative art space" and "artist-run spaces" are used interchangeably in literature on this topic, such as in Julie Ault's edited text *Alternative Art New York: 1965 – 1985* and *Alternative Histories: New York Art Spaces 1960 to 2010,* edited by Lauren Rosati and Mary Anne Staniszewski.[24] In this chapter, I adopt the terminology alternative art space to refer to a site designated for activism and art because it emphasizes that many of the artists were working outside of the mainstream art world. Artist collectives, marked by shared artistic output and aligned leftist goals, were often connected to an alternative art space. Basement Workshop is frequently labeled as an artist collective in literature on the topic, with writers such as Ryan Wong citing Basement as the collective responsible for the "genesis of New York's Asian American resistance culture" in the title of his article on the group's history.[25] I argue that it is important to emphasize the site of production as a key informant for artistic collectivity. More importantly, the Basement Workshop housed multiple branches, not all involved with art. Therefore, it is inaccurate to categorize Basement Workshop as an artistic collective. Basement, can, however be discussed in the context of collectivity, noting the trend of alternative art spaces housing artist collectives. The discussion of alternative art spaces reveals new modes of collectivity emerging in the 1980s and 1990s, discussed later in this dissertation.

[24] Additional literature on this topic includes Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in urban Change* (Newark: Rutgers University Press, 2014); Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996); and Richard Konstelanetz, *Soho: The Rise and Fall of an Artist's Colony* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

[25] Ryan Lee Wong, "Basement Workshop: The Genesis of New York's Asian American Resistance Culture." *Signal 06: A Journal of Political Graphics and Culture* (February 2018): 26-49.

Semantically, alternative art space suggests an exclusion from primary art spaces.[26] This was certainly true, especially concerning the artist spaces dedicated to marginalized groups including the Art Workers Coalition, Guerilla Art Action Group, and CoLab.[27] However, it is undeniable that the label of "alternative" cultivated a utopic vision of the downtown scene. Manufactured countercultural ideals were fueled by increased interest in developing some of the only untouched spaces in Manhattan. The tendency to glamourize Lower Manhattan was not ignored by critics, with writers such as Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan revealing the reality of New York's artistic climate in writings such as "The Fine Art of Gentrification," published in *October* in 1984. Critics such as Deutsche and Ryan painted a far more dystopian vision of artistic havens like the Lower East Side, foregrounding the largely working-class neighborhoods on the brink of capitalist exploitation. "The representation of the Lower East Side as an 'adventurous avant-garde setting,' however, conceals a brutal reality," wrote Deutsche and Ryan. "For the site of this brave new art scene is also a strategic urban arena where the city, financed by big capital, wages its war of position against an impoverished and increasingly isolated local population."[28] With rampant crime and numerous gangs ruling varying blocks, the neighborhood was essentially left to fend for itself. According to

[26] Julie Ault writes "Use of the terms alternative, marginal, and oppositional have historically been regarded as problematic by participants in the arena because these terms inscribe and promote a hierarchical understanding of the art field as a system…For the sake of visibility and clarity, I find alternative to be useful as a general term because it declares historical and critical relations between the structures thus classified and the then-existing institutions and practices." See Julie Ault, "For the Record," in *Alternative Art New York, 1965 – 1985*, 4.

[27] Alan W. Moore writes a semi-autobiographical history of New York artist collectives in his 2011 book *Art Gangs: Protest and Counterculture in New York City.* See Alan W. Moore, *Art Ganges: Protests and Counterculture in New York City*.

[28] Rosalyn Deutsche, "The Fine Art of Gentrification," *October* 102, vol. 31 (winter 1984), 93.

Yung's 1968 Chinatown survey, 28% of the interviewees suggested that their primary dislike of living in Chinatown was that it was unsafe. Too many thefts, frequent muggings, and occasional murders were listed as reasons for their disproval.[29] Thus, the urban makeup of New York shifted constantly alongside the avant-garde movements, which forced artists to continuously negotiate with their surroundings.

The Basement Workshop also signaled its outsider identity in New York through the built environment, which is important to consider in terms of the artmaking sites for Asian American and Asian diasporic artists. The alternative space's first location was in the heart of Chinatown at 54 Elizabeth Street, with group meetings held in the building's leaky basement.[30] It would be easy to overlook the unremarkable structure, as it bears resemblance to most other multi-unit housing complexes near the banks of the East River. However, those resemblances are what make the location distinct to the Lower East Side's architectural history.[31] A tenement, defined as a multi-unit housing complex, marked the neighborhood's built environment. Newcomers to New York chose to live in the often-run-down structures for their inexpensive rent and proximity to many garment factories, resulting in an association between the structures and New York's immigration history. Built in 1890, the tenement building was built with a tan, brick façade, single-pane windows with white panes and an arched crown. Wiry metal fire escapes connect the floors on the building's exterior. The building is flushed with the sidewalk, leaving no

[29] Chinatown Study Group, "Urban Design in Chinatown New York" (December 1968), in the private collection of Bob Lee and Eleanor Yung.

[30] Alexandra Chang, *Envisioning Diaspora*, 24.

[31] The Tenement Museum was founded in 1988 to preserve the paired architectural and immigration history of the Lower East Side. It is now located at 97 and 103 Orchard Street in Manhattan.

room for a yard. Adjacent to the main entrance, framed by two white columns, are stairs leading to the basement, garden level, unit.[32] It is unknown if the building on Elizabeth Street was chosen for any reason other than price. However, there bears an uncanny parallel between the marginalized history of residents living in the Lower East Side tenements and Basement's struggle for recognition within the New York art world, where differences were determined by location.

Intersections of the Local and Global

New York's urban landscape was not the only forces of reckoning – downtown New York in the 1970s proved to be a battleground for idealistic, leftist artist-activists engaged in both local and global politics. The Basement Workshop was no exception, serving as a bastion for sociocultural issues relating to both Chinatown and China. Basement was founded amidst intense cultural shifts in New York City caused by post-World War II Cold War tensions, Vietnam War (1955-1975) protests, the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968), and global effects of the student movements of the 1960s. Additionally, the group engaged in discussions of China's Cultural Revolution, which many members supported from abroad.[33] Members approached the cultural moment from the perspective of the Third World movement, deeming all political struggles of the '70s to stem from imperialism. According to Bob Lee, director of the Asian American Art Center (AAAC) and early Basement member: "In the 1970s youth culture of that time, everybody seemed to be a part of the revolution and a part of

[32] The year 54 Elisabeth Street was built is found here: "Building: 54 Elizabeth Street," *StreetEasy*, accessed April 30, 2022, https://streeteasy.com/building/54-elizabeth-street-new_york.

[33] Differentiating opinions on Maoism eventually led to unsolvable disagreements within the organization. See Alexandra Chang, *Envisioning Diaspora*, 26.

what was happening. Naively, we were ready to take over the U.S. of A."[34] Basement members were eager to express activist sentiments through art, often with a focus on identity. Discussions were dominated by issues of identification due in part to the establishment of the term Asian American in the early 1970s.[35] Singer-songwriter and Basement member Charlie Chin stated that, in the 1970s, "you could think of yourself legitimately as an Asian American. We had hoped that this would mean that our position was a position that we could be proud of, and that we would eventually develop our own art, our own literature, our own music, and these things started to come to me as various people stepped forward up to the plate to try to help out where they could."[36] Basement members looked to groups like the Black Panthers and Brown Berets as examples in this pursuit.[37]

Though the Basement Workshop included Asian American members with ancestry from any nation in Asia, political motivations and aesthetic inspiration came from China. The Basement Workshop included many Maoist members who believed art should always have political intentions. In fact, Basement Workshop's mission is even said to have been inspired by Mao Zedong's infamous "Talks at the Yan 'an Forum on Literature and Art," which stated that "there is in fact no art for art's sake, art that stands

[34] Lauren Rosati and Mary Anne Staniszewski, eds., *Alternative Histories*, 68.

[35] Alexandra Chang, *Envisioning Diaspora*, 24.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid., 26.

above the classes, art that is detached or independent from politics."[38] This political and aesthetic inspiration was reflected in posters designed by Basement artists, many of which directly reference Chinese woodblock prints and propaganda posters. For example, in a 1976 screen-printed poster advertising an International Woman's Day Celebration in Chinatown depicts a woman holding a small child, a gun slung on her left shoulder. The poster, printed the year of Mao's death, bears uncanny similarities to a 1964 poster that circulated China. Reading "US Imperialism, Get Out of Africa!" (*Mei diguo zhuyi cong feizhou gun chuqu* 美帝国主义从非洲滚出去) the poster features a woman holding a gun and carrying a sleeping baby on her back.[39] Though emerging from different contexts, the posters share an intended pro-communist message of Third World Liberation. These images often championed collective labor. The 1976 Basement advertisement, printed with red ink, features motifs championing labor: a person driving a tractor is placed below the woman, another chopping wood in the bottom right. Stalks of wheat frame the right-hand side of the poster, pointing up to a red sun in the center of the image. In addition to propaganda posters, the Basement advertisement references the Chinese woodblock movement in the 1930s (*xingxing banhua yundong* 新兴版画运动). Artists of this movement celebrated the medium's potential for "public service through reproducibility."[40] According to Julia F. Andrews, the movement was a form of art that,

[38] Margo Machida, *Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 29 and Mao Zedong, "Talks at the Yan 'an Forum on Literature and Art," in *Mao Zedong and China's Revolutions: A Brief History with Documents*, edited by Timothy Cheek (Boston and New York: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2002), 112-116.

[39] See Robeson Taj Frazier, *The East is Black: Cold War China in the Black Radical Imagination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014) for an analysis of Asian American activism and Maoist-era Chinese communism.

[40] Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, *The Art of Modern China*, (Berkely and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 82.

from its inception, fully synthesized the cosmopolitan aspirations of its practitioners with the particularities of their Chinese situation."[41] Often, these prints used images of everyday life to make statements on China's global position. In the 1933 print *Street Scene,* artist He Baitao offers a glimpse into a Shanghai alley. A man sits at a mill, with four additional figures shown from behind. At the end of the ally, a man leads a horse pulling a carriage. *Street Scene* is comprised of thick, saturated linework, which is echoed in the Basement advertisement. The medium differs between the advertisement and *Street Scene*. The linework in the earlier image is a result of the woodblock method, while it is an aesthetic choice in the later advertisement. This is significant because it demonstrates the global influences in visual culture produced by Basement.

According to Art Historian Melissa Chiu, the interest in internationalizing Chinese art for an American audience is distinct to Chinese diasporic communities in the United States. Chiu argues that this reflects the "pre-eminent power and universality of American culture in the world today and the position of New York as the center of the international art market."[42] For Chiu, artists interested in looking to China reflected a trend to create "...an idea of Chineseness as a more international construct," which involved "transforming Chinese references into universally recognized symbols, as opposed to setting up an oppositional structure of East and West or integrating them into a local context."[43] However, that the desire to create global art that would resonate internationally for a New York audience was not an attempt at artistic hybridization, but

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[41] Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, *The Art of Modern China*, 83.

[42] Melissa Chiu, *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside of China*, 58.

[43] Ibid., 59.

something specific to the artistic environment of Manhattan. For many left-leaning artists, the political causes driving the Basement Workshop were analogous with other local groups. For example, many groups, including the Arts & Language group, shared Marxist beliefs. Led by artist Hans Haacke, A&L protested "Rockefeller controlled institutions," suggesting that the famous family incorrectly defined good art as "apolitical," frequently referring to the 1933 removal of a Diego Rivera mural from Rockefeller Center for including a portrait of Lenin.[44] Drawing attention to local sites of production expands on Chiu's argument of "Chineseness as international style" to indicate that this mode of thinking trended among alternative art spaces in New York. Local investigations of the contemporary spaces that shape contemporary art history unearth connections to global events.

The political connection to China was the primary point of contention amongst Basement members, which was evident in propaganda poster-inspired works. Discussions of categorizing the Basement Workshop as either a political organization or an artistic space were constant. Amerasia Creative Arts, which eventually became the Asian American Art Centre, even released a statement criticizing Basement leadership on their art direction in an internally circulated statement. The statement proposed the art group become autonomous under Basement umbrella, which would allow leadership to focus on political endeavors.[45] The statement's critiques hinged on Basement's artistic philosophy. Artists seemingly observed a disconnect between Chinese political inspiration and an

[44] Alan, W. Moore, *Art Gangs: Protests and Counterculture in New York City,* 76.

[45] Amerasia Creative Arts, Amerasia Creative Arts statement, date unknown, Asian American Art Centre Archives.

American audience, suggesting that Basement members unleased a "mechanical interpretation of political art in general and no attempt at analysis of political art and culture in America before directing unprincipled criticism at Creative Arts."[46] The statement continued to critique Basement for not politicizing the artistic branch, suggesting that the artists were only used to make advertisements.[47] The memo, which references two social art historical texts, carries Marxist undertones that suggest art should serve a political purpose: the artists did agree politically, but felt that a more local understanding of art would allow the group to further their mission and expand their audience. This is echoed in Amerasia's proposed structure, which suggests that division would better allow the groups to remain united in developing "into a coalition of independent organizations working together for social change against racism and oppression under the capitalist system in the forms of democratic rights: legal, health, education, housing, employment."[48] Discussions such as these suggest that Basement's understandings of art focused on the audience. This debate within Basemnet solidifies why a site-specific understanding, alongside analysis of politics affecting specific worldviews, is necessary when discussing global contemporary art.

Developing an Alternative Art Aesthetic

The Basement Workshop produced just one artwork: an artist book titled *Yellow Pearl*. The artist book exists as a folio of fifty-nine artist poems and songs, each with a specially designed graphic. Each image is printed in black on yellow paper, "a visual nod

[46] Amerasia Creative Arts, Amerasia Creative Arts statement, date unknown, Asian American Art Centre Archives.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid.

to the idea of different racial groups coming together under 'Yellow' or 'Asian American" identities.[49] The success of the *Yellow Pearl* led to Basement receiving an NEA grant.[50] For *Yellow Pearl*, individual artists were given agency to develop their page as they pleased. The book then, like Basement's physical space, served to unify the members. The images varied: some artworks were paired with poems, others just included drawing. Interestingly, some of the works were not signed, which reflected some members' belief that art should embody Maoist ideals where art serves a political purpose and authorship reflects a bourgeoise mentality.[51] The book was unbound so readers could hang images on their walls or bring to protests.[52]

In addition to *Yellow Pearl*, Basement members further cultivated their audience by producing *Bridge: The Magazine of Asians in America*. The title Bridge references the term used to describe Chinese citizens living abroad in Mandarin: the character for bridge, *qiao* 侨, is used in *huaqiao* 华侨, or "overseas Chinese." Though *Bridge* served as a venue for Asian American expression, it engages with the late twentieth century trend of artistic magazines emerging from alternative art spaces and the increased popularity in artist books and zines. According to Susan E. Thomas, artist magazines are marked by small circulation and independent publishing practices.[53] Artist magazines were not for

[49] Ryan Lee Wong, "Basement Workshop: The Genesis of New York's Asian American Resistance Culture," 29.

[50] Ibid. 37.

[51] christina ong, "Activist Placemaking and Environmental Influences on Asian American Diasporic Art: The Case of the Basement Workshop" (Zoom, AAAS 2022, April 16, 2022).

[52] Ibid.

[53] Susan E. Thomas, "Value ad Validity of Art Zines as an Art Form," *Art Documentation* 28, no. 2 (2009), 29.

the public, as content catered to the artists involved. Because of this exclusive distribution, artist magazines are useful in understanding an alternative artist space's audience. Therefore, it is important to consider *Bridge* as interconnected to any art produced or exhibited at the Basement Workshop.

Bridge was released four times per year, with each issue containing "a quarterly blend of criticism, political commentary, poetry, and fiction."[54] At first, *Bridge* catered to a Chinese audience. The magazine aimed "to communicate as well as bring about unification and a sense of awareness of being Chinese."[55] Bridge writers intended to create a network of communication for people of Chinese descent living in the United States through artistic writing. Authors were eager to engage in issues of identity, with plans for the first issue to include an article by Frank Ching on "Governmental politics towards overseas Chinese in countries such as South Africa, Thailand, and Australia…"[56] The subsequent issue directly connected politics and art with an article on Taiwan Independence following an interview with famous Chinese architect I.M Pei.[57]

In addition to artist magazines, artists of the Basement Workshop were keen to utilize exhibitions as an artistic practice. Along with the Chinatown Historical Society, Basement members Jack Tchen, Susan Yung, John Woo, Don Kao, and Gin Woo developed an exhibition detailing the history of Chinese in America titled *Images from a Neglected Past: The Work and Culture of Chinese in America.* The exhibition opened in

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[54] Ryan Lee Wong, "Basement Workshop: The Genesis of New York's Asian American Resistance Culture," 34.

[55] Basement Workshop, *Bridge Magazine* planning document, year unknown, Asian American Art Centre.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid.

summer 1977 at the American Museum of Immigration at the Statue of Liberty National Monument.[58] The exhibit was described as a "multi-media exhibit of old photos, historical documents, artifacts, slides, music & a mural which interweave to tell the rich & intricate experiences of Chinese in America."[59] The mural, spanning an entire gallery wall, was the highlight of the exhibition. The scene depicted the history of Chinese people in America with images of key events. Events included "the mass lynching of Chinese in Los Angeles in 1871, the detention center at Angel Island, and McCarthyism's targeting Chinatowns."[60] The mural is Pan-American in scope, including a depiction of the International Hotel in San Francisco, which had become a beacon for affordable housing.[61] The goal for the exhibition was to draw attention to the marginalized history of Chinese people in America, stating that: "Authentic Chinese American history has rarely been recognized as a legitimate area of study. What non-Asian Americans do know of Chinese and Chinese Americans tends to be totally stereotyped…"[62] The artist book, journal, and exhibition are therefore best considered extensions of Basement's physical space.

Legacies of the Basement Workshop

[58] Basement Workshop, press release for *Images from a Neglected Past: The Work and Culture of Chinese in America* exhibition, 1977, Fales Archives and Special Collections.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Ryan Lee Wong, "Basement Workshop: The Genesis of New York's Asian American Resistance Culture," 44.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Basement Workshop, *Images From A Neglected Past* exhibition brochure, 1977, The Fales Archives and Special Collections.

During its fifteen-year run, the Basement Workshop grew rapidly in popularity before succumbing to debt and different opinions. Basement occupied three different locations: beginning at 54 Elizabeth Basement, the group then moved the primary meeting space to 22 Catherine Street in Chinatown, and eventually to a Soho loft at 199 Lafayette Street. At its height, the group occupied four different buildings in and around Chinatown. However, disorganization plagued the organization from the beginning. Basement shuttered in 1986 due to interpersonal conflict, political differences, and lack of funding. Founder Danny Yung left suddenly for Hong Kong in 1985 amid these conflicts, leaving all documents of his time leading Basement with his sister Eleanor Yung and brother-in-law Bob Lee.[63]

Danny Yung continued making art in Hong Kong, eventually founding the experimental performance group Zuni Icosahedron. In 2014, He returned to the United States to create a bamboo structure on the National Mall in Washington D.C. for the Smithsonian's Folklife Festival.[64] Working with Choi Wing Kei, Yung said: "This is an installation experiment that merges traditional creativity with contemporary creativity. The traditional spirit of folk creative work in Hong Kong is rooted in bold experimentations, open and limitless interactions, collaborations, and dialogues."[65] The *Tian Tian Xiang Shan* figure reflects Yung's traditional cartoon character of the same name. Yung developed this character while in New York.

[63] Bob Lee, interview with author, September 13, 2019.

[64] "Bamboo Installation at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival," Smithsonian, Accessed March 16, 2022, https://festival.si.edu/2014/china/bamboo-installation/smithsonian.

[65] Ibid.

Even considering Yung's exhibition in Washington D.C., the Basement Workshop remains unrecognized by New York art critics, who offer a limited narrative of the entirety of New York's artistic climate in the 1970s. When asked about connections to the broader New York art scene, Lee stated

> Well, let's start this way. 1972 was one of the peaks in Chinatown. That was when we had the first street health fair in Chinatown. There were hundreds of volunteers putting up big booths made of plywood all over Mott Street. That kind of volunteer base was a big part of Basement too. Eventually, NYSCA [New York State Council on the Arts] gave some people at Basement a small amount of money as a part-time salary, and as soon as volunteers saw that someone was getting paid, the number of volunteers dwindled. Once the volunteers were gone, they struggled to keep Basement going and when NYSCA refuse to give them more of a living wage in the mid-1980s, they were no longer able to continue."[66]

Lee's sentiment reasserts the need for increased local understandings of diasporic artistic production: after all, local conditions were a leading reason for ignoring Chinese diasporic and Chinese American artistic production within New York's art history of the late twentieth century.

The legacies of Basement are obvious within Chinatown's built environment. The most recognizable legacy is the Museum of Chinese in America, which was founded in 1980 by Basement members Charles Lai and John Kuo Wei Tchen. Lee's Asian American Art Centre, discussed in Chapter 4, still operates from an office space in the Lower East Side. Basement member Tomie Arai leads the Chinatown Art Brigade, a radical group of artists working against art-washing and gentrification in Chinatown. Many members, especially those working within Basement's artistic branches, continued to make art after Basement closed; among these were Bing Lee and Ming Fay, both of

[66] Lauren Rosati and Mary Anne Staniszewski, eds., *Alternative Histories,* 68.

whom joined Epoxy Art Group and eventually exhibited at the New Museum. Bing Lee, along with former Basement member s Margo Machida and Ken Chu, also helped found Godzilla: Asian American Art Network in 1990; this activist group focused on Asian representation within the American art world.

CHAPTER II: EPOXY ART GROUP: PROJECTING IDENTITY IN CHINATOWN[1]

On a September evening in 1983, a crowd gathered at the intersection of Spring and Broadway in Lower Manhattan's SoHo neighborhood to view Red Spot Outdoor Slide Theater's latest spectacle. Looking northwest toward the Hudson River, a brick wall illuminated with a countdown: NEXT SHOW STARTS IN 5 MIN. The sources for the projected image, two Hasselblad PCP-80 projectors automated by an ABL Show Pro-5 computer, perched from a loft apartment across the street belonging to Allen Daugherty, known as "Red Spot," to Lower Manhattan's denizens.[2] The next slide of collaged texts in both handwritten and typed black-and-white fonts appeared on the wall, titling the slideshow *Erotica*, transforming the apartment's exterior into a work of art. The slideshow continued by naming seven Hong Kong-born, New York-based artists on the 50 x 50-foot screen as the event's auteurs. To these seven artists, the city was a site for artistic intervention. The slide exhibition was attended by friends of the artists, many of whom were students at the Art Students League of New York, and those passing on the street below.

All seven participating artists in *Erotica* – Bing Lee, Jerry Kwan, "Frog King" Kwok Mang Ho, Esther Liu, Ming Fay, Kang Chung, and Cissy Pao – belonged to the

[1] A version of this chapter is forthcoming in *Making Do and Transformational Participatory Urbanism. Communities Claiming Space and Creating Place*, edited by Liska Chan and Elizabeth Stapleton, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022) as "Epoxy Art Group: Alternative Tactics for Artmaking in Chinatown."

[2] Mark Singer, "Red Spot," *The New Yorker* (December 1, 1986), 31. Red Spot Slide Theater was open for about a decade, from 1981 until Daugherty's death in 1991. See Richard Kostelanetz, *SoHo: The Rise and Fall of an Artists' Colony* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 105.

Chinatown-based artist collective, Epoxy Art Group.[3] Frustrated by the lack of gallery representation within New York's often-exclusionary art scene, the collective formed in 1982 as a makeshift solution for their situation. The collective's motivations centered on personal experiences with art world-based discrimination of their identities as Hong Kongese artists living in New York. The name "epoxy" was chosen to represent the hypothetical "gluing" of Eastern and Western cultural experiences through their art.

Slide exhibitions such as *Erotica* exemplified one aspect of the collective's unique forms of collaboration with each other and artists active in New York's downtown scene. *Erotica*, which contained images created by Epoxy artists, marked a continued collaboration with Red Spot Outdoor Slide Theater in SoHo, a neighborhood noted as an artistic haven near Chinatown. In addition to artistic slideshows, Epoxy artists explored apartment installations and xerox collages as unifying mediums that celebrated artistic innovation and nuanced perspectives of New York's alternative art world while questing for recognition. This chapter suggests that Epoxy Art Group utilized these alternative modes of artmaking –apartment art, slide projection, and the xerox – out of necessity and in response to the hegemonic nature of New York City's art scene in the late twentieth century. Epoxy Art group serves as a case study in considering how an artist collective can reconfigure discussions of collectivity in contemporary art, platform unique forms of artmaking within urban contexts, and explore ideas of transnational exchange.

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[3] Epoxy Art Group was predominantly male and did not often add new members. The original roster included Bing Lee, Eric Chan, Chung Kang Lok, Jerry Kwan, Ming Fay, and Kwok Mang Ho. See Alexandra Chang, "Epoxy Art Group" in *The Grove Encyclopedia of American Art*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195335798.001.0001/acref-9780195335798-e-617.

In addition to the slide format, Epoxy artists adopted apartment installations and photocopies as mediums for artistic experimentation that are worthy of further investigation. I turn to media scholar Kate Eichorn's book *Adjusted Margin: Xerography, Art, and Activism in the Late Twentieth Century* as a model for foregrounding marginalized artists' engagement with alternative materials as a form of activism. Utilizing this framework, I suggest that these alternative tactics had lasting impact on New York City's art scene in the late twentieth century. Eichorn suggests that an artists' chosen material is key to understanding artistic identity. For artists operating outside of the established scene, the margin acts as a "conditional site" for artmaking. Eichorn writes that

> In the 1980s and early 1990s, the margin was evoked in the name of undergrounds and diasporas, sub-cultures and subalterns. While it was sometimes used to refer to actual places (e.g., refugee claimant hotels, suburban mosques, and cruising spots for gay men), the margin was also synonymous with more abstract forms of alterity and displacement.[4]

Noting the connection between marginalized groups and materials, my analysis of Epoxy Art Group expands on narratives of New York-based artist collectives to further account for the medium in pursuit of a common working objective. I intend to subvert collective/individual paradigms by exploring Epoxy's unified focus on alternative materials as a critique the New York art world for limiting participation for diasporic and marginalized community members.

Epoxy's identities as diasporic artists significantly influenced their reception in New York. In this chapter, "margin" and "diaspora" here describe the situational

[4] Kate Eichorn, *Adjusted Margin: Xerography, Art, and Activism in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 2016), 21.

conditions for artistic production. Though the artworks created for exhibitions like *Erotica* are archived as physical objects, the performance of the slides was fleeting and temporary.[5] This dynamic reflects the impermanent nature of both diasporic conditions and alternative artmaking methods that contextualize the works of art within New York City's urban environment. Scholar Ranajit Guha described conditions of diaspora not only to be spatially situated, but also to be a "temporal dilemma" best mediated in the present.[6] Epoxy's use of experimental mediums as uniquely rooted in 1980s New York mirrors the temporal paradigm of past/present articulated by Guha to describe diasporic experiences.

Again, I argue that it is important to consider local nuances within Chinese diasporic histories. This is especially true in analyzing Epoxy's alternative artmaking tactics.[7] Because of distinctions in dialects and local customs, Chinese immigrants often settled in US cities with others from the same regions in China. Immigrants seeking refuge in New York's Chinatown hailed primarily from the Canton region in southern

[5] Epoxy member Ming Fay donated many of Epoxy's archival materials (including photographs, artworks, press releases, exhibition invites, exhibition reviews, and correspondence) to the Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University in New York, NY.

[6] Ranajit Guha, "The Migrant's Time," in Saloni Mathur, ed., *The Migrant's Time: Rethinking Art History and Diaspora* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 9.

[7] Other major sites of Chinese diasporic activity in the late twentieth century included Sydney, Vancouver, Paris, and London. See Melissa Chiu, *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside of China* (Milan: Charta, 2006). In addition to sites around the globe, multiple Chinese cultural enclaves exist within New York: there are nine Chinatowns in New York City today.

China, of which Hong Kong is a part.[8] Epoxy's connections to Hong Kong points to the diversity often overlooked within art historical analyses of Manhattan's Chinatown.[9] Thus, the cultural references in Epoxy's work feature an artistic interpretation of Hong Kong's contemporary political histories. More specifically, Epoxy's use of impermanent, alternative materials can be read in the context of Hong Kong's colonial history. In 1985, three years after the formation of Epoxy, the British government and the People's Republic of China ratified the Sino-British Joint Declaration, dictating Hong Kong's return to China in 1997 under the agreement of "one party, two systems." Thus, much of the art produced between 1985 and 1997 by artists from Hong Kong – including Epoxy artists – included a temporal element meant to represent the anticipated handover.

Downtown New York in the 1970s proved to be a battleground for idealistic, leftist artist-activists engaged in both local and global politics, with collectives forming amid intense cultural shifts in New York. The intensity of the cultural moment encouraged an environment of artistic experimentation writ large vis-à-vis technological and material invention. For scholars including Kate Mondloch and Claire Bishop, new media art essentially begins with the developments of installation and performance art in

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[8] Cantonese remains the dominate language spoken in Manhattan's Chinatown today. Edgar Wickberg, "Localism and the Organization of Overseas Migration in the Nineteenth Century," in Gary C. Hamilton, *Cosmopolitan Capitalists: Hong Kong and the Chinese Diaspora at the End of the Twentieth Century*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999, 47. The port city always functioned as the "door in an out of China," especially after British colonization began in 1841. British colonization of Hong Kong ended in 1997, when the administrative region was "handed over" to the People's Republic of China on a 50-year lease. The Sino-British agreement declared Hong Kong to be under PRC rule, however, the PRC's socialist policies would not be employed for 50 years in a "one party, two systems" compromise. This decision will be revisited in 2047. For information on Hong Kong serving as the "door" to China, see Edgar Wickberg, "Localism and the Organization of Overseas Migration in the Nineteenth Century," in Gary C. Hamilton, *Cosmopolitan Capitalists: Hong Kong and the Chinese Diaspora at the End of the Twentieth Century*, 51.

[9] Other Chinese- and Asian-American art collectives and organizations in New York in the late twentieth century included Basement Workshop, the Asian American Art Centre, and Godzilla. See Alexandra Chang, *Envisioning Diaspora: Asian American Visual Arts Collectives: From Godzilla, Godzookie, to the Barnstormers* (Beijing and Shanghai: Timezone 8 Editions, 2009).

the 1950s and 1960s, with New York was an important center of activity.[10] This turn incorporated a phenomenological reconsidering of the viewer and further expansion of the art object. Artist collectives increasingly turned to unconventional uses of technologies to unite their practices as debates about the object (or lack of), the role of the viewer, the idea of the spectacle, and authorship permeated discussions within contemporary art spheres in New York. Though Epoxy's use of alternative materials was in part of necessity, their artworks contributed to important art historical shifts rooted in New York.

Epoxy's tactics were eventually celebrated with an exhibition review by Lucy Lippard in *In These Times* and acquisitions into the permanent collections at the New Museum.[11] Epoxy's success utilizing alternative modes of art making to reflect their cultural experiences was praised in Chinatown and helped bring the neighborhood into the art history of Lower Manhattan. Asian American Art Centre director Bob Lee, a key figure in the defining of an Asian American art history, stated that "[being] an Asian impedes one's career and has a bad effect not only on artists but on U.S. culture. Yet these artists are in a unique position: [Epoxy artists] are pioneers of a new art that has important implications for people in Asia as well…"[12] Epoxy's centering of material as a mode of cross-cultural commentary specific to New York necessitates a site-specific understanding of diasporic artists in understanding their alternative tactics.

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[10] See Kate Mondloch, *Screens: Viewing Media and Installation* Art (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010) and Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (New York: Verso, 2012).

[11] See Lucy Lippard, "Re-orienting perspectives by Asian American artists," *In These Times*, vol. 9, no. 29 (July 10-23, 1985), 21.

[12] Ibid. Bob Lee and the Asian American Art Centre are discussed further in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

Works on an Apartment Wall

After Epoxy's founding in 1982, the group struggled to find venues willing to showcase their work. Epoxy hosted public exhibitions in Kwok's apartment-turned-gallery, formally named Kwok Gallery, as a makeshift solution. In turn, the gallery functioned as an artwork itself. Kwok Gallery was the site of numerous Epoxy shows, including the 1983 exhibition *Works on the Wall*. This first exhibition was integral in Epoxy's making-do with minimal gallery representation and allowed them to debut their collective aesthetic.[13] Epoxy's unique collective practice created opportunities for each artist to highlight their individual contributions, re-configuring discussions of collectivity to include both group and personal concerns. Paradoxically, this type of collective practice allowed each Epoxy artist to develop their signature style.

To create *Works on the Wall*, each artist covered a portion of gallery space with their artwork for the exhibition. The gallery walls transformed into an experimental space filled with drawings, paintings, and sculpture. Black and white drawings with graphic forms, all unsigned, covered the walls like wallpaper. The images, most about 4 x 6 inches, included linework designs, bodily forms, and cartoonish faces. Black rectangles bearing the name "Kwok Gallery" in bold, sanserif font named the space.

Kwok Gallery served as an incubator for Epoxy artists to expand on existing work or test new methods of making, transforming the apartment into a conceptual installation. The materials used were often found, everyday items, paralleling Kwok Gallery's own transformation from apartment to formal gallery. Kwok utilized the exhibition as opportunity to continue his international *Plastic Bag Happenings*, which he began in

[13] Kwok Gallery was located at 229 Mott Street in SoHo.

1978.[14] Kwok inflated numerous plastic bags, creating transparent, floating orbs. The bag-sculptures were hung from the ceiling with red string. In addition to the plastic bag installation, Kwok performed a work of art at the opening. Standing in front of a large red painted circle, Kwok moved his arms, as if the hands of the clock. The reception of these exhibition of these exhibitions is unclear. Except for a review by Lucy Lippard, limited criticism and first-hand accounts exist.[15]

At the conclusion of *Works on the Wall*, the collective occasionally exhibited in blue-chip galleries, such as midtown Manhattan's Hammerquist Gallery, though they were often tokenized for their cultural identities which limited discussions of their artistic experimentation.[16] For example, a press release for Epoxy's exhibition at Hammerquist described their performance, *Ball Show*, as "…a happening, Chinese style."[17] The collective hoped for the cultural discussions to be mediated through their artistic practice instead of their identity as a defining trait. As a result, Epoxy shifted their focus from gallery to city skyline as their next site of artmaking.

Erotic Projections

Though *Works on the Wall* garnered Kwok Gallery some recognition, Epoxy Art Group still sought further integration into the New York art scene. In addition, the varied responses between artists within Epoxy's apartment installations resulted in a lack of

[14] For this performance, Frog King installed plastic bags on landmarks around the world including Tiananmen Square and the Great Wall of China. See Valerie C. Doran, "Frog King: Totem: An Evolution," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* vol. 15, no. 2 (2016): 21-38 for images of *Plastic Bag Happenings* in Beijing.

[15] See Lucy Lippard, "Re-orienting perspectives by Asian American artists,"21.

[16] Hammerquist Gallery closed in 2002.

[17] Hammerquist Gallery, *Ball Show* Press Release, 1983, the Fales Library and Special Collections.

aesthetic unification between members. At the time of the closing of *Works on the Wall*, creative uses of the slide emerged as a new form of experimentation within the alternative arts communities.[18] Likely noting this trend, Epoxy artists embraced the medium as a method for expanding beyond the bounds of Kwok Gallery and – quite literally –within New York City. Epoxy's first slide exhibition *Erotica* popularized the slide as an important art form within New York's urban context.

In the months leading to *Erotica's* premier, Epoxy artists conceived of the exhibition by posing a question: "Can eroticism be art?"[19] Seven members submitted small, visual responses that could be attached to a 2.25 x 2.25-inch slide; and later, to be projected into the city skyline. Though each artist was bound by the structure of the slide, responses from the seven participating artists varied and experimentation was encouraged due to the temporary nature of their chosen medium. The standardized size signified that each artist held equal importance within the group.

Similar to *Works on the Wall*, the slide contributions varied aesthetically. However, *Erotica* was conceptually unified by the shared use of the slide. For this exhibition, the slide served as a vehicle for Epoxy's making-do with ordinary, found materials as artistic medium. Kwok, then a student at New York's Art Student League, suggested that the *Erotica* exhibition continued the Duchampian tradition of using found objects in art, altered in response to unsanctioned artistic trends responsive to the urban

[18] See Ron Magliozzi Sophie Cavoulacos, eds., *Club 57: Film, Performance, and Art in the East Village, 1978 – 1983* (New York: MoMA Publications, 2017).

[19] Unknown author, "The Erotic Street Slide Show," *China Times* newspaper, September 19, 1984, the Fales Archives and Special Collections.

landscape, such as graffiti art.[20] Kwok said that part of the inventiveness of the works in *Erotica* was that "the slide show is part of graffiti culture except for that when the show stops the wall will become clean again" – the connection to the exhibition's theme was not lost.[21] For *Erotica,* Kwok expanded from his plastic bag installations and drew his iconic abstracted frog, which consists of an oblong shape topped with two triangle – one half black, the other white. The figure is boldly outlined. Kwok named various celebrities within the frog's open spaces – Cyndi Lauper, Eddie Van Halen, Michael Jackson, and Boy George. The combination of celebrity names within the frog shape offers an autobiographical element to the *Erotica,* which centers on Epoxy's' individual response to the question of if erotica can be art.

Contributions to *Erotica* represented artistic growth from *Works on the Wall*. Epoxy member Bing Lee, known for the erotic comic-like figures with bold outlines that featured in *Works on the Wall* included three gestural drawings of phallic forms as his contribution. The black and white drawings were made with pen, with cross-hatching marks utilized to shade the bodily forms. Lee's organic shapes, along with contributions from the other six Epoxy artists, were projected onto the Soho wall each evening for three weeks.

Epoxy collaborated with other artists integral to the New York art scene to produce *Erotica*. Andrew Culver, then-assistant to composer John Cage, served as Epoxy's sound artist for the exhibition; Allen "Red Spot" Daugherty hosted *Erotica* at his

[20] Kwok stated of the rogue exhibition: "I believe Epoxy art group uses the slide show as a new art experience." "The Erotic Street Slide Show," *China Times*, September 19, 1984, the Fales Library and Special Collections.

[21] Ibid.

Soho loft-turned-alternative art space. *Erotica* was part of a compendium of outdoor slide shows that transformed sites of artistic importance within the city. The most popular venue, Daugherty's Red Spot Outdoor Slide Theater, located just blocks from Fluxus founder George Manciunas' original artist coop, hosted numerous shows from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s.[22] Daugherty was known among his peers as willing to exhibit a variety of art, which likely appealed to Epoxy because they lacked official representation.[23] Variety and experimentation appealed to the SoHo locale, with Red Spot audience members largely comprised of fellow artists living nearby. They observed the slideshows from the street, neighboring apartments, or at a party in Daugherty's own loft.[24]

Epoxy's slide show pointedly spoke to 1980s New York. Additionally, the artist's reclaiming of the slide reconsiders a tool historically bound to the field of art history. This parallel connects to larger issues of representation in contemporary art history. Frequently employed as a pedagogical tool championed by foundational Art Historian Heinrich Wölffin, slide lectures, says, Scholar Robert S. Nelson, are so integral to the field that "art history *is* the illustrated lecture." To Nelson, the slide*show is* essential to art

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[22] With occasional funding from New York's public art fund, Daugherty curated about three group shows per year. The exhibitions were held in the spring, summer, and fall. See "Red Spot: Outdoor Slide Theater," Public Art Fund, accessed September 2, 2021, https://www.publicartfund.org/exhibitions/view/outdoor-slide-theater/.

[23] According to Richard Koselanetz, an artist who worked alongside Daugherty, "the only criterion for acceptance is image visibility." See Richard Kostelanetz, *SoHo: The Rise and Fall of an Artists' Colony*, 105.

[24] "Red Spot: Outdoor Slide Theater." Curator Darsie Alexander lists Robert Smithson's lecture *Hotel Palenque* (1969-72) and Dan Graham's *Homes for America* (1966-67), which originally existed as slides, as some of the first artists to utilize the slide as an artistic medium. See Darsie Alexander, *Slideshow: Projected Images in Contemporary* Art (Baltimore: The Baltimore Museum of Art, 2005).

history, with the accompanying lecture performance serving nearly as a work of art itself.[25] Though Nelson's discussion of the slide as a pedagogical performance does not apply wholly to Epoxy's experimental slide lectures— they were not formal lectures— exhibitions like *Erotica* can certainly be as attempts to incorporate into New York's alternative tactics and contributions from artists outside of the traditional canon.[26]

36 Tactics for Artmaking

In addition to apartment installation and the slide, Epoxy artists utilized the photocopy in their collaborative artistic practice. As Epoxy became well-known, the group sought additional methods for creating transferable art beyond New York. The use of the photocopy allowed for Epoxy to continue their mode of collective making while expanding their influence internationally. Epoxy artists were familiar with the photocopy's potential in art, utilizing the machine to create advertisements for exhibitions like *Works on the Wall* and *Erotica*. Before utilizing the photocopy as art, Epoxy scanned events or calls for participation. The call for entries for the slideshow *The People's Wall*, for example, was created using a photocopy machine and then distributed around lower Manhattan. Featuring collaged elements, drawings, and slide examples, the call also functioned as a transferable artwork. This trend extended to other artists in New York's alternative communities. Due to the inexpensive cost and relative accessibility, the

[25] Robert S. Nelson, "The Slide Lecture, or The Work of Art *History* in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Critical Inquiry* 26 (Spring 2000), 415.

[26] Ironically, experimental slideshows are overlooked in art historical records. Art historian Darsie Alexander edited one of the few contemporary art texts focused on the slide as an accompaniment for her 2004 exhibition *Slideshow: Projected Images in Contemporary Art*. See Darsie Alexander, *Slideshow: Projected Images in Contemporary Art.* Additionally, Sonia de Laforcade's examination of Brazilian artist Frederico Morais' slide lectures presents a model of medium-focused analysis within the context of global modern and contemporary art. See Sonia de Laforcade, "Click, Pulse: Frederico Morais and the Comparative Slide Lecture," *Grey Room* 72 (2018): 96-115.

photocopy played an especially important role in New York's alternative history. Photocopies hung on lampposts and bus stops were one of the most efficient ways to identify important local artists and events in the late twentieth century.[27] The photocopy suggested that you had "arrived" on the scene.[28]

Noting the photocopy's significance in determining "who was who," Epoxy turned to the photocopy as an artform. Epoxy's most significant photocopied work was *36 Tactics,* which was a collection of 36 Xerox copies based on a Chinese military treatise, *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu, which was widely circulated.[29] *36 Tactics* exhibited internationally at three art institutions: as part of the *Out of Context* exhibition at the Hong Kong Arts Centre in 1987; at Sabrina Fung Gallery in 1988 in New York; and lastly, at the New Museum's *Decade Show* in 1990.

Without an apartment or brick wall as their stage, *36 Tactics* required more attention to be placed on the art object than the surroundings. Epoxy artists developed *36 Tactics* together rather than combing individual submissions to produce the final work of art. As a result, *36 Tactics* bears less evidence of individual members than contributions to the *Works on the Wall* or *Erotica* exhibitions. However, the process of combining varied media to create the photocopies – including photographs, drawings, and text in Cantonese and English – exemplifies Epoxy's collective practice.

Of all of Epoxy's works, *36 Tactics* most explicitly references Epoxy's identity as Hong Kong-born artists living in New York. Additionally, the work contains the most

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[27] Kate Eichorn, *Adjusted Margin: Xerography, Art, and Activism in the Late Twentieth Century*, 82.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Alexandra Chang, "Epoxy Art Group," Grove Art Online.

unified message within Epoxy's oeuvre. The written text in the work declares war: Sun Tzu's treatise dictates "a set of stratagems that aid survival and provide the best defense against opponents" that Epoxy artists revisited to offer their own interpretations of militant messages.[30] The resulting photocopies were sardonic, critical responses to Sino-American relations, the global impact of the Cold War, and the Mao regime. Epoxy's use of the photocopy therefore conflates local and global histories with their choice in material because of its portability.

36 Tactics was unabashedly political, like Basement Workshop's posters discussed in Chapter 1. For example, the first photocopy in *36 Tactics* features a photograph of then-president Ronald Reagan, a controversial figure in American and Chinese histories.[31] Reagan's headshot is accompanied by the text "Fool Heaven Sail Sea" in both English and Cantonese. The listed military tactic is accompanied by a quote from one of Reagan's most controversial speeches, given in 1986 in the wake of the United States' conflict with Iran. This work spoke to the local impact of global events by using a medium used for political statements (e.g., posters, etc.).

Additional photocopies overtly criticize the PRC's use of governmental propaganda and limitations on freedom of speech imposed by the Chinese government. Epoxy's position as Hong Kongese artists living in New York allowed for them to vocalize their political opinion more freely. One photocopy features a photograph of the Chinese army marching. The work pairs the message of "Stage a False Show of Sight & Sound" with a description of the photograph: "the ground forces of the People's

[30] Epoxy Art Group, *Thirty-Six Tactics*, (self-pub., Epoxy Art Group, 1988).

[31] President Reagan visited China in 1984.

Liberation Army are 3,600,000 strong, criticizing the illusion of military power within China. Another features a famous portrait of Mao saluting a crowd in the Forbidden City. This work serves as a criticism of the Cultural Revolution, which disastrously affected Chinese citizens.[32] The tactic "use other's knife to kill" sits above text reading: "Chairman Mao reviewing for the first time the mighty army of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution on the Tiananmen Gate rostrum on Aug. 18, 1966."

36 Tactics first exhibited in Hong Kong in 1987. The piece was included in *Out of Context,* an exhibition held in a mansion on Kennedy Road featuring new, experimental works primarily made by artists working outside of Hong Kong. The title of the exhibition referenced diasporic experience of many artists. Though *36 Tactics* referenced the global political climate, Epoxy's use of the photocopy resonated in New York. After its tour in Hong Kong, *36 Tactics* traveled to the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. The *Decade Show* featured more than 100 artists, with many collaborative works, including Epoxy's.[33]

Shortly after the *Decade Show*, Epoxy Art Group disbanded. The group's dissolve allowed members to focus on their individual practices. Many members returned to Hong Kong, where they continued their experimental material-focused practices, something that likely would not have happened without experience working outside of the more conservative art scene in Hong Kong. Many group members associated with Epoxy

[32] The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was a sociopolitical movement in China supported by Chairman Mao Zedong that intended to reassert his power. Though the exact number is unknown, it is estimated that hundreds of thousands to even millions died. The figures range from 750,000 to 20 million, though most often are cited as 1.5 to 2 million.

[33] Roberta Smith, "3 Museums Collaborate to Sum Up a Decade," *The New York Times* (May 25, 1990), C22.

returned to individualized forms of practice, which echoed the intent of Kwok Gallery installations and Soho slide slams. Though Epoxy gained institutional recognition at the *Decade Show*, the inclusion revealed limitations for artists engaging in alternative practices traditionally outside institutional bounds.

III. GODZILLA VS. THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

On July 25, 1990, artists Margo Machida, Ken Chu, and Bing Lee met in Machida's studio to discuss the formation of a new arts network reflective of "emerging needs of contemporary Asian American visual artists."[1] The primary concern was how to define and present Asian American art to the public. Their focus was first New York, where in 1990, there was only one space dedicated exclusively to Asian American art.[2] This meeting considered the status of Asian American and Asian diasporic art and collectives in the aftermath of groups such as Basement Workshop and Epoxy Art Group, both of which had recently disbanded.

Unlike Basement and Epoxy, which primarily sought recognition, Machida, Chu, and Lee wanted agency over presentations of Asian American art history and targeted the New York art world as their biggest obstacle. At the conclusion of the meeting, Godzilla: Asian American Art Network aimed for inclusion within New York's art world behemoths, including renowned institutions like the Whitney Museum of American Art.[3] A Godzilla monster, inspired by the Japanese film series, served as the collective's network's mascot. Godzilla's mascot emblazed their meeting notes, xeroxed advertisements, and eventually, their newsletter. In a poster designed by artist Charles Yuen, the monster towers above the former World Trade Center buildings in Manhattan.

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[1] Margo Machida, Ken Chu, and Bing Lee, "Meeting Summary" in *Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network*, edited by Howie Chen (Brooklyn, NY: Primary Information, 2021), 60-1.

[2] At the time of Godzilla's founding, the Asian American Art Centre was the only location in New York City dedicated to collecting and exhibiting exclusively Asian American art. The Asian American Art Centre is discussed in depth in chapter four of this dissertation.

[3] There are certainly parallels with the connotation of the monster being "awakened" by the United States' nuclear decisions in WWII.

Reminiscent of a tyrannosaurus rex, it reveals its sharp teeth mid-roar. The monster symbolized the ferocity of the collective's unified ambitions: they wanted a say in how Asian American art was represented and they wanted it immediately.

This chapter considers how Godzilla expanded on ideas of relational art and institutional critique to call for inclusion of localized movements within large-scale exhibitions in challenging ideas of diaspora, nationalism, and globalization. Specifically, I argue that Godzilla's engagements with the 1991 and 1993 Whitney Biennials successfully critique institutional claims of representing alternative voices. Working within an increasingly internationalized New York art world and America's broadly focused emphasis on identity politics, Godzilla artists were confronted with shifting ideas relating to diasporic identity and institutional limitations disproportionately affecting artists of color. "Identity politics," often a signifier of "outsider art," is broadly defined as a period of artmaking in the late twentieth century centered on cultural identity and pluralism. This trend shifted focus away from the art object to the artist and audience. Amidst this disciplinary shift, critics increasingly interpreted artwork within the context to the artist's cultural identity and the contexts of the work's presentation. While some criticized the supposed shift away from visual aesthetics, others including art historian Lucy Lippard championed identarian issues in their scholarship in arguing for art's inherent boundedness to politics and attendant activism.[4]

Collective Foundations and Rising Internationalism

When Godzilla formed in 1990, the cultural landscape of the United States had drastically shifted from the previous decades. For the first time, the Asian immigrant

[4] For one example of literature on multicultural art and identity politics in New York, see Lucy Lippard, *Mixed blessings: new art in a multicultural America.* New York: Pantheon Books. 1990.

population was larger than the U.S.-born Asian American population, primarily due to the immigration reforms discussed in Chapter 1.[5] Alongside this demographic rise in the United States, Asian art increasingly gained popularity in the art world writ large, especially by artists from China amidst Chinese reforms. The rising internationalism of Asian art, aided by the Cold War's challenges to isolationist policies and the predicted economic rise of Asian economies, played a crucial role in the formation of new global cultural centers and capitalist markets. City governments increasingly looked to art to establish themselves as cultural centers. This mirrored New York's deployment of artists to revitalize its downtown during the years of Basement Workshop, though on a much larger scale.

Responding to these global and local shifts and subsequent effects on the art world, Godzilla adopted a pan-Asian approach within their collective, which reflected the global era in which they were working. The group invited New York-based artists from across the Asian diaspora to join their quest for representation locally and beyond.[6] Godzilla's primary interest was to offer multiple, intersecting, and fluid definitions of Asian American and Asian diasporic art amidst a rise in Asian immigration within the United States and global expansion of Asian economies. This porous understanding of art and identity was theorized by Godzilla members to be an accurate reflection of the artistic climate in New York, particularly as it related to artists of the Asian diaspora. Founder Margo Machida, who later worked as a curator and academic, suggests that increased

[5] Pyong Gap Min, *Asian Americans: Contemporary Trends and Issues* (Newbury Park: SAGE Publications, 2005), 20.

[6] For a detailed history of Godzilla, Alexandra Chang, *Envisioning Diaspora: Asian American Visual Arts Collectives from Godzilla, Godzookie, to the Barnstormers* (Beijing: Timezone8 Editions, 2008).

Asian immigration to the United States after 1965 created new "contact zones" for artists from across the Asian diaspora to meet with those born in the United States.[7] Machida's positing of different sites of Asian art activity as contact zones references Arjun Appadurai's ideas of social imaginary, which he calls "scapes" according to their cultural location.[8] Both theorists position space-based identity as constructed and in accordance with global positionings. These arguments relate to discussions of Godzilla because they demonstrate how artistic identity is informed by the specific site of production and not exclusively determined by broader labels. [9] Whereas East Asian identity played an important role for Basement Workshop and Epoxy, Godzilla adopted an internationally porous and Pan-Asian structure to better account for diversity within the Asian diaspora in New York.

The collective carried the activist intentions and desire for representation from its predecessors, especially Basement Workshop. Godzilla member and curator Alice Yang stated that "…in the broadest sense of the word, Godzilla is also an anarchistic force that attempts to break through isolation and boundaries within which many Asian American artists have had to work."[10] This structure allowed for the group to address both individual and collective needs. Members in the collective included artists, curators, and

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[7] Margo Machida, *Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 4.

[8] Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Theory, Culture & Society* vol. 7 (1990), 295-310.

[9] Much of Godzilla's positioning in the New York art world reflects racial relations. Scholar Sarah Ahmed suggests that this is bet understood through a phenomenological approach, which considers factors leading to individual perceptions. See Sarah Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," *Feminist Theory* vol. 8 (2): 149 – 168.

[10] Alice Yang, "Godzilla; The Anarchistic Lizard," in *Why Asia? Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art*, edited by Jonathan Hay and Mimi Young (New York: NYU Press, 1989), 89.

community activists. Unlike the Basement Workshop, the collective refused to formalize as a non-profit, intentionally operating out of institutional bounds. There was no formal membership and anyone attending a meeting had voting power.

It is important to avoid conflating Asian American and Asian diasporic identities, as this distinction is precisely what is at stake. Godzilla's confrontations with the complexities of identity formation are reflective of the collective's shifting engagement and awareness of their positioning within the global art world. Godzilla's uniquely fluid structure, one that challenges traditional artist collective formations, responds to Pierre Bourdieu's contemporaneous structuralist ideas of cultural production, in which he argues that the art world is comprised of a series of related phenomenon and reactions to systems of power.[11] Godzilla's collective formation allowed artists to highlight their unique artistic viewpoints as systemic of a multitude of global influences.

Godzilla's activism emphasized their local community.[12] Similar to Basement and Epoxy, Godzilla's concerns fell primarily within Chinatown even though the collective engaged with transnational discussions of art. Machida argues, however, that the work of community artists was still oriented outside their immediate networks and "emerged as an organic response to the world around them."[13] Godzilla artists offered a nuanced form of collectivity that was not centered on identity but rather positionality in the art world in

[11] Bourdieu frequently served as inspiration for artists and activists, including Hans Haacke, discussed later in the chapter. See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

[12] Machida names Basement Workshop, San Francisco's Kearney Street Workshop and Japantown Art and Media as pioneering groups in what she calls the "community arts movement." She suggests that "[their] activities, while focused on Asian Americans, demonstrated a commitment to maintain ongoing relations with other communities of color." See Margo Machida, *Unsettled Visions*, 23-9.

[13] Margo Machida, *Unsettled Visions,* 27.

both local and global contexts. Machida offers the term "communities of imagination" to accurately reflect this type of engagement.[14] Machida states that the term "is meant to evoke something more elusive, the generative capacity of the artistic imagination in producing a sense of collectivity or affiliation among people."[15] I use this framework to discuss Godzilla because it describes fluid collectivity that includes networks of exchange.

Critiquing the 1991 Whitney Biennial

Dialogue was central to Godzilla's collective artmaking because much of the collective's activism and art evolved from meeting discussions. The group started with sixteen members and grew to three hundred members by 1995. The collective expanded nationally, eventually amassing over two thousand members.[16] With no formal meeting space, Godzilla gathered at alternative artist spaces like Exit Art.[17] Committees helped guide meeting structure, and voting was completed with questionnaires.[18] Above all, it was a social network. Alongside the social events, Godzilla members planned how to increase their visibility in New York and support their local community. These meetings

[14] Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* inspired this idea. See Margo Machida, *Unsettled Visions,* 27.

[15] Ibid., "The Imagining of Asian America" in *Fresh Talk/ Daring Gazes: Conversations on Asian American Art*, by Elaine H. Kim, Margo Machida, and Sharon Mizota (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), xv. See also Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections of the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York, NY: Verso, 1991).

[16] Margo Machida, "The Imagining of Asian America" in *Fresh Talk/ Daring Gazes: Conversations on Asian American Art*, xv.

[17] Basement Workshop shuttered its' doors by the time Godzilla formed, though Godzilla included many former Basement members. Ibid.

[18] Margo Machida, The Imagining of Asian America" in *Fresh Talk/ Daring Gazes: Conversations on Asian American Art*, xv.

resulted in tangible action, including exhibitions like *Dismantling Invisibility: Asian and Pacific Islander Artists Respond to the AIDS Crisis* (1991) and organized protests, such as those opposing Broadway's *Miss Saigon* in 1991.[19] Godzilla's most famous intervention was their critique of the 1991 Whitney Biennial. Their intervention led to the inclusion of Korean American artist Byron Kim in the 1993 Whitney Biennial and the appointment of Chinese American scholar Eugenie Tsai as a curator at the Whitney in 1994.[20]

Founded in 1932, the Whitney Biennial is touted as the "longest-running survey of American art."[21] The Biennial's history is marred with controversy and critique. Self-assigned with the task of defining American contemporary art for the world, it is a near guarantee that controversy surrounds any edition of the Biennial, particularly in addressing the complexity of American identity.[22] Art historians such as Aruna D'Souza have examined the Whitney Biennial's controversial past through episodic investigations and concluded that the institution repeatedly fails to adequately address issues of gender, race, and class.[23]

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[19] Margo Machida, The Imagining of Asian America" in *Fresh Talk/ Daring Gazes*, 18-9.

[20] Eugenie Tsai worked alongside Thelma Golden as two of the first women of color to hold curatorial roles at the museum. Eugenie Tsai (John and Barbara Vogelstein Senior Curator of Contemporary Art at the Brooklyn Museum) in discussion with the author, March 16, 2022.

[21] The exhibition was initially held every year but switched to a biannual format in 1973. "The Whitney Biennial," The Whitney Museum of American Art, Accessed December 1, 2021, https://whitney.org/exhibitions/the-biennial.

[22] It is important to note that the Whitney Biennial only features artists living in the United States.

[23] Aruna D'Souza, *Whitewalling: Art, Race, and Protest in 3 Acts* (New York: Badlands Unlimited, 2018), 26.

On May 13, 1991, twelve Godzilla artists penned a letter addressed to newly-appointed Whitney director David Ross.[24] This criticized the lack of Asian American and/or Asian diasporic artists in the most recent Biennial.[25] Godzilla wrote that the Biennial "…fails to live up to its intention, as stated in the official brochure, of providing 'a framework for better understanding the diverse creative vitality that characterizes art of this period."[26] They argued that a true reflection of American demographics would include artists of Asian descent – a claim that originated in meeting discussions.[27]

The performative nature of the letter qualifies it as one of Godzilla's only collective artworks, even though it has never been presented as such. The letter can be viewed as institutional critique, or artwork that critiques an artworld institution, like a museum.[28] It is important to consider David Ross's short tenure at the Whitney at the time of Godzilla's intervention. Ross had been employed by the Whitney for less than six months at the time the letter was sent, so the Biennial's direction was not decided under his influence. This statement is not to dismiss Ross's responsibility to democratically

[24] The artists who signed the letter included Todd Akita, Tomie Arai, Ken Chu, Uday K. Dhar, Karin Higa, Arlan Huang, Byron Kim, Bing Lee, Colin Lee, Janet Lin, Mary Lui, Margo Machida, Stefani Mar, Yong Soon Min, Ming Mur-Ray, Helen Oji, Paul Pfeiffer, Mitsuo Toshida, Eugene Tsai, Tony Wong, Garson Yu, and Charles Yuen. See Godzilla, letter to David Ross in Howie Chen, ed., *Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network*, 100.

[25] Godzilla did note the inclusion of Chinese American painter Martin Wong in the Biennial, though his inclusion was alongside the collective Group Material. See Ibid., 99.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Included with the letter were several articles and artist slides highlighting Asian contributions within contemporary art. Ibid.

[28] Artists working primarily our of New York began utilizing institutional critique as an art form as early as 1960. Hans Haacke is often cited as one of the first artists to engage with this practice. See "Art Term: Institutional Critique," Tate, Accessed March 21, 2022, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/i/institutional-critique#:~:text=Institutional%20critique%20is%20the%20act,ve%20Heard%20is%20Wrong%20(1999) for a brief overview and definition of the artform.

represent American art at the Whitney Biennial, but instead to point to institutional limitations that affected the 1991 presentation, including Ross's ability to significantly alter the curatorial vision.[29] Therefore, Godzilla's letter can be viewed as largely performative, even though it resulted in tangible outcomes.

Ironically, artworks categorized as institutional critique are often inherently contradictory. Though intended to critique an institution, these works rely on institutional recognition and exhibition to be categorized as such.[30] Even so, it is an important art form in that artists and collectives engaging in institutional critique expose the structure of the artworld to the public. In the late 1990s, curator Nicholas Bourriaud wrote about the potential for "relational art," a term that encompasses works of institutional critique. Bourriaud suggests that it provides an opportunity for artists and audiences to consider art within the social and cultural context.[31] For Bourriaud, artworks and artists served to facilitate discourse related to their sites of intervention. Under this framework, Godzilla's letter could be considered a work of relational art. This categorization is significant; Godzilla's efforts are never discussed as artworks and the parallel to relational art points to the limitations of this art form relating to identity, collectivism, and institutional representation.

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[29] In an interview with Eugenie Tsai, she pointed to Ross's recent appointment in noting that Godzilla members did not expect the Whitney to respond. Eugenie Tsai (John and Barbara Vogelstein Senior Curator of Contemporary Art at the Brooklyn Museum) in discussion with the author, March 16, 2022.

[30] Felicity Allen argues this is true of pedagogically focused art, saying that art critics only "…acknowledge art as pedagogy if it is mediated through an exhibition-based model." See Felicity Allen, "Introduction," in *Documents of Contemporary Art: Education* (Cambridge: White Chapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2011), 17.

[31] See Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (France: Les Presses Du Reel, 1998).

Godzilla's institutional critique is tied to a longer history of artists intervening within museum exhibition spaces. German artist Hans Haacke's *MoMA Poll*, part of the Museum of Modern Art's 1970 *Information* exhibition, exemplifies early institutional critique.[32] In contrast to Godzilla's letter, *MoMA Poll* was included in the Information exhibition itself. *MoMA Poll* is an apt comparison, however, because it challenged a major New York institution and considered local politics within the gallery space.

For *MoMA Poll*, Haacke constructed an artificial polling station and asked visitors to vote on their approval of the New York governor, involving the local community in his artwork. The question read: "Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon's Indochina Policy be a reason for your not voting for him in November?" MoMA guests voted "yes" or "no" with color-coded ballots. Almost three quarters of the poll's participants voted yes, signifying their disproval for the gubernatorial incumbent.[33] *MoMA Poll* qualifies as institutional critique because the content directly confronts the MoMA's institutional structure: Nelson Rockefeller was previously the MoMA's president.[34] Additionally, the work relies on public participation. *MoMA Poll* allows the viewer agency in their interaction based on their own situation and an opportunity to bring local issues into the museum. Works of institutional critique frequently result in little tangible action. It is impossible to know if the *MoMA Poll* voters

[32] While it is unclear if any Godzilla artists knew Haacke or were familiar with his work, though it was very likely considering his renown, I discuss the *MoMA Poll* to articulate how Godzilla's letter can be considered under frameworks of institutional critique. For more on the *Information* exhibition, see Lawrence Weiner, Mel Bochner, Lucy Lippard, Paola Anotonellia, Kynaston McShine, and Hanna Girma, "50 Years Later, a Conceptual Art Exhibition Still Courts Controversy," *MoMA Magazine* (Jan. 28, 2020), https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/225.

[33] Nelson Rockefeller was reelected in 1970.

[34] "Nelson Rockefeller Becomes President of the Museum," Press Release, May 8, 1957, MoMA.

who chose "yes" actually withheld their support on election day. However, the work inspired ongoing, important discussions of the intersections of art and politics often hidden from the average museum goer.

The fact that Godzilla's letter has not been previously categorized as an artwork points to the other contradictions within the practice of institutional critique and attendant art historical discussions. Art historian Claire Bishop writes that relational works tend to overemphasize the viewer and artist as the art object itself.[35] Whereas Haacke's *MoMA Poll* was mediated through an actual art object, Godzilla emphasizes the contents of the letter and ensuing conversations instead of the physical piece of paper.[36] Secondly, few people outside of Godzilla's network knew of the letter, thus limiting any subsequent documentation. Though these works often respond to the artist's local conditions, successful documentation of institutional critique primarily occurs at large, established institutions that are built for experimental art forms. Institutional critique necessitates a willing audience and subsequent documentation of their response, which is not always possible at small, community-oriented galleries and art spaces. As a result, these factors limit who can partake in institutional critique to those who are already represented by a museum or gallery.[37]

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[35] See Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (New York: Verso, 2011) and Ibid., "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," in Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung, eds., *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985, Second Edition* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 166-193.

[36] Upon penning their complaints, Godzilla broadly distributed their letter to various cultural leaders. ACT UP or Guerilla Girls, other contemporaneous art-activist organization, for example, also disseminated their work in similarly public ways.

[37] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, 6.

In addition to this type of artwork relying on curatorial mediation to be recognized, the artist must also be a recognized figure within a museum for their critique to be heard. Many of the artists engaging in institutional critique already worked within museum frameworks and catered to an audience familiar with the genre before they sought to challenge it. Claire Bishop acknowledges this as a limitation. In discussing the work of artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, Bishop notes that most attendees at Tiravanjia's exhibitions were people who frequently visited museums and galleries in New York. Most of the guests at Tiravanjia's exhibitions even knew each other. For Bishop, this negates the intentions behind an artist centering democratic communication.[38]

I expand on definitions of institutional critique to consider local voices and events that impacted the trajectory of large-scale exhibitions because they more accurately reflect the public the exhibitions purport to serve. Godzilla was uniquely positioned to critique the Whitney Biennial due to their nuanced ideas of identity and collectivity and understanding of local/global intersections. The collective was largely unrecognized at the time of their letter, which limited Godzilla's inclusion in art historical narratives. This points to the necessity of institutional critique's expansion to include artists working outside the dominant canon. Unlike Godzilla, Haacke's work was well-known in New York at the time of the *MoMA Poll* and *Information* exhibition. Haacke centered his practice around social issues following the success of the *MoMA Poll*.[39] For Art Historian Rosalyn Deutsche, the work was successful because there were no immediate

[38] Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," 178.

[39] Haacke's first solo show in New York took place in 1981, titled *Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business*. The New Museum would eventually exhibit Godzilla, as discussed later in this essay.

consequences for participants — the work started and ended with the museum visit.[40] Twenty years after *MoMA Poll,* institutional critique had itself become an established art form.[41] The content of Haacke's work is not entirely different than the issues written of in Godzilla's letter, in that it questioned the museum's leadership decision from within the institution. The collective, however, did not have the previous recognition required to fully engage the public in their dialogue.

"A Scapegoat for the Ills of Art"[42]

The 1991 Whitney Biennial, curated by Richard Armstrong, John G. Hanhardt, Richard Marshall, and Lisa Phillips, attempted to highlight diversity in medium and artists in contemporary American art by including film and video, paintings, sculpture, and photographs. On the surface, the 1991 Biennial offered a utopic vision of the best in American art. But under the surface, systemic issues of race and representation emerged. As noted by Godzilla in their letter, the only Asian American artist included in the 1991 edition was Martin Wong. Martin Wong, however, was not displayed alone, but instead included in Group Material's *AIDS Timeline* (1989, with subsequent iterations in 1990 and 1991).[43]

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[40] Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 295-6. Deutsche's argument is also used in Claire Bishop's article "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics." See Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," 175.

[41] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells,* 1.

[42] This subheading refers to a quote from a *New York Times* review of the Biennial. See Michael Kimmelman, "A the Whitney, A Biennial That's Eager to Please," *New York Times* (New York, NY), April 19, 1991, 47, 70.

[43] Martin Wong was not a member of Godzilla. For more information on Group Material, see Alison Green, "Citizen Artists: Group Material," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 26 (Spring 2011), 17-25.

Group Material was a collective of artists and creatives who worked together to critique the artworld and art market.[44] The collective was different than Godzilla because they adopted a more formal structure, including their own art space at 244 East Thirteenth Street. Like the Basement Workshop, Group Material believed that the space legitimized the group to New York. They stated: "We knew that in order for our project to be taken seriously by a large public, we had to resemble a 'real' organized gallery."[45] Group Material's functioned as the site of socially-engaged exhibitions like 1981's *The People's Choice (Arroz con Mango)*, where Group Material recruited neighbors to displayed objects that held personal significance.[46]

Part exhibition, part artwork, Group Material's *AIDS Timeline* considered various responses to the AIDS epidemic with a variety of artifacts beginning from 1979. The artifacts were put on display, allowing viewers to consider the responses together. The artifacts were pinned to the wall in a somewhat haphazard fashion, and included photographs, posters, public health information, magazines, and pamphlets related to the AIDS epidemic. This timeline included drawings and paintings by artists affected by AIDS, all hung under a banner that stated: "All People with AIDS Are Innocent." Martin Wong, who died of AIDS related illnesses in 1999, contributed an artwork to the

[44] The founding members of Group Material were Hannah Alderfer, Julie Ault, Patrick Brennan, Beth Jaker, Marybeth Nelson, Tim Rollins, Peter Szypula, Yolanda Hawkins, Marek Pakulski. See Lauren Rosati and Mary Anne Staniszewski, eds., *Alternative Histories: New York Art Spaces 1960 to 2010* (New York: Exit Art, 2012), 194.

[45] Group Material, "Caution! Alternative Space! (1982)," in Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz eds., *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings, Second Edition* (Berkeley: University of California press, 2012), 1055.

[46] Lauren Rosati and Mary Anne Staniszewski, eds., *Alternative Histories*, 194.

timeline. The diversity in objects and voices in *AIDS Timeline* is like Godzilla's intervention in that both highlight local contributions and voices.

AIDS Timeline functioned similarly to Hans Haacke's *MoMA Poll,* in that it brought political issues into the gallery, forcing the museum to reconcile their role in addressing political issues. The work differed, however, in that it centered on dialogue surrounding the object; the work need not physically exist in the same way, or at all, for the meaning to remain intact.

Identifying the Local within International Exhibitions[47]

Though billed as an exhibition for American artists, the Whitney Biennial confirms New York's status as an important global art center. In her book *Global Work of Art*, art historian Caroline Jones questions what it means to label a work as "global."[48] Labeling the phenomenon as "critical modernism," Jones argues that we must approach global artwork with an eye towards unearthing its international qualities. Jones suggests that globalism, then, is an aesthetic component of an artwork that is perpetuated by the space in which it is exhibited. For Jones, the aesthetics of globalism are best examined through large-scale exhibitions. The Whitney Biennial can be understood as site that fosters global, but also distinctly American, works of art due to the prestige and

[47] "International exhibitions" and "large-scale" exhibitions are used interchangeably in this chapter to refer to periodic, large-scale exhibitions aimed at the international art world. These exhibitions occur under many guises, including various "biennials," "biennales," and "triennials," Manifesta, Documenta, etc. Though bearing national differences, all exhibitions in this category function to highlight the best art from specific regions. Often, they serve to establish or reaffirm an urban center as an artistic capital.

[48] Caroline Jones, *A Global Work of Art: World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

significance of the exhibition within the art world. At the time of the 1991 Biennial, international exhibitions featured several works that engaged in institutional critique.[49]

Godzilla's letter explicitly addressed cultural identity in the artworld. In the wake of art history's global turn, large-scale exhibitions like the Whitney Biennial are almost always sites of controversy, particularly relating to tensions between local politics and the event's global aims. As these exhibitions proliferated, controversies continued to arise in part because their curators frequently adopt stagnant understandings of national identity that do not reflect local understandings of global forces that impact identity formation.[50] Scholars such as Min noticed that in the 1990s there was a concerted effort within various artworlds to present a multifaceted understanding of cultural identity in art, with large-scale exhibitions becoming the "primary vehicle for showcasing an unprecedented number of marginalized and minority artists."[51] The efficacy of this model for representation, however, remains in question. Art historian Saloni Mathur also provides a framework for critiquing large-scale exhibitions, suggesting that though they were founded with democratic intentions, the exhibitions become microcosms of the power structures they intend to challenge.[52] Large-scale exhibitions reveal the limitations of identity and national-based categorization within global contemporary art. This critique pertains to exhibitions like the 1991 and 1993 Whitney Biennials, which centered on

[49] For example, the Third Havana Bienal in 1984 included many socially-engaged works that emphasized local politics. See Mosquera, Gerardo, "The Third Bienal de La Habana in Its Global and Local Contexts," in Weiss, Rachel ed., *Making Art Global (Part 1)* (London: Afterall Books, 2013), 70-81.

[50] Caroline Jones has led the scholarly charge surrounding ideas of large-scale exhibitions and the "global turn." See Caroline Jones, *A Global Work of Art*.

[51] Susette Min, *Unnamable: The Ends of Asian American Art* (New York, NYU Press, 2018), 1.

[52] Saloni Mathur, "Museums and Globalization." *Anthropological Quarterly* 78, no. 3 (2005): 701-702.

local negotiations with the international art circuits and helps to explain Godzilla's minimal recognition.

The 1993 Whitney Biennial

The Whitney made significant changes to the 1993 Biennial in response to the 1991 controversy. The critical literature surrounding the 1993 Biennial often does not include reference to Godzilla's activism, however, even though the edition focused far more on cultural identity.[53] Led by curator Elisabeth Sussman, the 1993 edition featured 80 artists engaged with both artistic and social issues in the United States.[54] Sussman organized the Biennial around specific goals, including the inclusion of interesting new work that critiqued artistic conventions, art that confronted issues of race, gender, sexuality, and class, and new media.[55] Ten Asian American artists and filmmakers were included in this version of the Biennial, including Byron Kim, Simon Leung, Shu Lea Cheang, Bruce and Norman Yonemoto, Roddy Bogawa, Christine Chang, Janice Tanaka, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Kip Fulbeck—a dramatic increase from 1991. Critics of the Biennial questioned how much discourse should surround cultural identity and who is best fit to discuss an artwork's meaning (e.g., critic, artist, or curator).

At the 1993 Biennial, issues of race were evident upon entrance. Artist Daniel Joseph Martinez designed tabs for visitors to wear that read "I can't ever imagine wanting to be white" Kim's then-unknown painting is perhaps the most famous of the Asian

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[53] See Hal Foster, "Politicized Black Art," in Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin Buchloh, eds., *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism, vol. 2, 1945 to the Present,* 3rd edition (New York and London: Thames and Hudson, 2016) 741-6.

[54] Whitney Museum of American Art, "1993 Whitney Biennial Explores Key Artistic And Social Issues In Recent American Art," in Howie Chen, ed., *Godzilla: Asian American Art Network*, 267-269.

[55] Ibid.

American inclusions. *Synecdoche* (1991 – 1993) is comprised of a grid of 275 squares in various skin tones. The monumental work covers an entire wall, forcing the viewer to directly confront the scale of the piece. To create the work, Kim invited people to sit in his studio, in which he would replicate their exact skin tone.[56]

The Biennial's critical reception largely centered on the reception of Kim's work. Dominant critiques surrounding 1993 Whitney Biennial centered on distinguishing the art from the artist. A scathing *New York Times* review by critic Robert Hughes argued: "Instead of the Artist as Star, we have Artist as Victim."[57] Art historian Rosalind Krauss, in discussion with Hal Foster, Silvia Kolbowski, Miwon Kwon, and Benjamin Buchloh, noted "…the tendency of recent art criticism to avoid talking about the art itself and instead just to name a set of ideas that the art might invoke. I was struck reading the catalogue texts for the Whitney Biennial by this constant deflection of attention from the structure of the work."[58]

Kwon stated in the same discussion that the Biennial's emphasis on identity limited artists of color, thus pointing to limits of representation.[59] She used Kim as an example in her argument to suggest that *Synecdoche* may be unintentionally conforming to a Minimalist approach to artmaking. Further, reception of Kim's work, she suggested, centered on his identity as Asian American, the work serving as a visual confirmation of

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[56] For information on Kim's work, see Eugenie Tsai, et. al*., Byron Kim: Threshold 1990 – 2004* (Berkeley, Ca: University of California Press, 2004).

[57] Robert Hughes, "Art: The Whitney Biennial: A Fiesta of Whining," *New York Times*, (New York, NY), March 22, 1993.

[58] Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Silvia Kolbowskim Miwon Kwon, and Benjamin Buchloh, "The Politics of the Signifier: A Conversation on the Whitney Biennial," *October*, 66 (Autumn 1993), 4.

[59] Ibid., 16.

Sussman's curatorial aims. However, as Kwon notes, Kim's interest in the grid also offers an Asian American response to Minimalism.[60] This episode exposes limitations of foregrounding an artist's perspective while also allowing a work of art to speak for itself. This opens an opportunity for further inquiry that accounts for sting perspectives, such as through oral history.

The 1993 Whitney Biennial in Seoul

After the 1993 Whitney Biennial closed in New York, it traveled to Seoul, South Korea where it was exhibited at the National Museum of Contemporary Art from August 1 – September 8, 1993.[61] The international edition of the exhibition speaks to the global significance of the Whitney's Biennial.[62] It suggests that locally-oriented exhibitions have a profound impact on global contemporary art if they are viewed as a microcosm of global political events. This was the first time the Whitney toured their biennial.[63] Biennial curator Elizabeth Sussmen and Tae Man Choi of the National Museum of Contemporary Art chose to exhibit 107 works from 64 artists.[64] They also commissioned a portfolio of works on paper commemorating the cultural exchange.[65] Additionally, the

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[60] Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Silvia Kolbowskim Miwon Kwon, and Benjamin Buchloh, "The Politics of the Signifier: A Conversation on the Whitney Biennial," 16.

[61] Director of the Whitney David Rose described the scene in Seoul as "…lively and very progressive." See Carol Vogel, "Inside Art," *New York Times* (July 23, 1993), C23.

[62] To view the portfolio, see Kungnip Hyondae Misulgwan and the Whitney Museum of American Art, *93 Whitney Biennial in Seoul*: *A Benefit Print Portfolio for the National Museum of Contemporary Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993).

[63] Carol Vogel, "Inside Art," *New York Times* (July 23, 1993), C23.

[64] In contrast, the 1993 Biennial in New York featured 80 artists. See: Carol Vogel, "Inside Art," *New York Times* (July 23, 1993), C23.

[65] To view the portfolio, see Kungnip Hyondae Misulgwan and the Whitney Museum of American Art, *93 Whitney Biennial in Seoul*: *A Benefit Print Portfolio for the National Museum of Contemporary Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993).

international edition confirms New York's dominance as an artistic capitol, even amidst the rise of other cultural centers.

Byron Kim was also included in the Seoul edition, though *Synecdoche* was not displayed.[66] Instead, the curators exhibited a watermarked print of a vase on a white sheet of paper. Compared to the scale of *Synecdoche*, Kim's *Untitled* is significantly smaller - thirteen inches tall and six inches wide. The watermarked vase reflects the vessel shape and white color used in Korean Joseon pottery, also known as Joseon *baekja* 한국 백자. This can be read as a both a reference to Kim's Korean cultural heritage and the exhibition's location.[67] However, there are some interesting visual similarities between *Synecdoche* and *Untitled*. Upon a closer look, *Untitled* reveals a gridded background not unlike the structure of Kim's painting. Additionally, *Untitled* shares conceptual similarities that reference the work's audiences. Both works humanize iconic artforms synonymous with the location of presentation; *Synecdoche* reflects Minimalist aesthetics, while *Untitled* harkens to Joseon porcelain traditions. The site-specificity of the work's meaning proves the necessity of understanding artwork in relation to the context of its presentation when exhibiting globally. Additionally, it suggests the artist's ability to work transnationally and create work resonant with specific, local audiences.

The critical reception of the Seoul exhibition is frequently omitted from art historical literature surrounding the 1993 Whitney Biennial.[68] However, it appears as if

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[66] Not all the artists in the 1993 Whitney Biennial were included in the Seoul edition.

[67] For more information on Joseon pottery, see Lee, Soyoung. "In Pursuit of White: Porcelain in the Joseon Dynasty, 1392–1910." In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/chpo/hd_chpo.htm (October 2004).

[68] Jina Kim, "Invitation to the Other: The Reframing of the 'American' Art and National Identity and the 1993 Whitney Biennial in New York and Seoul." (PhD Dissertation, SUNY Binghamton, 2004).

the Whitney Biennial in Seoul functioned as a model for future international exhibitions in an emerging artistic and economic center. In 1993, Korea had yet to establish their own international exhibition. The Gwangju Biennale, Korea's premier international exhibition, was founded just two years later in 1995 to commemorate the 1980 Gwangju democratic uprising. The first edition of the Gwangju Biennale was titled "Beyond Borders." The curatorial vision of the exhibition was to bridge the "West" with the "Third World" via art, just as the Whitney Biennial intended to present a unified vision of America.[69] The format of the exhibition, which featured regional pavilions delineated by Western constructions of nationalism: West and East Europe, North America, South America, Asia, The Middle East and Africa, and Korea and Oceania .[70] Like the Whitney, the Gwangju Biennale centered issues of identity in perpetuating nationalistic ethos instead of highlighting formal aesthetic contributions.

International exhibitions like the Whitney Biennial and the Gwangju Biennale are frequently critiqued as inauthentic. In his response to curator Okwui Enwezor, art historian George Baker argues that international exhibitions present a falsified version of globalism. Baker calls on the exploitative nature of international exhibitions as permeating Western notions of the nation-state and global capitalism instead of offering platforms for emerging art markets and local talent.[71] This critique belies an important

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[69] See Kwangju Biennale Foundation, *Kwangju Biennale 1995 | Beyond Borders* (Gwangju, South Korea: Kwangju Biennale Foundation, 1995)

[70] Additionally, the catalogue included excerpts from American curators, such as Kathy Halbreich, then the director of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota. "Kwangju Biennale 1995 | Beyond Borders," Asia Art Archive, Accessed March 22, 2022, https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/library/kwangju-biennale-1995-beyond-the-borders.

[71] George Baker, "The Globalization of the False: A Response to Okwui Enwezor." In *Documents 23* (2004).

truth, however, as many large-scale national and international exhibition do not reflect local ambitions. As evidenced by Godzilla's letter, it is important to investigate artists working in the peripheries to better understand the influences in a global work of art. The 1993 Whitney Biennial in Seoul demonstrates how localized artworks and community-based art shape the global trajectory for many artists and exhibitions. Questions remain, however, for gathering this information to offer nuanced understandings of global art phenomena. The remainder of the dissertation shifts away from case studies to consider methods for conducting global art historical research. I emphasize oral history as a tool for constructing a global contemporary art narrative that includes marginalized voices.

IV: GLOBAL CONTEMPORARY ART AND ORAL HISTORY AS METHOD

In calling for a site-specific understanding of Chinese diasporic art using New York City as a case study, this dissertation primarily relied on textual and archival resources and short-form interviews with key artists. The first three chapters featured three case studies that demonstrated the importance of including overlooked local contributions in the study of global contemporary art history: Basement Workshop, Epoxy Art Group, and Godzilla: Asian American Art Network. My research further revealed numerous other histories that remain understudied, including the contributions of many Asian American artists in New York. How best to include voices omitted from the global contemporary canon is one of the more pressing questions in the field. I explore this issue in this final chapter to proposes the use of oral history for global contemporary art research. I suggest that using oral history as a method that empowers marginalized artists and provides a nuanced explanations of local issues within global contemporary art history. I demonstrate my findings by conducting and transcribing an oral history with Bob Eng Lee, director of the Asian American Art Centre.

Oral history methodology is a mode of inquiry often used in the public humanities. Public humanities is a field of study that considers the impact of humanities research within the broader public. The public humanities support episodic and localized art historical investigations, such as the three case studies in this dissertation, because the intent of the field is to broaden public understandings of humanities research. Though public-oriented art history is not new, scholars, including Art Historian Laura M. Holzman, have recently called for a more consistent approach in the value and role of

public scholarship amidst questions of art history's relevance.[1] She writes that "we need to be more consistently explicit about the value and role of public scholarship within our discipline," arguing for public scholarship's potential for deeper "understanding of our subject matter."[2]

This chapter asks what the public humanities can offer to global contemporary art research and considers why oral history is a useful methodology to consider when expanding to a globalized perspective. Synthesizing scholarship from the public humanities, I propose methods by which oral history could aid in disseminating this research. Public humanities research often incorporates objects classified as material culture, which maps onto my dissertation research. Art Historian Jules David Prown suggests that objects classified as material culture are often overlooked or excluded from global art historical study because many cultures do not specify or distinguish objects as art.[3] Contemporary art historians, such as Julia Bryan Wilson, who writes on intersections of art, craft, and activism, have complicated the divisions between material culture and art to argue for all their interdependence within contemporary art research.[4] Other scholars have approached the divide creatively. Cultural Historian Saidiya Hartman posits "critical fabulation" as a possible solution. Critical fabulation relies on speculative

[1] See Laura M. Holzman, "Isn't it Time for Art History to Go Public?," introduction to Bully Pulpit, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 5, no.2 (Fall 2019), https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.2271.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Jules David Prown, "The Truth of Material Culture: History of Fiction?" in *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture*, edited by Steven Lubar and W. David Kingery (Washington and London: Smithsonian institution Press, 1993), 2.

[4] See Julia Bryan Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

storytelling from the perspective of marginalized peoples to reclaim space in historical record.[5] I concluded that best approaches to global contemporary art involve critical examination of archival records to unearth untold histories, as demonstrated in Chapters 1 through 3, and listening to artists, curators, and cultural workers on the ground. Because this type of research involves careful examination of both community-based (often understood as material culture) and institutionalized art forms, it is essential for art historians to navigate interdisciplinary methodologies to detail a global art history that expands on current understandings of canonization.

Art historians, including myself, frequently rely on archival engagement as a method for discovering these alternative histories. This methodological approach is noted by Art Historian Hal Foster in his essay "An Archival Impulse."[6] Archival records, however, must exist to conduct this type of research. Formal archives housed in universities and museums often only include the works of established artists. Oral history offers a unique opportunity to document artistic praxis of marginalized artists in ways written and photographic records cannot, while also eschewing established art historical categorization.

Oral histories are distinct from interview in that they are directed, in part, by their subject and are characterized by their subjectivity.[7] Oral histories are also marked by their

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[5] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe*, Number 26 (Volume 12, no.2), June 2008, pp. 1-14

[6] Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October*, vol. 110 (Autumn 2004), 3-22.

[7] Substantial literature exists on oral history, though not related specifically to the field of art history. Literature includes the journal *Oral History Review*. See also Thomas Charlton, Lois Myers, Rebecca Sharpless, *Handbook of Oral History* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2006) and Donald A. Ritchie, Doing Oral History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) as additional examples.

depth, as they often include personal anecdotes, opinions, and emotions associated with the topic of discussion.[8] Additionally, they are distinguished by the relationship between the subject and interviewer, as the most successful oral histories read as conversations. This is not to say that oral histories are entirely driven by the subject, as this poses concerns of self-serving narratives and other, related problems. However, oral history offers an opportunity for the art historian to reveal their positionality within their materials and relationship to their subject matter – something that scholarship often does not allow for. This is pertinent to global contemporary art research because a chief concern in the field relates to increased voices. I suggest that this not only should include marginalized artists, but also the art historian. According to Historian Linda Sandino, editor of *Oral History in the Visual Arts*, oral histories unearth "hidden, marginalized aspects of the past" while also providing "firsthand narratives and experience."[9] Therefore, oral histories can provide information that can inform understandings of both the art object and the viewer – key points of concern for contemporary art historians – within a globalized narrative.

Oral history programs are still rare in contemporary art institutions. Among those that do feature such programs, few histories exist of Asian American artists or other artists of color, who arguably would most benefit from this form of documentation. The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) Archives Department sponsors an oral history program that has

[8] There is not a standard length for oral histories, though some compilations may take hours or even multiple sessions over a series of days to complete. Many oral histories require numerous sessions to adequately cover the subject matter. In conducting future oral histories, it would be beneficial to extend the length of interview and divide the session into multiple settings to allow for further nuances to emerge.

[9] Linda Sandino, "Introduction: Oral History In and About Art, Craft, and Design," in *Oral History in the Visual Arts*, edited by Matthew Partington and Linda Sandino (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 11.

compiled around 100 oral histories of artists and museum workers, although the program is now dormant.[10] The Smithsonian's Archives of American Art includes one of the oldest oral history programs.[11] Starting in 1958, the organization has collected over 2,300 histories of artists working in the United States, including many contemporary artists.[12] This archive is one of the most useful collection of oral histories for art historians. There are significant limitations, however, as the archive is limited in national scope, thus framing all narratives within an American perspective. Additionally, and as noted above, there exist limited histories for artists of color.

While visual arts archivists utilize oral history to supplement their archives, art historians rarely discuss oral history as a possible research method.[13] In comparison to interviews and roundtables, oral histories, until recently, have been underutilized.[14] Within the context of art history, oral history is most often used to discuss craft and vernacular aesthetics – art forms often designated as material culture. Oral histories are not as formal as textual primary sources. Complete with informal patterns of speaking

[10] I'd like to thank Michelle Elligott and Michelle Harvey at the MoMA for sharing oral history resources with me. "Oral History," MoMA, accessed January 27, 2022, https://www.moma.org/research-and-learning/archives/oral-history.

[11] "Archives of American Art," Smithsonian Institutions, accessed January 27, 2022, https://www.aaa.si.edu/.

[12] I did not draw from this archive in my dissertation beyond analyzing its structure for this chapter.

[13] See Matthew Partington and Linda Sandino, eds., *Oral History in the Visual Arts*.

[14] Journals such as *October* frequently use the roundtable format for articles. For example, see Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Silvia Kolbowskim, Miwon Kwon, and Benjamin Buchloh, "The Politics of the Signifier: A Conversation on the Whitney Biennial," *October*, 66 (Autumn 1993), 3-27, which is referenced in Chapter 3 of this dissertation. Roundtables differ from oral histories. This distinction will be further articulated later below.

and often non-linear narrative order, oral history gathers information that falls outside of categorical bounds.

Some helpful models for this important work exist. While not explicitly oral history, the Voices in Contemporary Art (VoCA) program sponsors annual Artist Interview Workshops. This series of seminars, which began in 2012, is designed to train art historians on how to better interview artists and share their findings. Institutions such as Columbia University's Center for Oral History Research, and organizations including Society of American Archivists, also offer viable models for best practices and archival processes.

Curiously, artists working in the late twentieth century – the timeline for this dissertation – engaged in practices that mirrored oral history by producing interviews as works of art and were increasingly interested in self-documentation.[15] Though different in format and intent, both the emergent interest in self-documentation and the increased use of oral history demonstrate an interest in substantiating archives with more authorial voices. Art Historian Hal Foster, for example, compares artists post-1960 to ethnographers and analyzes the importance – and associated risks – of a self-reflexive artistic practice amidst postmodernisms.[16] Foster's argument presents the challenges of interpreting an artist's voice alongside the art object, as in the case of the 1993 Whitney Biennial, which was critiqued for relying too heavily on the artist's voice. Even so,

[15] As discussed in Chapter 3, Nicholas Bourriaud, Claire Bishop, and Grant Kester have written extensively on "relational art." See Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (France: Les Presses Du Reel, 1998); Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (New York: Verso, 2011); Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

[16] Foster, Hal. "The Artist as Ethnographer," in *The Return of the Real: The Avante-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996), 171 – 205.

contemporary artists increasingly utilize the interview as an artform, especially amidst the rise in institutional critique and relational art. In *Oral History and the Visual Arts*, Historian Linda Sandino described artist William Furlong's *Audio Arts* (1970s) as an example of artists using interviews as their medium.[17] This work, or "cassette-based magazine," included interviews of prominent figures (e.g., artists, critics, collectors) in the global art world, including Joseph Beuys, Lucy Lippard, Noam Chomsky, Laurie Anderson, John Cage, and Gerhard Richter.[18] *Audio Arts* is now at the Tate in London. As noted by Sandino, all the interviewed artists exhibited at established institutions and museums, ostensibly producing ample documentation alongside various exhibitions.

Other interview-based artworks, like Godzilla's exhibition within the New Museum's *Urban Encounters*, offer examples of marginalized artists using interviews to create archival records. Sandino considers these interventions more "in keeping with the ethos of oral history," which intends to look outside dominant records of history.[19] Following the 1991 Whitney Biennial, Godzilla participated in the New Museum's exhibition *Urban Encounters*.[20] Because one of Godzilla's aims was to educate the public on understudied Asian art, Godzilla highlighted their genealogy in Chinatown with both textual sources

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[17] Linda Sandino, "Introduction: Oral History In and About Art, Craft, and Design," in *Oral History in the Visual Arts*, 14.

[18] "Materials Relating to William Furlong's Audio Arts Magazine," Tate, accessed February 12, 2022, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/archive/tga-200414/material-relating-to-william-furlongs-audio-arts-magazine.

[19] Linda Sandino, "Introduction: Oral History In and About Art, Craft, and Design," in *Oral History in the Visual Arts*, 14.

[20] The New Museum was still a relatively new institution at the time of *Urban Encounters*. With its history as an alternative art space, defined in Chapter 1, the New Museum seemingly offered Godzilla a compromise between institutionalism and anarchy. In Urban Encounters, Godzilla exhibited New York-based ABC No Rio, Bullet Space, Guerilla Girls, REPOhistory, and World War III Illustration. See "Urban Encounters," New Museum, access June 3, 2022, https://archive.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/316.

and interviews. Upon entrance to the installation, one found a complete timeline of Godzilla's history from the Basement Workshop to the date of the exhibition (1998). Covering an entire wall, the diagram offered a brief history of Asian American and Asian diasporic art. In the center of the space sat a boxed television with four sets of headphones hanging below. Titled *From Basement to Godzilla* (1998), the video installation presented long-form interviews of Godzilla members. Featuring several volunteers from Godzilla and its affiliates, the video offered one of the first oral histories of the collective.[21] *From Basement to Godzilla* demonstrated the importance of varied archival methods in contemporary art research.

As demonstrated by Godzilla's video installation, technology has also significantly shaped art history and its methods. Artists continue to explore recording and documenting new media and performance works – both of which are of increasing interest within global contemporary art since the 1970s.[22] These trends continue to challenge ideas of authorship and audience. This challenge is not unlike those associated with photography, where debates around subjectivity are ongoing. Art Historian George Baker, for example, states that "Perhaps, indeed, photography's expanded field, unlike sculpture's, might even have to be imagined as a group of expanded *fields*, multiple sets of oppositions and conjunctions, rather than a single operation."[23] Noting these trends, Art Historian Kate Mondloch suggests that there should be attention placed on the

[21] Godzilla also presented a response to Basement Workshop's *Yellow Pearl* (1972) titled *From Basement to Godzilla* (1998) within the *Urban Encounters* exhibition. The portfolio featured 46 artists with connections to Godzilla.

[22] For one example or art historical analysis of artists recording their own work, see Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield, eds., *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History* (Bristol: Intellect Ltd, 2012).

[23] George Baker, "Photography's Expanded Field," *October* 114 (Fall 2005), 124.

spectator, suggesting that *how* the viewer sees an art object is as important as *what* they see.[24] Interventions such as Mondloch's draw attention to subjectivity in contemporary art.[25]

The inherent subjectivity of oral histories is why they function best as an addition to textual sources. Within the field of contemporary art, researchers are also increasingly interested in revealing their own positionality, in addition to that of the artists they study. Recently, scholars are also reconsidering ideas of individual subjectivity within their research. For example, editors Christopher K. Ho and Daisy Nam compiled 73 reflections from Asian American artists and writers in the book *Best! Letters from Asian Americans in the Arts*.[26] This creative text features Art Historians Marci Kwon and Anne Anlin Cheng. This text eliminates barriers between the personal and public while commenting on key issues pertaining to the art world, including cultural identity, racism, and nationalism. All the letters in *Best!* are written in first-person and highlight the author's perspective and writing style. In her essay "Friends of Fans of Mao: Researching China's Cultural Revolution," Art Historian Jenny Lin admits to liking her research topics and encourages other scholars to admit their own biases within global contemporary art history. She writes that "we usually select topics of study based on what we like, or love and on personal experiences and subject positions, however publicly we might deny

[24] See Kate Mondloch, *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

[25] Questions about how to leverage technology as an aid in conducting oral histories will be discussed later in this chapter, especially relating to the COVID-19 pandemic.

[26] Christopher K. Ho and Daisy Nam, eds., *Best! Letters from Asian Americans in the Arts* (New York: Paper Monument, 2021).

subjectivity in the wake of 'The Death of the Author.'"[27] Oral history offers an opportunity to do so because it is not a neutral telling of history, like formal interviews are often presented as. This is recognized by the interviewer and interviewee in oral history research because individual opinions, memories, and personalities of *both* participants are apparent.[28] With oral history, the subjectivities of both the interviewer and the interviewee inform the final product. If global contemporary art history is about increased perspectives and viewpoints, it is essential for the author, in addition to the artist, to be a part of archival documentation. Amidst competing subjectivities, questions remain as to if presenting a historically accurate account is the primary goal. I argue that while it is important to honestly represent yourself and your subject, the goal of an oral history is not to create a source that functions as the sole account. Instead, oral histories are meant to supplement other historical narratives and be used to inform fact-based narratives.

Collecting Oral Histories and Proposed Methodology

The subjectivity within records of oral history amplifies the purpose and use of collected oral histories. For this chapter, I did not need to gain Institutional Review Board approval to conduct an oral history with Bob Lee. As noted above, the Oral History Association (OHA), a partner of Columbia University's Center for Oral History Research, is the leading authority on oral history methods and ethics. In 2018, OHA

[27] Jenny Lin, "Friends of Fans of Mao: Researching China's Cultural Revolution," in *Fandom as Methodology: A Sourcebook for Artists and Writers*, edited by Catherine Grant and Kate Random Love (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2019), 180.

[28] Oral histories are closer to informal conversations than formal interviews.

updated their principles and best practices that expanded on their 1968 list.[29] Oral histories involve real people, and often touch on sensitive subjects. Institutional approval is often required for those using human subjects in their research.[30] At the University of Oregon, researchers are required to comply with guidelines issued by the Committee for the Protection of Human Subject (CPHS) and the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Researchers are required to seek training and IRB approval before initiating any projects if human subjects are to be used in research. Oral history, however, does not require IRB approval.[31]

Like textual sources (primary and secondary), oral histories are intended to *support* a research argument. In line with this chapter's thesis, oral history can serve as a method for accessing information that otherwise would not exist. Analysis of the oral history, in tandem with other sources, can be used to devise theses and make claims. Oral histories are not considered research in terms of federal policy. According to the "Common Rule" in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services policies for human research, research is defined as "a systematic investigation, including research development, testing, and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge."[32] Under this definition, the policy states that "scholarly and journalistic

[29] Tory Reeves and Sarah Milligan, "2018 Principles and Best Practices Overview," Oral History Association, October 2018, Accessed March 14, 2022, https://www.oralhistory.org/principles-and-best-practices-revised-2018/#Introduction.

[30] See "Information about IRBs," Oral History Association, July 2020, https://www.oralhistory.org/information-about-irbs/ for a broad overview of this topic.

[31] Nevertheless, it is important to consult with an ethics advisor before conducting an oral history, as different institutions will vary in policy depending on the size, length, and format of the project.

[32] "Update: July 2020: Oral History, The Protection of Human Subjects in Research and Institutional Review Board Oversight," Oral History Association, July 2020, https://www.oralhistory.org/information-about-irbs/.

activities (e.g., oral history, journalism, biography, literary criticism, legal research, and historical scholarship), including the collection and use of information that focus directly on the specific individuals about whom the information is collected" does not meet the technical definition of research.[33] This does not mean that oral history cannot be used in research, or as a crucial method for gathering information. Rather, this suggests that oral history cannot function as standalone research. This is important to consider for this dissertation because I suggest oral history be used to complement existing sources.

To conduct an oral history, a researcher must have rapport with the subject as the content covered in an oral history can be sensitive. Often, the researcher has known their subject for many years. Additionally, a close relationship allows the subject to be more candid. Sandino suggests that though oral histories are meant to highlight individual stories, they serve to add to collective understandings of history by offering diverse perspectives. [34] Additionally, it is important to remember that people may forget or have differing versions of histories depending on the time the oral history is taken. For example, an oral history of an event three days ago will likely be substantially different than an oral history of the same event taken thirty years later.[35] While oral histories add value to the field of art history, it is up to the researcher to interpret and contextualize it with other sources.

The Asian American Art Centre

[33] "Update: July 2020: Oral History, The Protection of Human Subjects in Research and Institutional Review Board Oversight."

[34] Linda Sandino, "Introduction: Oral History In and About Art, Craft, and Design," in *Oral History in the Visual Arts*, 17-18.

[35] See Paula Hamilton and Linda Shope, *Oral History and Public Memories* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008) for examples on negotiating public and individual memory in oral history research.

Bob Lee, the director of the Asian American Art Centre (AAAC) served as the case study for my oral history exercise. I chose Lee because of his importance in relationship to the case studies in this dissertation, the length of time I have known him (since 2019), his familiarity with my research, and the familiarity I gained with the AAAC collection while curating two exhibitions on the Centre's impact in New York.[36] Lee's oral history offers a paradigmatic example of the benefits of oral history for global contemporary art history research such as my dissertation because it highlights an understudied history from his perspective. Though some archival documents from the AAAC (e.g., marketing materials and exhibition guides) are found at archives such as the Fales library and Special Collections at NYU and UC Berkeley's Ethnic Studies Library, little critical attention has been given to the reception and understanding of AAAC's curatorial program. I decided to utilize oral history to better understand Lee as a curator and to better account for the reception of some of the first exhibitions celebrating Asian American art in New York City.

The AAAC evolved from the Basement Workshop, where Lee was also a member, and is one of the only collections dedicated exclusively to Asian American art. The AAAC was first formed under the name of the "Asian American Dance Theatre," which was a dance company founded by Lee's wife, Eleanor Yung.[37] After marrying, Lee and Yung shifted the focus of the Dance Theatre to include an exhibition program, in turn renaming the organization. The Centre began collecting and exhibiting art in 1983,

[36] Lee supplied many of the archival documents that informed Chapter 1 on Basement Workshop. *Heartmind: Exhibitions from the Bob Eng Lee and the Asian American Art Centre Collections* was held at Pearl River Mart and Think!Chinatown Art Space from October 2021 to January 2022.

[37] Eleanor Yung is the sister of Basement Workshop founder, Danny N.T. Yung. E. Yung and Lee met at Basement Workshop.

hosting upwards of four exhibitions and multiple programs per year. The most famous exhibitions including *CHINA: June 4, 1989,* which commemorated the Tiananmen Square massacre. The exhibition was held at PS1 and Blum Helman Warehouse before traveling around the United States.[38] Today, the archive and collection includes three hundred works of Asian American art, including works by artists Tseng Kwong Chi, Zhang Hongtu, Tehching Hsieh among others, and many former Basement Workshop, Epoxy, and Godzilla artists. The Centre also maintains artsasiaamerica.org, an online archive of Asian American artists.

The Asian American Art Centre offers perspective on the development of an Asian American aesthetic in the late twentieth century through the eyes of its curator, Bob Lee. Lee attempted to archive what he felt exemplified an "Asian American aesthetic" with AAC's collection. This approach differed from Godzilla, who favored an autobiographical telling of history, as demonstrated by the *Urban Encounters* exhibition. Lee's definitions of Asian American art shifted as the Centre became more established. At first, Lee collected works that fit aesthetic conventions of Abstract Expressionism, such as those of the artist Carrie Yamaoka (b. 1957).[39] Yamaoka's untitled work (approx. 1970s), the first work accessioned into the collection, is relatively small, about the size of a standard sheet of paper. The work includes a light orange background with a light blue paint stroke streaking through the middle. A graphite grid is drawn over the top. The work, which was created in the 1970s, reflects New York trends of abstraction.

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[38] *CHINA: June 4, 1989* exhibited at PS1 before it was acquired by the MoMA. Bob Lee, "Exhibitions Overview," Asian American Art Centre, Accessed March 28, 2022, http://www.artspiral.org/exhibitions.php.

[39] Wall text, *Heartmind: Portraits from the Bob Eng Lee and Asian American Arts Centre Collections*, Pearl River Mart, New York City, NY.

Yamaoka's *Untitled* contrasts with works collected later, such as Toshionori Kuga's *Golden Flower* (1996). *Golden Flower*, which Kuga dedicates to Tibet, first appears as a dark black box. The box opens, however, to reveal red tassels and a gold hand. The piece is meant to be interacted with.[40] This piece, collected about twenty years after Yamaoka's painting, demonstrates Lee's new interests in performance art, which center the artist.

Many of the works collected by Lee were produced by artists who had yet to gain recognition. Some of the works in the collection reflected prejudices faced by Asian American artists. Chen Zhen's (1955 – 2000) *A Cannot Be Realized Project* exemplifies the conceptual turn in Lee's collection, as well as discrimination of marginalized artists in the New York art world. Lee intended to exhibit Chen, a Chinese-French artist, while he was in New York. Upon discovering they could not host an exhibition due to lack of funds, Chen placed the unknown work, presumably a work on paper, in between two sheets of plywood and drilled the work shut with large metal screws.[41] Chen then labeled the work with *yige buneng shixian de jihua* 一個不能實現的計畫 and "A cannot be realized project." This work demonstrates increased interest in internationalism within Lee's collection because Chen was not American.

Case Study: Oral History with Bob Lee

Exhibitions in Discussion

On March 26, 2022, I collected and transcribed an oral history of select exhibitions in AAAC's program with Lee at the Centre's offices in the Lower East Side

[40] Wall text, *Heartmind: Portraits from the Bob Eng Lee and Asian American Arts Centre Collections*, Pearl River Mart.

[41] Wall text, *Heartmind: Selections from the Bob Eng Lee and Asian American Art Centre Collections*, 1 Pike St (Think!Chinatown Artspace), New York City.

of Manhattan.[42] For the oral history, we limited our discussion to one exhibition hosted by the AAAC, *And He Was Looking for Asia: Alternatives to the Story of Christopher Columbus Today* (1992), and one unrealized exhibition, *Silk Road*. These exhibitions, chosen in conversation with Lee, were selected because he felt they best exemplified his, and by extension the Centre's, definition of Asian American art and curatorial vision.

And He Was Looking for Asia was held at the Centre's 26 Bowery location September 25, 1992, to October 29, 1992.[43] The exhibition questioned what would have happened if Christopher Columbus had landed in Asia instead of the Americas in 1492. Lee's mythologized understanding served as a metaphor for extant cultural differences between Asian and Western cultures. The included artists were Mo Bahc, Willie Cole, Arlan Huang, Young K., Betty Lee, Joanna Osburn, Jorge Tacla, and Barbara Takenaga. *Silk Road* is an unrealized exhibition that suggests the global ambitions of the Centre. The artists Lee had planned to include were Andrew Binkley, Junko Chodos, Nancy Hom, Lilya Lifanova, Chris Mendoza, Selime Okuyan, Kea Tawana, Alina Viola Tas, and Lily Yeh.

Process for Gathering Oral History

One of the most important aspects of oral history is informed consent. To gain consent and conduct an ethical oral history, the researcher should articulate the goals of the project, the format for the oral history, and any details relating to distribution to the subject. Craft Historian Matthew Partington, for example, requires that his subjects fill

[42] The transcription is included as an appendix in this dissertation.

[43] Bob Lee, "And He Was Looking for Asia: Alternatives to the Story of Christopher Columbus Today," Asian American Art Centre (1992), http://www.artspiral.org/1992-1993.php.

out a document consenting to the interview, which is then stored alongside the recording.[44] The process for conducting an oral history should be transparent and should largely be determined by the comfort level of the subject and ethical standards of each individual case.[45] It is difficult to articulate one best established practice because of the variability in conditions surrounding oral histories. Additionally, it is important to allow the subject agency in determining the direction of their oral history, because the method is designed to highlight their individual perspective.

After Lee agreed to participate in my oral history project, I met with him weekly from January 2022 to March 2022 to discuss the history of the Centre and plan the oral history. Though I indicated that I wanted the oral history to address the Centre, it was important to me that Lee would choose the exhibitions to discuss in the oral history. Lee and I decided that choosing two exhibitions would minimize the scope while still highlighting his curatorial perspective. Furthermore, the focus on two exhibitions best exemplifies the usefulness of oral history in connection to textural resources that already exist, especially relating to *And He Was Looking for Asia*. *Silk Road* was selected to highlight Lee's curatorial process, which greatly informed the Centre's exhibition program, but is not something easily discerned outside of conversations with Lee.

Lee and I practiced the format for the oral history before the final recording. After completing the practice oral histories, I compiled a finalized list of questions to ask Lee, which I shared with him two days before conducting the oral history. Lee shared with me

[44] Matthew Partington, "Conclusion: Oral History and Research Ethics in the Visual Arts: Current and Future Challenges," in *Oral History in the Visual Arts*, 194.

[45] For more information on the ethics of gathering oral histories, see ibid., 191-201.

many documents, notes, images, and exhibition materials related to the two exhibitions in discussion in the weeks preceding that informed my questions. The questions I outlined were as follows:

And He Was Looking for Asia:

1. What inspired the exhibition? How was it different than other exhibitions?
2. Which artists were included, that you can remember? What did the art look like?
3. Which works best encompassed your curatorial ideas?
4. *And He Was Looking For Asia* was global in scope. How did the artists respond?
5. How was the show installed?
6. How was this show received?

Silk Road:

1. How are *Silk Road* and *And He Was Looking for Asia* connected?
2. How had the Centre evolved at that point?
3. What is the story behind your ideas for the *Silk Road* show?
4. What made you interested in the Silk Road?
5. Why an exhibition and not a book?
6. Which artists do you hope to include? Could you talk about a favorite work or two? How do you know these artists?
7. Many of the artists were local to New York and actively producing work. Why did you decide to include those artists?
8. Could you tell the story of why it was not exhibited?
9. How do you think the exhibition would have been received?
10. How have your ideas about the *Silk Road* show and Asian American art continued to evolve?

The questions were circulated to Lee two days before the oral history was recorded. It was understood that the questions may or may not be asked. Before recording, I established a series of guidelines with Lee before the oral history. Lee was aware that he could pause the recording at any time to take a break, which would then be indicated in the transcript. Lee was made aware that he could request a "do-over" and/or eliminate any part of the oral history if he was uncomfortable, both of which would be indicated with the use of "[redacted]" in the finalized transcript. Lee was encouraged to be as

casual in his responses as he desired and felt comfortable. Lee also decided to utilize notes he prepared for the oral history.[46] Though photography is used in some oral histories, we did not consult any images.[47] In addition to sharing my questions with Lee, I also shared an estimated oral history length with him of four hours. It was understood that Lee could stop the oral history at any time.[48]

Recording the Oral History

In addition to establishing expectations, it is necessary to discuss the best options for recording the oral history and where the files will live. Ethical considerations for recording oral histories continue to shift due to emergent technologies and public health-related restrictions. Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the Oral History Association updated their guidelines to include strategies for remote oral histories, including a decision-making diagram.[49] Best practices indicate that decisions relating to location and recording method should be made in consultation with both the researcher and subject.[50] Lee and I decided to conduct an in-person oral history while wearing masks. I consulted with Lee to decide the best methods for recording the oral

[46] Lee's notes are not included in this chapter.

[47] See Alexander Freund and Alistair Thomson, eds., *Oral History and Photography* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

[48] Moving forward, it would be beneficial to conduct oral histories in multiple sessions to more fully articulate Lee's individual perspective.

[49] See "Considerations for Remote Oral History Interviewing," Oral History Association, August 27, 2020, https://www.oralhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Remote-interviewing-guidelines-10.8.2020.pdf.

[50] See "Remote interviewing Resources," Oral History Association, August 27, 2020, https://www.oralhistory.org/remote-interviewing-resources/#personvremote.

history. The oral history was recorded using both Zoom audio and the Voice Memo app on my cellphone, resulting in two identical recordings.[51]

Transcribing the Oral History

The oral history with Lee took three hours and twenty-three minutes. At its conclusion, I transcribed the interview using Zoom and Express Scribe. Zoom produced an automated transcript that served as a rough outline. From there, I used the free program Express Scribe to finalize the transcription, which allows the user to easily stop, start, and adjust the speed of a recording. I referenced Guilford College's guidelines for formatting my transcription.[52] The guidelines suggest minimal edits to properly account for the patterns of speech of both the researcher and subject. Connecting words (e.g., and, but) and statements such as "you know" were left in the transcript. I included all false starts, as indicated by a dash. Indecipherable phrases were indicated by "[indecipherable]." Filler words (e.g., ah, um) were eliminated for clarity. Laughter was indicated with "[laughs]." Encouraging remarks by myself (e.g., yes, sure) were left out of the transcript, unless a significant pause followed. Information that aids in cohesion of the interview for readers was added to the transcript in brackets or a footnote.

The transcription was distributed to Lee as a word document. The final storage site for the audio recording remains to be determined, as there are varying ethical standards for recordings. Some authorities suggest that the recording should be made available for further research, others encourage researchers to destroy their original

[51] Another reason Zoom was utilized was because it has the capacity to produce an automated live transcript, which aids in transcription. The transcription processes are discussed below.

[52] "Some Guidelines for Transcribing Oral History," Guilford College Hege Library & Learning Technologies, Accessed March 1, 2022, https://library.guilford.edu/c.php?g=111767&p=722621.

recordings upon publication.[53] Some researchers choose to submit their recordings to organizations like Story Corps for archival and publications purposes. However, these decisions depend on the content of the oral history and on the subject. The Oral History Association suggests that traditional modes of archiving are not suitable for the varying formats of oral histories. They also note that this especially affects vulnerable and marginalized communities.[54] In short, the researcher should consult with the subject to determine best practices. At the time of this writing, Lee does not have an opinion on the destination of the recording but is considering publishing the interview transcription on the Asian American Art Centre's blog.

Oral Art History: Remaining Considerations and Summary

Lee's oral history significantly informed my analysis of the Asian American Art Centre because it offered interesting perspectives previously unknown and captured Lee's personality. The interview and subsequent transcription revealed how local cultural producers were interpreting global contemporary art vis-à-vis exhibitions and art. Additionally, the interview revealed Lee's preference for conceptual, relational art that maps onto trends discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

Questions remain for art historians as to where collected oral art histories should be located. Scholars must also consider accessibility and distribution of collected oral histories for a public audience. A paradox exists between the public-facing intent of oral art histories and their final destinations, as they are often housed in academic libraries

[53] Matthew Partington, "Conclusion: Oral History and Research Ethics in the Visual Arts: Current and Future Challenges," in *Oral History in the Visual Arts*, 198.

[54] "Archiving Oral History," Oral History Association, October 2019, https://www.oralhistory.org/archives-principles-and-best-practices-overview/.

and/or research centers. This limits accessibility of these histories to only those working in universities or museums, potentially negating the public intentions of oral history projects. This is certainly a contradiction for my own research methods, in which the transcription is distributed via text. This contradiction is paired with the lack of viable archives specializing in oral art histories. However, there is value for art historians who decide to collect oral histories. Used in tandem with other research methods, oral history is a vital tool for capturing the histories of marginalized artists. Further, the method reveals the potential for a more public-facing global art history that accounts for community-engaged and institutionalized art.

My dissertation has explored how to conduct global contemporary art history in a way that emphasizes site-specific, local contributions. Urban-oriented interventions that call for site-specific understandings of art amidst globalization, including work by Art Historians Jenny Lin, Meiling Cheng, and Anthropologist Sasha Welland, served as models for this research.[55] Looking outside of China, I approached this research by examining three Asian American artist spaces and collectives in New York City. I limited the scope of each artist space/collective to specific episodes and artworks that demonstrated local understandings of global events, including the Vietnam War (1955-1975), student protests of 1968, and the Cold War (1947 – 1991). Additionally, I proposed a method for global contemporary art research that allows for marginalized artists to voice their own histories. I questioned how global contemporary art should

[55] See Jenny Lin, *Above Sea: Contemporary Art, Urban Culture, and the Fashioning of Global Shanghai* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019); Meiling Cheng, *Beijing Xingwei: Contemporary Chinese Time-Based Art* (Chicago: Seagull Books, 2014); and Sasha Su-Ling Welland, *Experimental Beijing: Gender and Globalization in Contemporary Chinese Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

account for location-based nuances in artmaking as relates to diasporic artistic production. In so doing, I shed light on art as a communication tool for political discourse by drawing on pedagogical and activist art scholarship.

The first three chapters were devoted to case studies of paradigmatic artist spaces and collectives. Chapter 1 considered how the architecture and visual culture of nonprofit art spaces and community organizations contribute to site-specific understandings of global contemporary art. I focused my analysis to the Basement Workshop, an artist-activist space in Chinatown from 1971 to 1980. I considered Chinatown's architecture and the visual production at Basement Workshop, including posters and the artist book *The Yellow Pearl* (1972), to suggest that more attention should be placed on the art and architectural history related to the site of production to better understand the local conditions. This chapter provided the foundation for the remaining chapters and set the stage for later artistic interventions by Chinese and Asian diasporic artists.

Chapter 2 considered Epoxy Art Group's (1982 – 1992) interventions in Soho and Chinatown to argue that their use of nontraditional materials in urban contexts (e.g., gallery installations, outdoor slide shows, and xeroxes) centered their identity as an artistic collective in New York City. Chapter 3 expanded on ideas of relational art and institutional critique to call for inclusion of localized movements within large-scale national and international exhibitions. I considered Godzilla: Asian American Art Network and their engagements with the 1991 and 1993 Whitney Biennials as my case studies. I argued that Godzilla's interventions at the 1991 Whitney Biennial successfully challenged institutional claims of representing alternative voices, leading to institutional changes for the 1993 Whitney Biennial. Each chapter negotiated concerns of identity and

positioning within a globalized art world. The episodes in discussion illuminated the challenges – personal, collective, and national – of working in globalized art center as a diasporic artist.

The final chapter, Chapter 4, complements the first three by analyzing a method for continuing local investigations into global contemporary art. I incorporated scholarship in the public humanities to theorize ways in which my dissertation research can be distributed to a public audience using oral history as a methodology. I suggested that oral histories empower marginalized artists to share their own stories to provide a nuanced understanding of local issues within global contemporary art history. I demonstrated my findings by interviewing Bob Lee, the director of the Asian American Art Centre, to suggest how an oral history can be used alongside textual records to better account for marginalized artists and curators. This chapter includes a transcription of the interview as an example.

There is still crucial work to be done by art historians utilizing oral history within global contemporary art research, including further research into this methodology and expansion of viable oral history archives. Fittingly, community organizations are paving an interesting path for the future of oral history in art. For example, Think!Chinatown (T!C) offers a creative platform for oral histories. Pairing an artist with an interviewee, T!C produces collaborative art books that visually tell the stories of people working and living in Chinatown.[56] As demonstrated throughout this dissertation, it is important for art historians to pay attention to cultural workers on the ground in envisioning a global

[56] See "The Art of Storytelling," Think!Chinatown, Accessed March 17, 2022, https://www.thinkchinatown.org/art-of-storytelling.

contemporary art history that is publicly accessible and gives voice to marginalized artists.

CONCLUSION

One of the most pressing challenges in the field of contemporary art is constructing a global narrative that accounts for local specificities. Often characterized as the pursuit of broadening the canon, investigations into global contemporary art history reveal numerous other tensions associated with increased internationalism, such as racism, marginalization, and shifting identities. This dilemma in the field is complicated by artists working transnationally. Artists are no longer relegated to one space; instead, they traverse national and cultural boundaries with their art, muddling the national-based approaches, favored by global contemporary art historians such as Terry Smith.[1] In line with thinkers like art historian including Reiko Tomii, among others, I argue that we must direct our attention to the local in order to properly understand the global.[2] In my dissertation, I investigated interdisciplinary archives, revealing episodes that have been neglected and that give voice to marginalized artists. I emphasized a localized approach because it more aptly considered non-canonical voices. Furter, this approach defines how globalism manifests for artists. My episodic approach elucidated how global events are accounted for by artists and demonstrated how those interpretations shifted with each decade.

This dissertation was written during an historic global event: the COVID-19 pandemic. The effects of the pandemic, coupled with the related rise in anti-Asian crimes, reshaped and informed my research trajectory and thesis, many times over. In the early

[1] See Terry Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2011).

[2] See Reiko Tomii, *Radicalism in the Wilderness: International Contemporaneity and the 1960s Art in Japan* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016).

stages of this project, I planned to travel to Hong Kong and Beijing to gather important archival research to develop an explicitly transnational arc within my research findings.[3] This strategy, I initially hypothesized, would allow me to articulate how art made by diasporic Chinese artists differed based on the site of production, using New York, Hong Kong, and Beijing as sites of investigation. After proposing my dissertation, pandemic-related restrictions eliminated opportunities for travel beyond my preliminary, pre-dissertation research conducted in Shanghai before the onset of COVID-19.

The inability to travel outside the United States prevented me from expounding upon the reliance of transnational art as bound to urbanization, as argued for in literature by art historians like Jenny Lin, Meiqin Wang, and Meiling Chung.[4] The project was redefined by my own pandemic experience in New York City, where my life was characterized not by numbers or news reports, but instead by my day-to-day adjustments necessary for survival amidst the global outbreak. This realization – that a global event was most accurately characterized by my personal experiences - inspired me to adjust my research findings to further account for individual reflections of global events from my home base in New York City. I was lucky to enact this thesis from one of my initial areas of inquiry: New York City. Though my project shrank in geographic scope, it broadened into debates of categorization and terminologies pertinent to global contemporary art history. As my project shifted from my initial area of inquiry in urban-oriented,

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[3] I would like to the thank the Henry Luce Foundation and the American Council of Learned Societies in China Studies for awarding me a pre-dissertation fellowship to support preliminary research in China and Hong Long. I was unfortunately unable to utilize the award due to pandemic-related constraints.

[4] See: Jenny Lin, *Above Sea: Contemporary Art, Urban Culture, and the Fashioning of Global Shanghai* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019); Meiqin Wang, *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art* (New York: Routledge Press, 2016); and Meiling Cheng, *Beijing Xingwei: Contemporary Chinese Time-Based Art* (Chicago: Seagull Books, 2014).

transnational contemporary Chinese art, to intervening within Asian American discourses, and finally to a retelling of New York's contemporary art history, I wondered if my project remained relevant to the field of global contemporary art. As my own definitions of globalism, transnationalism, site-specificity, and diaspora began to account for localized understandings of the terms, however, I realized that my discussions of how individuals conceptualized international events truly characterized global contemporary art history. Instead of presenting a global contemporary art history focused on how artists literally interact with the world, I turned instead to how artists reflect on globalization via art.

It is important to root these ideas within the context in which they were formulated. However, the questions at the heart of this project, particularly, the connection between location and art, still take priority. For example, Anthropologist Sasha Su-Ling Welland asks in her ethnography about Beijing's globalized artworld after the 20098 Summer Olympics, *Experimental Beijing: Gender and Globalization in Contemporary Chinese Art*: "am I trying to write an ethnography about a city in which art plays a part or an ethnography about art in which the city plays a part?"[5] I suggest that both perspectives can, and must, be taken. The global art market is often bound to urban developments, and art historians *should* seek to highlight local specificities amidst transcultural exchange in artistic centers like New York to properly tether interpretations of globalism to extant art historical narratives. That way, new networks of art histories can emerge that intersect and shift, forgoing the illusion of one grand, monolithic

[5] Sasha Su-Ling Welland, *Experimental Beijing: Gender and Globalization in Contemporary Chinese Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 10.

narrative. Art Historian Margo Machida echoes this sentiment, arguing that globalization in art "does not mean that perceptions and affective investments are therefore unanchored or remain perpetually free-floating. Rather they are still formed in relation to particular places and routes of passage."[6]

Each chapter of this dissertation follows this line of inquiry by presenting specific understandings of internationalism. In Chapter 1, I considered the Basement Workshop. Inspired by the likes of the Brown Berets, Basement members conceived of the global via activism.[7] Looking both to the Bay Area in California and Mainland China, where many members were from, artists in Basement Workshop conceived of posters that reflected Maoist aesthetics. Though Basement members were unified under the nationally rooted, newly-coined-term "Asian-American," the alternative art space in Chinatown reflected global aesthetics of Third World liberation groups, uniting the Basement Workshop with activist movements around the world via their aesthetic approach.

In Chapter 2, I discussed Epoxy Art Group, an avant-garde collective working in Lower Manhattan. My inclusion of this collective revealed nuances in American's understandings of "China." Hailing primarily from Hong Kong, Epoxy members explored Hong Kongese politics through their art, which differentiated them from the Maoist aesthetics explored by those in Basement Workshop. By including the likeness of Ronald Reagan and Mao Zedong within their collaborative artworks, Epoxy artists

[6] Margo Machida, "Diasporas in Motion: The Visual Arts and Communities of Affinity," in *Envisioning Diaspora: Asian American Visual Arts Collectives from Godzilla, Godzookie, to the Barnstormers*, ed. Alexandra Chang (Beijing: Timezone 8 Editions, 2008), xvii.

[7] Alexandra Chang, ibid., 26.

demonstrated their understandings of international politics from their unique viewpoints as Hong Kongers living in New York.[8]

Chapter 3 considered Godzilla: Asian American Art Network and their interventions at the 1991 Whitney Biennial. As a national exhibition, the Whitney Biennial aspires to showcase the "best" in American art for the rest of the world. Considering New York's status as a cultural leader within broader art worlds, the exhibition carries global connotations.[9] This chapter also revealed how local politics inform presentations of contemporary art for an international audience.

All three chapters reveled different understandings of globalism that were dependent upon local conditions, individual identity, political philosophies, and cultural background. Despite these revelations, I still felt that individual differences *within* each group were left unrecognized. I first sought to fill these gaps by scouring my archival notes from summer 2019, when I conducted preliminary research in New York City. However, I quickly identified and explored all the possible archives in New York. I realized that I needed to further consider and gather first-hand accounts to properly gather the stories that would fuel my interpretations and new hypotheses. With many of the artists in discussion still living in New York, it was possible for me to connect with members of these artistic groups and hear first-hand accounts, especially as pandemic-related restrictions lessened and virtual and/or masked, outdoor meetings became possible. The insights offered were invaluable; each artist conceived of and described

[8] Epoxy Art Group, *Thirty-Six Tactics*, (self-pub., Epoxy Art Group, 1988).

[9] For more information on large-scale exhibitions, see Caroline Jones, *The Global Work of Art: World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

their artistic careers in drastically different ways. Thus, Chapter 4 proposed using oral history to better account for individual's understandings of their position within the art world and better understand how cultural figures envisage the global contemporary art scene.

This chapter contains and oral history with Bob Lee, director of the Asian American Art Centre in Chinatown. Oral history necessitates a relationship between the interviewer and interviewee; often oral histories read as conversations between friends. I decided to conduct an oral history with Lee because I have known him since I began my dissertation research in summer 2019. While I interviewed other artists in Basement, Epoxy, and Godzilla throughout the project, I concluded that it was only feasible to conduct an oral history with Lee because I have known him longer than any other artists discussed in my research. Though the chapter emerged out pandemic-related adjustments, I find it to be the most compelling area for further expansion. Ideally, I would like to conduct additional and lengthier oral histories with other artists to aid in articulating what this method's potential for global contemporary art history.

The oral history with Lee also confirmed my hypothesis and demonstrated how definitions of identity are rooted in personal experience. Lee's oral history revealed a distinct, and sometimes contradictory, understanding of Asian American art that, which he insists must reflect and reinterpret Asian folk traditions. Lee's ideas are a noted point of contention in extant literature. For example, Cultural Theorist Anne Anlin Cheng critiques Lee's ideas of Asian American art, articulated in a 2007 letter to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as reinforcing binaries of Orientalism and Occidentalism.[10]

[10] Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (New York: Oxford university Press, 2019), 90.

Cheng's critiques are not unlike my own: we both view recent attempts to broaden the Western-centric canon through global contemporary art as reinforcing the canon. I argue that it is important to hear from cultural makers like Lee to understand how ideas of globalism, identity, and cross-cultural relations exist within the communities in which they operate. Lee's oral history, which spans millennia and continents, is useful because it helps to articulates his interest in historically rooted exhibitions and his preference for folk art. The oral history also demonstrates how ideas change over time and are informed by surrounding influences. Before looking to the Silk Road, for example, Lee collected abstract art that matched Abstract Expressionist aesthetics – an art movement that originated in New York.[11] Interestingly, though the far-reaching themes of Lee's final, unrealized exhibition span continents, and yet the exhibition primarily included artists from his hometown of Newark and from studios across the street from the Asian American Art Centre. To me, this is evidence of attempts by cultural makers in Chinatown to contest with the global by way of localized understanding. Ideally, with more oral histories of other cultural producers and extended interviews with Lee, more perspectives will emerge that better characterize how globalization affects community-based art movements.

This dissertation, altered and perhaps even improved by the travel challenges associated with the pandemic, reveled many additional questions that pertain to the field of global contemporary art history. In addition to what was selected for analysis, my archival research unearthed troves of information relating to other adjacent New York-

[11] See Theresa Papanikolas and Stephen Salal, *Abstract Expressionism: Looking East from the Far West* (Honolulu: Honolulu Museum of Art, 2017) for an analysis of Asian American artists who married traditional East Asian philosophies with Abstract Expressionist aesthetics in the 1940s and 1950s.

based community arts movements that have yet to be explored within the art historical canon. But as demonstrated by early attempts to develop a global canon, it is impossible to account for every encounter in one, singular narrative. Furthermore, I suggest that this should not be the goal. Instead, art historians should look to local archives to understand how artists interpreted global events. This, I argue, is where a truly global art history can emerge that focuses not on content, but on individual understandings and reconciliations with various art worlds.

An episodic approach, such as the one I utilized in my work, has the potential to leave much unattended, both locally and globally, but it also creates room for increased academic collaboration between researchers, artists, archivists. When working together, these key players within the field of art history can inform how to interpret materials previously unaccounted for. I conclude that global contemporary art history enriched by scholars exploring community archives and recording by oral histories. If the goal of global art history is to diversify the canon, more needs to be done to add information to our records. It is up to us as art historians to continue looking locally to understand the global.

CODA: GODZILLA RETURNS

The legacies of Basement Workshop, Epoxy Art Group, and Godzilla Asian American Art Network reverberate throughout New York's art world as ideas of Asian diasporic and Asian American art continue to be redefined collectively and intergenerationally. Most recently, the Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA) in New York City planned a 2021 exhibition on Godzilla's collective history titled *Godzilla vs. The Art World: 1990-2001*.[1] The exhibition, curated by Ryan Lee Wong and Herb Tam, would have highlighted the collective's unique national contributions and commitment to intergenerational dialogue. This emphasis on intergenerational dialogue would demonstrate a commitment to oral history. Sadly, the exhibition, which would have served as a reunion for Godzilla members by creating an opportunity to gather oral histories and present them to a new generation, never materialized.

Godzilla vs. The Art World would have marked the end of tumultuous period in MOCA's history: a little more than a year earlier a fire destroyed 70 Mulberry St, which housed some 85,000 objects in MOCA's collection.[2] MOCA's support conflicted with Godzilla's initial desire to never institutionalize while simultaneously seeking platforms for exhibition. This reflects similar contradictions faced after Godzilla's interventions at

[1] "Museum of Chinese in America Cancels Godzilla Collective Exhibition After Protesting Artists Withdraw," *Artforum*, March 11, 2021, https://www.artforum.com/news/museum-of-chinese-in-america-cancels-godzilla-collective-exhibition-after-protesting-artists-withdraw-85236.

[2] According to MOCA, 95% of the archival objects were saved, but 85% will need restoration. See "Fire Recovery," Museum of Chinese in America, Accessed December 1, 2021, https://www.mocanyc.org/collections/fire-recovery/. For information on the significance of the fire, see Hua Hsu, "What We Lost in the Museum of Chinese in America Fire," *The New Yorker,* January 27, 2020, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/what-we-lost-in-the-museum-of-chinese-in-america-fire.

the 1991 Whitney Biennial.[3] Godzilla's assistance with Byron Kim's inclusion in the 1993 Biennial and the appointment of Eugenie Tsai as a curator at the Whitney positioned the collective as a means towards institutional representation, contradicting the group's original anarchist ethos. But with MOCA's roots in Basement Workshop, *Godzilla vs. The Art World* signified a renewed effort towards increased institutional representation of Asian and Asian American artists within New York's museums, which was sorely needed amidst COVID-affiliated anti-Asian discrimination and subsequent attacks in New York.

MOCA's renewed interest in Godzilla echoed recent global interest in activist art. As groups like Decolonize This Place gain prominence on social media platforms like Instagram, institutions are increasingly eager to embrace contemporary trends to appeal to broad audiences.[4] MOCA's location in Chinatown and claims of dedication to community efforts was a logical venue for Godzilla's reunion.[5] *Godzilla vs. The Art World* promised to engage in dialogue relating to art, activism, and the urban surroundings.

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[3] Curator Simon Wu writes of Godzilla that "…you get the sense that Godzilla wanted to be separatists (with talks of creating their own museum for Asian American artists) but ultimately became something more like integrationists—fighting from inside the system. Eugenie Tsai became a curator at the Whitney, then the Brooklyn Museum; Margo Machida an academic at the University of Connecticut; Alice Yang a curator at the New Museum, before her untimely death; and so on… Is the story of Godzilla ultimately an assimilation narrative, even if its roots were separatist?" See Simon Wu, "Art Monsters: A new anthology documents the pioneering 1990s art group Godzilla," *Bookforum*, Dec/Jan/Feb 2022, https://www.bookforum.com/print/2804/a-new-anthology-documents-the-pioneering-1990s-art-group-godzilla-24710.

[4] Decolonize This Place also protested the Whitney Museum of American Art. In 2019, the collective initiated "9 Weeks of Action" to call for the removal of Warren Kanders, CEO of Safariland, as Whitney's Vice Chairman. See Decolonize This Place, "9 Weeks of Art in Action," Decolonize This Place, accessed March 14, 2022, https://decolonizethisplace.org/9weeksofartinaction2.

[5] MOCA's purpose and goals can be found online. See: MOCA, "Purpose and Goals," MOCA, Accessed March 14, 2022, https://www.mocanyc.org/about/mission/.

In the years leading to the exhibitions' planned opening, MOCA increasingly found itself at odds with Godzilla and the local community. Just as in 1991 at the Whitney, Godzilla members assessed the price of institutional recognition as MOCA's role in current debates of a new jail in Chinatown became transparent. Godzilla eventually decided to act. As written by member Arlan Huang: "the legacy [of Godzilla] is to question boldly and be prepared to tear it apart again."[6] On March 5, 2021, nineteen Godzilla members submitted a letter to MOCA's director formally withdrawing from the exhibition, with MOCA canceling the show shortly after.[7] The letter, made public through *e-flux*, an online forum for contemporary art scholarship, cited four reasons for their withdrawal that could not be overcome in time for the anticipated opening. The first was MOCA's compliance with plans for a new jail in Chinatown, evidenced by the $35 million in compensation from New York City to defray potential monetary impacts related to construction.[8] The second was MOCA's disconnect with Chinatown, writing:

> We cannot, in good conscience, entrust the legacy of Godzilla as an artist-activist organization to a cultural institution whose leadership ignores, and even seeks to silence, critical voices from its community. Differing viewpoints serve to strengthen an organization and allow it to evolve in healthy and necessary ways. How can we exhibit our work within the walls of an institution when the values of its leadership betray our own founding principles?[9]

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[6] Arlan Huan, email message to author, March 11, 2022.

[7] The nineteen artists were Tomie Arai, Todd Ayoung, Shelly Bahl, Alexandra Chang, Sung Ho Choi, Allan deSouza, Skowmon Hastanan, Arlan Huang, Dorothy Imagire, Byron Kim, Franky Kong, Sowon Kwon, Yong Soon Min, Paul Pfeiffer, Athena Robles, Amy Sadao, Kerri Sakamoto, Chanika Svetvilas, Lynne Yamamoto. See Godzilla, "Open Letter to the Museum of Chinese in America from Godzilla Collective," *e-flux*, March 5, 2021, https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/open-letter-to-the-museum-of-chinese-in-america-from-godzilla-collective/10263.

[8] MOCA vehemently denies support of the jail. See Museum of Chinese in America, "MOCA Statement," Press release, January 28, 2021, https://www.mocanyc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/MOCA-Statement.pdf.

[9] Godzilla, "Open Letter to the Museum of Chinese in America from Godzilla Collective."

The third reason for Godzilla's withdrawal harkens to Godzilla's distrust of formal institutions. Amidst a cultural reckoning ignited by the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, the letter questioned MOCA's commitment to Black Lives Matter and other social justice initiatives, noting the higher incarceration rate of people of color.

Most critically, Godzilla critiqued the acceptance of compensation, asking

> if it is not appropriate for war profiteer Warren Kanders or the opiate-dealing Sackler family to sit on the boards of our city's museums, how ethical is it for MOCA to receive $35 million for its complicit support of an ever-expanding criminal justice system – against the wishes of its community?[10]

They concluded by suggesting the museum do more to align itself with Chinatown residents to understand the effects of the jail.[11]

Art historian Marci Kwon argues that the study of race and art history necessitates an interdisciplinary understanding of the cultural conditions surrounding artmaking, in turn offering a more nuanced, albeit messier, chronicle of art history. She writes: "I am reminded that Asian American history is not simply the history of Asian Americans, but the history of race, capitalism, labor, settler colonialism, imperialism, legal exclusion, incarceration, gendered violence, and war – and their entanglement – in American history."[12] The history described by Kwon is also true of Chinatown – a cultural enclave affected by gentrification, racism, tourism, and classism. Godzilla confronts this complexity by calling for discussions about community issues within the broader narrative of contemporary art and that it is essential to consider local activism,

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[10] Godzilla, "Open Letter to the Museum of Chinese in America from Godzilla Collective."

[11] Ibid.

[12] Marci Kwon, "Asian American Art Pasts and Futures," introduction to "Asian American Art, Pasts and Futures," *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2021), https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.11465.

architecture, and urban histories to tell the history of Asian American and Asian diasporic art in New York. As demonstrated by Godzilla's high-profile withdrawal from the MOCA exhibition, their activist efforts affect the art world in New York. Godzilla's inspiring and provocative protests reveal that global contemporary art, at its best, is rooted in histories found beyond white cube galleries, ivory towers, and auction house doors.

APPENDIX

TRANSCRIPTION OF ORAL HISTORY WITH BOB LEE

INTERVIEW WITH: Robert (Bob) Lee, Director of the Asian American Art Centre (BL)

INTERVIEWER: Jayne Cole (JC)

LOCATION: The Asian American Art Centre, 111 Norfolk Street, New York, NY 10002

DATE: March 25, 2022

DURATION: 3 HOURS 23 MINUTES

JC: I'm Jayne Cole and I'm interviewing Bob Lee, the director of the Asian American Art Center, on March 25th, 2022. We're sitting together in Bob's office at the Asian American Art Center at 111 Norfolk Street in New York City. Today, Bob and I are going to talk about some exhibitions that he curated at the Centre.

We're going to start with the 1992 exhibition, *And He was Looking for Asia*, which is one of your favorites. Right, Bob? I wanted to know, kind of, what inspired this exhibition. And, you know, how is it kind of different than some of the other exhibitions that you did earlier on at the Centre?

BL: I would love to jump into this question, but I feel like I should start with his joke.

JC: Okay.

BL: However, I can't think of one. [both laugh]

JC: We can come back- we can include a joke if you if you think of one. We can-

BL: No, I- I just thought that it's been wonderful having all these conversations with you, and to have you here in the office. I don't think I've ever done anything like this before. But I just think that we had a good time. and it would be nice to be able to continue this kind of thing and get it recorded so that people can see the Art Centre and see what we've tried to do together from a fresh point of view.

However, this the question I thought that we- you know we prepared a lot of things for this, and perhaps too much, in order for us to be improvisational, and keep our informal kind of quality going, which I'd like to do if possible. But the- the idea that that you are asking now is actually something we haven't prepared. I get to realize that, see, that covers different kind of things. So, it does bring me back a little bit, but I'll try not to go too far back into that.

You know, like I mention to you at some other occasion, that I miraculously, or idiosyncratically, bumped into this incredible scholar who was into Asian culture and Asian art, who was, you know, who was so? How- how did we say it? We said that he- Not only was it an incredible scholar, but he was an artist, but also someone who was so deeply into what he was studying, that he sort of, what did we say? That he crossed over. And he was this incredible, gentlemen scholar. In Chinese, we call him a *wen ren* 文人, and he didn't speak that much. He was- A lot of what he got across to us was simply in his manner, his poise, his voice, and it was- It was just extremely a powerful influence on me. And I tried to understand him. What are you going to say?

JC: Oh, I was going to say, was this a scholar that you met at the Art Centre or before?

BL: Oh, no, no! This was in undergraduate school.

JC: Oh, okay.

BL: It was about 1962.

JC: Okay, okay.

BL: And I went back to Newark Rutgers in '64. When I had a chance to transfer from New Brunswick to the Department of Art, Department in Newark, where he was located. And so I didn't have to take Janson's text about art history with me from New Brunswick because he didn't need any text at all in order for us to introduce us to the arts.[1]

So, that was an incredible experience. However, I've mentioned in other places, that his direction was going into, going towards Asia, and my direction was going in the opposite direction. You know, like on a bridge there's two-way traffic. I was going towards the United States to the Western culture. So that was a very difficult problem, issue for me to respond to. But given that and with me bumping into Chinatown, and Basement Workshop, and IWK, all of my training sort of fell into place that I had learned, and I could see how it fit into the Asian American movement and an emphasis on ourselves as Asians in America, and the development after what? Six or seven months of- Back in those days, calling ourselves Asian American, rather than maybe 40 or 50, 100 other optional names that we were going to use to say who we were when we were interviewed on the streets, because we were all protesting. And I actually, you know, that I was a part of that generation. That was there when people said, you know, tune in and drop out. However, we didn't go to Woodstock, we had too much work to do in our community. And so we rarely got into the drug scene. So that was sort of the difference that where things began.

And the other aspect of it is that in '92, that you were asking, the show we did- That was after that the split between- Because the Art Centre was, you know, the archive was

[1] See Penelope J.E. Davis, Frima Fox Hofrichter, Joseph F. Jacobs, eds., Janson's *History of Art: The Western Tradition* (London: Pearson, 2006).

begun in around ’81, ‘82, and by 83, we started exhibitions. Oh, for about 10 years before, we had done an awful lot of exhibitions. A lot of the basic kinds of exhibitions we did were with Asian American artists. And the *China: June Fourth* exhibition on the Tiananmen Square Massacre in China. That was a huge exhibition with 300 artists. And we did another important show at that point, just before that, in ’88, called *Public Art in Chinatown*.

So coming into the ‘90s, this was after the split with Godzilla, and this was a difficult time for us to continue as a nonprofit organization, because there was this resistance.[2] The split between. And so, we- I wanted to do exhibitions with strong curatorial premise, more so than we did in the first ten years, and to demonstrate the value of a nonprofit. I now see after all this time, more and more, the value of a collective approach. So, I can really appreciate what they [Godzilla] did. However, it pitted us again to each other, which unfortunately should not have done. We should have been working well together. But it- it had that effect. And we- But I think that now I can see that a curator who is an independent, the experience that I had, and maybe other people like me have, it doesn't work. I couldn't be in a collective of curators and doing what I did or doing what I wanted to do. And so there needs to be a way for a nonprofit entity, or some other legal structure. Perhaps nonprofits- the way it was formulated and implemented by the State and this and the country, could have a better way of doing it, because certainly it put me through hell. All of us, when [NY State was] giving us, you know, so much difficulty, and to try to play this role in our community.

But there needs to be a way for us to transition into a recognized role in society, so that communities and the effort to make communities a legitimate player in how our cities are built, and how our country is built, how our culture is built. That needs to happen. So that- so anyway, I tried to select shows that were- had a strong curatorial premise. So that for that next decade they were other shows that I did which maybe I should just mention a few of them first before we get into the one we're talking about because we’ll spend the rest of time talking about them.

But some of the other shows we did was *Milieu: Part I*, which was- they were three or four other parts to that we did, and that was focused on the predecessors to the artists that were of my generation. Looking at Asian American artists from 1945 to 1965, since that was after World War II. It was after the camp experience of Japanese, camps or, you know, concentration camps and the artists who were doing that kind of camp art. And it was the time of major direction of the New York School Abstract Expressionism, and that kind of abstraction, was the time when a number of Asian American artists felt it was an opportunity for them to jump into the mainstream and see if they can make a go of it. So that's why, we when we started the archive, that what we were going to collect in the archive, we thought about starting then.

[2] See Bob Lee, “Godzilla and the Asian American Art Centre,” Asian American Art Centre (August 13, 2017), http://artspiral.blogspot.com/2017/08/and-asian-americanarts-centre-so-many.html.

That would give us the opportunity to try to research or explore, previous generation to us, who some, many of them might still be alive. And we could get a grant, which we did, to research them. So that was one of the things we did, starting the *Milieu* series.

JC: That's interesting, because I remember from our conversations that when you started the archive you were interested in looking at abstraction and like, abstract works. So was that *Milieu* show different than the initial interest in abstraction, would you say?

BL: Absolutely. A lot of abstraction was a key player in every- a lot of things we did. I was probably too influenced by abstraction, and wish I had been more tuned in to the value of other ways of making art.

You know, we had a guest curator [Jeffrey Wechsler] who was helping me with the *Milieu* [exhibition] when we did the first one, when we did the first group of interviews on the West Coast that we got a Rockefeller Grant for, to go out there and do that. And his emphasis was to, you know- we eventually wanted us to do a big show of all these- We found maybe 80 or 90 artists from that period of time, and many of them were on the West Coast. And this guest curator wanted to, after a year or so that we had done this work, wanted to curate this big show that we were planning in the future, and he wanted to focus on those Asian American artists who were following in the footsteps of the American abstract masters, Abstract Expressionist masters, so to speak. Well-known people. And I- I couldn't live with that. So we didn't really get to work together because I thought that Asian American artists do other things aside from that. So. But I, myself, could have been more open to other modalities. And so that was- That was one aspect of.

On the other hand, we never got more, enough grants, to do a big show. We never got enough grants to really flesh out that whole effort. All of those things that we collected are in that file cabinet right there. And they've been sitting there all this time. A lot of the interviews that are still on tape or back over there in that corner. Some of them are not transcribed.

So it could have been- It could have worked out better. But I think what we finally ended up doing, is the guest curator [Wechsler] went off on his own and he had access to funding because he was connected to a major institution. And was able to do a big show of about fifty to sixty artists, Asian American artists, that traveled around.

But we, as a small nonprofit in the community, we could only continue to do a two, three, four, five, six, you know, maybe at most, ten or twelve people in a show. And so we did a series of *Milieu* shows over the next, you know, years, following years, of exactly that. Three or four people together.

JC: Okay.

BL: To talk about them. I think we did one show where we put a sequence of people who had mentored each other. So, one generation mentoring another generation. And then that group that had gotten mentored, or artists actually, one artist, became a mentor for the

next, younger artist. So we did some shows like that. And that was one sort of theme that we wanted to continue with.

Another show during that the following year, ’93, was called *Betrayal/ Empowerment*. And it was done in conjunction with Teachers College at Columbia University. And it might be interesting for you to hear that the beginnings of that, was the premise of that was- Carlos Bulosan, a famous Filipino writer, wrote about the Filipinos, the *pinoys*, as he said, living in I-Hotel in San Francisco, and they were tearing down the hotel, and he was writing about these immigrants who had worked on the farms and were in the- their homes were being torn down once the hotel was gone. And talked about them in terms of: “they're being betrayed.”

And we found out that Richard Wright, the African American writer, had also written about the normal or typical psychology of a person of color is to be mentally in siege. So that's sort of- is sort of, that- But then coming out of, seeking empowerment, and the will to fight and resist this kind of social situation was that there might be limits to what, even if we win our empowerment, what that would bring to us. And I quoted in the essay that went with this, Amalia Mesa-Bains, who is one of the people of color on the West Coast, who said that: from our own inner being, our own integrity, we can find continuity beyond all odds. And so we were- Yeah, anyway, we're trying to point in that direction. If you have a question about that, I can tell you.

Another question- another exhibition we did in ‘95 was *Ancestors* [*Ancestors: A Collaborative Project with Kenkelaba House*] and that's where we brought African Americans together with Asian Americans to do a show in which one of the things we were talking about is that, under these united blue lands, we should pay homage to all the ancestors of this land. So that was sort of the idea. One of the artists in that show had half or more African American and Asian American artists in it, was- what is her name? Now I'm forgetting her name. Simone Leigh, who happen to be very well-known now, but at that time she was just beginning.

JC: This is very interesting to hear about these shows. I wanted to ask you about, kind of, this shift because these shows after about 1990, the shows, kind of, leading to *And He Was Looking to Asia*, and the ones after it, they're very different from the ones in the ‘80s, you know, where they were primarily featuring artists from the communities, solo and group shows, what kind of changed for you in terms of curation where you felt you know a shift there. What kind of inspired your kind of shift in curatorial vision, to focus, kind of, on these very strong curatorial statements that kind of extended beyond Chinatown to discuss, kind of, issues in New York, and you know, the United States and the world, kind of, more broadly?

BL: Well, I needed to demonstrate that there was a role for someone like myself. That was not a collective current direction. And that the context that we try to provide for the artist’s work. The artist’s work needs to come first. But the context that we try to formulate can be very helpful to the audience and to society. The context for many artists- They have their own context.

Their work is coming out of their own vision, their own experience. And they may feel that, you know, they're open to whatever anybody else has to say, and they're very receptive to being regarded from any point of view, and so they want to stay open to that.

However, given my background, having gone into all of this art history, particularly in Asia, and sort of beyond that its, it's something that I think the audience, particularly, needs some steps to take in order to help them to see something entirely new. You know they may be very, very well-heeled gallery goers who may not need that. But certainly, in our community [in Chinatown], that's not the case. So, even though- I think, you know- One of my limitations is that I'm English-speaking. I don't speak Chinese. I'm really separate from the traditional culture that I have inherited, even though that's in my background. So that- I couldn't translate this into Chinese, for example. I couldn't present a Chinese point of view to the to our community in that way.

I was really addressing- I had to be addressing an Asian American audience, who were fluent in English and understood the difficulties of us making and carving out a place for us in this society.

So I was in large measure, trying to have that understood, to understand what are- how the arts were- contributing to our understanding of the cultural dilemma that we faced. And so I don't know if that fully answers your question?

JC: Absolutely! I think that's a great answer. I know I've asked you this question before, and I want to ask it again. But why did you choose curation to tackle these kinds of questions? Why, an art center and not a book, per say?

BL: Yes, I thought that was that was something you mentioned. And that is very simple! No, I never thought of a book I bumped into, you know, Basement Workshop, and the woman I married was a dancer and a choreographer [Eleanor Yung]. And she wanted to establish, once we got married, her own dance company separate from the group of dancers she was with. And so, I was sitting in the midst of a nonprofit in order for her to continue to do her dances and grow that organization and have classes for children in our communities. To serve our community in these kinds of cultural ways. So there, the opportunity was for me to use what I had acquired and studied, to do to apply the nonprofit, to foundations like NYSCA [New York State Council on the Arts], and things like that, to do programs for the community. So, the other aspect of it is that I knew that academia was not for me. And I would not want to go that direction. I saw how incredibly difficult it was for the professors that I had studied with to do what they did and innovate in the way that they did, the kind of innovation that I never thought I could master.

And so, I think the idea of something like a book, that came…what? How many? Twenty? Until what, 2007, maybe? And so what was that? 2007? And we started around '82? So that's 27 years later? And it's that opportunity to do something, which for me is the Asian American, is Art Asia America [artasiaamerica.org]. It's the website that allows

people to come in and look at it and enter and go anywhere they want and come out any time they want and go into another direction. Not like a book, not like a narrative. You don't have to trap people in your own words, and the words are inadequate.
So, a website to was a much more of attractive to do. And it's that opportunity was never in the future. It happened to come only because of 9/11. When the World Trade Center came down, the- what is it? Lower Manhattan? I forgot the name of the agency- distributed all the money to rebuild everything.[3] They put aside a certain amount for the Lower Eastside, which was more directly impacted by what happened downtown. And so, Chinatown was one of those Lower Eastside communities in which maybe seven, eight, or nine organizations go, for us, a much bigger grant than we ever would ever see. And that enabled to create the website. And we would have never asked to take that money and write a book! So that, that sort of, I think, that answers your question.

JC: Yeah. [laughs]

BL: I think the other- Before we go on, the other aspect of that was, we did a show on passion and compassion about Buddhism and brought one of the artists who was later in the exhibition for the show that we're doing on Silk Road, was in that show. Junko Chodos was in *Passion and Compassion* [*Passion and Compassion: Five Artists Reflections on Buddhism*]. And the one I already told you about, *Three Generations* [*Three Generations: Towards a History of Asian American Art*], which is three generations mentoring each other.

And the other one I wanted to mention was *7 lbs. 9 oz.* [*7lbs. 9oz.: The Reintegration of Tradition into Contemporary Art*]. And the subtitle for that was: "The Reintegration of Traditions into Contemporary Art." And. there I was trying to point to, now once this, this gap between traditional societies and modern societies, is, is more… how would you say that? It's maybe just, healed? Once that gap is healed, then these two categories of culture can be seen as to how they flow into and complement each other. And I think that's still a major issue, you know, I said that- I used that name in two shows back in the mid to late 90s, and I don't think it's sunk in. Society hasn't seen modernism or postmodernism, or what the next one is going to be. I think I heard another one being spoken of. It hasn't seen how what we're living through now, integrates or attacks the next step into describing what we have. So that was my crack at that in those days. Anyway.

Oh, so your question was, excuse me. [laughs]

Your question was: How did I get into Christopher Columbus alternative?

JC: Yeah, we can-

BL: Or *And He was Looking For Asia: Alternatives to the Story of Christopher Columbus Today.* How did I get into that?

[3] The name of the organization is the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation.

JC: Yeah, I'm interested in that show because I know that you have discussed that as one of your favorite shows. And I wanted to ask you a little bit more about that. So how did that come about? What were you- What was that story? How did you curatorially think of that show? So yeah.

BL: So when I was leaving Rutgers, my mentor offered this course in the migration peoples of Europe. All of these names of peoples that I had never heard of before: the Ostrogoths, Visigoths, Langobards, Merovingians, you know. I guess so many of these different names.

I wondered: why was he offering a show [course] like that you know of? He had started us out with the stone, bronze and iron age, a separate show [course] for Chinese painting, another show, another course on other early cultures. And from there we jumped right into Picasso and the modern period. If we wanted to take the Renaissance, we had to go to another teacher, which she was there, and we could study with her. But for him to select this show [course], I said he must have awfully good reasons why he wants to do this one. And so, I had to understand that. So that was it was planted in me this curiosity about all of this kind of stuff.

And coming into Chinatown and realizing that that before that I was nobody. You know, even after undergraduate school it's only coming into Chinatown and Basement Workshop where you will you begin to find all of these other people who are just like you and that's when we realized: "We're Asian Americans. That's who we are." And after selecting, you know, from forty, fifty, sixty, other optional names, this is the name we gave ourselves to address the press on the street [Asian Americans]. You know we didn't call ourselves *tongjangai* 唐人街 which is what Chinese people call themselves in Chinatown to each other.[4] You know that means "sweet people street." We couldn't say that to the press. We have to say something that was that the Census Bureau would accept. So, we had that name "Asian hyphen American." It changed after about five, six months to drop the hyphen. And then for the Pacific Islanders to come in and say: "Hey, you're forgetting us." Then we have Asian Pacific Americans. And so now permutations of that term have continued to be with us. And now it's sort of coming back after all of this because it died for a while. And now, it's coming back in the face of anti-Asian violence.

So, now I'm trying to get back into your question now. [laughs]

The '92 show right?

JC: Yeah!

BL: So, all of the things that accumulated for me- Oh, what, maybe we can call them now? It's synchronicities. [The synchronicities] got accumulated. So many different things that came along and began to make me realize more and more why these migration

[4] In Mandarin, this is *tangrenjie* 唐人街

peoples were hidden. Why in the master narrative of this country that we're all educated into, what- how important their role is, how significant they were into the whole evolution of what we know of as the West. And how they're so unspoken of- And so one of things I did was I bumped into a very prestigious, or established, gallery, next to the Metropolitan Museum [of Art]. I think it was on Madison Avenue.[5] And there, they have a whole book that they have published themselves on the fibula pins that these migration peoples all had their own style that they would wear, holding their fabrics together. And they- In the preface of that book they introduced it as: "The hidden art, or the foundation of the West." Something like that.

And you could go to the Met and underneath the staircase and see this bookcase sort of display of all these different fibula pins. But that's all, there's nothing that elaborates at all. So, why is this not spoken of? Why is this the Dark Ages? And it just- More and more things came up, and I realized that I need to tell my community about this, that the country we're in as and that we understand we are part of, has this other aspect to it. Which is at most to announce it, make a big deal out of it, or tell what is true about it.

I think about a month, or, you know, maybe about a year before I put on [the exhibition] in '92, because the quincentennial for Christopher Columbus…Who was it? Michael Woods was doing his six-part thing on PBS. And one of them was *The Barbarian West*. And he just confirmed all this stuff that I had bumped into and found out and was looking at. And, you know, so that it's just all of these kinds of synchronicities that confirm that this is something that I need to do, that that is a valid about a thing to come out and to, for a community organization like ours, that even though so much of it was I don't want to- In certain ways it's speculation, but on the other hand, it has it- had growing affirmation and validity. And that it would help us to better understand ourselves, who we were. what we were a part of, what energies were flowing through the culture, and that we were just part of all that. This is what we had ourselves become. But we didn't know it and we needed, at least, to get some sense of it.

Now I'm not fully sure if I answered your question. I think not quite.

JC: [laughs] Maybe you can tell me a little bit more about the title. So, what does *And He Was Looking for Asia*- What does that refer to?

BL: Should I read the statement of that, or should I keep your- What does it refer to? Well, Christopher Columbus was looking for Asia, right, when he took the trip from Spain. What I had imagined, in order to put the show together and to write about it is, I just hypothesized that he was wearing a fibula pin, and that it was the fibula pin, you know, was round, and he wore on his chest. And so that course, yes, he was looking for wealth and gold, and riches, and all of those things. But he had also come away with being a part of the Eurasian continent and the transcontinental culture there, that, you know, I can mention a few things later. That in paleolithic times, Neolithic times, there may have been a transcontinental culture across that whole continent. And that so many of the different groups there who were essentially nomadic, shared different aspects of

[5] The gallery was Ariadne Galleries.

this in so many multiple different kinds of ways while all jostling, even battling each other, for territory. But also, for goods, for exchange of culture, of religions, of sacredness, of horses. All of that was part of that whole culture, which we will get into later.

And so that dream. My prothesis is that he was wearing a fibula pin, and he was part of the whole mentality that had Asian elements in it, as well as many different cultural elements. And so, what he was looking for, like what- the names they gave things as they bumped into them, you know. I don't remember all that. Of course, you know that some were the mythologies at that time. The tree of life. I know there was Valhalla, was something that happened in Germany.

When they [Christopher Columbus and his crew] finally got across- I forgot, maybe they are terms for islands they bumped into in the Caribbean. But when they got to Hawaii, of course they're thinking of, you know, paradise. So, you know, Asia, particularly, China for about 2 millennia, was the place to go to. You had to get across the Eurasian continent to go through the- past the Taklamakan desert, I'm saying it wrong, in order to trade with China and bring those resources back to other parts of the world, particularly into New York. That kind of trade, and that status of China, for two millennia, two centuries, is something that was a norm for that length of time [2000 years]. And so, to reach all the way to Asia, through another path, across the ocean.

All of those mythologies and spiritual ideas were caught in parcel of what they were doing, not just the material quest. There were other kinds of quests involved there.

And so, what do we tell ourselves? What are the myths? What are the stories by which we can understand what Christopher Columbus was looking for? And what our country had therefore become, what state did it begin to take? And how did those early visions, lead into, particularly for me, why Asia and the West have become so polarized. Why they continue to be these exceptional, utterly different places.

Even though, you know, back in the colonial days, George Washington was not yet President, and he was debating with the people who had just come from China, bringing with them pottery. Blue and white ware [pottery] from China that he had ordered, because at that stage in our colonial history, blue and white ware from China was *the* thing to have in your home. And so, in the middle of the Revolutionary War, he [George Washington] has to go figure out what's happening with his treasured blue and white ware.

You had those kinds of attractions, but at the same time you had these other differences that only that only grows more and more to polarize our two cultures. So how does that inform us as Asian Americans? How does that- How does this recognition of nomadic peoples as part of our history, and who are with us today, who had largely forgotten that past, and bought into all of the other aspects of Christianity, of the status and prestige of the Mediterranean world. All of those things that were inundated. And the animistic early cultures of these nomadic peoples were suppressed and dominated by this kind of idea

that they are meant to inherit the City of Gold, to move and become part and inherit this great Roman civilization. That sort of gets into you know what we'll talk about more. But the title was sort of meant to open is to wonder, what is it referring to.

JC: Yeah. That's very interesting. And it's really quite, kind of, a global show in scope, too. So how did you select the artist for this show [*And He Was Looking for Asia*], or what- who participated in this show?

BL: Looking back now, I can, I think that we had been accumulating the Archive since ’82, ’83. And largely, I think those artists were chosen by looking at the archive that we had accumulated by that time. And I think- let's say, the one artist who would not have been in the archive was- let's see, what's her name, Joanna Osborne Big Feather.

JC: Okay.

BL: There was a Native American Social Services and gallery [American Indian Community House] close to the [East] Village area in those days, and it was pretty well-funded. They had a big space back in those days. It's totally disappeared. Almost totally disappeared. But I had, you know, met her there and seen some of her shows there. And she was both an artist and a curator. So I thought, you know, this show- someone like her should be in the show.

Jorge Tacla, I don't know how- I don't remember how I met him. But I was- I know I was very impressed with him. I remember him telling me, you know, we must have met socially because he was telling me how he had spent so many, I think, in Chile, he would walk out from where he was living into the desert and spent a week, two weeks, three weeks in the desert, and how he would come back from that experience and be inspired. And create artwork from that experience. And he's still a very prominent artist today.

Well, Willie Cole, an African American artist in- I don't know if I met him in Newark, New Jersey, but I know probably bumped into him back then. He's still in New Jersey. Willie Cole was very, very good friends with Hal’s [Hal Laessig] wife. We'll talk about more about Hal, he was with me for so many years. [Hal’s wife] Yoland Skeete. So we were very close. Yoland, I guess, so Willie Cole and Yoland were very close, and you know so he [Hal] might have mentioned him and talked about Willie. Willie has become, and even back in those days, really becoming stronger and more well-known.

[pause recording to answer phone]

I met- if you want me to go with that part of the story- Yoland Skeete came to one of our events, one our panel talks, and we started to meet and talk together at that point. Eventually we partnered with the Kenkeleba House to do the *Ancestors* show. And Yoland was- I exhibited Yoland in that show, and Hal put on this tremendous, traditional African dance. He walked from my gallery all the way to the Kenkeleba House, dancing around with drums. And I never took a video of that. And Yoland was living in Newark, where she established her nonprofit arts group. And I told her that she was living in the

middle of what used to be Newark Chinatown. So, she went out and looked at some of the buildings, and saw some inscriptions on some of the buildings, and got inspired, and spent the next, I don't know, 5, 6, years writing a book about- that came out with the title of *Newark Used to Have a Chinatown*. [*When Newark Had a Chinatown: My Personal Journey*, 2016] Something like that. And she learned more about Chinese [people] in New Jersey than I ever knew. But we had, you know, so we had been very close for many years. And she's done so many amazing things. So, but anyway, that's sort of how I sort of got Willie Cole to participate.

Mo Bahc, Barbara Takenaga, Young K., Arlan [Huang], you know, those people probably were all coming out of the archive. I would have known Arlan from that Basement days, also. But I know I only met Young K through the archive while then he submitted some stuff.

JC: Yeah.

BL: But so that's sort of how we got to hear about these people. I know that I brought them all together and told them all these stories about why I wanted to do this show, and it, you know, I know when at one point later, perhaps I was talking to Arlan about it, and I know he was-

He made this comment about it, saying: "Oh, galloping horses." So, I understood, and it- that is sort of what happened is that some artists can relate to historical things and find some aspect of it, which they identify, which they enjoy and make it, and find a basis for which to respond. But a number of artists- This kind of ancient history didn't ring a bell for them, and so I did find that to happen. And so, you want me to get into a little bit of that?

JC: Yeah, maybe you could talk about how some of the artists interpreted the curatorial theme.

BL: Okay. So I'll tell you what I haven't told you already.

JC: Okay.

BL: Young K. came back. He was a very clever guy, and that's why I chose him. But he came back with two five-gallon jugs of water. You know, these huge jugs of glass. I think he had two or four, I'm not sure. I know I have a picture of two of them with a little picture above on a pedestal. And the label is saying that: "here is the original water from 1492 from the Caribbean.

JC: [both laugh] That's kind of funny.

BL: Yeah. So, you know, we have things like that. And the other one that I mentioned to you is a beautiful painting. However, Mo Bahc did this large painting, about this big, and instead of a map of Eurasia, he had a map of Asia. Southeast Asia, Southwest Asia, that

whole area. And he had painted, you know, Chinese chopsticks, Korean chopsticks, Japanese chopsticks. Yeah, I don't know how many of them were there. But of course, the Korean chopsticks are made of metal. So, it was a well-painted piece. However, it was, you know, there was these- the dynamics happening between the different peoples, and cultures, and spats, and hostilities, and struggles, and different kinds of cultures were symbolized by these chopsticks for him. And comparing that to what I was trying to talk about in the roots of Western society, that's how far I got with him. That's before I got with him.

So, there was that kind of thing. Willie Cole had a great idea. But he wasn't able to flesh it out, he didn't really have- I guess, you know, he's doing so much in order to make a name for himself, which he did. But he originally wanted to create a body on the floor that would lie there. That I don't know if it was dressed as a Spanish inquisitor [conquistador], or however it was dressed, or whether it was Christopher Columbus, who was dead there on the floor, or- That's what his plan was. But finally, he I guess, he ran out of time, and so he just came back with a large blackboard, with a scroll of different words under different kinds of categories sort of explicating that kind of energies that might have existed during that period of time.

But the other artists that I thought were able to find a connection between what I was doing. Barbara Takenaga's piece was called, that's the piece that's on Art Asia America website, I think you can see the image of it there. The title of it was "Skidding to America." Skidding. And the image of it there, like under the blue sea, all of these blue miasma objects floating around under the ocean. And then the kind of vague shadowy figure of someone lost or exploring or wandering. That painting, I didn't really show it on our website with the other aspect of it, which was that I, you know, showed you more recently, of another piece, almost the same height, like a shape of a door, with many, sort of, racks of stones, maybe forty or fifty stones, each one painted gold. So, the whole idea of treasures to be found in this nebulous exploration under the sea. I thought she connected to what I was saying to as to something that is open, to try and understand.

And of course, Jorge Tacla, you know, his painting. Andrea Mantegna. I said his name right last night that I can't remember it now. Very famous, I think, Spanish painter from maybe the Renaissance or late Renaissance era, who has a painting of Jesus Christ lying dead on the surface, with his feet in the foreground and his head off in the dis- behind it, looking from this point of view.[6] That is his painting, and Jorge Tacla had recreated that image of- but perhaps the body of Christopher Columbus, but with hundreds of sort of ghostly knives punctuating up through body, through the whole surface, all over the place. And then four little squares hung onto the right-hand side, are these symbolic images. You know, clearly in remembrance of what happened in the South.

So, it was- Oh. Joanna's artwork, which drew directly from, you know, a Native American experience, was a classic book. I don't know if it was a Bible, or some very well-made classical book. Opened with a metal instrument going across the top, and a kind of little chalice, with some mementos inside the chalice, and then the whole thing

[6] The painting referenced is titled "Lamentation Over the Dead Christ" (1490).

framed by this beautiful fabric that, you know, hung very high and hung very low. There's a picture of it somewhere over there. Was also, you know, very much invoking the age of discovery from the point of view of a Native American, Indigenous people looking back on coming to grips with even before colonialism, when there was just outright conquest and destruction, genocide.

So there were works in the show that I felt addressed what I was trying to do. I guess this leads into the other aspect, which is, as I mentioned earlier, right? We needed to demonstrate that a show, what curators might do and putting together a context for which, in which to understand what artists are doing, and for those artists, also, to help flesh out the theme of what the issues are. In this case, what I have presented to them, that that relationship is a valid- that whole enterprise- is a valid cultural undertaking. And so we wanted to do that kind of show.

In '92, which was two years after Godzilla, that they had been making this push that they were making. It was, you know- So, I tried to use those kinds of shows to establish or to validate the value of a nonprofit like us in the visual arts. But that's when- Those were the years when it was very difficult to get an audience. And so when you talk about what is the audience response- Those were different times. And I think what we were able to do, although I made an effort to get certain kinds of progressive media outlets to give special attention to this show which came to not. We did get to hold a public event, and we had a fair number of people in the room, including some high school students and people from Basement Workshop, back in those days. And at that point, we were only able to make a small card, not like some of the other cards that we've made to mail out, in which you have, were to flat open, and there's an essay written in there. We weren't able to do that, so I had all of the questions, all of the pieces of a puzzle, together on the wall, along wall installation. And I had a lot of good questions from the audience. And I know that I remember one guy from the early days of Basement, you know, was really- wanted to try to understand: What am I going to do with all this information? What am I going to- How am I going to handle this? Where is it going to go?

So, the theme of the title through the postcard and our press releases went out, and people were curious. We were able to generate some of that curiosity coming into this event. I know that I got a handwritten, secret note from some other big cultural organization in New York City. I don't want to mention the name. But they wanted to know what the hell was my show all about. And anyway, there was that kind of- I thought I was doing the right thing because no one else was doing that. No one else had thought of doing that. And for me to see that kind of underhanded kind of approach to see what I was doing was- I wish there was more public response that I could speak about, but that's what happened.

And so, the opportunity at this late date, to talk about it again- is, what does it remind me of now? It reminds me of my favorite movie, *The Matrix*, and how at the end of the recent *Matrix* said how thankful they were to Warner Brothers for enabling them to say the same thing again. [both laugh] Where does that lead us?

JC: That's really interesting. I think that's a really interesting story about the ‘92 exhibition [*And He Was Looking for Asia*]. I have one other question about it. One final question. And why was that exhibition? Or one of your favorites, I should say.

BL: Well, it probably has to do with Hal, who came- who was here, I think, from 2016 to 2019. Because he helped me to revive the whole way of thinking about it. The- For the Asian American community and for the country, it probably has far more implications than many of the other shows that we have done. The show *7 lbs 9 oz* [*7lbs 9 oz: The Reintegration of Tradition into Contemporary Art*], has some of that in the title, but not as historically based. And certainly *Ancestors* [*Ancestors: A Collaborative Project with Kenkeleba House*], finding fellowship with African Americans and Asian Americans, and paying homage to our ancestors together, and suggesting that this kind of recognition of our mutual spiritual ancestors is something that- it’s an aspect of our culture which is hardly ever considered, and something that we ought to do as Americans.

You know, but so, for me, it takes me all the way back to the beginning, where I started, and then, as you, as we have already discussed, you know, how it continues to evolve into the future and into addressing what's on our horizon. And it also leads me outward, to all the things I don't know, all the things are a new horizon for me and to so many different other cultures, and so many different other peoples. And things that could be wonderful. But it also could be quite difficult!

So, it's something that I can see that is still a dream in so many ways, that, I will, that will never, you know, it doesn't have point where it's going to not be as fruitful as I think it would be.

I think that I should read this thing that I thought I would kick this whole thing off with that I think is very important, for whoever is listening, or reading, what this whole interview is about.

And He was Looking for Asia: Alternatives to the Story of Christopher Columbus Today. The opening press was written in this way.

A story that has haunted me for years, is the link between Asia and the West. But it did not begin to come together for me until I learned about the art of the so-called migration peoples. Now, after so many years, fragments remain hopelessly scattered over vast stretches of history and language. Without the artifacts to meticulously piece these together, how can I relate to you a story so punitive? But I dare not delay further, to leave in the hands of professional historians a tale that has been ignored and denied in the West for so long. A story that in itself a tale of denial, of pride, or religious and political oppression, and genocide, and buried legacies and the evidence of art.

If this sounds like the history after Columbus’s arrival on the shores of North America, it is not. Rather, it is the history before his decision to look for Asia. Centuries before the formation of Europe. When the barbarians first basked on the frontier of the Roman Empire. The journeys of Columbus and their fateful consequences were based on events

long before they took place. When the peoples who were to become the New World of 1492 first clashed.

I think that will help anyone who's reading this to understand the whole- everything else that we're still going to talk about.

JC: Yeah, absolutely. So, with that, I think I might be interesting for us to move forward in time. So, the exhibition *And He was Looking for Asia*, that was in 1992. And you continued to have an exhibition program following that, you know, up until pretty recently. But one of your last show ideas, I think, continues on those themes of *And He was Looking for Asia*. And this show was the *Silk Road* show. And this show hasn't yet been exhibited, but has been something you've been working on and thinking about for, you know, upwards of 5 years now, right?

So, I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit more about the *Silk Road* show. How did you come to this idea? What does that show mean to you? And, if- how is it maybe connected to some of the work that you were doing in the 90s, like the *And He Was Looking for Asia* show?

BL: Well, let me make sure that this is going to- that I don't think I should jump into this and respond to you right away. [pause]

I think, I really didn't think that something like this would happen until Hal came to work with us, which was about 2016, when we had lost our gallery [at 26 Bowery] in 2010, and so we were in the office in this area. And eventually came here to this small little place [at 111 Norfolk St]. And I was able to bring Hal on to help put together the Google Docs, which we could then itemize our permanent collection and send that to museums to try to generate interest in acquiring and finding new homes for our artwork. And so, for three years I was able to keep him. Of him being with Yoland Skeete and having run their own nonprofit, and him having all these skills of an architect and me losing him those many years when he finally was able to find an architectural job.

So he was this incredible expert hidden in the woodwork of the Silk Road. He has made, his own enjoyment, these investigations of that whole phenomena and period of time and very beginnings. He has made two Google Earth maps. Is that what it's called? Of the beginnings of all the little towns, and the date when they were established, and the pass, in and out, in order to, you know, acquire and the goods and bring in the things that they were trading to China. So the whole network, and energy, and character of these two millennia in which- so much of a world evolved along this route, all across the Eurasian continent, got evolved in passing through each era. He had this sense of all that, and the opportunity for me to awaken- to further what I had become fascinated about, with the nomadic peoples in the early Middle Ages, expanded back in time and forward in time by all the different conversations that we had.

So, for the days that he was here, we would always take time and go for coffee, and have these long chats about all of these fascinating things. And so evolved an exploration of

history, and of fantasy, and of dream exhibitions that were so well funded that we could do everything. That we thought we might want to do, you know, an exhibition that would take place in this part of the world, and then next year in that part of the world, and another exhibition and another place and an online panel discussion from all these different places… and eventually trying to bring the artists together, so that they would collaboratively create other things that they might exhibit together.

Of course, all of those dreams, and all those ideas of doing it and funding it were all talked about over coffee up the block on Rivington Street. So, it was never any pursuit of real money. And in many ways, that's how I- I should realize that it was.

There was a time when it became something that might happen. And at that point, Hal had already left. And it was impossible for him to continue to be a partner to it that I thought he would, but it didn't happen. So, it generated so much more that it's just impossible for me to, over so many years, to- all the things that he dug up, and all the things that I dug up, to flesh it out, that something we thought we were going to do, and then now have to try to make it cohere into something that can be discussed in half an hour or two hours.

Pulling out some of the main features of it, that can begin to make sense. I think just before you step through the door, I sent to you another thing that I found out, that I dug up in old notes that I wrote two, three years ago that I've forgotten, so I thought: "Oh, I'll share this with you."

It's amazing what these things- What this has revealed about our culture, our society, our history. What are institutions did a thousand years ago. It's like what [historian] Richard Tarnas has said. These are synchronic things that you piece together, and you bump into, and it's miraculous. It makes sense. It helps us to understand ourselves and understand, at least begin to understand, that the world is more wonderful than we think.

So did I- I don't even know if I even answered your question.

JC: [laughs] That's okay. Maybe- I'm curious to know: what is the "Silk Road" to you? So, what, kind of, is that concept? And how did that exhibition that you and Hal conceived of- How did that fit within the Art Centre?

BL: How did- How did *Silk Road* fit into the Art Centre?

JC: Yeah.

BL: Well, it didn't fit. The Art Centre as we were known as was on 26 Bowery, when we had a gallery, and even early on, when my wife's [Eleanor] dance company [Asian American Dance Theatre] was active. When we were putting on exhibitions, four or five or more every year. And we had a regular schedule, [indecipherable]. Maybe one or two part-time staff. This [the *Silk Road* exhibition] came after we lost our gallery. After we're trying to figure out how: How did I get this prominent collection that is on my hands?

How the hell am I going to find somebody who wants to preserve it and keep it? What's going to happen to the Art Centre and all of the resources that we collected? Because we were running as if we were going to become a museum, some kind of institution. And when we lost our space, and maybe you know, four or five years before we lost this space, I had a bicycle accident, and so there was lots of things that were no longer possible. And we put a lot of things in storage all over the place. We had so many storage rooms. This wonderful time when I had to be with someone who was so much into their dreams of their own nonprofit like Hal, and what he and Yoland were doing, and being able to share so much with each other that we could talk about. It was a hiatus that the *Silk Road* came rising out of that.

You know, on the other hand, it came not only out of that, but like so much out of our- I don't know. I don't know if it was childhood. I don't know whether *Star Trek* started when I was still a child or when I was the teenager, or something like that, I just know that the whole idea of *Star Trek* and this great mission impossible that it was going off into the galaxy, to go where no man has gone before. All of the *Silk Road*, all of the journey, connects so vividly and richly to those memories. And to the fun of those kind of quests.

And so, when the later movie came out, *Galaxy Quest*, and that was like so magnificently, beautifully funny. And the director of that movie happened to be my next-door neighbor, who lived on the fifth floor of 26 Bowery, Dean Parisot. And I remember meeting Dean in the hallway before he won the Academy award for his ten-minute short of these people tramping through a bar? Drinking upside down cups? Or, no! He- His figure was actually upside down, and he drank in the- when he was upside down. And anyway, he was this- It was so funny! Hilarious. And I'm so happy for him. But then he split, I haven't seen him in probably fifty years, to become this great director in Los Angeles, and produce this marvelous film [*Galaxy Quest*] which is still being talked about. I just saw something on Netflix about it.

With *Galaxy Quest*, it is so prophetic that it helped open for me some aspect of this blockade. This wall that you can't get past. How do- How do we ever get through that and find a way to address something that people just don't want to confront? Because it's impossible even to conceive of it, do I call it the climate crisis? Or do I- or is that the wrong words for it? Because it doesn't help us to address it or know what it is in any real human terms. But *Galaxy Quest* helped me to. [both laugh]

So, you know, it's- what was your question now? [laughs] You wanted to know how it fell into what the Art Center is. I think it comes to: How does it fit into my life? How does it fit into our lives? Certainly, what does it mean for the Asian American population that is here? What does it mean to my daughter and my grandchild, and to Asians in the United States? You know, is that thing ever going to heal? According to the Senator addressed Congress in 1882, and got the law passed to- what's it called? To stop Asian from entering the country. That law.

JC: The [Chinese] Exclusion Act?

BL: Yeah, the [Chinese] Exclusion Act. And from what I've heard, he said, you know: "this country is either going to remain Christian, or it's going to be Sinicized." That's what he said. And I don't hear any historian repeating his words. I forgot now where I read that, but there's all the myths, and there's all the hostilities, and there's all the racism. But there's also this kind of observation that- and some of it is still around here. There is that- we are unassimilable. But what our society is facing now, at least that's what they tell us, are we going to assimilate with the earth, or are we going to fly off to Mars and depart? Do the odd and incredible and weird, unimaginable, freaky, miraculous, amazing things that all kinds of other cultures, all kinds of indigenous people, have created in their way of evolving in this earth, going to help us to create a way for our society, to also find peace with the earth. You know, is Asia going to add a piece to that? So are we are going to find a way to stay together?

You know, I you know. Okay, in the *Ancestor* show, I thought, okay, pay homage to all the ancestors of this country. Well, this idea [of the *Silk Road*]- I didn't become aware of the climate crisis until what? Less than ten years ago. It's been written about and talked about since more than thirty years ago. But I didn't have a clue of that. I didn't know how what I was addressing with the Asian American presence related to that kind of thing until not that long ago. So, I can see that *Silk Road* was really meant to, from the beginning, to address, "Hey, let's take a break. Let's look at the world from a different point of view. Let's step outside of our national borders, whatever your national borders are, and we come to the Silk Road, and with this realization, you know, that we're Asians in the United States. And that if we see ourselves, see how this cultural relationship between Asia and the West, how that played out along the Silk Road over so many different eons and ages, and beyond. And how one culture developed in one way, and another country developed in another way. And those differences- particularly the one that I was focused on in Christopher Columbus Show [*And He Was Looking for Asia*], the early Middle Ages and the migration peoples, and how that sort of really was a key moment in a very different orientation. And for all the migration peoples, animistic, and other roots need to be resurfaced, and take pride in, and at least come back to the roots of who we are. Each of us, whoever we are, for those kinds of- search for our authenticity. To enable our society to be a society.

But that- it takes us into deep time. We have a habit, perhaps, of looking at this national story, of two, three hundred years old, and the Silk Road takes us far, far, far, far, far deeper, into the very beginnings where, as far as we can trace, and see, the larger story of our humanity. And so, the Silk Road takes me far, far, far beyond just the story of Asian American art, in Basement, in Chinatown, in this localized area. And [I] want to include so many other different peoples [in my exhibition], and cultures, and artists and types of work, and energies, and histories, and outlooks. And other kinds of stories. And to see how we relate to each other, how we are meaningful to each other, and how we can share the earth together.

So does that fit into the Art Centre? [laughs] It hardly fits into Chinatown. But just to go- to take a little excursion and see how things look from that point of view. That's what I originally thought the *Silk Road* [exhibition] was going to be about. That it should bump

into the climate crisis? I guess it has to. You know, so many other people who are writing about this that I found like, I told you, Charles Eisenstein? I think the book is- the one I want to mention was *The Ascent of Man* (2007). The other one is different. It's called *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know is Possible* (2013). I read both of them. But to address these questions, that's what they have to do. They have to go all the way back into deep time.

But beyond- what? Beyond that climate crisis, is- fits into the other area you mentioned. It's- what did you call it? Where is it leading me, and so therefore- so Tarnas's thing? And the other woman [writer Elizabeth Childs Kelly], the Divine Feminine Wisdoms? Those things were never part of *Silk Road*.

JC: Okay.

BL: Those things are in the next stage, that's where it's taking me. It's continued to grow; I've continued to explore. But those 2 things are far, far beyond *Silk Road*. The *Silk Road* [exhibition] is already trying to tie in a story that is incredible- is already the far too incredible to try to put under one roof. I began to realize that once we met on Wednesday. I realized that, you know, to just to take that step is already- I don't know, you were talking about audience. You know, I don't think most audience will- they'd have to sleep on it for a week! Just to think that they're going to step out of the national boundaries that they've always been seeing the world from, or their ethnic point of view that they've always- where they've come to see the world from, to take a little vacation and begin to see it from the point of view of the Silk Road. That is already far too big of an endeavor. And from me to try and jump from there into the climate crisis? Or, for me to jump from there into astrology? As a real thing? As a scientific truth? [laughs] No!

I think that my dreams with Hal over coffee are taking me on this flight. I shouldn't try to bring an audience along with me.

JC: So, for you this "Silk Road," so the actual, historic Silk Road, the thing that existed for many years…that was kind of a symbol for your kind of- served as a jumping-off point to consider how artists and art can have us think about how we view the world around us. Is that kind of right?

BL: Mmhmm.

JC: Yeah?

BL: How these artists, how the ones we've chosen already, view their world, and the way they are viewing the world. How that tells us something. These are very, very different people than we might normally know, and how their way of what they're trying to deal with- how that reflects the journey that we've all been on. And that the Silk Road has been this global paradigm for two thousand years, and for the next, how much, for the next thousand years. How that is all bringing us together and making us continue to encounter all of our differences and all of our experiences, and all of our perspectives.

And so, *Silk Road* sheds light on them. And, you know, when some of these artists are very enthusiastic to take part in this kind of thing. And like in the Christopher Columbus [*And He Was Looking for Asia*] show, some of them are- doesn't ring a bell for them. But by including those kind of people, perhaps for the audience, I'm thinking. it will ring a bell for them. Maybe not. I don't know.

JC: What kind of artwork did you want to include in this show? What kind of artists did you talk with about this idea?

BL: Well, I know- we've tried to speak a little bit about that. I felt that the artists who I had wanted, and I thought we were really perfect for this, some of whom dropped out. I don't think I should mention them in this context. But the first one I thought should mention was Kea Tawana in Newark, New Jersey. Let's see, I don't have- do I have the dates here? But when she, I think it was in the middle or towards the end, was it the 80s? Or maybe in the 60s? No, I- let's see. The riots in Newark, the so-called uprising in Newark, took place in 1967. So, that's when there was this couple of acres in the African American part of Newark, New Jersey, that was about three or four blocks from where I grew up, became this kind of wasteland of bricks that was left here for more than twenty years. And she was able to- probably [because of] all of this experience in demolishing houses, collecting the timber from those houses, being this, woman with very strong hands, having this odd background of being both part Chinese, excuse me, part Japanese and part American.

How she [Tawana] was able to get the church that he was working with and being a member of to validate, or enable, we were to use a piece of this wasteland and build what she called an ark [*Ark*, 1982]. A ship. I think about more than twenty-four timbers on both sides of the of this ark that rose, oh, three, four stories high, and able to cover the lower portion of it. And then on the top area, a little sort of area cabin, sort of where she could welcome people to walk up the ladder, and theses these steps, and invite them into the ark and talk about how this could bring the city of Newark together, to bring the communities of Newark and find way to save us all. And how the city eventually had her in court for, I don't know, for two or three years, always being announced in the newspaper, all of her stories. Coming out of the local newspaper of Newark, and eventually forcing her to take it down. To cut every single piece of lumber and demolish it. That I, you know, I thought, was just this of remarkable and visionary idea of- She passed in, I think 2014, something like that.[7] I think the decision of the court was, I think, in 1988, or something like that. And so, it stood, and was there for a number of years. And Yoland and Hal remember going to visit her and climbing up those stairs and talking with her, and other people would go and do that, and some architectural site has this beautiful statement, and you can still see her images of her *Ark* there, and the statement that they wrote. And then this all came back to me because I had no idea of it, when a Aferro, a gallery in Newark, brought all these documents back together again, maybe six, seven, eight years ago, and I was there to encounter them. I really felt that she was the keynote of what I of what the *Silk Road* [exhibition was about.

[7] Kea Tawana passed away in 2016.

Alina Viola Tas, a woman who grew up in Europe, who always had this feeling about Europe, and eventually came to the United States, where she got more involved into Asian philosophies and other ways of seeing the world. And got into- got into [indecipherable] herself, and eventually marrying somebody in the Islamic Culture. Traveling, leaving Bard College, where she was a teacher. [She was] somewhat into film, before that, more into visual arts. And before leaving, and going to Istanbul, and raising her child there, she created this tent. Oh, I don't know, maybe it was ten feet in diameter. Black felt with punctured little holes in the black felt. Little beams of light coming through with patterns of people and things like that. Expressing this kind of perspective, which was more from a different culture than what she had known where she grew up. And I met her in Istanbul, and when I happen to be there, and amazingly introduced to her through another artist who we've, exhibited. And discovering that she had this amazing story, which so many years later, she wrote to me about her whole experience in Europe and how she's reconciled to where her life is going. So, I just sent you an image of some of the other artwork that she does? That's much more colorful than the tent itself.

And then Junko Chodos, who, as I mentioned, I exhibited her first in the *Passion and Compassion* [*Passion and Compassion: Five Artists' Reflections on Buddhism*] show that we did in the 90s. And incredible woman who grew up in Japan, in the middle of World War II, and having these very traumatic experiences, and had written this incredible book about her whole life. The experiences that she went through, finally coming to America, marrying someone who is very knowledgeable about his Jewish heritage, and together there are this team making her career as an artist so well known on the West Coast, and writing so incredibly, thoroughly about her vision, her work. Why she defines herself as, very specifically, an Asian American artist.

And deciding that for this show [*Silk Road*] she would offer the work that she did, I think, ten or fifteen years ago, in which she created this group work related to a dance performance that was going to be done, she had a specific studio built for her to create these works. And all about this- religious leader, who I think, in the Tang dynasty (618 – 907 CE) was sent by some authority to Chang'an 长安, In the Tang dynasty, maybe 700, 800 [CE]. around there, Chang'an is the endpoint.[8] When you travel along the silk route, you end up in China in Chang'an. This is where so many different cathedrals, and churches, and places of worship, so many- all of these different spiritualities mixing together in Chang'an. And he [the Tang dynasty religious leader] was sent by- from Japan, to go there and find out about this new thing called Buddhism. And he was ordained there by person who was doing that as the inheritance of Tantric Buddhism, or I think it's called Esoteric Buddhism. It's very different from many of the other kinds of Buddhism. And bringing this back to Japan and linking it with, what it's called? Shintoism. Shintoism as an indigenous, nature religion. He joins it with Shintoism, and it becomes the most widely practice Buddhism [tradition] in Japan. It's much, apparently, it's much more people involved in it then, Zen Buddhism. Part of it involves this ship that

[8] Chang'an is modern day Xi'an 西安市.

he was on, that crashes, and that so many of the other people sent there, crash along the shores and die. And he somehow survives on this ship and then gets into Chang'an.

So part of the ship journey she feels, is also part of why she wants to be a part of the show. And that this work is appropriate for what she wanted to exhibit. And this beautiful, long essay that I sent to you? Describing so much of the history of all these things, stories, connections…that you never hear anybody who's talking about Buddhism talk about this kind of rich, travel, geographic, lived experience and she's able to spell this out for us in such a beautiful way in the essay. So, I wanted the essay to be part of the show, too.

This is another one of those things that is so regretful that I can't really bring her to the public.

Liliya Lifanova, who was originally from Kyrgyzstan. Who- Okay, here is one who is right here in New York City, right across the street, in Clemente [The Clemente Soto Vélez Cultural and Educational Center], where she has her studio. So, very close to my office [at 111 Norfolk St]. She, and the other woman also from this part of the Silk Road, Selime Okuyan. Oh, anyway, they're also at the studio across the street. But Liliya grew up in Kyrgyzstan. Years later, had an opportunity to go back there for five years. Investigate her culture. Begin to understand more deeply the Russian influence on the Kyrgyzstan culture. Take the poem of T.S. Elliot, "The Waste Land" (1922), and finding someone who had written a play, I think, about- that is from the basis of this poem. And then reading a whole- scene, and installation for this play to be enacted, coming to find translators and all the people to help her to create all this artwork and perform it.

And I saw the performance. I think not here, in another location, where she finally got to have a performance of it? Or no, I think to have a video. The video that she made of the performance to play here at, I think, Third Avenue. That film place above- over, above Houston Street [Anthology Film Archives on 2nd Avenue]. And see all the very, very unusual things that are displayed in this film, in the performance. And you know, felt as this- the original ancient fabric from the prehistoric age, Neolithic age, when the first fabric that was ever created. And then [Liliya was] creating all of these other artworks- that I just sent you a picture of some of them. And her being one of the most enthusiastic people who want to do this and join with us. And because of her, we found this book on the Scythians at the Metropolitan Museum, and brought it back and loaned to her, and she read the whole thing from cover to cover, and went to go and get a new one, and for her own.

And to find the other artist, who is utterly different from her. Selime. But for me, she rang a bell. I sent you an image of her, one of her works, and it can be nothing else but authentic. And unfortunately, with her, I haven't had much discussion or talk, I just knew that she fit into what we were trying to do.

And Chris Mendoza, from Nicaragua. I mentioned, you know, bumping into him at an auction to raise money for Buddhism, and, no! I think it was for Tibet. it was a fundraiser

for Tibet. And I couldn't take my eyes off of his painting. And it was. It was the space sense of space that was just so incredible. And I just couldn't take my eyes off of it. And I've forgotten to tell you that miraculously, the name of the painting is “Silk Road.”

JC: That is quite ironic, right?

BL: He couldn't tell me why he named it “Silk Road.” You know, but telling me about his growing up in Nicaragua, about fleeing at some point with his family, his father. Him as a little boy and taking this little boat to an island and hanging out there, while all this other stuff is going on, and trying to get into the spirituality that he felt in looking at the stars from this little island. And then him taking off to Florida, and then north of here, and then back there again. So he’s not always in New York, only once in a while now, and anyway.

Another, you know, thing that disappoints me, that I can't be the vehicle by which he gets visibility.

Andrew Binkley, who had a show on the Bowery, so I was able to go there and see it and meet him. Someone who in his youth, quit school went to southeast Asia, joined the the sect, where the Siddhartha was originally a part of. They still use palms with the bowls, you can go and request palms in their bowls, and he [Binkley] was a priest for a number of years with that group. He's blonde, he looks totally American. And now he’s left, became an artist and is doing amazing and incredible things, as the image I showed you, of this boulder in the sky, that he does and he is in Hawaii and continues to be…it looks like a very successful artist. Oh, quite an incredible- His work is quite awesome.

But I think that would be enough artists to talk about.

JC: Yeah, you have quite a few artists, and I think something that's kind of interesting- So they're from, you know, of all different backgrounds from all around the world, often will have a connection to the Lower East Side, but for you, it seems like the “Silk Road” as a concept, and, as you know, a thing, that is kind of a term for you as well. Like the term Silk Road is, kind of, how you understand globalization, or globalism, in arts. Would you say that's correct?

BL: Yes, I think it has all those kind of connotations. Oh, it's- it has a romantic edge to it. But I think it's much more appropriate and more revealing than “diaspora,” and I think it doesn't necessarily need to replace what we've been using all these years is Asian American, but it adds a dimension, a much bigger dimension. An open- a quite open dimension, to where it's going, what its past, so wonderous, might have been, and might still be, if we try to dig it up. So, I feel like, is there potential for- there is potential for a lot of mass media things that could be produced and created to flesh out more of this story?

Some of the things that I had written down about how- I know this one book that is totally written on the history of the Silk Road and talks about these nations where did I

put them. This region called the Eurasia. If you name some of the states that are now there, countries that most of us would not hear about. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan. Kurdistan, Turkmenistan. The countries of the Caucuses. These may be unknown to us, but they were the bridge between East and West. It was here that civilization was born. Here, that great metropolis was created nearly five thousand years ago. This is where the world's religions met, and shared: Judaism, and Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, all of these things jostled together. And this is where one of the books that we came across, called *The Horse Wheel, and Language: How the Bronze Age Writers from the Eurasian Steps Shaped the Modern World* [by anthropologist David W. Anthony]. Whose thesis is that it wasn't only in these metropolises that were building architecture, and these amazing things that stunned what man could do, that it was in this nomadic- no man's land, people who would never build architecture, people who had soft leather boots, who rode around in horses, who were inheritors of the BMAC. Well, what did I call it? The BMAC [Bactria–Margiana Archaeological Complex] culture, for the roots. BMAC standing for Bactria–Margiana Archaeological Complex, where the language of Sanskrit was perhaps begun. And then the meeting of all those people living there, mixing with the nomadic groups, the secondary groups mixing with the nomadic groups, who came From an Indian trading post, developing the Sanskrit, and then spending off. One part, moving to India, another part moving to Persia. But the beginnings of the Mahābhārata seem to have been written there, and later fleshed out in India. The wisdom of those early writings was likely part of some piece of the Trans-Eurasian continent. Perhaps a universal culture, through back in the Paleolithic times, the Neolithic times.

We have this mummy found, where? In the Swiss alps, right? Called Otsi. Otsi. Three thousand years ago has the same acupuncture points as a tattoo on his body that are found in China. You know, these little bits that tell us what the Eurasian continent, where you could travel from one end to the other, what was the culture back then, when it was perhaps more unified. And *majiayao* 马家窑 water jug that was found in China around Three thousand BC describing the cosmology of the *yin* and the *yang* 阴阳, and the *wuxing* 五星, the five elements and the three powers. The early principles of what Chinese cosmology, cosmological thinking, was. How those things began to have a of distinguishing marks of what China was to become. But still, there was a wisdom tradition all across vast, vast continent.

And, that we know that the Hungarians trace their very beginnings to an archaeological site in China. I don't know if that's exactly the same, or similar, to the Armenians. But the Armenians, apparently, are also closely connected to Asia. And when I was in Istanbul in Turkey, and meeting [*Silk Road* artist] Alina [Viola Tas], and being amazed by culture that has a permanent, national position of being split! It has an identity crisis between Asia and the West. It's not like us as a minority, their crisis is historical and national, as part of their basic roots. And all their t-shirts. Reflect this kind of posture. You know that the world is such- when you begin to understand, that to go to the Silk Road and look for our roots and our beginnings, and our deep historical story, that we find our ourselves in a place that we would never think we would ever hear about or know about. Why is this been all covered up? Why do we not know of a history deeper than two, three hundred years?

And along these lines, I should mention, you know, the book by [historian] Livia Kohn, *The Pristine Affluence* [*The Pristine Affluence: Daoist Roots in the Stone Age*, 2018]. Talking about the Paleolithic and Mesolithic period in China's history, where the roots of Daoism began, and how number of scholars since 1968 have been talking about the hunter-gatherer era as a time when there was great affluence, and it was a pristine way of living, and that we should get out of, back in those days, the agriculture way of living that was so burdensome, that they wanted to find a solution by going back into this earlier way of living. And that's where the Daoist philosophy began. These are things that are being written. And this book was from 2018.

Livia Kohn has been writing books about China for probably thirty years before that, about so many different phases of Chinese culture.

Oh, so, should I mention this one, too? Oh, hopefully, kinship between Sanskrit and Russian language, that the grammatical base of Sanskrit is more closely connected to Russian than any other European language, and that it even apparently sounds similar. So, these are things that we don't know.

Oh, and here's this term that I was going to try to dig up for you. So many of the languages that branched off came from this original source, which is called "Proto-Indo-European language." That language is all traced back to them. And then I also found this thing that I was going to say that I have haven't mentioned yet. That what continues to exist today of this migratory migration people's culture, an art group that exists, was here in New York about three years ago, sponsored by the Kazakhstan Government. Brought here by Leeza Ahmady. Leeza Ahmady, who was- is no longer the director of Asia Contemporary Art Week, brought them here and exhibited them in Jersey City at a large art center. Called- The group is called Kyzel Tractor, or "red tractor," and they had been recognized for reorienting their nomadic and Sufi and shamanistic philosophies to and a new art language that they have shared for this modern era. This still exists.
Part of this is still there. It has not been overtaken by all kinds of modernisms, by all kinds of nationalisms, by all kinds of mechanizations and inventions. There are people who still have out there living with these traditions.

And I should mention also, [American priest] Matthew Fox. Who- a theologian, who has so much of his career, he was banned by the church. And the Pope recently, or you know, the current Pope, has welcomed him back into the church. Someone who's- so many books have been pointing out these aspects of how the religion oppression that happened in the history. So, saying that, original sin, apparently something from St. Augustine, is nowhere in the Bible. I've read things about the Celtic Christian Church. How they were amenable to welcoming this new kind of Christianity. But then, when the Roman Christian came, it was done with, you know, aggression and suppression. And that the leader in England at that point of the church, I unfortunately don't have a name here, apparently resigned rather than comply with this kind of teaching that Matthew Fox was talking about, that this was done in order to get everybody to fall in line under one

Roman Catholic Church. So, this is exactly when the Empire collapse. And so, the Church tried to take its position.

So, this kind of affirmation of our speculation about all this period of time, bumping into him, was something that happened for me, and of, you know. Should I mention you know, Derek Black again? How he, as the inheritor of the Ku Klux Klan, son of Don Black, spends every weekend having dinner with a Jewish young man at college, and emerges after three or four years to we renounce his heritage, and is the, you know, separate himself from the Ku Klux Klan, and goes on to the University of Chicago, to study the early medieval history, exactly where we've been trying to look, at to find the roots of this kind of racism, that he wanted to learn about and understand. So, we are doing the same thing, trying to learn and understand the roots not only a racism, but of the idea of superiority. The idea of the Prometheus Quest, to go on this *Star Trek* journey and achieve amazing, incredible things. However, the cost. At what cost does it extract from us when it pulls us so much apart from the real sources of who we are, as being part of this earth?

So, then more recently, the thing that I mentioned that it is not part of the- I would claim now, that it's not part of the *Silk Road* show. But it's one of those journeys that I'm taking myself. Bumping into Richard Tarnas's book, *Cosmos and Psyche*, from 2007, and finding that the only people who have given him a serious review, is an astrological company, a new film, I think on on YouTube has come out. A ten-part series based upon his book and his investigation of astrology and synchronicities that apparently [psychologist] Carl Jung was so deeply involved with, and picking up from his work, to look at them seriously, and investigating how much the patterns of the stars have affected different moments in human history and linking them to his [Jung's] whole notion of archetypes.

These are, you know. These are- This is a long way from New York City. [both laugh] And so much of- despite all that New York City has, these incredible things, what are they? Speaks to us about roots that are our own roots.

When, what's his name? [Edgar] Mitchell. When the astronaut in '71, '72, I'm skipping on his name, Craig Mitchell? Or something like that. Huh! Saw the earth from the moon and has this incredible experience that's called- its skipping on me again! The experience that he had could only be described by this this word in the Celtic language [samadhi], that but that in- Anyway. See I guess that I knew this one so well I didn't think I needed to write it down.

JC: [jokes] That always happens, right?

BL: I guess so.

JC: I think one thing that I would like to know, a little bit, is you've done such an incredible amount of research, and it seems like all of your shows, including *And He Was*

Looking for Asia, were also heavily researched. And I was wondering why you chose to exhibit primarily contemporary works of art in shows that were so historic?

BL: Well, I'm- I don't- There are so many people out there are experts in different fragments of different periods of history and art, and I don't feel my- that I have any confidence in doing that. Yeah, so, that my area is to look at contemporary art, and particularly to keep the focus on how we are looking forward, how are you going to address what's on our horizon.

What's there that we have yet to reconsider. So, you know, taking a look about- Going back into those particular areas, and seeing how they are so professionally done. It's totally outside of my scope to try to step on the toes of other people, would be able to do that much better than I. However, those people cannot do what I can do. They cannot live by the skin of their teeth on the fringe of a community and wonder about things that relate directly to being kicked off this part of Manhattan, because the real estate people are going to take over. They have no way of trying to understand what it is for all the different people who are considered expendable. All the different cultures that are here, that can enrich us, and how and how we're going to deal with our situation. And instead, they are sort of stuck into the establishment, and the way the establishment foresees where their vital interests are taking them. So, for me to see that I bumped into someone [my undergraduate professor] who was able to play the game of the establishment and be this incredible, authentic artist and philosopher, and human being. That he was able to sustain that. How do I- How do I live up to that?

JC: And who is that? Was that-

BL: Yeah, that that was him [George Weber].

JC: Was your professor?

BL: Yeah. Yeah, you know, so I think that has been my guiding star.

JC: Yeah.

BL: And that I-

JC: It's been, has guided you towards-

BL: If the sky fell on me, and I'm supposed to say it was a blessing. I don't know how else, you know, do I have any right to say anything else? And at certain points in my life, it falls more. And at other times, I don't see it, I don't know what the hell am I doing here? But even if it's gobbledygook, I have to get it out. It's something that, for whatever it is, not everybody figured out what it is.

JC: I've got another question about your art, the artwork that you chose [for *Silk Road*]. So you're choosing contemporary works, but they all are aesthetically similar, in that- or

maybe conceptually similar is a better way of saying that, in that they engage the audience in an interesting way. These works are very creative, you know they're kind of a departure from the first works that you started to collect for the Centre, which were primarily paintings, some abstract works, abstract paintings. What kind of drew you to the kinds of artists that you wanted to include shows like the *Silk Road*? What about their art really, kind of, struck you as interesting?

BL: Gee, I don't know what you're talking about. I think, you know, what I- what we- you know. Something just turns me on, and I can't- I am a loss of words, but that I can't take my eyes off of it. And maybe later, I can come up with some notion or some can connection with words that will help to explicate it. And these are the instrumentalities that we live with, and I find more and more, how words are inadequate.

I begin to appreciate more, and more, why, the roots of Buddhism are in this language that's all the way out there [Pali], and you, when you go to those events, they always bring up these words and these mantras that you're supposed to say, and the syllables that are supposed to be so perfectly aligned. And I begin to- I used to think of them as motion. But now I begin to appreciate why, if some culture hit on some words that worked for them, and they want to share that with us, and that we have so many words that are inadequate to address- You know, it's something that I've lived all my life with is not knowing Chinese. Luckily, I have my wife [Eleanor], who can sometimes, not nearly enough as I might want her to, tell me more about that word that's written in Chinese. Oh, that's one of the things I love about what happened recently. What's her name? The woman who won the award for a *Nomadland* (2020).

JC: Oh, yeah, Chloé Zhao.

BL: Chloé Zhao got up on the stage and said [in Mandarin]: "the roots of man, he is good."[9] And I always- I bumped into that at a certain point in my life, and I found that I have it written above my computer on little scrap of paper that so faded. I must have written that thing when I- I did buy the book. It's called the *Three Character Classic*, and I did find it on my bookshelf, and so I when I bumped into that I was so amazingly stunned because I have never heard that statement stated in any of the academic things I ever got in school. And there it was, for little children learning Chinese, the first three characters.[10] And I had written it above my computer. I just took a picture of it, that I scribbled it on, something or other, and got the exact translation of how it's written from Eleanor. That those three phrases are, and she [Chloé Zhao] quoted it there for everybody. I guess- I guess, you know, that is a synchronicity for me. To hear it affirmed in her own experience. But of course, she went out and created this masterpiece. Which I

[9] This is a reference to the Confucian poem, the *Three Character Classic*. The first two lines read: *ren zhi chu xing ben shan* 人之初 性本善. The popular phrase carries the sentiment of people being inherently good. Zhao incorporated the poem into her acceptance speech after winning an Academy Award for *Nomadland*. The speech was censored in China. See Suyin Haynes, "Here's Why Chloé Zhao's Oscar Win Was Censored in China," *Time* (April 27, 2021), https://time.com/5959003/chloe-zhao-oscars-censorship/.

[10] Parents will often use the poem to teach their children how to write Chinese characters.

love that film. And I actually love her other film, the one that's getting panned [*Eternals*, 2021] about what? These nine or ten superheroes? No, I think that was good, too.

But it's- I feel like we're on a momentum, that we use that people are going in the right direction. But I also feel like the two or three thousand years that are- that where we are coming from. Is, has got the upper hand. That that momentum is still putting us along. And how we are going to continue to find a way to reconfigure it, to like, right in that big hero movie. She just puts her hand into the earth, and the energy just spreads out everywhere, and the giant creature that was going to destroy the earth, turns to a different pigment, and the earth is saved.

And it's how do you transform something? That- How are we going to do that? So to see how deep those, that momentum is coming from, so that's why I just sent you this little thing this a while ago. It's a- But I think there are a lot of people moving in the right direction, and a lot of things moving in the right direction. And, you know, if their work, what. What I'm doing is only going to touch fits in pieces here, and maybe that's all I need to do. Because there are so many other people who are moving along this direction. And it's at this stage where I've felt around enough, a lot, maybe can feel around more, and touch upon so many more people who are doing more things and recognizing the direction we need to go.

Is that that Asian American art? [laughs] It's art. It's being alive and following your nose, so you continue to be alive. [laughs] I think the woman who was writing about the divine feminine wisdom said it better than just did, more simply. I won't read it. [laughs]

JC: Alright.

BL: I- Samadhi! The word is samadhi. That Mitchell the Astronaut came back and got all of these researchers to come back to him, and to describe his experience as samadhi. And so, he left Cape Canaveral, and went on his journey to discover what that was.

And I can- now I member of [scholar] Joanna Macy, so much into Westernizing Buddhism, so deeply involved with the film called *Planetary* [*Pathways to Planetary Health,* 2021]. Oh, about five, six years ago, thinking that the journey to the moon, giving us this vision of the unity of the Earth, was going to transform the world, and writing her book about how there's going to be a great turning and the world is going to come together, and we're going to recognize how this spirituality can bring us back to a different direction for our society. And designing the whole film of *Planetary* along these lines, and recognizing five, six years later, I saw her work a year ago, in another talk, in which, of course, nobody recognizes Planetary. No country is going to wake up and see the world and have a turning point in the way they manage their industry, their economic forecast. And she's, you know, we're all in this boat together. And it may take us how long? Before any of these great visions, like er vision, actually impact those people who make decisions. And it really may take a disaster before we wake up. But it's so inspiring to see her, so inspiring to go back and look at this film. How well they presented the case for what we need to do.

So, you know there's a site that I can now get on my phone called Insite Timer? Insite Timer.

JC: I don't know about that.

BL: It's been around for what? Five years, there's probably more than maybe even a thousand, all kinds of people, but teachers in so many different aspects of spirituality that, you can get five min, ten min, an hour, two hours, with on your phone. So, immediately, hundreds of them making a living off of this site by having people who you can- You can listen to those people, love them, and decide that you want to give them some money, or you don't want to give them. It's a gift economy, the gift economy that [Charles] Eisenstein wrote about. The gift economy that this site works upon, and hundreds of, if not maybe more than hundreds, making a living by having a whole group of people follow them. I won't mention the name of the person I'm following. [laughs] But, you know, contemporary technology does enable things that we could never do in the past, to find things that were not available to us.

And there are others that I can mention, but.

JC: I think that's good. I think I think we did it.

BL: Did we?

JC: Yeah.

BL: And the question we didn't think you were going to ask?

JC: Yeah.

BL: Of the difficulty of ever doing this show. In 2019, I lost Hal. He got a full-time job, is doing very well, and I couldn't get him back. In March of 2019, the Tiananmen Square show [*China: June 4*] almost, probably about a hundred doors, and I don't know, maybe ten or twenty, something like that, small works, were finally transferred, after being with us for nearly thirty years, out of storage and transferred to Humanitarian China [in the Bay Area]. So the shipped it to an artist, who has a plot of land and a building on this highway that connects Los Angeles to Las Vegas. And there he displays outdoor sculpture. These, you know, huge things. The Goddess of Democracy, his own version is there. The Tank Man is there the big number 64, which is, you know, June 4th, 1989.[11] Those numbers, that sculpture stands in maybe thirty or more than thirty feet tall? He wants to make this place where people can stop and, you know, park, and look at the sculptures. Inside one of the buildings that he has, there is all of the doors and the Tiananmen Square [*China: June 4*] pieces that they are now preserving. An organization

[11] The Goddess of Democracy and The Tank Man are both images associated with the Tiananmen Square massacre. The goddess of democracy is a symbol of democratic freedom. The Tank Man recalls the famous photograph of a student standing in front of three Chinese tanks as they departed Tiananmen Square.

that has been for more than ten years now, working with political prisoners from Tiananmen Square, and when they get released, some of them they have brought to California and resettled them. So, they are still working on what's happening after, you know, all this time with the issues of China and Tiananmen Square.

I just came back from a play last night [at the Player's Theater in New York City] on the Requiem, the Tiananmen Square Requiem [*Tiananmen Requiem*]. Where, on opening night, because a few days ago, the most wanted man in China, I think his name is Wang Yang, or am I getting it mistaken? That was the keynote speaker for that play. So, with Hong Kong, with the Tibetan people, with the Uyghurs, this whole issue with China and Tiananmen Square…so after thirty years, for the thirtieth anniversary, a lot of our work that we had, is now being preserved there, and may eventually become part of display the museum on this- between Los Angeles and Las Vegas.

But that happened, working out that kind of agreement happened, in 2019. Covid hit us, of course, in around January 2020, and my stepmother died in 2021 in February. So, the agreement that we once had with a friend who runs his own nonprofit. Had to be, you know. Had to be canceled. Which- so it was canceled around, in June 2021. I think maybe a bit earlier than that? But the idea that this could become this show could become a reality was only, say in maybe- maybe June, maybe September, that we were informed that this could become a reality. So that's- So middle to rate 2020 was when I had asked Hal if he could come back and help us do something that we never really thought was more than a dream. And so, it was only a short period of time, comparatively, that our discussions might become actually something that could really happen. And then it collapsed and disappeared as quickly.

JC: Oh, no!

BL: Yeah. So, in some ways, I'm very happy to pull this together for you, and because you wanted to do this kind of interview, and it's enabled me to piece this thing together that I never really pieced it together before, and make it sound more substantial, perhaps, than it ever was. But that it still nourishes me. Even through all these difficulties, and still wondering where all of this is going to go. Where are the things we still have in our collection going to go? Maybe the last few doors of Tiananmen Square [*China: June 4*], I'll give to Fengsuo Zhou in April. Oh, I'm not sure.

So, I'm sure other nonprofits are still in this kind of condition. We're still all struggling. And, you know, we try to do our part with the struggle of the prison that [Former New York City Mayor Bill] DeBlasio has apparently put on this train, and signed all the documents, so that this train is now moving, and all our efforts to stop this train, and stop the bill, and the construction of this prison, has been described to me- what [New York City] Mayor [Eric] Adams would have to do, to get sued up the wazoo by all these firms that have signed a contract with DeBlasio.

So, our community is in this dilemma. Which is- which largely goes unrecognized, and largely goes unseen. And more and more of what common, normal people do and live

through, it's so much like this, and perhaps more and more people are experiencing this kind of thing.

And what do they say? They say it's supposed to make us stronger. [both laugh] I'm glad you're laughing, maybe I finally told a joke.

JC: You finally got to tell your joke!

BL: Was that it?

JC: That was your joke!

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