

Godzilla, Tseng Kwong Chi, and Go-Go Girls!

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When Godzilla Dismantles Invisibility

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Hong Kong-born American artist Ken Chu's thought-provoking exhibition proposal for **Dismantling Invisibility: Asian & Pacific Islander Artists Respond to the AIDS Crisis** in 1991, he expressed

1. This article was supported by the National Culture and Arts Foundation in Taiwan, and written for the article series "Museum of Desire: Transnational Queer Art Perspectives from the Phenomena Writing - Visual Art Criticism" project.

2. Ken Chu, "Dismantling Ken Chu Proposal Letter AIG (1990)," in Howie Chen (ed.), **Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network 1990-2001** (New York: Primary Information, 2021), 125.

his curatorial motivation: "No community is immune to AIDS. The past year witnessed a troubling surge in reported AIDS cases within the Asian community, yet it continued to be perceived as an outsider's affliction."² This bold statement epitomizes one of the defining characteristics of the art collective Godzilla, in which Chu played a pivotal role. Fearlessly unapologetic, anarchic in its organization, and unafraid to intervene, Godzilla emerged as a dynamic force within the New York art world since its establishment in 1990, actively working to amplify the visibility and recognition of Asian-American and diasporic experiences.

In 1991, New York was a city in upheaval. ACT UP protests became frequent acts of intervention on the city's streets. The art world grieved the loss of Hong Kong-born American artist Tseng Kwong Chi, renowned for his photographic documentation of Keith Haring's art across the urban landscape and his strikingly performative self-portrait series against iconic global landmarks. In the same year, Cuban-born American artist Felix González-Torres and his art collective, Group Material, were making their mark at the Whitney Biennial with the impactful **AIDS Timeline**. In this pandemic time, the realms of art and activism became intimately entwined, forging a symbiotic relationship.

Dismantling Invisibility emerged one year after the establishment of Godzilla and played a pivotal role in shaping the activist practice of this art collective. It went beyond being a mere critique of the absence of Asian voices in the AIDS pandemic; it became a rallying cry for the amplification of Asian-Pacific voices. When reflecting on this exhibition in 2015, the participant artist Zhang Hongtu emphasized the importance of acknowledging all the names of the artists involved:³

3. Amy Sadao, Zhang Hongtu, Esther McGowan, Herb Tam, Panel Discussion, "Dismantling Invisibility: Asian and Pacific Islander Artists' Response to the AIDS Crisis," New York University, 4 May 2019, accessed 23 September 2023, <https://vimeo.com/141445735>.

Ayisha Abraham, Chunron Aisuke, Ken Chu.

The challenge of reading out this list smoothly highlights the cultural and linguistic multitude represented in this groundbreaking art show. By bringing together artists with divergent Asian-Pacific backgrounds, the exhibition challenges the prevailing Sino-centric representation of Asian minorities in America.

Eroto-Asian-American-Histography

4. José Esteban Muñoz, "Ephemerality as Evidence: Introductory Note to Queer Acts," **Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory** 8:2 (1996): 5-16.

5. Art historian Jennifer González once questioned the capacity for the discipline of art history to "assess the contribution of queer feminist of color artists." See: Jennifer González & Tina Takemoto, "Triple Threat: Queer Feminist of Color Performance Art," in Amelia Jones & Erin Silver (eds.), **Otherwise: Imagining Queer Feminist Art Histories** (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 294.

Godzilla, in my view, surpasses its identity as a simple Asian-American network; its whimsical monstrosity carves out a realm ripe for queer interpretations. Delving into the case study of **Dismantling Invisibility**, an exhibition with limited documentation, underscores the invaluable role played by queer historians. Queer histories offer methodologies for uncovering not only concrete evidence but also a means to excavate the ephemeral, the emotional, and the visceral aspects. These ephemeral traces and alternative archives are indispensable for preserving queer embodiments within historiography and archival institutions⁴.

This exhibition case study prompts me to ponder a question once posed by a senior museum researcher: How does one study an exhibition that has never been personally experienced? If visiting experience matters, so does the reading, particularly through the exhibition catalogue—an extended body of an exhibition. Notably, there was no catalogue publication for **Dismantling Invisibility**. However, within the recently published monograph **Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network 1990-2001** (2021), edited by Howie Chen, several installation photos and communication letters surrounding this art show have been included. This publication, spanning an oceanic five-hundred pages, embodies a Godzilla presence that the

discipline of art history is ill-equipped to contain⁶. Excessive in its volume, it demands not merely historical rigor but an immersive sensorial engagement, offering the opportunity to read, touch, and feel between its pages.

6. Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 95-96.

Ken's curatorial statement resonates with an urgent call for trans-communal solidarity. This message remains remarkably pertinent even in the context of the racist and anti-Asian hate during the COVID-19 pandemic. My fascination with this relatively overlooked chapter in the history of AIDS art exhibition is rooted in what queer scholar Elizabeth Freeman describes as hybrid temporality, a queer method bridging the past and the present. Elizabeth introduces the idea of erotohistoriography, which perceives the body as a method and links historical consciousness intimately to corporeal sensations⁹. In my exploration of **Dismantling Invisibility** through a close reading of the Godzilla monograph, I embody Elizabeth's erotohistoriography. This approach deliberately diverges from the conventions of empirical historical research, which typically rely on hard evidence and overarching narratives. Instead, I contend that the tactile experience of flipping through the black and white reproduction prints, though removed from an authentic historical archive, fosters an intimate connection with the historical exhibition.

Absencing Kwon Chi

7. Kerri Sakamoto, "Dismantling Invisibility: Asian & Pacific Islander Artists Respond to the AIDS crisis," in *Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network 1990-2001*, 169.

In a newsletter circulated in 1991 by the Godzilla network, art critic Kerri Sakamoto sheds light on **Dismantling Invisibility** and notes that many of the artists involved in the exhibition "speak of absence" and employ a technique she describes as "strategic self-othering."⁷ A noteworthy example of this approach is found in the work of New York-based Chinese artist Zhang Hongtu, specifically his piece **Untitled No. 47**. This photo-installation takes the form of three crosses, each photo reproduced from Tseng Kwong Chi's **East Meet West** series, in which the artist poses in Mao suits with a pair of sunglasses against worldwide tourist destinations such as the Lincoln statue, Statue of Liberty, and the San Francisco bridge. Zhang Hongtu, however, carves out all the figures of Kwong Chi, creating a haunting absence. In the original works, Kwong Chi staged himself within these landmarks as a passenger who affirms his presence in the world. At first sight, Hongtu's installation seems to disappear Kwong Chi's highly performative subjecthood in these portraits, rendering the artist's body into a stage of non-performance. However, such cut-out paradoxically underscores the absence, prompting the audience to wonder who is absent. In Sakamoto's succinct phrasing, Kwong Chi was "there and not there."⁸

8. Ibid. 173.

His strategic use of absence in art recalls the work of Felix González-Torres, known for often titling his poetic installations or collages as 'untitled.' For instance, his **Untitled** (1991) billboard series features an empty double bed with wrinkles that suggest it has been slept in. González-Torres's work embodies both presence and absence, resisting the authoritative demand for self-exposure. Simultaneously, the empty bed serves as an open space for affective imagination. Art historian Richard Meyer, while

acknowledging the avoidance of homophobic censorship in Felix's poetic billboards and candy installations, points out the potential risk of perpetuating forgetting within HIV/AIDS activism by sustaining this assumed absence.

9. Richard Meyer, *Outlaw Representation: Censorship & Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 268.

Richard wrote: "Such strategy of erasure may, however, court a different kind of danger, namely, that they mimic invisibility so well as to enact the very suppressions they seek to elude."⁹ However, Hongtu's cut-out of Kwong Chi profoundly accentuates the resounding absence rather than sustaining the institutional erasure. The erasure or the death of the artist, to paraphrase Roland Barthes, gives rise to the birth of the audience, especially those who have not been acknowledged.

Go-Go Girls

10. Kerri Sakamoto, 173.

Kerri's exhibition review serves as both my eyes on an exhibition I never had visited and my ears attuned to the previously unheard voices. Within the stark black-and-white installation photo, I am presented with a blurry tableau of four female figures, their bodies seductively contoured against the backdrop of a record player's pole. According to Kerri's account, the record player resonated with the pop singer Nancy Sinatra's haunting rendition of "You Only Live Twice," a signature tune from the 1967 James Bond film. This auditory landscape was meticulously produced by Thai artist Skowmon Hastanan as a part of her sound installation in **Dismantling Invisibility**.

Skowmon's installation seems to be a sensory marvel, fusing the alluring dance of four female figures into a spiral installation that harmonized with the cinematic allure of James Bond, a white heterosexual male hero taking action against a Japanese backdrop. Here, the "go-go girls," who bore an uncanny resemblance to the Bond's girls immortalized on the movie poster, assumed vulnerable poses that poignantly mirrored their unprotected reality—coerced by their procurers to forego the use of condoms¹⁰. By doing so, Skowmon's work foregrounds an underrepresented voice in AIDS memorization, which tends to focus on "go-go boys."

Remarkably, Skowmon's art was not confined to mere aesthetic contemplation. In a profound gesture of solidarity, she collaborated with a Bangkok-based organization, EMPOWER, dedicated to the welfare of female sex workers. Inside the gallery, this collaboration extended beyond the visual and auditory realms, offering valuable information and resources. Through this multifaceted approach, Hastanan deftly amplified the narrative of AIDS, transcending boundaries of intersectionality and nationality. Her work became a bridge that spanned the intersection of the AIDS crisis, sex work, and international perspectives, inviting viewers to engage with this complex issue's profound, multifaceted dimensions.

A Self-Loving Butt

While the Godzilla monograph doesn't include every installation photo from **Dismantling Invisibility** and some works on display remained unidentified,

a remarkable connection emerges within its pages. In the Fall 1992 issue of **Lavender Godzilla: Voices of Gay**

Asian & Pacific Islander Men, a striking juxtaposition catches my eye. On the lower left page, we encounter **Our Lady of Perpetual Health** (1991), an artwork made for the **Dismantling Invisibility** show. This piece is by Hawaii-born American artist Paul Pfeiffer, who resided in the Philippines. This piece depicts Madonna adorned with condoms and surrounded by portraits of individuals of Filipino and other Asian-American backgrounds, including lesbians, gay individuals, and heterosexuals engaged in intimate acts.¹¹

Notably, the caption alludes to the nickname 'Tita Aida,' which circulated among the queer Filipino diaspora as a reference to AIDS ('Auntie AIDS'). By personalizing and feminizing the virus, a tactic often utilized in HIV/AIDS prevention efforts by Filipino medical organizations, Martin F. Manalansan argues that queer diasporic Filipinos showcased creative resilience in the pandemic.¹² In this context of queer Filipino culture, Paul's installation ingeniously transforms the once-oppressive Catholic icon into a symbol of protection.

Next to Paul's **Our Lady of Perpetual Health**, an intriguing image emerges on the cover of *Lavender Godzilla*: a self-fingering buttock with the word "SMUT," a reference to erotic fan fiction, boldly displayed. *Lavender Godzilla* is a magazine published by GAPA (Gay Asian Pacific Alliance, later became GLBTQ+ Asian Pacific Alliance), which was established in 1988 in Berkeley, California. This publication not only offered vital information and support for Asians living with AIDS but also served as a platform for exploring diverse aspects of queer Asian stories.

The juxtaposition of Paul's queered Madonna on the back cover and the self-loving buttock on the front page creates an intriguing resonance between the two images (Madonna safeguarding the butt, perhaps?). This editorial choice, while possibly seen as a humorous play on words and visuals, holds deeper significance for queer Asians who have often been unfairly associated with the bottom roles in gay sexual dynamics. In this way, the afterlife of Paul's Madonna image persists, offering a creative and empowering subversion of stereotypes, encouraging self-love, and challenging preconceived notions about queer Asian experiences.

Contrary to prevailing stereotypes, film scholar Nguyen Tan Hoang asserts that bottomhood is not merely about submission or subjection; it's a radical practice laden with social agency. He challenges the conventional understanding of top-bottom roles, often portraying the 'top' as dominant and active and the 'bottom' as submissive and passive. Nguyen notes, "the power dynamics between the two positions are much more multifaceted, as the appellation of 'butch bottom' attests."¹³

Nguyen's critical perspective intersects with the ideas put forth by Leo Bersani in his influential article, "Is Rectum a Grave?". Bersani contends that gay male intercourse triggered homophobia and oppression during the AIDS epidemic precisely because it disrupted the traditional notion of ideal manhood. Nguyen extends this argument to propose that embracing bottomhood can lead to more intersectional activism within Asian-American communities, which often feel

compelled to masculinize themselves for social assimilation. The act of bottoming, involving the acceptance of penetration, undoes this assimilationist approach, as it encompasses both pleasure and pain, challenging established norms.

Coda: Godzilla as a Bottom Subject

The parallel choice of "Godzilla" as the name between the Asian-Pacific-American artist network in New York and the queer organization in Berkeley holds a significant charge. Suppose *Godzilla*, a trans-Atlantic monster, is depicted as a symbol of immense power, destruction, and even masculinity. In that case, introducing a queered version of *Lavender Godzilla* invites us to explore a page of erotohistoriography

In this eroto-Asian-American-historiography, it's crucial to refrain from interpreting the provocative image of a self-fingering buttock as an act of self-degradation or submission. Instead, it should be recognized as a potent representation of bottomhood, challenging established bias. The middle finger, subtly teasing the buttock, symbolizes resistance, alluring and potentially dismantling the conventional alpha masculine ideal. Through the interconnection of these two Asian-American initiatives, we uncover the potential for embracing queer and trans* Asian-American and diasporic identities as bottom subjects.

The artworks by Hongtu, Skowmon, and Paul featured in **Dismantling Invisibility** embody the practice of bottom subjects in compelling ways. These artworks transcend the mere pursuit of representational visibility. Instead, they actively contest established norms. Through strategic absence, resonant soundscapes, and humorous assemblages, they navigate the intricate terrain of bottomhood. Within this exploration, a subversive form of tenderness perseveres.

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A 'bottom' view of references from the author's room.
Photographed by Lukáš Dolejš, 2023

