

MESSY, ENERGETIC, INTENSE: A ROUNDTABLE CONVERSATION AMONG NEW YORK'S ASIAN AMERICAN EXPERIMENTAL FILMMAKERS OF THE EIGHTIES WITH RODDY BOGAWA, DARYL CHIN, SHU LEA CHEANG, AND REA TAJIRI

Vince Schleitwiler, Abby Sun, and Rea Tajiri

This roundtable grew out of conversations between filmmaker Rea Tajiri, programmer Abby Sun, and scholar Vince Schleitwiler about a misunderstood chapter in the history of Asian American film and media: New York City in the eighties, a vibrant capital of Asian American filmmaking with a distinctively experimental edge.

Although “Asian American” as a concept had a foothold in New York City and on a few New England college campuses by the early seventies, its center of gravity was in the multigenerational Chinese American, Japanese American, and Filipino American urban communities on the West Coast.¹ The idea that these ethnic groups shared similar histories, forms of social oppression, and a common destiny was something radically new. Media and arts activism, including handmade comics, community newspapers, silkscreened posters, music, performance poetry, and documentary filmmaking with Third World revolutionary politics and a DIY aesthetic, was central to the emergent movement. Asian American filmmakers and their audiences engaged in a collective process of formal innovation to invent new ways of telling stories to a pan-ethnic community they were helping to conjure into being.

By the mid- to late seventies, as Asian American cinema began to institutionalize and professionalize, these innovations had become codified. Young artists in New York City in the eighties encountered the category “Asian American” and assumptions about the aesthetics of “Asian American film” as already determined, not radically new. Not surprisingly, they rebelled against those constraints, drawing equally on punk-rock defiance and New York attitude. As a new wave of immigration was rapidly expanding Asian American visibility

beyond its traditional West Coast base, these artists firmly established New York City as a new creative center. Unlike the West Coast media activists of a decade earlier, their innovative processes were individual rather than collective—indeed, even this roundtable’s rubric of “Asian American experimental film” was refused by at least one of its participants.

If the filmmakers’ innovative processes were individual, though, the creative energy that inspired them pulsed through vibrant networks of friends, acquaintances, and organizations, within a milieu that was sprawling and multifaceted. Rather than being specifically or exclusively Asian American, this world was variously multiracial, feminist, queer—with a path to film that wound its way out of and back into the worlds of conceptual art, video, and performance art. Because this era also marked the beginning of a film school boom, and many of these artists would become part of the new wave of Asian American indie filmmakers to gain mainstream visibility in the nineties, contemporary observers typically overestimate the cohesiveness of the Asian American film scene in the eighties.

To tell this story, Rea Tajiri contacted her artist contemporaries Shu Lea Cheang and Roddy Bogawa as well as writer and critic Daryl Chin. Daryl had been a fixture in New York City art circles since the sixties, his presence central to Asian American film from the beginning. The scope of this discussion extends loosely from the mid-seventies through the late nineties, with Tajiri, Abby Sun, and Vince Schleitwiler initiating topics, compiling responses, and finalizing its form as a collage-style roundtable conversation.

Part 1: “I Never Studied Anything Officially”

DARYL CHIN: I had no “training” or educational background in film. I went to the High School of Music and Art, and at

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Rea Tajiri, center right, with filmmaker friends in 1990.

the age of fifteen decided that I wanted to start my career. I was interested in being a filmmaker, and my idol [in 1968] was Jean-Luc Godard. He and the rest of the *Cahiers du cinéma* group started out as critics, so I decided I would start out as a critic, too. Since the closest equivalent to *Cahiers du cinéma* was *Film Culture*, I wrote an article on Robert Bresson and sent it to Jonas Mekas. I waited and didn't hear anything, and then right around my sixteenth birthday, a section of my article was published in the *Village Voice* courtesy of Jonas.

I met Jonas, and through him, Donald Richie, who was then Curator of Film at the Museum of Modern Art. He was preparing a retrospective on Bresson to be held in February 1970 and asked if I wanted to work on it. I said yes. Anthology Film Archives was also opening then [at the Public Theater], and there was a lot of work to be done on its Essential Cinema collection. Jonas asked me if I would help. That sounded interesting to me, so I wound up helping to “document” some of the films: I would look at the archival prints coming in, make sure they were complete, et cetera. So I learned how to do archival work, just because there weren't many other people who wanted to do it.

I graduated from high school in 1970 and went to Columbia University, but I refused to study film. I began taking courses in anthropology instead, and my grades were good enough that I was allowed to sit in on several graduate seminars where the “Special Lecturers” were Claude Lévi-Strauss, Mary Douglas, and Clifford Geertz. I was always interested in “alternative” cinema, and I simply continued to be interested in it. I would say I had many people who were mentors, but I never studied anything officially.

RODDY BOGAWA: I went to UC San Diego really because my parents still lived in Los Angeles and I didn't yet have New York on my radar. I attended the MFA program there. The faculty at UCSD was filled with loads of East Coast artists and film people: Manny Farber, Allan Kaprow, Helen and Newton Harrison, David and Eleanor Antin, Faith Ringgold, and others. It was a program that had filmmakers, sculptors, photographers, painters, and performance artists who all worked together and shared studio spaces. As I found myself gravitating from sculpture to photography to photo series with text, I eventually thought, “Well, it seems like I should just make a film.”

I ended up working intensely with Jean-Pierre Gorin [who had landed in San Diego after working with Godard in Paris], the great cinematographer Babette Mangolte, and video artist Steve Fagin, and doing a lot of grad teaching for Manny Farber. If you know any of the names on this roster, you'd know that no one really had an inkling of how to teach “straight” filmmaking. Manny screened and lectured on Hollywood films, usually B movies or humanist comedies, and even those, he'd pit against a Rainer Werner Fassbinder film or Chantal Akerman. It was also, however, in Manny's class that I first saw Kenji Mizoguchi and Yasujiro Ozu films; that was my first exposure to Asian film. Jean-Pierre Gorin would fine-tune that with Shōhei Imamura, whose films absolutely blew my mind.

Jean-Pierre and Babette constantly stressed that you didn't have to have a massive budget and crew to make a film, which was a big thing for my generation—the punk rock sentiment that what was most important was *what* you had to say. Experimental film was perfect for this, for it had always foregrounded the notion that form and content were of equal importance. This had a parallel in the Pictures Generation in the art world, exploring quotation and appropriation, rephotography, using sound and image to turn mass-media imagery back on itself.² Timing-wise, it was kind of a perfect storm for me, as I would move to New York City to attend the Whitney Independent Study program in 1989.



Roddy Bogawa

REA TAJIRI: My family moved from Chicago to the San Fernando Valley in Los Angeles.

In the late seventies, I dropped out of high school during the fall of my senior year. My guidance counselor told me that if I enrolled at Los Angeles Valley College, they would graduate me. So I did, and took courses in world government, French, and printmaking. I made friends with a bunch of art students. Our printmaking teacher was very open and interdisciplinary: she had us doing performance pieces, and Super 8 films, and then a little bit of printmaking. From there, I was accepted at CalArts. I entered to study painting and printmaking, but came out a video artist.

I was in the art department, studying with conceptual artists John Baldessari, Michael Asher, and Doug Huebler. Later, Barbara Kruger came as a visiting artist, followed by Laurie Anderson and pioneering video artist Dara Birnbaum. In the film school, there were only a handful of women studying. I remember sitting in on classes taught by Alexander Mackendrick, and Kris Malkiewicz, and going to the film-studies screenings. There was a cult figure that everyone loved: Don Levy. His class was called “Film Now: Sex, Death, Exponential Nirvana.”

I remember rejecting everything Mackendrick said. But later, in 2007, when I started to teach, the school assigned me their textbook: *On Film-Making* by Alexander Mackendrick! I read it in one day, loved it, and realized what divine karma it was that the teachings I’d rejected as a nineteen-year-old were the ones I embraced in middle

age. I think of the late eighties and early nineties as the generation of the film school boom.

SHU LEA CHEANG: I wanted to study production at New York University [NYU] but got misguided into Cinema Studies, where the New American Cinema of expanded, experimental, and durational cinema taught me a lot. I was formed and cultivated by a community of filmmakers at NYU, including Ang Lee, Jim Jarmusch, and Spike Lee; by the emergent scene of Asian American filmmaking at the time, such as Stephen Ning [*Freckled Rice*, 1983], who unfortunately died too young, and Richard Fung in Canada; the loud and clear scene of black filmmakers, including Isaac Julien, Marlon Riggs, the Black Audio Film Collective—whose John Akomfrah has recently reemerged, making strong work. There were also the video artists Bill Viola, Ant Farm, Joan Jonas, and Martha Rosler, whom I befriended, as well as the Lower East Side punk scene with Beth B, Nick Cave . . . I can keep listing forever, these are my beloved contemporaries.

Part 2: “We Lost Many Friends”

BOGAWA: That moment was extremely messy, energetic, and intense in New York with the meteoric rise and cataclysmic fall of the stock market, the AIDS epidemic, gentrification of housing, homelessness, and crack. While I’m not nostalgic for those times, it was a very powerful emotional environment in which to make work. When I moved to New York, my friends and I dove headfirst into all it had to offer: going to Brighton Beach to have lavish feasts and buckets of vodka, scouring for the best dumplings in Chinatown, exploring and soaking up as much as we could.

CHEANG: I was living there throughout the eighties and nineties, as part of the downtown performance community—La MaMa, PS122, the Wooster Group, to name a few—and the independent filmmaking scene. Those were times of protest and street actions, of clubbing, sex, drugs, and the AIDS epidemic. Finally, we were hit by the AIDS epidemic all across the spectrum.

TAJIRI: AIDS was one of the reigning factors in the New York City landscape at the time. There were weekly open meetings for people to organize. I attended a few, but I didn’t stick it out: it was mostly a very white group. But it was a significant moment in the beginnings of public dialogue and visible cultural responses to the AIDS crisis. It was a devastating time: a lot of folks who should be here today are not.

CHEANG: We lost so many friends. ACT UP was leading direct actions and civil disobedience to demand the release of drugs that might cure AIDS. Today, I still hold the U.S. government and the pharmaceutical industry responsible for the AIDS epidemic, for their negligence and mismanagement.

The HIV virus mutated and would become the major topic for my recent “cyberpunk” sci-fi movie *FLUIDØ*, which premiered in the Berlin Film Festival, the Berlinale, in 2017 but has yet to find a distributor or proper release in the United States. *FLUIDØ* ultimately claims the virus as my own salvation. It’s my attempt at reconciliation with the pain of lost intimacy.

Part 3: “Asian CineVision Was Literally across the Street”

TAJIRI: When I first came to New York, I worked at the organization Film/Video Arts as an “intern.” The deal was that you worked there for free; for every shift, you were paid in access after hours to their editing rooms and equipment. I lived on East Broadway. What I didn’t know at the time was that the Basement Workshop was down the street from me on Catherine Street and Asian CineVision [ACV] was literally across the street from me on East Broadway. Basement Workshop was an arts and political organization that had classes on art and writing, and Jessica Hagedorn staged performances and ran a writer’s series there. Asian CineVision was a film organization founded by Danny Yung and Tom Tam, Christine Choy, and Peter Chow.

I used to see their posters on the street for their ACV film festival. I started to go to Chinese horror films in a small theater on East Broadway, a few blocks from where I was living.

I’m trying to remember where I first met Shu Lea, Ela Troyano, Kathy High, and others who were all part of the group office we ended up renting together. Shu Lea and I used to hang out on the phone and we talked about getting a group together and renting space, to get out of working at home as well as to share equipment and edits. We ended up with a space on the ninth floor of 594 Broadway. It was one of three floors that had been the offices of a hip-hop record label that crashed, and suddenly a whole bunch of cheap space became available.

At first, there were four of us, or six, and later it grew to nine. Kaya Publishing was there for a bit.³ I can rattle off a whole bunch of folks who sublet desk space from us: Shari Frilot worked briefly for Shu Lea on her first feature, *Fresh Kill* [1994].⁴ Jessica Hagedorn cowrote the script, so she came in from time to time.⁵ Sandi DuBowski came in

at night to borrow my editing equipment and made his first video about his grandmother, *Tomboychick* [1994]. Thomas Allen Harris was a visitor; Jason Livingston worked for Kathy [High] one summer.⁶ Kerri Sakamoto, who would return to Toronto to write *The Electrical Field* [1998] and become an award-winning novelist, wrote part of the script for my film *Strawberry Fields* [1997] there. Friends and visitors included Canadian filmmaker Helen Lee and the installation artist Lynne Yamamoto. I met Sikay Tang, who had worked on *Fresh Kill*, and had just worked for Ernest Dickerson when he shot Spike Lee’s *Malcolm X* [1992]. That was such an active, chaotic, and wonderful space.

CHEANG: I guess in today’s terminology, it would be called a “co-working” space. However, it was not just about sharing a space, because we were supportive of each other’s film/art making.

TAJIRI: Yes, I would view filmmaker Ela Troyano’s edits, for instance, and others. Sometimes, folks would come in to work on our video-editing machines, and share their cuts with us. At one point, Amanda Zinoman, an editor, came in and we built a room for her. She housed her Avid in there and cut episodes of the HBO documentary series *Real Sex* [1990–2009]. Filmmaker Art Jones came by a few times.

Sometimes there were vacant office spaces on the eleventh floor and the landlord would loan them to us for casting sessions. At one point, Grace Lee worked for Shu Lea and I hired her to work as production coordinator on *Strawberry Fields*. She was amazing, serious and focused. Later she left to go to film school at UCLA, where she made the Student Academy Award–winning *Barrier Device* [2002], starring Sandra Oh and Suzy Nakamura; *The Grace Lee Project* [2005]; and *American Revolutionary: The Evolution of Grace Lee Boggs* [2013].

CHEANG: I was “cultivated” in the spaces of Third World Newsreel, DCTV, and Film/Video Arts. I was part of the Paper Tiger TV and Deep Dish TV collectives throughout the eighties and nineties, and was involved with production at Third World Newsreel and workshop training at Downtown Community Television [DCTV]. These associations grounded me. I was engaged with the whole downtown filmmaking community—Millennium Film Workshop, Collective for Living Cinema, Anthology Film Archives—throughout those decades.

BOGAWA: I came to New York too late to be at the legendary East Village loft screenings hosted by Rafik, but



Shu Lea Cheang preparing her first feature, *Fresh Kill*, in the communal space at 594 Broadway.

I spent a few days a week at the Collective for Living Cinema when it was being programmed by Mark McElhatten. There was a real sense of an experimental film community coming together, with shows selling out quite regularly. Coco Fusco programmed “Young, British, and Black” there, and she was programming large survey shows at the gallery Exit Art and at the Flaherty Film Seminar [with Steve Gallagher]. I would strike up relationships with many fellow filmmakers from these screenings. If memory serves me correctly, Rea and I screened our works together at the Flaherty: her *History and Memory: For Akiiko and Takashige* [1991] with my *Some Divine Wind* [1992].

TAJIRI: There was a two-week film festival at Exit Art in 1991, “The Hybrid State,” curated by Coco Fusco with Exit Art’s Papo Colo and Jeanette Ingberman.⁷ They brought together everyone, it seemed—POC artists, filmmakers, writers, and performers from London, Toronto, New York, Los Angeles, Montreal—for a festival of events, performances, screenings.

They plastered posters around town on all the walls, fences, buildings, and doorways. That moment was incredible: queer and alternative artists and artists of color were everywhere, and the work was being seen.

Maybe that’s when Shu Lea and I got to hang out more. I was very inspired by her ability to assemble a team of collaborators and engage folks in conversation. Shu Lea assembled a bunch of us to collaborate on *Those Fluttering Objects of Desire*, which went on to the 1993 Whitney Biennial.

Early on, I was doing video art and showing at Artists Space, the New Museum, and then the Whitney Biennial for the first time in 1989. I started to follow Ping Chong’s work. I met Matthew Yokobosky through him, and I think he recommended a piece of mine to John Hanhardt at the Whitney. I remember meeting Barbara Hammer at the opening, who said, “How did you get in?” [Prior to 1991, it was extremely difficult to get exhibition if you were queer, a woman, or a POC.]



Posters for “The Hybrid State” film festival at Exit Art in 1991.

I used to see Renee Tajima [now Tajima-Peña] and Christine Choy all the time, in different spaces; they were running the Film News Now organization together. The New York State Council on the Arts [NYSCA] put on a huge conference in 1989 with the Rockefeller Foundation and Film News Now. It had a corny title, “Show the Right Thing.” I met so many folks there: Louis Massiah, Coco Fusco, Thomas Allen Harris, Arthur Jafa, Julie Dash, Ellen Spiro, Cheryl Dunye.

BOGAWA: It was at ACV’s festival in 1988 that I met many young filmmakers who had similar impulses: Gregg Araki, Jon Moritsugu, Mar Elepaño, and others in this roundtable, many of whom became lifelong friends. From screenings and press attention—and I think also from Daryl Chin pushing my work—I began to get support from MoMA through curator Larry Kardish as well as curator John Hanhardt at the Whitney, who included me in the biennials of 1993 and 1995. Having support at that level meant a

higher profile. I began getting my first film-production grants from NYSCA and the Jerome Foundation, allowing me to continue making what was fairly idiosyncratic work.

Part 4: “The Only Festival That Accepted It”

CHIN: When I got out of college in 1974, it was hard to find a job. Jonas called and asked if I would work as managing editor of *Film Culture*, so that was my first job. After about a year, Jonas had left the *Village Voice* and was starting at the *Soho Weekly News*, and asked if I’d become a film critic there. Tom Allen was the film editor. During that time, I was contacted by Danny Yung—because of my “prominence” as the only Asian American with a regular job as a film critic—about the idea of an Asian American film festival. Thomas Tam was also crucial to the start of the festival, in 1977.⁸ After two years, though, the festival was in flux: it couldn’t sustain itself on its own, and so we merged with Asian CineVision [ACV], which was then a

community media center with a cable television show providing programs for Chinatown.

There are so many people who formed the community which brought about the Asian American International Film Festival [AAIFF]: the original organizers, Danny and Thomas and Fern Lee; Peter Chow, who helped with the first festival, and took over the administration in the third year; Renee Tajima-Peña, Nancy Tong, Amy Chen, Marlina Gonzalez, Risa Morimoto, Diana Chiawen Lee, Angel Velasco Shaw, and John Woo and his staff, who took over in the last decade and continued its mission. I'm sure there are many more, so my apologies to those not listed.

BOGAWA: After I made my first short, *A Small Room in the Big House* [1987], the only festival that accepted it was the AAIFF in New York. Believe it or not, ACV had money back then to actually fly out some filmmakers with short films in the festival. So that was my first trip to New York City, in 1987. ACV would also go on to screen my second short, *Four or Five Accidents, One June . . .* [1989], which led to my first review from Manohla Dargis in the *Village Voice*, with a half-page film still from the movie! Both these films on the surface didn't deal with "Asian American" topics, but they were semiautobiographical. So one could make the argument that they were precisely about Asian American issues—as Daryl Chin had to argue, both publicly and privately. This initial exposure led to screenings at the Collective for Living Cinema and Anthology Film Archives in New York and Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley, as well as all the other Asian American film festivals that were starting to grow at the same time—including Visual Communications and NAATA [National Asian American Telecommunications Association] in California. My work began straddling the experimental film world and the Asian American film circuit.

CHIN: The ACV festival has morphed over the years. In the mid-eighties, we added a video festival. The inclusion of "experimental" work was always a significant part of these festivals, which brought an association with filmmakers in Japan and, later, the Philippines. In Japan, ACV was in touch with Image Forum, the Tokyo equivalent of the Millennium Film Workshop, run by Katsue Tomiyama. They often sent over whole packages of experimental work by Japanese filmmakers.

I think that one reason for the video festival was that NYSCA gave out grants for video presentation, distinct from film, so there was funding for it. And we knew there were video artists, starting with Nam June Paik and Shigeo Kubota. Nam June and Shigeo were important,

because they would always make sure that Asian and Asian American video artists would be aware of the festival.

TAJIRI: Ping Chong curated an early piece of mine in the ACV video festival. I loved how he used film/video in his theater pieces. I was very moved by his work.

CHIN: In 1973, I was asked to do a catalogue about films and videos relating to "performance" by Eva Wisbar of Visual Resources, which published an annual catalogue of films and videos about art called *Art & Cinema*. I got in touch with a lot of artists I remembered from the sixties, including Red Grooms, Carolee Schneemann, and Dick Higgins. I got to meet a lot of artists that I had previously only seen through their work. We helped to revive Jud Yalkut's film *Kusama's Self-Obliteration* [1967], on Yayoi Kusama.⁹ I was able to see a lot of video art in the seventies through Shigeo Kubota's video program at Anthology Film Archives. Video was very different from film back then, with totally different technology and different presentation.

It was because of this awareness of a distinct universe that the Asian American Video Festival was started. There were so many people working in video at that time that I can't even begin to list them all. But Rea was one person who started out working in video: her piece *Hitchcock Trilogy: Vertigo, Psycho, Torn Curtain* [1987] was a highlight of one of the early video festivals.

BOGAWA: My first feature, *Some Divine Wind*, screened at Sundance in 1991 in the Dramatic Competition—against *Reservoir Dogs* . . . hahahaha. And then it screened in nearly every Asian American film festival as well as the American Film Institute's film fest, Mannheim Film Festival, and too many others to remember now.

At the time, I also was nominated by critics and filmmakers to be the second Artist Mentor at Film/Video Arts, where I worked intensely with young filmmakers, all of whom have had successful careers: Lana Lin, Denise Iris, Rebecca Baron, and Matthew Buckingham. This post would lead to my teaching 16mm film production and postproduction at Film/Video Arts, and that started my teaching career. Lots of interesting characters passed through my classes, including Michael Kang, who made his first short in the production course.¹⁰

In appreciation of their initial support, I gave ACV the New York premiere, rather than hold out for an invitation to the more prestigious New Directors/New Films festival held by the Museum of Modern Art with the Film Society of Lincoln Center. I still feel it was the right thing to do,

albeit maybe not the most advantageous career-wise. *Some Divine Wind* eventually would be distributed by Third World Newsreel, starting my decades-long friendships with them as well as the start of my collaboration with Strand Releasing and Marcus Hu. Giving the premiere of *Some Divine Wind* to ACV was a conscious decision that everyone tried to talk me out of at the time. I wanted to give something back to the first festival that had supported my work. A lot of filmmakers were starting to abandon the Asian American film festivals at the time, getting stars in their eyes and sending their work to the Asian American festivals only if they didn't get into other festivals. I wanted to give my film to ACV and the other Asian American film festivals in the hope that the audiences of these festivals would see that there were other types of films being made about identity.

Part 5: "All of Sudden You Had These Asian Films Being Picked Up"

TAJIRI: I remember my dad loved the films of Akira Kurosawa and wanted us to see *Seven Samurai* [1954]. I don't recall exactly when I finally got to watch it, maybe in the seventies or eighties, when it could have played at the revival houses, Fox Venice and the Nuart. I'd ditch high school and take the bus to Little Tokyo from the San Fernando Valley to watch these Japanese samurai films, like Kenji Misumi's *Lone Wolf and Cub* martial-arts film series of the seventies [1972–73].

I also remember going to LACMA and seeing *Tokyo Story* [Yasujirō Ozu, 1953] and then trying to explain the plot to my father, who hadn't seen it. I told him I was so moved by it. I remember saying it had all the elements of sadness, comedy, and drama. I loved the compositions, how the house and domestic space was such a dominant part of the storytelling.

BOGAWA: When I moved to New York, knowing everyone at ACV, I'd get free tickets to the festival and would try to see as many films as possible. I think it was to the credit of the ACV group at the time—Peter Chow, Daryl Chin, Norman Wang—and others who were shaping and riding this wave. Because of his history with avant-garde theater and film, Daryl in particular was pushing the new generation of Asian American filmmakers, trying to expand the parameters of what was at first more community- and documentary-based work.

CHIN: In New York in the sixties, there were artists like Andy Warhol [who] was famous, not just for painting, but

also for his presentation of the Velvet Underground, his films, et cetera. He wasn't the only one. Yoko Ono was doing a lot of her own work, but was also presenting the work of other artists. And Yayoi Kusama was still there, doing a lot, including various "happenings" that were sometimes done out-of-doors—on Wall Street, for instance. Nam June Paik, of course, was pioneering video art, but he had trained as a composer and was also doing performances with Charlotte Moorman. In one, Nam June had Charlotte playing her cello in the nude, and they wound up being arrested for obscenity.

So by 1970, when I made my appearance on the scene, I was simply part of all this. Jonas Mekas and George Maciunas were friends with Yoko. There are many different stories about Fluxus.¹¹ Evidently George decided to start it as a sort of booking agency for Yoko's performances, and then wanted to have other artists perform as well, as a sort of collective. The initial artists had been part of John Cage's composition classes at the New School in the late fifties, but then it expanded.

BOGAWA: Norman Wang and Peter Chow both had very strong ties to Asia, so they were able to bring films from Asia that had no distribution or weren't being seen outside of their home countries. It was kind of amazing to see films at the festival where the audience was 95 percent Indian families, or 98 percent Chinese speaking. I was the guy in the back. . . . It isn't credited to them [Wang and Chow], but all of sudden you had these Asian films being picked up by Sony Pictures and other mainstream distribution companies, who saw a new market.

CHIN: Norman's involvement shouldn't be overlooked. Norman had been in Cinema Studies at NYU, studying with Jay Leyda. Norman and another NYU grad, Sophie Gluck, began to work for Renee Furst, a legendary publicist since the fifties. She had been the American publicist for filmmakers like Federico Fellini and Alain Resnais, and continued through the eighties. When she died, Norman and Sophie took over her business.¹²

Norman and Sophie began to deal with filmmakers from Asian and Francophone countries. And they would deal with international film festivals: Cannes, Berlin, Venice. So when "interesting" filmmakers began to emerge from, say, the Middle East/North Africa—Algeria, Syria, Iran—or from Asia—China, Taiwan, Hong Kong—Norman and Sophie became the American publicists to deal with.

TAJIRI: Norman and Sophie really did a service for all of us, connecting us to Asian filmmakers through their work,



Tajiri directing *Strawberry Fields*.

inviting us to press receptions and screenings, and making their films available to festivals. They never pulled rank. Norman introduced me on two occasions to my idol, Wong Kar-wai.

I remember meeting Roddy with Norman and Sophie at one edition of the Independent Feature Project, where my film *History and Memory* screened in a sidebar. I also met John Cooper of Sundance there, who said he regretted they couldn't show *History and Memory* because it was on video, but that he would like me to send anything else I made in the future, if it were in film. I felt very included.

Through Norman and Sophie, we saw a myriad of films. It was a special luxury. We got to sit with the critics and have the space to absorb and contemplate the work. The critics do their job, and the filmmakers get to discuss and sometimes create cultural dialogue through their films.

CHIN: I should mention that MoMA was receptive to Asian films because of the interests of its curators Adrienne Mancia

and Larry Kardish. The New Directors/New Films series also included films from Iran and from China [Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (1984)] and Taiwan [Hou Hsiao Hsien's *A Summer at Grandpa's* (1984)]. But a lot of other films weren't getting shown anywhere.

AAIFF showed the first four features by Edward Yang as well as Tsai Ming-liang's *Rebels of the Neon God* [1992]. There were films by Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou shown there, too. So it was through Norman and Sophie, as well as Danny Yung, that AAIFF became the place where these films got shown. In those early days, Asian CineVision organized a tour: the festival traveled to Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle, with films from India and the Philippines that were getting attention internationally but had a problem finding any exposure here. AAIFF took up the slack.

TAJIRI: When I was a kid, my mom wanted us to have some connection to Japanese culture. When the Noh theater came

to Chicago, she took me to see it. She said it was going to be slow and I might not like it, but I wanted to go anyway. I was ten years old or so. My mom wasn't from a highly cultural family, but she felt we had the means to go and so we should sample it.

I remember being surprised that it was so choreographed. It commanded the audience's attention with its ritualistic slow pace and quiet focus. I was engrossed, at least part of the time. Later, in college, I became intrigued by Kabuki, which I had only seen in movies. The Grand Kabuki theater came to Los Angeles, and I bought tickets.

I think the influence that Japanese films and theater had on me was in the way that their very formal, very slow-paced elements can command attention, force you to slow down and enter a kind of meditative state. I strove to do that in my own films.

Part 6: "I Related to the Depiction of Viscera as What I Thought Was a Particularly Asian Thing"

TAJIRI: I wasn't really part of the Asian American movement, and I think there is this kind of assumption that to be making work at that time you had to be in the movement. But I wasn't into politics immediately, coming out of art school. I remember Richard Fung used to have a term, "born-again Asian," meaning that at some point you started shifting your awareness towards the identity politics of "Asian-ness." That came later for me.

CHEANG: I do not particularly concern myself with Asian American issues. In some earlier work with Paper Tiger Television, I did produce a few titles dealing with Asian American racism, but my approach in my own productions is more about multiracial dialogues.¹³

TAJIRI: When I lived on East Broadway, there was a small Chinese theater that always had untranslated posters for their subtitled movies. They were Chinese horror films, and I became obsessed with them through the images alone. I remember going to see *The Witch with Flying Head* [*Fei tou mo nu*, 1982] by Cheung Yan-Git. Later the theater gave me the poster. I related to the depiction of viscera as what I thought was a particularly Asian thing. The witch's head could detach from the body, and fly around with the entrails and organs still attached.

Living in Chinatown was formative, because it was my first time living in a predominantly Asian space, on the streets, in the shops. To watch films that weren't necessarily sanctioned by European film aficionados and mostly gather

the plot from visuals, and to be an outsider because of language yet feel an insider because of how I appeared.

BOGAWA: My parents—fifth generation on my mother's side and fourth on my father's—left Hawai'i for college, in Seattle and Chicago, and then they landed in California. I was totally assimilated, skateboarding in the first swimming-pool generation along with the famous Z-Boys of Los Angeles and really either repressing my ethnicity or trying to mask it. It wasn't until punk rock came along, about 1976, that I first went to shows where, all of sudden, I met a cross culture of Los Angeles—Mexican American kids, runaways, queer kids—and I had some blast of the sense that California was more diverse and filled with difference than I had thought. As the Gang of Four wrote: "At home he feels like a tourist."

Moving to New York radically retuned my thinking about race in general. The landscape was so different from the one in which I had grown up, where you basically were in your car going from one place to another. In New York, walking around, you were confronted by languages, faces, colors, shapes, et cetera at every street corner or on the subway. There is absolutely no way to avoid it.

CHEANG: In this period, I was quite engaged in developing interracial collaborative platforms which, while using the film/video medium, would turn into multichannel installations. In 1989, I released *Color Schemes* as a one-channel video and exhibited it as a three-channel installation—my first-ever solo artist show—at the Whitney in 1990. It uses the washing machine as a metaphor for the great American "melting pot" of ethnicity, presenting twelve nonwhite performers undergoing four wash cycles—soak, wash, rinse, and extract—to process integration. *Those Fluttering Objects of Desire*, a multichannel installation exhibited at the Whitney Biennial of 1993, dissects the politics of desire with fifteen artists and filmmakers, all women, relating their interracial, lesbian, and heterosexual erotic encounters.

Amidst the racial and sexual politics of daily encounters, the introduction of the Internet brought a 3-D dimension to the city's 2-D landscape. The big companies rushed onto the superhighway, and MCI declared there is no race and no gender in cyberspace.¹⁴ I put my thumb out, hitchhiked for a ride to the promised utopia. On the way, I took a quick exit turn to homestead the cyberspace. *Fresh Kill* [1994], my first feature film, carried the banner "Eco-Cyber-Noia."

By 1995, I had started making cybernetic networked installations: *Bowling Alley* [1995] used strikes and spares

to scramble interconnected texts; *Elephant Cage Butterfly Locker* [1996] charged the U.S. military for violation of women and ecology in Okinawa; and *Buy One Get One* [1997] made a “homeless page” with a mobile bento electronic suitcase. I had a major commission, *Brandon* [1998–99], from the Guggenheim Museum, to further explore gender fusion and the techno-body in actual and virtual spaces.

TAJIRI: When I was in high school, my dad served on the board of advisers for Visual Communications. That was right after we moved to L.A. and I was about sixteen. He dragged me to a screening of films by Asian Americans. One of the films I remember was *Cruisin’ J-Town* [Duane Kubo, 1974]. My memory is that it was in a style I’d only seen on late-night public-television shows: observational cinema, before I knew what that was. I was moved by it, and then I didn’t see anything like it until much later.

My family had always been into the arts. Somehow they believed that artists were doing something worthy for the world. My uncle Shinkichi Tajiri had fled the United States after the Japanese American incarceration during World War II, and became a sculptor in Holland.

Chan Is Missing [Wayne Wang, 1982] is a funny story: I only saw it because my boyfriend in graduate school had his short film paired with it at the AFI Fest in L.A.—I think it was there, at least. *Chan* was a surprise: an all-Asian American dramatic feature that felt so freshly contemporary, not rooted in strictly historical themes. But I think my assessment was clouded because my boyfriend’s film had to take a back seat to it. Years later, I saw how important it was, and how radical it was in its storytelling.

Part 7: “They Were Brilliant Failures”

BOGAWA: In the time period on which we’re focusing, on almost every front, everything was being challenged and explored. Just as the New Festival was where you went to see a Derek Jarman film, so AAIFF was the *only* place you could see certain Asian films. I remember seeing *Rebels of the Neon God* just because I thought, “What the fuck could that be about?” and also remember seeing the first film out of Vietnam, a black-and-white ghost story.

There was a pervasive feeling that new languages needed to be developed to tell these marginalized stories. So I would say that everyone, from Todd Haynes to the makers of ACT UP videos to filmmakers in the Asian American scene, were for a moment working in parallel tracks, imploding narrative



Rea Tajiri (left) and Angel Velasco Shaw (right).

and documentary tropes, incorporating many of the formalist strategies of experimental film with new methodologies and subject matter. We did mess up in not calling ourselves “the Asian American New Wave,” though. . . .

TAJIRI: Angel Velasco Shaw and I would have conversations about Asian American identity and culture. We’d been friends since CalArts. I became engrossed in a dialogue about marginalized stories and began to explore the story of my family’s incarceration. The more I researched, the more politicized I became. We had this story that circulated in my family about a house that went missing, so I started digging in the archives to track it down. I am still fascinated by archival material.

I admired the work that Loni Ding, Steve Okazaki, Renee Tajima-Peña, and Chris Choy were doing, but that kind of direct investigation wasn’t my way of storytelling. I was focused on the other end of the spectrum—abstracting and interpreting archival material in more conceptual and poetic ways, to explore how incarceration affected us personally. *History and Memory* came out of that

and was shown in the Whitney Biennial of 1991 that John Hanhardt curated.

BOGAWA: Probably one of the real dramatic moments was that 1991 Whitney exhibition, which became known as the “identity politics” biennial, and was a lightning rod for attacks from different forces trying to shut down the discourse around multiculturalism. Unfortunately, the pressure did make filmmakers and artists more “conservative” in their practice, created infighting, and ultimately set a trajectory back to the status quo rather than a hoped-for balance.

I’ve always thought that my films, even though they may be “landscape” films or “portraits” or sometimes “still lifes,” each in their own way address identity. The landscapes are both literal and psychological, the portraits are gateways to speak of larger social or historical issues, and the still lifes act as triggers to evoke memory. On reflection, this interest was fine-tuned from this moment in the nineties, when there was a common desire to develop your voice in tandem with formalist experimentation. Many of the films back then were failures, but they were brilliant failures. . . and inspiring as such.

CHEANG: I continue to consider myself a media activist. I consider my work genre-bending gender-fxxking. Multiracial, multiculturalism was the way of the eighties. I was crafting my own genre of science-fiction New Queer Cinema, a self-declared generation of Neo Ultra Punk.¹⁵ My new work *3x3x6* was presented at the Venice Biennale in 2019 at the Palazzo delle Prigioni, which first served as a prison in the sixteenth century and employs contemporary technologies of communication and surveillance to construct a multithread trans-punk-fiction scenario that reconfigures the algorithm of gender and sexuality in the digital age. I continue to pursue the subject matters of body politics.

BOGAWA: I think really there should be all types of filmmaking made on subjects such as what it means to be Asian American—docs, narratives, even comedies. The only demand I would make is that filmmakers don’t default to the same old clichés, or back to some degree zero. Filmmakers too often think their audiences are not as smart as they really are. My film *I Was Born, But . . .* [2004] just came in at number twenty-one in a list of top Asian American films of the last twenty years, right behind Justin Lin’s *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* [2006].¹⁶ How can those two films even be thought of within the same parameters? It’s like comparing a hippo to an armadillo.

Note: This roundtable was initiated by Rea Tajiri, conducted via email by Vince Schleitwiler and Abby Sun, and then compiled and organized for publication by Schleitwiler. In addition to Tajiri, the participants are as follows:

Roddy Bogawa, born in Los Angeles, studied art and played in punk bands before turning to filmmaking. He had a midcareer retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 2013. A book on his work, *If Films Could Smell*, is due out from Kaya Press in spring 2020, and his first feature, *Some Divine Wind*, is being rereleased by Sentient. Art Film. He lives in New York City and teaches film production at New Jersey City University.

Shu Lea Cheang is an artist and filmmaker. She drafts sci-fi narratives in her film scenario and artwork imagination. Her artistic pursuits demonstrate an imagination and desire to cross the boundaries of society, geography, politics, and economic and gender structures. She has made three feature films: *Fresh Kill*, *I.K.U.* (2000), and *FLUIDØ*; *Brandon* (1998–99) was the first web art commissioned and collected by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. In 2019, she presented a brand-new mixed-media installation, *3x3x6*, representing Taiwan at Venice Biennale 2019.

Daryl Chin is an artist, critic, and curator. He was the managing editor for *Film Culture* magazine (1975–76), film critic for the *Soho Weekly News* (1976–78), CETA Writer-in-Residence at the Museum of Modern Art’s Department of Film (1978–80), and an associate editor for *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* (1989–2005). He cofounded the Asian-American International Film Festival, served on the board of directors of NewFest (New York Lesbian and Gay Film Festival) and Apparatus Productions, and worked for the Independent Feature Project’s Film Market.

Notes

1. The best introduction to the Asian American movement is Karen L. Ishizuka’s *Serve the People: Making Asian America in the Long Sixties* (New York: Verso, 2016).
2. The Pictures Generation was the name given to a loose group of artists in New York City, in Buffalo, New York, and in California who showed work together in an exhibition curated by Douglas Crimp in 1977 at Artists Space gallery.
3. Kaya is an a nonprofit publisher of writers from the Asian and Pacific Islander diaspora. It was founded in New York in 1994 by Korean writer Soo Kyung Kim and has been run for many years by publisher Sunyoung Lee, now based at USC.
4. Shari Frilot went on to run the downtown festival MIX New York and today works at Sundance and runs the festival’s New Frontiers section.

5. Jessica Tarahata Hagedorn was doing theater, music, and performance at that time and working on her first novel, *Dogeaters*, which was published in 1990.
6. Jason Livingston is a filmmaker, writer, and programmer who has worked with Cornell Cinema, the Experimental TV Center, and the Standby Program. Kathy High is an interdisciplinary artist and professor of Video and New Media at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Filmmaker Thomas Allen Harris is cofounder and current executive producer of the Digital Diaspora Family Reunion.
7. Exit Art (1982–2012) was an early nonprofit arts space that presented cutting-edge shows. “The Hybrid State” festival “showcased recently produced independent films and videos about the hybrid cultures of migrants, exiles, and the burgeoning postcolonial communities in the United States, Canada, Africa and Europe,” according to the website at <http://users.rcn.com/exitart/exhibit/91-92/hybrid.html>.
8. According to the ACV website, in 1975 grassroots media activists including Peter Chow, Danny Yung, Thomas Tam, Christine Choy met in a loft—then occupied by Tsui Hark, who at the time was studying experimental theater at Columbia—and founded ACV under the name CCTV (Chinese Cable TV) in New York’s Chinatown. See www.asiancinevision.org/history/.
9. Kusama had returned to Japan from New York in the seventies and had checked herself into a sanitarium; that was prior to her reentry into the art world.
10. Michael Kang went on to direct a feature, *The Motel*, in 2005.
11. According to Wikipedia, Fluxus was “an international, interdisciplinary community of artists, composers, designers and poets during the 1960s and 1970s who engaged in experimental art performances which emphasized the artistic process over the finished product.” Maciunas was the founder of Fluxus.
12. Today, Norman Wang is in Hong Kong, where he works with Wong Kar-wai, Yonfan, Sylvia Cheang, Ann Hui, and other filmmakers. Sophie Gluck is still in New York and has her own PR company, Sophie Gluck & Associates.
13. Paper Tiger Television is a nonprofit public-access television program and open-media collective cofounded by media activist DeeDee Halleck in 1981.
14. MCI Inc. was a telecommunications company that pioneered global phone calling through its MCI cards and then was absorbed into Viacom.
15. B. Ruby Rich included my film *I.K.U.* in *New Queer Cinema: The Director’s Cut* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).
16. Brian Hu, “The 20 Best Asian American Films of the Last 20 Years,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 4, 2019, www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2019-10-04/asian-american-films-canon.