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Screening Asian Americans



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A History in Progress: Asian American Media Arts Centers, 1970-1990

Asian American media arts organizations are at a critical juncture: arguably the best organized of any alternative media arts by people of color in the United States, yet too fragmented to constitute an effective national network. Asian American media arts organizations consist of three major centers: Visual Communications (Los Angeles), Asian CineVision (New York), and the National Asian American Telecommunications Association (San Francisco). These are complemented by three smaller organizations: King Street Media (Seattle), Asian American Resource Workshop (Boston), and Asian American Arts and Media (Washington, D.C.). Several other groups also serve Asian American filmmakers and media artists, like Third World Newsreel, Women Make Movies, and the Downtown Community Television Center (all located in New York City).

These centers face chronic funding problems from an economy hostile to artistic and educational endeavors (a legacy of the Reagan years), and an even greater problem of passing over two decades' worth of commitment and idealism on to the next generation of producers, media activists, and administrators. Yet, the presence of the Asian American voice and image on movie screens and through the airwaves has never been more assured. Where we go from here in sustaining a community of cultural organizations committed to "moving the image" of Asian Pacific Americans depends on how we assess the development of our efforts to date. What follows is a description and assessment of Asian American media arts organizations and their development from 1970 to the present.

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Background—The 1960s

The genesis of any social movement begins with the influences that shape its artists, leadership, and directions. The Asian American media community emerged from the movements for racial and social justice and cultural affirmation of the 1960s. The institutions themselves—as media arts centers—were both unplanned and unprecedented. Mostly, Asian American media arts was developed by relatively small groups of diverse individuals, from suburban southern California to New York's Chinatown, from the campuses of Los Angeles City College to Harvard, who held two beliefs in common. The first was that being Asian American transcended the experience of being solely Chinese, Korean, or Japanese American. The second was a belief in the power of the media to effect social and cultural change, in response to the negative power of Asian stereotypes in the mainstream media. At the time, the tools of media production were becoming affordable and available for community and individual use in a way not possible earlier. Many foresaw the opportunity of replacing negative media stereotypes with more authentic and affirmative images.

What is a “Media Arts Center”?

The term is generally self-descriptive, and applies to several types of nonprofit organizations that provide services to support media activity, generally in production, exhibition, distribution, and advocacy. According to the Membership Directory of the National Alliance of Media Arts Centers, there are approximately 125 organizations in the United States that so define themselves. These centers serve constituencies of artists and producers working in film, video, and radio, but they also help present these works to a larger audience. Some media arts centers, like the Community Film Workshop of Chicago, concentrate their efforts on one area of media activity, in this case, in film production training for minority youth. Others, such as the Film Department of the Museum of Modern Art, emphasize exhibition, distribution, and film preservation, working on an international level with film archives and cinemathèques in other countries. Whether connected to museum or university or not, media arts centers tend to support an alternative vision of media, or at least one that transcends the commercial Hollywood industry. The media arts, as opposed to the media industry, covers social issue documentaries, experimental film and video art with regional, gender, and multicultural diversity.

The media arts field is organized through mutual consent—on the part of the organizations listed above, and the hundreds of producers, filmmakers, and video artists they represent. The rules of the game, in terms of grant support, are supplied by federal (the Arts and Humanities Endow-

ments) and state (such as the New York State Council on the Arts and the California Arts Council) funding agencies, private foundations (especially the MacArthur Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation), and the public broadcasting system (through the Corporation for Public Broadcasting).

Asian American media arts centers should be viewed within the larger context of the field of media arts centers. After all, they share a common agenda of social and cultural change. More important, if this agenda is to be realized, they will have to work together to achieve it. But it is these very groups that also compete for limited funds from government agencies and private foundations. This paradox of interdependent competition is worked out in practice, as all intertribal relationships are, through unwritten protocol and obligations.

The Models—Visual Communications and Asian CineVision

In the beginning none of us knew what we were doing—and that made for some difficult challenges. But that's also what made it so much fun.¹

—Robert Nakamura

In 1970, a small group of Asian Americans in Los Angeles came together to produce a photographic exhibit about the Japanese American internment during World War II. This was the first project by the group, which began calling itself Visual Communications, or VC. The founders of VC, Robert Nakamura, Eddie Wong, Alan Ohashi, and Duane Kubo, had been deeply influenced by the civil rights and anti-war movements that had stimulated student and community activism. In the Japanese American community, community-based organizations such as Gidra and Storefront were established; at UCLA, a number of the key VC members went through the Ethno-Communications Program and made their first films, and were involved in developing the Asian American Studies Center.

Initially producing posters, leaflets, and photographs for Asian American community groups, VC was incorporated as an independent nonprofit organization in 1971. VC members recognized that these modest projects with their uncertain funding were inadequate to realize their larger goal of effective sustained social and cultural change. Nonprofit status allowed VC to seek support from a broader set of funding sources, especially through publicly legislated programs such as the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) and Emergency School Aid Act (ESAA). These programs provided key staff and production support early on; later, the Media Arts and Expansion Arts programs of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) became mainstays for VC's sustained development as an arts organization.

From 1972 to 1977 VC produced some ten films of increasing sophistication, including *Pieces of a Dream*, *Wataridori: Birds of Passage*, and *Cruisin' J-Town*, as well as a major photographic publication, *In Movement* (1974), and work in video. "It was not easy," Bob Nakamura recalls, "because the community at that time was really fragmented, with many different viewpoints and conceptions of what the Asian American community was and how people should serve it. The radical left and the conservatives of the community had very different ideas about the role of media. We were criticized by both sides."² Since there were no precedents for the films VC was beginning to make, people in the community felt proprietary about the content and treatment. Some criticized these early works based on their accuracy and historiography. Ironically, for some, the VC films were too technically proficient, too slick, and too indebted to Hollywood and network television.

The pressure of being responsive and accountable to the community while at the same time trying to develop the craft of filmmaking continually challenges those in Asian American media. Steve Tatsukawa, the late and greatly missed VC administrative director, once observed,

We have to fight the tendency of becoming isolated as filmmakers who happen to be Asian Americans. I think we like to see ourselves as Asian Americans who know how to make films. . . . Time and again we have sat down and said no, it's not just going to end in a production company that grinds out films for the sake of the dollar. We have some real stories that have to be told and some histories that have to be analyzed.³

VC thus defined and established an oppositional stance to commercial mainstream productions. In doing so, for the time being, they left unanswered the question of art-for-art's-sake, and media artists working in experimental genres that were more revelatory of personal vision than of community history.

As Visual Communications was becoming one important model of a media arts center, in 1976, a complementary organization was established in New York City: Asian CineVision.⁴ Founded by Peter Chow, Christine Choy, and Tsui Hark, Asian CineVision was conceived originally as an organization to provide workshops to train the New York Chinatown community in basic video techniques, so that it, in turn, could produce half-hour video programs for the newly developed cable access channel on Manhattan Cable. The intent was to teach the community to produce programs to effect positive change in areas such as housing, redevelopment, and health care. In 1977, ACV-trained producers were creating a half hour of programming per week. By 1982 they were producing a nightly hour-long news program in Chinese. In time, however, ACV stepped away from the workshops, having found doing a daily video production and training facility too hard to maintain, especially since other media arts centers such as Downtown Community Television and Young Filmmakers (now Film/Video Arts) were able to fulfill this need adequately.

Peter Chow, ACV's executive director and guiding spirit, has long been a master of program diversification, and so ACV began to develop programs in exhibition, distribution, and information services. In 1978, ACV, with help from Daryl Chin and Danny Yung, organized its first Asian American Film Festival. The aim was to showcase independently produced films by Asian American filmmakers. The festival seemed to signal a coming of age for the 1960s generation. Because it was more of an experiment than the inauguration of an event, few ACV staff members thought that there would, or could be, a second festival. The film festival is programmed by a committee whose selection process, stormy at times, has over the years helped to shape the definition of what the Asian American media arts are, and who is considered an Asian American media artist. This definition has ranged from the narrow to the non-specific: from the epigrammatic "films by, for and about Asian Americans," and "positive images and truthful portrayals of the Asian American experience," to experimental and personal works by artists like Fu-Ding Cheng, Gregg Araki, and Trinh T. Minh-ha. The evolution to a more inclusive definition of Asian American media work indicates a steady maturation of the field, a growing assurance that once the basic history of exclusion and internment has been told we are free to tell more personal tales and follow other topics and impulses.

The festival was subsequently enlarged to include Asian films along with Asian American works, a move that acknowledged the cultural interconnectedness of Asian and Asian American work. It also enabled ACV to take advantage of Asian films in slack periods when Asian American works were scarce. The Asian American International Film Festival tours to other cities around the country, although some sites occasionally supplement the selection with additional works.

Other key programs offered by ACV have included the Asian American Video Festival, two editions of the *Asian American Media Reference Guide*, and *Bridge* magazine, which up until 1986, when it was replaced by the more modest *CineVue*, presented an important mix of news, essays, film criticism, book reviews, photography, and poetry from an "Asian American perspective." *Bridge*, published as an irregular quarterly, was expensive to produce but it offered a distinctive point of view and gave a coherent voice to the emerging Asian American media community.

For the Asian American media centers that followed in Boston, Seattle, and Washington, D.C., Visual Communications and Asian CineVision have served as models and as sources of encouragement and support. The support has often been mutual. In 1980 VC produced *Hito Hata: Raise the Banner*, breaking ground as the first Asian American feature film. Unfortunately, the organization was faced with a substantial debt that threatened not only the film's completion but the future of the organization itself. Following the inception of the first Friends of Visual Communications support group in Los Angeles, numerous other ad hoc

chapters came together in these and other major communities across the nation. It was not only an inspiring show of community support, but a catalyst in stimulating the formation of other groups.

Coast to Coast: The Network Grows

Seattle

In Seattle, interest in the emerging Asian American media was concentrated in the offices of the *International Examiner*, where several staff writers and photographers, including Bill Blauvelt, Ken Mochizuki, and Dean Wong, formed King Street Media.⁵ Although incorporated separately as a nonprofit organization, King Street has never emerged from the confines of the *Examiner* and in fact has never had a paid staff. But an informal organizational structure may have been the appropriate approach given the needs of the community and the interests of the members. King Street still manages to mount a film festival in order to broaden exposure for Asian American films, and it also presents area premieres of significant Asian American features, such as *Dim Sum* (1985) and *Living on Tokyo Time* (1987), usually to benefit the *Examiner*. Their most ambitious project to date was the production of *Beacon Hill Boys* in 1985. Co-directed by Blauvelt, Mochizuki, and Dean Hayasaka, this featurette (at forty-eight minutes) was a well received coming-of-age story of Japanese Americans in Seattle. At the time that this was written, the King Street members were at work on another screenplay and were also planning for another film festival.

Boston

The Asian American Resource Workshop was founded in Boston in 1979 by a group that included Mike Liu, Fred Ho, Ramsey Lieu, Irene Wong, and Albert Lau.⁶ Boston has many of the same elements found in New York City, albeit on a much smaller scale. It's an old Eastern city, within an urban context of diverse and turbulent ethnic groups, as well as a plethora of colleges and universities. So, Asian American Resource Workshop developed many of the same programs as ACV, including video workshops for the community, and film festivals and premieres. Later on, however, as chronic funding problems set in, the organization modeled itself more on the lines of VC, which worked with AARW to develop a long-range plan. Continual financial struggles and dismal funding prospects from the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities have kept AARW from developing as expected. Today, according to Helen Liu, the Workshop is in a "survival mode," concentrating on the provision of media services to the community and local colleges. Community workshops on video production are produced through contracts, as income-generating services

become vital to the organization's existence. Still AARW is the fourth largest Asian American media arts center in the country, which itself is a sobering fact.

Washington, D.C.

In Washington, D.C., the flame is being kept alive by a small group of true believers, including Theo-dric Feng, Laura Chin, Lori Tsang, and Wendy Lim. For more than ten years this group of volunteers have maintained an Asian American media presence in the nation's capital. Incorporated finally in 1985 as Asian American Arts and Media, Inc. (and known conversationally as Arts and Media), the group's efforts are impressive given the scarcity of resources and inherent limitations to organizational development. Arts and Media presents an annual film festival (a supplementation of ACV's touring festival), and activities and visual arts exhibits in conjunction with the Asian Pacific American Heritage Month. Theo Feng hosted "Gold Mountain," a weekly hour-long radio program covering Asian American political and cultural issues, on WPFW, a Pacifica Foundation station. Some of these activities are not necessarily Arts and Media projects but are undertaken by, inevitably, the same group of people. Because of the lack of Washington, D.C.'s foundations and corporations, the modestly budgeted D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities is the only source of public funds.

San Francisco

By 1979 the Asian American media arts field had a national network of organizations. In San Francisco, there was no formal media organization, although filmmakers and producers like Loni Ding, Felicia Lowe, Emiko Omori, Geraldine Kudaka, Christopher Chow, and Curtis Choy had for years worked in and around the commercial and public spheres of television and film. Yet, a growing sense of frustration was developing there as well, especially with regard to equal access to public television (PBS) and radio. In response to more than a decade of criticism, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which has been created by Congress to channel public money to the public broadcasting system free of political pressure, responded by convening a national blue ribbon task force which produced a comprehensive report entitled "A Formula for Change." Its recommendations for inclusion of minority-produced programming and increased training opportunities for minorities in public broadcasting stations were initially acknowledged and then generally ignored. For the Asian American media community, the most significant result of these efforts was a growing sophistication in dealing with "the system" and resolve to claim a fair share of public broadcasting. These efforts culminated in a gathering of tribes: the first conference of Asian American filmmakers and producers

held in Berkeley in 1980. Organized by an ad hoc committee headed by Lon Ding, an independent television producer and instructor in the Ethnic Studies Department at the University of California at Berkeley, the conference brought together Asian American producers and media activists from across the country. From the VC contingent decked out in Hawaiian shirts to the worldly-wise and slightly cynical group from New York, the Asian American media community was meeting face to face for the first time.

By the time the three-day conference ended, the groundwork had been laid for an organization that would acquire, package, and distribute television and radio programs on Asian American history and concerns. The new organization would also advocate against racist and stereotyped images of Asian Americans and support and encourage greater participation by Asian Americans in public broadcasting. Originally the organization that was to become the National Asian American Telecommunications Association (NAATA) encompassed Pacific Islanders within its mandate to CPB. However, the effort splintered even before it was formally organized. Members of the Pacific Island media community argued for, and formed, a separate organization to provide relevant programming to the public broadcasting system.

NAATA, formally established in late 1980 in San Francisco with James Yee as its founding executive director, was conceived as a national organization with a board made up of representatives from regional chapters. This structure has given way to a board of both local and national representation and a mix of national and local services and programs, including the television series (under the "Silk Screen" banner) and specials, like *The Color of Honor* (1987); sponsorship of original radio dramas such as "Quiet Thunder," "Juke Box," and "The Last Game Show"; "Cross Current" media distribution; and, more recently, workshops and exhibitions in the San Francisco Bay Area. NAATA has also played a highly visible advocate role in both the commercial and public film and broadcasting worlds, assuming a position against stereotyped depictions of Asian Americans in films like Michael Cimino's *Year of the Dragon* (1985).

NAATA's accomplishments, although significant, have always been tempered by the modest support provided by CPB⁷ (roughly \$135,000 per year throughout the 1980s)—less money than is spent on the production of a single half-hour program on public broadcasting, or of a thirty-second commercial on network television. And yet this amount was supposed to provide for a significant and ongoing Asian American presence on public television and radio.

During the early 1990s NAATA's Yee worked with other independent media arts organizations to increase the amount of money for independent multicultural programming for public television. At the time this was written, it appeared that the amount of funds for program development available specifically for Asian American works would double in the near

future. In addition, sources and overall funding for independent production were sought from the Independent Television Service. However, it is difficult to believe that all of these potential changes will, in fact, come to pass. The record to date suggests protracted struggle with the system.

Ten to the Twenty-first: Questions and Choices

What choices will we have to make in the next decade? Some are organization-specific, although of a depressingly common genre: how to survive budgetarily. VC, ACV, and NAATA have all participated in arts stabilization (so-called advancement) grant programs through the NEA and state arts agencies, yet still face ongoing budgetary problems. Worse, administrators find themselves spending more time seeking grants and contributions than they do in managing services to filmmakers and the community.

The question now arises, was it the ultimate goal of the Asian American media arts movement to get grants from Chemical Bank and Anheuser Busch? The Asian American media arts movement from its inception was an alternative movement developed in opposition to mainstream strategies and structures in the film and television industries.

Other challenges are how to continue to serve the ever-changing Asian American community (especially with recent immigrant groups from Southeast Asia, who have little in common with your typical highly assimilated third-generation Asian American). This issue underscores the fact that the Asian American media arts field is fundamentally a political (rather than a cultural or ethnic-based) movement.

A related concern is how to attract and hold on to the next generation of filmmakers, producers, activists, and administrators. Will the next generation be willing to accept lower salaries and career mobility for jobs of increasingly dubious social prestige?

Each of the centers has and continues to struggle with the issue of Pan-Asian representation. Situated in L.A.'s Japanese American community, VC's Executive Director Linda Mabalot (herself a Filipino American) has struggled to diversify VC's board, staff, and collaborators to include Chinese, Koreans, Filipinos, and Pacific Islanders, while at the same time continuing to draw upon the tremendous support offered by the Japanese American community. In these efforts VC can call upon a history of working successfully with a variety of community organizations in workshops and exhibition programs.

In New York, Asian CineVision, originally a Chinatown group, has made concerted outreach efforts to include Indian and Filipino works in the film festival and publications. NAATA, too, has diversified its board and staff and has struggled with the delicate issue of representation of and

services to the Pacific Islander community ever since the initial splintering of the group in 1980. (The group originally recognized as representing the Pacific Island community by CPB is no longer functioning and a process is underway to replace it.) The Asian American media arts center field has also diversified from its original dominance by men to greater inclusion of women in key administrative and board governance positions.

Not all of its challenges lie within the inner circle. It has also become increasingly clear that the Asian American media arts centers may play a key role in the current cultural debate over "multiculturalism," whether it is the rhetoric about marginalized classes and ethnic communities or something more potent. As institutions, Asian American media arts centers must play an activist role on all levels of municipal, state, and federal arts funding. The recent attacks on the National Endowment for the Arts and the issue of federal funding for arts activities reflect both a continuation of a fight for freedom of expression and equity in support for the arts that is both decades old and a harbinger of things to come.

NOTES

1. Interview with Robert Nakamura, *In Focus*, Vol. 6, No. 1, Winter 1990, 3.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Jeanne Joe, "Visual Communications: A New Image on the Screen," *Newworld*, No. 6, 1979, 54.
4. Interview with Peter Chow, May 1990.
5. Interview with Dean Wong, June 1990.
6. Interview with Helen Liu, June 1990.
7. Adequate support is relative. The entire Asian American media arts field is woefully undercapitalized. The three largest centers, VC, ACV, and NAATA, have budgets under \$400,000 per year. The Asian American Resource Workshop has a cash budget of less than \$50,000 per year, and Arts and Media and King Street have no permanent staff and individual project funding only.

Identity and Difference in "Filipino/a American" Media Arts

The continuing unevenness of conditions and developments among specific groups' media arts is already being concealed by the weight of the category "Asian Pacific American." The "Asian American," and the later term "Asian Pacific American," have been made to encompass the multiplicity of various peoples' experiences, implying the formation and transformation of a mass for two opposing objectives: a homogeneity of other peoples and cultures that becomes the basis of racial stereotyping ("massification") and which, in turn, forms a base experience among various peoples and cultures that becomes the foundation for coalition-building ("critical mass").¹ While the solidarity articulated largely in political bondedness has been useful in the pronouncement of the Asian Pacific American's transformation into a critical mass, the category fails to inscribe the specificity and historicity of included and excluded groups. With the growing body of works in Filipino/a American media arts, a need arises to locate the space of the "Filipino/a."² It is along this area that I would like to explore the issues of constituting the category of "Filipino/a" within "Asian Pacific American" media arts, addressing both the dominant representations of "Asians" and "Pacific Islanders," and "Asian Pacific American's" marginalization of the "Filipino/a American" range of experience.³ The pioneering book *Moving the Image: Independent Asian Pacific American Media Arts* (1991), a collection of fifty essays by media and cultural workers, provides the juncture to situate the discourse of "Asian Pacific American" media arts.⁴ The experience of Filipino/a Americans marks both commonality and difference with other Asian Pacific Americans. In this essay, however, I emphasize *difference* as a way of rethinking both identity formation (characterized by "heterogeneity,

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