Resonances across the Asia-Pacific podcast transcript

Annie Jael Kwan

Hello and welcome to Nothing Concrete, the Barbican podcast here to help inspire more people to discover and love the arts. This is a guest curator episode by Annie Jael Kwan, as part of Noguchi: Resonances. Hello, my name is Annie. I'm an independent curator and researcher, usually based in London, but I'm currently in Singapore due to the pandemic and family matters. My work is focused on contemporary and live art in relation to Asia, with an interest in archives, art histories, issues of identity, Southeast and East Asian diasporas, and questions around collectivity and Transnational solidarity. I'm an associate of Asia-Art-Activism, which is based in London and a council member of Asia Forum. Asia-Art-Activism is a research network based in London and working transnationally. It focuses on exploring the three areas of Asia, art and activism and its entanglements and proximities. Asia Forum refocuses global issues as a lens with which to examine exciting artistic practices and critical urgencies. So I'm really pleased to be currently the digital researcher in residence at the Barbican and curating Noguchi: Resonances, the online public programme that will unfold from October to December this year alongside Noguchi, an exhibition celebrating Japanese-American sculptor Isamu Noguchi. The residency has been an interesting opportunity to reflect and respond to Noguchi's artistic legacy, artistic legacy, his transnational lived experiences, his voluntary incarceration at Poston, one of the Japanese-American internment camps during World War 2, and the questions raised around his identity, positionally and transnational global perspectives on community and solidarity. So today, I am really pleased to have with me Professors Marci Kwon and Ming Tiampo and fellow curator researcher Mika Maruyama, who are joining in from around the world. Marci, I believe you're in the West Coast of USA and Ming you're in Rome and Mika, you're still in Japan. So thank you for making time to talk with me and being here despite the stretch across multiple time zones. So maybe as a way to kick us off, if you could please each explain a little bit about your practice, which would give us some context from where you work and then perhaps then share with us your encounter with and perspective on Noguchi as an artist and person. And perhaps Marci, if you could please do the honours.

Marci Kwon

So first of all, Annie, thank you so much for gathering us here today. My name is Marci Kwon. I'm assistant professor of art history at Stanford, where I teach American art with a focus on Asian-American artists. I'm also the co-director of the Asian-American Art Initiative at Stanford University's Counter Arts Centre, which is our campus museum, which is dedicated to the collection, display preservation and research of artists of the Asian Diaspora living in the Americas. For those of you who aren't familiar with Isamu Noguchi, he was born in 1984. His mother was Leni Gilmour and Irish-American writer and editor, and his father was Yone Noguchi, who was an acclaimed Japanese poet. And he had quite a distinguished artistic career, working, for example, with dancer Michio Ito. In 1926, going to Paris and becoming an assistant of Constantin Brancusi and making all sorts of works actually quite politically engaged in the 1930s, including Death, which was a pretty remarkable sculpture of monel metal and a rope and wood that shows a lynched figure that was created as part of a kind of artistic response to the continued lynchings in the United States. One of the key moments in Noguchi's life is when he was voluntarily incarcerated in Poston, Arizona, in 1942. And this brings us to the kind of larger story of Japanese incarceration by the United States during World War Two. After the bombing of Pearl Harbour. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, then the President of the United States, signed Executive Order 9066 as a response to the kind of fear that Japanese people or people of Japanese descent living in the United States would somehow aid the war efforts of Japan. So there was written into the executive order was a specific discussion of potential sabotage of infrastructure. And practically what that meant was that approximately 120, 000 people on the western seaboard were forcibly rounded up and relocated. It was so quick that many of them

had to make hasty arrangements for their property, their possessions, their homes. You know, very famously, they could bring only what they carried into first assembly centres, which were, you know, the infrastructure required to house and incarcerate so many people so quickly was being built right after the executive order. And so they were actually transferred first to these assembly centres, which were often located on racetracks because they had stalls for horses that families lived in and then were relocated to one of 10 permanent incarceration camps across the United States. So Noguchi, who is living on the eastern seaboard at this moment, was actually not subject to Executive Order 9066 who is people only within a kind of designated geographic zone. But he met with John Collier, who is then the head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which was heavily involved in this incarceration effort because a lot of the land they had was, you know, they quote unquote managed through a project of native reservations and was actually the site of many of these incarceration camps because there wasn't a lot of infrastructure around. And he persuaded Noguchi to actually enter the incarceration camp at Poston in order to try to ameliorate the lives of the people there and also create a work, you know, potentially kind of landscape designs and things of that sort. So when he's in the camps, he works on various things, including, in fact, a portrait of the actress Ginger Rogers. But he quickly finds that his kind of idealistic intentions of entering the camps are coming up against a really brutal reality of what it's like to be incarcerated. You know, he talks about both the material effects of this. You know, he was promised as much kind of material as he wanted in order to build and create. Obviously, that was much harder to come by there. And actually, his turn to wood at this moment as a chosen artistic medium is coming from what he can actually salvage from the camp's environment around him. But he's also, I think, acutely aware of the psychological effects he talks about the sense of being kind of frozen in time in the camps where the rest of the world is kind of passing by around him. I want to make sure to say that a lot of this research has been done by the art historian Amy Lyford and a Dakin Hart who is a curator at the Noguchi Museum. Amy wrote a wonderful book on particularly kind of illuminating this this aspect of Noguchi's career, and Dakin curated a show at the Noguchi Museum called Self-Interned. And so Noguchi is eventually completely disillusioned, granted a temporary furlough of a month and just never returns to the camps and says, you know, this is an incredibly profound experience for him. He has this feeling when he emerges from his incarceration that he's constantly being watched. And in fact, later it was shown that the FBI ended up tracking him for three years after his incarceration. And so, you know the question of why this is important today? I mean, first of all, just the story of incarceration and torment is such a key moment in the history of Asian-American racialisation for several reasons. One, this notion of I'm of a kind of foreign agent and it shows how geopolitical events are entwined with things that are considered more domestic, such as racialisation. It also, you know, helps us understand a bit about the complexities of different ethnicities and cultural backgrounds in relation to these geopolitical events. There were actually propaganda images that were published during the war that were teaching, quote unquote, people how to distinguish between a Japanese person and a Chinese person or an enemy alien or an ally. And I think that it is also just, you know, a story and a reminder of the depredations of the American government. Just as the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 was the first kind of nationality based discriminatory immigration law, which we see in subsequent executive orders. You know, this kind of forcible rounding up and incarceration under the, you know, the more gentle term, which is, of course a euphemism of internment is still happening in the United States.

Annie

Thank you so much, Marci. Thank you for that wonderful introduction that gives us such a good overview and summary of the context in which Noguchi was working and why he made that decision, perhaps to enter the camps. And it was just a few things you said that also sort of triggered thoughts in my mind was that I think one point you made was the internment of the Japanese-Americans all happened very quickly. You know, from the point of time that there was a decision and an executive order and then it just happened. And I think that sometimes I think it's something worth thinking about

because some of us, we think that things move very slowly. But for some reason when there's a kind of hostile governmental act it's actually very quick. And so therefore there isn't actually the opportunity to respond as a community to really consider what's going on. So I think that's something that is very sobering. I think the other thing also that you mentioned was so interesting. You said that they were doing this kind of propaganda around how do you distinguish between a Chinese and Japanese person? But of course, that's not even actually possible to some degree, because of course, a famous incident in 1982 was exactly about that, with Vincent Chin's murder because I think he's Chinese-American, but he was mistaken for a Japanese, and there was a lot of anger because of the success of the Japanese car industry, which led to a car factory being closed down, I believe in Chicago. And there, two disgruntled employees basically beat him up and he was beaten to death, which is really horrific, but we sort of start to think about how these kind of broader geopolitical entanglements get played out in a kind of reality in terms of everyday life. Maybe right now if I just kind of turn to you, Ming, perhaps if you could introduce yourself and you can hear a little from your perspective as well.

Ming Tiampo

Hi, Annie. Hi, Marci. Hi, Mika. It's so great to be with all of you and to think alongside you about these really important issues and in the context of the Barbican's Noguchi show, I'm really thrilled that this would be taking place and that we'll be able to use this as a way to have some really important dialogues, both about our history, but also about race and diaspora and trying to understand what it means to have those to think those two issues, those two different ways of understanding our history together. So I'm a Professor of Art History at Carleton University and I'm the co-director of the Centre for Transnational Cultural Analysis and also a scholar of the global postwar. The focus on Transnational models and histories that provide new structures for understanding and reconfiguring the global. Most of my publications have been on Japanese modernism, global modernism and diaspora, and the early part of my career was really spent thinking about Japanese postwar art history and in particular, the Gutai group. I wrote a book published by the University of Chicago Press and also curated an exhibition at the Guggenheim. And so more recently, I've been taking a different direction in my work, and I've been thinking about intersections between Diaspora and the global through the concept of global Asians with a project called Transversal Modernism. The Slade School of Fine Art, a study which reimagines how we write global art history through global micro history, as well as writing a book on the Korean Canadian artist Jin-me Yoon. And so you can see that I'm thinking about global issues and also thinking about diaspora issues. So I'm also involved in a lot of collaborative projects right now, which I think is really necessary for the future of global art history. And you know, this is because when we write global art histories, it's not possible just to take one perspective. So I think it is really important for us to be having conversations like this for us to be collaborating with people in different other fields. And one of the things that I'm doing is I'm part of a collective that's producing a source book or a textbook called Intersecting Modernism. And also part of a project called World and Public Cultures. So we've been cooking up many different things. Annie and I, including the very exciting Asia Forum. My understanding of Noguchi's work is very much inflected by the fact that I come from postwar Japanese art history and the work of my colleagues, especially Bert Winther-Tamaki, whose work really locates Noguchi's work within the spaces of both Japanese and American art. So within the material culture of Japan, clay, paper, wood and its minimalist aesthetics, and also the nationalist politics of the American postwar art world, which continuously quoted his work as Asiatic and oriental. And so the work that Winther-Tamaki does is brilliant in the way that he traces those histories and those visual languages and material cultures, demonstrating how Noguchi's work was inflected by geopolitics and the client state relationship that Japan had with the United States after the war. So this sort of us Japan aspect of the reception of Noguchi's work was really very present in Winther-Tamaki's work. So more recently, scholars have been thinking more about Noguchi, not just as a figure situated between Japan and the United States, but the Japanese-American artist, which Noguchi articulates as a political category in his

1942 essay, I became an Nisei which he wrote for Reader's Digest, but which of course, was never published. So in other words, in contemporary scholarship, now he's no longer just being understood within aestheticized frameworks of being between east and west but through the political lens that Winther-Tamaki brought to his work on US-Japan relations and also the racialisation of Japanese-Americans in American life. So that is to say that we understand Noguchi now as an artist of global Asias. And so this interestingly, also plays into that Noguchi's design for a cenotaph memorial for Hiroshima as he creates a design that would be visible from outer space, which then situates Hiroshima as a crime against humanity, which universalises of the bombing and sort of distances the issue of victimhood from Japan so that we're thinking about, you know, not US Japan relationships, what we're thinking about a crime against humanity in this work, which is quite an interesting shift that happens. So this is, of course, important because it reminds us that the intensification of racialisation takes place in specific moments in history. This is something that Marci brought up this now, and that diasporic experience is shaped by global events. So it's really important to think about global Asias as a model for thinking about diaspora and global histories as intersecting narratives and not as being separated as we have had a tendency to do in scholarship in the past. So here with Noguchi, we see this playing out in the context of Japan as an enemy nation during World War Two. But of course, it also makes me think of the racialisation of Arab diasporas in the context of 9-11 and the racialisation of East Asians in the context of COVID 19. And these are really important flash points to remember so that we understand that this isn't just a faraway history that can be forgotten, but really something that continues to be really relevant. To experience today, and so Marsh's work on Noguchi and ensuring that makes an important contribution to this discourse, as does Amy Lyford's book that she mentioned just now, as well as the exhibition by Upton Park at the Noguchi Museum. So we're really starting to think differently about Noguchi recently, and I really like the way that Lyford's book understands Noguchi as a social activist actually, and the ways in which he brings out his commitment to civil rights, labour. And then after Pearl Harbour and Executive Order 9066 which, as Marci mentioned, decreed the relocation of Japanese-Americans to internment camps. She begins to understand Noguchi as addressing Japanese-American and specifically Nisei or second generation Japanese politics. So in reading Noguchi's, I became a Nisei. A few issues emerged for me that are extremely resonant for us today, and the most urgent issue which I will address today is really the question of how does he become Nisei? Which is a process that is for him, both gradual in that he writes about how he had a haunting sense of unreality of not quite belonging longing, which drove him to seek answers among many say. And also it's quite locateble. He, the first time he heard of Nisei as a community was when he received the Yamamoto Award for Nisei Achievement in 1940, which then connected him with a group of Nisei from Hawaii. And then the second time when he started to think about Nisei as an identity was after Pearl Harbour, when he felt his face suddenly connected to theirs. And he writes: 'But it was only after December 7th when I again found myself upon the shores of the Pacific that I actively came to associate myself with the Nisei in any way. I sort them out in Los Angeles and in San Francisco, out of her realisation of their special misfortune. I wished to help. I also wished to know the people who, because of war, I had suddenly become a part.' So here we get at the core of Asian diasporic racialisation in the United States, Canada, Australia, Britain and especially Europe, where I'm living now in Italy, which is that any claims to belonging or to homing are so fragile and are easily disrupted by geopolitical events. So I'd like for us to think a little bit about what the rise of anti-Asian hate in the context of COVID-19 tells us about diasporic citizenship and the ugly phrase that unfortunately, we've probably all heard go back to where you came from, and if that place is where you are and have been for generations, what does that actually mean? In the case of lower colonial countries like the United States, Canada and Australia, that phrase becomes even more problematic as assumptions of white belonging are themselves premised upon indigenous dispossession, which we can see in the case of the Poston internment camps, which were built on an indigenous land. So here we have this really difficult tension of entangled histories that we really need to disentangle and understand as intersecting oppressions. So I think in the case of Noguchi, we are seeing an artist who used the critical potential of racialisation as a fight of empathy and of solidarity, both in terms of his voluntary internment, but

also in terms of his larger social justice agenda and the incredible 1934 work that Marci you already mentioned entitled Death: Lynched Figure, which address the problems of lynchings of African-Americans in the American South.

Annie

Thanks Ming for that. Thank you for your insights. I mean, there are certain things that you said that really kind of struck home, especially when you said go back to where you come from. You know, as someone who's lived in the UK for a couple of decades now, I wouldn't say exactly how long. It's very interesting this question of how many years do you stay in the place before you are allowed to think of it as home? You know, even now, I think if you're on a long-term visa, you still have to prove that you have the right to work or to have the right to reside. And you know, these laws, you know, are subject to change. You know, at some point, if they decide to change that system, then you'll be vulnerable again. And it's very interesting as well, I suppose, when four specific communities, especially Diaspora communities, where migrations are intergenerational and it's happened through, you know, maybe an ancestor moving from China at some point or some other country some point and you've got these layers, then you know, what is that process of indigenising like? How does one relate to land? How does one make a home in relation to land? And the other thing also that you mentioned was this entanglement between that specific context in which you're working and then the geopolitics of how that racialisation might be framed. And it's certainly very true because for myself at least, I feel the most Asian in context when the Asian-ness is being challenged, you know, because I never feel very Asian, because obviously I live in the UK and I've never been very traditional. But recently there was a conversation around someone sort of negating Lunar New Year, and suddenly I felt very passionate about Lunar New Year, even though as a child, when I grew up, I was always, you know, a bit of a rebel and be like, why can't I wear black at Lunar New Year? You know, I had a very frustrated mother. And all of a sudden, I was advocating very strongly for the fact that we should acknowledge, and it is very strange how this sort of plays out that you start to feel that you have to represent or take up space for something to be acknowledged, which is actually a very common practice globally. But why is it so difficult to accept in a particular context? So, you know, I think the sort of anxiety emerges, especially during these moments of crisis or urgency. And yeah, it would be something good to sort of think more about that together as well. But first, I'd like to welcome Mika. Mika, if you please share with us about your work and then tell us a little bit about your encounters with Noguchi.

Mika Maruyama

Thank you, Annie, for inviting me, and it is a great pleasure to be part of this podcast with Ming and Marcy. I am Mika Maruyama from Japan and usually I'm based in Vienna, Austria, but currently I'm back in Japan, so I'm now speaking from Japan. I am independent curator, writer and researcher focusing on the intersection between queer and feminist theory and media technology. But my practice ranges from curating and zine making to collaborative artists like this with interest in trans cultural practices and the content electives that some of us have no sympathy. And since 2018, I have been a co editor of the Queer Feminist Arts in piece in Japanese and English is up my angel, and I'm also an active member of the Biennale based artist collective Mai Ling. Mai Ling is basically an artist collective, but also functioning as a platform of contemporary art of contemporary Asian art culture, especially in German speaking countries, with a focus on queer and feminist positions to share and exchange experiences of racism, sexism and homophobia, especially against Asian woman's body. So it is really challenging for me to talk about Noguchi and his walk and narratives in relation my practice. But I believe that reflecting his Transnational experiences is important in order to discuss issues of identity and belonging as Asian, living outside of Asian countries and as a Japanese person doing art like this. This totally eclipses how we relate his artistic legacy and history, and we should also ask a question about rich history commonalities should be discussed along with perspectives in

the present day. But personally, while my best memory of his work is Moerenuma Park, which located in Hokkaido, the north island of Japan, and this park is like a whole big sculpture and that the park has a fountain of glass and his that from one gigantic landscape that it can be enjoyed as a fusion of specific nature of the land and artistic intervention towards nature. So we need to use our bodies to climb up and down this sculpture. Then and forth. So it is really bodily experiences. I think as Ming talked about intersectional aspects of how his work as seen and also the tendency of leading of his works. And this is. But in general in Japan is highly respected as an artist and designer who believes that traditional Japanese culture and the spiritual aspect of the culture and design and most of the time here has been the latest with issues of identity as Japanese American, and therefore his narrative is always produced with his unique philosophy between West and East and his strong wish for peace because of his experiences starting between Japan and the US, especially during World War Two. Yet, if we are talking about Transnational or Trans Asian solidarity, non-natives alone in Japan seem to focus on the US Japan trajectory. And of course, it is barely made a dominant narrative. And for me, they are lacking different perspectives to reflect other experiences of the war and the Japanese commitment to violence towards other Asian countries that are more complex than this Japan and the US relationship. Yet ironically, his proposal for our memorial monument for the hills months before Memorial Park was rejected because his proposal is too abstract. And some people say that is because he is a Japanese-American. So this is really like a part in someone. He is really appreciated, but at the same time, people see him as a non-Japanese artist. So as a Japanese person based in being in Europe, I have certain experiences that is closer in some ways with other Asian diasporas. That is what to might have faced in his life. But at the same time, I also have to confront Japanese-ness. And it used to be that I, I tell you with my body and the culture, so sometimes I can speak as just a person. But sometimes I am forced to speak at a Japanese, and sometimes I became Asian. And sometimes I had to talk as a gendered person. So I constantly I feel that the personality and identity are changing depending on what I'm talking and whom I'm speaking to or who is talking with. So for example, when I talk, I am walking with other Asian or Asian immigrants within the artist collective, mainly in Vienna. I'm really aware that each of us has different positions and backgrounds and homes, and we never can say we are the same Asian descent, and our experiences and personalities are different depending on nation, class, gender or sexuality, and also depend on their relation to colonial and imperial inheritance in contemporary civil society. But at the same time, it is still important to build solidarity in terms of how we can survive and support each other against flawed categorisation of races against Asian in Europe and globally. So it is really challenging and also exciting to talk about Noguchi today regarding not only our legacy, but also his Transnational experiences with his attempts and maybe a failure from transnational and global perspective.

Annie

So thank you so much, Mika. I think that's really interesting as well what you're saying there about how in some way being this of a hybrid positionality, you're sort of there, you're here and there, but sometimes in neither places are you also considered at home and accepted? Right? And so that's always this idea of code switching between different contexts to try to assimilate. And I think earlier, Marci, you used the word agent as well. And so sometimes you are playing the sort of double agent. Not necessarily politically, but you are always translating and mistranslating sometimes. And it's like slippages of meaning between different contexts that you are negotiating. And, you know, sometimes as a as a person, I find it playful sometimes, but also very tiring because of the amount of work you have to do to have your aesthetic appreciated or your context understood. I think the other thing also that is really interesting is that when you were talking about how we need to be very careful, on one hand, when we say Asian community, it speaks quite hopefully, perhaps, to a sort of strength in numbers of solidarity. You know, that is a shared experience, as we were talking earlier about not being able to always differentiate between different Asian communities just by sight. At the same time, we don't want to eradicate, you know, specificities and differences between different historical

cultures that change that, but that the differences between different cultural context or languages or lived experiences. And I think that's really interesting because recently, I think I had a conversation with someone where I think with reference, I think they were implying because I was working with Asian activism. They were saying, oh, well, you know, you just work with one community. And I thought that moment I had to kind of bite down really hard. I was like, one community like, what do you mean by one community? You know, because engage in Asian activism, we have so many artists and curators, you know, that are connected to Vietnamese, Filipino, Malaysian, Singaporean, you know, communities of different heritages. So it was sort of perplexing at that moment to be sort of told that that's all subsumed under one category of Asian because we happened to look at Asia as a lens. So I certainly share some of your frustrations there. So thank you so much that you've brought so much to the table. And I'm just thinking, how do we unpack - how do we start to look at this? And maybe if we could start with sort of one very big public event, which was that in 2020 at the tail end of 2020, in November, after 10 or 11 months, where we've already experienced this global unfolding of the pandemic, which saw a corresponding spike of violence against Asian folks in the U.S. and UK internationally, in response to the fact that there was a weaponisation of the coronavirus and the language around it put forward by President Trump. So what do we make of the fact that Noguchi's sculpture Floor Frame was installed in the White House Rose Garden, which makes Noguchi the first Asian-American artist to be collected as part of the White House collection by the Trump presidency? What do we make of that? And in a way, what do we make of the fact that Noguchi has come to the fore again this time? How should we understand this?

Marci

I can just start by saying that when I saw that news pop up in my email digest, I just went, Oh, it was like so repulsive to me. And I think that, you know, it does seem, though, to crystallise in the most kind of flagrant way. You know that simply visibility and inclusion is not the political goal. And in fact, could and is often used to manage dissent. And then the other thing that kind of came up for me is, I think, the thing that it's a it's a kind of thorny question that I'd be really interested in talking to all of you about, which is, you know, I think that the conventional art historical kind of approach to something like this in, let's just say, placing an artist's identity in relation to their work is to say that, well, the form is the most important thing. We can't just re inscribe a narrative of this, you know, this person's work to who they are, you know, who they are in the world. Isn't that just be inscribing the logic of racialisation? And to a certain extent, I understand where that point is coming from, right? You know, it's so striking to me the way that in talking about this event, it almost makes the sculpture invisible, you know, and the very the very structure of the sculpture, which is actually in two pieces. It's so it's called Floor Frame, but it's a broken frame in that it's two distinct pieces that, when installed, appear to actually dip below the floor. And Noguchi is really interested precisely in categorisation and space and how it is that things don't just have an essence but are defined in relation to each other. I think that's key to his his interest in theatre as well. And so, you know, for me, on one hand, you know, there's a way in which the narrative that's ascribed to it by the White House in this acquisition is its own kind of really bad, literal art history, simply saying that this work is reducible to this artist's identity, and that's why it's important. And at the same time, you know, I think that we can't separate this interesting categorisation, this interest in space from someone who has experienced incarceration and actually physically experienced the physically the physical parceling of space and the way that that enacts force. And so I think that for me, it's always this question of kind of keeping both of these things that might appear to be opposed to each other, let's just say kind of form and lived experience. But understanding that the relationship is quite complex and not a kind of one to one relationship now.

Ming

I think for me, there are two issues I'd like to respond to in terms of what you were just saying. And one of them is this question of inclusion when we build our historical narratives, all museums these days have DNA I committees and they're all thinking about, you know, how do we diversify and include more? In fact, I might even say that this podcast itself is the result of a DEA effort, and we need to think about what that actually means. Nevertheless, if we think about inclusion in these kinds of projects, we absolutely also need to think about what it means to construct new narratives that we can't just be slotted into a structure that has already been predetermined, that are reproducing structures of domination and allow that where our core inclusion allows those logics to be perpetuated. You know, we really need to think of ways to interrupt and rebuild new narratives so that we're decolonizing entire structures and we're decolonizing the ways in which we build those narratives. So that's the first thing. And the second thing that I thought was really important about your critique there of the tribes was the way in which you talked about aesthetics and the way in which I think it's critical for us to think about aesthetics and social justice together. It's not one or the other. These two ways of looking and ways of knowing can coexist. And over the weekend, I was very lucky. I went to Amsterdam and saw this exhibition called Expressionism Colonialism, which was an exhibition of immunologists and Kirshner, and they were bringing together objects from various collections in Germany that Kirshner and know that had looked at. And they were thinking very much about the colonial histories of those objects, how they were collected, how no different picture would have had access to them. And there was a shift where, you know, the history of colonialism was foregrounded and Nodar and Kirshner were centered. And one of the critiques that that emerged of this exhibition was, you know, the question Can you still look at these artworks? Can we still see beauty in these artworks, right? And I would ask the question, What is beauty? Can we see aesthetic beauty? And can we see it in the context of ethical beauty as well? And what does it mean for us to de-center aesthetic beauty even just for a moment so that we understand that these histories, they're not innocent histories and we need to look differently to retrain the eye, right? And so I think that for me, in thinking about aesthetics and social justice together, it's really important to be able to do both so that you don't lose the objects, but also so you don't lose the history.

Annie

Thank you so much, Marci, for your thoughts and Ming for intervening with your insights on that. The submission pack the stuff before we talk about aesthetics and ethical justice. I want to loop back to just clarify one point because we've touched on this really important question here about inclusion and visibility, especially when we, as we all work with institutions and we have, we know that's a kind of, well, no critique now of many institutions and their colonial histories and so on. So my question here is firstly, why did Collier invite Noguchi? Like, was there an explicit reason that it was made known anywhere about why the invitation was issued? That's the first question. And I guess the second thing about thinking about working with institutions, I think there's always this difficulty because for practitioners like myself and I'm sure Mika you experienced as well as it often, you know, there are the invitations come as opportunities and especially when you're an independent practitioner and the opportunities are precious because they're a way of making your voice heard or surfacing certain narratives around experiences. But at the same time, then there are questions around what is representation if it becomes exploitation? Right? So what is the point of self exploiting just to be visible? And so it raises questions around. I think what also Noguchi experienced, which was his lack of resources, the fact that he didn't receive the support even though he was invited to take up that role. So he wasn't supported in fulfilling the mission that he was invited to take up. So I find it really interesting this conundrum of why he was invited in the first place if they were not going to support him.

Ming

So. The history of arts in the camps. I think there's still a lot of work to be done in terms of research.

But one thing to know is that a lot of the artistic programs were government run and it was to occupy people's time. And this is not the same as counter programs run by people like Chiura Obata, who are artists in the camps who actually ran programs for children, as well as other art as well as other. Chiura Obata ran artistic programs for kind of his fellow prisoners, but the government, you know, and all of these government agencies, one had this kind of philosophy of arts as a form of improvement, and that's coming from the philosophy of people like of pragmatists, philosophers like John Dewey. But also, they were putting people to work, for example, making camouflage nets for the war effort. So that's one thing is the way in which arts were actually functioning in the camps feels like a really important future direction of research. So in terms of this other question, which I would actually love to hear Mika respond to because you've already in some ways articulated it so, so beautifully. But I guess I just say that I think a lot about this sentence Anne Anlin Cheng wrote in The Melancholy of Race. That identity is the grounds upon which both discrimination and progress are made. And it's like, What do we do with that?

Marci

Oh, I would just love to hear you talk a bit more about this question that Annie posed, which had to do with "You have to appear in a in a particular way in order to be heard" and and sharing in The Melancholy of Race describes this as for minority and subject as identity being the place where progress and discrimination are made. It's where you can be visible and where you become visible. But it is also that which kind of marks you is different.

Mika

Yes, and yes, it's really challenging things, but maybe I maybe I can talk why I'm also doing this Mai Ling artist collective. And they usually do. They are, of course, I'm talking as a member, but they usually we are working active as anonymously. So like a people not really knowing who are in Mai Ling. At this collective because we thought this all the time. You know, like constantly, we are categorized as Asian, Japanese whatsoever or, you know, female, trans, whatever. And it's really like tricky things for any artist and any collectors who has different background based in Europe, for example, because the difference, of course, as a kind of from one perspective is this advantage because we have some different voice that kind of showing diversity in the white society. But at the same time, we are also doing the different things, not only talking about our identity. That's why we kind of decided to find it in collective because one person voice is not enough. And therefore, our collective voice is really important because this is not talking about me or like one person I did today. But we are talking how this race and gender criticality has been had been constructed within this structure. So and then I think this is because in society like agenda law and also the art institution is the same. So like, we are kind of all the time playing with this game or I don't know, like we should say, game or not, because it's really like a violin sometimes should not be the game, but we are playing with this kind of problem. That's OK. We need. We have to make our voice visible. But at the same time, we also have to hide ourselves in some points. And then, for example, the work presents where important difference, for example, because he is talking about, you know, because of how white subjects are transparent. So that's why we need to like them, don't need to explain everything what we are doing. So this is for me like kind of strategy that in some point we have to open the door to kind of to in order to construct a narrative for ourselves. But at the same time, we also hide ourselves in some point.

Annie

I like it that you're used the word "game" there because obviously I think a lot of us are now watching Squid Games, which is a popular cultural reference there. And I suppose that who comes to mind to some degree, because when we think about visibility and inclusion, you know, we're thinking also

about competition to some degree. And there's a kind of scarcity mindset of being like exceptional in order to be included in the canon in order for you to be validated by a mainstream institution, to be allowed to do work within that institution or to be seen in the institution. And so there are these kind of interesting tensions between being seen and being valued, and therefore the work is being allowed to be supported to be made and so on. So, yeah, hopefully we're not that violent yet. So I just wanted to go back to another point that maybe you made about how when we're working with institutions, and I sometimes wonder if it's almost inevitable that we will have these moments of working with institutions. So what then are the strategies of interruption as you were suggesting? Or how do we change the landscape and change the game plan if we are going to take up these challenges? Because at the same time, I can see there are advantages of doing that because you have a possibly a platform and you're reaching out to a different kind of audience. But in which case of how do we negotiate that communication? And as Ming, you were saying, sometimes we are trying to bring some issues to the fore. And yet there are some aspects that are have to be hidden. And I also think that's really interesting from a project I was working on recently, where because the artist was working in such a different cultural context with multiple migratory experiences of the institution I was working with felt nervous that the audience would not understand what was that experience. And so it was very interesting this process of how they were asking for a lot of information in order to nail down exactly what this multiple migrations that his family, the artist family experienced. And I was wondering like, how much more information do they need? How much more detail do they need in order to understand the work when precisely in a way, the artist was trying to say that because of these ruptured histories in the family background, there are these pieces of ambiguities, basis or ambivalence, which are part of the experience that he's trying to convey in the work. Exactly. But yet there was a real need by the institution to pin down exactly what this word means, you know, and that makes me, of course, think of Glissant's piece, you know, about the right to opacity that even though I am a racialised subject in some context, it is not necessarily my work to just explain everything to you either, which can't be done anyway in reality. So I just wondered whether you would like to comment. Anyone would like to comment on that?

Ming

Sure. Thank you so much for that excellent question. And it's a fraught one. One that I brought upon myself because of my comment earlier and one that I think about quite a lot. Actually, I should say first that I am somebody who does work with institutions. I am I believe in institutions. I think it's absolutely important for us to support institutions, given the enormous platform that they have in the space of public culture. Right. So for me, the starting point is how can I help? And you know, the other question. The other thing is, you know, I have many colleagues who are thinking about how do we break down the institution? How do we blow up the institution, right? How do we get rid of institutions altogether blow off the roof? But if you do that, then you have no roof, right? It takes a lot of work to build these institutions. And I think that for us, it's really important to recognise there's no such thing as being outside of history. And if you blow up the institution, then you'll have something else to deal with. So I think that what's critical is a project of reform, which, you know, is always fraught because, you know, as we were discussing earlier with DARPA, these inclusion projects always have a tendency to perform inclusion more than they actually enact them. And my view on that is actually not that it's lip service, but rather that it's a kind of aspirational project. And I think that's important to remember that if you're aspiring to making change, if you're aspiring to justice as long as the work is being done, it's that that kind of slow incremental change does eventually result in, you know, more just institutions. The question is, how do we get there and how do we get there a little bit more quickly? Right. And I think that it's important for us to think about how we engage in that hard work, how we, you know, to think about how can museums hire more BIPOC curators in order to make cultural change within those institutions, but also for those of us who don't work in institutions? I mean, I work at a university, but not a museum, but so I have an inside outside relationship to museums. And how can we on the outside then use our positions outside to interrupt, as I was saying

earlier, to sort of provide useful advice to think alongside like minded curators to really. Rethink the ways in which these institutions represent artists and histories of colour.

Marci

Yeah, thank you, Ming. You know, for me, Annie, the situation you just described about an institution wanting more and more and more explanation. My question is explanation for whom, you know, what does that say about the audience you're assuming is coming to this to this exhibition, right? And this is also something I think about, like every single day, I guess I'm working with a museum like on a collecting project, and it keeps me up at night, to be honest. And I think that's personally what I've come to is one. There is no outside to the structure. You know, it's like it's all like settler colonialism in the United States, you know, so that's that's the first thing. And then starting from that place, I just ask myself, Well. What where is it that I'm standing right now? You know, I'm standing on Mike Maloney land, but I'm also standing on land that was purchased by an institution that whose fortune was amassed by the building of the Transcontinental Railroad, which you know is one of the major technologies of American Empire, which was built in large part on the on the western side by Chinese. So I'm an I'm at an institution that was built through the wealth that was created by the transcontinental railroad and the building of it. That's how Leland Stanford made his money, which was built through the underpaying, the drastic underpaying and mistreatment of Chinese labourers. And so for me, I guess the two things about working at institutions that I'm at least starting from is who are we serving? You know, who is our audience? And also to not pretend like the institution that I'm at is somehow apart from these histories, but to actually foreground that in everything we do.

Ming

Marci, thank you for that really powerful and important history, the exegesis of the place where you stand, which I think is so necessary. I think that question that you're asking, who is this for, who are we serving is really important. And it's a question that can also be asked of large institutions in the sense of how can we rethink who they're for? And I think that that's really a really important way of reimagining not just who is represented and what diverse artistic collections are represented, but who does the museum speak for? And how is the museum being rethought to imagine togetherness differently? So that it's not really just about white audiences, but really thinking in a much broader sense to understand how do we connect communities and what are those communities?

Annie

I think that was a really important question here about how we can't necessarily be outside of the system because the whole thing is one system. And that, of course, makes me think about how quite often we've been. I've been hearing a lot about the politics of refusal. And I think that there is some that can be a useful strategy, a specific moments, you know, where the conditions are untenable. And you know, so therefore you can exercise that politics of refusal not to play in a game that doesn't have the right conditions. But I think to completely disengage, I think is what you're saying that we can't disengage from the public narrative because we're trying to be part of that public narrative and speak to it in order to hopefully alter it. And I think that, you know, it goes back to some really kind of everyday things that I think about when I'm taking up a project with an institution, you know, going back to Noguchi's issue. Are there sufficient resources, you know, will there be enough support? Is there someone, you know, engaging with you because as a project unfolds, there are many anxieties or things that you haven't thought of that you might need support in executing that make that whole working process better. I also thought about how, you know, we talk about these days, especially in activist spaces holding safer spaces. And I think it's really important that museums are focusing on that or honouring that within like even the communications of the working process, that there are safer spaces that you can feel that you know, that that's going to be mutual respect

and in the language that's being used. And I think these are just some of the starting points, in fact, ou know. And I think that makes me slightly, I don't want to use disillused, but sometimes I'm a little disheartened that, you know, the starting position is, is that far back? You know, because even back in 2019, when I was working on a project with quite a major institution which had huge budgets and they wanted to work with a group of Southeast Asian artists and their works, at the very last moment, they were suddenly telling me, Oh, we have no budget for this and we're not going to pay the artist, even though that was promised right from the start. So, you know, even something as fundamental as, you know, payment, you know, was something that was considered that perhaps the museum was doing them a favour so that they can be visible. I think there's something very wrong in that way of thinking, but I think beyond that, I think, you know, I was also reading about how engagement with institutions. We're not looking only to be included in certain conversations, but how whether that invitation comes with a commitment to a sort of longer term engagement, a longer term unfolding of, you know, how the institution sees its position and the narrative it wants to create. And that's something I'm still trying to learn how to. How do you navigate those kind of negotiations? Once the doors open and you stick your foot in it and say, Well, OK, so maybe we can do something different here. And I just wonder whether you've encountered that in your work because you know the way that you've negotiated that.

Mika

I think I am not really kind of institutional person, maybe because as while working as an independent and when it comes to the collective, we also kind of working as independent and we have more perspective as a grassroots more kind of focusing on the community building because I think this is the most important thing that as a collective who are focusing on Asian diaspora because we don't have any narrative. First of all, we had to kind of make like and form the community so that we really can speak what we want to say, because all the time being alone talking just about this, the problem, people just say like, OK, it's not important. And then you are the only one, what I think is with the collective voices. I think this is also like how we founded the collective in 2019 and the sense that we have been kind of doing different projects and, you know, sometimes in art museum and sometimes art kind of artistic last bass and also that public space. So we have different audiences. And also like for me, the most important thing is that how we how the audience applauds to us, for example, in the museum, of course, nobody applauds to us. But in the smaller space, we sometimes can talk each other and then public space. It's really interesting for me, for me. And of course, especially since we have this social networking service, for example, Instagram. So like a young adolescent just came to us. Even they don't they have no idea about what, you know, what is art or what is contemporary art? They just come to us, OK, you know, this is the first time that we really see Asian, like our blood is in Vietnam, for example. So like for us, this is quite interesting how much these narratives deviated from institutional narratives and how much we had to do in the from the bottom level and the grassroots. I believe that, of course, it's really important that we think we have to go into institutions, but at the same time, we also have to kind of take care of our environments and the conditions that we all live in. So this is what we what I kind of really feeling now and especially as animals are brought up some is just like Lorna. Ironically, like we, of course, we are visible because of course we are the only or like a few voices in Austria or in German speaking countries talking about Asian racism. That's why we are now more easy to connect easier. So this is like interesting, but of course it's so kind of the painful to deal with all the time with these issues as artistic parties, practices and of course, we face like a different violence. But at the same time, this visibility really allow us to connect one better network with other artistic practices and artists and networking, not on other outside institutions. So for me, like this like was different like politicians, different networks. Quite important to talk about. This is just because this is also like for me, is always thinking better. What is art now and how we kind of not define, but how we kind of. See, art and activism in like, yeah. Familiar with the analysis. So like a how we kind of really think about the intersection of art and other fields to talk about these issues because I mean, there's no place only for art. I think.

Annie

Perhaps we can link this back actually to what you were saying earlier about aesthetics and the role of aesthetics and ethical justice, which I thought was a very interesting way of think you know, another way of thinking about art and activism. And you know, I just want to also to raised recently that I read this review of the Noguchi's work by Jonathan Jones, who's a British art critic, and he was very scathing about the Noguchi's artistic legacy. You know, but his name rang a bell. And so I was looking it up and I thought I heard something. I remembered, Oh, I see. He was also someone who wrote about the exhibition Artist and Empire by the Tate back in 2016, and he wrote about it in sort of a way that wasn't very critical at all. Just said it was very exciting. And in an on another occasion, he had called, you know, the very respected artist, Bhupen Khakar, a ham-fisted hack. So it made me question about, you know, who is writing art criticism and for whom? How are they viewing these works? What are their references that they're bringing in the way they're reading these works? And I also link that to an issue that I had personally not long ago when we were forming Asia Forum and there was a discussion around, you know, how do we work with a PR company in order to promote the work that we're trying to do? And it was actually such a challenge because we realised that most PR companies, art PR companies in the UK are very, in a sense, Eurocentric. And so they have no real way of engaging with what those narratives are. And so they can't really identify with them and perhaps even bring a very different aesthetic lens. And I was also surprised at that time because I said, Oh, perhaps the importance of doing such a project would be because of this rise of violence against Asian people internationally. And the comment at the time in response was, Oh, I think that's exaggerated. It's probably like the incidents of violence on the streets of Poland that were far more exaggerated than in real life. And I remember thinking, this is strange. And later I kind of took a step back and I thought, OK, he probably thinks that, you know, as a white, middle class male, because that's what the papers tell him. You know, they're not - not all the incidents are reported. And I know about these incidents because they are shared through, say, educational networks or grassroots communities network. And so not all of these instances make it to a mainstream broadsheet. So from his perspective, yeah, there are not that many incidents. So they thought this whole issue about rise of the rise of violence against Asian people as exaggerated. So I think it's really interesting. There's a kind of gap between, you know, there is context and who then who is writing about it. And I just wondered if you'd like to comment on that.

Ming

Annie thank you so much for bringing this up. Thank you for connecting the dots for us and of Jonathan Jones's review of Artist and Empire, as well as his review of books and Khakar. I think it's really important for us to look at these three reviews together and to understand what he's doing there and to show us the importance of thinking about the role of art criticism in creating public narratives as a kind of public storytelling that changes the way that the general public will think about culture and who is a legitimate cultural producer and who was not a legitimate cultural producer. I think that I just wanted to sort of acknowledge what Mika said earlier about the importance of grassroots networks and alternative institutionalisms, thinking about different ways of being together and to build solidarities and community. I think that's very, very important. And perhaps the answer is, you know, not that either the large institutions or the grassroots networks need to sort of dominate in a sort of larger strategy, but rather that they work together so that there are these safe spaces within grassroots networks and that the sort of larger space of the public sphere, such as, you know, the art critic art criticism that you were that you read of Jonathan Jones, that art criticism plays an important role in defining that public sphere, as do museums. And so I think it's really important for us to think critically about that public sphere and to critique the fact that he is building narratives that are creating a certain kind of narrative about the primacy of British, European and American art, which excludes art from other places, and thinks about those narratives in very particular ways.

Annie

I think Mika, you described Noguchi's Park in Hokkaido, which I, you know for me is an aspect of his work that brings a kind of embodied playfulness. And I think that's really precious to some degree. And in a way, I think that was also part of the work that he showed at the Venice Biennale. And I wonder if we could speak a little bit more about that because this is such a joy as well and certainly his use of materials and the form that he embraces experiments with. And I wonder whether we can rethink, how do we reclaim that way of speaking of aesthetics that is not the Eurocentric, more kind of normalised standard aesthetics.

Marci

Yeah, this is a big interest of mine. And, you know. It's an open question to me, but the way that I've been thinking about it lately has been that the problem. It's not aesthetics itself, it's the hierarchy that's created, and its hierarchy. You know, it's the sense that something is beautiful. Therefore, it is just, you know, as opposed to there being multiple systems and structures of evaluation, none of which, none, not one has any kind of primacy. So the problem with a museum or with art criticism or generally, you know, is that it's embedded in this structure of value making and distinction, right? That is as, I think being really brilliantly elucidated, like brings certain types of aesthetics or practices to the fore. But I think that at the core of that is the function of these structures is to create a sense of one practice or one narrative or one is static being superior to another. And that's the structure that I feel like we need to be fighting against. And the question is, how do you do that? I mean, I think that even in in talking with all of you, you know, what becomes clear is that we all have very different practices, which is actually incredible. You know, and really exciting because we are finding ways we're I think, trying to find ways to do this that isn't about a kind of form of mastery over all spheres. But that is located in what we're able to do. And that's the that's the emphasis on collaboration, Mika that you were talking about. So I guess I guess. But for me, like it's not about like destroying a museum, but trying to put the museum on par with those kinds of local collectives that you're talking about as both being crucial arbiters. And, you know, not like, you know, saying this critic has all the power in the world, but being like, no, like this is just one voice among many.

Annie

Thank you so much for that Marci, and thank you, everyone for this conversation, because I guess it's really making me think about how we work in our everyday lives, how we work with institutions, how do we work with alternative spaces, how do we work within ourselves, in our communities and how all of these are interconnected within a kind of broader ecology? And I guess is making me also think of, you know, this phrase we've been really talking about within Asian joy because the last few years, you know, the narratives have been so dominated by grief and loss, which has been experienced on a global scale, of course. But in some way, you know, we're finding moments of respite by our shared happiness in some, you know, for example, in food, you know, for example, perhaps in pop cultural references and these moments are really precious. But I think when I think about radical joy, you know, it also makes me think of the wonderful text you wrote Ming, which has always inspired me since I read it, which I love to read. If that's OK, just a small little paragraph, because it makes me think because I, you know, often as curators, as we use this word radical, a lot like radical vision that, you know, but what does that really mean? And so this text is a challenge, I think, to have a more expansive idea of what a radical city might mean. So just to read from your text, it says, "To be radical is to think beyond the disciplinary logics of art history rooted in 18th century nationalism, nation building, the creation of national collections, national archives and even the logic of national competition enshrined in large-scale Biennales. It is to imagine new scales of analysis, to seek new ways of building art histories, to find new connections and resonances, and to imagine new structures

of affiliation. It is to find new modalities that enable us to read archives against the grain and to understand their absences in order to tell stories that have been suppressed, forgotten or never imagined to have existed. It is to seek transversal articulations of urgencies that appear parallel, relational comparisons and worldly affiliations, which help us to think imaginatively about how we're connected rather than forced apart to think to dig deep into the ground to reveal the invisible mycorrhizal networks that link our roots, the Radicii, the radical foundations of our hard histories." And I think maybe that, you know, I find that so encouraging that it requires us to dig really deep into ourselves and into the work that we do as a kind of self-reflexivity and questioning. Like, Why do we do something? How do we do something? What is the impact of what we do?

Ming

I think I might want to say it a little bit about this passage that you just read, which was in some senses a call to think about radicality not as being at the forefront of a struggle, but as a kind of rootedness that thinks relationally about how we place ourselves vis-a-vis our interlocutors so that we are understanding that it's not necessarily that we have to sort of stake out the most radical position, but that what's really what what's most important to me, at least, is how do we proceed with care to build new worlds together in such a way that includes multiple voices, even the ones that we don't necessarily agree with?

Annie

Marci or Mika makers or anything else you want to say?

Mika

I think it is really beautiful that Ming said no, because I think we also have to accept our ugly feeling that this is not like, of course, being kind of sometimes competitive, but at the stems of we care about ourselves. But at the same time, I like other people. So this is it's not just the one, you know, like a bit it a clear feeling or emotion, but to be complex and things. And then I think always this is, of course, in everyday life. But at the same time, art is all about this kind of accepting these kind of difficult situations and negotiating. And also like acknowledging which kind of power relations we have now. So I think we're really like kind of also reflect what I'm doing and also how we kind of position in this kind of this narrative.

Annie

Thank you. This conversation has been incredible. And I really like also being you reminding us that, you know, it's about digging deep and digging into a rootedness, which of course, is really one of those conundrums for the migrant, right? How do we gain ground? How do we grow roots? You know, how do we relate to land so, so much there again to think about in that image? So I want to thank you again. My guests today, professors Marci Kwon and Ming Tiampo, and my fellow curator Mika Maruyama, So thank you for joining me from across the world at all hours. It's been an amazing conversation and a wonderful way to kick start this program. So hopefully we'll get to reconvene it another time. But thank you very much.

Thank you for listening to Nothing Concrete. And this special episode as part of the Noguchi Residences digital residency. Please subscribe to Nothing Concrete on Acast, Spotify or wherever you find your podcasts. Thanks