Coined in the era of Black Lives Matter, the mantra Stop Asian Hate inevitably raises conflicting questions: Can Asian Americans be trusted as moral stewards for racial solidarity? Or will anti-Asian violence be used as a convenient excuse to backpedal on calls last summer to defund the police? Curator Daisy Nam and artist Christopher Ho have released *Best! Letters from Asian Americans in the arts* in a time of heightened visibility for Asians in the United States and of great uncertainty about what this attention means. Published by n+1’s *Paper Monument* imprint, the anthology begins from a broad premise: as Asian art workers in prestigious positions, what would we say if finally allowed to speak on our own terms?

Of the seventy-three contributors who answered this call, most have at some point percolated through the institution—they have been hired by Ivy League universities, exhibited at major museums, and featured in glossy publications. Nam recently joined the staff at Ballroom Marfa, and Ho was appointed executive director of *Asia Art Archive*. Many contributors are alumni of the annual Leadership Camp that Ho runs for the Archive, where cohorts gather for seminars to discuss global models of Asian authority. As a curatorial endeavor, *Best!* confers on its contributors a designation of excellence that originally
models of Asian authority. As a curatorial endeavor, Best! confers on its contributors a designation of excellence that originally forged the model minority myth, throwing a wary shadow over a title inspired by a generic email closing. Some contributors, like curator and writer Howie Chen, chose to confront this irony. He addresses his letter to thirty-three contentious public figures of Asian heritage, like “Dear Kamala Harris” and “Dear Peter Liang,” leaving only a suspenseful blank space before signing off: “Good luck.”

Eliding the predictable critiques of privilege or elitism, Best! instead attends to a common vestibule of institutional authority that Asian American leaders move through. The letters vary widely in style, but most reflect on the difficult conditions of this passage. For example, a “leaked” email from Celine Wong Katzman to a professional colleague details how his unwanted advances violated her boundaries. The addressee’s name is redacted, which not only suggests how transferrable the experience feels—it could happen to anybody—but also serves as a ghostly reminder that sexual assailants continue to receive more protection than their victims.

Over and over, we read about “this fucked-up industry,” to quote critic and curator Tausif Noor’s measured letter of advice to no one in particular. For those still hungry for retribution, moments of unleashed anger can feel particularly satisfying. Take, for example, architect Philip Poon’s delicious diatribe against fashion brand Eckhaus Latta and their unfettered indulgence in Chinatown aesthetics as a resource ripe for the taking. I find myself among the intended audience for this expression of rage—a rare feeling of being seen.

Art often faces pressure to boast of its subversiveness, but in these letters artists instead offer quotidian observations on the unfinished work of social change. Josh Kline’s art typically evacuates all traces of sentimentality in order to exact political critique, but he shows a vulnerable side in a letter about his dual Filipino and Jewish heritage and the dark comedy that ensues when people impulsively inquire: “What are you?” J Fan’s work upends societally ingrained ideas about gender and race, and yet his letter conveys feelings of dysphoria and non-belonging with the fragile memory of a romantic breakup. Ajay Kurian has shown work and written extensively in discontent with the American racial landscape, but his letter dares to wonder what he might cultivate from these efforts: the first generation of Indian American art. These letters allow artists to expand on their public-facing work by showing more of the face behind it. The authors allowed themselves to play host to contradictions: underdog status can offer delight when we stick it to the man; our embarrassments and shame make us recognizable to each other.

In a rare move, Herb Tam, curator and director of exhibitions at New York’s Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA), chooses to address an ongoing controversy that he is still embroiled in. Local activists continue to demand that the museum refuse “give-back” funds made available through the city’s plan to build a new jail in Chinatown. Tam’s letter imagines his own fateful resignation, as if entertaining the possibility that a mournful end to his tenure will also end the agonizing conflict. His apologia argues that the museum was a mere puppet in a clever maneuver by the carceral state. Contradicting truths are part of the job, and although Tam offers no catharsis, at least he seems earnest; MOCA’s ethnic
offers no catharsis, at least he seems earnest; MOCA’s ethnic allegiances obscure drastic class and ideological differences, leaving curators confused as to whom a museum for preserving minority culture actually represents.

In the controversy’s latest development, MOCA canceled “Godzilla vs. the Art World: 1990–2001,” a highly anticipated exhibition about Godzilla. Asian American Arts Network, after nineteen of the twenty-three included artists withdrew in solidarity with the Chinatown community organizations who are protesting the new jail. Their notice of withdrawal was delivered in the form of an open letter. Best! stands on the shoulders of such letters from Godzilla; the editors mention drawing inspiration from the network’s 1991 letter to Whitney Museum director David Ross, which demanded that the museum rectify the dearth of Asian American artists in their exhibitions. The letters in Best! mark a shift in our relationship to the institution: no longer simply seeking admittance, we seek kinship within it.