Season 1, Episode 1: We Survive - with Thea Quiral Tagle

Thea Quiral Tagle: And then in March, everything shut down and everything was put on hold for close to six months because no one know what was going on or what would happen with the show, if the show would be canceled, when would it be safe to reopen, all of this. And meanwhile, right, the world's still turning. COVID's still raging. All the summer race rebellions and the movements for Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, all those folks are really activating another wave of Black Lives Matter protest.

And so, when I got the call again in August at this point, they're really thinking that the show was killed, in August, why we say I asked or said, right, if we wanted to open the show, could we convert it to a public facing and online show? And could we do it in two months?

[music]

Michelle Lin: Welcome to "We Won't Move: A Living Archive", a Kearny Street Workshop podcast series about Asian Pacific American artists of the past, present, and future whose stories shape the movements and dreams of San Francisco. I'm Michelle Lin, literary and mixed media artist.

Dara Del Rosario: I'm Dara Del Rosario, non-profit arts administrator, and curator.

Kazumi Chin: And I'm Kazumi Chin, poet, scholar, and educator.

Michelle Lin: Before we get into the episode, we wanted to take some time to introduce the podcast. "We Won't Move: A Living Archive" will feature conversations with artists and activists from San Francisco and the Bay area. And, you know, it's a pretty interesting and packed title, "We Won't Move: A Living Archive", so we're just going to talk a little bit about what we were thinking about. Because we moved through several titles with this podcast and yeah, let's just talk a little bit about the genesis of this and what it means to us.

Dara Del Rosario: For myself, when I think of archive I constantly think about the process of learning and discovery and how that's so much a part of my own relationship to history as well as my own identity. Right? Like it's not just something that exists in this static place, but it's ever growing and evolving. And my relationship to these histories or to these archives are ever changing and evolving.
Michelle Lin: Yeah. I think we have this notion that, like, history is something that's past and gone, but we all know that like present movements and the ways artists create work, it's always informed by history in a way that makes it alive and continuing to move.

Dara Del Rosario: Yeah. I think with the way that we're talking about living archive is that time is not linear. Like it's almost like time is a knot that is constantly either growing, like we're going forward, backwards, in the present all at once. And I think that there's something about that that just drives away from like really traditional academic understandings of archives. And as artists, we're constantly trying to challenge that. Like colonialist ideas of time, of our relationship to the past, of our relationship to material objects, not as something that we own but as something that we can deeply connect with.

Michelle Lin: [affirmative response]. And I like how you brought up challenging because there's also this idea of like well, who has the power of saying that this is archivable or this is the proper archive, or this is of historical significance? And in making this podcast we wanted to say we do, all of us do, and all of us are making history right now.

[music]

We need to talk about "We Won't Move."

Kazumi Chin: Okay.

Michelle Lin: Do you want to start, Kazumi?

Kazumi Chin: So, I guess the way that I would say it is that "We Won't Move" brings into clarity a lot of the history of KSW, which has its roots in the I-Hotel, but also that it speaks a lot to the present moment. As we continue to fight against gentrification, as we continue to make our presence known, to make our stories known, we won't move isn't just about physically moving, but it's about the way in which people are moved outside of history, are moved outside of being seen, are moved outside of representation.

So, for us to say that we won't move, it's not just geographical, although it is, but it's also about the way that the cultural informs that geography, the way the cultural informs San Francisco, and the way that when we are able to stay here and to show people that this place isn't just a city, but that it has a kind of value for the people that live there, that is has a way of creating community with your people, that's what we're not moving.
from. Right? We're not moving away from our art, we're not moving away from our community, and we're not moving away from the city as it is.

Michelle Lin: Perfect.

[music]

Dara Del Rosario: That was really good.

Michelle Lin: It's hella good.

[music]

For this episode, we sat down to talk with Thea Quiray Tagle who is a curator, art writer, and a system professor of ethic studies and gender and sexuality studies at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. Dara, before this interview you actually had a chance to visit Thea's most recent curatorial project in person. Can you tell us more about "After Life (We Survive)"?

Dara Del Rosario: I would love to, Michelle. "After Life (We Survive)" is a multidisciplinary exhibition that in response to COVID-19, turns Yerba Buena Center for the Arts inside out. The art can be viewed through the windows of the ground floor and features work by Black, Indigenous, queer, and trans artists of color who ground us in legacies of resilience and joy. "After Life (We Survive)" reminds us that we have always dreamed and created worlds where we can live freely.

Michelle Lin: YEEE-YEAH!

[laughter]

Dara Del Rosario: The exhibition can be viewed online, and the link can be found in our show notes.

Michelle Lin: We're going to leave that in. I think that's good.

Kazumi Chin: Yeah. I think it's good. I think it's good.

[music]

Michelle Lin: And I know we saw online that the first exhibition was called "After Life (What Remains)" I believe, and it was shown at The Alice Gallery in Seattle, and then "After Life (We Survive)" is what's at Yerba Buena right now. Can you share a little bit about the journey between these two different exhibits and the names?
So, maybe to back up a little bit, it might be helpful to know about the genesis of the show and really how it needed to change, not just for COVID, but for this ongoing political landscape, this moment that we're moving in and moving through. When I first presented "After Life" this was after coming back from two trips. One to the Philippines, and this was 2017, so it's after the U.S. election but it's also after an election in the Philippines where they've elected an authoritarian leader who's like banning all kinds of things, like banning cigarette smoking, which is really anti-poor; putting out a war on drugs; putting a lot of restrictions on people's movement where you're seeing, you know, still now folks getting killed by extrajudicial killings. So, being really affected by that and life looking like it was going on as normal, even if it's really abnormal.

And also coming back from the Big Island of Hawaii where I was for just a week or so, and while there I came upon the so-called plastic beach, Kamilo Beach, which is its south point which looks totally deserted, right, like literally the end of the world southernmost point of the U.S. state territory on this island. And there's plastic pieces washed up on it that are really showing again the existence of our imprint as humans on this beautiful landscape.

And those two things really prompted me to curate a show that tried to bring together Asian American, Filipino, and/or Indigenous American folks, and they were Michael Arcega who's based in San Francisco; Rea Tajiri, the incredible Japanese American filmmaker; Leeroy New, who is based in the Philippines from the Philippines, and his "Aliens of Manila" project; Alejandro T. Acierto, a Latinx Filipinx composer and curator and artist; and then the last is Super Futures Haunt Qollective who are a collective of three, Angie Morrill, C. Ree, and Sam Jung.

When I invited those five artists or art collectives, I really was trying to focus it on thinking through different survival strategies, specifically for Asian Pacific Islanders and Indigenous folks. How we can work in relation with one another, especially in the context of the U.S. where we don't often talk about things outside of Black Right relations. Or even in the West Coast where Asian Americans are a much bigger demographic. Kind of the divergences and differences between our communities and our relations with Indigenous folks aren't really explored.

So, that show for me was really about trying to present works that I thought could help us articulate or think about those forms of relation differently.
The first one was really reflective. I want folks to like look inwards and consider your own relationship, especially as an Asian American person to Indigenous folks. What kinds of relationships do you have in real life, in real time, and politically with Indigenous communities where you're based?

And then for the second show, "After Life (We Survive)" at Yerba Buena Center, it felt really important especially knowing that we were going to turn it inside out and show the work in public to put forth not just reflections on where we've come from and how we can act and think differently and be in relation differently, but actually to present work that was already modeling different kinds of relationships and bringing forth buried archives of survival and solidarity and resilience that are so often covered over, even when we talk about revolution and what it looks like.

And that is essentially what I pitched last year to Yerba Buena Center. There was an open call, really broad, saying pitch whatever you want on the second floor of Yerba Buena with like zero parameters of like how many artists or whatever. And I pitched this show, but more expanded to think about the San Francisco context.

And bringing in some of my earlier research and thinking about specifically Filipino American artists and the Bay area who's work I really think help us imagine alternative futures. Michael Arcega, for example, who was in the first show. And, you know, other Bay area artists who I thought could really help activate the Yerba Buena space in particular, right, to help us think about not only, you know, maybe more global, whatever that means, forms of violence, but really things that were close to home. Really specific to the Bay area around the violence of displacement, the violence of evictions, right, the violence of food insecurity, and other kind -- policing, right, things that are really still prevalent here.

Michelle Lin: [affirmative response]. I think that's what I also -- we really loved about. We also read your essay in Yerba Buena Zine on this exhibit and we particularly love how you talked about -- I think the quote was, "We have been living in the After Life for a long time." So, even with the context of this exhibit is going up now in this pandemic, that there's like misconception in spaces that don't, like, center Black, Indigenous, Asian American folks, that like things aren't particularly bad just right now because of the current administration or pandemic. And like in ways they are, but also that does erase this long history of movement, organizing work that people have been doing for a long time and continue to do.
And so, like, we really like that part in the essay, thinking about how there have always been queer, Brown, Black, and Indigenous folks who've never stopped fighting. I'm quoting you now, "to preserve our collective humanity in this quite broken world." And just thinking about how these different violences and also the different, like, radical ways in which we survive are all very much connected to each other.

And I think one thing that you mentioned is like what good is art at a time like this? And I'm wondering if you could like maybe just share a little more about that and like what you've been thinking about. Maybe if anything's changed now that exhibit up, too. You know? Might be interesting to share.

Thea Quiray Tagle: So, thank you. Thank you for having engaged and having read it. You know, one thing that I've really been thinking about and have for a really long time is there's this really overquoted Toni Cade Bambara quote, right, that says that "the role of the artist is to make revolution irresistible." And it's such a powerful quote and I want to agree with it with my whole heart, and also, I have such trouble with it. You know, for a long time, and the reason why I went to grad school, is because I was really troubled and thinking about this question of yeah, like, how do artists serve the movement? And what kinds of movements do we serve? You know, art is incredible as propaganda and incredible as movement work.

And thinking back to Kearny Street Workshop, like when I started my dissertation, I didn't know everything or really much of anything about folks like Al Robles or Carlos Villa, and folks that I ended up writing about. Or contemporary artists at all. I came to it because of the posters, right? The Kearny Street Workshop posters and Nancy Hom and those incredible like prints and pieces that said we won't move and how important that was to articulating solidarity. Real, you know, transnational, multigenerational solidarity for a shared cause. And in that way, you know, I always think the artist's so central to movements.

And at the same time, as someone who, at different moments in my life, has been part of so-called radical or leftist or feminist organizations. Like I've had to leave many places that I thought of as my political home because of the ways that, right, women or queer folks like myself who were leadership even were so marginalized for a kind of flattened narrative of what the space was about or what our movement was for. And that's not unique. And so, from having those experiences, it's also this thing of like art should also be used to put pressure on that. Art should also be used not just to uplift the great work that movements are doing and amplify the slogans, but art can also be used to make
revolution, you know, to point out the fact that revolutions can be ugly and can hide the existence of queer folks in our communities and other spaces.

I think that all of the work is kind of trying to play with that, to play with that question a little bit. And I don’t think I’ve answered your original question. So, maybe you can restate it.

Michelle Lin: I mean, in a way I think you have because, like, a lot of that, like, what good is art during this time? The question that continues to transform itself. I think as artists one of the responsibility is to constantly be holding that question and thinking it through because it needs to adapt because that’s where possibility and transformation happens is like continuing to return to it.

Kazumi Chin: Yeah. And I think -- I guess the problem with revolution as a genre of thinking, of action, is when it becomes known and it becomes a particular thing that doesn’t include others who have a different vision of that revolution. And so, the goal of art is to make revolution irresistible. It really does matter what revolution, whose revolution, what are the things that this revolution is even doing? Right? And does that revolution include the kind of work that marginalized people within the movement even are thinking through and trying to accomplish. And I think something that you were talking about is queer dreams and thinking about dreaming queerly in these exhibitions and I think that maybe can help us expand on this idea of revolution in maybe a different kind of imagining.

Thea Quiray Tagle: Yeah. And thank you. [indiscernible 16:08] both of you are like really great distillations, right, of these thoughts and ideas. And, you know, with this show in particular there’s some artists -- I mean, all of them, to me, are radical in their own ways even if it’s more quiet than in others, but all of them I think actually articulate a kind of queer desire for us to relate to one another differently, whether we’re thinking about overthrowing capitalism and having, right, radical social transformation in that way, to really radically shifting how we interact with each other, like on a really day-to-day interpersonal basis.

I was drawn to all of the particular projects in this show, but also to these artists because of the ways that we shaped and continue to shape, right, what the project looks like. So, you know, there’s a couple of pieces that I can point out that I think help, right, maybe illuminate what kind of like queer dreaming or queer speculation can look like when, you know, maybe overtly is Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s, “Tomorrow We Inherit the Earth.” And I think he has done stuff with Kearny Street Workshop before. Right? Everyone knows and love Zulfikar in the Bay, which is amazing.
Zulfikar's whole project is about taking up this figure, this really contentious figure, at least in the West, of the martyr, the Islamic martyr, and having us rethink really what they died for and what they're living for. Right? I mean, Zulfikar's whole project is about resurrecting. Sufi and other kind of mystical traditions. He plays a lot with numerology and he presents this initial with a multicolored, hyper-colored world that's both really identifiably Muslim and also really identifiably queer. Right? And he doesn't see these two things as somehow in contradiction, but as things that can live together and has possibilities for folks that can live together in ways that I think are popular, imaginary of who queer people are as not religious as well as who Muslims are, which isn't queer. Don't allow for. He's actually giving us that world.

Queer dreaming, and again in terms of what can art do at this time, right, and how can we see the political even in smaller or quieter moments. I'm really thinking about the work of Art 25 and they're a collective of two. And for this project in this show, "Future Ancestors," Lisa Jarrett and the poet Lehua Taitano collaborated with Jocelyn Kapumealani Ng who, you know, is based in Honolulu and is Kanaka Maoli.

And the three of them, you know, this is, to me, is maybe the most radical project in that it's 11 larger than life portraits of three fem presenting folks in radial embrace, binding and holding and caring for each other, you know, with their bodies exposed or covered in different moments in ways that are really hard to define if you're looking at them. You don't know what that relationship is, if it's mother-daughter, if it's lover. What's happening there?

And their whole project is about holding, right, holding one another and caring for one another in a way that the state will never care for us, that mainstream society will never love us like we can love each other. And that, to me, is really profound. And to be able to show that again publicly, I think, is something that, for me, demonstrates the power of art. Right? To make you stop and be like what the heck am I looking at, in this arresting way that maybe even a more overt protest flyer or something wouldn't make you stop.

Dara Del Rosario: With that work in particular, just even the title, "Future Ancestors," I think about what we are going to pass on for people to come. Right? Like what is the state of the world in which we hope to create that they can inherit, that they can live and thrive with? And I also think about, like, the inheritance of intergenerational trauma in [indiscernible 20:14] DNA or intergenerational hope and how this moment is really impacting, like -- or like it's opening up ruptures, right?
I think that's something that we've talked about, the three of us, of how this exhibition is really about, like, what are the multiple ruptures that are happening and what is growing from these ruptures? And like the big thing that came up for me was just like relationships are coming out of these ruptures, that love is coming out of these ruptures, because these are things that we've been taught for so long that we have to capitalize off of, that we have to find -- that we have to have some type of marketable value with, but like, what does it mean to love and care for each other authentically to create a future in which there is [indiscernible 21:00]?

Thea Quiray Tagle: Yeah. And thank you for saying that because one of the things that's been kind of weird about this show, in this version of it, is in all of the writing I've had to do, every time I write a draft of something, like whether it was the text that was on the outside of the building, or that opens it up online, or the longer essay, I wrote it and then I was like oh, my god, this sounds so corny. Like what? Why do I sound so corny? And, you know, the astro part is I'm Capricorn with Leo moon. Like putting emotions out on blast and like leaning into love and relationship is not something publicly that I do as like a way of being.

But at the same time, like over the course -- and this, I think, is something that's very different about curating than perhaps art writing or scholarly writing, which is sometimes a really solo pursuit, is that curating and putting out shows are really about that relationship at its core. And for me, curating this show and working with these artists who, again, had two and a half months to really turn things inside out to put this show out really tested, you know, all of our relations and reminded me why I loved their projects to begin with because of what they are about in terms of the content of it, but also the people behind it. Like I really care for them and the work that they're making.

And as a curator who takes the care part seriously, the Latin cognate of curation, all of this show, the way it was put together, really is this radical exercise in trust. Right? How can we actually hold each other in terms of me holding the integrity of their work and, you know, them trusting that I wouldn't exploit them to an institution to have this show, them trusting in a larger vision because many of them couldn't be here at all and still can't be here to see the work or have any hands in installing the work, trusting that the institution wouldn't just put their images up and not their words and the intention behind it. All of that, I think, is all really -- I don't want to, you know, make it sound like I'm so radical, but I think it's a radical act, right, of caring that we were all part of it, and that's been actually, for me, the most profound part of this project.
Michelle Lin: Hey, everyone. It's Michelle here. We hope you're enjoying our first episode so far. We're taking a quick break for the following announcements. Submissions are now open for our interdisciplinary writers' lab presented by KSW and the Asian Art Museum. IWL is a three-month multi-genre master class for BIPOC writers in poetry, fiction, and comics. This year's faculty includes Devi S. Laskar, Trinidad Escobar, and Monica Sok. Amazing people. You don't want to miss out. Please submit your work by March 15th. And we're very excited to read them.

And on Friday, March 19th, 6:00 p.m. Pacific Standard Time, KSW presents "Spirit Houses," a poetry reading featuring Maw Shein Win and Khaty Xiong. This event is a celebration of Maw's newest book, congratulations, Maw, titled, "Storage Unit for the Spirit House" from Omnidawn, and is a celebration of both poets' powerful work performing rituals of grief, pain, and the life after it and with it.

Also, if you're a writer of color writing about similar things we're actually accepting submissions for readers to open the event. So, you can visit our website, kearnystreet.org, to submit. That's also where you can buy a ticket, sponsor a ticket, or for those in need, claim one of those sponsored tickets. So, we hope to hear from you soon.

And, you know, let's get back into this episode, because I'm excited to dive right back in. Thank you for listening.

Thea Quiray Tagle: Yeah. And, you know, again, Kearny Street, I'm really happy that you're all putting together this podcast and just extending that work too, because for a long time, you know, Kearny Street was a model and is a model for what different kinds of relationship could look like and boost up, especially within different Asian American communities that don't often come together or work together or have like intergenerational beef. Right? I think that's rad.

Michelle Lin: I also just love the term intergenerational beef. Like, can that be, like, our tagline for this podcast? But, I mean, yeah, it's definitely been a huge honor and gift for, like, all of us to be like part of KSW to continue working in this like long lineage. And that's one of the hopes we have for
this podcast. We’ve been calling it a living archive because we're thinking so much about how we want to be in conversation with artists and organizers from KSW's past but also people who are carrying on that work today and thinking about the future generations.

And something that really drew us to, like, really wanting to bring you on is also in just reading your writings about the exhibit and also this exhibit itself. Just like these artists are documenting ways of surviving, like radically surviving and loving and being in relationship with each other. I mean, like, this is possible. It is so possible. And you can do it, too, in the future. So, yeah. And you can do more because it's like when you -- people were laying down this groundwork and, like, can you imagine what more queer dreaming, you know, can happen?

Thea Quiray Tagle: Absolutely. And just hearing you talk made me think about -- and I'm not a word person. To the extent, like, I never remember, like, other people's quotes. Right? Like I have to write them down. Like, have them because I can't just pull it out of a hat.

But this whole question of archiving and why we archive, there's this -- you know, he's now passed on, he's an ancestor, but you know, the queer Latinx performance study scholar Jose Munoz has this incredible book on critical utopia, and he talks about the work of critical utopia as a kind of archiving. And, you know, he says, and this is a quote from him, that "the present must be known in relation to the alternative temporal and spatial maps provided by a perception of past and future affective worlds. It's an act of calling on the past to animate it, understand that the past has a performative nature, which is to say rather than being static and fixed, the past does things." And that's an end quote.

And I think about that a lot. How, at every moment, when -- you know, with this show and in other projects that I've curated, like how can we bring together work of artists that I think do an amazing job of archiving the past in a different way? And again, presenting alternative futures that we all can live in and, you know, bringing up these ancestors that so many of us forget are ours.

Like, you know, Alejandro Aciero's piece in the show has a sound clip from Sylvia Rivera where she stormed the stage at a Christopher Street Gay Right's rally in 1973 and was already calling them out, right, for whitewashing the movement, for pushing trans women of color out of the movement. And it's, you know, Alejandro resurrects, right, this angry and fierce TRANScestor to remind us, right, of the ongoing resilience and
survivance of trans women of color in all movements, not just mainstream lesbian and gay, right, liberation movements.

But also, does it in a way, because it’s activated the video by LGBTQ as a hashtag. So, it’s also archiving for us what people are doing right now, even on the internet, to organize. And that’s super rad because that’s showing us that, like, LGBTQ organizing also involves organizing for DACA and organizing for Black Lives Matter and all of the intersectional social justice movements. And I love that. I love that it’s an archive of the past but also one of this present. Right? Archiving this moment of, again, intergenerational, multiracial solidarity.

Dara Del Rosario: Honestly, I feel like I’ve just been learning and listening a lot from this conversation, too, and like say I know that -- like, I’ve talked to you about curation before and, like, it’s something I’m so passionate about learning about. And so, for me, like knowing that there are curators with this in practice, it definitely makes me feel less isolated. Right? Which I also think is really powerful. And so, I really appreciate you coming onto this podcast for this interview. So, I just want to extend my gratitude.

Thea Quiray Tagle: Thank you. But I should say I learn from you all of the time. I mean, see you and, like, PJ Policarpio and like Kim [indiscernible 30:27] and the way that you all collaborate and work with each other has been super informative. Like even if it’s mostly on Facebook and like Insta that I see that relation, I think that, like, I learn a lot from that, too.

Kazumi Chin: I think maybe we can start wrapping up. I have one last question about world making. You wrote about world making and [indiscernible 30:50], we look at the exhibit and we do see these worlds that are being made even as you walk past this museum turned inside out and you see these images and how arresting they are, and I feel like that is an instance of world making in a very small moment. And I think also where you’re speaking to, in the essay and in the curation, is, you know, like an expansion of that idea of world making. And so, I would like to know, I guess, as we close up here, like, what do you envision the world that you’re making with this exhibition to be?

Thea Quiray Tagle: I don’t know if this is answering your question at all. But I see kind of -- I’ve been seeing some things as I’ve been walking past the exhibition, because I kind of go by there several times a week to take folks through, right, or just to check up on stuff. And two things I notice in terms of always present there, because right, like everything else, YBCA is shut down on the inside and it really depends on time of day, you know, if anyone’s around or if less people are around.
But two things that have always been present, or more recently have been present, are Filipino men have continued to play chess and card games. They've never left, right, and they're wearing masks which is good. But they're there. Right? They're arguing with each other and playing chess every single day and right in front of the window and doing their thing, getting takeout or whatever.

And then more recently, and maybe I shouldn't say, but it's there, in one of the exhibitions there's seeds, because the project is about plant life and plant making as like forms of witchcraft, and in the installation a little mouse has been coming to visit to eat, to take the seeds. You know? And the artists love it and I do, too. I don't think the institution loves it, but they haven't gotten rid of it yet. And I think both of those things are actually part of the exhibit now in terms of modeling life and resilience in the midst of, right, like a really challenging time.

Our communities have continued, right, to show up and to be there and to live.

[music]

Michelle Lin:
"We Won't Move: A Living Archive" is a program by Kearny Street Workshop. For this first season we'd like to shout out some of the donors who helped make this podcast happen. These are just some of the folks who gave during our 2020 yearend fundraiser. So, so much love to Adrienne Sancho, Alex Brown, Alexandra Naumova, Alfred Wong, Alle Hsu, Alvin David, Amanda Chaudhary, Amira Samaha, Amy Lam, An Bui, Andrew Yeung, Angi Lou, Anna Bunting, Anne Schukat, Anne Okahara, Antmen Pimentel Mendoza, Arhm Choi Wild, Atsushi Murase, Audee Kochiyama-Holman, Audrey Brown, Barnali Ghosh, Beatrice Dong, Benny Hom, Brahmavar Amrutha, Cara Nguyen, Charles Higueras, Chen Chen, Choppy Oshiro, Christine Joy Ferrer, Christine Santos, Christine Wong Yap, Claire Light, Clarize Yale Revadavia, and Sourmouth Sweetheart. Thank you so much for your love and support.

We will continue to shout out our supporters in future episodes and if you would like to make a donation to help sustain this podcast and other KSW programs, you can visit kearnystreet.org. Stay updated on our events by following us on Instagram, @kearnystreet. We hope you take good care of yourselves and we'll see you very, very soon for episode two. Bye!

[music]