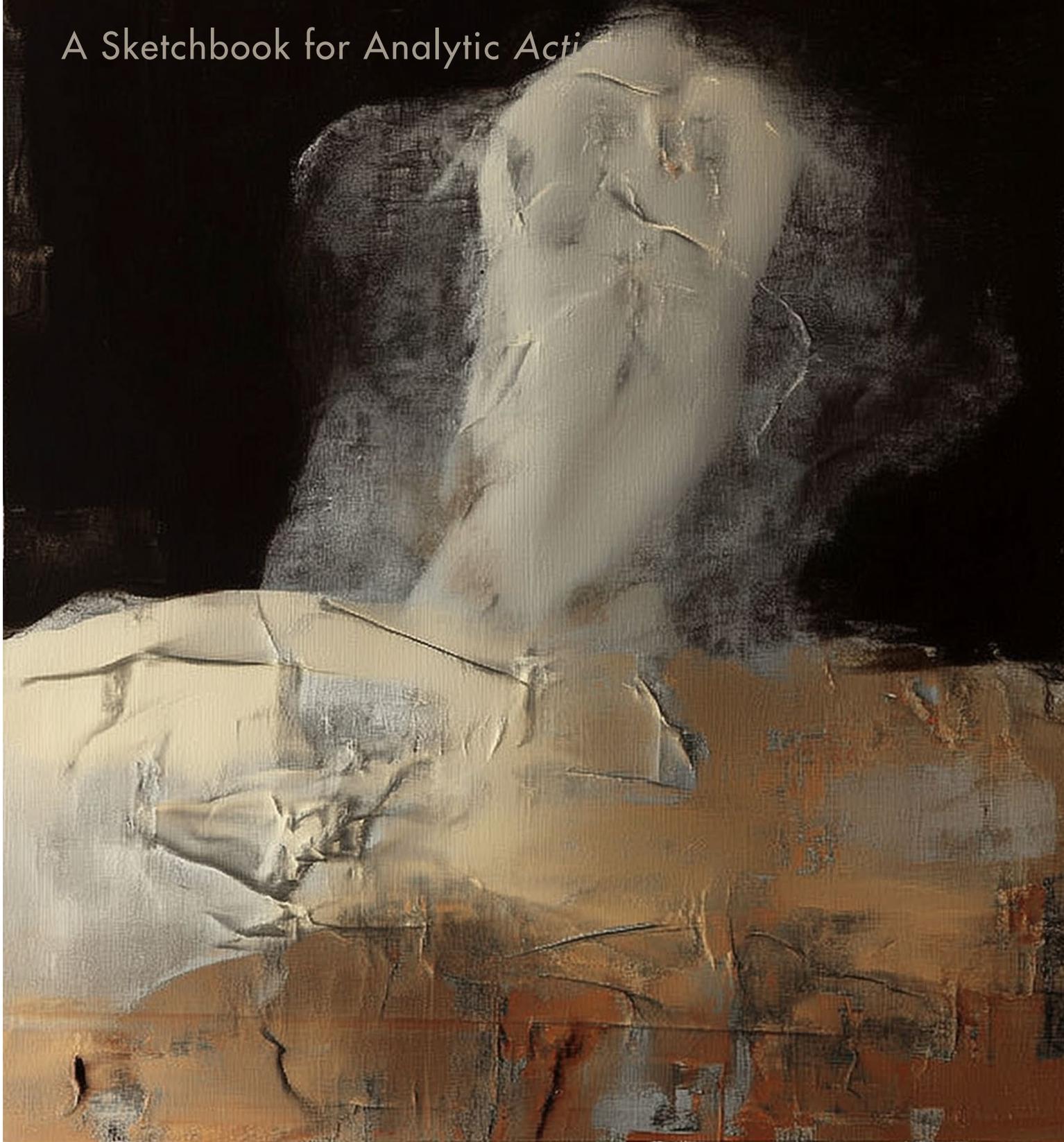


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**NEW DIRECTIONS**

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# Contributors

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Dr. **Michiko Oki** is a cultural researcher/writer and Senior Lecturer at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London. Her interdisciplinary writings, drawn from art history, critical theory, philosophy, intuition, and emotion, approach the question: What is the nature of the aesthetic experience when confronted with violent reality, and what constructive effect does the dark imagination have on the human psyche and society? Her recent research revolves around a range of different themes and curiosities, all of which aim to explore a polytheistic perception as a means of transgression, challenging the violence of identity thinking and normalization in relation to the monotheistic belief system.

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**John Pring** is a poet and author based in the UK, where he is an MFA candidate at Manchester Metropolitan University. He has poems published or upcoming in *Epiphany*, *The Comstock Review*, *SoFloPojo*, *Poetics*, *B O D Y*, *The Passionfruit Review*, *The King's English Society*, *Panorama*, *Months To Years*, and others.

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**Meenal Raghava** is a New York-based interdisciplinary artist whose work explores the fluid construction of identity shaped by migratory and transnational experience. Working with oils, acrylics, concrete, and epoxy, she creates layered surfaces where memory and material intersect, reflecting how belonging is continually renegotiated across shifting cultural terrains. Born in New Delhi, Raghava's practice emerges from the tension between displacement and the desire for rootedness. Her visual language draws from color field painting, Impressionism, and the aesthetics of Indian miniature and tribal traditions. Through textured industrial materials and chromatic abstraction, she examines the psychic architectures formed through ongoing self-redefinition. Central to her work is the concept of "becoming"—transformation as a lived condition rather than a fixed destination. Her compositions function as contemplative sites, inviting reflection on identity as shaped by geography, history, and the internal migrations of memory and imagination. Raghava has exhibited at The Other Art Fair, Atlantic Gallery, Art Gotham, and Saint Marks Gallery, and engages an international audience of over 70,000.

**Bia Roy** is a Dalit, queer psychotherapist in private practice. She holds an MPhil in Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy and a master's degree in Psychosocial Clinical Studies from Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University, Delhi. Her interest lies in attending to the complexities of the psychoanalytic encounter in India as shaped by caste, class, gender, religion, and

sociopolitical histories. She approaches her work as a perpetual student of life, experience, uncertainty, and limits of understanding. Beyond the clinic, she enjoys art and music that help her dabble with the ineffable aspects of existence.

**Ann Shenfield** works across various media. Her animated films have received local and international prizes including selection to the Berlin film festival. Her poetry has received numerous awards including the Judith Wright Poetry Prize. Her book *A Treatment* (Upswell Publishing) was listed in The Age Best Books 2023. She is a practicing psychoanalyst (Candidate) and member of the Australian Center for Psychoanalysis.

**Ariana Suits** is working towards her master's degree in history with a focus on Latin America. Her Ecuadorian heritage and graduate studies are common themes in her poetry. She has been published in both academic and literary journals, most recently in *The Braver Collective*, with work soon to be featured in *Scapegoat Review*.

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**Margaret Vega** taught undergraduate and graduate courses in painting, drawing, color theory, concept development, and thesis at Kendall College of Art and Design until 2022. She also taught at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Perugia, Italy, and Grand Valley State University. Vega has exhibited widely, including solo and group shows at Atlantic, Viridian, and Prince Street Galleries in NYC, Dacia Gallery, Artifacts, and Grand Rapids Art Museums, the American Academy in Rome, and international venues in Italy, China, and Germany. Her work is held in private, corporate, and museum collections worldwide, including the Grand Rapids Art Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Giovanni Valdarno. Awards include a Michigan Council for the Arts Grant, YWCA Tribute Award, and Legacy Award. Vega, represented by Dacia Gallery and Via Design, is Founding Director of SiteStudio and the Children Designing for Children initiative.

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# Starting from Ground Zero

When a postcard arrived from a friend, I was in my late teens, living in the passive-aggressive air of the bright grey sky in a tiny room in Kobe. The picture on the postcard was seemingly drawn hastily in a graffiti-like style in pale pastel colours. In it, a woman in pyjamas with dark, messy hair is sitting on a single bed, slightly hunched over and covering her mouth with her hands. She appears lost in thought, blankly bemused, as she stares at an open suitcase in front of her, waiting to be filled, with piles of books lying next to it. From her strangely impassive face, I heard an inaudible voice oozing out—“What shall I do?” With the hallucinating whisper stuck in my ear, I saw myself in this picture—a person at a standstill, chocked in a void. I later discovered that it was a self-portrait by the German-Jewish artist Charlotte Salomon, depicting herself just before she fled Nazi-occupied Berlin in 1938.

Images travel beyond the constraints of time and space, arriving to us in an unknown place at an unknown moment. The hunched portrait of Charlotte Salomon arrived to me at a time when I was struggling with what had been oppressing my life. The picture is from Salomon's autobiographical picture book *Life? or Theatre?* (1941–1942), a series of paintings created during her time as a refugee in the South of France before her death in Auschwitz. The book, composed of 769 gouache paintings accompanied by corresponding narratives, describes factual scenes from Salomon's public and private lives as

well as her own psychological visions. They deal mainly with the difficulties in family relationships, love affairs, and the position of female German Jews in the immediate aftermath of the rise of the National Socialists to power. Salomon's struggle against depression and the prevalence of suicidal tendencies in her family is most evident, and a sense of distress and anger rings out from the series. Her crude, hasty expressionist style and fragmented pictorial composition suggest an impending emergency, as if she had to make an urgent statement in the face of the injustice of her precarious life. Behind that impassive

face on the postcard silently screaming out to my ears, “What shall I do?” was her confrontation with harmful, damaged realities beyond her control, compelling her to escape from the toxic ground zero.

Twenty-something years ago, I also fled from a literal Ground Zero, perhaps one of the most symbolic places on Earth, bearing witness to the catastrophic violence of humankind. I grew up in Hiroshima as an outsider resident, not as a descendant of a victim, immersed in the guilt of absorbing the pain of others. In this city, I came to be saturated with grotesque stories and testimonies narrated by A-bomb survivors and with apocalyptic images of the aftermath archived in film footage and photos. Throughout my youth, horrified by this unearthly inferno landscape and at the same time darkly illuminated, I became haunted by the malice of the world and started to see violence everywhere. Sometimes, I question the validity of the “peace education” I went through in my school days in Hiroshima. Devouring those dark spectacles can be too aggressive; its influence on a youthful mind could go easily wrong beyond its “peaceful” intention. I still don’t know if the apocalyptic imagination I cultivated back then has helped me to think positively about this world—empathy could go in the wrong direction too. Every 8:15 a.m. on the 6<sup>th</sup> of August, every time I walk down the street in Hiroshima, I still can’t stop seeing the landscape of living hell full of bodies hideously burned wandering around looking for water, piles of rotten corpses on the street giving off a nasty smell, the vivid orange colour of intestines pecked by crows, floating corpses crowding the Enkō-gawa river, swollen like balloons. My imagination is unstoppable in devouring a vision that human history witnessed for the first time—the immediate, collective death of tens of thousands of people who had the misfortune of being around the Ground Zero.

At some point, the somber sentiment that I cultivated for 6 August started to materialise in the form of a dark sense of humour. After I relocated to London in my late twenties, I started an A-bomb memorial party at home as 6 August approached, as if to perform a pious witness to the pain of survivors to the western people. This gradually turned into something darker that I called a “violence party.” The particularity of the moral commemoration of the Hiroshima/Nagasaki atrocity retreated, and the ubiquitousness of violence of this world came to the front, where the comfort of the dichotomic division between oppressor and oppressed, between victim and witness, can’t hold any longer. I once disguised myself as a Miss Atomic Bomb with a mushroom-cloud-shaped crown on

my head, as a tribute to the Miss Atomic pageants that were held in the 1950s United States. Another time, I became the *Necessary Evil*, a B-29 camera plane flying with the *Enola Gay* from Hiroshima Mission planes. The dark sense of humour serves as a point of contact between raging disgust and its sublimation. Subversion becomes a methodology. I had been too exposed to the generational trauma of this Ground Zero, becoming immersed in the pain of others that I would never be able to experience firsthand. In the moral struggle in the face of something inexplicable and unrepresentable that I would never claim authorship of, my prayer became perverted, confronting the fate of spectacle.

My confusion and its hedonistic turn led to a perverted desire for the violence party as I finished the intellectual marathon of writing a PhD thesis on the representation of violence (including the image of that hunched Charlotte Salomon in the postcard). At one of the violence parties, I threw my bloody thesis into the fire and stared at it as it burned to ashes, feeling a mixture of self-pitiful regret, guilty pleasure, and fearful liberation. I had been too immersed in redemptive endeavour to recognise the pain of others as my own, which then became the source of my novel oppression.

Years later, after I had burned my thesis and the storm of the pandemic had started to recede, on a rainy day in June, I visited the Mitaki Temple in the north of Hiroshima City, where the remains of unidentified victims of the Atomic Bomb are buried. I then discovered that in a corner of the vast temple grounds, there is a small pagoda, installed in 1973, which enshrines the remains of Auschwitz victims sent from Poland. Looking at the inscription on the pagoda, suddenly it all made sense to me—why I had come all the way from there to here, and what drove me so compellingly to write a hundred thousand words on violence: “We should ponder over ourselves of the avarice, rage and stupidity that are deeply infiltrated in the hearts of each and all, and cultivate the integrity that humans share.” I realised that I had always been driven by the unknown forces of the collective generational witness to humanity’s atrocities, operating beyond my agency. At that moment, my dark desire to be devoured by the unreachable pain of others was sublimated into the collective suffering—that which inspires humanity’s endeavor to resist and survive its own violence. In the cathartic pleasure of this self-induced revelation, I breathed the air of Mt. Mitaki, green and translucent, washed by the sudden heavy rain that had poured over Hiroshima on that day. ■