

BODY AND SOUL REDUX

On Paul Chan at the Schaulager Basel



Paul Chan, "Happiness (Finally) After 35,000 Years of Civilization (after Henry Darger and Charles Fourier)", 2000–2003, film still

Hurricane Katrina, Abu Ghraib, the 2004 Republican National Convention – as the United States calibrated to the new millennium, these crises, situations, and events revealed that the country's twentieth-century capitalist shell was cracking. Although many artists made work in response, perhaps none is associated with taking these state-of-exception occasions as sites of production more than Paul Chan.

This year, the Schaulager invited the New York-based artist to mount what is essentially a mid-career survey. The result, as writer Daniel Horn suggests, offers not just a thorough look at Chan's aesthetic strategy – reaching from his early pop-culture informed animations to the open and allegorical nature of his newest works – but also a near history of politically engaged, post-9/11 artistic production.

It has been five years since Paul Chan's last proper solo exhibition. In the meantime, the artist has made several appearances in group exhibitions throughout our anxiously busy contemporary art world, but except for his participation in *DOCUMENTA* (13), these did not feature new work. Given the market's constant demand for fresh works, Chan's extended hiatus borders on unacceptable conduct. Until 2009, the artist enjoyed a prolific and often explicitly historiographic

practice – addressing the troubling state of affairs of his native United States, from the corrupting of democratic rule of law post-9/11 to the governmental bankruptcy displayed during and following Hurricane Katrina – so such an abrupt halt to commercial art production can't merely be aligned with the market's coinciding downturn. And yet, since this austere 2009 vintage has entered recent annals "as a year when the art market shed its excesses and narrowly avoided a complete meltdown"¹, the rather stark look of Chan's new installations indicates a response to the economic crisis, in particular to undefined communities and their activist activities, such as Occupy Wall Street.

To this end, the exhibition begins chronologically, starting with the early works. Led on by the coy infancy depicted in the computer generated drawing "To All the Girls I've Drawn Before (After Happiness)" (2002), the viewer, looking closer, is nudged right back into Chan's aesthetic regime; represented here by an orderly lineup of bright colored little misses, some in gyrate postures unpredictably flashing their preteen bigendered privates. This PG-13 intro gives way to the more X-rated yet infantile-to-pubescent



Paul Chan, "Master Argument", 2013, Schaulager Basel, 2014, installation view

comic style that has become associated with Chan, informed art-historically by Henry Darger's pedophilic "outsider art" and pop-culturally by digital animations à la "South Park". Hormones have fully kicked in with "Orgy Before Man and Storm" (2003), a print in the same illustrative style: The primary grid has evolved into unruly clusters of young bodies of various shapes and shades avidly enjoying each other. Here, Chan colorfully pictures pure ideology insofar as that ideology is inculpable. The adjacent text-based pieces, installed quite high on the wall, function as clouds and carry passages from the societal pipe dreams of Charles Fourier, precipitating the philosophical manna – or paternal supervision – over this underage fuckfest.

In rigorously linear order and titling, the exhibition proceeds with "Happiness (Finally) After 35,000 Years of Civilization (after Henry Darger and Charles Fourier)" (2000–2003), an animation projected onto a suspended wide screen. There, amid a verdant and plush if coarsely pixelated Cockaigne-cum-kibbutz, the frolicking girls resume their domestic duties of libertinism and idleness until nightfall, when suited men armed with briefcases and cellphones attack, heralding said civilization. Its dark facets

are epitomized here; in yet another animation "My Birds... Trash... The Future" (2004), by crude renderings of sterling art historical references (Jaques Callot, Goya, Courbet et al.); the famous Associated Press image of a bare Vietnamese girl fleeing a Napalm bomb blast; Biggie Smalls, and much more. Chan's digital compositing of memes and tropes is less post-Internet, more downright classical postmodernist.

"From Sade to Fourier sadism is lost; from Loyola to Sade, divine interlocution. Otherwise, the same writing: The same sensual pleasure in classification, the same mania for cutting up (the body of Christ, the body of the victim, the human soul) [...] the same erotic, fantasmatic fashioning of the social system".² Roland Barthes's improbable threesome of radically enlightening vernaculars – each probing, dislocating, and parodying creaturely law – structures great parts of this exhibition as the introductory utopian happiness via organized lust fades into monastic and ultimately disembodied reflection. Chan's "The 7 Lights" series (2005–2007), consisting of polygonal projections in varying sizes, including one scored sound component, is as arresting as it was when it first appeared. Some of the "Lights" are dramatic James Turrellesque spatial configurations in



Paul Chan, "1st Light", 2005, Schaulager Basel, 2014, installation view

vibrant hues, their sublimity tainted by outlines of detritus, rats, falling bodies, and telephone masts doubling as crucifixes. Others translate this ocular play with iconography and abstraction more subtly into silhouettes of cross-bisected windows that softly hover atop wall works in Romanesque-shaped frames.

Chan's use of the strikethrough in this work corresponds with Giorgio Agamben's application thereof, which in the latter's case serves to illuminate the simultaneous effacement and emergence of sovereign "Force-of-Law"³ (basically a politically updated modification of the term, as discussed by Jacques Derrida⁴). In fact, Agamben's reassessment of contemporary sovereign power⁵ represented by the former Bush administration is thematically aligned with the "Lights" works. They enigmatically project the havoc the state of exception can wreak, giving autonomous form to this negative sublation so spartanly illustrated by the strikethrough. In "Sade for Sade's Sake" (2009) meanwhile, a projection of jagged human silhouettes engaging in stuttering sexual acts, sovereign transgression is rendered more specific by drawing on the exemplary Sadean imagery of the Abu Ghraib abuses as the historical and literal raw material. Thus, when Agamben

states, "The contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness"⁶, Chan can be said to have risen to the task of such perceptive chronicling of plenteous "darkness" (again: 9/11, the Iraq war, sanctioned torture, Abu Ghraib...). More significantly though, he explores the slippery terrain of correlating yet clashing politics alleged to be on the "right" and "wrong" side of history. In his practice, "The question of democracy is an extremely complicated one" (2005) is not only a perplexingly hollow title to an absurdly conservative charcoal drawing of Saddam Hussein. His questions extend further, to the publishing and hence to a genuine consideration – and dissemination – of Hussein's political thought from the 1970s, bearing the striking title "On Democracy"⁷. However, the trenchant reach of Chan's "political" works here contended with their natural aging process, which has been only accentuated by the museum's conservation mode. Despite having been made less than a decade ago, these works speak to and of a political past that already feels rather distant, making it easy to forget that manifestations of "Force-of-Law" have in some cases remained in place. At Guantanamo, literally so.

Forgoing clearly datable subject matter, the new works Chan specifically conceived for the Schaulager's space consist of an elegantly "timeless" disarray of cabling covering large parts of the museum's lower level. Some of these power cords are fashioned into small, self-contained, Minimalist arrangements. Where executed in all white, protruding from the wall, they even recall Eva Hesse's cord pieces, if it weren't for titles like "Mitch McConnell" and "Bunga Bungas" (both 2013). For the most part Chan lays them on the ground, where they plug into wall outlets or multisolets; into shoes, or projectors not projecting anything. Others are wrapped into nooses, spliced together or abruptly cut off, causing them to transmit nothing anywhere – disconnected. Elsewhere, the cables form colorful webs denying access to individual galleries. The most expansive variation, aptly titled "Master Argument" (2013), is a rhizomatic sprawl of nearly every imaginable kind of footwear, albeit all somewhat abject looking and devoid of designer labels (thus no art-historically well-worn fetishes here). Interconnected via said cables, the shoes are filled with concrete. Are these the scattered individual remnants of some latter-day camp? Or does this floor piece sketch out a rudimentary form of community modeled on Jean-Luc Nancy's thesis, one of "Being Singular Plural"? Largely stripped of the earlier perceptual complexity as projected by the "Lights", Chan's treatment of these mundane objects turns to the more matter-of-factly allegorical. Are the wired-together shoes an aggregation of alternative powers, a technologically (em)powered multitude resisting empire? Or the relics of the ditched spirit of Zuccotti Park instead; i.e., powerless structures left behind? Perhaps it is the devalued stock of another crumbling Shoe

Emporium and its widening demographic. Such may be the potential lines of enquiry followed by Chan's cords, becoming greatly entangled as they do so (and probably the only state in which they can exist). "Communication ≠ Connection"⁸ posits Chan, like a tweet of an updated May 1968 graffito. Ultimately, Chan offers the best epitaph to this show's inherent, and let's hope continuing, dialectic of exuberance and exhaustion: "Human beings carry a faint but discernable electrical charge by being alive".⁹

DANIEL HORN

Paul Chan, "Selected Works", Schaulager, Basel, April 12–October 19, 2014.

- 1 According to Thierry Ehrmann, founder and CEO of artprice.com. Online at: <http://www.artprice.com/artmarketinsight/575/Artprice%3A+Annual+Art+Market+Report+for+ condition>.
- 2 Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, transl. by Richard Miller, Baltimore 1997, p. 3 [Paris, 1971].
- 3 Agamben's thesis of "Force-of-Law" is developed in: *State of Exception (Homo Sacer II.1)*, transl. by Kevin Attell, Chicago 2005, pp. 32–40. Note that the English edition curiously uses an X-strikethrough as opposed to the German version that more closely corresponds to Benjamin/Schmitt, "Gesetzeskraft".
- 4 See Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law. 'The Mystical Foundation of Authority'", in: *Acts of Religion*, ed. By Gil Andijar, New York 2002.
- 5 A philosophical argument going back to Walter Benjamin's eventual critique of the contemporaneous proto-fascist conceptions of unchecked sovereignty/force by Carl Schmitt (and Heidegger).
- 6 Giorgio Agamben, *What Is An Apparatus? and Other Essays*, transl. by David Kishik/Stefan Pedatella, Stanford 2009, p. 44.
- 7 Paul Chan (ed.), *On Democracy*. By Saddam Hussein, Athens/New York 2013.
- 8 Paul Chan, *Selected Writings 2000–2014*, ed. by George Baker/Eric Banks et. al., Basel/New York 2014, p. 90.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 124.