

Paul Chan: Breathers



Paul Chan, *2chained or Genesis and Nemesis*, 2019. Nylon, fan, screenprint, tarp, synthetic woven fabric, 87 x 113 x 82 in. © Paul Chan. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York. Photo: Zeshan Ahmed.

Paul Chan became well known in the early 2000s for his richly animated video projections that engage with topics as varied as social justice, philosophy, war, violence, religion, and sex. His art reflects his multidimensional identity as a visual artist and writer as well as his experience as a political organizer. Having been widely exhibited in the short space of a decade, Chan decided in 2009 to take a “breather” and stop making video art. Among the many reasons he gave at the time was how he could no longer stand looking at video or computer screens. “I hit peak screen,” he

confessed. This testament rings true for many people after years of pandemic lockdowns when computer screens have become the site of our daily activities, whether working, socializing, or playing.

This exhibition includes examples of ways that Chan confronted a common problem today: burnout and exhaustion. How do you find joy and curiosity again in your work? What does it mean to step away from the usual ways of doing things and try something new? Chan has grappled with these questions in his own practice.

In 2010 he established the experimental publishing press Badlands Unlimited. Working with a range of collaborators, Badlands breathed new life into his creative practice, seeding ideas and offering new ways of working. While continuing to publish, Chan gradually returned to art-making, creating works with the same undercurrents of humor and irony. These pieces also engage with social and political ideas but are radically unlike anything he had made before.

Also on view is the artist's most recent body of work titled *Breathers*. These fan-powered sculptures consist of billowing fabric bodies that suggest notions of friendship, vulnerability, dependency, and conflict. Chan's works made in the past decade reimagine the possibilities of the moving image, freed of the screen and projected image. Seen together, they also tell a larger story of an artist who resisted expectations and sought renewal by forging something new.

Badlands Unlimited

The exhibition centers on a pivotal moment in Chan's career when he was no longer making artworks. With the ambition of creating "books in the expanded field" he founded the New York-based publishing press Badlands Unlimited in 2010. Working with a group of collaborators, he modeled its activities in part after radical independent presses of the past, including Olympia Press, Grove Press, Hogarth Press, and New Directions.



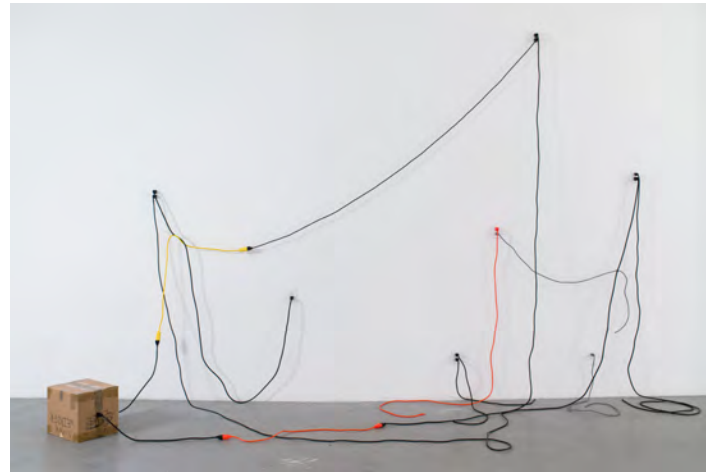
View of the exhibition *Paul Chan: Breathers*, 2022. Photo: Eric Mueller for Walker Art Center, courtesy Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

The topics of Badlands projects ranged from aesthetics and critical theory to the first-published English translations of major figures in politics and philosophy to artist writings and interviews.

The press freely defied traditional practices of publishing by creating books in a variety of formats, including e-books, paperbacks, and even a stone book. Methods of distribution were just as varied: some titles were available on Amazon and at bookshops, while others

were given away at art spaces or political protests. Approaching publishing as a creative endeavor, Badlands considered books not only as the written word on bound pages but as objects in themselves.

Arguments and Nonprojections



Paul Chan, *The argument: haircut (of the year)*, 2012-2013. Cords, outlets, cardboard, 120 3/4 x 206 3/4 x 60 1/4 in. © Paul Chan. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York. Photo: Jason Mandella.

In 2012 Chan began developing the *Arguments*, which take the form of electrical cords that plug into myriad surfaces and objects, such as concrete-filled shoes, furniture, cardboard boxes, doors, and electrical outlets. Soon after, he started the *Nonprojections*, which consist of projectors sitting idly on the floor, their lenses pulsating with light. Having no surface onto which to project, the equipment is rendered useless. The flickering imagery becomes, as the artist describes, "ghostly visual impressions that one conjures up in one's mind when reading a good (or bad) book."

The *Arguments* and *Nonprojections* demonstrate Chan's continued engagement with the possibilities of the moving image, pushing the medium beyond itself. These works subvert our expectations that a video should always take the form of a projected image. The artist has arranged these materials to question their ultimate purpose. Here, wires conduct electricity but power no devices, while projectors are switched on but show no image. Chan has referred to these pieces as "works on strike," urging us to consider: "if these objects refuse to operate the way they typically should, what do they become instead?"

Breathers

Since 2015 Chan has been creating *Breathers*, billowing fabric "bodies" powered by industrial fans. He considers these to be at once sculptures and moving image works. For this series, he was inspired by the ancient Greek concept of *pneuma*, signifying "breath" or "spirit." He has also described the works as "animated by breath" and "clothing for spirits."



View of the exhibition *Paul Chan: Breathers*, 2022. Photo: Kameron Herndon for Walker Art Center, courtesy Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

Breathers were followed by a series of works titled *Bathers*, which look to the art historical motif of the bather to explore the relationship between the individual, society, and nature. Most recent are the *Drowners* and *Deaders* that fail to remain upright, instead appearing defeated, wounded, or expired.

Each piece functions like a video loop with a defined choreography of repeated movement. To make each work, Chan created dozens of prototypes based on sewn patterns, and spent long stretches of time studying the movement of air through the fabric shells. His visually arresting and imposing pneumatic, or air-activated, sculptures of hooded figures strike a range of tones and allusions. They may conjure menacing, scheming, and mournful scenes but also suggest the entanglement and vulnerability of personal relationships and sharing space with others.

Word Book

In 2020 Badlands Unlimited published *Word Book*, the first English translation of Ludwig Wittgenstein's 1925 *Wörterbuch für Volksschulen* (*Dictionary for Elementary Schools*). An influential 20th-century philosopher, Wittgenstein left his teaching position in Cambridge to become an elementary school teacher in a rural area in Austria.

Recognizing the need for a suitable dictionary for his students, he wrote a primer consisting of 5,968 words and concepts.

Chan illustrated the book using his nondominant left hand in what he calls the "left-handed path." As he describes, drawing this way resists the "spirit of authority" and encourages the idea that "one's weakness—given the right circumstances or frame of mind—may be one's real strength." On view on CAM's Project Wall is a new painted mural based on a drawing from Chan's *Word Book* series, *Spazieren, der Spaziergang* (*to stroll, stroll*).

Street Views: Paul' V.4.3

For *Street Views*, projected on the museum's facade every night from dusk to midnight, CAM presents *Paul' V.4.3* by Chan. An ongoing project begun in 2021, this work makes its public premiere at CAM.

Chan calls Paul' a "synthetic self-portrait," using the single apostrophe to denote the mathematical symbol for "prime," which identifies value as derivative of something original. Programmed and trained by Chan himself over the past three years, Paul' is designed to respond to queries about Chan, the *Breathers*, and "semself," the pronoun Chan invented to refer to Paul' and other synthetic agents. Over 1,600 questions were collected over the past three years from Chan's friends, strangers, artists, museum staff, children, and St. Louis residents. Responses to a sampling of the questions appear dynamically on the screen, as if someone were typing the words in real time. Paul' types at the same speed as Chan and even makes the same typing mistakes and misspellings the artist does. It is said that how a person types is as unique as their fingerprints.

Chan's ongoing private research and development in AI stems from his interest in imagining what a 21st-century kind of portrait might look and feel like. What would Holbein or Vermeer make today? "I want sem to do more than chat. I want Paul' to respond to questions and hold conversations like me. Just as a photographic or painted portrait may aspire to possess likeness, my ambition is to capture likeness in a durational medium like texting or a casual dialogue."



Paul Chan, *Spazieren, der Spaziergang* (*to stroll, stroll*), 2024. Painted mural based on a drawing. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York.

Paul Chan: Breathers is organized by the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis and curated by Pavel Pyš, Curator of Visual Arts and Collections Strategy; with Matthew Villar Miranda, Curatorial Associate, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, and former Curatorial Fellow, Visual Arts. The Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis exhibition is organized by Misa Jeffereis, Associate Curator.

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Paul Chan. Photo: Photo: John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

Related Programs

For a complete list of programs, please visit camstl.org.

Artist Talk: Paul Chan

Saturday, March 9, 11:00 am–12:00 pm

Power of Creative Pauses: Beethoven's String Quartet Op. 131

Thursday, March 28, 7:30 pm

Fluid Perspectives: Pack Dance Performance

Thursday, April 18 at CAM, 7:30–8:30 pm

Friday, April 26 at SLAM, 6:00–7:00 pm

RE: Deep Breathing

Wednesday, May 1, 6:00–7:30 pm

Learn More

Visit our website for more about *Paul Chan: Breathers*, including an **audio guide** from the curator.



Paul Chan (b. 1973, Hong Kong; lives and works in New York) was recently named a 2022 MacArthur Fellow by the MacArthur Foundation. He was the 2014 recipient of the Hugo Boss Prize, which coincided with his solo exhibition *Nonprojections for New Lovers* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2015). In 2019, Chan was one of six artists to co-curate the group exhibition *Artistic License: Six Takes on the Guggenheim Collection*. Solo exhibitions include *Odysseus and the Bathers*, Museum of Cycladic Art, Athens (2018); *Bathers at Night*, Remai Modern, Saskatoon (2018); *Rhi Anima*, Greene Naftali, New York (2017); *Pillowsophia*, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia (2017); *Hippias Minor*, Deste Foundation Project Space, Slaughterhouse, Hydra (2015); *Selected Works*, Schaulager, Basel (2014); *My laws are my whores*, The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, Chicago (2009); *The 7 Lights*, New Museum, New York (2008); and *The 7 Lights*, Serpentine Gallery, London (2007). Chan's work is in the collections of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; Art Institute of Chicago; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, among others.



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