

# ARTFORUM

SUMMER 2006

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

Chris Marker Portfolio  
Allan Kaprow Remembered  
Terry Eagleton on Slavoj Žižek  
Paul Chan



\$10.00



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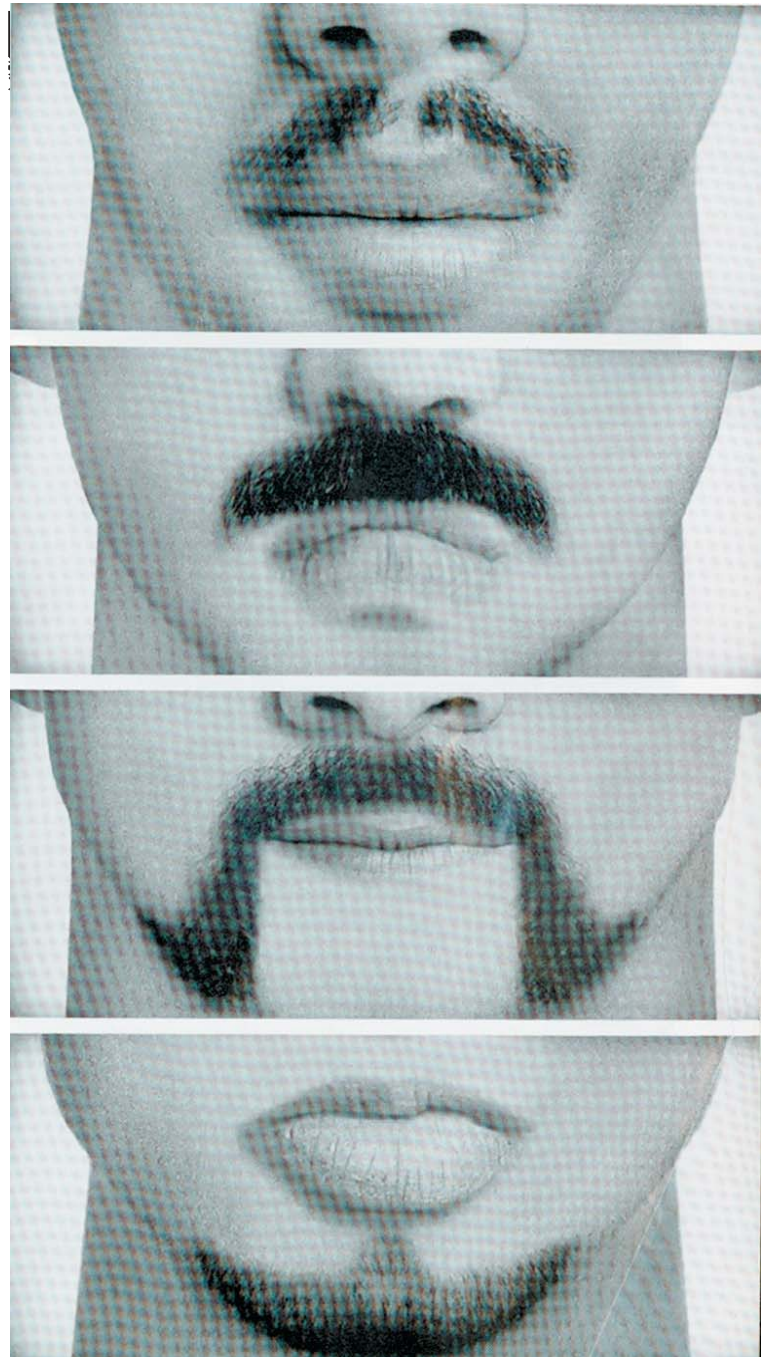
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## Embedded in the Culture

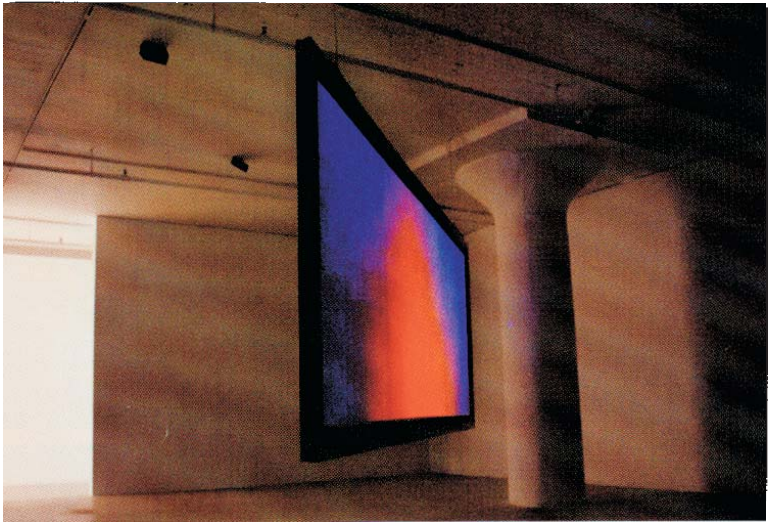
Scott Rothkopf on the art of Paul Chan

**THE ELEVATOR** man is hassling me. I'm in a building in Chelsea trying to find Paul Chan's studio, but his name isn't listed in the directory and I'm not making much progress with the attendant. "Why do you want to see him?" I'm asked. "What do you do? Is he expecting you?" The interrogation is unsettling—my first maximum-security studio visit. Despite my best efforts, the attendant refuses to divulge the suite number but eventually agrees to take me there. He asks the other passengers to wait as he chains the elevator cage open and proceeds to lead me along an anonymous hall to a door simply marked **KNOCK HARD**. It swings open and Chan greets me warmly, a gesture that appears both to relieve and slightly disappoint my imposing escort. Once we're inside, the artist matter-of-factly explains that he had asked the building's staff not to reveal his whereabouts after an unexpected visit from plainclothes investigators in the summer of 2004, when he was at work on *The People's Guide to the Republican National Convention*, a map-cum-handbook for protesters that remains one of the liveliest and most acute artistic responses to that roiling political season.

This story is a précis of sorts: its improbable and immediate politicization of a simple studio visit succinctly captures the tensions subtending the whole of Chan's multifarious practice, from his large-scale animated projections and almost academic charcoal drawings to projects like the map and a video made from footage shot in Baghdad on the eve of war. I hesitated to tell it, though, given the artist's repeated insistence on the distinction between his well-documented political activities (on behalf of groups such as Voices in the Wilderness, the Teamsters, and Indymedia) and his more artistic ones—a nearly inviolable separation that has become one of the defining tropes of his critical reception. At first, Chan's position might seem a kind of cover-your-ass pragmatism at a time when "political art" (a term that, he wryly observes, is often followed by the caveat "whatever that means") invariably provokes the clichéd charge of its supposed inefficacy.



Opposite page: Paul Chan, *1st Night* (detail), 2005, still from a color video, 14 minutes. From the series "Lights Cycle," 2005. This page: Paul Chan, *Now Let Us Praise American Leftists*, 2000, stills from a black-and-white video, 2 minutes 30 seconds.



Yet his vigilant border patrol, an admitted “provocation,” derives from a carefully considered and deeply held philosophical position. He sees his politics and his art as pursuing two fundamentally different aims, the former practically addressing present social conditions with specific ends in mind, the latter ambiguously posing “new questions for possible futures.” In interview after interview, Chan has made eloquent comments to the following effect:

Collective social power needs the language of politics, which means, among other things, that people need to consolidate identities, to provide answers . . . to make things happen. Whereas my art is nothing if not the *dispersion* of power. . . . And so, in a way, the political project and the art project are sometimes in opposition.

Point taken. Chan’s Ranciéan wariness about reducing what he sees as art’s polysemy to politics’ “message” is certainly compelling, and one should hesitate to use his activism as a badge of honor for his “gallery work.” Yet Chan is not Carl Andre or Donald Judd at a late-’60s meeting of the Art Workers Coalition expounding on the gulf between metal boxes and Vietnam protest politics. To maintain such a distinction in his case risks an altogether different kind of reduction, requiring us to determine which of his diverse activities might qualify as “art” and, conversely, which do not. Surely we could draw a line between his video installations and his on-the-ground involvement with certain activist groups. But what of Chan’s artful RNC map; or his freely downloadable fonts in which letters correspond to icons or slogans from ACT UP and the Black



Panthers; to say nothing of his single-channel video response to the controversial conviction of civil rights lawyer Lynne Stewart? With these slippery examples in mind, it may be more meaningful to embrace Chan’s blurring of categories rather than their delineation. Altogether distinct from many artists’ wholesale engagement with the social sphere or their appropriation and depiction of it, Chan’s project is propelled by a kind of wily perversion wherein a pop aesthetic at once winsome and brutal is brought to bear on the peculiar urgencies of our time. The point, then, is not so much to delimit the aesthetic and the political but rather to relish the productive possibilities of their mutual contamination.

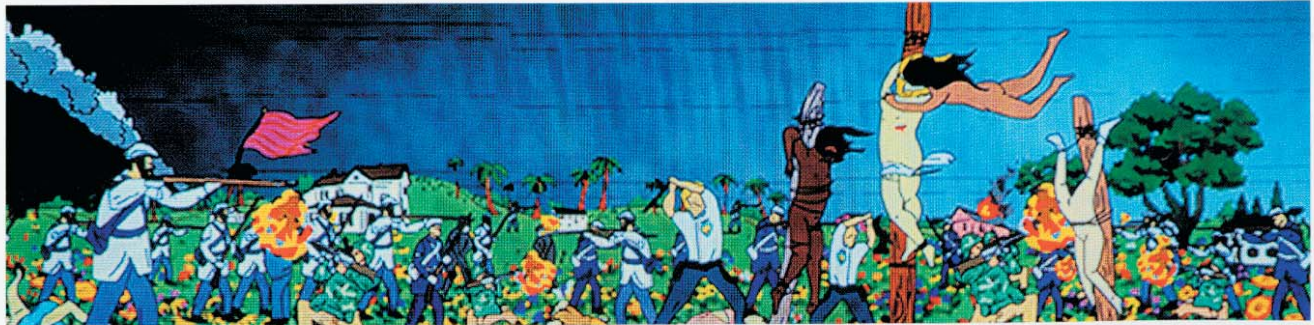
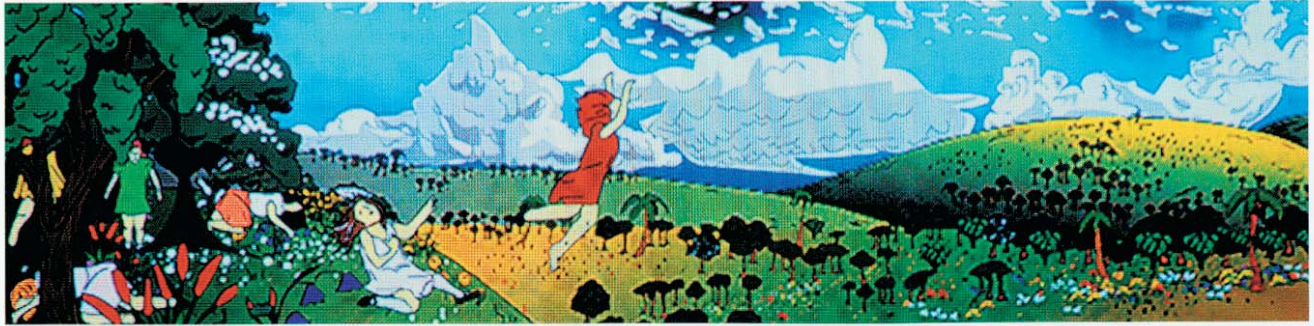
Accordingly, lavish experiments in crossbreeding often serve as the formal and narrative motors propelling Chan’s art. This methodology is particularly evident in his two large-scale animated video projections, the first of which marries the nineteenth-century utopian socialist philosophies of Charles Fourier with the mystifying corpus of the reclusive janitor-turned-master draftsman Henry Darger. Projected on an eight-foot-long paper screen pieced together like Darger’s Cinemascope drawings, Chan’s *Happiness (Finally) After 35,000 Years of Civilization*, 1999–2003, depicts a verdant paradise in which a latter-day gaggle

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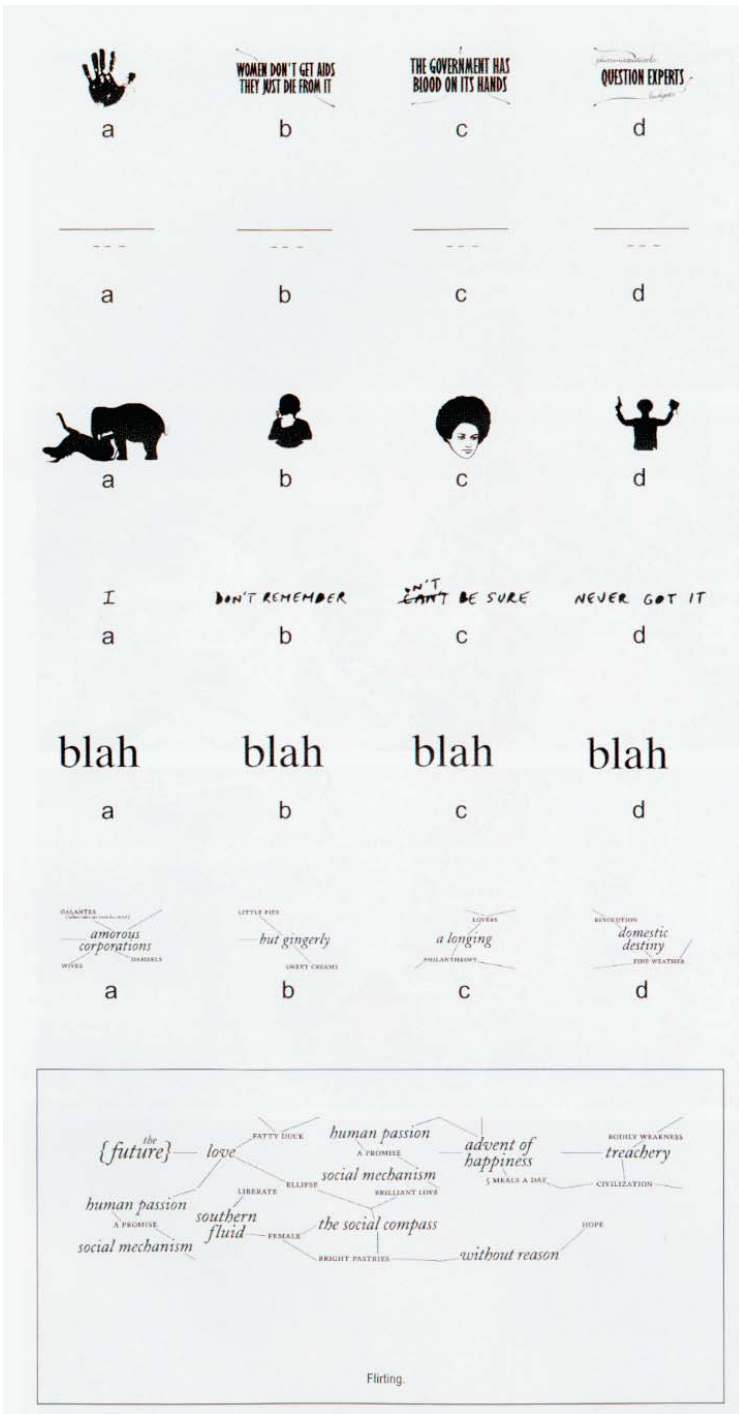
of Vivian girls lounge about munching exotic flora, pleasuring themselves, and shitting wherever they please. Back home, in a gustatory riff on Fourier’s vision of plenty, they tuck into a frantic banquet set to the pared-down strains of “Big Pimpin’,” Jay-Z’s anthem to livin’ large. But the agents of bourgeois civilization soon descend in the form of cell phone-toting suits, academics in violet regalia, and soldiers reminiscent of Darger’s evil Glandelinians. A nightmare of killing and natural catastrophe ensues until a Richter-like seismic of effulgent color engulfs the screen and a new race of naked girls emerges to mourn the carnage and run through a peaceful land once more. Chan’s follow-up animation, *My birds . . . trash . . . the future*, 2004, is equally hybrid in its sources if bleaker in tone. Here, *Happiness’s* lush greenery gives way to a barren

field dominated by a huge dead tree, which recalls the setting of *Waiting for Godot*. Home to twenty birds (and a bat) that Chan took from the list of inedible fowl enumerated amid Leviticus’s dietary laws, this desolate landscape is first populated by twin slain poets of social injustice—a naked and shivering Pier Paolo Pasolini and an amputee Biggie Smalls in standard-issue puffy coat—before being overrun by a Hummer full of paparazzi snapping pics of the gnarled tree, now hung with bodies as in Goya’s “Disasters of War”; an invasion of pantless hunters; copulating refugees; and suicide bombers wearing nothing but their deadly backpacks.

The promiscuousness of Chan’s sources and his densely braided narratives could easily inspire reams of almost scriptural exegesis, and it’s clear that his meditations on utopia and apocalypse are meant to open a liberatory space for thought beyond the empty solutions and body counts that undergird political discourse in our still-young millennium. But Chan’s quite literally fantastic worlds are also resolutely tethered to our own through a rich network of visual and aural allusions—chief among them a low-tech form of digital rendering, which may well represent one of the most original approaches to drawing



Opposite page, above: Paul Chan, *My birds ... trash ... the future*, 2004. Installation view, Greene Naftali, New York, 2004. Below: Paul Chan, *My birds ... trash ... the future*, 2004. Projection views of a digital animation, 16 minutes 37 seconds. This page: Paul Chan, *Happiness (Finally) After 35,000 Years of Civilization (after Henry Darger and Charles Fourier)*, 1999–2003. Projection views of a digital animation, 17 minutes 20 seconds.



This page, top: Paul Chan, six TrueType fonts. From top: *The Party's Not Over—ACT UP*, v.1, 2000. *The Wave, Gone*, 2005. *Black Panther Omega* 2000, 2000–2005. *Self Portrait as a Font-Print*, 2001. *Politics to Come*, 2005. *The Future Must Be Sweet—after Charles Fourier*, 2001. This page, bottom: Paul Chan, *Alternantheria* [Maps of the Future I (Flirting)], 2001, screenprint on archival paper, 30 x 40". Opposite page, top: Paul Chan, *RE: The Operation*, 2002, stills from a color video, 27 minutes. Bottom: Paul Chan, *Now Promise Now Threat*, 2004, still from a color video, 32 minutes.

today. The flat, brightly colored, bitmapped shapes of Chan's settings and characters are immediately familiar from early video games or cartoons like *South Park*. Yet he brings to the genre a remarkable degree of invention and formal bravura, whether through the almost Matissean dissociation of his dazzling color and supple line or the mismatching of graphic conventions, as in his pairing of tonal shading with modeling based on stacked planes of graduated value. Chan pushes such disjunctions further through jarring shifts in scale and point of view, lowering us like the Vivian girls amid towering blades of grass or raising us up to hover directly over the dead soldiers' supine bodies.

These spatial gymnastics grow most extreme in his visual suturing of the projections on either side of *My birds*' suspended screen, which has less to do with video games than it does with Michael Snow's 1974 *Two Sides to Every Story*. Walking around this immense object, we can see the action unfold from two almost directly opposing viewpoints but, of course, can never occupy them both at once. Chan helps us find our bearings by situating the massive tree equidistant from the foreground on either side so that we can gauge the yawning illusionistic space between a figure placed directly before us on one side and our far-off view of his back on the other. What's uncanny, though, is the realization that, when standing directly before the hulking frame of, say, Biggie, we are actually occupying part of the visual field described on the screen's reverse face, though our presence would never be registered there. Pictorial space, then, seems to extend infinitely toward a horizon in both directions, fictively obliterating its physical container and, in the process, our view of ourselves. Such formal experimentation is hardly empty showmanship but has everything to do with inspiring a kind of wonder perfectly in keeping with Chan's metaphysical thematics, while drawing us, almost literally, into his allegorical universe.

Apart from his animation style, Chan marshals an eclectic range of references that connect his dreamscapes to our cultural databank, but not through iconographic identification alone. The scenes of destruction in *Happiness*, for instance, involve panhistorical quotations of Bruegel's *Tower of Babel*, Hans Bellmer's four-legged bodiless bodies, and Nick Ur's iconic image of a screaming Vietnamese girl after a napalm attack—all scored with the explosion not of bombs but fireworks accompanied by the requisite *oohs* and *aahs*. It's through subtle touches like this sound effect that Chan often strikes his most resonant critical chords, cleverly hinging the surreal Technicolor warfare on-screen to our chillingly debased suburban patriotism. Likewise, *My birds*' sound track derives from avian calls, car alarms, and hip-hop cell-phone ring tones that play snippets of rap or Roberta Flack's "Killing Me Softly," as famously covered by the Fugees. These spare MIDI clips, files of uncertain copyright status that Chan downloaded freely from the Internet, hint at the resourcefulness, and complexity, of his dexterous high/low sampling.

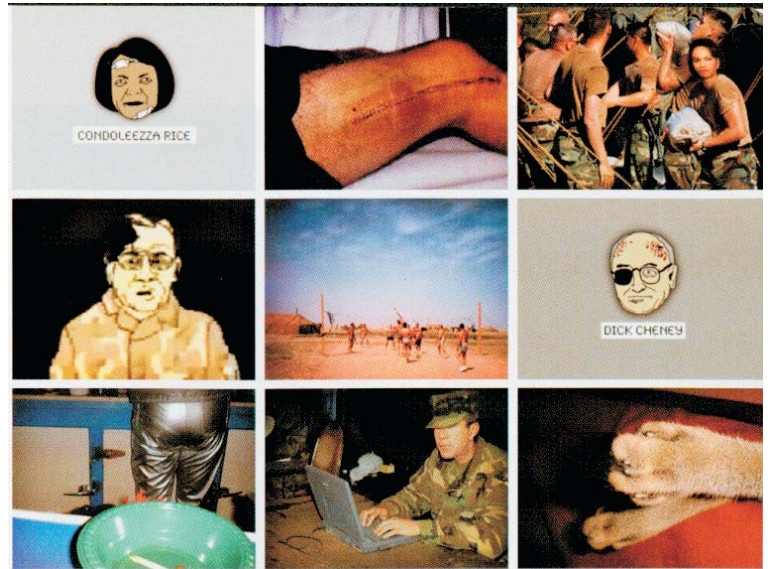
Indeed, Chan's appropriative strategies reach well beyond the now-ubiquitous collaging of disparate cultural references to engage and interweave diverse strands of our contemporary mediascape, which at times brings the lofty literary pitch of his work crashing down to pop-cultural terra firma. Chan, for example, adapted the sheets of paper blown in *My birds*' biblical windstorm directly from a Microsoft Windows screen graphic, while in another video a stentorian narration of a satirical text by Kari Krauss is economically punctuated by the quack and "indigo" tone familiar to error-prone Mac users. This work, *Now Let Us Praise American Leftists*, 2000, also relies on the software used by law enforcement officials to render images of suspects, which the artist harnesses to conjure a rogues' gallery of facial-hair styles corresponding to members of the Black Liberation Army, the Jewish Agitation Bureau, and just about every stripe of leftist in between. Chan, we might say, does not so much illustrate our contemporary mediascape as inhabit it. With a nimble, intuitive grasp of diverse technologies, he establishes a bidirectional circuit through

which purloined elements of the digital continuum are synthesized within his works, parts of which may then seep back into the world—often far outside art’s institutional structures. He has freely distributed downloadable desktop icons of bloodied Bush cabinet members from one of his videos on a website that otherwise purveys images of hip-hop stars, just as he has made available on his own site nearly a dozen fonts for home-computer use. These include *The Wave, Gone*, 2005, a typeface eulogizing Agnes Martin by rendering every letter as a pair of tremulous horizontal lines, and *The Future Must Be Sweet—After Charles Fourier*, 2001, a DIY utopian theory kit in which typing V produces the word “violence,” X the “unknown,” and g a constellation linking the phrase “the social compass” to “bright pastries” and “brilliant love.”

If the imaginary realms of Chan’s most painterly video projections are shot through with a network of worldly references and even the actual stuff of our now-immaterial material culture, conversely, his works engaged more directly with present social circumstances are subjected to layers of poetic and pictorial sabotage. In 2002, Chan responded to the US invasion of Afghanistan with *RE: The Operation*, a spellbinding fever dream in which he imagines the members of the Bush cabinet writing letters home from some nondescript foreign front. As the video begins, a voice-over in the guise of then-National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice numbly contemplates the erotics of war before musing tartly about one of her predecessors, “Sometimes I wonder how Madeleine did it. But now I know. She didn’t have to choose between her mind and her body for men to understand her, because they were both the same: mean and ugly.” Next up, Secretary of Transportation Norman Mineta drafts a to-do list that includes finding both a shipment of two-hundred-pound body bags and a recipe for lobster bisque. Varying wildly in subject and tone, the narrations largely accompany a succession of still images that range from banal American street scenes and pet-filled domestic interiors to close-ups of wounded limbs, snapshots of recreation at desert military installations, and images of GIs on which Chan has digitally superimposed the cabinet members’ heads.

Although *RE: The Operation* was made in advance of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, in retrospect it seems startlingly prescient with regard to the military action and rhetoric to come. Even more compelling—and potentially revelatory—however, is its gripping admixture of scathing satire and an almost touching sympathy for these agents of our present global conflict. Chan clearly understood that to pull off his absurd conceit, the cabinet members’ missives home would have to evoke the poignancy of the genre. When George Bush writes in a letter to Laura, “I miss you and the dogs” before struggling to understand Dick Cheney’s references to Robespierre and, finally, requesting “more jerky,” we are struck by both the hideous consequences of his callow worldview and the pathos of his momentary literary identification with those he sent to war. As in *Happiness* and *My birds*, Chan here, too, cannily invokes today’s technological landscape. Take, for example, Donald Rumsfeld’s congratulatory video greeting to MANDY\_RUMSFELDT98T@HOTMAIL.COM: In a setup

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eerily akin to recent hostage videos, an animated secretary of defense, his head bandaged, is seen through a screen of blocky pixilation familiar to anyone who has ever streamed video on a low-band Internet connection. “I’m told you received a degree from . . .” he begins, but his patchy speech is interrupted by coughs and flashes of the word BUFFERING, before he arrives at his penultimate observation: “We must learn to live with low-density hope.” Indeed, its high-density variant now seems well behind us.

Chan followed *RE: The Operation* with two more single-channel videos, which he grouped with the first under the title the *Tin Drum Trilogy*. Its central work, *Baghdad in No Particular Order*, 2003, draws on his four-week sojourn in the Iraqi capital just months before its invasion. Chan traveled there under the auspices of Voices in the Wilderness, an activist group that had since 1996 protested US economic sanctions against Iraq and has subsequently been ordered by a federal court to pay a substantial fine for illegally dispensing aid there. During his stay, he shot hours of video and hundreds of photographs of ordinary people posing for the camera or going about their daily lives. On his return, the snapshots were made into posters appended with only the word BAGHDAD and the date on which they were taken; a volunteer collective then plastered them by the thousands around New York and more than forty other cities during the buildup to war. The related video could be called Chan’s most





straightforward “documentary,” in that it ambles almost randomly from marketplace to household, café to Christmas Mass, without any obvious digital effects. But, as usual, Chan injects this aleatory compendium with a level of beguiling ambiguity by overlaying it with a patchy narration in five languages, which casts the authority and coherence of his viewpoint in doubt as much as his repeated relinquishing of the camera to his supposed subjects. A year later, Chan completed his trilogy with *Now Promise Now Threat*, 2004, a collage of footage he shot in his hometown of Omaha, Nebraska, as he attempted to come to grips with Bush’s reelection by chronicling the divergent local realities of “red state” America.

If, as Chan has said, art, in contrast to politics, is about “questions that we don’t even know how to ask yet,” then the *Tin Drum Trilogy* would clearly fit the bill. Though somewhat uneven in execution, each of its individual chapters unfolds as a restless and curious response to a pressing circumstance that seems somehow beyond the pale of reason and, perhaps by extension, determinate action. Yet it would be disingenuous to suggest that the videos are entirely innocent of suasion, either, whether acting as a proleptic condemnation of a coming war or a call to consider the potential casualties of one already underway.



This tension is perhaps most perfectly crystallized in Chan’s seventeen-minute portrait of Lynne Stewart (2005), which makes the dyad of poetics and politics both its subject and its means. In the video, the well-known activist defense lawyer Stewart discusses her recent conviction for providing material aid to terrorists and lying to the government, charges that centered on her relaying of messages from her imprisoned client Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman to the press. Stewart’s guilty verdict, whether or not it is well founded in current law, raises important questions about civil liberties and the rights of legal counsel at a time when the current administration is methodically compromising justice in the name of a dubious sense of security (a point Chan poses bluntly by opening his video with a recording of John Ashcroft singing “Why Me, Lord?” while an intertitle notes that in 2002 the then-attorney general appeared “on *Late Night with David Letterman* to announce terrorism charges” against Stewart).

Stewart, somewhat surprisingly, interlaces her discourse on the law with comments on the emotional impact and ethics of poetry, which she has often read before juries and proceeds to do for us in the voice of the amiable grade school librarian she in fact once was. The screen cuts from her image to a vivid field of slowly dissolving color (a graphic device Chan has used in nearly all his videos), as she recites the words of John Ashbery: “If it was treason it was so well handled that it became unimaginable. No,” she continues. “it was ambrosia.” Whether these lines apply

to Stewart’s actions, those of the government, both, or neither remains uncertain, which may be precisely Chan’s point. His simple video is riven by symphonic pauses, gaps between Stewart’s speech and her often frozen image, which open this moving portrait of a grandmother facing thirty years in prison to haunting holes in reason and wells of conflicting emotion. Stewart’s portrait has clearly been crafted to convince us of her martyrdom—a decidedly political, if debatable, argument to advance as she awaits sentencing—but its thematic and structural preoccupations with poetry unequivocally reveal the potential reciprocities between activist aims and more clearly artistic ones.

With its iPod-ready delivery system, Chan’s *My Own Private Alexandria* is an engrossing self-portrait in the age of Google, a composite image of an empathetic young artist finding his way through a vast cultural inheritance.

This slippery negotiation played out to perhaps its greatest effect in *The People’s Guide to the Republican National Convention*, which Chan designed as part of the loose collective Friends of William Blake. Distributed by the thousands online and in cultural centers, the map served foremost as a digest of information useful—perhaps in equal measure—to protesters and delegates of the 2004 RNC. The foldout broadside detailed the schedule of the week’s various events, as well as the hotels and adult entertainment venues that visiting Republicans were expected to patronize. One could find tips for getting around and eating on the cheap in New York, what to do in case of arrest, and how to go about using “public” toilets at spots like Tiffany’s and Bergdorf’s. But Chan supplemented this informational tool with a dense web of metaphoric and pictorial whimsy that pitched the project into a dreamy headspace. There are quotes from Kathy Acker and Maurice Blanchot, unsigned contributions from artist friends, and a large burst of flames that holds the words, WITH A KISS LET US SET OUT FOR AN UNKNOWN WORLD.



Opposite page, above: Paul Chan, *Untitled video on Lynne Stewart and her conviction, the law and poetry*, 2005, color video, 17 minutes. Below: Paul Chan, *Baghdad In No Particular Order*, 2003, stills from a color video, 51 minutes. This page: *Friends of William Blake: The People's Guide to the Republican National Convention* (detail), 2004, foldout map, 22 x 33".

While Chan's recourse to such graphic and philosophical play suggests a certain idealism, even utopianism, it speaks to a poignant realism as well—a way perhaps to hedge potential political losses with other intangible gains. George Bush, of course, is still in power, which not so subtly indicates that the *People's Guide* failed to achieve its ultimate goal. But Chan's work allows that through poetry—and, dare one say, beauty—other spaces of resistance might be found. This is not mere escapism. Rather, Chan seems always to be questioning how diverse realms of thought and our more worldly travails might be brought into a kind of precarious alignment. Nowhere is this more evident than on his website ([www.nationalphilistine.com](http://www.nationalphilistine.com)), which has lately been relaunched as *My Own Private Alexandria*, quite possibly his magnum opus. There one finds an extremely personal library of forty-five free MP3 recordings in which Chan reads texts spanning twenty-five hundred years of history and authors as diverse as Lao Zi, Colette, Mark Twain, Adorno, and the food writer M. F. K. Fisher. At first, the catalogue can seem daunting, even off-putting, in its just-so mix of the trendy and the obscure. But the more than sixteen hours of audio files, which Chan undertook as a way of working through an artistic dry spell, bristle with the humane, offhand charm of which he is a master. Each opens with a kind of hokey synthesized musical theme (think gongs and triangles on the way into the evening news), before Chan recites texts refreshingly scarred by coughs, stumbles, and mispronunciations—all of which are catalogued on the website's master list along with the source's ISBN number and keywords like "sharks," "truth as impediment," and "hating kids" (see "From *Slices of Knowledge* by Henri Michaux"). In a nod to our in-boxes' catholic scramble, the clips can be sorted by date, length, and headings such as "works containing recipes" and "works written in the midst of war." With its iPod-ready delivery system, Chan's

*Alexandria* is an engrossing self-portrait in the age of Google, a composite image of an empathetic young artist finding his way through a vast cultural inheritance. "Here we are, then," he seems to say, "but where exactly is that?"

In an interview last year, Chan commented on the importance of "reckless compassion," a phrase that pertains to his reading of Colette, his video portraits of Stewart and the citizens of Baghdad and Nebraska, and, indeed, to the whole of his capacious art. We find it in *My birds*, when the outcast flock of winged creatures performs random acts of charity like pecking at the nooses hanging from their tree, restraining Biggie during the windstorm, or bringing blankets for the masses of huddling refugees. We find it even in the searing eloquence and improbable humanity with which Chan endows some of the hapless members of Bush's cabinet. And we find it as well in the generous silence that accompanies the shadowy vision of falling bodies in his mesmerizing recent animations *1st Light* and *2nd Light*, both 2005. Chan's work is deeply felt and, though full of wit, it makes sparing use of irony at a time when that rhetorical device is often summoned as the best defense against a geopolitical crisis seemingly immune to our protests. This is a risky stance to take. There is the risk of dashed hopes and emotional betrayal, the risk, above all, of the cloying sentiment for which advanced art has rarely had much use. But these are risks well worth taking, and Chan is a canny tactician when it comes to managing them. Here is where his digital samples and mordant humor serve to temper but never to undermine the optimism necessary to address one's work—whether obliquely or directly—to the troubling state of human affairs. This, after all, is a body of wartime art, however quaint and unfamiliar and, finally, urgent such a phrase may feel today. □

SCOTT ROTHKOPF IS A SENIOR EDITOR OF ARTFORUM.