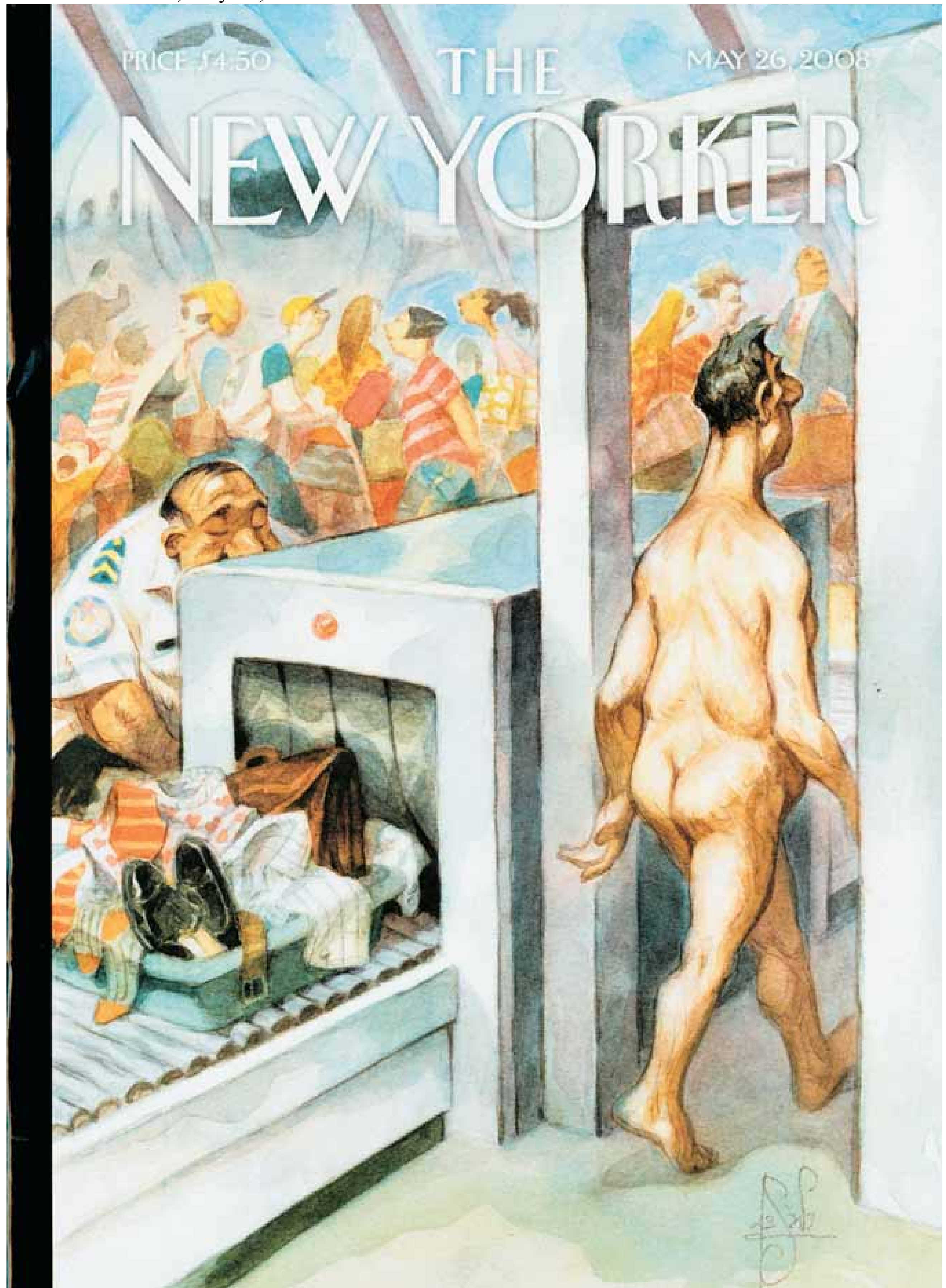
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PROFILES

SHADOW PLAYER

The provocations of Paul Chan.

BY CALVIN TOMKINS

Two weeks before the opening of Paul Chan's current exhibition at the New Museum of contemporary art, a mysterious poster began appearing on walls and billboards in downtown Manhattan. In black type on a white background, it read:

> You ~~think~~
> ~~things~~ will ~~end.~~
> ~~And that will~~ be the
> opening.
>
> ~~I want you to know~~
> ~~things don't think~~ to
> end.
> ~~And that is~~
> the promise and the
> threat.

The brief text, composed by Chan, could be read with or without the words that were struck out. Either way, it seemed to carry a message that was ambiguous, elusive, and somewhat ominous, and in this sense it accurately reflected the body of work—in video animations and documentaries, drawings, photographs, and other media—that has made Chan one of the more closely watched artists of his generation.

Thirty-five years old and a bit under five and a half feet tall, Chan himself can be quite elusive, although he tries hard not to be. Many things amuse him, and he is attuned to the enriching absurdities of the moment. Not long ago, when my wife and I were having dinner with him at a downtown restaurant, the co-owner came over and asked whether he was our son. Chan looked up at her and nodded guilelessly. She persisted: Was he in college? What was he studying? "I'm studying to be an artist," he said, not quite untruthfully.

The exhibition, called "The 7 ~~Lights~~," will be on view here through June 29th. It is Chan's first one-man exhibition in a New York museum, and only his second solo appearance here since he showed at the Greene Naftali Gallery in 2004. His name still draws a blank among some art-world professionals, but important collectors, including Dakis Joannou and David Teiger, have bought his work, and it is in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum, and the Walker Art Center, in Minneapolis. "His work is really about dissolution," Kathy Hallbreich, the new associate director of MOMA, said recently. "Dissolution of faith, dissolution of the worlds we know. . . . He has figured out a way to make the perils of our time accessible."

Most of the darkened space on the New Museum's third floor is devoted to his shadow plays ("Lights") of moving computer-generated images, all of which date from the past three years. (When I asked him why the word "Lights" was struck out in the title, he said, "Because what I'm showing are projections of light and shadows, and shadows are light that is struck out.") There are six projections in the title series, each soundless and lasting fourteen minutes; a seventh takes the form of abstract drawings on music manuscript paper. They all begin with a flood of warm colors, reds and yellows, which gradually give way to black, silhouetted images. In "1st ~~Light~~," the initial images include a telephone pole, overhead wires, and flocks of birds; into this space, a minute later, small objects slowly rise—cell phones, eyeglasses, folding chairs, an iPod—defying gravity and breaking apart. Larger objects float up: a police car, a bicycle, and then, shockingly, a body hurtles downward. More human figures fall, sometimes singly, sometimes in pairs or groups, travelling much faster than the rising objects, until color returns in washes of deep blue and violet and the cycle begins anew.

One thinks inevitably of September 11th. Also the Apocalypse and the Rapture, but with a twist—God welcoming our consumer goods while send-

ing us to the Other Place. When I asked Chan about this, he grinned and said, "Given that what I like is to turn things upside down, I thought it might be more interesting if Jesus didn't take anyone, but only took our favorite things." Quasi-religious content, pushed by darker impulses, is a recurrent factor in Chan's work. "Paul is not religious," Massimiliano Gioni, the New Museum curator who installed the show, says, "but there is a spiritual tension in all his work, and a troubled relationship with religion." Ever since his student days, Chan has been engaged in social activism as well as in art, even while insisting, not entirely persuasively, that the two are not only separate but incompatible: politics is about concentrating power, he says, and art is about dispersing it. Certain works of art resist our attempts to interpret or explain them, Chan believes, and that resistance—what he calls their "articulate speechlessness"—is what gives them enduring power.

Chan says his art aims for "articulate speechlessness." Photograph by Steve Pyke.

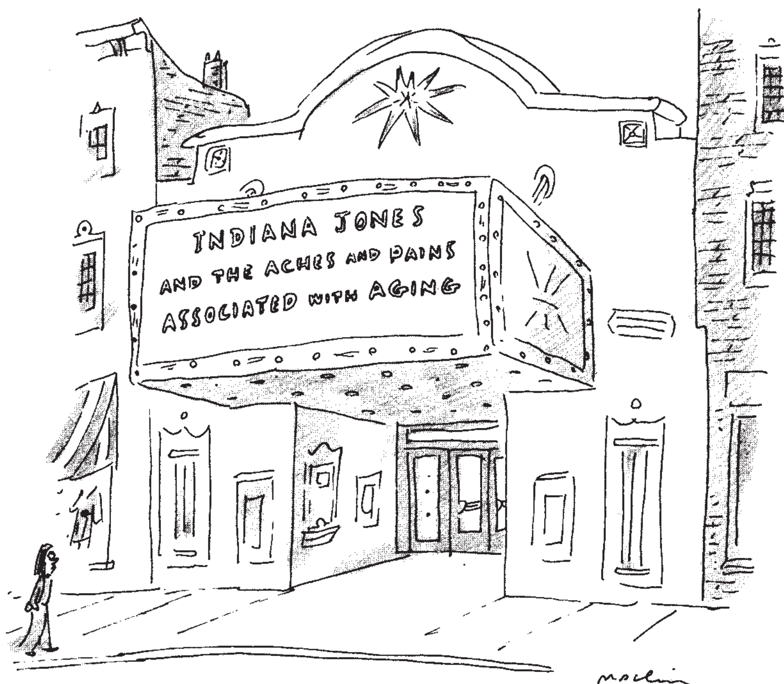
More than a thousand people came to the opening of Chan's New Museum show, on April 8th. His mother and sister had both flown in from Chicago, and Marlo Poras, the young documentary filmmaker with whom he lives, had arrived the night before from Beijing, where she was researching a new film. The opening had the festive, excited feeling of an art-world event, a confirmation. Chan, who is rarely seen in anything more formal than jeans and a T-shirt, had dressed for the occasion in a dark-blue pin-striped suit made to order by a downtown tailor (Lord Willy's) he'd heard about from a friend. "I'm strangely calm," he told me, laughing. "But then I don't know when I'm not strangely calm."

Paul Chan first experienced the articulate speechlessness of great art in his freshman year at Omaha North High School. His family had moved to Omaha when he was eight. Trying to impress a girl in the senior class, he took her to see a new theatre company in town, which was doing three short plays by Samuel Beckett. "Even now, talking to you, I can feel the shiver of it," he said. "I didn't even pretend to understand it. I probably still don't understand it. But the combination of the cadence and the rhythms of the words coming at you, and the space and the lighting—it encompassed a kind of netherworld that I had never imagined, and couldn't imagine anyone imagining. I was just gone."

To get to this point, Chan had already bridged some impressive distances. Born in Hong Kong in 1973, when it was still a British Crown Colony, he had spent his early years living in a two-room apartment with his mother, who taught high-school biology; his father, a former teacher who had stopped working; his paternal grandfather; his "auntie"; and his sister, Anna, who was eighteen months younger than Paul but whom he always thought of as being older, because she took care of him. "I was sick and clumsy," he remembers. "I fell a lot—I had trouble with gravity." He was also severely asthmatic. When the Chans immigrated to the United States, in 1981, it was mainly to find a healthier environment for Paul.

The family ran what Paul calls "a typical Midwestern Chinese restaurant" in Omaha. He adjusted easily to American life. He had learned English in Hong Kong and had watched a lot of American TV, so he felt at home in the culture; as his asthma cleared up, he found that he could play football and basketball and other sports. "My mom became an avid sports fan. We lived in a lower-middle-class suburb in Omaha, and if you said 'How about the Cowboys?' you were O.K."

When it came time for college, he chose the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, but not because he had decided to be an artist. "I assumed an art school would give me the kind of freedom I needed to learn at my own pace, and I guessed right," he said. "I took a lot of non-art courses. I studied video production and journalism." On his own, he read a lot, something he had been doing since his Beckett epiphany. Beckett had led him to Eugène Ionesco and Edward Albee, and to Gertrude Stein, and eventually to twentieth-century European literary, social, and political theorists: Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin,



Jacques Derrida, Maurice Blanchot, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and others. "It was just reckless self-education," he told me. "Part of the pleasure of reading Derrida is precisely that I do not have to understand him. Comprehension is not the game. I don't care what he thinks he's saying—I want to read word for word, and pay attention so much that I begin to hallucinate. Which I think is a very reckless way of reading, but for me a productive one."

In his last two years at the Art Institute, he began to concentrate on video. "It was the beginning of the global political landscape," he said, "and the personal computer was getting powerful enough to edit video at home." Chan's technical skills were immediately evident. When he graduated, in 1996, he was offered a teaching position in the Art Institute's video department, and that led, two years later, to a somewhat similar job at Fordham University, in New York.

After work, at Fordham or alone in his rented room in Chelsea, he made single-channel videos, which were more attuned to polemics than to art. "All you needed to do that was a video camera and a computer," he said. He had a girlfriend, and he was discovering the art world, going to galleries and museums and alternative spaces and performances. "In a way, I felt like king of the hill," he remembers. "I was young, I was teaching, I was living in New York, I'd started showing in small film and video festivals." But Norman Cowie, an assistant professor in the Fordham communications department and a close friend, kept pushing him to go back to school. There was very little money available for video artists, and, as Cowie knew, without a master's degree there was no hope of getting a decent teaching job. Bard College, two hours north of the city, offered an excellent M.F.A. program in three summer sessions; Chan applied to Bard, and started there in the summer of 2000.

The program at Bard was interdisciplinary: painting and sculpture, film and video, creative writing, music, and photography. Chan says the most useful advice he received came during a conversation with the artist Amy Sillman, who was (and still is) on the faculty. "Paul," she told him, "it's clear that you're very bright, but dumb people make great work, too." This was the first time he'd realized that "the intellect had no priority, that there are different senses involved when you make forms," he said. "At the time, I thought you could think it through."

In his three summers at Bard, Chan drew and animated, on his computer, thousands of images for a video that would become his first important art work. The idea for this had been germinating since his student days in Chicago, when he discovered the drawings and writings of a Chicago janitor and outsider artist named Henry Darger. In a fifteen-thousand-page manuscript discovered just before his death, in 1973, Darger had imagined, in words and accompanying watercolors, a fantasy world of prepubescent girls—often naked or semi-naked—whose leaders mount a rebellion against a regime of child slavery imposed on them by adults. "It threw me for a loop," Chan remembers, "all those naked bodies and physical and metaphysical violence." He added, "It didn't make sense to me until I read Charles Fourier, the nineteenth-century utopian philosopher. Fourier was the Rosetta stone for Darger."

The link between Darger and Fourier is a little hard to discern. Darger didn't know about Fourier, as far as we know, and the rest of us may be inclined to see the connection as a dazzling example of Chan's "reckless" reading technique. "He and Darger were both hedonists and proto-feminists," Chan said, trying to be helpful, "and, to me, Darger was illustrating Fourier's philosophy." Chan had made some drawings on the Darger-Fourier theme before he got to Bard, but it was there, working fourteen hours a day or more at his computer, that he completed the seventeen-minute animated video called "Happiness (Finally) After 35,000 Years of Civilization—After Henry Darger and Charles Fourier."

The real world, meanwhile, had grown darker. Chan was attending a film and video conference in Amsterdam on September 11, 2001. Hearing people talking about something that had happened in New York, he went to a nearby bar and saw TV images of the Pentagon on fire. "Coming back from Amsterdam, the first thought was just to understand my city again," he said. "To see friends, do what you can, try to come to terms with it. To have coherent thoughts about what had happened seemed like hubris."

The war in Afghanistan triggered something, though; he made a single-channel video called "Re: The_Operation," in which members of the Bush Administration, their faces bloodied or bandaged, can be heard (in voice-over) writing letters home from the front—as if they themselves had gone to fight.

Chan's opposition to the invasion of Iraq brought him into contact with Voices in the Wilderness, a Chicago-based group formed in 1996 to protest the economic sanctions that were causing such devastation for Iraqi civilians. The group had been sending small teams into Iraq, in defiance of U.S. law. Chan joined a team that left for Baghdad on December 12, 2002. For the next month, he spent much of his time talking to people and shooting video footage and still photographs of everyday life in Baghdad. He was surprised by how friendly most Iraqis were, and how unconcerned they seemed over what was about to happen to them. "I was also surprised by how Western it felt there," he said. "I heard hip-hop songs playing on the radio that I'd heard two weeks before in New York." When people in Baghdad heard his name, they got very excited. "Jackie Chan?" they'd ask.

In New York, Chan and others posted thousands of copies of his photographs of Iraqi civilians around town, each one imprinted with a date and the word "Baghdad." Chan, who had left Fordham in 2001 and was teaching at Hunter College and the University of Pennsylvania, talked about his Iraq experiences at several colleges and at informal gatherings in New York and other cities. He edited his footage into a video that he called "Baghdad in No Particular Order," which was shown in a MOMA nonfiction film series at the Gramercy Theatre. "In the midst of all this," he told me, "I got an e-mail from Carol Greene"—the owner of the Greene Naftali Gallery, in Chelsea—"asking to see some of my work. I sent her DVD documentation of 'Happiness,' and she put it in her 2003 summer show." What people saw there was not the DVD but a full-scale video installation projected on a two-sided, translucent three-by-eight-foot screen that allowed the vividly colored images to appear on both sides. It was the first piece of Chan's to appear in an art gallery, and several reviewers took notice. Roberta Smith, in the *Times*, called it "a brilliantly imagined work." David Teiger bought the Greene Naftali installation (one of an edition of six) and donated it to MOMA. Chan's reaction was typically low key. "Iraq had taken over my life," he said, "so it was nice to be reminded that there were other parts."

He immediately set to work on a second animated video. Called "My birds . . . trash . . . the future," this one was grimmer in tone and content than anything he'd done to date. "My birds," which occupied him for a year and a half, evoked a sort of wasteland, with a Goyaesque dead tree full of carrion birds, a huge black cloud that suggested, among other things, the oil wells that Saddam's retreating army had set on fire in the first Gulf War, and two male protagonists (based on the rapper Biggie Smalls and the director Pier Paolo Pasolini, both murder victims in real life) struggling to survive marauding hunters, freezing cold, and violent winds. The new work was a two-channel projection; each side of the fourteen-foot-long screen showed the same scene (more or less), but from different angles, front and back. "When I was making the piece, I was a real misanthrope," Chan said. "I wanted to use the form of 'Waiting for Godot,' but I didn't want to give hope to humans, so I gave it to birds. They're the Biblical birds, the ones you're forbidden to eat in Leviticus." He added, "It's the birds who wait. They stick around. They act more human than the humans."

"My birds" drew respectful, though not ecstatic, reviews when it was shown at Greene Naftali in 2004. Jerry Saltz, in the *Village Voice*, praised the work's "extravagant, eye-popping color"; the *Times*' Michael Kimmelman called it "hypnotic at first, then dull." Carol Greene had no trouble placing all five editions of the new work in major collections, however; there is a deep emotional undercurrent to Chan's videos, a sense of longing and even pain which is strangely moving. "Whatever he does is charged," the artist Rachel Harrison, who has known Chan since 2002, said. "It feels like it's exploding."

Chan and I are in the back room of his studio, a drab two-room suite in an industrial building in Chelsea. Computer equipment takes up most of the space, but to protect himself from what

he calls "the tyranny of connectedness" he has no Internet access. A side wall is covered with sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century illustrations from pornographic books—research for his new art project, which, he tells me, deals with "the secular trio of politics, philosophy, and pornography, the three things that freed us from God as an institution." (A large drawing of the Marquis de Sade, flaunting both rifle and penis, is wedged into an alcove in Chan's New Museum show: a preview of coming events.) On one of his several computers, he demonstrates for me the process by which he animates his images, using a sequence from "My birds." "That's my last window," he says. What he means is that he's no longer making works that, like a great deal of art since the Renaissance, give the impression that you're looking at a scene framed by a window. His alternative, he says, is "windowless light," as in "The 7 ~~Lights~~."

After "My birds," Chan's next step was to animate a famous Caravaggio still-life, the "Basket of Fruit" (c. 1599). He had read that this was "the stillest thing in painting," so, naturally, he drew his own version of it on a computer and set it in motion. Leaves, stems, grapes, pears break away one by one and rise slowly, quiveringly, followed eventually by the basket itself. With the Caravaggio piece, he said, "Part of the idea had to do with religion as an invisible force, like gravity, and so can you invert it?" He was pleased with the video—it's called "Untitled (After St. Caravaggio)," and is in the New Museum show—but it wasn't really what he'd been after. "It still has the lines and shapes and colors of 'My birds,' and you're still looking at it through the camera obscura of the past. I realized that what I had to do was impoverish the image. I had to give up all the things that I thought were my strengths—the vibrant color, the brutal clarity of line that comes from digital animations, the sort of depth I got by almost putting the foreground and the background together. If you're willing to impoverish, you can go on to something else."

The solution gradually took shape as he lay in bed watching the play of light and shadow on the floor, wall, and ceiling of his bedroom, which by then was in a tiny apartment in Brooklyn. "The shadows cast by the power lines and the trees and the cars carried all the rhythms, movements, and dimensions of images in a film," he said. "After the Caravaggio piece, I said, 'No more color, no more sharp lines. Can you work with blurry? Can you work with a projection that is not framed, and project it on the floor? Can you free it from what it is, to become what it can be?'" At first, he tried to capture real shadows with a video camera, but that didn't work—the results were both "too real and not real enough." In the end, over two years, he drew every image and detail in "The 7 ~~Lights~~" himself and animated them digitally.

In the fall of 2006, Chan was invited to lecture on art at Tulane University. He had never been to New Orleans, and the city's devastation astonished him. "The smell of putridness was still there if the wind was right," he said. Back in New York, he talked to Anne Pasternak, the president and artistic director of the public-art organization Creative Time, about an idea that had come to him, which was to have "Waiting for Godot" performed, outdoors, in that stricken city. Susan Sontag's production of the play in Sarajevo, in 1993, was certainly on his mind, but "Godot" seemed even more relevant to the situation in New Orleans. "You couldn't help but see it," he remembers telling Pasternak. "The emptiness, the stillness, the sense of waiting—they're still waiting for help."

"The minute I heard that, goose bumps went down my arms," Pasternak remembers. "'I don't know what this means,' I said, 'but I'm in.'" What it meant for Chan was a nine-month obsession, which began with his going to see Christopher McElroen, the co-founder of the Classical Theatre of Harlem. Chan had heard about the group's 2006 performance of "Godot" in Harlem, which was inspired by Katrina; its central prop was a rooftop emerging from a stage flooded with water. McElroen had originally wanted to take his own production to New Orleans, but the logistics were too complicated. Early in 2007, Creative Time agreed to produce the play.

"I knew we couldn't take anything for granted, certainly not an audience," Chan told me. "Who wants art? We went around talking to as many different people down there as we could, not selling them the idea that New York artists were coming to bring them something but just letting them know we were going to be in town and would love to work with them." They spoke to a man named Robert Lynn Green, Sr., whose mother and three-year-old granddaughter had died in the flood. Green, who is fifty-three, was living in a FEMA trailer in the Lower Ninth Ward, where his house had been—the area was now a bare, weed-choked landscape, with concrete slabs the only evidence of the missing houses. "Robert really sweated me," Chan said. "'Why do you want to do this? What does it have to do with us?'" Chan gave him his telephone number and his copy of the play, and the next morning Green called him. "Let us not waste our time in idle discourse," he said, quoting Beckett. After that, Green became their unofficial ambassador, adviser, and chief publicist.

Chan moved to New Orleans in August, and stayed there. Marlo Poras, his girlfriend, took time off from her filmmaking and moved down, too. New Orleans "was like nothing I'd experienced," she told me. "Paul lost himself in wanting to help." He came up with the idea of a "shadow fund," to match the money that Creative Time was raising for the production and to distribute grants to local community groups. He taught, without pay, at Xavier and at the University of New Orleans, and he went every Sunday to Robert Green's Baptist church.

The site Chan and McElroen eventually selected was in the Lower Ninth Ward, a couple of blocks from Green's trailer and close to one of the breached levees. It matched Beckett's stage direction: "A country road. A tree." (Some big trees had survived here, but the one they used was made by Chan, out of a junked metal coatrack and other scrap materials.) Urged to perform in another neighborhood as well, because the city's tragedy was so widespread, Chan and McElroen picked a site in the badly damaged Gentilly section. Wendell Pierce, who played Didi in the Harlem production and would play him again in New Orleans, had grown up in Gentilly; everyone in town knew him from "The Wire," the HBO series in which he had appeared for the past five years. After months of preparatory work, they scheduled four perfor-

mances in early November, two in the Lower Ninth and two the following weekend in Gentilly. Admission was free; Creative Time was providing chairs for six hundred people, but nobody had any idea how many would show up.

As it turned out, more than a thousand people had to be turned away at the first performance. A school bus that was supposed to bring the unnamed messenger ("a boy") to the stage couldn't get through; McElroen had the boy sit in the audience and put a spotlight on him when he moved forward to speak his lines. The audience, which was about equally divided between blacks and whites, and included plenty of children, was served gumbo in a tent near the performance area, and was then led to the seats by a second-line jazz band.

McElroen had cast other actors from Classical Theatre's repertory group as Gogo (J. Kyle Manzay) and Pozzo (T. Ryder Smith), and local actors for the other roles. There had been some problems in rehearsal, but the first performance went off without a hitch. The audience listened raptly, and roared with laughter at the jokes—especially Pierce's improvised line when he ran into the audience and came back saying, "What are all these white people doing in the Ninth Ward?" (Pierce is black.) At the curtain call, the cast took their bows and then turned and, as McElroen said, "kind of melted into the darkness, walking slowly back toward the broken levee. It was one of the most powerful moments I've ever experienced."

So many people were turned away the next night that they did a third performance in the Ninth Ward, and the crowds were almost as big. "There were times when I felt I wasn't in a play," Pierce said recently. "To be surrounded by the people of that community, in the middle of the Ninth Ward, where many have died, and it's two and a half years later and still looking like that. And you're saying, 'At this place, at this moment in time, all mankind is us. Let us make the most of it. While we have a chance let us do something, before it's too late.' Those lines just ring and ring."

A few days after his opening at the New Museum, Chan returned to New Orleans for the first time since "Godot." Robert Green had invited him to a memorial service he'd arranged for his granddaughter, and Chan went with Marlo and his mother. Before he left, I asked him whether the "Godot" experience had changed his thinking about the incompatibility of art and politics, or art and social justice. Chan thought for a minute and then, quietly, said no. "People did come together," he said. "That was part of what happened, but it wasn't what I was after. I was after articulate speechlessness—you know, the thing I talked about in my first experience with Beckett. It's like the clearing of a space. My mind was cleared for something else to happen, which I think is what art does. If you do it right, that's what happens." He went on, "I think that art can be any number of things at once, and they can all be contradictory." ♦