So Gorky’s fusion of Miró and Matta in the mid-1940s is particularly productive in that it leads the way to his greatest work. As it happens, Matta will eventually have an affair with Gorky’s spouse, and this, along with a series of other devastating events, will contribute to Gorky’s tragic downfall and suicide in 1948, which dramatically ends one of the most crucial careers in the early formation of the New York School.

ALEXANDER ALBERRO


Note
1 Following the Philadelphia run of the show, the exhibition travels to the Tate Modern in London, and then to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

PERVERSION, ABSTRACTION AND THE LIMITS OF THE HUMAN

On Paul Chan at Greene Naftali, New York

Viewers of last summer’s Venice biennial were confronted with a special form of the “theater of cruelty”. New York-based artist Paul Chan, who in recent years attracted international attention for his apocalyptic-poetic work cycle “7 Lights” among others, had animated a shadow theater entitled “Sade for Sade’s Sake” featuring anonymous figures in a spectacle between libertinage, Bruce Nauman, Abu Ghraib and Pasolini with a duration of several hours.

The presentation of this work at Greene Naftali in New York now offered another opportunity to encounter Chan’s consciously perverse reflections on the relationship between aesthetics and politics in modern and contemporary art.

In his brief end-of-the-decade reflections in Artforum (December 2009), Hal Foster nominates Paul Chan as among the most significant artists of the early twenty-first century. Foster suggests that the best contemporary work engages a certain “precarity” at work in both artistic discourse and the sociopolitical field. In artistic discourse, according to Foster, this precarity is evidenced by a lack of any overarching criteria in the face of a radically heterogeneous array of concerns, legacies and problem-sets at work in contemporary art, a condition that calls for provisional, situated, and multifaceted acts of judgment that nevertheless hold at bay an indifferent affirmation of plurality as such. The precarity at work in the socio-political field is indexed for Foster by the chain of crises marking the past decade ranging from 9/11 to Hurricane
Katrina to the current global recession, all of which have involved (uneven) intensifications of human vulnerability to risk, suffering and death. As an example of a productive mediation between these two senses of precarity, Foster refers cursorily to Chan’s "7 Lights", the theologically-inflected cycle of projected animations in which ghostly silhouettes of everyday consumer objects drift across hypnotically illuminated color-fields projected onto the gallery floor while those of floundering bodies seem to “fall” in the opposite direction – an inversion of the apocalyptic scenario of the “ascension of the blessed” that simultaneously functions as a traumatic afterimage of 9/11. Unfortunately, Foster does not situate “7 Lights” in relation to the overall spectrum of Chan’s œuvre over the past decade, the highpoints of which would include the digital animation/installation “My Birds … Trash … The Future” (2003), the counter-cartographic project with Friends of William Blake, “People’s Guide to the Republican National Convention” (2004), the series of hallucinatory Bush-era video-essays, “Tin Drum Trilogy” (2003–2005), and the site-specific collaborative production “Waiting for Godot in New Orleans” (2007). Had Foster done so, Chan would arguably have to emerge not only as one interesting artist among others in a productively uncertain contemporary field, but as the exemplary artist of our time insofar as he has systemically dismantled a series of critical antinomies – aesthetics and politics, autonomy and engagement, excess and utility, abstraction and site-specificity, sacred and secular, old media and new media, among others – that make and unmake the very disciplinary parameters of the artistic field itself.

Chan signals his simultaneous concern with these multiple registers in the title of his recent exhibition at Greene Naftali, “Sade for Sade’s Sake”. This title echoes the classical Kantian axiom concerning the “purposeful purposelessness” of the aesthetic object – later popularized as l’art pour l’art – in which the autonomous, self-legislating artwork is understood as an analogue to the freedom of the human subject from being instrumentalized by or instrumentalizing others. However, Chan inhabits the axiomatic structure of “for its own sake” only to expose Kantian moral rectitude and its Greenbergian correlate in modernist medium-specificity to a kind of polymorphous – yet rigorously structured – perversity at the level of formal medium and psychosocial resonance alike.

First exhibited during the 2009 Venice Bien- nal, the centerpiece of “Sade for Sade’s Sake” was a digitally animated shadow-projection on the gallery wall which oscillated between figuration and abstraction. Set off against the eerie, gradually-shifting palette of crepuscular light operative in earlier works such as “My Birds …”, “Now Promise”, and “7 Lights”, the life-scale shadow-figures in this projection twitched, jerked and spasmed like uncannily animated marionettes or automata. Mostly outlined to indicate male genitals – although at least one was marked as female – these figures sexually engaged and brutalized one another, their movements animated by a kind of frenetic rhythm that never seemed to reach an end or climax. In addition, the figures were accompanied by a series of variously-sized black squares that variously evoke windows, screens, paintings, or torture-blocks before changing places or disappearing altogether. Chan’s shadow play operated a series of indexical traces of a non-existent tableau within which we were nevertheless implicated by virtue of standing in front of the illuminated surface, as if it were the presence of our bodies outlined against the projected light (indeed, when one passed in front of the three floor-bound projectors, one’s own shadow and that of the animation would temporarily overlap). Chan’s decision to use the visibly irregular surface of the gallery wall – with window panes, radiators, and columns – further highlighted our ambivalent position as spectators, situated phenomenologically within a play of light and dark in a specific architectural space, on the one hand, and a psychic theater of pornographic phantasmagoria on the other. Our very participation in the space
of aesthetic contemplation thus seemed complicit with an unconscious archive of perversions and abominations.

The figures in Chan’s projection were mobilized within a kind of rule-bound economy of positions and configurations in such a way that terms of active and passive, aggressor and victim, top and bottom, freedom and determination become undecidable (which is not to say that brutal inequities between the “masters” and “slaves” were not evident). Exceeding “sex” as either a consensual exchange of desires or as a form of utopian desublimation, this inventory included practices of torture, with shadow-bodies hung from the ceiling and arranged into piles that alluded to the Abu Ghraib photographs of 2004 as unmistakably as the “falling bodies” of “7 Lights” allude to 9/11. Chan’s linking of Abu Ghraib with Sade was implicitly mediated by Pier Paolo Pasolini’s “Salo or the 120 Days of Sodom” (1975) which diagrams the precisely ritualized sexual violence practiced on a group of young peasants by a quartet of powerful libertines (the Duke, the Bishop, the Magistrate and the President) and their collaborators in the final days of the Italian Fascist regime. Indeed, “Sade for Sade’s Sake” might be regarded as a kind of contemporary remake or reenactment of Pasolini’s infamously “unwatchable” film, to the extent such a thing could be possible.

Over the course of what was ultimately a 5:45 hours long projection divided into 45-second “scenes” – likened by Chan to the lines of a ballad – the figurative gestalt of these shadow-beings variously came in and out of visibility as they were eventually reduced to a rapid succession of dismembered body parts – arms, torsos, genitals, heads. Set off against the otherwise monochromatic color-fields of the projection, these shadows came to echo the aleatory composition of torn paper-shards by Hans Arp’s “Papier Dechiré”. At several points over the course of the projection, the appearance and disappearance of the spectral part-objects was sped up to a kind of frenetic pace, recalling at once the dynamics of inscrip-
scale. Frequently redacted with black lines like so many CIA documents, many of these drawings functioned as almost pedagogical demonstrations of the “law” underlying the apparently irrational word-chains of commands, pleas, profanities, and bodily onomoeia generated by Chan’s pornographic-cum-poetic writing-machine: “I need it A I know B … I want it C Mister D [d* teach me]”.

In the same room as the font-based projects was a remarkable series of line drawings echoing the sense of precarious figuration at work in the shadow-projections, for instance, in “Oh What Glory Wholes”, bodies are piled into a kind of pyramid-formation recalling the most infamously “sculptural” of the Abu Ghraib images. The precise number of bodies is impossible to determine, however, due to Chan’s mode of draughtsmanship, in which the body is indicated not with a unitary shape, outline, or modeling, but rather as an accumulated joining of uneven ovaline loops of various sizes, almost like a diagram of the jointed wooden mannequins traditionally used for training in figure-drawing, albeit with a wavering, asymmetrical contour. In and of themselves, none of these empty “holes” in the white expanse of the page bears a mimetic relation to the body; like the line drawings made by Matisse to accompany Mallarmé’s poetry, it is only in their unending play of presence and absence that they come to describe a figure. Piled onto one another, these semiotically precarious figures begin to loop and interloop one another in such a way that they gave way to a kind of abstract tanglework of lines. The latter effect is intensified in “lilf”, in which any sense of a discreet tableaux has been eliminated in favor of an allower composition of asymmetrical lines that at first glance look like a rayograph of shoestrings or electrical wires. However, the elements of figuration here come in and out of legibility in such a way as to suggest bodies bound and tied together as if a sado-masochistic session, an Actionist performance, or indeed, a scene of political torture. Furthermore, like the erotic allusion made by the title “Oh What Glory Wholes” – a clever punning between bodily and architectural “holes” of sex-clubs and the organic “wholeness” demanded of the artwork by traditional aesthetic theory – “lilf” participates in the ever-expanding series of revisions made to the pop-cultural acronym MILF – “Moms I’d Like To Fuck” – in this case substituting an indeterminate “L” for “M”. Given Chan’s concerns throughout the exhibition, however, we can only imagine that the “L” stands for “lawyer” or even “law” itself: “Laws I’d Like to Fuck.”

Throughout “Sade for Sade’s Sake”, Chan’s interweaving of projects of “pure” visual abstraction and “debased” practices of embodiment worked to probe the limits of who or what is legible as the human – limits in the sense of both the line and shape of the human figure, as well as in legal and political terms of which lives are framed as worthy of protection, sustenance, and grievability. One’s overall impression from the show was that Chan is at once passionately attracted to and violently repulsed by the universalist claims of abstraction – whether in law or art – as both an emancipatory promise and a barbaric threat concerning the limits of the human. This was the paradox explored by Hannah Arendt in her account of stateless refugees in possession of nothing other than their bare, universal humanity. The abstraction or reduction of humans to their humanity involves a failure of law to protect humans from persecution and suffering, a condition that gives rise to the “humanitarian” administration of sheer biophysical life in camps and feeding-centers. Yet a certain appeal to the higher law of “human rights” can also provide a condition for the making of dissensual claims vis-à-vis those particular legal regimes that tolerate if not enact persecution in the biopolitical domains of war, immigration, health, environment, and sexuality, among many others.

To be sure, “Sade for Sade’s Sake” makes no overt mention of such contemporary biopolitical conflicts over the status of the human, nor of the endless intertwining of law, sex and violence in mass-mediated imaginary of the United States, from the nightly scandals of “sex-addicted” legis-
lators, to the murder of abortion doctors, to the trafficking of immigrant women, to the pornographic avatars of Sarah Palin and beyond.

However, it is undoubtedly with such biopolitical and mass-cultural phenomena in mind that Chan reactivates the legacy of Sade, treating the latter as neither a heroic transgressor nor secret champion of the law, but rather as an exemplary literary corpus in which the heritage of the Enlightenment – reason, autonomy, freedom, universality – are undecidably bound up with their opposites. As in the work of Kara Walker – whose cutout silhouettes are a major point of reference for Chan – “Sade for Sade’s Sake” is ultimately a call for infinite vigilance to those both inside and outside the artistic realm concerning persistent historical legacies of dehumanization and our complicity therewith. Such legacies cast a dramatic shadow over the increasingly precarious hopes Americans and others have invested in the messianic figure of Obama, a condition that makes Chan’s provocation all the more challenging than had it been made two years ago during the Bush Administration’s “state of exception”.

YATES MCKEE


Notes


4 Paraphrasing Adorno, I suggest “Art After Abu Ghraib” as the horizon of Chan’s negotiation of figuration and abstraction in: Yates McKee, ”The Prayers and Tears of Paul Chan”, in: Paul Chan, Tin Drum Trilogy, Video Data Bank, 2008.


7 A series of 21 such font-systems are available for free download at Chan’s website, www.nationalphilistine.org.


