



Wendell Pierce, left, and J. Kyle Manzay rehearsing Paul Chan's production of "Waiting for Godot," set in the badly damaged Gentilly neighborhood of New Orleans.

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A Broken City. A Tree. Evening.

The Vast Nothingness Evoked by 'Waiting for Godot' Plays a Large Part in a Project by the Artist and Activist Paul Chan

NEW ORLEANS

IN an instant all will vanish and we'll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness."

When the actor Wendell Pierce spoke these words in performances of "Waiting for Godot" here last month, he really was in the middle of nothingness, or what looked a lot like it.

The performances, by the Classical Theater of Harlem, took place outdoors in parts of the city particularly hard hit by Hurricane Katrina and slow to recover. In the Gentilly section, a gutted, storm-ruined house was used as a set. In the Lower Ninth Ward, where one of the largest black neighborhoods in a mostly black city was all but erased by roof-high water surging through a levee, the intersection of two once-busy streets was the stage.

The streets are empty now, lined with bare lots. A few trees and houses stand far off. Reclamation work by returning homeowners and volunteers is under way. But some residents live in cramped trailers supplied by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, here widely despised for its inefficiency. Under the circumstances, Beckett's words sounded less like an existentialist cri de coeur than like a terse topographic description.

The "Godot" performances were not isolated theatrical events. They were part of a larger project conceived by the New York artist Paul Chan, 34, who is well known to the international art world for his video animations of paradises embattled and lost, and to law enforcement officials for his activist politics.

In person quiet, good-humored and self-contained, he is an unlikely firebrand. He is also an unusual model for an artist, being one for whom creating objects in the studio and dynamic situations outside it are equally important. ~~and for whom reading, teaching, talking and writing are all part of a larger something called art.~~

Writing is everywhere in the Lower Ninth Ward. The faded circles, X's and numbers spray-painted on vacant houses by search teams after the storm continue to tell their coded tales: No bodies found. Two bodies in attic. Dead dog under porch.

A board propped against a ruined church carries a hand-painted text: "Can these bones live? Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and ye shall live." The words, evoking an apocalyptic future, are from Ezekiel.

Sometime in October, new words began to appear. Printed on small cardboard signs, they consisted of the same three phrases: "A country road. A tree. Evening." — an exact quotation of Beckett's scene-setting for "Godot."

The signs were designed by Mr. Chan and posted all over the city, in a distribution pattern that had a rhythm of surprise: Drive through a "good" neighborhood or a "bad" neighborhood and you'd spot one. At a traffic light, another one. On the boarded window of an abandoned shopping mall, another.

After a while the signs came to feel like a shared secret, or some bounteous but anonymous civic gift, the way Keith Haring's subway paintings felt in New York in the early 1980s. They added up to a visual network, art as a connective tissue for a torn-apart town.

Mr. Chan himself was everywhere in the city this fall, clearly at home in its multicultural dynamic. Born in Hong Kong, where he lived until he was 8, he spent his adolescence in Omaha. He went to school at the Art Institute of Chicago and Bard College, starting in photojournalism and branching out into drawing, graphics and video.

A glance at his art tells you he's a cultural polymath. The fantastic digital animations that first brought him art-world attention a few years ago refer to Beckett, Goya and Henry Darger, and blend images of biblical birds, suicide bombers and Biggie Smalls. They have the driven, eschatological urgency of outsider art. And New Orleans, an outsider city if ever there was one, where the self-taught artist Sister Gertrude Morgan (1900-80) preached in the streets and painted biracial heavens and hells at her home in the Lower Ninth Ward — the house is still there; it survived the flood — is right for him.

But he has landed in other vision-shaping places as well. In 2002 he went with an antiwar group on a medical mission to Iraq in defiance of United States sanctions. Photographs and a video came out of that.

In 2004 he was arrested after taking part in a demonstration at the Republican National Convention in New York. But, as is often the case, his political activity was twofold: in the street and in the studio, where as part of a collective called Friends of William Blake he designed a free New York map for protesters, pinpointing convention events, delegates' hotels and public toilets.

J. Kyle Manzay, left, and Wendell Pierce in a "Godot" that took place outdoors in various parts of New Orleans. In one area, the intersection of two once-busy streets was used as the stage.



More recently he has created gorgeous, shadowlike film projections of an everyday world in gravitational crisis — one was in the last Whitney Biennial — with bodies pulled down and objects floating away. At the same time he finished a filmed interview, broken by intervals of abstract color and light, with the civil liberties lawyer Lynne Stewart, who was convicted of passing information from an imprisoned client, Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, to terrorists.

A canny tactician, Mr. Chan insists that his art and his political work run on two separate, possibly conflicting, tracks. Political action is collaborative, goal-specific and designed for power, he maintains. Art, by contrast, is individually produced, ductile in meaning and built to last. It is the opposite of ideologically instrumental; it is made to melt power.

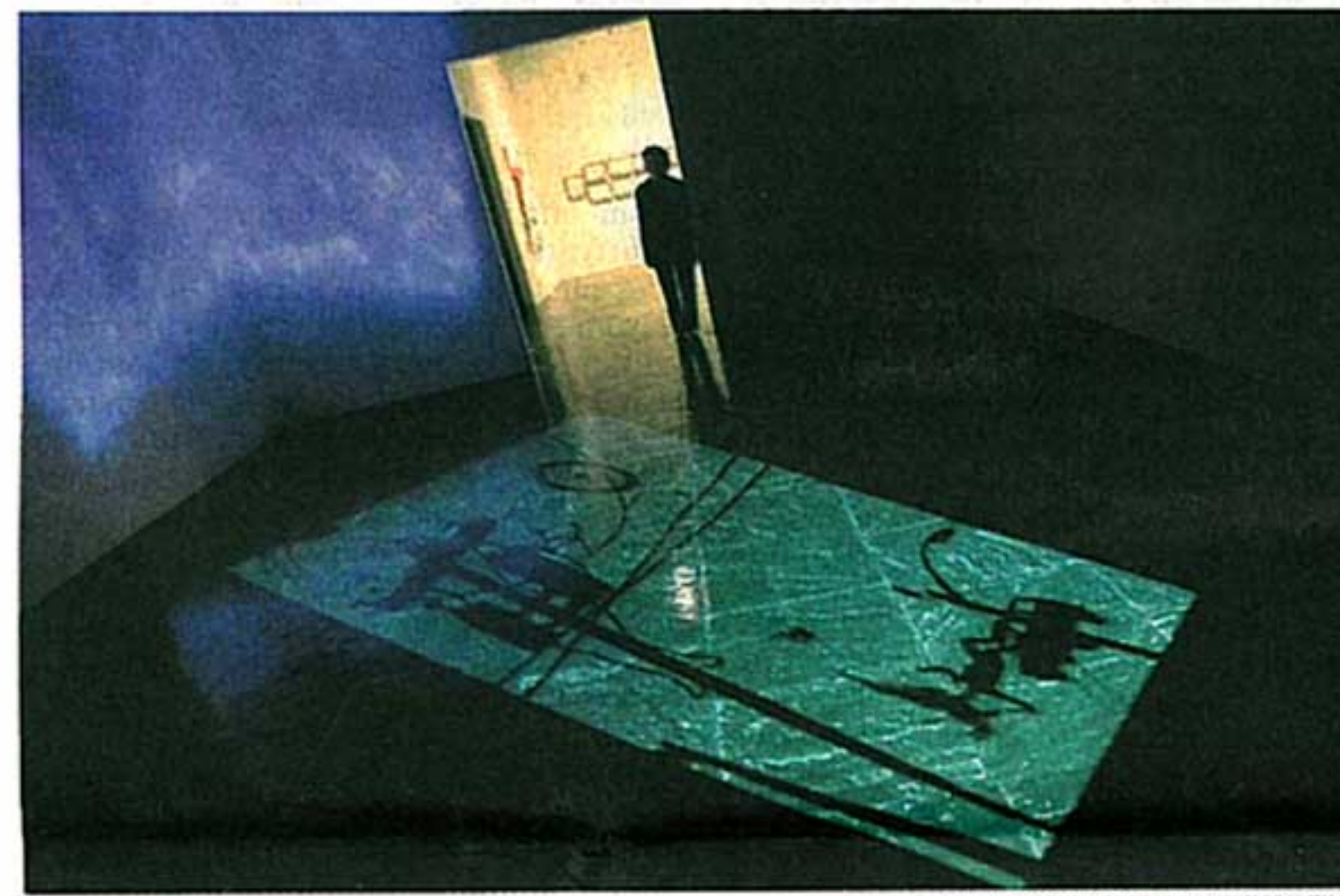
In New Orleans, though, the two trajectories merged in a multifaceted project that was various in form and meaning, communal, physically ephemeral yet socially and politically continuing. The project encompassed the "Godot" performances, but also included teaching and extended into neighborhoods and individual lives. It was a species of political art, one that enlarged and united both halves of that disparaged and despaired-of term.

Keeping the halves separate, you might say it was art that brought Mr. Chan to New Orleans and politics that kept him there. He came to the city for the first time last year to give a talk at Tulane University, where one of his shadow projections was installed. During a short stay, he visited the Lower Ninth Ward and was stunned by what he saw, both the ruin and the reclamation work.

In addition, the vista of empty streets, bare ground and solitary trees brought "Godot" to mind: he had already used the play's landscape as a setting for one his animations. This in turn evoked the memory of Susan Sontag's production with amateur actors in Sarajevo in 1993, and performances in prisons before that.

He contacted Creative Time, a nonprofit organization supporting public art (it presented "Towers of Light" at ground zero) and proposed a New Orleans "Godot" project, for which he would serve as a nebulously defined artistic director. Anne Pasternak, the director, said yes; Nato Thompson would oversee it as curator.

Mr. Chan approached Christopher McElroen, who had directed a well-received run of "Godot" for the Classical Theater of Harlem using the agonizing wait for help after Katrina as central metaphor. He agreed to rework the production for an outdoor setting. Three actors from the New York cast would appear, including Mr. Pierce, a New Orleans native familiar from the television show "The Wire." Others would be hired locally. Mr. Chan would design new props. There would be two performances at each location, admission first come first served, and free.



How an ambitious project in New Orleans blended words, images, acting, teaching and activism into a striking work of political art.

While all these arrangements were pending, the artist sought the advice of locals with strong thoughts on the project, among them the artist Willie Birch, the community organizer Ronald Lewis and Robert Green Sr., whose granddaughter had died in the flooded Lower Ninth. Initially, they were skeptical of what looked like to be another carpetbagging venture: privileged outside artist comes into a stricken city, makes a dramatic gesture for which he gets credit, and departs, leaving nothing useful behind.

Mr. Chan answered the doubts by committing himself to several months of teaching in public schools and universities before and after the "Godot" run. Through Creative Time, he also established a "shadow fund," in which donors would match dollar for dollar whatever the project cost, with the money staying in New Orleans,

Mr. Chan answered the doubts by committing himself to several months of teaching in public schools and universities before and after the "Godot" run. Through Creative Time, he also established a "shadow fund," in which donors would match dollar for dollar whatever the project cost, with the money staying in New Orleans, distributed among grass-roots organizations involved in the city's recovery.

Since the only promotion had been a stealth advertising of Mr. Chan's cryptic signs, there was no guarantee of an audience. But The Times-Picayune gave the event significant coverage, and thousands of people turned up for the performances over two November weekends. (A fifth was added to meet the demand.) At each, gumbo dinner was served and the audience was brought into the seating area by second-line jazz bands.

The "Godot" performances were different in the two locations. In the Lower Ninth, the surrounding terrain — no light no sounds, almost no people — became a character itself. Actors emerged from and vanished into darkness. At the end, Vladimir and Estragon walked off in the direction of the levee that had burst.

The house in Gentilly was closer to a traditional stage and grounded the play in everyday life. The very fact that the house had survived, standing, registered as a triumph, and the vaudeville side of Beckett play, the laughing in the dark, came forward.

New York. Mr. Chan stayed behind. He still had teaching to do. He would also be involved in a film about the project by Cauleen Smith, and a commemorative book with text by New Orleans writers. In all of this, teaching included, his creation of a shadow presence — himself — is one of the most interesting aspects of his work.



TED JACKSON/
NEWHOUSE NEWS SERVICE

Above, Paul Chan.
Right, Mr. Chan's "1st
Light, 2005," a digital
animated projection
that was featured at
the last Whitney
Biennial.

As an activist he understands the power of personal anonymity, or at least of elusiveness. It's a kind of freedom. It keeps the field of possibilities open, lets you go where you're not supposed to go, do what you have no right to do. You don't know what you're getting into? Great. Get into it. Make a mistake. Or be lucky. It's all the same. Then move on, back to the studio, into the street, wherever.

Mr. Chan was, of course, the center of the New Orleans project and the imagination behind what is essentially a time-based, collaborative work of performance art. The kind of dispersed authority it represents runs against present trends, which overwhelmingly favor the production of single objects in a capitalist marketplace. No mystery there.

Yet Mr. Chan is part of that same story. He makes exceptionally beautiful objects. His animations, projections and drawings are already in museum collections and will doubtless represent him in art-history books, those arbitrary compendiums written by museums. This is how the art industry works, and it's not going to change as long as our concept of art is institutionally determined and our notions of quality and craftsmanship driven by a thumbs-up, thumbs-down imperative.

But Mr. Chan also wants to try out — everything is a tryout — a new story, as have other artists, Beckett among them, who feel they are living in a time of moral emergency. The soul of "Godot" isn't in Vladimir's despairing cry at being marooned in nothingness, but in something he says later in the play: "Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! Let's do something, while we have the chance! It's not every day that we are needed. Let us make the most of it before it is too late!"

When these words rang out in the night in the Lower Ninth Ward and in Gentilly last month, every person present knew exactly that they meant, in that place, at this time. And Mr. Chan knew, which is why we were there in the first place, participants in an art project that had everything, or at least a lot: objects, words, images, ideas, emotions, discourse, actions, lessons, beauty, politics, criticality and generosity. At the same time, it wasn't all that big a deal. An artist — an unusual one, to be sure, and rarely idle — saw a chance and made the most of it.

Below, Paul Chan's
2003 artwork
"Happiness (Finally)
After 35,000 Years of
Civilization — After
Henry Darger and
Charles Fourier."

