

# YOU MADE ME DO THIS

If someone stops exhibiting but doesn't make a big deal of it—doesn't, like Darren Bader did in 2023, tell *The New York Times* they're done<sup>1</sup>—it can take time for people to notice. There are lots of artists out there, lots of shows, and nobody sees everything. I hadn't visited a Paul Chan exhibition in a while, but I assumed that the Hong Kong-born, US-based artist, a generational talent who'd gained widespread recognition in the early 2000s with digital moving-image works, was still having them. I'd clocked his retrospective at Basel's Schaulager in 2014, for example. But early last year I heard Chan on a podcast saying that he had pretty much quit making art in 2008 or 2009, subsequently focusing on his experimental-writing publishing house Badlands Unlimited, citing burnout on what he termed "the circus," specifically an accelerated producing and exhibiting cycle encouraged by the market.<sup>2</sup>

## BY MARTIN HERBERT

While midwifing books and questioning whether he'd ever return to art, Chan left himself open to ideas. It seemed like any next step wouldn't include screens (contra, then, the post-internet cohort who emerged after the 2008 financial crash that Chan, notably, doesn't cite as a factor in his withdrawal). Tentative works he tinkered with over the years, included in his 2023 touring exhibition *Paul Chan: Breathers*,<sup>3</sup> involved electrical cords plugged into non-electrical things—furniture, concrete-filled shoes—and projectors that didn't project onto anything. Later, circa 2017, Chan hit on the eponymous *Breathers*, avowedly non-digital, fluttering fabric bodies attached to air blowers, based on the inflated figures seen outside car dealerships. By his own account, these require much trial and error, homemade hand-stitching, and open-ended battling with materiality to make. But they're rich in emotional, mortal resonance, and uncouple not only from the digital, but from expectations of what a particular artist should be doing, when, and how fast.

Paul Chan, *Khara En Penta (Joyer in 5)*, 2019,  
*Paul Chan: Breathers* installation view  
at Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2022–23.  
Courtesy: the artist and Greene Naftali,  
New York



Chan's *Breathers* scan as inventiveness that emerges from, or consciously against, the constrictive expectations of the art world—namely that artists conform to a production-line ethos by making brand-recognizable works at an amenable pace, which doesn't necessarily sync with inspiration, innovation, or satisfaction. Among the books Chan published during his downtime was, notably, Calvin Tomkins's *Marcel Duchamp: The Afternoon Interviews* (2013). Its introductory conversation between publisher and author ends with Tomkins noting that "his friend Henri-Pierre Roché once said Duchamp's greatest work was his use of time."<sup>4</sup> In the discussions themselves—held in 1964, when the artist was officially retired but secretly working on *Étant donné*s (1946–66)—Duchamp repeatedly lamented fast art. One year after Andy Warhol founded his Factory, a model that seems pernicious today, the French artist said this: "I think there is a great deal to the idea of not doing a thing, but that when you do a thing, you don't do it in five minutes or in five hours, but in five years." That way lay durability of expression. Asked how he now spent his time, Duchamp replied, "I'm a breather."<sup>5</sup>

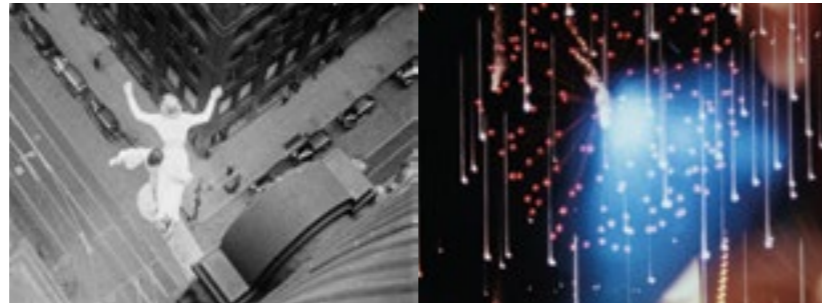
Paul Chan, *Fifth Season Treer 3*, 2023,  
*Paul Chan: Breathers* installation view at Walker  
Art Center, Minneapolis, 2022–23.  
Courtesy: the artist and Greene Naftali,  
New York



If there's a straggly, uncodified continuum of artists between this version of Duchamp and this version of Chan, it isn't united by an interest in quality-ensuring slowness. Rather, thoughtful resistance to being rushed is a subset of a larger sidestepping, or mobilizing, of the antagonistic but potentially useful constraint that is the art world's wider conservatism—its desire for relatively dependable throughput by relatively known quantities.<sup>6</sup>

One might think, casting back, of the havoc-creating practice(s) of Bruce Conner: a questioning of multiple unspoken tenets of art production, with a focus on undoing fixity in both object (or commodity) permanence and the bankable artistic persona. In the 1950s and early 1960s, absent an identifiable market for his work, the San Francisco-based Conner announced himself with spooky junk-sculpture assemblages made from house-clearance discards and intentional perishables: cobweb-like skeins of nylon hosiery, fading photographs. From there he continued marshaling entropy and turning things into processes. In 1959, Conner sent two assemblages to a New York gallery, one deliberately cracked before packing, the other expected to fall apart at some point. When his *Homage to Joan Brown* (ca. 1962) started disintegrating, the artist posited that a Plexiglas wall should be placed in front of it and fallen elements left where they landed. In 1980, he gave art historian Kristine Stiles a light-sensitive felt-tip-pen drawing, told her to hang it in direct sunlight, and quipped that it would last as long as her marriage. (He felt she'd made an unwise match; she disobeyed, but the marriage failed anyway.) As late as 2007, the year before he died, Conner gifted *Homage to Jay DeFeo* (1991), a large painting made under the pseudonym Anonymous, to a collector on the stipulation that they'd hang it on their garden fence and let the San Francisco weather destroy it.

Bruce Conner, *A MOVIE* (still), 1958; *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS* (still), 1959–67/1996. © Conner Family Trust. Courtesy: Paula Cooper Gallery, New York



When Conner began making films in the late 1950s, he didn't see that medium as fixed, either. His moving images cannibalized and reactivated others, and unhitched themselves from any idea of a "director's cut." *A MOVIE* (1958) spliced together found bits from a stag film, news reports, and B-movie footage. *COSMIC RAY* (1961) underwent multiple transformations, from single projection, to three screens playing films of different lengths, to further versions over the decades up until the digitally restructured, nonlinear *THREE SCREEN RAY* (2006). Conner re-edited *REPORT* (1963–67) eight times, altered the length and soundtracks of *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS* (1959–67/1996), and gave a copy of *LUKE* (1967) to a friend, mentioning a preferred soundtrack (Miles Davis) and advising that she could run the film forward or backward.

Additionally, Conner operated under a Duchampian plethora of fake names (Anonymous, Anonymouse, Diogenes Lucero, Justin Kase, and others) while producing a fossil field of assemblages, collages, films, and drawings. And he lived many more lives outside even these deceptions and feints: name another junk sculptor who photographed the 1970s West Coast punk scene and then made music videos for David Byrne and Brian Eno. Attending a party in the 1960s, he handed out badges to guests that read, "I AM BRUCE CONNER"; a later badge said the opposite. In 1973 in San Francisco, he exhibited under the name of his friend, the actor and artist Dennis Hopper, after a failed attempt in 1965 to borrow Hopper's name without telling him. He distributed business cards "authorizing" holders to alter his work. He spread authorship and iteration over as wide and baffling a matrix as possible.

The impish creative model that such an approach most closely fits is that of the trickster. Such figures, as cultural theorist Lewis Hyde writes in *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (1998), "keep the articulated world lively, at the very least, and . . . sometimes pull off the more complicated trick of stealing the boundary markers so that new worlds might appear from the plenitude that particular worlds necessarily hide."<sup>7</sup> The trickster timeline in contemporary art takes in figures like Sturtevant, Julie Rrap, David Hammons, and Maurizio Cattelan, plus artists who address rather than inhabit the trickster role—think of the pointedly grotesque goddesses of Mary Beth Edelson's 1973 *Trickster Series* of photography-drawing fusions. And it includes figures whose tricksterism extends to maintaining a glimmering, will-o'-the-wisp profile.

If, for example, you don't know Sarah Rapson—who is British and in her mid-sixties—that's somewhat by design.<sup>8</sup> Since her 1992 solo debut, held some years after she moved to New York, her work has evaded categorization, and she's repeatedly been here, then gone, then here again.



Sarah Rapson, *Love is everywhere Monet / London Trip*, 2021, *Ode to Psyche* installation view at Secession, Vienna, 2021. Courtesy: the artist and Maxwell Graham, New York

In the 2000 looped video *Catcart Hill*, filmed in early-conceptualist style on Super-8 at the then-new Tate Modern, a woman wearing a wig and leather vest—described by Rapson as resembling a 1970s feminist—is shakily filmed by another person. (It's unclear which one is Rapson.) The subject jogs around, totes a baby, rides a pram over a Carl Andre sculpture, ignores the exhibits, reads a book, and climbs over a crowd-control barrier. Edged with gender critique, such a work also encapsulates Rapson's self-designation as interloper. Her swerving multimedia practice—films, collage, drawing, painting, books—has been united by a stark black-and-white aesthetic and hitched to an exhibiting career that's been pointedly erratic, stuttering, self-sidelining.

Rapson has at once diverged enough from painting not to be defined as a painter, established and revisited ways of painting enough to refuse the idea of an evolving style, and periodically contradicted that style. She's made (and continues to make) near-monochromes that often embed and obscure fragments of newspaper imagery or text and other printed media, to the point of teasing near-illegibility. At other times, her paintings are effectively free of such paraphernalia, sometimes breaking their own "rules" by being startlingly legible. *One Thing I Like about Zen* (2008) mostly covers a painted white square with a newspaper article about another sedulously self-removed artist, Agnes Martin.

In a show earlier this year at Modern Art in Paris, Rapson's paintings hewed to a pointedly rough-edged, anachronistic Minimalism—mostly white monochromes on vertical, slightly cockeyed, self-made stretchers; Rapson, like the other artists discussed here, typically keeps her overhead low—augmented by a black-and-white image of Claude Monet's *Water Lilies* (1920–26) in the Musée de l'Orangerie, pointing back toward one origin point of abstraction. Yet she titled the show *Mad in Pursuit*, suggesting an enraged chase toward something unreachable.



Sarah Rapson, *Monet*, 2021, *Mad in Pursuit* installation view at Modern Art, Paris, 2024. Courtesy: the artist and Modern Art, London / Paris

When Rapson's recent paintings determinedly resemble her older ones and other people's still-older ones, and hang halfway between painting and collage, it feels less like the work of someone out of ideas than a stab at undoing chronology per se, and the idea that a way of making art should slot neatly into it. The art industry is the pearl-forming grit in Rapson's oyster shell.



A good test of whether you've been indoctrinated by the contemporary art business is when you look at such practices and ask, "But how do they make a living from that?" as if the goal of making art were always to live from it, as if that weren't a relatively recent development, as if riches are the consensual endpoint. People have made art on their own terms while doing all kinds of other things. Not to romanticize this, but having less sometimes leads to achieving more.



NAME DIFFUSION, *Untitled (Statement)*  
*NAME DIFFUSION*, 1991, photocopies  
 on colored paper printed for Art Basel, 1991.  
 Courtesy: the artist

In 2017, I visited the Romanian-born artist Marion Baruch at her home studio in Gallarate, outside Milan. She was in her late eighties, and her hopscothching oeuvre was on the cusp of rediscovery. She'd lived multiple artistic lives. In the 1950s, Baruch was a figurative-then-abstract painter. In the 1960s, she was a maker of climbing-frame-like outdoor sculptures, and then a collaborator with Italian architect AG Fronzoni on wearables and manipulable sculptures, like big Perspex globes that could contain a rolling person. In the 1970s and 1980s, she made miniature copies of Rembrandt's self-portraits in British museums and re-animated them via Duchampian references. In the late 1980s, Baruch adopted the moniker NAME DIFFUSION, registered it as a real company, and intersected art and commerce via sculptures made from modified shopping trolleys and installations of artist-branded clothing and self-designed cafés. In Paris in 1994, she "exhibited" a valid voting center for municipal elections. Later, skewing increasingly relationally, she made big, knotted fabric sculptures in public spaces, demarcating places to gather and overlay art unpredictably with real talk.

Throughout, Baruch had been connected to the Italian textile business through her husband. By the time I met her, she was widowed and a few years into a new, flexible style. In the early 2010s, thanks to a chance encounter at a local pizzeria, she had gotten hold of offcuts from designer clothing by big houses like Gucci—skeletal monochrome sheets of fabric, more cutout than material—which she began to select from and drape on the wall, meticulously adjusting their contours toward Rorschach-like equivocation. The something-for-nothing results, couture's negative space, are multifarious: deeply elegant, a latent consumerist critique, sometimes oddly reminiscent of weaponry, a meditation by an older artist on void space, and insistent on art as a life-giving, life-sustaining process.

In her studio, many dozens of these works, constituting acres of potential wall space, were folded into little boxes, closely stacked: the canny stratagems of an artist without much money, physical mobility, arm strength, storage space, or external expectations of what she *should* be doing, but with an inextinguishable urge to make art. I thought about that, afterward, whenever I saw a show where an artist had evidently been handed a large production budget and acquiesced to making more of the stuff that demonstrably sold.

It's possible, of course, to run a sizable operation and retain creativity; it's just easy not to. More interesting, to me at least, are figures who size up the art world's depredations and, in the face of them, deploy a mix of wiliness, cunning—the latter a favorite word of Chan's, to judge from his conversations and lectures<sup>9</sup>—and, often, a light footprint. The experimental rock musician Robert Fripp once described himself as a "small, independent, mobile, and intelligent unit."<sup>10</sup> That description is applicable to artists, too.

In her 2020 exhibition at Etablissement d'en face in Brussels, the Belgian artist Sarah Deraedt began by glassing off most of a bare-looking

gallery so that insistent viewers had to take a circuitous route inside, then arrive at a now-constricted, under-stimulating area—the same room from the other side of the glass—with their own rationales for company. Deraedt, locating unexplored gradations within the post-Yves Klein tradition of evacuating galleries, offers emptiness that asks to be populated and lit by thought, containments that are paradoxically liberating. She seems less interested in articulation than in holding space for it, figuring a midpoint between refusal and affirmation. Elsewhere in the same show, *Stove* (2020) comprised a waiting dinner plate perched on four ordinary mayonnaise jars and heated from underneath by a candle in a tin can, a kind of condition-zero of warmth, activity, potential sustenance, and transformation that was nevertheless not-nothing.



NAME DIFFUSION, *NAME DIFFUSION*  
*News*, 1993, back page of promotional  
 newspaper printed on the occasion of the  
 exhibition *Business Art/Art Business*,  
 Groninger Museum, 1993. Courtesy: the artist

Deraedt does not appear to offer a boutique line of *Stoves*. Her 2022 exhibition at Maxwell Graham in New York—where Rapson also shows—consisted of vertical, cage-like, anxiety-inducing metal structures; the parsimonious press release said only that these were human size. But they were welded shut and you were outside, privy to all their aspects, coming to open-ended inward conclusions about containment. This simultaneous inside/outside-ness—which itself might narrate a cautious relationship to the commercial art world—was redefined two years later by Deraedt's show *free*, presented simultaneously in spring 2024 at Germany's Kunstverein Freiburg and Switzerland's Kunsthalle Friart Fribourg. At the former, she showed a constellation of Christmas-market sheds, rented off-season from the town, while the works at the latter were based on Deraedt's perceptions of pre-existing works by Marianne Berenhaut, Morag Keil, and Pope.L, again seemingly referencing a displaced other. The project was described in the press release as "one exhibition in two places at the same time," and a symbolic undoing of codependency in which "separation is real." Wherever you were, the other half was two hundred kilometers away. You were in a circumscribed space but "free."

This viewer, at least, feels a need—as for a candle that just about warms a plate—to return to such independent, mobile, intelligent, limber approaches whenever wearied by a steady stream of barely variegated shows of Instagram-ready, punched-up paintings, or the now-familiar

Sara Deraedt, *Stove*, 2020, Sara Deraedt installation views at Etablissement d'en face, Brussels, 2020. Courtesy: the artist



feint of mingling two sculptural series in one exhibition to create an illusion of variety. The satisfying irony inherent in the practices sketched above is that the commercial art world, while sometimes appearing designed to throttle innovation, variable creative schedules, and even what we might call artistic freedom, to some degree also helplessly generates them. These artists and their scattered coevals do all kinds of different things, take divergent paths, and that's part of the point. They each address a constrictive, deeply financialized art establishment and say: you made me do this.

- 1 Brian Boucher, "Want to Be an Artist? You're in Luck. This One Is Selling His Practice," *The New York Times*, May 26, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/26/arts/design/darren-bader-artist-sells-practice.html>.
- 2 Allan Schwartzman and Charlotte Burns, *The Art World: What If...?!*, episode 7, on Paul Chan, aired February 9, 2023, available at <https://www.schwartzmanand.com/art-posts-the-art-world/the-art-world-ep7-paul-chan>.
- 3 Which appeared at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2022–23); the Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond (2024); and the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis (2024).
- 4 Calvin Tomkins, ed., *Marcel Duchamp: The Afternoon Interviews* (New York: Badlands Unlimited, 2013), 19.
- 5 Tomkins, *Marcel Duchamp: The Afternoon Interviews*, 44, 3.
- 6 A condition that increasingly meshes, of course, with financial precarity, encouraging artists to make what is most likely to sell.
- 7 Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2010), 254.
- 8 I am indebted to curator Liv Cuniberti's PhD thesis on Rapson, which draws on her interviews with the artist, for insights into her art and life.
- 9 Jeanne Gerrity, "José León Cerrillo, Ilja Karilampi, and Paul Chan," *e-flux*, January 5, 2015, <https://www.e-flux.com/criticism/236709/jos-len-cerrillo-ilja-karilampi-and-paul-chan>.
- 10 Robert Partridge, "An Interview with Robert Fripp," *Melody Maker*, 5 October 1974. Accessed at: [https://www.elephant-talk.com/wiki/Interview\\_with\\_Robert\\_Fripp\\_in\\_Melody\\_Maker\\_%281974%29](https://www.elephant-talk.com/wiki/Interview_with_Robert_Fripp_in_Melody_Maker_%281974%29).



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