

diSONARE with Paul Chan Politics to Come

In the days that followed Donald Trump's presidential election, diSONARE editors Diego Gerard and Lucía Hinojosa met with Paul Chan at his Badlands Unlimited headquarters in New York City to discuss themes like race, art, politics, language and the role of independent publishing as a unique reactionary tool of resistance and progressive action.

Diego Gerard / diSONARE: Where do you think art and race stand at present in America?

Paul Chan: Well, it's as scary and as complicated as it was before. But the one thing that has changed is that we have an explicitly racist president, which makes the conversation even more urgent and tense. *Whitewalling: Art, Race and Protest In Three Acts*, is a book we just published at *Badlands Unlimited* about art and race. The writer is Aruna D'Souza. She wrote a story about the tortured history of art and race in America through three historical events: the first one is the Whitney Biennial of 2017; the second one is 1979 at Artists Space, when they did a show called *Nigger Drawings* by a white guy called Don Newman; and then the last act is 1969 at the Metropolitan Museum, when they did a show called *Harlem on My Mind*, that had no black artists in it.

I don't know if there are many answers in the book but at the very least it tries to give us a language to talk about this issue in a way that's not reactionary and that is more historically minded, because there is a lineage for how we think of art and race, and it didn't start in 2017, or in 1969, but we can see the echoes of the conversations that happened across five decades.

DG: Do you feel as a publisher that you have certain responsibilities in terms of selecting subjects?

PC: Yes, I think this is captured by the phrase: "publishers are custodians of culture." We play that role, in a way like a curator does. What we do as publishers is a part of culture, but our added job as a custodian is finding the poet or the writer that you believe in and bringing them into public attention, because by bringing them to that attention we all have better ideas to reflect upon. That is an editorial vision—knowing what is worth publishing so that things can be a bit better, or at least not worse. Taking the art and race book as an example, I needed a better language to describe this issue, so I found this writer who I believed could accomplish it. Hopefully this book provides an opportunity for other people to have a new language to describe how complicated it is. In this way, publishing is much more public than art making. Art making follows a certain path, which can be public, but is not necessarily public. Anyone can go to a gallery, but in truth, no one goes to galleries—maybe students, collectors, but it's a very small portion of society. It may be true that art is public but we know truthfully that it's not meant to be public. But with books and publications, they are truly meant to be social in a way that art is not. I'm very sensitive to that idea.

Lucía Hinojosa: I guess that's also the importance of distribution and circulation. How we do things around books and publications treating them as activators and how we present them to the public and to what public. This being said, what is *Badlands Unlimited's* public?

PC: I think our public is mostly people who don't read—I hate to say it. We publish for people in their 20's and 30's.

DG: But how do you make them read, though?

PC: Our font size is really big... so it feels substantive, and there are actually not too many words.

DG: You can finish it quickly and feel the fulfillment...

PC: That's right, you can read it in one train ride. It's all geared towards the idea that things that are important don't have to be long, and things that are short can be edited so they can illuminate without having to be heavy. Accessibility is something we think about a lot. But also the idea that it's hard to get a real cultural education, so we publish things that we feel should be renewed in contemporary culture as a form of pedagogy.

LH: But also as a form of memory?

PC: Yes, I agree. There's this great psychoanalytic writer that once said, "the longing for the new is the reminder of what is worth renewing."

LH: It's very fragile, though. Of course I agree with this statement, but when paradigms are shifting there seems to be a lingering involvement of canons and traditions that is sometimes confusing or incoherent...

PC: An example of that would be that it's now clear that a vision of progress in America has been the idea of diversity, POC—people of color—. It's becoming clear that the paradigm of POC may not be enough to mitigate or help solve the problem of America's persistent inexplicit anti-blackness, that once upon a time *people of color*, which also encompassed African Americans, could be the way in which we diversify culture, infrastructure and economics so that diversity would protect us. But now, two to three decades on, with the principles of *people of color* and *diversity* it's also clear that we have a president who is explicitly racist, that it may not cover the ground, it may not be enough of a bandage to heal the wound of anti-blackness. That is a paradigm shift, because I grew up in an America where we knew anti-blackness was happening, but I thought that POC would be able to cover that ground... but it may not be the case anymore. So, to contend with this changing ground is a good question. I, personally, don't want to give up on the idea of POC, of seeing diversity of different kind of races as a way that everyone is protected, but I have to acknowledge the anger and the resentment, and the real economic and social harm that is explicitly anti-black in a way that the POC concept has not been able to protect people from.

DG: I'd like to return to the fact that you do feel a certain responsibility regarding what you publish and edit. In terms of *New Lovers*, your erotica publishing imprint, does the same responsibility apply with this genre?

PC: I'll tell you my most perverse answer: I do it for my daughter. I have a six-year-old daughter, her name is Ruby, and it's perverse to think that I would publish erotica for her, but I think she has to grow up in a time when she can openly say what is pleasing and not pleasing to her without feeling ashamed. Our idea with *New Lovers* is to provide a platform for younger writers, all women, who talk about not only of what is pleasing to them but especially what is not pleasing

to them. We don't tell the writers what to write, we just say, write erotica, use sex and pleasure and erotica as the platform to talk about whatever you want to talk about. And the writers have done that. We're going to publish a forthcoming one called *A Million Blows*, by Jade Sherman, an Indian American writer. It's the story of a young Indian American girl living in an army base, trying to grow up and trying to deal with her parents who she doesn't like, trying to deal with sexuality and people. It's great, it feels very real, and she talks about what she likes, and what she doesn't like, and that is exactly what *New Lovers* is about for me. If people masturbate to the books that's great, but I don't think the books are masturbation material as much as excuses for writers to use sex and erotica in a literary form that was built from the ground up as form of critique. Pornography in its European lineage is really about what it can do as a weapon against class and aristocracy. That's how you get people to read about churches and popes and ministers, you lampoon them sexually. So, for me, *New Lovers*—this shows you how conservative I am—has a historical lineage of understanding what erotica and pornography are.

LH: Why is this a genre for only women writers?

PC: It started differently, we weren't only seeking women at first but it turned out that the best-written ones were all by women. The men who were submitting erotica weren't fun to read, it wasn't relational—I don't mean relationships between men and women—but they saw sex as an act rather than as an opportunity for other kinds of relationships.

LH: For you, what's the difference between erotica and pornography? Where do we place Eros in each?

PC: Historically what differentiates them is money. Pornography is really stories about people exchanging sex for material things—money, favors, whatever—so pornography is about exchange. Erotica is historically just about coitus and forms of bodily pleasure. Both aim at pleasing, but literary-wise I like pornography better because there is a social aspect to it.

DG: Does the difference between pornography and erotica also lay in the immediacy of the delivery of the final image?

PC: I can't speak for visual images, but as far of literary forms of erotica and literary forms of pornography, I think the first way to discern is really how social it is. The great innovators of pornographic literary works in Europe were those who used sex as a form of critique and as a weapon. For instance, you have the great Italian publisher Pietro Artino. He wrote pornography against the Italian State and against the aristocracy. He used it as class warfare. He would go to a town in Italy and say he would publish a catalogue of all the famous and rich people in this town, and he would ask money from them, and if they didn't, he would write shit about them. He extorted the rich and the famous in Italian villages. I think with erotica it really is about bodily pleasures, which needs a certain air of intimacy and a certain way of describing relationships that are much smaller in scope than pornography. It's quite rare to find a truly erotic writer, and that's because we understand sex and pleasure in a social way.

LH: How would you describe a purely erotic writer?

PC: Someone who has the language and the rhythm to express a kind of bodily pleasure, and can put those images in your mind, but in a way that is much more intimate. Sexual pleasure tends to be intimate, you don't have a lot of people involved, it's one person, maybe two, who knows, but it's the intimacy that matters, and it's very hard to construct sentences that give you that feeling. I don't know if this is a global thing, but every year there is an award for the worst sex scene in literature—I think Jonathan Franzen won it twice—because it's really hard to write about this. With *New Lovers* we hope that it's hot, but we hope it's about the social aspects of it and talking about how to find the language to describe what is pleasing and what is not pleasing.

LH: Your relational approach to pornography reminds me of the work you did with fonts and words. Do you think pornography needs to have a political content in order to be relational?

PC: No, I don't, but if you do it right, people will find political uses for it. Politics is the negotiation between people, and I think there are always better ways of negotiating with people. We always need better ways to read people, to understand them, to negotiate with them, and also in the end, to know who to stay away from. These are all things that literature and words provide uniquely. Paintings may not do that for you. If you publish it right, the attraction to those words may be that people find them useful. That's as hopeful as it gets. That is how I read. When I read when I was younger, it was because I needed to know stuff, and I thought books would tell me. I was wrong. But in the process I learned a language of describing what it is that I was looking for. That may not be the answer, but that is not nothing. It gave me a language to be vigilant, and gave me an ear for understanding certain ideas and knowing where they come from. I know when to stay away from people who use certain words and when to engage, whereas before I really didn't know that distinction.

DG: All this seems like a progressive way of reading, but in terms of independent publishing, how can we attain progress?

PC: Speaking of progress, I think losing money and wasting time on your own terms is as progressive as we can get... Really... the people who win are terrible, they're just the worse, so the best thing I feel I can do is lose money and waste time in my own terms. At *Badlands*, we have no institutional protection of any kind, we are not part of an academy, we are not beholden to a gallery or museum, but we have to make our own money to sustain ourselves... and it's terrible... you guys know what I'm talking about. It's nightmarish... but the sad thing is that it might be as good as it gets. If you can do things on your own terms and your own time, losing your own money, I don't know what is better. I've seen others that have tried another way, and they are miserable, they don't do it right, they hate themselves...

DG: Finally, what is your relationship to the content you have published?

PC: I guess the simplest answer is that I am the custodian. We would never publish something we wouldn't believe in, so we feel the responsibility to get them out in the world, and that they have a proper opening, that the authors feel they have been cared for, but above all it's a custodianship.

I wouldn't say it's a parental relationship, but it's definitely a custodianship. I don't have the same feeling with my artwork. I try to make the pieces as tough and as resilient as possible and then they're gone. But books are different, they exist differently. The attachment to them might be a little misplaced, because you know this, like *diSONARE*, it's a self-portrait of its publishers, of you. So this book about art and race might be dissipated, it's not like a memoir or a self-portrait painting, but it remains a self-portrait. So part of the responsibility is taking care of oneself. But it's also about how we become more ourselves when we are enlarged, and that's him (points to a painting of Hegel on his office wall), Hegel was a terrible philosopher, but one of the great insights he had was that we are enlarged by believing in something and doing something beyond us, and that is very important for humans as social animals. We become bigger when we deal with something bigger than us. And, *Badlands Unlimited* is bigger than me, it's not just me, but I belong to it, and in belonging to it, I become enlarged, and that's a great relationship to have with something. As publishers we have a network of friends, artists and writers, we become a point of belonging that protects us and grants us opportunities. This becomes a very important social element, because it shows people we can protect ourselves by dictating the terms of that kind of belonging.

LH: That collective quality of publishing versus being an individual artist... you don't feel protected there...

PC: No, you don't. I think there's a lot of individualism there—I'm all for individualism, people should be as weird and stupid as they like, that's fine—but in publishing you can't be isolated, the very function of it means that you're a social creature.

