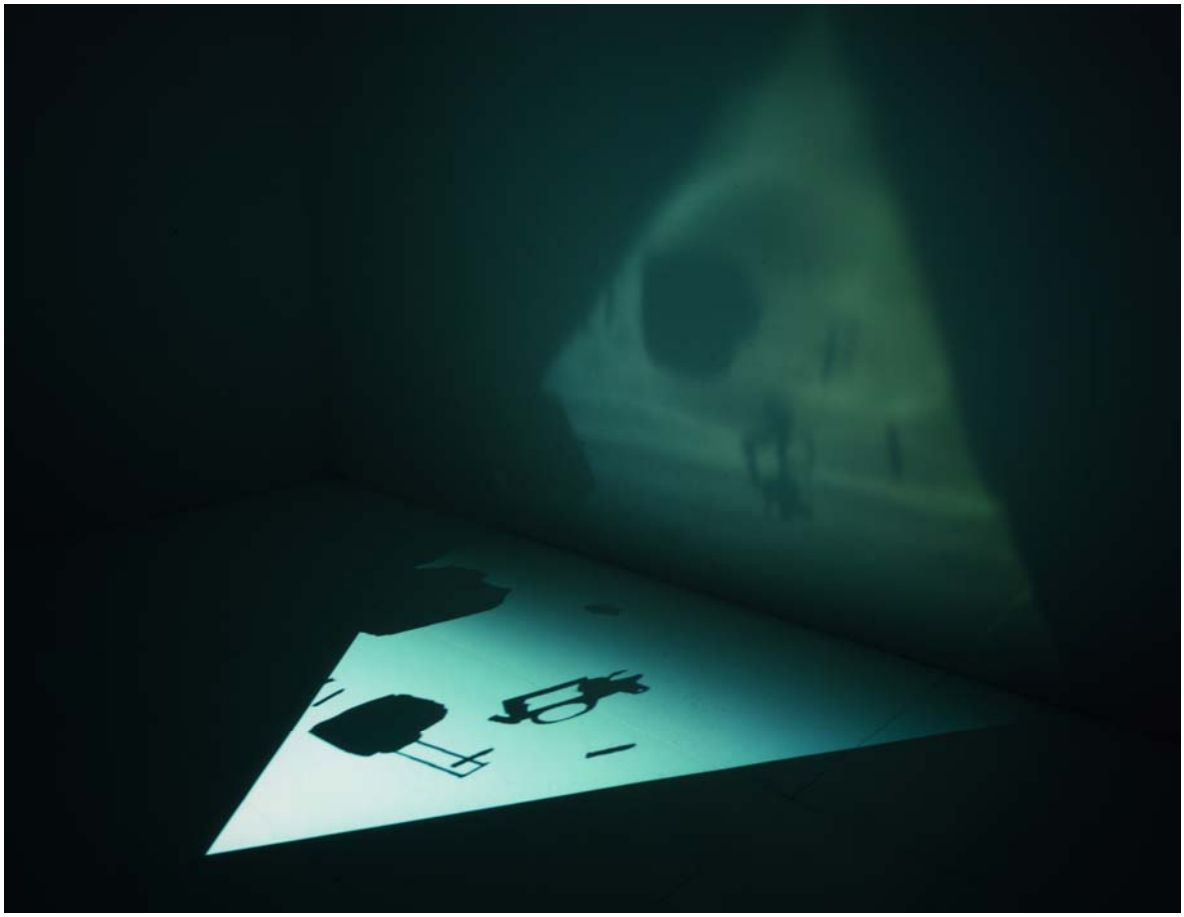
Serpentine Gallery

Teachers' Notes

Paul Chan
The 7 ~~Lights~~

15 May – 1 July 2007



5th ~~Light~~, 2007
Digital video projection
14 minutes
The Marieluise Hessel Collection, Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
Image courtesy of Greene Naftali Gallery, New York
Photograph © Sean Vong

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These notes are designed to support teachers on a visit to the Serpentine Gallery. They are suitable for all age groups, but include activities that relate to **Key Stages 2, 3** and **4**. Feel free to adapt them to suit your needs to inspire discussion and practical work.

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Paul Chan

Paul Chan has achieved international acclaim for his videos, drawings and installations that blend a novel drawing aesthetic with philosophical reflections on politics, religion, sex and life. Born in 1973, Chan spent his childhood in Nebraska and now lives in New York. In 1996, he completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Video/Digital Arts at the Art Institute of Chicago and graduated from Bard College with a Master of Fine Arts in Film/ Video/New Media in 2002.

Chan's early works, *Happiness (Finally) After 35,000 Years of Civilization (After Henry Darger and Charles Fourier)*, 1999 –2003 and *My Birds… Trash… The Future*, 2004, are digital animations projected onto panoramic screens that sample and reference a range of sources from art history to popular culture. The engaging, low-tech drawing style, and the inclusion of recognisable artistic figures such as rapper Biggie Smalls and Italian filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini, initially belie the more serious reflections on suffering and survival, and utopia and apocalypse, that are revealed through the narratives: peaceful hedonists slaughtered by invading armies; bleak landscapes occupied by a 21st-century cast of refugees, paparazzi and suicide bombers.
In addition to the animations, Chan has produced a number of single-channel video works that were initially made available for viewing through his website. These include an 'ambient video essay' on everyday life in Baghdad, four weeks prior to the invasion of Iraq, a film taken in the 'red state' of Nebraska and a portrait of the activist defence lawyer Lynne Stewart, who was the first attorney in the United States to be convicted of aiding terrorists.

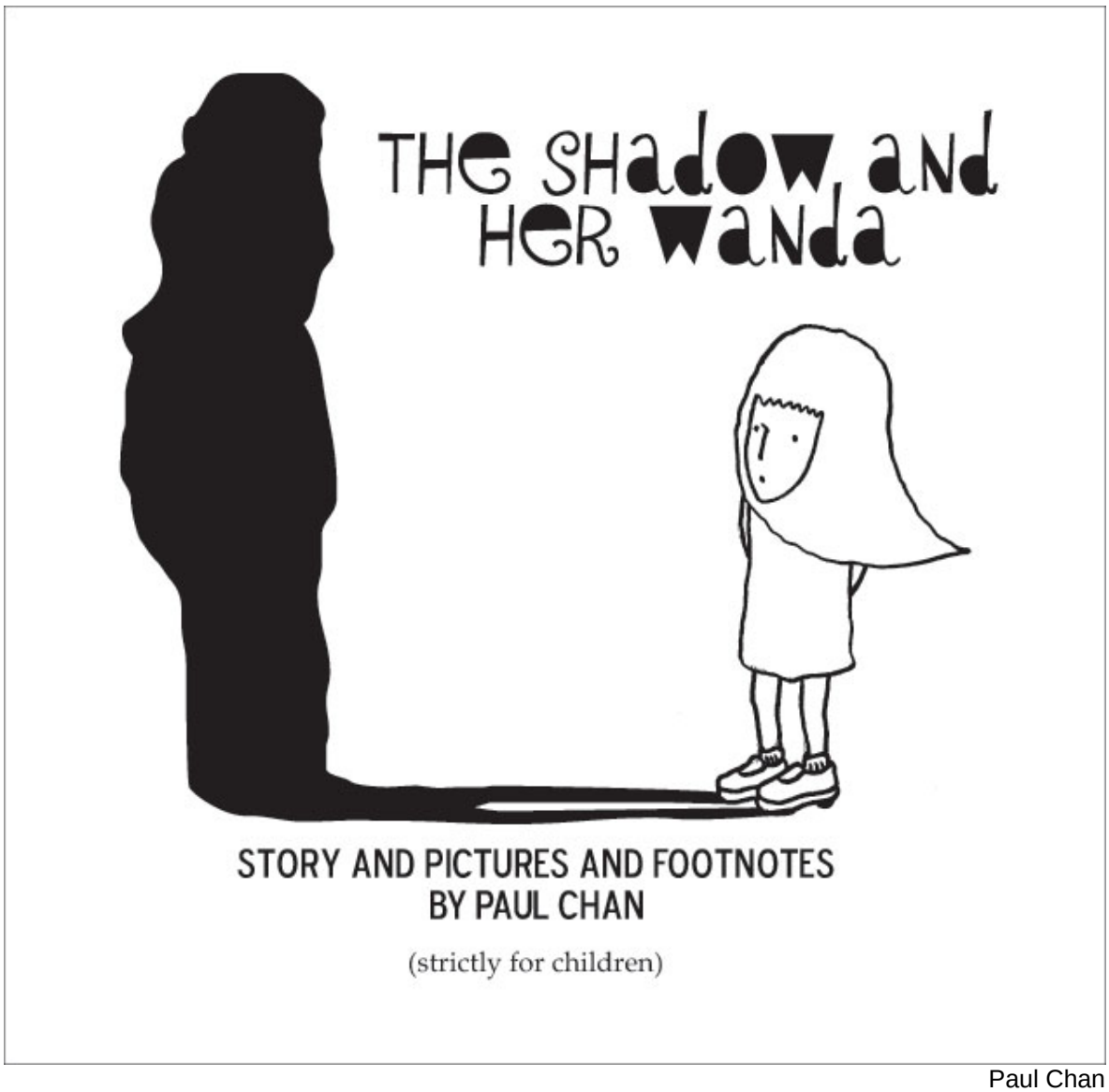
Paul Chan works across a range of media and fields. He is an artist, activist and writer. Hans Ulrich Obrist Co-Director, Exhibitions & Programmes at the Serpentine Gallery recently called him 'one of the main protagonists of a new political art movement in the USA'. Among other things, Chan was co-founder of the New York chapter of Indymedia, an independent media network. Chan draws a distinct line between his life as an activist and an artist. He believes that art and politics are different categories that function in different ways.

On Chan's website www.nationalphilistine.com, under the section 'Free Baghdad' snapshots, video clips and diary entries can be found. Visitors can also download free MP3 files and hear the artist reading 16-hours'-worth of excerpts from writers, artists, philosophers and filmmakers. The files are categorised under headings such as 'works haunted by God' and 'works activists should listen to' in what he refers to as his own library of Alexandria. Chan also offers free downloads of fonts he has designed, where each letter is an icon, so that a text is immediately injected with a visible political or artistic message.

Chan has had solo exhibitions at Magasin 3, Stockholm; Portikus, Frankfurt and Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, all 2006. He recently presented *Untitled Video on Lynne Stewart and Her Conviction, the Law and Poetry* at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival, Utah, and his work has also been featured in: Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, 2004; *I still believe in miracles*, Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville Paris 2005; *8th Biennale d'Art Contemporain de Lyon,* France 2005; and *Whitney Biennial*, Whitney Museum Of American Art, New York, 2006.

The Shadow and Her Wanda

An artist's book for children was specially commissioned to accompany the *Paul Chan* exhibition. This innovative and engaging illustrated story with footnotes introduces young readers and parents alike to challenging ideas around language art, contemporary culture and philosophy.



Paul Chan
The Shadow and Her Wanda
2007 (detail)
Hand and mouse drawing

Available from the Gallery Lobby Desk, Price £5

The 7 ~~Lights~~

This solo exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery will be the world premiere of the complete series of *The 7 ~~Lights~~,* 2005-07, large-scale digital projections and drawings that 'hallucinate' the seven days of creation and the accompanying themes of the sacred and the profane, temptation and renunciation, in relation to the iconography of the modern world.

The 7 ~~Lights~~ series can be described as a commentary of a world on the edge of disintegration. In the words of the artist, the series is about 'light and light that has been extinguished'. In the title, although the word light is literally struck out, the horizontal line can also be read as a ray of light, and symbolises the tension between light and dark which is the backdrop of Chan's melancholy, sometimes sinister, animations.

With *The 7 ~~Lights~~* Chan intended to make a group of works that deliver a physical experience. Aside from the 7th *~~Light~~*, which is composed of works on paper, *The ~~Lights~~* are projected from the ceiling onto the floor, or partly on the floor and wall. The works are structured as a cycle of day and night, sunrise to sunset. They are mostly triangular or trapezoid-shaped, and reminiscent of light pouring through a window - a window opening onto a faraway outside world, where only a suggestion of the shadow world is visible.

The shadows are part of Chan's attempt to find a new visual language to describe the contemporary world. "After 9/11, after globalisation, in the midst of a kind of radical and fundamental transformation of geo-political power and geo-political space, how do you visualise it? What is the new language to describe this new world? Rightly or wrongly I began imagining shadows as the language to do that."

In the projections these shadows describe recognisable objects moving through space. Contradictions collide: upward and downward movements, inside-outside, slow-fast, light-dark, chaos-order, utopia and apocalypse, the sacred and the profane. In the cycle, Chan makes extensive reference to Christianity and religion in general:
'I don't have much belief in faith', says the artist in a recent interview. 'What I do believe in is looking at new ways to reinterpret, and even mistranslate, what we imagine as history into another form and I think that's what art is for. Art is a sovereign place in which things can be up for grabs again'. www.art-diary.net/**PAUL-CHAN**-Lights-Drawings

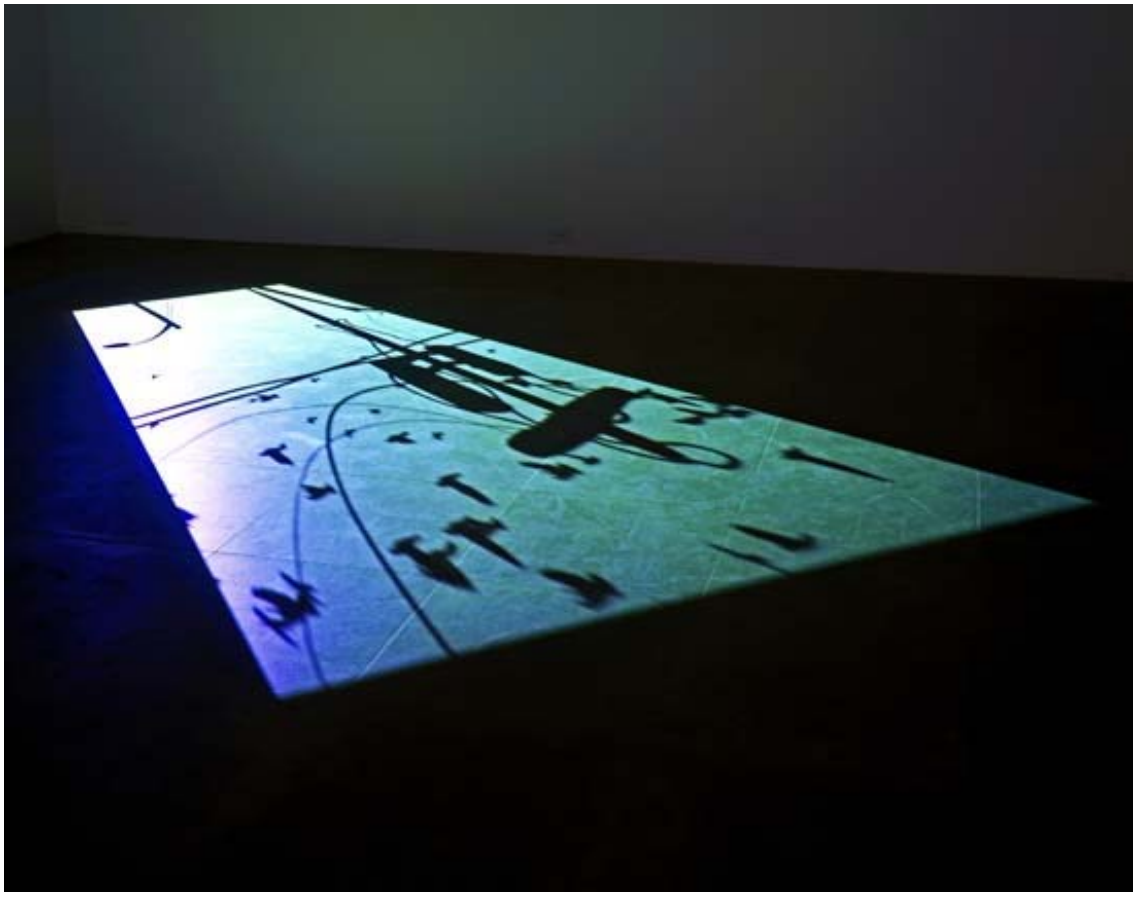
The viewer is left to create their own interpretation for despite the violent depictions of a disintegrating world, the perpetual repetition of images on an eternal loop provide a certain rhythmic structure to this world of pure disorder. Such order can be seen as a reassuring mantra, a possibility to embrace violence and calamity through the liberty of colour and shadow. Chan denies a belief in faith but there seems to be no denial of hope in his work. Indeed he has described art as nothing but a brutal exercise in hope.

Discussion Topics, Words and Questions

- ## Light and shadow

Keywords
shape – surface – brilliant – darkness – silhouette – edge – obscure – outline – hidden
absent – present – represent – clarity – temporary – fleeting – transparent – translucent

Pre Visit discussion
What are your usual expectations when going to see an exhibition in a gallery?
What's the difference between looking at paintings, photographs, video and film?
Do you prefer representational or abstract art? Why?
What do you think is more important in a drawing - the object or the space around it?
What is the difference between a silhouette and a shadow?
Where do shadows fall at different times of day?
How can silhouettes and shadows be used to tell stories?



Paul Chan
1st ~~Light~~ 2005
Digital video projection
14 minutes
Courtesy the Dakis Joannou Collection, Athens
Image courtesy of Greene Naftali Gallery, New York
Photograph © Jean Vong

Visit activity
Find *1st ~~Light~~* and *2nd ~~Light~~*
Name some of the objects you can see. How can you recognise what the objects are?
Can you find a link between all the objects? What is happening?
Which *~~Light~~* do you prefer? Why? What is the difference between the two works?

"Once, I thought an image consisted of the outline of the thing and the inside of this outline. Now I think it's is only the outline.....That's what the drama and the movement of shadows is; it's just about the relation between the black and the white, not what's on the inside"
Paul Chan, Adam Phillips and Hans Ulrich Obrist in Conversation
Paul Chan The 7 ~~Lights~~ Serpentine Gallery New Museum Catalogue essay

Paul Chan
2nd ~~Light~~ 2006
Digital video projection
14 minutes
Courtesy Cranford Collection, London
Image courtesy of Greene Naftali Gallery, New York
Photograph © Jean Vong

- On one sheet of paper draw the outline or silhouette of three objects or people. What elements of the object would you need to include to make them recognizable? How would you arrange them on the page? How much space would you leave between the objects or would they overlap?
What would be the relationship between the objects?

How would you use these shapes to make a rotating shadow lamp?

- The Golden Frame

Keywords

picture – window – screen – projection – depth – distance – movement – momentum – reality – fantasy – perspective – illusion – intrusion – development – advance - viewpoint

Paul Chan
4th ~~Light~~ 2006
Digital video projection
14 minutes
Collection Debra and Dennis Scholl
Image courtesy of Greene Naftali Gallery, New York
Photograph © Jean Vong

Pre visit discussion

Where are pictures in a gallery normally found? On the wall, floor or ceiling?
Where would you put a TV screen or monitor if you wanted to watch it?
What's the difference between looking at a TV or monitor and looking at a picture?
How different is it to watch a film on a TV or projected on a screen?
Which do you prefer? Why?
Would you like to watch animations shown on the ceiling or floor?

> Imagine painting's architectural metaphor is the window. We look at a painting to look at a square on the wall so that we can see through it, so we can see another world. Video functions the same way especially video made within a certain period of time… where a projection would project on a wall.. and we look to see something through it. What I want to do is something radically different. I want to make something that would intrude into our space so that we are not separated by this golden frame. The light that comes from the window intrudes and invades our space and how we deal with it physically. So that's the metaphor: light coming through a window"
> Paul Chan, Adam Phillips and Hans Ulrich Obrist in Conversation
> *Paul Chan The 7 ~~Lights~~* Serpentine Gallery New Museum Catalogue essay

Visit activity

In 4th *~~Light~~* there is lighting in the gallery and the projection is on the wall. How different is the effect compared to the other dark rooms?

What time of day is it?
Where is the light coming from?
Do you feel you are looking at a projected image, out of a window or at shadows?
How would you describe the atmosphere in the room?

Look how the light is falling in each room. If *The 7 ~~Lights~~* refer to different times of the day from dawn to dusk, what time would each *~~Light~~* be?

Choose one of *The 7 ~~Lights.~~* Imagine the images you see are coming through one of the windows in the room, what would be happening outside? Describe the noises you would hear, how you would feel and what you would do next.
Notice that the images are on a loop does this change your response? Why? Why not?

- Art and meaning

Keywords
meaning – message – understanding – belief – opinion – agree – opposition – vision – allusion – reference – impression – motif – intention – standpoint – symbol – motivation

Paul Chan
3rd ~~Light~~, 2006
Digital video projection and table
14 minutes
Installation view at Portikus, Frankfurt
Courtesy of Greene Naftali Gallery, New York
Photograph © Wolfgang Günzel 2007

Pre-visit discussion
What techniques do artists use to communicate their ideas?
Which subjects do artists work with?
How accessible are artistic and religious references to today's audiences?
Do you think students should be taught classical and religious references and the use of symbolism in Renaissance, Victorian and historical paintings and sculpture?
How important is the history of art to an appreciation of contemporary art?
Discuss the value of a work of art

The layering of religious motifs is a process both of assimilation and refusal; in other words, religion is seen by Chan simultaneously as a force of liberation and one of oppression. On the one hand, he points to the resurgence of religion in our culture, commenting on the way in which obscure and supernatural beliefs continue to shape our neo-medieval present. In this sense, *The 7 ~~Lights~~* speak of the conservative times in which we live, hinting at the international wars that are marked as crusades against the unfaithful or the 'axis of evil'. On the other hand through the use of spiritual symbols and mystical thoughts, Chan defines a space in which religion acts as a force of imagination, a tool to open up new ways of envisioning and describing our present. It is an attempt to charge our world with mystical powers so that we can experience it once again in a daze.
Massimiliano Gioni, All is Fair in Love and War
Paul Chan The 7 ~~Lights~~ Serpentine Gallery New Museum Catalogue essay

Visit activity
Find *3rd ~~Light~~*. Look at the room and the light, how is this room different to the others? What effect does the table have on the space? What connections can you make with this long table viewed from the front? Does it remind you of any painting?

The table at the centre of this piece is built to the exact dimensions of that within Leonardo Da Vinci's painting *The Last Supper* (1498) and much of the series references symbolic images and religious paintings of the past. Adam Phillips in his catalogue essay particularly highlights the work of Caravaggio and other depictions of the Ascension and Doomsday "where whirlwinds of angels and bodies are called up to heaven of participated down to hell."

How would you describe the atmosphere in the different rooms of the gallery?
Does it remind you of any other spaces?
How does the light and colour change the space?
What connections can you find to creation stories?
How do these relate to your own beliefs?

Create a drawing that completes the sentence "In the beginning……."

Activities for the Classroom

Sun, shadow and light

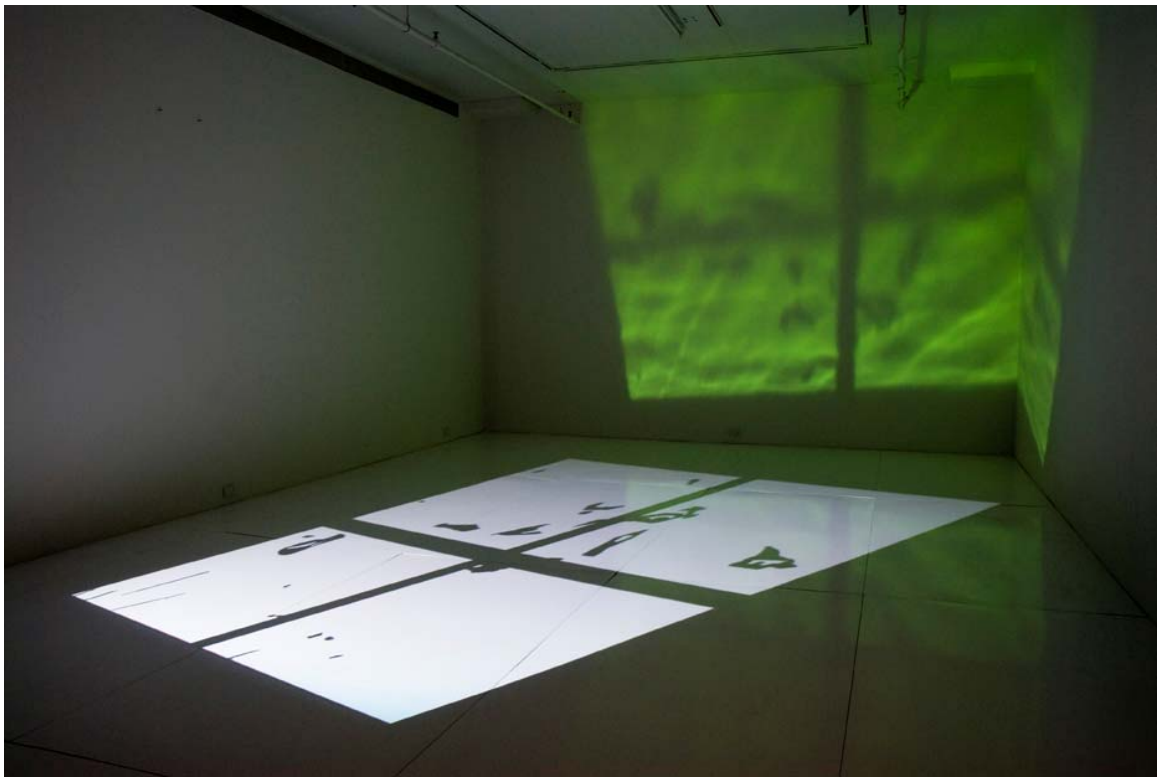
In my bedroom, noon is the darkest time of day. There are two windows and both face east. In the morning, the sun rises and pours light through those windows, illuminating every corner of the room. But at noon, the sun is directly above the building and the morning light penetrating the windows retreats from the room, leaving darkness in its wake. But the room is not just dark. It is strangely still, as if time followed light's lead and left the room too. It is a short farewell. The sun soon breaks the stillness of noon and moves west. Sunlight penetrates my place once again, this time from the kitchen, where the windows face west. The rays of light stretch longer and longer and touch more of the interior as the day wears on, until the bedroom becomes illuminated from the other side, by way of the opening that connects the bedroom to the kitchen. It's a small apartment.

Not all light retreats at noon. Slivers and other irregular shapes of light manage to make their way onto the walls and corners of the bedroom. This must be the work of indirect light, ricocheting off the side mirrors of cars parked on the street to hit the shiny new cell-phone tower recently erected on the roof of a building across the way, bouncing light through my window. The light and dark blurry shapes that show up at noon are craggy, delineated by the different surfaces that reflect the light and the trees and fire-escapes that obstruct its circuitous path of travel. This light does not illuminate things to see per se. It is instead a kind of light that transmits – in its lack – the very shape of things.

A light that shows by not shining, this is the light at noon.
Paul Chan, *On Light as Midnight and Noon*
Paul Chan The 7 ~~Lights~~ Serpentine Gallery New Museum Catalogue essay

Key Stage 1 & 2
How does your shadow grow?
Create shadow puppets to explore narratives – traditional or imagined
Art & Design - 4A Viewpoints – Images in a dream – creating atmosphere and narrative through shape and colour
Drama 11 presenting stories to others
English 1 & 2 reading traditional stories & tales from a range of cultures – especially creation stories, or stories about different times of day.
Science 4 Light & Sound

Key Stage 2
From dawn to dusk
Research the use of light to record historic events and daily life. Using film and photography record
Art & Design - 6A People in Action – image and movement
History -1 chronological understanding - recording time – the methods used to record time - Sun, stars, watches
History – 11 Victorian Britain - The history of film & photography
ICT - 1 Research
Science – 4 Light & Sound



Paul Chan
6th ~~Light~~ 2007
Digital video projection
14 minutes
Collection Astrup Fearnley Museet for Moderne Kunst
Image courtesy of Greene Naftali Gallery, New York
Photograph © Jean Vong

Key Stage 3
Light - line
How much is daily life affected by the sun and daylight? How different was that before electric light? How does light affect people's lives?
Citizenship – Has technology made us more materialistic? How is light used in displaying and protecting our possessions?
Geography – Images of a country
History Unit 11 – Industrial changes
Science 8K – light – how we see objects
Art & Design 8A, B & C – Select objects that have personal meaning. Explore different ways of viewing them and recording how they change over time. Either natural - as they grow and decay, or man-made how they have developed and will change in the future.

Key Stage 3
Sacred spaces
How important is it to have a place to go to where we feel safe? What sort of space is that? What makes it feel safe?
Look at the built environment around us, identify the places used by groups to meet together.
Describe any similarities between them, both functional and structural.
Is there a difference between sacred and secular spaces?
Look at size, structure, materials and lighting.
Working as a group choose a familiar space and think how you could redesign it to make it a more welcoming space for groups to meet- this could be formal or informal - inside or outside. Think carefully about how you would use light to create an atmosphere.
Present your ideas to the rest of the class
Art & Design – 9A life events and 9C Personal places, public spaces
Citizenship 3 – How important is it to have spaces where people can meet to share ideas?
English En1 – 10 Group discussion
Geography 3 – How important is the environment around us to the way we feel and interact?

Key Stage 4
Comparative studies
"[P]eople need a religious language. It's almost as though we underestimated just how traumatic it would be to live in a secular world. People like Darwin, Freud and Marx, who introduced all this, were voices on behalf of culture. There was this great shock and then a great embracing and then great ignorance again. [Chan's] work is very preoccupied with these areas. There's a real attempt to produce a non-transcendent secular art that still has hope in it. The real problem with secularism is hope."
Adam Phillips speaking in *Paul Chan, Adam Phillips and Hans Ulrich Obrist in Conversation*, *Paul Chan The 7 ~~Lights~~* Serpentine Gallery New Museum Catalogue essay

How much do you agree with the statement that modern art lacks the uplifting, transcendental qualities of traditional religious art?

Compare Paul Chan's *The 7 ~~Lights~~* with work by artists such as Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, Rembrandt van Rijn, William Blake or Francisco Goya

Explore the following aspects
- how each artist used new techniques
- the influence of religion on their work
- their attitudes to nationalism and materialism
- the use of light, dark and shadow in their work
- identify the effect on the viewer in relation to hope and despair

Further Reading

Selected Books and Catalogues
Birnbaum, D. & Millqvist E. - *Paul Chan* Exhibition Catalogue No.35, Magasin 3, Stockholm Konsthall and Portikus Frankfurt am Main, 2006
Chan P, Rosler M. & Cesarco A. - *Paul Chan / Martha Rosler (Between Artists),* A.R.T. Press, 2006

Selected Articles and Reviews
Rothkopf, Scott. *Embedded in the Culture* Artforum, Summer 2006

Weblinks
Paul Chan's website www.nationalphilistine.com
www.bombsite.com/chan

Planning a visit to the Serpentine Gallery

Serpentine Gallery
Kensington Gardens
London
W2 3XA

Tel 020 7402 6075
Fax 0207402 4103
www.serpentinegallery.org

Transport
The nearest tube stations are South Kensington (1.25 km walk), Knightsbridge (1.25 km walk) or Lancaster Gate (1 km walk) [Please note that Lancaster Gate is currently closed for maintenance work.]

Car parking is available near the Gallery (£1.50 per hour)

Bus routes 9, 10, 53, 94 and 148 stop near the Gallery

Contact Details
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Education and Family Events
Education is at the core of the Serpentine Gallery's activities. Through workshops, events and projects, the Education Programme offers a range of innovative ways to engage with modern and contemporary art and architecture.

Education Projects in 2007 supported by

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Please refer to www.serpentinegallery.org for information on events and activities taking place as part of the Education Programme during *Paul Chan: The 7 ~~Lights~~* exhibition.