CONTENT NOTE
The exhibition *Paul Chan: Breathers* contains mature language and themes.
Paul Chan’s ongoing series of protest posters and signs titled *New Proverbs* (2017–) is among the experimental publications produced by Badlands Unlimited. Six of these placards—identified by their bold all-caps text and neon colors (pictured at top right in the cover image)—are included in *Y.oung P.ublisher 99¢ & Up (2)*, an installation on view in the exhibition *Paul Chan: Breathers*. This work was inspired by a neighborhood store in New York that Chan collaborated with to sell Badlands books and art. It brings together a range of typical household products that have been playfully altered, along with a selection of books and printed materials.

**HATE SPEECH AND THE WESTBORO BAPTIST CHURCH**

Chan’s *New Proverbs* series responds, in part, to the posters of the Westboro Baptist Church, based in Topeka, Kansas—an organization known for its harsh and inflammatory hate speech signs that attack the LGBTQIA+ community, Catholics and other Christians, Muslims, Jews, American soldiers, and politicians, among others. As the Southern Poverty Law Center describes, “the Westboro Baptist Church is arguably the most obnoxious and rabid hate group in America.”

However, Chan’s *New Proverbs* shift the language, turning the gaze on those who demonize and discriminate on the basis of gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity. Because the *New Proverbs* posters draw upon the Westboro Baptist Church’s hate speech to challenge it, visitors will encounter politically, sexually, and racially charged language. Former Badlands Unlimited director Micaela Durand reflects, “The spirit of the signs is to inspire fear in those that think they’re more powerful than the minorities they’re attacking. We’re trying to take power back.”

**ACTIVISM AND ADVOCACY**

Chan’s *New Proverbs* have been part of the LGBTQIA+ solidarity rally at the Stonewall Inn in New York, the General Strike rally in Washington Square Park, the ACT UP 30th Anniversary March and Rally worldwide, the National School Walkout Against Gun Violence, the Women’s March in Washington, DC, and other public protests around the United States. In response to a question about the efficacy of protest, Chan reflects, “Many of us feel like we don’t belong here [in America] right now, and it’s a shame, and it doesn’t have to be this way. … It just so happens that we’re publishers and artists and we wanted to make these beautiful, provocative signs that remind people what we stand for, as Americans.”

The term “New Proverbs” derives from a literary form, “proverbs,” or brief and direct truisms widely associated with the Bible. Using this title for his ongoing series of posters, Chan not only questions the tone of harmful religious dogma but also asks us to consider the power of written and performed speech.
Westboro Baptist Church members demonstrate with their antisemitic and homophobic posters at the Virginia Holocaust Museum, 2010  Creative Commons: Attribution 3.0; Photo: JCWilmore

Selections from Paul Chan’s New Proverbs (2017–) used at the March for Equality in Washington, DC, 2017 ©Paul Chan; courtesy Paul Chan and Badlands Unlimited
Characteristic of Chan’s dedication to civic participation, proceeds from sales of the signs have been donated to organizations including the American Civil Liberties Union, Planned Parenthood, Ida B. Wells Society (an organization devoted to diversity in newsrooms), Black & Pink (an organization supporting LGBTQIA+ people affected by the prison system), and Heart of Dinner (a New York nonprofit dedicated to combating food insecurity and isolation within the city’s elderly Asian American community).

POSTER DESIGNS
The visual style of the Westboro Baptist Church’s posters is itself derived from signage made by the Colby Poster Printing Company in Los Angeles (1948–2012). Colby produced hundreds of neon-hued, attention-grabbing signs for various promotional purposes—from concerts, fairs, and commercial advertisements to political campaigns. Aside from Chan, contemporary artists including Anthony Burill, Eve Fowler, Allen Ruppersberg, and Ed Ruscha have all used these same text-driven and color gradated fields, inspired by the Colby Posters, in their own works or have directly commissioned the press for their own projects.

ADVISORY ON LANGUAGE
Many of the artist’s New Proverbs signs include the word “F*gs,” which in the past has typically been used by aggressors as hate speech to inflict violence upon femme presenting and nonconforming bodies. In recent years some members of the LGBTQIA+ community have reclaimed this word. Of this “most offensive antigay slur in history,” Advocate magazine notes: “If reclaiming slurs is a way of fighting oppression, giving power to ‘f****t’ is a battle cry.” Much like racial slurs, one should consider their own racial, gendered, and sexual position before using such words.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
As you experience the exhibition, consider these questions or prompts for discussion and further conversation.

- What role does protest play in civic life and democracy?
- What are the boundaries and limits of free speech?
- What kinds of speech are protected, profane, or sacred?
- How do we express dissent without harming others?
- How and when is language harmful?
- Have you seen ads with similar aesthetics—neon colors, bold all-caps lettering—around town? If so, what kinds of things do they advertise? Does your perspective on these signs change knowing their design history and the ways artists have engaged with them?
FURTHER READING TO LEARN MORE

In an interview with the Westboro Baptist Church’s media director Steve Drain in 2014, Walker Design Director Emmet Byrne poses questions about much more than the church’s chosen typeface.
• Erica Chenoweth and Jeremy Pressman, “This is what we learned by counting the women’s marches,” Washington Post, February 7, 2017.
Upon the Colby Poster Printing Company’s closing in 2012, the International Printing Museum acquired the company’s type, graphic woodcuts, halftone engravings, and select archival posters.
• “Made in L.A.,” Anthony Burrill artist site.
• Stephanie Eckhardt, “HUMANS HATE TRUMP: On Trump’s 100 Days Anniversary, These Artist-Made Posters Are the Best Way to Enrage the Alt-Right,” W Magazine, April, 29, 2017.
Paul Chan had designed a cover for New York Magazine in response to Donald Trump’s mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic, which featured the phrase “MAGA RONA 2020.”
• C. R. Stecyk III, “Colby Printing: Rainbow Posters on Every Corner,” SoCal Connected (video), KCET.
• “Westboro Baptist Church,” Extremist Group Info for an SPLC Designated Hate Group, Southern Poverty Law Center.
New York–based artist Paul Chan (US, b. Hong Kong, 1973) became well known in the early 2000s for his richly animated video projections that engage with topics as varied as social justice, philosophy, war, violence, religion, and sex. His art reflects his multidimensional identity as a visual artist and writer as well as his experience as a political organizer.

Following a decade of art-making, Chan embarked on a self-imposed break and turned his attention to publishing by founding the press Badlands Unlimited in 2010. Inspired by the notion of taking a “breather,” this Walker-organized exhibition surveys Chan's activities since his voluntary break from 2009 to the present. Paul Chan: Breathers includes a range of radical publications, experimental moving image works, and a series of kinetic sculptures. Seen together, the works also tell a larger story of an artist who resisted expectations and sought renewal by forging something new.

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE
The exhibition is accompanied by a Walker-produced catalogue, created in close collaboration with Chan, with contributions by the artist, exhibition curator Pavel Pyš, and Vic Brooks, senior curator of time-based visual art at EMPAC, Troy, New York. Available in the Walker Shop and online.

ABOUT THE WALKER ART CENTER
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