

Philip Martin Gallery

Johnstone, Mark, "Carl Cheng," 1+1=1, Manipulated Photographs before Computers by Carl Cheng, Macau: **Cultural and Recreational Services**, Temporary Exhibition Gallery of the Provisional Municipal Gallery of Macau, July 2000.

Rarely are the essential qualities of Cheng's work incisively, even adequately, addressed in the writings about it. The most obvious qualities are those which are identifiable (seen), that much of it is sculpture as an imprint, a physical action, and somehow these things come about through the properties of certain things that have been assembled in a particular work.

Many attempts have been made to base his work in eastern philosophy, usually for reasons of his background and/or the materials employed. These attempts have usually failed to account for some part of or development in his career, while the answer has been consistently placed in front of the public for consideration. The simple answer is that it is all the work of Carl Cheng, artist. A more complex answer involved the fact that he adroitly uses technology and nature as levers, one applied to the other, in order to discover and reveal the beautiful wonders of each.

Cheng's utilization of the world as an available space, with more options than are available in a gallery or museum, is both a choice and a direction and is based in two simple premises: The investigation and invention of art as knowledge (akin to the use of ideas by a conceptualist), and finding out how things define themselves (seeing what can be pulled out of something), Cheng is a kind of conceptualist-materialist.

More than twenty years ago, in "Erosions and Other Environmental Changes" (Baxter Art Gallery, California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, 1975), Cheng laid out his interest in the disruption that is at the heart of all the basic processes of nature. He has continued to work with these issues of temporality, making pieces for or about the North American Western Coast (using the beach, or nearby areas) which often involve time, water, earth, sand, light, and air. The movement endemic in them, however slow or fast, predicates that they cannot ever be seen in their entirety. What is always amazing about Cheng's works is their apparent simplicity, as the technological contraptions that he dreams up are tempered by quiet contemplation of the piece, or what is produced by the piece. Despite technological interventions, there really is no control for what goes on outside of a piece's inner workings; it is unanticipated and entirely wondrous. The audience is moved from passivity to activity, if only in visual appreciation or thought, as his illusions of science, mechanics and nature approximate a precision that is entirely artificial – and yet models the real world, and spiritually adds to it. Metaphors of art and the real world are made to be interchangeable, and both are the richer for it.