

A Conversation with Carl Cheng: The John Doe Company

by Richard Whittaker, May 2, 2002

I can thank the late James Doolin for introducing me to Carl Cheng. Along with Carl, he also introduced me to Michael McMillen. The three artists were best friends. Jim spoke glowingly about both Michael and Carl. He marvelled at each artist's capacity to build things, nearly anything. And each one's originality.

"Carl," he said - and searched for the right words... "he has a way of thinking that's really unusual." After Doolin's unabashed enthusiasm, I wanted to meet both artists. It wasn't difficult to arrange, and when I arrived at Cheng's Santa Monica studio I found myself fascinated by some of his almost scientific looking projects in various states of construction. As we chatted soon we were talking about our early experiences of Southern California...

Carl Cheng: For a year I actually lived on a farm in Pacoima. I was only five years old then, but it was a paradise for kids. My uncle had an asparagus farm. I have four brothers and, as a kid, it was just ideal. There was a horse and barn and workers to dig the asparagus. That was around 1947 and '48. But it was already changing overnight. They built these awful tract homes. Within ten years a million people moved there.

Richard Whittaker: Did your family move here in the forties?

Carl: My father went to college in Michigan from China in the late '30s. My mother was still in China, at the Art Academy in Beijing. Later my father did postgraduate work at Stanford and my mother came over. Two of my brothers and I were born in the Bay Area. My father was almost drafted because he was actually born in this country. He did alternative service and he had four kids by then. That kept us here, whereas the rest of my relatives moved back to China. They were educated, actually rich, and in politics, and they'd run from the Communists. My grandfather on my mother's side was educated in London in the late nineteenth century. My grandfather was the mayor of Canton and on my mother's side there were even more distinguished figures.

RW: So during the Cultural Revolution that was all wiped out?

Carl: Yes. My grandfather was a government officer for The Republic of China under Chiang Kai Shek. In the early 1940's he was an ambassador to Brazil, and when Mao Tse Tung took over, he was already retired and lived in Hong Kong and the U. S. [Cheng gets up to turn the background music down, an electronic composition.]

RW: Are you a student of music in some way? How do you come by a piece like that?

Carl: This one I got from a friend in Germany. I like music where I can't understand the lyrics, basically. Once I tried to make a little device to take the words and distort them so you couldn't understand them. It'd record and sample the sound, and then mix it back a little delayed so you couldn't understand the words. I've always been fascinated by ideas like that.

RW: When I was here with Jim [James Doolin] you were talking about how you'd been in photography early on.

Carl: I started out in art school taking painting, but I wasn't happy with it.

RW: What were the problems?

Carl: I grew up in what I call "pre-sixties, racist America." That means that ethnic groups were marginalized. Everything was wrapped around basic white male entitlements. In the sixties, in college, I was part of everything that was rebelling against that. I very much supported the black movement.

RW: You experienced all that?

Carl: In a different way than blacks, of course. Our family didn't live in Chinatown. When I was in the San Fernando Valley, in a high school of 4000 students, we were one of three families of Asians. That was it. So I grew up with a certain amount of popularity because I was different, and yet I was always marginalized.

When I went to UCLA this one woman teacher in the art department, liked everything that I did because I was so uniquely novel to her in this kind of marginalized way, like she'd never met an Asian. So everything I did was "good." That just infuriated me. It just made it so I couldn't learn anything.

Then one day I was walking in the shop area at UCLA and I saw students designing the inside of an airplane. I was just fascinated with all the tools, the materials and everything. I enrolled in Industrial design immediately and got out of painting. And I met a couple of friends who became life-time friends. My friend Pat O'Neill became a film maker. We became photographers, and we liked using technology. We were adept at it, for one thing.

This was about 1964. In those days they didn't have photography in Fine Arts. It was in Design School. The painters kept it out. But later Robert Heineken, who taught graphic design and photography, got photography into the fine art school. We all made that switch together and Pat and I were some of the first graduates. It was an exciting time to be an art student.

RW: I remember you saying you became more fascinated by the enlargers than by the camera and doing "straight" photography.

Carl: I got into lenses and projectors. Pat and I went to a surplus place and he found a contact printer for 16mm. film. We got it back to UCLA and he started playing with it. You could solarize it and do all kinds of stuff. I did a lot of experimental work like that. I used to use four enlargers at once. I'd have a piece of paper that was souped already and I'd bring it wet to the different enlargers with different images just burning them in to see what would happen. It was totally a mess. We violated everything you can imagine in terms of an Ansel Adams print. [laughs] But that was our lifestyle in those days. Then I went into making projectors and building them into sculptures.

RW: You'd gotten some recognition for photography, I understand—and there was pressure for you to stay with that, but you resisted.

Carl: Yes. That had to do with the fact that photography was trying very hard to be like the Fine Arts. And there was the *art market*. Something never worked for me on that level. I didn't go to school just to make money. Every photographer was trying to make some kind of style that would be marketable, just like a painter. For me that was just absolutely not what photography was about.

I was somewhat successful. [gets a magazine, *Art in America* Sept/Oct 1969] This is from a show of photography-as-sculpture. Peter Bunnell was the director of photography at MOMA at the time. He put together a show of mostly West Coast artists. I made film positives and vacuum molded them into 3D

sculptures. I had some success with that.

I had a gallery and sold a few, and blah, blah, blah. If I'd wanted to be a one-idea career artist, I'd have stayed with that, but I was more interested in a "research and development" attitude toward art. I'm always experimenting and doing things and moving on. As gallery owner told me, "that's not what you want to do." That doesn't fit the career-artist attitude.

RW: I'd be interested in your reflections on that conflict.

Carl: It's pretty simple. I just don't feel I went to school to study art to become a *cottage industry*. In America we have art schools in universities, and what happens when the art school is in the university is that you are exposed to everything that the rest of society is exposed to in terms of education. You're allowed to take any courses offered, and I was also interested in science. I was interested in geology. I took classes in zoology and physics and other subjects. To be able to take anything you want, as an artist, is amazing. This is an incredible possibility.

Through a small scholarship, I went to Germany for a year—to the Folkwang Art School in Essen. I walked into the sculpture department to look around and it was like a dungeon. They all had a stone and were chiseling away at it—no power tools allowed! It was medieval. I was accepted in the design school (industrial design) as a graduate student. We were working on product design.

RW: In other words, in the design department things were contemporary, but in the art department it was a different story.

Carl: Yes. Because they have a tradition in sculpture that goes back to year one. Stone! And here's a school that was a later version of the *Bauhaus*. Using industrialization was one of the main thrusts of the *Bauhaus*. Using it as a creative medium was one of the ideologies of what the *Bauhaus* was about, and it was why I was in industrial design. But I was always interested in sculpture too.

When I went to Europe, this was the attitude I found. An artist is someone who is "outside" of society. Maybe he doesn't live very long and maybe he isn't educated at all. He puts out a few pieces of artwork. It has beautiful implications in a very profound way, but it's someone else who interprets what he's saying.

But here we have this system in America where art is taught right in the university. We are going along in the same intellectual fervor and attitudes of the time as anybody else.

We have a huge advantage, if we have the same fervor. We're going to go all over the place because we can break through all the academic disciplines. This is something I found that is unique in America. We allow artists to become part of the university system.

But it's pretty hard to fit art into a university system, when you get down to it. Doing art on the quarter system is incredibly crazy. You're performing so fast you don't even know what you're doing, but it allows you this exposure. In my case, that's what happened. Once you get that exposure you start evaluating—what are my avenues after I get out? Is it back to this primitive level of making something that someone can sell to somebody rich? To me, that's primitive. Why can't an artist be a member of society who contributes on a much bigger level? See what I mean?

RW: Yes. I find it a very perplexing situation. You're a student and are exposed to all these wonderful things. Then you're out of school, but there are only galleries and museums which are grounded more in a marketing model. It's a strange disconnection, it seems to me.

Carl: It's disturbing isn't it? New York sets up its model of what art is, and it's the greatest *art market* in the world. They're selling them there. I think New York represents that commerce idea—trade, banking and commerce. Okay, where are the inventions happening? They're not happening in New York.

What's the next evolution of that? I think it belongs out here somewhere. They're not inventing anything in New York City. All the ideas are happening out on the West Coast, and other places outside of NYC—for better or worse. And where is the new technology? It's out here.

I picked that up a long time ago. I'm not saying it's doing well. I'm just saying, this is where it is. It may not last very long either. L.A. has lost most of its aerospace industry. All the satellites used to be made in the El Segundo area. So what's the next evolution about? That's why I'm in L.A. It's up to the artist to make something out of all this technology. It's the raw material of our time.

But after college, I tried to get out of LA fast. I wanted to go anywhere but here. I went all over the world, and I ended up back here. I had to face up to it. "Hey, it's not so bad after all!" You get to do things nobody else can do. The resources are here.



RW: What do you think the next evolution of art will be? Not that you'll necessarily have an answer.

Carl: I can only say what I think is worth doing. Public art, if you think about it, is even worse than the gallery system. It's much tougher. You're dealing with the general public. I just went to the city council the other day in Santa Monica to make my presentation as part of a design team. We're making proposals for a new library. You're doing everything that society demands of everybody else! That challenge is really tough, especially for artists. But at least I got an education in a university that gave me the skills to try.

To me, what's important is getting art *into* society. We have so much ugliness here in our

environment. Things are so throw-away. Architecture, most of the time, is just façades—imitations of stuff. If you wanted to pick the most extreme example, it would be Las Vegas. We've reduced everything to commercial rubble basically. Okay, now start from there.

We could have a renaissance in art that begins with this rubble. Art could help lead us out of our material waste. When you go to Paris, what is it that makes Paris so special? They preserved all their monuments. This is something that L.A. could do. I'm not saying we're going to do that, but I'm saying we could. Why not make public art that's everywhere? Make the landscape of this area into something that has unique value.

RW: You're making your own effort in that direction.

Carl: That's what fuels my willingness to do public art. For me, it's the next evolution. What other models are there?

RW: What is the potential good in public art? In what does that consist?

Carl: That's a good question because it's hard to answer. The potential of public art is to make us value what we have. What we have now—throw-away society—is the opposite. 12% of the world's population gobbling up 60% of the resources. It's a crime.

What if we found meaning that reaches down to everything we own? This has huge implications. But we don't have anything out there that's worth anything in a broad sense. Why is that? We don't care about our environment here. This is a big travesty. Here we have the richest country in the world and we can't preserve anything here. We don't have anything of value. You have countries that have very little money, and they're doing things that have lasting value.

This is the art of public art, to bring value into our world, into our experiences on a daily basis. It changes your attitude about the environment. So maybe that's my answer to that.

RW: Consumer culture sells us on an idea of meaning inherent in some commodity.

Carl: If you had no commerce, you couldn't do anything either. Now why don't we take those ingredients and make some beautiful lasting things out of them? This is a real good question, right?

RW: Yes it is. I noticed the word *beauty*...

Carl: [laughs] I'd better retract that word. It's a pretty hard one to deal with. Everybody's idea of beauty is different. We can all agree on some of the things, but there are plenty we can't. There's nobody who can put his finger on it. I love that. Just think of the word 'artist.' Anybody can be an "artist." If you say, "I'm a doctor." That's very defined. If you say, "I'm an artist." How do you define that? I think it was Simone de Beauvoir who said, "success in art is a matter of appearances."

The real thing about it, for an artist, is the meaningfulness of what you're doing. I love the fact that it's an unknown. Why do the richest people on earth collect art? Subconsciously they want to get close to that act of creating that nobody can define, and nobody can put a handle on.

RW: But there's something there, isn't there?

Carl: There definitely is. Maybe it's more about that than it is about the actual object of it.

RW: When you're engaged in that creative energy, does not one feel transformed in some way?

Carl: The closest word I can come to is *fulfillment, purpose on earth*. I think most artists in their most personal, private moments in their studio ask "what's my purpose on earth as an artist?"

RW: The artist is alone with that question. The art world is almost an incidental in this area.

Carl: You're right. The poet has to ask that question, the writer too. Anybody who contemplates—they all melt together at some point. As an artist you try to share those thoughts with people in a poetic realm. You try to share it in your work. You bring out things that try to reveal it. But it's not defined, and it changes all the time.

It's this constant quest that makes you an artist, I think. You're talking about everybody—your common man's heart. It hits something basic that we all deal with. In your deepest moments this is what you're asking yourself. "Why do I exist?"

RW: Does that relate—I wanted to ask you about your choice of calling yourself "The John Doe Company."

Carl: A long time ago, for tax purposes, my accountant told me "you've got to become a business" in order to be an artist. It's the easiest way the tax people can understand you. I started thinking, "okay, what name?" Well, something that I believe in. I guess that's where "John Doe" came in.

There's something about Shakespeare I love. He did all these famous plays and nobody knows who he was. I just love that! To me "John Doe" represents that, and public art is also that. And I like the humor "John Doe Co." implies.

When I went to India and other places, I'd see these huge sculptures out there, like a gigantic elephant that's three stories high. It's beautifully carved. Or the sphinx, or the buddhas in China. All these were made by people who made art, and nobody cares who they were. I felt I learned something when I went to those countries.

Public art is something, let's say, like an altar you see somewhere on a street in Kathmandu. Everybody is using it, putting their flowers on it, pouring their milk on it, sitting on it, even having their lunch on it. It's all worn down. In India you see things like this. They sing in front of it. They've been there for thousands of years, and they're alive! Nobody cares who made it! It's not a thing about "I." That just hit me so hard when I went to those countries. That's sort of been my attitude about it ever since. It may be naive.

RW: It's touching and extremely refreshing, to tell you the truth, an effort to place one's values somewhere beyond egotism.

Carl: Yes. I think so. The "John Doe Company" represents that. But now I've kind of gone past that. In the 1970's I started making artworks that were signed "John Doe Company" and of course, I would get no reviews. I did them anyway. I did some shows out here that were by "John Doe Company." Then after awhile I used "John Doe Company" on and off. I used it as part of my public art thing. It's not that important to me anymore, in terms of the original reasons. I just let go of that problem.

RW: Switching gears here, would you agree that with the forces passing through LA, the West Coast, the Bay Area, Seattle, that this is one of the main nexuses of world energy right now?

Carl: I think I agree with you but I don't think it will last very long. Right now the Pacific Rim is growing faster than anywhere else. It's a natural evolution. If you look at societies, take China, dynasties came and went seven times already. You see that the energy could shift in this direction, but it doesn't mean the other places are dying. It just means there are certain forces—like right now, the West Coast is one

of the free-est areas on earth!

In a certain way there are freedoms here that are incredible! Maybe they're even dangerous! I mean, if a guy next door is making a neutron bomb in his garage, you wouldn't know it.

RW: One has a tendency to take all this for granted. It's only been recently I've begun to see how extraordinary this situation is, this freedom.

Carl: ...It's a fleeting moment. Because what we've done to so many countries out there, through our government, is going to come back to us one day. After WW2 we went around and took everybody's resources. Every country I went to we'd already exploited something out of them. We set up all the puppet governments all over the world etc. In our own naive way we raped every country basically. Some day it will come back to us. This culture will come and go like every other culture.

RW: How would you say your own work relates to the moment we're living in?

Carl: How can I be working, you mean? [laughs]

RW: Not how, but...

Carl: ...Why should I? [continuing to laugh]

RW: You have some hope. Is that a fair thing to say?

Carl: Well, I want to share, let's say. All artists want to share their thoughts, of course. As an artist, I'm trying to fit into the world and make myself useful.

RW: Let me ask you about this project with the banks of dials.

Carl: This particular project, the meter boards, has to do with things we can't perceive. Basically this piece has to do with making the invisible, visible.

I don't know if you've ever been in a small plane and listening to what they're saying up there. When you're flying someplace, going through the sky, it looks very simple. Actually the sky is all divided up. Every airport has a zone. Every place is demarcated. There are millions of lines up there that are all on radio waves. A pilot has to radio in to where he's going, he has to say where his path is, where he's going to cross another path and every time he crosses he's got to make radio contact. And there are hundreds of radio stations out there! Not counting cell phones by the zillions, and they're all using these same air frequencies. We can't sense it, but it's chaos up there! If you've ever heard it, it's unbearable. But when we look at the sky, we think it's just the sky.

This project just brings this out. If you press that button there you're going to hear just seven channels, and it's chaos already. But what I'm doing is, I'm moderating it so that it becomes something visual and acceptable. That's an explanation of the piece, but the aesthetics of the piece are something else.

RW: There is something strangely beautiful and meditative about it, those little dials silently flicking. It's so unlike the chaos you're describing.

Carl: Exactly. I think you're touching pretty much exactly what I was hoping to bring out. And that word *beauty* comes out again, right? There's something very peaceful about those things. We need that. [laughs] or we'd be driven crazy!

It has a poetic feeling to it. And there's a lot of dials, so their combined little efforts give us an impression that is just the opposite of what they are, in a way. I mean they give us a sense of *peace*. I love things like that—where it's chaos, and it turns into its opposite. And I'm just doing a slight change to it.

RW: Of course that makes me think of your piece that generates the bubbles. It really does put one immediately in a completely different state if you really watch those ring bubbles slowly rising, breaking up, catching the light in all those different ways.

Carl: [laughs] I don't consciously go out there and do that, but I know, since I meditate myself, I know what it's about. Art can do that.

RW: You talked a little about this bubble-generating piece and your negotiations with the *Exploratorium* [in San Francisco]. I'm sure they like you up there, but you described how they wanted to do something with the piece you didn't want them to do.

Carl: I was resistant. They like to turn everything into a demonstration piece where you can press a button. But they're an educational institution, geared to a lot of kids, and they like to explain everything.

You could explain how a ring bubble comes up, but that isn't my intent as an artist, and I've been able to keep the piece as something that is *not* that.

If you made a piano and no one had seen it before you could show it and just play notes on it, ding, ding, ding. But along comes a composer and we get the full experience of our senses and our feelings. This is what I'm stabbing at. I don't want my bubble sculpture to be just a thing you demonstrate, ding, ding, ding. It's going to be more than that.

I've been playing with that thing for twenty years. I've been watching how it works, and playing off it's program and making things happen. There are moments where two ring bubbles come up together and somehow they hook together and make one big one. There are other times where they repel each other. Sometimes one goes up through another one. There are a thousand little tricks these things are doing. This piece is called "Friendship Acrobatic Troop." It doesn't always make it. It makes mistakes. Sometimes it makes magic and humor too. The essence of that piece is the composition of it, not the piano. I don't want it made into a demonstration of how a piano works.

RW: These two wax circles on your wall are quite beautiful and you told me a little about how they were generated from a machine you made.

Carl: Let me see if I can find a picture of that thing. [leaves to look for it. Coming back he says,] You're a person creating a situation where I can actually reflect on what I do, and I'm very grateful for that.

RW: Thank you. I feel a strong connection with the kind of things you're saying and, in general, I don't think artists are being given the chance to really talk about their experiences and ideas.

Carl: Look in most of the reviews. It's just so superficial. Back in the early days, because I'm Asian, everything I did was "Zen, Taoist, meditative or else Dada." Just fitting you into pigeon holes and moving on. Some of my work *is* meditative and peaceful, but hopefully there is more there.

There are people in minority groups, like me, who aren't talking about their minority culture all the time. I'm so bored hearing about that. That's not the only issue people live on, you know.

Through the years I've built a lot of "art tools." That means I've used technology in ways to make something, to see what it does. These are some examples [showing me pictures]. These wax circles are so

fragile they just fall apart. These are the only two I could get up on the wall.

RW: It's fascinating to see this complex thing that's made from a relatively simple device.

Carl: ...A very crude device.

RW: There's a certain degree of control, but a lot that's beyond your control.

Carl: You're right. There's an interplay of manipulation and physical phenomena. One aspect of what I do is to look at physical phenomena a lot—sunlight, how it plays on things, how water moves across a rock. This way of looking at things has a lot of influence for me. I'm always looking at what creates the phenomena. What I'm seeing is the result of a lot of elements. If you see a soft light, there's haze in the air. What does water vapor do in the atmosphere when sun shines through it? A dust storm?

Physical phenomena are always part of my public art. I always look at a site and ask. What created it? How does sun and weather play out at the site. That's part of it.

RW: You said you had no shortage of ideas. Maybe there's a shortage of time and resources.

Carl: Yes. Right. [laughs] I'm probably going to be down in the laboratory right down to my deathbed still trying to do something. I like to invent things. Do you know how things are invented?

RW: Tell me.

Carl: That's how I discovered that ring-bubble idea. I was working on nozzles for the Exploratorium, trying to do something in their lagoon. I was shaping nozzles that would squirt water up in different shapes. Then one day—you know how those bottled water dispensers work? You press the button and air gets in and the bubbles rise through the water with creative turbulence. When I saw that while I was working on this other project, something clicked. Instead of making the water come up in the air, why don't I make the air come up in the water? So then I played around and figured it out.

I'm not saying that ring-bubbles are an invention. I'm just saying that inventors pull things from places most people would not think of, and they hook them together.

RW: I remember Jim Doolin talking about a piece that you did in which you used avocado seeds.

Carl: [laughs] The show itself was called "The Organic Laboratory." What I did was take something as innocuous as an avocado seed and I started playing with it. I made a display of hundreds of them. You have a greenhouse laboratory and within it there are work tables displaying all the things I'd done with them.

What I liked about the avocado seed was that there's about a six month period from when the seed is fresh—you've eaten the avocado—to when it turns into a black nut. It dries up. Within that period, let's say you're cutting your avocado and your knife hits the seed. That will put a line on it, much like on the bark of a tree when a kid cuts an initial in it. The tree grows and the initial turns into this tattoo on the bark. This happens really fast on the avocado seed, and I was using this period of time for my laboratory. I played on this period of degeneration.

RW: What would you say were the ideas behind the "Organic Laboratory" show?

Carl: I was working on impermanence. That was one of my interests—using something that was not going to last. A lot of my projects have that impermanence aspect to them. To me it's another valuable

concept to explore. My installations allow me to develop and share ideas that sometimes end up in public art projects.

RW: I'd like to go back to your "Santa Monica Art Tool." What was your thinking around that piece?

Carl: It goes back to my first public art project in 1979. I had a studio at the Santa Monica pier, and that's where I did my first public art piece. I talked the pier manager into letting me use a condemned building and do a window piece. That piece was pivotal to how my attitudes grew in terms of, what is the public? A museum also has a public, too, you know.

But here was a pier where I was getting really off-the-street people, and none of them were interested in art at that moment. They'd be there for the beach, or for the pier. So I put this piece right in there along side a hot-dog stand. It was even coin-operated. That piece involved me for a year at the pier.

RW: Describe it a little, if you would.

Carl: It was in an old building called the "Sinbad Building," a two-story building right on the pier. There had been a dance floor and a night club. The city was trying to decide if it was "a historic building" and re-do it, or whether to tear it down. It was really falling apart, and leaking at the roof level.

I made a big bay window, and placed, right at the window's edge, a fifteen by twenty foot table. Then I put sand on that and commenced to build this big piece which was the first of my "art tools." I used the sand because it was right there, and I made a rake that would rake back and forth in a very crude way.

I had a window board that "explained" the process and next to that, was a selection board with ten little diorama windows. Each one had a bunch of organic sculpture things that I'd built in traveling all over southeast Asia for two years before this. I'd traveled all over and had seen what artists were like in those cultures and the public art aspects of how people worshipped and did things with shrines and so on.

RW: In a traditional way, you mean?

Carl: Yes. Used by the culture. In India, every little street corner has its shrine, and that was art to me. That was an inspiration point for me, just the way they put flowers on these things, seeing that people were using the art. You're not afraid of it and not protected from it. You're just literally, *using* it. That experience made me really want to come back and see what I could do with public art. To me, that was real public art, not a statue of a horseman sitting on a pedestal.

So they let me stay in that building for a year and I built that first project. You had to turn this dial to select one of ten items. The little dioramas had no explanations to them. One looked like little beetles and stuff made into a thing that I had made in Bali, let's say. Not having any explanation for what each one meant was very important to me. I'm making someone make a selection with no explanation other than "this is a museum." You had to put a quarter in the slot after you'd made a selection. The coin-operated part made the viewer commit to seeing it.

RW: Say a little about why it was important to you that they would make the selection without an explanation.

Carl: A lot of it was pure curiosity, and it was an aesthetic thing I'd felt. I was also curious to learn which was the most popular, and if I gave people one word of explanation for any of those objects, they'd look for the symbol of it from the word.

You'd walk into a little arcade-like space made out of awning material where you could see inside. After you'd make your selection and put your quarter in, it would operate. What you would see then,

when you looked in through the window would be a big rake that moved across the table mechanically and wipe the sand clean. Then coming back—it was very crude, just solenoids operated by random timers—maybe it would go down into the sand three times, or maybe five times, or maybe ten times. It was arbitrary. There were all kinds of little organic things hanging off the sides of the arm that was operated by the solenoid. It would clunk into the sand and pivot or something with some twigs or seashells, and it would scrape the sand and then come up. So that would leave an abstract pattern in the sand.

In the diorama windows were these little organic assemblages, and then there's the rake and its actions. Try to put these two elements together. You're going to have *a lot* of dialogue. So I'd set it up one way and after a week, I'd just switch things around. It wouldn't matter.

While working on it, I noticed I could hear people when they were standing out there looking at it because I was near the window. I could hear, "Whaaaaat the Hell is This!?" "This isn't ART!" Blah, blah, blah, and they'd walk away. Another person would say, "Okay, I know how to work this!" And they'd select something. I mean, *all the things* people would say! People would *explain* it. Some guy would say, "Whoa! Well, you know why there are *three* of these!" They'd make connections. And I'd switch things around and the next week there'd be some other explanation. So it was a free-for-all.

I got lots of in-put. A friend of mine went out and interviewed people while I was inside. I also had a comment slot where you could slip your comments in. People would stand around and finally one guy would put a quarter in and everybody would rush up to watch what happened.

Different times of day also made a big difference. In the morning there'd be retired people and bus-tour types. They'd look at it one way. And you could also get a refund. Out of the year I had three people who wanted their money back, and I sent it back with little souvenirs from "The John Doe Co."

RW: That's wonderful.

Carl: There was a bell-curve of comments, from the worst to the best. There were some really great ones, "We've been in America for three weeks. We're from England, and this is the most wonderful thing we've ever seen. We can't imagine how..." I'd get a few dollars. Some people would slip money in, "Great show!" written on a dollar. One of the best ones I got was just listening to two guys who came on their skateboards. "Wait, wait, wait—Come here!" I could hear the other guy still zooming around on his board. "What is this thing?" They put the quarter in, and "Whaaaa... Uhhh.. I, I, aah Whoaaaa—yaagggghh, uunnnnh...ergggghhh." This went on for minutes—no words, just these sound utterances. They couldn't verbalize what they were seeing. An incredible response. I just cracked up and was rolling on the floor.

And then there was a lot of formal knowledge I got out of it, like with the time of day. In the evening, couples would look at it. They were probably the most receptive. A guy taking his girl on a date to the pier. They're both totally receptive, because they're looking for fun, and this was a great thing for that. You'd see them really look, maybe even put more than one quarter in there.

RW: So people's reactions to a situation which isn't clear. No explanations...

Carl: ...Except there's the name, "The Natural Museum of Modern Art."

RW: And it has these little dioramas. And an explanation board which says...?

Carl: ..."This is a public art project by The John Doe Co." It said that many of the dioramas were made in the builder's travels in southeast Asia. I found you had to give *some* degree of explanation. Originally, on the canopy itself I'd put something like "Draw On Art" as a title. The project wasn't called a museum at first, and people started drawing right on the canopy. One day I was going in to work on it, and Art

Philip Martin Gallery

Linkletter was there with a bunch of people "officially" writing his name on the canopy. This reaction happened so fast—the canopy was graffitied immediately—that I had to rename it. By calling it a "museum" at least I gave people a little something to... I wouldn't say that now.

RW: So this was all before your *Santa Monica Art Tool* piece.

Carl: Yes. It was the first one I did. And out of that one year I was pretty much convinced of the value of doing public art. Any time I went outside, if people saw me, they would stop and talk with me about it.

RW: It sounds like a multi-level, rich experience.

Carl: Yes. It really gave me a pretty good take on art in general.

RW: In comparison, a typical gallery artist has an opening once a year, maybe, and shows up for three hours—and that's it.

Carl: This is more like an event where you're actually contacting people. They don't feel inhibited. You know what I mean? People go to a museum with this feeling that they're not authorities on art and whatever they say isn't going to be relevant. Then they head straight for the cafeteria.

RW: That's an interesting side-effect of having art experts, specialists.

Carl: And of course, that does intimidate people to no end. You show an abstract thing, for instance, and the experts are saying "it's great." You're a person from the streets and, to you, it's just a flat piece of color on the wall. [laughs] Abstract art really pushed that thing, but that's another story.

RW: Yes. A world of "expertise" is needed to explain why a lot of work should be of some interest. [laughs] But anyway, then, after a year there at the pier...?

Carl: Well, I'd gotten the use of the upstairs of The Sinbad Building also, a huge dance hall that had walls of big, open windows. Can you imagine? And it was right on the water's edge. I could look straight up the coast, or turn around and look out straight down the coast. I mean, when it comes to studios, this was it!

RW: It sounds unbelievable!

Carl: The height of the room must have been oh, maybe 25 feet, at least—all built of wood, but it was—birds went in there, and stuff. Anyway, I started working upstairs even as I was running this thing downstairs. I was already building a mechanical thing that was actually portable instead of this machine that was built around a table. Of course, I could just bring sand upstairs and make this new thing go all the way up and down this big dance floor. And then one day I looked out the window and I thought—"Why don't I just make something that uses the entire beach?!"

So I started trying to initiate this idea with the city, "What if I made something that did something on the beach?" I wasn't thinking of anything permanent at that time, just another public art project. And right about that time there was an artists' competition for this NES Park, Natural Element Sculpture Park on the beach. I got squeezed in. I wasn't initially invited to submit an idea, but one of the panel members knew me and she got me in there. This was about 1981.

So I submitted this drawing. There it is on the wall [points]. And it just instantly won everything. It was about the time of the Richard Serra controversy in New York where they took that big steel piece of

his out of the square. This is where the art connoisseurship hit the fan with the public. They didn't like that thing! And I don't blame them. I saw it many years later, and saw exactly why. He just took this thing and put it right across a plaza like the Berlin Wall forcing everybody to go around, and it just completely ruined that square. So the selection panel decided to go public. They put everything out in the city hall and had people vote on them, and I won because from the illustration you can just see it. It talks well.

I won the competition, and it went through the city council and so on. It took them five years to administrate that project! [laughs]. There was a whole contingent that didn't want anything in the sand. It's already beautiful, right? And the maintenance people didn't like the idea of having to get off their tractors and have to rake around any art work there in the sand. Anyway, I ended up getting funded, and the project ended up being a pretty big success. It was very catching to have a thing like that in the evening news. To have this thing rolling along and a little city appearing in the sand.

RW: Well, it's a very evocative. One thinks immediately of the tide coming in, thinks of its transitoriness. I wonder if any of that entered your mind?

Carl: Oh, absolutely! There's a humor aspect to it also. It's called "Walk on L.A." so I'm inviting you to *trample* L.A. Los Angeles is one of the first cities in America where the sub-divisions just kept going.

So I was thinking, here's a thing that's printing the city and you can walk and trample on it as well. That's how transitory it was. It all fits in a way. There's a magic combination of stuff.

It appeals to kids. I used to sit up there and watch and invariably it would be a kid who would tell dad what it is. Dad just shoots them off to the beach. He's not even looking. And the kid says, "Hey dad, I know what that is." Dad comes back and the kid says "See, it's backwards. When it rolls it makes prints in the sand." Kids always pick up on it, because 13 year-olds aren't jaded and they still see. There's no way you can not like, it in some way. Whenever I show it to people, they instantly get it.

RW: The idea is compact, and so—so "out-of-the-box," I guess you could say.

Carl: The thing I like best about it, is that everything about it is public. People eat their lunch on it and kids, of course, climb all over it. And I made it so it's huge. Some of those art commission people thought I was going to make a little four-foot roller. I had no intention of that. I was going to make the *biggest* thing you could pull. I researched rollers in Rome and China. They had little [? machines} and lasagna rollers, and I just started playing with it.

RW: It is playful. There's also a level at which it's profound. And there's something so surprising. No one would ever think of this, but you did.

Carl: It has a revelatory aspect to it. Most people say to me, "God, why didn't we think of this before? it's so obvious!" Well, that's exactly the essence of creativity, right? An inventor pulls from different things that are obvious. That's the kind of thing creative people are supposed to do.

RW: "Revelatory." That's the right word.

Carl: It you can get that, you can really change something. But you can't just do it again. It's not a formula. It just comes.

Another aspect of this which was fun for me—having an industrial art background—was that I had to figure out how I was going to make this thing. I wasn't going to carve it. That would cost twenty times more than the budget! I figured it out. I used a vacuum molding machine, I made one that had the right parameters for this thing, and I made these modules. I laid out the entire thing on the floor to see

how the roads would go and how they would fit together. I had three scales for this thing. I had big cars, small cars and tiny cars.

In order to get the idea of Los Angeles—that generic, flat look—I went up in a plane and did my research. The industrial sections of LA, the Beverly Hills area, and the flat-lands of the valley all have certain looks to them. So I figured that out, and then I had these three scales—major roads with bigger cars and smaller roads etc. I made sets of cars—maybe fifty small cars and fifty bigger cars, and little tiny cars. And I had a lot of building units. So I could just put the cars right on these modules with the roads worked out. Then I would vacuum mold it, then move it around and make another one. That way I could make ten million cars appear, and I only had fifty cars.

So all of that was really fun for me. I'd sit there and mold something and if I didn't like it, I'd throw it away and make another one. I just had a lot of fun with it. I put my hands in it. I put dead birds from the beach in there. I had fifty car crack-ups. I had crabs going all over Beverly Hills-type places. There's a whole invasion of these nuclear starfish that had come ashore. I mean, I was just fantasizing, and on that scale you can have quite a lot of fun. In no time I had all the molds made.

RW: You must often find a sense of delight from the results of these things.

Carl: Oh yes. It's fun. I wouldn't be doing this stuff if I wasn't getting something out of it. It's the sense of discovery, and it allows me to laugh. I'm grateful and honored to be an artist.