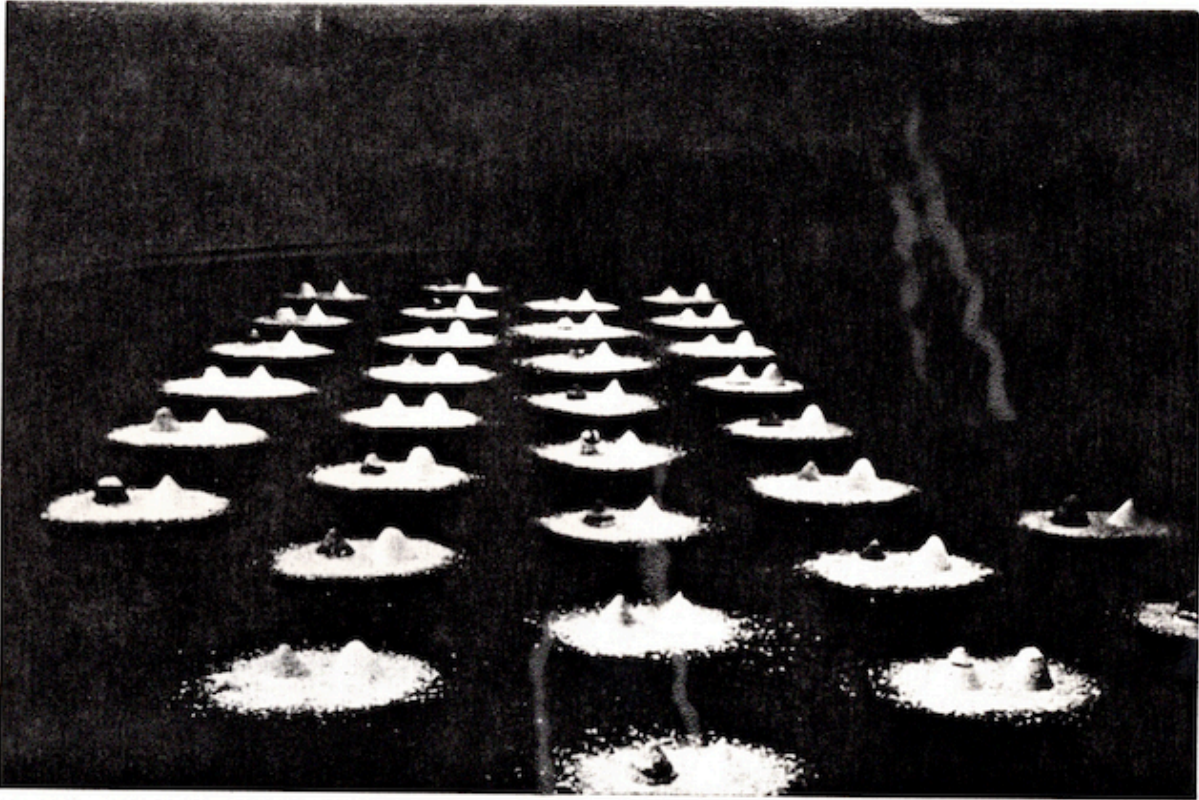


# THE IMPACT OF CONTEXT

Pasadena

Melinda Wortz



*CARL CHENG: Installation at the Baxter Art Gallery, California Institute of Technology, Pasadena.*

Installation pieces by Carl Cheng and Michael McMillan on view at Cal Tech present a provocative contrast of sensibilities. Cheng's works – several executed in Japan – are scientific in conception and appearance, described by the artist as a series of experiments and presented in two separate spaces enclosed by opaque walls of plastic sheeting. McMillan's work is readily seen in a long line of esthetic tradition stemming from Dada and, more recently, related to the Southern California version of assemblage, most specifically Kienholz. Several of Cheng's pieces, on the other hand, look more like science than art, although they incorporate aspects of earth and process art.

Entering the first room of Cheng's presentation, through a closed door, we are confronted with thirty-six pairs of small plaster cones, approximately eight inches tall and placed on the floor in an irregular grid. Each pair sits on a discrete mound of sawdust and reflects two different states of erosion; in some cases one member of the pair has not yet been subjected to the eroding process. Along a wall behind the floor arrangement, five water tanks operated by an automatic timing device alternately turn on and off several jets of water aimed at pieces of plaster. Gradually these selectively oriented streams of water cut away their respective objects, altering their configurations – in a process not unlike traditional chiseling

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– and also create color variations by uncovering sand and other natural elements embedded in the plaster. The results of this procedure can be seen on the floor, in pairs grouped in relation to each other: 1-9, 2-8, 3-7, 4-6, 5-5 and so forth according to degrees of erosion. The completed pairs of cones are both esthetically and geologically evocative. After being subjected to the erosion process, the cones exhibit a variety of textures – slick, rough, grainy – and coloristic richness in black, gray, brown and white tonalities. If we were to come upon one of these objects in the desert, we would undoubtedly view it as a remnant of a cinder cone. It is the context (an art gallery) and the act of naming the experiments art that enables them to be seen as art.

Cheng's second room contains a number of discrete objects – an insect breeder, a Venus Fly Trap titled "Supply and Demand" and an "Experimental Stream Machine," all encased in plexiglass. In both rooms the scientific apparatus is mounted above patches of grass enclosed by plastic. Crickets living in these grasses greet us with continuous, cheery chirps. "Drying Up," consisting of leaves pinned to the wall in various stages of decay, and "Shrivel Stick," bamboo poles topped by a cactus leaf, differ from Cheng's other objects in their greater reliance on natural rather than on artificially imposed processes of erosion. They are also the most ephemeral. "Shrivel Stick" has a shamanistic quality which is not shared by Cheng's other works.

The works of both artists ultimately hark back to Duchamp's blurring of distinctions between art and life by making the former a function of conceptual context. How and what we see depends upon the mental set with which we look – an insight that is particularly important for scientific inquiry, as in the Cal Tech milieu in which the exhibition is viewed.