

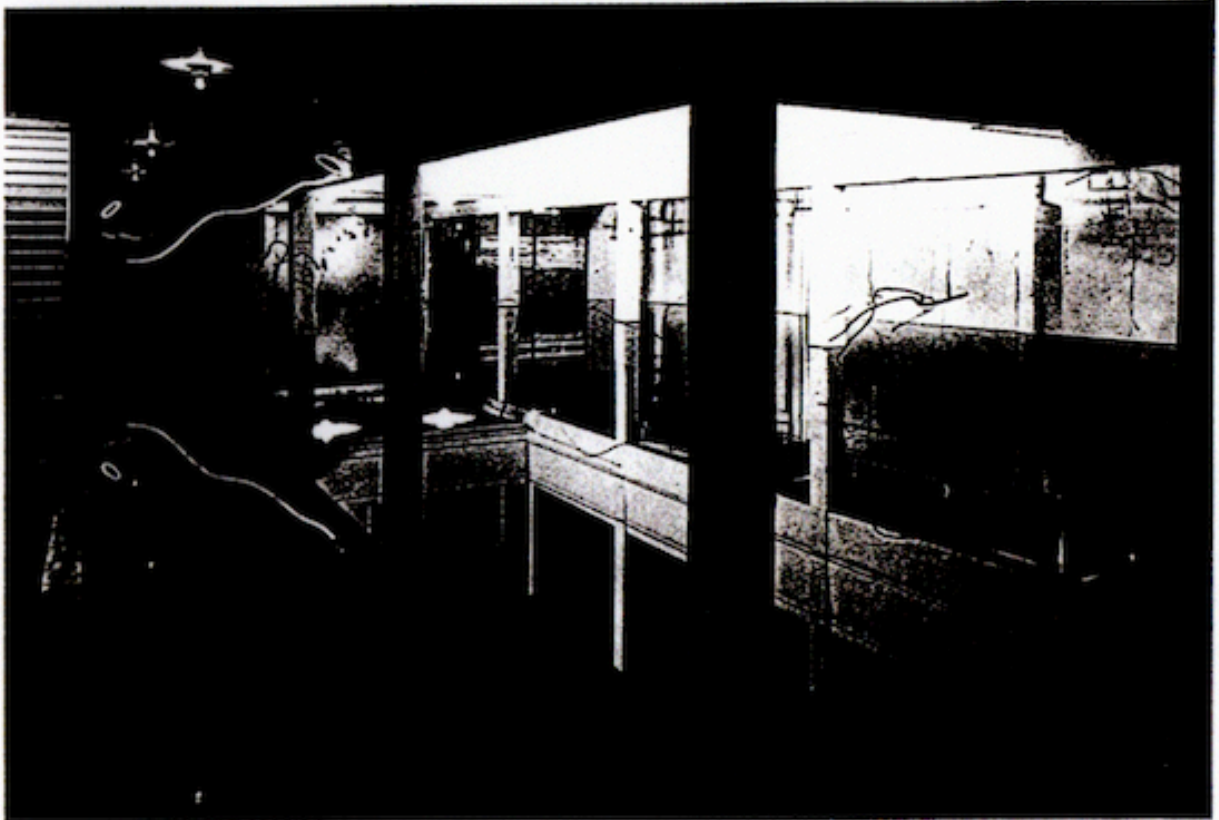
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Art in America

**SAN FRANCISCO**

Carl Cheng at  
Capp Street Project

By Gay Morris



Carl Cheng: Installation view of *66% Water*, 1989–90; at Capp Street Project.

Capp Street Project is one of the Bay Area's most adventuresome spaces for site-related art installations. Last summer, for example, Ann Hamilton spread honey over the floor of the 10,000-square-foot building, and subsequently Bill Viola created hills of soil and planted evergreens for "Sanctuary." Now Carl Cheng has flooded the space for "66% Water." He's made most of the ground floor into a shallow black reflecting pool that can be observed both from that level and from the second-story gallery that runs around all four sides of the room.

Entering on the second-floor level is an eerie experience. The room seems dark at first, but you can sense the water below and also hear it dripping far away. As your eyes grow accustomed to the gloom, objects slowly begin to appear. The dim outlines of frayed and knotted ropes can be seen hanging like a clothesline of fetishes below on side of the balcony. Suddenly a snake of neon lights up in the pool, a little fountain of water erupts and fades, a red light bulb glows and splashing sounds can be heard in the distance. As one descends to the pool, the room takes on a different appearance. It becomes clear that nothing is actually in the water; instead the pool's surface reflects a variety of objects—chairs and a table, more ropes, twigs and delicate branches—that the artist has hung beneath the second-story gallery. As the light sources in the room change, these objects appear first dimly reflected in the water, then illuminated with such clarity that they seem to rest on its aqueous surface. In a side room, water

alternately drips and cascades into another pool, forming an aural accompaniment to the visual effects. This charming ballet of light, movement and sound lasts perhaps 15 minutes before repeating.

“My art work results from an attitude that says we humans are not adversaries of nature but are a part of nature,” Cheng asserts. And indeed, in this installation man-made objects—not only furniture but lights, plumbing apparatuses, computer timers and the plastic pool itself – blend harmoniously with natural elements of wood, water and fiber. Despite an obvious difference in atmosphere, “66% Water” provides the kinds of small surprises one might expect to encounter in an 18<sup>th</sup> -century garden filled with fountains, follies and mazes. Like the garden, and despite Cheng’s assertion to the contrary, this installation does not so much demonstrate that man is a part of nature as that he is capable of bending nature to his will. For “66% Water” is 90 percent artificial. Its pool and showers, its drips and eruptions are possible only thanks to synthetic materials and the mechanical devices of plumbing and electronics. Perhaps when Cheng says “nature,” he really means the entire external world, in which case technology is not in opposition to nature but part of it. If Cheng intends to make the point that man must use the external world benevolently, then “66% Water” demonstrates one way to do it.