Artist-Tinkerer Carl Cheng Teaches a Lesson in Surrendering to Systems

By Louis Bury
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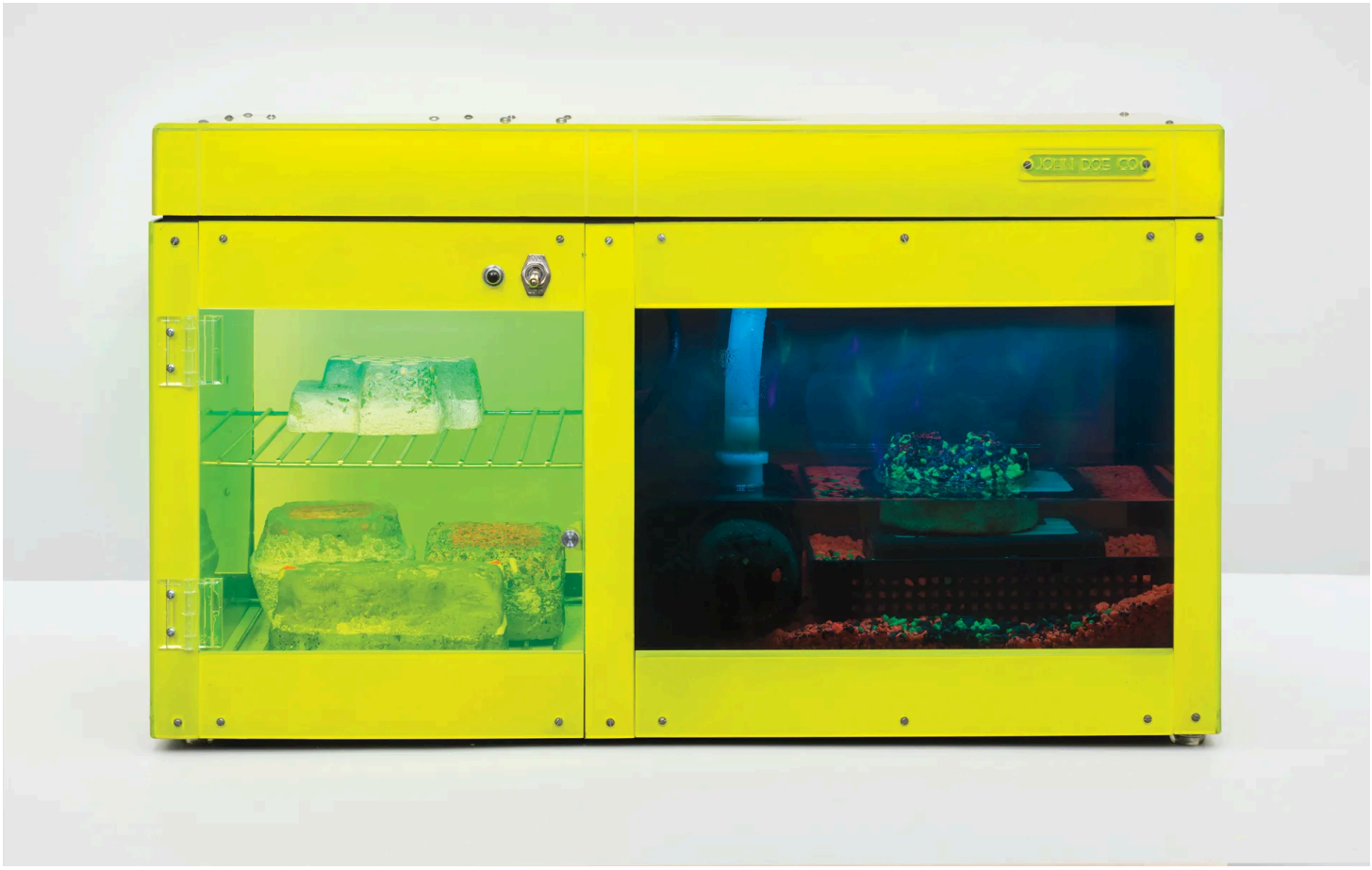

Carl Cheng: *Erosion Machine No. 4*, 1970.
Photo Jeff McLane. Courtesy The Artist And Philip Martin Gallery, Los Angeles.

Since the 1960s, **Carl Cheng (https://www.artnews.com/t/carl-cheng/)** has sometimes worked under the alias "John Doe Co.," a sly response to his accountant's suggestion that his art practice become a business. This coy refusal is perhaps one of several reasons why his ingenious work has yet to receive the art

historical recognition it deserves. Another is the way his kinetic, ecologically minded sculptures play with their own impermanence, from machines designed to erode rocks ("Erosion Machines," 1969–2020) to those that create contoured shapes in the medium of sand ("Santa Monica Art Tool," 1983–88). Yet another is his extensive work in public art, a genre neglected by critics and museums. Underlying it all is a tinkerer's DIY ethos, which manifests a refreshing indifference to careerism.

Whatever factors contribute to Cheng's relative obscurity, his cabinet of curiosities-like retrospective, "Nature Never Loses," at the Contemporary Austin, can only enhance his reputation as it tours the United States and Europe through 2027, stopping at the Institutes of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia and Los Angeles, as well the Bonnefanten Museum in Maastricht, Netherlands, and the Museum Tinguely in Basel, Switzerland. The exhibition and its catalog culminate four years' research by curator Alex Klein, in collaboration with Cheng. This recuperative feat consolidates the 82-year-old artist's hitherto scattered archive, rendering his eclectic and ephemeral oeuvre easier to apprehend, and showcasing its bricolage charm.

View of the exhibition "Carl Cheng: Nature Never Loses," 2024, at the Contemporary Austin.

Cheng has an insider's pedigree and an outsider's sensibility. While attending UCLA in the mid-1960s, his backgrounds in industrial design and fine art photography led him to create three-dimensional molded plastic photographs. The maudlin objects were included in MoMA's 1970 group exhibition "Photography

into Sculpture," the first substantial recognition of Cheng's work, which don't feel at home in either genre. Their blobby forms depict things such as a nuclear explosion on an empty road ("Nowhere Road," 1967) or a group of elderly wheelchair users ("V.H.," 1966) who appear uncomfortable in their own skin.

The artist's early 1970s travels to India and China clarified his sense of purpose. Cheng was struck at how the public shrines in both countries—elephants, sphinxes, buddhas—were anonymously authored and incorporated into civic life in the utilitarian manner of a park bench or a table. This insight encouraged him to deemphasize the role of authorship in his own practice and design use-value into his array of invented "art tools." His series of wooden "Art Tool Paint Experiments" (1972), for example, look like crosses between shoeshine kits and sewing machines that, when activated, drag and drip paint onto a support. Cheng considered the machines' practical functions more important than any incidental sculptural or performative qualities they might possess. This value system, together with the artist's willingness to surrender to processes of nature or chance, lends his work an endearing humility.

Carl Cheng: *Natural Museum of Modern Art*, 1978-1980.

Courtesy The Artist

Yet in the gallery, audiences can't easily experience the art tools in their activated states. Cheng's ambitious first public artwork, *The Natural Museum of Modern Art* (1978), makes this discrepancy clear. The self-initiated "museum" was installed in a

condemned building on the Santa Monica Pier and contained a large table of sand with a room-size mechanized rake. Boardwalk passersby encountered a coin-operated kiosk containing 10 dioramas made from organic materials; when they inserted a coin into a kiosk slot, the machine activated an organic stylus (such as a seashell or a pelican beak) that made imprints on the sand. The artwork's conceit and extant artifacts remain inspiring, but museological documentation can't replicate the strange thrill beachgoers must have experienced in stumbling upon the installation.

Carl Cheng: *Alternative TV #3*, 1974.

Photo Ruben Diaz. Courtesy The Artist And Philip Martin Gallery, Los Angeles.

A fanciful streak pervades both the methods and outputs in Cheng's artworks, even the notionally utilitarian ones. The speculative implements comprising his "Emotional Tools" (1966–2024) series adopt semi-recognizable forms, recalling objects from styluses to condoms, without adhering to those forms' typical functions. His kooky "Avocado Laboratory" (1998–2024)—hundreds of resin-sculpted avocado parts, displayed in a greenhouse—contrasts organic decay with museological fixity. His "Alternative TV" series (1974–2016) situates rock- and plastic plant–filled water tanks inside TV chassis, contravening expectations about home entertainment. His "Emergency Nature Supply Kit/Subway Wormhole Project" (1970/2015) imagines a dystopian sci-fi scenario in which a dose of nature

provides respite for its human user, yet the kit contains only artificial grass and a battery-powered speaker playing recorded birdsong.

The retrospective's title might seem to suggest that humans can't get the better of nature, though the work itself is irreverent toward any distinction between the two categories. For Cheng, humans and their zany creations are both parts of nature, same as beavers and their dams. His irresistible artworks, which teeter between utility and whimsy, model how our species' efforts to shape the world to our purposes always contain the seeds of their own undoing. Nature may never lose, and sand drawings may remain lost to art history, but what would it mean to win anyway.