

# The Contemporary Austin

JONES CENTER  
700 Congress Ave., Austin, TX 78701

LAGUNA GLORIA  
3809 W. 35th St., Austin, TX 78703

## The Contemporary Austin Presents *Carl Cheng: Nature Never Loses*

**Premiering in Austin and touring across North America and Europe, the exhibition marks the artist's first in-depth institutional survey**

Austin, TX (**July 9, 2024**) – The Contemporary Austin is thrilled to announce *Nature Never Loses*, the first in-depth museum survey of artist Carl Cheng. On view from September 6 – December 8, 2024, the exhibition brings together six decades of Cheng's prescient, genre-defying work that operates at the intersection of identity, technology, and ecology. Organized by Alex Klein, Head Curator & Director of Curatorial Affairs at The Contemporary Austin, with assistance from Rachel Eboh, Curatorial Assistant, *Nature Never Loses* will tour throughout North America and Europe to the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania (January 17 – April 6, 2025), Bonnefanten (May 9 – September 28, 2025), Museum Tinguely (December 3, 2025 – May 10, 2026), and Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (September 26, 2026 – February 28, 2027).

Cheng first developed his practice in Southern California in the 1960s, amid political unrest, an interdisciplinary art scene, a booming post-war aerospace industry, and a rapid development of the region's landscape. Over the last sixty years, he created an ever-evolving body of work, incorporating a variety of materials and media and engaging with environmental change, the relevance of art institutions to their publics, and the role of technology in society—topics that are increasingly urgent in our contemporary moment. Although he originally gained recognition for his photographic sculptures, his inventive lexicon includes the creation of “art tools” employed in the production of artworks, “nature machines” that anticipate an artificial world shaped by humans, and site-specific interventions aimed at engaging broad audiences.

Cheng's vision is marked by an unparalleled understanding of art and its correlation with his own identity, and the natural and human-made worlds around him. Since 1967, Cheng has also operated under the moniker John Doe Co., a simultaneous critique of corporate culture and the Vietnam War-era discrimination he faced as an Asian American. His work has consistently probed questions of natural agency and the extractive impact of humans on the environment. These investigations are tied to his unique approach to technology as an artistic tool and his critique of neoliberal notions of progress that undergird both the art market and the tech industry.

*Nature Never Loses* seeks to highlight the innovative and interdisciplinary nature of Cheng's practice, one which has been largely excluded from art historical narratives to date. Klein and Cheng worked closely over the last four years, meticulously distilling the artist's vast oeuvre and archival material into a survey of more than 60 objects as well as documentation of past installations and public artworks that have been rarely seen by the public. As the majority of Cheng's work is still in his possession, *Nature Never Loses* animates

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the arc of the artist's career through a presentation that is multidisciplinary, ephemeral, material, process-based, and interactive.

The exhibition will open with *Anthropocene Landscape 1, 2006*, and *Anthropocene Landscape 2, 2006*—two topographic works made of circuit boards that imagine the ground from a bird's eye perspective of 6,000 and 30,000 feet—exposing the reality that even the most advanced technology is bound by the rigidity of a point A to B logic, as opposed to the organic biomorphic forms found in nature. The survey then delves into the foundational role of photography in Cheng's practice, reflected in *V.H.*, 1996, one of the artist's molded plastic photo objects originally included in MoMa's seminal 1970 exhibition *Photography Into Sculpture*. Furthermore, Cheng's travels through Asia and Southeast Asia in the early 1970s significantly altered his perspective on the value placed on discrete objects, traditional modes of art making, and who has access to art and where it is displayed. Beginning in the 1980s, Cheng shifted his focus and began producing public art commissions, with his background in industrial design providing the technical prowess required to create compelling and practical proposals that ultimately led to the realization of nearly 20 commissions that have shaped public spaces across the country. A key example is *Santa Monica Art Tool*, 1988, a public artwork on the Santa Monica Beach that was activated when a concrete roller pulled by a tractor imprints a 2" scale aerial view of a cityscape entitled "Walk on LA" onto the sand. Cheng views his public art projects as opportunities to engage a broader audience and provides an expanded analysis into what he terms "human erosion," the eventual deterioration of his public projects due to vandalism or lack of maintenance, as well as the ephemerality of artworks made from organic or natural materials, allowing his works to serve as metaphors for the precarity of a climate and landscape irrevocably changed by humans and their built environment.

Cheng's artistic concerns in the 1960s anticipate the expanding awareness of human's impact on the environment and later, in the 2000s, the concept of the Anthropocene, a term commonly used to describe the geological era shaped by the impact of humans on the atmosphere and landscape. This throughline in Cheng's career is also seen in his early *Erosion Machines*—a series of sculptures that use water to erode "human rocks," modeling nature, its processes, and effects for a future environment that may be entirely controlled or completely fabricated by people. An avid collector and recycler, Cheng often worked with everyday materials such as avocados, one of his favorite foods, since the 1990s as a vehicle to explore the tenants of durational art. A large greenhouse will be installed at The Contemporary Austin to house hundreds of small avocado sculptures that have been carved into, shaped, and undergone a drying process, demonstrating the artist's unique ability to merge conceptual tactics and playfulness in his work. The exhibition will also include the *Art Tool: 1022, 2024*, a reimagination of Cheng's ambitious installation *Sand Rake Art Tool*, 1978, that will take the form of a site-specific, large-scale drawing made of sand. The artwork was specifically restored for this survey exhibition in collaboration with REDCAT and in partnership with the other presenting institutions. Each venue will feature a unique large-scale sand drawing made by Cheng in response to the site.

"I am continuously inspired by Carl's ethos and outlook," says Alex Klein, Head Curator & Director of Curatorial Affairs at The Contemporary Austin. "Informed by his own unique methodology and lexicon, his work consistently challenges disciplinary boundaries and is imbued with a genuine desire to engage broad publics. In our current moment of ecological calamity and rapid technological change, his prescient practice

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offers an alternative vision of humans' relationship to nature, our ability to innovate and adapt, and the possibilities of art."

"We're thrilled to present this important survey of Carl's work," says Sharon Maidenberg, Ernest and Sarah Butler Executive Director and CEO of The Contemporary Austin. "The project embodies so many elements that are core to how we work here at The Contemporary Austin, including collaboration, experimentation, and a deep commitment to giving voice to underrecognized artists. With meaningful institutional support from Teiger Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, The Carpenter Foundation, and national and international partner institutions from both coasts and Europe, *Nature Never Loses* stands to leave an indelible mark on the art world in the coming years and brings much-deserved visibility to Carl Cheng's work."

The exhibition is accompanied by a comprehensive publication documenting Cheng's life and practice. Designed by Studio Lin, the catalogue will include contributions by the artist, Klein, and scholars including Gloria Sutton, and is set to be published by JRP in early 2025.

*Carl Cheng: Nature Never Loses* is organized by Alex Klein, Head Curator & Director of Curatorial Affairs, The Contemporary Austin, with assistance from Rachel Eboh, Curatorial Assistant. In an effort to expand the public knowledge and global engagement with Cheng's unprecedented career, the museum has partnered with the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania; Bonnefanten, Maastricht; Museum Tinguely, Basel; and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

Original support for *Carl Cheng: Nature Never Loses* was provided by The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, Philadelphia. Major support is also provided by the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and Teiger Foundation, with sustainability efforts guided by Rute Collaborative as part of Teiger Foundation's Climate Action Pilot. Additional support provided by Philip Martin Gallery and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Art and Technology Lab.

The Contemporary Austin's Exhibition Program is supported in part by Rachel and Jeff Arnold, Annette Carlozzi, Debbie Dupré and Richard Rothberg, Kathleen and Christopher Loughlin, Chris Mattsson, O'Shaughnessy – Rivers Family Fund, and anonymous donors. Exhibitions and programming are also made possible by the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Still Water Foundation, and Stratus Properties.

The Contemporary Austin is supported by the generosity of its Board of Trustees, members and donors, and the citizens of Austin through the City of Austin Economic Development Department, Cultural Arts Division.

The Contemporary Austin's presentation of *Carl Cheng: Nature Never Loses* will be accompanied by a range of public programs and events, to be announced in the coming months. To stay updated, please visit [thecontemporaryaustin.org](http://thecontemporaryaustin.org).

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## ABOUT CARL CHENG

For over six decades Carl Cheng (b. 1942 in San Francisco, CA; lives and works in Santa Monica, CA) has worked across a variety of media to explore the tensions between nature, artmaking, identity, and technology. At UCLA, he studied industrial and graphic design as an undergraduate and later became one of the first graduate students of the university's new photography department under the direction of photographer Robert Heinecken. His experience at UCLA as well as his graduate work at the Folkwang Essen, Germany exposed Cheng to the interdisciplinary ethos of the Bauhaus influenced education that wedded art and industry. Although Cheng received initial recognition for his molded plastic photographs that were included in MoMA's 1970 exhibition *Photography into Sculpture*, he was always experimenting with different materials and forms. Notably, from 1966 to 1970 he incorporated as John Doe Co. as both a practical solution to sourcing materials and as a critique of the art market and Vietnam War. Under this anonymous moniker he began producing "products" to fulfill the American appetite for new forms of entertainment and that also foreshadowed the notion of the Anthropocene, a geologic era shaped by humans. His travels throughout Asia, from 1970 to 1980, and his interest in Marcel Duchamp further informed his approach and prompted a shift in his work towards portable objects, recycled materials, and public interventions. Cheng has exhibited his work in solo presentations at venues such as: Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum, Santa Barbara; Capp Street Project, San Francisco; LIST Visual Arts Center at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge; Sculpture Center, New York City; and ASG Foundation Gallery, Nagoya, Japan. Starting in the late 1970s he found a wider platform through public art (both official and self-initiated). Working in public space allowed him to create on a more ambitious scale and with greater resources to reach a general audience. In recent years, the methods and questions raised by Cheng's practice have resonated with a younger generation resulting in his inclusion in group exhibitions such as: *Potential Worlds 2: Eco-Fictions* at Migros Museum of Contemporary Art, Zürich, Switzerland; *3D: Double Vision*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; *Specters of Disruption*, de Young Museum, San Francisco; and *Emerald City*, K11 Art Foundation, Hong Kong and new scholarship. Cheng's artworks can be found in the permanent collections of institutions including Migros Museum of Contemporary Art, Zürich, Switzerland; de Young Museum, San Francisco; and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. In 2022 REDCAT mounted Cheng's solo exhibition *Material Behavior*, which centered on Cheng's important sand rake *Art Tool: Rake 1022*, which was restored through a partnership with the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Bonnefanten, and Tinguely Museum for inclusion in the forthcoming survey exhibition *Nature Never Loses*.

## ABOUT THE CONTEMPORARY AUSTIN

As Austin's only museum solely focused on contemporary artists and their work, The Contemporary Austin offers exhibitions, educational opportunities, and events that start conversations and fuel the city's creative spirit. Known for artist-centric exhibitions and collaborations, The Contemporary invites exploration at both its urban and natural settings—downtown at the Jones Center (700 Congress Avenue) and lakeside at the Laguna Gloria campus (3809 West 35th Street), which includes the museum's Betty and Edward Marcus

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Sculpture Park, with a growing program of commissions, temporary projects, and a permanent collection of outdoor sculptures by artists including Ai Weiwei, Terry Allen, Carol Bove, Sarah Crowner, Tom Friedman, Anya Gallaccio, Ryan Gander, Liam Gillick, Nancy Holt, Teresa Hubbard / Alexander Birchler, Paul McCarthy, Wangechi Mutu, Tom Sachs, Monika Sosnowska, Jessica Stockholder, SUPERFLEX, Marianne Vitale, and Ursula von Rydingsvard. Learn more at [thecontemporaryaustin.org](http://thecontemporaryaustin.org).

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