

utterflyzu



**As The Butterfly  
Said To Chuang Tzu**

**Michael Zheng**



# **As the Butterfly Said to Chuang Tzu**

A catalogue for the exhibition of

**Michael Zheng**

at

MISSION 17

2111 Mission Street, Suite 401

San Francisco, CA 94110

June - July, 2006

With an essay by Clark Buckner

Reviews by Colin Berry, Terri Cohn and Scott Oliver

[www.mission17.org](http://www.mission17.org)

[www.michaelzheng.org](http://www.michaelzheng.org)

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# The Artist, the Sage, and the Butterfly: Ideas and Aesthetic Enjoyment in “Post-Conceptual” Art

Clark Buckner

Among various ways to talk about the pluralism of contemporary art, I have repeatedly encountered the term, “post-conceptual.” To my ears, the expression implies two things about the contemporary scene. The first is historical: the open-endedness of art since the 70s indeed developed largely, though not exclusively, through conceptual art. When, in the wake of minimalism and its principled confrontation with the limits of painting, sculpture, and music, it becomes feasible merely to declare, “all the display windows of all the shoe stores in San Francisco right now, that’s my art;” then, as Arthur Danto explains, “everything is possible, or at least anything is possible.”<sup>1</sup> The defense of the autonomous work of art dissolves beneath the weight of its own critical self-consciousness and gives way to the pluralism of contemporary art, in which artists no longer define their practices in terms of specific media, and art can no longer be clearly distinguished from industrial projects, commercial advertising, personal collections, social gatherings, and other aspects of everyday life.<sup>2</sup>

The second implication that the term “post-conceptual” has for me extrapolates from these conditions and draws a conclusion, with which I am not entirely comfortable. Because artists now often work between different media and don’t define their practices in disciplinary terms as, for example, painting or sculpture, some draw the conclusion that *the media don’t matter: what matters is the idea*. In this sense, post-conceptual art is understood as conceptual art. It not only bears the mark of its historical legacy; it carries on its practice. And the practice of conceptual art is understood as putting art at the service of ideas.<sup>3</sup>

As someone with training in academic philosophy, I have been wary of this conclusion for two principle reasons. Language and thought handle concepts with far greater rigor and clarity than images. If post-conceptual artists were indeed only interested in ideas, wouldn’t they have given up their art practices long ago and gone back to the books? If ideas really do trump images in post-conceptual art, wouldn’t we have to conclude that post-conceptual artists are lazy, pretentious, pseudo-philosophers, who remain mired in picture thinking? And isn’t at least some contemporary art better than that?

Also in the history of modern philosophy, the relationship between ideas and aesthetics has been more complicated. Indeed, some like Hegel and Danto argue that scientific self-consciousness trumps the enjoyment of art in the development of the modern world. However others, like Schiller, Nietzsche, and Freud, see art as an antidote to the all-too-coherent logics of conceptual thought. For them, artwork doesn't merely express ideas in cloudy images but articulates contradictions in us and in experience, which conceptual thought implicitly disavows insofar as it presumes to be able to explain them away. Under the influence of this romantic line of thinking, philosophers from Kierkegaard and Heidegger to Blanchot, Derrida, and Deleuze have adopted performative approaches to philosophical writing and explored the poetics of language and thought in opposition to the over-valorization of conceptual clarity.

And finally to treat contemporary art primarily in terms of the dominance of ideas simply seems wrong. On the one hand, it fails to acknowledge that ideas always have been part of the enjoyment of art – not merely as theoretical or political positions expressed by artworks, but as *aesthetic ideas* inspired by the formal tensions of the works themselves and, as such, intrinsic to them.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, treating contemporary art as conceptual fails to acknowledge how thoroughly sensuous it has become.

As a glaring example of this confusion, literature accompanying Mathew Barney's recent exhibition at SFMOMA, *Drawing Restraint*, identified him as a conceptual artist. If Barney's orgiastic spectacles are conceptual, the term means nothing or, at best, the opposite of what would seem to be intended. Rather than expressing the centrality of ideas in art, the term "post-conceptual" would imply that conceptual art and the other anti-aesthetic movements of the twentieth-century have been altogether left behind. We are once again free to indulge our sensuous impulses without being bothered by disturbing, self-conscious reflections on the conditions of our enjoyment. And the appeal to concepts in name would act only as an abstract (and as such meaningless) guarantee that the work is meaningful, while sparing us from actually thinking – like the lexicons identifying the "significance" of distinct elements of the work, which Barney often provides.

Sticking to the first, historical implication of the term outlined above, the programming at MISSION 17, where I work as a curator, might rightly be described as "post-conceptual." The artists who show there often don't identify their practices in terms of specific media or disciplines. They often appropriate images and forms from commercial, amateur, and other extra-artistic sources. And some have almost entirely left behind formal, aesthetic considerations. Among other approaches, they have instead orchestrated interpersonal encounters, explored the objectivity of social scientific discourse, and crafted exhibitions of everyday objects solicited from amateurs.

So where do they stand with regard to the second implication of the term "post-conceptual," which I

have outlined above, and the questions it begs concerning the relationship between ideas and aesthetic enjoyment?

Among all the “post-conceptual” projects undertaken at MISSION 17, none has borne the mark of conceptual art’s legacy as obviously as Michael Zheng’s *As The Butterfly Said to Chuang Tzu*. Within the framework of my curatorial practice, the show marks something of a limit, which defines the “conceptual” within the “post-conceptual.”<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, aspects of the show were decidedly beautiful. Zheng’s articulation of his ideas remained rooted in, and dependent upon an aesthetic encounter. And the intellectual enjoyment provided by the show often had a distinctly affective quality. Despite its epistemological orientation, one might say, the show was poetic. *As the Butterfly Said to Chuang Tzu* thus provides a rich occasion to explore the relationship between ideas and aesthetic enjoyment in contemporary art. Does the media matter in Zheng’s work? Does it merely serve ideas, which otherwise remain independent of it? If not, what is the relationship in Zheng’s art between thought and aesthetic enjoyment? And what does this imply about the force of concepts in art today?

The title of the show, *As The Butterfly Said To Chuang Tzu*, announced it as a study in perception. The Taoist sage Chuang Tzu famously dreamed he had turned into a butterfly. When he awoke, he couldn’t help but wonder whether it was he, who had dreamed of becoming a butterfly, or the butterfly, who had dreamed of becoming Chuang Tzu. Zheng’s concerns in the exhibition were primarily epistemological. He was interested in how we know what we know. And the show focused specifically on questions about framing, and how shifts in seeing aspect shape experience.

To explore these questions, in much of the show, Zheng employed the gallery itself as the medium of his work.<sup>6</sup> For “Hole in the wall,” he hammered a hole in the wall, photographed it, and covered the hole with an image of the hole, leaving only the tip of the actual hole visible above the photograph. Had Zheng actually damaged the wall? I was around when he was installing the show, but frankly I didn’t know for sure. Was this a photograph of a hole in another wall, taken somewhere else and mounted here? Or was it not a representation at all, but rather a transparent piece of plastic over an actual hole?



A second piece, “The Wall,” took these questions still further. Zheng photographed an area of the wall and posted the image onto the wall itself. The absence of any obvious content provoked formal questions. What is the relationship between the wall and the representation of the wall? How is the distortion of the photograph different from the refraction of a transparency, if that’s what the piece actually is? Where

does the wall end and the piece begin? What is presented here and what is being concealed?

“The Pillar,” similarly played with these dynamics of presence and absence in the constitution of experience. Zheng encased in plywood an actual pillar in the center of one gallery wall. Was there a pillar there? I could hardly remember. Was this a work of art or a necessary structural support? The exposed wood made the piece look like the wall was obnoxiously still under construction. Did it actually “work” – as edifice or artifice?

And, for “The Big I,” Zheng cut out an 8’ by 1.5’ rectangle from the wall and raised it by one half an inch. In this piece, Zheng’s epistemological concerns reached a certain limit. What was the piece and what was the gallery? The gallery itself had become the piece, framed by the rectangle cut in it – not positively as a drawing, but negatively as an absence, a bracketing of the gallery.

Each of these pieces raised questions that might be considered equally appropriate, if not more so, to philosophical epistemology. Nevertheless, as an artist, Zheng did not leave behind or even actively thwart the viewer’s aesthetic enjoyment of the work. His questioning remained rooted in the construction of encounters, which were aesthetically rich as well as intellectually stimulating. In fact, the two could hardly be separated. And, in this regard, *the medium mattered*. Zheng’s use of the gallery walls, of course, suggested that he had no medium; but in fact the show employed photographic, sculptural, and drawing techniques, which only seemed to disappear on account of Zheng’s subtle mastery of them. Furthermore, Zheng exhibited a *refined capacity to engage the limiting conditions of his surroundings, both aesthetically and intellectually*. This is the technique that frames Zheng’s eclectic use of other media and, despite the conceptual nature of his concerns, it had a look like any other. Zheng asked specific questions in specific ways. And his questions not only stimulated thought - they resonated.

“Hole in the Wall,” presented a subtle composition in which the otherwise empty picture plane was interrupted by an almost circular shape set asymmetrically in the upper-right-hand corner. This hole itself was composed of small fragments of various shapes, which often overlapped or collapsed in against one another. And they surrounded an off-yellow shape with a different texture, comprised of insulation from behind the sheet rock that now was revealed. As well as conceptual, “The Wall” could be enjoyed as a minimalist composition: a simple off-white rectangle with hints of purple and blue, whose opacity seemed to shift as one moved towards and away from it. “The Pillar” was a sensuously textured wooden sculpture, which stood against the wall with a commanding physical presence. And “The Big ‘I’” oscillated between a sculpture and drawing, which Zheng talked about even as representational – a letter “I,” and an image of the subject both as a thinking consciousness and as a physical body.



Even the epistemological questions raised by the show remained rooted in an aesthetic confrontation with the work.<sup>7</sup> The viewer was provoked not only to think, but also to suffer frustrations, to laugh with surprise, to marvel at the indeterminacy in the work, and, perhaps most importantly, *to look again*. Rather than a philosopher, Zheng acted like an illusionist. He orchestrated deceptions, pierced the veil of these deceptions, and left the viewer wondering which of the two to believe, the illusion or the truth offered to explain it away – Chuang Tzu or the butterfly. Contrary to the cold abstractions of philosophical epistemology, the show inspired an aesthetic contemplation, which as philosophy might better be compared to religious wonder. And, rather than a scientist, Zheng occupied a position as an artist somewhere between a sage and a sideshow barker.<sup>8</sup>

So what are we to make of this persistence of aesthetic enjoyment in Zheng’s otherwise conceptual art? And specifically, within the framework of this essay, as defining the “conceptual” in the “post-conceptual?” A proper response to this question would require a deeper historical study of conceptual art as it has appeared and re-appeared since the 20’s. One would need to examine the dynamics between ideas and aesthetic enjoyments at each of these moments, and consider broader trends in art, ideology, and politics, since then. However, it seems clear that for Zheng attention to concepts in art does not require disrupting what Sol Lewitt describes as “the expectation of an emotional kick, to which one conditioned to expressionist art is



accustomed.” Zheng relishes in aesthetic enjoyment as integral to his conceptual concerns.

Does this persistence of the aesthetic then imply that the ‘post-conceptual’ has left behind the self-consciousness of conceptual art? Did conceptual art exhaust the critical resources of modernism and open the door to mere spectacle, as I have argued above about aspects of Mathew Barney’s work? *As The Butterfly Said To Chuang Tzu* does not resolve these questions. However the show offers three distinct models for understanding the dynamics between of ideas and

aesthetics in contemporary art. These models are, to my mind, embodied in the remaining pieces from the show, as variations on the *experience of wonder*.

1. The first is indeed *wonder as spectacle*, presented by what were, to my mind, the weakest pieces from the show. To make “The Knob,” Zheng wrapped a piece of reflective mylar tape in a circle around a

screw in the wall. The piece offered little more than a cheap illusion: is it in fact a knob or merely a screw with a piece of mylar wrapped around it? One's answer depended only on the degree of one's willingness or desire to suspend disbelief. In "ONO YES," Zheng employed the same mylar tape, placing it in circles over pieces of square paper on which he had written the letters O-N-O-Y-E-S, in reference to Yoko Ono's "Yes." The play between the letters as words and shapes added a complexity to this work, but the historical reference ultimately undermined any tension it provided. Once you had read the words properly, it was clear what it meant: Zheng was situating himself in relationship to Fluxus and, as such, reassuring the audience that this was art, despite the questions raised by other work in the show. One either knew the reference, read the words, and 'got it,' or didn't. And, for "Seeds" Zheng planted seeds in three pots with instruction to viewers to water each of them with distinct intentions: encouraging, discouraging, and neutral. I couldn't help but be reminded of a recent study of prayer and its failure to aid recovering patients. The piece played with questions of faith that are currently too politically charged to take lightly. And again, the force of the work depended only on the degree of the viewer's critical self-consciousness or need to believe. In these three pieces, *wonder was aestheticized as mere spectacle*: one was free to wonder in the reassurance that the questions raised had already been answered or hadn't been seriously posed at all. This wonder belongs to the mystic and the charlatan as well as much post-conceptual art.

2. "The Blind," on the other hand, expressed *wonder as anxiety*. Zheng hung a beat-up Venetian blind on the long wall of the gallery. The viewer could not help but worry what was behind the blind, despite recognizing the absurdity of the question: there was nothing but a wall. The blind created what it concealed by concealing it. And this sense of the hidden, called attention to *the psychological desire* to know. As the sun set, shadows from the sign in the window were cast across the surface of the blind. What was inside? What was outside? The piece reminded me of film noir. And the phenomenological play of presence and absence seemed to be invested with the sense that something was wrong, and needed to be resolved. It expressed ambivalence, more than indeterminacy, and seemed to be riddled by guilt and desire.

3. "As Is" in turn expressed *wonder as social tension*. Zheng hung a microphone out the gallery window, which channeled the sound of the street into speakers set on the floor at the other end of the room. The sound was beautiful, abstracted from its context, and the piece was successful simply as a composition. The echo of the street in the gallery was disorienting and one couldn't help but question not only what one was hearing, but also where one stood. The piece raised phenomenological questions about framing akin to those addressed by "The Wall," and "The Big I." Was the gallery the frame for the sound of the street or the street the frame for the gallery? However, in this piece, the uncertainty took on a decidedly political tone. The question of the frame entailed considerations of class, ideology, education, work and leisure, calling attention to the social relations that inform aesthetic enjoyments as well as the aesthetics that inform social relations. How were these spaces distinguished? Who is included and who is excluded?

As *The Butterfly Said To Chuang Tzu* raised epistemological questions through aesthetic encounters and engendered a phenomenological sense of wonder about the nature of experience. It not only posed questions, it provoked them as affectively, psychologically, and socially loaded. And, though it did not categorically clarify the dynamics between ideas and aesthetic enjoyment in contemporary art, it articulated vivid models for further investigation.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Danto, "Art After the End of Art," in *The Wake of Art*, ed. Horowitz and Huhn, p.122. My example paraphrases one provided by Allan Kaprow in "The Education of an Un-Artist."

<sup>2</sup> Roberta Smith explains the connection between minimalism and the origins of conceptual art:. She writes, "Minimalism itself had aspired to be completely logical. Yet it was also the first art movement to be 'formalist' and Duchampian in equal parts. It achieved pure, abstract, often classically beautiful form via a preconceived intellectual approach, which made extensive use of various 'readymades': mathematical systems (used to determine composition), geometric forms, un-manipulated industrial materials and factory fabrication (which removed the artist from the actual construction of the object). Minimalism reinforced the idea of progress in art, which verged on the scientific and likewise of an art which moved forward by appropriating methods and ideas from other disciplines and areas of knowledge. Also Minimalism's severe reduction did not leave younger artists, instilled with this idea of progress, much to do in the formal arena: this too helped push them towards what seemed to be the next logical step – the elimination, or at least de-emphasis, of the object, and the use of language, knowledge, mathematics and the facts of the world in and of themselves." From "Conceptual Art," in *Concepts of Modern Art*, ed. by Nikos Stangos, p.262

<sup>3</sup> Sol Lewitt would seem to give support to this idea, at least concerning conceptual art, when he writes, "What the work of art looks like isn't too important. It has to look like something if it has a physical form . No matter what form it may finally have, it must begin with an idea," and later, "Ideas may stated with numbers, photographs, or words or anyway the artist chooses, the form being unimportant." However, he's also careful to add, "conceptual art doesn't really have much to do with mathematics, philosophy, or any other mental discipline." Sol Lewitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alberro and Stimson, pp. 13 - 15

<sup>4</sup> Kant writes, "By an aesthetic idea I mean a presentation of the imagination which prompts much thought, but to which no determinate thought whatsoever, i.e., no [determinate] concept, can be adequate, so that no language can express it completely and allow us to grasp it." *The Critique of Judgment*, p.182

<sup>5</sup> In the pluralism of contemporary art, Danto argues, art history ends along with the dissolution of the autonomous work

of art. And avant-gardism gives way to the repetition of diverse forms, as all now equally “possible.” In this light, the topic of my paper might be reformulated as a study in the repetition of conceptual art: how does it function now?

<sup>6</sup> Analogously Dan Graham explains the origins of his own involvement with conceptual art as a questioning the relationship between the value of art and the gallery itself. He celebrates this exploration in the pieces by Dan Flavin, which use the gallery’s fluorescent lights as their medium (whether or not this was Flavin’s intention), and sees them as solving a problem he had with Duchamp’s model of conceptual art. He writes, “By contrast Flavin’s fluorescent light pieces are not merely a priori philosophical idealizations, but have concrete relations to specific details of the architectural arrangement of the gallery, details which produce meaning.” Dan Graham, “My Works For Magazines: a history of conceptual art,” in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Alberro and Stimson, p.42

<sup>7</sup> Lucy Lippard notes, “Dematerialized art is post-aesthetic only in its increasingly non-visual emphasis. The aesthetic of principle is still an aesthetic.” ,” From “The Dematerialized Object of Art” in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Alberro and Stimson, p.48

<sup>8</sup> Sol Lewitt writes, “Conceptual artists are mystic rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach.” From “Sentences on Conceptual Art,” in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Alberro and Stimson, p.48

<sup>9</sup> Like John Cage’s 4:33

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This essay was also presented at the conference “Visual Intelligence and the Sense of Art” at Cal State Stanislaus; an interdisciplinary faculty seminar at Mills College, Oakland, 2006; and “Canadian Society for Aesthetics,” in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 2007.



Terri Cohn

One legacy of the perceptual vocabulary of Minimalism has been artists' continued exploration of the phenomenological experience of objects in relation to architectural space, and the dismantling of a fixed position for the viewer. Forty years after Minimalism's initial inception, artists continue to address our notions of immutable visual and material relationships, exploring ways in which space, objects, and perception relate to form and aesthetic experience. Michael Zheng's exhibition "As the Butterfly Said to Chuang Tzu" posed just such questions for the viewer to consider and resolve.

Zheng plays with the physical dualities inherent in his relationship to the gallery space by deliberately complicating our experience of the distinctions between it and what we perceive as the art. In *Hole in the Wall*, he adroitly played with this ambiguity by attaching an unframed photograph of a hollow he had punched in the wall over the same area, leaving visible a tiny portion of the cavity. Zheng posed further questions in *The Pillar* and *Big I*, which inverted and deconstructed the neutrality of the white cube. For the former, Zheng sheathed an existing pillar with unfinished plywood, which both concealed and amplified its presence. The uncertainty created by this strategy was augmented by the lack of a similar pillar on the opposite wall, occupied instead by a window blind (*The Blind*) whose function was blurred. Our uncertainty about the utility of these elements was intensified by a large section of incised and protruding wall, placed in its original position as though waiting to be fitted and finished. With their contradictory nature as objects representing non-objecthood, the duality of these works suggested a purposely prosaic interpretation of Robert Irwin's *Columns*.



One problem with a show reliant on the viewer's engagement with perception is the need to control the experience of the work. In this context, Zheng's pieces that depended on consistent lighting to achieve a trompe l'oeil effect suffered. For example, the delightfully simple gesture of *The Knob*, which in bright light appeared as a

Plexiglas cylinder attached to the wall with a bolt, disappointed me during a subsequent visit on a cloudy day. Without bright light its material truth was revealed: a wall-mounted loop of reflective Mylar surrounding a screw. Similarly, my experience of the illusion created in *The Wall* (an extremely subtle version of *Hole in the Wall*) was affected by the fluctuating natural light.

The piece best served by such mutable conditions was *As Is*. Here, Zheng confused our understanding of ambient sound by placing a microphone outside one of the room's windows and small speakers inside, effectively shifting the relationship between the sounds of the bustling outdoor street and the interior quiet. The incidental sounds of the surrounding environment suggested Zheng's interpretation of John Cage's *4'33"*, which added meaning to the work. When experienced under optimum conditions, *As Is* reinforced our sense that nothing is quite what it seems to be, serving to restate and augment Zheng's material, perceptual, and philosophical queries.



Terri Cohn is a San Francisco-based writer, curator, and art historian.

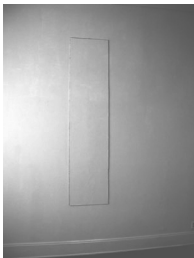
Reviewed in the March issue of the *Sculpture* magazine, 2007. Transcribed with permission from the author.

## Michael Zheng at MISSION 17

*Scott Oliver*

“The Taoist sage Chuang Tzu once dreamed he had turned into a butterfly. When he awoke, he couldn’t help but wonder whether it was he, who had dreamed of becoming a butterfly, or the butterfly, who had dreamed of becoming Chuang Tzu.” And so I was introduced, by way of an email announcement, to *As The Butterfly Said To Chuang Tzu*, Michael Zheng’s sparse exhibition at MISSION 17. As you might suspect the story about Chuang Tzu is not the literal subject matter of Zheng’s artwork but a philosophical departure point (a frame of reference) for inquiry into the nature of human perception. All of this, I gathered, before ever stepping foot in the gallery.

I only mention it because with *As The Butterfly Said...* Zheng has articulated his interest in how our experiences (what we take as reality) are largely of our own construction. As I entered the gallery I was already imagining, as Chuang Tzu did, a less certain self. It sounds rather mystical, but Zheng’s approach is surprisingly concrete—responding to the physical attributes of the gallery and using its rarefied environment to raise questions about our relationship to the material world.



For “Big I,” the show’s only titled piece, Zheng cut a long, vertical rectangle into the gallery’s wall and pulled the freed chunk of sheet rock a half inch into the space. The resulting shadow line and raw gypsum edge delineate the boundary between two and three dimensions, between wall and art or painting and sculpture, yet we are always aware that what we are looking at is essentially the wall. Or has it become something else? In this way Zheng explores the limits of the gallery as a context for art and continually asks how one’s experience of art is shaped by it’s framing. This inquiry extends both to physical



frames (architecture) and mental ones (our expectations and assumptions). It is the space between these—the “gap” suggested by Duchamp—where Zheng’s work really lives and where the question of framing becomes most fertile—in the mind of the viewer.



Zheng’s spare visual sensibility and preoccupation with the phenomenological possibilities of the gallery space are well suited to creating openings for the viewer’s subjectivity. As *The Butterfly Said...* is almost pedagogical in this respect. Zheng uses a variety of strategies to engage and challenge his viewers, and to provide opportunities to enter the work. Take the seedling piece for instance (perhaps the show’s most accessible). At the far end of the gallery, near the windows, is a table with a watering can and three small, labeled pots, each with a seedling. A sign nearby instructs visitors to water the plants if the soil is dry. As they do they are to utter encouraging words to the plant labeled “Encourage,” discouraging words to the plant labeled “Discourage,” and nothing to the plant labeled “Neutral.” When I visited “Neutral” had grown tallest and “Encourage” was the runt. I was being asked to reconcile belief and empirical evidence. The best I could do was recall something I’d read about water molecules being altered by meditation.

The other works in the show are less immediate—their effects more gradual. As *The Butterfly Said...* definitely benefits from (and merits) taking one’s time, as I did, to wonder about the set of old blinds hanging on the gallery’s south wall, or the incongruous plywood column, or be confused by the distorted space of the Mylar cylinders collected in a corner, or catch on the disembodied sound of a passing motorcycle. All of these in one way or another, point back to the gallery itself, and so I began to notice details native to the space—how light entered the room, blemishes in the wall, the placement of electrical outlets, repairs to the wood floor, inconsistencies in the trim work along the ceiling and so on—a heightened sense of awareness that lingered with me long after I left the building.

Scott Oliver is the co-initiator of the *Shotgun Review*, a web publication that includes reviews of events, projects and exhibitions in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Reviewed on Shotgun Review on June 27, 2006. Transcribed with permission from the author.

# Artweek

## Michael Zheng at MISSION 17

*Colin Berry*

Perched pigeon-like over the rough stretch of the San Francisco district from which it is named, MISSION 17 excels at transforming its tiny art space into something larger than the sum of scruffy parts. Director Clark Buckner favors artists like Tucker Nichols and Tracey Snelling and works that zag between conceptual, sculptural and installation. Although *As the Butterfly Said to Chuang Tzu*, a June exhibition of new works by Michael Zheng, didn't transform the gallery as radically as some, the show succeeded on a number of levels, serving as a refreshing antidote for the city's maximalist summer art program (Matthew Barney, anyone?) and snuggling Zheng more deeply into his niche as a low-key art radical.

About that title, however: fourth century-B.C. Taoist master Chuang Tzu, the story goes, once dreamed he had transformed into a butterfly. Upon waking, he puzzled over whether it was he who had dreamed of becoming a butterfly, or the butterfly that had dreamed of becoming him. For the show, Zheng, the artist, sought to muddle the difference between frame and object, between surface and content. What was art, he wondered, and what was just ... walls?

In all his work, Zheng favors a light touch: for *Butterfly* he created art so subtle one occasionally missed it altogether. A cutout-and-painted piece of mounted drywall covered a section of the gallery; a wooden pillar was, upon closer inspection, actually a casing constructed around the real pillar beneath. A dusty horizontal blind hung on one wall suggested a window behind, but in fact covered nothing at all.

Interesting enough. But when Zheng pushed these ideas further, they began to cohere. Upon what appeared to be another blank wall the artist pasted a photograph of the same wall; around a corner, a hole in the wall was covered with a photograph of the hole, perfectly aligned. The effect was vertiginous, slightly Truman Show: What the hell was real, anyway? Was everything fake?

The idea continued with a microphone mounted outside the fourth-floor window, which broadcasted sounds from the street through speakers into the room. Hip-pop, rough voices and a police siren all slightly preceded the actual street noise. It was a simple, odd effect, a time-delay juxtaposition done without programming.



More intriguing were a series of Mylar loops placed around the gallery, and unobtrusively reflected – and changed – any surface they touched. Six strange hieroglyphs mirrored in the loops; a collection of ten loops grouped in the corner on the hardwood floor appeared glassine, fragile, surreal – like a tiny warp (as my sci-fi friends would say) in the time-space continuum.

Besides minimal materials, Zheng’s art also required viewers’ committed interaction. Beneath the window were three tiny seedlings in pots, with instructions to water each one “encouragingly,” “discouragingly,” or “neutrally” in turn. The day I was there, they all looked identical, though “neutral” seemed healthiest by a whisker. What did it prove? Who knows? Interaction with intention was the point.

Not all of Zheng’s ideas were new: Felipe Dulzaides has recently created billboard-sized versions of surface “reality” photographs (and even Amnesty International has a campaign using the same idea); and the artist’s sound pieces owe much to minimalist composers, including Alvin Lucier and Steve Reich; and artists from Duchamp to Christo have investigated how surfaces define (and obfuscate) what an object really is. Still, Zheng’s gentle demand for close attention to his work and the world in general was infectious and interesting. We are undeniably fascinated by things under cover: holiday presents, boarded-up houses, stripteases and drawn curtains. Leaving the show, I found myself looking at everything – ceiling vents, concrete sidewalk squares, the mirror in the elevator – with a fresh appreciation and a delicious suspicion of what might actually lie beneath.

Colin Berry is a contributing editor to *Artweek*.

Transcribed from the September, 2006 issue of the *Artweek*, with permission from the author.



## **The Plates**



*Hole in the wall*

Digital Photograph, 20"x28".

First a hole is punched in the wall with a hammer. Then a photograph is taken of the area of the wall and pasted back on the same area, leaving just the tip of the actual hole visible.

The photograph serves both as a visual object in itself and as documentation of a performance. The physical action is insinuated by the size of the photograph.





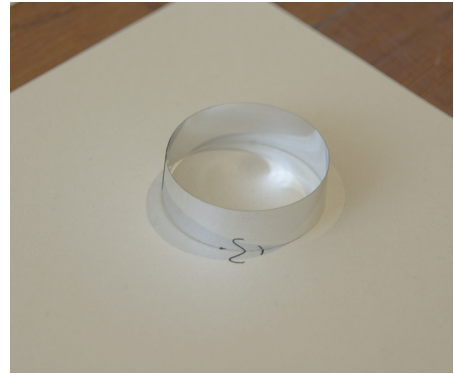
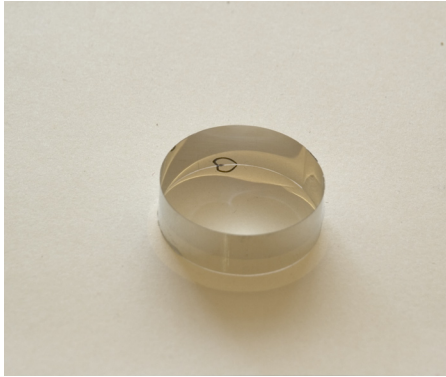
*Big I*

Wall cutout on wall. The wall is 16' x13', the cutout is 1.5'x8'.

A piece of a wall is cut out and pulled into the space by 1/2".





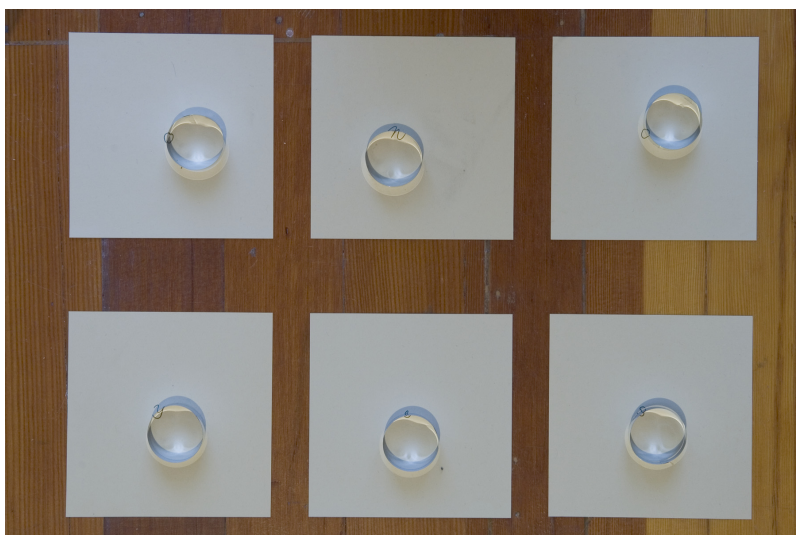
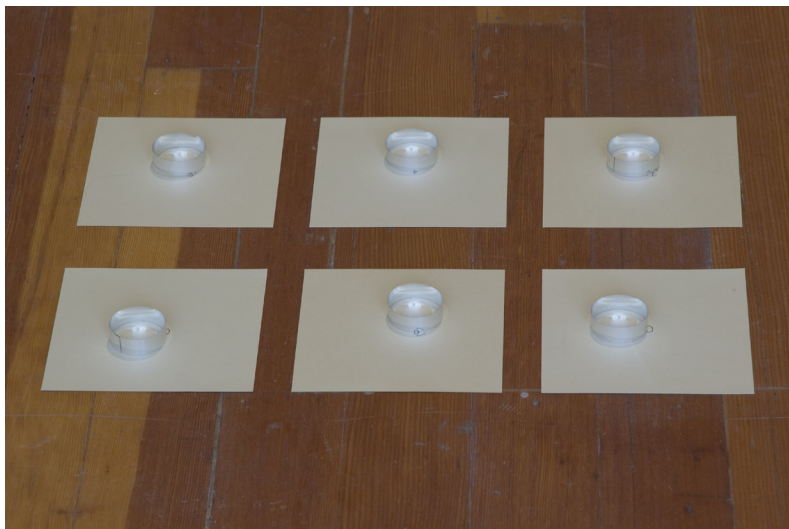


## *ONO YES*

Reflective Mylar, paper, ink, glue.  
Each piece of paper is 5"x5", each Mylar loop 1.5" in diameter.

What appear to be magnifying lenses turn out to be just Mylar tape loops. The drawing on each piece of paper resembles a heart shape from most viewing angles. Only when viewed from straight above, the drawing reveals to be a letter. The six letters spell out O-N-O Y-E-S, referencing the "Yes" piece by Yoko Ono.

*Above clockwise: 'e'-inside, 'e'-outside, 'y'-outside, 'y'-inside.  
Opposite top: overall view; down: aerial view.*





*The Blind*

Found window blind, wall. The wall is 32' x 13', the blind is in proportional dimensions of 13' x 4'.





### *The Pillar*

Plywood, the actual pillar in the wall, the pillar height is 12'.

The plywood covers the actual pillar as a snugly tight skin, revealing the shape of the pillar, which is otherwise only visible through the opening at the foot of the cover near the baseboard area. The plywood structure serves both as a representation of a pillar and an illusion of a support structure. It covers both to conceal and to reveal the actual pillar. This effect is accentuated by the fact that on the opposite wall, there is not such a pillar at the symmetrical position.



*The knob*

Reflective Mylar, screw; Mylar loop diameter is 1.5".

The object on the wall sometimes appears to be a solid acrylic cylinder held to the wall by a screw, some other times just a loop of tape made of reflective Mylar.





## *Seeds*

Flower seeds, pots, water, the viewer participation.

Instructions were given to viewers to water the seed in each pot while uttering silent words to them, 'encouragingly', 'discouragingly' and 'neutrally', according to the labels. Over the course of the exhibition, the seeds germinate and grow, providing an empirical mirror to what one wishes to believe.





## *As Is*

Wireless microphone and receiver, amplifier, speakers.

The ambient sounds from the bustling Mission Street are funneled through the two speakers inside the gallery, placed at a distance away from the window where a wireless microphone is placed in plain view.

An anecdote best illustrates the effect of this piece. During the opening reception, all of a sudden the audience heard a piercing siren coming straight from the speakers. They all rushed to the speakers, and soon realized that that's actually not where the sound was generated and then turned and rushed to the windows. Once one has heard an 'interesting' sound, s/he would listen *for* the next one to come.



## *The Wall*

Digital print on wall, 12"x16".

A photograph is taken of an area of the gallery wall and printed on a piece of paper, and then pasted back tightly to the same area on the wall. The photograph is printed in the dimensions of a 20" TV (and it appears to be a TV screen from afar with its silvery tone.) When viewed from a closer distance, it appears to be a transparency through which the patterns on the wall can be seen.







## Biography

Michael Zheng is a San Francisco based artist. He was born and grew up in China. He studied Computer Science in both China and U.S. Later on he attended the San Francisco Art Institute, where he studied with Paul Kos, Tony Labat and John Roloff. His artistic and philosophical concerns are rooted in his Taoist and Buddhist heritage. His work is conceptually based and often takes the form of site-specific installation, sculpture or performance. His interest is in bringing awareness to how our perception of reality is influenced by phenomenological, cultural and political conditioning.

He has exhibited his work nationally and internationally, including an intervention project *Art For Sale!* with the “9th Baltic Triennial of International Art” at the ICA in London; “Portland Museum of Art Biennial” in Maine; and the ERNST Museum in Budapest, Hungary, all 2005.

Locally, his work was included in the “Murphy and Cadogan Fellowship Exhibition” at the San Francisco Arts Commission Gallery; “Monumental”, at Southern Exposure in San Francisco and “Topographies,” at the Walter and McBean Gallery of the San Francisco Art Institute, all 2004; and in “Close Calls”, at the Headlands Center for the Arts in Sausalito, 2006. “As the Butterfly Said To Chuang Tzu” was his debut solo show in San Francisco.

He received Residencies from the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire in 2005 and from the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine in 2003. In 2005 he was nominated for the prestigious SECA Award from San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

His work have been reviewed in Sculpture Magazine, Artweek, the Shotgun Review, the San Francisco Chronicle, the SF Weekly, the Portland Phoenix, and Artists Magazine in Taiwan, among others.





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