

# IAN CHENG

## *Forking At Perfection*

20.02.–16.05.2016

The work of the American artist Ian Cheng (b. 1984) explores the nature of mutation and the capacity of humans to relate to change. Drawing on principles of video game design, improvisation, and Darwinian brutality, Cheng has developed so-called “live simulations,” living virtual ecosystems that begin with basic programmed properties, but are left to self-evolve without authorial control or end. His simulations model the dynamics of often imaginative organisms and ecologies, but do so with the unforgiving causality found in nature itself. What results is a cascade of emergent behaviors that the artist can manage but never truly master. This process is punctuated by states of chaos, collapse, cannibalization, recombination, perfection, luck, and boredom. Cheng, who studied cognitive science at the University of California, Berkeley, describes his simulations as akin to a “neurological gym”: a format for viewers to deliberately exercise the feelings of confusion, anxiety, and cognitive dissonance that accompany the experience of unrelenting change. In his first solo exhibition in Switzerland, Cheng presents two versions of the simulation *Emissary Forks At Perfection*: as a panoramic projection originally shown in 2015; and as its mutation, or “fork,” in the form of a tablet-based experience that invites viewers to physically explore the world of the simulation, its organisms, and its ongoing dynamics.

One crucial point of reference in Cheng’s most recent works is the controversial magnum opus of the American psychology professor Julian Jaynes (1920–1997). In *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, published in 1976, Jaynes sketches an evolutionary history of human self-awareness. His radical central claim is that the humans of pre-classical antiquity lacked subjective consciousness, which he defines as an introspective and reflective I that can control and direct its own actions. Mankind, he argues, attained this ability around 1000 BC. In “pre-conscious” man, by contrast, stress situations triggered hallucinated voices originating in the right hemisphere of the brain; hearing these voices, man associated them with gods and obeyed their instructions. Jaynes’s core thesis rests on the neurological model of a “bicameral mind.” In the so-called “pre-conscious stage” of human development, the brain was equipped with two speech centers. The one in the left hemisphere supported everyday speech, while its right-side counterpart, which has now lost its function, was the seat of divine voices. The reorganization of the neuronal structure, Jaynes argues, was driven by sociological changes due to large-scale migration and the spread of writing, which exposed humans to alien cultures. These developments gradually silenced the divine voices and allowed individual consciousness to emerge in their stead. Vestiges of the “bicameral mind,” Jaynes hypothesizes, persist even today, becoming manifest in phenomena such as schizophrenia, hypnosis, and religious ecstasy.

Jaynes’s speculative archaeology outlines an alternative and flexible model of the evolution of human consciousness according to which the mind, not unlike an ecosystem, is subject to multiple influences that call forth a broad and unpredictable array of behavioral patterns. Cheng’s recent “live simulations” may be read as laboratory setups that put Jaynes’s model of cognitive evolution into practice. Where divine voices guided man’s actions as recently as in Homer’s *Iliad*, these simulations—set in the age of smartphones, apps, and big data—situate the human being in a field of forces overflowing with complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty. They prompt an appreciation of the limits of conscious reason’s ability to adequately deal with the stress of not knowing. And as the ancient mind continues to whisper into us with fears and anxieties, the simulations may act as a format through which to view these difficult feelings with equanimity, to love them, and to play with them.

Ian Cheng (b. 1984, Los Angeles) lives and works in New York. Recent solo exhibitions at venues including Pilar Corrias, London (2015), the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin (2015), Kunsthalle Düsseldorf (2015), the Triennale di Milano (2014), and Standard Oslo (2013). Cheng also participated in group exhibitions at the Musée d’Art Moderne (2015), the Taipei Biennial (2014), the Lyon Biennial (2013), and at Sculpture Center (2012).

Curator:  
Raphael Gygax  
(Curator, Migros Museum  
für Gegenwartskunst)

In early June 2016, a companion  
book including contributions  
by Raphael Gygax, Ian  
Cheng, Franziska Bigger et  
al. will be published by  
JRP|Ringier.

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**List of Works:**

Ian Cheng  
*Emissary Forks At Perfection*  
2015-2016  
live simulation, sound  
infinite duration

Ian Cheng  
*Emissary Forks For You*  
2016  
live simulation, sound, Google Tango Tablets  
infinite duration

**Production Credits:**

Veronica So – producer  
Samuel Eng – technical director  
Sean Manning – story consultant  
Joshua Planz – 3D modeler & rigger  
Brecht O'Hearn – 3D modeler  
Aaron Bohenic – 3D modeler  
Chad Waldschmidt – animator  
Greg Heffernan – sound fx & voice synthesis  
Chris Clapis – graphics programmer  
Ramsey Nasser – tablet development  
Jessica Wilson – assistant to artist

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