

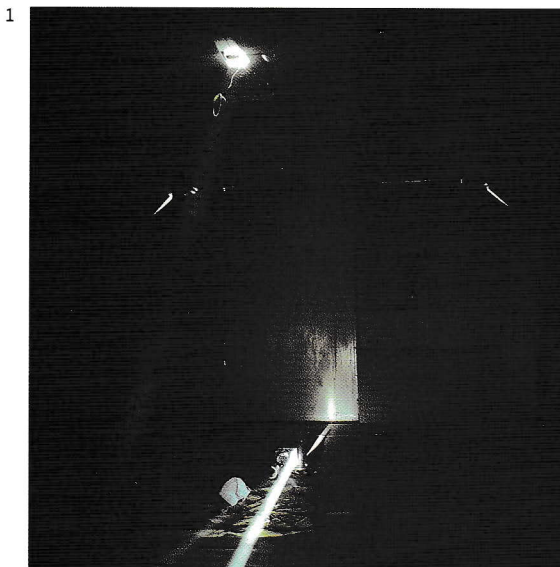
# Al Wong

*For the past thirty years I have used natural elements such as sunlight, birds, and clouds to provide a sense of constant change within my work. I believe that art attains a lifelike force through flux, which mirrors the ways of nature. Much of my artistic life has been devoted to exploring the relationship between life and death, which I feel, in essence, are points on the same continuum of change. In my work I translate this view into formal oppositions—such as solidity/transparency, visibility/invisibility, and past/present—and strive to reveal the interconnections and continuities between them.*

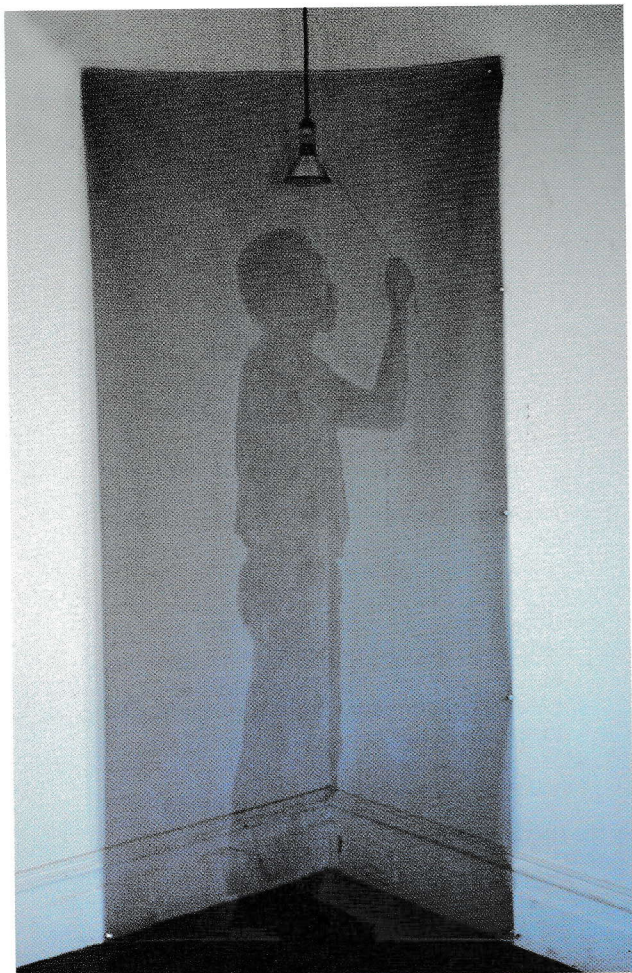
Al Wong filmed the view from his kitchen window every day throughout the year of 1975 as a means of investigating the changing effects of sunlight over the course of an entire solar cycle. At the end of this project, entitled *Same Difference*, he produced a seventeen-minute film that expressed his conception of change and continuity in terms of a natural phenomenon. He enlarged this investigation in *Sunlight* (1979), an installation presented in his San Francisco studio. Once again employing natural light as a protagonist, Wong orchestrated its entrance through an aperture in the roof and its movements across the interior space. The light beam interacted with mirrors and other objects to articulate or obfuscate particular shapes and spaces, creating, with diffuse incense smoke, the illusion of a diaphanous dome in the air. As the sun altered its course throughout the day and shifted its position in the sky from day to day, it revealed to its viewers a repertoire of aesthetic capabilities, both dramatic and subtle, which, paradoxically, could be apprehended only within the virtual void of a dark room.

Wong's artistic engagement with metaphysical matters characterizes much of his work. Once a student of Zen philosophy, he draws upon certain of its tenets in conceiving works that consider states of being—such as presence and absence, life and death—as neighboring points on a continuum rather than as binary oppositions. In Wong's art this concept is often expressed through images that hover between materiality and immateriality, as seen in the elegant *On/Off* (1988). A painting on a net scrim depicts the shadow of a man pulling the cord of a lamp. When the lamp (an actual light activated by a timer) is switched on, the image disappears, and an empty corner is revealed. That something would exist only in the dark or as an illusion is antithetical to most strains of Western thinking, in which illumination generally reveals substance—not nothingness. By inverting the usual equation, Wong proposes a more fluid basis for our perceptions—an idea that he develops through more narrative means in his video works. In *Three Pines* (1996), for example, video images of the artist—seen,

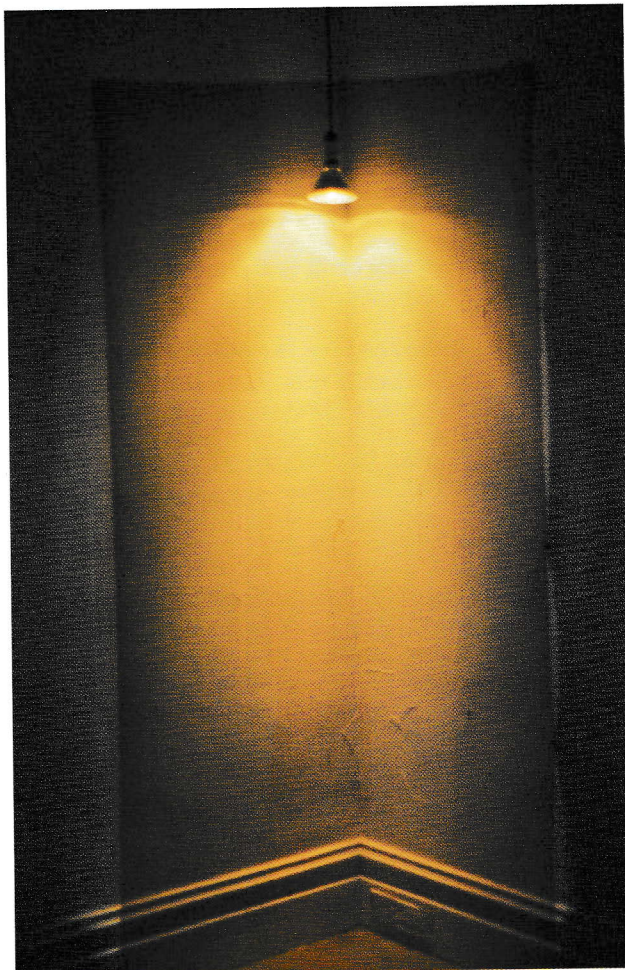
simultaneously, from the front and the back—are projected onto three pine boards. Framed by the upended boards, he enacts a repetitive series of motions using props (a gong, drum, and fishhook). Although initially perplexing, the rhythmic repetition of actions that have no discernible meaning, using objects that have little symbolic resonance, constitutes a study in absence and presence, solidity and transparency—in a form, characteristic of Wong, that invites the viewer's reception in tiny, revelatory increments.







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1 *Sunlight*, 1979  
Mixed-media installation  
12 x 15 x 18 ft. (3.7 x 4.6 x 5.5 m)

2-3 *On/Off*, 1988 (two installation views)  
Netting, paint, light  
72 x 48 x 30 in. (182.9 x 121.9 x 76.2 cm)

4 *Three Pines*, 1996 (still from video)  
Video installation  
96 x 66 x 5 in. (243.8 x 167.6 x 12.7 cm)

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