

Overview



The waterfall on Ponape, clockwise from front:
Dorothy Wiley, Marina Abramovic, Joan Jonas,
Daniel Buren, Chris Burden, and Mary Corse, 1980.

CROSSING INTO THE EIGHTIES Escape Now and Again

An excerpt from a memoir in progress by Kathan Brown

On January 15, 1980, thirty-five artists and other art people, with one baby in arms, boarded a small plane in Honolulu for the once-a-week flight to Ponape. Some of us had come from California, but others were from New York or Europe where winter was locked in. After a few hours, the plane stopped for refueling at an atoll. The loudspeaker said we could get off and stretch if we liked. The ocean was right next to the plane, a few steps from the runway. We all took off our shoes and ran into the water. A few went too far and got completely wet. There was a nice breeze, and the lightweight clothes we'd put on in Hawaii mostly dried before we reboarded.

For the rest of the flight, people cruised up and down the aisles, introducing one another, laughing, talking. Bryan Hunt was passing around his Walkman, a new gadget we all thought was tiny, only barely larger than the (big) cassette tapes it played. "If this plane were to crash," someone said, "the headlines would say, 'John Cage and some others died.'"

Tom Marioni had named the conference "Word of Mouth" *VISION #4*. Twelve artists each gave a twelve-minute talk. Since LP records lasted twenty-four minutes, he had specified twelve-minute talks so we could put two on a side. Later we presented three records in a box. The records are white—"because it felt like we were landing from a flying saucer when we got off the plane in Ponape," Tom remembers.

The plane circled over what looked like a green dot in a blue sea, and we landed abruptly on a short white runway made of crushed coral with a great green rocky cliff at one end and the sea at the other. Against the cliff was a new low building. Shirtless workers in jeans hustled our bags from the plane into a big square hole in the building's side, visibly pushing them onto a moving carousel. A man in a grass skirt and an inspector's cap hustled us inside to claim them. The airport building was full of people, many in grass skirts, some (men and women) topless. They clapped and whistled as we filed past. We learned later that word had circulated that we were an American rock group.

In front of the airport was a flatbed truck with fourteen white wicker chairs from the hotel dining room strapped on the bed in two facing rows. There was also a "bus" with long benches facing one another, and a few private cars. Our caravan slowly made its bumpy way up the side of the rocky outcropping, and finally we were on the hotel's great longhouse platform with Bob and Patti Arthur and their staff serving drinks as the sun went down into the ocean below.

We would take the next plane out a week later. There was no television. People didn't carry phones back then, and there were none in the rooms, but the hotel's office had a phone we could use if necessary. The conference agenda was simply to have an artist talk before dinner each night and another after dinner. We recorded the talks, but not the following discussions, and although almost everyone had a camera and a couple of artists had brought eight millimeter film equipment, we did not, ourselves, document. I assigned my son, Kevin, who was eighteen, to take photos—I thought that would keep the "official" photography unobtrusive.



Left: Joan Jonas, Bill Wiley, John Cage, Dorothy Wiley and others at the ruins on Ponape. Center: Robert Kushner speaking. Cage, Bryan Hunt, and Marina Abramovic are on his right. Right: Wiley, Brice Marden, and Tom Marioni at the bar.

Everyone, sooner or later, went swimming under the waterfall and in the ocean, made a trip to the ruins in a little outboard motorboat, and spent time on the great longhouse platform eating, drinking, thinking, and talking to whoever was around. Laurie Anderson and a few others attended a local funeral; most of us watched (and some joined in) a dance the villagers held, and some of us tasted a narcotic drink pounded and twisted out of a root before our eyes.

Most of the twelve artists who gave talks were not well known at the time, but their names are familiar today: Marina Abramovic, Laurie Anderson, Chris Burden, Daniel Buren, John Cage, Bryan Hunt, Joan Jonas, Robert Kushner, Brice Marden, Tom Marioni, Pat Steir, and William T. Wiley. We saw them as representing the art-world avant-garde, a mix of Tom's selections and mine, East Coast and West, and two from overseas. The trip was a joint project of Crown Point Press and the Museum of Conceptual Art. It was the first year Crown Point made a profit, and we used the money to go to the South Seas.

Thirty-six people made the trip because that was how many the hotel could accommodate. Brice and Helen Marden brought their baby daughter, Mirabelle. From San Francisco, we had with us a favorite curator from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Suzanne Foley, now deceased, and a gallery owner, Paule Anglim, who still supports advanced art. There were a couple of art writers, a couple of art collectors, a couple of college art gallery directors, and several younger artists, some of them companions of the participants. Tom likes to say we were "a microcosm of the art world."

Everyone had been invited either by one of the artists who gave talks or by Tom and me. People other than the participating artists paid their own way, and Crown Point paid the bulk of the balance. Tom's nonprofit MOCA rounded up enough donations to bring Marina Abramovic from Yugoslavia and Daniel Buren from France, and the National Endowment for the Arts paid for the phonograph records to be pressed. Of

course, we didn't use any government money for the trip itself.

"It was a wonderfully crackpot idea," Robert Kushner told Grace Glueck, who wrote an article for the *New York Times* shortly after we returned. Brice Marden told her the idea was "slightly rarefied," but added, "the trip was important because now I have a whole new idea about the Coast, and how its being out there in the Pacific has really had an influence on its culture." Kushner went on to tell Glueck something that I've heard often over the years from people who were there: "One of the major positive things was making friends and being able to talk with people I'd never get to know otherwise." I thought the quote in Glueck's article that summed up Ponape best was from Melinda Wertz, a professor at the University of California, Irvine: "The idea was romantic and unreal and totally irresistible."

Grace Glueck quoted me as saying "the conference brought together artists with an individual, expressive approach that is beginning to modify the recent emphasis on reductivism in art." It sounds stilted to me, but I think I was exploring an idea close to that in my print publishing at the time. I doubt that I used the word *expressive*, but I know that I thought something romantic was stirring in our world after the sobriety of the seventies. Perhaps *romantic* is not exactly the right word, either. The art I'm thinking of has a direct relationship to the way we live our lives. Tackling this art in etching was somewhat daunting because most of the artists involved were not painters; they didn't normally work flat. Some of them wanted to use our medium in ways that had never been asked of it before.

Daniel Buren, who was at Ponape, had come to Crown Point from France the year before our trip and had made a work that was not only his first print but also his first framed work of any kind. He called it *Framed, Exploded, Defaced*. Since 1965 all Buren's work has been stripes, usually pasted on walls, as he says, *in situ*. The art magazine *Modern Painters* in 2011

called Buren “France’s most celebrated contemporary artist... once controversial, now revered.” His stripes occur in both expected and unexpected places — on museum walls framing other art, or out in the world, at the historic Palais Royal court in Paris, for example, framing life itself. “The point of the stripes is just a little signal for something else,” Buren has said.

Setting out to help Buren re-create his stripes as an etching, Lilah Toland, the printer in charge, decided not to try to paint them on a plate. Hand-painted lines always waver a bit, and Toland asked Buren if the stripe widths must match exactly. He replied, “Not exactly. They can vary within a millimeter.” After checking a metric ruler and finding a millimeter to be just a little wider than the edge of a fingernail, Toland decided to cover a large square plate all over with an evenly bitten aquatint, then mask out the stripes in printing. Buren was delighted that the edges of the stripes were absolutely straight, and also that the uncolored stripes were absolutely white. The mask eliminated any trace of the plate tone normally present in etchings. We printed the work in an edition of forty-eight. The first print in the series is yellow, and for each subsequent print the printers added a measured amount of red to the yellow ink. Most of the prints are orange of various shades, but the first is yellow and the last is red.

Buren had the printers cut each print into twenty-five equal fragments, and he asked us to frame them all. (We made twelve hundred frames.) Once he had decided on the width of the molding for the frame, he instructed that we cut down each square so that when the fragments were framed and put tightly next to one another, the “defaced” print was the same size as when first printed.

If you bought the print, you received a boxful of framed fragments with detailed instructions on how to “explode” them to fill any wall. If there was space enough on the wall, you could hang other artworks between the stripes. “I think people who have the etching will have something which is very close to a contradiction, but still as perfect as possible as an etching,” Buren said in *View*.

In 1979 Crown Point brought two artists from Europe to work with us. Buren was the first, and the second was Jannis Kounellis, a Greek artist who has lived in Italy most of his life and is the primary figure in the influential art movement called *arte povera* or, in translation, “poor art.” Kounellis’s early work—a brazier filled with coal or bundles of wool attached to a steel bed frame, for example—placed humble yet symbolic materials in the context of high art. As his work became more complex, he sometimes created “living pictures.” In his most famous piece he filled a gallery with tethered horses. In another work he sat motionless on a horse holding the mask of a Greek statue to his face.



Framed, Exploded, Defaced, with Daniel Buren and Lilah Toland in Crown Point's first gallery upstairs in Oakland, 1979.

Arte povera was named and described by Italian art critic Germano Celant, and Kounellis is featured in his 1969 book of that title, which also includes Italian, German, English, and American artists, some of whom are associated with movements called process art, anti-form, and earth art. Celant wrote that *arte povera* developed “in opposition to the consumerist ambiguity of pop art and the rigidity of minimalism.” Because those movements were mainly American, *arte povera* is usually seen as European or European influenced.

Kounellis said, in *View*, that his art is based on the “accumulation of history,” and he speculated that American artists mainly reject history. “The square,” he said, “eliminates completely the possibility of accumulation.” Perhaps because he was working in the United States, he started his first print at Crown Point with a large dense black square. Then he created “accumulation” by arranging flowers, printed in blue, in a rectangle around the outside of the square. That image is called *Untitled*.

Kounellis’s second 1979 etching, *Manifesto per un Teatro Utopistico*, is rectangular, like *Untitled*, but this time the “accumulation” forms a rectangle around an empty center. In beginning this work, Kounellis shopped in used-book stores for old family photographs. He arranged twenty-one of these around the edges of the rectangular plate. At the last minute, he added a photograph of a picture of a burning house to the frame. Many of the photographic images are of houses with people in front of them: old people and children, black people, white people. One group is Chinese. Our country is a utopian theater. There is possibility in the empty space in the center, but it is also possible that the fire in the burning building will spread.

Vito Acconci, having tested our seriousness in 1977 with his prints of penises and guns, returned to Crown Point in 1979 to make a huge ambitious installation work that took us three



Italians and American Italians, the first exhibition in Crown Point's street level gallery, Oakland, 1981. Prints by Francesco Clemente and Vito Acconci are visible.

years, working off and on, to complete. "I feel like I've left 'wall' out of my work," he said, "and prints force me to really think of 'wall.'" Before he began work on this project, he had only done one wall piece, called *Wall Drawing*, the term that Sol LeWitt was using for the work he was doing at the time. Acconci's *Wall Drawing* was not a drawing at all, but many actual ladders fastened to a wall to make a grid.

I remember looking out the window of the Oakland studio and seeing Acconci and his chief printer, Nancy Anello, walking down the street with a huge aluminum ladder they had bought and managed to propel from the hardware store through half-dozen blocks of downtown. The first of his set of three wall prints was the photographed image of the ladder, extended to twenty-foot-high by accumulated individually framed prints. The work is titled *Twenty-foot Ladder for Any Size Wall*. You can leave a section or two off if your ceiling is low.

"The way I thought of these pieces," Acconci said in *View*, "was that I was starting with the basic notion of plate. Plate can have image, plate as image can be added to another plate as image. As these plates are added, they start to overlap, then paper is added to paper, and starts to correspond to the form of the room. So you could have a twenty-foot ladder and a twenty-foot airplane wing. Plate becomes image, becomes paper, becomes wall, becomes room."

Acconci and printer Stephen Thomas assembled a model airplane from a kit, and we photographed a wing, then enlarged it to ten feet and made two sets of plates, sectioning the image. The second set is reversed, so the piece, *Two Wings for Wall and Person*, is two wings, flesh colored, hung at shoulder level with a gap between them just big enough for a person to stand in. Both the ladder and the wings evoke a longing to escape.

Acconci's third print, *3 Flags for 1 Space and 6 Regions*, shows the United States as a central space, with China and

the Soviet Union encroaching on it. Acconci, in a magazine interview, spoke of his immigrant father doing piecework, sewing bathrobes in their apartment in the Bronx. "It wasn't until I was twelve or thirteen that I realized you didn't have to be Italian to make music or art.... All my life, I've never had particular skills, particular talents. I've just had will. I see myself as a drudger."

Acconci brought the three flags with him from New York and later did several works of sculpture using them. At Crown Point he pinned them up on the wall and the printers photographed each one. Then they made transparencies that Acconci moved around to form different relationships. He finally decided to show the Chinese and American flags obscuring the Soviet one. This turned out to be a presentiment of world events. A dozen years later, the Soviet Union was dissolved and China and the United States began to lock horns just as the United States and the Soviet Union had been doing at the time Acconci made this work of art.

Buren, Kounellis, and Acconci are very different artists, but all three use theatrical and/or decorative approaches and at the same time remain connected to conceptual art; they retain a sculptor's sensibility and they focus on ideas. Robert Kushner, who, like Buren, came to Ponape with us, broke radically from that sensibility and stepped away from conceptual art to focus directly on the theatrical and the decorative. Kushner's work placed him in direct opposition to a culture of avant-garde painters who for the preceding thirty years had used the word *decorative* pejoratively. He and a few other artists, supported mainly by the Holly Solomon Gallery in New York, changed that culture by developing what they called pattern and decoration art, the forerunner of much painting today, including Damien Hirst's spots.

Kushner has said that he started making decorative art "because you weren't supposed to." That changed after he made a trip to Iran (anyone could travel there then), "saw incredible works of genius and became aware of how intelligent and uplifting decoration can be." Kushner had come to decoration from performance art and an interest in costume; at that time he insisted that the costumes he made were art only if they were being worn. His trip to the Middle East in 1974 changed his approach: "The garments interested me a lot, especially the veil that the women wear. As soon as I got home, one of the first things I did was to try to cut one out just to see what it would feel like—and when I did, I realized very quickly that there was this big, sort of flattened half circle shape that I could paint on." In this way he shifted from conceptual art to painting.

Kushner's mature style uses an abundance of multicolored, multisurfaced fabrics as support for his paintings. The etchings he made at Crown Point in 1980 (and

Günter Brus, *The Diamond Cutter*, 1982. Hard ground etching. 10-x-7-inch image on 20½-x-15¼-inch sheet, edition 35.



Robert Kushner, *Nubiana*, 1982. Aquatint with sugar lift and spit bite aquatints and soft ground etching with stenciling in gold paint on two sheets of paper. 36½ x 51 inches, edition 35.

continued to develop with us for more than a dozen years) are figurative works that involve decorative materials, colors, and textures. *Nubiana*, one of his first prints with us, for example, is on Japanese paper in which fragments of colored paper are embedded. The image is of two dancing figures strumming lutes, along with black and white textures and flat areas of gold. The two figures in *Nubiana* are on individual sheets of paper designed to be shown together.

Joel Fisher, who worked with us in 1980 for the first time, also used two sheets of paper side by side for a single print. In his *First Etching*, the paper itself is the artwork—the plate was not actually etched but was inked and printed blank (there is plate tone). It bridges two sheets of paper that Fisher made at the papermaking studio of Don Farnsworth. To make his paper, Fisher pulped stacks of prints our printers had rejected as they worked on editions at Crown Point. We had been printing some fine-line prints by Sol LeWitt and rejecting a lot of them because of tiny skips of the ink in lines that don't cross other lines—this is extremely difficult work to print. The colored fragments of ink from the rejected prints remain linear in the paper pulp and are identifiable in the new sheet. The other identifiable elements in Fisher's paper are flat bits of color from Robert Kushner's work.

Kushner and Fisher, with their different approaches, set the tone for an exhibition I assembled for Crown Point Press in 1982 called "Representing Reality: Fragments from the Image Field." This show traveled, under arrangements made by Margarete Roeder, to the Contemporary Art Center in Cincinnati. In the "Representing Reality" catalog essay, I described the artists in the show as creating "milestones along the road" to a new type of painting variously called at the time

wild painting, new wave, energist, neo-expressionist, and trans-avant-garde. (The names that stuck were neo-expressionist and trans-avant-garde.)

Francesco Clemente, who was just beginning to exhibit his work in the United States, is the only artist in the show who was actually seen by the art world as a neo-expressionist/trans-avant-garde painter. The others, the forerunners, were Joel Fisher, Robert Kushner, Pat Steir, Günter Brus, and William T. Wiley. My idea may have been something of a stretch—it's a diverse group—but critic Robert Atkins, reviewing the show for *California Magazine*, explained it well:

They have dispensed with the traditional notion of figure and ground—an object or person depicted in front of a background—and instead regard their images as a nonstatic stream of consciousness or metaphorical field. Their prints are ravishing.

My longest stretch was the inclusion of Günter Brus. He lives in Vienna and was part of an infamous performance art movement there in the 1960s in which his naked body was stressed in public, sometimes even receiving self-inflicted wounds. Brus pioneered forty-five years ago an "endurance" art of the sort that Marina Abramovic, in 2011, made famous with her exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In 1970 he gave up performance art, called *aktion* art in the German-speaking world, and began to draw representationally. "Abstraction in recent art ended with the *aktion*. From now on, the laws of the wonder world hold sway," Brus wrote in the early seventies when performance art in the United States was just beginning to take hold.

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Because of Brus's position in the history of performance art, it was exciting to have him travel to Oakland, California, to work with us, and his prints—which have to do with his fear of earthquakes—show what I called “an easy slippage in and out of another time, another place, often dense and dark and smelling of the earth.”

In my essay for the exhibition catalog, I talked about scientific attitudes toward reality and concluded by quoting from an interview I had read with Michel Poniowski, a French scientist who discussed the coming age when computers would dominate our lives. “Einstein defined the relativity of time and space; nonlogical physics defines the relativity of objects,” he said. “Everything becomes relative, not only time and space but the object contemplated in relation to time and space.”

This seemed to me to relate to a statement by Francesco Clemente, in *View*, that his paintings are “crossing points for images.” I ended my essay with the thought that new science combined with “a new vein of art built on the same assumptions” argues powerfully “for the existence of a changed world.”

William T. Wiley, the San Francisco Bay Area artist in our “Representing Reality” show, filled his prints with dense networks of drawing and writing. In one of them, *Working at CPP*, 1978, we are looking through what might be the opening of an earthy cave to see a hand with a crown serving as a cuff above it. The hand points a finger toward a press that bears an image of a rectangle divided into four squares. Below the

press is written, “thanks, kids,” and in another spot there is a handwritten lament (I have provided punctuation):

I guess people might think, myself included, there was another time we were closer to, that this wasn't always our harmony, to rattle around like this, here and there, around the planet as savage as ever, some continual distant echo observed from some spot thought to be just a little more advantageous, outrageous, certain things become uncertain. They might feel they have no choice. Think for certain this uncertainty. We now understand.

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