

Overview

TOM MARIONI

Know Where You Are and What is Going On

An excerpt from a memoir in progress
by Kathan Brown

Tom Marioni grew up in Cincinnati, the second oldest of four boys. His mother was born in Syracuse, New York, into a family of twelve children. Her father worked in a factory, and her mother had a dairy. She had started by selling milk from her parlor and eventually owned a bottling plant and trucks that delivered milk to homes. Both of Tom's mother's parents had emigrated from Italy. On the other side, Tom's grandfather had been an ice-cream man in Italy. Tom's father immigrated at the age of 21, not speaking any English, and eventually became a doctor. He put himself through medical school by making ice cream. "I come from a dairy family," Tom says.

Tom grew up in Cincinnati, went to Catholic schools, was an altar boy, studied music, and played the violin in a youth orchestra. He visited San Francisco on a family vacation as a youth, and the day after he graduated from the Cincinnati Art Academy he took a train out here. That was in 1959, the same year I arrived in San Francisco on a freighter with my etching press. But we did not meet until 1974. That year, Lucy Lippard, an art writer from New York, visited me at Sol LeWitt's suggestion. She said that Tom Marioni was doing "the most interesting work being done out here." Crown Point published a print of his before 1974 had ended.

I had been working mainly for Parasol Press, but was doing Crown Point projects whenever I could. I had just completed *A Scratch on the Negative* by Jim Melchert, and I met Tom at a party at Melchert's house soon after Lippard's visit. I found him soft-spoken and somewhat shy. He was living in his studio, recently separated from his wife (he has three sons, the oldest about the age of my son). He had manners I thought of as courtly. Someone at the party kidded him about being a famous beer drinker, and he said he might be a "famous" beer drinker but he was "not a big beer drinker." This went over my head.

When I invited Tom to make a print, he suggested a beer label, and I told him our printing process wasn't suitable. Eventually I came around to the label, but back then he quickly switched gears. Could he make a print outside, in a garden? He had a commission from art supporters David and Mary Robinson, who lived in Sausalito. (Mary still lives there, but David, I am sad to say, died in 2008.) They had asked for a performance piece in their garden. It was not the way I was used to making prints, but we did that. The print is titled *The Sun's Reception*.

The Robinsons invited friends, many of them artists, and served a wonderful lunch on a beautiful day. We used a big copper etching plate, our biggest, and Tom set it up by the swimming pool with a microphone attached to its underside and speakers behind it, then used a sanding disk on an electric drill to draw a spinning oval traced around the reflection of the sun in the copper.

This took about a minute, and then Tom spent another half hour or so polishing the center of the oval, broadcasting quiet sounds. More sounds came from a friend stirring water in the copper base of a kettledrum, a beautiful object also fitted with a microphone. The next day, I printed the plate in pale blue, the color that comes to your eye as the afterimage of the sun. We made an edition of six, and sold the print with a little book of photos from the afternoon at the Robinsons'. My son, Kevin, age thirteen at the time, took most of the photos and he bound the book, his first bookbinding project for Crown Point. More were to come.



Tom Marioni, *Drawing a Line*, 2012.
Drypoint with plate tarnish printed
in sepia and black. 47½-x-97⁄8-inch image
on 54¼-x-16¼-inch sheet. Edition 20.
Printed by Ianne Kjørlic.

After that early print of Tom's, we published in 1977 another drawing-based work, *Landing*, essentially a portfolio of small images. Back then, Tom was the leader of a jazz group in which he was the drummer, and he has made drawings by drumming with wire drum brushes on sandpaper for long periods until residue from the wire builds up an image that resembles a bird. The *Landing* images are related to his drum brush drawings and are a part of a series of works that Tom calls "out-of-body."

Tom has done "out of body" works throughout his career, sometimes with an audience, sometimes not. After traveling to Japan in the early 1980s, he began to make circle drawings (extending the *enso* tradition) by using his arm as a compass, and "finger lines" by attaching a pencil to a finger and folding and unfolding it. He has made "flying" drawings alone and "with friends" by running and jumping with a pencil and "walking" drawings by holding a pencil at his hip as he walks alongside a sheet of paper. He performed the earliest of these works, *Drawing a Line as Far as I can Reach*, 1972, at the De Marco Gallery in Edinburgh, Scotland, with a microphone behind his drawing paper. In the same year he did an action piece called *Body Feedback* at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in which he struck a sheet of paper hanging on a wall. A microphone on a stand was facing the paper, and Tom moved his body between the microphone and the sheet to control the feedback sound.

All the drawings I've described followed a work called *One Second Sculpture* that Tom created in 1969. It was both a drawing and a sculpture, and also ephemeral, documented in a photograph. He threw into the air "an instrument made from a metal tape measure that flies open like a spring in one second, making a loud sound. The object leaves the hand as a circle, makes a drawing in



Kathan Brown and Tom Marioni, 1975.

space, and falls to the ground as a straight line." When I asked Tom about *One Second Sculpture*, he said it "is probably the smartest work I ever did because it is a measurement of both space and time and also incorporates sound as a material."

Tom's sound and action works follow a coherent path, enough, you might think, for a career. But, wait, there's more! Since conceptual artists are, as Tom often says, "free to work in any medium,"

they are hard to pigeonhole.

Tom's most influential work is different from what I have described. It is what he speaks of as his "large-scale social artwork," the Museum of Conceptual Art, MOCA, now closed, and its continuing corollary, a salon I will call by one of its names, *Café Society*. (There have been several name changes over forty years.) In its earliest version, performed in 1970 at the Oakland Museum of California, it was *The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends is the Highest Form of Art*. Now, we have reached the point of talking about why Tom Marioni is a "famous beer drinker."

Beer drinking with friends, exhibitions of art seen nowhere else at the time, a magazine, an artists' conference on an island in the Pacific—all were part of the social activity of Tom's museum. He created it as a nonprofit corporation in San Francisco in 1970 and kept it active for more than a decade. It was a museum, by Tom's definition, because it was "concerned with restoration, interpretation, and collection." Its collection was made up of "records and residue from art actions." Tom closed MOCA in 1984 (the building was torn down by the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency in 1986), and the Berkeley Art Museum at the University of California purchased the MOCA archive.

In an exhibition titled "The Museum of Conceptual Art at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art" in 1979, SFMOMA, the modern art museum, actually gave out free beer. It later purchased for its collection a segment of the installation including the refrigerator from MOCA ("Free Beer" is lettered on the door).

Remembering my own ignorance when I first met Tom, I am thinking that I should address a basic question: How does "conceptual art" fit within "modern art," and how does "contemporary art" jive with those designations? The simple answer is time based: first "modern" art, and then "contemporary," and then "conceptual," an influential, fairly recent part of "contemporary."

The MOCA acronym (with the *O* in *of* capitalized) that Tom began to use in 1970 was appropriated in 1979 for the just-opened Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Its website says it shows art created since 1940. Contemporary collections start at about that time—the middle of World War Two, when abstract expressionism in the United States and tachism in Europe began. Modern art museums go back further, usually beginning with impressionism (mid-nineteenth century) and continuing into the present. Almost all modern and contemporary museums now show at least some works of conceptual art.

Conceptual art began to gain attention with a 1969 exhibition in Berne, Switzerland, called "When Attitudes Become Form," and museums in New York and Europe have shown it since then. California museums lagged behind, and Tom's use of the word *museum* to title his large-scale artwork called attention to that. In the same vein, in 1973 when the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art had been searching for some time for a new director, Marioni sent out a card announcing his own appointment to the job.

In 1970 Tom laid out a narrow mission for his museum. He described it as a "specialized sculpture action museum" and "an excuse for a party." Now, about forty years later, it's becoming clear that the moving, changing, interconnected, experiential world we

live in today was predicted by early conceptual art, which focused on activities (including parties) rather than on objects (including paintings).

When conceptual art, a truly international movement, sprang up in the late 1960s, there was no center from which it spread. In Europe and on each coast of the United States, it had distinct approaches. The Europeans were generally materials oriented, but in England language art and land art dominated. Language art also developed in New York, along with art that used systems in various ways. Marioni calls California “a body culture” and says that it took its influences from Asia and Europe rather than New York.

Besides looking to Europe for influence, Marioni drew on Northern California’s long unbroken figurative tradition. Richard Diebenkorn (who had turned from abstraction to figurative art at the time), Wayne Thiebaud, and many other figurative painters were active here, and younger “funk” artists like William T. Wiley were working irreverently with figuration. Marioni and the artists who showed at MOCA extended that tradition to make what they called “body works.” Marioni defined conceptual art in the early 1970s as “idea-oriented situations not directed at the production of static objects.”

Now, as I look back to the seventies, I realize that my association with Tom Marioni expanded my way of thinking into a much wider world than I had seen before. That wider world is clearly visible in 2012 to everyone. Well in advance of the Web’s democratizing influence, Tom threw himself into a do-it-yourself-and-with-others ethos.

Tom’s Museum of Conceptual Art was a big project that contained smaller ones. One smaller one is his continuing beer-with-friends salon, and an offshoot of that is the Crown Point Press publication *Café Society Beer*, 1979. It is not simply a print as a beer label; it is an actual bottle of beer with an original print for a label.

Fritz Maytag, founder and, at that time, owner of the Anchor Steam Beer Brewing Company in San Francisco, produced a beer for us with a unique formulation, and our printers helped Maytag, Marioni, and a technician bottle it in champagne bottles in an edition of one hundred. Tom designed the label to wrap around the bottle like a napkin and hand-engraved the title. The documentation sheet gives an instruction: “To complete the artwork this beer should be shared by at least two people.”

Tom Marioni created the Museum of Conceptual Art because no museum in California was showing the kind of art he was interested in. He didn’t bury himself in strategizing about how to get what today is called “funding.” He did work within standard institutional structures and applied for, and received, some small grants, primarily from the National Endowment for the Arts. That agency created a category called “alternative art spaces” rather than give him the museum grant he applied for. (A performance space in New York, 112 Greene Street, received an “alternative art space” grant soon after.) Tom also sought and found fifteen or twenty supporting members for MOCA at \$25 a year.

Tom’s attitude has always been to do something somehow and sustain a project as long as possible with minimum support. His approach enhanced my confidence in a careful, but at the same time daring



Tom Marioni, *Café Society Beer*, 1979. Soft ground etching mounted on a bottle of Anchor Steam beer. 5½-x-8¼-inch image on 5½-x-10-inch sheet. Edition 100.

approach to Crown Point Press as a business. Tom and I independently reinforce and exhilarate each other.

I wish I had been savvy enough to visit the Museum of Conceptual Art for its early historic shows, “Sound Sculpture As,” 1970, for example, probably the first sound art show anywhere, or “All Night Sculptures,” 1973, nine sculptors each creating an action or an installation in a different room, or Chris Burden’s one-man show in 1971, his first outside student situations. Overall, group shows were more prevalent at MOCA than one-person shows. The guiding principle was to explore concepts, and occasionally Tom put on a pure-concept show that allowed him to do that with a narrow focus.

One MOCA show of the pure-concept type was called “Chinese



Tom Marioni, *Drawing a Line as Far as I Can Reach*, 1972.

Youth Alternative,” 1974. It consisted of debris and graffiti left in the space upstairs from MOCA when the youth organization (a front for a gang) moved out. Another, “The Moroccan Experience,” 1976, was five thousand square feet of wall-to-wall rugs borrowed from a shop located downstairs from Tom’s space. The rugs had a strong smell, camel dung I thought. “I’m trying to make art as close to real life as possible without it being real life,” Tom said.

Why, then, I asked, was “The Moroccan Experience” not real life? These were the same rugs that had been for sale when they were in the store. “Put anything in an art context and it becomes art” was Tom’s reply. This is the other side of the coin to John Cage’s idea that “art should slip out of us into the world in which we live.” I asked Tom if a sunset can be art. “Nature makes a sunset. People make art,” he said.

“The Chinese Youth Alternative” and “The Moroccan Experience” were not artworks by the Chinese youths and the Moroccan shopkeeper. Although it was not mentioned in exhibition material, both shows were conceptual artworks by Tom Marioni, who placed the “found” materials into an art context and caused viewers to see them differently from how they would have seen them in the context of real life.

The management reserves the right to refuse service to anyone who doesn’t know where they are or what is going on.
People bring their own drinks.
No drinking from beer bottle except in character.
Bartenders can invite up to 3 guests.
Guests do not invite guests without checking with Tom.
No theater people except famous movie stars.
No art students except those who can pass as professionals.
No art collectors except in disguise.
People should sign guest book at the bar.
Hours 5 to 8 PM, except on special occasions.

This is a short list version of the house rules for the Society of Independent Artists, the current version of Tom’s *Café Society* salon. He has hosted the gatherings once a week since 1973. There are more rules; I left out the ones like “no popcorn, unshelled peanuts, or cake” that are mostly related to keeping the premises trouble free. The salon is normally held in Marioni’s studio, and the house rules apply to that location. I asked Tom to explain the ones that start with *no*. What does drinking “in character” from a beer bottle mean? “A cowboy would never drink out of a glass,” he replied. Why not theater people? “Because they are too theatrical.” What would be a disguise appropriate for art collectors? “That they don’t announce they are art collectors.”

Sometimes, *Café Society* is held in institutions rather than in Tom’s studio. In 2011, for example, the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles presented it, and in the same year Tom traveled overseas to present the piece in museums in Vienna and Bristol, England, and an art center in Paris. There are conceptual artists around the world who use food, drink, and social situations as art materials, and Tom’s *The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends is the Highest Form of Art*, because of its 1970 date, is a grandfather to them.

When Tom presents his salon outside his studio, he creates a specific environment in the field institution: The beer bottles, after having been emptied, are deposited on shelves built to his specifications. He designs the bar and the lights (yellow, like California sunlight), and indicates the music to be played (jazz). Sometimes the room contains other artworks of his, an “out-of-body” drawing on a wall, for example. He has done that kind of drawing before an audience in the past, but lately his preferred performance for his salons takes another form. He tells jokes. He takes a microphone, stands up before an audience, and tells jokes.

This development was surprising to me, because I know that Tom is shy, and a person is at his most vulnerable, perhaps, in “stand-up” mode. But, thinking about it, I know that artists have to work outside their comfort zones. The best art is usually close to being out of control.

When you think about it, a lot of art being done today is under control without necessarily seeming to be. In order to recognize art, and other valuable things and ideas in the world right now, it is important to know where you are and what is going on.



Tom Marioni, *Nest*, 2012. Soft ground etching printed in black and yellow. 18½-x-15-inch image on 26¾-x-23½-inch sheet. Edition 20. Printed by Ianne Kjørlic.

IN THE GALLERY

TOM MARIONI SPEAKS OFF THE TOP OF HIS HEAD
FRIDAY, APRIL 27 6:30-7:30

TOM MARIONI / PAT STEIR exhibition through May 19, 2012