

Overview

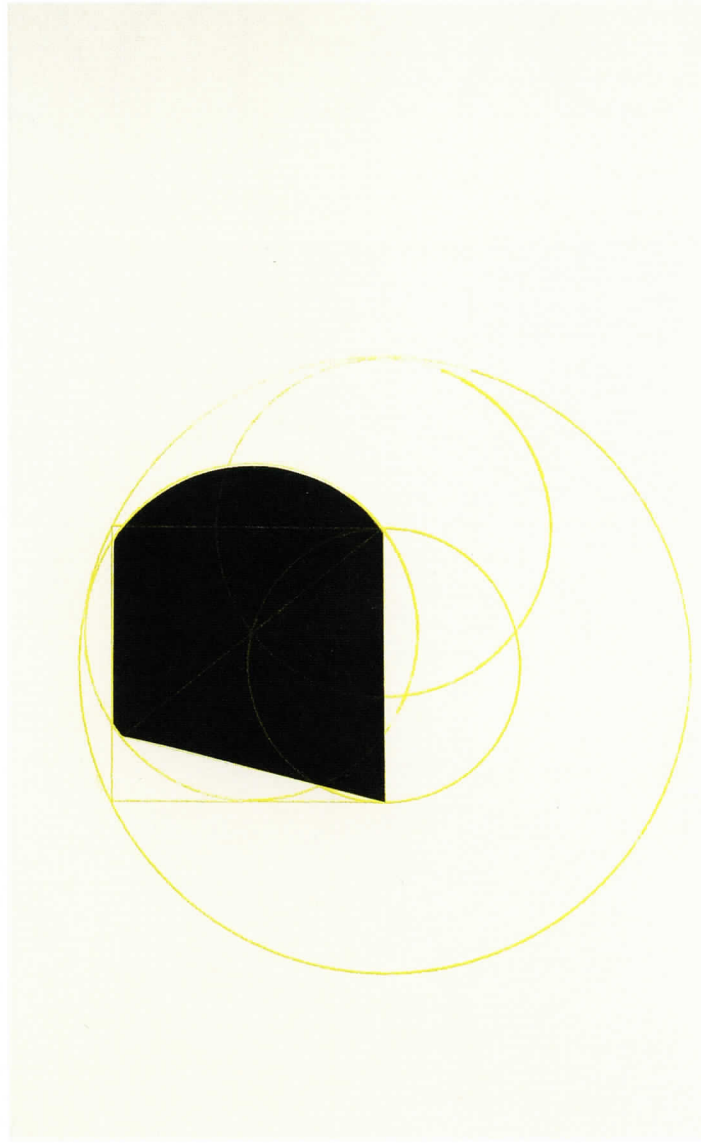


Tom Marioni, *One Second Sculpture*, 2002. Direct gravure with water bite aquatint printed in black and blue. Paper size: 32 x 23"; image size: 21 x 13". Edition 15. Printed by Rachel Fuller.

Tom Marioni

Tom Marioni was born in Cincinnati in 1937 and arrived in San Francisco in 1959, fresh out of the Cincinnati Art Academy, where he had received traditional training in drawing, sculpture, and design. His sculpture at that time was abstract and formal. But a few years later he began reading about Yves Klein, a French artist who died in 1962 at the age of thirty-four. Klein did early, elegant performance art and blue paintings that he said represented "the void."

Marioni also studied the works of Marcel Duchamp and revisited Leonardo da Vinci's writings and drawings that his father had shown him as a child. He read about the work of Joseph Beuys, a German artist who coined the term "social sculpture." Beuys gave lectures on art and politics (he was one of the founders of the Green Party) and advocated using life experience as raw material for sculpture. Marioni was in touch with what was new in art in Europe as well as in New York, and he began to think about making work that was not, as he says, "object oriented."



Tom Marioni, *Circle Triangle Square*, 2002. Soft ground etching with aquatint printed in yellow and black. Paper size: 30 x 20"; image size: 22 x 13-3/4". Edition 15. Printed by Rachel Fuller.

In 1969 Marioni sent out a card titled "Abstract Expressionist Performance Sculpture." It instructed the person receiving it to create such a sculpture by buying a roll of film, opening it to expose it to light, pressing it to their tongue to mark it in a personal way, and then throwing it on the ground. At that time in New York, pop and minimal artists were well represented in gallery and museum shows and a movement called "anti-form" was developing in reaction to them. Marioni saw his work as part of an underground group of artists who were using abstract expressionist concepts of gesture and expression in performance and installation works. This included some artists in New York, but also the European *Arte Povera* artists and the *Gutai* group in Japan. (In 1998, Paul Schimmel of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art organized an historic exhibition focused on this range of performance artists. He called the exhibition "Out of Actions.")

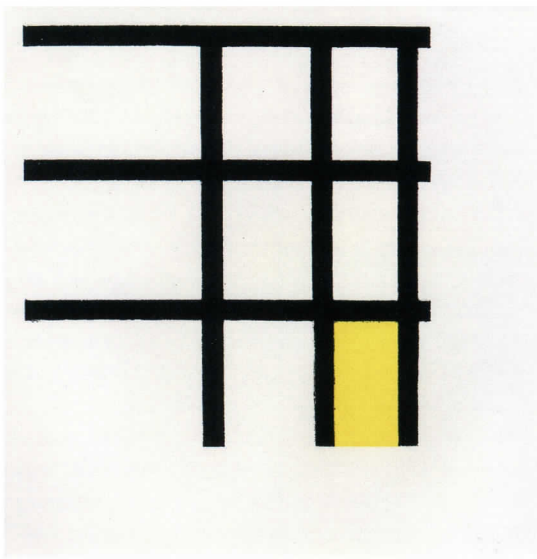
Marioni's group of San Francisco artists in the early '70s called their work "actions" rather than "performances." Unlike the earlier artists who did Happenings in New York, they were anti-theatrical.

By performing real-time activities they explored the properties of particular, often unusual, art materials in front of an audience.

At that time, sound was Marioni's chosen material. (He had briefly studied at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music so the step was an easy one.) In 1969 he performed an art action titled *One Second Sculpture* that succinctly linked action, sound, and drawing to make a work of art. The elegant visual wholeness and simplicity of this work is characteristic of Marioni's art in general, and action, sound, and drawing are still of primary importance to him. *One Second Sculpture* is at the center of what he calls his "personal" artwork.

To perform *One Second Sculpture*, Marioni removed the case from a metal tape measure and threw the coiled tape into the air. He describes this as demonstrating "an instrument 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 space, and falls to the ground as a straight line."

A year later, in 1970, Marioni had an exhibition at the Oakland Museum titled *The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends is the Highest*



Tom Marioni, *Mondrian*, 2002. Direct gravure with aquatint printed in black and yellow. Paper size: 14-1/4 x 13-1/2"; image size: 13-1/2 x 13". Edition 15. Printed by Rachel Fuller.

Form of Art. This began what he calls his "social" artwork, which he has continued to maintain side by side with his personal art. Marioni sees beer with friends as "an aid to communication" and, as time has gone by, his beer pieces have continued to be present in his art. He still holds "Wednesday meetings" where friends meet to drink beer in his studio, and he has done a number of installation works that include functioning bars. As he sometimes says, he is not "a big beer drinker." But he is "a famous beer drinker."

He uses the word "famous" somewhat tongue-in-cheek. One of his most "famous" works of art that involved beer also involved sound. In a show that he organized in 1970 called *Sound Sculpture As* he climbed up on a ladder (after drinking beer) and, with his back to the audience, urinated into a metal bucket. "As the water level went up, the sound level went down," he says.

Sound Sculpture As was probably the first sound art show anywhere. It was the first official show of the Museum of Conceptual Art (MOCA), a "large scale social work of art" that Marioni founded in February 1970. MOCA was a real museum with a physical space, which—as Marioni announced at the time—was dedicated to the presentation of "idea-oriented situations not directed at the production of static objects." Many historic shows occurred there. Marioni closed MOCA in 1984. By that time there were other "alternative art spaces" showing conceptual art, something that was not true when MOCA began.

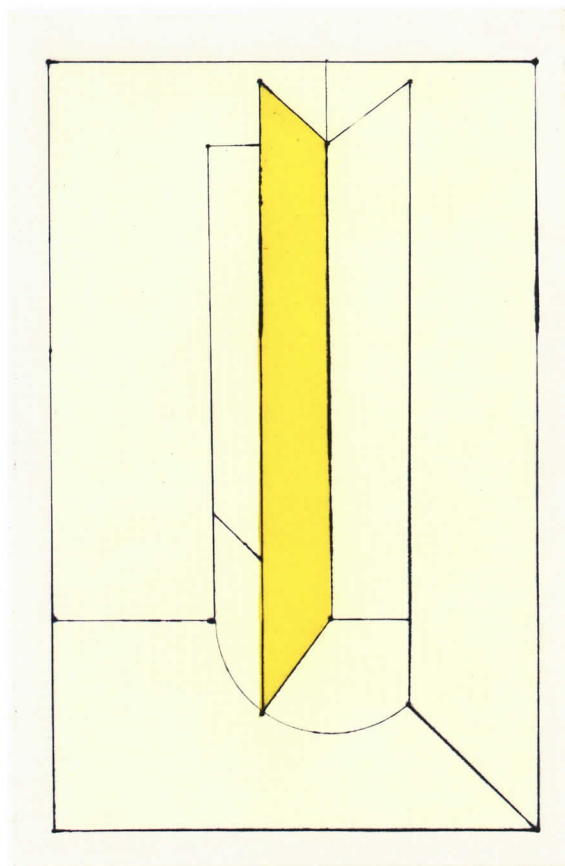
In New York, conceptual art mainly was concerned with systems and language, but—largely because of MOCA—the San Francisco Bay Area has been, from the beginning, a center for actions performed as art. Marioni states clearly that "the art that was made in MOCA was not my art, but the idea of the museum was." MOCA, itself, was Marioni's most complex work of art in his social, or public, way of working.

In his private, or personal, way of working, a lot of Marioni's art has been involved with drawing. He more-or-less stopped doing performances in the mid-'80s, but until then all his performances that did not involve beer were rhythmic drawing activities. He did these in museums or galleries where he had prepared installations that included controlled lighting. He used yellow

lights placed to create strong shadows, and he amplified his drawing activity to create sound. In his *Studio* series of the early 1980s, for example, he drew his shadow, and then, by means of a small curtain and positioned lights, withdrew slowly so his actual shadow disappeared into the drawn one. The amplified sound of his pencil moving over the paper, sometimes combined with snatches of recorded music, created a meditative, almost mesmerizing experience for audience members. In a stylized way, it allowed others to grasp the feeling of momentum (sometimes called "flow") that an artist has in the studio when work is going well.

Marioni accomplished this by pulling the audience along with his rhythmic drawing, a concept that came out of an activity he calls "drum brush drawing" which he began doing in 1972. He draws with jazz drum brushes, one in each hand, moving them repeatedly in an overlapping pattern, a natural movement for a drummer. He uses fine sandpaper as a surface, and the metal brushes leave residue on it that creates a delicate gray drawing. Marioni did these works in performances at first, with the sound amplified, and he continues to make them in his studio as a way of drawing that allows him to make art generated directly from his body without intervention by his mind during the working process.

Lately he has begun doing drawings in color using pencils on paper in the same way he would use the drum brushes on sandpaper. The idea is to make an artwork not primarily formed by the artist's taste and will, an approach that John Cage called "imitating nature in her manner of operation." Throughout his career,



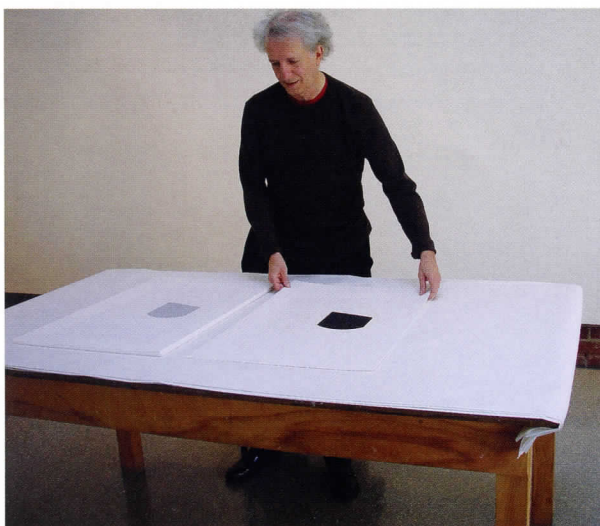
Tom Marioni, *A Door Must be Either Open or Closed*, 2002. Drypoint with aquatint printed in yellow and black. Paper size: 17 x 11-1/2"; image size: 8 x 5-1/4". Edition 15. Printed by Rachel Fuller.

Marioni has done many drawings and prints that are the result of setting in motion natural or mechanical gestures.

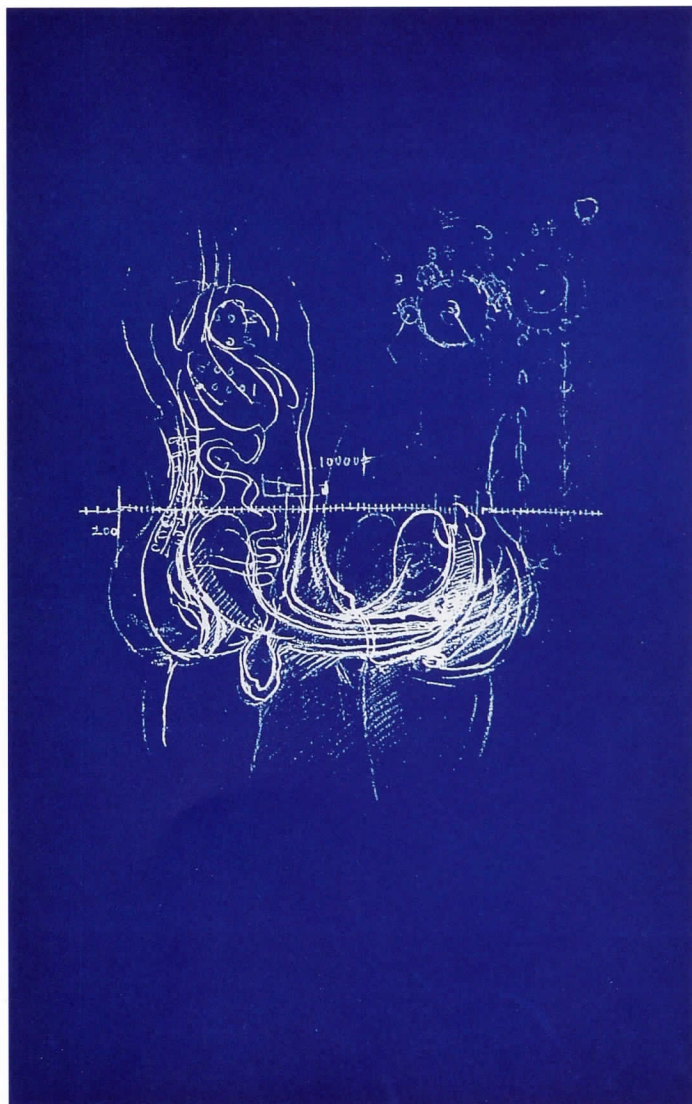
He often uses his body to draw in a rhythmic way: running and jumping to make long marks across the paper, or reaching as far up as possible from a sitting or standing position. Sometimes he attaches a pencil to a finger and draws repeated lines by folding and unfolding the finger. And, expanding this approach, he has produced traditional works related to Chinese calligraphy, an ancient art dependent on body rhythms. He also has made artworks by initiating mechanical or semi-mechanical marking actions only partly controlled by him.

This was the case in a series of monotypes, and one etching, which he calls process landscapes. For the etching, Marioni bit four plates by pouring acid at the end of each one, then running it through the printing press. The pushing action of the press's roller distributed the acid, which created forms that suggest a generalized landscape of distant mountains. The monotypes were done earlier. In that case, the press pushed printing ink across the paper. Marioni has also made landscape drawings by inserting a rolled piece of paper in a bottle, adding colored drawing inks, and turning the bottle. All of this work harks back to 1970 when he did an installation work called *Process Print* in which he ran one hundred sheets of paper through an offset lithography press without an image and without the water necessary for proper ink distribution. The first sheets to come out were almost clear of ink, and the last were fully inked. In between, they were all different, but roughly sequential. When hung side by side they can be read as a landscape in changing light.

Marioni says that conceptual artists don't define themselves by medium. They choose the appropriate medium for whatever idea they are pursuing at any given moment. However, for Marioni, sculpture lies underneath it all. He says that this is because sculptors think about forms in space rather than illusions of space, as painters do. His action or performance works and his installation or object works are all works of sculpture. His prints and drawings are not sculpture, of course, but he often uses them as elements in his sculpture. In his performance works he usually made a drawing of some kind, and his installation works frequently include framed drawings.



Tom Marioni in the Crown Point studio, 2002.



Tom Marioni, *Leonardo IKB*, 2002. Direct gravure printed in blue. Paper size: 26-1/4 x 19"; image size: 17-1/4 x 11". Edition 15. Printed by Rachel Fuller.

In Marioni's installation sculpture he uses found objects, which in a way function like his automatically generated gestures to prevent traditional art-crafting—shaping the art according to the artist's taste. However, he does choose the objects and, in choosing, he considers both formal and cerebral attributes. Even natural objects—a rock or a seashell for example—appear by virtue of the meaning that people give them. And since meaning, as we all know, grows out of juxtaposition and context, those two concepts are Marioni's stock-in-trade as he creates his sculpture works both large (room sized installations) and small (shadow boxes and sculpture objects).

Marioni's installation work clearly shows the formal underpinning of all his art. He combines his found objects with drawings or (occasionally) other objects made or altered by him, and connects them by framing, mounting, lighting, and/or placing them in a prescribed space. For example, the central object in a 1989 installation sculpture called *Beijing* is a framed drawing of a ghostly figure, a shadow drawing. In front of the drawing is a real bicycle, stolid and black; the rider is absent from the bicycle, but his shadow remains, ghost-like, nearby. Between the bicycle handle-



Tom Marioni, *Drumming*, 2002. Color soft ground etching with aquatint. Paper size: 27 x 18"; image size: 16 x 10". Edition 15. Printed by Rachel Fuller.

bars Marioni placed a large Chinese calligraphy brush that he had shaped to suggest the liberty torch of the statue Chinese students created as part of the tragic demonstrations they carried out that year in Tiananmen Square. Mounted on the carrier behind the bicycle is a board, and balanced on a stick poking out of it is a dinner plate of the type Chinese acrobats juggle. The combination of an insubstantial figure with juggler's tools and a liberty torch creates a metaphor for the position of Chinese students in Beijing in 1989.

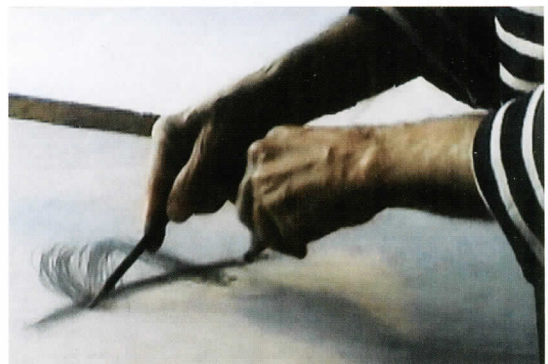
In description, that work sounds complex, but visually it is spare and clean, like all Marioni's work. He has a leaning toward Zen simplicity (sometimes, also, toward the humor of Zen absurdity), and this gives his art, in general, a contemplative demeanor. It looks simple, but it feels like it will support repeated reflection. The feeling is enhanced by his often invisible use of the Golden Rectangle, a mathematical construction that underlies the composition of many of his works. He has called attention to it in several of his titles—*Golden Rectangle with Boomerang* 1987 (a wall sculpture in copper), for example, or *Golden Rectangle* 2000 (a yellow-lighted shelf unit containing rows of beer bottles). The series title of this 2002 group of prints from Crown Point Press is *Golden Rectangles*.

A Golden Rectangle is constructed from a square using the Golden Section or Golden Mean, a ratio of 1:1.618 (like Pi, an irrational number). This proportion was used by the ancient Greeks for temples, the ancient Egyptians for the Pyramids, and by many architects since, including Le Corbusier. It is also found in the growth patterns of living things from seashells to human beings.

The seven etchings that make up Tom Marioni's Crown Point Press *Golden Rectangles* place some of the preoccupations he has had for thirty or so years into this orderly and satisfying framework. The prints give insight into how an artist can meander through old images and influences to make new and surprising works of varying character. But—in the long run—they stand on what they look like. *One Second Sculpture*, for example, exists in the form of a photograph and a sound recording of the 1969 performance work, and now it has also become a 2002 direct gravure etching taken from a Xerox of a dot-screened reproduction of the sky portion of the original photograph. The important things about this print, however, (and by extension the others in the series) are not its references. The important things are its presence, beauty, and ability to evoke mood or feeling. The background material was a pathway followed in order to get there.

Three of the etchings relate to artist-heroes of Marioni's. *A Door Must be Either Open or Closed* is inspired by a famous work by Duchamp, a door in his Paris apartment that served two rooms. *Leonardo IKB* puts two heroes together. Marioni photocopied a Leonardo drawing from a book, reversed it onto Mylar that he used to make a direct gravure image on a copper plate, then printed the resulting image in a field of International Klein Blue (IKB). The image titled *Mondrian* is perhaps the most meandering of them all. In the gift store of the Museum of Modern Art in New York Marioni was fascinated by a packet of paper napkins that reproduced a Mondrian painting. The folded napkin under the plastic box cover displayed the fragment used in this print. The little yellow shape is a Golden Rectangle.

Two of the etchings are the result of direct drawing actions on metal etching plates. The plate used for *Drawing a Line (An Ounce of Gold)* is actually gold. Marioni hammered a small gold bar to smooth out the official designs that were on it originally. Then he scratched lines ("from my series beginning in 1972 'Drawing a Line as Far as I can Reach,'" he explains). These are drypoint lines, so the plate was simply printed after that. An additional (copper) plate was added for the yellow tint. Marioni made the second of the direct-drawing prints, titled *Drumming*, by drum-



Tom Marioni in the Crown Point studio, drawing the soft ground image for the print *Drumming*, 2002.



Tom Marioni, *Drawing a Line (An Ounce of Gold)*, 2002. Drypoint with aquatint. Paper size: 8 x 5"; image size: 2 x 1". Edition 15. Printed by Rachel Fuller.

ming with both hands using pencils on four different plates that had been prepared with soft ground overlaid with paper. The plates were printed in yellow, red, blue, and black, one on top of the other over a toned background printed from a fifth plate.

Finally, the etching titled *Circle Triangle Square* shows an image of a shape Marioni devised by working with the Golden Rectangle. This shape contains within it a circle, a triangle, and a square, three figures beloved by Zen Buddhist calligraphers. The guidelines used to construct the shape are retained and are printed in yellow. The lines "suggest light reflection in an abstract way," Marioni says. He made this shape originally as a sculpture work, a flat copper panel hinged to the wall, one side painted black and the other reflecting light from its copper surface.

Tom Marioni is, by his own description, a conceptual artist. By that he means he follows his work where it takes him, without regard for medium. Recently, after a talk he gave, someone asked a question that implied that she thought conceptual art was "not supposed to be" visual.

"All visual art is visual," Marioni replied. And that was the end of that.

—Kathan Brown

In the Crown Point Gallery:

Friends: New Etchings by Robert Bechtle and Tom Marioni
January 9 - March 1, 2003

Please join us in the gallery at a reception for the artists on Friday, January 10 from 6 - 8 pm.

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