

# Artists' Conference Alights at a South Seas Island

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OAKLAND, Calif. — A cultural invasion of Ponape, a remote Pacific island paradise best known for its hospitality to scuba divers, was planned here and peacefully executed recently by a dozen well-known artists and their friends.

Under the sponsorship of Oakland's Crown Point Press, generally considered one of the finest workshops in the country for artists' etchings, the group of more than 30 people made the 7,000-mile trip from here to Ponape, a volcanic outcropping 13 miles in diameter that belongs to the United States Trust Territory of the East Caroline Islands. They stayed at one of the island's few hotels for slightly more than a week, snorkeling, sightseeing and taking part in what is certainly the first art conference ever held in those parts.

"We wanted to get the artists together to talk with each other, and we felt we really had to be detached," Kathleen Brown, Crown Point's director said. She and an artist friend, Tom Marioni, came up with the idea for the meeting. They took a freighter trip to the South Seas in 1978, and found "paradise" on Ponape. "The conference brought together artists with an individual, expressive approach that is beginning to modify the recent emphasis on reductionism in art. We chose artists who are different but could speak the same language."

## 12-Minute Presentation

The formal participation of the artists, most of whom have produced etchings for Crown Point, consisted of a 12-minute presentation by each on a topic of his choice, attended by group discussion. The proceedings will be published and sold by the press as a three-record album.

In the moonlight-and-palm-tree setting of the hotel's open-sided meeting house, the presentations, given before and after dinner, ranged from structured talks to loosely themed performances. Robert Kushner, a young New York artist whose work is part of the current trend to "decorative" painting — that involved with rich effects of pattern and decoration; William Wylie, the San Francisco painter, played the Jew's harp, read poetry selections, sang an old New England folk song and ended with a rendition of "Amazing Grace" on his harmonica.

Marina Abramovic, a Yugoslav performance artist, discussed her rela-



William Wiley, left, the artist, and John Cage, the composer, protect themselves from the sun on Ponape  
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tionship with audiences. Brice Marden, the New York painter, combined accounts from his journals and a story by Isak Dinesen with a statement about his own work. Chris Burden, the California performance artist, read a piece about learning to be a glider pilot.

## Poetic Tributes to Thinkers

John Cage, the composer, a mentor to many of the younger artists, gave poetic tributes to thinkers and theorists who had influenced him, using chance operations derived from the ancient Chinese book of I Ching to determine the sequence of his presentation. Other artists present were Laurie Anderson, Daniel Buren, Brian Hunt, Joan Jonas, Pat Steir and Mr. Marioni.

"The idea was so incongruous, to do this kind of thing while we're living under inflation and the threat of war," Melinda Wertz, head of the fine arts department of the University of Califor-

nia at Irvine and one of the nonartist observers who went along, said. "It was romantic and unreal and totally irresistible. I felt that once we got there, no one would want to talk about art, but no, every artist took his presentation seriously, and the work was highly disciplined."

For most of the artists, aside from its vacation aspect, the trip meant a chance to get acquainted with the work of other artists or to meet for the first time those whose work they had admired. "It was a wonderfully crackpot idea," Mr. Kushner said. "For me, one of the major positive things was making friends and being able to talk with people I'd never get to know otherwise, like John Cage, who is very important to me. The trip also broadened my understanding of how some artists viewed their work, how it fitted into their way of thinking."

## "Slightly Rarefied" Experience

Mr. Marden was more ambiguous, finding the experience "slightly rarefied." "I thought," he said, "it would be a bit more controversial, but everyone was established, so there wasn't much of that. Yet for me, the trip was important because I got a much better perspective on the West Coast, about which I'd been disdainful. 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."

If the conference had benefits for artists, it also left its mark on some of Ponape's 5,000 inhabitants. "At first at the hotel, we had to ask the staff to stop ringing up drinks and washing dishes while we recorded the artists," Robin White, a Crown Point aide who coordinated the trip, said, "but then they became entranced. They had never seen such a laid-back group that got along so well together." Several of the artists, in fact, were invited to a native funeral, and with the permission of the mourners, dragged video equipment into the jungle to record the rites.

Fare and accommodations for the 12 artists were paid by Crown Point; others on the trip paid their own way. Financing was also helped by private donations. A grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, given to produce the fourth of a series of publications by the press on artists in their

habitats, will be used to produce the album of the trip as the fourth publication, to appear in June.

## New Ideas and Recognition

Although Crown Point will lose money on the trip, according to Miss Brown, dividends will undoubtedly come in the form of new ideas for artists about their work, and "the recognition of Crown Point as 'more than just a print publisher, a force in the art world.'"

Although the trip seems adventurous indeed for a noncommercial print workshop not exactly rolling in profits, the innovative idea did not surprise those who know Miss Brown. A one-time painter who studied printmaking in England, she set up an etching workshop in 1962 in the basement of her North Berkeley home to produce books with prints "in which the entire book was the artwork." In 1970, she began to work with artists on editions of etchings alone. The first of these projects was a series of color aquatints by Wayne Thiebaud, the California painter, and a year later she moved the workshop to the spacious, sunny quarters it occupies in the heart of downtown Oakland.

Since then, Crown Point — which does a good deal of printing for the New York art-publishing house Parasol Press — has helped to spark a renaissance in etching techniques. Besides most of the Ponape sojourners, artists who have worked at Crown Point to turn out the high-quality, deliberately small editions that the press is noted for include Richard Diebenkorn, Claes Oldenburg, Sol LeWitt, Chuck Close, Dan Flavin, Helen Frankenthaler, Richard Smith plus others not known before for their printmaking propensities, such as Mr. Cage and another composer, Steve Reich; Mr. Burden, Miss Jonas and another performance artist, Vito Acconci, and Hans Haacke, the conceptual artist.

The romantic trip to Ponape, Miss Brown said, tied in with her notion of the direction that art will take in the 1980's, "away from the refined, reductive classical New York art of the 60's and 70's toward an art that is more open, more expressive, looser in structure and temporal rather than eternal — an art to which California will make a bigger contribution."