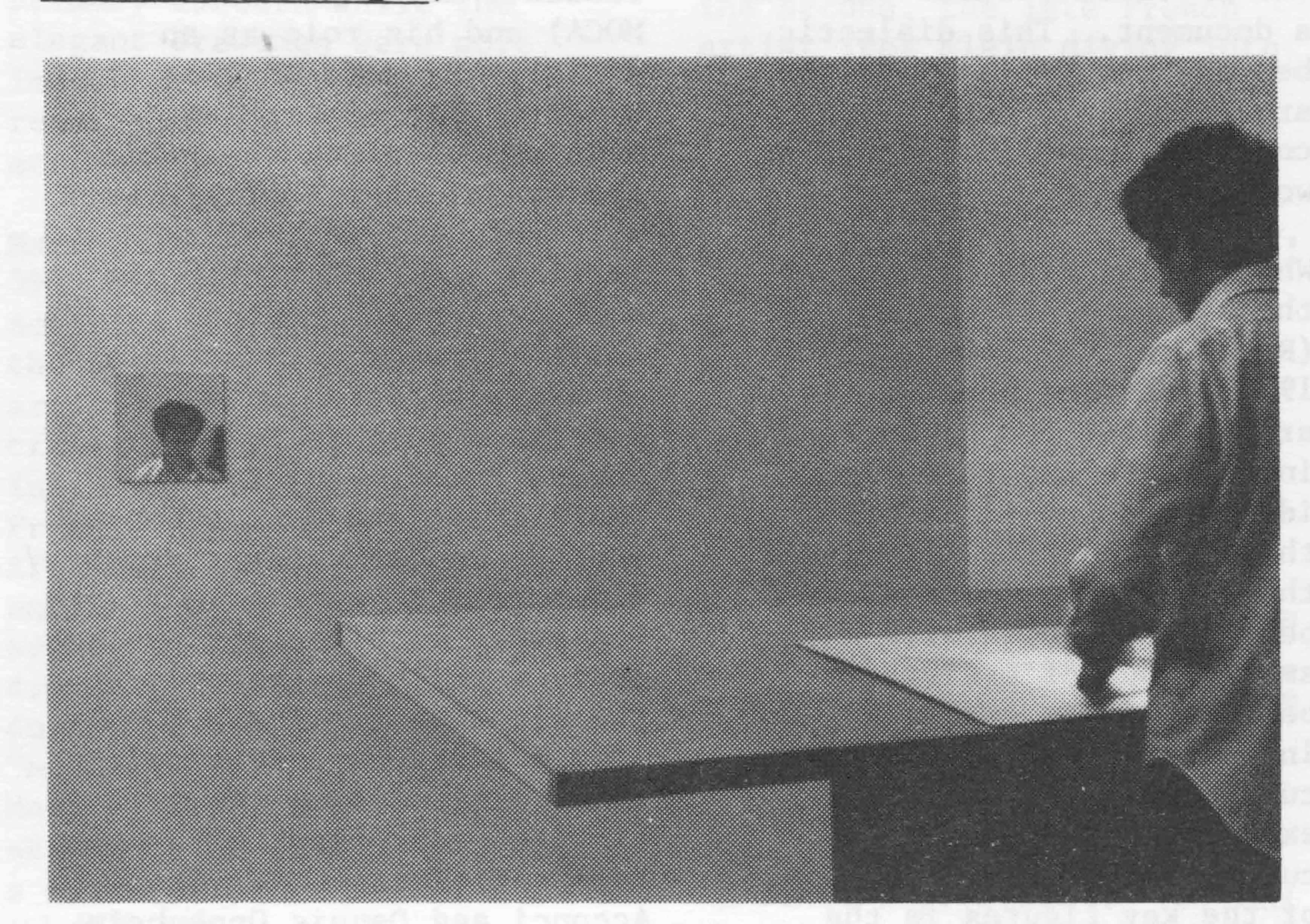
The Sound of Flight, 1977



In the late sixties Tom Marioni, using the pseudonym Allan Fish, created an artwork consisting of himself and three friends eating a sixcourse dinner at the opening of the Walnut Creek Art Center exhibition 6x6x6. The dirty dishes and empty wine bottles were left on exhibit to underscore his assertion that it was the activity which constituted the art and that the material residue was only a document. This dialectic between the art act and the art object has remained a constant issue in Marioni's work.

While serving as curator at the Richmond Art Center (Richmond, California, 1968-1971), Marioni adopted the artist alter-ego Allan Fish in order to separate his identity as an artist from that as a curator. During these years at Richmond he became associated with a small group of artists because of his extremely innovative and controversial curatorial attitude. For example, under Marioni's curatorship, Terry Fox, one of the key figures in the development of performance art in San Francisco, produced a seminal work, "Levitation," (1971) in which he lay on a mound of dirt in the gallery holding tubes of blood, urine, milk and water (symbolic of elemental bodily fluids being expelled from his body) in a metaphoric attempt to release his spirit from his physical being. Works such as these outraged the Richmond officials, and Marioni was forced to resign. Well before "Levitation," however, Marioni sensed that his curatorial career at Richmond might be short-lived. As a result he founded the Museum of Conceptual Art (MOCA) in San Francisco in 1970, one of the

first "alternative" museums anywhere. MOCA soon became the center for situational art (art conceived for a particular place) as well as performance art, a form which has subsequently involved many Bay Area artists.

Since the establishment of MOCA, Marioni has no longer felt a conflict between his role as curator (he has remained curator/director of MOCA) and his role as an artist. He sees them as two sides of his art-making, MOCA representing the public and social aspect of his work while his own actions or performances constitute the more personal. Marioni allied himself with artists of his generation in San Francisco such as Fox, Howard Fried, Paul Kos (MATRIX 36) and Bonnie Sherk, who, as conceptual/performance/ video artists were primarily concerned with the art process or idea while de-emphasizing the art object. These Bay Area artists were developing their attitudes in the late sixties, concurrent with New York artists such as Vito Acconci and Dennis Oppenheim and European artists Joseph Beuys and Daniel Buren. As Ursula Meyer points out in her book Conceptual Art, (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1972), "In a certain sense the artist performing replaces the traditional object of art --that is to say that, in performance, artist and artobject merge." Marioni and Fox, however, preferred to use the German term aktion (action) to describe their work in order to stress the activity, the artist's interaction with an audience and materials, and to avoid the theatrical associations inherent in the term performance.

In recent years Marioni's work has become more subtle and complex while remaining conceptually consistent. The drum brush drawings, "See What I'm Saying" were made between 1972 and 1978 by drumming on sandpaper with silverplated wire brushes. As in the dinner piece, the activity of prolonged drumming in the presence of an audience was Marioni's primary concern while the elegant drawings were more important to Marioni as records of the meditative actions.

Marioni's action for MATRIX 39, "Studio," is a public activity designed to suggest the private space of the artist's studio. This contrasts with his recent installation at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art where he recreated the ambiance of MOCA, a public space, inviting visitors to drink beer as they would during an evening at his "museum." In "Studio" Marioni draws his life-sized shadow which is distorted by a piece of black velvet suspended between two yellow spotlights and the vertical drawing surface. In a recent conversation Marioni explained that he chose yellow light because it is linked with the intellect in alchemical theory and would, therefore, facilitate the telepathic communication he hopes to achieve with the audience. Musical sound, alternating between jazz and classical, accompanies the action much as it would in his own studio. It is significant to note that Marioni has maintained a life-long association with jazz and percussion which is manifested in both his drum brush drawings as well as in the action/drawing "Studio."

The large drawing produced in "Studio" is the central work hanging in the MATRIX gallery. It is accompanied by "See What I'm Saying," "Religious Picture," an etching made by drum brushing, and the three-part drawing entitled "Personal References." The images in the triptych evoke artists who have profoundly influenced Marioni. The first image is the lower portion of Miles Davis' face; the second, the late French artist Yves Klein diving into space from a second-story window as a performance; the third, the smile of "Mona Lisa." Marioni not only has been a devotee of Miles Davis' music, but has adopted Davis' attitude of facing away from the audience while performing. Marioni regards Klein as a pioneer "performance" artist who, like himself, invited an audience to witness the creation of a work of art. For example, in Klein's famous "Blue Anthropometries" (1960), female nudes covered with blue paint printed themselves onto a blank canvas under his direction. Finally, the Renaissance genius Leonardo da Vinci represents to Marioni the ultimate "concept" artist whose brilliance manifested itself in a multitude of ideas but few finished works.

As demonstrated in his most recent work, Marioni is less concerned about the denial of the art object. He now believes that objects resulting from an activity, such as the drum brush drawings and the self-portrait produced in "Studio," have an inherent value greater than mere containers of the energy expended in their creation.

Though the four works in this unit appear to differ stylistically, they are unified by Marioni's intention, to either record a process (i.e. the

drum brush drawings and etching) or to concretize an idea ("Personal References"). In a sense the "Studio" work represents a convergence of Marioni's interests. It is both a record of a specific action and a self-portrait. That Marioni chooses his own shadow as the subject of "Studio" is indicative of a merger of his interests in the apparent dichotomy between public and private spaces in relation to his singular and continuing exploration of self as material.

Marioni was born in Cincinnati Ohio, studied violin at the .
Conservatory of Music, and commercial and fine art at the Art Academy in Cincinnati. He moved to San Francisco in 1959 and between 1960 and 1963 was stationed in Germany with the United States Army.

Constance Lewallen

Works in MATRIX:

Studio, Nov. 5, 1980, action.

Studio, 1980, pencil on paper, approximately 10' x 7'. Lent by the artist.

See What I'm Saying, 1972-78, silver on sandpaper, 7 sheets, each 22" x 28". Lent by the artist.

Personal References, 1979, pencil on paper, 3 sheets, each 30" x 40". Lent by the artist.

Religious Picture, 1977, soft ground etching and drypoint printed in gold, 16/25.
Collection, University Art Museum, Berkeley.

Selected one-person exhibitions (E) and Actions (A):
The Oakland Museum, CA, The Act of Drinking Beer with
Friends is the Highest Form of Art, as Allan Fish '70 (E,A);
Whitechapel Gallery, London '72 (A); Galeria Foksal,
Warsaw, Thinking Out Loud '75

(E, A, Catalogue published); The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, The Sound of Flight '77 (E, A, Catalogue published by the artist); Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, See What I'm Saying '78 (E); The Museum of Conceptual Art at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art '79 (E); Modern Art Gallery, Vienna, The Power of Suggestion '79 (E); Musee National d'art Moderne, Centre National d'art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, Paris '80 (A).

Selected group exhibitions:
De Saisset Art Gallery and
Museum, University of Santa
Clara, CA, Fish, Fox, Kos '71;
Walnut Creek Art Center, CA,
6x6x6 '71; San Francisco Museum
of Modern Art, Space/Time/Sound1970s: A Decade in the Bay Area
'79; Musee d'art Moderne de la
Ville de Paris '80; University
of California, Santa Cruz,
Music, Sound, Language, Theater:
John Cage, Tom Marioni, Robert
Barry, Joan Jonas '80 (traveling
exhibition, catalogue published).

Selected bibliography about Marioni:

"The Newer Art: Tom Marioni in conversation with Prudence Juris," Studio International (U.K.) vol. 183, no. 944 (May'72).

Vergine, L. (Ed.). Il Corpo Come Linguaggio: la body art e storie simili (Milan: Prearo '74).

White, Robin. Tom Marioni," View, vol. 1, no. 5 (Oct. '78).

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