

The San Francisco Art Institute Annual 1975–76

By Renny Pritikin
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In a cold warehouse on San Francisco's Bluxome Street, a dozen or so people waited for the performance to begin. The small audience and word-of-mouth publicity lent a conspiratorial tone; it was the fall of 1974 and anyone who had been active in the antiwar movement recognized the feeling of underground activity. This event was part of *South of the Slot*, a series of evening performances organized informally by artists and named after the nineteenth-century term for the area south of Market Street. Many recall this two-month-long series as galvanizing; it is often thought of as the first call in San Francisco for an alternative space, to provide a permanent home for new art forms like performance and installation. Less than a year later, in July 1975, a space named 80 Langton Street answered this call, opening with a video installation by Peter D'Agostino. Following on its heels in September '75, the much-anticipated San Francisco Art Institute Annual opened in a rented storefront at 2793 16th Street, off Folsom—now home to King's Refrigeration.

Back on Bluxome on that 1974 evening, Bill Morrison—who died in [May] 2013—performed a “song” accompanied by the *cha-chunk* of an old-fashioned adding machine strapped to his chest like an accordion, illuminated in the dark warehouse by a single lightbulb. It is an image I will always cherish for its sheer imagination and wit, and it is central to my understanding of how the arts can bring something new into the world and embody an anarchist spirit of resistance. Other artists in the series included Linda Montano, Paul De Marinis, Jim Pomeroy, Jim Melchert, Terry Fox, Tom Marioni, and Paul Kos. In a brochure published by the curators of *South of the Slot* was the following statement:

The work that was presented differed widely with each individual, but in general relied on real-time presentation for transferring information from artist to audience. The directness of this type of transference sets up a field of variables very different from traditional forms of art. Each artist dealt with these variables by finding a mode which best suited the ideas inherent in the design of the presented situation. The 22 presentations included such various modes as: video, performance and live performance, projections and photo-documentation, dance and music, tableau, and environmental situation.¹

The precise, dry nature of such rhetoric reflects a defensiveness born of a time when the local art community was highly skeptical about conceptual practice; the necessity of performing in an empty warehouse reflects the utter lack of support from extant museums and galleries.

The San Francisco Art Institute Annual, a much-ballyhooed event that had been staged by that institution in one form or another—annual, biennial, with schedule gaps and changes in format—since 1871, continued until 2006. Through most of the Annual’s history, a committee of local artists selected those who would be included. Nearing its centennial in 1974, most of the San Francisco museums hosted a component of the Annual, and the Annual’s organizers enlisted judges such as Richard Diebenkorn, Walter Hopps, Carl Andre, Maurice Tuchman, Brett Weston, and Nathan Oliveira. That year Andre refused to disqualify any artists from the pool of potential participants, a sign that a new generation of artists was questioning traditional artistic formats.

For more than one hundred years, participation in the Annual had been a major achievement for local artists, akin to being included in the SECA award show at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) today. As planning for the 1975–76 exhibition began, the reputation of the Annual was still high, yet in that era of rapid change, no cultural tradition was immune to radical reconsideration. The committee that year included the photographer Barney Bailey and the young conceptual artists Howard Fried, Terry Fox, Paul Kos, Steve Laub, Tom Marioni (who was the chairman), and Bonnie Sherk. (Note the overlap with the *South of the Slot* participants). Given this cast of iconoclasts, and Marioni’s penchant for using alternative spaces to house new art events, it was inevitable that the status quo would be shaken. Rather than housing the Annual in the Art Institute Gallery or another prestigious site, the committee chose to create a completely different format. They embraced the decentralization of the art world, moving away from the white-box spaces and the sway of professional curators into site-specific contexts that could match the raw, experimental nature of the works on view. Each week, one of fifty-two selected artists received the key to the chosen space on Monday morning, built an installation or prepared a performance that opened on Friday night, cleaned up, and handed the key over to the next participant. The rent for the space over one year cost the committee \$2000; each artist received a \$25 honorarium. Of the forty-two pieces documented in the accompanying catalog, there were roughly equal numbers of installations, performances, performances within installations, and film and video screenings. The program also included a week of seminars.

Tom Marioni, writing as the chair of the Annual’s artist subcommittee, offered the following:

The 1975–76 Art Institute Annual took place in a politically and visually neutral space: a rented storefront in the industrial part of San Francisco (16th and Folsom). The exhibition was conceived as a year-long show...“The Annual” was designed to run itself (more or less). It provided an ongoing, artist-curated situation. There was always something to do on Friday nights.²

Marioni’s idea of a neutral space is interesting because of the simultaneous reference to what was effectively another white box, a storefront, relocating the term from the academy to a neighborhood setting. The notion of a yearlong show evokes the committee’s interest in incorporating ideas about time into art and breaking out of predictable forms in exhibition practice as well as art making. The valorization of artist curation was consistent with San Francisco’s almost militant artist advocacy. The joking reference to Friday nights underlines Marioni’s and the community’s interest in fun and early forms of social practice.

The Annual’s roster included many who became well-known Bay Area figures of the era, such as Cherie Raciti, Richard Alpert, Al Wong, John Woodall, Paul De Marinis, and David Ireland. Others became known nationally in different roles: Jock Reynolds as the museum director at Yale; Kathan Brown as the owner of Crown Point Press; and Suzanne Lacy as a feminist educator and large-scale community-event organizer. Many more have disappeared into history. Only twenty percent were women; ten percent were people of color.

Marioni recalled in an interview in the *San Francisco Arts Quarterly* in May 2013:

Howard Fried was in charge of the Annual [in 1974] and he said that for the show we're just going to exhibit the money for the budget, which was \$4,000. So we had four one-thousand-dollar bills framed and hung in the gallery with a guard that stood there, and then at the end of the year that money was turned over to the next year. So I had \$8000.³

During a phone call with this writer in July 2013, Howard Fried described his action as a protest against the inadequate support the school was offering for new and difficult art forms. It was also an early attempt by an artist to make the mechanisms of the art world transparent for public inspection. Fried's concern with supporting new, time-based genres was characteristic of that generation's urge toward more experimental art making, which laid the foundations for many works created almost forty years later. One of the most acclaimed artist projects of the past decade in the Bay Area was Jon Rubin's independent art school, which operated between 2005 and 2006. As Rubin describes the project:

The Independent School of Art [ISA] is a nomadic, experimental art school...By existing without a site and locating nomadically, the school prioritizes social over physical architecture, and challenges students and teachers alike to imagine how their practice might intersect and respond to a larger set of physical situations and cultural possibilities. ISA...can be fluid and experimental, changing each semester to reflect the ambitions, personalities, and abilities of those in its community.⁴

Paul Kagawa's contribution to the Annual in March 1976 was *The Floating Seminar Temporary School of Art*. Kagawa's announcement for his weeklong project stated:

[The Floating Seminar Temporary School of Art] is a presentation of daily workshops and seminars for artists...[and] will examine both practical and theoretical subjects that are not normally included in art school curricula. All events are open to the public and free of charge.⁵

The remarkable congruence of these two mission statements, given the gap in time, speaks to an often-unacknowledged thread that runs through much Bay Area art history: the exploration of art in a context of political power and control. Kagawa's class schedule included lessons on media manipulation, art and local politics, and video, and on Friday night everyone was invited to a closing party, consistent with the format of the Annual.

For his 1975–76 Annual contribution, Jock Reynolds—then a much-admired sculptor, long before his career as a curator and museum director had begun—invited the audience into a darkened space with a grid of twelve buckets hung near the ceiling over a corresponding set on the floor. Each of the elevated buckets had a hole punched into it that slowly dripped water into the lower one. A candle floated on the surface of each upper bucket, creating shifting light reflections on the ceiling as it slowly sank. The sound of the drips, at first metallic, became gentler as the lower bucket filled; the piece ended when all the water had been transferred. Reynolds's simple work epitomized several trends: non-object-based art; the use of modest, found materials; the concern with temporality, process, and meditateness; and the incorporation of sound into sculpture. The cross-pollination of sculpture and sound, inspired in part by John

Cage, can also be seen in the inclusion of Paul De Marinis in the Annual. Originally a composer, De Marinis was one of the first artists in the country to use computers in sound art. His contribution to the Annual was *Pygmy Gamelan* (1976), featuring small digital gizmos placed around the storefront, each of which made gamelan-like sounds. As De Marinis stated, they were “complete circuits, both self-performing and responsive to changes in the electrical field in its immediate vicinity.”⁶

Jory Cory—a member of the genre-defying dance/performance group Motion—captured the cross-disciplinary, process-oriented ethos of the moment when she said in the catalog, “Improvising is an expedition, a journey into who and what is there, then, through each performer’s stories, accidents, intentions, vision, and through our collective history (herstory).” Contrasting this approach, Cherie Raciti showed straightforward photo documentation of her long-term guerilla project in which she rendered huge monochromatic rectangles of paint onto the concrete foundations of Yerba Buena, which was in ruins during the years prior to the construction of the Moscone convention center. While her use of the Annual’s storefront was conservative, Raciti’s larger body of work epitomized the expansive use of the urban landscape by artists exploring the abject in an inherently politicized way.

The prestige of the Annual declined in the decades following 1976 as curatorial roles evolved and expanded and as tensions arose between the Annual’s artist committee and gallery directors and curators, who began to feel their prerogatives were being violated. It was finally cancelled early in this century. But the 1975–76 Annual epitomized that era’s incipient momentum of conceptual and non-objective practices, and captured the imagination and ambition of Bay Area artists, years before such work emerged to general public attention. It produced the first tremors that led to a tsunami of experimental work that would wash over the local art world throughout the ensuing forty years.

1. Philip Linhares, “South of the Slot,” *Artweek* 6 (January 11, 1975): 6–7.
2. Tom Marioni, “Introduction,” *The Annual* (San Francisco: San Francisco Art Institute, 1977), unpaginated.
3. Tom Marioni, “MOCA 1970–1984,” *San Francisco Arts Quarterly*, no. 13 (July 2013): 44–57.
4. Jon Rubin, mission statement for Independent School of Art, <http://www.independentschoolofart.org/about/missionStatement>, accessed September 7, 2013.
5. Paul Kagawa, “The Floating Seminar Temporary School of Art,” *The Annual* (San Francisco: San Francisco Art Institute, 1977), unpaginated.
6. Paul DeMarinis, “Pygmy Gamelan,” *The Annual* (San Francisco: San Francisco Art Institute, 1977), unpaginated.