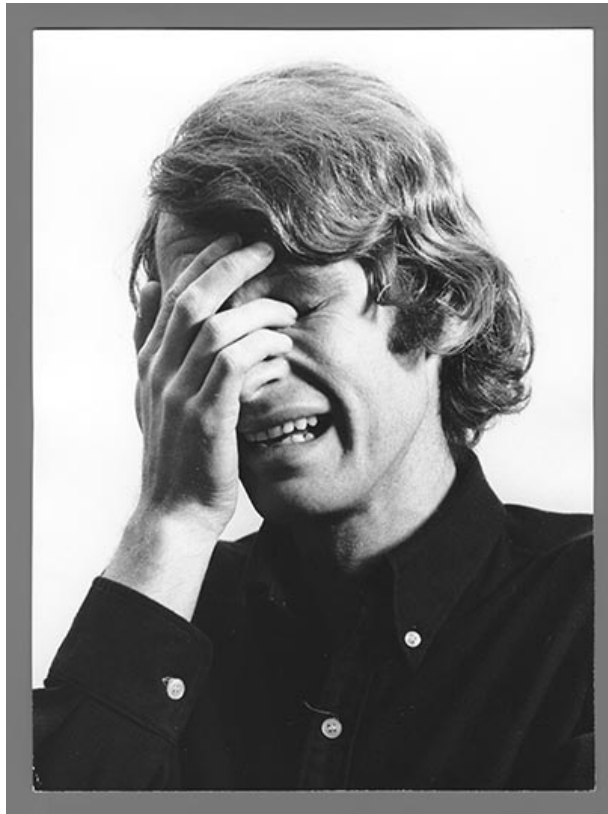


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State of Mind: New California Art Circa 1970

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Smart Museum of Art, Chicago

Review by Una Dimitrijevic of [Brave New Art World](#)

Organised as part of the landmark Pacific Standard Time initiative by the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAM/PFA), and the Orange County Museum of Art, 'State of Mind: New California Art Circa 1970' is the first in-depth survey of conceptual art from California. Unlike their counterparts on the East coast, these Californian artists (whose collective output is represented here through more than 150 works by 60 artists and collectives) developed their ideas

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far from the highly monetised art-world and did not hesitate to confront questions about art-making and the role of artists with a good dose of humour.

Their focus was on ideas and the artistic process, with the end-product itself seen as a secondary affair, a documentary relic. This was coupled with a desire to circumvent the traditional system of displaying and selling art. As such, much of the art produced by the California conceptualists consisted of happenings, public interventions and performances which are by their very nature ephemeral and irreproducible. All that can be represented in a gallery space is documentation of their occurrence: mainly video and photography, as well as the occasional scathing news article such as 'Conceptual Art – just what is it?' from a 1971 edition of the *Chronicle*.

The question posed above is certainly justified, especially when dealing with artistic actions which include fooling middle-class people into thinking that they owe money to large corporations and then sending excrement in the post to these same corporations (part of Terri Keyser, Marc Keyser and David Shire's 'Sam's Café'). Some work referenced in *State of Mind* certainly does seem to have been propelled to fame by sheer audacity and a desire to shock. There's the video of Chris Burden willingly getting shot in the arm in 'Shoot'; the images of Suzanne Lacy floating in a pool covered with animal innards ('Anatomy Lessons'); and the expected dose of nudity in performance acts like Nancy Buchanan's 'Hair Transplant' in which she replaces a man's body hair with the red curls she takes from her own head.

These works are nevertheless balanced out with subtler pieces, and contextualised into thematic groups which are a great help in navigating the large scope of this show: Politics, the Environment and Mapping; Domestic Space and Feminism; the Body and Art/Life; Psychological/Perceptual Space; Language and Word Play. Joe Hawley, Mel Henderson and Alfred Young's political performance piece, in which they wrote 'OIL' in nontoxic dye on San Francisco Bay to highlight the environmental dangers of oil tankers, still feels pertinent today. Videos in the Body and Art/Life section, such as Bruce Nauman's 'Thighing' and Terry Fox's 'Tonguings' are mesmerising and almost repulsive explorations of a particular body part, confronting the viewer with an unexpected proximity to the artist.

Three works which were able to be reproduced in a gallery setting are installation pieces by Paul Kos, Barbara T. Smith and Bruce Nauman. Smith's 'Field Piece' transports us back to the 1970s: its Ethafoam base and fibreglass rods light up as the visitor navigates through them, shoes discarded but fully clothed – unlike the original participants whose nakedness (true to hippy form) is attested in the accompanying photographs. The other two installation pieces have better withstood the test of time. Paul Kos' 'Untitled (Sound of ice melting)' challenges us with the impossible task of hearing the amplified sound of two 25 pound blocks of ice melting. Nauman's 'Yellow Room (Triangular)' is especially intriguing, enticing us into a solitary experience. The small, angular space, lit by cold neon yellow lights, make us feel foreign to our surroundings, both lost and enclosed, bemused actors in

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our own Truman Show.

Whilst their output varied widely in both form and quality, what united these idea-based, process-oriented artists was a desire to challenge conventional definitions of art and notions about the role of the artist. Much of their work may seem focused on self-understanding to the point of egocentricity, but a number of the artists represented here were also clearly happy to poke a little fun at themselves and at the new artistic concepts emerging around them. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in John Baldessari's piece 'I Am Making Art', in which the artist takes literally Bruce Nauman's assertion that anything an artist does within his studio is art, and films himself repeating the title phrase over and over again. The right State of Mind to approach this show is surely an open one, coupled with a good measure of whimsy.