“Do you feel that?” Constance Lewallen, a curator at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, said to a group of journalists and students. The crowd, gathered just inside the museum entrance, stopped, looking perplexed.

“It’s a column of air,” she explained, the work of the artist Michael Asher. The group could not see it, but they could feel the air blowing straight down. “It’s very hard to recreate,” Ms. Lewallen said.

The column of air, like the nearby neon signs, cardboard cutouts and a block of ice flanked by microphones, is one of many surprising displays that greet visitors to “State of Mind,” an exhibition at the Berkeley Art Museum on California’s influential ‘70s conceptual art movement.

“So much of what we’re seeing in art finds its roots in that period — collectives, an emphasis on process and social interaction,” Ms. Lewallen said. “All these things are current today.”

Curated by Bampfa and the Orange County Museum of Art, the show is one of a handful of exhibits from Pacific Standard Time, the huge Los Angeles-based exhibit about California art, that has made its way to the Bay Area. More than 60 collectives and artists are featured, including Bruce Nauman, William Wegman and Ed Ruscha. It runs through June 17.

“State of Mind” was not intended to be a Bay Area-centric show, but almost half of the artists featured are local. Conceptual art — known more recently as “social practice” or “relational art” — has been one of the most salient art forms in the always-experimental Bay Area.

Conceptual art reached its heyday in the ‘70s and is defined by its emphasis on ideas, not objects. Much of the performance-heavy work was meant to exist in the moment and often there was nothing to sell or touch. As such, the art presents unique curatorial challenges: much of “State of Mind” consists of documentation of live happenings.

“Once we got rid of the kind of demands that an artist behave and make work that shows a very special expertise, like painting or sculpture, then the whole thing is opened up and art can be information. It can be about anything,” said Michael Corris, an art professor at Southern Methodist University who is the author of “Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth and Practice.”

The movement was happening around the world, but the Bay Area was a unique incubator, where artists drew inspiration from the protest and free speech movements.

“There was a lot of experimenting going on,” said Bonnie Sherk, an artist who has been working out of the Bay Area for 40 years. “I think it was unique to being in this place, and maybe because there was such a lack of a strong critical milieu.”

“I spent time in New York during the early days of SoHo,” she added, “and the streets were like rat runs — big, dark buildings and very focused niches. It was a more controlled and controlling environment.”

Rats seem to be a motif for Ms. Sherk: she kept one next to her in a cage during an art performance at the San Francisco Zoo in 1971, where she ate lunch in an animal enclosure. Her neighboring prisoner was a tiger. A photograph of the scene appears in “State of Mind.”

Much of the art of this period was born out of frustration with traditional art styles and sites. When Lynn Hershman, artist and filmmaker, was rejected from a group art show on the grounds that her sound-infused sculpture was not art, she decided to look outside normal galleries. She rented a room in the Dante Hotel in North Beach, placed two wax figures in the bed and filled it with objects that belonged to fictional inhabitants. The installation ran from 1973 to 1974, and visitors simply had to request a key from the front desk.
Today, one might call Ms. Hershman’s display a pop-up.

In another example of a modern-day influence, Ms. Lewallen pointed out a 1969 project that foreshadowed the flash mob. The “Yellow Cab Event,” orchestrated by a group of artists, asked participants to hail taxis all over San Francisco at the same time and direct them to the intersection of Market and Castro, causing a massive traffic jam.

The paradox of containing such transgressive work in museums is not lost on scholars or artists. “Never in my wildest dreams when I started out did I think that conceptual art would get close to the academy,” Mr. Corris said.

The goal for many artists, Ms. Sherk in particular, was to take art out of contained spaces. She transformed streets and freeway offramps with palm trees, turf and animals, predicting the current craze for parklets and urban agriculture.

In 1971, she did a series of performances in which she sat in a chair around San Francisco for hourlong intervals.

“It was the original Occupy,” Ms. Sherk said.