

William Wegman, Family Combination, 1972, black-and-white photograph.

MAUD LAVIN

I had these terrible fits of rage and depression all the time. It just got worse and worse and worse. Finally my parents had me committed. They tried all kinds of therapy. Finally they settled on shock. The doctors brought me into this room in a straight jacket because I still had this terrible, terrible temper. I was just the meanest cuss you could imagine and when they put this cold, metal electrode, or whatever it was, to my chest. I started to giggle and then when they shocked me, it froze on my face into this smile and even though I'm still incredibly depressed — everyone thinks I'm happy. I don't know what I'm going to do (*Rage and Depression*).

Rage and Depression was included among William Wegman's video work shown in The Museum of Modern Art video show, August 22–September 30,

NOTES ON WILLIAM WEGMAN

1974. Wegman also produces drawings, photographs, audiotapes and written pieces. Wegman makes up his video pieces in front of the camera. Avoiding eye contact with the viewer, he concentrates on his image on the monitor. Caught up in every second of his work he uses this direct feedback to entertain himself as well as the viewer and to create perfectly timed situations.

You have your best conversations by yourself.

I hold back a certain kind of real feeling. It doesn't have a commitment that seriousness has, but it's serious nevertheless. I say them seriously and I don't laugh when I do them. It's rather mesmerizing to do a tape watching yourself.

The tone of *Rage and Depression* is typical. Wegman's usual deadpan expression here becomes a frozen smile but the effect is the same: a cemented, bland expression describes the character (a student, a child, a dog, a victim of circumstances), as lacking in free will. A mild approach encourages trust and suspended disbelief in the viewer.

Wegman's mild, conversational and ordinary tone seduces the viewer into listening to him. He speaks in a nonliterary impersonal style. He stereotypes himself: a salesman, an instructor, a didactic unprestigious individual who usually enters the viewer's life in a boring, conventional way. Hence the response is automatic; listening with a degree of attention slightly above polite boredom. In doing this the viewer himself is stereotyped: the TV viewer, the student, someone receiving directions. Suddenly the ridiculousness of his instructor's references dawns on the viewer and hits home to the most ordinary aspects of life. After the doubletake, Wegman's light, all-inclusive humor keeps the viewer absorbed in his pieces. His irony is without alienation. His work consumes his audience, and they enjoy it.

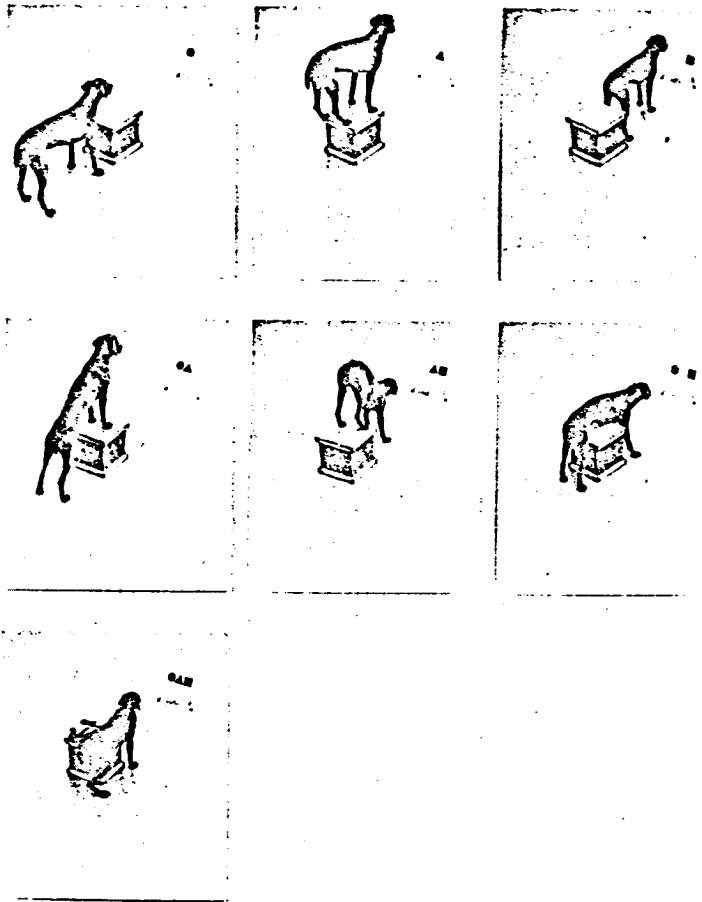
Wegman's subjects are chosen from his domestic environment. The common subject matter makes his work broadly accessible.

I avoid hot issues like current events. Tend to use dead materials. Like in some tapes I talked about doing laundry and sometimes I used Chinese things or talk about emperors or doctors. Pretty much common material that isn't too questionable. Used car salesman . . . I have to have something that I can play against; that's pretty common and set. If I dealt with something too controversial there wouldn't be something to subvert because you'd have to figure out my position.

I think that the things I write about or deal with on tape are what people generally think about whether they like to admit it or not. Sometimes I've drawn on autobiographical material, maybe situations that I've felt trapped by, and turned them into something else, but in a very superficial way, not in an intense psychological way. When you find yourself thinking and worrying about certain things they become ridiculous. In general, I might distort or change or reorient certain conventional attitudes but I'm aware that I'm playing with them, and I'm more interested in what I do with them formally.

Wegman's domestic environment includes education; he has spent a great part of his life either teaching or studying. His subject matter and treatment is often didactic. For example, a TV educator droning on in an uninflected voice. He ridicules the procedure and the style. In his tapes which use education as a subject, learning appears as a boring and absurd confrontation with elusive information. They are hilarious in the same way as Stan Lawder's play on 1950s sex education films. In one videotape, Man Ray, Wegman's talented dog, gets a spelling lesson. He gets some words right, some wrong. Wegman patiently explains idiosyncrasies of spelling such as in going to the beach not Beech Nut gum to a bewildered Man Ray.

The relationship between Wegman and Man Ray parodies that between Wegman and the viewer. Man Ray assumes the viewer's role as he becomes the helpless victim of an endless pattern beyond his control. In



Heads or Tails, Wegman flips a coin and turns Man Ray's head or tail to the camera according to the outcome of the flip. For the viewer there is the usual lapse between accepting the situation and realizing what's really occurring. The coin is flipped very casually and Wegman's body is mostly out of the frame so that he appears as an outside force systematically placing Man Ray's head or tail to the camera. With a bewildered expression on his face, Man Ray stands rigid allowing himself to be treated as an object.

Wegman exploits the video medium for a variety of effects. In a shot of a dark studio, all that is visible is a panning, randomly traveling track of light. The mystery of what's occurring becomes more intriguing until the lights go up to reveal Man Ray running out of the frame holding a flashlight in his mouth. Elements in this tape common to other Wegman tapes are time and expectancy. Wegman also confronts a video method that has interested dancers in the medium. The whole body's (in this case, Man Ray's) movement is defined by the movement of one body part. The light attached to one

part of the body leaves a track on the dark screen. The tracking light can be choreographed.

Wegman uses close-ups on parts of the body as visual puns to deceive the eye and misconstrue expectations. Richard Cork has described one instance "When Wegman's naked torso minces towards the screen, dressed in a drag-like loin cloth, the camera moves slowly up to reveal a remarkably ample pair of breasts. And the pay-off is hilarious as you realize that these superb appendages are nothing more than his elbows, bunched up so cleverly that even the nipples are beguilingly simulated" (*Studio International*, March, 1972). Using two expressions distorted by closeness to the camera, with only his mouth visible, Wegman simulates a conversation between two people. Wegman sometimes incorporates well-timed pauses in his narration. He manipulates the buzz quality of the soundless tape building "louder" and "quieter" silences. He uses off-screen sound to build expectancy and to animate objects.

In his videotapes Wegman uses visual elements in a seemingly natural, straightforward fashion, and linear time sequence to gain acceptance of his preposterous

narratives before throwing in a surprise ending.

In *Born with No Mouth*, Wegman accentuates his mouth by surrounding it with shaving cream. He is close to the camera. He is also close to the wall so that his T-shirt blends in with the background and the white shaving cream is even more noticeable.

I was born with no mouth at all — just a smooth kind of plane across my face. I did have a well developed nose when I was born, but actually I did have a mouth, it was more a kind of slit. It was about 1/8" wide and hardly 1/16" high and my parents just figured that gradually it would develop — that it would grow into a real mouth — but by the time I was six they could see it wasn't going to happen and they were afraid to send me to school with a mouth like that — so when my grandfather died — when I was six, they transplanted his mouth onto mine — took out my mouth — and I think they gave it to the University of Massachusetts — so I've been shaving ever since I was six (*Born with No Mouth*).

Some of the simpler tapes are pure timing or slapstick. Tension rises as Man Ray's close-up face rests on the bottom of the frame, slowly rises, his neck stretches and stretches — until his nose is at the top of the frame, SNAP he catches a biscuit and it's over. Some of his pieces are quite short, 60 seconds: a still frame shows a studio space containing two photographic tripod lights. Voice from offstage: "Hey, Mom. I think Randy is going to be sick." Quickly, one light swivels toward the other one which falls off the stool.

In his photographic pieces, Wegman establishes a sense of scale-orientation and then disturbs it, bringing in illusions of time as well. One of Wegman's photographic sequences is two photographs of Man Ray, in exactly the same position lapping up milk. The difference between the two is that in one the floor planks run horizontally, in the other vertically. The sense of disorientation hits before the difference is apparent. Formerly, Wegman would use a linear time sequence to build a sense of expectancy in his photographic sequences. Now his groups of photographs are more self-contained; they build an illusionary world. They tend to balance one another. Often they deal with

perceptual illusions. *Furniture Arrangement* is a cluster of three rearrangements of the same chair, a rug, and a painting. At the end of the cluster each object has assumed each position; stretched out on the floor, hung on the wall, and placed sitting against the floor and the wall. Each arrangement is portrayed as normal and ordinary thereby discrediting any particular one as the norm. A similar vein is mined in *Family Combinations*. Three frontal facial photographs of himself, his father, and his mother are shown with three more photographs of his mother's and father's faces superimposed, mother and son superimposed, and father and son superimposed. The portraits are taken close-up which broadens the faces slightly and they become even more identical. The superimpositions are almost exactly congruent. The result is to form a composite, ageless, and sexless family face.

When Wegman makes his video and photographic pieces, the properties of the medium are given first consideration. However the subject matter itself is incidental and often chosen by chance. But for quick transference of his everyday input to a medium, Wegman prefers to use drawings. In some drawings, Wegman uses contemporary art issues for subject matter. Kosuth's dictionary definitions and the language artists' encyclopedic tone are familiar. Wegman uses dictionary contents to subvert our sense of reality. In a drawing like *Thoth with tholes* which portrays two archaic images in a seemingly logical pose, Wegman takes two dictionary illustrations from opposite pages and combines them. (Thoth: "Egyptian Religion. The god of wisdom, learning, and magic, the inventor of numbers and letters, and scribe of all the gods . . ." Thole: "a pin inserted into a gunwhale to provide a fulcrum for an oar," *Random House Dictionary*.)

The unassuming drawing style and realistic pose of the Thoth holding the thole give the drawing a mundane acceptability. Upon further examination or discovery of his working method, the image becomes ridiculous, especially since the viewer can't know what the dead words like Thoth mean without using the dictionary. Moreover, the juxtaposition of such lispish words as Thoth and thole creates a sense of disbelief that such

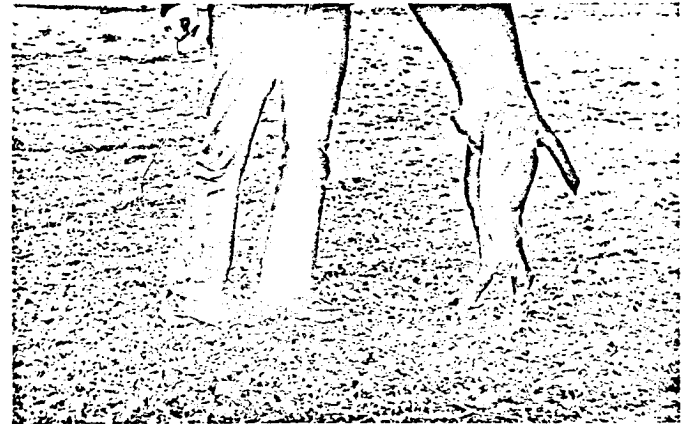
words can even exist. And this work came about not with a stark, disembodied, purely conceptual confrontation with language but by Wegman's putting his own personality into the work. He simultaneously incorporates fantasy, humor, nostalgia, wryness which combine to drive the idea home not through one's eyes which see a childlike drawing style, but through logical discrepancies. The power of all Wegman's work is that it can simply and clearly bring up these art-referential issues without lecturing the viewer, which might be the case with a more analytical approach.

As a graduate student at the University of Illinois, Wegman made Minimal sculpture and afterwards was included in the "Soft Objects" show at the New Jersey State Museum in 1969. In 1970 when he moved to California, he showed floor works which responded to their environment and each other and seemed to be a direct progression from his work as a Minimal sculptor.

. . . I started to get into a less homogeneous sort of material; material that had information associated with it and had a content. Like nails rather than steel or doors rather than wood. It would just give me one more element to arrange or rearrange or reorder.

Large squares made of linoleum modules each containing a common household object would complement one another by being a positive/negative of the same piece. Corresponding to one linoleum square's module face up on which was placed the top half of a cupcake was another square's module face down on which was placed the bottom half. These sculptures dealt with series, relationships between objects, references to an ideal total object which was nonexistent (after all, who can see both sides of the floor at once?) and expectancy. Furthering these concerns, Wegman abandoned the object and turned to photography, a medium that allowed quick reading of sequences and a variety of techniques for disturbing them and affecting the predictability of the series.

Wegman showed with a generation of L.A. artists that followed that of Ed Ruscha. Similarities in the two are strong although any influence by Ruscha is indirect. Both use word play and its connotations in their work as



William Wegman, *Half and Halls*, 1973.

opposed to language artists' careful use of language as a definitive form. Both incorporate everyday subjects. Ruscha's earthy stains touch upon the same level of reality as Wegman's deadpan talk of laundry. Ruscha is not as funny as Wegman, but is his predecessor in work with a self-effacing, throw-away, wry quality that deliberately gives the impression of not taking itself too seriously.

Also in California Wegman produced photographs documenting the "use of his body in literalistic enactment of a verbal metaphor" (Willoughby Sharp, *Avalanche*, Fall, 1970). *Untied On Tied Off* is the caption of a photograph of two feet, one with a shoe on untied and the other with a shoe off tied to his leg. A childhood problem. The information that one is supposed to get appears elusive and tongue-twisty. *Tongue Tied*, 1971, shows a close-up of Wegman's face, tongue out and tied with a string. The most striking of these photographs is *Eleven Toothpick Expressions*, 1970, 11 photographs of Bill Wegman's mouth with toothpicks sticking into his gums. For a sense of completion, Wegman set the toothpicks on fire. Wegman included himself in his works simply as an extension of using domestic subject material. The effect of his using his own body is strong and is repeated later in his videotapes. Wegman takes superficial reality or fantasy or an edited version of reality and gives it importance out of proportion to the attention it normally receives. He creates a new mundane world. His physical presence of which distortions of his body are an extreme gives the empathizing viewer the sense of experiencing this bent reality. The empathy raised by the photographs is often physical because they deal with physical illusions.

I'm not sure whether as a maturing artist, William Wegman's switch from eclecticism to the development of an individual style has been typical or atypical. In any event, simultaneous with his absorption of contemporary movements, he has been shown as representative of them. Because of Wegman's early burst of experiments in art and, as a teacher, his need to identify with corresponding movements, critics have held back on serious examination of his work, while praising its appeal. They seem to be waiting for a strong identification with one group, better yet one medium, and perhaps personalized rhetoric to support a hard and fast posture. In fact Wegman has not identified himself with any particular contemporary movements. He has stayed open and in doing so has put more of his personality in his work. He takes the Duchampian attitude that when he has exhausted the possibilities of one medium he will move on to another.

Evident in all his work is that Wegman is not afraid to humanize his art. He incorporates the perceptual concerns of Conceptual art and the spatial and personal concerns of body art with his own sense of humor. The result is a powerful and fresh interpretation of everyday reality. Wegman is such a master of comedy, timing, media, and design that the viewer is seduced into assimilating his work. His art has the appeal of Pop — but a friendly, subtle, self-effacing Pop that presents the ordinary and delights the viewer when it turns up as preposterous reality. ■



UNTIED ON TIED OFF

William Wegman, *Untied On Tied Off*, 1972.



William Wegman, *Elbows*, 1971, videotape.