

William Wegman
MATRIX 9

Wadsworth Atheneum
July August 1975

Videotape: William Wegman giving
Man Ray a spelling lesson,
1972



This presentation of work by William Wegman in MATRIX marks the first time the Atheneum has shown videotapes as a gallery installation. During the past decade many artists have been experimenting with video: some exploring the technical possibilities; others translating issues of contemporary aesthetics into a fresh medium; still others, like Wegman, using video in its traditional role as a vehicle for direct communication. A product of mid-century technology, video is lacking in any specific art historical precedents. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that some of the most original work surfacing today is to be found in this new field. Evidence of the burgeoning use of videotapes as an artistic medium will be apparent to Atheneum visitors when Video Art, a major exhibition including the work of over seventy-five artists, opens in the museum's Austin Gallery this September.

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William Wegman is above all else a keen observer of the human condition. Implicitly acknowledging that all we can possibly know about either art or the world around us begins and ends with our own perceptions, Wegman sets himself in the center of his art. Sometimes he includes his dog, Man Ray, a Weimaraner of exceptional abilities.

Wegman is interested in unlikely juxtapositions and in human expectations of cause and effect and similarities and differences. Although he explores these same issues in both photography and video, the stylistic stance he takes in each of these mediums usually differs significantly.

In his videotapes, Wegman's approach is deceptively casual. He chooses to come before the camera and yet

consistently and consciously avoids eye contact with the viewer. His subject matter invariably includes the commonplace. While he is boring us with his deadpan expression and the drone of his voice, he deftly manipulates everyday objects and ordinary situations in such a way as to challenge directly our basic assumptions of reality. It is Wegman's intention that the viewer take this assault personally.

While his videotapes are informal and, in fact, often improvised, his photographs are rather elaborate constructions in which the artist pays considerable attention to detail. Each piece is given a title and often the title is an important part of the work. The titles are Wegman's way of encouraging us to respond to the preposterous or unlikely aspects of a given situation. Although using the same familiar subject matter he uses in his video work, his photographs are meticulously arranged set pieces which leave nothing to chance.

William Wegman was born in Holyoke, Massachusetts in 1943. He graduated from the Massachusetts College of Art and received a Master's Degree in painting from the University of Wisconsin before moving to Los Angeles where he lived for four years. Currently Wegman lives in New York City and is represented by the Sonnabend Gallery. Wegman produces drawings, audio-tapes and written pieces as well as photographs and videotapes.

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Works in MATRIX:

Videotape 1972, black & white, twenty minutes, sound.

HALF ASLEEP/HALF AWAKE 1973, two photographs, 13 3/4" x 11".

HELLO 1973, photograph, 11" x 14".

INSIDE/OUTSIDE #2 1973, three photographs, 12" x 11".

CROQUET 1972, two photographs, 14" x 11".

DOG/FISH BUBBLES 1972, photograph (Edition of 10), 11 1/2" x 10 1/2".

DOING THE DISHES 1972, photograph, 14" x 11".

CROSSED FINGERS 1972, photograph, 14" x 11".

THREE MISTAKES 1971-1972, photograph, 14" x 11".

...Wegman's humor is not a matter of a kind of non-committal cynicism. What Wegman presents is essentially a different way of thinking about things ("things" in its vaguest sense), and while his different way is generally ridiculous, it is nevertheless a genuinely different way and raises questions about the "everyday" mental constructions we place on things and events. In questioning these "everyday" constructions, there is no implicit rejection of them; but his questioning does show these "everyday" constructions to be a matter of convention, not bad or wrong convention, but simply convention. That the alternatives to conventional constructions which Wegman presents are both actual and ridiculous gives rise to their humor...Generally Wegman's art explores the difference between the fact of a situation and the way we read the facts or what we infer from them.

Bruce Boice, Artforum, January '73

...A mild approach encourages trust and suspended disbelief in the viewer...Suddenly the ridiculousness of his references dawns on the viewer and hits home to the most ordinary aspects of life...His irony is without alienation. His work consumes his audience, and they enjoy it...

Maud Lavin, Artforum, March '75

Selected one-man exhibitions:
Pomona College Art Gallery,
'71 (first); Galerie Sonna-
bend, Paris '71, '73; Sonna-
bend Gallery, NYC '72, '74;
Konrad Fischer Gallery,
Dusseldorf '72, '75; Los
Angeles County Museum '73;
Mayor Gallery, London '75.

Selected bibliography by Wegman:
"Shocked and Outraged,"
Avalanche, Winter '71, pp. 58-
60.
"Man Ray do you want to..."
an interview with Wegman by
Liza Bear, Winter-Spring '73,
no. 7, pp. 40-50.

Selected group exhibitions:
Museum of Contemporary Art,
Chicago Art by Telephone '69;
Kunsthalle, Bern When Attitude
Becomes Form '69; Documenta V
Kassel '72; Hayward Gallery,
London Eleven Los Angeles
Artists '72; Whitney Museum
of American Art, NYC Annual
'73; Paula Cooper Gallery,
NYC '74; Institute of Con-
temporary Art, Philadelphia
Video Art '75 (coming to the
Atheneum September '75).

Selected bibliography about
Wegman:
Winer, Helene. "How Los
Angeles Looks Today," Studio
International, vol. 182, no.
937 (October '71), pp. 127-131.

Boice, Bruce. Artforum,
vol. XI, no. 5 (January '73),
pp. 88-89.

Winer, Helene. "Scenarios,
documents, images," Art in
America, vol. 61, (May '73),
pp. 72-73.

Livingston, Jane. William
Wegman, Los Angeles County
Museum of Art, 1973.

Lippard, Lucy. The dema-
terialization of the art
object from 1966 to 1972...
Praeger Publishers (New York),
p. 218, '73.

Lavin, Maud. "Notes on
William Wegman," Artforum, vol.
13, no. 7 (March '75), pp. 44-47.