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 curse 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 Modem Art video show, August 22-September 30, 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.

Notes on William Wegman

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 boredom. In doing this the viewer himself is seduced into listening to him. He speaks in a conversational, 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. I 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 fall on my own position. I think that the things I write about or deal with on tape are what people generally think about whether they like 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 beach as 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 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 loincloth, the camera moves slowly up to reveal a remarkably ample pair of breasts. 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 arises 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 the subject in a seemingly logical pose, Wegman takes two or more photographs of his subject, one of which is placed the bottom half. These sculptures correspond 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, and expectancy. Furthering these concepts, Wegman abandoned the painting 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.

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 transferal of his everyday input to a medium, Wegman prefers to use drawings. In some drawings, Wegman uses contemporary art issues for subject matter. Kusuth's dictionary illustrations from opposite pages and composites to a medium, Wegman uses dictionary contents to subvert our sense of reality. In a drawing like Thoth with hole, which portrays two archaic images in a seemingly logical pose, Wegman takes two dictionary illustrations from opposite pages and composites 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 hole 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 loping 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 combines to drive the idea home not through one's eyes but by Wegman's putting his own personality into the work. He simultaneously incorporates fantasy, humor, nostalgia, wryness which combines 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.
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 on 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 hold 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.

The artist's quotations are either from an interview with the author, September 13, 1974, Avalanche, May, 1973, or marquee magazine, August, 1974.