

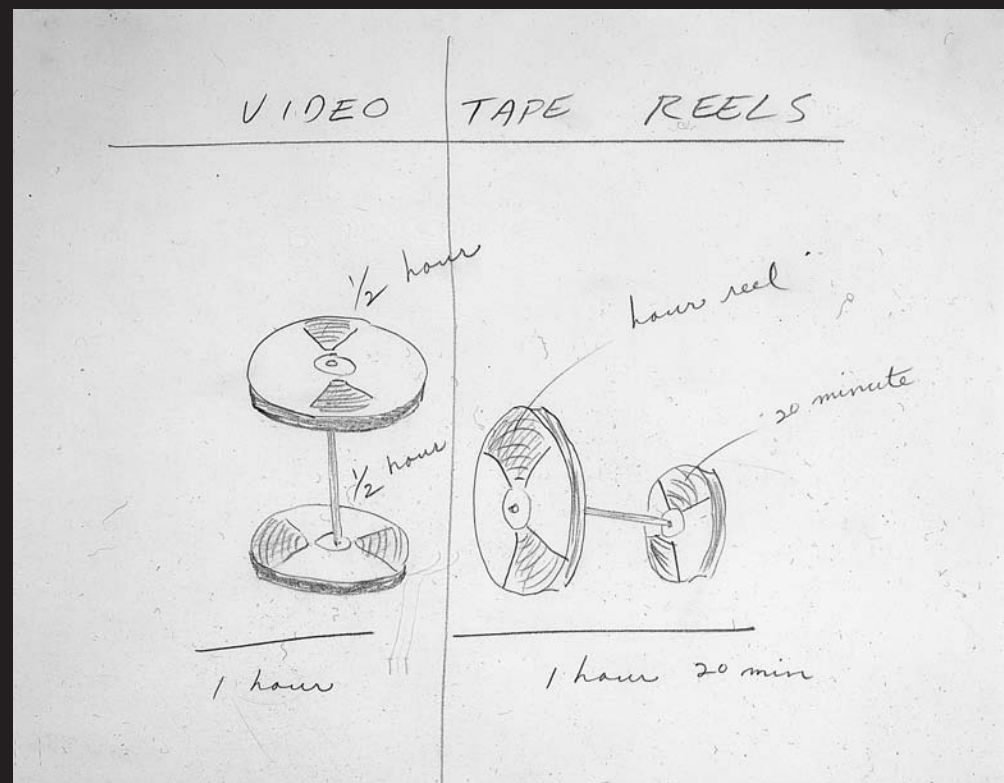
William Wegman Early Works



William Wegman, *Untitled (Bill with chair)*, 1973
Gouache on silver gelatin print
13 1/4 x 10 1/2 in.



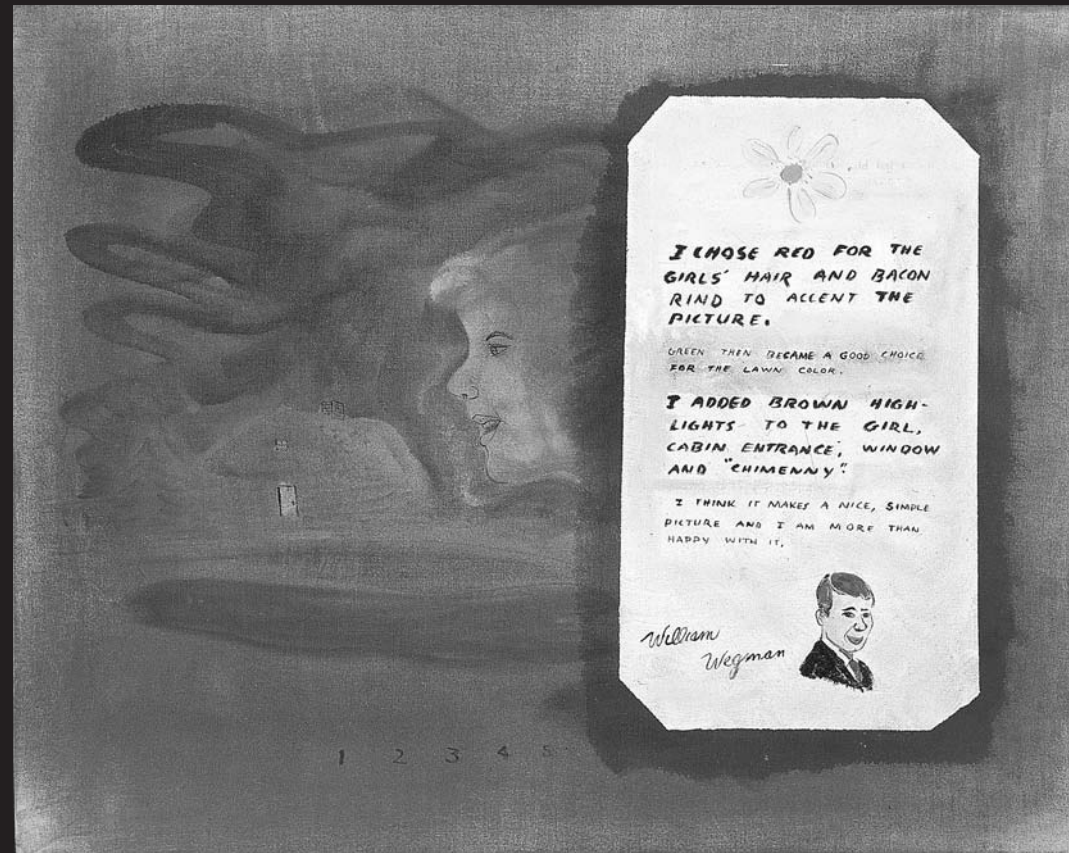
William Wegman, *Untitled*, 1973
Silver gelatin print
14 x 11 in.



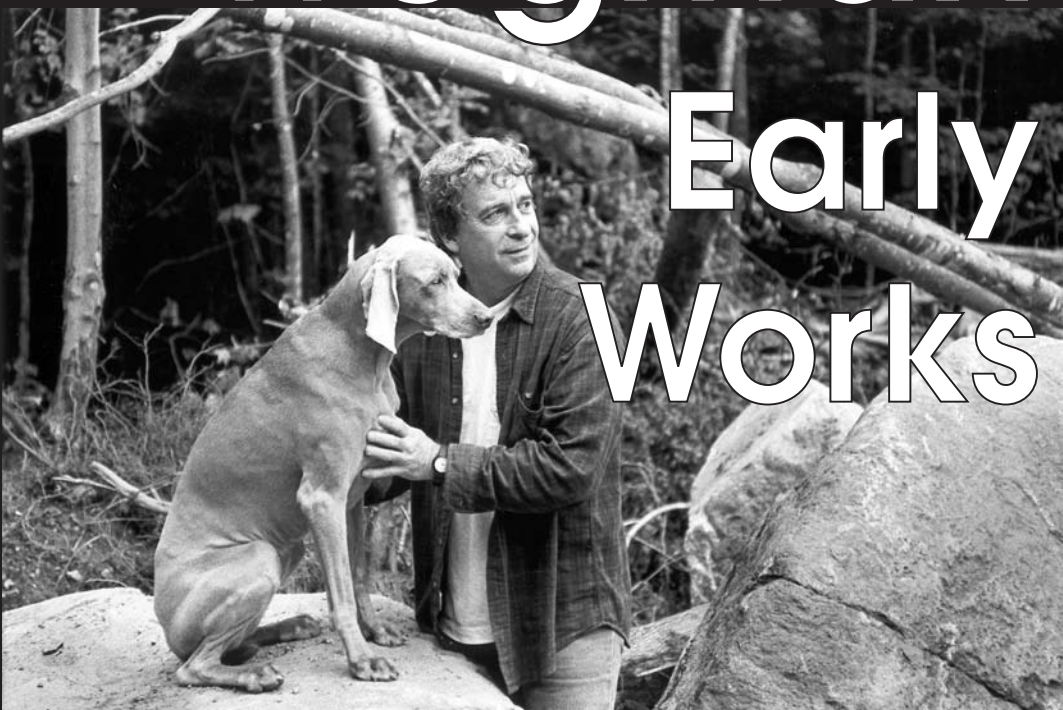
William Wegman, *Video Tape Reels*, 1973
Pencil on paper
8 1/2 x 11 in.



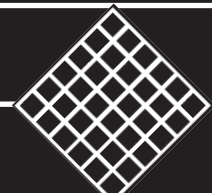
William Wegman, *Drying*, 1975
Watercolor on paper
8 1/2 x 11 in.



William Wegman, *Hope*, 1985
Oil on canvas
20 1/4 x 25 1/4 in.



William Wegman, *Madeleine de Sinety*, 1999



Haggerty Museum of Art
Marquette University

William Wegman: Early Works

Curtis L. Carter

Always in search of new directions for his art, William Wegman once floated styrofoam commas down the Milwaukee River.¹ This event, which became the subject of a photograph, took place during a three-year teaching stint at various Wisconsin colleges just after he graduated from the University of Illinois at Champaign in 1967. Like the floating commas set free in the stream, Wegman’s creative intuitions freely attached themselves to uncharted projects that would soon establish his approach to the evolving concepts and art practices of the late twentieth century. Blessed with a wide range of conceptually driven skills, Wegman works in all visual media including drawing, painting, photography, and video.

Like Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray before him, Wegman explores in his art the untapped features of both conventional and unconventional materials. Like Ray Johnson,² a fellow conceptual artist with an equally fertile imagination, Wegman functioned in an era when anything-found objects, photography, words, video, and mixed media as well as more traditional means such as drawing and painting—were available for making art. While Johnson, who founded the New York Correspondence School, used the mail as his primary mode of art communication, Wegman turned first to photography and video, before returning to drawing and painting. Wegman differs from many conceptual artists because his art is accessible through its emotional or logical poignancy. The message varies, of course, depending on the experience and knowledge of the viewer. Virtually every piece, however provocative its didactic message, is laced with humor and bespeaks a deep sense of humanity. Both qualities are evident in his treatment of anthropomorphized dogs in his photography and video, as well as in his cryptic drawings, which address a broad scope of human experience.

Contrary to their initial appearance, Wegman’s early photographs are far from simple. Even those produced ostensibly to record his visual projects are highly sophisticated. In almost every instance, the viewer is directed to a subject matter staged exclusively for the camera. Sometimes the pictures feature human subjects, often they are of the artist himself engaged with a video camera or monitor. Or the photograph may feature a dog-centered narrative exploiting some human foible as in *Untitled* (1973). The photographs are executed with ample technical facility. If they appear naïve, in comparison with traditional photography, it just may be a result of the artist’s intent to comment upon photography itself, subvert the viewer’s conventional assumptions about photographs, or offer alternatives to traditional art photography. Wegman’s photographs are performative, in the linguistic sense, rather than passive representations. Whatever meaning one derives from the photographs emerges from the action embedded in subject matter or actions implicit in illustrating or demonstrating. If style is a matter of an artist’s selecting a subject, developing a visual vocabulary, and choosing or inventing compositional means to explore that subject, Wegman has certainly developed his own unique style. At this point it is virtually impossible for anyone familiar with his work not to recognize immediately instances of his photographs, even when they appear in isolation from a larger body of the work. When Wegman began using the Polaroid camera for making large format photographs of his famous Weimaraner dog Man Ray in 1979, his photography took on new dimensions of scale and surface and heightened pictorial qualities. These captured the attention of a mass audience, as well as patrons in the art world, while taking on a new social significance. The Polaroids are not included in the Haggerty exhibition, which mainly focuses on works more closely related to Wegman’s early videos. The question of altered photographs, which occupied Wegman in the seventies takes the photograph into drawing, which will be discussed later.

Videotapes figure prominently in Wegman’s early work. Video allowed for the possibilities of expanding both subject matter and audience since it could be broadcast or exhibited direct-

ly. He first began investigating video in 1969 at the University of Wisconsin - Madison. Wegman’s principal video works are short pieces collected in seven reels done over a period of seven years beginning in 1970. Several works including *Gray Hairs* (1974-1975) and *Man Ray*, *Man Ray* (1978) were made at WGBH in Boston. Later pieces included *Dog Baseball* (1986) created for *Saturday Night Live* and works for *Sesame Street* (1989-1994). In 1998, 20 years after reel 7, reel 8 was completed. He is presently working on reel 10. Wegman has likened his videotapes to Plato’s *Dialogues*.³ There is perhaps a common element of dialectic shared by Wegman’s videotapes and the Socratic method employed in certain of Plato’s *Dialogues*. The disputants in a Platonic dialogue, (a questioner and an answerer), undertake to defend or demolish a logical thesis, for example that virtue is teachable, by a chain of questions and answers. Wegman’s videos, too, raise questions which are explored through the manipulation of logical and narrative visual and verbal constructs, sometimes using dogs masquerading as their human counterparts. Most likely, these endeavors occurred with less philosophical rigor than was expected of Plato’s *Dialogues*, but with no less imagination or seriousness.

Drawings appear first in Wegman’s work as sketches for videos or installations. Some would say that drawings are the pivotal elements in Wegman’s artistic world, helping to define his approach to video and eventually to painting.⁴ Drawing is also prominent in his altered photographs where the mechanically produced photographic surface is transformed by autographic means. Then they became completely independent and were made as works in and of themselves. Perhaps his drawings are akin to the sayings of an oracle. As the sibylline voice of the oracle is known to be ambiguous, and often is the bearer of shades of darkness, as well as profound and judicious wisdom, one finds that similar expectations apply to the drawings of Wegman. The drawings can be disarmingly humorous, even banal pictorial ideas whose meanings depend on references to mass culture. Or, by challenging the strategies and assumptions of the avant-garde arts with satire, he distances himself from more pretentious aims.

Painting is a late undertaking in Wegman’s artistic career, although he majored in painting at the University of Illinois and graduated with an MFA in 1967. In the late 60s, like other artists of the era, he declared painting dead. After a gradual transition from using color in his ink drawings, he took up painting again in 1985. Still grounded in his conceptual mode, the painting *Hope* (1985) features a female head in profile surrounded by landscape rendered in pale colors with a verbal account of the artist’s color choices inserted into the picture. More typical is *Birds, Planes, and Ships* (1989). Here the implicit narrative revolves around these objects placed variously throughout the pictorial space. The canvas is covered with cloud-like surface, which acts as a background for the birds, planes and ships. The spatial order of the picture is seemingly more influenced by Chinese than western painting. The perspective of the viewer is similar to that experienced in an airplane on a cloudy day. Like the drawings, the paintings are disarming in their soft focus, low-key mode. Yet a closer inspection finds much to explore, both in the narrative elements and in the painting surfaces themselves. Again, these works are more sophisticated than their deceptively subtle features might reveal at first glance.

The Haggerty exhibition features Wegman’s early drawings, photographs, and video art pieces from 1970 to 1989 and is organized by the Museum in conjunction with *The Search for A Personal Vision in Broadcast Television: Fred Barzyk* which surveys television and video art produced at WGBH in Boston where Barzyk served as producer/director. The Barzyk exhibition which features artists from WGBH’s New Television Workshop also includes early video works by Wegman: *Dog Duet*, *Tube Talk*, and *Man Ray*, *Man Ray* (1978), featuring Wegman and his dog Man Ray.

Works in the Exhibition

Collection of the Artist

Photographs

Dishes...Falling Glass, 1970
Silver gelatin prints (Triptych)
7 1/2 x 8 in. each

As a Joke, 1971
Silver gelatin prints (Diptych)
12 3/4 x 10 7/8 in. each

Knife in the Water, 1972
Silver gelatin print
13 x 10 in.

Electric Saw, 1973
Silver gelatin prints (Diptych)
14 x 11 in. each

Inside Out, 1973
Silver gelatin prints (Four b/w prints)
14 x 11 in. each

Inside/Outside, 1973
Silver gelatin prints (Triptych)
14 x 11 in. each

Inverted Plywood, 1973
Silver gelatin prints (Diptych)
10 3/4 x 9 3/4 in. each

Photogram, 1973
Silver gelatin print
14 x 11 in.

Untitled (Bill with Chair), 1973
Gouache on silver gelatin print
13 1/4 x 10 1/2 in.

Untitled (Bill sitting on couch holding TV that Man Ray is watching), 1973
Silver gelatin print
14 x 11 in.

Sweeping, 1973
Silver gelatin print
13 7/8 x 10 7/8 in.

The Spike, 1973
Silver gelatin prints (Diptych)
11 x 14 in. each

Three-Legged Dog, 1974
Silver gelatin print
10 7/8 x 13 5/8 in.

Drop Leaf, 1974
Silver gelatin print
13 x 11 in.

Ajax, 1977
Black ink on silver gelatin print
20 x 16 in.

Man Ray Contemplating the Bust of Man Ray, 1978
Silver gelatin print
8 x 8 in.

Private Show, 1978
Ink on silver gelatin print
10 7/8 x 14 in.

Skylark, ca. 1980
Ink and gouache on silver gelatin print
7 1/2 x 9 7/8 in.

Liquid Measurement Futility, 1980
Gouache on silver gelatin print
16 x 20 in.

Untitled (Man Ray and Cords), 1981
Altered silver gelatin print
10 1/2 x 13 1/4 in.

Hoffman Residence, 1981
Gouache on silver gelatin print
19 x 20 in.

The Secret, n.d.
Pencil on paper
8 1/2 x 11 in.

A Large Living Room, ca. 1973
Pencil on paper
8 1/2 x 11 in.

Untitled (Good Night), ca. 1973
Pencil on paper
8 1/2 x 11 in.

Stubborn as a Mule, Fat as a Pig, ca. 1973
Watercolor and pencil on paper
8 1/2 x 11 in.

Video Tape Reels, 1973
Pencil on paper
8 1/2 x 11 in.

I Can't Figure Out if I'm a Balloon or a Beet, 1973
Pencil on paper
8 1/2 x 11 in.

Imperfect Spiral, 1973
Pencil on paper
8 1/2 x 11 in.

California (Inside/Outside), 1973
Pencil on paper
8 1/2 x 11 in.

Flying Kite in Gymnasium, 1973
Pencil on paper
8 1/2 x 11 in.

Gulls/Waves, 1973
Pencil on paper
8 1/2 x 11 in.

Landscape Color Chart, 1973
Pencil on paper
8 1/2 x 11 in.

Is This the Only One You've Got, 1974
Pencil on paper
9 x 12 in.

Dangerous/Safer, 1974
Pencil on paper
11 x 14 in.

Producer/Actress, ca. 1975
Pencil on paper
8 1/2 x 11 in.

No Fun Sleeping Under A Picture Like This, 1975
Ink on paper
8 1/2 x 11 in.

House with Thin Door/ Dark House, Light House, 1975
Pencil on paper
8 1/2 x 11 in.

House with Thin Door (recto), *Dark House, Light House* (verso)

French Lake, 1975
Pencil on paper
11 x 14 in.

Happy/Sad, 1975
Ink on paper
8 1/2 x 11 in.

Please Stand By, 1986
Ink on paper (21 drawings)
6 3/4 x 8 1/4 in. each

Dome and Cottage, 1985
Oil on canvas
22 x 36 in.

Dock Scene, 1985
Oil and acrylic on canvas
14 x 19 in.

Hope, 1985
Oil on canvas
20 1/4 x 25 1/4 in.

Birds, Planes, Ships, 1989
Oil and acrylic on canvas
44 x 54 in.

Turner, 1989
Oil and acrylic on canvas
50 x 60 in.

Selected Video Works, 1970-78
Dog Baseball, 1986
25 mins. approx.
Distributed by: Picture Ram
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Acknowledgments

The exhibition *William Wegman: Early Works* featuring the artist’s photographs, drawings and paintings from 1970-1989 would not have been possible without the generous cooperation of the artist William Wegman, the staff of the Wegman studio, the Holly Solomon Gallery in New York, and the Haggerty Museum staff.

Sponsorship of the exhibition was made possible in part by the Stackner Family Foundation Fund.

Curtis L. Carter
Director

1. David Ross, "An Interview with William Wegman," in *William Wegman*, edited by Martin Kunz. (New York: Harry Abrams Inc. 1990), p. 15.

2. Michael Morris and Sharla Sava, *Ray Johnson, How Sad I am Today....*, exhibition catalogue, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia, (Morris/Trasov Archive 1999).

3. William Wegman, "Videotapes: Seven Reels," in Kunz, p. 26.

4. Kunz, "Drawings: Conceptual Pivot of Wegman’s Artistic Worlds," in Kunz, p. 133.