Brava, 1977
William Wegman started making videotapes of essentially private performances and actions while teaching at the University of Wisconsin in Madison in 1969. In the same year, Harold Szechman, writing in a catalogue introduction for the seminal exhibition "When Attitude Becomes Form," noted that "The major characteristic of today's art is no longer articulation of space but human activity, the activity of the artist has become the dominant theme and content." (The Institute of Contemporary Art, London, Sept. 28 – Oct. 27, 1969). Since that time, Wegman has produced hundreds of short and often profoundly funny video works mainly dealing with the exposure of a kind of private space that makes the viewer feel somehow less like an audience than a passerby observing, out of context, the behavior of a stranger seen through an open window.

In the strictest sense, Wegman's video and photographic works point out an essential character of contemporary art. His continued focus upon himself and the objects that touch upon his life underscores the kind of narcissism that the critic Rosalind Krauss relates to the move away from a dialog based upon the "internal structure of the picture-object." ("Video: The Aesthetic of Narcissism," October, Issue No. 1, Spring, 1976), to a dialog extending out from the picture to include the experience of the artist and viewer. As she and other writers have pointed out, this extension is perhaps at the core of understanding the nature of video art and perhaps a significant aspect of contemporary art's condition as well.

What makes Wegman's videotapes work so well, besides their brevity (which has always been appreciated by those whose feeling about video was that it might be interesting if it didn't demand so little time), is the intimacy he generates through the use of a number of simple devices. In his early tapes, such as the pieces collected on Reels #2 and 3, rather than address the camera directly (as does Vito Acconci) he works towards a more placed to the side of the camera. This allows Wegman to keep himself on camera without a cameraman to follow him. Another effect of this staring just off-camera is that the viewer feels unchallenged, as one might while accidentally overhearing two people in conversation. Yet—perhaps as a result of the implied eves-dropping—one becomes completely wrapped up in the monologue and caught off guard by its banality or absurdity.

Relying on the known conventions of the TV pitchman, Wegman is also able to play the expectations of the viewer against his highly stylized awkward timing and gestures. In a sense, by representing altered situations and objects (an aspect of his work also apparent in the retouched photographs as well as the tapes) as faithfully reenacted autobiographical narrative Wegman playfully challenges the relation between validity and belief.

A great deal of Wegman's activity centers around his relationship with his incredibly stoic and well behaved Weimaraner, Man Ray. A tireless performer, Man Ray's completely predictable behavioral quirks are used by Wegman to produce the facade of a human-to-human dialog instead of the actual master-to-pet relationship. Working with observed behavioral cues, Wegman constructs realities based on, again, dialogues and responses that are presented more as slice-of-life dramas than as a trained-dog act. Central to this kind of construction of course is Wegman's ability to control these performances within the privacy of his studio and share them in a way that implies immediacy and intimacy with an audience conditioned (perhaps as well as Man Ray) to accept the facticity of television's real-time reality.

Although Wegman produced some color works while in residence at Boston's WGBH TV, these new color works in this MATRIX unit as seen in Reel #7 represent the first color works that he has produced working alone in his own studio, as he is accustomed to working. Technically, his work has progressed as the casual result of his ability to obtain new and more sophisticated equipment. His move into color (as opposed to earlier "advances" marked by tongue-in-cheek studies of his advance toward the state-of-the-art) is noted by a disturbingly heightened sense of TV realism imposed onto now familiar characters and monologues. Through it all, however, Wegman uses the medium of television to avoid the pitfalls of "live" performance while managing to incite and share its essence and strangeness through a technology used more to reveal that aura of strangeness than anything else.

Wegman was born in Holyoke Massachusetts in 1943 and studied at Massachusetts College of Art before moving to California in 1969. Since 1973, he has lived and worked in New York where he is represented by Castelli-Sonnabend Tapes and Films and the Holly Solomon Gallery. The photographs in this exhibition were lent by the artist and the Holly Solomon Gallery.

DAR

Works in MATRIX:
Selected works: Reel #2, 1972, b/w, 20 minutes. Courtesy Castelli-Sonnabend Tapes and Films.
Selected Works: Reel #3, 1972, b/w, 20 minutes. Courtesy Castelli-Sonnabend Tapes and Films.
Selected Works: Reel #4, 1972, color, 17 minutes. Courtesy Castelli-Sonnabend Tapes and Films.


Vanda L50,000, 1977, photo, ink. 19 x 15½". Collection of the artist, courtesy Holly Solomon Gallery, New York.

Man Ray With Beret (back view), 1977, photo, ink. 20 x 20". Collection of the artist, courtesy Holly Solomon Gallery, New York.

Man Ray With Hat (posing front), 1977, photo, ink. 19⅝ x 20⅝". Collection of the artist, courtesy Holly Solomon Gallery, New York.


Selected one-person exhibitions: Galerie Sonnabend, Paris, '71; Sonnabend Gallery, New York, '72; Konrad Fischer, Dusseldorf, '72; Galerie Sonnabend, Paris, '73; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, '73; Sonnabend Gallery, New York '74; Galeria Toselli, Milan, '74; Mayor Gallery, London, '75; Galleria Alessandra Castelli, Milan, '75; Konrad Fischer Gallery, Dusseldorf, '75; The Kitchen, New York, '76; Sonnabend Gallery, New York, '77.

Selected bibliography about Wegman:


MATRIX is supported in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal agency.