



*William Wegman, Dusted, 1982.*

## William Wegman's Psychoanalytic Vaudeville

*Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only  
to laughter.*

—MIKHAIL BAKHTIN, *Rabelais and His World*

A retrospective is an occasion to chart the itinerary of a career, to articulate the ends towards which it is directed and the purposes by which it is shaped—in short, to assess an artist's achievement. To speak of William Wegman's achievement, however, as his current mid-career retrospective mounted by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis encourages us to do, is to ignore the ways in which Wegman has effectively jettisoned the whole ideology of achievement. In our culture, achievements are invariably teleological and always comport some more or less explicit idea of mastery; whereas Wegman's work—if the plurality

of his works can indeed be reduced to the singularity of an oeuvre—has been characterized from the very beginning by a deliberate refusal of mastery.<sup>1</sup>

Until recently, Wegman worked almost exclusively in video, drawing, and black-and-white photography; his works in these mediums are distinguished by their informality, artlessness, even vulnerability. Still, his refusal of mastery is not simply a matter of technique; rather it is often the explicit theme of his works, which speak of failure more often than success, of intention thwarted rather than realized, of falling short of rather than hitting the mark.<sup>2</sup> *Three Mistakes*, for example, an early black-and-white photograph (1971-72), depicts three puddles of milk next to three empty glasses, while a photo-diptych from the same period demonstrates the technique of *X-Ray Photography*: The first shot, captioned “How It’s Done,” explains the setup (Wegman attempting to photograph a female model through what appears to be a lead plate); the second, a photograph of the plate, is captioned “The Finished Product (Unsuccessful).”

In neither of these works does failure produce a melancholic sense of frustration or defeat, as it does in the work of so many of the younger artists whom Wegman clearly has influenced. Rather, if his work posits an essential powerlessness, it is one which can continually be traversed and enjoyed, and from which something can be carried away in the end. (Thus, from 1975 through ‘79 he executed a series of altered photographs, in which he capitalizes on his own mistakes, drawing directly onto overexposed or poorly developed prints, thereby salvaging what might otherwise have to be abandoned.)

This aspect of Wegman’s activity is reminiscent of that of the late Roland Barthes; as Paul Smith writes in a recent essay on Barthes’s last texts:

Barthes was never a master, would never have wanted to be one.... In his project of decomposing the certainties and fixities of a kingly structure, our culture, Barthes acts almost as that most trifling value in the game, the pawn who makes relentless forays against the space of the king—classical, doxical, scientific, masculine space as that is in our inherited culture. And to the extent that this is a specifically disruptive gambit, it concerns us all.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a similar discussion of the refusal of mastery, to which my own is indebted, see Paul Smith, “We Always Fail—Barthes’ Last Writings,” *SubStance* 36 (1982), 34-39.

<sup>2</sup> In the early ‘70s John Baldessari, with whom Wegman has been closely associated, also executed a series of works which deliberately court esthetic error—works in which he attempted to photograph a bouncing ball so that it appeared in the middle of the frame, or four balls thrown into the air to form a straight line.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, “We Always Fail,” 34.

Barthes's weapon in this subversive activity was, of course, *écriture*, writing; Wegman's is laughter. He uses it to undermine all belief, to dislodge all certainty, to discredit all dogma.

*The serious aspects of class culture are official and authoritarian; they are combined with violence, prohibitions, limitations and always contain an element of fear and intimidation.... Laughter, on the contrary, overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations. Its idiom is never used by violence and authority.*

—BAKHTIN

Wegman himself acknowledges the link between laughter and nonmastery in his work: "As soon as I got funny," he is quoted in the Walker catalogue, "I killed any majestic intentions in my work." Still, the Walker retrospective tends to minimize this aspect of his activity. Perhaps any retrospective would have done the same, but here this problem is compounded by the unjustifiable omission of Wegman's videotapes, in which his refusal of mastery is most explicit. Neither the 20-minute compilation tape titled—debatably—*The Best of Wegman*, nor Kim Levin's catalogue essay on Wegman's video are adequate substitutes for the tapes themselves, which often narrate the failure of his attempts to impose himself on, and at the expense of, his pet Weimaraner Man Ray.

What the Walker retrospective does include is a disproportionately large selection of the large-format (20-by-24-inch) color Polaroids that Wegman began making in 1979. The majority of these pictures are of Man Ray, either in distinctly human situations—*Ray and Mrs. Lubner in Bed Watching TV*, or wearing an Indian headdress, stranded in a canoe— or transformed into another breed, even species—wrapped in tinsel to become an *Airedale*, or photographed upside-down as *Ray Bat*. Abrams has recently published a collection of the Polaroids, titled *Man's Best Friend*. In the introduction, Lawrence Weider relates them to Wegman's videotapes—"In single photographs, Wegman and Man Ray manage to condense the extended conceits of the video performance into one elegantly composed and articulate image"—but he also observes a (highly significant) difference: "Unlike the grainy video image, the resulting glossy color prints have the presence and uniqueness of paintings."<sup>4</sup>

Elegant composition, presence, uniqueness—these are precisely the values that Wegman's earlier works repudiate. But it is not simply in their technical virtuosity that the Polaroids appear to reinstate the aura of mastery that Wegman once refused; in them, Man Ray is used in an entirely different manner. For while these "masterful" images deal with the domestication of the Other—our tendency

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<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Weider in William Wegman, *Man's Best Friend* (New York: Abrams, 1982), 9.

to reduce its difference to a variation of identity—in them Man Ray behaves less, as in earlier works, as a foil that deflects Wegman’s designs on him, and more like a passive and submissive model. (This development is pushed further in Wegman’s recent parodies of fashion photographs, in which a woman is frequently substituted for the dog.)<sup>5</sup>

The Polaroids appear at the conclusion of the Walker retrospective; however, many are seen at its beginning as well, in a highly professional introductory slide show (accompanied by Wegman’s voice-over commentary) about Man Ray, who died in March of 1982. Framed by—suspended between—these seductive images, the retrospective appears to be working at cross-purposes: on the one hand, to commemorate Man Ray; on the other, to certify Wegman as a contemporary master.

This contradiction can be resolved, however, if Man Ray is regarded as substitute for his master; and, in a lengthy wall label, prominently displayed in the galleries and reprinted in the catalogue, this is exactly what curator Lisa Lyons proposes:

Did Wegman regard Man Ray as an alter ego of sorts? Not exactly forthcoming on this point, he simply says that by using Ray he was able to diffuse the narcissism that is so often an element of conceptually oriented video and photography. That may be so, yet it is undeniable that Ray often appears as a surrogate for human presence in Wegman’s work.

“It is undeniable . . .”—such certainty seems very un-Wegman-like. Wegman’s statement is as follows: “There’s always the risk in video of putting yourself on TV, being narcissistic. I think Man Ray diverted all that.” So Lyons attributes to Wegman precisely what he himself denies—the narcissistic identification with an other, through which the ego is constituted as a (libidinal) object:

The ego takes its place by taking the place of the other, by replacing that other within itself and by seeking to deprive it of its alterity. One of the most powerful forms this process can take is precisely the desire to redis-

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<sup>5</sup> In the catalogue for the Walker retrospective, Lisa Lyons detects a shift in Wegman’s career. Writing of Wegman’s recent “Man Ray Portfolio,” she observes, “Technically and stylistically, the portfolio prints may well mark the beginning of a new direction in Wegman’s photography. Clearly, he has fallen under the medium’s spell and, in fact, he acknowledges that he has recently become interested in the work of such masters of photography as Weston and Strand.”

cover the same, to repeat, to recognize, and thus to transform a movement of difference into one of identity.<sup>6</sup>

The narcissistic ego attempts to assimilate, to appropriate, to *master* the other, treating it as a mere extension of itself. But this is precisely what Wegman refuses to do—at least prior to 1979.

*Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naïveté and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality. Laughter does not permit seriousness to atrophy and to be torn away from the one being, forever incomplete. It restores this ambivalent wholeness. Such is the function of laughter in the historical development of culture and literature.*

—BAKHTIN

Wegman's refusal of mastery reveals his historical filiation with minimalism—minimalist performance in particular, with its assault on the exhibitionism of traditional performance modes. “The display of technical virtuosity,” Yvonne Rainer wrote in 1966, “of the dancer's specialized body, no longer makes any sense.” Significantly, Rainer rejected such display as introverted, self-congratulatory, *narcissistic*; in its place she advocated “a context wherein people are engaged in making a less spectacular demand on the body and in which skill is hard to locate.”<sup>7</sup>

In works of the early '70s, Wegman constructs just such a context. This was, of course, a time when many site-specific and ephemeral art works were being reinserted into the circuit of commercial distribution and exchange via photography, and many of Wegman's early photographs and videotapes *pose* as documentation—even though Wegman's performances were executed only for the camera. Sometimes he deals with the photographic packaging of the artistic personality: in the brief video sequence “Stomach Song,” as well as in a pair of black-and-white photographs *Drinking Milk* (1971) he parodies the narcissistic conceits of “body art” and its substitution of the artist's body for the esthetic object (Accenci in particular comes to mind). In both works Wegman presents his own bare torso, cropped at shoulders and waist, as a face— nipples becomes eyes, and the navel a mouth, through which he either sings or drinks milk with a straw.

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<sup>6</sup> Samuel Weber, *The Legend of Freud* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 94.

<sup>7</sup> Yvonne Rainer, *Work 1961-73* (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1974), 65 66.

Although Wegman “comes out” of minimalism, many of his early works were conceived as parodies of specific minimalist practices and, more generally, of their austerity, reductiveness, humorlessness. A 1971 photograph of a sheet of masonite propped against a wall (reminiscent of Richard Serra’s prop pieces from the late ‘60s) includes a pair of shoes protruding from underneath, as well as the caption “To Hide His Deformity He Wore Special Clothing.” *Building a Box* (also 1971), nine photographs displayed as a grid, parodies process-oriented sculpture (Robert Morris’s *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* comes to mind), as well as the systemic and/or serial concerns of artists like Andre, Bochner, and LeWitt. (The last is also the target of several works involving Man Ray in serial poses: *Stormy Night*, *Ray-O-Vac*, *Permutations: Before/On/After*.)

The structure of these works seems at least as significant as the practices they parody. For a parody is a dialogue; as Bakhtin observes, “In parody, two languages [the one being parodied, and the one that parodies] are crossed with each other, as well as two styles, two linguistic points of view and, in the final analysis, two speaking subjects.”<sup>8</sup> Structured as a conversation, parody is dialogical; it narrates an artist’s encounter with another work, another text, another subject.

If, in the works mentioned above, Wegman encounters other artistic practices, in a number of other works from the same period he engages with the spectator. A 1970 photograph of a stuffed parrot, for example, is improbably captioned *Crow*. This picture is not about the incommensurability of words and images; Wegman is not Magritte. Rather, he presents what initially appears to be a seamless, entirely plausible image of reality that turns out, on closer inspection, to be fundamentally duplicitous. For the shadow cast by the stuffed bird is not the shadow of a parrot at all, but of a crow. What we witness, in this work, is not the (narcissistic) reduction of difference to identity, but rather the emergence of difference out of apparent sameness.

In other works—*Madam I’m Adam*, which Wegman describes as a visual palindrome, and *Chairs* (both 1970)—what appear to be two identical photographs are exhibited side by side; they are not the same at all, however, but opposites—because one of the prints has been flopped. Wegman frequently employs such reversals and inversions (*Upside-Down Plywood*, 1972)—Bakhtin described parody as “the world inside-out”<sup>9</sup>—to seduce the viewer, to lead him astray, and thus to force him to recognize his (narcissistic) desire to perceive analogies, similarities, resemblances.

Insofar as the position of the spectator is inscribed, in these works, within the scenario they seek to tell, Wegman’s art retains certain affinities with minimalism. A minimalist installation also denies the spectator any transcendental view-

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<sup>8</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 76.

<sup>9</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968), 11.

point outside the work, from which it can be viewed as a meaningful, self-contained object against which he can situate himself as an equally meaningful, self-contained subject. What distinguishes Wegman's work is his (re)introduction of narrative—the third person—into the intersubjective artist-viewer dyad. The appearance of this third term diverts both the artist's and the spectator's attempts reciprocally to constitute themselves as self-contained subjects revealing instead their dependency upon an other they can never fully master or assimilate. And this third "person" was Man Ray.

*[Man Ray] takes a lot of pressure off me. It's like having a third person in a conversation; one of you doesn't have to talk all of the time.*

—WEGMAN

*A joke is the most social of all the mental functions that aim at a yield of pleasure. It often calls for three persons and its completion requires the participation of someone else in the mental process it starts.*

—SIGMUND FREUD

*Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*

In the Walker catalogue, Lisa Lyons writes that Wegman's art deals with such themes as "transference of identity" and "the realm of the irrational." Transference, irrationality—these are, of course, subjects investigated by psychoanalysis, and Wegman's involvement with them locates his works within a distinctly psychoanalytic (as opposed to psychological) space. The videotapes, in fact, are a psychoanalytic vaudeville played out within the classic scene of imaginary identification: although he faces the camera directly, Wegman never looks directly into it, but off to one side, at his own image in an off-screen monitor. Positioned as both subject and object of the look, he reenacts the narcissistic fantasy of simultaneously occupying two positions, of being in two places at the same time.

The identification of the subject with his image is incomplete, however (as Jacques Lacan demonstrates in his famous analysis of this same scenario in his commentaries on the mirror state), without the intervention of a third person, who grants this image to the subject: "In Lacan's mirror stage the infant is fixed, constrained in a representation which the infant believes to be the Other's, the mother's, image of [him or] her."<sup>10</sup> In Wegman's videotapes, this function falls to the spectator, whom the artist solicits as an accomplice in his narcissistic attempt to consolidate himself as an autonomous, self-contained ego. (Significantly, the image Wegman contemplates in the off-screen monitor is identical to the spectator's image of him.)

Enter Man Ray, who, as Wegman remarks, "diverted all that."

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<sup>10</sup> Jane Gallop, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 121.

Is it merely coincidental that the first photograph of Man Ray to appear in the exhibition depicts a *Dog Dream*? (Man Ray sleeps on a sofa, while a stuffed alligator preys upon a stuffed squirrel.) Freud, of course, identified the dream as the “royal road” to the unconscious; but he also designated another mode of access, one that is somewhat less regal—the joke. Jokes, too, depend upon the intervention of a third person. If, as Freud argues in his celebrated study of *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, the distinguishing feature of a joke is the “explosive laughter” it produces; and, further, if we can never laugh at our own jokes (except, Freud adds, *par ricochet*), then the power to decide the fate of the joke resides not with the person who tells it, but with the person who listens.<sup>11</sup> Thus, Freud describes the joke as a scene with three protagonists: an exhibitionistically inclined first person, who tells the joke (“the motive force for the production of innocent jokes is not infrequently an ambitious urge to show one’s cleverness, to display oneself—an instinct that may be equated with exhibitionism in the sexual field”);<sup>12</sup> a second person, the object of the joke (who need not be a person at all, but an idea which is unacceptable to consciousness); and, finally, a voyeuristically inclined “third person,” whose laughter completes the mental process initiated by the first.

This trio makes its first appearance in Freud’s analysis of obscene jokes, which, Freud contends, originate in a *failed* attempt at seduction. The joke begins as an obscene remark directed at a woman with the intention of arousing her sexually. Such remarks, however, frequently meet with the woman’s resistance: “The ideal case of a resistance of this kind,” Freud writes, “occurs if another man is present at the same time— a third person—, for in that case an immediate surrender by the woman is as good as out of the question.”<sup>13</sup> The third person “soon acquires the greatest importance in the development of the smut” into a joke, however, for he gradually displaces the woman as its addressee. Thus, second and third persons change positions: the man becomes a second person, while the woman becomes the object of the joke. Thus, the positions of the two men are ultimately aligned with the grammatical positions assigned by the personal pronouns “ I “ and “ you “; while the woman assumes the position of the nonperson, the “it,” or, in Freudian terms, the “ id.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1960), 100. Significantly, in his discussion of the psychology of the artist in the *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (Lecture XXIII), Freud attributes the power to decide the success or failure of the work of art to the spectator; see my “Honor, Power, and the Love of Women,” *Art in America* (January 1983), 7 - 8.

<sup>12</sup> Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 143.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>14</sup> “The common definition of the personal pronouns as containing the three terms *I*, *you*, and *it* abolishes the notion of ‘person,’ which belongs only to *l/you*, and disappears with



This scenario is continually reenacted in Wegman's videotapes, with Wegman as seducer, Man Ray as the other (the woman), and the spectator as "third person." Wegman frequently attempts to impose the human upon the not-human; sometimes he attempts to teach Man Ray to spell, or to smoke cigarettes, addressing him as "you." ("P-A-R-K was spelled correctly. *Wait* a minute. And you spelled O-U-T right.") Wegman is not, of course, attempting literally to seduce the animal, but he is encouraging his submission, acquiescence. And, as "*Wait a minute*" indicates, Wegman's attempts usually meet with (a greater or lesser degree of) resistance. In the mock television commercial "New and Used Car Salesman," for example, Wegman attempts to hold Man Ray on his lap— "Just as this dog trusts me, I would like you all out there to trust me and come down to our new and used car lot and buy some of our quality cars"—while Man Ray struggles to get free.

Here, it is not (as Kim Levin suggests) the "failure of words to live up to images" that is exposed, but rather the ultimate failure of the ego's narcissistic attempts to appropriate the other as one of the modes of its consciousness, of itself. As such, Man Ray comes to occupy the position of the "it"—"this dog"; in Wegman's work, then, he represents that measure of alterity that can never be fully assimilated or mastered.

But if Man Ray has assumed the position of the third person, then the spectator is simultaneously promoted to the position of the second person, and it is through the spectator's laughter that Wegman's failure is redeemed, even celebrated. And when we laugh at Man Ray's foiling of Wegman's designs, we are also acknowledging the possibility, indeed the necessity, of another, nonnarcissistic mode of relating to the Other—one based not on the denial of difference, but upon its recognition. Thus, inscribed within the *social* space in which both Bakhtin and Freud situate laughter, Wegman's refusal of mastery is ultimately political in its implications.

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*it.*" Émile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966). Benveniste's distinction seems highly relevant to Wegman's work, which constantly stages the struggle between the personal and the nonpersonal, the self and the Other, the ego and the id.