Considering the state of the world as of late, we could all really use an injection of William Wegman to cure our woes. At least that’s what I discovered when I took on the dream job of editing *William Wegman: Writing by Artist*, which was just released by the publisher Primary Information. The project got started before the Covid lockdown, and in the dark days that followed, I found my downed spirits being hoisted by the mood-enhancing weirdness of Wegman’s laugh-out-loud art. For many around the globe, he is the iconic Weimaraner photographer, but those in the know have long recognized Wegman as one of conceptual art’s most prodigious practitioners. His perception-bending photographs from the late 1960s and 1970s remain remarkably fresh after all these decades, and his canonical, deeply enjoyable early videos helped to define the burgeoning medium. In the ensuing years, Wegman incorporated drawing—and later, painting—into his expansive and prolific practice, and while moving forward he rarely ever looked back.

As the title indicates, the new book focuses on Wegman’s writing, however these are not your typical artist statements or aesthetic theses. While I was initially focused on assembling a substantial grouping of the delirious texts he typed in the 1970s, what I came to realize is that words run throughout Wegman’s output in all mediums, from back then up to the present. The book brings together a career-spanning swathe of largely unseen work that was excavated from the boxes in the artist’s New York City studio, which is where we met to discuss our shared passion for humor, word play, and music.
ANDREW LAMPERT: With your early writings, it seems like you typed these things, got them out of your system, then walked away and moved on.

WILLIAM WEGMAN: Yeah, the early writings are a lot like my drawings. I don't remember making them. A photo of a dog or a painting I'll remember. But the drawings and writings just occur spontaneously when I'm sitting in front of a piece of paper at my desk. As soon as I'm up and away, they're gone, and I don't really remember them. That's what makes it exciting, because I can find them again and go, "Oh, look at that." Yesterday I opened the book to the potato drawing and I laughed so hard that tears were flowing out of my eyes. It was embarrassing because it was my work and I didn't remember it!

AL: The typed texts in this book mostly come from the 1970s, but you continue to draw up to this day. When do you work on the drawings? Your studio is set up for photography and painting, but the drawings seem like something you're not doing in that setting. They're more solitary.

WW: They're always done at the desk in my studio, an old partners desk that I got at a Salvation Army near my home town of Springfield, Massachusetts. I've hauled it everywhere since I found it in 1970. So everything happens on that table. My typewriter is set up there, my drawing paper, and a pencil… Simple, ordinary.

AL: All of that work is made at one desk?

WW: Pretty much. I don't like to write on the bus or in the park or other places.

AL: You're not just struck by inspiration walking around with a pad of paper?

WW: No, and I don't wake up in the middle of the night and write things down. Although I do wake up in the middle of the night.

AL: When you started exhibiting drawings in 1973, what was the landscape like for artists drawing? It seems like that was the middle of a minimalisms/post-minimalism period and that your particular style of drawing would have been aesthetically verboten.

WW: I'm not really sure. Back then, I was showing videos and photos at Sonnabend Gallery and elsewhere. It seemed to me that one more thing was needed, and when I started to do the drawings my work felt complete. Photo, video, drawing—simple, perfect, portable. I considered myself a minimalist conceptualist for better or for worse, and these drawings were minimal so they fit that category nicely.

AL: Would you say that you are still a minimalist today?

WW: Absolutely not. I completely shattered all of that. That's gone. Sadly, the messy and bulky prevails. I think an artist needs a manifesto that states what you won't do more than what you will do. It's good to have rules and so forth, which I did, and later I got bored and broke them.

AL: Your conceptual approach took root when you were in school and you really flourished during your early California years. Before moving to New York in 1973, you were already showing alongside other conceptualists and minimalists. Did you think of the photos and videos you were making as satirizing this scene?

WW: Not really, not satire. I'm not sure how to describe it.

AL: There's a big difference between satire and parody. And there's also just tongue-in-cheek humor.

WW: The reason that humor appealed to me is that early on I would show my work, and someone would say, "It's interesting." Then a little later, when I would show my photos, videos, and drawings and someone would burst out laughing, I knew they really got it. I was looking for clarity in my work. I had to "get" it myself.

AL: "Interesting" is such a stand-in word. You know, the idea that humor is a lower form of expression is ridiculous. There is such a wide realm of art that is so flat, it doesn't elicit any type of reaction. When work is funny, or even sad, people tend to have a prejudiced reaction, as if it is somehow easy. But making work that people viscerally respond to is actually harder.

WW: Not for me. When I first started working, I was really striving for clarity. What I liked about my videos was that my mother would like them, my neighbor would like them, anybody would like them. Whereas with other works of mine, you'd perhaps have to know something, be schooled in something. The videos just seemed to break through. That's something very strong.

AL: Your work deals so much with signs and symbols. Did you pay attention to things like semiotics and other critical theories?

WW: Yes, I'm a big intellectual. BFA, MFA.

AL: I edited your new book by arranging the works into thematic sections, one of which is more directly about language. It includes a few rebus drawings where you use figures in place of words. It takes a little effort, but they are very legible in terms of their meaning. I feel like the clarity you seek is what makes your work feel universal; lots of people can see it and get it. You aren't talking to a limited art world audience—knowing about French theory doesn't matter, even if the work can be analyzed through that framework.

WW: Those theories are interesting and can be really useful, I suppose.

AL: I'd imagine that they were also part of the conversation in that era. You studied painting as an undergraduate at MassArt in Boston, right?

WW: Yes, then I went to the University of Illinois, and that's when I broke into other areas.

AL: Were you at the University of Illinois when John Cage was there?

WW: I spent most of my time at the music school and the Department of Electrical Engineering... anywhere...
opposite: Eckhard Puzzin, 1992, Ink on silver gelatin print, 14 x 11 inches.

below: Learn to Dance with Modern Electronic Equipment, 1973, Silver gelatin print 14 x 11 inches.
but the painting department. I had a fellowship to work with engineers on interactive environments. I’m not joking.

AL: What was like pairing you up with scientists?

WW: Yeah. I would think up something and we would build it together. My graduate thesis was an interactive environment where you would walk through, and things would fall on you or drop down or light up. I really thought that was much more ambitious and much cooler than painting. I had to stay back a summer to get my MFA in painting.

AL: (laughter) Oh, really?

WW: Truly.

AL: What were you doing with the music school? Did you know LeJaren Hiller?

WW: I met him. He wrote the illiac Suite at Illinois. The first work composed by a computer I think.

AL: Right. And he did HPSCGD (Harpsichord) with Cape.

WW: There was a lot going on in the music school that was radical. I was close to the composer Salvatore Martirano who was open to collaboration. You could do something, and someone else would do something else, and we’d all be there interacting, so to speak. I made gigantic inflatable sculptures with lights and sounds... very ’60s.

AL: You were mixing your mediums, that’s for sure. Were you already working with photography as well?

WW: Not really. I picked up photography when I first started teaching at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, along with Richard Artschwager, Malcolm Morley, Robert Morris, and John Chamberlain. You know who was there too? Borges! I thought I had discovered him but when I went to his lecture, the place was packed. “What, you know him?” Godard was there that year. It was a pretty interesting place.

AL: Wow.

WW: It was really exciting. I would do these things like throw radios off buildings and record the sound. I had something that dripped from the top floor all the way to the bottom floor so that when you walked up the stairways something cool might happen to your eyes. I was teaching conceptual art to grad students. For a twenty-two-year-old, it was a pretty cool position, right?

AL: The coolest.

WW: I would take the class to watch pigs being slaughtered at the Oscar Mayer plant. We watched the artificial insemination of cows. We discovered these emergency fire escape chutes at the university. You would jump through a trap door and be sent flying out into a parking lot. These had been closed since the ’40s, but we discovered them and used them, and were sort of arrested as we went flying into the parking lot.

AL: Oh my God. How did you land that gig?

WW: The head of the department there liked my work and thought he’d take a chance. I was hoping to get a faculty position but that certainly didn’t happen. I did a show called Leftovers where I took the work that students abandoned at the end of summer and put it in the exhibition hall, lit it perfectly. It looked beautiful, as good as the good stuff, but they thought I was making fun of the department. Plus I never went to faculty meetings. I didn’t realize that you had to do that to keep your job. Luckily, I got a one-year position at Cal State-Long Beach. It was for the best. I moved to LA. I got a dog and named him Man Ray.

AL: And the rest is history... But teaching one class can’t do much for your budget—then, or especially now.

WW: I was floating on like $7,000 a year or something like that. When my rent was only $225 or $100 a month, you could basically manage.

AL: Were you reading a lot back then?

WW: Yes. I was reading Borges and the Bible. I remember describing myself as a crystal to the draft board.

AL: You just told them that you were a crystal?

WW: Yes. It was when I moved to LA that my funny work started to come out. Also my writing really happened then. I got a typewriter, and found the Princess Cruise stationery. One of the things I was doing at that point was photos with text underneath. I would type the text, photograph it, and then print it with the image. I didn’t want to write on the photograph, it had to be purely photographic.

AL: Were your texts used as scripts for the early videos?

WW: I hooked something up to the plumbing system so the toilet would flush and the earth would raise a little bit.

AL: It was your earth piece! Gotta bring that back.

WW: Okay! I’ll go do that now. See you later.

AL: (laughter) Where in Wisconsin were you?

WW: I lucked into a great position as a visiting artist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, along with Richard Artschwager, Malcolm Morley, Robert Morris, and John Chamberlain. You know who was there too? Borges! I thought I had discovered him but when I went to his lecture, the place was packed. “What, you know him?” Godard was there that year. It was a pretty interesting place.

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AL: It’s fascinating that your writing ends up having more of a relationship to your drawings and photos than to video, where one would think of text working as a script. Did you completely abandon painting at that point?

WW: Yes, I never thought I would get back into painting.

AL: Your drawings are so expressly funny and often strange. I’m wondering if you were ever a fan of comics, or whether you were thinking about Saul Steinberg or other cartoonists like that?

WW: Not really. One thing I noticed about my drawings versus cartoons is that the cartoonist had a recognizable style and before you even saw the joke you knew what the joke was because of that style. You get ready for the kind of shaky line that this person does or the squiggle line that another one does. I found that my strategy, which I developed after a little while, was to change directions so you couldn’t predict or know what might happen, and that this might result in more surprising things.

Hans Pototow, 1981
Ink on paper, 8 1/2 x 11 inches.

AL: Well, that definitely happens in the often-asynchronous marriage of language and image in your drawings. The cognitive dissonance—or maybe the distance—between words and images is what makes me think of the drawings as an extension of your writing more so than comics.

WW: I love Roz Chast and I like lots of cartoonists but I don’t feel like I’m one of them. But some other people might think I am. I don’t know.

AL: Well you don’t have characters.

WW: That’s it.

AL: You don’t have anything that recurs. I have a cartoonist friend who regularly submits her work to The New Yorker, and she often makes the cut. There is one day a week when all the comic artists submit their portfolios with eight to ten pieces. If they don’t choose any of your works you can’t resubmit them, they’re done. I can’t think of a worse profession.

WW: That’s harsh. My dealers weren’t too happy when I would bring in another fifty drawings for them to catalog, because it took more time than their staff was willing to spend on putting the number on the back and entering it into the book. I remember Horace Solomon saying, “We have enough drawings.” Then

Ileana Sonnabend was really upset with me because I wouldn’t let her frame anything. The drawings couldn’t be framed; they were just pinned up. The photographs couldn’t be framed; they were just pinned up. That was part of the sort of minimalist conceptual period when it was really important to be strict and stern.

AL: What broke you out of it?

WW: I’m a painter, and I always was. Of course I had given it up because painting was dead and I wanted to be alive, so I stopped. But I kept dreaming: If I was painting, what would it be like? By the early ’80s people were painting again.

AL: Once painting was allowed again?

WW: Yeah, painting was happening. Salle and Schnabel, and everyone. So I sheepishly did a painting on one of those Fredrix canvases that you can buy, but I painted on the back of it. A farm scene with a telephone pole and a broken telephone line. I did this painting in Maine, far away from the art world. A secret vice. Then I just got used to it and had fun with it.

AL: The paintings you’ve been doing from the mid ’80s onward are stylistically all over the place, you’ve made so many different moves, but while working on this book with you and

curating your exhibitions at Sperone Westwater and Marc Selwyn Fine Art that will accompany the book, I found that, no matter what medium, you continually work with many recognizable sets of themes. I built the book around these, rather than trying to go for a chronological approach or some other structuring device. One can see how the themes play out across your videos, photos, drawings, and paintings.

WW: It’s fascinating to me that you notice that. I’m not sure I do, but it’s interesting that you think I do.

AL: I’m sure it’s hard for any of us to see what our own patterns are like. For instance, you have done a lot of work about architecture.

WW: Architecture has always been something that gets in there. I don’t know why.

AL: A lot of the writing feels like jokes for an abstract Bob Hope routine, like if you were a gag writer and you were coming up with one-liners for his USO show. And some of them are really abstract, like poetry. Were you a poetry reader?

WW: No, not at all.

AL: You’re just kind of a quasi-poetry writer.

WW: Yeah.

AL: What have you been reading lately? Last time we talked you were reading The Recognitions by William Gaddis. Did you finish it?

WW: I did. I loved it. It is certainly worth rereading.

AL: You like big books.

WW: I do. I don’t like short little ones. In art school I read Remembrance of Things Past, War and Peace, Ulysses. I liked that. The first short thing I liked was Borges’s Labyrinths which had a big influence on me.

AL: I love that you read this heavy stuff and then the work you make is all about Get it!, 1984, ink on paper, 8 1/2 x 11 inches.
AL: Always?

WW: Yes. Since I first became overwhelmed by it in my last year of high school. I heard The Four Seasons on the radio. It was a really corny Vivaldi piece, but I was just like, Wow, what is that? I had goosebumps. And then I heard Bach’s sixth partita played by Glenn Gould, and that gave me goosebumps too. I went to art school in Boston and they had amazing radio stations at MIT and Harvard. They would devote whole programs to exploring the sonata form, for example, or the entire work of one composer. It was really deep; it wasn’t just a little of this, a little of that, like FM stations. It was heavy and exciting and I became a Glenn Gould addict.

AL: Did you see him live?

WW: I saw him in 1964 at the Gardner Museum, where he didn’t perform; he just stood next to a piano and talked. It was really maddening, but quite enterprising at the same time.

AL: Right, like there’s a piano up there, but not to be played. I saw Charlemagne Palestine do something like that once at Sonnabend. He hadn’t performed in New York in however many years, and they had a Bösendorfer for him, which has the extra keys he needs to get into the lower depths. He ranted the whole time about how New York doesn’t respect classical. He ranted the whole time about how New York doesn’t respect the piano. He hadn’t performed in New York in twenty years, and now I’m back into that. And I do love William Byrd as well as Fayrfax, Tallis, Gibbons, Brahms, Scriabin, and Bach. I have twenty million CDs, all classical.

AL: The new paintings that you’re doing, what are they about?

WW: I became interested in images of wrecked houses or cars or boats. Disasters from the Internet. An interstate contractor bulldozed the condos he built somewhere in England when he didn’t get paid. A car drove into Mr. Plueger’s kitchen, it had to be boarded up. A truck smashed into Pete’s Convenience store in Iowa… I’m also working on drawings on plywood—it’s corny Vivaldi but some look like they should be on paper like New Yorker cartoons, but they’re drawn on big chunks of wood. I’ve been also making more of my postcard paintings. Recently, they’re mostly these beautiful motel cards. Working upstate for the past three years has led to quite an array of directions and that’s okay, I guess.

AL: So many directions. This book is different from a lot of your other publications, certainly the books in the last number of years. In terms of your audience, what do you think the reaction will be?

WW: I have no idea. I’m really happy with the book. You did a great job curating it. The most puzzling thing about it, I guess, is the cover. You know, it’s very misleading.

AL: The cover is indeed confusing. I had some friends over to my house, and I didn’t point it out to them. It was just sitting on my table, and it really confused a couple of people.

WW: It’s very perplexing, isn’t it? Perfect.

AL: You and I both share a love of Morton Feldman. When did you find him?

WW: I met him when I was at the University of Illinois and remember seeing him on stage talking to John Cage. He was pretty magnetic. I recently got a recording of his five-hour String Quartet no. 2. It kind of cleanses the palate to listen to something like that. And I was listening to a lot of spectral music five or six years ago and that was really exciting.

AL: Like who?

WW: Gérard Grisey. And Tristan Murail, another composer who was teaching at Columbia.

AL: Do you get inspiration from listening to music while you’re working?

WW: No. I just have it on. For a while I was making sure that when I was painting, I was only listening to twentieth-century music, because I didn’t want to get distracted and start painting the wrong century. Or if things are too overwhelming and too wonderful you kind of interpret your own work as being the cause of that.

AL: It infiltrates your mind.

WW: For a moment you think you’re great.

AL: I recently bought a new stereo and had this experience the other day when I put a record on while I was trying to work. The speakers are so much better than what I had before, and I became completely overwhelmed by the music. I stood frozen in place with a book in my hand for two minutes because I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

WW: What were you listening to?

AL: A duet album by the great South African jazz pianist Abdullah Ibrahim and bassist Johnny Dyani. I must have been standing in the sweet spot, almost where the microphone was when they were recording it. In a way it felt like the music was being aimed directly at me, and while it was on I couldn’t do anything else.

WW: Wow. AL: I’ve found that I can’t work anymore at all with music that has words. I used to be able to, but now I can’t get anything done.

WW: Lately, I’ve been listening to Monteverdi and Gesualdo madrigals while I’m painting. I went through a big Monteverdi period about twenty years ago, and now I’m back into that. And I do love William Byrd as well as Fayrfax, Tallis, Gibbons, Brahms, Scriabin, and Bach. I have twenty million CDs, all classical.

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