



Man Ray, Do You Want To

Man Ray, do you want to do something? Do you want to go out? Where do you want to go? To the park? Or do you want to go to the beach? Or, do you want to see Gayle? Where's Gayle? Or Man Ray do you want to see Judy? Or how about Teddy? Man Ray, do you want to see Teddy? Or do you want to stay there? Or do you want to come here? Man Ray, Man Ray, Stay. Do you want to go to see Gayle? D'you want to go to see Teddy? Do you want to go to see Judy? Do you want to go to see Gayle? Do you want to go to see Ralph? Who's Ralph? I don't know. Do you want to see Gayle? How about Gary? Man Ray, do you want to go see Gary? Or, we could do that, or we could . . . Man Ray, do you want to go to the beach? What about just for a bike ride? Do you want to go for a bike ride? Why don't we go? Let's go. But first, stay there. I don't know. Maybe we should, well, we could. Man Ray, we could, Man Ray, we could uh, Man Ray now, we could. If you don't want to, we don't *have* to now. Man Ray, do you want to? Only if you want to. Are you sure you want to, Man Ray? Why not? Why don't we go there? We could . . .

LB: How long have you been working with Man Ray?

WW: When we moved to California in 1970 . . .

LB: Can you speak up?

WW: No. We got a dog when we moved to California because we had a big space or we decided it wouldn't be too difficult. We picked him out of a litter in Long Beach. Compared to the other puppies in the litter he acted strange and distant. Later we found out why—he had swallowed a beach ball. Most of it came out a couple of weeks later. We're still waiting for the rest of it. I had no idea I was going to be using him in the pieces. . . . I didn't get him for that reason. He was brought up under the camera all along because he'd be around while I was working and get into some photographs and tapes accidentally, so it became very matter of fact to use him.

LB: And you were using objects in your domestic environment anyway.

WW: As far as the videotapes go, I could work quite well with him around because he doesn't . . . or at least, I don't think he understood what I was saying so he didn't

bother me at all. In a way, he's like an object. You can look at him and say, how am I going to use you, whereas you can't with a person.

LB: But unlike an object he obviously can respond to you and some of the most hilarious tapes are those where the gap between human thinking and dog-type thinking seems to have been eliminated.

WW: He doesn't respond to my looking at him and having designs on him, ulterior motives. You can manipulate him so that he doesn't feel manipulated, so that he feels he's doing something he's supposed to do or having fun, one of the two. I can command him to do what I want, like telling him to stay or I can trick him into doing something like licking up the milk or getting the treat out of the bottle. I play on his natural inclinations.

LB: How did you get him to lap up that milk?

WW: Well, he likes milk, simply. He'd lick it up if the camera wasn't on him. But there are other times when he seems to know that I'm working with him and he gets calm somehow, he's not silly or frivolous.

LB: But it seems that now you have a very

An
Interview
with
William
Wegman
by
Liza
Béar



Man Ray, *Do You Want To...* 1972. All stills are from half-inch AV videotape.

special relationship with Man Ray in which he's much more than just part of your natural environment.

WW: That's true. I could never love a doorknob. . . . Maybe I was always trying to animate objects, maybe I wanted to make them come to life in some way in my work. And Man Ray already had that tension, that potential of becoming more than he was. At times he appears to be on the brink of transcending his animal nature. Once I thought I heard him say, "Will you be needing me today, Bill?" It would take very little for him to put it all together, and that's what I work with in some of the tapes. I treat him as though he already has and the tension is in that he has not. But mostly I think he has a great presence and that's what I get away with. I never wanted to use him in a cute doggy way as in dog food ads or in a falsely sentimental way like Lassie or Trigger. I didn't want to romanticize him at all. But it's hard for me to be objective because he's my dog and I'm fond of him as a pet as well as an art partner.

LB: Do you think that some of your best tapes

have been done with Man Ray?

WW: Those that are done between us may be the best. There's a kind of pretension that might exist when I am on alone that he helps to ease. On the other hand the tapes—the treat in the bottle, for instance—where he is working on his own, I don't feel so strongly about. I guess the most successful ones are those with a higher degree of coordination between us—whether I'm on camera with him, like in *Spelling Lesson*, or behind the camera like in *Panning*. I'm pretty discriminating in the pieces that I do with him.

PAUSE.

1234567891011121314151617181920212223
242526272829303132333435363738394041
424344454647484950515253545556575859
606162636465666768697071727374757677
787980818283848586878889 but they're
all pretty small.

LB: (Laughs). That's absurd.
WW: Here's another version.

1234567891011121314151617181920212223
242526272829303132333435363738394041
424344454647484950515253545556575859
606162636465666768697071727374757677
787980818283848586878889 But twelve of
them are dead.

LB: What are you counting? The first time I thought you were counting the rungs in the zipper.
WW: Just little things in there.



Counting 1973

CARTOON FACES

- There you are! I've been looking all over for you! Time to go!
- What?
- Don't you remember?
- I don't remember you.
- Sure you do.
- You're making a mistake. You're confusing me with somebody else.
- I never forget a face! Let's go!
- Couldn't you uh come back for me tomorrow? I've got some things to do. You know, take care of some business and see some people, and stuff like that. Then I'll be ready to go.
- That's what you said the last time and you ran away! You're not going to trick me this time! I'm right here. I'm going to watch ya and we're going to go in just a minute. So . . . say good-bye.
- Uh . . . I think that maybe I would rather *not* go, actually. I've been thinking it over and . . .
- You made a contract! Don't hedge!
- Uh . . . couldn't uh . . . let me call up my lawyers and stuff.



Cartoon Faces 1971



- You signed and it's time to sign off.
- (no)
- Uhhuh!
- (no)
- Yes it is! Say good bye!
- (bye)

PAUSE.

LB: Could we look at the tape you made last week?

AIRPLANE TRAVEL

That would be a terrible way to go, wouldn't it? I mean, you're just so . . . I can't think of a worse way to go than in an airplane crash, but if it's not going to crash it's so boring and your legs get all cramped up and it's not worth it, you might as well drive. And when you do finally, after circling the airport for half an hour, you get down there and you go to pick up your baggage and wait around for another half hour. I mean you could have driven usually, and then when you get your baggage, by the time you get it, half the time it's empty.

SPELLING LESSON

P-A-R-K was spelt correctly. *Wait* a minute. And you spelt O-U-T right. But when it came to BEACH, you spelt it B-E-E-C-H, which is like . . . uh, well, there's a gum called beech-nut gum, but the correct spelling is . . . we meant beach like the sand, like the ocean, so it should have been B-E-A-C-H. (Man Ray whines). You see, that's the difference. Well okay, I forgive you, but remember it next time.





LB: You don't like *Airplane Travel*?

WW: Oh, it's all right.

LB: It's not quite as *zachlicht* as most of the others, is it?

WW: I think the words aren't placed right; it doesn't flow as well; the language I use isn't quite natural. But the idea is just as good.

Maybe it's different from a lot of my pieces in that I'm presenting an object and a motion, not just an object and telling a story about it. But the motion itself is very exaggerated, totally unrealistic—I'm wobbling my legs very

mechanically. I'm not trying to be convincing in the least. There's a displacement. In other words, no one really behaves that way in an airplane; something was off in it (the motion).

LB: Is that what you're interested in, very often, a kind of displacement from the familiar function of an object or a familiar activity?

WW: That's partly it. I present a situation and develop some kind of explanation around it. By the time the story is over you get to know why that particular prop or mannerism was displayed. But in *Airplane Travel*, nothing is

explained. It's as though the story is dispelled, or the structure of the story has been abused. In other words, it doesn't follow that the bag is empty because you're waiting around for a bag at the airport . . . now I like the idea.

LB: The idea of a certain kind of non-sequitur?

WW: Yes, of a logical assumption that's false. Everyone knows what fear is on an airplane. I suppose, unless they're terribly brave. There are certain cloudy experiences on an airplane like fear of crashing, boredom and the hassle of waiting around for your baggage which are very familiar. Usually the baggage doesn't end up being empty, but I presented that as a typical occurrence, and one can imagine it being a normal function of . . .

LB: Oh, it's something that could easily fall within your range of expectations when you travel.

WW: But it doesn't actually—you don't get your luggage back with nothing in it, so that ending wakes you up more than a normal story would of someone complaining. I suppose most of my stories are like that.

LB: You mean they have a twist at the end, an element of surprise? "Surprise" is a bit too strong, though, isn't it?

WW: Yes, it is. The ending is unexpected but I'm not telling it as though it's at all surprising. *Born with No Mouth* is the kind of story I was thinking of earlier where the dialogue leads away from the familiar take on the image and finally reinstates it. On TV, the image of a man's face covered with lather usually indicates a commercial about shaving cream. But what I did with that image was to focus on the mouth—which of course looks very small and peculiar with the lather around it—and made up a story around it.

I'm sorry I called you an idiot. I'm not very good at names.





BORN WITH NO MOUTH

I was born with no mouth at all, just a kind of plane across my face. I did have a well-developed nose when I was born. Actually I did have a mouth; it was more like just a little slit about an eighth of an inch wide. Hardly even a sixteenth of an inch 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. 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.

LB: It's a pretty outrageous story!

WW: I think that's one of the better ones. The principal problem becomes that I had to bother with shaving since I was six, and it throws away the embarrassment of having a very small and unusual mouth. When I do get my grandfather's mouth grafted onto me, they had to put some skin around my face as well—it was old man's skin which you had to shave everyday. And then the original image seems to make sense.

LB: Oh, for a moment I almost took you

literally! The tone of your voice was exactly the same as it had been on the tape.

WW: (laughs) I just imagined you were a camera.

LB: Well, I was trying to think more about the notion of displacement. . . . One of the reasons your stories work is because they're told in an absolutely deadpan voice, and there's no change of tone throughout.

WW: Deadpan, but hopefully without a comic's forced deadpan. . . . Some of the pieces are exaggerations of normal situations and others are a cutting away. The activity or the situation is somehow adapted or bent out of shape and then reconstructed, but I perform it as though that's the way things really are. When I relate to something, I don't sound terribly surprised or upset about it; it's as though someone were telling a normal story about an everyday event. That's partly a force of the medium because I look at my image in the monitor while I'm speaking and I refer to that rather than to myself. It's a definite reorientation because that image is reversed. You have to relearn left and right and your mind has to work a little harder to overcome what the body is used to. My speech becomes deliberate and slower than normal.

LB: Let's look at some more of the new tapes.

TRIP ACROSS COUNTRY

For the most part, then, the trip across country is really pretty boring. You go through a lot of—little towns. It's mostly flat, you know. I thought there'd be more, more green. It's that kind of arid dry brown dull—it's very boring. I don't know, it's really boring. And the food, especially along Route 66—I mean we had some really terrible awful dinners. Then we got to the Grand Canyon, now that's another story, that is really overwhelming. In fact, I . . . I never forgot the Grand Canyon, I . . . I can still see it. It's really spectacular—truly amazing. But other than that, there wasn't much else—to see.



WW: In the more recent tapes, I've been using facial expressions and movements which are in some way out of phase.

TIME

I was just—you know, I wasn't bothering anyone, I was walking down the street on my way home from work, and this guy stops me and he says, Hey buddy, what time is it? And I said, I don't know, I don't have a watch, and he says, That's not what I asked you, and he slugged me. Knocked me down. People said that I shouldn't move, I should wait for an ambulance. I've been here about twenty minutes, it still isn't here.

RADAR SCREEN

During the day, I work all day on checking out the radar screen. I have to make sure that none of the planes bump into each other. My eyes get tired from looking at the radar screen all day, so when I get home I want to relax but first I have to check and make sure that everything is in order, perfect order or else I won't be able to really relax.

LB: This is the first time you've had the voice out of sync, isn't it? It's also interesting because you're approximating the function of an object.

WW: In Radar Screen? Yeah, I imagined that if you were watching a radar screen your body would have to follow it as well as it goes round and round. What really gave me the idea for the piece was sitting in that swivel chair. But in the dubbing over in general in the stories, I wanted to get more of a narration effect.

LB: An additional displacement.

WW: Yes, it makes for a different kind of piece. I was interested in the different pattern that my voice develops when I'm not recording live. Because I can see the image when I play it back to record the voice over, I'm always trying to catch up with my actions by anticipating what



WW: Yes, but I have to place the monitor so that I'm in partial profile to the camera. The viewer is in the same position as the camera, so I have to place the camera where it automatically comes out the viewer is going to be, where he's going to see my particular point of view, my image or the image of what I set up. But if I am in complete profile, I find it's too stylized and it doesn't project that I'm talking to someone else, or it looks too self-conscious. I think the pieces read somewhere in between talking to another person and just talking. The eyes are also very important. . . . The false eye contact you would



was previously recorded. I see them progressing in a certain order and I try to make the words partially fit, and sort of recapture what was done originally. I just did a tape where I asked Gayle to look at the material and then dub her own interpretations of what I was doing over it, knowing that it would be almost impossible. When she got the microphone she started laughing and said she couldn't do it so I helped her out and then there's the two of us describing the action.

LB: There's an edge to your voice in that piece, just verging on cynicism, which you usually manage to avoid, though with a slight inflection it could often turn into a gentle kind of mockery. And it's also different because there's a real dialogue between two people as opposed to a pretended dialogue with you speaking in several voices. Is that something you might get into?

WW: I might give it a try. Every once in a while I have to get into a different situation to stimulate myself. Though I can't imagine working with a whole crew of other performers around. . . . I've noticed that usually when I work by myself, a piece doesn't seem right if it isn't a certain distance from the camera or if I'm not looking at the camera at a certain angle.

LB: Do you look straight at the monitor?

have by looking straight at the camera is more disturbing than the kind of posture one assumes. If my eyes were looking into the camera then it would seem as though I was looking into the viewer's eyes. We would have this eye contact which sets up a whole psychology of a relationship that doesn't actually exist. It's quite shocking. . . . film directors are conscious of this. Only Godard would occasionally have a character looking directly into the camera, and have an imaginary audience for him which takes you out of the story.

LB: In that case there always seems to be some sort of power play involved.

WW: Yeah.

LB: Are you very aware of directing techniques in movies?

WW: Not really.

Man Ray: Bark. Barkbark. Bark.

LB: Why did you do *Dog and Ball* as a videotape? It seems much closer to your photographic work than to the other video pieces.

WW: In a way it does parallel my photographs in that there seems to be a series of stills. What I did was to ask Man Ray to place each paw, four paws he has, on the bowling ball, and he held them there for as long as he cared to, which

turned out to be about thirty seconds. After he breaks each pose he sits, and I interpret that to mean he still knows he's under command to do something, and he responds with the most familiar form of obedience he knows and that's sitting. After he's been through the four paws I make him sit on the bowling ball because that sort of follows, and what struck me as interesting was that after he broke that pose he didn't sit, he lay down. I don't know why, but it seemed to make sense. I think it wouldn't have worked if I had done it as photographs, because the effect of the piece had a lot to do with the time and the breaking of the pose.

LB: I suppose one of the main elements that make videotape more interesting is what you can do with timing, which obviously has to be judged very finely.

WW: But the absence of that time element is what makes the photographs interesting for me to do which is why I do both. Without a lot of fancy cutting you can't pull out and rearrange in a videotape, or show things existing in a number of different states.

Would you mind helping me with this coat. I can't figure out if this is a button or a zipper.





Same Old Shirt 1972

SAME OLD SHIRT

—I suppose you do that just to insult me. I mean here I get all dressed up and you come looking like a mechanic in the same old shirt.

—What d'you mean? What's wrong with this?

—You've worn that three straight days. It's beginning to smell.

—I just washed it.

—I can smell it from here. I thought we were going out tonight.

—Yeah, but just to a movie or something; it doesn't matter, you know, what you look like. Nobody's going to see you in the dark anyway.

—It's just the idea. I like to look nice when we go out, and I'd like you to look nice too.

—Well, what d'you want me to do? Change or something? We'll miss the movie if I do that.

—Well, why don't we stay home and watch TV. I'm not going out with you looking like that.

—It's up to you. Personally I don't care.

WW: I was thinking of that TV style of teaching, like Julia Child showing you how to make croissants or something, and I worked up the story around it.

LB: At one stage you seem to have drawn on commercials a lot as source material . . .

WW: Yeah. But my tapes have a different kind of thrust. The piece with Man Ray where I'm selling cars is in fact based on an advertisement in LA and probably all over the country which uses a dog. A dog sits on a car and the guy in the ad fondles the dog while he's talking about cars. Everyone can figure out that you use either a pretty girl or a dog . . .

LB: A cultural cliché . . .

WW: . . . an image that people can fit right into, a stock image that has mass appeal, but in *New and Used Car Salesman* I used the dog to undermine as well as play with that gimmick.

LB: You took that kind of advertising gimmick to its logical conclusion . . . or rather, you made the presence of the dog necessary to the piece in a way which it never is in advertisements, where it's usually just a sentimental adjunct . . . its relevance is assumed, but not really justified.



Straw and String 1972

STRAW AND STRING

Straw in one hand, and then with the string that we've given you, start from one end coiling it around. It should look like this. Now, draw the two ends together, so that you get to about the middle. Does it look like that? Now with the cup in the other hand, notice, your hands aren't touching the straw, your lips don't touch the cup, and only the straw touches your mouth, and then when you drink, you don't have to worry at all about germs.



New & Used Car Salesman 1973

NEW & USED CAR SALESMAN

I am lifting this eighty-pound dog onto my lap and I'm trying to talk normally even though the pain from the weight of the dog is almost unbearable. It's very hard to talk and keep a straight face with the dog on my lap because he fidgets so and he tries to get away, he tries to break out of my grip but I have him securely locked in my arms. I'm trying to sell you a new or used car from our downtown lot and trying to talk you into buying one and I hope that if perhaps if I have this dog on my lap you'll come to see me as a kind person, because a mean person . . . if I was a mean person and a shark so to speak, this dog wouldn't let me touch him and paw him so; he'd uh, he wouldn't have such faith in me. And so too, just as this dog trusts me, I would like you out there to trust me and come down to our new and used car lot and buy some of our quality cars. I know you'll be satisfied. Thousands of others have been. Thank you for listening.

LB: Do you find commercials the most interesting aspect of channel television?

WW: No.

LB: What then?

WW: I actually like seeing long movies. I tend not to like short things that are funny and quick, that are more like my own work. The kind of art that I like and the books I like to read are usually long and involved.

LB: Why do all your pieces fall within a very speedy time range? What's the longest one you've done? Three minutes?

WW: No, there's one that's about eight minutes, where Man Ray is trying to get the treat from the bottle. All my pieces involve a few elements with a single idea. They're not cut and spliced or put together in any sense, and that's what you'd have to do to make a longer and more complex work. I don't think I have the patience to do a long video piece or a long story; I always feel a great relief when it's over.

LB: Well, the short linear episode is definitely a form that's special to your work. But some of the stories don't have such an obviously built-in length. It seems that you have to decide when to stop.



Growing 1973

WW: Yes, I could elaborate more on one or another. And there are some non-narrative pieces, like the one of Man Ray with the cape where he's panning back and forth where I just had to say, that's enough of that. It ended up being about two minutes long but I could have made it into a loop and done it for an hour. But the fact that he pans back and forth for what seems like a long time—but not forever—is what's interesting because it develops into a mechanical-looking image.

LB: You don't quite know when he's going to stop, so a certain tension is created.

WW: And if it had been a loop you would know that it was artificial somehow, manufactured.

DIRTY FLOOR

When my floor is dirty I don't bother with brooms and buckets and mops and that sort of thing, I just . . . in a real stern voice I say, Go on, get out of here, go some place else, and don't come back, d'you hear? And it usually works.

WW: The little black smudge that moves towards the end of the tape is a spider.



Dirty Floor 1973

It sure is good to be out of that coma and back on the job. I don't know if I'll ever get used to these new felt-tipped pens though. If you're not careful the ink soaks right through the paper. If I work with them too long I get dizzy.

LB: Some of the written stories might work equally well on videotape.

WW: Except that I never write down the story before I do a videotape. I don't follow a script. Some of the stories could have become tapes if I hadn't written them down.

LB: You mean once you've written it down it's impossible to perform it?

WW: It becomes much more difficult, because you'll notice when I do a piece over and over again it doesn't get better. Occasionally I'll think of a new component to add, or maybe I did something basically wrong the first time, but generally my performance doesn't improve with repetition. There's probably something in the struggle of thinking up the story in front of the camera that makes the tone of the voice sound right or fit the work. Otherwise I would have to get into acting—and I'm not a very good actor. I can't read the story and memorizing makes me speak too fast. Generally the pace speeds up when I repeat a piece, and I seem to add certain expressions which I think will work but actually don't; they're usually overdone. It's hard to control it.

LB: So the way you work is exactly the opposite of learning, practising a routine, or rehearsing and then performing.

WW: Yes, but when I have an idea for a piece I don't just set up the equipment and start babbling. Sometimes I have a particular prop in front of me, or a fairly specific reference in mind—for instance, in *Speed Reading*, I was thinking about those courses given to help you



read faster, and when I was in front of the monitor, I noticed that your nostrils seem to look at a book just as much as your eyes—at least mine do because they're very large—so they might as well be doing something. So I thought of putting transistors in your nose “to decode difficult words and send them up to brain.”

EMPEROR AND DISH

You see, I knew that the emperor was going to be coming down that particular street that day because there was a parade, and so I positioned myself on a corner, and had this piece of broken dish in my hand and started crying, I was bawling my eyes out. And sure enough, the emperor came over to me and he said, Sonny, what's the matter? And I said, I saved all my money and bought this dish for my mother, and I just dropped it and it broke on the street. And as he reached in his bag he said, reached down, he said, That's okay, Sonny, here's a new dish, you give this to your mommy. And I was really grateful and everything, but actually I just found this piece of broken dish on the side of the street, so I got a dish for nothing.

WW: After doing a lot of these narrative tapes with my image on them I got really sick of hearing myself talk and seeing my face, so I started panning the camera around in the area that I was working in.

IN THE CUP

—Hey Bill!

—Yeah.

—Where are you?

—I'm in the cup.

—Okay, I'll see you later.

—Yeah, I'll talk to you in a while.

WW: I think I did it over. I'll see if it's any better.

—Hey Bill.

—Yeah.

—Where are you?

—I'm in the cup.

—All right, I'll talk to you later.

—All right, see ya.

WW: That's the one I used, the second one.

LB: When did you start working with video? And what was the immediate impetus?

WW: In Madison, Wisconsin, in '69. It just so happened that the education department had some Craig half-inch equipment used for taping lectures which was made available to me. Right



Emperor and Dish 1972

before that I had done a few live performances and some outdoor pieces, floating words in the water—I did one called *The River Has Five Words*—and some 8mm films. I had a studio right on campus and I could use the videorecorder everyday so I did a lot of very short pieces, mostly under a minute long. They had to do with props rather than stories, though.

LB: What kind of props were you using then?

WW: I did floor pieces with familiar objects—matches and nails and whatever was around. I was using material for the kind of look it had already, but still manipulating it in some way.

LB: Did it seem like a real breakthrough when you got into making tapes?

WW: A tremendous breakthrough. I wanted my work to deal with things that really meant something to me . . .

LB: What were they?

WW: Well, the kinds of things you tend to catch yourself thinking about, whether you're supposed to or not. In Wisconsin I fixed on that as a very strong idea, but when I moved to California it became a resolution, not to let myself get too far away from what I was really thinking about. And more than that, I wasn't

going to build a body of work based on my previous work.

LB: How did video enable you to do that?

WW: The whole way of working with it is so open—you don't have a sense of completing certain problems with different materials . . . Photography isn't fluid enough, and there's something unnatural about doing pieces for a place or even on location, a separation between having an idea and putting it down just in terms of time. Video is closer to real time—it allows me to keep up with myself.

LB: Is that partly why you like doing short pieces?

WW: I don't much like working on something I don't feel in touch with any more. I like to get it down once right away. Of course, sometimes I have to do a tape several times before it works. And that's also why I don't like to go outside my studio with my equipment. Once I got there, I'd probably forget what I'd been thinking about; I'd have to throw myself back to an earlier state of mind.

LB: What kind of equipment did you have access to in California?

WW: At first I tried to work with a borrowed half-inch portapak without a monitor. But I

couldn't use it everyday so I bought a \$200 machine and an old camera—I couldn't focus well over a certain distance with that kind of equipment so there'd be a lot of complaints about the quality of the tapes. I don't think that's so important, but it kept me within certain confines. I had to work within a radius of about ten feet, and I didn't have a very good microphone, so I didn't think of any pieces where I would be narrating. It's hard to think of what came first, whether if I'd had a good microphone and camera at the time I'd have done the kind of pieces I'm doing now. Also I was working in a house, not a studio.

LB: What kind of a house?

WW: It looked like anyone's house. It had a door and a window, a regular front door with steps.

LB: You mean, it was a fairly domestic set-up.

WW: The setting was familiar . . . and I liked that.

LB: And there were lots of objects around.

WW: Enough to fix on. We got Man Ray at that time too.

LB: Have you always found it necessary to have a very stable environment to work from? A material base that's relatively unchanging?



Peck & Chuck 1972

PECK & CHUCK

I wanted to find out/how much wood/a woodpecker could peck/compared to that of a/ . . . to how much wood a woodchuck could chuck and it turns out that/a woodpecker can peck as much/wood as a woodchuck can chuck/relative to their own/size.

WW: I used to think so. Now I'm pretty excited by going into new spaces, but I have to live there . . .

LB: Since you've come to New York?

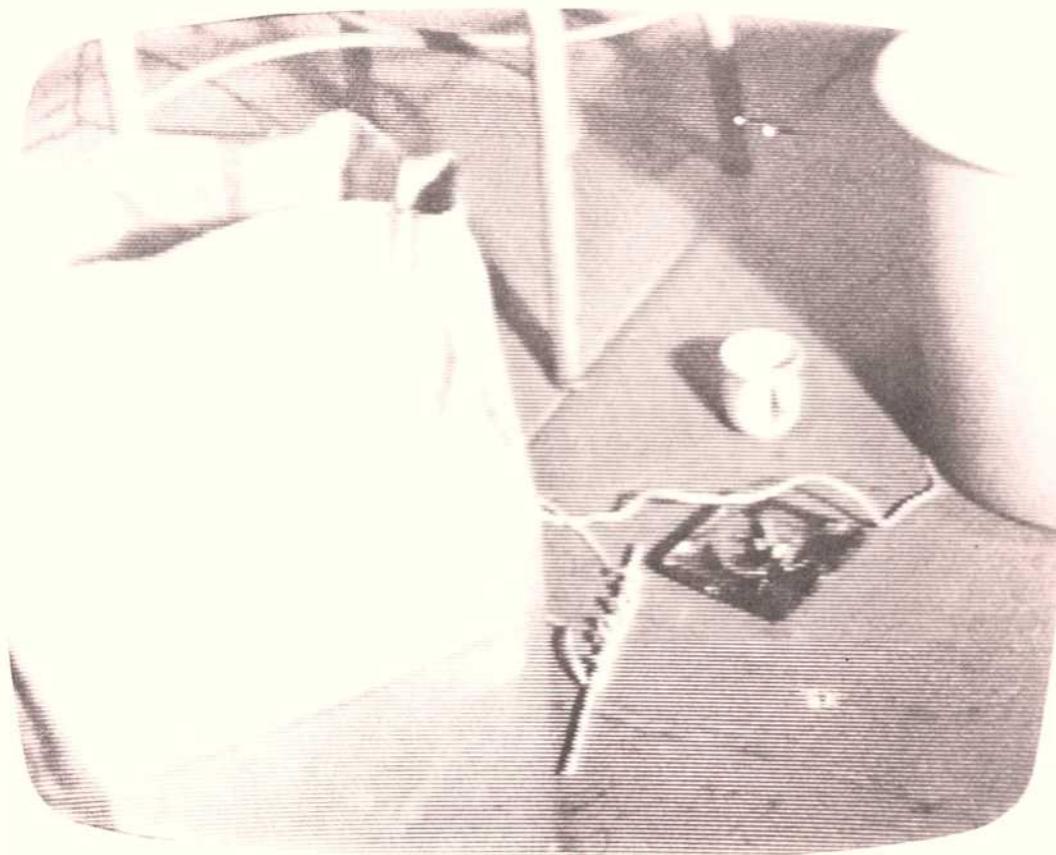
WW: Well, before then. In fact, when I moved to my typical artist's studio in Santa Monica I had to buy props at the Goodwill and so on to have around to stimulate me. There's nothing there that looks like a house. I could have taken something off a door and it would have stopped looking like a door because it was just a piece of plywood with a door handle on it; it didn't have too much other information in it. So I focussed on myself more in this new environment because there was nothing else around that I could deal with in an amusing way. But I never had any sort of devotion towards objects. There were just certain things that I could charge up more easily than others. I think I could work anywhere as long as I felt I was living there and not just visiting.

LB: Had you been writing down stories before you got into the more narrative videotapes?

WW: Yes. I used to write down stories but it wasn't until after the tapes that I realized where they might fit in.

LB: What's your main interest in these stories?

WW: First of all they're not exactly stories, they're very short, never more than a few sentences, and the style tends to shift from



In The Cup 1972

straight narrative to different kinds of throwaway literature. Quite often they start out in ordinary conversational tone and then there's a transition to the style of an advertisement or newspaper copy or an office memo, some familiar kind of non-literary writing, but it's never that obvious, it's more just reminiscent of those styles. The tone is somewhere between conversation and written language. They're meant to be read.

LB: Are they intended as parodies of those forms in any sense?

WW: Not really. I'm more interested in the shift . . . a phasing in from one tone to another. Also, I'm not comfortable moving around with my equipment. I don't even like taking photographs outside my studio, but the writing I can do anywhere, and I don't have to be tied down to a particular setting or place. For me to make a tape, there usually has to be some immediate visual stimulus, like that swivel chair . . . I won't just put myself on camera and tell a story, there has to be a reason for it. In the written stories nothing could be added, no prop or object or timing . . . they usually take off from some memory of an experience or a situation.

LB: But it's never a literal rendering of it . . . there's a sort of subtle play on different forms of expression . . . The range of experiences that you draw on, though, in both the videotapes and the written stuff seems to me to overlap—things that have generally been excluded or ignored as being too light-hearted or commonplace to be material for art—

WW: I think that the things I write about or deal with on tape are what people generally think about whether they like to admit 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. I know the normal take well enough to have a different take, but I don't have any set notion about the nature of reality or what the world's really about or anything like that. What I select is more like an example. In other words, something exists in the world first and then I make a piece out of it.



CROOKED FINGER CROOKED STICK

- Neat stick!
- Boy, is it crooked!
- Oh, that's nothing. You ought to see my finger.
- Wow! Neat finger! Boy, is that crooked!
- Oh, that's nothing. You ought to see my stick.
- Wow, is that neat! Boy, it's really crooked.
- That's nothing. You ought to see my finger.
- Wow, that's even neater! Boy, is that crooked!
- Oh, that's nothing. You ought to see my stick.
- Oh wow! Is that ever crooked!

DEODORANT

Of all the deodorants, this is the one that I enjoy using the most. It feels real nice going on, and smells good, and keeps me dry all day. I don't have to worry about it cutting out at clutch moments. All the other ones are just, oh, they just never seem to hold up under pressure for me. I can put this on once during the day, and for the rest of the day I'm fine. I'm all set up; I don't have to worry about, you know, social nervousness or anything. It's just . . . It keeps me feeling good and fresh. I love the smell. I don't think there's any deodorant that comes close to this one.



BUBBLE-UP

Okay, I'm only going to do this once, so watch carefully because we don't want to have to retake it. (Slap over and over). Bubbleup. Okay, now I'll try it. (Slap). Bubbleup. No, your rhythm, your whole timing is off. You did hit yourself in the right places but you've got to get more feeling into it. Watch this just one more time. (Slap) Bubbleup. Okay, I got it. Blooop. I didn't get the bubbleup right did I? No, it's got to sound more like a real bubble going up. (Slap). Bubbleup. Let me try it over where you are. (Slap). Bubbleup. That was good; that's better.

WW: It's interesting to watch the original tape . . . those three pieces were done together and I used them together. In *Deodorant* the language is okay but it's too specifically set as a parody of an advertising commercial. *Bubbleup* is better in that it's less one track—it's not so much a grotesque extension of a commercial—it combines some features of a commercial with the role of a film director.

LB: When you edit them into a half-hour tape, is there any attempt to program different tapes or do you just keep the ones that are best on individual grounds?

WW: Well, generally I keep the ones that I did together together. Probably because I feel comfortable with the spaces in between and how they read. I don't consciously fit pieces together and in one half hour of tape there's quite a range. I get into a certain gear and carry over the same voice if it seems right. So a series of pieces will have a similar feel because my voice pattern is alike. In *Crooked Stick*, though, the voice pattern is slightly different; it's more deliberately self-conscious. I'm trying to imitate someone who's amazed or excited about something that really isn't too exciting. Of those three I like *Deodorant* least.



At one point I liked the idea of having the same character play both roles, director and actor, and *Bubbleup* was a play on that, splitting a character. One half was on screen and the other off screen, and the irony was that the actor only got it right at the end, when he was off screen. It's a bit like those puzzles where you have to figure out something very obvious, how far a train is going and how long it'll take, and you're given so much unnecessary information and then you discover that the whole premise is false and the train doesn't

even exist, something stupid like that. The way that piece was set up, the only way to get the bubble up correctly was to be off camera—the actor keeps thinking he does it incorrectly because of rhythm and timing or something, but actually it's just because he wasn't in the right place.

PAUSE.

WW: Do you want to go on to something else?

LB: Okay.

WW: Here's another story.

—Where were you? We were looking all over for you.

—I went shopping.

—Oh, what d'you get?

—I got a new shirt.

—Looks nice.

—D'you like it?

—Yeah, it's a great shirt. It's kind of big on you though, isn't it?

—Well, once I wash it it'll shrink down to my size.

—That shirt's not going to shrink, it's sanforized.

—Well, if it doesn't shrink I'll bring it back and get a smaller shirt.

—Well, I don't think they let you take things back once they're washed.

—Well, I'll make up some story then if it doesn't.

WW: I don't like the commercially-oriented tapes so much any more, the ones that have their roots in something that's familiar through a medium, television or . . .

Man Ray: (Yawn.)

LB: Do you think they're tied in to a certain California sensibility?

WW: No, I don't really. It was just a particular phase. I did most of those tapes in a few weeks and was probably watching too much TV. I seemed comfortable dealing with products then; that's what I wanted to talk about, that's what happened to be on my mind. I also wrote most of the first stories at the same time and they have a somewhat Ozzie and Harrietish flavor . . . you know, a slightly tongue-in-cheek attitude toward that kind of life. ■

What was that bright substance you had in your hair last night? When I touched it some of it came off on my hand and this morning I noticed my fingers are swollen.

