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Zohn, Patricia. "William Wegman gifts his entire short video catalogue to the Met." *www.wallpaper.com* (Wallpaper\*), 24 January 2018.

## Wallpaper\*



An excerpt of *Spelling Lesson*, 1974, by William Wegman. Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art

The stately Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York is now home to 174 short videos gifted by William Wegman. They're contextualised in an exhibition, 'Before/On/After', which includes works and ephemera from his confederates in the California Conceptual movement; but it was after an appearance on David Letterman's late night show in 1982 that Wegman's sly, renegade practice first took hold in the wider, popular consciousness.

Wegman recounted the origin of *Spelling Lesson*, a 1974 low-tech video he made with Man Ray, his first beloved Weimaraner, which he named for the legendary surrealist. He had been teaching conceptual art at the University of Illinois and had purloined a video camera that had been used to record lectures. After moving to California in 1970, he says, 'I was doing floor pieces and the dog was a total pest, impossible dog, and I'd be taping something on the floor, and there he was, but he looked great, a lot better than the bits of cheese or nails I was conceptually placing in the corner, and he was grey, that seemed to suit black and white video very well.'

The idea for this particular droll video – actually recorded after he left Long Beach for New York – began on a drive in Syracuse with Man Ray. Wegman was looking for Walnut Street, saying the names of each street they passed out loud. When they came to Beech, Man Ray, a California dog who loved the beach,

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Before/On/After (detail), 1972, by William Wegman. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Vital Projects Fund Inc. Gift, through Joyce and Robert Menschel, 2016. © William Wegman. Courtesy of the artist

‘went bonkers’. The slacker humour of the dog receiving spelling corrections from Wegman as they sit formally together at a table becomes a gentle lesson in how to deal with failure.

In his three years in California – 1970-1973 – Wegman became part of a group that also included Ed Ruscha, John Baldessari, Vija Celmins and Allen Ruppersberg, all of whom were poking holes in the stuffier, more academic, East Coast version of conceptualism by using paint, video and photography in ironic ways that turned didactic formalism on its head. In Wegman’s case, ‘putting on the dog’ turned out to be the very opposite of stuffy and pretentious, and contravened a scene in New York that he says ‘nearly did [him] in’.

Yet it is Wegman and his revolving cast of Weimaraners who have taken the journey from lo-fi Long Beach to international celebrity, completing a decidedly unforeseen Hollywood trajectory that belies their humble origins. The exhibition at the Met, of his work and that of his fellow travellers, makes for a cheerful New Year’s antidote to the more challenging news from around the world.