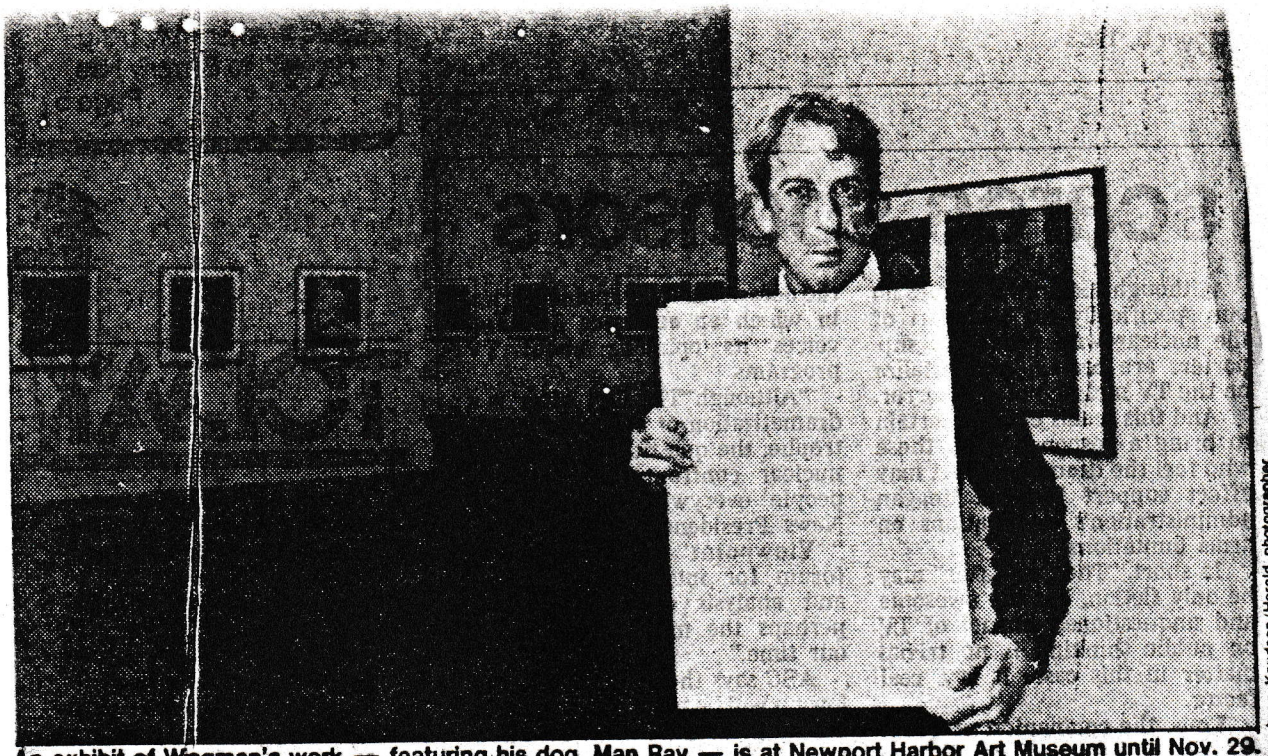

Anne Knudsen/Herald photographer

An exhibit of Wegman's work — featuring his dog, Man Ray — is at Newport Harbor Art Museum until Nov. 29.

Artist William Wegman is happy when people laugh at his work

His dog was his best friend . . . and also his best subject

By Hunter Drohojowska

William Wegman owned the most famous dog in the art world — Man Ray.

The dog, named after the dadaist artist, was the center of attention in Wegman's amusing and irreverant videotapes, photographs and drawings for 12 years.

Starting in 1970, Wegman took photographs of Man Ray contemplating his own bust or posed atop a Minimalist box or dressed up in ridiculous costumes. The videotapes of Man Ray are indescribably absurd, parodying some of the extremely self-conscious body art of 1960s. By the late 1970s, the dog was better known than the artist. "I found that everyone was saying, 'Oh, yeah, the guy with the dog,' and they weren't looking at the work," Wegman said recently. "So for a time I worked very infrequently with him on purpose (doing drawings and altered photographs) until 1979," when the dog began to age rapidly. "I thought that each picture might be his last, so I really wanted to do it (then)."

When Man Ray died in 1982, the art world mourned the loss and the inevitable question arose, "How would Wegman make art?"

Wegman, 39, is a sandy-haired, obviously shy man whose aesthetic is based on sight gags — the unexpected humor of vaudeville. Seated in a curator's office at the Newport Harbor Art Museum, where there is a retrospective of his art titled "Wegman's World" on view through Nov. 29, he remains a touch defensive as he responds to queries about a future without Man Ray. "I didn't really *have* to use him because I couldn't do anything else. But I felt that I had to do it that last year, that I had to get some more (pictures) to keep him that way. So, in a way, his death was kind of liberating. I did a lot of artwork right afterwards that was more fun and less ponderous. I missed him though."

Wegman was making art long before he bought Man Ray for $35. He began drawing as a child in East Longmeadow, Mass. "I was rather a lost child. . . . I was the kind of person who used to find quiet corners where I could putter with stuff. I took apart all my parents' old radios that didn't work and strung them together to make one super radio. I could get one station if I put one loose wire into a jar of Skippy peanut butter as a ground. I never went through a child phase. I was one of those kids who could draw in perspective when I was four."

He discovered his "true purpose" in 1961 when he entered Boston's Massachusetts College of Art, "and then I became this incredibly serious bore. It took a few years to get rid of that business."

He did Minimalist paintings typical of the period and, after graduation, went to the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, for his master of fine arts degree. But he only continued painting for one year because "I always struggled with painting. I couldn't decide whether the paint should be thick or thin, stained in or laid over, and I felt a real painter knows that instinctively."

In 1967 he accepted a teaching position first in Wausau, and later Madison, Wis., where he began experimenting in environmental, performance and conceptual art. It was there that he photographed some of his first whimsical environments and debuted his witty videotapes — a move that challenged the

prevailing academy of Modernist thinking in art. Wegman recalled the first responses were not uniformly encouraging: "When Martin Friedman (director of the prestigious Walker Art Center) said my work wasn't art because of the narrative, I knew I was on the right track." (Paradoxically, the current Newport exhibition was organized at the Walker, where Friedman still presides.)

Wegman spoke hesitantly as he retraced the motivations for his bizarre art. "It was with a sense of loss that I started to get funny. I knew that I was giving up something rather grand, I suppose ... the aquiline-nose, ascetic-artist image of serious high art. (I was) losing the magic, mystical, awe-inspiring Rothkoesque experience for something that I was just more capable of doing."

There were other reasons as well: "I was bored with all these artists who quoted (philosopher Ludwig) Wittgenstein all the time and probably didn't know much about it. Thinking back about 12 years, I know I did a lot of things because I was sick of a certain stance. The word 'interesting' wasn't enough for me. When another artist would come in and say 'That's interesting,' it wouldn't give me the kick that if someone laughed out loud."

Although local art aficionados claim Wegman as an "L.A. artist" — he lived here from 1970 to 1972 while teaching art at Cal State Long Beach — Wegman finds this idea somewhat amusing. "I had all these videotapes and photographs from Wisconsin and the day I arrived, I was in a show called '24 Young L.A. Artists" at the L.A. County (Museum of Art), and in 1971 in another show called "11 L.A. Artists" at the Hayward Gallery in London.

"It seemed that L.A. was in an era when they wanted to get over the finish-fetish sculpture," Wegman said, "and my rather casual photographs and tapes seemed like an L.A. sensibility. Actually, I *did* develop my work here much more and I can really see why I'd be called L.A. — my blondish hair, T-shirts, lack of concern for technology."

It was while living in Long Beach that Wegman bought the six-week-old Man Ray for his wife. He was making his videotapes with common objects around the house and the puppy kept blundering into the view of the camera. "I tricked him into doing some things for me and he seemed to have a real knack for it. He paid a lot of attention when the lights were on and the camera was going. Also, because I was working with black-and-white, and he was gray, it really exploited the tonal qualities. If he'd been a spotted dog, he'd only been good for a couple of jokes. He seemed to have a lot of latitude."

At first, Wegman said, he used the dog as a formal element, "a space modulator," but the dog started to do things on tape that were funny. Eventually the dog became a ham and enjoyed being a star. "He could hold a pose forever because he was a hunting dog. After a couple of years he knew exactly what was going on, what was video and not just me."

In 1972, the artist moved to New York City, where he still lives.

Wegman was approached by Polaroid in 1979 to use their newly developed instant camera which made large scale 20-by-24-inch prints in 85 seconds. Wegman resisted at first, never having worked in color, but he wanted to do a last series with Man Ray. The results, featured in this exhibition, are some of the most dramatic and touching, as well as humorous, portraits of the dog.

Since Man Ray's death, Wegman has continued to work at Polaroid with his girlfriend Eve Darcy as the subject, as well as drawing and making videotapes.

When asked about the exhibition title "Wegman's World," he explained, "I see it (the world) upside down and backwards and twisted, I suppose. Inverted. I usually take something that in one frame tells you *this* is going to happen, and then do the opposite in the next ... but have it make sense."