

WALLY HEDRICK: Offense Intended

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Within limits, a certain quality of unpleasantness and of ugliness is perfectly acceptable in the chic and fashionable world of contemporary painting. Yet even this world, conditioned to being slapped in the face and loving it, tends to reject Wally Hedrick's work out of hand. There is something in his particular kind of unpleasantness that seems to break an unwritten agreement, that seems to **actually** offend where other artists often only **pretend** to offend.

His conduct of himself as an artist — his management, or non-management, of his career also appears as a total rejection of the game. Though he has shown, for example, with some of the most important of his contemporaries (Jasper Johns, Rauschenberg, Stanekiewicz, Frank Stella) in the Museum of Modern Art's 1959 "Sixteen Americans," he is totally unconcerned with status. In a city overburdened with museum wall space he prefers to show in an offbeat artist's hang-out, the New Mission Gallery. Again, at a time when it is virtually a basic requirement for acceptance at a serious level, let alone the common practice, to create an identity by an easily identifiable and personal image, he resolutely refuses to nurture a style. Uncompromisingly uncommercial, he rejects every channel leading to acceptance.

Every aspect of his art is stamped with eccentricity. He loves art, but is full of the most genuine anti-art attitudes — his imagery is a completely crazy mixture of pop, common, vulgar and even obscene art tendencies. He is a character liable to do anything.

Originally from Los Angeles, Hedrick in his teens was an ardent hot rod fan and admirer of Von Dutch Holland, the famous itinerant custom coach craftsman of the Hollywood hot rod world, who conceived and executed the striping motif of hot rod decoration, mixed with corny science fiction images. This milieu profoundly affected Hedrick's art and was the first step towards his own particular brand of pop imagery. The hot rod world is not only marked by a high quality of mechanical ingenuity but also by an impeccable quality of surface and finish, and a piece of Hedrick's early welded sculpture in the exhibition, ("Yagi," 1953) is distinguished by this touch, later to be completely dropped.

In 1952 he moved to San Francisco where he found the artistic milieu charged with Rothko's esthetic notions that art is an adventure into the unknown, that the world of imagination is violently opposed to common sense, and that the essence of academicism is that it does not matter what one paints as long as it is well painted. Rothko had also expressed a spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art.

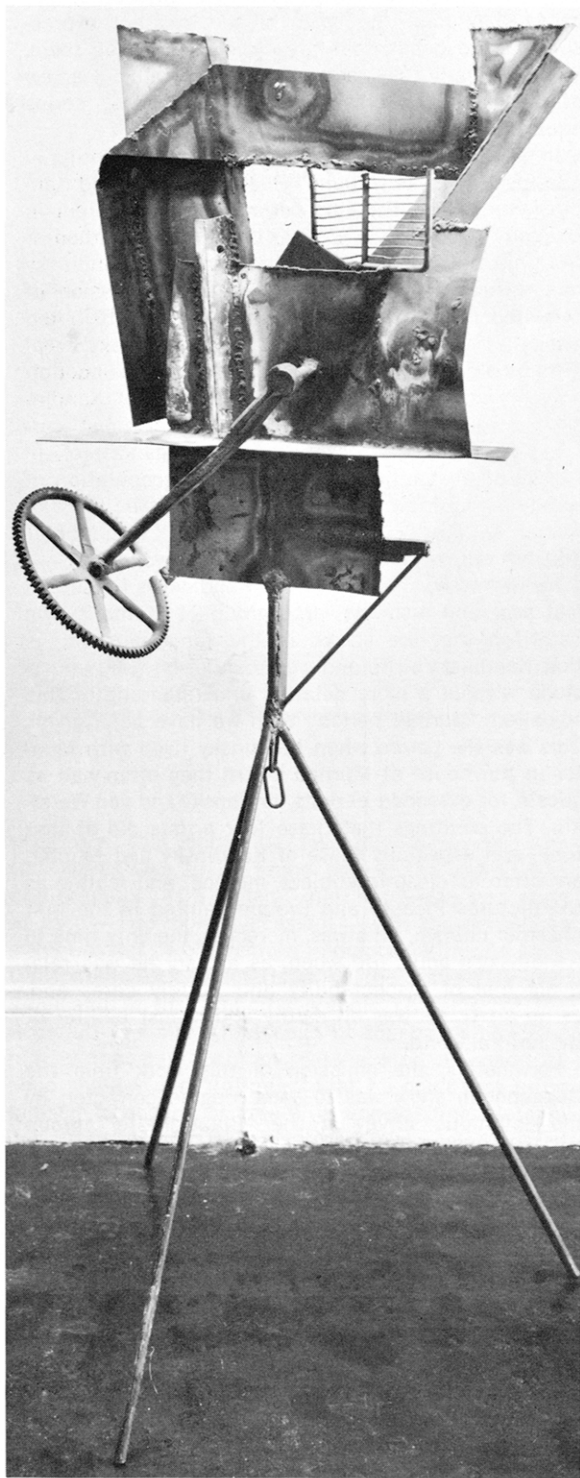
Hedrick's reaction was to go the other way. Uninterested in myth-ism, in the search for an eternal, or primordial sign, he rejected almost immediately any interest in, or notions of spiritual kinship with, primitive art. At the same time, he suspected already certain defects in abstract expressionism: his interest was in confronting directly contemporary culture, and he more than suspected that abstract expressionism had failed to face contemporary culture with a contemporary image. Also, given a natural distaste for order, he felt that the movement was dead as soon

as the prime innovators — like Still — became teachers, breeding a second generation.

His response to the prevailing San Francisco mood was to begin to feed banal and ironic reflections on our contemporary culture into junk sculpture, to disembowel radios and paint on the working parts, and to trace these ironic reflections onto the surfaces of television cabinets and refrigerators. (In this aspect of his work, incidentally, he predates Tinguely's esthetic concern with the guts of the radio by ten years.)

To the mood of mystical and fanatical dedication which characterized so much of his milieu at that time, Hedrick wilfully counterposed a sense of the absurd, and he drew for the enrichment of this sense on the palpable, obvious, ever-present visual effects of the mass consumer society in which everyone, like it or not, had to function. Hedrick's reaction to this society took exactly the same form as his reaction to the esthetic notions of his fellow artists. This concern with television, for example, as a key to our cultural situation, pre-dated the whole Common Object, or Pop Art movement, but what Hedrick was doing was simply protecting his own vision by reacting to the esthetics of his fellow artists with anti-art attitudes. Hassell Smith, for example, had long been interested in flags and their high formal emblematic quality; Hedrick's reaction was to pull the subject back to its pedestrian origins: the highly charged, emotional qualities that the flag is more usually identified with, that is, patriotism, human sacrifice and the will to win in battle. He painted an American flag with the word "Peace" heavily inscribed across it. He consistently refused to be interested in what he describes as "a high art look," which he then considered a waste of time and energy. Instead he attempted to consciously evolve a direct and uneducated way of performing, a mindlessness of technique that perfectly prevented preciousness and estheticizing of the subject matter. This mindlessness, a much-needed defense mechanism at the time, has, with this recent exhibition, shown itself to have lost its function and become Hedrick's Achilles heel. It explains, in part, how others have been able to catch up with, and finally surpass him.

This attitude reminds one of "Art Brut," but Dubuffet went to child and schizophrenic art as an expressionistic source to replace this tailored look. It is in this area that we confront the fatal weakness of Hedrick's art: He confuses funkiness of thought with funkiness of performance. The crude and scatological drawings shown in his current exhibition have no esthetic merit but merely draw our attention to what many of us are aware of: obscenity is in the eye of the beholder, that no aspect of the high ritual of sex, however athletic or free in its ramifications, is filthy. In being rigorously anti-art, and completely ditching what he describes as high art tradition he fails to replace it with a high level inventive performance of his own. Pollock, for example, employed aggressive anti-art means but in doing so he endowed his art with highly inventive qualities despite the crudeness of these means — the drip can and the stick, instead of the knowing brush. Hedrick's art chronically lacks plastic wit, for all its ironic commentary. But there is little doubt that chronologically he was an original and curious precursor. ■



"Yagi," welded metal, 60"h., 1953. (New Mission Gallery.)