Wally Hedrick, Anger, 1959, Oil on Canvas, 65 3/4" x 56½"
Collection of the Artist, Courtesy Gallery Paule Anglim

Expo-Sea Summer 1985

An Interview With **Wally Hedrick**

Mark Van Proyen

X: I've been following the earlier part of your career, which is documented in catalogs and articles. After doing a little research, I think that, historically, your work is much more important than a lot of people give it credit for, on the basis of you being a seminal influence for a lot of other artists and concepts that have emerged in the art world since you began working. How do you feel about that status?
WH: I'll be a smartass and say that your question says more about you than me.

Actually, I don't really worry about it. I've had so many people say I should have gone to New York and all of that, but, to me, it's really important to be reasonably happy. Going to New York is one thing that I do not enjoy. I like to live where I don't have to fight snow, sleet and all that stuff. I like to have a little comfort, but not too much.

All this business about who did what first—I care very little about that. I've even had people accuse me of changing dates on my paintings. Jasper Johns was just out of his mind because I painted that flag painting before he did. The painting has disappeared, so I have no way of documenting it now. I don't even know Jasper Johns. I've been in some shows with him, but I don't know him. I've always admired his paintings, but I never thought of them as being competitive, in the sense of who did what first.
X: That's a good illustration.

Do you have any ideas about what you think art criticism, or critical writing that pretends to be criticism, should be and if that is any different than how it is?
WH: I think there should be criticism of art. If I

have any feeling about most critics now, it's that they give a shopping list and they don't have any opinions. I think that critics should approach criticism as an art and express their opinions or feelings, subjective feelings, one way or the other. Sometimes you don't have a reason. Your gut tells you what is bad painting. I know I feel that way. If I were a critic and I went to a show and didn't like it, I'd have to say that I didn't like it.

X: But you'd also have to say why you didn't like it. You'd have to say, "I didn't like it because it's trite"; "I didn't like it because it's incompetent"; "I didn't like it because it's shallow.". . .

WH: Well, you're right. But that kind of stuff can be done using a sort of poetry. One of my favorite art critics was Lawrence Ferlinghetti. He only wrote for a very short time, because he got canned. He talked about one of Jay (DeFeo's) paintings at the museum, one that was falling apart. Every day one of those nice young men would have to go and sweep up with a dustpan. But the way Ferlinghetti described the painting was, it looked like Jay had backed up to it. To me, there's a critical statement, but in a poetic image that everyone can interpret in his or her own way. No, I think there should be art criticism, but it has to be more than just a lineup--who's running in what race.

X: Let's shift. When you were younger, you lived in San Francisco and were involved and shared a lot of experiences with a lot of other artists. Who was a part of all that? Were you aware of a place called the King Ubu Gallery, by Jess Collins?

WH: Yeah. The way that happened was an obscure poet called John Allen Ryan, who is still around, was a very close friend of Jess's. He was from Pasadena. When we came up here--and when I say we, we really did come as a group--he was our connection with the poets. I admire poetry, but poets are a very strange group of people, and I never had too much contact with them. But, anyway, John did. He knew Jess, Robert Duncan and that whole crew. He was also going to school at the same time I was, and Jack Spicer--one of the so-called beat poets--was teaching then. Anyway, they ran out of money; they were going to lose the gallery. That's why this group that I knew got together, and--I think the rent was $35--we managed to scrape it together, and we took it over.

X: So the King Ubu Gallery became the Six Gallery?

WH: That's right. Thirty-one nineteen Fillmore. It's a hardware store now. The King Ubu Gallery closed, and we opened. In Kerouac's On the Road, there's a poetry reading at what he calls the Gallery Six--he switched it a little bit. That was the original reading of Ginsberg's Howl.

X: At the original opening of the Six Gallery?

WH: Yeah, it was a fund-raising thing to buy plasterboard so that we could cover up the walls. We raised $80. We bought enough plasterboard to do the whole thing.

X: Were you selling paintings? Was anyone selling anything?

WH: Actually, it was a rummage sale. There should have been someone taking photographs, because it was surreal: all these racks with all these old clothes hanging on them. And then there was this party. Halfway through the party, everyone started putting on these old clothes. Then Art Grant came in and lit the piano with a blowtorch. He held it on the strings, and they started twanging. Oh yeah, it was a success. There were some New Yorkers there, and this became what they later called "happenings." In fact, the guy who invented the word happening--Allan Kaprow--was there. But for us, it was just a party.

X: What about Anna Halprin and her dance-performances?

WH: They were there. They would come over. The Six Gallery had a stage. There was a guy who said he could talk to birds, so we gave him a evening, and he brought all these birds in cages. There was another guy who did 3-D movies, and then the poets were reading at the drop of a hat. And the dancers would come over. That was the first time in my life that I saw a group of dancers stark naked. I mean, I'm just a kid from Pasadena. That was far-out for me.

John Allen Ryan--if you can ever dig him up--was the recording secretary, because he was a poet and could write. He had records of things. He could probably tell you more about it than I can. I was the director of the gallery, and I didn't even know what was going on.

X: Director meant sweep the floor and lock the door at the end of the night?

WH: You're exactly right. But it sure was a lot of fun.

X: When did the Six Gallery close?

WH: It didn't really close. It just sort of petered

out, somewhere around 1964.
X: About the time that Jay finished The Rose?
WH: Exactly. That was about the time that Jay and I split from the city. We were splitting individually, too. But when we left the city for Ross, that was just about the end. There was no need for us anymore.
X: Well, the gallery scene in San Francisco picked up.
WH: Yeah. Sonia Getchoff's mother had the East-West Gallery, and Jim Newman had Dilexi, and the Berkeley gallery was going. There was no need for us anymore.
X: So the art scene here started picking up around 1963. Galleries were opening; people were buying art. And yet, you and Jay were moving out of town. How did you feel about the business excitement that suddenly appeared around the art scene here?
WH: It really had no effect on us. The only person I knew personally who got any money at that time was Joan Brown.
X: She had the thing going at George Staempfli's gallery in New York.
WH: Yeah, that was impressive. We had lots of people come in and look, but this guy came in and said, "OK, I'll buy them all." And wrote a check. I didn't believe it. I told Joan, "You'd better get to the bank in a hurry." He was on the up and up. She went back east and to Europe with him—the whole business. I have to admit, it seemed like a fairy tale. But remember that when he discovered her, she was about nineteen, a blue-eyed blond and bubbly and—whew. It sort of happened to Jay, too, but she wasn't that cheerleader type.
X: Not many people know that you made assemblages, too. Did the fact that you seemed to work through all kinds of styles in your painting and in your sculpture damage what people expected of you in terms of a professional identity, having one kind of identifiable image and sticking with it?
WH: You keep hitting on things that are my favorite subjects.

When the IRS form asks me my vocation, I put "artist." To make a long story short, I have been trained. I can use my hands, and, hopefully, I can use my head and my heart. But the idea has always been more important to me than the execution. I try to explain this to students. There are two kinds of artists, if you look at it musically: the Beethovens and the symphony orchestras.

X: The composers and the performers.
WH: That's exactly right. Either one is great. I personally like to think of myself as being a composer. Maybe that's self-indulgent.

What I'm trying to clarify is that the idea deserves the right technique. If you're playing a sonata, you play it a lyrical way. You don't play it like a marching band. But a lot of students don't get that. They think, well, I've got to have a body of work that all hangs together. And, man, that's a mistake. That's something that the galleries have thought of. A product.
X: Don't you think that in the long run, it hangs together regardless of whether or not you try to make it hang together? I was amazed that, despite the diversity of images in your show at the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI), it all hung together. It made sense.
WH: I'm glad it did. What I'm saying is that I'm sort of against the idea of serial paintings. That would lead to repetition. Someone in the gallery scene might be in a position where he would be pressured to say, "Well, Wally, gee, that guy just bought that one. We don't need any of this other stuff.
Maybe Cool Whip for a while?" Now, that has never happened to me, but I have a fear of it.

Some of my best friends are painters. But I think of myself as a great improviser. I grew up with jazz, even though I never did it professionally. Jazz is jazz, and it has to do with the moment, not any long-term getting to heaven or any of that. It has to do with right now, and either you make it or you don't. If there's a distinction between Frank Lobdell and I, it's that he's worried about heaven. I don't say that I'm free, but every increment of freedom is important to me. I decided a long time ago that I can't be a nice, middle-class American and do what I want to do.
X: Do you think galleries like to have artists be like poodles and jump through hoops whenever they hold up the hoops?
WH: That part is obvious, but it's more subtle than that. Having a nice house and a nice car and a nice television set and nice little kids and all that—the American Dream—sure, everyone would like to have that, but what I'm against is the thing that goes with having those things.
X: You think the sacrifices are not worth it?
WH: That's right, only you put a reverse twist on it.

I'm saying that I'm not going to have that, so that I can do these things downstairs that I'm not even sure have any worth. But I've decided that's the way it's going to be. Can we understand that to be free, we have to watch it? The chains are coming from every direction, and sometimes they're very camouflaged. I'm not saying that you have to suffer; that's dumb.

X: Well, there's a difference between suffering and sacrificing. Do you think that there's a possibility that the art world could have different rules, like the gallery rule in which the art becomes an investment commodity? Bruce Conner suggested that it was like a chain letter, where all the rich people are creating a false sense of worth to works of art on the basis of their popularity. Is there any way that an alternative system of deciding what art is worthwhile and what art isn't is possible?

WH: I don't really care. You have to be really egocentric and think of yourself first. Kids, wives, mothers—all of that has to be set aside. It's a terrible thing to say, but it works for me. I'd love to have my kids here all the time—except it won't work. I couldn't have my mother here all the time. I can't have my friends dropping in all the time. I sometimes turn off the telephone, even though I know the guy on Channel 2 is calling me, and it's $640, and it's three up from the bottom.

X: If you attain this self-sufficiency, would you care if no one saw your paintings? Would you continue making them?

WH: There was a long period during which I decided that I wasn't going to show them to anybody. The world was so bad that I wasn't going to let it look at them. That sounds very egocentric, very self-serving, but it's the truth. I have paintings that are thirty years old which have not been seen. You picked one up just a few minutes ago. Not that it was going to be seen, because it's a terrible thing.

X: You don't feel a need to communicate with an audience?

WH: I would if I thought it would do any good. There was a period of almost twenty years when I denied my services to mankind.

X: That was during Vietnam.

WH: And it didn't do a bit of good.

X: Mankind didn't require your services?

WH: It would have been better if I had bombed the Pentagon. That would have served a better purpose. I'm not bitter. I had this thing; I had to do it; and I did it. That's the way it was. Now it's paying off, in kind of a reverse way. The paintings that I didn't show, I can show now.

X: When you denied your services to mankind, did that include quitting teaching?

WH: Yeah, in fact, that's how I got fired from the SFAI. I was fired because I went on strike, and I insisted that my students go over and march in parades, and other things. A couple of little old ladies went and complained. Art and politics don't mix. Actually, I resigned. I went to a faculty meeting, and I tried to get them all to say, "We as a group are not in favor of the government's position in Vietnam." They couldn't pass that, so I resigned. Fuck 'em.

If I seem a little bitter, it's just that I didn't get the response I wanted at the time I wanted. Now, after the fact, sure. But it reminds me of a story about Duchamp making his rotoreliefs. He was convinced that the people would love them, because they could put them on their record players, and while they were listening to music, they could see these things. So he went down to New York and rented a little booth. He got all these record machines and put these things on them. He was going to sell them for fifty cents apiece. He sat there for three days, and nobody bought one.

X: During those years, how did you make your living?

WH: I opened Wally's Fix-it Shop.

X: Wasn't that a service to humanity?

WH: Yeah, but I was fixing junk. I figured that here are people that have their broken junk, and I can fix it for them. It's better than going out and buying new stuff.

Here I am talking on and on.

X: That's what I want you to do—talk on and on. That way I don't have to interview myself.

I'm interested, how did the painting that you titled Anger evolve out of a series of panels? It seemed to be an evolutionary process in the painting.

WH: Actually, it was economics. There was a period when I was very poor, so poor that I stole canvases. Sometimes they weren't the right size, so, literally, I nailed them together. This was the period when I lived on Fillmore Street. Joan Brown lived next door, and Sonia Getchoff lived upstairs. We just didn't have any money. This is a terrible thing to say, but I would go over to the art school and steal paintings.

Students' or whoever's. This used to be a secret, but it isn't a secret anymore. I'm probably the only person in the United States who has painted over a Clyfford Still. The Berkeley Art Museum owns that painting now. They don't know that, but it's all right. That statute of limitations is OK, and I don't care anymore. I think they probably would appreciate knowing that they have a Clyfford Still. The reason I'm mentioning it is because I want to find out if they are going to see if they can take my painting off to get to the Still. I'm not making this up. If you look on the back of the painting, on the stretcher bar, there's a little typewritten thing that says—I forget the title—"Clyfford Still, $350." I didn't mean to do it. There was this canvas, and I needed it. It's the one thing I've never been able to tell Frank Lobdell, that I painted over a Clyfford Still. Before I die, I have to know his reaction.

X: How did you feel about the whole funk phenomenon and your relationship to it?

WH: I didn't know anything about it until Bill Morehouse, who teaches at Sonoma State, called me up and said, "You know, there's a show called Funk that Peter Selz organized, and you're not in it." He was really mad. "Well, we're going to have a show to make up for that," he said. And he organized a show. I still don't have any claim to being a funk daddy. I understand the term. Funk was a music thing long before it ever became an art thing. Joan Brown is funky, and Jay was funky, and Manuel Neri was funky. But I never thought of myself as being funky. I can fake it. Joan can't fake it.

X: What about William Wiley, Robert Hudson and those guys?

WH: They're about as funky as Albert Einstein. No, those guys are great. They have exactly the same attitude that I do. If you want to be funky, you're funky. The thing that those two people and I would agree upon is that the style should be controlled by the idea.

X: What about Fred Martin?

WH: Well, Fred's a romantic. The only problem is that his romanticism is in his mind. He should do it in the street. He came up the other night (at the SFAI reception) with tears in his eyes and said, "This is the most beautiful show I've seen in my life." That's how close I am to Fred, even though he fired me. But that's different: that's another world. He deserved to fire me, because I wasn't fulfilling my functions. He was being a good administrator. I think Fred's going to be the Walter Gropius of Northern California.

X: There's a lot to be said for that. He's modeled the whole school (the SFAI) and a lot of other things in an image he believes in.

WH: And that's what you have to do. If you have an idea or you have some ideals, you should take it to the extreme. If anybody gets in your way, that's tough.

X: What is the Northern California school, now that we've identified Fred as the Walter Gropius of it? The San Francisco Art Institute is the epicenter of the whole phenomenon.

WH: Well, I'm going to turn your question. If I were somebody anyplace in this world and I wanted to be an artist, I think at this particular instant in time I would go to San Francisco and enroll in that school.

X: Why?

WH: Not because of the faculty. The faculty has its ups and downs, but the school goes on. There's something in that building. The work in the graduate school is better than the faculty's. It's in a different galaxy. The students are what make that school go. I think Fred senses that. He is saddled with people who have been there a long time: they don't have tenure, but they have tenure—that whole business. He's concerned. I think the problem is that they're still riding on twenty years ago. I told Fred, "You may be approaching a point when you're going to have to make a new image." I don't know how you do that. You fire the faculty and start new. Well, that's easy for me to say, but he can't do it. So, he makes do.

Somehow the school carries on. I really think it is the students. They teach each other. They yell and scream at each other, but deep down, they all know that they're working toward the same thing. And I don't think there's another school like that in the world.

X: You don't feel the same way about the Otis Art Institute, which you went to? You have a really sour look on your face.

WH: It's a nice place, but how many artists do you know that came from the Otis Art Institute?

X: Not too many.

I'm approaching a question in a roundabout way. What authors do you like to read?

WH: I read a lot. I read probably ten to twelve books a week, if not more. Right now, I'm reading the Encyclopedia Britannica, when I run out of other things to read. I'm not bragging. I read a lot. To me, that's one of my inputs. It makes up for my lack of social contacts. I could bring in a pile of books right now, and the subject matter would range from how to tune a piano to identifying flowers. I subscribe to only one magazine: Scientific American. I don't read art magazines. Nonfiction is more important to me than fiction: I read a lot of nonfiction. I also read fiction, but it's almost masturbatory. I know that it isn't real. It's a sort of fantasy. Who's the guy who wrote The Great Gatsby? Fitzgerald. I've read everything he's written at least two or three times, and I can't even remember his name. I enjoy reading fiction, but it's not the same as reading an article on prehistoric sites in New Zealand in Scientific American. I don't say that one is more real than the other. It's just that I know Fitzgerald was fantasizing.

X: What I was getting at was the element of your paintings being a fiction of your own creation.

WH: Now, I'll go along with that. That's why I call my work subjective realism. It's what I think is real. It's not necessarily what anyone else thinks is real, because I know it isn't.

X: You don't think that other people might accept the reality of your paintings?

WH: If they want to, that's fine. But they don't have to.

X: Or reinvent the reality of them?

WH: They may reinterpret them. I would hope that they interpret the realness through their own selves.

X: Does it bother you that your work has disappeared from time to time?

WH: Most of the sculpture has disappeared. Actually, it doesn't bother me that much. I called it Eco Art--ecological art. EA, as opposed to AE. This was taking junk that people didn't want--beer bottles, beer cans, garbage, whatever--and through the mystery of whatever it is, I was going to make it into stuff that would be something.

X: Sell it in a gallery?

WH: For money. In our culture, that would make it into something, even though we would know what it was. Well, most of that stuff has reverted to its natural, pre-EA state. When the show came up, David Rubin wanted to have some of those things in it, but there just aren't any. Al Wong had one tiny one that I didn't even know he had. I offered to build a replica, but then I started thinking about it. You can't get steel cans anymore, and I never learned how to weld aluminum.

X: Wouldn't it just be soldering?

WH: Have you ever tried to solder aluminum cans?

X: Do you realize that there's another artist who has made an entire career out of beer-can iconography and beer parties? Tom Marioni used to do giant museum beer parties, where he would fill a museum with cases of beer, and anyone coming in would drink beer.

WH: Well, I know Tom. He was a student of mine, believe it or not. In fact, his two brothers were students of mine. That's a strange family.

X: What other students have you had who have gained some notoriety in the art world?

WH: Well, the one that I'm most proud of is Mike Henderson. When I was teaching at the SFAI, they used to give me the students they didn't know what to do with. They figured that I could talk to people and that, because of my political leanings and my social feelings, somebody who was black and who just didn't fit in was somebody I could get along with. They were exactly right. Mike and I got along beautifully. He made a series of monster paintings. I don't know if he'll ever get to show them. He painted out his aggressions, about how he felt about white folks. Those pissy-ant people at the SFAI just couldn't take it. I mean, they didn't like to see their mother being raped by a black man. I think Mike had to go through that. It showed up in the films he made, and now he's like I think of myself. I don't think of myself as a Bay Area artist. I'm a stellar artist, a Planet Earth artist, and I think he's at that level now.

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