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Wally Hedrick: Refusal Under Conditions of Compulsory Artistic Circulation

Abstract

This essay argues that Wally Hedrick's practice constitutes a sustained system of artistic refusal operating across form, space, career, and circulation. Rather than producing stable works, Hedrick repeatedly converts artistic activity into acts of cancellation (the Black Paintings), environmental enclosure (War Room), and withdrawal (the artist's strike). These gestures are not isolated or expressive, but coordinated operations targeting different layers of the artistic system: the object, representation, distribution, and the role of the artist.

The essay situates Hedrick as a case study in non-participation under conditions of compulsory circulation. Where contemporary art increasingly depends on continuous visibility, production, and institutional integration, Hedrick withdraws contribution at each level. His black paintings cancel prior images while preserving their trace; War Room transforms negation into a spatial condition in which participation yields no resolution; and his withdrawal from exhibition and teaching interrupts circulation rather than content.

Contrasted with the terminal ambitions of modernist abstraction, particularly Ad Reinhardt's claim to finality, Hedrick's work operates within what this essay identifies as a post-terminal condition. Rather than resolving painting, his practice sustains ongoing negation while resisting the institutional stabilization that Reinhardt's project achieved. Refusal, in Hedrick's case, emerges as a precise but unstable response: not a solution, but a temporary suspension of participation within a system that neither permits exit nor prevents the reabsorption of what has been withheld.

Introduction: Refusal as Structure (Not Attitude)

Wally Hedrick is not defined by a style but by a structural position within the artistic system. His work does not stabilize into a recognizable form or trajectory.

It moves across painting, space, career, and circulation without consolidating into a fixed identity. What appears as inconsistency or multiplicity is, more precisely, a coordinated refusal of stabilization under conditions of continuous production, visibility, and circulation.

This refusal operates across distinct but interconnected levels: the transformation of painting into acts of overpainting and cancellation; the conversion of surface into enclosing space in War Room; the withdrawal from exhibition and teaching during the artist's strike; and the interruption of visibility and distribution as conditions of participation. These are not phases or experiments, but parallel operations targeting the points at which the system requires contribution.

Refusal here is not the romantic gesture of the outsider, nor a matter of attitude, expression, or dissent. It is an operational withholding of contribution wherever participation is required. Unlike later forms of institutional critique, which continue to supply content to the system they interrogate, Hedrick's practice acts at the level of contribution itself. It does not reinterpret or reframe the system; it withholds the material through which the system sustains itself.

The logic governing this practice is explicit. If political conditions cannot be altered through direct intervention, then cultural participation becomes the remaining site of action. Hedrick's response is not to produce oppositional content, but to deny contribution altogether. Artistic production is converted into negation, interruption, and withdrawal. Refusal is not thematic. It is procedural.

This procedural refusal does not occur at a single point. It operates across each node where participation is demanded, from the production of images to their circulation and institutional framing. What is refused is the requirement that something be made, shown, and sustained within the system at all.

Hedrick's practice emerges within the Bay Area during the formation of a countercultural infrastructure that would later be identified with the Beat milieu:

the Six Gallery readings, early performance-like events, and the social field of North Beach, where poetry, music, and visual art intersect. He participates in jazz circles, performing with figures such as David Park and Elmer Bischoff in the Studio 13 band. These affiliations place him within the scene at the level of activity, proximity, and exchange.

Yet this participation does not translate into institutional stabilization. Hedrick does not consolidate his position within the structures that would later define artistic legitimacy. Even during his time at the California School of Fine Arts, his presence remains partial and often unofficial. His movement between Pasadena and San Francisco produces a discontinuous trajectory, preventing sustained integration into any single institutional or geographic framework. He participates in gatherings, performances, and informal networks rather than progressing through established pathways of recognition.

This position is not the result of exclusion. Hedrick is not outside the scene because he is denied entry. He is inside it, but without accepting the mechanisms through which participation stabilizes into identity, style, or career. His relation to the scene is therefore structurally distinct: embedded at the level of activity, but detached from the processes that convert activity into position.

Within this context, Hedrick's work repeatedly engages domains that contemporaries identified as sex, politics, and religion. These do not function as themes to be represented or explored. They appear as fields subject to interruption and cancellation, domains in which the production of content is itself put into question. The engagement is therefore not expressive but operative, aligned with the broader logic of refusal that governs his practice.

This distinguishes Hedrick from closely related figures within the same milieu. Artists such as Bruce Conner move across media while maintaining circulation; Jay DeFeo intensifies production through sustained labor. Hedrick, by contrast, withdraws contribution across multiple levels simultaneously. His participation in the scene does not lead to consolidation within it. It provides the structural conditions under which refusal can be enacted from within rather than from outside.

Prehistory of Refusal

An early instance appears in *Peace* (1953), a defaced American flag. The work does not reinterpret or symbolically critique its subject. It intervenes directly at the level of the image, altering it as an object. This gesture establishes destruction not as representation, but as a primary artistic operation. The act is not expressive in the conventional sense. It is structural: the image is not used, but acted upon.

From this point forward, Hedrick's work does not consolidate into a recognizable style. He moves across media—painting, assemblage, signage, installation,

diagrammatic systems—without linear progression or formal continuity. Each movement interrupts the possibility that a stable visual identity might emerge. Hedrick later stated, "I'm not interested in development in painting. I'm interested in ideas."

This instability is not the result of experimentation in search of form. It is a refusal of fixation. Stylistic coherence, which typically enables recognition, circulation, and market legibility, is actively avoided. Prior solutions are not refined or extended, but abandoned, overwritten, or displaced. The work does not accumulate into a signature. It disperses it.

This refusal extends to repetition. Hedrick does not return to earlier forms in order to develop or perfect them. When forms reappear, they do so under altered conditions, as reactivations rather than continuations. Repetition is treated as a risk: the point at which a gesture becomes legible, repeatable, and therefore assimilable into identity. To prevent this, the work proceeds through variation, interruption, and overwrite.

In this respect, Hedrick's practice aligns with a broader strategy of resisting stylistic continuity associated with Duchamp. The artist does not become identifiable through repeated solutions. However, the form this refusal takes differs. Duchamp's withdrawal operates through concealment and strategic absence, whereas Hedrick's refusal remains visible. It is enacted within the field of production and circulation that it interrupts, rather than outside it.

The result is not the absence of form, but the prevention of its stabilization. Hedrick does not develop a style; he actively prevents one from forming. Multiplicity here is not exploratory. It is defensive. Refusal is not a late position. It is foundational.

The Black Paintings: Cancellation as Form

The Black Paintings begin in 1957 with an operation that is both direct and irreversible: Hedrick paints over existing works, often his own. The act does not revise or extend the prior image. It cancels it. What results is not a new composition built from a blank ground, but a surface produced through negation. The prior work is not erased. It is buried and structurally retained beneath the new layer.

This operation alters the internal structure of the painting. Each work contains multiple strata: an image that has been covered, a decision that has been revoked, and a temporal sequence embedded in the surface. The painting no longer functions as a resolved composition. It becomes a record of negation, a material trace of decisions withdrawn rather than completed.

The political logic of this operation is explicit. Hedrick, a veteran of the Korean War, was among the first American artists to protest the Vietnam War. The Black Paintings begin as an antiwar gesture during that escalation and continue in relation to subsequent conflicts. The use of black is not a reduction toward

formal purity, but a negation directed at the conditions under which cultural production continues during war. Painting becomes a refusal to contribute to cultural normalcy at a moment when such contribution would function as implicit support.

Titles play a critical role in preventing these works from stabilizing as formal monochromes. They reintroduce specific political references, anchoring the work to external conditions and resisting absorption into purely aesthetic discourse. The monochrome surface does not detach from context. It remains linked to the conditions that produced it.

The logic governing the work is consistent: artistic contribution becomes the variable that can be withdrawn when direct political intervention is no longer possible. The painting does not represent opposition. It enacts it through cancellation.

This operation is not singular. Hedrick repeatedly returns to the Black Paintings, repainting works that are already black and updating them across decades with new dates. Each repainting does not intensify the original gesture. It registers the continuation of the condition to which the gesture responds. The accumulation of dates prevents the work from being fixed to a single moment of production and resists stabilization as a discrete object within the conventions of authorship, chronology, and collection.

Refusal here becomes durational. It persists across time without resolving into a final statement. Each successive alteration marks not escalation, but persistence—the ongoing presence of the conditions that necessitate cancellation.

These works are not monochromes in the formalist sense. They are acts of cancellation preserved in object form.

War Room: Refusal as Environment

With War Room, the operations established in the Black Paintings are no longer confined to the surface of the canvas. They extend into space. Painting ceases to function as an object and becomes an enclosing structure. The work is composed of multiple black canvases arranged to form an architectural chamber, with painted surfaces facing inward and the backs of the canvases—stretcher bars and supports—exposed on the exterior. The conventional orientation of painting is reversed. The image is turned inward. The structure is turned outward.

What the viewer encounters is not an image but a chamber assembled from repeated black surfaces. The exterior presents the raw mechanics of painting—stretcher bars, supports, and the backs of canvases—while the interior closes around the body in dark, nearly featureless planes. Entry occurs through a small opening rather than across a frontal picture plane. The work does not offer a scene to be surveyed. It places the viewer inside an enclosure whose material facts—scale,

blackness, exposed support, restricted entry—produce the condition the work names.

The viewer no longer confronts the work from a distance. Entry becomes necessary. Painting is encountered not as an image to be viewed, but as a space to be occupied. The work shifts from representation to condition. It does not depict war or its effects; it imposes enclosure and negation as a spatial condition.

Within this structure, no stable vantage point is available. The interior-facing surfaces deny the possibility of an external position from which the work can be surveyed or resolved. The viewer is placed inside the condition the work establishes. Space does not organize perception. It produces it. The result is not an image of negation, but an environment in which negation is sustained.

Scale reinforces this condition. Constructed from repeated panels extending more than twelve feet across, the room exceeds the dimensions of a single painting and becomes an accumulative structure. Its vertical exaggeration intensifies enclosure. The repetition of black surfaces does not create rhythm or variation. It eliminates them. Repetition no longer organizes movement. It converts enclosure into duration.

Although the work retains a square plan, the spatial logic associated with that form is disrupted. The enclosure admits entry but denies orientation. Movement does not produce trajectory. The exit does not resolve the condition. It marks the limit at which the structure can no longer fully contain what it establishes.

The effect is a breakdown of spatial resolution. Participation does not lead to conclusion. The work does not unfold. It holds.

War Room expands cancellation from surface to total condition. What was enacted through overpainting is now enacted through enclosure. Refusal becomes immersive and inescapable.

The Strike: Withdrawal as Medium

In the early 1960s, Hedrick extends the logic of refusal beyond form and space into the conditions of artistic circulation itself. He stops exhibiting his work and withdraws from teaching, enacting what can be understood as an artist's strike. This withdrawal is not partial or symbolic, but directed at the institutional systems through which art is made visible, distributed, and sustained.

The logic governing this action is direct. If art continues to circulate, the system that depends on that circulation continues as well. Visibility is not neutral, but functions as a condition of cultural reproduction. To participate in visibility is to contribute to the persistence of the system. Hedrick's response is not to alter what is shown, but to withdraw the act of showing altogether.

This withdrawal is not an absence of activity. It is an interruption of the system's demand for continuous contribution. It does not operate as protest, boycott,

or demand, each of which presumes negotiation over content or conditions. Instead, it removes the offered contribution itself, leaving nothing for the system to process, interpret, or absorb at the level of content.

Hedrick articulates this position explicitly: "I had decided that I would withdraw my services from almost everything... I was going to stop the war by not letting anybody see my work." The statement does not propose an alternative form of engagement. It identifies visibility as the mechanism through which participation is sustained. Withdrawal therefore interrupts circulation rather than content.

This interruption marks a point at which participation and recognition no longer align.

Under these conditions, visibility is no longer treated as expression. It is understood as a structural requirement of the system. To refuse visibility is to refuse participation at the level at which the system operates most continuously. Refusal targets distribution as a condition of visibility, not production alone. The work is not only what is made, but whether it enters circulation at all.

This produces a shift in the status of absence. Non-production is not simply a lack of output. It becomes the work. What is withdrawn is not replaced by another form. It remains absent, and that absence operates within the system as an interruption rather than a contribution.

Hedrick's strike transforms non-participation into a deliberate artistic act. It does not symbolize refusal. It enacts it at the level of circulation itself.

Anti-Careerism and Self-Cancellation

Hedrick's refusal extends beyond individual works and moments of withdrawal into the structure of a career itself. Despite early recognition and proximity to figures who would later become canonized, his trajectory does not consolidate into a stable professional identity. Opportunities for visibility and advancement are not missed. They are refused.

This refusal operates against the mechanisms through which recognition stabilizes. Career formation typically depends on continuity—of style, production, exhibition, and institutional affiliation. These elements accumulate over time into recognizability, allowing the artist to be positioned within a market and historical framework. Hedrick repeatedly interrupts this process. Institutional participation occurs, but does not persist. It appears intermittently and is withdrawn before it can consolidate into a trajectory.

A decisive instance occurs in 1959, when Hedrick refuses to attend the Sixteen Americans exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. The exhibition functions as a canonical entry point for several of his peers. His absence does not result from exclusion. It is a

forfeiture of entry into a structure that would have stabilized his position within the emerging postwar field. This pattern extends beyond singular decisions. Hedrick does not maintain the consistency required for market identity. He does not repeat forms that would become recognizable or collectible. The accumulation of recognizability is actively undermined. What would otherwise produce a career is interrupted at each stage.

The resulting obscurity is therefore neither fully self-produced nor externally imposed. It emerges from a sustained refusal of the mechanisms that convert participation into position. Recognition does not fail to occur; it fails to stabilize.

Within this condition, Hedrick is often described as an "artist's artist." This designation acknowledges a form of influence that circulates laterally rather than vertically—through proximity, dialogue, and informal networks rather than through institutional consolidation. Influence persists without translating into canonical position.

Hedrick does not fail to become canonical. He resists canonization. The career is not an unintended casualty of refusal. It becomes one of its primary sites.

Against Modernist Closure

Hedrick's practice can be more precisely situated by contrast with the terminal ambitions associated with modernist abstraction, particularly in the work of Ad Reinhardt. Reinhardt's black paintings pursue reduction, restriction, and a claim to finality within painting. Hedrick's black paintings operate under different conditions. His practice operates within what this essay calls a post-terminal condition: painting does not arrive at its conclusion but remains subject to ongoing negation. Where Reinhardt seeks a purified limit internal to the history of abstraction, Hedrick cancels prior images while preserving their trace. The buried image remains structurally active beneath the black surface. The work does not resolve into a final state. It retains revocation as part of its form.

The distinction is therefore not simply between two kinds of black painting, but between closure and persistence. Reinhardt's project organizes black painting around the possibility of an endpoint and stabilizes that claim through institutional fixation. Hedrick's returns to black painting do not produce an ending, but repeated reactivation. Repainting, re-dating, and renewed cancellation prevent the work from stabilizing as a terminal form. Black painting is redirected away from completion and toward refusal that cannot be fixed.

Total System of Refusal

Hedrick's practice does not consist of isolated gestures or discrete works. It organizes multiple refusals into a coordinated system operating across distinct domains. What appears as variation—shifts in medium, form, or activity—resolves into operations acting on different

layers of the artistic structure. These are not thematic concerns. They are procedures.

Across painting, refusal takes the form of cancellation. Images are overwritten, decisions revoked, and prior work buried but retained. In installation, refusal becomes totalization. Enclosure replaces surface, and the work expands into a condition without external position. In the structure of a career, refusal appears as withdrawal. Participation is interrupted before it can stabilize into trajectory. At the level of identity, refusal produces instability. Style does not consolidate, and recognizability does not accumulate.

The refusal of style prevents indexing within systems that depend on classification and repetition. The refusal of circulation interrupts the processes through which the system reproduces itself. The refusal of visibility blocks absorption into regimes of attention that convert appearance into value. Image production is withdrawn from representation as such. The refusal of completion leaves works reversible and resistant to closure.

Taken together, these elements position Hedrick as a case study in non-participation under conditions of compulsory circulation. Cancellation acts on form. Withdrawal acts on career and production, extending at times to total refusal of participation in the commercial art market. Non-participation acts on circulation and contribution. War Room introduces a fourth operation: totalization, in which refusal expands into an environment admitting no external position. Across each operation, time accumulates without progression: dates are added without sequence, enclosure recurs without development, and the strike persists without culmination.

The work does not exit the system it interrupts. It remains available for later retrieval, documentation, and exhibition. Early accounts noting the absence of record-keeping and the disappearance of works indicate a practice not oriented toward preservation or posterity, yet this does not prevent later incorporation. What is withheld at one moment can reappear as content at another.

These operations do not function independently. Each reinforces the others. Cancellation undermines the stability required for recognition. Withdrawal interrupts the continuity required for career formation. Non-participation disrupts the circulation required for

the system's reproduction. Totalization encloses the conditions under which resolution might otherwise occur.

The result is a coordinated negative system. Contribution is suspended across multiple levels simultaneously, yet the system that demands contribution remains intact. Refusal does not terminate it. It exposes the condition under which participation continues to be required even when contribution is withheld.

Conclusion: No End State

Hedrick's practice does not arrive at a final form. Works are repeatedly revised, repainted, and re-dated; each trajectory is interrupted before it can consolidate. No terminal gesture is produced. What remains is the continuation of negation—each operation recurring without an endpoint that would fix meaning or function. This establishes a different condition for artistic practice: the work withholds completion, circulation, and recognition simultaneously. Refusal is not the absence of work; it constitutes the work.

Yet this withholding does not produce an external position. The system from which contribution is withdrawn remains operative and continues to demand replacement, visibility, and return. What is not supplied at one moment is replaced at another. The absence introduced by refusal does not terminate the system. It is routed around.

This limit becomes visible in the later exhibition of Hedrick's work. Objects once withheld from circulation reappear within institutional frameworks that present them as content. The retrospective title organizes sex, politics, and religion into a legible, circutable category, reintroducing the work into the very structures from which it had been withdrawn. Refusal is not preserved as refusal. It is converted into material for display.

For this reason, refusal cannot be generalized as a model. Under conditions of compulsory circulation, withdrawal suspends contribution without altering the system that absorbs, replaces, or redirects what is withheld. Hedrick's work demonstrates both the possibility of non-participation and its limit. The system continues to require what is withheld and to absorb it when it reappears.

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