Intimate Gestures
Handmade Books by William Gedney

November 12, 2015 – March 1, 2016
Chappell Family Gallery | David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library
“I do not consider myself a ‘social-problem’ photographer, I am concerned first with making a good photograph — an uncropped blending of form, value and content. I prefer the ordinary action, the intimate gesture, an image whose form is an instinctive reaction to the material.”

William Gedney
Intimate Gestures: Handmade Books by William Gedney

Few people knew William Gedney well. However, from his photographs and journal entries an image of him can emerge. He was a relentless observer, a voracious reader, and a meticulous maker, enamored of the attentiveness that photography demands. He was passionately introspective and often reclusive, preferring time and solitude to produce his work, and shared little of his personal world with the family, friends, and colleagues he did have. However, the sixty thousand methodically arranged and described items William Gedney left behind in his personal archive perhaps speak to his desire for a photographic legacy beyond that which he himself was willing or able to build. I am glad to say that this exhibition is just the most recent effort to bring Mr. Gedney’s extraordinary work to light. Since his death in 1989, there has been a long line of advocates devoted to the preservation of Gedney’s archive, including his chosen heirs to his estate, photographer Lee Friedlander and his wife, Maria, who served as executor; curator and former director of photography at the Museum of Modern Art John Szarkowski; and Gedney’s only brother Richard. The Friedlanders and Richard Gedney arranged the donation of William Gedney’s cameras and library of photobooks to the Chitrabaní Art College in Calcutta, India, creating the William Gedney Photography Library. They also arranged for the donation of Gedney’s personal archive—which consists of finished exhibition prints, work prints, negatives, contact sheets, notebooks, journals, and the handmade books included in this exhibit—to the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Duke University in 1992. Since arriving at the Library twenty-three years ago, there have been a variety of archivists, scholars, curators, and photographers to steward Gedney’s work, including most notably Margaret Sartor and Geoff Dyer. Their scholarship resulted in one of only two books published on William Gedney to date. Sartor and Dyer’s What Was True: The Photographs and Notebooks of William Gedney (2000) surveys the entire Gedney archive, pairing images from Gedney’s major projects with corresponding journal entries. The second book, Iris Garden (2013), edited by photographer Alec Soth, combines a selection of Gedney’s images with text written by John Cage, who Gedney photographed in 1967, in a sequence highlighting the unique vision and philosophy of the maker and reader, enabled Gedney to marry form with content. As a photographer who was both attentive to and reluctant of intimacy, the corporeal book must have seemed the ideal medium.

To date, it is likely that just a handful of people have seen the books and ephemera included in this exhibit. While Gedney’s photographs have been exhibited internationally at venues such as the Center for Documentary Studies, the George Eastman Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Intimate Gestures is the first exhibit to focus on Gedney’s work in book form and this is the first time his entire collection of handmade books has been publicly displayed. While this catalog provides a limited view of the books themselves, images of the books in their entirety can be viewed on the Rubenstein Library website. Additionally, all of the materials in the exhibit will be accessible in our reading room after the conclusion of the exhibit.

Lisa McCarty
Curator, Archive of Documentary Arts, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library
William Gedney was not only a prolific imagemaker, but also a prolific writer. The William Gedney Photographs and Writings Collection contains seventy journals and notebooks with entries dating from 1949, when Gedney was just seventeen, until 1988, just months before his death. This consistent output provides a window into Gedney’s life and creative process, but also conveys his dedication to works made by hand over the course of his lifetime. Not only are all of Gedney’s journal entries written in a tidy script, but the majority of his journals were also made by hand. The earliest of the handmade journals is from 1969, two years after Gedney starting making photobooks by hand. Gedney’s interest in bookmaking and design can be traced back to his training at Pratt Institute, where he received a BFA in graphic design in 1955. Soon after graduating he began work at Condé Nast Publications and then later at Time-Life Books, where he specialized in magazine and book design. Gedney also took classes at the Center for Book Arts in New York in the 1970s and studied bookbinding techniques independently as well. Three notebooks in particular, made between 1977 and 1982, chronicle Gedney’s devotion to the book form and include detailed notes, sketches, and transcriptions from book arts manuals on a variety of binding and folding techniques. By 1982, Gedney was teaching bookmaking, in addition to photography, at Pratt Institute.
Brooklyn Bridge


William Gedney photographed the Brooklyn Bridge intermittently over the course of twelve years. This iconic structure fascinated Gedney. It served as both a gateway to Brooklyn, where he lived the majority of his adult life, and as the muse of a writer he held in great esteem, Hart Crane. Gedney transcribed large portions of Crane’s poem, “The Bridge,” in several journals. In a 1969 entry, Gedney wondered whether he could produce a book illustrating the poem with thirty of his images. Notably, the 1930 edition of *The Bridge* incorporates images of the Brooklyn Bridge by photographer Walker Evans, whom Gedney also references in his journals. The final version of the book produced by Gedney does not include the poem, however, and contains only nineteen images, with six images stretching across two-page spreads. The prints included in *Brooklyn Bridge* are the largest in scale of all the book projects and were printed at a higher contrast than was typical for Gedney. This graphic print style, combined with both crisp and impressionistic views of the bridge, mirrors the lyric tone of Crane’s poem.
Homage to Downtown Brooklyn

Photographs: 1967, Book undated | 18 pages

William Gedney lived in Brooklyn for over twenty years and photographed frequently throughout the borough. In that time Gedney devoted several series to specific places in Brooklyn, including the Brooklyn Bridge, his neighborhood bar O’Rourke’s, as well as a series depicting the changing view from his apartment window on Myrtle Avenue. Gedney’s interest in the theater of the street is also evident in Homage to Downtown Brooklyn. The choice of the word “homage” in the title alludes to Gedney’s reverence for his neighborhood, however, this slim volume may have also been intended to honor another photographer whom Gedney admired. A single journal entry from 1967 references this book project with the text “Homage to Walker Evans” followed by “Downtown Brooklyn” a few lines below Evans’s name. The ten images included in this book are certainly characteristic of Gedney’s style, yet also recall Evans’s project, Many Are Called, which captured the self-possession of New York City subway riders amidst a crowd of fellow commuters.
Gedney left the least amount of information about this book, which was undated and untitled, and is the only book in the archive to utilize a plastic binding. The images in the book were taken between 1960 and 1962, and the correlating contact sheets are labeled in Gedney’s handwriting “Italian Festival” or “San Gennaro,” which references the Feast of San Gennaro, an annual festival that takes place in the Little Italy neighborhood of Manhattan. Notably, this book strays from Gedney’s usual design constraints of an imageless cover and single images of the same size affixed to a page. The book incorporates images on the front and back cover, multiple image sizes, and two pages that include pairs of images. This lively design highlights the vitality of the festivities and the community depicted.
In 1966 William Gedney received a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship to pursue what he described as “Photographic Studies of American Life.” This fellowship supported the production of two ambitious projects that Gedney pursued in tandem. The majority of the images in A Time of Youth and PORTRAITS 50 Contemporary American Composers were made during Gedney’s 1966–67 Guggenheim Fellowship year, although he started the composer project before receiving the award and initiated several visits to composers as early as 1965.

Gedney corresponded with and then photographed at least fifty-one composers as part of this project. He engaged each composer by sending a personal, typewritten letter explaining his intentions and often providing references, such as John Szarkowski at the Museum of Modern Art, who would vouch for him. It also appears that Gedney parlayed his contact with composers whom he had already photographed to gain access to other composers he admired. For example, in a letter to John Cage, Gedney mentions receiving his address from Morton Feldman. In many of his letters Gedney expresses his wish to create a book because of his interest in “contemporary American music and my concern over the resistance of many of the intelligent mass public to new music.” The portraits Gedney made reflect his sincere interest in these fifty-one men, their music, and their creative process, revealing each composer in candid moments and in their preferred environment. In a letter from 1966, Gedney wrote to publisher Bob Markel, “People do not have one face, and no photographer can take the ‘definitive’ picture of anyone. I have tried to be incisive as to the character of these men. To reveal subtlety. This is my main concern and objective.”

PORTRAITS 50 Contemporary American Composers is distinct as the only one of Gedney’s book projects to be accepted by a publisher and the only one in which he attempted to collaborate with a writer. Unfortunately, it was the text component that prevented the book from being published with the Macmillan Company. While Gedney completed his photographs and design in 1968, the contracted writer, Eric Salzman, failed to deliver a text and the publishing agreement with the Macmillan Company was cancelled. This early disappointment discouraged Gedney; while he did write of his desire to publish books throughout his career, it does not appear that he actively pursued mainstream publication of any of his book projects after 1968.
Letter to Leonard Bernstein, 1967

Contract between the Macmillan Publishing Company, William Gedney, and Eric Salzman, for the publication of PORTRAITS 50 American Composers, 1966

Spreads from PORTRAITS 50 American Composers, 1967
Thirty-One Photographs


Like many photographers, William Gedney chose to organize his archive by series, grouping all the images from a single place or subject together. This organizing principle is consistent throughout the archive, from contact sheets to work prints to finished prints. The majority of Gedney’s journals are in fact organized this way as well, with thoughts on particular subjects, places, or projects segregated into specific books. Thirty-One Photographs is the only exception to this rule. For this project Gedney sequenced thirty-one images from multiple bodies of work, including images from his grandparents’ farm, the composer series, San Francisco, South Dakota, Chicago, Kentucky, Montana, Detroit, the Brooklyn Bridge, and a variety of other images taken in New York City. The order of images is not chronological, nor are the images grouped by region. This group does, however, speak to Gedney’s sequencing prowess, with graphic and conceptual links connecting the images from page to page.

A journal entry from 1971 may shed further light on Gedney’s possible intentions for this book:

> During a depressing day yesterday I pulled out the Bellocq book ‘Storyville Portraits.’ How beautifully lucid and strong the pictures are. There are only 34 plates in the book and as I remember looking at them at Lee’s, only a little over 90 photos in all, in existence: the total surviving work of Bellocq. I was struck now in looking at the book how in just 34 pictures, so complete a world is rendered, an all encompassing wholeness. Each one of his photographs seems to contain the germ of all his work.

If Gedney’s intention for Thirty-One Photographs was to replicate this idea of encapsulating his entire oeuvre in just a small group of photographs, Gedney bested Bellocq in this pursuit by three images.
A Time of Youth

William Gedney’s second Guggenheim-supported project, A Time of Youth, begins with a quote from John Cage: “They seem to be doing happy things sadly, or maybe they’re doing sad things happily.” Cage, who was also included in PORTRAITS 50 Contemporary American Composers, concisely provides context for Gedney’s series depicting a group of young hippies in San Francisco whom Gedney lived with for several months. He participated in their community yet also remained at a characteristic distance. Gedney’s journals and images speak to this fact, at times providing intimate views, such as couples entwined in tangled sheets and huddled on street corners, yet always pulling back again to see the larger tableau, as seen in his book cover designs.

Gedney had a precise vision for the structure of the book and refers to the project several times in his writings as an “attempt at visual literature, modeled after the novel form (characters progress throughout the book and other literary devices are used in the format).” In a 1969 journal entry, Gedney also described his intentions for each of the seven sections of the book, which progress from morning to night, encompassing the cycle of a day as well as the youths’ continuous search for love and fulfillment. While these images of the hippie counterculture certainly exemplify Gedney’s concept, as John Szarkowski observed on the occasion of his solo show at MoMA, “Gedney, being a good witness, does not attempt to direct our verdict concerning the quality of these lives. He does allow us to see that they are in many ways much like our own.”
In 1969 Gedney received a Fulbright Fellowship to photograph in India. He arrived in Delhi in November and traveled to Benares, where he lived and photographed for fourteen months. This was Gedney’s first trip abroad, and he chronicles it in great detail across several journals, obsessively observing Indian culture and customs. Gedney is often confounded by the concurrent difficulty and beauty of daily life in Benares, and by February 1970, he states his interest in producing a book from the images he was making there. In a journal entry that begins, “Notes for a book on Benares,” Gedney proceeds to transcribe the following from A Reader’s Guide to Finnegans Wake: “Rise and fall and rise again, sleeping and waking, death and resurrection, sin and redemption, conflict and appeasement and above all time itself.”

The parallels between James Joyce’s circuitous final novel and Gedney’s books on Benares are perhaps more apt than Gedney could have realized at the time. Gedney’s interest in dream states and his experience of nonlinear time while in India are apparent in the images included in Benares Photographs and the incomplete maquette Benares Night. These books also took the longest of any of his projects to realize. Six years elapsed between the making of the images for Benares Photographs and the making of the book, and nine years for Benares Night. Benares Photographs was also the last book design Gedney completed before his death.
Unfinished Book Projects

Gedney’s journals suggest that he considered making at least one and, in some cases, multiple books related to each of his major photographic series. While he realized seven of the fourteen projects described in his notebooks, many projects were not completed before Gedney’s death in 1989 at the age of fifty-seven. His archive includes the beginnings of four unfinished book projects, including spine labels for an ambitious photo album project, a petite ten-image maquette for a book entitled Benares Night, and two spreads for a book dedicated to his images of Myrtle Avenue in Brooklyn.

The most developed of these unfinished projects are the plans Gedney left for a book devoted to the images he made in Kentucky in 1964 and 1972. In addition to a two-image spread and a scale model with notes on his desired page and image size, Gedney also made sketches depicting the images he wanted to include in the Kentucky book. In a journal entry from March 1973, Gedney describes making a final selection of eighty pictures and that he planned “about 168 pages so maybe it will still be economical though the chances of publication are slight.” While Gedney was not able to complete the project in his lifetime, there is in fact still a chance for publication due to the interest of North Carolina photographer and Appalachia advocate Roger May. May intends to join the lineage of Gedney supporters by bringing the Kentucky book to fruition.

Mock-up of “Myrtle Avenue” book spread, undated

Mock-up of “Benares Night”, 1982

Mock-up of “Benares Night”, undated

Text for Benares Night, 1982

Mock-up of Benares Night, 1982
Epilogue

On an undated, loose piece of notebook paper, William Gedney transcribed the following quote, attributing it to photographer Alfred Stieglitz:

"It is one thing to think about a piece of work as a scientific or objective entity that will stand up a hundred years hence, and another to think of the living quality of the person doing the thing and of his development. Is the thing felt—does it come out of an inner need—an inner must? Is one ready to die for it?... that is the only test...."

William Gedney's archive lives up to both these standards professed by Mr. Stieglitz. As the earliest of Gedney's books approach fifty years in age, they continue to "stand up" in their own right and to contemporary handmade photobooks. And because they are archived here at the Rubenstein Library, they will be available "a hundred years hence" for further scrutiny.

Just as important as the longevity of Gedney's archive, however, is the second quality Stieglitz described. William Gedney's handmade books embody the spirit of the maker in every pristine silver image, every measured page, every crisp fold, every hand-mended binding, and every mark of his felt tip pen. They were made out of that inner need, that inner must. They were and are fully felt.