

# *A TIME OF YOUTH*

*San Francisco, 1966–1967 • William Gedney*



EDITED BY LISA MCCARTY WITH AN ESSAY BY PHILIP GEFTER

*A TIME OF YOUTH*

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*San Francisco, 1966–1967*

*William Gedney*

EDITED BY LISA MCCARTY

WITH AN ESSAY BY PHILIP GEFTER

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This book is an attempt at visual literature, modeled after the novel form (characters progress throughout the book and other literary devices are used in the format).

I worked for the collective impression, yet tried to make each of the individual pictures stand on their own. The book tries to bring pictures together in a strict dramatic sequence. Perhaps this is an impossible task to set for a photographer working in reality, measured by time and chance.

The photographs were made while on a Guggenheim fellowship in 1966-67. I wandered the streets of San Francisco, these were the people I met, this was how they lived.

The book is designed in a square format to allow for the equal size of both horizontal and vertical pictures. The present size is 8 1/2 x 8 1/2 inches, this size can be altered (as long as the basic proportions remain the same) depending on press and sheet size etc. It now runs approximately 100 pages without any introductory matter.

William Gedney

Statement accompanying Gedney's final design for *A Time of Youth*, 1969. William Gedney Photographs and Papers, Box 161, Folder 7, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

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# INTRODUCTION

LISA MCCARTY

One historical-existential trace has been hunted, captured, guarded, and preserved in aversion to waste by an avid collector, then shut carefully away, outside an economy of use, inaccessible to touch. Now it is re-animated, re-collected (recollected) through an encounter with the mind of a curious reader, a researcher, an antiquarian, a bibliomaniac, a sub sub librarian, a poet.

—Susan Howe, *Spontaneous Particulars:*

*The Telepathy of Archives*

Dear Reader,

The book you hold in your hands has been reanimated after fifty years of dormancy. William Gedney completed a maquette for *A Time of Youth* in 1969, and he intended for the book to be seen, read, and held close, as is evidenced in a typewritten statement of his from the same year (see the accompanying image). Gedney carefully saved these manuscripts, along with sixty thousand additional items that documented his life and work, for twenty years as he moved between various home studios in Brooklyn and finally to Staten Island. When William Gedney's life was tragically cut short by AIDS in 1989, when he was fifty-six, the future of his archive, and thus his legacy, was precarious. In some ways this was not surprising, given the nature of Gedney's life and work.

William Gedney was born in New York and was based there for most of his life. He was most active as a photographer from the mid-1950s through the mid-1980s and traveled

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throughout the United States, as well as in India and Europe. He had an impressive résumé, which included a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA), as well as Guggenheim and Fulbright Fellowships. Gedney's contemporaries included the celebrated photographers Diane Arbus and Lee Friedlander, who knew Gedney and supported his work. However, his approach and interests as a photographer were distinctive from those of the school of New York street photographers with whom Gedney is often associated. Over the course of his career, Gedney focused on photographing specific communities in which he embedded himself for extended periods. To do this, Gedney took jobs intermittently as a graphic designer, a librarian, and later an educator to support himself. He tended to keep these positions until he had saved enough money to photograph for several months at a time without the constraints of a day job. This approach, and Gedney's propensity to work rather than to self-promote, allowed for prolificacy but brought him little commercial gain or acclaim.

Gedney worked toward what he referred to as "photographic essays."<sup>1</sup> He undertook long-form explorations of his own neighborhood in Brooklyn, a family of coal miners in Eastern Kentucky, everyday life in Benares (Varanasi), India, and youth counterculture in San Francisco, the last of which is presented in this book. For each of these projects, Gedney spent months photographing and often years corresponding with the people he came to know. Such a work ethic demonstrates Gedney's commitment but also his long-term exploration of precariousness, both in his own life and in the lives of others. To quote the former director of MoMA's Department of Photography, John Szarkowski, Gedney photographed "people living precariously under difficulty."<sup>2</sup> In the 1968 press release for Gedney's solo show, Szarkowski also noted, "Gedney's pictures make it clear that individuals are more complex and interesting than the clichés. . . . The pictures reward us with real knowledge of the lives of specific people."<sup>3</sup> The photographs in *A Time of Youth* certainly reward us with such knowledge and complexity.

In a sequence of eighty-seven photographs, Gedney presents the intertwined lives of young friends and lovers. We can see the intensity of these relationships in singular gazes, gestures, and embraces, both on the streets of San Francisco and in makeshift shared beds on apartment floors. Within these improvised spaces, swagger and self-consciousness are rendered visible through Gedney's tight framing and sympathetic eyes. He made all the photographs in *A Time of Youth* between 1966 and 1967 while living for several months with the communities he photographed. Gedney was able to undertake a project of this length only through the support of a Guggenheim Fellowship that he received in 1966. In

his application he wrote, “I have pursued this as far as I can with personal means, being constantly interrupted by the necessities of earning a living, to support the expenses of photography. A grant will allow me to do what I cannot do as a journalist: cover in depth areas of American life that are largely ignored or that the mass media are reluctant to cover. It will give me freedom to devote all my time, thought, and effort to photographing America as I see it.”<sup>4</sup>

In the course of his thirty-year career, Gedney made approximately seventy-six thousand unique images that speak to precarity in different ways. However, much of this work has come to be known only posthumously by virtue of Gedney’s archive, which found not only a home but a long line of stewards. After three years of uncertainty, Gedney’s archive came to the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Duke University in 1992 as a donation from the co-executors of his estate, who included his brother and his closest friends, Lee and Maria Friedlander. In collaboration with a variety of Gedney advocates, the library has facilitated several waves of activity to promote his work and make it available. In 2000 the Duke faculty member Margaret Sartor and the writer Geoff Dyer coedited the collection *What Was True: The Photographs and Notebooks of William Gedney*.<sup>5</sup> Exhibitions at Duke’s Center for Documentary Studies and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art were organized to coincide with the book’s release. As a result of the book and exhibits, between 2000 and 2012 Gedney’s images were among the most requested photographs in the library’s collection. They have been reproduced in exhibition catalogs, magazines, and textbooks. The publication in 2013 of a second book showcasing Gedney’s work marked a second spike in public interest. *Iris Garden*, edited by the photographer Alec Soth, features Gedney’s photographs combined with text by the composer John Cage.<sup>6</sup> The book was shortlisted for the Aperture Foundation’s PhotoBook of the Year award but is now out of print. *Iris Garden* introduced a new generation of photographers and curators to Gedney’s work and spurred much of the widespread attention that Gedney is now receiving.

From 2014 to 2019 I was privileged to serve as the curator of William Gedney’s archive. Soon after my appointment in 2014, I began the project that has led to this publication. As a photographer, fellow bookmaker, and curator, I was awestruck when I found William Gedney’s handmade books, book designs, and bookmaking ephemera during a reorganization of his archive. I immediately set to work on an exhibition to display these previously unseen treasures. While Gedney’s images have been seen and celebrated in recent years, to date only a handful of people have seen his books. In addition to the thousands

of images and prints Gedney made throughout his career, between 1967 and 1982 he conceived, designed, and constructed seven unique photobooks. Gedney's archive also includes descriptions and in-progress designs for at least seven more book projects, making a total of fourteen books overall, which would have corresponded to his major photographic essays. While only one of the books Gedney completed in his lifetime was ever under contract to a publisher, it is clear that he believed his images should be experienced and disseminated as books.

As the former steward of Mr. Gedney's archive, I am elated to carry out what I believe to be his wishes. That said, I must acknowledge the speculative nature of this posthumous publication. This book would have been very different if William Gedney had been able to publish it in 1969. This book would be different still if Gedney were alive today and able to supervise this publication. My methodology for undertaking this reanimation of *A Time of Youth* was to preserve as many of Gedney's decisions as possible while also providing context for his extraordinary but little-known achievements as a bookmaker and archivist of his own work. As such, his image selection is presented here exactly as he composed it, in the sequence and at the scale he desired. When Gedney's decisions or intentions were not clear in his original design, I referred to his copious journals for guidance. However, there are aspects of this publication that Gedney did not specify and certainly would have had opinions about, including paper stock, printing method, and print run. The additions of this introduction, the essay by Philip Gelter, and my afterword and chronology are certainly leaps of faith.

In his application for the Guggenheim Fellowship, Gedney also wrote, "My work expresses itself completely in visual terms, never trying to duplicate what words can do."<sup>7</sup> The words added to this volume are not intended to duplicate or explain William Gedney's photographs. However, I hope they can provide a window into his process and perhaps paint their own parallel picture of William Gedney as an artist, a bookmaker, and a humanist.

Sincerely,

Lisa McCarty

*Assistant Professor of Photography, Southern Methodist University*  
*Curator, Archive of Documentary Arts, Duke University (2014–2019)*

## NOTES

*Epigraph:* Susan Howe, *Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives* (New York: New Directions, 2014).

1. William Gedney, Guggenheim Fellowship application, 1965, William Gedney Photographs and Papers, Box 166, Folder 14, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.
2. Museum of Modern Art, press release no. 130, for release December 17, 1968, [https://www.moma.org/documents/moma\\_press-release\\_326598.pdf](https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_326598.pdf).
3. Museum of Modern Art, press release no. 130.
4. Gedney, Guggenheim Fellowship application, 1965, William Gedney Photographs and Papers, Box 166, Folder 14.
5. Margaret Sartor and Geoff Dyer, eds., *What Was True: The Photographs and Notebooks of William Gedney* (New York: W. W. Norton and Lyndhurst Books of the Center for Documentary Studies, 2000).
6. John Cage and William Gedney, *Iris Garden*, ed. Alec Soth (Saint Paul: Little Brown Mushroom, 2013).
7. Gedney, Guggenheim Fellowship application, 1965, William Gedney Photographs and Papers, Box 166, Folder 14.

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