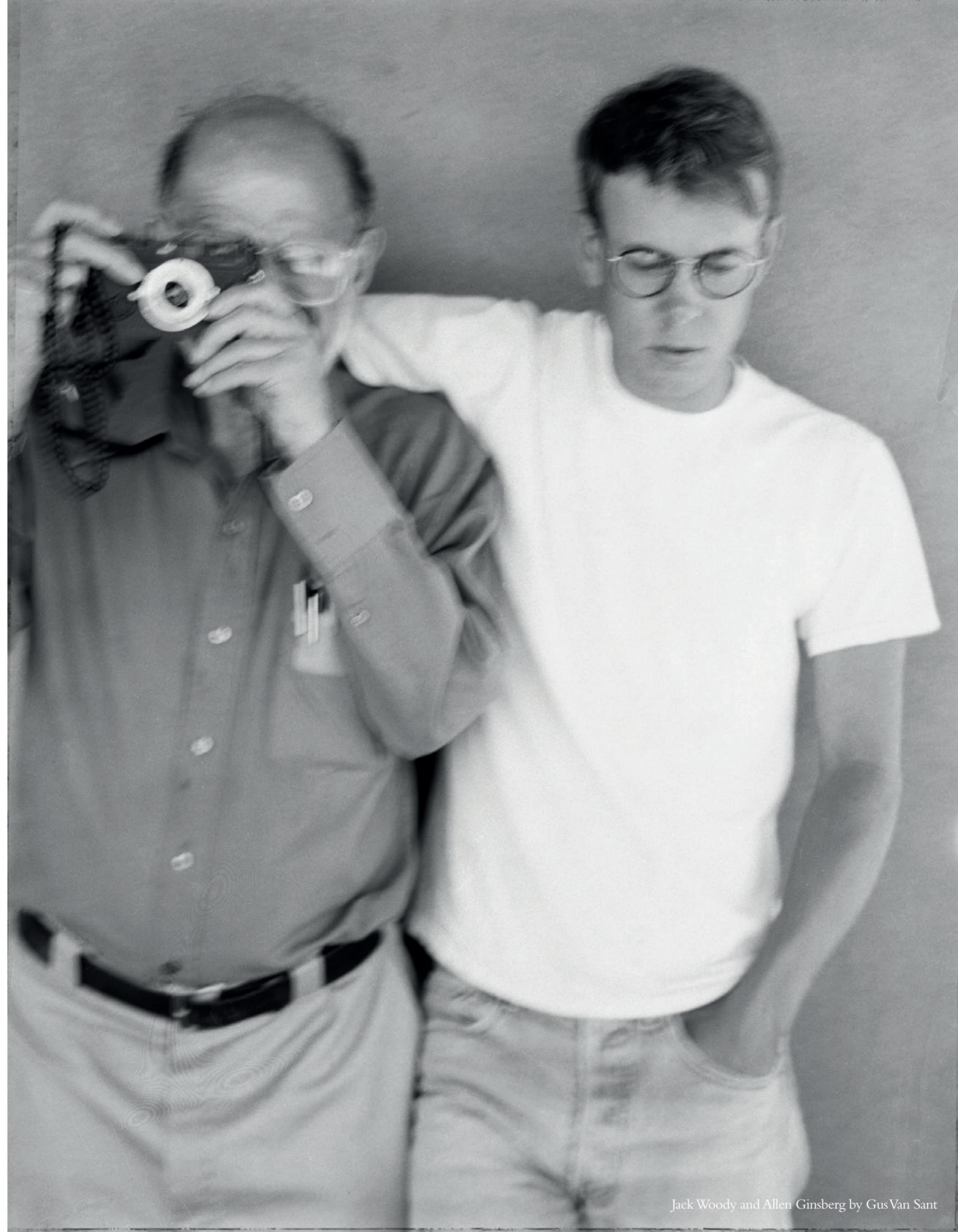


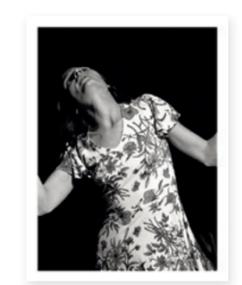
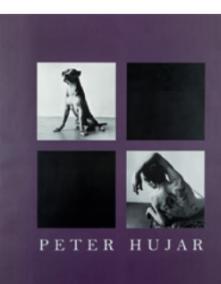
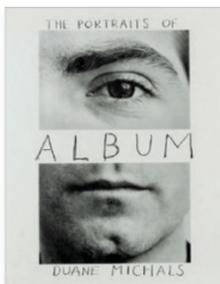
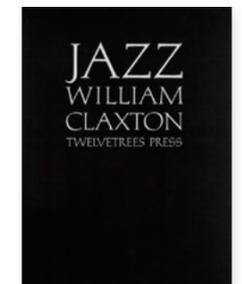
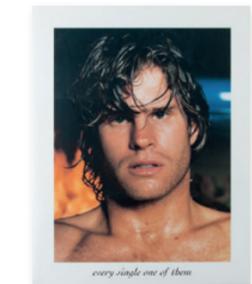
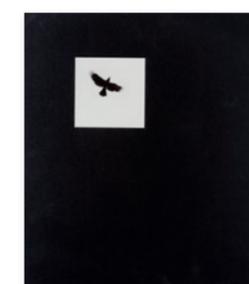
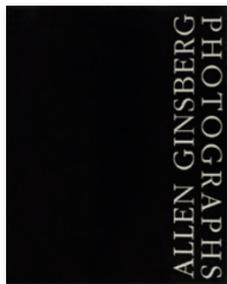
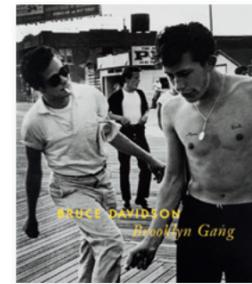
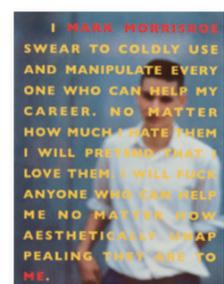
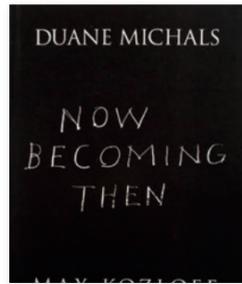
# Jack Woody

Interview and portraits by Caroline Tompkins



For a self-described pathological liar, Jack Woody is in the wrong line of work. Woody has spent the last three-and-a-half decades at the helm of Twelvetrees Press and Twin Palms Publishers, one of the premier art book publishers in the world. Though the operation is small, Woody's attention to detail and commitment to quality material has attracted the world's foremost artists and photographers to his shop. Under his guidance, Twelvetrees and Twin Palms have put out books that have fundamentally shaped the face of photography for the last few decades. From the shadow play of Horst P. Horst to the exuberance of Ryan McGinley, Woody has helped to publish and popularise photographers who have shaped the visual language of our society. Woody never wanted to produce art books. He grew up steeped in the tradition of California literary presses, and set out to join them, only stumbling into photography after a failed project with Joan Didion and David Hockney. Instead of putting out works of literature, Woody has spent his life compiling and communicating an archive of images, a study of the way we picture ourselves and our society. Photography has always been used as evidence. A photo shows us, to some degree, the truth of human experience, and uncovers what is hidden in plain sight. At their most difficult, (like James Allen's *Without Sanctuary* or Deborah Luster's *One Big Self*), Woody's publications challenge us to remember and reexamine the violence that shapes our history. Woody's work reminds us, that sometimes, in the most vital cases, seeing is believing.







Caroline Tompkins: During my research, I noticed how few interviews there are with you. Is that by choice?

Jack Woody: I'm just a pathological liar. It's one of my problems, so doing interviews can be problematic because if I'm in a certain mood, I'll just make up things. Then I figured out if I don't do this very often, people can't really compare anything.

CT: In that Elizabeth Avedon interview –

JW: That was a total trap. I am so mad about that. She's changed the date on it too. I did that in 2012 for her blog, and a friend of mine said she's changed the date to 2017. She wanted to make people think it was more up to date than it was.

CT: Interesting. She calls you reclusive. Is that by choice?

JW: Reclusive means when someone calls you and asks you for something and you say no; it's not really reclusive.

CT: So why am I allowed here?

JW: I just don't do interviews very often and it was totally capricious of me to say yes. The next day, I was like, 'Why did I say yes to that?' I had gone through agony with the podcast [*Magic Hour*]. I also feel like every now and then I should say something, even though I'm not sure what it is or why.

CT: Do you have a bad experience doing them?

JW: I feel like I have no real experience. I don't have to do it. People say it's good for press, but I don't need press. You just said there aren't very many interviews, but I feel like there are way too many of them.

CT: I'm basing it off what can be found on the internet.

JW: People say it's impressive how low my profile on the Internet is. They kind of congratulate me.

CT: I'm thinking about how photographers often use their cameras like a passport as permission to have access to something, and I'm wondering if publishing is your permission to photography?

JW: Publishing photography books happened totally by accident. I didn't intend to publish photography books. I started out wanting to do a literary press. The first book I did was Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy, a book called *October* in 1978. I was a kid, and I just wanted to do beautiful literary books. It was leather bound and a beautiful, precious thing. So that was my first book. I was in California, and there was a real tradition of literary presses there. Growing up, I always had a library and collected books, so I aspired to do something like that. I don't remember where the idea of making a book came from, but I love reading them. Then I think in '78 or '79, the next project I was going to do was with Joan Didion and David Hockney. David was going to do all the drawings and Joan the writing. I went to see Joan, and I think *The White Album* had just come out. *Play It As It Lays* was kind of biblical for me, so I think it was one of the things that brought me to LA. I went to Joan's house and John Gregory Dunne

answered the door, and there was no Joan. We're sitting in the living room talking, and he goes over to the stairway. It was a weird stairway, just a hole in the wall, and completely dark at the top. I always knew about her migraines, and John kept yelling 'Joaan!' All of a sudden I see two feet emerge from the blackness. Anyway, I couldn't get her to commit. *The White Album* was just this huge thing. There were so many demands on her. Everybody finally said, 'Well you don't get her without him [John]!' So what I should have done, instead of David, was to have John Gregory Dunne and Joan do some sort of collaboration. In the meantime, someone told me that the National Endowment had grants to do books. So in 1979, I got a grant to do the George Platt Lynes book. I had been scrounging around doing stuff and I met the guy who owned the George Platt Lynes photographs. Out of nowhere, I got this \$25,000 grant to do this book, and all of a sudden, I became a photography publisher. I did that book and the *New York Times* picked it as one of the best books of the year. All of these people started coming to me and wanting me to publish their books. That really set the whole thing off.

CT: So do you feel like you were—

JW: —carried along?

CT: [*Laughs*] Yeah. Did you still have literary aspirations?

JW: I do and I did because I always like to hire interesting writers to write for the books. A lot of photographers couldn't care less about that. Anything that distracts from the photos is problematic, but to me it's part of the book. In a way, that's remained in the books. I also brought all these old traditions of bookmaking that others have adopted without really knowing where they come from. It all goes back to these literary traditions that I really admired.

CT: How do you feel about photography now? The good and the bad.

JW: There is just so much out there. Who can even pay attention anymore? I was looking at some publisher the other day that I had never heard of and they had something like fifty books. I was going through this list thinking 'I haven't heard of a single one of these people, this is completely insane.' People keep saying 'community', but there's a kind of dissonance in it. I'm just doing what I'm doing and you're doing what you're doing. I don't really get that much interesting stuff in the mail, or I should say email. I get things every day, four or five submissions a day. A lot of it usually traces back to a kind of academic approach. I'm looking for empathy. Growing up, my brother and I would watch TV and we'd watch Westerns. He always cheered for the Cowboys, and I always cheered for the Indians. The Indians always lost. I remember thinking 'Why does my side always lose?' Then later in my adolescence, I picked up a copy of *Coming of Age in Mississippi* by Anne Moody. I was completely freaked out, I mean, this was a world I had no idea existed. It was really extraordinary. I have this empathy for the downtrodden. People who were thwarted somehow in life. They are on the outside looking in. So I think when I make some of my publishing choices, like *Without Sanctuary*, it comes out of that. Other things are more frivolous, like the fashion stuff. Being gay was a part of that. The gay community is sort of isolated in a way. There were West Hollywood and gay bookstores, and I always wanted to break out of that. If I was going to do that George Platt Lynes book, I



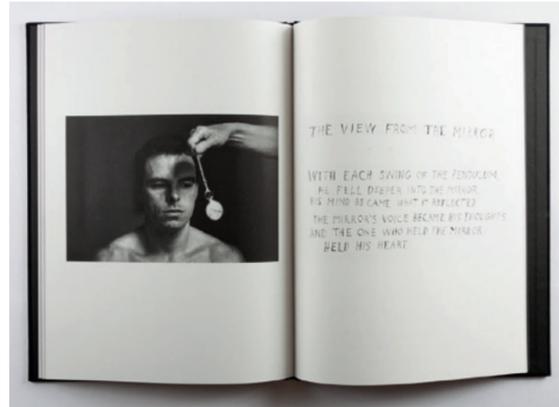
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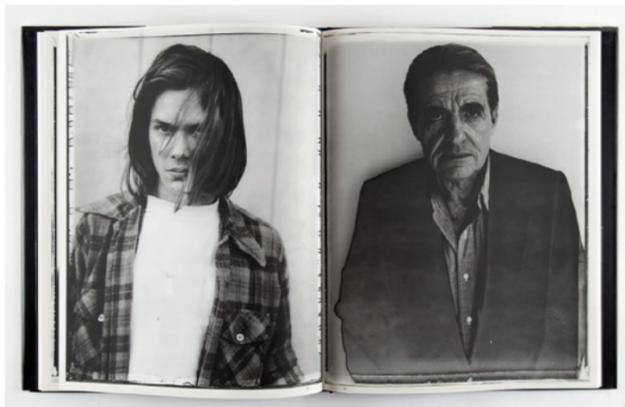
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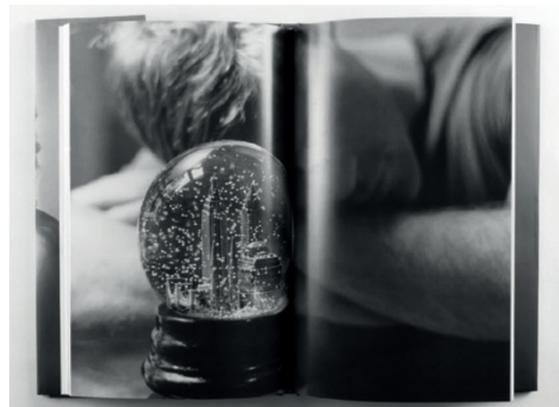
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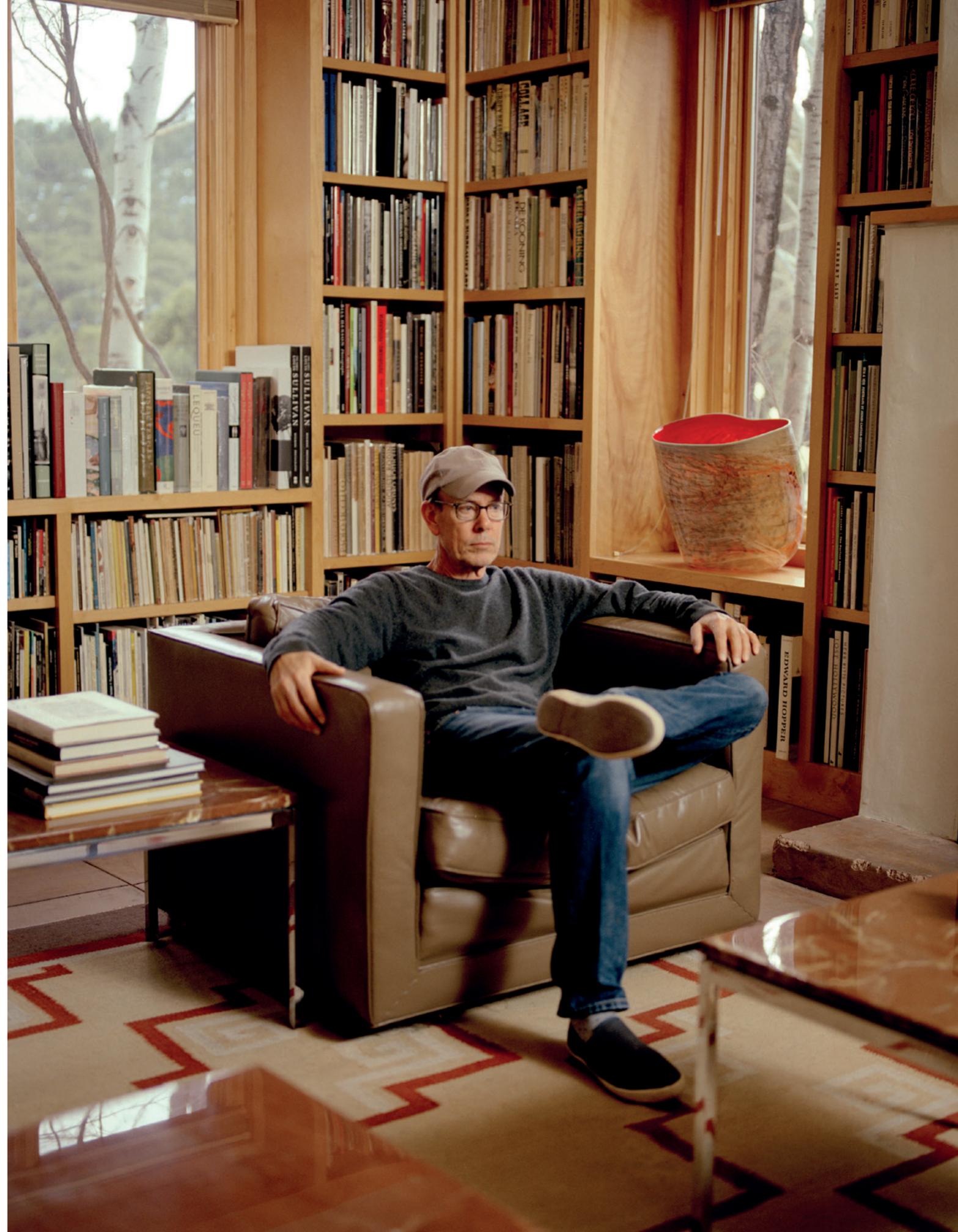
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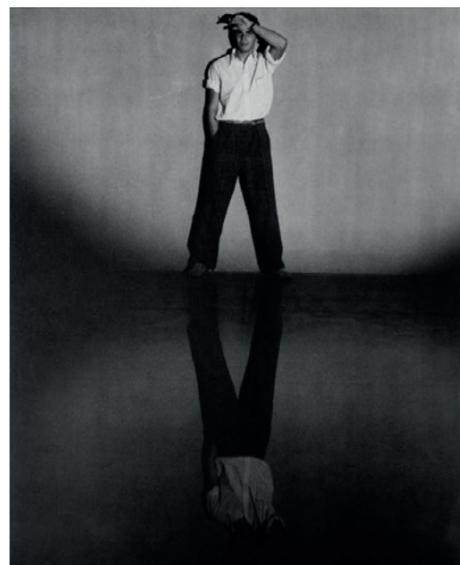


108 Portraits, Gus Van Sant



Questions Without Answers, Duane Michals





Photographs 1931-1995, George Platt Lynes

didn't want it just in the gay bookstores, I also wanted it in Rizzoli on Fifth Avenue in New York. That's where the *New York Times* book reviewer saw it. That took me out of being a gay book publisher, because there were lots of those. I don't ever feel like there was a master plan. I was washed in and out with the tide. One thing led to things I couldn't have imagined. Like Bruce Weber came to me and wanted me to do his book, which led to Herb Ritts coming to me to do his book. Those books turned out to be immensely successful. I made an extraordinary amount of money on them. What happened after that was the big publishers went to them and offered them six-figure contracts to publish books with them. Until then, they wouldn't have even thought of them because of the whole gay thing. All through the Eighties was the AIDS thing, which I wasn't really a part of because I didn't live in West Hollywood. I didn't want to live with the gay community. I lived in a black neighborhood in Altadena. I've always set myself apart, and I'm not sure why. For me it's a healthy choice. You mentioned the photo community here in Santa Fe, and for me it's like ... not a chance. But you know, Photo Eye bookstore sells my books, so I am a part of it, but not in a personal way.

CT: You had mentioned in a previous interview that publishing is often autobiographical. What about what you're working on now is autobiographical?

JW: It's autobiographical in terms of the choices I make, in regards to themes and the people I'm attracted to and what they're doing, but it's not so specific. It's almost like you're making up your biography as you're going along and adding to it. They're my interests and they interest me. Where those interests come from, I don't know. Certain things, like *Without Sanctuary*, are compelling and seem like something I should do. Some people said, "This is horrible, how could you do something so terrible?" People didn't know how to look at it, so they just looked away. The idea of collecting all these images in a book was completely horrifying. We would send out a catalogue every year, and people called to unsubscribe because the book was in it. It was not the response I was expecting. I remember one morning right after Christmas, I got a call at 6am, and they said "Go get a *New York Times*. There's a full page feature about *Without Sanctuary*." It turned out to be an amazing thing because Roberta Smith

[*The New York Times*' chief art critic] gave people a way to look at the book. She did an amazing service to that book. We sold 3,000 copies in one day, and that was all that I had printed because I didn't think people would even want that many. It was an extraordinary moment. Back to autobiography – I can certainly trace *Without Sanctuary* to reading *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, and how I felt. It was something that had an impact on me. I'm emotional about a lot of it. It's a business too. I have to make some choices that I might not necessarily make. The fashion stuff didn't matter to me that much, but the gay angle was my way into it.

CT: I'm interested in publishing as a political act.

JW: Well, it is a political act. For me it was very political. That's more important to me than being a part of the photo community. That's one of the reasons I'm still around. It gives it a personality.

CT: I've noticed that Twin Palms maintains a 'straight' photography approach.

JW: I'm kind of avoiding the whole conceptual thing, which is fine. There are presses that do only that, and it's great. I understand why people would be into it, but it's never mattered to me that much. I can appreciate it, and they are certainly beautiful books, but they're not something I'd necessarily want to do myself. It's not something I want in my library, or it is something I want in my library, but not publish myself.

CT: Is that your basis of publishing something? Whether it would be in your library?

JW: Yes, kind of. Some people can make really nice books, maybe not consistently, but none of us can do anything consistently. There are people out there doing amazing things. It's very crowded, like Jones Beach in the summer, but there's still good stuff.

CT: Do you relate the influx of publishers to the influx of images via things like Instagram? The good stuff is there still, but you have to find it.

JW: It's insane. When I became a publisher, nobody wanted to be a publisher. There was no such thing as becoming a publisher. It wasn't a thing. Aperture was publishing then,

and a few other smaller ones were around. Eakins Press was a crazy guy doing it out of his New York apartment. His father had sold three Thomas Eakins paintings, died right after, and left him the money, so that became Eakins Press. He was doing these incredibly beautiful books. Anyways, all these kids now are publishers.

CT: Why do you think?

JW: There's just nothing else to do, maybe? They can't possibly be making any money. I guess if you come from circumstances you could afford to do it for a while. There are so many people doing that, it seems like a much less interesting thing to do. There must be something else that would be more interesting.

CT: It seems like crowdfunding is so much more a part of the process.

JW: Someone I published had a thing where if they get 500 presales, then they'd do the book. Otherwise, it's never going to happen. How important could it really be if these are the conditions under which it's going to be published? What if it's 1,000 copies? It'll never see the light of day.

CT: It doesn't always feel like there's another option.

JW: There probably isn't unless someone can put money towards it. Then maybe it shouldn't be happening anyway. Why don't you reconsider? There's so much of it and there's lots of money churning around. Lots of books keep coming out. Like Michael Mack – it's like every Friday, a new book comes out. [Laughs].

CT: But I would think Mack is one of the good ones?

JW: Michael's a businessman. He's smart. He's got a formula. He's real. He's not some kid that's just got out of graduate school and wants to be a publisher. He's totally for real, which you have to be. He's a role model for that: if you're going to do this, here's a blueprint. I don't know how he runs the numbers, but he should be a role model for people. He's got a format. He's got it all figured out. I can just see him counting the square inches on the paper for how much it's going to cost. I think he told me he used to be a lawyer, plus he has



kids! He has five boys or something, so they need to eat. He's much more serious than I am. He should be the role model.

CT: And you shouldn't?

JW: I may be, in spite of myself, successful, but I'm no one's role model.

CT: Do you think your success is a mistake?

JW: Well it certainly wasn't planned. I remember in high school getting fired from my busboy job, and thinking 'I got fired from a busboy job.' I was like, what am I gonna do? Publishing at that point had not occurred to me, but I knew that I was going to have to figure out something to do. That was the moment that I knew I didn't fit. I knew I could never have a real nine-to-five job. I could never do it well. That was a good warning, like you better get your shit together because you're not going to have an easy time of it.

CT: When talking to other photographers, they talk about photography like a marriage, or a parent, or a sibling. As a publisher, does your relationship resemble that?

JW: Maybe adopted, but not a blood relation. I haven't had anyone talk to me like that. That would freak me out. Another reason not to leave the mountain. Like a family thing?

CT: Like a relationship where you're not sure who's influencing who, not sure who's in control. The way photographers talk about their affair with the medium.

JW: I think you come at it anyway you can to try to make it make sense to you. You bring in anything that will make it work or help you rationalise whatever the hell it is you think you're doing. Give yourself a reason to go forward with whatever because there must be so many reasons not to. It must be so discouraging for people. As a photographer, you're more dependent on other people and a kind of framework. The whole thing is probably on the verge of collapse. I can't imagine how much longer this can go on for. It's got to reorganise itself, and I'm not quite sure how that's going to happen. I get invited to look at portfolios, and it's just the saddest thing in the world. People just have such unrealistic expectations. What do you say? It's not gonna happen? I'm supposed to be the nice guy. They have these events, and they

have dinners. The only one I do anymore is the New Orleans one because I have a house there, and I try to feel like I'm supporting the community by at least doing something.

CT: I've done a few of those as the reviewer. It's difficult because their framework is often so far from what you can conceive of. It's like, 'What part of the internet are you looking at?'

JW: Right. 'What planet are you from?' I only do half a day now because, psychologically, I'm exhausted.

CT: Has it ever been fruitful?

JW: There have been nice people. Occasionally there's someone who makes perfect sense, and you can talk to them *really*, and say 'You know these are the issues.' Other people, you just don't want to burst their bubbles. You don't know what's going to happen. I had someone cry, and it was my fault. That's what they said to me. 'You can't come here and make people cry because then they won't pay us and come back next year.' That whole thing is so creepy. They're just taking money from people. That's a business model that's completely exploited.

CT: Has this always existed?

JW: No. That's something else. It's like some little monster on the side that grew up with this photo community to exploit it. They give prizes and they have competitions. They drag these poor people through these photo review things. Poor people on both sides of the table. I think they should be banned. I would never recommend any photographer go to them. A lot of them now have set up these things where they have someone who's like an advisor. I won't name names because I don't want to get in trouble. These kids are being set up, and there's someone there to say, 'Oh if you pay me seventy-five dollars an hour, I can help you in your career.' Not a chance. First, you have the experience of the portfolio review, then you can't get out of the room because they've got other people who can help you too. I don't know how they split the proceeds. It's totally exploitative.

CT: It's hard to parse out which 'prizes' actually do matter.

JW: The prizes that have always mattered still matter. I think it takes time to become something that matters. You can watch them

and think, 'They seem to be doing interesting things.' You have to be around for at least a decade. You have to show people that you have staying power. You have to prove yourself.

CT: What was it like to see your friends and colleagues change photography?

JW: I've been doing this all my life. It's been forty years. One of those reasons is the busboy problem – having to make up my own professional life. I don't think I ever thought about what was happening or where it was going. I understood that when I did something, like the fashion books, seeing something explode and seeing people make a lot of money. I remember Aperture coming to me in the early Eighties saying that we should work together, and they were the one, they were *the* publisher at the time. I was flattered by that. People would come to my house, and I was working out of my living room at the time, so I think they were a little disappointed. Like, 'Oh this is a flakier operation than I thought it was.' They'd see all these books out there and think that I was a real publisher.

CT: When did you feel like a real publisher?

JW: After twenty years and a garage full of books. I just realised I made my own hell, and that was it, I was in it. I always kept control. I don't have a business plan like Michael [Mack]. I always just do whatever. I've always been a flaky publisher. I've been a disappointment to people. I said I would do people's projects and then change my mind. It's more personal, the way I do it. I haven't treated it as a real business. I think if I had made more decisions based on money and business, things would be quite different. I'd do things and know I wasn't going to make any money doing it. No one ever made money doing Duane Michals books, and I did six of them, but I love Duane. That was part of the whole gay thing. He really became a role model to so many people. He's such a great person to talk to. Because of those books, someone would go talk to Duane about something. I felt safe sending people to Duane – promoting him through these books.

CT: Did you ever have to do 'business' books?

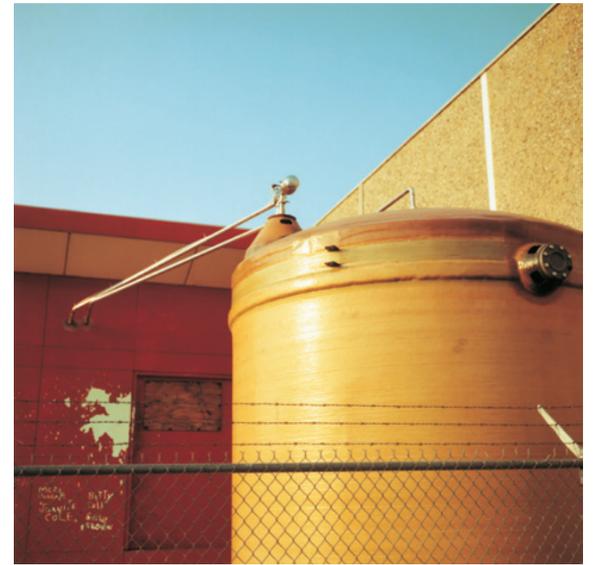
JW: The trouble is knowing what a business book is. You never know if you're going



Jack Woody, Nevada



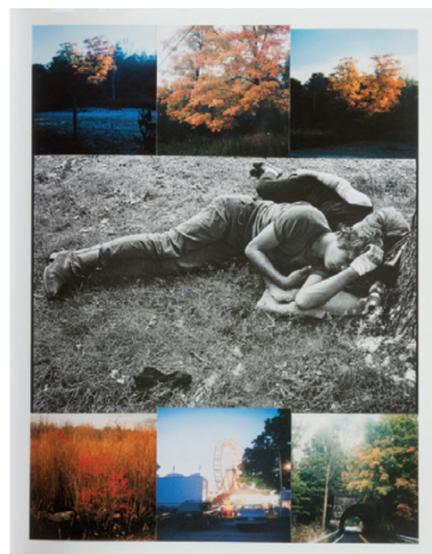
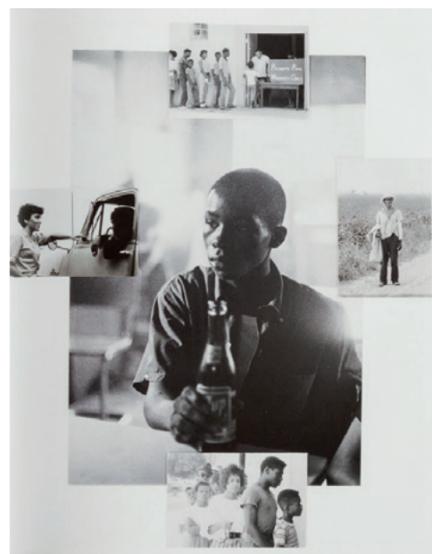
Jack Woody and mother, Nevada



2 1/4, William Eggleston, Courtesy and Copyright of Eggleston Artistic Trust



Odessa, Yelena Yemchuk



*Knave of Hearts*, Danny Lyon

to make money or not. That's part of the problem.

CT: I'm thinking of *Humans of New York*, do you know it?

JW: Uhh... no.

CT: It was a blog maybe? A photographer who shot very unstyled portraits of people on the street in New York. He would take a quote from them, and it was all extremely formulaic. It really blew up. It's one of those things photographers get as gifts. It's like getting a lens mug. It's low hanging fruit, so I'm wondering if there's a connection there.

JW: No. I think there's a market for that. Publishers like Rizzoli or Phaidon. Taschen can pack 1,000 pages into anything. I don't think I'm too weird. I'm looking at *Libyan Sugar* right now. Michael [Christopher Brown] sent that to me, and I picked it up, and it wasn't something I'd ever thought of publishing. Things like that happen. It just came out of nowhere.

CT: Isn't that exhilarating?

JW: It's a relief. It doesn't happen. When it does happen, it's kind of extraordinary. It's apocryphal. You always hear these stories, like William Faulkner's first novel, it was published after being rejected by fifty publishers. It's a miracle that something like that shows up.

CT: What percentage is you seeking something out versus you receiving it?

JW: I spend most of my time seeking stuff out. If you wait for things to come to you, you're going to have a lot of gardening time on your hands. I could show you ten things that came through in the last twenty-four hours, and there's nothing, it's hard to even look at them. They always begin with the 'Dear Mr Woody...'

CT: Would you rather not receive them?

JW: No, because I'm always looking. The *something* could come that way. If you're a publisher, you have to have that antenna that you can't ever put down, wherever you are.

CT: Do you feel like an authority on photography?

JW: If I'm a role model, people are really in trouble. The entire world of photography is totally screwed. I can't be. I'm not responsible. I take no responsibility. I do anything to evade responsibility. Someone told me I was a loose cannon when talking about photo fairs and portfolio reviews. People say, 'That's a part of our community, it's very important to young photographers.' No, it's not. If there's someone you admire, then track them down and have coffee with them. That's what people should do. If you love Bruce Davidson, track him down through Magnum. On a good day, maybe he'll see you. That's what people should do. Who are your heroes? Who matters to you? Why are you doing this? Look for those people. The idea of a system where they present you to someone you don't even know. That's why when I do it, it's a pain in the ass because I don't do it very often, so then you get all these people with expectations. I realised that I cannot do this again.

CT: Expectations of being published?

JW: Yes. People are surprisingly optimistic. I give them credit for that – that kind of optimism, but it's misplaced.

CT: What's the hardest part of all of this?

JW: The accumulation of stuff. You saw my garage. It's a case-by-case basis. Michael [Christopher Brown] was an ass when we were working on his book. Then it turned out he had PTSD. I never screamed at him or anything. He was doing a lot of screaming. I mean, kind of nuts. That was difficult. The difficult comes out of nowhere. It's not anything you expect. Usually, when you publish someone's book, they're usually really grateful and nice to you.

CT: Right, but there's so much more to the business than the publishing. I'm thinking the distribution, printing, etc.

JW: It's horrible. The business part is pretty terrible. That's one of the reasons I have such an advantage. I started early, and I was able to set all of that up when I was first publishing and selling 5–10,000 copies of a book was unusual. I still probably sell more books than most people, like Mike Brodie's book. We're selling thousands of copies of things, not 300 copies. When I do a book, it gets out there. There's only so much I can do. I'm

kind of lazy. I'm doing four books this year, and I'm exhausted just thinking about it. This Winogrand thing. We've been working on it for four years with so many trials and tribulations. We'll see. I think a book like that would sell just because it's Winogrand but maybe it won't. No one's going to make a \$100,000 loan to you so you can print it. The problems come out of nowhere. Whether it's a problem with the artist or the printer. They misprint a book, and you have to trash 5,000 copies to redo it. Everyone is fighting over whose fault it was. Tens of thousands of dollars are on the line. Those are the business aspects of it. I used to go to Japan because I printed in gravure. The gravure printer was in Kyoto. It was an amazing experience. Those were my earliest experiences working with a printer and they were extraordinary. I stopped going after a while and eventually we stopped doing gravure, but up through the Eighties and Nineties, I'd go to Japan. It was very personal because they knew me, and they'd welcome me, and they'd be nice to me [Laughs]. It made everything much easier. That's all gone. I remember they called in '98 or '99, and they said, 'Mr. Woody, you're our only customer, and we can't keep these presses running.' So I reprinted *Brooklyn Gang*, Bruce's [Davidson] book, and Danny's [Lyon] book, *The Bikeriders*, and I reprinted a few others before it was over.

CT: Did you ever think of buying it?

JW: You can't because it's a whole ecosystem with the inks etc. I think it's very toxic. Part of the reason I am like I am now is because that was pretty bad. There are a lot of metals. The printing can be kind of silvery. I thought, 'Oh...there are a lot of heavy metals in this.' That's why it smelled so bad.

CT: Do you have your pick of the litter within publishing? I can't imagine someone saying no to you.

JW: Why don't people say no? I think it's the way the situation unfolds. It's a collaboration from the beginning. I'm doing a book with Stacy Kranitz. I was in New Orleans, and she showed up at my house and showed me her work. I said, your book is going to look biblical. She was like 'Biblical! I love that!' There's just kind of a synergy in a weird way. It becomes a partnership very quickly or it doesn't at all. Yalena Yemchuk is another I'm working with.



*A Period of Juvenile Prosperity, Mike Brodie*



Jack Woody by Kurt Markus

CT: Is there an interest for you to publish more women or is it something you're not thinking about?

JW: I remember getting a letter once in the Eighties or Nineties telling me I wasn't publishing enough women. It was great. I hope I saved it somewhere. It's just the funniest thing because it never even occurred to me. I don't really think of someone's sex when I'm working with them. I think that goes back to the Cowboys and Indians thing. I would never think that someone is less in any kind of way, but apparently I was publishing more men because someone was keeping track. I think I do publish a lot of women.

CT: It feels in the zeitgeist to keep numbers.

JW: It always was. I got that letter. It was an early women's lib thing. It kind of started in the Seventies, but it continued because someone was keeping track of what I was doing.

CT: Right, but now it's *everything*, which is not all bad.

JW: It's not all bad, but it's not all good either. It becomes a kind of restraint on things and can affect people's decisions. Is it half and half all the time? How does it work? Everyone is trying to make amends or even the playing field. It becomes false in a way. It's a token. It's not real. Then what happens? When the real gets set aside, then it becomes really confusing. What's genuine and what isn't? Where do I fit into all of this?

CT: At the same time, I understand the systems in place that leave women out of history.

JW: And they're hardened. It's difficult. It's a big deal. I respond to people in a personal way, the artists I work with, whether they're male or female. So whatever it is in the man or the woman, there has to be that connection. Maybe it's different or maybe it's just the way we see photography. It's just another burden in a way. I think that's why I hide out. I'm under the radar.



Jack Woody by Kurt Markus

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