

NOTES

Notes on the W. Eugene Smith Archive and Materials Associated with His Big Book Project at the Center for Creative Photography

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THE MOST COMMON MATERIALS GENERATED BY PHOTOGRAPHERS to share their work publicly include exhibition prints, portfolios, photographic essays, and photographic books. Alone, these edited and refined materials cannot convey the time and effort a photographer devotes to a topic or project. In contrast, negatives, contact sheets, work prints, sketches, correspondence and maquettes are commonly found in photographic archives and represent tangible evidence of a photographer's working techniques. When researchers have access to these archive materials they can gain invaluable insight and understanding of a photographer's entire creative process. The Center for Creative Photography is fortunate to have responsibility for the long-term care and preservation of over 235 photographic archives documenting the history of photography. One of the center's largest and most complete photographic archives, acquired in 1977 and 1978, represents the life's work of the photojournalist W. Eugene Smith.

The unique materials preserved in Smith's archive occupy over 300 linear feet of shelf space and include personal papers and audiovisual and photographic materials dating from 1910 to 1978. The archive includes approximately 3,000 exhibition-quality prints, as well as approximately 53,000 work prints. The personal papers are comprised of incoming and outgoing letters, notebooks, rough drafts for writing projects and letters, book maquettes, exhibition announcements and checklists, financial records, scrapbooks, and photographic essay project files. His negatives, contact sheets, and work prints are evidence of his working process, while the exhibition photographs show his meticulous printing to express his vision of an image. Books, magazines, newspaper clippings, and catalogues show his voluminous project research as well as how his work was presented in publications. The archive houses hundreds of portraits of Smith at work as well as family albums, acrylic paintings, drawings, a typewriter, camera equipment, and over 1,700 audiotape recordings of speeches and lectures, television and radio programs, and jazz sessions.

The object reproduced here is a two-volume maquette for a photographic book that Smith referred to as *The Big Book*; he was unable to complete and publish it during his lifetime. Other materials associated with this project include multiple versions of introductory text (one of which

is reproduced here: see p. 12), photographs of hand-drawn sketches for page layouts, boards with mounted gelatin silver prints, hundreds of Polaroids, correspondence, contact prints, and image identification lists. Examination of these materials and a review of the published literature¹ reveals that Smith's *Big Book* project was enormous in scope and demanded a considerable amount of his time and creative energy over three decades.²

Each volume is a bare textblock approximately 13 inches in height, nine-and-three-quarters inches wide, and three inches thick. The only binding material present is a thick, clear adhesive layer on the spine of each volume that holds the textblocks together. The lack of additional binding materials and overall heft of each volume makes them fragile to handle. They also show significant wear. The pages of the textblocks are made of a heavyweight machine-made calendared paper that is cream in color. Each page has one to five images adhered to it that range in size from the smallest, at approximately two by three inches, to single images spanning entire adjacent pages. The images are attached with a glossy yellow rubber-based adhesive which in some cases has lost its tack and made images loose or completely detached from the textblock. Green backprinting on the loose and detached images identifies the reproductive process used as Agfa Copyrapid.

Agfa Copyrapid is a trade name for one of the earliest office copying materials, also known as a silver halide diffusion-transfer-reversal (DTR) process. Agfa's first Copyrapid product became available in 1949. From 1950 to 1960 significant resources were devoted to advancing and promoting "photocopying" materials, and the new market of office copying saw incredible growth worldwide.³ The variation of the image quality throughout the maquette can be attributed to multiple factors, including the quality of the original images and the stability of the copies. The stability of DTR copies is dependent on the quantity of residual processing chemicals remaining in the copies and the environmental conditions in which they are

¹ Hughes, Jim, *W. Eugene Smith / Shadow and Substance*. Chapter 47 of this publication focuses on Smith's work on the Big Book project in the late 1950s and early 1960s and includes firsthand accounts from his studio assistant, Carole Thomas, as well as from Smith's other friends from this time period.

² Hand-drawn sketch pages and image lists indicate that Smith continued to work on this project into the 1970s, when he began to incorporate images from his *Minimata* photoessay. After the two maquettes were printed in 1959, the evolution of Smith's conceptual thinking about revisions to the Big Book remains a puzzle. Further research is needed to address the unanswered questions.



THE BIG BOOK, W. EUGENE SMITH ARCHIVE, CENTER FOR CREATIVE PHOTOGRAPHY
Photograph by Edward McCain



stored. The condition of the images in the maquette currently ranges from fair to poor, with almost all of them exhibiting the common forms of DTR copy aging, which includes yellowing or yellow-browning of highlight areas and fading and browning of high-density image areas. Though the images throughout both volumes have deteriorated because of their inherent vice, the overall image content remains mostly legible.

Since Agfa Copyrapid materials were new and meant for office copying, it seems unlikely that Smith created the copies in his studio. Therefore, the

actual image copying and assembly of the maquette remains unclear. It seems to have been created as a visual aid to propose the project to prospective publishers. Examination of the associated archival materials supports the conclusion that the image selection, design, layout, and sequencing of this two-volume maquette was certainly dictated by Smith. Therefore, this object is the most complete iteration of Smith's concept and layout in his archive, and it appears to be the closest realization of *The Big Book* achieved during his lifetime.

³ Rott, Andre and Edith Weyde, *Photographic Silver Halide Diffusion Processes*. London: The Focal Press, 1972. Rott and Weyde's publication provides a comprehensive introduction to DTR processes and insight into the variety of manufacturers and DTR materials on the market when the Big Book maquette was created. Multiple Copyrapid materials including

Copyrapid Normal, Copyrapid Dry-Positive, Copyrapid Multi-Positive, and Copyrapid Offset were developed during that time. Without known examples of these various materials for comparison, identification of exactly what Copyrapid materials were used to create the images in the maquette remains unknown.