

Non-Adhesive Binding: Books Without Paste or Glue, Keith Smith

Karen M. Wirth

Known both for his artist's books and textbooks on bookmaking, Keith Smith favorably adds to his impressive body of work with his newest text, *Non-Adhesive Binding: Books Without Paste or Glue*. This is the third in the series of textbooks, joining *Structure of the Visual Book* and *Text in the Book Format*.

In *Non-Adhesive Binding*, Smith provides the technical details of building a book, adding another dimension to the more conceptual directives of the two previous books. This does not mean conceptual matters are ignored here. In fact, it is the combination of the technical and the conceptual that makes this valuable work unlike any "how-to" book. As part of the preparation for binding in one section, Smith states: "Binding serves content," "...the physical, conceptual, and visual decisions are interwoven," and "...if the binding dominated, the book would be superficial." Thoughtful and investigative comments such as these frame the more practical directions for binding. The voice of the commentary is not that of an anonymous textbook writer, but of Keith Smith- a very patient teacher, never condescending, who is totally immersed in the Gestalt of the book. His sensitivity as a teacher is evident in the fine points which are usually limited in technique books: inclusion of left-and right-handed sewing procedures; suggestions for covers for each binding and tips on those that should not be used; and the generous acknowledgment of those who taught him particular bindings.

The book is divided into four parts. In the first, Smith develops an "approach" to binding by setting up the parameters of both the mental objective and the physical object. He advises that Part One should be read before doing any of the actual techniques that follow. Most people do not read a "how-to" text from cover to cover sequentially; rather, they pick and choose the pages appropriate to a particular object. In this case, that would mean missing out on some very special musings. A particularly thought-provoking section includes Smith's playful yet introspective exploration of the possibilities of one piece of paper, folded once.

Part Two contains the directions for thirty-two sewn bindings, ranging from easy pamphlet stitching to embellished sewing patterns such as long stitch and sewn concertinas. With a minimum of specialized jargon, the directions for each binding are first spelled out in detail. Each "elaborated procedure" is accompanied by clear drawings, sewing diagrams, and photographs of completed books. Following the elaborated procedure is a condensed one. The technical information is additive, starting with very simple forms. The beginning bookbinder should be able to progress through the bindings, from the simple to the more complex, by being patient and careful. At first the amount of detail may be overwhelming to the uninitiated, who will need to flip back and forth between the step-by-step directions and the diagrams. Rather than just reading the steps, it may be helpful for the beginner to work on dummy materials to get a feel for the techniques. For those who have taken even one weekend workshop in bookbinding,

the clarity of the directions will reinforce what is already familiar. More experienced binders should be able to visualize the procedures while reading the elaborated directions, or work directly from the condensed version. It is even possible to work solely from the carefully numbered diagrams.

As the title of the book denotes, all of these bindings are done without the use of glue. Adhesives are the bane of many binders, and an array of options is given to avoid using them. The “hinged album binding” and the “separately wrapped boards” are especially noteworthy for the simple fold and tuck methods of covering boards without glue.

A variety of flaps, slits, and tabs are included in Part Three, *Covers*. These construction elements are also design elements, and there are many suggestions on how to emphasize them with decorative slots and additional sewing patterns. These components may be combined with any of the provided covers, such as the “concertina binding with straps laced through pleated spine cover” or “dotted border turn-ins with lined cover.”

At this point it is easy to understand how these separate units- bindings, covers, tabs, and slits- can be mixed or matched to suit both the content and structure of the book. Throughout the text, Smith thinks out loud creatively, brainstorming on techniques to see where they will go. He is at his brainstorming finest when he discusses the relationships among image, text, and form in the “Fold Books” section. This imaginative inquiry continues in the section on compound books, where he speculates on the combination of multiple book forms into one book. As the styles move away from strict tradition, informed invention takes over.

The final part of the book is a very helpful reference section, listing binding and art supply sources, book dealers, and workshops around the country. In addition, there is a concisely worded glossary of terms.

There are a few minor organizational oddities that do not interfere with the use of the book, but should be pointed out. These are most apparent when using the information selectively, rather than sequentially. Visually, there could be clearer divisions between the four parts. While they do blend smoothly in content from one to another, it would be easier to spot a section if each had its own title page. A similar point can be made about section headings; the white type on black bands is smaller than any other typeface in the text, and can be difficult to read. Sometimes there are interesting discussions that are peculiarly placed. One example is found in the brief but intriguing paragraphs on the difference between a photograph on a page and the picture area of a page. This is included in the introduction to stab bindings rather than in the seemingly more compatible first part of the book. However, it is fair to assume that users will be compelled to read the entire book, and not miss out on these ruminations.

If it is true, as Keith Smith states, “we only truly see at brief points of inspiration,” then he has given us many gifts of inspiration with his book. Not only does he share with us his own creative vision, he gives us license to use it as a guide and take it even further. And that is the sign of a consummate teacher.