

BOOK REVIEW

Rollin Milroy

Woven & Interlocking Book Structures from the Janus, Steiner and Gefn Presses
Claire Van Vliet & Elizabeth Steiner
Janus Gefn Unlimited Vermont 2002
142 pages; Smythe sewn softcover;
US\$35.00 (available from the publisher
care of 101 Schoolhouse Rd, Newark,
VT 05871-9773).

For all of the people who have admired Claire Van Vliet's unceasing improvisation and innovation to the traditional book form, the artist has demystified some of her more well-known – and complex – structures in a new step-by-step manual. *Woven & Interlocking Book Structures* also includes several structures developed by Van Vliet's collaborator, New Zealand book artist Elizabeth Steiner. Together the authors have created a book that is a unique combination of instruction manual, bibliography and artist monograph. Whichever of these elements most immediately appeals, readers will find themselves enjoying – and perhaps learning even more from – the others.

I first heard of Van Vliet and her Janus Press in the early years of my education in the book arts, from the fine press publishers Peter and Donna Thomas. About eight years ago I was working in San Francisco, and took a Saturday off to drive to their home town of Santa Cruz, hoping to find some of their beautifully produced books. Like Van Vliet, the Thomases (whose own education in the book arts included working with William Everson) have established a solid reputation for creative book designs, especially miniatures. I managed to track them down at their home near the beach, and they were kind enough to let me drop

by. During an enjoyable visit, I asked Peter who he thought was doing the most interesting fine press work at the time. Without having to pause to think, he replied "Claire Van Vliet." That was the first time I heard of her. Not long after, the Alcuin Society organized a one-day workshop for Van Vliet in Vancouver, at which she taught some of her simple, non-adhesive box structures. Her new book, with Steiner, succeeds in offering the same kinds of insights to the designers – and designers – as the workshop.

Steiner's name and work were not familiar to me. This may be a result of her working on the other side of the world, and focusing on one-of-a-kind books or editions that often number just a few dozen copies. The brief biography included at the end of the book tells us that Steiner focuses on publishing New Zealand authors "using innovative structures and her own handmade papers."

There is a third contributor to this book, not named on the title page but credited in the book's subtitle and imprint. The Gefn Press was founded in 1977 by Susan Johanknecht, who contributes one structure to the book. Her press publishes contemporary poetry with original prints.

Woven & Interlocking Book Structures includes 16 different structures, although several of these are variations on a theme. Ten of the 16 structures are from Van Vliet, including two of her best known, *Aunt Sallie's Lament* and *Bone Songs*. Each chapter begins with a brief description by the artist of the structure's genesis, generally focusing on the need to create a unique format to suit the text. (Most of the structures in the book were developed for texts that had quilting or

weaving as a central theme.) These essays offer interesting insights to the artists' work processes, and how and where they look for inspiration. One aspect of the book I particularly appreciated was the bibliographic descriptions (materials, printing, edition, etc.) of the original books whose structures were revealed. None of these books was published in large editions, and it is likely many readers might not have seen any of the original pieces; certainly not all of the ones included in *Woven & Interlocking Book Structures*.

The design of *Woven & Interlocking Book Structures* itself is simple and clean. The step-by-step illustrations are numerous and detailed without becoming cluttered. Slightly wider outer or bottom margins might have left better room for a reader's annotations. My only real criticism of the book's production is that, although Smythe sewn, it does not want to lie open on the bench for reference while working without breaking the spine - not something people who make books are comfortable doing.

The structures included deal predominantly with creating a codex out of unfolded sheets (i.e. not quires), assembling these sheets such that the book is able to open flat. When dealing with unfolded sheets people often resort to some form of side-stab binding, a format that really only works for Japanese paper (and still does not allow the book to open flat). The solutions Van Vliet and Steiner have come up are based on the concept of weaving long strips of paper through slots cut in the leaves, with the strips functioning in a manner similar to tapes or cords in traditional sewn structures. None of the structures explained re-

quires more than a straight edge, knife, folder and paper to assemble. The patterns are clean and structurally sound, and would be particularly useful for artists interested in simple ways to assemble loose sheets into book form. The trick will be for these artists to turn the structures into something uniquely their own, as the authors of this book have done.

Note: the book is also available in a limited edition of 200 copies, accompanied by 16 small samples of structures described, all contained in a cloth clamshell box. The book is exactly the same (softcover). The price is US\$400.

Rollin Milroy is a frequent contributor to Amphora and is the proprietor of Heavenly Monkey.

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