

Vivian Sming shares Bookmaking Tips with CCA GD

Abridged and prefaced by Sarah Chieko Bonnicksen



Throughout the 2020-21 school year, the Graphic Design program took advantage of remote conditions by making the talks, workshops, and virtual field trips that happened in individual classes open to the entire CCAGD community. The virtual studio visit below took place in a CCA Graphic Design Typography 2 course.

There is no denying that going to school during pandemic times is different. Every class now lives within the confines of a computer screen, linked across the globe yet strangely bounded. While the experience can sometimes feel isolating, digital communication tools have also made it possible to open class spaces to a wider community and to invite a range of visitors into the surprisingly intimate platform of our home-classrooms.

The Graphic Design program at CCA has been taking advantage of this opportunity by hosting creatives from both the Bay Area and abroad to share work and ideas with students during different courses. These virtual class visits are open to the larger CCA graphic design community, and many are open to the broader CCA community.

On February 22, artist Vivian Sming joined the undergraduate design course Typography 2, taught by Associate Professor and Chair of the Graphic Design program, Rachel Berger. Sming runs the publishing studio Sming Sming Books, where she explores books as “art, discourse, exhibition, and archive.” Since founding her studio in 2017, she has worked with a range of artists to collaborate on artists’ books, zines, and editions that experiment with and push the boundaries of the book form.



Vivian Sming in her studio, with cat in the background.

Sming characterized her visit to Type 2 as a “studio visit”: offering her perspective and experience with bookmaking to the students, who were in the process of planning their own book projects. Fellow book designer Luca Antonucci—co-founder of the art publishing practice Colpa Press—was also in attendance as a guest and contributed additional insights during the hour.

The atmosphere in the zoom classroom was warm and relaxed, as students and guests asked questions about the appeal of the book form, concept formulation, and production methods. Sming was situated in what appeared to be her personal studio space, with tall cases full of materials

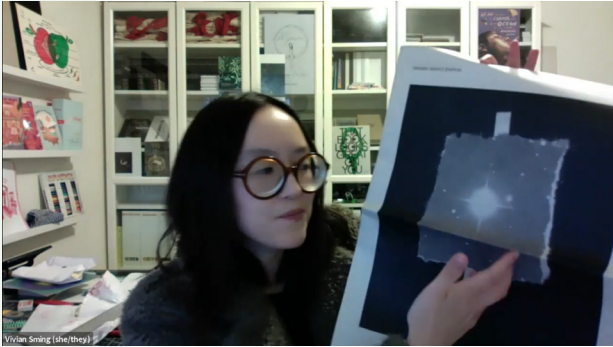
and tools visible in the background, and occasional cameos from a very charming, fluffy black cat. The conversation that ensued was filled with helpful bookmaking tips that would be interesting to anyone wanting to explore the format.

In truncated form and lightly edited for clarity, the following summarizes highlights from the visit:

ABOUT SMING SMING BOOKS

Vivian Sming: To give some background, my approach to bookmaking is that of an artist who became more of a writer, who somehow ended up making books... I didn’t start out with the goal of wanting to publish, but I kind of fell into the form and it became something that started really answering a lot of the questions I had

about what it means to take up space, what it means to support artists and support each other with limited means, to continue discourse. There were a lot of different threads that...books became the answer to, and I'm still discovering those threads.



Sming showing *that which we cannot ever expect to see*, a newsprint collaboration with artist tamara suarez porras.

My approach is always centered around artists and their ideas first, because of my background. I don't have a background in design, I'm self-taught. I think about [book design] in the way that a curator or an artist might...if we're presenting a work of art in a space, where do we situate the work? And what are ways to create a book form so work can speak for itself? I almost think of it as a non-design approach.

As artists, we have a very specific idea of how we want our work to be represented. The approach that I take is trying to honor that and not put a design vision to it. I get to know the artist's work as much as possible so that I can anticipate design choices that they might make for themselves.

...I'm always wondering what the purpose of a book is for the artist: is it for distributing ideas? Is it important that the work is conveyed through a very specific material? And I think the question, "why make a book?" is an important one to start with. To make a book... to take up space... to take up materials; everything does have a material cost. There are plenty of things that the internet is great at in terms of a digital platform. So what is it about the book form that is working with the work? That's where I begin.

WHY BOOKS?

Rachel Berger: You sort of put out this provocation: it doesn't have to be a book... So then, what is the case for making something a book?

Vivian Sming: Sometimes I feel like the publishing field right now is a reaction to the internet and being overwhelmed by information online. I would say that there are a lot of books out there that are like tumblrs in book form—and there's no shame in that! But I think my own reasoning for why [make a book] has to do with: how would it be contributing to a larger archive of knowledge? How is this work situated historically? Would the book be doing something that the work itself can't do? Would it be doing something that a digital form or publication couldn't do? Then I also think: does it require the attention and the intimacy that a book has? What is it about the format of the book, where it is this very individual experience? It is something you can keep revisiting?

LEARNING

Rachel Berger: So you said you don't have any formal training in design? How did you learn about typography and things like that?

Tiya Pertiwi: Do you have any book that you feel like you learned the most in making it?

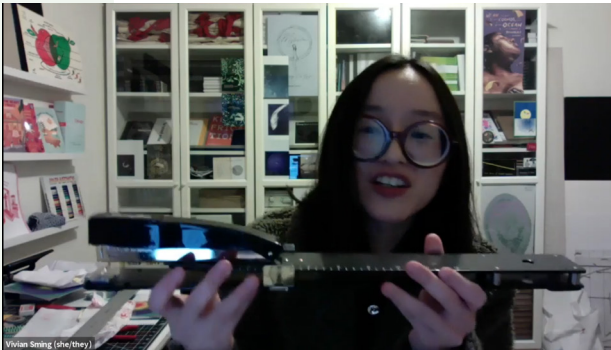
Vivian Sming: I'm still learning! I think I've always been self-taught... I kept learning tools on my own, usually just by trial and error... Just trying, making mistakes, and learning from them.

With typography: it really is something I'm actively learning. I think designers probably all approach type with...historical context and cultural context, etc. I honestly don't come from that approach, but maybe I'm not too far off in terms of thinking

about how typographic choices can reflect what the artist is thinking. I think [every book provides] an opportunity to learn something new. I'm always excited to try something different.

TOOLS

Rachel Berger: Can you talk a little bit about your toolkit, like the sort of essential tools that you use?



Vivian Sming: A ruler, first of all. One thing that I've noticed myself doing recently is that I look at books for—I mean, this is terrible—but I like looking at books for their design, instead of reading the material. I'm always looking at the size of books, measuring the size. So a ruler is something that I will end up taking to my bedroom or dining table... or when folding sheets of paper, to get a sense of the dimensions of something.

Then...I have a long-arm stapler. I think this is a great tool to start with if you're just doing zines that are staple bound.

I definitely have a spiral binding machine. And I don't know if that's something that folks have access to, but for materials—I get a lot of my materials at [My Binding](#). For spiral binding, there are different color options, including glow in the dark.

Also, a bone folder...for folding paper. So if you're folding zine, you'll need it to score paper. I think that is essentially it. And, of course, a really good relationship with a local printer. That, I think, is probably the most difficult to find.



Sming holding up a long-arm stapler and coil bind samples.

PRINTING

Vivian Sming: When I first start working with an artist, that's a conversation that I'm having with them in terms of: Are we printing in black and white? Are we printing in color? Black and white printing is typically cheaper—a lot cheaper—than color printing.

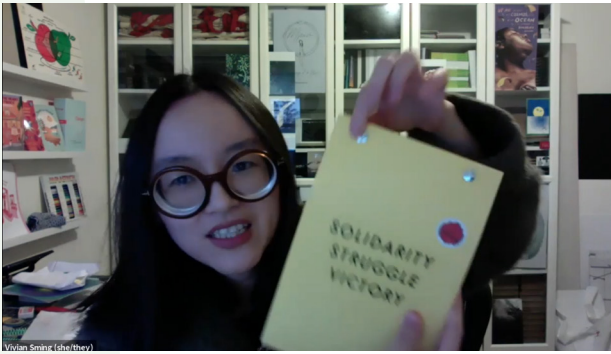
I think the idea is: how do you transform the material and humble ways of printing so it's an exciting experience? ...This is an example of what I think of as alchemy.

Another thing when you're looking for printers is [to look] for people who do short run printing, which just means that they can print low quantity. Because with most commercial printers, usually you're printing out 1000 copies or more. With short run, you can print, 100-200: that's usually the amount that I go for.

BINDING

Hyunsoo Kang: How do you decide on which binding method to use?

Jennifer Kim: What are some printing/binding methods do you enjoy and would recommend?



Sming using *Solidarity Struggle Victory* as an example of a book bound with screw posts.

Vivian Sming: The binding method, again, is part of a conversation with the artist... The cool thing about spiral binding, which I use a lot, is that you can print with different types of materials and insert them...you can have that flexibility. It does take a long time to put it together because you have to line up the holes, but feel like the end is worth it.

Another resourceful method of binding is screw posts. With screw posts, you literally just hole punch it and put the screws in. This also allows for you to [use different materials]...and it is really easy. The only thing that's annoying is when you buy it: you have to measure the width of your book before you buy the screws because they come in different heights. But, it's pretty fun, you just hand screw them together. Then you have a book! Which is the best thing ever.

I know that some people have done sewn binding and I just don't have time for that!

One of the books I'm working on right now will use metal pronged fasteners. This would be a really easy method as well, where you are just hole punching two holes and putting it together with a metal clip. That one I'm excited to try.

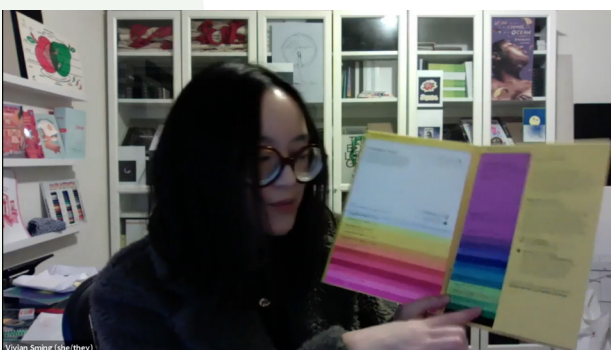
With other books, it sometimes makes sense to go for perfect binding, when it's just not feasible to put everything together by hand. I like to send [perfect bound books] to other printers specifically to work with.

It's kind of a mix of having different tiers of either printing resourcefully but then requiring more hand-labor [to put it] together or sending it out and having something that's perfect bound.

PAPER

Keqin Zhong: How to make a choice to decide which kind of paper?

Leo Cantu: Do you have any recommendations for papers to ensure good color reproduction from photographs to print?



Sming showing a paper swatch sample book.

Vivian Sming: I think choosing paper is also a conversation with the artist. [Using multiple papers in one book] can help differentiate types of work.

You can get a paper sample book or a paper swatch book which shows a bunch of different options. If you're working with a printer, you can ask what their options are.

[Regarding paper to ensure good color reproduction] Actually, I wonder if Luca has an answer to this because I don't make a lot of photo books. I do know how important it is for photographers to have that kind of control over color correction and how something turns out. If those are the parameters that you want to work with, it might be

good for you to print it yourself or find a printer who will allow you to work with them closely. But in terms of paper—Luca, do you have any recommendations?

Luca Antonucci: I think that the best quality reproduction usually happens on a paper that has a finish on it. Both matte and glossy papers have finishes for digital printing. Anything printed on uncoated paper is going to reproduce your

image less faithfully. So, look for coated papers—matte and glossy are two different types of coatings.

PLANNING

Kexin Li: Will you create a storyboard before printing and typesetting?

Vivian Sming: I usually just make a design draft. And I don't do proofs. In printing, when you get a proof, it's just to make sure everything is the way it's supposed to be, that there are no errors. But they're usually pretty expensive to make, it's more like an approval process. But I think part of publishing and part of making books is leaving some room for the unexpected. It can be a very precise process, if you want it to be, but I just choose to err on the side of being looser about it. It isn't as fun if you're trying to get it exactly in a certain way... plus, I think it doesn't really honor the work.

I think part of the challenge that is nice about books is...thinking about how to make multiples. How would you make 50 or 100 or 200 of the same book? Or if your intention is to make just one singular book object—then you can look at other examples from artists who have used the book as a sculptural form. You can get a little more creative with it if it is a singular object.

[Another] fun thing about books: thinking about them almost cinematically, in terms of turning from one page to the next. You have control over the narrative or feeling you want to unfold. But what would it be like if you started in the middle or started backwards? I think there are a lot of possibilities there.



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