

DANIEL KELM

Recipient of the 2020 GBW Lifetime Achievement Award

A book is most successful at telling a story when all components work together toward a single effect. So why is it that we expect words and images to be used to artistic purpose, but rarely demand the same of the binding? To many the binding provides—at most—an additional surface on which to compose visual elements. This strikes me as an opportunity lost. The deep, expressive qualities of a binding are to be found not just on its surface, but in its form, material, and movement. When these integrally support the text and imagery there is a synergistic effect, and the impact is potent. - Daniel Kelm

Daniel Kelm is an artist, scientist, philosopher, bookbinder, and teacher. His work combines the discipline of a scientist, the imagination of an artist, and a philosopher's curiosity about the nature of reality and existence. Daniel brings all of these interests to his teaching along with a keen sense of humor and play, and a kind heart.

After a boyhood of scientific experimenting, Daniel pursued formal training in chemistry and then taught at the University of Minnesota. He began his binding career in 1977 at the university and then worked as a bookbinder in several production studios in Minnesota and Boston. Daniel learned progressively more specialized traditional binding techniques and was the finisher at Harcourt Bindery in Boston. Then he moved to Easthampton, Massachusetts, to work with David Bourbeau at Thistle Bindery before setting out on his own.

BOOK MAKING

Daniel opened his studio, The Wide Awake Garage (WAG), in Easthampton in 1983. At WAG he designs and produces artist's books, interpretive fine bindings, and book sculptures. Daniel brings an inventor's mind and a sculptor's hand to the creation of his books. His work is inventive and often complex. While many of his books journey beyond the traditional form, they always work and they are always to the highest technical quality. In exploring book structures, he has built objects that unfold in multiple directions, creating puzzles for the viewer to take apart and put back together—invitations to see the story from different points of view.

Most of us are familiar with his wire-edge binding method, a technique that uses a completely new way to join pages that creates a fluid, mobile object in the guise of a book. The structure makes it possible for a book to become a sculptural piece as well as a medium for storytelling, and inspires the viewer to participate in the kinetic exploration of its content. From these first explorations in reimagining the book, Daniel's orbit moved further out and away from the expected, conventional book.

Daniel's wide knowledge of and interest in materials is evident in his use of nontraditional materials such as metal, plastic, glass, wood, and resins. In short, in both his sculptural approach and his use of unconventional materials, he has been a disruptor for many of us who have long accepted the static concept of what a book and its binding should be.

CHEMISTRY

Ten-year-old Daniel filled the basement of his family home and his lungs with chlorine gas during an experiment in his basement chemistry lab. Afterwards, a family friend wrote out the equation for the chemical reaction that created the gas, and Daniel was permanently hooked on chemistry.

While WAG has been the site of Daniel's binding work, it is also the center of his other major interest—chemistry and its history. Daniel re-creates historical scientific experiments and lab environments, has produced a number of scientific videos, and has consulted on projects at a number of museums. In 2012, he researched chemical glassware and co-curated the exhibition 'Glass at MIT: Beauty and Utility'. A number of scientific videos were made in collaboration with Steve Turner, Curator of Physical Sciences, at the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian Institution. They focused on the legacy of English chemist James Smithson, whose donation to the people of the United States funded the Smithsonian. Another video, Syrup of Violet, was made for the exhibition 'Beyond Home Remedy: Women, Medicine, and Science' at the Folger Shakespeare Library. His enduring interest in alchemy led him to build an alchemical furnace. He describes its use as interactive and transformative both to the material being transformed and the operator as "you, the operator, are also changed by the operation." Daniel is an avid collector of chemical and physical apparatus and most of his collection resides at WAG.

Daniel's science informs his design and binding work. The left-brain side of his website states "Poetic Science=Life" and he proposes the following to us:

Poetic Science offers a way of being in the world that celebrates relationship and connection. It crystallizes a broad approach that I have developed in my life and work. By combining the perspectives of art and science it moves to unify what is commonly thought of as separate. Through this fusion of body and mind, heart and head, matter and spirit, we are able to enter into a more intimate relationship with materials. And, having learned to distinguish their characteristic rhythms, ask them each to lend their unique personalities to the expressiveness of our work.

TEACHING

Daniel has presented at the Guild's 'Standards of Excellence' three times and at Paper and Book Intensive twice. He has taught numerous binders and artists in workshops in his studio and throughout the U.S. and abroad.

In 1990, he founded the Garage Annex School for Book Arts (GAS), and soon after with his wife Greta Sibley expanded the program to provide a program where people could be certain to learn many aspects of our intricate craft. He teaches structured workshops but also provides private instruction and coaching at GAS. His students include those interested in gaining traditional binding skills but most notable are those who come to GAS to develop their interest in inventive structures and design. Through his teaching, Kelm has introduced many people to binding, but he has also brought a great many well-known teachers of the craft to teach in the studio.

Students range from traditional binders interested in Daniel's inventive advances such as his wire-edge binding structure to those who want to learn how to create their own unique volumes and editions. He is both exact and flexible in his work and instruction, making him an ideal person to teach both experienced and novice bookmakers. He has been an inspiration to binders, artists, and designers throughout his career. His aim has been to further the craft, and that he has surely done. Students declare that he is a "magician" and "a genius" at teaching, allowing participants in his classes "to join him in his thinking process" as they are "invited to figure out for themselves" where a project will end up.

COLLABORATION

Daniel's affinity for collaborative work has attracted artists, designers, and printers to WAG over the years. His thought process and his way of seeing the book as a platform for expression excites others, and he finds them returning repeatedly. The many collaborative projects included on his website are a testament to how valuable his collaboration with other artists has been.

Some of the most significant collaborative projects during Daniel's first years in the Pioneer Valley were with Alan Robinson of Cheloniidae Press and Barry Moser of Pennyroyal Press. He has done many projects with Tim Ely; and completed twenty editions working with Steve Clay at Granary Books. Other collaborative projects include two with 21st Editions, several with Peter Koch, and two extensive series with Thomas Ingmire of one-off manuscript books combining Neruda and Lorca poetry with original art by Manuel Neri. He is currently working on a project with another frequent collaborator, Robin Price. Some of the most challenging pieces have been artist's books done with Tauba Auerbach.

FINALLY

Asked to share a treasured wish, Daniel once said: "It's an ongoing wish: as a teacher, to continue to help others discover their own authentic voices." Although his love of chemistry has sometimes tempted him to return to chemistry full time, he has remained a book maker because he enjoys the good people in the book community so much.

Daniel's work has been recognized and collected nationally and internationally. He has notably shared his thoughts and knowledge in published articles. His techniques and innovations, his amazing craftsmanship, and his whimsical, innovative structures have ignited creativity in countless others. All of these contributions warrant a place for Daniel among the giants of our field. But it is the boundless enthusiasm of his students and fellow craftsmen, seeing things in new ways through his inspired guidance, that has earned him this award. The field of bookbinding is not the same since he entered it. He has opened up new dimensions of exploration and has generously and enthusiastically shared his journey with all of us.

Daniel is the epitome of a seeker, a thinker, and a doer, and by that he is a rare resource to us all. He has changed our perception of how we view what we do, and we are all better for that awakening and challenge.

NAMING OF THE WIDE AWAKE GARAGE

For me, the garage has always been a place to physicalize what I imagine—a place to build spaceships, hovercrafts, and machines capable of digging to the center of the earth. These two elements—being aware and having a place to create—came together for me when I discovered an old photograph from the 1920s of my maternal grandfather standing in his auto garage. On the back of the photo my mother, at a young age, had written "Wide Awake Garage, Buffalo, Minnesota, Verna Lindberg." So the studio is named for a way of being in the world, and for my sweet and cranky grandfather.