



INTRODUCTION

In 1967, I made the first of my now some one hundred-forty one-of-a-kind and twenty-three production books. That first attempt had thirty-two photo etchings. After printing the plates, I laid the etchings on the floor and started the hours of arranging and rearranging. I thought one print made a perfect summation. I placed it at the end. Another seemed like it made a good beginning, stating several themes. I placed it at the beginning. I cannot recall now how I logically "sequenced" the other thirty prints. Surely it was ordered well, for, after all, had I not spent several hours to "buy" its validity?

That evening, my roommate Steve Foster came home from his job at UPS. I eagerly awaited his thoughts on my first book. "What do you think of the order?" Without hesitation he said, "Why don't you shuffle them up?"

By his intimating that would be just as good a solution, I knew he was trying to get to me, but I also respected him and wondered what he was leading to. He talked about a teacher he had had in Rochester named Nathan Lyons, who talked about conceiving pictures toward a book. The term *visual flow* entered my vocabulary. I said to Steve I thought photo flow came out of a bottle. And I grinned which helped me to gracefully face the fact that my first attempt at a book was a failure.

I think to some extent I had been aware in taking time to arrange those divorced, isolated prints that I was fooling myself by thinking I had ordered them. They were all photo etchings, all 2 x 4", all from photographs I had taken on subways, CTA and Greyhound buses. Relationships between the pictures had to exist. I bound Book One the next day, but it was held together only by its binding.

Over the next few weeks I was determined to make a good book, an unique book as well. I had to prove to myself, and yes, to Steve, that I could do it. Many events came together which led me to Book Two.

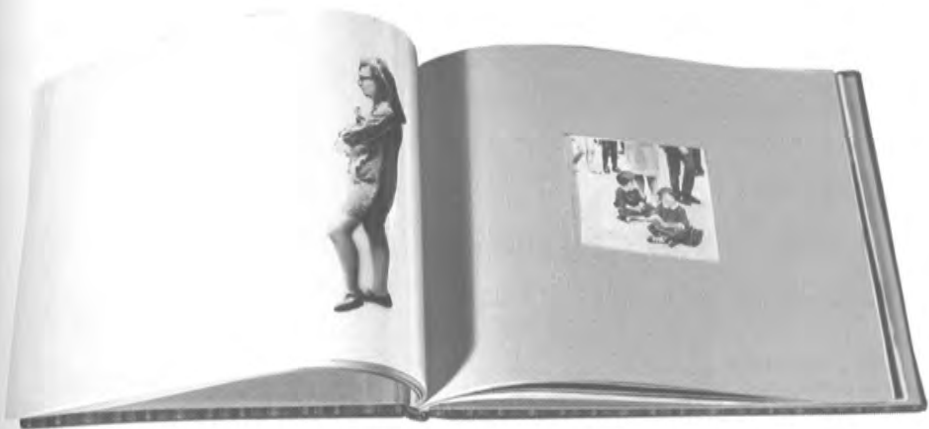
One major insight came to me in the darkroom. I was enlarging onto a Kodalith sheet film to make large film-positives to contact print onto my etching plates, as I had been doing for two years. Only this time, when I turned on the light to check the exposure, I had trouble seeing the image, as my fingers were in the way. I grumbled at me, and moved my hand to see the picture. But I stopped. All of a sudden I had *really* seen!

I saw that the picture was not the opaque black shapes on the clear sheet of acetate, but rather, a combination of that plus anything else viewed in front of or through the transparency. This excited me; I had seen freshly. I yelled and immediately held the dripping sheet of film in front of the enlarger, the wall, my arm, my penis. I ran out of the darkroom laughing, looking at everything in the apartment through this sheet of film. I placed it on the mirror and looked at myself. I slapped it on the window where it clung. Someone walked by; I watched through the printed image.

I thought what can I do with it? I could make room dividers, transparent walls and watch people alter the picture as they became incorporated into it, but I couldn't afford to work large. I could make transparent curtains or imitation stained glass and view the out of doors through the sheets of film. I thought about making drawings and laminating the film on top, but this didn't interest me as much as the kinetic transformation of the transparent walls or window pieces. I did make a few collages with film, but that was ignoring the potential of the ever-changing image.

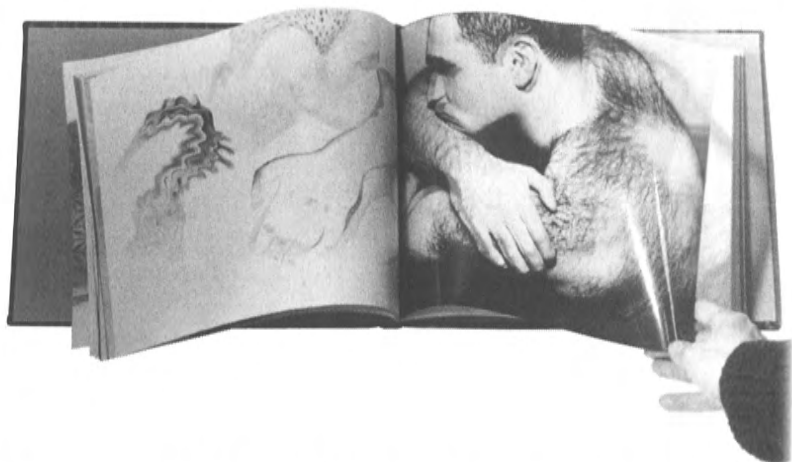
While playing with a collage before laminating the film, I decided to attach the sheet of film to the window of the mat instead of to the collage. Opening and closing the matt I could see the collage in various changes. Only when I experienced this matted collage did it sink into my head that this was the answer to my need to make a book. Only when transparencies were seen vividly did I *see* their potential. I then remembered several months previously, Gary Frost had said, "Why don't you make a book of transparencies?"

I wondered how he had come to ask me that? He was not involved with the properties of transparent materials. Was insight second nature for him? I had used transparencies for two years. I had worked long hours since the fiasco of Book One. I had struggled, and only accidentally come upon the potential of transparencies as pages for a book. Was I so dull, or Gary so brilliant?

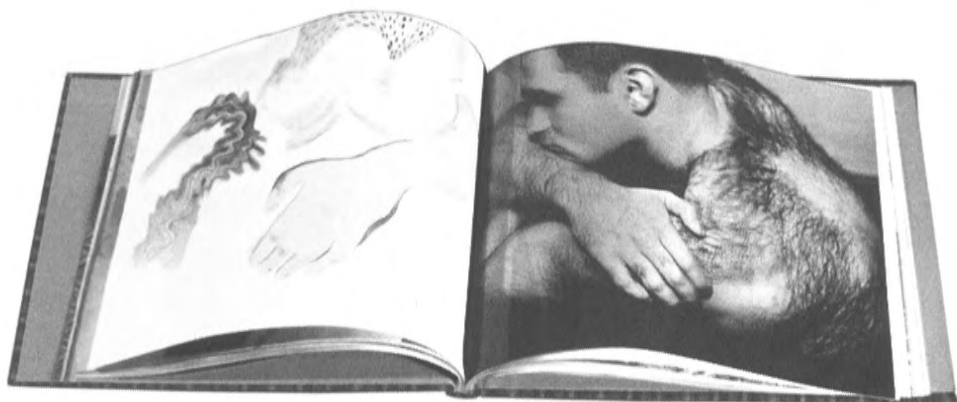


Keith Smith, *A Change in Dimension*, Book 2, 1967. One-of-a-kind. 28 x 35.5 x 1.5 cm.
The cast shadow, in focus, then increasingly out of focus, crosses the facing page in turning the transparent page. The shadow is not printed; it only exist while viewing the book. Turning the page creates the image—an experience only possible in the book format.



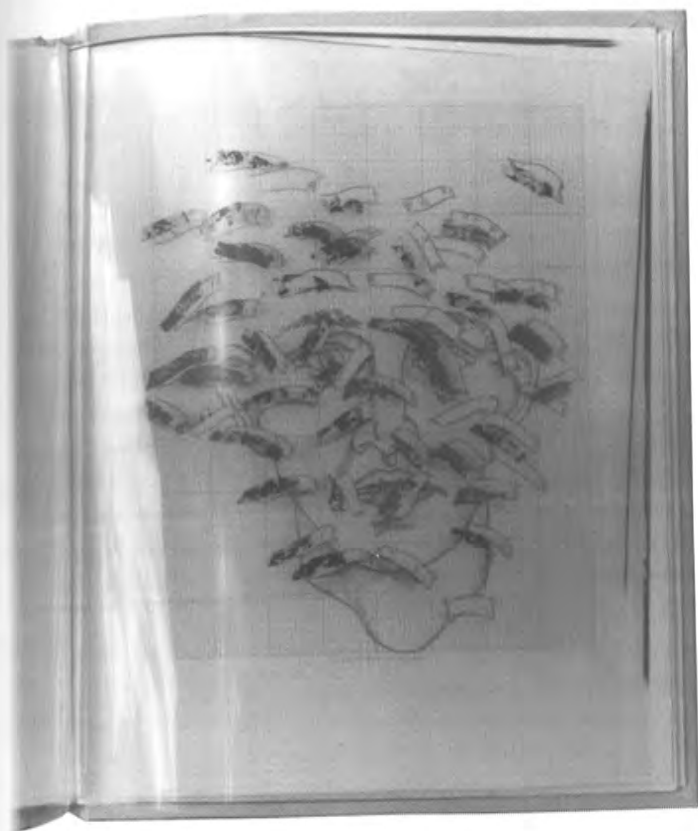


Keith Smith, *A Change in Dimension, Book 2*, 1967. One-of-a-kind. 28 x 35.5 x 1.5 cm.



In any event, now I knew how to resolve the problem of how to make a good unique book. The turning of the page would allow the transparency to have different backgrounds.

For two years I had been processing sheet film. For two years I had been blind. I had seen by habit, not trusting to see with my eyes. It had been suggested that I make a book of transparencies, but I did not hear.



Self-portrait, 1965,
was the basis for the
line drawing on the
left in Book 11.

Keith Smith, *Out*, Book 11, 1969. One-of-a-kind. 38 x 29 x 1.5 cm.

Book 2 had single transparencies sandwiched between opaque paper pages. The transparencies interacted with the facing pages. By using several transparencies in succession, as in Book 11, the images printed on the mostly clear transparencies are seen floating in layers above the next opaque paper page. Compare this to Book 5, page 96, where the entire book is transparent.

In Book 11, an opaque paper the size of the page had holes cut in it to reveal portions of 35mm negatives. The negatives were taped on the back of the opaque sheet which was then photographically contact printed onto a sheet of 11 x 14" transparency. Four such transparencies, mostly blank, containing tiny exploding photographs are seen above, floating in front of an opaque page of graph paper with a felt tip pen line drawing of my face. The viewer peers down through the the transparencies to the drawing. Turning the transparent pages permits the tiny photos to fly through the air, to drift and fall to the facing page.

I could not comprehend the potential, because of a preconception to an end, and had always seen transparencies as photographs, which I equated with paper prints.

True, I had said in *words* it is transparent material, but I had not experienced transparency. From that day on I could never again see a negative or a film-positive or a projected slide as a picture complete in itself, but only a part of a compound picture made up of the transparency and whatever else might be seen through it.

Over the next two years and fourteen books, I evolved various visualizations for the film-positive as page, chapter, and as the entire book. I found limited use for a single film-positive between opaque paper pages.

Far more possibilities presented themselves when I used several transparencies in succession. I was less apt to treat each sheet as a complete picture, but rather as a fragment. A single picture can be created by looking down through the combination of transparent pages. This, it seems, is a better use of the essence of transparency. Using more than one transparency in succession milked the idea, similar to drawing out the punch line of a joke.

After two years of making one-of-a-kind books utilizing the properties of transparency, my book ideas then came mostly from a single source. It was a favorite book which I would pick up many, many times through the years. Sometimes I would read the entire book.

Other times I would just pick up the book and hold it, and start to think.

That favorite book of mine is a blank book. Since it is the least common denominator, I find it not only the broadest, but my richest resource.

RESIDUAL CONCEPTS

One way of learning is to carry over what is learned from one process to another. Residual concepts are one way to hasten new knowledge, by understanding relationships in a new area by employing familiar concepts. Throughout this text, I will refer to the other arts when talking about book ideas. Structures in music, poetry, story-telling and cinema can be translated to the book format.

ERRONEOUS RESIDUAL CONCEPTS

Carry over of past concepts is often inappropriate, however. Revolutionary ideas must be realized when starting to work in a new medium. The basic problem in making books is approaching it as if it were many single pictures, and it is not.

This error comes from working in one medium, and carrying over principles to a new process, rather than discovering what is unique about the new medium.

If still photography students take a course in cinema, some of the results of those films will be more related to still imagery than to motion pictures. I have heard Harold Allen say many times: "Some people think to make a color photograph, you just have to put color film in the camera. The result is *not* a color photograph." The conception is not of color relationships.

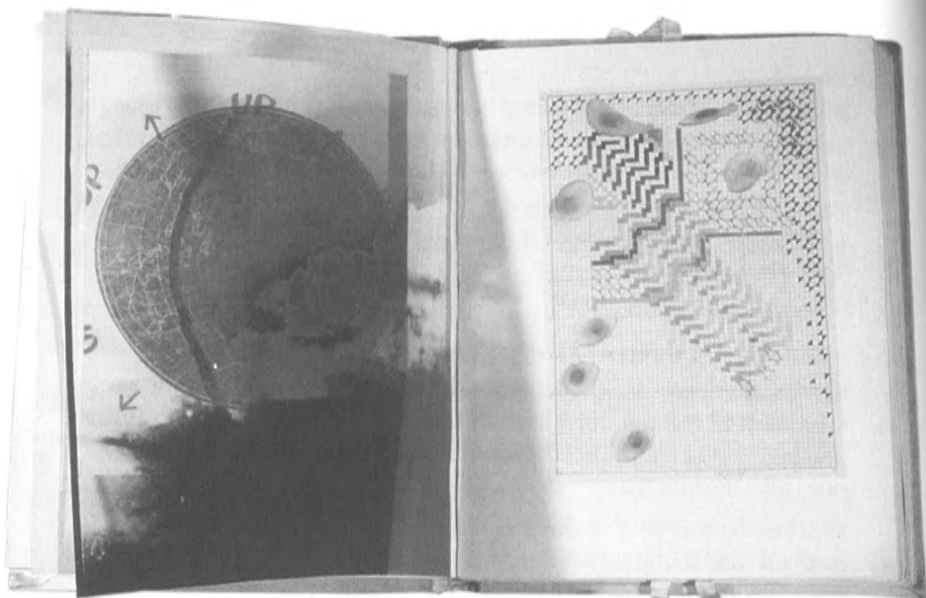
When color is used in photography, it is often only to mimic nature—the one thing it can do least. At other times, it is used to decorate, which it does better, and, to alter mood or space. But there is a myriad of potential uses for color and few take the time to explore what these might be. They are still seeing in black and white. Most people do.

SIMULATED VISION

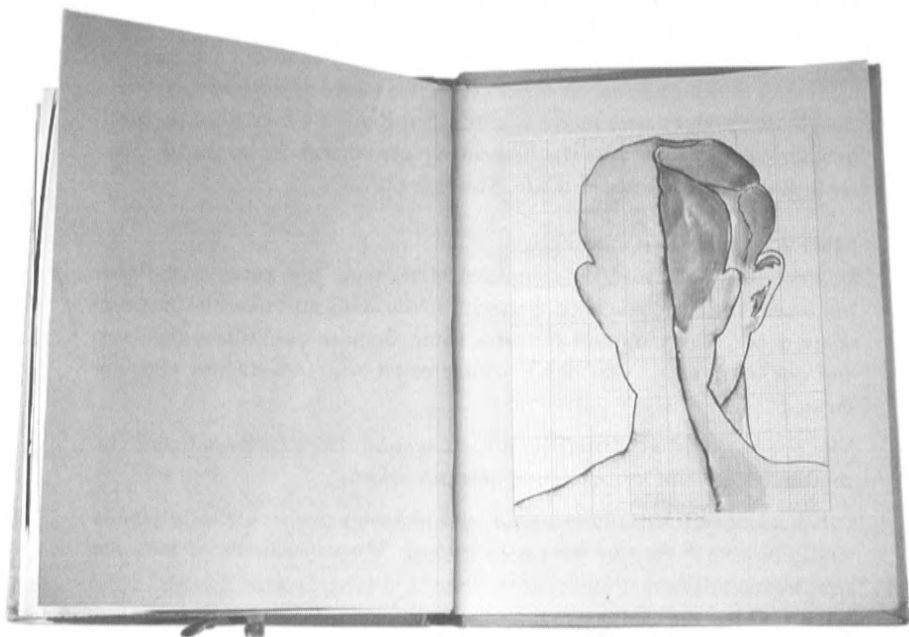
In *2001, A Space Odyssey*, the computer, HAL, says, "Oh, never mind figuring it out, I will tell you what is there." So the astronauts never bothered to think or see. Our brain does the same thing. Someone walks into the room and our brain says, "Oh, don't bother to see who it is or how they are dressed."

The eye has only glimpsed for a split second, the ears have heard the rhythm of the walk, and our computer intercedes.

It has taken very little information and instantly projects what probably would be seen if the eyes were used instead. We are unaware we have not seen with our eyes.



Keith Smith, *Out*, Book 11, 1969. On the CBS evening news President Nixon said man is "on his way up to the moon". Walter Cronkite said, "That is a 15th century term. There is no up or down, only out." I named this book I was working on to underline Nixon's outdated notions. Below is the final page, a drawing which suggests a transparency into my mind.



It is like CBS projecting the winner of an election based on 2% of the vote. Our brain gives us simulated sight, a projection of approximately what might have been seen if we had taken the time to observe. We see a fraction of a shirt or blouse, and our brain says, "Never mind, I am faster," and projects the pattern instantaneously. We didn't have time, nor take the time to see.

This is why I didn't notice Scott has shaved off his goatee a week ago. I have been with him constantly, but haven't bothered to "see" him in a week, victimized by simulated vision.

The danger of simulation is that we are not consciously aware that we are not seeing. The advantage is instantaneous comprehension, a valuable tool for survival. The disadvantage is that simulated vision has as its source only what has been programmed into our computer: past knowledge. It is incapable of new vision—of creativity.

Simulated vision is anathema to the visual artist if not recognized and kept in its proper place.

Besides being unaware of its creeping in, we use it out of laziness, and, the erroneous idea that seeing is inferior to any kind of *mentally* acquired knowledge.


We believe in the power of words, not pictures.

When I first made pictures, I would say in words, out loud to others, or silently to myself, "I am going to make a picture of _____." Then, I would go about making the picture. The result was second hand and non-visual, a substitute for the words. It was not vivid and exciting. Now I am capable of direct visual perception. I make pictures. Since the picture has never existed as words, the results are often as baffling to me as to any other viewer. I know what I have accomplished, but it is visual knowledge. I have to struggle to put it into words the same as anyone else. I can look at a completed picture and find, "Oh, yes, I used tertiary colors here, complementary there, saturated color in this small shape to counter balance the weight of the heavy form in another part of the composition." Sometimes, six months later, I can verbalize why I made a certain picture. Other times I cannot.

But I say, "It just must be where I was at the time." I don't get upset that I cannot put it into words. I have not failed; I have succeeded visually. Artists do not have to justify or be able to give a verbal equivalent of their work. If they could put it into words, why make pictures? If they could use words on the level of their pictures, they would also be poets. This text is not to justify or explain the visual statements of my previous books, but to reveal the underlying means of expression in making any book.

Pictures are a separate reality, another way to knowledge. I am not against words, but I believe in pictures.

Some people think we are born with sight. It is a language we have to acquire and master. We must learn to see: nature, space, color. We have to gain the ability to see photographically, to see with our third eye, to read visual material. It is a constant struggle requiring regular practice. We must find various ways of learning. One of many is concentration. We must daily practice observation, for we are in the business of seeing. Seeing demands research, discipline, training and courage. It takes energy to be visually perceptive rather than to follow simulated vision.

When I say, "I see..." it is not a passing exclamation, but a statement of triumph. That is why I sign my name with an  rather than an *i*.



Keith Smith, *Acrobats*, Book 212, edition of 10, digital inkjet prints. 2002. 18.5 x 14.5 x .5 cm.

BECOMING ACQUAINTED WITH A FORMAT

If I am going to make drawings or photographs which include a bicycle, I might go for a bike ride, but more importantly I would fantasize about a bike. I would picture a bike in my mind. The most obvious depiction is the side view because this is the *significant profile*. I would then imagine a standing bicycle with no rider, looking from above, directly down on the bike, or from behind or in front of the standing bike with my eye-level midway between the ground and the handlebars. In these three positions the bicycle is seen from the least significant profile. It is a thin vertical line with horizontal protrusions of the pedals, seat and handlebars. The area viewed is so minimal that the bicycle almost disappears.

Before long in examining a bike I would become involved with circles. Looking at the tires, I think about the suspension of the rim and the tire, indeed the entire vehicle and rider, by the thin spokes. It amazes me that everything is floating in space, connected only by thin lines. I imagine riding the bike through puddles and the trace of the linear journey from the congruent and diverging water marks left by the tread on the pavement. I might think about two friends together and separated. Symbolism.

I think about cycles of being with friends and apart. And again I would think literally of cycles, circles and tires.

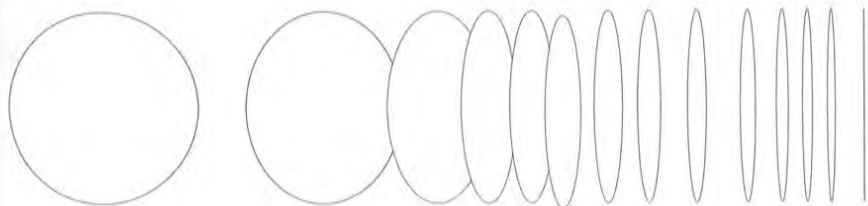
I would think of the full moon as a circle, and how in its cycle it turns into a line. I would see the tire from the significant profile and in my mind I would turn it in space and it would become an ellipse.

If I turned it further, until it was on an axis 90° from the significant profile, it would no longer be a circle or an ellipse, but it would be a line. So again *line* comes into my thoughts.

A circle is a line.

A circle is a straight line.

I can now look at any line and say, "that it is a circle."



A circle or two dimensional disk, turned in space, is seen as a line. Point of view creates context, destroying and creating what is seen.

I look at the word bicycle—popsicle, honeysuckle, bisexual. Connotations flow; I am off on a tangent which comes back to line as a thread as I tread through the exploration, or, back to circles. I think about or research the symbolism various cultures place on the circle, the meanings I have assigned to it when I use it as a form in an object or more subtly as the underlying structure of a composition in a picture. I think about the circle as a visual means of transition from one page to another in a book, and how I might use it in the future.

In other words, in building a visual vocabulary, I become saturated with the object, its suggested activities, the connotations, the mood or feelings I pick up from it before I even think of using it in my work. I don't want to just have some sensitivity about what I am doing, I want to become one with it. When I am making a book, I talk to it and it responds. Maybe not in English with an audible voice, but it gives and takes, and more, unites with me.

Becoming saturated with a form or mastering an element allows it to become second nature. (When I turn left on my bicycle, I do not have to tell myself to counterbalance by leaning to the right. It is automatic). I abandon the lists, the studied concerns of technique.

The discipline of having taken the time to master technique frees me to dismiss such concerns at the time of imaging. Words and thoughts of technique are inappropriate at that particular moment. Then is the time for seeing. I begin with silence. I continue with intuition and respond with spontaneity.

and say 'that is a circle!' I can now look at any line



EXPANDED FOURTH EDITION

STRUCTURE
OF THE
VISUAL
BOOK

Keith A. Smith

BOOK 95