

Megativity and Miniaturization at the Frankfurt Book Fair

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The Frankfurt Book Fair, or in its native German, the Frankfurter Buchmesse, restarted in the aftermath of the Second World War as a symbol of post-war reconstruction, an engine of book industry capitalism, and a celebration of bookish cosmopolitanism. But by the late 1960s, it had become a contested site, encountering the revolutionary fervor of the period. In 1967, publishers had joined students in signing an anti-conglomerate declaration against the publisher Springer (which owned the tabloid newspaper *Bild*) on the grounds that too much power in one media group was dangerous. ¹ In 1968, the organizers of the Buchmesse anticipated further trouble, particularly after the uprisings of the Prague Spring. "House rules" ("Hausordnung") were introduced, allowing the organizers to close the Fair to the public if the peace ("Messefrieden") was threatened, and requiring events (including receptions, press conferences, and musical performances) to have written approval. ² Police were brought into the Fair and placed on standby with water cannons; the Fair was informally dubbed the "Polizeimesse" ("police Fair"). The route to an event celebrating the publication of a book by the German finance minister was blocked by protestors, with the latter making fun of the demand to let police through with the words "Macht aus Polizisten gute Sozialisten" ("turn policemen into good socialists"). ³ Some publishers reacted angrily to the Fair's authoritarianism, and threatened to stay away the following year if the "Herr im Haus" ("King of the Castle") approach from the Buchmesse continued. ⁴

Five years later, German Chancellor Willy Brandt made a speech at the opening of the 1973 Buchmesse. In it, he reflected on the Fair's management of controversies during the protests and upheavals of 1968. The year, he said:

was a caesura that requires more reflection. We faced radical misunderstandings of what freedom of the Fair (Messefreiheit) meant — a misunderstanding that resulted from a long history of mistaking indolence for tolerance, pseudo-liberal self-satisfaction for democratic self-confidence; intellectual bustle for mental vigor; liberal pathos for the courage to practice real freedom. The Book Fair survived this. It has become an international institution of social life in Germany. ⁵

Brandt's speech pitches the Fair as struggling with, then transcending, political and economic turmoil. 'Pseudo-liberal self-satisfaction', or, in the original German 'pseudoliberaler Selbstzufriedenheit,' is a term that connotes self-centeredness and

smugness. It was, in Brandt's account, for too long a part of the Fair's identity; pseudo-liberal self-satisfaction and other undesirable qualities (indolence, bustle, pathos) were confused with genuine intellectual leadership. For Brandt, such confusions have receded to the past. But rather than seeing the revolutionary years around 1968 as an interruption to business as usual, the historian Ulrike Seyer argues that they were crucial to the formation of the Fair's political identity. Because of, rather than despite, these events, the Buchmesse has become a highly visible arena in which to observe the political and economic clashes that shape publishing ecosystems.

Fifty years on, we set out as researchers to undertake our own investigations of the Frankfurt Buchmesse and its role in the contemporary publishing industry. Our fieldwork took place over three years, from 2017-2019, and our motivating research question initially followed commercial lines: to examine how international bestsellers are generated at the Fair. The Buchmesse is crucial to the business of international rights sales and advance marketing, and therefore to the production of the publishing industry's most high-profile and high-selling products. In our forthcoming book *Publishing Bestsellers: Buzz and the Frankfurt Book Fair*, we present a theory of "buzz," a word often used in reports of the Fair to describe the communications surrounding future global bestsellers.⁶ Our research, though, required us to dig deeper. The Buchmesse is bound up in its status not only as a site of commerce, but as an "international institution of the social life in Germany," in Brandt's words, and indeed a high-profile institution of the global publishing industry. How, we wondered, has the Buchmesse come to have such a central role in the global business of books, and what relationship does its current-day iteration have both to its "pseudo-liberal self-satisfaction" of the 1960s and to 21st century neoliberal ecologies of publishing?

At a symbolic level, "Frankfurt" is a byword in contemporary publishing, a semi-mythical placeholder for the center of the industry. Presided over by the Frankfurter Buchmesse GmbH, a subsidiary of the Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels (German Publishers and Booksellers Association), the Buchmesse is an international forum for the exchange of rights, and a festive showcase for books and publishing. With its origins in the 15th century, the Buchmesse is the place where the industry gathers en masse once a year, often described as "the largest of all" trade events in the global publishing industry.⁷ It presents what we term "megativity"; an attitude expressed through physical scale and positive, future-oriented behaviors, including the trade of international rights. It hosts the largest of all publishing companies: the conglomerates whose processes of mergers and acquisitions intensified from the 1970s onwards to form the globally dominant companies of the 21st century. It is also the place where new entrants to the industry go to establish an international presence, as "Everyone attends because everyone attends."⁸ It is the key annual destination for global book business, and the most important date on the publishing calendar. In 2019, the Buchmesse hosted 7,450 exhibitors, 302,267 visitors, 4,000 events and 10,000 journalists; while this confirms its size, the Fair is physically smaller than it used to be, occupying two fewer Halls in the Messe complex than in 2015.⁹

The Fair has also been described as "offer[ing] the world in miniature" in its co-location of publishers from around the world.¹⁰ We therefore wondered whether we could see the shape of the global publishing industry mapped across the Buchmesse's multiple Halls. Did the organization and scale of stands at the Fair replicate the structures of that global industry? And what might any discrepancies in this process of miniaturization suggest?

In order to answer these questions, we employed a methodology in accordance with Ullapoolism. Ullapoolism is the conceptual school we have founded, named after the site of our earliest fieldwork (the Scottish highlands town of Ullapool) and guided by an 11 point manifesto.¹¹ Ullapoolism is playful and harnesses the energy of amateurism and rapidity. It is, and works with, art. Ullapoolism is deeply invested in the present, and has a commitment to activism and intervention through Scholarly Direct Action. Ullapoolism intentionally raises some ethical predicaments. Ullapoolism rejoices in forced sociality, materiality, redirected conversations, and satirical asides. It is an epistemology that challenges notions of how we get and create knowledge about contemporary culture.

Ullapoolism draws inspiration from the Situationist Internationale's interventionist opposition to commodity capitalism and the "spectacle" that renders people as passive consumers.¹² Two of the situationists' key modes are the *détournement*, a parodic rewriting of images and texts, and the *dérive*, a practice of actively drifting through urban

environments and responding to the emotions they inspire. Our use of the *dérive* also draws inspiration from "low theory," a term proposed by Stuart Hall and adapted by Jack Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure*.¹³ Low theory is a "kind of theoretical model that flies under the radar" and "tries to locate all the in-between spaces"; it is "theoretical knowledge that works on many levels at once, as precisely one of those modes of transmission that revels in the detours, twists, and turns through knowing and confusion, and that seeks not to explain but to involve."¹⁴ Our own *détournements* to date have included card and board games that explore the dynamics of literary festivals and a spot-the-difference quiz that plays on the similar-sounding names of musician and actor Janelle Monáe and author Gerald Murnane; our *dérives* include the thoughtful drowning of a copy of *Moby Dick* to reflect upon the materiality of books and reading in a post-digital age.¹⁵

Ullapoolism went to the Buchmesse, and our interest in Frankfurt as both the largest publishing industry trade event and a miniaturization of the book industry led us to play with measurement and scale. We were particularly interested in two different ideas of scale: as a physical manifestation, and as an underlying economic arrangement in which the dominant conglomerated multinational corporations control a large amount of money, and the peripheral players are small, with few staff and scarce resources.

Our *dérives* around the Buchmesse revealed an intensification of aspects of the hierarchical global industry identified by Pascale Casanova in *The World Republic of Letters*.¹⁶ Frankfurt's Halls are organized in multiple ways (for example, one area, the LitAg, is dedicated to the power-broking literary agents), but the predominant organizing force is geographical and linguistic: German-language Halls for the home national industry, and then a series of "International" Halls, roughly broken down in 2019 into Hall 6 for English-language publishers and organizations, largely from OECD countries; Hall 5 for international publishers from a range of regions, including Europe and Africa; and Hall 4 for Asian and Middle-Eastern publishers, along with a range of book-adjacent services and goods as well as the "Business Club," an area of the Buchmesse promoted as an exclusive meeting hub. Such seemingly commonsensical geographic placements reveal long-held sociocultural affiliations, economic partnerships, and fast-growing market areas, and are indicative of the hierarchization of the global publishing industry.

Our observations matched those of Roanna Gonsalves, who explored the strategies of Indian publishers at Frankfurt early in the 21st century.¹⁷ She situated her primary research within a Bourdieusian perspective, via Sapiro's core-periphery conceptualizations of global book markets.¹⁸ As Gonsalves explains, the "centre" of the Buchmesse is "understandably the German publishing industry, given that the fair takes place in that country," but as she notes English language trade publishing is also "territorially hierarchised," with UK and US conglomerates "positioned as the establishment, and others such as Indian publishers positioned on the periphery as outsiders and newcomers."¹⁹

Our fieldwork observations confirmed the enduring importance of publisher stand position.²⁰ In the English-speaking International Hall, we immediately noticed the stands that took up immense space, from Penguin Random House's almost aisle-length stand, to the colloquially named "Fortress Hachette" (a nickname that recognizes its size as well as the impermeable crenellated panels of its custom design). When we commented upon the size of Fortress Hachette to a friend who works for a mid-sized publisher, they replied, "But Hachette is big," demonstrating the conflation of physical presence at the Fair and market dominance. We noticed the publishing data company Nielsen BookScan in a prominent end of aisle position. We saw that some small publishers, such as those in "Australia Alley," were less-centrally located; others rented tables on shared stands; others staked no physical position at all.

Many publishers cannot afford to travel to Frankfurt; especially those located at a distance from Europe, such as African, Australian, Indian, and Chinese publishers. Some can afford to get to Frankfurt and buy a trade visitor ticket, but have no stand. When we spoke to Eloise Millar from Galley Beggar Press (a remarkably successful small UK publisher) about our interest in using a laser to measure stands and assess scale, she responded, "you'll have to measure me." Our meeting with her was held at a café; the 900-page experimental book she was pitching that year became a Booker Prize shortlistee (Lucy Ellman's *Ducks, Newburyport*). Other publishers hold meetings in hotels, hallways, or benches between food trucks in the open-air Agora. An army of foot soldiers travels from stand to stand, meeting

others on their territory, and requiring the "comfortable shoes" that industry insiders recommend to first-time attendees. ²¹

Amazon offered an intriguing example of the manipulation of visual messaging through stand position and design. Despite the company's powerful role in the book industry, Amazon had no stand replicating its scale. In 2017, we were struck by its position, tucked into a corner of the German-language Hall, and representing its publishing and self-publishing operations, rather than its retail platform. Its decor was subdued and non-intrusive. By 2018 and 2019, Amazon had moved into a more prominent central position, albeit still in the German Hall. Its stand design of wooden tree cut-outs communicated "friendly mid-size publisher." Amazon's presence at the Fair is growing, but is still at odds with its predatory reputation, dominance over online selling and the ebook market, and the vast warehouse it operates at Koblenz, a couple of hours drive from Frankfurt. Amazon uses the Frankfurt Book Fair for purposes that suit its own particular agenda, such as recruiting German self-publishers, or promoting its translation program. The size and presentation of Amazon's stands at Frankfurt do not, that is, demonstrate Amazon slowly catching up to large publishers, but rather show its indifference to traditional modes of displaying status, and its reconfiguration of power in the book industry.

Building on these observations, we created the Cardboard Buchmesse. The aim of this experiment was to use the process of making (and playing with) a miniature, cardboard book fair to reflect upon structural elements and relations at Frankfurt. We began with prototypes of different elements of the Fair, including a doll's house-sized version of the Hachette stand and a cat-sized version of the Business Club (Figure 1).



Fig. 1: Prototypes of our Buchmesse Model

Extending these ideas, we began the task of modeling an entire Hall, as a détournement of its full-size spaces, and the even larger global industry the Fair seemingly represents. Our first stand was a generic shell, as advertised online by the Buchmesse. We then made bespoke variations, using a range of colored and textured cardboards to create stands of different sizes (Figure 2). We chose not to particularize via words or images, in order to focus on the materials and dimensions of the stands as communicative devices, as we had observed during our dérives around the Buchmesse.

Our reflections while making the Cardboard Buchmesse included thoughts on scale. We made one deliberately overlarge stand to gesture at the unequal sizes we had observed. Discussions during our construction phase included the observation that large stands of multinational publishers were "both closed and open, emotionally speaking," and one of us wondered whether we should make them "castellated, with potential for boiling oil to be poured from the ramparts," articulating the predatory activities of the largest of publishers, which grow through mergers and acquisitions, and benefit from favorable marketplace access.



Fig. 2: The Cardboard Buchmesse in Action

Then we took the Cardboard Buchmesse on the road (in a cardboard box), inviting friends and colleagues — most of whom had not been to Frankfurt — to arrange the stands and comment upon the dynamics of different physical layouts. Our first finding from this experiment was that most people grouped the stands by size. One put all the small stands together, thinking that they would have been "relegated" to a back corner by organizers, but that this might come with advantages: communality, shared social spaces, and some peace and quiet. This person also grouped all the larger stands, thinking they would have their own exclusive area. Another participant, while initially "not sure what signifies what," also wanted to group by size, saying, "I imagine the big things are at the center with the smaller things orbiting them." This behavior, we suggest, shows a recognition, or even a tendency to reinforce, the affinities and power structures that exist in the publishing industry and book culture more generally. Book culture tends to be marked by at least superficial "niceness" and conviviality; a searching for commonality, like-mindedness and affiliation that can be both productive in terms of cooperation, but also a way to obscure or make bearable patterns of neoliberal conglomerate power.

A second finding was that the model felt corporate. One participant was reminded of the time they worked in corporate communications and attended their events, and suggested that the arrangement of stands felt generic rather than book-industry specific. Another person commented that this was "kinda like IKEA" and another agreed, "yes, you can't get out." The absence of visual markers of bookishness in our model revealed the underlying corporate aspects of the publishing industry.

Our miniaturized, cardboard version of the Buchmesse, then, demonstrated through the Ullapoolist mediums of creative cardboard play and storytelling some of the ecologies of neoliberal publishing, as they are displayed and performed on Frankfurt's floors. But the model failed to capture some of the other dynamics we observed. Our dérives around the Halls showed aspects of the Fair that seemed illogical, rather than following logics of neoliberal publishing. As well as stands that were not to scale, such as Amazon's, other aspects of the industry were seemingly missing, or engaged in strategic non-displays. Staff from Netflix, Youtube and Nintendo — game changers in the media industries — were present at the Fair but did not have stands. Instead, they operated under the radar in a shadow network of meetings in interstitial locations. At these meetings, as far as we could tell, ordinary business took place: the pitching of content to be acquired, discussions about co-licensing arrangements, and soft social encounters. These cross-media meetings have a growing financial significance and play a role in generating buzz, but do not yet to form a highly visible component of the Fair. Breaking through this invisibility in 2019, Netflix's vice-president of international originals Kelly Luegenbiehl was a speaker at the high-profile

Global 50 CEO Talk. The company thus assumed a significant and highly visible space on the program, if not in the Halls.

To understand the Buchmesse more fully, we found it useful to seek out the invisible, the gaps, the silences. In 2018, we discovered a world behind the scenes of the Buchmesse. We opened a door beyond one stand and entered a hauntingly empty space, lined by the reverse of publishers' stands on one side and the entrance to the toilets on the other (Figure 3). A wall of windows at one end opened out onto a view of the Messe's other buildings, some no longer used for the Fair. And in the middle: tumbleweeds. Echoes. Emptiness.



Fig. 3: Behind the Scenes at the Buchmesse

Our questions about this negative space led to people telling us about the Fair's size reduction in recent years. In fact, in every year of our fieldwork, people told us the Fair was smaller than the year before. (We increasingly started to wonder if it exists at all.) They also told us their memories of the International Hall being located in the no-longer used Hall 8. A ghost or shadow Buchmesse exists in the mind of long-term attendees, who remember when the Fair — and, they imply by metaphorical extension, the industry — was bigger. Negativity is a familiar mood in publishing, which is an industry powered by existential crisis. Accounts that reflect in elegiac mode on the diminution of the Fair, the lack of big new titles, or the death of the book, are part of the persistent downbeat motif of publishing. This persistent mood (the Fair always feels smaller) is borne out, in recent years, by reality — the Fair actually is smaller. The disruptions to Frankfurt and the traditional book industry are real: as noted above, some of the most significant actors are media companies that operate invisibly, hold meetings underground (not literally), or otherwise obscure the size of their influence. A sense of loss and threat balances the boosterism of media reports about Frankfurt, a negativity that operates in counterpoint to the scale and bustle of the Fair's "megativity." ²²

In Hall 6, the vast empty space between the stands and the toilets is, perhaps, the repressed unconscious of the Fair, the space where the secrets of industry failure hide behind confident pronouncements of growth growth growth and the bold face of business as usual. The sudden transition from bustling Hall floor to dead zone made us contemplate industry retraction, the global economy, and the various costs — including those of environmental sustainability — of such large events. This hidden space offers both a reprieve from the bustle of the Fair, and an encounter with its shrinking footprint and wasteful underside: loose cables, discarded chairs, paper rubbish. Other hidden spaces, such as publishers' storage closets (or Kabuffs, thereby inspiring Blaire Squisroll's spin-off novella *The Frankfurt Kabuff*), reveal the work that sustains the buzzy glamour of publishing: storage, supplies, mess, walls that fall down and need to be taped up again. The transient, hidden, and negative spaces of the Fair underscore the uneasy tensions embedded within the ecologies of neoliberal publishing.

Our Situationist-inspired, low theory approach to the Frankfurt Book Fair, then, enabled us to gather perspectives upon the global business of books and its "miniaturized" manifestation at the Buchmesse. Such an approach interrogates the ostensible functions of the Fair in terms of its principal business orientation: rights trading. And yet our investigations also extended to the Fair's function as a site of social and cultural interchange, which interweave with its economic functions.

As Brandt's 1973 speech evidences, public pronouncements at the Fair are often lofty, articulating liberal ideals such as cultural exchange and freedom of speech. Yet any apolitical positioning taken by the Fair has led to contested territory. In its post-war development, the Buchmesse affected a stance of political neutrality, saying that "all nations were to be welcomed, independently of their governments."²³ Such attempted neutrality was immediately hard to sustain on a regional level, given the political tensions between West and East Germany. Which East German publishers were allowed to exhibit was highly political, and contributed to the "pseudo-liberal self-satisfaction" articulated by Brandt in 1973. Any uncomplicated affirmation of intercultural exchange is disconnected from geopolitical realities. The challenges to the Buchmesse of the late 1960s, and the organizers' responses, illustrate the difficulty — in fact impossibility — of sustaining a "neutral" Fair.

In the 21st century, further challenges assailed the Buchmesse and its aspirations toward being, in the words of its current Director, Juergen Boo[k]s, "a peaceful meeting of cultures."²⁴ The Fair's Guest of Honor scheme is one flashpoint for political turmoil. Enabling one country, region or language grouping to showcase itself as the Guest of Honor is a conferral which operates bi-directionally. The Guest of Honor (at its own cost) reaches extended markets and audiences, but the Buchmesse also derives value: first, from being able to demonstrate increased commerce that takes place as a direct result of the Fair, and second, through a visible commitment to cosmopolitan discourse.²⁵ The act of showcasing, inevitably, is not neutral. In 2008 and 2009 respectively, Turkey and China were the Guests of Honor; both countries operate oppressive regimes, including censorship of the literary and publishing sector. Decisions about which country to honor that aspire to separate culture from regime, or to encourage democratic development through the means of culture, have been frequently challenged.²⁶ Such decisions also suggest that the Buchmesse still operates in a state of political and cultural confusion, in Brandt's words, in which "real freedom," "democratic self-confidence," "intellectual bustle," and "pseudo-liberal self-satisfaction" sit uncomfortably side by side.²⁷

In the three years during which we conducted our fieldwork, far-right politics gained strength across the world, including in Germany. Once again the Fair was not able to cast aside its "confusion." In 2017, a meeting we were having was interrupted by a physical fight at the nearby stand of a far-right publisher, one of a series of disturbances occasioned by its presence. The Fair's "free speech" position was heavily debated as a consequence.²⁸ There was an inherent and irreconcilable contradiction between the "On the Same Page" celebration in 2018 of the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the Buchmesse and the German Publishers and Booksellers Association, and the admittance of far-right publishers and politicians to the Fair. Neutrality is impossible under such circumstances.

So when the Fair's Director continued within the "On the Same Page" press release to state that "the Frankfurter Buchmesse platform, this 'stage for world affairs,' only works because basic liberal principles and respect for the other are considered non-negotiable values here," the juxtaposition of discourse and Fair floor reality is striking.²⁹ The decision to give a platform, or not, problematizes any glib assertion of freedom of speech. The press release's language, and the representational discourse of the Fair, demonstrates a continuing pseudo-liberal — or perhaps by 2018, neoliberal — self-satisfaction or even collective complacency in the mediatized attempt to contain challenging geopolitics within the commercial and cultural activities of the Buchmesse.

Recognizing the Frankfurt Book Fair as a key agent and a manifestation of the neoliberal ecologies of contemporary publishing thus exemplifies the dual role of the Buchmesse in both international business and the formation of cultural-political identity. The Fair dramatizes the economic tensions that inform the book industry, from the state of play between conglomerate publishers to the seismic influence of media players Amazon and Netflix. Alongside the Fair's exhibition of conglomerated and behavioral megativity and the

hierarchization, gaps and silences in its processes of miniaturization, the Buchmesse performs cultural-political work that conjoins scale and ideology. Frankfurt's material realities and its semi-mythical status work together to render it a demonstration of neoliberal ecologies in festive guise.

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