

Transnational Activism in the Post-Digital Networks of the Bound Art Book Fair and the Hackney Comic + Zine Fair

Louisa Preston

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TRANSNATIONAL ACTIVISM IN THE POST-DIGITAL NETWORKS OF THE BOUND ART BOOK FAIR AND THE HACKNEY COMIC + ZINE FAIR

Louisa Preston
University of Stirling

ABSTRACT

The author's experiences of the Hackney Comic + Zine Fair (HCZF) and the Manchester-based Bound Art Book Fair (BABF) are the point of departure for this article. The discussion focuses on the distinctiveness of these spaces of dissemination and the positioning of the agents involved. This article shows how virtual engagement at each fair became entangled with situated experiences and printed publications. The article also considers the significance of an autoethnographic approach within the post-digital context, and its relationship to pursuing scholarly activism within twenty-first-century book studies. HCZF and BABF operate in post-digital networks of artist- and self-publishing; this positionality allows them to advocate for change and social justice. Transnational activism is evidenced through the accessibility, resources, and community empowerment that these fairs offer and generate for creative publishing practices. HCZF and BABF evidence resistance to major book fair networks, e.g., in Frankfurt, and London, whilst simultaneously influencing and infiltrating those very networks.

RÉSUMÉ

Les expériences vécues par l'auteurice dans le cadre des foires Hackney Comic + Zine Fair (HCZF) et Bound Art Book Fair (BABF, Manchester) sont le point de départ du présent article portant sur ces espaces de diffusion en ce qu'ils ont de distinct et sur le positionnement des agents y étant impliqués. Il montre la manière dont ont fini par s'enchevêtrer l'engagement virtuel dans ces foires, les expériences situées et

les publications imprimées. Il souligne également l'importance que revêt l'approche autoethnographique en contexte postnumérique et son rapport avec une recherche qui se veut engagée, en études du livre au XXI^e siècle. Les foires HCZF et BABF opèrent en effet dans des réseaux postnumériques axés sur l'autoédition et l'édition par l'artiste, un positionnement favorable aux revendications en matière de changement et de justice sociale. Le militantisme transnational est mis en évidence par l'accessibilité de ces foires, par l'autonomisation qu'elles permettent et par les ressources et le soutien qu'elles apportent aux pratiques d'édition créatives. Les foires HCZF et BABF témoignent, enfin, d'une résistance aux grands réseaux des foires du livre (celles de Francfort et de Londres, par exemple), réseaux qu'elles n'influencent et n'infiltrent pas moins.

Keywords

Post-digital networks, self-publishing, autoethnography, transnational activism, art book fairs

Mots-clés

Réseaux postnumériques, autoédition, autoethnographie, militantisme transnational, foires de livres d'art

Transnational activism through the post-digital networks of the Hackney Comic + Zine Fair (HCZF) and the Manchester-based Bound Art Book Fair (BABF) across the world involves a range of participants, including but not limited to art gallery institutions and curators; researchers; artists and comic and zine makers; small-presses and art publishers. In this article, I use an autoethnographic, artist-publisher-researcher methodology, looking at the mix of virtual and digital modes of attendance at each fair, to analyze the post-digital experiences of HCZF and BABF. With reference to current literature on literary festivals and book fairs, the mainstream publishing counterparts to artists' book fairs and comic and zine fairs, I discuss the extent to which HCZF and BABF agitate, disrupt, and advocate for alternative, creative, or experimental publications and promote equality for the cultural workers in this field. The analysis shows that small-scale fairs empower communities, support creative practice, and amplify voices of under-represented groups in alternative networks of distribution, which interact in a complex post-digital dynamic with their mainstream counterpart publishing distribution networks.

HCZF was initiated in 2019 by London-based organizer, graphic designer, comic maker, and self-publisher Joe Stone.¹ The inaugural HCZF took place in London Fields Arches, Hackney.² Due to the Covid-19 pandemic HCZF did not take place in 2020. In 2021, HCZF became an online fair with some live in-person events and workshops in London, such as “Drink and Draw,” an evening of comic creating and socializing, mediated via Twitter.³ HCZF programmed Zoom events throughout September that aimed to “showcase the many different forms, styles and genres that sequential art can take—especially in the independent, self-published and small-press scene.”⁴ Virtual “halls” showcased a selection of comics and zines on the HCZF website. Publications were searchable using tags such as “Queer, Women in Comics, Semi-Autobiographical, Perzine, Post-Internet.”⁵ Comic and zine creators were introduced on the HCZF Instagram site.⁶

The public programme of Zoom events was advertised on the HCZF website. HCZF was supported by Arts Council England, Broken Frontier, and Gosh! Comics.⁷ Gosh! Comics is a retailer selling comics, zines, and graphic novels for all ages online and in a physical shop located in London.⁸ Broken Frontier publishes journalism on comic and small press creators on its website. Since 2002, it has focussed on the “independent and small press scene,” in an effort to show that “there’s so much more to comics than spandex.”⁹ HCZF describes Broken Frontier as a platform that aims to “champion new creative voices.”¹⁰ A primary aim of Broken Frontier is “to celebrate the diversity of the medium and those who work in it.”¹¹ Staff writers contributing to Broken Frontier hail from Britain, Canada, America, Belgium, Holland, the Philippines, and Australia.¹²

BABF was established in 2017 as a “celebration of artist publishing from the UK and Europe.”¹³ The fair showcases artist publishing practices and organizes a programme of events, including book launches and performances. BABF organizers state:

We welcome artist publishers and collectives, small presses, independent publishers, galleries and distributors who are committed to expanding the potential of publishing to communicate radical ideas and amplify underrepresented voices.¹⁴

BABF is typically a two-day in-person fair, hosted by The Whitworth, an art gallery owned and operated by the University of Manchester.¹⁵ In 2020, due to Covid-19, organizers programmed an online fair, Hypertext, in collaboration with the Open Eye Gallery in Liverpool.¹⁶ The Whitworth shares similar aims with BABF, operating “with communities to use art for positive social change, and actively address what matters most in people’s lives.”¹⁷ Supporting radical ideas and the community, amplifying underrepresented voices, and using art for positive social change are the aims of BABF organizers and the host institution, the Whitworth.

Attending HCZF and BABF: Implications for Access & Emotional Resources

The fact that travel arrangements and associated travel costs were not required to attend HCZF in 2021 made it widely accessible to participants across the world, as long as they had an internet connection and a device to connect with, and the time zones aligned somewhat with the event schedule. HCZF organizers were conscious that online access to this fair would enable wider access, not only from across the UK but from anywhere in the world. Panel speakers attended from Hong Kong, Montreal, London, and a range of other cities across the UK. A virtual sense of community was effectively created amongst those who attended more than one event. I participated in seven HCZF events spaced across the month, which were held on weeknights at 7:30 pm and on weekends and lasted approximately one to two hours. The events were scheduled at times that would be accessible to those who are busy with other jobs during the day (a common characteristic for people working with zines and comics) and for working parents, like me, with limited childcare hours. Events were recorded and made available on the HCZF YouTube channel.¹⁸ Between the events, there was time both to reflect individually and to engage with other participants and organizers on Instagram.

There were, however, some downsides to the online experience. During one event, attendees and presenters had to endure a Zoom bombing.¹⁹ This, coupled with the fact that attendees were usually joining from their home environment, made some events feel vulnerable to invasions of privacy— even if different backgrounds can be applied in Zoom to protect

users' privacy. Accessibility issues for the online events also included different internet speeds and bandwidth, which sometimes made connecting and hearing the speakers difficult for attendees. As these hiccups suggest, online festivals must all contend with the broad problem of digital poverty, or the inaccessibility of digital tools or even of unreliable internet connectivity for people from certain regions or socioeconomic classes.²⁰ In addition, there was an implicit requirement to participate in certain social media platforms: for example, Instagram was a primary tool used by people attending the events as well as HCZF organizers, and while this helped to establish a sense of virtual community around the fair, that community would be inaccessible to anyone not using the platform. That said, the online environment increased accessibility in other ways, such as through the provision of live captioning for the Zoom events.

BABF in October 2021 was significantly less widely accessible than HCZF, and required an investment of different personal, emotional, and material resources. In 2021, the cost of exhibiting at the fair was 60 pounds. Entrance to the fair by the public and attendance at the public programme of events was free.²¹ In-person attendance at BABF posed particular challenges for people attending from outside of Manchester's immediate locale, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Social distancing requirements in 2021 imposed restrictions on the number of people who could gather in an enclosed space, so the two-day fair was smaller in scale and duration than in previous years.

Personally, I was nervous about travelling, both due to possible changes in restrictions and my concern about contracting Covid-19. The train was expensive and on par with what a flight would cost. I decided to drive the four hours and fifteen minutes estimated by Google Maps, even though I was worried about driving on my own and about being away from family, anxieties exacerbated by the pandemic lockdown experience. Factoring in fuel stops, rest breaks, and 20 minutes locating the correct car park, the journey took six hours. I had planned to go straight to the Whitworth as soon as I arrived in Manchester to see the end of the first day of the fair. But it was 3 pm by the time I checked in to the hotel. My car was securely parked. I had spent the day sitting, driving, and felt sure I would get lost trying to navigate unfamiliar road systems through busy traffic. I wanted to walk the 30 minutes it would take to get to the venue, but it was already getting dark. I was nervous about

walking on my own as a female in the city, holding my phone to follow the map, for fear of sticking out as an easy target for theft or worse. Pre-pandemic, I would have been at ease and excited to be in a bustling new city. However, after the strict guidelines imposed on us and the constant reminder of the risk of being exposed to the virus, I was anxious in a way I could not have anticipated. Manchester streets were busier than any I had experienced in two years. And so, rather than rushing to attend the last part of day one of the fair, I decided to gather my thoughts at the hotel and prepare for the next day.

On Sunday morning, I walked to the Whitworth. There had been showery weather, but the sun was beginning to come out. The gallery is situated in a green space surrounded by trees and sculptures, and I arrived just after it opened, at 10:30 am. Two people stood outside drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes. I began to relax a little after the busy streets I had walked through to get to the venue. The brick-built gallery with a modern glass-walled addition at the back and side of the building felt typical of a contemporary art space. I walked through the Victorian entrance, past the gallery shop on the right, and into the first gallery. Chatter echoed throughout the space, creating a warm, lively atmosphere and I could hear people talking at the BABF tables. Step-free entrance points were available to visitors, as were assisted and family toilet facilities. The Whitworth has established quieter visiting hours during the week and made ear defenders available, as well as quieter spaces for the benefit of visitors with autism. The Whitworth has also developed the accessibility of their website in parallel with the accessible facilities of the building.²²

A key contrast between my experiences of HCZF and BABF was the impact that the different modes of attendance had on the degree to which I could access and engage in each fair. The relatively long journey and high cost required to attend BABF was considerable compared to HCZF. Attending BABF required more intense engagement over a single two-day period, in contrast to the seven shorter one- to two-hour Zoom meetings of HCZF. In addition, getting to Manchester demanded more emotional energy than I expected, and certainly more than I had needed for HCZF. HCZF was less intense due to its spread of events over a month, which fitted into my usual working week and which I could attend from home. The practical, emotional,

and situated characteristics of my trip to Manchester defined my experiences of BABF, which differed greatly from my at home, virtual experience of HCZF.

One benefit of attending BABF in person was that I could dedicate my attention to it, which was not possible in the same way when I had to balance HCZF along with childcare and household and work responsibilities. However, participants of HCZF events kept their cameras on, and the discussions that I participated in were more focused and in-depth than any that I had at BABF. This could have been due to my lowered sense of inhibition in contributing via the screen in the relaxed environment of my home. I felt more empowered by this relative ease and freedom of access than I did when attending BABF. The virtual gathering of participants created a non-geographically situated community specific to HCZF. Zoom events became nodes in this network of attendees and speakers. Whereas the in-person BABF gathered exhibitors at one geographical site, the virtual HCZF brought together publications and publishers as part of a larger network of artists' book fairs operating internationally. Individual and community empowerment amongst transnational networks is the focus of the following discussion of several events at HCZF—"Gareth Brookes: The Power of the Small Press", "WIP Comics Open Day", "Asian Comics: Beyond Manga" and "Abstraction in Comics"—and of the publications presented at the tables of BABF.

Transnational Community Empowerment at HCZF and BABF: The Power of the Small Press and Alternative Distribution Networks

Gareth Brookes is an author and self-publisher of 21 comic books, and he led the first HCZF event, "The Power of the Small Press." Brookes illuminated the power dynamics of small press and self-publishing from his viewpoint as a comic maker and spoke about the role of small presses in building communities. In 2005, as he recalled, no publishers were making the kind of work that he was making in his region. There were no comic fairs or anthologies. Commercial printers were difficult to approach, and the printers he did talk to did not understand what he wanted, so he used a home printer or photocopier to re-produce his editions. By 2010, the larger publishers

Myriad and No Brow were established. Outwardly these seemed like *big* publishers, but really, they were small presses—usually operating in very small teams out of kitchens with no offices. Brookes co-created *The Comix Reader*, a comic anthology printed in tabloid newsprint format. Looking for new distribution channels, he approached the organizers of the Green Man Festival, who enthusiastically agreed to allow him to sell copies of the anthology from a wheelbarrow. The Green Man Festival is a family friendly music festival located in the Brecon Beacons, Wales. It hosts a range of activities alongside music, such as: storytelling, foraging, poetry, drumming, yoga and drawing workshops.²³ According to Brookes, buyers of the publication said, “I never knew this stuff existed.” His appreciation of their response—“if you hear that you know you’re doing well,” he said—reflects his ambition to extend awareness of comics into other cultural arenas. Discussion at the end of the event revealed that other comic creators share a similar desire to insert comics into mainstream culture, and do so by, for example, leaving copies of their comics for discovery by the reading public in libraries and in between books on the shelves of Waterstones.²⁴ In the early 2000s Brookes was involved with the Alternative Press, an artist collective “dedicated to encouraging creativity through self-publishing, zine making, DIY and beyond.”²⁵ Brookes spoke of the Alternative Press table called *Are You Zine Friendly?*, which aimed to disrupt the commercial sales function of the book fair and the selling conventions of zine and comic makers, who usually sat at individual tables. The Alternative Press became an intermediary for the zine makers, whereby zine makers dropped off their zines, rather than sitting and doing the selling themselves. According to Brookes, this afforded individual sellers the opportunity to more freely network, rather than simply selling their publications.

Brookes argued that the formats of some publications require that they be published by small presses. In recounting a visit with a publisher, Brookes described seeing a one-page comic titled *God Takes a Cigarette Break* sitting on the mantelpiece in a large room full of books. This was the publisher’s favourite comic. When asked why he had not published it, the publisher responded with the question, “how would I? I can’t make it into a graphic novel titled *God Takes 500 Cigarette Breaks*; how could it be developed? It’s perfect as it is.” Brookes used this vignette to illustrate that some formats of comics by their essence do not conform to mass commercial production of

the mainstream book publishing industry. Instead, an alternative publishing network has grown up around these special formats, a network whose priorities differ from those of publishers of mass-produced literary fiction, for example.

Three comic creators presented at the “Asian Comics: Beyond Manga” panel to discuss the meaning of the term “Manga.” The panelists spoke of their resistance to being pigeonholed as a particular type of comic maker based on their ethnicity. Their presentations focused on their work in international communities comprised of globally connected readers. Jason Chuang, who was born in Taiwan and trained as an illustrator in London, spoke of the moment that an art director in New York told him that his work “looked too Asian...a negative quality”, due to the assumption that the drawing style would not appeal to “the public”.²⁶ For Chuang, this comment only strengthened his resolve that his Asian heritage influenced his view of living “in a western society from a young age, and the importance of using one’s unique voice.”²⁷ This unique voice is Chuang’s style of illustration which he hopes people view without predetermined expectations of Asian comics.²⁸ Lee Lai, who was born in Melbourne, Australia, and lived and worked in Montreal, Canada, spoke about her first graphic novel with a commercial publisher, *Stone Fruit*.²⁹ Previously she had self-published, and had presented at Toronto Comic Arts Festival in 2017. Describing her move from Melbourne to Montreal as a young trans person, Lai said she felt supported by a “huge queer Asian community” in Montreal.³⁰ However, Lai noted that although the number of queer comics and trans creators is growing, they are still in the minority.³¹ Lastly, Kaitlin Chan, a Hong Kong-based “cartoonist and cultural worker,”³² spoke about her forthcoming “graphic memoir” published by Surely Books,³³ a new imprint of Abrams Comic Arts focused on LGBTQ+ comics.³⁴ For Chan, the term Asian comics felt non-descript and unhelpful in defining the range of styles of comics being produced in Hong Kong. Chan showed examples of painting styles in Asian art history and poster culture in Hong Kong, in addition to a range of comic artists which all influence her work.³⁵

These presenters, all speaking to us from different countries around the world and assembled via Zoom, evidently push for enhanced representation of their identity, their unique voices, and their associated underrepresented groups in

their comic works, either as Asians living in western society or as trans and queer authors. Hong Kong- and Montreal-based creators joining the Zoom event from their home locations along with others based in the UK exemplifies transnational activism through global connections being made remotely via the virtual platform. HCZF actively pushed for the representation of LGBTQ+ creators and celebrated community empowerment that can be achieved through the publication of graphic novels, comics, and small-press publishing. The organizers of HCZF emphasize the power of self-expression, DIY zine- and comic making, and self-publishing.

Of BABF participants, 34 exhibitors had tables at the Whitworth: 29 from the UK; two from Spain; one from Germany; one from the Netherlands; and one from the UK and Canada together. As I walked through the hall, it was not immediately obvious where the exhibitors had travelled from (fig. 1). Closer inspection of the publications and discussions with stand holders, however, revealed activist motivations behind the publications and the places of their production. The first publication I picked up, from an unmanned table at the entrance to the gallery, was an A4 pamphlet titled, *Art Workers of the World Unite!* published by the Designers and Cultural Workers Union, a union branch of United Voices of the World. The call to action at the bottom of the pamphlet reads, “Join our fight to build a more equitable culture from below!” Accompanying this was another A4 pamphlet titled *Legal Rights of Freelance Staff, A Guide for Cultural Workers and Employers*. These publications aimed to raise awareness amongst freelancers and others working in the creative industries of their legal rights and the support available to them via the Designers and Cultural Workers Union. Ironically, however, the absence of anyone at the table left a resounding silence, and gave the impression that perhaps the union support was not so readily available after all (fig. 2).



Figure 1. Hall of BABF tables at the Whitworth, 2021. All photographs are by the author.

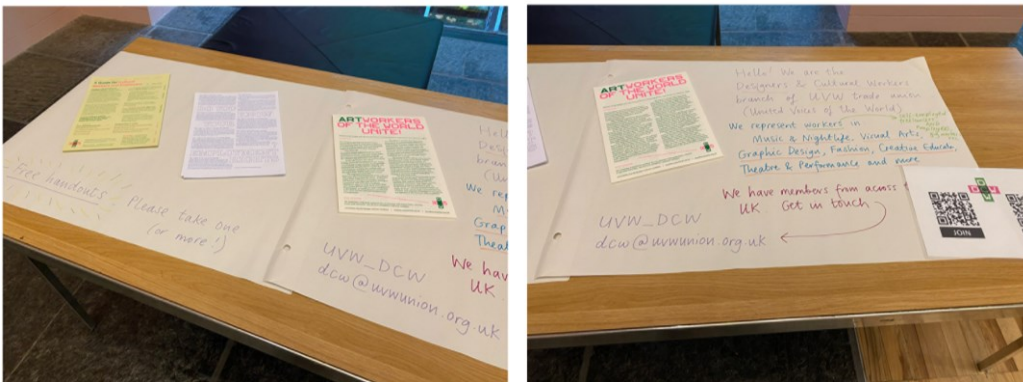


Figure 2. Table with *Art Workers of the World Unite!* leaflets, BABF 2021.

Two zines titled *Radical Bookstores* and *Radical Bookstores Part 2* offered information about radical bookshops and their locations across the UK. The zines promote independent bookshops, some of which are run on a not-for-profit model supporting the communities in which they are situated. Each zine contains a curated collection of radical bookstores with a short summary of what they provide. In *Radical Bookstores*, handwritten text describes the Lighthouse in Edinburgh, which is promoted for its function as a community space and “an amazing selection of queer, feminist and

anti-racist literature”. Cowley Club in Brighton is highlighted for being “100% volunteer-run” and “supporting grassroots projects”. In *Radical Bookstores Part 2*, typed text describes October Books, “a co-operative, radical, neighbourhood bookshop and community hub in Southampton.” Gay’s the Word in London, is highlighted as “the UK’s oldest LGBTQ bookshop, founded in 1979 by a group of gay socialists as a community space.” Thus, rather than containing their own radical or activist content, these zines provided directions about how to find that content elsewhere throughout the UK.

At another BABF table I came across Spun Press collective. According to their risograph-produced leaflet, Spun Press offers “risograph printing services, graphic design studio events & workshops.”³⁶ The London-based collective, founded in 2020, works collaboratively with artists to help publish works with “makers from working-class communities.” Their risograph services are made available at a discount for “socially conscious projects” and for creators from disadvantaged backgrounds.³⁷ I bought one of their publications, *The Red Goblin*, a risograph on rough textured sugar paper. This tongue-in-cheek publication depicts a goblin’s view of an art school, based on Camberwell Art School; the piece offers a critique of the university system, an exposé of funding flaws, and a taxonomy of the subjects taken at art school and the types of people who attend.³⁸

Another press I encountered was Occasional Papers, which describes itself as “a non-profit publisher of affordable books devoted to the histories of architecture, art, design, film and literature.” Occasional Papers showcased their focus on the design quality of the printed publication through a variety of sizes and formats.³⁹ *Natural Enemies of Books: A Messy History of Women in Printing and Typography* considers the challenges for women freelancers working from home with the mix of paid and unpaid work tasks of the domestic and professional worlds. Containing interview excerpts with four women who were formerly typesetters and a collection of essays with excerpts from the 1937 *Bookmaking on the Distaff Side*, the edited book aims to enhance our understanding of the women pioneers in the industry and their working conditions. The private press movement that resulted from women “collaborating to gain control over print production,” as well as radical

London printshops of the 1960s to the 1980s during the Women's Liberation Movement, are central topics of this book.⁴⁰

The publications found at BABF illustrate levels of community empowerment which are associated with the BABF organisers, exhibitors and attendees networks. The fact that BABF was held in Manchester emphasised the community-focused dimensions of the publications and of the event. An exhibitor based in Manchester, referring to self-publishing in the city said, "it's good we can show we can do it and it's not just happening in London." She was proud of the local exhibitors and pleased to see self-publishing in Manchester acknowledged by the institutionally hosted BABF. The fair also attracted international presenters, however. Onomatopee are an art publisher and gallery founded in 2006 by Freek Lomme in Eindhoven, Netherlands, who were collaborators for the MODUS project, the focus of an afternoon workshop I attended at BABF. Onomatopee produce transdisciplinary projects led by curators and editors.⁴¹ A statement about Onomatopee highlights the international networks of art book fairs they participate in and evidences the connections they develop among small communities through their work in a global context:

Inspired by a DIY attitude and a hunger for critical elevation, Onomatopee Projects discusses and mediates a habitual visual sanctuary of pop culture, power and other environments of visual consciousnesses alike. ...[T]hey attend many international art book fairs throughout the year and regularly organise shows abroad. Taking the hub of Eindhoven as a starting point to mount globally relevant programs of various sizes and interests, Onomatopee produces visual criticality and advocates progressive culture.⁴²

MODUS is "a platform for expanded fashion practice"⁴³. The MODUS project, developed in partnership with Onomatopee, was initiated and led by Ruby Hoette (a designer, researcher and Senior Lecturer at Goldsmiths, University of London) and Caroline Stevenson (a curator and writer based in London), in collaboration with Roland Brauchi (an artist graphic designer) and the research assistant Floriane Misslin.⁴⁴ MODUS explored experimental approaches to participating in fashion that might serve as alternatives to those

of the heavily commercialized fashion industry.⁴⁵ The workshop involved participants (myself included) deconstructing a printed copy of *MODUS* (designed as a “live provocation⁴⁶”) and then re-constructing—and “re-fashioning”—the publication using other text and images that Hoette and Stevenson provided (fig. 3). Activism was present in this workshop on two levels, both through the project’s critical stance on commercial consumerist fashion and through the active re-purposing of the publication for the workshop participants’ ends.



Figure 3. BABF MODUS workshop and my re-worked publication in process, 2021.

The print publications I encountered at BABF, similar to the MODUS workshop, involved me as a consumer and receiver, and to some degree a participant in the activist projects of the respective publishers, self-publishers, and content creators. These projects ranged from the efforts of the Designers and Cultural Workers Union to the curated presentation of radical bookstores in zines; from the community printing and publishing service that Spun Press provides to the makers in London; from the academically focused *Natural Enemies of Books: A Messy History of Women in Printing and Typography* to the active research enquiry of the MODUS workshop. My participation in the MODUS

workshop prompted me to consider fashion as a concept linked to theorising publishing practice in a similarly expanded mode. The *MODUS* website is gathering contributions from the network to develop definitions of the term ‘fashion.’ *MODUS* is also developing a glossary of terms by asking each contributor to select five verbs linked to their practice. The verb publishing for example contains contributions from people who consider fashion beyond that of a worn garment, such as a publication, text or performance.⁴⁷ Notably, at BABF, my engagement with the communities represented by and in the different zines was mediated primarily through the physical publications and not through conversations with the people behind the stands; this is in sharp contrast to my experience at the virtual HCZF. The possibility of handling or buying the publications being discussed synchronously at HCZF was absent due to the online environment, but my engagement was more strongly mediated through the presenters and the discussions that the online events inspired.

The Role of HCZF and BABF in Generating and Sustaining Creative and Self-Publishing Practices: Autoethnography and Practice as Research Approaches

The HCZF event “WIP Comics Open Day” introduced participants to a group of comic creators who meet regularly throughout the year, and who welcomed HCZF participants to join after the fair ended. In addition to being the HCZF organizer, Joe Stone also organizes WIP (Work in Progress) meetings.⁴⁸ WIP was set up in 2011 to “help aspiring artists, writers and comic creators” in the development of their projects by constructive criticism fostered in supportive discussions.⁴⁹ The group is open to anyone, and people attend with varying levels of comic making skills and experience. At the WIP session, after explaining the WIP group ethos, Stone spoke about his autobiographical comic *Stutter*, which expresses his challenges of living with a speech impediment. His presentation focused on his comic-making process, such as decisions about the size, shape, and layout of the panels for the drawings, as the organizing structure for the overall comic. The desire to make for self-expression was affirmed in this group, as was stated: “that’s what comics are good for, getting things out of your system.”⁵⁰ He also spoke about how he documents his process over time, through blog writing, video and

images, and posts on Twitter about his latest progress. We discussed online comics at the session as well, but there was a general agreement in the group that printed comics were more likely to be bought. Stone recommended a good website for printing comics.⁵¹ In all, the WIP session emphasized HCZF's efforts to support comics makers, celebrating comic formats, and individual expression. A similar focus on celebrating the comic format was apparent at the "Abstraction in Comics" event. I recognized one of the panel members as someone who had facilitated a memory poetry comic workshop I attended as part of the Glasgow Zine Festival in 2021; their presence indicated participation across a network of zine and comic events. The panelist, Gent, spoke of "comics as a form of catharsis," and said that she "[made] comics that captured a feeling." In her mind, abstraction was the perfect mode for combining images and words.⁵² These two HCZF events explored niche formats of the autobiographical comic and the memory poetry comic, celebrated the nuances of these comic formats, and enhanced their profile for wider audiences.

My own background in contemporary art practice is intertwined with my research interests in attending HCZF and BABF.⁵³ My autoethnographic approach incorporates drawing and comic and zine making in digital and print formats as observational research methods that capture emotional and visual characteristics of my experiences.⁵⁴ I developed what I call my artist-publisher-researcher methodology during my post-doctoral WiRe (Women in Research) Fellowship at the University of Münster. My project, titled, "An autoethnographic study of Artist-Publisher Activity and Artists' Book Fairs in the UK," was conducted remotely between August 2021 and April 2022. WiRe fellowships were set up to address inequality in the academy, aimed at women with caring responsibilities, with the option of part-time and full-time modes of attendance.⁵⁵ The WiRe fellowship enabled progression with my post-doctoral research and subsequent career development as a Lecturer in Publishing Studies at the University of Stirling. Thus, transnational activism underlies this research by virtue of the very way it was enabled. As a mother based in a small town in Scotland with a professional background and training as an artist, my practice-research aims to produce visual, practical, and experiential understanding of publishing practice within the context of post-digital book cultures.⁵⁶ This methodology

is underpinned by practice-based studies, theories, and approaches as outlined below.

Practice-Based Studies are receiving renewed focus, validity, and engagement from the academy. The *practice turn* is an interdisciplinary approach, acknowledging practical knowledge and rejecting Cartesian dualisms.⁵⁷ Within book studies, Wiles outlines three branches of literary anthropology.⁵⁸ These are “literary texts as ethnographic source material”; “the use of literary modes of writing ethnography [such as] the incorporation of metaphorical language and the subversion of conventional ethnographic structures to the production of fiction as ethnography”; and “the anthropological examination of literary cultural and production practices.”⁵⁹ A particular value of my autoethnographic approach and other ethnographic approaches taken within contemporary book studies is the experiential understanding it generates. Several key creative approaches to research in book studies provide methodological context for my artist-publisher-researcher approach. Most notably, Ullapoolism, “a post-data, activist, autoethnographic epistemology for contemporary book culture studies,” gave me the confidence to use my drawing practice and to incorporate publishing practice as part of my own research enquiry.⁶⁰ Wiles has employed an equally creative ethnographic approach to examine live literature, which she terms “experiential literary ethnography” and which, she explains, is “an approach to writing about experience that uses creative writing techniques to *evoke and examine* that experience, in order to reveal its cultural value.”⁶¹ Wiles uses thick description of the experience of literary events, capturing rich details of the place and interweaving them with conversations that she had to create rich ethnographies of each event.⁶² In addition, in their work on book festivals in the UK, Driscoll and Squires have undertaken creative approaches, such as making paper and card model dolls, which they describe in “Experiments with Book Festival People (Real and Imaginary),”⁶³ and designing gamified approaches to research in “Bookfestivalopoly.”⁶⁴ Similarly, Dane has used sketching instead of a camera to observe and document tote bags in her examination of the cultural value of tote bags at contemporary literary festivals.⁶⁵

For both HCZF and BABF, sketchbooks were my primary data collection tool, alongside photographs taken with my mobile phone. My sketchbooks

contain four different types of sketches and drawing: observational drawings, for example of the faces of people attending HCZF Zoom events; sketches made from memory; sketches that try to visualize something confusing or muddling; and sketches endeavouring to map or diagram relationships in my research between concepts, topics, phenomena, and theory. Amongst the sketches, I also make written notations of things to follow up or remember, comments that distill a feeling or moment, and experiments with found poetry to develop memory-poetry comics. Instagram posts are also part of my dataset. Posts include documents gathered pertaining to each fair, website and social media screenshots and photographs, which record my participation in HCZF and BABF events as well as moments of my ongoing artist-publisher-researcher practice development. Some posts published to Instagram are made through transforming sketches with the use of Canva.⁶⁶ For example, a sketch which documented my experience of “The Power of the Small Press” (fig. 4), became an Instagram post using Canva (fig. 5). Interestingly, I used a similar green colour to the HCZF branding and online content, though I was not aware of this at the time.

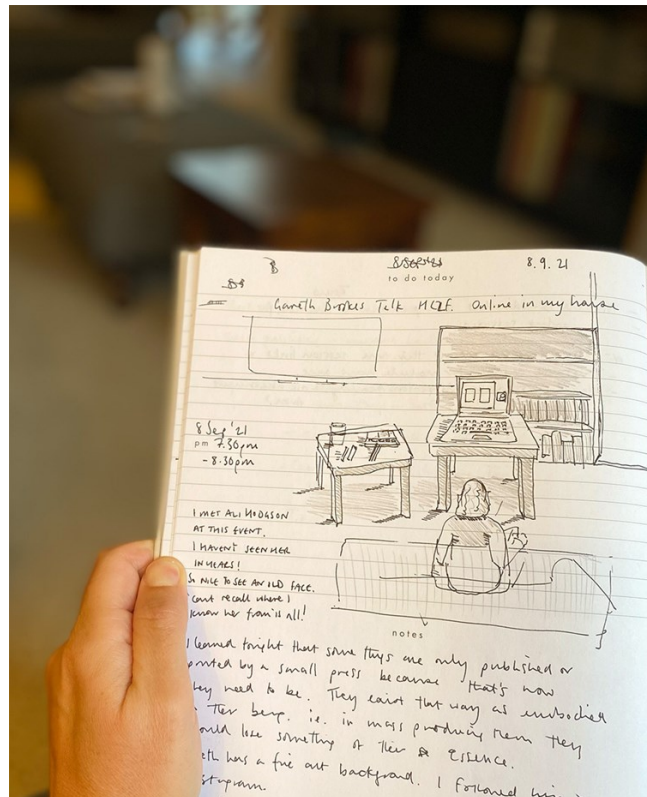


Figure 4. Sketchbook observations of “The Power of the Small Press” event, HCZF, 2021.

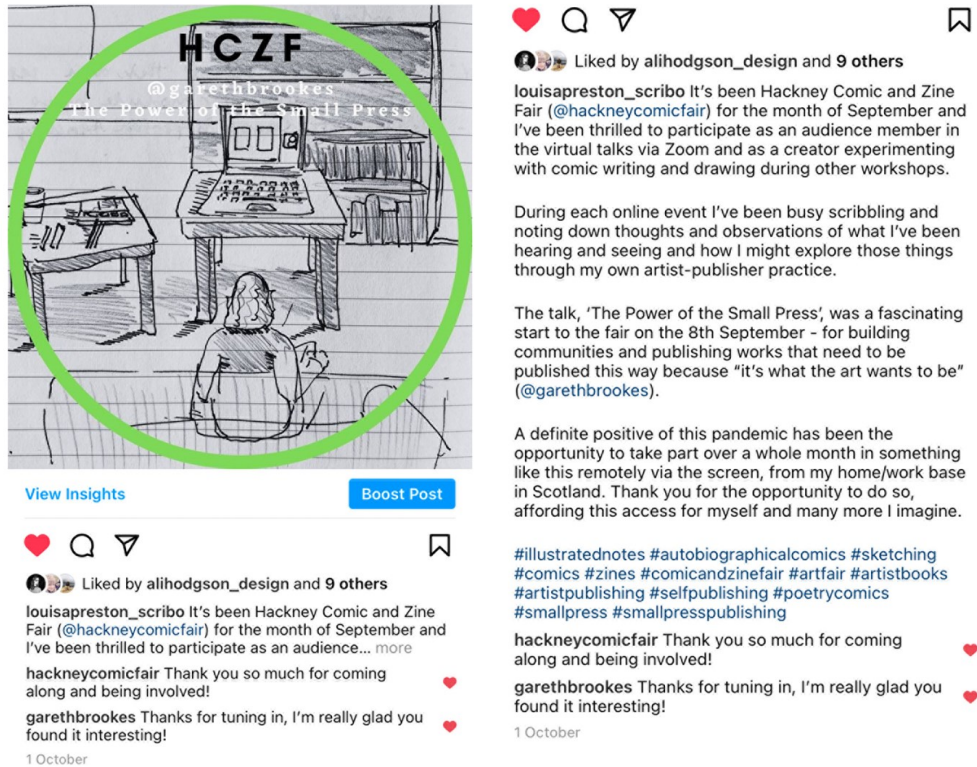


Figure 5. Instagram post, @louisapreston_scribo, HCZF and “The Power of the Small Press” event 2021.

The post thanked HCZF organizers and created an Instagram connection between us by tagging @hackneycomicfair. The significance of HCZF in providing insights for my practice and in the access it afforded me through the online nature of the events felt important to highlight on a channel that had been used throughout the fair. The timing of my post (a month after the event) represented a delayed mediatization of my experience. However, the post was not principally about showcasing my drawing, but rather aimed to contribute to and extend the conversation. Similarly, I used Instagram to connect with BABF MODUS workshop organizers. Sketchbook pages I made at the beginning of the workshop (fig. 6) formed part of an Instagram story (fig. 7). My participation in MODUS was also mediated via Instagram through Onomatopoe’s account.⁶⁷ Instagram enabled me to virtually connect with BABF participants I met in person, which gave me the opportunity to express my thanks for our discussions, and to extend our interactions beyond the timeframe of the fair.

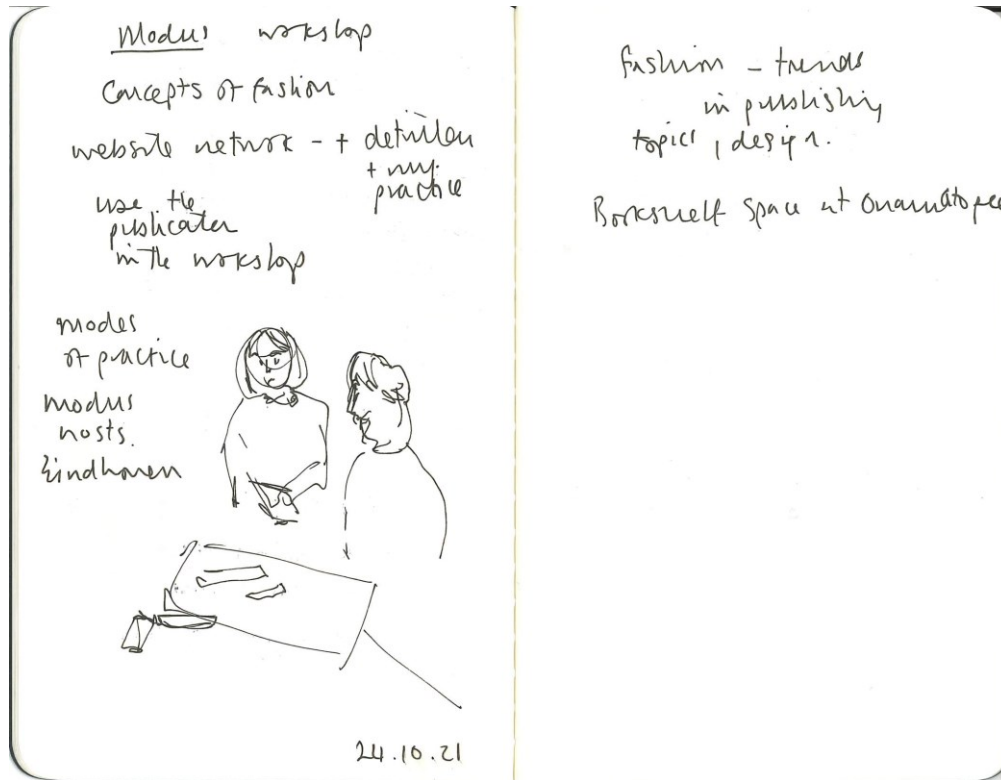


Figure 6. MODUS workshop sketch, 2021.

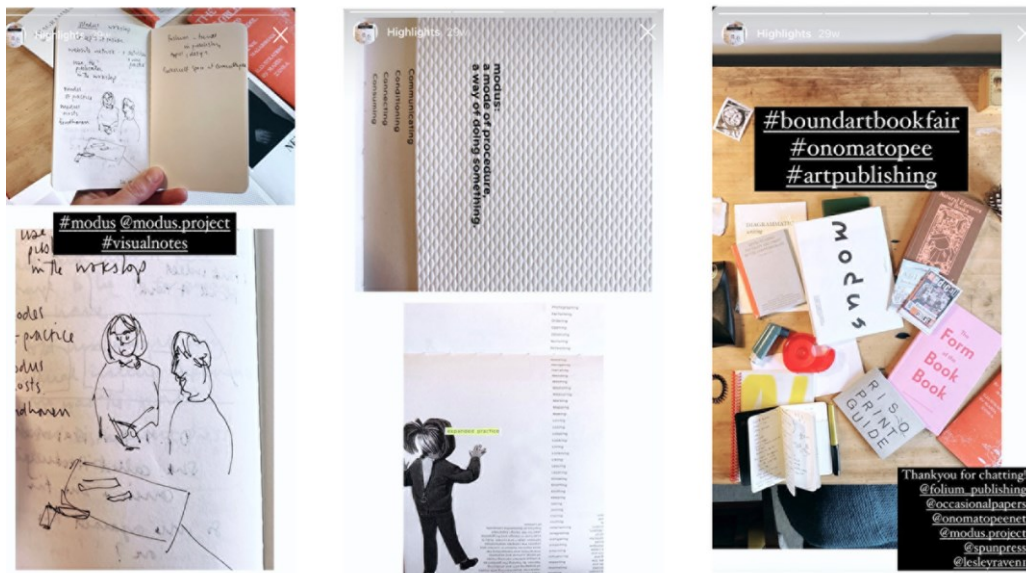


Figure 7. Instagram story I posted after BABF, 2021.



Figure 8. Memory poetry comic of BABF, 2021.

Referring to the contemporary mediated context, Thurston views self-publishing as a praxis, arguing for self-publishing and small press publishing that support “publication as a mode of public action.”⁶⁸ Current definitions of the “independent publisher” in twenty-first-century book publishing show that the term tends to encompass “locality, diversity, relationships, partnering and emotion,” all of which contribute to greater social capital for independent publishers.⁶⁹ The MODUS workshop, offered participants the MODUS publication as a tool to creatively examine ideas of fashion, design process, and practice research. This is an example of publishing as public action, distributed as part of the artists’ book fair network, and mediated via Instagram channels and networks that connect people, place and publication in interesting ways.

The publishing practice that I described earlier of my fair experiences aims to connect my work to the wider discussion and members of the community network involved. Although I published many aspects of my experience of the fairs online, some drawings (and thereby facets of my fair experiences) did not make it to Instagram, either because of timing or a lack of clarity

around the purpose of publishing them on the platform. These works are envisaged as part of an independent printed and/or website based publication, currently under development. A memory poetry comic, for example (fig. 8), expressed both internal and external elements of my BABF experience, revealing personal and emotional aspects of attending the fair in ways that words alone or photographs would not convey. Other sketchbook pages, such as fig. 9, reflecting on elements of BABF also remained unpublished. On these pages are a mix of observational illustrated research notes and fictional imaginings of connections made via Instagram.



Figure 9. BABF Reflections sketchbook pages, 2021.

I also refrained from publishing found poetry that I created while staying in Manchester to Instagram (fig. 10 and fig. 11).⁷⁰

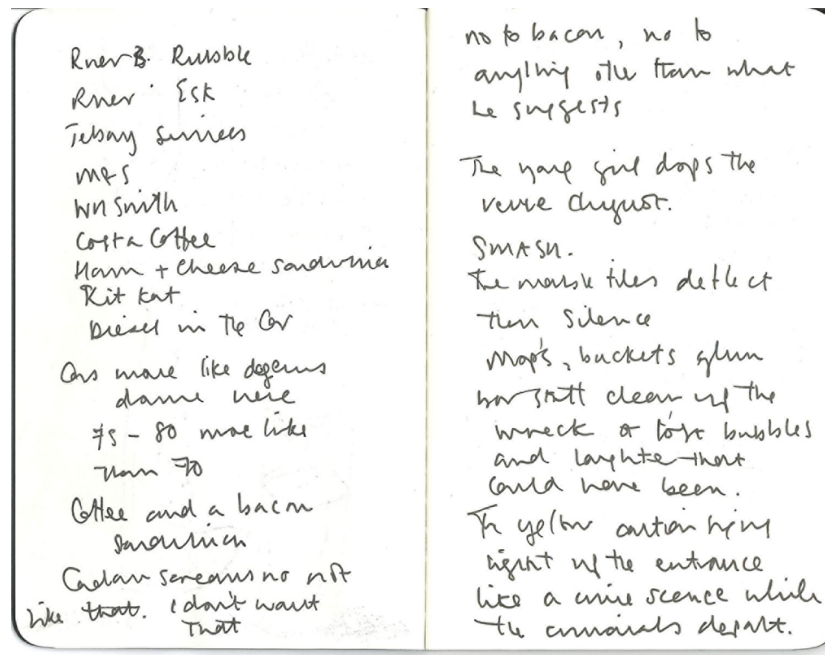


Figure 10. Sketchbook pages of found poetry made while waiting in the hotel lobby, BABF, 2021.

River Rubble	no to bacon, no to
River Esk	anything other than what
Tebay Services	he suggests
M&S	
WH Smith	The young girl drops the
Costa Coffee	Veuve Cluquot
Ham + Cheese Sandwich	SMASH
Kit Kat	The marble tiles deflect
Diesel in the Car	then silence
Cars move like dodgems down here	Mops, buckets, glum
75-80 more like	barstaff clean up the
Than 70	wreck of lost bubbles
Coffee and a bacon sandwich	and laughter that
Caelan screams no not	could have been.
like that. I don't want	The yellow caution signs
that	light up the entrance
	like a crime scene which
	the criminals depart.

Figure 11. Typed version of the found poetry shown in figure 10.

Observations of BABF that I made while sitting in the Whitworth café (fig. 12) were also not published on Instagram. The comment/slogan that I wrote, “Art Galleries are a Sanctum,” identifies the value for emotional wellbeing that art and art galleries offer by providing space and opportunity

to contemplate, consider, pause, and create. The idea of art galleries as a sanctum resonates with BABF exhibitor Onomatopee’s aims to create a “visual sanctuary” for critical discussion and engagement with ideas in publications and exhibitions (as mentioned on p. 14).⁷¹ Since I attended BABF in person, I made more sketches documenting my experience than I did at the virtual HCZF. I recorded observations of my experiences during in-between moments at BABF, in the hotel lobby, the café, or after the fair—that is, whenever the opportunity arose, in moments that were not so available to me during HCZF. This perhaps explains the feeling of “sanctuary” that I had in the moments just described.



Figure 12. Sketchbook pages made while in the Whitworth café, taking a break from conversations in the hall, BABF, 2021.

My participation at both fairs combined visual research enquiry with my interest in making stand-alone experimental works including comics, found poetry, and self-publishing in digital formats (in this case via Instagram).⁷² This developing artist-publisher-researcher practice both resists and expands existing, traditional, accepted modes of knowledge production and scholarly publication.⁷³ Research theorizing publishing as practice argues for

conceptualizing publishing “as a set of processes and practices—constitutive of all formations of writing and reading.”⁷⁴ Relevant to the intersections among visual arts, comic formats, literature, and poetry that can be found in experimental publications featured at HCZF and BABF is the claim that:

The publishable must be malleable in a range of media forms: adaptable, extractable, and/or abridgeable for newspapers, magazines, radio and the Internet. The publishable is not therefore governed exclusively by publishers or even by publishing processes. ... [T]he publishable, as a set of horizons, is conceived within a broad map of cultural and media relations.⁷⁵

The legitimization of publishing practice by those other than conventionally understood publishers situates zine- and comic-making and artist publishing activity as experienced at HCZF and BABF more squarely within these broader “horizons of the publishable.”⁷⁶

HCZF and BABF in the context of Literary Festivals, Book Fairs, and Post-Digital Book Cultures

Literary festivals, also known as writers’ festivals, book festivals, or readers’ festivals, have several common characteristics: “They take place in a specific, embodied location over a concentrated period of time and are typically annually recurrent.”⁷⁷ Book *fairs* share these characteristics, but have an emphasis on business-to-business transactions. Attendees mainly comprise publishing industry professionals gathering to exchange rights deals: this is the main difference between a book fair and a literary festival.⁷⁸ Authors attend book fairs, usually at the behest of their publisher, but not to interact with readers in the same way as interactions happen at a literary festival.⁷⁹ Despite the increasing number of literary festivals since the 1980s, academic analysis was relatively thin up until 2018.⁸⁰ A special issue by *Mémoires du livre/ Studies in Book Culture* in 2020 helped to address this gap.⁸¹ However, scholarship within this area that investigates artists’ book fairs and comic and zine fairs such as HCZF and BABF is sparse.

Since the development of Web 2.0 in 2004, the use of social media and user-generated content has rapidly developed, and literary festivals have increasingly embraced digital technologies.⁸² A surge in social media use at

literary festivals began in 2012, but well-designed and functioning websites developed by literary festivals were a requirement even before Web 2.0 for programme and location information and ticket sales functions.⁸³ As web technologies developed greater capacities for holding larger files, literary festivals began uploading recorded videos of live events and using YouTube to present festival channels.⁸⁴

Place, authorship, audience, and live events are the four key interrelated areas of “terrestrial literary festivals impacted by digital media.”⁸⁵ Place imbues the literary festival with a sense of character, since location is used to market the festival and communicate a particular atmosphere associated with the festival, such as rural, semi-rural, or urban. The location of the festival also has economic and other organizational dimensions. Balancing international guest speakers and visitors with “showcasing” the work of local participants can be challenging.⁸⁶ Digital writers’ festivals such as the Sydney Writers’ Festival (SWF) have embraced livestreaming of literary events. The Live and Local programming of events took SWF to regional areas of Australia and “undermin[ed] geographically entrenched class-based oppositions in one of the world’s most expensive cities.”⁸⁷ However, the question has been posed: does the use of digital interactions and modes of delivering literary festivals remotely erode the benefits of “geographic specificity” that has been a feature of literary festivals since they were first created?⁸⁸

The majority of HCZF was conducted remotely in 2021, but the regional name of the east London area, Hackney, remains in the title. BABF has been situated in Manchester since its inception (apart from the one online fair during the pandemic). HCZF events included a greater degree of interaction amongst transnational participants. This was a less prominent feature of the geographically situated BABF. The MODUS workshop led to a deeper level of interaction with other participants, and the opportunity to be creative together. However, HCZF online workshops and events felt more inclusive, as the Zoom platform removes the hierarchical aspect of listening to a panel in a room, where some audience members are closer to the speakers than others, effectively equalizing the quality of engagement and the intensity of the experience. My conversations also felt less superficial during the HCZF events. As research about the online aspects of festivals has shown, “digital media uptake does not diminish the relevance of literary festivals’ physicality;

rather digital technology increases readers' awareness of the affordances of both environments and facilitates more deliberate and considered involvement."⁸⁹ HCZF employed the benefits of online events to enhance accessibility for people not living in Hackney.

Seeing authors "in the flesh" and the "ritual of authentication", whereby the festival attendee can make judgements of the author in contrast to their work, is a noted and key purpose of the literary festival and the perpetuation of the literary star system.⁹⁰ Prior to Web 2.0, the author was seen as someone who attended to briefly do the publicity for the next book before retreating to their private creative process. Now, with shifts in the performance of authorship via social media, long-running public engagement results in peaks and troughs depending on the frequency of new blog posts, tweets, and Facebook or Instagram posts leading up to, during, and after a literary event.⁹¹ Today's participatory audiences are a part of "networked publics [which] seek engagement opportunities that might lead to enrichment, rather than transactional marketing communications that merely seek to attract them."⁹² My remote engagement at HCZF affirms previous conclusions that, on the one hand, digital media enables mass participation in festival events on a virtual basis but, on the other hand, foregrounds what non-metropolitan audiences are missing and thereby increases the coterie frisson of the live event.⁹³

However, the concept of literary aura does not seem to apply to HCZF and BABF; firstly, perhaps due to these fairs being young compared to the literary counterparts of Edinburgh Book Festival for example, and secondly because there was no equivalent author star appearances at either festival. For me, both HCZF and BABF generated an equivalent sense of community excitement around the live online Zoom and in-person events, albeit in their differing modes of situated engagement. This could be due to a more egalitarian curation of authors/artists presenting at each fair which stands in contrast to the "literary star system" which is perpetuated by literary festivals, as previously mentioned.⁹⁴

HCZF and BABF are minuscule in comparison to the major international book fairs of London and Frankfurt. These book fairs, which are primarily focused on the business of making money from the buying and selling of

rights, and the long-established literary festivals and writers' festivals, operate on a different level to HCZF and BABF.⁹⁵ Interestingly, the Frankfurt Book Fair introduced the Comics Centre in 2000, an area of the European publishing hall that has continued to grow year over year. This development acknowledged the “surging popularity of comics and graphic novels” but was essentially set up for “the repurposing of print-based comics material for the screen industries.”⁹⁶ HCZF and BABF, by contrast, have a focus and purpose that are more akin to those of writers' festivals or literary festivals. However, the formats and contents of the publications, as has been shown, are creative and experimental, visual, and research-oriented, and have evidenced the creators' and publishers' motivations to promote equality, diversity, and inclusion in and by different modes and degrees. My experiences of HCZF and BABF and the ways in which I represented them through the creative responses of my research methodology, alongside both fairs' focus on creative process and the social roles of publications, encapsulate resistance to conventional formats and the circuits that these are distributed within. However, by situating HCZF and BABF within the larger context of literary festivals and book fairs, this article shows that they are in a multifaceted relationship with those mainstream, commercial, and conventional publishing formats and distribution networks.

The key characteristics of the post-digital context are the do-it-yourself (DIY) sensibilities, and tensions created by resistance to commercialism and simultaneous tolerance or acceptance of it. “Post-digital” does not simply refer to a time after the disruptions of digital technologies experienced in society and throughout the publishing industry in its production and consumption practices. Rather, post-digital refers to the current ways in which we use analogue and digital technologies simultaneously, and, at the fairs, to the inclusion of non-professional DIY creation and production and resistance to commercialism. A working definition of the term states:

Post-Digital neither recognizes the distinction between old and new media, nor ideological affirmation of the one or the other. It merges old and new, often applying network cultural experimentation to analogue technologies which it re-investigates and re-uses. It tends to focus on the experiential rather than the conceptual. It looks for DIY agency outside totalitarian innovation ideology, and for

networking off big data capitalism. At the same time, it already has become commercialised.⁹⁷

With respect to literary festivals, James English reminds us that they are “instruments of *economic* as well as of communicative action.” The negative side of the economic characteristics of the literary festival is the “more-or-less exploitative deployment of symbolic capital,” which is said to happen just as much as the more culturally virtuous “exchange of ideas and the construction of reasoned consensus about art and society.”⁹⁸ Arguably, then, it is the exploitative element of festivals that HCZF and BABF organizers and participants resist. The use of Instagram, a commercial platform, by attendees and exhibitors of both fairs and their networks might complicate the idea that their publications resist mainstream conventional formats and distribution networks. However, the tensions made apparent in the above post-digital definition, of a simultaneous resistance to and complicity within commercialism, helps to explain this dynamic in the use of Instagram by HCZF and BABF attendees and organizers, who are complicit in the use of the commercial platform Instagram although they seek authorial agency, as DIY, artist- and self-publishers with non-commercial priorities.

Post-Digital Networks and Transnational Activism: Modes and Nodes of Resistance

In 2013, a marked proliferation of artists’ book fairs was acknowledged.⁹⁹ Despite the supposed “omnipresence of digital screens,” artists’ books continue to be made and distributed amongst a flurry of artists’ book fairs, which were necessary as alternative networks of distribution due to the limited outlets worldwide for these formats and modes of visual communication.¹⁰⁰ But this raises an important question about why “we continue to pursue the possibilities” of the print format.¹⁰¹ One reason posited is that artists’ books have survived and continue to proliferate due to their qualities as “resistant transmitters.”¹⁰² The resistant characteristics of artists’ books are multi-layered and their ability to communicate ideas is unique; their formats challenge strict definitions and enable them to “explore forms of knowledge transfer that go beyond the restrictions of a single artwork or written word.”¹⁰³

Common amongst post-war, avant-garde art movements connected to the development of artists' books and forms of resistance was "a belief in the liberatory and transformative power of art and a desire to communicate this conviction by non-traditional methods."¹⁰⁴ Jo Milne argues that the power of artists' books "as resistant transmitters" is most clearly seen in "artist-run distribution centres and at the fairs dedicated to artists' books."¹⁰⁵ Artists' books are described as "'mutable mobiles' in this digital age," due to "their physical and temporal qualities and their abilities to transmit and generate the exchange of ideas on multiple levels."¹⁰⁶ For example, the artist-led initiative Banner Repeater "brings attention to the role of dissemination in artists' self-publishing."¹⁰⁷ The founder has spoken of how "technologies that can now be found easily online certainly contribute to a broader activity of what it means to 'publish,'" and remarked that "post-digital publishing makes use of all available technologies [I]nterest in the conventions of printing on paper is certainly far from over."¹⁰⁸

Post-digital publishing is understood as "the expansion of digital: the second (or even third) wave of digital publishing, wherein digital and analogue book technologies exist with simultaneous relevance."¹⁰⁹ This is exemplified through photos of printed books posted to Instagram, online book reviews, and crowdfunding for niche publication projects.¹¹⁰ Developments in artist publishing around 2013, such as AND publishing, Self Publish, Be Happy, and Artists' e-books, demonstrated how "technological advancements" offered "unprecedented opportunities to the artist-self-publisher."¹¹¹ These initiatives and those of HCZF and BABF reflect a wider motivation to create alternative platforms for documentation and distribution of artists' publications linked to a history of activity in the 1970s. For example, the bookshop Other Books and So was established in 1975 in Amsterdam by Ulises Carrion, who regarded the book as a "catalyst for experimenting with the structures that govern the relations between texts, objects and images, and for trying out new avenues and forms of authorship and artist-reader participation."¹¹² The founding of Other Books and So occurred within the context of the time of artists taking responsibility for the distribution of their own publications.¹¹³ Initiatives like Other Books and So were part of a development at the time of "an international network dedicated to the exchange of works and ideas."¹¹⁴ Other Books and So also gave rise to contemporary shops such as Art Metropole and Boekie Woekie, both also

operating from Amsterdam. Motto distributes “artists’ books alongside magazines and general art books,” but it is the major distribution networks of Printed Matter, Inc (est. 1976, New York) and its imprint Book Works (est. 1984, London) that have “thrived.”¹¹⁵ However, the cost of maintaining a physical space and the possible “waning circulation of mail art” are cited as the main reasons for the rise of fairs dedicated to artists’ publications.¹¹⁶ As evidenced by BABF, artists’ book fairs “adhere to a fairly standard format, with a community of imprints and artists gathering to present their publications over one or two days, often complimented by workshops, talks and performances.”¹¹⁷ Similar to literary festivals, artists’ book fairs “function as commercial venues but also as spaces for communication.”¹¹⁸ Another reason for the rise in artists’ book fairs is the exchange of ideas and gathering of community they foster, which is more greatly valued than profitability.¹¹⁹ Since the late 1990s, artists’ book fairs have multiplied across the world, including Printed Matter’s New York Art Book Fair (est. 2004) and several “institutional fairs such as BABE, Art Libris, Singapore Art Book Fair.”¹²⁰ Notably, smaller events have also started to appear, such as Gutter Fest and PRINT.ed in Barcelona, Libros Mutantes in Madrid, and Volumes in Zurich.¹²¹ Elsewhere, an interest in print publishing for artists has been described as providing sanctuary in an increasingly controlling art world dominated by government objectives and global capitalism.¹²² Bouillis states that “in this context, publishing seems to offer an authentic, autonomous space within the art community.”¹²³ The evidence from HCZF and BABF is consistent with the idea that “artists, photographers and graphic designers have continued to show a deep interest in publishing, finding alternative routes to creating and distributing art on their own terms.”¹²⁴

Artists’ books “sit at the juncture of established practices such as literature, art, graphic design and publishing.”¹²⁵ Zines are defined as “non-commercial, nonprofessional, small-circulation magazines which their creators produce, publish and distribute themselves.”¹²⁶ A sub-category of zines are “comix,” defined as “underground comic books” that can be funny, serious, and abstract.¹²⁷ Zine creators have similar agency as those who produce artists’ books. “Zines,” whose name is a shortened form of the word “magazines,” have their origins in “fanzines,” which first emerged in the 1930s among fans of science fiction, and later gained popularity with 1970s fans of punk rock.¹²⁸ Going even further back, the activist beginnings in Britain of the zine are

rooted in the radical pamphlet.¹²⁹ Zines focus on a range of subject matter, commonly topics on the outskirts of mainstream society and culture.¹³⁰ Historical links to science fiction authors with strong aims for political change are noted with regard to the legacy of activist zine making.¹³¹ The political aspects of zines may not be universal, but zines are known to provide “a safe place in which to test out new ideas and to imagine a different way of doing things.”¹³² In expressing their thoughts and ideas with each other, zinesters create networks which address underrepresented topics. These networks combine technologies developed by and for commercialized society, such as the mail system and photocopiers, and “steer the use of these technologies towards non-profit, communitarian ends.”¹³³ Zines are also recognized for their links to gift culture, fostering “intimate, affectionate connections between their creators and readers, ... *embodied* communities that are made possible by the materiality of the zine medium.”¹³⁴

HCZF and BABF are situated at the crossroads of these historical artists’ books, comix and zine making, and their networks of distribution, layered alongside the traditional publishing industry. In a wider context of resistance within the fiction publishing sector, a growing subset of authors and readers are creating and discovering digital forms and distribution networks that circumnavigate the traditional gatekeepers of the industry.¹³⁵ As noted earlier in the vignette of the HCZF event “The Power of the Small Press,” these current trends in book-making echo the efforts of eighteenth-century citizen authors, who were “actively disrupting the publishing model of the time by defining the book as suited their work.”¹³⁶ Contemporary citizen authors use social media to write and publish in order to “actively step outside the traditional industry’s model and provide content, rather than a book, directly to readers in digital spaces.”¹³⁷ Consequently, citizen authors actively resist the systematic hierarchies in the publishing industry.¹³⁸ This is why they create their own networks and platforms to distribute artist publications, as evidenced in the experiences of HCZF and BABF. Their desire for agency is also apparent in the element of control that artist-self-publishers have taken and take in distributing their work.

A stallholder at BABF referred to HCZF as a “self-organized” fair. This comment struck me as one which implied a hierarchy of book fairs in the field of small press and self-publishing, and which seemed to suggest that HCZF

was situated below BABF in that hierarchy, despite HCZF having high-profile fair partners such as Arts Council England. Driscoll and Squires show the ways in which hierarchies within the global publishing industry manifest for example at the Frankfurt Book Fair.¹³⁹ Similarly, HCZF and BABF seem to be situated amongst hierarchies of fairs within the small press, artist- and self-publishing field. In addition—in terms of transnational activism and post-digital networks—small-presses, independent publishers, self-publishers and citizen authors are operating in HCZF and BABF networks which both interact with and resist larger publishing industry fairs and the publishing industry that they serve.

Conclusions

The transnational activism that I have explored at micro and macro levels throughout this article resides in the resistance to standard formats of the written word that form the traditional publishing industry and associated worldwide distribution networks. HCZF and BABF were established to celebrate artists' experimental publications: the zine, memory-poetry-comic, and one-page comic most notably. The "power of the small press" (to use a title from a HCZF event) and of self-publishing were celebrated at both fairs, not for selling thousands of copies but for producing and celebrating creative and experimental publication formats and content. As Gareth Brookes said, "it's what the art wants to be, small press published." In seeking alternative distribution networks and creating their own networks through their publications, institutional and independent fair organizers, creators, self-publishers, artist-publishers, and small press publishers carve out a place for their work, their ideas, and their forms of expression that stand in tension with or are opposed to those of their literary counterparts, such as the London and Frankfurt Book Fairs. In other words, this article has argued, HCZF and BABF exist within post-digital networks of artist publishing and self-publishing in a complex dynamic with their mainstream counterparts, and which are transnationally activist. The experiential aspects, the degree of community empowerment, and the desire for inclusivity have been explored and illuminated in this paper, in addition to the roles that HCZF and BABF play in supporting creative practice and personal autonomy in a larger book publishing context.

My scholarly approach, incorporating creative practice in the form of a visual and emotive enquiry in modes of experimental publication both resists and expands existing norms of scholarship. My focus in this paper on the experiences of the fair in terms of emotional and economic resources required at some personal expense highlights the sacrifices that attendees make when pursuing their work and modes of expression. This is particularly true when their motivations are deeply connected to finding a voice and being heard at artists' book fairs and comic and zine fairs such as HCZF and BABF. Fairs such as HCZF and BABF amplify their voices. Small in scale, HCZF and BABF nonetheless contribute to larger mechanisms of the publishing industry and will, though this might be idealistic, influence the more exploitative aspects of it for the better, at least if complemented by continued activated scholarship participating in and examining the impacts of emerging developments in post-digital book cultures.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTICE

Louisa Preston recently conducted an autoethnographic study of artist-publisher activity and artists' book fairs in the UK as a WiRe Women in Research Fellow in Book Studies at Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität, Münster, Germany. She is Lecturer in Publishing Studies at the University of Stirling, Scotland. Louisa was awarded her PhD in Post-Digital Audience Engagement Activity in and across Visual Arts and Publishing from the Centre for International Publishing and Communication, University of Stirling and the School of Management, University of St Andrews in 2019. Her thesis illuminated complex and transforming relationships between publishers, cultural organisations, and their audiences, reinforcing and enhancing our understanding of the place and role of publishing amongst other cultural mediums in the post-digital age. She graduated from the MLitt in Publishing Studies at the University of Stirling in 2012. She also completed the M.F.A and B.A (Hons) in Fine Art at DJCAD, University of Dundee in 2008 and 2004 respectively.

Notes

- ¹ “Joe Stone Info,” Joe Stone, accessed April 8, 2022, <https://www.joe-stone.co.uk/info>.
- ² Andy Oliver, ‘Looking Back at Hackney Comic + Zine Fair 2019 - Joe Stone’s Triumphant Day of Comics Community Is One We’ll Be Remembering for a Long Time to Come.’, Broken Frontier Exploring the Comics Universe, 9 September 2019, <https://www.brokenfrontier.com/hackney-comic-zine-fair-joe-stone-hczf/>.
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¹⁶ “Bound Art Book Fair 2020 / Hypertext,” Bound Art Book Fair, accessed August 22, 2022, <https://boundartbookfair.co.uk/archive/2020>. Hypertext ran 24 hours a day on 28 and 29 November 2020. Organizers decided “to create an online event in 2020 in order to support [their] community in [a] time of crisis, and drive revenue to artists and publishers.” Hypertext exhibitors were showcased on the BABF webpage, and a programme of events was held online. Panel discussions, lectures, slideshows, and site-specific presentations were all co-programmed with a focus on selecting new works, works-in-progress or events that provided “innovative ways to present publications in the digital space.” Events were live-streamed within the now-closed hypertext.fun website and via the BABF Instagram account that year. Sable Radio also featured exhibitors.

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- ³¹ Ibid.
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- ³⁴ Brigid Alverson, “Mariko Tamaki Debuts New LGBTQ+ Graphic Novel Imprint,” *Publishers Weekly* (November 3, 2021), <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/comics/article/87790-mariko-tamaki-debuts-new-lgbtq-graphic-novel-imprint.html>.
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⁵⁵ “WiRe Application New Postdoc Fellowship Call out Now!” WWU Münster, accessed October 26, 2022, <https://www.uni-muenster.de/forschung/en/wissenschaftler/wire/index.html>.

⁵⁶ Louisa Preston’s Instagram, accessed October 28, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/louisapreston_scribo/. Experimental publications are posted to Instagram, with initial posts made during 2020 and 2021 around Covid-19 lockdowns. The increased time available to document, express and thereby process my feelings of isolation, and the challenges of that time, is a notable aspect of initial posts.

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⁵⁸ Ellen Wiles, “Three Branches of Literary Anthropology: Sources, Styles, Subject Matter,” *Ethnography* 21, no. 2 (March 2020): 280–295, [doi:10.1177/1466138118762958](https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138118762958).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 281.

⁶⁰ Beth Driscoll and Claire Squires, “The Epistemology of Ullapoolism: Making Mischief from within Contemporary Book Cultures,” *Angelaki Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 25, no. 5 (September 2020): 137–155, [doi:10.1080/0969725X.2020.1807147](https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2020.1807147).

⁶¹ Ellen Wiles, *Live Literature: The Experience and Cultural Value of Literary Performance Events from Salons to Festivals* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan), 186.

⁶² *Ibid.*

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⁶⁵ Alexandra Dane, “Cultural Capital as Performance: Tote Bags and Contemporary Literary Festivals,” *Mémoires du livre, Studies in Book Culture* 11, no. 2 (June 2020), [doi:10.7202/1070270ar](https://doi.org/10.7202/1070270ar).

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⁶⁷ Onomatopée’s Instagram, accessed October 24, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/onomatoppeenet/>.

⁶⁸ Nick Thurston, “The Publishing Self: The Praxis of Self-Publishing in a Mediatized Era,” in *The Contemporary Small Press: Making Publishing Visible*, ed. Georgina Colby, Kaja Marczevska and Leigh Wilson (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2021): 136.

⁶⁹ Rachel Noorda, “The Discourse and Value of Being an Independent Publisher,” *Mémoires du livre, Studies in Book Culture* 10, no. 2 (June 2019): 20, [doi:10.7202/1060971ar](https://doi.org/10.7202/1060971ar).

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⁷³ Research outputs produced with my artist-publisher-researcher methodology may be further refined in future engagement with research that has explored these questions, “The Academic Book of the Future, Research Questions,” Samantha Rayner, Nick Canty, Marilyn Deegan, Simon Tanner and Rebecca Lyons, last modified June 2015, <https://academicbookfuture.org/about-the-project/research-questions/>. Regarding scholarly publication and accepted forms of knowledge production, The Academic Book of the Future examined the effects of “changes in the nature of research, the research environment, the research process” on the purpose, process, impact, accessibility, and value proposition of the academic book cited from primary research questions of the project.

⁷⁴ Rachel Malik, “Horizons of the Publishable: Publishing in/as Literary Studies,” *ELH* 75, no. 3 (Fall, 2008): 707, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27654631>.

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⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Simone Murray, *The Digital Literary Sphere: Reading, Writing and Selling Books in the Internet Era* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2018), 83.

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⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

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⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Murray, *The Digital Literary Sphere: Reading, Writing and Selling Books in the Internet Era*, 92.

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⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

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⁹³ Murray, *The Digital Literary Sphere: Reading, Writing and Selling Books in the Internet Era*, 110.

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¹⁰⁴ Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists’ Books*, 2nd ed., (New York: Granary Books, 2004), 69–70.

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¹¹⁵ Milne “Artists’ Books as Resistant Transmitters.”

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Appendix

Examples of memory-poetry comics published on Instagram since 2020, [@louisapreston_scribo](https://www.instagram.com/louisapreston_scribo).

Figure 1. Hall of BABF tables at the Whitworth, 2021. All photographs are by the author.



Figure 2. Table with *Art Workers of the World Unite!* leaflets, BABF 2021.

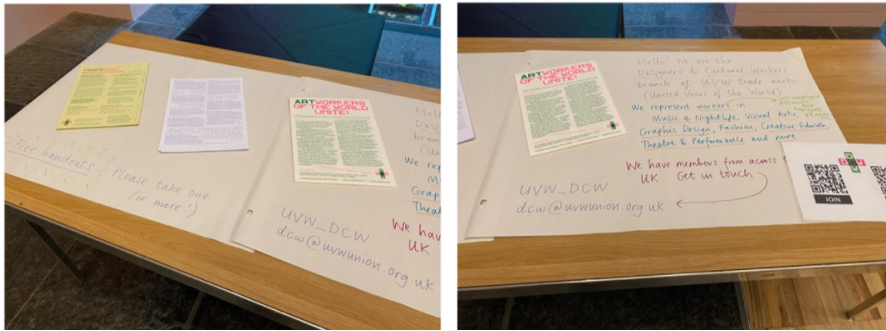


Figure 3. BABF MODUS workshop and my re-worked publication in process, 2021.

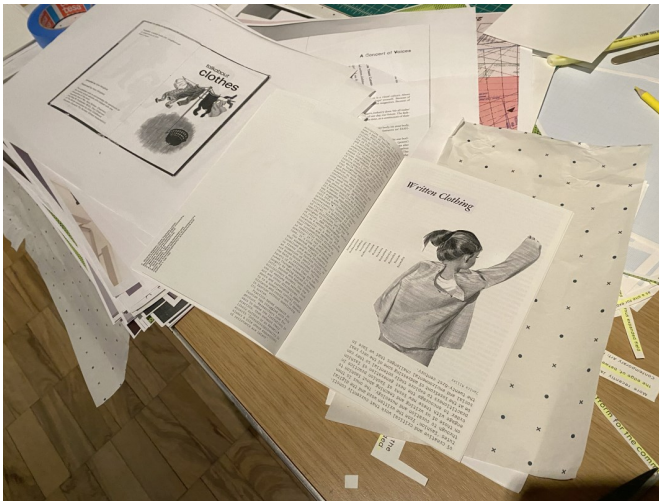


Figure 4. Sketchbook observations of “The Power of the Small Press” event, HCZF, 2021.

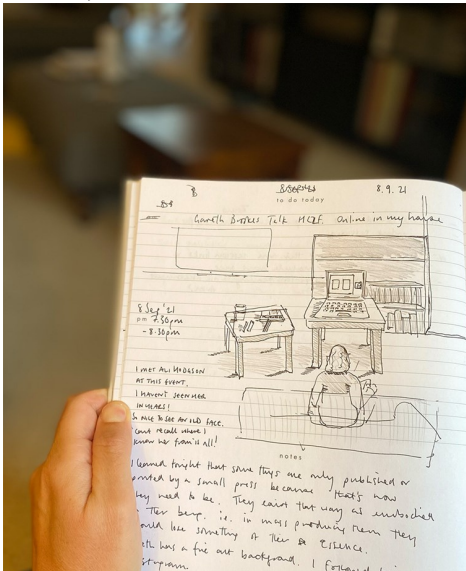


Figure 5. Instagram post, @louisapreston_scribo, HCZF and “The Power of the Small Press” event 2021.



View Insights

Boost Post



Liked by alihodgson_design and 9 others

louisapreston_scribo It's been Hackney Comic and Zine Fair (@hackneycomicfair) for the month of September and I've been thrilled to participate as an audience... more

hackneycomicfair Thank you so much for coming along and being involved! ❤️

garethbrookes Thanks for tuning in, I'm really glad you found it interesting! ❤️

1 October



Liked by alihodgson_design and 9 others

louisapreston_scribo It's been Hackney Comic and Zine Fair (@hackneycomicfair) for the month of September and I've been thrilled to participate as an audience member in the virtual talks via Zoom and as a creator experimenting with comic writing and drawing during other workshops.

During each online event I've been busy scribbling and noting down thoughts and observations of what I've been hearing and seeing and how I might explore those things through my own artist-publisher practice.

The talk, 'The Power of the Small Press', was a fascinating start to the fair on the 8th September - for building communities and publishing works that need to be published this way because "it's what the art wants to be" (@garethbrookes).

A definite positive of this pandemic has been the opportunity to take part over a whole month in something like this remotely via the screen, from my home/work base in Scotland. Thank you for the opportunity to do so, affording this access for myself and many more I imagine.

#illustratednotes #autobiographicalcomics #sketching #comics #zines #comicandzinefair #artfair #artistbooks #artistpublishing #selfpublishing #poetrycomics #smallpress #smallpresspublishing

hackneycomicfair Thank you so much for coming along and being involved! ❤️

garethbrookes Thanks for tuning in, I'm really glad you found it interesting! ❤️

1 October

Figure 6. MODUS workshop sketch, 2021.

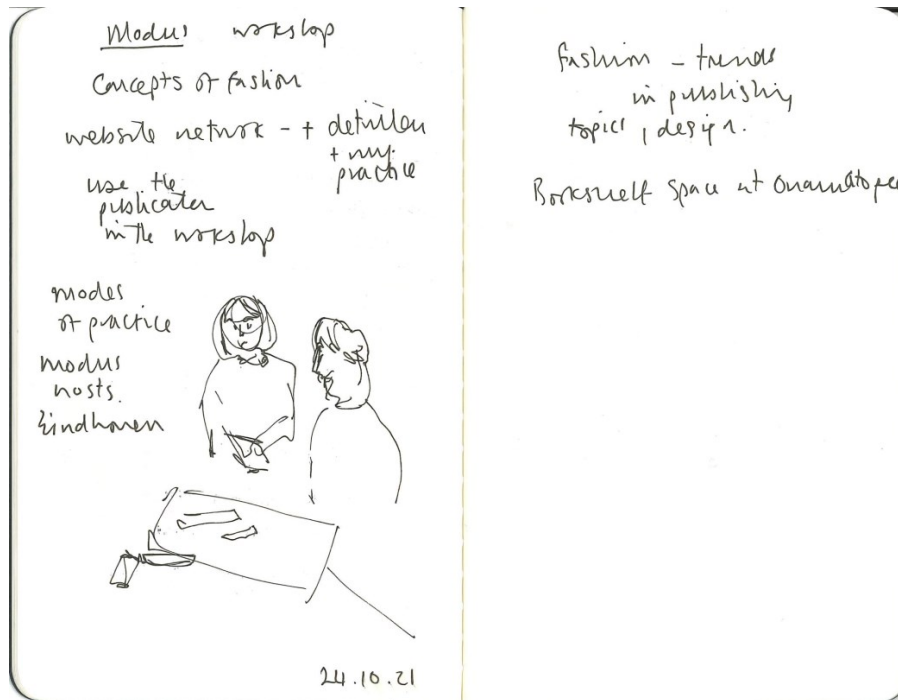


Figure 7. Instagram story I posted after BABF, 2021.

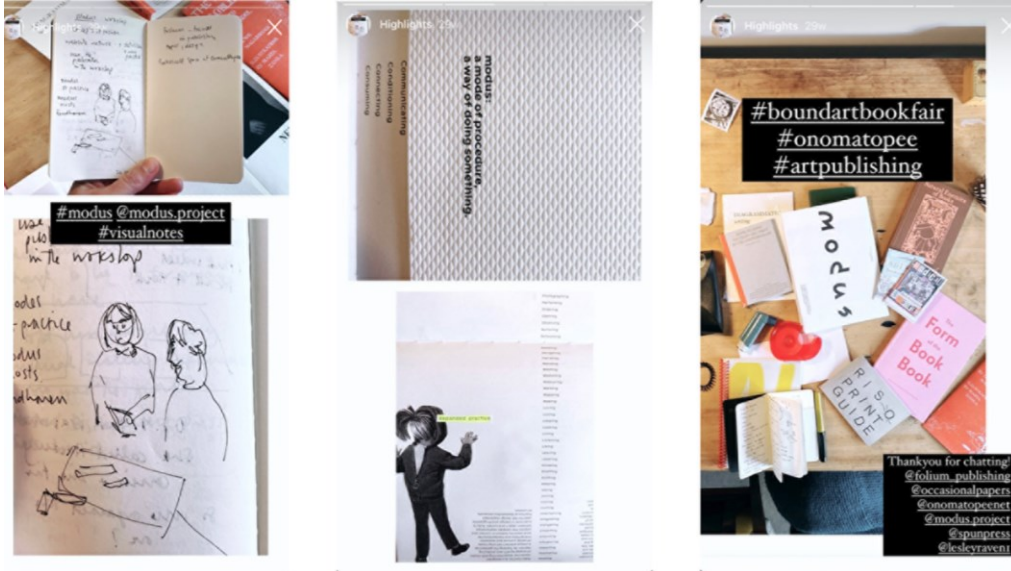


Figure 8. Memory poetry comic of BABF, 2021.



Figure 9. BABF Reflections sketchbook pages, 2021.



Figure 10. Sketchbook pages of found poetry made while waiting in the hotel lobby, BABF, 2021.

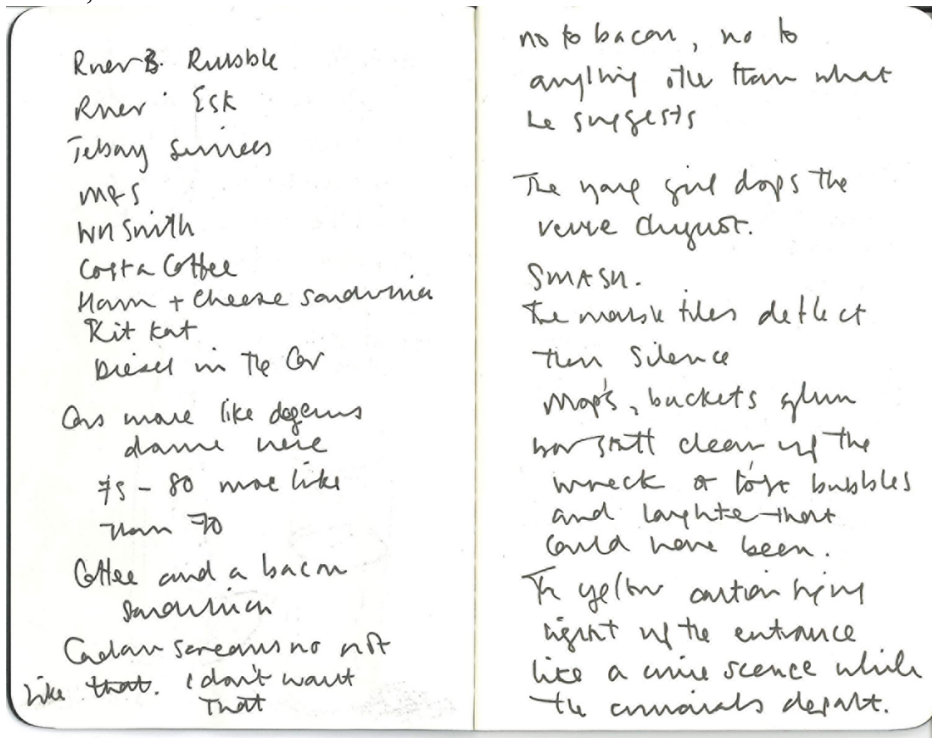


Figure 11. Typed version of the found poetry shown in figure 10.

River Rubble	no to bacon, no to
River Esk	anything other than what
Tebay Services	he suggests
M&S	
WH Smith	The young girl drops the
Costa Coffee	Veuve Cluquot
Ham + Cheese Sandwich	SMASH
Kit Kat	The marble tiles deflect
Diesel in the Car	then silence
Cars move like dodgems down here	Mops, buckets, glum
75–80 more like	barstaff clean up the
Than 70	wreck of lost bubbles
Coffee and a bacon sandwich	and laughter that
Caelan screams no not	could have been.
like that. I don't want	The yellow caution signs
that	light up the entrance
	like a crime scene which
	the criminals depart.

Figure 12. Sketchbook pages made while in the Whitworth café, taking a break from conversations in the hall, BABF, 2021.



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