

Activism in the International Geography of Books: Small Publishing Houses from Argentina at the 2020 Virtual Frankfurt Book Fair

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Article abstract

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ACTIVISM IN THE INTERNATIONAL GEOGRAPHY OF BOOKS: Small Publishing Houses from Argentina at the 2020 Virtual Frankfurt Book Fair

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ABSTRACT

International Book Fairs are vital for the international geography of books and allow the researcher to observe the relations of domination and the defiant practices that shape book production. This article draws on a survey and in-depth interviews with small publishing houses from Argentina to analyze their participation in the 2020 Virtual Frankfurt Book Fair, and complements this data with an online observation of the fair. While Argentine history is rich with cases of publishers closely related to politics, we pose the question on the forms activism adopts in the twenty-first century. This analysis engages in current debates on the links between publishing and politics, centers and peripheries, power dynamics, and on how these phenomena shift in the virtual sphere. This participation is theorized as activism practices, i.e. (i) resistance from dominant practices, (ii) an enthusiastic approach to the virtual sphere, and (iii) cooperation and reliance on institutions.

RÉSUMÉ

Les foires internationales du livre sont centrales pour la géographie internationale du livre et permettent au chercheur d'observer à la fois les rapports de domination et les pratiques de provocation qui façonnent la production du livre. Cet article s'appuie sur une enquête et des entretiens en profondeur avec des petites maisons d'édition argentines pour analyser leur participation à la Foire virtuelle du livre de Francfort de 2020, et complète ces données par une observation en ligne de la foire. L'histoire argentine regorge d'exemples d'éditeurs étroitement liés au politique, et cet article analyse l'activisme au xxi^e siècle. Cette analyse s'inscrit dans les débats actuels sur les rapports entre l'édition et la politique, entre centres et périphéries, les

dynamiques de pouvoir, et sur ces phénomènes dans l'espace virtuel. L'article définit cette participation comme des pratiques d'activisme, c'est-à-dire : (i) résistance des pratiques dominantes, (ii) approche enthousiaste de la sphère numérique, et (iii) coopération et appui d'institutions.

Keywords

Activism, International Geography of Books, Small Publishing Houses, Argentina, Virtual Sphere, Frankfurt Book Fair

Mots-clés

Activisme, Géographie internationale du livre, Petites maisons d'édition, Argentine, Espace virtuel, Foire du livre de Francfort

Introduction

In 2020, most governments imposed restrictions on movement and travel due to the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in various limitations on economic activity that affected, among others, the global publishing industry. Bookstores and printing houses had to close, paralyzing the supply chain, but at the same time lockdowns spurred the digitalization process aimed at replacing face-to-face practices in what Roger Chartier called a “*tiempo del todo digital*.”¹ Faced with the need to postpone activities, some major events in publishing shifted online, including the Frankfurt Book Fair (FBF), which decided to offer an online edition with the motto “The Fair Is Wherever You Are.”

Recent studies have highlighted the importance of translations in the consecration process, attesting to the internationalization of the literary field in which all previous authorities (publishers, critics, journals, literary prizes, among others) participate without questioning the separation between domestic and foreign literature.² In this geography, international book fairs play a fundamental role. Given that they constitute a microcosm of the book industry, they are particularly relevant spaces to analyze the publishing field³—and particularly the FBF, due to its international centrality and its receptiveness to novelties.⁴ Considering the crisis the industry was suffering in the midst of the pandemic, the 2020 Virtual Frankfurt Book Fair (VFBF) offered exhibitors free registration. This entailed a promising opportunity for

small publishing houses, which cannot afford the usual expenses of either travel or registration fees.

The present article will focus on the practices of small publishing houses from Argentina that participated in the 2020 VFBF. Our analysis focuses on the relations of domination that shape international book fairs and on the practices of small publishing houses from the peripheries of the international geography of books. The present case is particularly relevant because 2020 marks the tenth anniversary since Argentina became the guest of honor at the 2010 FBF, the year of the Argentina Bicentennial. In 2009, numerous small publishing houses self-identified as independent had organized an event at the National Library of Buenos Aires called “*Rumbo a Frankfurt.*”⁵ While no financial aid was extended to foster this enthusiasm, the number of publishing houses from Argentina that participated in the 2010 FBF grew.⁶ Given that a continuous presence at these events is key for small publishing houses seeking to engage the global industry,⁷ the 2020 VFBF offers an opportunity to analyze how the participation of Argentina evolved. The 2020 edition allows us (i) to explore hierarchies, power dynamics, resistance and disruptive practices; (ii) to analyze the conditions that enable small publishing houses to enter dominant areas of the publishing industry; and (iii) to examine the ways these issues may shift in the virtual sphere. This article draws on a survey and in-depth interviews with small publishing houses, and complements this data with an online observation of the Fair.

The discussion centres first on the conceptualization of practices of the abovementioned small publishing houses as disruptive, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s framework, and as cooperative, as proposed by Bourdieu’s critics. Second, the focus turns to the underexplored notion of activism, which scholarly discussion usually relates solely to the support of a political or social cause. This article argues that the participation of small publishing houses in dominant areas of the publishing industry constitute activism practices, which involve three dimensions: (i) resistance from dominant practices; (ii) an enthusiastic approach to the virtual sphere; and (iii) cooperation and reliance on institutions. In conclusion, our work opens questions on democratization and bibliodiversity, entailing not only diversity of output but also diversity of the books that are noticed, purchased and read—i.e., that circulate.⁸

International Book Fairs, Power Dynamics, and Activism from the Peripheries

Existing scholarly literature has established that analysis of international book fairs and their oppositions, contradictions, and ambivalences offers productive ground for theoretical debates concerning book production and contemporary society and culture.⁹ This article builds on the concept of fairs as spaces of economic and cultural negotiation,¹⁰ fenced by gatekeepers,¹¹ to enhance a sociological understanding of literary mediations, observe the internationalization of the field of publishing, and identify the social practices leaving traces in books through selection, marking, and reception.¹²

The field of publishing studies offers a body of work on the FBF that covers its history,¹³ the circulation of writers,¹⁴ the place occupied by genres and types of books,¹⁵ and the figure of the guest of honor.¹⁶ Since the 1950s, the FBF has been the biggest international book fair in terms of the number of countries, visitors, and events involved, but also in its symbolic weight.¹⁷ The FBF is “a pilgrimage to a holy place for a faithful believer,” even for peripheral publishers who are minuscule compared to the Fair’s own organizational bureaucracy and global prevalence.¹⁸ The FBF impacts media and the perception of national literatures,¹⁹ which is relevant for peripheral or semi-peripheral cultures, such as the one the present study delves into. The latter seek a type of recognition opposed to market logics, which are dominated by Anglophone markets,²⁰ and resort to practices of cultural otherness to gain visibility.²¹ The FBF’s practice of including a country as a guest of honour is an opportunity for just this kind of visibility, as the FBF devotes a specific stand to the guest of honour to promote and display its production and culture, and foster the creation of programs to subsidize translations.²²

This leads to the article exploring, in the second place, the tensions and power dynamics operating at international fairs. One dimension of these power dynamics is the relative international power of languages: “‘hypercentral’ English is followed by two central languages, German and French... followed by several semi-central languages (Russian, Spanish, Italian, Swedish), each of which account for between one and three percent.”²³ Even with the growth in international exchange and communication, regional structural inequalities

survive.²⁴ While Spanish is semi-central, for example, Argentine literature is peripheral in relation to the central place of Spain for book production in Spanish²⁵ and for the orientation of the Argentine book industry towards the domestic market.²⁶ Another factor in the power dynamics of book fairs is the relative size and character of publishing companies. The case study of this article features small publishing houses that have emerged since the 1990s, enabled by technological advances, and are opposed to the concentration and foreignization of the industry. They are very different in character from transnational conglomerates that acquire local and family-run publishing houses and promote successful but ephemeral products and quick sales as opposed to long-term investments. While these multinational companies represent the majority of the income of this sector, small publishing houses explain the growing amount of new releases.²⁷ The latter share characteristics: small structures, a small amount of books published per year, carefully built catalogues including unpublished authors, the advocacy of causes such as bibliodiversity and the organization of their own events and professional associations.²⁸ Some of these projects were born closely related to social and political movements,²⁹ steeped in a rich history of publishers with literary and political commitment.³⁰

Specialized literature on the international geography of books shares this literary and political commitment, and seeks to become “a sort of critical weapon in the service of all deprived and dominated writers on the periphery of the literary world.”³¹ Recent studies have critically rethought the conceptualization of peripheral agents as rupture, prioritizing instead the concept of friendliness and highlighting the strategies of cooperation.³² The present analysis revisits the concept of practices of disruption as activism to explore their ambiguous and complex nature. Studies on activism and book production have focused on the relation between political movements and writers and works,³³ catalogues, and publishers, including questions on the tension between autonomy and heteronomy,³⁴ and on how print and book production have acted as vehicles for activists to spread their opinions, elicit support, and build identities.³⁵ Recently, activism in the art world has been defined as opposed to institutions,³⁶ such as the FBF. However, Latin American scholars have warned how definitions may become “corsets”—i.e. prescriptive instead of analytical.³⁷ Thus, for example, activist art of the

mid-1990s in Argentina defended the right to both oppose the dominant logic of art institutions and inhabit them.³⁸

Our analysis adopts a relational lens that draws on studies that define activism practices through the dynamics that they resist and challenge.³⁹ Given the forces of deterritorialization that rule the international field of publishing, its festivalization and spectacularization, and the power of specialized international gatekeepers,⁴⁰ activist practices that challenge these dominant dynamics entail anti neoliberal actions and standpoints,⁴¹ such as “the book in movement.”⁴² Activism is here defined through two main dimensions of analysis. Firstly, we consider the positions of the actors involved and their power dynamics, for which the FBF is a relevant empirical referent because it serves as a map of the forces governing the market of books,⁴³ displaying its structural inequalities and centre-periphery dynamics.⁴⁴ Secondly, we attend to the symbolic dimension and the perceptions of agents, articulated as “buzz,” hope,⁴⁵ the management of ideas,⁴⁶ and the tournament of values,⁴⁷ all of which are vital to the workings of the Fair given that two main states exist at the FBF: “as market-ready reports in the mainstream media, and as soft, partial, lived experiences at the Fair.”⁴⁸

Lastly, this article considers the virtual sphere. While the Fair has been implementing virtual tools for years,⁴⁹ its physical space has been the far more important dimension of analysis because it objectifies the power relations that shape the Fair.⁵⁰ The most financially powerful sectors (with multinational and multilingual pavilions) receive the highest density of human traffic, professional exchanges, and visibility at the Fair.⁵¹ The virtual edition of the FBF prompts the question of how these hierarchies transform and are challenged when that physical space is displaced. Scholars have deemed a future domination of the virtual sphere as variously implausible,⁵² the cause for new challenges and hierarchies,⁵³ and providing the opportunity to erode traditional gatekeeper roles.⁵⁴ Recent studies of online book fairs during the COVID-19 pandemic approached their subject from the viewpoint of consumers.⁵⁵ The present analysis delves into the experience of publishing houses and their enthusiastic but ambiguous relation with the virtual sphere. Publishers are deeply informed of the book industry, and their reflexivity allows us to address questions about the limitations and opportunities that the virtual sphere offers to book production.

Method and Data

This article draws on a survey and in-depth interviews with publishers from small publishing houses from Argentina, and complements this data with an online observation of the 2020 VFBF. Exhibitors at the FBF are various agents in the field of publishing, including literary agencies, printing houses, suppliers of sales and production services, bookstores, among others. Our focus is on the participation of Argentine publishing houses (as identified through the exhibitor directory). 55 of them participated, which we have grouped as (i) national and small- or medium-sized publishing houses, (ii) local branches of international companies, and (iii) university presses. We study the first group.

The online observation of the 2020 VFBF allowed us to map and describe the platform and its tools in order to inform the questions of the survey and the interviews. We browsed the website, and created user accounts to explore the directory and platforms such as the Matchmaking Tool and the Frankfurt Rights Platform. We followed the live programme (October 12 to 18, 2020), the digital Bookfest (October 17, 2020), and various sessions of The Hof via Zoom. One of the principles of virtual ethnography poses the problem of deciding when to stop, and highlights that the virtual space is “achieved and sustained in the ways in which it is used, interpreted and reinterpreted.”⁵⁶ A survey was included to explore these interpretations.

First, we drafted a set of open- and closed-ended questions administered through Google Form and sent to the 55 publishing houses. The questions delved into the size of the publishing house and degree of internationalization (if and how frequently they have participated in international fairs and in the sale or purchase of rights) and their experience at the 2020 VFBF. We received 10 survey responses. The publishing houses represented in our data share two characteristics: (i) they had participated in international fairs and had experience in the trade of international rights, and (ii) they were young — only one was created before 1992, and 60% since the 2000s — with small structures — fewer than 15 people work in 90% of them, and 60% publish between one and ten new titles per year. This led us to conceptualize them as internationalized small publishing houses.

The last and main step of the data collection consisted of follow-up in-depth interviews with five of the publishers, three of which are included in the EcoEdit map (see n. 8) and meet between 5 to 7 of its values. The publishers' accounts were vital to fill the gap between how the Fair is reported and how it is experienced.⁵⁷ Besides, for most of these publishing houses, participation in the 2020 VFBF consisted of attending (and not organizing or participating in) virtual activities and conferences, and mainly using the Frankfurt Rights Platform and the Matchmaking Tool (a platform where users searched for and received recommendations to connect with business partners). The exchanges in these platforms are private. Thus, interviews became the only way to retrieve these experiences. We included an interview with a publisher from the Argentine branch of an international publishing company for contrast, and to explore the structural tensions that organize the Argentine field of publishing.⁵⁸ The interviews used open-ended questions to elicit the publishers' experiences, appraisals, and assessments of the VFBF and its outcome. All interviews were carried out between January and March 2022 via videoconference and email, given the conditions related to the Covid-19 pandemic. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The names of interviewees, publishing houses, and other identifying characteristics have been anonymized. We have identified each interview as Publisher 1-6; Publishers 1 to 5 represent small publishing houses from Argentina, and Publisher 6 a local branch of an international company.

The dimensions defined to analyze the transcriptions were: (i) overall appraisal of the experience at the 2020 VFBF; (ii) description of the preparation before the Fair and the follow-up process; (iii) cooperation with actors or institutions and opinions on how to access the international geography of books; and (iv) viewpoints on the virtual sphere and its future. The article draws on secondary literature on the transformations of the book industry due to the pandemic, particularly reports on national situations,⁵⁹ to complement the abovementioned data.

Small Publishing Houses from Argentina at the 2020 VFBF

Activism as Resistance

Catalina Symmes's recent study of publishing houses from Chile that self-identify as independent is helpfully illuminating for the present study because of its description of their resistance and political role.⁶⁰ On the one hand, the Chilean independent publishers studied by Symmes challenged an economic and political background that discouraged disruption, while on the other hand, they resisted a climate defined by neoliberal policies (a condition that also applies to Argentina)—a scheme that systematically produces inequality. The scenario of polarization between big transnational companies and small national publishing houses that Symmes demonstrated in Chile is mirrored at the FBF, as becomes especially clear when observing the spatial distribution of the stands.⁶¹ While central agents may ignore the forces that shape the international geography of books,⁶² to small publishers interested in participating in the Fair the rules were clear: "*Los actores con más poder económico son los que van a tener más voz y van a poder marcar la agenda.*"⁶³ This power imbalance did not deter them from participating even though "*no es necesaria una feria para que las editoriales más pequeñas puedan unirse o encontrar soluciones comunes.*"⁶⁴ So why would these publishing houses devote time, effort, and capital to participate in places like FBF that are not particularly meant for them?

One answer is that fairs become powerful sources of information valuable to small publishing houses. One publisher highlighted that "*no somos ajenos a los conglomerados editoriales.*"⁶⁵ In consequence, "*estar informado y atento nunca está mal,*"⁶⁶ and the Fair provides information on "*cómo se está moviendo la industria.*"⁶⁷ Among the events of the 2020 VFBF were activities organized for professionals of the industry such as "Market Insights" and "Curated Networking."

Nevertheless, the weight of power inequalities is clearly felt by small publishers, and was expressed in two main ways: work overload and no results from the participation in the Fair. The FBF has been described as a site of excess,⁶⁸ given, for instance, the overabundance of manuscripts that are

shared.⁶⁹ Various publishers emphasized the difficulty and fruitlessness of undertaking extra tasks apart from the rest of their daily activities: “*perdimos mucho tiempo en reuniones que no tenían sentido.*”⁷⁰ Publishers also detailed the specific skills required to succeed in such a large, international gathering: “*uno no está entrenado para eso [vender derechos], una sabe entusiasmar a los lectores pero después vender los derechos es diferente.*”⁷¹ The heavy workload even discouraged some publishers from maintaining a continuous presence at the Fair: “*estoy desbordada con otros tipos de trabajo de la editorial . . . así que tengo que priorizar lo que me dé venta de libros.*”⁷² Anticipating this excessive workload, the organizers of the Fair decided to impose a limit to the contacts users could make through the Matchmaking Tool. However, this restriction had unintended consequences, particularly for small publishers who sought to make the best use of the limited amount of time they could devote to the Fair: “*uno trata de tener el máximo posible de contactos en el momento en que estás conectada con la feria.*”⁷³

50% of the respondents described their experience at the Fair as unsatisfactory: “*interesante pero poco efectiva,*”⁷⁴ “*decepcionante,*”⁷⁵ and “*intrascendente.*”⁷⁶ Publishers from small publishing houses explained that this experience was “*frustrante*” because “*nos costó mucho seguir algunos contactos que tenían sentido.*”⁷⁷ In stark contrast, the publisher from the branch of the international company explained that they devote a department to preparing for the FBF and other fairs, which entails periodic meetings (“*es una relación constante*”⁷⁸) with scouts from all over the world who provide information to successfully close deals at the Fair: “*nos van trayendo los panoramas editoriales, presentando los libros . . . cuáles tenían trascendencia editorial para ser traducidos y ellos nos hicieron de link con las editoriales.*”⁷⁹

Despite this unequal power dynamic and despite reporting not having sold rights at the Fair, the other 50% of publishers regarded their experiences as satisfactory because it allowed them to build a network in a central event for the publishing industry: “*hicimos muchos contactos,*”⁸⁰ “*tuve la oportunidad de poder estar a la par de otras editoriales grandes que pueden pagar un pasaje a Europa.*”⁸¹ 70% of the presses (including two whose experience was “unsatisfactory”) valued having made connections. The difference in this appraisal cannot be explained by the characteristics that the survey tracked (year and province of foundation, distribution system, amount of new releases per year). While a positive experience was more frequent in publishing houses with smaller

structures, this sole variable is not sufficient to explain the difference or identify patterns, reinforcing the importance of the in-depth interviews with publishers.

The participation of small publishing houses in the 2020 VFBB as described above underscores the disruptive dimension of activism. While a peripheral position does not intrinsically entail a disruptive stance, the data collected sheds light on the existence of dominant logics that govern the Fair. Despite these obstacles to their participation, small publishers nevertheless work to be a part of the Fair, contact their international peers, and learn the rules of the game.

Activism as an Enthusiastic Approach to the Virtual Sphere

Historically, book fairs have brought together all members of the supply and value chains of the publishing industry, providing a unique occasion to interact face-to-face. The physical spatial dimension is key in these events. The distribution of the stands, the venues outside the fair, the spaces behind the scenes, all create a carnivalesque atmosphere and reinforce the disparate power within the book industry—but at the same time they enable informal pathways that foster connections between peripheral actors.⁸² The 2020 VFBB encouraged the participation of those actors who could not afford the registration fee and the travel expenses, such as survey respondents who commented “*Fui porque quedaba cerca*”⁸³ and “*Es una feria en la que no suelo participar*.”⁸⁴ The only requirement for attendees was to create a user accounts on MyBookFair, to exhibit the catalogues, to explore the platform Frankfurt Rights, to contact sellers and buyers and initiate transactions, and the abovementioned Matchmaking Tool.

While the crisis unleashed by the pandemic exposed the low levels of digitalization of publishing houses in Argentina (specifically with regard to eBook production and the online availability of their catalogues),⁸⁵ publishers showed considerable enthusiasm to participate in the VFBB. They stressed the importance of free registration because otherwise they would have struggled to attend “*por costos y por logística*.”⁸⁶ Answers from the survey anticipated that future virtual fairs will be useful to “*conectar a editores pequeños*

que no pueden asistir a las presenciales por una cuestión de costos.”⁸⁷ Others highlighted the advantage of accessing centralized data provided by the virtual platform: *“es más sencillo para hacer seguimiento de contactos, ya que la información está toda en un solo lugar. Menos agotadora.”*⁸⁸ The virtual dimension of the VFBF allowed some publishers to overcome usual obstacles they encounter, such as the heavy workload, by enabling them to manage their time: *“Ayuda a poder estar. Como tener actividades grabadas y acceder cuando se puede.”*⁸⁹

However, responses to the virtual sphere were not unequivocal, particularly when compared to in-person fairs. The dynamics of connection fostered by the virtual sphere also made the workload heavier (*“hubo tantas charlas y encuentros que ya no te acordás . . . parece todo lo mismo”*⁹⁰), exchanging quality for quantity and causing discouragement for publishers looking to curate their contacts to prioritize fruitful transactions: *“como es fácil, todos piden . . . uno manda invitaciones masivamente, y así también te llegan editoriales que no tienen nada que ver con vos.”*⁹¹ The organization of the Fair did seem to have anticipated these critiques and offered a virtual space named The Hof, in reference to a hotel where attendees would meet when the Fair was held in person. These networking events took place in Zoom to discuss specific topics, listen to speakers, and exchange ideas in smaller breakout rooms.

Face-to-face interactions seem irreplaceable for small publishers who may benefit from the “predictable unpredictability” of these events.⁹² Responses from the survey reflected the importance of face-to-face interaction, observing that the virtual edition *“no tuvo punto de comparación con la experiencia de la feria presencial.”*⁹³ Publishers reached this conclusion due to the difficulty to cultivate committed relations: *“Es muy distinto poder hablar cara a cara con un editor extranjero y explicarle de qué trata una novela y transmitirle entusiasmo por el texto.”*⁹⁴ Another issue mentioned during interviews was the loss of information exchange through informal interpersonal interactions, which could not be captured in the virtual sphere: *“se pierden las relaciones interpersonales, que son otros de los canales por los que circula la información.”*⁹⁵

As mentioned above, events such as the FBF demand preparatory work, and getting in touch with contacts through encounters that *“casi exclusivamente, es presencial.”*⁹⁶ Besides, making connections, furthering relations, and conducting transactions cannot be reduced to a recommendation by an

algorithm from an app because they entail “*una combinación de base de datos, interacción directa en el stand de Argentina en las ferias y las presentaciones que se dan por medio de amigos en común.*”⁹⁷ Even big publishers agreed about the importance of face-to-face encounters, and saw virtual tools as complementary: “[*la virtual*] *no fue la plataforma donde más contactos tuve . . . fue por los contactos previos.*”⁹⁸

The possibilities offered in the virtual sphere point to the positive and constructive dimension of activism. While publishing houses in Argentina historically displayed low levels of digitalization, they found the virtual sphere a positive factor that enabled their otherwise-unlikely participation in the Fair. It allowed publishers to contact numerous possible business partners, while creating a format that helped organize data that is usually scattered and difficult to access. The type of presence this enabled for publishers otherwise on the periphery is key to gain visibility in an evolving, global business and a digital era of abundance.⁹⁹ However, the virtual approach was not unambiguous, and there is a parallel here between the Fair and the ambivalent nature of the virtual sphere in the book industry. On the one hand, scholars have noted that Amazon, one of the strong actors of the industry which owes its power to the digital revolution,¹⁰⁰ had a stand at the FBF that did not physically replicate their position in the field of publishing.¹⁰¹ On the other, studies focused on literary festivals have suggested that the creation of virtual spheres lead to reaffirming the value of in-person meetings and print books.¹⁰² In a similar vein, the publishers we interviewed underscored the vitalness of face-to-face encounters for successful transactions, and expressed an ambiguous feeling towards the democratization promised by the digital revolution.

Activism as Cooperation and Reliance on Institutions

The virtual affordances and practices being discussed are frequently construed in terms of disruption, seen from the viewpoint of opposition as a way to contest consolidated power. From the same perspective, any relationship with state institutions appears to imperil the autonomy of the literary field.¹⁰³ The participation of small publishing houses in the 2020 VFBF allows us to explore the dimension of cooperation with and reliance on institutions that, instead of creating tension, enabled actors from the

peripheries to access central areas of the field of publishing, which would otherwise might be too distant for them.

A clear example comes from one of the publishers interviewed, who emphasized that “*participamos con Key Titles.*”¹⁰⁴ Argentina Key Titles is a project aimed at promoting the translation of Argentine books, created in 2020 by a partnership between the Cámara Argentina del Libro, the National Agency for Export and Investment Promotion, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Trade and Worship, the Programa Sur de Apoyo a las Traducciones, and the Asociación Argentina de Traductores e Intérpretes. A jury of specialists selects titles to support in order to guarantee Argentine books are represented in their bibliodiversity at international book fairs and cultural events. More than 100 publishing houses submitted their titles to the 2020 call, and 15 of the exhibitors that participated in the 2020 VFBF were part of this selection. Only three of the publishing houses selected did not participate in the Fair. This initiative contrasts with the role of the Argentine state in the 2010 edition of the FBF, when Argentina was the guest of honour but publishing houses received no support to cover expenses.

Government programs also aided publishing houses in 2020 by giving seminars on how to register, and by offering general advice. One of the publishers explained that the seminar on registration was “*re explicativo, sirvió un montón. No me había animado a presentarme a una feria internacional de ese nivel.*”¹⁰⁵ Key Titles also assisted publishers in unexpected ways: “*ayudó bastante en los criterios de selección . . . Ellos han pedido que postulemos las novedades . . . han seleccionado las que consideraban como candidatas interesantes para cesión de derechos.*”¹⁰⁶ A publisher who had participated numerous times in the Fair explained the intricate selection process of uploading titles to the virtual platform, a lesson they had learnt through experience: “*aquellos de autores claves: reconocidos internacionalmente . . . cuando ya se han cedido los derechos de algún libro al inglés.*”¹⁰⁷ While no local branches of international companies were part of Key Titles, they were aware of the existing inequalities and the importance of state aid for small publishers: “*te hablo desde un lugar de privilegio y comodidad . . . Al tener casa en España y que el libro pueda viajar sin necesidad de un contrato . . . se presenta directamente sin mediación de un programa.*”¹⁰⁸

While the practice of activism can be considered as primarily disruptive, under some conditions activism can be enabled by joint work and support from institutions such as the state. Programs developed by the Argentine state such as Key Titles were vital for small publishing houses to prepare themselves for and participate in the 2020 VFBF. This dimension of the practice of activism calls us to explore its ambiguity within the power dynamics and the conditions that make it possible.

Conclusions

This article analyzed the participation of peripheral small publishing houses from Argentina in a central event of the international geography of books, the 2020 VFBF, suggesting that their participation constituted a practice of activism because they challenged the power dynamics of the Fair. Activism in this sense entails, firstly, resistance to and disruption of dominant practices: despite the facts that the language of the website and communications were in English, almost no transactions could be conducted, and the workload prior to and during the Fair was prohibitively heavy, nevertheless small publishers worked with determination to participate, become visible, and learn the rules that hinder their growth. Secondly, this activism was made possible by an enthusiastic approach to the virtual sphere because, while some exclusionary dynamics were reproduced, the fact that participation was free of charge and virtual enabled and encouraged publishers to register, and gave them access to centralized data and multiple contacts. Lastly, the disruptive work of activism can be advanced through cooperation with institutions; joint work and support from state programs encouraged and equipped publishers to participate in the Fair.

The data analyzed, which was collected through a survey, in-depth interviews with publishers, and complemented with an online observation of the Fair, was aimed at contributing to the study of the mediators of the publishing industry and the international geography of books in the digital age. The focus on small publishing houses from the peripheries allowed us to open questions on the conditions that enable their participation in international fairs and on issues such as the democratization of the field and bibliodiversity.

This article was based on a small sample, so future research would benefit from continuing to explore the experience of publishers at fairs—in particular at the Latin American fair at Guadalajara or the Madrid Book Fair, which is vital for books in Spanish—and comparing them to these results. Another, inherent, limitation of this study owes to the fact that transformations in the virtual sphere are still ongoing, and constantly accelerating, calling for follow-up analysis of future virtual and hybrid editions of fairs.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTICES

María Belén Riveiro holds a degree in Sociology and a PhD in Social Sciences (Universidad de Buenos Aires). Her doctoral dissertation, funded with a doctoral fellowship awarded by Conicet, delves into the logics of domination of the literary field of Buenos Aires focused on the trajectory of César Aira. Currently, Riveiro carries out a postdoctoral research project (Conicet) on the transnational circulation of Aira's books. Riveiro is a professor at UBA and of the Master's Degree in Documentary Cinematography at the Universidad del Cine. Riveiro is one of the editors of the journal *7 ensayos. Revista Latinoamericana de Sociología, Política y Cultura* (Instituto de Investigaciones Gino Germani-UBA).

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Notes

¹ “An all-digital time” [All translations into English of texts in Spanish are our translation, unless clearly stated otherwise]. Julieta Grosso, “Roger Chartier: ‘Nadie está obligado a volverse prisionero de los algoritmos o las noticias falsas,’” *Télam digital*, August 6, 2020, <https://www.telam.com.ar/notas/202008/499404-roger-chartier-algoritmos--noticias-falsas.html>.

² Gisèle Sapiro, “The Transnational Literary Field between (Inter)-nationalism and Cosmopolitanism,” *Journal of World Literature* 5, no. 4 (2020): 483, doi:[10.1163/24056480-00](https://doi.org/10.1163/24056480-00)

³ Simone Murray, *The Adaptation Industry. The Cultural Economy of Contemporary Literary Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 82.

⁴ Gustavo Sorá, *A History of Book Publishing in Contemporary Latin America* (New York: Routledge, 2021); Alejandro Dujovne and Gustavo Sorá, “Un hecho de política cultural: Argentina en la república mundial de la edición,” in *Argentina país invitado de honor Feria del Libro de Frankfurt 2010*, ed. Magdalena Faillace (Buenos Aires: Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio y Culto, 2010), 219.

⁵ “On our way to Frankfurt.”

⁶ For an analysis of the participation of publishing houses from Argentina and its role as guest of honor at the 2010 FBF, see Dujovne and Sorá, “Un hecho de política cultural.”

⁷ Alejandro Dujovne, *Políticas y estrategias de internacionalización editorial en América Latina* (Bogotá: Centro Regional para el Fomento del Libro en América Latina y el Caribe. UNESCO, 2020), 91.

⁸ We follow, firstly, John B. Thompson’s reflections on diversity and discoverability (John B. Thompson, *Book Wars: The Digital Revolution in Publishing* [Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021]), as well as the ten values of bibliodiversity and independence defined by the EcoEdit project (a map of Latin American and European publishing houses hosted at the Universidad de Granada; see “Valores ECOEDIT,” EcoEdit, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://ecoedit.org/que-es-ecoedit/valores-ecoedit/>), and employed in a comparative analysis by Ana Gallego Cuiñas, *Cultura literaria y políticas de mercado Editoriales, ferias y festivales* (Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2022). On the debates and history of the term bibliodiversity and the ways it shaped book production in Latin America, see José de Souza Muniz Junior, “Girafas e bonsáis: editores ‘independentes’ na Argentina e no Brasil (1991-2015)” (Postgraduate thesis, Universidad de São Paulo, 2016); and Daniela Szpilbarg, *Cartografía argentina de la edición mundializada. Modos de hacer y pensar el libro en el siglo XXI* (Buenos Aires: Tren en movimiento, 2019).

⁹ Sorá, *A History of Book Publishing*.

¹⁰ Marco T. Bosshard and Fernando García Naharro, ed., *Las ferias del libro como espacios de negociación cultural y económica* vol 1 (Madrid-Frankfurt: Iberoamericana-Vervuert, 2019), 19.

¹¹ William Marling, *Gatekeepers: The Emergence of World Literature and the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹² Pierre Bourdieu, “A Conservative Revolution in Publishing,” trans. Ryan Fraser, *Translation Studies* 1, no. 2 (2008): 151, [doi:10.1080/14781700802113465](https://doi.org/10.1080/14781700802113465).

¹³ See Peter Weidhaas, *A History of the Frankfurt Fair* (Toronto-Ontario: Dundurn Press, 2007).

¹⁴ See Lucia Helena, “A internacionalização dos pobres na agenda globalizada: uma reflexão em torno do intelectual escritor no mercado multicultural,” *Brasil/Brazil. A Journal of Brazilian Literature* 27, no. 50 (2014): 48–70.

¹⁵ See Beth Driscoll and Claire Squires, *The Frankfurt Book Fair and Bestseller Business* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); and Murray, *The Adaptation Industry*.

¹⁶ On the cases of Brasil and Argentina, see José Muniz Junior and Daniela Szpilbarg, “Edição e tradução, entre a cultura e a política: Argentina e Brasil na Feira do Livro de Frankfurt,” *Sociedade e Estado* 31, no. 3 (2016): 671–692, [doi:10.1590/s0102-69922016.00030006](https://doi.org/10.1590/s0102-69922016.00030006).

¹⁷ Sorá, *A History of Book Publishing*. For the numbers of the 2020 VFBB see <https://www.buchmesse.de/en/press/press-releases/2020-10-18-fbm20-virtuelle-vielstimmigkeit-digitale-vielfalt>.

¹⁸ Sorá, *A History of Book Publishing*.

¹⁹ Iolanda Galanes Santos, “Traducción e invitado de honor en FIL. Una aproximación,” in *Promoción cultural y traducción. Ferias internacionales del libro e invitados de honor*, ed. Iolanda Galanes Santos, Ana Luna Alonso, and Carmen Villarino Pardo (Berlin-Bern: Peter Lang, Bern, 2021), 76.

²⁰ A noteworthy example is that the FBF website is accessible only in English and German. Besides, the survey showed that publishers communicated with other agents in English.

²¹ Gustavo Sorá, “Peter Weidhaas y América Latina. Internacionalización y politización de las ferias de libros,” in Santos, Alonso, and Pardo, *Promoción cultural y traducción*, 41.

²² E.g., the Argentine Programa Sur de Apoyo a las Traducciones. See Szpilbarg, *Cartografía argentina*, 271–95.

²³ Johan Heilbron, “Obtaining World Fame from the Periphery,” *Dutch Crossing* 44, no. 2 (2020): 137, [doi:10.1080/03096564.2020.1747284](https://doi.org/10.1080/03096564.2020.1747284).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Dujovne, *Políticas y estrategias de internacionalización*, 91.

²⁶ Szpilbarg, *Cartografía argentina*, 235.

²⁷ Malena Botto, “1990-2010. Concentración, polarización y después,” in *Editores y políticas editoriales en Argentina (1880-2010)*, ed. José Luis de Diego (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2014), 219–70; Szpilbarg, *Cartografía argentina*, 45–123; and Sorá, *A History of Book Publishing*.

²⁸ For research on the emergence and history of small publishing houses in Argentina and other cases in Latin America, see Souza Muniz Junior, “Girafas e bonsais”; Jacinto Martínez Olivera, “La edición artesanal en México. Tres casos” (MA thesis, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2016); and Paula Andrea Marín Colorado, “El libro en Colombia: Entre la sostenida concentración y la lenta marcha hacia la independencia (2000-2019),” *Amoxtli. Historia de la edición y la lectura* 5 (2020): 39–58, [doi:10.5281/zenodo.4377459](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4377459).

²⁹ For this archetype of publisher, see subtitle “El editor militante” from Szpilbarg, *Cartografía argentina*, 187–202.

³⁰ Hernán Vanoli develops this hypothesis in “Por una sociología del espacio editorial. Cuatro modelos de edición literaria en la Argentina del siglo XX” (MA thesis, Universidad de Buenos Aires, 2010). For an illuminating account of the tight relation between politics and book production in the 1960s and 1970s across Latin America, see Claudia Gilman, *Entre la pluma y el fusil. Debates y dilemas del escritor revolucionario en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI editores, 2003).

³¹ Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge-Mass: Harvard University Press, 2005), 354–55.

³² Roanna Gonsalves, “The Survival of the Friendliest: Contemporary Indian Publishing in English at the Frankfurt Book Fair,” *Cultural Sociology* 9, no.3 (2015): 429, [doi:10.1177/149975515590244](https://doi.org/10.1177/149975515590244).

³³ For the Latin American case of the 1960s and 1970s, see Gilman, *La pluma y el fusil*; for the French case see Gisèle Sapiro, *Les Écrivains et la politique en France. De l'affaire Dreyfus à la guerre d'Algérie* (Paris: Seuil, 2018), and her book revisiting these issues in the wake of movements encouraging the revision of the literary canon, *Peut-on dissocier l'oeuvre de l'auteur?* (Paris: Seuil, 2020).

³⁴ See the special issue “Le livre et l'imprimé engages/ Committed Books and Publications,” ed. René Audet, and Marie-Hélène Jeannotte, *Mémoires du livre/ Studies in Book Culture* 3, no 1 (2011), [doi:10.7202/1007570ar](https://doi.org/10.7202/1007570ar).

³⁵ See Rachel Schreuber, ed., *Modern Print Activism in the United States* (London-New York: Routledge, 2013); and Trysh Travis, “The Women in Print Movement: History and Implications,” *Book History* 11 (2008): 275–300, [doi:10.1353/bh.0.0001](https://doi.org/10.1353/bh.0.0001).

³⁶ Paula Serafini, *Performance Action: The Politics of Art Activism* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 3.

³⁷ Ana Longoni, “La teoría de la vanguardia como corset. Algunas aristas de la idea de ‘vanguardia’ en el arte argentino de los 60/70,” *Pensamiento de los confines* 18 (2006). http://rayandolosconfines.com/pc18_longoni.html.

³⁸ Daniela Lucena, “Sobre la inserción del arte activista argentino en los espacios de exhibición,” *Arte, Individuo y Sociedad* 28, no. 3 (2016): 583–600, [doi:10.5209/rev_ARIS.2016.v28.n3.51664](https://doi.org/10.5209/rev_ARIS.2016.v28.n3.51664).

³⁹ Dingkun Wang and Xiaochun Zhang, “Fansubbing in China: Technology-Facilitated Activism in Translation,” *Target* 29, no. 2 (2017): 301–318, [doi:10.1075/target.29.2.06wan](https://doi.org/10.1075/target.29.2.06wan).

⁴⁰ Gallego Cuiñas, *Cultura literaria y políticas de mercado*.

⁴¹ E.g., contemporary to the 2020 VFBB, Argentine small publishing houses and bookstores undertook the collective initiative “*Sálvese quien lea. Del neoliberalismo nos curamos entre todos*,” which offered the pre order of books at a discounted price to be picked up once lockdown restrictions were lifted. The title is a play on words with the phrase “*Sálvese quien pueda* [Every man for himself].” The word “*pueda*” was replaced by its minimal pair, “*lea*,” i.e. “read.” The second phrase of the initiative’s name translates to “Together we will find the Cure for Neoliberalism.”

⁴² Magali Rabasa, *The Book in Movement. Autonomous Politics and the Lettered City Underground* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019). Bourdieu opened a fruitful avenue for research with the hypothesis that small publishers have been “the real bastion of resistance to market forces” since the 1990s given their defense of books that do not fall into the commands of commercial publishers. Bourdieu maintained that “only here, in this practical internationalism opposed in its very essence to the arrogant hermeticism of commercially dominant nations, can the tradition of imperialism of the universal survive” (“A Conservative Revolution in Publishing,” 151).

⁴³ Dujovne and Sorá, “Un hecho de política cultural,” 218–23.

⁴⁴ Driscoll and Squires, *The Frankfurt Book Fair and Bestseller Business*, 24.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 14–35.

⁴⁶ Murray, *The Adaptation Industry*, 184.

⁴⁷ Brian Moeran, “The Book Fair as a Tournament of Values,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16 (2010): 138–54, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40541809>.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁹ In 1993 the theme was “Frankfurt Goes Electronic.” See Weidhaas, *A History of the Frankfurt Fair*, 262.

⁵⁰ Sorá, *A History of Book Publishing*.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Weidhaas, *A History of the Frankfurt Fair*, 268.

⁵³ See Ann Steiner, “Private Criticism in the Public Space: Personal Writing on Literature in Readers’ Reviews on Amazon,” *Particip@tions* 5, no. 2 (2008), <https://www.participations.org/05-02-05-steiner.pdf>; and Thompson, *Book Wars*.

⁵⁴ Simone Murray, *The Digital Literary Sphere: Reading, Writing, and Selling Books in The Internet Era* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 20.

⁵⁵ Hoang Nguyen et. al., “Online Book Fairs during the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Experience of Vietnam,” *Logos* 32, no. 1 (2021): 37–43, https://brill.com/view/journals/logo/32/1/article-p37_4.xml?language=en.

⁵⁶ Christine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography* (London-California-New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001), 64.

⁵⁷ Driscoll and Squires, *The Frankfurt Book Fair and Bestseller Business*, 6.

⁵⁸ Sorá, *A History of Book Publishing*.

⁵⁹ *El sector editorial iberoamericano y la emergencia del COVID-19*, CERLALC 2020, https://cerlalc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Cerlalc_Sector_editorial_Covid_Impac

[to_052020.pdf](#); and Daniela Szpilbarg, *Editoriales argentinas ante la pandemia por Covid 19: efectos, balances y desafíos (Informe)*.

⁶⁰ Catalina Symmes, “Editar (en) el Chile post-dictadura: Trayectorias de la edición independiente,” *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos* (2015), [doi:10.4000/nuevomundo.68211](#).

⁶¹ Dujovne and Sorá, “Un hecho de política cultural”; and Moeran, “The Book Fair as a Tournament of Values.”

⁶² Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, 355.

⁶³ “Agents with economic power are the ones who have a say and set the agenda.” Publisher 4, interview by author, Buenos Aires, March 11, 2022.

⁶⁴ “Small publishing houses do not need a fair to meet nor to find common solutions.” Ibid.

⁶⁵ “We are not alien to publishing conglomerates.” Ibid.

⁶⁶ “It does not hurt to be informed and to stay alert.” Ibid.

⁶⁷ “Industry trends.” Ibid.

⁶⁸ Driscoll and Squires, *The Frankfurt Book Fair and Bestseller Business*, 79.

⁶⁹ Thomas Franssen and Giseline Kuipers, “Coping with Uncertainty, Abundance and Strife: Decision-Making Processes of Dutch Acquisition Editors in the Global Market for Translations,” *Poetics* 41 (2013): 51, [doi:10.1016/j.poetic.2012.11.001](#).

⁷⁰ “We lost time in senseless meetings.” Publisher 2, interview by author, Buenos Aires, March 2, 2022.

⁷¹ “One is not trained for this [selling rights], one knows how to get readers excited, but selling rights is different.” Publisher 4, interview.

⁷² “I am overwhelmed with the workload of the publishing house . . . I have to prioritize whatever helps me sell books.” Publisher 5, interview by author, Buenos Aires, March 17, 2022.

⁷³ “One tries to approach as many contacts as possible while connected.” Ibid.

⁷⁴ “Interesting but ineffective.” *2020 Virtual Frankfurt Book Fair*, survey by author, November 19/December 5, 2020.

⁷⁵ “Disappointing.” Ibid.

⁷⁶ “Inconsequential.” Ibid.

⁷⁷ “Frustrating” because “we struggled to build connections that made sense.” Publisher 2, interview.

⁷⁸ “It is a continuous relationship.” Publisher 6, interview by author, Buenos Aires, February 24, 2022.

⁷⁹ “They describe the publishing scenario, present books . . . detail which ones are significant enough to be translated and they contact us with other publishing houses.” Ibid.

⁸⁰ “We built lots of connections.” Publisher 5, interview.

⁸¹ “I had the opportunity to be on par with big publishing houses who can afford to travel to Europe.” Publisher 1, interview by author, Buenos Aires, March 25, 2022.

⁸² Driscoll and Squires, *The Frankfurt Book Fair and Bestseller Business*, 14, 56–75.

⁸³ “I attended because it was near.” *2020 Virtual Frankfurt Book Fair*, survey.

⁸⁴ “I usually do not attend this fair.” Ibid.

⁸⁵ Szpilbarg, *Editoriales argentinas ante la pandemia*.

⁸⁶ “Due to costs and the logistics involved.” *2020 Virtual Frankfurt Book Fair*, survey.

⁸⁷ “Connect small publishers that cannot attend in person due to the costs entailed.” Ibid.

⁸⁸ “It is easier to follow up contacts because information is only in one place. It is less exhausting.” Ibid.

⁸⁹ “It allowed us to attend the fair, having recorded activities and accessing them when we have time.” Publisher 4, interview.

⁹⁰ “So many talks and meetings were organized that one cannot even remember anything . . . I cannot tell one from the other.” Ibid.

⁹¹ “It is easy, so everyone contacts you . . . invitations are spammed, and you end up contacting publishing houses with no relation to you.” Publisher 2, interview.

⁹² Brian Moeran, “Trade Fairs, Markets and Fields: Framing Imagined as Real Communities,” *Historical Social Research* 36, no. 3 (2011): 96, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23032428>.

⁹³ “Cannot compare to the experience of attending in person.” *2020 Virtual Frankfurt Book Fair*, survey.

⁹⁴ “Talking face-to-face to foreign publishers, explaining what a novel is about, arousing enthusiasm for the text, is very different.” Publisher 1, interview.

⁹⁵ “We lose interpersonal relations, which constitute another channel through which information circulates.” Publisher 4, interview.

⁹⁶ “Almost exclusively are in person.” Publisher 3, interview by author, Buenos Aires, January 20, 2022.

⁹⁷ “A combination of databases, direct interaction at the Argentine stand at fairs, and introductions made by mutual friends.” Ibid.

⁹⁸ “[The virtual] platform was not the means through which we contacted most publishers... we already knew them.” Publisher 6, interview.

⁹⁹ Thompson, *Book Wars*, 174.

¹⁰⁰ For an analysis of the rise and position of Amazon, see Thompson, *Book Wars*, 141–70.

¹⁰¹ Driscoll and Squires, *The Frankfurt Book Fair and Bestseller Business*, 42.

¹⁰² Millicent Weber, *Literary Festivals and Contemporary Book Culture* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 137.

¹⁰³ Recent studies have revisited the practice of book censorship from its productive dimension analyzing how censors added meaning to the works, even if, of course, it altered its original purpose and went against the will of authors and publishers. See Álvaro Santana-Acuña, *Ascent to Glory: How One Hundred Years of Solitude was Written and Became a Global Classic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

¹⁰⁴ “We participated through Key Titles.” Publisher 4, interview.

¹⁰⁵ “Super informative, and really useful. I had not dare to register at an international fair of this kind.” Publisher 5, interview.

¹⁰⁶ “It helped us regarding the criteria to choose the titles . . . they have asked us to submit new releases . . . and have chosen those considered as candidates to license their rights.” Publisher 1, interview.

¹⁰⁷ “Those from key authors, who are internationally celebrated writers . . . those titles whose rights have been already sold into English.” Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ “Ours is a position of privilege and ease . . . Given that our main office is in Spain, the book travels without the need to sign a contract . . . the book is directly introduced without the mediation of a program.” Publisher 6, interview.

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