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Can the Book World Build Its Own Art Basel?

By Boris Kachka



The Miami Book Fair International.

If you happen to be in Miami this week and run into a crowd of thousands thronging varicolored tents, please be advised that Art Basel has not arrived two weeks early, relocated inland, and doubled in size. It's just the Miami Book Fair International, the country's largest and one of its oldest, and if you don't know about it, you probably will soon. Under the new leadership of Tom Healy — poet, gallerist, fund-raiser — it enters its 31st year with a growing budget and a plan to expand into a year-round institution that would make Miami as indispensable to the book business as it's become to art collectors on the make.

That may sound implausible, but it's a project rooted in the long history of a fair that served, from the start, as an engine of urban revival. When Eduardo Padrón, the president of 165,000-student Miami Dade College — the largest in the U.S. — pitched Coral Gables bookstore owner Mitchell Kaplan on starting a book festival, he had ulterior motives. "I did not start this because of literature," he says. "I was president of this college in downtown Miami when it was a desert" — a seedy patch of a seedy city rolling in poverty and crime. "People would not come downtown after five o'clock, and I was desperate to revive it."

What began as a lark — "like one of those Mickey Rooney movies: 'Let's put on a book fair!'" Kaplan says — worked as no one could have predicted. James Baldwin appeared in the inaugural year of 1984, and others rapidly followed. Having the field virtually to itself — there were only two others like it in the country — the fair was limited only by its physical capacity; every time the campus of Miami Dade grew, so did its marquee festival. This year, there are 600 writers speaking and signing throughout the week for an audience of more than 200,000. A dozen years ago, the fair was consolidated under the school's new Center for Literature and Theater. When Center director Alina Interian retired this year, Kaplan and Padrón went looking for someone to bring in more energy, attention, and funding.

Healy, who was ending a three-year run as chair of the Fulbright scholarship board, had the résumé. After turning one of his first jobs, speechwriting for

Jesse Jackson's presidential campaign, into a consulting company, he'd opened one of Chelsea's first art galleries. He later headed the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, tasked with funding arts endeavors in the wake of September 11. He's published two collections of poetry. He also knows a few people through his partner, Fred Hochberg, a direct-marketing heir and Obama fundraiser who currently chairs the Import-Export Bank. "Tom is a really wonderful networker and proponent," says Kaplan, "a bring-togetherer of all kinds of people."

Healy has close ties to the Miami-based Knight Foundation, which funds mostly journalism but also arts initiatives surrounding Art Basel and, for many years, the book fair. But this year, it's kicking in almost \$500,000 for the Center. Some of that is for two new Book Fair initiatives aimed at raising its profile with both elites and the tote-lugging public: flying in most of the National Book Awards finalists the day after Wednesday's New York ceremony; and funding PBS.org's "Olympic-style" wall-to-wall streaming coverage of the fair. Healy estimates that the festival's budget is up 25 percent (though administered through the college, it must sustain itself).

Knight is also helping develop a plan to turn the Center into a literary foundation of its own. Healy's hired a firm to conduct polling on community needs. He wants to set up writers' residencies. He's floating the idea of launching an African-American bookshop in nearby Liberty City. He also envisions an award for Spanish-language literature, with the winner to be translated and put out by HarperCollins imprint Ecco Press. Ecco's publisher, Daniel Halpern (also a poet), notes that the Center will soon absorb the annual happening known as O, Miami, during which poetry has been dropped from a helicopter and proclaimed (when in Miami ...) from a Lamborghini. "Everything is there, just ready to go," says Halpern. "People like to get out in the winter. I'm excited."

It takes more than mild winters, of course, to make a scene. "These organizations don't build themselves," says Knight Foundation CEO Alberto Ibarguen. "Basel didn't pick Miami just because it happens to be winter in Basel. They picked the place because there is a community for whom art is critically important." That may not be exactly true; there was a Miami art world before Art Basel Miami Beach, but you could say that of a dozen other cities without the weather or the nightlife. Still, if you're trying to build a major festival of any kind, you do need some local scaffolding — in this case, precedents like the Miami Book Fair and natural connectors like Healy. "It's easy to say, 'Come down in November,'" says Ibarguen. "But if you're coming down in June" — for a one-off workshop, say — "you'd better know the guy calling, or you might not take the call."

Comparing a book fair to Miami's art-auction frenzy is still a bit of a stretch. It's one thing to get a flashy beach town hooked on contemporary art — to build what W.W. Norton editor Bob Weil calls "a spending playground of the hedge fund world." It's another to create a nonprofit literary network. Gallerists, collectors, and flush artists have no problem jetting down to Florida, but thin-margined publishing companies barely even pay for book tours anymore, which is where institutions have to fill in the gaps. Travel fare is a major festival expense (with help from sponsor American Airlines). To organize a panel among online book reviewers ("Critics in the Cloud"), Healy had to convince the Rockefeller Foundation to foot the bill — their first partnership with the fair.

Where the analogy to Basel makes sense is in the need for Miami to stand out among a proliferating international circuit of book fairs — a circuit that didn't exist when this one was founded. "I've pitched all the major publications," says fair publicist Lisa Palley, "and the answers I get is that there are book fairs all over the country now." There are plenty of writers' institutes, too, even in Miami. "So we're victims of our own success." The only way to raise your profile is to generate news and word of mouth — through panels, fellowships, and prizes — and to find partners like PBS to spread it around.

The Center hopes, most of all, to capitalize on Miami's majority-Latino population and boost its international profile — to become a Latin-American literary hub within the American book-buying market. But with 600 writers already coming down at least once a year and a polyglot audience in the hundreds of thousands, the core strategy extends from the same impulse that's always distinguished the festival: "We wanted to honor the diversity that was