

# Spinning Tales: The Many Pages of Pablo Helguera

by Thomas Micchelli on September 28, 2013



*Pablo Helguera, Librería Donceles (2013). Used books in a traveling installation. Dimensions variable. (all images courtesy Kent Fine Art)*

On paper, the Mexican artist Pablo Helguera may fit the mold of a neoconceptualist with a social agenda, but the more I see of his work, the more he resembles some kind of latter-day mystic, conjuring up improbable connections and unsettling dislocations.

Last spring, selections from his “*Conservatorio de Lenguas Muertas / Conservatory of Dead Languages*” (2004-present) were included in the group show [Hypnotherapy](#) at Kent Fine Art in Chelsea. For that project, he recorded the dying languages of indigenous peoples on Edison wax cylinders, traveling from Anchorage, Alaska, where he found the last speaker of Eyak, to the southernmost tip of Tierra del Fuego to record the last speaker of Yaghan.

# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents



*Pablo Helguera, "Rogaland" (2012), Sixty-five framed prints. 4' 2" x 27' 33" overall.*

His current project at Kent, [Librería Donceles](#) (2013), is a Spanish-language used bookstore set up within the confines the gallery. As Jillian Steinhauer writes in her [discussion](#) with the artist that appeared last week in Hyperallergic:

In addition to two other artworks by Helguera, the show consists of a bookstore installed in the gallery, with 10,000 tracts on a huge range of subjects, as well as the other familiar trappings of a used bookstore: antique lamps, old posters, miscellaneous objects chosen and placed for their aesthetic value.

Helguera, as we learn from Steinhauer's article, is an incorrigible bibliophile, and one of the motivations behind creating the bookstore is to draw attention to the impossibility of finding a single Spanish-language used bookstore in New York City, which has a Spanish-speaking population of nearly two million.

But there is another dimension to the installation that can be felt only by those who aren't conversant in Spanish, and that is the feeling of being a world apart, that the knowledge contained within these thousands of books is sealed off and out of reach.

That the books are in Spanish, which is ubiquitous in New York, rather than a language at a further remove, exacerbates the incomprehensibility experienced by non-speakers of an essential culture within our midst. Any presumption of familiarity, which is a form of

entitlement, is abruptly snatched away.

Multiply that by the number of languages in the world, and you have a neat metaphor of reality's impenetrability.

However, in separate project mounted in a large space on the other side of *Librería Donceles* — as spare as the bookstore is cluttered — Helguera repurposes that sense of estrangement into a kind of demented poetry.

The work is called “Rogaland” (2012) after the title of a Norwegian book, *Gale gårdsanlegg i Rogaland*, written by an archeologist named Jan Peterson, which Helguera bought, not surprisingly, in a used bookstore. Published in 1936, the book “is an account of the excavations of several medieval farms in the Rogaland region of Norway,” according to the gallery’s press release, which also explains its attraction to the artist:

Helguera was drawn to the book for its particular feel and for its photographs and diagrams, which to the mind of a twenty-first-century artist, suggest depictions of land art.

The captions for the book’s sixty-three photographic plates are in Norwegian, a language Helguera doesn’t speak or read, but rather than surrender their meaning to the unintelligible aftermath of Babel, he decided to knowingly mistranslate them, giving a new spin on the idea of creative misinterpretation, “suggested by the image and imagined sound of the printed words.”

Each of the framed works in the installation contains a plate from the book on the right and Helguera’s fabricated caption on the left. One particularly fractious verse goes like this:

Flies by foot. The wilderness scalps its flight. Full of hours, usually to the north. It strengthens its foreground as it sees its idleness, its background breaking loose. It forgets its own image.

In smaller accompanying installation in the same space, used books and translation meet autobiography in a circular tale reminiscent of the eerie connections drawn in the “Conservatory of Dead Languages,” where the last speakers of Eyak and Yaghan, both elderly women, were found at the beginning and the end of the artist’s trip, at the top and the bottom of the world.

# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents



Pablo Helguera, "On the Future of Art" (2013). Mixed media installation. Dimensions variable.

In "On the Future of Art" (2013), through printed texts Helguera relates his encounter as an adolescent with the Spanish translation of the book *On the Future of Art* (1969), edited by then-Guggenheim curator Edward F. Fry, who later resigned in protest when Hans Haacke's 1971 solo show at the museum, which he had organized, was canceled.

The book introduced the young Helguera to the work of Haacke, Dennis Oppenheim, Robert Morris and other conceptual and minimalist artists, setting him on the path he follows today. Fry had compiled the book from a lecture series he coordinated for the museum and — long story short — after Helguera makes his way to New York to pursue his career as an artist, he was hired by the Guggenheim to manage its public programs and lectures — the same job held by Fry.

The experience of these diverse projects is enhanced by an installation in a far room titled "Canon" (2013), a two-channel video on the Italian tenor Enrico Caruso (1873–1921), with one screen showing interiors of the Enrico Caruso Museum, a personal shrine created by a first-generation Italian-American in his Brooklyn home, and the other presenting a very long take of Caruso's great-grandson, Riccardo Caruso, also a singer, who is seen sitting very still (and occasionally blinking) as if for a painter's portrait.

# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents



*Pablo Helguera, "Canon" (2013). Two-channel video. Dimensions variable.*

The striking resemblance between great-grandfather and great-grandson, which Helguera discovered through a photo of Riccardo at the Caruso Museum, prompted the artist to track him down in Florence.

The recorded human voice, which plays a pivotal role in the "Conservatory of Dead Languages," was something Caruso knew how to exploit from the technology's infancy, turning himself into, as the press release notes, "the first global recording star and the first artist to sell a million records."

And we hear those recordings throughout the length of the video — arias resonating across the exhibition's alienations, misapprehensions and dislocations with a golden sumptuousness and warmth. No translation necessary.

**Pablo Helguera: [Librería Donceles](#)** continues at Kent Fine Art (210 Eleventh Avenue, 2nd floor, between 24th & 25th Streets, Chelsea, Manhattan) through November 8.