

# Bringing a Spanish-Language Used Bookstore to New York

by Jillian Steinhauer on September 17, 2013



*Pablo Helguera, "Librería Donceles" (2013) (all images courtesy Kent Fine Art)*

Of New York's 8 million people, some 1.9 million speak Spanish at home. That's almost a quarter of the inhabitants ([all figures](#) based on the 2008 census). And trends here reflect a larger one: the US is now home to the [second-largest Spanish-speaking population](#) in the world, after Mexico. And yet, in New York at least, it's difficult to fully experience Spanish-language culture. One of the biggest obstacles is the lack of devoted bookstores, places where you can wander in and discover a written heritage.

Artist [Pablo Helguera](#) is working to change that. Last week at Kent Fine Art Gallery, Helguera opened [Librería Donceles](#), which doubles as both his latest solo exhibition and what the press release calls "the only Spanish-language used-book store in the city." 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

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trappings of a used bookstore: antique lamps, old posters, miscellaneous objects chosen and placed for their aesthetic value.

“I am an obsessive used book buyer,” Helguera wrote to Hyperallergic. “I am more interested in used books than in contemporary art, quite frankly. And when you are an obsessive used book buyer, pretty quickly you know where you can find (or can’t find) books. In 15 years of living in New York and looking for used bookstores every weekend and after doing even more thorough research, I haven’t yet found a single used Spanish bookstore in NYC, nor have found anyone who has. Moreover, regular Spanish-only bookstores are virtually nonexistent.” (Searches on the subject turn up several places that have come and gone, most notably Librería Lectorum, [which closed in 2007](#).)



Helguera wanted to offer the vast, unknowable depths of knowledge that a used bookstore encompasses in Spanish. So he solicited donations, particularly from people in Mexico City, and gave away artwork in exchange for boxes of books. The collection at Kent, he says, includes “1940s studies of archaeology,

1970s marxist essays, 1980s law manuals, theater, sociology, psychology, medicine, spiritism, etc.” — the kind of selection you could get at, say, an old bookstore on Donceles Street in Mexico City, after which the project is named.

There are some key differences between a regular used bookstore and Helguera’s, though. At Librería Donceles, you may only buy one book per visit, a restriction that Helguera says “has both the intention of preventing speculation” — i.e. book buyers who flip their purchases for high prices on eBay — “and inviting the visitor to think very well about their selection.” But you may pay for that book whatever you wish. The money will be donated to local Spanish-language literacy programs. And, since the one-book-per-customer rule only applies to each visit, “if you come 100 days in a row to the bookstore, you can take 100 books with you!”

Given the glaring void that this project seems to fill, I was curious about Helguera’s decision to locate the bookstore in a gallery, as an exhibition, with a finite end date (November 8). Why not set up shop somewhere less transitory? “The infrastructure of

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the gallery in this instance lends well to the transactional nature of this project,” he explains. More importantly, “I want this to be itinerant because it is meant to reach as many people as possible in this city and perhaps beyond. While we will be located in our current space, we will be bringing mini ‘branches’ to the five boroughs over the course of the next few weeks, making displays in hospitals, waiting rooms, offices where people are bored.”



*Pablo Helguera, “Librería Donceles” (2013)*

Helguera says he would, at some point, like to find a permanent home for Librería Donceles, but in “a situation where the project can retain its autonomy and remain sustainable.” Given New York City real estate and the donation-based nature of the project — not to mention the current business prospects of book selling — that might end up being another art space. Which is just as well.

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

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