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Reading Between the Lines of Pablo Helguera's "Librería Donceles"

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Photo by Micah Schmidt
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An Ex Libris sticker identifying the person who donated the book

Right now, the art world does not want for immersive, attention-demanding art environments (Doug Aitken's [travelling art carnival](#), anyone?). It's worth taking a moment, then, to pause and appreciate the relatively low-key virtues Pablo Helguera's "Librería Donceles" at [Kent Fine Art](#). Venture up the stairs to the second-floor Chelsea space, and what you find is that the gallery has been transformed into a funky little Spanish-language used bookstore. There are chairs where you can sit and read quietly, a cheerful nook with brightly colored children's toys and picture books, and hand-lettered signs indicating sections dedicated to "Artes" and "Clásicos Mexicanos," as well as quirkier categories of Helguera's own invention, like "Ficción de valor dudoso" ("Fiction of Dubious Merit") and "Títulos Surrealistas" ("Surreal Titles").

Helguera is a [big deal](#) in the world of "social practice," the [emerging genre of public art](#) that blurs the line between artistic and activist practices (he's also the [head of MoMA's adult education programming](#)). And when you stop to think about it, the "Librería Donceles" is an odd project to find in a commercial gallery. Nothing is for sale; in fact, the whole thing is pointedly based on a gift economy. You are encouraged to take away a book — one per visitor — and leave a donation in a little box by the door.

When you dig into the installation's details, they suggest the story behind it, which is important. The books were all donated by Mexico City bibliophiles Helguera recruited to his cause. A room next to the main library space includes a wall of plaques featuring photos of these donors, smiling and holding small artworks that Helguera gave them to repay their generosity. Each book has an Ex Libris sticker on its title page identifying the person who gave it. Decorations on the walls of the "Librería Donceles" feature framed ephemera that Helguera found in the pages of the books — receipts, doodles, undeveloped strips of film, business cards — hinting at the lives behind them. The project is used-bookstore-as-goodwill-ambassador.

Helguera points out that there are no longer any Spanish-language bookstores in the Big Apple, so "Librería Donceles" is a gift to the city that really does fill, or at least point to, a need. But is Chelsea really the best place for a project like this, if its purpose is to serve a Spanish-speaking community? "The idea of the project is to be itinerant," Helguera wrote me when I quizzed him about this. "As such I have also been taking books to the neighborhoods." Last weekend, the "Librería" team was at the [East Harlem Latino Book](#) fair. Following its run in New York's commercial art epicenter, there will be stops in Arizona, Miami, and possibly Los Angeles, before the work returns to a permanent site in New York next year, possibly in East Harlem.

Yet, as I leafed through the books in the "Librería," I wondered if there might not be another message encoded in the Chelsea debut, one that makes a healthy point about the limitations of "participatory art" itself — at least its more starry-eyed versions, which suggest that participation itself is some kind of universal good. A non-Spanish speaker might well walk into Helguera's "Librería Donceles" and think, "This seems very well-intentioned — but I'm not sure it's really built for me." Which is to say

that it nudges you — if you're typical of the mainly Anglophone Chelsea audience — out of your accustomed position of centrality, putting you face to face with the kinds of real social divides that render a lot of symbolic gestures of artistic inclusion, well, purely symbolic.

Pablo Helguera's "Librería Donceles" is at Kent Fine Arts, 210 Eleventh Avenue, Second Floor, through November 8, 2013.

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