

# MUCH MORE THAN BOOKS

The «cartonero» publishing phenomenon in Latin America





**Eloísa was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina.**

Eloísa is the actual name of an enchanting Bolivian woman with which **Javier Barilaro** fell in love with, in the Summer of 2003. Barilaro is an Argentinean artist whom together with acclaimed writer Washington Cucurto, and artist Fernanda Laguna initiated a social and artistic project, a very unique publishing house, named precisely Eloísa Cartonera.

In short, they managed to put up a book publisher who both sells and manufactures, which articulates the work of people living from picking litter from the streets, buys their cardboard five times the standard market price, and makes available a rich catalogue of Latin American authors, at very affordable prices.

This sort of wonder is said to be typically a Latin American trait, that of achieving economically weak but culturally strong products and social structures. Eloísa and the following network of *cartonerias* are such an example.

The love affair between Barilaro and Eloísa is said not to have gone very far, but her name and beauty would in any case serve as muse to the birth of this family-like project: now with sister-cartoneras and cousin-cartoneras travelling all over South America.

Considering its short life span, and no ambition in expanding like that, it is amazing that the concept has to the day been applied and translated in ten different countries, into approximately twenty similar publishers - and all this in only six years time!

Today, you can find *Sarita Cartonera* in Lima, Peru; *Animita Cartonera* in Santiago, Chile; *La Cartonera* in Cuernavaca, México; *Yiyi Yambo* in Asunción, Paraguay; *Felicita Cartonera* in Asunción, Paraguay; *Dulcinea Catadora* in Sao Paulo, Brasil; *Mandrágora Cartonera* in Cochabamba, Bolivia or *Yerba Mala Cartonera* in La Paz, Bolivia - and many others. You can travel all over South America, and you won't get tired of witnessing the success of such a startling simple idea. It has spread with different names to different cities taking different shapes and working at different scales - but with the same core concept, this basic idea of a publisher that sells "more than books"...

**A short introduction to the "cartonero" publishing phenomenon:**

For an introduction to this universe of cardboard books, *cumbia* dancing and half-naked heroines, here is a brief picture of the context most of these projects sprouted from, the 2001 crisis:

To talk about a "crisis" in Argentina is awfully general and encompassing. When was there no crisis? - we could ask.





Throughout the last decades there was an acquiescent middle class that was recurrently pacified through manipulative and often corrupt political measures, like paring the dollar with the peso. This huge middle class, historically the largest in Latin America, was forced to wake up to the hardships the lower classes had been experiencing since always, when in 2001 all bank accounts were frozen and no one could have access to their own savings (episode was caustically called "*The Cerralito*") Half the population fell below poverty line, people were thrown out of their jobs in massive numbers, industries and services were closed overnight, and an unparalleled social turmoil emerged. People got together and filled the streets, both protesting as well as organizing in communal projects. This was the start of the famous barter clubs, and all sorts of similar collaborative endeavours and forms of self-government. To survive, thousands of people were forced to collect scraps of cardboard and paper from the gutters and rubbish bins to sell for whatever they could get, giving birth to a whole new class of urban poor. They were known as *cartoneros*, meaning the "cardboard pickers".

Eloísa Cartonera, the Argentinean mother of all *cartoneras*, is often said to be "*a product of the crisis*" or a project which "*aestheticized misery*". Truth or not, this is far from how they portray themselves. If you ask any

of them, they are a work collective. They get together to be together, to learn new skills with one another, to make a decent living, and to serve society around them. In addition to all, they take great joy out of producing beautiful books and meeting new people.

**Ricardo Piglia**, one of Eloísa's published authors and household names, and a great name of Argentinean literature, couldn't have state it better:

**"It's not about making a cult of poverty, but rather, not allowing oneself to be intimidated by it."**

**Much more than books**

Eloísa is based on the intention of selling something other or something more than just its books. This translates into a very inspiring initiative that "sells" (or better said, *offers*) among other, alternative visions, and better-world-ideals. They offer idealistic dreams of alternative modes of functioning, values - they offer hope. They offer different values to different audiences: to the average Argentinean, they offer an opportunity for questioning his strong but globally dominated publishing industry, and the traps of their profoundly capitalist-dependent culture. For the lower classes, they offer a way-out prospect for those who feel helpless or overpowered by the lack of employment. For everyone else, it offers some



beautifully romantic ideas of other ways the world could work. It also offers access to and visibility for a phenomenon that shouldn't go unspoken, that of the thousands of people living off their societies' detritus.

In operational and social terms, it offers potentials - to establish a closer relationship between reader, writer, and publisher; To enact literature in a closer dynamic to social and economic cooperation, by offering feasible prices to those who can't afford regular book prices, therefore providing quality literature to a large number of readers who wouldn't otherwise pay for such books.

For all of us committed to the idea of "another world being possible" they offer an inspirational example of a project that can stand by its own, and they offer books which are symbolic of community power in moments of crisis, and which certainly feel like tokens of bottom-up empowerment.

#### **But they also sell books, right?**

Ah, but of course! - they also sell books. Beautiful and one of a kind books that might stain your purse or get glued to your wallet, but which intonate some of the best voices South-American literature has to offer.

Eloísa's books (as books from sister *cartonerías*) are quite a treat. You might notice that what you hold in your hands is far from your normal perception of a book.

It is a light-weighted object made of reutilized cardboard, directly picked from the streets, colourfully and amusingly hand-painted in all styles and outcomes - therefore always a unique piece. There are no two books alike. They look odd and precious, but most likely you won't buy them for their quality. The binding promises not to last long, it will most likely leave stains in your purse or in your hands, and they can't be folded. You may come to find pages glued to each other and it is not rare to find books with missing pages. Buying such a book surely places you a thousand miles from the normalised and standardised experience of any normal bookshop. It's almost an adventure.

Yet, there is something truly irresistible about them, and once you start buying them you will often find yourself starting a collection.

#### **Much more than books...but really good books!**

Definitely, one of this project's greatest achievements is the impressive catalogue they managed to pull together. In the early years, the project launched with acclaimed writers, such as Ricardo Piglia, or César Aira. These were followed by very experimental texts by unknown or emerging authors, as well as rare and out-of-print books. Nowadays, with almost two hundred titles, ranging from poetry to short stories, short novels and theatre plays, even literature for children, it has broadened its scope to



include authors from Chile, Mexico, Uruguay, Brazil, Costa Rica and Peru.

It is admirable how such meagre production resources, in a material sense, could embed such high cultural value. It costs close to nothing to produce one of these items, at least by western standards, but the literary quality is even so of very high value.

**"Las tapas feas venden más"  
(Ugly covers sell more)**

Poverty and material hardship are very much a deliberate aesthetic choice. It is nothing compared with a phenomenon such as green-washing, because these covers don't pretend to refer to a poverty they have nothing to do with. They describe exactly the backdrop they were born off, and in that sense, they are genuine.

They are surely not some deceptive strategy aimed towards selling more books. But the people selling and painting the books are in any case very much aware of the values and the myths they are selling and they do take advantage of that. "Roughly-painted" covers are known to sell more, because they look more "crafty", less "professional", more "genuine". They appeal to romantic ideals and they represent a social phenomenon we can then empathize with, namely poverty and the *cartonero* phenomenon.

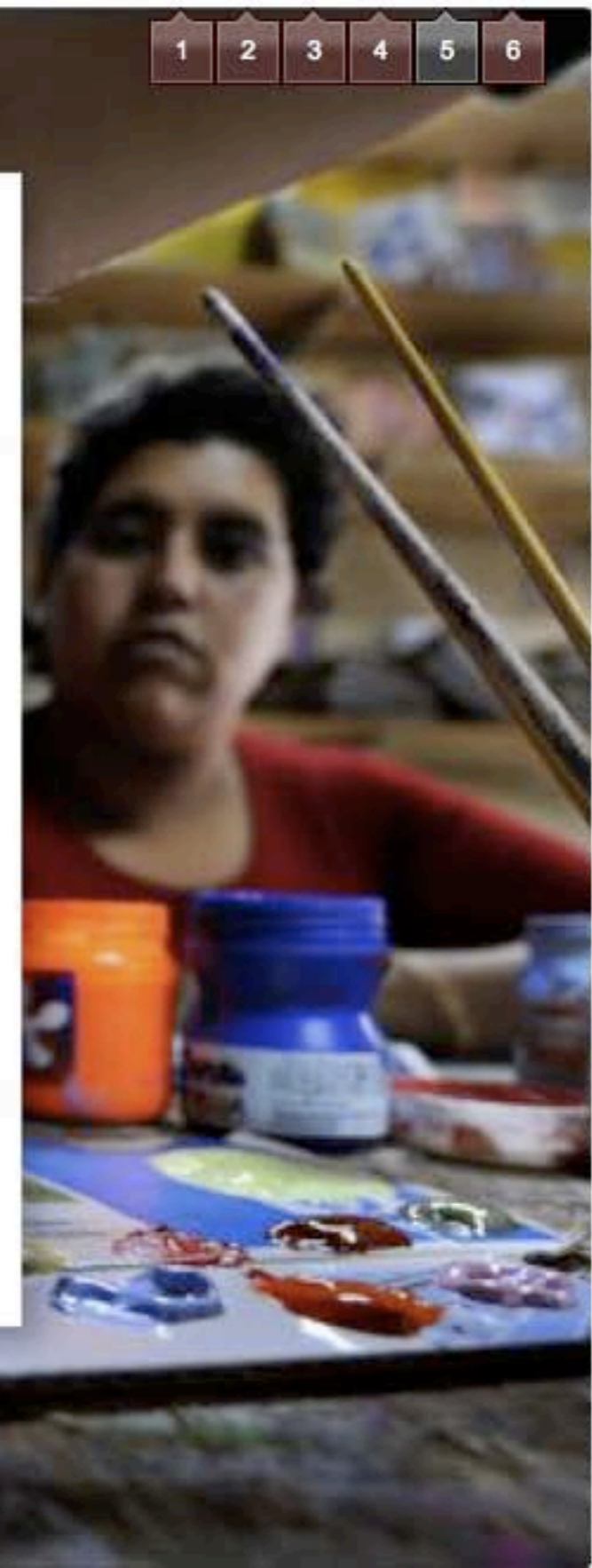
The position of the designer was gladly abolished. The book covers can be designed by virtually anyone. If you enter the store one day and feel like painting some covers, you are very welcome to do so. Anything that you might be able to put together will be good enough, there are no covers better than others. Anything goes - and that is somehow liberating.

**A reporter's treat**

Another extraordinary feat is undoubtedly the media attention it got all through the years. Every single day, in their headquarters in La Boca, one of the most vibrant quarters of Buenos Aires, they receive the visit of reporters, photographers, students, or a scholar of some sort. Adding to that the fact that one of the project's initiators - Washington Cucurto - is a controversial shooting star from Argentinean literature, the result is that it is immense what has been said and published about Eloísa. It has given birth to several academic dissertations, and a documentary film (by Norwegian film-maker Annie Rostad) is due to be out soon.

**Economical sustainability**

The thing about Eloísa is that it actually works. It works, in the sense that they are self-sufficient. They have never taken a subsidy or funding of any sort. And this is rare. On the other hand, this puts an economical pres-





sure over the project that makes it often neglect the social and artistic aspects of it. Simply because books *must* be sold.

It is curious to note that they state that they don't keep track of their sales. Books are produced as they are missing from the shelf, and this is not quantified. Yes, they could show me their "best-sellers", that is, the titles that sell more. But they couldn't estimate if this meant three hundred or three thousand books sold. (A rough estimate shows that they have to sell at least 400 books per month to keep the people that keep the project running). This pressure towards self-sufficiency and the unarguable need to sell, as said, brings a pressure that raises many issues, but this is known to be a commonality among social projects.

**Cardboard and recycling**

Imagine that every night tens of thousands of people (numbers point to something around 100.000) walk the streets of Buenos Aires going through every rubbish bin. They are the *cartoneros*, the city's unofficial recycling system. They open every container and rip the plastic bags apart when scavenging for the materials they can later sell. If on the one hand this activity keeps many families from falling completely beneath the poverty line and enables materials to be reintroduced in the production and consumption chain and therefore not wasted,

the way they do it is also what turns Buenos Aires into a huge urban dump, and therefore decreases life quality, health and environmental urban levels.

It's often said that Eloísa sells recycled books - but that's incorrect. They take cardboard that would in any case be resold, and give it a new life. That is surely something. But they are in any case using bleached white paper and chemical pigments and manufacturing new books with it. They don't trade, they sell. They are environmentally and economically wise (as this often goes hand in hand) but they don't directly solve any environmental issue. What they do, and that has to be valued, is raise awareness to the life prolonging potential that any material in our trash bins has.

If you take this idea even further, you can even consider an implicit metaphorical statement in the way that material excess and social excess, both created by capitalist and neo-liberalism, is reintegrated in the larger social landscape and given a new life.

With all this in the bucket the result is a sort of meeting point between artistic expressions, social systems, and life at large. This all-encompassing trait has everything to do with artistically unifying concepts of artistic practices such as Joseph Beuys' "**social sculpture**" concepts, which Javier Barilaro (again, one of the three founders of the project) has in different interviews referenced as an important link to the social design work carried out by Eloísa.

**And finally, how to get your hand on one of these books!**

If you are in Buenos Aires (...lucky you!) you should get to La Boca, not far from the famous Boca Junior stadium, to **Aristóbulo del Valle 666**. If you want to order them via mail you can do so through their website: [www.eloisacartonera.com.ar](http://www.eloisacartonera.com.ar)



Notes: Joana Bértholo worked with Eloísa Cartonera for six months in 2009. Special thanks to Johana Kunin for a broader perspective on the 20 other publishers. <http://johanakunin.blogspot.com/>