

ELOÍSA CARTONERA, BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA

Alice McKenzie



Figure 1. Children's book-painting workshops at the 2012 International Book Fair in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

The community orientation and the royalty-free philosophy of Eloísa Cartonera has sparked worldwide interest in this publishing cooperative, enticing writers, artists, filmmakers, travellers, students and academics curious to learn how they operate, and how they can take this model back to their own countries and produce books on similar lines. I travelled to Argentina and worked with the collective for ten months in 2013.

Spanish is a beautiful language. Spoken. Heard. Written. I will never tire of it. An aficionado of magic realism and Latin American poetry, I remember the first time a friend showed me a cartonera book; in our country, where cream and brown and taupe was the new black, this brazen and lustfully colourful book with its hand-painted cover assuited my senses. I was smitten. It was love at first sight.



Figure 2. A young *chica* displays the colourful fruits of her labours at a painting workshop at the 2012 International Book Fair in Buenos Aires.

Who would have imagined that this small publishing house, conceived during Argentina's economic crisis of 2003, would prove to be the inspirational model for more than 50 independiente editorial cooperativas (independent editorial cooperatives) in Latin America?

Eloísa Cartonera¹ was born from the labours of writer Washington Cucurto and artists Javier Barilaro and Fernanda Laguna, with the mandate of publishing inexpensive books whose covers are made from cardboard purchased from local cardboard-pickers or *cartoneros*.

During the crisis, thousands of people became unemployed and many took to the streets, collecting cardboard for sale and recycling it in order to feed and support themselves and their families. The two-wheeled carts (*carros*) of the *cartoneros* became a familiar sight as they were pulled or pushed around the streets of Argentinian towns and cities.

In solidarity with the cardboard pickers and acknowledging the stresses placed on the cultural production of literature, Eloísa Cartonera began publishing books that were affordable and accessible to all.

Established and emerging Latin American writers and poets donated novels, short stories, plays and poems to the collective which, in turn, and armed with an old Multilith 1250 printing press, began to produce and paint their iconic books.



Figure 3. The printing press that started it all, the Multilith 1250.



Figure 4. Cardboard stencils for the book covers.



Figure 5. Aristobulillo del Valle 666, La Boca, Buenos Aires.
Books for sale out front of the workshop
of Eloisa Cartonera.

I arrived in barrio La Boca via the bus (el colectivo) 152, clutching my carefully written and vetted translation of my desire to work with the collective.

"Hola."

And I nervously spoke their beautiful language: my name, where I came from, how I was inspired by them ... and ... and Alejandro, smilingly, interrupted me: "Please. Speak English!"

So began ten months of working voluntario with these amazing people who took this crazy Kiwi woman under their wing.

Every Wednesday I would spend an hour and a half on the bus, gazing out the window, soaking up the tempestuous streets of Buenos Aires, the beautiful architecture of this city, the Paris of Latin America. Wondering if I would ever master the sing-song chatter of the Porteños, the people of the port.

The production and sale of their books calls into question the Western model for the dissemination of literature; they are printed, collated and painted locally with the aid of people from their community. The books are inexpensive to buy, making them available to people previously ignored by traditional markets, and sold from the workshop or at fairs, outdoor markets, demonstrations and political rallies.

The cooperative's books are printed on regular A4 white printing paper; folded and stapled. The covers are cut from collected boxes, folded with a spine, and the back page is glued onto the back cover of the cardboard. Stencils are cut for the cover title, and white paint or gesso used to block in the letters before the books are individually painted by members of the collective, local kids and parents, neighbours, visitors and volunteers.

The process is simple and elegant. It involves everyone and anyone present in the production.



Figure 6. A cartonero's cart and some massive bags of collected cardboard waiting for pick-up.



Figure 7. Alejandro staffs the Eloisa Cartonera street stall at the enormous Fiesta Patria Popular in December 2012. Hundreds of thousands of people took part in marches at this festival celebrating Argentinian workers and sponsored by the Department of Human Rights and Democracy (Derechos Humanos y Democracia).

I sit in the bathtub, in my clothes with Julian. It's on the road beside the footpath, opposite the corner from the Eloísa Cartonera workshop. It's summer and Buenos Aires is blistering in a 45 degree heatwave. We have been painting book covers for a couple of hours before putting down our paintbrushes and submerging blissfully into the tepid water. We chat and share that typical Argentinian drink ... maté.

A car pulls up beside us and one of the two chicos pokes his head out and laughingly asks for directions. He wants to take a photo. I say "Sí, pero cuesta cinco pesos!" (Yes, but it costs five pesos.) Julian thinks that's terribly funny, and hasn't my Spanish improved ... before passing back the maté.

In 2012, the Eloísa Cartonera cooperative was made principal laureate by the Netherland's Prince Claus Awards, an annual prize awarded to individuals or organisations active in the field of culture and development. The fund, set up in 1996, "supports artists, critical thinkers and cultural organisations in spaces where freedom of cultural expression is restricted by conflict, poverty, repression, marginalisation or taboos."² The 100,000 Euro prize money has enabled the editorial group to continue to grow and expand their catalogue, and purchase a newsagent's kiosk on Buenos Aires' Avenida Corrientes where they now sell their books, books from other Latin American cartonera publishers as well as regular newspapers and magazines.³

We take a colectivo to barrio Palermo, two big rucksacks heavy with painted books. Ricci and Julian shoulder the potential. We sit in a cluster, sharing our kilo weight of sweet bread shapes. La Osa (the bear), a former cartonero, points out heritage buildings and warns me about other streets, places, should I be wandering around on my own, to take care. Cuidado. We set up in a back bar area of a swanky restaurant and display the rainbow-painted books. Stylishly dressed Porteños flock around and finger the books. The table beside us holds the newly and traditionally printed books of three poets who wait nervously, ready to read excerpts from their works. I sip my wine and let their words seep into me.

Muchos abrazos y besos por sus amistad. Xxx



Figure 8. Eloisa Cartonera book-painting table at the Fiesta Patria Popular. It was a fabulous day, blisteringly hot and marvelously chaotic. We made lots of new friends and I got to practise selling books in Spanish! (author second from right)



Figure 9. The workshop, the bookshop, the painting shop, the hangout spot. Two blocks down from the Boca Junior football stadium is the magic place where Eloisa Cartonera brings its philosophy and community to the world.

Alice McKenzie, aka Alice Anonymous, has a BA Creative Arts (Hons) in ceramics, from Griffith University, Queensland, and a Grad Dip Education from the University of Otago. She is a writer and visual artist with a penchant for street theatre and performance art events. Having returned from a year of adventures in South America, she is teaching secondary school art, English, media and fabric technology.

- 1 <http://www.eloisacartera.com.ar/ENGversion.html> (accessed 15 Aug 2014).
- 2 Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development, Programmes, About, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2lVI-ai68A> (accessed 15 June 2014). See also <http://www.princeclausfund.org>.
- 3 University of Wisconsin Digital Collections Center; Latin American Cartonera Publishers Database, <http://uwdc.library.wisc.edu/collections/Arts/EloisaCart> (accessed 5 June 2014).