

Interview with Patricia Phelps de Cisneros

by Ada Ciniglio, Acting Director, ArtTable

Ada Ciniglio: As a collector, philanthropist, educator, and woman you, like many ArtTable members, are juggling different and demanding roles. What is your advice to women who have multiple and challenging roles to fulfill?

Patricia Phelps de Cisneros: One needs to have a sense of flexibility regarding priorities; on some days, the tiniest detail may be the most important thing to attend to. I have been fortunate because my husband Gustavo and I complement each other regarding our abilities to understand the importance of both the details and the “big picture.” The details need to be attended to, but not at the expense of the overall larger outcome; similarly, that outcome will not be as successful if the small things continually fall through the cracks. I also think that because everything I do, whether as a collector, philanthropist or educator, relates somehow to Latin America, there is a connecting thread that makes those efforts more solidly of one piece. On the other hand, if one of my grandchildren walks into the room, I drop everything!

AC: Works from your collection have been lent to museums all over the world and you yourself sit on a number of boards—from MoMA in New York, and the Harvard Art Museums, to the Reina Sofia in Spain and the Tate in London. From your international perspective, what do you think is the museum’s role in the 21st century? And do you see that role being different in Europe from that in the Americas?

PPdC: I grew up in Caracas in the VQs, where art was all around me as part of the environment and incorporated very publicly into the modernist architecture of the city, so that the city itself seemed like an open-air museum. I didn’t therefore think first of art as something that resided in a museum, because it was part of my daily life. What I’ve seen in my travels and associations with international institutions is how important it is for artworks—as well as curators and artists—to travel. For an audience to be able to see works in a different context or culture; for curators to speak with artists directly in their studios; and for artists to be able to understand what others, geographically remote from their own practice, are doing and thinking, are opportunities to make the connections that are crucial to the vitality of art. Freedom of thought depends on the physical and virtual mobility of people, objects and ideas.

Much of what we have done in the Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros directly supports those kinds of exchanges to and from Latin America: we lend work, we underwrite travel grants and scholarships—but we also understand that virtual travel is an important part of the equation and have begun to focus on digital media to disseminate ideas, art, and individual voices across miles. Our association with MoMA is a natural one, as the museum has had the most comprehensive holdings of Latin American art since its

inception, and has dedicated significant resources to continue to build upon those holdings. Gustavo and I have underwritten staff positions that support Latin American art, and I founded the Latin American and Caribbean Fund, which works with curators throughout the museum to identify works from those regions that will best augment the collection, and through our committee members we secure funding for their purchase.

Our partnership with the Reina Sofía museum comes at a moment when the traditional support of European museums by the state is changing to allow more participation by the private sector. We have helped to create the Reina Sofía Foundation as one mechanism whereby that may happen, and are excited to be involved with an organization at the forefront of embracing this change. Existing museums do such a good job at contextualizing artworks that we made a conscious decision not to build a physical structure to house our collection. To have done so would have effectively isolated them as one entity, when what we really wanted was for people to gain a sense of how these artworks were actively engaged in a much broader conception of art history.

AC: Your family has been involved with media holdings for generations. How has this involvement affected your own philanthropy and perspective on the arts?

PPdC: Going back to the idea of travel, one can look at traditional media as important vehicles for ideas and news and culture to traverse and transcend political boundaries, which is a goal in keeping with what we have done with the collection. Today, as I mentioned, digital media is making more interactions possible: we can have a conference in Caracas and stream it live all over the world, and extend invitations for participation in real time to people who don't have to be physically present to weigh in. It's amazing!

AC: You recently entered into a collaborative agreement with the Museo Reina Sofía through which more than two hundred works from the Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros are being shown in Spain with the purpose of highlighting the role of Latin American artists in the history of modern and contemporary art. What do you see as the responsibility of a collector to the public?

PPdC: One of our mantras is that we are not the owners of artworks; we are merely their caretakers for a while. As such, our obligation is, of course, to make sure they are physically well cared for; but more than that, to assure that they get the scholarly attention they deserve, and participate in more global accounts of art history.

AC: Through your philanthropy you have supported a variety of educational projects—from endowments of professorships to traveling fellowships for students. What guides your philanthropy in regard to education? What are you trying to accomplish in this area?

PPdC: In the most simple terms, we are creating possibilities for people, ideas, and culture to get acquainted across boundaries—to make those boundaries less daunting, more elastic and transparent, and to create conditions conducive to a free exchange of ideas and information. Lately, we have been concentrating on publications—including e-books—which have been increasingly important as yet another tool to disseminate information about Latin American culture.

AC: You and your husband are collectors of colonial and ethnographic objects as well as modernist works of geometric abstraction from Latin America and depictions and documentation of Latin America by traveler artists in the seventeenth century and beyond. Recently you have been collecting contemporary Latin American art. What objects have you chosen over the years that have a particular resonance for you and why?

PPdC: It is too difficult to choose individual pieces. One of the joys of making loans from the collection is that, in each place where the works or objects are displayed, I have the opportunity to see them anew, in fresh juxtapositions with other works and objects; literally in a new light. Each aspect of the collection reflects our involvement with the heritage of Latin America, our fascination for the cultures represented within the region in general, and in Venezuela in particular. The colonial objects are a material history of the influences and counterinfluences of mingled cultures; the Orinoco collection of indigenous objects preserves another aspect of Venezuela's cultural past and also recollects personal memories of family expeditions to the Amazonas; the Latin American geometric abstraction works were among the first things Gustavo and I collected, and represent an aesthetic that I have found consistently appealing and engaging as well as possessing a politically motivated ideology that is peculiarly Latin American; and the paintings, drawings and diaries of the traveler artists who recorded their impressions of Latin America are a revelatory glimpse inside the "discovery" of Latin America through the centuries—a discovery that continues today. Contemporary art is a further unraveling of history; it's exciting to see it as it happens, and to be part of that process.

AC: You have attributed your interest in collecting to your great-grandfather, William Phelps, an ornithologist who went to Venezuela around RYZQ. How would you compare his 19th century approach to collecting with your own?

PPdC: His utter absorption in his self-appointed tasks; his careful research and writing that have served as primary source material for other scientists since; his meticulous documentation and archiving of his birds and his enthusiasm for sharing his discoveries with an international audience were inspiring to me. I also inherited his love of nature and deep connection to place.

AC: With regard to collecting contemporary art, is it important for you to meet the artists and talk to them before buying their work, or do you prefer, as some collectors do, to only meet the artists after you have made your decisions about

collecting their work?

PPdC: I always love talking with artists, but it's not a prerequisite for buying art. The artwork speaks for itself, but what an artist has to say about his or her work provides illuminating contextual information. That's why, in our series of bilingual publications *Conversations/Conversaciones* (which, by the way, are available in digital form from iTunes at <https://itunes.apple.com/> and in print form through our website, www.coleccioncisneros.org), we make records of the artists' voices through discussions with scholars of Latin American art. It's a continuing series, and so far, we have six "conversations" with the artists Carlos Cruz-Diez, Jesús Soto, Tomás Maldonado, Jac Leirner, Ferreira Gullar and Gyula Kosice. Contemporary artists always lead the way with their fearless invention and deep insight; through their work, I feel very connected to what is vital about our world today and in tune with possibilities to come. Artists remind me not to take anything for granted; to remain flexible and open minded, and to appreciate the surprise of the new with a sense of delight and wonder.