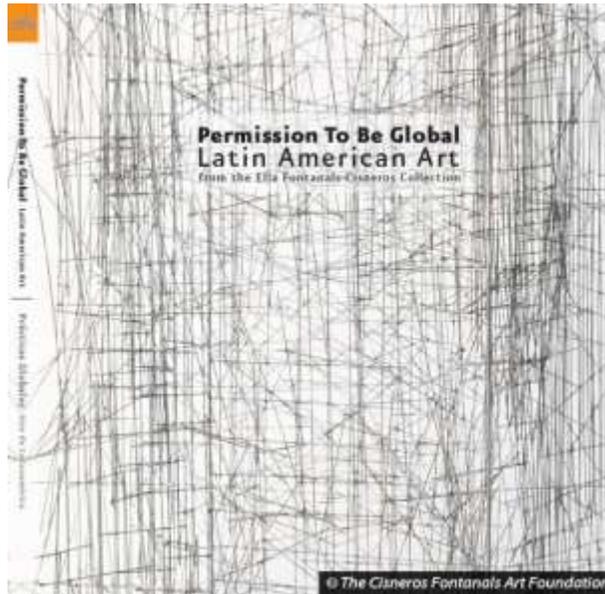


Book Review: *Permission to be Global/Prácticas Globales: Latin American Art from the Ella Fontanals-Cisneros Collection*  
Jordan Karney



Book Cover.

**JEN MERGEL and LIZ MUNSELL.**

***Permission to be Global/Prácticas Globales: Latin American Art from the Ella Fontanals-Cisneros Collection.***

**Miami: The Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation, 2013. 135pp.**

**\$40.00 paper**

**9780615911014**

In the spring of 2014 the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA) mounted *Permission to be Global/ Prácticas Globales: Art from the Ella Fontanals-Cisneros Collection*, the first exhibition of Latin American art in its 138-year history. *Permission to be Global* debuted at the Fontanals-Cisneros Art Foundation (CIFO) during Art Basel Miami in December 2013 before travelling to Boston. Jointly organized by MFA and CIFO curators, the exhibition and accompanying catalogue present some 60 works from Fontanals-Cisneros's private collection made by Latin American artists such as Lygia Clark, León Ferrari, Cildo Meireles, and Ana Mendieta, along with many emerging artists including Eduardo Abaroa and Daniel Medina.

Perhaps because of the broad scope of the exhibition, which spans some twenty nations, fifty years of art production, and includes forty-eight artists, the viewer finds a smoothing over of complex, often tragic, histories, including the omission of the fraught

relationships between the United States and many Latin American countries which intensified during the Cold War. However, despite an abridged presentation of national and personal histories, the works themselves are captivating—both refreshing and familiar—motivating the viewer to seek out supplementary information.

Unfortunately the 135-page fully illustrated exhibition catalogue offers no scholarly essays—only a curatorial “conversation” between MFA Curators Jen Mergel and Liz Munsell, and CIFO Director and Chief Curator Jesus Fuenmayor. The catalogue, like the exhibition, is divided into four sections: “Powers Parodied,” “Borders Redefined,” “Occupied Geometries,” and “Absence Accumulated”; all text is included in both English and Spanish. The sections begin with a single brief introductory paragraph, and each of the following pages include one artwork associated with the section theme, accompanied by one to two illustrations and a three to five line caption.

The five-page curatorial conversation is the catalogue’s only designated space for explanation, discussion of the exhibition’s theoretical underpinnings, and its organizing principles, and while the participants introduce many rich discussion topics (translation, immigration, and the positive and negative effects of globalization on art production, among others), the conversation reads like an assemblage of selected snippets of email correspondence. It is disjointed, disorienting, and fails to adequately frame the exhibition historically. This is not to say there are no provocative questions posed by the catalogue text—there are, stemming from brief discussions of the exhibition’s rather loaded title and its Cold War era resonances, as well as the difficulties of mounting a “global” exhibition. However, treatment of these seemingly central issues tends to be overly broad, and they are often only cursorily addressed.

The lack of contextualizing information in the exhibition installation and the absence of scholarly essays in the catalogue renders the endeavor something of a missed opportunity. The catalogue is the lasting trace of the museum exhibition—and in the case of contemporary exhibitions, catalogues become increasingly valuable research tools, as they are often the first and only spaces for the scholarly treatment of emerging artists. This publication would have provided an excellent occasion, if it so desired, for the MFA, Boston to demonstrate its interest in making a serious commitment to both contemporary art and the Arts of the Americas, which it has signaled boldly in recent years with the opening of its new Art of the Americas wing and the Linde Family wing for Contemporary Art. [1] Instead, a catalogue containing only a single “curatorial conversation” and surprisingly brief captions for each artwork included seem not to do justice to what MFA Director Malcolm Rogers describes in his foreword as an “exciting moment” in the museum’s history (12). Regrettably, in this instance the catalogue seems to be a publicity tool, marking the museum’s participation in the Latin American art exhibition trend, rather than making a significant contribution to the development of the field’s literature. Ultimately this catalogue is most useful as an annotated checklist for an exhibition of outstanding works of contemporary Latin American art. Those readers seeking historical background, political context, and conceptual linkages will have to fill the gaps themselves.

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**Exhibition schedule:** Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation, Miami, December 4, 2013-February 23, 2014; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, March 19-July 13, 2014.

**Endnotes:**

[1] While the exhibition catalogue was technically published by CIFO, MFA involvement was essential. Because the MFA has such a strong publications department, I believe that production of a more scholarly robust catalogue would not have been outside the realm of possibility for the institution, if it wished to produce such a text.