

Shaping History: Forty-Five Decades of Latin American Art at the Blanton Museum of Art

by URSULA DAVILA-VILLA

I

IN THE LATE 1940S, Donald Goodall, then Professor of Art History at the University of Texas at Austin, learned Spanish and Portuguese and began traveling extensively throughout Central and South America, visiting museums and artists' studios wherever he could. In

1963, Goodall was named the founding director of the University Art Museum at UT Austin.¹ While the Museum of Modern Art in New York had seemingly diminished its initial interest in Mexican Art,² Goodall fully embraced Latin American art at UT in the 1960s, making it a collecting priority for the institution. Key to this effort was Goodall's encounter with John and Barbara Duncan in 1966.³ The Duncans began collecting Latin American art during the late 1940s when they lived in Lima, Peru. Unique to their collecting strategy was their sense of history and appreciation for written records. As they acquired artwork, they also gathered documents and books on mostly South American artists, creating an impressive archive that is currently housed at The Blanton and the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection at UT. Captivated by the University Art Museum and UT's interest in Latin America, the Duncans began donating their art collection to the museum in 1971,⁴ gifting the work of artists such as Argentine Antonio Berni, Chilean Eugenio Dittborn, German-Mexican Günther Gerzso, Uruguayan Joaquín Torres-García, and Peruvian Fernando de Szyslo, among others.⁵

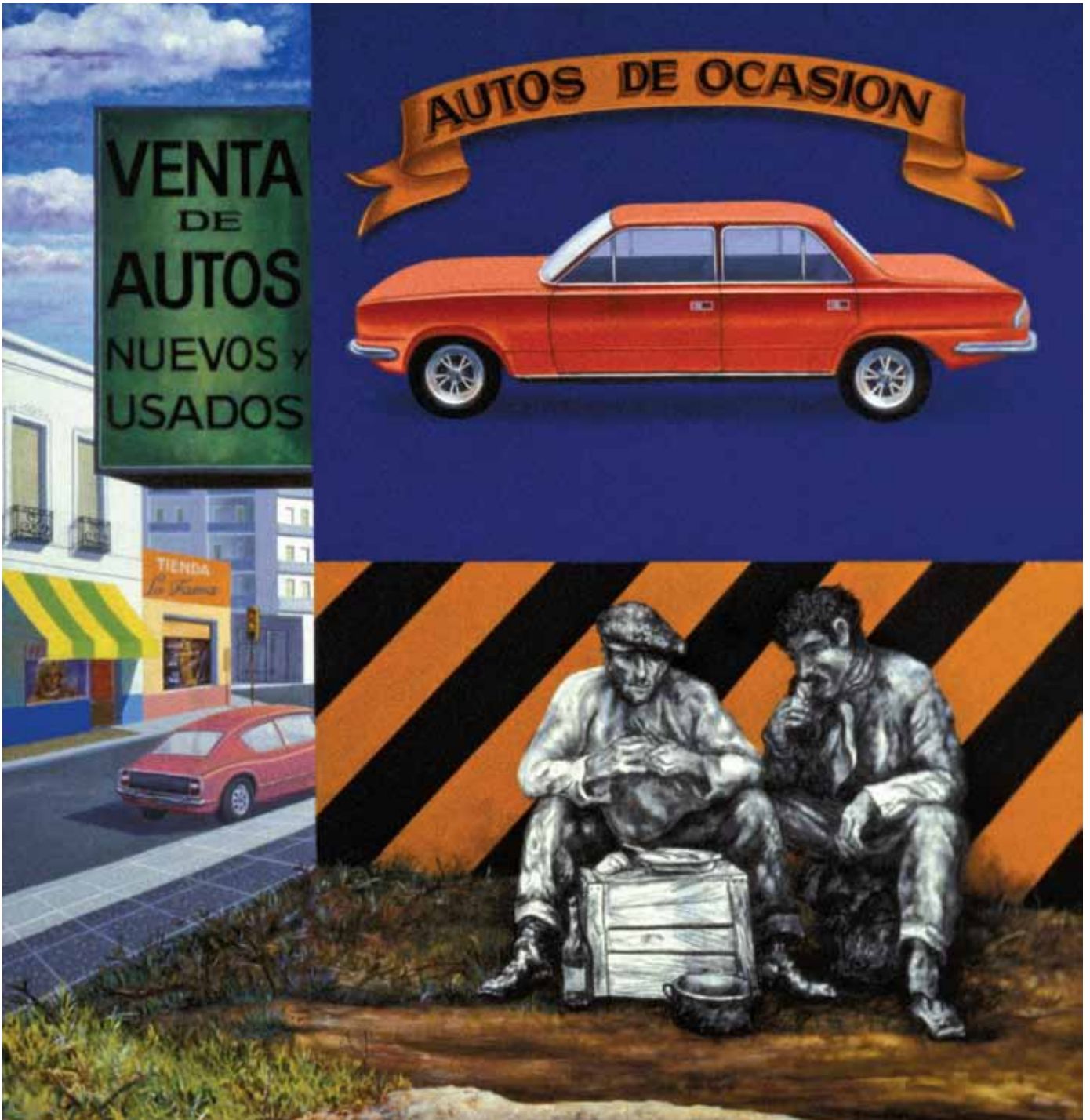
Latin American art has been part of The Blanton's DNA since its founding. The department's most emblematic characteristic during its first decades was its pioneering spirit. Over the years, curators who presided over the department created opportunities to study,

display, and document art from a large and diverse region while producing innovative scholarship that shaped the emerging field of study. For example, in 1974 The Blanton organized the exhibition *Joaquín Torres-García 1949–1974*, curated by Barbara Duncan, becoming the first North American museum to present in depth the work of one of the great masters of modernism. Furthermore, while most American institutions that considered Latin American art privileged work from Mexico, The Blanton's collection and programming was distinguished by its inclusion of art from across the region. Throughout the years, the museum's collection and exhibition program revealed the richness and complexity embedded in different art practices throughout Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, Uruguay, Venezuela, and beyond.

The year 1988 would be pivotal in The Blanton's history. In a risky and visionary move that signaled the depth of its commitment to Latin American art, the museum became the first North American institution to establish a curatorial position exclusively dedicated to this field. Mari Carmen Ramírez⁶ was the first curator to hold this post, developing groundbreaking exhibitions such as *The School of the South: El Taller Torres-García and Its Legacy* (1991) and *Cantos Paralelos: Visual Parody in Contemporary Argentinean Art* (1999). In 2002, two years after her departure, Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro⁷ became the second curator to lead the department. His six-year tenure saw



Barbara Duncan, 1974.



Antonio Berni, *Mediodía [Noontime]*, 1976, acrylic and collage on canvas. Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Barbara Duncan Fund, 1977.97.

the reinstallation of the permanent collection as *America/Americas* at the then newly opened Mari and James A. Michener Gallery Building (2006), the redefinition of the institution's mission as serving both the university and Austin communities, and concluded with the award-winning exhibition *Geometry of Hope: Latin American Abstract Art from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection* (2007). While both curators shaped and presided over one of the few North American

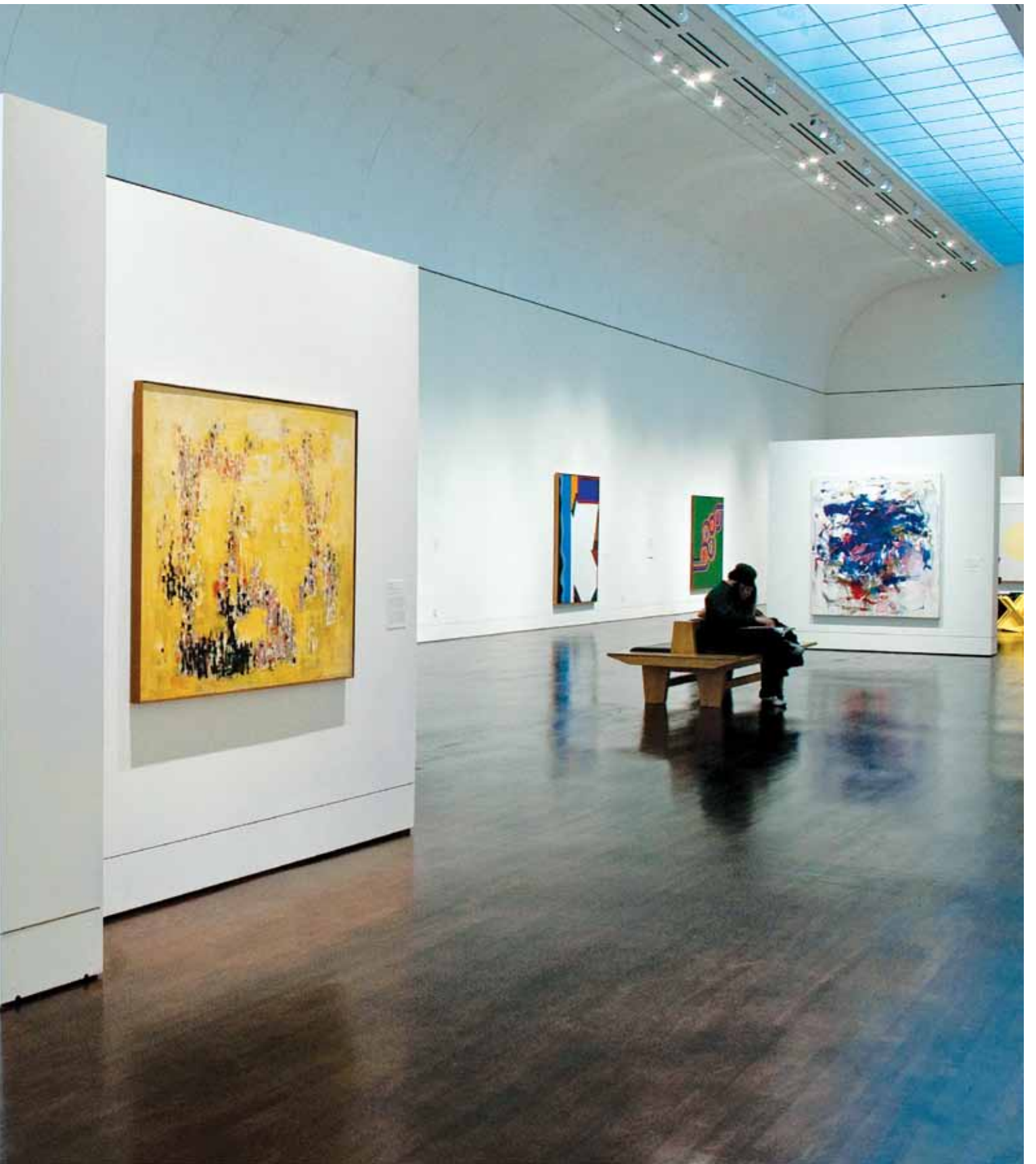
curatorial departments exclusively devoted to Latin American art, they also became leaders within this growing field that transformed debates, displays, and missions of museums and universities in the United States.

In 2008, the year that I was given charge of the Latin American department following Pérez-Barreiro's departure, The Blanton faced great new challenges and changes. Its director of thirty years, Jessie

Otto Hite, retired, followed by a two-year search for a new director. Ned Rifkin then briefly served two years before the appointment in 2011 of Simone Wicha as director of the institution. While these changes took place, the field of Latin American art saw exceptional international expansion, resulting in the founding of several Latin American art departments in museums and the growth in numbers of Latin American art enthusiasts around the world. These developments transformed the topography and geography of the field and outgrew the infrastructure that defined debates, collecting practices, and exhibitions. As a result, the role The Blanton played when it first began collecting and exhibiting Latin American art dramatically changed in a matter of years. Today, Latin American art no longer lives exclusively within region-specific departments or museums. In recent years, specialists of American and European modern and contemporary art have organized and presented work from across Latin America, enriching the current debates and discourse—particularly when considering issues such as identity, gender, and geography. Within this context, The Blanton’s approach to Latin American art shifted from displaying North and South American art as parallel but different histories, to the aforementioned *America/Americas*, a platform that redefined the political map to create a borderless geography for art from the Americas. Co-curated by Annette DiMeo Carlozzi, current deputy director for art and programs at The Blanton and then curator of American and contemporary art, and Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, this display of the permanent collection combines the museum’s modern and contemporary American and Latin American art holdings, making connections between the artistic movements, history, politics, economics, and cultures of the entire continent. This proposition responded to the changing landscape of the study of art and intended to expand horizons and revisit assumptions of how region-specific art should connect with art from other localities.

In addition to the changes developing in the field at large, The Blanton’s location—a research university with a strong commitment to Latin American studies—has significantly informed our methodology for researching and producing exhibitions and publications on Latin American art. First as a university





Installation view of *America/Americas*, 2006, Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin.

gallery, and later as one of the biggest university museums in the country, The Blanton has grown alongside one of the most important art history departments in the nation. In 1981, UT Austin became the first institution of higher education to establish an academic position devoted to the study and teaching of Latin American art. Dr. Jacqueline Barnitz first held this position, and in later years, the Latin American art faculty grew to two posts, currently occupied by Dr. Andrea Giunta and Dr. George Flaherty (see related story p. 51). These academic voices have had great value in the development of The Blanton's Latin American art project. Indeed, many of our exhibitions were conceived and organized in conjunction with faculty and graduate students. Exhibitions like the aforementioned *The Geometry of Hope*, *The New York Graphic Workshop, 1965–1970* (2008), and *Recovering Beauty: The 1990s in Buenos Aires*⁸ invited the participation of faculty and students through related research seminars, public programs, and publications. These critical discussions have greatly contributed to each project, resulting in tangible decisions that positively shaped exhibitions and publications. In addition, the participation of students of art, art history, and art education in academic and curatorial projects has enriched their graduate school experience and shaped their young professional careers.

As the debates around Latin American art transformed, so did the art market. In 1998 the museum was able to acquire one of the most important works by now internationally recognized Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles, the installation *Missão/Missões* (1987). However, in the face of escalating prices over the past decade, The Blanton has changed its collecting strategy in order to continue to grow its holdings within its purchasing capabilities. By 2004, the museum was collecting the work of artists from the 1990s generation. The idea behind this initiative was to collect key artists working in different cities throughout Latin America in order to contextualize the contemporary artistic production developing in contexts as different as Santiago de Chile and Guatemala City. This strategy not only allowed us to document art “scenes,” it also led to the development of research projects that centered on the urban nucleus of the works. Such was the case of the aforementioned *Recovering Beauty*, the first historical

examination of artistic production in Buenos Aires during the last decade of the twentieth century.

While the study, presentation, and collecting of Latin American art has rapidly diversified, creating a richer and more complex field, this does not imply that specialists in this area of study are no longer needed in order to produce scholarship and exhibitions. On the contrary, experts in Argentinean, Mexican, Brazilian, and Guatemalan art, among others, should take the lead in shaping the debates taking place around Latin American art. In an expanding world where borders are easily crossed in the digital sphere, specificity in the face of integration is more important than ever. In a way, the history behind The Blanton's Latin American art project serves as a blueprint of the field's early beginnings, development, and growth. It is important to recognize that key to The Blanton's identity and Latin American art project is its relationship with UT, a university that houses one of the most important Latin American studies programs in the world. This setting demands a curatorial practice that is open to debate and questioning, and that integrates critical voices and embraces experimentation—exactly the kind of environment that prospers in any university.

We are once again at a crossroads that calls for a visionary program and commitment to excellence. With this in mind, the museum's future programming in Latin American art grows out of a commitment to bilateral collaboration. We recently established a partnership with the Fundação Iberê Camargo (Porto Alegre, Brazil) to develop the first career survey of recognized Brazilian artist Waltercio Caldas. This exhibition will open first in 2012 in Porto Alegre, and then during spring of 2013 will travel to the Pinacoteca da Estado de São Paulo and in fall of the same year to The Blanton.

Whenever I am asked why I specialized in Latin American art my answer is: because the art from this region has density, agency, and history, and the artists never cease to take risks allowing for the unexpected while mirroring the specificity of their own reality. Indeed, Latin American art allows for a multidimensional and sensorial experience. The vision to define a curatorial practice focus on Latin American art should therefore come from the source itself: the art and its creators. ✨

Ursula Davila-Villa is associate curator of Latin American art at the Blanton Museum of Art.

Notes

1. In 1980 the University Art Museum was officially renamed the Archer M. Huntington Gallery, and in 1997 it became the Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art.
2. It is important to mention that MoMA is considered one of the first institutions of international prominence to devote attention and resources to art from Latin America. Their involvement with the field has been episodic. Beginning in the 1930s, the museum mostly collected art by Mexican artists. The following decade the institution expanded its purview to other artists from South America. The postwar years saw a decreasing interest in acquisitions and display of art from the region. However, since the 1990s, a resurgence of collecting activity devoted to Latin American art as well as the display of monographic exhibitions of artists from Venezuela and Mexico, among others, have reenergized MoMA's Latin American program.
3. Donald Goodall met Barbara Duncan in 1966 at Yale University during the symposium organized in conjunction with the exhibition *Art of Latin America Since Independence: 1800–1965*, curated by Stanton Loomis Catlin, from Yale University Art Gallery, and Terence Grieder, from the University of Texas. The exhibition was displayed at the Blanton Museum (then the University Art Museum) April 17–May 22, 1966.
4. The Duncans donations to the museum continued through 1999.
5. Previous to the Duncans' donation, The Blanton received a major gift of American art in 1968 from writer James Michener and his wife. The Michener donation of close to 300 works played a role in the Duncans' decision to offer their collection to the museum.
6. Mari Carmen Ramírez is currently the Wortham Curator of Latin American Art and the director of the International Center for the Arts of the Americas at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.
7. Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro is currently director of the Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros.
8. I was the curator of *Recovering Beauty: The 1990s in Buenos Aires*. The exhibition, displayed at The Blanton February 20–May 22, 2011, was developed in collaboration with UT and Universidad de Buenos Aires graduate students.