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## Marta Traba in Black and White

This publication is a translation from the Spanish to the English of selected passages from the essay *En blanco y negro: Marta Traba en la televisión colombiana, 1954–1958*, by Nicolás Gómez Echeverri.

Gómez Echeverri's text examines the 1950s-era Colombian television programs produced by the influential South American art critic and historian Marta Traba. These programs were groundbreaking on various levels, not least in their ambition to teach art appreciation to a wider, popular audience. Gómez Echeverri's research focused on the making of these early TV shows, and on their public reception in Colombia. It is worth noting that Marta Traba continued realizing, albeit sporadically, other television programming until her tragic death in 1983 at the age of 63.

Originally published in 2008 by the university press of the Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, Colombia, Gómez Echeverri's essay was written in conjunction with a series of artworks he made as a thesis project for his art degree from the same university. The selected and translated passages in the following text—titled *Marta Traba in Black and White*, it is the third publication from Murmur—are depictions of the encounters with the images that inspired Gómez Echeverri's investigation into Marta Traba, reorganized and interspersed here with factual research he collected on her television programs. The illustrations that accompany this edition of the publication are selected from the series of artworks that Gómez Echeverri himself created in conjunction with his original essay.

Nicolás Gómez Echeverri (1984) lives and works in Bogotá, Colombia. A visual artist, he is one of the founding members of the independent art research group En un lugar de la plástica ([www.enunlugardelaplastica.com](http://www.enunlugardelaplastica.com)). With this group, Gómez Echeverri has written on the work of several Colombian artists and cultural practitioners, among them Maria Teresa Hincapié, Judith Marquez, and Carlos Rojas, and organized exhibitions at venues including the Museo Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá.

—Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy



I've purchased a black-and-white photograph that depicts an image on a television screen. It shows a somewhat rectangular screen, with its inner-rounded corners framing the televised image. The intense gleam that emanates from that screen makes the space around it appear marginal, like a wide, black frame. The image itself offers a television program from the 1950s in Colombia. A young woman with short, dark hair stares at the audience. She is dressed in a tailored suit and a turtleneck. The camera shutter must have been pressed while she blinked, for her eyes appear to be closed and, as if she were about to say something to the spectators, her mouth is slightly open and her hands are caught in movement.

The woman is sitting behind a desk made of wood, on which a stack of books is piled. There are about seven or eight of these books. Some are thin, some thick. Some leather-bound, others paperback. Due to the decade in which it was broadcast, the television program pictured in this photograph must have had a duration of fifteen to twenty minutes per episode. That's what makes the pile of books so unusual. Given the brevity of the program, and in lieu of the woman's speech and use of the images that rest on an easel situated next to her on the stage, why would one need to have or use so many books?

In the photograph you can also see that in the backdrop a curtain hangs across the entire stage. The curtain suggests that this shot belongs to a particular *mise-en-scène*. For 1950s-era spectators and for us as well, this young, elegant, and captivating protagonist is appearing on screen in the role of a versed woman that shares new knowledge with her viewing public. This woman is Marta Traba, an art historian and critic from Argentina that arrived in Colombia in 1954 by way of Europe.<sup>1</sup> From the year of her arrival in the capital city of Bogotá, and for the following five years, Marta Traba created four broadcast programs dedicated exclusively to art history and criticism that aired on Colombia's recently inaugurated television network system.



Marta Traba began producing her television programs toward the end of 1954. The young director of Radio Televisora Nacional, Fernando Gómez Agudelo, had introduced this Argentine critic to Colombian national television. According to Marta Traba in an article in the newspaper *El Espectador*, Gómez Agudelo “wanted cultural programs as part of his variety lineup.” Television in Colombia had been inaugurated on June 13, 1954, and was broadcasting on a single channel<sup>2</sup> during evenings for three hours a day, from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. Each program had a duration of between fifteen and twenty-five minutes.

At 32 years of age, Marta Traba began her work in television with a brief program that aired on Monday nights. The program was called “La Rosa de los Vientos” (The Wind Rose), and was about her travels in Europe.

Soon after, Marta Traba began developing television programs about visual art. The first program on this topic was called “El museo imaginario” (The Imaginary Museum), which was broadcast on Wednesdays at 9:30 p.m. The name of that television show was taken from André Malraux’s book of the same title, and would later inspire Marta Traba’s first essay on modern art, “El museo vacío” (The Empty Museum), which was published by Editorial Mito in 1958. The stage set for this show featured a single wall hung with “an exhibition” of postcards and illustration plates of European artworks, particularly artworks from the twentieth-century avant-gardes. The recording studio was in a basement room of the Biblioteca Nacional in Bogotá. This television program was thus an exhibition of art, made up of a curatorial selection of reproductions, generally paintings, which were summed up and commented on by Marta Traba.

Similar to “El museo imaginario” was her program “Una visita a los museos” (A Visit to the Museums), begun in early 1955, which broadcast on Friday nights. In this program “spectators could see, by way of graphics, the most important aspects that characterized European museums,”<sup>3</sup> including the Louvre in Paris and the Prado in Madrid. In each episode, Marta Traba would appear holding up maps, image plates, and books that she had brought

back from her travels in Europe—where she had visited the most important museums—and then she would present artworks from their collections that she had selected.

Parallel to “Una visita a los museos,” Marta Traba also starred in the program “El ABC del arte” (The ABC of Art), which presented national art, and for which she conducted interviews with renowned Colombian artists of the time. Artists that appeared in this television show included the painters Ian Munn, Judith Márquez, Marco Ospina, Armando Villegas, Augusto Rivera, Gustavo Valcárcel, Sofía Urrutia, and Ignacio Gómez Jaramillo, as well as the sculptors Hugo Martínez and Arenas Betancourt.

Marta Traba’s first television shows aired for about two years but, as she would explain later in an interview, they were suspended in 1956 for political reasons by the government administration of General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla.<sup>4</sup>



In January 1956, a feature on Marta Traba in *Cromos* magazine led with the heading: “A Look at the Lifestyle and Thought Process of the Maximum Colombian Television Star.” A month before, *El Espectador* newspaper had listed Marta Traba, along with television presenter Gloria Valencia de Castaño, as among the “most popular female figures” in the country.

Marta Traba landed in Colombia after being educated in art history and theory in Europe. She arrived at the age of 32, though she appeared much younger. She was an elegant woman, with tobacco-colored eyes. She was not very tall. Throughout her life, Marta Traba had a sweet, soft, southern Argentinian accent. She collected hats, and she dressed in European-tailored suits and skirts. Until the end of the 1950s, she wore her hair in a bob, which came to define her look.

In Bogotá, Marta Traba became part of the most influential social spheres of communication and public opinion in visual art, literature, and education. Her demeanor and intellect captivated Colombia’s elite and its general public. That she had studied in Europe added to her cache as the very image of the young foreign woman; it also added to her cultural capital, for it represented knowing the latest trends in contemporary art. And those ideas and references were expressed with ease and creativity through both her writing and oral skills. Thanks to this, Marta Traba brought to the art-historical field novel ways of thinking about art, and she was able to create platforms for debate that were attractive to the larger public, though certainly repulsive to some.

The newly inaugurated television network services in Colombia required that its presenters exhibit expertise on topics of cultural interest and, preferably, new and attractive faces with oral expressions that could confront the challenges of transmission. Even though she initially showed some level of nervousness and had a natural anxiety triggered by the film cameras, Marta Traba performed well and communicated aptly. Because of this, and particularly because of her pedagogical motivation and elevated discourse,

she did more than match what was being accomplished in other Colombian media channels such as radio and the press. Her stage talents, furthermore, were advantageous for television's audiovisual nature. Taking drama courses with Seki Sano reinforced Marta Traba's inherent performance abilities. A Japanese stage director that arrived in Colombia around the same time that Marta Traba began her television career, Seki Sano taught theater technique, history, and theory, but it wasn't long before he was deported for being a communist.



On June 4, 1957, Marta Traba reappeared on national television, after an invitation by Compañía Colombiana de Seguros to be interviewed on a cultural news program.<sup>5</sup> That same year, at the invitation of the directors of Radiodifusora Nacional, Marta Traba returned fully to television. On Friday, November 22, she began broadcasting “Curso de Historia del Arte” (Art History Course). Not long after, in collaboration with thirty prestigious intellectuals, she began another television program, “Ciclo de Conferencias” (The Conference Series), which included the participation of some of the most important people in science, literature, art, economics, and education, all of who proposed discussion topics for the show.<sup>6</sup>

“Curso de Historia del Arte” was widely promoted in the Colombian press, generating great expectations. It consisted of thirty-nine episodes that intended to cover cave art to the twentieth-century European avant-gardes. In this program, Marta Traba appeared seated behind a desk surrounded by books; a chalkboard stood nearby, on which she occasionally sketched diagrams of architectural designs or compositions from frescos and paintings. More than 640 members from around the country signed up for this televised art course, and received copies of the program script—originally, typewritten—so they could study the topics after each broadcast.<sup>7</sup>

Some of these scripts included suggested activities with questions about the topics at hand. The affiliated members could send in their responses to the program producer, Servicio Cultural de la Televisión Nacional, and Marta Traba would read aloud in the following episodes the names of those who best responded to the questions. According to the host of “Curso de Historia del Arte,” copies of these scripts were used by a group of priests in Chocó to teach the courses in regions where there was no television signal.



A black-and-white photograph taken in 1957 or 1958 shows Marta Traba standing in profile. She is wearing a dark blouse with three-quarter-length sleeves; a skirt, also in a dark hue, which drops to just above her ankles; and leather high-heel shoes. In her left hand she holds a sheet of paper; in her right, a piece of chalk, which lightly touches a chalkboard. Only a fraction of this chalkboard appears in the image, as it is cut off by the right edge of the photograph. It seems Marta Traba is drawing a diagram. Perhaps it is of an architectural floor plan, or a sketch of some fresco, or even the composition of a painting. In the foreground, in front of the chalkboard, also on the right-hand side of the photograph, is a structure that appears to be made of wood. The structure is comparable to an easel, and presents a sheet of paper featuring an illustration of, it appears, an artwork.

Also in the foreground, but on the left-hand side of the image, you can see a fragment of a film camera that appears to be manipulated, as you can make out a splinter of someone's hand handling the equipment. If you follow the direction of that camera lens, you notice that it appears to be focused on the easel-like structure that supports the illustration. Behind the film camera, you can also catch a glimpse of a desk, even though only part of it is visible. Four or five books are placed on that desk, as well as an object that looks like a cloth bag. Behind the desk is a chair, and behind the whole stage set is a curtain that fills the background.

The elements that accompany the scenery—the desk and chair, the array of books, the chalkboard and easel—and the protagonist's docent-like character allows us to see in this image the pedagogical tone intentionally set by this constructed television stage. One can also see this intention in other production shots. These kinds of photographs make evident the need to produce and analyze visual didactic material, such as image plates, maps, illustrations, books, and diagrams. In these film stills or production shots, Marta Traba appears holding or pointing at her supporting materials, explaining them to the television cameras for a spectator public. Even the very names

of her television programs, “El ABC del arte” and “Curso de Historia del Arte,” acknowledged and corroborated their intention of being educational. (We could also consider how the titles of her other programs, “El museo imaginario” and “Una visita a los museos”, invoke the idea of the museum as a space for education.)

“Personally,” Marta Traba wrote, “I think of TV as a vehicle for culture, and everything that refers to it makes me enthusiastic.” The press constantly highlighted this educational aspect of her programs as their principal virtue.<sup>8</sup>



Marta Traba's sporadic television appearances after "Curso de Historia del Arte" ended are mentioned in the 2003 essay "From Marta Traba to Sister Wendy: Arte por la tele," by Florencia Bazzano-Nelson.<sup>9</sup> Bazzano-Nelson notes that in 1959 Marta Traba presented a short program called "Viaje alrededor del arte" (Around the Art World), and that between 1961 and 1962 "Una Visita a los museos" was rebroadcast. Unfortunately, no records are left of these television shows, nor do statements by Marta Traba about them appear in press articles of the time. The bibliography and press articles that offer information about this art historian and critic's participation in Colombian television also point to the existence of another program, "Puntos de vista" (Viewpoints), broadcast in 1966 yet no longer on state television. This television show was produced by the private network Teletigre, directed by Consuelo de Montejo, and transmitted on Channel 9. "Puntos de vista," Marta Traba said, "was not an art show, but more about presenting different perspectives on culture in general: visual arts, literature, theater, travels, interviews."<sup>10</sup>

As in 1956, a change in the political climate emerged, causing "Puntos de vista" to be suspended in September 1966. Marta Traba had invited to the show a group of students from the National University to talk about their cultural, academic, and professional labor, but their statements were seen as inciting subversion and police burst in during the live transmission. Afterwards, the show's host declared that she would permanently end the program "since she could not ask for public respect if she were to accept censorship and police control, nor if she remained working for a television network in which its director cannot make the necessary and advisable distinction between an independent intellectual, an electrician, and a servant."<sup>11</sup>

In 1983, the year that President Belisario Betancur would give her Colombian nationality as well as the year of her death, Marta Traba recorded with the director Rodrigo Castaño Valencia a series of twenty episodes, each thirty minutes long, of "La historia del arte moderno contada desde Bogotá" (The History of Modern Art Narrated From Bogotá). Inspired by the

renowned “The Shock of the New” by Australian art critic Robert Hughes,<sup>12</sup> the program began transmission in 1984, inaugurated with a homage to Marta Traba organized by friends and colleagues including Lía Ganitzky, Ana Mercedes Hoyos, Bernardo Salcedo, Beatriz González, Emma Araújo, and Gloria Valencia de Castaño. In each of the show’s episodes, which were to be her last television productions, Marta Traba presented a movement or chapter in the history of modern art, making a brief introduction to the topic, then showing corresponding images of artworks by artists in the United States, Europe, Latin America, and Colombia.<sup>13</sup> The television programs were shot throughout Bogotá—in Plaza Bolívar, street markets, artist studios, and various renowned buildings of the city such as Torres del Parque.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In understanding Marta Traba's various cultural roles, it's worthwhile to consider Carolina Ponce de León's thoughts on the role of the Colombian critic: "In Colombia, the role of the art critic gets confused with that of the historian, pedagogue, commentator, curator, and journalist. Without the infrastructure that allows one to train, differentiate, and professionalize the role of divulging art, the cultural "promoter" is a jack of all trades." See: Carolina Ponce de León, *El Efecto Mariposa: Ensayos sobre arte en Colombia, 1985–2000* (Bogotá: Instituto Distrital de Cultura y Turismo, 2004), 223.

<sup>2</sup> It was transmitted on Channel 8 in Bogotá, Channel 10 in Manizales, and Channel 7 in Medellín.

<sup>3</sup> Alberto Rojas, "La T-V es un gran medio para educar, dice Marta Traba," *El Espectador*, March 15, 1958, final edition.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. [Translator's Note: General Gustavo Rojas Pinillo assumed power in Colombia when he led a coup d'état in Colombia on June 13, 1953; he was elected president the following year, and eventually overthrown in 1957. It was his administration that brought television services for the first time to Colombia.]

<sup>5</sup> Translator's Note: Some weeks before, on May 10, 1957, General Gustavo Rojas Pinillo's regime was overthrown.

<sup>6</sup> See: Alberto Rojas, "La T-V es un gran medio para educar, dice Marta Traba," *El Espectador*, March 15, 1958, final edition; and, no author, "Television Cultural," *El Tiempo*, February 7, 1958, final edition.

<sup>7</sup> The episodes and scripts included the following titles (in Spanish): *Nacimiento del arte*; *Akhen-Atón (Tell el Amarna)*; *Persépolis*; *Cnosos*; *Olimpia*; *Atenas*; *Elche*; *Suplemento de Semana Santa: Arte Religioso Moderno*; *Tarquiniia*; *Roma*; *Pompeya*; *Fayoum*; *Palmira*; *Ravena*; *Moscú*; *Autun y Vezelay*; *Chartres*; *Reims y Amiens*; *La Sonrisa y el fin del gótico*; *Pisa y Siena en el 1200*; *Padua*; *Florenxia*; *Roma, año 1500*; *Florenxia 1525*; *Isenheim*; *La Roma de Bernini*; *Quito*; *La Roma de Borromini*; *Amberes 1600*; *Amsterdam 1600*; *De Francia, Siglo XIX*; and *Londres 1800*.

<sup>8</sup> In March 1958, while the program "Curso de Historia del Arte" was being developed, the newspaper *El Espectador* published an article on a report done with Marta Traba. The headline read: "La TV es un gran medio para educar, dice Marta Traba" (TV is a great medium for educating, says Marta Traba). This is significant if you consider the kind of program she was making at the time, which consisted of creating a televised art course in which any person could register and, at no cost, receive by mail a copy of the thirty-eight screenplays to be used as study materials. This initiative clearly exposed the educational aim intended by the producers of these television programs. See: Alberto Rojas, "La T-V es un gran medio para educar, dice Martha [sic] Traba," *El Espectador*, March 15, 1958, final edition.

<sup>9</sup> Florenxia Bazzano-Nelson, "From Marta Traba to Sister Wendy: arte por la tele," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, University of Arizona, Volume 22 (2003): 21–33

<sup>10</sup> Marta Traba, "Carta de Marta Traba sobre programa de TV," *El Tiempo*, September 11, 1966, final edition.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. [Translator's Note: Marta Traba was politically exiled from Colombia in 1968.]

<sup>12</sup> Victoria Verlichak, *Marta Traba. Una terquedad furibunda* (Bogotá: Editorial Planeta, 2003), 289.

<sup>13</sup> The episodes included the following titles (in Spanish): *Post-impressionismo*; *Cubismo*; *La nostalgia del orden* (on Constructivism); *Arte y sociedad*; *La raza* (about the undercurrents of Mexican muralism and Americanism in Colombia); *La visión alterada*; *Más allá de lo real* (on Surrealism); *Las posibilidades de lo fantástico* (about Latin America's appropriation of Surrealism; the film location of this program was the studio of artist Bernardo Salcedo); *La no figuración* (on Abstract Expressionism); *Otra vez el orden* (on geometric abstraction and Minimalism); *El cientismo*; *La geometría sensible*; *El regreso al lugar* (this program focuses considerably on the artwork of Alejandro Obregón); *Arte pop No. 1*; *Arte Pop No. 2*; *Emerge la material*; *Con las manos* (the film location of this program is the studio of artist Olga de Amaral, and deals with craft processes in art, like textile weaving and the use of adobe, straw, and 'fique'); *Arte conceptual* (the film location is the studio of artist Ana Mercedes Hoyos); and *Hiperrealismo* (the film location is the studio of artist David Manzur).

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