

# *The Politics of Taste*



Beatriz González and Cold War Aesthetics **ANA MARÍA REYES**

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**ANA MARÍA REYES**

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## Dis-cursis

The weekly Colombian television show *Correo Especial* on June 7, 1978, begins by showing a woman walking through a narrow, busy, and cluttered flea market.<sup>1</sup> She wears a traditional *ruana*, Colombia's peasant wool poncho, with a short skirt. Massive demographic changes in the mid-twentieth century engendered this type of hybrid fashion, an attempt to resolve the local and traditional with the modern and international. This was a time rife with cultural tensions wrought by what the modernization theorist Walt Whitman Rostow called the transitional stage of development in a society ready for "takeoff" toward modernity.<sup>2</sup> The camera suddenly shifts to a pile of furniture for sale: a wicker crib, a metal bedframe, and a collapsible cot. The reporter Gloria Valencia de Castaño, barely visible through breaks in the crowd, announces that the Pasaje Rivas, this vibrant flea market in which she is standing, has "entered into history . . . thanks to the use and misuse [of its wares] by the artist Beatriz González." As two men carrying furniture pass through the narrow market alley, we notice that the artist has been standing next to the reporter all along.

A spectator familiar with González's artistic production would immediately connect the wicker cribs to *Baby Johnson in situ* (1971; figure I.1), in which the artist assembled her painting of a Johnson and Johnson baby advertisement into a wicker carriage.<sup>3</sup> The bedframes remind the viewer of *Camafeo* (Cameo [1971]; figure I.2), in which González inserted a medallion portrait of Beethoven into a pink metal bedframe decorated with stenciled flowers that the art critic Marta Traba called "repulsive open corollas."<sup>4</sup> The title *Camafeo* carries the double meaning of "cameo" and "ugly bed," connecting a musical icon of legitimate culture in no uncertain terms with bad taste. Likewise, in *Mutis por el foro* (Exit Stage Rear [1973]; figure I.3) González placed her commercial enamel version of Pedro Alcántara Quijano's *El Libertador Muerto* (ca. 1930) — a "representation of a representation" — in the place of a mattress on a red metal bedframe that she purchased at the Pasaje Rivas.<sup>5</sup> The modest bed reminded the artist of Bolívar's desolate passing in Santa Marta in 1830. Reflecting on *Exit Stage Rear* González dryly wondered, "Dead Bolívar, isn't it best for him to rest on a bed?"<sup>6</sup> All three works reproduce immediately recognizable images taken from the mass media or, in the case of Alcántara Quijano's iconic patrimonial painting, repro-



**I.1** Beatriz González, *Baby Johnson in situ*, 1971, enamel on metal plate, assembled on wicker baby carriage, 45 × 30 × 70 cm.

**I.2** Beatriz González, *Camaféo*, 1971, enamel on metal plate, assembled on metal bed, 125 × 100 × 75 cm.

**I.3** Beatriz González, *Mutis por el foro*, 1973, enamel on metal plate assembled on metal bed, 120 × 205 × 90 cm.





duced massively on Colombia's Extra de la Independencia lottery tickets of 1972. Alongside their punning titles, these works materially, stylistically, and thematically exemplify González's critical incursions into the politics of taste, which she has provocatively displayed in art institutions. Her assaults on elites' sensibilities have elicited responses in the media that disclose the processes by which these institutions mediate social and cultural difference.

In 1978, González was already recognized as a leading artist, representing Colombia in various international exhibitions and art competitions, including the biennials held in São Paulo and Venice. Today González remains one of the most powerful cultural figures in Latin America, continuing to produce as an artist, curator, and art historian. While her artworks have consistently engaged the institutional and discursive framing of culture, as a curator of the art and history collections at the National Museum of Colombia and as a highly influential member of the acquisitions committee for the Banco de la República, the largest cultural organization in the nation, she has become a powerful agent of the institutions that legitimize cultural patrimony.<sup>7</sup> Yet during the early years of her career she staged a sharp critique of those very institutions, the modernizing discourses that served as their aesthetic compass, and the exclusionary social structures they buttressed. Her artistic engagements with lowbrow subject matter and materials, saturated with local, gender, and class references, stood in stark contrast to the demands for artists to produce sophisticated, "exportable" works as evidence of Latin American modernity, best represented by the rise to prominence of geometric abstract, kinetic, and op art, along with new technological media, during the post-World War II period.

This book analyzes González's artistic practices; responses to her works, including the writings of the art critic Marta Traba, which helped to secure González's position in the Colombian art world; and the institutions where they worked and contextualizes them within the dynamic historical processes that unfolded during the coalition government of the National Front (1958–1974) and after the Cuban Revolution. Colombia was just emerging from bloody internecine war that has come to be known as La Violencia that left hundreds of thousands dead and the authoritarian dictatorship of Gustavo Rojas Pinilla (1953–1957).<sup>8</sup> With the return to democracy, the nation experienced a short period of optimism about peace, expanding democracy, and improving of the standards of living for all. The failure and erasure from historical memory of this dynamic and innovative period, what the historian Robert Karl calls a "forgotten peace," reveals the limitations of democratic participation.<sup>9</sup> Even the most progressive and well-intentioned reformists were unable to overcome elite distrust of the masses, described as *el pueblo*, and their fear of communism. This is a study of González's emerging career (1964–1970) during the aftermath of this democratic experimentation, a time of disillusionment with the promise of state-led modernization

programs and hemispheric cooperation that motivated many to take up arms through guerrilla insurgency and others to stage their critique from within democratic and cultural institutions.

The passionate and polarized responses that González's paintings generated in the press give us insight into the social anxieties and political frustrations underlying Cold War aesthetic discourses. As a student of Marta Traba at the University of Los Andes (Uniandes) and her protégé at the Bogotá Museum of Modern Art (MAMBO), González's triumphal debut materialized these institutions' desire to cast Colombian art as modern, sophisticated, and universal. However, when González's works turned to local and urban lowbrow culture, they unsettled the still pervasive binary definition of culture as eruditely universal or rural folklore propagated by the Ministry of Education for its cultural policies since the 1930s.<sup>10</sup> Unpacking critical reviews of González's exhibitions reveals the rigid hierarchical society perpetuated by the model of elite modernization that proved to be an insurmountable obstacle for social reform. Social, economic, and political modernization programs claimed to build a more egalitarian and democratic society — a reformist alternative to a Cuban-inspired revolution. However, hemispheric elites perceived the impoverished masses as unruly and threatening, making these objectives contradictory and impossible to achieve. Both González and Traba lived through the turmoil generated by these social, economic, and political engineering programs. As modernization promises failed to deliver, the National Front started to crack down on social unrest, and as many Latin American nations began to experience military repression, including Traba's native Argentina, her critical writings increasingly characterized U.S. culture as a dangerous neoimperial instrument. In tandem, González's disavowal of a homogenized, rational, scientific, and international aesthetic resisted the underlying premises of an evolutionary or progressive modernization ideology. Instead, González's recycling aesthetic looked to the heteroglossia of urban popular culture. She joined artists through the hemisphere, such as expressive figuration artists who attacked conventions of good taste as well as Brazilian artists Hélio Oiticica, Caetano Veloso, and those associated with the Tropicália movement, in resisting the demands of local elites by unleashing flamboyant and insubordinate creativity.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, González's erudite art of appropriation prompted viewers to express their fears and prejudices toward urban newcomers. Critics and intellectuals rehearsed a language of class condescension that reproduced rather than challenged social hierarchies and asserted their privileged distance from the "popular."

## Art and Symbolic Violence

The subject of this book arose from a question: How could Colombian art critics during the 1950s and early 1960s have reduced aesthetic debates to a decontextualized formalist analysis, given that Colombia was undergoing one of the most dramatic and dynamic moments in its history? How could art critics so conspicuously evade issues of violence as the country was emerging out of *La Violencia*, one of its darkest historical moments, and embarking on another phase involving Cuban-inspired guerrillas and counterinsurgency initiatives? Instead of paying attention to myriad artworks that engaged social realities, critics and exhibition jurors, aspiring to an ideal of artistic autonomy, accommodated their descriptive language to formalist and internationalist art discourses. By doing so, critics disconnected artworks from their local contexts at a time when the nation was recovering from civil war and military dictatorship and attempting to transition back to democracy. I came to understand that at the center of political violence in Colombia were other forms of symbolic violence and detachment — among cosmopolitan elites, the provincial *pueblo* (populace), and rural-to-urban migrants; between the world of ideas and historical events; and between those who possessed aesthetic discernment, or “good taste,” and those who did not. González’s works serve as effective critical tools that interrogate the politics of taste, the boundaries of representation within cultural circuits, and art’s relation to symbolic violence.

Colombia has endured several waves of violence and many coexisting conflicts that continue to dramatically alter the social landscape today. González’s career began amid a significant shift in these internal conflicts. To stop the bloodshed of the brutal partisan war between liberals and conservatives known as *La Violencia*, the country’s economic and political elites sponsored a military coup by General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla in 1953. After several years of intensifying authoritarian rule, the traditional ruling parties ousted the dictator and formed the National Front (1958–1974), a power-sharing coalition government. The National Front alternated the presidency and divided power mathematically between the Liberal and Conservative Parties to end partisan resentments and, in theory, make government more pluralistic. By limiting power to the traditional liberal and conservative elites, the National Front government effectively ruled out all other political alternatives.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, while many Latin American nations were succumbing to military dictatorships, this coalition government collaborated closely with the United States to preserve a fragile and restricted democracy through intense modernization programs designed to avert revolution.<sup>13</sup>

The initial phase of the National Front, especially under its architect and first president, Alberto Lleras Camargo, was a time of optimism and collaborative ingenuity in which the state and communities searched for grassroots solutions to

violence and development. As part of this *pax criolla*, the state granted *campesino* combatants amnesty and loans to purchase and farm their land. Many other nongovernment organizations, including the Catholic Church, the Asociación Nacional de Industrialistas (National Association of Industrialists; ANDI), and the Federación Nacional de Cafeteros (National Federation of Coffee Growers; FNC) also searched for alternative ways to tackle social inequities and expand economic and political participation.<sup>14</sup> One exceptional case was Acción Cultural Popular (Popular Cultural Action; ACPO), created by an inventive rural priest, José Joaquín Salcedo, who was able to tap into a vast international religious network to channel anticommunist anxieties and funds into an ambitious and effective rural radio literacy program.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, many of these historical actors soon learned that peace and democracy building would be impossible without major structural changes. For instance, enthusiastic peasant leaders of ACPO, determined to elevate peasants' well-being and productivity through education, realized the program's impotence in the context of indentured servitude.<sup>16</sup> Many community development programs were blocked by old partisan political resentments at the local and national levels.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the efforts of many government officials, rural folk, and even former combatants, the traditional political elites acted to preserve the traditional order and turned against the peasant guerrillas who had been fighting on their behalf in the countryside. Even Lleras Camargo, who extended amnesty to the guerrillas and worked toward their integration into rural economies, was simultaneously instrumental in the developing anticommunist policies of the Organization of American States (OAS) and of the United States in Latin America.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, between 1958 and 1960, before the Alliance for Progress, Lleras Camargo worked with the Eisenhower administration to shift military aid programs reserved for external threats, according to the Caracas OAS declaration of 1954, into internal security programs — that is, the beginnings of counterinsurgency operations that altered the course of the Cold War in the region.<sup>19</sup>

The Cold War was a period of ideological warfare that had significant consequences for the daily lives of people worldwide, and most dramatically in the global South. The 1960s in Colombia offer a compelling chapter in this complex history, a period when international forces interacted with national transformations closely tied with U.S. policies toward Latin America. Alberto Lleras Camargo, the director of the Pan American Union (PAU) and first general-secretary of its successor, the OAS, as well as the architect and first president of the National Front, was a key figure in determining inter-American Cold War policies. He was a highly respected Liberal Party statesman, a friend of Nelson Rockefeller, and deeply respected by John F. Kennedy; his ideals of liberal democracy matched the rise of postwar liberalism in the United States.<sup>20</sup> The admiration he commanded from Kennedy and his brilliant diplomacy helped transform an ambitious plan

of hemispheric economic collaboration, drafted as Operación Pan-Americana by Brazil's President Juscelino Kubitschek, into the Alliance for Progress.<sup>21</sup>

The Alliance for Progress materialized Latin American governments' desires for increased U.S. economic aid and for refashioning the global role of the United States in accordance with modernization theories articulated from Ivory Tower social science departments. Modernization theories resonated with the traditional political class in Colombia, especially Lleras Camargo's Liberal Party, which had already experienced an intense period of political, economic, and cultural modernization during the Liberal Republic (1934–1946), especially during the *Revolución en Marcha* under the presidency of Alfonso López Pumarejo (1934–1938). Lleras Camargo shared Washington's fervent anticommunism and the belief that social, economic, and cultural modernization was a cure for all social ills.<sup>22</sup> Colombia, along with Chile, thus became a “showcase” for the Alliance for Progress, a program intent on strengthening democratic institutions and alleviating the misery that jeopardized them.

The 1960s in Colombia was a decade of economic, social, and cultural reform that followed several different development theories, including the Latin American *desarrollismo* formulated by the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA), U.S. modernization theories, and the many different community development theories that had circulated since the Liberal Republic, some of them tied to Catholic intellectuals.<sup>23</sup> Working under the assumption that modernization programs would eventually foster a more egalitarian society, the National Front promoted accelerated industrialization through import substitution programs for manufacturing and by luring foreign investments in other areas. Other programs, such as ACPO and the Peace Corps, followed theories of community development that sought to help find and implement local solutions.<sup>24</sup> As this book elaborates, none of these development programs could surmount the obstacles posed by a deeply stratified Colombian society and the Cold War agendas of both the elites and U.S. foreign policy. Indeed, the public and private alliances of national and international elites proved to be instrumental to the resilience of hierarchical structures in Colombia.

On May 18, 1964, just one month after the opening of González's first solo exhibition, curated by Marta Traba at the MAMBO, the Colombian armed forces launched an air strike against the “independent republic” of Marquetalia, a small bastion of peasant communists that had consolidated from the liberal guerrillas of La Violencia.<sup>25</sup> The attack intended to eradicate domestic communism once and for all but instead gave birth to the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia; FARC) and opened a new chapter in Cold War history that continues to unravel to this day. Realizing that party leaders were operating in defense of elite rule and catering to U.S. interests, and inspired by the success of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, peasants, along

with students, intellectuals, union leaders, and even radicalized priests, turned to class-based guerrilla warfare against the state.

The art world was deeply entangled in these processes. After the bitter aesthetic battles of the 1940s and 1950s between the conservatives who continued to support academic neoclassicism as a universal idiom superior to what they considered a degenerate modern language of the Americanists supported by liberals, the National Front also opened an era of updating culture through cosmopolitan modernism.<sup>26</sup> Through newly founded cultural institutions such as the MAMBO and the International Coltejer Biennial in Medellín, many modernizing agents, in both the private and public sector, sponsored a controlled form of modernism to integrate Colombia into an evolutionary narrative and redirect the gaze of intellectuals away from political opposition by promising participation in universal culture.<sup>27</sup> Many museums of modern art founded across the hemisphere during the 1950s and 1960s championed abstraction as a modern *lingua franca*. In Latin America, on the one hand, geometric abstraction, op art, and kinetic art provided a visual language of cultural advancement that trafficked with a faith in industrial, scientific, and technological universalism; geometric abstraction thus became the aesthetic partner of economic development, or the visualization of modernization. On the other hand, lyrical abstraction served to both foster Latin American global participation and, in its entanglement with discourses of spiritual elevation, supported a pervasive claim on Latin American spiritual authority above a materialist United States.<sup>28</sup>

The scholarship on the political uses and abuses of cultural internationalism during this period is vast and convincingly demonstrates how “internationalizing” culture was a facet of Cold War ideological battles, serving as a means to redirect the attention of artists toward participating in a cosmopolitan culture, coded as universal, and away from political involvement and ongoing armed struggles taking place in the global South.<sup>29</sup> Cultural modernization proved to be an authoritative discourse that lured the support of diverse and at times antagonistic characters. In the United States, powerful institutions such as the Central Intelligence Agency, the Museum of Modern Art, the Rockefellers’ petroleum company Esso, the Center for Inter-American Relations, and the PAU sponsored abstraction as evidence of democratic freedom and capitalist free enterprise and used it as a weapon of the Cold War against dogmatic Soviet socialist realism.<sup>30</sup> In Latin America, supporters included the industrial bourgeoisie invested in participating in global capitalism and the political elite eager to stake a claim for their nations amid Cold War redefinitions of power relations. Furthermore, intellectuals who had witnessed the pathological nationalism and racism of World War II now rejected race-based indigenist and Americanist discourses that had occupied many of the Latin American avant-gardes in the first part of the twentieth century. Abstraction’s iconophobia served as an antagonist to fascism’s iconophilia —



that is, the cult of leaders, as well as racialized and atavistic nationalism. Finally, the Roman Catholic Church, especially after the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), found in abstraction a means to update and modernize a Catholic or universal art that could reveal the human soul through artistic intuition.<sup>31</sup>

In this context, the cultural sphere served as an important space for ideological negotiations to effectively shape a dynamic public sphere that contrasted with the political limitations of the National Front. Through the lens of González's early exhibitions (1964–1970), *The Politics of Taste* looks at the role played by the arts and criticism within this restricted and precarious return to democracy, as well as at the effects of the modernization programs that were taking place within a deeply traditional and hierarchical society. In doing so, it allows us to access an important and previously neglected piece of the Cold War puzzle — that is, to understand the ways in which aesthetic discourses played out in a country considered the closest hemispheric ally of the United States during the Cold War.<sup>32</sup> It also helps us trace how the failures of the National Front's reforms became manifest in the cultural sphere as artists and intellectuals challenged internationalism. González's ascendance to cultural prominence parallels the turn away from high modernist universalism toward resistance articulated as a form of regional, not national, authenticity, vaguely alluded to by critics as *lo nuestro* (that which is ours).

González's strategic provincialism and Traba's theory of cultural resistance to cultural imperialism must be understood alongside this sense of frustration with a limited democracy and U.S. involvement in Colombian affairs.<sup>33</sup> If we consider the discourse of cultural advancement as a companion to modernization theory, we could also conceive of the discourse of cultural authenticity as a companion to community development's search for local solutions. Indeed, many critics and artists throughout Latin America during this era searched for regional aesthetic solutions as alternatives to importing neocolonial art trends. In repudiating both elite cosmopolitanism and nationalist folklorism of the Liberal Republic, González's appropriation of urban popular culture, in all of its hybrid, diverse, excessive, and "fantastic irregularities," served as resistance to the perceived elitism and homogenizing effects of international modernism and the ultranationalism of the Rojas Pinilla dictatorship.<sup>34</sup> During the 1960s and early 1970s, González's works helped critics revitalize a discourse of cultural authenticity, as reformulated from the urban marginal or geographic periphery, and not an idealized academically constructed folklore designed to articulate national unity.<sup>35</sup>

Precisely because González launched her career by successfully meeting the terms of cultural modernization, when she subsequently challenged and parodied those terms in explicit ways, she did so from a consecrated position. Therefore, critics could not easily dismiss her works and were obliged to react in support of or against them. González's early exhibitions serve as privileged case



studies because they managed to arouse passionate support and irritation, if not fright, from diverse historical actors. These responses demonstrate how people could express their positions on social and historical changes through the arts in ways that may not necessarily have been intelligible to themselves or socially permissible through other avenues.

The varied responses to González's aesthetic provocations on the battlefield of cultural and political realignments during the Cold War era demonstrate that her artworks challenged and aggravated many different cultural agents, including Colombian conservatives who were trying to preserve traditional patrimonial hegemony; progressive elites who enlisted culture in forging a modern nation; and European cultural agents who were competing with the United States for influence over the global South, among others. González's artistic interventions with taste engaged with institutional categories of legitimate culture that attempted to fix and stabilize social distinctions; she parodied trends in the growing international art circuits in order to resist them.

The Colombian context provides a valuable model for understanding modernism and modernity within a particular modernization process that emerged under the watchful eye of the traditional political and economic elites and in a deeply Catholic and fragmented society. Unlike many Latin American nations where liberalism had triumphed in the nineteenth century, initiating earlier processes of modernization and secularization, in Colombia the Conservative Party won the nineteenth-century civil wars and consolidated its hegemony through the Constitution of 1886, which remained firm until 1991, and its close alliance to the Vatican with the Concordat of 1887.<sup>36</sup> The role of the church in Colombian history runs deep; it has been a protagonist in the nation's modernization processes. Therefore, while the 1960s witnessed a strong push toward secularization, Catholic discourses of morality continued to play an important part in cultural debates.

Because of the *longue durée* of Conservative Party hegemony, Colombian national identity continued to be articulated primarily as Catholic and Hispanic. With limited success, intellectuals within the Liberal Republic, especially the Ministry of Education, made a concerted effort to secularize and unify Colombian identity through folklore. However, they were unable to create a cohesive narrative from the ambitious folkloric surveys of 1942.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, the Colombian case serves as a contrast to Mexico and Peru, where cultural producers drew from pre-Columbian imperial civilizations to construct a strong sense of national identity; Argentina and Brazil, where a long history of industrialization inspired a sense of full participation in a modern and universal global culture; and Venezuela, where the magic of the petro-state could create the mirage of modernity without modernization.<sup>38</sup> This inability to construct a cohesive "imagined community," as described by Benedict Anderson, in large part has been due to the absence of a strong, centralized state, a condition the National Front sought to correct.<sup>39</sup> Fur-

thermore, the difficult topography of Colombia, which is divided by the splintering of the Andes into three ranges, made for diverse regions that remained relatively isolated from one another until the beginning of air travel. Colombia is thus characterized by its biodiversity and multiculturalism, but also by its political and social fragmentation. Consequently, despite many attempts, Colombian cultural agents developed neither a strong sense of nationalism, as in Mexico, nor a sense of internationalism as a paradoxical form of nationalism, as in Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela. Instead, many artists, such as González, parodied and resisted artistic internationalism through a calculated regionalism that anticipated and influenced cultural Third Worldism and, eventually, multiculturalism.

### Lo Último

Let us return to the 1978 interview in *Correo Especial* with which I opened. When González appears on camera, she is visibly more at ease than her interviewer, Gloria Valencia de Castaño, in the crowded street market. González asserts that the Pasaje Rivas is a “thermometer” that measures “the latest in artisanal crafts and decorative furniture.” The artist’s brief but revealing characterization of the informal market, so easily dismissed by Valencia in her haste to move the conversation along, was in fact carefully crafted with rich references, which I take up here as an opportunity to unpack some of the themes elaborated in this book.

In evoking the metaphor of the thermometer, González was citing Marta Traba, who had famously called the National Salon the infallible thermometer of official Colombian art.<sup>40</sup> We can surmise that this was no coincidence, as González cited Traba’s phrase again a decade later in the title of her essay on the salon’s history, “El termómetro infalible.”<sup>41</sup> The relationship between González and Traba, between student and teacher and then artist and critic, was not only a close collaboration but also a key part of this era’s narrative. The Argentine-born Traba, one of the most influential art critics in Latin America, was decisive in shaping González’s career as her professor at Uniandes, curator of her exhibitions at the MAMBO, and critical defender of her work in print. González was an attentive student who learned a modernist discourse from her professor. González’s first exhibition at the MAMBO in 1964, directed by Traba herself, launched both the artist’s career and the museum’s young artists program. Throughout this study one can trace a fascinating dialogical relationship in the works of both artist and critic, each influencing the other as they shifted ideological positions from modernist autonomy toward Traba’s theory of regional resistance and González’s strategic provincialism. In her monograph *Los muebles de Beatriz González* (1977), Traba grappled with her own aesthetic and social presumptions to defend González’s furniture assemblages.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, when Traba articulated a theory of resistance to cultural dependence in the 1970s, she applauded González’s *pop nacional* style

as exemplary of such artistic defiance.<sup>43</sup> Ironically, Traba spent much of her critical energy in denouncing both aestheticized nationalism, which she regarded as a cancer emanating from Mexico, and U.S. cultural imperialism, which she called the “terrorism of the avant-gardes” and traced in the mimetic adoption of trends such as conceptual art, happenings, and pop art. Although Traba admired U.S. pop art, she faulted Latin American artists for adopting styles that she considered pertinent only in highly industrialized consumer societies. González’s engagement with urban popular culture and the emerging mass media in the Colombian context forced Traba to reconsider pop art’s valence in neocolonial contexts. Thus, González’s heretical turn was one of the factors that influenced Traba’s change of course. Rather than think about the González-Traba relation as an inversion of mentor-student roles, it is crucial to understand both as unfixed cultural agents who mutually informed and influenced each other.

An “infallible thermometer” seems like an odd metaphor for cultural assessment. The term presupposes a measurable outcome with a high degree of accuracy, one that involves experts that can decipher given technological data. This characterization of the National Salon seemingly contradicts Traba’s disdain for technolatriy and González’s irreverence toward official aesthetic conventions, yet it reveals the degree to which the critic and artist valued the role of experts and institutions in determining aesthetic values. Traba’s thermometer was necessarily institutional in nature and presided over by professional art critics. Nonetheless, institutions were also shifting agents, themselves embedded in a complex web of local and international power relations.

The notion of a cultural thermometer to measure *lo último* (the latest) implies not only a value judgment but also a temporal judgment — one that presupposes an evolutionary narrative of culture that depends on specialized experts who can perceive and foster this development. Paralleling Rostow’s stages of economic development, culture was presumed to be in the same need of updating as the industrial sector. Importing experts in just about any conceivable field to assess newly discovered problems in the newly conceived Third World was characteristic of the general political, economic, and cultural outlook of modernization theories.<sup>44</sup> Under the ideology of cultural development, art institutions invited professional experts, mostly art critics imported from the industrialized world, to judge international artistic competitions. They rewarded artists who produced works that experts deemed international and not national, global and not local, universal and not provincial, sophisticated and not *cursi* (tacky). However, institutions did not generate these expectations in a vacuum; they were responding to larger forces that directed them away from local and toward international objectives. González’s use of this metaphor, even if ironic, reveals the extent to which this discourse of advancement permeated even the ideas of those who considered themselves resistant.

Modernism in the arts became symbolic of the modernization programs of the National Front, which in large part explains why Traba secured such a prominent public role soon after she arrived in Bogotá from Europe in 1953. She introduced a rigorous modernist discourse at an opportune time to break the aesthetic impasse that dominated the National Salon debates in the two decades before her arrival. The cosmopolitan universalism of abstraction could satisfy the discursive needs of both the progressive liberals and the Catholic conservatives, putting an end to their bitter aesthetic disputes.

With the arrival of television under Rojas Pinilla in 1953, the visual arts could join other forms of cultural democratization implemented during the 1930s that sought to expand the access of culture — that is, high culture — across the country through modern technology such as radio broadcasts, educational films, village and transportable libraries, and other printed material, including reproductions of artworks.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the Liberal Republic shared Walter Benjamin's enthusiasm for mechanical reproduction,<sup>46</sup> but rather than believing in its revolutionary potential, liberal intellectuals thought that modern media constituted a means of spiritually elevating the masses either through exposure to universal high art or the guided refinement of folklore.<sup>47</sup> The art critic Casimiro Eiger also had been broadcasting his art criticism over the radio since 1946.<sup>48</sup> With television, at least theoretically, the provinces could now visualize the artworks that were being discussed. Traba's arrival in Bogotá coincided with the first television broadcasting in the country. Alvaro Castaño Castillo immediately hired her to work alongside Eiger at the cultural radio station HJCK. Castaño Castillo was an important modernizing agent who founded the HJCK station; was one of the cofounders of Uniandes, where González studied and Traba taught; and was married to González's interviewer, Gloria Valencia. At HJCK, Traba wrote and broadcast the radio shows *Cincuenta años de progreso* (Fifty Years of Progress) and *Cómo nacen las empresas* (How Companies Are Born), both sponsored by Esso.<sup>49</sup> Traba would later work on a series of television shows for Radio y Televisión Interamericana (RTI). Before the 1950s were over, and at a time of limited television programming, it is remarkable that Traba broadcast several shows on art history, including *El museo imaginario* (The Imaginary Museum [c. 1955]; figure I.4), *Una visita a los museos* (A Visit to the Museums), *El ABC del arte* (The ABCs of Art), and *Curso de historia de arte* (Art History Course). The last was an extension of her lessons at the Universidad de América in Bogotá.<sup>50</sup> González recalled Traba opening up the conversation about art to a mass audience. "Before Marta, art critics would call each other on the phone to chat," she said. "Then she came on television for *all* Colombians to see! A priest from [the department of] Chocó would send her letters thanking her for educating through television. In these letters we find people from the provinces who could now participate in [high] culture."<sup>51</sup> By linking new technology — radio and television — to the arts, cultural "advance-



**I.4** Marta Traba filming her television show *El museo imaginario* (The Imaginary Museum), c. 1955. Photograph courtesy of Nicolás Gómez Echeverri.

ment” coupled its new technical lexicon with didactic new media. González’s enthusiasm was more ideal than factual, since television remained a luxury item for many more decades.<sup>52</sup>

González participated in this emerging artistic public sphere, which included the opening of several museums around Colombia — including the Museo Zea in Medellín in 1955, the Museo la Tertulia in Cali in 1956, the Colección de Arte del Banco de la República in Bogotá in 1957, the Museo de Arte Latinoamericano in Cartagena in 1959, the MAMBO in Bogotá in 1962, and the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Minuto de Dios in Bogotá in 1966 — and the establishment of several corporate sponsored art competitions, such as the Salón Intercol de Artistas Jóvenes in Bogotá in 1964, the Festival de Cultura in Cali in 1965, and the International Coltejer Biennial in Medellín in 1968.<sup>53</sup>

The Salón Intercol de Artistas in Bogotá, where González exhibited *Vermeeri-anas* (1964), was one of the many such efforts by private industry to sponsor the arts. In fact, the role of the petroleum industry in general, and of Intercol (the International Petroleum Company, affiliated with the Rockefellers’ Esso) in particular, must be considered in analyzing how new artistic values were promoted in Colombia. In a series of articles titled “La empresa privada del petróleo y el interés público” (Petroleum’s Private Enterprise and Public Interest [1964]), published first by the magazine *Economía* and later as part of the series *Empresa Privada en Colombia* (Private Enterprise in Colombia), Intercol outlined its economic, legislative, and cultural goals.<sup>54</sup> Although various authors discussed separately the diverse aspects of Intercol and the petroleum industry, they all believed in global



capitalism as free enterprise based on open competition. They warned against the dangers of nationalizing the petroleum industry in a way that resonated with Traba's argument against the nationalist tendencies in art. Intercol translated the concept of open competition into its duty to Colombian culture.<sup>55</sup> Through the sponsorship of "free competition" in venues such as the Premio Nacional de la Novela Esso and the Salón Intercol de Artistas Jóvenes, the petroleum company gave itself credit for patronizing and above all exporting the best of what Colombians had to offer.<sup>56</sup> Following this logic, Intercol privileged the "stupendous examples" of Colombian art that "beg[a]n to appear," a reference to emergent and new rather than the traditional or to the international rather than the provincial tendencies in art that could have been considered the most efficient testimony of an advancing culture.

Intercol conceived Colombian art as playing a diplomatic role directed at North American and European audiences in the mission to attract economic investment.<sup>57</sup> Florencia Bazzano-Nelson demonstrates how Alberto Lleras Camargo, along with his close friend Nelson Rockefeller and Intercol, astutely conducted cultural diplomacy by sponsoring the exhibition "3,500 Years of Colombian Art" at the Lowe Art Museum operated by the University of Miami. While purportedly a comprehensive history of Colombian art, the exhibition highlighted two periods: pre-Columbian civilizations and newly emergent modern artists, selected by Traba. Both Lleras Camargo and Rockefeller understood that cultural dissemination could feasibly accomplish what politics could not — that is, to testify to the sophistication and relevance of a nation. In this way, the exhibition crafted an image of refined ancient and modern societies that would counter descriptions of a violent country, especially against Protestants, that had coursed through the *New York Times* and other prominent media sources during the previous decades. Bazzano-Nelson demonstrates the skill with which both statesmen seized the opportunity to promote their own interests — that is, to facilitate Intercol's ability to drill for oil after losing its concessions in Barrancabermeja to Ecopetrol, and for the National Front to promote its main agricultural export, coffee, after its devaluation had disastrous effects on the economy. When Lleras Camargo visited the Lowe Gallery, he was on his way back from Washington, DC, where he had discussed increased aid for Colombia's internal security with U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower. After leaving Coral Gables, the exhibition traveled to Washington, DC, curated by José Gómez Sicre, director of the PAU's Division of Visual Arts. The "3,500 Years of Colombian Art" exhibition was on view on the Washington Mall around the time U.S. officials deliberated on the fate of military aid for the National Front.<sup>58</sup>

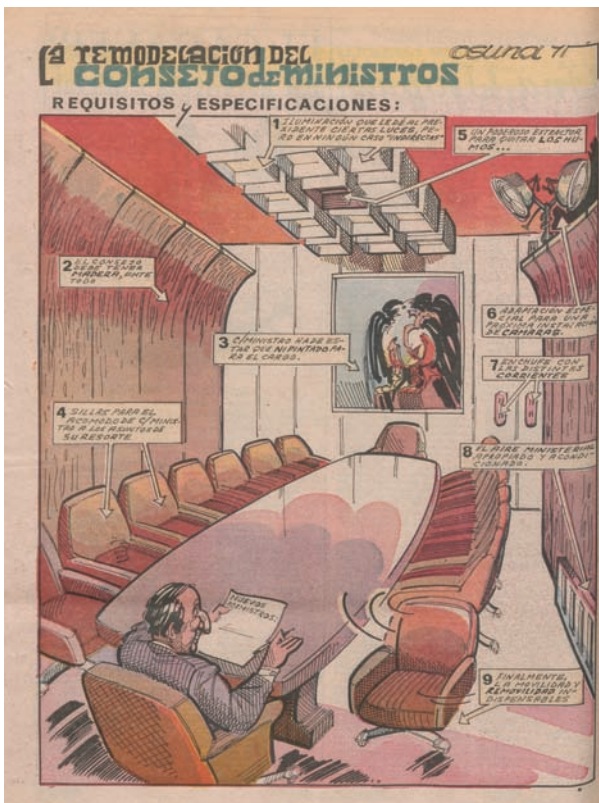
Intercol was an important patron of the art world that González navigated.<sup>59</sup> Intercol's magazine *Lámpara* published texts by critics who sympathized with abstraction, such as Casimiro Eiger and Walter Engel. In fact, Intercol's grant to the

MAMBO was the decisive financial support needed to open its doors in October 1963.<sup>60</sup> González was present at the museum's founding in 1962 and recalls Traba rushing to liberate the patronage bonds of the MAMBO from the state, which she considered a necessary step in the emancipation of artists from the nationalist and political role they had played in earlier decades, including in the National Salon.<sup>61</sup> Traba did not have to venture far. Her petition was met by generous and enthusiastic support from the private sector — domestic, as well as multinational, corporations.<sup>62</sup> Traba also readily found corporate and multinational sponsorship for her own magazine, *Prisma*, where the Banco Cafetero advertised in its pages, "You Are in the Circuit of Progress."<sup>63</sup>

Traba invited Gómez Sicre to consult on the future MAMBO in 1961. She had worked with him earlier, in 1959, when they organized an exhibition of modern Colombian art as part of an exhibition series of new, "exportable art" from Latin America for the PAU.<sup>64</sup> The exhibition catalogue, *Art in Latin America Today: Colombia*, gave Traba an opportunity to define what was representative of modern Colombian art on her own terms and, hence, strengthen her version of a new canon. She concludes her essay in the catalogue by saying, "Freedom from every interest except plastic."<sup>65</sup>

Traba's brief in the 1950s and into the mid-1960s was for artists to be at once modern, autonomous from extra-aesthetic concerns, and highly subjective; over time, she added authentic to that list. Her champion was the Spanish émigré Alejandro Obregón, whose gestural, abstract, and expressive style she viewed as the origin for a fully realized modernism in Colombia.<sup>66</sup> The National Front's Presidential Collection purchased Obregón's *Cóndor* (Condor [1971]; figure I.5), a large-scale painting that hung on the walls of the Salón del Consejo de Ministros (Ministry Cabinet) in the Nariño Presidential Palace, joined later by González's painting *La Constituyente* (The Constitutional Assembly [1991]; see figure E.3). A caricature by Héctor Osuna that same year titled "The Remodeling of the Ministry Cabinet: Requirements and Specifications" (1971; figure I.6), published in the Sunday supplement of *El Espectador*, references the change of the ministry guard and parodies the government's attempts to "update" the ministry by equating its efforts with interior decoration.<sup>67</sup> Obregón's recently purchased *Cóndor* figures prominently at the head of the table as the pictorial equivalent to government modernization. In the caricature, one sees the Ministry Cabinet redecorated to look more like a corporate boardroom than the nineteenth-century neoclassical, Republican-style rooms typical in Colombian government buildings. Osuna weaves together allusions to modernized furnishings with the goals of the new cabinet members — for example, "The air of the ministry [is] to be appropriate and conditioned" and "The lighting should illuminate the president, but never indirectly." The text attached to Obregón's painting reads, "Each minister should be '*que ni pintado*' [as if painted] for the position." The expression is a play on





**I.5** Alejandro Obregón, *Cóndor*, 1971. Courtesy of Casa Museo Obregón. Colección Presidencia de la República.

**I.6** Héctor Osuna, "La remodelación del Consejo de Ministros: Requisitos y especificaciones," *Magazín Dominical, El Espectador*, June 6, 1971. Courtesy of Fidel Cano, © *El Espectador*. Image source: Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia.

words suggesting both that the ministers should be the appropriate “fit” for their nominations and that Obregón’s *Cóndor* seems to have been painted specifically for this room and occasion. Osuna comments on the symbolic value of Obregón’s painting in representing the nation as updated and modern, yet still authentically Andean, as symbolized by the national bird. Therefore, when Obregón, arguably the most iconic exemplar of Colombian modern art, lauded González’s first solo exhibition of the *Encajeras* (Lacemakers) at the MAMBO and called her the “revelation of ’64,” he tacitly passed the baton to a new generation. His endorsement could have been the most sacrosanct at the time, even if it amounted to no more than one phrase.<sup>68</sup>

### Lo Cursi

In the *Correo Especial* interview, González called the Pasaje Rivas a thermometer of *lo último*. In doing so she was describing the flea market as the measure not of the latest artistic trends — as high culture *qua* international — but of “the latest trends in artisanal crafts and decorative furniture.” Her strategic use of *lo último* to describe lowbrow, informal commerce, crafts, and second-hand furniture at the market was both a satirical and a deliberate provocation that exposed a key theme that she explored from the beginning of her artistic career: the discursive constructs of taste and cultural legitimacy and how they function in Colombian society as forms of social exclusion and discrimination.

Twenty-seven years after that television interview, in 2005, González was again recorded at the Pasaje Rivas informal market for the art documentary series *Plástica: Arte contemporáneo en Colombia*. This time she said, “Mi trabajo es Pasaje Rivas” (My work is Pasaje Rivas [see figure 1.7]).<sup>69</sup> Why would González characterize her oeuvre in this way? It is clear that the cluttered, informal market had only grown in González’s esteem — or, perhaps, in its symbolic value — from *termómetro de lo último* (thermometer of the latest) to a metaphor describing her long career of accomplishments. Yet this is an unusual and provocative assertion. To begin with, only some of her works are materially resonant of this space. For instance, González painted several paintings based on popular lithographs printed by Gráficas Molinari in Cali — including the purgatorial souls (see figures 3.2 and 3.12), the mythological nymphs (see figures 3.7, 3.8, 3.13, and 3.16), and the Christ of Monserrate (see figure 5.1) — that were still being sold at the small commercial stands around the Pasaje Rivas. Other works, such as *Baby Johnson in situ*, *Cameo*, and *Exit Stage Rear* are multimedia pieces in which González attached her enamel-on-metal paintings to furniture she purchased at the Pasaje Rivas. However, the majority of her works are not so explicitly tied to this specific market, although she, along with critics, repeatedly associated her works with this space and the San Victorino shops along Tenth Street.



**1.7** Pasaje Rivas, Bogotá, 2016. Image source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/yonolatengo>. CC BY 2.1.

González's description of her oeuvre as "Pasaje Rivas" from the position of a renowned artist forty years into her prolific career acts as a provocation similar to the one she put forth many decades earlier, both allying her artistic practice to cultural practices considered tasteless and even perhaps illicit — that is, *cursi*. The works studied in this book emphasize the connections between place and taste in subtle and complicated ways, conflating the world of consumerism and functional art and the critical world of high art. González drags into high-art institutions the very social terrain the market connotes. In bringing the Pasaje Rivas into the modern art museum, National Salon, and international biennials, she satirically challenged cultural modernization theory and its ideological distinctions between the global, elite, and legitimate and the provincial, illegitimate, and *cursi*, in the process puncturing this divide.

Many elite Bogotanos view the Pasaje Rivas as an excessive and unsophisticated, even a dangerous, space.<sup>70</sup> This disdainful attitude betrays their anxiety over the so-called invading cultures that stemmed from accelerated migration in the wake of La Violencia and the effects of industrialization, which transformed Colombia from a primarily rural society to a primarily urban society: while 70.9 percent of the population lived in rural areas in 1938, by 1973, 77.5 percent of the population lived in the cities.<sup>71</sup> The massive migrations changed the face of cities such as Bogotá and sparked concerns about patrimonial and invading culture. As elite Bogotanos moved to the northern sectors of the city, they abandoned the historical center to the migrants and squatters. González herself migrated from

Bucaramanga to Bogotá in 1957 to study at the university, giving her a privileged perspective on these social tensions.

It is the sense of illegitimacy Pasaje Rivas possesses that makes it such an interesting referent. Like so much of the informal commerce that has emerged out of the expansive urbanization in Bogotá, especially around the old “doors to the city” in the San Victorino neighborhood, the resilient market stands as a testament to the entrepreneurial survival of urban newcomers and their creative production. The markets that developed in Pasaje Rivas and San Victorino sold the *cursilerías* that stylistically embodied Bogotá’s excessive growth. Yet the elites, nostalgic for the days that they held the city center, have mythologized these markets as places of dubious, illicit activity, in turn exposing their fear of the rural-to-urban migrants.

These tensions are rendered explicit at the Pasaje Rivas. The market is adjacent to the city’s main Plaza de Bolívar, which houses the central government, legislative, and ecclesiastical buildings of Colombia. The Pasaje Rivas is behind and metaphorically obstructed by the French-inspired architecture of City Hall (Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá, figure I.8). The street vendors’ appropriation of the back alleys in the historical sector of Bogotá is an abrupt contrast to the tightly controlled official zone surrounding the government buildings (figure I.9). The seats of central power are not only visually emphasized by the vast, open square, the Plaza de Bolívar; they are also harmonized by the uniform ochre-colored limestone (known as *piedra amarilla* or *piedra bogotana*). The use of the local stone and neoclassical architectural style of the administrative buildings pay homage to the discourses of universalism and authenticity underlying national foundation. There is no doubt about the legitimacy of this space. No street vendors or solicitors are permitted in the unobstructed expanse of the central plaza. Indeed, after the Bogotazo riots of April 9, 1948, the Plaza de Bolívar was emptied of all features except the statue of Simón Bolívar to safeguard against unruly mobs. Despite warnings about petty theft in the alleys of the Pasaje Rivas, one is more likely to lose one’s camera in front of the Nariño Presidential Palace, as I discovered personally. As I was photographing the site in 2005, I was confronted by a military police officer who demanded my film and then the entire (digital) camera. It was only my academic credentials that spared my camera from becoming the property of the state; however, to keep it I had to agree to delete all images of the presidential palace. This anecdote reveals the government’s continued defensive attitude toward the public and is key to understanding the impassioned and polarized responses to González’s works during the 1960s. Members of the pueblo were conceived not as participatory agents in democratic institutions but as threats to the established order.

I locate González’s work precisely at the interstitial space between official and informal spaces that come into productive friction at the intersection between