

JUAN BOTAS & MTV: SET DESIGNS FOR THE TENTH
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JUAN BOTAS & MTV: ESCENOGRAFÍAS PARA EL DÉCIMO ANIVERSARIO DE MTV

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Abstract

This article is focused on the scenography designs of the asturian artist Juan Suárez Botas. Since the premiere of MTV in August 1981, music videos have increased its importance and contribute towards forming the MTV's image. Ten years later, in 1991, Juan Botas was the MTV election to develop several sets for the multinational. The channel chose Botas' project because it was an interesting and strong visual proposal, based on the aesthetic possibilities that these designs offered to get a successful staging. The text explain this project, and valuate Botas' designs correctly, using an appropriate methodology based on a research of the communication process and the artist's ideas about that, with references as a support. Furthermore, the article studies, substantially, the television techniques and tactics, knowing the scope of MTV's multicultural offer and aesthetic ideals to analyze the whole project of Botas' set designs.

Keywords: Juan Botas, set designs, MTV, contemporary art, scenography.

Resumen

Este artículo trata sobre los diseños escenográficos del artista asturiano Juan Suárez Botas. Desde el inicio de MTV en agosto de 1981, los videos musicales han incrementado su importancia y contribuido a formar la imagen de MTV. Diez años después, en 1991, Juan Botas fue la elección de MTV para desarrollar varios sets para la multinacional. El canal eligió el proyecto de Botas porque era una interesante y fuerte propuesta visual, basada en las posibilidades estéticas que estos diseños ofrecían para una exitosa puesta en escena. El texto explica este proyecto, y valora los diseños de Botas correctamente, usando una apropiada metodología basada en una investigación del proceso de comunicación y de las ideas de los artistas sobre ello, con una bibliografía como apoyo. Además, el artículo estudio, sustancialmente, las técnicas y tácticas televisivas, conociendo

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el alcance de la oferta multicultural de MTV y los ideales estéticos para analizar todo el proyecto de los diseños escenográficos de Botas.

Palabras clave: Juan Botas, diseños escenográficos, MTV, arte contemporáneo, escenografía.

1. Juan Botas and his link with the MTV channel.

Juan Botas was born in Gijón in 1958. He became an important artist, designer and illustrator in New York City, after he completed Fine Arts studies in Syracuse University in 1982. Later, Botas enrolled in School of Visual Arts where he met Milton Glaser, who was really impressed with Juan's works and designs. When the course ended, Juan started to work in Glaser's studio but decided later on to continue his career in New York City¹ on his own. During this last period², Juan Botas performed important works of different journals, magazines, newspapers and multinationals. This artist had a special brain for the design and conception the space of the drawing. For this reason, Botas was an important figure inside of New York City graphic design during the 80's and the early 90's. The different commitments and works for magazines, newspapers and business, had increased Botas' fame in the New York society. In 1991, MTV was looking for artists to develop its new television sceneries, choosing between fifteen international artists. The choice of MTV was Botas' project. His purpose was revolutionary from aesthetic and compositional point of view but, unfortunately, Botas' couldn't assumed the whole project. His physical condition began to decline because of AIDS, until a year later, 24 of August 1992, Juan Botas died at Greenwich Hospital, in Manhattan.

The design that Juan Botas presented for MTV, from his point of view, was a strong and striking proposal³ that contained sets for an emission study of news, two for recording performance sets, another one for rap music and finally several sets for recording VideoJockeys' performances and the channel's presenters.

Moreover, the language used in these designs was perfectly studied by the spanish artist, who got the best way of communication between the show and the viewer. Furthermore, the language used fitted with MTV's proposals, offering multiple possibilities to the musical context and to the entire project, using the contemporary composition of set design.

2. MTV and public image.

MTV transmissions were initiated on Saturday 1st of August of 1981 at 00:01. However, the channel had announce this event with images of the space shuttle Columbia 16 minutes earlier to attract audience to the show. The MTV started to offer a 24-hour US cable program service presenting an endless stream of music videos⁴; after that, the popularity of the MTV and music videos was increased by the US music industry. Apart from the practices of record

companies, this context was determining the public image of the channel as well, taking into account that in its first decade MTV's audience was absolutely multicultural. In United States, cable TV was consolidated in 1970 being this the starting point of several cable channels. In the following decades, this industry grew significantly, becoming the start of outstanding broadcast channels that still continue today. But there was a determining factor in the whole process: the Great Depression of 1979. This meant something more than a mere setback in the music industry. However, the emergence of MTV provided an opportunity for many artists, because they could share and establish themselves in the world of music⁵.

The aesthetic of MTV was variable throughout the 80's, becoming consolidated in the early 90's. The cause was related with the music videos, because the earliest of them came from Great Britain, where promo clips development was better than in United States. Moreover, Music Television presented these videos constantly, in contrast with other individual programs on other television networks. Gradually, the MTV success was so great that in 1985 the creation of a second video channel owned by Music Television, VH1, was possible. This channel had an indistinct image and was languished in the shadow of MTV. Nevertheless, both of them were the most important outlets for music video programming in the United States. MTV's musical offers were narrow at the start, but using different strategies, these offers were becoming more diversified. In the mid-80s, MTV bargain on a variety of programs that had a rich diversity of music⁶. At the same time, the Music Television increased the essence of a full service network, offering news, sports, sitcoms, documentaries, cartoons, game shows, and other traditional TV fare.

Although, MTV contributed to the institutionalization of music videos, which were impregnated of a film aesthetics air⁷. The music channel reached importance and popularity, thanks to two strategic factors: it's close to the FM Radio and its different programming in relation to television-broadcasting. Made the consolidation of MTV video into a television genre⁸. MTV programming not only contained exclusive music videos, but had, in its origin, music reports, sponsors advertisements, bullets and MTV brands and the appearance of VJ Mark Goodman⁹. These elements contribute to the strengthening of the youthful image of MTV that purported to show to a diverse and multicultural public. However, we must pay attention to a significant fact from Denisoff: "MTV was dealing with the record labels, not the artist"¹⁰. Music Television programs promoted brands of physical items, while clips made popular singers, messages and images increase. All of them were contributing to a major development of entertainer's popularity, promoting his/her record, producer, music type, style of dance, and physical image. That was an important strategic of the MTV success. For some time, music companies, brands and agencies were waiting to place their ads on MTV to increase its own profit. Then, the newsletter included advertisements and information about new developments in the MTV Network.

Music Television changed the music experience and the way musicians compose it. Moreover, the young people that had watched the premiere of MTV

were changing over time. In the early 90's, the public demand, the context, and ideas were different than at beginning in 80's, although MTV always plays only specific music to be interesting by demographic group. Inside of MTV, songs were not only to listen, but were to be enjoyed through the vision. From the aesthetic point of view, the musical experience was composed of several elements from movies, arts and the society of that time. The casual environment that MTV always had, was relevant to develop a set that fit with these ideas. Innovative developments and new communication techniques that were emerging in this field, were the main premises of Juan Botas' drafts.

3. The scenographer's work and Juan Botas' designs for MTV sets.

In relation to the scenography we must take into account the importance of the message, the space, the audience and the means to carry out the design. Furthermore it must be taken into account that there are new demands on the established production system¹¹. Besides it is essential to know the public image of MTV and find the way to reach the widest possible audience. These two issues had been raised and carefully studied in Juan's designs, where the set had been projected to offer multiple possibilities and interactions with the environment. Laura Gröndahl explains that "scenography is increasingly conceived of as event, experience, and action, rather than a set of physical elements, or representational or metaphoric images"¹². We must remember that the performance event is full of communication acts in real time between the communicator (the emitter) and the viewer (the receiver) through a stage using a special language developed, in this case, by the artist. This experience is composed by multiple resources used by the designer to capture the viewer's attention. But one of the most important things in this way of communication is the set design, whose designer would have to do a very careful reading of the play.

Borrowing from Gröndahl, the scenographer's work is divided into two phases: creative design and practical implementation. The first one includes tasks such as reading several books and looking for pictures to have a variety of ideas. Later, there are works like drawing sketches, making scale models and experimenting with different materials before doing the design. The practical implementation has the executive plans, where is usually to have less control over the changes. Besides, this last process also includes the collaboration plan with other artists and technical staff, which contains negotiations and compromises¹³. As we will read throughout the text, Botas only could develop the first part of the work because of his health.

To complete this part of the theoretical and technical work it is important to understand that the scenographer has to be in connection with cultural and social modes of communication. That is one of the most important tasks of the scenographer's work. In this case, we are talking about a Music Channel with special and casual aesthetic that pretends to be closer to everybody. That was the challenge of Juan Botas: develop sets that fits with the claims of the TV channel.

However, the spanish artist not only made a brilliant project of sets designs, but he also conceived each of the sets as canvases that form a series, with ideas from a post-modern eclecticism. All of them with a treatment closer to the drawing, pioneer in its use in the scenery which gives a renewed spirit. These premises were the cause of the success of the Juan Botas' project.

The root of this commitment was the commemoration of the tenth anniversary of MTV. Juan took part in the choice of the Music Channel between more artists and designers from all over the world. The election of MTV could be motivated by the aesthetic essence of Botas' drawing. His sketches impressed to MTV directors that decided to order this task to the spanish artist. It was in early July of 1991 when Juan Botas started to work in his study of Mott Street, in New York. The process of creation started with the development of the first drawings design, where he made sketches of each stage, in cardboard with some lines of color. All of them are full of notes about the parties. Final designs were in black cardboard and all of the set parts were specified. Finally, then, with this final result, Botas made a conversion of these 2D drawings into 3D thanks to his friend, Fernando Martín Ibáñez. This process, as Fernando mentioned, "Was careful because of the stage, space which was small". So they had to work hours and hours to adapt the first drawings to the stage. On materials, Juan used colors cardboards, gouache and grease pencils to create beautiful collages. Moreover, the artist used his favorite colors: yellow, blue, red and black¹⁴. The first task was to use wood panels, foamboard and styrofoam objects as a support.

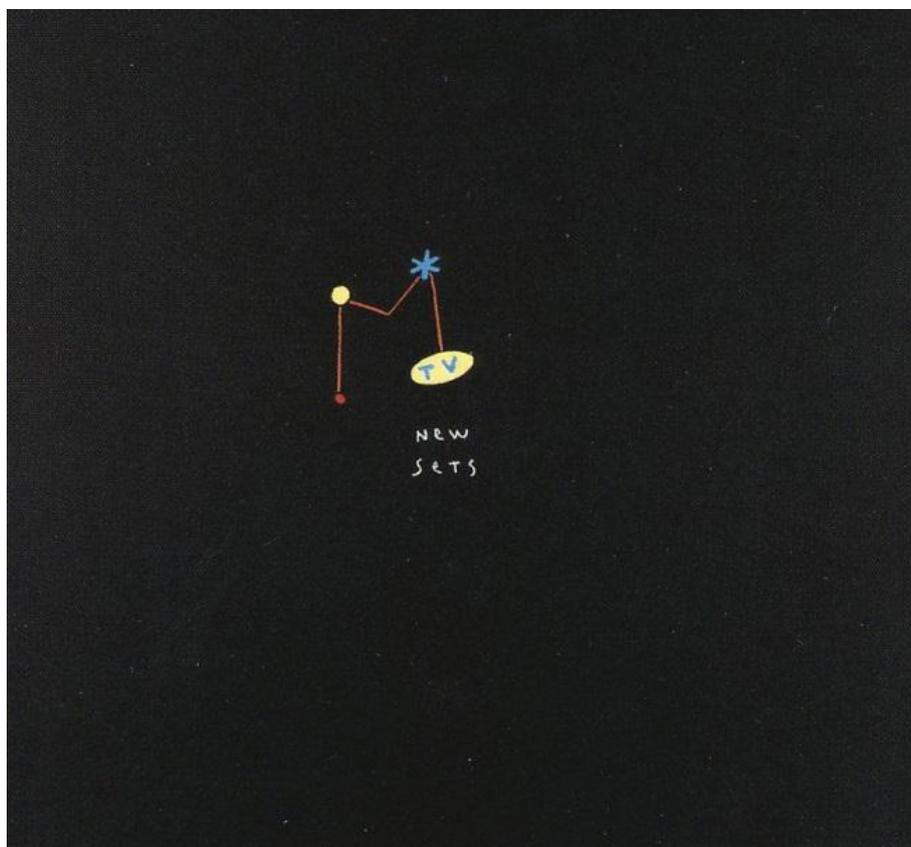


Fig. 1. Cover for MTV sets designs, 1991. Museo-Casa Natal de Jovellanos.

The series is composed by twelve set designs that were intended to offer new possibilities for the sets. Visually, these sets offer placed on scene fences reminiscent surreal in some cases. These artworks are daring, sometimes amazing with architectures almost impossible within a decorated and many views. Moreover, the performance space and the audience space, both are conceived as a conjunct. This stenographic identity is connected with the integration of the scenic space in the architecture of the whole space. These were keys for the starting point of the project.

The first of them, *Yo! MTV Raps*, provides a scene surrounded by architectural decorations. In its center there is a small table and a couple of chairs. This interview area seems to be surrounded by the rest of components. However, it offers a comprehensive view at the action develop which.



Fig. 2. *Yo MTV Raps*, 1991. Museo-Casa Natal de Jovellanos.

The design for *120 Minutes* offers a variety of possibilities. The set is solved by a giant screen that wraps around the scenario. Inside we found a staircase¹⁵ that rises to the ceiling, where a male figure seems to descend. At the back, the composition ends with single architecture with a man photograph. In this case, the communication is determined by the screen. *Interview Area A* and *B* results determined by its architecture. The space is relatively small, so Botas' expertise was to introduce all the elements and distribute them on set harmoniously. Despite the complications, the communication between the public is direct and very open. In both of these sets, the guest star has a prominent place, where the public almost have a complete view. On *Band performance area*, Juan Botas bore in mind the feedback to resolve the set with multiple points of view. At the back, we can see a staircase and several images cropped of a newspaper. The series ends with six designs for *VJ sets*.

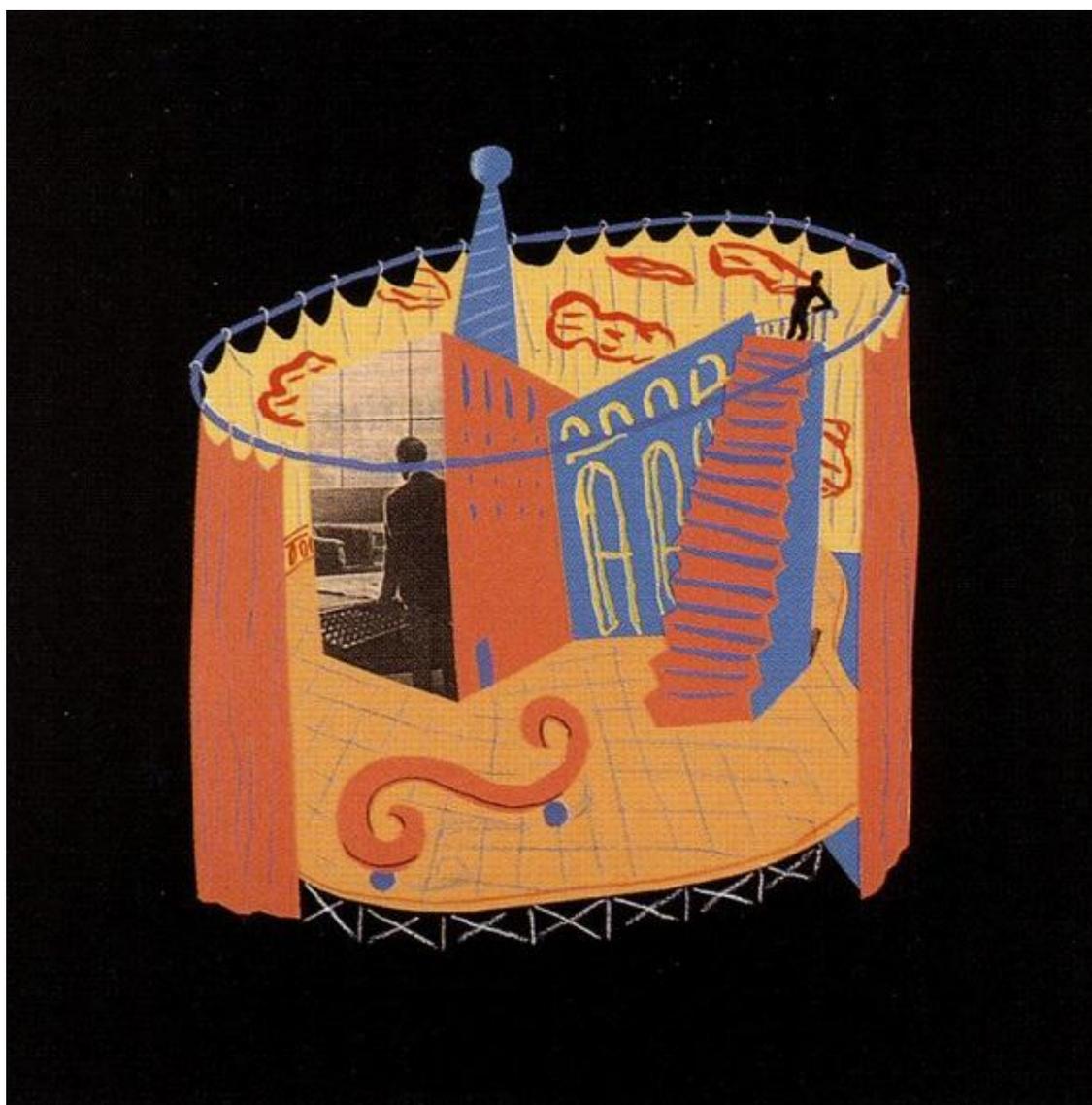


Fig. 3. *120 Minutes*. Museo-Casa Natal de Jovellanos.



Fig. 4. *VJ sets #5*, 1991. Museo-Casa Natal de Jovellanos.

All of them seem to be like an indoor room of a typical house. Botas' idea consists of creating a home space, making a relaxing atmosphere for the VideoJockey¹⁶. The essence of these designs lay in creating uninhibited, intimate and close to both: issuer and receivers of this environment. Another two, *The week in rock* and *The day in rock*, show an interview area made with newspaper collages, in which we find in the center a table with a chair to be used by the program's presenter. But all the composition culminates with a big eye on the top. This point receives all eyes, therefore achieving a certain depth of field. In both the curious proposal results amazing for the MTV public.



Fig. 5. *The day in rock*, 1991. Museo-Casa Natal de Jovellanos.

The scenarios were intended to be as a means of two-way communication between spectator and spectacle. The space which they developed provided multiple points of view and endless communication possibilities, such as live and television audience. Some of them offered from a two main views to the possibility of an interaction from a 360 degree view. Furthermore, the expressionism is presented in all of the designs generating a subjective view of the set. Objects with enormous sizes in contrast with other elements less emphasized are one of sets characteristics. Without a doubt, they are pictorial expressionist sets, where the perspective is deformed and architectures serve to action. Moreover, the influence of Joan Miró, Picasso, and David Hockney is present in the majority of these sets. Botas' used some reminiscences from Miró's

eyes, mixed with Picasso's space and Hockney's lines. Although some elements were extracted from surrealist and postmodernist influence, everything is designed to serve a deformation and stylization dependent on the world subjective view of Juan Botas. All of these elements were far away from US Television News ideals, where sets were formed by the scheme of rationality, objectivity and utility¹⁷. Over the time, MTV created a TV program, *MTV News*, where assume the majority of US Television news designs and characteristics. Moreover, the Music Television used virtual sets with the emergence of new technologies¹⁸. To add, Juan Botas generated a subjective vision of each set, to be understood freely by the audience. This deformation of the elements used is depended of the personal vision of the artist's world. Besides, these set designs have a special care with the technique, an essential characteristic of the American aesthetic of the twenty century¹⁹. However, Botas' designs are provided by a graphic air from the point of view of an illustrator, artist and graphic designer, whose root was drawing. Although these almost impossible architectures hadn't become to be builded in a real space, ideas and proposals of Juan Botas from a drawing view, could be pioneer inside of contemporary scenery.

In the last period of Juan's life, his compositions were full of dark colours, with a special sense of drawing. In addition, Juan always had a particular perception of space, where architectures and decorations charged the importance on the scene. This was the way in which Botas conceived MTV sets.

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NOTES

¹ To complete Juan’s biography, consult CRABIFOSSE CUESTA, Francisco, *Juan Botas. Una memoria (1958-1992)*, Fundación Municipal de Cultura, Educación y Universidad Popular, Ayuntamiento de Gijón, Eujoa, 1997.

² Three years between 1983 and 1986. CRABIFOSSE CUESTA, Francisco, *Juan Botas. Una memoria (1958-1992)*, p.40.

³ ESCUDERO, Felipe, “La MTV encarga sus nuevos estudios al diseñador gijonés Juan Botas”, in *La Nueva España*, Cultura, Oviedo, Sunday 11 de agosto de 1991, pp. 41.

⁴ BANKS, Jack, “Video in the machine: the incorporation of music video into the recording industry”, in *Popular Music*, volume 16/3, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 293.

⁵ HOLZBACH, Ariane, “MTV: a remediação da rádio FM na construção de um canal musical de televisão”, en *Galaxia*, Online magazine, n. 24, 2012, São Paulo, pp. 269-270.

⁶ Some examples: Yo! MTV Raps, Club MTV, and Headbangers’ Ball.

⁷ HOLZBACH, Ariane, “MTV: a remediação da rádio FM na construção de um canal musical de televisão”, pp. 266-267.

⁸ HOLZBACH, Ariane, “MTV: a remediação da rádio FM na construção de um canal musical de televisão”, p. 267.

⁹ VJ Mark Goodman presented music videos almost at the same way that a DJ presented songs in the radio, and giving information on concerts, tours and musical events.

¹⁰ DENISOFF, R. Serge, *Inside MTV*, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1989, p. 154.

¹¹ GRÖNDAHL, Laura, “Scenographic Strategies and Communication”, Univ Tampere 2012 – <http://t7.uta.fi/drex>

¹² GRÖNDAHL, Laura, “Scenographic Strategies and Communication”.

¹³ In this last part, the scenographer usually gives to the technical staff very precise information. As the same time, he keeps his plans flexible with the artistic team. GRÖNDAHL, Laura, “Scenographic Strategies and Communication”, p.8.

¹⁴ These colors were used too in the major part of Juan’s artworks.

¹⁵ The use of stairway results quite singular because is also related with its use in the cinema. We can found different meanings of this element in several situations in movies and in videos. To know more about its meaning: AGUILAR MORENO, José María, *El cine y la metáfora*, Editorial Renacimiento, Sevilla, 2007, pp. 83-107.

¹⁶ Video-Jockey or Vee-Jays was an abbreviation used for designed the people who presents music videos as a disk jockey on the radio. BANKS, Jack Edward. *The historical development of the video music industry: A political economic analysis*, Ph. D., University of Oregon, 1991, p. 112.

¹⁷ TOBIAS, Jenny, “Truth to Materials: Modernism and US Television News Design since 1940”, in *Journal of Design History*, vol. 18, n. 2, Summer, 2005, p. 180.

¹⁸ Jenny Tobias explained that new technologies which her refers to, were Computer-Aided Design with chroma-key to place newscasters in a simulated, dynamic, threedimensional space. TOBIAS, Jenny, “Truth to Materials: Modernism and US Television News Design since 1940”, p. 188.

¹⁹ In words of Thomas Munro, BAYER, Raimond, *Historia de la Estética*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, México, 1965, pp. 441-442.

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