Pandemic, Art, and Way(s) of Life. Reflections From Colombia¹

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Abstract

This paper emerges from ongoing research on the art works and exhibitions created in Latin America in response to the Covid-19 crisis which is understood not only as a health but also as a social, political and ecological crisis. In the first part, I reflect, from a Colombian perspective, on the different dimensions of the crisis unleashed by the pandemic, proposing that, more than a health crisis, the pandemic constitutes a political, social and existential crisis of profound scope and implications. Likewise, I examine the causes of this crisis in Colombia, framing them within the sui generis governmentality implement- ed in Colombia. In the second part, I examine several art works and exhibitions that respond to this crisis. I end by proposing that it is in the affective power of art that we find its ability to intervene in crisis contexts such as that of the pandemic.

Keywords: Colombian art, Latin American Art, art and Covid-19, contemporary art.

The deepest crisis, though not the most visible one, unleashed by the pandemic does not lie in health issues but in the destabilization of our already precarious existences. In Latin America, the pandemic has exacerbated inequality, poverty, exclusion, sexism, and other forms of structural violence that we have historically endured. In Colombia — which, like other countries in the region, has a centuries-long history of violence and injustice — this situation has been particularly insidious. With greater clarity than in the global North, the precariousness of existence reveals itself there, in one of the dark sides of the current capitalist regime: in the loss of the most basic material securities — for those who once had them — and in the disintegration

¹ This article is a revised and expanded version of the paper I presented at the International Seminar *Interperie: Politics of Will and Poetics of Shelter* (2021) and at the LASA Congress *Socio-environmental Polarization and Great Power Rivalry* (2022).

of the existential cores of work, consumption, and leisure. Yet, on the other hand, the crisis is even deeper, because the very banality of these existential cores is precisely what the pandemic has exposed.

It would be naïve to suppose that the answers we need would come from a state that could not even respond adequately to the health crisis. In Colombia, the management of the health emergency was disastrous, resulting in the paradoxical situation of having implemented one of the most draconian lockdowns while occupying, throughout 2021, one of the worst positions in infection and death statistics. One of the failures of the health program was the lack of a serious economic support plan for vulnerable social sectors. Something similar was repeated in 2021 on an international scale, with the greed and "us first" attitude of wealthy countries that hoarded most of the vaccine production, leaving peripheral nations begging pharmaceutical companies to ship them the few batches that remained. In countries like Colombia, for example, the civilian population had few alternatives in the face of the health crisis, beyond pressuring the state to accelerate vaccination and improve the response capacity of its fragile health systems.²

Moreover, we are in the midst of a social crisis that is much deeper than the health crisis. The state has been one of the main agents of this crisis. Co-opted from its very origins by the socioeconomic elites, the Colombian state has fostered the various forms of political violence we have suffered, the deepening of the social divide, and the neoliberal precariousness we are currently enduring. This is nothing new: historically, local "governmentality" has aimed to secure ways of life rooted in classism, rampant consumerism, and leisure—with privileges for a

² We should note that in Colombia, as in other parts of the world, the situation improved considerably in 2021 thanks to the implementation of the vaccination plan, which was noticeably more efficient than the state's initial response to the pandemic.

few and at the expense of the rights of others. This was pathetically exposed in 2021 with the Colombian government's proposal for a tax reform, euphemistically titled the "Sustainable Solidarity Law," which, once again in history and at the worst moment of the crisis, sought to increase the contributions of the middle and lower classes. The motivation behind this proposal was not simply the "defunding" of the state exacerbated by the crisis, but rather the commitment made to the International Monetary Fund—entered into before the pandemic—to reduce the fiscal deficit, along with the threat of losing the country's investment-grade credit rating from international agencies. Adhering, even amid the crisis, to the goal of deficit reduction and the preservation of the investment grade is significant from the government's neoliberal macroeconomic perspective, but not from that of the citizens who have suffered and continue to suffer through the crisis.³ Although the massive popular mobilization triggered by the reform project succeeded in defeating it, the proposal itself—made at the worst moment of the crisis—revealed both the state's contempt for the circumstances of the "underprivileged" and its servitude to the interests of international investors, businesspeople, and economic elites.

The *National Strike*, as this social mobilization has been called, not only brought down the reform but also led to the resignations—in May 2021—of the Minister of Finance, the Foreign Minister, and the High Commissioner for Peace. Yet the protest did not stop there: it expanded to

³ There are other ways to refinance the state that would affect the finances of the middle and lower classes far less, including extending existing wealth and income taxes, selling national assets, increasing the level of state indebtedness —an area in which Colombia has traditionally been conservative—, limiting government spending, and issuing currency through the Banco de la República. See *Cámara de Representantes* (2021). *Oposición radical "Ley de Equidad Social," una contrapropuesta a la Reforma Tributaria del Gobierno Nacional*; G. Cardona (2021). *Sí existen alternativas a la crisis fiscal y a la pretendida reforma tributaria del gobierno*; *Infobae* (2021). *Industriales presentan alternativas a la reforma tributaria de Duque*.

exclusion, and violence against groups such as social leaders, women, peasants, and Afrodescendants—demands that had been "boiling" in Colombia long before the pandemic. The state responded to the protest with police violence, joined by the violence of certain civilian and paramilitary sectors, causing dozens of deaths and drawing condemnation from both national and international communities.⁴ Beyond this, the persistence, organization, and strength of the mobilization—unprecedented in the country's recent history—demonstrated that there is a deep social crisis whose structural causes cannot simply be attributed to the pandemic.

To understand these causes, we must examine some characteristics of contemporary "governmentality" in Colombia, which is not merely a local phenomenon but is intertwined with global power structures, whose main axis is neoliberal capitalism. Understanding "governmentality" as a mechanism of power aimed at directing the population toward production and maintaining and expanding the existing order (Foucault, 2006, p.136), we see that in recent years it has been articulated in Colombia through a specific political project: *uribismo*. For twenty years (2002–2022), *uribismo* maintained power through a particular blend of hegemony and coercion which, as Castro-Gómez (2021) observes, consolidated a *sui generis* version of neoliberalism in Colombia. According to Castro-Gómez, this was achieved through several factors. First, the alignment of the two traditional political forces—Conservatism and Liberalism—so as to transcend the old bipartisan system that marked the period known as *La*

⁴ As of June 9, 2021, Human Rights Watch had documented 68 violent deaths during the strike [see *Human Rights Watch*(2021). *Colombia: Brutalidad policial contra los manifestantes*]. The *Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz*(*Indepaz*) documented 80 deaths [see *Indepaz* (2021). *Listado de las 80 víctimas de la violencia homicida en el marco del Paro Nacional al 23 de julio*]. According to both NGOs, the number of injured people is in the hundreds.

Violencia(1925–1958), but also to blur the ideological principles of these forces, particularly those of Liberalism. Second, the invention of an internal enemy—the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)—which justified an illegal and repressive internal war that not only managed to divert the population's attention—so that it largely forgot social issues—but also created a "thanatopolitical regime" that operated through the active elimination of a large number of political and social subjects deemed undesirable. Finally, and related to the above, was the state's articulation with narco-paramilitarism, which effectively resolved the war between the state and drug trafficking that had taken place in the 1990s and normalized the presence of narco-power at all levels of Colombian society. Through this singular combination of elements, local "governmentality" has become linked both to global neoliberalism and to the transnational illegal economy, exacerbating inequality, exclusion, and poverty.

We can therefore see that the social crisis is complex. On one hand, it is the consequence of the unfulfilled promise of modernity—to achieve well-being for all—which in reality could never be fulfilled, since, as we well know, inequality and exploitation are intrinsic elements of its primary mode of production: capitalism. Capitalism depends, for its maintenance and expansion, on the exploitation of both the human majority and the natural world. Worn out and pushed to the limit by the Covid-19 crisis, but also informed—mainly through the Internet—by social movements and political projects elsewhere, the once-silent majorities are demanding the material well-being

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⁵ The war, waged in association with paramilitarism, produced phenomena such as the "falsos positivos"—the illegal execution by state forces of at least 6,402 civilians from disadvantaged sectors who were presented as guerrilla fighters; the mass displacement of rural, Indigenous, and Afro-descendant populations; and the forced expropriation of land, which ended up in the hands of paramilitaries or the landed oligarchy. [See *Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz* (JEP) (2021). *La JEP hace pública la estrategia de priorización dentro del Caso 03, conocido como el de falsos positivos*.]

they were promised. This is evident in the recent social mobilization in Colombia, where workers, students, peasants, and, in general, the middle and lower classes made clear their desperation at the loss of the promised horizon.

Here lies the structural reason for the state's violent repression of the *National Strike*. *Uribismo* never truly intended to fulfill the promise of material well-being for all; instead, it adhered to the neoliberal ideology of "trickle-down economics," which has only deepened inequality and modernity's inability to deliver on its promise. In Colombia, as in other parts of the world, the majority are expressing that they no longer believe in this ideology. This represents a crisis for *uribismo*, which, seeing its hegemony slowly fade, responds through the only means it has left—violent coercion—a method it knows well, as it has always been the flip side of its power.⁶

At the same time, it is clear that the problem runs deeper than the loss of the horizon of material well-being. Certain social sectors—particularly students and young people—have lost faith not only in the promise of well-being but also in the ways of life promoted by contemporary "governmentality," which they view as profoundly unsatisfying. These groups increasingly show a desire to build ways of life that are not centered on material accumulation, leisure, and consumerism. Moreover, they look with concern at the growing environmental crisis—denied by neoliberal ideologues and ignored, or rather deliberately excluded, by *uribismo* from its political

⁶ I am not referring only to the "falsos positivos", which were an organic consequence of President Álvaro Uribe's security policy. I am also referring to the so-called "parapolítica"—the connections between far-right illegal armed groups and public officials from all branches of government, including 44 members of Congress and, quite possibly, the president himself. See Álvaro, M. (2008). La Parapolítica: la infiltración paramilitar en la clase política colombiana. Ánfora, 15 (24), 1–14.

discourse. Students, youth, and Indigenous groups are increasingly demanding not a return to the pre-pandemic normality—for, as one of the most striking slogans of recent local and global resistance movements proclaims, *normality is precisely the problem*—but rather, nothing less than the creation of a new society and a new world, since this one—the capitalist Western modernity—has not only been denied to them but has also run its course.

What does art offer in this scenario? Clearly, art will not restore the material securities or the senses of existence promoted by global capitalism. How could it, when artists are among the sectors most affected by the crisis? In the context of the neoliberal management of culture, dubbed in Colombia the "orange economy," artists have been experiencing a gradual process of precarization, in which survival means becoming an agent of oneself—a hybrid of creator and cultural manager who must navigate the circuits of cultural and entertainment industries to subsist. If society is a sick body, then artists—particularly independent ones, emerging artists, and those denied space within the field—are among its most affected organs.



For this reason, it is striking that, both in Colombia and elsewhere in the world, much of the artistic response to the crisis aligns with the government's management of it. Much art—from works by the most established artists to anonymous and street artists—directly or indirectly supported the discourse and authoritarian measures of the "sanitary leviathan." Within this dynamic, some of the few valuable opportunities promoted from—not by—the state were squandered. A case in point is the "De Voz a Voz" project by the Bogotá Museum of Modern Art (2020), in which the Sunday pages of Colombia's most widely read newspaper, El Tiempo, became the stage for a significant number of artistic interventions that, unfortunately, were largely little more than aesthetic translations of the government's crisis discourse—simplistic calls to not lose hope, narcissistic reaffirmations of individuality, or a combination of these elements. A similar dynamic can be observed transnationally in projects like Al Aire, Libre (2021), supported by institutions such as the MUCA Roma Museum (Mexico City), the Salvador Allende Museum (Santiago, Chile), and Casa do Povo (São Paulo), in which over 70 artists from Mexico, Chile, Brazil, and Argentina participated, though examples of dissenting artworks were few.

Perhaps this should not surprise us: artists, particularly the more established ones, are, like the rest of us, conditioned by contemporary "governmentality," with its aim of neutralizing the power of art through the cultural market and entertainment industries. Consequently, they defend and even naturalize the positions they have managed to occupy within the cultural field. This is certainly an obstacle, but not an insurmountable one, as suggested by the fact that some projects, like those mentioned above, provided a stage for artistic interventions that were not only

dissenting but also articulated a "therapeutic" sense. I think of the "therapeutic" orientation that curators Melissa Aguilar, Yolanda Chois, Máximo Flórez, Alexandra Haddad, Cristo Hoyos, Ana María Lozano, and Edinson Quiñones sought to give to *Interior/Exterior*, a project in which about 130 artists—both established professionals and emerging/popular artists—exchanged instructions for creating artworks that the recipient would then materialize. This exercise of synchrony and aesthetic collectivity recovered a sense of artistic community that the dynamics of competitiveness—exacerbated by the neoliberal commodification of culture—often undermine.

The contrast between the exhibitions described above reminds us, as Theodor Adorno (2004) would argue, that a work of art is inevitably crossed by a series of "contradictions" or tensions, particularly the tension between its aesthetic meaning (*Gehalt*) and its social function (*Funktion*), that is, between its social agency and the mediation of the sociohistorical process that informs it and to which it belongs. A paradigmatic case of this is the project *Vidas robadas* (Stolen Lives, 2021), developed in Bogotá by the artist Doris Salcedo in collaboration with *Cuestión Pública*, an independent investigative journalism group led by Claudia Báez and Diana Salinas. The work consists of a series of photographs of 56 victims of the *National Strike* repression, accompanied by texts about their personal histories and the circumstances of their deaths. The work is installed in *Fragmentos*, a space conceived by Salcedo as a "counter-monument" that allows for artistic and pedagogical interventions dedicated to the memory of the Colombian armed conflict, political violence, and its victims. Regarding *Vidas robadas* and *Fragmentos*, one could argue—as many have with Salcedo's work in general—that it represents a new co-optation of victims' pain by the artist in service of her own symbolic and cultural capital. Nevertheless, visiting the

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⁷ On the long-standing critical discussion surrounding Salcedo's work, see Panzarowsky (2008). *Sobre Doris Salcedo y las Grietas de Unilever. Revista virtual [esferapública]*; Salazar

space and hearing Salcedo, but above all Báez and Salinas, speak about the work, it is difficult not to perceive a meaningful dimension in its homage to the victims and its effort to challenge us as a society. As Adorno notes, it is up to us, the visitors and spectators, to interrogate the tensions of the work, extracting elements that might help us articulate the meanings necessary to navigate our circumstances, while still acknowledging its contradictory aspects.



Projectios by Streetdente, Toquica Estudios and La Nueva Banda de la Terraza, all in 2021.

There are artistic responses to the crisis in which these contradictions are less conspicuous than in the work mentioned above. For instance, I think of *Diálogos desde la Ventana* (Dialogues from the Window, 2021), managed by a team from the CREA program of Bogotá's District

^{(2008).} La crítica como ritual. Revista virtual [esferapública]; Yepes (2012). Doris Salcedo y la violencia del arte. Revista de estudiantes de sociología SIGMA; Yepes (2012). La política del arte: Cuatro casos de arte contemporáneo en Colombia; Herrera and Peñuela (2021). Fragmentos, espacio de arte y memoria: ¿monumento de memoria histórica o galería comercial de arte contemporáneo? Estudios Artísticos: Revista de investigación creadora.

Institute of the Arts, which allowed a number of Bogotanos and people from other places—artists and non-artists alike—to intervene in their windows during quarantine, presenting personal perspectives on the crisis, the need to cultivate meaningful relationships of care and mutual support, and a critical imagination of the post-pandemic world. I also think of works like *Campo Muerto* (2021) by the collective Danza Común, which, through video dance and subsequent live performances, highlighted the intersection of two precarities: those exacerbated by the pandemic and those experienced by people displaced amid violence. Similarly, I think of the Bogotá-based women's collective *Vale la Pena Ser Callejeras* and their reclamation of the street—not only as a space for artistic and professional activity but also as a site for interrupting colonial, patriarchal, and racist logics in our society, reaffirming their artistic identities, and pursuing feminist *poiesis*.⁸

Particular mention should be made of the work of "projectionist" collectives during the pandemic. Building on the aesthetic strategies of groups like *Delight Lab*—whose projections during the Social Outburst in Chile became a protest reference—or *Projetemos*, whose projections in São Paulo against Bolsonaro's government symbolized resistance to extreme-right rule in Brazil—or the collectives *Streetdente* (founded by Diana Ojeda and Le Pridex in Bogotá), *La Nueva Banda de la Terraza* (founded by Checho Parson and Felipe Tavares in Medellín), and *Toquica Estudios* (founded by Andrés Toquica in Bogotá), who projected images

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⁸ The collective "Vale la Pena Ser Callejeras" is composed of Rocío Ortiz, Ana Milena Hernández, Solkin Otálora, Camila Sánchez, Andrea Duarte, Rosario Vergara, Natalia Riveros, Clara Contreras, Natalia Ruiz, Rosalba Vásquez, Cristina Alejandra Jiménez, and María Fernanda Sarmiento Bonilla. See Vale la Pena Ser Callejeras (2021). ¡Vale la pena ser callejeras! Fiestacultura.

and messages supporting the *National Strike* and denouncing police and state violence. These projects, complemented by documentation on the collectives' websites and social media accounts—sometimes going viral—articulate the pandemic crisis with the social crisis it has exacerbated. In themselves, these messages and images reveal nothing new; they do not show anything unknown to those of us living in the cities and countries where they have been projected. Yet their potency lies not in novelty but in their ability to energize and affectively recharge both participants in the protests and the social context in which they unfold.

Other aesthetic and symbolic actions carried out during the *National Strike* are worth noting. One such action was the toppling of statues of colonizers and national heroes by young people belonging to the Indigenous Authorities Movement of the South West (AISO) in cities such as Cali and Bogotá. The iconoclastic movement began on April 28, 2021, with the toppling of the conquistador Sebastián de Belalcázar's statue in Cali and continued on May 7 in Bogotá with the destruction of the statue of Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada, also a conquistador and the city's founder. According to AISO members, the goal was "to rewrite our country's history" and reject "symbols of colonization and glorification of violence" (Rojas-Sotelo, 2021). As Miguel Rojas-Sotelo notes, this iconoclastic phenomenon—which is, of course, neither uniquely Colombian nor recent—constitutes not only a "symbol of social, political, and historical vindication long desired by indigenous peoples" but also lies "at the center of processes of education, critical reevaluation of the concepts of history, art, and culture in Colombia and the Western world" (2021, p. 43).



Statue of Gonzalo Giménez de Quesada toppled by members of the Misak community, Bogotá, 2021.

To these actions we can add the various symbolic gestures and aestheticizations of the protests seen in Colombia in 2021—much like those that took place in Chile in 2019 and in earlier uprisings elsewhere in the world. In this regard, notable artistic interventions include the *Monument to the Resistance*, inaugurated on June 13, 2021, in a working-class neighborhood of Cali, Puerto Rellena, which was renamed *Puerto Resistencia*. This ten-meter-tall monument was built by a group of young people with the collaboration of the local community, the advice of several engineers, and contributions of materials and money from citizens. The monument depicts a raised fist holding a sign that reads "resistance." It is painted with the faces of some of those killed during the protests and incorporates several of the improvised shields used by members of the so-called *Primera Línea*—young people who faced riot police on the front lines of the demonstrations. The monument's inauguration on June 13 drew a massive crowd, featured live music, and included a "symphonic cacerolazo" (a coordinated percussive protest using pots and pans).

Also worth mentioning are the various artistic, theatrical, and musical performances that took place during the strike, such as *Empaquetados* (Packaged, 2021), staged in Medellín, where a group of young, unidentified artists, naked and wrapped in transparent plastic, occupied a sidewalk in a busy part of the city. Finally, we should mention the parades organized by the *Transfeminist Resistance Front Marikón Cuerpas Agitadas y Dignificadas* and the *vogueing* performances by Piisciis, Neni Nova, and Axid in front of riot police—both carried out in Bogotá during the *National Strike* protests, and both of which went viral on social media. These expressions of rejection of official history and affirmation of living memory, of non-hegemonic identities and bodies, reflect the exhaustion surrounding contemporary "governmentality" and embody the demand for a new world that has emerged with great force amid the pandemic.





Monument to the Resistance, Santiago de Cali (2021) and Performance Empaquetados, Medellín (2021).



Frente de Resistencia Transfeminista Marikón Cuerpas Agitadas y Dignificadas, Bogotá (2021) and the vogueing of Piisciis, Nova y Axid, Bogotá (2021).

As we have seen, there are various strategies that artists and other agents within the art field have developed in order to intervene in the context of the multidimensional crisis currently affecting Colombia. In the context of the pandemic, interventions such as Interior/Exterior have sought to open spaces for solace, encounter, and collectivity—aimed at providing an opportunity to find calm and existential grounding amid the material and existential uncertainties that the pandemic has intensified. Some works, such as Vidas robadas, Campo muerto, and Empaquetados, aim to denounce and raise awareness of state and structural violence, both within the context of the pandemic and in relation to the various forms of violence that have long afflicted the country. Others, like the interventions by Streetdente, La Nueva Banda de la Terraza, and Toquica Estudios, have supported the resistances that emerged at the intersection of the National Strike and the pandemic. In addition, the Monument to Resistance commemorates those struggles: coming from a marginalized social sector and claiming a place for such communities within public discourse, it operates as a counter-monument in a much stronger sense than

Salcedo's Fragmentos space-work. Both this monument and the toppling of statues carried out by young Indigenous members of AISO also represent a rejection of official history—one of the narratives contemporary "governmentality" has sought to articulate in its effort to construct a hegemonic account of the nation. Finally, the affirmations of non-hegemonic identities, bodies, and ways of life expressed by collectives such as Vale la Pena Ser Callejeras, the Transfeminist Resistance Front Marikón Cuerpas Agitadas y Dignificadas, and artists like Piisciis, Neni Nova, and Alexis, open up a horizon of alternatives to the existential constraints and conventional forms of life that the crisis has multiplied and called into question.

All these artistic interventions share the fact that, although motivated by the crisis deepened by the pandemic, they do not merely respond to it. Rather, they articulate the demand and desire for new forms of life and social organization, new collective projects, and new meanings of life.

Some ground their significance in political discourses that have emerged in recent years around issues such as dignity, lack of opportunities, rejection of violence in all its forms, dissident identities, and the environmental crisis. Others have yet to articulate a clear political discourse but express discontents that have been simmering for a long time. In every case, however, these are interventions that channel the profound existential crisis in which we find ourselves.

It should not surprise us that these interventions have come primarily from the periphery of institutional art, as they represent a claim to the power of art that is, precisely, more difficult to exercise from within its center. What does this power consist of? In a short and beautiful text titled "Does Art Heal?", Suely Rolnik (2006) offers an answer: it consists in giving a sign to

affect. Art, whether written with a capital or a lowercase "A," gives flesh, gives body, to affect. Affect, as an intensity that interrupts habitual meanings, discourses, representations, significations, and conventional emotions, uproots us from the regulated subjectivity oriented toward production. But it does not stop there: it also operates as the driving force behind the articulation of new signifiers and discourses, new forms of subjectivity and relationality, new agencies and political projects.

By itself, art does not heal; it is not a magical remedy or miraculous therapy for the illness we are currently suffering. Nevertheless, it is one of the spheres—perhaps the main one—of the affective labor we must undertake in order to resist and critically position ourselves in relation to contemporary "governmentality," to undo entrenched subjectivities and behaviors, and to invent new ways of relating and new meanings of life.

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⁹ Rolnik, when revisiting Deleuze's text in *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, refers not to affect but to sensation. We have chosen to use "affect" in order to maintain the terminology we have developed elsewhere.

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