

## **Aesthetic Interventions in Contexts of Crisis: Art and Pandemic in Chile, Colombia and Brazil**

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### **Summary**

In Latin America, the health crisis caused by the Covid-19 virus amplified the social and political crises that have affected the region since before the pandemic. In this essay, we address some of the visual arts practices developed in three countries where the crisis has been particularly insidious: Chile, Colombia and Brazil. Moving beyond the representation of the crisis and the governmental sanitary discourse, these practices *intervene* in the crisis, i.e., they contribute to the structural changes that the crisis compels us to effectuate. These practices emerge as *aesthetic interventions*, that is, not only as mediations of social forces, but also, as one of their forms, as a particular modality of resistance, political articulation and collective care.

**Keywords:** Pandemic, Latin American Art, Contemporary Art, Political Art

In Latin America, the Covid-19 virus has not only been a disruptive natural entity, but also a catalyst and amplifier of the multifaceted crises that have been raging in several countries for some time. A microscopic being whose place among the living is uncertain for science has led Latin American societies, as in other parts of the world, to a turning point where we recognize that it is no longer possible to postpone the profound changes that we require. Thus, the virus has also been a motor of the forces of dissent, a vector in which some of the most pressing resistances, dissents and activisms have converged.

Many artists, institutions and art workers have responded to this situation. However, most of these responses are allied with the governmental health discourse and with state efforts to

confront the health crisis (Yepes 2023). Only a few of them have faced the conjuncture constituted by the health crisis, social discontent, the governmentality crisis and the desire for a different and better world that developed across several countries. In this essay, we refer to some of the visual art practices developed in three countries where the crisis has been particularly insidious: Chile, Colombia and Brazil. Going beyond the representation of the crisis and the governmental health discourse, the practices in question *intervene* in the crisis, that is, they contribute to the structural changes that the crisis compels us to carry out. These practices emerge as *aesthetic interventions*, not only as mediations of social forces but also as one of their forms, a particular modality of resistance, political articulation, and collective care.

The concept of intervention is one of the most important contributions of cultural studies to contemporary theoretical-political imagination. This concept, derived from Gramsci's notion of organic intellectual (Hall, 2014), alludes to a type of intellectual work "theoretically oriented towards transformation" (Restrepo 2012: 163), a *praxis* that seeks to modify or, at times, maintain specific cultural and social contexts, in order to contribute to the change in the conditions of the actors involved in them. An intervention can consist of the interruption of common sense and collective imaginaries, especially those referring to the relationship between cultural practices and power. It may consist of the denaturing and repeal of the discourses, meanings, representations and affective structures that have been naturalized and that constitute the dominant social reality. It can also take the form of cultural criticism, insofar as it is inserted into cultural circuits, thereby influencing the production of collective meanings.

Frequently, intervention has an aesthetic dimension, understood as an appeal to style, shape or bodily experience, to the sensitive, perceptual and affective. Furthermore, in certain cases, the intervention *is* aesthetic, that is, the aesthetic constitutes both the field of action and the very form of the intervention. We propose the term *aesthetic intervention* to refer to these cases. This type of intervention can focus on the modification of the "distribution of the sensible" (Rancière 1996, 2005), the regimes of the sensible that frame the social distribution of the visible and the invisible, the audible and the inaudible, the forms of affect that can and cannot circulate and be expressed publicly. The "structures of feeling" that frequently organize affective experience, both in a regressive and progressive sense, can also fall within their purview.<sup>1</sup> Thanks to the structuring and structural nature of the aesthetic and the affective (or the aesthetic-affective), the agency of the aesthetic intervention is not limited to the field of aesthetic experience, but rather transcends it, influencing the dynamics of power within the social field. This is possible because, as most contemporary theories of affect hold, affect is fundamentally linked to agency (eg, Gregg & Seigworth 2010). Affect is not only at the center of issues such as conformism, passive acceptance of the status quo, discrimination against those who do not align with the hegemonic social model and contemporary neo-fascism; it is also the engine of political agency. Thus, the term aesthetic intervention refers to those practices that seek, from the aesthetic experience that they constitute or make possible, to resist, subvert, deconstruct, and/or transform the dynamics of

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Williams developed this concept in several works, varying its meaning throughout. In *Marxism and Literature* (1978), he devotes an entire chapter to it, although, as a notion, it had already appeared in works such as *Culture and Society* (1960) and *The Long Revolution* (1961). Without going into the details of this trajectory, we return to Williams's concept insofar as it allows us to address the felt experience of the present, both in its hegemonic and emerging aspects.

power, both those that cut cross the field of aesthetics and those focused on other aspects of the political and the social.

In Chile, the Social Outbreak began in October 2019, a few months before the first Covid-19 infections were detected. The rise in public transport fares in Santiago triggered a social discontent that had been accumulating for years, as a result of the increase in the cost of living, health insurance and inequality, the undermining of the pension system, the repeated abuse of power by members of government, the lack of political representation of sectors such as students, women, and workers, and, above all, the discredit of the political class and state institutions (Labarca, Quezada and Faúndez 2019 ). Instead of acknowledging the social discontent, President Sebastián Piñera sent the police to confront the students who started the outbreak by carrying out acts of massive evasion in the Santiago Metro and the other sectors that joined the protest a few days later. As a result, there were, according to a report by Amnesty International (2021), more than 5,500 victims of state violence, including more than 2,200 injured civilians – with at least 340 victims of eye trauma, 1,100 cases of torture and more than 70 cases of sexual violence. The Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent quarantines achieved the reduction in the scale of the protests that the "New Social Agenda" proposed by the government could not. Thus, the pandemic represented a “crisis of the crisis,” an event that interrupted the flow of political forces.

It is within this context that we should understand the projections of Delight Lab, a lighting design studio led by siblings Andrea and Octavio Gana, who combine their commercial videomapping and audiovisual design projects with the "luminous activism" they developed

during the Social Outbreak. Delight Lab made a series of projections of messages such as "Chile woke up", "we are not at war, we are united" (in response to President Piñeros, who stated that the nation was at war against criminal gangs), "this too shall pass", "let their faces cover the horizon" (a verse by writer Raúl Zúrita) and "destroy the logic of the system in our hearts" (a poem by José Ángel Cuevas). These messages, sometimes accompanied by images, were projected in various places in Santiago, such as the facade of the iconic Telephone Tower in Plaza Baquedano, one of the epicenters of the protest. These projections were not denunciations or disclosures of facts unknown by the civilian population; rather, they were catalysts of affect, energizers of the protests, which, appealing to the constitutive relationship between affect and agency, sought to maintain and even increase the impetus of dissent. Further, thanks to their continued realization after the outbreak had ended and the circulation of images of the projections through digital social networks and virtual artistic exhibitions, these messages have contributed to keeping the flame of the protest burning despite its weakening during the pandemic, becoming affective vectors of dissent.



Delight Lab and Raúl Zúrita, *Que sus rostros cubran el horizonte*. Santiago, 2019-20<sup>2</sup>.

In the same light we should place the actions of the Pésimo Servicio collective in the city of Valparaíso, whose members, trained in graphic design, visual arts, and photography, spontaneously grouped in response to the Social Outbreak.<sup>3</sup> Their interventions in the context of the outbreak range from projections on buildings, banners and posters, to the performativity of their participation in the marches. Their graphic simplification of the Chilean flag, in which the word “mata” (kill) appears inside a colorless banner, became a recurring image during the protests in Valparaíso, where it circulated in the form of posters, banners, flyers and, as we see in the image below, large-scale urban interventions. Reminiscent of the actions of the CADA collective during the Augusto Pinochet dictatorship, Pésimo Servicio’s interventions fueled the protests, infusing the resistance with affective energy, which, in Valparaíso especially, continues to circulate. As in the case of Delight Lab, the dissemination of images of these interventions through digital social networks has contributed to keeping the affective energy generated by the outbreak in circulation.

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<sup>2</sup> Image courtesy of Delight Lab.

<sup>3</sup> The collective’s members are Camila Fuenzalida, Danila Ilabaca, Gabriel Vilches, Iñaki de Rentería, Pablo Suazo, Paula López-Droguett and Rodolfo Muñoz.



another video-performance, *Contagion* (2021), presented as a TikTok "challenge", Reveco swallows, piece by piece, a large photographic print of a masked President Piñero, in an act of symbolic anthropophagy. In *Imagen higienista* (2020), Reveco digitally intervened a photograph from the beginning of the 20th century showing the mayor of Santiago, Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna, along with other government officials, standing on Huelén Hill, which Mackenna planned to convert into a Parisian-style park, which would not only be a "green lung" in the center of the city but would also serve to separate the capital's elite from the peasants and indigenous people who were migrating to the city, whom the mayor publicly branded as "dirty". In the image, Reveco placed masks on Mackenna and his companions, and intervened on top of the hill with some of the phrases and slogans used by protesters during the Social Outbreak, genealogically linking the discriminations and exclusions of the past with those of the present. The image circulates on the artist's Instagram account, where he has a considerable audience.

Perhaps Voluspa Jarpa's work in the context of the Social Outbreak best illustrates art's capacity to keep the energy of civil resistance alive. Jarpa produced *Blindness Archives* (2020) in response to the eye injuries suffered by many protesters at the hands of the riot police. The work consists of a series of multimedia works that document these violent events. The series includes a collaborative piece in which the artist, during the pandemic and in the context of the international virtual exhibition *Al Aire, Libre* (curated by Tiago de Abreu Pinto), sent a candle to several persons around the world. Each of the candles contained a pellet like the ones fired by the riot police and had printed a word from a sentence taken from José Saramago's novel *Essay on Blindness*: "I think we're going blind, I think we're blind, blind ones who do not see, blind ones who, seeing, do not see". Jarpa asked the recipients of the candles to light them, record the

moment the pellet landed, and send her the video or audio recordings. With these, the artist created a video piece documenting the process. Though these actions, Jarpa fostered the performance of small private rituals capable of creating an empathic bond with the victims of police violence, an affective energy that was accumulated and put into public circulation through the video.

In *Sindemia* (2022), Jarpa addresses the confluence of the pandemic and the Social Outbreak which, in her perspective, was experienced as "an oscillation between the erotic energy of change – added to the feeling of collective gathering – and the thanatic energy of repression of an official power scared by the size of the discontent and the cohesion of the population".<sup>6</sup> Jarpa points out that although the pandemic, with its quarantines and restrictions, effectively interrupted the protest in the streets, it did not end the social discontent. Rather, the discontent "entered into a latent state of permanent protest".<sup>7</sup> *Sindemia*, created with the collaboration of persons from different disciplines, carries out a "performative activation" (Hermosilla 2021) of the visual and testimonial archive of the protest, questioning and reframing it in order to understand its different factors in detail and revealing the repressive operations of power. In this way, the work revives the spirit of the protest, in an "anti-erasure" gesture that resists attempts to suppress collective discontent.

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<sup>6</sup> Retrieved from the artist's website (2022):  
<https://www.voluspajarpa.com/en/artwork/sindemia/>

<sup>7</sup> Jarpa, in a personal communication (2022).



Voluspa Jarpa, *Sindemia* (detalle). Santiago de Chile, 2022<sup>8</sup>

By reviving and putting into circulation the empathy towards the victims of state violence and the discontent that motivated the protests, both works activate the affective memory of the Social Outbreak. Both suggest that, rather than being the result of a detailed reflective process, the social discontent that motivated the outbreak is a "structure of feeling," understood here as a generalized emergent affective force that responds to the circumstances of social and political disadvantage in which many citizens find themselves. Both works activate this affective structure as a "felt-thought" (Williams 1978: 132) on the social situation in Chile. This affective activation is a crucial aspect of the intervention carried out by both works, while synthesizing the dynamics of the affective interventions developed by Delight Lab, Pésimo Servicio, Danny Reveco and other artists in the context of the Social Outbreak.

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<sup>8</sup> Image courtesy of Jarpa. The image can be seen on the artist's website: <https://www.voluspajarpa.com/en/artwork/sindemia/>

In contrast to the situation in Chile, the 2021 National Strike in Colombia gained strength because of the pandemic. The protest was triggered by President Ivan Duque's announcement, during the worst stretch of the pandemic, of a tax reform that disproportionately taxed the lower and middle classes, while maintaining tax benefits for large businesses and corporations (see Yepes 2023). The protests revived the demands that fueled the 2019-2020 National Strike, which erupted in response to the government's economic, social, and environmental policies, including its attempt to undo the 2016 peace treaty with the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) guerrilla and the murder of social and environmental leaders. Given this panorama, the proposal for a tax reform amid the uncertainty and hunger caused by the pandemic and the state's indifference turned out to be the straw that broke the camel's back for the Colombian people. As in Chile, the government's response was to send the public force to confront the protests, resulting, according to figures from Human Rights Watch, in 65 civilian deaths, 1,062 civilian injuries – with at least 103 victims of eye injuries – and 24 cases of violence. sexual.



Streetdente, *Toquen cumbia*, 2020<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Image courtesy of Streetdente.

It is in this context that we must interpret interventions such as the Streetdente project, which was born during the pandemic and brought together 40 artists, most of them graffiti artists.<sup>10</sup> The aim of this project was to reclaim the streets of Bogotá for artistic expression during the quarantine. To achieve this, the participating artists projected images on several walls across the city. The first series of projections was articulated around the symbol of the red cloth that many people placed on their windows and doors to indicate that they did not have enough to eat. The images, which were accompanied by music and circulated on social media, sought to draw attention to the humanitarian crisis produced both by the pandemic and by the government's dismissive attitude towards the destitute, whose circumstances were aggravated by one of the most draconian quarantines in the world. The projections, carried out in 2020, contributed to the amplification of the social unrest that had been boiling since the 2019 National Strike and that broke out in the 2021 strike.



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<sup>10</sup> In Yepes (2023), I develop the theme of urban and street art made in the context of the pandemic and the National Strike in Colombia.

Carlos Castro Arias, *Los padres ausentes* (detail), 2021<sup>11</sup>

Renowned artists such as Carlos Castro Arias and Fernando Pertuz also produced works that intervened in the context of the crisis in Colombia. During the 2021 National Strike, several statues of conquistadors and national heroes, in Bogotá, Cali and other cities, were toppled by individuals belonging to the Movement of Indigenous Authorities of the Southwest, in rejection of colonization and violence against indigenous peoples (Yepes 2023). Carlos Castro refers to these events through his series *Los padres ausentes* (2021), which includes busts of Queen Elizabeth, Christopher Columbus and the founder of Bogotá, Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada. The busts were covered with beads arranged in elaborate geometric designs, a practice of the Inga culture. If Jarpa's work activates the archive, these works, which have been exhibited in museums and galleries in countries such as Colombia and the United States, activate history by suggesting that the latter is not finished but rather in dispute, and by vindicating the original cultures over the European historical legacy, in a powerful decolonial gesture that points to a reconstruction of the local historical and identity narrative.



<sup>11</sup> Image courtesy of Castro. It may also be seen on the artist's website: <http://www.carloscastroarias.com/projects/en/uncategorized/los-padres-ausentes>

Fernando Pertuz, *Los hijueputas*, (virtual render, detail), 2021<sup>12</sup>

Fernando Pertuz, renowned for his career as a performance artist, created the series *En juicio* in 2022. The series includes the multimedia installation *Los hijueputas*, in which photographic images of several former presidents are accompanied by texts that list some of the crimes and abuses attributed to them. In addition, each former president has a speaker in the place of his mouth that emits a shrill laugh, so that the cacophony of laughter assaults the viewer's sensitivity. The series also includes four video-performances in which the artist denounces the Colombian State for human rights violations, corruption, violence, manipulation, and inaction in the face of the social crisis that the pandemic exacerbated. In each piece, the spectator can vote whether the presidents are guilty or innocent of the accusations levelled against them. Thanks to its dissemination through the artist's website, the series, aided by Pertuz's renown as a political artist, has at least the potential to reach broad audiences. Taken together, these works constitute a vector for the dissemination of the inconformity that a good part of the civil population feels towards their rulers and state institutions.

In Brazil, the social crisis had different circumstances than in Chile and Colombia. The Brazilian crisis was not motivated by widespread and multifaceted social discontent, but by the disastrous management of the pandemic by President Jair Bolsonaro and his government. Resonating with President Donald Trump's posture towards the pandemic, President Bolsonaro tried to minimize the threat of the virus: he discouraged the use of masks, refused for months to decree quarantine,

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<sup>12</sup> Screen capture, authorized by the artist. The work may also be seen on the artist's website: <http://enjuicio.pertuz.org/En-Juicio.html>

encouraged mass gatherings of his supporters, publicly insisted on the ineffectiveness of vaccines, and recommended, on national television, the use of medicines without any scientific backing, such as hydroxychloroquine. When he finally decided to act, he paid excessively for an unapproved vaccine, in a contract that his government later had to cancel due to suspicions of bribery. These actions and inactions led the Brazilian Senate to form the Parliamentary Commission for Investigation of the Pandemic, which presented a report in October 2021 that accuses Bolsonaro of "crimes against humanity" for his denial during the health crisis (Gómez Saraiva, 2022).



Projtemos, *Mutações*. São Paulo, 2021<sup>13</sup>

The demonstrations against Bolsonaro and his government were almost immediate. Although these did not result in a large-scale social outbreak, they did succeed in undermining the president's political capital. Several artists contributed to the protests through their work. Another

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<sup>13</sup> Screen capture, authorized by Projtemos. See their Instagram account: <https://www.instagram.com/projtemos/?hl=en>

projection art collective stands out, Projecemos (created by VJ Mozart, VJ Spencer, and Bruna Rosa), whose members define themselves as a “global network of free projectionists”. For years, they have been using the walls of São Paulo and other cities as supports for their “urban visual performances”, many of them critical of the government of Jair Bolsonaro (Schiavinato, 2020). The projection of messages such as *Ficar em casa é um ato político* (Staying home is a political act, 2020) intervenes in a context where sanitary measures and the state's concern for the health of the population stood out for their negligence and disdain. Although at first their projections – one daily for over 100 days – lasted several hours, when the members of the group realized that the images of their work that they published on social media had a much larger audience than the actual wall projections, added to the risk involved in projecting clandestinely (in Brazil projecting images onto private property is illegal), they opted for short projections, lasting just long enough to record them photographically.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the network nature of their activity, their offering of didactic guides for low-cost projections and their collaboration with other artists, have resulted in the expansion of their critical approach to contexts beyond the crisis in Brazil.

Although without the political radicalism of Projecemos, Marilia Scarabello, an artist who lives and works in the city of Juandaí, has also produced work that intervenes in the Brazilian crisis. During the pandemic, Scarabello created *Sem título* (Brasil) (2020-21), a series of photographs of a bar of soap marked with the word “Brasil” that she had bought at a local pharmacy, photographed throughout its use. Scarabello began the piece in March 2020, when the quarantine began in the state of São Paulo. Every morning, the artist washed her face with the bar and photographically recorded the action. The work ended with the dissolution of the bar in early

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<sup>14</sup> According to Mozart and Spencer in personal communication (2022).

2021, thus completing a process that acts, through its photographic record, as "a metaphor for the degradation of the Brazilian nation and territory, a degradation that has accelerated in the context of the pandemic."<sup>15</sup> Scarabello has participated with this work in several exhibitions, including the Covid Art Museum, one of the first international virtual art exhibitions during the pandemic, where it had considerable visibility.



Marília Scarabello, *Sem título (Brasil)* (detalle), 2020-21<sup>16</sup>

Several recent works by Scarabello intervene the Brazilian flag. In *Bandeira [fragmento 1]* (2020-21), two thousand white fabric handles printed with the words *Ninguém vai tombar nossa bandeira* (No one will bring our flag down) were installed at the Centro Cultural da Diversidade, in São Paulo, as part of an homonymous collective exhibition curated by Julia Lima. Passers-by could take one of the bracelets and tie it around their wrists. The artist repeated this strategy in

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<sup>15</sup> Scarabello, in personal communication (2022).

<sup>16</sup> Image courtesy of Scarabello.

*Bandeira [fragmento 2]* (2022), this time with fifteen thousand bracelets printed with the words *Não se esqueça que eu venho do Brasil* (Do not forget that I come from Brazil) and installed on the access ramp of the Niterói Museum of Contemporary Art, as part of the collective exhibition *Território Vento*, curated by Felipe Moraes. Both works seek to symbolically reappropriate the Brazilian flag and national identity, in a gesture that seeks to counteract Bolsonaro's manipulation of nationalist discourse, as well as to promote commitment to fellow compatriots and the Brazilian territory at a time of crisis.

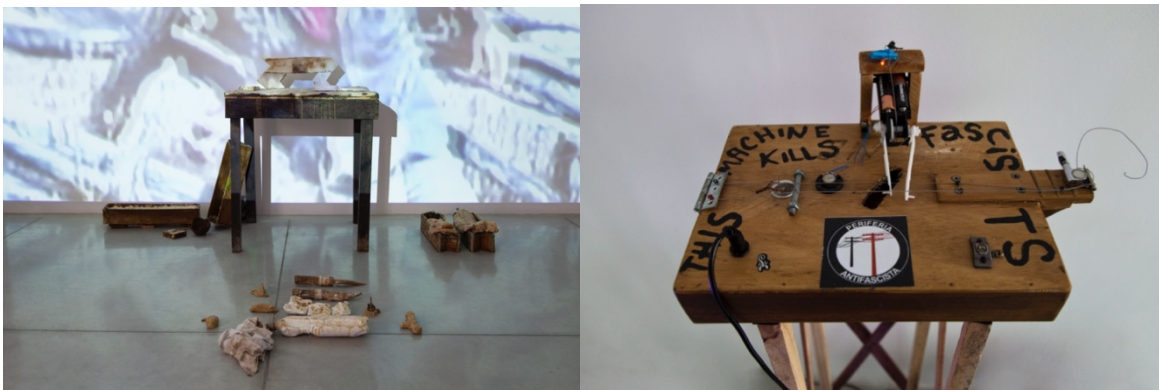
Even though there was no equivalent of an “Estallido Social” or “Para Nacional”, some aesthetic interventions in Brazil transcend the context of the government's mismanagement of the pandemic. In the city of Contagem, on the outskirts of Belo Horizonte, the artist Desali, whose work transits between community art, action art, street art, and multimedia work, has been developing Aliança Periférica Nacional (APN, 2020-present), a community project inspired by the figure of Carlos Lamarca, a captain of the Brazilian army who deserted in 1964 to participate in the armed resistance against the dictatorship that began that year. Lamarca's guerrilla actions in the south of the state of São Paulo are taken by Desali as a model for the development of APN together with the inhabitants of Barrio Nacional, on the outskirts of Contagem. According to Desali, APN is "a kind of urban guerrilla school in the open gallery format where you learn the principles of intervention and direct action, only in the form of urban art."<sup>17</sup>

APN participants, which include both adults and children, take waste materials and transforms them into sculptures and images, or “memory materials,” which they then install in both public and institutional spaces. For one of their works, they took discarded cooking oil and transformed

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<sup>17</sup> Desali, in personal communication (2022).

it into soap, which they then molded into weapons. In another action, *Lamarca Coletas: Eco guerrilha* (2021), they put up posters with Lamarca's face and the message that gives the action its name, while they cleansed and collected waste from their neighborhood, which they transformed into a series of objects and images alluding to the guerrilla struggle against the dictatorship and were exhibited in spaces such as the Athena Gallery in Rio de Janeiro. These actions draw a parallel between the situation in Brazil during the dictatorship and the pandemic crisis during the Bolsonaro government, fanning the flame of resistance in the popular sectors in which they take place. In addition, they bring peripheral sectors such as the Barrio Nacional community closer to the centers of art, thus subverting the systems of sociocultural exclusion that, in Brazil as in other Latin American countries, have been particularly insidious.



Aliança Periférica Nacional, installation with weapons moulded from cooking oil and “Antifascist Machine” assembled using found materials, both 2021<sup>18</sup>

These works, and others like them made in Brazil during the pandemic, exemplify the ability of art to intervene in contexts of crisis, where far-right political discourse has sought to control the collective political imagination. Works like these manage, even if subtly, to open or deepen the

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<sup>18</sup> Images courtesy of Desali. See the artist's website, [https://issuu.com/desali/docs/portifolio\\_oleo\\_desali\\_compressed\\_adc745844dfb0f](https://issuu.com/desali/docs/portifolio_oleo_desali_compressed_adc745844dfb0f)

cracks in that discourse and contribute to civil protest through their ability to denounce, convoke and create community, as well as opening spaces of experience and action in which dissent emerges as a real possibility.

As a whole, the artistic practices that we have reviewed here demonstrate the ability of art to intervene in contexts of multistructural crisis by denouncing the excesses and inactions of power, keeping alive the affective structure of dissent and contributing to its circulation and amplification, dismantling the discourses of power and their attempts to delegitimize civil protest, reconstituting cultural, identity and historical narratives, and constituting communities of resistance. Their aesthetic intervention in crisis contexts derives from their ability to create, transmit and mobilize affects capable of interrupting the affective discourses, circuits, and structures of the dominant power, as well as affectively articulating the collective forces of dissent. By framing this affective production within the discourse and practice of civil protest and resistance, they contribute to the disarticulation and transformation of contemporary governmentality, whose contempt for citizen well-being and even life itself has converged with the event of the virus.

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