

AUDIOVISUAL SERIES • EL PARO NACIONAL (THE NATIONAL STRIKE) - ART AS A TOOL FOR MEMORY AND PROPOSAL

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Marking the continuity of a plethora of actions and historical struggles in Colombia, the National Strike broke out on 28 April 2021. It was, in fact, a step towards the democratisation of dignity that called to the masses. As days went by, bodies fell and the reasons for striking simply overflowed, but the strike went on, hand-in-hand with art, despite the fear and death. Art became a way in which people could respond to what was happening.

We lived heart-wrenching and unnamable experiences, but even so we name them here to remember them. We also lived in a spirit of resilience, in experiences of *juntanzas* (community based gatherings) and hope deeply-rooted in the movements led by our youths. We reconfigured what was impossible and was possible; we re-designed good, the street, the pots (community-based food drives in giant collective pots placed over street fires to make food for all) and art; we created new forms of social mobilisation directed and inhabited by youth amid a pandemic, creating new utopias in their stride.

Amidst impossible living conditions, the pandemic, situations of inequality, corruption and murder of social leaders, lack of access to basic health, education, housing and culture rights, the youth of Colombia took to the streets and chose art. The government's response was the militarisation of the cities, the repression of social protests and the stigmatisation of young people. According to INDEPAZ¹, 80 people were killed during social protests between 28 April, when the National Strike broke out, and 22 May. Some 46 out of the 80 killings were at the hands of the security forces. In addition, the same institution recorded the disappearance of a further 346 people who took part in the National Strike. Most of the bodies belonged to young people aged between 13 and 28.

However, this was not the story that the official media and the government chose to tell. Both deaths and the repression were silenced.





Performance Mother I'll be home soon, in the live version of the audiovisual series El Paro Nacional - Cali, Colombia, 2021. Photograph by Sebastian Bolaños.



Performance Mother I'll be home soon, in the national protests beginning on April 28th, 2021 - Cali, Colombia. Photograph by Jimena AlmaRio

Silenced, too, was the beautiful art, the life, the *juntanzas*, the re-signification and the resilience we lived on the streets. It is with these words and, above all, with the accompanying videos, that we want to share the stories about how we went about building power among youth movements, how we came to embody resilience and love through *juntanzas*, thus creating processes of memory, visibility and proposition arising from the experiences of the National Strike in Colombia.

The audio-visual series *El Paro Nacional* is bringing together the voices and expressions of more than 50 artists, most of them young, who participated in the social mobilisations in Colombia. It is a methodological innovation in community-based research combined with art.

In this sense, we consider ourselves part of a larger collective of people, processes and movements which have been creating new forms of constructing knowledge and research in, from and for South America. We undertake the construction of knowledge without fear of the strength, the wisdom and the validity of our own voices or experiences. In order to put together the series *El Paro Nacional*, we blurred the lines between the systematisation of experiences and works of art, under the following premises:

1. We investigate our own processes as a sector, thus fostering empowerment, autonomy and transformation of power dynamics.
2. We believe there is a horizontal relation between the knowledge of our everyday experience and the knowledge generated in academia, which also assumes horizontality between people and institutions.
3. The purpose of systematisation is to foster action, and in this sense research must be useful for our own processes.
4. We see knowledge as situated², both the knowledge emerging from communities and movements, and the knowledge produced by institutions, science, history, and education.
5. We consider friendship, closeness and affection as the core axis of our research, and to us, these values represent strength.
6. We regard art and its manifestations as an ally of the systematisation of experiences and the construction of knowledge. This is why we choose to blur the lines between creation and systematisation, generating hybrids that boost the potential of research and, above all, help create new tools for communities to partake in these processes.





National Protests beginning April 28th 2021, Cali - Colombia. Photograph by Sebastian Bolaños.



Group Comadreo por la Vida in the live version of the audiovisual series El Paro Nacional - Cali, Colombia, 2021. Photograph by Sebastian Bolaños.

That's how we undertook the production and collective creation of the series El Paro Nacional. In the first weeks of the strike, when we couldn't have imagined all the experiences we'd go through in the following months, in real time the first episode was created:

Episode 1: The National Strike.

"And it brought about unity and ancestral justice, and we once again recalled the power of togetherness."

This episode assembles the experiences and feelings during the first moments of the Strike, the hopes, the citizens' proposals and the art. Four artists from different disciplines and more than 12 people who participated in the peaceful demonstrations of 5 May took part in this episode. See the first episode of the series on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zaj3FH6hC48>

As weeks went by, the violence became unbearable, and death and fear paralysed us, young bodies collapsed and disappeared, all while the institutional response was silencing voices and increasing militarisation.

Episode 2: The Horrendous Night.

"With dignified anger before such murky forces that insist on depriving us of the right to peace, we forgive, we don't forget, we demand justice and we choose beauty, truth and kindness."

This episode, a video-song focusing on memory, gives visibility to the violence exerted by public forces on protesters. Some 14 artists, mainly from Siloé, participated in this video, a collective narrative against anger and fear growing in our individual and collective bodies. See episode two of the series on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KNRL44ZwvL4>

The Strike went on for months, and the reasons for taking to the streets coalesced into a basic clamour for life: 'Do not kill us'. We stayed on the streets, with art and the communal pot to defend the right to defend our human rights without being killed, disappeared or stigmatised.

Emerging and emergency collective creations overflowed on every street, on every wall, in every conversation. This was how we were invited to join the *Madre ya regreso* (Mother, I'll be back soon) performance: a group of mostly young women and diversity groups which visited parts of Cali torn by violence, positioning their bodies on the ground to commemorate the young people who had been murdered and who had disappeared. In addition to their performance, they also burnt sacred plants and sang traditional songs interpreted by *Comadreo por la Vida* group of *Mayoras*³, a collective ritual of memory, mourning and farewell.

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Episode 3: The Mourning.

“Yeison was his name, García his surname. It is with that name that he leaves and will never be forgotten.”

This episode gathers the experiences of Madre Ya Regreso and Comadreo por la Vida in order to open a ritual space for mourning, seeking collective healing by naming the absent bodies. See it on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MD-og01r5j8>

What can be done with so much pain? How can we transcend the horrible nights and the mourning and go on to rebuild hope? The following episode in the series comes in response to these questions.

Episode 4: Fire.

“I saw my empty cage from afar. When it turned to ashes, I thanked the fire.”

At this point, the series switches gears to the beat of a *bullerengue*⁴. We see a ritual transition from death to life, from confinement to freedom, from what's sick to what's healthy, a meditation on the image of fire as a transformative, healing force. Fire as the main character and indispensable actor in the National Strike. See it on: <https://youtu.be/zx8FldaPrb8>

These young women and men are overflowing with resilience, with alternative manners of constructing memory, creativity and art. But currently, in a civic space so hostile and precarious, there is little space left for these forms of collectivity and organising. What's lacking and needed is for governments, institutions and funders to listen to these voices attentively and horizontally. What's needed is a reconfiguration of power based on the acknowledgment of our alternative ways of constructing knowledge and memory, to bridge the gaps in epistemic injustice that de-legitimises the voices, the experience and the bodies of women, youths and the LGTBQ+ population, and generally, the global south.

We share this systematisation-creation experience as one of the above-mentioned alternative ways of constructing knowledge, visibility and proposal. We regard art as a strategic ally in the re-configuration of power, voice and leadership of young people and social movements.

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¹ INDEPAZ 2021: <http://www.indepaz.org.co/victimas-de-violencia-homicida-en-el-marco-del-paro-nacional/>

² This idea has its roots in feminist proposals developed by authors such as Donna Haraway (1995) with the idea of situated knowledge, Sandra Harding (2004) with the theory of point of view, among others, who argue that all construction of knowledge is mediated by a way of seeing the world, in the case of the institutions of our western society (science, education, politics, economy, etc), this vision of the world is androcentric, cis-sexist, binary, classist, racist, speciesist, euro-centric, capacitive, reducing the definition of 'normal' to the minimum possible. They are versions of the world: mediated photographs.

³ It is the way of naming the older women transmitters of ancestral knowledge.

⁴ The *bullerengue* is a traditional rhythm of the Caribbean Region of Colombia interpreted and danced mainly by women.

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