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## The “Retablos” wait for your demands!

### Community building through feminist activism amidst lethal repression in Peru

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## The “Retablos” wait for your demands! Community building through feminist activism amidst lethal repression in Peru

**Abstract.** Ever since Dina Boluarte took Peru’s presidency, police repression, military violence, and killings followed massive mobilizations that rejected her. *Retablos por la Memoria* stands out as one of the civil groups that appropriated a rural tradition of artistic expression to denounce and mourn the assassinated. Initiated by feminist artists, they have spread in Peruvian cities and abroad, creating bridges and new communities within a fragmented and depoliticized society. In a country still affected by the internal armed conflict since the 1980s, and despite being harshly affected by Covid-19, *Retablos por la Memoria* contests impunity while demanding radical change. This article reviews its regenerative form of activism in a highly violent battleground.

**Keywords:** Toma de Lima, *Retablos por la Memoria*, feminist, collective mourning, activism

**Resumen.** Desde que Dina Boluarte asumió la presidencia de Perú, la represión policial, la violencia militar y los asesinatos siguieron a movilizaciones masivas que la rechazaron. *Retablos por la Memoria* se destaca como uno de los grupos civiles que se apropiaron de una tradición rural de expresión artística para denunciar y llorar a los asesinados. Iniciadas por artistas feministas, se han extendido en ciudades peruanas y en el extranjero, creando puentes y nuevas comunidades dentro de una sociedad fragmentada y despolitizada. En un país aún afectado por el conflicto armado interno desde la década de 1980, y a pesar de estar duramente afectado por el Covid-19, *Retablos por la Memoria* cuestiona la

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impunidad al tiempo que exige un cambio radical. Este artículo revisa su forma regenerativa de artivismo en un campo de batalla altamente violento.

**Palabras clave:** Toma de Lima, *Retablos por la Memoria*, feminista, duelo colectivo, artivismo

## Introduction

*Retablos por la Memoria* was created in response to the more than sixty deaths caused during the first two months of Dina Boluarte’s repressive government in Peru, amidst massive mobilizations that branded her as “Dina asesina” (Dina, the murderer) and organized epic journeys to the capital, known as *Toma de Lima* (Lima Takeover).<sup>2</sup> This unprecedented movement to the capital, primarily from the southern Andes, was creatively echoed by various civil groups demanding justice and reparations. Among them, *Retablos por la Memoria* stand out as a significant phenomenon due to its consistency and expansion. Since its inception in Lima in January 2023, these colorful *retablos* have appropriated a traditional artistic expression from Ayacucho to highlight the names and faces of the victims of violence. They have been widely reproduced in many Peruvian cities and abroad, becoming a recognizable and cohesive element in the protests, fostering temporary communities, strengthening alliances, and providing ways to express and process the intense affects circulating in a convulsed city.

Created by feminist artists, *Retablos por la Memoria* renew the available tools to challenge impunity and collectively mourn the deceased, emphasizing the value of each lost life, a novel gesture within the genealogy of artistic interventions in local protests. Due to their contagious and replicable characteristics, *Retablos por la Memoria* can serve as a renewing example for other contexts where extremist forces gain power, and the criminalization of protests increases. I participated in the early stages of this endeavor while being in Peru in January and February 2023, when many killings and major protests occurred. Since then, as a migrant living abroad, I have stayed connected through online meetings and discussions but have been absent from the shared daily struggles. Due to the hybrid nature of my partaking, onsite and online, the article sometimes use 'we' and sometimes 'they' when referring to the individuals behind the *Retablos*, whom I call *retablistas*, as we prefer to maintain anonymity when possible.

Caught by the violence and speed of the events in January and February, 2023, my involvement with *Retablos por la Memoria* was an immediate response

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<sup>2</sup> Information and a complete archive of *Retablos por la Memoria* can be found here: <https://www.instagram.com/retablosporlamemoria/>

as a citizen, an activist, and an artist closely related to the other initiating members. Since then, my commitment has been sustained by my understanding of a citizen's and an artist's responsibilities in conjunctures such as the one Peru has been undergoing and by deep-rooted activism which started during the mobilizations against Alberto Fujimori's dictatorship (1992-2002).<sup>3</sup> Later on, my experience of the protests was retrospectively considered from a researcher's perspective and complemented with subsequent discussions with the *retablistas*.<sup>4</sup>

The article aims to add on to the archival and reflection on these challenging times for Peruvian citizens, while expanding the reach of *Retablos por la Memoria*, an initiative that enables each of us to find our way to contribute to their existence, as an artistic expression of protest maintained by permanent yet fluid collective efforts. Resorting to theory written in Peru, I contextualize the events that motivated the creation of *Retablos por la Memoria* and the cultural tradition they depart from. Connecting lived experience, conversations and contemporary feminist theory on political performativity, I highlight the uniqueness and quick expansion of this new way of protest, to sustain that, amidst a context marked by ongoing violence and injustice, *Retablos por la Memoria* have changed the communities who have adopted them, making the reality more bearable for them, and a realm still capable of generating seeds of hope and transformation. Thus, the initiative managed to organically merge public and collective mourning with community building in an innovative way within the history of artistic interventions in Peruvian protests.

### **A president indifferent to colonial wounds and to re-traumatizing victims of violence**

Peru's former President Pedro Castillo and his family taking their belongings out of the Presidential Palace in plastic garbage bags, constitute one of the saddest images in recent history in a country where most of the Presidents since 1992 are convicted, accused or fugitives from justice (Biosca, 2023). On December 7th,

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<sup>3</sup> During 1997-2000 I actively participated in Estudiantes Unidos Contra la Dictadura (United Students Against Dictatorship), later on, in 2011 and 2016 against Keiko's Fujimori candidacy, as part of Artistas Anti Keiko (Artists Against Keiko) Mujeres Dignidad (Women Dignity) and Nadie Nos Paga (Nobody Pays Us).

<sup>4</sup> Apart from Whatsapp chat messages, I had a videocall in August with eight of the most constant members. I specify these interweaved roles for clarity, although as an artist who writes autoethnography, I don't usually disentangle the links between activism and research, since both nurture my artistic practice, constitutive of the exercise of my citizenship.

2022, Castillo, facing a third impeachment process against him, which was to be voted on that day, delivered a *Mensaje a la Nación* (Message to the Nation). He announced his decision to dissolve the Congress, intervene in the leading public institutions, and convene elections for a new Congress with constituent powers. Only backed by his Prime Minister and without the support of the Armed Forces, the announcement was quickly criticized. The Congress found the missing piece to remove him from office, and Castillo was arrested on his way to seek asylum at the Mexican Embassy (Buschschlüter, 2022).

The Vice President, Dina Boluarte, elected in the 2021 elections running with the same political party as Castillo, Perú Libre, was designated President by the line of succession. Peruvians were clearly divided between those condemning the coup and those supporting it, with some viewing it as a desperate move by an authority blackmailed by a Congress that didn't allow him to govern and whose unpopularity was even greater. Castillo's supporters were mostly Andean citizens from rural, Quechua-speaking areas, like himself, and they had organized the first demonstration called 'Toma de Lima' (Lima Takeover) for that very December 7th. That name entered the new political vocabulary on that day, marking the ongoing crisis characterized by massive demonstrations aimed at advancing national elections and defeating a government considered illegitimate.

As the 6th Peruvian President in six years, Boluarte soon disappointed those who were expecting the first woman president in Peru's history and those who considered her a leftist. Additionally, she found herself cornered by a corrupt Congress and lacked actual connections to the party that promoted her candidacy or its followers. In response, Boluarte resorted to the use of violence. Amidst repeated declarations of a state of emergency, police repression and military violence resulted in more than 60 deaths in two months, with none of those responsible being held accountable or providing reparations yet (Cottrino and Lum 2023).

But before delving into Boluarte's tenure, it is important to understand who she replaced. Pedro Castillo surprised everyone when he became President of Peru on July 28th, 2021, after gaining overwhelming support from the highlands. The election was contested by a right-wing coalition that demanded a recount of the ballots and echoed claims of 'fraud' along with the defeated Keiko Fujimori, the daughter of the dictator Alberto Fujimori. While Keiko refused to accept her defeat for the third time in her quest to become President and secure the release of her incarcerated father, the elites in Lima were not prepared to be governed by a rural schoolteacher, peasant, and leftist from the Andean highlands. Castillo was also accused of having close ties to the remnants of the subversive group Shining Path, which declared war on the Peruvian state in 1981 and contributed to a period of deadly violence exacerbated by Fujimori's State terrorism. Moreover, Castillo faced criticism because he belonged to the *rondas*

*campesinas* (peasants' self-defense groups), was part of an Evangelical Christian group, and, as the media quickly criticized, the soon-to-be First Lady did not speak “proper” Spanish (Terrones, 2021).

As Marisol de la Cadena has argued, such arguments can be explained by what the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano conceptualized as “the coloniality of power” or “the organization of a world-system through hierarchies stemming from modern notions of race, class, geography, and gender” (Quijano 2000 cited in De la Cadena 2023). Therefore, in the Peruvian imaginary, the further one gets from the city, the population tends to be less literate, less white, and more indigenous, aligning with the official geographical distribution of literacy in the country: higher in coastal cities, lower in the highlands, and even lower in the Amazonian region (De la Cadena 2023).

The last few decades of Peru's elections can be summarized by last-minute anti-Fujimori efforts, with Keiko losing in the second rounds in 2011, 2016, and 2021. But recent results have also shown a clear demand for change and redistribution in a country whose macroeconomic numbers have grown tremendously without translating into concrete improvements for most of the population. Fujimori's dictatorship administered the state through effective control mechanisms, promoting a process of “development” and “modernization” based on openness to a free market and programs of infrastructure works and poverty mitigation. But in reality, poverty expanded, turning the country into one of the poorest and most unequal in Latin America, while the existing social fabric was systematically fragmented, mostly among popular sectors, with the excuse of combating subversion (Pajuelo, 2004).

Illiterate peasants and indigenous populations have voted in Peru since 1980, when universal voting was promulgated, while democracy was restored after 12 years of military dictatorship. After Fujimori's imprisonment in 2002, since Peru returned to democratic governance, each election implies a strong message sent from the highlands to the conservative capital. The southern regions, especially, tend to vote against Lima's preferences, demanding authorities to prioritize needs beyond those of the urban coastal areas (Toche, 2023).

Every five years, Andean and rural voters, who often choose whoever represents an option for change, are portrayed by the monopolized media as ignorant and easily manipulated. And every five years, an unspoken contract is renewed, in which each President is elected by citizens who are not considered political subjects and with whom they subsequently develop relationships of political patronage. For the 2021 elections, voting was even more meaningful, since it implied a recognition of resistant existence after the deathly pandemic of

Covid-19 (Agüero, 2021). Ironically, Pedro Castillo was not up to the historical challenge posed by his election, coming from a sector that supposedly lacked criteria for governing the country. The political mediocrity, clientelism, and corruption during his short tenure were even more scandalous than in the previous presidencies (Arce, 2022).

With the endless capacity of Peruvians to find humor in our national tragedies, many of us joked about Castillo's lack of talent for discreet corruption or orchestrating a self-coup. The confusing events and his sudden imprisonment stirred protests among his supporters, who defended their right to be governed by someone they considered one of their own. However, dismissing the dangerous polarization prevailing in a context still grappling with the catastrophic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, Dina Boluarte began her rule without a willingness to engage in dialogue. Instead, she quickly expressed her intentions to complete the mandate in 2026, rather than calling for elections as the streets demanded.

The protests that began on December 7 were a reaction in defense of the vote and against the evident alliance between Boluarte, the Congress, the armed forces, the right-wing, the business elite, and the mass media. The provinces rose up before the regional capitals, often blocking highways, attempting to take over police stations or airports in an effort to paralyze the country (Ballón, 2023). The protesters demanded the dissolution of the Congress, the resignation of the President, new general elections, the establishment of a constituent assembly, and the release of Castillo—an initial demand that gradually faded away. On December 14, Boluarte declared a state of emergency, permitting the military to intervene against protesters across the country. By December 17, the death toll had reached 29, and 67 in her first 100 days in power (Vásquez, 2023). As in previous tragic episodes of Peruvian history, the victims were Andean people, primarily from Apurímac and Ayacucho, areas that saw the highest number of assassinations and disappearances during the internal armed conflict between 1980 and 2000 (CVR, 2003). Without considering the traumatic effects of these recent wounds, Boluarte sent soldiers to the streets of Ayacucho and repeatedly defended the use of violence by the police and army. Unfortunately, and swiftly, the government of the first Peruvian woman President had managed to become the second most deadly one in Latin America since 2000, surpassed only by Juan Duque's presidency in Colombia between 2018 and 2022 (Chillitupa, 2023). Due to the killings, the Public Ministry initiated an ongoing investigation against the President and her Ministers in January. Nevertheless, the Congress decided to cancel an open accusation against her for human rights violations.

*Quchua and Aymaras' mobilizations reach the capital: The 'Toma de Lima' (Lima's Takeover)*

The demonstrations that sprang up all over the country, apart from demanding Boluarte's resignation and new elections, soon became a call for justice and dignity in response to the killings carried out in the Andes but controlled from the capital. For many of us following alternative media, individual posts, and private information shared through WhatsApp, the name 'Toma de Lima' had a decolonial connotation. Several academic texts and journalistic articles stressed how the protests and their online reverberations defied the prevailing colonial power structures, which mold social interactions and hegemonic symbolic representations in Peru (Ragas, 2023). For the anthropologist Rodrigo Montoya these protests were the “first Quechua and Aymara rebellion in 200 years”, and their organizing modes challenged hierarchical, top-down configurations, like following the Zapatistas motto of mandar obedeciendo (to rule by obeying). Sociologist Víctor Caballero explained the intensity of the mobilizations due to the Indigenous ways of governance in their localities, which decentralizes power, in opposition to the extreme concentration of resources and decision-making that characterizes the central government (2023).

The major media, monopolized by Grupo El Comercio (owning 70% of radio, TV, and press), denounced the protesters as violent and radical, focusing on blockades, fires, broken windows, and painted walls. Nothing was said about the assemblies they organized in each town and city to collect money for sending delegations by bus or the spontaneous communal kitchens in the squares or the emergency brigades being created to assist the wounded while evading police and military personnel who were shooting pellet guns and tear gas at them.<sup>5</sup>

Through social media, we followed thousands of people who traveled 15, 20, 25 hours by car and bus from Cusco, Puno, or other areas, only to walk kilometers in a city that closed its doors to them, forcing them to sleep in parks and squares under the sun.

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<sup>5</sup> As can be seen in this video: <https://www.infobae.com/peru/2023/01/29/video-del-instante-que-un-objeto-contundente-le-cae-en-la-cabeza-a-victor-santisteban-yacsavilca-el-primer-fallecido-en-las-protestas-en-lima/>





Figure 1: Makeshift “olla común” (common pots) in Cusco, January, 2023. Picture: Ninoska Montufar

Those who traveled from the Andes to Lima wanted to defend their right to protest in peace and return home alive afterward. They sought to assert their right to be political subjects, fully aware that their messages were shouted at those who denied their humanity. Walking in solidarity against death, they gathered their bodies as tangible evidence that their lives mattered. Denouncing, crying, mourning, and organizing themselves to protest, they collectively answered the question 'What makes a life grievable?' (Butler, 2004). In a country where centuries of colonialism had conditioned its citizens to underestimate each other based on skin color, literacy, and the material their houses are made of, the protesters dared to express that the lives of their deceased were as valuable as those who ruled over them. In a country where COVID-19 disrupted the commemoration of the bicentennial of independence in 2021, the 'Toma de Lima' became a haunting, mobilizing spirit that reminded the center of power of the obsolescence of the never-fulfilled colonial nation-state project (Méndez, 2000).

That's why during the protests from January 19 to 21, which coincided with Lima's anniversary, a verse by Peruvian author José María Arguedas was

widely quoted and turned into memes on social media: 'Al inmenso pueblo de los señores hemos llegado y lo estamos removiendo' ('We have arrived at the lords' magnificent village, and we are shaking it').<sup>6</sup> This verse is part of the poem 'Tupac Amaru Kamaq Taytanchisman' ('To Tupac Amaru, Our Father Who Animates'), which was inspired by the killing of Andean men defending their lands from police sent by the Cerro de Pasco Corporation in 1960. Therefore, the epic journey from the Andes to the capital was a continuation of an ongoing, repeated story of struggle and abuse between the political forces defending the status quo and the subalternized groups defying it. Arguedas' verse inspired the bodies resisting military violence and the media's misrepresentation, whose precarious but courageous displacements echoed the familiar dislocations that constitute modern Peru, as the poem portrays (Torres, 2023). According to Christian Elguera, 'Tupac Amaru Kamaq Taytanchisman' represents Quechua migrants contesting spatial segregation, racial and social injustices by carrying different ontologies or 'worlds' within them when traveling, to preserve their notions of territoriality and resist coloniality in Lima (Elguera, 2020, p 119-120)."



<sup>6</sup> The translation is mine.

Figure 2: 'We have arrived at the lords' magnificent village, and we are shaking it'. Illustration by Carlín, La República, 20/02/23

Thus, that January, the social uprising filled Lima's public spaces with *wiphalas* (colorful flag associated with the Inca's Empire, Tahuantinsuyo, to the Aymara struggles and symbol of indigenous resistance in the region, notably in Bolivia), exuberant banners, colorful hats and *polleras* (traditional Andean skirts with patterns and materials corresponding to their places of origin). These cultural symbols, laden with ancestral meanings, denoted the collective spirit of the mobilization, made possible by *chanchas* (communal fundraising) and by the support of the non-human beings to whom the travelers consecrate their mission, protectors of their homelands. This Andean cosmivision, which has survived centuries after the eradication of idolatries, translates itself into contemporary cultural assemblages, permeating the imaginary of the 'Toma de Lima.' Those days were described as a different time, when popular demands could finally be heard, perhaps even the time of *Pachakuti* (Quechua for a total change): when everything is turned upside down (Durand, 2023). Many voices interpreted those tumultuous months as a moment when established orders could be unsettled enough to generate something new (Caballero, 2023, Rodríguez-Ulloa, 2023). For those of us participating or following closely the demonstrations, it felt like the closure of one cycle and the beginning of another, as if the vibrant display of lucid rage could bring about change. As Judith Butler wrote regarding bodies gathered in public spaces, what we witnessed could be described as the performative exercise of those bodies' right to appear: an embodied reclamation of the right to a more livable life (2017: 31). Those tense but culturally loaded protests were also a collective defense of the public character of space, something that more and more is proven that can't be taken for granted.

But months passed and Dina Boluarte's government remained in power, negotiating with the Congress and dismissing international critique. The 2nd Toma de Lima in March and the 3d one in July showed the passing of the time and the exhaustion of citizens not only still affected by the pandemic and the political crisis' consequences, but dengue, floods and El Niño phenomena increased by climate change. Advanced elections don't seem feasible, neither structural change or a change of Constitution. Nevertheless, the massive displacements towards the capital can be considered an historic expression of decolonial rebellion against the racism and inherited colonial structures shaping Peruvian politics. And downtown Lima's streets, transformed into a battleground, were the background not only of some of the most exaggerated displays of police and military force but of renewed and hopeful expressions of resistance, solidarity and mourning.

These last cycles of protests have proved that music, dance and diverse cultural expressions are not the exception in the public space anymore, but an effective way to combat fear and impunity. Building up on a transformative process that has grown since 2000, artistic collectives, creative initiatives and joyful social and feminist movements continue changing the rhetoric of protest in Peru. Not more solemn banners or limitations to black, white and red: subjectivity, sense of humor and color takes over the streets progressively, widening the range of affects imbued in the act of dissent, expanding allowed gestures and social choreographies. And as the *Retablos por la Memoria* initiative demonstrate, to protest can be a way for creating and strengthening communities, producing unexpected bridges and renovating hope amidst contemporary Peruvian necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003: 39).

*The origin of a feminist artistic movement: “And why not a Retablo?”*

During that period the demonstrations were portrayed as a threat to Lima’s order and peace. The big media represented protesters as radicals, amplifying the voices accusing them of being terrorists, or better said, *terrucos*, a colloquial expression used by the Peruvian right to delegitimize social movements (Gonzales, 2023, Villalba 2022, Greene, 2023). The government not only maintained the state of emergency to allow military force to repress the protests, but intervened violently when public universities decided to open their doors to host the protesters from Cusco, Puno, Apurímac (Gómez Vega, 2023). Daily images showed a capital hostile to the citizens who traveled for days to express their rage and grieve, generating a sense of impotency, in my case due to living abroad and not being able to express solidarity to the travelers.<sup>7</sup> And many people in Lima did not identified with the predominant narrative creating an irreconcilable opposition of “us against them”. Therefore, multiple campaigns were launched to collect money and buy basic items for the protesters: canned food, water, cheap mattresses, summer clothes for those who came from the highlands unprepared for the coastal weather. In January and February, the massive demonstrations were mostly composed by Andean Quechua and Aymara people, who could be seen in diverse districts of the capital walking for kilometers to reach its center. But not many locals joined them, due to indifference, the

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<sup>7</sup> After attending the protests in Peru from mid-January to early March, I continued to participate from a distance by coordinating, fundraising, and assisting with the creation of texts and images.

summer holidays and fear of the violent repression. That is how the *compañeras* of *Retablos por la Memoria* remember those days, filled with anxiety and distress.

However, those were precisely the feelings that motivated them to act in response to what was happening. It all began with a group chat among concerned friends who supported one another emotionally and psychologically. They have in common being all artists, feminist and activists, who previously collaborated in cultural or political projects. Unsatisfied with the available coverage of the events, they shared information unavailable in the mainstream media, and tried to come to terms with the unsettling images of soldiers erupting into the streets and houses of Ayacucho.

It was a macabre *déjà vu* that made its inhabitants feel as if thirty years hadn't passed since the war ended in that region. Clearly, Dina Boluarte and her ministers were not concerned about the possibility of re-traumatizing the population of Ayacucho, which accounted for almost half of the deadly victims between 1980 and 2000 and was the only place where the deaths caused by the military rivaled those caused by the Shining Path, according to the Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación (2003).

Since one of the now *retablistas* is from Ayacucho, the chat group became a sound board for the outraged emotions caused by the contrasting ways in which the violence was being inflicted on the Peruvians, depending on their provenance. This is how the now *retablistas* started to discuss how to expand the denunciation of state violence beyond the center of Lima, reaching the middle-class neighborhoods where people seemed to inhabit a parallel, unaffected reality. Being all artists, they aimed to create something visually appealing, non-aggressive but friendly, that could engage wary individuals in a conversation they might prefer to avoid. They wanted to emphasize the deathly victims of the regime and make Lima understand that they constituted losses for everyone, not just in Andean Peru. The shared motivation implied an understanding of life as something which always has the same value, interdependent, and that imposes certain ethical principles. Thus, even if 'my' life is not annihilated, a part of it is destroyed when other lives and vital processes disappear (Butler, 2017: 49).

That's how the *retablistas* decided to create something that would convey the act of caring about the losses, in the midst of the violent indifference expressed by the mainstream media and the government. Initially, they thought about building small houses, similar to those installed on Peruvian streets and highways when someone dies in a car accident. They also considered adapting a model of banners seen in Argentinean protests. However, the *retablista* from Ayacucho, proposed, 'Why not a *retablo*?'

A *retablo* is a portable altar traditionally from Ayacucho, with an unknown origin date. It is believed to be a variation of transportable boxes

depicting saints, used by Spanish conquerors in evangelizing the Andes and later employed in rituals marking cattle and other Andean ceremonies (Ulfe, 79). Over the years, *retablos* underwent significant transformations. They evolved from depicting religious and rural scenes exchanged by peasants for animals to representing diverse cultural traditions and daily life vignettes intended for urban collectors. In recent decades, they became a way to portray the traumatic episodes experienced during the period of violence in Peru, thanks to the work of artists like Claudio Jiménez, Edilberto Jiménez, and Nicario Jiménez, all of them from Ayacucho. As María Eugenia Ulfe asserts, in this manner, *retablos* break free from the tradition-modernity dichotomy, opening new channels of circulation and entering the popular imaginary as a hybrid, impure, and subaltern practice (Ulfe: 76). Due to being representative of one of the areas most affected by violence, a giant *retablo* was the main decorative element at the presentation of the Final Report by the Commission of Truth and Reconciliation in 2003. In the last years, the *retablos* have become not only well-known and highly regarded nationwide but also a type of art that represents Peruvians in a unifying, inclusive way, transcending their place of origin and conditions.



Figure 3: Two *retablistas* at a demo holding the first made *Retablo*, respecting the traditional shape. Picture: *Retablos por la Memoria*.

In January, the first *retablo* was constructed to honor the victims of the December’s massacres in Apurímac and Ayacucho, where eight and ten people died, respectively, and more than one hundred individuals were wounded. The three pioneering *retablistas* displayed it in a central park in Miraflores, an emblematic middle-class neighborhood, to showcase the names and initials of the deceased, along with their pictures or 'NN' for the unidentified ones. Reflecting on that experience, the *retablista* from Ayacucho mentioned the fear she felt while

doing so, in an environment she perceived as supportive of the government's actions, which were later condemned by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. Indeed, in May, the international organization described the State's response to the protests as 'out of proportion, indiscriminate, and lethal.'<sup>8</sup>

A few days later, 18 people were killed in Juliaca, Puno, and a large demonstration was called for on January 12. The *retablo* was brought out and placed among the more conventional banners and posters. However, its 'visual and affective familiarity with religious cultural practices' encouraged 'protesters to make the sign of the cross and take turns carrying the altar as if in a pilgrimage or procession' (González, 2023). The potential of using it as a cohesive element during times of horror, as a binding agent capable of helping create the necessary conditions for possible collective mourning, was soon recognized by more enthusiastic *retablistas*. I interpret this gesture as a form of collective mourning that socially inscribes the loss in the public sphere.<sup>9</sup> Defying the government's and the mass media's efforts to downplay the killings, the initial appearances of *Retablos por la Memoria* aimed to highlight the lives lost and provide an outlet for the pain of those grieving. Responding as they saw fit, there was no time to analyze that by doing so, the politically inflicted wounds were being transformed into revolutionary possibilities (Athanasidou, 2017: 22)

One week later, for the Toma de Lima on January 19, ten *retablos* were created and taken to the streets, this time in a more portable format. By modifying the traditional *retablos*' three-dimensional structure, subdivided into two floors, and transforming them into a two-dimensional form, the *retablistas* made them more accessible to reproduce and carry. This was a crucial consideration since the idea was to rotate them, sharing the responsibility of carrying them among a diverse group of people, thereby spreading widely their message. From the outset, the goal was for the *retablos* to be replicated and embraced by many, not associated with specific faces or names. The *retablos* were not conceived as artistic pieces signed by an individual author but as a collective force to be activated wherever needed. They were quickly reproduced in other cities, such as Huaraz in Peru and abroad, in places like Brussels, Madrid, and Athens, where I

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<sup>8</sup> <https://elpais.com/internacional/2023-05-03/la-cidh-sobre-las-protestas-en-peru-podrian-calificarse-como-una-masacre.html>

<sup>9</sup> As have done and do mourning rituals for most of the cultures in the world, until the uncountable losses of First World War began to render mourning private in the West (Leader, 2014: 69)



brought them to the streets after being added to the chat group. Later in January, I went to Peru and participated in the protests until March.

An important task in creating the retablos was to gather and verify the names of each of the individuals killed, which unfortunately continued to grow as some of the wounded succumbed to their injuries. Coordination with the United Artists Against Dictatorship and the Coordinadora Nacional de Derechos Humanos granted us access to updated databases, allowing us to maintain a tragic archive that must be carefully preserved and defended. Among various organizations, there was a shared commitment to engaging in persistent self-documentation of death “as part and parcel of processing the loss, grief, and resistance” (Matsumoto: 128).



Figure 4: Peruvian migrants in London, January, 2023. Picture: *Retablos por la Memoria*.

### *Overcoming fear while experimenting new approaches to protest and activism*

A retablista recalls those days: “At least me, I was really scared”. She recalls how she used to walk alone in the protests, but since the appearance of the retablos, she started to feel accompanied. Another retablista remembers the

gratifying emotion she felt on January 19 when she heard people nearby giving each other instructions to regroup next to the retablos in case they would get dispersed. The colorful and innovative mourning tools started to become a point of reference, a gathering element that could be recognized from afar, guiding those marching alone and with fear toward an enthusiastic community in the making. And so, the retablos joined the massive banner of 'Artistas Unidos Contra la Dictadura' (United Artists Against Dictatorship) and began coordinated participation in that and the upcoming mobilizations.

Regarding that Toma de Lima, the retablistas remember bringing bandanas with vinegar and baking soda, prepared for tear gas and the anticipated repression. However, they also recount that from the beginning, they decided not to force anyone to stay if the situation became tense or frightening. Instead, they adopted a policy of simply leaving when the repression started, avoiding confrontations with groups that challenged the police to reach their chosen destination, usually the Congress. The priority was to highlight the unifying and inclusive aspect of the protests rather than its violent side. Therefore, the collective preferred to act and move based on their members' emotions, needs, and capabilities, following their *saber del cuerpo* (knowledge of the body). It was as if they were part of a collective body, attuned to its resonances and reverberations, reconnecting them to their own bodies as vibrating, pulsating agents (Rolnik, 48). There was no grander goal to impose or achieve beyond what was collectively felt as a driving force or a moment of retreat and necessary rest. As Verónica Gago would put it, it is a matter of a feminist way of knowing, rooted in trust in 'collective intelligence': That which we experience during a strike, in a march, or an assembly when we feel that 'we are part of a movement of thinking, which is practical know-how: putting assembled bodies into action' (Gago: 2020, 164).

The endurance of Retablos por la Memoria likely owes itself to this established respect for each of its members' intuitions and emotions, grounded in a praxis based on flexibility and openness to everyone's perspectives and approaches. This approach has been built upon a cumulative experience of feminist practices, nourished by previous collaborations and in some cases, long-lasting friendships. Furthermore, there was a shared weariness of participating in collective initiatives that allowed toxic leadership, individual protagonism, and overexposure.



Figure 5: Plaza dos de Mayo, Lima. January, 2023. Picture: *Retablos por la Memoria*.

The next action required intense discussions and coordination. After someone suggested bringing one hundred *retablos* to the demonstration following the initial ten, this idea, like each previous one, became a reality. More Zoom calls, WhatsApp discussions, and in-person gatherings to prepare the *retablos* followed. Everyone contributed to the discussions and debates, purchased materials, and engaged in painting, cutting, and pasting, depending on their available time. There is no division between planning and making, no separation between thinking and crafting for the *retablistas*. Everyone does everything while striving to take care of one another.

Where should the 100 *retablos* be brought? This was an important question to consider. Most within the group wanted to decentralize the protest, to reach places untouched by the conflicted chaos that pervaded the city center and the areas hosting the protesting travelers. The contrast between these different realities in Lima became more pronounced due to the summer season and the allure of the beaches. While downtown Lima appeared as a battleground between police and protesters from Aymara and Quechua-speaking regions, most of the capital's inhabitants were elsewhere, seeking solace under the sun. Therefore, the 100 *retablos* would reach them at the seashore.



Figure 6: 100 *Retablos por la Memoria* at Lima's coast, February, 2023. Picture: Ernesto Benavides.

After descending a touristy path in the middle-class, traditionally bohemian district of Barranco, the 100 *retablos*, carried by 100 individuals, brought the faces and names of the murdered people to a crowded beach on a Saturday morning. Capturing images of that moment was crucial, creating powerful visuals that would serve as a memory of resistance and collective denunciation, emphasizing the recognition of each life as equally valuable. The 100 *retablos* served as proof of the mobilizing power of loss while hinting at other possible collective horizons, subtly evoked by the vast open sea behind the participants. Impressive photographs were taken and shared through social media in hopes of reaching a wider audience. The goal was to demonstrate that non-violent and creative forms of protest were taking place and needed more participants. However, evaluating the action led the collective in new directions.

The objective of honoring the victims of state violence was fully achieved in a touching and original manner. A new aesthetic of protest had clearly emerged, while still allowing space for growth, dissemination, and transformation. However, this small, rewarding experience seemed insignificant in the face of the

larger picture. The indifference of those in power raised questions for the *retablistas*: How can this be allowed? What does democracy mean, and who is it meant for? Ongoing debates in the news, on social media, in public and private spaces added even more questions: Would a new constitution change this situation? How can we encourage more people to defend the legitimate right to protest? What are our demands?

As the *retablos* passed from hand to hand in each demonstration, the potential scope of their content also expanded. Initially, they were meant to be shared and spread, not owned or hoarded. Digital materials were quickly made available, with downloadable files ready for printing as stickers and a detailed manual for replicating the *retablos* anywhere.<sup>10</sup> However, at this point, the need was not only to recognize the lost lives as shared losses that needed to be publicly mourned but also to consider what else was meaningful to communicate: Why else were we protesting? What other emotions, beyond grief, fear, and rage, resided within us? What could inspire hope and desire in our wounded country?

So, for the next demonstration on February 9, the decision was made to provide empty *retablos* for people to write down their demands. Since most of the protesters gathering in Plaza 2 de Mayo Square were still those who traveled from the Andes, the intention was to create a shared space for discussion and listening. To learn about what motivated them to journey and risk their lives in an unwelcoming environment. And to offer a different kind of interaction with the inhabitants of Lima, even if only for a brief moment, aiming to foster a glimpse of potential equality. The desire was to exercise together freedom as something which does not come from me to you but comes from what is in between us, from the bond established between us while exercising freedom. This bond is necessary for the possibility of freedom to exist. (Butler, 2017: 58).

*An exchange between protesters of diverse backgrounds makes Lima’s public space hospitable*

“That day made all the previous work worth it”, says a *retablista* about that intervention. The 100 *retablos* were taken to Plaza 2 de Mayo along with drinks and snacks for the protesters. This turned the moment of writing down demands on the *retablos* into an expression of admiration, gratitude, and support for those who were daily portrayed as ignorant and violent by the mainstream media. The afternoon expanded the duration and quality of the protest, creating a preamble of joyful encounters and friendly coexistence. People passed fruit juices, cookies, colorful markers, and cardboard among each other, transforming a

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<sup>10</sup> All the downloadable files can be accessed here:  
<https://linktr.ee/retablosporlamemoria>

context predisposed to repression and anxiety. Instead, the event demonstrated how struggles for justice can be "understood as an extension of the work of collective care" (Gago, 79).

Initially, some people felt uneasy about writing on the *retablos*, but slowly, the action seemed less strange, and soon, there were no more surfaces for people's statements. The *retablistas* decided to start by doing, filling in some *retablos* themselves to create contagious energy around these peculiar objects. The demands had to be seen and heard, and the *retablos* offered themselves as a vehicle for that. Not as a work of art but as something else, as something that functioned as it was created collectively in each new iteration of the initiative. They embodied trust in a gesture of address that was not asking or expecting something concrete but chose to carefully and warmly give space for claims that lacked enough resonance platforms. The offering was embraced, and soon, the collection of *retablos* displayed all kinds of handwriting all types of requests. Looking at that now, a *retablista* remembers the result being so moving that she felt reminded of the actual power of art. The kind of power that gets weakened when artistic practices focus on individualism or authorship.

But that day, art was all about connecting with others and creating a temporary community based on a gesture of hospitality. It was about a fleeting but rippling sensation of diminishing the gap between the capital and other Peruvian regions. Art was about creating bridges between differences of gender, class, and race. The air was filled with enthusiasm provoked by the hints of how to hold those bridges longer and make them stronger. And with the excitement of people from highly different backgrounds having common goals but also experiencing how conflicts can produce alliances that generate new tools and ways of being together. Amidst days and months in which the big media and the authorities created divisive discourse and clashes between "us" (the civilized urban center defending democracy) and "them" (the emotional rural areas disrespectful of infrastructure and institutions) (Ragas, 2023), that day was about finding common ground.

Some protesters walked among the *retablos* searching for the printed faces of their killed relatives, expressing relief when they found them. Acknowledging them as a loss felt by others beyond their intimate circles created a sense of recognition and belonging, a different way of nurturing something in common. As Athena Athanasiou wrote regarding the former Yugoslavia's activist group ZuC: "Collective resistance rises from loss and also from enduring loss and accounting for loss through creating alternative ties of belonging: it is, ultimately, what makes survival possible – albeit not necessarily less unbearable." (2017: 39). What was

created and expanded that day was a temporary community as a renewed space of political agonism. (Athanasίου, 2017: 40).

After the moment dedicated to writing in the square, the *retablos* left their gathering spot to be carried by all kinds of people. They didn’t have an owner or an author, and they soon dispersed among the mass of thousands marching in highly guarded streets. People would adopt them and pass them on when they were tired or had to leave. They had a life of its own.

For the *retablistas*, it was felt as a healing dynamic. Later, it was replicated in London, Madrid, and other cities abroad. And the guidance for those adapting it to such different contexts was to also imitate the way of working: building up the *retablos* and bringing them to be intervened in the public space to accompany each other and generating common grounds. When discussing how the initiative could grow and expand, a *retablista* commented that many times in the street, people would say, “it had to be women the ones doing this”, like establishing a natural connection between the acts of collective care and the fact that most people in the *colectiva* are women. Although such comments caused sympathy among the group, we preferred not to formulate a description that makes explicit its members’ identities. This agreement was aligned to our understanding of the *colectiva* as something open and fluid, without individuals appointed as representatives or authors. Therefore, although our faces and names may unavoidably circulate in connection to *Retablos por la Memoria*, we don’t promote that association but prefer to establish them as an anonymous welcoming entity, which takes shape thanks to those who commit to joining.



Figure 7: People intervenes the retablos with their own demands. Plaza Dos de Mayo, Lima, February, 2023. Picture: *Retablos por la Memoria*.

The participative dimension of *Retablos por la Memoria* can evoke an action like Muro de la Verguena (Shameful Wall), a 15 meters fabric that had faces of the most representative characters of Fujimori's dictatorship and was installed by the collective La Resistencia in Plaza Francia, downtown Lima, in the year 2000. The big surface invited people to intervene it, offering itself as a relieving moment to openly express frustration and criticism but also jokes about the political situation. Like this action, other interventions made by artists have altered, even if only symbolically, the conflictive recent Peruvian history. This archive of political protest is also composed by the actions *Lava la Bandera* (Wash the Flag) and *Pon la Basura en la Basura* (Put the garbage in the garbage), both emblematic moments of the struggle against Fujimori and of art's capacity to



return the control of the symbolic to the civic society, even if briefly (Vich, 2015: 185).

Twenty-three years later, *Retablos por la Memoria* adds to a genealogy of artistic interventions in the context of protests that vigorously challenge the structural violence reaffirmed by authoritarian governments, each one according to its specific historical period. *Pon la Basura en la Basura*, *El Muro de la Vergueza*, and *Lava la Bandera* attempted to put a face to the corruption and criminal acts eroding the Peruvian democratic institutions and social fabric by offering a sense of humor, shared alleviation, and a cleansing ritual that promised a different country as a result of collective action. *Retablos por la Memoria*, responding to a moment in which the protesters’ lives were being disdained in an unprecedented manner, stands out as a creative and cohesive tool for collective mourning that wouldn’t allow the assassinated people to be easily forgotten. *Retablos por la Memoria* appeals to the effects of compassion and mutual recognition and to activate a sense of justice that the status quo needs to sedate for its perpetuation.

In that sense, they can be understood attuned to how Víctor Vich interprets the work of the renowned *retablistas* Edilberto Jiménez: as an event situated in between that which is forbidden to be shown and what is urgent to be shown (2015: 35). While Jiménez renewed the tradition of the *retablos* with his moving depictions of the violence he witnessed and experienced in Ayacucho during the war, *Retablos por la Memoria* enriches the history of the object by making it widely appropriated by people participating in protests and manifestations. While, according to Vich, Jiménez creates an “event for the gaze”, *Retablos por la Memoria* expands the possibilities of consumption and circulation of these alternative versions of the object, inviting the passerby to observe, intervene, carry, and share them, making them their own and becoming active agents in their distribution.

*The collective awareness about not aiming to create a tool “for the people”*

The rewarding results of the invitation to intervene in the *retablos* increased the *colectiva*’s desire to share them with others. And so, the idea of conducting workshops to teach people how to create *retablos* emerged. A workshop was held at the cultural space *El Galpón*, and another one took place at *Arenas y Esteras* for a VHI+ community. During one of these workshops, someone wrote, “There is no democracy without Vihchotas,” incorporating VIH into the word *bichota*, the title of a popular *reggaetón* song. This experience further expanded the repertoire of demands that the dispositif could host and spread, enriching the learning process of the *retablistas*.

As we discussed recently within the group, the *retablos* are not something created by artists "for the people," nor are they devices "for the people to be heard" or to represent "those without a voice," as paternalistic narratives about the relationship between high culture or artists and "common people" often state. On the contrary, they existed because, as one *compañera* pointed out, "we didn't know what to do with the indignation, the sadness, the fear." They are not brought to places or given to others as a service or charity but are proposed as an exchange to support each other amid a violent and unfair scenario. They allow us to breathe and heal, gather strength while being vulnerable together, and understanding vulnerability as an opening towards the other that allows for collective becoming. In this sense, vulnerability becomes a mobilizer for political action, corresponding to a notion of agency that does not presuppose a sovereign self (an individual in possession of "her" ideas and "her" feelings). Moreover, what is at stake here is not sovereign will but "an enactment of plurality and relationality outside oneself and along with others in the public space". (Athanasίου, 2017: 19).

The *retablos* are the strategy and device we developed to accompany each other and create resilient, loving communities that expand with each passing day. They allow us to create together and put into practice what feminism and art can provide as transformative tools when life is threatened and violated. Through their synergistic dynamics, they have shown how complaints can be creatively translated into an affirmative expression of shared and affective commitment to justice. In response to a prevailing consensus for the normalization of death in the context of protest, this initiative highlights that we shall not numb ourselves to pain and violence and that feelings of despair and rage make sense. On the contrary, the critical moment being lived in Peru offers us an opportunity to collectivize such feelings, to feel connected and present while developing networks of trust and responsiveness. The *Retablos por la Memoria* are concrete proofs of how rebellion is not necessarily violent or destructive but a fruitful field for renovating ways of relating to public space and creating kinship. Overall, they constitute concrete expressions of new forms of responsibility that emerge from a collective sense of "feeling invited to participate in the world, care for others and be cared for, and support and be supported" (Montgomery and Bergman, 2017: 133).



Figure 8: A sticker in Lima (May, 2, 2023). Picture: *Retablos por la Memoria*.

## Conclusion

As an expansive, resistant, and healing movement, the *Retablos por la Memoria* constitute a cohesive force that connects wounded communities and creates spaces of belonging that point towards more equal exchanges. By profoundly exploring different types of bonds (the intimate one of the collective, sustained daily through coordination and hands-on work but also joyful celebration, the organizational one in dialogue with United Artists Against Dictatorship and other articulation spaces, the wider ones with the temporary communities formed during workshops and protests), *Retablos por la Memoria* is sustained by, sustains, and exhibits the interdependency of life in a way that transforms the fields of its appearance. As

Butler wrote regarding assemblies in public spaces, we should be capable of forming alliances and bonds that connect interdependency with the principle of equality in a way that results in disturbing for the powers distributing recognition in a differentiated manner (2017: 49).

Thanks to their aesthetics taken from the traditional Ayacucho's artistic practice, they allow us to exercise intercultural dialogues sustained on a decolonial and feminist horizon. As a new kind of *retablistas*, we offer them through digital means, painted on cardboard, printed on stickers and banners, adapting them to each new conflictive context, but always making them as if playing, anonymously but collectively finding the tools to transit a painful period. Those who can't demonstrate help us with their donations to buy materials, others share the pictures online or quietly walk beside us without holding them. In that way, each person who feels the call to create a bond with the initiative has been welcomed to do so according to their possibilities. *Retablos por la Memoria* constitute an open invitation to expand a chain of agents taking responsibility to fight for the forces to create and cooperate, to produce a common affirmative potency that invests our daily actions against the Peruvian State's *necropolitics* (Rolnik, 79). The initiative has evolved to be an example of what can be described as joyful militancy and joyful politics: Politics that change your life for the better already in the present, without denying that political engagement can involve suffering or be born out of suffering. "But the joy is knowing and deciding that we can do something about it; it is recognizing that we share our pain with other people" and feeling the solidarity around us. (Montgomery and bergman, 2017: 244).



Figure 9: The giant *retablo*, made for the 8<sup>th</sup> of March (Women’s day), on the Third Toma de Lima (July, 20, 2023). Picture: *Retablos por la Memoria*.

*Retablos por la Memoria* expands its demands every day with an overarching will not to create a unitary discourse or centralized source of content. The initial motivation was to honor the assassinated people and to welcome the Aymara and Quechua protesters to Lima, supporting their sacrificed journeys. After those intense months of December and January, marked by the felt need to mourn publicly, the retablos became a contagious entity that aligned itself with the feminist motto of changing everything. By embracing a wide variety of demands, the Retablos refused to be blackmailed by the big media and official narratives criticizing the protesters for "not having a clear agenda." Thus, *Retablos por la Memoria* refuses to adapt its manners to what the Peruvian authorities and elites consider proper political speech, which is supposedly in the antipodes of the grammar deployed by indigenous citizens, always portrayed as pre-political and manipulated.

Far from attempting to solidify a fixed identity, *Retablos por la Memoria* continues its persistent and caring work, sustained through ongoing collaborations and fluid alliances. Almost one year after Dina Boluarte's ascension to power, the *colectiva* continues expanding its reach, keeping as a cohesive element the defense of life, especially where those in power pretend to establish whose lives are grievable and which ones are not.<sup>11</sup> The endurance of the group despite the exhausting times living in Peru, the conversations we had, and people's response to *Retablos por la Memoria*'s appearances in protests demonstrate that the initiative has developed an innovative form of inclusive community building. By combining colorful messages, just demands, and intercultural elements, these objects pass from hand to hand, becoming a sign of the carrier's refusal to even one more person killed in a demonstration. Moreover, the *retablos* are made by and shared among people who want to live in a country where everyone's life deserves to be grieved for. By being passed on among protesters, *Retablos por la Memoria* are a vital sign of a common desire to take care of each other while understanding political struggle as a way to create other types of relationalities and communities.

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<sup>11</sup> While finishing this text, *Retablos por la Memoria* participated in demonstrations demanding the cease of fire in Palestine (October) and in a protest for legal abortion (September).

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