

## Cecilia Vicuña's Bodies in Space

Isabella Vergara

**Abstract (English):** In this article, I propose to think Cecilia Vicuña's poem "Palabra e hilo" and her performances *Disappeared* and *Living Quipu* as redefinitions of what a performance is or might be. Diana Taylor defines *performance* as a double thing between a "doing" and a "done" (7). That is, as both a living action and a definitive thing. "Performance" understood as a movement within this process is extended to an active form of living. For Peggy Phelan, "performance" is an act of the present that cannot be repeated and finds its form in the production of its own disappearance that takes place as a raw immediacy. As I would argue, Vicuña's performances, as poetic acts that embody alternative materialities, situates the body in-between this "doing," "done" but through the acts of weaving and writing. Vicuña's poetic acts considers the body as an expanded field where the tensions between "doing, done" suggests a poetic opportunity in which the body is moved and simultaneously guards its movement, it looks for its passage while gestating interdependence relations anticipated by Verónica Gago as a form of reliance.

**Keywords:** Performance, Weaving, Writing, Poetic language, Cecilia Vicuña

**Abstract (Spanish):** En este artículo propongo pensar el poema "Palabra e hilo" y los performances *Disappeared* y *Living Quipu* de la artista chilena Cecilia Vicuña, como redefiniciones de lo que el performance es o podría ser. Diana Taylor define el término *performance* como un doble movimiento entre lo "hecho" y un estar "haciendo" (7). Es decir, entre una acción viviente y otra definitiva. "Performance" entendido como un movimiento entre lo "hecho" y el "estar haciendo" se extiende hacia una forma activa de lo viviente. Para Peggy Phelan, "performance," por otro lado, es el acto de presentar lo irrepetible y, como una inmediatez en bruto, encuentra en su producción su propia desaparición. Los performances de Vicuña parecen intervenir de otro modo. Como actos poéticos, estos performances incorporan materialidades alternativas que sitúan el cuerpo entre lo "hecho" y el "estar haciendo" por medio del tejido y la escritura. En ambos actos, Vicuña concibe el cuerpo como un campo expandido que es movido mientras guarda su propio movimiento. En ese pasaje el cuerpo gesta

relaciones de interdependencia anticipadas por Verónica Gago por medio del tejido y la escritura.

**Palabras claves:** Performance, tejido, escritura, lo poético, Cecilia Vicuña



*La palabra es un hilo y el hilo es lenguaje.  
Cuerpo no lineal.  
Una línea asociándose a otras líneas<sup>1</sup>.*

(“Cecilia Vicuña: Palabra E Hilo  
/ Word & Thread (1996)”)

This writing<sup>2</sup> begins with a verse that is an epigraph and a way into Chilean artist and writer Cecilia Vicuña’s world of threads and words. I take the poem to be an inscription, a materiality that permeates what can and cannot be put into written words, and as a vacant space through which her words become an expanded field for others to interact with. Because most of Vicuña’s poems are read with silences, pauses, murmurs, whispers, and chants, I see this writing as an opportunity to assemble some of those sounds as a way of responding to her poetic fluencies, acts, and gestures.

“Palabra e hilo” opens an encounter between weaving and writing.<sup>3</sup> Both acts compose poetic gestures to be embodied by the poet and the reader, the performer,

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<sup>1</sup>Trans: Word is thread and the thread is language./ Non-linear body./ A line associated to other lines (Rosa Alcalá, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> I am deeply grateful to the collaborative working group *Performance in the Wake of the Political*, with whom these thoughts were first experimented in understanding, solidarity, and collaboration. I am also in great debt with the editors of these issue, who encouraged me to polish my thoughts.

<sup>3</sup> *Palabra e Hilo/ Word e Thread* is published in a numbered edition of 300 copies, including 26 signed and lettered by the author and translator, on the occasion of Cecilia Vicuña's

and the spectator, among others. Vicuña associates' "word" and "thread" with silence and sound, fullness, and emptiness. Word and thread are set in tenuous motion, they turn, vacillate and tremble, as vibratory forms that resonate in what they touch, what they weave. Coming and going to and from different places, word and thread cannot exist without a body that makes them shake. As vibrations, they are acts of union and separation that keep animating each other. In short, word and thread are acts of reciprocity that carry with them processes as instances of transformation.

Diana Taylor frames the practice of performance as an avant-gardist movement from the sixties in which artists have used their bodies to challenge regimes of power and social norms, placing the body in artistic practice departing from painting to the living flesh and breath of the act itself (2). Performance refers to what is called performance art, body art, live art or active art, terms that emphasize both the centrality of the living artist in the act of doing and the aesthetic dimension that tells what is and what is not art. Because performance is a word that has been used, not only *in and as* different artistic expressions, but also across disciplines, it is a term hard to classify. On the other hand, performance as defined by Peggy Phelan is an ontological concept that implies "representation without reproduction" (147). That is, a form of art that only lives in the present. Phelan's notion of performance attempts for a definition in which performance "cannot be saved, recorded, documented (...) or participate in the circulation of representation." Performance's being, then, "becomes itself through disappearance" (147). Phelan's approach, however, overlooks the possibility of performance as something that can still happen and be in the future, whether it is reproducible or not.

Thinking about performance with Cecilia Vicuña's works allows to redefine performance as a work that is culturally fluid. In part because the word performance implies a wide range of significations that are pertinent to the specific contexts in which it is used and in which it appears: either as a discourse, a bodily action, a political denunciation, or a site of activism, among many others. Performance, as a word and an action, makes its definition still more unclassifiable. As an action performance seeks activation in the present while it deconstructs this present to make it last in actions to come. If a performance cannot be repeated, as Phelan argues, the documentation does not serve only as "an encouragement of memory to become present" or as a register in which the "now is supplemented and buttressed by the documenting camera" (147). Beyond institutional practices, the documentation in performance implies rather a post-memory of it. Performance is thus a living document that could be used by the artist as part of its own archive, as it is also a way to open the field to diverse types

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exhibition *Preario* at Inverleith House, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, October 26<sup>th</sup> 1996 to January 5<sup>th</sup> 1997.

of participation that are not exclusive to a presence. An example of this is the work of Cuban artist Ana Mendieta, whose use of the body always involved different mediations like a camera or a glass, as ways to intervene in the formation and deformation of a body at work. Mendieta incorporates the camera as a device that works as spectator and participant, challenging an absolute presence in the immediacy of a performance.

I consider the word performance following Taylor's definition: both a doing and a done (7). As a doing and a done performance is an action that moves across temporalities, on the one hand, and what captures the living movement, the now of its awakening, on the other hand. This duality does not imply a hierarchical position, it does not work as separate temporal times—either past or present—but rather proposes a horizontal approach to what a performance is or could potentially be. Through Cecilia Vicuña's work I consider performance as a *process* of gestation to which I will return later. I focus on Vicuña's poem "Palabra e Hilo" and her performance *Living Quipu* from 2018, to think through a double movement between poetry and performance. My analysis draws from Vicuña's own poetic proposal that emerges from word and thread as materials that are put into action throughout her work. I will argue that Vicuña's poetic gesture, in which materials appear as trivial, uncultured things, articulates an idea of performance that defies both permanence and disappearance.

One of the most unusual things about Cecilia Vicuña is her experience of exile and her recognition beyond Chile's national sphere. Vicuña's works have been known to be at the center of resistance to fascist agendas, social hierarchies, patriarchal and sexist structures. She is a poet, painter, sculptor, singer, performer, filmmaker, and activist. In the context of many fractures within the political, representational, and sociocultural sphere during the seventies and eighties, some critics, like Claudia Panozo, had categorized Vicuña's works as the possibility of a dense, programmatic, and versatile register of resistance towards neocolonial and neoliberal powers in her use of materiality as the support of a memory in recovery (152). As Daniel Borzutzky says, her works, among other things, is that of a "radical archivist" (*New and Selected poems of Cecilia Vicuña*, xix) in which she never ceases to refer to a life in between art and politics through presence, resilience, continuous innovation and a relentless questioning of history and tradition. By such questionings, writers, and artists like Cecilia Vicuña, have made the effort to highlight the blind spots of historical narratives that are tied to State censorship, political persecution, and capitalism.

### **Palabra e Hilo**

La palabra es un hilo y el hilo es lenguaje.  
Cuerpo no lineal.  
Una línea asociándose a otras líneas.

Una palabra al ser escrita juega a ser lineal,  
pero palabra e hilo existen en otro plano dimensional.  
Formas vibratorias en el espacio y el tiempo.  
Actos de unión y separación.

La palabra es silencio y sonido.  
El hilo, lleno y vacío.

La tejedora ve su fibra como la poeta su palabra.  
El hilo siente la mano, como la palabra la lengua.

Estructuras de sentido en el doble sentido  
de sentir y significar,  
la palabra y el hilo sienten nuestro pasar.

(“Cecilia Vicuña: Palabra E Hilo / Word & Thread (1996)”)⁴

In Cecilia Vicuña's poem “Palabra e hilo,” the relationship between word and thread alludes to a corporeality where the poet's body is a material thing and a site of passage. The poet's body is an active agent constantly in the making. One that resists ownership and property while it takes the form of images, words, and sounds, outside of traditional frames. In this exteriority, the poet's body creates acts of intervention that animate the apparently definitive contours of a body as it inscribes the interstice between the poetic and the political. A first animation within those contours is when we conceive the body as sound. As Debora Kapchan reminds us of, the body begins in sound,

the sound of the body is the sound of the other, but it is also the sound of the same. (...) subjectivity emerges from intersubjectivity, the one is born from the many. We resound together (33).

Julia Kristeva called this sound the *chora* (26), the space of continuity where sound, shapes, and sensations take place without belonging to anyone. The *chora* is neither model nor copy, it is what precedes and underlines figuration, what is analogous to vocal rhythms that denotes a mobile and provisional articulation:

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⁴ Translated from Spanish by Rosa Alcalá: “Word and Thread.” Word is thread and the thread is language./ Non-linear body./ A line associated to other lines./ A word once written risks becoming linear,/ but word and thread exist on another dimensional/ plane./ Vibratory forms in space and in time./ Acts of union and separation./ The word is silence and sound./ The thread, fullness and emptiness./ The weaver sees her fiber as the poet sees her word./ The thread feels the hand, as the word feels the tongue./ Structures of feeling in the double sense/ of sensing and signifying,/ the word and the thread feel our passing. (1996)

constituted by movements and their ephemeral states. We differentiate this uncertain and indeterminate *articulation* from a *disposition* (...), the *chora* as rupture and articulations (rhythms) precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality and temporality (26).

The *chora* is the foundation of the drives as pre-cultural forms of desire; it insinuates the pre-lingual stage of development when we were closest to the materiality of existence. The *chora* seems to be a disruption to culture from its inception, and always already disruption. Vicuña's poetry is in line with the *chora*. For her, poetry is a site of intervention and mediation, what articulates and defies articulation. Through poetry Vicuña exposes words and threads as actions that are processes: what is not yet unified in an ordered whole while also subjected to a changeable course. Through a constant reference to the roots of words, Vicuña conveys an ongoing discontinuity, where roots, like threads in a loom, are incessantly re-combined as continual awakenings. By using and disrupting culture, Vicuña acts with the body where word and thread defies permanence and disappearance. Through these states, Vicuña seems to suggest, the body is also an indeterminate site of actions to come. This indeterminacy relies in writing and weaving, where the body can act as it is acted upon in the doublings of feeling and signifying. In this double sense, the weaver's and the poet's fingers mediate word and thread while transforming the body's own passage.

The poet's body is open to touch and to be touched by other lines. It is also where both words and threads emerge in a pre- and post- culturized and capitalist world. With the body, word and thread act together while situating the poetic in a place of indeterminacy that, like the *chora*, can never entirely be fixed. As Kristeva explains, "one can situate the *chora* and potentially give it a topology, but one can never give it an axiomatic form" (26). Words and threads work as assemblages of assemblages that defy axiomatic forms. They present an unstable quality in which a topology involves movement within the words and fingers that give them form and formlessness. Through those engagements, Vicuña suggests that languages from indigenous cultures and western traditions are interwoven. This relationship becomes visible in the act of weaving, which she includes as part of her experience with the women from the Andean region. For Vicuña the shaman is "she who ties" (*Precarious*, 62), is also she who weaves, as the poet is she who serves "like a midwife who helps humanity be reborn within the consciousness of being" (62). In the artist's obsession of looking for etymological roots, she finds openings in words that reveal their inner associations, "allowing ancient and newborn metaphors to come to light" (63). Those associations are the threads in a loom that slowly come to be interlaced as the weavers weave a birthing community.

The art critic M. Catherine de Zegher frames the act of weaving with a long tradition of female labor of child caring and food preparation (*Precarious*, 19). As de Zegher comments, "weaving (as the resulting in cloth) and parturition (as the

resulting in babies), display women's generative capability" (19). This division of labor not only speaks of a specialized labor composed around the ability to do things, but rather to a type of labor that revolves around reliance. We can see this reliance in Vicuña's analogy of weaving and writing. In her case, reliance is an interdependent relationship where the body is the locus for both actions (weaving and writing) to occur. The word parturition, for example, is related to the verb "palabrir." A verb that for Vicuña is a composition of "palabra" and "abrir". For her, "palabrir" means "to open words" and "abrir" (to open) was originally *parir*: to give birth (*Palabrarmás*, 1974). Vicuña relates the gestation of words to the gestation of life. The women's body is not merely a place of reproduction, but is rather an open material that, like a loom, is divided into infinitesimal parts that relentlessly gestate and transform each other in and out of them. The act of birthing is an opening that refers to another opening, and so on, where the body takes a fractal shape that exceeds its own dimensions.

Through the weavers, who weave in community, the body appears to be between the domicile that houses it and an outside where communality takes place. By linking weaving and writing, Vicuña already performs what Verónica Gago calls the spatiality in which the body becomes territory. Gago argues that this type of body opposes individuality, "El cuerpo que deviene territorio es la espacialidad *contrapuesta* al encierro doméstico" (114).<sup>5</sup> In Vicuña's poem, the body, as the site of gestation of words, is far from individuality, it rather acquires a materiality that inhabits a force. From there, the body invents territories with everyday life materials and its residues that, through weaving and writing, become creations that oppose confinement. Such creations suggest an interdependence relation that links the weaver and writer to the world. This relation is not abstract, but one that proposes to think the body as what one has as part of something, rather than an object of possession. Being part of is, acknowledging this interdependence as what composes us and makes life possible (Gago, 98). It is not a coincidence, that the women defenders of the land are defenders of a life that is not naturalistic, but imaginative in what defends and gives shelter to a common and expanded production, to a commonwealth (99). The body territory is a two folded corporeality that nurtures as it is nurtured in the defense of life and the common where it becomes spatiality.

Throughout the poem, Vicuña tells us that the thread works as writing. That letters can become as physical as threads, strings, or textiles. Words are the result of a body that gives birth while weaving emphasizing a form of care that sustains communality. Words are produced with the same craft and care as threads are woven in a loom. As Vicuña says, "to care is to carry, to bear children, to bear a name" (*Precarious*, 19). To care, as to carry something in and outside, is a state of

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<sup>5</sup> Trans: The body that becomes territory is the *opposing* spatiality to domestic confinement (Isabella Vergara).

being and an artistic procedure where things are taken in hand and performed in the process of weaving and writing. The communal act resides in both actions where things are carefully taken in and by the hands of the weavers.

Word and thread materially appeared later in Vicuña's 2018 performance *Living Quipu*. Here, the performance shows a re-birth of the "Disappeared Quipu," a previous site-specific installation that combines strands of knotted wool with a four-channel video projection. The artist reactivates the quipu, as the complex mnemonic system used by ancient people of the Andes, as immersive installations, participatory performances, but also as poems and songs. The quipu, a practice of registration that was lost during the colonial period, is also what cannot be recovered. Vicuña, nonetheless, materializes a kind of quipu that resists this loss while creating a language where past and present could meet. The prominence of textiles and threads in Vicuña's work suggests documenting otherwise, to perform despite what cannot be registered.

Vicuña's performance as poet, writer, and singer activates the emptiness of a loss in a present that intentionally meets with the past. She states that "The 'quipu that remembers nothing,' an empty cord was my first *precario*" (*Precarious*, 132). What is empty, however, is already full, a cord composed of other ones. Like the *chora*, the cord seems to be a disruptive entry to culture from its inception, it assembles a world of residues, where this loss is reactivated and transformed.

In *Living Quipu*, such a loss passes through the visual experience of writing to a haptic experience of weaving. The tactility that the poem assumes is one where, through poetry, like weaving, the body becomes spatiality. As Vicuña says in the poem "Entering,"

First there was listening with the fingers, a sensory memory:  
the shared  
bones, sticks and feathers //  
If //  
poetry was an act of communion, a form of collectively entering a vision,  
now it is a space one enters  
a spatial metaphor (*Precarious*, 131).

The fingers organize a state of listening. Vision is transformed into bodily actions that act in communal spaces. The body becomes an intersensory site of attention and experience that recenters the poetic as an act of communion. Vicuña's artistic production is explicitly participatory, not only because she includes the spectator, or the reader, into her work, but because she weaves in juxtaposition with other languages of the world, both living and lost.

The movement of the fingers in the textiles also indicates an outside. Because the women that Vicuña alludes to were those who wove in common, a different space of the political is organized around them. One that does not oppose the domestic, per se, but proposes another architecture where houses are, as Gago



says, opened to the streets: “al barrio, a las redes comunitarias y a un techo y unas paredes que refugian y abrigan sin encerrar ni enclaustrar” (115)<sup>6</sup>. Weaving, in Vicuña's poem and performance, is the irruption of a political force whose center is a poetic language. While weaving, while writing, a fractal house is opened for the body to find communal webs to be entangled with and to follow detours, errancy, and desire.

It is important here to recall Vicuña's reference to “Arte precario” (*Precarious*, 136)<sup>7</sup>. For the artist, precarious refers to several things: to a poem, an art installation and to the works that she has been producing since the sixties and that are composed of assemblages of found objects like pieces of words, feathers, plastic, herbs, shells, and threads among others that she calls “little things” or “found, useless objects” (“Cecilia Vicuña: Listening with the Fingers on Disclaimer”). And to the poem and art installation. As both, precarious illustrates the different temporalities through which these little objects are rearticulated: in its moment of emergence, or in the potential future of what is not yet formed. As a group of works, *Precarious* are visual poems based on the word precarious itself. As Vicuña says:

When I said *arte precario* an energy was born.  
The two words transformed each other.  
Doing (*ar*) became prayer (*prec*), and prayer (doing)  
Arte precario (*Precarious*, 136).

Precarious is something asked, “which is obtained from a prayer” (*Precarious*, 136), that which is uncertain, exposed to risks, which is unsure (“Cecilia Vicuña: Listening with the Fingers on Disclaimer”). A prayer is a request addressed to what is and what is not physically present, but that still resonates in the world. It is also a dialogue that mediates between what is to what could be: a word, a thread, a body that links them both. Like the threads in the loom and the poetic word in writing, the bodies activate the thread that irrupts as potency. That is, a potency where “prayer is change, the dangerous instant of transmutation” (“Cecilia Vicuña: Listening with the Fingers on Disclaimer”). Such a potency allows for a body that, as Gago says, can desire and assumes desire as its force (115), one that is an open structure as always being individual, collective and in variation.

As collective and oral performances, Vicuña's *precarious* are multi-mediatic as they appear in different media and languages simultaneously. Orality alludes to

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<sup>6</sup> Trans: to the town, to communal networks and a roof, some walls that give shelter and wraps without locking and enclosing (Isabella Vergara).

<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that *Arte precario* is, as M. Catherine de Zegher suggests, “the name that Vicuña gives to her independent voice within the Southern Hemisphere, challenging her colonized position. Her art *is* Andean, is not *about* Andean art. It belongs to this urban mestizo culture and not to the Western purist version of its appropriating ‘little lama’” (*Precarious*, 24).

the same roots that share the words *oír* (to hear) and *orar* (to pray). Orality here, then, has the status of a request performed when the poem becomes songs, or chants. In this passage, performance becomes an act of mediation, a process that detonates an awareness of processes, there where words become songs, bodies become space. The performance is this processual awareness, that carries transformation into the world, as well as unfolding in their process of emergence. Performance is in Vicuña's thought, the act and the act's passing through. It works with an everydayness materiality where art and handicraft act together as poetic acts of gestating, birthing and caring. In such composition the poetic unfolds in the course of time, as well as carrying these acts' own dissolution. A dissolution, however, that does not achieve finality, but rather regenerates a life force of what remains.

The artist's poem thus emerges between what is performed and its movement: where voice and writing meet and enter the world as vibrations. In this reenactment, word and thread become a voice that sings, chants, and whispers. A voice that is a shareable medium of the word outside of the written page. Jean Luc-Nancy calls this communality a "we" that is both inside and external to the self. According to Nancy, there is something in us that cannot be entirely at rest. As we are *near* the others, the unrest that we are and that we desire is where proximity can be assumed: neither possession, (...) but proximity (...), like the beat of a rhythm (79). Similar to what Vicuña proposes in "Palabra e hilo," where word and thread are both made with and of the others, this unrest defies unity as a static thing<sup>8</sup> (acts of separation). The "we" that is proximate resonates in other bodies that are near, that weave together. The beat of a rhythm is Vicuña's voice that incorporates a "we" in the intervals of time where weaving, writing, and signing take place, that is, "in the fleeting and rhythmic awakening of a discrete recognition of existence" (Nancy, 78). I understand Nancy's "fleeting awakening" to allow a recognition of experience through which we may know sensations, perceptions, and intuitions again, elliptically, while we weave in writing and re-writing.

The discreetness that Nancy suggests offers a "we" that relies on the encounter between the weaver and the writer. Vicuña, however, reframes the "discreet" as a poetic language where bodies do not cease to tremble, to be agitated, awakened by others through weaving and writing. Here the body is in a constant becoming, where intensities and vibrations are part of an expanded field that gestates words and threads in communality.

Poetry, following Vicuña's logic, is where the body is an active agent whose fingers make words *move* like threads. By vocalizing the poem, Vicuña animates

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<sup>8</sup> This state of "unrest" is similar to the concept of *chora* as what denotes "a mobile and provisional articulation, constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases" (Kristeva, 26).

the text, she alters the written word to make it resonate and build webs of vibration that, like the weavers, bring the poems to life. As she says: "The poem is not speech, nor in the earth, nor in paper, but in the crossing and union of the three in the place that is not" (*Precarious*, 73). To bring the poems to life is to bring closer the material relationship between weaving and words, the body that emits sounds and gestures. Through the body that performs them, the poem acquires this place that is not, this place outside of confinement, the body as spatiality.

The "not" in the verse insinuates a place where the poem is more ephemeral and unstable as it avoids being completely defined. This does not mean, however, that the poem is set to disappearance, but rather that it takes the shape of what is not, that is, in the place of the not yet but that can still potentially happen. Like the *chora*, the place that Vecuña proposes as performative is one that produces a sense of place where the body disrupts the confinements, the contours, of its shape. For that reason, she insinuates to listen as an act of reliance<sup>9</sup>, to weave, as to perform, with her, to enter the space, where the body could be a site of porosity and permeability.

### From Disappeared Quipu to Living Quipu

The threads in the *Living Quipu*, suggests a reading with the tactility of the fingers where the body is a site of awakening and expression. Even though there is an explicit relation between oral and written traditions in Vecuña's works, the way she activates words through performance enacts, emphasizes, an unstable relationship between both. This instability of the performance, as the condition of being in the liminal space of the not yet, suggests that poetry is something that works with and exceeds the written page, and where it is much more indeterminate, anonymous, open to hazards. Poetry is a poetic act in constant gestation that maintains the tension between permanence and disappearance. Vecuña's poetic performances resist because they carry with them a memory of

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<sup>9</sup> I am grateful to Gwendolen Pare who recommended to me Kristeva's article "Reliance or Maternal Eroticism." For Kristeva, reliance is a specific economy of the drives such that "countercahcted by psychic representation and thus *fixe*d by psychic inscriptions, the energy of the originary split at once sustains and moves through primary and secondary repression" (71). Without displacing those drives into a psychotic regression, maternal eroticism renders the fixation of the life and death drives and places them in the living as an "open structure," related (*relié*e) to others and to the environment (71). For Kristeva, for example, "motherhood in Chinese culture is a primary and wordless reliance between everything, one which calligraphy transcribes through a movement of the flesh (sight, movement, gesture, and dance) into image and meaning" (footnote on page 80). Kristeva suggests that the structure of motherhood, like the structure of writing, art, and analysis, is about rebirth, that is, a cyclical time of flowering and dying off as two movements that are necessary for life.



*Isabella Vergara*

*Cecilia Vecuña's Bodies in Space*









Figs. 1-5: Cecilia Vicuña, *Living Quipu*, 2018. Collective performance with unspun wool, Brooklyn Museum. Courtesy the artist, Brooklyn Museum, New York, and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, Seoul, and London.

The immediacy of the performance does not end in the moment that it takes place, like Phelan would suggest. Vicuña's performances can be read instead with Rosa Alcalá's definition, for whom performance "provides the ward and weft upon which any text may—or may not—be woven; and at the same time in performance, all texts are subject to change" (*Spit Temple*, 16). Following Alcalá, performance is also an unstable thing, a surface that works in the exchange of a request and for what is about to change.

Vicuña's performances formulate a type of archival recollection where documentation is redefined as a parallel process of record-keeping in the *quipu*. Vicuña reconfigures the doing and a done, to recall Taylor, by continually reactivating the quipus as living things in the present and staging the futurity that such present might take. If a doing involves movement and positionality and a done involves finality, the artist's performance takes place in between both forms of the auxiliary verb to "do." She envisions this situation by saying: "My work dwells in the not yet, the future potential of the unformed, where sound, weaving, and language interact to create new meanings" ("Cecilia Vicuña: Listening with the Fingers on Disclaimer"). The "not yet," is the liminal tension between a doing and a done that works as the thread in language. Word and thread, as processual acts, keep activating each other and forming webs of connections, they gestate each other and avoid their complete permanence or finality.



Figs. 6-8: Cecilia Vicuña, *Quipu desaparecido* (Disappeared Quipu), 2018. Installation view, Brooklyn Museum, May 18-November 25, 2018. Courtesy the artist, Brooklyn Museum, New York, and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, Seoul, and London.



Weaving is the awakening of an exchange between words. As Vicuña says in her poem "Arte precario": "A thread is not a thread, but a thousand of tiny fibers entwined" (*Precarious*, 137). The poet's fingers are also how the quipu was used to trace memory. Therefore, if weaving and writing are central actions in Vicuña's poem, it is because they both are activated by a body that moves them. The weaver gives life to the thread in the now and the "not yet" so that she becomes a doer, a performer, and a guardian of the act of weaving. The same can be said about the poet who writes:

/El hilo está muerto cuando está suelto, pero está animado en el  
telar:  
la tensión le da un corazón./

("Cecilia Vicuña: Palabra E Hilo / Word & Thread (1996)")<sup>11</sup>

The thread in the loom emerges as something living. The tension in the loom gives the thread a beat and rhythm that is the poet's voice. The voice, as what tenses vocal cords, makes word and thread return as vibration. The loom resonates with the poem, as words resonate with threads. The link between loom and poem, thread, and word, suggests the connection between everydayness and life. Here Vicuña suggests a poetic act where art and life are reunited where weaving and writing happen in common. However, more than merely fusing art and life as an avant-gardist premise, Vicuña is in line with what Paola Cortes Rocca and Cecilia Palmeiro calls a "feminist avant-garde." For them this avant-gardism is not only a return of art to the terrain of life, but rather a reunion that

comes from a power of creation, a 'pollination' [...] and germination of potential worlds [...], through the resonances that can be awakened in them [...]. A feminism that leaves the counter-state itself to gestate — [...], in each act — the world we wish to inhabit [...] where feminism has become a way of reading and reordering [...] to design a device oriented toward the transformation of experiences, bodies and languages (2022 13).

With Cortes Rocca and Palmeiro's definition, I argue that Vicuña's gesture is political because it is poetic. That is, it is poetic because of the double movement of endlessly framing and re-framing the space-time relations through which words, threads, and language reappear. A persistent movement that, through its course, finds ways of union and separation, ways of interdependence. The "inter" within interdependence marks a temporal frame of things occurring between permanence and dissolution, where the body moves away from normalizing functions as well as it works as a critical tool. The "inter" thus allows for another

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<sup>11</sup> Trans: The thread dies when it is released but comes/ alive in the loom:/ the tension gives it a heart. (Rosa Alcalá, 1996).

distribution of time and space where poetry, and its reenactment as a performance, is the force of an imaginative way of being-with.

In Vicuña's poem, the task of the weaver as that of the poet refers to sensorial experiences where the word is acoustic and tactile. This sensorial exchange redistributes spatiotemporal dimensions where word and thread, as vibratory forms, allows for a poetic body to exist outside of its frame and lands into the performance. The poetic emerges as this disturbance. Word and thread shake the linear progression of time, where reading and writing traditionally take place, while they both oscillate in and outside each other.

Vicuña's poetic act is displayed as an action where reliance is the ability to hold the body in an openness that gestates words just as fingers weave the threads. An act that, in becoming communal, resists both permanence and disappearance. Reliance thus implies having a body where, like I said before, this "having" is being "part of" (Gago, 98). The body is linked to a life that weaves spaces, times and bodies and the concrete combinations in which this life unfolds, becomes possible and livable.

The poetic body emerges in the threshold between fixation (permanence) and the definitive action of its extinction (disappearance). In the tension between both forms of appearance Vicuña finds the poetic that disturbs confinement. The body that moves while simultaneously looking for its passage gestates the relation of interdependence anticipated by Gago as a form of reliance. The "body-territory" brought by Gago alludes then to a body as an extensive territory, "no como confinamiento de una individualidad, limitado a los bordes del cuerpo propio entendido como propiedad respaldada por derechos individuales" (99).<sup>12</sup> The "body-territory" is an amplified matter, an expanded surface of affects, trajectories, resources, and memories, that resonate with Vicuña's notion of the *precarious*. If we understand the notion of precarious not only as a resourceful tactic to make the most with what is at hand, but also to re-compositions of the poetic while weaving and gestating a community of hands.

In that manner, Vicuña envisions her *ars poetica* as "words that wait, words that liminally exist, perhaps exhausted, they are nurtured again by your, well, I'd say your slow hand, your patience" (*Precairious*, 54). These types of words take their time to appear. Like the thread that takes time to be woven, word and thread opt for poetic acts as gestures that perform through time. In such gestures, performance as a process is articulated, and through it, words and thread create a vibratory field of embodiments. Words are interdependent because, as Vicuña shows, they are always connected to another thing and thus mutually affected.

Fingers and words act together, they perform in weaving and in writing. They defy both fixity as permanence and complete disappearance. They dwell in

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<sup>12</sup> Trans: not as confinement of an individuality, limited to the contours of one's own body understood as a property endorsed by individual rights (Isabella Vergara).

the “not yet” that Vicuña repetitively refers to, they are dead and alive. The weaving bodies reconfigure what they touch, whether it is another word, another thread, or another body. The permanence resides in the body that emerges while weaving, that is, while birthing. This tactile birthing body is neither permanent, nor does it disappear, but rather maintains itself in a liminal state that, through others, perpetuates its continuum in transformation. That is the nurturing quality that Vicuña highlights in her words as open structures that perform between a doing and a done. Between what keeps gestating words, threads, and bodies insofar as they keep touching and birthing each other in weaving and writing.

The division of labor in which women weave and take care of children is actualized by Vicuña's as poetic acts that are woven in communality through bodies that perform by being-together. Being-together means the inclusion, interdependence, and mutual affection of other bodies, beyond male or female, as part of their performance. It is not gratuitous that Vicuña ends the poem by bringing the body back:

Es decir, los dedos entrando en el  
textil producen en las fibras una imagen en espejo de su movimiento,  
una simetría que reitera “el concepto de complementaridad que  
permea el pensamiento andino.”

//

*Soncco*, es corazón y entraña, estómago y conciencia, memoria,  
juicio y razón, el corazón de la madera, el tejido central de  
un tallo.

La palabra y el hilo son el corazón de la comunidad.

(“Cecilia Vicuña: Palabra E Hilo / Word & Thread (1996)”) <sup>15</sup>

The weaver's fingers, as the poet's words, reflect on their own movements: they see and hear each other while they weave, while they write. The symmetry that Vicuña makes visible as a central concept in the Andean knowledge, is such that weaving is a mirror of writing. A mirror in which they do not coincide completely, but rather work together in the same plane of vibrations recognizing both what unites and separates them. Rather than fusing with each other, they act together. Hence the relevance that Vicuña gives in the poem to the conjunction, “and” which is always in between “la palabra y el hilo” (word and thread). As an

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<sup>15</sup> Trans: the fingers entering the weave produce in/ the fibers/ a mirror image of its movement, a symmetry/ that reiterates “the concept /of complementarity that imbues Andean/ thought.”/ The thread dies when it is released, but comes/ alive in the loom:/ the tension gives it a heart./ *Soncco* is heart and guts, stomach and conscience,/ memory,/ judgement and reason, the wood's core, the stem's/ central fiber. The word and the thread are the heart of the/ community (Rosa Alcalá, 1996).

intermediary, the “and” gives reciprocity to word and thread to appear as events that appear together, even if they stage dissolutions and separations.

Vicuña's reference to Andean knowledge suggests creating with another type of knowledge. Rather than essentializing this knowledge, she brings back the mirroring effect of weaving and writing through which the textile's fibers are in mutual affection with the poet's fingers. Such symmetry suggests a ritual in which weaving and writing are implicated as two forms complementing each other and in constant mutation. When word and thread are the community's beat and rhythm, both acts keep activating each other forming common threads. They gestate, reframe each other while avoiding their complete permanence or finality. As acts, weaving and writing acknowledge the porosity of the body, which also means recognizing its evanescence and impermanence, its ongoing transformation. Like Vicuña suggests,

To name a work for its dissolution responds to an ancient vision:  
 the path of the planets, the sun and the moon, //  
*ecliptic.*  
 Kwakuitl string figures receive names from their patterns of dissolution  
 in the hand

“Arte Precario” (*Precarious*, 136).

Vicuña reframes this ancient thought as a method and a state of being. In union and separation, the poet's words and the weaver's thread disassociate themselves from capitalism, neoliberal politics, fascist, and patriarchal agendas. Between a doing and a done, Vicuña stages the community of weavers in an alternative temporality where the quipus rely on the impossibility to bring back its memories and the possibility to make such impossibility move. Instead of emphasizing an absolute loss of memory, Vicuña dwells on the incompleteness that the quipu embodies. She maintains the thread as “patterns of dissolution in the hand” only to produce changes and exchanges, or “Continuity in obliteration” (136). When weaving and writing perform together, they keep doing what can never be entirely done: they animate the gestating body that resists while performing, weaving, and writing. There the body disrupts permanence and disappearance, it becomes spatiality. That is, a common expanded field of acts: those that passed, that seem to be too fugitive, and the ones to come.

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