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The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global

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Threading together politics and poetics in Cecilia Vicuña's fiber art

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On September 26, 1979, Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña spilled a glass of milk in front of the Quinta Simon Bolivar, the former home of the revolutionary leader of South America during the early nineteenth century. With a red cord tied around the middle of the vessel, Vicuña, seated on the ground, pulled the string from a short distance to unleash the opaque white liquid composed of deeply pigmented water. Her action responded to *el crimen lechero*, the “milk crime” happening in Bogotá, Colombia, wherein nearly 2,000 infants died from milk laced with paint produced and sold through the country. To end the performance, Vicuña scrawled the poem:

The cow is the continent whose milk (blood) is being spilled.
What are we doing to our lives?¹

Vicuña's site specific performance in front of the home of Bolivar connected her ephemeral memorial for the deceased children to a larger protest happening within the country – one centered around violence and order occurring through conflicts between guerilla factions and the Colombian government.² The crimes of milk also extended to the crimes of blood taking place simultaneously throughout the South American continent where various restrictive governments were gaining power during the latter half of the twentieth century, and who would shape artistic production through censorship. Vicuña was forced into her own self-exile after the overthrow of the first democratically elected socialist government in Chile when Salvador Allende won the vote in 1970. The 1973 coup d'état ushered in a seventeen-year-long dictatorship under General Augusto Pinochet when over 3,000 people “disappeared” and as many as 40,000 were tortured, killed, or imprisoned.³

The notion of disappearance emerging in Vicuña's *El Vaso de Leche* connected to the larger concern around forced disappearances or *desaparecidos* that were seen in widespread projects emerging in Chile via the collective artist group Colectivo Accion de Arte (CADA) composed of the writer Diamela Eltit, poet Raúl Zurita, and artists Lotty Rosenfeld and Juan Castillo. Members distributed one hundred half-liter bags of milk to residents of La Granja - a neighborhood in Santiago particularly affected by the erasure of Allende's socialist policies. Each bag bore the label “one-half liter of milk” - as the former Popular Unity government had guaranteed this quantity to all children each day; and the mere presence of this printed phrase

¹ Cecilia Vicuña, *QUIPOem*, trans. Esther Allen (Hanover: NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1997): 54-55.

² Simon Bolivar, nicknamed “el Libertador,” was a South American general and politician, an emblematic figure of liberation struggle of the Spanish colonies in South America from 1813, and in particular of Colombia. These *desaparecidos* are both those who are innocently killed by tainted milk, as well as those who disappeared at the hands of the ongoing of the 19th of April Movement, a guerrilla faction that later became a briefly active political party in Colombia. The group went so far as to steal a sword of Simon Bolivar's in order to announce its armed activity and hijacked milk trucks to distribute milk to the poor.

³ The Rettig Report was carried out in 1991 following the end of the Pinochet presidency. The Valech commission followed up and released its latest figures in 2011.

brought to memory the Allende government.⁴ CADA's second action with milk had its members drive a parade of ten milk trucks through Santiago and park in front of the Fine Art Museum (Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes). The line of milk trucks gave the immediate impression of an invasion of military tanks. Upon arriving at the museum in the milk trucks, the artists covered the facade with an enormous white cloth and declared that the true museum was outside in the streets. Nelly Richard, a key cultural theorist of the period, understood this exercise as a double act of censoring the institutional aspect of art.⁵

When returning to the work *El Vaso de Leche*, it is clear that Vicuña demonstrates the nuanced integration and interplay between politics, language, and threads or fiber at a tumultuous time in Chile's history. Like CADA, she questioned the government's participation in the disappearance of social programs to the detriment of, in the case of Colombia, infants and children. The red string that is seen in the performance goes on to punctuate her oeuvre with the early iterations of the *basuritos* strewn about the environment in the 1960s to the 2006 quipu performance in Santiago, summoning concerns around environmental devastation and the disappeared. The early "little trashes" provide a concurrent examination of disappearance through an ecological lens. The thread - the umbilicus to her work - recognizes those voices lost during colonization and is critical of the military apparatus. Through an analysis of the textual layers existing within Vicuña's fiber art, from those seemingly banal strands used in her installations and performances, to their integration into her lines of poetry featuring the indigenous language of Mapudungun from the Mapuche people native to Chile and Argentina, the work connects to the local situation but with a resounding message of the more pervasive affects extending beyond the country. The inclusion of thread emphasizes Mapuche identity around textiles but also deeply connects to the Chilean dictatorship that severed artistic communities and enacted such a profound censorship wherein literature, art, and even threads had to take on a new language. In examining how these constructed fibers enter into everyday language and act metaphorically in highlighting issues of identity, Vicuña's artistic production expands a pertinent cross-cultural dialogue around disappearance.

These first explorations happened with the *precarios* objects began in the early 1960s. The photographs that captured these early projects show strings of wool, thin and wavering, hanging delicately among riverbeds and in the sand. Some of the threads are propped up by sticks and drape more mechanically over the natural detritus with emblems incorporated by Vicuña, such as spirals drawn in the terrain. Evoking ideas around land art and the maneuvering of the natural environment, Vicuña's precarious objects led to the manipulation of found material and were simultaneously known as, *basuritos* – or "little trash." This ephemerality of the particles that disintegrated in the water or were swept away speak to the dissolution of Chile's artistic sphere post-coup as Vicuña wrote:

After that moment I have lived mostly in english. The coup disintegrated language... the disintegration of my speech began when that axe blow was

⁴ In response to the performances in Bogota and Santiago, artist Eugenio Tellez drank a glass of milk in front of the Toronto City Hall in Canada.

⁵ See Nelly Richard, *Margins and Institutions: Art in Chile Since 1973*, Melbourne: Art & Text, May-July 1986.

inflicted on us. If we are to be made into litter and cast-offs, then fine, I assume that post, I am garbage and a cast off, and that is my language, the exploded fragment.⁶

Her statement is evidence in how society reorganized itself in order to function under countrywide censorship and the threat of disappearance, similar to the historical role of colonization that perpetuated the silence and dissolution of indigenous populations.

Upon the overthrow of the Popular Unity government, Vicuña worked with a small press in order to publish her book *Saborami* (1973) when completing a graduate degree in painting at the Slade School of Fine Arts in London. Inside the tome, the artist used its pages to explore the meaning behind her poetry and paintings, as well as write letters and notes about the pivotal historical moment. The book acted as a platform to showcase her paintings of key political figures such as Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, as well as to understand the repercussion the overthrow of government would have on Chile. Its modest size coupled with the inclusion of handwritten notes featuring a rumpled envelope, velum paper with pressed leaves, and the pen and ink drawings gave the book its diary-like character. Indeed, even its title evoked a personal relationship - *Saborami* ("Taste of me"). The book was not the only aspect that spoke to Vicuña's experience. Before the coup, when the right wing and army were openly conspiring to overthrow the Popular Unity government, she began to make an object each day that was in support of the Chilean revolutionary process. Each journal entry included was an object constructed from debris from the streets in London – connecting Vicuña's two seemingly disparate worlds. Finally, after completing 400 objects, she stopped working on the journal. There is an intimacy with the objects, with their found nature, but also the red string that found itself through the artist's oeuvre. Other work such as her *Palabrarmas* (armed words) incorporated language and wordplay alongside thread, printed matter, installations and again, a red string, all evoking a continuous history of her approach to the violent polemic faced by friends, family, and the country as a whole.

In her poetry, Vicuña often includes Spanish, Mapudungun, and English and thus explores the notion of identity and its constitution. Furthermore, she calls up the issue of censorship particularly when concerning poetry. Those such as Pablo Neruda and Gabriela Mistral whose writing reflected the concerns of both the country and its indigenous populations followed traditions set by Alonso de Ercilla, a sixteenth century poet who was the first to write about the Spanish conquest occurring in the country. Deemed the first epic poem of the nation, *La Araucana*, illustrated the attempt by the Spanish to overtake the Mapuche people in the southern region. Unconquered by the Spanish conquistadores from 1641-1825, the Mapuche were provided recognized territorial autonomy by the Spanish crown until the late 19th century in the south-central region of Chile, between the Bío-Bío and Toltén Rivers.⁷ The nearly three century Arauco War, spurred the subject of de Ercilla's poem and inasmuch began the perpetuation of a

⁶ Cecilia Vicuña, email to Rosa Alcalá, "Introduction," *Spit Temple: The Selected Performances of Cecilia Vicuña* (Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Press, 2012), 26.

⁷ Diana Haughney, "Defending Territory, Demanding Participation: Mapuche Struggles in Chile," *Latin American Perspectives* 185, 39:4 (July 2012): 202.

stereotypical vision of the Mapuche people – one that offered either a category of ‘noble Indian’ or ‘rebellious savage.’ The poem acts as a key referent in understanding indigenous identity within the country; as mestizo identity is described as the marriage between two warrior races (the Mapuche and the Spanish). Through the independence and creation of the Republic of Chile by the 1840s, the Mapuche were relegated to *reducciones* (reservations), with the stealing of land through violence and fraud happening at an alarming rate by the newly independent Chileans.⁸ The rampant racism against the Mapuche, and economic nation building by the state, exacerbated the hostile take-over of ancestral lands and an impending extermination by the government; Mapuches were depicted as wild and untamable to render bodies animalistic metonyms aimed at dehumanization.⁹ This destruction of territory and culture continued in the aftermath of the Pinochet regime, which saw widespread human rights violations over its 17-year-reign. Then, with the end of the 20th century and the new millennium, the Mapuche again faced a deadly silence with the remnants of the Pinochet economic policies that supported multinational forest companies and were kept in play without recognizing collective indigenous land claims.

The fight for a sovereign state began with the Incan civilization, whose settlements were built upon by the Spanish post colonization.¹⁰ One of the most notable artifacts of the Inca was the quipu – the key cultural product employed by Vicuña in her artwork and poetry. With its system of knots and nodes throughout the pieces of thread, the quipu acted as a system of record keeping but also recalled stories, poetry, and events. Vicuña’s first quipu was “the quipu that remembers nothing,” an empty cord in space created as a way to “listen to the ancient silence longing to be heard.”¹¹ This ‘longing’ or ‘silence’ written by Vicuña explores similar concerns of the Nueva Canción - a political resistance movement begun in the 1950s around the preservation of folkloric songs and traditions that would then position itself against the Pinochet dictatorship. With social conditions at a decline by the mid-twentieth century, those from largely indigenous communities moved to the city centers and merged distinct musical traditions with those rooted in European culture that was largely listened to by students and the middle class. Singer-songwriters, most notably Victor Jara and Violeta Parra, promoted the daily hardships, concerns for the economically- and politically-marginalized populations through their musical styles accompanied by regional instruments from across South America.¹²

Nueva Canción revived an interest in Chilean folklore that had been lost in the oppression of indigenous populations across the country. Parra preserved over 3,000 Chilean songs, recipes,

⁸ Haughney, “Defending Territory, Demanding Participation,” 202.

⁹ Macarena Gómez-Barris, “Mapuche Hunger Acts: Epistemology of the Decolonial.” *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Culture Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 1:3 (2012): 122.

¹⁰ See Rubén Stehberg and Gonzalo Sotomayor, “Mapocho Incaico” *Boletín del Museo Nacional de Historia Natural, Chile*, 61:85-149 (2012).

¹¹ Biography of Cecilia Vicuña, *The Oxford Book of Latin American Poetry*, 477.

¹² See *La Nueva Canción: The New Song Movement in South America*, Smithsonian Folk Ways Recordings, accessed May 14, 2018, <https://folkways.si.edu/la-nueva-cancion-new-song-movement-south-america/latin-world-struggle-protest/music/article/smithsonian>

traditions and proverbs and founded cultural centers - *peñas* - to provide training and performance opportunities and spaces for leftist political activism. Her “tinny” voice and fabrication of *arpilleras* also gained her notoriety.¹³ *Arpilleras* were originally yarn-based tapestries and presented images of daily activities and cultural representations along with religious motifs important in folk tradition. They later gained further significance as they presented the horrific events many faced during the dictatorship, such as the rounding up of men, women, and children by *Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional* (DINA – Chilean secret police), firing squads, and forced disappearance. Exported clandestinely, these *arpilleras* typically included notes from those who made them providing witnessed accounts and became increasingly important to families and friends who were forced into exile for political reasons, often even raising money from abroad to provide aid and relief. There are distinct parallels that arise in considering how the body and its environment are mediated by the yarn used in the *arpilleras*. Vicuña discussed how the viewer must “join in to complete the poem” as much as “the knot [in the khipu] is witness to the exchange.”¹⁴ The use of the quipu complements the *arpilleras* as a mnemonic device - both can be manipulated and deployed, just as much as they provide information of the events unfolding in Chile.

What is elucidated through the connection drawn between the Nueva Canción and the *arpilleras* to Vicuña’s own projects is the historical and contemporaneous concern for language and censorship. That is, the incorporation of indigenous identity and language alongside thread-based practices examined ongoing practices of colonization. Both Nueva Canción and Vicuña extended their support to marginalized practices and populations that gained new rights and recognition under the Allende government. This is further seen in Vicuña’s formation and participation in *Tribu No* (No Tribe) - a collection of friends and artistic collaborators who supported the left-wing popular movement beginning in the 1960s and would continue their support in the wake of Allende’s election. When the group was not invited to the International Writers Conference held in Santiago in 1969, they distributed their handwritten fliers among literary and government dignitaries with quotes from Antonin Artaud and *Tribu No*, declaring, “‘Long live poetry,’ ‘Long live the displaced.’”¹⁵ Through this tumultuous displacement, Vicuña established a nationalism located in the absence of the geographical realm but found in her actions, performances, and writing.

Thus the quipu – with its tie to language and information – took on a heightened sense of purpose and importance in Vicuña’s work. Such groups like the Mapuche, the Quechua, and the Aymara of the Andean region have their own specific relationships to cloth and textiles, such that thread elucidated symbolic meaning or the embodiment of certain identity and held an economic sway, as the Incan quipu realized. Historically, textiles within Mapuche culture served

¹³ Jara was kidnapped and tortured by the dictatorship, and was shot dead with his body left in a street in Santiago on September 12, 1973. Parra committed suicide in her home in 1967 and was survived by her children, two of whom were also active in the Nueva Canción movement. The *peñas* set up by Parra and her children would reach far and wide, spanning to Los Angeles in the United States.

¹⁴ Cecilia Vicuña, “An Introduction to Mestizo Poetics,” in *The Oxford Book of Latin American Poetry*, xxv.

¹⁵ Cecilia Vicuña, “The No Manifesto of Tribu No,” in *Manifestos and polemics in Latin American modern art*, ed. Patrick Frank, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2017): 205-6.

as ponchos and outfitted horses and while they were largely utilitarian, they conveyed meaning related to myth and cosmology, status and lineage, through color, design, and symbols. Social identities expressed in the textiles rarely remained static and shifted through the long struggle of the Mapuche populations to resist the Spanish crown and later the Chilean state, as evidenced through El Cerrillo's *El Araucana*.¹⁶ By highlighting the importance placed on the intersection between indigenous history and threads, Vicuña's re-utilization of the quipu considers both memory and the past, but also draws on connections between history, the environment, and further complications arising in colonization. For example, in her first term as president, Michele Bachelet allowed a Canadian company to drill through an important glacier overlooking Santiago. And furthermore, this silence from Chileans that allowed Bachelet to carry through with her action exercised another form of colonialism that has been repeated again and again, and was particularly pertinent in the wake of the recent memory of Pinochet. Vicuña, who like so many other Chileans had loved ones disappear, enshrines an indecipherable history into the quipu – it remembers nothing; not because of the inability to “read” these threads without Incan instruction, but that there is ‘nothing’ to read. Rather, as she points out, it is merely the blood of the mountain and the people that pours down. The dictatorship maintained such control in order to erase a history that did not serve the government's purpose. The threads of her quipu, like those that drape along riverbeds, possess meaning and act as signifiers for identities ignored or displaced. Vicuña's performance in Bogotá likened the disappeared under Pinochet's regime to those young children who died because of poisoned milk. Her larger body of work bears these political markers of those forgotten in the use of threads, as she reminds us of the connections drawn between threads, dress, and ultimately, a kind of language.

Vicuña's performances and thread-based work provide a focus on the complicated entanglement happening between the political, indigenous and thread-based realms focused on knowledge, culture, and identity. Her work questions the constitution of identity and knowledges through the ephemeral and precarious nature of the thread. The threads were first in danger of being destroyed by the elements; however, with the dictatorship came the threat of censorship. Vicuña often maps her work to indigenous cultures within the country. Through her performances and poetry, she exemplifies the hardships faced by Chileans and in connecting to histories around knowledge and place, she reminds those outside the literate and powerful of their ability to claim social memory and identity. She probes the performative nature of identity, one that concurrently speaks to disappearance, as the two go hand in hand during the statewide censorship of cultural expression outside what was deemed acceptable by the government. In looking to the complex history in Chile and its relationship with indigenous populations, the *desaparecidos*, and Vicuña's praxis, the complexities around identity formation materialize. Vicuña's work exists between a Chilean/Andean/indigenous identity, all of which are tied together to manifest her own space; yet, it is through these paths that she arrives at a constantly shifting notion of self. That is to say, her voice and her activism is never stagnant and works in tandem with multiple languages and subsequently, she provokes the multiplicities of identity that exist specifically within Chile.

Through Vicuña's use of the quipu, she evokes how threads are an intrinsic aspect of language and act as metaphorical connections between an individual and their identity. In these examples, the threads and quipus can stand in for the disappeared quite literally as she highlights the plight of indigenous identity in many of her more contemporary projects, as well as those that spoke

¹⁶ Carol Hutchinson, ed. *The Chile Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013): 72.

directly to the dissolution of the Allende government. In fact, the artist connects the coup d'état and the nearly twenty years under dictatorial rule to the inability of Chile to heal from a deep political schism. In the manifestations of the quipu, Vicuña does not speak for a larger Chilean population or enact an indigenous identity to represent these populations; rather in utilizing textiles and threads alongside her poetry, she provides an alternate possibility to understanding notions of invisible knowledge and experiences. The precariousness of the objects, materials such as wool and thread and their ephemerality, connect to an analysis of identity under first a dictatorship and then further under the postmodern state and capital production.

The strings that reverberate throughout Vicuña's poetry and installations make appearances in the early precarious objects, are repeated again in *El Vaso de Leche*, and again find their way in Vicuña's performance on top of the glacier El Plomo. Through the references to knowledge and knowing, for Vicuña the quipu and its strands is an important device because of its tie to thread, wool, and textile manufacture in the Andean region. Its regular employment in her oeuvre sees the thread as a longstanding connection between the political manifestations it evokes and the interest in often-ignored Mapuche culture, Vicuña's use of the quipu expands these notions of embodied knowledges as intertwined to the thread.

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