

Spit Temple: The Selected Performances of Cecilia Vicuña
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NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
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SPIT TEMPLE

THE SELECTED PERFORMANCES OF CECILIA VICUÑA

EDITED BY ROSA ALCALÁ

Illapantac

Al canto
se rompen

las aguas
del llanto

las que
media rán

cantá
rito
roto
la fer ti lidad

el canto
les abre

grueso portal
quíbralo dentro

que hay que llevar
el canto quebrado

que hay que comer

templo e'saliva
que no ha de volver

1. "Illapantac" and an earlier version of its translation appear in *cloud-net*. New York: Art in General, 1999. 62-63.

Illapantac

To song
the waters

of wailing
break

they will
mediate

pitch, a fertile
rite
a little
broken pitch
er

song
opens

a heavy portal
smash it in

it's time to de
cant, to begin

eating

the fractured
song

spit temple
to never return

INTRODUCTION

“Made Not of Words, But Forces”: Cecilia Vicuña’s Oral Performances

Rosa Alcalá

I.

| II

JUST WHAT IS THIS WOMAN DOING?

Gathered with dozens of people in a small library at Brown University—too small, in fact, for the number who have shown up—I wait for the invited poet to approach the podium. There has been the usual introduction and applause, but after several minutes of silence, she is nowhere in sight. As I nervously scan the room looking for her, the silence gives way to the sound of audience members shifting uncomfortably in their seats. Then, at the height of tension, singing—a cluster of vowels, really—begins to rise up from somewhere among the rows of chairs, first quietly, then growing louder and more persistent, until it seemingly permeates even the library’s polished wood. Cecilia Vicuña emerges suddenly from within the audience, having wrapped wool thread around those sitting next to her. Continuing her high-pitched chant, she slowly and deliberately approaches the podium, pulling the thread behind her. Relieved, I expect her, despite the unusual entrance, to introduce herself, say a few words, and begin reading from *Unravelling of Words & the Weaving of Water*, the book that prompted this event in progress. In fact, I organized this reading on the strength of her book, knowing little about her, and there are poems I am hoping she’ll read, some favorites she might explain, into which she might offer insight. Still, she’s not reading—at least not in the usual sense; instead, she sings, chants, whispers, navigates a registry of sounds, swiftly moving between languages (Spanish and English, perhaps others I don’t recognize). With her voice and intonation she explores the musicality within words, changing their very meaning. Or she becomes quiet, compelling us to listen to the birds singing outside of the library, so that in the absence of her voice, we listen to what’s present at the edges of the university. There are books and papers in front of her, but this is, without a doubt, not a “poetry reading” in the usual

sense—an oral reproduction of text on the page framed by anecdotal remarks, performed with that “reading” voice so familiar to us all. And while I expect her to read poems written in Spanish, then equitably offer their English translation, her movement between languages is less than predictable. I keep listening for the poems that I remember, and maybe I recognize a phrase or an idea now and again, but so much of it, I think, must simply be poetry I have not yet read. I can’t say for sure if what I have just experienced is a “poetry reading”; I only know I am sure that it is poetry.

This first experience of Vicuña’s reading in 1995—confusing and appealing at once—perhaps resembles the experiences many audiences have had watching her performances, as Rodrigo Toscano confirms when he voices the audience’s collective uneasiness by asking, “just what is this woman doing?”¹ But what does the audience expect “this woman”—this poet—to do? Where does the audience expect to be taken within the space of the poetry reading? In a very basic sense, the audience wants to witness a kind of authenticity, the poem read by the person who wrote it. But that place is also one that is enforced by determined parameters, known well by those in attendance: there is a poet at the podium, there’s a poem on the page to be read, there’s witty preamble to the poem, and an audience in its place holding its applause until the end. All of it followed by the polite sale of books. In other words, the place the audience expects to inhabit—at best a “transcendent” space where poems open up in an exchange between audience and poet—is always-already encoded and pre-determined. These conventions remain in place despite a century of challenges to their primacy: Kurt Schwitter’s phonetic experiments at the Cabaret Voltaire, The Four Horsemen’s apocalyptic cacophonies, David Antin’s “untinterrupted dialogues,” or Augusto De Campos’s “verbivocovisual” dimensions. In fact, there are many examples of poetry performance in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that don’t adhere to the conventional reading of poetry—and yet, what we normally expect from a poetry reading remains more or less intact.

Certainly, Vicuña’s approach to the space of the reading challenges those of us schooled in the twentieth-century Anglo-American poetry reading tradition and its conventions, but perhaps what makes Vicuña’s performances exceptional, and what challenges on a deeper level the poetry reading’s primary convention—the reading of poems printed on a page—is not her unusual

entrance or the use of thread, but the ways she re-imagines and animates the text by singing, improvising, and altering, in performance, her printed poems. In general, poetry readings—even when they are called performances—often reflect our general privileging of literacy over orality; despite poetry’s origins in orality, we expect readings to be merely fleeting enactments of poems that properly exist in books. As a result, the printed versions of poems—as is true for most poets in the age of print—are seen as the quintessential archive through which we measure the poet’s work and through which the poet is to measure herself. It’s true that there exists no dearth of recordings of poets reading their poems, but these recordings, while perhaps bringing a poem “to life,” rarely upset the centrality of the printed poem, and, more likely, reinforce it.

In addition to those oral performances which occur within the space of the poetry reading, Vicuña also delivers performance-lectures within the space of the conference or lecture hall. Here, Vicuña continues to challenge dominant paradigms by eschewing the usual formulas for argumentation or observation found in panel discussions and “talks.” Vicuña’s performative and less formal approach—“more ceremonial than academic,” as Linda Duke describes the Krannert performance-lecture—is similar to her recent critical “poem-essays” on Emma Kunz (“The Melody of Structures”) and Mayan dress (“Ubixic del decir”). Unlike most papers, which foreground an argument or thesis, building support through theoretical and textual evidence in a linear fashion toward a totalizing conclusion, the overlapping threads of her poem-essays and performance-lectures enact a flexible and multi-directional thinking-through of ideas. In a sense, she pushes the academic argument closer to that of poetry, and as with her poetry performances, Vicuña’s “papers” would be difficult to reproduce in journals—because they are improvised rather than read, and, more important, because most journals would not recognize them as proper academic arguments.

If we consider Vicuña’s work through this lens, the problem is that the oral performances—because they are rarely straight readings of papers or poems in books, and because they are improvised and ephemeral—rarely exist as print texts. Yet, one could easily argue that Vicuña’s performances are, in many ways, her definitive works, and are at the very least key to understanding her work as a whole. Despite their importance, however, little has been written about them,

PERFORMING MEMORY:
AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

CECILIA VICUÑA
Translated by Rosa Alcalá

CHILE

The Streams of Bellavista
Valle del Maipo, 1948

I was born in a space of silence, at the foot of a blue and eternal wall; the Andes Mountains. We lived in La Florida, surrounded by orchards and gardens, irrigation canals and crops. In Mapuche, *Maipo* or *maipun* means to plough or cultivate land.

I played with water and its reflections. I spoke to and hummed with the water's utterances, bathing twigs and dolls in its stream. At night, the toads croaked and the entire valley resonated with the now extinct *sapitos de cuatro ojos* orchestra.

My mother played lullabies on her guitar, singing in an invented Mapuche:
"Amo tu anay, amo tu anay..."

My father taught me to speak by reciting Rubén Darío:
"Margarita está linda la mar y el viento lleva esencia sutil de azahar..."

There was no TV, only my mother's 8 mm home movies.

Chile: 1948-1972
London, England: 1972-1975
Bogotá, Colombia: 1975-1980
New York: 1980-2002

La Niña Atahuallpa, or Hen Girl
Bellavista, 1952

38 | My first boyfriend was a rooster. At all hours, he watched over me.
Perhaps thinking I was a hen.

Performance with Airplanes
Valle del Maipo, 1952

We lived far from Santiago. Bored, my mother would stage little theatrical productions in the garden.

She dressed my brother and me in ballet costumes to perform *Swan Lake*, with neither lake nor swan. My brother would appear among the weeds, looking for his love in the distance. I would emerge from between pink carnations, executing a *pas de bourrée* along the dirt path. Suddenly, a plane overhead would distract me, and I'd forget about the ballet. Camera in hand, my mother filmed all of it, only to later torture guests.

To Make a Mark Is to Tread on New Ground
Los Lilenes, 1952

40 | On the beach I watched seagulls, their prints in the sand more beautiful than ours.

I played by making tracks in wet sand, avoiding the footprints of people I didn't like. I later learned it was better to walk on fresh sand.

Speaking to the Signs
Bellavista, 1952

My mother recounts the day she found me "writing." No one had taught me how to write. "What are you doing, *mijita?*" she asked. "I'm painting," I told her, and went on speaking to the signs.

Empire
New York, 2002

Charlie Morrow invited me to perform with him on the observation deck of the Empire State Building. We arrived very early one morning, before the tourists. I began to weave and sing, while Charlie played his trumpet and bells.

The unsaid poem in my pocket said:
“Empire” means “to prepare against.” The empire is fear.

Embracing our fear, a deep mourning emerged, the Skyscraper Blues.



Cecilia Vicuña in La Florida, Chile, 1950. (Photo by Norma Ramírez.)



Top: The Tribu No, Santiago, 1970. From left to right: Marcelo Charlín, Claudio Bertoni, Baby Mukti Ahimsa, Tao Rivera, Francisco Rivera, Sonia Jara, Cecilia Vicuña, Coca Roccatagliata. (Photographer unknown.)

Bottom: Cecilia Vicuña and Claudio Bertoni, Santiago, 1967. (Photo by Marcelo Charlin.)

NO MANIFIESTO DE LA TRIBU NO

el no-movimiento de charlie parker, ésto somos nosotros en la noche desprendida y tibia del sur. mientras la vida magnífica perdure en nuestras experiencias solitarias y sin embargo unidas, nada nos preocupa.

no manifestamos ningún deseo o característica. no hacemos un manifiesto para no quedar encasillados. y no tenemos miedo a encasillarnos. éso es tan difícil como que mañana mismo seamos el grupo paracaidista más osado de la polinesia. perturbamos el orden con nuestra inmovilidad exacerbada. además el no-movimiento es un movimiento de charlie parker, de john coltrane, de nicolás de cusa y martínez de pasqualiz. de rimbaud y philoxenes. más que nada andré breton y hölderlin. en realidad no nos transformamos en manifestantes para que la experiencia no sea predominantemente exterior. excavamos la sociedad interiormente. por ésto somos subversivos y amorosos además somos tan pequeños y desconocidos que la libertad es nuestro delirio, no sólo imaginativo. sino real. las campañas de la tribu no son altamente secretas y los únicos resultados visibles para los humanos que no viven el no-movimiento son nuestras obras estúpidas, tortas e incoherentes, aunque no necesariamente.

damos a conocer la existencia de la tribu no únicamente para que sea notoria la gran inmovilidad y también dedicamos éste aparatito con palabras a los que hablan demasiado y abusan de la compañía continua.

esperamos convertir a la Soledad en el nuevo ídolo mundial

no decimos nada. dejamos todo igual, de modo que nadie pueda jactarse de haberlo comprendido o agarrado. después de hablar siglos de ELLO permanece igualmente secreto. el bonito manifiesto sirve para mostrar su inutilidad. nuestro intento macabro es de ar desnudos a los humanos. sin ideas preconcebidas ni atamientos convencionales. atamientos-vestiduras. no se asusten, nuestras obras tardarán años en aparecer: no estamos jugando. la parte interior de las semillas es suave. ELLO se conoce únicamente viviéndolo. sea lo que fuere ELLO ELLO está todavía por descubrirse.

67

The No Manifesto of the Tribu No by Cecilia Vicuña, Santiago, 1967.

sky tinted water

the pleasure

of place

for
pleasure
sure

there

pleasure
of place
in the
place

pleasure

of the

place

of the

pleasure

sure

pleasure

of the

place

de
proua
Void

of the

pleasure

sure

to place,

are only

sure

sine cura

place

San Juan.

place

a portion of space
an area with definite or indefinite
boundaries

M.E space, locality fr. O. French fr.

Latin platea

broad street, space

fr. platea

fr. platea

fr. platea

broad

flat

platea

these
broods

line

des
esperre
mades

plat - to speed

extended root

pete -

variant from *plad

→ flat / genuine

flat / more

flat / O.E

flat / O.F.

flander / O. Swedes

L. planta

sole of the foot

plantare

to drive in

with the sole

of the foot

the dapper

obscure origin

L. spatium + space, distance.

Place

an
empty

clan

expense