Open Library of Humanities Journal

Gander, C 2025 Re-visioning the Archive: Cecilia Vicuña's Permanent Impermanence. *Open Library of Humanities*, 10(1): pp. 1–29. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.18449

Open Library of Humanities

Re-visioning the Archive: Cecilia Vicuña's Permanent Impermanence

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This essay examines 'permanent impermanence' as a key aesthetic to the work of Chilean poet and artist Cecilia Vicuña. It traces Vicuña's persistent making, unmaking, and remaking of what she has termed her *arte precario* from the 1960s to the present to consider her practice of re-versioning as a form of radical archivism, informed by socialist, Indigenous practices of community and care. Underpinning the essay are two animating concepts: metaphor, brought back to its root meaning of *carrying over*; and collectivity, understood through Cristina Rivera Garza's work as the bringing together of objects, bodies, and communities in opposition to capitalist individualism. The essay explores how Vicuña builds an alternative narrativization of history by accreting a disappearing, reappearing, collective archive of work in which ephemerality and vulnerability insist as powerful forces. It argues for the aesthetics of permanent impermanence as a theory of how art (whether literary, visual, or performance art, and importantly, as the fluid transfiguration and mediation between these forms) can both respond to and re-vision a world increasingly patterned by the throwaway culture of late capitalism, and by the ongoing histories of colonial, imperial violence.

> 'The poem is not speech, not in the earth, not on paper, but in the crossing and union of the three in the place that is not' – Cecilia Vicuña[1]

Introduction

Chilean poet and artist Cecilia Vicuña has told the story many times: of how, one day in January 1966, she stood on the beach of Con cón where the Aconcagua River meets the Pacific Ocean, and arrived at the concept of *arte precario* [*precarious art*].[2] Although she was alone, Vicuña describes the moment in terms of cooperative relation:

> The wind made itself into a knot around my body. And I remember turning around as if I had been enveloped, caressed, by the wind. … I turned around to see the sea, the light, and I became aware that all of it was aware, and that I was being sensed exactly like I was sensing all that. And I dropped to the ground, the wet sand where I was by the sea, and I grabbed a stick, a piece of debris, and I pushed it into the wet sand, and drew. And when I did that, I knew that I was doing it not for me but for the sea and for the elements—in other words, I would be communicating with them just to say 'Yes, I see' (2022: 49).

Soon, Vicuña was collecting more beach debris, this time assembling twigs, feathers, pieces of discarded plastic, cloth, and glass into small, fragile sculptures, which she tied with bark and string and planted in the sand along the shoreline. Reciprocity was the impetus; impermanence was the point. These were gifts that the elements could reclaim. The sand drawings would be erased by the water and the wind; the little sculptures—termed by Vicuña *basuritas* (the diminutive form of the Spanish for 'rubbish')—would be carried away by the high tide. Precarious and ephemeral, the constructions were offerings (as Vicuña frequently notes, the words 'prayer' and 'precarious' share an etymological root: '*precarious is what is obtained by prayer, uncertain, exposed to hazards, insecure*') (2017: 9, emphasis in original). They were also transformative acts; meaningful assemblages of the materials deemed valueless in the language and logics of late capitalism. 'We are all *basuritas*', according to Vicuña, 'throwaways of this world' (2018: 83).[3]

What happened at Con cón was an act of return in its manifold meanings: a physical turning around; a creative recycling; a gesture of giving back—of reciprocal perception, and an offering of gratitude to the elements that had demonstrated their awareness

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[1] Cecilia Vicuña, 'Introduction', https://www.ceciliavicuna.com/introduction.

[2] Although the place name *Concón* is commonly written as one word, I retain Vicuña's spelling, *Con cón*, which honours its naming by 'the first peoples of Chile' (Vicuña, 2017: 7).

[3] Vicuña, 'Author's note' to *Precario/Precarious*, trans. Anne Twitty, Tanam Press (New York, 1983), reprinted in *New and Selected Poems*. The line recurs through Vicuña's work, including in *About to Happen* (2017: 48).

of the poet-artist's presence.[4] Vicuña's description of the experience is marked by the same emphasis on accumulation as the *basuritas* themselves, the anaphoric 'and…and… and' producing an accretive affect that serves to pull the listener or reader into the moment of their creation, bringing us to an act of cognitive realisation that comes only after, and through, an embodied response ('And when I did that, I knew…'). The next day, Vicuña recalls, she came back to the same beach and made more sculptures and markings–the same, but different. *Arte precario* would be the method and the concept of Vicuña's artistic and poetic praxis thenceforward.

We might call that revelatory day in January an origin moment (many art theorists writing about Vicuña's work refer to it as such), but to do so would be to overlook Vicuña's own understanding of the moment as an arrival at a familiar consciousness previously inhabited. Vicuña has spoken about her feeling of connection on the beach with 'an ancestral drive' stemming from the site's pre-Columbian past (2022: 50). Con cón, named by the first people of Chile after its meeting place of *water* and *water*, is, according to Vicuña, 'a place with no historical memory, and yet with a deep memory embedded in the land' (2017: 103). She describes Con cón as an inclusive site of spatial and geological memory, activating within her a recognition of an awareness already felt: that all the elements of this world are brought into being reciprocally.

This emphasis on interactive response rather than singular originality has shaped Vicuña's ethics and aesthetics from the 1960s to the present. When questioned about the importance of innovation to her artistic practice, Vicuña has acknowledged the influence in her early education of the credo to *make it new*, yet is keen to assert that while a writer or artist should strive to find their own style, they should never deny that 'whatever we do is always a continuation, too' (2022: 52).

> You hear artists and poets speak of 'my work.' Even I say it. People ask about 'your work,' in those terms. But I think my or your is relative because what's really happening is always an interaction. You can own that interaction maybe, but it will always be changing. There's a permanent impermanence to that relationship (2019b).

Vicuña's approach resists the hierarchical schema entrenched in capitalist value systems by refusing its guiding logic of individualism. 'The West is interested in individuality and in signalling that this person is a genius as opposed to all the others', she states. 'But in truth, everything that we do responds to something that we're building on' (2022: 52). What is most important in her *arte precario* is therefore the set of relations that the artworks and poems (re)animate, both internally—between the elements of their

[4] For more on the concept of *return* in Vicuña's work, see Brown, 2020.

construction—and beyond themselves—between the artwork and its environment, and between the witnesses and readers of the artwork. 'An object is not an object', Vicuña writes in the poem 'Arte Precario' in 1997, and rewrites 20 years later in her artist's book *About to Happen*, 'it is a witness to a relationship' (1997: 136; 2017: 28).

While critics and scholars before me have done invaluable work analysing—among other things—precarity in Vicuña's art and poetry as a resistive mode to capitalist, imperialist, totalitarian, and anthropogenic ecological violences,[5] I would like in this article to consider what is at stake in her aesthetics—and poetics—of 'permanent impermanence'. The making and unmaking of *precarios* is a kind of recycling that embraces the change or reconstitution of meaning that new combinatory forms create. Vicuña extends this practice to her writing, reproducing and altering poetic fragments, extracts from manifestoes, notes from her performances, and photographs of her site-specific and installation pieces across various printed and online publications. Indeed, when writing about Vicuña, it can be very challenging to locate the 'original' formulation or location of a poetic line or image.

Instead of trying to solve this question of singular originality—which I have hopefully begun to demonstrate is a bogus concept in Vicuña's aesthetics—I am interested here in thinking further about the repetitive, accumulative acts of recycling and re-versioning across her career. I also want to think more about her ongoing commitment to responding to social, political, and planetary precarity, not only via the repeated making, unmaking, and remaking of art objects—be they poems, sculptures, installations, artist's books, or paintings—but via their transmediality: the transformation of such objects from one composition or medium to another.[6] By attending to this overarching practice of Vicuña's, I hope to demonstrate how her entire oeuvre has been, and continues to be, a project of radical archivism: an alternative method of documentation that counters dominant historiographies constructed primarily to dismantle the relations Vicuña works to reactivate, and to silence the narratives she wishes to amplify. As will become clear, Vicuña's radical archivism is a relational project, shaped by principles of communality and participation. As such, it is in contradistinction to what archival scholars recognise as the 'conventional standard[s] of archiving' that privilege custodial and preservationist paradigms, and more aligned with collective, activist-driven models of archivism that began in the late

[5] The critical corpus on Vicuña is growing. Stand-out scholarship includes work by José F. Alvergue, Julie Philips Brown, Sarah Dowling, Juliet Lynd, Kenneth Sherwood, and M. Catherine de Zegher.

[6] Vicuña's transmedial poetics is something I have discussed elsewhere, for example in 'Extending the Document: Contemporary Transmedial Poetics' (IAWIS Max Nänny Prize lecture, Amsterdam 28 March 2025, from book project of same name). See also Gander, 2025.

1960s alongside civil rights movements and anti-war protesting (Schwenk, 2011: 52). Such models are predicated on 'social responsibility and equality' (52, 53) and position the archivist as 'community facilitator' (Cook, 2013: 116). To understand Vicuña's aesthetics of permanent impermanence is not only to enquire how an archival practice might value people, ecologies, cultures, and communities who are underrepresented and undervalued in dominant social discourses, but how an archive's organising structure might reflect the precarity of its subjects.

Vicuña (b. 1948) came of age during an era when conceptual artistic movements in the States and in Latin America were taking root; when cultural production intersected with political and social life in ways that situated art 'as an open system, a site that is the matrix of social exchange' (Shtromberg, 2016: 3).[7] Over the last 20 years or so, scholars have paid increasing attention to the work of Latin American artists and poets responding to violent political regimes.[8] The majority of this scholarship has focused on cultural production under the 21-year dictatorship of Brazil (1964–1985), during which artists and poets such as Helio Oiticica, Lygia Clark, Antonio Manuel, Artur Barrio, Cildo Meireles, and Ferreira Gullar created art objects, poems, and performances that blurred the line between text and image, that emphasised viewer participation over passive consumption, and that sought new formulations of democracy via various 'systems' of communication and social and ecological relationality (Shtromberg, 2016: *passim*). While Vicuña's *arte precario* can be (precariously) placed within this lineage, Chilean art movements of the 1960s did not embrace what was later termed conceptualism so readily. Chilean American poet and translator Daniel Borzutzky quotes scholar Juliet Lynd on Vicuña's contribution to the 'artistic, political and cultural revolution' of Chile in the 1960s and 70s:

> Cecilia Vicuña was on the vanguard of this cultural scene: she lived in the margins, but her work (visual, performative and also poetic) of that era anticipated the important artistic and academic movements in conceptual art and performance that took off in the 70s and 80s encapsulating even the discourses of second wave feminism. … Lucy Lippard has classified her small sculptures made from objects found on the beach in Concón in 1966 as a precursor by six months to Robert Smithson's Earthworks in the US; they also predate the silhouettes of Ana Mendieta, the exiled Cuban artist who sketched feminine figures into the landscape in the 70s as well as the earth-drawings made by Atsuko Tanaka in Japan in 1968 (Borzutzky, 2018: xvii).

[7] Shtromberg writes of how New York-based critic Jack Burnham's 1968 essay 'System Esthetics' 'affected not only the configuration of the art object but the whole critical apparatus surrounding artistic practice' by emphasising (in Burnham's words) that "art does not reside in material entities, but in relations between people and between people and the components of their environment' (Burnham quoted in Shtromberg, 2016: 3).

[8] For example, see Shtromberg (2016), Calirman (2012), Camnitzer (2007), and Kosick (2024).

This article will in part examine how Vicuña's situation by contemporary critics as both a product of, and a precursor to, idea-led and materialistic artistic movements under political dictatorship; as both at the vanguard and outside of their contexts (Vicuña left Chile in 1972 to study art in London and was thus exiled after the 1973 coup), contributes to her enduring aesthetics of permanent impermanence.

Animating this article's enquiry are two concepts, which are key to Vicuña's *arte precario*. The first concept is collectivity. We can understand this term broadly, as the method of construction Vicuña uses to assemble the component parts of her *basuritas*, her artist's books, and other *precarios*, such as many of her *quipu* installations (more of which later). But we must also understand the extent of relationality in Vicuña's practice; how collectivity in her work's meaning and making extends to include communities of people and their more-than-human relations. In this appraisal, I am guided by the work of Mexican writer Cristina Rivera Garza, who, in her book *The Restless Dead: Necrowriting and Disappropriation*, argues after anthropologist Floriberto Diaz that authorship is always plural, and that writing (and cultural production) is an act of 'communality' in which both the living and the dead partake. For Garza, disappropriation is an ethical and aesthetic practice that 'exposes the plurality that precedes individuality in the creative process, opening a window onto the material layering so often concealed by appropriative texts' (2020: 65):

> In producing layers upon layers of connection to language as mediated by others' bodies and experiences, disappropriative writings are geological writings. As a result, disappropriation's way of 'appearing' is usually attained by means of many different re-writing strategies, including excavation, recycling, and juxtaposition (65–66).

In considering contemporary literatures of disappropriation, Garza draws on the Indigenous Oaxacan practice of *tequio*, a form of collective labour that is concerned with no less than 'the material creation and recreation of the world', and that 'benefits the community at large' (2020: 47). *Tequio*, like so many forms of unpaid and community labour, radically opposes, and is rendered invisible by, today's global forces of capital. Significantly, what Garza calls a 'poetics of communality' derives from the Mixe philosophy of 'relationship with the earth based not on property but on mutual belonging' (52, 50). Vicuña's aesthetics likewise derives from Indigenous—in her case, Quechua—understandings of relationality, in which all forms of life and nature are interwoven. Her *arte precario* is informed by, among many other Andean concepts,

minga, a pre-Incan practice bringing community members together to work for the common good (such as harvesting and building).[9]

The second animating concept is metaphor. Vicuña has often called the *precarios* 'visual poems' and 'metaphors in space', not least because their reconfigured forms afford them capacity to hold a plurality of meanings.[10] In thinking through the various manifestations of repetition, return, and displacement in Vicuña's life and work, I bring metaphor back to its roots in the Latin and Greek *metaphora*, meaning a 'carrying over': the 'transfer' of an object or word from one location or condition to another, during which process an 'alteration' occurs (*Etymonline*, 2024a). Understood according to these etymological terms, metaphor finds a correlative in translation: to translate also means to 'carry over', to 'remove from one place to another' (*Etymonline*, 2024b). An involuntary exile from Chile after the military coup of 1973, first in London, then Bogotá, and then New York (where she has lived since 1980), Vicuña knows what Juliana Spahr calls 'the disquieting linguistic disorientation of migration' (2009: 164). While much of her poetry in Spanish has been translated, primarily by Rosa Alcalá and recently by Daniel Borzutzky, Vicuña writes in Spanish and English, maintaining that it is 'language' that is 'migrant' (Vicuña, 2016). Many of her poems are translingual, moving across and between Spanish and English to pull upon the threads of their commonalities, reflect upon the linguistic displacement wrought by imperialism and colonialism, and to unpick the multiple meanings embedded in the constituent phonemes and etymologies of words in both languages.[11]

These concepts provide us with related ways to examine Vicuña's aesthetics of permanent impermanence as a theory of how art (whether literary, visual, or performance art, and importantly, as the fluid transfiguration and mediation between these forms) can both respond to and re-vision a world increasingly patterned by the throwaway culture of late capitalism, and by the ongoing histories of colonial, imperial violence. Vicuña's body of work is far too expansive to address in this article; however, I consider how we might understand Vicuña's lifelong project of permanent impermanence by attending to a selection of her works across media and from across the six decades of her practice.

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[9] Vicuña's 2019 exhibition in Santiago's Centro Cultural de España en Chile, 'Minga del Cielo Oscuro' ['Minga of the Dark Night'] brought together 'scientists, ancestral knowledge and artists' to 'bring awareness to the fact that the disappearance of the darkness of night is killing us and thousands of other species' (Vicuña, 2019a).

[10] The occasions are too numerous to list here. Examples can be found, however, in Vicuña's own descriptions of her work on her website: http://www.ceciliavicuna.com.

[11] See Dowling, 2018 for an excellent and in-depth analysis of translingual poetics in Vicuña's *Instan* and in the work of other contemporary poets.

The Radical Archive

In his illuminating introductory essay to her *New and Selected Poems*, Daniel Borzutzky calls Vicuña 'a poet, a performer, a visual artist, an anthologist, and, among other things, a radical archivist' (2018: xix). He does not linger on the final term, nor does he expand his meaning. Yet his description perceptively encapsulates Vicuña's aesthetic-political project. Vicuña's *precarios* direct our senses to processes and sites of erasure wrought by forces of (neo)colonialism and the Capitalocene.[12] For example, her artworks at Con cón constitute a fragile record both of the lost human cultures of pre-Columbian Chile, literally buried beneath the earth and discovered via excavation in the mid-1980s, and the pollution of the Aconcagua river by Chile's first oil refinery, built on the site of an Indigenous cemetery in 1954, and responsible for the loss of migratory birds to the estuary. The damage to environmental ecologies caused by the refinery has further impacted relational practices of sustainability between humans and the more-than-human: 'Oil erased the cultural memory of the land,' Vicuña writes. 'The fishermen forgot their poetry and dance learned from bird rituals, the "torn sound," *el sonido rajado*, of Con cón. Without the dance, the sea began to die' (2017: 7).[13] The *precarios* are not only tributes to the human and more-than-human lives so often discarded or overlooked in our globalised world, then, but highlight, as Sarah Dowling points out, precarity as 'a set of relationships and the worldviews—implicitly Indigenous—in which these are foundational' (2018: Ch1).[14] Dowling astutely notes that Vicuña's understanding of precarity is not so much concerned with recent (Western) crisis discourses addressing 'the disaggregation of a whole self or subject', but rather 'focuses on nonsubjective and at times even nonpresent entities' (Ch1). Adding to this, I suggest that Vicuña's persistent re-versioning of *los precarios* across decades (and bridging two centuries) decentres and distributes the individual subject further, building an alternative narrativization of history by accreting a disappearing, reappearing archive of work. In this collective archive, ephemerality and vulnerability insist as powerful forces.

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[12] 'Capitalocene' is a term that has gained traction over the last ten years as an alternative to 'Anthropocene', directing emphasis away from 'the age of man' toward 'the age of capital'. Whereas Anthropocene describes the geologic era marked by humanity's impact on earth, Capitalocene describes the current epoch of human and natural history in which the capitalist mode of production has led to the destruction of our planet.

[13] This was the subject of Vicuña's documentary film, *Kon kon*, made in collaboration with Indigenous and non-Indigenous inhabitants of Chile. (Dir. Vicuña, 2010). The film can be viewed online: https://www.cultureunplugged.com/documentary/watch-online/play/54444/kon-kon.

[14] Dowling argues for the difference between Vicuña's understanding of 'precarity', which 'frames bodily vulnerability as a question of [interdependent] *relation*', and prevailing Western theories of precarity such as Judith Butler's, which centre on an unbalanced dynamic between a 'stable' self/witness and an 'inchoate' other/mourner (Dowling, 2018, Ch1).

Vicuña was already aware of this power in June 1973, when she began constructing the hybrid book, *Sabor a Mí* [Taste of Me] as a student at Slade School of Fine Art, London.[15] Originally intended as a collective object in support of Salvador Allende's democratic Unidad Popular government after the first failed coup against him on 29 June 1973, *Sabor a Mí* became, in the wake of General Pinochet's successful coup on 11 September 1973, an exilic work of protest and resistance.[16] Two hundred and fifty copies were made of the 'original' edition of *Sabor a Mí* by Beau Geste Press in Devon, England. Yet, as Vicuña explains in a new endnote to *Saboramí*, a subsequent reissue of the book, this first edition was also an exercise in re-versioning, each copy being 'one-of-a-kind with elements inserted at random such as letters, insects, or threads' (2011: 159). Indeed, the overall project of the book underwent significant revision:

> My original plan was to do an 'artist's book', a journal of objects with beautiful black and white photos. But the coup took place only a few days before production. I had to change plans and create a new work, and do it fast. I had to include the poems, the paintings, and the *Autumn* narrative, sensing that they would disappear. In fact, these poems (pp. 103–152) were censored in Chile for the next 37 years. The Beau Geste Press *SABORAMI* was a precarious edition, each book a piece of debris, *una basurita editada* (159–160).

Described by Vicuña as 'an edited little piece of rubbish', each edition carried in its precarious construction the means of its own unmaking. Yet by curating and editing these little compilations, Vicuña underlines how important it is for them—and their gradual dissolution—to be seen. *Basurita* may mean rubbish in Spanish, but in South American vernacular, including that of Chile, it also means 'a particle of dirt, especially one that enters the eye' (*Diccionario de la lengua Española*, 2025).

A collective form of natural and printed ephemera, *Sabor a Mí* gathered leaves, feathers, various newspaper clippings and paper scraps, drawings, decals, paintings, poems (often erotically sensuous), and written diary entries. It also included a section from Vicuña's '*diario de objetos*' ['diary of objects']: black and white photographs of

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[15] I write *Sabor a Mí* in reference to the 1973 Beau Geste edition (as it is written on the cover, and referred to by editor Filipe Ehrenberg within. I write *Saboramí* in reference to the 2011 Chainlinks edition. In her essay on 'Vicuña's *Saboramis*', Julie Philips Brown does same, adding: 'The poems collected in *Sabor a Mí* derive from an earlier manuscript of the same title, but the remainder of that manuscript was unpublished until recently, with the Spanish- language release of El Zen Surado (Santiago, Chile: Editorial Catalonia, 2013). See Brown, 2020: 410.

[16] *Sabor a Mí* also functioned as an evidential document in what Courtney J Martin has called 'an incredibly precarious' court case: the case brought to the English government to prove Vicuña required political refuge in the UK after the 1973 coup in Chile, as her art had made her a target of the new regime (Martin 2023).

basuritas that were themselves re-versions of those made at Con cón in 1966. These *basuritas* are presented in *Sabor a Mí* as imagetexts, with typeset poems and textual fragments woven into the visual field in both Spanish and English (see **Figure 1**). In later publications, particularly *quipoem* (1997), many of the *basuritas* appear in revised form again, including entries '30 julio 73' and '31 julio 73', juxtaposed with other *basuritas* on a hand-drawn grid of horizontal and vertical axes that bears resemblance to both a chain-link fence—an image of separation associated with military occupation—and a quilt—an image of comfort, ancestral craft, and interwovenness (see **Figure 2**). Another *basurita* imagetext, undated in *Sabor a Mí*, but occurring between *basuritas* dated '27 junio 73' and '29 junio 73' (and therefore likely made the day before the failed coup led by Colonel Roberto Souper against Allende), is an assemblage of sticks, feathers and beads in a grid very similar to the drawn grid of *quipoem*, anchored in four corners by parts of a poem in Spanish and translated into English (see **Figure 3**).

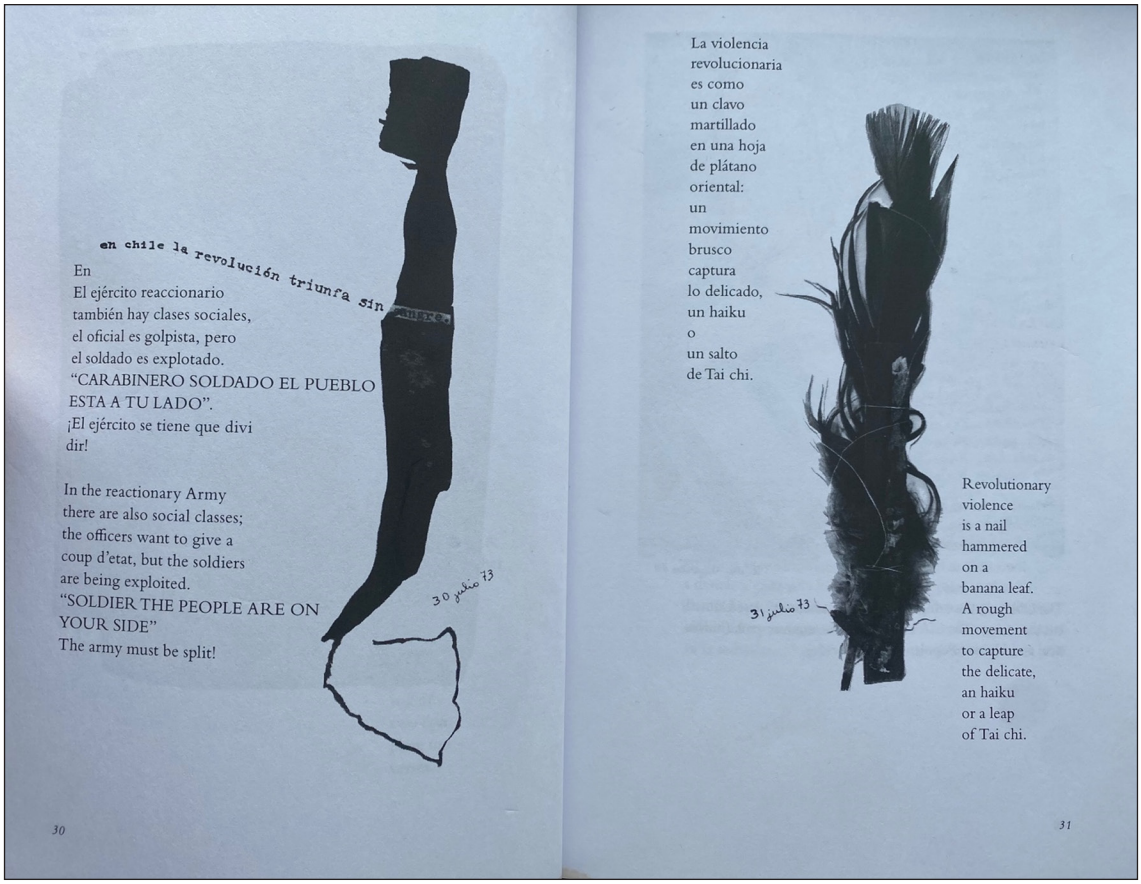

Figure 1: Cecilia Vicuña, pages 30–31 of *Saborami*. (2011 [1973]). Oakland: Chainlinks Press.

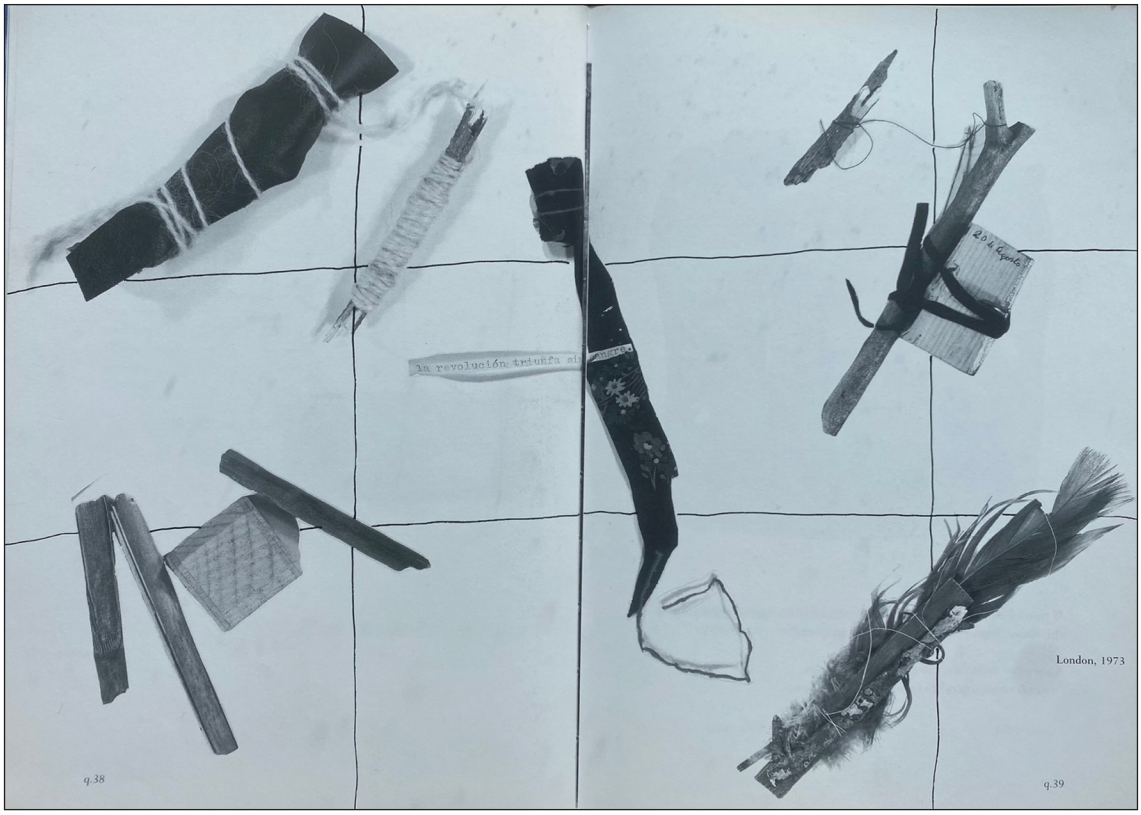

Figure 2: Cecilia Vicuña, pages q.38–q.39 of *quipoem*. Wesleyan University Press, 1997. © Cecilia Vicuña, ARS New York/IVARO Dublin, 2025. Reproduced with the kind permission of the artist and must not be reproduced without permission from the copyright holder and the artist.

The fragmented words of this imagetext call for the continuation of socialism in Chile in a manifesto-cum-prayer-cum-spell: '...we need / a mira / cle: that / the CIA/ dissolves / the mili / tary can't / coup, that / Christian / democracy / may rot, / that mummies* / may die // *mummy is a reactionary person' (Vicuña, 2011: 17). Here, as she develops more explicitly in her later poems, Vicuña demonstrates how language can be shown to hold additional meaning when it is bent or broken. The isolated phonemes and other constituent parts of the sentence in English splinter significance, not only compelling the reader to attend more closely to the poem, but to do the work of putting, or pulling, the poem together. Participating in the act of metaphor, then, the reader must carry the words' meanings over and back across the *basurita* in a form of reading-as-weaving. 'Mira', for example, is a visualised component of 'miracle' as well as a word that means 'look' in Spanish, and recalls phonetically the English 'mirror'. The miracle Vicuña invokes begins with the act of looking, both at the overlooked, and at oneself in relation to historical processes continuing to rend the social fabric. When Vicuña reproduces a photograph of this *basurita* in *quipoem* 25 years later, she places it on its own page, without the more historiographic poem, and instead with the single

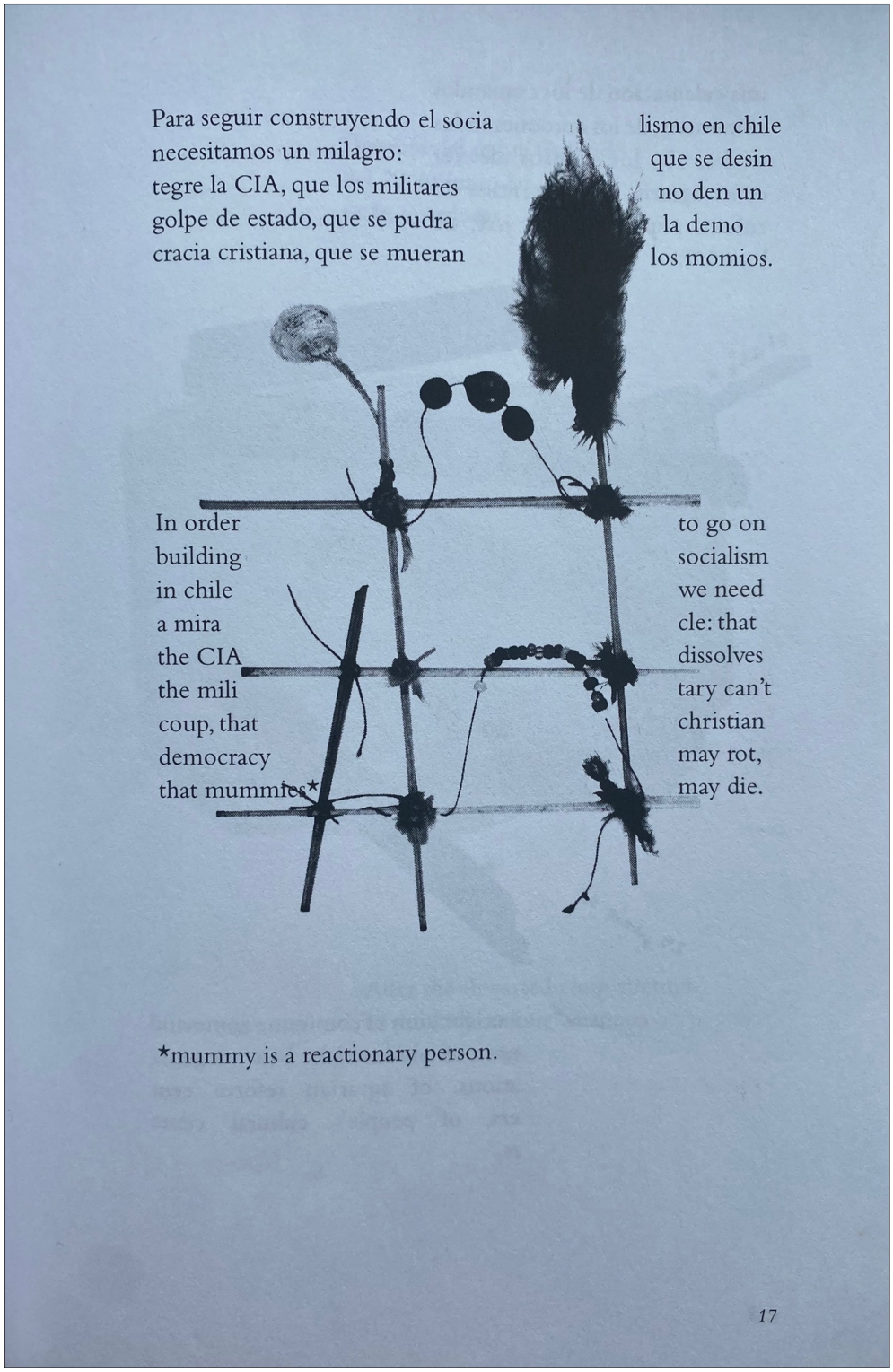

Figure 3: Cecilia Vicuña, page 17 of *Saborami*, (2011 [1973]). Oakland: Chainlinks Press. © Cecilia Vicuña, ARS New York/IVARO Dublin, 2025. Reproduced with the kind permission of the artist and must not be reproduced without permission from the copyright holder and the artist.

line of text that serves more as a slogan for her aesthetics at large: 'Weft of incense sticks: maximum fragility against maximum power' (Vicuña, 1997: 41).[17]

Repositioned in *quipoem*, with most of their poems and individual date-markers removed, the *Sabor a Mí basuritas* are deliberately incomplete citations of themselves. They draw attention not only to the repetitions of history, and to the connections both to each other and between their iterations, but to the gaps and absences in the historical and personal narrative they retell. (On the flyleaf, Vicuña calls *quipoem* an 'autobiography in debris' (1997: np).) Combining avant-garde art and radical politics, the *basuritas* constitute a historiographic re-visioning that seeks to materialise precarity not only as a state but as a force, all the while pulling attention back to the overlooked. The *basuritas* thus demand participation in their reader-viewer, who becomes, like the object, not a passive recipient of external forces, but a 'witness to a relationship' across space and time.

Julie Philips Brown has justly called *Sabor a Mí* 'one of the most important poetic representations of this most traumatic era in Chilean history' (2020: 393). Indeed, *Sabor a Mí* remains one of the era's most important documentary accounts, not least because it of its multimedial, trans-genre reach, its record of artefacts and news clippings, of the collective and personal hopes and fears of the Chilean people. Throughout *Sabor a Mí*, Vicuña writes against American imperialism and capitalism, fearful of the effect of their colonising impulses on Latin America. As is now well-known, the United States, especially under President Nixon's government, had for years heavily funded the conditions for a military coup in Chile; Pinochet's successful overthrow of Chile's first democratically elected president was a blow Vicuña felt deeply. In a diary entry written before the coup, titled 'The victory of Latin America', she writes

> Latin America should never become like europe or the u.s.
>
> Chile could be the first happy country in the world, a way of being constantly affectionate would grow from innocence and neolithic ecstasy (reappearing). ... Socialism would achieve a cosmic consciousness, the sum of the wisdom of the pre-Columbian Indians and of the many wisdoms of other places. ... There would be much dancing, much music, much friendship. Socialism in Chile could give birth to a joyful way of living! (2011: 34).

[17] Brown has written persuasively of 'Vicuña's *Saboramis*'. Of this particular reproduction in *quipoem*, she writes that the latter re-version 'is no longer historically specific and violent in its aims. … And yet Vicuña maintains her essential, underlying argument: that the weak will overcome the strong, as Allende would have it: history belongs to the people, and neither 'crimes' nor 'force' will overwhelm them' (2020: 404).

Woven into Vicuña's description is an unspoken connectivity to the land and its gifts: the 'neolithic ecstasy' may well refer to practices of plant-drug use; the 'wisdom' of pre-Columbian Indians is rooted in relationality with the more-than-human. Vicuña's socialist Chile is a joyful, sensuous, and cooperative culture, wherein ancient practices are 'reappearing', and precolonial, communal wisdoms are recycled and shared. The contrast to the capitalist West, with its dedication to the personal accumulation of wealth, its extractive economies, and its insatiable consumerism built on a culture of disposability, is stark. It is no wonder that under the new, US-funded regime, Vicuña's work was banned in Chile for so long. Yet, in her hurried re-assemblage of *Sabor a Mí* to include those records of Chilean art and social and sexual life that she knew would be censored ('I had to include [them]..., sensing that they would disappear'), Vicuña foresaw and articulated, with words, images, and artefacts, a condition of late capitalism that Fredric Jameson was famously to call postmodernism's 'crisis in historicity' (1991: 22).

The Loss of Historicity

In Jameson's assessment, as the juggernaut of capitalism rolled across the 20th century, connectivity to the past in Western culture—specifically, American culture—was replaced by a fascination with the immediate present, in which history is represented by a series of empty stylisations in the form of pastiche. Driven by a cultural logic of commodification and simulacra, postmodernism lost connection to the Real and to the foundations of its own construction:

> [T]he postmodern must be characterized as a situation in which the survival, the residue, the holdover, the archaic, has finally been swept away without a trace. In the postmodern, then, the past itself has disappeared (along with the well-known 'sense of the past' or historicity and collective memory) (Jameson, 1991: 309).

Vicuña's *arte precario* continually critiques and counteracts, often via repeated enactment of this very process of being 'swept away' (think of the tide at Con cón), the loss of historicity and collective memory that Jameson bemoans. In 'Fragments of Memory', an afterword to *Saborami* (the 2011 Chainlinks reissue of *Sabor a Mí*), Vicuña includes a two-page fragment called '*What we lost*'. It is worth quoting at length:

> With the coup we lost the memory of who we were. ...
>
> In the Chile before the coup, the 'I' was experienced simultaneously as individual and collective. We felt it when a million people marched together in Santiago (a city of 3 million people) to salute Salvador Allende. We felt it as we chanted '*ahora somos*

> *nosotros*' 'now we are us'. Not the American 'us versus them', but a collective us, including us all, even those who were against Allende.
>
> We lost the memory of the ancient meanings. Chile took its name from Chili, an indigenous leader of the Anconcagua valley where a powerful dissonant music was born, *el sonido rajado*, a pre-Columbian art form still practiced today. A sound that embodies a democratic vision: in its ritual performance there are no soloists and no leaders. … Dissonance is beauty. The history of the social struggles of Chile, from pre-Columbian times to the present reflects this spirit, a native concept of participatory democracy.
>
> Today, the experience of the double 'I', of the collective and individual as one, is only remembered by the indigenous who are now being persecuted and branded as the new 'terrorists' (2011: 160–163).[18]

That Vicuña's entire artistic project is resistance against such loss is one of the reasons she is a radical archivist. The very precarity of her works becomes a ballast against our disconnection from memory, from history, from each other. Precarity accretes into strength. Permanent impermanence does not let us forget what we were, who we are, or what we could be (again).

Drawing on another famous evaluation of the materialisation of cultural memory, we might consider Derrida's description of the archive as a concept that both shelters in itself the memory of its name and shelters itself from this memory. As Derrida has it, the name *arkhē*, which means 'commencement' and 'commandment', 'coordinates two principles in one: the principle according to nature or history, *there* where things commence—physical, historical, or ontological principle—but also the principle according to the law, *there* where men and gods command, *there* where authority, social order are exercised, in this place from which order is given' (1995: 9). What Derrida identifies as the archive's power by dint of its status as site of origin, Vicuña undermines by continually and irrepressibly resisting such ordering impulses. It is the losses and erasures from the historiographic record that Vicuña is dedicated to materialising; it is the teleological notion of originality, with all its associated circuits of power and control, that she refuses.

In 'Archive Fever', Derrida returns to Freud's familiar model of the Mystic Writing Pad, or Wunderblock, 'to *represent on the outside* memory as *internal* archivization' (Derrida, 1995: 15; emphasis in original). The Mystic Writing Pad, a child's toy created

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[18] Note Vicuña's reference to *el sonido rajado* [*the torn sound*] that she later connects with the sound of water birds whose habitation near Con cón is destroyed by capitalist extractivism, and with the 'poetry' of the fishermen, whose practice relied on relationality with the birds.

in the early 20th century, comprised a thin sheet of celluloid over a sheet of waxed paper and a thicker, waxy resin block. A writer could make marks on the celluloid with a stylus by creating lines of contact with the layers underneath; erasing the marks required only to lift the celluloid from contact with the block. For Freud, the Mystic Writing Pad was, of course, a succinct metaphor for the workings of personal memory: the human unconscious retains traces of the stimuli it receives via the conscious mind, just as the wax slab retains traces of the impressions it receives via the celluloid layer, despite the ease with which that layer is instantly removed of marks (and consciousness is refreshed to receive new perceptions). For Derrida, Freud's analogy extends to the 'internal contradiction' (19) of the archive's processes of conservation and erasure, metaphorising the ways in which the technology of the archive mediates and shapes historical memory. In *Saborami*, we see how the concept of archival mediation is extended further, to (partly) reveal the process of documentation as both the preservation of cultural memory, and a record of its erasure.

Saborami contains colour photographs of selected pages from one of Vicuña's scrapbooks, labelled 'Hojas del Cuaderno Café' ['Leaves from the Brown Book'] (2011: 45). These photographed pages, or leaves, in turn contain black and white photographs and newspaper clippings from 1970–1973, items such as a small leaf, a zip, a safety pin, a postage stamp, and collages of image, text, and coloured threads sewn onto the page. Created to celebrate Allende's democratic rule, the *cuaderno* was, according to Vicuña's accompanying description, 'a charged object' because it was 'a touched object'—a personal archive of public ephemera collected and made by hand, and 'the result of a caress' (2011: 43). In this two-dimensional reproduction, colour—the only use of colour in *Saborami*—stands in for a lost tactility. Sight is required to perform, or replace, the work of touch. Yet in their deep hues and imaged textures, the reproductions require significant effort to see. Calling to mind the Mystic Writing Pad's layers, the pages of the *cuaderno* are interleaved with translucent wax sheets, further obscuring the objects.

One such object is the pasted page from a small-format magazine, showing a photograph and caption (**Figure 4**). At least seven adults are pictured from the waist up, posed somewhat reluctantly for a group portrait. They wear the traditional dress of what the caption tells the uninformed reader are the Araucanian peoples of Chile, whose entire population is estimated ('calculated') at around 500 thousand ['lo poblacion araucana, tanta rural como urbana, es calculada en 500 mil personas'] (Vicuña, 2011: np). Framed and recorded as an object of scrutiny and taxonomy by the magazine, this Indigenous group is categorised along long-established colonial strategies as a disappearing race, the erasure of their lives and culture attributed vaguely to 'the arrival of Europeans': 'Con la llegada de los europeos, los araucanos perdieran algunos elementos de su atuendo primitivo. Las mujeres, empero, mantuvieron algunos, como sus adornos y

los pies descalzos' (Vicuña, 2011: np).[19] In her examination of materiality in Vicuña's work, Anna Corrigan has argued that '[t]he latent power of material, evident in the *precarios* ... emerges in this image to suggest that the persistence of clothing, fabric, and adornment might be harnessed in the struggle against erasure' (2023: 124). This is a persuasive point, especially when considered alongside the material persistence of the original *cuaderno*'s composite tactility and inclusion of colourful woven threads. Yet, as with Derrida's archive, the *cuaderno* is haunted by what has been lost, bearing material traces of a past neither fully recoverable nor fully visible. Viewed behind the wax paper, and out of reach, the photograph of the Araucanian group is caught between coming into and fading from visibility; the layer of wax paper, like the archive, serves both as a protective technology and a process of obfuscation.

Figure 4: Cecilia Vicuña, *Hojas del Cuaderno Café* (np) from *Saborami* (2011 [1973]). Oakland: Chainlinks Press. © Cecilia Vicuña, ARS New York/IVARO Dublin, 2025. Reproduced with the kind permission of the artist and must not be reproduced without permission from the copyright holder and the artist.

[19] Translation (my own): 'With the arrival of the Europeans, the Araucanians lost some elements of their primitive attire. The women, however, kept some, such as their adornments and bare feet.'

In her accompanying text for the *cuaderno*, written first in Spanish and then in English, Vicuña dismisses the magazine's anthropological rhetoric, instead employing a natural metaphor to redirect the colonial language of conquest and enlightenment: 'The indian population has been calculated..... No, it has not been calculated. the indians are only waiting to germinate, to conquer their own way of life. the Indian people will rise, enlightening thus the rest of the people' (2011: 44). I agree with Corrigan's assessment that '[t]he *Cuaderno* does not attempt to speak for the indigenous populations, but rather uses the collaged form to invoke indigenous voices' (2023: 125). Collage and material juxtaposition are key documentary techniques that Garza sees as disappropriative; methods that emphasise communality and 'mutual belonging' over the more paternalistic 'giving voice to the voiceless' (2020: 5). Additionally, the *cuaderno*'s stratified form gestures toward both society's divisions, and what Garza calls disappropriation's 'layers and layers of connection to language as mediated by others' bodies and experiences' (65).

What can be imagined is shaped by the language—visual or verbal—we use to imagine it. Vicuña's description of the Indigenous people of Chile here could be read as strangely totalising, even reductively abstract, raising more questions than it answers: where are 'the Indians ... waiting to germinate' as if they were seeds, pushed into the earth? In what liminal realm or reality does Vicuña figure them to be in abeyance, and how, and when, will 'they rise'? We should remember, however, that her relational poetics exists in contrast to a (colonial) anthropological logics of elimination and extinction. Germination requires a period of dormancy. Allende himself knew this when delivering his final speech: 'I am certain that the seed which we have planted in the good conscience of thousands and thousands of Chileans will not be shrivelled forever... History is ours, and people make history' (2018 [1973]).[20] Vicuña's language is therefore part of her radical (a word meaning *root*) archival practice of collective revitalisation. It breaks ground not in the method of colonial extractivism, but as a natural act of growth, from the earth up. Indeed, in 1971, Vicuña had proposed 'a day of the seed' to Allende, in which thousands of seeds would be planted around Chile, turning 'rooftops and terraces into gardens, cities and fields into orchards'. Allende responded that Chile was not ready: 'Maybe by the year two thousand', she reports him as saying (Vicuña, 2018: 101).[21]

If for Vicuña the planting of seeds constitutes 'a collective gesture of love' that 'can turn back destruction' (for example, 'the forests, cut down and burned') (1997: q.28),

[20] Julie Phillips Brown begins her excellent essay 'Return of the Disappeared: Cecilia Vicuña's *Saboramis*' with reference to Allende's final address, emphasising his 'vision of revolutionary time' as 'future-as-history' (2020: 392).

[21] In 2015, Vicuña was able to activate her seed project at the exhibition 'DUMP! Multispecies Making and Unmaking' in Aarhus, Denmark, for which she created what she calls another of her 'Metaphors in Space'—'Semiya/Seed Quipu', a network of seed pods and threads suspended from the gallery ceiling (Vicuña, 2018: 101).

the description of 'the Indians' in the *cuaderno* as 'waiting to germinate' connects Indigenous languages, cultures, and value systems with the regenerative, even salvational force of nature itself. Throughout her work, Vicuña equates this force with poetry. In her 2024 artist's book *Libro Venado / Deer Book*, she writes: 'A poem lives in the in-between, the interval between languages / The in-between invites us to enter the imponderable space of imperfection' (np). It is to the spatio-temporal functions and figurations of *inbetweenness* in Vicuña's permanent impermanence that I now turn.

The Non-Place and the Not-Yet

In 2013, the Museum of Memory and Human Rights and the National Museum of Fine Arts in Santiago jointly held the archival exhibition *Artists for Democracy*. The exhibition displayed for the first time many of the printed and painted ephemera that Vicuña had retained from the artists' collective of the same name. Vicuña co-founded the collective in 1974 with artists David Medalla and John Dugger and critic Guy Brett to raise support for democracy in post-coup Chile. For Vicuña, the reason for the resurgence of interest in her work and in the wider work of her collectives (she co-founded several during the 1960s and 70s) is to do with a growing interest in and demand for social justice among Chile's—and the wider world's—young people. The Artists for Democracy archive, itself a work of transnational and precarious communality (Morris, 2013), should be understood as 'a network of relationships', according to Vicuña, 'a kind of multidimensional document' that joins the voices of the dead with the living, that brings together, across space and time, 'the spiritual, the political, the existential, the ecological' (Vicuña, 2014).[22] Memory thus becomes the foundation of the future: 'It's a future archive', states Vicuña, 'an archive that will exist if you wish for it to exist' (2014). Her formulation speaks to Derrida's characterisation of the archive's future anteriority—its paradoxical 'retrospective logic of a future perfect' (1995: 12)—as it does to Indigenous philosophies of time as fluid and non-linear.

By approaching Vicuña's archival impulse as temporally fluid, we can further understand her conceptualisation of memory and loss. Loss, of course, is not only experienced after the fact; we can feel it pre-emptively, proleptically. In her attentive study of ephemera in postwar American fiction, Sarah Wasserman reminds her reader of this, and points out that '[e]phemera often feel like animate objects because they have "lifespans" that remind us of our own mortality' (2020: 15). Precarious objects might thus be considered *memento mori*, carrying the message of a coming catastrophe.

[22] David Morris charts the precarious construction and ephemerality of the Artists for Democracy collective, noting that '[a] level of volatility is not uncommon in the context of collective political and artistic endeavors; group initiatives that last into the medium-long term are a comparative rarity' (2013).

We can anticipate loss, we can gauge by the wheel of history and the predictions of science how our future losses will be enacted, whether through war, ecological collapse, extractive colonialism, or imperial violence. Read this way, Vicuña's *precarios* are indexes of the past, the present, and the future, all of them reciprocally related.

On the page after the colour reproductions of the *cuaderno* in *Saborami*, Vicuña writes that there was another notebook, blue not brown, which 'includes what I don't know how to think'. 'I have no photographs of it', she continues, 'In the void there seems to be no order, only presences' (2011: 55). We are again reminded of Derrida's figuration of the archive as a spatio-temporal construction—'the place from which order is given' (1995: 9). As Derrida understands the archive as the (physical) seat of an organisational principal from which the 'two orders of order: sequential and jussive' emanate (9), Vicuña identifies non-documentation as a 'void' in which there is 'no order'. Yet her description nonetheless emphasises a living reality, albeit unseen, that must be accounted for. In the 'void' are 'only presences', collected existences that are unclassified by external systems, and that must not be erased. The 'void' here is memory—a kind of non-place, outside normative structuring mechanisms of time and space—but also something else, a shared realm from which meaning can be carried over to the present, and into the future. In this, it is closer to the ineffable power of poetry.

Vicuña's poem 'The No' written in 1989, and published in *quipoem* in 1997, similarly ensures that non-documentation is not synonymous with absence. She writes, 'The first precarious works were not documented, they existed only for the memories of a few citizens':

> History, as a fabric of inclusion and exclusion, did not embrace them.
>
> (The history of the north excludes that of the south, and the history of the south excludes itself, embracing only the north's reflections.)
>
> In the void between the two, the precarious and its non-documentation established their non-place as another reality (1997: 135).

By repeatedly making note of how the undocumented *precarios* established 'another reality', alive in the 'void' between two hemispheric histories, Vicuña not only signals the historiographic erasure of the thousands of Chile's undocumented dead and 'disappeared' under Pinochet's rule, but indicates that precariousness, as a liminal, unfixed condition, is an alternative narrative to Western concepts of historical truth.[23] By writing about the existence of the first precarious works in 'The No' and

[23] As other commentators on Vicuña's work have argued (among them, Brown, de Zegher), and Vicuña has also noted, the *precarios* soon came to be read as metaphors for the near 1,500 'disappeared' Chilean lives under Pinochet's regime.

elsewhere,[24] and reconstructing their creation in a documentary film called *Kon Kon* (shot 2006–2009, released 2010), for which she returned to the beach at Con cón, the site of their non-documentation, Vicuña both re-inscribes an almost-forgotten past continually on the present, and projects it into the future.

In the artist's book *About to Happen*, published to coincide with the first survey exhibition of her art in 2017, Vicuña reproduces several colour photographs of *precarios* that were taken by her partner James O'Hern during the filming of *Kon Kon*. These include close-up images of Vicuña drawing a spiral on the beach with a stick, crouching by the shoreline placing *basuritas* and feathers into the wet sand, and a series of photographs depicting them being swept away by the incoming tide. On the pages before and after these images are scattered textual fragments that can be read both as poems and as artist statements. Opposite the image of the artist inscribing a sand-spiral runs the line: 'In encounter, the possibility of ex-change'. Then:

> In the Andes they say:
>
> 'The time has come to renew the past.
> The future is behind: it has not yet arrived.'
>
> If the memory of an event is a 'trace' in the land, the actions that took place long ago are 'etched' there, but 'long ago' may become tomorrow at anytime! (Vicuña, 2017: 18)

Deliberately breaking the word 'exchange' into its component parts ('ex-change'), Vicuña visualises how reciprocity contains both the past, in the guise of the *former* ('ex'), and the capacity for *transformation* ('change'). Her appeal to Indigenous Andean conceptualisations of temporality as nonlinear and inscribed, via memory, into the land helps us to understand her aesthetics of permanent impermanence as placing as much weight on the quality of *becoming* as on the process of dissolution. Further into *About to Happen* she writes:

> 'Not yet' is a crucial concept of the Americas. In the *Popol Vuh*, the Maya Quiche creation story *Mahucutah*, 'Not Yet', or 'Not Right Now' is the name of one of the first four humans, reflecting a trait that can lead to disaster or potential. Today, we face the total destruction of Earth and yet, we are not yet ready to act in its defense (2017: 102).

That the Con cón *basuritas* were made several years before Pinochet took power, and many more years again before it transpired that several of the 'disappeared' had been dropped from aeroplanes into the sea, serves to further situate Vicuña's art as presciently 'ahead of its time'. See Report of the Chilean National Commission.

[24] The poem is reproduced without its title on the 'Introduction' page of her website, for example (Vicuña 2025a).

Connected to this quality of prolepsis in her work is Vicuña's frequent characterisation by critics as 'ahead of her time'.[25] The recent turn in Western environmental humanities and climate activism toward Indigenous practices of ecological sustainability point to another reason why Vicuña's work is currently finding a more receptive audience.[26] One example of many is Vicuña's 2022 Hyundai Commission for London's Tate Modern art gallery.[27] 'Brain Forest Quipu' (**Figure 5**) was an installation combining sculptural, audio, and video elements, all gesturing, as its title suggests, to the interconnectedness of sentient and non-sentient life on our endangered planet. For over five decades, Vicuña has employed in her written, visual, and performance art the Andean quipu (Quechua for *knot*), a pre-Hispanic recording device in which knowledge is encoded in multiple, coloured strings, knotted as pendants at significant intervals, modes and directions, and suspended from a connecting cord. As a method of documentation, the quipu did not long survive European colonisation of South America. Vicuña has noted that during the 16th century nearly all quipus were banned and destroyed in response to Indigenous protests against the exploitation of natural resources and the displacement of native peoples: 'people showed up in the colonial courts with quipus as proof of their communal ownership, and their duties and responsibilities toward the land. That's when it was banned' (2022: 49). Drawing on her own Indigenous ancestry, Vicuña employs the quipu as an art practice rather than an art object or documentary artefact, recognising it as 'a field of knowledge' (43). She describes each knot in the quipu as 'a poem in space, a way to remember, involving the body and the cosmos at once' (Vicuña 2025b), a re-cording of a past event that both materialises memory and reminds us of how settler-colonialism has rendered much of the past illegible.

Central to the Tate Modern's 'Brain Forest Quipu' exhibition were two large sculptures, seven metres wide, hanging from the Turbine Hall's high ceiling and reaching the floor 27 metres below. These precarious quipu (re)constructions were made from interwoven unspun wool, plant fibres, feathers, cardboard, rope, and

[25] Lucy Lippard, for example, was among the first to point out that Vicuña's *Casa Espirale* and other *precarios* of 1966 predated earth works of US artists such as Robert Smithson (See Borzutzky 2018). Juliet Lynd has noted that Vicuña 'pioneered experimental art in Chile a decade before happenings and other genre-bending artistic displays emerged in the mid-seventies' (2005: 1588). Daniel Borzutzky suggests 'that as a performance artist, as a feminist artist, as a visual artist, and as a literary artist, [Vicuña] was way ahead of her time not just in Chile, but around the world as well' (2018: xvii).

[26] Vicuña has spoken of how at least three major exhibitions in the US between 1992 and 2002, all addressing the climate crisis, were poorly attended. 'No one cared about climate change then' (Rinaldo, 2019). The Western turn to Indigenous wisdom in ecological matters is now widespread. Fikret Berkes wrote in *Sacred Ecology* that the 'growing interest in traditional ecological knowledge since the 1980s is perhaps indicative of two things: the need for ecological insights from indigenous practices of resource use, and the need to develop a new ecological ethic in part by learning from the wisdom of traditional knowledge holders' (2012: 19). Such perspectives rarely account for the appropriative practice of knowledge extraction in which this 'growing interest' continues to engage.

[27] 'Brain Forest Quipu' ran from 11 October 2022–16 April 2023.

several small found objects such as pieces of bone, twig, shell, glass, ceramic, and clay pipes mudlarked from beaches of the River Thames. Simultaneously of this world and gesturing to its disappearance, they brought to mind the bleached-out remains of a temple of trees, or the ghostly clues to an eradicated human biome.

Figure 5: Installation image of Cecilia Vicuña: Brain Forest Quipu, Hyundai Commission 2022, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern. © Cecilia Vicuna; Photo © Tate (Sonal Bakrania) 2022. Reproduced with the kind permission of the artist and must not be reproduced without permission from the copyright holder and the artist.

The collective aspect of the installation extended to its collaborative making. Piped into the Hall was a soundscape co-created with Colombian composer Ricardo Gallo, incorporating Indigenous music from around the world, as well as natural sounds of birdsong, interjected with silence. On digital screens, documentary films by Indigenous land- and water-defenders made explicit the inseparability of (neo)colonialist and capitalist violences enacted on people, on cultures, and on the earth. In addition, the mudlarked items tied into the quipus were collected by women from local Latin American communities. 'Brain Forest Quipu' can thus be understood as a collective effort toward what Garza calls disappropriation, a production of communality that draws on Mesoamerican and Andean practices of labour toward 'the material creation and recreation of the world … that benefits the community at large'. As Garza asserts, such a

practice 'also connects nature with human beings in contexts of mutual belonging that radically oppose notions of property and dominion (of what-is-one's-own) in today's global capitalism' (2020: 47–48). That the Andean quipu was an ancient, material form of documenting communal life further situates Vicuña's project within the political, ethical and aesthetic operations of disappropriation: 'Brain Forest Quipu' presents, in multidimensional, multisensory ways, a radical archive of the lost, the found, and the disappearing, sharing with Garza's assessment of 'documentary writing (both in prose and verse)' the ability to 'bring[] into the present a past that is about to come into being. Here. Now' (90).

The suspended nature of the hanging quipu structures in 'Brain Forest Quipu' is thus an essential, and somewhat overlooked, element of the work. Poised along a vertical axis between the ceiling and floor, the quipus hover in the 'not yet', occupying an intermediary space-time of potential and transition. In their impermanent occupation of the Turbine Hall (itself a liminal space of the museum), they invited visitors to enter them bodily, to walk through and among their gaps and openings, to look closely at their composite fragility while marvelling at the grandeur of their scale. In this way, they also echoed the capaciousness of Vicuña's poetry on and off the page, in her long, looping lines, phonic reverberances, gaps and silences, her use of paginal and performance space to encourage contemplation and connection. Indeed, the quipus at the Tate invited what Vicuña, in a poem called 'Entering' (1983–1991) terms 'listening with the fingers, a sensory memory':

> If, at the beginning of time, poetry was an act of communion, a
> form of collectively entering a vision, now it is a space one enters,
> a spatial metaphor
>
> Metaphor stakes out a space of its own creation.
>
> If the poem is temporal, an oral temple, form is a spatial temple (1997: 131).

As ever with Vicuña, some of the poetic lines in 'Entering' find their way into other poems, statements, and artist's books.

If the poem, opened spatially, is encountered collectively, 'an act of learning' takes place. 'Together we go into a phase transition,' writes Vicuña, 'an invisible metamorphosis, a different state of consciousness, in order to see' (2017: 106). This too, then, is a form of re-vision. Perhaps nowhere is this collective phase-shift more obviously experienced than in Vicuña's poetic performances, which she calls 'quasars': 'not-yet poems', quasi-events in the process of being born' (102). Her written poem 'Quasar' serves to explain her meaning further:

> A poem only becomes poetry when its structure
> is made not of words but forces.
>
> Force is poetry.
>
> Everyone knows what poetry is, but who can say it?
> Its nature is to be felt, but never apprehended (2021 [2012]: 123).

Vicuña's poetry performances, or quasars, are live events that are unrepeatable; the multidimensionality of their happening is undocumentable. They reside inadequately in transcripts, and ineffably in memory.[28] In her written response to a performance on 19 May 1999, Jena Osman notes: 'In writing this, I realize that memory and ambience are two common phenomena, both calling attention to the sensation that there is a wholeness that can only be perceived in fragments' (2021 [2012]: 296). To recollect or remember Vicuña's quasars, as to re-collect or re-member anything, is to re-gather parts of the past; to attempt to reassemble a fragmented embodiment.

Vicuña will often bring handwritten notes and poems to her readings, which, in their performance, become interwoven with the various elements of their environment: a cough from an audience member, a cry from a baby, a noise from the street. Kenneth Sherwood has written of Vicuña's performances as re-versions of her already orally inflected poetry, positing that rather than re-reading a poem, Vicuña 'weaves variations' (1997: 88). In her bilingual translations from page to body, 'a fusion or melding creates a new, local arrangement—in Spanish and English, with lines omitted, repeated, reordered—a new versioning' (Sherwood, 2021 [2012]: 316). Frequently, Vicuña physically entwines her listeners to each other with lengths of red yarn, creating a network of bodies enjoined by an energy that soon seems to exceed the tensile force of the thread. For a moment, it can feel as if everyone in the room is a knot in a living quipu, a node of potential energy, an essential component to a poem. If, as Vicuña says, there is 'phase transition' in such collectivity, there is the possibility of social change, away from the individualism that her poetics decries.

The re-versioning of the written poems that Vicuña enacts during these necessarily ephemeral performances establishes a shared, temporary dwelling outside of dominant discourses of communication. The point I have pursued across this article is that Vicuña's *arte precario*, in its multiple rewritings, revisions and reversions, in its various manifestations, cannot be anything other than what Garza terms 'an exercise in unfinishedness' (2020: 48): an ongoing, mobile, traversed practice that necessarily

[28] This said, several transcriptions of Vicuña's performances exist, many of them collected in *Spit Temple* (Vicuña, 2021 [2012]).

resides in a space of in-betweenness, of 'non place' and 'not-yet'. This is the operational space of metaphor: '*metapherein:* to carry beyond / to the other contemplation / to contemple the interior and exterior', Vicuña writes in 'Entering' (1997: 132). Its animating force is—and has always been, for Vicuña—poetry.

Coda: Establishing Another Reality

Permanently impermanent, Vicuña's *arte precario* in its constant revisions and reversions works to counter cultural amnesia and to destabilise fixed meaning, materialising and dematerialising how it feels to be displaced or deranged by history. It warns against the encroaching erasures of our Capitalocene—erasures that Vicuña has called 'terminal death: a new kind of death without the possibility of renewal' (Tate, 2022). But seeded at the centre of all of Vicuña's work is the possibility for collaborative remaking. Generating a new communality involves not just the reactivation of memory—of what has happened (social injustices, and the destruction of our planet)—but also the retrieval of a forgotten awareness—of our relationality with each other and the more-than-human, of our collective potentiality. Such an awareness insists on radically revising the archive to be brought continually into our current, embodied experience, so that Derrida's formulation of the archive as a grounding coordinate of distance—'*there* where things commence … *there* where men and gods command … *there* where authority, social order are exercised'—is replaced by an assertion of proximity: *here*, where place is a process and a material relationship.[29] Acknowledging our position 'here' requires us also to ask, 'who is *not* here where I am?' (Garza, 2020: 53). For Garza, as for Vicuña, this vital question prompts a recognition of those who have come before us, as well as those who have been expelled or 'disappeared' from, or denied entry to the 'here'.

We should therefore, as Vicuña does, take metaphor's 'carrying over' seriously—that transfer of meaning from *here* to *there*, and from *there* to *here*, wherein a word (or object) can stand for, can become, a world. For in the act of rewording, a reworlding can take place. This is the 'other reality' to which Vicuña gestures in the 'void' between memory and the traditional archive, and to which Garza, quoting Maurizio Lazzarato, refers when describing 'communalist writing' as a praxis that 'does not generate the object (the commodity), but rather the world in which the object exists. Nor does it generate the subject (worker and consumer), but rather the world in which the subject exists' (Garza, 2020: 55).[30] Beyond this, Vicuña's permanent impermanence points the way to another, more egalitarian world: a possible version of the world we still have, here.

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[29] See Garza (2000: 25) for more on 'place as imaginary relationship'.

[30] Garza quotes Maurizio Lazzarato, 'Struggle, Event, media', in *The Green Room: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art #1*, ed. Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl (Berlin: Steinberg Press, 2009), 216.

Acknowledgements

Warm thanks to Cecilia Vicuña for her kind permission to reproduce images of her work, and to the fellow-thinkers close and far who helped me work out what I wanted to say in this essay.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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