

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

“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,

and few recordings or transcriptions have been made available to the public. Most who have written on her work have discussed some element of her oral performances, or have looked at the ways in which the notion of performance (or the performative) intersects much of her work.² But few have studied extensively the oral performances themselves.³ All that exists to document her extensive work in oral performance, therefore, are a few transcriptions and recordings on the Internet.⁴

Listening to Quasars

Although Vicuña is focused on oral performance, hers is no romantic idea of a pristine orality. It is one fully cognizant of the intervention of print, and is concerned mainly with the interplay between poetic texts and the vocalization and improvisation of those texts. This “spoken poetics,” Sherwood writes, must be understood as “interface or hybrid (and not a ‘transitional technique’) between the oral and the written” (78). Echoing the darker side of historical debates concerning orality and textuality, Vicuña, instead, refers to the space between them as “a war zone” whose frontline is necessarily the performance (personal interview). In this “war zone” Vicuña weaves together improvised narratives with previously written or published poems she modifies in performance. This alteration of texts in performance is what Sherwood refers to as “versioning,” meaning that Vicuña creates new, in situ, renderings of her poems by changing language or phrasing, or alters the standard edition by singing, whispering or chanting.⁵ Poems are “versioned” between or as part of the improvised narratives, which in turn begin as notes handwritten with a certain site or concern in mind, sometimes days or hours before the performance. Compared to her published poems, neatly printed and bound in books, her notes appear to be disorganized, random compositions floating across the page, the detritus of transitory thoughts jotted on a small hotel notepad, each page torn as it is read. And unlike the poems which circulate in print, these notes are simply filed away after each performance, having fulfilled their function as a kind of score for the performance. While one might think of this technique as improvisation, a making new in the instant, Sherwood has us reconsider

Crimen Lechero / Milk Crime
Bogotá, 1979

82 |

The *Colectivo de Acciones de Arte* (C.A.D.A) in Chile invited me to participate in a project called *Para No Morir de Hambre en el Arte* (To Not Die of Hunger in the Arts) that would be realized simultaneously in Santiago, Toronto, and Bogotá. At the time Bogotá was enduring *el crimen lechero* (the milk crime), where merchants added paint to milk in order to increase profits, resulting in the death of 1,920 children. And the government was doing nothing about it. Around the city, I announced on posters the spilling of a glass of milk in front of the Quinta de Simón Bolívar. Twelve people attended. I spilled a glass of white paint on the sidewalk and wrote the poem on the pavement.

Empire
New York, 2002

100 |

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 reading a letter sent by artists imprisoned by the dictatorship on opening night of the Arts Festival for Democracy in Chile, Royal College of Art, London, October, 1974. (Photographer unknown.)



Cecilia Vicuña performing *Vaso de Leche* / Glass of Milk: a glass of white paint spilled on the pavement in front of the house of the liberator Simón Bolívar, September 29, 1979 (Photos by Oscar Monsalve.)

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA'S RARIG CENTER

APRIL 12, 2001

224 |

sky tinted water

minne ha ha

laughing water

los nombres del olvido

el Mapacho

el cordón umbilical

2 tension

bet

rem & forgett.

el tejido de hoyos

2 net of holes

not even shields

can hold such

emptiness

• Luis gómez

el dar vuelta
chile ^{poles}

en sociedad 2.244 2 consume slavery

• mangue hue

lumber
site

Del árbol flye: la pal

• chusquea Quilz

Don Alejandro → inner
variant

olvidados

"net working"

web of life

memory is born at the inter
section
of time/space

el com

- cordón

- corral

- cruz del sur

- unidos 2
ndos

el com

- cloud.net

net working

web of life

= shadow

tejido
de hoyos

Luis gómez

N.Y.

THE POETRY PROJECT AT ST. MARK'S CHURCH
NEW YORK, NY, MAY 15, 2002

Cecilia Vicuña

Vicuña writes to her mother regarding the St. Mark's performance on May 15, 2002:

| 319

yes, mami, it was the most beautiful reading in the world for me. as always, i begin not knowing what i am going to do. i am introduced, people applaud, and as they wait, i don't make a move. i am nowhere to be found. i sit quietly, in the back, with a spool of white thread in my hand, and suddenly, i lift the spool and make it spin, as if it were a spindle. and at that moment i realize that i, too, have become a living spindle and begin to listen to its slight sound, almost imperceptible. while turning, and without thinking, I begin to do a little dance beneath the spindle, placing the spindle next to the ears of some people, so that they too can hear it turning. i walk down the wide aisle in the center of the hall. mimicking my movements, the thread begins to fall to the floor, like a small cascade, undulating back and forth: it goes forward as I approach the stage, then back again, until it forms a tangle. then I take the spool and throw it forward, towards the podium. once there, i grab the end of the thread and put it in my mouth, saying: "That is my mother" and I begin to sing a little song, as if in your voice, and say: "that is what she would do, with a thread in her mouth," and I continue to sing and read the poem from my new book that is dedicated to you. when i am done, everyone is like in another world, and it is difficult to return to this one. it is a gesture of love towards you, who taught me to weave and play with thread while singing, as you do. ¿le gustó?

love, your cec

[Translated from the Spanish]

AT PLAY IN THE PSYCHE OF CYCLES:

CECILIA VICUÑA'S ENDLESSNESSES

Edwin Torres

The universe is my dress

—Kazuo Ohno

| 331

The process of occupying one's space is rooted in clarity; a search for, an understanding of, a desire for its lastingness as a way of understanding one's place, one's stance, the posture of our geography within a personal humanity—if each of us is a globe where does territory stop and population begin? It is that shared desire for *understanding's* elements which illuminates the work of Cecilia Vicuña. The physicality of language as a tool for change embedded within each of us.

Among many locations, I've seen her perform in an art gallery, read at a poetry bar, lecture in an auditorium; and the continuous line at her every appearance is how the audience is presented with a space of their own by bringing hers to the forefront. Whispering into the microphone *inside* her signature whisper, she asks us if we can hear her. Adjusting the relationship to her space between mouth and microphone, between human and machine, so the relationship itself is adjusted not the volume. Our ears are caught, having always been thrown—in a listening that happens with the skin, with the senses.

The audience is the performer's ocean, the ebb and flow of the performance guided by the degree of the audience's involvement. Cecilia presents us with the possibility of helping her shape the message by empowering us—with listening. An audience given a chance to listen is suddenly made aware of its place—an empowering political act, to own your space.

Cecilia's work embodies the role of the griot—the political tied into the personal—as reflected by the territory of sound at her beckon. A word polyglotted into neologistic tendencies will reveal its root, Cecilia grasps this opportunity to delve into the roots and expose hidden wonders, redefinitions, meanings, and new words like seeds waiting to break the dictionary's surface.

The organic entity of the griot manifested as shaman inventing an ecology of language which grows over a lifetime.

What inspires and motivates is how she manages to maintain her singular plurality while traveling from medium to medium. From her book *Instan*, which threads through its pages as a lifeline, a horizon for the viewer to consider, to a benefit for AIDS in Africa where she chanted and slowly dissected the word “aid” while surrounding each layer with its Spanish translation “sida” (which also means care), bringing reverie and worship into simultaneous conclusion, transforming the vibrations of the room in three minutes.

Each performance, each reading, each installation, each book has a timeless lineage with no beginning or end. Every time I see her I feel as if she hasn’t begun or ended but continued—the storyteller continuing the parable—which lets me bring my history of that moment into the performance. In that liberation, in that mutual exchange is where something new is allowed to happen, for performer and audience.

I thought I’d write about a specific performance of hers performed for only two people, a recording engineer and myself, in the engineer’s home-studio, his closet.

The magazine *Rattapallax*, which I co-edited, included an audio CD in every issue. Issue no. 9 featured contemporary Brazilian and American poetry. Cecilia was included on the CD—her voice, a necessary ground, expanding the reaches of South into North America, plus the chance to record her was too tempting to pass up. We selected a section from her long poem “Se Mi Ya (Seed Me Now See You Later),” which had just been beautifully translated by Rosa Alcalá, and then arranged a recording date to fit into her schedule. We would have an hour of her time to record a three-minute piece.

Late-autumn, New York City on a Saturday morning, orange sun, blue sky, long shadows, winter’s around the corner. She arrives at the recording studio, a one-bedroom apartment in lower Manhattan, bundled up for a cold wind yet to blow. In the bedroom is where the computers are—speakers, amps, and a perfectly designed collection of bare-bones hardware needed to drive the ever-growing technology. In the closet is where vocals are recorded, a first-rate microphone and music-stand with clip-on light share the space with neatly hung clothes, shoes on the floor, and tightly rolled socks. It’s here that *the*

magic happens, creativity captured to live between the ears. The quality is professional, the prices are not! (Sounds like an ad.)

Cecilia has her cache of instruments: seeds, pebbles, bowls, shakers—I had asked her to bring what she needed for a journey into sound. The recording will be her voice on one track, her music on another. I want to use the studio to try to catch what happens in performance by bringing her many facets together within the scope of this brief recording, by using what energy is caught at the moment of its creation and reflecting our surroundings by being implicit *within* them. By layering voice with voice or music we can embody the crux of the text while giving the listener choices on every new listen.

Sitting on the sofa in the living room, we decide to record the music here in the open and proceed to set up the microphone in this environment. It isn't soundproof like the closet, but the energy with the sun streaming in feels right and any minimal outside noise will bring some air and room into the music.

This will be an improvisation of water, seeds, beads, leaves, string and assorted percussives that she's brought with her. We don't know where it'll fit with the words yet, leaving that to chance. We choose not to give her headphones so she can create the music freely without hearing every little tweak. Music like this is created for the microphone, being imperceptible otherwise, as details of breath and listening transfer to music and sound—appropriate for this poem, this poet—to record the macro world under the surface of hearing.