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Twentieth-Century Experiments in Form: A Critical Re-reading of Cecilia Vicuña's Indigenism as Episteme

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.

—Cecilia Vicuña, *sabor ami*, "What we lost," 161–62¹

Poetics and Thinking between Dissidence and Dissonance

Chilean-born artist and poet Cecilia Vicuña's work performs a dissident aesthetics that resists the way consent garners power in the acculturation of norms and expectations during twentieth-century globalization.² I use the notion of "dissidence" to describe her aesthetic project, because it is important to keep her work within a critical discourse in which the formal elements that compose it function as a regime of sensible logics that belie consensus, but do not foreclose being expressive, open, and generative. Vicuña's poetics of dissonance evokes a harmonious discordance with the politics of consensus while proposing new modes of expressing the collective. Together with the conceptual diversity of Transnationalism(s), Vicuña's poetry keeps the critical engagement of dissidence with dissonance open to the experience of her performativity, which chal-

¹ All text from the Chainlinks Press reissue of *sabor ami*, also cited as *Saborami*, appears in both Spanish and English. Original translations in the 1973 edition are by the editor of Beau Geste, Felipe Ehrenberg. Translations of the newly included coda, "Fragments of Memory: An Afterword," where "What we lost" is found, are by Cecilia Vicuña and James O'Hern.

² Magda Sepúlveda reads Vicuña's work as a participant in the "counter-canonical" aesthetics of late 1960s Latin America, wherein the distinction between discreetly "political" acts and artistic practice is a blurred space describable only by their shared interests in "public" consciousness. My aim is to explore the formal modes of representing this shared public consciousness in Vicuña's oeuvre, with form studied as a complex mapping of the epistemology of dissent.

lenges the normative expectations of the histories and structures of power of the present she engages, yet remains connected to that present and the networks from which particular formative events emerge. In what follows, I discuss the poetics of this connection with the pre-Columbian influence of Vicuña's indigenism, the neoliberal unsettling of Chilean democratic experimentalism in the 1970s, and an undisclosed democratic polity comprised of Western participants and multiple locales interconnected linguistically and epistemologically.

The notion of "dissidence" also offers an opportunity for re-examining late twentieth-century experimentalism such as Vicuña's, in which *indigenismo*, or indigenism, provides both an array of aesthetic and formal strategies and a mode of social resistance to the increasing pressure from Latin American middle-class belief systems, which were built upon the values of North American consumer and corporate culture during the rise of neoliberalism and free trade.³ In its aesthetic role, indigenism involves epistemological codices—forms—in various media (music, muralism, sculpture, textiles, dance/theatre, and literature). However, Vicuña's formal interventions are unique even in this context because of the inter-relatedness of her poetic engagement with society and language and the spatial dimension of her sculptural works. Vicuña, in other words, focuses on compositional practices that open pathways towards experiencing the eventfulness of dissonance. "Dissonance is beauty," but as Vicuña states in this essay's epigraph, dissonance also constitutes a way of understanding processes of production and the process of history. The "social struggles" she references reflect the means by which radical democratic forms are in some way unpacked from various modes of encountering public and social space. And, like other Latin American radicalisms, Vicuña's indigenism displays an interest in grassroots campaigns using conceptual visual art and the opening of communicative environments for community engagement (including digital and cybernetic ones) through political activism and artistic creation.⁴

Indigenism is counter-canonical in the sense that artisanal composition creates a singular experience for both the artist and the spectator. Unfortunately, however, indigenism also makes Vicuña a prime candidate for essentializations that reduce her theoretical complexity. Thus, ethnopoetic readings of her work tend to focus on questions involving "authenticity," effectively reducing the poet to a set of traits that make the work incapable of employing radical forms to

³ "Dissidence" carries in it a kernel of "disagreement" that is related to my reading of Lyotard's faith in *petit récit* as a counter-logical modality of community, language, and knowledge production (which includes belief, law, spirituality, etc.). In his *Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard critiques "consensus" as an "elaboration" of a process involving Habermasian social space, since "agreement," "intellect," and "will" are validated by "the narrative of emancipation," which is a by-product of a desire for an "efficiency" that maintains the authority to verify its own power (14). In terms of specific structural and institutional challenges, aesthetic form suggests radically new arrangements within particular "modes" of subjectivation. In this light, Vicuña's work also offers an almost archeological catalogue for retracing the evolution of Marxist-influenced feminisms as responses to the articulations of global capital throughout the latter half of the twentieth century (Fraser).

⁴ In this aspect Vicuña's performance and poetry resonate with the work of Vitto Acconci, a New York poet and performance artist who, like Vicuña, links poetry and performance as two modes of engagement. What separates Vicuña from Acconci, however, is her involvement with political organization during Salvador Allende's presidency and the distinct national practices of these artists.

promote socio-structural, political change.⁵ Ethnopoetic translation, in other words, merely notates performativity, whereas I argue that it is from performativity, the simultaneous singular-collective experience of art, that indigenism's true conceptual radicalness and lyric tenor radiates (cf. Spahr, Kim, and Howe).

***Con-cón*: Early Work and Instants of “Lyric” Authorship**

The image in Figure 1 documents Vicuña's 1966 installation, *Con-cón*. It is a recurring installation at the same site, the Con-cón, which I distinguish from the installation itself by avoiding italics. The Con-cón is a beach in Valparaíso, Chile, where the Acongagua River, which runs along the Andes through communities that depend on irrigation, empties into the Pacific Ocean. It is also the site of a recurring indigenous ritual called “los bailes chinos,”⁶ as well as an industrialized site with oil refineries, trawler fishing, and a beach where Vicuña placed her first installation: “the birthplace of art in Chile.” The comingling of so many diverse interests is depicted in the opening minutes of Vicuña's 2010 documentary film, *Kon-kón*. In the film, this comingling or coupling is framed experientially as an encounter between songs, with each song an articulation of a dissonant and causal temporality. The dissonant nature of the songs in “los bailes chinos”—performed within the same temporal and locative experience at the Con-cón—illustrates the singers' confluent experience of interrelating across invisible (though “sensible”) boundaries or territories. Need, as a responsible ethos regarding resources and the health of a community, is thus “sung.”⁷

That Vicuña's use of the spiral (fig. 1) is seldom unpacked demonstrates that North American critical practices often elide the political and social significance of geometric forms in indigenist art—that is, unless these forms are considered in purely ethnographic rather than aesthetic or contemporary frameworks. This is especially the case when it comes to visual innovations in poetry written by transnational women who can call upon trans-cultural historical epistemological symbols and signs to communicate complex temporalities or transitive relationships and identities. In her essay “Spinning the Common Thread,” for example,

⁵ Ethnopoetic readings come in two forms and can be traced to two separate historical definitions. The “comparative” ethnopoetic method seeks and explains aesthetics in the context of cultural values, beliefs, and social practices. A distinct divide is maintained between the “reading” cultural observers and the culture that is “read” ethno-linguistically and anthropologically. The second definition of ethnopoetics identifies it, in Dennis Tedlock's words, as a “decentered poetics.” In both definitions, ethnopoetics seems only to be interested in the White subject translating and/or coming to realize an “other authenticity” in the experiences of an “authentic” subject located “somewhere else” in the world.

⁶ *Los bailes chinos* dates back thousands of years and can be traced to the indigenous people of Nazca in central and northern Chile. The ritual sound is characterized by a unique dissonance produced by multiple rows of flautists. Vicuña describes the sonic experience as “torn sound.” “Chino” is a fairly derogatory term for “worker” or “servant” and, racially speaking, is used to indicate non-European features by emphasizing the Asiatic ancestry of the Amerindian settlers of South America. Nowadays, the ritual is performed in Spanish on Christian holidays, another residual of Christianization and miscegenation.

⁷ Scientific and anthropological databases reveal a robust connection between singing and community structure. However, even though ethnopoetic methods focus on the very orality Vicuña deploys, ethnopoetics fails to account for the philosophical similarities between Vicuña's paralogical aesthetics and the physics of “community.”



Figure 1. Cecilia Vicuña, *Con-cón*, “Casa Espiral” (Chile, 1966), in *Precario/Precarious*, Tanam Press, 1983. Used by permission of Cecilia Vicuña.

The ear is a “furrow” drawn in the sand. The dimensional element of the curvature in the line can be linked to “channels” in Incan stonemasonry, where the geometric presence speaks of a particular “unity” articulated by water cults.¹¹ The form of the furrow is, moreover, the spiral form Vicuña refers to as the “ear,” a sense of “unity” inaugurated by flowing and receiving. The movement of water is a metaphor for causal concepts related to temporality and totality as a sense of universal-causal duration (including the sensible, invisible, and potentially perceptible). The duration of the drawing encountered as a whole (the work in-situ) receives and stores sound just as a magnet attracts charged matter. The endurance of sand governs the logic of storing the system of the “sign” as a relationship between what is exposed—the beach site—and the Con-cón as a metaphorical-actual (“sacred”) place where exposure, site, and “sign” reflect a more complex social relationship *present* at the “instant” or moment of a signifying dissonance (the songs, the waves, the wind, birds, and so on).

Exposure is linked to the “sacred” when Vicuña’s indigenism recalls the (often ignored) indigenous history of South America in order to critique the present. Exposure describes a sense of duration that runs counter to the suburbanization of space as an architectural commodification of lived experience and a cultural transition from “public” to “private” space. The industrialization and suburbanization of Valparaíso (the suburb Viña del Mar is directly referenced by Vicuña in relation to her installations at Con-cón), moreover, is a reflection of the suburban ethos that now dominates what used to be practiced there, since Con-cón may be an oracle site named after the god Con, who is the oldest Incan god and is associated with water. (Vicuña spells it “Kon” to, as she states, “separate it from the context of Spanish grammar.”) That water is a vital resource for the fairly arid Chilean geography (much of its water is frozen in high glaciers) contextualizes the significance of Incan irrigation systems as a major infrastructural and political development. These two oppositional beliefs—suburb/industry vs. “Con”—reflect the tensions of the late 1960s in Chile, but also point to the influence of globalization throughout Latin American space(s). Vicuña calls attention to this conflict by reinstating a spatial thoughtfulness related to the linking of language to “site.”

“In Mapundungun,” states Vicuña, “the words ‘Co’ and ‘Con’ mean water and embody the concept of the sacredness of the cycle of water—from glacier to ocean, to river to cloud” (Vicuña, “the god kon”). The repetition of “con” in Con-cón reflects Amerindian grammar games that indicate emphasis. The emphasis here involves conservation and co-existence with resources, and the repetition of “Con” composes a sort of grammatical situation wherein the aurality of language becomes also locative. The name marks a temporal contemplative experience that is collectively valued and relates to the process of becoming socially incorporated. “The ear is a spiral / to hear,” and the form of the ear also reminds the observer how to face the “sound within.” The second and fifth lines, beginning with “to,” open a playful gap in which facing the installation becomes a public facing itself. The public produces the dissonance; the ear gathers this dissonance; the public

¹¹ *Paqchas* are ceremonial architectonic forms (“cups” and “furrows/canals”) that incorporate water/fluids in rituals that revere unity. Vicuña plays on this water ritual by situating the installation at a beach, where the Acongagua empties into the ocean. The symbolic “fluid,” however, is transposed at the Con-cón to song, sound, and, of course, “dissonance.”

faces what it produces as the spiral unfurls it back into space. Facing is the performance of attentiveness as a participatory and spatial arrangement.

Acongagua, the name of the river that empties into the Pacific Ocean at the Con-cón, means “looking at Con” in Quechua. As Vicuña notes, “in sacred contexts Andean verbs also encompass other dimensions” we understand as being both “logical” and “sensible.” “Qaway,” from “qawa” in A-konqawa, “implies a ‘reciprocal exchange’, a ‘life giving, entangled gaze’ like we find in Qawachi, the ceremonial center of Nazca, where the great geoglyphs are at once gazing, and being gazed upon, by the cosmos” (“the god kon”). Vicuña is here referencing both the Nazca lines, which I discuss below in relation to the use and meaning of *ceq’è* (lines), and the spatial significance of a “speech act” sensed as an arrangement of “facing” entities, which I read in the etymological unpacking of “stanza” and “verse.”¹² Poetry in Vicuña’s interpretation is an experience of “looking at” what we recognize as important in a “life giving” way. But that is not to say that “life giving” means only one “authentically” indigenous thing. Furthermore, Vicuña specifies a “life giving, *entangled gaze*,” which grants physical dimension to the reciprocal performance and suggests that readers should approach poetic metaphors in Vicuña’s work in such terms. It is in metaphors that the reader often encounters the world wherein the installation alters meaning by simply “looking at” and being “looked at.”

As Vicuña continues to explain, “In my view Kon Kon and Kon Qawa are metaphors for the cosmic exchange of consciousness and the life force. The seeing, seeing itself in a *double feedback loop*” (“the god kon”). It is at the Con-cón, however, where this feedback loop is suddenly corrupted by the entropic communication of globalization and its companions, the capitalization of space and colonization of time. It is at the Con-cón that Vicuña “hears” the necessity of poetry as a lyrical grammar that gestures—being simultaneously aural and locative—towards the recognition of spatio-temporal consciousness in the performance of a contemporaneous response to a present situation.

The “drawn” character of *Con-cón* reveals a dynamically spatial presence more complexly related to symbolization than a conventionally Western understanding would suggest. *Ceq’è* (*ceque*) refer to the Incan network of radial lines that extend “from the Temple of the Ancestors in the city center, dividing the landscape into pie-wedge irrigation zones, each assigned to a different kinship group” (Aveni 3). *Ceq’è* are sometimes called “lines,” sometimes “rays,” or, in a notion more inline with my reading of Vicuña’s poetry here, “pathways.” *Ceq’è* also operate on a localized level where the radial lines from the Temple of the Ancestors interconnect with radial lines originating in smaller communities and extend outward. These “pathways” are partitions of sensible realities that bind the spiritual, the agricultural, and the social spheres of daily life in a “union” I call “political” in that they provide a guideline for practice (and so, shared experience) within the community. The universal recognition and unity of dissonance in communities designated (mapped out) by *ceq’è* comingles with the daily juridical actions and par-

¹² Verse, “to turn,” originates in the description of plowing as *vertere*, to “turn,” “to turn the plow.” The plow leaves behind a trace (the “furrow”) of the “stance” (“stanza”) at the dawn of the speech act. Or one’s stance leaves a “furrow,” or trace, of one’s movement prior to standing. “Stance” and “stanza” are thus closely connected in what, and *how*, poetic form gestures or “says.” “Verse” is place—*polis*; “stanza” is multitude.

conventional human sense is that it is a “complete” form. By anthropomorphizing “form” we attribute our own bodily symmetry to organic displays of “growth” and thus the causal universe. But, although our bodies, explains Thompson, are always the same age—our arms are the same age as our fingers, for example—the center of the spiral is not the same age as the outermost rings of the shell.

As social and cultural readers, we have to surrender our “hold” on the desire for completion, especially in the context of language as writing and writing as a social act of interactive and participatory thought. “An empty furrow / to receive” points to a way of being with language that is not contingent on “recording” in the sense of a historical text or document. Such a text has an author, does not work from methaxis, and thus presents a fallible speaker. “A standing stick,” on the other hand, is infallible in that it signifies by its presence, which is organic and complete. As author, Vicuña merely points to the form, and in its arrangement the reader experiences a metaphorical pathway to what is signifying there (what is “speaking”). “To write from below,” then—to write from the event of the self-creating world as “seeing the efface”—is to witness and understand the insignificance of writing’s presence, although “insignificance” in this instance points less to a lack of importance than to a second-order of importance to what writing/language was first meant to accomplish in pre-textual societies—namely, to extend and connect (see Sherwood 85). Geometric forms serve as the foundation of more complex mathematical and conceptual compositions, but are used only to promote the “sacred” in the space of the “profane”—that is, to promote spaces and sites for a temporal alignment with “meaning,” an alignment *with* time (cf. Heidegger’s “attunement”).

Vicuña’s use of Amerindian geometry offers a telling analysis of how critique is deployed at the crossroads of material and spatially articulated practices and poetics. The epistemological significance of the spiral speaks in a directly affective physical opposition to the metaphorical forms of capital, which are translated into the very real structures of life, production, and exchange in Chile: the industrialization of fishing and oil, the suburbanization of Valparaíso, and the development of a transportation infrastructure. Together, these structures speak in straight lines of labor, exchange, and mobility. Opposite to, if also inscribed *over the landscape* where “ceq’e” speak in lines, these lines of capital do not open “pathways,” but rather eradicate alternate options. They refuse “openness.”

Vicuña’s formal decisions thus compose an interrelated network of sensible connections that reveal that the history of Chile—and the West, for that matter—is an “open” narrative available for a re-reading and re-writing that oppose the “closing off” of participation. The conflict can be described as the spiral vs. the enclosure, the line vs. the meandering curve, and so on. But it is also important to note that Vicuña’s installations are composed of debris, found matter, and other organic and plastic detritus, while spaces built in the name of capital are pre-fabricated, industrial, and monolithic. This material tension combines with the metaphorical tension of form to compose an encounter that allows her poetry and installation art to reach a collective consciousness and show by reflection that collective consciousness’s capacities to open up to its own form of becoming and ultimately liberate itself via the recognition of a new participa-

tory ethos. Her lyric sites perform epistemologies that promote organic change in the conceptual behaviors of a collective conscience (see Ziarek 9).

These epistemological and social codices of Vicuña's formal concerns recognize newly mappable spaces during a time when language-centered experimentalism is characterized by what Lyn Hejinian, speaking of North American avant-garde communities, describes as a "rejection of closure." "It is not hard to discover devices—structural devices—that serve to 'open' a poetic text," writes Hejinian, naming those devices, "arrangement and, particularly . . . rearrangement" (43). I situate Vicuña in a cultural moment in which "structural" awareness and the aesthetic project of composing "openness" involves formal ways of reimagining the "open" as a space available for "participatory" (and thus "meaningful") arrangements and "rearrangements" of our world.¹³ "The 'open text,'" continues Hejinian, "by definition, is open to the world and particularly the reader. It invites participation, rejects authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies. *It speaks for writing that is generative rather than directive*" (my emphasis). Viewed thusly, and not ethnopoetically, Vicuña deploys the oral logic of language and its contingency to spatial and temporal arrangements as a critique of the North Americanization of Chilean history, industry, and politics, a process that according to Vicuña culminates in an insensate civic body (in her 1973 *Saborami* Vicuña describes the Chilean middle class as "momios" or "mummies") and a flattening of space and dimension.¹⁴

Vicuña's work has much in common with other aesthetic critiques of our twentieth-century hemispheric situation. The installation at Con-cón, for example, develops a way of gesturing to consciousness through the body and its location in a historically entropic social landscape that is similar to the practices of American land artist Robert Smithson, whose *Spiral Jetty* (1972) critiques prevalent modalities of power in the twentieth century through a similar attention to form as a participatory geometric vocabulary residing outside the post-war commodity-world.¹⁵ Both Vicuña and Smithson propose a complex performativity involving simultaneity and futurity, Vicuña through dissonance, Smithson in his concept of "entropy." Although Vicuña's aesthetic focus is the impact of language-based innovations on form and poetry, it is Smithson's use of geometric form that is more readily examined in North American scholarship as a "poetic" critique of capitalization—as a lyric critique of space.

¹³ Considering an "open structure" accomplishes a folding in of Latin American Socialism, based as it is on a utopic spiritualism informed by organic indigenism and communalism, and twentieth-century practices in architectural space in order to couple "metropolis" to the "rural" as indicators of economic stability in the newly globalized world.

¹⁴ One of Vicuña's precarious objects in *Saborami* is a hanging effigy of a "momio," photographed and with an inscription from Mao: "All reactionaries are alike; if you do not strike at them they will not fall" (21). The term "reactionary," and "reactionario," is an interesting way of thinking through "complacency"; another precarious object states: "In order to go on / building socialism / in Chile we need / a miracle: that / the CIA dissolves / the military can't / coup, that Christian / democracy may rot, / that mummies may die" (17).

¹⁵ Spirals, zig-zags, and so on speak a basic social language without elevating one etymological narrative (Latin, Greek, or Amerindian) above the other, and thus also refusing to sanction one belief system above any other.

Hemispheric Geography in Form: *Con-cón* and *Spiral Jetty*

One of the most popular examples of the spiral in Western aesthetics is Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, completed in 1972. Gianfranco Gorgini's 1970 photograph of *Spiral Jetty* is the most iconic image of Smithson's installation, which is 1500 feet long and 15 feet wide (see robertsmithson.com). Like Vicuña's early installations, Smithson's work indicates a concern with the over-industrialization of the American landscape. Using rock in the shallow waters off the northern shores of the Great Salt Lake in Utah, Smithson arranged a spiral protruding into the dense waters north of where the Transcontinental Railway cuts across the lake, also known as the "Lucin Cutoff." There, the pinkish bacterial growth on the rock created by the minerals in the water allowed him to use the symbolization of articulated form/color as part of his ongoing dialectic study of "Site and Nonsite," which explores a cognitive dissonance between modes of living that are validated environmentally (spatially) in the form of metaphorical installations.¹⁶ The "installation," whether in-situ or in the gallery, is a performance of irreversibility pointing in two directions: capitalization and the "organic."¹⁷ Both "infinities," however, are formal, and both reveal evidence of time (deterioration/decay, for example) as their social and performative "voice," a social and political performance that intersects the theoretical with the participatory in a lyric manner reimagined within the "structural" consciousness of lived experience during the latter half of the twentieth century. Both Vicuña's poetics of "voice" and Smithson's poetics of the "organic" oppose the totalizing forces of capital via form. "Voice" and the "organic" are performed and present: first, in the spatio-temporal critique of Vicuña's lyric practices at the Con-cón, where she gathers the "overheard" chatter of the public's unrecorded voice; and, second, in the "organic" display of growth, form, and accumulation through which *Spiral Jetty* performs time-space to the observer in a manner that untethers the linear historicism of collectivity in the West from the processes of the production of history.

Smithson's spiral arrangement of basalt and earth leaves the shoreline in a straight line, and one has to imagine how the scale of *Spiral Jetty* places the participant in a horizontal dimension. As it settles in the water and begins turning back towards the shore, the spiral-form exhibits the behavior of an equable-spiral, otherwise known as the spiral of Archimedes, maintaining an equal distance—a visible distance—from where the participant stands/walks, to where she has stood/walked, to where she *will* stand. The curve locks her in an "entangled" gaze involving past, present, and future selves and locations *on* the form. Through its dimensional and metaphorical unfolding, *Spiral Jetty*, in short, partitions time. But what does this say of poetics? What does this say to the sociology of lyric poetry, especially?

What Smithson's spiral provides is a physical place composed in the scale of an actual landscape wherein the "mobility" of a signifier moves along the shape of

¹⁶ Smithson had at one point considered the many micro-bacteria-filled "salars" (salt lakes that provide rich feeding grounds for pink flamingoes) high in the Andes regions of Bolivia for *Spiral Jetty*, but decided against it because of their remoteness (Flam 153).

¹⁷ Cf. Hejirian's dialectic between "open text" and "closed text." Smithson diagrams these axes between "site" and "nonsite" as a difference between, among other characteristics, "open limits" and "closed limits," "a series of points" and "an array of matter," "indeterminate certainty" and "determinate uncertainty," and "many" and "one."

an experimental-*experiential* direction. The spiral opposes the directionality of the environment wherein the cultural value of that signifier is first produced alongside the practices of capital. Moreover, the poetics of the spiral perform dissident-dissonant motion in a stilled-form, challenging the normative linearity of use through which certain signifiers gain cultural value. “Belongingness,” for example, and even the term “Western” are both signifiers employed according to the instructional narratives of the dominant ethos in those environments where, epistemologically and symbolically speaking, those narratives speak the loudest. Once located in Smithson’s spiral, however, the Westerner is suddenly dislocated from the linearity that defines her historical consciousness, her politics, and her consumerist desires. Moreover, if we are to imagine the “democratic” as a similar linear signifier, what happens to the “Democratic Citizen” when she walks into the jetty and along the curves of the spiral, contemplating as she goes the actuality of Western Democracy’s ability to encompass future and past histories into its definition of rights, property, and labor? What becomes of Western “exceptionalism,” in other words, once the horizons are swirled into an entropic arrangement of distances and the only “sense” that matters is the body’s own “sense of direction” in relation to the form through which it moves?

There is, alternative to the ways in which capital attempts to subsume the epistemes “freedom” and “democracy,” a language that speaks, spatially, for other ways of being, for “differentiality” and “equability.” These alternative ways, as Smithson and Vicuña show, are sparked by the spatio-temporal encounter in which the spiral encourages a mathematically spaced, though simulated, “return” to “shore” every time the curve turns in a dimension capable of open mobility. The uniformity at work in equable forms is a constant identity in perpetual “re,” which Vicuña notes is “the process of poetry.” “I think of your struggle with ‘recognition,’” writes Vicuña to Jill Magi in *Letters to Poets*; “I imagine a sweet shift to move you to the need behind it. I think that what we really want is to see who we are. If we manage to look inside and ‘recognize’ it, maybe others will follow. And re, re, re as needed” (Fires-tone and Lomax 170–71). The lyric re-recognition of the state of being-*in* a dimension of connections effaces the exceptional state of interpellations between space, history, and “citizen.” As she writes in *Palabramás*, 1974:

Sek, to cut, split, Latin *scire*, to know, “to separate one thing from another.” Old English *scrim*, shin, shinbone, “piece cut off.” Suffixes from *skiy-ena*, Old Irish *scian*, knife, Germanic *skitan*, to separate, defecate. Suffixed form *sk(h)id-ya*, in Greek *skhizein*, split.

Demo (the root for democracy) comes from the root *da, dai*, to divide. Suffixed form *dam-mo*, division of society, *demos*, people, land. (Those who divide among themselves what there is.) (*Unravelling Words & the Weaving of Water* 61)¹⁸

Vicuña’s ear is an integration of an equable inner ear and a circular outer ear. Lines drawing matter and sound to the center surround the ridges of the ear. Detritus is arranged along the perimeter. The form performs Vicuña’s aesthetics, a drawing-*in* of the world around her, a gathering-*in* and a metaphorical pathway towards listening-*to* as a way of ethically (equally) partitioning the experienced world from a “point” towards the association of connections drawn and woven into

¹⁸ Like the poems in *QUIPOem*, the works in *Unravelling Words* are translated by Weinberger and Susanne Jill Levine and appear in English. I was not able to acquire Spanish versions, although it is also unclear where/when there would be an original Spanish version.

the world of other points. For *Con-cón* the point is the “birth” of art in Chile, which she attributes to the temporary dissonance of the “song” that endures a time for “asking” (as prayer); the utopian ideal of the new community of Allende’s Chile is born in the “speech act” that in turn produces consciousness.

Vicuña’s recurring installation-performance *Con-cón*, which dates back to 1966, also anticipates the central concerns of her later poetry. Thus, the 2002 publication of *Instan* continues to reinitiate new ways of “voicing” the public “re, re, re”:

Silence
 turns the page
 the poem begins.
 alba del habla, the dawn of speech.¹⁹

...

Time undone by the instant!
 A *continuum* contradicted by name, time is “tem”: to cut.
 An instant is present,
 it “stands,”
 a filament of *sta*, a state of being, *stamen*,
 a thread in a warp,
 a web in ecstasy.

“Being” is composed of three forms: “to grow,” “to set in motion” and “yes, it may be so.” To be not an *estar*, but a way of being. (Vicuña, *Instan*, “fábulas del comienzo y restos del origen”)

Stanzas like these make up the latter sections of *Instan*, a book that reflects upon “the journey inside the word *instan* . . . the third person plural of the infinitive ‘instar,’ meaning ‘to urge, press, reply.’” The “third person plural” of “Being”—“composed of three forms”: “urge/grow,” “press/motion,” and “reply/yes”—is an unspecified social participant. “Instar” refers to a time-space or a social (itself a tempo of *scire* and *demos*) space, which Vicuña refers to in the form of the “growing” and “urging” spiral of “time (bending) tongue” (fig. 2). The book itself is composed primarily of hand-drawn word-phrase units that have been dismantled into smaller letter-phoneme units that are then connected by lines articulating curves, zig-zags, spirals, crosses, and other geometric angles associated with pre-Columbian stone work and textile; as such, the book is itself the performativity of installation. In *Instan* the unity of the letter-phoneme units is paramount, but only if one considers in detail the physics of dissonance as a product of sociologically mapped out “mobility.” In the example of “los bailes chinos,” the listener standing on the beach is treated to the cacophony of flutes only because the dance is a ritual that involves migration and the flautists move from the inlands to the shoreline; that mobilization is a mobilization of myth across generations of indigenous people and their communal conflicts with an ever encroaching suburb. The sound

¹⁹ The poem here opens with a gesture that can be found in other works. For example, Vicuña’s 1983 *Precario/Precarious* opens with the poem “Entrando,” or “Entering.” The “beginning” as a spatial act is marked as an experience and encounter with the “event” that initiates it. These are examples of how Vicuña uses the spatial experience of a gateway, prominent throughout Incan sites, not simply to mark a site but also to indicate the various and heterogeneous modes of sharing that take place there: space, water, food, spirituality, communication, among them.

of the trawler offshore is possible only because it moves across the beach, fish move across the ocean, generations of fishermen have mapped their migration, and so on. Dissonance is both a tapestry evoking the fluctuating map of all extensions and performances of mobility and, in Vicuña's poetry, also a way of describing the experiential universe via the gaps between sonic elements initiated by extension. Her poetics allow a "piercing" event to reveal an alternative to the normative readings of dimensional studies that solidify the capacity of *sense* to also be a form of knowledge. "For me [instan] suggests a movement inward," explains Vicuña in her endnote to *Instan*, "towards the *sta*, the inner star 'standing' in the verb 'to be': *estar*" or, one might say, being is spoken in the duration in which the "open" pathway is exposed, pierced by "re-cognition."

This generative force of Vicuña's three-part etymological map of "Being" is the unmasking of "becoming" in the everyday occurrence of language as a succession of events that, although dissonant as discreet experiences, compose a unified encounter with *being-in* the world. The three events of "Being" are repeated in *Continuum*. "[T]em': to cut. / An instant is present" is followed by the unmasking force Vicuña unearths from Andean geometric vocabulary: "it 'stands,' / a filament of *sta*, a state of being, *stamen*, / a thread in a warp, / a web in ecstasy." A "thread in a warp" is the filling of a form, in this case a curved "abnormality" (warp), with the speaking voice of *ceq'e* (line). It is also related to weaving as both structural event and duration. To speak from within the curve as ground (an abnormal, or ab-ground) is to embody and perform connective pathways as alternative structures that endure in active making (weaving). Embodiment and performance are constitutive acts that give shape to a "web" of connectivity; Vicuña thus often refers to the multiple meanings of "web," as "network," ("world wide web") (Strauss).

The "point" I reference above in relation to the curve-partitioning of the equable spiral is the "stanza" or stance (to stand in /from a position) as the truly radical "spoken" act *in* and *as* form; the "poem" is the "dawn of speech"; speech is the dawn of the social.²⁰ Curve-partition, or the *partage* of the sensible experience of the curve, speaks in a grammar of proportion made into visual codex. This is what Vicuña gathers from the Andean architectonic use of spirals and zig-zags throughout Incan oracle sites and stonemasonry—those forms Paternosto reads beyond the ornamental. In the age of postmodernism the artist gathers-in from a proportion defined in the parlance of what is contemporary. And it is here where we can situate the mathematics of the spiral form as an indication of proportion and the arrangements of knowledge that articulate contemporary readings of Vicuña's practice: as one might say, "math is beauty." "Fact is aesthetic" is a more difficult conclusion to draw, but this is precisely why re-reading Vicuña is important as a way of resolving the unsteady relationship between poetics and the sociological mapping of form.

²⁰ The relation I am drawing here between language and mathematics is in service of a geography defined as a mapping of "space" rather than "society" (as a series of narratives). Only the logarithm, a formula that expresses numerical change between a "base" and any "produced" or given number (that is, a present effect brought to visual awareness), is capable of imagining a temporal logic based on spatial change without giving time over to power.

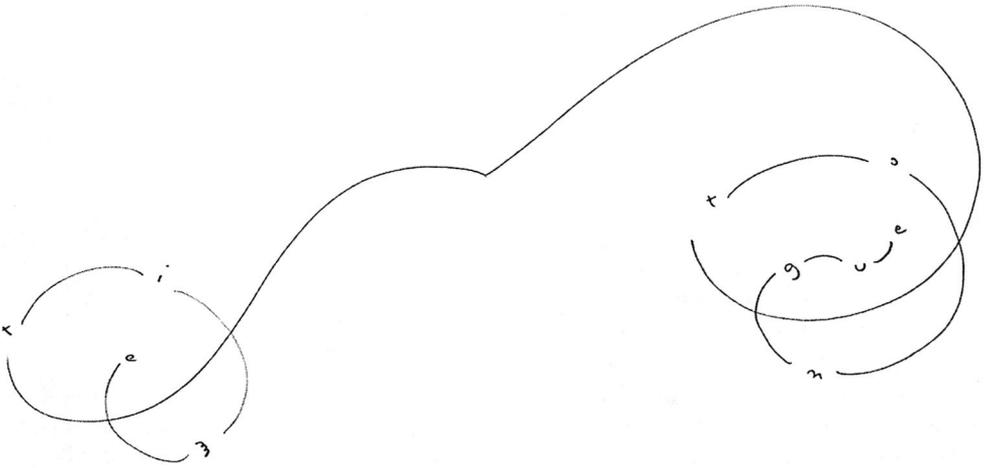


Figure 2. Cecilia Vicuña, “time—tongue” from *Instan*, Kelsey St. Press, 2002.
Used by permission of Cecilia Vicuña.

Logarithm refers to a “ratio-number” or a “word-number”; the Greek *arithmos* means “mathematics” and *logos*. What we gather around us in time and space is made visual by the word. It is thus the word that Vicuña dismantles joyfully in *Instan*. A world composed of this language is also the problem Smithson confronts. His *Spiral Jetty* deconstructs the expectation of *logos* with a mathematic-experiential force that expresses a universal attunement to the rhythm of time extending into all forms of word-matter as evidence of experiential movement. Smithson’s poetics are spatial in this sense, but not very different from lyric poetics (like Vicuña’s) related to the indigenist critique of sociality in the twentieth century’s entropic migration away from collectivity as a formal performance of labor, thought, and enjoyment. Joy is the performance of lyric redress that interests me, since it resituates itself throughout any social context or historical setting as both critique and creative activity. Both involve duration in a spatio-temporal manner.

The early geometry of *Con-cón* reappears in 2002 as an “exploded” spiral where the “meandering” line veering off from its anchor point indicates the “flow of a river” into a vast, less confinable space (like an ocean or lake) or “play” as an alternative “path” (as an alternative form of a jetty into such a body of water) and path a performance of moving—in a unified and meaningful, though “open” and “participatory,” way through time and space. Vicuña calls this spiraling poem “time—tongue,” though I call it here “time (bending) tongue” so as to describe what happens over the gutter of the book itself. The line, which almost bursts into a logocyclic curve, separates the verso and recto pages. In the “feedback loop” of walking-reading the curve, which Vicuña describes above in relation to the reciprocity of the “thinking-gaze” of qaway, something sensible/eventful happens. As the distance increases between point and curve, between what we look towards and our “stance” (where we stand as we look), we read the unpredictability as the journey of a (spoken) word towards its culmination as a (written) meaning.

Conclusion

I have re-read Vicuña outside the scholarly tradition influenced by ethnopoetic frameworks so that we may begin to recognize poetic alternatives to thinking and engaging with the structures that impose totalities upon the ways we form social bonds through language and action. As one other contemporary poet, Myung Mi Kim, states:

Poetry . . . unbounds knowledge from Fact, Truth, or final articulation. What I am calling poetry's "formal thinking"—formal forbearance, almost—is the site of the consideration-never-holding-steady. I think "forbearance" suggests the interval or lag between any act of attention, any mode of looking, listening, hearing, let alone speaking—and where there is almost nothing. I'm wondering about forbearance in relation to the suddenly emergent—forbearance as the porous condition of knowledge production, recognition, attention before it forecloses itself. (Keller 339)

I would add to Kim's conclusion that "facts" are not in themselves dangerous, but that to reify events as "final articulations" reduces the long narrative of History(-ies) into a single identity. This exceptionalism has corrupted even the foundation of Democratic practice: the "individualism" basic to the communication of rights, properties (geographies), and biographies. Poetry, particularly the manner in which lyric engagement performs a plural individual in its singular articulation of experiencing spatio-temporal disjunction-association (*scire-demos*), is as important today as it was during its last moment of lyric focus during the nineteenth century. What we see in Vicuña is an expanded and extended language/ground of various other geographies and biographies that both incorporate and challenge potential voices in the dissonant musics of experience.

The ethnopoetic essentialization of Vicuña's work and appearance continues to limit the ways we talk about her poetic contribution to the study of experimental and radical aesthetics in English, and in American scholarship especially. It also shows that the notion of "voice" is problematic, in that most readings describe Vicuña's oral performance as the "wispy voiced" social shaman. But voice, as is argued by the artist Pamela Z, is a means, lyrical even, of composing an aesthetic situation within which an encounter occurs between modes of speech and sites where speech acts reify or dissent from processes of producing normative social space (Malloy 349). I re-read Vicuña so as to situate her project in an emerging, or post-language, lyric practice (Keller; Spahr; Willis). Vicuña's poetics shares in what Kim describes as a practice focused on forms of forbearance, but which is also a performance of language as a "porous condition of knowledge production." *Con-cón* thus reconsiders the interpellative linkages that draw social forms into recognizable "signs" as a "site" of "consideration-never-holding-steady." It is in this flux read as dimensional "dissonance" that we finally locate the site wherein Vicuña writes the "native concept of participatory democracy" in the Americas.

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