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**Weaving Sight--Weaving Life: Threading the Sacred
and Seeking the Meaning of Photography in
Cecilia Vicuña's Works**

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A dynamic and versatile avant-garde poet and artist, Cecilia Vicuña's works are like Vicuña herself--alluring and performative. Her works not only incorporate poetry and prose, but they also include photographs and her drawings. Vicuña's use of certain avant-garde elements includes experimentation with different mediums from sculpture to typography to painting and even photography; Vicuña's book *QUIPOem* incorporates all of these elements. This sometimes-edgy book differs from Vicuña's *Instan* where poems are hand-drawn pictures, suggestive of concrete poetry. *QUIPOem* instead contains an explosion of color and black and white photography. *Precario/precarious*, another one of Vicuña's books utilizing photos, contains all black and white photographs, which make poignant statements about her native Chile in an amalgamation of visual and poetic pieces. Here, her texts act as an extension of Vicuña herself—poignant, provocative, and deep. Lucy Lippard in "Spinning the Common Thread" says of the poet's work, "Vicuña has never accepted the boundaries between cultural disciplines, creating a terrain her own in the interstices" (8). In fact, her texts seem to become *part* of her; they invoke the performance quality of her words, engaging the audience and holding them captive. Like her oral performances, these photos are open to interpretation and offer another interesting and deep meaning to her poetry.

Not only is she an oral poet, a painter, a filmmaker or performance artist, but Vicuña is also a visual poet--weaving meaning into her work through the use of both oral and visual characteristics. *QUIPOem* and *Precario* are set apart from other "traditional" books of poetry by the way that Vicuña mixes photography with her words and poems. She is a master of this poetic and visual fusion. According to Catherine de Zegher's *The Precarious: The Art and Life of Cecilia Vicuña*, the poet "embraced the modernist vanguard aesthetic as a liberating force" (37). Furthermore, this blurring of the poetic boundary is something that Vicuña herself refers to as "a shock that is going to generate new poetics" (qtd. in Carrasco and Pavon, "U.S"). The question is, then, what *do* the photos in her texts add to Vicuña's poetry? She clearly has a reason for

including them alongside her poetry. Although it is evident that photography has a definite place in Vicuña's works, three "precarious" situations arise in which the audience must consider the relation of using photos to the poetic and prose pieces. First, there seems to be a deliberate tension between the word and the picture, which heightens the meaning of both when viewed simultaneously. Secondly, the pictures are capable of carrying the weight of the word, acting as a metaphor for the poet or for the poem. Lastly, there are certainly times when photographs cannot accurately represent the word and do not enhance the narrative in any way and should be or can be viewed separately from the poetry.

Clearly, visual elements have had a long and time-honored association with oral tradition and poetry. Native cultures, including Vicuña's, have long embraced powerful visual elements including textiles or sand art. Ancient native cultures used drawings to record events. Cave drawings displayed (among other things) hunts and religious acts. Leslie Marmon Silko in *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit* says of the Native American's use of the visual, "The Pueblo people had long understood that certain man-made visual images were sacred and were necessary to Pueblo ceremony" (175). From illuminated manuscripts to concrete poetry, artists and poets have continually pushed the envelope of poetic convention, and Vicuña is no exception. Since poetry can represent the emotions of poets, introducing the visual in connection to their poems can invite their audiences deeper into their minds, something that has been referred to as "picture theory" (Taylor 123). Dick Higgins in "Synesthesia and Intersenses: Intermedia" adds that there is a "natural human impulse to combine one's visual and literary experiences" (17). Higgins adds that visual media or what he refers to as "intermedia" helps to include audiences—to draw them in and adds a sort of physical dimension to the poetry (outside of performance). To Higgins, this media mixture has its place in poetry. He further argues that, "Intermediality has always been a possibility since the most ancient times, and though some well-meaning commissar might try to legislate it away as formalistic and therefore antipopular, it remains a possibility wherever the desire to fuse two or more existing media exists". Therefore, a reader cannot simply ignore the photographs in Vicuña's texts, but rather take in the text and visual together to produce a single, powerful meaning. This reader participation is performative in its own right.

Like Higgins, Walter Ong sees the verbal and the visual as two mediums being able to successfully combine and connect to make meaning. Ong argues that pictures do act as "aides-memoire"; they embody a code of sorts, which allows them to represent specific words in relation to each other (84). Despite this rich history, however, deliberate tension (both literal and figurative) can exist between word and picture. This tension "charges" a poem or narrative with such electricity that the audience cannot help but to be infused with *some* sort of feeling. Vicuña, like the Mexican poet, Maria Sabina, revealed the injustices in her government, in this case, Chile. Sabina was unwittingly exposing poverty in Mexico, and, as Heriberto Yépez wrote, was exposing Mexico's embarrassment ("Clock"). Vicuña also makes a statement about her people and their obvious oppression during the 1970s. Frances Richard relates that, "Vicuña blends political activism with experimental aesthetic practice" ("Cecilia"). Evidence of this relationship exists in two black and white pictures entitled, "Chile 1973" (*QUIPOem* 46-47).

The arrangement of the two photographs is startling. On the left, there are children in the foreground, playing a string game while a seemingly endless line of people waits for what appears to be food. On the right, a soldier points an assault rifle (perhaps in the act of shooting) at a man crouching behind a fence, his palms open and an imploring look on his face. The photo was taken around the time of the Chilean 1973 coup, which led to the death of President Allende. Revolution is ugly, tense and emotionally charged. The arrangement of the two photographs is obvious and deliberate; they show the reader two different views regarding the effects of unrest and government exploitation. The poem “The Black Page of a Black Book” (see [figure 1](#)) introduces these two photographs: “The coup fell like a drop of blood into the void . . . Of the world that had been there remained only a few photographs” (Vicuña, *QUIPOem* 44). Looking at the accompanying photos only deepens the poignancy of these words. Readers can see, read, and experience, on some small level, a little of Vicuña’s tense 1970s world. The strained relationship between the country of her birth, the people, and the government is revealed and literally exposed. The picture and the poem come together as a sort of protest, and they actively involve the reader by exposing the trauma and the drama that influenced those words.

Like Vicuña, Leslie Marmon Silko also understands this often-tense collision of visual and verse. In her essay, “As a Child I Loved to Draw and Cut Paper,” Silko states that the relationship between the word and the image goes back thousands of years (167). Silko emphasizes that writers need to place photographs in the correct context, however, for them to be taken as truth. For her, photographs can represent a lie as much as the written word if the user of the photo does not correctly identify the photo’s time, place or use other identifiers. To her, the spoken word can change, the written word can change, but photographs can potentially be reliable. This use of images can also lead to what Harry Polkinhorn refers to as tension of experience (“Sound”). By examining an image or a symbol in relation to narrative, a reader can undergo a range of emotions, and some emotions can be particularly powerful (i.e. Vicuña’s “Chile 1973”).

Tension, however, can also lead to power. For example, Native American ceremonies often rely upon this meshing of the two forms to create a more powerful meaning. Navajo healing ceremonies incorporate singing, chanting, dancing and sand painting. This last act involves recreating sacred symbols to invoke the power of healing. These images are so sacred, that their reproduction outside of the ceremony is sacrilege. Images, then, can represent the bridge between outer and inner dimensions of human experience and mediates between body and mind. There is a mix of the senses and the image goes beyond aesthetics by the experience it invokes.

Vicuña’s images perform a necessary duty; they get the audience involved in active reading, and the images serve to extend that meaning; “only art explores the unknown ‘psychological constituents’ that have the same relation to reality as words” (qtd. in Taylor 123). Many of her photos are of her precarios. Of her own art, Vicuña states that it helps one “learn to live on the ground of precariousness” (qtd. in de Zegher 21). Her work justly exhibits a tension between the want for permanence in a universe of uncertainties. Artists intentionally produce precarious, using a balance of materials. de Zegher says of this balance, “although not featuring any symmetry, each whole structure stands up in a fragile state of suspended equilibrium. This feeling of the

precarious must be absorbed for one to discover in the immanence of the act the meaning of existence" (21).

Precarios themselves are made from thrown-away objects, and if they could speak, they would say, "we are made of throwaways and we will be thrown away" (Vicuña). When the audience sees these photographs of precarios, which command respect for the environment, they are forced to think about their own place in the universe and environment. Vicuña, Frances Richard states, creates pieces that "rely on the fragile and the friable—those aspects of language, action, and objects that, as she has said are 'twice precarious, they come from prayer and predict their own destruction'" ("Cecilia"). In *Precario*, for example, the photo piece "Tunquén" Chile 1981 represents the meeting of life and death (see [figure 2](#)). Drawn in the sand at the water's edge, the image is frozen in time right before an incoming wave erases it. "Life and death twine together in Tunquen/ the bone signifies pain, the sun—resurrection" (Vicuña, *Precario*).

Another way that photos are important is that they *can* also carry the weight of the word. They can act as extended metaphors or can even be poems themselves. Since Polkinhorn argues that images are imbued with power, Vicuña's work *Precario* is the bridging together of media and is an excellent example of power in image. Hugo Méndez-Ramírez mentions that the metaphor is a "principal poetic tool" for Vicuña as it links together "dissimilar objects" (61). Vicuña's work *QUIPOem* is also peppered with photographic representations of her "visual poems," which offer a different perspective on her oral and written poetry. Because her sculptures are made from found materials, they seem to connect Vicuña to the earth-- to nature and are sacred in character. Art, according to Hugo Méndez-Ramírez, is the act of connecting or uniting that which apparently has no relationship. For Vicuña, the precarios seem to have a connective relationship to her spirituality, "by praying you reconnect" (Vicuña, *Precario*). Since the origin of the term "precario" comes from "precis" Latin for prayer, they are like little prayers (de Zeghar 27). Vicuña even refers to her use of them as a "communion with the sky and sea metaphor takes us to other spaces of metaphor" (Vicuña, *QUIPOem* 131). Her photos extend her to extend her metaphor of thread and weaving; they are part of the metaphor.

In response to her use of photographs, Vicuña writes, "At first I didn't think of photographing them; they were totally precarious. Born of contemplation, they were for the earth and sun" (Vicuña, *Precario*). "'A force impelled me to do the precarios,'" she recalls, " 'a desire to expand. They began as a form of communing with the sun and the sea that gave me a lot of pleasure and a lot of strength' " (qtd. in Lippard 8). This communion can be seen in her "Con-cón" Chile 1966 photographs. Lines traced in the sand tie into the ancient Peruvian diviners who traced lines in the earth to let the "divine speak through them." "And the objects-where did they come from? ...I heard them dancing on the beach / an offering to the sun and sea." (Vicuña, *Precario*). Interesting to note is the difference in the presentation of "Con-cón" between *Precario* and *QUIPOem*. *Precario*, was published in 1963 and *QUIPOem* in 1998. In *Precario*, the poem is not with the picture. In *QUIPOem*, lines of poetry connect into the picture itself actually making it part of the poem itself and not a picture independent of the meaning. Here, the two are intertwined, connected by a thread of words. In *QUIPOem*, "Sendero Chibcha," shows photos of threads leading into quotes and lines about weaving. Both the lines of

poetry and the thread combine and meet at a cross, which Lucy Lippard says is a symbol standing for weaving, and it means a “unity of opposites, of horizontal and vertical, which in Andes religions represents fertility and the continuity of life” (11).

The inclusion of the photographs helps her audience to envision these connections. In *Precario*, the three picture series and poem “Vaso de Leche” Bogotá 1979 carries a personal crusade on behalf of Columbia’s poor, condemning the government for not stopping the distribution of contaminated milk. This “milk crime,” as she refers to it, resulted in close to 2,000 deaths of Bogotá’s children. As protest, Vicuña stages the spilling of milk outside of Bolívar’s house (see [figure 3](#)). Part of the irony of this piece lies in the fact that Bolívar was *the* Liberator. This type of irony is not uncommon in her work; “Vicuña composes her work with a shamanic relish for refuse and a taste for puns both linguistic and visual” (“Cecilia”). The spilling of the milk is a metaphor for the crime itself. Here, the photograph does not distort the poem; rather, both the poem and prose illuminate the photograph and places it within context. Not only do these pictures carry the weight of Vicuña’s words, but of the nation’s impoverished children as well.

Many of Vicuña’s images involve threads. Whether they intersect, connect, or weave together, each makes some sort of metaphorical statement. In fact, as noted in Kenneth Sherwood’s article, “Elaborative Versionings,” Vicuña often prepares for one of her performances by “weaving threads throughout a space” (6). Why weaving? In a way Vicuña connects or weaves images into her narrative. She refers to these images of weaving as “performance events” (Vicuña, *Precario*). “Loose Stitches” page 25 of *QUIPOem* embodies this term. She has wound thread around her room tired of its “normalcy;” here she asks, “Is this how to open the hinge of the other worlds?” In *Precario*, she writes about the quipu an image, which appears in several of her exhibits, photographs, and poems. Also spelled “khipu,” this string of knots records events and numerals in the Incan ancient culture (Hallwalls). For the Incas, everything in the world existed to end up in a quipu. Eliot Weinberger notes that, “Vicuña’s quipoem is a 30-year count of the threads, an account of her dangling work as poet, sculptor, installation artist, performance artist, and filmmaker.” It is a theme that reappears throughout both *Precario* and *QUIPOem* the act of doing and undoing offers many beginnings and endings, and many pathways in between (Hallwalls) Like her precarios, the thread makes a connection between the earth and man. “The action of weaving itself is the esthetic and spiritual thread that runs though all of Vicuña’s cultural production” (Lippard 10). The threads themselves are also powerful cultural symbols. Like Native American symbols in sand painting, the thread that Vicuña weaves throughout her photographs and exhibits is her “main medium” and it “proposes weaving as a form of participation issuing from popular culture. She has always perceived and understood weaving an alternative discourse and a dynamic model of resistance. In her poem “Poncho,” Vicuña writes that the poncho is “a book/ a woven message/ a metaphor spun.” The poncho, a woven textile becomes a representation of her beloved Andes culture. Another of Vicuña’s poems, “The Origin of Weaving” is printed on top of a picture of her exhibition “Resurrection of the Grasses” in *QUIPOem*. Among pictures of quipu, her words talk of these spiritual threads connecting people to earth. Knots account for universal events such as life, death, birth and rebirth. This ties into a picture of her boyfriend taken in 1970. Depicted here is a man, his head enveloped by a thick black string “Life and

death are knotted in a thread/ the hanged man's rope/ and the umbilical cord" (Vicuña, *QUIPOem* 27)

Leslie Marmon Silko thinks of photography as something that can be used as an extension to her narrative. To her, photographs are more than illustrations to simply "serve a text". Instead, Silko believes that the photographs should "form a field of vision for the reading of the text" ("Child" 169). The readers should experience the text through their own interpretation, or as Silko writes, "the influence of the accompanying photographic images on the text is almost subliminal" ("Child" 169). In her own work, *Storyteller*, Silko exposes her family and her landscape to the reading public. Around each photograph, Silko constructs a story—sparked by the memories the photographs invoke. In her acknowledgments, Silko admits that the photographs are "themselves part of the stories."

Certainly, there are times when the metaphor does not carry over, Vicuña stated about one her own exhibitions that sensory memories can be lost and her work could get lost in metaphorical subtlety and lose the political charge she was seeking (Lippard 11). There are also times when the poet decides not to include photographs as it may compromise the words. Many of Vicuña's pictures appear without words. Pictures of her quipu often do not have words; often, they only have a title. Of her three-day "Otoño" exhibit, she wrote that no photographs were taken. The exhibit, she explains in *QUIPOem*, was dedicated to "the building of socialism in Chile" and was a testament to itself—no photos were needed; "A work dedicated to delight wants to make the urgency of the present, which is the urgency of the revolution, palpable" (Vicuña, *QUIPOem* 30).

Photographs, however, are not and should not be replacements for the oral narrative. Including visual images does not automatically discount the narrative. Whereas visual poetry or concrete poems encase the poem, photographs cannot operate in quite the same way. Like *QUIPOem* or *Precarious, Juniper Fuse* by Clayton Eshleman is a prose/poetic work, which also includes photographs. Unlike Vicuña's works, however, the narrative of *Juniper Fuse* does not depend upon the photo. Here, the visual is an "add-on" or bonus material to help the reader envision the author's inspiration for his poetic work. The text is independent of the images. Even in Vicuña's books, there are instances where she does not include photographs. For example, she may have a hand drawn/written poem where there are no pictures as here the poem stands as its own visual.

Photographs also should not be used to replace oral tradition or to preserve a whole culture. In this respect, photographs cannot carry a culture or embody hundreds of years of oral tradition. Silko tries to offer a different perspective of Native Americans in *Storyteller*. Instead of allowing the early American staged stereotypical photographs of Native Americans to be the standard view of Native Americans, Silko and her dad offer tender, provocative photographs of both Native Americans and the world around them. She adds, though, that photographs should never overpower the point that the storyteller is trying to make ("Child" 169). In addition, photographs as with anything else are open to interpretation. If a photo is used to preserve culture in this way, it could be unreliable making the oral tradition more favorable as a cultural artifact.

Photography in prose/poetic works needs to be kept in *context*. Moreover, photography cannot stand in place of an oral performance, and it is not always appropriate in every situation. Instead, photography, when used as it is with Vicuña's

works, brings a more intense level of participation to the audience. Sherwood writes, “When the delivery of the poems becomes an act of *poesis* . . . it reveals the expressive manifestations of sound, the materiality of the spoken; it allows the audience to take the performance’s variations as valuable” (78).

Ethnopoetics is an ever-changing field, accounting for different types of poetry to be viewed outside of the traditional Western canon; poetry is and will continue to be accepted for its changing format. Ethnopoetics, “enriches our understanding of traditional poetries in formal, philosophical and spiritual terms, it alters received ideas about the western canon and literary form thereby enlarging the domain of poetry” (Sherwood, “Ethnopoetics”). This theory allows for the incorporation of photographs and other visual media into poetry. As the technology improves, its implication for the visual in poetry is endless. In Vicuña’s work, the importance of the photographs is for the audience to see the cultural implications behind Vicuña’s poetry. It also weaves or bridges together cultural tradition with newer technology. It also allows the audience to see Vicuña’s precarios as she constructs them since their destruction is imminent. Photographs are also central when the poet is looking to extend a metaphor beyond words. “The juxtaposition of the photographs with some ethnographic textual treatments . . . may aid the reader/viewer in understanding the photographs as careful, interpretive constructions similar to a first person anecdote, a poem or a series of reflexive statements” (Hammond 142). Just as weaving adds a visual and tactile dimension to Vicuña’s words her photographs do as well.

Vicuña’s mark on the world is not precarious. Her art and poetry weave together the world, her culture, history and her oral performance into a stunning fabric of culture and tradition. Because Vicuña uses different mediums to explore the connection between humans and nature, her precarios become tangible records of this tenuous relationship. Her work embodies the true definition of ethnopoetics and blurs the line of traditional poetic convention; her use of the precarios stands as a metaphorical base for her work, and each material piece can stand as its own modern-day cultural artifact. The bridging together of the oral, visual and written brings together the myth and sacred quality of her culture and of her being. Her photos act as an extension of her oral performance, and her work embodies a “cross media.” Vicuña performs a sort of “crossing over” by mixing performance with photography with oral and vocal. Instead of separating word from image, it is important for the audience to view them *together*. The photos help the reader to understand and to visualize the truth and reality behind Vicuña’s world. Taken in together, they allow the audience to participate in Vicuña’s dialogue—almost like sitting in at one of her performances. Perhaps with her photographs and her exhibitions, Vicuña acts much like an early pattern poet who “intended to enrich the fabric of poetry as a whole (and perhaps visual art)” (Higgins 3).



Figure 1 "The Black Page of a Black Book"

Courtesy of Cecilia Vicuña



Figure 2 "Tunquén"

Courtesy of Cecilia Vicuña



Figure 3 "Vaso de Leche"

Courtesy of Cecilia Vicuña

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