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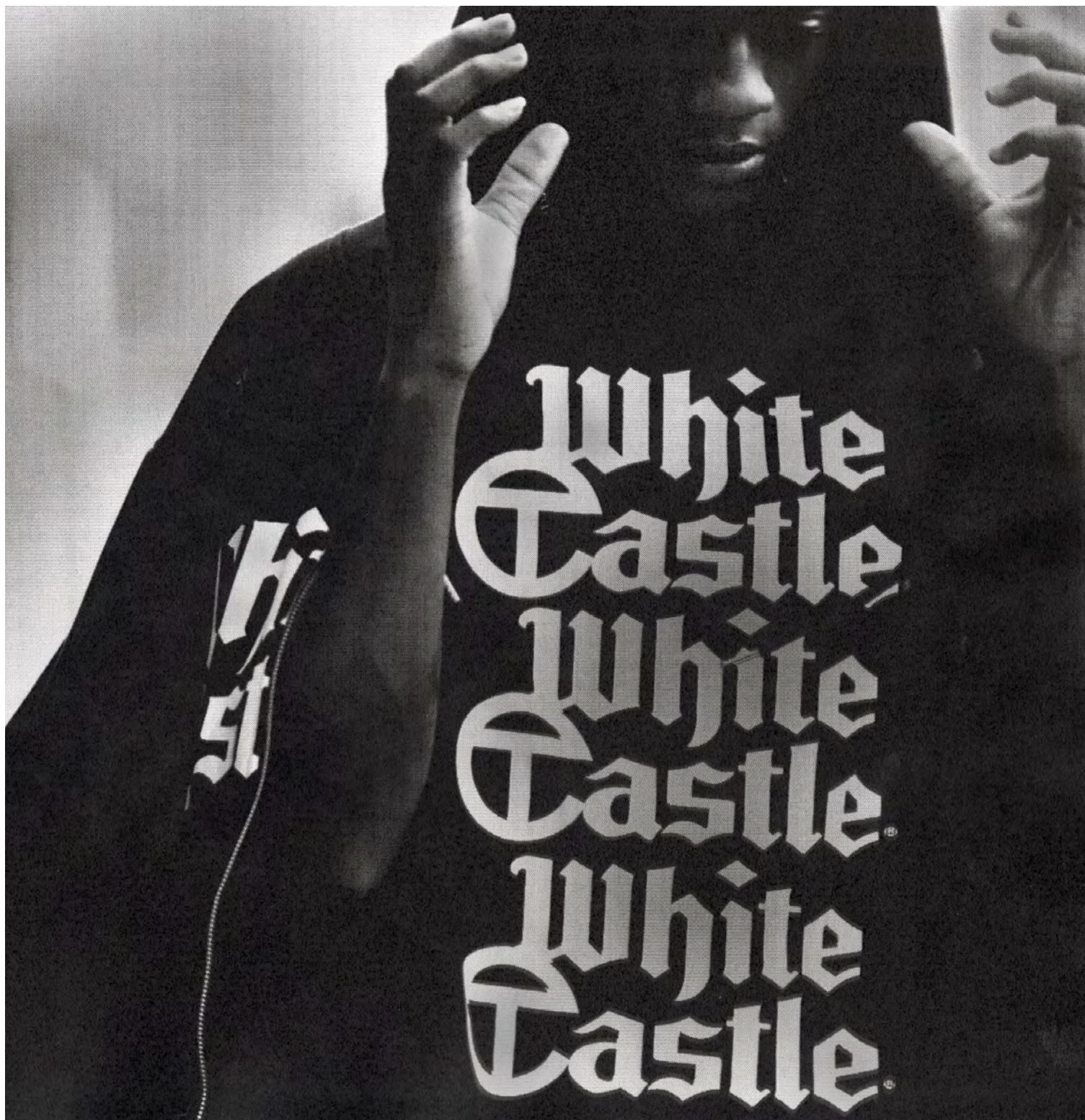
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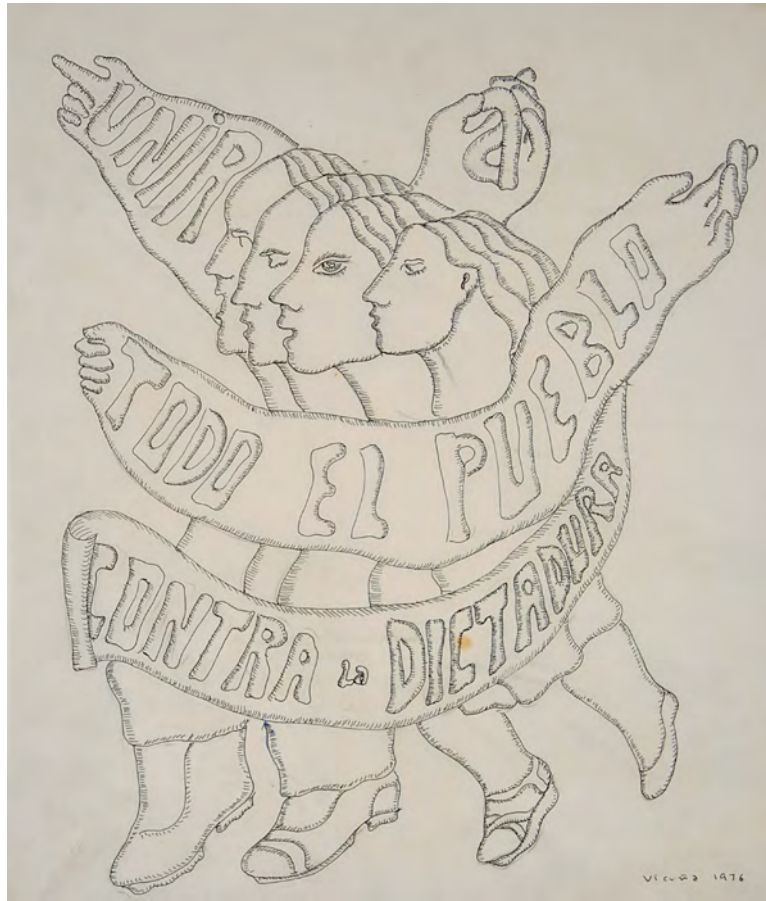
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MELANIE GILLIGAN / CECILIA VICUÑA / EMIL MICHAEL KLEIN /
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Feminist Forms

*Julia Bryan-Wilson on the fleeting-yet-emphatic
multimedia art of Cecilia Vicuña*





Page 29:
Fidel y Allende (1972)
Courtesy of the Artist
and England & Co
Gallery, London

This page:
Unir Todo el Pueblo
Contra la Dictadura (1976)
Courtesy of the Artist
and England & Co
Gallery, London

Next page, from top:
Guardian (1967)
Courtesy of the
Artist and Lehmann
Maupin, New York

Otoño (1971)
Courtesy of the
Artist and Lehmann
Maupin, New York

In her 1972 painting *Fidel y Allende*, Cecilia Vicuña (b. 1948, Chile) has placed twinned leftist figures, in the midst of a sensual handshake (or is it a dance step?), within a dislocated space: a brownish-yellow reminiscent of the gold ground that backs some religious icons.¹ Meant to evoke Fidel Castro's visit to her home country—a phallic airplane hovers between the two men's foreheads—the painting camps and queers this encounter, swathing Salvador Allende in a delicately pink veil and giving Castro colored nails and a mustard-colored suit as their feet entangle near a garland of flowers. Allende's left arm is bared so that his skin shows, and he cradles a butterfly in his outstretched hand.

This work, part of a series titled “Héroes de la Revolución,” begun in 1972, that also includes portraits of Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin and Violeta Parra, was one facet of an all-encompassing project undertaken by Vicuña since she began writing and making art in the mid-1960s. This project sought to forge a revolutionary political aesthetic around the production of new subjectivities—one that would be defiantly feminist and erotic, indeed feminist *because* it is erotic—within all the many mediums she worked in, from poetry to installation to figurative painting. Indeed, the persistent thread that ties together her tremendous range of multimedia work—including artist's books, spoken word, video, and visual art that has incorporated both representation and abstraction—is her commitment to inventing new feminist forms. Her refusal to settle

on any one idiom, or to adhere to the false binary of abstraction versus figuration, makes a polemical point about the arbitrary hierarchizing and policing of styles.

Vicuña's work sometimes takes inspiration from the ostensibly “low” realms of the amateur or vernacular. Ridiculed in their own day for their naive, folkloric style and for undermining the masculinity of sacrosanct Marxist figures, “Héroes de la Revolución” was featured to great acclaim in Documenta 14; forty-five years later, the works appear to offer a prescient alternative vision to the dominant rule of hetero-patriarchy. Yet the portraits were only one of the components of Vicuña's practice on view at Documenta; she also created massive wool-based sculptures and performed in both Kassel and Athens. Though she is well known in poetry circles, having published nearly two dozen books of her own work and having served as the editor of *The Oxford Book of Latin American Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 2009), her appearance in Documenta provided some art-world viewers with their first encounter with Vicuña. The towering installation *Quipu Womb (The Story of the Red Thread)* (2017), with its deep crimson knotted fibers cascading down like spurting blood in the middle of a pristine white box gallery space, and with its explicit reference to the messy process of reproduction, was less easy for audiences to assimilate than were her paintings; one critic noted that, in contrast to the rest of the austere offerings at the Athens National Museum of Contemporary Art, Vicuña's piece seemed “excessive, almost gaudy.”

In both its title and composition, the piece references the *quipu*, the Andean knotted string system of recording information in which threads hang from a horizontal element. Like many female artists who pursue fiber-based work, especially that which references, however obliquely, as unfashionable a body part as a womanly “womb,” Vicuña has pushed against prevailing trends for some decades; only now, at the age of sixty-nine, is she beginning to reap the benefits of an art-institutional surge of interest in textiles. In my recently published book *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), I consider how Vicuña's deployment of textiles—including yarn, scraps of unraveling fabric or weavings in process that are never resolved into functional cloth—connects to her use of text, particularly in the wake of the 1973 military coup against Allende in Chile and the Pinochet dictatorship. Her art must be situated in relation not only to textile traditions, but also to conceptual art, not least because of her creation of an alternative vocabulary or language through her sculpture.

From very early in her conception of herself as an artist and poet, Vicuña was gripped by feminist interests that were equally about reveling in corporeal gratifications and enacting a fierce resistance against the injustices of sexism, homophobia and colonization. Beginning in 1966, while she was still living in Chile, she wrote seven thousand words a day as a ritual exercise to track her emotions and sensations; she was also training herself to have discipline as a writer. The subsequent voluminous pages, collectively entitled *El Diario Estupido*, posit that





Precarios (1966-2017)
Installation view at CAC,
New Orleans (2017)
Courtesy of the Artist and
CAC, New Orleans
Photography by Alex Marks

keen awareness of the physical world — a heightened sensorium — is one root of political change. Much of her work calls for no less than a complete reevaluation of the connections between desire and politics; by taking pleasure in her materials as she manipulates them by hand, Vicuña charts her search for recalibrated social relations. As she has stated, “A true revolution would have to be a revolution of the senses, a revolution of the body, a revolution of the way we love each other, the way we compose our poetry, our music. That would be total transformation.”² This “revolution of the body” is a feminist call to arms; her awareness of her own sensations was never purely inscribed within her individual psyche, but rather understood as profoundly impacted by the ongoing dynamics of misogyny, alongside concerns about the environmental ravages of capitalism and the repression of female sexuality.

At the same time she began to write *El Diario*, she started to create small ephemeral installations, combining twigs, feathers and other scavenged objects together, outside, often near the Pacific Ocean, where they were washed away by the tide; she has termed these sculptures “precarios,” and she has continued to make them throughout her career. With these fragile and fleeting juxtapositions of stick, twine and trash, Vicuña enacts a feminist method as she exhorts us to tread more carefully, or, maybe, to let go more easily. She moved to England

in 1972 to attend art school; when Pinochet seized power the following year she decided not to return to Chile, and exile and migration have been longstanding thematics in her poetry. (After living briefly in London, Vicuña moved to Bogotá, relocating to New York in 1980. She now splits her time between Chile and the US.)

Her signature form of the “precarios” became an especially potent resource for her when she was a student in London, surviving on very little money around the time of the military coup. Works such as *Venda* (Bandage) (1973–74), in which she attached a tattered length of orange-red cloth around a stick — the cloth had been worn by her as an armband in solidarity with those in Vietnam who were fighting against the imperialist US war being waged at that time — echo the relation between vertical and horizontal found in the form of the *quipu*. This is one piece from a larger series collectively entitled “Journal of Objects for the Chilean Resistance,” suggesting that Vicuña has long been interlacing seemingly disparate issues, including an insistence on the sophistication of precontact forms of communication or indigenous epistemologies, protesting the Vietnam war, mourning the death of Allende, and decrying the rise of the Pinochet regime. Though Vicuña’s work has often fallen out of Chilean histories of conceptual or anti-Pinochet art, it has always been deeply interested in articulating an oppositional politics that can be gestured



*Balsa Snake: Raft to
Escape the Flood* (2017)
Installation view at CAC,
New Orleans (2017)
Courtesy of the Artist and
CAC, New Orleans
Photography by Alex Marks

to with abstract means, “poor” materials and attention to the way that objects can speak.

Vicuña’s work has continued to take inspiration from the *quipu*, including an earthwork about land use and the commercial plunder of natural resources called *Quipu Menstrual* (2006). She continues to place bodily fluids like milk and blood in conversation with textiles; even as her emphasis on excretion, consumption and other fleshly processes have never been tethered definitively to any one gender, they are also in conversation with the realities of self-identified women. In the recent show “Cecilia Vicuña: About to Happen,” which I curated with Andrea Andersson at the Contemporary Arts Center New Orleans, she again utilized the form of the *quipu* to create a large-scale installation that draws together lengths of unspun wool that drip down from the ceiling to the ground in intestinal colors — these are the purples and pinks of internal organs, of unspooling entrails. This sculpture, titled *Quipu Visceral*, was also site-specific in that it related to the colors of an orchid native to New Orleans; containing references both disturbing (disembowelment) and beautiful (flowers), it illustrated how Vicuña’s work is marked by her embrace of polarities.

In fact, the entire exhibition was a meditation on a city — actually, a world — facing a post-Katrina precarity with regard to global warming and coastal erosion.

What has somewhat recently been termed eco-feminism is differently formulated by Vicuña: she has been theorizing the connections between gendered injustice and environmental despoliation for many decades through the forms and means of her art, made possible in part by her indebtedness to indigenous ways of thinking. She says that by the mid-1960s “climate scientists had gathered and predicted that the Earth could come to an end in a matter of years, if the ecological destruction that was already taking place continued. That made me very aware that this extraordinary beauty — the mountains and the ocean, and all that — was at risk. I was aware of that even as a teenager. This is important, because at the time ... very few people had this understanding. But I have to say that for a teenager in Chile it was totally possible to be aware.”³

At the center of the exhibition in New Orleans were over a hundred of her small sculptural “precarios,” mounted on the walls as well as on a field of local sand, a reminder of some of her first interventions into the landscape with temporary constructions that would be blown away by the wind or carried away by the currents. Many of these works are humorous, deeply witty in their irreverent approach to scale and to the conjoining of unlike materials. Such “precarios” combine the mass manufactured (a cartoony toy eraser, say) with the organic, with the effect of denaturalizing



This page:
Basuritas del fin
del mundo (2012)
Courtesy of the
Artist and Lehmann
Maupin, New York
Photographed by
James O'Hern

Next page:
Quipu Womb (The
Story of the Red Thread,
Athens) (2017)
Installation view at EMST
– National Museum
of Contemporary Art,
Documenta 14, Athens
Courtesy of the Artist
and Documenta 14
Photography by
Mathias Völzke

both; that playful sensibility is a profound part of her practice. With her attentions to the tactile valences of texture, with her assertive hands-on making, with her emphases on wombs, blood and guts — as well as her frequent refusal of representation in her many allusive or elliptical gestures of resistance — Vicuña has produced some of the richest and most useful visualizations of what feminist forms can look like.

“About to Happen” attempted to do justice to a wide array of her work, and included drawings, videos, an animation, handmade books and poetry. The centerpiece was a fifty-foot-long sculpture created by Vicuña out of detritus she salvaged from the Louisiana coast that included plastic, driftwood, Mardi Gras beads, deflated soccer balls, discarded shoes, sailor’s rope, branches, metal fragments, wire and more. Entitled *Balsa Snake: Raft to Escape the Flood* (2017), this rickety raft is an attempt

to envision what happens after the destruction of the world by the flood that we know is coming, that has in fact already come, that is rising all around us — how do we use what remains to stay afloat? Will it be enough to hold us?

Julia Bryan-Wilson is Professor of Contemporary Art and Director of the Arts Research Center at the University of California, Berkeley. She is author of Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era (University of California Press, 2009); coauthor of Art in the Making: Artists and their Materials from the Studio to Crowdsourcing (Thames & Hudson, 2016); and Fray: Art and Textile Politics (University of Chicago Press, 2017).

¹ This text is a modified, expanded version of a talk presented at the symposium “The Political Body in

Latina and Latin American Art” at the Hammer Museum, September 2017.
² See Julia Bryan-Wilson,

“Awareness of Awareness: An Interview with Cecilia Vicuña,” in *About to Happen: Cecilia Vicuña*

(New York: Siglio Press, 2017), p. 114.
³ “Awareness of Awareness,” pp. 112–13.

