

El Ande Futuro, installation detail (Paracas textile), 1992



Cecilia Vicuña's art is delicately balanced between myth and reality, between past and present, between hope and despair. For over three decades, she has created work that evokes the rituals and themes of ancient, pre-Columbian cultures in the context of a modern world on the brink of social and ecological collapse. In her MATRIX exhibition, *El Ande Futuro*, Vicuña brings together two themes that have always been at the heart of her work: precariousness—a sense of the extreme fragility of life on earth; and weaving—a practice redolent with metaphoric value, especially in her native Andean culture.

Vicuña's earliest recorded art work was a ritual performance, *Con-con*, that took place on a beach near Santiago, Chile, in 1966. The piece involved drawing lines in the sand—a practice recalling pre-Columbian divination rituals—and arranging various found objects including stones, sticks, and feathers. Another important early work exemplifying her interest in natural materials and ephemeral forms was an installation piece, *Otono*, 1971, for which Vicuña filled an entire gallery of the National Museum of the Fine Arts in Santiago with autumn leaves.

In the mid-1960s, Vicuña began making what she called “precarios” or “basuritas” (bits of garbage), small assemblages of found materials such as feathers, sticks, shells, leaves, bones, and thread. Some “precarios” were meant to be portable and comparatively permanent, while others were situated in natural or urban settings without consideration for their long-term survival. Writing about *The Chibcha Trail*, a site-specific “precario” situated in the verdant hills above Bogotá, Columbia, Vicuña said, “Poetry inhabits certain

places where the cliffs need only a signal to bring them alive; two or three lines, a mark, and silence begins to speak.”

The art critic Lucy Lippard called Vicuña's sculptures “visual poems,” and she has compared their recognition of inherent value in what is normally lost or discarded to the work of artists such as Richard Tuttle, Jimmie Durham, Alison and Betye Saar, and David Hammons. “These materials are lying down and I respond by standing them up,” explains Vicuña. “The gods created us and we have to respond to the gods. There will only be equality when there is reciprocity. The root of the word ‘respond’ is to offer again, to receive something and to offer it back. ‘We are made of throwaways and we will be thrown away,’ say the objects. Twice precarious, they come from prayer and predict their own destruction. Precarious in history, they will leave no trace. The history of art written in the North includes nothing of the South. Thus they speak in prayer, precariously.”

Vicuña's interest in weaving derives from the great metaphorical significance of this practice in the rituals and myths of the ancient Andes. In Pre-Columbian times, finely woven textiles were often burned or interred as offerings to the dead. In Quechua, the language of the Andean people, the word for “language” also means “thread,” and the word for “complex conversation” also means “embroidery.” Vicuña's identification with weaving is no doubt also strengthened by the fact that the wool used in Andean cloth is taken from her namesake, the mountain vicuña. According to legend, vicuñas are born at the sources of springs high in the

Andes, and the fiber made from their wool has come to symbolize the paths of mountain streams and the tenuous thread of life itself. “Everything is falling apart because of lack of connections,” says Vicuña, “Weaving is the connection between people and themselves, [between] people and nature.”

Vicuña's MATRIX installation is divided into five sections. In the first, “Encountering the Ancient Textiles,” Vicuña has set two Pre-Columbian funerary wraps amidst an arrangement of dried grasses and woven fiber mats. Viewers are encouraged to sit in this space and, in the words of the artist, “feel the presence” of these finely woven textiles. The second section, “Seven Ponchos & Seven Boxes (*Siete Ponchos Hilachudos*),” provides a link between the present and the distant, pre-Columbian past by juxtaposing seven of Vicuña's own recent “precarios” with tomb offerings of the ancient cultures of Southern Peru. Vicuña calls her recent “precarios” used in this installation “ponchos,” since their form resembles that of the traditional Andean garment. Like the ancient textiles displayed on the floor, these small sculptures are made from a gauze base onto which the artist has added found materials such as seaweed, thorns, and thread. The third section is called “Spiral Weaving” and symbolizes the origin of weaving with a strand of fleece extending from the floor to the ceiling. At the rear of the gallery is the fourth section, “The Loom of Life,” an enormous web of yarn suggesting, in the artist's words, “the mind of the weaver, or a weaving seen from the inside.” Lastly, in the concrete wall, Vicuña has placed numerous tiny sculptures, in an installation that she calls “Constellation.”

Vicuña's MATRIX installation literally and figuratively weaves together the past and the present, suggesting that the spirit of the ancient Andeans bears a profound relevance to the condition of life in the modern world. “I look at things backwards,” says Vicuña, “as they are going to look when I am gone. I have a very intense feeling that what we do is already the remains of what we are doing.”

Cecilia Vicuña was born in Santiago, Chile, in 1948. She completed post-graduate studies at the Slade School of Fine Arts in London and worked with a variety of music and theater groups in Bogotá, Columbia, during the 1970s. In 1980, she moved to New York City where she continues to live and work. She is known internationally for her poetry, of which there are eight published volumes, most recently *Unravelling Words & The Weaving of Water*, (Graywolf Press) edited by Eliot Weinberger.

Lawrence Rinder
Curator

Work in MATRIX (individual works are lent by the artist; unless otherwise indicated, artifacts are lent by the Phoebe Apperson Hearst Museum of Anthropology, University of California at Berkeley, gift of Mrs. Hearst):

El Ande Futuro (The Future Andes), 1992, an installation in five parts

Part I. “Encountering the Ancient Textiles,” mixed media

Brown and white tie-dyed cloth; probably Late Intermediate Period or Late Horizon, about AD 800-1534, from Chancay, Peru. Lent by the Hearst Museum, gift of Mrs. Charlotte Uhle. Salmon-colored cloth with tapestry border; probably Late Intermediate Period or Early Horizon, about AD 800-1534, from Chancay, Peru. Lent by the Hearst Museum, gift of Mrs. Charlotte Uhle.

Part II. “Spiral Weaving,” fleece.

Part III. "The Loom of Life," mixed media.

Part IV. "Seven Ponchos & Seven Boxes (*Siete ponchos hilachudos*)," mixed media

- A. *Poncho de cinco hilachas* (Poncho of five threads)
- B. *Poncho de pelo* (Hair poncho)
- C. *Poncho bermellón* (Red poncho)
- D. *Poncho de escombros negro* (Rubble poncho)
- E. *Poncho de espinas* (Thorn poncho)
- F. *Poncho de estrellas* (Star poncho)
- G. *Poncho de nacar* (Seashell poncho)
- H. Box with artifacts
 - Wood spindles with whorls of ceramic, stone, cane; thread of cotton, wool; bobbins; and whorls; Pre-Spanish, pre-AD 1534, possibly from Huarcocondo, Department of Cuzco, Peru.
 - Needles; Late Intermediate Period 8, about AD 1400-1476, from Chincha, Peru.
 - Balls of cotton yarn in assorted colors; Late Horizon, about AD 1476-1534, from Chincha, Peru.
- I. Box with artifacts
 - Fragments of red coloring substance enveloped in coarse whitish wool; Late Intermediate Period 8, about AD 1400-1476, from Chincha, Peru.
 - Gourd bowl containing hair; Pre-Spanish, pre-AD 1534, from Chincha, Peru.
 - Mass of fine red and yellow wool for weaving; Pre-Spanish, pre-AD 1534, from Soisonga, near Nazca, Peru.
- J. Box with artifacts
 - Cotton bag containing 2 pieces of dressed white chalk and 2 small cotton bags; Pre-Spanish, pre-AD 1534, from Ancon, Peru.
 - Improvised doll of tulle, rags, and human hair; Late Horizon, about AD 1476-1534, from Chincha, Peru.
- K. Box with artifacts
 - Two sticks of split cane originally lashed with feathers at one end; Early Horizon (probably Late Ocucaje 9, about 550-500 BC), from Ocucaje, Peru.
- L. Box with artifacts
 - Mass of human hair, center wound about with a small black and white sling; remainder wound about with 3 black woolen cords; Pre-Spanish, pre-AD 1534, from District of Nazca, Peru.
- M. Box with artifact
 - Embroidered textile fragment; Early Horizon, about 1000-200 BC, from Paracas, Peru.
- N. Box with artifacts
 - Woolen belt with long strings; Late Horizon, about AD 1476-1534, from between Chulpaca and Tate, Peru.

Part V. "Constellation," mixed media.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Santiago, Chile, *Otono and Pinturas, Poemas y Explicaciones* '71; Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, England, *Plain Things and Explanations* '73; Galeria La Gruta, Fundacion G.A. Avendano, Bogotá, Columbia, *Homenaje a Vietnam* '77; Galeria Ocre, Caracas, Venezuela, *Cecilia Vicuña* '78; EXIT ART, NYC, *Precarious* '90.

Selected group exhibitions:

Museum of Modern Art, NYC, *Latin American Video* '81; Center for Inter American Relations (Americas Society), NY, *Women of the Americas* '82; Franklin Furnace, NYC, *Latin American Multiples* '83; Kunststamtes Kreuzberg, Berlin, Germany, *Chilenas* '83; La Habana, Cuba, *II Biennial* '86; Archer M. Huntington Gallery, U. of Texas, Austin, *Latin American Artists in New York Since 1970* '87 (catalog); Exit Art Gallery, NYC, *The Debt* '88, and *The Hybrid State* '91; The New Museum, NYC, *The Decade Show* '90 (catalog); National Museum of Fine Arts, Santiago, Chile, *Efectos de Viaje* '91; Royal Museum of Ambers, Belgium, *America: 500 Years of Latin American Art* '92.

Selected bibliography about the artist (see also catalogs under exhibitions):

- Brightman, Carol. "Where Dirty Work Is Transformed into Art," *In These Times* (Feb. '82).
- Lippard, Lucy R. "The Vicuña and the Leopard" (interview), *Red Bass International*, Tallahassee, Florida ('86).
- Reid, Calvin. "Multi-Site Exhibitions, Inside-Outside," *Art in America* (Jan. '91).
- Levin, Kim. "Cecilia Vicuña," *Village Voice* (May 9-15 '90).
- Weinberger, Eliot. "Everything Dead Trembles," *Sulfur Magazine*, vol. 29 (Fall '91).

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