

CECILIA VICUÑA  
SEEHEARING THE ENLIGHTENED FAILURE



Cecilia Vicuña. *Sol y dar y dad*, ca. 1977–1979. Performance and intervention in a public space, Bogotá.

Exhibition presented by:

**Kunstinstituut Melly**

Kunstinstituut Melly, Róterdam

Sponsored by:



Ministerio de las Culturas, las Artes y el Patrimonio | Gobierno de Chile

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## GENERAL INFORMATION

Exhibition title:  
Cecilia Vicuña. Seehearing the Enlightened Failure.

Organised by:  
Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo and Kunstinstituut Melly,  
Rotterdam.

Sponsored by:  
Ministerio de las Culturas, las Artes y el Patrimonio |  
Gobierno de Chile.

Curator:  
Miguel A. López

Dates: 20 February – 11 July 2021

Opens: Saturday, 20 February at 11am

Publications: CA2M and Turner have issued a Spanish version of the book published in Rotterdam by Kunstinstituut Melly. It is a retrospective publication with texts by Cecilia Vicuña, Miguel A. López, Julia Bryan-Wilson and Lucy Lippard.



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## PRESENTATION

*Cecilia Vicuña. Seehearing the Enlightened Failure*, presented jointly by Kunstinstituut Melly, Rotterdam, and CA2M – Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo – is the first retrospective of this Chilean artist's work to be held in Spain.

The foremost exponent of Latin American art on the international scene, Vicuña has long been considered to be a leading performance artist, but she is also a writer, poet, activist and visual artist.

She was distinguished with the Spanish art award Premio Velázquez de Artes Plásticas 2019 for her outstanding work and her multi-dimensional art, distinguishing her as one of the essential figures in contemporary Latin American art.

Since the 1960s, Cecilia Vicuña (Santiago, 1948) has been offering a radical view of the relationship between art and politics through her writing, and through her artistic creation. She worked in different parts of the world after leaving her native Chile for London in 1972, eventually settling in the United States in 1980.

For decades, this poet, visual artist and activist has been forging a varied and multi-disciplinary body of work, built using words, images, environments and a combination of languages, media and techniques.

The exhibition, curated by the Peruvian Miguel A. López, brings together more than one hundred works – shown for the first time in Spain – reflecting the artist's ongoing commitment to themes ranging from eroticism, colonial legacies, the struggle for liberation, collective joy, indigenous thought and environmental destruction.

Starting with words, she constructs huge installations and paintings that draw from certain indigenous languages while also focusing on her relationship with nature and feminism. She also compiles different types of documentation that narrate part of her journey, making her work timelessly radical.

## PRESENTATION

The military coup that took place in Chile in 1973 had a profound effect on Cecilia Vicuña (Santiago, 1948), shaping the structure of her emotions in her formative years, and that of the entire nation. Her work is linked to political resistance, and feminist and sociological precepts, dialogues with indigenous culture and environmental justice permeate her work.

The curator, Miguel A. López, highlights Vicuña's convictions in his interpretation, selection and presentation of her art, whose function is not to colonise or dominate, but to foster change in social and emotional structures: 'Her desire to dignify rubble, the tiny fragments and the things we throw away, focuses the question on how to reconnect the scattered parts of what we might today call ecological justice – an assembly of many worlds and multiple forms of awareness.'

Her first assemblages, produced in 1966, were swept away by the waves and the sea breeze. Unlike international movements such as land art or participatory art, her early work was not a response to debates about modernism, institutionalism, the market, or even art itself. Her pieces were not early exercises in minimalist art or 'sculptures in the expanded field' – both of which were subjected to a rapid process of institutionalisation between the 1960s and 1970s in the United States and Europe. The artist created small assemblages out of items collected from the beach: she placed them on the shore in a humble act of communication with nature. Like sacred offerings, these fragile material articulations – made of driftwood, pebbles, feathers and string – took part in a larger dialogue. She called them *precarios* [the Spanish word meaning 'precarious'], but also spatial metaphors or multi-dimensional poems. Using found materials – what she calls *basuritas* [bits of refuse] – is a way of highlighting the possibility of unearthing the meanings and strengths of things that are destined to be disposable by the frenzied logic of consumerism and the quest for profit. The delicacy, ethereal quality and smallness of these pieces are integral aspects of her work, even though this ephemerality has often meant that the importance of their significance has hardly been acknowledged.

Andean peoples would weave meanings into textiles and knotted cords. The *quipu* is a 'writing' system using knots made on coloured cords that was invented in the Andes over 5,000 years ago, meaning that it may be older than writing. The *quipu* had a virtual counterpart, the *ceqe*, which means 'line' in the Quechua language. It was a concept that connected all communities to sacred sites on the earth, usually where there was water. Vicuña began

tying *quipu* knots when she was a teenager living in Chile. It was still being used at the time of the Spanish conquest of South America in the 15th century but was banned shortly thereafter.

For her, therefore, it was an act of rebellion to once again begin the process of speaking through the cords. The *quipu* is made of unspun wool that symbolises the state of 'not-yet-being' from which everything is born. When people pass through it, they themselves become the 'knots', the bearers of memory. A poem in space, a way of remembering, involving the body and the cosmos at the same time. A tactile and spatial metaphor for the union of everything.

Vicuña values the ritual, medicinal, healing or shamanic dimension of art, whose function is not to colonise or possess, but to bring about modifications in both microscopic structures (non-visible phenomena) and macroscopic structures (perceptible physical experiences). Her cyclical understanding of the creative act is expressed through a return to ideas that do not exist as 'final objects', but as rehearsals – like the *precarios* and *quipus* that she has been creating since 1966. Her weavings and assemblages seem to recall the memory of ancient civilisations. The hair, strings and plant and mineral debris the artist incorporates into her work evoke indigenous settlements, Andean *wak'as* (sanctuaries, idols, temples and tombs) and the remains of native peoples that reveal aspects of indigenous ontologies and other ideas of the sacred that challenge Western notions of time – in Andean philosophy, past and present are part of the same non-evolutionary and non-determinist temporal concept based on convolutions or loops called *pacha*.

Cecilia Vicuña began painting in the mid-1960s. She was influenced by Andean and mestizo painting produced by the Cuzco School in the 16th and 17th centuries, which appropriated iconographic elements of European art in order to preserve Andean beliefs. Her encounter with the painter Leonora Carrington in Mexico in 1969 was also significant. Drawing on these influences, Vicuña's paintings included nude women protesting in the streets, references to animism, Andean philosophy, folklore and popular myths, as well as depictions of important left-wing figures and feminist and civil rights activists. It was a continuation of colonial images of saints painted by mestizos – a Spanish tradition with a Latin American twist – that offered a glimpse into the syncretic Latin American culture of today. Although such works were exhibited in museums and nationally acknowledged, they also proved to be controversial, such as *Ángel de la menstruación* [Angel of Menstruation] (1973).

## PRESENTATION

The sexual drive of her early poems – such as *Retrato físico* [Physical Portrait] (1966), *Anatomía del papel* [Anatomy of Paper] (1967), *Luminosidad de los orificios* [The Brilliance of Orifices] (1968), among others – challenged the patriarchal dominance of cultural norms.

In September 1967, Vicuña wrote *No-manifiesto* [Non-Manifesto]. This document gave rise to Tribu No, a collective of young poets and artists in Santiago who, like Vicuña, sought to visually express their opposition to the country's conservative forces. Tribu No's improvised actions were influenced by self-reflexive experiments in the field of poetry. Tribu No was an expression of liberation and collective joy. Between 1967 and 1972, they created poems, drawings and paintings, as well as rituals, games and physical improvisations. Several black-and-white photographs taken between 1969 and 1970 show three women – Vicuña and her friends Carmen Bertoni and Coca Roccatagliata – dressed in black and lying on the floor, their bodies entwined. In another photograph, Sonia Jara and Roccatagliata appear naked in an embrace, surrounded by plants and flowers, as if listening to the sound of their bodies.

After moving to London in 1972 on a scholarship to study painting, and shocked by the brutal coup engineered by General Augusto Pinochet on 11 September 1973, Vicuña distanced herself from her vivid and exuberant paintings of harmony between animals and humans and of triumphant liberation movements. Her work took another course, one of agitation and mourning. 'Allende's death marked the end of my life as a painter,' she concluded. *La Ruca* [a term used to describe an indigenous dwelling found in the Pampas and Patagonia regions] is an anticipatory work of art which, like *Biombo* [Screen], puts the viewer in the centre of the piece in order to redirect their view; in this case, they are invited to look through Allende's eyes and his trademark dark-rimmed glasses.

The cheap reed blinds forming the windows of the installation echo the forms of improvised and nomadic architecture, often erected by women; typically, transportable structures made of sticks tied together. Plants, wooden dowels and branches are tied together to support some of her previously completed paintings (a sort of alternative gallery), while a large portrait of Allende with his eyes cut out hangs on the outside. The fluttering cloths above the little house evoke the Chilean tradition of planting a red flag after the roof of a house has been built, signalling the arrival of its new occupants.

In another collective effort, Cecilia Vicuña, David Medalla, John Dugger and Guy Brett founded Artists for Democracy in London in 1974. This group mobilised international artists and intellectuals, who responded to their call to donate and create works in support of Chile's struggle to restore democracy. Their contributions ranged from a mass demonstration in Trafalgar Square to collages and paintings demanding an end to imperialism and colonial rule.

In 1977, Vicuña presented *Homenaje a Vietnam* [Homage to Vietnam] in Bogotá. It was an exhibition celebrating the victory of the Vietnamese people. Her paintings highlighted the beauty of the renewed relationship between bodies and the natural world in a reunified Vietnam. The works, painted like banners of silk, cotton and strips of cloth, were hung on bamboo poles. Vicuña's intention was for the wind to flow through the works in the same way that the fight flows through the air.

One of her most important paintings is *Chile Salutes Vietnam!* (1975). This work shows an indigenous Mapuche woman and a female Vietnamese guerrilla fighter in a lush landscape of plants and flowers, exchanging a rifle and a red book entitled *La revolución de agosto* [The August Revolution] – the name of the Vietnamese revolutionary uprising against the French colonial government in 1945. The image documents a transfer of knowledge about anti-colonial war and suggests both an intellectual and military connection between Vietnam and Chile at a time when Latin America's military dictatorships were setting in motion a machine for persecution, torture and death known as Operation Condor. That US-backed campaign of political repression was an organised system of state-sponsored terrorism.

Since 1973, this artist has been creating collages and drawings and undertaking actions as part of her *Palabraromas* [Wordweapons] series. Largely created between London and Bogotá, *Palabraromas* express unresolved paradoxes between art and revolutionary politics. Through the representation of words as weapons, the series advocates the transformative dimension of language in the fight against dictatorships. *Palabraromas* are words that have been opened up to explore their possible meanings, revealing a space for the development of imagination and transformation. This notion of openness is emphasised through the image of the 'shovel' that stirs up language as if it were soil in order to 'till' it, with the dual meaning of both working it and cultivating it.

## PRESENTATION

Through words, what may seem fixed in language is set in motion and words are rewritten, spreading them out beyond the limits of syntax and their usual meanings. Just as the work of art is relational, sustained by the action of many agents, the word is understood by Vicuña as a multiple and spirited entity in transformation, always in relation. *Palabrarmas* are not isolated and discreet objects; rather, they reveal how a word that apparently designates a single thing leads to a web of other words, knowledge and beings, as if it were a strand of a much wider and denser fabric. The emphasis placed on the creative act also had a compelling political connotation for Vicuña. As the termination –*armas* [weapons] suggests, *palabrarmas* were intended to be instruments of war with which to oppose the brutal aggressions of military dictatorship. The first *palabrarmas* Vicuña coined in London in 1974 were ‘*ver-dad, men-tira and sol y dar y dad* [playing on the Spanish words for ‘truth’, ‘lie’ and ‘solidarity’, respectively]. Vicuña’s *palabrarmas* of the *mentira* [lie] are conceived as the atrocious violence used to slash bodies into pieces; while the word *verdad* [truth] is transformed into open and outstretched palms as a gesture of humble and simple offering. Vicuña contrasted the watchful and repressive prison regime imposed by the dictatorship with acts of openness expressed as a hand that welcomes, holds, receives and delivers a vision, a word, a call.

In 1975, Vicuña returned to Latin America and settled in Bogotá, where, in addition to her participation in political meetings of the Chilean resistance in exile and research into Maya codices and the vernacular art of the Americas, her most rewarding working experiences were her collaborations with music and theatre groups, such as the *Corporación Colombiana de Teatro*, for which she painted stage sets in 1975 and 1976, and with the Chilean folk music group *Quilapayún*. In addition, she held workshops in collaboration with indigenous communities such as the ones she held in 1979 for the *Guambianos*, an indigenous community in the *Valle del Cauca* region of southern Colombia. During those years, she travelled around the country on her own, giving talks on the Chilean struggle and offering poetry readings. Also in Bogotá, she gave street performances, including a 16mm film based on interviews with prostitutes, policemen, beggars, activists and slum dwellers that was called *¿Qué es para usted la poesía? [What is Poetry for You?]* (1980).

Until relatively recently, Vicuña’s work was not included in the narratives on artistic practices that challenged the military dictatorship in Chile (1973–1990). Her work was not included within the *Escena de Avanzada* [Advanced Scene],

the term coined by the theorist Nelly Richard in 1981 to refer to the anti-dictatorship art that emerged between 1975 and 1982, mainly in the fields of graphic art, performance art and conceptual art. Vicuña’s work was also excluded from all other accounts of critical art produced in the 1970s and 1980s, years in which she was living and working in exile. In hindsight, it is possible to see how her ignored work did not fit into – or interrupted – the listings and conceptual models used to identify political art practices under Pinochet’s dictatorship.

Vicuña’s desire to dignify rubble, the tiny fragments and the things we throw away, focuses the question on how to reconnect the scattered parts of what we might today call ecological justice – an assembly of many worlds and multiple forms of awareness. In that awareness lies the poetics of enlightened failure, the possibility that the ordinary can become an event. In this sense, the fate of much of her work underscores disappearance as the thing that generates the entirety of her poetics. Her poetry-actions, her *precarios*, her spatial metaphors, her collages and art hangings, her songs and her living *quipus*, insist that there are no successions, only returns.

### CECILIA VICUÑA

Cecilia Vicuña is a visual artist and writer; she is considered one of the pioneers of conceptual art in Chile. Her work focuses on performance, painting, sculpture and video. She studied at the Faculty of Arts at the University of Chile and later pursued postgraduate studies at the Slade School of Fine Arts of University College London. She founded the Tribu No group of artists and poets, and co-founded Artists for Democracy in London, an organisation of artists dedicated to creating solidarity projects with what was then known as the 'Third World'. In 1975, she moved to Colombia, where she continued her studies on indigenous folk art and collaborated with the Corporación Colombiana de Teatro. She was professor of Art History at the Fundación Universidad de Bogotá Jorge Tadeo Lozano and of Contemporary Latin American Poetry at the Fundación El Arte of the Universidad Libre de Bogotá. She was part of the Heresies Collective, which published the magazine *Heresies: A Feminist Publication of Arts and Politics*.

Her works are part of the collections of museums, such as the Tate Modern in London, the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Chile (MAC), the Museo de Arte de Lima (MALI) and the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes (MNBA) in Santiago. Her most recent group exhibitions include *Radical Women: Latin American Art 1960–1985*, shown at the Hammer Museum and the Brooklyn Museum. In 2017, her work was part of *documenta 14*, held in Athens, Greece, and Kassel, Germany. She lives and works between New York and Santiago.

Cecilia Vicuña won the Premio Velázquez de Artes Plásticas 2019, awarded by the Spanish Ministry of Culture and Sport, for her 'outstanding work' and her 'multi-dimensional art'. According to the panel of judges, Vicuña 'displayed multi-dimensional art in which she interacts with the land, written language and fabrics.' They also added that she is 'the creator of special poetics in which environmental awareness, the city and the art institution intersect.' Her work 'owes a debt' to 'a thousand years of knowledge updated through performances, installations, sculpture, books and gestures of everyday life.'



## MIGUEL A. LÓPEZ

Miguel A. López is a writer and researcher, and until January 2020, was the co-director and chief curator of TEOR/ética in Costa Rica. López explores the collaborative dynamics and re-articulations of art and feminist culture of recent decades. He is co-founder of Bisagra, an independent art space in Lima. In 2016, he was distinguished with the Independent Vision Curatorial Award by Independent Curators International (ICI) in New York.

He has curated a number of different exhibitions, including: *Virginia Pérez-Ratton. Centroamérica: deseo de lugar*, co-curated with Maria P. Malavasi, MUAC, UNAM, Mexico City, 2019; *The Words of Others: León Ferrari and Rhetoric in Times of War*, REDCAT, Los Angeles, 2017; *Equilibrio y colapso, Patricia Belli. Obras, 1986-2016*, TEOR/ética, San José and Fundación Ortiz Gurdian, Managua, 2016-2017; *Teresa Burga. Estructuras de aire*, MALBA, Buenos Aires, 2015; *Deus é bicha* at the 31st São Paulo Biennial; *Un cuerpo ambulante. Sergio Zevallos en el Grupo Chacacayo. 1982-1994*, MALI and Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart, 2014-2015; *Perder la forma humana. Una imagen sísmica de los años 80 en América Latina*, collectively curated by the Red Conceptualismos del Sur, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, 2012.

His work has been published in journals, such as *Artforum*, *Afterall*, *E-flux Journal*, *ramona*, *Art in America*, *Art Journal*, *Journal of Visual Culture* and *Manifesta Journal*, among others. He has recently published *Ficciones disidentes en la tierra de la misoginia* (Pesopluma, 2019); *Robar la historia. Contrarrelatos y prácticas artísticas de oposición* (Metales Pesados, 2017), and *Agítese antes de usar. Desplazamientos educativos, sociales y artísticos en América Latina* (co-published by Renata Cervetto, TEOR/ética and MALBA, 2016). He lives and works in San José, Costa Rica.

## SELECTED IMAGES



*Guardián-Guardian*, 1967. Photograph of destroyed sculpture, Concón, Chile.



*Quipu menstrual (la sangre de los glaciares) – Menstrual Quipu (the Blood of Glaciers)*, 2006. Installation. Wool, letter to Michelle Bachelet, video, invitation and fragment of poem. Photo: James O’Hern. Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, Seoul.

SELECTED IMAGES



*Ángel de la menstruación–Angel of Menstruation, 1973.*  
Oil on canvas, 57.1 x 48.2 cm Photograph: England & Co  
Gallery, London. Catherine Petitgas Collection.



*Suéter para John Dugger (basado en su estandarte Chile vencerá)–Sweater for John Dugger (based on his Chile vencerá banner), 1974.* Hand-knitted wool, 64 Å~ 50 cm.  
Private collection. Courtesy of England & Co Gallery,  
London.

SELECTED IMAGES



Cecilia Vicuña in collaboration with Tribu No, *Niñas flores*—*Flower Women*, ca. 1969–1970. Record of the improvised action.



## SELECTED IMAGES



*La ruca abstracta—The Abstract Ruca*, 1974. Installation. Bamboo, wool, string, precarious objects, and seven oil paintings. Festival of the Arts for Democracy in Chile, organised by Artists for Democracy, Royal College of Art, London. 250 Å~ 300 Å~ 300 cm. Courtesy of England & Co Gallery, London.

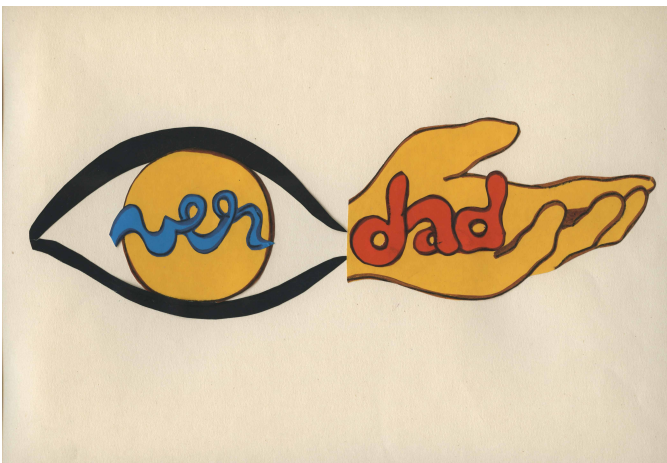


*Chile Salutes Vietnam!*, 1975. Pigment on canvas, 228.6 x 213.36 cm.

## SELECTED IMAGES



*Sol y dar y dad—Solidarity: To Give and Give Sun*, ca. 1977–1979. Performance and intervention in a public space, Bogotá.



*Ver dad—Truth: See Give*, 1974. Collage on paper, 21 x 29 cm. Photo: England & Co Gallery, London.



*Men tira—Lie: Men, Tear the Mind Apart, Pull, or Discard*, 1974. Collage on red paper, 22 x 28 cm. London. Private collection. England & Co Gallery, London.

SELECTED IMAGES



*Angela Davis*, 1971. Ink on paper, 42 x 29 cm Courtesy of the artist.



*Lenin*, 1972. Oil on canvas, 69,9 x 51,1 cm.  
Photo: England & Co Gallery, Londres. Cortesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin, Nueva York, Hong Kong, Seúl.

SELECTED IMAGES



*Hammer and Cabbage*, 1973. Oil on canvas, 91 x 71,1 cm.  
Photo: England & Co Gallery, Londres. Collection  
Juan Yarur Torres.



*India roja recortada*, ca. 1976. Oil on canvas, 67,3 x  
33,7 cm. Cortesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin,  
Nueva York, Hong Kong, Seúl.



SELECTED IMAGES



*India azul recortada*, ca. 1976. Oil on canvas, 67,3 x 33,7 cm. Courtesy of the artist Lehmann Maupin, Nueva York, Hong Kong, Seúl.



*Paracas*, 1983. 6 mm digital transfer, 18:26 minutes. Courtesy Museo de Arte de Lima (MALI) Contemporary Art Acquisition Committee 2017. Gift of Juan Carlos Verme.