

## Plastic Poetry of the Page: Cecilia Vicuña's *Instan*

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**Abstract:** By examining the poems of the contemporary Chilean poet and artist Cecilia Vicuña in her book *Instan* (2002), this essay shows how they, through their experimental form, model visionary feminist and egalitarian social relationships. Consisting of letters or parts of words connected by drawn lines forming short words or phrases in English, Spanish, Latin and Quechua, these visual poems invite the reader to follow the paths of the lines with his/her eyes and body in a visual and kinetic consciousness. The readers are encouraged to make their own connections between letters, words and phrases, producing a process that allows them to occupy a place *between* narrative, time and space. Poems that allow for such radical readerly involvement can be called 'plastic', that is, mouldable by the reader.

This poetic space of between-ness both emerges from and transforms Vicuña's biographical condition as an exile from Chile during Augusto Pinochet's military dictatorship and as one alienated from the contemporary capitalist world. Vicuña both biographically and poetically inhabits a 'non-place' (a term used both by Marc Augé and Vicuña herself). Rather than seek to dissolve or overcome between-ness, she recreates it in her poems as a dynamic transformative position through constant change, crossing over, that is, *translation*, from language to language. This essay thus illuminates how Vicuña's 'non-place' is a highly energized and plastic field capable of 'moulding' new relationships for the exile and imagining an egalitarian and feminist society.

**KEY TERMS:** plastic poetry, poetry of exile, non-place, visual poetry, Cecilia Vicuña, readerly participation

As painter, sculptor, singer, performer, literary commentator and poet, the contemporary Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña takes a step forward in experimental and avant-garde art by making the act of reading poetry a micro-version of a democratic, indeed feminist, society. This lofty ambition demands a radical rethinking of what poetry can achieve, both in form and content. Any encounter with her work involves immersion in language through the senses of hearing, seeing and even touch. It invites participation in the making of the poem as a collaborative event. In this article, I show how Vicuña, in her book *Instan* (2002), expresses an ultimately egalitarian vision through a poetics of what I call plasticity. Criticism of Vicuña's work up to this point has emphasized her feminism, but has yet to take up carefully the question of her work's formal and linguistic elements and their implications. Therefore, while my analysis will not exclude delineation of the feminist aspects of her work, it will look more specifically at her poetic experimentation as it affects her visionary social aspirations. Her performance art, which necessarily involves participants from the community, is perhaps the more realized version of her poetics but does not differ substantially from her written work. I will illustrate how the space and time of the poem in Vicuña's vision is contingent upon the reader/viewer/listener's (and potentially the author's) participation with not only the final product, but also the process of creating the work itself. In her use of plasticity, with its required extreme activation of the reader/viewer, Vicuña models a more democratic and less totalitarian society; the failure

of social relationships in a totalitarian society is challenged by a poetic act that turns that failure into a social success.

In the following study of her poetry, the rubric of plastic poetics will help illustrate how the form and content of Vicuña's work envision a transformation beyond the page. This envisioning begins with the invitations granted to the reader, who is treated in her work not simply as a person in the presence of a text but as a citizen who initially occupies a 'non-place' of isolation or exile, but for whom a 'non-place' may be transformative, into what she calls a more open and responsive space of betweenness. I will argue that plasticity allows for both author and reader to express and transform the condition of the exile, which Vicuña herself has experienced. The exile, existing in a precarious place between cultures, and while not necessarily choosing his/her social displacement, is no longer stuck in any particular place and can therefore continuously move between them. Similarly, Vicuña's book does not constrict itself to one reading, but allows for new readings to be moulded.

Plasticity in *Instan* first requires disruptions of expectations in reading. As with other avant-garde writers, received meanings, ordinary syntax, reliance on the line as the poetic unit, expression in a single language and the assumption of self-sufficiency in the work of art are all challenged. The focus on the page as the poetic unit initiates this disruption of orientation. On the page, the reader is thrown into unexpected worlds: the world of weaving and the web, on the one hand, and, on the other, the cosmic orientation of constella-

tions. Both of these new orientations are defined by connections that the reader is asked to make. Vicuña's poetry is fundamentally unstable or precarious, not fixed and stable, but constantly being made and remade by readers in new encounters. Unlike the line, the page means that there is no right or proper mode of contact with the work. Similarly, the presence of more than one language in a poem suggests not a single point of view but multiple ones. Translation in her poetry refers to carrying a language across from one linguistic perspective to another. Readers in this situation make and remake meanings which, implicitly, are as various as the number of people encountering her work and stand in relation to each other, just as the naming of a constellation comes about through a reading of the relationship between a group of stars. The imagery and language of weaving and constellations appear on the pages of Vicuña's poetry, but it is through the absorption of these ways of reading by many readers that one can speak of the transformation of the reader as a person in a 'non-place' into a member of a 'constellation' of an effectively democratic community and, given its fundamentally non-hierarchical attitude towards the value of individual readings, a feminist community as well. Vicuña provides a space and time for those who have been marginalized to re-envision themselves in a creative and dynamic community.

Originally used in the beginning of the eighteenth century to describe how objects are formed in architecture and sculpture, the term 'plastic' is applicable to Vicuña's work. She aims to create poems, which are 'easily shaped or moulded' (the common definition of 'plastic'), just as objects in the plastic arts are. Furthermore, by emphasizing the process of that moulding, her poems include a meta-discourse on their plasticity. Vicuña does not mould objects out of clay, wax, or stone, but instead utilizes poetic, performance, and visual art techniques to transform what seems flat on the page into an artistic creation that evokes three dimensions. Her plastic poetry thus accords with Charles Bernstein and Jay Sanders' definition of 'Poetry Plastique' as poetry that is 'off the page or outside of normal typographic constraints [...] Pushing the boundaries of textuality [...] literary and visual artists move poetry into a new dimension that emphasizes the concreteness and materiality of the written word' (7-8).

An important feature of plasticity is that it requires a spatial and verbal agreement between poet and reader that allows a reader/viewer to engage actively in the creation of the poem. Such readerly participation in plastic art begins with a disruption of his/her expectations of the space that s/he ordinarily occupies when reading a poem and the subsequent defamiliarization of language and syntax in the received social discourse. This disruption occurs particularly through the spatial arrangements of the words on the page. The non-typical relationships between word and white space on these pages encourage the reader to move through the text non-linearly; the spacing on the page allows the reader to mould the text into his or her own reading. Jessica Smith defines 'plasticity' in art as 'those aesthetic features that reinforce the concomitance of space and

time, simultaneity and succession' to explore the 'virtual reading spaces' of poetry (614-616). Drawing on this definition, I will show how Vicuña's work invites the reader not only to interact with the text as though it were three-dimensional, but also to engage in the production of this 'virtual space'. Vicuña furthermore emphasizes the *process* of art rather than art as a product or object. Because it disrupts power hierarchies through reading, her attempt to unsettle the reader's expectations and defamiliarize his/her sense of time and space creates, moreover, a political and indeed feminist art, its goal being to redefine and strengthen the relationships one has with others and with the fragile environment of current capitalist societies.

Because the relationship between viewer and object becomes the focal point of plastic poetry, the realization of the artwork relies on the engagement of the viewer, and therefore could be said to have an ephemeral or precarious existence. Vicuña plays on the ambiguity of the word 'precarious', a poetic state that ultimately allows for the collaboration that is characteristic of plasticity. On the one hand, she evokes that which is, as stated in Judy Pearsall's edited dictionary, 'not securely held or in position; likely to fall; dependent on chance; uncertain' (Pearsall). On the other hand, she makes use of its secondary etymological meaning as 'prayer' (Pearsall). Juliet Lynd describes Vicuña's precarious aesthetic as 'the vehicle for attaining an open-ended mode of representation that denies fixed meanings and privileges creative connections, positioning the ephemeral as a gesture of hope against hegemonic discourses of power' (1592). Precariousness describes, on the one hand, a socially and economically unstable condition; as such, it represents the failure of a 'top-down' social system to serve the welfare of its citizens. On the other hand, to create precariousness in art means to turn a social failure into an aesthetic success, one that features a sense of openness towards the active presence of any reader and towards the juxtaposition of multiple mediums of art.<sup>1</sup> 'Precarious' art happens in contrast with 'monumental' art that, in theory at least, stands alone, needing no active participation from the reader/viewer. For Vicuña, presumably, monumental art would be associated with a status quo of the art establishment and state-sponsored art, whereas a precarious poem would represent a variety of possibilities with unpredictable outcomes.

Vicuña's primary means of expressing openness and non-hierarchical precariousness is through a dismantlement of linear reading formed by the image of the web and acts of weaving that produce webs, images that have particularly feminine and indigenous associations. For example, the Inca wrote in the form of a quipu, which, although not precisely an instantiation of traditional weaving practices, was formed by knots tied in particular places along strings. Although the purpose of the quipu is unknown, Vicuña claims that the Incas thought memories would be lost in written language, and would only persist through quipu writing (*cloud-net*, p. 20).<sup>2</sup> Literarily, weaving has been represented as a particularly feminine form of writing. To give just one example, Ovid's Philomela, who, after

her rape and her tongue is cut out, communicates her story through weaving. Drawing upon these indigenous and feminine traditions, Vicuña strives to create her own alternative discourse.<sup>3</sup> Through her weaving of precarious threads that are manifested as words, poems, pages, and even real threads, she expresses 'the want for permanence in a universe of uncertainties' (Gordon 95). Because the poems encourage multiple readings, they remain unstable on their own. Nonetheless, each reading, albeit ephemeral, adds to the web of infinite readings which the texts allow. In other words, Vicuña's poetry grants a new, democratic kind of strength through the multiple readings it allows as a mouldable text; the strength comes from the multiple rather than the singular. She uses the imagery and actions of weaving to strengthen relationships in the world that have become precarious and will continue to be so unless they are repeatedly woven together. Vicuña's plasticity is furthered by weaving because the latter shares a number of plasticity's characteristics. In order to weave, one must use one's hands; weaving creates a connection between the thread and the hands that guide them. Plastic poetry, like weaving, requires one to focus on the materials being used to create the work, as well as on his/her physical position, manifested semantically, visually, aurally, and even tactilely in relation to that material; one has to move the page around, flip non-linearly between pages, follow web-like lines and even create his/her own virtual lines to connect the letters on the page. For example, in Figure 1, one has to move the page and/or one's head around the page in order to connect the letters and parts of letters that create the webs.

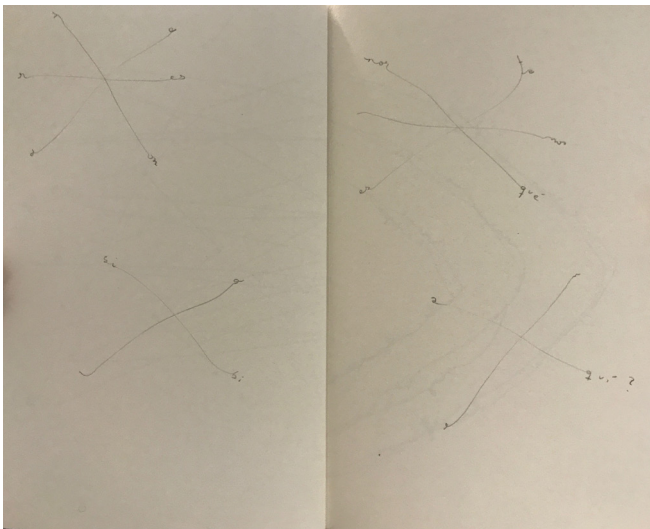


Figure 1: *Instan* drawing. Reproduced with permission of the author.

Vicuña's work, paradoxically, has to remain precarious in order for it to strengthen webs of relationships.

Turning now to her book, *Instan*, and before discussing some individual sections of the book in detail, I shall show how Vicuña's use of the page—the two-dimensional space as the poetic unit—manifests her plasticity. The page opens the vision of poetry, and

consequently the revisioning of thought engendered by the poetry, in three expansive instantiations away from the narrow world offered by the poetic line alone and instead towards: the web, the cosmos figured as constellations and translation as a multiplication of a single linguistic domain. I will provide examples of all three aspects of her work and also the interactions between them. By drawing 'word-constellations' ('palabras estrellas' [77], to use her words), that is, words or parts of words that are strewn across the page, sometimes connected by lines, Vicuña defamiliarizes the reading practice by making the page (as opposed to the word or even the line) fundamental to this collection and encouraging the reader to reconstruct his/her perceptions of space. The spatiality of the poems occasions and results in the image of the created web.

Because the multiple sections respond to one another non-linearly, the structure of *Instan* informs its creation of plastic webs manifest on the page. Published in 2002, *Instan* is a single book of poems 82 pages long, consisting of five interrelated sections. The first section, titled 'gramma kellcani (the drawings)', contains pencil-drawn 'poems' (that can either be read separately or as parts of one continuous poem) that consist of words, parts of words, or letters connected by lines (see, for instance, Figure 2). In the majority of the 'drawings', the words and/or letters float above or beside the lines, some break the lines up, and some flow into the lines or become part of them.

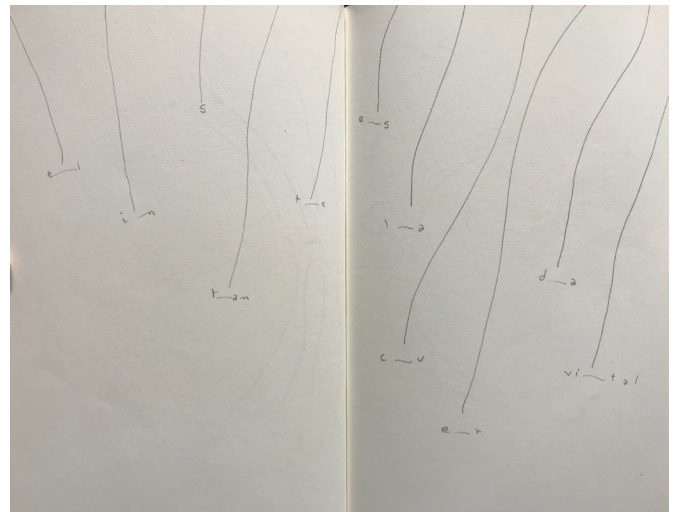


Figure 2: *Instan* drawing. Reproduced with permission of the author.

The first and last pages of this section, however, contain no lines, and the last drawing consists only of dots, thus lacking language all together (see Figure 3).

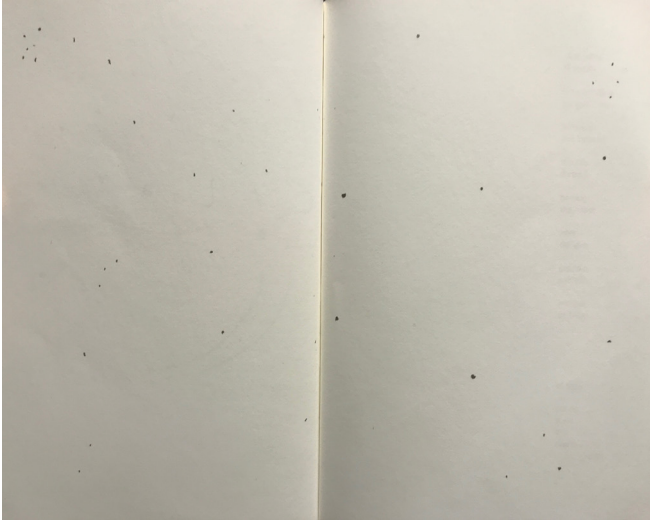


Figure 3: *Instan* drawing. Reproduced with permission of the author.

While Vicuña offers a largely visual poem in the first section, in the second section, titled 'el poema cognado/the poem', she provides a printed verse version of the poem. This poem, which is eight pages long, consists of two or three line stanzas, with each line containing only one or two words. Like many other poems throughout her *oeuvre*, this poem looks like a quipu string, with each stanza 'acting' as a knot. The words and stanzas of this poem, more importantly, correspond almost directly to the drawings of the first section (that is, the words of the drawings are the same in the poem, although there are a few words in the drawings that do not exist in the poem).<sup>4</sup> As Vicuña defines it in the title ('el poema cognado'), the poem in this section is the legible cognate of the visual poem of the first section. These first two sections are calligrammatic: the pages of the first section contain visual webs formed by the words and lines, and the pages of the second section seem to portray precarious threads that have yet to be connected into a web.

The next three sections are meta-poetical reflections on the first two ones. The section titled 'fábulas del comienzo y restos del origen//fables of the beginning and the remains of the origin' contains a short 'poetical poetics' that includes quotations, notes, and stanzas in verse. In the fourth section, Vicuña includes a 'carta or end note' which, written in prose, explains how she 'encountered' the idea of the book. The final section, called 'dixio nary a diction', is a dictionary that provides Vicuña's own definitions of most of the Spanish and Quechua words she uses in the drawings and the poem.

Vicuña produces a poetry that recreates, on the *page*, the experience of exile at the same time that it responds to and transforms that condition. She conveys her understanding of the situation from which she writes, a position of exile in a contemporary world where people tend to be unaware of, or give no weight to, the connections they have with one another. She supplies a poetic response of multiple connections forming strong webs and constellations that attempts to 'heal', or strengthen, the links between people. Like the space of exile she inhabits, Vicuña's poems, and the

words within them, are, as we will see below, 'non-places': as Vicuña herself states in *Instan*, '[a] word is a non-place for the encounter to take "place"' (*Instan*, p. 71). Vicuña's 'non-place' recalls one defined by the contemporary French anthropologist Marc Augé: 'If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined [as such] will be a non-place' (Augé 63).<sup>5</sup> In contrast to what he calls an 'anthropological place', a 'non-place' refers to a location in which 'inscriptions of the social bond [...] or collective history' cannot be seen (Augé viii). Vicuña's poetry attempts to recover that bond by inviting her readers to participate in a new kind of 'place'. A 'non-place' in her work seems to be a space of perpetual between-ness.<sup>6</sup> Vicuña, however, does not create these 'non-place' poems in order to wallow in the state of the deterioration of connections she perceives; instead, she uses the condition of exile to transform displacement into strength. The poems, through the disruptive spatial arrangement of words and parts of words on the page, allow for the creation of a 'web' or 'constellation' of multiple readers that turn the non-place into a new community based on democratic principles. In other words, Vicuña allows for the possibility for encounters 'to take place' and for identities to exist, albeit in a fluid form. In *Instan*, Vicuña reacts to weakening connections by urging the reader to discover on the page a new way to interact and thereby to create new bonds or strengthen old ones, that is, a way that allows for fragility and ephemerality as a means to form continuously new connections.

As I have been arguing, Vicuña defines the poems and drawings in *Instan* as urgent responses, expressed visually on the page and aurally when read aloud, to the alienation contemporary society produces. In the 'end note', Vicuña defines the word *Instan*: '*Instan* is the third person plural of the infinitive "instar," meaning, "to urge, to press, to reply." It first appears in Spanish in 1490, and is associated with political demands. In English it means "to stud with stars"' (77). She then tells the reader what it means for her: 'For me it suggests a movement inward, towards the star, the inner star "standing" in the verb "to be": estar' (77). She describes, furthermore, what the book means to her in the first line of the note: '*Instan*, el libro de la palabra estrella, is the journey inside the word *Instan*' (77). Because 'instan' refers to stars, being, and response, the word brings together a sense of someone responding to the world in a 'non-place,' which may not be of this world, but instead is located elsewhere in the cosmos. In *Instan*, then, the page represents the cosmos, and is 'studded with stars', or words. The cosmos of stars is transformed into constellations by the reader; as an internal re-visioning of accepted readings of words, the cosmic constellations are brought within his/her imagination.

Vicuña's title and her definition of it evoke, and most likely allude to, Stephané Mallarmé's (121-122) as well as many concrete poets' (30-33) 'poetic constellations' that constitute the page. In Mallarmé's poem, 'Un coup de dés', the space that has been shaped by the placement of the words on the page (in particular, they form the shape of the constellation of the Big Dipper) ultimately moves



the reader through the text (144-145).<sup>7</sup> With reference to this poem, many concrete poets use the term 'constellation' when they speak of poems—for these poets, a poem is like a constellation, a drawn map created by the spatial relationships between the stars, that is, the words, on the page. It is not just the words that form the poem, but the white space between them that connects them. In the drawings section, Vicuña creates her own visual poetry, that is, her versions of constellations and the cosmos (see, for example, Figure 4, in which the drawings resemble galaxies), which, in the framework of her poetry, further her democratic visions: individual connections made on the page and by the reader between the letters and words form patterns of connections that are in constant motion.

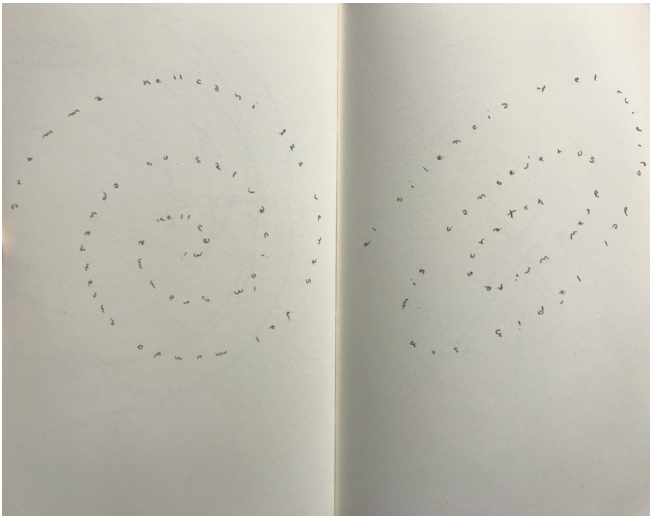


Figure 4: *Instan* drawing. Reproduced with permission of the author.

For Vicuña, the constellation is a cosmic response to the world brought about by the reader's active moulding. In *Instan*, each page in its entirety is a constellation (many with the lines between the 'word-stars', or 'palabras estrellas' [77], already visibly drawn for the viewer), and the pages together create a series of constellations that form a night sky. The two-dimensionality of the page-as-web has been given a cosmic presence. Vicuña's 'drawings' encourage the reader to focus on the spatial relationships between the letters and words. In fact, Vicuña emphasizes the spatial relationships so much so that they become just as, if not more, 'meaningful' than the words themselves (for instance, the words literally translate, or 'cross over,' one another). The words become separated from the signifieds behind them, and thus become material, insofar as they can communicate through means other than those ascribed to traditional language. In Vicuña's 'drawings', not only do the words become material, but the connecting space between them at times becomes visible and solid in the form of drawn lines. It is through the democratic process of the reader(s) and author's participation in following and forming of these lines that the power of the cosmos comes into existence.

Vicuña's constellations, or, 'drawings', in *Instan*, while remain-

ing relatively closed off in that the reader is not required to create his/her own lines between the letters and words, nonetheless require the reader to interact with them. Reading this book is not solely an activity for the eyes, but is also tactile and requires other bodily movements. The reader cannot engage with the text in a traditionally linear fashion because s/he not only physically has to turn the book around in order to read letters and words and follow the connecting lines, but also has to jump back and forth between the poem of section two and the drawings of section one for help understanding the hand written letters of the drawings. The physical manipulation of the book the reading requires informs its plasticity.

The actions of the reader and author in the creation of the text emphasize the space through which connections are made. Vicuña's exile (one that theoretically continued even after Pinochet's dictatorship ended) and the alienation produced by the contemporary world in which she writes gives this book a sense of betweenness that is found in a 'non-place' between cultures, places, languages, and even between and within words on the page.<sup>8</sup> But the non-place becomes a place of empowerment in her work through her plastic vision of translation in which she both reflects on and enacts translation as 'crossing over' and does so in connection with her reader. Translation, therefore, both in its literal enactment on the page and in its etymological sense of 'crossing over', features significantly in *Instan*.

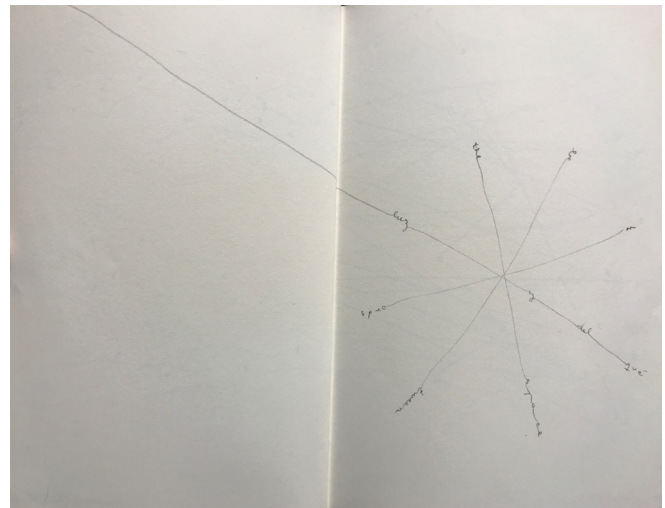


Figure 5: *Instan* drawing. Reproduced with permission of the author.

These poems create a 'non-place' of translation; the poems on the page then are, in the term of the critic and translator Pierre Joris, nomadic, in that they are constantly crossing over, that is, translating, from language to language, and never staying still in one side or another (5-6). Translation, moreover, furthers the mirroring effects of the page, for each translation reflects and responds to the preceding language. As we will see below, Vicuña's 'non-place', of translation on the page, is a highly energized field capable of 'moulding' new relationships for the exile.

By translating between languages and never privileging one

language over another, Vicuña illustrates the poems' ability to be constantly remoulded and renewed with the signifiers and signifieds of multiple languages. In the poem(s) of section one and two, Vicuña writes in Spanish, English, Greek, and Quechua.<sup>9</sup> Joris explains that nomadic poems do not simply offer translations or words to be translated, but rather keep many languages in play at the same time.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Vicuña does not merely translate literally, but combines the different languages by playing with cognates, both visually and aurally, and with definitions of certain words in various languages.<sup>11</sup> For instance, she plays with the words by placing Spanish words next to (or close to) their translations into English and by creating couplet stanzas in which the sequence of words mirror each other (although with a slight difference):

madre  
del habla

imán  
del gen

palabra  
estrella

mother  
of time (p. 59, ll. 9-16)

In this case, she mirrors the first couplet stanza in the last, but switches languages from Spanish to English. In addition, she changes the last word of the mirrored phrase from 'habla' to 'time'. It thus seems as though the mother of speech is also the mother of time. (I will discuss the connection between origin and word further below.) The translation also evokes a sense of conversation, and thus connection, between the two languages.

While there is a connection between both languages, they are still expressed (visually and aurally) distinctly. The 'drawing' of the first stanza of this passage is an inward-moving spiral with the letters detached from the lines (Figure 6), whereas the last stanza's 'drawing' looks like a large asterisk made of four lines, each line beginning and ending with a syllable or letter (Figure 7).

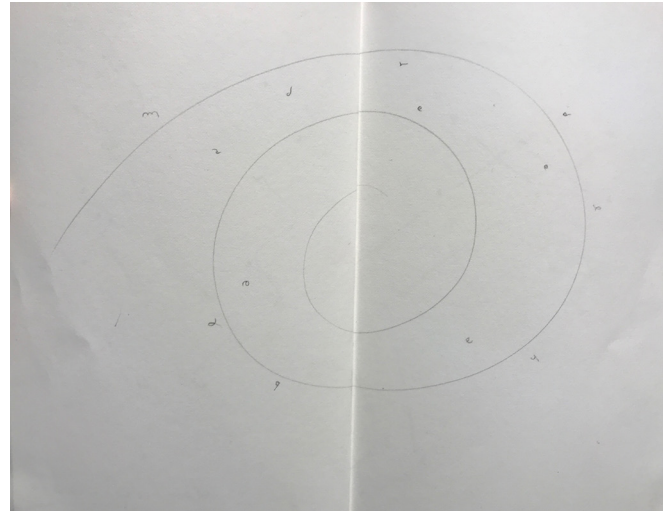


Figure 6: *Instan* drawing. Reproduced with permission of the author.

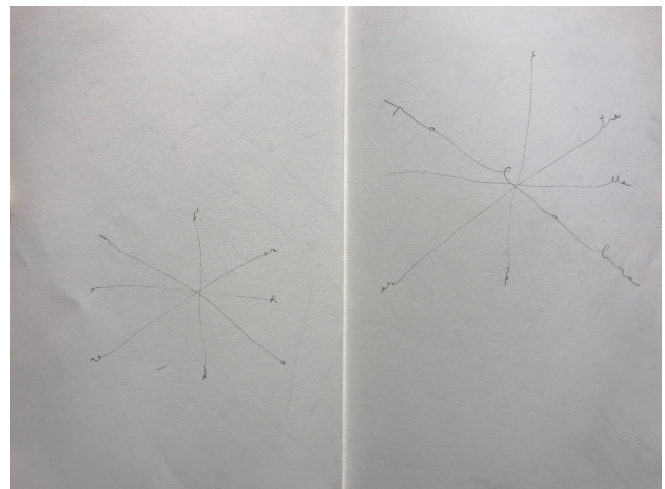


Figure 7: *Instan* drawing. Reproduced with permission of the author.

Thus the conversation occurs not only through the translation of language, but also through a visual translation of the form of the language; the reader, like a nomad, passes through both meanings and forms of language.

Vicuña not only mirrors the languages semantically, but also mirrors them through her use of the spelling and sound of cognates and false cognates. For example, she 'crosses' between languages within the words:

el sign  
o  
no es  
si no  
insi  
nua t  
ción (p. 59, ll. 17-23)

She takes apart the word 'signo' to find the English word with the

same meaning ('sign'), and then 'translates' aurally: 'signo' has the aural 'cognate' of 'si no'. With the cognates 'insinuation' and 'insinuación', the 't' visually demonstrates the crossing point between the two languages.<sup>12</sup>

Vicuña also 'translates' within the same language by taking words apart into their roots and prefix parts. For instance, she takes apart the word 'respond':

a pond  
res ponds  
  
libar  
the way  
you  
re spond (p. 61, ll. 59-64)<sup>13</sup>

The body of water (a pond) answers (responds) by re-sponding.<sup>14</sup> In other words, it creates itself anew. Renewal occurs when one looks at words in a new way, either by taking apart the word and finding new ones inside it or by translating it into other languages. Mirroring is a vital principle in *Instan*. It can be understood as a form of renewal: a pond reflects, or mirrors its surroundings, creating a new, yet similar, image. The mirrored image comes after the original one, and in this way is a response; unlike the 'mere' reflection of Narcissus, this reflection responds. This process of mirroring, for Vicuña, is the act of offering (libar, spond), and it requires one to do it not once, but continuously: 're', going back and doing it again.<sup>15</sup> Mirroring, as an act of translation, thus requires constant refiguring and continuous 'crossing over.' Translation as an act of libation also occurs in the poetic form here: 'spond' makes one think of 'spondeo,' and the line 're spond' is a spondaic foot.<sup>16</sup>

The special character of the poetic drawings in *Instan* can be said to be formed by 'translation', or 'carrying/crossing over', illustrating Vicuña's democratic vision. In many of the 'drawings,' Vicuña solidifies the 'crossing over' from one letter or word to another by drawing a line between them (see, for example, Figure 5). In these 'drawings', the lines not only cross over to different words, but also cross over themselves. Each line, on its own, could be seen as vulnerable, or in a precarious position (although less so than the 'invisible' lines in her book *PALABRARmas* because in *Instan* they are actually drawn), but, the more lines that are drawn, the stronger the network becomes. In a sense, each line is like an 'offshoot' of a rhizome (to recall the term made famous by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari), which, when alone, is vulnerable and may easily break, but when joined with other offshoots, becomes stronger and less precarious.<sup>17</sup> Vicuña's translations create a network of crossing threads that do not remain stagnant in one language because the signs and meanings of the signs move between multiple languages.

As I have been arguing, translation becomes a basic principle or vision in this book for the establishment of all sorts of plastic webs of relationship, a 'crossing-over' from one exiled being to an-

other. Vicuña not only translates words and lines from language to language, but 'crosses over' different modes of artistic expression. She weaves together drawing, poem, poetics, letters, and didactic texts into one book. She not only blends together or makes a collage of the genres, however, but also allows for a constant movement between them, creating what Joris describes as a 'material flux of language matter' (5). The translations she creates model a new way of making connections for the reader. Unlike engaging with a traditional visual collage (in which all of its parts can be consumed at once), the reader moves nomadically from genre to genre, from medium to medium, as if in a 'non-place'.

The 'non-place' in these poems is not defined by a particular culture or origin, but by an encounter with multiple origins. Where Augé's 'non-place' leads to solitude or at least fake, mediated encounters, Vicuña's 'non-place' allows for the formation of relationships. Augé states: 'Clearly the word "non-place" designates two complementary but distinct realities: spaces formed in relation to certain ends [...] and the relations that individuals have with these spaces [...] As anthropological places create the organically social, so 'non-places' create solitary contractuality' (76). If one, however, does not aim towards these certain ends, the 'contractuality' of the 'non-place' could become a means towards social relationships. This is what happens in *Instan*: the 'non-place', or the 'word' (as she says, 'a word is a non-place for the encounter to take place') becomes the ground for connections to take 'place'. In other words, the 'non-places' potentially allow a space of interaction to solidify into a 'place', albeit temporarily. Vicuña demonstrates this potential in each 'drawing': she takes the letters of words apart only to highlight the space connecting them; the page in its entirety becomes the centre of the poem, rather than the semantic meanings of the words.

For Vicuña, these connections in art and society are possible in the 'non-place', the space of the in-between. In the third section, she states: 'A continuous displacement, a field of 'con,' togetherness.//A word disappears, the connection remains' (71). As difficult as this might be, Vicuña seems to call for an acceptance of her position within a 'non-place' and advocates for a continuous movement between cultures. Such movement is crucial to the creation of a living twentieth- and twenty-first century poetics; as Joris has pointed out with reference to nomadic poetry, 'the days of anything static, form, content, state are over. The past century has shown that anything not involved in continuous transformation hardens and dies' (6).<sup>18</sup>

Vicuña maintains this continuous movement in part by forcing the reader/viewer to focus on the changing movements *between* the words and languages. In the poem, Vicuña emphasizes the space between words:

luz y del qué  
the space  
between words

imantando  
el cruzar  
  
crossing  
magnet (p. 60, ll. 32-38)

Vicuña here explains that the space between words is not empty, but rather is full of light ('luz') and energy ('imantando', 'magnet'), foregrounding the space between words, rather than solely the words themselves.

The space between words that manifests on the page, for Vicuña, can be compared to a threshold through which people can pass, but one that continuously changes its location:

luz del  
portal  
  
Mej<sup>29</sup>  
del migrar (p. 61, ll. 69-72)

Vicuña draws the reader's attention to the space between the words and even the space between the letters so that this space, like a frontier, can be recognized, but then re-drawn and reformed.<sup>20</sup> The 'portal' for Vicuña, as mirrored in the stanzas above, allows for migration. The word 'migrar' most likely refers to Vicuña's own experience as an exile and migrant herself, yet also engages the condition of her readers as well as of the words themselves. In this regard, Vicuña acts as Augé suggests a poet does: the poet, for Augé, must write from the space of the 'non-place', or a space 'between', in which one's identity becomes lost in order to create poetry; on the one hand, the poet him or herself has, to a certain extent, to experience the surrounding culture; on the other hand, s/he has to separate him or herself from his/her surroundings to reflect upon them (74-75).

In this space between, the individual (both as poet and reader), for Vicuña, is both the same person and the other at the same time, or, better said, exists between the same and the other. The poet and reader are neither someone else, nor the same person, neither fully one nor the other. As she states in the third section,

Per haps, in di vi dual says  
un divided dual attention  
un divided dual belonging  
to itself and the whole at once.

Dis solve into union it says.  
You will always be longing (73)

The between-state from which Vicuña writes and in which her poems (at least ideally) exist is both unique and shared, as she says in the third section: 'a uni verse wants to *con* verse'. Paradoxically, the

individual must divide in order for it to form connections with others, or become something inclusive ('con' instead of 'uni'); poetry ('verse'), for Vicuña, requires dissolution and reforming. However, the constant dissolving and division requires one to reach continually for something ungraspable. Because both reader and author will always be part individual and part collective, never fully one or the other, they 'will always be longing'.

As the title suggests, the visionary demands of the plastic 'non-place' in *Instan* have its temporal counterpart in what Vicuña calls 'ecstasy,' the affective experience of the instant. She claims in the third section, 'Time awakens inside words'. In particular, the 'time' of her poems is instantaneously and at once present and originary, at the beginning of time:

Silence  
Turns the page  
The poem begins.  
Alba del habla, the dawn of speech [...]

'The soul co-authors the instant,' Humberto Giannini says.

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. (69)

The poem as an instant, according to Vicuña, exists both as an origin and in the present because it is both continuous and ephemeral. Thus, time is 'undone by the instant!' Time is organized by past and future, beginning and end, but the instant of poetry is always in the present. As she says poetically, it is a 'web in ecstasy', 'ecstasy' coming from the Greek *ékstasis*, meaning displacement, away from (ec) stance (stasis), or out of oneself. We can now say that the word is instant, instant is present, present is a web in ecstasy, and this web exists within a 'non-place' of a consciousness out of time.

The image of a web in 'ecstasy' mirrors many of the 'drawings' in section one. Each line, as a thread, crosses over and connects to make a web. Moreover, this thread is 'in a warp'. The thread seems to be spinning in a circular motion, as though someone were spinning it into yarn from wool (in other words, creating it). As she says in another part of the third section, the poem itself is a vortex: 'El poema se desvanece en el vórtice entre las dos'.<sup>21</sup> The energy from the spinning vortex disappears, or dissipates, in the space between the two 'lenguas'. To form the web in ecstasy, the poem's words (or the threads) 'dissipate' like 'dissolving particles' in a space between.<sup>22</sup> Because the 'threads' of space between the words, moreover, draw



the reader away from the signifieds of the words, the plasticity in *Instan* occurs as 'ecstasy'; the reader engages with the space out of, or besides, the supposed singular meaning of the word.

For Vicuña, connections in such a web gain strength in the instant. The instant, for her is a cord, like the string of a quipu:

el instante  
es la cuerda  
vital (p. 66, ll. 82-84)

The instant in which the poem originates is the vital string that forms connections.<sup>23</sup> These bonds recall an origin, in fact, the beginning of life: infancy, that is, the time without speech.<sup>24</sup> For Vicuña, the poem similarly begins without language; her extremely short lines and the drawings of the dismantled words suggest the beginnings of language out of silence. She alludes (see below) to the imagery of milk to indicate a necessary state for poetic language to exist. During infancy, one needs to drink breast milk (or some substitute formula) in order to survive. Vicuña emphasizes that words themselves carry a similar, vital milk of infancy.

Such a state of infancy can imply the involvement of a motherly figure, and here Vicuña yet again conveys a feminist, maternal vision of a language of a place between. In the second and third sections, the woman's body to which Vicuña refers is and creates the time of and space of between-ness through words; words are the location and time of the 'non-place', and these words are possessed by and embody the motherly figure. Firstly, as we have seen above, the woman is the creator of both time and speech:

madre  
de habla

imán  
del gen

palabra  
estrella

mother  
of time (p. 59, ll. 9-16)

From the first page, the female figure seems to be the force (both 'imam', Muslim religious leader, and 'magnet') of the word, which occurs in time, in an 'instant'. The instant of speech originates with the motherly figure that provides sustenance (words). She also provides the genetic code ('gen'); the genes she passes on to the infant could be undeveloped words that, as the infant grows and is provided sustenance (milk), develop into a full language.

The motherly figure creates words on the page not only temporally, but also materially and spatially. Through translating words and parts of words, Vicuña finds the word milk within the words in

the following excerpt from the poem:

carry back  
el re late

la justicia  
de la relación

de volver  
el juguito  
vital

¿adónde  
la leche  
de una  
teta  
común?

a com mon  
teat?

milk  
del trans  
late?

[...]  
a suckling  
of musical  
ink?

la her  
mandad  
de los rhythm

s (pp. 62-63, ll. 98-125)

Mother's milk, according to Vicuña, comes from both the act of translating and the word itself: *translate* (sounds like the words from Romance languages: *latte*, *leite*, *laite*, *leche*, etc.). In order to arrive at this meaning of the word, one has to first cut up the word and cross over to other languages. This milk can also be found in the word 'relate'. Vicuña takes the word apart to form the word 're-late', which could be interpreted as 'milk again/back', or 'carry back' (go back to the origin). Vicuña thus connects the words relate, translate, and milk; translation allows for relation because both of the words *carry* the milk that allows for life. The 'non-place' of translation is therefore the space of relation, which is a 'milky' feminine space.

By breaking up the word 'hermandad', Vicuña also proposes that the space of relationships, this space *between* people, is feminine. Not only does Vicuña tell us that the word is feminine, but, and more importantly, she separates the English word 'her' from the rest of the word 'mandad'. Vicuña emphasizes that fraternal

relationships include the feminine other ('her'). One could also read this in two other opposing ways: Vicuña could be separating the 'her' from the rest of the word, meaning 'command' or be 'in charge of', to distinguish the feminine from the masculine and paternal power (within the Spanish word 'mandad' we find the English word 'man' and the word 'dad'). Moreover, 'mandad', could be read as the imperative of the infinitive 'mandar', meaning 'to command'. One could also read the word 'her' as a possessive adjective, thus reading the stanza as (more or less) 'her command of rhythms'. For Deleuze and Guattari, rhythm is the binary basis for language: there is either sound or not sound (310-350). 'Her command of rhythms' could thus imply that she (woman) is in command of language. Through the ambiguity of the meaning of this phrase, Vicuña attempts to take away the power of any one signified and away from a male-dominated space to allow the feminine to 're-territorialize' the space. Feminizing the space, however, does not mean a transfer of power from one set of hands to another, but instead a transfer of power from one to many.<sup>25</sup>

In sum, *Instan* is a plastic work, in that the book, with its translating constellations and webs, has to be physically manipulated, or moulded to be read. The moulded connections Vicuña desires peo-

ple to recognize and strengthen are not just mental, but physical. In the age of the Internet, a time in which physical relationships are pushed aside in favor of virtual ones, Vicuña urges us to understand the importance of these relationships, despite the ephemeral and precarious nature that the contemporary world grants them. She evokes on the page the 'non-place' of a pre-symbolic language and the 'ecstasy' of encounter, with it as the vital and transformative occasion for a response to exile. The 'non-place' of the in-between can continuously be moulded and restructured (plasticity) because it exists not as something static, but can move to and from its poles. The one who moulds is the translator, the one who 'mirrors' but then 'carries over'. In *Instan*, the translator is feminine, mother, because the space of the between does not fully belong to any phallogocentric society. The translator is also both poet and reader (or at least leans towards being the reader); Vicuña lays out the translations for the reader to translate. It is through the plastic poetry of this feminine 'non-place' that one can combat the destructive nature of a space without connections. Vicuña attempts to change her situation of exile from one of solitude to one of solidarity and invites others to do so as well. In other words, the page, in Vicuña's visionary recreation of it, becomes the poetic site for the recovery of relationships.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Kelly Gordon emphasizes this juxtaposition in her discussion, focusing on the precarious relationship between the photographs and the word in *QUIPOem* and *Precario/Precarious* (93-102).

<sup>2</sup>De Zegher explains that Vicuña has always understood weaving not only as an alternative discourse, but also as a form of female participation in political activities. She draws from the example of the Panamanian Kuna. In this indigenous group's communal meetings, the most eloquent men engage in verbal discourse in the center of a circle, surrounded by rows of women who work on textiles while the chiefs chant. (De Zegher p. 27).

<sup>3</sup>Lynd argues that, in *QUIPOem*, Vicuña's weavings are a new way of representing the memory of the female and indigenous voice (1588-1607).

<sup>4</sup>Although this poem acts as a guide, it might, as I will discuss later, restrict the interpretations of the drawings.

<sup>5</sup>Examples of Augé's non-places include airports, supermarkets, hotels, motorways, etc.

<sup>6</sup>Following Augé, I will use the term 'space' in this way throughout to further the definition of 'non-place', that is, a space that cannot yet be defined as a place (Augé 63).

<sup>7</sup>In addition, the word 'constellation' appears in the poem.

<sup>8</sup>Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'a line of flight', de Zegher proposes that Vicuña's sculptures, as weavings, also exist as a space between (de Zegher 30-31).

<sup>9</sup>It is worth noting that the titles of the sections are all in some way translated, but each translation is connected to its cognate in a different way: with parentheses, a slash, a line break, the word 'or', or a play on the multiple translations within one word: 'contents//1. gramma kellcani (the drawings)//2. el poema cognado/the poem//3. fábulas del comienzo y restos

del origen//fables of the beginning and remains of the origin//4. cartas or end note//5. dixio nary a diction'. The entire book is thus based on translation—beginning with visual poems that are translated into a 'verse' poem, which is translated to poetics, and then into a dictionary.

<sup>10</sup>Although nomads might not be multilingual, their movements between places are similar to those movements that one in exile might take between languages.

<sup>11</sup>Even the poem section is a cognate for the drawings, as Vicuña calls the section 'el poema cognado'.

<sup>12</sup>When discussing Vicuña's 'precarious,' Lippard similarly proposes that 'the cross form that recurs in the sculptures [...] might also be a symbol of bicultural experience, paths that both meet and depart' (11).

<sup>13</sup>The deconstruction of the word 'respond' is reminiscent of what Vicuña does in *PALABRARmas*.

<sup>14</sup>Vicuña emphasizes the relational nature of understanding art with the image of the pond. As a reflective surface, the pond responds to the person looking at it, that is, the reader/viewer.

<sup>15</sup>The act of offering adds to the precarious nature of the poems; they are pleas.

<sup>16</sup>As a libation, this translation links to the divine.

<sup>17</sup>The instances of translation in nomadic poetry, as Joris explains, inform its rhizomatic qualities (5-6).

<sup>18</sup>This is not to say that one cannot linger in one place or another, only that one should not remain static. Joris explains that a poem is 'a stop in the moving along the nomad line-of-flight' (46-47); Vicuña's poems, as 'instants', act in a similar fashion.

<sup>19</sup> Here, 'Mei' could be the translation of 'light' into Japanese (although the word has many definitions in Japanese), thus emphasizing the light and energy that the space between words carries.

<sup>20</sup> For Augé's definition of a frontier, see pp. xiv-xv.

<sup>21</sup> The image of the poem as vortex is reminiscent 20th Century Vorticism, such as the pre-WWI works of Ezra Pound, in which he attempted to create a spiralling energy that spun into a culminating point.

<sup>22</sup> This is reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome that grows and constantly becomes (9-15).

<sup>23</sup> The originating instant, however, does not stay in the past, but continuously recurs in the present. Unlike Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, in which its shoots can always break off and recreate, Vicuña's poems in *Instan*, however, may recur, but they do not explicitly reshape every time they are read—a reader might become lost when following the lines or might take awhile to find where to begin following the lines of a drawing and thus

might not read the drawing in a unique fashion, but eventually each reader can find the same logical reading (especially with the help of the poem of the second section) of the drawing. Because the lines connecting the letters and words in many of the 'drawings' are already drawn for the reader and have already been solidified, this book, furthermore, does not fully realize a rhizomatic poetry where the lines can be broken, reformed, renewed, or 'deterritorialized' and 'reterritorialized' by the reader (Deleuze and Guattari 9-15). While Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome cannot be captured in any particular instance for fear that it will solidify and come to represent itself, rather than be its constantly moulding self, the 'drawings' are nonetheless, I suggest, instances of a rhizomatic poetry, or, more precisely, they are like photographs taken of a rhizome at a specific point in time.

<sup>24</sup> The word etymologically means 'not able to speak.'

<sup>25</sup> Hélène Cixous argues that the woman is multiple (875-893).

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