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Cecilia Vicuña's Quipu-Making as a Theory of Time

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"[A] quipu that is not/ time's ritual measure"
Cecilia Vicuña

Cecilia Vicuña's aesthetic production began in the 1960s, a period in Chilean political history defined by intense social discontent and turbulence, which led, in 1969, to the creation of the leftist coalition, *la Unidad Popular*, and to the presidency of Salvador Allende in 1970. Indisputably, 1973 marked Chilean history with one of its deepest historical wounds, the military coup—the effects of which are still felt today due to the violent crimes committed against the community at large and the human rights of individuals. After Augusto Pinochet forcibly took control of the country three years into Allende's administration, many artists went into exile, fleeing the government's machinery of surveillance and censorship. Vicuña, already living in London at the time, decided to embark on a self-imposed exile through Latin America where she became familiarized with Amerindian cultures.

As Vicuña has explained in her book *Precario/Precarious*, her commitment to the socialist cause and Allende's government—along with her desire to transform

sociopolitical structures throughout the Americas—has always informed her aesthetic imagination and ethical commitment. However, Vicuña's work fails to neatly fit into what Adorno has called "committed art" in his famous essay, "Commitment." Nor can it be seen as an example of fetishizing textile and aesthetic practices into "autonomous" constructs.

Vicuña's art is undeniably abstract and conceptual although still invested in social and political reality. Juliet Lynd, in her panoramic analysis of Vicuña's oeuvre, calls her "a pioneer in experimental art in Chile a decade before happenings and other genre-bending artistic displays emerged in the mid-seventies as a deliberately cryptic form of resistance to the violent regime of Augusto Pinochet" (1588). If the particularities of the Chilean political scenario demanded that writers and artists resort to cryptic aesthetic forms in order to manifest their opposition, Vicuña's experimental art, already *a la vanguardia* from the beginning of her artistic production, had a different, although not opposite, aim in mind. The reality to which her artistic production responds has an ethical ambition: to unearth the other from the past, to encounter the other in the pre-history of national discourses so as to reinterpret the political present in hopes of opening up a symbolic time and place for the other in the future.

Vicuña, heeding the quintessential Jamesonian dictum to always historicize, seeks the origin of the other's disappearance within national discourses, for she conceives of this disappearance as the primary violence upon which the whole of Chilean history has been written. This is her fundamental bet. For this reason, she historicizes the dictatorship and the post-dictatorship era as signposts of political and historical violence, by tracing a line, a thread, back to pre-colonial times, showing that the whole issue of Chilean national history has to do precisely with its pre-national history insofar as absence. This particular connection to historical events defines her whole quipu-making as a practice, as a methodology, but also—and, more importantly—as a philosophy of time. In speaking of a thread, as in yarn or fiber, I also mean line, as in a poetic line. Line and thread are ubiquitous, supplemental, additive, and, at times, interchangeable in Vicuña's work, not only because she is a poet and a visual artist, but also because thread and line are woven together into a whole new plastic worldview embodied in her aesthetics of *arte precario*.[1]

[1] I use the word "additive" here in contrast to "reductive," following Tim Ingold's taxonomy of traces. By additive trace or line, he means "an extra layer superimposed upon the substrate," whereas reductive traces "are formed by the removal of material from the surface itself" (43).

What operates upon and moves across Vicuña's textile weaving operates upon her language, and vice versa. This interrelation is constitutive of an integrated aesthetic sensibility wherein weaving and writing are inseparable and woven together in the creation of a new sense of temporality. The weaving of thread and line is, furthermore, the opening and intertwining of new worlds represented by each thread. Vicuña's multifaceted art is comprised of the weaving of plastic arts with poetry: she fuses sculptures, art installations, and paintings with concrete and visual poetry, with comparative etymology, and digital films. She inserts poetic language into textiles and volumetric forms, sometimes as a gloss when documented *a posteriori* in a book, sometimes as integral to the aesthetic procedure, but always calling into question the very ethos of all interpretation in terms of the creation of meaning and the constitution of national histories and identities.

Vicuña's art responds to political and historical violence by transforming its fundamental elements. Therefore, she is committed to the reality of the invisible yet *a priori* to Chilean national and historical representations, for she finds in this pre-history an underlying violence that has permitted all historical violence in Chile. Her creative response to this state of profound violence is to re-use obsolete memory technologies associated with women's and Amerindian practices: weaving textiles so as to re-weave the past. She weaves in the flexibility of memory's time to the fabric of history. Memory's time interrupts history with the images of its absence, hence her use of the obsolete represented here by the art of pre-Columbian communities and their textile practices which infuse her art.

I posit that Vicuña's recourse to Amerindian textile art as a response to historical and political violence entails a re-evaluation of the concept of time and consequently of the notions of past, memory, and loss. Her aesthetic project exceeds the notions supported by post-dictatorship studies and secondary literature that conceive memory, the past, and its interpretations as melancholic and as allegories of failure.[2] What are the implications of this reconceptualization? How does it affect memory's work? How does it affect allegory, understood as a critique of history? If the

[2] Through a reductive reading of Benjamin's work, critics who write about the post-dictatorship era pose the work of memory as melancholy. As Susana Draper astutely explains in her article "The Question of Awakening in Post-dictatorship Times": "it is important to understand the ways in which certain readings of Benjamin's work became dominant in the decade following the end of the military regime, and to raise a series of questions regarding other acts of reading that did not take place" (88). This does not imply there is a need to replace or discount Benjamin's influence on post-dictatorship studies, but rather we should try to find and institute "other acts of reading."

pre-colonial past is the substratum of Chilean historical obliviousness, Vicuña's effort to remember or to pay our debt to seeks to name and heal this historical void. Her *quipu*-making is thus memory-making. I refer to this as the uses of the past.[3] She is not neglecting the concreteness of her time by turning to obsolescence and waste but rather unearthing what she sees as the origin of Chilean historical violence. This is her urgency. My aim is to show how Vicuña transvalues the obsolete, first, into a critique of Chilean historical malady, and second, into a massive allegory of time. The first section of this essay briefly introduces the figure of the quipu. The second is devoted to the study of the line in Vicuña's "the quipu that remembers nothing." Through a Bergsonian lens, the last section explores the aforementioned poem in relation to the concept of memory along with Vicuña's calligram *Ceq'e*.

I. If "A thread is not a thread," then the Line is not a Line

Before analyzing one of Vicuña's most well-known visual poems, "The quipu that remembers nothing," and her poem *Ceq'e*, a caligramatic quipu, we need to understand the quipu's possible functions (Fig. 1). *Khipu* derives from the Quechua word for "knot." Vicuña does not use the Quechua spelling but the Spanish "quipu." Knotted, colored threads were (allegedly) used for different purposes, ranging from statistical records to historical narrative. According to Gary Urton, an authority on the quipu tradition, the quipu is a "powerful system of coding information in pre-Columbian South America and which, like the coding system used in present-day computer language, was structured primarily as a binary code." Sadly, we have no way of definitively interpreting the material contained within the few 600 quipus that are extant today (*Signs of the Inka Khipu* 1-2). Although thanks to colonial records we know that the quipus were used for purposes as varied as to record "censuses, tribute, ritual and calendrical organization, genealogies, and other such matters from Inka times," the discussion continues as to whether to conceive of the quipu as a simple mnemonic or, indeed, as a form of writing (3). Whether the quipu was merely a mnemonic or not, or

[3] I follow Nietzsche's distinction between the uses and abuses of the past in his *Untimely Meditations*. Vicuña contests reactive abuses of memory and proposes an active, positive remembrance. The activity of memory, as opposed to a passive recollection, belongs to the realm of ethics for it is, first, a doing, an action, and second, because it is a reading, an interpretative act. The activity of memory, as opposed to its passion, is an ethical response to the individual and political oblivion suffered during the military regime and its aftermath. Memory conceived in these terms does not seek to restore any lost unity of sense or cosmovision but attempts to envision another future. In other words, this memory does not aim to serve the past but the future.

if it constituted some kind of coded alphabet, is not really Vicuña's point, for she re-interprets it for other reasons. The quipu, according to Vicuña, does not remember anything.

Figure 1. Traditional quipu.

I want to briefly develop two elements pertaining to the structure and value of the quipu, which will allow me to analyze the particularities of Vicuña's quipu-making in section three. The first concerns the quipu structure: "Khipu are composed of a main, or primary cord to which are attached a variable number of what are termed pendant strings" (Urton 4). In Vicuña's work there is a movement from a rather mimetic quipu-making that looks two-dimensional (as in her quipu from 1991 simply entitled "quipu"), to a volumetric representation of the quipu without a main cord (her art installation the *quipu menstrual*), to an even more radical transformation of it in her film *Kon Kon* (which she defines as a "digital quipu"). In Figure 2, there is a primary cord to which eight knotted pendant strings are attached. The cords vary slightly in color and seem to be messily knotted and arranged; some of the strings appear to be knotted to each other, suggesting or creating a circular motion. We cannot discern any narrative or any fixed meaning from it, since Vicuña did not add any text to it or explain what the knots signify. This mimetic quipu speaks only as expressivity, through the tension of form and context. Threads and knots have an ontological value, bearing witness to anything other than the existence of the quipu and the flexibility and plastic

potentiality of the yarn thread, which, as I will show, intervenes and supplements the character of the written line. This is perhaps Vicuña's most melancholic quipu and the least avant-gardist of them all. What we can infer, however, by virtue of its own expressivity, is the precariousness of the threads, the fragility of the knots, and the small, shy scale of the quipu, in stark contrast to her "menstrual quipu" (Fig. 3). Vicuña's quipu-making was still in an inchoate state by 1991. While I will return to the quipu structure in my analysis of "the quipu that remembers nothing," for now, let us retain this structure of "main thread" and "pendant strings."

The second element is the quipu's colonial use: it is interesting to note here that the Spanish colonizers used the quipus to understand the past and social structure of the Amerindian civilizations. However, in time, the Spanish became wary of them since, as social registers, they competed with Spanish records, particularly in legalistic matters (Quilter and Urton, *Narrative Threads* 4). The question of competition is of vital importance since it points to the primacy of the written language represented by the colonizer versus the textile technology of the colonized. Ángel Rama has extensively studied the relationship between the lettered man and power in his well-known, posthumous work *La ciudad letrada*. It is not too difficult to envision how the written alphabet in colonial times—as monopoly and control of signs—took over sign systems that were not alphabetical. As Rama explains, the demands of colonial administration and of evangelization contributed to the constitution and consolidation of the power of the letter (23-27). The clout of the alphabet was, of course, vital in the process of indigenous institutionalization. The fate of the quipu was inevitable. Vicuña does not relinquish the power of the letter for she is, of course, a poet, but her recourse to, and transvaluation of, obsolescence is more than a mere aesthetic gesture: it is her attempt to intervene within the authority of the letter. The plasticity of the quipu, and its freedom from predetermined signification, allows her to problematize different semantic registers as well as different technologies of registering and accounting for the past. The power of the letter in the determination of the political future is, then, contested by the open field of endless weaving and re-weaving that the yarn represents. In other words, the quipu's added quality frees any preempted telling of the past and foretelling of the future contained in the thread *qua* trace, thus evoking the plasticity of time.

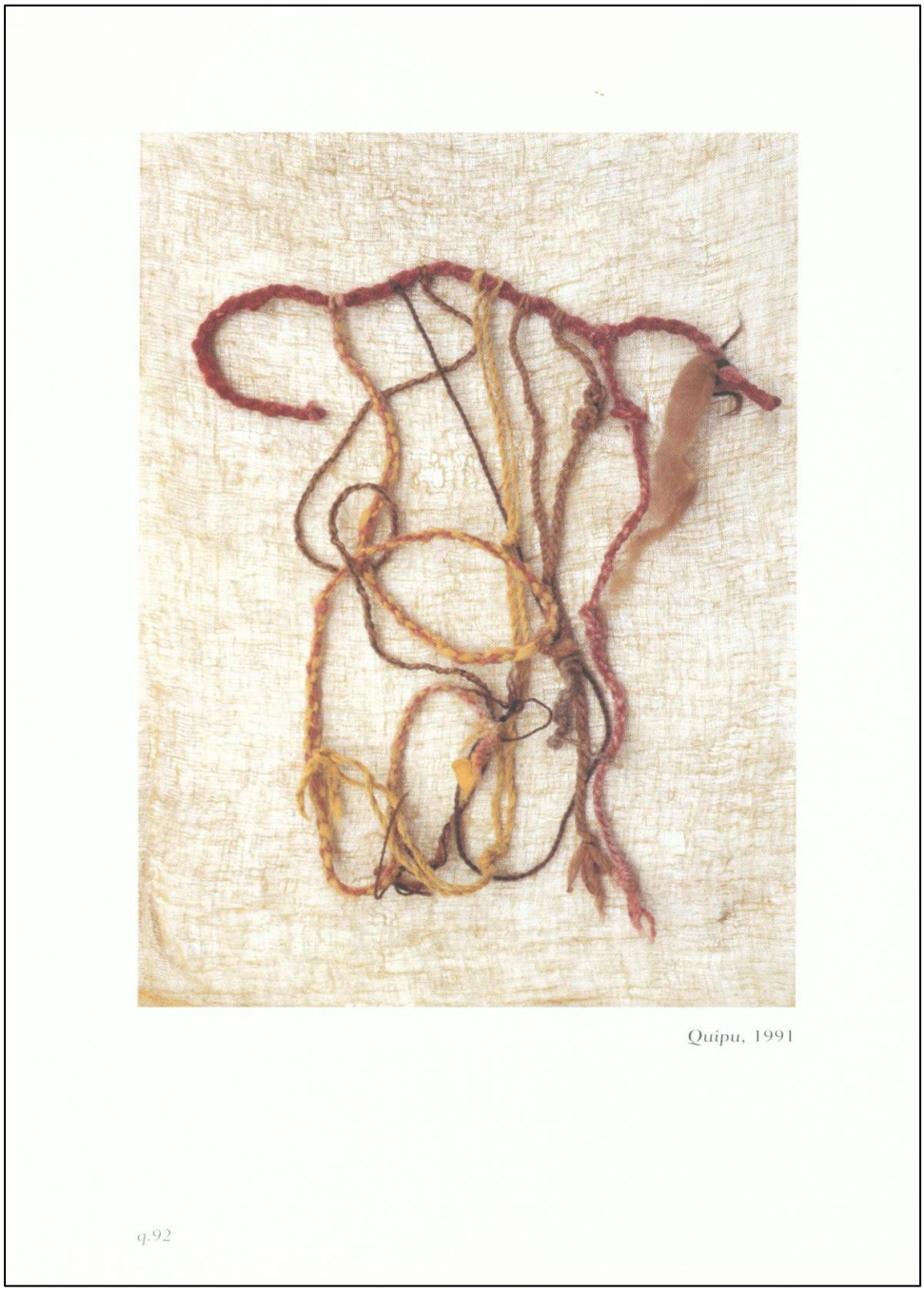

Figure 2. In *quipoem,* 92.

Figure 3. *Quipu menstrual* installation in the Centro Cultural Palacio de la Moneda.

II. Vicuña as *khipukamayuq*

The ambiguous social function of the pre-Columbian quipu accentuates Vicuña's creative act and the aesthetic and political qualities she attributes to her own quipus as allegories of temporality, and not so much of history, historiography, or narrativized versions of particular historical or cultural events. For Vicuña, form (threads, knots, lines, words, quipu) functions within the Chilean post-dictatorial context and within Chilean history as a whole as an intervention within the registers of memory determined by the cultural and political imperative to forget. Through the formal arrangement of the thread and of the line, Vicuña entwines the representational aesthetic function of her quipus with presence—the presence of an erasure—proper to the selective, historical fabulations of nation-building. The quipu enters into competition with historical narratives not by virtue of a parallel content but by virtue of its own allegorical structure. The book quipo*em*, which contains the visual re-writing

of the original "quipu que no recuerda nada," is from 1997, almost a decade after the plebiscite that led to Pinochet's removal as President of Chile. The book as quipu and the writing of poetry—hence the name quipo*em*—is thus a direct critique of the politics of memory and reconciliation and the state of silence by way of which the Chilean nation has decided to continue to bury the past. As archeological memories, Vicuña's quipus are, in sum, not historical; however, this does not mean that they are ahistorical either. They are, as I aim to show, calendrical objects.

Vicuña's decontextualized use of the Andean quipu as well as the written language of the Spanish exacerbates the "disparity between European and Andean cultural modes of thought and representation" (Brokaw 112). Outside of its original social system of signification and inserted into a different tradition and cultural system, quipu-making has become a deliberately obsolete communicative technology. Vicuña's will to remember as a genealogical effort moves her to dig up this system of communication so as to catalyze a whole new system of values attributed to it. Recontextualized, obsolescence itself poses the question of the place of memory and its uses in the constitution of political life, but also inquires as to the possibilities of a new modality of thinking. Is the memory of our own past threatening to become obsolete too? Can our present historical technologies, the annals of history, withstand the pressure of time? What has been incorporated into the civic life of the nation and what remains invisible yet actively sacrificed to the forces of the market, the forces of neocolonial powers, the forces of oblivion?

In "the quipu that remembers nothing," the alleged memory function of the quipu has been lost (Fig. 4). The quipu remembers nothing, not because *it* cannot but because *we* cannot. What we lack is a way to remember, not memory. The past, unactualized, is already contained within the thread. The reality of what is ostensibly lost is concurrent, although virtual (as I shall shortly show), stored in time, with the historical present. It is hence not devoid of historicity but awaiting actualization. The quipu, with its colorful threads, then, is there; the images, although unused, are there. In other words, the quipu's phenomenality, the trace of its constitutive, original movement, stands in and for the place of signification. What we lack, then, is a modality of interpretation, and this is what Vicuña is trying to create: a new way of remembering the past through its uses (positive, affirmative, and transformative). Hence, she performs an ever-increasing disparity, an ever-greater distance and mediation of registers between the pre-Columbian memory, the colonial past, and the post-colonial situation of Chile. Vicuña's art objects encode a knowledge that does not seek to

represent, reconstruct, nor restore the cultural past in which the quipu had functioned; it is in this sense that the obsolete is reworked into sheer newness.

Newness has baptismal powers: it names the void and the new and creates an innovative way of expressing things. It has recourse to other means, codes, and artistic supports. This is the fundamental value of the obsolete textile art of weaving and of quipu-making. The re-contextualization and relocation of the obsolete seeks to alter its original meaning by imbuing the aesthetic object with new formal qualities that respond to the specificities of the new societal conditions of production. As an aesthetic form and as a memory technology, the obsolete represents an active use of the past that not only serves as a new modality of expression, but also as an antidote to the neoliberal ideal of consuming the new. The re-inscription of the obsolete into newness serves the purposes of unveiling the internal dynamics of the work of art and its materiality along with unveiling societal dynamics by way of these innerworkings. Newness, in this regard, must not be confused with the production of new commodities for fast consumption.

Since this is a visual poem, Vicuña relies on the interrelation of the pictographic and the alphabetical to, on the one hand, convey and comprise the meaning of her *ars poetica*, and, on the other, to open her compilatory book quipo*em* as an epigraph that introduces her theories of time. She weaves together reproductions of some of her art installations, sculptures, poems, and documents into a whole new theory of time and meaning that the name quipo*em* represents: poetry and quipus, quipus as poems, poems within quipus, the book as quipu, a biographical existence as quipu, time as quipu, quipu-making as changing time (and hence memory and history), etc. The unity of quipu and poem produces a new aesthetics which both necessitates and creates a new language. The line as thread and the thread as line involve the encounter of two aesthetic media. If the thread is the limit of the world, as Vicuña states in one of her poems, the knotting of line and thread represents the knotting of two worlds, the world of time and the world of language, the time of art and the time of memory conveyed into the visual arrangement of the thread/line (quipo*em* 36).

It is the synthesis of thread and line, weaving and writing, that constitutes for Vicuña the work of memory. Language alone or image alone are not able to interpret the images of the past without the repetition of the same. Therefore, the most creative use of the past for her comes from weaving, from connecting what is missing, for "[w]eaving is union," as she states in *Unravelling Words and the Weaving of Water* (102).

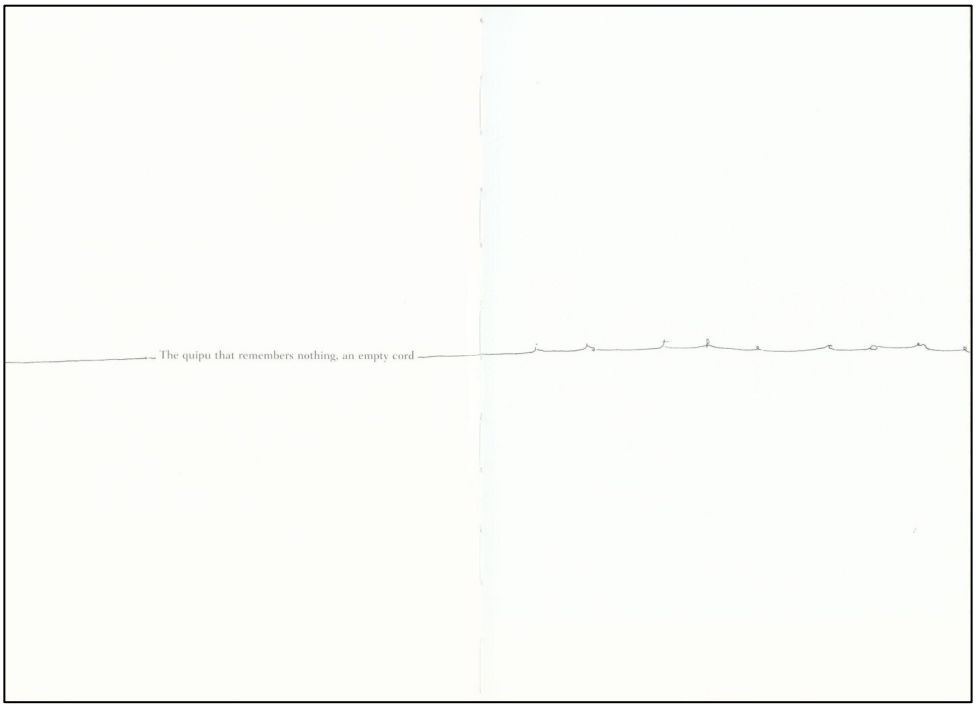

Figure 4. First two pages of "the quipu that remembers nothing."

This visual poem is, thus, not only a trace upon a surface, constrained by the possibilities of the page and determined by its creative, dynamic impetus, but also spurred by eruptive connections. The poem is a site of newness and inventiveness because through the word "we can invent an *etymon* (true meaning), one that contains within what the world will be" (38). Vicuña charges the word, the line, the thread, and their multiple exchanges and interactions with potentiality and with the futurity of the world or of worlds-to-be. They are not, then, traces of the past, as it may be assumed by the status of poem *qua* indelible mark on a page, but traces of a tension, of a constant presence announced by the line. If "'tension' is the force living within the element," as Kandinsky would have it, the trace that the quipu represents is the force of time (*Point and Line to Plane* 57).

For Vicuña, the line itself is a complicated and productive site where multiple forces, linguistic and extra-linguistic, encounter each other:

> La palabra es un hilo y el hilo es lenguaje
> Cuerpo no lineal
> Una línea asociándose a otras líneas
> Una palabra al ser escrita juega a ser lineal,
> Pero palabra e hilo existen en otro plano dimensional
> Formas vibratorias en el espacio y el tiempo
> Actos de unión y separación. ("Palabra e hilo" 8)

The word, and furthermore, language itself, have a paradoxical structure: they are non-linear bodies which, through association and the process of writing, appear to be linear, yet at the same time, they are lines associating with other lines. Their materialization thus depends upon their associative possibilities; the page, in this regard, is the canvas for the possible encounter of multiple associations. Vicuña's poem is only in appearance minimalistic, for word and thread carry with them the knowledge of another dimension of being, another plane of existence which, in the line and by the line, are able to vibrate, to reverberate their multidimensionality in the time and space of the page. Hence, the line is the anchoring and materialization of other-worldly existences.[4] The precariousness of the poem's line acquires renewed impetus when contrasted with Vicuña's understanding. The line is, for her, a creative appropriation and a chiasmic encounter between time and space. The poem signifies, consequently, in the interval between them. The ontological vibration of which Vicuña speaks contests any static reading as well as any static image of the poem; the poem is in flux and the line, like the words on the second page, is trembling.

Brokaw has argued that all quipus are in some way related to oral traditions (113). The fact that Vicuña's visual quipu "does not remember anything" does not refer to a lost oral tradition; it does not signal "the emptiness of the traces of the forgotten and unknowable," as Lynd suggests (1593). The trace, first and foremost, speaks for and by itself as a trace, as latency, dormant yet breathing, not in the emptiness and not as emptiness, but as a reservoir of newness. It certainly says that this is invisible, this is forgotten, this is unknowable to our alphabet, but it also says that this is a possibility of remembrance: the possibility of hearing, of creating, in sum, of interpreting "an ancient silence waiting to be heard." The textile work as well as the poem are thus a listening "with the fingers, a sensory memory" (quipo*em* 131). In this regard, "the quipu that remembers nothing" is not melancholic but affirmative, creative, and fundamentally rebellious against any predetermined temporal and poetic signification. What the reader senses in the line and what the line carries within are vibrations of meaning waiting to be actualized.

[4] Gloria Gálvez-Carlisle states that "[d]entro de la aparente sencillez de la palabra [de Vicuña] merodea un estilo alegórico que incisivamente alude al carácter híbrido del origen americano y, al mismo tiempo, a la compleja polifonía intercultural que marca su discurso" (125). I agree with Gálvez-Carlisle, yet I see in Vicuña's allegorical style not only a cultural concern, but also an ontological one, with regards to the origin of language and the being of words prior to any cultural, temporal, and spatial coordinates. Vicuña's polysemy encompasses a much more nuanced and philosophical interrogation of the being of words and thread.

Lynd analyzes the first poetic version of "the quipu that remembers nothing" as a melancholic gaze into the past. She reads its reworking into a visual poem, conversely, as an indication of "a different way of representing memory" (1593). The quipu cannot remember the past because the past needs to be invented. The visual poem, by definition, uses language and image as a medium; it communicates in the interaction of both. The fact that Vicuña reworked the original poem into a visual one only emphasizes the openness and plasticity of memory as well as Vicuña's consolidation of her own aesthetic practices and her urgent task to create the past; as she states in one of her poems, "the past is that which is yet to come" (quipo*em* 146). The visual aspect, with respect to the traditional arrangement of its predecessor, has a glossing function and serves as a critique of the constraints represented by the broken line of actualizing the past. In other words, the poem must be interpreted along with the concept of time suggested by the cord of the quipu stretched across three pages. But it also is indicative of Vicuña's refusal of any preemptive notion of beginning and end, of opening and closure of the poetic, and of the temporal. The line of the visual poem refuses to break itself into stanzas or organize itself according to its previous verse incarnation. If its predecessor yielded to the verse tension between the "semiotic" and the "semantic," wherein the poem has both a definite beginning and end, the visual articulation of the "quipu that remembers nothing" proposes, first, a different interaction between sound and meaning; second, it disrupts the end of the poem. The visual arrangement of the quipu rejects enjambment. There is no tension between sound and meaning but rather a dynamic complicity, an unfurling together along a continuum. What happens, then, to the end of the poem? Giorgio Agamben states that "if poetry is defined precisely by the possibility of enjambment, it follows that the last verse of the poem is not a verse" (*The End of the Poem* 112). Consequently, Vicuña's visual poem seems to be caught in an identity crisis: it is either a poem that is not verse, for it is already at its end—doomed as it were, from its inception—or it is a radical reframing of the institution of the poem, freed from versification, in which there could be no possible end to it, for the quipu's line (and not the verse) is time's semantic and semiotic love child. The reworking of it, in other words, implies that, for Vicuña, the power of the letter can and must be reworked if the future itself is to be different. This is fundamentally the influence of "word-working," words that show, that allow us to see (*UW* 38). Yet the seeing evoked by the visual poem, does not re-inscribe the gaze's ontological status, which would subsume it into a subject-object relationship. This would be contrary to Vicuña's sensual, tactile poetics. There is not an "I" and a "you"

here; the gaze, rather, merges with a force, an expansion, a movement, a dynamism—the tension of which Kandinsky speaks—removing the reader at once from her subject position and submerging her into the breath and flesh of time, suggested by the horizontal line that cuts across the three pages. At first glance, the line might seem to invoke homogenous, teleological time, but the inclusion of printed text and handwriting, the interruption of the book binding, the multidimensionality of the word, as well as the content of the poem, suggest otherwise.

The simplicity of "The quipu that remembers nothing" borders on abstract minimalism, stemming from Vicuña's participation in conceptual art as well as her own aesthetic of precariousness. The poem extends for three pages in which the white page is almost cut across in the middle by a straight, hand-drawn line that appears to come from the back of the page. The origin of the line points to an ever-expanding and always connected thread to the past. The straight line that inaugurates the poem carries with it "the potentiality for endless movements," as Kandinsky reminds us, which suggests that the line on the second page is but one possible movement contained within the straight one (*Point and Line to Plane* 57). In a medium-sized font, the first page reads, "The quipu that remembers nothing, an empty cord." After the word "cord," the hand-drawn line continues across the second page, where it is suddenly interrupted by hand-written words that minimally differ from a straight line. They seem to be part of the line, as if it were suddenly and softly warped by a ripple of memory, as if a memory were just recollected causing the line to quiver and slightly record its vital signs as in a cardiogram. The quipu records the brevity of this movement. The line suggestively reads: "is the core."[5] There is no conflict or tension between these pages. The

[5] Whereas in Raul Zurita's *Purgatorio* (1979) the poet provides a poetic-scientific (cognitive) diagnosis of his madness, Vicuña's poem evokes the idea of the electrocardiogram, for according to its etymological origin, *recordar* (from the latin *re* and *cordis*, again and heart) means *pasar de nuevo por el corazón*. However, Zurita's visual poems differ in their aims and scope. First, they are not exclusively spatial. They resemble an electroencephalogram as much as a seismograph, recording the vibrations of Inferno, Purgatory, and Paradise, thus traversing the geocentric distance and geography between these three allegorical realms. Notwithstanding, these three realms are also instances, snippets of political time recorded, and encoded, within Chile's national identity, implied by Zurita's intervention and creative conflation of the national flag and anthem. These movements and images record seismic movements in Chile's history while they also estrange the national anthem "learned by heart." Yet like Vicuña, Zurita's subjetivity also wishes to participate within time. The electroencephalograms record the journey of the poetic voice from its infernal solitude, "mi mejilla es el cielo estrellado", to the paradisiacal community of "el amor que mueve el sol y las otras estrellas", that is, from the individual asserting herself, however precariously, within the collective, to the erasure of the individual in a cosmic experience. Where Vicuña wishes to leave a mark of herself within the currents of temporality, the mark of her heart passing anew the images of memory, Zurita dissolves himself within a new sense of utopian collective identity.

actualization of the second one emerges out of a crease, the book binding being both the interruption and the generative force.

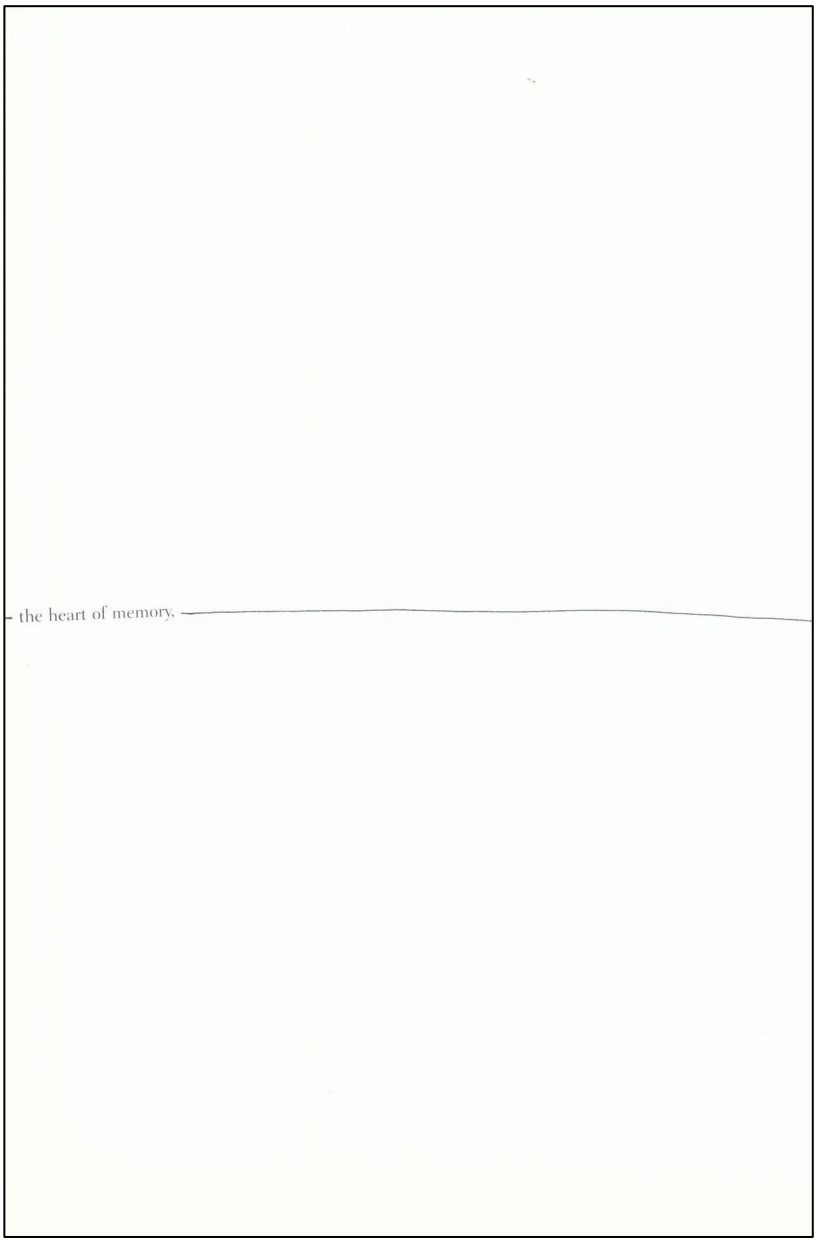

Figure 5. Last page of the poem.

The third page continues in yet another font that seems almost contiguous to the verse of the second page. It reads: "the heart of memory," and is followed by a long

hand-drawn line that ends in the book binding (Fig. 5).[6] Vicuña's materialization here, once again, is not mere visuality. Rather, the tactility of the poem on the second page seems to be the result of a finger stretching and magnifying the line, spreading one of its potentialities. The totality of the poem can be read following along the movement of a finger as if any possibility of reading depended, actually, on the possibility of touching. For James Longenbach, the line is sonic more than visual (*The Art of the Poetic Line* 18). We can say that Vicuña's line is ultimately a tactile rather than a visual element of the poem. The comma after the word "memory" on the third page clearly suggests the indetermination and unpredictability of what is to come. The lines that are about to be written are suspended since the comma represents a brief pause, followed by a line thrown into the future. If the comma separates while also mediating two sentences in Spanish (the language of the original "quipu que no recuerda nada"), Vicuña seems to suggest that what is to come, futurity—represented by the empty line here—is related but not determined by the previous lines. Between past and future there is, consequently, a relation of indeterminacy. "The quipu that remembers nothing" signifies, then, in the interplay between sameness and difference, between linearity and movements, between line and word.

Vicuña's rebellious line is a refutation of any expectations. She opposes the flatness of the line's movement and directionality with the tremor of her handwriting, or *ductus*, on the second page. This page introduces the bodily *qua* trace and connects the flow of time—of which the quipu line is but one manifestation—with the gestural hand. If, as Barthes argues, light is the umbilical cord that connects the gaze to "the photographed thing," the insertion of the *ductus* in the second page is the umbilical cord that connects the gaze to the gesture, to the performance of the hand (*Camera Lucida* 81). The handwriting reveals the biographical existence that aims to insert itself into the surface of time. It is not banal that "the quipu that remembers nothing" looks like the lines of the palm that allegedly contain or narrate the totality of a person's life, because for Vicuña "the letter is the poet's lifeline" (quipo*em* 23). The *ductus* is, hence, the phenomenological presence of human embodiment as both trace and origin. The body, however, is engaging with the line as much as the line, and the surface is engaging with the body. The fruitful interaction of this engagement is the "guiding thread of the body," what Klossowski has called corporealizing thought (50). The handwriting is,

[6] Juliet Lynd analyzes this poem along with the image on page 4, "ConCón, Chile." I do not see them as part of the same poem nor do I think the meaning of the quipu is enhanced by the image.

then, an instant of thought corporealized, guiding us back to, or perhaps, pointing us beyond the page to its inaugural gesture.

According to Carrie Noland, "gesturing is evaluative, a form of perception, adaptation, and creation, as well as a programmed routine, an operating chain" (*Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture* 96). This means that Vicuña's handwriting is an evaluative response to the surface of time, a pact that the hand and its gesture have made with the page and the surface of time. The *ductus* is the vibrational representation of the poet's existence adapting itself to the plane of the page and to the flux of time. The appearance of handwriting testifies to the interpretative capabilities of the body to respond to its environment like a crease or crack produced by the encounter of two forces. Without a proper response to the pressures of time, oblivion, history, and memory, the subject gets subsumed or flattened, like a horizontal line, invisible within the sea of unactualized images. In other words, only by virtue of the differential, of differing, of the self's willful inscription, might we distinguish the biographical existence within the infinity of time. It is only because of this handwriting that we are able to discern the human within the quipu of time, wherein the *ductus*, although belonging to the straight line, is charged with its own *dynamis*.

Vicuña writes or etches the lines of her poem upon the surface of time. The page becomes the messy and unruly sea of raw temporality upon which the line, as notation, organizes its contents. The line wishes to traverse the pulse of time while recording a path; that is, the line also wishes to intervene, to change, the relationship between the surface and itself, as Tim Ingold incisively suggests (39). Vicuña's poem anchors the political in this interrelation. In this sense, the poem is only in appearance melancholic, since its content affirms the political value of the aesthetic gesture, even when suggested by the fragility of the line and its sinuous tremors but also, and perhaps more significantly, because the poem carries with it the hope that the precarious, the fragile—a furrow in time—can withstand and transform the currents of oblivion. Consequently, Vicuña's poem not only subverts any pretentions to closure that the page and the institution of the poem might have, but also, any closure that memory and its technologies, whether current or obsolete, might represent. "The quipu that remembers nothing" highlights the insufficiency of the page and of the verse to contain the poem, or perhaps, more suggestively, poetry itself. The exchange and interaction of the line stretched across three pages reinforces the plasticity of any temporal actualization, insofar as any actualization is already a creative act, or rather, a creative encounter between different segments of time. It also recalls the fact that the line contains in its

expression a different modality of seeing. This, of course, does not deny that the quipu is a creative spatialization of time wherein the line is the agent of such spatialization; Vicuña states that "[i]f the poem is temporal, an oral temple, form is a spatial temple" (*UW* 4). The line so displayed designs and offers itself to the visual field, consequently illuminating and revealing the chaotic flux of time. In this regard, Vicuña's line is quite literally a trace in the strictest Derridean sense: differing from the flux of time while deferring it. Bringing forth from the darkness of that which is not visible (time as a force), the line is an umbilical cord that connects time and space, invisibility to visibility, obsolescence to actualization (time as a poem).

If the line of "the quipu that remembers nothing" can be considered a pleat in space, folded by the forces of time, the *ductus* within the line's topology corresponds to a subjectivity that has been folded, pleated by the pressures of past and future. Looking at the line appear across the pages, I am reminded of different forces coming from multiple directions, pushing the line and producing its text, from above and below, and from the infinity suggested by the left-hand origin of the first page and the right side of the third page. I also perceive the tectonic forces of time pushing the additive nature of the line upwards, rising from the depths of time. These multidirectional forces affect the *ductus*; they determine the gesture while the gesture resists and creates a different textuality. Since, as Carrie Noland explains, "gestures are neither natural nor inevitable but rather contingent expressions of the kinetic energy they organize," the handwriting, the trace of the gesture, expresses the organization of the biographical self within the energy and the pressure of time. However, as Noland argues, gestures "remain part of that continuum, pulled by the body's tow" (206). The bodily and the temporal then are interrelated in the production of the gesture of which the *ductus* is the product and the remainder.

III. Calendrical quipus

The quipu as an aesthetic object and as a memory technology belongs to the experience of that which Henri Bergson calls pure memory. For the French philosopher, the past survives in two different ways: motor mechanisms or learnt recollections, and independent or spontaneous recollections. The survival of the past is fundamental to understanding the quipu as an example of the creative uses of the past. Rather than understanding the past as that which is gone for good, Bergson envisions the past as preserved in its entirety in two different ways: one informing learning and the other informing volition. What is even more interesting is the fact that memory is

fluid and mobile, since it needs to pass (contract) from one plane to the other. It needs to descend from pure memory into a recollection. This ultimately signifies a kind of progression and adjustment of memory in order to fit the requirements of the present (see Bergson's famous cone of memory in Fig. 6).

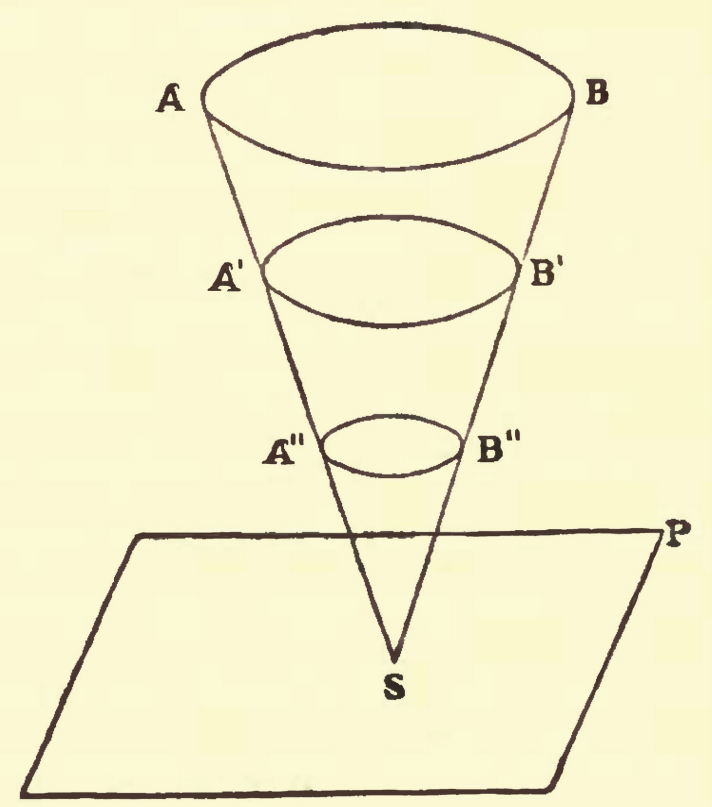

Figure 6. Cone of memory wherein the plane P represents "my actual representation of the universe" (Bergson 196).

What interests me here is what Bergson calls memory par excellence: "the effort of the mind that seeks in the past, in order to apply them to the present, those representations which are best able to enter into the present situation" (87) . Spontaneous memory stores all the events of our life; it is a faculty "which permits us to retain the image itself, for a limited time, within the field of our consciousness" (98). Memory thus defined emphasizes the fact that remembrance is, in fact, an interpretative modality that does not occur *ex nihilo*. Vicuña's thread, in her visual poem as well as in her first mimetic quipu from 1991, corresponds to the typical structure of the quipu as we saw above. The main cord represents the whole of memory, a different visuality from Bergson's cone, despite the fact that it implies the same principles.

"The quipu that remembers nothing" is *not* an empty cord. In fact, the main cord registers at least three visible memories that would represent the quipu's knotted pendant strings: the verse that names the quipu and qualifies it as empty, the verse that locates the quipu as the core, and, on page three, the verse that "is the heart of memory." Vicuña's quipu contradicts itself but only to prove the point that memory is, in fact, never empty; hence, the images of the past are the heart of memory, waiting to be knotted. If we rearrange the poem, we have: "the quipu that remembers nothing is the heart of memory." At the heart of memory, we have its absolute latency. Knotting, weaving is remembrance. The empty cord (which is not empty) is Bergson's cone. The point S in the plane P is action. SP is, therefore, a knot in the thread, the maximum concentration of pure memory into a recollection. Furthermore, the three pages, connected by a line representing the whole of memory, contain different lines (verses), which we described above as "pendant knotted strings." This suggests that there are different kinds of recollection symbolized here by three different types of writing, implying different levels of remembrance as in Bergson's cone (A"B", A'B', and AB), and consequently, different actualizations of the past, which we might call "interpretation." It also highlights the commonality of the thread, which is not surprising since, for Vicuña, poetry is "an act of communion, a form of collectively entering a vision." The construction of cultural memory means that each individual can access this line according to one's individual needs and according to different contexts (quipo*em* 131). Most importantly, the poem means that remembering is an interpretative modality that allows the past to take different shapes, as the different letterings imply.

Vicuña connects to memory as a vast storage, and each verse of her visual poem is indeed her search into the past for what she needs to face in the present moment. Above, I stated that Vicuña's constellation transports us to the pre-Columbian era, for it is this memory that serves the needs of the present. These are the images that can enter into the present. The long line, the thread that goes across the three pages of this visual poem, is Vicuña's representation of temporality since, at each moment, "the present that endures divides at each instant into two directions, one oriented and dilated toward the past, the other contracted, contracting toward the future" (Deleuze 52). The line on the first page of the poem seems to be coming from this dilated past, whereas the one that continues on the last page of the poem stretches infinitely and hides from our vision in the crease of the book binding. The present is pure becoming. It acts but *is* not. The past is no longer useful but it *is*, and the future is a pending action; "[o]f the present, we must say at every instant that 'it was,' and of the past, that it 'is,' that it is

eternally, for all time" (55). This implies that both are different in kind. Indeed, the past is no longer useful. The will to remember as an interpretative modality, as the work of memory, takes that which is not useful and turns it into usefulness; it acts only to support the future for it is there where action resides.

Pure memory and pure recollections are virtual and unconscious, whereas the present belongs to psychological experience:

> Whenever we are trying to recover a recollection, to call up some period of our history, we become conscious of an act *sui generis* by which we detach ourselves from the present in order to replace ourselves, first in the past in general, then in a certain region of the past—a work of adjustment, something like the focusing of a camera. But our recollection still remains virtual; we simply prepare ourselves to receive it by adopting the appropriate attitude. Little by little it comes into view like a condensing cloud; from the virtual state it passes into the actual. (Bergson 171)

This process of actualization resembles Vicuña's "poetics of space" from her film *Kon Kon* in which she submerges herself in the silence of the landscape in order to detach herself from it. Since memory for Vicuña is sensory, the adjustment of memory corresponds to her listening with her fingers. The tactile in the textile is a form of hearing the past—the interaction between tactile and textile, the guiding thread and the corporealized thought. The yarn and the line are thus the virtuality of the past, whereas the weaving and knotting are the past's actualization. The verses of Vicuña's visual poem are, accordingly, actualizations of sheer virtuality along the line or thread of time. In Vicuña's aesthetic, this line is the allegory par excellence: it represents time as becoming, ever changing, ever open. It represents weaving, the thread (and the word insofar as the word is a thread), yarn, and fiber being constitutive of textile practices. It stands for a poetics of language in which each word is a thread, an aesthetic procedure, and a social and cultural vision of the world of what she calls "interconnectedness." As Lynd explains,

> [f]ar from a mere celebration of the beauty of indigenous aesthetics, her [Vicuña's] references to weaving evoke the subordinated yet persistent cultural practices of Amerindian communities. The writing of poetry finds parallels in the semiotics of weaving, a textile-textual practice that alludes to the unspoken, unwritten stories of women and of the indigenous. (1590)

Although I agree with Lynd, I believe that the relationship between the textile thread and the poetic line is much more than a parallel that alludes to a whole system of historical erasures. The specific parallelism between line and thread is allegorical. Between the poetic line and language, on the one hand, and the thread and the textile,

on the other, there is a more complex procedural relation of interpretation in which both line and thread are woven together in an effort to transvalue language and textile into affirmations of time's openness. In other words, weaving is not only a suggestion of a "lost way of life" or a "desire to know the precolonial past" but an evaluation of its creative uses within aesthetic practices as an active commentary and intervention within a whole system of memory politics and technologies.

Vicuña is not only interested in a mere aesthetic celebration: her recourse to Amerindian traditions such as the *ceq'e* and the quipu represents her re-elaboration of an historical system supported by a specific conception of temporality and its concomitant modality of thinking and seeing. So, hers is, primordially, a re-elaboration of theories of time, and the quipu is her allegory of it, as we can see in her calligram *Ceq'e* (Fig. 7). It is by conceiving time anew that we can envision a new humanity and a new way of thinking and seeing. The complexity of the thread as line, as I demonstrate above, is further enriched with the figure of the *Ceq'e*, a sort of Incan geographical quipu, a system of reductive lines (after all, *ceq'e* means line in Quechua). As César Paternosto explains, this system of lines represents a "geometric partition" of the Incan territory. These ideal lines arrange the organization of the sacred and the profane and the political and social structure of the Incan empire. For R. T. Zuidema, the *ceq'e* is comparable to a giant quipu "that served in the local representation of the Inca cosmological system, in its spatial, hierarchical, and temporal aspects" (qtd. in Paternosto 9). The *ceq'e* thus served not only as a spatial system (such as marking springs of water and shrines) but also as an astronomical, agricultural, and temporal one (9-10).

If the line in "the quipu that remembers nothing" refused segmentation into traditional verses, the *Ceq'e*'s rebellious ethos pushes even further to contest, in the first place, the association of the line with space and, secondly, its Cartesian coldness and flatness upon the surface or plane. This double de-realization is further enhanced by each ray of the unfinished sun. This openness in the design once again signifies Vicuña's refusal to conceive time as closed, preemptive, or bearing any telos already inscribed within the line's movement for there are, as Celan's epigraph corroborates, "still songs to be sung on the other side / of mankind." The movement and impulse that inscribes the line as an open circle is open to further temporal actualizations and materializations of the instant.

Vicuña turns to the visual configuration of the calligram in *Ceq'e* to transvalue and de-realize time by introducing heterogeneity and depth to our understanding of it. Contrary to the European tradition of Vicente Huidobro's and Guillaume Apollinaire's

iconic calligrams, Vicuña's resemble pre-Columbian hieroglyphs carved in stone. Her calligramatic sun rebels against any absolute associations between time's conventional spatialization, as homogenous, empty time (line) or as the eternal recurrence of the same (circle). The missing rays of the sun signify both the "songs to be sung" and the "other side of mankind." In other words, the calligramatic sun reveals the inability of the gaze and human temporality to give an account of the movement, unfurling, and depth of time. The mental quipu is a gnomon of time's openness and depth. The sun depicts a defiance of circularity, of recurrence, and determination as much as any idea of signifying wholeness. In this sense Vicuña's calligram is the sign of a new concept of time and thinking. Here it is fruitful to state the obvious: if thinking occurs in time, a new concept of time will entail a new modality of thinking.

Vicuña's first line defines the *Ceq'e* in temporal terms. She denies the mere spatiality of it by stating that it is not a line, but an instant. This instant is somehow perceptible through vision and constitutes vision. The instant is a gaze, a snapshot of time. In other words, if the *Ceq'e* is space, it is only insofar as time's spatialization, which amounts to say that the *Ceq'e* is a visualization and an actualization of time's openness, caught in an instant by the gaze, only to return later to its open flux. If the *Ceq'e* is not a line but an instant, only the gaze that catches this instant can attest to it. In this regard, the open sun-shaped "mental quipu" that follows is that gaze's plastic configuration, expanded upon the field of vision, its materialization. The line, the thread, represents an image of time, a contraction of it in Bergsonian terms. The line thus conceived allows Vicuña to redefine the quipu understood as a ritualistic calendrical technology. The already obsolete technology is thus revalued in relation to its original function. The re-contextualization of its expressivity supposes a re-reading of its function and meaning. This is Vicuña's inversion of values. Time understood as a quipu is not "time's ritual measure." This quipu, an allegory of time, serves instead to "measure and mediate a thought," what I would call an interpretation of memory's images. The time of Vicuña's allegorical quipu signals the time to come ("there are / still songs to be sung on the other side / of mankind"). However, it is not empty time that is to come, but a time charged with a possibility of thinking. This is the most radical aspect of Vicuña's re-evaluation of time: thought is contained *qua* possibility and not as content within the invisible depth of time and within the suggested heterogeneity of the plastic configuration. This is why the instant itself is not closed; the gaze, visuality, cannot account for its depth, for depth is the dimension of the hidden and the simultaneous, as Merleau-Ponty explains (219). The possibility of a new time, of a new thought, is

coetaneous, yet invisible, to the materialization of the instant by the figure. The involvement of art in politics for Vicuña not only aims to unveil a system of abuse and oppression but also, and just as importantly, seeks to think and imagine that which is yet to come. In Jean-Luc Nancy's words:

> [w]e must be able to think a world… Our question, or rather our categorical imperative, or again our necessity in the sense of our poverty and our way of being needy because we have no world, but we must be able to imagine a world. To imagine the total impossibility of thinking a world immediately leads to madness, to death. (20)

Vicuña is thinking a world, hence her definition of the quipu as able to record and measure a thought. She is, furthermore, seeing and listening to it (quipo*em*, "Arte precario" 137). The bodily participation, what Klossowski calls the corporealized thought, the entrenchment of the senses with a poetics of space, as Vicuña proposes in her movie *Kon Kon*, bequeaths to her a reading of the world where time (memory) is contracted into matter. Thinking the world is hence a movement from the dilation of time to the contraction of space, which I call her *allegoresis*. To not imagine a world is death; to not imagine a world is melancholic in that it leads to madness. Vicuña's reading is an expansion, a letting loose of temporal threads that virtually lie in matter. Her operation is not merely metonymic but allegorical. That is, the line or the thread does not participate in the world as part of a whole in which this whole assumes some unequivocal essence that can be also found as a whole, as an essence, within organic matter. Hers is an *allegoresis* because the world of meaning signifies a possible layer of interpretation, never given, always primarily virtual, always sensitive to re-interpretation. Vicuña's art is hence involved in the creation of the world, a world, and multiple worlds. That is her imperative. The encounter of form and matter, the process by which art emerges in her work is, consequently, always cosmogonic, a cosmogony of sense, of creative memories that heed the call of the material but also the call of political struggles. Form is imbricated in its historicity precisely because form allows (calls for) contextual interpretation, because it allows (calls for) a reading that emerges coetaneously as an answer to the pressure of time. Vicuña sees and lets us see a world through a precarious form but this aesthetic vision is only perspectival; hence, it is never totalizing and it is always open to new allegorical visions, insofar as it is an allegory. The line and the thread acquire the value of a world, of meaning-production. Vicuña does not elevate simple objects from the mineral kingdom or organic and inorganic waste into art as a capricious gesture to raise the marginal to the heights of the museum. Threads and lines are

allegories of the world; they are aesthetic objects by themselves. Her role is much simpler. These quipus are just Vicuña's recollections: her reading of the infinite and the always-expanding meaning of a world in an instant.

Vicuña has reached this epiphany because a line is not a line but an instant. It is the snapshot of temporality's flux that allows her to claim that there is indeed a future. This new vision of time corresponds with a new vision and with the thought of a new humanity; it is in this sense that the quipu is mental because it both measures and mediates (accounts for) a new thought while radiating (refracting) this new thought into the visual. This is the other side of humanity, not its underside, its reverse, but its futurity. This futurity is the hidden depth of the materialized instant. Time and memory—for what else is an instant but the memory of time's movement—are perceptible only insofar as remembrance, as recollection, as instances, images, knots of threads, knots of lines and threads. Weaving the instant into a mental quipu allows the epiphany of time's openness and the transformation of the obsolete into an active technology of memory that has the ability, because of its openness, of affecting and effecting thoughts, thoughts that are multidimensional and have depth for they can be "seen from above or from below."

Contrary to Benjamin's transcendent vision of allegory and de Man's immanent one, Vicuña opposes a joyful one in which time is not equivalent to death, and therefore humanity is not equivalent to the *facies hippocratica*. In Vicuña's re-elaboration of time, in her use of detritus and the obsolete, she conceives of time as creativity and joy. The figure of the skull, the fragment, is not a melancholic sign of the human condition because: "[l]a conciencia de la propia muerte trae una nueva visión del Tiempo. Una obra dedicada al gozo quiere hacer sentir la urgencia del presente que es la urgencia de la revolución" (*Precario/Precarious*, n.p.). Since time is creativity, the melancholic and allegorical figures are transvalued into joy, or *goce*. Vicuña's work is devoted to this joy; it is born from the urgency of the present, from the demands of the present. The violence of history, the invisibility of the other, and the trauma of the past represent the calling of the will to remember both violence and trauma in order to establish a new vision of time. Only by conceiving of time as becoming can we later both remember the past and envision a politics of the future. Vicuña's quipus, and I should add, her aesthetics, respond to violence supported by history's abuses of the past, not only to political, class, and feminist struggles, but also to ecological concerns related to land reclamation. The past, in this sense, is for Vicuña a constellation of elements that creatively and conjointly imply a vast imaginary that ranges from geographical concerns,

communities of fishermen in the coastal regions of Chile, music, dance, America, dunes, the sea, weaving arts, and traditional music.

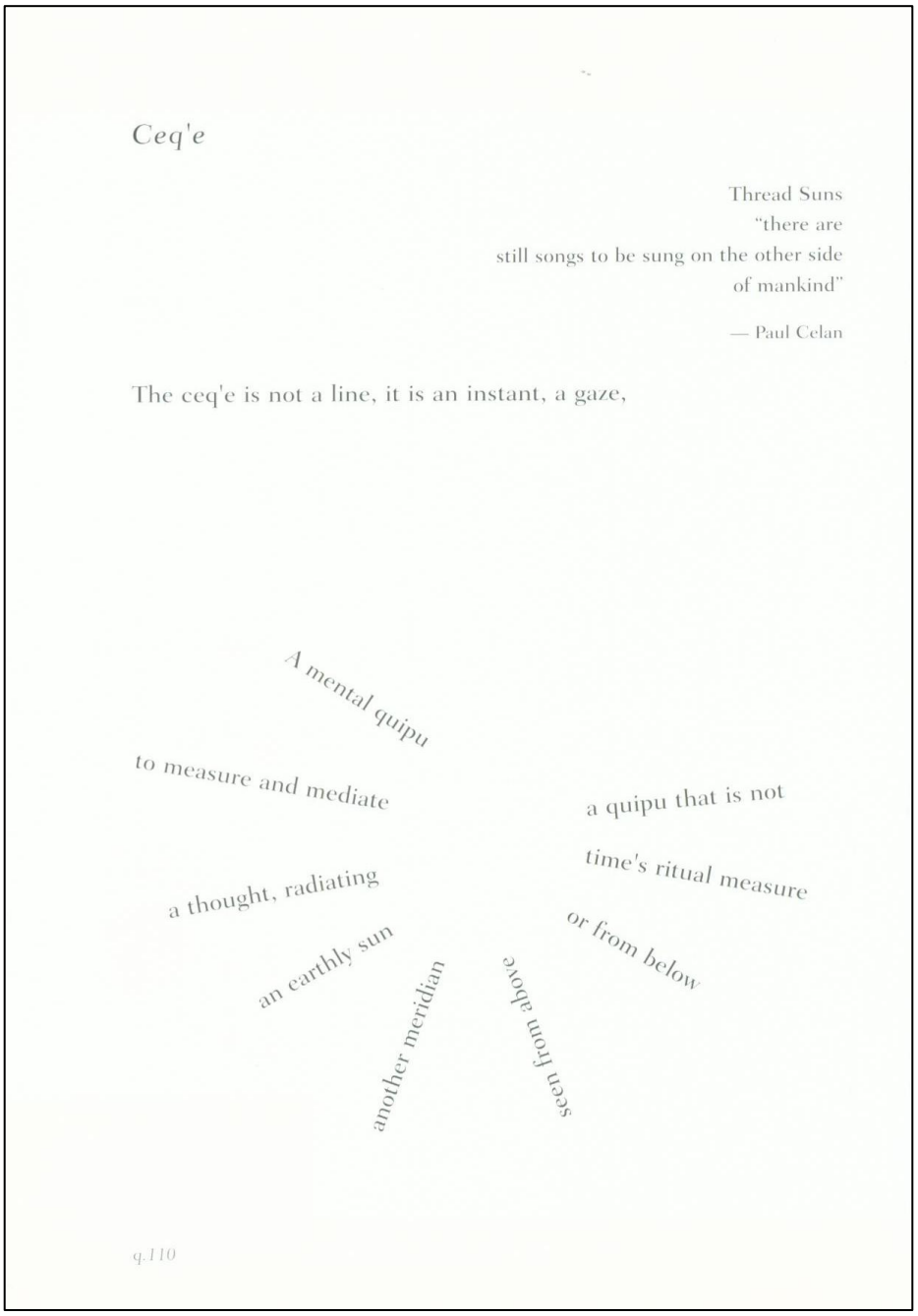

Figure 7. The calligram *Ceq'e*.

For Vicuña, experimental art represents an archeological tool and a direct consequence of her allegorical attitude and way of reading history. As Craig Owens states, "allegory is an attitude as well as a technique, a perception as well as a procedure"

(68). Vicuña's art seems to embody this definition if by "procedure" we understand an interpretative modality of disinterment. What is interesting, then, is the potentiality of this newness to break the order—in this particular case, the political situation of Chile, where violence took place. The break that Vicuña's experimental art instantiates is in its naming of the oblivion of the other as the origin of Chilean historical violence, an oblivion that supports and conceals not only the disappearance of bodies during the military regime, but also the disappearance of the precolonial past. Vicuña's quipus point towards a continuity of violence and erasure within Chile's national history, but herein lies, once again, her refusal of melancholy and her affirmation of joy and hope, for there is "[c]ontinuity in obliteration. / In death, resurrection" (quipo*em* 136). Obliteration is not exclusive to Chile, of course, and this is the point of Vicuña's poem "El Ande Futuro," which signals that memory, and, furthermore, the future of the national, depends on the renewal of the past and the weaving together of Andean cultures (98). Vicuña's art is her faithful answer to violence and her allegory of time through the experimental re-appropriation of the quipu, her production of newness. This truth is thus procedural: something is being produced in time. Vicuña's reinterpretation of political violence operates through a particular confiscation and rearrangement of the images of the past. Newness as reinterpretation of the obsolete is where Vicuña situates her joyful and rebellious answer to the violence of historical erasure

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