DIARIO DE VIDA

CECILIA VICUÑA’S ARTISTIC PRACTICE IN LONDON (1972-1975)¹
(A LETTER TO CARLA MACCHIAVELLO)

I thought that all this was perhaps nothing more than a way of remembering
To remember (recordar) in the sense of playing the strings (cuerdas) of emotion
Re-member, re-cordar, from cor, corazón, heart.²


Dear Carla,

I would like to begin this letter with a sequence of images from a TV program. In March 1974, as you know, a documentary on Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña was broadcast by the BBC.\(^3\) Cecilia had travelled to London in 1972 to study at the Slade School of Art thanks to a scholarship by the British Council. After the 1973 coup, she remained in the United Kingdom as an exile, then, in 1975, moved to Colombia.\(^4\) I do not need to remind you all this, of course, as you have been researching Cecilia’s work and itinerary as much as, or—to be fair—even more than I have. Nevertheless, let me be as rigorous as I can in constructing this narrative and articulating some questions that I would like to share with you. In this documentary, two scenes struck me as particularly meaningful for reflecting on the work that Cecilia created during those years in London. I am not referring to what she said in the film, but rather to what she did. In the first scene, her hands were filmed while she manipulated a series of objects on a table: a fragile construction

\(^3\) In this documentary, Cecilia adopted the pseudonym “Maria Santiago”. Titled \textit{The First Freedom}, the film aired on BBC2 on the 14\textsuperscript{th} of March 1974, in the context of the program 2\textsuperscript{nd} House. See: <http://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/56ef65adfbcf4ede2a268b81b78aeb2dc> [Accessed 2018, January 16\textsuperscript{th}].

made with incense sticks and feathers, a little doll made of cloth or paper, two uneven pieces of what looks like concrete and wood, a black and white image of *Le déjeuner sur l’herbe* with small twigs attached to it. In the second scene, she was filmed from afar, while walking alone, as a solitary *flâneuse* in the deserted streets of London.

You are probably thinking, what about these images? Why do you consider them such a challenging starting point?

*Arriving*

In the “explanations” of one of her paintings displayed at her first solo exhibition in London—“Pain things and explanations”, held in the foyer of ICA in May 1973—, Cecilia wrote: “When I didn’t know what to paint I was going from one side of London to the other looking for a subject.”

I understand that the process of wandering through the city was initially associated, in Cecilia’s migratory experience, to the pain of uprootedness and its dramatic impact on her artistic practice. “When I knew that I was coming to London”, she wrote, “I was so excited that I began writing down ideas for paintings in a notebook thinking that as soon as I had a studio organized I would begin painting as if I had a fever. But once in London not one of the ideas interested me. I used to sit on the sidewalk like a dead animal and cry. Sometimes I sang. I bled almost everyday. As nothing made sense I had nothing to do.” Back in Chile, Cecilia used to be a walker, a mountain hiker. In London, materials collected during her meandering through the city were used

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6 *Ibid*.
7 Skype interview with the artist. November 11th, 2015.
in fabricating the small pieces—some of them filmed in the BBC documentary—integrating her installation *A Journal of Objects for the Chilean Resistance* (a work comprehending a set of precarious objects and *12 Books for the Chilean Resistance*).\(^8\) Initiated in 1973, before the military coup\(^9\), these objects were exhibited at the artist run space Art Meeting Place in Covent Garden in July 1974.\(^10\) *(Fig.1)*

Recently described by Cecilia as “... four hundred precarious objects created from debris from London streets”\(^11\), these pieces actually combined ordinary things found in London’s urban space with little *basuritas*\(^12\) brought from Chile and printed materials – magazines and teletypes – collected at the Chilean Embassy.\(^13\) By *suturing* the here and there, they created a space where geographical and cultural difference could be negotiated to produce new languages. As acutely observed by Cecilia during our conversation, “... there was never an object that looked like Chile or an object that looked like London.”\(^14\) Don’t you think that the word *suturing* is very evocative here? Not only because weaving together, materially as well as symbolically, is so important in Cecilia’s work since the 1960s, but also because, in medical terms, to

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\(^8\) This work was acquired by Tate Modern in London in 2014.

\(^9\) Vicuña, About the objects. [*op. cit.*], 12.


\(^12\) Little rubbish. Term used by the artist, for example, in the text Vicuña Cecilia (1968). *Las Basuritas de Con-cón.* In: *QUIPOem. [*op. cit.*], 21.

\(^13\) Skype interview with the artist. [*op. cit.*].

suture means to close a wound, etymologically to sew a wound. Words suggest that this is perhaps where the wounds of uprootedness, first, then the wounds opened by the military coup’s unheard violence could possibly be mended. Be mended or be made sense of? You may argue that “wound” is too strong of a word to refer to the migrant’s experience. Yet consider this phrase that Cecilia wrote in 1973: “The effect of London is that I died.”

Let me dwell a little longer on suturing as a material as well as an aesthetic process. In film theory, the Lacanian term “suture” refers, as reminded by Slavoj Zizek, to a mechanism in which “... external difference is mapped onto the inside.” Initially the spectator is “absorbed” by a shot, then realizes that something is missing, cut out

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15 Vicuña, Pain things and explanations. [op. cit.], 8.
17 Ibid.
of the frame: “... the show is run by the Absent One (or, rather, Other) who manipulates images behind my back.”  

In a subsequent shot, the place from which the absent one is looking is attributed to a fictional character in the film. “In Lacanian terms,” observes Zizek, “the second shot represents (within the diegetic space of representation) the absent subject for/of the first shot. When the second shot replaces the first one, the ‘absent one’ is transferred from the level of enunciation to the level of diegetic fiction.” Without entering into discussions on this concept’s specific use and limits in the cinematic context, I would like to suggest that the aesthetic strategies deployed by Cecilia in her work A Journal of Objects for the Chilean Resistance may somehow resonate with this process of inscription or translation of the outside into the inside.

On one level, the appropriation of everyday materials, often residues—the term of basuritas, little rubbish, is particularly eloquent here—, sutures non-art into the artistic object, the street, or public space more in general, into the work. The opposite had already happened in Chile. Do you remember how Cecilia created ephemeral installations on the beach in Con-cón since the mid-sixties? Erasable by the tides, they did not last long. A photograph of an arm and open hand covered with different coloured threads records The Glove, an action that took place on a bus, in Santiago, in 1966. Once more, ephemerality was a key coordinate of creation. If the work of art is sutured into everyday life, it is submitted to the same rules as any other common object or action: it may disappear, be forgotten or remembered, be noticed or go

18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
completely unnoticed, blending itself into life. “... in Santiago,” wrote Cecilia, “I did unannounced performances in the streets and buses. I imagined the city as an organism embracing my performative acts or ‘arte precario’ into its collective memory.”21

In a decade in which contemporary art vigorously attempted, using very diverse strategies, to negotiate a different, closer, relation to everyday life—often seeking to blur, or even to dissolve, the barriers between the two—, Cecilia’s suturing actions resonate with other works produced in different cultural and geographical locations.22 Nevertheless, they were pioneering in the Chilean context.23 And although I found no record of ephemeral actions by Cecilia in London, the objects created in the city also seem to operate a double suture, inscribing into the artwork materials coming from both the London streets and everyday life in Chile. Consider for instance the little cardboard box full of Chilean soil on which a small Chilean flag is planted.24 (Fig.2)

21 Vicuña, Chronology. [op. cit.], 18.
22 Among others, the work of Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica comes to mind, but also Mira Schendel’s Droguinhas from the mid-1960s. A relation that certainly deserves further exploration is the one between Cecilia’s A Journal of Objects for the Chilean Resistance and Colombian artist Alicia Barney’s series of Diario-objeto created in the late 1970s.
24 I have seen The Journal of Objects for the Chilean Resistance in 2013 in London, when it was exhibited at the gallery England & Co. (24 May – 29 June 2013). In 2014, Tate acquired it. At the moment, for several reasons, I have not yet been able to have access to the work in Tate’s storage. In this sense, I could not decipher the inscription traced by the artist on the small box.
Another of the objects,” wrote Cecilia, “is Chilean soil that I took to London: a drawn flag tied to a wire. I put it in the ground. All in a little box with a text.”25 In this case, it seems to me that the “threatening intrusion” of absence, painful separation and displacement—signified here by the desire, affection and visceral belonging condensed in that little portion of Chilean earth—is somehow brought into expression by its suturing into the artwork.

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26 “What one should bear in mind is the fundamental ideological operation that is involved here: the threatening intrusion of the decentring Other, the Absent Cause, is ‘sutured.’” Zizek, The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski between Theory and Post-Theory. [op. cit.], 33.
Staying

Do not worry: I have not forgotten the political questions at the core of these artworks. By considering Cecilia’s objects created in London first through the lenses of her experience of migration, my aim was to stress how inextricably woven together are the affective, the aesthetic and the political dimensions of Cecilia’s practice at this time. In 1973, she was well aware of these intertwinements. On that year, in the press release of her exhibition at the ICA, she wrote, referring to her pictorial work: “My painting is political in a personal way. My canvases are born as representation of a socialist paradise where everything is possible, in fact they are part of my poetry.” 27 And in the book Saborami, also published in 1973 by Beau Geste Press, in a text titled “About the objects”, Cecilia affirmed that these pieces “… try to kill three bird with one stone: politically, magically and aesthetically.” 28 In June 1973, in fact, a few days before a failed attempt to overthrow Allende’s government, she started to create an object a day, “in support of the Chilean revolutionary process” 29, then, in September of the same year, the coup took place. “In the beginning I wanted to prevent the coup,” she wrote, “now the objects intend to support armed struggle against the reactionary government.” 30 At the same time, they were conceived as a journal, “un Diario de Vida” 31, in Cecilia’s words.

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27 Vicuña, Pain things and explanations. [op. cit.], 8.
28 Vicuña, About the objects. [op. cit.], 12.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 13.
From the perspective of her political commitment, her travel to London, under the auspices of the British Council’s *soft power*[^32], resulted, at least initially, in a deception—London was very different from the imaginary city shaped, from afar, by cinema and vanguard art[^33]. The very practice of travelling from the periphery to a supposed cultural “centre” as an artistic milestone—that had marked generations of South American artists before her, especially with regards to Paris[^34]—was strongly questioned at this time. Invited by Roszika Parker to contribute to the British feminist journal *Spare Rib*, Cecilia wrote, in her 1974 article, “I suffered very much because I realized that the decision to come to Europe instead of participating fully in the revolutionary process showed how culturally colonised I was, in spite of being leftist all my life. I think it was a class problem. As I belonged to the upper middle classes it took me a long time to realize that to be leftist was not


[^33]: In our conversation, Cecilia referred for instance to the importance of the film *Blow up* (1966) by Michelangelo Antonioni, inspired by Julio Cortázar’s short story “Las Babas del Diablo” (1959). Skype interview with the artist. [op. cit.].

enough."\(^{35}\) In this sense, a position of critical difference—initially provoking a sense of isolation and marginality in London\(^{36}\)—had to be strongly assumed. Consider for instance the little typewritten work made of red silk cloth, “A diary of objects for the Chilean Resistance” (1974), on which Cecilia wrote, referring to the precarious pieces created in London: “the objects have to be very small in order to travel with me. They also are very precarious, I put them together with what I find, little nails, glue. Looking at them you must always remember I belong to [an]other culture / I have not chosen to stay in England.”\(^{37}\) (Fig. 3)

As you know, Cecilia actively engaged, during her stay in London, in disseminating information about the role of the arts in Allende’s political program and, after the coup, in actions of resistance such as the co-funding of Artists for Democracy and the participation in the Chile Solidarity Campaign.\(^{38}\) In the scope of her exhibition “Pain things and explanation” at the ICA in May 1973, she did a talk on “Art in the Chilean Revolution” and, on this occasion, met the art critic and curator Guy Brett. In April 1974, in a discussion organized in the frame of Conrad Atkinson’s exhibition “Work, Wages and Prices” at the ICA, she also met artists David Medalla and John Dugger\(^{39}\)—co-funders, in 1971,

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\(^{36}\) Skype interview with the artist. [op. cit.].


of the group Artists Liberation Front. As indicated by Su Braden in the magazine *Studio International*, the months of April and May 1974 in London were dense with events that questioned the relations between art and politics from different perspectives: an exhibition by the Art Workers Committee of the Artists’ Union at the Congress House, the above mentioned exhibition by Conrad Atkinson—“an artist who is also an active member of the Labour Party”—, the Anglo-Dutch conference “Politics in Art/ Theory and Practice” at the Royal College of Art (Dugger and Medalla of Artists Liberation Front contributed with an intervention in which texts by Mao and Lenin were debated in relation with the artists’ own practice), and finally the discussions that took place at 48 Earlham Street, in the context of the feminist show “c. 7, 500” curated by Lucy Lippard.

In this multifaceted context, resistance against the Chilean military coup and solidarity with the struggle of the Chilean people was articulated through important newly founded organizations like the Chile Solidarity Campaign whose broad front gathered a vast array of affiliates and nurtured a significant relation with the unions. In the art field, *Studio International* published, in December 1973, an article on the future of the artworks donated to the Museum of Solidarity created

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42 Ibid., 273.

by Allende’s government, including a letter addressed by Brazilian art critic Mario Pedrosa—one of the project’s initiators and the president of the Comité Internacional de Solidaridad Artística con Chile—, to José Maria Moreno Galvan in Spain.44 The following month, an article by U.S. critic Lucy Lippard, asserted the need for American artists to react to the coup and the current oppression in Chile by participating in actions to “engage public attention and press coverage”45—“since the US government and industry were instrumental in greasing the ways back to fascism…”46 In this sense, she described events organized in New York such as the recreation, in the U.S. city, of a mural work originally painted by Brigada Ramona Parra in Chile. Interestingly, in March 1974, as reported by the magazine Architectural Design, Chilean artists, with the collaboration of Camden’s Fine Heart Squad, also painted a mural in solidarity with Chile in London, in King Henry’s road47. Cecilia participated in the creation this collaborative work and, as the short article indicates, “friends of Cecilia Vicuña may recognize her self-portrait on the left.”48

You may wonder why I am referring specifically to these two publications. What they have in common is that they were both differently connected to Cecilia’s life in London and her political involvement in the Chilean struggle, and beyond. On one hand, Studio

International's director, Peter Townsend, supported the group Artists for Democracy and its activities by granting the use of a working space belonging to the magazine. On the other, Monica Pidgeon—the editor of Architectural Design from 1946 to 1975 and born in Chile herself—was part of a network of friends of Cecilia in the U.K. that included and went beyond the group Artists for Democracy. While Monica Pidgeon authored an article on Chilean murals for Studio International in April 1973—thus highlighting the relevance, for the international art world, of what was happening in Allende's Chile—Architectural Design significantly referenced, although always in a very short form, some key artistic initiatives in support of the Chilean resistance against the military regime—among them the “Arts festival for democracy in Chile”, held at the Royal College of Art from October 14 to October 30 1974. An initiative of Artists for Democracy, the festival comprised an

exhibition of artworks donated by British and international artists and a large program of events. At the end, an auction of the artworks was meant to raise money to help the process of recovering of democracy in Chile.

**Building**

Much has been written about this event, but I would like to propose you to look at it from the point of view of its spatial imagination. In the scope of the festival, in fact, the hall of the Royal College was changed into a sort of “campamento”. As recalled by Cecilia, “The Festival was held in the central hall of the Royal College of Art, and was thought of as a large camp or laboratory of the arts inspired by the Chilean populations. There they mixed large installations, posters, flags and works of art sent by post.” By building explicitly ephemeral structures, the exhibition’s environment at the RCA possibly pointed to the provisional and precarious character of the festival itself. It may also be envisioned, though, as a process of symbolic occupation—or “squatting” as suggested by art historian Courtney J. Martin—of a

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55 “El Festival ocupaba el hall central del Royal Collage of Art, fue pensado como un gran campamento o laboratorio de las artes inspirado en las poblaciones chilenas. Ahí se mezclaban grandes instalaciones, afiches, banderas y obras de arte enviadas por correo.” Vicuña, Páginas de un libro borrado (un relato oral), Londres 1972-1975. [op. cit.], n. p.

56 Courtney J. Martin refers to a sort of “squatting” of the RCA. She also suggests the “stage-like” character of the environment: “The banners, posters, and wood scaffolding created, as the other installations had, a kind of imagined ‘Third World’ stage suggesting that the festival was squatting the RCA.” Martin, Courtney J. (2018). Collectivity, Temporality, and Festival Culture in John Dugger’s Quasi-Architecture, 1970–74. In: Applin, Jo, Spencer, Catherine and Tobin, Amy (eds.), London Art Worlds:
European art institution through fictional dwelling spaces (transformed into exhibition spaces) directly inspired by South American vernacular building practices—here specifically by “poblaciones callampas’ chilenas”\(^57\) (Chilean shantytowns). This utopian effort to renegotiate power relations—not only the cultural relation between Europe and what was then called the “Third World”, but also between popular and vanguard artistic languages—is also implied by Cecilia’s description of Artists for Democracy’s objectives. “AFD’s revolutionary attempt,” she wrote, “was to dream on the scale of the Americas by reversing the colonial order of the art world, where the metropolis dictates the aesthetic language the colonies must follow. It offered an alternative model of creativity generated from South America and the Third World (a name that has fallen into disuse), where revolutionary politics and experimental art merge with ease.”\(^58\)

In the festival’s “campamento”, Cecilia presented *Ruca abstracta* or *Allende’s Eyes* (1974), a more intimate installation also evoking a dwelling space (Fig. 4). Visible at one corner of the stage in Lynn MacRitchie’s film of the festival’s opening ceremony\(^59\), *Ruca abstracta* was “a shanty houinstallation made of bamboo with oil paintings, objects and plants.”\(^60\) Among all these elements, the precarious shelter hosted artworks created by Cecilia in the early 1970s, among them

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\(^58\) Ibid.


\(^60\) Vicuña, Chronology. [op. cit.], 27.
[Fig. 4] CECILIA VICUÑA. Ruca Abstracta or Allende's Eyes, 1974. Site-specific installation. Installation view, Arts Festival for Democracy in Chile, organized by AFD at the Royal College of Art, London, October 14, 1974. Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong.
Lenin (1972) and Los ojos de Allende (1974). The respective position of these paintings—hang on the inside and outside walls of the Ruca—pointed to the very penetrability of the structure. Through the cut-out eyes of the represented figure of Allende, on the outside of the Ruca, in fact, the public could see the inside of the shelter, as if Allende’s political ideas, metaphorically, were a significant lens through which to look at and to apprehend Cecilia’s aesthetic practice. On the other hand, when inside the “house”, one could use Allende’s imaginary perspective to look at the reality immediately outside.61

I wonder if this ephemeral and precarious dwelling, conceived by Cecilia as a “Spiritual house for Allende”62, could be also envisioned as a sort of metaphorical home for the exile—whose texture is woven through connections between the multiple interlinked struggles in which Cecilia was then engaged—and, at the same time, as a precarious “monument” to a socialist dream that tragically failed. The ruca to which the title alludes represents the main unit of dwelling in the Mapuche tradition—a simple structure, generally without internal divisions, made of locally sourced materials of plant origin and collectively built. Because of the natural materials used in its construction, the ruca is ephemeral and biodegradable.63 In this sense,

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61 Cecilia explained: “En esta obra Allende no tiene ojos. La idea es que nosotros seamos sus ojos, que nosotros podamos ver el mundo a través de su visión, de su sacrificio...” [“In this work Allende has no eyes. The idea is that we are his eyes, that we can see the world through his vision, through his sacrifice... ”] Rodríguez, Ana (2014). Los lamentos de Cecilia Vicuña. The Clinic online, 11/02/2014. Interview. Retrieved from: http://www.theclinic.cl/2014/02/11/los-lamentos-de-cecilia-vicuna/[Accessed 2018, February 1]

62 “una casa espiritual para Allende”. Ibid.

63 “In keeping with the Mapuche concept of temporality all types of ruka are ephemeral, made of only natural, biodegradable materials with little elaboration.” Whitman, Christopher J, Armijo, Gabriela and Turnbull, Neil Jon (2015). The Ruka Mapuche: Clues for a sustainable architecture in southern Chile? In Mileto, Vegas,
it respects a balanced, non-exploitative relation with the environment.\textsuperscript{64} If the reference to Mapuche architecture—although an “abstract” one—is to be framed in Cecilia’s vital interest and participation, as a Chilean “mestiza”, in Mapuche culture and aesthetics, it also assumed a strong critical positioning against the process of invisibilization of indigenous communities in South America, the marginalization of their culture, the colonization of their territories, assimilation, and the progressive erosion of their living environment.\textsuperscript{65}

But the struggle for liberation from intertwined structures of domination was also meant to open, in Cecilia’s perspective, an emancipatory space for women. In Lenin’s 1972 portrait, placed inside the \textit{Ruca abstracta}, the communist leader says in fact: “the proletariat will not achieve complete liberation until it achieves the complete liberation of women.”\textsuperscript{66} Then, it comes as no surprise that, in her 1974 text in \textit{Spare Rib}, Cecilia explained that, before the coup happened, she was planning to go back to Chile and form a brigade of women painters

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\textsuperscript{64} “In the Mapuche world vision there exists the intrinsic concept of Az Mapu, or how things must be done to maintain equilibrium between man and the earth. This concept leads to clear rules and guidelines for every aspect of daily life including the location, orientation and design of the ruka.” \textit{Ibidem}. See also: \textit{Guía de Diseño Arquitectónico Mapuche 2016} (2016). Dirección de Arquitectura, Ministerio de Obras Públicas, Gobierno de Chile, 40-41. Retrieved from: <http://arquitectura.mop.cl/Documents/Guia_diseño_arquitectonico_MAPUCHE.pdf> [Accessed 2018, January 31]\textsuperscript{61}.

\textsuperscript{65} This also relates to Cecilia pioneering concern with the environment. In 1973, she wrote: “When I think on the revolution in South America, I see it not only as the end of exploitation, but also as the end of the unwise and destructive way of being and relating to the planet.” Vicuña, Cecilia (1973). From the explanation of the painting called ‘The response of the warrior’. ICA documentation, n.p. ICA archive, Tate Library. On this subject see Lippard, Lucy (2017). Floating Between Past and Future: The Indigenisation of Environmental Politics. \textit{Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry}, issue 43, Spring 2017, 94-118. iBook.

\textsuperscript{66} “el proletariado no logrará alcanzar la liberación completa hasta que no logre la completa liberación de la mujer.”
“...to go all round the country painting murals about the history of women and their incorporation into the revolutionary process...”67 This utopian vision of the socialist revolution somehow matched Artists for Democracy’s broad engagement with "... giving real and active support to liberation struggles all over the world, particularly in the Third World countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America”68, and was reflected in the festival’s multi-focused program that included symposia such as “Progressive Women and the Arts” and “Art and Culture in Africa and the Black Culture of the Caribbean.”69

But Ruca Abstracta also seem to materialize, retrospectively, a space dedicated to the memory of what Allende’s way to socialism represented, not only to Chile, but to all the so-called “Third World” and, more personally, to Cecilia herself. If, as Andreas Huyssen pointed out, memory sites such as monuments, memorials, public sculptures and parks are powerful instruments to “support public memory narratives”70, Cecilia’s Ruca Abstracta and her objects from A Journal of Objects for the Chilean Resistance embody perhaps a kind of “counter-monument” not only because of their precarious, fragile character and their relation to time—an object a day as a “little prayer”, a form of not forgetting—but also because of the fact that they articulate, although in distinct ways, a fluid relation with space and place. How to build a monument in exile? How to build a monument to support both public

67 Vicuña, The Coup came to kill what I loved. [op. cit.], 38.
and personal memory when all objects will possibly have to travel somewhere else or be left behind?

Moreover, as possible “counter-monuments” *Ruca Abstracta* and the objects from *A Journal of Objects for the Chilean Resistance* privilege interrelations and “confusion” —in the etymological sense of mixing together—rather than clear-cut narratives. In this sense, both artworks are bundles of connections suturing into their material presence the personal and the political, the here and there, the individual and the collective. This con-fusion somehow reflects the way in which the socialist revolution in Chile was experienced and envisioned by Cecilia. In *Saborami*, she wrote: “In the Chile before the coup, the ‘I’ was experienced simultaneously as individual and collective. We felt it when a million people marched together in Santiago (a city of only 3 million people) to Salute Salvador Allende. We felt it as we chanted ‘ahora somos nosotros’ ‘now we are us’. Not the American ‘us versus them’ but a collective us, including us all, even those who were against Allende.”71

Finally, instead of using solid materials, made to last, these works identify strength not in firmness, nor in durability—in what can survive the life cycle of humans, animals and plants—but rather in what discloses and participates in the finitude of this very cycle: precariousness, fragility, instability. Interaction with the world is the

point, not conservation.72 “Weft of incense sticks:” Cecilia wrote in 1973, “maximum fragility against maximum power.”73

Leaving

I have been thinking very much about what Cecilia’s work of the early 1970s in London can teach us—me, you and all those who are currently attempting to explore how to develop art historical research and writing adopting a more relational—and transnational—approach. Her work certainly offered me multiple insights for present and future reflections. Let me outline here some provisional considerations. On one hand, I think that Cecilia’s narrative of her first times in London and her shattered expectations about a city that previously held such a special place in her imagination, incites us to question our own expectations about a smooth version of artistic cosmopolitanism in which conflicts, dissonances and failure would be overlooked in favour of positive values such as dialogue and encounter. On the other, like “wefts of incense sticks”, texts are woven heterogeneously, using different elements, and their equilibrium depends on the balance of these elements together. As suggested by Catherine de Zegher, in Cecilia’s precarious work “Each piece is composed in such a way that every material holds another in balance.”74 Not only the fragile construction of the precarious objects requires a high degree of

72 As emphasized by Jo Applin, Catherine Spencer and Amy Tobin, “Vicuñas presentation of her small collaged items as books, coupled with her overarching identification of this project as a “journal of objects,” indicates that these items are intended to pass from hand to hand, transmitting ideas and information as they go”, in Applin, Jo, Spencer, Catherine and Tobin, Amy (eds.), London Art Worlds: Mobile, Contingent, and Ephemeral Networks, 1960–1980, 537-539.
attention and care but the objects themselves are articulated through the creation of connections and points of balance and tension between various materials.

We could perhaps envision our art historical narratives as fragile constructions in which our perspective is generously given substance and equilibrium by other voices with which it connects in many different ways. While Cecilia considered that “... an object is not an object, it is the witness of a relationship”\(^{75}\), I ask myself to which point our art historical texts are also “witnesses of relationships”. It is difficult for these questions not have an impact in the way we choose to write. This is the reason why I thought that perhaps this text should not only be a discussion on Cecilia’s work in London but also a letter to you. Can one do the two at the same time? I hope you will not be unpleasantly surprised by this choice. My friend and colleague Margarida asked me if I knew Daniel Arasse’s letter “Cara Giulia” in his book *On n’y voit rien* (2000), and wondered which would be the right way to reference this connection. I read Arasse’s letter for the first time while I began writing this text, rapidly and with great pleasure as if it was part of a novel. I thought that considered that my name is also Giulia, I had a good excuse to draw of on the same epistolary impulse as a kind of *homage* to this art historian.

Finally, one more thread has to be pulled. In a recent conference that we organized in Lisbon, you proposed to reflect on artistic networks not only because of their capacity to connect but also because of what they fail to connect, what they let slip between their gaps: their

unmapped spaces.\footnote{Macchiavello, Carla (2017). Caught in a Mesh: Weaving Forms of Resistance and Collaboration. Unpublished. Keynote paper presented at the conference Through, From, To Latin America: Networks, circulations and artistic transits from the 1960s to the present, Lisbon, FCSH-UNL, 27-28 November 2017.} In 1974, in an article suggestively titled “Sharing Art”, dedicated to artist-run galleries in London and to John Dugger’s “Ergonic Workshop” at the Art Meeting Place in London, Guy Brett wrote that “The one-man show, the retrospective, the mixed show, have become stereotypes of communication; they pull the emphasis on the artist as a professional, rather than on the forces of artistic creation in which everyone shares.”\footnote{Brett, Guy (1974). Sharing Art. The Times, London, 16 July 1974, 7.} But whereas Dugger’s itinerary had been marked by his participation in the London collective Exploding Galaxy (1967-1968) and by the encounter with Lygia Clark in Paris in 1970\footnote{“Clark introduced Dugger to the Brazilian avant-garde movement, Neoconcretismo, of which she was one of the leading proponents. Through Clark, he also honed his interest in the interactivity of artists and audiences that he experienced in Galaxy performances.” Martin, Courtney J. Collectivity, Temporality, and Festival Culture in John Dugger’s Quasi-Architecture, 1970–74. [op. cit.], 3029-3031.}, what about Cecilia? In her case a process of “sharing in the forces of creation” seems to relate to an altogether different network of cultural references and artistic dialogues.

On one hand, for Cecilia, the socialist government in Chile opened new horizons for participatory processes in the arts and beyond, somehow redefining what art could be at a collective level. “If before AFD, other Latin American artists like Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica had inspired Europe by creating participatory art forms centered on the interaction of bodies,” she wrote, “the Chilean experience offered a different possibility: to think of a social movement that changes the order of the world as a ‘work’ or a large-scale participatory art form.”\footnote{“Si antes de AFD, otros artistas latinoamericanos como Lygia Clark y Hélio Oiticica habían inspirado a Europa creando formas de arte participatorio centradas en la interacción de los cuerpos,” she wrote, “la experiencia chilena ofrecía una posibilidad...”} On the
other, while Cecilia got familiar with the work of Lygia Clark in London, through Guy Brett\(^80\), her earlier ephemeral sculptures and actions in Chile associated relationality with both human and non-human forms of participation and interconnection—with both experimental art and indigenous culture. In this sense, the heterogeneous networks in which her practice participated—some of them well known such as those connected to the magazine *El Corno emplumado* in Mexico and the publisher Beau Geste Press in the U.K.—stimulates a questioning on the very notion of artistic network and on how we explore those fertile liminal zones in which the “artistic” and “non-artistic” connect, suddenly unsettling our precarious disciplinary boundaries.

I look forward to hearing back from you,

A presto,

Giulia

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diferente: pensar un movimiento social que cambia el orden del mundo como una ‘obra’ o una forma de arte participatorio en gran escala.” Vicuña, Organizar la ensoñación. [op. cit.], n. p.

\(^80\) Skype interview with the artist. [op. cit.]
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