Thanks to Lisa and Kazim for convening us in such delightful conversation, and to Kamran and Michael for two truly excellent papers. The title of my talk is “Reading as Ritual Response: The Artist’s Books of Cecilia Vicuña,” and it comes from a larger project that I have recently begun, *The New Sister Arts*, which examines the poētic potentialities of the artist’s book. Today I’ll be discussing the work of Chilean poet and visual artist, Cecilia Vicuña, and in particular, her first book of poems, *Sabor a Mí* [“A Taste of Me” (1973), which she originally fabricated at Beau Geste Press while still living in exile in England. As an artist’s book, *Sabor a Mí* documents the poet’s distant, anguished experience of Pinochet’s coup through its compelling arrangement of visual, verbal, and tactile materials, including drawings, collages, paintings, photographs, diary entries, letters, poems, and essays. It is a book that Vicuña has returned to repeatedly throughout her decades-long career, publishing and re-publishing excerpts and whole versions of the book in Spanish and in English. In the wake of the coup, it is through the ritual of re-reading, and through the act of return—as pilgrimage, making, and remaking—that Vicuña works toward historical, cultural, and personal redemption.

**Poetry in the Expanded Field**

Borrowing a term from Rosalind Krauss, I want to begin with the proposition that the artist’s book represents one important medium for what we might call *poetry in the expanded field*. The artist’s book, by virtue of its visual, tactile, and material qualities, exceeds ordinary textual conditions: to “read” an artist’s book necessarily involves the full *sensorium*—i.e., the senses in totality—of its reader. For the purposes of my talk today, the expanded field of the book is important for two reasons: i) more so than other books, the artist’s book instantiates its meaning not merely through typeset characters on the page, but as physical matter—ink and paper, to be sure, but also various other materials, as likely to exist off the
page as on it; and ii) because the artist’s book tends to exceed the limits of its four corners, it expands the possibilities of its object status, creating a weave of co-extensive text-objects. Thus the artist’s book promises a poetic text with its own heft and spatiality—a material language that spans the histories and fabrications contained in the book and the emergent conditions of the reader’s present reality. Said otherwise, the artist’s book supplies an alchemical poetics: a mattering of language, and a way of materializing what remains absent or still immanent, through collective acts of reading as embodied, ritual response.

The artist’s book is particularly fertile in the hands of Cecilia Vicuña, whose lifelong body of work hybridizes poetry, painting, sculpture, installation, dance, song, and film. Vicuña’s idea of the artist’s book is orchestral—that is, it may encompass other art objects and media, even including other artist’s books. We find this capacious conceptualization of the book even in her earliest works, such as Otoño [“Autumn”] (1971); A Journal of Objects for the Chilean Resistance (1973-74); El Cuaderno Café [“The Brown Book”] (c. 1973)—and the book that contains them all, Sabor a Mí. In these works, hybridity is as much a question of aesthetics as it is one of survival: the recursive, ritualistic nature of Vicuña’s reading and writing practices helps to concretize and proliferate an otherwise precarious archive, and ultimately suggests a boundless poïesis, almost without origin or end (after all, such is the temporality of revolution).

[SLIDES 04, 05] - Forms of Expansion: Otoño & A Journal of Objects for the Chilean Resistance

[Salón de] Otoño [“Autumn”] (1971) was Vicuña’s first solo exhibition at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Santiago de Chile, which she staged in the museum’s “Sala Forestal” [“Forest Room”] (like several of Vicuña’s early installation works, Otoño was later re-staged at the Museum in 2005). Together with her friends and family, Vicuña collected and filled the room with sycamore leaves (the leaves stretched from wall to wall, sloping gradually from waist-height to about 10 centimeters). An accompanying text, the “diary of autumn,” was placed on a far wall, legible only to “those who dared to cross the sea of leaves.” Thus Vicuña conceived Otoño as embodied space, collective action, and process art—what she calls “living the sculpture”—all as a “contribution to Socialism in Chile” and a celebration of the Unidad Popular. But the installation also realized an expanded form of the book itself:
“hojas” in Spanish means both “leaves” and “pages,” and in this sense Otoño is an immersive environment, a sea of pages, to which the viewer-reader must submit the entire body.

As Vicuña later recounted in Sabor a Mí, the Otoño installation was ultimately a non-event: delayed by the assassination of Chile’s minister of the interior (Edmundo Pérez Zujovic) and with Chile in a state of national mourning, the installation “opened three days later with no one around to see it.” Soon afterward, Vicuña left Chile to study as a postgraduate student at the Royal Academy of Art in London. She would not return until decades later. Once the coup had taken place, her exile—from family, home, and archive—was immediate and complete. The threat of rupture and disappearance are persistent themes throughout Vicuña’s career: from censored manuscripts and precarious installations to undocumented and lost works, her oeuvre is marked by the cultural destruction of the coup and evocative of the thousands of Chileans violently disappeared by Pinochet’s regime.

Prior to the coup, Vicuña had been at work in London on A Journal of Objects for the Resistance, a series of more than 400 precarious objects, which she originally made in support of Salvador Allende’s Unidad Popular government, but later reworked “to support armed struggle against the reactionary government” following the coup. Objects like Libro Tul [“Tulle Book”] and El Cuaderno Café [“The Brown Book”] are talismanic, and they reveal Vicuña’s already expansive concept of the book. As Vicuña explains in her artist’s statement for the project (seen here printed on red silk), the objects were intended to function against Pinochet’s regime on three levels at once: “politically, magically and aesthetically.” As we will see, Sabor a Mí attempts to gather and re-present earlier works like Otoño and A Journal of Objects, as a means of renewing their potency as object-sites of mourning and revolutionary resistance.


Sabor a Mí numbers among the most groundbreaking poetic representations of the coup’s trauma, and yet, because of its limited publication abroad, it has remained relatively unknown to Chilean readers until recently (of course, even if Sabor a Mí had somehow been published in Chile, it would have been the exception: only five books of poetry were published in Chile in the period from 1973 until 1978).
Perhaps also limiting its reception was its hybrid, multimodal format, which challenges linguistic and readerly conventions at every turn. It is for both practical and aesthetic purposes, then, that Vicuña has revised and reissued *Sabor a Mí* many times in the last fifty years, for Chilean as well as British and American audiences alike.

The remainder of my remarks today will focus on the “original” *Sabor a Mí* in comparison with these later incarnations—in particular, the small press edition released by ChainLinks in 2011. I want to insist that we think of *Sabor a Mí* in the plural, for it is most certainly not a singular historical artifact. Together, the original artist’s book and its various reincarnations form a *corpus* of works—a corpus that refuses to disappear. Rather, the books insist on their own materiality, evoking at once both the presence and the absences of history. History in the *Saboramis* is visible, tangible, and real, and is it also fugitive, flawed, and vacant. The books serve as memorial sites, intimate portals through which Vicuña returns to a Chile that no longer exists.

From one edition to another, it is the material and tactile elements of the books that enact the *Saboramis*’ continual project of mourning, making, and re-making. In its re-presentations of earlier installation works and objects, such as *Otoño* and *A Journal of Objects*, the 1973 edition offers a variety of found materials—a leaf, a unique envelope with a mimeographed letter inside, and varied paper stocks—that invite the touch of curious readers. As Vicuña writes in *El Cuaderno Café*, the sense of touch is fundamental to her “way of reading chile,” whereby she remembers the three-year period before the coup. Thus Vicuña implies that to handle a book (and perhaps in particular, an artist’s book) is to charge its pages with affective energy—as though a reader’s presence or caress might bring the book’s memories back to life.

In light of these reflections, it may be difficult for readers to encounter this same passage in the 2011 edition without feeling somehow bereft—for if “a touched object is a charged object,” what is left to caress in the later edition? Missing from *Saborami* are the sensory delights of the original’s hand-tipped found materials and dingy mimeograph reproductions. There are no real leaves pasted on glassine pages, and there is no envelope from Chile with its letter tucked neatly inside. Rather, the leaf appears only in
silhouette, and the glassine page is printed on an opaque, coated stock. The transparency, texture, and sound of the glassine pages, like the rustle of Otoño's leaves, are lost. We may find some satisfaction, however, in the enhanced detail of the full-color reproductions of El Cuaderno Café; the photographs of Allende and Violeta Parra are more easily recognized, and the texture of the notebook is at least visible, if not tangible. But when handling Saborami, its glossy, full-color pages repel any actual touch, as if to remind the reader that she is still farther from El Cuaderno Café than ever before. These tactile failures ultimately dramatize Vicuña’s experience of exile, recalling a Chilean homeland that she and her compatriots could only ever grasp at arm’s length. If the original Sabor a Mí, in all its conspicuous materiality, serves as a touchstone, a way of returning home from exile, then the later edition falters, and the reader’s own experience of loss and distance echoes that of the anguished poet.

That Vicuña returns to the material of Sabor a Mí, time and again, might indicate a fundamental failure in the original. And yet, I want to suggest that the failures of the Saboramis—all those instances in which the books’ visual and tactile elements reveal themselves as vacant simulacra—are what drive the renewal and expansion of the corpus. The poet's dogged reworking of the Saboramis reveals faith, and something to be salvaged. Like Allende, Vicuña conceives the Saborami corpus as a future that has already been fulfilled, as well as a history to be rewritten and redeemed by that future. And indeed, the later edition of Saborami also offers new possibilities for connection, such as the re-discovery and inclusion of Vicuña’s painting, Salvador Allende’s Death, which had been missing in the 1973 edition, and a newly-added afterword, which recontextualizes Vicuña’s narrative of the coup to response to contemporary American readers and their sociopolitical realities.

[SLIDE 07] - Conclusion

In the Saborami corpus, the twin forces of mourning and remaking drive the poet’s repeated acts of return, and of re-reading Chile. To return, to recover, to resurrect what has been lost might seem a failed project from the very outset—a melancholia born from a process of mourning that never completes—and yet, the Saborami corpus is also an open-ended project that continually evolves in
response to its present moment. Each small gesture of devotion to social democracy brings Vicuña closer to the moment when the present will open onto the past, when history might be rewritten and redeemed. With no immediate resolution for the trauma endured in Chile, nor for the continual emergence of new forms of political violence and oppression in the United States, the Saboramis both memorialize and enact Vicuña’s deferred hopes for social democracy. So long as readers return to Allende’s Chile and to Sabor a Mí, the project of the Unidad Popular lives on; and with each devotional act of re-reading, one may still hope for redemption to come.