

Danspace Project

Conversations Without Walls:

Samita Sinha and Cecilia Vicuña

October 10, 2020

Judy Hussie-Taylor: Welcome to Danspace Project and this Conversation Without Walls. I'm Judy Hussie-Taylor, Executive Director & Chief Curator. Today I'm thrilled and honored to welcome two brilliant and singular artists, Cecilia Vicuña and Samita Sinha. Welcome. Poet, artist, filmmaker, and activist Cecilia Vicuña has moved fluidly across disciplines for over four decades. Critic Lucy Lippard has written, "Vicuña has never accepted the boundaries between cultural disciplines, creating a terrain of her own." In 2002, I was so fortunate to have worked with Cecilia to organize "Thread Mansion," an exhibition of Cecilia's body of work, including photographs of performance actions, poetry, sculpture, and space weavings at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art. We have fond, beautiful memories of that. Samita Sinha's work vibrates at the intersections of voice and body, tradition, and innovation. She creates works that cross boundaries of genre and discipline, tradition, expanding possibilities for artistic collaboration, and traditions. She is a 2019-2020 Danspace Artist Research Fellow. Unfortunately, her collaboration with Okwui Okpokwasili, scheduled to premiere last March, and her solo evening of new work scheduled for our fall season were canceled due to the pandemic. But Samita is now offering a monthly series entitled "Breathing Room." Please visit our website for more information at danspaceproject.org. Samita, Cecilia, I'm so grateful to you both for accepting this invitation. So it's with love and gratitude that I hand this Zoom space, this Zoom room, over to you and I'm going to leave the Zoom space. Thank you. [Judy leaves Zoom]

[Samita and Cecilia exchange a series of sounds and gestures for about 10 minutes]

Cecilia Vicuña: Hello

Samita Sinha: Hello, my friend.

Cecilia Vicuña: So nice to see you. Mm. You took us to some universes there, to some unknown vibrations, (vocalizing) that exist inside all of us. They exist and you bring them forth to be seen and heard. Loved and caressed. (speaking) Just before you came on I thought to look up something that I had written long ago. I thought I had it here in front of me, but I don't seem to. Ah! Here, I found it. Ok, good. And it is in dialogue. I wrote in conversation with Rigveda and I know that you have been in conversation with the Vedas and with the ancient Indian traditions where you come from, for all your life. So as a gesture of love for your work, for what you do with your sound, I suddenly remember a few minutes ago of these notes, and it says: "El silencio es la madre del sonido." Silence is the mother of sound. "I every, I, all", says Jane Sprague. "El silencio es el pensamiento del sonido." Silence is the thought of sound. The poets of the south of Chile say "Ya eres los huecos del aire." That's the voice of the ceremonial dancer, Claudio Mercado. And that means you have become the holes in the air -- the holes in

the air. A poem is the syllable of water and the Vedic tradition says syllables are pure energy sound. -- translated this fragment of the ninth Mandala hymn of the Rigveda. It is called "To the Liquid." And it says "Aru? No (whispered) which is set against the bow. Guf that one delivers, no (whispered). That thought leaps to its mother's udder, udder. I don't know how you pronounce that. Like a wide river, it milks the tip of the course. The liquid in its own valves is released. Clothed, not with cloth, but with its own wave. That is you. Clothed by your own wave."

Samita Sinha: I receive your love Cecilia. It is a very rare, a very rare, love.

Cecilia Vicuña: I think in this ocean, our hatred that we find ourselves, where we're murdering the sources of life. We're murdering the insects, the plants, the rivers, the oceans, the animals. We're murdering this earth with the language of hatred that now rules. Therefore, the only thing that can erase hatred and transform hatred, is the language of love. A language we have forgotten and therefore, we sing. We sing because they say that the first sense that developed within the fetus is the ear. And we wonder what is it that pushes the fetus to hear first, even before the heart beats in the fetus? It begins by listening. Isn't that the greatest form? To listen to what connects us, to listen to what unites us, and the only thing, the only name we have for that is love.

Samita Sinha: You give it so many names. I was listening to you speak about "Concon." And "con," you called it "the life thread, the force, the pulsation inside of the life thread." And that feels also like the knot, when you talked about it as the knot, as a pretzel, the water as a pretzel, that in this dimension, where the connections can happen, where the threads can be joined, where things can be woven. And it's such a big and wild place and scary in its vast -- in its vastness. And I feel with you, that you have -- you, you live there.

Cecilia Vicuña: Yes, it is true. And if you think of the syllable and the water as being knotted too because what makes a syllable possible? Is its paradox? Its contradiction. Because each word is composed of silence. And when we take for granted all that beauty that you sense, that we sense, that we feel, that the fetus is sensing. If you can imagine the fetus, what is the fetus doing? The fetus is having the greatest fun in the world. And having can be felt, what can be heard. And so it's that sense of utter joy—the only guide we have in order to be aligned with that and not with the fear and pain, destruction, violence. And that belongs to all of us, that joy. And we have been extracted. It's not just we live in a culture of extraction of the earth. It's like our senses have been extracted, our sense of relation to language, to water. For everything that's sacred has also been removed, pulled out of us in order to feed us this violent greed.

Samita Sinha: And some of us go crawling, crawling to find -- to find that through the rubble, through the -- through the rubble, (laughing) through the debris.

Cecilia Vicuña: Yeah. And the willingness to see. This is why the only tool is that longing. And when I speak with that word, "con," I have gone through a journey with that word all my life. My father says that I was conceived very close to the place that is called Concón. But I was conceived at the foot of a mountain called Aconcagua, which means looking at con. And so this

word "con" was revealed to me after, I could say perhaps 14 or 15 years of working with the place. And even in encountering different sources until I found one source that opened the way for me to free the idea that you could find it in a book. Because how can this kind of knowledge be found in a book, when books have been involved in erasing precisely that kind of knowing. And so when I say that "con" really means that, it's really coming from what the land has said. And the millions of voices that have sought these true meanings for us. It's not just me, it's a chain a line of people that know that there is more to these meanings

Samita Sinha: Yes. You know that "con," in uh -- it's a beautiful coincidence, you could say. In Hindi, "Kaun" means "who." And there's one bandish, which is the composition Bandish, the word "Bandish" means composition in classical music, Hindustani classical music. And just to go on a language road for a moment, baandhana is to tie. So bandish means a tying of rhythm and melody and language. And so in one of these bandishes the words are "Kaun(a) gat(a)." (Singing Kaun(a)) And I've been singing this bandish for a long, long time. And I just keep separating that word, kaun, kaun, kaun(a), kaun. And I sing it and it becomes for me at this point it's like this cry. Who who who. And it's maybe 20 years or so, I've been singing. And I untied you know, I untied the bandish, untied the composition, and this word kinda of fell out (laughing) and stays with me. And just shows up like these fragments, you know, these clues. And I just thought somehow it's either in my body or in the shape, you know, the shape of the reality, the way it shapes the space. Something is there, and it becomes its own portal.

Cecilia Vicuña: I am writing what you said because it is so incredibly beautiful. And I think when you said that it is in the body and I understood that you were speaking of the body of your sound. It is like the body of your sound has a knowledge that is definitely beyond you and me.

Samita Sinha: Yes.

Cecilia Vicuña: And this is how it feels to me. In that little that you saw that spoke to you because I was speaking of the word "con." And the word "kon" in Japanese stands for what the German word Ur, U-R, is. And "ur" is like the impulse that causes the life force to exist. Even in German, even in Japanese, even in Hindi, you know, and the portal that I have to understand came from a woman, from a woman historian, a lady. Her name was María Rostworowski Tovar de Diez Canseco, and she writes in a footnote in one of her books about the great Lord of the ocean and she says that we know this Lord by the Quecha name, but Quechua is a recent language. This language is only 1,000 years old, but she says the ancient name of this god of the ocean, god of chaos. This god of water is a female deity called Con. You know, and that name came from the south, meaning it came from what is now Chile. The highest mountain of the western hemisphere is -her- this mountain is called Aconcagua. So I am born at the foot of this great majestic being Aconcagua that is looking at the ocean because Chile is on the ocean. So this baby comes out in reverence of this, that is, and how you should move from us taking that this baby play, plays with the water, and the water embraces the baby and the baby and the water begins a conversation and that's my life (whispering). So it's the same

with you, Samita. You, in your story, are playing with the sounds, like I played with water. So the sound became the mother.

Samita Sinha: Mmhmm mmhmm. Yes, I feel raised, raised by them, raised by the sound, raised by the -- and I had to go through the traditions also because the traditions have their own layers of hierarchy and patriarchy and also to go through those to find where I can be mothered.

Cecilia Vicuña: Mothered beyond time and space. Do you remember, Samita, when the moment when you were young girl, and you knew that sound was speaking to you?

Samita Sinha: You know, I remember -- it was the record player in our living room and, you know, it was a difficult household. And a lot of the -- you could say -- what sound opens for me in the connectedness was not there in the home. But I was maybe 6, or small, 6 or 7. And whatever records we had, which were very few, I would just play them over and over and over and over. And it was my time alone. And it didn't matter what it was. It didn't matter what song, how, what, just something. I just somehow sat there and it was like I understood that it was a refuge.

Cecilia Vicuña: How wonderful. So it was your vehicle, it was your transport, it was your liberation. And you think of how many teenagers relate to sound in the same way. I did something very similar. I stole the record player from my mother, from the living room, and I put it in my bedroom. (laughs) In reality, the family accepted that because it was an old record player, so they say, okay, we replace it. They let me keep it! And my bedroom was very tiny and this record player was a big ancient furniture that occupies half the room. And so it didn't matter to me because I did exactly the same as you and but I soon enough discovered which was the transport that really worked for me. And I was older than you when this happened. I was probably 14, 15, and my transport was John Coltrane, "A Love Supreme" especially. And then through John Coltrane, of course, I discovered Eric Dolphy, Alice Coltrane, and I discovered all these masters, which were really unknown in the 60s, even in the US. You know, they were like, doing their sublime music in the depths of their corners, you know, like the underneath culture of the United States. And how on earth did they reach me in Chile is just beyond -- just another story. But without that sound I don't think I could have been freed to be myself, I think that's why I love so deeply. And I think when you sing "kaun," I feel where you're coming from and I feel where you're going, and I go with you. I can go with you. And this is what sound does for all of us, that's why sound is really the door.

Samita Sinha: You know, Cecilia, you said in the last conversation we had, you said that the power of ritual is in not knowing and once the ritual is set, it is -- and known, it's dead. And that space of not knowing, I don't know where it came in our conversation, but somehow we related it to sound. That sound itself, what is the river of -- that opens that -- you know that unties, you could say, all of the definitions and all of the holds -- holdings that we have.

Cecilia Vicuña: That is so beautiful that you remember that because it's true. You know, I think it comes from -- see, you and I sing in a manner that is the most despised of them all. It is

because it's not prescribed. It is not ruled. It is not often authoritative. It is not hierarchical. It has not been sort of sanctioned by either religion, or the powers, or education, or anything. We sing as close as possible to lament. The word that I don't know how to translate, which is *quejido*, which is like the moan of pain, you know, you're hurt and the first thing that comes from you is a cry. Cry, that is unruled. Everything that exists in that cry is just infinite. And so your ear and my ear sought that space. And that space is the most profound, revealing, and the most profound opening to different ways of being, to different ways of relating to each other and to the pain in your heart and the heart of others. And when you hear that empathy is disappearing from the world, it is because listening is also disappearing. So the ability to listen. What are we listening for? You know, we really need to listen to that hidden pain that all of us are carrying and it is true that ritual is eternal because it's incomprehensible and because true ritual is a seeking --it's not a prescribed system when it becomes ritualized, it doesn't serve the people. You know those who believe that they know better, those who believe they are entitled to command us. Every living being knows that we're not here to be commanded or ruled. It's against our brain. It's against the beating heart. It's against the ear.

Samita Sinha: One, one question I have for you is, I have 1 million questions, and I thought I would wait to see which one came. And it's not a line but you spoke in our conversation about pain as the light as the guide and vulnerability, you said—I thought this was very intense— you said "Vulnerability is our only defense but it's also very dangerous." And there's something there about being vulnerable enough to let that pain be the light, opening enough to that, and then also on the other side this disappearing, this constant disappearing, and there's also this I think for me these powers, especially in their most monstrous form that they're in right now, most violent. How do you manage? Or do you feel? Do you experience fear of obliteration, or fear of disappearance in this process of staying vulnerable in that way? Because the only way to that space that we both speak of in, let's call it sound, or let's call it ocean, or let's call it "con." Let's call it "con," right? The only way to touch that, and the only way to keep being able to touch it, and to be available to it, and to join with it, and to serve it, is to stay open. And this also -- this constant disappearing sometimes, you know, I know earlier in the week, after the debate there, there can be such a terrible descent into powerlessness. And then slowly I recover this most, you know, the sunlight into "con," right? And it's always related though, the descent and the recovery just keeps deepening. I think the connection to "con" or the connections. So my question is, in your four decades of making in this way, if there's anything you have to offer about that field of experiences? I think a lot of people would love to hear.

Cecilia Vicuña: Yeah, I think it's probably nothing that I can even consider a teaching, or a lesson, or a way, but I can speak on how it's been possible for me. I can speak about that. As for your question, do I feel fear? Constantly. I mean, we are in fear. Who isn't in fear now? You know, so the only way to be in it, is to acknowledge it. And so for me the most powerful word in this moment is actually the word that had a military origin, which is "ack." "Acknowledgment" is a word, that if you look up, it is a word it is related to battle. And how did you battle? You know, so it doesn't feel like you're battling anything. But when you are acknowledging that you are in total fear, yes, fear of obliteration. But this fear of obliteration is not just that you will be obliterated, it is that life itself is being obliterated. Perhaps not from the planet, because the planet is mostly

bacterias and viruses and they will go on. But the biodiversity of this planet is definitely being crushed, murdered. So that means millions of species. So my fear is definitely not just about me, it's about all we know and all we love. Everything! No. And so how can we exist in this fear, without fear? You know, that's why I was reading that poem. It's like, you are clothed, not by clothes, but by its own wave. In other words, since fear is now our reality, fear is our home. Fear has to be our teacher. Fear has to be our door, our way into discovering something in us that we'll know how to move forward. The way things are going very soon there will not be enough food for all. Very soon, there will not be enough water for all. In the last scientific report, they said that at least five new pandemics will evolve every year, and knowing that this is all coming from the destruction of wilderness. So the little window we have to mobilize, to stop this destruction is shrinking by the minute and you still see no action, no desire. So the desire to act on behalf of others has to come from our longings. Do you know what I mean? This appears not in the sense that we are not here because the way I have dealt with disappearance is I understood when I was very, very young, that I, the person called Cecilia, would disappear. And therefore understanding that I knew whatever I was here for couldn't disappear, because I had been brought in and somebody else would be brought in, you know. So in other words, I understood that disappearance and continuity are one phenomena but it requires our dissolution. It requires the dissolution of the ego. It requires the dissolution of beliefs, dissolution of ideas, of descriptions, narratives. It describes the dissolution of everything in earth to free that in us, that knows more than we do. Like a mother knows, for example, I don't know if you saw the videos of the bomb in Beirut. I mean now we can see videos of the bomb as it is striking people and something I will never ever forget, an image I saw. There's a lady in an apartment near the port and I don't know how she was being filmed, I suppose by her husband. And there are three babies, children. They're her babies. One baby that is like a baby, like maybe three months old, one that is maybe two years old, and one that's a year old. And you see the bomb explode and as the wave is hitting the glass of her apartment, this young mother jumps, like a Panther, (Cecilia makes a whooshing sound) like that, to protect the youngest baby, you know. And the other two children run because her body can't cover the three of them. But who does she pick in that moment? The one that is closest to her womb, you know, the one that has the furthest chance to continue. I feel like crying. You know, for example, when the earthquake, the brutal earthquake was in Mexico, this was in the year '68. And many buildings just simply dropped to the ground because they have built through corruption, corrupted systems that had stolen the cement and replaced it with sand. Therefore, the buildings collapsed like cakes, burying people. They buried thousands of people. And in one of those destruction, there was a crash --what do you call-- where you keep lots of babies like a clinic, babies that were like a few days old. And there were -- if I remember correctly -- like 16 of these babies in this clinic, and they were buried alive. And they were buried alive and were there for the longest time, I don't remember, 2-3 weeks. A longest time, while the rescuers and their dogs keep looking for survivors. Can you believe that when they found them, they were alive? You know, nobody fed them. This life force within the babies, had made them survive the rubble, survive the lack of oxygen. I mean, how could they breathe? And such miracles are what we need to be fed with in order to know that something will and has to survive, so we work for that. We cultivate that energy as if that energy were a garden. You know, that's what we need to water. We sing for that. Love, for life loves life.

Samita Sinha: Cecilia, I think that's a perfect place for us to rest.

Cecilia Vicuña: Thank you, my dearest Samita.

Samita Sinha: Thank you for this magic circle.

Cecilia Vicuña: My love goes to you and the work you do, weaving sound with many people.

Samita Sinha: Thank you for raising us all.

Cecilia Vicuña: Thank you.

[Outro]

Seta Morton: Thank you for joining us for this Conversation Without Walls. The Conversations Without Walls 2020 digital series will be broadcasted on YouTube Live for one time only viewing parties. Don't worry if you don't catch us there, the conversations are all pre-recorded and will be posted ultimately on the Danspace Project website on our online Journal in Issue 11: *trembling archive*. Our Journal issues accumulate over time with new material added regularly. Apart from this series, you will find video, audio, and written work by Danspace Project artists, curators, and writers. Please also check out Issues 1 through 10 to find work that centers the Danspace Project past Platforms, seasons, experiments. The online Journal is really a place to get more insight into some of the internal conversations, research, and work that goes behind our more mainstage public facing programs. So check out the online Journal, and we look forward to having you at the next Conversation Without Walls.