Andean Epistemology in the Art Gallery:
The Presence of the Kipu in Contemporary South American Art

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Abstract

Andean Epistemology in the Art Gallery:

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This thesis analyzes the presence of the Andean kipu in the work of Contemporary South American Art to discuss its potential as a decolonial tool within art spaces. With a focus on the artistic kipus of Jorge Eduardo Eielson, Cecilia Vicuña, and Paola Torres Núñez del Prado, I identify aspects of their practices that reflect Andean epistemology and ontology. By choosing this Andean textile as a source of artistic inquiry and inspiration, these artists go beyond the kipu's aesthetic properties, employing it to explore and question historical narratives, social issues, identity, and ancestry. Their professional practices show the continued presence of the kipu as a form of art in the museum and beyond.

In order to understand the kipu's materiality in relation to the Aymara notion of *uywaña* (mutual nurturing) as explained by Elvira Espejo Ayca, I begin with a historical overview of the kipu's usage and evolution. The next section analyzes Eielson's kipu artwork as a relevant precedent for artistic kipus. The following sections explore the works of Vicuña and Torres respectively, in connection with notions of the Andean weaver, decolonial praxis, and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's proposal of a *ch'ixi* (mottled) identity. Finally, by considering the distinctive approaches of these artists as contemporary *kipuskamayocs* (kipu experts), and the notion of *yanak uywaña* (mutual nurturing of the arts), this thesis explores where and how the kipu can introduce aspects of the Andean knowledge into the art gallery and how it can function as a potential decolonial tool in these spaces.

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Kipu

Meaning knot in Quechua, the kipu is an Andean textile device employed for recording information. A kipu is mostly composed with a main cord made of camelid wool or cotton from which other vertically attached cords hang. These subsidiary cords often have knots, key elements in the registering of numeric and narrative data, depending on their type and organization pattern. The spelling varies according to the language; in Quechua, it is often spelled as ‘kipu’ or ‘khipu’, ‘chinu’ in Aymara, and in Spanish as ‘quipu’.

Figure 1 Kipu, AD 1400 - 1532
Source: Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian

Introduction: Un Nudo en la Garganta

In the summer of 2018, I went to visit Cecilia Vicuña's *Disappeared Quipu* (2018), a large-scale installation located in the Great Hall of the Brooklyn Museum. Witnessing the soft fibre textures, the geometric projections, and the chants of this enormous kipu installation in the art gallery led me to write my BA thesis about it. This encounter laid the foundations to deepen my research into the presence of this Andean device in the contemporary art space by following the artistic practices of makers who have previously and continue to work with the kipu as a recurring thematic element. After examining archival material, artwork, and written sources, I scheduled a research visit to the Royal Ontario Museum to closely observe the only two kipus housed in Canada. None of my research had prepared me for this encounter. Arranged in a workshop-like room, these amazing but fragile textile devices were laid before me, resting on padded surfaces on top of a wide table. To me, these were not just textiles, but resembled dormant ancestral entities that I was ill-equipped to address. This initial encounter with the kipus was a fairly clinical affair and mainly consisted of taking notes and measurements while looking at details through a plastic protective cover using a small magnifying glass provided by the technician in charge. This close examination allowed me to notice many of the kipu's intricacies and compelling material qualities. My encounter made me aware of the tangible, haptic aspects of these kipus, which centuries ago were handled by *kipuskamayocs*, kipu experts who during the Inca Empire, would have voiced the information knotted on these strings.

My inability to deeply understand or *read* the kipu, parallel to my interest in the kipu as an Andean textile and form of technology, forms part of a wider history of the colonial wound in South America and the current resurgent efforts to decolonize the region. The kipu's role in this sense has evolved from its origins as a recording tool and system employed by pre-Hispanic

cultures (predominantly during the Incas' ruling), to becoming a point of reference that can recover ancestral Andean knowledge. Often relegated to an object of study in the scientific fields of archeology and anthropology, the kipu's presence in the arts claims a different role, contesting its status as an obsolete or '*dead'* item. The inherently complex nature of the kipu's creation and materiality introduces aspects of the object's epistemology and ontology, along with Andean knowledge more broadly, into the museum/gallery space and beyond. In this thesis, I focus on this decolonizing aspect, arguing that the kipu in South American contemporary art becomes a potential decolonial tool within the colonial structures of museum and gallery spaces. By tracing the kipu and its central presence in the works of Jorge Eduardo Eielson, Cecilia Vicuña, and Paola Torres Núñez del Prado, as artists whose practices foreground Andean ontology and whose artworks often take the form of the kipu, I contextualize their work through the lens of decolonial theory, primarily from South American scholars including sociologist Anibal Quijano, theorist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, as well as anthropologist and weaver Elvira Espejo Ayca. The explanation and proposal of the Aymara notions of *ch'ixi* (mottled) by Rivera Cusicanqui and *uywaña* (mutual nurturing) by Espejo Ayca will serve to explore the decolonial potential of artistic kipus.

Knotted Knowledge: The Kipu

In this section, I focus on the kipu, describing its materiality and tracing its history. But what exactly is a kipu? Frank Salomon, ethnographer and ethnohistorian of the Andes employs the following definition: "a khipu (or chinu in Aymara) is an Andean information storage device made of cord."[1] To better understand how 'information' is 'stored' in these cords, it is necessary to go through an overview of the kipu's components. The device's main features are strings and knots, but rather than being simple elements, their characteristics can be quite diverse, with each varying string and knot likely to carry a plethora of meanings. A kipu has a primary cord, often thicker than the pendant cords attached to it. This primary cord sometimes presents an end knot (*cayte*) on one side and a dangling end on the other, marking the direction from which it should be read, starting from the cayte.[2] Along its long horizontal structure, pendant cords hang vertically, and these each have knots that vary in quantity and style. The pendant cords can have knots, be plain without knots, or even have subsidiary cords attached to them, which can also be plain or knotted.

In a kipu, each cord provides information through its material qualities. Qualities such as plying method, type of fibre, and colour can reveal a great deal about a kipu's significance and function. By looking closer at the cords, we are able to learn a great deal from the construction of both ancient and customary kipus. In a single cord, it is possible to distinguish the plying direction, which is commonly one of two types: 'S' when the twisting is been done clockwise, and 'Z' when done on the opposite direction (Fig. 2). According to anthropologist Sabine Hyland, the plying may reflect a social organization in moieties: S-knots corresponding to *hanan*

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[1] Frank Salomon. *The Cord Keepers* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 11.

[2] Lucrezia Milillo. "New perspectives on khipu semantics based on a khipu in the Pigorini Museum in Rome, Italy," *Quipus y Quipucamayocs, Codificación y Administración en el Antiguo Perú* (Lima: Ernst & Young Peru, 2020), 268.

(upper) and Z-knots to *hurin* (lower).[3] In each plying type, it is possible to observe how a tight plying provides sturdiness to the cord. Kipus are typically made of cotton or camelid wool from animals indigenous to the Andes, most commonly from vicuña, llama, or alpaca. The process to treat the fibres is the usual process for making textiles, starting with the harvest of plants or the cutting of animal fur to later be washed and combed, which is then spun with a *pushka* (hand spindle) into threads of various thickness. To avoid any breakage when working with the threads, they are plied so that two threads twisted together in a *pushka* become sturdier for weaving or knotting. This step is followed by the respective dying process according to the desired hue and the organic pigments involved. This multi-step process is a science that requires chemical knowledge from both expert weavers and dyers.

The cords of kipus can vary extensively in colour, ranging from shades of white and brown, to greens, blues, and pinks, among others. The use of colour is of prime significance in the textile practices of the Andes, as the intensity of a textile's hue can reflect how much energy the fibre has absorbed from the source animal and/or plant.[4] In this sense, rather than understanding the textile as 'made of' a particular fibre material, it is recognized as an entity that contains aspects of these animal or vegetal lifeforms, which have been transformed to produce it. In other words, the textile embodies a transformed version of these beings as well as the reciprocal interspecies relations that it emerges from. As in most Andean textile items, colour in kipus appears to have a specific meaning used for the coding of information, which could have direct connections to specific places and resources. During a weaving workshop I attended at the Cusco Traditional Textile Centre in 2023, my instructor, Noemi, a young weaver from the

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[3] Sabine Hylan, Gene A. Ware and Madison Clark. "Knot Directions in a Khipu/Alphabetics Text from central Andes." *Latin American Antiquity* 25, no. 2 (2014): 189–97. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4318746.
[4] Elvira Espejo: "La ciencia de tejer en los Andes," Museo de Arte de Lima 2021, video 01:39:45. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a4kVxoF2YEk

Chinchero's community, was able to identify the various kinds of pigments as well as where they came from simply by looking at the colours on different textiles. This type of expertise reveals the close relationships Andean weavers have not only with their fibres and tools but with the landscape and environment that these textiles emerge from. Furthermore, these weavers are highly skilled to interpret colours and iconographic patterns within the social fabric they inhabit, as this coding serves to identify and distinguish communities across the Andes.[5] Considering the level of knowledge exhibited by modern weavers, it is possible to deduce that colour is likely to be an element that plays an important role in systematic seriation, as many kipus present an 'ordered grouping' based on the cords' colour. Recently, Hyland has been studying a possible connection between cords and phonemes; based on the colours and types of fibre from a few knotless kipus made between the 18th and 19th centuries. A couple of this type of kipus are housed by the community of San Juan de Collata in Peru and one is held in the Museum of Peoples and Cultures of the Brigham Young University in the U.S.A. Hyland has examined them and argues that they could be syllabic, therefore containing narrative components.[6] Nothing is conclusive at this point, but it is clear that colour is a crucial element in a kipu's coding system.

Another key component in kipus are their knots, which consist of figure-8 knots, long knots, or single knots.[7] Each knot indicates specific ciphers of a decimal system in numeric kipus, while their relevance and meaning in narrative kipus is still unknown. Other kipu components include loop pendants located either on top or below the primary cord, and their

[5] Noemi, the young weaving instructor at the Cusco Traditional Textiles Centre, showed me diverse iconography depicted on vinyl material on a wall, explaining how each of the communities the CTTC works with has their own identifying motives. She also explained details of her own garment as typical of Chincheros.
[6] Sabine Hyland in *Empire Inca – L'Histoire révélée*, directed by Thibaud Marchand. ARTE France, *2023*.
[7] Gary Urton, 47.

respective top or pendant cords. Although the Wari kipus,[8] in addition to their colourful pigments, simple knots and Z-plying, present cords wrapped with other cords that form a tube-like lining.[9]

It is worth mentioning that the characteristics of the kipus vary according to specific time periods and regions. The oldest known kipu is 4600 years old, which was found in the ruins of Caral (Supe-Lima), the oldest civilization in the Americas. Anthropologist Manuel Medrano has proposed a referential timeline to trace the traditions of the kipu in relation to particular attributes and historical adaptations.[10] In his *Quipus: Mil años de historia anudada en los Andes y su futuro digital* (2021), Medrano uses a graph to chart the traditions in the following order: Wari, Inca, Early colonial, Colonial/Republican, placing an arrow to signal an open ended practice, as kipu traditions continue to evolve. He clarifies that the history of the kipu is not limited to its material evolution but that kipus are a mirror of the socio-political systems of their respective era.[11] He states that the early technology of the Wari kipus expanded to fulfill its role as a systemic accounting medium.[12]

The main function of the kipu in Andean culture was accounting, reaching its height during the Tawantinsuyo or Inca Empire (period from 1438-1533 when leaders named Incas ruled great part of the Andean territory),[13] where its usage was core to the Inca Empire's

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[8] The Wari were a civilization of the Middle Horizon (600-1000 a.C.), who inhabited part of the south-central Andes, along the coast, highlands, and Cuzco region.
[9] Manuel Medrano. *Quipus: Mil años de historia anudada en los Andes y su futuro digital* (Lima: Editorial Planeta, 2021), 39.
[10] Medrano, 32.
[11] Medrano, 34.
[12] Medrano, 39.
[13] Tawantinsuyo was the name of the Inka Empire, which in Quechua means "the four regions" as its territory was divided in four *suyos* or regions: Chinchasuyo at the North, Cuntisuyo at the West, Collasuyo at the South, and Antisuyo at the East, all in relation to Cusco's location. It covered part of what today is the South American continent including today Ecuador's and Peru's territory, the South of Colombia, part of Bolivia's West, the North-

administration and the maintenance of their hegemonic power. According to anthropologist Gary Urton, understanding kipus as archives provides an insight into the relationship between accounting, power, and governance throughout the Tawantinsuyo.[14] To fully understand the significance of kipus as a form of archive and method of account-keeping in the Andean world, it is necessary to turn to the Quechua language; tracing the root *yupa* (glossed as 'count and account'),[15] the word in its nominative case forms *yupana,* referring to numbers. *Yupana* in turn is the name of a device used to make calculations recorded on kipus. Urton adds another possible meaning of significance, as *yupay* (infinite) also refers to 'recounting', as in storytelling and relating events in a narrative manner or explaining something (accounting for).[16] Considering that these many meanings are englobed by the root *yupa-* and its construction, it is possible to affirm that the main function of the kipu was for counting, accounting, and recounting.

Numeric kipus, containing an arithmetical structure known as Lockean conventions,[17] are mostly identified by the organization of knots in a decimal system, which translates to knots distributed along the cords defining a type of register that is linear. It is known that numeric kipus store information about goods, food, people, and the distribution of *mita* labour across the Tawantinsuyo. *Ayllus*, a type of communal organization base on localities (that continues to function today), would have had their own kipus to keep track of their affairs as well; at this time, there were different levels of administration that allowed for a hierarchical governance system, from *ayllus* to the Inca. On the other hand, there is much that remains to be studied about

half of Chile and part of Argentina's Northwest. The Tawantinsuyo was a prolific civilization ruled by a leader called the Inka.

[14] Urton, 28.

[15] Urton, 23.

[16] Urton, 24.

[17] Salomon, 13.

narrative kipus, which contain non-numerical data. With narrative kipus, the organization of cords and knots is generally less consistent, making it challenging to identify a pattern.

The first Andean chronicler, Guaman Poma de Ayala, depicts through the drawings and texts of his *Nueva Crónica y Buen Gobierno* (1615), historical characters such as the alderman (Fig.3), the astronomer-poet (Fig. 4), and others who required kipus for their respective duties.[18] Kipus were read by the kipuskamayoc, meaning 'kipu expert' or 'kipu guardian'/ 'animator' in Quechua.[19] Kipuskamayocs were in charge of orally communicating the information encoded in the kipus. This act of extending the kipu, touching the cords, and voicing the content to an audience is often compared to and referred to as 'reading'. This ability to not only read but to understand the kipu, turned the kipuskamayocs into relevant agents within the Tawantinsuyo. In this regard, Urton states that "[Kipuskamayocs] should be understood as active, creative agents of state governance. In fact, they served as catalysts of social formation: they actively created and legitimized the social formations that they recounted from their [k]ipus."[20] It is evident then, that kipuskamayocs reinforced the structures and organization of the Inca Empire by keeping the functions of accounting, counting, and recounting in motion, when recording and updating various kinds of data and information.

It is unfortunate that such a complex and sophisticated system of recording was affected by the colonization of the Tawantinsuyo that started in 1532 with the capture of Inca Atahualpa at the hands of the Spaniard colonizers under the lead of Francisco Pizarro, an appointed *Conquistador* of the Spanish crown. It is at the conjuncture of the Spanish conquest and its

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[18] Descriptions and images of these people's role can be found in Guaman Poma de Ayala's Nueva *Cronica y Buen Gobierno* in pages 800[814] and 883 [817]. Other specific individuals who used kipus are introduced in pages 348 [350], 358 [360], and 360 [362].
[19] Medrano, 23.
[20] Urton, 22.

aftermath that the kipu's role shifted and much of the ability to read it was lost. But this was not an overnight event. The kipu continued to be employed upon the arrival of the Spaniards colonizers, who ended up finding this information system quite useful for their own colonial objectives. Some written records reflect how surprised and intrigued they were by the fact that Indigenous peoples could read knots.[21] Unfortunately, their dismissal of non-European knowledge and their own conception of literacy did not allow them to understand the sophistication of the kipu, disregarding it as inferior to writing. Birgit Brander Rasmussen, scholar in Ethnic Studies, explains that "the failure or refusal to recognize [I]ndigenous forms of literacy as writing can be seen as a legacy of colonialism." [22] A colonial attitude that would persist centuries later in the scientific fields of anthropology, its subfield archeology, along with ethnography, and even linguistics. Historically, linguistic studies on the kipu have often situated this device as either "merely mnemonic" or as a prewriting system.[23]

In 1583, the Third Council of Lima ordered the banning and burning of kipus considered idolatrous,[24] but the edict allowed the usage of kipus for evangelizing purposes. Despite this limitation the usage of the kipu was adapted to this new context and during the colonial period, many were brought to *audiencias* (legal trials) to lay complaints related to land and goods issues, while others were used to record sins for confession purposes.[25] This proves that even the foreign colonizers recognized the value of kipus and continued to permit or tolerate its usage for specific matters. Despite not being the official medium to record information or keep state archives

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[21] Birgit Brander Rasmussen. "The Manuscript, the Quipu, the Book." *Colonial Mediascapes: Sensory Worlds of the Early Americas.* Ed Cohen, Matt, and Jeffrey Glover (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 143

[22] Rasmussen, 144.

[23] Rasmussen, 143.

[24] Medrano, 77-78.

[25] Salomon, 117 – 120.

anymore, the 'art of the kipu' was not an entirely marginalized practice either.[26] According to Salomon, studies point to the end of the Pacific War (1879) as a marker of the decline of its usage. It seems that between the end of the 18th century and the beginning of President Augusto B. Leguía's government, Andean populations fully shifted to alphabetic writing.[27] Referring to the decline of kipu usage, archeologist Carmen Arellano argues that "the real driving force behind their disappearance were educational reforms, beginning with the first in 1905, and continuing with those of Leguía in 1920."[28] As with Salomon, she links the decrease in kipu usage to writing, as a consequence of mandatory schooling in provincial capitals during the first decades of the 20th century.[29]

Today, kipu making continues to be practiced in communities like Cuspon and Ticllus in the central Andes of Peru, where it is costumary for an elder kipuskamayoc to make a funerary kipu when a member of the ayllu passes away. This kipu is made with the help of the family members of the deceased and tied to their waist with each side of the cord falling on their legs. In 2014, Gregoria Rivera Zubieta, known in her community as Mama Licuna, passed away. She was known as the last kipuskamayoc of Cuspon, when in fact she had taught her daughter Elisa how to make funerary kipus, as this is a tradition passed from mother to daughter in her family.[30]

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[26] Salomon, 118.
[27] Salomon, 131.
[28] Carmen Arellano Hoffmann. "Sobre Cuerdas, nudos, colores y dibujos: una introducción," *Quipus y Quipucamayocs, Codificación y administración en el antiguo Perú Perú* ed. Ernst & Young Consultores S. Civil de R. L (Lima: Ernst & Young Peru, 2020), 49.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Molly Tun and Filomeno Zubieta Núñez. "Los Quipus Funerarios y Tributarios de Cuspón y Chiquián: Hoy y Ayer." *Arqueología y Sociedad* Nº 31, 2016: 403-421.

During the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, some elders from Ticllus revealed their ability to make funerary kipus, and offered their service to the family of those who died from the virus.[31]

The designation of Mama Licuna as kipuskamayoc is somewhat surprising since this role is mostly attributed to male figures. The imagery generated around the kipuskamayoc is mostly based on the drawings of Guaman Poma de Ayala, who depicted all kipuskamayocs as men. However, it is also in his *Nueva Crónica* that he indicates that women also handled kipus. This is mentioned in a chapter on the census, where he describes the *paia cona*, women in their fifties who took care of the community's goods and were called *mama* (Fig.5).[32] He writes that "they shall have kipu and account of it all."[33] In his book *The Cord Keepers* (2004) Salomon includes the story of María Micaela Chinchano, an Indigenous herder who participated in the sabotage of the anti-Spaniard coalition in Huarochiri (1705-1719),[34] which suggests that women could make the knots 'speak' too. He explains that Sebastian Franco de Melo, a Portuguese settler and mine operator in Huarochiri, reached out to Chichano to request her help in passing along messages that would dissuade part of the local Indigenous population to join a planned uprising to end Spanish ruling in the region. The messages were transmitted through letters and kipus. Salomon argues that her employment of the kipu may have had an accreditation effect that made her gain the trust of the letter recipients proving the veracity of its content, and/or that they served to paraphrase it.[35]

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[31] Sabine Hyland, Christine Lee, and Roberto Aldave Palacios. 2021. "*Khipus* to Keep Away the Living Dead." *Anthropology News* website, October 22, 2021. https://www.anthropology-news.org/articles/khipus-to-keep-away-the-living-dead/
[32] Guaman Poma de Ayala. *Nueva Crónica y Buen Gobierno* (1615), 217 [219].
[33] Poma de Ayala, 218 [220].
[34] Salomon, 122-123.
[35] Salomon, 123.

The making of kipus by women goes beyond their ability to knot and read their content; it goes in hand with the key role that women have had as weavers in Andean society. During the Inca Empire, there were diverse categories of weavers mostly organized by age, in some respect, ranking their ability in correlation to their social roles within the Tawantinsuyo.[36] The relevant place that textiles have in Andean societies predates the Inca's rule and carries traditions from many of the peoples who have inhabited the territory since time immemorial. Anthropologist Elvira Espejo Ayca, who is an Aymara artist and weaver herself, explains that in the textile production chain, women undertake many important tasks, and it is this production chain that enables relations between makers and the environment, beginning from where they obtain raw matter, transform it with their ancestral knowledge (science), and weave iconography passed through many generations. This cycle of production is expanded by the life of the textile itself. This chain of production construes the textile more as a living subject than a mere object.[37] This cycle reflects a notion that in Aymara is called *uywaña* and in Quechua *uyway*, which Espejo translates as "mutual nurturing with utmost care."[38] These notions represent not only the reciprocity between humans and the natural world (which they are part of); it also involves a more-than-human aspect of the land, *tirakuna*, or what anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena refers to as "earth beings" for lack of a better translation.[39] The *uywana* or *uyway* is always "co-constitutive" and "reciprocal."[40] Understanding this logic and the various intra-connections that

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[36] In Guaman Poma de Ayala's *Nueva Cronica y Buen Gobierno*, there is a section dedicated to the general inspection or the census. From pages 194 [196] to 234 [236] there are categories organized by age and gender, which defined peoples' roles within the Inka society.
[37] Denise Y. Arnold and Elvira Espejo Ayca. *El Textil Tridimensional: La Naturaleza del Tejido como Objeto y Como Sujeto* (La Paz: Instituto de Lengua y Cultura Aymara, 2013), 30.
[38] Elvira Espejo Ayca. "Yanak Uywaña: The Mutual Nurturing of the Arts." *A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* (2023), 34.
[39] Marisol de la Cadena. *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice Across Andean Worlds*. (London: Duke University Press, 2015),
[40] De la Cadena., 103.

textile making involves brings us closer to the core of Andean ontology through which to consider kipus.

Knot & Body: The Kipus of Jorge Eduardo Eielson

Jorge Eduardo Eielson was born in 1921, in Lima, Peru, where he spent his childhood and youth. Between his teenage years and early adulthood, Eielson made the acquaintance of creative and intellectual figures such as Javier Sologuren, Blanca Varela, and Sebastián Salazar Bondy, and even studied under the renowned writer José María Arguedas. Most of these interactions occurred during his time at the Universidad Nacional de San Marcos and the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes, which Eielson attended, but eventually left without completing the degree. In 1948, he held his first solo exhibition at Galeria de Lima. Later that year, he traveled to Paris after being awarded a scholarship to study at the Ecole du Louvre.[41] After some time, he moved to Rome, never returning to reside in Peru again.

In 1962, Eielson started creating pieces employing clothing,[42] and it is with the manipulation of these textile items that the theme of knots first started appearing in his work. For example, in *L'Angelo* (1963) (Fig. 6), a white shirt is ripped, knotted, and stretched over a cream-coloured wood surface. The shirt has been divided into three main strips that pull in different directions along the 118 x 99 cm surface. Two of them are stretched showing a pocket and vestiges of the neck, while the other strip has a knot. The piece of fabric that attaches the knot to the rest of the shirt is plied, adding a poignant sense of tension, as if it could be pulled off from the rest of the fabric at any moment. *L'Angelo* is a great reference point for the key

[41] "Timeline," *Eielson*, ed. Sharon Lerner (Lima: Asociación Museo de Arte de Lima, 2018), 304.
[42] Lerner, 305.

characteristics and features that many of Eielson's later kipu artwork would have, such as the plied stretched fabric, the flat monochrome surface, and of course, the knots. Eielson's emphasis on the aesthetics of knots was a point of departure to rethink the value of the kipu, especially since his written and material poetics of the kipu brought a different kind of attention to this device.

The vaults of the permanent collection of the Museo de Arte de Lima (MALI) hold a small number of Eielson's works that provide insight into the different styles employed in his knot works. *Progresión Gris* (1966) (Fig. 7) is a light blue wooden panel with a white knotted fabric stretched diagonally over the surface. On its right corner, there is a knot composed of multiple twisting elements attached to the surface, while the rest of the same fabric progressively expands in the opposite direction, towards the bottom left corner. The parallel folds of the fabric, along with the knot's organic shape and volume, breaks the flatness of the surface, generating an effect of tension across it. The fabric, which has been treated with some kind of modeling paste, provides a hardened consistency to the composition that oscillates between the sculptural and the painted.

Quipus 29 A-1 (1966-1971) repeats the same composition but on a bright yellow surface with the fabric placed in the opposite direction. At least 14 iterations of these pieces would be made in monochrome compositions of primary colours, in black or white, or on plain jute. Other similar compositions combine some of these colours in one piece. The majority of these canvases are titled as *Quipus* accompanied with a letter and numeric code, while a few remain untitled. Eielson's knots escaped the canvas-like surfaces to also appear in performances with fabric and his sculptures. These artworks are not explicitly referred to as kipus, but they are an extension of these explorations. Eielson's knot cannot be fully understood without their connection to the

kipu, in fact they should be regarded as kipu iterations. In *Nudo* (1973), a knotted cotton fabric has been intensively twisted, forming roundish and intricate organic shapes, creating a complex knot measuring 21.8 x 26.6 x 22.3 cm. Despite this relatively small size, its form gives it a sense of dense weight, while the red, blue, yellow, green, and white stripes of the fabric emphasize its torsion, rendering the knot simultaneously sinuous and rigid. The characteristic aesthetic of his sculptural knots is heavily performative as it emphasizes the hand of the artist.

Eielson's kipus frequently foreground and play with the act of knotting and his canvases and sculptures often serve to underline the *action* of knotting. In this sense, his own body is inscribed in the manual-corporal gesture and the material tension of the knotted fabrics. This dynamic evokes a hyperbolic mimicking of past kipuskamayocs engaging corporally in the act of knotting. Performing these actions in the art studio or gallery, the knot is isolated and directs our attention towards it. Eielson's kipu work often makes reference to the body, which in contact with the fabric, participates in the act of knotting. This idea of collaboration between body and fabric can be seen in his various collaborative works, such as the performance *El Cuerpo de Giulia-no* (1972) in the 36th Biennale di Venezia, where Eielson and his friend, artist Michele Mulas, wrapped a female performer's body from head to toe, [43] in 247 metres of white cotton fabric. Eielson and Mulas knotted the fabric, turning their collaborator into a complex assemblage of knots. By the end of the performance, the woman's transformed figure resembles the other knotted sculptures present in the space. In a way, the now woman-knot mirrors and becomes one of the sculptures herself. With this performance, Eielson makes evident the relationship between knot and body, as entities that mirror each other: knot as body and body as

[43] Despite appearing on the performance's documentation images, the performer's name is not acknowledged in any description or documentation of the work.

knot. At the same time, this performance shows that for Eielson, knotting is never a strictly solitary affair. In his work the act or gesture of making a knot is somehow relational.

In an archival photograph from 1972, we can also see artist Michele Mulas and another young man holding Eielson's sculpture with a tense gesture. The tension of their muscular bodies with exposed torsos and arms, in many ways resembles the sculpture itself, which consists of a knot with a tricolour fabric that has been rigidly plied. A sense of camaraderie and homoerotism is captured by the camera, creating a triangulation between the three 'body-knots' within the frame. Most of Eielson's knots were made by himself, but he confessed to Mulas that he would not have been able to make them without him. In a tender self-recorded and transcribed conversation, part of their dialogue focuses on their own understandings of the knot, where Eielson reveals the impossibility of their creation without Mulas' friendship and intervention:

> Besides, you don't help me to do them, we make them together. That is to say that this type of knot cannot be done by oneself, without you they would not exist. [...] the knots become a psychic entity when the author or the authors transfer their soul charge to them. Our knots, for example, could only be made by us both. Without the bond of our friendship, they could not exist.[44]

Despite this acknowledgement of the hand that makes the knots, Eielson's kipu works, through their poetic and material elements, carry the weight of artistic authorship, in some ways placing Eielson among the modernists of his time. There is a distancing with the Andean subject, as his abstractions of the kipu do not seem to directly point towards the contemporary Andean culture of the 60's and 70's, nor to its peoples. The abstraction, even deconstruction of the kipu, through the amplification of the knot, including the reduction of the colour palette to white, black, grey,

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[44] Jorge Eduardo Eielson. *Ceremonia Comentada: Textos Sobre Arte, Estética y Cultura 1946-2005*, ed. Luis Reboza Soraluz (Fondo Editorial del Congreso del Perú: Lima, 2010), 251. Text translated to English from original in Spanish by Roman Justo.

and Western primary colours,[45] renders void many of the kipu's key elements such as plying direction, string colour, and seriation, which disappear in his oeuvre. As a result, much of the kipu's relational, culturally specific meaning vanishes. Curator and researcher Sharon Lerner has described Eielson's kipus as a "series based on abstract, constructive elements that avoid all narrative, anecdote or historical themes."[46] This abstraction of the aesthetic aspects of cultural belongings in some ways recalls modernist primitivism, which Eielson was exposed to given his proximity to the European art scene. However, Eielson's work differs slightly from practices like those of Picasso and Brâncuşi in that for him, the kipu was understood as part of his own cultural heritage and not just a superficial exploration of other "exotic" or "primitive" cultures.

Nevertheless, it was in part this aesthetic interest in the kipu that led him to study it in depth, and what ultimately marked its presence in the field of the arts. In this sense, filtered through the aura of the art gallery/museum, the kipu escapes the anthropological gaze, switching its status from object of study to an object/subject worthy of contemplation and admiration. Eielson was also interested in the revalorization and continuation of pre-Hispanic ancestral cultural and their visual richness. He engaged in serious research and study not only of the kipu, but of other Andean artifacts even collecting some items. This involvement with Andean artifacts may have sparked in him an interest for contemporary Andean communities, an unrealized project attests to this interest. In 1975, Eielson sent a proposal for a Guggenheim Scholarship with the intention to acquire funds for a project to create artwork in collaboration with a not-yet-defined Andean community. In the letter he specifies his goal "to demonstrate the current degree

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[45] Bolivian artist and weaver Elvira Espejo in a talk titled "La ciencia de tejer en los andes**"** (the science of weaving in the Andes) organized by the Museo de Arte de Lima, explains that the primary colours in the Andes are understood through textile pigment making. Resulting in categorizing orange, green and purple as central colours, since water immersion processes are taking into account, therefore how and with what core animal and vegetable pigments are diluted will result in the hues of blue, red, and yellow.
[46] Sharon Lerner, "Against All Certainty," *Eielson* ed. Lerner (Lima: Asociación Museo de Arte de Lima, 2018), 90.

of creativity of the descendants of antique civilizations."[47] He intended to do a workshop that would generate a collaborative piece, where everyone involved would be recognized as authors. Eielson remarked:

> This because I consider that only them possess the required immemorial talents. We would carry then, a collective workshop with the participation of the whole town where time –past, present and future– would be annulated. With this will reach the second goal, which is to demonstrate the intemporal validity of certain genuine art forms, which eternal modernity and freshness always amaze us.[48]

In addition to the collaborative piece-making workshop, the work was proposed as a 3 to 4 month project in a local Andean community, with photographs and video documenting the process. All of these components were going to be part of an exhibition showcasing the resulting artwork. Unfortunately, he did not get the requested funding and the project remained unrealized, leaving us to imagine what could have emerged from it. Worth mentioning is that the project's proposal relied on the basic understanding of generational creative continuity and recognition of Andean peoples as part of Peruvian contemporary society. This regard was likely an inheritance of the *Indigenista* movement that developed in the first decades of the 20th century and was active among the cultural and political spheres of Peru until the early1950's. The movement "sought the political and social vindication of the region's [I]ndigenous peoples,"[49] and went in hand with the revalorization of Andean culture and its material legacy.

Intellectuals from diverse fields took different approaches, but all somehow put the spotlight on the Indigenous past and present of the nation. Julio C. Tello, known as the father of Peruvian archeology, was one of the greatest promoters of the study of pre-Hispanic cultures. He

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[47] Jorge Eduardo Eielson. Project Proposal for Guggenheim Scholarship (1975). Typescript document with 3 folios from the Getty Research Institute. Image reproduced in page 53 of *Eielson*.
[48] See note 47 above.
[49] Jorge Coronado. *The Andes Imagined* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), 54.

was the first director of the Museo de Arqueología and Antropología in Lima, inaugurated in 1913. Through his practice, he formalized excavation sites and institutionalized the field of archaeology. Under his leadership and mentorship, numerous collections were gathered and maintained — collections that would give artists like Eielson and researchers like myself access to a plethora of pre-Hispanic cultural belongings. In fact, one of the kipus that I observed at the Royal Ontario Museum was excavated and gifted to the museum by Tello. Gustavo Adolfo Emé Leyva has described Tello's practice as *Indigenismo telúrico-arqueológico* (telluric-archeological Indigenism), explaining how he employed archeology to create an exalted and nationalist image of the antique Peru, highlighting its achievements.[50] This tendency would be found in *Indigenista* artistic production such as literature, photography, and painting. But in contrast with *Indigenista* literature, which often addressed the socio-political struggles of Indigenous contemporary populations, like many stories and articles written by José Carlos Mariátegui and José María Arguedas, the visual depictions tended to idealize Andean individuals, creating an imagery of the 'noble savage' and even a utopian Andes. The notion of the "modern" Andean was always called into question, as someone who falls between the trap of the "Indian problem" and socio-political initiatives of inclusivity. Still, *Indigenismo* marked a path for artistic creation and socio-political critique that continues in Peru today.

Eielson was surely familiar with *Indigenismo*, and as mentioned above, he was a student of Arguedas, one of the most representative authors of the movement, so the suggestion of an *Indigenista* influence should not be ruled out. What we can affirm is that his interest in collaborating with contemporary Andean people, and any explicit acknowledgement of them as

[50] Gustavo Adolfo Emé Leyva. "Julio C. Tello's Illustrators: The Influence of Telluric-archaeological Indigenism on His Work, 1935-1965" MA Thesis (Universidad Pontificia Católica del Perú, 2017), 10.

active creators is not found in his broad oeuvre, unlike his identifiable focus on the pre-Hispanic as a creative source.

The relationship Eielson had with the kipu is one of the sources of tension and ongoing internal dialogue that took on an individual and collective dimension in his practice. Considering that Eielson opted to live abroad, there was a constant negotiation of his cultural identity, likely amplified by his migrant experience, which made the kipu the anchor to maintain a connection with the past and present of his homeland. This dynamic in many ways defined his approach towards making and writing, perhaps as a means to navigate the complexities of his own mixed and fragmented identity. Here I am referring to his identification as Spanish, Italian, Swedish, and Nazca[51] — this latter identity referring to pre-Hispanic Nazca culture (most famous for the eponymous "Nazca Lines" in the Nazca Desert) located on the Coast of Peru.[52] Regarding Eielson's positionality, he sometimes made the claim of being "triply-exiled" from his country, language, and sexuality.[53]

In his work, the knot becomes the embodiment of the indecipherable and the inexpressible. Eielson exploits this element to reveal the many incongruencies of his mestizo, migrant, and queer identity, always in a constant state of tension, of doings and undoing, being and non-being. Through their texture and tautness, the knots in Eielson's works are always an index of the human body, and quite often his own body. The reconfiguration of his knots points to his own personal search of self, how he explored and tried to articulate his multiple identities.

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[51] Martha L. Candfield. *Jorge Eduardo Eielson: Nudos y Asedios Críticos* (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2002), 17.

[52] The Nazca culture is the name assigned to the civilization that inhabited between 100 BCE – 800 CE the southern coast of Peru close to the Rio Grande de Nazca and the Ica Valley. They are characterized by their pictorial polychrome pottery, and for being the creator of the renowned Nazca Lines.

[53] Martha L. Canfield interviewed by tv host and actress Norma Martínez for *Sucedió en el Perú: Jorge Eielson*, aired on TV Peru, February 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5N3vQct9Z58. Translation from Spanish to English by Roman Justo.

Eielson's artistic career has been characterized for blurring the boundaries of multiple disciplines including writing, painting, sculpting, and performance. In his oeuvre, knot, body, and word are often interchangeable. Lerner explains that Eielson "strived to avoid restrictions imposed by fixed categories," linking this dialogue between his written and fine arts work to Rosalind Krauss and her concept of the "expanded poetry."[54] For Lerner, this type of interdisciplinary freedom "guided Eielson's development of a specific visual language, which finds in its *quipus* its most consistent forms."[55]

Unspun Cosmos: The Kipus of Cecilia Vicuña

With a similar sense of cohesiveness, Cecilia Vicuña has created an evolving kipu oeuvre that has solidified her artistic career and earned her the recognition of an international audience; like Eielson her kipu work oscillates between media taking the form of poems, sculptures, and installations. Vicuña was born in Chile in 1948. She studied Pedagogy in Fine Arts at the Universidad de Chile in Santiago. In 1972, she traveled to London to pursue further studies in the arts. She was in Chile during President Salvador Allende's death in 1973, which occurred during the coup that placed Augusto Pinochet as the new Chilean president, his government is now known as one of the most brutal dictatorships in the South American region. Vicuña has always been a vocal Allende supporter and back then realized she could not go back home due to the government's surveillance and censorship, which resulted in her becoming an exile for many decades.[56] Since then, she has returned to Chile to exhibit her work but not to reside there.

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[54] Lerner, 41.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Carolina Díaz. "Cecilia Vicuña's Quipu-Making as a Theory of Time," *A Contracorriente* 16, no 1 (2018), 174.

Vicuña's kipus emerged during her youth in Chile and kept appearing in the work she has made in the different countries that she has traveled to. The kipu has become her tool and language to approach diverse subjects such as climate crisis, feminicide, and Indigenous rights. In October 2022, her installation *Brain Forest Quipu* (2022) (Fig. 8), installed in the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, brought attention to the current global environmental crisis with her now well-recognizable style of massive hanging kipus. In this "multi-part installation made up of sculpture, sound, music, and video," [57] Vicuña displayed diverse fragments of organic matter and items such as tree branches, shells, and pieces of cardboard attached to thread and rope, which hung along strips of thick knotted and unknotted unspun wool. All of this came together to form a circular area for the audience to walk through or sit on the benches surrounding it. Similar to *Disappeared Quipu* (2018) (Fig. 9) (another massive installation with thick knotted unspun wool hanging from the ceiling) the whiteness of the fibers provides a sense of translucency, even frailty, that in *Brain Forest Quipu,* is brought forward through the porousness and decay of many of the included items, producing a ghostly effect. In a previous paper, I have argued that in *Disappeared Quipu,* there is an interplay between the act of disappearing and appearing, and even if the title suggests the former is taking place, it becomes ambiguous, as other elements of the installation, such as audio chants and the video projections signal the opposite.[58] These media components come together to animate the kipu, endowing it with a liveliness that encourages multisensorial engagement on the part of the audience.

Brain Forest Quipu works similarly and utilizes audio as a key component. When talking about this piece, Vicuña states that "when a forest has been hurt, people sing it back to life, and

[57] Tate Modern. "Chilean artist and poet Cecilia Vicuña has created a poignant new artwork for Tate Modern's Turbine Hall." Tate Modern website, https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/cecilia-vicu%C3%B1a
[58] Karla Karina Roman Justo. BA Thesis: "Cecilia Vicuña's *Disappeared Quipu* (2018): Materializing Indigenous Knowledges through Artistic Practice" (Ontario College of Arts and Design University, 2018), 24-25.

that's why there is this extraordinary music involving the kipu, to bring back the life of the forest."[59] This 'singing back to life' juxtaposed with the vanishing of ecosystems allows her massive kipu to simultaneously embody both the processes of appearing and of disappearing, processes that are never static. The kipu opens a liminal space where course of action and awareness point to past, present, and future, swinging between life and death; while we mourn the forest, we don't cease singing it back to life. In this sense, Vicuña's kipus are complex nodes of Andean knowledge, revealed through her recourse to ambivalence, her employment of sound, and textile materials.

Intentional or not, the ambivalence of Vicuña's *Brain Forest Quipu* and *Disappeared Quipu* seems to embody the notion of *Yannantin*, a term from the Pukina language, [60] that refers to links of complementarity and proportionality. [61] In his book *Qhapaq Ñan* (2003), Javier Lajo explains that the main Andean paradigm is that everything and everybody has been born, and that cosmogonic origin, in contrast to Western notions of the individual self, is not a unity but a parity.[62] This means that a whole contains a pair of what may be considered opposing forces that represent aspects of this whole existing in relation to one another , as "each is necessary to complement and counterbalance the other."[63] *Brain Forest Quipu* seems to embody the opposing forces of disappearance and appearance. These parallel notions demand reflection from the audience, who with their actions or inactions can determine the future of the forest. Vicuña is concerned about loss whether it be the loss of the forest, collective memory, or ancestral kipu knowledge. For her, death is a process of transformation, but the kind of death that capitalism

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[59] Cecilia Vicuña. "Cecilia Vicuña: Brain Forest Quipu | Artist Interview." 2022. London. Video, 00:05:14, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zufpIinnVUM
[60] Puquina language is the ancestor of Quechua and Aymara, which went extinct during the 19th Century.
[61] Javier Lajo. *Qhapaq Ñan, La Ruta Inka de Sabiduría* (Quito: Ediciones Abya-Yala, 2003), 75.
[62] Lajo, 20.
[63] Constance Classen. *Inka Cosmology and the Human Body* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1993), 11.

brings about is an ultimate and irreversible death,[64] therefore static. Unlike her kipus or the *Yannantin*, this type of death allows for no exchange, nor any ultimate kind of balance. With *Brain Forest Quipu* Vicuña offers the audience an opportunity to engage with the notion of *riparana*, which means "to repair injustice or harm by becoming aware" in Quechua; for her it is still possible to change the course of current crisis by assuming a "collective responsibility to create a different cultural memory."[65]

Vicuña does not only improvise chants in her performances and artistic presentations, but also frequently invites her audience to sing and knot along with her. In the Andean world, sound is understood as an "exchange between the environment and the body,"[66] and "song and road are paired heteronyms in quechumara: taki-thaki [, alluding] to a sonorous territoriality that displaces itself through space-time."[67] Vicuña's usage of sound is never arbitrary; even her chant improvisations have a method that begins with auditory attentiveness of her environment. [68] In other words, one never sings in solitude; singing is always in relation with a human or a more-than-human entity. With her own vocalizations and sound pieces made by collaborators, Vicuña immerses her audience into the sonic worlds that some of her kipus enclose.

As previously mentioned, Vicuña's kipu installations are titled in relation to specific issues that run through the artist's oeuvre. In *Menstrual Quipu* (2006) (Fig. 10), the artist first made an *ofrenda* or offering, to an Andean mountain range, in hopes that president Michelle

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[64] Cecilia Vicuña. "Your Rage is Your Gold" Tate Museum Interview. 2023 London, video, 00:07:21, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQfvdV3_GJ0
[65] Cecilia Vicuña. "A Quipu Autobiography." *Cecilia Vicuña: Brain Forest Quipu*. Ed. Catherine Wood (Tate Enterprises Ltd., 2022), 123.
[66] Classen, 19.
[67] Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui. "The Potosí Principle: Another View of Totality." *Principio Potosí Reverso* (Madrid Museo Reina Sofia, 2010), 10.
[68] Cecilia Vicuña. "Cecilia Vicuña la niña que habita el caos." 2019, Chile, video, 00:41:18, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2XrtZpDjzX8

Bachelet would not sell the glaciers and mountains to the mining industry. She extended long strands of red unspun wool over the ground, which later that same year were hung in the Centro Cultural Palacio de La Moneda, as part of a collective exhibition. *Menstrual Quipu* is emblematic of Vicuña's oeuvre, since it shows the use of a vibrant colour in her chosen medium: unspun wool, a characteristic repeated in other installations. According to her, in Andean cosmology "unspun wool is the energy of the cosmos, pure potential."[69] In this piece, the fibre has different shades of red, and as alluded to in the title, it is clear that it is a representation of blood, which offended some of the other participating artists, leading to a censorship of *Menstrual Quipu*, as it was suggested to reduce the size and thickness of the unspun wool. Details of how the kipu stayed in the exhibition are shared in a website solely dedicated to this artwork.[70] It is not only menstruation that this red unspun wool evokes, but also the fluidity of blood that flows when injured, born, and when used in ritual. In all instances, there is a sense of sacredness around this life-carrying substance. With this vibrant red thread, Vicuña pairs the regular bleeding of women with that of the land, as bodies that are constantly extracted and violated. This parallel links women's issues with the environmental crisis by referencing land as kin and mother, or *Pachamama*.

Pachamama, is one of the most known Quechua and Aymara words, often understood as "the normatively gendered Mother Earth." [71] This definition limits what this key notion encompasses in Andean cosmology, which goes beyond the idea of nature as provider.

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[69] Ibid.

[70] Cecilia Vicuña. "Exhibición Quipu Menstrual Glaciar del Plomo." Quipu Menstrual. Accessed November 27, 2023. www.quipumenstrual.cl

[71] Miriam Tola. "Between Pachamama and Mother Earth: Gender, Political Ontology and the Rights of Nature in Contemporary Bolivia." *Feminist Review*, 118(1), (2018). 25. https://doi-org.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/10.1057/s41305-018-0100-4

Pachamama is time-space as well as the “vitality that animates the earth.”[72] This includes an ensemble of material and spiritual relations between human, the non-human, and the more-than-human, again the *uywaña* Espejo refers to. The clash of Western and Andean “onto-epistemic worlds” [73] (a term I am borrowing from de la Cadena) has generated ongoing confusion about the notion of land, an issue at the heart of land disputes and resource exploitation, leading to historical socio-economic inequality and the current environmental crisis, mostly impacting Indigenous communities around the globe. Bolivian activist and writer, Maria Galindo, in her book *Feminismos Bastardos* (Bastard Feminisms) (2022), reminds us of the “scene of sexual violence as origin;”[74] that terrible gendered violence exerted against Indigenous ancestors by colonizers birthing the first mestizos before this term existed as a racial category. What emerged is a society of “bastards” who in addition to that inhabit an abused land. Galindo claims that “neither the land or women are territory of conquest” making a clear parallel between past and present violence against women with the exploitation of the land.[75]

In *Menstrual Quipu*, we see various components that evoke the lifeforce of the land. The red fibers call for a dual metaphor of *Pachamama*’s bleeding, that of the menstrual blood related to reproductive capacity and that of “bleeding out” through inflicted harm. This becomes less of a metaphor when correlating it to the high rates of feminicides and everyday gender inequality in the region. The female body, especially those of racialized woman, has long been the battlefield of political discourse enduring many types of violence. This message is made more evident in *Quipu Lava* (2022), a performance where Vicuña and many participants knotted a red unspun

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[72] Tola, 25.
[73] Marisol de la Cadena. *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice Across Andean Worlds* (Duke University Press, 2015), 150.
[74] María Galindo. *Feminismos Bastardos* (Lima: Isole S.A.C, 2022), 39.
[75] María Galindo. “Ni la tierra ni las mujeres somos territorio de conquista,” in *Viento Sur*, September 13, 2019. https://vientosur.info/ni-la-tierra-ni-las-mujeres-somos-territorio-de-conquista/

wool quipu within the Espacio Escultórico, located at the foot of the Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl volcanos in Mexico City, which she dedicated to the murdered girls and women victims of violence.[76]

The female experience is embedded in Vicuña's practice, and her work has been closely related to gendered associations of the arts and crafts, particularly to weaving. Juliet Lynd has analyzed Vicuña's work describing it as "textile-textual practice that alludes to the unspoken, unwritten stories of women and of the [I]ndigenous."[77] I have also discussed Vicuña's practice as a *tejedora* (weaver), [78] since this connection to textiles, more specifically to Andean textiles, places her within the continuation of the Andean weaving tradition. For her, "to weave is to speak," [79] which points to this textile-textual dynamic between her written and her sculptural pieces. Furthermore, as Catherine de Zegher remarks, it is evident that Vicuña "has always perceived and understood weaving as an alternative discourse and a dynamic model of resistance (as do most [I]ndigenous Latin American women)."[80] In this sense, with her words and threads, Vicuña weaves stories into poems and artwork that resist the erasure of the memory of a whole region. Through her kipus, she articulates her concerns and strong will to counteract the environmental crisis, violence against women and Indigenous communities, as well as state violence, whose origins could be ultimately traced back to the colonization of the Americas and its ongoing ramifications, now enhanced and accelerated under capitalism.

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[76] Cecilia Vicuña. "A Quipu Autobiography." *Cecilia Vicuña: Brain Forest Quipu*. Ed. Catherine Wood (Tate Enterprises Ltd., 2022), 110.
[77] Juliet Lynd. "Precarious Resistance: Weaving Opposition in the Poetry of Cecilia Vicuña." *PMLA*, Vol. 120, No. 5 (2005), 1590.
[78] See note 57 above. In the section "The Artist and the Weaver" I argue how "in many of her projects she makes reference to weaving, specially to the Andean female *tejedora* (weaver), and in so doing connects the material act of weaving to a mode of weaving stories, ideas, time and space."
[79] See note 59 above.
[80] Catherine de Zegher. "Ouvrage: Knot a Not, Notes as Knots." *The Precarious: The Art and Poetry of Cecilia Vicuña* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1997), 27.

It is not insignificant that Vicuña's practice centres on Andean epistemology, which is reflected in her role as a contemporary weaver and kipuscamayoc operating within the artworld. The artist has been explicit about primarily identifying with the Indigenous side of her cultural heritage since a young age.[81] Vicuña is clear about the place Andean knowledge has in her practice and why she opts for it. When talking about her interest in the kipu, she shares that when learning about them, she was "flabbergasted at the notion that this incredible system existed and it had been taken away from us."[82] On a personal level, I deeply relate to Vicuña's sentiment regarding the realization that such a valuable system has somehow been erased from our cultural memory; it has led to my own interest in artistic kipus, and my commitment to researching and writing about them. It is therefore that I argue that Vicuña's opting to identify as more Andean than a Westernized mestiza is not just a reaction but a productive response to what Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano explains as the "coloniality of knowledge" when tracing the colonial project development in the region.

Quijano's notion of the coloniality of knowledge is a facet of what he frames as the "coloniality of power." Through the analysis of historical power dynamics, he looks back into the conquest of the Tawantinsuyo to dissect the "model of power" that it generated,[83] being its two main axis: "the codification of the difference between conquerors and conquered in the idea of "race,"[84] and "the constitution of a new structure of control of labor and its resources and products."[85] With the first, Quijano explains the creation of race as a "mental category of

[81] Cecilia Vicuña interviewed by Lara Demori. Decolonizing Myself for the Latin American Symposium "Decolonizing Third World Feminism: Latin American Women Artists (l960-1980)," June 7, 2018, Munich, video, 00:18:22. vimeo.com/278096899.
[82] Tamman Mike. *Cecilia Vicuña. 'Your Rage is Your Gold'*. December 5, 2022. Tate Modern, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQfvdV3_GJ0
[83] Quijano, 533.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Quijano, 534.

modernity," that fabricated the social identities of the Indigenous, the Black, and the mestizo as "redefined others," while at the same time creating its counterpart, the European identity. [86] This racial difference taken as natural, served to justify the colonial relation of domination with a Eurocentric gaze.[87] On the other hand, the second axis indicates how race was employed for the division of labor, which ultimately framed the foundations for the development of modern capitalism in the Americas.[88] This dynamic between race and labor, and the resulting social categories, is what Quijano referred to as the "coloniality of power," which continues to be active in relations between the Global North and Global South, and in the everyday racism experienced by Andean communities.

Quijano then refers to the "coloniality of knowledge" as another means to conquer not only bodies but subjectivities. It is through Eurocentrism that categories of the Indigenous as primitive and inferior prevail,[89] forcing the non-European or the racialized Other into an object of knowledge rather than a producer of knowledge.[90] That is why for so many centuries the mainstream subjectivity has regarded the Andean as a lower racial and social class, even opposed to modernization. Through this gaze, the kipu as an Andean information device can be seen as a remnant of the past, inferior to writing, and merely as an object of study. These diminishing conceptions is what Vicuña's kipus serve to counteract. She succeeds not only in actualizing the kipu by relating her works to contemporary issues, but they become the means to bring attention and to put Andean epistemology into practice. In this sense, her artistic practice reflects an "epistemic turn" towards the Andean, a turn closely connected to the "decolonial

[86] Quijano, 534-535.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Quijano, 535-536.
[89] Quijano, 552.
[90] Quijano, 555.

option" that Walter Mignolo writes about, referring to "a particular frame and orientation for research, arguing, doing, and the praxis of living."[91]

Taken as a whole, Vicuña's use of textile elements and techniques are loaded with the myriad meanings they carry in the Andean world, allowing for evocative and insightful metaphors in relation to the themes that she foregrounds with her kipus. But perhaps it is this very poetic and metaphoric aspect that distances her work from a direct connection between what she creates in the art gallery and the actual Andean contemporary communities, the knowledge-keepers such as skilled weavers or individuals still making and/or using kipus. In regard to her poetry, Lynd noted how despite the fact that Vicuña frequently worked with Indigenous communities, her use of weaving and her referencing of the quipu is "remarkably removed from [their] sociopolitical realities," even stating that her "appropriation of [I]ndigenous aesthetics (…) makes the [I]ndigenous voice a palpable absence."[92] It is worth clarifying that Lynd's analysis was done before the selected installation examples were produced, and that Vicuña's repertoire has evolved to be more socially involved. Nevertheless, the absence of the Indigenous voice is recurrent as the artist constantly focuses on onsite participation from gallery visitors, and her work, similar to Eielson's knots, now carry the hand of the artist in a very evident and iconic style. But to say that Vicuña appropriates Indigenous aesthetics is to flatten the complexity of mestizo identity and the way this aesthetic is perceived as a part of a common cultural heritage for many people inhabiting Andean countries. A degree of appropriation can indeed be pointed out, but when considering it alongside the conscious choice to opt for the Andean ways of doing as a decolonial turn, we are confronted with the unresolved tensions between mestizaje and

[91] Walter Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh. *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 127.
[92] Lynd, 1591.

Indigeneity in the Latin American context, which is altogether different than the dynamic between Metis and Indigenous identities in Canada and the U.S.A.[93]

The question of how the Andean subject is present and directly acknowledged in Vicuña's practice remains to be observed in her future work. In *Brain Forest Quipu,* the video section *Digital Quipu*, located at the entrance of the Turbine Hall, plays testimonies of activists from diverse Indigenous communities around the globe, each talking about the at-risk forests they live in, putting a voice and a face to the environmental struggle. In addition, one page in *Brain Forest Quipu*'s catalogue shows members of the Tupicocha community wearing kipus, while another page addresses the emergence of evidence of the "political use of the quipu by current Andean communities,"[94] which reveals what will perhaps become a frequent practice of hers, to allude to specific groups currently using the kipu along the Andes. But the key acknowledgement of current kipu keepers is in the list of artists contributing to the audio of the installation, since artist Paola Torres Núñez del Prado collaborated with the Tupicocha peoples to create *To wear Quipus or Cables* (2021), one of the sound pieces included in Vicuña's work sonic component. Their piece consists of an audio of a cord instrument and ambient sounds of what seems to be a celebration, with some distortion and high pitch frequences the predominant melody takes an uncanny turn. This recognition of co-authorship is only one of the ways that

[93] Unlike in North America, individuals with Indigenous ancestry in Latin American countries do not hold an official Indigenous or Native status. The identification of Indigenous peoples and mestizos is often blurred by a myriad of factors not limited to racial features and miscegenation hierarchies created through the caste system during colonial ruling.

[94] Cecilia Vicuña. "A Quipu Autobiography." *Cecilia Vicuña: Brain Forest Quipu*. Ed. Catherine Wood (Tate Enterprises Ltd., 2022), 106. In a conversation artist Paola Torres Núñez del Prado Torres mentioned how through the invitation to participate in the sonic piece for *Brain Forest Quipu*, she had the opportunity to share with Vicuña her research, emphasizing the role of the Tupicocha community as kipu keepers. It is possible to deduce that this exchange may have influenced the decision to include pictures of the Tupicocha kipuscamayos in the catalogue, along a brief text citing Frank Salomon.

Torres continuously connects her kipu work with contemporary kipu keepers, alongside her clear political engagement with Indigenous struggles.

Sound Knots: The Kipus of Paola Torres Núñez del Prado

Paola Torres Núñez del Prado is a Peruvian artist whose work has focused on exploring sound, image, and the tactile. Currently based between Lima and Stockholm, Torres' artistic formal education has oscillated between the fine arts, design, and interactive media. She started studying painting at Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú in 1998, but never finished the program, later receiving her formal arts education abroad. In 2005, she obtained a BA in Studio Art from Hunter College in New York, and some years later she received her Master's degree in Fine Arts from the Royal Institute of Arts in Stockholm. Currently, Torres is a PhD. candidate in Performative and Media-based practices at the Stockholm School of the Arts, centering her practice and research on the kipu, an endeavor she has focused on over several years, which has generated a cohesive body of work and substantive information on the kipu in the arts. Torres has framed this ever-growing employment of the kipu in the field as an artistic global movement. Identifying herself and other artists, including Eielson and Vicuña, as *Neoquipocamayocs* in a manifesto that emphasizes their contemporary role within a decolonial framework. Eielson and Vicuña's respective practices have influenced Torres' work and serve as a connecting thread that traces how each of these artists have pushed the potential of the kipu further within the arts, slowly building up to its resignification and its potential as a decolonial tool.

Torres' combination of textiles and digital technology creates compelling pieces characterized by their tactile and sonic qualities. Her projects classified as *Singing Textiles*, include diverse approaches in media and techniques to explore specific textile styles and items

belonging to specific Peruvian Indigenous communities. In the series *Corrupted Structures* (2016), Torres produced electronic embroidery textile fragments that display patterns of contemporary and archeological textiles from the three main ecological regions in Peru: *Corrupted Structure I (Coastal)* (Fig. 11), *Corrupted Structure II (Andean)*, and *Corrupted Structure III (Amazonian)*. Her work has also ventured beyond the modern borders of Peru, and in 2018, she also produced *Corrupted Structure IV (Modern Mayan)*, based on a contemporary Mayan textile. Each of these colourful and geometric patterns are "interrupted" or *corrupted*, as the sequency of their shapes are replaced by harsh lines that create a distorted view. These pieces are described by the artist as "sound visualizing distorting textile patterns," since these distorted patterns are "visualisations of sounds related to social events or culture clashes."[95] These fragments become a complex representation of the dissonance between a renewed national appreciation of a common cultural heritage and the social struggles of a fragmented population, where Indigenous communities tend to be the most affected.

In Peru, the revalorization of the Andean, has gone a long and slow way without a conclusive success. As mentioned in a section above, *Indigenismo*, despite its diverse overtones and implications did reflect concerns about the exploitation of Indigenous peoples.[96] In contrast with this type of cultural and political engagement, the 21th Century has seen the embracement of the Andean through the "brand Peru" initiative promoted by PROMPERU (The Peruvian Promotion Committee for Export and Tourism),[97] which as a concept has emerged from a

[95] Paola Torres Núñez del Prado. "Sonic Experiences," Singing Textiles. Accessed 27 November 2023. http://www.singingtextiles.com/sonic+.html
[96] Hannah Burdette. Revealing Rebellion in Abiayala: The Insurgent Poetics of Contemporary Indigenous Literature (University of Arizona Press, 2019), 179.
[97] La Comisión de Promoción del Perú para la exportación y el Turismo (PROMPERU), is attached to the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Tourism and constitutes a budget document. https://institucional.promperu.gob.pe/imgs-pp/pp/0-institucional.jpg

renewed valorization of cultural practices with commercial purposes, mostly to attract global markets and tourism. On a local level, the "brand Peru" initiative reflects a broken mestizo self-esteem that engages with cultural manifestation in order to reiterate a positive image of hybridity. Unfortunately, this optimistic lens is used to create a homogenous national identity that ends up exploiting and erasing Indigeneity while dismissing the political risks of such capitalist and nationalistic tendencies. In a certain sense, the idea of nation as an "identity and loyalty to liberalism" reflects an ongoing process of internal colonialism,[98] which Mignolo explains, "enforces colonial politics towards [I]ndigenous communities" and "stablish[es] alliances with metropolitan colonial powers."[99] It is a simplistic multicultural, syncretic national narrative of the *happy mestizo* that Torres disrupts with her corrupted textiles, that despite not producing sound, speak very loudly; through embroidered audio visualizations, Torres foregrounds the people's voice, whose discontent and agency have the power to modify what and how we see.

Compared to Eielson and Vicuña's respective oeuvres, Torres' usage of certain Andean or Amazonian aesthetics is never detached from its cultural, historical, or sociopolitical context; in fact, all of these considerations are what allows for the production and understanding of her pieces. Her interest in textiles expands to the kipu as the textile device and technology that it is. In her *Knot of Codes* project, Torres developed subprojects to explore the kipu using different approaches. The project includes the album *AIELSON El Tiempo del Hombre*, which consists of an experimental audio piece that uses a a generative pre-trained language model with the poetry of Eielson, Vicuña, and Torres herself, that resulted in an album with an AI generated's voice of

[98] Quijano, 569.
[99] Walter Mignolo. *Local Histories/Global Designs* (Princeton University Press, 2012), 104.

Eielson reciting new poetry. The second project is *The Quipus of Tupicocha: Beyond History*, a 22-minute documentary about the kipuskamayocs of the San Andrés de Tupichoca community in Huarochiri. The third project is *Quipu Program*, a computer program developed to visualize kipu data by inputting information such as knot or cord quantity, and type of plying (Z or S). The forth project is *voxINformatio* a performance captured in a two-channel video where she digs the sand of the Paracas dessert to bury a single copy of the *AIELSON* album. Through this project, Torres builds connections with kipuskamayocs of the present and the past, and despite not presenting a defined kipu artwork, these pieces provide ways to explore the kipu as a subject in relation to ritual, sound, and atemporality.

Another singing textile is *Hanap Pacha Quipu* (2019) (Fig. 12), a tactile interface that resembles the knots and strings of most kipus in their original size. When touched, it plays the recreation of the *Hanap Pachap Kusikuynin*, a hymn to the Virgin Mary composed in Quechua during the 17th Century and published in *Ritual formulario e Institución de curas* (1631) by Juan Pérez Bocanegra, a priest and member of the Third Order of St. Francis.[100] The work is significant for being the first vocal polyphony printed in the Americas. The interactive textile in Torre's piece functions through a midi interface connected to a Raspberry Pi computer, utilizing its conductive properties to transform touch into sound. Prerecorded vocal recordings are triggered every time somebody touches or interacts with the knots or strings, making the kipu 'sing'. This piece takes elements of pre-colonial and colonial Andean history. Torres creates a kipu that merges both the Andean and the Western into the present. At the same time, her employment of analog and digital technologies invites one to imagine future means to create or

[100] The authorship of *Hanap Pachap Kusikuynin* is often attributed to Pérez Bocanegra, but there are some researchers who question this attribution. The possibility of a student of his being the composer has been mentioned but not proven.

interact with kipus. *Hanap Pacha Quipu* collapses a linear progression of time; by overlapping the meanings of its elements, it creates a multi-temporality that simultaneously evokes past, present, and future. In addition, the performances with this device and similar tactile kipus created by Torres, recall the public readings by kipuskamayocs during the Inca empire. She has performed with these tactile kipus internationally in public spaces, art galleries, in a church in Utrecht, and even on a rooftop in Lima.

In Torres' work, the integration of opposing paired elements ie.the traditional and the modern, the textile craft and digital technology, the Indigenous and the Western, are interwoven in such a way that bends what these notions mean in relation to one another. This contrasting mixture produces pieces capable of creating tensions and contradictions by juxtaposing these opposites, fitting into what Bolivian scholar Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui proposes as *ch'ixi*.[101] Cusicanqui takes the Aymara word *ch'ixi* from Andean textile practices to analyze the "mottled mestizo" identity and experience, imagining it as a textile where weft and warp are the European and the Indigenous inter-woven identities that constitute who we are. The *ch'ixi*, refers to the juxtaposition of two opposing or contrasting colours in a textile,[102] ie. black and white, that when looked at from a distance, gives the illusion of a grayish stained fabric,[103]an illusory mixture of colours that clash and never fully merge. Cusicanqui makes a parallel between the black and white, and that of the Andean and the Western, whose cosmologies have been framed as opposite

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[101] Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui. *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa: Una Reflexión Sobre Prácticas y Discursos Descolonizadores*, 1ª ed. (Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón, 2010), 69.
[102] The textile technique is called *ch'imi* en Aymara and *ch'imisqa* in Quechua. As explained by Elvira Espejo Ayca in *El Textil Tridimensional: La Naturaleza del Tejido como Objeto y Como Sujeto* (2013).
[103] Rivera Cusicanqui, 69.

in a colonizing project. In other words, the "*ch'ixi* denotes an encounter between opposites that defies synthesis,"[104] resulting in an "included third other."[105]

Nevertheless, the *ch'ixi* does not erase Indigeneity, as Cucicanqui goes beyond purisms. She has mentioned how we are all *ch'ixi* in the South, as the reality we inhabit has been built from the colonial logic; the pouring of European culture in our territories has affected everyone's lived experience during the past five centuries, defining our specific socio-economic positions and the type of politics we embrace as South American republics. The *ch'ixi* does not deny the gruesome history of the region- on the contrary, it signals a productive mobilization of these frictions for social transformation, where the Andean or indigeneity cannot be denied anymore. In fact, they must be fully acknowledged for our emancipation.[106] It is within a similar logic that many of Torres' singing textiles, as well as her kipu work can be understood as *ch'ixi*, a quality I have also previously attributed to Vicuña's kipu work.[107]

As seen in *Hanaq Pacha Quipu*, the employment of the kipu as interface turns it into a holder of layered onto-epistemic worlds, where the Andean meets Silicon Valley. At the same time the audio brings the listener to a liminal space where time is collapsed, since a colonial polyphony sung in Quechua is reproduced through a machine played by Torres, who as a performer resembles simultaneously a DJ and a kipuscamayoc. Identifying these onto-epistemic elements or distinguish them from one another becomes a complex and even impossible task. As *ch'ixi, Hanaq Pacha Quipu* cannot unweave these interconnections, only make them evident in

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[104] Burdette, 180.
[105] Cusicanqui, 69.
[106] Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui in conversation with Bonaventura de Sousa Santos for *Conversa do Mundo* 5 produced by Espelhos Estranhos, Lições imprevistas: Definindo para a Europa um novo modo de partilhar as experiências do Mundo, October 16, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjgHfSrLnpU.
[107] Roman Justo, 24.

benefit of the narrative that centers the history, actuality, and futurity of the kipu, a history artistic kipus are now a part of.

A similar exercise is practiced in *KhipuKoding* (2023) (Fig.13), a performance inside a church in Utrecht, part of the International Conference on Live Coding programme, where Torres played her *ML:Knot ()* (2021) interface composed of thick ropes displayed as a kipu in connection with a Computer Vision/A.I. and a Live Coding system. Initiating with a “blank” kipu, Torres starts knotting the cords which respond to her action by generating coding and reproducing sounds of an Andean song (with vocals and instruments). All this, while a screen showed her *Neoquipocamayocs* Manifesto. There is a video that shows an iteration of *KhipuKoding*, through a tripartite screen. Each displaying one of the three key aspects of the performance: Torre’s knotting and unknotting the kipu device, the generated codes, and the manifesto. The audio turns the whole ordeal into an uncanny version of Andean music, that reverberates certain sounds and distorts others, still the style is identifiable by those who are familiar with these songs. Once again Torres has collapsed the traditional and the futuristic, in an auditory continuum that brings contemporary Andean voices into the art space, no metaphor on this.

Torres, with her singing kipus, generates a direct dialogue between technological media by connecting textiles with digital interfaces, video, and sound. In *The Andean Information Age* (2021), a publication co-authored by artist Oscar Santillán and art historian Alessandra Troncone, both authors share research that traces the history of the kipu in connection to locations, astronomy, and technology. They remark that the antique Andeans knew the concept of zero, indicated in the absence of knots in some cords, making connections to computational

binary coding system, and referring to the kipu's content as *encrypted*.[108] Santillán and Troncone bring historical facts into consideration while drawing comparison between the kipu and contemporary technologies.

Torres is not the only artist using tactile and conductive interfaces to explore the kipu; artists like Patricia Cadavid Hinojosa (with whom she has performed) and Constanza Piña Pardo, have also created kipu pieces that incorporate the haptic and the sonic in order to speculate about kipu readings and to foreground ancestral knowledge, but mostly their artworks reiterate the kipu's status as a technology with its own merit. Torres has named these kinds of artists, including herself, as "Technokhipumancers". In her "Neokhipukamayoq Manifesto" (2021), she describes them as follows:

> [T]he third generation of a long but not yet recognized artistic trend in Latin American arts and beyond. (…) In this context, we choose to position ourselves as the heirs of a millennial tradition where the prefix "Neo" is what marks a division that is, in practice, more linked to the cultural milieu than to a temporal framework: as we resignify these artifacts of pre-Columbian origin within the Modern and Contemporary arts, we highlight its long history that goes beyond archaeological remnants.[109]

The resignification of the kipu through the artworks that Torres frames as a continuation of the kipuskamayoc tradition, detaches the kipu from the notion of obsolescence as it becomes clear that its activation can be a tool for artistic and narrative purposes. This contrasts tremendously with how the ethnographic gaze has historically portrayed this device, focusing on its historical role rather than its contemporary usage and speculative potential as the *technokhipumancers* continue to explore.

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[108] Oscar Santillán and Alessandra Troncone. *The Andean Information Age* (BON DIA BOA TARDE BOA NOITE, 2020), 51.
[109] Paola Torres Núñez del Prado. "Neokhipukamayoq Manifesto" (2021) https://khipumantes.github.io/

Artist Alan Poma has proposed the exploration of this potential as "Andean Futurism"- in a manifesto published in 2020, Poma, inspired by the Russian Futurism movement from the early 20th century, frames Andean Futurism as a medium that fuses the tradition of the avant-garde with that of the Andean culture,[110] finding in art-making "a way for the invention of new futures."[111] Focusing on the geometry of the *Tocapu*, Poma is interested in the attribution of new meanings rather than deciphering past ones, a creative license that results in "conceptual empowerment" and can have an effect on reality. [112] This intuitive and speculative aspect of Andean Futurism coincides with Torres' resignification of the kipu, as both manifestos envision a future for the Andean within the arts. In Torres' work, the future of the kipu is evoked through different speculative sonic or tactile explorations; her sonic-texiles are a language and performative gesture that serves to project this futurity. Her work and those of other *neoquipucamayocs* have contributed to forging this potential future, solidifying the continued use of the kipu within the field.

Despite its creative approach, Poma's manifesto remains in the artistic realm as he continues to focus on the aesthetic languages of a pre-Hispanic past. The manifesto calls for a "decontextualization" of these aesthetics to freely relocate and imagine them as functioning in the future.[113] This is where the Andean Futurism and the Neoquipocamayoc manifestos part ways, as the second is rooted in a tradition as continuum and is invested in a decolonizing project. Artist Patricia Cadavid Hinojosa has explored her own practice and that of other *technokhipumancers* like Torres, focusing on new interfaces for musical expression (NIMEs).

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[110] Alan Poma interviewed by Infrasonica. "Museum of the Resurrection" (2023). https://infrasonica.org/en/wave-9/museumofresurrection.
[111] Alan Poma. Andean Futuristic Manifesto (Lima: Soma Publicaciones, 2019), 23.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Poma, 17.

Under the framework of decolonial aesthetics and Dussel's liberation aesthetics Cadavid argues that "there are as many decolonial aesthetics as there are cultures that were colonized." [114] Acknowledging a multiplicity of practices, she remarks that by updating and keeping present our roots, we are in turn, decolonizing them.[115] In her analysis, Cadavid recognizes the "decolonial character" in the kipus created by *technokipumancers* working with NIMEs.[116] As much as I agree with this notion of decolonial aesthetics applied to this type of artwork, I argue that the artistic kipu in any of its formats is always more than aesthetics. The kipu as a tangible device cannot be detached from its own ontological and epistemological nature.

The onto-epistemic worlds cultural belongings emerge from define what they are and how they function in a culture-specific logic. In his book *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (2020)*,* Dylan Robinson explains how a Gitksan song is always "more-than-song", as it not only carries emotional or aesthetics qualities but it functions as "law, medicine, teachings, and primary historical documentation."[117] He explains that "epistemic violence" is imposed on something like a 'song' when it is forced to fit a category existing in Western logic.[118] This imposition of meaning and value from a Western settler perspective remains unable to comprehend the more-than-aesthetics aspects of the Gitskan song.[119] Similarly, the kipu is always more than knot, more than tool, more than artifact/artwork, as it is

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[114] Cadavid, 39. Cadavid author cites the definition of decolonial aesthetics from the decolonial manifest from the TDI+Transnational Decolonial Institute.
[115] Cadavid, 40.
[116] Cadavid, 46.
[117] Dylan Robinson. *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (University of Minessota Press, 2020) 46.
[118] Robinson, 46.
[119] Robinson takes as reference during the Delgamuuk Trial v the Queen trial (1985) where Justice McEachern did not recognize the legitimacy of a limx oo'y performed by Mary Johnson, Gitxsan hereditary chief Antgulilibix and part of one of the parties in the trial, which he misunderstood as a tactic to move him emotionally to influence his veredict. McEarchen alledges he had a "tin ear", expression Robinson employs in his book to make a correlation between settler listening habits as settled.

inseparable from the ancestral Andean onto-epistemic world that it belongs to, going beyond the gallery space and the temporalities of a linear view of history.

Robinson signals the "transformative politics of listening", which should be "decolonial in their ability to move us beyond settler listening fixations."[120] This unsettling of listening can be extended to other sensory logics. In a way, Torres' singing kipus, which respond to touch with patched overlaid sounds, disrupts the image of a silent relic behind glass in a museum while also recovering a haptic element lost in kipu conservation practices. As *ch'ixi*, her kipus unsettle not only sensory logics but also push the audience to locate themselves within the narrative that knots and strings carry.

Torres acknowledges the challenges of navigating ethically her responsibility as a mestiza artist,[121] and when it comes to creating artwork carrying such heavy cultural and social baggage, the process is not exempt from mistakes. This commitment of responsibility and self-awareness is reflected in *The Neoquipocamayoc Manifesto,* which englobes a stronger statement concerning the making of kipu artwork that must acknowledge the history of the device and of its makers, prioritizing the needs of Indigenous communities in the Americas, rather than the personal benefit of the artists, who are mostly mestizo. In its call against hierarchical and racial structures, along with its recapitulation of the colonial legacy, the manifesto is explicitly decolonial. Torres' articulation of artistic practice with sociopolitical commitment frames the expectations and goals of this broad kipu 'movement' within the arts.

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[120] Robinson, 38.
[121] Paola Torres Núñez del Prado interviewed by Giuliana Borea for the Women Artist from Latino America Podcast series produced by Amalgama (2024).

A Matter of Place: The Kipu as a Decolonial Tool

The arts in its diverse manifestations represent not only an opportunity for creativity but provide a space for conversations and actions, therefore for decolonial praxis. Scholar Catherine E. Walsh argues that "insurgency and its decolonial prospect" can be embodied and manifested in diverse spheres, including the arts.[122] She is interested in praxis as "the affirmative and prospective thought-actions-reflections- actions that give shape, movement, meaning, and form to decoloniality".[123] Vicuña and Torres' activist tendencies have found in their artistic practice a front to mobilize and advocate for socio-political change, a front to undertake a decolonial praxis. Walsh's notion of "decolonial praxis" along with Mignolo's "decolonial option" seem to be revisions that emerged from Cusicanqui's critique of the decolonial as mere academic speech. Cusicanqui has elaborated on how not only thems, but other intellectuals from the South had omitted other local intellectuals, and even Katarista ideas,[124] remarking as well how their multiculturalism tends to neutralize decolonial practices.[125] Nevertheless, she considers the arts to be politically and socially powerful. Cuscanqui continues to explore the "sociology of the image", a methodology that she frames as a decolonial praxis and which she has written and lectured about.[126]

Where and how kipus are displayed is a key aspect of the narrative their makers, curators, or institutions intent to build, as I argue it is in the museum or gallery space that the kipu becomes a potential decolonial tool. Museums have colonial foundations, as their collecting

[122] Walsh, 44.
[123] Walsh, 17.
[124] Cusicanqui, 67. The Katarist was a political movement that emerged in Bolivia during the early 1970s, seeking to recover the political identity of Aymara people.
[125] Cusicanqui, 68.
[126] Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, *Sociología de la imagen: Miradas ch'ixi desde la historia andina* (Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón, 2015), 13.

practices reflect centuries of extraction, dispossession, and hoarding of items belonging to colonized territories and their peoples. Espejo has remarked that "art galleries are a function of hierarchical epistemic geopolitics[,] a philosophy rationalized for conquest and domination."[127] Considering this logic from which the museum as an institution of knowledge emerged, James Clifford has elaborated on the museum as a "contact zone", borrowing from Mary Louise Pratt who described it as "a space for colonial encounters."[128] Clifford states that "when museums are seen as contact zones, their organizing structure as a collection becomes an ongoing historical, political, moral relationships."[129] From this notion, Willie Ermine proposed the "ethical space" for finding ways to reconcile disparate contexts.[130] Museums are spaces where the communities that items belong to come in contact with colonial legacies often filtered through institutional policies and enacted by museum agents. In this context, Indigenous art workers within the museum and community members invited for consultation and programming bring about their own onto-epistemic worlds in the various ways that exhibitions and public activities are executed. Such interactions are not free of tensions, as two or more onto-epistemic worlds encounter each other in this type of space. To move forward, Ermine has pointed to the "new order of relations" that an ethical space calls for.[131] This requires sustained institutional commitment and the centering of Indigenous ways of doing, as well as the leadership of Indigenous art agents. The insertion of the kipu with its Andean onto-epistemic nature and

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[127] Espejo Ayca, 40.
[128] James Clifford. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the late 20th Century* (Harvard University Press, 1997), 192.
[129] Clifford, 192.
[130] Willie Ermine. Ethical Space: Transforming Relations: a Discussion paper. *National Gatherings on Indigenous Knowledge*. Wanuskewin Saskatchewan May 25-27, 2005, Canadian Heritage. www.traditions.gc.ca/docs/docs_disc_e.cmf
[131] Ermine, 5.

history contest colonial narratives in the art gallery as a contact zone, while making space for other ways of doing and thinking.

These ways of doing and thinking bring us back to the notion of *uywaña* that Espejo refers to, but this time to a very specific kind: *yanak uywaña*, the "mutual nurturing of cultural objects", that can include the arts. These cultural or art objects are in fact considered as subject.[132] An important aspect for the creation of the work of art or *jaqichaña*, relies on *amuy'taypakay uywaña*, the "mutual nurturing of thoughts and sensitivity in incessant self-reflection,"[133] which can be understood as a "sensing-thinking."[134] Santilla and Troncone have suggested that the kipu is inherently synesthetic,[135] since its construction combines visual and tactile cues through hand and finger movements, "embody[ing] the potential for an all-encompassing system."[136] The artistic kipu allows for this sensing-thinking in its making and its display. For example, through the manipulation of the fibres and threads or with sound making through tactile contact, these among other possibilities it offers that ultimately engage body and mind but without that divide.

It is not surprising then that artists working with the kipu often explore these sensorial aspects. Eielson's kipus were all about the gesture of knotting, with the body being core to his practice, particularly in his fabric-body assemblages that took form in his performances. His oeuvre seen as a whole, including his writing, reflects this process of sensing-thinking. For Vicuña, a similar process takes on a collective dimension, incorporating knotting and singing and other elements. Her threads and unspun wool being her best allies to sense-think together with

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[132] Espejo Ayca, 35.
[133] Espejo Ayca, 36.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Santillán and Troncone, 34.
[136] Santillán and Troncone, 33.

the audience. For Torres, this synesthetic quality activates her kipus and textiles as she makes them sing, while other times the public is encouraged to interact with her interfaces. The diverse approaches of these *neoquipocamayocs* is in relation to ideas, sensations, materials, and processes that through their kipus are brought temporarily into the gallery space.

Another key aspect of sensing-thinking is collaboration. I have already explored this aspect of Eielson's knots in his "knotting with" and in "relation with," a characteristic emphasized in Vicuña's grandiose kipus which most of the time require assistance for making the knots, either behind the scenes or during public performances where the audience is invited to join in. In her most recent exhibition *Soñar el agua* (2024) at Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires, the process of preparation of her kipus became a public performance where the museum staff cleaned, sewed, and felted the unspun wool. In the case of Torres, the collaborative aspect is less evident as she often performs by herself, but she works with other people to create her audio works, for example, to create a textile interface that incorporates the Shipibo-Conibo style, she recorded the singing of Aurelia Brito, a member of that community, performing an Ikaro. For her sound piece *To Wear Quipus or Cables,* Torres collaborated with members of the Tupicocha community. Reflecting the ideals of her manifesto, she is very vocal about acknowledging this type of collaboration.

De la Cadena expands on this process of working together as "co-laboration", and points to the equivocations that can occur when onto-epistemic worlds encounter each other in the process;[137] after all, the museum remains a *contact zone*. She analyses the experience of Nazario Turpo, a *yachaq* (healer) from Cuzco, who was invited to The National Museum of the American

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[137] De la Cadena, 212.

Indian for consultation. The idea was for him to provide some guidance for the Quechua community section part of the *Our Universes* (2004-2023) exhibit, but within the many interactions between museum staff, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, the purposes of actions, the selection of items, and the words used in the didactics ended up lost in translation.[138] Unlike Nazario Turpo, whose interests and concerns came from outside museum practices, my selected artists are not only mestizo and migrants, but they have undergone professionalization in the field, which makes them very familiar with the language and logic of the museum and the art world. As *ch'ixi* subjects, they partially inhabit many contradictory worlds. In their role as artists, they engage in what Lugones calls "world(s)-travelling," a kind of travelling between realities.[139] In each reality or world, our bodies and identities might by coded or understood differently, even by our own selves.[140] Travelling back and forth from South to North, from the gallery to the mountain, from the conceptual to the streets, and ultimately from coloniality to epistemic change. Their experiences of these realities allow them to weave and infiltrate kipu narratives in the art space, which could be considered a decolonial strategy, readily available to be detected as resilience, resistance, a call to action, or even as a message of love by those who voyage into the museum world.

Today, even if the art gallery and the museum create potential for sensing-thinking, co-laborating, or worlds-travelling, the fact is that they remain buildings with physical walls, often located in urban areas, inaccessible to many Andean individuals residing in rural locations. Espejo is critical about contemporary art as she argues it "generates fragmented epistemic

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[138] De la Cadena, 209-240.
[139] María Lugones. *Pilgrimages: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions* (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 85-90.
[140] Lugones, 87-88.

extraction."[141] Furthermore, when referring to performance, she alerts how it often takes fragments of an action from a community to a gallery, what she refers to as the "predation of small things."[142] In my view, this applies to a certain degree to the practice of my selected artists, but their *ch'ixi* quality also provides an alternative to this exclusively extractive or appropriative dynamic. This can occur when the artistic kipu transcends the gallery space- when the kipu transcends this colonial space and connects with people on a level that challenges the relationship between object and "audience".

It is my belief that there is power and disruption of coloniality when Vicuña offers her kipus to *Pachamama* by the glaciers in Chile or in memory of women victims of violence at the outskirts of the Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl volcanos in Mexico. This power comes from *despachos* (offerings) which are real interactions with earth-beings. The same power can be found in Torres' visits to San Andrés to Tupicocha. Last year she organized a free screening of her documentary there and brought along *Hanaq Pacha Quipu* for the attendees to interact with (Fig.14-13). No vernissage needed, simply a community gathering with gratitude from the artist, who unlike many researchers, had brought her work for them to see. These moments remind me of Espejo's description of *uñachht'ayaña*, or "exhibiting to all people" often in community celebrations that allow for debates and exchanges that can trigger new creative ideas.[143]

So it is the presence of the kipu in the art space that represents a first step in its efficacy as a decolonial tool, since it has the potential to tear down gallery walls and take us out of a mono onto-epistemic world, bringing our gaze, audition, and touch towards the knowledge-keepers, the activists, the weavers, towards Pachamama, the earth beings and myriad relations,

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[141] Espejo Ayca, 40.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Ibid.

not only from the Andes but from Abya Yala. Towards the socio-political realities of the territory, assuming our positionality without erasing Indigenity. The kipu as an object-subject is more than a tool and more than an aesthetic object, it is kin and an ally.

The history of the kipu from ancient times till today reveals that its presence in the Andes was core to the functioning of many societies that inhabited the territory, and today it continues to have a role among certain communities that have kept this tradition alive, like the kipuscamayocs of Tupicocha or those from Cuspon and Ticllus. The kipu's presence in the art world is gaining more space through the work of artists like Eielson, Vicuña, Torres and many others who are partaking in the creation of artistic kipus. But these emerging kipuscamayocs are not only to be found in the art gallery, they are also educators and independent researchers who through their workshops and community engagement are taking on the role to recover the ability to understand the knots, teaching children and adults how to make numeric kipus as a first step to approach them. This is no minor task as it slowly awakens a memory through our finger. Therefore, it is through the practice of contemporary artists and other knot makers that the kipu's decolonial potential can be fully activated and realized, when knotting with it ethically, in *yanak uywaña*.

Figures

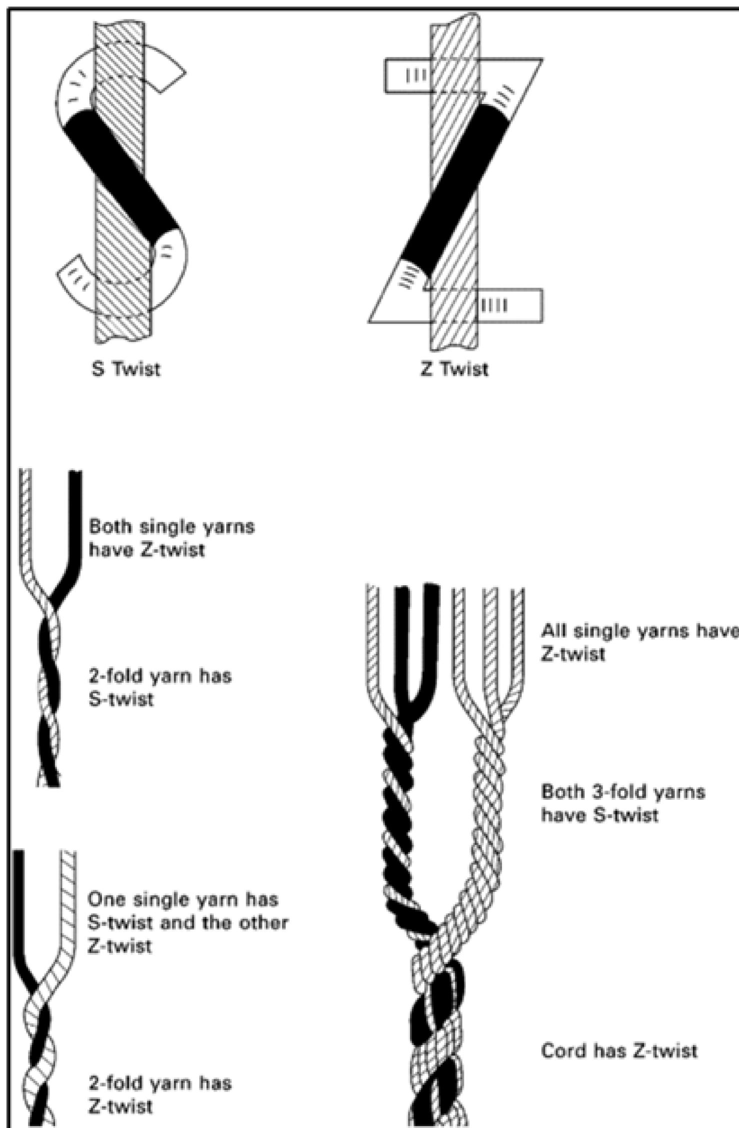

Fig. 2.

Plying cord and Twist Direction. British Standards Institution, 1963

Fig. 3

Guaman Poma de Ayala. "REGIDORES: TENGA LIBRO QVIPO CV[EN]TA [Alderman: has book khipu account]" in *Nueva Crónica y Buen Gobierno* (1615), manuscript page 800 [814] Denmark Royal Library Digital Archive.

Fig. 4

Guaman Poma de Ayala. “ASTRÓLOGO, PVETA Q[VE] SAVE del r[r]uedo del sol y de la luna y [e]clip[se] y de estrellas y cometas ora, domingo y mes y año y de los quatro uientos del mundo para senbrar la comida desde antigua. [Astrologer, poet that know about the turning of the sun and the moon and the eclipse and the stars and the comets pray, Sunday and month and year and the four winds] in *Nueva Crónica y Buen Gobierno* (1615), manuscript page 883 [897], Denmark Royal Library Digital Archive.

Fig. 5

Guaman Poma de Ayala. “SEGVNDA CALLE, PAIACONA (viejas) [Second Street, old women]” in *Nueva Crónica y Buen Gobierno* (1615)*,* manuscript page 217 [219], Denmark Royal Library Digital Archive.

Fig. 6
Jorge Eduardo Eielson, *L'Angelo* or *Camisia*, 1963. Assembly on canvas, 118 x 99 cm. "Jorge Eielson - Portafolio English," Galería Revolver

Fig. 7
Jorge Eduardo Eielson, *Progresión Gris*, 1966. Mixed technique on Wood, 120 x 122 cm. “Colección,” Museo de Arte de Lima.

Fig. 8

Cecilia Vicuña, *Brain Forest Quipu*, 2022. Details of installation view at Tate Modern, Turbine Hall. Photograph from Maximilíano Durón, "Cecilia Vicuña's Beautiful Turbine Hall Commission at Tate Modern Mourns the Destruction of the World's Rainforest," ARTnews website. October 11, 2022.

Fig. 9

Cecilia Vicuña, *Disappeared Quipu*, 2018. Installation view. Brooklyn Museum.

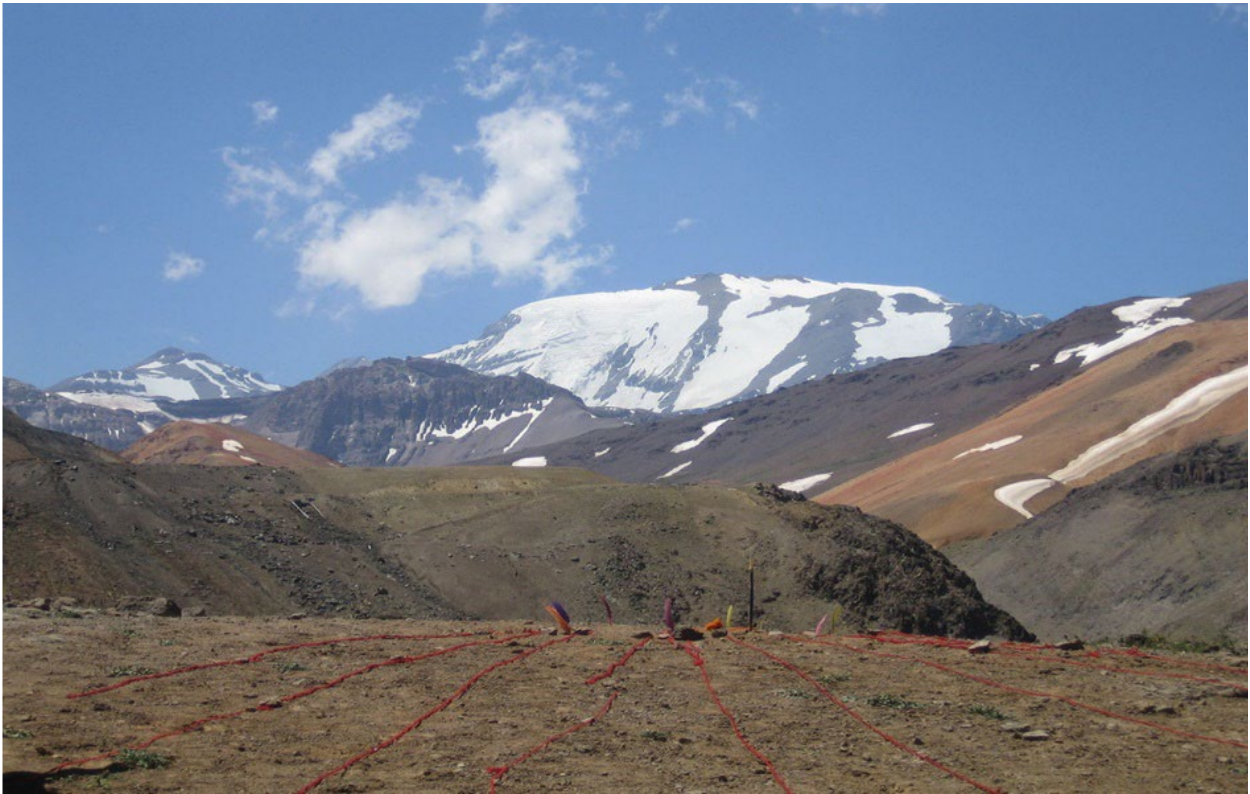

Fig. 10

Cecilia Vicuña, *Menstrual Quipu* (2006) at the skirt of the glaciers in Chile. Quipu Menstrual project website.

Fig. 11

Paola Torres Núñez del Prado, *Corrupted Structure II (Andean)*, 2016. Machine embroidery on fabric, artist’s website.

Fig. 12

Paola Torres Núñez del Prado, hands playing *Hanaq Pacha Quipu*, 2019. Textile sound interface. "The Sonified Textiles within the Text(il)ura Performance: Cross-cultural Tangible Interfaces as Phenomenological Artifacts," Research Catalogues, 2022.

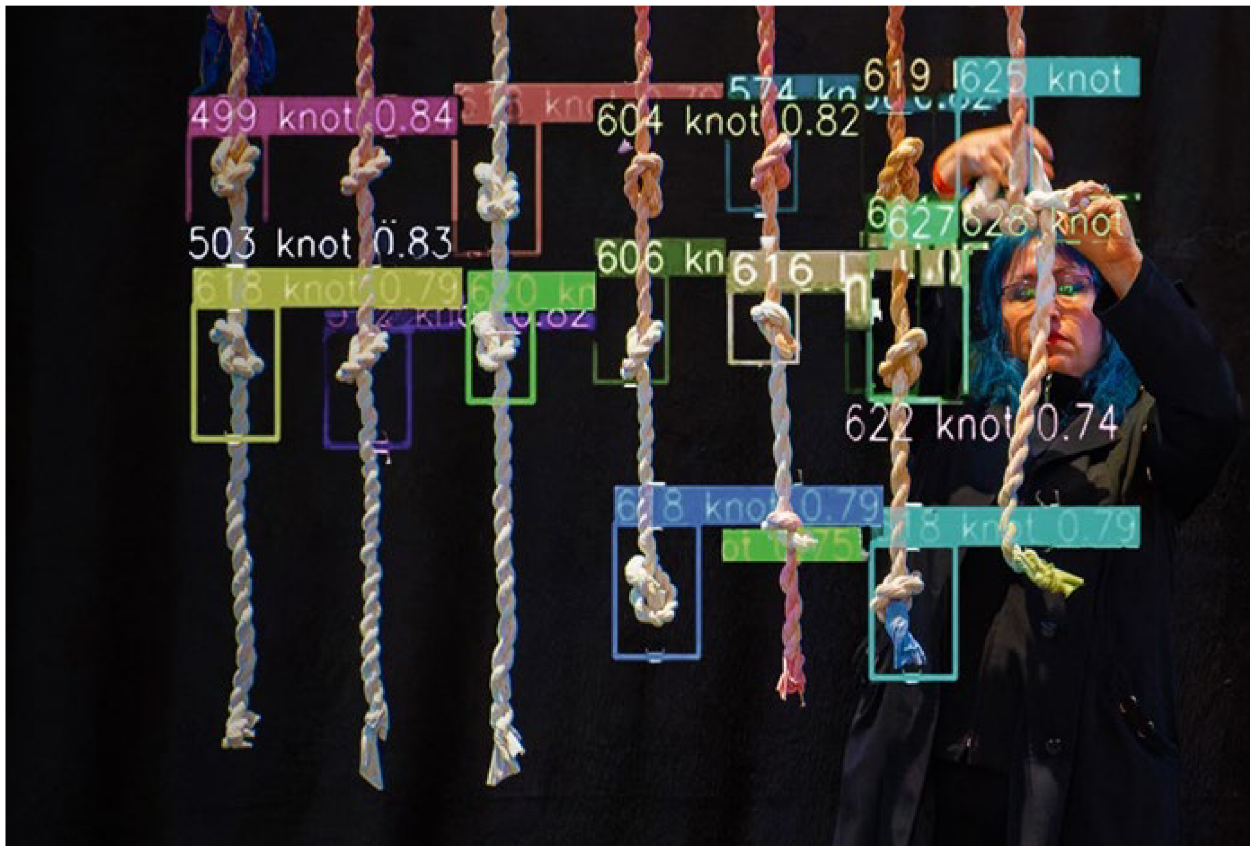

Fig. 13

Paola Torres Núñez del Prado. Artist performing *KhipuKoding* (2023) with *ML:Knot ()* (2021). Artist Website.

Fig. 14

Paola Torres Núñez del Prado. Group of children of San Andrés de Tupicocha community playing *Hanaq Pacha Quipu,* 2019. June 2023. Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 15

Paola Torres Núñez del Prado. Artist with boy of San Andrés de Tupicocha community playing *Hanaq Pacha Quipu*, 2019. June 2023. Courtesy of the artist.

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