

Brooklyn, New York
December 4-29, 2004

Dear Cecilia,

I write to you from Brooklyn on a sunny Saturday afternoon. It is almost winter and so the sun is low, its light angling right in the window and the warmth feels good.

To write with the light touch of gratitude--aware of you, reading this. So to begin, I want to thank you.

There will be lots of stops and starts in this letter because I am still working full-time at the college. I will weave this letter-writing into my busy days which will be a good reason to pause.

I am thinking of the round-shaped letters you sent to Chile. You wrote, "The letter is the poet's lifeline." This letter will be round in a different way--a meditation, coming around again and again to thoughts and questions I have about your work and mine.

•

Dear Cecilia,

I remember that at the Dodge Festival of Poetry this year you said that the death or disappearance of a language occurs because of the shame of our own sounds. I am wondering--how was your Latin

American tour? Were your performances well received? Could people hear the sounds of the languages in their histories, in their bodies and memories?

Now I am thinking of the sound of the Estonian language in my own family. How my father made extreme efforts to learn English well and to try and lose his accent. But I remember loving to hear the sounds of his first language.

This is the story I tell in my project called *Threads*. I gave the manuscript this name because I had an image that I was connected to the sound of my father's home language by just a thread. A delicate sense of the relationship, not forgetting, though I think he tried very hard to forget what he had seen as a child and the words that accompanied those experiences of war and separation.

Listening for lost sounds--that is where the writing and drawing comes in? I think so.

•

Dear Cecilia,

Your sewn rooms and landscapes, threads connecting rocks and sticks, your pages in *Instan* where words flirt with the margins and gutters of the page/stage/frame. Pages where words are not separate

from each other. A breath is drawn across the space between. It is about making silence visible.

Over and over, you lay threads down across emptiness and invite us to pluck at these strings. Instruments need empty spaces in order to sing--

A question: how much of your writing comes from sitting still? How to find silences, how to write across empty space?

And another question: is your visual work a kind of poetics? Are your poems notes for your visual work? Or, there is no separation? Do words fail you? And then images fail as well? Both needing each other?

•

Dear Cecilia,

A memory: you performed in 2002 at the Poetry Project and I remember that you entered the space from the back of the room after you were introduced. You sang as you walked, unraveling a ball of red thread, draping it over the people sitting near the aisle. Some people held on to the thread and continued holding it like a kite string through the rest of your performance. Listening, I felt part of what was going to happen, that my physical presence depended on that thread, your movement, your voice.

And as you read, you wove languages together--English, Spanish, Quechua. There was no meaning problem. Because of your voice, I felt I understood everything and yet there was more I could learn.

I remember there were some chanting sounds coming from the dance performance next door. Instead of ignoring those sounds, you turned your head toward the wall and recognized these sounds, leading us all in a round of applause for the invisible (to us) dancers.

It was very human. None of us had to ignore anything anymore. There was no shame, no sense that you had been interrupted. There was a sense that it was impossible to interrupt a performance.

•

Dear Cecilia,

The idea that your work makes visible the unseen--this is what draws me to your work and this is what draws me to poetry. It is a spiritual concern, isn't it?

Do your spiritual practices inform your poetry and art? Did art lead you to these practices? Can that cause and effect be untangled? Is there a story there that you can tell?

I am thinking of something John Coltrane said. He said an artist must "work on themselves" in order to make good art. Of course his quest for music was spiritual.

I probably use poetry and art to attend to my spiritual life. But I feel like something is missing.

•

Dear Cecilia,

I want to say that the sense of pause in your work is political. Your work seems to guide people to a place of compassion--first toward themselves and then others. It does so by inviting people to be in the moment. To not turn away. To stop a little. Your work lets us see ourselves as tricksters and scavengers, inheriting everything--problems and joys, justice and injustice. I am excited by this playfulness as revolutionary.

Later, I read these words in your book, *QUIPOem*: "A work dedicated to delight wants to make the urgency/of the present, which is the urgency of the revolution, palpable."

I feel my most political act is still teaching. The classroom may be one of the few spaces left where the humanizing process, as Freire calls it, can take place. Teaching students to go ahead and take the adventure needed to make art and to observe it--this leads to adventurous thinking in other realms? As citizens? I think so.

I am thinking now of Lorenzo Thomas' essays in *Extraordinary Measures*--about African American writers and modernism and then later, the Black Arts Movement. He articulates the inextricable link between politics and art in Black America. This is an important literary history to remember as a North American artist. To think there is mostly a split between poetry and activism in this country is to disregard this vital legacy and ongoing tradition.

•

Dear Cecilia,

Sometimes I feel young and anxious about poetry. I'm anxious about "getting a book published" and yet that language about the publishing process feels passive and untrue.

I have been reading Agnes Martin's *Writings*. She says: "To feel confident and successful is not natural to the artist."

My struggle with recognition becomes less of a struggle when I am making work and distributing it through my own means. Right now I am making small books, decorated a bit with stitching. I make three or four of a kind and give them away. Little books, sized to fit the body. Brenda Iijima talks about this idea of publishing. She says she is interested in taking art off the wall, putting it into the observer's hands.

Again, Agnes Martin: "I would rather think of humility than anything else."

The only rule for my small books is that I won't purchase paper to make them. That way they cost me nothing. That way they become good gifts.

•

Dear Cecilia,

What about your basuritas? Do you make new little monuments to garbage and from garbage now?

And do you still decorate New York city streets? When I look at your work from the 80's all around Tribeca, I think of the fact that almost all of those empty spaces are now filled up with people, offices, restaurants, stores. Is there "a galaxy of litter" anywhere to be found downtown?

•

Dear Cecilia,

A dream: I was surprised to find out that my uncle had published a book of poems. He's not a poet. Nevertheless, it was a beautiful

hardcover book and he presented it to me as a gift. I wanted to give him something in return and was frustrated that I didn't have anything so solid and seemingly permanent. I gave him a handful of my homemade broadsides, chapbooks, and pamphlets. Then I opened his book. I found two columns, almost a dual-language book, but when I read closer, I found that the column on the right was a commentary on each poem. Historical information was recorded there. One of the facts listed: "The bombing of Tartu." These events explained his poems. And so the book went on until I turned to a page where the language was unrecognizable. There, I read an italicized title: "Durne Durne." A gibberish I could not decode. Perhaps it meant "turn turn"--keep going, continue?

The next night I dreamt of a crane in flight, moving its neck wildly, so that it appeared to be writing something for me on the open blue sky.

•

Dear Cecilia,

The year is drawing to a close and I quit my job! I will still teach. It is a little risky financially but I believe that everything will be OK.

"I'm not afraid of love/or its consequences of light," writes Joy Harjo.

This turning toward solitude, more light, days at home.

Agnes Martin writes: "The silence on the floor of my house/Is all the questions and all the answers that have been known in the world . . . "

So now, quietly and happily, I wait for your reply--

With love,

Jill