

[00:26.41] **LAURA HAKEL**

Dear friends and colleagues, thank you for joining us for the third event of this Fall Speaker Series. Today, we are honored to welcome the poet, artist, filmmaker and activist Cecilia Vicuña. Each semester, CCS Bard hosts a program of lectures by leading artists, curators, and critics, situating the school and museums concerns within a larger context of contemporary art production and discourse. The speakers are selected primarily by faculty and second year graduate students. My name is Laura Hakel. I am a second year graduate student, and I'm happy to be hosting this event. Cecilia Vicuña's work addresses pressing concerns of the modern world, including ecological destruction, human rights, and cultural homogenization. Born and raised in Santiago, Chile, she has been in exile since the early 1970s. After the military coup against the President Salvador Allende. In the mid 1960s, she began creating works composed of debris, with structures that disappeared and Quipus, recovering ancient traditions and creating metaphors around the act of weaving. She named these productions "Arte Precario," "Precarious Art," as an independent and not colonized category for her art. Soon, her works evolved into collective rituals and oral performances. Her creative process begins as a poem, an image that morphs into a film, a song, a sculpture, or a collective action.

[02:22.47]

Where the ephemeral and the participatory can be transformative acts that bridge the gap between life and art, the ancestral and the present. In the early 1970s, she started a series of paintings where she decolonized the art of the conquerors and the saints inherent from the Catholic Church, to create irreverent images of heroes of the revolution. The works of Cecilia Vicuña are part of collections of major museums around the world and have been increasingly activated over the past few years. As an artist and a poet, she has published more than 22 books. Beyond her own production, she has edited comprehensive surveys of Latin American poetry and poets of Mapuche language, translated into trilingual edition. Sound, weaving and language interact in Cecilia Vicuña's work to create channels between the past and the present, proposing situations of contact, healing, fluidity and coexistence, bringing together subjective and

collective experiences. For the strength of her artistic vision, always looking for ways to heal and nourish the human legacy, her understanding of ancient spiritual technologies, and her activism in the field of arts, it is an honor to have her here today as our guest. Welcome, Cecilia. Bienvenida. We are going to start. I'm going to stop talking to let Cecilia start her presentation.

[06:05.23] **CECILIA VICUÑA**

I wanted to begin and let me know if you hear me okay or not. Casey, you have to tell me, because usually I lower my voice to the point where it becomes impossible to hear. It seems to be an act of weaving in the sense that my weavings are appearing and disappearing at the same time, which is the main metaphor. Since you speak of the metaphors, I wanted to begin with this surprising note that I found the other day on Instagram. I don't even know how I found it, but I thought it was such a wonderful thing that somebody found this, which I am sure is a story I told at some point, which is true. I'll read it to you, even though I'm sure you can read it.

[07:09.45]

"On a trip to New York in the late 60s," it is actually in 1969—"a 20 year old woman who is equally drawn to art and poetry visits the Museum of Modern Art." Yes. That woman is Cecilia. I was here in New York for the translation of my first poetry book into English. "She feels very strongly that as a Latin American woman, she doesn't belong in this temple of modernism. But then she notices the strange small painting of a girl at the beach."

[07:46.83]

This is the only part that is not exact, actually. It is a small painting of the girl looking at herself in the mirror. It is a very famous little painting by Morris Hirshfield. So we keep going, with Raphael Rubenstein, and it says, "the beach by a self-taught Polish immigrant who only began to paint in his mid-60s—" that was Hirshfield. "I saw that and I thought, why could it be in the Museum of Modern Art? It clearly didn't fit. It was like a mistake. I completely connected with that mistake. I am that mistake."

[08:41.25]

I wanted to begin with that story because you are in a Curatorial Studies place, and it is really a curatorial story, the decision to include Morris Hirshfield in the Museum of an Art, and it was also a curatorial decision by Cecilia to decide that she was a living mistake. When I realized that I was a living mistake, that freed me to become myself even more freely than before. How can you be freed to be more free? It's an awkward thing, but that is one of the things that art asks. And I bring it forth because of what Laura wrote, and was very smart, and in the sense that it is true that I began working with my [foreign language 00:09:41] and my precarious work long before this encounter with this painting in the Museum of Modern Art.

[09:49.72]

And it was that encounter in the Museum of Modern Art that caused me to begin painting in that clumsy, ridiculous, absurd way that I really wanted to paint in, as an act of rebellion. Now it is called a decolonizing act, but back then we called it liberation. And so I was liberated by that mistake. And I recently learned that through the invention of a new molecule of which we hear more about in my work very soon, this molecule will change quantum computation forever. And the way this molecule works is through continuous creation of defects, so many defects that it allows it to do 1000 million things that before were not possible, neither by molecules nor by quantum computers. So this notion of giving yourself to the mistake, to the defect, it's not only something that we can do as artists, it's also something that subatomic particles and molecules do, and we also know genes do. So life creates this biodiversity through the mistakes, or these defects. So we are the defective people in this moment. And this morning I encountered the next image that I want Casey to show. And this is another curatorial story, and it will serve us as an intro to the images I will show.

(CARS HONKING)

[11:57.25]

It is 05:00 in my street and you can see that the drivers are getting impatient and are

honking a lot, because they want to go home.

[12:10.43]

This I encountered today, because a curator from Chile, her name is Carolina Castro posted it. And this is a story that relates to Ono Yoko, like the Japanese call her, or Yoko Ono as she's known in the West. So Yoko Ono was having this very large exhibition travel around the world. And in each new city and new country where she arrived, she requested that a local curator would choose two local artists to join her and have a room in the exhibition along with her. So, Yoko was creating this participatory invitation and I was one of the artists. The other one was Enrique Ramirez. And so we were invited to come. The only restriction was that we should try to do something connected to Yoko Ono's instructions of the '60s. I happen to be one of those people who was alive in the 60s. Back then, I had the original edition of "Grapefruit" with all these beautiful instructions. So in the moment that this invitation arrived, I was in Crete. I was in Réthymno, in this amazing island of Crete. As part of my Documenta 14 [inaudible 00:13:45] I stayed in Greece for three months.

[13:50.15]

And so I wrote this poem which I will translate to you, because it has never been translated, to be my poem for Yoko. And it says, "The poem is water. Debris gathered in the beaches of Réthymno, Crete." This is just a description of what it was. It was seashell, plastic and clay. So now comes the instruction. "On a day after rain, weave the fragrance of the forest into your body. Pick up some twigs and weave the shadows of this twig to your hand. The body is water. The body is shadow, the shadow that guides it, the forest of the future water."

[15:09.79]

We were asked as well to dedicate our instruction. So I dedicated it to liberation of the contaminated waters and the privatized waters and the commodified waters. And this is because Chile is the first country to privatize water. So people are going thirsty all over the country. Millions of people who before had running water, don't have running water

anymore. And they are reduced to trucks, where water is delivered in small portions for each family.

[15:48.01] - Cecilia Vicuña

You probably don't know, but in many places in the US, the same is true because of fracking. There is this wonderful film, and I have made a video about that film, where you can see thousands of places where this is happening in [the United States.] But the people who suffer this treatment of being deprived of running water are not allowed to speak the truth of their loss of water, because if they speak the truth, they will be punished, and will not have the truck coming anymore. This is people in the US. Just like in Chile, who used to have running water, and because of fracking, when they turn on the faucet, fire comes out of the faucet instead of water. And so the last line of this poem, combined with dedication and with instruction, says, "Si el agua sufre, sufre toda la tierra." "If the water suffers, the whole earth suffers."

[16:57.99]

Casey, now we can begin with the presentation and you can show it in a sort of slow rhythm. In Spanish, we confuse soft and slow, very often. You can let it run, leave them perhaps for a few seconds, maybe 6 seconds.

(VIDEO PRESENTATION PLAYS)

[22:24.31]

See, you can keep it there in that image, please. Sorry, I thought this was a bilingual presentation, and it turns out that it was in Spanish. And there were many reasons why I wanted to show you this, because I am, as well as you probably are too, completely devoted and concerned with what is happening, with the extinction, the drive to exterminate Indigenous peoples, and exterminate the forest and living creatures and the wilderness of this planet. And one of the things that is most crucial for us is water. And water has been under attack for many centuries.

[23:15.32]

Now, of course, the crisis is so big that it is happening, that, for example, here in this last work, and I wanted to stop in this one in particular, for those who don't understand Spanish, it says, "the death of water." On the site is Laguna del Inca. This is one of the most sacred sites of Chile. And look what I said. This is the price to convert everything into something like a city. And this is a glacial lake in the highest mountains of the Western Hemisphere, at the foot of Aconcagua, which seems to be part of the Himalayas, even though it is in the Americas.

[24:12.51]

And so here I climbed with my girlfriend, Camila Marambio, to this lagoon to find the lagoon so depleted that it is like a desert scene. And this lagoon had never been depleted for thousands and thousands of years, and now it is going down. And so when are we, the humans, going to wake up to the fact that our water is disappearing? And two weeks ago, I did this collective [inaudible 00:24:49] here in New York at the High Line for the insects, because the insects are also going extinct. And without insects, half the plants are going to disappear. And without half the plants, there's not going to be enough food for people. So we are making sure that we will go hungry, that we will go thirsty very soon. That is the intelligence kind of ruling this planet at this moment. And I created this presentation for my last live event before COVID, which was the retrospective of my work created by Miguel López at the MUAC. This was to be the second stop of this retrospective. MUAC is the Museum of Contemporary Art in Mexico City. [inaudible 00:25:59] And so the celebration that the museum thought was inviting Lucy Lippard. So I created this presentation to share it in my conversation with Lucy.

[26:12.02]

And I did that as an homage to her, because Lucy began to write about my work very many decades ago, when nobody was interested in my work. And she was also the first to notice that a great deal of my work was concerned with water. In Indigenous culture, we don't think of water as a material, as an object, but as a living entity, as a living being that has many dimensions. Most people see just three, but there are more

dimensions. And now it is known that there is a fourth dimension called the quantum state of water, which is where water can be in all its known states at the same time. Liquid, solid, ice, all of them at once. And so it is known now what Indigenous people have known all along, that water exists in the cosmos. Water apparently is born in intergalactic space, like the ancient Andean weavers have always said. But so far it seems that the only place where water is liquid is our planet. So it makes it an even worse crime to attack water. And that is the end of my presentation. So we can open now to questions.

[27:53.55]

Questions and comments not transcribed.