

Awareness of Awareness: An Interview with Cecilia Vicuña

Julia Bryan-Wilson

Julia Bryan-Wilson: Because we are having this conversation on the occasion of your exhibition in New Orleans, I want to focus on questions about land and site and the ocean, all of which are significant elements in your new work that appear consistently across your entire oeuvre. Can you begin by narrating some of your performances from the mid and late 1960s that took place on the shore in Chile? I'm especially interested in how you were theorizing transience and change in some of your very earliest pieces on the lip of the sea.

Cecilia Vicuña: I like that expression, "on the lip of the sea." You know that the sea for the ancient people of Con cón is "la mar," which is a feminine incarnation. So the sea is perceived as the life force—the life force of this earth. I learned that recently, in the last fifteen years. But as a kid, I had the sense that I was conceived in front of the ocean, in the meeting point between Viña del Mar and Valparaíso, which is a large cliff overseeing the ocean. I was going to the sea even when I was in my mother's tummy, and there are pictures of me playing in Con cón at the age of maybe a year old, two years old. So the passion for the sea, being touched by the sea, was a constant in my life. There are home movies from when I was still a baby, and I'm already dancing with the ocean, even though I can hardly walk. It's a deeply felt, visceral relationship.

My art began on a given day in the year 1966, in January, when I felt that the ocean was alive and had as much awareness as I do now. I felt in complete awe and my life changed in that very moment, because I had this awareness—an awareness of its awareness. I felt that I needed to respond, to make a sign to indicate to the ocean that I understood. So, I picked up a little stick that was just lying about. It was this beach that had a lot of debris. I stood it up, and once I stood it up, making it vertical, I knew that in that change—between horizontal and vertical—I had woven my place in the world. Even by telling you this, I am overcome by emotion from thinking that something so simple could have such an effect on the ocean, the sea, and myself—at the meeting point of sea and human being.

From that moment forward, I continued doing that. After I put the first stick, I began making sort of a spiral design, and planting more sticks, and ordering the debris. That year, I had just finished high school. I was still a teenager. I was intending to enter architecture school.

My dream was to be an architect. So, I created a sort of architecture of an imagined city that could be very ancient, Paleolithic in its looks, but completely futuristic at the same time. I was also creating my entrance into the world as an artist, because I felt that architecture was a total art where I could do poetry in the city, where the city itself would become an art form. As you can see, these thoughts are very ancient, even though at the time I didn't know they were ancient thoughts. I thought they were the thoughts of a young girl in Chile in 1966.

JBW: Your being moved to tears thinking about the strong realization that you had, that the elements are alive and that you are one element among these other, greater forces—including the sea and the earth, etc.—leads me to my next question, which is about your installation *Otoño (Autumn)* in 1971, where you gathered many bags of leaves and made an intervention in the National Museum of Fine Arts in Santiago by scattering them on the ground. How did you perceive this transition from making ephemeral configurations by the sea to working in an institutional site in a major city?

CV: There is a link between the two, the experience in Con cón and *Otoño*. My work in 1966 took place maybe twelve years after the pristine world of Con cón was transformed by an oil refinery that was installed at the mouth of the Aconcagua River. The refinery was built on top of the cemetery of ancient inhabitants that archaeology has indicated is perhaps 6000 or more years old. I remember that when you bathed at this beach, where I was doing my visual art, your feet always came out black because there was so much oil already in the environment.

Then I moved to Santiago. Santiago, in that era from the mid '60s into the '70s, was still a city where you could see the sky, where you could see the mountains, where you could still speak of eternal snow in the mountains that surrounded us. And yet, I had read in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* that climate scientists had gathered and predicted that the Earth could come to an end in a matter of years, if the ecological destruction that was already taking place continued. That made me very aware that this extraordinary beauty—the mountains and the ocean, and all that—was at risk. I was aware of that even as a teenager. This is important,

because at the time very few people were aware . . . very few people had this understanding. But I have to say that for a teenager in Chile it was totally possible to be aware. And now we know that Exxon was aware too, and they hid this information, so the trouble we are in now is due to this unwillingness to see.

JBW: How did you translate that understanding into your work, specifically in *Otoño*? Was it important to you where exactly you gathered the leaves, and did it matter what kinds of trees they were?

CV: My parents had planted almond trees in the garden, and there was this beautiful, huge, almond tree between my parents' house and my studio. When I was fifteen years old, my father had decided to build a little studio that was a wooden shack, three meters by three meters, at the end of the garden, so that I wouldn't be polluting the house with this mess of all my paints—because I was painting in my bedroom, you know. I was walking between the house and the studio, and the almond tree had lost its petals, and it was a rain of white little petals on the dark, almost black ground. When I saw that, I began collecting this rainfall and I spent a whole day picking these petals one by one, gathering them in sort of little containers that I found. So that's when I conceived that I wanted to create a room full of petals.

But next day, when I came to see my petals, the petals had rotted! [Laughs] They were not white any more. They had become shriveled, and sort of brownish. When I collected them, the petals were moist. The next day, given the *rocío* on them, the dew that they have received, they rotted. Ok, very well—I remembered this and I put it away.

When the fall came, I had the same experience, but this time with leaves. So I decided to start gathering the leaves, imagining that I would do a room of autumn leaves. My boyfriend arrived and saw me doing this extraordinary, poetic act of gathering. I had started to read Daoist and Buddhist literature as a teenager, and I had read a story of a peasant aspiring to be a *sennin*, a flying monk. He had been asked to do menial tasks, and he did these tasks—like cleaning and sweeping the floor—so wholeheartedly and in such a contemplative manner, that he did become a *sennin*!

When my boyfriend saw me similarly absorbed in my activities, he said, "This is so amazing, we should do this at the National Museum of Fine Arts." And I thought, "Oh my God, that's a wonderful idea." So I went to see the director of the museum, who had just arrived from New York. His name was Nemesio Antúnez. I proposed this idea to him to do my sculpture *Otoño* at the museum, and he said, "Let me think about it." After three days he called me and said "Ok, you can do it; what do you need?" I said "I need a letter inviting all the gardeners in the biggest parts of Santiago to gather leaves for me." He wrote that letter, which I still have. The gardeners did this because the National Museum of Fine Arts was asking them to do it. In addition, my mother, my godmother, my brothers—everybody—helped me to go around the city of Santiago, gathering leaves.

JBW: It's interesting that you recruited not only your family, but also the workers of the city to assist you. Using the visible evidence of all this manual labor is especially potent in the context of a museum piece produced in Chile in 1971. How did you conceive of the *Otoño* installation as speaking to the socialism of Allende's government, which had come into power one year before in 1970?

CV: When the social movement of Allende arose, this was very close to my family, because Allende was a personal friend of my grandfather. My father also knew him. So, this was not just a great social movement, but it was the social movement in which my family had been involved for four or five generations already. This was something that was very close to my heart.

Yet, I felt that this movement was only interested in what was called, at the time, class struggle. But for me, I felt that it was necessary to have a complete change of being, or way of being—otherwise it would make no sense. A true revolution would have to be a revolution of the senses, a revolution of the body, a revolution of the way we loved each other, the way we compose our poetry, our music. That would be total transformation.

JBW: I'm curious how this wish—or maybe it's a belief that socialism or true revolution would simultaneously involve a complete transformation of the senses—manifests itself across your

work. You engage with so many kinds of bodily and sensory encounters, from installation to poetry, video, performance, and sculpture. For you, is all of it part of the same essential stream of ideas, or do you think about each of those mediums as doing different kinds of aesthetic work and different kinds of political work?

CV: Both at once, because each one of these practices is clearly a different thing, but they are all based in the same principle expressed with great detail in the main work that I did in my teenage years: *El Diario Estúpido*, a journal I kept in which I would write 7000 words per day as a discipline to teach myself how to write. I did this starting in 1966 and I think I finished in 1971 or 1972. When you read that document, its 2000 pages of typescript, you see that the main focus was a sort of observation of my sensations. What did I feel? There's a tremendous focus on how I felt, in terms of sensing the temperature, emotions around me and in me.

It's a very specific kind of writing that shows an awareness that there is a massive aesthetic and philosophical field opening for me, just by paying attention to what exactly this sensorial world is for me. I would say that that is the root of art. It is also the root of politics. One of the lines in the text that accompanies *Otoño* says something like "sensing the seasons is part of awakening to the urgency of the revolution."

JBW: How was this hopefulness about revolution interrupted when you moved to England in 1972, and then, one year later, by Pinochet's coup in 1973? These two events—ruptures, really—happened quite close together, and it seems to me that they paused, or shifted, what had been your previous trajectory of making large-scale work that optimistically addressed the senses and socialism.

CV: Yes. Julia, I have to say that's a very perceptive question that has never been asked of me, and I thank you for asking me that. I will tell you how I see it. How I lived it.

I grew up in a sort of interval of peace in Chile. The social history of Chile is very violent and very turbulent, as you know—as it is in most of Latin America—with civil wars and the persecution of indigenous people, and the elimination of my ancestral heritage, the erasure of

the culture of my indigenous mothers. Despite all that violence, when I was born it was a time of peace. I have a movie of my life as a child, and you can see that it was like a little paradise. I grew up in this adobe house, surrounded by millions of flowers, surrounded by animals in a house where there were chickens, there were cows, horses, frogs . . . When you think of where we are now this seems like an impossibility, but we were actually alive, experiencing all of that.

It was also a moment of tremendous physical freedom, where there wasn't a lot of repression on sexual behavior for teenagers. We had tremendous joy, and this you can see in my poetry. My poetry is, I believe, perhaps among the first non-repressed female writing by a Latin American writer. I haven't encountered other poetry written in the language or in the tone that I did in the '60s, when I was sixteen, eighteen years old.

That universe was expressed as well in the Popular Unity. When you look at films such as Patricio Guzmán's *The Battle of Chile*, you see that in the rallies before the coup people are having picnics, they're having fun, the children are there, the grandmothers are there . . . There is tremendous fluidity, body with body, there's laughter. It was a joyful, freewheeling, political world.

I arrived in England in September of 1972, and when the plane opened the door, I felt immediately the horrendous grayness and sadness of the British soul, as if this world was a world of pain and repression, where people didn't have an iota of the physical enjoyment that we had in Chile. So I never undid my suitcase, because I knew I had to return to the Americas in that very first second that I landed in England. I was there with a British Council scholarship to study art, but the minute that this grant was over, I was going back. That was my plan. But three months before my grant came to an end, the military coup happened. So I had lost not only the joy of Chile, but the possibility of returning. I felt that it was like the end of the world for me.

JBW: There is a radical change in the tone of your work that starts with your exile and is compounded by the coup. It becomes more grim, more raw. For instance, you refer to yourself in a poem in 1982 as a "migrating animal."

CV: Yes.

JBW: On the one hand, that phrase signifies that you were a person very much in touch with animality, and by that I mean a kind of fantastically alert wildness. But you were also a migrant, and the compound phrase alludes to something possibly negative, or dehumanizing. How was your sense of bodily freedom reframed when you were displaced? How was your self-awareness altered as a Latin American woman living in London?

CV: Even though I was just twenty-four when I arrived in London, in truth, because I am small and because of the way I dressed, I probably looked like I was fourteen or fifteen—tiny and dark, with my long braids and all my handmade little miniskirts, and so forth. I remember that I went to an exhibition opening—I had been in London perhaps for two days—and I met Joseph Beuys and all these British artists, and immediately felt that these male predators were trying to eat up the newly-arrived young animal from Latin America. [Laughs] You see what I mean? They were after something that they could appropriate and devour.

I decided that I could be there while not allowing myself to be devoured by their system. The migrating animal was in London to learn from London, but at the same time I was about to learn much more about how amazing the world I had left was—by contrast, you see. So I began to develop this sense of poetic resistance, right there in that very spot. The migration is a double migration in the sense that you go to a place and it's the opposite of your place, because your place is not available to you any more, but you also migrate back into the source of who you are.

JBW: There are also profound continuities throughout your work, particularly the use of scavenged, natural materials, and the conjoining of words or objects into unexpected and revelatory juxtapositions. As the first major survey of your work in the U.S., the show in New Orleans will function somewhat like an overview of your practice. There will be new, site-specific sculpture, but it will also gather together a lot of your modalities from the past decades, including poetry and videos and films. Does the concept of the retrospective make sense to you, given the specific way your work approaches non-linear time? How do you feel about this taking-stock, historicizing, or looking-back? Do you return to work you made in the '60s and

'70s and understand it as belonging firmly to the past? Or does it feel just as present, just as current, as a *precario* you might have made yesterday? Or are all those temporalities constantly interwoven and spiraling together?

CV: It's very paradoxical. When you're creating a work, you are really outside time and space, while, at the same time, everything that you do is totally site-specific and moment-specific. I have always been aware of this extraordinary ability that we as human beings have—and I believe computers or machines can never match this ability—which is that we can simultaneously be time- and space-bound while completely free, and timeless, and spaceless. I am constantly faced with that double capacity, the ability to be boundless and completely of-the-moment. I hope that the people who visit the exhibition can have that experience of this double reality.

JBW: We are in an urgent time in which past, present, and future are colliding. New Orleans is a landscape where that collision is very sharply felt—not only because it is haunted by the governmental failures around Katrina, but also because it is a place that has long been shaped by the exploitation of resources. In a way, too, the area's rapid coastal erosion offers a bleak glimpse into what is to come for all of us in terms of climate change. How are you approaching the specific space of New Orleans? Do you feel an affinity between Con cón and the Gulf Coast?

CV: Yes, absolutely. The Mississippi River created this great delta of amazing fertility, and it's very much like Con cón in the sense that Con cón is created by the river Aconcagua. Now the geographies of these places couldn't be more different, because the latitude is different, the climate is different. Yet both are places with ancient pre-Columbian cultures, pre-Columbian habitation, and both sit on land that has been destroyed by the greed of the Western culture. Destroyed by oil. The destruction of the world right now is happening mostly because of oil exploitation. It's been the most destructive thing, from the plastic that is killing the ocean to global warming from combustion. This extracting mentality pulls out the heart of the earth in the symbolic language of this black oil.

I see the young girl Cecilia, running about naked, trying to remove the oil from her feet, from her hands. If you were touching the sand, already it was this horrible, sticky thing. And now the old Cecilia is going to New Orleans, and I feel tremendous reverence for the pain of the people, the pain of the fish, the pain of the birds. What's the name of this horrendous explosion that was around the year 2010?

JBW: The BP oil spill.

CV: Yes. Not only the spill was brutal, but so were all the chemicals that they put in the ocean to disperse it. So this is crime upon crime, upon crime. In every moment of my being, there is a sort of prayer for the waking up of what makes us human, so that we can love the earth again, and love every bit of grass, every little spore, and every bacterium that is making life possible.

JBW: Can I ask a question? It's meant to be a probing question, and not an antagonistic question. How do you continue to have conviction in the power of art? What is it about art that you believe has the capacity to change minds, even to change society?

CV: I believe what changes the world is our awareness, and I consider awareness to be the main art of human beings. Awareness is what we share even with subatomic particles. So awareness—consciousness—is the art. The physical act of making actions, exhibitions, objects, and so forth, is a sort of minor manifestation, or tangible manifestation, of our awareness. If it is not that, it has no power. It cannot change anything if it is not loaded with the clearest intent, and the most intense orientation, towards touching other forms of awareness. You see what I'm saying?

JBW: I do. That's a powerful answer, because it ties your very careful work, with form and intention, to how those forms and intentions spark thoughts in your audience. This implies a circuit of mutual awareness between the maker and the viewer, in which the creation of ideas depends on both sides.

CV: One of the things I have paid a lot of attention to in my life is studying, reading, and constantly experiencing the power of oral poetry in indigenous societies. Why is it that oral poetry has a true effect on an indigenous society, while our poetry in Western society is content to be exclusively in books, and in the realm of universities, and in small communities of poets?

I have been aware of the contrast between these two from an early age because I was exposed to the power of oral speakers. My grandfather, Carlos Vicuña Fuentes, was an oral speaker and he was a leader as well, who was an inspiration to Pablo Neruda. I witnessed the effect of his oral speeches. When he spoke, people were mobilized for justice. It's like he had the ability to mobilize people's hearts in order to want justice, to desire justice. He spoke in the most philosophical, and poetical, and humane manner, with not an iota of ideology. I was exposed to these teachings and to these practices from a very young age.

Getting back to the contrast: Why is it that the oral poet has an effect? It is because the society itself gives value to the speech of the oral poet, so people hear, people listen, people give meaning and significance to what is being said. For example, I often quote an oral poet—a very famous oral poet—Honorio Quila, a peasant from Chile who says that all he dreams for is to have good listeners . . . People that will “listen to him with wisdom.” That is his phrase. This is what we are lacking. We have so many enlightened artists in this moment who are working for ecological awareness, for political awareness, for the sake of the refugees' suffering, and for the migrant's pain. But they are not listened to with wisdom, because the people who write about art want to represent art as a sort of form of entertainment.

The power of art is being constantly removed from this idea that art should stay in place, as something that belongs exclusively in museums, and is only for the sake of being enjoyed on a Sunday afternoon.

JBW: In all of your work, you've attempted to shatter those assumptions, and you circulate your work in a broad array of venues. As a poet, especially, you don't rely upon the institutions of art. And, in your process of making, you often move outside of the spheres of art as you

embark on collaborations with communities—for example, with Chilean fishermen whose livelihood is disappearing. One of the challenges, but also one the opportunities, of the New Orleans exhibit will be your engagement with the land as well as with people, especially as you collect the materials for some of the site-specific works. Do you have any trepidation around this engagement?

CV: I know that there are local communities there who have suffered terribly with all of the events of the last few years. And these communities have been subjected to such exploitation, abuse, and appropriation by foreigners, like me, who come just to take. So I am also very, very aware that I might face resistance. I am sure I am going to encounter a lack of willingness to participate in something that is just passing, because these people are not passing. They belong there. They are of this place.

So for me, this is a very delicate place and I must tread carefully. And I will only be able to do it if they willingly participate. This is the way I have always worked with indigenous communities—by being invited. Even if I make a proposal, I make it very plain that this proposal will only work if it is precipitated by a desire to meet me midway.

JBW: We talked about how you asked the gardeners of Santiago to help collect leaves for you in 1971. Do you think about gathering refuse and debris as a kind of classed practice, a racialized practice, a gendered practice?

CV: Yeah. I have to tell you that I once arrived at a place, on an island in Lake Titicaca, which appeared to be empty. There wasn't a single human being on-site. I arrived on this island in total awe of the beauty of the place. There were some twigs, and I immediately began gathering the twigs like I always do, gathering little sticks and stones. And, all of a sudden, out of nowhere appears a local person who is extremely angry at me because I am gathering firewood. I said, “Firewood?” I couldn't conceive of those little, almost invisible twigs that I had gathered as firewood. I realized that, from the perspective of this local person who lives in a place that is in

the highlands at 4000 meters height with no trees, these little twigs are his valuable firewood. I was in awe of how much I was able to overlook while thinking that I was being very delicate.

JBW: In that instance, you were the extractor of resources!

CV: Exactly. The notion of collecting, the notion of gathering, is so subjective. It's so oriented to your own experience. After that moment, I have not gone anywhere without being aware that, though for me something seems like a dream, it may not be a dream for somebody else.

JBW: You are suggesting that subject positions around power are malleable, that they are not fixed or stable in any way, but rather contingent upon time and place and circumstance.

CV: Yes, absolutely. Every position in this world is exchangeable. We can exchange places in any moment, and we continually do. When I began publishing my poetry, I was accused by some of the main Chilean male poets of writing like a man. I was very struck by this. What they meant is that I have a very powerful sense of my own agency, and they attributed that agency to being male. That's bullshit from my perspective, you know. We are all entitled to our own agency.

Cecilia Vicuña: About to Happen

This artist's book is the second in a collaborative series between the Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans and Siglio in which artists are invited to intervene in the history and space of the book in conjunction with a solo exhibition at the CAC.

The exhibition is co-curated by Andrea Andersson, The Helis Foundation Chief Curator of Visual Arts at the Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans and Julia Bryan-Wilson, Associate Professor at the University of California, Berkeley.

About to Happen runs March 16 - June 18, 2017 at the Contemporary Art Center, New Orleans. It travels to the Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley, California, the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and the Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, Washington.

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