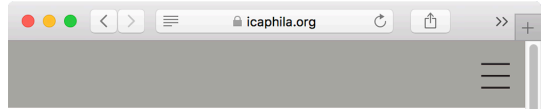


**we respond  
together**  
***Cecilia Vicuña:***  
***About to Happen***  
**at the Institute of  
Contemporary Art  
Philadelphia, PA**

The University of Pennsylvania  
Fine Arts 264 : Art, Design and Digital Culture  
with Avery Lawrence  
Spring 2019



FEB 1–MAR 31, 2019

## Cecilia Vicuña: About to Happen



Cecilia Vicuña, *Precarios*, 1966-2017. Site-specific installation: 110-112 found-object sculptures: stone, shells, glass, wood, plastic, thread, debris. Presented in field of sand and along the wall on small shelves made of wood. Dimensions variable. Cecilia Vicuña: About to Happen, 2017. Installation view, Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans. Photo: Alex Marks

### Artists

Cecilia Vicuña

### Organizers

Meg Onli

### About

Marking the first major solo exhibition of influential Chilean-born artist Cecilia Vicuña, the multidisciplinary presentation will offer unprecedented insight into the evolution of her practice through a range of landmark works, including sculpture, video, text, performance, and site-specific installations, drawn from the past four decades of her career. A poet, artist, filmmaker, and human rights activist, Vicuña operates fluidly between concept and craft, text and textile to draw attention to pressing social and political issues, transforming her pieces into topical vehicles of engagement with economic and environmental disparities and the reclamation of ancestral traditions.

The exhibition will re-frame dematerialization as more than a formal consequence of 1960s conceptualism but also as an artistic response to radical climate change. The extraordinary range of

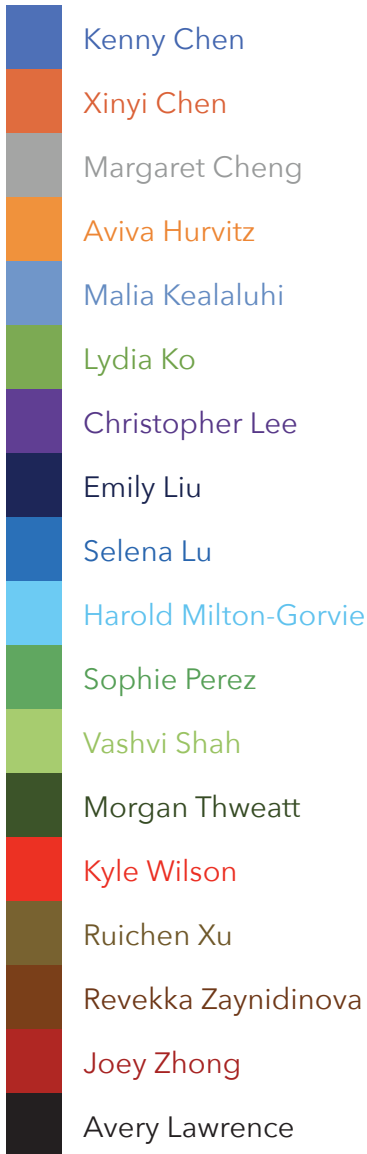
Screenshot of the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) at the University of Pennsylvania "Cecilia Vicuña: About to Happen" webpage



Screenshots from vimeo.com of ICA's recording of the conversation between Cecilia Vicuña and Jena Osman held in the Tuttleman Auditorium on February 6th, 2019. The class was in attendance



## the writers



Kenny Chen
Xinyi Chen
Margaret Cheng
Aviva Hurvitz
Malia Kealaluhi
Lydia Ko
Christopher Lee
Emily Liu
Selena Lu
Harold Milton-Gorvie
Sophie Perez
Vashvi Shah
Morgan Thweatt
Kyle Wilson
Ruichen Xu
Revekka Zaynidinova
Joey Zhong
Avery Lawrence

## **the sections**



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3. "Humans and Nature" *pgs 10 & 11*

4. "Light and Shadow" *pgs 11 & 12*

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7. "About to Happen-ness" *pgs 15 & 16*



# 1. "Introduction to We Review Together"

Avery Lawrence

"Let's co-write a response/review/reflection in reaction to our experiences with the exhibition 'Cecilia Vicuña: About to Happen' at the Institute of Contemporary Art," I said to 17 students in February of 2019. Thus began an experiment in collaborative art writing. I encouraged the students to share their honest and thoughtful feelings and ideas about the show. Instead of attempting to imitate a professional art-writing style, the idea was to embrace our amateurishness as we co-crafted an unimpeded - and, maybe, unexpected - written response to an art show.

As a class, we had various encounters with the work over the course of the exhibition:

**February 6, 2019** we attended a public conversation between Jena Osman and Cecilia Vicuña held in the ICA Tuttleman Auditorium

**February 13, 2019** we visited the exhibition at the ICA, spending 45 minutes taking in the objects, text pieces, and videos

**March 20, 2019** we chatted over FaceTime with Andrea Anderson, the co-curator of the original "Cecilia Vicuña: About to Happen," which was presented at the Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans, LA in 2017

The format of this collaboration was structured. Based on an initial written response to Vicuña's work, the students were organized into six thematic groups. Each group of two or three students worked together - in person or in a shared digital document - to craft one written response to their assigned theme. Each student had a color associated with his/her/their name, his/her/their writing. Some groups kept their colors and sentences separate. Others blended their thoughts into one paragraph (identified with a gradient). In the paragraphs and pages that follow, you will find 17 students thinking and writing about art, together.

**we review  
together  
Cecilia  
Vicuña: About  
to Happen  
at the ICA  
Philadelphia,  
PA**





## 2. "Art-Making before/within/beyond Adversity"

Aviva Hurvitz

Malia Kealaluhi

Sophie Perez

Art influenced or inspired by adversity is often the most meaningful and impactful. The hardships faced by the artist are hidden within the art, which makes deciphering the meaning behind the pieces so much more powerful. This is certainly the case with Cecilia Vicuña's exhibit "About to Happen". Each small sculpture of seemingly-thrown-away items tells a story of Vicuña's past, her journey, and her unwavering adversity. Each part of the exhibit at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Philadelphia, reflected some degree of adversity whether it be something Vicuña personally faced, or one such adversity that affected a group of people, a country or the entire world.

One of Vicuña's installations at the ICA, "Precarios" (1966-2017) touches on the adversity that the Chilean people faced under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in the 1970s during which Pinochet maltreated the citizens of Chile- a truth that is paralleled through the materials Vicuña used in "Precarios" (1966-2017) where the small sculptures were constructed from rubbish and loose items she found and collected, items that reflect the idea that the Chilean people were treated like rubbish under the unjust rule of Augusto Pinochet.

The adversity that Cecilia Vicuña faced in Chile was something that had an impact on all her art for years to come. Even when she was no longer in Chile the history was present throughout all her art and poetry. Through work such as the quipu she was able to connect to ancient Chilean culture. Andrea Andersson also touched on Cecilia Vicuña's personal adversity in terms of her popularity as an artist.

She maintained her humility even as her popularity grew and still focused on getting her message out through her art. Vicuña's strength and resilience in the face of adversity is incredibly prevalent in her work, and she continues to make meaningful art that inspires and educates everyone who experiences it.

### 3. "Humans and Nature"

Kenny Chen

Revekka Zaynidinova

It's striking how appropriate Vicuña's medium - found objects, debris, and branches - is with the theme of humans and nature. The first thing I saw when I walked into the exhibit was the giant, raft-like structure suspended from the ceiling. The "raft" itself was

Installation shot of *Raft* at the ICA. Photo: Constance Mensh



made from branches - natural material - held together by string and thread - human-made material - and above the "raft" various (mostly) human-made objects made of plastic, concrete, string, and other synthetic material were suspended. One of these objects was a plastic net sack filled with other colored, human-produced things trapped inside it. In the context of this show, this object really served as a symbol for many things that are associated with climate change: pollution produced by humans, contamination of the oceans with plastic bags and bottles, and a sense of things being trapped in this perpetual cycle of negative change led by humans. There were also many branches laying on the ground next to the raft, which I believed represented deforestation. Additionally, many of the branches used to build the raft were broken. As another classmate pointed out, the whole structure, as it was suspended and

moved with the air currents in the room, seemed like it was on the verge of collapse. The fragility of this “raft” and objects above it also seemed to represent the fragile state of nature today – because of humans. The damaged man-made objects on the raft, such as the destroyed nets and ropes, served as a representation of nature’s potential impact on civilization. Therefore, another interpretation of the damage done to the raft is that the power of nature is strong enough to damage civilization. As a result, Vicuña’s depiction of the raft suggests that people should have greater care when it comes to climate change and other man-made effects on the environment.

## 4. “Light and Shadow”

Lydia Ko

Margaret Cheng

Xinyi Chen

Despite the variety in sculptural integrity of Cecilia Vicuña’s art, one commonality they shared was the profound contrast of light and shadow. The balance and interaction of light and shadows in Cecilia Vicuña’s exhibit “About to Happen” were as much a part of the art as the physical objects themselves; shadow added complexity and a sense of completion to everything. For instance, one piece featured was eight wooden sticks. Although it seemed to be the simplest work, it weaved the most complex shadow. When standing in front of the Balsa Snake Raft, the viewer can’t help but look past the intricate piece at the pattern the shadows cast on the wall. By walking behind the piece, the observer’s shadow is incorporated with the shapes already present, making it appear as though they are a part of the art. This creates a dynamic relationship between the art and viewer that surpasses one produced between the eye and a two-dimensional, shadow-less surface. The harmony between light and shadow has been used for a wide breadth of disciplines. In architecture, light and shadow are crucial elements for the completion



Installation shot of *Precarios* at the ICA. Photo: Andrea Kirsh

of compelling space, but surprisingly they were so often ignored or not given so many thoughts to. It is inspiring to see an artist create such an architectural moment.

## 5. "The Past, the Present, the Future"

Chris Lee

Vashvi Shah

Ruichen Xu

Ideas of past, present, and future are evident even through the title of the exhibition. "About to Happen", implies a middle ground between the present and the future. Meanwhile, the items in the exhibit themselves connect the present to the past. The use of natural and artificial items give a sense of decay, the artificially objects unnaturally refusing to deteriorate while the natural ones obligating to the natural cycle. Furthermore, the earthy color scheme in the objects seemed to represent the past to Cecilia Vicuña, her Chilean home. The placement of objects bring light to the juxtaposition of

the present and future. As we experience the objects in the present, the rotating or dangling objects seems to hint at the what is about to come. The delicate rope structure or balancing structures are on the verge of moving, echoing the title of the exhibit, "About to Happen." In the placement of objects, there was an emphasis on



*Quipu Womb (The Story of the Red Thread, Athens)*  
2017  
Dyed wool  
Approx. 6 × 8 m  
Photo: Selvedge.org

the shadows, because as movements are about to happen, we still believe that our history, our past, is essential. Vicuña's use of books brings the abstract into the physical representation connecting the past and the present and representing the future. The quipu's are a record of the past, the events that have occurred but are still present in people's minds. In one quipu, she displays red stitches on the physical paper which connect the spatial world of time. Overall, Vicuña's answers to the questions of the world represent her strong self-expression. This can be interpreted as both a defiance against the Chilean government of her past and her hope that people continue to think deeply and question their society in the future.

## 6. "Precarity"

Emily Liu

Kyle Wilson

Selena Lu

Cecilia Vicuna's talk at the ICA touched on two topics that are personally interesting to me. The first being the focus of the precarious nature of objects, of experience, of being or having been. The second topic is the concept of cosmic scale, of their being both a larger and smaller reflection of our experiences in ourselves and in the cosmos.

When comparing these two scales I think both gain some depth but also lose their conceptual power. That is, I think the scaling from micro to cosmic brings into question what is precarious and what last? We will live for 100 years if we are lucky, but this planet will live a billion years, and the universe a billion more. A reaction in my cells will pass in hundredths of a second. So, the object washed away on the shore, was it precarious or had it managed to stand for eons that we choose to call brief due to our cosmic, humanist myopia?

"In line with the precarious nature of this project, I think you should throw caution to the wind with your words." - Kyle Wilson  
And such is the nature of Cecilia Vicuna's work... literally. Her placement of objects on the wall and on the floor seemed to both address and dispute the fragility of each individual piece, as if tempting the audience to both watch their steps and ignore their own presence at the same time.

There was a certain trash-like quality to the art. Compared to Vicuna's other works, such as [Quipu Womb](#), pictured upper left, *About to Happen* lacks the delicate and purposeful artistry that has become synonymous with her Quipu imagery. Nevertheless, the twists

and turns of her knots seem to make its way into whatever piece she dedicates her fingers to, as is shown by the knotted ropes in this showing, serving as almost a permanent signature for her and her obsession with the precariousness of certain beings and items. As I stood before her exhibit, I recalled the theme of chance versus purpose. Is an object's life influenced primarily by chance in the way that it was created, used, and beaten around by nature and by society? Or was everything somehow orchestrated to come beautifully together so that we happen to see a specific moment in time?

Her items are trapped in space, like the calm before a storm. They are about to fall and the viewer is held in suspense, yet they never do - gravity suspends everything in a delicate series of twists and bends, everything isolated yet connected by a fragile bond. To me, this reflects the impermanence of the memory of a human life: our memories are fleeting, but do they ever truly disappear? They are related to the rest of the human experience, and if one tumbles, the surrounding strings are tugged and shifted around.

## 7. "About to Happen-ness"

Morgan Thweatt

Joey Zhong

Harold Milton-Gorvie

It's rare that a show's title clearly make sense in the context of its content; that you can so vividly understand why a show is named as such. About to Happen is an apt title when you think of anxiety that this about to happen-ness conveys. By anxiety I mean the tension of the unknown or the feeling of standing on the precipice of something. The stillness before the storm or the unease that often comes with potential.

As I walked through the galleries, I felt the suspense. Everything

was about to happen. But what really is about to happen-ness? In a way it's everything. Everything we are and everything we know is in some sort of complex non-chaotic state. Even things you think are relatively chaotic usually have some sort of order. Despite what our existence would have us believe the universe is constantly edging towards chaos, constantly edging towards disorder.

The large instillation at the front, with its ropes suspended and twisting through the air, felt as though it could collapse if you stared too hard. If you looked at it just so, you could see the light sharply glinting off the clear wire that held everything afloat, showing just how precarious it all was. With the snap of a wire it could all end. That same sense of tension and anxiety was in the tiny sculptures made of beach garbage. Each one felt fragile and temporary, as though it could fall apart or blow away at a moment's notice.

So everything around us is constantly taking steps towards disorder. The net movement of everything around us is towards entropy. What I mean when I say everything is about to happen is that everything is on the edge of breaking down and changing into something formless. Eventually that's what's about to happen. We are surrounded by the potential to happen. Energy stored in bonds is always ready to be released to allow for a more stable state. This over convoluted way of thinking about to happen is stability.



Special thanks to Andrea Andersson for taking the time to talk with our class over FaceTime and to the ICA for presenting great shows and public programs



