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Enduring Rain

On Vajiko Chachkhiani's *Living Dog Among Dead Lions*

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ABSTRACT: Over the six months in which Vajiko Chachkhiani's *Living Dog Among Dead Lions* was exhibited at the Georgian Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale in 2017, heavy rain was pouring *inside* the installation. This artificially generated process provokes thoughts on the nature of the here and now as well as of the afterlife and of the future appearance of the hut's water-sensitive insides. Eventually, the spaces and furniture exposed to rain and water stagnation will begin to rot and disintegrate, and mould and moss might grow over them. Its viewers feel caught between what they see and what they hope to see; between their perceptions and expectations, in an exceptional time zone where 'natural' weathering is being performed as a subject of meditative observation.

Enduring Rain

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In bad weather, you can't be casual.

Martin Parr

A wooden hut in the rain. An unusual, weathered hut jacked up on bricks. The four sides have high filigree lattice windows. Small steps at the front and the back lead to closed doors with window panes, through which, like the windows on the sides, one can peep inside: A large front room with an enclosed porch, sparsely furnished. A single bed with a metal frame takes up a lot of space on one side, a portrait of a woman is hanging over the bed. The opposite wall has only a curtained window and a small framed picture. A dining table in the middle of the room with four different wooden chairs is covered with a plastic tablecloth. An oil lamp and a small pot are placed on top of it. A narrow daybed, a chair, and a side table are out on the porch, some kitchen utensils, plates, glasses, and enamel metal bowls are piled up on the chair as well as on the side table. The two rooms convey a certain frugality; their rustic decoration looks forlorn and from times past. Except for the two pictures and some bunches of dried herbs on the walls there is no decoration, no books. The hut is devoid of people, no residents in sight, though a dim yellow light, which illuminates



Figure 1. © Vajiko Chachkhiani, *Living Dog Among Dead Lions*, 57th Venice Biennale, Venice, 2017. Photo credit: Sandro Sulaberidze.

the gloomy and almost stage-like setting, suggests that something is anticipated, that at any given moment someone might arrive — or return — to animate the abandoned scenery.

Instead, bad weather has taken hold of the interior and the viewer witnesses heavy rain pouring *inside*. Over the six months in which Vajiko Chachkhiani's *Living Dog Among Dead Lions* was on display in the Georgian Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale in 2017, it was 'soaked in water and exposed to the elements'.¹ In Georgia, the Caucasus region of Eurasia, one still regularly encounters old wooden houses of this type (some nearly a hundred years old) made of greyish brown boards and prominent lattice windows. Originally located in the mountains, this particular abandoned hut was found in a village close to the manganese-mining town of Chiatura. It was purchased, taken apart, rebuilt in a factory hall in Tbilisi, and then had the irrigation system hidden in its ceiling. Apparently, the house came with

1 Text accompanying the official Biennale video, Vajiko Chachkhiani, 'Georgia — Vajiko Chachkhiani — *Living Dog Among Dead Lions* — Venice Biennale 2017', at 3:03 min, YouTube <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eryvtbZv5y0>> [accessed 30 March 2020].

some basic furnishings, though it is not known what was kept, added, or taken away.² Both the hut and the rain were translocated, 'placed' in an unusual setting — Is this simultaneity intended? The idea of the 'natural' decay of materials is conjured in order to have the viewer wonder about the possible results of this performative deterioration. And although probably no visitor (nor any Biennale staff) recorded the exact appearance of the installation in all its different stages of decay over the course of the more than six months of the Biennale, this time span inevitably provokes the imagination, generating ideas on what would or might happen to the hut. However, there is no storm coming, no apocalyptic culmination, no tipping point, and an end of the weathering is nowhere in sight.³ This work of art has no apparent beginning or end or rather the end is being transferred into the viewer's imagination.

At first sight, nothing moves, except for the jars and glasses that shiver while slowly filling with water. The dripping water creates a constant, evocative background noise. Strangely, while observing the unfamiliar scenery, the continuous rain is heard and then forgotten, heard, and then forgotten again. One's mind is wandering, recalling leakages in ceilings, water butts — distracting, frightening, or strangely soothing side effects of heavy rain fall.⁴ How different places can look with a sudden, furious change in weather. The rain swamps the senses, the viewer feels sucked up and finds herself in a state of absorption, trying to keep all details in view. Some sodden lengths of wallpaper are peeling off the walls. And despite the floors being covered with plastic sheeting, the water seeps right through. Almost magically, nothing escapes, the floor of the exhibition hall stays dry. The viewer's gaze is lingering on the jars and bowls collecting the water. Does it ever change: the speed or shape of the drops? A delay, a subtle decoupling

2 Julian Heynen, 'Georgia — Vajiko Chachkhiani: *Living Dog Among Dead Lions*', in *Viva Arte Viva, 57th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia 2017: Catalogue, Participants, Countries, Collateral Events*, ed. by Flavia Fossa Margutti (Venice: SIAE, 2017), pp. 62–63.

3 Many thanks to Delfina Cabrera, Christoph Holzhey, Marlon Miguel, and Arnd Weidemeyer for their astute and generous comments on the subject.

4 I wish to thank Amelia Groom for suggesting the apocalyptic film *The Hole* (Dòng), dir. by Tsai Ming-Liang (Fox Lorber, 1998, 95 min) to me, which depicts the life of two neighbours in a rundown apartment block in Taiwan during times of a strange disease — while outside rain is pouring heavily.

of seeing and hearing takes place. Usually, during bad weather, one retreats indoors, but in this case, one is better off outside. The indoor space, the very definition of human shelter, is itself being exposed to weather and weathering, uniting contradictions and admitting the unexpected. Opposing impressions are evoked simultaneously and play out in different intensities: the steady pitter-patter of rain drops on the scattered pieces of furniture while the surroundings appear perfectly silent. There is a constant dampness that seeps through the entire hut while the beholder stays dry. There is also a dim expectation of the possible arrival of people or other creatures, coupled with the intuition that this house has been abandoned a long time ago. Sensing a kind of nostalgic coziness within its remains, blurry traces suggesting that '[c]ontemporary nostalgia is not so much about the past as about the vanishing present.'⁵ A subtle relief and sense of comfort results from being located outside of the hut, yet is mingled with a discomfort at observing and witnessing its destruction. The pouring rain evokes pangs of longing. It intimately links the eerie strangeness of an atmospheric happening to the human condition in order to have the viewer sense the fictional dimension of the real or the real in its fictional dimension.⁶

Within this inversion, the outside turned inside, there is a moment of irritation — of something weird happening. The inverted normality of the house has a certain reality and persuasiveness and, at the same time, a dream-like fantasy to it. One feels caught between what one sees or hopes to see, between one's expectations of what may happen, and an exceptional time zone where 'natural' weathering is being performed as a subject of meditative observation. Eventually, the spaces and furniture exposed to rain and water stagnation will begin to rot and disintegrate, and mould and moss might grow over them. This artificially generated process provokes thoughts about the nature of the here and now as well as of the future appearance of the hut's water-sensitive insides. In a similar vein, Emanuela Zanon suggests,

[T]he natural process of rotting of the materials exposed to moisture and water stagnation generated a sort of spontaneous

5 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 351.

6 In a similar vein, in the exhibit *The Last Day* nature invades human spaces. Helmut Wimmer at Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien in 2018/19 <<http://www.helmutwimmer.net/the-last-day-galerie>> [accessed 10 January 2020].

dramaturgy that led to meditate (or rather to perceive) the existential implications of resistance and change.⁷

Assuming that nature informs and ‘re-forms’ the “finished” artwork,⁸ this installation ‘cannot perform without the assistance of its environment’,⁹ involving spectators and forcing them to imagine or anticipate what is going to happen. One recalls Marcel Broodthaers *La pluie* (*Projet pour un texte*) [The Rain (Project for a Text)] from 1969,¹⁰ and similar to Hans Haacke’s *Condensation Cube*¹¹ — an installation from 1965 inviting viewers to discover ‘the marvels that occur as water inside the cube condenses’¹² — *Living Dog Among Dead Lions* is kept from further human or external interference, hermetically sealed as in a lab experiment. Visitors are kept outside and can only watch, wait, and witness the changing state of disintegration. The work invites a slow, obsessive kind of contemplation, a penetrating observation. A gaze that adds and subtracts, a weathering gaze. Slowly, a relationship between a firm object that sits passively, waiting to be destroyed and the spectator, demanding some kind of damage to be observed, seems to be forming. Suddenly, one thinks of crowds of gawkers who cannot take their eyes from accidents, natural disasters, or acts of violence. The space outside the house feels like a waiting room; and the steady gaze of the audience suggests a kind of mastery of the situation: where nothing

7 Emanuela Zanon, ‘Vajiko Chachkhiani: The Poet of Absence at the de’ Foscherari Gallery’, *Juliet*, 30 January 2019 <<https://www.juliet-artmagazine.com/en/vajiko-chachkhiani-de-foscherari-gallery/>> [accessed 3 January 2020].

8 Mohsen Mostafavi and David Leatherbarrow, *On Weathering: The Life of Buildings in Time* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), p. 64. For Mostafavi and Leatherbarrow the informing and reforming applies to buildings.

9 To quote Hans Haacke, for whom the concept of change proved to be the ideological basis of his work, *Untitled Statement*, in Linda Weintraub, *To Life! Eco Art in Pursuit of a Sustainable Planet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), p. 71. This statement stems from Haacke’s exhibition manifesto for his exhibition in Cologne in 1965.

10 *La pluie* (*Projet pour un texte*), dir. by Marcel Broodthaers (Collection Centre Pompidou, inventory number: AM 1996-F1310, 1969, 2 min). A digitized replica of the 16mm black and white, silent film was posted by Matthias Planitzer, ‘La pluie’, *Castor & Pollux* (5 December 2009) <<http://www.castor-und-pollux.de/2009/12/la-pluie/>> [accessed 20 December 2019].

11 Hans Haacke, *Condensation Cube*, 1963–65, perspex, steel, and water, 305 x 305 x 305 mm, Tate Modern, London.

12 Linda Weintraub, *Eco Art in Pursuit of a Sustainable Planet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), p. 70.

will happen to me as long as I stand outside and observe the disaster that takes place at a distance — and not to me. Omer Fast has framed it as feeling safe ‘as long as you are in the waiting room like in a womb, what happens outside is not what actually happens to you.’¹³

Once the scenery is observed more closely, it becomes clear that the beds are tightly wrapped in plastic sheeting, as are the floors and tables, perhaps to delay the weathering or to shield the wrapped objects from being worn out too quickly, from re-forming, and from any rampant deterioration by the rain.¹⁴ A former life now vacuum-packed and preserved. The protective layers insert a distance, a shield against outside influences, and hint at the conservation of tradition.¹⁵ At the same time, it feels as if these objects cannot breathe, as if obsessive precautions were taken against dirt or unwanted affection. Can the inside of the hut be seen ‘as metaphor for the interior life of an individual, the rain as metaphor for a slowly nagging threat but also for an enduring ablution’, as Christine Macel suggests?¹⁶ An invocation of healing through ablution? Or rather a cage of domesticity weathered in order to ‘transcend its core phoenix-like’?¹⁷ The scenery refers to complex inter-relationships of past, actual, and anticipated events and to weathering as an inscriptive and imaginative force.

‘The weather’, to quote Christina Sharpe, ‘necessitates changeability and improvisation: it is an atmospheric condition of time and space.’¹⁸ How does rain invoke spheres of meaning? Rain is restless, all-permeating, and, by virtue of being liquid, ‘flexible in form and embracing in scope’, it comes with the ‘extreme power for self-

13 Cristina Baldacci and Claudia Peppel, ‘Zwischen den Wasserlilien. Ein Interview mit Omer Fast’, in *Die Kunst des Wartens*, ed. by Brigitte Kölle and Claudia Peppel (Berlin: Wagenbach, 2019), pp. 98–107 (p. 105).

14 Mostafavi and Leatherbarrow, *On Weathering*, p. 64.

15 The wrapping of furniture in plastic sheeting is used in the Georgian countryside in order to protect objects. See Vajiko Chachkhiani and Claudia Peppel, ‘Life Never Stops Being Violent. A Conversation’, in this volume, pp. 293–94.

16 Christine Macel, director of the 2017 Venice Biennale, see Heynen, ‘Georgia — Vajiko Chachkhiani’, p. 62.

17 Gerhard Matzig, ‘Geist aus der Asche. “Yakisugi” ist die Kunst des Verkohlens: Warum Architektur brennen muss, um zu leben’, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 124, 30 May – 1 June 2020, p. 56; my translation of: ‘Das Kunstwerk wird an der Oberfläche zerstört, um es im Kern phoenixhaft über sich hinauswachsen zu lassen.’

18 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 205.

transformation and transformation of its resistant opponents'.¹⁹ Rain — as weather in general is — is experienced as a 'highly affective phenomenon that can evoke a strong sense of wonder, delight, or terror, as well as a myriad of minor perceptions every moment'.²⁰ 'Memories of certain weather events are often nostalgically framed, they haunt and persist.'²¹ Weather shapes the perception of people in their environment, it causes sensations, creates spaces of experience, triggers pain, and influences mental states: The rain orchestrates emotional reactions such as feelings of abandonment and loss of control as well as a general awareness that things are being worn down. A recent study referred to rain as being the 'background noise of human history', and its results suggest that the sound of rain can even improve people's memory, promoting relaxation as well as stimulating concentration. In fact, for those of us lacking sleep or having trouble concentrating, YouTube videos offer anywhere from three to ten hours of non-stop rain fall.²²

Despite the impressive number of artworks in the past decades that involve rain as a fluid material and substantial weather element, art-historical research has hardly paid close attention to the atmospheric phenomenon.²³ In recent years, a new genre called 'weather art' or 'meteorological art' has appeared in art criticism. Works that

19 Chung-ying Cheng, 'Chinese Philosophy and Symbolic Reference', *Philosophy East and West*, 27.3 (July 1977), pp. 307–22 (p. 317) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/1398001>>.

20 Janine Randerson, *Weather as Medium: Toward a Meteorological Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), pp. xvi and xiv.

21 Georgina Endfield and Simon Naylor, 'Climate and Cultural Heritage: An Experiment with the 'Weather Memory Bank'', in *The Future of Heritage as Climates Change: Loss, Adaptation and Creativity*, ed. by David C. Harvey and Jim Perry (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 62–77 (p. 72).

22 One example is *Heavy Rain at Night*, a ten-hour video to reduce stress and/or insomnia as well as to improve concentration, Mermaid Waters, YouTube, 14 February 2020 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9QneqUhCVtU>> [accessed 20 June 2020]. For more information regarding the study see Alex Rühle, 'Flüssige Freude', *Süd-deutsche Zeitung*, 140, 20–21 June 2020, p. 17.

23 Instead, disproportionately more art-related research was done on fluids, fog, and blur. See *State of Flux: Aesthetics of Fluid Materials*, ed. by Marcel Finke and Friedrich Weltzien (Berlin: Reimer, 2017); Markus Finke, 'Im Nebel. Fluide Materialien und die Kunst der Zerstreuung', in *Wessen Wissen? Materialität und Situiertheit in den Künsten*, ed. by Kathrin Busch, Kathrin Peters, Christina Dörfling, and Ildikó Szántó (Paderborn: Fink, 2018), pp. 97–114; *Einfluss, Strömung, Quelle: Aquatische Metaphern der Kunstgeschichte*, ed. by Ulrich Pfisterer and Christine Tauber (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018).

are classified under this (rather broad) term range from land art to recent eco-critical art forms and consist of, or include, meteorological elements and/or engage with environmental components and/or climate change and its consequences. Janine Randerson conceptualizes weather as a medium within these artworks in the two-fold sense of a constitutive ‘material’ as well as an operating force. On the one hand, weather is contained within the materiality of its conditions, which connect us ‘to the world and to each other through the rain, wind, and sunlight that carry sensations to our human and machinic receptors.’ When represented *in* the media, for example in the news or in forecasting, weather takes on a different quality, as nature and human technology meet and ‘atmospheric phenomena are foregrounded and not a given.’²⁴ Randerson suggests that we ‘treat the weather as a lively provocateur, collaborator, and catalyst for vital ecocritical conversations.’²⁵ For her, meteorological art refers to ‘social encounters with live weather’ and ‘sustains an inter- and intradisciplinary perspective in which art is lately infused with atmospheric science and social politics.’²⁶ Perhaps too far-reaching a claim.

Although Randerson strives to delineate ecocritical tendencies as well as socio-political statements in weather art, Matthew Bower — in what he describes as ‘curious obsession’ — opts for a more playful approach: ‘As far as aesthetic subject matters go, weather is just begging for interactivity, some movement and spectacle that don’t just portray the elements, but actually imitate them.’²⁷ One example is Ryan Gander’s *I Need Some Meaning I Can Memorise (The Invisible Pull)* at documenta (13) in 2012, which consisted of a light breeze in the large, completely empty room situated just after the entrance of the exhibition hall ‘Fridericianum’. As far as rain installations are concerned, however, two types can be roughly distinguished, some — like *Living Dog Among Dead Lions* — keep the spectator observing at a distance, with no direct involvement. Others, building on the traditions of inter-

24 Randerson, *Weather as Medium*, p. xvii.

25 *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. xvi and xvii.

27 Matthew Bower, ‘A Storm in a Jar: 10 Very Cool Art Installations That Imitate Weather’, *The Atlantic*, 9 November 2012 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/11/a-storm-in-a-jar-10-very-cool-art-installations-that-imitate-weather/265017/>> [accessed 20 December 2019].



Figure 2. © Vajiko Chachkhiani, *Living Dog Among Dead Lions*, 57th Venice Biennale, Venice, 2017. Photo credit: Sandro Sulaberidze.

active art, create a situation in which the viewer physically enters the installation, moves around, and makes the artwork ‘respond’ to the human presence or movement. *Rain Room*, for instance, is an immersive artwork by Hannes Koch and Florian Ortkrass for Random International, in which visitors, upon entering the space, are given a sense of control over the weather, as the falling rain stops once a human body is detected. Viewers find themselves ‘simultaneously exposed to and protected’ from the heavy downpour.²⁸ Another example is *Symphony in D Minor*, a set of interactive hanging sculptures by Chris Klapper & Patrick Gallagher, which works in a similar way: ‘the hanging cylinders respond to movement, intensifying the effects of heavy rain, lightning, and thunder as the audience leaps and flails beneath.’²⁹ Without referring to any particular event, existential ‘weather’ implications of fixity and change, of endurance and resistance are at play.

28 The first exhibit of *Rain Room* by Random International took place at Barbican, London in 2012 <<https://www.random-international.com/rain-room-2012>> [accessed 20 June 2020].

29 Bower, ‘A Storm in a Jar’.

Living Dog Among Dead Lions — as will be explained in more detail in the following interview — stems from an idea for a film called *Heavy Metal Honey*, which Chachkhiani could realize only much later.³⁰ In *Heavy Metal Honey*, rain is falling *inside* a living room and disturbs a family's gathering at the table. The meal ends abruptly when the mother shows up with a gun and kills several members of the family.³¹ Blood, wine, and rain are mixed on the table. Only once the rain stops, the violence ends. It remains unclear whether the family members are still alive or whether this is the fantasy of the female protagonist (who is herself obviously doomed to die). Both works refer to rain water damaging confined territories and allude to the devastating flood in Tbilisi in 2015, when torrential rainfall bloated the river and led to it bursting its banks, dragging nineteen people to their deaths and flooding many homes. The city zoo was destroyed, some three hundred animals escaped and found themselves enjoying an unexpected freedom, 'roaming the streets for the following days, seeking shelter between the ruins', until they drowned or were shot.³² Only very few could be recaptured.³³ One might interpret the title of the work, *Living Dog Among Dead Lions*, a quote from the Bible (Ecclesiastes 9. 4), to be suggesting that it might be better to adapt and not to take risks rather than being exposed to the danger of wilderness and supposedly being killed. The title may imply that 'humble individuals [...] thanks to their meekness, manage to stay alive' in harsh living conditions.³⁴ A traumatic experience changes the interior life of a person', Chachkhiani said in a press release, and it seems that the confined heavy rain in the hut expresses the self-absorbed quality of the human psyche,

30 For his solo exhibition *Heavy Metal Honey* in 2018, see the interview with the curator Susanne Kleine at the opening at Bundeskunsthalle, YouTube, 28 June 2018 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-naE2m5l89w>> [accessed 20 December 2019].

31 Renate Puvogel, 'Bonn, Vajiko Chachkhiani, *Heavy Metal Honey*, 29 June – 7 October 2018 Bundeskunsthalle', *Kunstforum*, 256 (2018), pp. 260–62 (p. 260).

32 In Vajiko Chachkhiani's recent exhibition *Glass Ghosts*, the catastrophic flooding is again evoked, this time without rain but remnants of cages hanging from the ceiling populated with wooden animal figures (Zanon, 'Vajiko Chachkhiani').

33 Rein Wolfs, 'Preface', in *Vajiko Chachkhiani: Heavy Metal Honey*, ed. by Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (Bonn: Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 2018), pp. 11–12.

34 Anna Battista, *Irenebrination: Notes on Architecture, Art, Fashion, Fashion Law & Technology*, 17 May 2017 <https://irenebrination.typepad.com/irenebrination_notes_on_a/2017/05/vajiko-chachkhiani-venice-biennale.html> [accessed 10 May 2020].

and reminds the viewer how traumatic incidents tend to constantly reappear, linger, and reshape the remains.³⁵ The performance captures both the nostalgic grip within the process and its ongoing endurance, a landscape of a former life, witness to moments of irrevocable dramatic action that is somehow, nonetheless, withstood. It puts the viewer in a state of quiet reflection, a state of a rare and fleeting exposure to psychic metamorphoses, in which what once was has to be related to the exhausting awareness of change. What remains and what weathers? In *Living Dog Among Dead Lions*, rain acts as a malleable agent to explore existential questions: Weathering is the desire for *re-recovery* and the road to transformation.

35 Ibid.

Claudia Peppel, 'Enduring Rain: On Vajiko Chachkhiani's *Living Dog Among Dead Lions*', in *Weathering: Ecologies of Exposure*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, *Cultural Inquiry*, 17 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2020), pp. 277–87 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-17_13>

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