



Weathering: Ecologies of Exposure, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, Cultural Inquiry, 17 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2020), pp. 289–94

VAJIKO CHACHKHIANI
CLAUDIA PEPPERL 

Life Never Stops Being Violent A Conversation

CITE AS:

Vajiko Chachkhiani and Claudia Peppel, 'Life Never Stops Being Violent: A Conversation', in *Weathering: Ecologies of Exposure*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, Cultural Inquiry, 17 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2020), pp. 289–94 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-17_14>

RIGHTS STATEMENT:

© by the authors
This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

ABSTRACT: The conversation focuses on the role of extreme weather conditions and the vulnerability to weathering in Vajiko Chachkhiani's work, especially in the piece *Living Dog Among Dead Lions*, which was presented at the 57th Venice Biennale in 2017.

Life Never Stops Being Violent

A Conversation

VAJIKO CHACHKHIANI AND CLAUDIA PEPPEL

The interview was supposed to take place in Berlin on the occasion of the ICI Workshop *On Weathering*. However, in the late summer of 2019, Vajiko Chachkhiani received a Villa Aurora fellowship and moved to Los Angeles. Therefore, the interview was conducted online. Vajiko Chachkhiani (born in 1985 in Tbilisi, USSR now Georgia) studied art at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam and at the Universität der Künste Berlin. Chachkhiani received a DAAD scholarship in 2013 and the ISCP Residency Program in 2016. He was awarded the prestigious 7th Rubens Promotional Award of the Contemporary Art Museum Siegen in 2014. His latest exhibitions include *Heavy Metal Honey*, Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn (2018), *Moment in and out of time*, SCAI The Bathhouse gallery, Tokyo (2018), *Glass Ghost*, Galleria de'Foscherari, Bologna (2019), and *Winter which was not there*, Gallery Cork, Ireland (2019).

Claudia Peppel: In the context of the presentation of your work *Living Dog Among Dead Lions* at the 57th Biennale 'Viva Arte Viva' in 2017, you said that setting up this hut was driven by your personal experiences. How did you come up with the idea of reconstructing one of these typical Georgian wooden huts in Venice?

Vajiko Chachkhiani: It all started with an idea for a film called *Heavy Metal Honey*, which I could not make at the time. For the film,

a family would gather in a living room, and eventually it would start to rain inside the room. And then some other things would happen. That was the idea. Then, when we applied for the Georgian Pavilion, I first had a different proposal in mind, but when I saw the space, I thought, 'ok, maybe it would be cool to have a kind of big sculpture.' And as my works often deal with history and somehow also psychology, I thought the best thing would be to come up with a house, which has its own history. Then, the idea of the rain came back, and I thought, there should also be rain inside that would deform the interior; the wooden hut in this context is important because it has this authentic aura and also has a very intense wooden smell when it gets wet.

CP: After a heavy rainfall in 2015, Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, experienced a torrential flood; the river Vere overflowed its banks and the city's zoo was also inundated. Nineteen people and more than three hundred animals lost their lives. Because of the flood, several zoo animals experienced an unusual and unexpected freedom, like the white tiger that was eventually shot after assaulting and killing a man. Did this exceptional situation influence the outcome of this work or its title? I have read that you called the flood a mythical event?

VC: This flood affected me in a profound way. It was really tragic to see a worker eaten by a tiger. And as you mentioned, it was like a mythological encounter. There is no need to write mythologies anymore because they happen on their own. That flood really stayed with me for a long time. And I think unconsciously that could be the reason I brought rain into my work. After the piece, *Living Dog Among Dead Lions*, I did the solo show in the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn, which was dedicated to the worker who was eaten by the tiger. It consisted of a different set of sculptural installations called *Heavy Metal Honey*, which is the same title as the film I mentioned above. The title of the piece I presented in Venice comes from the Bible. In the Old Testament, there is one section where it says that it is better to be a dog and live than a lion and die. When you are alive, you still have the possibilities to do things or change them. You have more potential, essentially.

CP: The rain pouring down inside the hut inverts our expectations of how weather unfolds: Usually you would seek shelter indoors from pouring rain; here it is the opposite, outside one stays dry and everything remains intact, while inside everything gets wet and is

slowly rotting. Within this inversion — the outside made inside — there is a moment of irritation. One knows it's not real, but it convinces you at the moment of the performance. What role does this reversal or inversion of reality play for you? Does the tension within the work arise from the fact that you know it is not real but pretend that it is?

VC: In my work, I often use open and direct metaphors. And I don't reflect upon what is fictional vs. what is real because I believe fiction turns into reality, like mythology or stories. When stories refer to real human problems or conflicts, that's when they have impact. The piece consists of two narrative strands, an outer, where the hut remains inaccessible and untouched, and an inner one, where things change with a lot of dynamics and eventually become deformed. When I developed the idea, I had a couple of things in mind: I was thinking about the way history creates tendencies and affects someone's psyche and the present-day life. It is generally inscribed in a certain way. The past can deform a person's interior but you don't perceive these effects on the exterior. I think mostly we consider the impact of history on society, while we neglect the personal inflictions. On a personal level, you never really know what's going on. And the piece is a metaphor of that duality of inner and outer narration. What we present to the world vs. how we are feeling on the inside, that's really a different story. The secret story of a person is the psyche, and in the end, that's what I'm trying to understand, and what I am really interested in: the psychic life, and the way it is affected by history. It could be political or social.

CP: Viewers cannot enter or interact, they literally remain outside and can only watch the pouring rain and wait to witness the destruction or state of disintegration. Even though little happens, it is very suspenseful. I felt this suggests an obsessive, almost intrusive kind of observation, which is gazing rather than looking. Slowly, a bond seems to form between an interior that passively sits there, waiting to be destroyed, and the gaze from the outside, demanding to see something. What role do you assign to the audience? Are the viewers an active ingredient merging gaze and destruction into a situation on a greater scale?

VC: Conceptually I thought of making a classic sculpture, one that you look at but you cannot walk through, a space you observe that refuses entry. Because metaphorically the house stands in for the

interior of a human being. It is about looking at it from the outside, and yes, I think people really enjoy watching tragic things. They don't enjoy but are captivated by them. But as long as the tragedy is distant you aren't pulled in. But when you are involved in a disaster, you don't want to be observed. I think that is an interesting twist: to be watching while at the same time being immersed. In reality, if you watch the news and a tragic thing happens, that's a very different thing, but in this case, I wanted people to feel the tension and the subtle violence that happens to the interior, while at the same time the hut is almost sentimental and has this romantic appeal.

CP: *Living Dog Among Dead Lions* is a rather process- and time-based work, it is not a finite object. Does it address environmental concerns?

VC: I did not intend to address any environmental concerns, but somehow the work does. But this was not my intention, it happened independent of me. The work raises these concerns by itself.

CP: The weathering caused by the artificial rain accelerated a process that would have happened sooner or later without the rain: the hut would have eventually been destroyed 'by nature'. Why did you want to accelerate this process or make it so vividly perceptible? Can weathering be seen as a neutralizing destiny or as a 'romantic form of aging' like ruination, or rather as an act of inscription?

VC: What I find interesting about rain is that it is romantic. It can make the city very beautiful because of the reflections produced. Especially at night if you have wet streets. But on the other hand, it can also destroy or ruin everything, if there is a flood, for example. And that was the anchor. I have used the motif of water a lot in my work. Because it has this duality that it is beautiful, romantic, and sentimental, but on the other hand, in an instant it can become violent. And it also refers metaphorically to human nature. In the piece, the acceleration of decay adds an important dimension, the idea of the piece is based on the weathering process, without rain, it would be just a hut with just a history. Involving weathering aspects creates the drama of an interior human psyche.

CP: Weathering therefore adds to and subtracts from the 'finish': for example, it takes away colours, destroys the surfaces, but adds

the finish of the environment.¹ In this sense, the rain or what grows out of it re-forms the artwork although it is artificially controlled by the artist. What was the idea behind this process and what did you think the hut would look like at the end of the performance, after six months on display at the Biennale? Many people imagined right from the beginning that moss and mould might grow.

VC: This piece is somehow a sculpture but at the same time a performative installation. And the role of weather is really important because it makes the work function. It is the inner life of the piece to deform, change, and transform. And that is also my observation of how history works. It is an authentic house, which was inhabited by people for a long time. It was my idea to use this duality of the rain to create romantic ambiance, while at the same time it deforms the interior. The whole idea of the sculpture is that it is performative.

CP: Atmosphere refers on the one hand to meteorological facts, on the other hand to the characteristics that a space or place radiates and to the immediate perception of these characteristics. In your piece these aspects seem to come together. Any thoughts about these 'atmospheric' dimensions?

VC: Previously, I made a piece called *Rite (Dog Days)* (2014), which was a kind of heat sculpture, an empty space filled with hot air. The humidity and heat were based on historical data from different geographical sites (two prison sites) and combining them created a corridor, a transitory experience, somehow a rite of passage. This passage was immaterial and intense and through the intensified atmosphere the piece tried to evoke empathy. In *Living Dog Among Dead Lions*, the atmospheric dimension is also important since the concept of the deformation of the interior stems from this intensified atmosphere.

CP: Your installation remained not only untouched from the outside and devoid of people but was also closed as if hermetically sealed in a kind of vacuum-packaging. Some of the furniture was actually wrapped in plastic sheeting as if to protect it from too much weathering or destruction. Why?

1 Mohsen Mostafavi and David Leatherbarrow, *On Weathering: The Life of Buildings in Time* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), p. 64.

VC: In houses in the countryside, people normally put plastic sheeting on the furniture and on the ground because they don't want to wear it out. That's a very common thing they do there, a kind of preservation and conservation of the interior. Mostly in the living room and the porch. I used it to create more authenticity. That was the idea — to do a replica of what countryside people do in their houses.

CP: The German artist Hans Haacke once said that weather is a prototypical example of a system of interactive physical components with metaphorical significance, while Susanne Kleine, the curator at Bundeskunsthalle of *Heavy Metal Honey*, suggested that the permanent rain in the house can be read as a metaphorical condensation of living conditions or traumatic events and their consequences.² Can you tell me more about the metaphorical impact and about the role the artificial rain plays within this setting? Does it reflect an interplay or continuity of violence and vulnerability?

VC: The permanent rain is a reflection on nature and of the way life unfolds. Life never stops being violent; it never stops being vulnerable. It is always about motion, about transformation, about dynamics. The artificial rain somehow cleans up the environment, but on the other hand, it also can be violent in excess. But it depends also on the geography: in some places, you don't have so much rain, or you would like to have rain because there are a lot of fires. In other areas, you have cities with too much rain, and it could cause problems. Metaphorically, it suggests human psychic life is like a process of permanent inner salvation. It always runs. The rain represents the inner dynamics, the way it is in nature, and that history can be really traumatic and deform the interior. That is what the rain does in this piece.

2 Jack Burnham, 'Hans Haacke — Wind and Water Sculpture', in *Art in the Land: A Critical Anthology of Environmental Art*, ed. by Alan Sonfist (New York: Dutton, 1983), pp. 105–25 (p. 109). Susanne Kleine, 'Interior and Exterior Spaces', in *Vajiko Chachkhiani: Heavy Metal Honey*, ed. by Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (Bonn: Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 2018), pp. 33–43 (p. 33).

Vajiko Chachkhiani and Claudia Peppel, 'Life Never Stops Being Violent: A Conversation', in *Weathering: Ecologies of Exposure*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, *Cultural Inquiry*, 17 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2020), pp. 289–94 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-17_14>

REFERENCES

- Burnham, Jack, 'Hans Haacke — Wind and Water Sculpture', in *Art in the Land: A Critical Anthology of Environmental Art*, ed. by Alan Sonfist (New York: Dutton, 1983), pp. 105–25
- Kleine, Susanne, 'Interior and Exterior Spaces', in *Vajiko Chachkhiani: Heavy Metal Honey*, ed. by Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (Bonn: Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 2018), pp. 33–43
- Mostafavi, Mohsen, and David Leatherbarrow, *On Weathering: The Life of Buildings in Time* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993)