SPRINGS

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RAIN, CARSON, ART, SALT: A VENETIAN MATRIX

Catherine Bush

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Early September 2024: When, on the morning of my third day in Venice, I wake and grab my phone to check the weather app, I am met by the same orange band of trouble as the night before. There are severe thunderstorm and rainfall warnings for the entire Veneto region. Up to 86 millimetres of potential rainfall. I lie in bed in the small ground-floor apartment that I've rented not far from the Arsenale and the Giardini, sites of the Venice Biennale. I'm here to see art but am distracted by the weather. The air conditioner grinds away, the air thick with heat and humidity, the smell of the room touched with sulphur. The windows, shrouded by curtains, don't open. I think of the flash floods that recently hit my home city of Toronto, submerging highways; the flash floods in Montréal that inundated neighbourhoods, including a friend's basement; the flash floods in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, where my sister lives, which swept away my niece's teenaged neighbour, drowning him. There were spring floods in Bavaria, where I have lived for six months, rising river waters overtaking Regensburg. In July, torrential rainfall in Kerala brought on massive landslides.

An aerial view of the Venice Lagoon. © Luka Dakskobler. All rights reserved.

I wonder: How do I calibrate the weather warnings to calculate emergency at this moment? Do I shrug them off and continue undeterred with my cultural itinerary? Or do I consider my potential vulnerability? Venice is particularly flood-prone. If the apartment were to flood overnight, I could be trapped inside, with no exit other than the single street-level door. Surely, I'm catastrophizing. This apartment has stood for centuries. Yet I'm a visitor here, making my first return to the city in 30 years. The Biennale's title, *Stranieri Ovunque*, becomes "Foreigners Everywhere" when translated into English. As a foreigner, I don't know how to read the local weather. In *Fire Weather*, his book about the colossal 2016 forest fire that incinerated the town of Fort McMurray, Alberta, Canadian writer John Vaillant describes the Lucretius Problem: We judge current dangers based on those

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we've experienced in the past. Yet our past experience may no longer be a useful guide to what lies ahead.[1]

> *Rachel Carson urges us to pay ecological attention to the world—tuning ourselves to networks of relationship and consequence.*

I've come to the Biennale looking for Rachel Carson. Although Carson, the renowned twentieth-century US environmentalist, has been dead for 60 years, her work provides a living reference point, not just for environmentalists and social-justice warriors, but culturally. I'm working on a novel that fictionalizes Carson's life, largely focused on her shifting relationship to the sea. When a friend told me that John Akomfrah's installation, occupying the Biennale's British pavilion, explicitly references Carson, I determined to see it, curious to discover how a contemporary visual artist engages with Carson's legacy. In *The Guardian*, I stumbled upon an interview with theatre artist Sophie Hunter describing her new piece, *Salt of the Earth*, which evokes the imperilled salt marshes of the Venetian Lagoon and elsewhere. To be mounted in an old salt factory on the Venetian island of Giudecca during my stay, Hunter's piece was inspired by Carson's writing, in particular her insistence on the place of wonder in our engagement with the natural world. I manage to snare a ticket to the show.

In *Silent Spring*, her 1962 manifesto attacking the ruinous use of pesticides in the post–Second World War United States, Carson wrote out of a sense of emergency, calling attention to the ecological webs of relationship that bind humankind to the rest of the living world. It's Carson's ability to give lucid, penetrating voice to these connective webs that draws me most powerfully to her work. She urges us, in turn, to pay ecological attention to the world—tuning ourselves to networks of relationship and consequence. Spurred by Carson, I've brought questions with me to Venice: What does it mean to pay ecological attention not only to the world but to art? How can I look, ecologically, through art, back at the world? Only now I'm also trying to figure out how to pay attention to the weather.

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John Akomfrah, *Listening All Night to the Rain*, commissioned by the British Council for the 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, 2024. © Jack Hems. All rights reserved.

Two days before, in hot sunlight, I approach the neoclassical British pavilion in the Giardini, where many of the Biennale's national pavilions are situated, to find the front steps leading up to the portico roped off. Large panels hang in the spaces between the columns, each a screen split into two panels, filmed images in continual motion upon them. White or black cards bearing phrases such as "European Ladies" or "For Coloureds Only" float beneath shifting water; a rush of small rubber ducks, no doubt made of PVC plastic, tumbles down a creek, past the submerged dial of a clock whose one visible hand points almost to midnight. Watery babbles and melancholic ringing notes lace the exterior air. This is my opening encounter with Black British artist John Akomfrah's remarkable multichannel visual and sonic installation *Listening All Night to the Rain*.

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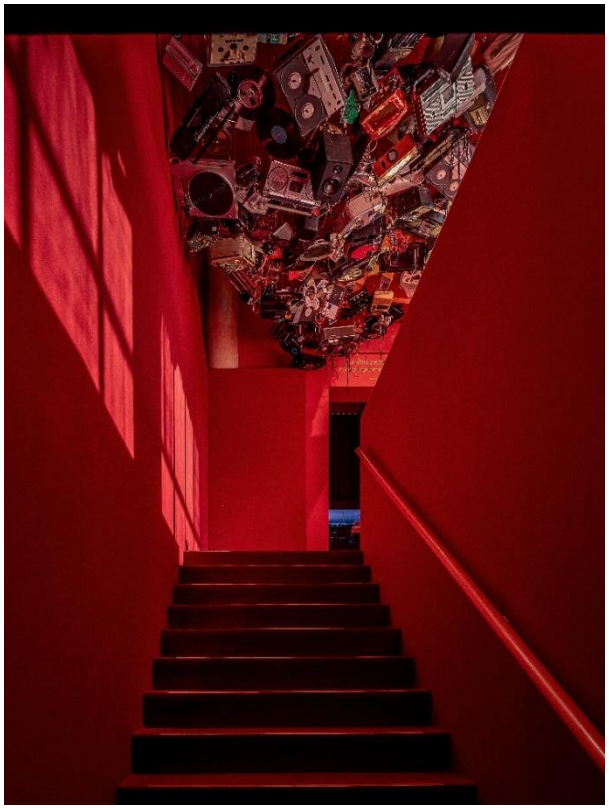
John Akomfrah, *Listening All Night to the Rain*, commissioned by the British Council for the 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, 2024. (Left) © Jack Hems. All rights reserved. (Right) © Taran Wilkhu. All rights reserved.

Listening takes its title from a poem by the eleventh-century Chinese poet Su Dongpo, meditating from political exile on the transitory nature of life: "I'm like a little boat / sensing an expanse of endless water . . . listening all night to the rain."[2] Each room of the pavilion, painted a different, darkly saturated colour, houses one of the installation's eight cantos, a word that recalls Dante's visionary journey through the underworld and the work of US Modernist poet and Fascist-sympathizer Ezra Pound, once a Venice inhabitant. Together the cantos accumulate to create a tissue of racial, colonial, and ecological history from the twentieth through the twenty-first centuries, symphonic and oceanic in scope, asking us not only to look but to listen. Entering on the lower level, I find myself in a darkened room panelled with screens. On several, a river of water rushes over photographs of Black men and women in nineteenth-century clothing. Images and sounds of water pervade Akomfrah's installation. Human presences, Black, Brown, white, male, female, characters, and guides, appear across a range of landscapes, often outdoors in anoraks, some turned towards the viewer, others away, our sense of the world simultaneously expanding beyond the human.



Canto V. John Akomfrah, *Listening All Night to the Rain*, commissioned by the British Council for the 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, 2024. © Taran Wilkhu. All rights reserved.

I locate Carson on the upper level in a small, umber-red room, past Canto III, an agglomeration of old pieces of sound equipment that hang from the ceiling and issue voices, including that of Malcolm X. On one of six screens mounted on one wall, an older Black man lies outstretched on a swath of satiny fabric, blue as the sea, wearing a yellow anorak, hood surrounding his face. His closed eyes and clasped hands give him a funerary air, as if his body has been laid to rest surrounded by talismanic memorial objects: photographs, antique computer

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consoles, a small, boxy TV. More rubber ducks surround him, along with an image of the chemical makeup of DDT, a photograph of Rachel Carson's face, her books—*Under the Sea Wind*, *The Sea Around Us*, *The Edge of the Sea*. I spot *Silent Spring*. The air swells with a texture of sound out of which single tones ring like bells. Water bubbles. The images shift, the prone man multiplying onto other screens, accompanied by different objects, Carson titles, the extended legs of another prone figure. The rubber ducks reappear atop a shining depth of water, the same blue as the fabric beneath the humans, as ducks like this were famously released into the Pacific in a 1992 container spill, borne by ocean currents across the world.

I spend perhaps an hour in this room, more in the pavilion. People wander past, often with the same speed as one might scroll through images on a phone. Akomfrah's work asks for time from us, time and the ecological labour of relationship-making: that we undertake the work of creating our own version of his epic from its vast storehouse of connections.

Canto VI. John Akomfrah, *Listening All Night to the Rain*, commissioned by the British Council for the 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, 2024. © Taran Wilkhu. All rights reserved.

As I enter the largest room, Canto VI, archival footage of anticolonial rebellion on the African continent and India in the mid-twentieth century surges across the screens: Patrice Lumumba, Congolese independence leader, orating to crowds; Lumumba, forced onto the back of a truck by soldiers, weeks before his execution. All this occurred, I realize, during the years in which, across the Atlantic Ocean, Carson was writing *Silent Spring*, condemning the human hubris that sought mastery over the natural world, deploring the technological shifts that meant even the vast ocean was no longer safe from destruction wrought by humans. Woven into Akomfrah's web, Carson becomes part of this broader, planetary fabric of encounter, peril, domination of both human and nonhuman, and resistance. In retrospect, I find myself applying the words of the Palestinian writer Isabella Hammad from her brief, powerful polemic *Recognizing the Stranger* to what I witnessed amidst Akomfrah's matrix: "In today's crisis of climate destruction, there will be moments—maybe

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they are happening already—that will later be narrated as turning points, when the devastating knowledge hits home to a greater and greater number that we are treating the earth as a slave."[3]

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On the day of the storm, I'm at the Palazzo Grassi on the Grand Canal, viewing the extraordinary, large-scale paintings of US, Ethiopian-born artist Julie Mehretu, when I pull out my phone. The palm-like shape of the Veneto region has gone from orange to red on the weather app: "Red Rain Warning . . . extreme weather events expected . . . expect significant disruption to daily routines. Only travel if your journey is essential." What is essential in this context?

Mehretu's work grapples with contemporary states of emergency. In this show, entitled *Ensemble*, the paintings are shown alongside work by artists with whom Mehretu has ongoing relationships. The sculptural presences of Huma Bhabha, Paul Pfeiffer's disembodied wooden limbs and torso of Justin Bieber (tattooed and smoother than skin), and the body prints of David Hammons foreground the necessity of bringing the body—Black, white, otherwise racialized, corporeal—into relationship, a dance, with Mehretu's more abstract art.

(Foreground) Huma Bhabha, *New Human*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and David Zwirner; (Background) Julie Mehretu, *Invisible Line (collective)*, 2010–2011, Pinault Collection. Installation view, "Julie Mehretu. Ensemble", 2024, Palazzo Grassi, Venice. Photo by Marco Cappelletti © Palazzo Grassi, Pinault Collection. All rights reserved.

Whether black and white or brash with colour, her canvases are dense with palimpsests of lines, architectural diagrams, gestures that demand we look closely and engage in an intensity of connection-making. At moments, Mehretu's paintings' exploding movement provokes an intense

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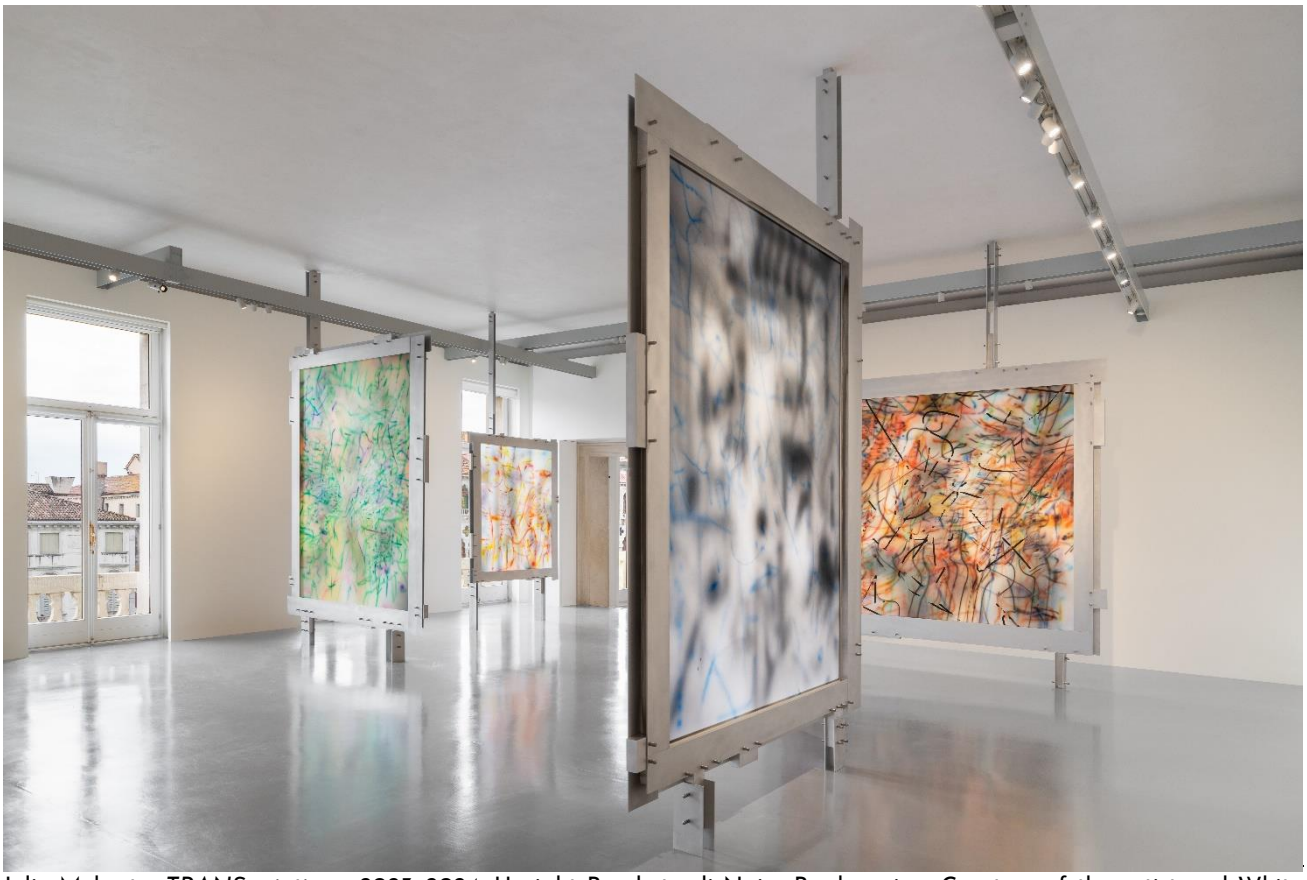
vitality or a stir of disturbance in my encounter with them; their kinetic density opens up a corresponding depth of response, also awe at the time-consuming deliberation and labour involved in the paintings' layered creation.

Some of the paintings bear traces of their origin in political or societal disasters. In *Maahes (Mihos) torch* (2018–2019), mounted alone in the first room, a smear of orange radiates from the bottom left-hand corner, counterposed with a flare of green in the upper right while black markings flicker or smudge the entire canvas. The artist began with a photograph of the massive 2018 fire that destroyed the National Museum of Brazil and its vast cultural heritage, an origin obscured unless you read the notes on the painting. I want to know this narrative trace—just as when, weeks earlier, in Berlin's Neue Nationalgalerie, I stood in front of Gerhardt Richter's four massive abstract paintings *Birkenau* (2014), which originated as responses to four black-and-white photographs of the concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau, the only surviving images taken by inmates themselves, knowing this origin allowed me to enter into charged lines of otherwise inaccessible meaning.



Julie Mehretu, *TRANSpaintings*, 2023–2024, Upright Brackets, di Nairy Baghramian. Courtesy of the artist and White Cube. Installation view, "Julie Mehretu. Ensemble", 2024, Palazzo Grassi, Venice. Photo by Marco Cappelletti © Palazzo Grassi, Pinault Collection. All rights reserved.

I've just passed the emergency-orange, flame-like billows of Mehretu's *Hineni (E. 3:4)* (2018), which draws on an image of the 2017 California wildfires, when I see the red stain of the heightened weather warning on my phone, its extreme alert. I can't bring my broken concentration back to the art. Two well-dressed women wander through the rooms ahead of me. The grey sky is not yet foreboding. The worst of the rain is supposed to arrive with evening. Before leaving my small rental apartment that morning, I have, though I can barely afford it, made another booking—for a room at a small hotel. There I would be above ground level, have access to more than one exit, be in the company of others. If nothing terrible happens, I tell myself, I will have done this as insurance. So that nothing terrible happens. Again, I wonder if I should simply shrug off the warnings. Only now

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every painting I look at is permeated by my anxiety about the weather, by a sense of emergency. So I flee the palazzo, hop onto a vaporetto, grab my bag from the small and sulphurous apartment and wheel it through bumpy alleys to the hotel, where, in the wake of the morning's brief torrential thunderstorm, the stone entranceway has already seen some flooding, and I must make my way across the damp remains of flattened cardboard boxes on my way to the lobby.

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A locus for arrivals from the world over, Venice is known as a city of water, situated in the Venetian Lagoon, islands threaded through with canals, slowly subsiding. It's less often thought of as a city that exists in relationship with the lagoon's salt marshes, essential carbon sinks and flood-protection buffers, which are disappearing at an alarming rate—from 180 square kilometres two centuries ago to 43 today[4]—losing sediment and drowning in the extremely and increasingly high tides. You can easily travel to Venice and not see its salt marshes or think about the vital role they play in preserving the life of the city. These days, ongoing reclamation projects are fortified by cultural projects that bring attention to the marshes. Sophie Hunter's *Salt of the Earth* sprang from her expeditions into the Venetian marshes with environmental engineer Andrea D'Alpaos. During its creation, she and her creative team collaborated with, among other groups, The Tidal Garden, which cultivates glasswort and other halophytes that grow naturally in salinated marshland soil.[5]

Wanting at least to see the salt marshes, I reach out to salt-water activist Pietro Consolandi, part of the collective Barena Bianca (*barena* means salt marsh in Italian), which seeks to highlight ocean-based ecological issues through hybrid projects. "Head out by vaporetto into the northern lagoon," Consolandi urges me. "Go to the island of Torcello. Climb the eleventh-century, Romanesque bell tower." The tide is halfway between high and low when I do so, the day after the storm. Nevertheless, the flat expanses of mud and maroon-brown grasses winding through the water are enough of an encounter for the reality of the marshes to press themselves upon me.

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View from bell tower on the island of Torcello, Venice. Photo by Catherine Bush. .

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Along with storm flooding, *aqua alta*, the tides that sometimes flood low-lying parts of the island city, are a regular phenomenon of Venetian life, most common in winter or spring, particularly in the Piazza San Marco, a place even more frequently flooded by tourists. On the day of the storm warnings, I set out from the small hotel, attempting to make my way on foot across town to the Palazzo Franchetti, where the off-site Portuguese pavilion, *Greenhouse*, is located. I have a few hours, it seems, before the rain begins. Yet my GPS insists on guiding me through the flooded Piazza San Marco where the water is at least ankle-deep, the *aqua alta* of 5 September unusual enough that photos of it make the international news, which I discover when friends and relatives message me to say they've seen them.

Along the waterfront of vaporetto stops and moored gondolas, tidal water slops and spreads over the stone lip of land. The Bangladeshi shopkeepers put away the small electric fans and sundresses of yesterday, replacing them with disposable plastic rain ponchos, raincoats, plastic boots to be pulled on over your footwear. They adapt, as we, the visitors, adapt, our temporary adaptations drowning us in a sea of plastic. People such as these stallkeepers will not identify as climate migrants, according to writer Amitav Ghosh,[6] even though flooding or other disruptions to the land, leading to economic upheavals, may be what has uprooted them and propelled them here, across the Mediterranean Sea.

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Photo by Catherine Bush. CC-BY NC 4.0.

The tourists around me, swaddled in bright pink, blue, and yellow plastic, echo the colours of the anoraks and floating rubber ducks in Akomfrah's filmed images. At this moment, across northern Italy, torrential rains are flooding Milan, although I do not know this yet. When I arrive at last at the Palazzo Franchetti, the sky over the Ponte dell'Accademia is split in two: half blue, swirled with white tufts of cloud, half incoming, ominous rolls of grey.

. . .

Greenhouse, a collaboration between a researcher, a visual artist, and a choreographer (Mónica de Miranda, Sónia Vaz Borges, Vânia Gala), brings a profusion of greenery into an interior usually reserved for human activities. Tropical plants, growing in small islands of planters, soil binding together disparate species, occupy the wood-panelled rooms. While they upend our sense of how these rooms should be occupied, I long to feel more disoriented, more unhumaned in their presence, for there to be more wildness in the intervention than perhaps is possible when importing plants and small trees into the rooms of a palazzo.

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Mónica de Miranda, Sónia Vaz Borges, and Vânia Gala, *Greenhouse*, Portugal Pavilion, Biennale Arte 2024. © Matteo Losurdo. All rights reserved.

The installation combines the sculptural with a site for performance and educational events. There's a session in progress when I arrive, a conversation with noted Indian scholar, activist, and seed preservationist Vandana Shiva, who advocates that seed and soil care are essential for our planetary survival. A young man raises a hand to ask a question, his English laced with a French accent: How can his generation find hope amidst the ongoing extinctions, the destructions? In response Shiva speaks of "climate havoc," but tells her youthful interlocutor that the earth can be regenerated, and we can be regenerated, too. We can grow hope, she says. I sense—not impatience from her, but the recognition that hope can't simply be given as one might pass a plate across a table. She can offer the young man a generative metaphor and mode of action, but he and others must grow their own hope, which will take care and labour. It is a practice that requires attention: *their* attention, *their* labour.

When I step outside again, fat drops of rain are falling.

. . .

I'm waiting with others outside the old salt factory on the island of Giudecca, on the southern outskirts of Venice, to enter the second of three performances of *Salt of the Earth*.

What can art do in response to the threatened world in which we find ourselves?, I wonder. Maybe the better question is: What can art be? What I seek is aliveness—sensed in the artist's act of creation, aroused reciprocally in me, so that I'm brought, body and mind, into a suggestive, sustaining exchange of connection-making. I'm weary of the dystopic. And I don't want to be told how to respond. Much of the art I've seen in Venice has been responsive to our contemporary existential crises: climate and biospheric breakdown, the punishing legacies of colonialism. Much

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touts its collaborative, even ecological bona fides, seeking participatory engagement from audiences and drawing on relationships that extend beyond the art world.

Salt of the Earth, trailer, performance and installation created by Sophie Hunter, premiering in Venice in September 2024, https://saltoftheearth.earth/trailer. © *Salt of the Earth* team. All rights reserved.

At the salt factory, we are ushered into a black-curtained anteroom in which three plinths hold bronzed bowls, each containing earth, salt, or water. Once gathered, we proceed through a curtained corridor into a much larger chamber filled with an undulating terrain of salt—tons of it. Small hills of salt press against the towering brick walls. Female figures in white roll across the mounds or move among us as we assemble, still standing. The oldest of them, white-haired, begins to speak. Novelist Megan Hunter, who has scripted the work's monologue, gives voice to Lot's wife, the nameless Biblical figure who, when she defies Lot and God by looking back at her homeland, the burning cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, is turned into a pillar of salt. Here, slipping through time and space, Lot's wife becomes a maternal devotee and denizen of the salt marsh; it's from her beloved marsh that she cannot bear to look away.

As *Salt of the Earth* ends, the walls of the old salt factory light up with filmed images of a salt marsh, as if we are spirited outdoors. A chorus of singing voices rises from amidst the audience, an embedded choir. The moment is both intimate and sacral, the hall full of beauty. Nevertheless, I yearn for the language of the piece to offer more gritty, sensory details of squelching mud, grass flecked with wind, the biting smell of salt, and most of all a sense of the ongoing tidal shifts, in and out, in and out, that shape and transform the vanishing marshes. I want to be transported imaginatively so that I'm not just told to pay attention to what is being lost but transformed, inhabiting, and inhabited by marshland.

. . .

Late in the afternoon, on the day of catastrophic warnings, the rain sweeps across the lagoon in a great sheet, obliterating the horizon. As the downpour begins, I make it back to the hotel where the young woman at the front desk keeps repeating to guests, "Don't go outside." One woman, insisting that she has to meet a friend for dinner, sets off through the flood. Others return soaked to the skin. A young woman, who arrives with her rolling suitcase, tells of the horrors of travelling from

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flooded Milan. From the high-ceilinged salon of a lobby, I observe all this, as rain, lashed by wind, drowns the small piazza outside.

> *What I discover is this: I can't write about the art without writing about the weather. Everything around me must be woven together into a matrix that makes up the world we breathe in.*

Is it an anticlimax to note that the rain wasn't as catastrophic as predicted? There will be greater storms, greater, perhaps, than we can yet imagine. Storm Boris, which will bring an unprecedented deluge, inundating parts of central Europe with a month's worth of rain in 24 hours, is only a week away.[7]

What I discover is this: I can't write about the art without writing about the weather. Everything around me must be woven together into a matrix that makes up the world we breathe in. This is my ecological lesson from Venice, from Carson. How do we collectively convince ourselves to be alive at every instant to these cascades of connection and consequence? How do we turn the reciprocal acts of making and recognizing relationship into the heart of our art of attention? How do we narrate these connections? Embody them? In the hotel lobby, I listen. Is it raining where you are? What, or who, asks you to listen to them right now? Somewhere rain is falling. All this is happening everywhere.

Notes

[1] John Vaillant, *Fire Weather: The Making of a Beast* (Knopf Canada, 2023), 179.

[2] Su Dongpo, "Seeking Lodging on a Rainy Night at Pure Life Monastery," in *Listening All Night to the Rain: Selected Poems of Su Dongpo (Su Shi)*, trans. Jiann I. Lin and David Young (Pinyon Publishing, 2020), 201–2.

[3] Isabella Hammad, *Recognizing the Stranger: On Palestine and Narrative* (Black Cat, 2024), 53.

[4] Andrea D'Alpaos, quoted in Catherine Bennett, "Why Salt Marshes Could Help Save Venice," *MIT Technology Review*, 22 August 2023, https://www.technologyreview.com/2023/08/22/1077661/venice-salt-marshes/.

[5] "The Tidal Garden Project," The Tidal Garden, accessed 9 April 2025, https://thetidalgarden.earth/The-Project-1.

[6] Stephanie Bernhard and Amitav Ghosh, "Amitav Ghosh on Literature and Climate Coincidence," *Orion*, 27 November 2019, https://orionmagazine.org/article/ghosh/.

[7] Martina Igini, "Storm Boris: Record-Breaking Rainfall Floods Central Europe After Continent's Hottest Summer on Record," *Earth.Org*, 16 September 2024, https://earth.org/record-breaking-storm-boris-floods-central-europe-after-continents-hottest-summer-on-record/.

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