

Lockdown Elevenes with Rebecca Lennon

Southwark Park Galleries Podcast is a place where we delve deeper into the practice artist in our program through conversations, interviews and readings.

For those of you that have listened to episode one of Lockdown Elevenes with Fani Parali, you'll know that in this series we catch up with a brilliant artist in our upcoming program, and ask them a bunch of questions to find out how they're making work, keeping their heads during these weird times, and so you can find out a bit more about them.

So prepare yourself some elevenes sit back and enjoy.

John Harris: In today's episode, I'm delighted to be joined by Rebecca Lennon, an artist based in London she works across media including video, text, performance, sound and music, to think about and play with the nonlinear shapes and rhythms, the voice memory and speaking body.

Rebecca has exhibited internationally across contemporary art and experimental music platforms, radio and recently publishing. She graduated from Slade School of Art London MFA in 2010 and is a visiting lecturer at universities such as Arts University Bournemouth and Royal College of Art.

Recent exhibitions and performances have included Essex road 6 in 2020 Kunstraum in 2019 and the Whitstable biennial in 2018. As well solo shows at Matt's Gallery, London and Almanac, Turin. Rebecca will feature a text in On Care an anthology of artists writings

published by MA Bibliothèque in 2020, and she has had several sound works featured on BBC Radio 3's late junction throughout 2019 and 2020.

Rebecca is currently supported by an Arts Council developing your creative practice award and will be starting a PhD at Goldsmiths this year. It's lovely to welcome you, Rebecca.

Rebecca Lennon: Hello.

JH: So, the last time I saw you was at Dilston Gallery just before lockdown when you were rehearsing for your show LIQUID that has unfortunately been postponed. Because of such an abrupt stop just before the show, have you been able to continue making work during lockdown? If so, how are you finding it? And what are you working on currently?

RL: Yeah, I mean, I've been really lucky because I've been locked down at my boyfriend's house in North London that he grew up in, and we've got access to a garden and enough space to work. I know that it's been really difficult for people in different ways who have been locked down with family members or, with people that they don't get on with, or for like families quarantined in houses with no outdoor space in a tiny flat. I do feel really lucky but even so, I found it quite hard to work in a sort of concentrated focused way and I've heard that from a lot of people. So I guess it's okay not to work like that and to just go with it for now. In the beginning, God It feels like ages ago, doesn't it? I couldn't really work at all at first and I kept thinking about I don't know where the Have you seen the film? 'Exterminating Angel' by Luis Buñuel?

JH: No I haven't seen it.

RL: Oh yeah, you should watch it and but for some reason I kept thinking about it, because it's, it's a surrealist film based in Mexico. It's about this group of people who go into a house, go to a dinner party, and then they can't leave and they don't know why. There's this kind of invisible psychological barrier or forcefield that stopping them from being able to leave. It feels quite relevant to this situation. I felt like I had this kind of weird psychological barrier around my work, and particularly around the work that I was working on before locked down. I couldn't really revisit it, so I've been trying to work with that. I guess one way of working with that kind of 'Exterminating Angel' is to approach like an artist block as something productive. For example, one way of dealing with an artist block for me has been productive avoidance. Productive avoidance is something that I

work with all the time where, you know, there's this kind of intense focused concentration on something that you're not supposed to be doing, to avoid doing the thing that you're supposed to be doing, which actually normally creates for me really good work. I always make the best work around the time that I'm supposed to be doing my tax return, for example. So that's led to like this complete obsession with gardening, which I've been doing in quite a focused way but at the same time, it's given me loads of ideas and I've been thinking about ethics and community and plant consciousness. It's been really great and I've developed like similar videos of insects, so I definitely think that that's been productive.

Another thing I've been doing to deal with the artist's block, because I can't focus that well on kind of writing something new, this seems to have too much pressure on it. I started to create these mind maps through mind mapping software. I don't know. Have you ever used mind mapping software?

JH: Yeah, yeah, I've actually got it on my computer. So I've used it quite a lot.

RL: I started to create these mind maps as a way of writing, like attaching images, and kind of hide these hyperlinks to narratives that go off and can be like, infinitely complex. So I've been going through my Google Docs, my text messages and my notes, and I'm bringing them all together to create these quite massive mind maps. That's hopefully gonna as I've actually started writing and bringing together ideas that are just left hanging out there because I tend to write notes and then just leave them. So it has just been really useful in bringing all these things together. I think something that I really wanted to do is

get away from the restrictions of the page, of the rectangular page. So that this has been really good for that.

I'm working together with some sort of ideas and research for my PhD but also bringing together text and kind of writing or recontextualising text that I've forgotten about. This has also led to a series of drawings, like diagrammatic drawings and batik text drawings, which I was doing before but I'm doing a bit more now. I guess I'm thinking about how to make these into sonic scores, because the work that I've been doing with sound is very spatial and psychological, so it makes sense to work with this structure. Also, something that I've been writing about and kind of making work about is, because my recent works have been drawing from architecture and specifically housing and its relationship to the voice, thinking about dereliction and precarity as a way to think about the denial or destabilisation of voice. That was a lot to do with the piece that I did at the Dilston Grove. I've been thinking about and starting to write about voice bleed like literally the voices of others that travel through the walls and that you can hear through the walls or over the garden fence. I'm thinking about this right now, architecturally, socio-politically, and also psychologically. This feels quite relevant now that we're stuck in our houses and also feels quite relevant to this process of me drawing these maps where the kind of ideas and narratives overlap and bleed into each other. All of these kinds of things that I'm writing at the moment and I'm making, I'm hoping will lead also towards my solo show in Nottingham at Primary that I'm working towards. So I've still got that kind of artist block 'Exterminating Angel' sensation to some degree, but I'm trying to work with it.

JH: You talk about productive avoidance as a strategy. It sort of reminds me of when I was a kid and would empty my box of Lego over the floor in my bedroom. I'd be looking for a certain piece and when I couldn't find I would trick myself into looking for a different bit altogether, then somehow that block of Lego I originally wanted would just turn up.

RL: Oh, wow. That's an amazing anecdote.

JH: So the reason I kind of mentioned this is that there's something in there about feeling that we need to maintain some sort of constant momentum in a project and how we sustain it using different methods. But do you have any specific working rituals or routines? If so, have they adapted in the current domestic situation?

RL: Yeah, I mean, I think that's such a great anecdote because I feel like that all the time. Like you're constantly trying to trick yourself, to be excited about your work or to make new work or to come at things from a different direction. I was actually talking to Rebecca Jagoe, the artist about this yesterday, about these ways of like having energy for your practice, and not losing or not losing momentum. We've all got these kinds of different strategies. I guess my main ritual is with writing because I do find sitting down and writing quite difficult, even though it's obviously central to my practice, it's a constant battle.

So the rituals that I normally do I pretend that I'm not writing to relieve any pressure that I've got in my head attached to writing, I specifically like working on the phone, rather than on

my computer, as it somehow takes away the formality of writing. I also write in bed, like somehow if I'm writing a text for a lecture, or if I'm writing a text for a performance, I have to somehow do it in bed. Because it feels like something really, unlabored is going to come out of that context. It helps me to convince myself that I'm doing a sketch or making notes towards something rather than doing something formal. Another thing I do is that I immediately record my writing to hear how it sounds because listening to how it sounds will dictate how it's edited and it stops me from over editing my writing. Once it's recorded as voice it becomes about intonation or stress or rhythm. If a word doesn't work, I'll know straight away because I feel weird saying it. This is also great working with other people because they will mispronounce something or say something wrong more than two times and that's it gone. I like that kind of energy of editing where it's like speed editing, which is normally for me the right decisions come out of that process. Also, when text becomes voice for me, it stops being linguistic and it becomes more material and sculptural and I can work with it. I find it much easier to work with, I can play with it and layer it and loop it and make rhythms out of it. Whereas for me working with the written word is very structured and architectural and I'm always trying to find ways of getting away from that heavy structure of writing. I guess also, that's what the mind maps are trying to do is get away from that structure.

If I'm working on a video, or sound like you know in editing software if once I'm at that stage, my process is pretty intense and quite unhealthy. Like I sit in front of the computer screen for like weeks without really leaving and sometimes forgetting to eat and I can

do that for weeks on end. I don't really have like this nine to five routine I generally work at night. I'd say that that's been like really enabled by this lockdown situation, and as a result, have become completely nocturnal. My sweet spot of concentration is between like, I don't know, 12 midnight and three at the moment. That's when all the good stuff comes out. In this context because my focus has been so distributed.

I've tried to do this thing where I've set up, I've turned my boyfriend's living room into a studio. I've set up different stations that I basically move between so I've got the computer with Ableton on it, the editing software, and the microphone, and that's ready to record and I'm working sound. Then I've got the mind map so that I can write into them and then I've got the batik and the drawing set up on a table. So I'm sort of moving between these things and also gardening.

JH: Kind of following on from that, who was the person who had the most influence on you as an artist?

RL: Yeah, I mean, I think this is really difficult because if I forget someone, like, you know, and there's definitely not one person. There have been quite a few people that have had a significant impact on me. I would say that after my BA in Sheffield, in Fine Art, I decided pretty much that I wasn't going to do art because I knew it was going to be really difficult to get a job. I knew it's going to be difficult to financially sustain myself. So I decided to go into curating, and I got a job in Liverpool curating for the BBC big screen with FACT and Liverpool Biennial. I wanted to go down that route of curating and I met at that point Ceri Hand who was at the time, the Director

of Exhibitions at FACT, and I worked closely with her. That was great, she had a massive impact on me and she specifically said to me, at the end of my contract after, I think it was a year, "I don't think you're a curator. I think you're a much better artist than you're a curator." She told me that I was an artist in denial, and I need to go away and make some work and come back to her when I've made some work so, so I did because I really massively respected her. Pretty much before that really decided I wasn't going to do it, so it was a big moment for me. Then I came back to her I think a year later and she asked me to be part of her gallery because she had just started her own gallery. I worked with Ceri for about 10 years or something like that at the gallery. So she had a massive impact on me and I was quite young at that point.

I'd say also Sharon Kivland, who I'm working with on the text MA Bibliothèque. Her ideas blew my mind when I was at Sheffield, because she was my tutor in Sheffield, in Fine Art. I'd never sort of met someone like Sharon, the ideas that she introduced me to I've stuck with actually. She still supports me now, so she's been a really important influence. Then beyond that, I would say that the galleries that I've worked with, like Matt's gallery, Robin Klassnik is an absolute legend and Jupiter Woods.

Specifically, I just want to say as well that the artists and writers in my community have been really important to and have really influenced me. I feel like it's the most special thing for me about being an artist is the community I've developed. As artists, we all share ideas and critique each other's work and support each other and work together constantly. If someone's going through a

dry spot, the other artists get them involved. You know, it just feels very positive. So I would say I would definitely say my network of peers.

Something that I've been thinking about, especially now because I'm reflecting on my work a lot is my dad's house, which is kind of obsessive associative archive. It's like an idiosyncratic museum of records, books, objects, and CDs and DVDs covering every wall and every surface. The things in his museum connect and are organised in very particular ways, in quite bizarre and associative ways. It occurred to me last time I was there, or it has done for a while, actually that the system that my dad employees is not dissimilar to my work. It feels like my work has been quite influenced by my dad's house. So it feels like my artwork is actually like, in some ways, a parallel version of my dad's house but with different subject matter and slightly different obsessions.

JH: So another difficult question for you to answer following on from that is who was the person you most respect as an artist and why?

RL: Yeah, I mean, this is difficult, isn't it? I feel like you constantly change who you're fascinated with at any given time and who I respect, it's really hard to say who the person I respect the most. I would say I really love the artist, the poet sorry, Audre Lorde and I've been reading 'Zami' her autobiography. Also, I was just watching a couple of days ago, the 'Berlin Years' by Dagmar Schultz, which is a documentary about her time in Berlin and the impact on the kind of African, German, lesbian poetry community there. The impact that she had was absolutely massive and it felt really inspiring to watch and to kind of hear all these stories about how she

brought so many people together and gave them the confidence to speak about and over the oppressions that they faced at that time because it was around the kind of 80s. For me, Audre Lorde has like massive power and her honesty and rawness and her energy. Watching this video, this documentary is really inspiring because she had cancer at that time as well, so it's a really beautiful film. Also, I use Audre Lorde in my writing workshops at Arts University Bournemouth and the students always get something, she has a really powerful impact on the students, it's particularly the text about 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.' So, Audre Lorde, I'd say but there are lots of others.

JH: Could you tell us about an artwork or project that you've seen recently that has had a significant effect on you?

RL: I know that there's been loads of Zoom performances and things like that, for some reason, I haven't really participated in any of those. I've watched a lot of films but the thing that had like the most impact on me actually was the artist, Lindsay Seers, has been sending sunflower seeds to people on request from the sunflowers in her garden. With the seeds, she sends them in this beautiful envelope with a letter that talks about her psychological relationship to sunflowers based on her memories of her father, and his love of sunflowers. She describes, particularly in the letter, her resistance to killing off certain plants, along the survival of the fittest logic. Instead of killing off the weakest plants or seedlings to give the strongest the better chance to live, which is normal gardening practice, she describes in this letter how she like nurtures the smallest misshapen, or sick ones and dedicates herself to this as a project. This really resonated with me I

think because I've been thinking a lot about the ethics of growing as a process of choosing and making space for one thing over another. Like killing off one thing to let another thing live, which all feels really symbolic and quite poignant right now, this kind of making space and denying space. It was a really, really beautiful and quite a simple project, but I felt like it had like a massive punch. I've got the sunflowers I've planted them in the garden and so every day I watch them grow which is really nice.

JH: So, you mentioned before, you're writing new texts, having this almost new way of working with mind maps and the time you're spending in the garden, but has locked down sort of enabled you to do anything that you've been meaning to do for a long time?

RL: Yeah, I said I'm going through all my notes, which is quite an epic process, bringing them together and restructuring them and reflecting on ideas that I might have immediately discarded, or kind of forgotten about. That's been quite useful to really look at the things I've been thinking about over the last like couple of years but also reworking things that I hadn't finished or drawing from things that felt unresolved. Also drawing again, which I haven't really, to be honest, I haven't spent time drawing for years, so that's been really nice. For example, I've been getting together some sound pieces for an EP that I want to release or I'm not sure if it's going to be an EP but a kind of collection of spoken word sound works.

There was a piece I did for TACO in Thames Mead. When was that? sometime before lockdown, in that before time. It was really annoying because I really liked this piece, but I lost it because there was some kind of

corruption in the file, all of the clips became unlinked and I knew that I had to basically start from scratch. So I just didn't touch it, I really wanted to work with it again. So I knew that at some point in the future I was going to sort of reassemble the parts and basically reconstruct it from scratch, which was going to be quite frustrating. So I just put it off and finally, I got round to doing that the other day and it's quite different than it was before. I think inevitably when you reconstruct something from scratch, it changes but I'm quite happy with it now.

Also, I made this like kind of really a bit silly pop song about Boris Johnson for Sophie's Transmission program. I mean, it's hard, to be honest, not to feel impotent as an artist around, you know like, there are people going out there and risking their lives and you're at home, sort of playing around with spider diagrams.

One thing that you know, this kind of growing vegetables practice that I've been developing and has been quite useful for that because it has felt quite different from my artistic practice but has also given me loads of ideas. It somehow felt useful, I had this like really weird moment, which I'm probably going to end up writing about where I overgrew, I mean, I over planted courgettes and tomatoes. Then because like Lindsay Seers, I couldn't get rid of them. I couldn't sort of kill them off and I ended up with courgettes like literally something like fifty courgette plants that were just everywhere and you know, they grow really massive and they've got this kind of alien thing about them. They had filled the garden and were coming into the house, then tomato plants were literally because they couldn't go out yet apparently,

we're like filling the entire house. It was like a greenhouse. I ended up giving them away on Freecycle, which was a really beautiful thing to do because all these people from the community came around and took courgette plants and tomato plants, then some people even brought me things back in return like chilli plants. That felt like it was something that I've never done before actually and it felt like a positive action, community action.

JH: That sounds absolutely lovely. Do you think this surreal period will kind of affect how you live or work in the future once normality in a sense returns?

RL: I mean, I'm not sure how it's going to impact on me personally. I think it's quite hard to predict that because, in terms of my life and my finances, a lot of my work is zero-hour contracts or freelance work. So it's kind of hard to know how that's going to be impacted in the current situation. I've actually been really lucky, you know, I got the Arts Council crisis grant and I've had some other good luck, which has kept me afloat and also kept me feeling quite positive. I've got these art projects that I'm working on so it's, it's hard to know how it's going, things are going to change in the future, but right now I'm kind of, I'm kind of okay, which I'm really, obviously like cherishing.

I do think it's gonna affect us collectively. Maybe the new normal that you talk about will change and I feel like you can already feel the ripples of that now. You know, maybe I'm being overly optimistic, but it's becoming really apparent how different people's circumstances are in in this situation and a time of collective crisis like these people are really disproportionately affected depending on those

circumstances. It feels like that's so apparent that I'm really hoping that there'll be a collective awakening about that and maybe that'll help us level things out in the future. Maybe that normal can be shifted.

JH: You mentioned before with a lot of Zoom performances happening and you haven't been dipping your toe into them or not being as interested, but with lots of digital content out there currently to recommend us anything,

RL: Just to say it's not that I've not been interested. It's just that I've had a bit of an 'Exterminating Angel' about that as well. It's been hard to get involved somehow, I don't know, I'm actually doing a Zoom teaching this week so I'm going to have to break my phobia. There is something around this online audience member situation that I'm kind of a bit ambivalent about. I've been watching as I said, a lot of videos and listening to a lot of sound pieces online. So I would recommend Chooc Ly Tan, she's got a really great video called 'Crepuscular Dreams of (Dis -) Alienation'. It's a collage of found and homemade video and sound footage. It's quite diaristic and it's very beautiful, like bringing together family visits to Cambodia, and then music that she's made. I think Chooc Ly's works really interesting the way that it merges like the personal and the political. Also, something that's really important to her practice is the relationship between music and dissent that's pursued through this video, so I would watch that.

I would also say I've been really enjoying Juliet Jaques interview series Suite 212, there are artists and writers like Tai Shani, Jennifer Walshe, Erica Scourti and Annie Goh. They're talking about their practices and their backgrounds within

the political context and responses to the political context. So that's been really interesting.

This is maybe a bit more of an obvious one, but I'd say Luke Fowler 'All Divided Selves'. I never actually saw this when it was on at the Turner Prize. I'm generally quite fascinated with R.D. Laing, the Scottish psychiatrist and the sort of movement of anti-psychiatry and his approach to schizophrenia. Luke Fowler has made this beautiful 16mm film that was in the Turner prize that is about R.D Laing. I do also really like Luke Fowler's films, his editing is very sculptural and the use of sound, which isn't him, I know he's worked with the sound artist from Manchester Lee Patterson, who's amazing, but I don't think it's Lee Patterson on this film, but the sound is great as well.

Maybe if I can just say one more? I recently discovered and Sharon Gal, who's a sort of experimental musician and performance artist, through a friend who said that they thought I would like her. There's this really great performance with David Toop, a sound artist who's also amazing at Cafe Otto. The way that Sharon Gal uses her voice, she kind of test the limits and pushes the voice to its kind of edges in a really raw way. I really, really love her performances, so I would say that as well.

JH: I think now's a really good time to talk about your postponed show. I've seen snippets of it, but I haven't seen it in its entirety. So I can't wait to experience it all once we reopen. But could you tell us about your vision for the exhibition and what we can hope to experience?

RL: So the exhibition is called LIQUID. I was specifically interested in it being in Dilston Gallery, because of this space, it's this amazing kind of deconsecrated concrete church, which feels like it kind of really works, It really sort of speaks to the work. So it's a nine-speaker, it's quite a complicated nine-speaker surround sound and two-channel video installation and performance featuring five performance and me. So the performers are Carl Gent, Stella Kajombo, Jennifer Hodgson, Chooc Ly Tan, Sophie Jung, and myself. The performers wear black, velour hooded tracksuit and are lit by changing coloured lights, so it's quite a visceral piece. There's a text made up of fragmented narratives on bodies and architecture, dereliction and finance. It conjures this kind of toxic liquid that moves through all the narratives, which also feel strangely poignant to the time actually. So the sound which is made up of live, spoken word, and also prerecorded audio recordings that move around the space and move around this kind of circle of speakers. So it's quite disorientating because you're not quite sure what's being spoken live and what's not. Something that I've been working with for a while is this kind of use of percussive rhythms that are made from vocal sounds like ticks, hums, and different vocal sounds like coughs. So it moves between the text and these kinds of preclusive rhythms. It's almost like a mind speaking through itself. There are two screens at opposite ends of the space. One is a video that I shot at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, which is mosquitoes that in macro, which has zoomed right in so that these mosquitoes are massive in the space. They are filling up with blood as they feed, it's almost like pulsating like it's quite rhythmical. As they fill up with blood, they then drip and this is sort

of connected with a narrative about water coming through the tiles of a house. So all of these things link in different ways. There's another video projection on the other side of this space, which is like a kind of black liquid, which then develops mould on its surface. Again, because that shot in macro, it's really, really zoomed in, you can see the texture of the mould and it almost looks like skin or animal fur. Rebecca Jagoe, who's an artist and writer, wrote a really beautiful text, bringing together my ideas and my writing and also bringing in her own ideas and her own writing that will be published with the show.

JH: Just before we go, what's on your lockdown playlist?

RL: I'd say Moor Mother, 'Analog Fluids of Sonic Black Holes' which is a really incredible album, I was introduced to Moor Mother at Wysing Art Center, The festival that Paul Purgas curated and that was an incredible show. Also, Cara Tolmie, who am a big fan of, she's a Scottish artist, I think she might be based in Sweden now. She normally does performances and she does sound projects, she's done a piece that she just put up called internal singing on SoundCloud and that's really beautiful. Also, yeah, maybe a collection of Inuit throat singing and that's UbuWeb, which is actually really dancey and quite fast, so that's really incredible. So those three

JH: Thank you so much for taking this time, Rebecca to do this and we look forward to seeing you soon.