



Don't stop 'til you feel it: explorations in environmental empathy with Kat Austen and Rosemary Lee

(automated transcript)

SPEAKERS

Rosemary Lee and Kat Austen

(Introduction: Renée Bellamy speaking in 2021 over spare guitar chords)

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(2018 audio file begins)

Heni Hale 00:45

So many of you here tonight, welcome to this evenings, crossings, board crossing borders talk. We're delighted to bring you crossing borders this season in partnership with Roehampton University. So that's fantastic. I'd like to welcome Kat, I invited here to talk with Rosie Lee, Kat Austen and Rosie Lee are going to be discussing explorations in environmental empathy. I'm not going to say much more about that, because I think they can certainly speak for themselves. But usually the format is that they'll have a conversation and then there'll be a we'll open up to group discussion towards the end. So welcome a lot of your questions. And

Rosemary Lee

Thank you. Thank you. Thanks, Heni, because I've got to meet Kat and it's just brilliant to meet her Kat is a installation artist, she makes interactive work involves workshops, she'll tell you a bit more about it. And she trained as a chemist, originally. But now as an artist. So I found that really interesting. And her work on climate change and work related to climate, and environment really fascinating. But it takes a very different form from my work. I'm a choreographer, and I make work that site specific, often outdoors, and sometimes with big participatory element. So I'm getting kind of we will be in conversation, but I'll be a little bit like the kind of interviewer as well, because I think it's so interesting to hear someone talk outside the dance world about embodiment and about her practice and how that links to ours. I presume most of us are from the dance world here, but I shouldn't assume that. But generally, that's the case. So I'll be careful not to make that assumption. Can you hear me? Alright, by the way, a witness Okay, at the back? Good. So we thought we'd start with embodiment, and what that might mean. So could you tell us a little bit about how, what that term means to you and how you use it in your work, especially around climate change?

Kat Austen

Yeah. So all of my work relating to embodiment, treats embodiment, or embodied knowledge as knowledge that comes from treating the mind and body as a complete system. So you can talk about it as the minded body or the embodied mind. But thinking rather than having this kind of dual Mind, Body division, understanding that we interact with the world, the world has affordances for us, and that our presence is an embodied presence. It's it's not just sort of... our body is not just a vehicle to carry our analytical mind around. Exactly, and so it's some there's a guy called Chicago to NACA, who has his series of kind of informed a lot of my work, and he talks about doing without representing, and it's something that comes from, so it's, you know, if I, exactly, this, this is an embodied interaction, that you don't think, oh, there's a plan, I'm going to pick it up. It's a kind of an immediate reaction. That's the doing without representing so you don't have a kind of cognitive model of what your body's doing. It happens, you know. And so that's kind of working from that concept of embodied knowledge is where I have

tried to start and to match with a sculptural musical approach to creating art, which is a kind of slightly complicated way to think about it, but in my work with Anthony was mentioning so empathy. It's this concept of embodied knowledge that really informs the work that I've made that tries to engender empathy with non human others by sort of using this principle, to direct the choices that I'm making the artwork.

Rosemary Lee

I'm curious how you got it. It's so lovely to hear that because it feels so good to hear someone else say that the mind and body one thing and sometimes

Kat Austen

Does it match with your

Rosemary Lee

Very much so, very much so yeah. And but there's sometimes a bit of a hierarchy of intellectual knowing and the knowing of the body. And yeah, I think certainly I have a bit of a chip on my shoulder about about how I, how I might be able to argue the case for that kind of knowing, yeah, then the knowing to do that, and to respond to these gestures to argue that that's as relevant and is as important and as wise as as intelligent as cerebral knowing. Yeah. So, yes, so it really chimes with me, and I'm sure with many people that but I'm really curious, how did you get to this place out of out of the chemistry? Or do you not know.

Kat Austen

Like, I mean, I can tell you chronologically, that trajectory and not sure, I suppose. I suppose, you know, yeah. So I studied chemistry, I did a PhD in chemistry. And then I went on and was a research scientist in chemistry. And I was looking at environmental issues the whole time that I was working as a scientist, and I realised that I wasn't happy. And that that wasn't there. While I could do it, I'd gone into it, because I thought it was my social duty. I know that sounds incredibly ridiculously worthy.

Rosemary Lee

It's alright you're allowed to be worthy. It was your what?

Kat Austen

My social duty, because I could do it. And because I've been brought up believing also this utilitarian hierarchy of knowledge is actually and so I suppose maybe, in fact, the work that I do to the addresses that knowledge hierarchy probably comes from some amount of the transitions that I've gone through, in order to get to a place where I'm actually happy doing the work that I'm doing, not just capable of doing it.

Rosemary Lee

That's really interesting. Yeah. We were talking about embodiment, and it made me think about, for me, I suppose it's not the correct use of the term. But when we talk when the word comes up, and I hear it, I think a lot for me is about how engaged the body can become in a state or in a quality in the dance world. For me, it's like how, how engaged? How can every cell be active in this particular state, or any energetic state, I mean, or in this movement, and when I'm teaching, I'm using language a lot. So in a funny way, I'm using the sort of verbal language of the intellect on some level, but then I realised that language comes out the body, but in order to get embodiment, say, of equality, I've got to get the right language. And, and you you, as a chemist, I'm very saying to me that you were talking to about the carbon cycle

Kat Austen

Right

Rosemary Lee

And how, how that was very, that's really poetic, but also sort of so meaningful for your work. Can you tell us, can you describe that because that really links to how I think about our presence in the work?

Kat Austen

Yeah, it's so that's, yeah, that's super interesting. And we were yeah. Because I think one of the things that matches within the way that we have a mental constructs of how and why we're doing our work, yeah, seems to be this kind of embracing of flow and transformation as a really fundamentally important process and one that is often not acknowledged.

Rosemary Lee

Yeah.

Kat Austen

And I realised that a lot of the meaning behind transformation or the relationship that I have to transformation comes from visual representations in my mind imagery and also sort of less codified intangibles relating to chemical processes. And of course it does, you know, it's the first intellectual language I learnt. You know, And so there's this work that I did, it's one of the, one of my projects is about food. And it's a, it's a big convoluted project, like most of my projects, and so quite hard to describe, but I'm going to show a picture of it. Oh, that's one picture from it, but it's not going to show you the one I want to show you that one.

Rosemary Lee

Can you see around my head?

Kat Austen

So this is this is a photo of the talismans. And this was with the talismans are objects to evoke kind of a more connected and embodied presence state when eating, and they. And the reason that they do that is because eating is like one of the most understandable processes where we are crossing the boundary between the self and other. So we're taking in the externality. I struggled with words for you know, so let's, let's say I don't mean hard boundaries, but between my body and the environment, and then, and I'm taking the environment into my body when I eat. And equally, then it comes out with me a bit later on. And but it's all part of the transformation, transformative process, and like, some of what I eat becomes me, you know. And so the, it that's actually beautiful, and very deep, meaningful thing to acknowledge, you know, and the fact is that all food is dice. But it's also life to us, you know, it's a real fundamental thing that we like that, that, if we appreciate it, it kind of brings an enrichment to us as well. And so the talismans are there as a reminder, which, you know, I know that I often need to be present in that moment and understand that meaning, and understand the position of oneself in that cycle of transformation of matter. Yeah,

Rosemary Lee

That's fascinating. Have you got that poem?

Kat Austen

Yes, we've got that. So, yeah, so the background, so I'm gonna read you a poem. Now, and the background to that, but there's two snippets from that poem in the mounting of the talismans, which is part of the installation of the of this artwork. And the yeah, we were talking about the fact that that language is really important in, in your working creating this embodied state and, and I also find that despite the fact that a lot of the work that I do, explores what's lost when we use codified language, or numbers or whatever, actually. Often it's a it's a dynamic process between codified and tacit knowledge. And I made the talismans and I showed them to a poet friend of mine, of mine, Simon Barraclough, who said, you have to read this poem. And I read the poem, and then incorporated these quotes from it into the work because they really are those quotes and they really make they really make an impact on the legibility of the work and the depth of it. So the poem is called mystic, and it's by DH Lawrence. They call all experience of the senses mystic when the experience is considered. So an apple becomes mystic when I taste in it, the summer in the snows, the wild welter of Earth and the insistence of the sun, all of which things I can surely taste in a good apple. Those summer course tastes preponderantly of water wet and sour, and some have too much sun rakish, sweet like lagoon water, there has been too much sunned. If I say I taste these things in an apple, I am called mystic which means a liar. The only way to eat an apple is to hog it down like a pig and taste nothing that is real. But if I eat an apple, I like to eat it with all my senses awake, hogging it down like a pig. I call the feeding of corpses.

Rosemary Lee

Wow.

Audience

Could you repeat the last sentence?

Kat Austen 14:59

Hogging it down like a pig, I call the feeding of corpses.

Rosemary Lee

That is so beautiful, isn't it. And it's great to hear you talk about food, and that this sort of mini carbon cycle just sort of here in our kind of sphere somehow, and then being part of the bigger carbon cycle and dust to dust and ashes to ashes. And for me, I think dancing helps me constantly deal with my more with constantly faced more mortality in a more constructive way, somehow, because, because when you're for me, when I'm dancing, that sort of change of state, which might be from one idea to another, or one image to another, or one element to another, helps me feel like I'm constantly in flux, you know, and I know my cells are changing, I know, sort of chemically and scientifically, but somehow to sense it in some other way, in a different way of knowing in some sort of subtle way of knowing. I'd find really, really affirming somehow.

Kat Austen

Yeah, it's the experience then of, of doing it, I guess it's beyond beyond this. Yeah. Beyond representing

Rosemary Lee

Yeah, this experiencing that moment. That we know it, but it's sort of trying to taste that moment of an in the same way that it says I eat with all my senses wake. For me, a sort of embodied dancer is every sense is awake while you're dancing. That's what you see. It's hard to put into words isn't it is the gap that like, say the bits, you can't say the tacit bit, but also when I'm really interested in this relationship to nature, so food, but then there's also sort of rocks or the sea, or the sky. And I find it really helpful to think of my body is a similar thing to, to, to the changes of a rock, it's just that it's happening in a really different time. Yeah. So. So geological time, I mean, it looks as if nothing is changing. It looks as if nothing is changing to this table. But it's all available, particles are still moving around in there. So then just the net. Yeah, sort of knowledge of the possibility of change. Makes you feel a bit less helpless. I think, especially in times like now where it feels so hard to change anybody's mindset tone. So maybe something about dances is really positive, because it's constantly reminding us that everything can change in some way. Yeah, that makes sense. I hear a little murmur in the audience, it's like we will come to you, hold those murmurs.

Kat Austen

Yeah But it's interesting, because so there's this notion of hyper objects, and climate change of the hyper object. Sorry, if I'm

Rosemary Lee

Could you explain that?

Kat Austen

Yeah, it's something that happens on a different scale than something that we can sense. So we don't have, like a daily, like, a legible experience of cause and effect for climate change.

Rosemary Lee

Right. Yeah.

Kat Austen

And although we now feel the effect of climate change, we still don't turn our car on, and it gets hotter.

Rosemary Lee

Yeah

Kat Austen

You know, um. And, and it was, it's interesting, because this concept of, of this gap of, you know, the then the knowing what's not there, as well. I don't know if I'm gonna say this, right. But so there's this other concept called hyper ignorance. And hyper ignorance is the something that's so large and complex that is completely unknowable. And it's been written about a bit like approaching the sun, you know, it's, it provides all the light, and it's enormous and bright and visible. And the closer you get to it, the less of it, you see, and the less of everything around it, you see. And it was it was originally posited by a guy called De Macias who was the last athenian chair in ancient Greece,

Rosemary Lee

Oh wow. Hyper ignorance.

Kat Austen

Hyper ignorance. And, and it's a really interesting concept because it it goes beyond the transcendence of the one like, it's really it's really interesting for me that I found resonance with this concept as well because theologians write about it as well

as philosophers and I don't consider myself to be in that theological realm at all. So God is unknowable, in a sense Actually, for De Macias. God was like, one rung down from from hyper ignorance. Yeah. Which is really interesting. Yeah. That's what some of the that well, that's what some of the interpretations are he was never so clear about it, actually. But that's what the majority of interpretations are. Yeah of it, but

Rosemary Lee

Go, you are you about to keep going?

Kat Austen

Well, I was just to make the point that one of the approaches to kind of understanding hyper ignorance, as a thing is to think about what one can know, in the knowledge that one can't know everything. And actually, that idea is incredibly powerful at the moment in relation to something like climate change. Because we, I, and many people around me, so I'm going to say we feel completely helpless and overwhelmed and disempowered in terms of addressing such a massive and very urgent issue. And I find solace in thinking about climate change as absolutely super complex system, or the causes of climate change as a super complex system that is not entirely knowable, because it has emergent properties. And it changes all the time. It's multi nodal loads of factors affect it. But that's one can address it, nevertheless, by addressing the knowable. And so some of my work, tries to find other channels to address parts of the knowable that haven't been explored. You know,

Rosemary Lee

Yeah.

Kat Austen

Does that resonate with you?

Rosemary Lee

I don't know if it resonating but I do somehow there. But what it made me think when you said it was some of these things. I don't know enough about it. So maybe we can open this up towards towards the end. But the thought that there's been some of those amazing programmes about trying to make us feel so helpless, because everything is so complex, that Putin does it that his PR person does it, that that Trump will do the opposite to what you think he's going to do. So that the confusion thing about keeping us confused, so we stay passive passive. So it feels quite similar. On some level. If it's all to big for you, then what can we do? But we can, of course, we can address the knowable that's all we can do to work on the knowable, and keep finding out more, but not wait to find out. Yeah, that's what it seems this waiting thing seems. What makes us feel most helpless. But anyway, it made me think about politics a bit as you were saying that and yeah, I mean, everything feels so contagiously.

Kat Austen

And it relates indeed, to fake news, as well as the phenomenon as you've, as you've pointed out, yeah. Interesting.

Rosemary Lee

Yeah. It's interesting, because I'm so into meshing and then mesh meant and Tim InGold all the way of thinking that that life is like that. And it's not simple. I'm so into that. But the danger of that is then that you feel paralysed because you can't go like that. Yes, you're going.

Kat Austen

But your work addresses this idea of coexistence. Right. And that's actually that in my head, that's a very related concept. So how, how does the coexistent that's in your work? Map onto onto this inmeshedness, this and the overwhelming thing?

Rosemary Lee

Really good question. Oh, sorry. I'm trying to think about that. Two things. I think the correct systems may be in the piece I did about with Calling Tree with Simon Whitehead. We've made it together. We could actually display the film just to give them some good data. So hot in here. Wake you up. Um listening to our voices. Is that right? And I'll talk a bit over it. Yeah. If you could take it back to the beginning of that. Okay. It's only 20 minutes. Maybe we can have it quiet. Yeah, but we can and I'll try and talk about that. It is that? Yes, it does relate to code.

Kat Austen

We can turn it up if it's not. Yeah. Can you see alright? So this is Simon Whitehead and myself started experimenting with a piece called Calling Tree and I suppose the motivation to make this was climate change, actually, because we both felt

helpless. We'd both been to big conferences called The Tipping Point conferences, where scientists would come and implore us to do something as artists and get the message out there and both Simon and I work a lot outdoors and in natural surroundings, so to speak. And we felt that the only thing we could do was work with, work with embodiment with helping an audience feel more, feel more of a connection to what was around them. This one is filmed in, in Wales in the middle of nature, it's not where we intended to be, it normally sits in urban landscape. So the tree is out of its natural forest, if you like, in the middle of a park in London or something. But it was, but it was also trying to use text and poetry and statements to call out of the tree to call people to attend to themselves. So calling to them to, to stand in their own footsteps or to breathe or to see, to sell them to really be in themselves. So back to that embodiment and back to presence, but also to hear the tree and to see it in a new light. So they were in the tree for six hours on this day, in two hour chunks. So if people hung around, in fact, Ray, who was there was there for six hours, I think, when you sow could get us a really different sense of time and a different sense of connection and relationship with with the tree. So in that sense, there was this coexistence feel about it and certainly for us as performers. When they left this tree, they had to go back up it even without the equipment the next day because they had such withdrawal symptoms. And I have to say, I had the same talking them. I just had to drive back to the tree the second the day after I couldn't be without it. So it always makes my voice choke, because there was something about it's kind of quiet presence. And I'm not trying to make it. You know, I hate that. What's the word anthropomorphize? Yeah, I hate that. It's a tree. And what was wonderful was being with its trees. Yeah, yeah. And that is the sort of coexistence and then the other thing very quickly that I would say about coexistence is, and perhaps this might bring us on to empathy, maybe and correlate to your other work that you can show. I think there's something about people dancing together and what I might be after, when I'm working with participatory projects, what I might want people to see is children and older people and different genders and different backgrounds and different races together, but not in a tweety sort of strokey strokey cuddly way, in fact, they rarely touched it in a way that they are absolutely equal in what they're doing. So that there is this sense of coexisting with other with others as well within our own species. So does that make sense? It's a sort of sense of togetherness without it being a literal relationship of a brother or sister. Yeah, it's a way that we need. Yes, actually, I guess.

Rosemary Lee

Well, I would hope so. But yeah. Yeah, some sort of level playing field in some way. Of, yeah. And lack of hierarchy.

Kat Austen

Yeah.

Rosemary Lee

On some level, let's come back to that. Maybe we could talk about empathy and how your how you do that in your work, particularly, work with Coral

Kat Austen

Oh with Coral Empathy

Rosemary Lee

Does that make sense? Let's do it. And you make a jump to that

Kat Austen

I can.

Rosemary Lee

Maybe we'll come back to the YouTube the hierarchy and things.

Kat Austen

Let's, I'm gonna show a little bit of that. Then maybe we talk about we talk over the top of it. Yeah. Oh, yeah. Right.

Rosemary Lee

So can you hear alright?

Kat Austen

Maybe turn that down a little bit. This is the Coral Empathy Device. And so, yeah. So actually, it's interesting to talk about this after your projects with the tree because in that project, there was another and it was the tree and you've talked about the presence of it. Yeah. And in this case, I designed the Coral Empathy Device to allow for empathy with a with something

that we can't access. Which is coral in its natural environment, or that you know, with which we try to get rid of my thingy. Yeah, so, to engender empathy with something that's very alien to us, but it's also a front line. species in in terms of climate change and environmental pollution overall, actually. And so the Coral Empathy Device devices and wearable wearable sculpture installation piece that you put your head inside, and you hear something akin to the track that you can hear in the background. And, but it's not just sound, so the whole device is a speaker. And they also have somebody with their head in flight. And so what you experienced when you, when you put your head inside is the fabric vibrates to the same frequencies of the speaker, which is the helmet, essentially. So the whole thing's vibrating along with this rather discomfoting track. And there's a smell inside as well. And it kind of acts on the body, it acts as a translation to something that's human legible of what we understand of the coral's experience of anthropogenic effects in his marine home. So it's not recreating the surroundings of the coral. It's recreating some understanding of what that means to the coral without anthropomorphizing the coral

Rosemary Lee 31:28

And then affecting our body through the smell and the frequency

Kat Austen

To try and engender an emotional response to it. Yeah. Yeah.

Rosemary Lee

So that is really about embodiment in that sense that you're important.

Kat Austen

You're working on the body with it. That's really interesting.

Rosemary Lee

Maybe also that that links to the most recent piece, oh, they without it, doesn't it in a sense of hearing change? Could you? Can you show us or tell us about that, because they've been listening, you were listening to the soundtrack as you came in.

Kat Austen

So the, the piece that you're mentioning is the matter of the soul. And indeed, what you heard when you came in, was the. So the installation of the master of the soul, it's a sculptural installation, with, with new media as well. So it has found and video as well as the sculptures should be another picture. Yep. So that's one of the shots of the sculptural installation. It's also a performance work. So I wrote a three part symphony. And what you heard, as you were coming in with the was the prelude to. And it's woven together from audio recording that I made in the Arctic, of interviews with people who lived there, or who had migrated there or visited there. And also have the chemical properties of the water in the Arctic. So I have a series of recordings from from different bodies of water in the Arctic, that I wave with the interviews and then make musical additions to on top and hydrophone recordings as well. And the whole thing is woven together to try to engender empathy with, in this case, the whole Arctic ecosystem, including the humans within it, because I don't make a distinction there. And because that's a very large system, I focused in on one process, and rather probably unsurprisingly, that process is a transformative process, which is dispersal. And so it treats it overlays. dispersal in terms of ice melting with dispersal in terms of the cultural changes that happen when people migrates and on top of that, it creates objects that then disperse online. So all of the audio that is created, and all of the video that's created is released online, under a Creative Commons licence that allows other people to take it and use it. And I'm really thinking that album this month, with a call for other musicians to take the audio, either audio or the compositions and rework them. So everything changes

Rosemary Lee

And the The water the properties of the water. You, you were telling me that you're measuring? How do you get a sound from the properties of the water? Can you just describe that?

Kat Austen

Yeah. So the, the, there are two properties, chemical properties that I was looking at chemical properties that change when the amount of freshwater change, like, goes into the seawater. And so it's the pH and the salinity, which is the saltiness. And I got two old pieces of lab equipment from University College London chemistry department, and I hacked them. So I took them apart and got into the circuits and you can detect, so all of these things, the, the, the way that they work is they measure the voltage that can be carried in the water. And that's a change in voltage. And a change in voltage is exactly what you hear from a speaker when I play the audio through, right, so the direct matching really there. And so you can take the change in voltage out of the circuit board, and run it into a recording device. And then you get the sounds.

Rosemary Lee

I think it's amazing, because, for me, it's like you're making manifest, you know, that the tacit thing, on some level, of course, is happening, but you're making it manifest in another way for us to kind of hear and digest and hear change in a way and here. He had destruction on some sense as well, I suppose, or maybe too strong a word, but I don't know.

Kat Austen

I second that sense of loss with the process of dispersal that is completely like in context completely unavoidable. Like it dispersal is a transformation of valueless transformation, except in the context of the changes in the Arctic, currently.

Rosemary Lee

I'm sure Kat wouldn't mind. But she said to me as as you were coming in, that the music really affects her because you made it and you were talking to those people. And it's really moving.

Kat Austen

Yeah. But in fact, it wasn't the people that really

Rosemary Lee

The salt

Kat Austen

It was the ice, right. So I was hacking I, I prepared one of the instruments before I went and the other one I took with me to the Arctic, and I worked on it there. And it was the one that measures the saltiness, the conductivity metre, and I couldn't find the sound in the circuit board. And I was working on it working on it. And then I, at one point, I took the probe out of the water. Yeah. And I heard the sound change coming out of the conductivity metre, and it sounded like you hear when the probe thing you hear a high pitched, you take the probe out, that goes away, and what's left is a kind of It sounds a bit like interference, it's sort of buzzing, but it goes. And it dies off. And when the conductivity metre stops having a signal, it goes away entirely. And the length of that die off relates to how salty the water is. And I was I was there listening to it, and I thought it just feels like I'm listening to the dying of the ice. No. And it just, it knocked me for six, I was useless that half a day afterwards. But, but actually like that track particularly evokes that feeling. But it also, I don't know what it is about it that that track is about the light, actually coexistence of two things that don't interact. It's about the ice and the water. And it's about separate cultures, it's about separation. And it's about the kind of these these ambiguities that that come with addressing the mixing of things. And when I wrote it, I felt like this is how it comes back to embodiment. I felt like there was an enormous black void here in my chest, starting from my throat and going down to my sternum, and I couldn't shake it and I wrote it, you know, I was working on it for weeks. And it was so present. And I played it that piece of music to a climate change policy person as part of a performance to it. A lot of people, but she was there in the audience at a climate change events in September. And she came up to me afterwards and she said, You know, I've been left cold by all of the polar bears, without, you know, flapping about in the water. She said that with an American accent and didn't say nothing about the jest. But that's the first thing to do with climate change, even though I'm completely invested in it. That's actually moved me. And she said, I felt it here. I felt like my heart was melting. And I felt a void here. It was really, but uncanny. uncanny.

Rosemary Lee

That's really very extraordinary. I wonder what that's about.

Kat Austen

So do I. Yeah,

Rosemary Lee

Here. Yeah, it reminds me of your eating and this cycle not happening or something? I don't know. That's extraordinary is amazing. Well, it's really moving to hear you tell us that.

Kat Austen

Thank you.

Rosemary Lee

Maybe we should go on to activism, then the bit that we both sat yesterday going, Oh, we do need to talk about it. And you had some more thoughts about it. But because of this helpless feeling, and how difficult it is, maybe if I start with this gentle

activism that I feel might be, I'm trying to do myself and then move to because you said you've got some things to tell me that I'm really looking forward to hearing. We both felt quite churned up by trying to talk about activism because it feels so so helplessly small and specialised in, for me, in the work I do. Because I can't make issue based work calling tree is the closest I've got to yelling out people on some level. But that didn't feel right either. So we stopped yelling. It felt really very unkind and sort of interfering. That word interference again, on some level, but so but because I live with somebody that is a climate change, strategist. And and works on activism, I sometimes feel like, yeah, what on earth can we do? So although it's small scale, I feel like there are sort of different things going on for me in the work that I'm trying to embed the activism in the work itself. And one might be where I placed the work and how I get an audience and make it free to view. So the accessibility of it is spread wider than this kind of lovely building and the kind of dance world to might be that I try to in the participatory projects actually can I just play that one on the beach. And one of them's here, one of the dancers from Cornwall is here, I can't believe it's so exciting. It's that little one. I don't know how you got it. Yeah, we go back to the beginning. I don't know why I want to play this, but I'm not sure it illustrates anything. Yes. Just got footsteps.

Kat Austen

Yeah.

Rosemary Lee

I don't know, I don't think this illustrates what I'm trying to say. But maybe it does on some level. Certainly, there's a coexistence going on here. So the fact that this lasted two hours, and that people just sat on the beach, or could just see it for a few seconds or sat with it for two hours and watch them, the women get go is right at the turn of the tide. So they move towards the sea, and it takes them about an hour to get to the sea and an hour to get back. And they're just inching along with this tiny, tiny step. And it's very likely sort of sandeel or centipede or, more or less the sort of time when you look in a rock wall to watch something move across and you look away and oh, it has moved. That sort of feeling. I mean, you can tell on this film, they're moving. But when you're far away from it, you it is quite it really is they progressed quite slowly. On some level, though, they're having to cover a lot of ground. And also they can't operate on their own, they've kind of got to be joined in this way. So in a sense, it's sort of some sort of statement about cooperation, and cooperation and equality, and insurance, as well. So as a sort of sense of why is that an activism is something about enduring some persistence in the face of difficulty and carrying on that that's what for me, that's what I was sort of trying to trying to do so. So the work is kind of reminds people to look at the landscape in a different way to be more embodied in themselves. And in that sense if the relationship is deepened, and we come to reflect on ourselves into the landscape, that's the best I can do with my skills that I have in some ways. So does that mean some sort of sense? So that's my, that's sort of my activism. But I think also, if you see a group behaving like this together with no conflict, and theatre is supposed to always have conflict, and my work never has it. Yeah. So it shouldn't work as a piece of theatre on some level because it's harmonious. Yeah. So in another level without it being utopian, I hope it's something about how you can cooperate together without, without conflict. Yeah. So that's my, that's my sort of activism. But what were you going to tell me that you've been thinking about overnight, that your, your activism, and

Kat Austen 45:46

Yeah, well, I wanted to say, also, like your work, presenting cooperation in the way it gives it a validity in context. Right, of cooperation have a valid way of being Yeah, right. Yeah. And there's, like, there's a lot of conflict narrative in the world, and it's being you know, added to thankie by some world leaders. And cooperation is not given the same sort of treatment. And a lot of, you know, and as you say, I can see, so conflict is a thing that is almost requisites. And in games, and in stories, you know, books, and it's a, it's something that is almost a given, and people end up thinking about the world as a, as a conflict, you know, and their relation to the world as a conflict. And people then feel also alone, you know, and I remember, I gave a talk about my work at a hacker conference called Chaos Computer Congress. It's and I, yeah, I was surprised. They had a climate change in art track. And so yeah, but this guy, I had a chat with this guy afterwards. He was he was actually from the organisation. It's a distributed organisation. And he was saying, oh, yeah, but you know, like, I'm a vegan, and I do all this stuff, but no one else is doing it. And, you know, humans are just combative by nature. And, you know, and it's like, it's, yeah, you would be very excused to think that you would, given all of the stuff that's thrown up to us every day. But actually, it's not true that he's acting alone. There are millions of people who have the similar agenda who takes the same steps in their daily life. George Monbiot wrote about this a little while ago, and there have been, there was a study that asked people about how much they think other people care, and how much they care and how much they do and how much other people do and lots of people who are, like, you know, on that sort of spectrum think that they're completely alone. Whereas lots of people who are on a slightly more individualist spectrum, let's say, think that everyone agrees with them. And, yeah, it's super interesting, but the fact is that statistically, they're not alone. In fact, everyone else is thinking the same thing. You know, and, and I told him that and it was some solace to him. I think pool guy. What, where was I? Oh, yes, just that cooperation is a

valid, like, you know, actually, cooperation is just as valid a constructive of our humanity. That's conflict is, you know, chimps or bonobos. Yeah. Why Yeah, I don't know where I

Rosemary Lee

No, it's alright. That's very relevant. Talking did any was that what you were thinking about when you think about activism? That sort of not feeling alone, or was this something else?

Kat Austen

Well, I suppose. No, that wasn't what I was thinking about. Thank you for getting me back on track. What they were thinking about was, you know, because I because the work is not over like the work is not activist in you know, it doesn't it's not didactic. It doesn't tell you what to do or what to think it creates An environment in which my internal framework is expressed to you, and you take from that what you take from it, you know, like, but it's a way of, but of course, like my all my values, and all of my thoughts just as yours get conveyed in your way they are. They're imbued into the work, of course they are. And so I have this framework of what I think how I think things should work, and I'm constantly re evaluating and constantly working on it, but it's there. And that's woven into the work. However, I'm quite vehement, generally, and I'm, I have quite strong views. And some people might call me opinionated, in fact. And so I think, you know, and I, I have taken part in what is clearly activism in the past. And so it's this is a really, it's a really interesting question to me to, to try to unravel how much like this, this thing between art and activism and where the boundaries are and where my boundaries are. And I'm thinking about it this morning, knowing that I was coming here today, and in the context of climate change, specifically. And I've been so the IPCC report on climate change came out just a couple of weeks ago, and it calls for a complete change in the way that we live in order to mitigate to a mere 1.5 degrees. Right. And I mean, it's terrifying. Yeah, lots of lots of nods. Now, in the face of that kind of knowledge, am I an activist? Or am I just a survivor? Am I just aware of what absolutely has to be done? Because Haven't we reached the point now where like, we've, the choice that we have isn't the choice anymore? And I was, and I don't have an answer to, to, you know, naming and boundaries in the sense, but it really struck me. Maybe activism is about when you've got a choice. And you can make a choice. And we have day to day choices now. But humanity as a whole. Like, the choices to dance into the fire or not? Sure you see conversations like with me at the moment?

Rosemary Lee

I'm thinking about another conversation I had and wonder if I can weave it in? If I can, because it's because I've been talking to someone and they're not there to defend themselves. But I'll try. I'll see where there's any any use. So structures like the structure, the capitalist system, the sort of the big structures, we're not going to knock them down in. We've got 12 years. Is that right? 12? years two was supposed to be at one point. Yeah. We've got 12. Is that right? Till we should have reached that point? Yeah, I think it's 12 years ago. Yeah. In 12 years, that is about two terms of office, in most countries, possibly less. Yeah, you're not, we're not going to be able to break the system. But what we can do is try and change the values. That's what I sort of think that you cut it because if we knock down the system, what can we put in its place in order to get there in 20 years, so we have to shake and pull it the system is not going to go, we have to kind of let it we've talked about change and transformation. Do you know what I'm trying to say? I'm leaking through the system to change the values at the heart of the system, even though the system stays there. And that is happening a bit. You know, I was telling you that story of the change in the investment. Think I'm allowed to say this, but the change in investment bankers thinking in the space of three years, when he said the first time this person I'm talking about met him. He's an activist said there's absolutely no way that we can't can stop mining in the art is going to happen during in the Arctic, the next year, it's like, well, there's, maybe there is a possibility it could stop, but we're still going towards it happening third year, we'll never let it happen and we won't invest in it. So that's a change in their value system. You've got to eat away at that. So we've got to talk about what we've been talking about, for the last hour about what matters. Because we if we're not done this, we can't knock down the system. If we can't, and what's what replaces it?

Kat Austen

Yeah.

Rosemary Lee

So it's sort of how that what is that activism? And how do we? Yeah, what's the groundswell to change those values? Because we talked about boundaries before we're getting close. We Yeah, we are right there. And I think we have to, we began to finish with personal motivation, boundary crossing process changed by identity, chemical understanding and connectedness, which I think we've done. Yeah. I think well done. So should I just open it out to you do that Heni? Or do I do it? We do it. Questions. It's open.

Heni Hale

Anyone got any comments or questions they want? I'm not gonna, I'm not gonna call anymore.

Audience

I really identify with what you're saying about being capable, versus I'm not sure exactly where to use, but changing from working as a scientist. And what that is giving you personally. So what does it mean for you, when you say there's a difference of being capable of doing something and doing something that's passively?

Kat Austen

Right? Right? You mean, what did that feel like? Or how?

Audience

How does it manifest for you? And notice, how did you know the direction to go and and what, right, essentially, what was the embodied feeling? Something gave you so you knew that you needed to change direction and go in that particular direction,

Kat Austen

Right. Right, you know, when there's bouncy ball in a box, or a ball in the squash courts, that's hit really hard. And it's just completely... I feel I look back on the time when I was a research scientist, and I feel like that's what was happening to me. It was sort of frenzied and everything yeah, I can't explain it better than that. And...

Rosemary Lee

Was somebody that person that thing hitting you is that the sort of desire to find something or the pressures of the

Kat Austen

It's more the velocity than something hitting me

Rosemary Lee

the velocity?

Kat Austen

Yeah. Yeah.

Rosemary Lee

Yeah, love it. The velocity.

Kat Austen

Yeah, sort of. It was, like the the impetus was that I was not comfortable. And I'm very intolerant of my own discomfort. And it was a, an essential discomfort. And so I didn't know what was the right thing to do. The kind of work that I do now is it's quite a long time ago that I left science and there was not that it was not well known, this kind of approach. It's still not really, its niche, you know, even now, but there's a lot more dialogue about this kind of work now than they used to be. And so I didn't have somewhere to aim for. I just knew that I didn't want to be where I was, and it wasn't right for me. So I started retraining in mixed media, art, and sort of, I did all sorts of things, you know, and I worked on a, I worked on a magazine and then I got a job at another magazine. I was doing life illustration for for a poetry organisation, and I was playing in bands and you know, it was all very all over and not environmentally focused. Then you have the creative outlets at that time, really, that I was aware of. And then I look back on my portfolio from those days. And actually, it's completely in there. In the approach that I made, like I made relief sculptures and collect kinetic sculpture. That's and, and it's there. But I didn't. It was, it was a very violent thing me leaving science, because it had been I was, I had been very certain that that was what I should be doing all my life that I could remember My aim was to be at Cambridge of a volunteer. And I got there and it's like, oh, oh, shoot. And so it was, you know, it's quite a brave.

Rosemary Lee 1:00:48

Wow, yeah. Brave, very brave.

Kat Austen

Um, yeah. And so, I suppose I, you know, I spent quite a lot of time trying to find out the direction and actively not trying to incorporate my scientific knowledge into my work. And it's only really, with the last three years that the scientific knowledge has been allowed back in. And it's a very long time, as I say, since I since I left science. And, and I think that it's very

valuable now, to me that I have that acknowledged that language. But I don't know if that answers your question, there was not directionality. But I felt a I never felt comfortable until now, in what I was doing, until I started full time doing this kind of work. And it's only with this project, the Arctic project, that I've felt like the tension that was in me, has been subsiding.

Rosemary Lee

So interesting, because you say that's the one that has the most discomfort for an audience.

Kat Austen

Yes I took all that discomfort and now its yours.

Rosemary Lee

Thanks, thank you. Yeah,

Audience

I was thinking about the relationship between the two, and having different ways you embody what it's out to bring it in. And in different ways you create with this ways of contaminating others to understand once this act was very beautiful, going back to the idea of activism, that this guy has tried to get in there, like, okay, what can we change? But I think in some way, you're both saying about micro, because we're talking about experiencing of employee relation with the nature and acknowledging what change can be there in that relationship. And make me think that the action or the role of activist would be to express that micro comeback to a microscale to this whole concept, rather than a thought that, how can we do this in a virtual world? Today, the massive communication we have. So I'm just just bring this problem, back to you think about any possibilities of forms of communication in which that micro can be spread? In a larger scale?

Kat Austen

Yeah. Oh, that's a really good question. But yeah, I've been think, do you have you looked like you've got something to

Rosemary Lee

No, no I don't know if I have really, because I think I've got, I think I've got a problem with the internet, somehow, I haven't found my way. I haven't found my way to use it in that way. And that's probably my failing, I need to figure out how to use it in with the skills I have, you know, sometimes it just feels out of your comfort zone, and you can't manage to affect it. But yeah, there's, you know, when you said that, visually, I was thinking of the World Wide Web, and that sort of net is so important. And yet it's so superficial. And yeah, they know there's sort of this going down into the earth, you know, you made me think of fungi and spores and things. And it's sort of How'd you pull the neck down into the localities as well, you know, bring people out of their, this and into this and their relationship to that. And sorry, I'm talking completely metaphorically, it's not very helpful, but there's a bit of me that is yeah, how can you plant that kind of active engagement in each locality, rather than just in thought I did. But I don't know what that is yet. And I'm, yeah, it's 12 years we've got to get thinking.

Kat Austen

Yeah, right. Yeah, I don't know, I think it's super difficult for the kind for Trump. I mean, I think it's difficult even just with documentation of the kind of work that we both make. It's about experience. It's about the lived experience. And this is and we both address, what is uncodefidable uncodefiable cannot be expressed with language, which is why we use these other channels to do it. And with screen based media, you're collapsing further the communication channels. That's, you know, that's very difficult. And it adds to this delusion of separation of ourselves from the external world. However, I do think that the internet is very useful and screen both media very useful in terms of things that they can communicate. And, you know, we've seen that, I don't know, I'm a little ambivalent about these things, because I think that it's hard to find the correct point with it. But what can be useful is the communication of an idea or a meme, to multiple points, and also methods and practices. And so all of the stuff that, like I all of the stuff I do is either open source, or creative commons, depending on what it is. And it is out there and I try I make it accessible to people, of course, like my reach is limited, but I also consider these things to happen. The I'm a node, Rosie's a node, everyone is acting on that so many of us actually desperately acting in similar ways on these issues. And so maybe, you know, like I used to, I used to have nightmares about how do we get everybody to know that, who else is doing things? Actually, maybe we don't need to have that. Maybe it's enough that we're doing them and learning as much as we can, you know, but it's, it struck me that, you know, with the scale of the things that we're having to address, like I've said before, actually, maybe the next step for humanity to be able to cope in this world that we've created is some kind of communal telepathy, that allows us to, you know, like, maybe technology or get us there, actually. But that allows us to work together in a much more effective way than we are at the moment, because as you say, and this is present in your work, like this collaboration is its key. Yeah.

Rosemary Lee

Yeah. Yes, I just had this little vision of everybody connected, you know, by their little fingers all over the world. Any other questions before? Yes.

Audience

I find it interesting that you both stumbled a bit on the idea of activism, because as a person who is fairly involved in the activist community, I actually see the work that you do as extremely crucial to this project. Activism, as we're activist as a label, I kind of agree has fallen out of fashion, I'm not quite sure why. But people in this world tend to call themselves organisers or campaigners, or choosing other words, that activists don't really come as a label anymore. And so as an organiser, you're organising people for a certain alternative future as a campaign, you're developing a campaign such a thing. And I think as an artist, you're also the key part of that project of reimagining what this future could be. And so when you were like, oh, we can bring down capitals in the next five years. I also agree. But when you pose the question, what is the other thing? Well, I think that's when the art comes in. And that's when literature comes in dance comes in other forms of art comes in because as being on more the political front, or the organiser, campaigner front there's sometimes a block of imagining what could be there and what could be that alternative. And your activism is providing that energy or that imagery, or some sort of release for that community have exhausted burnt out people to think beyond those ideas. And so, especially with this idea of embodiment, that like our current climate crisis is premised upon this idea that humans are separate from nature and that our minds are separate from our bodies. And so actually practising embodiment, through dance and through performance art is a crucial part of that activist piece.

Rosemary Lee

I think the reason I didn't we stumbled is not because I'm anti the word. I'm sorry, I didn't know that, that it was a we use it a lot more then. It's more that I feel like, it feels so gentle. And it thank you so much, because it's so affirming.

Audience

Gentleness is so necessary in a world that's like, in grinding and disempowered, I guess.

Rosemary Lee

Thank you. But yeah.

Kat Austen

it's really interesting to hear actually, I hadn't thought about my work being for activists. Yeah.

Rosemary Lee

Somebody, I heard a speaker talk about democracy on Friday night. And he said that democracy is as much a tool for our imagination that thought of what democracy might be, is a persuasive imaginary tool. So that reminds me, makes me think a little bit about what you're saying, too, that we need to we need to feed the imagination. It's really crucial. And also, I think the things we struggle to say and that we hear you, you agree, your agreement in sound and feeling around connectedness and around these, these things, that people that are are not valued enough, maybe if we have to, if we make that more present constantly, and we model that people are reminded of those, that cooperative nature, that differences is surmountable, in some way? Yeah.

Audience

So I'm asking this as much of myself and the work that I do as a viewer, and maybe everybody else in here as well. But why in these conversations, does capitalism come in so late? So just sort of looking at the time frame and what we had here today. It wasn't until the last five minutes that any one of us did utter the word capitalism. And yet, throughout the conversation, there was sort of mentioned that mentioned from you of the way you're offering things, that you're not being necessarily paid for the work that you're doing. So in a way, you're stepping outside of capitalism, or you're not charging for the audience members to see. And then your description of how you felt like a squash ball being bounced around is very similar, actually, I think, to what being a member of a capitalist society does to us. And that's actually how capitalism works and continues to generate itself, because we are in this one out of control, but we're being controlled. And so a question that of why if, if, actually, capitalism is sort of the umbrella that, in a way is causing climate change, and is also making it difficult for us to be artists in a large way. Why do we wait until so late in our conversations or in our work, or in our research? To pinpoint it and poke the finger?

Rosemary Lee

I think, I think just because we had embodiment first, and we are systems because I do No, no, no, I Yeah, yeah. I think a lot of people don't talk about it and connect it up. I think you're right. But I personally, I do all the time. But I Yeah, yeah. That I don't know what the I'm sorry.

Audience

And why? Or gently? Why are we so gentle about?

Kat Austen

Let me yeah, let me for that a little bit with Yeah. So the I remember being at climate camp, and seeing and it was on Blackheath, and two people from the local community came in, and they saw the anti capitalism, banners, and they left. And I remember thinking, Hmm, and I think that there's a real, there's a concept of an acceptable amount of disruption. And, indeed, to address climate change, for instance, like, you need everybody on boards, right. Some people are going to be fine with turning down their heating but they're not going to be fine with you flashing capitalism. So it very much depends on your end point and how you want to achieve it as to how you frame a dialogue. And I think that a lot of the time, there's a reluctance to address the elephant in the room in order to limit the amount of disruption to make it acceptable. I'm not sure if that's the right thing to do. I don't always do it. I don't in fact, I don't do it. But

Audience 1:15:33

Yeah, maybe it's a question of gently disrupting, or what's the sense for them actually educating about what capitalism is?

Kat Austen

What do you mean?

Audience

That, that perhaps those the people that are so put off by an anti capitalism sign, it's not about bombarding them with anti capitalism, but offering ways into what is it doing? How How are you implemented by this, this system? And I wonder how we could do that with our work. So it's not Yes. aggressiveness, but yeah, an education perhaps about how implemented by capitalism, and what effects that has on

Kat Austen

There are some artists to doing that kind of thing. Sorry. No, no. The demystification committee look at financial structures, for instance. Yeah. But I Yeah, that's a really good point. And really interesting. And indeed, why am I focusing on climate change and not focusing on financial systems? I'm not sure. Good point. Sorry.

Audience

While I was thinking, so I read something a couple of days ago, which was a new David Attenborough series is coming out. Yeah. The there was an article about the fight that said, you know, what, we're only doing a little bit about climate change, because people get turned off when we talk about it. And I'm thinking about well, I mean, if this is, forget, banging on the top of capitalism, it's feels like it's such an earlier step in terms of a consensus of something that we can only show. And I was thinking about, so whose responsibility is it to engender empathy or to support once I have some empathy to get me to act? And you know, I think, okay, so he's a filmmaker, and he's making documentaries, and they're going where they're going on a public broadcast apart for platforms as an educational remit from a tax funded broadcast, I want them to be railing about this and thinking, you know, the things when the report that we need the 12 years to limit warming to 1.5 deadline and thinking the the thing is to tell politicians that we will vote according to that.

Kat Austen

Yeah.

Rosemary Lee

Yeah

Audience

According to their behaviour. In relation to that, because we can't disturb the system. The only thing we can say is inform the system. If you don't do this, you don't have me fully other people as well. But it's sort of now I've got to sit down and write a letter to my MP. So far down the list of priorities. It's what I know right now. But then I think so if if then David Attenborough can't say say, no, they have to, compartmentalise the climate stuff about the Arctic into one programme, so they can still send it to the US. Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Sorry. That's not very useful.

Kat Austen

Somebody? No, it's totally irrelevant. Yeah.

Audience

I just want to point out that there was something very precious, gentle activism, that kinds of connects everything to us today. That how changes are made in nature. They're made in a very quiet silence. When we have an earthquake is not a result of that moment. It is happening 1000s of years before that, and what was there, there was a process of contamination of being present in the moment. And what is you are bringing to us in your work in different ways, is the embodiment of that precise thing. in how this can act, in our society, in relationships, as you have described very well, it puts people higher, you know, it will have a three, three thing. And this has a reach that is a totally different reach of things that are also important that we're purchasing. And then of course, we are extremely worried about our world. And when we think about all that struggle, and the labels and the capitalism that I don't believe capitalism exists anymore, if it exists, would be much better to have neoliberalism which is much worse the shape of documentaries we get, which is like society and impose it and it would have a capital that I was manageable off would be great. We have a problem that doesn't exist anymore, you know, corporations, mountains show up without any control much worse. So what we can do is to affirm a reality on the potentiality of change exist within this is much more powerful in my view, what you're bringing to us in a microscale is much more powerful of those blogs chaos fights and it is a scary is a scary topic.

Rosemary Lee 1:21:31

Got time for one more. Thank you so much for your lovely attentiveness and staying in the warm room with this man and a half and thank you for coming as well. Thank you for it.

(Outro: Renée Bellamy speaking in 2021)

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