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Rebecca Lennon: LIQUID i the Knot Commons

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Article DOI**Url**

<https://www.contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/rebecca-lennon-liquid-i-the-knot-commons>

ISSN

2631-5661

Cite as

Francesca Curtis and Kathryn Lloyd: 'Rebecca Lennon: LIQUID i the Knot Commons', *Burlington Contemporary* (4th November 2021),
<https://www.contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/rebecca-lennon-liquid-i-the-knot-commons>

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Cover image:

Rebecca Lennon: LIQUID i the Knot Commons

by Francesca Curtis and Kathryn Lloyd • 04.11.2021

LIQUID i the Knot Commons is a new, ongoing body of work by the artist Rebecca Lennon (b.1981), which has been developed with Matt's Gallery and Southwark Park Galleries, London, and Primary, Nottingham. The first iteration, a poly-vocal, three-channel video installation titled *LIQUID i* (2020), was shown at Primary (21st May–10th July 2021). This was followed by *THE KNOT COMMONS* (2021), a video installation and series of performances, at Dilston Gallery, Southwark Park Galleries (15th–31st October 2021). The two buildings demonstrate different types of repurposed civic architectures: a school and a deconsecrated church. Installed in these environments, Lennon's video works address subjects of housing, finance, bodily boundaries, the voice and the porous nature of selfhood.

Part I: LIQUID i

In the book *The Sea Around Us* (1951), the marine biologist Rachel Carson wrote extensively on the evolution of life from the ocean.¹ The origins of the earth, the result of gasses cooling into a liquid mass, eventually became habitable. Organisms in the ocean vastly predate terrestrial life forms. Fish, as we understand them today, signify 'our inheritance from the sea', allowing us to see shared ancestry in all creatures.² In Rebecca Lennon's video installation *LIQUID i*, the notion of selfhood – both human and non-human – is reframed. The artist explores the commonalities between humans, fish and mosquitoes and their processes of consumption and excretion, drawing parallels between the quality of liquid and the fluidity of selfhood. Examining 'those whose boundaries are roughly drawn', she asks what it means for one being to drink from another. The work continues Lennon's fascination with repetition, non-linearity and the dissonance between image and narration, all of which she exercises to question ideas of subjectivity.



Fig. 1 Installation view of *Rebecca Lennon: LIQUID i* at Primary, Nottingham, 2021. (Courtesy the artist and Primary, Nottingham; photograph Reece Straw).

The video installation begins with footage of feeding mosquitoes displayed across all three screens **FIG.1**, while a multitude of hushed voices hum, buzz, and whisper about thirst. The first identifiable full sentence is then uttered: ‘the first fish to be put here was named’. The voice continues: ‘she was slippery, hard to catch, but they all came here to find her even so’. A large carp is picked up from a sheet of black plastic on the ground, mouth gaping, sucking in air **FIG.2**. A person kneels on the floor, mouth also open **FIG.3**, while the narrator recounts a tale of ‘taking a fish out of her element’, naming her and photographing her before releasing her back into the water. The open mouth – both of the human and the fish – signifies that this is a fantasy loaded with violence **FIG.4**. A long croaking noise begins to falter, manifesting as the slow suffocation of the fish, removed from her liquid habitat; we are told that the fish was named Dyson.



Fig. 2 Installation view of *Rebecca Lennon: LIQUID i* at Primary, Nottingham, 2021. (Courtesy the artist and Primary, Nottingham; photograph Reece Straw).



Fig. 3 Installation view of *Rebecca Lennon: LIQUID i* at Primary, Nottingham, 2021. (Courtesy the artist and Primary, Nottingham; photograph Reece Straw).

*The first to catch her got to give her the name that would define her narrative, but each after that also had their special moment.*³

The three screens are located in what used to be a primary school hall and are framed by the exposed beams of its roof. This location

resonates with the ways in which lifeforms are classified, and often dominated, for educational purposes. Lennon's correlation between human and fish not only speaks to pedagogic and evolutionary perspectives, but also introduces themes of displacement. Images of cranes and building sites align Dyson's removal from the water with urban renewal and gentrification. The taxonomic documentation of lifeforms is paralleled with neoliberal regeneration; both operate on a fundamentally vampiric attitude that necessitates the exploitation of others.



Fig. 4 Installation view of *Rebecca Lennon: LIQUID i* at Primary, Nottingham, 2021. (Courtesy the artist and Primary, Nottingham; photograph Reece Straw).

The noises, akin to that in ASMR practices, that coincide with the repetition of certain phrases – from ‘the fish is always plural’ to the pulsing of the word ‘I’ – are characteristic of Lennon’s practice, most notably the video *Words Are Angular Sharp, Tenant* (2018), which also includes the repetition of ‘I’ alongside verbal tics to explore the boundaries of language. In *LIQUID i* this repetition leads to a rejection of linearity; past and present are suspended together in an unchanging cycle. A hand covered in thick black oil appears in the central screen momentarily – a signifier of contemporary pollution but also the prehistoric nature of fossil fuels. The work is therefore not only concerned with liquidity as a metaphor for the instability of selfhood, but also its associations with capitalist activity, finance and development – modes of exchange that are dependent on sucking the life out of others.

*She was called Dyson
She was called Dyson
She was called Dyson*



Fig. 5 Installation view of *Rebecca Lennon: THE KNOT COMMONS* at Dilston Gallery, Southwark Park Galleries, London, 2021. (Courtesy the artist, Matt's Gallery and Southwark Park Galleries, London; photograph Reece Straw).

Lennon's use of repetition and sounds draws on the affective possibilities of the medium to explore fragmentation and absurdity. This method resonates in particular with Laure Prouvost's *Deep See Blue Surrounding You* (2019), which was installed at the 2019 Venice Biennale. Prouvost's work also drew on the concept of liquidity to question who we are in relation to one another – a subject that certainly became more loaded in the developing context of Brexit.⁴ For Lennon, traversing time to explore our ancestry in fish is not only a means to explore human subjectivity but also an act of memorialisation.

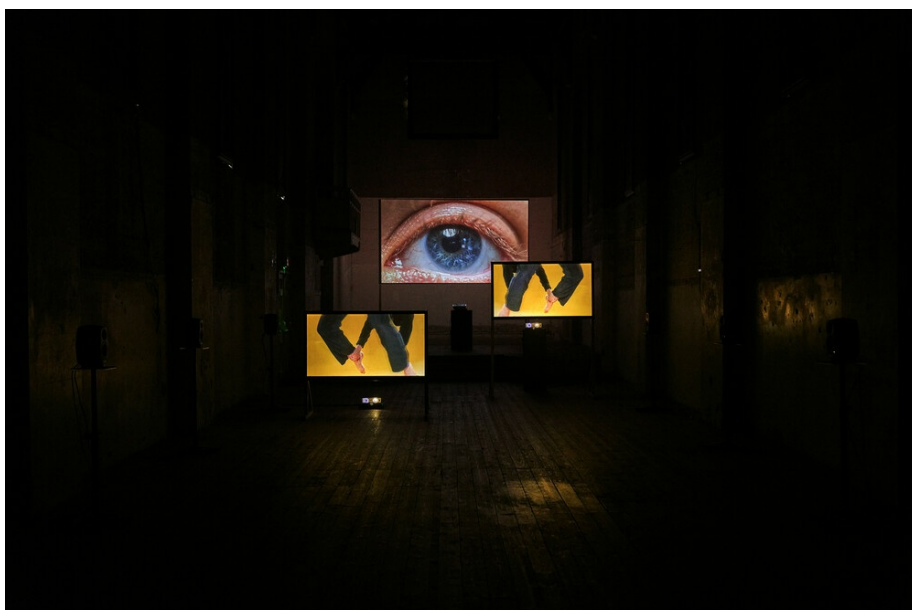


Fig. 6 Installation view of *Rebecca Lennon: THE KNOT COMMONS* at Dilston

Gallery, Southwark Park Galleries, London, 2021. (Courtesy the artist, Matt's Gallery and Southwark Park Galleries, London; photograph Reece Straw).

The thirsty feed off those with an excess to alleviate their lack, but liquid cannot pay what's due.

Part II: THE KNOT COMMONS



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Rebecca Lennon: THE KNOT COMMONS* at Dilston Gallery, Southwark Park Galleries, London, 2021. (Courtesy the artist, Matt's Gallery and Southwark Park Galleries, London; photograph Reece Straw).

In 1850 an unmarked, unsolicited box arrived at Kew Gardens, London. The box and its contents originated from Japan; from there it travelled to the city of Leiden in the Netherlands, before being dispatched to England. Inside the box was a single, female *Reynoutria japonica* plant, which had been collected by the doctor and botanist Philipp Franz von Siebold. Upon discovering how easily the plant could be cultivated, the Gardens' horticulturists began distributing it to nurseries around the United Kingdom. From these localities, cuttings of the plant were passed from gardener to gardener; it took root and established itself at an unprecedented rate, its strong, wood-like stems growing up to twenty centimetres each day. Nearly two hundred years later, *Reynoutria japonica* – most commonly known as Japanese Knotweed – can be found in nearly every area of the UK and its spread is controlled by government legislation. Each plant is a clone of that first female cutting, which arrived at Kew Gardens in the late nineteenth century.



Fig. 8 Installation view of *Rebecca Lennon: THE KNOT COMMONS* at Dilston Gallery, Southwark Park Galleries, London, 2021. (Courtesy the artist, Matt's Gallery and Southwark Park Galleries, London; photograph Reece Straw).

*And then there was a knotweed that spread its roots
under my house, splitting the pipes and throwing liquid
body out of the drains and down the street: an out-of-
body body disposal.*

In many ways, a knot is the opposite of a liquid. A knot is a solid mass – sometimes an orderly one, sometimes a chaotic one. It can be a protuberance or a node, it can cause a blockage or it can heal a rupture. A liquid, on the other hand, is defined by its lack of shape or structure. These two contrasting states of matter are explored in Lennon's three-channel video installation *THE KNOT COMMONS*, installed at Dilston Gallery. Across the three screens, the knot takes many forms: the invasive weed, but also a tied drawstring on a hooded jumper and the pulsating, bulbous forms of stress balls, the interior substance of which balloons through the fingers of the hands that manipulate them **FIG.5**. Creating a knot of limbs, an aerialist's suspended body folds back over itself, their hands grasping their ankles **FIG.6**. Similarly, liquid seeps its way through the work in a number of ways: water drains down a plug hole, the surface of a dark fluid collects hairy spores and throngs of mosquitoes feed from human skin, excreting drops of blood as they gorge **FIG.7**. Throughout the eight-minute work, liquid is repeatedly shown in propulsive motion, emanating from the open mouths of Lennon and her fellow performers in a perfect arc **FIG.8**. At points this is a reciprocal process, the arc bookended by separate mouths.

THE KNOT COMMONS continues Lennon's interest in the role of the voice and the organ that facilitates it. The narration is delivered by many mouths speaking one voice, or one mouth speaking many voices. Coughs, splutters, whimpers, hums and noises of dissent and agreement proliferate. There is often a slight lag on the repetition, creating the overall impression of an ever so slightly out-of-sync choir. The work begins with the refrain 'This is mine, this is yours', which is uttered repeatedly for over a minute in tandem – or competition – with a variety of vocal exercises and tics. The accumulation of noises is akin to the buzz of insects, as footage of mosquitoes feeding is displayed on screen. The words themselves are ambiguous, indicating both a sharing between participants and a division of assets.

Liquidation is the word given to the dissolution of assets after bankruptcy. An insolvent loses its form in liquid, dissolving, fizzing up like vitamin C and becoming it. Becoming liquid is the opposite of having a voice. But liquid cannot pay what's due.

Amid the pulsing noise, a story gradually emerges of a derelict street, the houses of which are falling prey to ruin. The removal of roof tiles has allowed water to seep in, causing them to rot from the inside. An invasion of knotweed has split pipes and water has spilled into the streets. For Lennon, the empty, hollowed-out house becomes a vehicle for the examination of bodily boundaries and their invaders, but also systems of ownership and exchange. In the fragmented narrative, dissolution and dilapidation refer both to the private and the public. Where there is liquid, there is also thirst, which in turn results in a form of exchange that is susceptible to corruption and domination.

An invasive species is not inherently so, its classification is determined by displacement. The most common cause is human action – both deliberate and accidental – as animals or plants are moved from a natural location to an unnatural one. What was once small and harmless enough to arrive in England in a box now has the strength to erupt through walls and pavements, targeting cracks and breaks in the order of material. Throughout *LIQUID i the Knot Commons*, the dominators and the dominated are tied together in a loop of repeated sounds and words. Lennon brings together states and forces that at once oppose and rely on each other. There are those – human and non-human – that draw sustenance from others, which exploit, penetrate and create holes, but there is also an unruly agency in the substances that break through.

*When the voice breaks, something else can come through
the holes, like liquid.*

Exhibition details **Rebecca Lennon: LIQUID i**
Primary, Nottingham
21st May–10th July 2021

Rebecca Lennon: THE KNOT COMMONS
Dilston Gallery, London
Matt's Gallery and Southwark Park
Galleries annual commission
15th–31st October 2021

LIQUID i the Knot Commons
www.mattflix.video
www.mattsgallery.org
15th October–19th November 2021

Footnotes

- 1 R. Carson: *The Sea Around Us*, New York 1961, esp. p.171.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p.60.
- 3 All texts in italics are quotations taken from *LIQUID i* (2020) and *THE KNOT COMMONS* (2021) by Rebecca Lennon.
- 4 See N. Rea: 'Laure Provost is digging a tunnel between the French and British Pavilions at the Venice Biennale', *Artnet* (8th May 2019), available at <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/laure-prouvost-digging-venice-biennale-1539073>, accessed 4th November 2021.

THE
BURLINGTON
MAGAZINE

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ISSN 2631-5661

The Burlington Magazine
14-16 Duke's Road, London WC1H 9SZ