

Stuart Hall Foundation & International Curators Forum present:

Living Archives – Season Two

Episode 2: Ebum Sodipo & Ain Bailey

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SPEAKERS

Ain Bailey, Ebum Sodipo, Yewande YoYo Odunubi

Yewande YoYo Odunubi 00:10

Hello, my name is Yewande YoYo Odunubi, and welcome to the Living Archive series, co-produced by the Stuart Hall Foundation and International Curators Forum. The Stuart Hall Foundation was established in 2015 by Professor Stuart Hall's family, friends, and colleagues. It's committed to public education, addressing urgent questions of race and inequality in culture and society through talks and events, and building a growing network of Stuart Hall Foundation scholars and artists in residence. International Curators Forum, ICF, is a catalyst and leader for cultural transformation in the visual arts, advocating for and fostering an equitable, inclusive, and accessible ecology that sustains and is sustained by the value of diversity through high-quality professional development initiatives, as well as critically engaged public programs and discursive outputs. ICF is transforming towards a better world for creative and cultural practitioners by resourcing them with the support spaces and leadership they need. What happens when two artists sit down together to talk? How might their conversation map a living archive of diasporic cultures in Britain? Hosted by the Stuart Hall Foundation and International Curators Forum, Living Archives is a podcast sharing intimate, intergenerational conversations between UK-based diasporic artists. The pairings in each episode begin with an invitation from one artist to another. Together, they exchange insights into art making, memory, and the ideas and influences shaping their practices. Rooted in Stuart Hall's vision of a living archive, this series is a record of creative dialogs that explore how histories, identities, and artistic practice are considered in the present. In episode two of this second season of the Living Archive series, we welcome Ain Bailey and Ebum

Sodipo, who reflect on their approaches to collage and archiving, the importance of the imagination within the current social political landscape, and their visions for the future. Thank you so much, Ain and Ebun, for joining me. To begin our conversation, can you take us back to when you first met or encountered each other's work? Can you share some of your initial impressions?

Ebun Sodipo 02:24

The first time I actually encountered your work in-person was at Serpentine. We did 'Atlantic Railton' with Imani, and I was like, "Okay." I was like...I think because I'm also interested in collage and the way that I work with sound, sometimes I was like, "Okay, who is this person?" Like, I really like this work. I also love the way that it was done, the movements, and then the way that the sound was, like, moving in the space, I think was the thing that really got me. And also, even listening to your recent work at Camden, just the way that it moves and the way that I have to, like, focus my body — I think that's what I really enjoy about your practice is I have to be quite present, or at least it makes me notice how my body is in space in relationship to the sound. So that's the first time I think I encountered your work, maybe before, but that was the one that really sticks in my mind. Yeah, it was incredible.

Ain Bailey 03:15

Thank you for that. I don't know that we met, but do you remember there was like this pop-up in Peckham, and you were, kind of, holding space, and you had a big afro...?

Ebun Sodipo 03:27

Oh my god!

Ain Bailey 03:29

That's the first time I actually saw you because we didn't meet, and I don't know -- I think I might have gone on my own? I can't remember, but then I think the first time I actually saw you after that, probably, was again like a 'Languid Hands' when they were doing a curatorial thing for Frieze and you were performing. Yes, and Rebecca Bellantoni was also on the bill, and then I think the first time I've seen your visual work was at CCA. And it's been really nice, kind of watching that kind of creative journey and the development of it. And then I know that you were recently actually in Frieze as part of -- I don't know what's it called -- it's a showcase of some sort?

Ebun Sodipo 04:17

Yeah, a booth. A booth.

Ain Bailey 04:19

No, no, but it has a title?

Ebun Sodipo 04:21

A presentation?

Ain Bailey 04:22

A spotlight or something. Anyway, yeah, I was like... "We love to see it. We love to see it." So yeah, I feel very proud, actually. It's really nice when you see people's journeys and that they seem actually quite happy on their journey. Do you know what I mean? Because I think a lot of people are just -- I mean, I don't want to cast aspersions, but they're not enjoying the ride, as it were. And I think that, for me, is part of the magic of what we do. Is that all the people we meet and we gather along the way, and we collaborate with, and we're inspired by and stuff. So, yeah.

Yewande YoYo Odunubi 04:58

I guess hearing you both speak about this journey of, like, growing as practitioners, I just wondered, maybe, because you've mentioned a few people, and it doesn't necessarily have to be people, but interested in some of the kind of key influences that have shaped your collective practices and how they're appearing in some of the materials or forms or processes that you're working with? It would be really interesting to hear that from both of you.

Ain Bailey 05:22

I think in the early days when I was literally just working solely with sound, it's a very solitary endeavor. Literally, it's just me and my computer, for the most part. But as I've kind of moved into the visual arena, even though, you know, I studied film at Central Saint Martins 100 years ago, so I've got a filmic language in my body a little bit, which I kind of use in my sound work in terms of editing. But what I quite like is being able to draw people in. So I'm not trying to do everything myself. So, say, like, for 'Atlantic Rails' and live -- of course, it was going to be Imani to, kind of, vocalise what that work was. What else have I done? Like, 'Version'. I worked with a whole host of people. I worked with a model maker. I worked with Elaine Mitchener, who vocalised one of the pieces. I don't want to try and do everything because that would just drive me nuts, and it would be super, super stressful. But fortunately, I do know people who are great and who are very talented, and who want to join the journey, as it were.

Ebun Sodipo 06:35

I kind of owe my practice and my career to, I feel like, Imani, Rabz, even BBZ who gave me, like, an early start, into like Aisha Richards from Shades of Noir who gave me, like, my first editing job after uni,

which then allowed me to, kind of, explore things critically, explore writing and theory, which then developed into poetry and performance. So, I think those are the really formative people for me who championed me, made me believe in myself. I remember the first 'BBZ', like, the graduate show in Peckham, I remember, I was talking -- I think it was one of the first times that I met Imani and Rabz, and I was like talking about like I was like, "Oh, this is so amazing," and I was kind of like, "Oh, I wish I could do this or I wish my work was blah blah blah," and they were really encouraging, and then they were the ones who gave me one of my first shows at Narrative Project in London ages ago. So, that was one of the first out-facing shows outside of uni that I did, and then there was Amrita Dhallu, Rochelle White, who, kind of, created this group called Eating at the Same Table, which brought young Black and Brown artists together, and then they did a show, and I was part of that, and then Amrita invited me to be part of the Peer Forum, I think it's called? Which is like a group of young artists [who] get a bit of funding to meet together. So, those are the things that really sustained me, and those are the people that really sustained me. So, I think yeah, I owe where I am a lot to the women in my life who've just told me to get on with it, I guess. I started making work from Tumblr. I think part of my identity is being like a Tumblr girl, but also being online at a time where a lot of Black people were getting politically aware, so we were all growing with each other as well, and that has definitely shaped everything that I do now. Those experiences on the internet, without those, I wouldn't be the person I am or make the kind of work that I make now. So, it's like a whole range of people, but yeah, definitely mostly just like Black women, Black femmes, and of course my sister Chloe, who gets me to like -- I remember when I was first going on-the-up and I was doing the most, she would, kind of like, get me to stop and rest and like just chill and take myself a little bit less seriously. Yeah.

Ain Bailey 09:02

If I can come back to that question, I mean, yeah -- if we're talking about literally who got me on my journey, there are a few artists, curators, and I always like to name-check people because you should always bring people into the room. So it's people like Rehana Zaman who included me in a group show at Eastside Projects in Birmingham, which I think was the first show that I did where it wasn't just about sound. It's the first time I actually worked visually, and then the first solo show I had, I was invited by Louise Shelley at Cubitt when she was a curatorial fellow in, whatever year that was, and then Hannah Wallace gave me another solo show at Wising, and then, throughout all of this, Lizzie Graham and Amal Khalaf, who were at Serpentine, they got me in to do my Sonic Stories workshops, and through them I actually got the Serpentine Commission, actually, as well. So, it's all these, kind of, young, young folk coming through. Also, not at the beginning of their journeys, but certainly some of them at the beginning of their curatorial journeys. And I always say to people, and certainly students when I work

with them, it's like, "What do we do? How do we get shown?". Like, well, you kind of just have to kind of try and keep being present for your practice, because you never know who's watching and listening, and making a note. And I think that's literally how loads of my stuff have come about. Does somebody, that I don't know, suddenly was, like, out of the blue -- "Oh yeah, I saw you do this thing, and da da da. Would you like to come and do this thing?" So yeah. Oh, big shout out to, sorry, Ima-Abasi Okon, total legend. It's a holistic art thing. I have to say with her, she is so inspirational and such a supportive friend, but also a supportive art friend, and someone I can go to if I've got queries or if I've got an issue, or "How much should I charge for that?". Like, really across the scale of how to be an artist, and super, super generous -- also bloody brilliant artist in her own right.

Ebun Sodipo 11:16

I have one question, which is maybe off the track a little bit, but that first show that you did with the visual stuff, I'm like, "How was that for you?". Like moving from sound to visual stuff. Like, how did you translate that?

Ain Bailey 11:29

Great question. It was actually fairly easy. So, it was a work called 'Din/Resonance in Blue', that's basically a sculpture, and -- I know we're going to talk about archives later -- but my mother passed away in 2013, and it took me like a year and a half to, kind of, go through all of her stuff, all of her papers. But in it, I found passport photos, but only three of them. So, I basically took my sonic story of 'Amazing Grace', which is a beloved, terrible hymn, but a beloved hymn sung at Caribbean funerals, and which I now can't really listen to because it's now forever associated with my mother's funeral. So, I basically, working with my friend Lara, blew this series of portraits up to like two and a half meters by sixty meters, and then embedded in the image the lyrics to 'Amazing Grace'. So, it felt for me like a natural segue, almost, into the visual, and even like the next show, which I think was the Cubitt show again, was dealing with Sonic stories, but then this -- it was me singing -- I think I sang 'Amazing Grace', it sounds terrible -- but I also then asked other people about their own sonic stories and about grief. So, it's kind of been this, kind of, slow journey, in it, out of it, and then back again. It didn't feel like a struggle, and I was quite surprised. And I was also quite surprised that I didn't make a sonic work, but that was also because the way that sound was going to be organised and the show didn't really fit with how I wanted my sound situated in the space.

Yewande YoYo Odunubi 13:12

What I find interesting about both of your practices is the different ways, or the different mediums, that you're using to explore these things that you're interested in expressing, but how they also morph into each other, and thinking about sound still being present in visual art. Thinking about your work, Ain, then also thinking about sound and, kind of, visual representation in your work, Ebum. One of the things that you, I think, mentioned earlier is around collaging and making this connection between both of your work, and I found that when I was listening to your sounds, Ain, and looking at especially some of your video work, Ebum, and thinking about some of your sculpture and print work, and I just wondered, could you both speak to this idea of collaging in your work and thinking about how you're, I guess, building or gathering material to put things alongside or be in relation to one another?

Ebum Sodipo 14:05

Collaging for me is like my main method of working, I would say. Collaging and fragmentation, because they always go hand-in-hand. Sometimes, I mean, sometimes when I collage with particular images, I don't cut them or transform them, but I still consider them like as fragments of stuff, because I guess like the whole thing that I'm collecting is not just the visual image, not just the income paper, but also the history behind it, the kind of emotions that it can evoke, and that the way that it speaks to you, as well. So, that idea of like, maybe not like audible sound, but the things that you hear and you feel when you encounter an image, and I think someone that was really important for me in that kind of thinking around images was Tina Campt, when she was talking about like slow images and the touch that you can feel and things that like linger or things that come out. And a lot of the places where I get my images from is, again, Tumblr and the internet, and I was doing this, again, at a time where people were kind of coming into political consciousness. Now I've talked about this a few times in different places, but this act of gathering and collecting these images that people would share was a way to capture, to archive this this political awakening, this moment in time, this particular point in this cycle of like liberation and white resistance to liberation, and so I just wanted to capture that. But instead of, like, doing something that is capturing things that are expected or capturing history in a way that we're used to seeing it, in the way that it's usually captured in terms of like -- you do an interview with someone and ask them about like, "What are your feelings about these events?", and I know something really specific I wanted to go like just tangential and think more about the emotional states of people at that time, the kind of affects that they were feeling and the ways that they articulated that. So, it was more like, "Why would someone choose to post a photo of a flower or a shoe?", or, I don't know, whatever kind of image or sound or thing that they wanted to post about. And also, people at the time were also writing a lot about what Blackness means for them and in relationship to other people and like making these rules.

So, I think it was like the formation of what is, like, the social justice war on consciousness, but Black, and so, it was like people really fighting and struggling for like their own space to have a world that respects them and treats the history as valid and treats their emotions as valid, and so all of these things where I was seeing and like the images that people were sharing, the little sound bites, the memes that people were sharing, because they communicated so much knowledge and so much history. And so, that's why I started to collect these images in these moments, and so that's, kind of, a lot of what goes on in my collage, and so I think of them as a little fragment of the of this larger, broader moment that then I have to reconfigure, and I think also coming into my own as like a political being as, like, an adult. I was also thinking about like questions that were really important for me, and I think this is probably because I'm a migrant from Africa, and I came back to -- I was born in the UK, but then we moved, and then we came back when I was 11, and so I think growing up in Nigeria and like the way that race plays out is really, really different from here, and so the body -- how one's perception of the body starts to shift when you go across the water and come into Europe, and so, for me, I was really questioning like, "Why this change? What is happening? Why am I Black? Why am I in relation to these people?", I was thinking a lot about gender. So, all these questions of, like, "Where are these things coming from? Where am I pulling these ideas from of who to be and how to react? And where are other people getting their ideas of what it means to be a man, a woman, a white person, and blah blah blah? And so, I started to really think about...I call it like the mad swirling grabbing thing. This kind of like the ways in which we form our identity and our consciousness is to pick and choose like different bits of random things in our experience in our everyday world, and we consume them and take them in, and that kind of forms who we are. So, and again, I think of identity as another way of talking about fragmentation and collages, human beings and human subjects as being themselves, collages of fragments of things that exist in the outside world, and so that's kind of also why collage is like an important methodology. It both reflects the way that we come to ourselves, the way that we form an identity, and then also because I also wanted to show the way that people were moving and relating to one another at a particular point in time, and now that's kind of shifting and changing. I feel as I grow older, obviously some questions are less interesting to me as well. In social media, and the internet has changed radically from when I was younger, and I think back then it was -- at least I was able to cultivate a space where people were actually reading books and talking about what they were reading, and not just talking about whatever. Like now, I feel like social media is just full of people who just want to go at each other. I don't know. Maybe it's not quite fair, but there's not that many spaces where people can engage in critical discussions, whether or not you're studying a master's, or you're like 12 years old and, like, asking a question. That space for critical discussion, that is, like, the aim of it is liberatory, isn't really present. Instead, like the way that social media functions, Instagram, Twitter; it's all

to elicit emotion and elicit particularly anger because these quick-fire emotions make us respond to these things, and we're engaging with all these platforms. So, I feel like all the spaces for more patience and deeper thought are gone on the internet as well. So, my interests have shifted a lot because the kind of way that people use that is just really, really different.

Ain Bailey 20:00

I think the way that I certainly edit sound, and, I guess, now technically also working with moving image, I would say is based on my learning about film, and, I guess, in particular experimental film when I was studying. So, at the time at Saint Martins, I, you know, was looking at people like Stan Brakhage and Maya Deren -- Maya Deren and Sergei Eisenstein are probably the two people who made the greater impact in terms of how you place one image together with another image, and how you make something else. And I think that's literally how I work with sound. And so, when I'm making sound, and I say this every time, and I can't believe I do this every single time, but for every new project, I make a completely new set of samples for that project. And as I'm playing around and playing in the sandbox, as it were, in Ableton, I'm always trying to form the narrative of how the sound will be. It takes ages. It's like the longest, longest part of the process. I think there was also something that I love working with sound, that I wanted to feel really cinematic and huge because there was always this thing -- I think when I was starting out working with sound, and I think it's less, but I think it's still very prevalent, that the visual always, kind of, has authority over sound. And I remember having a show, and there was an issue with the sound for my work, and I called Ima, and Ima was like, "Everybody wants the sound, but nobody wants the sound. And I just thought that, kind of, really nicely summed up that kind of power dynamic between the two mediums. And I know lots of people talk about having sound in their work, but every single show I have ever had there's been an issue with the sound, like for people, it's just really invasive, which it is, and I really appreciate that but I think to, kind of, physically turn sound down or off is a whole other thing because you wouldn't turn a video off, you wouldn't turn the lights out in the gallery because you don't like the way the painting looks, right? Anyway, back to montage. So basically, I think of my work -- it could be collage, it could be montage, but it's always how things sit together and how things layer. And I'm all about layering, and I'm all about looping. Those are, kind of, my two favorite ways to create, both visually - although I use loops less in my visual work at the moment, but certainly in sound, I'm all about repetition and layering and seeing how things, kind of -- if I make loops at different lengths, and how when they go round and round, how they're drifting and making new, kind of, connections and the textures, yeah.

Ebun Sodipo 23:06

So, I think when you were talking about how you kind of put the sound together and you try and form a narrative, and so it's like you've got all these -- this is how I'm imagining it, and maybe this is how I do it -- so you've got all the samples, and you chuck them in, and then you're like, "What works next to what? What's good?". And then you're like building slowly something that for you makes sense as a narrative, which I also love the idea of forming a narrative just from sound, and because like the sounds and you have like sometimes people are talking, but then it's also like loads of different things, right? It's lots of different sounds, and so I love the idea of forming a narrative and things that aren't so communicative, or at least they don't lend themselves so easily to, like, understanding language in that way, which I really love. And I think that's also kind of how I think about images as well, because I'm always like it could be like little fragments of a single clip that doesn't really say anything, or like a really zoomed-in -- sometimes it's like a flaw or like a shimmer, but it's so zoomed-in that the meaning is lost. But then you build like some kind of like emotional scaffold, or that's how I think about onto it through all these things, but it does take a lot of time because you're shifting and playing, and like you're like, "Okay, maybe that works," and you're like, "Maybe if I try with this," and then you go back, and then you're like, "No, no, no, let's do this one," and then you come back the next day, and you're like, "What the hell was that?" So that really, really resonates a lot with me, but I also like when you said, like, layering and leaping, what did you mean by --

Ain Bailey 24:51

Looping?

Ebun Sodipo 24:51

Looping. Oh, okay.

Ain Bailey 24:53

But there is a sense of leaping -- and it's funny because I had this residency / fellowship at Cambridge Art Science Fellowship in Cambridge a couple of years ago, and basically I was embedded in the Physics Department. And basically the question was: How does my practice relate to physics? And for me, it became: we leap into the unknown, both as physicists and as artists, because we start -- I mean, I never know how anything is going to turn out when I make work, like ever. But you're kind of trusting in the process of making and playing and fiddling about that the thing will appear, and I think that's also -- I mean, physicists would describe how they do it differently, but I think there's lots and lots and lots of parallels. So, absolutely leaping.

Ebun Sodipo 25:42

Another resonance was this idea of like that you never use the same sample in a new project, which I love. How do you create these samples?

Ain Bailey 25:55

So basically...I think I still call myself this -- I basically call myself, or used to, it's kind of shifting a little bit, an electroacoustic composer. Which kind of means that I go out into the world and make a recording, and take that back to my computer, and manipulate the hell out of the material until it becomes something unrecognisable. So, lots of field recordings. I've made works where I've recorded the electrical signals, currents in the appliances in my flat. I've recorded my breath. That was for a piece about my mum dying, which was quite difficult. But anyway, but all just plucking, plucking, and even like my current work, because I went to Jamaica recently, but then I got ill four days in, so I'd taken lots of images, but I hadn't really done any recordings. Then we traveled to the Blue Mountains, which was its own terror, but it was so beautiful. But then I was immediately ill. But I vowed -- because we're only there for one night, so I got up in the morning, took more images, but then made recordings because I thought, "I've come so far, I cannot not have recordings," one from Jamaica, but also from the Blue Mountains, which is such incredibly, beyond-beautiful place. But then bringing that back to my studio, I'm like, "Yeah, it's pretty beautiful, but it needs something else." So, it's never just the field recording. It will always be -- if, indeed, the field recording is recognisable, it will always be me tinkering and putting some other like a texture on it, a rhythm, reverb, delay, echo, whatever. There's always processing. It's very much at the center of what I do and make.

Ebun Sodipo 27:48

Like, how do you even describe that process of like, you hear something and then you're like, "This I must have"?

Ain Bailey 27:57

So, say for the Jamaica project, I knew that I wanted to capture sounds in the Blue Mountains as a very kind of central part of the work. I got loads of new mics and da-da-da-da, and in the end, I think I used maybe one or two, just because I was ill and there wasn't time, and I just couldn't do it. But it's not so much -- I think it's more that I have the idea for a thing, and then I try and find a sound that represents the thing. I think it's more that. But having said that, I also, you know -- most of us have mobiles with good recording facilities on it, so I am out and about sometimes, and if I hear something that will

intrigue me, I will record it, and I've done that. I mean, they live on my phone; they never make it out, but they're there as a weird archive to be discovered at some point. Voice notes, I love voice notes. So even if I'm trying to have an idea about a melody, I will kind of sing it into my phone, and try and play it on the piano, and I'm like, "Ah, okay." So there's all sorts of ways of coming at it, and always trying to find something different as well. So, trying to expand my practice sonically, to always trying to hear something new, which makes it even harder because then I have to try and learn and find new devices and processes and plugins and da-da-da-da. It takes long.

Ebun Sodipo 29:31

Yeah. Do you keep these sounds afterwards?

Ain Bailey 29:34

Oh yeah, I have everything, I think. But being profoundly dyslexic, it's completely disorganised, so I couldn't tell you where they are.

Ebun Sodipo 29:44

Okay. Okay.

Ain Bailey 29:45

But they're somewhere.

Ebun Sodipo 29:46

So there's like a massive bank of name sounds.

Ain Bailey 29:50

Yes.

Ebun Sodipo 29:50

Okay. Because I keep every image and sound that I've collected since 2013. So, I've got my own little massive bank of things as well.

Ain Bailey 30:03

Is it organised?

Ebun Sodipo 30:05

I feel like there's endless ways to organise it. When I actually first was like pulling all these things together, and then I was like, "Okay, maybe I should treat this as like a proper archive and start to like create like a catalogue", and how someone could navigate all this material because I I was like, "An archive can be a collection of anything, right?". It could be like receipts, it could be like -- I don't know. It could even be like a collection of dust, and they always say something: "You can draw a narrative and a story out of a collection of objects," but the point of the archive is how it's read is the really important thing. That's what gives meaning to it, and how it's read depends on how it's arranged, and how someone is supposed to navigate around it. So, like a collection of historical objects can say something vastly different under one person's control or manipulation than someone else's, and so I was like, "How do I get all this text and sound and images to kind of say something that I feel like they should be saying?". So, I was trying to catalogue it into different things, and I was like, "Black magic, Black trauma, Black-blah-blah," and then I was kind of like -- it just became a bit too much for me, and kind of away from the point as well. So, I stopped cataloguing it. So, now it's just a whole bunch of stuff that I just have to go through them every single time. And I even tried to be like, "Oh, these ones are the really funny ones, and these ones are the more serious things." And even the distinctions started to fall apart, and I was like, "Maybe I just have to respond to the only meaningful way that I've cataloged them is: ones that I've used and the ones that I haven't used," because I'm like you as well, I try not to use the same images, but there's particular images that I've used again and again and again, and I probably will continue to. That they'll continue to make a point because I think they mean something for my entire practice as opposed to a particular work. Like this image of Celine, who's like this half-bird woman who is like a monster and kills people. She appears in almost every single moving image work that I've made; Naomi Campbell appears in the last moving image work I made. That's the only time that she's not appeared in anything. So there are particular motifs that come up as well in my work.

Ain Bailey 32:34

I think it's interesting to talk about how you catalog your archive because I have two friends, Gemma Romain and Ego Ahaïwe Sowinski, who are like my archive senseis, and they, kind of, have instilled in me -- I mean, they haven't forced me, but I listen to them -- I love the way that Gemma talks about...she would call herself a historian. Ego's an archivist, Gemma's a historian...about reading against the grain in an archive. So, she goes into these archives, and it is like, "What isn't there and what are we missing? And who are we not hearing? What hasn't been archived, actually?". Because there must be so much material that is languishing, literally, in dusty boxes, waiting for someone to either have the time or the inclination, even, to actually kind of bring these archives to light. But I think

there's also something to be said, like about -- I think Ego talks about it -- like a living archive, which is literally like you say: everything. It makes me think, like about wills. So if I were to pass away tomorrow, what happens to my own archive? What happens to my work? What happens to all my vinyl collection, my book collection? Because that's part of my archive. You know, my notes on my phone, and it's also like -- I owe it to myself to kind of get it in order. I do, but it also feels now quite huge. I often think about creating a workshop where we all come together and we just literally start thinking about our own archives and how we leave them to people.

Ebun Sodipo 34:16

I'm pretty sure that lots of people would love to come work on your archive. Like, I'm absolutely 100% sure. Like I would be like, "Yes." If you ever need assistance, I'm sure there's a lot of people, myself included, that would love to come and work on your archive. But like, what hasn't been archived, I think that's also what motivated me to collect the things that I do, right? Because it's like, the archive, and in terms of like the state archive, institutional archives. These are like ledgers. It's an archive of capital, of the flow of money and power, and not of everyday people. And even when I think about like -- I've been working on this woman, Victoria, and her life for ages, and building performances, and I'm like, "What do commoners wear in the 16th century?". It's incredibly difficult to find it because what has been archived is like rich people's outfits, and so it's like, "What's everyday people doing? What do they do in the home? What's everyone eating? What do things smell like?". You know, those kinds of questions, like the detritus of everyday living, are never really captured in archives. I think only recently that people have been kind of doing that, and so it's always been like a record of transactions of land, of rich people-travel, and who gets access to be archived as well, are really important questions for me. And I think that's also why I'm like, "Let me use this social media archive to tell stories that haven't been told before." Yeah, what hasn't been archived is super important.

Yewande YoYo Odunubi 35:51

I think listening to you both, and I was thinking about the role that imagination plays in your work, in being able to tell these stories, whether it be people who have histories that we we don't know enough about, so there are gaps in our knowledge around that, and what the kind of role that imagination, creative imagination, plays in being able to imagine those gaps rather than fill those gaps. Imagine those gaps.

Ebun Sodipo 36:17

For me, imagination in terms of when I think about imagination in my creative practice, I think a lot about the gaps in the archive and how to fill in those gaps, right? And it's kind of like imagining, "How would I have felt in this time when I'm watching some historical drama?" and I'm like, "What would it actually have been like for someone like me in that time?". And then pushing against the "Well, you would have been killed," or like, "You would not have been happy," or blah-blah. Like actually, what then would it take for me to have been happy in that time? Or where can I find these moments of sustenance in that time? And so that kind of lends itself to like then imagine like, "Okay, trans people," -- and then I have to do the research of what were people's ideas about gender at the time and what was race like at the time? And then that kind of fosters better imagination. It fosters the possibility of my life in that time or a life like mine in that time. So, a lot of that kind of stuff is just -- I have to sit down and daydream, just kind of wonder. And I think I grew up reading a lot of Danielle Steel, who's like a romance writer, and so romance is like -- it's kind of the place that I usually go to when I go to the past. It's like. "I'm in the 16th century and I'm in love with someone, and what happens then? And how does that blah-blah..." So, love is really -- when I think about these things, it's kind of important. So, it's like a starting point. So, love and imagination always have to go hand-in-hand. And I love to daydream. I've been daydreaming a lot recently. I keep having like three, four kids in my daydreams, which is great. But that's off-topic. But how imagination shows up in my relationship with the images that I collect? I don't know. That's quite a difficult question because, I guess, I'm kind of like -- I just go off like my initial response to something, and then I ride with that. Like if it's like a sound or if it's an image that I'm like, "How does this make me feel?". And then maybe the imagination lies in how I piece them together in the relationship with each other and the way that I twist them, or something, or like how I zoom into like a particular section of like a sound, an image, whatever that makes something. And that's the kind of shift into like what it could be, or how to amplify what it is that I think it means, or what it means for me by then juxtaposing it to other stuff or layering it with other images. Then what I'm thinking kind of comes out. What I'm feeling about it, kind of, comes out by that relationship with sound and images together. But yeah, for me, when I think about imagination, I'm thinking about narrative and story, and how someone might look, how a scene might look, how someone might be moving through a space, what kind of movements, what kind of feelings might this person have had? Yeah, because, for me, it's like a lot of the stories that I write, a lot of performances that I do -- because that's where I feel like the imagination is super important; are all about writing a story that hasn't been told and is actively being discouraged from being told.

Ain Bailey 39:34

I think daydreaming is a big part of it. I think it's twofold. I think daydreaming -- but I think it's also the conditions in which you can daydream. Like, "Do you have a job? Are you stressed about money? Do you have a studio? Is your love life shit?". I mean, there are all these things because we don't move through -- I mean, some of us might, I don't know -- we don't move through the world just as an artist, it's like a holistic thing. So you know, "Is my house tidy? Can I be arsed to tidy my house?". But I think, in terms of imagination itself, certainly when I make work, I always try to allow myself enough time to think about it and to make it. But also knowing that, you know, creative genius -- not that I am, but the first thing I'm going to do isn't the thing that it's going to be right? And so, it's also like coming to terms with that's the process, but it's also fun because it's the process, but this is not the thing. So, what is the thing? And that's where you keep on and on, but you also give yourself enough time to kind of go, "That's shit, it might not be shit, some of it might be shit," and you have time to, kind of, rethink, reimagine, and constantly evolving and constantly thinking. So yeah, giving yourself time to imagine, and hopefully having the conditions in which you can imagine.

Ebun Sodipo 41:02

And I guess it's also like having all the things. Like, imagination also requires resources in terms of mental conceptual resources. Like, you have to -- like a good imagination is like a rich imagination, which is full of different things. So, you also have to encounter lots of different things and take in a lot of stuff to then start to mix and shift things around in your head, like a poor imagination or like -- I guess like, even now, like the kind of lack of political imagination in what is economically possible -- I think it comes from like not knowing how actually people live, and like not from like seeing what's happening and then how do you reconfigure all these things into something new, you know? And obviously, like power has a lot to play into that and privilege as well. But like, I think when we're thinking about like imagination, I think you have to live a life to be able to like imagine something like rich and good, and that other people can kind of step into and relate to as well, and I say this because I also want to write a book in the future, so I'm like I need to like read lots and like learn how language works in like lots of different contexts and get lots of like different ideas and see how other people are like doing stuff, so then I can start to mix things as well. I think what Ain and I do is like bringing lots of different things together to make something new, to make something different from the original. And like, I say this as someone who has been feeling like I've been making the same stuff over and over again, even though I've really only been doing stuff for like three, four years, there's definitely space to keep tradition, right? And there's space to do the same thing, but I think so much doesn't work in the world. And even if it's someone's like practice, like creative practice; if it doesn't work, like shift it, try something new. If it's not

adding anything new to you, I think there has to be some discomfort in order to shift. Like my flatmate always tells me, "I don't like change," that I like everything --

Ain Bailey 43:03

You don't like change?

Ebun Sodipo 43:04

Yeah. That's what she says, because she moves something in the house, and I'm like, "What are you doing?", or "Do you want to paint something?" and I'm like, "But why? Why do we need to change the paint in the house? Like it's totally fine." So there's loads of things that I'm like, "Why don't we just keep it the way it is. Why do we have to shift it?". But I guess I'm kind of like speaking about...it's kind of like TV shows and like the kind of formulas and narratives. That's what I mean by like, "I wish that people were just doing something new and different instead of giving us the same kind of dynamics and in relationships." Like one thing for me is like science fiction, in like how in a lot of science fiction, it's just the same world that we live in with maybe you've got lasers, and I'm like, "Can you give us something like really radical, you know, like give us like 'The Left Hand of Darkness', give us like you know like Ursula K. Le Guin." Like I love her writing because the world that she presents is it can be so radically different than the one that we have at present.

Ain Bailey 44:10

I think all of it's true, but I think, also -- but who are the gatekeepers? Who is commissioning? Who is greenlighting the same science fiction story over and over again. It's a different street. Do you know what I mean? So I think it's this, and I think it's also that. Because if you have a radical idea, and you know no one's going to ever commission it, do you kind of go, "Well, I'll just fall back into this kind of work that's kind of adjacent to what gets commissioned? Or do I hang out here on my own with no funding? If that's the thing that you want to do, do I try and write it? Do I try and find another way? Do I put it on YouTube? Which obviously is what a lot of people do as well, and then they kind of get picked up and can get shows, kind of, commissioned off of stuff they're doing on their own. It's really hard. It's really, really, really hard, and the fact that people persist, I find staggering. To be honest, you really gotta love what you do to, kind of, certainly be an artist here, because it is so hard.

Ebun Sodipo 45:16

Yeah, I don't know. For me, it's also like, how do you try to shift the world a little bit in the things that you're doing? Even though it's really, really tiny. Like, art is not as powerful as the people who buy art

like to pretend it is. But like there is still maybe some way of like doing small little shifts, and I guess that's what maybe I'm trying to say is like, "When you're representing the world, where's the thing that just shifts it a little bit?", and maybe it's just things that I personally find really interesting, as opposed to some like moral statement.

Ain Bailey 45:48

I am interested -- I'm interested in the bigger picture, but I'm also interested in people having their own voices as opposed to mimicking other people's voices. And that's I think the issue that I sometimes have. So, you see something working over there, and it's like "Okay, I might borrow a bit." So it becomes familiar, and it's a little bit different. But I'm like, "Well, why are you doing that?". But, yeah.

Ebun Sodipo 46:12

Yeah. And I think that I appreciate being inspired. Like I look at other people's work, and I'd be like, "Oh, I would love to try this out, but I don't want to sound arrogant, whatever." But I'm kind of like, "I'd love to try this out and then make it work for me" and say --

Ain Bailey 46:31

Absolutely. But we're all influenced. Everything we listen to, see, hear, not hear, you know, consciously, unconsciously, it's all there. It's a whole gumbo.

Ebun Sodipo 46:45

Yeah, I mean, like we're always taking and building from the things outside. Like I want to take. I want to use. I want to...I think human beings love to imitate and copy. We love to perform what we've already seen, and I think it gives us a really, really special kind of pleasure, but in that repetition of something that you've seen or something that you've heard, how do you put yourself? How do you put a spin onto it that then is you? Like makes it yours, in a way.

Ain Bailey 47:14

Me doing Beyoncé would definitely be a spin.

Ebun Sodipo 47:15

Huh?

Ain Bailey 47:17

Me doing Beyoncé would definitely be a spin.

Ebun Sodipo 47:19

Wait, can you now? Now that you've said it...

Ain Bailey 47:24

I don't think anybody's ready for that.

Ebun Sodipo 47:25

See!

Ain Bailey 47:27

Be careful what you wish for.

Ebun Sodipo 47:29

That's the next performance, Ain.

Ain Bailey 47:30

Oh my God! Oh my God. Yeah, anyway, imagination. Yeah, that's what that topic was.

Yewande YoYo Odunubi 47:41

Thinking also around, like really wanting to touch on, like, live performance in both of your practices because I think listening and embodiment feels really key, not just as thinking about yourselves as practitioners, but also thinking about the audiences, and like when they step into a performance and whether that be, again, live sound and thinking about all of that, what encompasses with that, and also thinking about live performance. I guess, I wondered for you how important is the live context to your work, and what it is that you're trying to share with audiences and also kind of express in these ideas that you're trying to bring out in the world?

Ain Bailey 48:23

I mean, I guess my live work -- I love gathering people, so when I get the chance to play live, I'm deeply appreciative of how people turn up to listen, and they do. Although, that Camden show, it took a little while for people to kind of settle down because they were really yapping, but then I played with the

sounds and was fading it in and out until they shut up. So, that kind of worked. But I really, I'm always deeply appreciative and feel privileged that people come out of their house to sit in a room, and I always like the room to be dark because, for me, I really want them to be tuned into the sonic, and to really try and concentrate on the sound. I would love for someone to share with me how they feel listening to my work in congregation with others in the dark...but I don't think a lot about what it means to play live. To be fair, I love doing it, and I'm glad I get to do it. But I don't really theorise about it too much.

Ebun Sodipo 49:31

I guess it depends on what the work is, because I work in so many different arenas. When I'm writing something to be performed, whether or not it's performed for film, or whether or not it's performed for an audience, is super, super important. And so, when it's like a live performance, obviously the audience is incredibly, incredibly important. And then, in that, there are some performances that require a connection with the audience for it to land and hit and do what it needs to do. My performance in the archive really requires an engaged audience that is confident, as well. I can't have like people who are too scared to make noise in that performance because then it doesn't land, and then it just makes it like not the same thing and like not good, and so it like -- I require someone there, and then there's also like some performances, like my earlier stuff, which also had like a sonic element to it, right beyond my voice. Like, um, one of the performances that I did with 'Languid Hands', there was like this scaffolding that I was hitting and was producing these like deep bass sounds that really affected the body, and so I sometimes think a lot about, not a lot, but I think about how the audience is feeling in sitting and how the sound affects them. But in almost anything that has my body in it, my voice is present, and how my voice hits the audience is super important for me. So, I practice a lot on how my voice changes, and what kind of sounds I'm producing, and how breathy my voice is, or how deep it is, or like how quick I'm speaking, or like -- because then, for me, it's like all of these engagements are they communicate the story that I'm trying to tell, and I think also I'm very aware of how my body appears and sounds to an audience of people that I don't know, as well. So, how I'm heard will colour the interaction with me afterwards, because then, maybe, out of performance my voice is slightly higher, and there's like a different kind of femininity that I'm projecting, and then maybe when in performing, my voice is deeper, more masculine, and so that really colours how then I'm treated and how the work is absorbed and felt and understood, because then if it's a woman performing, the work will be taken in a really different way than a trans woman talking or like a man talking, and so those are things that I'm very cognisant of, and how I use my voice is super important. And then the song and the singing, where that sits, how that affects people, as well. So, all of these things, I'm thinking a lot about the voice and its effects on

people. Like in the archive, the timbre and the pacing is super, like -- sometimes, like I want to draw people into it, and then I want to enter into storyteller griot mode. So, these are just kind of like different strategies that I have to employ in the work in order for me to feel like the work is succeeding in doing what it needs to. And so, in that sense, like a live audience is super important for me, and those kinds of performances that I don't ever want to record, and I never want any documentation. The Frieze performance with 'Languid Hands' was recorded, and I hated it, and I never want to do it again. And like, it's still online because I haven't -- I should probably email them, take it down -- but like, I hate watching that performance so much because, in the moment: excellent. One of my favourite things to do, and I, because it was kind of partly improvised as well, it felt so rich for me, and I think for the -- I would hope for the audience as well -- but then, that life is dead. It's killed by the camera. It's killed by the flatness. You don't get the breath of everyone in the room. You don't get the chairs moving when I'm moving around. You don't, so the physical experience of the performance has also become as important in that way.

Ain Bailey 53:31

It's interesting because I feel like I am...and I was thinking about it for the Camden show, or after the Camden show, because I normally don't want to be seen at all because I'm on my computer and I could be checking my emails, and I think it must be the dullerest thing to look at, and I think it is. And I've seen people with their laptops, and you just got the glow of the screen, and you're kind of waiting for something to happen, and you know it never will. And that's why, personally, I like to be in the dark because it's about the sound. I mean, if I ever want to be animated in some way, then that's a whole different thing. But I think while I'm on my laptop and my controller, literally performing the sound itself, it won't change.

Ebun Sodipo 54:17

I'm thinking back to the Camden performance, and again, like the way that the sound enters the space and encounters you, I think that is so powerful. For me, I'm kind of like shifting and turning and moving and like, you know, all of these things with it, which I really, really love. And then there was also another performer, maybe the day that you're performing or the day after or something, and like the way that they were moving, and I think maybe this is like the weird artist thing that's like, "Oh, that's so interesting," and it's just like a leaf falling. But the way that they were moving their hands on the laptop, I was like, "Oh wow, this is so --". And I think because of the lighting, the shadow became really like a visual thing as well. So, it was also like a moment to appreciate and just being there, watching someone, the light illuminating their body as they're doing all these things. I think that's also like a really

special aesthetic engagement. But maybe that's just like, again, the artist is like, "Oh my god, everything is interesting," kind of vibe. But for me, it's like how you're doing it.

Yewande YoYo Odunubi 55:23

So, I guess I wanted to just check in if there were any more questions you maybe had for each other that you wanted to kind of bring up?

Ain Bailey 55:31

I always like to ask, "What does the future hold?"

Ebun Sodipo 55:34

So, the original plan was to have kids by 35. That's not going to happen, but I still want kids in my future. I'm trying to make this collage of like this house I keep seeing in my future with like this big courtyard and I'm like this older woman, gray locks and like this red robe and there's like grandchildren running around. So, that's one of the things I want the future to hold for me. So a family, maybe that has a partner in it. I don't know. I don't care. I just know I want to raise children, and then, so I guess that also kind of means like making enough money to, one: support this family, but also to afford a lawyer because the UK -- deeply transphobic in every single way, shape, and form. And then, yeah, just to be stable. I just want to be able to live in a very comfortable way, which is getting increasingly out of reach. Even though it feels like the career is growing, but I don't know. It feels like a bit difficult to kind of imagine actually what it will be like because there's so much shifting at the moment, in terms of like the economy and politics, like what AI and technology is really doing to the future is stripping away the future and any kind of idea of what it could be like, and like the dystopias that we see in films, I don't think it's going to be like that. I think it's going to be much worse than we can imagine, and it's going to happen faster than we think. So, that destabilises my idea of the future but I know I want to have all my loved ones, like my best friends, my closest friends, my sisters, in that future. And then, I know for me, I want to also make sure that in the future that other trans women have access to medication, have access to ways of living. So, I don't know what that would mean, but in the future I want to be able to create something that supports trans women around the world, especially in Africa, because things are just getting more and more dire. So, those are really important things. And then, in terms of career, when I first started, one of the most important things for me was to have my work and my thought and voice be important in Black study, and to have my work created by writers and thinkers and theoreticians and all of that stuff. So, and that's still there. I want my work to be considered important to how we make sense of what it means to be Black in the world. And then, in the more immediate future,

I want to write a book set in West Africa in the 14th or 15th century. I haven't decided yet. I want to make a feature film about Victoria, and maybe like a documentary. Then I want to have a museum show where I'm responding to their archive and building something new out of that. So, those are three super, super important milestones that I want.

Ain Bailey 58:30

Wow, that's a beautifully expansive future.

Ebun Sodipo 58:35

And what about you?

Ain Bailey 58:37

I'd like all of yours. I don't need a family. I have family. I'd love to write an opera, and I'd love to have that opera performed at the Emirates football stadium. I'm a big Arsenal fan. Health, good health, would be good, and for the community to be okay, I think, because I think a lot -- not even everyone I know, but a lot of people like are probably struggling -- and it would be nice for people to kind of find peace on every level that they need. Yeah, somewhere to live, travel a bit, have a bit of money, buy some records. I'm basically a 14-year-old teenager going down the shops on a Saturday buying records. I just want to continue to live that life. And fucking free Palestine.

Yewande YoYo Odunubi 59:25

Thank you all for listening to the Living Archive series. Join us in two weeks for the third and final episodes of season two, as I speak with Rebecca Bellantoni and Gail Lewis, who reflect on themes of home and everyday life, as well as the legacy of Black cultural and social movement in pre-2000's Britain. Thank you all for listening. Until next time.