

Deborah-Joyce Holman  
*Close-Up*  
14 Sept–27 Oct 2024

Deborah-Joyce Holman's practice catalyses questions regarding the representation of othered bodies within the dominant politics of representation. In particular, Holman deals with the rendition of Black people and Black queer people within the visual cultures of a white-dominated, heteronormative society. The Western art system is an example of such visual cultures, with its mechanisms of circulation and attention economies. This also encompasses exhibition venues such as Kunstverein Freiburg.

Within a regime that centres whiteness as the norm, any Black presence on screen binds Black people at once to appear as under- and overdetermined: Representation simultaneously strips them of the luxury to appear as an individual and burdens them with myriad preconceived expectations. Within this paradigm, Black bodies on screen are distorted, exoticised and stereotyped, rendered invisible or hyper-visualised as spectacle—the screen reduces Blackness to raw material for non-Black fantasy.<sup>1</sup> Holman is sceptical of calls for more representation without changes to its prerequisites, conditions and framework, instead proposing a different approach which counters mechanisms of spectacle and exploitation with the withdrawal of visibility and legibility, enacting forms of quiet and nourishing refusal.

*Close-Up* follows from the solo exhibition *Living Room* (2023) at Kunsthalle Bern, which featured a three-channel video installation. With narrative and performance limited to a minimum, the videos feature the actress Tia Bannon in two different settings. First, in a two-channel installation, an 8-minute video loop shows the actress waiting on a chair in a sober waiting room, holding a script in her hand. Shot from a single, static camera position, the other scene, a 16-minute single channel video, shows the same woman doing nothing in particular in a modernist living room.

For *Close-Up*, the exhibition at Kunstverein Freiburg produced in cooperation with the Swiss Institute in New York, Holman restaged this video a year later in the same flat. However, in this re-enactment, the artist extensively choreographs the contemplative act of 'doing nothing.' The scenes reproduce each movement from the previous year's video down to the smallest detail. Unlike the digitally filmed videos for Bern, *Close-Up* is shot on 16mm film. While the Bern work set up the view of the entire room in which the scene was filmed like a box set stage in a static shot, in the restaging, the artist shot *Close-Up* with a hand-held camera exclusively capturing close-ups of the actress's face and of the surrounding interior.

From this intimate perspective, the woman's actions remain out of view. The context of her presence and activity in the apartment appears as a state of limbo without a clear beginning or a recognisable end. The loop overrides linear chronology and narrativity, with the sequence of small gestures accumulating without a determined frame of reference or chain of significations. From this void of 'nothingness', gradually, more and more details, sounds, and textures emerge.

Another focal point of both the work for Bern as well as its restaging shown in Freiburg is the filmic exploration of a person's interior life as a site of resistance. Here, Holman draws in part on studies by literary scholar Kevin Quashie. In his book *The Sovereignty of Quiet* (2012), he proposes the term 'quiet' not simply as a synonym for

'silence' but as a metaphor for a person's inner life, their desires, intentions, vulnerabilities and fears.<sup>2</sup> Quashie thus opposes an image of Black culture which represents Blackness primarily as directed outwards, as dramatic and spectacular, a framing which denies Black people an inner life and individuality—an image which makes Black people represent something public, protean, and generalised. In contrast, Quashie insists on Black internal life as a site that is not completely determined by social conditions of racism or resistance to them. This interiority is not merely reactive and yet is able to unfurl a political force despite, perhaps even because of, its inscrutability and faintness: "The inner life is not apolitical or without social value, but neither is it determined entirely by publicness. In fact, the interior—dynamic and ravishing—is a stay against the dominance of the social world; it has its own sovereignty. It is hard to see, even harder to describe, but no less potent in its ineffability. Quiet."<sup>3</sup>

If western political and visual regimes deny Black people normalcy, then images of Black ordinariness and mundanity, as well as scenes of inwardness, can counteract this.<sup>4</sup> However, this does not imply that such representations make a Black person or Blackness legible, nor that they must pander to an audience's desire for a portrayal of 'real life' or fantasies of 'Black authenticity.' Rather, Holman's work insists on what philosopher Édouard Glissant called the "right to opacity"<sup>5</sup> and withholds the protagonist's inner life from the viewer's grasp, depicting instead the residue of the Black interior's presence within built spaces and ideologies. One might then propose that the set featured in *Close-Up* stands for the inner life of the character; it might reveal something about this person on screen who appears to have made it her home. However, the room's interior reveals nothing about her and instead is a staged depiction of a distinguished mid-century style flat that remains generic and anonymous.

Stories place people and events in broader contexts of meaning. They allow the viewer to weave patterns of

explanation and capture attention. But precisely because almost nothing happens in the film—there is no plot—the viewer might impose upon *Close-Up* a documentary-like quality. This assumption crumbles under the fact that the person on screen is a professionally trained actress and that the film is a re-enactment which reproduces an earlier video down to the smallest movements. Instead of ‘real life,’ we see the staged performance of an earlier performance—the ostensible documentary is fiction without being fictional, hyperreal and as such without reference to aura, authenticity, or the ‘bona fides’ that define Blackness in the west (as physicality, vitality, exteriority, savagery etc).

In cinema, close-ups of a person’s face often bring to the fore their psychological expressive qualities. Tia Bannon, the actress in *Close-Up*, never looks at the camera; her face refuses clear legibility throughout the film. This kind of deadpan manner characterises itself with dry, expressionless gestures and enigmatic countenance, which literary scholar Tina Post describes as a critical tool of Black culture within the gaze politics of racialisation. In such contexts, the deadpan or vacant visage can be a strategy to resist oppression and the exploitation of Black life, yet doesn’t limit itself to functioning solely as a gesture of resistance, indexing instead the expansiveness of the Black interior.<sup>6</sup>

Cinematic close-ups fluctuate in a state of tension between intimacy and monumentality. In Holman’s film, I am overwhelmed by the close-up shots of Tia’s face: it appears both too big and too close. There is no vantage point from which the audience can view the subject from a distance, the critical distance necessary for choreographing and imposing narrative. Since the entire film consists exclusively of close-ups, the film lacks spatial orientation, which many films usually establish in an opening scene, presenting the location of the action in a long shot or medium long shot. The slight roller coaster effect of the hand-held camera reinforces this disorientation, which also blurs the distinction between actor’s body and the

space it moves within, while the monumental projection screen further destabilises any sense of proportion. Within the context of the installation, it almost seems as if the cryptic face radiates into the exhibition hall, enveloping the viewer. Instead of establishing the intimacy that close-ups suggest, the character’s face becomes an impenetrable barrier off which the viewer’s gaze ricochets, at most throwing back what they might project onto it. At the same time, the black frame, the grain, and small dust particles on the film celluloid remind us that what we see on screen is merely the skin of the film, onto which the image of the actress is imprinted.

Is it possible to actually portray Black people under conditions of structural inequality and racialisation, commercialisation and exploitation? Following Kevin Quashie’s concept of ‘quiet,’ Holman’s film can be seen as a search for a place where Black life is not determined solely by racism or in reaction to it. At the same time, this (re-)staging of a contemplative everyday scene questions, on various levels, whether and how one could depict such a place. If nothing else, the images of contemplative inactivity, mundanity and inwardness could also be read as suggesting a shared experience of ‘universal humanity.’ However, such an interpretation ignores the structural asymmetry of power that characterises the social position of Black people in a white-dominated social order. Holman’s exhibition does not resolve the conflict between the necessity of recognising this social position—even in refusing to react outwardly or explicitly to it—and the endeavour to depict Black life beyond reaction to social attributions and power relations, but rather holds the antagonism in suspense. Under conditions of white dominance, this conflict may not be possible to resolve and Blackness impossible to represent. In her book *Anteaesthetics: Black Aesthetics and the Critique of Form*, media scholar Rizvana Bradley argues that aesthetics, as essentially a “racial regime of representation,”<sup>7</sup> is not a sphere detached from society, but is constitutive of the modern, anti-Black

world: “Blackness, I argue, has no place within the ontology of the antiblack world and cannot be represented within modernity’s aesthetic regime; yet, paradoxically, this regime insatiably demands its labours and appearance.”<sup>8</sup>

There are three sequences in *Close-Up* in which the actress is visually absent. In one moment, she climbs the stairs to the upper floor and the camera pans around the room in a circular motion, scanning the kitchen, the floor, the sofa and the wall. Guided by the camera, the viewer’s gaze glides through the room, in which the protagonist seems to remain present, like an echo. In a second moment, when the actress goes back upstairs, the picture fades to black. We hear only the sound of a person moving and an undefined background noise. As at other points, but now more consciously audible, these noises overlap with the ambient sounds of the exhibition hall. In a third instance, the film reel ends and the projection screen is white for a brief moment. Like a cut in the coupling of filmic reality and cinematic apparatus, the visual production of meaning is interrupted for a few seconds. It could be these junctures of absence and noise, of interruption and loss of meaning, that cause cracks and open up loop-holes in the supposedly neutral edifice of normality. What emerges from the aperture? Nothing.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Elizabeth Alexander, *The Black Interior* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2004), 5f.

<sup>2</sup> Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Quashie, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. KJ Abudu, "Painterly Matterings of Ordinary Black Life," Tate, 2023, accessed 09.09.2023

<https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-57-spring-2023/painterly-matterings-of-ordinary-black-life>

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Édouard Glissant, *Philosophie der Weltbeziehung. Poesie der Weite* (Heidelberg: Wunderhorn, 2021 [2009]), trans. Beate Thill, 58f.

<sup>6</sup> Tina Post, *Deadpan. The Aesthetics of Black Inexpression* (New York: NYU Press, 2022), 22.

<sup>7</sup> David Lloyd, *Under Representation. The Racial Regime of Aesthetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Rizvana Bradley, *Anteaesthetics. Black Aesthesis and the Critique of Form* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023), 9.

As part of the *Close-Up* exhibition programme, Rizvana Bradley will present thoughts from her book at the online event *Choreographing Nothing: On Black Anteriority* on Saturday, 26 October 2024, at 7 pm, followed by a discussion with Deborah-Joyce Holman about the exhibition.

Deborah-Joyce Holman (\* 1991, CH) lives and works in London, UK, and Basel, CH.

Selected solo exhibitions: Swiss Institute, New York, US (2025); *Close-up/Quiet as it's kept*, TANK Shanghai, CN (2024); *Living Room*, Kunsthalle Bern, CH (2023); *Love Letter*, Galerie Gregor Staiger, Zurich, CH (2023); *Moment 2*, Cordova, Barcelona, ES (2022); *Spill I-III*, Istituto Svizzero, Palermo, IT (2022); *Moment 2*, Luma Westbau, schwarzescafé, Zurich, CH (2022); *Unless* (with Yara Dulac Gisler), Cherish, Geneva, CH (2021).

Selected group exhibitions: *Recital*, Arcadia Missa, London, UK (2024); Shedhalle, Zürich, CH (2023); *Cry me a river*, Simian, Copenhagen, DK (2023); 1ere Biennale Son, Sion, CH (2023); *Das Lied der Straße*, Biennale für Freiburg 2, Freiburg, DE (2023); *Creative Friend Group Bar New York*, Sculpture Center, New York City, US (2023); *Ars Electronica Festival*, Linz, AU (2022); *Eclipse*, 7th Athens Biennale, Athens, GR (2021); *Lemania*, Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva, CH (2021).

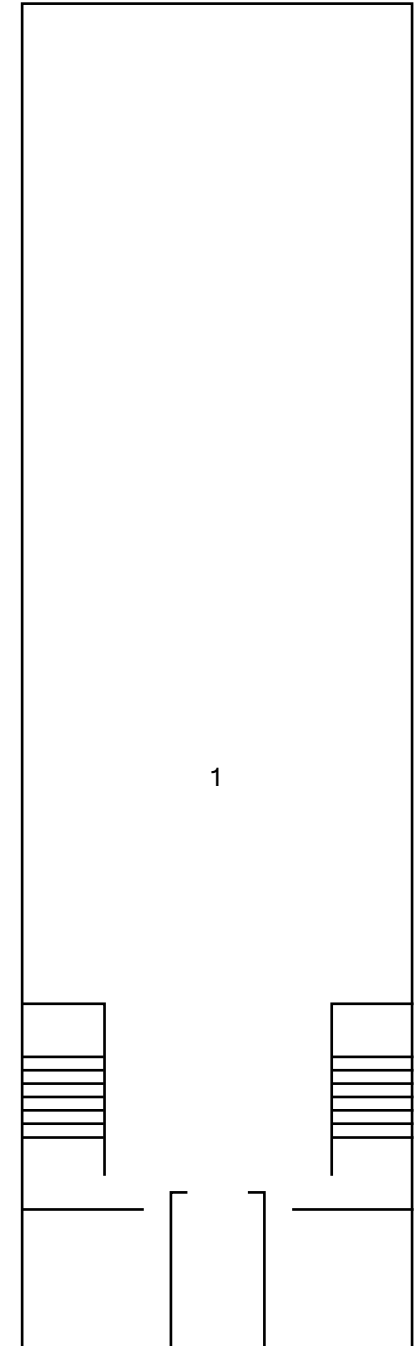
1  
Deborah-Joyce Holman  
*Close-Up*, 2024  
16mm colour film transferred to 4k  
video, stereo sound  
16:33 min.

Credits

Actress	Tia Bannon
Producer	Tobi Kyeremateng, Priya Palak
Production Runner	KC Ugwu
Studio Assistant	Shantelle Palmer
Director of Photography	Adenike Oke
First Assistant Camera	Joshua Baylis
Clapper Loader	Vaimiti Lebrere
Gaffer	Chad Morris
Spark	Teriq Roberts
Production Designer	Elizabeth Anibaba
Art Assistant	Hannah Naomi
Editor	Deborah Joyce Holman
Colorist	Anibal Castaño
Sound Designer	Chad Orororo
Unit Stills	Xanthus

With special thanks to Alison Coplan, Digital Orchard, Emmyland,  
Focus Canning, Heinrich Dietz, KJ Abudu, Kodak, manuel arturo abreu,  
Marilena Raufisen and Stefanie Hessler.

Hall



## Programme

Fri, 13 Sept 2024, 7 pm  
Opening with an Introduction by  
Heinrich Dietz

Thu, 26 Sept 2024, 7 pm  
Curator's Tour with Heinrich Dietz

Thu, 17 Oct 2024, 7 pm  
Guided Tour with  
Marilena Raufeisen

Sun, 20 Oct 2024, 2–4 pm  
Workshop for Children  
6–12 years  
(registration required)

Mon, 21 Oct 2024, 7 pm  
Film Screening  
*The Watermelon Woman*  
(Cheryl Dunye, 1996)  
Location: Kommunales Kino  
Freiburg

Sat, 26 Oct 2024, 7 pm  
*Choreographing Nothing:  
On Black Anteriority*  
Conversation with Rizvana Bradley  
and Deborah-Joyce Holman  
(online)

## Opening hours

Wed–Fri, 3 pm–7 pm  
Sat–Sun, 12 am–6 pm

Entrance: 2 € / 1.50 €  
Thursdays free  
Members free

In partnership with Swiss Institute,  
New York:

SI

The exhibition is supported by:

schweizer kulturstiftung

prohelvetia

Kunstverein Freiburg is funded by:

Freiburg   
IM BREISGAU

  
Baden-Württemberg

 Sparkasse