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Deborah-Joyce Holman & Rizvana
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Deborah-Joyce Holman: *Close-Up*
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Choreographing Nothing: On Black Anteriority Deborah-Joyce Holman and Rizvana Bradley



Deborah-Joyce Holman (installation view at Swiss Institute), *Close-Up*, 2024. Photo: Daniel Perez. Courtesy: Swiss Institute, New York & the artist.

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We are pleased to publish a conversation between Deborah-Joyce Holman and Rizvana Bradley reflecting on Holman's *Close-Up* (2024), [on view at the Swiss Institute](#) through April 20, 2025.

Deborah-Joyce Holman: First, a big thank you to you, Rizvana—there are so many resonances in your work that have deeply informed the articulation of *Close Up*. I've written down four pages of notes, but what's staying with me most right now is the problem of the frame, so let's begin there.

You mentioned the film's suspension between portraiture and anti-portraiture, which draws back to the split between the symbolic and the material, and the frame being the thing that stands between the two. However, its presence is negated. At least one of the aims posited in cinema is that the frame becomes imperceivable, erasing the materiality of the film and therefore immersing the viewer in the suspended reality of the glare of the image.

Rizvana Bradley: Thank you, Deborah. The film frame functions to contain film form, and the frame partially indexes the racial regime of aesthetics. What I am thinking about are those moments where Tia appears but then disappears from or leaves the frame. I'm always interested in that which is excessive to the film frame, or in the phrasing my 2023 book *Anteaesthetics: Black Aesthetics and the Critique of Form* deploys, in what is "exorbitant to the frame." The frame itself is one of the formal registers that grounds film as a technical medium. Part of the project that *Anteaesthetics* is trying to inaugurate at the outset of the introduction, which discusses Nina Simone and the photographic and filmic reproduction of one of her performances in Montreux, Switzerland, is that black artistry generally needs to be thought of in relation to the racial regime of aesthetics.

All forms of black artistry must contend with their placement before the racial regime of aesthetics, which engineers, as David Lloyd, after Sylvia Wynter and many others, has stipulated, a "racial regime of representation." So, the movement in and out of the frame is an operation that I'm interested in, precisely because it relates to the notion of racially-gendered blackness and coerced appearance. But you and I have also talked about the way your film practice is thinking through the problematics of racially-gendered appearance. I was initially drawn to *Close-Up* for these reasons, because I sense this is what your film is tracing or outlining. As you know, I am very much interested in the racially-gendered critique of fugitivity.

Anteaesthetics considers the racially gendered labor that is conscripted both in the reproduction of the world and of the world of aesthetic forms, and in the reproduction of fugitive socialities in flight from the anti-black world. The book insists on an interpretive approach to black artistry that remains attuned to this problematic, which I refer to as the double bind of reproduction.

Related to this, it would also be interesting to talk about the way that your film is imagining reproductive labor through figurations of contemplation or rumination. For instance, the film provokes certain questions about the way, in a Marxist sense, capital needs the worker for

expanded reproduction of labor-power. In contrast, however, the figurations of reproductive labor that animate your work, like contemplation, rumination, and rest, are necessary to the maintenance of capitalist structures, and hold racially-gendered labor in place as such. But of course, capital doesn't want these figurations of reproductive labor—it abhors them and relegates them to the outside of work.

DJH: And beyond the film itself, in relation to reproductive labor, there's the question on my reproductive labor as an artist, too. How can I make work within the framework of art if materially this is a contribution to a system that is harmful and extractive? Those are both intertwined.

I want to build layers that function as barriers, to create a tension between what the close-up formally proposes in terms of the lack of narrative and access the viewer gets to the inner world of the character on screen. In a similar way to Tia Bannion, the actress I collaborated with, leaving the frame and coming back, the decision to work with film adds an additional layer of remove. The filmic skin becomes visible, which is another effort to complicate the closeness the close-up formally suggests and to instead impose the frame.

I think the frame here can refer to the filmic frame, but also the frame of the medium, it being a film and therefore being a part of an aesthetic regime, and circulating as essentially an object within a capitalism.

RB: Part of what I enjoy so much is how you are playing with the close-up as a means of representation within film. I was compelled by the way you tease out a central paradox of the close-up. As a formal device, the close-up is meant to immerse the spectator, but, by way of your work, we might also understand that the close-up distances, or even estranges, the filmed subject from the viewer. We can see this in the way your close-up foregrounds impenetrable and unknowable registers of subjectivity. Additionally, your work alludes to the close-up's power to probe the interiority of the film's subject. But it can't. It can't quite get at the thinking and feeling inside Tia. There's some kind of refusal there; there's still something that remains opaque to us.



Deborah-Joyce Holman (still), *Close-Up*, 2024. Courtesy: the artist.

DJH: I want to mention Kara Keeling here, as one of the thinkers who’s also theorized this extensively, the way that narrative can pin down a black character on screen into a double bind of representation. On the one hand, representation as standing in and speaking for a group of people, and on the other hand, representation as a reenactment.

Your reading of the video of Nina Simone’s concert in Montreux spoke to me. Two years ago I made a pair of films, *Moment* and *Moment 2*, that engage a similar close look at the filmic representation of Jason Holliday in Shirley Clarke’s *Portrait of Jason* (1967). Like Simone, there are certain moments when Holliday breaks the illusion that he’s not aware of the cinematic apparatus he’s reproducing himself for. He’s acutely attuned to the ways in which he’s being exploited to benefit the construction of a trope image, really. His vulnerability is being extracted in order to create this film that then exists completely away from and outside of his own agency or authority. Especially taking gendered dimensions into account, it speaks to the shortcomings of language itself. And to the difficulty of framing any kind of black artistic work within critique that doesn’t then also pin down the character within the logic of representation.

RB: Right, part of what the film embodies through its (performative) non-performance is a refusal of being framed and reframed with respect to that racial regime of representation. What your film allegorizes at the level of embodiment is the exhaustion of constantly having to reproduce oneself in relation to a racial regime of representation—in relation to a racial regime of aesthetics that demands a particular comportment and figuration of “the black body” within the social field—an axiomatic figuration that my work tries to deconstruct.

DJH: This might be a good time to speak more to the tension between gesture and choreography that we briefly exchanged thoughts about prior to this conversation?

RB: A long time ago, I published an essay where I made a distinction between gesture and choreography. In it, I proposed that the gestic, or the economy of minor inhabitations that pertain to gesture, is fundamentally distinct from the choreographic—I relied on the work of somebody like André Lepecki to think about this. In the context of Anteaesthetics, the choreographic is tied to a racial regime of representation. The state, for example, and the work of the state—statecraft—involves the choreographing of citizenship and the choreographing of its citizens in relation to state sanctioned dictums. Gesture, by contrast, pertains to those minor registrations, those minor movements, that remain inaccessible to capture—that recede from socio-political choreographies. I am compelled by these irreducible gestures that comprise everyday life, which undergird your film *Close-Up*, those that compose the more minor registers of reproductive labor, like making tea, resting, tending to flowers, et cetera. I would align these gestures with the kind of intimate portrait of the subject that you’ve brought us to in this film. The performance or non-performance of refusal, exhaustion, and interiority are rendered quite beautifully in the film.

DJH: This question resonates with *Close-Up*, where all of the actions are very gestural and mundane. There’s no spectacle, no narrative, holding the whole thing together. But I have to add that *Close-Up* is extensively choreographed in that it reenacts all of the minute gestures of its 2023 predecessor, *Close-up/Quiet* as it’s kept.

RB: That’s an important formulation, because I think you are saying, “oh, well, the reenactment in this 2024 film is a choreographed reenactment,” right? In the context of Anteaesthetics, I would be inclined to say yes, that’s precisely the recursive operation that the book is theorizing—the movement back through the choreographic precisely in order to deconstruct the forms of mastery that choreography tends to prescribe. In other words, it’s theorizing how black artistry recursively deconstructs predominant formalisms. In this instance, at stake are the deconstructive operations of the gestic against the choreographic.

DJH: *Close-Up* was a going back to before the previous film. It goes further back than *Close-Up/Quiet* as it’s kept; it is something akin to the restaging of the rehearsal that would’ve preceded that film. This “choreography” therefore remains gestural in its nature rather than choreographed, as *Close-up/Quiet* as it’s kept was not choreographed but gestural. More than with a choreography through the space, I was concerned with establishing a pace and conveying an ambiguous relationship between Tia and the room the film is set in. Tia’s not quite bored, but she’s also not waiting for anything particular to happen. This gives space for her to be lost in thought—she’s thinking, she lays down, goes upstairs clearly with something in mind and comes back down, makes tea, sits down again. *Close-Up/Quiet* as it’s kept was extensively shaped by a temporal engagement and a discussion with Tia around the blur between her as a person and this character who stays undefined, even to me.

Approaching filming *Close-Up* this year was the reverse process: formally or conceptually speaking, her movement is an exact reenactment; it was all pre-defined. I’m trying to get at the fact that *Close-Up* was so rehearsed that there is kind of a circular relationship

between the two that maybe wants to harvest the choreographic, not in the same register as, say, in terms of choreographing a sense of social belonging or, again, taking on the task of standing in for a group, but rather to draw the circle between the before and the after, to blur those lines between those two films.

RB: Yeah, that makes sense, and it's is why, in my work, I think the work of those in performance studies who have theorized the extensive history of performances that have no clear beginning or end. In your work, what I think is quite profound is the way that the non-performative registers at the level of reproductive labor—the making of the everyday, the reproduction of the everyday, which is itself largely a function of racially-gendered labor. In the context of my work, your film makes me think about the way that kind of labor and the performance of that labor continue to go unmarked.

In your film, there is no definitive beginning and no end to the labor. It's just something ongoing. This racially-gendered labor is never marked, and goes unacknowledged, which is precisely what makes it both, on the one hand, exploitable labor, and also, on the other hand, that which lends itself to the making of fugitive socialities. That's precisely the double bind of reproduction in action, if you will. The way that you're playing with the space that Tia inhabits as refuge and enclosure, through gesture, speaks to this double bind.

Question from KJ Abudu, Swiss Institute: Thank you Deborah for your beautiful work and Rizvana for your lucid thinking. Rizvana, you've elsewhere discussed the notion of "black seriality" and the ways in which this black aesthetic strategy cannot be reduced to the colonial dispossessive grammars of the modernist grid or minimalist seriality. You've touched on it a bit already, but given the various recursive iterations of Deborah's work, could you say more about the ways in which you view black seriality as operative in this work, and its difference from conventional avant-garde deployments of duration and repetition, for instance, in structural cinema? Is it a question of racially-gendered reproduction?

RB: Yes. Black seriality is certainly a thing that is in operation here. The way that it gets aesthetically deployed is through a kind of repetition with difference. In the past I've talked about the serially imposed violence of black death, and, in a simultaneous register, we have the seriality of aesthetic-making. What we might think about in the context of your film is the serial life of coerced appearance—the differential iterations of Tia's appearance across these films – in the single channel and then the two channel, and then finally this year's version of Close-Up. What you have is the serial appearance of Tia, which, as I said in the talk, is realized through the performed slippages between appearance, reappearance, and disappearance. The question of how we might think about the serial appearances of blackness is very much bound up with the questions of racially-gendered corporeality and bodily dissimulation, which I discuss at length in the book.

Question from Francis Whorral-Campbell, artist and writer: I wanted to ask you a question about the relationship between vestibularity and waiting. (The waiting room is the first close-up, for example, but also the languid time in the second.) I'm particularly

interested in the viewer's waiting (for someone to happen) and how that might be related to the vestibularity of blackness to aesthetics.

RB: Yes, I would be really interested to hear about how you're thinking about this in relation to the two-channel iteration. And I think Francis is correct. The notion of vestibularity, as it is theorized by Hortense Spillers, is crucial. What Spillers argues is that black flesh is vestibular to the body. It's a complicated formulation, but importantly informs Spillers's distinction between body and flesh. Anteaesthetics draws from Spillers in order to emphasize that body and flesh are also recursively entangled with one another. Blackness is the negative vestibule, the constitutive negation, or the threshold that makes possible the anti-black world, and that which is held in reserve for the anti-black world.

Black flesh is that which permits the modern "proper body" to constitute itself as such, but is also simultaneously relegated to a vestibular, threshold (non-)position. The improper "body" of blackness is vestibular to the modern body and its construction. So, the concept of vestibularity is crucial to the way in which I'm thinking about anteriority. The question is smart, and I appreciate the way that it tries to think about vestibularity in relation to belated time, the belated temporality that Fanon is thinking about when he says, "I am the one who waits." What besets the black is this sense of historicity withheld. Black critical theory variously emphasizes that blackness is made to inhabit a radically different, even unreadable, spatiotemporality. The belatedness that besets the black is absolutely bound up with this notion of vestibularity. And working through these entwined problematics opens onto the deep critique of phenomenology that's woven throughout Anteaesthetics. Thank you for the question.

Heinrich Dietz, Kunstverein Freiburg: [Rizvana,] you mentioned Kevin Quashie and his thoughts in his book *The Sovereignty of Quiet* (2012) and about black interiority. How would you relate this to *Close-Up*, and do you think it is important to emphasize the black interior as a place that is maybe not only a place of resistance?

RB: Yes, I certainly appreciate the work of Quashie here, and I would not want to disavow the importance of protecting what he refers to as black interiority, even if we might understand this "space" in different ways. I appreciate the way that you framed the question, Henri. But I think what my work tries to additionally stress is that it's not possible to posit a transparent, or even positively opaque, interior without thinking about the violent conditions of possibility that make what we refer to as interiority, which continues to undergird even a more nuanced articulation of black interiority, possible.

So, in the book, more explicitly in the first chapter, I theorize the role that racial-colonial processes, predicated upon the violent seizure of and extraction from black women's wombs, played in forging the violent epistemological distinction between interiority and exteriority. The plundering of black women's wombs—and here, we might consult the work of Joy James and Françoise Vergès, who each engage these questions in crucial ways—has historically played an indispensable part in the violent construction of the very idea of interiority, which in turn serves to codify and legitimate claims to individuated personhood. We also must think about the way racial-colonial processes structure the forging of what

we refer to as “the interior,” and the way that becomes an index for a form of sovereignty in ways that have historically been quite disastrous. Anteaesthetics theorizes the ways in which the violently de-individuated, fleshly interiorizations to which black maternity is diffusively and continuously subject are anterior to the coveted individuated interiority of the self-possessed and possessing subject, as well as to the technological exteriorizations that serve, in the philosophy of media, as the mark of this subject’s species-being.

DJH: I think here also of the split between interiority and exteriority, and how this split becomes foundational to the function of modernity as a vehicle which seeks to obfuscate historicity. I just want to draw out, or briefly speak to, the choice of settings in most of my films, which situates a figure within an ambiguous room that’s marked by a modernist architectural and design language. Circling back to the reproductive labor that you mentioned earlier, and the racial, gendered aspect of it—in my film, I think there is an implicit violence that is made present in these type of spaces through the design language as embodied ideology and its efforts of ahistoricity. As you said, the interior space (referring to the domestic space here) as non-political is never possible because there is already all of this material in there that tries to obfuscate its foundations.

RB: Precisely. And I think that this brings us back to KJ Abudu’s question about duration and its temporality. I think this goes back to Francis’s question as well, with respect to the temporality of belatedness. In your films, particularly in the two-channel iteration, there is a stress on belatedness and the belated temporality of waiting, and in the most recent version of *Close-Up*, there is an emphasis on duration. I mean, of course, I’m not sectioning the films off—I think duration plays a role in all the films. But duration for me is really about what it means to inhabit the space of the mundane. For me, duration is really bound up with what, in my book, I call the racially-gendered problem of bearing. In *Anteaesthetics*, the word bearing acquires a tripled valence, at once evoking the reproductive, the orientative, and that which must be endured. It is in all three of these senses that black femininity, black maternity, is forced to bear the world—to bear the unbearable, as I have phrased it elsewhere. Duration has to do with this bearing, and how we bear the weight, shape, and directionality of the world, even within those recessive spaces that we wish were places of refuge. But I think, as you are also importantly pointing out, even domestic spaces of refuge can also be spaces of enclosure, precisely because they are spaces that continue to require and demand this sort of reproductive labor.