

Deborah-Joyce Holman

Spill I – III

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In formulating his concepts on ‘trembling thinking’ (‘tremblement’) and ‘archipelagic thinking’, the poet and cultural philosopher Édouard Glissant (born in 1928 in Beaudin, Martinique; died in 2011 in Paris) begins with the island and that which is trembling and unstable. For Édouard Glissant, the island or archipelago—a region consisting of a group of islands and the waters between them—and the tremble are figures of thought for a new way of thinking in spaces. They represent exchange and connectedness in a global space transcending linguistic and national boundaries, a chaotic world of random alliances and temporary mergers. As Édouard Glissant writes, this context necessitates a «more intuitive, more fragile, more threatened,» as well as a trembling, quaking, rhizome-like form of thought. A non-systematic way of thinking that seeks the unpredictable, the unstable, that which is constantly re-forming.

Édouard Glissant developed his thoughts while thinking about landscapes, and for me they link in different ways to *Spill I – III* (2022), Deborah-Joyce Holman’s new three-channel film. There is the volcano and the island. The film images were mainly shot in the landscapes of Sicily—the island in the south of Italy where archipelagos meet, where the continental plates of Africa and Europe collide, giving rise to volcanism, where the subsoil is unstable and in motion. For Deborah-Joyce Holman, the decision to film in Sicily resulted not only from the invitation to the exhibition in Palermo, but also from the desire to be closer to an unfamiliar landscape. And, of course, there is the volcano, but more about that later. Further, I think that the idea of archipelagic thinking and ‘tremblement’ can also apply to the working process that Deborah-Joyce Holman chose for *Spill I – III*. The artist speaks in this context of taking a highly intuitive approach, guided by a kind of bodily knowledge, interweaving various aspects in a free and rhizome-like manner, and thinking of the volcanic landscape as a protagonist. Deborah-Joyce Holman makes reference to asemic writing—a wordless, open form of writing that conveys no specific semantic content and can function beyond a purely linguistic sense. The reader is therefore free to construct different levels of meaning, reshape them, and think them a thousand times over. Determined, testing, trembling. Thus, Deborah-Joyce Holman describes the themes and motifs of *Spill I – III*: desire

as a state of emotional, physical longing, the voice, the eruption—in both the real sense (the volcano!) and the metaphorical sense and poetry—in its original connotation as the creation of literary texts. The title—‘Spill’—implies pouring out, leaking, overflowing—I also think in this context of a pouring out of words, of language, an overflowing of liquid, a volatile mass that makes its way, unruly and unstoppable. Puddles that spill into each other.

For me, these motifs and the described archipelagic, quivering, asemic strategies of thinking, writing, and developing find their counterpart in the images, perspectives, and sounds of *Spill I – III*. The slow-moving images, the soundtrack conceived by experimental composer Yantan Ministry, and the voice of performer Mawena Yehouessi form a kaleidoscopic collage with multiple approaches. The film as a visual poem is how Deborah-Joyce Holman describes it. I hear stones crunching beneath footsteps, the sound of wind or water perhaps, clicking tongues, guttural, vibrating noises. For Deborah-Joyce Holman, the vocal exercises integrated into Yantan Ministry’s score are also a reference to spilling over, overflowing: the voice that vibrates inside the body and suddenly spills out of the mouth, uncontainable. An eruption. A volcano. The poem I am listening to is *Joy of the Eyes* by Nisha Ramayya. In her collection of poems, *States of the Body Produced by Love* (2019), the author addresses the possibilities and impossibilities of translations between Sanskrit and English, the colonial appropriation and taming of languages, and, yes, love: «Discipline of desire begins in the mouth.» And here I think again of the volcano (the lava stones as the remnants of a volcanic eruption) as a symbol of an unstable landscape, of an eruption that breaks a surface and reveals the seething mass beneath.

As I move through the first exhibition space with its two large screens, I become aware of the camera’s slow, almost static gaze. Filmed with a handheld camera (occasionally supported by a tripod), the images reflect our view of the landscape and, more generally, my body’s relationship to the topography surrounding me. The decision to film outdoors and to avoid extreme close-ups or drone images (omnipresent techniques used in image production these days) are central to Deborah-Joyce Holman’s work and linked to reflections on the perception of the world itself. How do we relate to the world that surrounds us? How do we look at the world with a camera in our hands? How do we find gazes that do not follow a Western gaze

regime of surveillance and domination? In the exhibition display, the images I encounter are larger than life and so evoke, once again, a reflection on my relationship to the world, to the landscape; a reflection on my body in relation to the moving water, the lava stones overgrown with moss and other plants: the knowledge of the smallest creatures, bacteria or the unicellular organisms inhabiting the water and the stones. The realization that all human and non-human living beings are interconnected in complex systems of exchange.

Such themes and questions resonate throughout *Spill I–III*. I also think of philosopher Rosi Braidotti's critique of the concept of humanism and the questions it raises about the idea of the Anthropocene, which focuses on humans that are white, Western, and male. Meanwhile, marginalized people, indigenous people, and people of colour have always been excluded from the grand Western narratives yet are dramatically affected by the real-life effects of these ideologies (the exploitative practices of colonialism and climate change, to name a few). For Deborah-Joyce Holman, it is crucial to understand how geology is shaped by colonization and racism, as described by geographer Kathryn Yusoff. In a conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Édouard Glissant says: «The earth is trembling. Systems of thought have been demolished, and there are no more straight paths. There are endless floods, eruptions, earthquakes, fires. Today, the world is unpredictable and in such a world, utopia is necessary.» Deborah Joyce-Holman's video work *Spill I–III*, and the questions and thoughts it evokes, remind me of this.

Gioia Dal Molin, September 2022

The poem performed in the film is titled *Joy of the Eyes* by Nisha Ramayya, published in the book *States of the Body Produced by Love* (Ignota, 2019)

Joy of the Eyes

by Nisha Ramayya

The future is not the beginning, but the forerunner,
of a new intense-formation.

The first time that you see me, you will see me,
without implication of time.

The future expresses what is going to take place at
some time to come, adding on the one hand an
implication of will or intention, on the other hand of
promise or threatening.

If you, villain, had not stopped [prāgrahīṣyaṇ]
my mouth,
Without any implication of time.

Circles of future and desiderative border one another;
the one sometimes expected
where the other might be met.

I, conditional, want you to stop my mouth;
will you stop.

My mouth encircles the sustain of these refusals:
Sometimes and unexpected, unreasonable
and polite.

If you, beautiful, would perceive this new
stress-formation,
Reducing the noise of our [śyas] tomorrow,
Heads shaved, future universe, 'victorious banners
unlowered'.

Discipline of desire begins in the mouth.

Deborah-Joyce Holman (1991) is a multidisciplinary artist based between London and Basel. In 2020-2022 they worked at East London arts organisation Auto Italia first as Associate Director then as Associate Curator. They were the founding director of 1.1, a platform for early-career practitioners in arts, music and text-based practices, with an exhibition space in Basel, which ran from 2015 to 2020. Deborah-Joyce Holman has curated the 2018 and 2019 annual group exhibitions for the arts and music festival *Les Urbaines*, Lausanne, presenting newly commissioned works by over 15 international artists. Deborah-Joyce Holman's work has been shown internationally, including exhibitions at schwarzescafé, Luma Westbau, Zurich (solo, 2022); Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (2022); Centre culturel suisse, Paris (2022); The Shed, New York City (2021); 7th Athens Biennial (2021); La Quadriennale di Roma (2020); Material Art Fair, Mexico City (2020) among others.

Spill I – III

By Deborah-Joyce Holman

Conceived by Deborah-Joyce Holman
& Tarek Lakhri

With some images directed by Tarek Lakhri
Featuring Nisha Ramayya's poem *Joy of the Eyes*,
published in *States of the Body produced
by Love* (Ignota, 2019)

Performers: Phoebe Collings-James, Bernice
Mulenga, Mawena Yehouessi

Director of Photography: Jim C. Nedd

Camera Operator: Antonio Annese

Sound Recordist: Sebastiano Caceffo

Producer: Letizia Gullo

Production assistant: Shantelle Palmer

Styling: Alice Lushima

Editing: Deborah-Joyce Holman

Colour Grade: Andrea Vavassori

Score: Yantan Ministry

Vocalist: Makeda Monnet, Deborah-Joyce Holman

Field recordings: Deborah-Joyce Holman

Mixing & Mastering: Fitzrovia Post

Special thanks: Clelia Bartoli, Canan Batur,
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Thea Reifler, Marged Siôn, Maxim Young

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