Screening Room no. 13 with Holly Graham: *Haptic Registers, Tender Images, Sonic Frequencies*

Giulia Shah 00:01
Hi, Holly, it's so nice that you're here to chat about your film *Haptic Registers, Tender Images, Sonic Frequencies* that we're going to be showing in the screening room. Could you maybe briefly just start by introducing yourself and your kind of general practice?

Holly 00:23
Yeah, for sure. So, I always start by saying my background is in printmaking, and I think maybe it just helps me to root the work because, actually, my practice is really cross-disciplinary. But I did print as a Masters, and really saw it as a way as a sort of lens, I guess, that I could kind of think about making work through. And there's sort of certain threads within print processes that I think carry through and inform my ways of working across the board. So thinking about things like traces and repetition, material degradation. I've got a real interest in storytelling and in kind of how individual kind of subjective memories come together and form...overlap and sort of riff with other memories to form a sense of sort of collective or shared, remembering; and then how those in turn, come together to form histories or senses of history. So that's sort of what's, yeah, the common thread, I guess, of all the work that I make. But yeah, I work across audio, and dabble with moving image, with print as well. And sculptural forms. So yeah, I'm a bit of a jack of all trades, master of none.

Alex 02:09
Would writing also be considered part of that?

Holly 02:13
Yeah definitely. Text and writing is really central to lots of my work. So yeah, I actually think another thing that I think about a lot as like a unifying process or approach is collage, and the sort of bringing together of different or disparate fragments. And my approach to working with text has often been within this kind of realm of collage and citation and quotation, bringing together different fragments. Lots of the texts I've written previously haven't exactly been written, they've just been assembled. But in more recent years, I've also been doing more like just writing from my words, if you like,

and that still absorbs, kind of citation and these references, but I guess, channelling my own voice within that.

Alex 03:15
That probably sets the scene really nicely for the work as well talking a bit more about this, the relationship of the film to the essay that kind of came before. So maybe it'd be nice if you kind of talk a little bit about how those two works, or the writing and video essay kind of fed into each other, and maybe the context of how the work kind of came to be or where it came out of.

Holly 03:46
Yeah, absolutely. So the film is rooted in an essay that I wrote a few years ago now for an anthology called "On Care", which was edited, put together by Sharon Kivland, and Rebecca Jagoe. And so the anthology kind of brought together lots of voices of different artists and thinkers and writers and creatives to muse I guess, or to reflect on, this idea of care really broadly, and from lots of different kinds of perspectives and entry points. Yeah, I wanted to think about - and actually in conversation with Rebecca, who reached out to me - this kind of approach in terms of handling material. I guess, often within like, curation and curatorial practices, this idea of the root of ‘curating’ or ‘curator’, the sort of Latin root is often brought up as this idea of like caring and yeah, this kind of responsibility, I guess, to working with material. And I guess, maybe differently but in a related way I wanted to think as somebody who is, you know, often engaging with, and creatively responding to existing collections of material. And that's maybe something I didn't say in the intro to my practice and ways of working, I do often work with existing material. And that can often be archival or museum collections or other existing collections of stuff. And yes, I wanted to think about what are the duties of care for material when we work with it. And, in particular, I wanted to use it as an opportunity to reflect on two bodies of work that I'd been thinking through, and working on for some time and sort of coming back to and approaching from these like different angles, but repeatedly. And the two bodies of work are like very, very different. But each sort of speaks to or implicates Black life and Black bodies in different ways. So I wanted to think about images that carry the Black body, and think about what responsibilities are at play when working with this material. So yeah, that was the essay. And a year ago - I'm really bad at time these days - I think about a year ago, I was invited to do a digital commission for an online project space called Skelf. And, yeah, I was thinking about what I

might want to do for that space. I wanted to make something that was in some way interactive, but it offered a really nice opportunity to, I guess, expand on the essay, and to develop a sort of visual accompaniment, or, yeah, develop an illustrated version, which is what the film has come out of. So in, in the work for Skelf. It was a digital space, that was a desktop and you could click to open these different sorts of chapters, if you like, of the video. And you could also listen to the essay in full or just download the full text.

Alex 07:27
So that was kind of like, it is a different, another life in between the things that we've seen. That's really interesting.

Giulia Shah 07:36
You've spoken about this already a little bit, when you were talking about the essay, to tend, tenderness, and tending comes a lot, or comes up a lot in the film. Yeah, which feels appropriate considering the context of the work. I wonder if you could speak a little bit more about your relationship to images and care, and like what tenderness means to you in that context?

Holly 08:03
Yeah, I'd been working on these two very separate projects for, you know, several years actually by the time I wrote about them. And I think it was really useful. And, you know, yeah, I found it really generative actually carving out that time to write and reflect back on these approaches that I'd been engaging with in the studio without.... without fully having found a way to articulate like, why I was acting in those ways previously. So, for example, one of the bodies of work is a collection of images of these, you know, highly racially caricatured objects, the sugar bowls, which are porcelain, sort of figurine based objects, which depict representations of Africa, and America. And I was really conscious when I was thinking about working with them, and in response to them, of how loaded the images are, and how violent, like inherently violent. And I wanted to, therefore tread really carefully, because I wanted to make space to talk about them, but I also wanted to think carefully about how people are confronted by them and not reproduce the violent imagery as well. So I was approaching the images with this like real sensitivity and protectiveness almost, and being quite slow as well about how I thought through them. And I ended up developing a series of... well I did all sorts, but the first iteration of the work was a series of sugar lift etchings on steel, which kind of focused in on the

hands and arms of the figurines, in these quite like, very measured and selective ways, I guess. And I wanted to think about labour and gesture, gestures of servitude, and to slow down the pace of looking as well. So that it might invite a more sustained engagement. And the objects were, I guess, materially as well reflective of the content. So using sugar, this substance that was, you know, the scent, the subject matter, really, it was what would have been held in the bowls. It was the product of enslaved labour. It was a driver of wealth, which fueled industry, and which enabled people to have this kind of luxurious item on their tables. So yeah, I liked the idea that I could absorb in, like materially those elements too. But yeah, it felt like I wanted to think really carefully about how those were held. And also to provide a lot of like, padding and layers of accessing the image. So there were also interviews that I'd undertaken with V&A African heritage tour guides, which is where I first came across the bowls through doing these tours at the V&A. So the work was also accompanied by audio and text transcription of an edited version of the conversations. And there was a text, which, in the very centre, did have an image of the bowls of the two objects, the figurine sugar bowls, but I printed them on a sort of translucent tracing paper in a kind of light blue. And I felt like even there, there was a sort of withholding of the image. And also, you had to move through the text in order to get to the image in full, in order to access it. And even then there was like some slight withholding of the image. So I felt like there was this, like, very careful framing and protectiveness that I was feeling over how these images were shared. I think tenderness and also this idea of touch as well. And haptics, which I think a lot about in relation to, to the images, and I'm really interested in how Tina Campt, speaks about haptics in relation to images and to these different kinds of layers of tactile relation. So both in like the formation of the image, and in the sort of human social relations that come together to form images, and that might include in the relationship between the photographed subject and the photographer. But then also in those relationships between the object and the viewer, and the handler of the image, whether that's a physical image, or you know, whether you're accessing it digitally or otherwise, and then also in that in the circulation of the image, and how that moves around the world. So there's all of these different sort of like tactile relations at play. And, yeah, so I was thinking a lot about those as well, within the imagery that I'd been working with

Alex 00:00

Yeah, that's really interesting to hear. I mean, there's so many layers there. And I was quite interested to find out maybe what prompted these kind of like, two direct comparisons in the film.

Holly 00:17
I think it is interesting. You know, I don't entirely know why I really wanted to think through these two lines of inquiry, or bodies of work. Other than that, I'd been thinking about them for a long time and could see, like, ways of reading across them maybe, even though they're so intrinsically different. Obviously, one is a representation of a, you know, heavily stereotyped representation of a group of people, or groups of people as an "other" that is meant to kind of reference blackness, somehow, and is literally object in form. Whereas the other body of work is representations of individuals, and with their agency in framing the image of themselves as well. So it's, it's really, really different. But, yeah, I guess I wanted to kind of think through those differences, but also think about how, how some of the kind of approaches to reading the images, and to working with them might overlap, and how maybe there's a similar sensitivity and tenderness inherent in both. Yeah, one of the things that drew me to thinking about them together was that in some way, I had been drawn to these images, and that I felt in some way implicated by them. And that they were in very different ways, referencing me to some degree and I, you know, they're referencing Blackness in their, the sort of collection of them in their multiples and multitude, they kind of perform that. Yeah.

Giulia Shah 02:27
That's really interesting. And it reminds me of a question I had... in the section THE HOLD/THE WAKE/ THE WEATHER, you think about time and how long it should take to get over something. And you also talk about "the rawness of images tied to some unfinished business" and "opening up a leaky wound that must be tended to", and that made me think about like your personal experience of engaging with the materials that you're finding and your practice in general of accessing archives and, you know with archival practices, you never really know what you'll find. And as you really work with subject matters that relate to you so directly in your own history and identity and like, also a lot of history of violence, I guess I wanted to know if you have any ways of tending to your own wounds, and if there are any methods that you use to care for yourself when you're working on a project like that?

Holly 03:31
Hmm. Yeah, that's really interesting. I mean, I think the work is in part, an addressing of that, and it's a sort of, it's an exploring and an unpicking and trying to understand. Yeah, trying to kind of make sense, I guess, of things, which is very broad. Yeah, it's interesting that you speak of like, not knowing what the archive will throw up or not knowing what the work will throw up. And one of the things that developing this kind of iteration of this work, kind of buoyed up was like, a direct way into the Harry Jacobs archive, which is the other collection of photographs of images that I speak about. Via an image of my granddad in the in the Harry Jacobs studio. And it was, it was really strange, actually, because I think when I was thinking about what work I'd like to make for Skelf I had some reservations about returning to the essay, because I kind of thought, oh, maybe I've sort of done that. And I've worked all of that out and thought through it. And maybe that's that now? And do I really need to kind of rehash it or return to it to, you know, am I gonna get anything more out of thinking through it further? While I was kind of looking at different material, you know, I'm collecting visual material all the time, as many artists are in different ways, like just collecting stuff, not always knowing why I just have like a folder of crap waiting to be tapped into. And one of the folders that I had on my computer was – my granddad passed away, about two years ago now and after he died, like very shortly after he died, and just before his house was sort of cleared out, I, I just had this compulsion to take photographs and to film in his living room and main living area, because it was such a, you know, I guess, because it holds so much memory. And to kind of just let it go, it felt actually like I wanted to somehow capture that and document it. So yeah, I did, I photographed and filmed that space, and had this folder on my computer. And then when I was going through the process of developing the work for Skelf, I thought, actually, you know, I wanted something that would illustrate this kind of thinking about domestic portraiture and family photographs. And I thought, oh, I've got some, maybe some examples that I could pull up. And so I was watching all of this material, and thinking through the essay, and like, as I was watching it, I realised that this image that's been on my granddad's mantelpiece, like forever, and that I've seen loads and loads of time, is literally taken in the studio that I was writing about, that I'd been writing about that I've been looking at for all these years. And it was something really a really small detail. Harry Jacobs used the same backdrop and the same props repeatedly for like 50 years, which is one of the things that drew me to the photographs, actually. Which was that sort of universality of the studio space, and it being this like, this one

size fits all almost. And the options were pretty much to have the backdrop or to not have the backdrop. And then the props consisted of a wall, a fake wall, and then a basket of flowers. And so in my granddad's photographs, he didn't have the backdrop, which is a really recognisable garden image. So I think that's why I didn't recognise it at first. But he did have this wall, which was quite blurry. And so it was the wall. Suddenly, I was like, oh, my gosh, that's the studio. So that was quite a quite magical thing, really, in that a direct thing and feeling like, oh, you know, this is like locating oneself in the archive, as directly as possible. But also, I guess, in terms of kind of exercising, *exorcising,* sort of something like, a sense of loss, or, you know. Yeah, it felt like it brought some of these things together. I've been thinking so much recently of that, quote, you know, from bell hooks of - I'm not going to say it right, but like - *I came to theory, because I was hurting*, and I remember when I first read that, and I was like, yeah, I think it sort of resonated. But like, I think I was thinking of it in relation to like, yep, obviously, we all come to theory, in an expanded sense, as a way to make sense of the world. So, you know, well, my view is we have religion, you know, these whole theoretical systems for that reason, these ways of making sense. And definitely, you know, I mean, going to art school and reading a lot of art theory that I did not resonate with and didn't feel connected to, was like, was a big part of my art school experience. But coming across texts that really felt like they resonated with the work and with actually what I was kind of impulsively drawn to do, felt very healing. And it did feel, yeah, it felt like amazing, actually. And so, yeah, I think the idea of theory also alongside kind of practice feels, also for me like a useful way of like thinking through. And I think, in particular, like Christina Sharps framing of ‘the wake’, ‘the hold’, and ‘the weather’ as this practice of care and this like a practice that could also embody healing, or tending to, to wounds and tending to unfinished pasts - yeah, felt really useful to me, I think, as maybe something I was thinking through in the work but unable to articulate. It's a bit of a ramble.

Giulia Shah 11:10
Something I think about a lot when people work within an archival practice and working with materials, where either the subject or the person, the model, or the photographer, or kind of the maker of the material is either unknown, or not alive anymore. Like what kind of role collaboration plays in that and consent. I'm aware that a lot of your work has either been created in dialogue with specific communities, like other work as well, that you do you work a lot with, with making work with communities and groups of

people, or as in *Haptic Registers, Tender Images, Sonic Frequencies*, you are kind of collaborating with this archive, or the material that you're finding there. And there's something very ghostly about it. Which I'm really interested in. And I was just wondering if you could say something about the role that collaboration plays in your practice? And, and perhaps if this, like how you deal with consent? Yeah, I don't really mean how you deal with consent with like, working with community groups, but more like, yeah, of working with materials that you find of people that are kind of no longer with us, I guess.

Holly 12:42
Yeah, I guess with the Harry Jacobs images. I was thinking a lot about consent and sort of copyright, but, and in quite like, dry legal ways, actually. But also, the copyright within the Harry Jacobs collection is kind of interesting, because of time, I guess. So, the copyright doesn't just sit with the photographer, it sits with the people who commissioned the images, and who are in the images. So the Lambeth Archives have the Harry Jacobs images in their collection, but they don't know who the individuals are. The photographs were donated from Harry Jacobs' old studio, they were like, print copies that were spares, I guess, or tests, duplicates, and not the ones that also exist in people's homes. And so, and there aren't records of who those individuals are. So yeah, I guess I was aware that we have a photographer who's no longer alive, who's made this work, who… he specifically did not frame himself or think of himself as an artist, he really thought of himself as a jobbing photographer. And like, that was it was quite direct, I guess, in that respect. I was really thinking about the people in the image it is and the fact that they commissioned these and they're of them. And so I really wanted to work with the images but I also was very conscious of like, yeah, of their, like ownership of themselves and their bodies. And so, yeah, these processes of cropping kind of came into my approach for that selection of images. And I think in the essay, I mentioned as well, but that the Lambeth Archives, and Lambeth Town Hall had an exhibition some years ago, and the Lambeth Archives had basically displayed the images, but had invitations for people from the public to put post it notes on the images to identify individuals, which I thought was a really interesting approach, which was sort of like the flipside maybe of what, what my approach was in the absence of, of that knowledge. But yeah, collaborations are interesting. And I guess a big reference also for me, was Sherrie Levine's *After Walker Evans* and this idea of, you know, reframing, and, you know, is it a collaboration? Is it a response or a

rebuttal? And I guess, you know, the objects, the sugar bowl objects are also that - artisanal objects that have been made. And then they've been photographed. So there's these like, different layers of, I guess you could call it again, these haptic relations, or collaboration in making the image and remaking an image. So yeah, I'm interested in that. I think you mentioned that I do also have, you know, work with others in collaborative ways, particularly, I guess, in developing conversations around the work, but then feed back into the work. So with *Sweet Swollen*, the sugar bowl project, I was working with African heritage V&A tour guides. And so there was like a very direct live collaboration in that instance, where I was conducting interviews with each of them. And that's very, I feel like that's very different as well, from these sort of indirect collaborations, if you like.

Giulia Shah 16:52
I really like you're referencing Sherrie Levine. Yeah, that makes a lot of a lot of sense to just the way that you work very much in maybe a conceptual way as well.

Alex 17:09
I have, it's just more to say that there were a lot of kinds of, like terms or phrases, or I think, like phrases you've invented or borrowed, or maybe somewhere in between. That just kind of really struck me throughout the whole thing.

Holly 17:24
Oh, yeah. I mean, Tina Campt talks about, yeah, the ‘orphaned image’. And I think, yeah, this, in this sort of, maybe, slightly poetic way, or thinking through theory, is something that I'm really drawn to. I also think a lot about the anecdote and like, highlighting the inherent subjectivity of where you're speaking from, as something that feels really crucial for me, in accessing theory, if you like. I think that was one of the things maybe I felt found quite alienating, with lots of the theory that, you know, or with some of the theory that I was confronted by, like art historical, dry writing a lot about modernism, that felt very didactic, and was positing itself as completely objective and almost like voice of God sort of readings of stuff. And yeah, I really appreciate theory that acknowledges its subjectivity and its way in, and its kind of starting point or entrance narrative. I think it's really humanising.

Alex 18:47

Well, I guess we should say, Thanks for your time speaking with us.

Holly 18:52
Oh, thank you. It's been a pleasure.

Alex 18:54
Thanks. Bye.

Holly 18:55
Thank you. Bye bye bye.