



° Jeannette Ehlers

A T L A N T I C

INTRODUCTION ° FORORD

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was the setting for a relatively unknown and only reluctantly remembered part of Denmark's history and cultural heritage: The years when Denmark sold slaves and played an intensive role in the so-called Triangular Trade between Europe, Africa and the West Indies.

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places that marked the slave trade, like the ruins of the slave forts, or the coastlines as they present themselves today, the artist subtly steps into the scene, her presence registering as a reflection or shadow cast onto this distant history. By doing so, history is put into play in relation to her own identity. Her empathetic insight becomes quite literal, but also questioning and investigative.

This experimental approach is a characteristic feature of Jeannette Ehlers' work. Editing, image manipulation and the use of found objects are an often seen feature of the artist's photo and video based works. On these changeable terms meaning and identity is explored in an advanced and spontaneous sense.

The Aarhus Art Building is proud to present the exhibition as well as the accompanying catalogue.

We hope you will enjoy both.

træder kunstneren selv ind i billederne som skygge eller spejling. Hermed sættes den store og fjerne historie i spil i forhold til hendes egen identitet. Indlevelsen i historien bliver således ganske bogstavelig, men også spørgende og afsøgende.

Denne eksperimenterende karakter kendetegner generelt Jeannette Ehlers arbejde. Sammenklipning, billedmanipulation og anvendelse af fundet materiale indgår ofte i kunstnerens foto- og videobaserede værker. På disse omskiftelige præmisser diskutes betydning og identitet på en både avanceret og umiddelbar måde.

Århus Kunstabning er stolte af at kunne præsentere både udstilling og katalog og ønsker god fornøjelse.



THE DANISH SLAVE ° DEN DANSKE TRADE SLAVEHANDEL

A story about remembrance and oblivion

En historie om erindring og glemse

Kristian Handberg

The slaves walked on their naked feet through two hundred years of Danish history without leaving any other trace than the bit of information we find in the school textbook about Denmark being the first country to abolish the slave trade. Thousands of men, women and children. And one sentence to tell it all. And the claim is also wrong.

Thorkild Hansen: *Coast of Slaves*.

With his trilogy *Coast of Slaves* (1967), *Ships of Slaves* (1968) and *Islands of Slaves* (1970) the Danish author Thorkild Hansen (1928-1989) depicted a piece of forgotten Danish history. The meticulously researched and emphatically written books wish – like Jeannette Ehlers’ exhibition – to call a part of history back to life, an era that now exists as a parenthesis in the historical consciousness of most

Lydlose paa deres nøgne fødder vandrer slaverne gennem to hundrede aar af Danmarkshistorien uden at efterlade sig andre spor end skolebögernes lille oplysning om, at Danmark var det første land, som afskaffede slavehandelen. Tusinder af mænd, kvinder og børn. Og bagefter en enkelt sætning. Som er forkert.

Thorkild Hansen: *Slavernes Kyst*

Forfatteren Thorkild Hansen (1928-1989) skildrede et stykke glemt danmarkshistorie med sin triologi *Slavernes Kyst* (1967), *Slavernes Skibe* (1968) og *Slavernes Øer* (1970). De grundigt researchede og indlevet skrevne bøger vil ligesom Jeannette Ehlers udstilling kalde en historie til live, som den dag i dag optræder som en parentes i de fleste danskernes historiske bevidsthed, hængt op på ganske få navne på

Danes and is tied to a few names of far-away tropical islands that were once sold for next to nothing.

Whatever trade activities took place here, far away from Denmark, seem to concern no one. The history of the Danish slave trade is still not only a vague and incriminating chapter in the country's history, but also a poorly illuminated and rarely visited topic.

There are no museums or research centers dedicated to highlighting this part of Danish history.

In the last decades, though, there has been a large interest among international scholars in supplementing and revising the kind of traditional history that only focuses on the West and the ruling cultures.

Post-colonialism is an often used phrase for describing the awareness of the history of the colonies as well as the legacy of colonialism for the world today. The globalization of our times calls for a more truthful *world history* and in this light the recounting of the slave trade of colonial times becomes unavoidable.

The riches from worldwide trade activities not only affected millions of people through the centuries but also formed the basis of Europe's industrialization – the fundament of the modern world.¹ So there are good reasons to pull the slave trade out of

fjerne sydhavsoer, som vi solgte for en slik. Hvilken handel, der ellers foregik her, fjernt fra Danmark, beskæftiger man sig ikke med. Slavehandlens danmarkshistorie er fortsat ikke bare et dunkelt og belastet kapitel i historien, men også et svagt belyst og sjældent besøgt emneområde. Der er ingen forklarende museer og forskende centre dedikeret til denne del af Danmarkshistorien.

Interessen for at supplere og revidere den traditionelle historie, der kun har blik for Vesten og de herskende kulturer, har ellers været stor i de sidste årtiers internationale forskning. Postkolonialisme er et ofte brugt begreb, både til at beskrive bevidstadden om koloniernes historie og om kolonialismens arv for verden i dag. Nutidens globalisering kalder på en sandere *verdenshistorie* og kolonitidens slavehandel bliver uomgængelig her. Ikke bare var det en global handel, der omfattede millioner af mennesker gennem århundreder, men dens rigdomme gav fundament for Europas industrialisering og er hermed at betragte som et fundament for den moderne verden.¹ Der er derfor god grund til at kalde slavehandelen ud af glemslen – også den danske.

Igennem to århundreder handlede Danmark med

oblivion – including Denmark's role in it.

For two centuries Denmark traded in slaves and participated in the so-called triangular trade where

slaves were bought on the West Coast of Africa and sailed to the West Indies. From there the ships would return to Copenhagen loaded with sugar. In this way the ships were never empty, and the profit was always greatest in Copenhagen, where nobody

had to worry about the dangers and inhumanities that were the reality behind the trade route. More than 100,000 slaves were sailed across the Atlantic Ocean in the Danish slave trade, which corresponds to approximately 1 % of the total transport of the European colonial powers.²

As early as 1518, only a few decades after the first white man set foot in the New World, the first shipment of African slaves arrived in the West Indies.

When the traffic became systematized and more efficient hundreds of thousands of slaves were sailed across the Atlantic Ocean every year. In the beginning the activities were led by Spain and Portugal, but in the course of the 17th century, England,

France and Holland took over the leading role in this world trade. Denmark's participation began in

slaver og praktiserede den såkaldte Trekantshandel, hvor man købte slaver på den afrikanske vestkyst, som så sejledes til de Vestindiske øer, hvorfra skibene kunne vende tilbage til København lastet med sukker. Således var skibene aldrig tomme og fortjenes-ten blev altid størst i København, hvor man heller ikke skulle kæmpe med de farer og umenneskeligheder, der ellers var rutens realiteter. Over 100.000 slaver blev fragtet over Atlanten i den danske slavehandel, hvilket svarer til ca. 1 % af de europæiske kolonimagtens samlede befordring.²

Allerede i 1518, få årtier efter at den hvide mand første gang satte Den Nye Verden under fode, kom den første last med afrikanske slaver til Vestindien. Da denne trafik blev effektiviseret og sat i system, blev hundredtusindvis af slaver sejlet over Atlanten hvert eneste år. Først førte spanierne og portugiserne an, mens englænderne, franskmandene og hollænderne satte sig på denne verdenshandel i løbet af det 17. århundrede. Danmark kom med fra ca. 1670, hvor Vestindisk-guinesisk Kompagni fik kongebrev på handelen og etablerede kolonier på først den vestindiske ø St. Thomas (1672) og siden St. Jan (1718) og St. Croix (1733), og byggede

about 1670, when The Danish West India and Guinea Company received a royal charter on the trade and established a colony on the West Indian island of Saint Thomas (1672), followed by Saint John (1718) and Saint Croix (1733), and built forts on the West Coast of Africa in what is now Ghana but was then known as the Gold Coast and the Slave Coast. Contrary to what many believe, Western Africa was not

colonized in the golden age of slave trade. For the slave traders Africa "was chiefly a coastline; or rather it was three parallel lines, one of boiling white surf, one of brown sand, and finally a green line of jungle beyond which few of them ventured and from which fewer still came back".³ Instead of venturing into the foreign land and doing the hard work, guns and rum

were sold to the local tribes to manipulate these people into providing slaves by provoking internal wars.

Endless rows of black people were lead to the forts along the coast where they were measured and examined like goods and "kept in stock" in the slave

yards on the forts until a passing ship could carry them thousands of miles across the Atlantic Ocean. Many of these people had never seen the ocean be-

forter på den afrikanske vestkyst i det, der i dag er Ghana, men dengang var kendt som Guldkysten og Slavekysten. I modsætning til hvad mange tror, var Vestafrika i slavehandelens guldalder ikke koloniseret. For slavehandlerne "var Afrika først og fremmest en kystlinie, eller rettere tre parallele linier: en kogende, hvid brænding, en brun linie af sand, og endelig junglens grønne linie; bag denne vovede kun få sig ind og endnu færre kom tilbage".³ I stedet for selv at vove sig ind i det fremmede land og gøre det grove arbejde, fik man ved at sælge geværer og rom til lokale stammer manipuleret disse til at skaffe slaver ved indbyrdes krige.

Endelose rækker af sorte blev ført til forterne på kysten, hvor de blev målt og vurderet som varer og sat på "lager" i forternes slavegårde til et forbipasserende skib kunne føre disse mennesker, der end ikke havde set havet før, tusindvis af kilometer over Atlanten. Denne transport, kendt som Trekantshandelens 'Midterpassage', er blandt de mere kendte i den almene forestillingsevne: tegningerne af de tæt stuvede dæk med liggende slaver og den kalkulerede tabsprocent på op mod $\frac{1}{5}$ under den månedslange tur er svære at viske ud. Overfarten tog mindst

fore. This transport, known as the “middle passage” of the triangular trade, is among the more well-known aspects of the period in the general public’s mind: the images of the tightly packed slaves lying on the decks and the calculated percentage of loss of up to $\frac{1}{5}$ of the human cargo during the month-long journey are hard to erase from the mind. The journey lasted at least six weeks and at times several months. The ships sailed all the way into the Bay of

Guinea in order to take advantage of sea currents and then followed the South Equatorial Stream parallel to the Brazilian coast up to the final destination

in the West Indies. En route the dangers not only consisted of tropical storms and diseases but also attempts at rebellion and piracy. Because of this the slaves were kept on separate quarterdecks and the ships were armed externally with canons directed against attacking ships and internally with weapons to use against the slaves.

If all went according to plan, they finally reached the West Indies, the three Danish islands and ‘the red fort’ on Saint Thomas. Sugar production on the islands thrived in particular from the middle of the 18th century to the beginning of the 19th century.

6 uger og kunne gerne tage flere måneder. Man sejlede hele vejen ind om Guineabugten for at udnytte havstrømmene og fulgte den Sydækvatoriale Strøm parallelt med den brasilianske kyst op til målet i Vestindien. Undervejs var farerne ikke bare tropestorme og sygdomme, men også oprørsforsøg og sørøveri. Skibene var derfor bevæbnede både udadtil med kanonerne rettet mod angribende skibe og indadtil med skanser og bevæbning mod slaverne. Hvis man var heldig, nåede man endelig Vestindien og de tre danske øer (ca. på størrelse med Møn, Samsø og Læsø) og ‘det røde fort’ på St. Thomas. Sukkerproduktionen på øerne blomstrede specielt fra midten af 1700-tallet til ind i det 19. århundrede. Her var øernes havne internationale handelscentre og byen Charlotte Amalie på Skt. Thomas var med over 10.000 indbyggere rigets næststørste efter København. Velstanden var selvfølgelig baseret på slaveri. Forholdet mellem slaver og frie nåede op på 10:1, et forhold der krævede brutale disciplinære midler fra de hvide planteres minoritet for at holde på magten. Den kuede masses trussel var nok også incitament til forbuddet mod handel med slaver fra 1792. Det var nok verdens første af sin art (17 dage

In this period the ports on the islands were international trade centers and the town of Charlotte Amalie on Saint Thomas was, with its more than 10,000 inhabitants, the second largest town in Denmark after Copenhagen. Naturally the prosperity was due to slavery. The ratio between slaves and free men reached 10:1 calling for brutal discipline from the minority white plantation owners in order to secure their power. The threat from the subdued masses was most likely an inducement for the prohibition of slave trade from 1792. This was probably the first of its kind in the world (17 days before the English), but it didn't mean that slavery was abolished; it would carry on for another fifty years. Not until 1848 was the colorful Governor-General Peter von Scholten, pressed by a rebellion in the town of Frederikssted, forced to finally abolish slavery. But whether the circumstances improved for the freed slaves who continued to live as serfs on the plantations, is still a valid question.

The golden days of sugar production were over, and the islands turned into a grave and distant losing proposition for the kingdom of Denmark. Actually several attempts were made at selling the islands,

før det engelske), men betød ingen ophævelse af slaveriet, der kunne fortsætte et halvt århundrede endnu. Først i 1848 måtte den farverige guvernør Peter von Scholten, presset af oprør i byen Frederikssted, give den endelige afskaffelse. Og om så kårene bedredes for de frigivne som livegne landarbejdere er dog et spørgsmål.

Sukkerindustriens gyldne dage var da talte og øerne var for alvor en fjern underskudsforretning for kongeriget Danmark. Der var faktisk adskilige forsøg på at afhænde øerne, inden de endelig blev solgt til USA i 1917 efter folkeafstemning i Danmark i 1915, mens øernes egen befolkning ikke blev spurgt.

Med denne sidste handel synes Danmark at have solgt sin andel i ansvaret for den store slavehandel. Det er ikke vores historie og vi bliver ganske overraskede, når vi ser levn som den danske konges navnstræk på de hvide forter i Ghana, de røde forter i Vestindien eller de dansk prægede stednavne.

Et sådant møde indleder Thorkild Hansens beretning:

Vi havde et fort i Afrika. Det ligger dernede endnu, bygget på et lavt klippefremsspring, hvor kysten ligesom

until they were finally sold to the USA in 1917 after a 1915 referendum in Denmark. The island's inhabitants were not asked their opinion on the subject. With this last transaction Denmark seems to have sold its share of responsibility for the large-scale slave trade. It is not a part of our history, and we are stunned when we see relics like the emblem of the Danish king on the white forts in Ghana, the red forts in the West Indies and the Danish-sounding place names.

Thorkild Hansen opens his narrative with a description of an encounter of this kind:

We once had a fort in Africa. It is still there, erected on a low promontory of rock, where the coastline extends a foot into the ocean. The oft-whitewashed walls are visible among the palms. Over the portal, the emblem of Christian VII can still be seen. Every time a palm-branch nearby wafts in the wind, it sweeps its fleeting shadow back and forth over the initials as if in an attempt to wipe out the old inscription.

Thorkild Hansen: *Coast of Slaves*, p. 19.

English translation Kari Dako.

sætter en fod ud i havet. De hvide overkalkede mure lyser mellem palmerne. Over indgangen står Christian den Syvendes navnetræk. Hver gang en palmegren i nærheden bevæger sig i vinden, fejer dens fligede skygge frem og tilbage over initialerne som i et forgæves forsøg paa at udviske den gamle indskrift.

Thorkild Hansen: *Slavernes Kyst*, 1967.

Den fortrængte historie fortælles på en baggrund af erindring og glemsejl. Nogles stemmer er nedskrevne, for eksempel i de rejseberetninger, der i Trekantshandelens samtid var populære i Europa og var med til at forme romanen som litterært medie og kulturens mest højtagtede stemme. Og palæerne i København som Marienborg, der nu er statsministerens residens, fortæller om den velstand, slavehandelen skabte.

Slavernes historie skulle dog ikke fortælles. Den verden, de kom fra, blev udraderet, og i den nye verden skulle de bare være tavs nytteværdi. "*Until the lion has his historian, the hunter will always be a hero*", som en anonym tekst står indridset på fortet Prinzensteens mur i Ghana. Det ses på et af Jeannette Ehlers fotos fra hendes rejser forud for

The repressed history is told on a background of remembrance and oblivion. Some voices have been written down, for instance in the travelogues that in the age of the triangular trade were popular in Europe and helped shape the novel as a literary medium and a highly esteemed voice of culture. And palaces in Copenhagen – like Marienborg, where the Danish prime minister now resides – tell the story of the affluence created by the slave trade.

The history of the slaves, though, was not meant to be told. The world from which they came was erased from memory, and in the new world they were just meant to serve a silent and useful purpose.

"Until the lion has his historian, the hunter will always be a hero", as an anonymous inscription on the wall of the Prinzensteen fort in Ghana says. The inscription

can be seen on one of Jeannette Ehlers' photographs from her travels in advance of the exhibition. Photographs that in their own right are a fascinating depiction of the emergence of hidden history.

Jeannette Ehlers' *Atlantic* breaks the silence and turns the spotlight onto the Danish slave trade. It is not an all-seeing and all-explaining light, but a light that takes its starting point in the ruins and the

udstillingen. Fotos, der i sig selv er en fascinerende skildring af den skjulte histories fremkost.

Jeannette Ehlers *Atlantic* bryder tavsheden og sætter spot på den danske slavehandel. Det er ikke et altseende og altforklarende lys, men et med udgangspunkt i ruinerne og de skjulte vidnesbyrd. De tilgroede rester af forterne på kysten og øerne, palæernes noble diskretion, eller bølgerne i det Atlanterhav, der var Trekantshandelens scene.

Her skete det og det er så nært, vi rent fysisk kan komme. Udgangspunktet er dog også personligt, da Jeannette Ehlers som datter af en vestindisk far har direkte rødder i den danske slavehandels historie. Som i et forsøg på at trænge ind i sin egen historie, opträder kunstneren selv i værkerne. Ikke fuldt til stede, men som spejling og skygge. Når man kalder historien til live, er det i en spejling af sig selv.

Samtidig er man altid et produkt af historien. Som en skygge på det hvide forts væg eller en spejling i vandoverfladen træder kunstneren ind i de historisk ladede steder. Er det en flygtig genoplivning af fortidens liv på disse steder eller en illustration af, at kunstnerens nutidige identitet genforenes med noget her? Kunstneren byder sig selv op til dans

hidden testimonies of the overgrown forts along the coast and on the islands, the noble discretion of the mansions and the waves in the Atlantic Ocean that formed the stage for the triangular trade. Here is where it all happened, and we get as close as is physically possible. At the same time the starting point is also a personal one, since Jeannette Ehlers, as the daughter of a West Indian father, has her roots directly planted in the history of the Danish slave trade. As if in an attempt to insinuate herself into her own story, we catch a glimpse of the artist in her works. Not directly, but in the shape of reflections and shadows. Calling history back to life happens in a reflection of one's own self. At the same time we are all always a product of history. Like a shadow on the wall of the white fort or a reflection in the surface of the water the artist steps into the historically charged scenes. Is it a fleeting revival of past life at these places or an illustration showing that the contemporary identity of the artist is reunited with something here? The artist dances in halls like the ones that Peter von Scholten invited the blacks to dance in. It happens in a silent and reflective way, though. The combination of shots from the histori-

i sale som dem, Peter von Scholten bød de sorte indenfor til dans i. Det sker dog tavst og refleksivt. Kombinationen af optagelser fra de historisk ladede steder med de manipulerede indhop, gør *Atlantic* til en diskussion af indlevelsen i historien. I hvor høj grad er det muligt at træde ind i historien og hvad skal vi med specielt den mindre behagelige og fortrængte side af fortiden? *Atlantic* giver ingen svar, men anvender fotografiets både dokumentariske og manipulerende muligheder til at skabe refleksivt memento over den danske slavehandel.

Thorkild Hansens værk fik stor betydning for bevidstheden om den danske aktie i slavehandelen. I dens intensive inddragelse af faktuelt kulturhistorisk materiale og collageagtige gengivelse af kildemateriale er serien på bølgelængde med en væsentlig del af nutidens litteratur og kunst, som vi blandt andet ser hos Jeannette Ehlers. Hansens ønske om at forene alle stemmer i en samlet fortælling og tro på at repræsentationen af alles historie lykkes, vil måske problematiseres af den nye postkolonialisme, der er skeptisk overfor at tale for andre og repræsentere det andet. I Jeannette Ehlers *Atlantic* ser vi måske denne forskel: Hvor intentionen ved Hansen er at

cally charged places and the manipulated interpolations turns *Atlantic* into a discussion of inserting oneself in history. To which extent is it possible to step into history and what do we do with especially the less agreeable and repressed aspects of the past? *Atlantic* presents no answers, but uses the documentary and the possibilities of manipulating photography to create a reflexive memento of the Danish slave trade.

Thorkild Hansen's novels played a major role in the awareness of Danish participation in the slave trade. In its intensive use of factual historical material and collage-like reproduction of source material, the trilogy is in sync with a considerable part of contemporary literature and art – as we see, for instance, in the works of Jeannette Ehlers. Hansen's desire to unite all voices in a comprehensive tale and his belief that it is possible to represent all voices might be met with criticism by the new post-colonialism that is skeptical of speaking for others and representing 'the other'. Maybe we actually see this difference at Jeannette Ehlers' exhibition *Atlantic*: where it was Hansen's intention to tell as much as possible, Jeannette Ehlers' work discusses its own

fortælle så meget som muligt, diskuterer Jeannette Ehlers værk sin egen mulighed for at fortælle.

Atlantic udtrykker, at et resultat i form af den endelige og sande historie måske ikke er det vigtigste. Vigtigere er processen, forsøget på at forstå og erkende. Den er et møde med erindring og glemse, tale og tavshed, fjerne ting, der bliver nære og fortsat distance. *Atlantic* er således både en udstilling om en vigtig historisk tematik og om mødet med historien generelt. Historien stopper ikke, når den er blevet fortalt, men begynder først der. Med *Atlantic* kan historien om, da Danmark solgte slaver, begynde.

1 Skildret af Eric Williams: *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944).

2 Historikere sætter tallet mellem 9 og 12 millioner.

3 Daniel P. Mannix og Malcolm Cowley: *Den atlantiske slavehandels historie (Black Cargoes)*, Niels Bings Forlag 1966 (opr. 1962), s. 26.

particular possibility of telling. *Atlantic* illustrates that a result in the shape of a final and true story may not be the most important thing. More important is the process, the attempt to understand and acknowledge. The exhibition represents a meeting between remembrance and oblivion, speech and silence, far away things drawing closer and continued distance. In this way *Atlantic* is both an exhibition about an important historical complex of themes and about the meeting with history in general. History doesn't end when it has been told; it only just begins. With *Atlantic* the story about the Danish slave trade can begin.



¹ See Eric Williams: *Capitalism and Slavery*, (1944).

² Historians estimate the number to be between 9 and 12 millions.

³ Daniel P. Mannix and Malcolm Cowley: *Black Cargoes: A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade*, Longman, London, 1963, p. 13.

















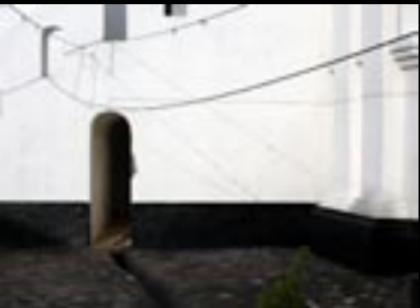
◦ Now is the time

D A Y
T H A T
U P
P E E D
S P
T O
F R E E A T L A S T !















FORT PRINZENSTEIN
BUILT BY THE DANES - 1784

BILLEDER:

- s. 6 fra Voodoo ceremoni, Keta, Ghana
- s. 17 fra Fort Prinzenstein, Keta, Ghana
- s. 18-19 fra videoen *Ballroom*
- s. 20-23 fra fotoserien *Atlantic* (Busua Beach)
- s. 24-27 fra videoen *Speed up that day*
- s. 26 citat fra *I have a dream*, Martin Luther King, 1963
- s. 28-29 fra videoen *Black Magic at The White House*
- s. 30-35 fra fotoserien *Atlantic* (Prinzenstein)





FLICKERING IMAGES ° FLAKKENDE BILLEDER

Manipulation and the search for identity in
Jeannette Ehlers' work

Manipulation og identitetssøgen i
Jeannette Ehlers' værk

Aukje Lepoutre Ravn

In contemporary art the inclusion of the floating and constantly changing stream of digital images that roll in and out of our over-stimulated visual life and thus also into the world of art is old news. But what still has not depleted its news potential is the decoding and understanding of how the digital image works as a dynamic and multi-layered system. The digital "video revolution" of the 1990s with pioneers like Tony Oursler, Dara Birnbaum, Michal Rovner and Pierre Huyghe gave access to a nuanced editing technology that for many artists became the key and tool for new artistic expressions. Although the use of digital tools has now become an integrated part of the artistic process, and although – in a typically dystopian way – some already talk about a post-digital era, the mechani-

I samtidskunsten er inkluderingen af det digitale billede flydende og konstant foranderlige billestrøm, der vælter ind og ud af vores overstimulerede visuelle liv og dermed ind i kunsten, en gammel nyhed. Hvad der derimod ikke har udtømt sit nyhedspotentiale, er afkodningen og forståelsen af, hvordan det digitale billede fungerer som et dynamisk system med mange lag. 1990ernes digitale "videorevolution", med pionerer som Tony Oursler, Dara Birnbaum, Michal Rovner og Pierre Huyghe, gav adgang til en nuanceret redigeringsteknologi, der for mange kunstnere blev nøglen og værktøjet til nye kunstudtryk. Selvom brugen af digitale redskaber i dag er blevet en almindelig integreret del af den kunstneriske proces, og der på sædvanlig dystopisk vis også allerede tales om en postdigital



cal medium to which digital art belongs still seems to have a large potential for development.

One of the young Danish artists whose artistic foundation is rooted in digital imagery is Jeannette Ehlers (b. 1973), who graduated from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in 2006. Among other things Ehlers is concerned with creating computer manipulated video works on the basis of existing video and film material – so-called *found footage*.

The principle behind her approach consists of taking

æra, så synes det mekaniske medium, som den digitale kunst indskriver sig i, stadig at have et stort udviklingspotentiale.

En af de unge danske kunstnere, hvis kunstneriske fundament er forankret i det digitale billede-sprog er Jeannette Ehlers (1973), der er uddannet fra det Kgl. Danske Kunstakademi i 2006. Ehlers arbejder blandt andet med at skabe computermanipulerede videoværker ud fra eksisterende video- og filmmaterialer – såkaldt *found footage*. Hendes værkprincip er at tage enkelte scener fra klassiske film eller populære tv-klip, hvorefter hun omskaber scenens narrative indhold ved eksempelvis at fjerne eller addere en personsikkelse. Med samme nøjsomme præcision som en kirurg bearbejder Ehlers det udvalgte materiale billede for billede. Teknikken er uhyre tålmodighedskrævende, fordi hvert sekund rummer ca. 25 billeder og hvert eneste billede skal behandles. Hvis blot et enkelt billede springes over, bliver manipulationens aftryk for evident og det ønskede ”forsvindingsnummer” umuliggøres. Særligt er det fjernelsen eller manipuleringen af menneskekroppen, der interesserer Jeannette Ehlers. I hendes første digitalt manipulerede video *Ghost*

single scenes from classic films or popular TV-shows and deconstructing the narrative contents of the scenes in question by, for instance, leaving out or adding a character. With the meticulous precision of a surgeon Ehlers works her way through the selected

material frame by frame. The technique demands extreme patience, for each second consists of about 25 frames and each frame has to be treated individually. If just one frame is skipped, the manipulation becomes too evident and the desired "vanishing act"

is rendered impossible. Jeannette Ehlers is especially interested in the removal or manipulation of the human body. In her first digitally manipulated video, *Ghost Rider 1*, we see a video-recording of a soccer match, where all 22 soccer players have been removed, so that only their empty shadows chase the

ball, and in *Ghost Rider 6*, a classic black and white fight scene from a western movie is turned into a comical disarming of the masculinity of the Marlboro Man. One of the sides in the fight has been removed so that only the most powerful of the fighters stands back alone and looks like a confused cowboy hunting the shadow of a ghost. In her manipulation of these filmic fragments Ehlers uses the simple trick



Rider 1, ser vi en tv-transmitteret fodboldkamp, hvor alle 22 fodboldspillerkroppe er fjernet, så kun deres tomme skygger løber rundt efter bolden, og i *Ghost Rider 6* transformeres en klassisk sort/hvid westernfilm-slåskamp til en komisk afvæbning af Marlboromandens maskulinitet. Den ene part i slåskampen er fjernet helt, så kun den mest slagkraftige af nævneørerne står alene tilbage og ligner en forvirret cowboy, der jagter skyggen på et spøgelse.

of removing the focal points that normally guide us in moving images and instead turns our attention towards something else that exists, so to speak, in the "shadow" of the primary action or person. The interference is simple, but the effect is large.

Jeannette Ehlers' technical method has parallels to, among others, the Austrian artist Martin Arnolds and the American artist Paul Pfeiffer, who also provide a direct inspiration. Paul Pfeiffer works with a similar intricate digital editing technique and uses it to create sophisticated examinations of identity and social constructions. In the video-triptych *The Long Count* Pfeiffer for instance removed the main characters in Muhammad Ali's three legendary boxing matches. We see the boxing ring, but the boxers have disappeared so that only the digital trace of their removal and the yelling and screaming audience can be seen and heard.

REPRESENTATION OF THE SELF

The absence of the main actors in scenes like these and their reduction to mere shadows have evident humorous and comic qualities, but at the same time the works are also saturated with a haunting absence

I manipuleringen af disse filmiske brudstykker foretager Ehlers det meget simple greb at fjerne de fokuspunkter, som vi sædvanligvis lader os visuelt styre af i det bevægende billede, og retter det i stedet mod noget andet, der så at sige står i "skyggen" af den primære handling eller person. Indgrebet er simpelt, men effekten stor.

Jeannette Ehlers tekniske metode har paralleller til bl.a. den østrigske kunstner Martin Arnolds og den amerikanske kunstner Paul Pfeiffer, som Ehlers også er inspireret af. Paul Pfeiffer arbejder tilsvarende med den intrikate digitale redigeringsteknik og bruger den til at skabe sofistikerede undersøgelser af identitet og sociale konstruktioner. I videotriptykken *The Long Count* har Pfeiffer eksempelvis fjernet hovedpersonerne i Muhammed Alis tre legendariske boksekampe. Vi ser bokseringen, men bokserne er forsvundet, så kun det digitale spor af deres fjerne og publikums hujen er at se og høre.

REPRÆSENTATION AF SELVET

Fraværet af disse sceners primære aktører og deres reducering til rene skygger har tydeligvis humoristiske og komiske kvaliteter, men samtidig er

of physical presence and identity. The persons are *in absentia*, and in their absence the surgically removed bodies suddenly seem to be the key to a much larger

question about the identity of the body and the identity behind the body. Ehlers' experiments with computer manipulations have developed side by side with another and more personal key theme dealing with self-presentation and the quest for identity. Seen next to one another the connection and interaction between these two fields of interest might seem oppositional since one seems to be concerned with a search for a truth about the ego while the other deliberately wants to peel away "truth" and turn it into something else. But it is exactly this tension between manipulation and search for identity that makes Ehlers' works function.

As the child of a mother from the West Coast of Denmark and a father from the West Indies the consciousness of a mixed culture and ethnicity has been

a natural condition of identity for Ehlers. For the same reason these circumstances have also given rise to the natural question about how a person's identity and self-image are formed by means of upbringing, sociality, ethnicity and the gaze of The Other.

værkerne også gennemsyret af et søgerende fysisk identitetsfravær. Personerne er *in absentia*, og i deres fravær synes den bortopererede krop pludselig at være nøglen til et meget større spørgsmål om kroppens identitet og identiteten bag kroppen. Ehlers eksperimenter med computermanipulation har udviklet sig side om side med et andet og mere personligt nøgletema, der drejer sig om identitets-søgen og selvrepræsentation. Ved siden af hinanden kan disse to interessers sammenhæng og interaktion virke modstridende, da det ene synes at ville finde sandheden om jeg-*et*, mens den anden bevidst vil pille "sandheden" bort og gøre den til noget andet, men det er netop denne spænding mellem manipulation og identitetssøgen, der får Ehlers værker til at fungere.

Som barn af en vestjysk mor og en vestindisk far er bevidstheden om sammensat kultur og etnicitet et naturligt identitetsvilkår for Ehlers. Af samme årsag har dette identitetsvilkår også affødt en række lige så naturlige spørgsmål om, hvordan vores identitet og selv billeder sammensættes gennem opdragelse, socialitet, etnicitet og den andens blik. Disse spørgsmål har Ehlers kanaliseret gennem sin kunst, for at



Ehlers has channeled these questions into her art in order to shed light on her own identity in a broader socio-cultural context. Ehlers presents these issues

for the first time in the work *Double Me* (2003), where we watch a short 16 mm film clip of a three year old Ehlers running down a sidewalk. Next to her runs an adult woman who has clearly been cut into the scene. At first glance the set-up resembles an idyllic scene with a race between a mother and her daughter, but the woman who has been added is

betydningsafklare sig selv i en større sociokulturel kontekst. Problematikken møder vi første gang i værket *Double Me* (2003), hvor vi ser en kort smal-filmsoptagelse af Ehlers selv som 3-årigt barn, der løber hen ad et fortov. Ved siden af hende løber en voksen kvinde, der tydeligvis er klippet ind i scenen. Umiddelbart ligner set-uppet en idyllisk scene med kapløb mellem mor og datter, men den tilføjede kvinde er Ehlers selv. Som en virtuel tidsmaskine illustrerer *Double Me* en meget genkendelig identitets-afsøgende tanke om at møde sig selv som barn, men med egne voksne øjne.

Senere i *Ventilate (part one)* fra 2007 har Ehlers i høj grad præciseret sit ærinde i forhold til teknik og identitetssøgen. I videoen ser man kunstneren danse sensuelt foran sin bogreol, mens hun rytmisk fejer alle bøgerne ned fra reolen, indtil den er tom. Ehlers krop er dog animeret væk og man ser den kun glimtvis som en flydende transparent masse, der udelukkende fastholdes med kroppens kontur. Alligevel er kroppen, trods dens kraftige ydre identitetsreducering identificerbar netop på grund af konturens bevægelse og ikke mindst kunstnerens lange, flettede afrohår, der kastes rundt i dansen.

Ehlers herself. Like a virtual time-machine *Double Me* illustrates the well-known identity-seeking notion of meeting oneself as a child, but with one's own grown-up eyes.

Later, in 2007's *Ventilate (part one)*, Ehlers has to a much larger degree defined her message in relation to technique and search for identity. In the video we see the artist perform a sensual dance in front of a bookcase while rhythmically sweeping down all the books from the shelves till the bookcase is empty. But Ehlers' body has been removed and we only see it in short glimpses like a flowing and transparent mass that is only contained because of the contour of the body. Nevertheless – in spite of its powerful external reduction of identity – it is still possible to identify the body because of the movements of the form and, not least, the artists' long, braided afro-hair flowing in the air while she dances.

That Ehlers works in such a focused way with digital intervention can be seen as a deviant layer that insists on turning our attention towards the technical manipulation itself instead of what the artist wants to say. It seems that a more frank and personal examination of self-presentation hides itself



At Ehlers arbejder så fokuseret med det digitale indgreb, kan opfattes som et afvigende lag, der fastholder opmærksomheden på selve den tekniske manipulation, frem for det som det manipulatoriske greb vil fortælle. Der synes nemlig at gemme

under the surface and suddenly pops up in *Ventilate (part one)*. By erasing the external layer of her subjectivity, so that only the sensually dancing silhouette of the body is left, she peels away in a digital-anatomical sense a layer of herself and reaches the substance hiding behind the skin. It seems like the very act of removing the most significant elements in the videos turns into a kind of artistic ritual for Ehlers that enables her to move around the back and reveal a more substantial and historically loaded layer of her own identity.

FLICKER

While still basing her work on digitally manipulated images, in the last couple of years Ehlers has turned her attention more and more to the genre of experimental films and produced a number of longer videos containing several filmic layers. The works are, to a much larger degree, appropriating, and the artist herself refers to them as flicker-films. The notion 'flicker-film' covers a special structural cutting-technique that the American avant-garde film artist Tony Conrad experimented with in the

sig en mere hudløs og personlig undersøgelse af selvrepræsentationen, som pludselig kommer frem i *Ventilate (part one)*. Ved at viske det yderste lag af sin subjektivitet ud, så kun kroppens sensuel dansende silhuett er tilbage, skræller hun i digitalanatomisk forstand dette lag af sig selv af og ind til det aftryk, der ligger bag huden. Det er som om at selve den handling, det er at fjerne de mest betydningsbærende elementer i videoerne, for Ehlers bliver en form for kunstnerisk ritual, der fører hende bagom og ind til et mere substantielt og historisk ladet lag af sin egen identitet.

FLICKER

Med stadigt afsæt i det digitalt manipulerede billedmateriale har Ehlers de seneste år bevæget sig mere over i eksperimentalfilmgenren og lavet længere videoer, der har inddraget flere filmiske lag. Værkerne er i højere grad appropriatede og kaldes af kunstneren selv for flicker-film. Begrebet flicker-film kan på dansk oversættes til flimrefilm og dækker over en særlig strukturel klippeteknik, som den amerikanske avantgarde-filmkunstner Tony Conrad eksperimenterede med i filmen *The Flicker* fra 1966. Conrad



film *The Flicker* from 1966. Conrad mixed black and white images – *frame-by-frame* – and in this way created a flickering total effect. Inspired by especially American avant-garde films of the 1960s the work Crossroads (2008) is Ehlers' first experiment within the genre of flicker-films. By means of her consistent technical systematism Ehlers mixes two of the most legendary road-movies in the history of film,

blandede sorte og hvide billeder billede for billede – *frame-by-frame* – og skabte dermed en flimrende helhedseffekt. Med inspiration fra særligt 1960ernes amerikanske avantgardefilm er værket *Crossroads* (2008) Ehlers første forsøg med flicker-filmen. Ved hjælp af den konsekvente tekniske systematik, sammenblander hun to af filmhistoriens mest legendariske roadmovies *Faster Pussycat!, Kill!, Kill!* af Russ



Faster Pussycat!, Kill!, Kill! by Russ Meyer (1963) and *Stalker* by Andrei Tarkovsky (1979). First a frame from one movie, then a frame from the other, etc. In Ehlers' interpretation of Conrad's technique the viewer is confronted with a similar frenetic passage of images that can also be compared to the rhythmic flashing of strobe lights. Perceptually the film puts a lot of stress on the eyes as well as the brain because it only allows us to understand the narrative

Meyer (1963) og *Stalker* af Andrei Tarkovsky (1979). Først et billede fra den ene film, så et fra den anden osv. I Ehlers' fortolkning af Conrads teknik konfronteres beskueren med et lignende frenetisk billedforløb, der også minder om stroboskoplysets rytmiske blinken. Perceptionsmæssigt stresser filmen både øjet og hjernen, fordi den kun tillader at opfatte det narrative filmforløb som opbrudte gestalter, og vi må forestille os deres sammenhæng og forløb via tidlige filmerfaringer. Kun ved at vænne øjet til den konstante blinken, kan billedinformationen blink for blink langsomt dechireres til den helhed, de er skabt ud af for så at kunne afkodes og forstås, også på et interrelationelt plan.

Til udstillingen *The Eye in the Door*, der blev vist i Kunsthallen Nikolaj tidligere på efteråret, producerede Ehlers værket *Divine Dichotomy* (2009), der arbejder med samme blandingsteknik som i *Crossroads*. Modsat før har Ehlers dog ikke anvendt *found footage*, men i stedet selv skrevet og instrueret en 8 min. film efter alle filmmanuskriptets regler. Resultatet er en filmisk kærlighedshistorie, der er bygget op som en re-enactment af udvalgte erotiske kunsthistoriske ikoner og tableauer fra renæssancen

sequence as fragmentary gestalts, and we have to imagine their connection and progress on the basis of our earlier filmic experiences. Only by letting our eyes adjust to the constant flickering the information contained in the images, blink by blink, may slowly be deciphered into the unity they spring from in order to be decoded and understood, even on an irrational level.

For the exhibition *The Eye in the Door* at Kunsthallen Nikolaj in Copenhagen earlier this year, Ehlers produced the work *Divine Dichotomy* (2009), where

she works with the same mixing technique as in *Crossroads*. Contrary to her earlier works, Ehlers has not used *found footage* for this work, but has written and directed an 8-minute long film following all the rules of a regular film script. The result is a filmic love story constructed as a re-enactment of selected erotic art icons from the Renaissance to our day. In the film we meet a caricature of two lovers who enact scenes from, among others, Masaccio's *Expulsion from Paradise*, Fragonard's ambiguous swing-pushing, Duchamp's voyeuristic keyhole and Jeff Koon's

self-depicting pornographic tableaus. Everything is presented at the speed of light. Ehlers' special



til i dag. I filmen optræder et karikeret kærestepar, der udspiller scener fra blandt andet Masaccios *Uddrivelsen af Paradis*, Fragonards tvetydige gyngeskubning, Duchamps voyeuristiske nøglehul og Jeff Koons selvportrætterende pornografiske tableauer. Alt sammen i et lynende tempo. Ehlers tekniske særlige greb i *Divine Dichotomy* er, at hun har sammenblandet den samme film i to forskellige visninger; den ene vises forlæns, mens den anden vises baglæns. På den måde mødes filmene på midten i et enkelt øjeblik af helhed – kysset – hvorefter de passerer hinanden og atter forsvinder ud i hver deres abstraktion. Med

technical trick in *Divine Dichotomy* is to mix the same film in two different versions; one is shown forwards while the other is shown backwards. In this way the two versions meet at the middle in a single moment of unity – the kiss – only to pass one another again and once more disappear into their own abstractions. With the flicker-technique Ehlers dissolves the narrative chronology and effectively challenges the viewer's phenomenological and art historical identification, but since it happens by means of the filmic recognition, Ehlers nevertheless allows a somewhat larger space for understanding and decoding of the complicated structure of the technique.

CONCLUSION

In Ehlers' work universe the contrasting balance between humor and reflection, between frenetic and static moments, between the evident and the enigmatic and, not least, the manipulated versus the original, functions as a dynamic generator, making sure to maintain the digital phenomenological and the identity-seeking tensions in the works. With her computer's editing program as her central surgical tool – a tool, that can separate, remove and add

flicker-teknikken op løser Ehlers fortællingens narrative kronologi og dermed udfordrer hun kraftigt betragterens fænomenologiske og kunsthistoriske identifikation, men i form af den filmiske gentagelse, tillader Ehlers alligevel et lidt større rum til erkendelse og afkodning af teknikkens komplikerede struktur.

AFSLUTNING

I Ehlers værkunivers fungerer den kontrasterende balance mellem det humoristiske og reflekterende, det frenetiske og statiske, det åbenbare og gådefulde og ikke mindst det manipulerede overfor det oprindelige, som en dynamiske generator, der sørger for at vedholde både de digitalfænomenologiske og identitetsundersøgende spændinger i værkerne. Med computerens redigeringsprogram som det centrale kirurgiske værktøj, der kan adskille, fjerne og addere lag, skræller Ehlers sig bogstaveligt ind til kernen af det, hun vil undersøge – sig selv og dermed mennesket.

Udforskningen af de digitale manipulationsmuligheder og den identitetssøgende selvrepræsentation – Ehlers to kunstneriske ledetråde - har gennem

layers – Ehlers literally peels her way into the core of what she wants to examine: Herself and thus also human beings in general.

Ehlers' two artistic guiding principles, the exploration of the digital possibilities of manipulation and the identity-seeking self presentation, have existed through all of her work production as parallel interests – at times mixed, often separated. But at the exhibition *Atlantic*, which is now on view at the Aarhus Art Building, the two principles seem to culminate

in a higher unity, where the precision of Ehlers' digital manipulations is beautifully tied up with her historically anchored identity search – the roots of which send us all the way from Denmark via Ghana to the former Danish West Indies.



hele hendes værkproduktion fungeret som parallelle interesser – somme tider sammenblandede, ofte adskilte. Men i udstillingen *Atlantic*, der nu vises i Aarhus Kunstabgning, synes de to ledetråde for alvor at kulminere i en højere enhed, hvor den digitalmanipulerende præcision bindes smukt sammen med Ehlers historisk forankrede identitetssøgen, hvis rødder sender os hele vejen fra Danmark over Ghana og til det tidligere Dansk Vestindien.

°ATLANTIC

Jeannette Ehlers

Udgivet i forbindelse med udstillingen
ATLANTIC
Jeannette Ehlers
Århus Kunstabgning
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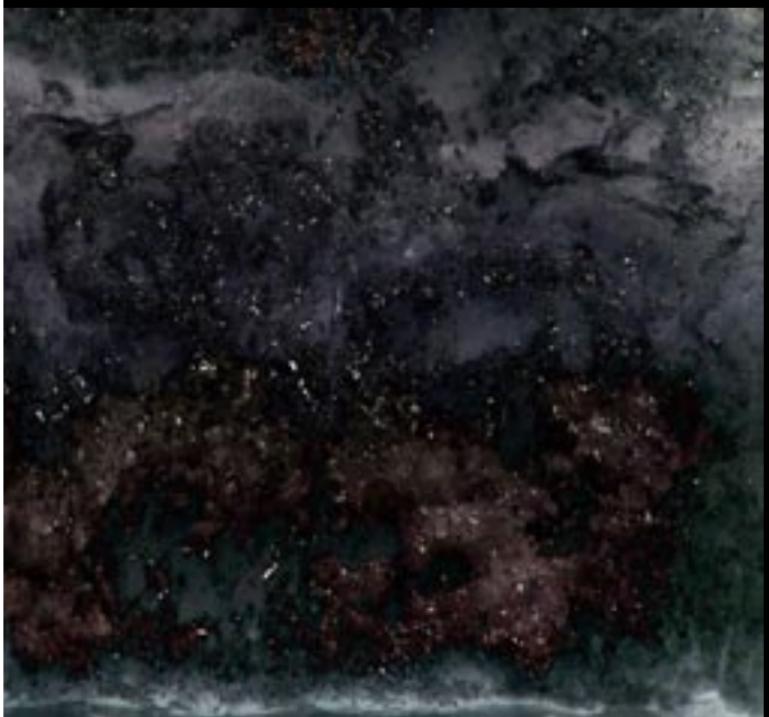
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