

**jeannette ehlers**

# “JEANNETTE EHLERS: SAY IT LOUD!”

NIKOLAJ  
KUNSTHAL

“SKØNHED OG GRU,  
MENNESKELIGHED OG KUNST.”

KUNSTEN.NU

“VÆSENTLIGE VÆRKER,  
SOM TALER TIL TIDEN.”

INFORMATION



“AN IMPORTANT EXHIBITION  
ABOUT DANISH SLAVERY.”

POLITIKEN

15. MARTS - 25. MAJ 2014

**FORLÆNGET  
TIL 31. JULI 2014**  
LUKKET 26. - 28. MAJ OG 9. - 20. JUNI  
ALLE DAGE INKLUSIV

ÅBNINGSTIDER / OPENING HOURS

TIRSDAG TIL SØNDAG 12 - 17 / TUESDAY TO SUNDAY 12PM - 5PM

TORSDAG 12 - 21 / THURSDAY 12PM - 9PM

NIKOLAJ PLADS 10 / 1067 KØBENHAVN K / NIKOLAJKUNSTHAL.DK



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STATENS VÆRKSTEDER  
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FOTO: CASPER MARE

**Nikolaj Kunsthal, Copenhagen Contemporary Art Centre  
March 15 - May 25 2014**

# **”JEANNETTE EHLERS SAY IT LOUD!”**

**OPENING MARCH 14 2014 5 - 7 PM**



*Atlantic (Endless Row), 2009, Jeannette Ehlers*

## **Press release**

“*Say it loud! I’m black and I’m proud*”, James Brown sang in 1968. The song was a call to the black population in the US to replace the chains of the past with pride. With “*SAY IT LOUD!*” at Nikolaj Kunsthal, Copenhagen Contemporary Art Centre, Danish video artist Jeannette Ehlers now addresses an equally grim but less exposed chapter in the history of the African slaves: Denmark’s past as a colonial power in the Danish West Indies.

It is a chapter including plantations, slaves, and Southern skies, and with a city of Copenhagen that built its grand town houses on the foundation of a transatlantic trade with sugar, rum, and people. At the same time, it represents a chapter in Danish

history that continues to influence our reality to this day, but which we have only in recent decades began to process as a collective history.

“*SAY IT LOUD!*” at Nikolaj Kunsthal is a poetic, fascinating, and tough processing of the Danish past in the West Indies, as well as of Jeannette Ehlers’ own experience of her identity as the daughter of a Danish mother and a father with roots in the West Indies.

Jeannette Ehlers employs the documentary and digitally manipulated potential of both photography and video to create a visually, spatially, and sonically appealing exhibition, putting under debate topics such as history, colonisation, freedom, responsibility, force, body, identity, community, and interhuman relations.

“*SAY IT LOUD!*” marks the largest overall presentation of Jeannette Ehlers’ works so far, including all her major works from 2009 to this day. The exhibition furthermore premieres her most recent video work *Whip It Good*. *Whip It Good* is a documentation of the artist’s first live performance, carried out in Berlin in 2013 and later recreated at Vestindisk Pakhus (“The West India Warehouse”) in Copenhagen, where, in earlier times, rum, sugar, and coffee from the West Indian Islands were lugged in. Today, it houses The Royal Cast Collection.

This performance will be re-enacted on the opening evening, when Jeannette Ehlers *reenacts* one of the most brutal means of punishment during slavery, the whipping, in a simple but tense rebellion, a kind of artistic reconquering of the atrocities that her forefathers were subjected to.

### **AN OUTSTANDING VIDEO ARTIST**

For a number of years, Jeannette Ehlers has established herself as one of the most significant contemporary artists working within video art, both in a Danish context and increasingly also internationally, with her participation in exhibitions such as *Kianga Ellis Projects*, New York; *Dak’Art*, the Dakar Biennale, Senegal; *Parisian Laundry*, Montreal; *CARIBBEAN: Crossroads of the World*, El Museo del Barrio, New York; *BLACK EUROPE BODY POLITICS*, *BE.BOP 2012* and *2013*; *ENTER 2011: Ung Dansk Samtidskunst*, Kunsthallen Brandts; *Subtle Whispering\_Danish Video Art Festival*, Total Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul; a.o.

It is a recurring element of Jeannette Ehlers’ artistic practice that she experiments with and challenges complex issues such as identity and representation in a clear and simple manner, making for strong and powerful works, often with a point of departure in her Danish West Indian background. Jeannette Ehlers’ modes of expression range from real recordings, digital video processing, sound montage, animation to performance.

It is with great pleasure that Nikolaj Kunsthal now presents Jeannette Ehlers’ recent works, brought together here for the first time in Copenhagen.

Jeanette Ehlers, visual artist, says:

*“Based on my own Danish West Indian background, I examine and process themes related to the transatlantic slave trade that, despite the predominant collective repression, still play an important part in our society. My work is a personal taking history to task and a protest against the suppression of and often ignorant attitude towards these problems that I meet in this part of the world.”*

Andreas Brøgger, curator at Nikolaj Kunsthal, adds:

*“With Jeannette Ehlers’ exhibition “SAY IT LOUD!” one enters a highly topical and relevant narrative of identity and belonging. We get to feel and reflect on the impact of globalisation and history through her use of all the facets of the video medium – from real recordings at the West Indian Islands to digital effects, and not least a very powerful soundtrack. The large and unique presentation at Nikolaj Kunsthal marks the first overall presentation of Ehlers’ works”.*

“SAY IT LOUD!” will be shown at the Lower Gallery of Nikolaj Kunsthal from March 15 to May 25 2014.

### **Event: BE.BOP 2014 (BLACK EUROPE BODY POLITICS)**

In connection with this exhibition, the seminar and art event BE.BOP 2014 will take place at Statens Værksteder for Kunst (“The Danish Art Workshops”) in Copenhagen from May 15 to 18 2014.

The event comes into being in collaboration with Alanna Lockward and Art Labour Archives, Network for Migration and Culture as well as Ballhaus Naunynstrasse, Berlin. The seminar opens with a keynote address by Walter Mignolo, Professor at Duke University, at the University of Copenhagen, Amager.

BE.BOP 2014 brings together international and Danish artists and theorists for a joint discussion of the aesthetics of decolonisation in a European and interdisciplinary context. Twice before, BE.BOP has taken place in Berlin, where key personnel within this field have engaged in debates, talks, film screenings, and performances in order to examine how intercultural trends, among these “black diasporas” and Afro-European culture, are represented in Europe.

### **LEARN MORE**

Jeannette Ehlers’ webpage: [www.jeannetteehlers.dk](http://www.jeannetteehlers.dk)

Jeannette Ehlers: “SAY IT LOUD!” on Nikolaj Kunsthal’s webpage: <http://www.nikolajkunsthal.dk/da/udstillinger/jeannette-ehlers>

## **THE TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE**

Up to the selling of the Danish West Indies in 1917, Denmark sent seafarers and merchants there in order to conduct trade and run plantations. A large part of the wealth generated up to 1870 by the sugar production at Saint Croix, the trading station at Saint Thomas, and the so-called triangular trade among Denmark, the West Indies, and the Gold Coast was channelled into Copenhagen and North Zealand fortunes to provide the economic basis of the magnificent residencies of the region, among these Marienborg, the Prime Minister's official residence, and Frederiksstaden, a tribute to the absolute monarchy of the Danish King Frederick V.

Behind this story of prosperity lies a dark chapter of a colonialist Denmark that had a high cost in terms of human suffering. Thousands of slaves perished during the transportation from West Africa where they had been captured and sold in exchange for textiles, aquavit, and weapons from Europe, to these islands, and even more lived under miserable conditions, with their labour exploited in the Danish plantations and households.

As the first European country, Denmark abolished slave trade in 1792, though it was not carried into effect until 1803. This abolition was highly affected by the economic and humanistic arguments against slavery put forth from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century by Quakers, Methodists and Enlightenment philosophers. Slavery came to an end in the Danish West Indies in 1848. The Danish West Indies received a total of 75,000 African slaves, as compared to the 1.6 million of the French colonies, the 2 million of the British colonies, and Brazil's 4 million.

Even though the transatlantic slave trade laid the foundation for a substantial part of Danish prosperity in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and has later been widely recognised as a crime against humanity, this has not occupied much space in Danish historiography and has only in recent decades become the object of debate.

## **CONTACT**

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Nikolaj Kunsthal, Copenhagen Contemporary Art Centre

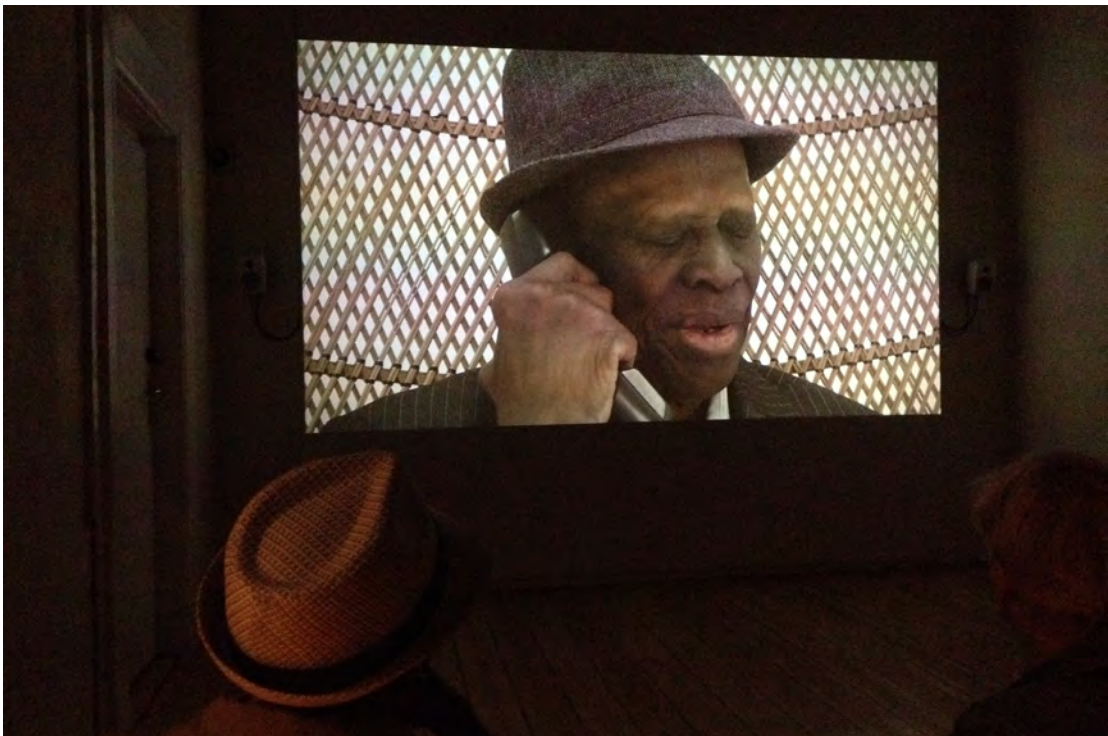
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**SAY IT LOUD!**  
Jeannette Ehlers  
Nedre Galleri, Nikolaj Kunsthal  
15.05 - 31.07 2014









**"JEANNETTE EHLERS SAY IT LOUD!"**



**SAY IT LOUD!** er den første samfide præsentation af den danske kunster Jeannette Ehlers' værker fra 2009 og frem til i dag.

Med video, foto og performance skaber Jeannette Ehlers visuelt historiske og videnskabelige værker om identitet og tilhørsforhold, historisk magt og globale bevægelser. Hun udforsker alle videnskabelige register - fra egne tidligere optagelser i Afrika og på de Danske Vestindiske Øer til historiske kilder og arkivgrafik materiale, digitale effekter, animation og ikke mindst en meget markant lydside.

Udstillingen bevæger sig gennem fortid og nutid og på byens af kontinenter. Jeannette Ehlers kender en række betydningsfulde momenter i den vestlige verdens historie sammen, den danske tid som kolonimagt med slaverhandelen i Afrika og Vestindien fra det 17. århundrede og frem, oprøret blandt den sorte slaverbefolkning på Haiti i slutningen af det 18. århundrede og de sorte borgerebevægelse i USA i det 20. århundrede. Kunstnerens egen dansk-vestindiske baggrund flettes elegant sammen med de store historiske skide på udstillingen. Ehlers peger på nutidens følger af historien og nye aktuelle former for tvang og fjendens. I sine værker undersøger hun mulighederne for, at tvang, diskrimination og uret kan føre til frihed, oplysning og forsoning.

Udstillingen begynder i Ghana, hvor sorte slaver fra midten af 1600-tallet og frem blev taget til fange som led i lokale storme og sejler for søen, kraft og som led i de hvide kolonimagter. Også Danmark havde etableret handelsforretninger langs Guldkysten, også kaldet Slaverkysten, hvorfra slaverne blev lastet på skibe, som sejlede over Atlanterhavet med kurs mod de Danske Vestindiske Øer. Fra søernes plantager blev sukker, bomuld og tobak skibet tilbage til Danmark som led i den såkaldte trekantshandel, der forbandt Europa, Afrika og kolonierne mod vest.

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The exhibition of as Jeannette Eh in the history of t was a colonial pe West Indies from the black slave p 20th century ble The artist's own i interwoven with s Ehlers points to a developments of liberation. In her and injustice and reconciliation.

The exhibition be mid 17th century wars and traded i weapons, gunpow forts along the G where slaves we for the Danish W cotton and tobacc the so-called trian colonies far West



But I heard him calling on me again.

**WHIP IT GOOD** live performance from the opening of the exhibit SAY IT LOUD!

Nikolaj Kunsthal, Copenhagen 14. March 2014



The performance *Whip it good!* is a “reenactment” of one of the brutal punishment methods used during slavery. In using the same method on a white canvas, I create a simple, though contradictory, artistic act of striking back.

I invite the audience to finish the painting, which leaves behind a scar-like black and white painting, raising complex questions and thoughts.

**Whip it good** was first performed in Berlin 2013 at BE.BOP2013, commissioned by Art Labour Archive and Ballhaus Naunynstrasse, and has since traveled to many different places worldwide.

Inspiration behind and set up for the performance *Whip It Good!*

By

Jeannette Ehlers



Materials: Whip, crushed charcoal, a white canvas, white costume and body paint (inspired by the above picture)

**How do you talk about three hundred years in four minutes**

Video 4 min, 2014



*"How do you talk about three hundred years in four minutes" is a subtle piece about the legacy of The Middle Passage. The quote is taken from author and activist Lorraine Hansberry who was the first black female playwright on Broadway. She collaborated closely with Paul Robeson, singer and activist, known for the song Ol' man river, which is the song my Trinidadian father is singing in the video, while sitting in a peacock chair. The chair is in itself a reference to an iconic photo of Huey Newton, founder of the 1960s American civil rights movement, the Black Panthers. The video is inspired by a situation where my father, Roy Clement Pollard, who lived most of his life abroad, sings this tune on the phone to relatives far away. In this way the video contains both personal and historical features which together point to the complex issues of longing, freedom struggle, identity and heritage.*

3 CHANNEL VIDEO INSTALLATION, 2012,  
OFF THE PIG  
THE MARCH  
BLACK BULLETS



14th August 1791 The Haitian Revolution begins.

Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité; Liberty, Equality and Fraternity echoed from the streets of Paris. They echoed across the Atlantic to the African slaves in the French colony of Saint-Domingue (Haiti). Saint Domingue was the first Latin American country which in 1804 gained independence as a result of the only successful slave revolt in history.

But the rebellion began with the legendary Vodou ceremony Bois Caïman in the northern part of Saint-Domingue. A black pig materialized and were sacrificed in a ritual in which hundreds of slaves drank the pig's blood. The blood gave them power to fight for freedom.

The result is the world's first black republic: Haiti.

The revolt was important locally for the region and for the future.

This piece is a tribute to the act of revolt!

THE IMAGE OF ME  
VIDEO 6 MIN, 2012



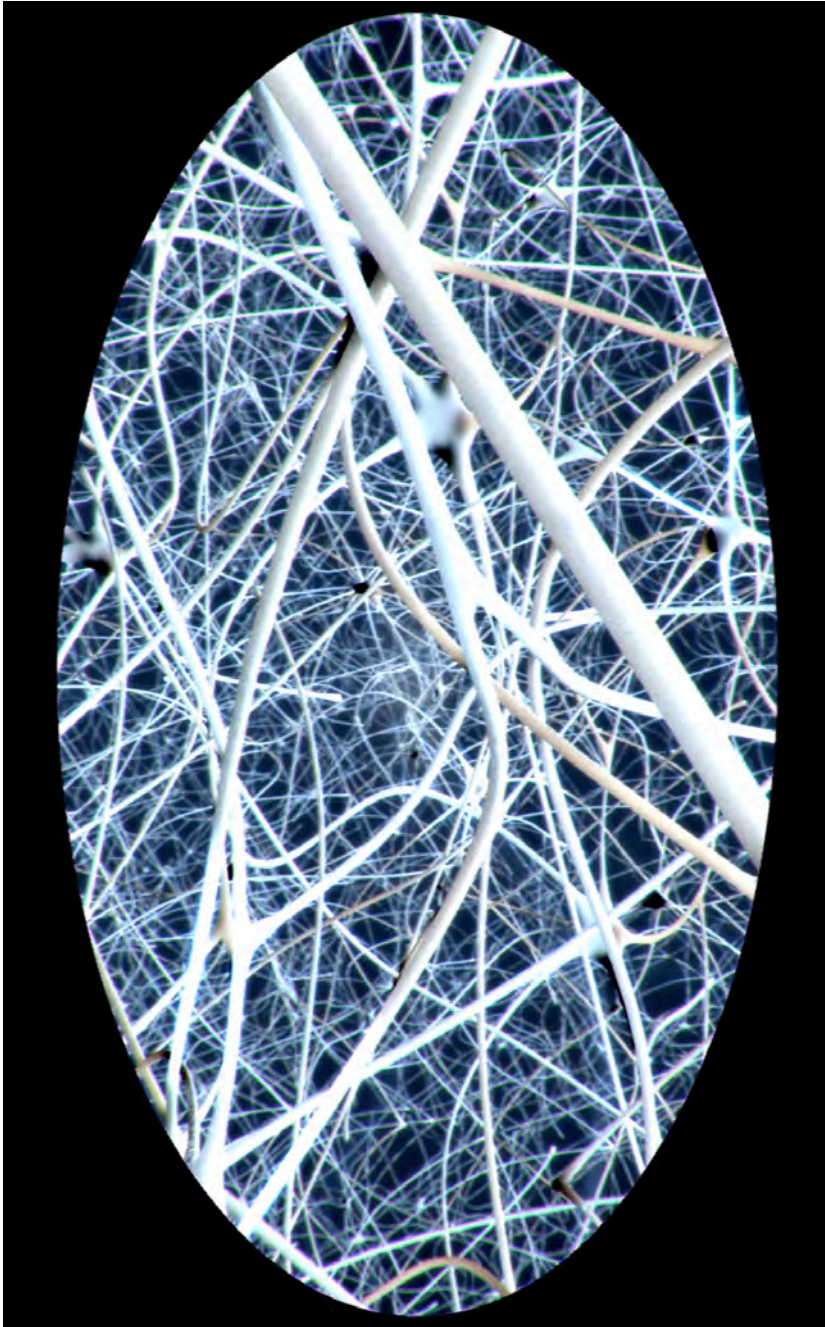
The video *The Image Of Me* is a collaborative project between the Dutch artist Patricia Kaersenhout and me. The video premiered on Black Magic Women Festival 2012 in Amsterdam in November and was then shown at the exhibition *Be You* at the exhibition venue CBK in Amsterdam.

Through a stop-motion video *The Image Of Me* portrays two women - one black and one white - who gradually changes color while a voiceover recites the poem "Lord Why Did You Make Me Black?" , written by the African-American poet RuNett Nia Ebo .

The video can be seen here:

<https://vimeo.com/54478441>

Still from BUSTIN' MY KNOTS, video, 2011, 6,22 min.



BUSTIN' MY KNOTS focuses on the power structures and repression mechanisms with roots in colonial times, that still have an impact on people of African descent. Based on the African American hair culture, the video investigates the destructive way of thinking that is inherited through many generations and examines the demoralizing self-awareness that seems to exist. The work consists of a 3D animated journey through the nervous system, produced from brain scans of my brain. In this way a pseudo-scientific and poetic universe is created which is linked to ideas about mentality and cultural identity. The visuals, that in a whimsical way reminiscent of tangled hair, is coupled with a voice over that covers the above theme.

Stills from  
*The Invisible Empire,*

2010. 20.04 min.

In *The Invisible Empire* Jeannette Ehlers has worked with her father, Roy Clement Pollard, as narrator and performer. Her father is from Trinidad, W.I., her mother Danish. By involving her own ethnic background she magnifies reality to study the consequences of eroding information.

Ehlers works thematically revolve around Danish slave trade in colonial times. With *The Invisible Empire* she looks at today's slave trade, also known as 'human trafficking'. By introducing her father in this context, she subtly intertwines her personal history with the narrative of the work.

Her questioning of historical ties and personal implications unfolds a strong pull on the viewer while raising awareness for servitude in globalized societies.



I can still remember some of the songs.



I crawled under the blanket and pretended I was asleep.



But they still wanted what they came for.



Documentation from the exhibition

*The Invisible Empire*

Rohde Contemporary, Copenhagen. 2010

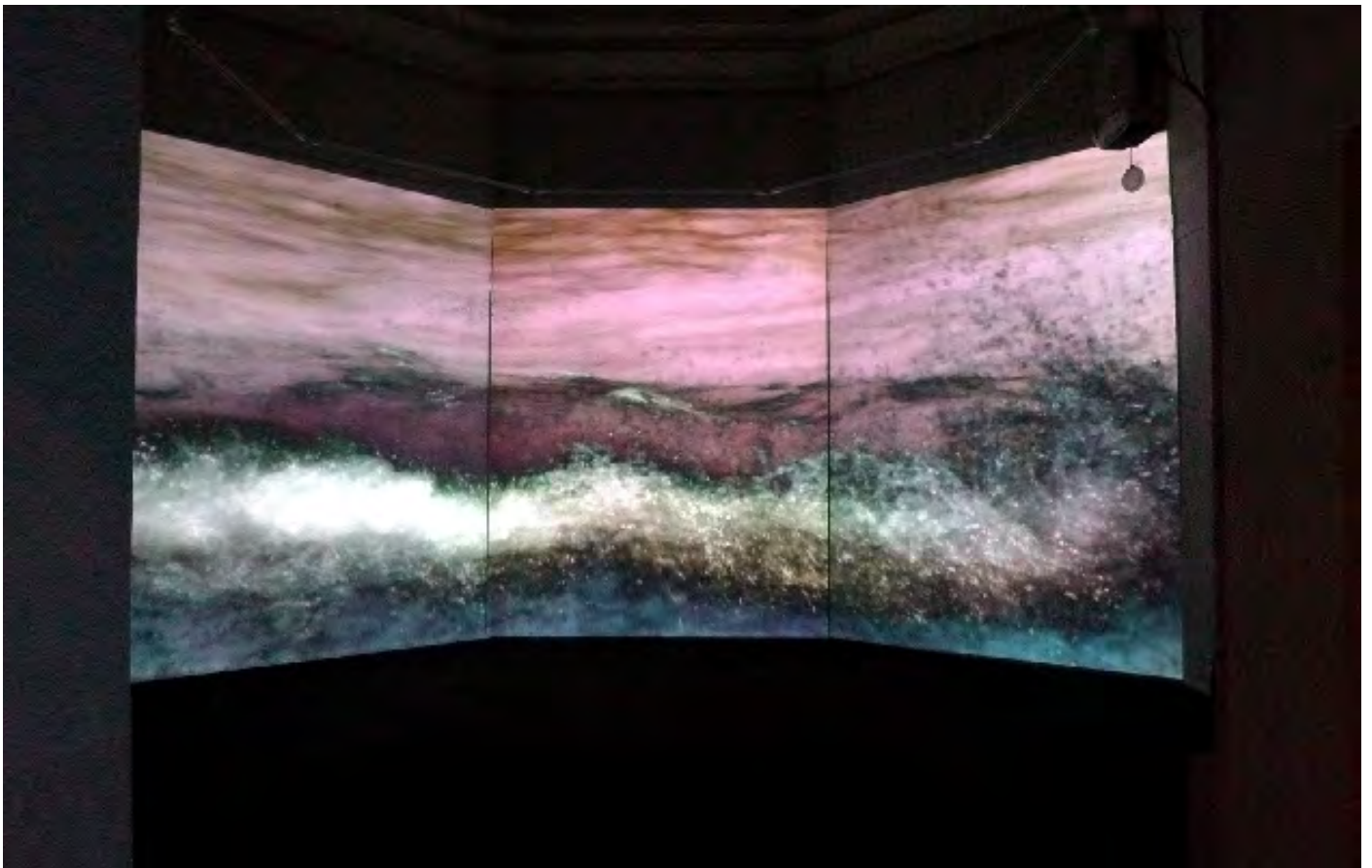


## ATLANTIC

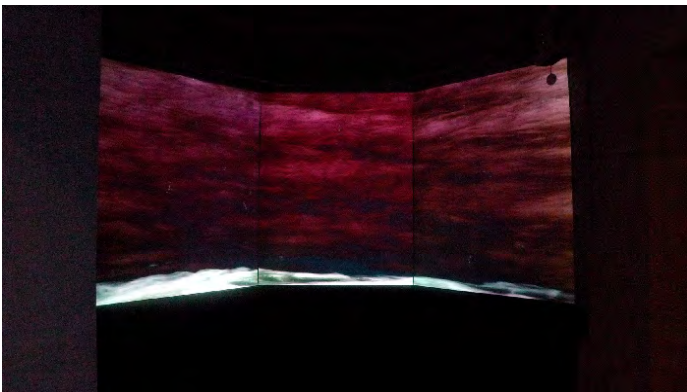
ÅRHUS ARTBUILDING

JEANNETTE EHLERS 2009/2010

Jeannette Ehlers, with ATLANTIC, brings focus on a dark chapter in Danish history: its intensive participation in the slave trade and colonialism. Through digitally manipulated photographs and video installations, she puts under the microscope the Danish triangular trade across the Atlantic between Denmark, the Caribbean and the Gold Coast. ATLANTIC offers no answers, but is a poetic presentation using photography, both documentary and manipulative possibilities to create reflections on the Danish slave trade.



*Waves, 8,04 min loop, 2009, 3 channel- projection, each projection measures 400x225 cm*



In the video **Three Steps of Story**, we see Jeannette Ehlers waltzing in a big mirrored hall, where the colorful and rebellious governor Peter von Scholten scandalized the white citizenship by inviting the then “free Negroes” to the ball. It was also von Scholten, who proclaimed emancipation of slaves on St. Croix in 1848. It happened in front of Fort Frederick, which forms the basis of the video **Speed up that day**. Here, Jeannette Ehlers has filmed the fort from morning to night and added a strongly processed soundtrack of Martin Luther King’s legendary speech ‘I have a dream’ from 1963.

In the video **Black Magic at the White House**, Ehlers is performing a voodoo dance in Marienborg which has a strong connection to the triangular trade. It was built as a summer residence for the Commander Olfert Fischer in 1744, who since sold it to merchant Peter Windt, who also had created a great deal of wealth from the slave and sugar trade, and who even brought slaves with to his home in Denmark. Several others of the period’s trading men have owned and put their stamp on Marienborg, and today it still plays an important role in Denmark, in terms of its position as the official residence of the country’s prime minister.

Shadows of people on the walls, stairs and water surfaces are seen in the photo series, **ATLANTIC**, that among other shows Fort Prinzenstein in Ghana, which was built by the Danes and used to keep slaves captured before their journey across the Atlantic.



*Black Magic at the White House, 2009, 03, 46 min*



*Atlantic (endless row), 2009, C-photo 60X120 cm*

**other projects**

**CROSSROADS, 2008, 2 hours.**



Based on the two road movies *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* by Russ Meyer (1963) and *Stalker* by Andrei Tarkovskys (1979), Jeannette Ehlers has created a “flicker film” which confuses the films, by consistently moving from one movie to another, frame by frame. *Crossroads* is a technical experiment to break with the film’s classical narrative and thereby creating a new perceptually challenge for the viewer.

*Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* and *Stalker*, which in many areas are opposites, linking into new ambiguous but powerful images and the film’s two stories wound into each other in a subtle and sometimes incredibly beautiful way. The characteristic female characters, intense, hard hitting and big-bussomed, now chained together with Tarkovskys’s introverted, intellectually seeking men. Apart from the gender-based clash arising from the concept, refers to *Crossroads* are cultural clashes, pointing especially to the drama.

How much image information can humans detect and understand? Is it possible to get a glimpse of, in this way, split narrative course, and if so, how will it affect the viewer’s physical experience of the work? The conceptual idea behind *Crossroad* is as much about the bodily perception of a work of art as about the intellectual approach.

In order not to betray the conceptual approach to the work (the respective movie requires to appear in their full course), she tuned them by giving them the same duration. *Crossroads* has a duration of no less than 2 hours.

CRUEL GEOMETRY, 2008, 4,43 MIN (LOOP)



The starting point for Cruel Geometry is Andy Warhol's first experimental film "Kiss" from 1963. Ehlers uses one sequence from the film which she digitally "rewrites".

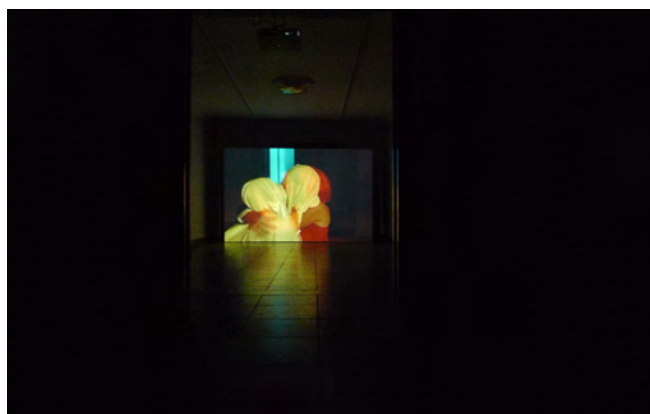
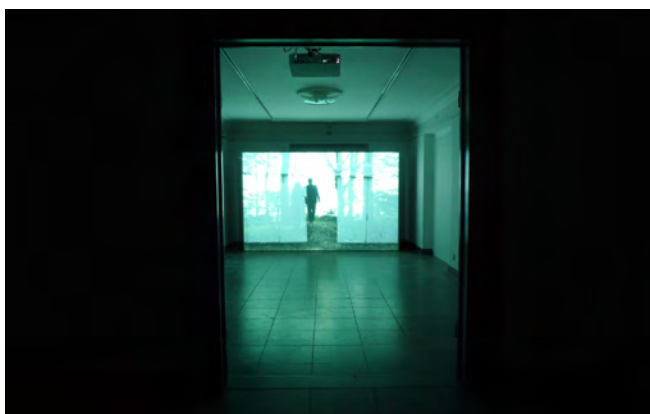
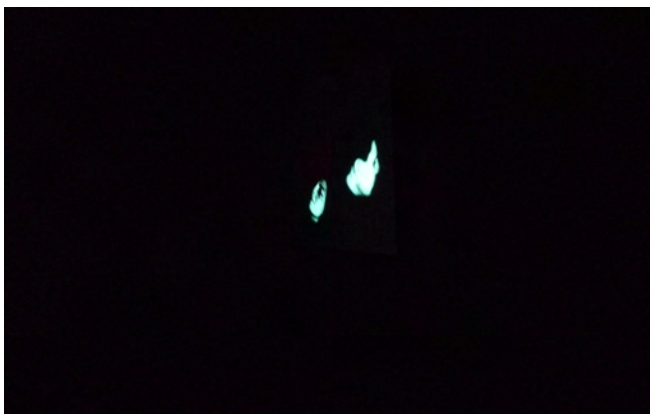
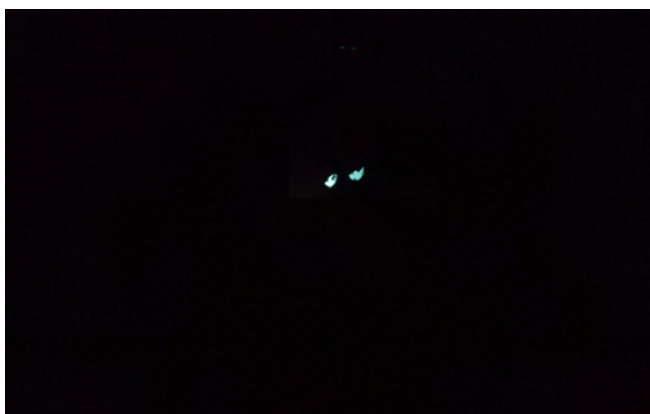
The kissing couple is now separated, placed back to back surrounded by a black universe. The simple but brutal intervention creates a complex atmosphere of distance and intimacy and invites the viewer make a new interpretation of the act of love .



INSTALLATION VIEW FROM INTERACTING MINDS,

MØSTINGS HUS,

JEANNETTE EHLERS 2009



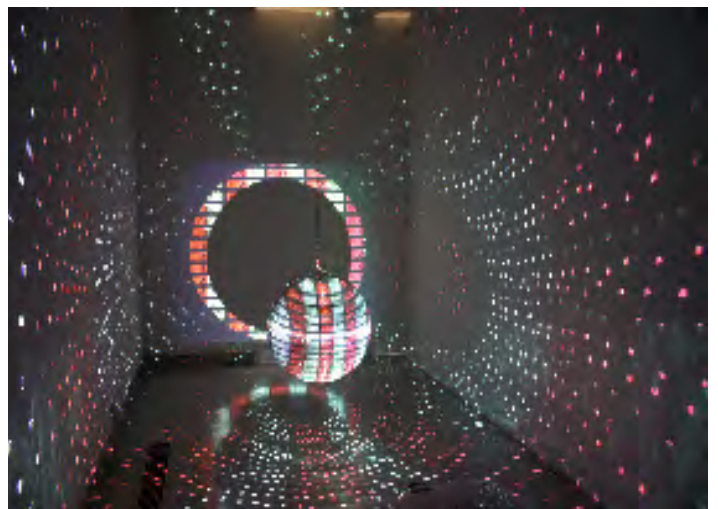
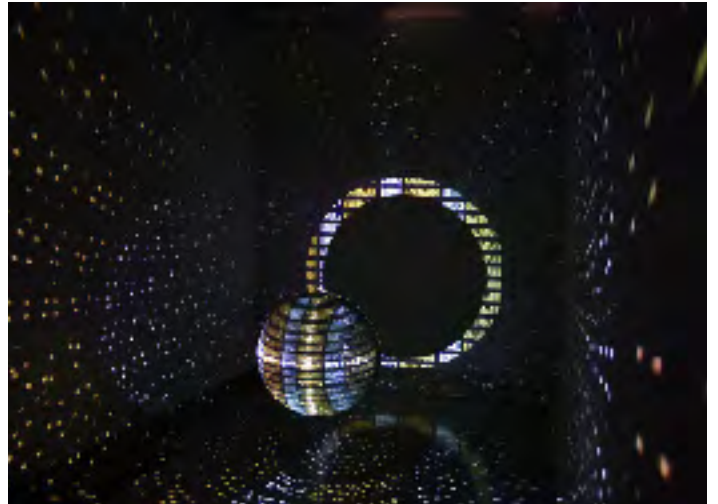
The solo show INTERACTING MINDS presented the three videos; *Crossroads* , *Cruel Geometry* and *Divine Dichotomy* .



*Ventilate (Part Two)*, 2007, 4,02min. In the video the artist is dancing for the camera in front of her bookcase, while emptying the books from the bookcase. By manipulating the material Ehlers has camouflaged herself with images of the bookcase. Complexity between for- and background, between intimacy and distance arise and the atmosphere is both aggressive and sensual. Among more the video deals with break up, purification and escapism and further more it comments on the identity's possibility for constant transformation.

*Installation view from the exhibition "FUZZY LOGIC  
at Tom Christoffersen Gallery, 2007*

*FUZZY LOGIC consist of the video "Ventilate (part two)"  
and the light installation "Fuzzy logic (Titles. After Kuball)".*



In "*Fuzzy logic (Titles. After Kuball)*" the artist is phrasing the German artist Mischa Kuball's sophisticated piece "*Space - Speech - Speed*" from 1998. In Ehlers' version, images of all the titles from the book case in "*Ventilate (part two)*" are projected onto a moving mirror-ball, reflecting the titles as fragments out in to the gallery space.

DOUBLE ME,03,14 min,2003



The concept of these pieces is also found footage which is digitally manipulated - but this time it is the artist's own personal material .  
The images are from super 8 footage and pictures from her childhood in the 70's sampled it with footage of today .

## Ghost Rider, 2000- 2003



*Ghost Rider 1, 01.40 min., 2000*



*Ghost Rider 2, 00.42 min., 2001*



*Ghost Rider 5 (I do it my way), 02,58 min., 2003*



*Ghost Rider 6 (last round), 02.08 min., 2003*

Jeannette Ehlers works with digital images, using them as the basis for computer-manipulated videos. Her starting point is in so-called "found footage", that is to say existing video imagery, which she takes into her digital laboratory where she painstakingly transforms it. Like a surgeon, she performs simple but significant operations on the appropriated material, from which she – with yet another term borrowed from surgery – "removes" parts of the pictures. In this way Ehlers shifts the focus of the pictures away from their original context. These operations take a very long time, requiring her to work frame by frame on video sequences containing 25 frames per second.

The series entitled *Ghost Rider* comprises 6 videos, each consisting of selected sequences of various takes and finished films which Jeannette Ehlers has retouched to remove the people in them, leaving only their shadows. Examples include a game of soccer played by two shadow teams; downhill skiing without a skier; a fight between a cowboy and a shadow. The recurring feature of these videos is absence, the expression of which ranges from the humorous to the poetic or frightening. In the soccer game in *Ghost Rider 1*, where you can no longer tell the difference between the players reduced to uniform shadows, a comical effect arises; but the teams themselves are also made anonymous, no longer distinguishable by their dress or how the players look, making the whole thing appear absurd as well as comical.

By going into the picture and removing elements from it, Ehlers accomplishes not only an immediate visual change but also a change in meaning, allowing us to read the images in a different way. When in *Ghost Rider 5*, for instance, she removes the punk icon Sid Vicious from the Sex Pistol music video *My Way* and lets his shadow perform on its own for an enthusiastic audience, she is lending autonomy to a shadow, ordinarily subordinate to the figure casting it, and therefore always secondary. An elongated, mysterious figure appears on stage, a ghost seeming to be a sort of animated trace of the deleted figure, thereby pointing to the existence of that figure in another dimension. Here the shadows of deleted figures live on, based on different premises in regard to such concepts as presence and absence, anonymity and identity. The work also plays on the title of the number performed by Sid Vicious in the video *My Way*, a song borrowed from Frank Sinatra who borrowed it from Paul Anka. Ehlers, now becoming the next in this chain of appropriation, has therefore given the title a twist: "I Do It My Way".

Jeannette Ehlers work has an affinity with the Austrian artist Martin Arnold who in his avant-garde videos manipulates old Hollywood films to the point of unrecognizability by means of computer techniques. A parallel can also be found in the work of the American artist Paul Pfeiffer who in *The Long Count* experimented with digitally removing the main characters in documentaries of famous boxing matches between Muhammad Ali and his opponents. In relation to the theme of identity, it seems as if this act of removing pictorial elements becomes a sort of artistic ritual, necessary in order to inscribe the self in the existing world, both as an artist and an individual. The aggressive nature of this ritual act can be compared to what the American artist Robert Rauschenberg did in his famous work *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) made by erasing a large part of a picture drawn by de Kooning, one of the great abstract expressionist on the American art scene at the time. For Rauschenberg this represented a kind of patricide, while in Jeannette Ehlers work it is about allowing yourself to intervene in the world, causing shifts that make it appear in a new way.