

**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**

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

Jeanette 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 residences 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**

Head of PR, Nikolaj Kunsthal

Eva Bjerring, m: [pr@nikolajkunsthal.dk](mailto:pr@nikolajkunsthal.dk) or t: +45 33181784 / mobile +45 21247393

Nikolaj Kunsthal, Copenhagen Contemporary Art Centre

10 Nikolaj Plads

DK-1067 Copenhagen K

[www.nikolajkunsthal.dk](http://www.nikolajkunsthal.dk)