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# ArtReview



Anne Imhof

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## Jeannette Ehlers *Archives in the Tongue: A Litany of Freedoms*

*Kunsthall Charlottenborg, Copenhagen 11 June – 7 August*

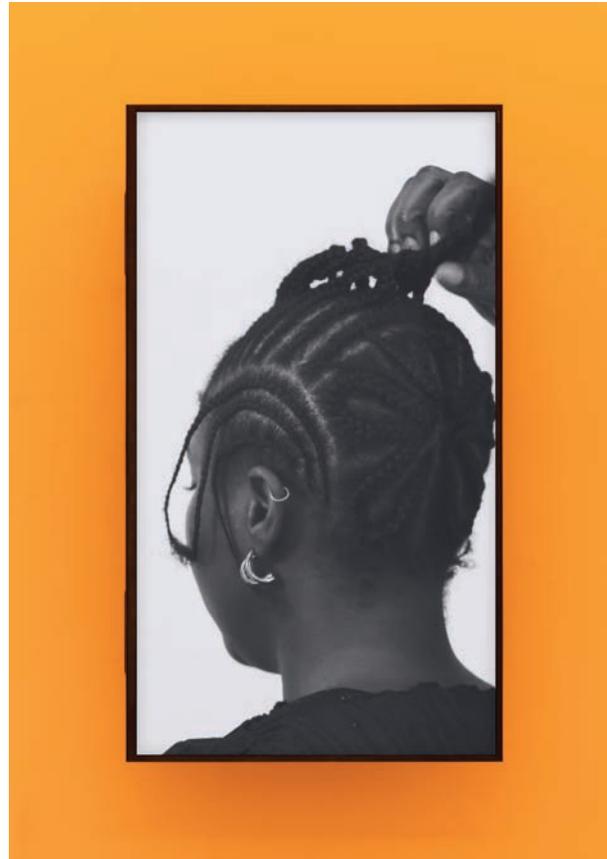
Interweaving evocations of revolt with pointers towards healing and communal exchange, Danish-Trinidadian artist Jeannette Ehlers's exhibition asserts a spiritual perspective on postcolonial discourse, examining Denmark's repressed imperial history both poetically and politically through multivalent objects, film, installation and performances. The show opens with *Moko is Future* (2022), a video installation portraying the carnivalesque Moko Jumbie – a mythical 'healing spirit' said to have walked across the Atlantic on stilts following West African slaves to the Caribbean – dancing through Copenhagen's old town to overlapping ocean sounds and shifting rhythms. Moko Jumbie's transatlantic journeys recall the routes Danish slave ships travelled; a displacement also signalled by *Gle* (2022), a ritual mask with high spiritual value, made in the Ivory Coast, purchased in Puerto Rico, and now displayed in a country that pretty much ignores its violent colonial history.

Nearby are the pink neon words 'Until the Lion has their historian, the hunter will always

be a hero' (*Until the Lion*, 2021): an African proverb that Ehlers saw graffitied on a ruined dungeon wall in a former Danish colony fort in Ghana. The statement could serve as a guiding principle not only for the exhibition but Ehlers's overall practice, a much-needed examination of colonial justice in this national context. Yet, if her early videowork focused on oppression and visibility, her varied collaborations and multiple media here allow her to activate the debate between violent and non-violent resistance with a triple focus on care, rebellion and community; articulated in diverse regimes of knowledge, from spoken word to bodily participation. See, for example, *Secret Pathways to Freedom* (2021), a colourful curtain of braided hair extensions – an identity marker for people of African descent, often used against them in policing – made in an exhibition workshop she organised in Detroit. The title refers to covert messages and diagrams such as escape routes that subjugated slaves interlaced into cornrows. In *We're Magic. We're Real #3* (*Channeling Re-existence into Hallowed*

*Grounds of Healing*) (2022), fantastically long braids of hair created in exhibition workshops with the help of local Afro-Danish hairdressers emerge from the walls and ceiling, filling the large space with crisscrossing thresholds of entwined hair before disappearing in bubbling buckets of dark liquid.

*Coil: The Sensuous Way of Knowing* (2022) concludes the exhibition with an immersive installation based on the ancestor-honouring Maafa ceremony. Instead of the traditional ritual candles, though, here rows of suspended cellphones play footage of fiery riots and indignant uprisings from around the world. The violent imagery builds to a serene closeup of a woman's hair being braided by her mother, while a commissioned spoken poem by Fiona Compton speaks to Afro hair in relation to both trauma and healing through coded, intergenerational communication and the legacy of postcolonial resistance. As it does so, Ehlers's braided concerns – and the show as a whole – reach a powerful apex. Rodney LaTouelle



*Coil: The Sensuous Way of Knowing* (detail), 2022, video installation. Photo: David Stjernholm.  
Courtesy the artist and Kunsthall Charlottenborg, Copenhagen