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## Hvid[mə] Archive — An artistic research project highlighting critical, intersectional and decolonial practices.

### Abstract

*This essay describes how the artistic research project Hvid[mə] Archive started as a critical comment on the Danish Royal Cast Collection's exhibition in the colonial West Indian Warehouse at the harbour front in Copenhagen. The essay situates the project as a response to the lack of verbalization about the warehouse's colonial past, as well as to the lack of a verbalization about the context and history that the plaster cast collection is a product of. Furthermore, the essay clarifies the use and re-conceptualization of the Danish noun hvidme, and how it created an entry point for a contemporary critical whiteness discourse in a specific Danish art context. The essay also describes how the project developed into the artistic research project and collaboration that it is today. A decolonial and intersectional artist collaboration, that seeks to facilitate exhibitions, encourage artistic workshops and networks, host events with visual artists, cultural producers, writers and theorists working within a decolonial and critical frame. The essay showcases some of our defining activities, as well as aspects of our working methods, practices, reflections, doubts and questions for further discussions.*

Keywords: artistic research, collaboration, critical whiteness, Danish coloniality, intersectional and decolonial practices, artists archiving

[ 'viðmə ] *Hvidme* (older Modern Danish (roughly 1500-1700) similar in meaning to *hwitnæ* (whiten, roughly 1350-1500); a derivative of *hvid* (white); comparable to *blødme*, *fedme*, *rødme*, *sødme* (softness, fatness/rich, blush, sweetness); now rare), white colour; whiteness  
– *Dictionary of Danish Language 1700-1950*

*Hvidme* is an outdated abstract noun formed by the Danish adjective *hvid* (white) and the suffix *-me*. The word ending is closely related to the more common Danish suffix *-hed* (best translated to *-ness*, *-ship* or *-dom*), but significantly different.

Where the suffix *-hed* originates from the German term *heit* ‘mode, kind, condition’ and from ancient English *had* ‘rank, position’, which refers to a specific character or certain quality already gained, the suffix *-me* indicates an incipient transition to/from a state or condition.

The seldom suffix *-me* is only used in connection to creating five abstract nouns: *hvidme*, *blødme*, *fedme*, *rødme*, *sødme* (whiteness, softness, fatness/rich, blush, sweetness), where *hvidme* and *blødme* have proven unproductive and are no longer used in the Danish language.

For all the nouns, otherwise unrelated, the commonality of the sensuous and bodily qualities is striking. By way of the suffix, these adjectives are bound to substance, material or body in a transition of becoming more or less red/fat/soft/sweet/white. This points to a processual and graduated phrase, that doesn’t restrain its meaning to a clear-cut condition, and furthermore places the body engaging with substance as the centre of perception.

## The Hvid[mə] Archive Project

The Hvid[mə] Archive Project started as a critical comment on the Danish Royal Cast Collection’s exhibition (or storage, to be more accurate) in the colonial Westindian Warehouse on Toldbodgade in Copenhagen. The project was initiated in 2014 by visual artist Annarosa Krøyer Holm(I/eye\*), while being a student at the Sculpture Department at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. As part of the practical teaching at the department, a few students started a collaboration with the Royal Plaster Cast Collection and the curator of the collection, Henrik Holm. The collaboration sought to showcase contemporary ways of working with the historical plaster cast collection as young artists working with plaster, and in the context of the traditional use of the collection and its sculptures as objects of learning, learning by copying the great masters of classical art.

Upon entering the collection in the warehouse, eye was overwhelmed by the physical presence of colonial traces, clearly visible in the building’s architecture and preserved remains from the colonial use of the building. The warehouse was built during the Danish flourishing trading period, in 1780-81, by the Danish West India and Guinea Company to store colonial goods produced in the Danish colonies. It was primarily sugar, rum and coffee from the former Danish West Indies, the islands of St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix, now US Virgin Islands.

Miming the historical way of storing colonial goods, the warehouse is now packed with plaster cast sculptures in the first three floors of the building. Around 2500 sculptures, moulds and casts are on display, leaving narrow alleys for the visitors to get lost in - a perfect place to study form, contour, gaps. The warehouse atmosphere is unspoiled, and eye’m left with a feeling of a paradoxical collapse that uncannily ties the past to the present.

*\*(I love Kathy Acker)*

*You see, neoclassical thinkers, artists and art historians  
with their fixation on the purity of white marble  
constructed an idealised pure white concept of the aesthetics of the Ancient Greece and Rome*

*Here, the veracity of form, line, contour  
were the true and noble concerns of the mind*

*Colour was seen as a threat, a contamination  
barbarian  
vulgar, primitive, female  
something that had to be contained and subordinated  
Unthinkable to corrupt the true intention of the form*

*In the whitewashed image of the cultivated and refined Greek democracy  
with its “classical” virtues, values and aesthetics  
a supremacy based on the white ideal took form*

*see sea seeing white  
and the virulent racism that was built into the construction of the classical ideal*

(Excerpt from the ongoing performative video work *Seeing White*, 2019. Annarosa Krøyer Holm)

What was now stored here, was in fact the very idea of European colonialism, the supremacy of the white man and his art.



(Still from the video *Seeing White*, 2019. A. Holm)

## The Royal Cast Collection

The presumed whiteness of the statuary and architecture of Ancient Greece and Rome was a common assumption that persisted well into the nineteenth century.

This presumed whiteness was a significant cornerstone in the establishment of the Royal Danish Academy in 1754, where a plaster cast study collection was embedded in the newly inaugurated institution. The study collection was an important element of the Academy's curriculum until the mid-1900s, where contemporary art and art education sought new paths. The collection grew substantially until 1895. From 1895 onwards large parts of the collection were handed over to the newly established Royal Cast Collection in the Danish National Gallery (SMK). The study collection was on display in the great halls of the museum until 1966, where it was put into storage in an old barn outside of Copenhagen and slowly forgotten for almost 20 years. In 1984 the partly shattered collection was moved into the Westindian Warehouse on Toldbodgade. The collection was restored over the next decade and opened to the public again in 1995.

Facing the sea of the inner harbour of Copenhagen, the Westindian Warehouse is surrounded by prominent power institutions. Between Amalienborg Palace - the residence of the Danish royal family, the Copenhagen Opera House - a most expensive construction donated by the foundation of the maritime multinational company A. P. Møller, the logistics company Mærsk, which furthermore has their head office at the waterfront next to the warehouse, and the military area around the naval station of the Royal Danish Navy with the battery of Sixtus, the fortress Kastellet and Trekroner visible at the mouth of the harbour. In front of the warehouse stands a 1:1 bronze replica of Michelangelo's David overlooking the water.\*

With the reappearance of the collection in the old colonial warehouse, the link between the collection and the history of the building became highly visible, and pointed to the fact that there is a lack of critical and historical consciousness about the neoclassical interweaving with European colonialism and the significance it had for the construction of the Western art canon.

As curator of the Royal Cast Collection Henrik Holm describes in the article "Whip it good" (2016): "... I can hardly imagine a more Eurocentric, colonially thought museum than the Royal Cast Collection. Here we are dealing with a highly choreographed museum, after Winkelmann's ideals of copying the greatest works from the Antiquity and the Renaissance" (translation mine).

The construction of both white art and the white body as norm, put forward during the European Renaissance and Neoclassicism's resuscitation of Antiquity, was the aesthetic paradigm of beauty, but it also came to symbolize ideals of civilization and the sovereignty and freedom of man (Bukdahl, 2004). A conception that is clearly expressed in the Royal Cast Collection, and continues to impact present day racial stereotyping, notions of national identities and the claim of heterogeneous societies.

The practice of sculpture became intimately connected to the production of race as a biological category, providing concrete representational validation of racial stereotyping (Nelson, 2007), that further provided philosophical and spiritual justification for the atrocities of European colonialism.

"It may have taken just one classical statue to influence the false construction of race, but it will take many of us to tear it down. We have the power to return color to the ancient world, but it has to start with us."  
Sarah E. Bond, 2017 (assistant professor of Classics)

\*(today, Michelangelo's David has company from the sculpture *I Am Queen Mary* by the two artists La Vaughn Belle and Jeannette Ehlers)



(Still from the video *Seeing White*, 2019. A. Holm)

In 2014 there was little (public, cultural) attention to the Danish role in European colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade, nor was there much attention paid to the emerging field of critical whiteness studies. With the Hvid[mø] Archive project I/eye wanted to introduce a critical consciousness that raised awareness about the interweaving of coloniality and classical art history, tying the plaster cast collection to its physical location in the colonial warehouse, and by doing so contributing to creating a critical whiteness discourse in a specific Danish context.

With the re-actualization of the Danish word *hvidme* and the suffix *-me* as entry level, the Hvid[mø] Archive project was a linguistic manoeuvre that represented a new vocabulary for a contemporary political, societal and ethical discussion, suggesting that societal and political discourses must have material and aesthetic consequences and vice versa, and that the aesthetical, material and bodily investigations contribute to advance and nuance the theoretical discourse.

By March 2015 the Hvid[mø] Archive Project opened in the small library in the Lounge of the Royal Cast Collection. It consisted of a multidisciplinary collection of texts, research and artworks, unfolding critical perspectives on whiteness. Relevant artists, thinkers and scholars were invited to contribute, by giving a copy of their work or excerpts of scholarly research within the field. In accordance with the premise of the cast collection, original pieces are not part of the archive; only copied and reproduced material on whitish sheets of paper were included. The archive was placed in the existing bookshelves, but clearly presented an alternative knowledge to the literature on classical art history in the library.



(Installation view: *Hvid[mæ] Archive*, 2015. Lounge of the Royal Cast Collection, Westindian Warehouse.)

## A tent

In contrast to the fragility of the paper that the archive is made of, and to physically mark the opening of the archive, a massive plaster sculpture was created in-situ in the foyer of the warehouse. A geometrical form, miming a triangular tent, with a cut in the middle. An un-moveable solid mass of 150 x 180 x 240 cm with the weight of around 2 tons. A tomb-like heaviness, that could not be dismissed, insisted on bringing forward a new order and a critical discourse in the collection.

A material way of highlighting this was to challenge the actual plaster cast process. To make a solid form, that goes against the nature of the material, as the form would not hold the pressure of the entire liquid mass. The tent is made by pouring thin plaster into a wooden construction. A process that stretched over 12 hours for a group of 5-15 people. The pace and speed of the plaster going into the form is visible as horizontal layers. The size and interconnectedness of the layers bear witness to the process and the many bodies that created the sculpture.

It is a tent, but it is also a massive cunt (as Vestergaard Jørgensen elaborated on in the article: “Stik, skær, brænd. Sprækken som (kunst)historisk berørings- punkt i værker af Carla Zaccagnini, Annarosa Krøyer Holm og La Vaughn Belle” from 2017) in disguise of a massive minimal (read: phallic) sculpture. The cu(n)t/split of the sculpture is what makes the tent recognizable as a tent, as it mimes the tent pole’s position and function in supporting an upright position. But the cu(n)t of the sculpture also indicates a possible break of the sculpture, a break from within, a destruction built into the sculpture. The cu(n)t/split/break opens up the strictly geometrical form of a classical triangle. The sculpture is in dialogue with the aesthetics of neoclassical art, but the cu(n)t opens up to other ways of seeing and sensing.



(Telt, 2015. A.Holm)



(Bronislaw Malinowski 1918)

With the archival photo of Malinowski's "*the ethnographer in his tent*" from 1918 placed alongside the sculpture, eye wanted to point to a post-colonial reading of the sculpture.

The tent was a physical manifestation of the new order that I/eye wanted to bring(break) in the collection. But as the project opened for the public and I/eye further collected and researched for material for the archive, I quickly became aware that the project and interest reached my own limits and it became vital for me to collaborate with other artists and scholars that shared overlapping interests. To share thoughts and discuss how to address the colonial past and the modern/colonial structures that still exists today, without reproducing the same structures that one wants to criticize, especially in an institution like the Royal Cast Collection that is part of the Danish National Museum, that partakes in producing and upholding certain historiographies, privileges and national narrations, both in art history and national storytelling.

Sadly, the collection and with it the newly established critical discourse closed for the public in the spring of 2016, due to financial cuts at the National Gallery.

## Hvid[mə] Archive as a collaborative project

The closing of the Royal Cast Collection to the public in 2016 did not stop critical discourse. With Sine Frejstrup and Lea Kim Kramhøft joining the project in 2015/16, the project developed into a dialogue-based space, focusing on expanding the discourse to other cultural platforms. But with the loss of the material and sculptural context of the Royal Cast Collection and the ambiguousness and multi-layered-ness that the artworks contained, it became crucial for us to elaborate and further clarify the conceptualization and the use of the word *hvidme*. As a result of our newly funded collaboration we wrote a manifesto:

## M A N I F E S T O

**Hvid[mə] Archive** will question whiteness as the default. The archive will highlight the ubiquitous structures that maintain and cultivate hierarchies that suppress.

**Hvid[mə] Archive** addresses the colonial aftermath and seeks to expose the collective amnesia in historiography of Denmark as a Nordic colonial power.

**Hvid[mə] Archive** has an activistic approach to language. As an entry level, we will re-actualize the old Danish word *hvidme*, that became obsolete in the early nineteen-hundreds.

By re-introducing *hvidme* to our contemporary vocabulary we wish to open a critical discussion on whiteness where the common word *hvidhed* is inadequate and too categorical.

**Hvid[mə] Archive** works toward an anti-sublime-demonstration of the white colour. By means of the suffix *-me* the archive seeks to tie white to substance (the material, the body) and the actual experienced reality.

The suffix *-me* is linked to a sentient body that stores memory and trauma.

**Hvid[mə] Archive** is not a proposal to use the word *hvidme* as an aesthetic approach to the white colour, it is not a celebration. The *hvidme*-concept must problematize whiteness.

**Hvid[mə] Archive** will showcase the white violence, the European imperialism, the institutional power structures, the construction of race, as well as body and territories as capital.

**Hvid[mə] Archive** is a space for dialogue and learning.

(Hvid[mə] Archive manifesto 2016)

The manifesto and an updated and expanded version of the archive was shown in connection to the play *WINGS (VINGER)* - *A story about living in a white society* by the playwright and poet Joan Rang Christensen. The play centred around the questions: *How do you find a foothold with a mixed background in a white country? How do you define an identity that is not either-or, but both-and?* With the Hvid[mə] Archive Project exhibited in the foyer, we hoped to open up and broaden the discourse and questions posed in the play.



(Flyer *Wings*, Teater Grob)

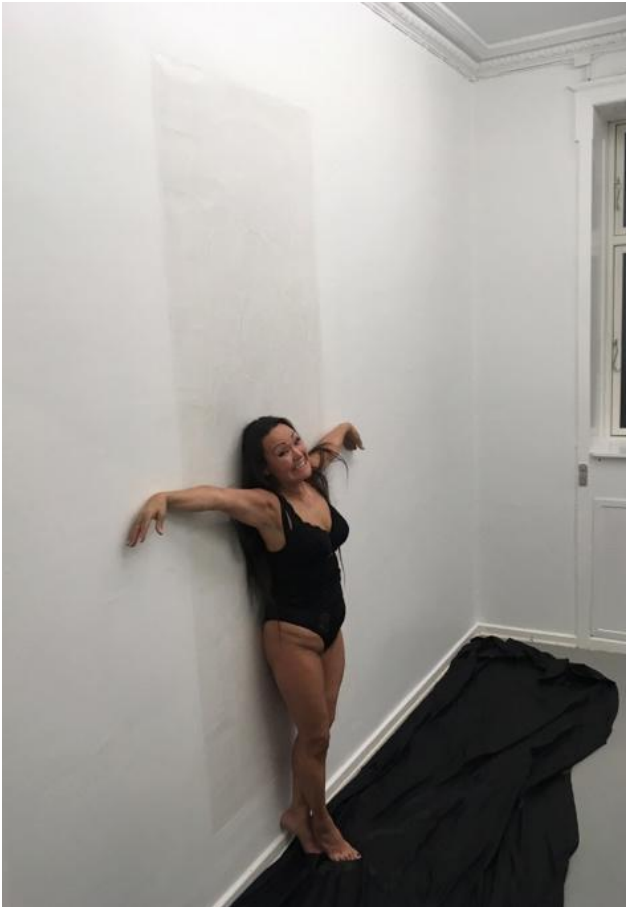


Installation view: *Hvid[mə] Archive*, 2016. The foyer at Teater Grob, Nørrebrogade 37, Copenhagen)

With the approaching of the 2017 centennial of the sale of the former colony “The Danish West Indies” to the USA, I/eye was invited to join the curatorial team of the newly established art-space *meter* in creating their first exhibition *Unravelings*. The exhibition aimed at showcasing contemporary ways of addressing the Danish colonial past and how it affects present day society. Eye contributed to the curatorial process by setting a material and physical context and frame for the exhibition. Eye made the mural work *Chromophobia fig.1* directly into the wall of the exhibition space. The work served as backdrop, almost invisible, miming the invisible structures connected to whiteness (and the white cube as a capitalist site, but that’s another story).



The term *chromophobia* is coined by the artist and writer David Batchelor, and refers to the angst or fear of corruption or contamination through colour within Western culture. With the title *Chromophobia fig. 1* eye wanted the work to be perceived as a sculpture. A white sculpture that points towards its own whiteness and speaks to the classical sculpture, which has been whitewashed by 18th century art historians.



L: Jessie Kleemann in the performance: "*I tråd med tiden*" in front of *Chromophobia fig.1* (Decoliss marmorino, 90x240x0,3cm), 2017. Meter exhibition space, Copenhagen). Photo @A.Holm

R: La Vaughn Belle: *Cuts and Burns* (ledger series 002) in front of *Chromophobia fig.1* (Decoliss marmorino, 90x240x0,3cm), 2017. Meter exhibition space, Copenhagen). Photo @I Do Art Agency

## Towards new artistic language and research



(Still from the video work *TIGRINYA WEALTH*, 2016. M. Haile)

To create a theoretical and discursive frame for the exhibition at *meter*, the Hvid[mø] Archive project was invited to take over a room in the exhibition space. Artist Miriam Haile (I/eye) had recently joined the archive, and with her an increased focus on diasporic narratives. With Miriam's extensive practice of addressing power relations between the diasporic and migratory voices close relation to nations, archives and borders, we(eye/eye) reformulated the project into the artistic research project that it is today. A decolonial and intersectional artist collective, that seeks to facilitate exhibitions, encourage artistic workshops and networks, host events with visual artists, cultural producers, writers and theorists working within a decolonial and critical practice.



(Hvid[mə] Archive manifesto 2017)

By questioning collective European memory, its borders and language, as it is more multi-layered than multi-cultural, we(eye/eye) wish to re-introduce and revisit what a critical artistic research project may contain, by focusing on decolonial practices and aesthetics, with relevant updated narratives as the artistic signifiers. Focusing on different working methods within critical theory and decolonial practices, we(eye/eye) work to create a more conscious space where one may share different perspectives and experiences, sharing knowledge within a flat structure. But at the same time taking the responsibility to create a safer space (if such exists) within the art world, to host dialogues and show artistic work.

With the exhibition at *meter* we(eye/eye) returned our focus towards the art world, updating the archive with mainly new artistic contributions. To accomplish but also to push and challenge the already curated program at *meter*, we(eye/eye) created our own program *Hvid[mə] Archive Presents* inside the exhibition space, where we(eye/eye) invited artists and scholars Yong Sun Gullach, Teju Adisa-Farrar, Lesley-Ann Brown and Ethelene Whitmire to present and show their work and research.



(Installation view: *Hvid[mø] Archive*, 2017. Meter exhibition space, Copenhagen)

2017 was a busy year, as many institutions took part in commemorating the centennial of the sale of the Danish West Indies to The United States of America. Transfer Day 31 March 1917 marks the transaction, when Denmark sold its former colony to the USA for 25 million Danish kroner in Gold. A transfer between Colonial Powers without consulting the opinion or taking into account the rights of the people on St. Croix, St. Thomas & St. John. Together with visual artist and scholar Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld we invited fellow colleagues and friends to an intimate Transfer Day Memorial Ceremony March 31st 2017 in the back of Christiansborg [The Danish Parliament] in Copenhagen.

We wanted to make a more spiritual, healing ceremony, creating solidarity and recognizing emancipation & legacies through art. With the ceremony, we wished to dislocate the word “transfer” from its stifling historical context, and approach it as a conceptual window for thinking about how culture, spirit and memory, both travels and also adapts.

We met at sundown at the back of the parliament, projecting a video directly onto the walls of the historical building, that until 1794 was the home of the Danish royal family. We facilitated a sound system and the microphone was open for people to share their thoughts.

The event was inspired by the many talks, artworks, projects and collaborations leading up to this day, particularly by the work of Temi Odumosu, La Vaughn Belle and Jeannette Ehlers, and the project Artlantic.





*Hvid[mə] Archive* in collaboration with Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld.  
*Unity in Fiah - Transfer Day Memorial Ceremony*. March 31th 2017 at 7.45 pm (sundown) – 9 pm.  
Live video projection and performance at Christiansborg / Berthel Thorvaldsens Plads, Copenhagen.

We(eye/eye) are still in the process of discussing, and somehow evaluating, the roadblocks we have encountered, and also what was highly effective within our past activities and discussions. With an interest in taking a closer look at archives, in order to re-create and activate artistic encyclopaedias, but also using the archive as an activist approach.

What does an archive entail? How does it look like? What shape can it take? What is the potential of using an archive as format? Whose impact/methods and timeline are we speaking and operating on? How is it possible to create a methodology that challenges Eurocentric archives and their knowledge?

We(eye/eye) are interested in what role archives play for national collective memory. In what perspective is visual, theoretical and artistic research told and archived? How may different independence struggles manifest and affect our societies today? Who is entitled to speak? Whose voices and experiences are included in the national storytelling and national archiving? And if excluded, how do the silenced voice and body speak/perform/operate? With the *Hvid[mə] Archive* project, eye/eye want to develop an artistic language and database, while expanding on already enrolled collectives, researchers and further curate an artistic dialogue of decolonial and intersectional practices.

Annarosa Krøyer Holm 2019

Contributions from:

Teju N. Adisa-Farrar, Rikke Andreassen, Zoltan Ará, Bolette Blaagaard, Lesley-Ann Brown, Nanna Debois Buhl, Else Marie Bukdahl, Joan Rang Christensen, Lene Bull Christiansen, Mette Clausen, Mathias Danbolt, Christian Danielewitz, Suada Ada Demirovic, Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld, Jeannette Ehlers, Athena Farrokzhad, Sine Frejstrup, Trine Mee Sook Gleerup, Yong Sun Gullach, Christina Hagen, Julie Edel Hardenberg, Karen Harsbo, Anne Folke Henningsen, Henrik Holm, Christina Marie Jespersen, Jane Jin Kaisen, Camilla Juul Kjærgaard, Jessie Kleemann, Mathias Kryger, Maja Lee Langvad, Alanna Lockward, Mette Moestrup, Lene Myong, Flemming Chr. Nielsen, Bjørn Nørgaard, Ana Pavlovic, Anu Ramdas, Anna Ravn, Angela Rawlings, Lulu Refn, Gunhild Riske, Simon Sheikh, Amalie Smith, Julie Sten-Knudsen, Javier Tapia, Vladimir Tomić, Ethelene Whitmire, Mette Woller, Jan Stubbe Østergaard.

Excerpts from:

Sara Ahmed, Pia Arke, James Baldwin, David Batchelor, Jean Baudrillard, Karen Blixen, Bruce Chatwin, Inger Christensen, Angela Yvonne Davis, Mary Douglas, Richard Dyer, Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, Frantz Fanon, Ruth Frankenberg, Walter Grasskamp, John Hartigan, bell hooks, Charlotte Klouk, Haney Ian López, Audre Lorde, Achille Mbembe, Peggy McIntosh, Herman Melville, Chandra T. Mohanty, Robert B. Moore, Toni Morrison, Fred Moten, Brian O'Doherty, Ovid, Edward W. Said, W. G. Sebald, Micheal Taussig.

Portfolio, an excerpt:

*Hvid[mæ] Archive*, printed archive, 2017

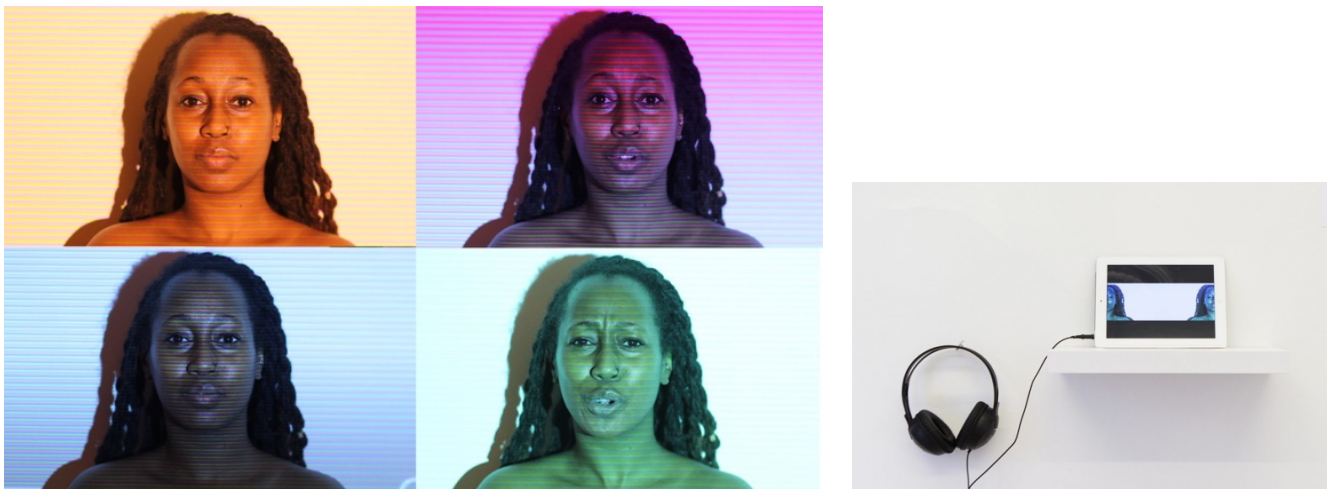


***Hvid[mə] Archive Presents:***

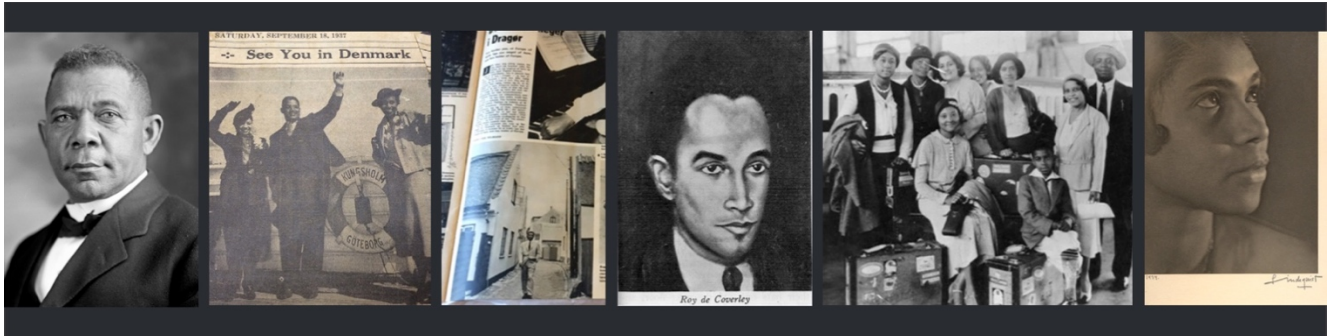
*Decolonial Daughter*. A reading by Lesley-Ann Brown.  
Opening event for Hvid[mə] Archive at meter Exhibition Space, January 5th 2017



*Dear White Europe*. A film by Teju Adisa-Farrar in collaboration with Hanna MiKoch, 2017.  
10 March- 17 June 2017, meter Exhibition space



*Searching for Utopia. The African American/Danish Archives* by Ethelene Whitmire.  
A visual presentation of Whitmire's research in connection to her upcoming book  
May 27th 2017, meter Exhibition Space



*The Star Child Project - A Performative Experiment* by Yong Sun Gullach.  
June 10th Performance, followed by crit-session. June 10th - 17th 2017 @ meter Exhibition Space



Photo: Courtesy of Mayra Navarette



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**Annarosa Krøyer Holm (DK)**

Visual artist, MFA from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. Initiator and co-runner of Hvid[mø] Archive.

Holm's artistic practice is centred on the notion that political and societal considerations have material and aesthetic consequences. Working with experimental video, performance, text, sculpture and installation, Holm address themes of classical art history, national historiography vs. personal memory, and how it is infused in artistic materiality, mapping and archiving. Her recent works explore the interlocking of Danish colonialism and the ideals emerging in European Renaissance and Neoclassicism.

**Miriam Haile (ER/NO)**

Visual artist, MFA from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. Co-runner, editor and co-curator of Mondo Books, an artist run bookshop and platform, and Hvid[mø] Archive.

Haile's artistic practice focuses on critical questions around national identities, migration-history, and border politics. Her recent work revisits different methods of entering war-archives and problematizing national-archives, by questioning the colonial gaze vs deep memory, in relation to racialized bodies and diaspora identities. Often presented within multimedia installations, she instigates an interdisciplinary dialogue with a political landscape, investigating how photography, text, audio and moving images produce meaning in relation to archives.

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