

This interview with the artist and filmmaker Ursula Reuter Christiansen was conducted in English by multimedia artist Lia Mazzari with Mark Harwood on July 22, 2018, for publication in this journal. Reuter Christiansen discusses her various collaborations with Henning, including several performances and, in particular, two films: *The Executioner* and *The Red Forest*. These two films will screen, followed by a Q&A with Reuter Christiansen, as part of the *Freedom is Around the Corner* programming, on October 13, 2018, at Anthology Film Archives, New York.

I first met Ursula on a farm on the island of Møn in southeast Denmark. Surrounded by this astonishing landscape, we walked through tickling high-grassed fields, visited windy white cliffs, climbed into prehistoric burial plots, and swam in a wild sea. I immediately recognized these as the sites at which Ursula Reuter and Henning Christiansen had created much of their individual and collaborative work.

Ursula Reuter Christiansen is a key figure in Danish and German contemporary art. Her contributions present a strong feminist statement through the mediums of painting, film, performance, and text. From an early age, Ursula was very fond of the dramatic narratives found within Greek mythology. A great storyteller, she taught Henning about the myths, the German fairy tales, the romantics, Kleist, and Novalis. Henning, in return, helped her bring her painting to life by composing music for and designing the sound in her films *The Executioner* (1972) and *The Red Forest* (1986). This culminated in a decades-long collaborative working relationship, which included touring Europe with different ensembles, artists, and musicians, all while maintaining Møn as their home base. Choosing a rural setting like Møn—as opposed to Copenhagen or Düsseldorf, where Ursula had studied under Joseph Beuys—the two artists developed practices that were at once singular and mutually influential. Together they created an immense body of work through the means of performance, composition, and sculpture, to which they gave the collective name *Aktion*.

—Lia Mazzari



Fig. 35

Ursula Reuter Christiansen, 2018. Photo by Norman Wilcox-Geissen.

LIA MAZZARI

We're going to talk mainly about you and Henning collaborating. And we're going to do it in a few sections, based on different things that you did—the films you did and his recordings. There are a lot of subjects for which we would like to bring a bit more light into what we have in terms of sources, because we have quite a lot of material, but it would be good to be able to understand more how your work relationship looked like.

I think maybe we should start with the films, *The Executioner* and *Den Røde Skov*. Obviously those two films are quite different from each other. What we want to ask you is, how was your work relationship? How was it initiated? Was Henning literally just involved in the sound making and how did that occur? Did you direct him on exactly how you wanted it to be? Were you sitting down with him and creating it together, or did he suggest things to you based on your scripts?

URSULA REUTER CHRISTIANSEN

That's a very good question. Because Henning, as a Scandinavian, was not at all educated in literature or anything. But he was a kind of wunderkind. His mother told me, Henning sang and sat under the table. His family, they were—what is it called, people who have big horses and go to the shops in Copenhagen and deliver the milk. It was a really proletarian family. His father owned a little shop, a milk shop. He came from a family of 18 children—nine of them died. It was really crowded [in Henning's father's home], but one of those boys was the clever one, so he got a little shop—Henning's father. He and his wife [Henning's mother] had the little milk shop where they sold butter, and bread, and so on. Henning's mother was a very clever woman, and when she had this child [Henning], his whole family said, "Oh shit." When they had drunk a lot of schnapps they sang and sang. And Henning, as I understand, had a really good voice. And his mother said, "This boy has really has some chances," and she brought him, when he was seven years old, to the Danish radio and the little boy's orchestra. And Henning continued there. At 16 years old he entered the conservatory. So he was a very special child.

To give some background: Henning and I met in 1966 at a performance [in Düsseldorf], and Henning came back to Düsseldorf in '67 because [Joseph] Beuys had invited him to come there. Then, we became a couple. Henning had no idea about literature, and I

had studied German literature and Romantics and so on. And I read Novalis to him—and the Romantics—and Henning was totally wowed by them. And when I wrote *The Executioner*, Henning was very fascinated by this new world which [was my world]. Then I began to write, when I was in Düsseldorf, and [then] I went to a small island outside [of Denmark, Møn] and had three children and it totally changed my life. And then I wrote some stories—and I had a good friend in the Danish Film Institute, and he said, “These are great stories, you should make a film.” And then I said okay, yes. So I continued to make a synopsis, and a script, and so on. I must say that Henning’s role in this was that it was “my stuff”—it was “my story.” But at the end, after the foundation [the National Gallery of Denmark] bought all the materials, the props, and equipment, [it turned out that] Henning had really helped make the film. The foundation had bought everything, because—Henning had learned from his father, who had this little milk shop, to write down every little detail and description [of the film’s expenses]. I am not a systematic person, but because Henning did this, the film was well-funded.

Henning was not only involved in the musical side of the filmmaking. When I was acting, playing the role in the film the whole time, Henning was giving instruction and direction, about where I should be standing—maybe move over a couple of feet, or so on. Therefore, when you asked about working together, I would say that Henning was really, very much involved. But he always said that it was my story, my history. It was me who it was about [*laughs*].

LM Yeah, I can see in the book [*HENNING CHRISTIANSEN: Composer, Fluxist and out of order*], at the end there is a little page where it says “Skizze zur Musik und Lautseite” [“sketches for music and sound”], so there’s actually a part where it has instructions for the music and the sounds, and there’s that first scene and it goes on and on until the end, and it’s really beautiful because it describes in a metaphorical way how the sound should reflect what is being shown in the visuals. So you basically created that together, and he wanted to have that really organized at different points, how it changes the whole mood in the films as well.

Today, I saw the next film for the first time, *The Red Forest*, which is about ten years [after *The Executioner*], I think.





Fig. 36 Still from *Skarpretteren*. Courtesy Ursula Reuter Christiansen.
(previous)

Figs. 37, 38 Stills from *Den Røde Skov*. Courtesy Ursula Reuter Christiansen.

URC Yes. *The Executioner* was [filmed in] '71 and *The Red Forest* was in '86. [They were released in 1972 and 1987, respectively. —Ed.]

LM Yeah. Oh, that's when I was born. I'm the child of *The Red Forest*.

MARK HARWOOD

That's why [Lia's] wearing red today, Ursula.

LM Yeah. No. But it's crazy, because I hadn't seen it before—I just listened to the soundtrack and I didn't realize that the whole record is the whole sound of the entire film, and it's so beautiful because you can see the change as well from *The Executioner* to this. *The Red Forest* is subtitled *An Oracle In Nine Illustrations* and the actors don't speak in the film, but you can hear the voices in the audio. So I'm wondering, did you both work on that? How did that look?

URC If *The Executioner* was my story, *The Red Forest* is a story about my daughter. She was a teenage girl—she misbehaved a lot and got into fights with me. I was very preoccupied with the *Ring Trilogy* [by Wagner], a famous German collection of stories of the German people. And I found that all of these German stories made me think of Snow White and other similar German fairy tales. And these stories laid much deeper, in older cultures, and I found that this conflict that I had with my daughter at this age was very common in these stories, where there is a mother and a daughter, and then the daughter reaches a certain age and her relationship with the mother is bad. Always. And I read a lot about it and found out that it is just a part of puberty, where the child and the mother are very close and then when the child enters puberty it is the opposite. This was my story.

But musically, in terms of Henning's music, since the time of *The Executioner*, where the music was very romantic, Henning had shifted completely and in this record he made Sound Music. So we made the film, and I said, "Okay, it's my film, but the music is so important that it is a film of both of us." The music and sound is so important—the sound overtakes. The sound is as important as the picture. Therefore, I said this is a film by both of us.



Figs. 39–42 Stills from *Skarpretteren*. Courtesy Ursula Reuter Christiansen.



LM Yeah, because you can really see how the sound reflects the same symbolism in the pictures that are living, that are alive and moving. Can you tell us a bit more in terms of that soundtrack, like what about the texts and the words, the dialogue in the film? You hear people whispering in Danish, I think sometimes also in German, and for us who don't really understand that, what was the intention? Did you write the text?

URC It starts with this old fairy tale of Snow White, where the mother says, "I wish to have a daughter with black hair, and red lips, and so on." And I was whispering, which was Henning's idea, about the red lips and the facial makeup. It was as if it were from this subconscious thought. Henning did a very good job translating what I wanted to express in the visuals into the sound. This was all Henning's work, to transform the film with sound.

LM I listened to it and it sounds like there are a lot of field recordings, and he works with a lot of tape and tape manipulation, which is new in *The Red Forest*—it was way more Romantic and Classical in *The Executioner*. But do you remember, was he there throughout the process? Was he there during the making of the film? Did he take recordings on set with you and then manipulate them later on at home, in his studio? Do you remember how it happened? Did he make the sound simultaneously with the filming? Were you there when he was doing it, or would he make things and then come to you ask you what you thought?

URC Henning made it totally himself. For both films, both *The Executioner* and *The Red Forest*. For *The Executioner*, he had taken all the audio on set during the filming, but for *The Red Forest*, it all took place afterward. He would make the soundtracks from the studio in our house. And I also had to cut the film, but Henning, much more than me, had a great "time-feeling." He knew exactly when to make certain cuts.

LM Just out of personal interest, how long did you work on these? Are we talking about years or months or? How long did this process take?

URC I started to write the stories [for *The Executioner*] and then came to Denmark in '69. In '71 we started to make the film while I was pregnant with my daughter. She was born in July and we were finished with the film in September... It was fourteen days total of shooting one time, then fourteen days more for post-production. We were so precise with the filming that there was nearly nothing to cut out. The editors said they'd never experienced this, where there was nothing to be cut out. Everything was so extremely organized.

LM How long do you think you worked together on *The Red Forest*?

URC Fourteen days as well. So, quite quick and efficient again. Everything was totally planned. We had scouted the locations, organized everything. Henning and I had done several performances together by now. I was always the actor. There were no rules or scripts. When the time would come, I would act. It was totally spontaneous and in character.

LM So he also played a significant part in directing parts of the film and being there with you?

URC There's a big difference between films where actors have very specific instructions and tasks, and the way we did it. We never tried to write for me like that. I knew I had to stand over here, and do this, and Henning would give me small instructions, like, "stand over here instead," and then it was done. I "played" a role, but I did not "play" the role—I *am* the role. I did not have to experiment with things like how to laugh. It was just me... I just have to be myself...

LM Should we continue with some other things, like recordings? We've got a few different questions, like wondering if you and Henning ever collaborated on visual art. Did you create any visual artworks together?

URC Henning loved to make performances. We went to this farmhouse [on Møn]. It was two different lives. Henning made a lot of [happenings]. He had students in Hamburg, where he was professor, and he loved performance situations. Whether on the stage, below the stage, he loved this moment where you really present and demonstrate—where you are just exercising. A happening as opposed





Fig. 45
(previous)

Still from *Den Røde Skov*. Courtesy Ursula Reuter Christiansen.

Fig. 46

Still from *Den Røde Skov*. Courtesy Ursula Reuter Christiansen

to a performance. An *Aktion*. It is an existential demonstration. It is all about that moment, [being] in that time. You take this moment and you go and demonstrate what happens. Henning and I did make some visual artworks [together], but it was much later. In the '80s and '90s, we made performances based on scenes from Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes From a Marriage*.

It was our marriage, and we had been anticipating [the performance] for quite some time. We had waited very long and I said, okay, let us take this situation, which is our situation, and all will be made for our situation. I did not have my normal dress, like I would wear in the house—I had a performer dress. It was really fantastic—I found it in Berlin in a second-hand shop. It was a Hollywood dress. We really made a lot of performances. One of the most famous was in New York—Nam June Paik arranged it for us. Henning performed a piece by Satie, where he [Henning] is playing *Le Messe Des Pauvres* [I believe]. And I am in my dress on the piano eating a pear.

LM Haha!

URC And so [Henning] made that a happening in the Fluxus tradition, but also it was for me. I can remember once we were in Copenhagen on the sea and we were making a picnic. I had a Hoover vacuum and I put it on my head and vacuumed the brain out of my head. Once, in a performance, I cut off his beard. I never should have done it—he looked terrible. We made normal-life situations into performances or *Aktions*. Domestic work, man and wife.

LM Let's talk a bit more about those performances.

MH Something like this one that we found [in the Henning Christiansen catalogue], which was the [performance] that was in the Venice Biennale [*World Peace Economy VI DERESTAURATION*]. This is the period—the '90s—when you're doing a lot of these kinds of performances. If you could talk about that period and how the collaboration came about.

URC It was in the Venice Biennale in 2001. Henning had a very big collaboration with his good friend Bjørn Nørgaard. The fantastic thing, there, was that we had this two-part video. I had one part—the old part—and he had the new part. There was a big roof,

and on the roof we made a performance where I was wearing a very big gala dress and my hair done as if it was in the Baroque time.

LM Yes, quite a Baroque style, with an evening gown.

URC Bjørn Nørgaard was naked and he had a big, big pig's liver on his shoulder. He had several of his good musician friends. It was fantastic. It was a grand performance.

LM So you did quite a lot of these performances over the late '90s and beginning of the 2000s, because we found quite a few in Henning's big book. At the end they are all listed with titles and dates and who was involved, and there are quite a lot of them where it says: "in connection or in collaboration with URC." There are a lot of them in '91, '94, 2001. One in particular, maybe you remember it—it was in '91—it's called *L'essere Umano Errabondo, Der Umberirrende Mensch*.

URC It was a fantastic, common experience for us when Henning stopped to make score music. I won't talk about it here now. It was at Documenta, in Kassel, where Henning was working on a theater piece. He invited Carlo Quartucci, who was a specialist in the early '60s with Beckett. He presented Henning's music. They were very fascinated with his music. He and Henning worked together for twenty years. It was around the same time as *The Red Forest*. They invited us to Rome and Sicily to perform in big theaters. For me, these people were so important because they created a theater piece for many years.

MH I've been transferring some of the cassette tapes [of *L'essere Umano Errabondo, Der Umberirrende Mensch*] that I got from the Henning Christiansen Archive, I'm not sure if you can hear, but I'll play a little bit, because I think it's quite different than some of the other things I've heard. You know, I've heard the *Penthesilea* project. [Recording plays.] I didn't know if you remember doing that piece, but the cassette says it's yourself, Henning, Carlo, and Carla Tatò [Quartucci's wife]. Is that a live performance or is that a studio thing?

URC I think this one was in Sicily, because Carlo is from Sicily, and he grew up in a town 800 meters above the sea. We performed in this beautiful church, and I was walking around the room. The character is looking for his soul, for his existence, and all the people were walking around. There was another performance where Henning was on stage and we had a fishing net down in the harbor. It was as if the sea had placed him on these platters. Does [the cassette] say who wrote it?

LM No, it just says Mario Rosaro. But I don't know what his part was in the creation.

MH I think I was just wondering, with something like that, whether Henning had come up with the composition or if it was improvised? Did you all contribute to these performances? Did Henning have a structure, etc.?

URC I think it was Carlo's idea to make this piece. He made a lot of theater about Pirandello, who is also from Sicily. I think this was Carlo's idea and this was a collaborative piece. I can only remember that people were walking around the stage searching for their own identities.

LM This was one action, one piece that you did in Sicily?

URC Yeah, but we made several variations.

LM In that location over a period of time?

URC Yeah. Made it down in Trapani and maybe in Taormina in this old church. I think it was Carlo's idea.

LM There are titles like *Shut Up, Where is the sea?, Keep Searching*. But yeah, I think because Mark has quite a few tapes with this title, you did a few different versions of it.

URC The interesting thing is that now I'm working with a younger artist to organize all the work I've done over the years into one place. It is really difficult work. And now that you mention this work... *L'essere umano errabondo*. There [in Italy] I really made a lot of drawings and photographs. We would go to the performance

space and engage in the actions, and then when we were home we would make sketches, drawings, and so on.

LM When you actually performed, how did it work? Were Carlo and Henning actually writing down scores, open scores, or scripts and directions? Or were you improvising around it?

URC [The performance] was not prepared prior to being inside the space. The content was informed by the town and the space before anything else. Once we were there, Carlo suggested we do this performance. Henning made the sounds with his recorder.

LM It is very Italian with the titles—*Il mare, Il Vento* [laughs].

URC It was rather boring if I remember correctly. The sound was the element that held it together. The rest of the performance revolved around the sound.

MH Can I ask also then with pieces like *Penthesilea*, which is obviously one of the larger projects that you were involved with together—so Henning made a musical thing, which is four hours of music, and then you're also doing paintings, but that's Henning's practice and that's your practice, they're separated. But at some point these things came together. Do you see it as like you have your own practice, your painting, etc., and then his practice with the music, etc., and then there's this third practice which is the unison of both of you—or do you just see that you're both working with the same topics and they come together? Did you formulate it strictly as separate things?

URC I made a lot of sketches when we performed with Carlo and Carla. There were many actresses—it was a big ballad. I made the sketches, and with my work as a painter, I made these big paintings at home. This was my own work. It was stuff I was already doing prior, but it was a fantastic coincidence that I met those people. They had the most exquisite actress, Carla. Really, really fantastic. So I got my inspiration from those theater people.

LM So it's like a separate practice, but still feeding off each other's?



Fig. 47

Ursula Reuter Christiansen, 2018. Photo by Norman Wilcox-Geissen.

URC Yeah. I was always there, but this was really professional. It was in a large theater with all proper accoutrements. I was not on the stage or anything, but I got a lot of inspiration for my own work.

LM We see also there is one performance that we found in the monograph—I don't know how you actually say it, but it says *Opus 151 Jomfru Fanny's Hofmusik*?

URC That has nothing to do with this. That was in the '80s, much before then.

MH With [*Jomfru Fanny's Hofmusik*], it says in the book that it's a piece of Henning's that he made, but the music is made for an exhibition opening of yours—and there are a couple where you had an exhibition opening in Copenhagen that he had made some music for. Is that another collaboration?

URC When I started to make a bigger shows, in museums and so on, I always used Henning's music as, how shall I say... I never made any exhibitions without Henning's music. It was the background music—*Grundton*—to give an extra dimension to my paintings. I am a painter, I make this information, and when I make exhibitions in a museum it is always a *Total-Installation*. You know? *Gesamtkunstwerk*, they call it. I always had Henning's music as the background music. My pictures are not only the objects and the pieces, it is the aura in the room. It begins to be *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

LM It begins to become alive. Based on all these performances, like you said, using Henning's sound or music as a *Grundton*, a grounding aspect to bring pieces alive—did you ever collaborate with him in the studio to make music together?

URC *Nein, nein!*

LM Ah, okay. So how did the *Little Red Riding Hood* piece come along? Because that is short piece of music where you both create a sonic picture of the fairy tale.

URC That has nothing to do with the sound. Nothing at all. I had nothing to do with that. We talked about it, but this was his work. The performance, the pictures—I worked on those. But the

sound I had nothing do with. It is only Henning's interpretation or inspiration.

MH He uses your voice as an instrument, as part of a sonic landscape.

URC Yes, but this is Henning who used my voice. It is his compositions and his work. He used my voice as an instrument. Otherwise, not at all. Nothing.

LM And then it's a bit out of context now, but just out of personal interest: with all these performances, with Carla and Carlo, when you did those, in Sicily or in Wiesbaden, Carlo and Henning instructed you in some way as to what was going to happen, but everyone was quite free as to what they did. So when people were singing "Il Mare" and so on, it was all in the moment?

URC It was the same way that Carlo worked. They were very good at working together because Carlo had established a fantastic stage and community. Henning would figure out exactly what he wanted, and since he and Carlo had such a good chemistry together—they were always on the same page. It always worked out well, Carlo made this, Carlo made that, and then Henning made sound. In this way it was a kind of a collage perhaps.

LM Yes, it sounds very concrete.

URC It has many different components that were going on, but because of the chemistry they would all work together. Each component took on its own life because they were all in the same sort of spirit. Each person had their own stuff, their own pictures or the sound. Sure, we had a lot of discussions while we were sitting there eating in the evening—we were always talking about things. But it was never any firm instruction or anything like that. No script or anything. It was just a feeling: what are we working on?