

## Islander Culture?

By Susanne Danig, director of BIRCA/Bækkelund International Residency Center for Artists

Is there a special islander culture? And if so, what does it look like, where do we see it?

Together with 6 European partners, BIRCA has set out to examine these questions with an artistic lens. We are 7 centers in total, all of which are located on islands in Europe, and we support artistic development within the performing arts. For BIRCA, this means that we connect with the culture that exists on the 7 islands – Mallorca, Vis (Croatia), Ireland, Sardinia, Corsica and Tenerife – and thereby gain a large international outlook. But it also means that we are closely connected with what happens in the artistic toolbox. And exactly the two things are - as I see it - where we can best contribute to illuminating and challenging Bornholm's cultural life: International perspective and artistic development.

The way I see it, culture is our cohesive force; our way of being together. If we didn't have it, we would invent it. We cannot help but create identification through our culture. It defines who we are, how we see ourselves. And then I usually say that art is the development department of culture. Artists have a special ability to look at culture and spot the cracks, they marvel at what the rest of us take for granted. They ask questions and see the new development. Because we do not live in a static society, we need to develop our way of being together and being in the world. In these years, we are faced with enormous changes around us, driven by technological development and by our overuse of nature's resources, which has put us on the brink of a climate collapse. We also live in the world in a new way. We know much more about the world, and we are influenced by global crises. We travel, we seek knowledge, we experience art (global music, games and movies/TV series are streaming towards us on digital channels) and we receive refugees from other parts of the world who bring their culture with them. Our culture becomes diffuse under the many divergent influences. We can see art as a way to create new understandings of who we are and what life opportunities we have. Many people say that we are living in a new renaissance. Here, art can point to the many possibilities that lie in the changes that currently seem unmanageable. It is a big role to give art, yes.

And what does all this mean for Bornholm?

Bornholm has a rich cultural and artistic life. There are lots of artists living here, and there is a lot happening on the island both in the summer and winter months. The artists have always been attracted to the island. Why? What kind of good growth conditions do we have and must protect? To understand that, I think it is important to understand what it means to be from Bornholm. What constitutes our human bedrock?

I myself am such an optional Bornholmer. I didn't grow up on the island, but this is where I feel at home. I have long roots here and it is the art that brought my family to the island a long time ago. For almost 100 years, we have been part of the large group of regular summer visitors. After we bought BIRCA in 2017, it has become my habitat - and my knowledge and understanding of

Bornholm has deepened. Still, I hesitate to call myself a Bornholmer, because I don't have a permanent residence here and I don't speak Bornholm either. I am a visitor, I travel out and come home to Bornholm.

There is a fairly well-established notion of a "real" Bornholmer. One who has been raised here for generations and does not want to leave the island. The completely opposite Bornholm habitat is the tourists. They are central to the island's self-understanding and survival. That is exactly what Bornholm has in common with all the other European islands that BIRCA cooperates with. Islands simply attract tourists and it has a big impact on all these islands. Those who live in the hustle and bustle of big cities simply cannot get enough of the islands' pristine nature and idyll. The longing to connect to something original and the tranquility of nature creates a romanticized image of the islands - which the islands should ideally live up to. The tourists do not see the social problems, they do not worry about the living conditions of the permanent residents of Bornholm. They just consume our island culture in large quantities for short periods.

Islands are thus generally stretched between a kind of isolation, a kind of conservation of the original, which attracts tourists, which in turn creates a great liveliness and exchange. We all know it: the difference between the noisy tourist season and winter, when we have the island to ourselves. In that span, two different cultural positions stand out: the traditional and the commercial. Partly a space of the very close bound to land, ranging from folklore to bingo and tractor races. Partly the tourist-oriented concerts and festivals that attract large numbers of tourists in the summer months. Often we are only aware of the two positions.

But that is not the whole truth, because islands are also links. Island culture connects the preserved with the new. In older times, the islands were central to trade routes – we see so many wonderful examples of this in Bornholm's cultural history. But also the many sailors from Bornholm have, for example, created connections to the world - just look at the wonderful ethnographic collection at Bornholm's Museum, with what has been brought home from exotic destinations.

So perhaps it is interesting to examine this third position – the connecting culture. And thus also the third group of "residents" on Bornholm; All the optional Bornholmers – the permanent tourists who actually live in a rather large part of the Bornholm properties; the visitors who have made Bornholm their livelihood and help to develop life on the island in numerous ways; the many artists who have made Bornholm their base, while they act in a constant dialogue with the outside world. All the young people who leave the island to get an education and come back. It is a moving, developing position that has an eye for and enjoyment of both the original Bornholm culture and the tourist experiences - but also everything in between. What I call here the artistic development department.

After all, we want to stick to the Bornholm tradition, and we also want to support tourist activities, simply because they generate tourists and thus the economy and jobs. But we must also be careful not to become too conservative and commercial, because that can lead to stagnation. My suggestions are to focus on: Expanding the international outlook; to make sure to maintain and strengthen the connections to the surrounding society - both in Denmark, in the Baltic Sea and in

Europe - even when it is not a matter of attracting tourists; to establish an artistic and folk-based dialogue with the countries around us and with our natural allies on other European islands. Artistic projects with such perspectives can actually also generate economy that benefits Bornholm.

In these years, as I mentioned at the beginning, BIRCA has started a study of island culture under European auspices, and we have received solid support from the EU's cultural programs for this work. BIRCA has also focused on the Baltic Sea area, where we have received support from The Nordic Culture Point for a number of projects that will form a network for the artists in the Baltic Sea region, with a focus on exploring what we call ecological performing arts. We are therefore interested in Bornholm's immediate area and neighbours, those with whom we previously had trade relations and share cultural relations - that is why we are also interested in the work with the Baltic Bridge. But we are also interested in examining our relationship with what is right around us in our nature, and how we as a human species enter into relationships with all that is non-human. Because I believe that art can play a significant role in the transition to a more sustainable way of life, in creating visions for our future and respect for the universe we are part of. We can do that because we work with emotions and body, with presence and dialogue in art.

Many others are underway on Bornholm. We have so many wonderful artists who live and are inspired in their art by the island. There are so many small cultural venues and galleries where you can experience art. We also have good cultural institutions, which we must understand to protect as a framework for development. I myself love Grønbechsgaard, and often take visiting artists there to get an insight into the special Bornholm look and the variety of the many local artisans. But Grønbechsgaard also manages to frame the Bornholm artists in a Danish and international dialogue through fine exhibitions with a high level of quality. The same happens at the Art Museum, which is particularly committed to drawing lines in dialogue with our own artists and pointing to transversal themes, which they have done through a completely unique study of light. For a number of years, Bornholm's Theater has done a fantastic job of digging into the local history and conveying it at a high artistic level. At BIRCA, we have had great pleasure in collaborating with the Bornholm Culture Week. It has given us a fine platform to show Danish and international performing arts. In terms of communication, we can reach further through the culture week, and at the same time it makes a lot of sense to me that artists and institutions stand together to show what our island can offer.

Perhaps island culture is about the complexity between the very close and the connecting lines. About having preserved the cultural history in particular, and about relating to what we surround ourselves with in a respectful and engaging way. And at the same time be a melting pot for activity in a developing dialogue with tourists, optional Bornholm residents and our neighbors in, for example, the Baltic Sea. Contemporary art must then interpret, thematize and convey all of this.