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Baltic Art Center

The Art Residency as Support Structure

How has Gotland, the Swedish island located in the middle of the Baltic Sea in a marine crossroad between Northern and Eastern Europe, absorbed the ancient cycles of mobilisation and demobilisation in its language and its landscape? What roles do artists and art organisations play in these cycles?

The foundation and the history of the Baltic Art Center (BAC), runs parallel with the latest of many historic cycles of military mobilisation and demobilisation on the island. During the perfect funding storm that took hold of the Baltic Sea Region in the post-wall atmosphere of the 1990s, we confidently grabbed the title of "Baltic Art Center" in 1999. The Cold War was over, Gotland had demobilised, and the cultural initiatives were invited to fill the void.





BAC and other cultural organisations in the region were founded in a new golden era by triumphant liberal democracies – but it didn't take many years for the tide to turn. Russia's covert invasion of Crimea in 2014 became the starting point for military remobilisation, which then increased considerably after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. After a rushed process in the Swedish parliament and humiliating negotiations with Turkey, Sweden became a NATO member in 2024.

A 200-year narrative of neutrality was over, and the military was once again a strong presence on the island. What will this mean for BAC and other cultural initiatives born out of a desire to build cultural dialogue in the Baltic Sea region in the peaceful (if brief) period following the collapse of the Soviet Union? And perhaps more importantly, how do these new military narratives affect the people of Gotland? These were some of the core questions with which we entered the On Mobilisation partnership, with its broader thematic framework of mobilising civil society through artistic processes.

BAC started out as an art space in a newly renovated warehouse in Visby harbour and then transformed into an international visual arts residency that focuses on facilitating artistic processes and projects in 2007. Still based in Visby, we

have an office, a guest apartment, a car and a small staff who use and share their “know-how” and “know-who”. These are BAC's main tools for facilitating artistic work on the island of Gotland. We don't have an artist's studio – we have an entire island, the ‘BAC-mobile’ and a generous supply of coffee, tea and biscuits for the many meetings where we discuss budgets, explore ideas and brainstorm about where to go, who to see and what to do next. This is the support structure that gives our resident artists access to Gotland, its sites and the local communities with whom they can develop their projects.

Because of our location on Gotland and its role in the aggressive sides of geopolitics, we decided that our artistic research project would be to commission an artist to explore the historical and contemporary peace movements of Gotland. We invited the Swedish artist Kalle Brolin, an artist who has established methods for long-term research projects on multi-layered sites of time, history and human endeavour in visual film essays that function as associative time-based portraits. Kalle Brolin in turn responded to the commission with a proposal to portray the local peace movements.

Starting with the initial brainstorming with BAC staff about where to go and who to see, Kalle Brolin continued his artistic research with a method of informal interviews with peace activists on

Gotland. The evening school *Peace Talks* that we organised as part of the On Mobilisation project also provided an opportunity to research and map the people and events that make up the local, current and historical peace movements.

Peace Talks took place in three three-hour sessions in Visby in March 2024. We primarily targeted the network of people connected with Kalle Brolin's research, but the audience grew by word of mouth and gathered an intergenerational group of artists, academics, students, senior peace activists and their initiatives. One thing that became very clear during the *Peace Talks* sessions was that artists have played an important role in historical and contemporary peace movements as organisers, designers and sponsors of the movements and their events on Gotland but also internationally. The evening school developed into a platform for several local activist groups and revitalised the idea of a local peace movement to the extent that one participant initiated the re-establishment of a Gotland branch of Sweden's largest peace organisation (The Swedish Peace and Arbitration Society) during the final session.

The evening school *Peace Talks*, as well as the personal archives and conversations with Kalle Brolin's interviewees, mixed with the artist's own research, references, associations and ideas. All these things led him further and deeper

into the social networks and imagery of peace activism on Gotland. The resulting portrait of Gotland's peace movements is entitled *Peace on Gotland* and is visualised as a two-channel film and photo essay that montages past, present, fiction and actual events on Gotland. Kalle Brolin is not only trying to create a portrait of different generations of activists and activism on Gotland. He is also trying to capture and make us see the flip side of war – peace and peace work.

The artistic research project titled *On the Language of Mobilisation* conducted by BAC and Kalle Brolin on Gotland as part of the transnational On Mobilisation cooperation developed into a real call and response of methods, aims and purposes, where the overlaps created blurred boundaries between art organisation, artist and local communities. Once gathered, the different groups of activists of Gotland's current and historical local peace movements mobilised and organised a new peace platform. The Swedish Peace and Arbitration Society Gotland is once again a strong voice for international disarmament and the costs of mobilisation and military aggression for Gotland. The local district is now working with the national level of the Swedish Peace and Arbitration Society at the national level to create public events and programmes to provide alternative thinking into a public discussion dominated by military logic.