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VIDEO ARTICLE

Voices of Green: Videotaped Island Encounters with Local Ownership in Transition Businesses

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This is a companion piece to the "Voices of Green" film. Watch the film here: *Voices of Green*

Abstract

This companion piece to the ethnographic film *Voices of Green* by Hannah Birch examines local perspectives on green transitions in Denmark, focusing on how inhabitants on the Danish island of Bornholm organize and act on climate change through business development centered around local ownership. Drawing on fieldwork conducted at two field sites – a local renewable energy project and a regenerative farm – in the autumn of 2024, our initial analytical aim was to understand *co-ownership* between the locals and the nation-state. However, our interlocutors stressed that co-ownership could not be understood or practiced without *local ownership*, which they viewed as a form of organization in which residents themselves drive transitions in and from local businesses. Yet, they experienced multiple political and economic obstacles to develop these transition-oriented businesses based on local ownership. In this companion piece to the film, we argue that visual

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anthropology opens up the concept and practice of ownership, which is crucial for both understanding and supporting local action in developing businesses capable of contributing to the green transitions called for.

Keywords

Local ownership, Green transitions, Transition-oriented business, Visual anthropology, Denmark.

Introduction: What Is the Role of Ownership in Green Transitions?

"[A]nd an important key to achieving that is local ownership." This was the answer to our question about how to realize green transitions, given by an inhabitant of the Danish island of Bornholm. During our fieldwork on the island, we embarked on learning how the inhabitants of a place that is simultaneously geographically and energy-infrastructurally remote, yet politically extremely connected, make sense of what enables green transitions. One of the largest land reforms seen in Danish history was taking place while we asked about, listened to, recorded, and filmed the island inhabitants developing new business formats capable of ensuring the transitions they recognized a need for. In a debate leading up to the final reform negotiations, broadcasted on Denmark's national radio, the need for all encompassing transitions was voiced:

> If we do not transition all parts of our society, we are not doing anything about the climate changes that we are all experiencing now, with storm surges and record-breaking months (our translation).

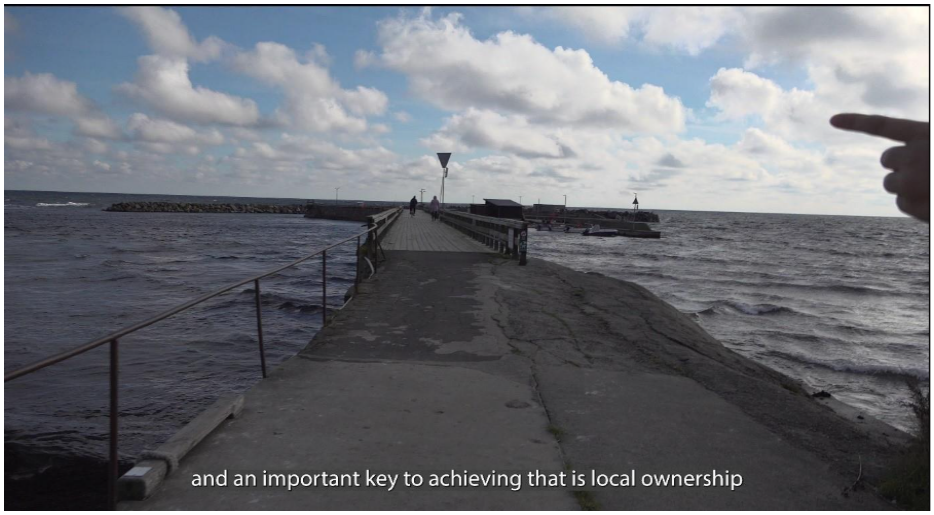

Image 1: A harbor on the Danish island of Bornholm, where a local energy project plans to construct nine wind turbines to make the island self-sufficient in energy.

The statement was made by the Minister of the Danish Tripartite Agreement; an agreement that was secured in the autumn of 2024 through collaboration among the Danish government, a nature conservation organization, the conventional agricultural industry organization, and various other public and private actors. The agreement became a symbol of how the nation-state as an actor in charge of centralizing planning for green transitions was not a story of yesteryear. Rewetting lowlands and establishing new forests were particular areas of action in the plan, aimed at ensuring simultaneous land changes in all corners of the nation-state. The agreement received public critique for focusing only on certain areas of greenhouse gas emissions and biodiversity. At the same time, in various locations across the country, people were working towards socially, economically, and legally developing their own businesses, articulating versions of green transitions that satisfied their ambitions more than the agreement did. Curious to learn how such local actions were organized in practice, which obstacles they faced, and how they differed from the ambitions articulated in dominant green transition governance, we ventured not only to Bornholm, but into the organizations currently in development.

To encourage local ownership, inhabitants of the island have mobilized and organized themselves in local projects, where locals influence decision-making and obtain the economic benefits of the island's green transition. Equipped with a notebook, a video camera, and a recorder, we followed local voices from the cooperative regenerative farm Hammersly (only Hannah) and the cooperative wind farm energy project Bornholm Offshore Wind (both of us). Drawing on Hannah's visual capture and editing, this empirical material was then transformed into a film, showing the obstacles and aspirations of the two projects. Importantly, in this process, visual anthropology was mobilized as more than a knowledge generation method by centering the wishes and

Image 2: A farmer picking tomatoes at a local regenerative farm on Bornholm while discussing the role of local food production.

Image 3: The island's industrial harbor, central for shipments and offshore wind projects in the Baltic Sea. In the image, we see a former board member of a local energy project, explaining that she has lost faith in the project due to experiences of political resistance.

practices of local ownership in the island's green transitions. The film demonstrates the political, legal, and economic obstacles that these projects are facing when their initiatives collide with difficulties in local organizing and in achieving the necessary forms of legitimization from actors beyond the community.

While our research on green transitions had initially led us to an interest in ownership, we were surprised to see how many conversations revolved around defining, distributing, and mobilizing ownership within the two projects. With the concept of ownership as a guide, this companion piece to *Voices of Green* elaborates on what we learned about local ownership in the context of climate change through our use of visual anthropology.

Effects of the Visual: Ownership, Opened up

In times of climate change, not only ecologies, but also economies are in transition. Questions arise about who benefits from green transitions, both in decision-making and in sharing economic gains, and, conversely, who is left with less, as well as which visions can realize what they promise. On Bornholm, these questions are central to the islanders' ways of organizing. Our use of visual anthropology opened up an understanding of what was at stake for the islanders, particularly their right to and use of ownership in the island's green transition.

While ownership can be talked about, it is one of those terms that is difficult to pin down. What kind of ownership, exactly, one might ask. Does it denote a feeling, a property, or something beyond such categories? We decided to experiment with a range of methods – some planned ahead, others improvised – which all served to center the visual, such as drawing, audio-visual fieldnotes, and reenactment of

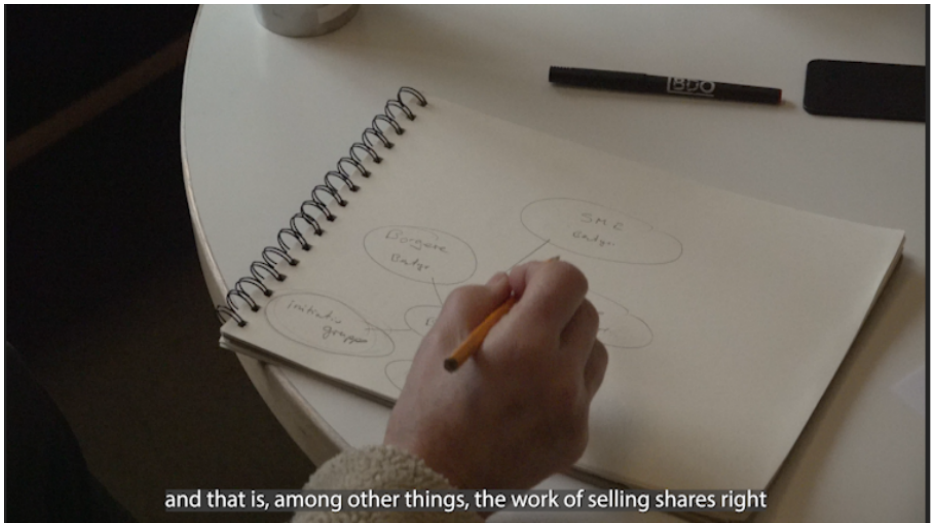

Image 4: An interlocutor drawing the organization of a local energy project.

photographs, to explore the ambiguities. We asked our interlocutors to draw the organizations of their projects, while we posed questions such as: What is your role? Who decides x? Who depends on y? Who gets z? In this way, we sought to include relational descriptions along the lines. We asked most of our interlocutors to participate in such mappings, and they all unfolded differently, also among people involved in the same businesses. These drawings were not organizational charts nor mere network mappings, but an exploration of how, and among whom, ownership was produced.

A moment of methodological improvisation during fieldwork occurred when we visited the director of the harbor in the town of Nexø. He wanted to share with us the extreme changes that the harbor had undergone; from bustling fishing industry to fish disappearing and the harbor going into economic decline. Due to these changes, the director and his colleagues now worked to transform it into a cultural hub. They recently decided to become an investor in the cooperative wind energy project that other inhabitants of the island had started, aiming for a community-based business case. If the project turns out successful, the harbor will become a key site for constructing and maintaining the wind turbines, most likely generating more economic activity in the town. While discussing these opportunities, the director pointed to a framed photo on the wall showing the fishing era of the harbor, which he wanted to show us. This prompted us to ask if he could show us where the photo had been taken. Off we went from the harbor office to the first floor of a building on the harbor's edge which had been turned into a popular restaurant.

Filming the director holding the framed photo displaying the same site decades ago proved visually interesting and was, therefore, also included in the film. The situation helped transform our conversation around the potential wind energy project from relying mainly on general

Image 5: Hannah taking a photo of the director of Nexø harbor holding a photo of the harbor from the 1980s. While the older photograph shows the harbor full of fishing boats, the current photo reveals it as empty, implying that the fishing industry on the island is fading.

thoughts and viewpoints to one building on the contextualized visual imagination. This ethnographic situation was as interesting as it was nurturing our new relation: The director understood that we were sincerely interested in the harbor's transitions – environmentally, economically, and as a culturally important site.

At times, we found the camera and the act of filming somewhat of an obstruction. We needed more time to set up, and while some people seemed to accept or enjoy the lens, others expressed they felt somewhat surveilled. In certain contexts, the fieldwork seemed to gain a different, perhaps deemed more important, status and a sense of us giving something back to the field, while others were skeptical and feared being portrayed negatively. We tried to engage the visual in a collaborative process with our interlocutors, involving them in decisions on how to film, in the editing process, and in discussions of ownership during panel debates and film screenings. Our interlocutors made it clear that they did not want the main focus to be on economic challenges, project failures, or the contrast between small- and large-scale projects. Instead, they wanted to show how their initiatives represent local action in the green transition, inspiring others to follow.

An example of how the film became shaped by local opinions can be seen in the case of the energy project. While our initial aim was to portray their work in organizing a new business, we found that the locals wanted to communicate their frustrations and efforts to build local ownership, which led us to shift our focus. Some initially feared that our aim was to portray the obstacles they were facing, causing the local society to mock them, for which reason some were skeptical about participating in the film. We experienced that, by involving them in the

editing process, we gained more trust enabling us to produce a film on local terms.

During an initial screening, the people from the local farm expressed that the film focused too much on resistance and skepticism within the community. Instead, they wanted it to highlight their initiatives to engage the locals and their efforts to transition the island's food production. The film was therefore re-edited to emphasize these practices even more. Locals from both projects stressed that their purpose in participating was to inspire others by showing alternative ways of organizing and empowering local communities towards a less ecologically harmful future. Accordingly, the film portrays local voices within, but also behind the scenes via co-created processes of filmmaking. Economic struggles and local resistance were given less screen time, while perspectives on ownership and local agency became the main focus of the film. By inviting and accepting local wishes about how the film was edited, the film also became a product of what they wanted to express, not only in the moment of filming but also generally. This decision was intended to distribute authority in terms of what was relevant to show. As a result of this collaborative process, our aim was that the film should portray ownership from local perspectives while also carrying a second layer in which the locals took ownership of the filmmaking process.

We considered the camera as an ethnographic tool and have focused on the process instead of the outcome of the film. Yet, during fieldwork, it also became clear to us that there was a strong interest in the film becoming not only developed and shown; people wanted their stories told and voices heard. Several of the people staring in the film also pushed us to launch it. They wanted to show it and use it within their own work. With this, we suggest that engaging with locally initiated green transitions

Image 6: A farmer guiding residents through tomato plantations. While the camera follows him, we hear a voiceover expressing his visions for the future of farming in local societies.

through videotaping opens up several simultaneous vehicles of transformation: in academic knowledge making, in sharing strategies and barriers across sites, and in enhancing opportunities for the sites which are analytically videotaped.

Ownership in the Multiple

In Danish, *medejerskab* (co-ownership) refers to the condition of being an owner with others; something one can hold, be given, or take collectively. While a wealth of literature from anthropology and beyond could inform such forms of ownership across places and practices, our interest here is mostly to indicate that, while many terms, understandings, and definitions were at play in and around ownership during our fieldwork and in the film, *local ownership* was the most consistently articulated and valued form of ownership among the locals in the projects.

Both projects were, at least at times, defined within the legal definition of cooperatives – in Danish, *andelsselskaber* – which themselves can take many forms. The energy project was later split into a production and a distribution part, taking form as a cooperative and a community-based business model with different yet connected legal frameworks. Still, the insistence on local ownership as the form of ownership that ultimately mattered demonstrates not only the relevance of economic, legal, and organizational ownership forms, but also the importance among the locals in *taking ownership* of issues that need to be addressed for the continuous flourishing of their own and others' livelihoods during a time of ecological crises. The attention to local ownership has led the film to emphasize the role of local agency in green transitions, highlighting the ways in which human lives inflict and respond to ecological change with their human means, such as relation-building,

Image 7: An agricultural field reserved for wildlife nature. While the camera follows the field, a voiceover features a resident discussing local ownership and economies.

trade, and construction. Yet, it also demonstrates how local agency, including initiatives to develop local ownership based on communities' own decisions and skills, is a position which is challenged by dominating political, legal, and economic regimes.

Local Ownership Within and Against a Changing Climate

The island inhabitants wished to strengthen the local economy by making the island self-sufficient in energy and food production. The people engaged in building these new organizations expressed dissatisfaction with the political transition pathways, which they perceived as controlled and practiced by state and large industry actors. This, they emphasized, removes decisions and benefits from local communities and economies while also distancing consumption from production. Their answer was to establish new community-based, non-profitable businesses seeking to produce vegetables and energy with minimal greenhouse gas emissions. It is crucial, we contend, to both understand and assist with how such organizations – what we have referred to here as transition businesses – can develop.

While this visual anthropological attempt to show how green transitions on the island of Bornholm are organized and face obstacles gives insight into the role of local ownership, it also raises new questions, interests, and curiosities. These include the geographically, economically, technically, culturally, socially, and politically defined boundaries of local ownership in relation to community-building and greenhouse gas reductions; the division of spheres between state and large industry projects versus community initiatives; and the contextual differences and effects of these dynamics on cooperative organizational development.

Image 8: A resident giving us a tour at the local regenerative farm, referring to it as "her place."

Thus, future analytical endeavors could dive deeper into how and why co-ownership relies on collective efforts to localize ownership. This also involves diving into how a generation of new local community-based commodity chains can and are replacing long-distance, emissions heavy, alienating ones. In other words, we end with a strengthened analytical interest in ownership which we think, and hope, is not only ours.

In this sense, we advocate for a collective effort in exploring and understanding local ownership in the context of climate change, not only *as* visual anthropology, but also *from* visual anthropology. Such an approach might position the researcher as an engaged, responsible, and relation-building partner who recognizes what is at stake together with the community. There are already many makers engaged in such activities. This effort is a task that is worth to engage in if we wish to take seriously the relations, cooperations, communities, and co-ownerships that may make green transitions possible – not only within and across organizations and businesses but also from the perspectives of our lenses.

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