



# Literary Landscapes

Literary Landscapes is a monthly column by Indra Wussow, a writer, translator and director of the Sylt Foundation.

**M**y thatched roof has been very honoured this afternoon as Thomas Mann was spending his time here.' This quote, from Siegfried Jacobsohn, editor of the internationally renowned Berlin weekly cultural magazine, *Weltbühne*, is taken out of a letter he wrote to his friend Kurt Tucholsky, himself a famous writer, in 1922. 'The old *Waterkantler* had not known the island before and fell so much in love with it that he either wanted to buy a Frisian home or some land.' In the end he did not buy any property

Valeska Gert, the artist who revolutionised dancing in the 1920s, died on the island in 1978.

The poets Max Frisch and Carl Zuckmayer met their publisher Peter Suhrkamp on the island to discuss their ideas, projects and visions or to discuss their latest texts.

There was a time when all the stars of the German cultural community were summer visitors on Sylt. 'From now on I will rather tell you daily who has not been here, as this is the minority,' Jacobsohn wrote in the same letter to his friend Tucholsky.

The island became famous for its parties and VIPs, the internationally renowned playboy Gunther Sachs was the leading figure of a crowd that came to enjoy themselves. Later on, the captains of industry, who became wealthy in the German *Wirtschaftswunder*, bought big houses for their families and met on the island in summer.

When the Sylt Foundation was founded in 2000, the idea of the artist island was long gone and Sylt's reputation for the arts was shattered. So in 2000, when the first artists came to live and work on the island, it was the continuation of a historically close and fruitful relationship between the arts and the island.

The Sylt Foundation is located on the site of a natural water reservoir and bottling plant called the Sylt-Quelle. The German word *Quelle* means source; an appropriate word, as the Sylt Quelle Foundation is intended as a place of beginnings: of ideas, of creative projects. The Sylt Foundation consists of a gallery, a large production hall, and three apartments for artists. The buildings are set in a wide, open space which is used for installations and open-air events and which unifies

get together to work on a common project, the results of which might be shown in other art institutions around the world or in the gallery of the Sylt Foundation. It is an inspiring place – and a free place.

Most of the works are only loosely connected with the island of Sylt, if at all; the guests are free to choose their own themes.

But the island, with its extreme weather conditions, is a perfect foundation for artistic work as German playwright Falk Richter explains: 'it takes a few moments and then one comes close to one's inner self again... only the essential things speak out and nothing distracts you from your work, while the completely unpredictable weather performs an entire drama itself – wind, rain, sun and hale all within a day.'

The island as a playground for the arts has also found its way into South African culture: be it in Strijdom van der Merwe's land art, Andrew Tshabangu's photos, Jaco van Schalkwyk's paintings or Berni Searle's installations. Poet and cultural activist Raks Seakgwa shared his idea of the



Quellenhaus



The Watt around the island of Sylt



Flood by Setlamorago 'Mash' Mashilo. Photographs by Rayka Kobiella

on the island of Sylt but became an enthusiastic summer visitor, who often returned to Sylt in the following years before the Nazis took over and the 'magician' went into exile. 'By this harrowing sea I deeply lived,' Thomas Mann wrote in the guest book of his Sylt patron, actress Klara Tiedemann, in 1928. When he was looking for some urban distraction, the famous writer and Nobel Prize winner did not need to travel far.

Regular visitors to the island were the composers Friedrich Hollaender and Otto Klemperer, the theatre expert Herbert Ihering and the dancer Valeska Gert, who fell so much in love with Sylt that she came back after the war and exile. She stayed in the small village of Kampen, where she opened the 'Ziegenstall' (goat shed), a cabaret lounge and bar, where intellectuals and celebrities met and partied.

No wonder that a lot of works and topics that had been created in those years before World War II and had made their noise in the world had their roots or were completed on this tiny island in the North Sea.

This liberal-minded and creative tradition was cut sharply with the advent of the Nazi regime, the war and leaden times following.

Of the artists that flocked to the island over the centuries, one of the most famous was the expressionist Emil Nolde, who built his home on the mainland not far from the island. Sylt had always been famous for its light and horizon, its ever changing weather conditions, its stormy sea and flowering salt marshes, but artists abandoned the island and discovered new places. Sylt became a holiday destination for the rich and an altar for mass tourism.

the modern architectural complex into an exciting meeting place. The gallery is located in the Quelle building: a light, uncluttered exhibition space in which temporary exhibitions of international contemporary art take place.

## In the Rhythm of the Tides

The nature of the island, the contradictions of mass tourism and the search for tranquillity, the loneliness in a strange place, make this island a perfect place for artists to experience, to think and to reflect. Something always takes effect on all the international writers, musicians, painters and filmmakers who are invited to the small town of Rantum with its 400 inhabitants. Some spend night after night discussing the meaning of life with others. Some barricade themselves in their flats for weeks on end. And then others

island, Sylt being the first island he experienced after being imprisoned in Robben Island for so many years.

South African artist David Koloane and Scottish writer A.L. Kennedy met on Sylt and mused about the nudist beaches, which are an integral part of the island summer culture. What emerged is an incredibly exciting dialogue about how a South African who grew up in apartheid feels when seeing a naked white person and to compare it with the experience of hostility to the body, as Kennedy feels rooted in Scottish Calvinism.

'The poets come and go, they read their stories and poems to three or a hundred listeners – they read in the very lap of the sea between the Wadden Sea and the flood. The wind is whistling and the seagulls are cruising above the house and the heads of the poets' (Cora Frost). **CF**