

September 27, 2016 - In 1976, Björk made her first public appearance on the Icelandic radio station, Radio One. She was 9 years old. She released her first album, *Björk*, when she was 11. Since then she's put out eight solo albums, most recently *Vulnicura*, in 2015.



As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3484 words.

Tags: Music, Art, Technology, Collaboration, First attempts, Focus, Adversity, Beginnings.

# Björk on nature and technology

## **Nature and technology have always overlapped in your work.**

For me, nature and technology stand for hope, and for a movement onwards to the future. I've always been like that. I think it has to do with being brought up in Iceland. Even though it's a capital in Europe, right now I'm outside my house, and I am literally walking on the beach. It's a lot of space! I remember the first time when I was really into technology was going to the dentist. I was in this hippie school where everything was very wooden and real. Then it was a dentist's office, and I was like, "Wow. This is the future!" He put all these things in my mouth, and I was like, "Okay, the future is here, this is where shit happens."

I think it's also some sort of instinct, just knowing that if there is to be hope, we have to unite technology and nature. You have to make them coexist, and they have to be able to work together. I mean, it has to happen, if we're going to survive. Maybe I'm being a bit limited, but the older I get, I realize better and better how I'm formed by my origins and where I'm from. But somehow it's easier for me to imagine that happening in a natural situation—like me talking on a phone on the beach to you now from a capital in Europe. You have technology, or GarageBand in your iPhone and record a tune on top of a mountain.

This has always been the ideal hopeful marriage for me. I've more or less always been into this—every album, I was like, okay, now I'm going to do something I've never done before. Then it always goes back to the same thing. Ever since I was a teenager in punk bands, and whatever, it's been pretty persistent.

When we were doing the tour of the album *Volta*, we had touchscreens. This was before iPads. Whenever there's new technology, one of my favorite things—a sort of murder mystery thing—is to figure out, "Oh, what's this for?" A lot of things are rubbish, but there's always one thing where it's like, "Oh, technology finally caught up with us, and now it can map out this very natural function in me." It makes life easier. People think I'm really, really good with technology. Actually, it's the other way around. I'm really rubbish. When an iPad comes along, it makes technology usable for me.

When I did *Biophilia*, I was so excited about finally mapping out how I feel about education and how I feel about musicology, because when I was a kid in music school, it was almost offensive, how I was forced to study music, or resonance, or timbre, or scales—everything from a normal book, and sit and read something for hours. If it's being seen and heard, it was something that needed to be felt and become visceral and physical. For me to do *Biophilia*, I rented this house on the beach, and we were there programming all the basic things in musicology, like rhythm and chords and melody and so on.

It was very obvious somehow that the touchscreen was basically a 3D book. You can see that now. How it's mostly used, it's great for schools, and especially things like physics or math or music, or things that

have to be 3D. It's the same thing. It makes sense for me to go back to this, because it's sort of like first you discover the tool, then it's like meeting a new friend, and then you can try and figure where the magic happens, where the most potential is to grow. It's that heat point, and that feeling of entering the unknown, that really excites me.

#### **How did you get interested in virtual reality?**

I've got a close collaboration with Andrew Huang, who I've done several videos with now. My interest in virtual reality came from that. When I was commissioned by MoMA to do the "Black Lake" video, we were going to do it in 360. Trying to squeeze into MoMA was a very exciting project for me. I think the shape of that song is influenced a bit by the fact that I was going to have it presented in a room, and I was thinking that people would walk in and out all day. It was this song that could loop forever.

So, we were first going to film it in 360, and it was going to be in a 360 dome inside MoMA. Then that wasn't possible for functional reasons, so we ended up doing it on two screens, which was actually perfect: I found a poetic reason for that because the song was written in a dark crevice in the middle of the night in Japan, so it was that claustrophobic feeling of being in a tiny canyon. [laughs] We set it up like that, and then just had crazy subs massaging you. That was that one piece.

For me, the interest in virtual reality has been a gradual development. It's been the opposite of *Biophilia*, where I basically cut everything off and created this space, went to a foreign island, and decided to make all these plants grow simultaneously; the technology, the programming, the music writing, the lyric writing. When we released it, it was ready on all the levels. But *Vulnicura* was almost the opposite, where the album was written really quickly, and then it leaked, which suited its character. It was like, okay, it's this kind of beast. Thinking about it now, the leak influenced us in a good way, because my team kind of went, "Oh, okay, it's one day at a time. There's no master plan... fuck that." So we had to be very reactionary and work with what we had.

Like, when we were filming "Black Lake" in Iceland, we happened to have a camera with us that was 360 that this company had lent us. We were going to film "Black Lake" with it, and then me and Andrew looked at each other one evening and said, "How about we do 'Stonemilker' tomorrow?" That was the spontaneous sibling of "Black Lake." It couldn't have happened that spontaneously if there hadn't been a year of difficult effort put into the "Black Lake" one. They coexist somehow.

It's been like that ever since. Next thing, we asked Jesse Kanda to do "Mouth Mantra." I was at a place in my life where the only plan was that there is no plan. You just have to go with the flow, and go totally with your gut. If it feels right, it's right. If not, then, you know, just go off the map. You lost your map, so just go off it.

We are up to six videos now with eight different people. And, one thing with VR that you learn very quickly: VR isn't just VR. 360 is completely different from VR, and then it's like do you show it in a dome, or do you show it in the glasses? We almost just decided, me and James Merry, my co-creative visual director. I was actually just with him, and talking about stuff for three hours. It's really a challenge for both of us. What we decided to do while this technology is still in the making—and it's still being discovered, but people don't know what it is—is to just use this search as an element. How do you hang a song on the wall?

Each video almost has been done with different technology, different themes, different directors, different problem-solving, everything. Everything has been, similar to *Biophilia*, has been done like an exchange across people. It's been really fun.

#### **Does the "Mouth Mantra" video go back to your early interest in dentistry?**

No, it does not. [laughs] I should say yes. I should be really clever and say yes there, but I have to credit Jesse. That's his idea.

**VR is still being developed. A year ago, you'd have to wear some kind of huge helmet, and it keeps getting refined. Like you say, it's this thing that hasn't quite been figured out entirely. It hasn't entirely congealed.**

Yeah, it's exciting. I love the feeling of entering the unknown. You have to allow yourself a lot of mistakes, and then when you get it right, it's so rewarding. I love the spirit. I love hanging out with those tech nerds and having ridiculous conversations. I've actually been talking to this company now who are doing these crazy sonic things—because, of course, it's sonic, too. You can walk around and hear different sections of the song, so maybe you have different things in different songs. Like, how you experience sound in 360?

I was talking to a friend about it the other day. It's almost like every time there is a new something, like for example, when film came out, or theater—that was a very long time ago—or a CD, or the LP, it's really fun to try to define it. For me, VR's quite Wagnerian or something. It's almost like I'm sitting there, and thinking, "Oh my god, how are they going to solve this for three hours, just looking at one stage?" People are interested. It's such a different struggle than 2D or a concert. It's literally the same kind of problem with VR, where you have the camera in the middle, and you can look all around you, and all the events, and kind of how you place everything. I think it's just really exciting. Riddles to solve. It's a privilege to be a part of figuring it out.

**Do you see VR as something that removes you from the natural world or do you see it as something that folds into reality?**

I think it's both. I think it's binary, and I think that's almost the point. If you try to escape one thing and just do one or the other, you're always going to end up at the same point. I don't know if that makes sense, but it sort of eats its own tail. It's always going to be that question, for sure, but I'm sure that was the same question people had with everybody on trains reading books or commuting or whatever. It's always going to be, are they here with us in the train, or are they somewhere else in their book? I don't think this is any different. There are obviously different challenges with this, though.

I heard somebody say that he watched some crazy game, for like eight hours a day, that had the wrong physics in it—like all the distances to the mountains or whatever didn't add up. So, what happened after a few days, is first he would get seasick when he was in the machine, and then he would actually get used to it. Then when he would take the machine off him, he would get seasick. He had to put it back on to not throw up. That's obviously very scary. Then with anything, you have to work out things like the soul and humanity, and what's good for you, and not be lazy. These good old ethics can come back. To not get addicted.

**Do you feel like with the Björk Digital that opens in the fall is something that you have more control of than your MoMA show? Do you feel like it's complementary?**

I probably would never have done a MoMA show if it was my choice. I was very flattered to be offered it, actually. Klaus [Beisenbach] offered it to me many times. I turned it down until I said yes. It was a really educating experience for me, and I know it was done from his behalf with all the good intentions. I learned more about my universe. There are certain things that work for me and certain things that don't work. What I really liked was, for example, premiering "Stonemilker" at PS1. That's more the continuity of the music video, and a natural universe for me that I've been in since I was a teenager. It made me discover, also, that I like this one-on-one that you have when you listen to music with headphones, or an album, in your house and read the lyrics. That one-on-one journey you go through, that narrative of music. It's different than 20th century visual arts.

I'm not criticizing it for a second. I just think it's there's a reason why people go to concert halls and sit there for an hour and a half, and it's a good idea. It works. In a way, VR's a better suited stage for this kind of universe than the white cube, or this sort of 20th century museum. "Black Lake" works in a museum; it's as white cube-y as I'd go. That was the piece that I probably put most of my work into. I think the VR exhibition is what I would've done if I hadn't done MoMA. Finding a roof for the VR videos—while people still don't have headsets at home—in a punk warehouse-y setting. And it is true, in this way, technology really has enabled women to work outside the already formed hierarchical systems.

Maybe the fashion element, too. I care about it, but I don't care half about it as much as I care about the music and the visuals. I mean, that's where my heart is. Also, life is short, and I need to just do new things, just do the stuff I'm doing now, and not a retrospective. If other people are interested in that, I'm really flattered, but I have to stay focused on the stuff I'm doing now. What I also discovered,

actually, was how much *Biophilia* has grown since then. It happened first for three years in Reykjavik schools, and now it's just done two years in Scandinavian schools and Greenland and the Faroe Islands.

When we do the exhibitions, we call it 'Björk Digital' because people can come with headphones and the iPad, and they have the instruments there, and they can try them, and they can play them all day. We are setting up a situation focused on interaction. It's not coming into a room and looking at paintings on the wall or acquiring visual art. It's different. It's more about people coming and trying *Biophilia*; it's interactive. Then they go and try all the VR videos.

We try to make it as immersive as possible. In Australia, there were 60 VRs, and people were there holding hands and crying. I mean, they would hang out in the *Biophilia* room forever. It's kind of more about the last two pieces I did, and I tried to make them most immersive. People can come and experience that. Making basically a stage or a place where people can do that, and the interactive part—with good headphones, of course. [laughs]

We adjust every time, and it's always about who wants to work with us. For example, the Tokyo show was really different to the Australia show. The Australia show was part of a festival, so it was a million and a half people that walked through it. Tokyo was in the Museum of Technology, where they have all the robots and that, and where we actually had *Biophilia* three years ago. The same teachers were there three years ago, so they had history with the teaching part of it, the educational part. Yeah. They were really different kinds of shows. The "Black Lake" room was not in Tokyo.

It's just one day at a time, and we don't really have a big plan. It's about interest. The only other idea I'd like to say is that we try to add one new video in every place. The place commissions one piece. We would premiere "Family" in Montreal. Then we'll just see how long it lasts. It's almost like having your own traveling circus, and you can DJ. Invite your friends over. I'm playing with the idea that when my next album is ready, that that could be my venue or something, that it is a bit of a family circus.

#### **You've been doing marathon DJ sets after these events.**

I've been DJing with friends, yes. There's a crazy amount of effort we put into preparing the sets and everything is so fun. It's a lot of passion there. Why not share it? For me, if I was really going to go throw away the map and be sincere about where my personal pulse is ticking at this particular moment, that sort of made sense, because that's what I'm doing.

I think because it's so immersive, the *Biophilia* educational thing and all the VR, it didn't make sense that I would then do a gig. Then it's like more me. But if I'm sharing my love for music, and everybody else's music, it made much more sense. It's more about the passion for music than looking at me. And there literally is some strange energy that happens when you play all your favorite songs back to back, and put it on top volume. It actually is energy being released. I love other people's music. I like to just jump up and down with excitement for some songs, and it's got nothing to do with me... it's like a break from myself. It reminds you why you're doing it all.

Saying that, there's an exception to the rule, as always. I did a gig in London, so that contradicts everything I said. We hadn't played London yet, and London for me is just such a mushy place. It's like the city that helped me become the musician I am, and fully formed. It's my other home, especially my musical home. It was only voice and strings—an attempt to put a spotlight on my arrangements. I already released a string album, without the beats. I've put quite a lot of work into this string album where there are sort of slightly different versions of things, and we got instrumentalists, viola organista from Poland. I hadn't ever done a gig with only strings, so I thought, "Okay, maybe this makes sense to do it there. I can invite all my London mates over." It sort of added up like that.

I just improvise, like we do. It actually doesn't take that much energy to do those exhibitions. Most of my time, I'm spending just writing music. That's also one thing great about these kind of exhibitions. When I stopped touring a year ago, I just turned straight to writing new happy songs. That's sort of the land I'm living in most of the time. It works really well together. They don't fight. It's two different parts of your person, or something.

Name

Björk

Vocation

Singer, Songwriter, Producer, Actress, Technological Innovator, Icon, DJ

Fact

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Photo: "Black Lake" Avatar by Björk, Andrew Thomas Huang, and James Merry

Björk Recommends:

Mirrors by Mala (electronic music influenced by the Andes mountains)

NAO (East London RnB)

Jürg Frey (slo-mo string stuff )

A Field in England, directed by Ben Wheatley (three-year old film SUBLIME)

Embrace of the Serpent, directed by Ciro Guerra (BEST FILM I'VE SEEN FOR AGES)

Berry picking in Autumn is *turning me on*

serpentwithfeet (Harlem singer-songwriter)

Long August sunsets on my beach in Iceland with bonfire dinners!

Bicycling fast on the beach with all your playlists on shuffle really loud early in the mornings, and then really reading into it for the rest of the day which songs come on-like DJ tarot or something.

Claire Hentschker (American visual artist)

Elysia Crampton

Ragnar Kjartansson exhibition at the Barbican

RuPaul's Drag Race

Crispin Best (London poet)

Harry Evans (London knitwear)

Sadaf (Brooklyn producer/singer)

Robin Hunicke/Jenova Chen (California, makers of the "Journey" computer game)

Margrét Vilhjálmsdóttir (Icelandic actress)

Jordan Wolfson (visual artist)

Katie Gately (LA musician)