



specimen of *Cladonia stellaris* is presented as research by WhiteFeather Hunter

view of Helsinki Art Museum (HAM)

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at the same time and in a familiar story, artist-run spaces in a large maritime warehouse like the pioneering artist-run Galleria Huuto are being forced out and a popular artists' downtown bar, MBar, was closed down (it has been reincarnated in the sea-bar on the ship Merikhero.)

Finland, often seen as a country of innovation and experiment, made the news recently by pioneering the much-lauded Universal Basic Income, an innovative strategy to pay every member of the population a no-questions-asked subsidy – saving money on employing social-security staff and easing poverty. This was only an experiment, however, with 2,000 participants and was only for unemployed people – thus nullifying the main premise behind the theory. In any case, the centre-right coalition, until recently containing the populist Finns Party, represented by the creator Laura Huhtasaari (the Finnish Marine Le Pen), has opted not to renew even this narrow experiment at the end of 2018.

For artists, meanwhile, a fairly durable subsidy scheme continues, with up to ten-year state artists grants, an artists' pension scheme from the government and a reasonably large expenditure on arts funding and art education. Then there are the foundations, including the very active Kone Foundation. When you ride in a lift in Europe, it is quite likely that it has been manufactured by Kone. As well as a funding scheme, the foundation also operates one

of the more generously financed residencies in Europe, the Saari residency in the Turku archipelago. Apparently, in an unusual move, the private foundations are also seeding the currently underdeveloped commercial art market in Helsinki.

One of the more ambitious residencies here is organised by the Finnish Bioart Society, which, despite its name, does more than bioart. Ars Bioartica, together with the Kilpisjärvi Biological Station in sub-Arctic Lapland, hosts artists in this area where the borders of three Scandinavian countries meet in what is considered the Sámi homeland, with its own parliament and radio station. While I was in Helsinki I met the Canadian bio-artist WhiteFeather Hunter – just about to start her residency in Ars Bioartica in order to, she writes: 'explore urine fermentation processing of lichen species and its association with textile dyeing, worthy of contemplation as an act of cultural resistance. Indigenous across global subarctic communities, this craft may become lost due to cultural assimilation and environmental degradation. During the residency, WhiteFeather will also try to engage with Sámi people to understand how sustainable use of lichen connotes environmental integrity in Sámi regions and how might this resist colonialism.'

Every other thing around the Helsinki area seems to be named after the iconic Finnish architect Alvar Aalto, including the rapidly

expanding Aalto University, where I attended the conference Radical Relevances, organised by artist Pia Lindman, which asked: 'How can we engage in new ways of thinking about and practising in terms of human and nonhuman co-existence and flourishing in the midst of vast predictable and unpredictable planetary transformations' and covered a wide range of subjects ranging from the 'post-human' to the mineral exploitation of Greenland.

Also in Kiasma is the ambitious 'The Aalto Natives' by UK artist Nathaniel Mellors and Finnish artist Erkkä Nissinen, which featured in the Finnish Pavilion in last year's Venice Biennale. Made 100 years after Finnish independence, it depicts an absurd story of terra-forming aliens who create a science-fiction version of Finland, drawing on the National Epic – the Kalevala – with the nation being formed from a giant egg. Using Mellors' robotic animations, it drew the audience deeper and deeper into a series of humorous explorations of Finnish stereotypes. Humour and Finnish identity are also well-explored by the artist Annti Laitinen, whose studio I visited. He once survived naked in a forest for five days as an art project and his well-known 'Voyage' works involved him rowing a small island across the Baltic and, in one case, up the river Thames in London, only to be turned back at the M16 building by the river police.

Returning to Suomenlinna, as I did every day during my residency – which was organised by HIAP (Helsinki International Arts Programme) and Frame – I was always struck by the strategic importance of this fortified island, as huge freighters and cruise ships passed perilously close by. This small, vigorously fought-over country only became independent from Sweden in 1918 and changed sides three times during the Second World War before it retained its neutrality. Yet its influence, in art, politics and social experiment alike, seems pivotal. ■

**Rob La Frenais** is an independent curator.