



**LEEDS
ARTS RESEARCH
CENTRE**

THE AALTO NATIVES

NATHANIEL MELLORS

OUTPUT INFORMATION

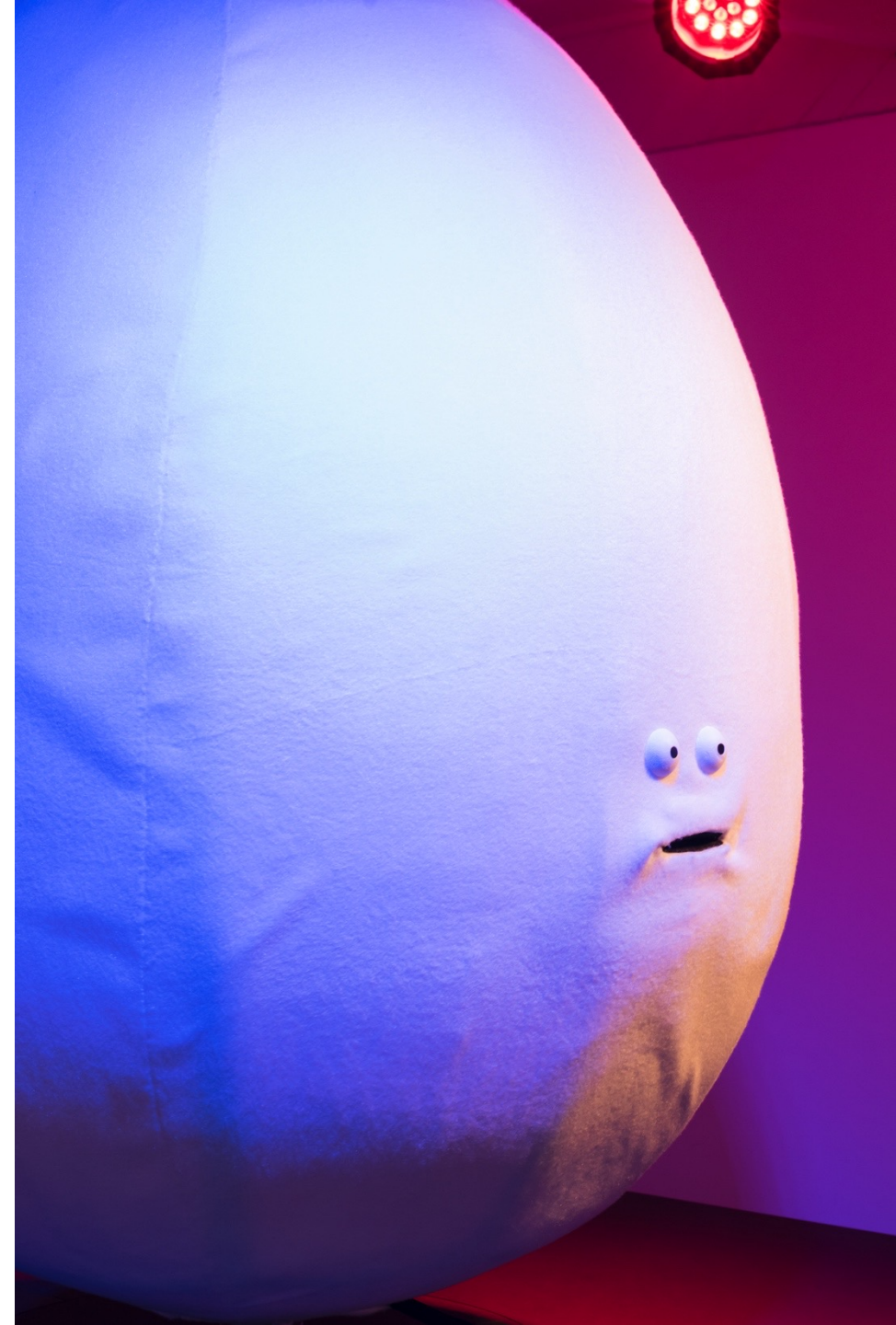
Title:
The Aalto Natives

Output Type:
M – Exhibition

Venue: Pavilion of Finland, 57th International Art
Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, 2017

Year of first exhibition:
2017

Research Groups:
Curating



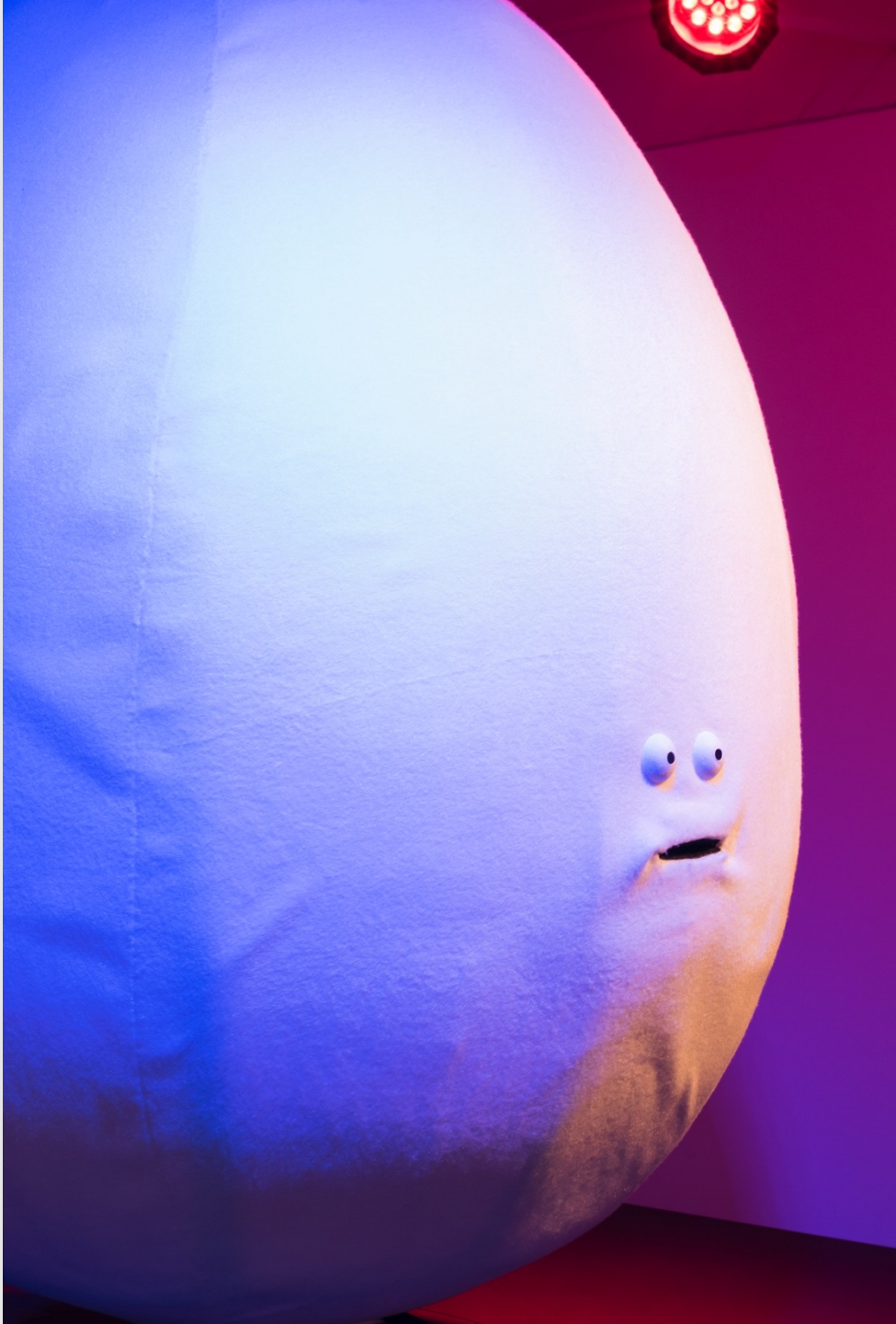
ADDITIONAL INFORMATION STATEMENT

For his project, The Aalto Natives, Nathaniel Mellors works in an interdisciplinary field, crossing over contemporary art installation with theatre which includes: HD video recordings of muppet-style puppeteering, 3D CGI and hand-drawn animation.

The new research insight is to make a derisive story that focuses on clichés and concepts of national identity, using absurdist satire to poke fun at its own discourse and political correctness. The work addresses issues of nationalism, bureaucracy and xenophobia using two animatronic puppets, Geb and Atum, to consider profound contemporary issues such as power, morality and tolerance. Using fragmented videos as points of discussion, the messianic puppets return to a pre-historic Finland to better understand existing Finnish culture. Through play and narrative science-fiction which critiques religion and anthropological thought, Mellors engages in the questioning of systemic errors of a culture dominated by rationalism.

The Aalto Natives, an immersive installation and animatronic sculpture made by Mellors (1974, UK) and Erkkä Nissinen (1975, Finland) for the Alvar Aalto Pavilion of Finland for the 57th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, 2017. The exhibition is accompanied by the book, The Aalto Natives — A Transcendental Manual, designed by Studio Remco van Bladel, Amsterdam and co-published by international art magazine Mousse.

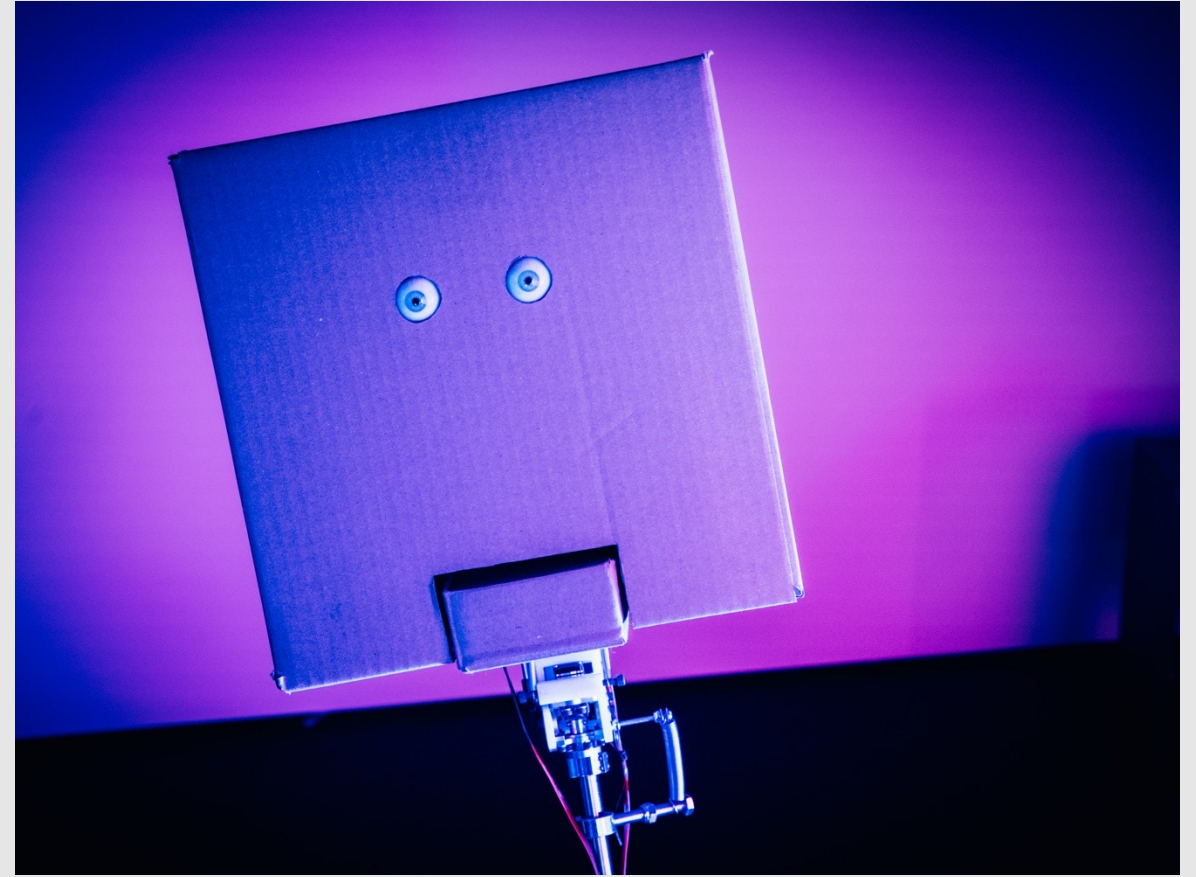
In terms of reach, the work received 500,000 visitors at the Venice Biennale. Major partners include: Visit Finland, Jyväskylä City & the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Finland. Main supporters include: the Mondriaan Fund, the Saastamoinen Foundation & the Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland, along with Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten, the Cobra Museum of Modern Art, Ellen de Bruijne Projects, Stigter van Doesburg, Frans Hals Museum | De Hallen Haarlem, Amsterdam, the Promotion Centre for Audiovisual Culture AVEK, Prague, the Embassy of Finland in Rome, MONITOR, Rome, The Box, Los Angeles & Matt's Gallery, London.



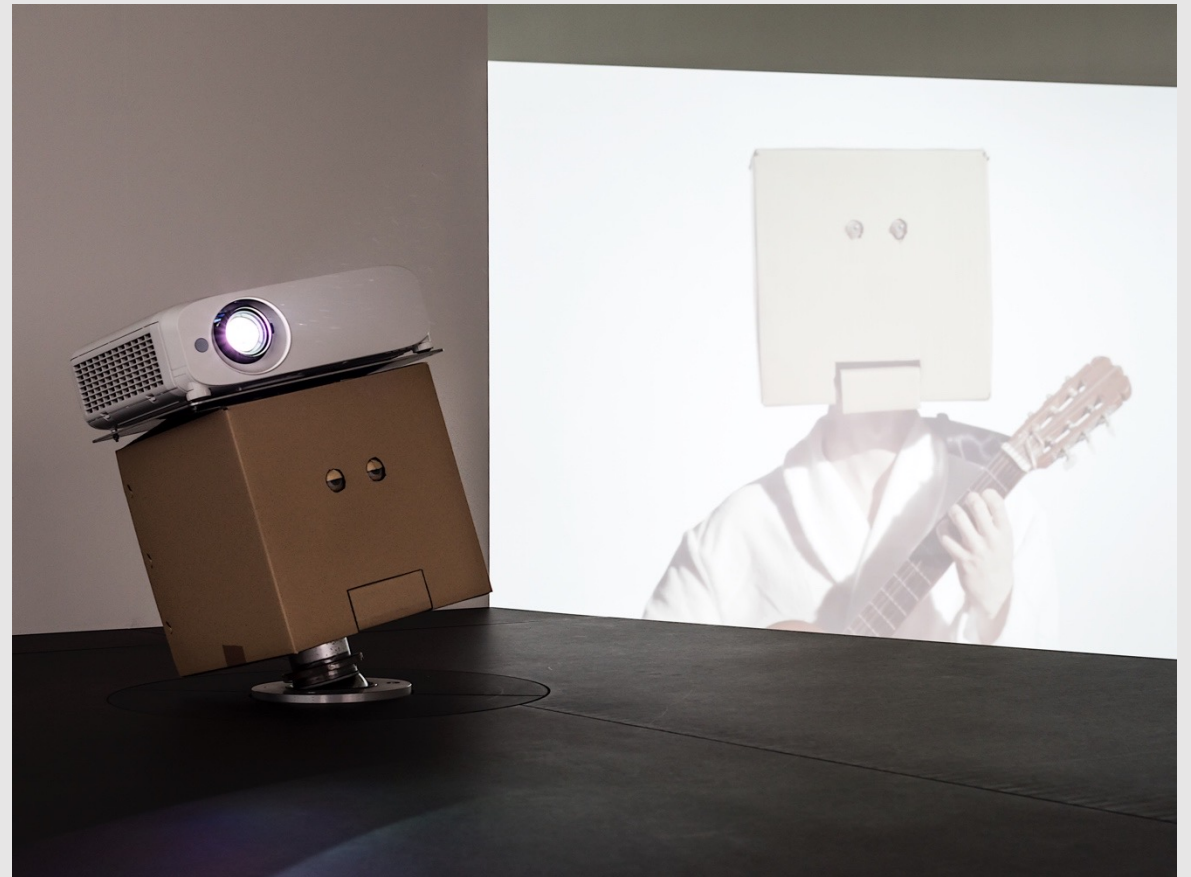
Images: Courtesy of the artist

Images: Courtesy of the artist





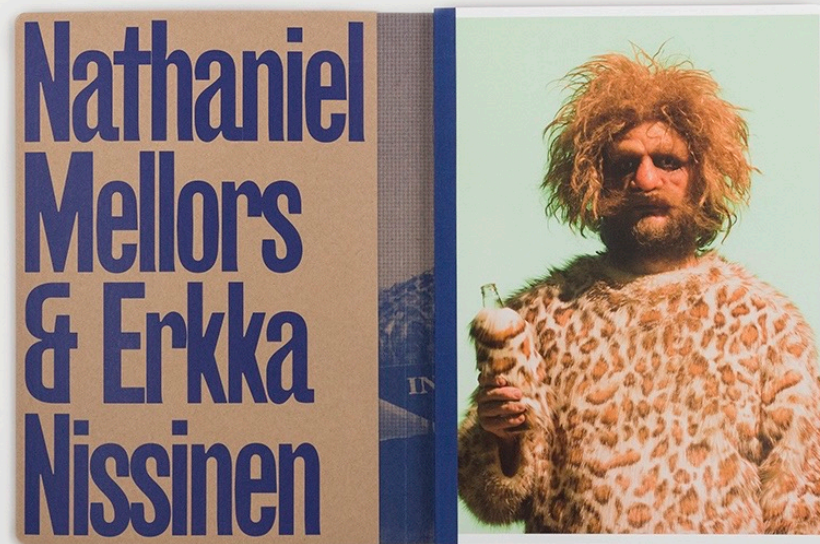
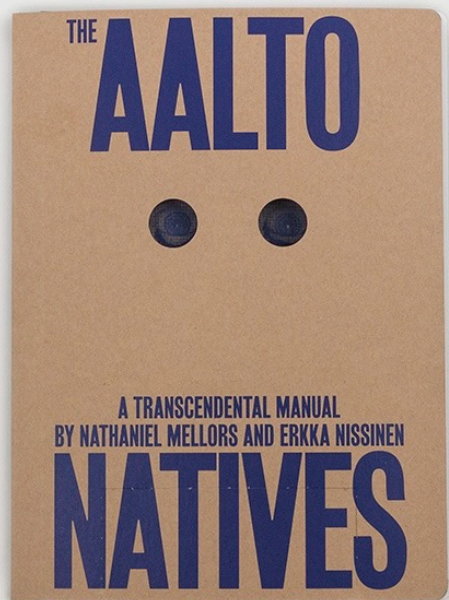
Images: Courtesy of the artist



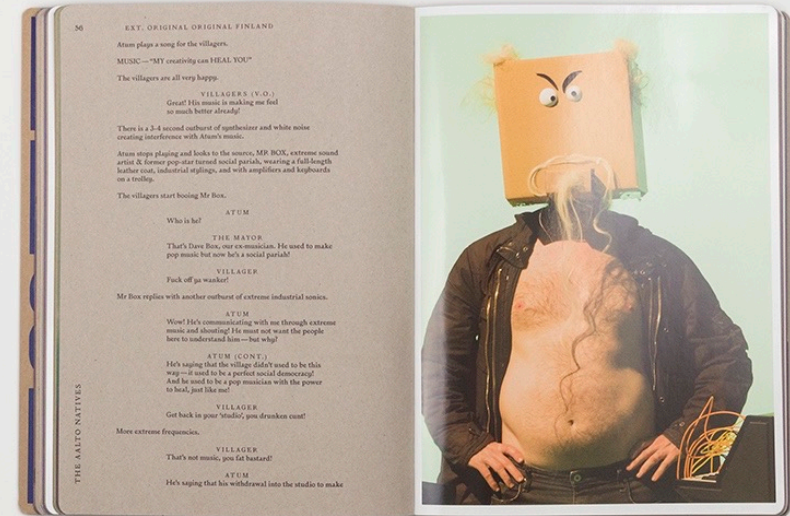
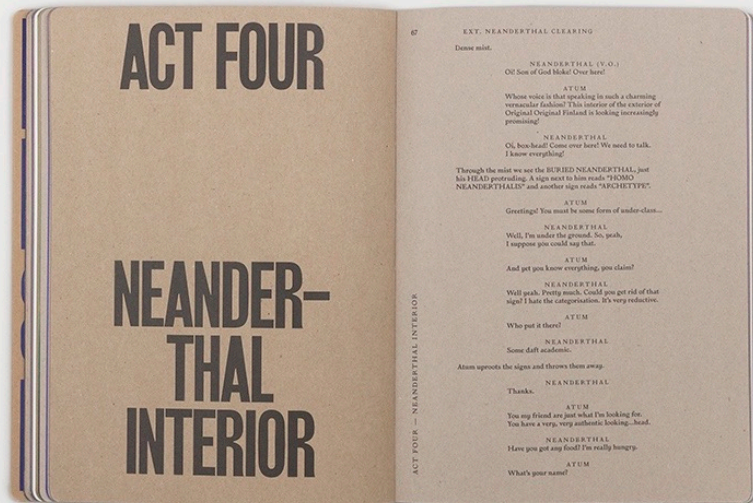
Images: Courtesy of the artist



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Images: Courtesy of the artist



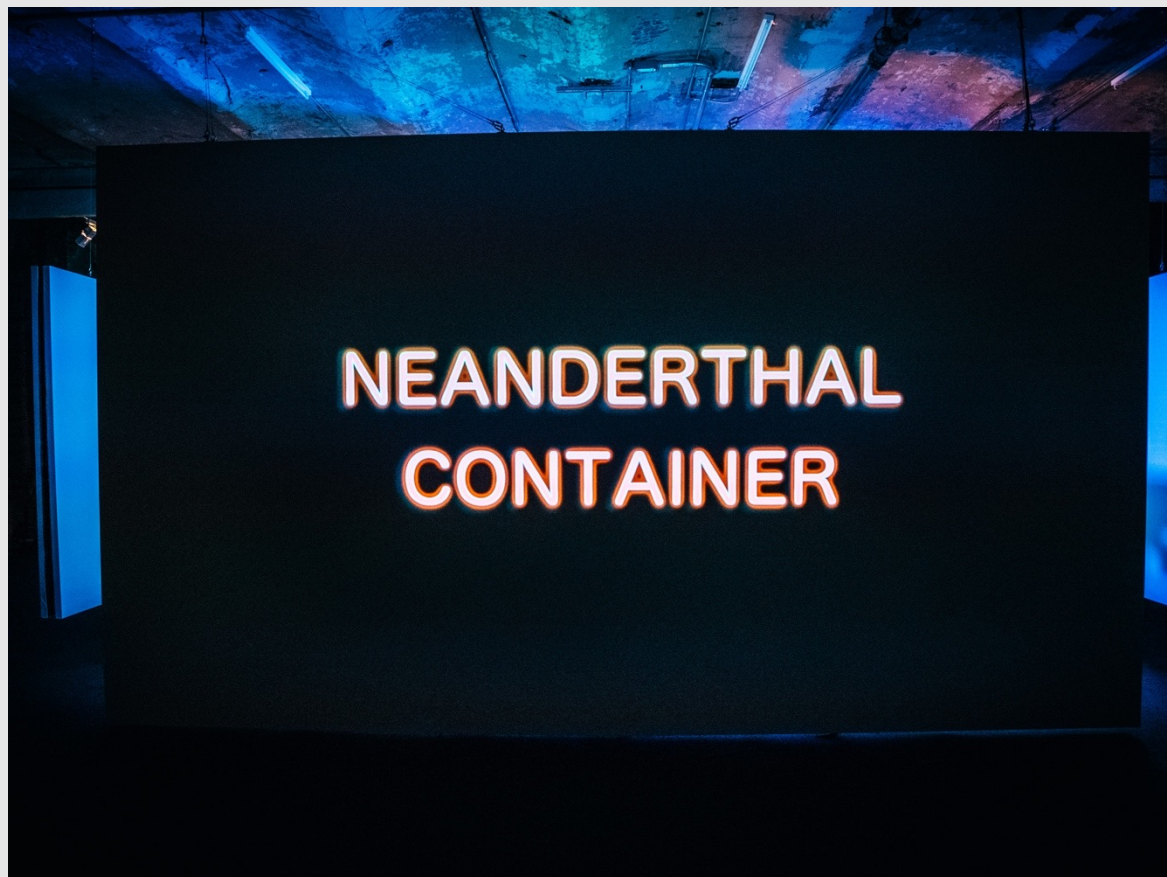
Images: Courtesy of the artist



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Images: Courtesy of the artist

AUDIO & VIDEO DOCUMENTATION

The Aalto Natives nähdään keväällä 2018 Kiasmassa.



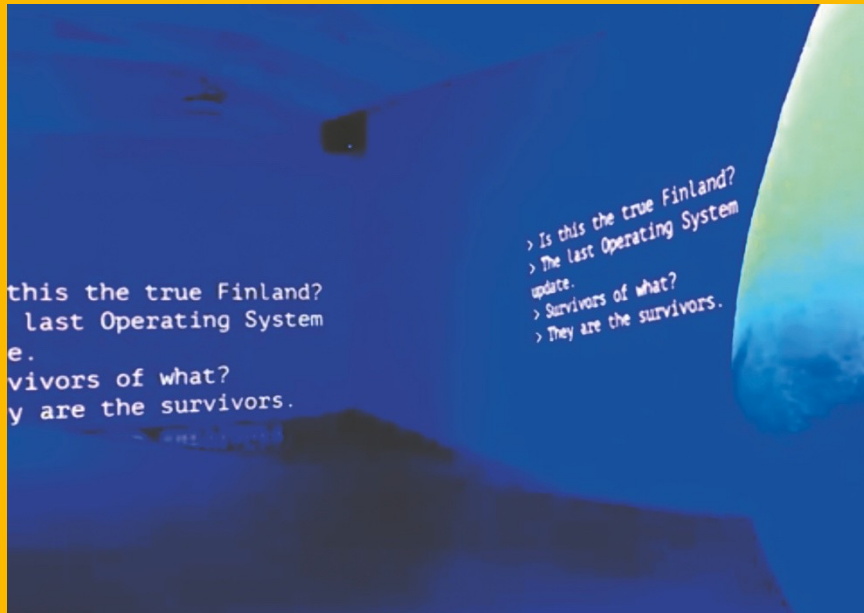
Radio Helsinki — RH x The Aalto Natives

<http://www.radiohelsinki.fi/2017/05/18/rh-x-aalto-natives/>



The Aalto Natives (2017) Nathaniel Mellors & Erkkä Nissinen

<https://vimeo.com/238627718/88c2df9de1>



The Aalto Natives — installation doc (True Finland)

<https://vimeo.com/223692451>



The Aalto Natives — Reel 8 (Mellors & Nissinen)

<https://vimeo.com/221095849>



Nathaniel Mellors and Erkka Nissinen
The Aalto Natives | Pavilion of Finland, Venice:
<https://vimeo.com/218913159>



Storyboard Video
The Aalto Natives — the Finnish Pavilion at the 57th
International Art Exhibition — La Biennale di Venezia:
<https://vimeo.com/212240215>



The Aalto Natives — Just A Box

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Yi-NN0pJ3c>



The Aalto Natives at the 57th Venice Biennale

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JyGOiXP_I9I



The Aalto Natives storyboard video

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRUxGU_xeAc

The Aalto Natives — Have I Failed?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1gjveA4ihRo>



The Aalto Natives — Failure Song

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sILFWvHYDyI>

AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

Over six months, The Aalto Natives received 500,000 visitors at the Viva Arte Viva, Venice Biennale.

Audience responses include:

2017

This was one of my favourite pieces at the Biennale. I kept trying to explain it to friends, but always fell short, of course. Thank you for amazing and wonderful art!

Finland has the best pavilion at La Biennale. No question. The smartest and funniest thing I've seen. I'm completely in awe.

How's this for an auspicious start to the Biennale.

This work was so weird and absurd and I loved every second of it.

It was transcendental!

You won't be disappointed.

It was funny as hell.

Probably my favourite so far.

Amazing.

This was the best.

Still my personal favourite: FINLAND and the AALTO NATIVES. I think the artists must be huge Mighty Boosh fans!

This was my favourite pavilion at Venice this year.

APPENDIX

Art World news.artnet.com

**5 Triumphant National Pavilions
at the Venice Biennale, From
Finnish Robots to Canadian
Floods, Lorena Muñoz, 10 May
2017**

Finnish Pavilion: Nathaniel Mellors and Erkkä Nissinen

It seems fitting for national pavilions to tackle the clichés associated with national identities. Nathaniel Mellors and Erkkä Nissinen have done just that in their presentation for the Alvar Aalto-designed Pavilion of Finland.

“The Aalto Natives” is the first collaborative project for the two artists, who share an interest in humor, satire, and caricature, and who followed and admired each other’s work prior to working together.

The result of this art bromance is a video installation that includes a film and two animatronic sculptures. The figures — which move about, talk to each other, and project the film through projectors stuck to their heads — are called Geb and Atum, two superior beings who revisit the Finland they created millions of years earlier and find themselves trying to understand the changes that have taken place.

Hilarious discussions about politics, social media, and ethics ensue. If it sounds bonkers, that’s because it is—in the best possible way. Do not miss it.

FRIEZE
57th Venice Biennale: Giardini
Part 1

**The first in our series of reports
from the Venice Biennale:
the best of the National
Pavilions
in the Giardini
Harry Thorne, 10 May 2017**

Breakdown and dislocation abound at the Finnish Pavilion, but this particular breakdown comes with a madcap twist. The Aalto Natives, a raucous immersive project developed in collaboration between Erkka Nissinen and Nathaniel Mellors, re-imagines Finnish society through the eyes of Geb (a talking egg) and Atum (a man with a box for a head, obviously), two terraforming god-figures who return to the land that they created millions of years prior and attempt to get a handle on the culture that has developed in their absence. As we piggyback on Geb and Atum's fact-finding mission, we meet a puppet psychologist, an eyeeating snake, and an escaping testicle, and much more, but there is sense in the senseless, as there so often is. With their hallucinatory dream-sequence, Mellors and Nissinen reframe concepts such as religion and cultural production and reveal the ludicrous principles upon which they are based. We, holed up in the Pavilion, scribbling away, don't escape unscathed. Atum picks up a VR head-set: 'What's this?' A bobbleheaded businessman replies: 'It's our way for you to see New Finland without going outside. [...] We never go outside. Not anymore.'

Wall Street International

The Aalto Natives

13 May – 26 Nov 2017 at La Biennale Di Venezia in Venice, Italy

12 February 2017

Artists Nathaniel Mellors (1974, UK) and Erkkä Nissinen (1975, Finland) represent Finland at the 57th International Art Exhibition – la Biennale di Venezia with 'The Aalto Natives'. Commissioned and produced by Frame Contemporary Art Finland, the exhibition is curated by Xander Karskens (1973, Netherlands), artistic director at Cobra Museum of Modern Art in Amstelveen. Working collaboratively, the artists will transform the Pavilion of Finland – built in 1956 by architect Alvar Aalto – into an immersive, multimedia environment. The installation brings together sculptural elements, animatronics and video, which are synchronised in a dynamic choreography of dialogue and image. The exhibition focuses on various clichés surrounding Finnish history and national identity for 'The Aalto Natives'. Taking cues from archaeology, anthropology and science fiction, short video vignettes at the core of the installation re-imagine Finnish society through the eyes of a pair of outsider figures, represented by talking animatronic puppets who, in dialogue, present a lecture. The animatronic puppets introduce a series of fast-paced video vignettes on Finnish mythology, contemporary Finnish society and their vision for the future of Finland.

Nissinen and Mellors are individually recognised for their absurd, irreverent and hilarious story-driven work; their humorous approach belies a profound understanding of contemporary issues of morality and communication. The artists met in Amsterdam during their Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten residency from 2007–8, and have been admirers of each other's work since. Nissinen and Mellors were selected through an Open Call process issued by Frame Contemporary Art Finland in 2016. The jury was impressed by the inventiveness of the proposal, its subversive humour, and the imaginative way it responded to the complex issue of nationhood and interdependence. "We selected the proposal because the ideas it presented were amongst the most captivating, surprising and artistically diverse. We are confident that it will generate debate and be a highly engaging experience for the audience."

**Architectural Digest
Venice Biennale 2017 —
Highlights**

**Among the trolls, mazes, and
Dobermans that art stars
brought to the global event,
these are our dozen must-see
pavilions.**

Janelle Zara, 16 May 2017

7/12 Finland, The Aalto Natives

Nathaniel Mellors and Erkka Nissinen's digitally animated film explores themes of power structure, national identity, and morality through a few unlikely characters, namely a talking giant egg and cardboard box — think Finnish Muppets with philosophy degrees.

flash art online

Alex Estorick, 29 May 2017

A different kind of historical reexamination occupies the Finnish pavilion. Situating visitors alongside animatronic sculptures conversing in space and on video, Nathaniel Mellors and Erkkä Nissinen's *The Aalto Natives* imagines a pair of Messiah-types from the future returning to debate and critique a Finland they once created. In a tone of disarming absurdism, Geb and Atum provide penetrating political observations on our time of historically irrational decision-making.

Huffington Post

11 May 2017

**Circulation: 46,200,000
unique users per month**

Finnish artist Erkkä Nissinen and British artist Nathaniel Mellors present a collaborative exhibition exploring the tropes of “Finnishness,” from health care to herring, as a satire told by an enormous talking egg and other characters. The artists met during a residency at the Rijksakademie in 2007, and found an affinity in their humorous and absurdist video works. This is their first collaboration. “We’re interested in making room for some kind of cognitive dissonance, or ridiculousness, or being politically incorrect,” says Mellors. “That’s our shared sensibility.”

In conversation with Xander Karskens

Xander Karskens is the curator of the Finnish Pavilion at the 2017 Venice Biennale. He is working with artists **Erkka Nissinen** and **Nathaniel Mellors** on *The Aalto Natives*, their joint exhibition opening at the Aalto Pavilion this May.

Karskens also recently took up the post of artistic director at the Cobra Museum in Amstelveen, where Frame caught up with him for a brief interview.

How did you end up as the curator of the Finnish Pavilion in Venice? You have known Erkka and Nathaniel for a while now — is that correct?

I've known Nathaniel since the early 2000s. We first worked together in 2005 on 'The Pink Mist', an exhibition of his work at Galerie Fons Welters in Amsterdam, where I was working at the time. I found his work very powerful in its intelligent use of language, drawing from a range of absurdist and satirical traditions. I also liked the playful, offhand way he combined different media, like sculpture and video, in his installations. He was still young but had a very distinctive voice, and his work felt very different from the theory- and research-informed practices that were dominant at the time.

Erkka and I met during his residency at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam in 2007, where he met Nathaniel, too. Erkka was perhaps even more singularly idiosyncratic. He was making intentionally silly-looking 3D animation videos, which a lot of people considered 'bad taste', but I found them completely hilarious. Also, he was utterly uninterested in being part of 'the art scene', or any socially defined group. He was just making these very smart, crazy things. When I would ask him anything about them, he would simply answer every question with 'Yes'.

Eventually I worked with both Erkka and Nathaniel, separately, as curator at De Hallen Haarlem, where we exhibited their work. When the open call for Venice was announced, Erkka got in touch with

Nathaniel and myself to develop a plan for the Aalto Pavilion. It felt like a very natural thing to do, as our connection was very close.

Since you know Erkka and Nathaniel well and have followed their process leading up to Venice, what are you most looking forward to in the *Aalto Natives* exhibition?

One of the most exciting aspects of their collaboration is the fact that they are creating the work together on all levels. They are — each for the first time — working as a duo, jointly developing every idea from conception to realization; writing, sketching, sculpting, filming. They are basically spending a year together. This brings a very particular, unpredictable dynamic to the project, and so far, it has produced an incredible creative energy. Having been involved in this process from the first ideas and drafts, one of the things that I look forward to the most is seeing the final work in the pavilion. The *Aalto Natives* has a solid but very open structure, allowing for a lot of ideas to be implemented on the fly, and this is exactly where the excitement lies for the curator. It's not like there was a step-by-step production outline or a design that subsequently got executed — the work is the direct result of a very open collaborative process.

With you in Holland, Erkka in New York and Nathaniel based in Los Angeles, plus Frame here in Finland, this project is quite scattered geographically. How have you managed the challenges of such a broad geography?

Some time ago, the Bulgarian mystic Dr Timen Timeff introduced me to the concept of vertical time. This is not the horizontal time that almost everybody lives in, but rather a secret, elusive meta-temporal concept that allows me to operate in different time zones simultaneously. After Venice I will slide back into horizontal time again, hopefully without any physical consequences.

You've just been appointed Artistic Director of the Cobra Museum of Modern Art in Amstelveen — congratulations! How has it gone so far? Do you plan to make changes at the museum?

In conversation with Xander Karskens

You've just been appointed Artistic Director of the Cobra Museum of Modern Art in Amstelveen — congratulations! How has it gone so far? Do you plan to make changes at the museum?

The Cobra Museum is in a very interesting place at the moment. It is in a transitional phase, rethinking the ways it is able to research, present and disseminate the legacy of Cobra. One of the things that I hope to make more programmatic are the connections between Cobra and contemporary art and thought. There are so many relevant ideas in Cobra for our current zeitgeist that it is a great lens for looking at contemporary issues of radicality, resistance and the connection between art and life.

Of course, Cobra was also about generating intense affective response, and visual exuberance; elements that have somewhat dissipated from a lot of contemporary practices. So, the current discursive debate about autonomy versus engagement — which is a principal discussion regarding the place of art in the world — can be fed by looking at the post war avant-garde that experimented with and questioned a lot of these concepts. I hope to be able to address these issues in a programme where Cobra and contemporary art are presented alongside each other, creating moments of cross-pollination and exchange.

The legacy of Cobra is indeed super interesting and it will be great to see where you and the museum will take it. I find a certain similarity to the form and politics of the Cobra movement and the work of Erkka and Nathaniel; 'uncivilised' expression and moving away from other existing art forms. Am I making this up or do you seek out projects that take place in this kind of a realm?

I think it is a very relevant observation. I am very much drawn to artistic expression that uses a personal, formal vocabulary, and art that deals with the irrational, the grotesque, and the animistic — more generally art that creates a world of itself, rather than art that points towards the world outside, or basically just refers to

something 'interesting'. Although one has to be careful with these kind of ahistorical claims, one can identify parallels between the practices of the Cobra artists and Erkka and Nathaniel — in their interest in the childish, the grotesque and the naïve, and in their shared fascination for what Asger Jorn called 'the human beast'. Tellingly, Nathaniel was the recipient of the Cobra Art Prize in 2011.

BOOK

The Aalto Natives — A Transcendental Manual, ISBN: 9788867492169

KEY ARTICLES

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Tom Jeffreys, T. (2017). The Aalto Natives: an interview with Erkkka Nissinen and Nathaniel Mellors

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Keywords:

Installation
Animatronics
Video
Sculpture
Absurdist Satire

Key Dates:

The exhibition, the Aalto Natives, was opened by the Minister of Education and Culture, Sanni Grahn-Laasonen, Ambassador Janne Taalas, President of the Alvar Aalto Foundation, Leena Rossi, Commissioner Raija Koli. Curated by Xander Karskens at the Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy (13 May – 26 November 2017).

The Aalto Natives was exhibited at the CONRA Museum, Amstelveen Netherlands. (15 December 2017 – 25 February 2018).

The work was exhibited at the KIASMA Museum, Helsinki. (March – September 2018).

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Email:

n.mellors@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

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