

FRIDAY 3 MARCH TO SUNDAY 19 MARCH ———
PRESENTED BY SAMSTAG MUSEUM OF ART
AT NORTH EASTERN CONCOURSE,
ADELAIDE RAILWAY STATION

Newwitt

A silhouette of a woman in a long dress walking across a beach at sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, orange glow in the sky. The woman is walking from left to right, and her shadow is cast on the sand.

JAMES NEWITT ——— HAVEN

Wardill

EMILY WARDILL ——— NIGHT FOR DAY

Resolution loss

“There is a place for the ahistorical, the pure present. It is that which characterises the inorganic, which requires no memory. Where the ahistorical marks the happy and contented time of the animal and the child who has as yet no history to recall (...)”

—Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution and the Untimely*, 2004

“(..) and you said it made you think about something Hannah Arendt had said already in the ‘50s and how it was undemocratic to understand the world through maths because it was a language most people didn’t know how to speak.”

—Subtitles from *Night for Day* (2021)

When Thomas More coined the word ‘utopia’ in 1516, he referred to the Greek words *ou-topos*, which literally translate to ‘no place’. Coincidentally, this is a wordplay on the almost identical *eu-topos*, meaning ‘a good place’. Untethering this from a location, physical or otherwise, utopia is an inherent expression of desire for something that is lacking in the present. As a conceptual construct, is this mode of thinking still a useful device for a collective imagination for human and societal progress? The multiple utopias across various temporalities contained in James Newitt’s new three-channel work *HAVEN* (2023) and Emily Wardill’s tenebrous film installation *Night for Day* (2021) centre around individuals in different periods who are in quest of and setting up these good places, and who are also synchronously caught in their (un-)making. By revealing the dissonances in ideological blueprints and the corresponding political and philosophical beliefs of these protagonists, the two films prompt fundamental questions about the possibility of imagining a shared present due to a bifurcating understanding of our legacies and the absence of a preconceived political future in the advent of an assumed technological evolution. What happens when the hard-fought rights and freedoms by progenitors are taken for granted—or even overlooked—by the rising generation in favour of an ahistorical apolitical world to come? Seen together, Wardill and Newitt’s pair of films takes a critical look at how technology has shaped recent history, current realities, and our future imaginations in the time of apparent political and ideological impasse.

The search for an ideal place of freedom from existing structures underpins Sealand, an unrecognised micronation on an offshore WWII British naval defence platform in the North Sea off the coast of Suffolk, England – the main location of Newitt’s *HAVEN* (2023). Sealand was occupied in 1967 by Roy Bates, a retired British Army Major and pirate radio broadcaster, initially with the intention of moving his then-illegal unlicensed radio operations outside of British territories. The radio station never materialised on the sea fort, and instead Bates declared Sealand’s independence from Britain. The film imagines details of the conflict between the Bates family and Ryan Lackey, one of the founders of HavenCo, a data haven which was established on the sea fort in 2000. Lackey and his cohorts chose the micronation for its isolation as well as its lax laws that could sidestep stringent internet censorship, data protection and copyright laws in other countries. The ideals of autonomy which Sealand purported to espouse were put to test in the process. Aligned with libertarian-leaning cypherpunks—who, from the late 1980s on, advocated for a world of internet free speech and cryptography for the masses—, HavenCo provided users secure, anonymous hosting, which they promised would be supported by servers stored in the gun tower, kept in rooms flooded with nitrogen to which only authorised technicians could gain access. These were the very same servers that Lackey stated staff would destroy if needed. When Lackey was expelled from Sealand/HavenCo, the Bates family was left with inadequate technical know-how and foresight for the enterprise—notwithstanding the unfavourable saline conditions of maintaining hardware at sea—, leading to the collapse of the project. The gun tower’s failure to become the off-government refuge for unregulated data Lackey aspired it to be is uncannily reminiscent of Roy Bates’s radical yet unrealised ambitions for the site for pirate radio broadcast.

The complex chasm between generations—and, in turn, their incompatible future visions—is evocatively depicted in the manufactured kinship of three people in Wardill’s work. The make-believe family is made up from interviews with Isabel do Carmo—founding member of Brigadas Revolucionárias, an armed resistance against the Portuguese fascist government in the 1970s—, and the founders of a moving-image recognition software venture, machine learning programmer Alexander Bridi and astrophysicist Djelal Osman. Bridi and Osman’s software venture settles in Lisbon to take advantage of a new non-place, a blank canvas primed for a new technological utopia, rid of the remnants of socio-political turmoil of the recent past. In the film, the politically apathetic yet culturally savvy newcomers remark that they have “no opinions because politics is too complicated”, and one notes that he can “move easily so he doesn’t care so much about politics”. They explain how computer scientists set up models to train computers to read pictures, and to distinguish between the real world, white noise, and data. In contrast, do Carmo cites a distinctly dissimilar model to measure up the world: Marx’s dialectic materialism, which she employs as an apparatus to understand society and the conditions, ideologies and institutions that constitute it. In the film, she continues, “...it looks at reality and not at forces or data outside reality, although reality still remains an iceberg to us.” This not only applies to the 70s when her group was active but also extends to the present, where she remarks that intrinsic pillars of a shared society, such as taxes and common workers’ rights, are no longer agreed as an essential part of the social contract. Models are constructed in response to parameters of the real world, though are constantly refined, altered, and even disregarded. In the lens of technological evangelists, reality becomes reduced to abstract data that is translated from the real world. The past only serves the purpose of accumulating datasets for machine learning.

Osman states plainly in his interview with Wardill, “Utopia can be fictional. There are no rules.” Setting up an ideal society, be it online or offline, is a confrontation between theoretical models, hypotheses and constantly changing realities on the ground. What seemed like a union of shared liberal values between a pirate-broadcaster-turned-head-of-micronation and cypherpunk-slash-coders came apart when put into praxis. It revealed that the fragile premise behind each group’s imagined system was not feasible when executed. Likewise, in Wardill’s film, even though the fascist government was toppled in 1974, do Carmo looks back to her political work and the state of current affairs and asserts, “We’ve been experiencing continuous defeat. We must think in terms of an obvious utopian future.” Whose future are we speaking about, and who does it belong to? The technocratic future touted by neoliberalism – who is it devised for, and what societal and basic rights does it uphold? Juxtaposed alongside the two young men who are in the process of developing their software, the results of what they are able to achieve is left open-ended.

As peripheral characters to these self-contained universes, Wardill and Newitt both employ reappropriation, cinema, and nonlinear narratives to excavate, reinvestigate and cross-examine these utopic narratives, where new readings of the past and alternative understandings of the future can be generated in the process. In *Night for Day*, Wardill stitches together disconnected fragments of candid interviews she conducted with the three protagonists, while Newitt works remotely to the site and its realities. Newitt deftly interposes himself among the characters and multiple narratives through a variety of found video footage, audio files, 3D renderings of Sealand overlaid with imagined dialogues of characters, and fragments of his one-sided email correspondences with Lackey. At the same time, Newitt takes possession of what is left over from this enigmatic story to retrace the undoing of the two intertwined domains that unravelled on the decommissioned platform. In the pair of works, Wardill and Newitt act as spectral intermediaries between figures with disparate world views to zero in on ideological rifts that define and divide them.

“In fact, in the sixties, it was a utopia, but a pre-conceived utopia. We thought that by taking specific steps with specific programs, we would arrive at our desired goal. That’s why at that time it was easy to imagine the future.”

—Interview with Isabel do Carmo, *Night for Day* (2021)

“ (...) the first few layers of all this learning is “what is the real world”; it is not learning anything other than that. If you look at white noise, that never happens in the real world, (...) so if I gave it white noise, it would not compute, it would just give me garbage.”

—Interview with Djelal Osman, *Night for Day* (2021)



Emily Wardill, *Night for Day*, 2020.
Production Still.

When looking at the brave new worlds that the male protagonists are attempting to build in both films, they resemble barren places without any traces of history, as though they are the architects of their own present and future, without a past. Politics—and, by extension, history—is perceived as something complicated, perhaps like the noise Bridi and Osman are trying to eradicate in the immaterial models and datasets as they develop their image recognition software. Noise in digital images and image-processing programs is considered unwanted information that disturbs the image, producing unseen lines, corners, and blurred objects. These disruptions—which machines cannot compute, and which consequently result in garbage—resonate with what do Carmo speaks of when she ruminates about reality's ruptures as fabricated and impossible to fully represent or capture. How much of what takes place in the real world is graspable, is otherwise regarded as extraneous and interferes with prototypical frameworks? In an antithetical way, it is striking that noise features prominently not only as a metaphor but also as a prevailing component in Wardill's work, produced through deliberately filming in low-light or shadowy environments where the camera can no longer accurately or clearly apprehend and render image data. Congruent to how do Carmo and her female comrades committed to a life of politics, went underground and subsequently became forgotten, the audience is guided by how the camera roves in the darkness, searching for light, the subjects shrouded in obscurity. While algorithms do not attempt to find information from what is obscured, it is conversely human nature to train our eyes to adapt to the unknown, regardless of the pitch-blackness ahead. In the instance where data can no longer become the infallible point of reference to navigate reality, we can only rely on corporeal memory as keystones to our present.

Equally barren is the desolate man-made structure that is established as the backdrop for the characters in Newitt's work. Even nature—the sea that surrounds the defunct platform—almost appears as abstracted white noise on film. The information and research Newitt gleaned from existing material are transformed and rendered anew in *HAVEN*. Fabricated memories from Sealand's matriarch, computer-generated animations, and Newitt's speculative correspondences with Lackey are commingled with found footage of Sealand/HavenCo as well as other associative imagery, such as seascapes and underwater clips. Using 3D-modelling software to recreate the interiors of the supporting towers where the Bates family lived and where the markedly sparse and basic data centre was located, the resulting impressions of the vacant rooms look at times almost too polished to be real. The assemblage of actual and digital sequences of servers and data centres conjures up a generic non-place that could be anywhere and yet is anchored by information and recollections from Sealand/HavenCo that are concurrently fictional and real. Simultaneously, rust and signs of decay are included in the computer-generated exterior to reproduce the natural elements of erosion that occur when metal is exposed to the harsh sea environment, as though these flaws and imperfections serve to reinstate what is portrayed back into physical reality. The ominous threat of nature against this man-made experiment is made palpable, particularly through the choice of sub-aquatic scenes of unrelenting floods and submerged cabins. Newitt draws additional attention to the organic material on this stagnant artefact by also including monochromatic excerpts of rust and mould – the only living things that are thriving on the wreck of these two utopias. Like white noise in imaging technology, have the founders of the data haven factored in these unforeseen forces of nature in their cryptographic project? The two films chart the territories and demarcation between humans, organic matter and the machine that challenge the protection of digital content and the fidelity of representing reality in our progressively data-driven world.

“Every eutopia contains a dystopia, every dystopia contains a eutopia.”

—Ursula K. Le Guin, *Utopiyan, Utopiyang*, 2015

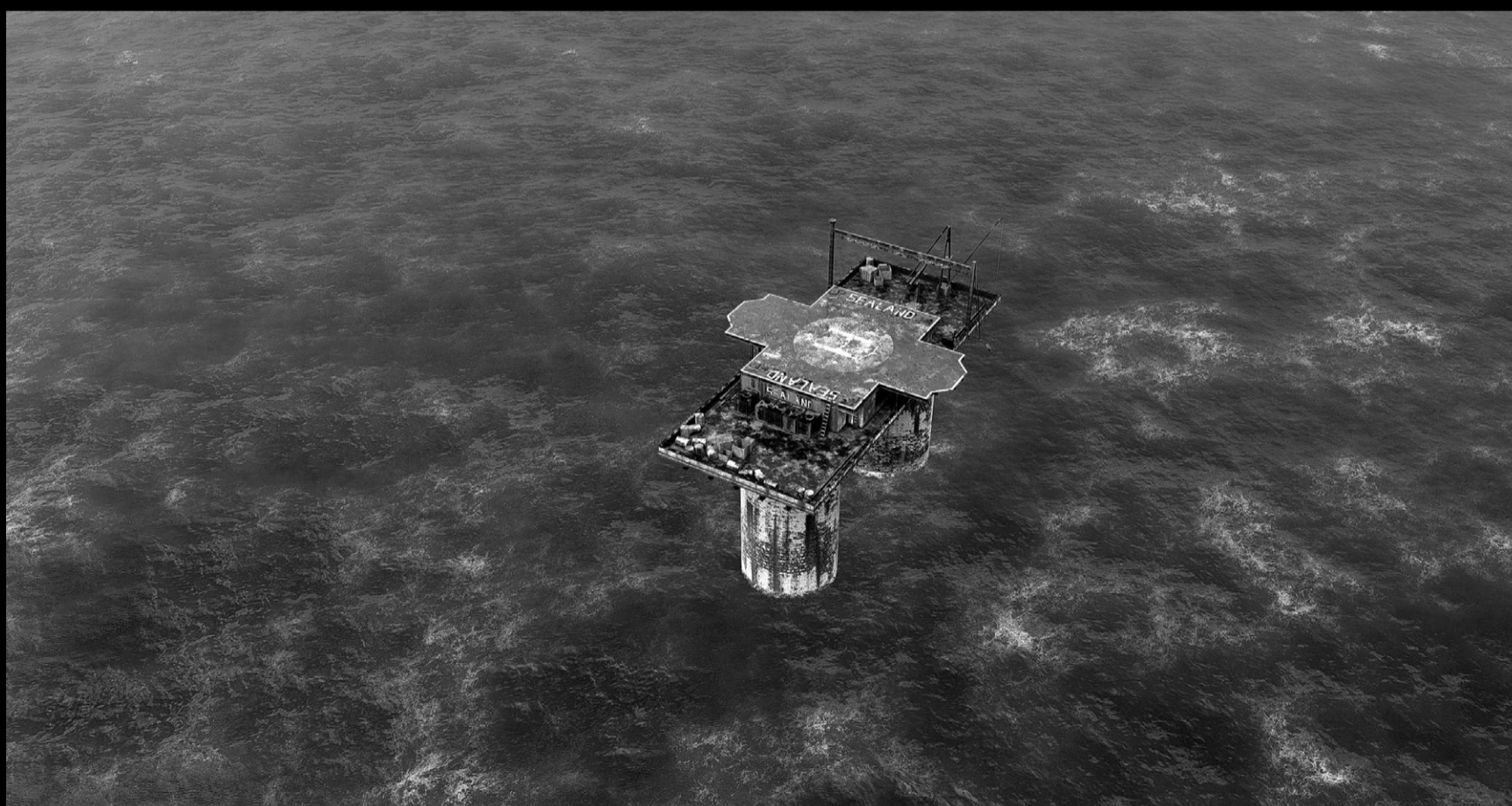
“I imagine you might also have a fear of forgetting. That the data haven could have been a place to save memory?”

—Email to Ryan Lackey, *Haven* (2023)

No matter how much one wants to evade history, each place and built environment is inevitably haunted by the memories, ideals and aspirations of its forebears. *Night for Day* looks at how utopian visions are defined by the triangular interplay of nostalgia, modernity and technology, not only in the articulations of the communist revolutionary and her two techno utopian offspring but also embodied by their pretend shared home. The three take up residence just outside of Lisbon in the real family home of architect António Teixeira Guerra. Guerra’s house, finished just before 1974, was designed in the shape of a triangle, and known for receiving visitors only at magic hour. The illusory footage was shot at dusk where the interplay of light and shadow of subjects and objects in the house blends with the architecture, continuing the exploration of the threshold of camera technology in accurately capturing reality. A timestamp of a new era post-dictatorship, this house epitomises the temporal and paradigm split which parts the mother and sons, as the two generations are disinherited and estranged from each other’s struggles and dreams. One of the sons laments to his mother, “You’re always speaking about the past, Mum.” Occupying this rift and spliced into the work are glitchy, low-resolution fractal images of sparkling shorelines, exploded quarries and the pitch-perfect singing and dancing fembot from *The Tales of Hoffmann*, as though they are disintegrating digital ruins fallen into disrepair and crumbling in front of our eyes. Are we witnessing a lag of ideals, failing to be captured and preserved within present-day image technology? The entropy is ciphered by the simulated voice of a fourth nameless character at the end of the film, speaking from the ruins of political and technological dissolution: “So I filmed *Night for Day* / And put on the airs of the living / by mourning my dead / filming footsteps in the sand / to keep as a relic / of the Last Woman.” This might be the fate of the façade of this make-believe watershed moment, immortalised for an instance as an image on the cusp of an uncertain future of humanity and our corporal world as we move from an unrealised post-war political utopia into an ahistorical digital one.

In *HAVEN*, memories of the two protagonists—the founding matriarch Princess Joan Bates and Lackey—loom as spectres over Sealand and HavenCo, two semi-deserted projects that were exemplary in their pioneering nature of their respective times. On Sealand, human memory and its malleability, as opposed to data in its absolute nature, operate on a different register and are entangled in the realm of fact and fiction. Newitt instils agency to these voices, albeit phantasmal, to humanise and counter the monolithic status of these unfulfilled liberal utopias. He pieces together life offshore through role-play with an actress to imagine Sealand’s early narrative from Princess Joan’s perspective—Joan being otherwise written off as the silent wife in male-centric accounts in and around this mystified site—, calling to mind how memories, although always at risk of being irretrievable, can be subjected to revision by oneself or others. On the other hand, the character of Lackey is invoked in the work through the artist’s numerous unanswered emails to HavenCo’s founder and from what remains of the venture’s digital and concrete presence, as though Lackey has taken roots amongst its wreckage. The film opens with ambivalent footage of a kendo playfight on the platform deck, teetering between the lines of menace and mischief, of which Lackey renounces his participation in computerised speech. While straightening the facts from hearsay may be part of the process in Newitt’s investigation into the antagonistic chain of events that transpired, it is not the film’s main goal. Instead, in a time where we are preoccupied with the technology around data security and its longevity, by placing data and memory—including their lapses and misgivings—side by side, *HAVEN* reminds us to reify the role of our memory systems, and of the necessity and value of activation and recollection in giving meaning to our collective human existence.

With a hint of melancholy, *HAVEN* ends as Newitt brings us up to speed on breakthroughs in data storage technology post-HavenCo, culminating with Microsoft’s latest venture of unmanned, ‘lights out’, undersea cloud storage centres. In an imminent future where our storage devices might be left forgotten and untouched in the depths of drawers and seas, what kind of techno utopic society can we imagine living in if our data is pristinely kept, shut out from human interaction? When immortality and permanence are the driving forces behind technological and societal progress, perhaps awaiting us is an automated future of undersea data centres and ahistorical ruins emptied of human life. This disheartening sentiment is matched in Wardill’s final monologue of the Last Woman, mourning the loss of those who lived before her. The two films prompt us to reimagine new utopias, and how we can live together in a humanity that devotes value to basic rights and social security rather than diverting financial resources to technology. Despite the existing discord in these two opposite courses ahead of us, for a moment, on film, Wardill’s pseudo-family might just be able to coexist in this temporal suspension where the sons can continue to learn about the political past that their mother cannot stop recalling.



James Newitt, *HAVEN*, 2022.
Still from moving image.

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Samstag 2023 Adelaide Festival exhibition relocation

Due to an unforeseen burst water pipe damaging the Samstag Museum of Art gallery floors, Samstag relocated its James Newitt: *HAVEN* and Emily WARDILL: *Night for Day* exhibitions to the Adelaide Railway Station Concourse.

Regrettably, our exhibition of ceramics by Bruce Nuske with design by Khai Liew has had to be rescheduled to a later date.

Please keep an eye on our website as we continue to update our revised 2023 program and venues.

James Newitt: HAVEN
Emily Wardill: Night for Day

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Samstag Museum of Art

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