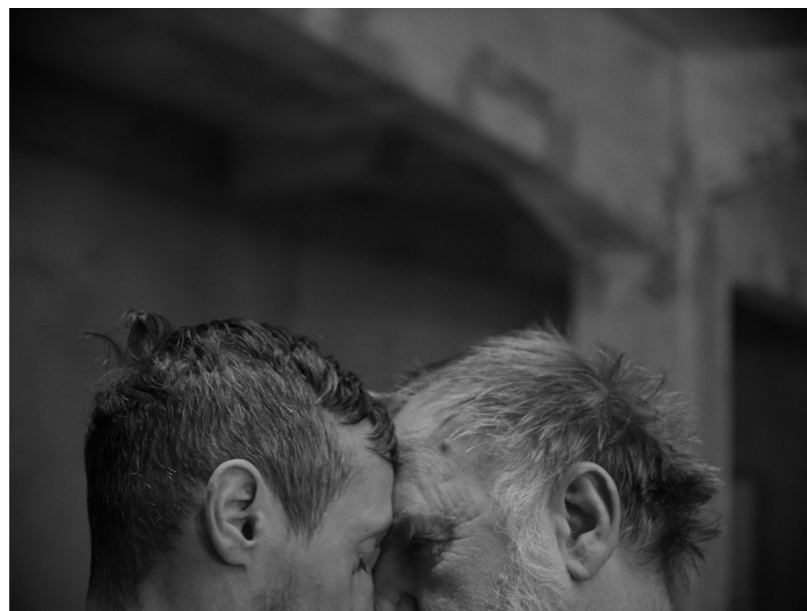With the exhibition *Phantom Letters*, James Newitt presents himself to the Belgrade audience for the first time. A selection of recent video works and accompanying elements reflect the artist's continuing interest in speculative narratives. By combining elements of both personal and official history, Newitt creates unique moving images to articulate a relationship to the various social and political mechanisms that shape the human experience.

A phantom presence in the form of represented bodies, voices, text and images stalks the viewer's gaze. The induced hypnotic effect evokes the question of what is personal and what is collective memory in the modern moment moderated by (surveillance) technologies, borders and the continuous flow of information.
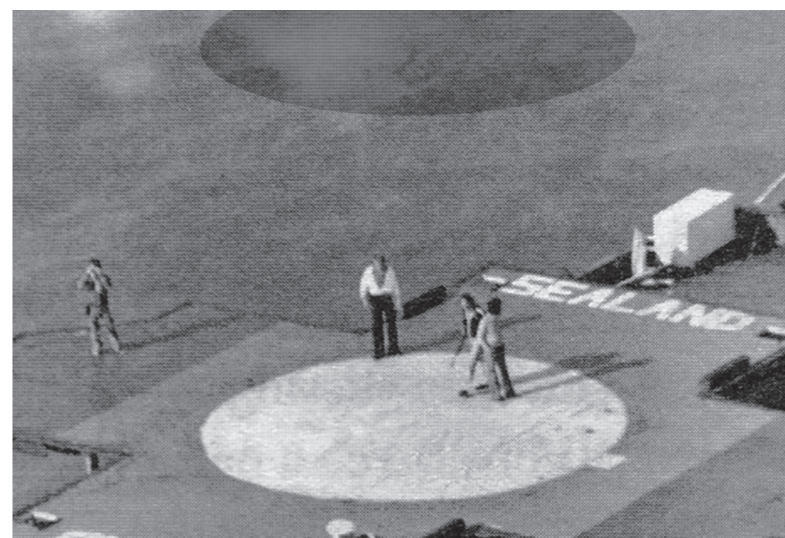

James Newitt's work explores specific social and cultural relations, embracing mutability and paradox. His videos and installations investigate spaces between individual and collective identity, memory and history, fact and fiction through personal, observational and performative approaches. He works on projects that often involve extended periods of research into specific social, cultural and environmental situations and the development of ongoing relationships with individuals and communities.

James Newitt ⌐ Џејмс Њуит

Phantom letters

⌐ Фантомска писма

30. 5 - 29. 6. 2024.
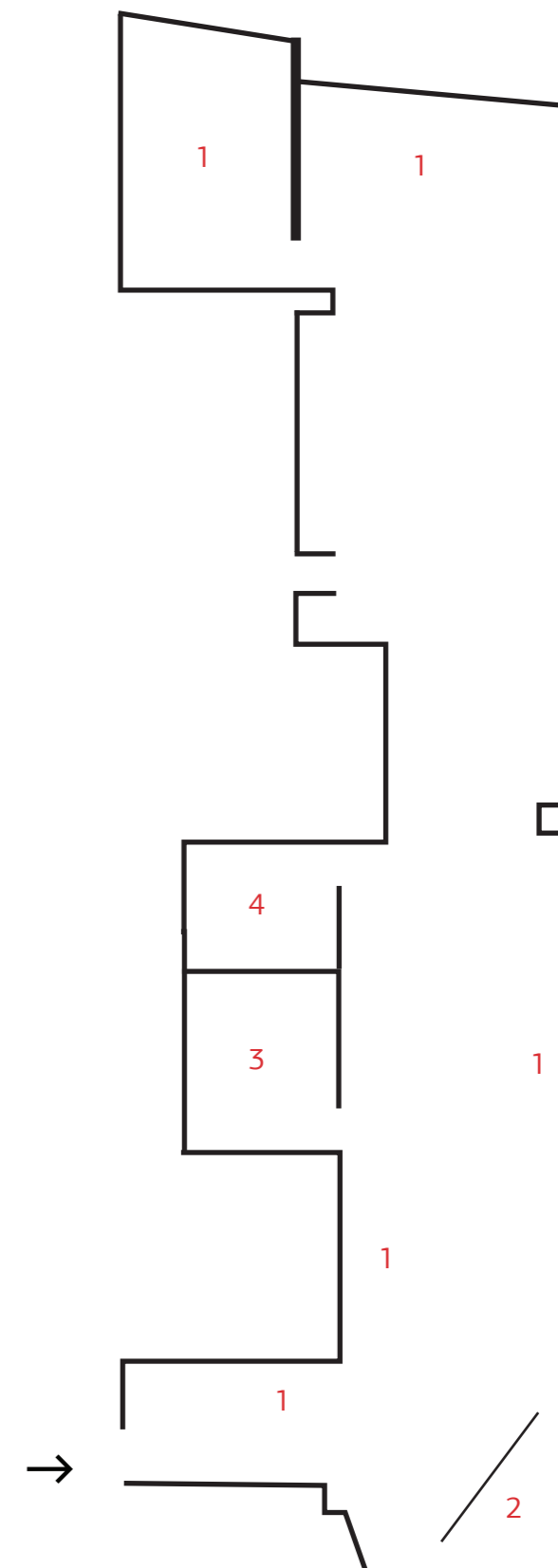
FOSSIL
2019

Performers: Anton Skrzypiciel and Romeu Runa
Director of photography: Mário Melo Costa
Production: Anže Peršin, Stenar Projects
Sound recording: Bernardo Theriaga
Soundtrack and mix: Jon Smeathers
Production assistant: Elise Paixão

Fossil is a short film that explores the lapses in memory and the gaps in language of a person who has suffered brain damage. The film follows a series of exchanges and physical struggles between two men, one older than the other. Aggressive but also affectionate, while it is not clear how the men are related, there is a co-dependency at play.

The film begins with a slow pan and a voice over that names the objects in a sparsely furnished, concrete room in slow succession. The objects in shot rarely correspond to what is listed. The characters return to this naming exercise repeatedly throughout the film. Objects are re-named as they are recounted. But this is not a game; the elder man can't remember. His faculties are compromised, his thinking impaired. This realisation creeps up on us slowly. It is hinted at in the image of an x-ray partly cropped out of shot, in the evasive answers to the question 'how do you feel today', in the text that appears occasionally like shy and subtle narrative cues ('now I don't re-mem-ber').

HAVEN
2023

stallation, 35 minutes, surround sound
Sound composition and mix: João Polido
Animation: Arif Ashraf

HAVEN is a critical and poetic reworking of the bizarre story of Sealand, a tiny, unrecognized micronation on an abandoned World War II gun tower in the North Sea. The tower has been occupied since the 1960s by a British family, who claim the artificial territory as their own, independent from state power. Originally intending to use the tower to broadcast pirate radio, the family worked with two cyber-libertarians in the early 2000s to establish the world's first data haven—what they described as "pirate internet." The data haven promised to be a refuge for unregulated data - the only truly safe place in the world to keep information. *HAVEN* explores the tower as a paradoxical site: at once promoting sovereignty and autonomy while being inaccessible, exposed to the elements and controlled by a closed and isolated family unit.

HAVEN's narrative approach speculates on the rift that occurred between the family and the data haven's founders. It also touches on other contemporary utopias and neoliberal ventures, such as the libertarian Seasteading project, which aims to build floating communities that they describe as 'start-up countries, each with a specific social, political and legal system'; and Microsoft's Project Natick, the world's first undersea data center and an attempt to eventually migrate the cloud below the sea. HAVEN incorporates these contemporary references to question the possibility the sea provides for utopian and extraterritorial places — spaces beyond the territory of the state, with ambiguous or with no state jurisdiction — while also critically analyzing the often capitalist and colonialist ideologies behind these ventures.

LAPSE
2023

Video and stereo sound

LAPSE presents a rapid flow of information, from which we can glimpse images of Sealand, concrete structures, the sea, start-up countries and artificial islands, seabed scans and data center hallways, among others. In LAPSE we experience an archival logic at play, an associative search where the algorithm of Google image search was employed to produce a constant and evolving feedback of images related to James' research for HAVEN. In LAPSE a semi-autonomous interface emerges to broaden the horizons of HAVEN and its material archive through the endless and ever-expanding memory of the internet.

REVERSE/SHOT
2024 - ongoing

8:30 mins
Video, stereo sound

Neil Davis, was a celebrated war correspondent during the Indo-China wars, particularly known for his reporting in Vietnam and Cambodia during the 1960's and 1970's. Neil was also my great-uncle although I never met him as he died 3 years after I was born while filming an attempted coup in Bangkok. As well as filming the Portuguese colonial wars in Angola, he reported on the Vietnamese War from the perspective of the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN), and was the only western journalist to film both the South Vietnamese and the Viet Cong in combat. During the 'fall of Saigon' he stayed behind as the Americans and the majority of the Western media fled, capturing the moment Viet Cong tanks smashed through the gates of the Presidential Palace, effectively signaling the end of the war.