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JAMES NEWITT
FROM ABOVE, AN ISLAND
20 April - 11 June 2023

EXHIBITION

Project coordination: Ulrich Kreienbrink
Technical realization: Carlo Bas Sancho, Mathis Oesterlen
Assistance: Lea Busch
Educational programme: Sandrine Teuber, Jan Blum
Graphic design: Katarina Šević, Anna Mándoki
Press: Edith-Russ-Haus

Thanks to: Sara Magno; Lucy Bleach; Emily Wardill; Justy Phillips and Margaret Woodward; Mattia Tosti; Reg Newitt; Jayne Dyer; Didier Volckaert; João Polido; Arif Ashraf; Anže Peršin; Mary Jiménez and Sound Image Culture; Erica Green, Gillian Brown and the Samstag Museum of Art; Edit Molnár, Marcel Schwierin and the team of the Edith-Russ-Haus for Media Art.

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From above, an island – 20 April - 11 June 2023

James Newitt's solo exhibition *From above, an island* premieres the large-scale, three-channel video installation *HAVEN* (2023).

Throughout his research-based practice, Newitt constructs a complex network of subjects and narrative strategies—a selection of which are included in this exhibition. These recurrent interests arise from Newitt's fascination with the conflicted existential position of an islander who perceives the deserted island as an escape from society, as a trap, and as a form of conquest—one burdened by the desires and limitations of the colonialist mindset. Through his work, Newitt carefully revisits and rewrites found materials, such as personal correspondence and media articles, turning these documents into a form of fiction. He incorporates these semi-fictional texts into expansive filmic installations, allowing space for stories and memories to reappear and mutate.

Previous projects also take inspiration from island stories, such as the installation *Delay*, which revolves around a film titled *I Go Further Under* (2018). In 1971, seventeen-year-old Jane Cooper arrived in the Tasmanian capital of Hobart from Melbourne and began asking local fisherman to transport her to a remote, uninhabited island off Tasmania's southern coast, known locally as the Big Witch. Jane intended to live permanently in total isolation on the island. She traveled with basic provisions and did not reveal the motivation for her desire to withdraw from society. *Delay* is informed by anecdotes and oral history; the Tasmanian government's legal proceedings against Jane; media articles; and a collection of personal letters written to Jane by people from around the world who absurdly romanticized her isolation. For Newitt, revisiting Jane Cooper's experience represents a conundrum: What does it mean to create a film about a character who wanted to withdraw from representation?

Also featured in the exhibition is *Fossil* (2019), a filmic installation that intimately follows two characters who

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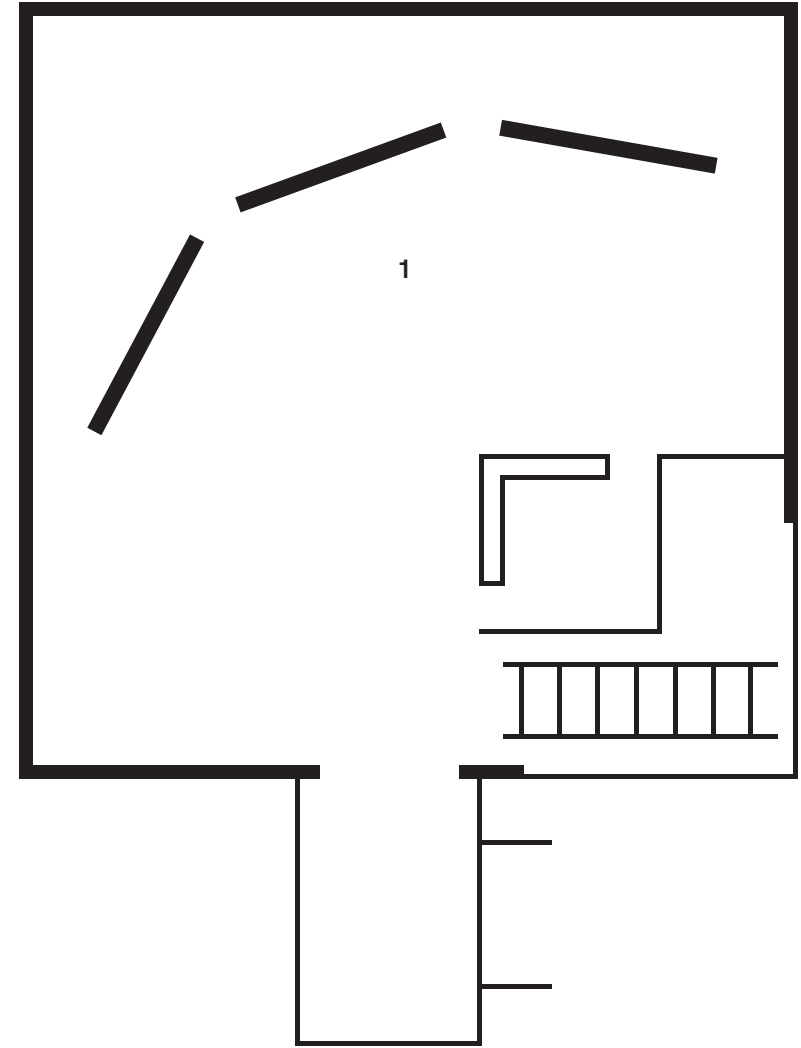
occupy an environment that appears to be either a hospital or a prison. Newitt developed *Fossil* from his novella of the same title, whose story is informed by the artist's close experiences with memory loss and aphasia. As the main character's capacity for communication and memory gradually disintegrates, so too does the materiality of the film itself—an approach that Newitt further explores in *HAVEN*.

From above, an island brings together a broad overview of Newitt's work in film, installation, and writing made over the last ten years. The exhibition celebrates minor histories and obscure personalities to focus on gestures of refusal, resistance, and withdrawal, encouraging a reflection on how such acts resonate today.

James Newitt is the 2022 recipient of the Media Art Grant from the Stiftung Niedersachsen at the Edith-Russ-Haus for Media Art. He is an artist from Tasmania, Australia, who works and lives in Lisbon, Portugal.

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GROUND FLOOR



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1 HAVEN

2023

3 channel video installation, spatial installation, mixed media

34:39 min

This newly commissioned work, around which the exhibition revolves, is a critical and poetic reworking of the bizarre story of 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 all state power.

The family originally intended to use the tower to broadcast pirate radio, and they also worked with two cyber-libertarians in the early 2000s to establish the world's first data haven—what they described as the “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 experimental narrative approach speculates on the rift that occurred between the family and the data haven's founders. It also touches on other failed utopias

and neoliberal ventures, such as the libertarian Seasteading project, which aims to build floating communities described as “start-up countries,” and Microsoft's Project Natick, the world's first undersea data center. Newitt incorporates these references to interrogate the possibilities the sea provides for extraterritorial places—spaces beyond the territory of the state—while critically analyzing the often capitalist and colonialist ideologies behind such ventures.

The installation is complemented by additional archive material and another video installation amidst a replica of the seabed in the basement of the exhibition.

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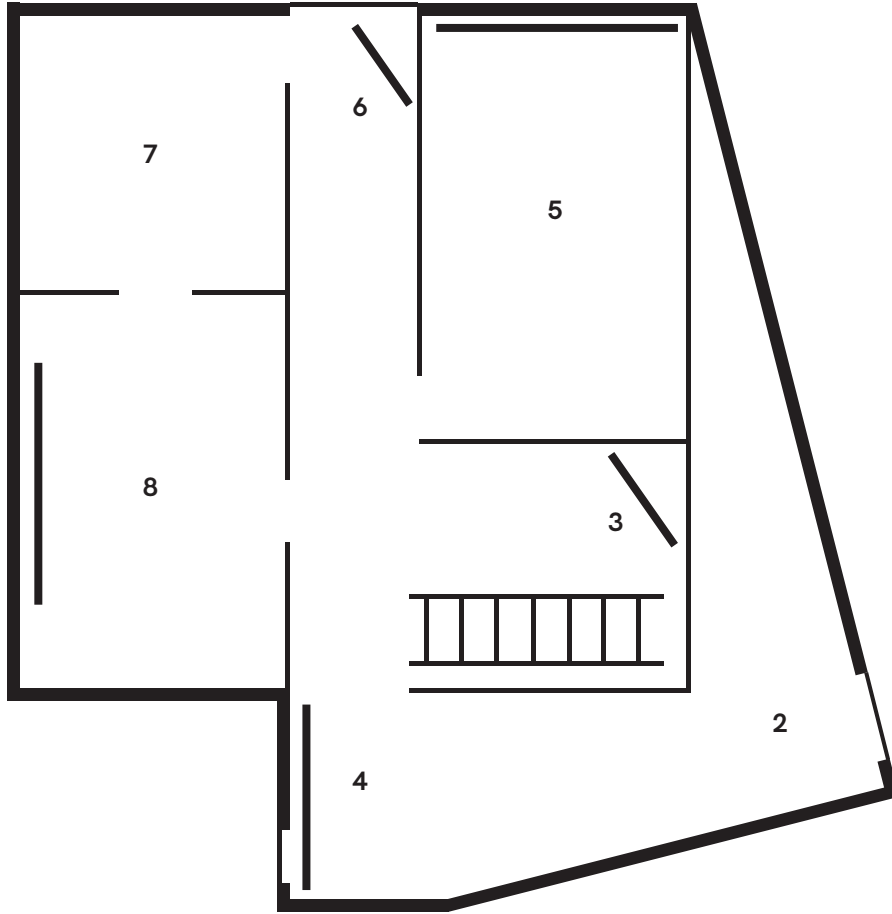
This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body.



This work was produced with the financial assistance of the European Union. The views expressed herein can in no way be taken to reflect the official opinion of the European Union.

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BASEMENT



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2 HAVEN - ARCHIVAL MATERIAL

2023
Spatial installation, wall paper, prints on
Dibond, objects, mixed media

3 HAVEN

2023
1 channel HD video wall, spatial
installation, mixed media
20:38 min

From above, an island – 20 April - 11 June 2023

4 CONUNDRUM

2016 / 2023
Wall drawing

Conundrum was a newly commissioned work as part of the exhibition 'Exhaust' at Contemporary Art Tasmania. *Conundrum* is made up of a constellation of elements that revolve around the question of what it means to withdraw - in this case from an invitation to exhibit - and what possible consequences such an act of withdrawal can provoke. The work looks at the myriad of relationships between the act of withdrawal, escape, non-participation and disappearance. In the initial exhibition *Conundrum* incorporated a large mind-map, an animated letter to an anonymous recipient, a collection of books placed throughout the gallery and an orchestrated gesture of withdrawal by two people who were present at the exhibition opening. Here in the Edith-Russ-Haus the mind - map is exhibited as a mural.

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1 - CLOSER TO NATURE
2 - ISLAND LIVING
3 - SELF-ADMISSION TO AN INSTITUTION
4 - HEAD BURIED DEEP IN YOUR HANDS
HÄNDEN VERGRABEN
5 - SUMMER RETREATS
6 - AVOID THE CAMERA
7 - REAPPEARANCE
8 - OVERWHELMING SENSE OF THE VASTNESS OF THE UNIVERSE
9 - SUICIDE
10 - DEATH OF A CAREER
11 - NO KNOWLEDGE ZONE
12 - LITERALLY NO PLACE
13 - MISINTERPRETED GESTURES AND BEST INTENTIONS GONE AMISS
14 - SLATE WIPED CLEAN
15 - ORGANIC LIVING
16 - REALITY TESTING
17 - SOME ELEMENTS COLLAPSE
18 - WHITE ON WHITE
19 - ESCAPE TO AN ISOLATED ISLAND BY OWN MEANS
20 - HEAD BURIED DEEP IN THE SAND
21 - AVOIDANCE OF PUBLIC SPACE
22 - THE FATE OF THOSE YOU LEFT BEHIND
23 - SELF IMPOSED EXILE
24 - UTOPIAN COMMUNITIES
25 - DRAWING UP NEW PROTOCOLS
26 - RELATIONSHIPS SEVERED
27 - PLAYFULLY ACKNOWLEDGING YOUR NON-EXISTENCE
DEINER NICHTEXISTENZ
28 - AMBIVALENT MOTIVATIONS
29 - EXPANDED TIME
30 - ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF

REALITY
31 - TEMPORARY AUTONOMOUS ZONE
32 - CONFLICTED MOTIVATIONS
33 - REMOTE TRAVEL
34 - DISAPPEARANCE
35 - ABSOLUTE COMMITMENT WITHOUT COMPROMISE
36 - IDENTITY SWAP
37 - SEVERING OF ALL PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL CONNECTIONS
38 - SUDDEN DETACHMENT OF SOCIAL CONTACT
39 - DIVIDED PERSONALITY
40 - EPIC DISTRACTION
41 - ADVANCED CAMOUFLAGE
42 - SILENT AND INVISIBLE PROTESTS
43 - BITING TONGUE
44 - GROWING SENSE OF ANXIETY
45 - RELUCTANT ACCEPTANCE OF STICKY CONDITIONS
46 - RETURN ALL FEES OR WAGES PAID IN ADVANCE
47 - THE BARTLEBY PROTOCOL
48 - PREFERRING NOT TO
49 - TIGHT LIPS
50 - QUIET BOYCOTT
51 - MUTENESS
52 - NON PARTICIPATION
53 - ESCAPE
54 - WITHDRAWAL
55 - INTERNALISED CONFLICT
56 - DEEP BREATHS AND CALM MOVEMENTS
57 - CONTRADICTORY ADVICE
58 - LOST OPPORTUNITIES
59 - PERMANENT CAREER DAMAGE AND/OR BROKEN FRIENDSHIPS
60 - A PROFOUND AND

SEEMINGLY ENDLESS STATE OF DEPRESSION
61 - PROFESSIONAL ISOLATION
62 - OPPORTUNITY SEEKERS
63 - A PLAN
64 - DISAGREEMENT
65 - REFUSAL
66 - FOLLOWING ADMINISTRATIVE PROTOCOL
67 - MISSED OPPORTUNITIES
68 - PAINFUL
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF YOUR NON-EXISTENCE
69 - CAREER ALTERNATIVES
70 - RESIGNED AMBITIONS
71 - REGRET
72 - ARMS FOLDED, LEGS CROSSED, LIPS TIGHT
73 - SENSE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS
74 - BEST INTENTIONS MISINTERPRETED
75 - POLITE LETTER OF INTENTION WITH NON-ACCUSING TONE
76 - EXTERNAL AGGRESSION DIRECTED TOWARDS AMBIGUOUS GESTURES
77 - INVISIBILITY
78 - SMOKE AND MIRRORS
79 - IMPERCEPTIBLY SLOW MOVEMENT OUT OF FRAME
80 - EXIT THROUGH THE BACK DOOR
81 - DOUBLE BLUFF
82 - SURGICALLY EXECUTED
83 - MAINTAINING THE PERFORMANCE
84 - AUTONOMY
85 - EXTREME ISOLATION
86 - IDEAS OF FREEDOM
87 - UNBEARABLE WEIGHT OF REALITY

5 FOSSIL

2019

1 channel HD video installation
Image ratio 4:3, Surround Sound
30 min

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

This project was commissioned by the
Art Gallery of New South Wales for
the exhibition, *The National 2019: New
Australian Art*.

This project was assisted through Arts
Tasmania by the Minister for the Arts.
This project was supported by the Cen-
tro Cultural Carpintarias de São Lázaro,
Lisbon.

Artist text by Isobel Parker Philip

James Newitt's video work *Fossil* (2019) began life as a book written by the artist in late 2017. Before it implicated image and sound and rhythm and pace in the unravelling of its narrative, it was just text on a page. But that's entirely appropriate, poetically prophetic even. For this work is about language: language as a navigational device and a life raft. The book's storyline is full of p(l)ot holes. Scenes bleed

into one another or else they suddenly stall; voices trail off or collide into entangled confusion. There's very little to anchor the reader. We move between hospitals and dream states, recollected fragments and running real-time commentary. Amid the jolts and jump cuts, the novella follows the slow recovery and recuperation of a patient who has suffered a cerebral aneurysm. The narrator must reorient their relationship to this character whose synapses and neural networks have shattered and short-circuited. Attempts to communicate misfire. In the film, this ruptured relationship – this grasping at the edge of intimacy – morphs into a physical struggle between two men, one older than the other. Aggressive but also affectionate, there is a co-dependency here but we're never sure if (or how) the two are related. As with the book, form remains fragmentary, meaning remains elusive; a voiceover sidesteps its subject. There is a glitch-logic at play in the way Newitt structures his film. Here, malfunction becomes a lyrical device. A glitch occurs through a technical fault. It's software that stammers. I'm no neurosurgeon, but perhaps it's possible to see the similarity between a malfunctioning machine and an injured brain. In both, operative functions stumble and stutter.

In *Fossil* (the book and the film) narrative itself stutters. Gestures, words and storylines recur like re-

traced steps. The patterns of return and repetition in Newitt's work are also teased out through metaphoric resonance. Allusions to networks, digital storage, data distribution and recovery are embedded throughout. A brain / a hard drive; both are systems that receive and output information while preserving the opacity of their internal workings. We don't need to know how information storage, whether human or digital, actually works to be able to interact with it. Both are technologically classified as black box systems. A black box, be it a brain or a hard drive, is an apparatus that operates according to the basic principles of translation. Information is input (recorded, retained) and then extracted. But how trustworthy is this act of translation? What happens when the black box blunders? When it buries its data?¹

Fossil relies on translation: a book becomes a film; text becomes choreographic; language becomes gestural. As they change, these forms morph and mutate, disintegrate and rebuild themselves – much like a body in a hospital trying to rewire and recover. But what are we left with, after the dust has settled and trauma has been triaged? Newitt offers an oblique answer: You close your eyes again, I can see that you're getting agitated but I don't care. You breathe to calm yourself and you whisper – a human tape recorder²

A human tape recorder; a body that holds its history in the face of malfunction. A body that can be translated (and transcoded), that glitches and stutters but continues to feel. Recording itself.

- (1) We need only think back to the conceit of the game *Chinese whispers* (while making note of the racially loaded semantics of its name) to know that translation is never exact.
(2) James Newitt, *Lost Rocks: Fossil*, A Published Event, Hobart, 2018, p.91.

6 TO ATTEMPT TO BECOME OTHER, SECRETLY OR NOT

2016
1 channel HD video, wall text, mixed
media
19 min

For George Bataille, the figure of the Acéphale (headless being) represented the possibility of emancipation from rational thought, it is a “a being that doesn’t know prohibition. A being that makes me laugh because it is headless, who fills me with anguish because s/he is made of innocence and crime.”

Within *To Attempt to Become Other, Secretly or Not* the Acéphale is caught by the camera, moving awkwardly through a forest at night. It is unaware, or perhaps uninterested, in the camera’s presence, instead it follows a logic of movement that appears strange and (un)reasonable.

Video credits:
Producer: Anže Peršin, Stenar Projects;
Performer: Vânia Rovisco; DOP: Mário Melo Costa; Production assistant: Diana Svihlova; Gaffer: Ze Manuel; Post production: Loudness films; special effects: Pedro Vicente; colourist: Jennifer Mendes
Thanks to: Sara Magno; Anže Peršin; João Chaves; Paulo da Silva; and Trygve Luktvaslimo

This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body

7 DELAY

2019 / 2023
Spatial installation, prints, drawings,
mixed media

8 I GO FURTHER UNDER

2017 - 2018
HD video
60 min

Actors: Emily Milledge and Chas Blundell
Cinematographer: Joe Shemesh
Soundtrack: Brendan Walls
Editing: James Newitt
Production: Brendan Walls and James Newitt
Sound recording: Brendan Walls
Second camera: James Newitt
Sound mix: Jon Smeathers
Colour grading: Jennifer Mendes, C.S.I., Loudness Films

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To Leave this World Is to Enter It.

Exhibition text by Jack Sargeant

“Croatoan” – message found carved on a tree following the disappearance of settlers at the Roanoke colony, circa 1590.

The fantasy of escape, of leaving everything behind, travelling far off the map, into uncharted territory is seductive, but even amongst the bravest, these dreams are rarely realised. In 1971 eighteen-year-old Jane Cooper left the certainties of suburban Canterbury, Melbourne, and travelled as far south as she could. To Tasmania, and then, further still, to De Witt Island. Colloquially known as the Big Witch, the island is a mere 8km from the Tasmanian south coast, but the tiny island, which rises 340 metres from the ocean, lays in the zone known, in honour of the extreme winds, as the Roaring Forties. For months the great Southern Ocean forms a near-impenetrable barrier, the weather – day after day of rain, averaging 240 each year – notable for its wintery storms even in summer, massive waves bombarding the Big Witch. Here the teenager settled for a year, despite warnings from authorities.

Opening with a line sung from Harry Robertson’s folk song *The Antarctic Fleet*, which details the experience of whalers lonely and

cold, and deep in the bloodied violence of their work, James Newitt’s *I Go Further Under* draws upon Cooper’s story but uses this as background to an elemental gothic exploration of isolation. The young woman, seemingly world-weary, and an old bearded fisherman travel to the island, neither speaks, and the grey-black summer waters churn around the small boat. On the beach, the girl is left with her meagre belongings. The rocky coastline seems primitive and unformed, the tortured woods of the interior pulling at her as she walks through the small island forest that will be her home. Simultaneously, geo-surveillance technologies chatter, even here near the bottom of the bottom of the globe, mapping the isolation.

I Go Further Under creates an uncanny atmosphere in which an unpeopled landscape presents illusions of life, but existence here seems alien and unforgiving: a bloodied chunk of fish on the boat, an underside of a mollusc that resembles some Lovecraftian black rotting meat, a pink worm wriggles, even a sealion seems strangely-monstrous as it basks upside down amongst the rocks. Simultaneously, in shallow tidal pools the combination of light and stone gives the water the bloodied timbre of slaughterhouse guttering. The pulp from a fruit becomes a fleshy, seeded and deeply visceral flesh palpation wiped across the

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girl's cold hands. Notably, when the ocean or wind falls to silence the soundtrack buzzes with endless flies. To be alone, far away from human contact, to rarely hear another voice, could for many to be a manifestation of torture. The isolation the rugged landscape of De Witt offers invariably echoes the grim psychological demands the penal colony inflicted upon prisoners removed far from society and the harshness of life for those who still work on the brutal Southern Ocean.

The work opens with text that emphasizes the geographical move south, the opposite direction from the Equatorial tropics. She is driven south, towards the barren, untamed, and windblown. Compelled to move. The island forms a primal landscape, an un-paradise that becomes the place where the individual can vanish, in contrast to the ethnocentric conceits associated with tropical beaches. On De Witt there is no trace of human habitation. For the protagonist it lays far away from the machinations of men.

The soundtrack - with its whispered voices, bird song, wind, ocean, electronic drones and hums, augmented on occasion with other sounds - further emphasizes the experience of the uncanny and the elemental. A desolate loneliness is at play, except in electing to remove herself from the everyday world

of society and community, the young woman has taken a voluntary vow of isolation, a contemporary manifestation of asceticism. But while the ascetic elects to retreat from the pleasures of the sensory world in order to meditate on the sacred, the protagonist of *I Go Further Under* has not renounced the material world, rather she is immersed in the physicality of the everyday; she swims in the ocean, she feels the cold, she builds fires, she huddles in her clothes against the howling wind. There does not appear to be a spiritual quest at play, so much as a pure negation of the contemporary world.

But the island, despite its extremes, also serves to protect the young woman, as the fisherman whispers; she is "a little witch in the arms of the Big Witch." There is perhaps something of the faery tale in such a relationship, the girl is protected by the mercy of the landscape in which she has placed herself. Moreover, this relationship suggests that rather than being separate from the landscape the protagonist, in her isolation, is becoming incorporated into it. The island, from the imposing ocean cliffs to the woods, offers security, comfort, like a mother comforting a child.

In the tree trunk carved by the British colonists the single word: "Croatoan" (in some versions of the story the tree was carved with the

more affirmative "gone to Croatan"¹) was all that remained of the one-hundred North American 'settlers.' Nothing was heard from them again. Some say they joined the local tribes, others that they faced madness or death. All possibilities hang over this colonial vanishing, but in the carving of that short phrase there is more at stake. An affirmation in the possibility of electing to cease to exist within a defined boundary, a moment instead of possibility. *I Go Further Under*: moving south, beyond all trace of humanity, into the promises of the Big Witch, seems impossible, but the gesture to move further into the world into the vertigo of nature becomes a move into the invisibility of existence itself.

(1) For more on the idea of Croatan as a manifestation of the Temporary Autonomous Zone see Hakim Bey, T.A.Z The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism, Autonomedia, 2003 (1985), p.114-116.

James Newitt (b. 1981, Hobart, lives and works in Hobart and Lisbon) is an artist and filmmaker whose work explores social and cultural relationships, including their mutability and paradoxes. His videos and installations explore 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 exploration of specific social, cultural and environmental situations and the development of ongoing relationships with individuals and communities. In recent projects he has additionally employed speculative forms of storytelling as an extension of the documentary tendencies he continues to explore. James Newitt is a fellow of the Stiftung Niedersachsen at the Edith Russ House.

Newitt is an Australia Council for the Arts 2021 and Oslo Independent Film Festival 2019 award winner in the Best Experimental Film category for Fossil.

Solo exhibitions include: Carpintarias de São Lázaro, Lisbon (2020); Appleton Cultural Foundation, Lisbon (2019); Contemporary Art Tasmania/Dark MOFO (2018); 55 Sydenham Road, Sydney (2017); Ar Solido, Lisbon (2016); Lumiar Cité, Lisbon (2013); Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart (2011).

Group exhibitions including: Bienal Fotografia do Porto, Porto (2021); Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (2021); Revelation Perth Internatio-

nal Film Festival, Perth (2020); Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney (2019); Oslo Independent Film Festival, Oslo (2019); Stuttgarter Filmwinter - Festival for Expanded Media, Stuttgart (2019); Centre for Contemporary Art, Glasgow (2018); Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney (2017); Contemporary Art Tasmania (2016); Light Moves Festival, Limerick, Ireland (2015); 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney (2015). Selected publications: Delay, published by Contemporary Art Tasmania (2019); Fossil, novella, published by A Published Event (2018).

Website: www.jnewitt.com

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EVENTS

EXHIBITION WALK

**Wednesday, 24 May,
5 p.m.**

with Edit Molnár – director ERH
(in English language)

**Wednesday, 31 May,
5 p.m.**

with Marcel Schwierin – director ERH
(in German language)

GUIDED TOURS

Every Sunday during the exhibition at 3 p.m.
(Attendance free, regular entrance).
Group tours on request.

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OPENING HOURS

Tuesday till Friday 2 a.m. – 6 p.m.
Saturday and Sunday 11 a.m. – 6 p.m.
Monday closed

EINTRITT

2,50 Euro / 1,50 Euro

Free admission on 22 April and 27 May 2023

Closed on 1 May 2023

Open on 18 May and 29 May 2023

Free admission for students of the
Oldenburg universities.

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