

GALERIA DA BOAVISTA

22.06–17.09.2023

HAVEN

James Newitt

curated by
Mattia Tosti

GALERIAS MUNICIPAIS – GALERIA DA BOAVISTA
Rua da Boavista 50, 1200-066 Lisboa

Open everyday 10h-13h and 14h-18h
Free entrance

Guided tours by appointment
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www.galeriasmunicipais.pt



1

HAVEN (archive), 2023

Books, documents, email correspondence,
dimensions variable

Courtesy the artist

2

HAVEN (archive), 2023

Prints on Coton Fineart, dimensions variable

Courtesy the artist

3

Untitled (tower), 2023

Print on Premium Luster, 50 x 50 cm

Courtesy the artist

4

Untitled (fire), 2022

Print on Premium Luster, 50 x 50 cm

Courtesy the artist

5

Lapse, 2023

Video loop, stereo sound, B+W

Structure design: Cosebelle/ Allegra Zanirato

Courtesy the artist

6

HAVEN, 2023

3 channel video installation, 5.1 surround
sound, 34'40"

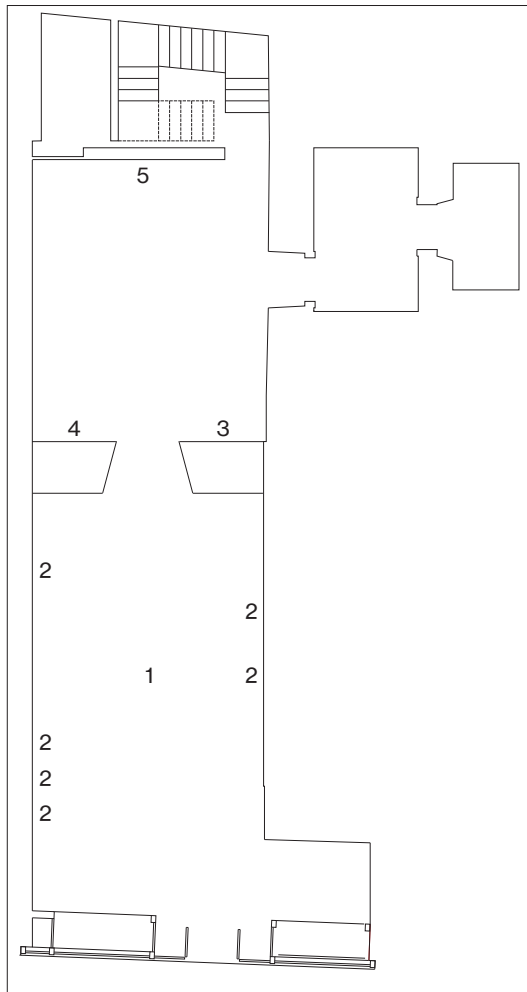
Sound design and mix: João Polido

3D Animation: Arif Ashraf; Additional
animation: James Newitt

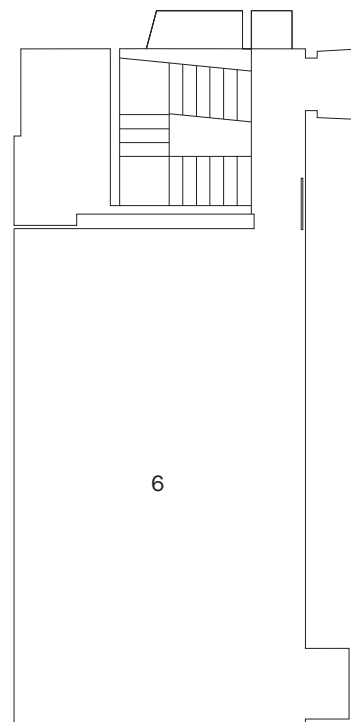
Voice actors: Nina Stratford and Brian Caspe

Courtesy the artist

ground floor



1st floor



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.

The first part of the exhibition functions as a heterogeneous archive where information extracted from HAVEN's research process materializes and becomes visible under different guises. Immediately after entering the space, in two vitrines we encounter a collection of documentary traces that circumnavigate the general context of the project, which ground the history of this floating micronation while also creating connections with other utopian projects that share a libertarian fantasy of encountering uninhabited spaces where one can 'start again'. Together with these books, drawings, and other primary sources, we also find a group of unanswered emails that the

artist wrote to Ryan Lackey, who created the data haven on Sealand. This one-way correspondence, touches upon subjects related to the aquatic future of technology, as well about his failed – yet premonitory – enterprise of moving the cloud off-shore. Other evidences in this room, however, don't perform the same function of validating the project's ties to "reality", but instead wish to stimulate a form of uncertainty towards this body of information and reveal the fluid and speculative nature of this documentary project. This is the case of the series of family photographs presented adjacent to the vitrines. These images introduce the viewer to the main characters of this extraordinary story: a family from Southern England that claimed the rusty platform in the middle of the North Sea as their own principality and for decades endured the extreme living conditions there, while persistently maintaining their claims of independence in ways unrivaled by almost all other micronations. Newitt, by departing from the ambiguous status of these archival images – that are in a hybrid place between private and public – and inspired by the uncommon biography of the subjects, employs a simple gesture of erasure to re-emphasise the privacy, and piracy, of the individuals being portrayed. In a similar, yet less evident way, the two framed photographs of the platform present fictional memories that inhabit a hybrid timeline where past and future coexist.

As we access the second part of the downstairs gallery through a corridor reminiscent of a data center, we encounter a rapid flow of black and white images, which presents glimpses of Sealand and the family, as well as previously unseen photographs of other floating concrete structures, utopian start-up islands, seabed scans and data racks. This piece, titled *Lapse*, marks the transition to a space where we witness a different archival logic at play, that of associative search algorithms. This video was in fact the result of the artist engaging in a dialogue with a search engine, that he fed key images from his project archive and which he was fed in return other images that the algorithm associated to them. What we see here is a sort of digital train of thought that is processing, expanding and deteriorating the archival information present in the previous room. In *Lapse*, Newitt allows for a semi-autonomous interface to broaden the horizons of

the project and its material archive through the endless and ever expanding memory of the internet.

In the second gallery space upstairs we encounter *HAVEN*, a three channel video installation. The film has a twofold nature that combines the logics and aesthetics of the two rooms encountered in the previous floor, as it partially represents a documentary account of Sealand and Newitt's other references, while it also speculates, re-imagines and animates this data by employing different digital tools. *HAVEN* starts following a loosely chronological order that recounts the history of the tower, while showing images from BBC archival footage from a documentary produced in 1972. The film introduces us to an event in 2002, the year in which the family expels Ryan from Sealand and nationalizes the data haven. After this point, the film departs from a documentarity aesthetic and approach and begins behaving in radically different way. Here Newitt weaves together a semi-fictionalised narrative that employs the digital medium and its archive to speculate about the future of Sealand and of the data haven. A deep-fake voice of Ryan finally answers one of Newitt's emails he never replied to, as we hear him opening up about his failed enterprise and the data that was left behind. Across the screens we see footage that was not filmed in the site, as the slow 3D rendering scenes that employ software to faithfully recreate and occupy the inaccessible ambiances of the platform; or excerpts gleaned from the internet that have associative formal, conceptual and textural qualities to expand on the story. Youtube videos of data centers, underwater pipe and cable scans and black and white footage of rust and mold that hint at the relentless deterioration of the tower and the sudden arrival of a flood that symbolizes the end of its libertarian dreams and lays the ground for the emergence of yet another aquatic utopia.

– Mattia Tosti