

Press Release

Emily Wardill

Identical

KW Production Series:
Emily Wardill

Identical

10 June – 20 August 23

Curator: Mason Leaver-Yap

Curatorial Assistant: Linda Franken

For the 2023 KW Production Series, artist Emily Wardill (b. 1977, GB) presents *Identical*, an immersive moving image installation. This new commission deepens the artist's ongoing enquiry into the 'imagined image'—what it is, what it has been used for, and what traces it leaves behind. Wardill's practice insistently approaches such questions, from her earliest work that looked at stained glass as an early device to communicate with the illiterate, to her recent work that reverses the cinematic technique of 'day for night' simulation in order to reflect upon technological vision, performed gender and utopias.

Wardill's new installation draws aesthetic inspiration from 'expanded cinema'—a multimedia form developed by artists in the 1960s and 1970s—while also engaging with the imaginary of 'expansion' as it relates to individual consciousness, and to territorial economic growth and domination.

Identical splits the audience's attention across two video screens whose images loop, split and fold into one another. With reference to iconic cinematic moments of sexual pleasure and physical violence, *Identical* reflects on the manufactured nature of these moments of abandon, lensing their reconstruction through children and inflatable automata. The accompanying soundtrack runs up and down a central channel in the gallery, weaving an eight-piece choir (whose chorus builds in a Fibonacci pattern) together with sampled tracks, cover songs, and ruminations on 'splitting' both as duplicitous and the genesis of life on a cellular level.

In its switching and merging, *Identical* asks the audience to consider who wove pleasure into domination and why, where does rhyme become reason, and what is the shifting relationship between comedy and tragedy. Amid such binaries, *Identical* begins to articulate a different space: a polyphonic experience that refuses to become one thing or the other.

KW Production Series is an annual commissioning project dedicated to artists' moving image works. The project takes inspiration from KW's founding principles as a place for production, critical exchange, and thoughtful collaboration. Within this ongoing series, KW seeks to identify and serve artists who are at a pivotal moment in their work and career—those who will benefit

not only from the financial support and institutional visibility this opportunity provides but also those who will be able to use KW Production Series to significantly contribute towards the depth and rigor of their artistic practice.

The exhibition is produced in partnership with the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation as part of the PARTENARIATS GULBENKIAN program to support Portuguese art in European artistic institutions. Media partner: gallerytalk.net

Curatorial Text

The opening seconds of Emily Wardill's film *Identical* (2023) are simple and elemental: the seductive play of light on water. Or, put another way, the film begins by depicting the moment where one thing bends, reflects and distorts another – and is seen differently as a consequence. This jewel-like mirage is doubled across a second screen. Initially, each image appears indistinguishable from the other, until the light shifts focus – from water to solid, from abstraction to figuration – to reveal a body turning, glittering, becoming different. This hypnotic introductory sequence punctuates *Identical* several times, and directly communicates what this installation is about: splits and expansions, and how shifting representations affect one's ability to comprehend what is taking place.

As with the genesis of all cellular life, 'splitting' is never just one thing. In *Identical*, the separation of one thing from another is potentially duplicitous on a social, historical and cultural level. As the double-channel installation unfolds over 16 minutes, there is a haunting feeling – 'in the bones', one might say – that is something isn't quite right. Indeed, Wardill describes *Identical* as a work full of dupes, seductions, gaslighting, and disorientations. It dominates the senses. In the score, one lone singing voice proliferates into a swelling chorus (built up in the manner of a Fibonacci sequence), while the on-screen drama of *Identical* spreads through hotel rooms and corridors, elite sports and recreational leisure. Time, too, warps: children pretend to be adults, while adults are reduced to regurgitating the movements of inflatable robots, or else appear spliced with iconic moments culled from twentieth-century music and cinema. (In the credits, titles often provide literal commentary on what is shown and said on screen: *Don't Look Now*, 'Sign O' The Times', 'First Time Ever I Saw Your Face', 'Tomorrow Never Knows', to name only a few of *Identical*'s samples.)

For over 15 years, Wardill has reckoned with 'imagined images' – what they are, what they have been used for, and what traces they leave in the present. The artist's early work looked at stained glass windows as a mediaeval device to communicate with the illiterate, while her recent film *Night for Day* (2020) reverses the titular cinematic technique of inverted light simulation in order to reflect upon technological vision, performed gender, and imagined utopias. Wardill's films summon misremembered histories alongside popular culture's dreams and nightmares, and carefully sequence the ghosts that haunt personal experiences and shape social relations.

In *Identical*, the artist's inquiry expands beyond the imagined image to split apart a host of sensory relationships: not just what is seen against what is felt, but also what is told against

what is heard and inferred. The disorientation conjured through viewing *Identical* is the encounter Wardill's seeks to interrogate via a dizzying collision of binaries: left and right, winners and losers, comedy and tragedy, rehearsal and remembering, up and down. All the while, a familiar drum beat builds and loops around the gallery space, like an aural lasso.

Despite the density of its cultural references, *Identical* doesn't seek to be decoded or reduced. Instead, the work activates complex narratives, whether intimating the cover-up of violent pasts (for example, showing unmarked mass graves of enslaved people turfed over with a mini-golf course in Lagos, Portugal), or the vertiginous feeling of being overwhelmed in the gallery space itself.

"The form is talking to you," says Wardill, indicating *Identical's* nod to 'expanded cinema', a multimedia art form developed in the 1960s and 1970s. Expanded cinema prefigured contemporary network culture, analyzed formal elements of the cinematic and televisual experience, and explored theories of mind-expanding, ego-less consciousness. "Structure was one of the things that expanded cinema wanted us to look at," notes the artist, "the structure of the gaze that makes someone active and someone passive, how benevolent stories bury the things they do not want us to see."

Just as *Identical's* watery prelude shows the combination of two things illuminating and distorting one another, Wardill wonders whether expanded cinema could be remodeled to draw attention to and confront disorientations in contemporary social consciousness. *Identical* also intimates that violence expands inwardly as much as it proliferates outwardly. Although never explicitly shown, the suggestion of physical impact – on heads, on limbs and torsos – is woven through the work, alongside frequent visual references to blood and bones. Voices, meanwhile, describe experiences of traumatic memory loss.

At one point, *Identical* contrasts a video of an elephant handling the bones of its ancestors (an action scientists speculate is a form of animal mourning), with human hands dispassionately playing with and reassembling 3d-printed bones. The comparison is one of association and dissociation, connection and disconnection. Drawing together both states, Wardill seeks to articulate a different space – a polyphonic experience that refuses to become one thing or the other.

— Mason Leaver-Yap

Biography

Emily Wardill lives and works in Lisbon, Portugal. Her work has been exhibited at Secession, Vienna, SMK, Copenhagen, de Appel arts centre, Amsterdam The Biennale of Moving Images Geneva, The Serpentine Gallery and MUMOK Vienna; She was awarded the Jarman Award in 2010, the Leverhulme Award in 2011 and the EMAF award in 2021. She participated in the 54th Venice Biennale, the 19th Sydney Biennale and GHOST 2565 in 2022.

Teaching has always run alongside her practice and she has worked at Malmo Art Academy, University of British Columbia, Central Saint Martins, School of the Art Institute Chicago, Städelschule, Goldsmiths University & the CCA San Francisco. Currently she is undertaking a PHD at Malmo Art Academy, Sweden.

Public Program

Curator's Tour

With Linda Franken

6 July 23, 7 pm

Focus Tour

With Theseas Efstathopoulos

12 July 23, 5 pm

Curator's Tour

With Mason Leaver-Yap

3 August 23, 7 pm

Screening

A screening with Emily Wardill

4 August 23

Public Guided Tours

Saturday, 24 June 23, 4 pm / in German

Sunday, 25 June 23, 4 pm / in English

Saturday, 15 July 23, 4 pm / in English

Sunday, 16 July 23, 4 pm / in German

Saturday, 12 August 23, 4 pm / in English

Sunday, 13 August 23, 4 pm / in German