

KINGS Artist Run acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we operate. We offer our respect to Elders both past and present and extend this offer to all First Nations people.

KINGS

Matt Siddall
NO LONGER
AN AFFAIR OF HUMAN
BEINGS

EMERGING
WRITERS PROGRAM

Artist Run

Established in 2003, KINGS Artist-Run provides a location for contemporary art practice, supporting distinctive experimental projects by artists at all stages of their careers.

Open 12-5pm Thursday,
Friday, Saturday
69 Capel Street,
West Melbourne VIC 3003

The whole thing was *no longer an affair of human beings*; it had become an affair of papers, blanks, affidavits, certificates, photographs, stamps, seals, files, height measuring and quarrelling about the correct colour of the eyes and the hair. The human being himself [sic] was out and forgotten.

B. Traven. *Death Ship* (1979 [1926]: 41)

Et sequentia is the second in a series of exhibitions by artist Ashe that explores his experiences as a cog within the confounding mechanics of bureaucracy. The exhibition at KINGS is part of preparation for a major exhibition by Ashe, to be shown at Contemporary Art Tasmania in 2023. Ashe sees *Et sequentia* as an opportunity to isolate elements of his practice in development and to seek feedback from audiences, which he feels is both critical for the evolution of his work and hard to find in the country town where he resides. *Et sequentia* is part of Ashe's wider exploration of the malfunctions of bureaucratic systems, where at KINGS, he presents framed photographic and sculptural works to examine the ambiguities of borders and turmoils caused by the failings of the Australian welfare system. Here, Ashe draws from two experiences: his mother's involvement in a Telstra scam, and the border closures between Victoria and New South Wales between July and September 2021 that affected him personally. During these months, the Andrews's Labor Government's attempts to eliminate the spread of COVID-19 meant that permits were required to cross the border between the two states—the situation described by the Victorian Ombudsman as 'downright unjust, even inhumane.'¹

How to apply for Queensland's \$1,000 flood relief payments and other government disaster grants

Anyone who has been affected by the floods and landslides can apply for government relief to help with expenses. The process is similar to applying for a state disaster payment if you live in an area that hasn't been affected by the floods. To apply for government relief, you must complete an application form available at your local department of public health or state treasurer's office. Depending on your situation, you may need to submit proof that you are eligible for social services through your state or territory government. All completed forms and relevant documents should be sent directly to your local Disaster Recovery Centre (DRC). You can find a list of DRCs on the Queensland government's website or by calling 13 REVENUE FREE ON REQUEST (1337).²

During one of Ashe's past performance works, an elderly unclothed male-identifying performer was held above the ground by a haulage strap. Attached to the ceiling, the haulage strap extended under the man's back to act as a support. The strap was raised around ten centimetres from the ground. His back was strained under the pressure of being supported by the strap. The lower half of his body teetered above the ground which supported his feet. In a state of extreme discomfort and pain, the man managed to hold the position for fifteen minutes, his breath laboured, while a photographer darted around him. A crowd watched in amazement at how he can hold such a precarious physical position for so long, even at all. The haulage strap was then released. The performer let out an enormous sigh of relief. In a moment of sympathy, and moved by both fascination and concern, the crowd stood around him until the man got to his feet and paced out of the gallery space.

¹ Victorian Ombudsman. 2021, 10. *Investigation into decision-making under the Victorian Border Crossing Permit Directions*. Melbourne: Victorian Ombudsman. <https://www.ombudsman.vic.gov.au/our-impact/investigation-reports/investigation-into-decision-making-under-the-victorian-border-crossing-permit-directions/>

² This news 'article' and subsequent news articles in this essay were generated by an artificial intelligence essay writing tool, accessible here: <https://www.the-good-ai.com/choose>

The performance was part of *Carport Sessions (1)*, an exhibition presented at Tributary Projects in Canberra / Ngunnawal Country featuring Ashe and two other artists that aimed to challenge conventions of gallery spaces as places that only present finished works by showcasing works that were unfinished or in-progress.³ *Carport Sessions (1)* was the first of three public presentations of works in development for Ashe's exhibition at Contemporary Art Tasmania upcoming in 2023. Due to the difficulty of having a performer being lifted above the ground in a haulage strap, the second iteration of the work, titled *Untitled (IC1)* and presented at KINGS, shows a photograph of the same male-identifying performer being supported by a haulage strap. The physical body of the performer is thus absent from this exhibition. In the photograph of the performer, the haulage strap is edited out of the image. The performer's pose in the photograph references scenes depicting the crucifixion in classical art, and the installation of the framed photograph held by a haulage strap references Michelangelo's *Pietà* (1498-1499). The famed iconography of Jesus resting in Mary's arms in *Pietà* is recreated through the support offered by the haulage strap in the photograph, while the pain in Jesus's eyes is recreated in the performer's troubled gaze. During a Zoom conversation between Ashe and me, Ashe talks about the role of the haulage strap in his performance piece. He describes the haulage strap as an object that represents the burdens of navigating bureaucratic systems that often cause anxiety and despair for many. He says, 'Everything is kind of heavy, and laborious, and not doing anything in some way.'

To be held up by a haulage strap that is not designed for supporting the contours of the human body is excruciatingly painful. The strap protects the body from the cold hardness of the gallery floor by lifting it slightly above the ground, but the risk of harm and slumping to the floor from exhaustion is very real. Ashe's use of a haulage strap reifies the idea that a sense of security and solace offered through welfare support exists on paper, yet this support can be so robotic and impersonal that for some, it borders on traumatic. Danish professor Nanna Mik-Meyer writes that the mechanisms of welfare states create a dichotomy between people on welfare and 'professionals' working for welfare agencies or job-hunting companies that cater to those requiring monetary support. In the case of Workforce Australia program which requires jobseekers to follow a job plan and meet mutual obligation requirements, the individual has to acquiesce to the ebbs and flows of neoliberalism. This includes applying for an endless number of jobs to meet a quota, trying to land an interview to score more 'points', meticulously recording one's income, and always altering one's availabilities to meet with job-search agencies.

In contrast, most workers in job-hunting agencies have little to no lived experience of relying on welfare. Their expertise as welfare workers is controlled by monitored adherence to meeting key performance indicators and achievement targets that are defined by the political ideologies of those in power.⁴ Being on welfare support forces one to unwillingly engage in cycles of self-surveillance and self-development performed for the benefit of the labour market.⁵ In an Australian context, the continual suppression of welfare programs through the successive passing of neoliberal policies enacted by the Australian Liberal Party has guaranteed that citizens are bereft of protection and are thus economically vulnerable. The right-wing slant of biased media outlets has time and time again painted the Labor Party as a dangerous promoter of progressive socioeconomic changes to the detriment of privatised business models. The haulage strap offers some degree of support to keep the body afloat, but at what cost?

3 Tributary Projects. 2022. 'Carport Sessions (1).' Accessed 16 October, 2022. <https://www.tributaryprojects.xyz/carport-sessions-1>

4 Mik-Meyer, Nanna. 'Professions, de-Professionalisation and Welfare Work.' In *The Power of Citizens and Professionals in Welfare Encounters: The Influence of Bureaucracy, Market and Psychology*, pp. 13-21. Manchester University Press, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv18b5fh1.6>.

5 Mark Fisher, 'The Privatisation of Stress: The Numerous Pathologies Generated by Neoliberalism Can Only Be Cured Within A Revivified Public Sphere,' *Soundings* 48 (2011): 125-127.

NSW towns dumped from Vic border bubble

NSW is dumped from the Vic border bubble. NSW is dumped from the Vic border bubble.

What does it mean for NSW?

It means that we will be at a disadvantage to other states in attracting and retaining skilled workers, because of our proximity to Victoria. It also means that we will have less influence on policy decisions made by state governments such as transport and health issues, which are important for business growth.

The NSW towns dumped from Victoria's border bubble include:

Ballarat—the Victorian town of Ballarat is no longer in the state's "border bubble" after a decision by the federal government. The change means residents will now have to pay GST on goods purchased online, as well as paying tax on their income and receiving welfare benefits.

Untitled (files) comprises of personal files embedded in cast concrete slabs. The files have been cast in concrete filing cabinet drawers and are vertically assembled on a hand trolley and a dolly. Ashe has used concrete due to its association with strength, and also, to reference the architecture of bureaucratic institutions and the makeup of roads—two of many systems that exist to govern our lives and our movements. Cement, one of the ingredients required to make concrete, appeals to Ashe as it is associated with strength, which can be, however, compromised by fluctuations in temperature. Cement is durable, but it needs to be combined with other materials to withstand pressure. As an example, concrete is created from cement acting as a binding agent, combined with water along with aggregates such as crushed stone, sand and gravel. Like bureaucratic organisations that are comprised of hundreds of people working in different departments, cement must work in conjunction with other materials to reveal its weight-holding capabilities.

Later on, in the same conversation between Ashe and me, he shares his experiences of living in Wodonga during last year's lockdowns, when Greater Sydney was designated a 'red zone' in June and July 2021.⁶ He recounts how Albury-Wodonga was declared a 'border bubble' community from August 2020 to November 2021 with residents of these communities becoming a subject to the power play between New South Wales and Victoria. Ashe needed a border bubble permit to cross the state border to visit certain amenities that existed only in Albury but were not available in Wodonga. Ashe shares a memory of trying to cross the border with some files that he needed to take to a medical appointment. On that occasion, he was denied entry into New South Wales. At the time, this was traumatic for him.⁷

The files and the filing cabinet drawers cast in concrete speak to the infallibility of enacted border policies that, in the case of the border closures between Victoria and New South

⁶ On the 9th of July 2021, the Victorian Government declared New South Wales to be an 'extreme risk zone'. The next ten days saw the Delta variant spring to life in New South Wales and make its way across the Victorian border. The Victorian Government urged all Victorians to return to Victoria. On the 20th of July, Victorians were given 12 hours to make it across the Victorian border from New South Wales, which would have been impossible for some. On the 23rd, all New South Wales was designated as a red zone. No one was allowed to enter Victoria unless they were classified as exempt, which required an application for a permit. Thousands of residents in Victoria and New South Wales were prevented from returning home due to these measures. For more information, see Victorian Ombudsman. 2021, 16. *Investigation into decision-making under the Victorian Border Crossing Permit Directions*. Melbourne: Victorian Ombudsman. <https://www.ombudsman.vic.gov.au/our-impact/investigation-reports/investigation-into-decision-making-under-the-victorian-border-crossing-permit-directions/>

⁷ Residents of the border bubble communities required permits to pass through checkpoints on either side of the Murray River (Wodonga being on the Victorian side) which depended on which state government was closing their borders. Residents in border bubble communities would have to obtain their relevant state border bubble permit to pass through border checkpoints, which were guarded by police and army officers on the border entry of whichever state had their borders closed at the time. Each permit would last fourteen days. Both Albury and Wodonga were inaccessible to each other for the first time since the Spanish flu outbreak of 1919.

Wales, failed to consider the complex needs of those needing to travel between the two states.⁸ Cement is dreary, unchangeable, soulless, anonymous, and lacking personality. The files embedded in the cast filing cabinets are trapped and have nowhere to be moved to, much like the people and families whose pleas to cross the border between the states were either ignored or rejected due to the immense pressure on the NSW Ministry of Health and Victorian Department of Health to keep COVID out of their respective states. In *Untitled (files)*, the stacked concrete slabs stand to represent the bureaucratic farce that was the imposition of control of the Victorian Department of Health onto the lives of people living in border bubble towns. Ashe's decision to cast personal documents in cement works to memorialise the countless stories and nuanced situations of those affected by the border policies of both states, trapped in a complicated administrative drama that was horrific for some.

Crackdown on the scammers costing tens of millions each year

The scammers are costing the country tens of millions each year. The government has spent \$2 million to date on this operation and is planning a further \$10 million for next financial year. This money could be better used elsewhere in law enforcement or assisting victims of crime.

What are the risks if the scammer gets caught?

If they get caught, they will face serious penalties including imprisonment, fines and deportation from Australia. If you have been targeted by a scammer, report it to police immediately so we can take action against them before they cause any more harm to our community.

Displayed on the far wall adjacent to the framed photograph supported by the haulage strap are a framed envelope and a photograph, both embossed with text. The envelope and photograph are secured in oak frames with museum glass. While using museum glass prevents reflection, it also alludes to the importance of the documents in the images, even though viewers are unaware of what the files contain—the only information that can be gleaned from the works is two statements seen embossed on the documents. Ashe suggests that the statements bring 'humanity' to the works, which are, arguably, the most personal works in the exhibition. The statements immortalise Ashe's mother's experience of being a victim of a Telstra scam and the feelings of helplessness that arose from dealing with the fallout of being scammed out of a lot of money.

A bound document pictured in *Untitled (FC1.D3.HF8)* reads 'She drew the blinds as best as she could', referring to Ashe's mother's fear of retribution after being scammed; she drew all the blinds in her house to prevent the scammers from harming her for a second time. Ashe's mother's household remained in darkness as she was unable to open her blinds because of her arthritis. *Untitled (C4)* displays a crumpled A4 envelope that reads 'If I live through this, what comes next?'—with the question mark at the end embossed in imitation gold leaf. Within the context of *Et sequentia*, 'this' could relate to any incident where people have had to wade the treacherous waters of bureaucratic administration that limits individual agency, and yet is normalised to the point where it is rendered invisible; or the devastating consequences of financial uncertainty that has been plagued upon victims of scams—where \$336 million has been lost to fraudsters this year in Australia alone.

8 During the peak of the COVID Delta strain infection period in 2021 in Victoria and NSW, a report commissioned by the Victorian Ombudsman found that the Department of Health's Domestic Exemption Team Staff had thirty seconds to categorise and process border crossing applications. Staff were expected to complete fifty applications per hour. Between July 9 and 14 September 2021, 33,252 individuals applied for exemptions to cross the Victorian-NSW border, and only 8% of these applications were granted. For more information, refer to Victorian Ombudsman. 2021, 6-17. *Investigation into decision-making under the Victorian Border Crossing Permit Directions*. Melbourne: Victorian Ombudsman. <https://www.ombudsman.vic.gov.au/our-impact/investigation-reports/investigation-into-decision-making-under-the-victorian-border-crossing-permit-directions/>

In his text *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology Stupidity and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (2015), author David Graeber summarises German theorist Max Weber's approach to bureaucracy by stating that bureaucratic forms or organisations were 'so obviously superior to any form of organisation that they threatened to engulf everything, locking humanity in a joyless iron cage bereft of spirit and charisma.'⁹ The works in *Et sequentia* epitomise this statement: Ashe presents an exhibition of work that challenges humiliation and despair caused by the bureaucratic entanglement that is the Australian welfare state and the farcical border policies that made interstate travel complex during the height of the pandemic. Judging from Ashe's experience of living in a border bubble during Victoria's COVID-19 lockdown, it is important to remember that borders perpetuate inequality and dispossession by limiting the movements of people between states, countries, and continents without considering the lives of people that lie on either side of these imaginary lines. At the same time, while the welfare state exists to correct inequalities within certain demographics of Australians that depend on its financial assistance, it can be described as a failed experiment. It does not guarantee that citizens are protected from damages to their social and financial status.¹⁰ *Et sequentia* is beautifully uncomplicated in that Ashe does not speculate on a solution to fix the unfixable. Instead, his sculptures, performance remnants and photographs tell of the experiences that have shaped the artist's present, delivering empathy and compassion for those who have suffered similar injuries from existing within the peripheries of social and economic precarity.

⁹ David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (Hoboken: Melville House, 2015), 32.

¹⁰ Rob Watts (1980), 'The origins of the Australian welfare state', *Historical Studies*, 19:75, p. 177, DOI: 10.1080/10314618008595633

Matt Siddall is a curator and writer living in Naarm/Melbourne, originally from Boorloo/Perth. He recently curated 'i burnt a hole in my pocket to fix myself' at M16 Artspace in Canberra/ Ngunnawal Country and 'as real as it gets' with Samuel Nugent at SEVENTH Gallery.