

ASHE
(Untitled) abrogation

Void_Melbourne,
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A Meditation on Cruelty Matt Siddall

I have a particular memory of visiting a friend's share house in Perth and laughing at a photo of Vladimir Putin riding on horseback that was attached by magnets to her housemate's fridge. I didn't realise until recently that this photo was one of a series of photos of Putin taken on a Siberian camping trip that was released on the Kremlin's website. You'd expect photos of this nature to be released by media outlets or a snooping member of the public. The difference between these photos of Putin and other captured photos of politicians in stages of undress is that Putin has carefully released these images to insert himself into a projection of traditional masculinity.¹ Putin's fearless masculine aura, archetypal of the rhetoric he has promoted of Russia as a collectivist and patriarchal powerhouse, emboldens those who stand for traditional Russian values of patriotism and strength and ostracises those that exist outside of the restraints of heteronormativity. The simplified dichotomy of the ruthless masculine versus the helpless feminine is endlessly manufactured in news cycles and analysis articles depicting the independent (and lonesome) Russia versus the weakened Ukraine, which is examined in Ashe's '(Untitled) abrogation)' through the medium of performance.

'(Untitled) abrogation' is a continuation of Ashe's exploration into the paradigmatic relations between what it means to belong and the nuances of existing on the fringes of society. The performance is an examination of the dualities between the oppressor and the oppressed, reified in the act of two performers standing a step behind handmade Russian and Ukrainian flags. The male-identifying performers face each other, yet they cannot see one another's faces as their bodies are obscured by the flags of 'their' respective nations. Their genitalia are visible through a cut-out gloryhole, signifying a concept fundamental to understanding one of the motivations behind Ashe's creative practice: that men in power exert their influence into every crevice of society to the detriment of the rights of those who are othered. The man behind the Russian flag takes a step and walks into the flag to collect it. As the flag clings to his unrecognisable form, it serves as a reminder that the man is denied of his humanity as a symbol of the state by participating in conflict through choice or by conscription. The performer walks into the Ukrainian flag and continues to walk into the person, again not visible to the 'Russian' performer, culminating in their bodies pressed against one another as the 'Russian' forces the 'Ukrainian' back and pins them up against a wall.

The act of one body physically exerting pressure onto the other, as rehearsed as it seems, is indicative of an orchestrated hegemony of strength and independence aligned with a nationalist vision of Russia that aims to repress marginalised identities whose visibility is prominent in societies that have embraced progression, democracy, and equality.² These 'Western' (liberal) values are embodied in the nations that Putin is trying, and has tried, to conquer. The Russian invasion of Ukraine that commenced on the 24th of February is the latest in Putin's disastrous string of attempts from Putin to recoup the glory of the USSR by means of conquest; the first being the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, followed by the annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014.

The performers and flags are accompanied by two props that supervise the actions of the two performers: a thurible that burns frankincense and myrrh and a handmade Russian Presidential

¹ Andrew Foxall, "Photographing Vladimir Putin: Masculinity, Nationalism and Visuality in Russian Visual Culture", *Geopolitics* 18 (2013): 135.

² Alexandra Novitskaya, "Patriotism, sentiment and male hysteria: Putin's masculinity politics and the persecution of non-heterosexual Russians", *NORMA* 12, no. 3-4 (2017): 304.

Standard flag. For Russians, the synthesis of the church and the state is an unshakeable absolutism that cannot be dismantled. Both props symbolise the fusion of church and the state that uses faith as an excuse to allow discrimination against the suppressed with impunity. By placing the Presidential Standard and thurible on the sidelines of gallery space, the institutions of church and state act as silent bystanders to deliver the reality of current affairs within the confines of the performance. Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, known as the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church, endorsed Russia's invasion of Ukraine to the disgust of many Orthodox bishops across the country, describing Russian opponents as a threat that should be eradicated. He has endorsed the conflict between both nations as a metaphysical issue that sees 'decadent' Western values face head-to-head with the remaining vestiges of what Putin believes is an attempt to revitalise Russia as both a world superpower and a traditional Christian nation.

In a Moscow sermon that Patriarch Kirill delivered on the 6th of March, he argued that gay pride parades were reason enough to justify Russia's aggression, stating that the conflict in Eastern Ukraine was "a fundamental rejection of the so-called values that are offered today by those who claim world power".³ For Patriarch Kirill, gay pride parades act as a metaphorical litmus test of progressivism, where Russia is situated on the conservative side of the fence and nations such as Ukraine that have slowly emerged as a hesitant supporter of queer rights are situated on the 'undesirable' side of acceptance. According to Russian Orthodox doctrine, the existence of a "Russian world" which includes Ukraine symbiotically combines the entrenched sociocultural influences of the Orthodox Church and the Russian military, where the church and the military are ideologically aligned in a spiritual justification to rid Ukraine of the 'evil' West in the form of NATO that is encroaching on Russia's western borders.⁴ Using Patriarch Kirill's rhetoric as one examples of many to legitimise excuses for aggression, Russia has used religion as an excuse to degrade and destroy civil rights awarded to marginalised populations in the enforced acts of violence against Ukraine's people, their identity and their infrastructure under the guise of demilitarisation and 'de-Nazification', while ensuring that Ukraine remains a neutral state in geopolitical negotiations.

If we place history and religion aside, Ashe is concerned with how the rights of women, queers, and all (in)visible others in both Russia and Ukraine have been countermanded due to Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The Russian military has, without consequence, exerted an onslaught of brutality on the bodies and minds of the Ukrainian people. The accumulation of fear experienced by Ukrainians and the Ukrainian diaspora has brought an endless nightmare of suffering by the violence of the Russian army in forms of rape and torture rendered against Ukrainian men, women, and children. As atrocities against humanity repeat themselves once again throughout the course of history, the Russian army has used sexual violence as a tactic of genocide to shape the future of a country through forced impregnation, where the villages of Irpin and Bucha were discovered to be sites of horrendous crimes against humanity.

The grandiose ugliness of warfare is materialised in the neutral space of the gallery as the performer positioned behind the Ukrainian flag remains trapped. The performer behind the Russian flag tramples onto his personal space and does not falter in his movements. Yet, we cannot do a thing but observe as the encounter plays out. The literal exaggeration of the 'Russian' performer's actions is an articulation of Ashe's fears concerning the annihilation of the rights of marginalised populations that have been tirelessly fought for. Russia's aggression against its western neighbour in the eyes of Putin stands for the victoriousness of traditional values and identities under the condemning eyes of the West, but the resolve of the Ukrainian people that have been forced to exist under a vanquished regime of terror again demonstrates that universal values of love, acceptance and kindness within scenes and stories of abject horrors can and will remain triumphant.

³ Delia Gallagher, 2022. "Russian Orthodox Church acknowledges gay pride parades were part of the reason for Ukraine war." *CNN*, March 8 2022 07:42am ET, World, https://edition.cnn.com/europe/live-news/ukraine-russia-putin-news-03-08-22/h_de0516e0f59ac2214af21bbb0aaf152e

⁴ Marlene Laruelle, "So, Is Russia Fascist Now?," *Labels and Policy Implications, The Washington Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (2022): 152-153. DOI: 10.1080/0163660X.2022.2090760

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Matthew (Matt) Siddall is a writer, emerging curator and arts worker based in Naarm (Melbourne). Matt has published writing for *Caliper Journal*, *un Projects*, SEVENTH Gallery, the University of Western Australia, the University of Melbourne and more. Matt completed an MA in Art Curatorship at the University of Melbourne in 2020.

In 2018, he co-founded Cool Change Contemporary, a multi-gallery artist-run-initiative in Boorloo (Perth). Previously, Siddall was a co-director of Moana Project Space from 2017 until 2019, where he co-curated *'It Is a Long Time Since This Moment'* as part of the Unhallowed Arts Festival. He co-curated *'silences between ticks of a clock'*, with Karl Halliday at George Paton Gallery, the University of Melbourne in February 2020.

Matt recently curated *'i burnt a hole in my pocket to fix myself'* at M16 Artspace, Canberra, in March 2022 and *'as real as it gets'* with Samuel Nugent at SEVENTH in June 2022.

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