

# Bureaucracy of Feelings

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13 Sep 2025

● Bureaucracy of Feelings, Gertrude Contemporary 23 AUG – 12 OCT 2025



*Bureaucracy of Feelings*, installation view, Gertrude Contemporary, Naarm Melbourne, 2025, image courtesy and © the artists, photograph: Christian Capurro.

Standing in *Bureaucracy of Feelings*, curated by artist, writer, and self-described facilitator Diego Ramírez, I’m trying hard to imagine how incorporated artist-run initiatives (ARIs) ever undertook this titular “running” in the pre-email age. How did anything happen—which it clearly did—if not facilitated via a constant barrage of correspondence with artists, board members, funding bodies, prospective venue-hirers or studio residents? What I do know is that the over the 2015–2025 period surveyed by Ramírez—as part of Gertrude Contemporary’s fortieth anniversary series *Past is Prologue: Four Decades of Gertrude*—ARIs, as well as larger arts organisations and most artists themselves, entered an era of “email realism.” Sarah Brasier’s painting *I dream it, I work hard, I grind ‘til I own it* (2023) confirms this state, depicting an endless plain of anthropomorphised flowers using laptops—the one in the foreground even uses a leaf as a standing desk.

I point to “email realism” as one symptom of the contemporary condition of “total bureaucracy”—coined by anthropologist David Graeber in his 2015 book *The Utopia of Rules* and cited in the exhibition’s publication, authored by Ramírez. For Graeber, “total bureaucracy” is the normalisation of the use of bureaucratic methods—of surveillance, protocols, policies, professionalisation, risk management strategies, and so on—to organise ever-broadening aspects of human life. Graeber emphasises the use of bureaucratic methods as a way to effectively manage “social situations which are founded on structural violence,” and the inevitable unrest generated. Ramírez uses the term to frame the curatorial rationale of *Bureaucracy of Feelings*, selecting artists associated with his time as director of Seventh Gallery, an incorporated ARI in Melbourne, from 2018–2023. According to the exhibition publication, these artists also “had parallel roles as volunteers, board members, advisory panellists, and arts administrators,” and their works are chosen or commissioned as responses to their experiences in this context.



*Bureaucracy of Feelings*, installation view, Gertrude Contemporary, Naarm Melbourne, 2025, image courtesy and © the artists, photograph: Christian Capurro.

Upon entering Gertrude, the first work I see is also viewing the exhibition. John Elcatsha's *Observer / Al-Manazir 1&2* (2024) comprises two translucent glass discs around fifty centimetres in diameter, installed close to the ceiling and inset into the gallery's walls. This placement, and the distance between the discs, is such that the work is visible throughout each of the interconnected spaces of the gallery. The discs have been shaped to replicate Elcatsha's glasses prescription, and each is placed beside the gallery's internal security cameras, clearly alluding to visual surveillance technology. Embodying a now near-ubiquitous feature of public and much private space in this country, the inclusion of this work prompts thoughts on managerial processes as attempts towards total visibility as risk management, as well as the literal surveillance of populations in order to "manage" them.

In one of the two main gallery spaces, Taungurung artist Steven Rhall's short video *Financial Disclosure* (2020) could also be read in relation to the bureaucratic demand for a particular type of transparency—here, of one's personal finances. Rhall bluntly announces that he would "like to be the first Indigenous artist to make a full, public financial disclosure," before itemising his annual income against expenses and calculating his net profit: just over ten thousand dollars. This performance of an administrative act recalls both the budgeting required by arts funding applications, as well as that demanded by the bureaucratic behemoths Centrelink and the Australian Taxation Office. It almost goes without saying that Centrelink has long weaponised the obfuscatory power of bureaucracy in order to dissuade and control people who try to access state social services.

Like Elcatsha's installation, Moorina Bonini—of the Yorta Yorta Dhulunyagen family clan of Ulupna and the Yorta Yorta, Wurundjeri, and Wiradjuri Briggs/McCrae family—has made an intervention into the gallery's architecture for her work, *bawu marking* (2025). The work stretches up the gallery wall in a monochrome band of iron bark sap and red ochre, before continuing along the modular ceiling panels, most of which Bonini has removed. The absence of this facet of the gallery's white cube reveals the bare roof and leaf-littered skylights. Unlike the other works here, soon to be vanquished when the exhibition closes, the painted panels of *bawu marking* will be flipped and reinstalled into the ceiling. For Bonini, this is the second long-term intervention she has made into the internal infrastructure of Gertrude Contemporary—the first being *yenmatj (to burn)*, in 2024. In this instance, Bonini burnt South-East Indigenous mark making into the exposed wooden beams of the gallery walls—a gesture that she describes on her website as both an institutional critique and "acknowledgement of the woka (Country), upon which Gertrude Contemporary exists." The endurance of both of these works beyond the prescribed durations of their exhibitions could be read, in part, as a refusal to conform to the usual protocols of the white cube. In the context of *Bureaucracy of Feelings*, *bawu marking* appropriates the suitably office-like ceiling panels and refuses to leave—ensuring an ongoing presence in the kind of space where, according to bureaucratic logic, it's possible for an organisation's engagement with Indigenous people to be considered quantitatively, rather than qualitatively. That is, satisfied by tokenistic inclusion rather than substantial engagement.



*Bureaucracy of Feelings*. installationview, Gertrude Contemporary, Naarm Melbourne, 2025. image courtesy and © the artists, photograph: Christian Capurro.



Discursively, *Bureaucracy of Feelings* is framed as an “anthology” of Seventh Gallery (pseudonymised as “Registered Charity”), temporarily nesting it within the organisational structure of Gertrude Contemporary. While this “anthology” differs from Seventh Gallery proper, the device alludes to organisational structures—both governmental and corporate—in which the proliferation of departments can reach levels only describable as Kafkaesque. In the exhibition text, several points of association between the galleries are noted. One is of place and circumstance—having been located several blocks apart for seventeen years, before both were rent-hiked out due to the (self-inflicted) gentrification of the area. Another is that the artists featured in the exhibition, through their aforementioned para-artistic activities, “directly or indirectly supported Gertrude’s activities over the past decade,” alluding to the strong artistic-network overlap between the spaces.

This nested structure also allows a dual focus on both artists and not-for-profit galleries as imbricated within the contemporary “total bureaucracy” and its demand for professionalisation—rather than just artists themselves. Gertrude Contemporary’s organisational history is therefore considered in these terms, from its establishment as a studio complex and gallery in 1985—directed by the then-twenty-year-old Louise Neri—to its current status as, in industry terms, a small-to-medium arts organisation with public organisational funding. While this trajectory is not necessarily desirable for ARIs, there was a distinct shift around the early-to-mid-2010s in the funding of many of these galleries—at least in Melbourne—away from the expectation that artists pay to sub-lease the space and towards the widespread cessation of this practice, as well as efforts towards paying artists’ fees. Like the artists in *Bureaucracy of Feelings*, my knowledge of this micro-history comes via my direct involvement with these ARIs since 2012. I should also emphasise that the galleries I am referring to—such as TCB Art Inc., Bus Projects, KINGS Artist-Run and Seventh Gallery, all now over twenty years old—were generally volunteer-run (TCB remains so), open-call, not-for-profit and leased their spaces. Although this removal of the exhibition fee was beneficial for artists, particularly the emerging artists they largely supported, it also meant that the galleries lost the stable income required to pay rent.

Instead, governmental funding was sought—from council to federal—which required constant managerial labour including writing detailed applications, administering ever-diversifying programs and grant acquittal. Those on ARI boards began chasing letters of support, writing budgets and strategic plans, and arguing for the “experience and capability of the people leading and governing (the) organisation.” This line is pulled directly from a state-funded grant application form, and also refers to the fact that, in many cases, this administrative burden resulted in changes to organisational structure. Historically, the structure of these galleries was that of a volunteer board which collectively dealt with all administrative and practical matters, and sometimes a group of volunteer exhibition attendants. Once it became clear that these galleries were now reliant on securing funding to survive, directors and organisation co-ordinators with the requisite “experience and capability” were appointed and afforded payment in order to maintain this now constant condition.

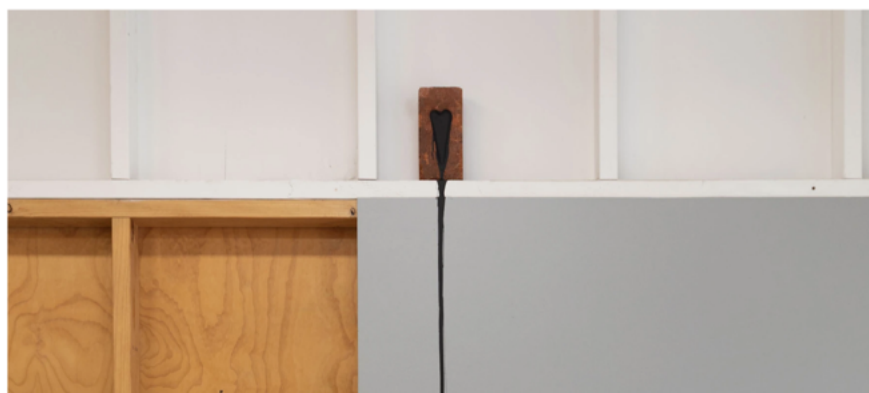


The absurdity of the language and affect adopted by these administrators and artists (myself included) in order to convey their “professionalism” is highlighted by both Lucreccia Quintanilla and Sophie Penkethman-Young. Quintanilla’s audio work *Thresholds* (2025) is played through one large speaker from the artist’s iconic green soundsystem, installed in a space adjacent to the main galleries. Uncannily benign music is interspersed with snippets of dialogue. I attentively scribble down what I hear, catching: “keep me in the loop,” “per my last email,” “wear many hats,” and “have a seat at the table.” These phrases selected by Quintanilla are adopted as a particular learned mode of address used to convey the speaker’s bureaucratised relationship to their interlocutor—a mode that in its most nefarious form can accomplish the aforementioned smooth management of social disquiet at injustice or violence. Penkethman-Young similarly parodies the affect, self-presentation, buzzwords and visual tropes of the tech-optimised young professional in her video *In Progress: The Wait of Expectation* (2022)—which feels like watching the TikTok feed of someone aspiring to this position. I’m sure that there is a module in a Fine Art doctoral program somewhere—another contemporary driver of artistic professionalisation—through which one can learn to talk the talk.

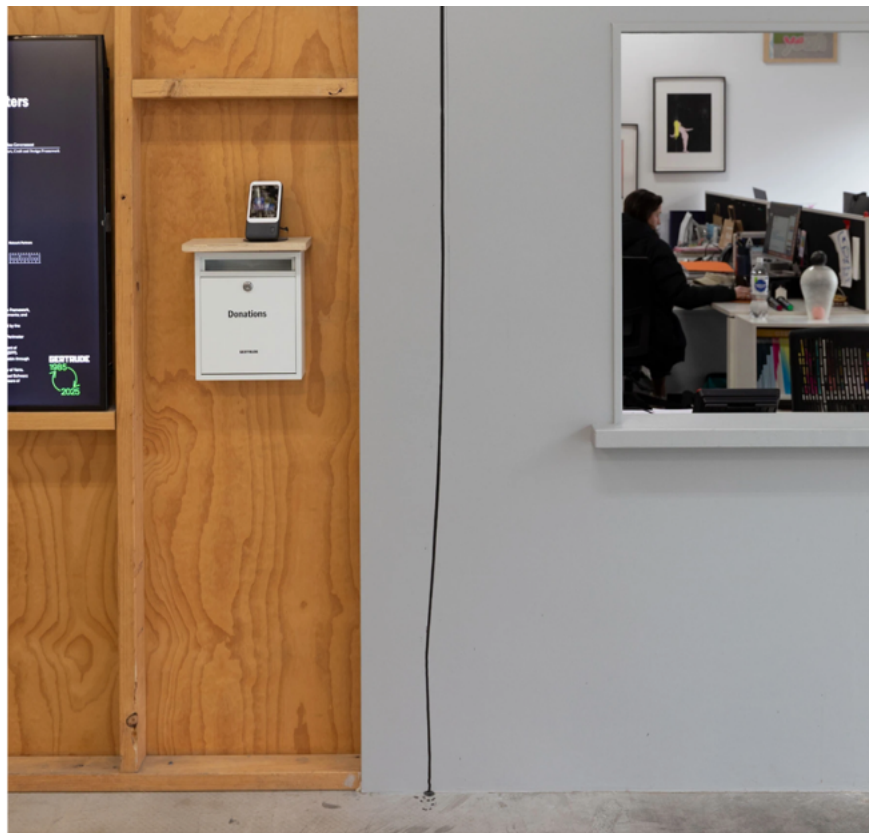
Turning this satirical lens onto the scene of the incorporated-ARI board meeting is the film *Animating Principles* (2023), which follows the fictionalised proceedings at Watch This Space, located in Mparntwe (Alice Springs). Meeting attendees are puppets, voiced and animated by people associated with the gallery. As such, *Animating Principles* is credited to a suitably long list of collaborators: Leonie Brialey, Sia Cox, Gabriel Curtin, Jonathan Daw, Jorgen Doyle, Charlie Freedman, Russell Goldflam, Tam Hanson, Harry Hayes, Vito Lucarelli, Meret McDonald, Dan Murphy, Seraphina Newberry, Garden Reflexxx, Beth Sometimes and Betty Sweetlove. In representing this archetypal scene, *Animating Principles* plays out the absurd digressions and well-meaning but totally impractical responses to an immediate, material issue faced by the gallery—a termite infestation.



Leonie Brialey, Sia Cox, Gabriel Curtin, Jonathan Daw, Jorgen Doyle, Charlie Freedman, Russell Goldflam, Tam Hanson, Harry Hayes, Vito Lucarelli, Meret McDonald, Dan Murphy, Seraphina Newberry, Garden Reflexxx, Beth Sometimes and Betty Sweetlove, *Animating Principles*, 2023, installation view, *Bureaucracy of Feelings*, Gertrude Contemporary, Naarm Melbourne, video of puppet show rehearsal, image courtesy of the artists and Watch This Space ARI, Mparntwe Alice Springs © the artists, photograph: Christian Capurro.







Daisy Collier. *Bleeding Heart*. 2024. installation view. *Bureaucracy of Feelings*. Gertrude Contemporary, Naarm Melbourne. red brick. black tradex paint. pain. image courtesy and © the artist. photograph: Christian Capurro.

Some of these suggestions—peaceful co-habitation with the “more-than-human” termites, for example, can be considered in relation to Koorie artist Daisy Collier’s sculpture *Bleeding Heart* (2024), installed in close proximity to Gertrude’s office. Here, Collier has inscribed a red brick with a black heart which drips paint down the gallery’s wall—the title presumably alluding to “bleeding heart” liberalism, whereby a person’s judgement or actions are perceived to be impeded by excessive emotion at the suffering of others (including termites). In this context, I understand the work as a critique of a proliferation of feelings-based social justice discourse by arts organisations, without much material effect. In an interesting juxtaposition, Jemi Gale’s sprawling mural, *trying to find evidence I’m not alone* (2025), overflows with affective forces—however what is privileged here amongst Gale’s scribble-paintings are various tokens representing the artist’s functional networks of mutual support.



*Bureaucracy of Feelings*. installation view. Gertrude Contemporary, Naarm Melbourne, 2025. image courtesy and © the artists. photograph: Christian Capurro.

Michael Kennedy’s installation *////131,; (2025)* engages with the logic of bureaucratic abstraction as it attempts to reduce the ineffable to language. Dozens of crumpled-up pieces of white paper are scattered on the gallery floor, upon which Kennedy has printed out the titles of his previous artworks, many of which are ‘Untitled’. This self-audit, along with Rhall’s *Financial Disclosure* are two examples in *Bureaucracy of Feelings* of bureaucratic or professionalised logics being instrumentalised as artistic methodology. In contrast, many of the works chosen by Ramírez contain representations of, or references to, this thematic—while remaining methodologically closely tied to practices of painting,

sculpture, installation, film, sound-based practice, and, in Bonini’s case, Indigenous knowledge systems. Conventional forms of office-infrastructure are represented too. The sculptural elements that make up Thea Jones’ contribution—a circle of wooden chairs titled *Autoprogettazione chairs* (2021)—recall very broadly the form of a meeting, and Katie Paine’s photographic collages, *A Patient’s Lament 1 & 2* (2024), are supported by what could be small, moveable whiteboards.



Katie Paine, *A Patient’s Lament 1 & 2*, 2024, installation view, *Bureaucracy of Feelings*. Gertrude Contemporary, Naarm Melbourne, 2025. C type prints, enamel, steel, magnets, image courtesy and © the artist, photograph: Christian Capurro.

Perhaps the self-imposed constraints of Ramírez’s curatorial method foreclosed the inclusion of a wider variety of works developed through bureaucratised logics. I’m thinking here of projects like Jessie Bullivant’s soliciting of personal letters of support as artwork documentation, published in their 2022 book *Attached*; or the practice of Debris Facility Pty Ltd, an artist who frames themselves as “an artistic/corporate entity” that emerged following the corporate takeover of their former identity in 2015. However, as has hopefully become clear, through Ramírez’s conceptual framing and the artists’ works, *Bureaucracy of Feelings* covers much ground as the last exhibition in Gertrude Contemporary’s 2025 series.

ARTISTS: MOORINA BONINI, DAISY COLLIER, JEMI GALE, MICHAEL KENNEDY, SOPHIE PENKETHMAN-YOUNG, LUCRECCIA QUINTANILLA, SARAH BRASIER, JOHN ELCATSHA, THEA JONES, KATIE PAINE, STEVEN RHALL, LEONIE BRIALEY, SIA COX, GABRIEL CURTIN, JONATHAN DAW, JORGEN DOYLE, CHARLIE FREEDMAN, RUSSELL GOLDFLAM, TAM HANSON, HARRY HAYES, VITO LUCARELLI, MERET MCDONALD, DAN MURPHY, SERAPHINA NEWBERRY, GARDEN REFLEXXX, BETH SOMETIMES, BETTY SWEETLOVE, FIONA MACDONALD, DEBRIS FACILITY PTY LTD, JESSIE BULLIVANT, DIEGO RAMÍREZ

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