



deborah kelly's gods, monsters and probable histories



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On a rainy night in September 2005 passersby at Sydney's Circular Quay were treated to a rather unsettling vision. A disembodied sign, made seemingly of light, appeared on the clouds over the Museum of Contemporary Art, flickered on the water near the ferry wharves, twirled around over the skyscrapers in the city and rested on Governor Macquarie's tower. It said: Beware of the God.

This vision was troubling on many accounts as it acted out its ambiguities on Sydney's skies. First of all it played with being a 'vision' coming dramatically into view on the clouds as if it was a trick of that god it alerted us to beware of. It recalled skywriting, the Christian iconography of ascensions and Baroque miracles from the heavens. It was at once threatening (if taken literally) and joking (if taken as a pun), it was self-evident and opaque. Was it a stunt? A joke? Was it serious? Who made it, a prankster or some fundamentalist group? The only certainty was the message itself, however one took it: there was a god to beware of.

Deborah Kelly **ABOVE:** *Beware of the God*, September 2005 projection documentation. Photo: Dave Gravina Reproduced courtesy the artist and Gallery Barry Keldoulis. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney, 2008. **OPPOSITE:** *Beware of the God* October 2005, projection documentation. Photo: Alex Kershaw. Courtesy the artist and Gallery Barry Keldoulis. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney, 2008.

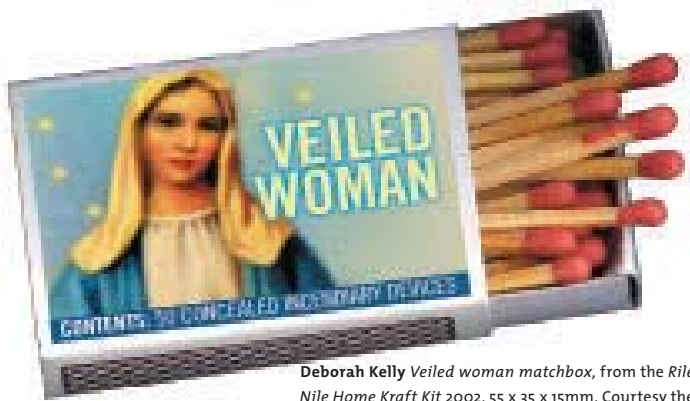
Like many of Deborah Kelly's works the projection on clouds of *Beware of the God* opened up a number of questions, both on the role of religion in contemporary politics and on the nature of contemporary art. As such it is a good place to start thinking about the constant innovation in her work, both artistic and political, as she experiments with a variety of media. It is possible to identify some recurring intellectual concerns, such as encounters between politics and religion (*Beware of the God*, *Veiled Woman*), the making of history (*Denial Beer*, *Coming Soon*), and the representation and normalisation of sexualities (*My friends and I*, *Sucka*, and the award-winning collaboration with Tina Fiveash, *Hey, hetero!*). Similarly some figurations migrate across her body of work, taking new meanings in different contexts.

Some works are produced for institutions, some as one-off images that respond to the heat of the moment and are circulated virally through friends and networks. Others are thought of as direct communicative actions in the context of contemporary politics. In some cases they are solo works, in others the result of collaborations with other artists, activists, institutions, unions and organisations.

The cloud projections, five in total between September and November 2005, were in this sense paradigmatic. Part of a complex assemblage of works using a variety of media, they hovered in a liminal area and crossed several conceptual borders. The projection which moved from the Museum of Contemporary Art to the space in and around the city's skyscrapers symbolically traced the constant shifting in Kelly's work from institutional to public spaces, and the desire and ability to be active in both. Departing from a stale rhetoric that shuns museums and galleries as possible sites of intervention to 'keep it real' in non-institutional spaces, *Beware of the God* traversed different worlds, taking advantage of their porosity to intervene in both.

The first embodiment of the idea was a 'Beware of the God freaky fun-damentalist facts' leaflet, that listed news items on different religions and invited kids to cut out the 'beware' sign and tape it to their front door to scare off evangelical visitors and superstitious burglars. The leaflet relied on friends to be distributed, dropped in public places, left on magazine shelves. As a full project it was developed for the MCA exhibition *Interesting Times*, curated by Russell Storer with the assistance of Keith Munro in 2005. It comprised a 30 second animation, shown at the MCA and on 42 video-

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Deborah Kelly *Veiled woman matchbox*, from the *Rile Nile Home Kraft Kit 2002*, 55 x 35 x 15mm. Courtesy the artist and Gallery Barry Keldoulis. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney, 2008.

billboards in train stations in Sydney CBD (www.bewareofthegod.com/?cat=6). The website functions as an archive both for the project itself - including several downloadable presents and for essays and articles on the rise of theo-conservatism and the global convergence of politics and religion.

The animated film, made entirely of text and conceived as a trailer for a movie, invited a reflection on how the meeting of religious ideas and political forces might impact on daily life, from parliament and health care to immigration policy. There was also an editioned, enamel plaque in the 'beware of the dog' tradition to be placed on one's front fence and 40,000 free postcard stickers. All the components of the project gave the same message, with subtle variations.

Kelly explored similar concerns in a 2002-03 work, *Veiled Woman*, and the genealogy as well as the genesis of her creative process is interestingly demonstrated here. In November 2002 the NSW politician the Reverend Fred Nile issued a call to ban Muslim girls from wearing the hijab in public schools. The story grew and mutated, swarming in different media, and in the general post 9/11 paranoia another layer was added: Fred Nile was said to have argued that the veil was a perfect disguise to hide terrorist devices. Kelly took a step back and looked at the veil in a historical and multi-faith perspective, realising that, arguably, the most famous veiled woman in history was the Virgin Mary. She produced some holy cards, like the ones sold in church shops, with a classic image of the Madonna with the superimposed caption 'Veiled Woman'. The idea took on a life of its own, and entered a conversation with institutions, curators and the media. It became an interactive installation at Casula Powerhouse in NSW and at Perth Institute of Contemporary Art (2003). It mutated into a craft kit, resembling women's magazines recipe cards to cut and paste images of the veiled woman - captioned 'Contents, 50 concealed incendiary devices' - onto matchboxes to be left as anonymous gifts in public places and finally turned into a fridge magnet that was later used in fundraising for a Temporary Protection Visa Guide published in 2003.

The project operated a detournement – or the recycling and recombination of well-known elements circulating in a particular context – rendering visible the mechanisms of the construction of public rhetoric and disrupting it. In all its embodiments it relied on dialogues and collaborations with art institutions but also with friends who helped the

viral distribution of the *Veiled Woman* holy cards, of the craft kit (surreptitiously inserted in the pages of magazines in newsagents across the country) and later of the matchboxes/ fridge magnets. In all its components it created, and at the same time depended on, social exchanges and dialogues, not only with willing art audiences but also with willing and unwilling strangers who became co-producers of the work.

Perhaps one of the most iconic images, the result of the ongoing collaborative practice of the group Kelly belongs to, boat-people.org, is the 2001 projection on the sails of the Sydney Opera House of an image of a tall ship accompanied by the text 'boat people'. Part of a larger project produced with the group, which included dLux Media's TILT conference of 2001 where the Indigenous activist Rebecca Bear Wingfield defined the non-Aboriginal audience as 'boat people', the image references the founding moment of 'Australian' history. The projection was organised through a website (www.boat-people.org) which provided an activist toolkit, downloadable images, stencils and a fact sheet, 'Debunking the myths' (including the Australian foundation myth). This invited people to protest against the imaginary fear of invasions by hordes of refugees that the-then Howard government had created in the lead-up to the 2001 election. The projection did not last long (it is illegal to project anything onto the Opera House). It appeared in the following months on different buildings and resonated in public opinion channels contributing to rip the supposedly neutral narrative of Australian citizens versus illegal migrants deployed in the media. More importantly it hinted at the possibility of a community of like-minded people, beyond and against the all-pervasive mainstream discourse on 'illegal aliens'.

While it redefined a very specific historical moment as a political action, it also signals the beginning of a reflection on history as a system of representation that boat-people.org have developed more recently in the project *Best We Forget (Denial Beer)* (www.bestweforget.org).

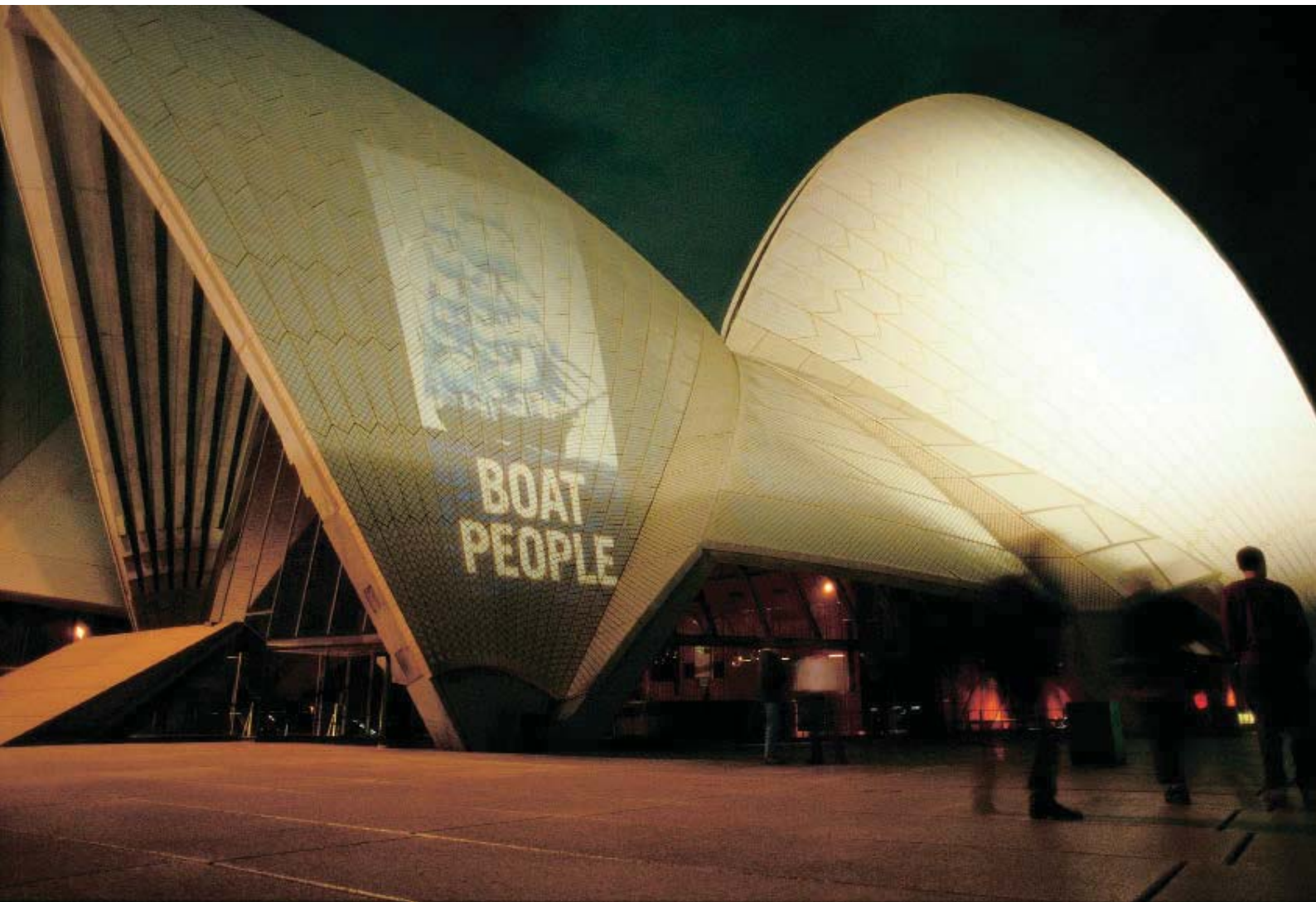
Launched in 2006 as a beer-drinking celebration of national amnesia, this project continues as a wiki that can be collectively edited to retrieve histories obliterated in the making of a particular version of Australian history, from Maralinga to a history of Australia as told through Irish songs. In 2006 Deborah was also invited to take part in *Yours Mine and Ours: 50 years of ABC TV*, an exhibition inspired by the ABC archives in collaboration with Campbelltown Arts Centre and Penrith Regional Gallery. The resulting work, *Coming Soon*, was a trailer of an imaginary mini-series on the double movement of fabrication and erasure of history (the 'History Wars') in which Kelly imagined watching Australia inventing itself through television in the footage of the ABC archives.

Deborah Kelly describes her tactics of direct action as 'a boiling down' of narratives and rhetorical figures that circulate, permeate and make up the public discourse. As a form of semiotic bricolage her works intervene both in the cultural grammar of the public discourse and in the spaces they traverse. Like Lévi-Strauss' bricoleur, she works with elements at hand, in this case signs and ideas, already existing in the mediascape. These can be visual images, but also sentences repeated until they saturate the public consciousness. She interrogates each of them for their entire



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boat-people.org LEFT: *Best We Forget Beer*, accompanying www.bestweforget.org beer labels, limericks. Photo: Deborah Kelly. **BELOW:** *boat-people.org Election projection event*, October, 2001, 5 x 10m, 35mm slide, home projector, Opera House. Photo: Tina Fiveash.






range of meanings, prodding, shaking and squeezing them. New meanings leap up through acts of recontextualisation, inversion, visual and verbal puns and new usage of existing signs, narratives and myths. All works are intertextual, with a wide range of references from history to art and cinema to popular culture.

A similar entanglement among different signs is also at the core of Kelly's more intimate art practice, such as the collage, assemblage and photomedia work she exhibits at Gallery Barry Keldoulis in Sydney. Her solo show *Knicker Knot 2007* included the series of ten collages, *Untitled (My friends and I)* a series of collages of fragments from magazines, such as handbags, details of bodies, bombs, shoes and animals, recombined to give birth to a mutant and anxious femininity. With this work she enters into a dialogue with artists working with photomontage as a means to explore the political, from the Dadaist experiments of Hannah Höch and John Heartfield to the contemporary productions of Martha Rosler and Peter Lyssiotis.

In the same exhibition Kelly flirts with and explores other monsters disrupting the normalisation of sexuality, and more simply assumptions about the feminine. *Empress (2007)* is a blonde pin-up girl who squashes in her hand a helpless King Kong in a forest of painstakingly phallic Empire State Buildings. In *Sucka*, a pop-artish sex doll (originally used in a 1994 card, *Disarm*) bares her fangs. The same doll returns in 2007 as a 3 metre wide inflatable head as part of the exhibition *The Big Easy: Relocating the myth of the 'West'* at the ACC gallery in Weimar, Germany.

In art practices that define themselves as activist the object itself is often representational, as in the case of art that illustrates a political point. In other instances the object vanishes in ephemeral and temporary events from 'community arts' to more recent politically framed projects, to relational aesthetics and its critiques. The care for detail and attention to the physical materiality and production that is found in her works is one of the traits that marks Deborah Kelly's entire practice as she experiments with ideas in different media. Most of her projects are both nomadic and site-specific, traversing worlds from art institutions to supermarket shelves and creating multifarious audiences along the way. Kelly, who is also an art director, understands well the value, affective and symbolic, of objects and their power to create, or disrupt, public discourses and communities. Her art in this sense is performative and not representational: it is not art *about* politics, it *is* politics. 

Deborah Kelly is participating in the Singapore Biennale opening on 9 September, curated by Fumio Nanjo and Matthew Ngui.

Ilaria Vanni is a lecturer in Italian Studies at the Institute for International Studies at UTS, Sydney.



Deborah Kelly Top: *Untitled* 2007 printed vinyl, electric fan, air, 6,000 penis-extension spams printed on 100gsm paper, 2 x 3 x 3m. Photo: Hans Scholtz. Reproduced courtesy the artist and Gallery Barry Keldoulis. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney, 2008. **LEFT:** *Untitled (My friends and I) #4 (of ten)* 2007, 72 x 94cm paper collage on Italian cotton paper. Reproduced courtesy the artist and Gallery Barry Keldoulis. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney, 2008. **OPPOSITE:** *Untitled (My friends and I) #1 (of ten)* 2007, 72 x 94cm paper collage on Italian cotton paper. Reproduced courtesy the artist and Gallery Barry Keldoulis. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney, 2008.