



Transcription of the discussion between:

Ilaria Vanni and Deborah Kelly

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Deborah Kelly: Good morning. I am Deborah Kelly and I am about to introduce Ilaria Vanni. Ilaria is an academic, a curator and cultural theorist. She works in the area of cultural studies, and is at present leading an international research project called "Contact Zones: Art, activism and media in Laboratorio Italia". She is also part of the management committee of the Information and Cultural Exchange (ICE) which works with western Sydney communities, recently arrived migrants and refugees.

<http://www.ice.org.au>

Ilaria Vanni: Thank you Deborah. I would like to give you a bit of context about the specific geography, the geo-political set-up of Sydney. I will try to be brief and after this geopolitical introduction I will roll out a number of concepts and ideas that are articulated in Deborah's work. I hope these ideas will be useful to reflect on what is the contact zone between art and activism, or if there is really a contact zone. Deborah will talk more about her work and specific tactics.

Sydney is a global city and it's also the land of different indigenous clans of the Eora nation. Sydney as such started its life as an English settlement, a particular kind of colony: a prison. Its geographic specificity of being an island led it to be thought of as a natural fortress with natural border protection. Prisoners could not escape from its natural borders. This is an important point because the idea of Australia as a fortress, protected by natural borders persists today, but it is reversed. Borders keep people out rather than in. One of the foundation myth of Australia is that of Captain Cook, who "discovered" Australia. *Endeavour* was the name of the ship he sailed on, and you can still see a replica of this boat carrying tourists in Sydney harbour. Other ships, The First Fleet arrived in 1788 starting the English history of Australia. The First Fleet carried a cargo of convicts, and proud white Australians still like to trace their origins back to them. This history was complicated by the movement of other people from Europe and China attracted by what came to be known as the "lucky country", and the possibility of finding gold. Therefore the characteristics of Australia were those of being a fortress country with natural border protection; that of being a colony and at the same time a colonizing power. Australia was also, from the beginning, a multiethnic society that was nevertheless imagined by its government as a monocultural one. These issues remain in the specificity of the current Australian political landscape. Together with the unacknowledged occupation of Aboriginal

land, these issues are central to a tangle of pathologies that are exploited by the present Federal Government. Racial discrimination, for instance, was legitimized in an immigration policy known as the White Australia Policy, which enforced white-only immigration for most of the 20th century. I believe that race is still at the core of many problems in Australia.

If this is a very general geopolitical sketch of Australia, Sydney has its own specific set of characteristic.

Sydneysiders define themselves according to where they live and each location and suburb immediately defines race and class issues. Sydney is also a very diverse place. Diversity is in itself a rich experience but it also means that political traditions do not settle. European political categories need to be reinvented in the context just described. There are, for instance, a few examples of antagonistic politics imported from Europe, which did not last a long time. The best example is probably the repeated attempts to establish a social centre, attempts that failed probably because the urban reality is radically different from Europe. The activist panorama in Sydney in terms of politics is quite complex. There are NGOs and there is also a general inclination of activist groups to become organized as institutions quite quickly. There are also a number of groups producing actions and events that interpret and respond to a wide range of very specific issues. These issues are often community based. There isn't a common political imaginary, and there isn't a movement. An anti-intellectual vein traverses many of these groups. In the arts there is what I perceive as a tendency to use the category of political art as a style, guerrilla as a style. Politics is fashionable. Guerrilla is the new black. On the other hand there are mainstream art institutions that either do not engage with the political, or where they do, they aestheticize the political.

This introduction was to give you an idea of the context where Deborah works. Deborah is an artist and previously was a creative director of a large left wing, advertising agency. She is interested in artwork that participates in local contexts and in the issues that surround this context. She has been voted one of the top five most un-collectable artists of Australia, which is quite an achievement. In fact, her work is given away for free. Sometimes she works collaboratively with a group called "Boat People", a collective that was born in 2001 after a series of workshops that Deborah ran. Her work engages with a variety of topics that touch the pathologies I described earlier. I would like now to make a few points about the theoretical context. I will start saying why I am such a big fan of Deborah's work. Deborah's work completely sidesteps the issue of what is political in the content of political art and she asks another question: how can art be political.

To go back to the questions that Fulvia Carnevale was asking yesterday, I think that the issue here is process. Art can be a process to intervene in politics. If we go back to yesterday's discussion on material labour and the shift from a Fordist mode of production to a post-Fordist mode of production, we see an emphasis on communication, production of affects and desires. Therefore, to be able to enter into a political dialogue with this kind of context, we have to use the same cultural grammar and use communicative strategies. This is what Deborah does: in her work art becomes a process to intervene in politics. Art is never -and she's quite adamant about this- an illustrated political idea. This is a fundamental point: the political element is not in the content, but in the process.

Connected to this idea of process there are other issues: temporality, transience and impermanence. Her work is born in very specific moments and it performs in very specific contexts. Location, that is where the work takes place, is another important factor to consider. There is also a carnevalesque aspect that interrupts the normal and expected flow of everyday life opening up the possibility of intervening politically.

And to finish, Deborah's work is also about a particular kind of mimesis, or better mimicry. Her critique becomes a mimetic exercise and a parody of that which is critiqued. This is possible through the mobilization of a politics of play and a politics of mirroring and distorting. I'm thinking specifically in terms of a work titled *Hey Hetero!* a series of posters in bus shelters, which is my first encounter with Deborah's work. The work made me very angry: it explores heterosexuality as a neutral value and the specific work I saw was a happy, 1950s looking family having a picnic. It made me angry because I thought it was a very reductive representation of heterosexuality and that there are a lot of queer heterosexual people and very straight gay couples. It took me a while to get the joke. And I guess that is a good point for Deborah to start, her work is full of inside jokes that you have to be quick to get and I was not quick at all.

Kelly: Ilaria kindly brought an article I recently wrote, and I realise that it introduces what I really want to say. I can't paraphrase it, so I'm just going to read a couple of paragraphs, and then I'm going to show a lot of pictures.

"The truth is I'm terrified. I keep imagining Europeans in the mid-1930s, asking each other in the withering world, it can't get any worse than this, can it? Can it? Everyday I scan the papers, the online news, and the news analyses. I'm searching for clues, a program. I'm trying to decipher the mysterious instructions on how artists might help change the world.

I can't tell the difference between actual events, the bald facts of history and their representation. So it seems to me that the labour, the work of art can be to participate in the collective project of interpretation. In Hans Haacke's sense the consciousness industry operates across cultural communications, most concentrated in mass media. I hope artists can engage in the contests for meaning in all the arenas in that industry.

It's not as if I think art is the best method to effect social change; not by any means. You'd be better off with a federal budget, a tame mass media and a crew of tycoons who share your agenda. Add to this, barely buried xenophobic anxieties that you can exhume and project onto, say, 353 refugees stranded on the deck of the Norwegian rescue ship, "Tampa". Let's say you can also invoke WW2 national security legislation that prevents media from showing the human faces of those refugees, rendering them ciphers, blank screens upon whom intersecting national anxieties can be played out to your enduring advantage. I would suggest that this methodology, brilliantly employed, has profoundly shifted Australian consciousness in ways that art can only dream of.

Asymmetric warfare, most notably the catastrophic 9-11 collision of planes, buildings and every television on earth also surely changes the world – but into what? Compared to the changes wrought by reckless maniacs like Al-Qaeda or the Australian federal government, art as an agent of transformation really sucks."

And then I want to refer back to what Hans Haacke said on Friday night. "You could implode with rage – or you could start somewhere and make things, little things probably".

So I'm going to show you a few very different kinds of work. Little things. For this first one I thank Sumugan Sivanesan, a member of the "Boat-People" group for making these documentations for me. The boat-people.org group emerged from a series of workshops I ran at a conference called TILT in Sydney in 2001. At the TILT conference, one of the Aboriginal participants, Rebecca Bear-Wingfield, a Kokatha Arabunna woman, kept invoking these words that the federal government was using to make people feel afraid of the refugees coming to Australia: the pejorative term "Boat People".

Rebecca Bear-Wingfield kept calling all of the non-aboriginal people at the conference "Boat People", which was really brilliant, startling and perfect. Because except for indigenous people, every one in Australia basically is a boat person. It was so especially resonant at this moment in history when our government was busy harnessing triumphalist national icons like the tall ships the first invading fleet arrived on in the late 18th century, and simultaneously fuelling border panic and xenophobia.

This image is from the Sydney Opera House, which is the main architectural icon of Australia.

Prompted by the words of Bear-Wingfield, we made an image of a tall ship with the text "BOAT PEOPLE" and projected it illegally onto the sails of the Opera house:

<http://www.boat-people.org/>

The video you can see is from protests that were being run by detained people. I don't know if you know that people who come to Australia seeking asylum, as refugees, are put into detention camps in the desert, far from the cities. There have been a lot of protests in and outside of the camps, and people acting in solidarity together.

<http://www.safecom.org.au/baxter-faq.htm>

Vanni: People in the camps are generally held there without any sort of legal proceedings for years and years. And these camps are actually a state of exceptions.

Kelly: Now I am going to show you a series of very different work. "Hey Hetero!" is a series of works I made with the photographer Tina Fiveash. I was approached by Mardi Gras Festival, the biggest, gay and lesbian, bisexual, transgender, inter-sex festival in the world, well, at least it was. They asked me if I would like to do an art project for that festival, they were thinking more along the lines of lesbian visibility... the idea of which just bored me to death.

What I proposed instead was something about heterosexual visibility. Because however strong a queer community there is in Sydney, we remain totally surrounded. There is almost no engagement between queer struggles and the idea of heterosexuality. Through the efforts of the producer and various sponsors, we were very blessed with significant access to multiple public advertising spaces and billboards. A free postcard company made forty thousand of one of the images and distributed it across the city. The Australian Broadcasting Commission built a subsite about it, talkback radio discussed it, it was in newspapers, magazines, and in the streets- so it had really extraordinary reach. The work made a lot of people furious, especially those people who are trying to collapse the distinction between church and state. That was nice.

Of course, the work was inspired by the study of whiteness. I had just been reading Toni Morrison on the invisibility of whiteness in American literature and I was using that kind of viewfinder. In one of the

newspaper interviews I did, the journalist said to me "so who is this work going to irritate?", and I loved the work so much that I couldn't imagine it irritating anyone... so I quite flippantly said that the only people who could be irritated were "straight supremacists". Which clearly refers to white supremacists - and it drove some Christians berserk, because I was conflating homophobia with racism and as they pointed out, racism is condemned in the Bible but homophobia condoned.

<http://www.wayoflife.org/fbns/fridaynews/fridaynews010323.html>

<http://www.wordspy.com/words/straightsupremacist.asp>

This one picture pretends to be about violence against straight people. I actually did go to the Bureau of Crime Statistics to find out if anyone had ever been bashed for being heterosexual and they couldn't find a single incident in history. But I thought 0.0 percent looked a bit pathetic so I just made up that 0.05% number. This work...was also in the train stations which was very nearly banned because the New South Wales Railway Authority clearly can't do maths, because they thought that we were proposing that there were going to be queer vigilantes going around hurting straight people, which was a little bit embarrassing for them when they realised, so they let us go ahead.

http://abc.net.au/arts/visual/stories/venice/hh_06.htm

In Australia it is illegal for lesbians to get access to In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) technology but also queer families don't have a lot of access to the kinds of things that heterosexuals take for granted. The question of whether non-heterosexual families can be a safe place for children inflamed Australian media at this time.

http://abc.net.au/arts/visual/stories/venice/hh_01.htm

This image is the one that irritated Ilaria so much. I would like to point out that all the people in these works except for a couple are real straight people. No heterosexuals were harmed in the production of this work.

These people in the picture are not only real heterosexuals but also they really are together and that is their real baby. This is the work that produced the complaints from the Christian people and it was also on the forty thousand postcards.

http://abc.net.au/arts/visual/stories/venice/hh_02.htm

The caption "no worries" is a typically Australian saying which just means what it looks like. You know if somebody says thankyou to you in German you say "Bitteschön", we say, "no worries".

http://abc.net.au/arts/visual/stories/venice/hh_03.htm

It has now become federal law in Australia that marriage be restricted to heterosexuals.

http://abc.net.au/arts/visual/stories/venice/hh_05.htm

It was so wonderful to see them –the artworks– in the streets. Tina and I kept on going out night after night documenting them. Wherever we saw the artworks, there were people standing around them arguing, and people would come up to us and start shouting at us. We were just photographing, documenting, not saying "we're the artists". It was really exciting to be part of something that made such a catalyst for argument and discussion.

Now I am going to show you a more serious work, partly inspired by debates in Europe. One of the Christian religious politicians in New South Wales, Fred Nile, suggested Muslim school girls be banned from wearing head scarves to school, "in the interest of diversity and unity". And when the

prime minister was first asked about Nile's proposal, he said "Fred Nile is a very good friend of mine and I know he speaks for a lot of Australians." Subsequently, there were a lot of reports of carloads of young men going out to the Lakemba and tearing veils from women walking down the street, which was very ugly and terrifying.

In a dream I remembered something central to the religion of all of those Christians (every person in the Australian government claims to be a Christian): the veiled woman Maria. So I started making little holy cards and giving them out. Somebody offered me some free printing, so I made a little kit, thousands and thousands of this little paper tool. This is the "Rile-Nile Home Kraft Kit". "Rile" means to irritate and Fred Nile's the politician. So I got to print some thousands of them for free and very brave friends of mine distributed them by sneaking into news agencies and popping them inside the pages of women's magazines, which is really incredible. And you could also download them from various websites. When all these government figures talked about banning hijab, other politicians to their right said Muslim women might have bombs under veils, because, they said, all Muslims are potential terrorists. The box says "Contents: 50 concealed incendiary devices". And you know, a match really is incendiary. So you cut these things out and you put them on match boxes and the suggestion was to just leave them lying around. And people actually started having little workshops. People who didn't know that this was an art work, it was as if it had appeared in response to their own desires to participate in this terrible argument...

At around this period, every single household in Australia got fridge magnet from the government, to protect them from terrorism. Really. A friend of mine suggested that the match box also needed to be a magnet, so it became the anti-terrorism-hysteria fridge magnet. We sold them to raise money for another project, a legal handbook for refugees in Australia in several languages. We made enough money to produce one of the English additions and the first Arabic edition of the legal information. So that was really lovely.

<http://www.bewareofthegod.com/?p=11>

<http://www.pica.org.au/art03/austr-kelly.html>

Vanni: I forgot to say something earlier on when I was talking about exodus and the power of exodus as an imaginative power. It is also in this case quite clear that in her work the power of traversing different situations, in a way the same idea has its own biography, a life that escapes the intention of the artist. One incarnation of the Veiled Woman was an installation in art centre and in a way it acted as a contamination of that space. A work doesn't need to belong in one place. It doesn't need to belong in the street or the park or the women's magazine or the gallery. There is no either or, or really, it is a case of traversing different situations.

Kelly: Ilaria kindly said before that I didn't do work that is just inert, but that's not true – some of my work is totally kind of dead, doesn't go anywhere...

Also, just to show that I am interested in "traversing situations" quite a bit, I worked with Martha Rosler and Daniel Blochowitz in a group called the Fleas, for a collaboration for the Utopia Station for

Venice Biennale 2003. We made this lovely ten-meter banner, "Beautiful Future" but I'm not really sure what it was really for... and I made several thousand matching postcards to give away.

<http://www.mip.at/en/werkbilder/2070.html>

Vanni: I've got a theory why Deborah doesn't like them because they weren't linked to a specific debate of the moment. They are more a general comment on a very general issue, which is world hunger.

Kelly: No, that's not what I meant at all and that shows exactly why my piece failed! What they are actually about is the fundamentalist Christians in the Bush administration who believes that the way to bring Jesus back is to start a giant conflagration in the Middle East. They are called Premillennial Dispensationalists, and they have an appetite for the end of the world. So, that's what I'm trying to highlight with this work- by attempting to make a new word: "endworldhunger".

In Australia, we just had a federal election. Unlike in America where the disenfranchised don't vote, in Australia it is compulsory to vote. If you don't vote you get fined, so it is an absolutely legitimate government, to my sorrow. But during the campaign the prime minister told a series of lies. Referring to this, a person of his own party was quoted as calling him a "lying rodent". After this, all across the media, suddenly wherever the prime minister went on his campaign trail there were giant rats. Which was really lovely. The Boat People group were very involved in the election campaign and we dressed ourselves up and took some things out of the government's campaign to get re-elected and turned them upside down. Their catchcry was just the one word, "TRUST", which was so horribly ironic given that they are such shameless liars.

<http://www.boat-people.org/downloads/trust.jpg>

http://www.boat-people.org/2_past_actions.htm

Vanni: Their translation of trust was strong economy, and no raise in interests rates.

Kelly: This is us with our banner, marching down the main street of Sydney looking like idiots. With our heads wrapped up in the Australian flag so we couldn't see, certainly we couldn't breathe either. And we are wearing suits like the governing party always wears suits... with these beautiful two meter rat tails. They were very rat like. We did this event, we were out on the streets every two nights, up to hundred people, down to three sometimes. We had won a big prize of money, so we had the means to produce material. We had beautiful helium balloons screen printed with a picture of the Prime Minister with his pants on fire, you know "Liar liar pants on fire", it's a childish way to call someone a liar....children especially totally loved them. And one night we made an event, we decided to hang out John Howard's dirty laundry. Which was to show the ugliness that has being covered up. We just walked into the main shopping centre in Sydney and erected this five meter clothesline with the giant underpants and projected things on it and had a big sound scape of John Howard's actual voice, telling actual lies.

http://www.boat-people.org/downloads/dirty_laundry.mov

Transcription: Ron Amber Deloney