

**No Human Being Is Illegal  
(in all our glory)**

Deborah Kelly + collaborators





## **No Human Being Is Illegal (in all our glory)**

An evolving collaborative collage portrait project with Zehra Ahmed (practice subject); Tony Albert (teacher, interlocutor); Michelle Robin Anderson; Kate Andrews; Gemma Avery; Roslyn Baker; Lucy Barker; Jo Bartels; Kevin Bathman; Prudence Black; Jenny Bohner; Briony Boulton; Ruth Braunstein; Jo Briscoomb; Frank Burgers; Gary Carsley (reader); Trish Cerminara; Shuxia Chen; Jodi Clark; Faith Colwell-Beaver; Dean Cotter; Jane Crowley; Jo Davenport; Bec Dean; Peter Drummond; Jenny Du; Helen Duckworth (team leader); Michele Elliott; Amy Emerson; Sally Evans; Alex Falkiner; Susan Forrester; Janette Gay; John Geraghty; Caitlin Gibson; Su Goldfish; Karen Golland; Daniel Green; Lydia Grossmann; Jane Guthleben; Treahna Hamm; Matthew Hamra; Toni Harris; Anne Hayward; Lynette Hearne; Rebecca Heffernan; Amanda Holt (team leader); Margo Hore; Camille Howard; Yang-En Hume (team leader); Jan Idle; Chris Isgro; Linda Jaivin (reader); Cat Jones; Nicolette Katsouras; Zina Kaye; Mary Kellam; Deborah Kelly (instigator); Sergej Kolke; Freddie Landgraf; Carli Leimbach; Tania Leimbach; Lex Lindsay (team leader); Susie Losch; Mahalia McConkey; Fiona McGregor (reader); Michael McIntyre; Tracie MacVean; Farhan Mahmud (team leader); Tea Mäkipää; Paul Matthews; Letizia Mondello (reader); Catriona Moore; Frank Motz (reader); Tamara Murray; Kathie Najar; Elena Ortega; Michelle Oxlee; Rujunko Pugh (team leader); Bernadette Roberts; Meara Robinson; Megan Rushton; Penny Ryan; Gary Samuels; Ewen Schell; Bron Shipway; Justin Shoulder; N.E. Skinner (documentation); Kim Spinks; Lin Starke; Olwen Steel; Ryan Sutherland; David Taylor; Abi Thompson; Bethany Thornber; Marian Van Dorssen; Ilaria Vanni; Raelene Weissel; Chantelle Woods (producer/curator, BoS).

**As of August 2015.**





## Foreword

Jacqui Hemsley, Director, Murray Art Museum Albury

One of Australia's leading artists, Deborah Kelly mines our visual language and forges new stories through cooperative creative labour shared with strangers. The works in this exhibition develop through 'barnacling': the portraits are adorned through the application of layers of discarded historical images in response to written or personal communications by the portrait subjects themselves. Without the barriers of language, culture, religion, sexuality, gender or race, this collaged imagery bombards the viewer with the human narrative, 'in all its glory'.

As the winner of the 2012 Albury Art Prize, Deborah Kelly is part of Murray Art Museum Albury's first suite of exhibitions. An artist whose work is studied and exhibited in Australia and overseas, Deborah in every way upholds the vision of MAMA as a significant contemporary art experience. MAMA celebrates contemporary arts, technology, and spirit made accessible through a touring program that ensures greater access to, and participation in, the culture of our times.

The exhibition of Deborah's work at MAMA includes the inaugural residency at MAMA's house. Generously supported by Museums & Galleries of NSW's Artist or Curator Residency Grant, this in-depth engagement kicks off the work's extensive tour of the regions, coordinated and managed by M&G NSW.

I want to acknowledge the brilliant local collaborators for their keen participation. Thank you for your talent and enthusiasm!

Thanks, too, to our curator Bianca Acimovic, whose energy and imagination have brought so much dynamism to our fledgling institution.

MAMA is a place to meet, a place to be challenged and engaged, for entertainment, learning and pleasure. MAMA exists because of the region's commitment to create unforgettable experiences, to encourage creative thinking, and to advocate and value the artistic pursuit of excellence. Fundamentally, MAMA aims to inspire, educate and encourage all audiences to experience art and culture.

Like MAMA, Deborah's work is progressive, witty, playful and surprising.

Embrace the unexpected!

**Opposite: Aku Kadogo,  
in *No Human Being Is Illegal*  
(in all our glory)**



## No Human Being Is Illegal (in all our glory)

Dr Tania Leimbach

Many contemporary artists have become smart cultural workers who can inspire commitment and trust from people. To be successful at this kind of work requires a certain charisma and confidence, and a belief in the value of the social world as a material of its own. Deborah Kelly is an artist who develops ambitious projects that weave together the social with her own refined aesthetic and political vision. Over six months in 2013–2014 I was one of about 70 people who collaborated with Kelly on a large-scale project commissioned by curator Juliana Engberg for the 19<sup>th</sup> Biennale of Sydney. The final work, *No Human Being Is Illegal (in all our glory)* is a suite of 20 life-sized collaged portraits.

The work was developed during intensive periods of workshop collaboration and was supported by a framework to guide the collective process. The space Kelly created enabled us to listen, talk, learn and make art, and for our labour to have value in the exchange. As collaborators in the project we came two or three times a week to collage the portraits. In Kelly's own words the process involved: *building a space for something new to happen in, and for many levels of shared contemplation, teaching and learning, and artmaking practice to be possible*. The workshop space was always set up with materials primed for hours of freely given labour. The atmosphere was relaxed, focused and creative. Kelly would move around in her own way, suggesting rather than directing the flow of activity. As the instigator of the project, she somehow managed to relinquish most of her control to a democratic process that appeared to delight her and everyone else involved.

The project began with Kelly's public call-out for people to share something intimate of their life story and worldview and to be photographed naked, 'in all their glory'. Kelly's invitation elicited more than 230 potential subjects and the selection was made collectively, using a simple voting system in the workshop. This wasn't an easy decision, but the final 20 subjects represent a fascinating cross-section of contemporary Australia. Each of the subjects was invited to come to the workshop and share readings, conversation and ideas while their collage-portraits developed. There was a mix of poetry, music, manifestos, fairytales, science texts and performance, and Kelly's idea to create a space of learning and exchange became a rare opportunity to engage intensely with the lives of others.

As an example, Latai Funaki Taumoepeau, a Sydney-based Tongan artist, offered powerful reflections from her *Island Exile Workbook*, a collation of information about the realities of climate change, particularly the impacts on vulnerable Pacific Island communities, including

Opposite: from left, Deborah Kelly, Helen Duckworth, Carli Leimbach, Meara Robinson, Kim Spinks and Tania Leimbach in the Central Park collage workshop.

her relatives in Tonga. Her community is facing a future displaced from its ancestral islands and is already living with the devastating impacts of king tides, contaminated water tables, degraded reef systems, tsunamis and cyclones. Latai's own creative practice gives voice to these communities' struggle to come to terms with their loss. It engages with a grieving process she believes is essential in considering the psychological dimensions of climate change. Latai's intimate relationship with the Pacific Islands, as well as the beauty and fragility of the ecosystems under threat, became the inspiration for the development of her portrait.

Refreshing as a low-tech art form, in Kelly's hands collage engages the imagination and destabilises the media universe of which we are all a product. In her collage work Kelly combines subtle and subversive provocation. Drawing on the legacies of German Dada (Hannah Höch) and American feminists of the 1970s (Martha Rosler), the science fictional utopias of Ursula K. Le Guin, Kelly is first and foremost a collage artist. A collector and re-combiner of images, she re-presents the world we assume we know and understand. Kelly has collected imagery from op-shops, garage sales and libraries, material discarded in the waste streams of history and memory. She has humorous affection for unlikely things – strange protozoa in a 1973 science almanac or the long limbs of a 1950 noir comic femme fatale – all grist for the mill. During the nine-month project the workshop was a visual field animated by the analogue re-mixing of media culture through collage.

Like other artists working in participatory ways, Kelly attempts to make the creation of art a more social experience, and the institutions of art more porous civic spaces. She has been making art that upends 'comfortable' notions of white Australia, unpacking gender and media representations, and exploring elusive questions of community for many years. Kelly places political value on participatory processes. When asked what motivates her to work collaboratively, she responds: *To zoom out from this question, I guess I'd have to say it's the atomisation of our era, the fragmentation of communities of interest that we see played out in, for instance, the brilliant slow-motion destruction of organised labour by the forces of capital. To zoom in, I'd have to say the experience of collective genius is absolutely intoxicating to me. I'm keen to reproduce that feeling, and especially to disseminate it.*

Providing this kind of opportunity is an artistic gesture toward living and working in more cooperative ways. The figure of the Western artist as solitary genius has been thoroughly ingested by most of us. It's the classic modernist image and the predominant legacy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But there are other legacies worth remembering. The experiments of artists like Allan Kaprow and Robert Morris forged art as an experience to be shared, bringing people

**Opposite: Tania Leimbach, Lex Lindsay, Rujunko Pugh, Amanda Holt, Freddie Landgraf, Mary Kellam, Kate Andrews and Michael McIntyre contemplate the portraits of Athol Kelly and Emma Price at the Central Park studio.**

PHOTO: N.E. SKINNER



into contact with each other in revealing ways. These artists questioned their isolation, the production of luxury objects, the hermetic domain of art institutions, and the separations between art and life. Developing skills in cooperation is not necessarily easy or therapeutic, but in order to be good at it, it needs to be practised, worked like a muscle. You need to be strong but flexible to collaborate, especially where formal structures don't exist.

Many of us who worked on the collaboration felt a distinct absence in our lives when it was over. There was something about this social experiment that just felt good. Maybe it was the collective focus and creative freedom, combined with the opportunity to meet new and interesting people. I'm glad to know people in regional communities will see the exhibition, and may have the opportunity to participate in this evolving work. I'm sure they will enjoy making collage with Deborah as much as I did.



