

**Kelly Mark**  
**108 Leyton Ave**  
**Tower Room**

*The Tower Room is only accessible via a number of steps*

*108 Leyton Ave* (2014), a new film by Canadian artist Kelly Mark is her most personally revealing work to date. Built from common expressions relating to “everything” and “nothing”, it was developed over a period when Mark was living in the social isolation of a quasi-suburban limbo on Toronto’s eastern edge. “Everything” and “nothing” are constructed as opposite but asymmetrical roles performed by the artist for a split-screen projection, plumbing the contradictions of her own personality to reveal the bravura and insecurity of having no one to talk to but yourself.

Dinh Q. Lê’s work *The Colony* is commissioned by Ikon, Artangel, Han Nefkens H+F Collection and Proyecto Amil, Lima. Supported by Arts Council England and the private patronage of the Artangel International Circle, Special Angels and The Company of Angels, with the additional support of Catherine Petitgas, Shoshana Wayne Gallery and private collection, New York.

Janet Mendelsohn’s exhibition *Varna Road* is organised in collaboration with University of Birmingham and Queen’s University Belfast. Supported by the Arts & Humanities Research Council, Exterion Media, The Photography Show, Flatpack Projects, Library of Birmingham and Ort Gallery.

**Visit the Resource Room where you can find a selection of books, audio and film.**

**If you have any questions about the exhibition please ask the Information Assistants in the gallery.**

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Ikon Gallery  
Brindleyplace, Birmingham B1 2HS  
0121 248 0708  
[www.ikon-gallery.org](http://www.ikon-gallery.org)

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and Bank Holiday Mondays, 11am–5pm  
Free entry, donations welcome

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# IKON

## Exhibition Guide

**27 January – 3 April 2016**

**Dinh Q. Lê**  
***The Colony***

**Janet Mendelsohn**  
***Varna Road***

**Kelly Mark**  
***108 Leyton Ave***

These three exhibitions feature a variety of spaces, inhabited differently, each very loaded with meaning.

*Varna Road* is a selection of photographs taken by Janet Mendelsohn during 1967–1969, when she was a student at the University of Birmingham’s newly-established Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Taken mainly in the nearby district of Balsall Heath, they tell poignant stories of a community on the verge of slum clearance. It is a far cry from the ‘guano islands’ of Peru, the location of Dinh Q. Lê’s new film installation. This extraordinary place, of austere beauty, is marked by a cruel colonialist history reminiscent of the kind of geo-politics that have been brought to bear on South East Asia, where the artist lives. By contrast, *108 Leyton Ave* is an out-of-the-way address in Toronto – “a quasi-suburban limbo” – but Kelly Mark’s work is more concerned with what was going on inside her mind when she was a resident there. It is, more than anything, a psychological space.

**Dinh Q. Lê**  
***The Colony***  
**First Floor Galleries**

**Zoe Butt in conversation with Dinh Q. Lê**

**Guano is a little known commodity, a bird manure of particularly high quality found on the unpopulated Chincha Islands. Historically it is a substance that once caused great transnational conflict, creating disputes about national ownership over the Chincha Islands between Spain and its former colonies (1864–1866) ...**

I’ve known this story for a long time, from when I was in college and I always found it fascinating that such a war (as someone who is interested in war obviously), that such a lowly material as guano, could trigger conflict and competition between many nations, not only the main instigators of the war, but allied with many other countries in a fight for guano. That was my initial interest and it has stayed with me ever since. It was only recently that I became deeply aware of the historical similarity of that narrative to China’s aggression in the South China Sea and their believing that these islands were their right to claim – which I find an unbelievable arrogance in this century. So I think what’s happening now in my backyard, it’s similar in a way with what happened with guano and American overseas expansion with their Guano Act of 1856. It’s just that here it is a fight for a different type of resource. China is fighting for natural gas, oil (because supposedly the South China Sea is rich in these deposits), as well as fishing rights, but also critically wanting control of the shipping lanes. It’s a big power grab. If you control the fishing lanes of the South China Sea you control a large area of international trade, so all of this to me is reminiscent of that kind of 19<sup>th</sup> century arrogance of America who

said we can go out and claim any island – China has this arrogance now.

**The landscape you picture inside this work appears to pitch the human world of desire against the natural world. The scene is initially unpopulated, seemingly abandoned, forgotten – the first inkling of any intelligence being the appearance of the drone. What is the role of this machine in this work for you?**

I think the drone is an aggressor, a kind of alien of the future, but at the same time it is utterly a machine we live with today. It is as if the drone is saying ‘the future is here’. The drone to me has the visual power to suggest a form of knowledge that invades.

**It is clear that we as the viewer are receiving these images through a machine whose marketed function is to spy. Considering the South China Sea disputes are reliant on mediated images of geographies taken during national surveillance operations, such as the footage inside *The Colony*, what are you trying to say about the role of imagery in sovereign warfare today?**

I think the value and power of such imagery depends on the way it is acquired. Some of the footage I am including in *The Colony* documents the American military flying over the South China Sea. These are surveillance videos that I found online. They are extremely beautiful but when you hear the Chinese radio warning “You are violating our territory” and the Americans respond with “This is international waters” – the tension is palpable. The point of this American military surveillance over the South China Sea was to make clear that America does not recognise China’s claim on these unpopulated waters, so in a way my sending in the drone to these inaccessible, similarly unpopulated guano islands is also a kind of surveillance, of

saying that this history, which in a way is being repeated, shall not remain hidden.

**You end *The Colony* with a shot of the film crew. This is unexpected, to see you give humanity back the control. By ending in that way, what are you trying to say?**

I’m saying that we, the viewer, are in control, that you as viewers are also authors in a way. Today we are accustomed to justifying that someone else is directing the toll of human suffering, but in the end I’m saying it is each of our responsibility to remember it, to understand it and thus ensure that our collective actions matter, our memory matters. When you realise you are looking directly at the cameraman who controls the drone you suddenly realize, perhaps, that you haven’t asked who is controlling the camera and why.

Zoe Butt is a curator and writer. Extract taken from the exhibition catalogue, *The Colony*, Dinh Q. Lê, available to buy at Ikon Shop or online at [www.ikon-gallery.org](http://www.ikon-gallery.org), priced £10.

#### **Associated Event**

##### ***The Legacy of Guano***

**Thursday 17 March, 6–7.30pm – FREE**

Dr Frank Uekötter, Reader in Environmental Humanities, University of Birmingham, discusses the historical context for Ikon’s exhibition by Dinh Q. Lê. The subject of Lê’s new work, *The Colony*, is a cluster of islands off the coast of Peru, rich in guano, a powerful fertilizer, and the setting for a brutal period of history.

Organised in collaboration with the University of Birmingham as part of the Arts and Science Festival 2016 (14–20 March). Booking essential. Please visit [www.ikon-gallery.org](http://www.ikon-gallery.org) to book online or call Ikon on 0121 248 0708.

#### **Janet Mendelsohn *Varna Road* Second Floor Galleries**

This is the first exhibition of Janet Mendelsohn’s *Varna Road* photographs since they were shown at The Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard in 1970. Made during 1967–69, they focus on Birmingham’s inner-city district of Balsall Heath and in particular Kathleen, a sex worker with whom Mendelsohn formed a close relationship.

Enrolled as a student at the newly-established Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), University of Birmingham, Mendelsohn was encouraged by Stuart Hall and Richard Hoggart – then deputy and director of the CCCS respectively – to explore ways in which photography could be used as “a tool for cultural analysis”. Thus we get extraordinary insight into a community in an acute state of flux, especially due to the recent arrival of immigrants from the Caribbean and South Asia, and ongoing issues relating to poverty. A number of images show the demolition of slum clearance as it rips into a tightly woven urban fabric, bulldozed blocks, terrace houses recently detached and shops boarded up. Against this tough backdrop is a compelling range of social activity. Busy street scenes are interspersed with others inside pubs, cafés and living rooms. Portraits of individuals, usually contemplative if not melancholic, are counterbalanced by a strong emphasis on family and gatherings of friends, making do and getting by.

During the late 1960s Balsall Heath was infamous as Birmingham’s largest red light district, a place of work for some 200 sex workers. Mendelsohn shows us their domestic arrangements and personal relationships as well as the tedious, unsettling nature of their profession. On the other hand, her images effectively

convey an understandable tendency to yield to the temptation of prostitution, due to difficult circumstances. We see Kathleen sometimes in her upstairs bedroom window soliciting passers-by, but more poignantly, in one photograph, she is standing, waiting in the street. The idea of her vulnerability here is heightened by her silhouette and long sunset shadow thrown onto a pavement made shiny with rain.

This is a young woman in a dark uncomfortable place, but Mendelsohn is careful not to slip into sentimentality. Other photographs make it clear that she finds Kathleen’s tenacity and defiance remarkable; also the love she has for her children, her sense of responsibility as well as her sense of fun. We see her in hospital, having just given birth to her second child, with its father Salim; at home with children in bed and at bath time, sometimes enjoying the company of other families; with a pram outside the local pharmacy; with children playing in a local park. In short, there is no suggestion of pity being requested, but rather a kind of fatalism that equates to “live and let live”. It would be wrong to assume that the inevitable displacement for Kathleen, her family and friends necessarily led to a tragic end, but clearly political power then was not on their side.

#### **Associated Event**

##### **People’s Archive Weekend**

##### ***Stories of Balsall Heath***

**Saturday 12 and Sunday 13 March**

**12–4pm – FREE**

To coincide with our Janet Mendelsohn exhibition, Ikon hosts a weekend looking back at the history of Balsall Heath, Birmingham. Mendelsohn’s images of *Varna Road* and the streets beyond form a backdrop for visitors to contribute their memories. Drop in to share your own stories, photos or memorabilia.