

Biennale artists' Working Group clarifies and responds to key points

"9 pesky artists"

- 51 participating artists signed the letter to the Board of the Biennale requesting that they end their funding arrangement with Transfield.
- Following the Board's response, 9 participating artists withdrew from the Biennale of Sydney by the time Luca Belgiorno-Nettis resigned from his position as chairman of the Board.
- Pressure from international funding agencies (government and non-government) who were withdrawing their sponsorship due to the Board's decision to remain loyal to Transfield was cited by Luca Belgiorno-Nettis and the Biennale as a factor in his resignation.
- 7 artists (Libia Castro, Nathan Gray, Ólafur Ólafsson, Ahmet Ögüt, Agnieszka Polska, Sara van der Heide, Nicoline van Harskamp) have, in conversation with the Biennale's Artistic Director, re-entered the Biennale and are showing their work as part of the programme. 2 artists (Gabrielle de Vietri, Charlie Sofo) have decided not to re-enter the exhibition.
- Employees of the Museum of Contemporary Art have resigned over Transfield's sponsorship of the organisation, and artists are beginning to question future involvement in organisations sponsored by profits of mandatory detention.

Public Funding vs. Private Sponsorship

Public funding for the arts is administered by the Australia Council for the Arts. This is funded by taxpayers' money, much like the Australian Sports Commission or the ABC.

Private sponsorship, on the other hand, is an agreement that holds value for both parties. By funding the Biennale and the artworks within it, a corporation will gain positive brand association and an engagement program that they think will enhance their reputation and appeal. Private sponsorship is funded by the profit-making activities of that company, in this case, operating and managing the offshore detention centres on Manus Island and Nauru.

Belgiorno-Nettis Family

We acknowledge the long-standing and significant contribution of the Belgiorno-Nettis family to the arts, and especially to the Biennale. We believe that this sponsorship was a genuine desire to support the arts. However, their company, Transfield Holdings, invests in and profits from a policy that breaches international conventions on human rights, and those profits were being channelled into the Biennale. This was not something that we could endorse through our participation in the Biennale.

Australia Council for the Arts

The Australia Council for the Arts is a public institution. It operates at arm's length to the government of the day. It has no influence whatsoever on the Australian Government's mandatory detention policy. No artist, by accepting funding from the Australia Council, acknowledges any sort of implicit approval of the policies of the government of the day. Likewise, no rejection of Australia Council funding would have any influence or relation to the government's policy on asylum seekers. Suggesting that they would have any effect is like suggesting that to protest the government's stance on gay marriage, you should boycott Medicare.

The Australia Council Act 2013 says a minister is “unable to give direction in relation to the making of a decision by the council, in a particular case, in relation to the provision of support”. This ensures that the giving or withholding of arts funding is not abused as a political tool, and that politicians' pet-artists are not funded over other art projects that the Australia Council judging panel deems worthy of funding.

George Brandis

The Attorney General's letter to the Australia Council is an attempt to shift the public focus away from mandatory detention and onto control over arts funding. If the government wants to save taxpayers' money, processing asylum seekers quickly onshore rather than detaining them in facilities overseas would save many times more money than what the federal government spends on arts funding each year.

Bullying the Australia Council for the Arts into refusing to fund artists who have declined to compromise their own ethics by taking money that has a direct link with profits they regard as morally ill-gained, is a direct attack on artistic freedom, on freedom of expression and on democracy as we understand it here in Australia. It would completely undermine the integrity and the public utility of arts funding to make it political – to withhold money from artists who are in dissent against a certain government position.

By logical extension, George Brandis' ultimatum would see public funding stripped from a children's sports festival that refused sponsorship from a tobacco company.

"Vicious ingratitude"

Artists who withdrew made a personal choice based on conscience. As freelancers, artists are entitled to turn down contracts funded by sponsors whose values do not align with theirs. It's like any other contractor turning down a contract because they do not believe in the company's values. Art sponsorship is not welfare. Artists do not have to take money or employment if they believe it is morally compromising.

To talk about our withdrawal in terms of “gratitude” suggests that corporate sponsorships are a question of pure, disinterested giving. That's not the case. Corporates wouldn't bother with arts sponsorship if they didn't believe it helped their bottom line.

Sponsorship works for the corporation by adding value to its brand, and increasingly, by helping it recruit the best talent. Arts sponsorship means they can offer terrific perks to their

employees – tickets to shows, opportunities to meet and engage with artists at exclusive events, such as previews and dinner parties. They can take their key clients to see the orchestra, the opera, the Biennale. It's real, concrete value for them.

Talking about "ingratitude" sets up a master-servant relationship that doesn't reflect what corporate sponsors gain from their relationships with artists and arts organisations.

Future of the Biennale

The Biennale has invited the artists' Working Group to be involved in the drafting of its Corporate Social Responsibility Policy. At this juncture we would like to accept this invitation and look forward to working with the Biennale to develop new, ethical sponsorship arrangements. We see this as a positive opportunity for the Biennale to find sponsorship from corporations whose values align with those of the Biennale and its stakeholders.

Additional to our involvement in the CSR Policy, we suggest that the Board seek to diversify its membership to include independent curators, artists, critics and academics. This may assist in bridging the gap between corporate interests and those of artists and the wider arts community.

Future of Philanthropy

The future of ethical philanthropy and ethical sponsorship is in no way jeopardised by the questions that have been raised by the artists, activists and refugee advocates in relation to the Biennale and Transfield. That companies will exercise a greater deal of self-scrutiny for their undertakings is a welcome development, and one that can only lead to a better situation for all. Common values are essential in the establishment of any new partnership between organisations and their sponsors. This is the beginning of greater accountability for individuals, organisations, corporations, and hopefully, eventually, government.

Protesting the Government

Many artists participate in protests against asylum seeker policy directed towards the government - they vote, sign petitions, write letters, attend rallies, and donate their time and money to supporting asylum seeker and refugee organisations. In this instance, our participation in the Biennale afforded us the position to directly affect the private industries that enable the government's policy to be enacted. These corporations are intimately bound in the government and their policies. By addressing Transfield's involvement in mandatory detention, the government was effectively targeted. The issue was brought forward in the Senate, and publicly debated by federal Ministers Malcolm Turnbull and George Brandis. This shows that the actions of the artists were effective not only in questioning the ethics of Transfield's activities, but those of the government making the policy.

Transfield

- The 19th Biennale of Sydney is funded by the Transfield Foundation and Transfield Holdings.

- Transfield Foundation is a joint venture between Transfield Services and Transfield Holdings.
- Transfield Holdings owns a significant share of Transfield Services (11.9%), the second-largest share in Transfield Services.
- Through their sponsorship arrangement with Transfield, the Biennale of Sydney received profits from mandatory detention.

Transfield's role at Manus Island and Nauru Detention Centres

- Transfield Services has been providing operational services at Nauru detention centre since August 2012. This year, Transfield Services was awarded a \$1.22 billion contract to expand their services at both Nauru and Manus Island detention centres to include welfare support services, garrison, catering, transport, security, and maintenance.
- No matter how well a company fulfils their contract, the very existence of these offshore detention centres is in violation of international human rights conventions.
- While Guido Belgiorno-Nettis claims that "Transfield Services will make a positive difference at Manus Island and Nauru", an improvement in services would be at odds with Government's vision of the camps as a deterrent for legitimate asylum seekers.
- Transfield Services has no experience in welfare support services, and reports from inside the camps indicate that they will be continuing to employ some of the staff involved in the violence of February 17.

More information

Letter to the Board and withdrawal statements: www.19boswg.blogspot.com.au