

Artists boycott Sydney biennale over Australia's asylum seeker regime

Richard Phillips
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Nine Australian and international artists have withdrawn their works from the forthcoming 19th Biennale of Sydney in protest over sponsorship arrangements with Transfield Holdings, a transnational corporation that is profiting from Australia's mandatory detention of hundreds of asylum seekers.

Transfield, a major corporate sponsor of art and music in Australia, is involved in construction, maintenance and infrastructure management in Australia, New Zealand, the Americas, the Middle East and Asia.

The artists' decision followed an open letter last month to the biennale's board of management, signed by more than half the 90 artists participating in the event. The letter called on the festival to end to its longstanding funding arrangements with Transfield.

Transfield Services, a company subsidiary, was last week awarded a \$1.22 billion, 20-month contract to run "garrison and welfare" operations at detention camps on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea and the island state of Nauru. Transfield Services were paid \$300 million last year for its already existing operations in Nauru. Last week's announcement saw the company's share prices soar by 24.5 percent. Financial analysts expect increased profits throughout Transfield's businesses as Australian governments increase their contracting out of services.

About 1,300 asylum seekers are incarcerated in overcrowded and squalid conditions on Manus Island, and over 600 on Nauru, in violation of international refugee law and human rights conventions.

Following on from the previous Labor government, the Abbott Liberal-National Coalition government is deliberately using the primitive conditions in the camps, combined with indefinite incarceration and a ban on any detainees ever living in Australia, to deter

all refugees from seeking asylum in Australia. Last month, state-sanctioned repression at Manus Island killed 23-year-old Iranian Kurd Reza Berati and wounded more than 70 other refugees, 13 of them seriously.

Libia Castro, Ólafur Ólafsson, Charlie Sofo, Gabrielle de Vietri and Ahmet Ögüt, the first group of artists to boycott the festival and relinquish their artist's fees, made their decision last week, after a blunt refusal by the biennale's board to end its ties with Transfield.

Yesterday, another four artists—Agnieszka Polska, Sara van der Heide, Nicoline van Harskamp and Nathan Gray—withdrew from the event, which begins on March 21 and is Australia's largest contemporary visual arts event.

The response of the biennale's nine-member board, chaired by Transfield executive director Luca Belgiorno-Nettis, to the open letter was arrogant and predictable. It categorically rejected the artists' appeal, declaring that the festival would "no longer exist" without Transfield's sponsorship. The board's "loyalty to the Belgiorno-Nettis family," it declared, "must override claims over which there is ambiguity."

In other words, the biennale belongs to Transfield and nothing will be allowed to disrupt this arrangement. Belgiorno-Nettis told the media the artists were "exploiting" the festival's relationship with Transfield and their actions were "offensive, simplistic and misleading." Transfield Services, he claimed, was "doing good work."

This "good work" involves overseeing the horrendous conditions at Nauru, where hunger strikes, suicides and other self-harm incidents are common. The facility is "like a concentration camp," a former nurse who worked at the facility, told the media. These

conditions led to a large-scale protest last July during which asylum seekers burnt much of the facility to the ground before being brutally suppressed by security guards contracted to Transfield Services.

Transfield, which has made millions from Australian military contracts, has close connections with all levels of Australian government. Tony Shepherd, for example, was Transfield Services chairman, as well as head of the Business Council of Australia, before being appointed chairman of the Abbott government's cost-cutting National Commission of Audit last October.

In a statement announcing their boycott, Castro, Ólafsson, Sofo, de Vietri and Ögüt appealed to other artists to do the same. They declared that any involvement in the biennale would link them to “a chain of associations that leads to the abuse of human rights.” This was demonstrated by refugee Reza Berati's death and Canberra's intensifying “warfare on the world's most vulnerable people.”

The artists said they were not prepared to “add value to their [Transfield's] brand and its inhumane enterprise” and called for an end to Australia's mandatory detention policies. “We stand with our local and international communities that are calling for the closure of Australia's offshore detention facilities.” The statement added: “In the pervasive silence that the government enforces around this issue, we will not let this action be unnoticed.”

The four artists who announced their boycott yesterday expressed similar sentiments. All nine artists called on the biennale to acknowledge the absence of their work from the exhibition, register it on the event's website and signpost it at the exhibition.

The decision by the artists to end their association with the Sydney Biennale is courageous, reflecting growing opposition among broad layers of young people and the working class to Canberra's anti-refugee regime.

These sentiments, however, should not be limited to protests to the biennale board or futile appeals to the federal government, which is also the largest sponsor of the art festival, and, along with the Labor Party, responsible for the demonisation and maltreatment of asylum seekers.

Artists should turn to the working class and a political fight for the abolition of the profit system that is fuelling attacks on basic democratic rights as well as

the drive to war and social counter-revolution.

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Gabrielle de Vietri told the *World Socialist Web Site* on Monday that she and the other boycotting artists had received wide support and offers of assistance within Australia and internationally.

“We are strongly opposed to the government's mandatory detention policy and its treatment of asylum seekers,” de Vietri said. “I was devastated by the death of Reza Berati. I didn't know him, of course, but it's appalling that this young man has been killed. These people—including children—are being treated worse than criminals.”

“Berati's death, however, is not a surprise, given the conditions in which these people are forced to live, conditions that violate over 100 human rights laws. And there will be more deaths unless this changes.”

De Vietri said in the lead-up to the biennale's opening on March 21, she and other artists would discuss how to develop their campaign against Transfield's sponsorship of the art festival.

The author also recommends :

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