

An open letter to the Board of Directors, Biennale of Sydney

19 February 2014

To the Board of Directors of the Biennale of Sydney,

We are a group of artists - Gabrielle de Vietri, Bianca Hester, Charlie Sofo, Nathan Gray, Deborah Kelly, Matt Hinkley, Benjamin Armstrong, Libia Castro, Ólafur Ólafsson, Sasha Huber, Sonia Leber, David Chesworth, Daniel McKewen, Angelica Mesiti, Ahmet Öğüt, Meriç Algün Ringborg, Joseph Griffiths, Sol Archer, Tamas Kaszas, Krisztina Erdei, Nathan Coley, Corin Sworn, Ross Manning, Martin Boyce, Callum Morton, Emily Roysdon, Søren Thilo Funder, Mikhail Karikis - all participants in the 19th Biennale of Sydney.

We are writing to you about our concerns with the Biennale's sponsorship arrangement with Transfield.¹

We would like to begin with an affirmation and recognition of the Biennale staff, other sponsors and donors, and our fellow artists. We maintain the utmost respect for Juliana Engberg's artistic vision and acknowledge the support and energy that the Biennale staff have put into the creation of our projects and this exhibition. We acknowledge that this issue places the Biennale team in a difficult situation.

However, we want to emphasise that this issue has presented us with an opportunity to become aware of, and to acknowledge, responsibility for our own participation in a chain of connections that links to human suffering; in this case, that is caused by Australia's policy of mandatory detention.

We trust that you understand the implications of Transfield's recent move to secure new contracts to take over garrison and welfare services in Australia's offshore immigration detention centres on Manus Island and in Nauru. We have attached for your information, a document that outlines our understanding of the links between the Biennale, Transfield and Australia's asylum seeker policy.

We appeal to you to work alongside us to send a message to Transfield, and in turn the Australian Government and the public: that we will not accept the mandatory detention of asylum seekers, because it is ethically indefensible and in breach of human rights; and that, as a network of artists, arts workers and a leading cultural organisation, we do not want to be associated with these practices.

Our current circumstances are complex: public institutions are increasingly reliant on private finance, and less on public funding, and this can create ongoing difficulties. We are aware of these complexities and do not believe that there is one easy answer to the larger situation.

However, in this particular case, we regard our role in the Biennale, under the current sponsorship arrangements, as adding value to the Transfield brand. Participation is an active endorsement, providing cultural capital for Transfield.

In light of all this, we ask the Board: what will you do? We urge you to act in the interests of asylum seekers. As part of this we request the Biennale withdraw from the current sponsorship arrangements with Transfield and seek to develop new ones. This will set an important precedent for Australian and international arts institutions, compelling them to exercise a greater degree of ethical awareness and transparency regarding their funding sources. We are asking you, respectfully, to respond with urgency.

Our interests as artists don't merely concern our individual moral positions. We are concerned too with the ways cultural institutions deal with urgent social responsibilities. We expect the Biennale to acknowledge the voice of its audience and the artist community that is calling on the institution to act powerfully and immediately for justice by cutting its ties with Transfield.

We believe that artists and art-workers can—and should—create an environment that empowers individuals and groups to act on conscience, opening up other pathways to develop more sustainable, and in turn sustaining, forms of cultural production.

We want to extend this discussion to a range of people and organisations, in order to bring to light the various forces shaping our current situation, and to work towards imagining other possibilities into being. In our current political circumstances we believe this to be one of the most crucial challenges that we are compelled to engage with, and we invite you into this process of engagement.

We look forward to hearing your response and given the urgency of this issue, hope that we can receive it by the end of this week.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Gabrielle de Vietri, Bianca Hester, Charlie Sofo, Nathan Gray, Deborah Kelly, Matt Hinkley, Benjamin Armstrong, Libia Castro, Ólafur Ólafsson, Sasha Huber, Sonia Leber, David Chesworth, Daniel McKewen, Angelica Mesiti, Ahmet Öğüt, Meriç Algün Ringborg, Joseph Griffiths, Sol Archer, Tamas Kaszas, Krisztina Erdei, Nathan Coley, Corin Sworn, Ross Manning, Martin Boyce, Callum Morton, Emily Roysdon, Søren Thilo Funder, Mikhail Karikis

NOTES

1. Please note that in this document we use the name Transfield to refer to three branches of the Transfield brand: Transfield Holdings, Services and Foundation. Please refer to our information sheet for our understanding of how these are linked.