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Blood Money for Art

Transfield and the Sydney Biennale

Anarchist Affinity

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The Guardian has broken the news that the Biennale of Sydney (BOS) has severed ties with detention centre operator Transfield Services. Transfield Holdings chairman Luca Belgiorno-Nettis has resigned from his role as chair of the BOS. Belgiorno-Nettis has acknowledged the success of the artists led boycott of the Biennale in forcing him out.

*The following article on the links between Transfield and the Sydney art world was written for issue 1 of *The Platform*. It is interesting to note that whilst Transfield and the BOS have now formally severed ties, Transfield remains a principle sponsor of the Sydney Chamber Orchestra and Luca Belgiorno-Nettis remains its chair.*

Transfield Services has hit pay dirt. Indefinite detention is big business and the contracts are flowing in. Transfield has already made a whopping \$215 million in just twelve months, building the fences, erecting the tents, and employing the guards that keep hundreds of vulnerable refugees detained in the tropical heat of Nauru's former phosphate mine. Meanwhile, Transfield's Nauruan employees are paid a pitiful \$4 an hour.

And the contracts keep coming. For the first time one company will be responsible for providing the guards who do the beatings, and the social workers who mop up afterwards. The Salvation Army has lost its contract to run welfare services on Nauru, and Transfield is set to replace them. This ‘proud’ Sydney company is now positioned to run every aspect of an immigration detention service – everything from the substandard accommodation to the substandard food and the incompetent unmotivated “welfare” staff can all be yours, direct from Transfield Services!

But it’s all for a good cause, the torture of refugees funds art and culture to enrich the lives of Sydney’s richest! Transfield Services is enmeshed in the Sydney arts scene almost as heavily as it’s enmeshed in destroying the lives of people fleeing persecution.

Since its establishment in 1973 the Biennale of Sydney has become the most prestigious visual arts event on the Australian calendar. It’s internationally prominent amongst the two hundred such events held annually, and is perhaps comparable in scope and influence to the oldest arts biennale, that in Venice. And it’s brought to you by Transfield.

Transfield founder Franco Belgiorno-Nettis is also Biennale of Sydney founder Franco Belgiorno-Nettis. For 41 years the Biennale of Sydney has been the centrepiece of Transfield’s arts empire. Transfield Holdings operates an “art rental program” leasing out works from its expensive private collection. The Transfield Foundation (a joint venture of Transfield Services and Transfield Holdings!) pours money into the Australian Chamber Orchestra, and coincidentally, the Chairman of the Australia Chamber Orchestra is one Guido Belgiorno-Nettis, Executive Director of Transfield Holdings.

Art is a big deal for this company. It’s not just culture wash (although its value as culture-wash is extensive). Art, for Transfield, is about status, prestige and legitimacy. It is no coinci-

dence that the venues for Biennale events include the private residences of Transfield directors and executives.

It is for these reasons that a Sydney Arts educator, Matthew Kiem, has published a call for a boycott of the Biennale of Sydney. If art means as much to Transfield as its entanglements suggest, an arts boycott of this company could at least inconvenience those involved in the corporate facilitation of human misery. At the very least, a public boycott of the Biennale of Sydney could undermine some of the culture-wash that Transfield deploys to pretty up its image whilst it works on the destruction of human lives.

It is interesting to note just how defensive the Biennale of Sydney have been to criticism of Transfield Services. On their official twitter account the Biennale organisers wrote:

“RE: comments on BOS sponsors: BOS brings attn
2 the ideas & issues of our times – objectors only
deny the legitimate voice of BOS artists”

The irony could not be more obvious if it were deliberately constructed.