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HD **At Sydney Biennale, controversy amid the art; Art**
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In a cavernous industrial warehouse on Cockatoo Island, only minutes by ferry from the Sydney Opera House, a woman dressed as a Hobbit-like creature warbled into a microphone that doubled as a tail, while a massive rock swung precariously overhead.

The performance, by the Norwegian artist Tori Wranes, is part of the 19th Biennale of Sydney, the country's largest contemporary visual arts festival. Works by more than 90 artists from 31 different countries, many commissioned for the event, are being shown across five inner city and harborside sites through June 9.

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Australia's biennale is well established — it was the first in the Asia-Pacific region — but it can take on a more experimental edge, said Juliana Engberg, the director of the festival this year. "It's Australia, you can trial things," she said. "You can be a little bit feral."

But this year's edition, which started on March 21, has also drawn attention beyond the wild nature of its art.

In February, a group of exhibiting artists threatened to boycott the event after it emerged that the main sponsor, Transfield Holdings, held a 12 percent **stake** in a **company** providing services to offshore detention centers. The Belgiorno-Nettis family, which owns Transfield and has been the biennale's partner since establishing it in 1973, was forced to withdraw sponsorship. The chairman of the biennale, Luca Belgiorno-Nettis, who is also an executive director at Transfield, later resigned.

An official statement released by Transfield last month said it does not have a representative on the board of the **company** that provides services to detention centers and "has no influences on the business activities or decisions of the public **company**."

The government's treatment of asylum seekers is one of the country's most polarizing issues. Boatloads of refugees are intercepted on their way to Australian shores and often are sent to grim detention centers on Manus Island, in Papua New Guinea, and Nauru. On Feb. 17, an Iranian asylum seeker on Manus Island was killed and many others were seriously injured after riots and clashes with the staff.

"It was a perfect storm of issues," said Ms. Engberg, who added that she was initially unaware of the Transfield connection to detention centers. Two artists eventually withdrew from the biennale. "I spent a lot of time helping artists come to grips with their own decision. It's not an easy thing for someone to step away from something that they've held dear."

In response to the Transfield biennale controversy, the arts minister, George Brandis, is considering developing a policy that would block government funding to culture organizations that reject prospective commercial partners on political grounds.

Still, many artists chose to stay and participate, like the Melbourne, Australia-based duo Sonia Leber and David Chesworth. "We knew this is where we are most articulate," Mr. Chesworth said. Their audio installation on Cockatoo Island, "This Is Before We Disappear From View," is held in an open-air concrete space where sound bounces and distorts. A booming voice recites passages about prison and

punishment from writers like Charles Dickens and Anthony Trollope, with a chorus of voices in the background. The artists updated the audio just before the festival's opening.

At the Art Gallery of New South Wales, another Sydney Biennale site, the artist Deborah Kelly said she had agonized over her participation. Her series of life-size nude photographic portraits, "No Human Being is Illegal (In All Our Glory)," using a phrase coined by immigration-rights activists, are embellished with intricate collages reflecting each subject's story. The unfinished collages will be worked on throughout the festival.

"To be told that this beautiful artwork is linked to the detention regime felt so disgraceful, it was really unbearable," Ms. Kelly said. She decided to continue to participate in the festival, however, because her series involved more than 40 other artists and because her father was also one of the subjects.

The boycott aside, politics suffuse other aspects of the biennale, which has the theme "You Imagine What You Desire." The Art Gallery of New South Wales is the beating heart, according to Ms. Engberg, with works intended to provoke. Here, the indigenous artist Yhonnie Scarce focuses on race with her lab-like installation "Weak In Color But Strong In Blood." Under harsh lights, stainless steel trays of misshapen blown glass are categorized by color.

The **Chinese** artist Zhao Zhao looked at violence in his series "Constellations," with three large panes of glass splintered by bullet holes, and the Scottish artist Nathan Coley has taken black and white photographs of protests in "The Honor Series" and overlaid the placards with **gold** leaf.

At Carriageworks, a large site that was once a film studio, much of the work is aptly tied to cinema, with many video pieces running 10 to 60 minutes. The Belgian artist Tinka Pittoors's large, chaotic installation, "Dysideological Principle," with cut-up flags, strewn newspapers and fence-like constructs keeping visitors out, was inspired by the death of more than 350 refugees and migrants in a ship that sank off the coast of Italy last year.

The Sydney Biennale has traditionally been held during winter but the board brought the 19th festival forward by three months to run in warmer weather and align with the international arts calendar. Ms. Engberg started traveling around the world in October 2012, meeting more than 1,000 artists through her own networks and research, as well as scouring lists from government agencies. She searched for young, lesser-known names as well as more established ones.

Ms. Engberg said she had no set agenda as she created her shortlist, only the idea that imagination and desire were inherent in the artists' work. "I'm quite pleased with this construction of the event as a bit of a wild place, a relaunch of the biennale in a way," she said.

It is estimated that the Sydney Biennale brings around \$60 **million** to the Australian economy. But the controversy around this biennale will probably have a lasting impact.

"The ongoing conversations that will occur from this are very interesting," Ms. Engberg said. "It may be something of a game changer in the way we think about how funding comes to the arts."

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