

Art and Politics in Australia

Dumping Wilson Security: The NGV, Art and Refugee Detention

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

Asia-Pacific Research, March 08, 2018

Theme: [Justice](#), [Society](#)

Art and politics mix, often poorly. Artists are sometimes the hoodwinked emissaries of the latter, sponsored, enlisted and marshalled by the state and corporate entities. Self-proclaimed radical artists can become compliant, or at the very least mute cogs, aware of their patronage and finite sources of funding. To question is to impoverish.

In Australia, the links between security companies and the art world have come in for a recent sniping. Such episodes should be more regular, but artists in Australia have woken up from a prolonged slumber of selfish apathy to push back against companies who provide the gruesome bill for Australia's offshore detention centres.

The issue drew some attention in 2014, when the Biennale of Sydney chairman **Luca Belgiorno-Nettis** resigned in response to an artist boycott regarding Transfield's security role in offshore processing on Manus Island and Nauru. Transfield's other hat was that of committed art patron, an association begun by Belgiorno-Nettis' father, Franco, in 1961. The irritating bee in the bonnet was less Transfield than its subsidiary company.

At the time, the then **Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull** condemned what he thought was "sheer vicious ingratitude" on the part of artists. The now retired **Senator George Brandis** found the gesture of protest "irrational" while chiding the Biennale board for capitulating "to the blackmail effectively of a small number of artists". [Belgiorno-Nettis](#) was unrepentant, claiming that there was "little room for sensible dialogue, let alone deliberation."

The National Gallery of Victoria should have been cognisant of that episode when it sought the services of another security company linked to Australia's offshore detention complex. Hecored by disgruntled artists, the NGV [announced](#) at the end of last month that it would be ending its fraught association with Wilson Security.

During its tenure, the company presided over a lengthy log of abuses, physical, sexual and psychological, a point noted by the [Australian Senate](#) in 2015. Last year, the company announced that it would cease providing security services at Manus Island and Nauru from October, an effort to rescue a tarnished brand rather than a wounded conscience.

The decision by the NGV has been put down to the Artists' Committee, which made much noise last year against the gallery's new contract with Wilson Security. In August, a petition heavy with over 1,500 signatures, including various heavies of the Australian art world, was submitted to the NGV director, **Tony Ellwood**. In conducting business with Wilson Security, the gallery was effectively supporting "systematic abuse".

Gabrielle de Vietri, speaking on behalf of the committee, put the position to [Art Guide Australia](#).

“We’re talking about a company whose numerous and well-publicised ethical breaches while managing security at Australia’s reprehensible offshore detention centres amount to nothing less than human rights abuse.”

The attempt to ruffle feathers began in earnest in October, which featured the [dyeing of water features](#) outside the gallery a jarring red. The participating artists courteously explained that the red dye was non-toxic and caused no damage. On [October 6](#), Picasso’s *Weeping Woman* was covered in black cloth sporting Wilson Security’s logo. Twenty signatories stood in front of the painting, stymieing efforts of security staff from removing it for up to an hour.

The scene was set for the NGV Triennial in December, when international artists joined the scrap. One salvo of protest involved South African installation artist **Candice Breitz**, who targeted the security outfit in *Wilson Must Go*, 2016, a seven-channel video installation spiked with reflections on the global refugee crisis. It should, however, be noted that Breitz sensed an opportunity, less to create a work in direct protest against Wilson Security as renaming it for the occasion in an act of “self-sabotaging”. (It had the previously bland title of *Love Story*.)

In Breitz’s [words](#) penned with political, albeit opportunistic purpose,

“The new title will remain in effect for as long as the work is on the view at the National Gallery of Victoria, or when the work is exhibited in any other exhibition context on Australian soil, until the NGV severs its relationship with Wilson Security.”

Wilson Security, she noted, had “violently enforced the imprisonment of refugees and people seeking asylum in Australia’s offshore immigration detention centres.”

The position on sponsorship, supply and largesse between soiled companies and the art industry remain slippery. The bar is subterranean for such figures as Brandis, who claim that art institutions should not “reject bona fide sponsorship from commercially sound, prospective partners on political grounds”. This neat nonsense provides a long iteration about the artist prostrate before the state, rather than one in resistance to it.

If detaining refugees and asylum indefinitely in indigent tropical states is deemed a sound policy to begin with, it only follows that security companies will be given a clean bill of health. Fortunately for those in the art establishment congregated around the NGV, the bar has been raised.

*

Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

[**Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page**](#)

[**Become a Member of Global Research**](#)

Articles by: **[Dr. Binoy
Kampmark](#)**

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). Asia-Pacific Research will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. Asia-Pacific Research grants permission to cross-post Asia-Pacific Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Asia-Pacific Research article. For publication of Asia-Pacific Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: editors@asia-pacificresearch.com

www.asia-pacificresearch.com contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: editors@asia-pacificresearch.com