THE POWER TO REFUSE

ANGELA MITROPOULOS

I CAN'T WORK LIKE THIS: A READER ON
RECENT BOYCOTTS AND CONTEMPORARY ART.
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Any boycott and artstrike—like the courageous decision by artists and exhibition staff such as Charlie Sofo, Gabrielle de Vietri, Diego Bonetto and Peter Nelson to withdraw from an event—is irreducible to refusal and disconnection. These are points of departure, the crucial preliminary disposition of an intensification, a shift in state and perspective. Every economist and financial trader knows that the only tangible power there is in a market is the power to break or refuse to make a contract (such as not buying a ticket, not contributing an artwork). Anything short of this *will* contribute value. The market is indifferent to the content of that value or how it came about. Yet no contract is an isolated land, or one island, even if no island is alike. Every Biennale is a temporary pause in a wider circuit of stops and flows—of value, people, things, art and feelings. The Biennale of Sydney, as with all Biennale, was an international event. Many of its installations are located on an island in the bay of Sydney. This sense of a city opening out to the world, its call upon the global mobility and freedom of movement of artists and audience is pivotal to its sense of an event, its very success and value. It purports to be an unrestricted economy. It is not. Transfield Services founded and sponsored the Biennale of Sydney; it is also the largest migration detention contractor. In its detention camps, there were (and are) also artists who were compelled to take flight because of the art they made. Those camps were also on islands (Manus Island and Nauru). To refuse to add value to one point in this circuitry is, even in its minimum, a leap over the border that divides the mobile artist from the artist who is detained. It is a subtractive leap from the technical restrictions of an economy that makes other kinds of connections, feelings and flows possible. If refusal exerts the material power of negation on the restrictions of the detention industry, the generative power and value of a boycott and artstrike lies in the intensification of that quantum leap. Some of these

themes are discussed elsewhere, including in a recent interview in *The New Inquiry* on ‘cross-border operations,’ and in an essay of mine in the journal *New Formations* called “The Archipelago of Risk.” I did want to add that as a result of the boycott and artstrike, Transfield Services has (among other things) since been forced to relinquish its rights over its own trademark, and is now called Broadspectrum. I also think it is crucial to underline the extent to which the Biennale of Sydney was indeed part of a wider assemblage of islands in a restricted economic circuit, the shape of which is discussed further in “The Archipelago of Risk.” That is, noting the prominent role of Transfield’s financial investment arm in the art market and sponsorship alongside its part in the increasingly militarised border control industry, the curatorial brief for the 2014 Sydney Biennale borrowed directly from the corporate language and practice known as ‘hybrid forums,’ in which we see the convergence of financial speculative techniques, aesthetic imagination, and (military) scenario planning used as a means to innovate the financial analysis undertaken by that corporation. This is the significance of ‘possible worlds’ in that brief. The Biennale of Sydney was not an isolated land but part of an assemblage that operates as a restricted economy of flows, filters, hubs, switching points and stops. We can remake assemblages through intensification or condensation, subtractions from some flows, drawing new lines between otherwise distant points, making other maps. But we cannot pretend that we are not working within broader diagrams.

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