



## **ARTVENTURE FREEDOM TO CREATE PRESS LAUNCH**

**Wednesday July 1<sup>st</sup>, Foreign Press Association**

**Dr. Agnes Callamard, ARTICLE 19 Executive Director**

Dear friends and colleagues,

Warm welcome to the launch of the Art Venture Freedom to Create Prize.

Many thanks to all of you for your interest in, and support to, this new and ground breaking initiative; to support and defend the right to freedom to create, too often forgotten, yet so central and essential to our History, lives and societies.

It is a great honour for ARTICLE 19 to be associated with ArtVenture in this initiative. In the course of its 20 year history, ARTICLE 19 has often worked on behalf of artists targeted by rogue governments or groups. We have often felt though, that we were only seeing and understanding the tip of the iceberg, and that there was far more oppression and repression of artists that went unnoticed. It is thus with extreme emotions and pleasure that we responded positively to Art Venture proposal to work together on this initiative. We hope that ultimately, the ArtVenture Freedom to Create Prize will bring greater global awareness to the nature and extent of the abuses, and their consequences for individual artists and our societies at large, thus allowing all of us to engage more systematically and strategically towards combating these abuses effectively.

ARTICLE 19 is 20 years old. Based in London, the organisation has offices in Mexico, Brazil, Kenya, Bangladesh, and staff based in Nepal, Lebanon and Senegal. We are a human rights organisation with a special mandate and commitment to protect freedom of expression all over the world.

Article 19 fights for all hostages of censorship, and campaigns against all systems, policies, laws and practices that silence.

We do so because censorship kills. It starves and it silences. It denies people access to information essential to their life.

The targets of censorship are often journalists, writers, politicians, sometimes you and I. We are increasingly aware of the attacks against the media and journalists or writers.

But artists are also the victims of censorship, the victims of repression and intolerance which attacks them at the heart of who they are: creator and witness

Artists make societies aware of what they are and are not – they mirror our inner workings, souls, contradictions, hypocrisy.

Artists open our eyes, ears, imagination, and our senses to human nature and societies in their awful, petty but also beautiful, generous and heroic aspects.

Artists make us aware of the existence and terrible consequences of abuses – the horrors of wars and torture, poverty, racism, violence against women.

For as long as humanity has existed, we have relied on the artists' pencil and painting, wood or stone carving, canvas, paper, to get inside our history and our making. For ever they have stood as witnesses.

And because they do so, they are targeted.

By state institutions – in Iran, China, Belarus, Cuba, Burma. Countries have developed the most sophisticated censorship apparatus; with thousands of workers, armed with the authority of their scissors, responsible for cutting in and out works of art which have displeased them – pieces destroyed for ever, or hidden in basements – never to be seen by the average citizen of these countries.

But artists are also, and probably increasingly, targeted by society and various groups within society; increasingly intolerant against dissent, and against any reproduction of itself which it does not like or with which it does not agree.

In the name of a certain idea of religion or ethnic or racial purity, artists are targeted. And silenced.

Did you know that in Iraq, nearly 80% of all singers have fled their country and at least 75 have been killed since the 2003 war?

Did you know that in Kuwait, last month, the Lebanese singer Haifa Wehbe was prohibited from performing because she was deemed to be too sexually provocative by the Parliament?

Did you know that in Russia, contemporary artist Oleg Yanushevski fled his country two years ago and sought and found exile in the UK. His crime: using the traditional form of the icon to address issues of spirituality in modern society. The punishment: physical attacks, threats, and his exhibit destroyed and ultimately exile.

Last year, Russian officials refused to ship a photomontage entitled the 'Candle of Our life' depicting the holy trinity with images of Jesus Christ, Alexander Pushkin, Vladimir Putin.

Did you know that in Belarus, musicians and theatre groups are banned or censored – they have to take extra precautions to perform, and screen their spectators?

Did you know that in Burma last month, actor and comedian Ko Zarganar was detained and that the Mustache brothers are regularly censored and imprisoned? Indeed, Htein Lin will tell us far more about the imprisonment and censorship.

Did you know that in Malaysia, the last couple of years have seen increasing restrictions on live performances? Regulations on live performances are decided at the local level, leaving discretion in the hands of local authorities and resulting in significant discrepancies in the standards enforced. In Kelantan, traditional art forms, such as the Mak Yong dance are considered 'un-Islamic' and have been banned since 1991. Even if a licence is granted, the police may raid a performance and arrest members of the audience. In January 2006 the National Fatwa Council, the country's highest Islamic authority, issued a fatwa (religious ruling) banning 'Black Metal' music.

Did you know that just last month, the Sudanese authorities confiscated 'Desirable Glance'; an Arabic novel written by Yagoub Adam Saed Al-Nour dealing with Darfur atrocities, under the pretext that the Canadian based publisher had failed to obtain the appropriate permission.

Did you know, did you know did you know...

These are just the tip of the iceberg.

There are far more instances of art being censored than is being reported; far too many artists denied the right to create.

And the trends are not positive.

Freedom of expression, the fundamental guarantor of human rights, has been weakened and eroded in emerging and older democracies alike.

We ended the 20th century with a wall falling down. We entered the 21st with not one, but several walls being erected, within and between people, between the haves and the have nots, between and amongst communities.

The politics of fear have taken over, in far too many places across the world.

Censorship and intolerance feed on fear.

And so do, and will, attacks against artists and the freedom to create.

The ArtVenture Freedom to Create Prize is thus fortunately, very timely. It is very timely because it will make us all aware that artists pay the harshest prize for fears. It will remind us all of us of the plight endured by many artists across the globe who's right to create is curtailed, abused, violated.

And it will also hopefully allow us to come together, and fight together, and demand together, that the freedom be respected and protected everywhere in the world.