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## ARTICLE 19

### Artist Alert April 2009

Art, in any form, constitutes a key medium through which information and ideas are imparted and received. Artist Alert, launched by ARTICLE 19 in 2008, highlights cases of artists around the world whose right to freedom of expression has been curtailed and abused, and seeks to more effectively promote and defend freedom to create.

In March 1959 an invitation to the Dalai Lama to attend a military theatrical performance sparked protests by an estimated 300,000 demonstrators in Lhasa, all concerned that the show would be a cover giving the Chinese army a chance to “disappear” the young leader. 50 years later in March 2009 whilst the Dalai Lama has been in exile for almost half a century, artists in Western China and Tibet still face widespread abuse, censorship and detention.

#### **Tibet and China: numerous artists detained and censored**

Editor Kunchok Tsephel Gopey was arrested in Gansu province at the end of February and his website *Chomei* (The Lamp) temporarily closed down.

*Chomei* ([www.tibetcm.com](http://www.tibetcm.com)) has been written entirely in Tibetan languages and aims to raise awareness of art and culture in Tibet, providing a valuable forum for poets and artists to express themselves creatively. According to Reporters sans Frontières *Chomei* has been regularly censored by the authorities since 2005.

Leading rock band Oasis has been blocked from playing concerts in China due to their previous support for the organisation Free Tibet. Concerts planned for Shanghai and Beijing were cancelled in March 2009 by their promoters after it became known that lead singer Noel Gallagher had performed in 1997 at a concert raising money for the campaigners for a free Tibet.

The cancellation follows a 2008 concert where singer Bjork allegedly shouted “*Tibet Tibet!*” and confirms rules that ban performers from lyrics that could damage “national unity” or “stir up resentment”.

Jigme Gyatso, a monk who assisted director Dhondup Wangchen in the production of the 2008 film *Leaving Fear Behind* was also re-arrested in March and there are reports of his torture.

*Leaving Fear Behind* ([www.leavingfearbehind.com](http://www.leavingfearbehind.com)) was created in the run-up to the Beijing Olympic Games and contains interviews with Tibetans about the impact of Chinese policies on Tibetans and Tibetan culture. Both Jigme Gyatso and Dhondup

Wangchen have been detained since filming. Jigme was released for several months in October 2008, only to be re-arrested in March 2009.

20-year-old writer Kunga Tseyang was also arrested in Golok County on 17 March. Tseyang studies at the world famous Labrang monastery and the Institute for Higher Buddhist Studies and writes about Buddhism and Tibetan arts and culture. There has been no news of his whereabouts since.

These arrests are just part of a larger campaign by the authorities to suppress debate, including their earlier blocking of Tibet Culture website ([www.tibetcul.com](http://www.tibetcul.com)) and their jamming of radio stations broadcasting in Tibetan languages.

### **United Kingdom: visa denials for artists**

Under the new points-based visa system for the United Kingdom, artists of all genres are repeatedly being denied access to the country because their artistic professions are not highly rated by the system. In the first quarter of 2009, three artists: Tenzing Rigdol from Nepal; Dmitry Vilensky from Russia; and Huang Xu from China, had their visa applications rejected by the UK Border Agency. All three had applied for their visas with firm support from the highly-regarded Rossi & Rossi Gallery, the Showroom Gallery and the October Gallery respectively.

According to the Manifesto Club, contemporary visual artists, musicians, academics, promoters, museum and gallery workers, a ballet company, tango enthusiasts, and international actors have all been refused entry.

### **Israel: Jerusalem Cultural Festival banned**

Israeli Minister for Internal Security Avi Dichter banned the festival *Capital of Arab Culture 2009* from taking place in East Jerusalem in March.

The festival was due to take place over a whole year but Israeli police intervened to stop all future proceedings, despite East Jerusalem being outside of Israel's legal jurisdiction.

20 people were reportedly arrested for being associated with the event and Agence France Presse stated that Israeli police confiscated flags and detained university employees distributing t-shirts advertising the festival.

### **Russia: exhibitors arrested for "insulting Christians"**

Russians Yurii Samodurov and Andrei Yerofeev were charged in April 2009 by the Taganskii District Prosecutor for curating an exhibition that, in the words of the Prosecutor, was "*clearly directed towards expressing in a demonstrative and visible way a degrading and insulting attitude towards the Christian religion in general and especially towards the Orthodox faith.*"

The exhibition, which was entitled *Forbidden Art*, took place at the Sakharov Museum in March 2007 and included work by well-known contemporary artists such as Ilya Kabakov, Aleksandr Kosolapov, Aleksandr Savko, Mikhail Roginskii and the group Blue Noses. Despite the fact that Russia is a secular state, where everybody is guaranteed the freedom to disseminate religious or atheist views, Samodurov and Yerofeev face prison terms of up to five years.

## **Lebanon: homelessness, prostitution and sexuality censored**

Mark Abi Rached's film *HELP!* was banned just four days after its release in Lebanon, despite being previously approved by the officer in charge of censorship.

*HELP!* addresses sex, prostitution, sexuality, homelessness and drugs in Lebanon and originally received firm approval from the authorities. Although given authorisation to be screened, a later bureaucratic change was introduced by a new censorship officer who revoked approval at the last minute. According to the Center for Defending Media and Cultural Freedoms in Beirut, the banning of the film was the result of complaints received from various Catholic institutions over the film's content and its alleged effect on public morals.

## **World: STAR TV censors "gay" in Oscars**

News Corporation-owned STAR TV cut sound during several references to homosexuality in the live broadcast of the 2009 Oscar awards ceremony. STAR TV is a privately owned satellite and cable channel that broadcasts mostly in Asia.

Dustin Lane Black, screenplay writer for the film *Milk* was cut when he said, "*I think [gay rights activist Harvey Milk] would want me to say to all the gay and lesbian kids out there tonight ... that you are beautiful, wonderful creatures of value, and that no matter what anyone tells you, God does love you.*"

Later, Sean Penn, Oscar winner in the best actor category, was also censored saying, "*For those who saw the signs of hatred [in an anti-gay protest outside] as our cars drove in tonight, I think it's a good time for those who voted for the ban against gay marriage to sit and reflect on their great shame and their shame in their grandchildren's eyes if they continue that support*"

The television channel has an estimated audience of 300 million people in 54 countries around the world, particularly in Asia, and STAR TV spokesman answered in response to complaints that STAR has "*a responsibility to take the sensitivities and guidelines of all our markets into consideration*".

## **Thailand: Harry Nicolaides free at last**

Author and academic Harry Nicolaides was released in March 2009 from prison in Thailand by royal pardon following a long campaign by Thai and international organisations, including ARTICLE 19. Nicolaides was imprisoned for three years under *lese majeste* legislation after writing a historical book on the Thai monarchy. ARTICLE 19 has highlighted Nicolaides' case and the effects of *lese majeste* legislation upon artists in a number of previous publications.

### **NOTES TO EDITORS:**

- For more information: please contact Oliver Spencer, [oliver@article19.org](mailto:oliver@article19.org), +44 20 7278 9292
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.