

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Writers' groups concerned by defunding of Canadian artist

November 24, 2011 — Toronto — Today PEN Canada and the Writers' Union of Canada voiced concerns that the government has interfered with a Canadian artist's freedom of expression by defunding an art exhibition in Europe and advising the show's producer to withdraw support from the artist, Franke James. James' artworks were viewed by officials within the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) as critical of government policy.

Internal government documents disclosed in a recent Access to Information (ATI) request show that after one DFAIT division expressed support for the exhibition, DFAIT's Climate Change Office advised that government funding would "not be consistent with our interests and approach . . . and would in fact run counter to Canada's interests more broadly."

"The government of Canada has no right to determine what is an acceptable opinion for an individual citizen, on climate change or any matter of public interest," said Charlie Foran, President of PEN Canada, "To do so is clearly not in the spirit of the Charter and the long history of freedom of expression in Canada."

In 2008 PEN Canada joined a coalition of artistic and freedom of expression groups to successfully oppose provisions in Bill C-10 which would have allowed the government to restrict funding to films whose content was held to be "contrary to public policy."

"The Government of Canada should not be interfering for political reasons in specific decisions concerning the funding of artists," said Greg Hollingshead, Chair of The Writers' Union of Canada. "The right to freedom of expression includes freedom from official disapproval, including the sort of bureaucratic interference encountered by Franke James."

On June 28 the Toronto Star reported that the Croatian producer of Ms. James' show was asked by a Canadian official: "Who was the idiot who approved an art show by that woman, Franke James? Don't you know this lady speaks against the Canadian government?"

On June 29, the Star quoted a Foreign Affairs Canada spokesperson as saying that "Funding was never withdrawn, nor was it guaranteed." On July 30, the Vancouver Sun quoted a Foreign Affairs Canada spokesperson saying that "there was no political interference" in Ms James' exhibition. However, the show's producer, Nektarina Non Profit has stated that, "In the past few months we have encountered many difficulties in organizing the exhibitions, usually connected to interventions of the Canadian Government or institutions under Canadian governmental control ... at times we felt patronized and even intimidated."

For more information:

Brendan de Caires: 416 703 8448 ext 21 | bdecaires@pencanada.ca

Kelly Duffin: 416-703-8982 x 221 | kduffin@writersunion.ca