

Open letter by Paolo Cirio.
Press Release Oct 6, 2020.

Addressed to Roselyne Bachelot, French Minister of Culture.

In response to the censored art installation at the exhibition *Panorama 22*, programmed at Le Fresnoy - Studio National, under the threat and pressure of the French Minister of Interior Gerald Darmanin.

Gerald Darmanin:

« Paolo Cirio: An unbearable pillory of women and men who risk their lives to protect us. I request the deprogramming of the "exhibition" and the removal of the photos from its site, under penalty of seizing the competent courts. » October 1st, 2020.
<https://twitter.com/GDarmanin/status/1311688550073724931>

I am a professional artist and an activist whose projects have international scope. I created the artwork *Capture* to comment, as a European citizen, on mass surveillance and police brutality in France.
<https://paolocirio.net/work/capture/>

This art installation is meant to address the danger of Facial Recognition technology and how it can also endanger the police officers safety. I aim to protect the privacy of all citizens, including the police. The installation is composed of public photos of police officers found on the Internet and acquired from members of the press. This installation doesn't endanger the privacy of anyone because the officers are not identified and their names are not displayed anywhere in the installation. These photos are displayed without dates, locations, and any context of sources, they are simply portraits of faces of police officers.

The take down of this installation from the exhibition at Le Fresnoy - Studio National is a pure act of censorship forced directly by the French government. This censorship puts in perils the very principles of democracy in which art as free expression must exist to debate, comment, and condemn governments and their institutions, including the police uncivil behaviors. Le Fresnoy - Studio National's communication regarding the take down of my installation from the exhibition:
<https://twitter.com/PoliceSynergie/status/1312024085447180290>

The simply display of public photos doesn't constitute a crime by law, as the lawyer Raphaël Kempf states : "The display of photos taken in public space are allowed both in artworks and in the media. [...] In similarity with street photography, artists and journalists are allowed to take photos of public events and publish them without the permission of the subjects photographed in such public space. [...] This proves how the artist Paolo Cirio has done nothing illegal". Public events are allowed to be reported photographically and eventually the circulation of such photos are necessary documents for society in political debates and oversight.

The minister Gerald Darmanin forcing the take down of artwork from an art institution in France is not only censorship, but also a demonstration of incompetence, naiveté, incapacity of participating in a debate, and understanding the basic principles of democracy and free expression. Gerald Darmanin's aggressive response didn't include any reference to police brutality in France, the increasing attempt of officers to cover their face to use violence against citizens in anonymity. Also he didn't explain how such images belong to the French media and free press, nor could he respond to the main claim of the project addressing the technology of Facial Recognition and its use in France to perform mass surveillance without public scrutiny. At this time the reaction of Gerald Darmanin is similar to a dictator of countries like China and Russia where the police live in impunity, the government surveils their citizens, censors artists and suppresses free speech.

I demand from the minister Gerald Darmanin responsible answers and behaviors as a competent democratic politician must do. I demand the ministry to retreat his demand for censorship of the art installation at Le Fresnoy - Studio National and I invite the minister Gerald Darmanin to respond to the questions that this artwork brings to the French citizens and all of EU.

Given the initial support by the institutions Le Fresnoy - Studio National and la Condition Publique for this important art project, I would also bring to attention their dependency to toxic political environments and reclaim their necessary freedom to support critical art. In a country like France where public funds are fundamental for the creation and promotion of art and culture, I demand that art institutions must take a stand against influence from the politics in the government. Le Fresnoy - Studio National and La Condition Publique must resist the call for censorship and separate themselves from problematic populist and authoritarian politicians. The presence of Gerald Darmanin as Vice-President of Le Fresnoy - Studio National, until lately, is outrageous and highlights a political model that is unacceptable for a democracy such as France where the creation and support of culture is fundamental.

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