

# *Singapore Government*

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[AMENDED]

**SPEECH BY MINISTER OF STATE FOR DEFENCE AND INFORMATION AND THE ARTS, MR DAVID T E LIM, AT THE FORUM “YOU CAN’T PLEASE EVERYONE: ARTISTIC INTEGRITY AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY” AT THE NUS CULTURAL CENTRE, 21 OCTOBER 2000 AT 10 AM.**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

### Introduction

Let me begin by congratulating the NUS on today’s forum. You have brought together not just a large number of arts enthusiasts in Singapore, but also a number of distinguished speakers and participants from other countries. I am sure that with such quality of delegates you will have a lively and productive forum.

This forum reflects the growing interest in the Arts in Singapore. I hope that it also signifies wide spread support for Singapore’s efforts to become a global city for the arts.

The subject chosen for today’s forum is a formidable one. It goes to the heart of the challenge faced by artists and arts policy makers not just in Singapore but everywhere in the world, and not just now, but throughout history. As such, I intend only to look at only some aspects of this issue, and mainly from Singapore’s perspective. I am sure that delegates will, in the course of discussions today, add their viewpoints, and extend the arguments to other countries and contexts.

## Role of the Arts

The importance of the Arts has grown over the past decade in Singapore. At first, our emphasis was to enrich the lives of Singaporeans, and to deepen their cultural roots. This remains a key objective of the government's efforts to promote and develop the arts.

But as a new millennium dawns, the Arts takes on new significance. In the new economy, competitive advantage comes from talents who are able to think up creative and novel ideas. These talents know that to stay ahead, they must constantly draw inspiration from their living and working habitats. So they are attracted to cities that can offer them a vibrant and stimulating environment.

The Arts, by its very nature, contributes significantly to the vitality of our cityscape. It therefore plays a new and significant role in our quest to become a talent city and a centre of opportunities. This is why the government has increased its investment in the Arts. For example, in March this year an additional \$50million was approved for the development of artists and arts audiences over the next 5 years.

## A renewed debate

But the advancement of the Arts will also bring about a sharper debate over how Singaporean society should develop. In the turbulence of rapid globalisation, some have questioned whether and in what ways the growth of the Arts should be circumscribed in order to preserve our values and our way of life.

In 1998 a foreign artist protested when the Singapore organisers of an art exhibition withdrew his controversial work from the exhibition after last minute negotiations broke down. This year, the Singapore Arts Festival drew vocal criticisms over a number of unconventional performances. Not long after that, a whiff of controversy drifted by when the local media highlighted the figure of a naked actor lying on the stage. More recently, tantalising headlines heralded a new play that will soon be staged.

Such controversies stir up a number of questions. For example, should an artist express his ideas in public freely and fearlessly, no matter what others may say? Should society, or by proxy the government, intervene to constrain the artist? Or should artists restrain themselves, whether for fear of being circumscribed, or in

the belief that self-restraint is the responsible way to behave?

There are no set answers for these questions. In reality, what artists do, and express in public, are the result of negotiations that take place between the artist and society through a number of means.

### Public Policy and the Arts

One of these means is the on-going exchange between artists and policy makers. In Singapore, the government exerts its influence over the arts both by restricting displays and performances, and by its allocation of resources to artists. Its actions are based on a number of principles. Let me enumerate several key ones.

Firstly, artists, like everyone else, must act within the law. There are laws that govern lewd behaviour, or defamation, or sedition and so on. This principle is axiomatic and foundational. But even then, exceptions readily come to mind. For example, artists may argue that nudity, which the law disallows in public places because it offends our conservative society, is justified under certain circumstances.

When this happens, a second principle is applied: that of complying with the spirit, rather than the letter of the law. Exceptions to the law can be considered, when there are good reasons to do so. For example, nudity in the arts may be allowed when it is material and essential to achieving a deeper understanding of the characters or themes.

A corollary to this principle is sensitivity and respect for the various religious, cultural and traditional beliefs of our multi-racial population. Preserving social peace is an important objective for the government. To make progress, society must from time to time examine itself and consider how it will change to keep pace with the times. But the government must judge the pace and manner in which change and adjustments take place, and attempt to make judicious decisions along the way so that social peace can be preserved.

Thirdly, the government intervenes as far as possible through the active participation of ordinary citizens and leaders in the arts community. MITA has many committees to advise and guide the implementation of policies that govern the contents of artistic expressions. These committees comprise people drawn from a wide spectrum of professions and vocations, so that we can obtain representative inputs.

Fourthly, standards are set relative to the context of the exhibition and the audience. For example, literature has high potential to be explicitly offensive, and yet is often the least constrained, because it is usually targeted at those who are prepared to expend serious intellectual effort in solitude to enjoy or be informed by it. Theatre, on the other hand, is more dramatic and rousing, and played to an open audience. Furthermore, words dramatised can convey meanings not always evident to a reader, and therefore hold more potential for mischief. So theatre scripts are usually scrutinised more carefully.

But scrutiny is at best a blunt instrument to manage the arts. So a fifth principle is that MITA encourages self-regulation. Theatre groups, for example, who have through the years developed a close and trusting relationship with the government, are exempted from having their scripts vetted beforehand. This approach has worked well so far.

This is because the majority of artists accept that they have a responsibility to preserve and enhance social peace. This does not mean that they cannot challenge status quo. Indeed it is quite the opposite, for the status quo left unchallenged may in some ways lead us to drift further apart as a community. But it does mean that in mounting such challenges, artists must be attentive to the mood and readiness of the people for change, and use their skill and art to find a way to navigate an acceptable path to the community at large.

Finally, MITA supports arts groups on the basis of their quality, and their commitment to develop and raise the standards of the arts in Singapore. We hope that our local artists and arts groups will be able to bring out in new and refreshing ways what is uniquely our way of life. And that in due course, they will win international acclaim for their artistic talent, sensitivity and skills.

### Artists and Audiences

These principles work best when artists recognise and accept that there is a need to try to resolve this apparent dilemma set out in your forum title: achieving artistic integrity, while at the same time being socially responsible.

But even with the best of intentions and good faith, the outcomes of arts events and activities are not always acceptable to both artists and society. From my observations, and those of others I have spoken to, there are several reasons why this may be so.

Firstly, artists sometimes appear to forget that they have audiences. Some might even say that they work autonomously of the audience; that they create art for art's sake, not for the sake of audiences. One of the reasons why a particular theatre performance at the Singapore Arts Festival this year was criticised was because the audiences felt left out and disengaged. It was as if they did not matter. I can't tell whether the playwright or producer or director intended this. But I believe this perception contributed to a poor response to the production, which I thought was otherwise well rendered.

Singapore's audiences are perhaps younger in the appreciation of the arts than in some other countries, given our relatively recent attention to the arts. But this is not necessarily a bad thing, for a younger, fresher audience can be more open and accepting of new ideas. Artists therefore need to give thought to how they can reach out to touch and win these audiences. This is a part of your social responsibility.

Secondly and conversely, artists may sometimes be impatient to create an audience. This observation follows from the first. Younger audiences – not in age, but in understanding of the arts – are easily shocked. Shocking audiences is therefore an easy device to get attention. And I dare say that there is quite some quantity of shocking art in Singapore!

But audiences are not always won over. Artists must consider whether the shock value of their art will eventually be converted into admiration, or at least respect. Or whether, once the initial shock has subsided, it turns into disdain and revulsion. Whatever label we might attach to it, art that engages, and says something deeply and powerfully about our lives, will endure and be treasured for a long time. Whether it is music or painting or theatre or literature or songs or opera, it is remembered for its intensity of meaning and the way it touches and changes how we think and feel.

Thirdly, a larger audience is not always a better audience. We should recognise that there is a natural rhythm and pace to how appreciation for the arts will grow over time, and not compromise artistic integrity for sake of expediency.

An announcement that actors would bare their bottoms and actresses disrobe may of course attract a larger audience to a theatrical production. But if the purpose of the play is a serious one, I wonder if a crowd attracted merely by the titillation of an R (A) type play would truly appreciate the larger message of the work. Or

worse yet, whether such teasers when magnified by the media, would result in an outcry and rejection from a public that would otherwise have been supportive of the work.

We should remember that young shoots may grow better in the shade, before they become sturdy enough to grow tall in the sunlight.

And finally, audiences too have a part to play. Experimentation in the arts is essential for its growth. This will result in new forms or styles that may at first be unsettling or unwelcome to audiences used to more standard fare. But audience support is essential for new ideas to develop and grow. If audiences approach experimental works with a critical but open mind, then they can help to develop the conversation that is needed between artist and society, and so help new art forms grow and flourish.

### Fostering a Healthy Debate

Ladies and gentlemen: I am not an expert arts critic. But it seems to me that the measure of great art is not how much attention it can garner, but how well it captures and reflects the shape and spirit of society. Great art can be shocking or startling, but perhaps it is more important that it be compelling and intelligent. It can be bold and daring, but it should also be sensitive and searching.

But whatever it is, there will always be a debate as to whether we are too liberal or too conservative. This is a natural and not unwelcome process of how we develop, both as individuals and communities. This debate, however, need not be rancorous. If we make the effort, as you have done today, to come together to speak and listen, we will be able to develop a better understanding of how we can bring out the best from our artists and audiences, and move our society forward.

There is a way to look at today's topic and see no conflict. If we accept that an artist's responsibility is also to serve society, then how well he does this becomes one measure of his integrity. In which case, social responsibility and artistic integrity are merely two sides of the same coin.

But some of you may say that this is too disingenuous a way to resolve the conflict. Perhaps it is true: we can't please everyone. But I would like to believe that if we work together in trust, we can at least create Art that is uniquely Singaporean and yet universal, reflecting our lives at this moment of our history, and bearing our hopes for the years to come.

I hope that this will also be your conclusion at the end of your deliberations today.  
Thank you.

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