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Speech by Mr David T E Lim, Minister of State for Defence and Information and the Arts, at the opening of the Visual/Video Art Exhibition at the Flying Circus Project 2000 on 8 December 2000 at Robertson Quay at 7.30 pm.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

1. Firstly, let me thank Theatreworks for inviting me here today to join you at the opening of the Visual and Video Art Exhibition. Let me also congratulate the artists who are participating in the Flying Circus Project 2000. I look forward to seeing your exhibits.
2. Singapore is making progress in the arts. Across the whole spectrum of artistic expression, we are seeing more and more engaging and well-executed presentations. Some of our artists, like Kuo Pao Kun and Ong Keng Sen, have won international acclaim for their efforts.
3. But progress in the arts does not follow an even path. An artist that is highly acclaimed today may be severely criticised the next. This is inherent in the nature of art, and the process of arts development in society.

4. Development of the arts follows a pattern that is not unlike stock markets – up one day, down the next. But just like markets, having the right fundamentals will ensure that the long-term trend is upwards, even if there are perturbations in the short term.

5. This analogy raises two questions. Firstly, what causes the ups and downs in the arts, and secondly what are the fundamentals on which we can develop a vibrant arts community? Let me take each question in turn.

6. Firstly, the ups and downs. The Arts cannot stand still. If it does it will stagnate, and become stale and uninteresting. Experimentation is at the heart of artistic endeavour and excellence. The spirit of creation pushes the artist to constantly search for new methods and media to express himself or herself. Video installations, which we will see today, is one such example.

7. But discovery and creation are not formulaic processes, nor are there well-trodden paths to follow. Sometimes artists over-reach. Their creations may not only surprise or shock, they may also cause alarm or anger. On the other hand, audiences sometimes over-react. They perceive the ideas expressed not merely as points for contemplation or discussion, but as challenges to their core values or insults to their fundamental beliefs.

8. Furthermore, audiences are in some ways more complicated than artists. There are at least two broad audiences: the individual, and the collective audience. Individual tastes and tolerances span a wide range. But collectively, individuals trade off individual desires and conform to social norms in exchange for good social relations. With only few exceptions, most of us find meaning and purpose being a part of society, and not apart from it. We are, therefore, willing to conform to societal norms even if we may personally be willing to tolerate more liberal practices, or alternatively, even if we are individually more comfortable with a more conservative standard.

9. It is important that we recognise this duality in values and standards because it explains in part the tensions between artists and audiences. For example, when arts proponents argue for more space, they suggest that people who are offended by the art need not view it. This proposal rides on the diversity of individual standards, and is not without merit. For example, the classification of films allows us to exhibit a wider range of movies and yet not offend the sensibilities of more conservative viewers.

10. But there are limits to this line of reasoning. If, for example, we extend film classification to include a category for hardcore pornography, the vast majority of Singaporeans would object. Allowing pornographic displays goes beyond the decision or rights of an individual whether to watch or not to watch a movie. Once such material is put into the public domain, it exerts its larger influence on society, and makes a statement about society's values. Neither society nor artists can deny this influence. This applies not just to moral issues, but to other areas of social values as well.

11. It is not surprising, therefore, that the views of artists and audiences collide from time to time. Artists need space to be bold and daring. They need to depart from norms, to test new paradigms, and to go where their thoughts take them. But audiences and society need time to evaluate new ideas. They need to weigh the new against the old, to think through the consequences of change, to find and establish a new equilibrium that change displaced.

12. But nothing is gained if we focus only on disagreements. Bearing this in mind, I turn now to the second question. On what foundations can we build this process, so that the trend line for the Arts is up, not down, and the overlap between artists and audiences grows larger rather than smaller? I would like to suggest 3 principles.

13. Firstly, let us recognise the inherent potential for conflict between artists and audiences and search for ways to resolve it. We need to listen more. Audiences, recognising that artists are trying to lead us to see things from a different vantage point, should step out of the familiar to consider new approaches. Artists, recognising that there are gaps of understanding and also fears and concerns, should think of how they can create intermediate steps to engage and communicate with their audiences. Both artists and audiences must make the effort. Then, we can have civil negotiations over how quickly and how much to change, rather than become embroiled in acrimonious arguments as to who should yield to whom.

14. Secondly, we need to take different approaches to deal with different situations. No two persons can be equally agreed on the myriad of issues that challenge our society. This is true of other societies as well, but especially so in Singapore because we are multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-religious. The divisions that other societies may have are made even more complex in the matrix of our multi-faceted society. The government is therefore more cautious when it comes to matters that touch on race or religion. Artists can help the process by

recognising this as well, and by adjusting their methods and expectations accordingly.

15. My third suggestion is that we work not just on the gaps, but also on the overlaps. There are many areas of the arts where artists and audiences agree on, such as arts that inspire and restore and give enjoyment. We should develop these arts further, and raise them to higher and international standards. The bigger we make these areas of overlap, the better positioned we will be to deal with the other areas where we differ.

16. Ladies and gentlemen: I began with an analogy that progress in the arts is not unlike the movement of the stock market. Let me conclude with another analogy. Developing the Arts is like moving from the old to the new economy. Not everything in the old economy is bad. Not everything in the new economy works. And some ideas from the new economy can be applied to the old economy to make it more productive. Over time, the character of our economy will change.

17. Likewise, the character of our society is changing. We are becoming a more cosmopolitan and global society. Some of our values will shift as a result. That does not mean that we should throw out all our traditional values in favour of the latest trends and fashion. But if we are to grow, we will need to renew our thinking and make some adjustments.

18. It will be a challenging journey. The issues we will have to confront are not cast in black and white, but in many shades and hues. The arts, by its very multi-dimensional nature, can help us navigate this future.

19. If we are timid and afraid to try a new path, we will make little progress. But if we are impatient and impetuous, we may end up on a perilous journey. We can move forward by taking a different path – one that is bold, yet patient; daring, yet circumspect. At the heart of the matter is the painstaking process of developing understanding, finding common ground, and establishing trust. If we are able to navigate such a path, then I think the journey will be exhilarating, inspirational, and grand. I wish it would be so.

Thank you.