Speech by Mr David T E Lim, Acting Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts & Senior Minister of State for Defence at the Lecture by Mr Frank Stella, at Singapore Repertory Theatre on 13 April 2002 at 2.35 pm

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Three days ago, the Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STPI) was officially opened. This is a remarkable institution. It reflects the passion, drive and ingenuity of Mr Ken Tyler, who founded the original print workshop in Mount Kisco, New York State, USA; and the creative energy of the many artists he worked with. I have every confidence that the workshop will in the years ahead play a leading role in advancing the state of the Arts in Singapore.

The opening exhibition at STPI features works of Mr Frank Stella, yet another unique artist who astonishes us with his bold, vibrant, inventive works. This afternoon you will hear Mr Stella speak about art.

I do not intend to talk about the Arts in the presence of these two experts, and no doubt many more in the audience.

Arts Development in Singapore

What I want to do is to look at how the Arts is playing a role in the transformation of Singapore, and then go on to address another issue related to this transformation. The level of Arts activities in Singapore has gone up. We have many more events in our annual Arts calendar, higher enrolments in our arts schools, larger number of Singaporeans who make the Arts a career or serious hobby.

For many years now, the government has steadily increased its funding support for the arts, through arts housing, arts scholarship, and various sponsorship schemes. Two years ago, MITA launched a $50 million programme to step up funding for the Arts for five years. In October this year our President will officially open the Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay, a $600 million investment in support of the performing arts.

Today, as we remake and reposition Singapore to compete in a knowledge driven global economy, MITA is likewise re-positioning the Arts. The Arts will play a bigger role in our economy and society, and contribute to the transformation of Singapore into a vibrant, creative, global city.

Censorship

But the transformation of our society will take more than government funding for the Arts. We will have to deal with a broad range of inter-related issues, from greater civic participation, to norms and guidelines on censorship. Let me speak briefly on the issue of censorship.

Censorship and the Arts do not sit easily together. But most people, artists included, accept that the issue is not one of censorship per se, but the extent and manner in which it is done.Censorship decisions are not always easy to make. In Singapore, the government sets policies and principles to guide these difficult but important decisions. These policies and principles are set and implemented in consultation with the public and reflect broadly the values and spirit of our current society. But as we implement them, we must be mindful that they will also shape and colour the character of our future nation.

Three Factors Shaping Censorship

In deciding what and how to censor, we first need to take stock of the key factors that shape our censorship rules. There are three broad factors

Multiracial Society

The first is the dynamics of community relationships within our multiracial society, set in the context of our history and geography. As Singaporeans, we have long celebrated our cultural diversity and heritage. A multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-lingual society weaves a rich tapestry of culture and traditions that brings life and vitality into the community. But such a society is also inherently vulnerable to conflicts. Contention and unrest can arise if any group decides that asserting their rights takes precedence over social harmony.

We cannot be insensitive to the feelings, aspirations and needs of each ethnic or religious group, because social peace is important for our society to grow. But at the same time, we must not be overly sensitive to perceived slights or criticisms, or else we will paralyze our society with rules and regulations.

We can get the balance right if we base our efforts on mutual respect, and recognize that some give and take is necessary for our society to remain at peace. We must therefore continue to dialogue and interact, practicing the deft art of how and when to speak our mind, and learning to listen out for ideas that can bridge differences.

The second and third factors are forces outside our society. Globalisation and technological advancement are inexorable forces that bring changes we cannot avoid, ideas we cannot ignore, and influences we cannot dismiss.

Globalisation

Embracing globalisation is key to our economic success. But the more we are connected globally, the more we must accept a flow of ideas and influences from other countries and cultures.
Not all ideas will necessarily work for us. For example, the norms for sex and violence in movies or digital games vary from country to country, as do the forms for expressing disdain or disagreement. Some may find foreign norms too liberal. Others may feel that our current norms are too constraining. Again, we have to find our own balance.

Global influences affect each of us differently. So over time, our society will become more diverse, not just in the cultural and traditional sense, but also in our lifestyles, values and aspirations. One consequence of this is that society will demand more choice, and concomitantly will need to accept a wider variety of views.

Inevitably, this will give rise to disagreements. Some will not be satisfied with just the freedom to exercise a personal choice, but will also seek to curb the advancement of conflicting values and lifestyles. This can happen when alternatives threaten to erode values they believe are necessary for our society to remain united and make progress.

We should not assume immediately that such disagreements arise because of narrow-minded or self-centred interests. Such voices may reflect well-informed viewpoints, driven by altruistic concerns, and guided by time-tested wisdom. We will have to judge each case on its own merits.
What we will need are processes that allow us to resolve such issues in ways that minimizes divisions in our community, and maximizes the common space we have to both pursue our individual convictions, and to come together in joint efforts.

Technological advancements

Technological advancements will complicate our efforts. In particular, digital and communications technology have spawned a whole array of media formats and communications channels that make the task of censors more difficult, and undermine controls and safeguards that society may wish to put in place.

This means that we will have to rely more on socialization and education to uphold values and shape social attitudes and behaviour. But who should take the lead, and who should play this role? Inculcating broad values is part of our formal educational system. In our schools, we instill values like meritocracy, integrity and care and concern for others. But there is a limit to the role of the state.

Not all questions of morality or conscience can be decided carte blanche or preemptively. It depends on context, precedence and peer opinions. The state cannot decide for each child which movie to watch, or what cyber games to play, beyond putting in place some general system of classification to guide or restrict access. As technology advances and creates new pathways of access, this burden of guidance or control may have to shift more towards parents and adults.

Summing Up

Let me summarise. Globalisation and technological advancements change our society. As an open, multiracial society, we need to consider some basic questions. How do we broaden our outlook and open our minds to new ideas and still protect our core values? How do we offer more choices and create a livelier and more vibrant society, and still preserve social unity and harmony? Should the government exert more or less control? Should parents and adults assume more or less responsibility?

We need a collective effort to answer these questions. The Remaking Singapore Committee has suggested that MITA should consider convening a Censorship Review Committee to review our censorship guidelines and practices in view of changes that have taken place in the media, arts and cultural sectors. MITA agrees that it is timely to do so. The last Censorship Review was done more than 10 years ago. A public consultative process now would be consistent with our efforts to engage more Singaporeans and to give them a say in the policies, principles and values that will guide our social development.

I have appointed Mr Liu Thai Ker to head this committee, and have asked him to submit his report in about 9 months time. This will allow ample time for his committee to consult widely with Singaporeans. My ministry will release the details of the committee shortly. I encourage all who are concerned about Singapore's future to give their inputs and play a part in this censorship review process.

Ladies and gentlemen: To some, Singapore may seem a rather conservative society. But our way of life has kept our society united and strong. What is important is that we are neither a closed nor a static society. Singapore will transform to succeed, but in ways that keep our community cohesive.

The development of the arts is a good example of how we have translated plans and intentions into action. Two years ago, the notion of building the Singapore Tyler Print Institute was only an intent. Today, it is a reality.

Thank you.