

**Presentation by Mr Alfian Sa'at, Resident Playwright, WILD RICE  
at IPS-SAM Spotlight on Cultural Policy Series Five:  
Roundtable on Whither Arts Funding: Priorities, Values and Control  
on Friday, 2 March 2018, 9am, Glass Hall, Singapore Art Museum**

**A Manifesto for Arts Funding**

**1. To fund the arts is to fund democracy.**

**2. Democracy involves dissent.**

Democracy involves debate, the contest of arguments, the sharing of different opinions. In such situations dissent is inevitable. And this dissent deserves public funding because this is the way to cultivate a public sphere, or to create the conditions in which both assent and dissent may emerge without fear or favour.

**3. The public consists of diverse minority groups.**

Arts funding is about disbursing public money according to public needs. But what exactly do we mean by the public? It cannot mean only the majority. Popular sovereignty does not mean tyranny of the majority. As much as democracy requires majority rule, it also requires minority rights. In between elections, minority views must be given fair play in the legislature, the media and also the arts. Thus, funding guidelines have to address the needs of a dynamic and diverse public, not a static and homogenous one.

**4. The public is not equivalent to the electorate.**

The public should not be permanently equated with the electorate. There are times when one is an audience member, or viewer, or reader, and other times when one is a voter. Voting itself is a complex procedure where the citizen has to decide whether one set of priorities is able to outweigh another. To think that a single work of art is able to sway votes is to overestimate the art and underestimate the public.

**5. Don't try to muzzle the mouth that you feed.**

We often hear the admonishment that one "should not bite the hand that feeds you". This is a dangerous stance to take, because it means that arts funding can be used to buy silence. It means that if we feed you, then you cannot criticise us, even if you notice any wrongdoing. It is a substitution of an ethics of conscience with an ethics of gratitude. But people who accept bribes are also often very grateful. They never bite the hand that feeds them.

**6. Taking funding away from anti-establishment art will not create pro-establishment art.**

In fact, it is the opposite. If the desire is to create art which supports the status quo, then they can only emerge by responding to the works which challenge the

status quo. Otherwise these pro-establishment works are just extensions of the status quo, characterised only by their repetitiveness and superfluity.

### **7. Censorship by funding might augment state power but destroys cultural capital.**

Every time funding is denied to a work for reasons other than lack of artistic excellence, one ends up eroding the country's cultural capital. Cultural capital is not just about amassing cultural products, but also about maintaining frameworks which allow for culture to flourish. If the work of an arts council is to build cultural capital, to erode it goes against the very reason for its existence.

### **8. Maturity is not merely a function of age.**

Maturity is a function of one's ability to think for one's self. It is developed as one is exposed to as many viewpoints as possible. The conventional argument is that some segments of the population are not mature enough to handle certain kinds of information, whether in the form of persuasive rhetoric or shocking images. But there can be no process of maturation if they are not first exposed to difficult ideas that lead to examination of the self and its values.

### **9. Controversy is a test of the state of our civic discourse.**

The state of our civic discourse can only be assessed when it is subjected to occasional stress. Avoidance of controversy should not be one of the principles of arts funding. Instead, one should strengthen the mechanisms in which one manages controversies, either by affirming a commitment to artistic excellence, or by facilitating discussion between those with opposing views. In an ideal world, an arts council will stand behind a controversial artist with the same resolve it showed in defending the controversial consultancy fees spent on a waste collection centre.

### **10. Bureaucrats need guidelines too.**

It is very important that guidelines are in place that can prevent arts council functionaries from acting *ultra vires*, or in excess of their authority. This is to prevent any abuse of power that might result from personal grudges, personal prejudices, or pressure from outside ministries and agencies.

Here are four principles that should guide the conduct of arts councils. The first is accountability, where one has to be able to justify one's decision-making. The second is consistency, where decisions adhere to unchanging principles of merit. The third is transparency, where the decision-making process is open to scrutiny. The fourth is neutrality, which includes political neutrality. This does not only mean being able to serve whoever is the government of the day in a non-partisan manner. Just as funding should not discriminate against an artist on the basis of race, religion, gender, sexuality, age, or disability, it should also not discriminate on the basis of the artist's political beliefs.

Accountability, consistency, transparency, neutrality. As a concession to bureaucratic language, the acronym for this is ACTN, or Action, if that helps.

This manifesto thus ends with a call to action on the ten points above.