

Talking about censorship: Singaporeans discuss restrictions imposed to protect “national interests”

When the works of activists and artists face restrictions, the Government tends to cite the reason of protecting “national interests.” This was the case for the Transformative Justice Collective (TJC) – they had put together a multimedia exhibition titled “Fighting For Life,” but could not proceed with it when the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) [denied TJC the classification](#) needed to hold a public exhibition.

In lieu of this, TJC organised a panel discussion titled “Censored: A Conversation In Lieu of An Exhibition” on 20 October 2024 at UltraSuperNew Gallery. This panel was part of “Putting the Death Penalty on Trial,” a series of events organised in commemoration of the World Day Against the Death Penalty. Through which, members of the public came together to share their views on the death penalty and censorship in Singapore.

The panel of experts facilitated the discussion in an informative and educational manner.

In addressing [discussions about the death penalty in the arts](#), poet and playwright Alfian Sa’at examined terminology commonly used by governing bodies, focusing on the use of terms like “disparage” and “undermine” to justify bans and funding withdrawals. Independent filmmaker Tan Pin Pin recounted how the [police banned the use of Shanmugam s/o Murugesu’s face](#) on a poster for a punk event in 2005; he was executed via the death penalty three months before the concert, and Tan expressed such restrictions as a “denial of personhood,” suggesting that it was part of the state’s attempts to control the narrative about death row inmates.

TJC member, Rocky Howe, shared insights about venue permit applications. Jokingly referring to himself as the “Chief Bureaucracy Officer,” he detailed his experience of having to go against his personal instincts by putting himself in the shoes of NParks, for example, when applying to use Hong Lim Park, in an attempt to navigate the technocratic process.

Speaking within the blank walls of the gallery space, Kokila Annamalai prompted the audience to think about the collective responsibility to look at this emptiness and contend with what the people lose, “What do we lose and what is the impact on the people when we don’t get to know and learn and think and make up our minds, when we are only told one story again and again and again?”

During the open mic, members of the public emphasised the importance of continued public discourse; “It keeps alive a memory that the state wants you to forget,” one of them said.

When we spoke to NTU Sociology Professor Stephen Campbell, he drew a distinction between the interests of a particular group and those of the general population, commenting that censorship commonly reflects ideas of the ruling class while, “the government tries to say that this is in the interest of society as a whole.”

Recently, the IMDA also [denied classification](#) for Daniel Hui’s docu-drama, “Small Hours of the Night,” claiming that it was “likely to be prejudicial to national interests.”