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# **A History of Fire: The Most Controversial Speeches of All Time, Vol. III — Edited by Mira Sen**

## **Preface to Speech #118: Deputy Secretary Marcus Reed, “Air Happens, Art Doesn’t”**

Delivered during FDF administration, Reed’s now-infamous speech became one of the most replayed—and reviled—pieces of political rhetoric in the post-Transition era. It was televised live during a budget session, and within hours, clips were circulating with captions like “art is dead” and “burn wood for charcoal.”

Critics called it a cultural assault, a calculated cruelty masquerading as pragmatism. Artists and educators condemned it from the floor of galleries and classrooms. Reed was burned in effigy at three major university campuses within a week of its delivery. And yet, for every outraged reaction, there were voters, officials, and media figures who called it “necessary,” “refreshing,” and “finally honest.”

What made it unforgettable wasn’t just the cuts that followed—it was the way Reed framed those cuts: not as reluctant austerity, but as necessary reckoning. Whether seen as brutal clarity or bureaucratic barbarism, this speech has endured as one of the defining rhetorical acts of the Re-alignment Period.

## **Speech Delivered by Deputy Secretary Marcus Reed, Floor Session**

Let’s get something straight.

Art is not oxygen. It’s not water. It’s not infrastructure. It’s not medicine. It doesn’t make the lights stay on or keep children warm at night. It doesn’t power a grid. Art is a luxury. And we have run out of room for luxuries.

People are screaming because we’re cutting arts funding. Good. Let them scream. You don’t need a grant to make something worth hearing. You think art dies without government subsidies? Go ask the kids who stole turntables during the LA riots what they built out of broken speakers and burned-out buildings. Go ask the ones who tagged concrete walls because they didn’t have canvases. They didn’t apply for fellowships. They made something because they had to. That’s

art.

And don't lecture me about tradition. Every time there's a cut, it's always opera and ballet that get protected. Not the neighborhood theater. Not the garage band. Not the muralist working with borrowed brushes and scrap plywood. The arts establishment doesn't care about art. It cares about itself. It preserves what flatters donors and boardrooms. It picks prestige over relevance.

You know what real artists do when the system turns its back on them? They make something anyway. They build their own scenes. Their own stages. Their own galleries. Real art crawls up through the cracks in the concrete. It doesn't wait for permission. And it sure as hell doesn't need a grant to be alive.

You want your voice heard? Shout. You want your vision seen? Project it. Paint it. Paste it. Stitch it to a jacket and walk down the street. Art will not die because we stopped paying for it. But it will finally have to prove it deserves to exist.

So here's my deal. If you want art—make it. You want to paint? Go grind minerals and mix pigment. Burn wood and make charcoal. Show it on the sidewalk. Scream it into microphones. Pass the hat. Barter for time. Ask for help. That's community. That's creation.

But do not—do not—ask the state to pay for your soul. Not now. Not when we're tearing down and rebuilding the foundation of our world. Not when every cent not used to keep someone alive or build a better tomorrow is a cent wasted.

Your art can survive on its own merits. Or it can die on them. That's how we treat everything else. Why should art be any different?

Let it rise. Or let it fall. But let it stand on its own.

If it's strong enough to matter, it'll survive. If it's not, let it make room for what is. That's not cruelty—it's clarity.

Some will say art helps people cope with the darkness. That it soothes, distracts, gives shape to the things we can't fix. Maybe that's true. But I don't want to help people cope with darkness. I want to end it. Fix what's broken. Replace what's failed. That's the job. That's what the money is for. Not interpretation. Not catharsis. Solutions.