

Letter from Victoria

April 13, 2018 – Editors Note: Rungh continues to follow the events unfolding at the Open Space gallery in Victoria, BC. Below is a letter regarding the meeting held on Saturday, March 10. We welcome responses.

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On a crisp Saturday afternoon in March, a leader from the Songhese nation named Bradley Dick stood at the front of the Open Space art gallery's main room, surveying the crowd. In one hand he held a large hand-drum and in the other, a drumbeater. The room rumbled with loose conversation: artists, writers, intellectuals, students, gallery patrons, and assorted hangers-on, all mingling in the white-walled space.

Mr. Dick struck the drum hide and began singing in Lekwungen. The powerful, chant-like song style paired with the unwavering drumbeat to quickly overtake the chaotic crowd-talk seemingly from inside the crowds' own sound. The chatter stopped. Everyone had turned to face him now. Gently yet firmly, he had beaten a pulse back into the room.

The crowd was at the hastily called public meeting because of events roiling Open Space's leadership and the wider Canadian art world. Days earlier, in a public letter that offered a rare glimpse into the inner workings of one of the oldest artist-run centres in Canada, Open Space's Aboriginal Curator, France Trépanier, had resigned. Her letter revealed that in a recent national search for an Executive Director, the gallery's hiring committee had come up with a long-list of 20 candidates, none of whom were Indigenous people or people of colour. Further, her request for a staff meeting to discuss this and other issues of representation was reportedly met with bullying and silence. In an effort to keep the dialogue going, she invited the staff, board and community to a talking circle focused on issues Indigenous people and people of colour face in their dealings with Open Space. The organization expressed an interest in addressing these shortcomings but took no further action.

Strikingly, these things were happening despite Open Space having embarked on a decolonization process in 2011. During the six years between then and now, the organization had been making efforts to incorporate Indigenous cultural protocols and worldview into the way Open Space operated. And perhaps most importantly, funding bodies central to Open Space's financial solvency had taken note of the institution's progress, rewarding it with increased provincial and federal government funding.

But then in the latter half of 2017, newly hired Executive Director, Kegan McFadden, assumed control, with the aim of fixing what he regarded as an organization "running in circles." Soon McFadden and the Board were asking Trépanier for input on changing the title and job description for the position of "Aboriginal Curator" – the job and title she, at the time, held – only to reject her suggestions of either keeping the word "Aboriginal" or replacing it with the word "Indigenous." Trépanier tried to continue the dialogue by suggesting the title of "Curator of Indigenous and Contemporary Art." Open Space rejected that one as well. In the eyes of

Open Space's leadership, Canada was now a "post-racial society"— and thus a curator position explicitly labelled "Indigenous" or "Aboriginal" was not needed. At that point, Trépanier resigned.

Adding kindling to the situation, Open Space's current troubles were unfolding in the wake of February's not-guilty verdicts in the Saskatchewan trial of Gerald Stanley, a white man who shot and killed a young Indigenous man named Colten Boushie, and the Winnipeg trial of Raymond Cormier, a white man with 92 previous convictions, acquitted of murdering an Indigenous teenaged girl named Tina Fontaine.

All that, in broad strokes, was the backdrop to the Saturday meeting. People arrived at the gallery upset, curious, outraged, unsure, hopeful, sad, sceptical, defensive, open and anxious—in short, folks were in the mood to listen and talk things out.

When the song finished, Mr. Dick welcomed the crowd into the space. He spoke of the song's deep origins in his family's history, of his own ancient familial ties stretching from what is now Victoria in the south to Vancouver Island's northern tip. Then Kwakwaka'wakw Elder, Gerry Ambers, opened the talking circle, as she and fourteen others – some Indigenous, some people of colour—took seats in a circle of chairs at the front of the room.

Ambers laid down the tone and defined the space with words about setting an agreement to make the circle a safe place for people to express themselves. She invited each participant to introduce themselves and pick a plant or an animal they felt close to. She encouraged participants and audience members to "listen with curiosity and compassion."

Charles Campbell, a black artist, stood up. Campbell was one of the event organizers. His opening remarks called attention to the origins of Vancouver Island's current place names and to the language everyone was using to participate in the circle, as basic evidence of colonialism's scars. "This is the context we find ourselves in," he said, "right here, right now: we're on colonial land and we speak English and we can't forget that."

Campbell recounted the public meeting's origins this way, "A few days ago, a group of artists – Indigenous and people of colour – met to discuss how to deal with Open Space gallery. Our solution was to walk into the space, not away from it." He offered the talking circle as a place for Indigenous people and people of colour to speak and others to listen.

Chris Creighton-Kelly, an artist and arts administrator of South Asian and British heritage, who is also France Trépanier's partner, presented a gift of cedar. He explained that Trépanier had elected to stay away because she did not wish to make the event about her.

In an effort to ease participants' nerves, Bradley Dick remarked that within the circle it was OK to be unpolished. "I find it helpful," he said, "to remember that being awkward and vulnerable in the circle is important because it indicates it is a time when I'm growing."

There was talk of cultural fragility and responsibility and of how this controversy was a reminder of Canada's colonial art system, which sees anything outside of Western art as inferior. Others talked about the legacy of art museums in this country: that colonizers stole things and then invited white people to look at them; that art pieces aren't valued at all until they are inside colonial institutions.

Creighton-Kelly wept while thanking artists that had come before him in the struggle, like veteran Indigenous filmmaker, Alanis Obomsawin. His tone turned hotter as he implored the audience to, "listen, do your homework, get on the fast train, learn the colonial history of this country and make it so we do not have to do this work again." Creighton-Kelly was one of several participants who mentioned how tired they were of having these same conversations decade after decade in Canadian art circles.

At the same time, there was talk of a need for cultural diversity and speaking colonial truths, continuing to talk about the effects of colonialism and how artists of colour and Indigenous artists have to constantly navigate those waters. The good news, one participant said, was that artists of colour and first nations artists are resilient.

Another participant expressed the relief she felt at the circle's ability to connect her to elders in common cause. Others talked about how they resented the fact that the responsibility to speak for all members of a community had fallen on them.

Bradley Dick reminded the crowd of the daunting history of Indigenous art being sold by white people for profit while this same power structure continually keeps Indigenous artists out of the art world. The key, he said, was "to create ways to include previously excluded artists into the Open Space organization." He asked how trust can be built between, "everyone else in the community" and the Open Space Board and Executive Director.

People made parallels between what was happening at Open Space and what routinely occurs at institutions elsewhere in the city. In one case it was an Indigenous artist speaking of having been commissioned to do work in City Hall that represents all indigenous people. In another case it was an arts administrator of colour at one of the city's most important art museums always being expected to articulate the "non-white perspective," as though there were a singular viewpoint and as though one person could provide such a service. People spoke of how hard the constant struggle is but reminded the crowd that the hardest part would be forgiveness.

Michelle Jacques, a woman of Afro-Caribbean descent and the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria's Chief Curator, spoke about how affected she was by Métis artist Jessie Campbell's description of what it was like being the only person of colour on a board of directors.

Others talked of a backlash after all the reconciliation talk around Canada 150 celebrations and how they saw this retrenchment manifesting itself in the struggle within Open Space. As Aya Clappis, an activist and university student of African and Indigenous descent, put it, "We need action and people need to step forward and take power while other people recede."

Near the event's end, Charles Campbell announced the most significant change so far in these early days of the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective boycott—namely that Open Space's Board of Directors had been asked to resign and agreed to do so. As Campbell explained, the Board was taking this action to allow Indigenous people and people of colour a voice in Open Space's leadership.

At this news, the room's temperature changed. Seeming to sense this, Campbell acknowledged that he was afraid to exercise power for fear of having his head "cut off." And that he felt it important to be say that, "everyone should understand that ceding power to others is necessary to heal this broken system. The communities we want to create and work with include everyone in this room." Campbell told the crowd that an interim board had been formed. Then he introduced each new board member by name: Eli Hirtle, Doug Jarvis, Michelle Jaques, Megan Quigley, Sabrina Williams and Campbell himself. Campbell asked each interim board member to stand and be acknowledged. Some rose from where they were sitting inside the circle; others rose from their seats in the audience. It was a dramatic moment.

Gerry Ambers closed the circle with words asking everyone there to think about how they leave the circle, that they should "look deep within and ask how am I walking away?" Then Bradley Dick closed with another traditional Lekungwen song.

When the song ended, there was silence. At first no one moved. Then the audience stood up. People broke off into groups, connecting, re-connecting, complimenting, questioning and discussing what they had just heard. Slowly, seemingly reluctantly, the crowd dwindled, as one by one they scattered onto the ocean wind-cleaned streets, dissolving into the omniscient, darkening air.