

*“...they work to erase us so they can be the champions ...(and) offer a pathway to salvation and equality without recognizing that it is the Western system that created the disruption in the first place.”*

Harlan Purden, First Nations Cree scholar and activist  
Managing Editor of Two Spirit Journal

February 20, 2018

Members of the Board of Directors  
Open Space Arts Society  
510 Fort Street  
Victoria, BC  
V8W 1E6

Respected colleagues,

It is with resolve and a heavy heart that I am resigning from my position as Aboriginal Curator at Open Space, effective immediately.

I first want to express my gratitude to the Songhees and Esquimalt First Nations for allowing me to be active, as an artist and curator of Kanien'keha:ka/French ancestry, on their beautiful unceded Lekwungen territory. I honour the many relationships that have been nurtured over the past few years with Indigenous artists and their communities – both local and national. I am humbled by the guidance and friendship of so many Indigenous elders. I also want to acknowledge my mentors, colleagues and audience members that have supported my journey as curator at Open Space. They are present in my heart and mind as I make this difficult decision.

The Indigenous artistic presence at Open Space has a rich history. As Aboriginal curator I stand on the shoulders of a long line of strong Indigenous artists such as Gerry Ambers, Sarah Hunt and Bradley Dick. I am indebted to Tahltan artist Peter Morin who was truly a trailblazer and the first Aboriginal Curator-in-residence at Open Space. In the last decade, Open Space has multiple times benefited from the support of the Aboriginal-Curator-in-Residence Program at the Canada Council for the Arts. The express purpose of this program was to create multiple permanent positions of 'Aboriginal Curator' in visual arts organizations across Canada. At Open Space, this led to the permanent position of 'Aboriginal Curator' that now no longer exists.

A number of recent events have dramatically transformed the curatorial vision and working environment at Open Space. I have witnessed, along with my colleagues and many members of the arts community, an alarming deficit of clear communication, leadership and respect, from both the board and the directorship of Open Space.

### **1. Representation**

While hiring a new Executive Director last autumn, after a national call, the hiring committee created a long list of 20 candidates for the position. Not one of those 20 candidates was an Indigenous or a person of colour. **That situation did not prompt the committee to pause and review its recruitment outreach and hiring process.** The making of this long list was in direct contradiction to Open Space's commitment to racial equity.

### **2. Lack of Leadership**

I requested a staff meeting to discuss this and other related issues. My request was met with a barrage of defensiveness and a dismaying public display of White fragility. I was bullied and silenced. **To this day, the board has never responded about this unprofessional and disrespectful behavior** (please see my email of October 4, 2017). After two weeks of deafening silence and considerable emotional disruption among staff, I invited the board, staff and arts community members to a talking circle. This circle provided an opportunity to discuss the presence of Indigenous artists and artists of colour at Open Space. It shed light on the challenges of systemic racism. Despite the enthusiastic commitment to continue this Indigenous process, I have never been asked to hold another talking circle.

### **3. Erasure**

Since 2011, Open Space has embarked on a decolonizing journey that led to the development of a new curatorial vision focused on practices stemming from different philosophical and artistic traditions. We developed collaborative, curatorial methods and community engagement protocols inspired by Indigenous worldview and knowledge. This vision formed the basis of our multi-year operating grant applications to the Canada Council for the Arts and the BC Arts Council. Open Space received very positive reviews from both peer assessment committees, which translated into significant grant increases. **Open Space has now drastically departed from that vision and methodological approach. It is a shift that I do not endorse.** Furthermore, in a recent meeting the ED told the staff that before his arrival at Open Space, 'we were running in circles' and that he is now fixing that.

### **4. De-Indigenization**

Over the past four years, I have invested in a serious amount of work at Open Space to ensure that local Indigenous protocols are respected; that the work of Indigenous artists is presented in historically, culturally and intellectually relevant contexts; that the Indigenous community can engage with contemporary art on their own terms; that young Indigenous artists feel welcomed and uplifted; that Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities can respectfully engage in difficult conversations. Stemming from the Indigenous principle of relationality, these relationships are to be honoured. I deeply care about this work.

I was asked to offer professional advice to the ED and the Chair of the board, regarding the title and job description of the Aboriginal Curator at Open Space. I recommended that Open Space maintain the position of 'Aboriginal' or 'Indigenous' Curator and that it be named as such. Titles are important, especially at this time of decolonizing the Canadian art system. While hiring Indigenous

people is critical, naming their positions as 'Indigenous' communicates a crucial, culturally relevant message to Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities alike. After all, we do not live - and Open Space surely does not live - in a post-racialized society.

**That advice was rejected, so I respectfully proposed a synthesis with a combined title of 'Curator of Indigenous and Contemporary Art'. This suggestion echoes the titles of some Indigenous curatorial positions across the country. This was also rejected.**

Indigenous presence in arts organizations is not merely an intellectual exercise. 'Indigenization' is a complex, sometimes contested, process – my Indigenous friends and arts colleagues are working this out across the territory called Canada. It is not exactly clear what it is or what it looks like. But it is clear what Indigenization is NOT – it is not White people telling Indigenous people how it is defined; it is not making arbitrary decisions that completely rupture ways of being/working, dishonouring our collective memory; and finally it is not imagining that they are 'leading' the discussions on how to 'Indigenize'. These attitudes are the personification of neo-colonialism in 2018.

I want to be explicit that my decision is not personal. These issues are much larger than me. They concern our arts communities - both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, both local and national. So, although I am leaving my position as Aboriginal Curator, I remain deeply committed to placing Indigenous arts at the centre of the Canadian art system. I believe that the art practices by people of colour must also play a critical role in this re-centering. Of course, I will remain co-director of the *Primary Colours/Couleurs primaires* initiative, of which Open Space is one of its sponsors.

In the spirit of honouring Indigenous guiding principles of respect, responsibility, relevance, relationality and reciprocity, I am happy to continue this conversation with determination and alacrity.

Nia:wen'ko:wa. Sken:nen.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "France Trépanier". The signature is written in dark ink and has a fluid, connected style.

France Trépanier