

Rocio Graham's Personal Letter

I am Rocio Graham. This letter is a personal follow-up to the joint statement letter written together with Alia Shahab, Brittney Bear Hat, Dan Cardinal McCartney, Richelle Bear Hat, and Teresa Tamby regarding our experiences with Contemporary Calgary (CC) and their response to our concerns. I want to express deep gratitude and admiration to my peers for taking on this work that has taken a lot of energy from our other artistic commitments to provide solidarity and care for one another. This letter is to provide context about my personal perspective and the motivation to engage in this intense and time consuming process and where I stand in this situation. As an artist who prides myself in creating communities of care, I will not stay silent and complicit to unfair systems that deeply affect my fellow racialized artists. I took this risk to speak up despite that I am fully aware that by doing so I put in jeopardy the labour and connections I have developed over time within my art community. I am aware of the risk I am taking that could potentially hinder future opportunities for my art practice. Staying silent is self serving which no longer supports my art community.

For context on the situation that involves me and the artists listed above click [<here>](https://jointletterto.cc/) (<https://jointletterto.cc/>).

I would like to recognize that this letter was written on the land where Elbow River and Bow River meet, known as Kootsisáw (Tsuut'ina), Mohkínstsis (Blackfoot), and Wincheesh-pah (Stoney Nakoda), which welcomed me as a new guest and provided support for my family and my art practice to thrive. I come from the Huichol region in Mexico and I am too familiar with long lasting effects of systems of oppression that can hinder people's opportunities to thrive and contribute. I care about my role as a guest in this land and feel a deep commitment to ensure I contribute to a community that is based on care and inclusion.

In the past few months Black Voices have urged us to look honestly to our contributions to a system that continues to be unbalanced and unfair. As a racialized artist that has faced physical and verbal aggression in personal and professional settings, I am familiar with the indignities of discrimination and inequitable practices.

BIPOC artists are often disadvantaged systemically to reach the same levels of opportunity as our white peers. We require systems that help racialized artists navigate a predominantly white art world. We require to see ourselves reflected in staff and boards, to be included in conversations about decisions that affect us. We require knowledge of first people's practices at an institutional level. As Contemporary Calgary continues with its programming we hope that our concerns are heard and translated to tangible action. We need the full engagement of our arts community to create meaningful change within our art institutions. I invite everyone to be part of this process, to ensure the support of Contemporary Calgary and its board and our BIPOC artists in this journey to create a more robust, resilient and inclusive arts community.

Friends call out their friends when they see actions that are unfair and self serving. I consider myself a friend and supporter of Contemporary Calgary. It is my wish that Contemporary Calgary thrives and cements its role as an important pillar of our art community. My participation during the first Collider art residency proved to be enriching and mostly rewarding. I managed to develop my artistic practice in new and exciting ways because of that art residency. I had access to studio space that was pivotal in developing new and exciting work. When fellow artists shared their experiences and their struggles with the same organization I had to listen carefully and engage in honest reflections. Why was my experience so vastly

different from some of my peers? How was I complicit in an un- equitable art system? What was my role and accountability in all this?

I realized that I have been trained to self negate and expect very little from art organizations, to be grateful for the most basic opportunities coming my way and being used to put extra labour and problem solving skills for things that should be basic expectations in a professional art setting.

For my art residency, I grew used to not having basic studio necessities. I problem solved constantly, I grew used to having my work moved around to fit the various external events and to be asked to move studios on a moment's notice to accommodate a fellow white male artist that required longer studio space. I grew used to self sourcing many of the supplies for the community engagement programming that I delivered during my residency (for which I yet to be reimbursed). During installation of the Planetary exhibition, I had to find my own external support for my AV tech needs . There was no capacity for the CC AV tech to provide the assistance I needed at such a critical time. The AV staff hired by Contemporary Calgary dismissed my many concerns during installation and I felt belittled by the AV tech when I asked for basic support. I found it more effective to seek help from other fellow artists in my community who supported me fully. I bought paint out of my own budget to paint the blue walls that I required for my exhibition piece. I am a resourceful artist, for me all these things were seen as part of being an artist. I have been trained by an art system to see all that extra labour as part of the role of an artist without expecting better. I did not consider how my resourceful actions were a disservice to my art community. Art organizations are growing accustomed to artists being the ones that take many of the responsibilities that should rest on the shoulders of art institutions.

As someone that had to navigate the art world alone since immigrating to Canada I grew accustomed to not expect much and be grateful for the most simple of opportunities. For me, having the opportunity to participate in a residency at an established art institution like Contemporary Calgary was enough. I felt I should not ask for anything more. I developed a deep connection to some staff members and I did not want to disappoint them with my demands. I saw the extraneous effort by some tired staff to try to support me when they, themselves, did not have the authority to do so. I have deep gratitude to Charlotte Le Gallais and her efforts to enrich my experience. In the excitement and gratitude for this opportunity, I failed to see that other peers were struggling with their own residency experiences.

I failed to advocate to have a more diverse artist and staff base. I failed to be vocal about the fact we did not have one single black artist in our residency or that I did not see myself well represented in the board of directors or staff at CC. I recognize that we have been operating from a culture of scarcity, our art systems expect us to compete with one another for a spot at the table. As I was trying to secure my spot at the table and make my voice heard, I did not reflect on the fact that many important voices were excluded from this opportunity. I take full responsibility for my oversight and for my delayed action to initiate change.

During the first weeks of the pandemic, when many artists lost their source of income and no federal help was announced, CC did not engage in a supportive and meaningful way with its artists.

I felt abandoned by an institution I so cared for. Instead, Field Trip programming [Field Trip residencies \(https://www.fieldtrip.art/field-trips/meet-the-artists-of-the-inaugural-field-trip-artist-residency\)](https://www.fieldtrip.art/field-trips/meet-the-artists-of-the-inaugural-field-trip-artist-residency) were announced. I was disappointed that CC failed to support its local artist base first, after all, some of its funding comes from the taxes of our local community. I think it was important to show solidarity to its local

artist base in such uncertain and frightening times. We needed clear leadership in such uncharted times. I approached a couple of CC staff about my concerns but I am cognizant that comprehensive supportive plans need to come from the board of directors and their top administrators not from staff.

After CC public BLM statement felt disingenuous to several artists in the Collider residency, an array of emails and exchanges erupted within our community expressing their mistrust in the statement as their personal experiences with CC during the residency were oppositional to the BLM statement by CC. My fellow racialized artists and I attempted to engage in an internal dialogue with CC as our focus was to be part of the solution in a meaningful way. In my 13 years working in the corporate world I came to trust in the positive impact of conflict resolution. I strongly believe that from conflict more honest and trusting relationships can emerge. I insisted that we engage with CC in a relationship of mutual learning and growing, creating a legacy for other BIPOC artists following our steps. I hoped that together we could emerge from this crisis wiser, humble and assured in co-creating a more inclusive art environment where BIPOC voices felt welcomed and supported in this art institution. Over countless hours of internal work in the past 7 weeks proved futile. We could not obtain clear basic signals or commitments that CC was ready to work with us in tangible plans to make CC more inclusive and supportive to racialized artists.

This experience left me exhausted and disappointed. I felt that I failed to initiate change that would benefit the BIPOC artists that follow behind. Unless large institutions are willing to navigate in discomfort, uncertainty and self reflective practices, meaningful change won't happen. Our art institutions belong to all of us. The responsibility to educate them and keep them accountable should not rest on the shoulders of the marginalized artists. Rocio Graham