

11 October 2019

### A Message to Our Audiences

For the past forty years, Mercer Union has championed the work of artists at formative stages of their practice. We are dedicated to supporting the production of new and experimental work, assisting artists in realizing pivotal exhibitions. Mercer Union aims to foster an intimate space for artists and audiences to develop dialogues and conversations. We believe art is crucial to expanding minds and pushing boundaries, and actively seek to program exhibitions that encourage critical inquiry and conversation within our community.

On 9 February 2019, Mercer Union opened a solo exhibition of new work by Toronto-based artist Nep Sidhu, curated by cheyanne turions. We supported the exhibition and led a partnership with our colleagues at Esker Foundation, Calgary, and later a touring agreement with SFU Galleries, Vancouver. The exhibition in Toronto was among the best attended in Mercer Union's history, having welcomed over 2,500 visitors and garnered coverage by local, national and international media outlets. The exhibition was conceived as an opportunity to explore a difficult history and examine how memories—especially those related to personal and collective resistance, resilience and ritual—persist in the present.

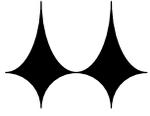
Upon opening the exhibition in Toronto, Mercer Union became aware that the project's references and framing had raised concerns among local audiences. For some viewers, the exhibition was an invitation for healing through shared experiences; however, we also came to understand that for some, it prompted recollections of personal and generational trauma. We first learned of the significance of these community concerns from our colleagues at South Asian Visual Arts Centre (SAVAC). They expressed their concern that the accompanying essay—intended to frame the work through historical context—put forth a singular narrative that inadequately captured the scope and complexities of Sikh history. While SAVAC outlined for us the history of state-led violence that has been directed at Sikh people, they feared the essay lacked context and, as a result, ignored tactical violence and intimidation used by some to support the pursuit of a theocratic Sikh state.

SAVAC has since devoted significant resources to managing and mediating responses to the exhibition from members of the South Asian community who sought their advocacy and support. We appreciate these substantial efforts, and want to express our sincere gratitude for SAVAC's stewardship, generosity, insights and patience.

We recognize that the initial essay did not account for the plurality of politics and lived experiences of many South Asian communities who have been and continue to be impacted by intolerance and religious violence. Our failure to offer a more nuanced and contextualized narrative, especially considering that many of our audience members may not have been familiar with this particular history and its generational impact, was a significant misstep.

Mercer Union, in consultation with Sidhu and turions, removed the initial essay from the gallery space and online platforms a week after the exhibition opened. We replaced it with a curatorial statement in which turions acknowledges the blindspots in the exhibition's original framing; we subsequently added an annotated bibliography to supplement that statement. The full statement and bibliography can be accessed [here](#).

Mercer Union engaged in private discussions with members of our community to listen and learn from others' perspectives, experiences and interpretations. Through those dialogues, we came to understand that Mercer Union should have addressed these concerns publicly and provided a more responsive and supportive platform that could have allowed for deeper discussion within our community.



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This has been an important learning moment for Mercer Union. We recognize that moving forward we must better understand the wider context of the work we exhibit and the communities our programming represents and impacts.

Over the last few months, Mercer Union as an organization has spent significant time considering curatorial responsibility. In our efforts to rebuild trust in the time ahead, we are committed to taking concrete steps to realizing the following goals:

- Dedicating resources to developing workshops and forums regarding curatorial responsibility and ethics;
- Being accountable to our communities by reaching out to individuals who have asked for dialogue and meetings;
- Working with staff, board and audiences to examine the institutional structures and policies that guide our programming decisions and organizational activities.

As an artist-run centre, Mercer Union remains committed to the open dialogue and respectful debate that provocative artworks and exhibitions can foster. We thank Mercer Union's community for working through this with us, and look forward to building and strengthening relationships with the artists and communities we serve.

We invite your feedback as we continue our learning process: [feedback@mercerunion.org](mailto:feedback@mercerunion.org)

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### **Mercer Union, a centre for contemporary art, Toronto**

Mercer Union is a non-profit, artist-centred space in Toronto. We have a unique track record of presenting innovative exhibitions by diverse Canadian and international artists in formative and established stages of their careers. We are dedicated to supporting the production of new and experimental work, assisting artists in realizing pivotal projects.

Mercer Union has the will and flexibility to take on ambitious projects. We foster an intimate and supportive space for artists to develop and take risks with their work. In turn, their exhibitions play a role in shaping the cultural landscape of Toronto, Canada and beyond.

Mercer Union. Cultivating artists and challenging audiences since 1979.

**For more information please visit:**

[mercerunion.org](http://mercerunion.org)

Mercer Union acknowledges the support of its staff, volunteers and members, the Canada Council for the Arts, the Government of Ontario through the Ontario Arts Council and the City of Toronto through the Toronto Arts Council.

Admission is free and all are welcome.