

Anne Whitelaw, *Spaces and Places for Art: Making Art Institutions in Western Canada, 1912-1990*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017, 352 pp. 58 b/w illus \$39.95 (paper) ISBN : 9780773550322

Andrea Terry

Volume 43, numéro 1, 2018

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1050837ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050837ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Terry, A. (2018). Compte rendu de [Anne Whitelaw, *Spaces and Places for Art: Making Art Institutions in Western Canada, 1912-1990*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017, 352 pp. 58 b/w illus \$39.95 (paper) ISBN : 9780773550322]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 43(1), 124–126. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050837ar>

been involved in artistic interventions along the Windsor-Detroit border for several years. The book's final chapter looks at a number of artistic works and interventions centred on this border region, from Ron Terada's installation of a bilingual sign bearing the words "You Have Left the American Sector" through the ongoing efforts of the Windsor-based Broken City Collective to alter the visible presence of the Caesar casino complex, whose signage had disrupted lines of sight across the Windsor-Detroit border. Finally, Rodney takes up the work of Detroit-based, Métis artist Dylan Miner, whose project *La (otra) frontera* "relocated" the southern border of the United States to the north by documenting the rich presence of Chicana/o culture along the nation's northern edges.

In one of this book's most poignant observations, Rodney notes how the engagement of artists with borders—and with the US-Mexico border in particular—has changed over the last thirty years or so. As she observes, it was common in the 1980s and 1990s to treat borders as places of mixing and indeterminacy, as incubators for new, fluid varieties of "border culture." The most influential example of this treatment was offered by the Chicana scholar Gloria Anzaldúa in her widely read book of 1987, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. For Anzaldúa, the regions between nations and cultures encouraged a destabilization of deeply rooted identities (of genre, sexuality, and race), and while this might make them places of loneliness and precarity, these borderlands were also laboratories in which new, mestiza identities might emerge. In the wake of Anzaldúa's work, Rodney shows, literature and performance were the artistic forms most engaged with the condition of life on the border.

This would change after 2001, when rising perceptions of a threatened US homeland and the consolidation of the security state severely challenged

any sense of borderlands as spaces of fluid invention. Since then, the author notes, the art forms engaging with the border are those most able to engage with the solid materiality and militarization of border complexes, particularly along the frontier dividing the United States and Mexico. These include new forms of activist architecture or social engagement and works of tactical intervention. No longer able to celebrate the liberating potential of borders as spaces "in between," artists now work to challenge or expose the border's new status as front line in the geopolitical operations of the paranoid state. ¶

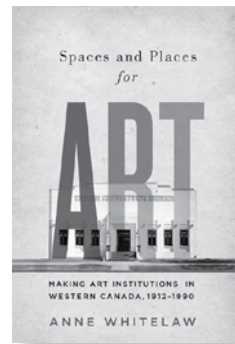
Will Straw is James McGill Professor of Urban Media Studies in the Department of Art History and Communications Studies at McGill University. —william.straw@mcgill.ca

Anne Whitelaw
Spaces and Places for Art: Making Art Institutions in Western Canada, 1912-1990
Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017
352 pp. 58 b/w illus
\$39.95 (paper) ISBN: 9780773550322

Andrea Terry

Spaces and Places for Art: Making Art Institutions in Western Canada, 1912-1990 is an extensively researched, compelling, and insightful book. In it, Anne Whitelaw effectively charts the complex relations between art institutions formed in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia and the National Gallery of Canada (NGC), beginning with the formation of the Winnipeg Museum of Fine Arts (1912), the first art gallery founded west of Toronto, and ending in 1990 with the termination of the National Museums of Canada Corporation. In tracing such a broad constellation of connectivity, the author highlights common experiences amongst these

institutions from Winnipeg westwards in terms of their formation, development, and ongoing exchanges with NGC. Framing her study as "an exploration of the *relations* between 'Ottawa' and 'the West'—rather than as the history *from* either location," Whitelaw reveals the socio-political issues that emerge when one thinks through "the *relationship* between so-called central Canada and 'the West' as something other than 'centre-periphery' or the discourse of a region alienated by a dominant (or dominating) centre" (10). In exploring these connections, she foregrounds concepts of space and place. For her, *space* is the geographical site or municipality in which each art gallery resides, as well as the physicality of the exhibitionary sites. Her consideration of *place* builds on the seminal work



of Carol Duncan in her book *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (1995), and, for Whitelaw, this term signals the "ideological and affective power of art galleries in the region" and their perceived contributions to the establishment of "centres of civilization in what was considered to be the western frontier" (15).

Both invoking the term "centre-periphery" and denouncing it, Whitelaw deliberately references an established body of Canadian historiography in an effort to move beyond "isolationist regionalism." In so doing, she speaks to a recent spate of publications bent on exploring connections among regionalist attitudes, arts

institutions, and cultural production, such as Erin Morton's book *For Folk's Sake: Art and Economy in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016), Lianne McTavish's study *Defining the Modern Museum: A Case Study of the Challenges of Exchange* (University of Toronto Press, 2013), and Caitlyn Gordon-Walker's work *Exhibition Nation: Multicultural Nationalism (and Its Limits) in Canada's Museums* (UBC Press, 2016). Whitelaw acknowledges her indebtedness to the writings of Canadian theorist Harold Innis (1894–1952) and his framework for political economy, which takes into account how particular facets of geography and economic history helped to shape political structures and power relations in the modern Canadian state. In this framework, various geographical features, such as the Saint Lawrence River, the Great Lakes Basin, the Mackenzie River, and the Hudson Bay basin, operated, most notably in the early to mid-twentieth century, not only as trade routes for the fur trade, but also as channels for the entrenchment of economic centres in the emerging nation, such as Ottawa, Toronto, and Montreal. Whitelaw suggests that this process led to a charged balance between cultural workers in newly formed arts institutions in the West and those in central Canada. As she adroitly puts it, "The way out of such isolationist regionalism is to bring back the centre but to try to destabilize its centrality" (13).

Cognizant of the pitfalls of ascribing a common identity such as "the West" to the lands now known as Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia, Whitelaw asserts that these particular provinces have found such a designation "politically useful" in working to distinguish their differences from the rest of Canada, but especially Ontario and Quebec. She argues that the actors in the histories and activities of art institutions located in western Canada viewed themselves and their work "as part of a broad social and economic entity called 'the West,' and in turn,

how figures from Ottawa in particular equally viewed them in such homogenizing terms" (17). Mindful of facing similar challenges that banded them together, these provinces collectively formed a bulwark against the controlling Ottawa-based forces.

Cumulatively, Whitelaw's study offers an overview of museum building in the region in addition to analyses of the oftentimes contentious relations between "centre" and "periphery" played out through the formation and development of fine arts institutions (17). With its introduction, six chapters, and epilogue, the study charts in a roughly chronological manner the always politically and economically charged dealings between institutions in western Canada and those in Ottawa. Chapter One outlines the contribution of museum building to transforming frontier settlements into major metropolises, presenting "capsule histories" of arts institutions in Winnipeg, Regina, Saskatoon, Edmonton, Calgary, Vancouver, and Victoria (17). Chapter Two speaks most directly to the primary themes of the entire study in its examination of western Canadian art galleries' collective involvement in NGC's loan exhibitions program, setting a provocative stage on which the rest of the study unfolds. Begun in 1913, the program operated as part of NGC's federal mandate both to support Canadian art and educate its audiences throughout the country. However, not only did this program promote NGC's visibility across the country, it also worked to justify its role as Canada's "national" art gallery. So, NGC really depended on the existence of arts institutions in the West. As Whitelaw puts it, "Although few organizations in western Canada would have been able to survive without the assistance of the National Gallery, this chapter [shows] that the National Gallery was equally reliant on regional institutions to fulfill its federal mandate and to demonstrate its national reach to international observers The relationship

between the centre and the periphery resulted in the *continued* attempt of the National Gallery to control the activities of regional galleries and to assert its authority in all matters of art in Canada" [italics added, 75].

Subsequent chapters continue tracking the tension-filled connections and relationships between institutions in the West and Ottawa. Chapter Three examines cultural policy developments in Canada from the 1930s through to the postwar period, culminating with an analysis of the findings of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences (the Massey Commission) and its "reassertion of centralized national institutions as the primary locus for cultural decision making and activities" (18). Chapter Four charts western galleries' reactions to these trends, focussing on the Western Canada Art Circuit (founded in 1944). Chapter Five explores how, starting in the 1950s, Canadian art galleries endeavoured to professionalize by hiring curators and directors trained and certified in museum management programs, which in turn raised the profile of galleries in western Canada, thereby evening out the "playing field" across the country. Finally, Chapter Six considers how western institutions were affected by the National Museums of Canada Corporation (founded in 1968), which consolidated the four federal institutions—the National Gallery of Canada, the National Museum of Man, the National Museum of Natural Sciences, and the National Museum of Science—under the management of a centralized board of trustees and remained in place up until 1990, while also outlining subsequent changes to the dispersal of funds as support shifted during the mid-1980s from operation to project funding. The Epilogue brings the themes considered and the relationships discussed into the 2000s, calling attention to how in the twenty-first century regional interests gave way to "the representation of gender, sexual, and racial diversity in acquisitions and exhibitions, and to

participating in aesthetic activities ... framed by global rather than national interests" (20).

In teasing out the complex dynamics among the assemblage of arts institutions across Canada over the course of the twentieth century, Whitelaw provides a wealth of observations, insights, and arguments that might be applied to events, exhibitions, and institutions in the twenty-first century. Consider the federal government's *Canada 150* campaign, which marks the 150th anniversary of Confederation (2017), and follows on the conclusion of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's activities (2010–2015), which cast "an undeniable light on mechanisms and effects of Canada's colonial formation that reverberate ... in the present."¹ The Dominion of Canada came into being as Confederation went into effect on 1 July 1867, endorsing the popularized belief that the "nation" of Canada began at that moment. Canada now operates as a settler nation-state with a federal multiculturalism policy built over existing Indigenous communities. Individuals and collectives across Turtle Island² challenged the *Canada 150* campaign, initiating *L'autre 150*³ in Quebec, *Canada 150+* in Vancouver, British Columbia, and employing Twitter as a platform using the handle @resistance150.

Another year-long, nationwide initiative was *LandMarks2017/Repères2017*, a series of contemporary art projects in and around Canada's National Parks and Historic Sites. Organized by the charitable organization Partners in Art, it brought together a select group of curators who worked alongside artists and art students from universities across the country⁴ "in collaboration with local communities, actively engaging audiences to critically examine Canada at 150 while offering a legacy for the future."⁴ Offering different communities the chance to engage critically with state-sanctioned

commemorative spaces through artistic interventions, *LandMarks2017/Repères2017* highlighted not only the ways in which Canada's articulation of its national identity depends on localizing forces, fostered by regionally specific characteristics and attributes, but also generated widespread recognition of artistic ways to reactivate institutionalized understandings of space and place. ¶

Dr. Andrea Terry is a contract instructor in the Visual Arts Department at Lakehead University and Acting Curator of the Thunder Bay Art Gallery (2018).
—aterry@lakeheadu.ca

1. Leah Decter and Carla Taunton, "Decolonial Cultural Practices: Advancing Critical Settler Methodologies," in *Schedule and Abstracts: 2016 Conference of the Universities Art Association of Canada* (Montreal: UAAC and UQAM, 2016), 66.

2. As writer, curator, and media artist of Mohawk-Jewish heritage Steve Loft explains, "Turtle Island is a term used by numerous Northeastern Woodland Native American tribes, especially the Haudenosaunee or Iroquois Confederacy, for the continent of North America." "Introduction: Decolonizing the 'Web'," in *Coded Territories: Tracing Indigenous Pathways in New Media Art*, eds. Steve Loft and Kerry Swanson (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2014), vii.

3. The curatorial team was made up of David Daviney, Ariella Pahlke and Melinda Spooner (Atlantic Curatorial Team), Véronique LeBlanc (Montreal), Natalia Lebedinskaia (Brandon, Manitoba), Kathleen Ritter (Vancouver/Paris), and Tania Willard (Secwepemc Nation). The artists involved include Michael Belmore, Rebecca Belmore, Chris Clarke and Bo Yeung, Raphaële de Groot, Maureen Gruben, Ursula Johnson, Cheryl L'Hirondelle and Camille Turner, Jeneen Frei Njootli, Douglas Scholes, and Jin-me Yoon.

4. Partners in Art, "Welcome to LandMarks2017/Repères2017," *LandMarks2017/Repères2017*, accessed 28 December 2016, <http://landmarks2017.ca>.



Serge Guilbaut and John O'Brian, eds. *Breathless Days: 1959-1960*

Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017

333 pp 67 b/w illus.

\$104.95 (cloth) ISBN 978-0-8223-6023-0

\$27.95 (paper) ISBN 978-0-8223-6041-4

Anthony White

This excellent anthology, assembled by two leading scholars of modern art, investigates a pivotal, yet overlooked moment in twentieth-century cultural history—the years 1959 and 1960. Although the period covered by the volume is limited, it encompasses a range of mediums—visual art, film, writing, theatre, and music—and works from several countries in Europe and the Americas. Serge Guilbaut and John O'Brian argue that this period was a turning point in both global politics and the arts. In 1959, Fidel Castro seized power in Cuba and Charles de Gaulle was proclaimed President of France's Fifth Republic. As Cold War tensions between the US and the Soviet Union escalated, several African countries established independence from colonial rule. In the art world, changes were no less tumultuous, with the passion for nominating things "new"—New Wave, nouveau réalisme, the Nouveau Roman—demonstrating that a radically different set of affairs was in place. Among the significant developments that occurred in this period—many of which are discussed in this volume—are the breakdown of the classic Hollywood studio system; the evacuation of the authorial subject in the Nouveau Roman; and the fluid exchange of jazz music between the US and France. Contemporary artists, writers, and filmmakers were rendered "breathless" by the pace of events.

The editors of this collection, who are both at the University of British Columbia, have impressive track records as historians of European and