

# Material Culture Review

## Revue de la culture matérielle

Robertson, Kirsty. 2019. *Tear Gas Epiphanies: Protest, Culture, Museums. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press*

Andrea Terry

Volume 92-93, 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1091239ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1091239ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

Cape Breton University Press

### ISSN

1718-1259 (print)

1927-9264 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this review

Terry, A. (2022). Review of [Robertson, Kirsty. 2019. *Tear Gas Epiphanies: Protest, Culture, Museums. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press*]. *Material Culture Review / Revue de la culture matérielle*, 92-93, 33-36.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1091239ar>

All Rights Reserved © Andrea Terry, 2022

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

**é**rudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

## ANDREA TERRY

St. Francis Xavier University

Review of

Robertson, Kirsty. 2019. *Tear Gas Epiphanies: Protest, Culture, Museums*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press. Part of the McGill-Queen's/Beaverbrook Canadian Foundation Studies in Art History Series. Pp. 432, 51 photos, colour section. ISBN 9780773557017.

*Tear Gas Epiphanies: Protest, Culture, Museums* is an extensively researched, compelling, and incredibly timely book. While protest movements, such as Liberate Tate and Occupy Museums, have garnered international attention, museums and art galleries in Canada, Robertson argues, have had “an uneven relationship with protest,” (Robertson 2019, 10) at times actively resisting the presence, voices, and calls of activists. Accordingly, *Tear Gas Epiphanies* explores how protest movements and activist demonstrations in Canada from the 1900s through to the present engage with museums and art galleries. The author goes on to call for cultural institutions to forge and maintain relationships with oppositional movements so that such sites might simultaneously acknowledge and engage with their “compromised position[s]” (Robertson 2019, xvi). From the outset, Robertson effectively sets up her study by pointing out that art galleries and museums, like archives, are not and cannot be neutral; they are never complete but operate in a perpetual state of becoming, of evolving, of change (2019, 11). More specifically, she characterizes museums as “key institutions that occupy the uncomfortable

space between the state, the private sector, the arts, and the economy, while also being both targets of, and occasionally providing engagement for, contentious politics” (Robertson 2019, 5). Through an examination of protest movements both outside and inside museums with a concentrated focus on the 1990s up to 2017, this book analyses the tensions generated at the junctures of protest, museums, culture, and cities. *Tear Gas Epiphanies* therefore expands understandings and studies of histories of protest against cultural institutions in Canada, placing arguably some of the most well-known demonstrations outside the *Spirit Sings* and *Into the Heart of Africa* into to a larger trajectory.

Two widely protested exhibitions, *Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples* at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary in 1988 and *Into the Heart of Africa* at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Toronto in 1989, have become widely acknowledged by scholars as “part of the series of upheavals in museums in the 1990s” that led to “deep changes to Canadian museum operations” (Robertson 2019, 10), such as the 1994 Task Force on

Museums and First Peoples. *Into the Heart of Africa* featured select African material culture, part of the ROM's permanent collection, that had been assembled in the 19th century. The curatorial approach attempted to acknowledge the colonialist – and racist – assumptions of missionaries to Africa, owing to their lack of understanding of the complexities of African culture. Framing these objects with missionaries' commentaries attempted to convey subtle irony to visitors, but visitors perceived themselves to be immersed in intensely problematic imperial and missionary ideologies.<sup>1</sup> Protests against the exhibition grew in intensity over its four-month run, but the ROM steadfastly “denied the show was racist and downplayed the ‘fuss’” (Robertson 2019, 65). Over two decades later, in November 2016, the ROM formally apologised for the exhibition. As a result, Robertson examines the periods before and after these two publicly contested exhibitions, arguing that “the slow work that has taken place in Canada has had a deep impact on museum operations in a way that other movements might do well to note” (2019, 11).

The book is divided into two parts. Part 1 provides the larger socio-political context for the case studies analysed. Here the chapters focus on protest, cultural policy, and museums. For example, Chapter 2 lays out a history of protest “in, outside, and against Canadian museums” (Robertson 2019, 25) to provide a larger context and understanding of “contentious politics at museums” (Robertson 2019, 11). Chapter 3 examines how museum architecture and renovation projects connect with gentrification processes. In Part 2, Robertson brings her contextual analyses to bear on institutional case studies; each chapter examines

a particular protest movement and cultural institution, including two provincial art galleries and a number of thematic museums. As contested and contestable spaces embedded in particular socio-political networks, Chapter 4 considers connections between anti-war protest, military investment, veteran activism, and the 2005 opening of the Canadian War Museum building in Ottawa. Chapter 5 looks at the formation of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg, and how the Idle No More movement and Shoal Lake 40 First Nation's calls for access to clean water as a human right motivated museum staff to foreground Indigenous knowledges and interpretations. Chapter 6 explores what the author refers to as a “missing” protest, focusing on the extensive corporate sponsorship of the arts in Canada by energy companies, more specifically the 2012 rebranding of the Canadian Museum of Civilization as the Canadian Museum of History under the Harper government with additional funds provided by the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP). Ultimately, this chapter calls attention to greenwashing. Museums, Robertson writes adroitly, “remain effective greenwashing laundromats...In Canada, this performance often attempts to reconcile the paradox of a fear of environmental disaster and oil as national culture” (2019, 210). Chapter 7 explores connections between real estate development, homelessness, Indigenous rights and land claims, and Vancouver's art scene through the lens of Occupy Vancouver and organizers' encampment located in the courtyard of the Vancouver Art Gallery.

Situated between all of the chapters are a succession of “short interstices” introducing interventions that represent, in Robertson's words, “textual curatorial undertaking[s]” (2019, 28) such as sit-ins,

protests, and demonstrative actions. Cumulatively, they operate as a timeline of activist actions at galleries and museums not commonly acknowledged in accounts of Canadian visual and material culture. They can also be read, according to Robertson, “separately or alongside the chapters” (2019, 28).

Robertson concludes her book by reminding readers that museums do have a role to play in imagining new futures, in opposing climate change, and supporting land claims. These institutions also have responsibilities to both acknowledge and repair broken relationships with communities, particularly marginalized ones. She advocates that such work can be fostered by “deep” collecting, more specifically through “activist-led collecting” (Robertson 2019, 268). She goes on to explain, “as with Occupy Wall Street, activists need to start thinking about archiving as a way to materially halt the process of erasure and resistance and that museums need to help by creating the time and space for these acquisitions” (Robertson 2019, 271). What is more, she writes, “when galleries and museums organize exhibitions about protest or celebrating activist art, the context in which those artworks were made could and should be foregrounded” (Robertson 2019, 271). In June 2020, digital demonstrations by cultural institutions around the world have encouraged (and, in many cases, called for) the implementation of what Robertson refers to as “slow work” to bring about change in museum operations.

In the wake of the police killings of Breonna Taylor (March 13, 2020 in Louisville, Kentucky), George Floyd (May 25, 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota), and Regis Korchinski-Paquet (May 27, 2020, while in the presence of Toronto police officers), cultural producers, workers,

and institutions around the world posted public statements of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) (Shaw and Harris 2020). Significantly, many of these statements galvanized museum workers, curators, artists, and communities to call out the respective institutions and share individual experiences of workplace racism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, and other forms of oppression in multiple public forums (Perla 2020a). In June 2020, *Canadian Art Magazine* published a feature article by artist, activist, and Black Lives Matter core team member Syrus Marcus Ware. In it, Ware recounts his experiences of anti-Black racism when he worked for the Art Gallery of Ontario. He goes on to challenge art institutions in Canada to allocate exhibition spaces in permanent and meaningful ways to Black artists, curators, and programmers; to pay them accordingly; and to hire BIPOC leaders (Ware 2020). Expanding on these calls to action, Armando Perla, Head of Human Rights at the Montreal Holocaust Museum, recommends that museums and art galleries prioritize addressing institutional racism and develop ethical guidelines in partnership with BIPOC communities (Perla 2020b). He argues for anti-oppression and human rights training for current staff, and points out the need to collaborate with, empower, and promote in sustainable ways the work of BIPOC colleagues. Seemingly echoing Robertson, Perla states: “expertise in different areas, such as community organizing, human rights, and activism must become some of the sought-after skills in the recruitment process. The lived experiences that BIPOC individuals bring to the table must be valued as much as museums value academic expertise or corporate acumen” (Perla 2020b). Archives, art galleries, and museums hold objects of value, but, as *Tear*

*Gas Epiphanies* argues, value is determined and assigned by people in different times and places. Concepts of value shift over time, often slowly. But as 2020 has demonstrated in Canada and beyond, crises and conflict in museums and galleries need to be foregrounded.

## References

Perla, Armando. 2020a. "The Museum Sector is in Crisis." *ActiveHistory.ca*, <https://activehistory.ca/2020/08/the-museum-sector-is-in-crisis/>.

---. 2020b. "Canada's Institutional Racism Problem is Also Embedded in Its Museums – How Can We Address It?" *Muse Magazine Online*, [https://museums.ca/site/reportsandpublications/museonline/fall2020\\_institutional-racism](https://museums.ca/site/reportsandpublications/museonline/fall2020_institutional-racism).

Shaw, Anny and Gareth Harris. 2020. "Art World Presses Pause for #Black-OutTuesday." *The Art Newspaper*, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/art-world-presses-pause-for-blackouttuesday>.

Ware, Syrus Marcus. 2020. "Give Us Permanence – Ending Anti-Black Racism in Canada's Art Institutions." *Canadian Art Magazine*, <https://canadianart.ca/features/give-us-permanence-ending-anti-black-racism-in-canadas-art-institutions/>.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Shelly R. Butler, *Contested Representations: Revisiting Into the Heart of Africa* (2013).