

**Kirsty Robertson, *Tear Gas Epiphanies: Protest, Culture, Museums, Montreal and Kingston*: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019, 432 pp. 51 illus. with colour section,  
\$ 125 (cloth) ISBN 9780773557000  
\$ 39.95 (paperback) ISBN 9780773557017  
\$ 39.95 (ePDF) ISBN 9780773558298**

**Mariane Bourcheix-Laporte**

Volume 44, Number 2, 2019

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1068331ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1068331ar>

[See table of contents](#)

---

**Publisher(s)**

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

**ISSN**

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

**Cite this review**

Bourcheix-Laporte, M. (2019). Review of [Kirsty Robertson, *Tear Gas Epiphanies: Protest, Culture, Museums, Montreal and Kingston*: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019, 432 pp. 51 illus. with colour section, \$ 125 (cloth) ISBN 9780773557000 \$ 39.95 (paperback) ISBN 9780773557017 \$ 39.95 (ePDF) ISBN 9780773558298]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 44(2), 206–208. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1068331ar>

avec l'exemple des projets du Sense-Lab, mais aussi d'après un contexte français où la recherche-création prend de l'importance ces dernières années à travers des organismes comme l'École universitaire de recherche ArTeC, le doctorat du SACRe et le programme SPEAP de Bruno Latour à Sciences Po. À la fois portrait institutionnel croisé, manifeste d'une recherche-création relationnelle, guide méthodologique et essai philosophique, il esquisse à quatre voix des considérations politico-esthétiques nécessaires pour cerner une pratique indisciplinaire en quête de légitimité. ¶

Benoit Jodoin est doctorant en histoire de l'art à l'Université du Québec à Montréal et à l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales (Paris).  
—jodoin.benoit@gmail.com

---

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

432 pp. 51 illus. with colour section  
\$ 125 (cloth) ISBN 9780773557000  
\$ 39.95 (paperback) ISBN 9780773557017  
\$ 39.95 (ePDF) ISBN 9780773558298

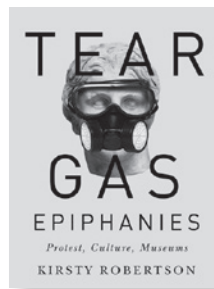
Mariane Bourcheix-Laporte

---

In *Tear Gas Epiphanies: Protest, Culture, Museums*, Kirsty Robertson recounts the “as-yet-untold story of political action at museums in Canada from the early twentieth century to the present.”<sup>1</sup> The book's numerous examples and case studies posit encounters between museums and “performative politics”—a term used by Robertson to signify the variety of oppositional actions that have implicated museums—as common occurrences that should be considered significant parts of institutional history. One of the author's stated—and achieved—objectives is to establish a history that moves

beyond well-known accounts of protests against *Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First People* (Glenbow Museum, 1988) and *Into the Heart of Africa* (Royal Ontario Museum, 1989). Analyses by Ruth B. Phillips (*Museum Pieces*, 2011) and Shelley Ruth Butler (*Contested Representations: Revisiting Into the Heart of Africa*, 1994), among others, have helped position these events as important moments in a trajectory towards the decolonization and indigenization of authoritative cultural institutions. Robertson expands upon this established narrative throughout *Tear Gas Epiphanies* by documenting the many ways in which Canadian museums have proven to be both contested sites and sites of contestation since the early 1900s.

The book is organised in two sections and includes seven short essays inserted between chapters—it is worth noting that these play an



important role in supporting the overall development of Robertson's arguments and considerably enrich a cover-to-cover reading of the book. Section one presents a historical analysis that establishes the slow but sustained development of oppositional politics involving Canadian museums prior to protests against *Spirit Sings* and *Into the Heart of Africa*. Section two extends this trajectory by presenting a compelling account of four twenty-first century case studies that position authoritative cultural institutions as stages for the performance of a *pas de trois* among culture, national identity, and political

economy in the late capitalist era of “creative cities.”

*Tear Gas Epiphanies* is a thoroughly researched and admirably written book in which many of the research threads in Robertson's work since the early 2000s (the book's title notably revisits that of the author's doctoral dissertation) are brought to culmination. The book adds significantly to the author's critical scholarship on intersections between Canadian culture and cultural institutions, movements of resistance, changing conceptions of national identity, creative industries policies, and resource extraction industries. Readers familiar with Robertson's work will clearly situate *Tear Gas Epiphanies* in relation to, and in continuity with, ideas examined in previous publications, including her co-edited volumes *Imagining Resistance: Visual Culture and Activism in Canada* (2011) and *Negotiations in a Vacant Lot: Studying the Visual in Canada* (2014). This said, *Tear Gas Epiphanies* constitutes a welcome addition to the field of critical museum studies, which has tended to produce episodic or narrowly focused analyses of museums' encounters with oppositional movements.

In recent years, Canadian scholars have sought to unsettle museums' institutional authority and emphasize their social responsibility and accountability through a multiplicity of methodological approaches and investigative foci—i.e. by proposing engaged approaches to curating, studying small and rural institutions, arguing in favour of counter-hegemonic exhibition practices and narratives, advancing the decolonization and indigenization of cultural institutions, and reflecting on the political and economic contexts that influence the administration of culture in Canada.<sup>2</sup> *Tear Gas Epiphanies* connects many of these approaches as it traces a comprehensive history, both before and after the late 1980s controversies, of how museums have materially and ideologically represented sites for the negotiation of Canadian culture and

identity, Indigenous and settler relations, the privatization and economization of culture, and the enactment of social and environmental justice.

Robertson's research in this volume establishes four waves of interaction between oppositional movements and authoritative cultural institutions. The first (1900s to 1960s) was marked by debates over collection and display policies, and intersected with anxieties over Canadian visual culture's identity. The second (1960s to 1970s) was characterized by anti-elitist activism grounded in ideological debates over aesthetics and Canadian nationalism. Here, Robertson notes that the Canadian context gave rise to interventions that failed to challenge the dominant national narrative and had less impact than organizing and institutional critique practices developed by artists in the U.S. at the time. The latter assessment is surprising if one considers the parallel emergence of artist-run centres in Canada, which can be understood, in and of itself, as a reaction against authoritative museums. A more fulsome discussion of the emergence of the artist-run centre movement in relation to organizing against authoritative institutions would arguably constitute a worthy addition to the timeline outlined by Robertson.

Nevertheless, the author importantly stresses that the seeds of anti-colonial resistance against museums were sown in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s—an argument that supports a long-view reading of this type of organizing. As an example, Robertson's discussion of the 1976 protests against Reed Paper's sponsorship of *Changing Visions: The Canadian Landscape*, a major exhibition organized by the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Edmonton Art Gallery, foreshadows some of the later actions analyzed in the book. Robertson explains how well-known settler artists organized in reaction to Reed Paper's implication in the mercury poisoning of a river system that affected Indigenous reserves

in northwestern Ontario. Here and throughout the book, Robertson is careful not to overshadow decades of sustained Indigenous resistance via the analysis of settler-led protests—an approach that other scholars should take note of. In discussing the third wave (late 1980s to early 1990s), Robertson revisits *Spirit Sings* and *Into the Heart of Africa* in light of the larger narrative traced by her research and positions the reception of these exhibits as important nodes in this history.

Finally, the author argues that the fourth wave (early 2000s to 2017) has given rise to a surge in political interventions involving museums in parallel to the emergence of new movements of resistance in the wake of alter-globalization protests. If some of these movements have translated into spectacular action—particularly in the case of environmental activism targeting museum sponsorships in Europe and the U.S.—Robertson's research highlights the importance of the non-spectacular in the Canadian context. In this regard, one of the case studies developed in section two, which looks at the state of environmental activism implicating museums in Canada in comparison to that of other contexts, offers a particularly insightful analysis of “missing” Canadian protests. Considering the cultural sector's reliance on subsidies from resource extraction companies and the importance of Indigenous land and water protection movements, Robertson develops a compelling argument for museum-oriented pro-environment action to be undertaken in parallel to, and in support of, other forms of activism in the Canadian context. The rise of neoliberal economic and cultural policies towers in the background of the other three case studies comprising section two, which together provide a nuanced analysis of the contemporary use of museums as political tools.

The discussion of the development of a new building for the

Canadian War Museum (CWM) notably challenges a narrative positioning oppositional action against museums as necessarily counter-hegemonic. Here, Robertson's discussion of veterans' opposition to the phrasing in an exhibition's text panel provides a fascinating exposé on the multifaceted nature of museums' accountability to the public at large and to special interest groups. For its part, the case study looking at the Canadian Museum of Human Rights (CMHR) highlights how marginalized groups can leverage cultural institutions. Amidst an analysis of the controversial development of the CMHR, which triggered an amendment to the Museums Act, Robertson explains how the Shoal Lake 40 First Nation mobilized action against the museum to secure its access to clean water. Finally, a chapter on the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG), whose plaza has repeatedly been used as a site for protests of all kinds and whose plans for a new building have proven challenging, poses important questions about cultural institutions' entanglement with political movements while highlighting the downside of “creative cities” policy and rhetoric.

Overall, *Tear Gas Epiphanies* testifies to the kind of multi-disciplinary research and engaged writing that Kylie Message advocates in *The Disobedient Museum: Writing at the Edge* (2017). Effectively, the book adopts a dual perspective that considers protest from both “inside” and “outside” the museum, meaning that Robertson documents encounters between museums and protests while taking stock of the larger political and economic contexts that frame these relationships. This multi-perspectival approach leads Robertson to establish a fulsome account of points of friction that have left a mark on Canadian museums. Further, Robertson repeatedly argues in favour of the development of alliances between museums and movements of resistance. In this regard, a short essay discussing the events that occurred at

the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology (MOA) in 1981 is particularly insightful. Robertson recounts how the MOA welcomed Indigenous demonstrators—who were protesting Pierre Elliot Trudeau's efforts to patriate the Constitution from the U.K.—and supported their occupation of its facilities over a period of twenty-four hours. In her analysis, the author cites the MOA's response as one of the rare instances in which a museum has played a collaborative role in the enactment of "performative politics."

It is also notable that the MOA's collection and exhibition of ephemera from demonstrations in reaction to the 1997 APEC meetings it hosted is later given as an example of the collecting practices that Robertson urges museums to adopt in order to materially archive the movements of dissent that implicate them. The author's extensive first-hand research into the collecting and archiving of material traces of activism by Canadian museums leads to the conclusion that these practices are in great need of development. This is another important insight offered by the book. However, from a practical perspective, Robertson does not offer clear directions as to how her vision of activist-led archiving in authoritative institutions may be concretized other than urging museums to adopt the "rapid response" collecting model developed by the Victoria and Albert Museum.<sup>3</sup> This opens the door to further praxis-oriented research in the Canadian context. On another note of criticism, the absence of a substantive discussion of Quebec cultural institutions in connection to protest is surprising, especially given that the 2012 Maple Spring movement constituted an important moment in the time period examined in section two. An analysis of museums' engagement or dis-engagement with this movement and how its documentation has been exhibited (e.g. in

*Création en temps de crise sociale*, Centre de design de l'UQAM, 2012; *Uprising x 25!*, Musée de la civilisation, 2017) could have been the subject of a worthwhile short essay. This said, *Tear Gas Epiphanies* provides a thorough and compelling account of museums *cum* protests/protests *cum* museums and constitutes a brilliant addition to existing scholarship. ¶

Mariane Bourcheix-Laporte is an artist, independent curator, and researcher based in Vancouver. She is currently completing a PhD at Simon Fraser University's School of Communication.  
—mariane\_bourcheix-laporte@sfu.ca

1. "Tear Gas Epiphanies," McGill-Queen's University Press, accessed August 5, 2019, <https://www.mqup.ca/tear-gas-epiphanies-products-9780773557000.php>.

2. For an overview of recent developments in critical museum theory and museum studies in Canada, see Lianne McTavish et al., "Critical Museum Theory/Museum Studies in Canada: A Conversation," *Acadiensis* 46, no. 2 (2017): 223–41.

3. See "Rapid Response Collecting," Victoria and Albert Museum, August 14, 2014, <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/r/rapid-response-collecting/>.

---

Mark Cheetham  
***Landscape into Eco Art: Articulations of Nature Since the '60s***

University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2018

256 pp. 27 colour, 36 b/w illus.  
\$34.95 (paper) ISBN 978-0-271-08004-8

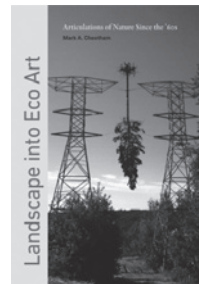
Karla Kit McManus

---

In his wide-ranging new book *Landscape into Eco Art: Articulations of Nature since the '60s*, Mark Cheetham proposes to consolidate the connections among three artistic practices: the historical tradition of nineteenth century landscape art, the conceptual explorations of land art, and the contemporary gestures of eco art both in and outside the museum. With deliberate titular reference to Kenneth Clark's *Landscape into Art* (1949), a text based on a series of lectures Clark gave as Slade Professor of Art at

Oxford and republished to popular acclaim in 1976, Cheetham builds an argument meant to "complicate and ultimately justify the linkage of historical landscape as a genre, land art, and eco art [...] to address in new ways the questions of how 'land' comes in to eco art" (5). In doing so, Cheetham offers an appreciation for the dialogic connections across these various practices rather than accepting the art historical accounts of radical break and rejection that are often applied to the works of post-1960s artists. Whether you agree with the argument of ongoing continuity and interaction between these practices, or are more inclined to see breaks and disruptions, Cheetham's deeply researched and thoughtful book will give you much to consider.

Rooted in his thorough understanding of Western philosophy of art and the growing field of environmental humanities, as well as in the literature on land art, earth art, and eco art, including recent works by



Amanda Boetzkes and James Nisbet, Cheetham makes a convincing claim for the ongoing relevance of landscape art in all its forms. Such a claim of continuity requires the reader to accept criticisms of some of the most important writings on nature, land, and landscape in the last two decades, from W.J.T. Mitchell's Marxist takedown of an exhausted genre in *Landscape and Power* (2nd ed. 2002) to Timothy Morton's object-oriented ontological exegesis of "nature" (2007). Instead, the reader will find