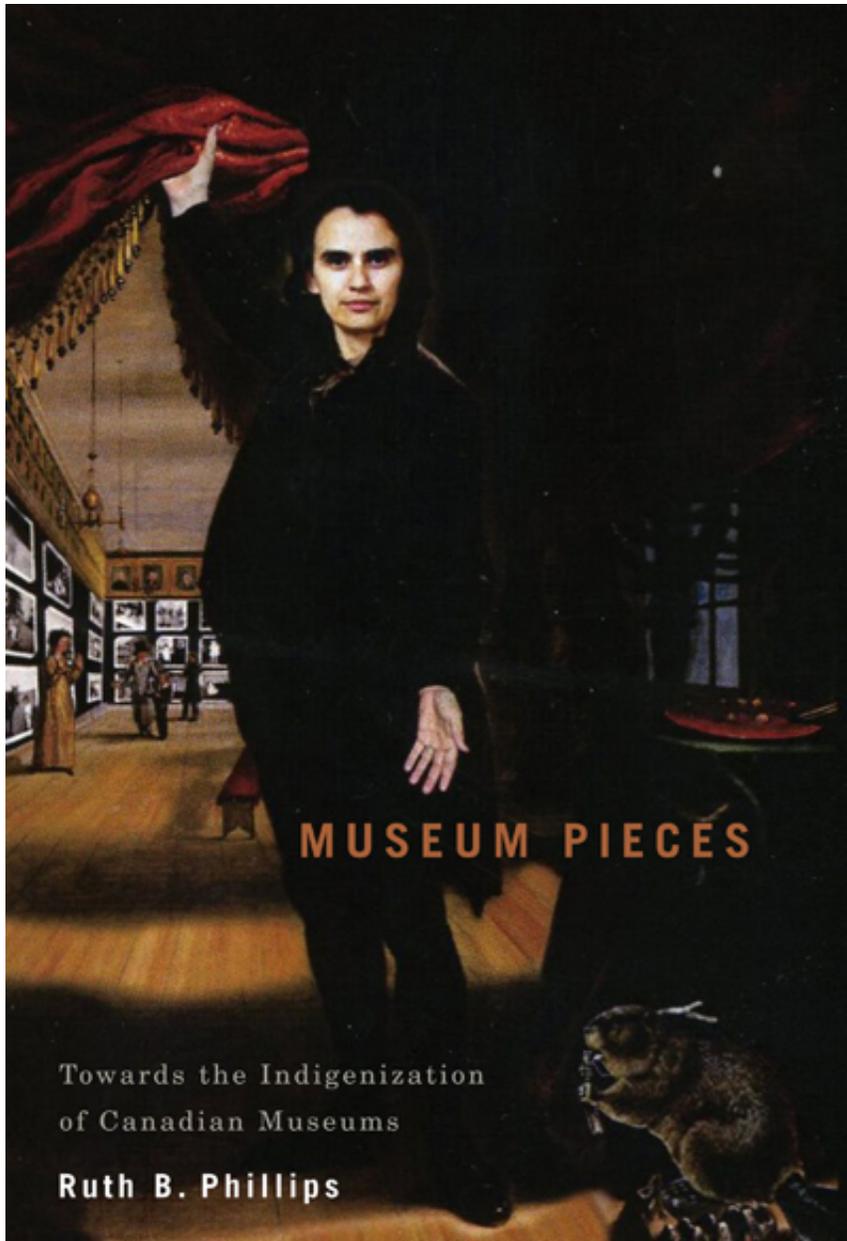


Book Review: Museum Pieces by Ruth Phillips

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[*Museum Pieces: Toward the Indigenization of Canadian Museums*](#)

Ruth Phillips (2011, Montreal: McGill-Queens's University Press)



Reviewed by Aaron Glass (Bard Graduate Center)

“Canada’s collaborative models of museum practice have arisen as organically from its history as the canoe or the snowmobile.”

The first sentence of Ruth Phillips’ long-awaited volume of essays on museums and indigenous people encapsulates a number of her analytical perspectives: it delimits the general institutional field of her study and suggests that particular collaborative practices are characteristic of their national context and their slowly evolving forms. But by invoking iconic modes of both indigenous and settler transportation, Phillips also implies that the museum itself is a form of technology—an engineered machine for achieving specific goals. She even materializes her own contributions to the field by invoking the polysemous term “pieces” to describe the essays contained herein. Throughout the book, she draws on Actor Network Theory to argue for the vital agency of museums (and essays about them) as key players in movements for effective social change, and the value of public controversies for spurring positive developments in institutional policy and protocol. Long a tool of colonial and imperialist ideology, Phillips advocates for the postmodern museum to be a broker and mediator of renegotiated postcolonial relationships—the museum as both beneficiary and sponsor of changing government attitudes toward indigenous peoples.

Likewise, the subtitle of the book communicates central themes within her larger argument. By focusing on developments in Canadian museums over the past fifty years, Phillips calls attention to the country’s cultural and political particularities while demanding a greater recognition for Canada’s role in exporting its innovative methodologies to museums worldwide. Her use of the term “indigenization” operates at multiple levels. On the one hand, it suggests that developments local to Canada—birthplace of multiculturalism as national policy—have a unique flavor (and American readers may note, by contrast to general conditions within the U.S., the strong influence of federal funding, government task force reports, and nation-wide initiatives on largely publicly funded institutions). On the other hand, it calls attention to the positive impact that Canada’s indigenous people have had on transforming national institutions—indeed, on forcing them to operate with indigenous principles in mind to a certain extent. In this latter sense, Phillips’ choice of “indigenization” over an appropriate alternative such as “decolonization” signals an important shift of focus from institutional actions toward indigenous artists, curators, and activists who demanded change. Finally, by hedging the subtitle with “toward,” she implies that the work of institutional transformation is unfinished business, and she offers the essays as both documentation of past developments and prompt to future ones.

The book’s essays, written over a period of about twenty years, are organized into four thematic sections (although as Phillips observes of the placement of objects in thematically curated exhibits, many pieces could well reside within multiple sections): “Confrontation and Contestation” attends to past pivotal exhibits and museum-hosted events that spawned controversy and prompted revisions in institutional practice; “Re-Disciplining the Museum” examines challenges to traditional disciplinary boundaries, discourses and exhibition methods; “Working it Out” surveys a number of curatorial experiments that foreground indigenous cultural, historical, political and aesthetic

perspectives; and “The Second Museum Age” offers some proscriptive suggestions for how museums might continue to learn from indigenous people, harness new digital technologies and curatorial strategies, and take risks that promise to further their important role as agents of social change. The genres of these essays are eclectic, the contributions ranging from the thought piece to the conference paper, from the “ethnographic” report of personal experience to exhibition and art criticism. The scale of analysis is telescopic: Phillips offers detailed portraits of specific objects, sociological and comparative insight into particular exhibits and institutions, and more general theoretical critiques. Accounts of some exhibitions and their social conditions of production and reception are reconstructed from archival documents, while the vast majority are based on Phillips’ own participation in or visitation of the museums and events discussed.

One of the great strengths of this book is the multiple perspectives it offers on museum practice resulting from the various modes of engagement with the museum that have defined Phillips’ career. She has conducted detailed object-oriented research in collections of all sizes as well as in indigenous communities in Africa and North America; she has curated or consulted on numerous important exhibits (most famously, perhaps, *The Spirit Sings*) and collaborative projects in a variety of museological venues; she was the previous director of the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology, one of the most consistently innovative and influential of the museums she returns to throughout the volume; and she has supervised and mentored generations of graduate students as they navigate the complex world of museums and museum-based research (many—including myself—are generously acknowledged or cited in the book’s notes). Even readers familiar with Phillips’ prolific projects and influential writings may be surprised to find just how many key exhibitionary events of the past 40 years she—a bit Zelig-like—has played a personal role in as organizer, consultant, advisor, contributing curator, or critic. Unlike Zelig, however, the volume testifies to Phillips’ consistent intellectual and ethical commitment to responsive and responsible academic and museological practice. She is thus uniquely positioned to offer not only critique of finished exhibits but insight into their conditions of production—a level of detailed ethnographic analysis often missing from reviews of exhibits or museums operating solely within the limits of poststructuralist or postcolonial critique of ideology. Phillips starts from the preconditions of such theoretical and political critique, but she uses them to inform a practical, realist, and activist vision for how museums might continue to reform themselves as agents of positive change. Her deep engagement with museum practice allows her to qualify shallow condemnations of the institutional or discursive “power” of museums or curators to determine the ultimate meaning of objects and their creators. Rather than indulge in endless semiotic deconstruction, Phillips provides a rare glimpse into the actual social and political fields of force—encompassing both governmental constraint and indigenous activism—in which museums operate.

As evidenced in the book’s very title, Phillips has a rhetorical fondness for double entendre (what she has identified in iconographic systems as the capacity for “dual signification”), a quality I associate with her attention to ambiguity, nuance and complexity in the twined processes of meaning formation and interpretation, whether regarding objects, exhibits, or sentences. Her own “dual” statuses are on display throughout the volume: her American origin and chosen Canadian

residence and identification; her theoretical and methodological engagement with both art history and anthropology; her fluid movement between the academy and the museum as loci for knowledge production; her internalization of the postcolonial critique of museums but her refusal to abandon classic humanist values and aspirations toward mutual understanding and cross-cultural rapprochement. Theoretically, Phillips returns to “hybridity” as a model of such variegated identity for both objects and persons, though I would have appreciated some more engagement with recent literatures that are critical of hybridity for its potential to re-inscribe the fundamental otherness of its core components.

Like the Canadian style of museology she documents and promotes, Phillips is a negotiator and reconciler of opposite points of view. Avoiding generalization and stereotype, she refuses to take “tradition” and “modernity” or “art” and “artifact” as pairs of opposing concepts, but rather analyzes their frequent interpenetration and mutual constitution. She chooses to take exhibits on a case-by-case basis rather than make general pronouncements about standard practices, and she remains optimistic about the capacity of museums and indigenous perspectives to be mutually informing and respectful. In this conciliatory stance, she rejects radical claims about the incommensurability of indigenous and non-indigenous epistemologies as a basis for the politics of Aboriginal sovereignty. Instead, she promotes the recognition—by collaborators and critics but also by museum curators, administrators and government agents—of messiness and of power struggle, and suggests making the reality of imperfect solutions more apparent in the exhibits we develop rather than retreating to the safety of uncontroversial statements. (For instance, Phillips leaves unresolved the thorny challenge of deciding what terminology to substitute for “objects” in order to refer to what many indigenous people consider “other-than-human persons.”) Phillips wants museums to take risks and to learn from their failures and controversies (Latour’s “imbroglios”) as a means of moving institutional discourses, policies, and social relations forward. While her embrace of messiness and conflict in principle reflects her realist engagement with actual museum practice, her own close relationships with many of the institutions in question may limit her inclination to publicly voice a certain degree of this complexity (she might, for example, have focused a bit more on the politics of the Shell boycott in her otherwise insightful discussion of *The Spirit Sings* as curatorially innovative). But this limitation itself is illustrative of her call for a reconciliation of theoretical or political critique--often lobbed from the ivory tower--with the practical needs to continue the work itself, on the ground.

In a volume comprised of essays written on similar themes over multiple decades, a certain repetition is to be expected, and indeed Phillips returns frequently to many of the key events, exhibits, and provocations (in more or less detail depending on the immediate context). While this can seem redundant if the book is read cover to cover, there is certain value in returning to these seminal events from slightly different perspectives each time. One minor drawback, also associated with the genre of collected essays, is the lack of consistency in identifying the previously published or unpublished source material for each chapter; while some sources are clearly identified in the margins of chapter title pages, in other cases they are obscured in introductory sections or in endnotes. I found the greatest limitation of format to be the lack of a comprehensive references

section, which means that key contributions to the literature—including foundational texts in critical museology as well as Phillips's own seminal essays not included in this volume—are hidden deep in the endnotes. These are minor complaints, however.

Overall, this volume draws on Phillips' detailed research, close observation of institutional practice, personal engagement with many of the transformational exhibits surveyed here, deep commitment to ethical partnerships with indigenous people, and lucid theoretical analysis. Phillips argues convincingly for a renewed recognition of the role of Aboriginal activists in promoting systemic institutional change in Canada's museum world, and of the positive models that have resulted from concerted museological experimentation and reformation. The book is not only an invaluable guide to the particular development of influential methodologies in Canada, but also a handbook for the continued relevance of museums and museum-based research in the ongoing postcolonial project of empowering indigenous populations in settler states around the world.