

**Performing Ground: Space, Camouflage, and the Art of Blending In.**

By Laura Levin. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014; pp. xiv + 243. 35 illustrations. \$95 cloth, \$74.99 e-book.

doi:10.1017/S0040557416000594

Reviewed by Lindsay Adamson Livingston, *Brigham Young University*

The title of Laura Levin's *Performing Ground: Space, Camouflage, and the Art of Blending In* instantly situates the text's preoccupation with environment, identity, and mimesis within a long trajectory of phenomenologically based performance studies. Questions of *situatedness*, or the ways in which humans dissolve into, weave themselves throughout, and otherwise negotiate a place within spatial environments, are at the heart of Levin's exegesis on camouflage as a "process of performative correspondence" (4). Not merely a process of aesthetic mimicry, camouflage is multifaceted and adaptable, encompassing various types of performed practice that focus on positioning the self within a larger environment. The book's six chapters link together several contemporary performances of camouflage while arguing for the political potential engendered by a close acknowledgment of and engagement with one's environment—practices of "performing ground" that can reveal and challenge "theatre and performance studies' enduring attachment to a triumphant individualized subject" who is privileged as the master of the spatial environment (14). Emphasizing the reality that the bodies of women, people of color, and other marginalized persons are often coterminous with backgrounds and aligned with the properties of space, Levin calls forth the possibilities of empowerment that can be tapped by rethinking human relationships with the spaces they inhabit and produce.

Rather than attempt to establish a singular definition of camouflage, the book's first chapter instead fashions a theoretical space within which Levin tests various possible modes of camouflaging as both performance practice and political project. She binds this space with theoretical nets composed of threads drawn from Martin Heidegger's notion of the world as picture, Roger Callois and other "dissident" (17) surrealists' writings on spatial subjectivity, and Luce Irigaray's thought on women's relationships to space. Levin weaves the above threads together with strands from Lacan's theories on the production of identity and writings on feminist mimesis so as to produce a sound methodological scaffolding. This careful theoretical construction deftly underpins her assertion that camouflage performance can precipitate a dismantling of the philosophical discourses and ideologies that buttress an anthropocentric focus on the individual as the seer outside the perspectival frame and endowed with the power of world making.

The book's subsequent chapters are organized around types of camouflage performance. Chapter 2, "Camouflage Acts," considers the works of women portrait photographers and their performed relationships with the spaces they inhabit. Calling self-portrait photography a "site of contemporary performance specifically wedded to the visual disclosure of the subject," Levin articulates how artists such as Janieta Eyre use techniques of visual camouflage to offer new modes of engaging with background and environment (31). In Chapter 3, "Performing Ground,"

Levin offers a critical reevaluation of the ways that marginalized bodies, particularly feminized and racialized ones, formed the literal “background” of many environmental performances in the 1960s and 1970s. Suggesting that these bodies “serv[e] as vehicles through which spectators negotiate their relationship to the spatial conditions of an avant-garde aesthetic,” she argues that these bodies must be reintroduced as agential producers within the historiography of environmental theatre (68). As a counterpoint to the work of 1960s avant-garde theatre practitioners, Levin offers *Gob Squad’s Kitchen (You’ve Never Had It So Good)*, a 2007 production that reanimates Andy Warhol’s 1965 film *The Kitchen*. The production, through misapplied camouflage, or a mimicry that purposefully gets it wrong, exposes the ideological underpinnings that created “environment” in environmental theatre. Chapter 5 explores the intricacies of “embedded performance,” or performance in which artists place themselves inside a certain group so as to see “*from inside the picture*” (138; emphasis in original), and Chapter 6, an epilogue, reasserts the larger political meanings of situating the self within a world frame.

Chapter 4, “The Environmental Unconscious,” is the book’s strongest. Jumping off from the previous chapter’s explication of gendered space in environmental theatre, this chapter claims emancipatory potential for gendered avant-garde spaces through an examination of three women artists who use camouflage in their performances. Levin’s exploration of the performances in this chapter is a microcosm of the book’s larger project. Although this exploration is a critique of how women’s bodies have functioned *as* background in avant-garde art and is a recuperative project, it simultaneously endows the work of women artists with value equal to or greater than that of the most celebrated men (such as Richard Schechner and Allan Kaprow) who are often valorized as representative of the genre of environmental and site-specific art. Levin analyzes the work of artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles, who concretized “maintenance” work in her art by “staging an environment through quotidian actions” such as actually cleaning a museum floor for hours (115). Such entanglements with environment, Levin suggests, “envisage a constructive permeability between self and material world” that can destabilize formalist interactions with space that privilege individual mastery (117). She also examines the work of and critical reactions to Rebecca Belmore and Yayoi Kusama, arguing that their work and other site-specific art by women can “propose a feminist environmental politics” that asserts alternative configurations between self and world (120).

By offering different ways of imagining being in the world and privileging a self that is entwined with, rather than separate from and master of, an environment, *Performing Ground* offers exciting new methods for thinking through the possibilities inherent in subjective experiences of space. At times, I was weighed down by the mass of theorizing present in the text; with Levin’s analysis of her examples often being so rich, I wish she had dedicated more attention to illuminating the density of their relationship to camouflage. However, this book is remarkable for its new contribution to a genealogy of texts that includes those of Rebecca Schneider, Amelia Jones, Peggy Phelan, and others who explore women’s art and the ways in which engaging with feminized spaces can be politically

efficacious. Insofar as it also establishes a field of study—the performance of camouflage—the book will be of interest to scholars of space, performance, and gender generally.

• • •

**Disabled Theater.** Edited by Sandra Umathum and Benjamin Wihstutz. Zurich and Berlin: Diaphanes, 2015; pp. 248, 18 illustrations. \$30 paper.

doi:10.1017/S0040557416000600

Reviewed by Allison P. Hobgood, *Willamette University*

In *Disabled Theater* editors Sandra Umathum and Benjamin Wihstutz have compiled a series of scholarly essays, interviews, and vignettes that explore Jérôme Bel's 2012 production of the same name, "a production that involves eleven actors with cognitive disabilities from Theater HORA in Zurich, one of the foremost inclusive theater companies in Europe" (7). The performance was received in widely contrasting ways across the world by spectators and theatre critics alike, and this controversy evidenced "the collision of completely different conceptions of theater, art, and aesthetics" (7). Umathum and Wihstutz aim to cultivate in their volume an array of responses to the production that are anything but "indifferent" (7). They open their short Prologue with two main goals: to offer a forum for heterogeneous responses from audience members to performers themselves to the question "What do you think about this piece?"; and to make space for discussion of the "relationship between aesthetic, social, and political aspects of the performing arts" (8). Though its sole focus is clearly *Disabled Theater*, the volume is comparative at times, positioning this production next to other performances Bel has directed, as well as against Christoph Schlingensiefel's 2004 film *Freakstars 3000* and Diane Arbus's photography, for instance.

Arguments in the collection range from understanding *Disabled Theater* as political "because it systematically destroys any kind of secure ground from which to differentiate between an appropriate or inappropriate representation of disabled people" (30) to "tak[ing] seriously the production's interest in disability as a potent aesthetic tool" (63). Essays also attend to the way the work resists identity politics (147) and to how "discourses on *Disabled Theater* seem to end up rotating around the still-disturbing spectacle of alterity with which the actors and their *handicaps* interpellate the audiences' ableism simply by *being present*" (144). Authors also broach the possibility of an aesthetic that arises precisely from how "the performance was treading the fine line between presenting and exposing its performers, thus highlighting the intricate problem of (re)presenting disability" (179).

Although a few of the essays are incisive, one of the most useful, unique aspects of the collection is its inclusion of interviews with both Bel and all of the actors in the production. Although some of the interview questions are too leading or even vaguely infantilizing, particularly in the case of the actors, one does get a sense of the lived history of the production before and after its more ephemeral night-to-night moments on the stage. Furthermore, Bel opens his interview with