

Reason, Matthew, and Anja Mølle Lindelof, (eds.). *Experiencing Liveness in Contemporary Performance: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. New York and London: Routledge, 2017. 304pp. (Hardback ISBN 9781138961593; E-book ISBN 9781315659701).

Experiencing Liveness in Contemporary Performance offers the latest installment in the ongoing inquiry into the “liveness” of live performance. As the title suggests, editors Matthew Reason and Anja Mølle Lindelof place the emphasis of this collection on how liveness is experienced by audiences and performers. The editors take the present participle “experience-*ing*” seriously. Through formal experiments, an unconventional curation of the 30 chapters (including 18 “shorts”) and, of course, the content of the essays themselves, the book stages an investigation of how experiences of liveness might extend to acts of performative writing and even reading. Framed by questions of *how* liveness matters, to whom, and asking, “what are the particularities of live experience?” (14), the volume puts forward many specific insights into processes of creating and recreating performances that audiences perceive *as* live. However, this rich collection of particulars struggles to locate itself within the larger scholarly debate on the subject. It shows readers that “the” debate about liveness is fractured among the several disciplines that care to address it, with different authors pursuing similar arguments along parallel, asynchronous lines. Yet rather than encouraging the intersectional conversations that could push the study of liveness further in all these fields, *Experiencing Liveness* tends to reproduce disciplinary divisions in microcosm, leaving the reader to knit together their separate strands of inquiry. Thus emancipated, like Jacques Rancière’s famous spectator, the reader is free “to compose her own poems” (qtd. 10) and it is up to her to decide the pressing question with which the editors close their introduction: “*Does liveness matter?*” (14; italics added).

For readers who have traced “liveness” through two editions of Philip Auslander’s seminal book *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* ([1999] 2008), engaging in the heated debates about temporality, presence, and yes, the ontology of live performance that Auslander’s work poignantly reframed, the question whether liveness (still) matters offers an enticing draw. Yet the provocative question contains a familiar feint. Invoking a pun that punched its way into the field with Judith Butler’s *Bodies that Matter* and which resurfaced – often with less profundity – in the recent turns to “new materialism” and affect studies, the question of “mattering” imbricates the double meaning of importance

(“something matters”) and materiality. The editors divide the book into two corresponding sections: “Audiencing,” which focuses on ways that liveness presents itself to spectators, and “Materialising,” which closely examines the *materials* of liveness, including bodies, spaces, electronic “media” and its hardware, and above all, documents. These examinations of how liveness matters to *particular* persons and through *particular* media stand in for a general evaluation of whether liveness continues to offer vital challenges to performance or cultural theory. If the book provides a more general response, it does so only insofar as it stages an experience. The reader who follows the editors’ prompt to move “crab-like” (14) through the pages, hopping from “full-length theoretical chapter” to bite-size “short” (13), may find herself partaking in the participatory “audiencing” of *Experiencing Liveness*. As such, she may ratify the opening premise: “That dance, music and theatre, along with live and performance art, are experienced *live* is something that is valued and celebrated” (1). In academia as well as art, perhaps.

Not every reader will be persuaded by such an oblique editorial gambit, but readers looking for straighter answers will find many within the volume’s diverse individual chapters. One of the strengths of this collection is to reveal the remarkably distinct canons that have formed around questions of liveness in seemingly proximate fields. The contributors hail from several disciplines within art and media studies, and the juxtaposition of essays by musicians and music theorists with texts by performers and scholars from other “live arts” backgrounds is especially effective. This testifies to the value of the collaboration between Reason, whose work has focused on reception of theater and concert dance, and Lindelof, whose publications explore popular music milieus (like the rock concerts that led to Auslander’s seminal monograph). For instance, while performance scholars will be familiar with Peggy Phelan’s assertion that “performance’s only life is in the present” (146) as well as the decades-long rebuttal it prompted within their field, they may be surprised to read that, in 2008, Christian Marclay argued from the perspective of music-based “performance studies” that “‘the true nature of music’ is in its ‘impermanence’ ... you do it and then it’s gone” (qtd. 180).

If at many instances the simple juxtaposition of discipline-specific essays is revelatory, at other times, the essays cry out for more explicit cross-referencing, both with recent publications on liveness and among the contributors themselves. *Experiencing Liveness* highlights some of the difficulties of employing a collected essay-format, which is notoriously slow to publication and offers relatively few

chances for interaction among the contributors to address theoretical questions that are so insistently *present* in the field. That the most recent citations come from 2014 makes it difficult to see this volume as a collective advance, especially given the intervening release of works such as Daniel Sack's *After Live: Possibility, Potentiality, and the Future of Performance* (2015). However, the bigger issue lies within the volume itself. Even when the individual texts are limpid and provocative, the frustrating dead air between them at times contravenes the possibility of experiencing presence across distance, liveness in mediated forms. The lack of internal feedback loops is all the stranger given that most of the contributors are close to each other in their field, with several of them being colleagues at the same institutions.

Despite their respective merits, the contributions by Jonah Westerman (Chapter 9), Lisa Newman (Chapter 10), and Rebecca Schneider (Short 9) evince an especially enervating estrangement. Westerman's essay offers a helpful engagement with the theoretical development of "liveness" in art history, from Phelan to Auslander's recent work by way of Mary Kelly and Amelia Jones. He argues that while each of these theorists elucidates the relation between performance and documentation, their work displaces their objects of study from the historical context of reception. Comparing Marina Abramović's performances in 1970s Yugoslavia with her 2010 re-performances at MoMA, Westerman claims that only by restoring her earlier work to its historical "place of performance" can scholars "reanimate history" and avoid being seduced by "inherently dehistoricizing museums" (199). Perplexingly though, Westerman makes no mention of his co-contributor Schneider, whose influential 2011 monograph, *Performing Remains*, marshals a nearly identical cast of theorists as she, too, thinks through the reanimation of Abramović's work. The editors do stage a sort of conversation by pairing Westerman's chapter with Newman's sharp critique of the exhibition *11 Rooms*, which also features Abramović reenactments by hired performers. As one of the only authors to explore the *materialism* of liveness in its political-economic sense, Newman draws on Schneider's more recent analysis of "zombie capitalism" and the Occupy movement, while demonstrating that the exhibition serves to commodify liveness "itself." She delivers an important extension of Schneider's article, interrogating how the value attributed to the labor of materializing living presence reflects who can be seen – and sold – *as* live in the contemporary art world. Nevertheless, it feels like only a tantalizing insight into a conversation that could have sparked this volume's relevance to ongoing debates and deepened its political resonance. Finally, Schneider's "short" provides a performative account of the variants of liveness she experiences when

encountering an ancient artifact. Though intriguing on its own, it feels aloof, given the potential for dialogue with the other essays present.

Overall, however, these shorts offer the most lively moments in the book. Reason and Lindelof give their authors great liberty to push out from stodgy formal constraints. They claim these 2500-word texts are “not necessarily any less ‘academic’” than the “full-length theoretical chapters” (13), and true enough, these bite-size readings give rise to many of the most surprising theoretical provocations in the text. They thus make for a worthy, if comparatively miniature complement to collections such as Adrian Heathfield and Amelia Jones’ wide-ranging *Perform, Repeat, Record*. Artist-theorists make present their lived experiences of the problems and impasses that working – and writing – with liveness entails. The readers are productively drawn into these quandaries, and the brevity of the shorts encourages readers to explore experimental texts they might not be willing to invest more time in. The majority of these short experiments succeeds in conveying a lively sense of their respective authors’ concern, struggle, or fascination with presence. Mathias Maschat and Christopher Williams (Short 10) create an intriguing tension between a textual description of musical improvisation with a handwritten, post-facto “score.” Dugal McKinnon’s explication of the “liveness of loudspeakers” (Short 13) shakes up assumptions about the criteria for some *thing* to be experienced *as* live. Victoria Gray’s “re-languaging” of her experience staging a photography session in which cameras were forbidden overflows into poetry as she writes, “i’m (*sic*) trying to be immense slightly...” (Short 2, 106). Such efforts help to pry open many of the questions that, in theory, have come to seem obvious, over-rehearsed, or simply, “dead.” If Martin Barker is correct that experiences “come alive” in the “‘moments’ where form is *visible but stressed*,” as he elegantly claims in his ponderously titled chapter “Coming (A)live: A Prolegomenon to any Future Research on Liveness,” then the provocative “shorts” provide the moments where *Experiencing Liveness* is, and remains, most “magically alive” (22). In their invitations to the reader, the shorts offer the granular sense of “experiencing” the editors strive for. They bring the book to life.

The full-length chapters offer more traditional testimony from various disciplines. Despite the editors’ desire, following Auslander, to push “against ontology” (4), one of the finest essays is philosopher Gary Peters’ “What is a Live Event?” (Chapter 7). Drawing on Heidegger and Deleuze and displaying a jovial dexterity with their respective language-games, Peters elucidates a useful distinction between “rehearsal” and “practice” that evinces his long and careful