

LAURA LEVIN

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

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. xiv + 243 pp. Illus.

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While Laura Levin's *Performing Ground* gives intricate attention and thought-provoking analysis to its already intriguing subject, being that it is the first major study of camouflage's resonances in performance, the book also succeeds in another way—by performing, while simultaneously analyzing, its topic. That is, in introducing camouflage to the field of performance studies, the book points to a largely unexamined nuance of performance and performance documentation that is seemingly hidden in plain sight, and illuminates its shape by providing it with rich social, historical, and political context. Levin skillfully draws together such diverse fields as psychoanalysis, war and propaganda, feminist theory, plant and animal biology, and globalization in order to examine the relationship between a subject and its surroundings in an equally diverse range of performative acts, including site-specific performance, performative photography, guerrilla activism, portraiture, and urban mimicry. The resultant analyses and observations are not only astute and compelling, but timely and important: in arguing the notion of reciprocal exchange between the subject and its surroundings in which “the human body commingles with or is presented as a direct extension of its setting” (13), Levin directs the tenor of the book towards the ethical responsibilities that all subjects bear towards their surroundings and to one another.

Levin begins her argument in the first chapter by usefully defining terms that surround and echo notions of camouflage, such as mimicry (a close relation of camouflage; the method by which a subject adapts to its surroundings [11]) and masquerade (an often feminized approach to disguise; “how a specific cultural archetype is deconstructed through dress-up or by adopting an identity-laden pose” [32]). She distinguishes these from “camouflage,” which she proffers can “describe the very foundations of human subjectivity: how identity is, both consciously and unconsciously, constituted through space” (7). Camouflage, thereby, describes an intrinsic link between subject and surroundings, one that constitutes a mutual exchange as site acts upon subject and subject, in return, acts upon site. As such, as Levin suggests, camouflage can be usefully read in performance not only as an aesthetic underpinning, but also as a means by which to understand the politics of visibility and authority, to explicate relationships between subjects, and/or to deliver activist demonstrations (15).

The book is structured in such a way as to highlight these overtly political applications and readings of performative camouflage, and maintains a strong feminist undertone. Chapter Two directly addresses notions of marginalized embodiment in/of space through an analysis of the performative portrait photography of female artists Janieta Eyre, Liliana Angulo Cortés, and Francesca Woodman. Using camouflage to problematize notions of identity in performative portraiture, Levin illuminates the quotidian (and thereby camouflaged) alignment of female, non-white, lower class bodies with the qualities of space. Historically, she explains, these bodies have been equated with domesticity, servitude, and invisibility (54-55). Chapters Three and Four apply these notions of marginalized bodies-as-space by

analyzing the properties of site-specific and environmental performance and the bodies that occupy them. Levin posits that the removal of the proscenium and its spatial differentiation, while apparently operating to evoke a semblance of equilibrium both in terms of participants (performer versus spectator) and space (that of the performance versus that outside it), may actually reinscribe notions of ownership over space. This occurs, she suggests, at least in part due to the tendency for space to be treated as a “resource” to be dominated, mastered, and inscribed, and for female and non-white bodies—those that have historically sustained likeness to space itself—to be appropriated as catalysts for white, male negotiations with space (72). Using this argument as a foundation, Levin’s analysis in Chapter Four of Rebecca Belmore’s *Wild* (2001) is especially potent, particularly with regards to her assertion that it is precisely the seamless blending of the artwork with its colonial setting that marks the postcolonial and feminist impact of the piece (124-31). As Belmore blends into her lavish surroundings, her inconspicuous presence highlights the “taming of the wild,” the display of pilfered resources, and the control of women’s bodies that underlines colonialism itself (128).

The fifth chapter is directed towards what Levin calls “embedded performance”—a strategy deployed both by urban mimics such as Liu Bolin and Desiree Palmen, who intricately paint and clothe the subjects of their photographs into their urban backdrops, and by activists such as Sacha Baron Cohen and The Yes Men, who infiltrate groups in order to perform outwards, thereby altering the tenor of the frame within which the group presents itself. By exposing the underlying political particulars of space through these covert performances, Levin argues that these artists enact a giving way of “camouflage consciousness (absorption in environment)” to “consciousness of camouflage (an awareness of what that environment conceals)” (171). Finally, in the epilogue, Levin moves towards a discussion of the contemporary desire to self-situate within a place as a means by which to maintain a grasp on personal identity. However, she questions—through the artworks of Violeta Luna, and *Ex Machina* and Robert Lepage—whether the acknowledgement of the mutability of self-in-place might produce more gratifying forms of self-discovery and identity. The book concludes with images of Violeta Luna sharing bread and poetry with her audience, and reiterates the notion that identity bound to spatiality allows us to ignore our implication in the material conditions of others.

If I have one criticism of *Performing Ground*, it is that despite the keen attention that Levin gives to feminist theory, female bodies, queering space, and notions such as “passing,” there is no discussion of trans\* performance artists and the ways in which their works are relevant to discussions about performative camouflage. Trans\* performance artists whose works interact with the aesthetic of camouflage, foreground the various challenges of camouflage with regards to “passing” in quotidian space, and explore how the imperative for camouflage intersects with the oppression of trans\* people would add an additional dimension to Levin’s already accomplished argument. The performances of Nina Arsenault, Lazlo Pearlman, and Sunny Drake in particular could serve as fascinating subjects of analysis in the context of this research.

Nevertheless, in not only inaugurating the lens of camouflage within the performance studies field, but also in accomplishing an engaging, challenging, and adroitly researched approach to her analyses, Levin has produced a work that marks a compelling and important contribution to the field.

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**YANA MEERZON**

***Performing Exile, Performing Self: Drama, Theatre, Film.***

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 350 pp.

MATT JONES

Should we be worried that the age of globalization is fast becoming, as Arjun Appadurai claims, an age in which the state of exile is the norm (293)? Today's condition of mass exile has produced a far more sombre literature than other after-effects of global trade liberalization like cosmopolitanism, the opening of borders, or the global village. Yet even Edward Said, for whom exile was a lifelong personal and political tragedy, acknowledged that the phenomenon is "strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience" (qtd. in Meerzon 296). If exile is universally terrible, then why, asked Milan Kundera, did none of the great émigré writers who fled the Soviet Union return to Russia following the collapse of Communism (296)? What draws so many to remain in exile or even, for those who are not coerced, to seek it out? There appears to be something compelling not only to think about but also to live through in exile, no matter how traumatic its beginnings may be.

This mysterious combination of trauma and fascination at the heart of the exilic experience is the subject of Yana Meerzon's *Performing Exile, Performing Self*, which attempts to correct what she considers to be our overly negative assessment of the exilic state as "one of mourning, depression, disbelief, and constant suffering" (2). To be sure, all of these phenomena show up in her analysis, but Meerzon wants to draw our attention to the ways that such suffering also provokes creativity. She suggests that the destabilization provoked by exile demands to be worked through in ways that produce a new kind of artist, whose work is often characterized by a high level of self-reflexivity, a hybridity of styles, and a tendency to avoid representational forms.

To set up this argument, Meerzon first asks us to expand our usual understanding of an exile. She refers not only to political exiles but also economic migrants, children of migrants, and even voluntary nomads: anyone who has been separated from their place of origin and has to reconceive of their identity in the negotiation between an absent homeland and the somewhat alien new culture in which they find themselves. This new deterritorialized identity is both liberating and bewildering, which provokes a lifelong search to come to terms with it through art. As aspects of quotidian life such as language or appearance (skin tone, clothing, mannerisms) become markers of the exile's otherness, the exile develops heightened attention to the performative nature of everyday existence. This tends to make for a high degree of self-reflexivity in performance, generated by what Meerzon neatly describes as "the exilic artist's self-alienated gaze" (302).