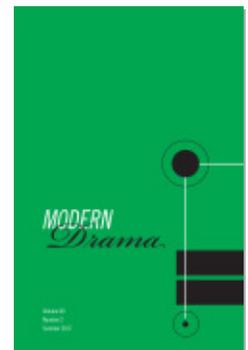*Performance and Media: Taxonomies for a Changing Field* by Sarah Bay-Cheng, Jennifer Parker-Starbuck, and David Z. Saltz (review)

Chris Salter

Aston and O'Thomas have managed to produce an outstanding resource on the Royal Court, its history, and its legacy at home and abroad, while also offering a rare methodological masterclass on how to pursue dialogue and collaboration with practitioners within an original academic research project.

Part of the now defunct but much praised book series Studies in International Performance, edited by Janelle Reinelt and Brian Singleton for Palgrave Macmillan, *Royal Court: International* is an important contribution to the study of cross-cultural encounters in theatre. Driven by the spirit of the series – exemplified by Reinelt and Singleton's ongoing concern with equality in international and cross-cultural projects – the volume is required reading for students, scholars, and practitioners with an interest in theatre that aims to cross national borders.

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SARAH BAY-CHENG, JENNIFER PARKER-STARBUCK, and DAVID Z. SALTZ. *Performance and Media: Taxonomies for a Changing Field.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015. Pp. 192, illustrated. $26.95 (Pb).

*Reviewed by Chris Salter, Concordia University and Hexagram and Milieux Centres for Research-Creation in Media Arts, Digital Culture and Technology*

*Performance and Media: Taxonomies for a Changing Field* is the latest in a veritable deluge of studies focused on the ever elusive arena of theatre and new media technology. As authors Sarah Bay-Cheng, Jennifer Parker-Starbuck, and David Z. Saltz argue, whether described as performance and media, technologically augmented performance, digital performance, or "new media dramaturgy" – or by any of the dozen other labels we attempt to affix to this (supposedly) late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century phenomenon – this field has inspired growing scholarly efforts to understand "these connections as not just a matter of theater and performance studies but necessary for a broader comprehension of contemporary culture" (2).

The book is not so much an edited volume as a collectively authored book from three scholars who present different perspectives on how to categorize and classify these "new species" of performance. As the book reminds us from the start, taxonomies present contexts and formal structures not only for the organization of knowledge but also for the production of what anthropologist Stefan Helmreich calls "forms of life": "those cultural, social, symbolic and pragmatic ways of thinking and acting that organize human communities" (9), or in this context, the ideological and cultural–socio-technical operations of the classification system itself. Reflecting their theme of the technological

relations or matrices of the performative, the authors of *Performance and Media* argue that taxonomies present an interesting model with which to take on a range of diverse methodological approaches, as individual taxonomic "islands" can "complement, intersect and enrich one another" (3).

This approach is not without its risks. Indeed, what the authors' strategy means in practice is the adoption and structuring of different taxonomic fields clustered around individual performance/theatre/media practices, something that requires defined objects of knowledge already available for classification. For example, Bay-Cheng attempts to grapple with the tensions between theatre and cinema/media using a model of space/body/time and virtual–material within what she calls a "taxonomy of distortion." Playing off a taxonomy developed by Human Computer Interaction researchers Paul Milgram and Fumio Kishino to understand the continuum between reality and virtuality, Bay-Cheng situates performance across three spectra (time, space, body) with "mediated" (mainly image-based forms of visual/pictorial representation) and "material" (physical, tangible) acting as the extreme ends for each. Using, in particular, the performance group Temporary Distortion as a model, Bay-Cheng aims to construct less a taxonomy than a method, which, as she argues, can fluidly accommodate many different media-based performances in order to study the various "distortions" that emerge as one moves to either end of each spectrum.

Building on her previous work on cyborg bodies, Parker-Starbuck takes a different approach, developing a tripartite schema that moves away from media to theorize another thorny interaction: the relationship of bodies and technology in live performance. Her categories take us back to the comfort of subject/object distinctions in arguing that not just human but non-human bodies (i.e., technologies) are always already subjects. Employing a cross-matrix that articulates three types of bodies (abject, object, subject) and three types of technologies (abject, object, subject), Parker-Starbuck's taxonomy helps us reimagine their intersections by taking up somewhat hard-to-classify works, such as Heiner Goebbels's scenic installation *Stifters Dinge*, as well as the more usual suspects, such as the Wooster Group or The Builders Association.

David Z. Saltz adopts yet another tactic. Like Parker-Starbuck, Saltz revises an earlier classification schema based on the dualistic relationship between performer and "media objects." Resembling a kind of combinatory game, Saltz's massive Excel-like tablature "indentifies variables along three dimensions – dramatic function, space, and time – and [. . .] assesses each from two distinct perspectives – the performer's and the character's" (94). As Saltz states, this taxonomy demonstrates how even a single production can occupy many categories at once; this quality, he suggests, points to the overall strength of the model.

I have to admit that the taxonomies developed by Parker-Starbuck and Saltz made my head spin as I went back and forth trying to decipher the

various permutations and combinations. At times, this approach reminded me of Pierre Schaeffer's attempt to classify sound objects in the 1960s or of the exhausting experience of trying to "read" a combinatoric, serial-based score from someone like Milton Babbitt or Pierre Boulez. In the process of trying to map things, I lost sight of performance as an affective, experiential *event* as I became ensnarled in a grammatical categorization exercise that forced me to ask some broader interrogative questions of these proposed approaches – techniques that owe as much to a kind of structuralist yearning as to Linnaean classification.

Most useful to me was the final chapter, titled "Intersections and Applications," not only because it presents interesting scale-based comparisons between the different taxonomies (using The Builders Association's *Continuous Cities* as the example) but also because it acknowledges the underlying limitation of the overall approach: despite the power of classification schemes, they are ultimately fixed, and hence, when it comes to the temporal and dynamic nature of performance (something that only Bay-Cheng really addresses), they prove unwieldy. How can we rethink or "break apart our own conception of what a 'body' is" (135), as the authors provocatively ask, when the concept of "body" has already been pre-established as a mode of knowledge?

*Performance and Media*, however, also invokes theoretical problems that have stalked performance for centuries, such as issues of representation and the now (very) tired tension between the live and the mediated. Furthermore, despite arguments to the contrary, some of the classifications seem to depend on that which can be seen (or heard) and hence understood and classified. In other words, these schemas do not begin to grapple with just-emerging developments in applying digital processes to live, co-present performance – that is, with the operations of algorithmic reasoning and its resultant effects and affects, which are completely inaccessible and increasingly alien to performer and spectator alike.

In the end, I am ambivalent as to whether such taxonomic methods are the most useful for understanding political, perceptual, and ontological shifts where the dichotomy between human agency and object-demarcated bodies (whether Hiroshi Ishiguro's robots or Kris Verdonck's runaway spinning machines) is quickly being displaced within the algorithmic, quantitative atmosphere of the broader technosphere. As Saltz claims, perhaps such tools are useful for students who need to understand the role that media plays in performance. Yet models that take up the integration of performer and media are less relevant when it comes to practices where media/technology already constitutes the ontological makeup of the thing itself. I find it equally difficult to imagine practitioners using such taxonomic tools, as my fellow artist colleagues who work with technological systems are too busy trying to develop and debug them even to think about how they might be categorized. This book, however,

may be useful to theatre scholars who need such schemas to try to comprehend a world that is very messy indeed. But just as John Law argues that the social sciences are ill equipped methodologically to deal with the increased production of sociotechnical monsters, so too does it seem that theatre and performance are still struggling to deal with the collective *agencements* (to use a Latourian term that Parker-Starbuck rightly appropriates) that not only new technologies but also new forms of life introduce onto the age-old stage.

**WORK CITED**

Helmreich, Stefan. *Alien Ocean: Anthropological Voyages in Microbial Seas.* Berkeley: U of California P, 2009.

<p style="text-align:center">⌇</p>

JESSICA SILSBY BRATER. *Ruth Maleczech at Mabou Mines: Woman's Work.* London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016. Pp. 255, illustrated. $24.99 (Pb).

*Reviewed by Iris Smith Fischer, University of Kansas*

Jessica Silsby Brater's important *Ruth Maleczech at Mabou Mines: Woman's Work* is the first book devoted to the work of the legendary performer and director. More than a co-founder and co–artistic director of the theatre company Mabou Mines, Maleczech ran the company for many years as an "actor-manager of her own making" (207). As Brater contends, for Maleczech, Mabou Mines's productions were "family business" (59), the collaboration of artistic equals on performer-driven work. Brater's book brings into view Maleczech's emergence as an influential yet lesser-known avant-garde artist dedicated to "putting strong female voices onstage" (188).

Brater uses material from her interviews with Maleczech and her collaborators to outline the characteristics of a body of work whose artistic principles were remarkably consistent over fifty years. Foregrounding Maleczech's belief that the performer acts not as an interpreter but as "an autonomous collaborator of creative significance" (201), an idea that Maleczech picked up in the late 1960s from Jerzy Grotowski and Bertolt Brecht's Berliner Ensemble, Brater demonstrates convincingly that Maleczech co-created productions that are more often attributed to Lee Breuer (e.g., *Hajj*) or JoAnne Akalaitis (*Dead End Kids*). Maleczech emerges in this book as an artist with her own point of view and a dedication to the performer as an "active mediator for the audience" (201). A highlight is Brater's account of the development of *Imagining the Imaginary Invalid,* which Clove Galilee, Maleczech and Breuer's daughter, completed after her mother's death in 2013.