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Book Review: Practice-as-Research in Performance and Screen, and: Mapping Landscapes for Performance as Research: Scholarly Acts and Creative Cartographies

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PRACTICE-AS-RESEARCH IN PERFORMANCE AND SCREEN. Edited by Ludivine Allegue, Simon Jones, Baz Kershaw, and Angela Piccini. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; pp. 260 + DVD. \$130.00 cloth.

MAPPING LANDSCAPES FOR PERFORMANCE AS RESEARCH: SCHOLARLY ACTS AND CREATIVE CARTOGRAPHIES. Edited by Shannon Rose Riley and Lynette Hunter. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; pp. xxiv + 274. \$75.00 cloth.

This pair of beautiful books marks the arrival of an emerging field designated by an ever-growing multiplicity of names: Practice-as-Research, Performance as Research, Practice-based Research, Practice-led Research, Studio Research, Research/Creation, and so on. The diversity of PAR (by which I mean all of the above, although there is no consensus on this abbreviation) is well represented in these volumes, which focus primarily on the United Kingdom and the United States, respectively. Readers impatient for PAR to take hold in the United States will find much in these books to bolster their arguments; those who are skeptical of PAR may also find support for their misgivings. As the two publications are complementary in content and intertwined in authorship, it makes sense to read them together.

Practice-as-Research in Performance and Screen (PARPS) is a thorough multimedia plunge into the theory and practice of PAR in the UK, along with one chapter each on France, Canada, and Australia. Grounded in the six-year "Practice as Research in Performance" project led by Baz Kershaw at the University of Bristol (2000–2006), it comprises ten print chapters, eight color plates, a DVD documenting forty-four PAR projects, a comprehensive bibliography and index, and a note on "How to Use This Publication." (Despite the similarity in titles, this book should not be confused with *Practice as Research*, edited by Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt. The latter is an Australian book, also part of the PAR landscape though not comparable in scope or depth to those reviewed here.)

Mapping Landscapes for Performance as Research (MLPAR), with thirty-seven chapters in three sections, provides both a broader and narrower view of PAR than *Practice-as-Research*. The first section gives a panoramic portrait of PAR's diverse manifestations in Britain, Wales, South Africa, Australia, Canada, China, and Finland, as well as in theatre, dance, ethnomusicology, and visual art. The third section tackles the United States, which, according to editors Riley and Hunter, has "lagged behind" other countries in instituting PAR, because of dif-

ferences in its higher education structures (xv). Less successful is the middle section, organized around a set of emergent keywords, such as "embodiment," "environment," and "situated knowledge." Although this section does not, despite the editors' claim, "give the reader a basic toolkit for studying, conducting, and implementing PAR projects" (xxii), it does include some thought-provoking meditations on current terms (e.g., Riley's piece on the physical spaces associated with university research). Overall, the geographical and methodological diversity of its coverage makes *Mapping Landscapes* an excellent reference text for a broad-based discussion of PAR.

The editors of both volumes are not hesitant to make strong claims about the significance of this movement. "By the twenty-first century," writes Kershaw, "it became clear that practice-as-research had the potential to trigger fundamental and radical challenges to well-established paradigms of knowledge making, inside the academy and beyond" (PARPS 2). The editors of *Mapping Landscapes* state that the various forms of PAR "constitute part of a revolution in how we look at knowledge today" (xv). Undoubtedly, the emergence of PAR accompanies profound epistemological questions in academia, related to a broader turn to practice and to the development of qualitative research in the humanities and social sciences. Both volumes aim to strengthen the position of PAR, and schematic analyses of the emerging field are offered throughout. Neither, however, can ultimately satisfy Simon Shepherd's call for a "full-on analysis" of a field that remains "under-theorised [and] a bit too slippery" (PARPS back cover).

A close reading of these works reveals two very different ideas of PAR. The dominant view, evident in both volumes, understands PAR as a deepened relationship between artistic practice and scholarly research. As such, PAR is "fundamentally interdisciplinary" (Daniel, PARPS 154) and calls for "the mix of performance and textual practices" (Jones, PARPS 29). Many contributors thus assume that the value of PAR lies in the potential of embodied work to enhance scholarship and vice versa. Unfortunately, by approaching PAR in this way, many authors unintentionally reinforce the practice/theory binary by aligning practice with action and research with text. They also narrow the potential scope of PAR by locating it firmly within academia. Most problematically, this notion of PAR bypasses the fundamental epistemological issue: while new interdisciplinary relationships between practice and research surely represent a valuable area of exploration, they do not constitute a vision of practice as research.

A very different idea of PAR is put forward by a few contributors, most notably Brad Haseman and

Arthur Sabatini in *Mapping Landscapes* and Robin Nelson in *Practice-as-Research*. These authors begin from the premise that “not all performing arts or performance practices constitute research” (Nelson, *PARPS* 125) and then seek to theorize this distinction, which is ultimately a difference between *types of practice*, rather than a union of practice and theory. Haseman recounts the Australian conceptualization of PAR along these lines in the 1980s; Sabatini surveys the historical epistemology of practice; and Nelson gives the most convincing theorization of PAR to be found in either volume. Among these contributors’ most important points is the need to “re-examine and historicize research by artists *outside of academia* and relate or adapt it to existing discourses and approaches to research . . . in the university” (Sabatini, *MLPAR* 118, emphasis added). In other words, rather than treating PAR as a trend within academia, these authors ask: Which artists have advanced performance knowledge in concrete ways through practice?

Among the names invoked to answer this profound question are Stanislavskii, Meierkhol’d, Strasberg, Adler, Grotowski, Cunningham, the Atlantic Theatre Company, and Mary Overlie. That these artists produced *knowledge* is shown by the ongoing pedagogical lineages that continue to teach aspects of their work today. As Nelson explains: “If knowledge in dance, physical theatre and other performance practices is . . . incommunicable in words but disseminable through a process of . . . [embodied] education . . . then practice-as-research practices begin to meet acceptable criteria for research which approximate to scientific and scholarly investigation” (*PARPS* 118). This argument has major implications for the framing and assessment of PAR. Most importantly, it introduces the idea of the *teachable* as an important criterion for distinguishing knowledge production (research) from other types of meaningful work. We might then ask, how many of the projects currently taking place under the rubric of PAR succeed in producing teachable performance knowledge of the kind generated by artists like Stanislavskii and Overlie?

Only *Practice-as-Research* includes a DVD for multimedia documentation of actual PAR projects. Regrettably, in comparison with other recent multimedia publications, the *Practice-as-Research* DVD is disappointing both aesthetically (clumsy navigation; poor formatting) and in its content. It seems that the editors wanted to include as many projects as possible in order to give an idea of the field’s potential scope. The resulting DVD seems mainly to illustrate the absence of coherent standards for PAR projects in the UK, being extremely diverse in medium, size, and quality. Many of the live performance projects on the DVD are PAR only in the sense

of being framed by theoretical questions, and not in the more rigorous sense of advancing transmissible knowledge. The lack of a clear theoretical position on what exactly constitutes PAR is evident throughout; for example, several of the research statements for dance projects draw heavily on contemporary philosophy, while saying nothing about the training and backgrounds of the dancers themselves. In doing so, they articulate research questions, but not research methods. Thom Hecht’s project is more clearly framed, but the scope of the project—the relationship between ballet and contemporary dance technique—is still far too broad to produce research outcomes in any rigorous sense. Paul Clarke documents two darkly fascinating theatrical works—but even here the precise sense in which these projects constitute research remains unclear and must be deduced by the generously minded viewer.

It is easier to perceive research content in the screen media projects. Several of these (Allegue; Downmunt) offer experimental video documentaries that unquestionably disseminate knowledge about their subject matter in ways that exceed the printed word. (The entire publication, as a combined book-DVD, also attests to this.) Allegue and Miereanu even argue that their video on Sufi dance can “give the viewer knowledge about this dance that witnessing the performance [live] could not” (*PARPS* 141). Two final print chapters in *Practice-as-Research* on the complexities of digital archiving (Smith) and the impossibility of “total documentation” (Piccini and Rye) further clarify the value of video as a research output in the documentary sense, and make this volume very strong overall on the subject of documentation. It is not clear, however, that live performance can function as research output in the same way.

Both publications should be required reading for anyone interested in the relationship between embodied practice and academia. Although they will not resolve all the questions surrounding PAR, they articulate these questions comprehensively for the first time. In doing so, they put forth a challenge. If these publications are successful—as I hope they will be—they will spur the development of projects, seminars, programs, and eventually departments in this field.

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