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Theron Schmidt, 'Site-Specific Performance (review)', *Modern Drama*, 55.2 (2012), 278–80  
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PEARSON, MIKE. *Site-Specific Performance*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Pp. xv + 207, illustrated. \$85 (Hb); \$29.00 (Pb).

*Reviewed by Theron Schmidt, King's College London*

Mike Pearson's *Site-Specific Performance* might appear to be "a survey of the field" from one of its foremost thinkers and practitioners. However, as Pearson argues, one of the functions of site-specific performance is to complicate our assumptions about such apparently straightforward concepts as "survey" and "field." So it's not a surprise that these complications are reflected in the book's form as well as in its content, and Pearson deliberately resists imposing a programmatic interpretation or singularly authored argument.

Instead, he draws upon several decades of making, teaching, and writing, interweaving all three strands to form a densely striated composite. Individual passages might switch abruptly among recollections of things that happened in particular locations at particular times, lengthy citations from related thinkers or from earlier writings by Pearson and his collaborators, and provocations for the reader's own potential explorations. It makes for a reading experience that can feel partial and fragmentary, as we rarely get anything passing for a generalised overview or a conclusive judgement. Instead, what emerges is a reflection of the irreducible multiplicity that makes up the experience of site; the specificity of local knowledge and the partiality of experience by those who encounter such work; and the potentiality of performance as a mode of research-based practice with which to approach the complexity of the social and geographical landscapes we inhabit.

Site-specific art has become a mature and richly theorised field of practice, and for Pearson as for others, a simplistic idea of "theatre set in unusual locations" is hopelessly inadequate. As Pearson notes, works such as Nick Kaye's *Site-Specific Art* (2000) and Miwon Kwon's *One Place After Another* (2004) have expanded the points of reference for site-specificity to include a broader range of artistic practices and frameworks. Pearson also tracks changes in the conception of "site" itself; referring to the work of Fiona Wilkie, he describes a shift "from attention to the cultural resonances of one particular site, to an active rethinking of how 'site' is constituted" (8). As Pearson describes it, the work of site-specific performance is not to excavate the hidden truth or essence of a location, but instead to activate the inherent multiplicity of site: site is always many places at once, a convergence of experiences and fabrications, a somatic experience rather than a purely scapic or scopic one (49). His critical references, then, are drawn not only from artistic practices but also from geography, architecture, and archaeology, such as Tim Ingold's description of "taskscape" (15) or Bernard Tschumi's hypothetical "programmes" for architecture as event rather than as backdrop for action (39).

Some sources of inspiration for Pearson are much more local – such as the untranslatable Welsh word *cynefin*, which might be glossed as "locale," but which significantly includes emotional affect amongst its inflections: in Bedwyr Lewis Jones' definition, it is "that area we feel we belong" (quoted on 101). Pearson's own attachment to Welsh locales is deeply rooted indeed, beginning in the 1970s with Cardiff Laboratory Theatre, evolving into large scale projects with the celebrated company Brith Gof, and supplemented throughout by an ongoing collaboration with Mike Brookes. The book refers to these examples as well as to many other

practitioners based in Wales, and so this small nation plays a special role in the development of site-specific performance. Unfortunately, the book predates the establishment of National Theatre Wales, which has significantly augmented the scale and visibility of site-specific work in Wales.

Indeed, the “specialness” of Wales is indicative of an emphasis that Pearson places on the “special” in the site-specific: the particular, the variable, the unpredictable. Pearson follows a loose taxonomy, describing events that take place within various types of spaces (barns, railway stations, homes, and occasionally theatre auditoriums), such that concerns and tactics emerge associatively rather than through explicit categorisation. Nothing can be abstracted except the fact of the variability of production, the particularities of site, the localness of all knowledge. Nevertheless, Pearson extrapolates a set of questions and sensitivities, and one of the strengths of this book is its inclination toward practice and application. One particularly useful example is the reproduction of a set of exercises for a multi-week group project in Frankfurt, which could be directly applied to student or other research projects (83-86).

Finally, the third term of the title’s equation: performance. Although Pearson makes occasional references to the domain of the theatrical, the theatre is not the primary point of orientation. Instead, performance is considered as itself a kind of “place-making” (5); like landscape, Pearson writes, it is “a mechanism of involvement, an interpenetration of materialities” (94). Performance is valuable in relation to the multiplicity of site because diverse objects and perspectives “can be drawn into heterogeneous, hybrid *assemblages*” (117). Pearson imagines performance as a mode of resistance to globalisation, sanitisation, and processes of “genrefication and gentrification” (46). Instead, it can create temporary autonomous zones (125) and is to be regarded “as *sensorium*, as *field*, as *site of cultural intervention and innovation*, as *utopia*, as *heterotopia*” (141). This idealism is tempered by Pearson’s hands-on experience, and he is sensitive to questions of ethics with regard to participation and expertise. And so, despite the seeming irrelevance of ideas of “theatre,” Pearson repurposes a surprisingly old-fashioned word: dramaturgy, which becomes an expanded frame within which to consider the ethics and “ergonomics” of encounter (170-74).

It is clear that the work being described in this book is of vital importance, not just for those thinking and working in theatre, but also for related fields of archaeology, architecture, and geography. However, for those unfamiliar with site-specific performance, the book’s particularity is both its strength and its possible limitation. Pearson describes the practice of “chorography,” which sets out “to distinguish and espouse the unique character of individual *places*” (31). This book, with its meandering style and collage of citations from disparate sources, might itself be described as a kind of chorography: a “deep map” of an artistic genre. It is a map drawn from memory with great care, and offered with humility and generosity.