

## Nature performed: environment, culture and performance

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# reviews in brief

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**Nature performed: environment, culture and performance.** Edited by Bronislaw Szerszynski, Wallace Heim and Claire Waterton. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. 226 pp. £16.99 paper. ISBN 1405114649.

What does it mean to perform interdisciplinarity, to conduct conversations and actions that cross disciplinary boundaries and redistribute competencies to speak about environment and culture? This enquiry is at the heart of the latest Sociological Review Monograph, emerging from an interdisciplinary conference held at Lancaster University in 2000, which aims to bring academic debates about the 'performative turn' to bear on the performance of nature–society relations. This interdisciplinary terrain is well rehearsed in the excellent introduction to the book, and these concerns pepper the 12 further chapters, organized loosely into four thematic sections.

The ambitions of this book are, at times, grand. In places, this is expressed in the philosophical reworking of ideas of work, labour and life (Szerszynski) or ritual and ecology (Grimes). In others, the focus is on innovative investigations into the encounter between different epistemological and artistic practices, or introducing different ways of thinking about knowledge produced in conditions of uncertainty (Waterton, Heim, Simmons, Lorimer and Lund, Watson). In the remainder, the emphasis is mainly on providing richer and more expressive accounts of diverse but apparently familiar cultural practices, such as hunting, allotment holding, taking part in participatory processes or performing green lifestyles, through attending to their materiality and performativity. Yet throughout, the book's tone is modest and playful, and in its own terms, its achievements indeterminate, playful and imaginative. The focus upon performance enables this tension. As the introduction explains, performance is about iteration and repetition, but also about creativity and the manifestation of agency. Many chapters make productive use of the concept of performance to attend to both alterity and stability. Yet the performance of biological processes plays a less central role than the introductory remarks might suggest, appearing only late in the text and most strikingly in the chapter by Clark on feral ecologies. Those that do make use of the concept bring a further, welcome dimension to these portraits of practice, challenging the rather romantic tone of the book by bringing ambiguous manifestations of nature's agency into focus, and extending the conceptualization of performance itself.

So how might we evaluate this book as a performance of interdisciplinarity? Perhaps surprisingly, the book ultimately has the feel of a traditional academic text; the audiences assumed are graduate students and other researchers. The content and contexts of the artistic performances at the initial conference are published in a separate

text, suggesting institutional constraints on this experiment in interdisciplinarity. Even given the constraints of academic publishing, the book is light on illustrations and heavy on analytical text, challenging the reader to bring to mind the performances it recounts. In more ways than one, then, this book challenges us to use our imaginations to think about how it might be possible to perform nature and our status as knowers of nature differently.

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**Ghost ships: a Surrealist love triangle.** By Robert McNab. London: Yale University Press. 2004. 266 pp. £25.00 cloth. ISBN 0300 10431 6.

This well-researched book fills a lacuna in the early history of French Surrealism, illuminating an episode which has long puzzled scholars and surrealists alike. When, in March 1924, the poet Paul Éluard abruptly dropped his Surrealist activities and left Paris on a round-the-world trip, his colleagues were thunderstruck. Their bemusement was renewed when Éluard turned up again, six months later, sidestepping all queries and dismissing his journey as ‘un voyage idiot’. No more was said, and so the journey has gone down in Surrealist lore as an aberration, an *acte gratuit* on a par with the futile walking tour in the Sologne countryside which André Breton and others undertook in May 1924 (and which McNab also deftly reconstructs). Now, thanks to this book, we know better.

By profession a documentary film-maker, McNab has applied a range of skills to his account, scanning the timetables and passenger lists of long-extinct cruise vessels, boning up on Cambodian architecture, and delving into private letters and shadowy corners of art history. His many threads of enquiry fashion a persuasive narrative that encourages fresh insights into Surrealism and especially the art of Max Ernst.

What happened is that Éluard and Ernst were involved in a *ménage à trois*, sharing the favours of Gala, Éluard’s fickle Russian-born wife (who later married Salvador Dalí). At a certain point, Éluard succumbed to emotional stress, and, pocketing money from his father’s property business, booked a passage to Saigon in French Indochina, via the Panama Canal and the Pacific islands. When Ernst and Gala followed in July, the poet was persuaded to abandon his symbolic suicide and return to France with his wife. Ernst then lingered in Saigon to see the sights.

The most valuable chapters of *Ghost ships* concern the visionary paintings which Ernst executed over the following decades and which reflect a double revelation – the fabled site of Angkor Wat and the tropical ocean. Those ancient Khmer ruins, engulfed by vegetation, offered an irresistible Surrealist image, while the ocean supplied a fertile metaphor for the unconscious. Thus, whereas the poet’s impulsive voyage was largely a painful hiatus, the painter’s *dépaysement* inspired such haunting canvases as *The entire city* (1936–37) and *Sea and sun* (1926). McNab’s argument is amplified by superb