

Bachmann, M. (2020) [Review of] Birgit E. Wiens, ed. 'Contemporary Scenography: Practices and Aesthetics in German Theatre, Arts and Design.' London: Methuen Drama, 2019. 248 p. £75.00. ISBN: 978-1-350-06447-8. *New Theatre Quarterly*, 36(2), p. 196.
(doi: [10.1017/S0266464X20000329](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X20000329)) [Book Review]

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Deposited on 08 March 2021

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Birgit E. Wiens, ed.

Contemporary Scenography: Practices and Aesthetics in German Theatre, Arts and Design

London: Methuen Drama, 2019. 248 p. £75.00

ISBN: 978-1-350-06447-8

Scenography is increasingly becoming a keyword for the study of contemporary theatre and performance. Among the main drivers for this development are a renewed focus on built space in many performance practices (e.g., immersive theatre); fresh theoretical impulses from interdisciplinary fields such as new materialism, object-oriented ontology and actor-network theory; and—last but not least—the ‘expansion’ of scenographic practice and analysis beyond theatre in the narrow sense.

In Germany, Birgit Wiens has vastly contributed to discussions of scenography, most notably through her excellent 2014 monograph, *Intermediale Szenographie*, on spatial aesthetics in twenty-first century theatre. Her edited collection, *Contemporary Scenography*, promises to bring the German debate to an English-language readership.

Many of its articles and practitioner interviews focus on individual scenographers, including some of the most renowned stage designers in post-1989 German theatre: the late Bert Neumann, Aleksandar Đenić, Klaus Grünberg, and Katrin Brack. Through his collaborations with director/composer Heiner Goebbels, Grünberg’s work might be the one that international audiences are most familiar with. It is also a good example of what German designers have to offer for a rethinking of scenography. As evidenced in a joint article by Grünberg and David Roesner, productions such as the performative installation *Stifter’s Things* (2007) provide ample opportunity to reflect on the relationship between musical and spatial composition, as well as between autonomous materiality and scenographic organisation. Similarly, Brack’s work—with its characteristic use of single materials in

otherwise minimalistic settings (e.g., the continuous falling of ‘theatre snow’ throughout Luk Perceval’s *Molière*, 2007)—allows Joslin McKinney to describe scenography as temporal event and ‘as a process of matter coming to matter.’

Such careful analyses, often with a ‘new materialist’ bend, are a welcome introduction to German scenography. Throughout, the collection aims to ‘move beyond artistic and aesthetic criteria to explore how scenographic practices relate to traditions, cultural discourses, and institutions.’ In her introduction, Wiens draws on Foucault’s notion of the *dispositif* to offer what she calls a ‘context-oriented perspective’ on German scenography. One would thus expect to hear more about the latter’s material, economic and social conditions; and about the relationship between local and more global frameworks, especially when it comes to case studies that are international co-productions or tour the festival circuit. However, not all contributions achieve this ambition. It is most fully realized in the second part of the book, which moves away from theatre (part one) to analyse how scenography functions in other institutional settings: in museums (Maar; Brückner and Greci), public space (Foerster-Baldenius), and digital installations (Zinsmeister). The third part of the book, ‘Rethinking scenography’, extends the discussion into the realms of philosophy and education. For instance, media philosopher Dieter Mersch reads scenography as an ‘ungovernable’ practice of material performance, while Thea Hoffmann-Axthelm and Robert Kraatz analyse how it is being taught at higher education institutions. If contemporary scenography indeed sits between ‘ungovernable’ materiality and *learning* its spatial organisation, then Wien’s collection is an excellent guidebook to what this might mean in German theatre, arts, and design.

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