A challenge facing this edited collection of essays on British Live Art is that the field is famously hostile to taxonomy. Most of the authors here make use of terms like slipperiness, uncertainty, fragmentation, and antinormativity when discussing the methods of its practitioners. In gathering these pieces together in one volume, Maria Chatzichristodoulou’s organising principle is inspired by Edward Lucie Smith, who described government funding for “Live and Performance Art Practices” in the 1970s as “an establishment mechanism for dealing with freaks” (qtd. 10). In a lively discussion of “freaks” and “misfits,” Chatzichristodoulou argues that ideas beginning at the periphery will often ripple towards the centre (11–12). Live Art, which is forever mutating into strange new forms, thus maintains important and influential relationships with what we might think of as more orthodox or mainstream cultural practices. This is reflected in the practitioners covered: people like Franko B, Tim Etchells, and Cosey Fanni Tutti, who have become household names (though never domesticated), are studied alongside less canonical artists like Martin O’Brien and Jordan McKenzie. The effect is pleasingly kinetic, with parallel narratives offered across the chapters that demonstrate ways in which Live-Art practitioners continually respond to one another and their surrounding contexts in advancing the possibilities of the field.

Sara Jane Bailes’s opening chapter on Etchells investigates the use of language in his work, specifically the slippage of meaning in the mechanics of writing and the ways that this may be explored in performance. Bailes makes good use of Clare Swyzen’s “database dramaturgy” to propose anti-hierarchical systems of meaning production through randomised, cut-up, and repeated texts (30–31). It would have been interesting to see this argument applied to more explicitly poststructuralist debates, where studies of the writing/speech dialectic too often ignore performance in favour of textual analysis. That said, the discussions of Etchells’s work are well-handled and draw valuable points from practices of “looping” – concluding, perhaps inevitably, amidst echoes of Samuel Beckett.

Roberta Mock’s chapter on Marisa Carnesky showcases a body of work that has unabashedly drawn connections between sexuality, Jewishness, dystopic body-modifications, Victorian freak shows, and gendered violence. The chapter is markedly open, with its critical voices (Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva, for in-
stance) acting as signposts rather than structures and with the majority of attention paid to grand-guignol tales of mummified arms uncovered on film sets, brightly coloured ritual tattoos, or mock-executions of audience plants by putting power drills to their heads. There are some sober currents of unease flowing through the chapter – lack of union support for sex workers, for instance, or the elision of miscarriages from public discourse – but it is appropriate that these shadow, rather than suffuse, the intense visualities of Carnesky’s showwomanship.

Deirdre Heddon’s rather lovely chapter on Marcia Farquhar adopts the drifting, digression-heavy structure of the artist’s “auto/biographical performances” and begins by describing a walk that the two of them took through London in 2015. The chapter builds a fairly robust discussion of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari into what Heddon calls “psychoperformance,” a kind of performance that relocates the “ambient ‘drift’ of psychogeography – a practice which demands attention and response to surroundings – to the performance space” (83). The term arrives too late to be properly unpacked, but, as is appropriate to the subject of this book, interpretation is a challenge left to the reader. The chapter maintains an essential playfulness by ending with a series of quotations that orbit one of the book’s many engagements with “precarity” – here, that of the performance which abandons text to the hazards of improvisation.

Dominic Johnson’s chapter on Franko B, “The Gold Standard,” sets out to view the performer’s body “without recourse to metaphor, or to specific material and historical realities outside of the spectacles he creates” (92). This Artaudian ambition is defended in the language of “hardship art,” experiential performances in which the physical suffering of the artist confronts the spectator with challenges about their role and response to witnessing pain. Franko B, a grandee of Live Art, has been somewhat sidelined since his retirement from bloodletting performances in 2006, and Johnson uses this sidelining to open up a discussion about his chapter’s ultimate object of study – the audience. For all that, the analysis starts with B’s body, Johnson reminds us that the “pain that disconcerts us in Franko B’s performance is not the artist’s, but our own” (103).

This theme is complemented in Gianna Bouchard’s chapter on O’Brien, whose cystic fibrosis and “daily regime of chest percussion to dislodge the build-up of excess mucus in his body” fuel much of his experiential art (106). Bouchard approaches these performances through a Foucauldian lens in which the body is rendered a “specimen” (that is, made representative of its species through isolation) and argues that “under contemporary biomedicine we are all now specimens undergoing self-experimentation” (107). It is a bold claim in the light of O’Brien’s illness, one that the spectator cannot know given the inaccessibility of pain, yet it allows Bouchard to suggest a way of breaking down the Otherness of sick or dis-
abled bodies through creating “an ethical community as we are put into a relational and reflective communion with the artist and other spectators” (114).

Johanna Linsley’s chapter on Oreet Ashery traces a shift from “intimate, one-to-one encounters, structured through the use of alter egos, to a practice that now involves both literally assembling groups of people and investigating the complex and often raw politics of collective life more broadly” (133–134). It is a very impressive piece of work, its discussion informed by the likes of Deleuze and Butler and strengthened by Heddon’s earlier caution that there is nothing “inherently political” in Live Art since the political “takes place within a matrix of diverse cultural and historical relations, relations that include the spectator” (119). As well as foregrounding her own subjectivity as a spectator, Linsley heeds this caution by attending to the financial precarity facing Live-Art practitioners and historicising the way that funding structures informed the shift in Ashery’s work. Under the austerity politics of the Tory-LibDem coalition, a defunded arts sector combined with increasingly privatised public housing and the commercial “instrumentalization of arts practice in the service of producing a buzz or vibe” complicated the ethics around community arts projects (127). Rather than retreating from social engagement, Linsley quotes Simon Bayly as saying that “a sizable constituency of contemporary art appears to have taken on the self-assigned task of the resuscitation of the public sphere through a direct engagement with processes of ‘self-organization,’ assembly-gathering and convocation” (127). As well as fortifying Linsley’s excellent analysis, this contention clarifies a theme common to many of these chapters, concerning the value to Live Art in providing space for communication between subjects that can offer resistance to the financial and social precarities of the present.

The final section of the book takes a deliberate turn towards levity and begins with Gavin Butt’s study of David Hoyle, whose work he classifies as a “bastardized post-war end-of-the-pier act” (148). The philosophical problem at the heart of this chapter asks how “camp” and “sincerity” might sit in relation to one another through performance. Butt does not provide an answer to this but instead sets up a series of provocations, celebrating a kind of parasitism in Hoyle’s art as he riffs off politicians invited to his shows to act as foils – wittingly or otherwise. This parasitism uncovers an interesting overlap with Linsley’s chapter – both Ashery and Hoyle have performed at the Tate Modern, and there is an obvious tension in counter-hegemonic work being produced within such a mainstream institution. For Linsley, this is celebrated as Live Art in the UK functioning as a cuckoo’s egg thanks to savvy organisers making use of available opportunities. Butt’s response is more anarchic, delighting in a “Queer Tour” that Hoyle conducted, which largely ignored the artworks in favour of audience banter and concluded with Hoyle as a modern version of the trickster spirit, one who will “appear to suggest
an amoral action, something right/wrong that will get life going again” (151). Butt’s obvious enjoyment of this playful rebellion is a pleasure to read.

Katie Beswick’s piece on McKenzie offers close readings of three distinct projects, paying particular attention in each case to the politics of space. In Spent (2008–), the artist ejaculates onto yellowed paper and covers the discharge in graphite paper; the results are presented in galleries. In Border Patrol (2014–2015), he displays objects used by drug dealers and users to wedge open doors in his home, a council estate in Bethnal Green. In Shame Chorus (2016), McKenzie works with the London Gay Men’s Chorus and a number of other collaborators on an evening of songs, spoken word, and a Q&A session on experiences of homosexuality. In each case, Beswick suggests, there is a tension between “normativity and antinormativity,” with McKenzie’s work offering challenges to the expected places of art, and, in its diversity of forms, demonstrating the ways in which Live Art itself offers a continuing and necessary challenge to practices of scholarship.

The book concludes with Eleanor Roberts’s chapter on Cosey Fanni Tutti, which addresses a question that has occurred in various preceding chapters about the role of sexual intercourse and sex acts in Live Art. Placing Cosey Fanni Tutti within a genealogy that includes Yoko Ono and Annie Sprinkle, Roberts’s argument is one of feminist inclusivity, defending Cosey Fanni Tutti against sex-negative feminism that writes off the artist’s work as “just” pornography. In response to the moral panic of various British newspapers and “horizontal aggression by feminist arts communities” (179), Roberts argues through aesthetic and political analysis that Cosey Fanni Tutti’s sexually explicit work can be understood as “so-sophisticated interventions of appropriation which, for example, ‘reclaim’ agency or embodied subjecthood by turning capitalism’s own methods against itself” (185). This does not eclipse the work’s function as pornography, however, which maintains a complexity in its production and reception:

Tutti refuses to either joyfully celebrate the body and its sexual potential, as sex-positive artist-activists like Sprinkle might, or condemn exactly the field of pornographic representation in which Tutti is involved (and which reminds us of our own involvement). (188)

The alterity of this position seems a fitting close to the book, which ends without epilogue or afterword. The reader is left with a valuable amount of uncertainties, which, I suspect, would please the various artists whose work is under discussion. Live Art in the UK complements works like Heddon and Jennie Klein’s Histories and Practices of Live Art (2012), Johnson’s Critical Live Art (2018), and RoseLee Goldberg’s Performance Now: Live Art for the 21st Century (2018), offering an important and absorbing contribution to the scholarship around this restless and ever-evolving field.