

Archived version from NCDOCKS Institutional Repository <http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/asu/>



Lost in the Desert: Mark C .Taylor, Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion.

By: **Richard M. Carpe**

No Abstract

Carp, Richard (1994) "Lost in the desrt: Mark C. Taylor, Disfiguring Art, Architecture, Relgion". Art Journal, Spring 1994 (vol. 53. #1 pp. 94-97. Published by the College Art Association (ISSN 0004-3249)

Carp, Richard (1994) "Lost in the Desert: Mark C. Taylor, Disfiguring Art, Architecture, Religion". *Art Journal*, Spring 1994, Vol. 53, No. 1, pp. 94-97. Published by the College Art Association (ISSN: 0004-3249) Right to archive confirmed by Joe Hannan, Director of Publications.

Lost in the Desert

RICHARD M. CARP

Mark C. Taylor. *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. 360 pp., 36 color ills., 101 b/w. \$45.00

Mark C. Taylor, Preston S. Parish Third Century Professor of Religion at Williams College, is one of the first American religious thinkers working within and out of the currents of "deconstruction." He is one of the most influential young religious thinkers in the academy, as is indicated by his positions as editor of both a book series and a journal published by the University of Chicago Press. In keeping with deconstructive literature, his prose is intentionally thick, full of word plays, puns, feints, and misdirections. In *Disfiguring*, there is no discursive thesis, but an "argument by example," which offers an interpretation (not the interpretation), since Taylor views all communicative forms as disseminative, sustaining multiple, perhaps contradictory, interpretations and giving rise to unintended but genuine significations. *Disfiguring* is breathtaking in its scope and erudition, despite some troubling lacunae, moving fluidly and intelligently within and between theology, philosophy, art, and architecture and regularly reflecting on the political and economic ramifications of his sources.

Refusing the traditional label of "theology," Taylor dubs his work a/theology and himself an a/theologian. In a previous book *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*, working out of what he called a "radical Christology," he proposed that God, self, word, and book are mutually interpretive within Christian thought, and that the contemporary reconception of word and book must necessarily transform God and self.¹ Then, in *Altarity*, he explored how the Western tradition has thought "being" and "the appearance of being" in terms of difference (rather than presence), since Heidegger's challenge to Hegel's unifying System.²

Disfiguring unites these themes, reconceiving religion as a binding together (*religare*) that is a double binding "in which irreconcilable differences are repeatedly negotiated. . . a 'double movement' that is neither merely positive nor merely negative" (p. 318). Traditionally, "God" has referred to "being itself" (or to "the ground of being") and "salvation" to a pure presence of

beings to one another and to God, a total wholeness manifest in "bind[ing] back together everything that has fallen apart" (p. 317). Taylor grapples with imagining "God" and religion when "being" is viewed as a logocentric dream and presence is inevitably permeated with absence. Following Kierkegaard and Blanchot, Taylor envisions an aesthetic education that "does not reveal the presence of the divine here and now but stages an unrepresentable *retrait* that leaves everyone gaping. . . through the *failure* of language. The 'name' of this failure is the unnameable and the pseudonym of the unnameable is 'God'" (p. 314).

At the end, Taylor offers a religious textuality he believes to be consonant with "truly" postmodern art and architecture (e.g., Michael Heizer, Peter Eisenman, and Anselm Kiefer). Not rejecting modernism (avoiding a "negative duplicate" of modernism), Taylor wants to undo it "as if from within. . . to recall something that is terribly old. Though neither eternal nor divine, this immemorial borders on what might be figured as the religious" (p. 316). He wants to suggest the spacing that enables space, the timing that enables time—to indicate what Plato in the *Timaeus* called *chora*, what (he says) Derrida calls *différance*. This makes thought possible though it cannot itself be thought. It can never actually be revealed, nor can it be at all; it is the (pre)condition of any being.³

Taylor deploys three "nondialectical epochs"—modernism, "modernist" postmodernism, and postmodernism *strictu sensu* (which "subverts both modernism and 'modernist' postmodernism as if from within" (p. 6)—presented as strategies of disfiguring. Modernism disfigures by abstraction (removing the figure), modernist postmodernism disfigures by refiguring ("deforming, defacing, or corrupting") modernist purity, and "true postmodernism" disrupts and dislocates both of the others "by trying to figure a disfiguring that struggles to figure the unfigureable" (pp. 9–10). Taylor likens modernism to Kierkegaard's "reflective aesthetic" and modernist postmodernism to his "senuous aesthetic," while "real" postmodernism corresponds to the "religious." Like Kierkegaard's, Taylor's categories are not chronological, but represent inevitable and mutually entangled aspects of human desire (see, e.g., p. 231).

For Taylor, modernism has its roots in late Enlightenment philosophy:

When taken together, the aesthetic theories formulated by Kant, Schiller, Schelling, Schleiermacher, and Hegel interpret religion—religare—as a binding that is a rebinding—re-ligare. . . . As such, religion promises to heal the wounds, mend the tears, cover the faults, and close the fissures that rend self, society, and world (p. 46).⁴

This religioaesthetic theme, which connects these philosophers despite their significant differences, links religion, art, and nature via "presence." Taylor calls this the "theoaesthetic." Modernism, rooted in the theoaesthetic, "expresses a deep and abiding longing for the presence of the present and the present of presence" (p. 50). Modernist artists' search for originality can be seen as a search for origins, for the source of creativity and for an unconditioned beginning. They enact an image (and espouse a rhetoric) of the artist as spiritual prophet and of art as presenting the sacred or divine. Modernist abstraction sought universality by suppressing individuality and particularity, making abstraction "in effect, a ritual of purification" (p. 52). Modernist architecture shared this same urge for purity in its increasingly rational simplicity of form and in its justifying rhetoric. The architects' program of "dis-figuring" is clear in Le Corbusier's idea of "deformation" as the way intellectual beauty (i.e., eternity, presence) is revealed (p. 108). Mies van der Rohe (following Aquinas), defined architectural work as making "the significant fact" evident in the supreme unity of an architecture permeated by a single philosophical idea: "to lay bare the foundation of the Real by building this ideal structure" (p. 134).

Philosophically, Taylor sees "a disturbing complicity between modernism and fascism" (p. 12). Despite the evident mutual distaste of modern artists and totalitarian systems, they are linked by a deeper resonance. The desire for totality of system is evident in both the modernist yearning for full presence and in totalitarian politics, while the quest for purity manifests as both an architectural and a genocidal regime. In this interpretation, he aligns himself with Kiefer, who incorporates in some paintings the names of cultural heroes in the context of holocaust, implicating the theoaesthetic tradition in our century's horrors, insisting that, "The genesis of transgression . . . is idolatry" (p. 298). Like the modernists, the Nazis were drawn to theosophy.

For Taylor, modernist negation of representation is always only a penultimate negation on behalf of the affirmation of an "other." Like Hegel, the modernists affirm negation only to negate it. In this they meet their existential, as well as their philosophical downfall. Artistic abstraction ends in Mark Rothko's despair, while Mies ends his work, in the Seagram building, with a statement of withdrawal and aloofness, an absence bordering on the void. "This inward turn discloses neither the Absolute nor the divine. . . . it reveals nothing" (p. 141).

In the face of this nothing, how is one to proceed? One strategy is "[disfiguring] the purity of modernist canvases and buildings. If your aesthetic is ascetic, figures are disfiguring" (p. 9). Postmodernism begins (with Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, J. S. G. Boggs, and, above all, Andy Warhol) with a refiguration centered around "the seemingly insignificant signs of postindustrial consumer culture" (p. 144). Their concerns lie in aestheticizing commodities (epitomized by Boggs's "money as art" schema) and in presenting signs as reality itself (p. 173).⁵ For Warhol and Johns, "the signifier does not point beyond itself to a secure ground outside the structure of signification. . . . *There's nothing behind it. it's image all the way down*" (p. 179). Life and art become strangely one, as both are consumed within the "reality" of media spectacles, especially Warhol's beloved television.

For Taylor, Robert Venturi is a pivotal figure in the failed postmodernist inversion of modernist architecture. His affirmation of pluralism and imagery is "logo centrism" of figure, image, and sign, the intrinsically nondifferent mirror of the old logocentrism of speech, word, and reason (p. 188). His opposition of "the difficult whole vs. the easy whole" critiques modernism for being too exclusive, insufficiently tolerant, and therefore, incomplete. His ideal "remains a whole or totality" (pp. 196–97). Following Venturi's admonitions, and perhaps embodying them better, are James Stirling, Michael Graves, and Charles Moore.

Graves's mythologism and Moore's irony meet in Graves's Walt Disney World Dolphin Hotel, an architectural capitulation to "the society of spectacle" in which "figures, signs, and images are not only what is consumed but are all-consuming." Thus the architecture of spectacle serves an economy built on radical consumption, in which what is consumed is not "the things themselves but their representations, [which] must be ephemeral, insubstantial, and constantly changing." Philosophically, modernist postmodernism "remains within a metaphysics of presence [the self presence of signs which refer only to other signs] and an economy of presentation" (pp. 224–25).

Stirling's Staatsgalerie New Building and Chamber Theater in Stuttgart represents a movement toward another postmodernism. In its exact middle, there is a "truncated Doric portico that

suggests a religious altar and hence evokes a sense of sacred space" (p. 207). Yet the center of this space holds a drain and a tricircular form that is not the Trinity but a crosscut view of an electric cable. "The center, which traditionally is deemed sacred and, as such, provides life with meaning, order, and direction, is not precisely missing but has become the site of refuse and waste" (p. 207). Stirling's refusal and desertion of the center lead toward "true" postmodern, which embodies "an irreducibly nondialectical double movement that does not negate negation but requires us to linger within the negative . . . forever" (p. 318).

In the two penultimate chapters—"Refuse" ("to reject, to resist" and "garbage, waste products") and "Desertion" (abandonment of duty and being deserted)—we reach "denegation"—the return of the repressed and refused through a strategy that "neither erases nor absolutizes figure" (p. 230).⁶

The key figure in "refusal" is Peter Eisenman, represented by the Wexner Center for the Performing Arts. He subverts all dreams of presencing in an architecture that "unsettles rather than settles" (p. 267), building the Wexner Center in (or as) a "(w)edge" that severs the connection of two existing buildings (p. 262). "Between" he builds a variety of spaces, including art galleries "interrupted by pillars and posts, some of which are themselves interrupted" (p. 263).⁷ He multiplies the use of grids as structure and ornament, creating a temporal effect. "As grids double and redouble, they repeatedly shift, oscillate, and alternate until it becomes impossible to locate stable axes that provide orientation" (p. 263).

"Desertion" presents Taylor's artistic exemplars, Michael Heizer, Michelangelo Pistoletto, and Anselm Kiefer. Heizer's *Double Negative* appears as a tear (a wound), that invites entrance, inverting and subverting the oppositions that ground art, religion, and philosophy, insisting on negation, doubling without negating negation (p. 274). *Double Negative* presents the void, not by the failed strategy of abstraction but using "figure against figure to figure what cannot be figured" (p. 277). Denying the dream of "mend[ing] the tear that rends human life," Heizer's art insists on the impossibility of wholeness (p. 280). Pistoletto, too, disrupts a dream—the dream of self:

Staring at myself from behind the mirror, I discover the blindness that has always been inherent in my insight. To know myself, I must reflect on myself by returning to myself from my exile in others. . . . [who] scatter rather than consolidate an I that was never one in the first place. . . . I never have been, am, or will be one. Rather, I am no one (p. 288).

The final taste Taylor leaves with us (before "A/theology," a sort of post-face) is that of Kiefer, "ash . . . always ash." Kiefer is an artist of disaster, or of Disaster, for it is no particular event, but the disaster of our broken, wounded, deserted condition. As Heizer presents the void, so "Kiefer's

paintings do not represent the desert; rather, *they become the site of desertion*" (pp. 291–92).

Taylor's insistence on our partial, torn, and incomplete existence is honorable, although he evades the question of how we can notice these tears without metaphors or glimpses of wholeness against which to measure our condition. Nevertheless, today complete healing or full presence do seem to be fantasies rather than possibilities. It is also important to acknowledge the metaphysical and practical complicity (even if unintended) of the arts with political and economic systems of repression. Yet here Taylor's exegesis begins to unravel. Does he suppose that his artistic, architectural, and philosophical exemplars are devoid of their own complicity with social, economic, and political injustices? The urge for purity of which he accuses the modernists emerges here in another, equally improbable desire.

What is absent from a text is as telling as what is present, and the ellipses in Taylor's text are eloquent. Despite its erudite scholarship, the work is spectacularly devoid of artistic or textual works by women. It is monolithically rooted in the high philosophical and artistic traditions of the Eurocentric West. The working class, Africans, South Americans and other Latinos, Oceanics, and those of their descent join women and the poor in their mute invisibility. Taylor does not refer to his own social location in the text; it seems to be irrelevant in his eyes.

One wonders, too, at the absence of other forms than painting and architecture, except for *Double Negative* in the Nevada desert. Taylor claims to have learned much from "strategies" in sculpture and performance, but they have left no obvious traces in his text. Since these are arenas in which women, people of color, and colonized peoples often work, their mutual absences speak of one another. Kumkum Sangari reminds us that "the postmodern preoccupation with the crisis of meaning is not everyone's crisis (even in the West) [and] there are different modes of de-essentialization . . . mediated by separate perspectives."⁸

Yet the architecture Taylor admires seeks to impose a single experience of crisis. "Eisenman's architecture," claims Taylor, "is calculated to deepen the 'existential anxiety' he believes is endemic to the postmodern world" (p. 257). Is Eisenman exacerbating a universal anxiety or universalizing that of the late capitalist (perhaps male, white) West? Is he diagnosing, insisting, or imposing?

In *Disfiguring*, architecture appears as facade and image, not as place or context. Taylor seems not to sense a difference between signifying/reading and inhabiting. Many who use the Wexner Center dislike it, not because it is "demanding and frustrating" (p. 263) but because it is dangerous. The very disjointedness that Taylor admires makes it an easy haven for those committed to violence; a person walking into one space is radically cut off from another. The building is difficult and expensive to heat or cool, a

genuine environmental disaster, not merely a metaphor for disaster as such.

Taylor seems willfully ignorant of aspects of the cultural scene that would challenge, engage, or transform his perspective. Heizer's work, for example, can be seen as a monumental imposition of self-importance on the body of the earth,⁹ in contrast to, e.g., Suzanne Lacy's work, which is aimed at an endless, ongoing network of social interaction. It is not self-contained, complete, or systematized; it exists relative to specific wounds; it does not seek or imagine a final healing, but it is healing nonetheless. As a scholar of religion, Taylor seems unaware even of the Buddhist echoes of his position, which would be much strengthened by reference to concepts of "emptiness" and to Nagarjuna's notion of codependent origination.

At bottom, Taylor seems to believe that the world sustains a single, univocal interpretation. "From time immemorial," he claims, "the desert has been the site of exile, nomadism, and erring" (p. 186). Yet for the Gabra of Somalia, the Hopi of the southwest United States, and others, the desert is a generative home. Indeed, the desert has been a means of communication, as well as a wasteland or an image of despair. In the end, Taylor presents a universalizing interpretation of the human religious situation, rather than acknowledging the variety of valid, incomplete religious interpretations coexisting in contemporary experience. Finally, Taylor fails to undermine the urge for purity and universalism from which he wants to escape. —

Notes

1. *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

2. *Altarity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

3. For a thoughtful discussion of the disappearance of primordial (full) being to make an opening for partial (existent) being, see Lawrence E. Sullivan, *Icanchu's Drum: An Orientation to Meaning in South American Religions* (New York: Macmillan, 1988).

4. Taylor convincingly displays this common theme through a closely reasoned and well-documented argument too complex and lengthy to duplicate in a review.

5. "Johns," asserts Taylor, "is a sign painter" (p. 174).

6. For more on de-negation and its historical roots in Freud's ideas of dream work, see p. 7.

7. Taylor interprets this as questioning "the metaphysics and ideology of the museum" (p. 262). Perhaps it is only the imposition of the architect's ego on spaces that might be left for "others" to define.

8. Quoted in Lucy Lippard, *Mixed Blessings* (New York: Pantheon, 1990), 12.

9. On Heizer see, e.g., Joseph Masheck, "The Panama Canal and Some Other Works of Art," *Artforum* 11 (February 1973).

RICHARD M. CARP is chair of the School of Art at Northern Illinois University and works in the interstices of performance, visual art, anthropology, and the academic study of religion.