

No Distance at All

The Figure of Islands in Two Articles by Hubert Damisch

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No Distance at All

The Figure of Islands in Two Articles by Hubert Damisch

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In a 2012 interview, Hubert Damisch (1928–2017) recounts his delight at the title of a book review of his only work of fiction. In Florent Georgesco’s review, titled “L’archipel Damisch” (The Damisch archipelago), the reviewer claims that the figure of the island occupies a central place in Damisch’s thinking and provides a model for approaching the book under examination in the review and his writing generally.¹ One only has to accept even provisionally the autobiographical impulse and accept as unambiguous Damisch’s directing such an interpretation of this outlier book of fiction, *Le messenger des îles* (The messenger of islands).²

1.

Florent Georgesco, “L’archipel Damisch,” *Le Monde des livres*, June 21, 2012, https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2012/06/21/l-archipel-damisch_1722182_3260.html.

2.

Hubert Damisch, *Le Messenger des îles* (Paris: Seuil, 2012).

3.

Hubert Damisch, *Noah’s Ark: Essays on Architecture*, ed. Anthony Vidler, trans. Julie Rose (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2016).

4.

Jean-Louis Cohen, “Review: Noah’s Ark: Essays on Architecture, by Hubert Damisch,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 76, no. 2 (June 2017): 244–245.

history – one this is attentive to forms and their historical meanings.”⁴

In a conference devoted to the theme of islands, it is appropriate to call on an historian who was preoccupied with architectural objects and phenomena that function, according to Damisch, as islands: as places of separation, of retreat, that work to construct a distance that allows them to resist being cornered in single interpretations. To that end, this paper conjectures that analysis of the figure of islands and associated terms such as distance, gap, separation, and freedom in the writing of Damisch may allow us to begin to understand his definition of architecture as that aesthetic condition occupying the gap or seam between form and formlessness.

To test this hypothesis, the paper undertakes a comparative analysis of two articles by Damisch. While other writings are referenced, the paper focuses on “Blotting Out Architecture? A Fable in Seven Parts,” and “Against the Slope: La Tourette,” both published in the early 2000s. The former engages the Blur Building, Yverdon-les-Bains, Switzerland (2002) by Diller + Scofidio, and the latter focuses on Le Corbusier’s Dominican

Monastery of La Tourette, Eveaux-sur-l'Arbresle, France (1953–1960).⁵

The paper asks: By what means and in what forms do the differences in approach and effect of the two buildings manifest themselves for Damisch? From the Damischian reading, can it be claimed that both projects function in ways that operationalise spacing, separation, gap, and distance, and in turn illustrate a kind of freedom? Was Damisch attracted to these projects in part because they resist “being localised, imprisoned in a rigid frame, cornered at a specific point”⁶? If one can take at face value that the Blur Building is in the realm of an island-building – literally offshore, afloat, one that could disappear from sight in certain weather conditions – then what might placing La Tourette into the same frame reveal? More generally, what could be made of the trope of islands, of all those island histories that constitute an archipelago system in relation to phenomena from architecture’s past and that called out to Damisch for comment?

The paper responds to the provocation in the conference call for proposals to interrogate the topic of distance as an aspect of islands broadly and contributes

to studies on Damisch, with a focus on the still latent potential of his thinking for the history and theory of architecture.

5.

Damisch, “Blotting out Architecture? A Fable in Seven Parts,” and “Against the Slope: Le Corbusier’s La Tourette,” *Noah’s Ark*, 295–327 and 177–211.

6.

Hubert Damisch, “Le messenger des îles,” interviewed by François Noudelmann, *Le Journal de la philosophie*, Radio France, June 20, 2012, <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/le-journal-de-la-philosophie/le-messenger-des-iles-5293982>.