No Distance at All

The Figure of Islands in Two Articles by Hubert Damisch

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DOI: 10.55939/a5407pu4ha

Citation:

Jasper, Michael. "No Distance at All: The Figure of Islands in Two Articles by Hubert Damisch." In *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand:* 40, Islands, edited by Ashley Paine and Kirsty Volz, 35-36. Brisbane, Australia: SAHANZ, 2025.

Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand (SAHANZ) Volume 40

Confence hosted by the University of Queensland and the Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane 2-4 December 2024

Edited by Ashley Paine and Kirsty Volz

Published in Brisbane by SAHANZ, 2025

ISBN: 978-1-7638772-0-7

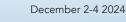
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Accepted for publication on 9th June, 2024





Society of Architectural Historians Australia & New Zealand



Brisbane, Australia

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 messager des îles (The messenger of islands). 2

The 40th Annual SAHANZ Conference

This historiographical stance is further put on display in the 2017 anthology of Damisch's essays on architecture, itself tagged (one assumes not by accident) with another title that places it squarely in the sights of a project seeking to interrogate what happens when the lens of islands is brought to the history of architecture. To add to the setting and take another point of departure in another book review, Jean-Louis Cohen noted at the time: "In *Noah's Ark*, Damisch has been able [to] create an archipelago of interpretations that, taken together, constitute a fertile model for a

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

Florent Georgesco, "L'archipel Damisch," Le Monde des livres, June 21, 2012, https://www. lemonde.fr/livres/article/2012/06/21/1-archipeldamisch_1722182_3260.html.

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

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

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. 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 messager 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-messager-des-iles-5293982.