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GO FIGURE!

REFIGURING *DISFIGURING*

Gary Shapiro

In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche imagines a madman rushing into the marketplace to announce the death of God. It is mad, we might say, to take this death so seriously, and this is certainly the reaction of the traders, who think that this is old news and want nothing so much as to make their profit for the day; they don't want to be distracted from the fluctuations of the Dow Jones average by this mad intruder. What is perhaps maddest of all in the madman's words and acts is not the news that God is dead (they've heard it all before) but his claim that the death is still going on, that we have still to learn what it is to lose the center, that the smell of the corpse has perhaps not quite reached us yet, and that we might very well respond on an artistic or aesthetic level, as he does, by singing requiems to the dead God.

In his extraordinary book, *Disfiguring*,¹ Mark Taylor bursts into the marketplace of the contemporary artworld by bringing together the idea of the death of God with that of the death of art. In the artworld prices of Van Goghs, Monets, and Warhols go up and down; the glossy journals like *Art in America* chronicle these values discreetly and contain prospectuses for investments, whether in the form of actual advertising or in the pieces pushing the latest artist or style, or looking for hidden value in an old one. In this marketplace the death of God is also, it seems, old news, so that the attacks of the religious right on a Mapplethorpe or a Serrano should be considered from the standpoint of the marketplace: as interferences with the process of fundraising or the rise and fall of artistic reputations. Here, as Taylor points

out, everything is "currency," both in the sense of what is contemporary and of what is the medium of exchange. Andy Warhol's images, apparently going on to infinity, of dollar bills, bring the two senses together nicely. To intervene in this apparently seamless web in which the business of art is transacted, Taylor proceeds by arguing that there is an implicit, sometimes explicit, theological dimension in the artworld itself, and that it is God's corpse that we smell in the Museum of Modern Art, or Soho, or in the pages of *October*. The death of art, which is sometimes rumored in these places (not that it could ever interfere with business), will turn out to be part of God's prolonged death agony and decomposition.

Taylor's story of twentieth century art (perhaps we should call it post-Nietzschean art) is neither conventionally modernist nor postmodernist. The leading modernist narrative, as articulated by Clement Greenberg, sees modernism, like Kant's philosophy, as aiming at making a strength of its own limitations and conditions, the flatness of the canvas playing a role analogous to that of the forms of sensible intuition and the categories of the understanding. But Taylor rewrites the modernist quest for purity, showing that much of it is iconoclastic; seeking to eliminate all specific images, it disfigures for the sake of a purified frame, as in the paintings of Malevich and Reinhardt, or a structure devoid of ornament, in the buildings of Le Corbusier and van der Rohe (that these goals cannot so easily be obtained is also part of Taylor's story). Modernism turns out to be a form of negative theology, with roots both in

Protestant iconoclasm and late nineteenth century spiritualism. This is the first of three stages in what reads as something like a Kierkegaardian parody and inversion of Hegelian dialectic. In the second stage, which Taylor calls modernist postmodernism, the image returns, flaunted in all its superficiality in Disney World, the Mirage Hotel in Las Vegas, and Pop Art. If iconoclastic modernism is an art of either/or, opposing purity and decoration, God and the world, this is an aesthetics of both/and: impudently disfiguring the ascetic surfaces of modernism it announces that you can have your rich, creamy image with all the trimmings, and eat it too. It's a choice between indicating a transcendent presence by means of a rigorous abstinence from and absence of earthly images or of revelling in a carnival of signs, what Taylor calls "logo centrism" (two words), that exults in their sheer presence and lack of depth. Finally, but with no resolution or reconciliation, there is another postmodernism, the postmodernism of the neither/nor, of the flickering oscillation of presence and absence, one that exhibits not negation but Freudian denegation, a return of the refused or repressed. This is the most passionate part of *Disfiguring*, and Taylor marks the difference between his treatment of the art of this phase, including the work of Eisenman, Heizer, Pistoletto, and Kiefer, by speaking in a more personal and lyrical voice.

Hegel is the figure who constantly returns here; the book is haunted by the grand architectonics of his *Aesthetics* and by his role in bringing together the discourses that speak of the death of God and the death of art. Hegel proclaimed a God so realized and immanent that, stripped of all transcendence, he could no longer be said to have a life of his own and so he quickly became identical with the state, the historical process, and was fully naturalized in Feuerbach and Marx. It was also

Hegel who spoke of the dissolution or *Auflösung* of art, saying that it had reached its highest possibilities and must now merge with the science and philosophy of art, that is with its reflective transformation into art, history, and aesthetics. And the cause of death is the persistence of the figure—Hegel called it the sensuous—that is both the vehicle of art and the sign of its limits. When art in its romantic manifestations strains to go beyond the figure by disfiguring the Apollonian Greek body in a grotesque Grünwald crucifixion or, like Hamlet, declares that it has that within it which "passeth show" and declines "like a whore to unpack [itself] in words," then it is living at the expense of its own death, since it now exists through the fact that it undermines the very figurative principle that defines it.

It is appropriate, then, that Taylor takes Hegel as the paradigmatic expression of what he calls "theoaesthetics," which we might translate as the aesthetics of presence that aims at a complete unfolding and manifestation of spirit in art (or as complete a manifestation as possible, recalling Hegel's sense of the sensuous as a limiting factor). Taylor develops the alternatives to theoaesthetics by means of an implicit and explicit confrontation between Hegel, on the one hand, and Kierkegaard and Derrida, on the other; but the confrontation is evoked in the first instance by the work of artists who refuse to be whole and integrated—like Peter Eisenman, who offer refuse in the place of beauty, or like Anselm Kiefer—and who go into the desert—like Michael Heizer—where they excavate without building, producing neither pyramids nor the Tower of Babel (both of which could be said on Hegelian principles to be the "first" work of art), but a *Double Negative* beneath the surface that might be an empty tomb. In orchestrating this confrontation Taylor focuses on *figurative* art—that is, visual art and archi-

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ecture—thus reversing the typical philosophical (and, again, Hegelian) hierarchy according to which art becomes more spiritual as it moves away from its rude beginnings in the material and the sensible and into the realm of language and poetry. However, I don't believe that Taylor thematizes the issue of the visual or material figure, as opposed to its musical or literary analogues, in order to demonstrate more specifically how "art and architecture" (the plastic arts) resist the closure of theoaesthetics. Many of the figures that do emerge here are those that Hegel calls abstract or symbolic; they are excavations or labyrinthine, mazelike works of building (some only in the form of plans); they are *not*, strikingly, the human figure that Hegel thought was the necessary midpoint in the unfolding of art, the place where the sensuous and the spiritual might fuse, briefly, in the sculpture of the Greeks. If the figure appears here it is in the complex mirror constructions of Michelangelo Pistoletto, whose aim is to fracture or disfigure the imaginary narcissistic unity of the face and gaze that these mirrors reflect back, undoing the mirror stage of art.

Several reviews of *Disfiguring* have suggested that since Taylor is concerned with art and theology (or a/theology) he ought to have given much more attention to explicitly religious art and architecture such as churches, synagogues, and mosques. This observation misses one of the main things at stake here, for what Taylor is exploring is the general link between art and religion. Both theoaesthetics and the a/theoaesthetics he introduces suggest that this is not an adventitious conjunction of categories (such as flowers in Shakespeare) or a specialized genre of architecture (like schools or grain elevators), but that there is a connection between art and architecture and the religious that extends far beyond those works that are clearly and officially devoted to religious purposes.

Theoaesthetics (as with Hegel again) sees art as the becoming and realization of the spiritual, while a/theoaesthetics suspects that the spiritual never becomes present but must be characterized in terms of a play of presence and absence.

We might raise the question whether we should accept the idea that some form of the theological question hangs over modern art and its successors as heavily as Taylor seems to think. But before doing so, let us recall another association or complicity between art and religion that shadows Taylor's book, and that could be made more explicit. This is the tendency noted earlier to make art itself a form of or substitute for religion, above any role it might play as a vehicle of religious meaning; the tendency was baptised in the nineteenth century as *Kunstreligion*, or the religion of art. As Nietzsche pointed out, the demise of one form of the center does not prevent us from seeking out a series of other versions of it that might provide analogous metaphysical comfort. In *The Voices of Silence*, a rather Nietzschean book that could be profitably compared with *Disfiguring*, André Malraux offered one of the most penetrating analyses of the religion of art as it has emerged in the last two centuries. He speaks of "The Aftermath of the Absolute," the time in which the old gods have fled, to be replaced by art as their substitute or placeholder. Like Taylor, Malraux finds the rejection of appearances in high modernism to be an iconoclastic way of evoking or suggesting a transcendence that cannot be expressed in images. Writing in the 1940s, Malraux could not, of course, have anticipated Andy Warhol, Michael Heizer, or Anselm Kiefer, but he did sketch a plausible genealogy of the way in which art can take on many of the functions of religion. Moreover, Malraux shows that it is the Western conquest of other peoples and appropriation of their art, of the formation of the museum, and the expansion

of techniques of reproduction, in “the museum without walls” that has led, after the demise of transcendental religion, to a religion of art complicit with the marketplace. I would like to say that Nietzsche and Malraux pose a Foucauldian question for an enterprise like Taylor’s: to what extent is the association of religion and art to be understood genealogically and archaeologically, as a way in which the West, at a certain time and in certain circumstances, responds to the death of God? How might we compare this with other possible displacements of the theological onto the body or the system of information? And to what extent is an affirmative art possible, one that was no longer in God’s shadow? Should we understand Andy Warhol’s simulacra of Campbell Soup cans, dollar bills, electrocutions, and Marilyn’s as attempts to fill an absence left by God’s departure with the currency of the here and now, or should we, with Foucault (in a passage that Taylor quotes in part, but does not really take up into his argument), understand all this as a kind of *kenosis*, or emptying out of the meaning of the figure through the very process of indefinite repetition itself?² This would be an arrival of the figure, an event of figuration/disfiguration that involved an affirmation of something like eternal recurrence and a testimony to the power of the figure. We might see it as a transfiguration of the marketplace rather than its simple confirmation.

On Taylor’s reading, the figurative refuses any *Aufhebung*. Despite the book’s title it is in many ways devoted and dedicated to the figure, not to the wantonly superficial figure of that form of postmodernism that Taylor calls “logo centrism” but to the figure as, say, Jean-François Lyotard understands it, that is as an explosive, eruptive event, that which interrupts discourse, conceived as an apparently continuous totality of language. If I were to disfigure the book’s title, I might say

that it is an implicit or explicit imperative: *Go Figure!* urging us to let the figure emerge in its work of challenging the hegemony of the discursive. That title can also be read as a question, evoking the further uncanny questions that arise in this text. *Disfiguring* itself becomes less discursive in the final chapters devoted to “Refuse” and “Desertion,” that is, to forms of the figurative that have to do with what refuses to be assimilated or to the place and practice of leaving behind or abandoning the discursive. It opens up onto a landscape that is other than ourselves and our expectations; we begin to enter a world that is not simply filled by forms with a conventional cultural or iconographic meaning in the normal adult *Lebenswelt*.

It is the stronger and stranger notion of the postmodern that takes hold in much of *Disfiguring*, especially in the last few chapters, to which I want to turn now in order to convey some of the texture of the work and to raise some questions about figuration and the void. In “Desertion,” the penultimate chapter of the book, Taylor literalizes this journey or displacement from one form of the postmodern (“logo centrism”) to the other, which involves desert, silence, abandonment, and the double negative. The scene is set by the remembrance of a conversation on another continent with Edmond Jabès, who told Taylor that in the desert one not only becomes silent but that silence can speak. As if on a quest to hear this silence, Taylor takes off in a helicopter from Las Vegas, leaving behind the Mirage Hotel, whose logos of tropical pleasure (noisily obscuring the desert silence) he had analyzed earlier. The mode of the book has changed from comprehensive analysis to personal narrative, a story of losing and finding oneself in the desert that draws on a rich vein of such legends (the reports of the desert fathers, for example) and resonates with some of the most striking productions of contemporary art. Taylor is

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seeking Michael Heizer's *Double Negative*, a huge excavation in the Nevada desert, in which 240,000 tons of earth are displaced in a 50 by 30 foot cut that is 1500 feet long. From the air the desert appears as a gigantic canvas "covered with subtle patterns painted in rich earth tones" (270). The landscape has become an abstraction, a non-figurative painting. This non-figure is then marked or interrupted by the "surgically precise" cut of Heizer's earthwork, a work that could be said either to jump across a gap or to be interrupted by that gap created by the natural topography. There is an uncertainty about this work, which Taylor's description elucidates: "Whether a single cut interrupted by a certain absence or two symmetrical cuts joined by a certain presence, the middle remained empty. Absolutely empty" (271).

What is it to be absolutely empty? This is the question that Taylor is asking via Heizer, and he does so with all of the Hegelian resonances in "absolutely" and with Jabès's words echoing in the "empty." But can Hegel and Jabès be brought together even in the uncanny wasteland of the Nevada desert? We find that the narrative of the journey has itself been displaced when we learn that Taylor has already visited the site of the absolutely empty by land, driving through eighty miles of desert. Departing from the highway, following obscure tracks and traces, the search party couldn't locate the cut, which finally appeared as night was falling and they were about to give up the hunt. Taylor invites us to follow him into the work, thus displacing the usual relation of aesthetic distance that is supposed to allow us the possibility of disinterested contemplation. He insists that the work must be experienced from *within* and *below* the ground, therefore reversing the usual position of art, in which the work is framed, erected, or put upon a base in order to underscore the way in which it escapes the pull of gravity and the material world (both

Hegel and Schopenhauer begin their idealistic hierarchies of the arts with architecture's struggle with the elements).

The title *Double Negative* parodies the Hegelian and, Taylor adds, modernist attempt to negate negation in order to affirm. But in this trip into the desert we are said to "linger in the negative" in a more radical way than Hegel ever imagined. The doubleness of the negative here is the unsurpassability of negation as well as a persistent duplicity that refuses to submit to any form of totality. Heidegger is a better guide here than Hegel, because he acknowledges that the *Riss* of *Zerrissenheit* is ineluctable; it is that which renders the work of art what it is and prevents it from collapsing into the illusory unity of form and matter that beguiled Aristotle and after him almost all of the Western aesthetic tradition. Taylor marks the many forms of rendering, fissure and fracture narratively by saying that "I heard silence speak" or, less personally, "*Nothing appeared*" (272). Now, what about this nothing? Is it "absolutely empty" or does it play a figurative role? Obviously something is presented—the work *Double Negative* that is encountered in the desert—although presentation itself is in question; in Taylor's formulation the work "presents and re-presents the impossibility of presence" (276). I find this formula more appealing than some of the other ways in which the situation is described, that is, as the appearance of nothing or the manifestation of the absolutely empty. To recognize that something is presented and figured, even in the flickering oscillation of presence and absence, need not imply that one is committed to the hegemony of the organizing center, to the theoaesthetic stand-in for a God who is simply and unquestionably there. Let me suggest that a work like *Double Negative* is still figurative in its way, something that one strand of Taylor's text acknowledges, as when he says, "The absence of ground is

figured by the removal of earth. As ground withdraws or is withdrawn, figure appears. The shape of the work is formed by subtraction rather instead of addition” (276) or “Disfiguring breaks figures without breaking with figuration” (277).

It might be helpful here to think about another way of distinguishing the modern and the postmodern. Slavoj Žižek, following Lacan, suggests that a certain form of modernism breaks with tradition only in so far as it shows that the work can function with an empty center as well as with an obvious one; it’s like the tennis game at the end of Antonioni’s film *Blow-Up* that is played without a ball but *as if* there were one. On this view, postmodernism would consist “in displaying the object directly, allowing it to make visible its own indifferent and arbitrary character.”³ Following scholars like Jean-Pierre Vernant, one might say that the empty center is as old as the *polis*, which is constituted by the absence of a hierarchy that has religious and mythical authority. The *polis* works by allowing anyone to attempt to step into the center, but the emptiness of the center takes precedence over its temporary occupants and the city revolves around it. That empty center is also the marketplace (the *agora*), and so we might say that the empty center has been from the beginning and continues to be complicit with the marketplace; it is not the negation of its currency. What Žižek calls “the obscene object of postmodernism” can be anything at all, like the barren mesa that figures in *Double Negative*. Robert Smithson, one of Heizer’s contemporaries, referred to the work of the American Minimalists not as abstractions, but as *obstructions*, obstructions that force themselves upon our attention, displacing and disorienting our usual relation to space. Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* in the Great Salt Lake is such a work, one that intrudes into a place while disorienting us. Others would be many of Richard

Serra’s constructions, for example the *Tilted Arc*, which was removed from the plaza in front of the Federal Building in lower Manhattan (and because it was site-specific this removal amounted to destruction). What the enemies of Serra’s work saw better perhaps than its defenders was that the *Arc* was a parasite, something that intruded itself into a space that was not its birthright. While easel paintings are destined for the walls of galleries and museums, the work as para-site becomes an unavoidable object rather than a void. At one point in *Disfiguring*, Taylor recognizes that modernism employs a binary and exclusionist logic of the parasite which might be revalued in a perspective that acknowledged the structural necessity of parasitism. I would extend this suggestion to include specifically our sense of the place or site of art, so as to make possible a way of understanding the systematic nature of displacement in art like Serra’s, Heizer’s, and Smithson’s, which explores the many modes of displacement, including the displacement of the museum which enforces a modernist site on its contents. (Such a logic of the parasite could learn much from the work of Michel Serres.) Now we might say that there is an empty center in the plaza that once held *Tilted Arc* in so far as it is haunted by the destroyed work, just as there is one in the Great Salt Lake, where the *Spiral Jetty* is now submerged (Smithson wanted to have the *Jetty* raised back into presence, but died too soon to have this done). Postmodern works have become modern ones. The parasite is conventionally thought of as an extraneous obstacle to the free circulation of goods or the normal occupation and movement through space, but we might also think of it as that which intervenes in the empty space of the *agora*; as such the para-site is perhaps more effective in an inhabited, urban space rather than as the object of a rare and difficult expedition into the wasteland. (In any case,

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even a work like *Double Negative* enters ambiguously into the public space of the art world by means of film, photographs, documentations and narratives like Taylor's, which invite us to participate vicariously in a spiritual quest.)

We might also think of Jean-François Lyotard's conception of the figure here. For Lyotard the figure is that non-discursive event that disrupts, interrupts and scrambles discourse, like the dream work that transforms a linguistic thought into something like a rebus. The last artist treated at length in *Disfiguring* is Anselm Kiefer, whose *Zim-Zum* is reproduced on the cover of the book and whose work is a site of the clash between figure and discourse. The discursive dimension is rather obtrusive: names and words are written across the paintings, titles allude to specific historical events or literary texts, and then there are the great leaden books themselves, in which the presence of the word is forced upon us. Nevertheless, as Taylor sees, "Kiefer's canvases flaunt their materiality. His paint is so thick that it cracks. Straw, sand, earth, lead, iron, burlap, and cardboard are freely mingled with oil and acrylics" (291). When you walk into a room with one of these gigantic Kiefer paintings, with its richly composted layers of dark material that protrude from the canvas, the immediate effect is that of a huge, threatening, engulfing force. There is something sublime here that has transgressed a threshold or limit. Taylor aptly says that these works "enact a return of the refused." As he also observes, they violate the modernist principle of autonomy with a vengeance, and I would like to focus on the way in which they stage the agon between the material image, on the one hand, and the linguistic and symbolic, on the other. The material (I continue to follow Taylor) has the look of having been burnt, ripped, and tortured, so that it pushes to an extreme the degradation of classical beauty that Hegel

found crucial in the transition to Christian art. But unlike that art— at least in Hegel's understanding of it— it offers no reconciliation or consolation. That reconciliation is refused, in part, by the way in which the tortured and frightening figure subverts the discursive aspect of a work: a canvas titled and inscribed with the names of *Germany's Spiritual Heroes* shows the interior of a long, empty wooden structure; the walls are dangerously lit by torches and there is a distant, ominous door at the very end of the space. The rough wooden architecture could suggest a communal hall as imagined in German legend, or a concentration camp barracks cleared of its prisoners, and the rugged cross-beams could evoke the image of the gallows. Taylor suggests that the inscription of the names of Kant, Fichte, Hegel, and others in this and similar paintings is a demonstration that theoaesthetics leads to idolatry and terror; but of course these are not the only names included, and the malignancy of the image overtakes more than a particular theory of art. Kiefer's works are dreamlike, recalling Lyotard's claim that the dreamwork does not think but figuratively warps the reassuring world of discourse; more specifically, they are nightmares in which terrible, enigmatic and inescapable forces play havoc with the symbolic world of the daytime. The last sentence of "Desertion" reads: "The end of art: Desert . . . Desertion . . . The errant immensity of an eternity gone astray is the desert in which we are destined to err endlessly" (307). What is "the end of art," either in the sense of a culmination or a purpose? Hegel imagined that it would be a perpetual untying of what had been intensely knotted together, a dissolution into strands of realism and spiralling forms of ironic play that rung the changes on the various modes in which the artist could be present or absent in the work. For Taylor, the end of art is a place, the desert, but a place that is no place in particular

because it is that to which we have been displaced and in which we are lost. But I wonder if this way of thematizing the end and the place (a conjunction that Heidegger also pointed to in his essay on “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking”) doesn’t contain a nostalgia for the fuller, completer end, the promised land that was supposed to

be there at the conclusion of our wandering through the desert. So we are left with questions: Is there room for an affirmative figuration/disfiguration that is no longer haunted by transcendence? A Nietzschean rather than a Kierkegaardian art? Is the desert really in stark opposition to the marketplace of the artworld?

ENDNOTES

1. Mark Taylor, *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion* (The University of Chicago Press, 1992).
2. Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 189.
3. Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), p. 143.

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