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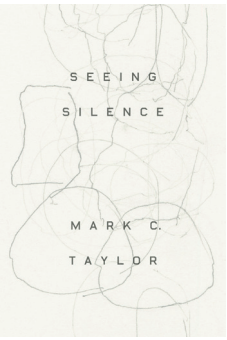
SEEING SILENCE

by Mark C. Taylor
(A Book Review)



Silence, yes, but what silence! For it is all very fine to keep silence, but one has also to consider the kind of silence one keeps.

–Samuel Beckett, "The Unnamable"

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As with many meditations on the powers of silence, Mark C. Taylor's *Seeing Silence* begins with photographs. Clearing his parents' house in the months after his father's death, Taylor discovers "in a dark corner under the rafters […] unmarked boxes stuffed with pictures" (2020: 4). The first few boxes are easily identifiable, "family snapshots" of recognizable faces, but then come "dozens of nameless faces taken by nameless photographers" (2020: 5). Taylor is troubled by their mute testament to relations that were once alive, articulated, and above all incomplete, awaiting a response. The photographs bring his attention to "what [he] heard in what [he] couldn't hear" (2020: 10): not only the subject and the photographer (both, importantly, nameless, unknowable, silent), but also answers to questions he can no longer ask of the past. *Seeing Silence* begins with a return to these questions. Specifically, it is the task of listening to images which Taylor takes up: "it was what I heard in what I couldn't hear that arrested my attention" (2020: 10). The photographs he finds present a breach in language because they seem to stand

in for something unsaid or unsayable, something like memory and its failings but with the uncanny sharpness of presence added to the mix. It is as if the photographs *do* 'speak,' and the questions in Taylor's opening chapter would attest to this, but this speaking is lost on us. Should this loss mark a limit of sorts, within which there is only silent contemplation? Is it, more acutely, a confrontation with the dead, a meeting, as Barthes put it, with those who were "then *already* dead (yesterday)" (1981: 96)?

These questions extend themselves across Taylor's twelve chapters, each organized around an attitude or approach to silence in art: "Without," "Before," "From," "Beyond," "Against," "Within," "Between," "Toward," "Around," "With," "In." There are also three 'chapters' marked only with ellipsis, providing knowingly blank intervals in a text that remains rigorous in its inquiry and open in its style, and which provides not answers but an eclectic series of frames for thinking through silence as it relates to space and the visual field. The photographic image is a departure point (fittingly, given Taylor's own interest in photography from childhood), whilst the rest of the book occupies itself with a series of writers, architects, and artists, for the most part twentieth-century American, each one notable for his (and they are all men) engagement with silence. In structuring his inquiry around a series of encounters with art works, Taylor's argumentation is both philosophically dense and at times close to memoir, ending with(in) his own sculptures on Stone Hill, in the Berkshires, which he began in August 2006. The book so moves, in an overtly redemptive arc, from the disquieting stillness of the photograph to the "[f]leeting grace-full presence" (2020: 259) of the rock garden.

As well as this autobiographical journey, which Taylor conceives as "[r]eversing while at the same time repeating the *Via Dolorosa*" (2020: 26), *Seeing Silence* testifies to its author's long and varied dialogue with major currents in twentieth-century and contemporary philosophy, critical theory, and theology. There are reflections on the status of silence as it relates to linguistics, literature, visuality, architecture, phenomenology, epistemology, mysticism, divinity, frequently prompted by Taylor's readings of artists. Chapter one—"Without"—begins with John Cage's *4'33"*, placing it within the context of twentieth-century avant-garde artistic practices

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which responded to the proliferation of noise in urban spaces. Here Taylor gestures towards what is otherwise the book's most significant omission: a convincing account, or an extended consideration of, the historical conditions which might give rise to a preoccupation with the possibilities (and the impossibility) of silence. How is it that post-war art converged around ideas of abstraction, negation and absence, and lined these up against expression, affirmation and representation? Susan Sontag, writing in 1967, situated these trends within a prolonged decline of spirituality's traditional outlets (religion, myth, mysticism) and the rise of a post-psychological conception of consciousness. The emergence of art as an alternative spiritual site, a "form of mystification," in turn gave rise to the myth of anti-art, the assailing of that spiritual site by the heroic artist, and the pursuit of silence became one prominent mode of driving towards the "abolition of art itself" (Sontag 1969: 7). Taylor quotes Sontag's "The Aesthetics of Silence" in his introductory "Chapter Zero," citing her distinction between "loud" and "soft" silence (2020: 18), and yet Sontag's own attempt to historicize her dialectical claim is not fully taken up.

In place of an account of how it was that artists like Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt, and Barnett Newman came to be prized by post-war critics for their distinctive resistance to representation and moves towards the unrepresentable ("silence is so accurate," goes the gnomic Rothko phrase), Taylor leans in to the spiritual textures of their lives (Newman's commitment to "penetration into the world-mystery" [2020: 71], for example, or Reinhardt's interest in medieval mystics [2020: 105]). Each chapter thereby structures itself as a miniature of the book itself, tracing the development of an artistic sensibility through a series of aesthetic and philosophical encounters. Beneath the central thesis (that urbanized modernity has generated a need for silence), there emerges a more elaborate claim: that the mid-twentieth- century artist was acutely, entirely, and perhaps heroically sensitive to this need, and that abstract expressionism and its various aftermaths were a means of responding to it. The relationship between artistic making and writing is fundamental here: the artist (or the philosopher) resolves to make something which cannot be expressed in writing, or writes something which cannot find expression in their art.

The gap between the two, and the capacity of any given artwork to heroically render an idea through its making, and to thereby subtract this idea from language and reformulate it in a *silent* form (be it a painting, a sculpture, or a building), is what interests Taylor. In part, this represents a recapitulation of familiar readings of American art in post-war New York. It is an echo of the idea that these artists were vacating the "active self" in pursuit of "cosmic identifications" with a "tragic dimension," as Irving Sandler wrote of Rothko in *The Triumph of American Painting* (1970: 183). That this 'triumph' was received and promoted as distinctly *American* is a subject for the most part eschewed by Taylor, who pulls together a more transnational and transhistorical narrative which can absorb influences from Zen Buddhism to the thirteenth-century Flemish mystic John of Ruysbroeck.

Seeing Silence is nonetheless an account of artists who lived and worked much of their lives in America, and it is clear that Taylor's interest in the kinds of silence they produced is to be weighed against the 'noise' (which Taylor glosses for its etymological connection to nausea [2020: 28]) of contemporary culture in the United States: "[o]ne of the most pressing problems is that in today's high-speed, noisy word, people have forgotten how to listen" (2020: 261). In one of the book's later chapters, Taylor cites a beautiful passage from Jean Baudrillard's *America*, which documented the theorist's road-trip across the country:

> The silence of the desert is a visual thing too. A product of the gaze that stares out and finds nothing to reflect it. There can be no silence up in the mountains, since their very contours roar. And for there to be silence, time itself has to attain a sort of horizontality; there has to be no echo of time in the future, but simply a sliding of geological strata one upon the other giving nothing more than a fossil murmur. (1988: 6)

Baudrillard, Taylor writes, discovered in the desert "an ecstasy that was no longer human" (2020: 192). It was, however, an 'ecstasy' which Baudrillard then reversed in the book's exhaustive critique of what he described as "American primitivism": the endless seeking after a "sublime natural phenomenon," such as Death Valley, finds its mirror in "the abject cultural phenomenon" of Las Vegas (1988: 65). The search for origin, Baudrillard maintained, was made possible by the "secrecy and silence" on which the United States

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had constructed itself: "[this] obsession with finding a niche, a contact, precisely at the point where everything unfolds in an astral indifference" (1988: 8). The desert, in others word, is not 'more real' than the culture that intrudes on it, nor does it have something interpretable, useful, meaningful to give. Rather, the culture that intrudes on the desert finds itself without fixity or form, and tipped likewise towards an indifferent, meaningless expansion. The noise of modernity comes out of the desert because it is, in some way, provoked by this antinomy. Silence, in this context, is far from the contemplative and ultimately positive sense of presence that Taylor arrives at towards his conclusion. Silence here is instead precisely that which upends the very possibilities of self, thought, and their communicability.

In response to Baudrillard, Taylor "decided [he] had to return to the desert" and he headed towards Marfa, Texas, an hour's drive north of the Mexican border (2020: 192). Here he considers the legacy of Donald Judd, artist and collector who left New York in the mid-seventies to work on permanent installations in the desert town. Taylor's biographical sketch of Judd is instructive for the questions it raises about the aestheticization of this desert silence. Judd came to work in Marfa because, as quoted by Taylor, "the continuous noise in some cities, especially New York, is thoughtless" (2020: 195) and the desert provided a place in which his spare and precise minimalist constructions could be set against the vast emptiness surrounding them. As Taylor notes, a remarkable number of artists loosely associated with minimalism and environmental art—Judd, as well as Walter De Maria, Michael Heizer, and Robert Irwin—were drawn to the West:

> The desert rather than the city was the preferred setting for their work. As post-World War II consumer culture heated up, these artists cooled on the city and, like monks fleeing the corrupt world, headed to the desert. (2020: 193)

But what remains striking is that these installations were conceived of both as responses to and bold intrusions upon the blank canvas of the desert. In the case of Judd, his two major works at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa are designed "[t]o make this space for others to see" (Taylor 2020: 199). The surrounding

desert is a suitable backdrop, but what's really evoked is a question of space as it is generated by and within the parameters of the installations themselves. Walter De Maria's *The Lightning Field* (1977) included four hundred steel poles installed in western New Mexico. Michael Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969) involved shifting over 200,000 tons of sandstone to clear a 1500-foot-long trench in the Nevada desert. For Taylor, these works heighten our awareness of the "astral indifference" that Baudrillard described. But it is also possible that they present an interruption of just that indifference, an attempt to allay it and speak over the silence that these artists were first drawn to. Do these works not enact a spilling over of the city's dreaded noise to the desert? Can they encourage their spectators to 'see' silence, as Taylor believes they can? Or is the desert, in his own telling phrase, nothing more than their "preferred setting"?

Seeing Silence tends to smooth over such difficulties because of its interest in an aesthetic reformulation of theology's *via negativa*: a conscious process by which works and writings that negate and subtract, end up reinstating, rather than diminishing, our sense of presence and openness to the world. The desert artworks exemplify this because they help us see the reality of the space around them, rather than masking it or obliterating it. Yet it is also true that many of the works discussed by Taylor might just as well be experienced as declarative, loud, *noisy*. A broader frame of reference may have changed this impression. Even remaining in the US during the same time period, the illuminated canvases of Mary Corse, for example, would have shed some light on the monumental and overpowering tendencies of James Turrell's works. Or the grid paintings of Agnes Martin, which whilst everywhere concerned with "experience that is wordless and silent" (Matin 1992: 89), seem nothing like as intrusive or bombastic as, say, Heizer's *Double Negative*. This, naturally, is in part a question of taste, and Taylor presents a very personal walk through the artists and thinkers who have accompanied him for years. The threads drawn together across the work give the impression of marginal notes brought to the center: silence as a motif that lines the edge of many major theoretical frameworks that Taylor knows intimately and which he can expertly draw our attention to. The questions remain: what

silence is kept, who keeps it, and for what purpose? *Seeing Silence* is mostly monochrome and happily repetitive in answering this: silence relates to presence; the artist accesses it through work; the purpose is contemplation (or the artwork *is itself* a contemplative space). The move of Taylor's narrative from photography to land art in part reflects this, with the latter ultimately preferred for its presumed depersonalization of spectatorship, an escape from the noisy questions which the photograph's unnerving silence can too readily arouse.

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