

The Scene of The Image

The work of Marcel Dinahet is closely connected to the seashore. Since the early 1980s he has been exploring terrestrial and submarine landscapes with a video camera. The pieces he first put together from filmed sequences still cultivated his past as a sculptor, with which he did not break completely when he "changed over to images", because he now submerged his sculptures in the sea. Abandoning them to the effects of the elements, losing them and then retrieving them during his dives, he finally relinquished them altogether and devoted himself to an investigation of the Brittany coast. His research soon extended across the entire Atlantic sea front and the Mediterranean coast.

From his carefully planned travels he brought surprising images which, at first glance, elude any documentary or narrative logic. Recorded by a camera often abandoned to the elements, to the movements of the sea or to those of a body walking or driving around, they have a physical impact on the viewer. Seeming to embody the "vision without a gaze" evoked by Virilio⁽¹⁾, they render the experience of places moved through and felt rather than seen. Depending on his projects, depending on their relation to place (a beach or shipyard), to a journey (Saint-Malo/Portsmouth) or to an itinerary (harbours, land's ends or Finistères), the images he collects are then edited into sequences of moving images or series of freeze-frames destined in the end to be presented as an exhibition or installation.

In Quimper, Dinahet has set up a sequence in which the pieces are articulated and connected in relation to the architecture of Le Quartier, with four rooms in a row.

The exhibition "opens" with a wall. Visitors must move around this to find the entrance to an airlock or giant container built on site to hold *Le Ferry*, a video shot on board the Saint-Malo to Portsmouth ferry, and projected at the end of the tunnel. The camera accompanies the cars as they enter and exit, the two processes being difficult to distinguish in this looped film. They drive around amidst the din of sheet metal strangely orchestrated by the regular rhythms of the ferry's engines. The unstable and at times random camera finally reveals the presence of the cameraman who is moving around on foot in this risky zone which is out of bounds to pedestrians.

We leave *Le Ferry* for *Le Royal*. This luxury hotel in Dinard, filmed by a camera floating somewhere out to sea, is like a liner threatened by a powerful sea swell. The video has also been broken down into a series of still photographs, wrapped in a perfectly waterproof plastic film whose brilliance emphasises the liquid matter in the image.

Facing *Le Royal*, two monitors show looped sequences shot at Mont-Saint-Michel during the high tide. Scanned by the camera revolving around itself at body height, the horizon of the *Paysage frotté* curves and forms a perfect circle, far from the earth and far from the sea, and yet broken by a camera movement that is reversed and whose precarious balance ends up affecting the viewer's. This same horizon seems to be inexorably receding in *Sur la baie*, in spite of the advancing work, not visible in the image, whose resolute steps ring out on the wet ground.

Further on, to the rear, a small monitor plays a video made in Cyprus (*À Chypre*). As if imprisoned in a miniature aquarium, a factory rises out of nowhere in the middle of the sea and is soon swallowed up by the waves, endlessly reappearing and disappearing in the edited loop. Like others, this video manifests Dinahet's interest in that zone close to zero on sea maps where the land(sea)scape is often self-filming. Leaving these Cypriot mirages, we come to the mirrors of *La Plage*. This installation occupies an entire room. Two large basins full of water duplicate the still images projected onto the walls. These slides come from a sequence shot in Dinard. Placed on the ground, the camera captures the feet of bathers whose reflections are inverted on the wet sand. Maintaining the contusion between right side up and upside down, the image and its double, Dinahet seems to be representing Cocteau's word of advice to mirrors, that

they "would do well to reflect before sending us back images."

The exhibition closes with a large-format projection of *Les Finistères*, a video completed in 2000, the first parts of which were shown at Le Quartier in 1998. Undertaken in 1997, the project consists of a progression built up through a video installation linking eight of these "land's ends" located on Europe's Atlantic coastline, from northern Scotland to southern Portugal. These extremities, capes and tips, remote as they are from Europe's great economic and political centres, are places with strong geographical and cultural identities whose specificity Dinahet has attempted to grasp. His itineraries follow the coast, on the border between terrestrial and submarine spaces, as he films both their proximity to one another and their radical difference. The editing goes from the solid to the liquid without transition, plunging us suddenly into the water; a silence filled with breathing, taking away our bearings in a world where vertical and horizontal are meaningless until, suddenly, we are back on land, at the foot of a lighthouse, at the top of a cliff. The editing of the movement from one Finistère to another obeys the same logic. The interlocking of the eight sequences sketches out a highly precise geographical map, while seriously testing our ability to identify the different sites.

At the end of the exhibition, Dinahet puts us in the image in the same way as he took us on board the ferry at the beginning. In fact, we have to go all the way back through the show to get out. Paradoxically, in spite of all the unexpected angles and strange camera movements, these works produce an almost live reality effect. If our first impression refused to acknowledge any documentary or narrative function in Dinahet's work, we now have to acknowledge that these two aspects are implicitly present, albeit in a reworked form, in all his installations.

In his bodily struggle with the very matter of the image, we can imagine Dinahet remaining a sculptor, an heir of Land Art, a walker who crosses real spaces in order to build other spaces elsewhere which recapture the earlier ones. But we could also see him as an action painter. In one of his statements,⁽²⁾ Jackson Pollock distinguished two phases in his pictorial work: the dripping phase, when he was *in* the painting, moving around the canvas in which he inscribed the choreography of his movements, and that of the gaze, a reflective phase that followed on from the action, when he became aware of what had been done so that he could go back to the painting. With its immersion in the scene, not looking into the lens when shooting, followed by examination of the rushes during the editing phase, Dinahet's method can be seen to echo Pollock's. Looking further back in the history of painting, we could even detect a few Impressionist ideas – the attempt to penetrate the depths of the scene, to record a perceptual experience, to set down a fleeting sensation on canvas, a passing moment.

Video is no doubt well suited to such backward glances. Closer to the present, Dinahet's work manifests a number of affinities with that of Bill Viola, and in particular with the videos of the 1970s and '80s in which Viola represents limit experiences, extreme situations, by constructing spaces that we have the impression we are seeing from within. For him, "video has its source in the live experience (...) it is close to the sound of film or photography" and the shooting of the image coincides with a reality that is already there.⁽³⁾ Indeed, the striking thing about Dinahet's videos is this impression of live footage rebelling against the televisual context that always locks it into a narrative, but capable in this case of passing on experience.

The awareness of being part of a filmed world enables him it to produce unclassifiable images that are comparable – to venture an unnatural parallel – with those

of Nan Goldin's first slide shows, whose strange documentary quality is due primarily to the fact that they are part of this milieu – which, this time, is human and marginal – that she photographs. As for Marcel Dinahet, by giving his body to the image that he theatricalises, he manages to construct a "new site for the gaze."⁽⁴⁾

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notes

(1) In his preface to *Guerre et cinéma I*, Paul Virilio speaks of an orbital vision which is not human but belongs to a «vision machine on board an intelligent satellite. » (Paris : Editions Cahiers du cinéma, 1991)

(2) See the statement reproduced in the catalogue to the 1982 exhibition at the Pompidou Centre.

(3) Bill Viola, *L'espace à pleines dents*, interview with Raymond Bellour, *Cahiers du cinéma*, 1986.

(4) This formula borrowed from René Payant describes the functioning of the video principle. Quoted by Christine van Assche on page 322 of *L'époque, la mode, la morale, la passion* (Paris : Centre Georges Pompidou, 1987).