The Image and How to Show It
Dominique Abensour on the work of Marcel Dinahet

January 1896 and the Lumière brothers' passenger train pulls into the Indian Room
of the Grand Café on Boulevard des Capucins in Paris.[1] More than one contemporary
account bears witness to the effect of this six-minute work on the audience of
thirty or so; for despite its silent, eighteen-frames-a-second black and whiteness,
this was perceived as a violent intrusion of the real world. Since then the
conventions governing our credulity have changed radically and the potent realism
of the cinema has become an everyday affair. So, we may wonder, what does today's
viewer find awe-inspiring about Marcel Dinahet's videos?

Taken directly from the actuality of the artist's aquatic and terrestrial
landscapes, these images share the documentary aspect that marked the birth of the
cinema. Stripped of all fiction, narrative and special effects, they emanate true
visual power; yet far from being frightening, they fascinate and, more precisely,
absorb and disturb us to the point of being physically wearying. Reality as
recorded by Dinahet becomes palpable, inducing a kind of empathy with the movement
of the camera: his videos, whenever and wherever we find them, confront us with an
authentic experience. But what exactly does this reaction hinge on? Can it be said
that everything depends on the filming and editing, with the exhibition context
playing only a minor part? Most definitely not. The specific context of the
exhibiting of his work are an integral element of this artist's agenda and actually
set his images working on the viewer.

Mise en scène
Looking back, the screening of the artist's first-ever video was instructive in
more ways than one.

Invited to take part in an event covering the whole of France's Côtes- d'Armor
département in 1991,[2] he chose as his venue the ferry terminal at Saint- Quay-
Portrieux in the bay of Saint-Brieuc. There he built a sheet metal cabin to house a
monitor showing *Escale*, a video made not far away. Probing the multi-coloured
seabed, the camera here and there comes upon various extremely strange objects, set
in a hollow behind a screen of seaweed, colonised by shellfish and eaten away by
undersea vegetation. These are, in fact, sculptures by Dinahet which he himself had
submerged.

One might think that by setting up in a ferry terminal Dinahet had settled the
exhibition space issue, and indeed, this was true at the time. However the
apparatus, not unlike an automatic photo booth, also met other requirements. Cut
off from the outside world in a kind of closet resonating with the artist's
breathing — this is the soundtrack — the viewer finds himself looking directly at a
liquid image enclosed in a fishtank-monitor. Critic and curator Jean-Marc Huitorel
has described the experience as one of total immersion in an overwhelming acoustic
and visual space.[3] Inside, the cube-shaped monitor is reminiscent of the protective
housing for the camera the diver is holding at arm's length as he strives more to

home in on his sunken sculptures than actually film them: deep in the water, he can hardly make out his camera's display screen, and it is only later, during the editing process, that he will see what he has recorded, on a monitor like the one the viewer is watching.

Escales has overtly been subjected to an elaborate process of mise en scène, and since then has retained its exhibition cabin. In his juggling of the film and editing data, Dinahet has set out to create an experience whose protagonist is no longer the artist but the viewer.

Going nomad

In the history of Dinahet's exhibitions this initial venture turned out to be significant. During a residency in Sète three years later he went looking for an air transport container, and this time the exhibition context actually preceded the video: the dive was made close to the location chosen for the container. Aptly named *Plongeon de haut vol* (High-flying Dive), the work was screened on two monitors simultaneously, the duplication of the images heightening their effect. Originally designed to travel through the air, this container now looks on the inside like a diving capsule complete with control screens. For the visitor forced to bend a little as he enters, the reality of the undersea landscape traversed by the artist rises to the surface.

Starting with those very first videos Dinahet has sought to lay bare certain aspects of that landscape, these places so close to us and yet beyond our visual reach. The lure for him here is not so much the image's capacity to convey the reality of these unknown sites as the ease with which they can be transposed, recreated elsewhere, compared or, best of all, embedded in more accessible places, among people. In installations and videos alike the artist would continue to merge these disparate realms — land, water, air — at once so near and yet so far.

Cabins, caissons and containers were perfectly suited to this approach. The container — by definition moveable, emblematic of sea transport and available wherever his projects took him — provided the ideal underpinning for his relocation of landscapes and images that have been nomadic ever since the movies were invented. The artist has made extensive play with this nomadism, his diurnal and nocturnal images migrating to and colonising the most diverse settings. The lighthouses of *Les Finistères* illuminate a Paris boulevard, the frozen waters of Russian ports chill Brittany to the core, the springs at Maubuisson bubble up in distant Novossibirsk.

At Hendaye in 2006 he made a series of portraits of French and Spanish Basques, filming them in a swimming pool, then putting on itinerant screenings of the results inside the back of a truck. Shown in close-up just above the surface of the water, these stark faces travelled back and forth for days on both sides of the border. Offered to startled inhabitants of the Basque Country on squares or at roadside stops, this work triggered extensive debate.

By contrast, in urban settings, when a monitor is not the only possibility, large-format projection is the preordained procedure.

Projection

When the sculptor-diver opted for the image in the 1990s, projectors were still rare items in exhibition venues. Later Dinahet would take advantage of their increasing availability, but without abandoning the use of monitors and plasma screens: for him the exhibition format depended above all on the project.

In 1993, when the Art & Essai gallery at the University of Rennes gave him the first opportunity to project one of his videos, he opted for *Dinard*, shot the year before and only 1' 57" long. In a monochromatic undersea landscape devoid of flora and fauna, the camera seems to be homing in on a dark shape rising out of the depths. A curious object crystallises, neither vegetal nor animal, made of stones and knotted rope. But it is lost to view almost at once, and at each fresh sighting it withdraws into the undersea infinity. In fact Dinahet is circling one of his sculptures, motionless on the seabed. The object occupies the territory of the image, and gives it meaning, but the space constructed by the filming process is new and unsettling: deprived of all bearings and direction, we are plunged into a zone whose reality vectors have vanished.

The choice of *Dinard* for this first large-screen projection was by no means arbitrary: the work founded a new nexus that Dinahet would further test by abandoning his sculptures to their watery fate and focusing solely on landscape and his experience of it. Henceforth the camera would be one with the artist, accompanying him on his travels on foot, by car, by boat, and on or beneath water; it would also be entrusted to the movement of the waves in landscapes that filmed themselves.

"Where are we?" asks critic Pascale Risterrucci, contemplating the "bottomless" images of *Les Finistères*. "Nowhere in fact, because constantly on the boundary. Between the earth and water…Between air and water." Whatever the case, she continues, we are at a far remove from Cousteau or the heroics of exploration movies.[4] Voyaging is at the heart of many of this artist's projects, but as landscape the *terra incognita* he discovers or invents remains readily accessible.

The period 1995—98 saw him roving the capes and points of the Atlantic Arc, from northern Scotland to southern Portugal. Shot day and night in fair weather and foul, his sequences follow each without transition, as borders and local particularities disappear: there is no telling if we are Ireland, Scotland or Brittany. A map tracking the artist's journey often accompanies screenings of *Les Finistères*, but its presence only heightens the discrepancies between chart and terrain. Confronting in these images the "eyeless vision" Paul Virilio speaks of,[5] the viewer is projected into something fascinating: what he sees is at once foreign and familiar. The frontality and immobility of the projection context are mandatory, for on the inside everything is collapsing.

Freeze-frame

The loss of bearings is admitted to again in *Les Flottaisons* (Waterlines, 2000) whose jumpy images pay no heed to the vertical and the horizontal. Here a floating camera tossed into the waters of European ports from the Atlantic Ocean to the North Sea is the plaything of the waves as it films at water level. The editing consists in splicing the continuous shots from each port end to end, with the join happening in the trough of a wave that covers the lens. Once again, Rotterdam to Barcelona with no transition. This project gave rise to an installation at the Grand Café art centre in Saint Nazaire in 2006.[6] On his way to the turbulent waters of *Les Flottaisons*, the visitor was confronted with a giant freeze-frame from the video: a steamer — or part of one, rather — painted onto an entire wall in the grey of the nearby shipyard. Brought into the exhibition space, this vessel, still a long way from life-size, gave an idea of the dimensions of the reality being tackled. Facing it, a series of photos[7] printed from screenshots froze the images yet again, this time between sheets of rhodoid acetate film gleaming like the surface of the water. Audible in the same room were the radio signals emitted by the beacons of *Radiophares* (1999-2000), recorded before the latter were supplanted by GPS in 2000. Thus, while comparing still and moving images, the exhibition also set up a second dialogue between an inaudible and an invisible reality that had no need of freeze-frames or the movement of the waves.

Exhibition scenarios

While the scenario is absent from the actual making of the videos, it often plays a part in their spatial presentation: itineraries take shape and the exhibition generates a narrative of which, naturally, the visitor is the protagonist.

The exhibition at Le Quartier art centre in Quimper, Brittany, in 2001, brought together works from the period 1996—2001 by drawing on the geography of the artist's travels. Right at the entrance *Le Ferry*, a video screened in a purpose-built airlock, took the visitor on a choppy crossing from Portsmouth to Saint Malo, filmed with the camera attached to the handlebars of a bicycle. Stepping off the ferry, one went to Dinard for the photographs of *Le Royal*, lifted from a video: filmed from sea level, this grand hotel was metamorphosed into a ship at the mercy of the waves. One then continued on through a forest of monitors showing acts by the artist in the landscapes of Mont Saint Michel: rotations, walks, scrapings, the camera held by the walker at arm's length or thigh height. As punctuation, a tiny, solitary monitor in a linking area provided a delicate setting for a factory filmed from the sea in Cyprus. Leaving the factory behind, one made a second visit to Dinard with *La Plage* (The Beach), where two pools reflected still images projected onto the walls: children's feet and their reflections multiplied in the water. The "end of the exhibition" was reserved for a departure towards *Les Finistères*.[8]

At the other extreme from the neutral exhibition space at Le Quartier was the medieval architecture of La Cohue, the museum in Vannes. Dinahet showed there in 2006, in an annexe offering a vaulted, awe-inspiring roof-frame like the hull of an overturned boat. The monitors spread around the floor showed videos shot in the

gulf of Morbihan: silent images from a camera in search of immobility, targeting from the sea shifting points of focus on the islands of Er_Lannic, Berder and Arz. Our eye moves over them, observes them, while a sound we can't quite identify strikes the ear: we're puzzled — how to describe it? Rapid, rhythmic, squishing collisions that turn out to be coming from somewhere else: from another room, reached by picking your way through the field of monitors. There's a video being projected, its sound matching images whose meaning can't be grasped: legs marching towards us, but with inhuman feet thrusting into thick mud, booted feet that look like clogs.

Dinahet manages his effects skilfully, effects he discovers in the wake of the act of filming and then recreates in a mise en scène whose economy hinges on two practices common to both artist and viewer (and which may reverse their order): you move about to address this multiplicity of fixed viewpoints, filmed — and shown — at ground level, but you stop to confront the artist's body on the march.

Look and you shall see

A full-time participant in the images Marcel Dinahet exhibits, the viewer became the actual subject of an installation created for the museum in Corte, Corsica and acquired by the Corsica Region Contemporary Art Collection.

In the vast, bare space of the museum lobby a series of monitors was set strategically at the base of broad windows opening onto an impressive mountain view. On the screens were static shots of tourists filmed from behind and apparently admiring the view — when in fact they were looking at the actual sea that forms the backdrop in the videos. In the middle of the room a container housing a video projection served as a counterpoint. Armed with his habitually roving and relatively unstable camera, the artist had accompanied a group of tourists and recorded the comments of their guide. Like a film director, the guide focuses the tourists' collective gaze, which is clearly enthralled by the splendour of the landscape and nature's "ability" to come up with such chance images as the mountain in the shape of a heart: images not to be missed, images which set all heads turning as if at a football match and trigger countless cameras and digital video recorders.

In this installation fluctuating between the still and the moving, the museum, looking like a semaphore and overlooking two valleys at an altitude of 450 metres, is one of the actors. Inside the container, the eye's dutiful submission to standard commentary is contradicted by the artist's lack of visual discipline, while outside the gaze dictated by the orchestration of scenic spots is directly confronted with the reality of the landscape as presented by the architecture. Intrinsically involved, the exhibition space can thus be seen as one of the factors helping to shape the image.

Multi-projections

Whatever the exhibition venue, Dinahet's images always seek to inhabit it.

In a large-scale piece dating from 2006 he reworked the aquatic portrait genre, using dancers he called upon to abstain from all movement. The installation premiered the same year at the Ménagerie de Verre in Paris.

In a darkened, low-ceilinged room we are ringed by giant faces filmed at water level. Covering the walls, the images occupy the entire space, and our place in the middle of the room is that of the camera in the middle of the swimming pool. On the floor reflections of the projections imitate the shimmering of the water. We are looking at *Les Danseurs Immobiles* who, paying no attention to the ripples slapping at their faces, stare back ceaselessly. This unbrokenness is achieved by looping the continuous-shot portraits, with the actual exhibition mechanism taking care of the assemblage — or rather disassemblage — by filling the entire wall space with what amounts to a second loop. The loop factor comes into play yet again in a reverse mirror-effect in which the viewer is viewed — more benignly than in the Lumières' *The Sprinkler Sprinkled* — and the captive dancer is truly absent while the active beholder is well and truly present.

Dinahet would later experiment with multi-projections using other configurations, notably the 16:9 videos at La Criée in Rennes in 2009.[9] *Figures* (Faces), for example, is the fragmented portrait of a woman dancer submerged and holding her breath in a swimming pool. Perfectly calm and at peace, this body seems simply to be living in the aquatic environment. As if possessing the gift of ubiquity, it is present everywhere, floating on the wall of the exhibition room in films made at different times but all projected at once. The space then becomes a glass-bound diving pool seemingly set into walls hollowed out from within.

While a project like *Figures* seems tailor-made for multi-projection, the technique can also generate innovative associations of images. Such is the case of *Portraits d'Ouessant* (2008) and *Falaises* (2008), a joint installation in which portraits and cliffs are shown opposite each other in 16:9 video.[10] In a tribute to director Jean Epstein, Dinahet has filmed the descendants of the actors in the latter's *Finis Terrae*, a 1928 docudrama about the island of Ouessant and its people. This tribute speaks volumes about the artist's love of Ouessant and his affinities with the visual curiosity that was the essence of cinema in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Ground, sky

The wide range of exhibition procedures Marcel Dinahet is still testing out is echoed by the diversity of filming methods he continues to add to. Last winter he set a camera on the end of the boom of a crane, to record the Brittany Region Contemporary Art Collection's "Chantier" (Worksite) event in Rennes. And summer found him filming the sky from the seabed at Ouessant, for a video to be projected on the ceiling of a gallery during an exhibition in London this autumn.[11]

[1]. *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (A Train Pulling into La Ciotat Station), made by the Lumière brothers in 1895 and shown for the first time in January 1896.

[2]. Titled *"Escales" (Stopovers),* the event was organised by Jérôme Sans at the invitation of Danièle Yvergniaux.

[3]. See Jean-Marc Huitorel, "Marcel Dinahet Turns Twenty", p. 257 of this catalogue.

[4]. Pascale Risterucci, "La caméra, le cadre et le cadreur", in *Marcel Dinahet: périples*, Quimper, Le Quartier, 2001.

[5]. Virilio refers to satellite surveillance as "eyeless vision", free of all human input. See Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema*, London/New York, Verso Books, 2009, p. 3.

[6]. The exhibition was organised by Sophie Legrandjacques.

[7]. The Burgundy Region Contemporary Art Collection has acquired a series of seven photos from the video, and provides continuous satellite mapping of the exhibition's travels.

[8]. See Dominique Abensour, "La scène de l'image", in *Marcel Dinahet: périples*, Quimper, Le Quartier, 2001.

[9]. Three installations, *Fleuve*, *Figures* and *Falaises* (River, Faces and Cliffs), were shown at La Criée as part of the exhibition "Marcel Dinahet: 1=3", organised by Larys Frogier.

[10]. An exhibition planned for the Filles du Calvaire gallery in Paris in 2010.

[11]. At Marcel Dinahet's solo exhibition at DOMOBAAL in London.