Marcel Dinahet Turns Twenty
Diachronic and Synchronic Observations
Jean-Marc Huitorel on the work of Marcel Dinahet

It was in the early 1990s, with his fiftieth birthday looming, that Marcel Dinahet finally found recognition as a young artist. All the evidence needed is the list of other names from the group exhibitions he took part it. And without falling victim to the most banal form of autobiography, I must cite as a preamble a number of enlightening elements regarding the nature and history of an oeuvre whose disregard for chronology is equalled only by its concern with time.

Dinahet's work first began to find visibility when it vanished into the sea, far from the public gaze and the habitual exhibition contexts. It was by diving into the depths that he surfaced on the art scene. But before looking into this paradox and its consequences, it would be instructive to outline, albeit briefly, its prehistory and, even more so, its protohistory.

Prehistory
After graduating from the School of Art in Rennes around the mid-1960s, Dinahet embarked on a course divided between the need to keep body and soul together and the measured exploration of a pathway towards an oeuvre whose foundations he was still groping for. As an assistant to his former sculpture teachers, Francis Pellerin and Paul Griot, both much sought after at the time for civil and religious public commissions, he achieved hands-on mastery of all the relevant techniques except casting. From these twenty years, and despite numerous exhibitions,[1] he has kept almost nothing — not even documentation of the works produced. A black and white photo in a small, group-show catalogue from the early 1980s[2] shows a tall, black, vertical structure made of resin and bristling with tiny, precise, abstract-looking signs: spindly combinations of suppleness and solidity for which he initially had to mould a clay template. At the same period he was turning out pencil and Indian ink drawings on different-sized sheets of paper, some of them sketches for sculptures, others inspired by sculptures he had already made. A little earlier he had ventured into the figurative, a surviving example being an academic female nude in metal: this was his way of settling accounts with the last vestiges of Rodin-style modelling as taught at art school in those days.

Ultimately, all he retained from those years of apprenticeship was a rigorous devotion to drawing, which he held to until the crucial turning point of the late 1980s. I shall come back to that. At the end of this "prehistory" Marcel Dinahet's artistic range embraced a remarkable level of technical skill and a flagrant cultural shortfall: in the closing years of the 1960s the art school in Rennes, like most others outside Paris, was a victim of its isolation, and the teaching staff — erstwhile Rome Prize

winners whose creative fires were waning – were hardly likely to hitch their wagon to the famously exciting international context of the time. Dinahet's contemporary artistic culture would be picked up later, when he became a teacher himself and made outreach a cornerstone of his approach. And his work truly took shape at the confluence of a solitary process of exploration and a keen historical sense not limited solely to art.

Sculptures and drawings: protohistory

When he finally managed to find time for personal reflection and work, Dinahet realised how necessary it was to get out of the studio, to come to grips with natural materials and, more importantly, landscape. "And if I was going outdoors," he has said, "it had to be for what I was most drawn to: quarries and the seashore, my enduring landscapes."[3] So began, around 1980, a time of experimentation that no doubt constitutes the protohistory of the oeuvre we know today. From the quarries near Rennes he brought home clay and water; sculptures resulted, but he soon turned to sand and cement – and shells, because there was also the pull of the sea, of the beaches where he picked up junk and debris for sculptures whose shape and materials would echo their context of origin. It was thanks to this renewed contact with the landscape of his childhood that he began to feel in tune with his own work and things really clicked into place.

In 1984, not long after the tall resin poles mentioned above, he began using the same sandy clay from the quarries for small circular structures that he kneaded and set on top of each other. Anxious to ensure the stability of his material, he worked with specialists from INSA, the Institute of Applied Science, in Rennes. Before the year was out the first sculpture of this type was in place at the entrance to the Domaine du Dourven, at Trédrez-Locquémeau on the Brittany coast; and in 1985, after further experiments, he set up three more sculptures on the same site, this time closer to the water, between the customs house and the small coastguard building overlooking the sea. The works are domes topped by two superimposed conical structures; here and there the artist has slipped pieces of stainless steel wire into the dark mass of stabilised clay, an idea suggested by those little coils of limestone left by serpulas, tiny tubeworms Dinahet had discovered when diving. Like compact, hermetic shepherds' huts, these "uninhabitable dwellings" as he calls them, remain in dialogue with the site where they can still be seen today, conjuring up stories as they seemingly put down roots into some imaginary archaeological past. Gone is any suggestion of the autonomy one might have expected from them in an open space like this: instead they flaunt the presumption of their own disappearance, as does the necklace-like arrangement of shell pancakes later set up on the rocks at the very tip of the domain, destined to be gradually carried away by the sea. Here we have one of the key starting points of the oeuvre to come. Another is to be found in a statement by the artist from the same period: "The sculptures are always constructed around an axis. That's a constant in my work."[4] The third harbinger – a component, even – of the oeuvre lies in drawing.

Looking back to his years at art school, Dinahet speaks of drawing and modelling in the same breath, as if the latter were a mere variant of the former, a kind of drawing in space, a tool for capturing light, line, edge. Drawing was an intensive activity, often interrupted but never really abandoned; and he would return to it daily in 1988, using a ballpoint and compulsively filling one sketchbook after another. The results were signs sometimes suggestive of things seen on the seashore — ropes, shells — but never drawn from life. Sometimes they served as sketches for the small sculptures described further on (except when they are transcriptions of small sculptures and thus a contradiction of the notion that he does not draw from life). Forming more or less dense lines on the page, they resemble writing; and in fact this *is* writing, if we are ready to consider writing as a code for formalising and communicating a personal relationship with the world. This daily exercise came to an end late in 1989, probably because he felt he had exhausted its possibilities: but my theory is that video, to which the artist would turn some years later, might very well be — although not exclusively — drawing continued by other means.

In parallel to the drawings, Dinahet produced a series of modestly-sized circular and/or conical sculptures roughly thirty centimetres tall by twenty in diameter, made of stabilised grey-black sand — findable, he says, only during three months of the year — and shells mixed with cement. Some have a tubular axis running through them. In some cases they are assembled into groups, using steel cable most often ending in a loop: nautical manipulations and shapes, conspicuous human intervention — he sometimes adds in elasticised rubber — and visual intimations of elusive marine mineral matter. The use of these lines of steel in association with the black and white alternation of the materials prolongs the underlying memory of the drawing, testifies to its ongoing practice. These small pieces suggest spinning tops, buoys, enormous shells and fragments of rock, recollections of stuff recently gleaned on beaches, but without ever lapsing into the figurative or the purely mimetic. Modelling for him was not only the work of an artist or some residue of ancient practices: it was also an homage to work in general, to those simple actions that affirm man's relationship with his environment. Some of these sculptures were on display in 1990 on the floor of the L'Imagerie gallery in Lannion, while most of his output from previous years was on show all summer of that year at the Domaine du Dourven. Coordinated by Danièle Yvergniaux, these two events brought to a close what I call the protohistory of the oeuvre.

Submerged sculptures

Since 1986 Dinahet had been submerging some of his sculptures, but no one was privy to this practice. He made regular dives off the coast at Plouha, at the foot of the Gwin Zegal cliffs, at Cape Fréhel and a host of other points along the north Brittany coast he knew so well. Only a handful of diver friends were in on the secret as he submerged not only his sculptures, but his whole way of working: ten metres down he abandoned both the objects he himself had made and, more crucially, an entire sculptural tradition, a manner of making art with which he had broken definitively. Severance,

then – but also continuity if we think of these submerged sculptures as taking to its logical conclusion the process of fusion with the environment begun with the Domaine du Dourven experiments: once he had found his way back to the landscapes he loved – thanks to regular scuba diving, among other things – he set about, in a far-reaching gesture, ridding himself of sculpture as object, that very sculpture that had been the core of his practice. But this was a slow, gradual destruction, utterly unrelated to those veritable annihilations some painters have inflicted on their own oeuvres. Once on the sea floor, the sculptures remained there, merging little by little into their surroundings. Limestone and marine vegetation like mermaid's hair accreted on these strange, ruggedly polymorphous skulls. Dinahet visited them regularly, checking their locations and their surface changes and the texture of the water around them. Very soon – at the time of the exhibitions of summer 1990 – he began documenting these theatres of phenomena at once so far-removed, so close, and known to no one at all. He wanted to keep a trace of them before they disappeared completely, displaced from where he had originally put them, buried under sand and vegetation. This is how he came to take his first photographs of undersea sculptures, photographs which in a way are themselves sculptures: in terms of the work required for taking them, for finding a point of view and striving to hold to it; and in terms of the massiveness and solidity conferred by the rusted steel that now frames them.[5]

In the summer of 1991 Jérôme Sans organised *Escales* (Stopovers),[6] an event covering the whole of the Côtes d'Armor region. Dinahet's contribution, in the lobby of the ferry terminal at Saint-Quay-Portrieux, was a kind of galvanised sheet steel watertight container inside which his first undersea video was shown on a monitor. The camera circles the submerged sculptures in a movement whose instability is dictated by the effect of underwater gravity on the artist as he filmed. Listening to the almost intrauterine sound of his breathing, we realise at once that this is less a matter of an ordinary – if undersea – landscape than of a tension between a body and an object: a sculpture process, an act. Confronting us at once, tangible and unambiguous, is the performative dimension that henceforth constitutes the principal orientation of the work. At the same time the container is not just a handy presentation contrivance: it is an integral part of the work. As the artist sees it, the institutional system for showing the image – this act by the sculptor – must be matched by a specific installation, a kind of equivalence. And so the viewer is summoned to submerge himself, via this container with room for an audience of one, in an environment at once visual and auditory: to actually dive into the work. Those who have undergone the experience can testify that it has nothing to do with the bliss boxes in relaxation clubs, or James Turrell's all-pervading ambiences. Here the viewer is steeped not in water but in image and sound of rare power and presence: so much so that the ferry terminal staff had no qualms about lowering the volume or even shutting it off completely.

Filming underwater

The sculptures most often used for the seabed sitings consisted of groups of stabilised clay objects and shells set into a cement binder, with lengths of string holding the elements together. The impression is of something as much vegetal as animal, of an artefact that disturbs with its self-evidence and naturalness. The works have long since vanished into the depths at Plouha, Cape Fréhel and Dinard, but also in Lake Baggersee – all places where they were installed at different times in 1992.[7] At Dinard the sandy bottom and relatively clear water allow for a better idea of what takes place – but also for getting things wrong and thinking, for example, that the sculpture is being moved about by the current. For it is the camera, and the artist holding it, that circle the work, seeking the line of sight, the point of view that will best reveal the subject. Once again this is the unalloyed act of a sculptor and, unquestionably, of a draughtsman, of Dinahet carrying on his drawing exercises via the camera. Sometimes the artist's body is misaligned and the object whose outline he is striving for is lost to view. Then there remains only aqueous matter, a landscape in itself, almost a painting in which light, taking the place of the shapes, plays the leading part. Ultimately virtual, the axis in question is the space created by the artist's constant movements as he endeavours not to drift away. This struggle against the mass of water is a ceaseless effort to remain in touch with what is becoming, little by little, no longer a sculpture but an idea, a memory of sculpture. What counts is the hand to hand combat with the water and the undersea vegetation: here the sculpture process – body versus materials – is displaced into the body/image binomial. And the least physical displacement – a kick of a flipper, for example – triggers a change in the image and is instantly imprinted on the surface of the film. It is not the camera that moves, and not even the arm, but the body as a unit that also includes the camera. Thus it can happen that the length of the video is determined by the level of physical effort required: *Le Brusc* (1998), for instance, closes with the exhaustion of the body moving through the water. This is its substance and its goal. Nothing other than this act, for at this moment the body is submerging nothing other than itself. No bearings any more, just an axis founded on nothing except the resistance that obliges it, here, to film head downwards. These are extremely discreet, subtle qualities and call for a very precise mode of exhibition. And so Dinahet is especially attentive to the context in which his work is received, and to the role of the viewer as a body within this relationship.

Dematerialisation

The object in question, moreover, rapidly changes character. The sculpture produced by the artist, who has brought his skills to bear on a specific project, is going to disappear as artefact and be replaced by a mere pebble, bound with a string handle or sometimes a metal armature. A brief comment is needed here regarding this non-man-made (well, so to speak…) stone. On the cusp between the 1980s/1990s Dinahet discovered, not far from Cape Fréhel, a kind of quarry where someone had had the idea of putting pieces

of pink sandstone in the sea, close to the shore, so that the to-and-fro movement would polish them into the shape of sea pebbles. The operation required two to three years and the results were then sold for decorative purposes. The artist took samples of this object for which the sea had acted as sculptor and used them for a time for this intermediate stage on the road to his dematerialisation of sculpture. The process was completed in 1996–97, just after his first stay at Cabo Espichel on the coast of Portugal. But by then the pebble, despite its odd tidal genesis, was already more a point of reference, like a lighthouse on the seabed, than an actual object to be filmed. The artist's concern was now the content of the water, the matter in it, its vegetal and mineral makeup: a context, a landscape.

Watery matters and video textures

1993 was a key year for Dinahet's artistic evolution and his reputation. In addition to his first group show at the Sous-Sol gallery in Paris, it also brought, after Germany and Lake Baggersee, fresh travels beyond the Brittany coast. The video *De Sète à Cerbère* found its inspiration on the Languedoc coast, while *Plongeon de haut vol* was filmed off the beach at Lattes.[8] In the latter we feel the violent contrast between the soundlessness of the sea bottom and the aggressiveness of the waves on the surface. The work was shown in 1994 in an air transport container, the kind of specific setting so important to the artist: one that places the viewer in a context not similar to but symmetrical with that of the person filming. The pebble the artist was using as a landmark was scarcely visible – he was making a different point now, as already mentioned – and he next took it to the island of Vassivière,[9] thus tackling a lake setting for the second time. Created in 1949, Lake Vassivière is among France's largest artificial bodies of water: beneath its 1000 hectare-surface lie numerous villages and hamlets, with a handful of islands peeping above the surface, and on one of them is an art centre designed by Aldo Rossi. But anyone who thought that Dinahet the dedicated diver had come to play the archaeologist and exhume part of all this buried memory was very wide of the mark. What interested him above all was the light problem: the dead leaves strewed over the lake bottom absorb the daylight and very quickly, at a depth of seven or eight metres, all is blackness. And so the pebble had to be placed not far from the shore so that, ahead of the underwater gloom, it would be possible to capture the light which, together with the singular content of the water, gives the lake its texture. Becoming more and more interested in the specific character of these aqueous matters, the artist was intent on grasping the make-up of this landscape invisible to ordinary eyes. In the art centre's nave he presented a few small photographs set at the centre of huge areas of aluminium, together with videos shown in caissons, as at Saint-Quay-Portrieux. The distinctive texture of the image was achieved by a process known as gridding, which the artist first used at Vassivière. The image the viewer sees is not the one obtained by the camera, which is too low-resolution for screening purposes, but the result of a second filming from a monitor, which accentuates the distancing effect and so forestalls any propensity to documentary.

Initial interfaces

A few months later, in 1994, he set out to explore the flat, shallow waters of the Dombes region,[10] north of Lyon. So shallow, in fact, that they were all but impossible to dive in. So the artist either cruised about on the surface with a snorkel or dragged the camera through the water in its waterproof case. The pebble he had left there showed up from time to time, as if surprised by the camera. Dinahet also filmed the surrounding landscape. This was the first time his work embraced the entire context in its visual (horizon, marsh surface, vegetation) and auditory (croaking frogs) dimensions. It was, too, the first example of his work on the earth/water and water/air interfaces, a new direction that would loom larger in the projects that followed. Interface was yet another sculptural problem; but it was a drawing problem too, a business of contours and boundaries, of the confrontation of an object with its surroundings. It was also in the Dombes that, for the first time, he used his car for tracking shots, driving along the paths bordering the ponds and filming landscapes of grass and water hanging motionless in the dying light of dusk. Shortly afterwards, one of his videos was shown at a local agricultural college, inside a grain silo lying on its side.

This consideration of context, with its broader landscape of alternating underwater views and the great outdoors, would be reinforced during a residency in Sicily in 1995, when he was invited by the French Cultural Centre in Palermo to La Fiumara d'Arte and art patron Antonio Presti's "Hotel Atelier sul Mare" at Castel di Tusa. One of the videos he brought back includes the sound of a choir recorded through the open window of a retirement home, together with images of beach-cleaning machines at work, enormous backhoes rendered even more threatening by low-angle shots. And again there is the alternation of underwater silence with, despite the calmness of the sea, waves made violent by the close, hand to hand combat that is the Dinahet trademark. From a Sicily drenched in sunlight and saturated with the blue of its waters, he returned with rough, twilit images — light-wary, light-resisting images — that he damped down even further with the gridding process mentioned above.

The same year[11] found him at Cabo Espichel on the Portuguese coast. Through the windscreen of his car he filmed his arrival at the former abbey there, circling the courtyard with the camera on the dashboard, then parking a little way off, where people come to look at the sea from the clifftop. From a radio in a car with the windows down we hear the commentary on a football match! Known images of the known world: no sea, no diving — they'll come in their own good time — but instead a recording of the approach, a consideration of the insignificant to be found so close to hand, of the obverse or the incidentals of famous places. This was definitely the last time he took his pebble with him, bound around for the occasion with a metal cross and filmed both underwater and on the surface. From the video he also lifted two small photographs, one of the pebble, the other of a rock rising out of an unruffled sea, on which he has overprinted its longitude and latitude. Heavily gridded, blue-inflected images.

In 1997, for his second solo exhibition at Yvon Nouzille's Sous-Sol gallery, Dinahet presented a multi-monitor video installation titled *Signaux* (Signals), which filled the entire gallery space. One of the films, *La Rance*, was shown inside a small container bought from a farm supply store and positioned near the office: images taken near Hyères, on the Mediterranean coast, but also in Brittany where we see him advancing among the seaweed at La Rance, with the Fréhel lighthouse not far away in the background. In non-chronological succession the film offers pétanque matches, the beds of seagrass typical of unpolluted waters, foghorns, bulldozers cleaning the beach at Hyères, etc. It was during these two years that the camera rotations and inclusion of context first appeared as harbingers of what was now to come: an ambitious, recently conceived project whose execution required only the necessary time – which the artist managed to find. The first results were shown at Newlyn, in Cornwall, in 1998, under the title *Les Finistères*, literally "Ends of the World".

Les Finistères

The work of art as something definitively signed, sealed and delivered is not one of Dinahet's primary concerns. Often he returns and begins editing again from scratch, rearranging sequences into fresh configurations, exhuming shots long left unused. His titles fluctuate too, and in more than one case are no more than matters of convenience. Some large works, however, go counter to this inclination and stand out as stable landmarks over these last twenty years. Historically speaking *Les Finistères* is the first of them, a montage of sixty sequences each forty to forty-five seconds long and separated from the others by a brief cut to black. The idea came to him in 1998 when he was looking at a map published by the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions of Europe: on the map a banana-shaped zone running from Turin via the Ruhr to London (but bypassing Paris) outlines the Continent's highest concentration of economic and cultural activity. Dinahet decided to challenge this clear-cut pronouncement with one of his own: as someone working above all on the coastline, he systematically functioned a long way from this strip crystallising the centres where art was being most made and most seen. Being as far as possible from "everything" was the alternative that triggered his Atlantic Arc project, which consisted in visiting the Old World's westernmost points (the most remote ones, some would call them), starting in Scotland and then on to Ireland, Cornwall, Finistère in Brittany, Cabo Finisterre in Spain, and finally, the furthest west of all, Cabo da Roca in Portugal. Forty minutes long, the work was shown by Dominique Abensour at Le Quartier, the art centre in Quimper, in 2001, two years after the first trips and the first images. In between, versions were included in various exhibitions, in Newlyn as already mentioned and in Edinburgh.
In this highly ambitious and perfectly achieved piece all the timid experimentation so furtively present in its predecessors is mastered, consolidated and enhanced. And everything in this all-embracing act heralds the works to come. With no lapsing into the overly systematic, the undersea sequences are intercalated among shots – night and day, static and tracking – of the coastal landscape. Yet amid the enormous variety of images constant factors can be observed: landscapes seen through the windscreen,

notably a rocky promontory whose perfect Maxime Mauffra Impressionism is caught through the raindrops on the glass before being swept away by the windscreen wipers. Or lighthouses filmed from a distance at night or in low-angle shots: this red one, for example, with maintenance workers busy on its railing. And an atmosphere that can suddenly turn fantastic, as when a beam of light (from a lighthouse?) collides with the shaft of the cross on the edge of a path, or a white glove gleams and flickers deep under water. Gone are the submerged sculptures; and yet, as the camera circles a wave-tossed beer can, we feel in this reminder of those works that something has changed, that this new situation is more unstable, more engaged with external reality. And the rustling of the world on a soundtrack that comes and goes: sounds of the sea, yes, but also voices on a car radio and the purring of an engine. The editing is complex, defying both chronology and geography, constructing its narrative independently of all linearity, all bearings, all names. The visible, here, is as much a matter of shared self-evidence as of buried proximity; and what the screening recreates is the overall landscape shaped by this fine-tuned mix – something at a far remove from the entire Western history of monocular perspective.

Les Flottaisons

One of the *Les Finistères* sequences shows the surface of the water filmed by a camera we register as situated on the boundary between sea and air, the current bringing the wavelets up to break on the glass of the protective housing. Here Dinahet is still actually holding his camera, but soon he would be letting it float free on the surface: at Saint Nazaire in 2000, at the invitation of Sophie Legrandjacques, director of the Grand Café art centre. The outcome was his second major piece, *Les Flottaisons* (Waterlines). The significant innovation here is the separating of the camera from the body. Only rarely had Dinahet replicated vision with the lens: as has already been pointed out, it was his entire body that was coupled with the camera-eye – during his dives, but also later, for instance when walking or running along the river Loire, in *Estuaires*,[12] or when setting himself spinning by the bay at Mont-Saint-Michel for *Paysage Frotté*. In this sense it can be said that he remains a sculptor: a sculptor who uses video, but definitely not a video-maker. Before commenting on the performative and experimental aspects of this work, I should emphasise its creator's rejection – in contrast with the classical tradition – of the authority of the eye. One of the most effective means of guarding against authoritarian choices and decisions is to rely either on an external protocol – painting constraints, for example – or on chance. This is what Dinahet did for *Les Flottaisons*, an unobtrusively, chronologically edited video comprising seven sequences shot in Saint Nazaire, Lisbon, Bilbao, Brest, Saint Malo, Saint-Nazaire again, and Rotterdam. Each time the camera in its housing was left to float free on the surface like an uncontrolled, unprogrammed drone. The resultant images depend neither on the artist's eye or hand, but on the movement of the water. This produces, in the most literal sense, a watercolour video: the colours – of boats at anchor or entering port for example – mingle with the water through reflection and the pitch and roll of the camera. Dinahet resorts to this delegating of the filming

process on other occasions and in other ways. In several of the *Estuaires* sequences the camera is set up for "readymade" tracking shots: behind the windshield of a train in Taiwan and, on the ferry across the Loire, through a porthole and from the end of a pedestrian area giving onto the landscape through a narrow opening. The framing is determined by the trajectory of the means of transport and the spatial character of the surroundings.

What does *Les Flottaisons* reveal of the spaces it shows us? And is this really the point? An attentive eye will recognise the bridge in Lisbon, the facades of Rotterdam, the submarine base at Saint Nazaire, the Old Town in Saint Malo, and so on. But all this local colour is mere background, pushed up into the top of the image in competition with the sky and, even more so, the water. Here the horizon line that defined the classical landscape is so unstable that it simply cannot fulfil any structural role within the picture. And so the singular and the local make way for the common denominator of the water and its splashing as they trigger the movement of the filming and introduce a kind of shared matter, an overall landscape. Doubly distanced by the gridding process and the plastic overlay, the screenshots the artist takes from his videos confirm our impression of scenes that are archetypal rather than documentary. In this they tend towards painting.

Experience/performance.

In the early 2000s diving gave way to other modes of operation, but with no challenge to what ultimately constitutes the ongoing thread of Dinahet's work: what we might describe as act, experience and performance. At the turn of the years 1980/1990, the act of submerging sculptures counted less than the opportunity for a new kind of art gesture, that of a sculptor testing himself against the resistance of his materials by working around an undersea axis and withstanding the thrust of the water. A number of his early videos are limited by the time frame of their activity and come to an end with an exhausted body picking its way through seaweed or surfacing with the help of a cable, as at Newlyn. The artist repeatedly emphasises that certain sequences are the outcome of a physical momentum. In *Estuaires*, as he walks along the Loire revelling in the lightness of the air, the quality of the light and the beauty of the landscape, and then begins to run, the camera attunes itself to his pace. When he is out of breath things come to a halt, and the film with them. The question, then, is not so much one of landscape as of the inscribing of a body in space. This is what the image shows: the chaos of physical experience. In this respect a large part of the Dinahet oeuvre is performative: not that he claims to be a performance artist, but when, by the bay of Mont-Saint-Michel, he spins and spins until he loses balance, what is at stake is spontaneous experience. And experience of space, too, as when, in *Basse marée* (2003), he runs along the mussel beds in the same bay, the camera swinging in time with his arm; whereas in *Marée basse* he is running again, but because of the mud on the window

of the camera housing we perceive the landscape only through a tiny area of still-clean glass and the pounding of the artist's feet on the wet sand.

Most of these "acts" are totally unpremeditated, being the outcome, rather, of close attention to the surroundings, to what can happen at any moment: "Each action is distinctive in that countless parameters come into play: the weather, the wind, the light in the landscape, what the ground is made of. In this respect the action is very close to sculpture."[13] An eloquent illustration of what he is talking about dates from his many trips to Saint Nazaire, and the traffic roundabouts he had to drive through. One day he had the idea of going full-circle on the roundabouts with the camera sitting on the dashboard. Repeating the movement of the diver circling an imaginary axis so as not to lose sight of the sculpture on the seabed, he thus rediscovered, in *Rotation* (2004), the tripartite structure he had so often based his work on: experience, landscape, sculpture.

Boundaries and borders (political landscapes)

Asked about the notions of interface and boundary as habitually applied to his work by critics, Dinahet confirms their relevance while quickly signalling their inadequacy. Obviously the geographical boundary – between land and water, water and air, land and air – is a representational challenge. It is a non-place in the same way that the pure present is a non-time, caught between the pull of the past and the push of the future. On these boundary zones – seashore, water surface, ground – which are always junction points, but immaterial ones (which is why the artist could not do otherwise than abandon sculpture-as-object), he overlays another binomial: what's plain to see/what can't be seen directly. The visible/the concealed. Combined with the performative element, these categories of the scopic enable him to give shape to experiences that could easily have been cruelly lacking in it. Such were the aim and function of his diving and, among other things, of his floating camera; and of those explorations on foot in empty zones a stone's throw from populated areas.

This exploration of interface and boundary can also be achieved by frontal means. Many of Dinahet's videos are screens awash with water, brutal, all-over, in-your-face monochromes: for instance, his filming of a sandy beach being covered by the incoming tide in *Dieppe* (2005) offers, in its total invasion of the screen surface, a veiled allusion to the issues of modernist painting as explored by American painters of the years 1940–50. The impression of colliding with this border/wall is even more marked in *Falaises*, a five-video installation filmed at Ouessant, Brittany, in 2008.
From 2000 up until the present, Marcel Dinahet has been travelling extensively: in France, of course, but also on a regular basis to Cyprus, London, Russia and Taiwan. Among the works dating from this period several could be classified as architectural constructs with overtones of economics, culture or power; as if, little by little, his work has become politically concerned – but without abandoning the connection between

what is plainly visible and what is exhumed. Whether in Strasbourg, with Arte TV headquarters, the European Parliament, the Palais des Droits de l'Homme and the port facilities, or in London with Westminster, the City, City Hall and Tate Modern, the system is invariable: the camera floats on the river, filming continuously. These are buildings anyone can see, but rarely in this lurching way, as if tossing on a watery instability which may be the instability of our times; as if, thrust upwards, they are revealing their hidden side, their more or less polluted lower depths. And all this in images as sumptuous as they are toxic.

The rovings and stopovers of any contemporary artist have different explanations, but whether in response to an invitation or individual choice, they ultimately hinge on a personal decision. In the final analysis, then, is it by chance that Dinahet's path, and circumstance, have led him to geopolitical enclaves and focal points for tensions, not to say overt conflict? Cyprus, Taiwan, Kaliningrad, the Franco-Spanish Basque Country border? In Kaliningrad, that Russian enclave between the Baltic countries and Poland, he filmed a frozen, cold-war sea (*Svetlogorsk*, 2006), together with the port and its military structures. He also took the notorious "Berlinka" road, built by the Germans between Berlin and Koenigsberg and used for shipping deportees towards the Nazi camps. A road now Russian, and abandoned: nothing has changed here since the War, and at the cut-off point that is the Polish border a fence and sentry boxes mount guard pitifully amid a landscape of snow and solitude. In Kronstadt, headquarters of the Russian admiralty and the Baltic fleet command, he alternates static shots of warships with the sunny peacefulness of the little marina. During his most recent stay in Cyprus, in 2009,[14] he explored Famagusta, once a mainly Greek seaside resort; when it was occupied by the Turks in 1974 its inhabitants fled, leaving behind what is now no more than a ghostly, fossilised bargaining counter for hypothetical future negotiations. Getting as close as he could to this closely monitored border zone, and foiling military surveillance by placing his camera on the water or filming on the sly, Dinahet succeeded in wrenching totally new images from this odd place. As if buried, the city functions as a point of focus just like the first submerged sculptures: the approach broadens, but the artistic fundamentals remain. And then, on the French-Spanish border, in the heart of a Basque Country where autonomist aspirations and agitation are rife, he filmed,[15] in *Aller en France* and *Aller en Espagne* (both 2007), that most invisible of frontiers, the footbridge at Hendaye, with its comings and goings of ordinary people whose history seems limited to crossing with a backpack or a suitcase on wheels. Here interface and boundary are revealed in the paradox of their invisibility, despite the historical charge of this interspace that was long the sole crossing point between Spain and France and which, especially during the Second World War and the Franco years, saw its share of tragedies.

For Dinahet, however, in contrast with Chantal Akerman, Ursula Biemann and Avi Mograbi, borders are not a subject as such. They are only one of the means of achieving a

broader grasp of the world and of reality, with their roots in a sculptural act now continued by other means.

Faces and portraits?

As the reader will have noticed, strict chronology has gradually lost its relevance in this examination of an oeuvre shot through with intersecting, recurring, shifting perspectives. As mistrustful of history as of geography, Dinahet pursues his investigation of the world using a combination of proven procedures and unceasing alertness to the new forms this necessitates. As has often been pointed out, most of the works mentioned so far are structured around the experience of a body – the artist's – as part of a space it is constantly testing out; however the least one can say is that the body itself remains unobtrusive, reduced as it is to its effects on the image as opposed to actually making an appearance. Likewise, there are few human beings in the landscapes, apart from the tourists – in Dinard, in Corsica – who function as an essential aspect of his affirmation of this immediately visible portion of the world (those who see, those who are seen).

In the course of a residency in Russia in the summer of 2004, Dinahet filmed faces for the first time: young women mostly, actresses or dancers with their bodies hidden in the waters of a lake. Slightly tensed by the cold and staring into the lens, the faces are filmed statically along the waterline, which comes up to the level of the mouth. This is the artist's first attempt at bringing the human face into his work as an actual subject. But here too we find ourselves wondering about borders. Is this really a/the subject? If there is an answer to this question, it lies in the group titled *Les Danseurs Immobiles* (2006). The ten dancers – Fabienne Compet, Katja Fleig, Osman Kassen Khelili, Typhaine Heissat, Julien Jeanne, Maud Le Pladec, Thierry Micouin, Mickaël Phelippeau, Carole Perdereau, Pedro Rosa – are filmed motionless in a swimming pool, once again with the water up to their mouths, and interest the artist in more than one way. With the exception of a single, somewhat jokey self-portrait, Dinahet has never depicted himself. Doubtless he felt obliged to deal directly with the issue of the submerged body, even if it were someone else's; and yet he did so only much later, having first tested out the issue of waterlines and adopting a configuration that was different in many respects. From his diving works he has retained the physical difficulty, the resistance to the movement of the water and the challenge of holding to his axis. Between holding to the axis and holding the pose – a bygone memory of drawing and sculpture from life – he patiently tautens the thread. To ask a dancer to remain motionless in water is, in a sense, to impose both a constraint and a familiar exercise. These dancers are not motionless like other dancers: their immobility is that of a body intended for controlled movement. This can be sensed. And it can be seen on what little is visible of their bodies, the faces in which the entire act seems concentrated. Immobility endows these faces with what the least movement of the body endowed the submarine images of those early videos: the repercussions of a decision

taken. So are these — still — mere faces, and thus portraits? If showing a face inevitably entails the idea of a portrait, then yes, these are portraits, singular and human. But like borders, the faces of the dancers are part of some larger, infinitely more complex process referencing, once again, sculpture and, more generally, the enormous enterprise of capturing interfaces, those tiny points of contact of a body coming to grips with space. At some of the showings of these videos[16] the dancers were actively present in the exhibition space, aligning themselves with their images and moving freely within this new configuration, as if submerging themselves a second time. During the same year another series of faces, Spanish and French, was filmed in a swimming pool in Hendaye. As insistent as ever on the mode of exhibition, Dinahet screened his images inside a truck with its back doors open, on squares and in other public places on both sides of the border.

In 2009 the artist renewed his work with dancer-choreographer Maud Le Pladec for *Figures*,[17] a group of four videos showing their subject holding her breath underwater in a swimming pool. Like the earlier submerged sculptures, she remains motionless the way — as mentioned above — only dancers can do. The film lasts as long as she can hold her breath. And the space, once again, is a sculptor's space, with the underwater camera moving around this human axis but giving the impression that it is the subject itself that is moving. These four silent projections, large-format but on different walls and at different heights, reinforce the sense of immersion by taking the beholder to the heart of the work, in this singular setting in which the image's zone of influence expands into the three-dimensional.

To group the works showing faces under the heading — even open-ended — of faces and portraits, is not without its dangers, so different are the pieces from each other and so resistant are they to any pigeonholing. Apart from the faces, for example, what do these dancers have in common with the portraits from Taipei and Ouessant, dating from 2008 and 2009? For Marcel Dinahet Ouessant is a kind of elect place. He visits often and over the years has built up lasting relationships with the inhabitants of this island off France's Atlantic coast. Filmmaker Jean Epstein, director of the magnificent ethnographic fiction *Finis Terrae* (1928), said of them that they were one with the landscape. Eighty years later Dinahet tracked down the descendants of Epstein's actors and filmed them in very close-up static shots, in face-to-face silence. More geographic than psychological, and defying all attempts at classification, these full-frontal faces could indeed be described as landscapes. In the same way the faces of the Taiwanese living by the river and filmed by Dinahet during his rambles relate the history of successive waves of immigration; we might readily believe that what the artist is looking for here is the equivalent of those "aqueous matters" of the 1990s: facial matters.

Return to the roots

Among Dinahet's current projects, *Sources* merits particular attention. Invited successively to the abbeys of Bon Repos, in the Côtes d'Armor département, and Maubuisson, in the Val d'Oise – both originally Cistercian and now exhibition venues – the artist has set about examining an essential criterion in the choosing of sites by the disciples of St Bernard: the location of springs (*sources* in French). Dinahet is fond of recalling his father's gift for detecting sources of water, that talent for water-divining he himself has inherited. He very quickly tracked down the springs feeding the ancient forest around Bon-Repos, and the irrigation networks at Maubuisson. To round off his aquatic explorations in Brittany, he made a number of videos of resurgences in the forest of Quénécan. The filming method is reminiscent of that of *Les Flottaisons*, and the results, while putting greater emphasis on the question of water level, represent a natural, archaic counterpoint to those ports marked by the activity of our modern conquerors. Reversing the act of diving, while equally affirming it, he worked his way up the watercourses from Maubuisson to their sources; and found there, in the form of shrimps, proof of the distant maritime origins of what is now the Paris basin. As has already been mentioned here, his relative indifference to chronology is matched only by his alertness to history's great chapters.

End paper

A video taken – almost stolen – at Kaliningrad[18] shows a docked submarine with a sailor dancing to music on the bridge. He looks like the only man in the world, utterly carefree, utterly taken by his own physical rhythm. But all at once – is he drunk? has the great steel monster suddenly pitched? – he loses balance and almost falls. Then he recovers at the last moment, regains his axis and continues his strange dance. No doubt he will soon be back inside and diving towards unknown depths.

1. Among them a solo show at the Cultural Centre in Rennes in 1983, and in 1984 "Jeune Sculpture", the Young Sculptors Salon.

2. *Rennes-Sculptures 82*, Parc Oberthür, Editions Municipales, Rennes, 1982.

3. Interview with the author, 2010.

4. *Marcel Dinahet: Flux, reflux, 85 et 90*, texts by Jean-Marc Lhabouz and Yannick Miloux, pub. Domaine de Dourven, Tredrez; exhibition at L'Imagerie Gallery, Lannion, Côtes d'Armor Cultural Development Office, 1990.

5. Together with a video, these photographs were presented in December 1991 at Le Triangle in Rennes. Prepared by Yvette Le Gall, the exhibition "Vives Eaux" (Living Waters) comprised works by Marcel Dinahet and Xavier Ribot.

6. At the invitation of Danièle Yvergniaux, head of the Visual Arts Unit at the Côtes d'Armor Cultural Development Office.

7. And then shown in the exhibition "...A Stroetmann", Munsterland Gallery, Emsdetten, Germany.

8. At the invitation of the Languedoc-Roussillon Region Contemporary Art Collection.

9. At the invitation of Dominique Marchès and as part of the exhibition "île, terre, eau, ciel", 1994.

10. At the invitation of Claire Peillod for the exhibition "Récoltes" at the Centre d'Arts Plastiques in Villefranche-sur-Saône, 1994.

11. At the invitation of Isabel Vila Nova, who organised an exhibition of his work at the Museu Nacional de Historia Natural in Lisbon.

12. *Estuaires* is a group of videos resulting from several stays on the banks of the Loire at the invitation of Jean-François Taddéi and the Pays de la Loire FRAC's International Art Workshops. Most of the videos were shown at the FRAC in Carquefou in 2002.

13. Conversation with the author, 25 March 2010.

14. Dinahet has been to Cyprus several times and taken part in group exhibitions there, notably at the Art Centre in Nicosia. His videos of his 2009 stay were part of the "Suspended Spaces" exhibition organised by Androula Michaël and Françoise Parfait at Jules Vernes University in Amiens, France in 2010.

15. During a residency at the Domaine d'Abbadia in Hendaye.

16. At the Ménagerie de Verre in Paris, then at Le Triangle in Rennes.

17. *Figures* was one of the three successive sections of Marcel Dinahet's exhibition at La Criée Centre for Contemporary Art in Rennes. The exhibition was curated by Larys Frogier.

18. *Le Marin du sous-marin* (2004).