

One Step Further

Whether he allows his camera to float with the current or carries it with him in his strolls along the shore, Marcel Dinahet always puts the emphasis on spontaneity, freedom and intuition. He makes no precise plans, programmes or preparatory sketches, but simply lets himself flow with the unknown and his own marked taste for surprise and improvisation. The short sequence shots that result from his movements or immersions in Brittany, Scotland, Portugal, Cyprus, Russia or elsewhere all reveal his interest in the landscape around him and, more particularly, in seacoasts, in beaches and the sea. Free of documentary or narrative aspects, his videos are removed from any topically urgent ecological concerns. What really captivate the artist are the limits between the physical elements composing a landscape and the way in which these limits can be blurred by the random movements of the camera. Faced with these images in which water, air and earth mix together, the beholder's habitual perception is disrupted and he begins to lose his bearings. During his residency at Abbadia, Dinahet continued to explore these notions of the in-between, of the frontier.

"If I wasn't personally engaged, it would be like a postcard!"¹

In *Hendaye, la plage* (2006), the artist continues with the experiments begun in the bay of Mont Saint-Michel, running in the water at high tide, holding his camera low, just above the sea, and filming the buildings along the seafront. The sky is heavy with clouds, the atmosphere dark, it is raining and the screen becomes speckled with drops of rain and salted that grow thicker as the walk goes on. Then the image stops suddenly and gives way to a second sequence set on the beach, this time at low tide. It is a clear day now, the light is bright and transforms the expanse of sand into a mirror. The artist runs and spins in one direction and then the other, brushing the landscape with his camera. The increasingly fast movement causes the elements in the image to merge together: the sky, the buildings, their reflection in the sand, the beach and the water blend to form abstract coloured lines, as in *Paysage frotté* (2002).

What is in play here is above all the artist's physical engagement. We constantly sense his presence, especially because of the sound track which picks up the noise of his steps and therefore his moments of fatigue when his run slows to a walk. More than video, Dinahet's medium is performance, and sometimes even choreography. Seeing his works, the spectator feels a loss of balance that may attain a state of dizziness or seasickness. By pitting himself against an often hostile space, by committing his own body, the artist manages to create a direct link between his work and the person seeing it.

Inhabited non-places

The videos *Aller en France* and *Aller en Espagne* (2006) were shot on the bridge connecting Hendaye and the Spanish town of Irun. The walking motif features once again, but this time it is the movement of people in front of the camera, and not of the artist himself. But Dinahet's presence is still perceptible in *Aller en France*, where the camera he is carrying sways with the wind. Once again, here, it is a dark day of abundant rain and a brewing storm. Sheltering with others on the Spanish side (we can hear snatches of conversation), the artist films people making their way over to France on the footbridge. Locals have told him that, over the last century, the bridge was used by successive generations of emigrants to France and was the scene of many fatal falls and drowning. Today, people use it to go from one station to another, but also, in the total absence of police control, to engage in all kinds of trafficking (cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, etc.).

¹ Quoted from a discussion with the artist (July 2007)

The people in both videos are filmed from behind. *Aller en Espagne* is made up of a symmetrical and almost still wide shot (the camera is placed at waist height on a block of concrete). The somewhat leaden atmosphere of the scene is lit up only by the sudden appearance of two girls giggling because their umbrella has blown inside out when they were lighting up a cigarette. Knowing the historical and political context of the place, the images might bring to mind those of a surveillance camera. But behind this work there is no intention to comment on a social situation. For the artist, these images are a way of apprehending the join between two physical spaces from a new and deeper angle. *Aller en Espagne* and *Aller en France* extend the work already done on bridges in Nantes and in Kaliningrad, where people were filmed in profile. These videos also fit into the context of the "Just a Walk" project initiated by the Rennes-based artist Jocelyn Cottencin, who invited several European artists to reflect on the way in which movements test the notion of the "territory."² This back and forth between France and Spain also brings to mind the video *Ferry* (2001), in which Dinahet recorded vehicles entering and exiting the boat that sails between Portsmouth and Saint-Malo. Waiting for a train one rainy night, the artist filmed the station at Irun with the immobile train, the rails and the deserted platform. These spaces – a bridge and boat both connecting countries, a frontier station – are typical of the cold, anonymous "non-places" defined by ethnologist Marc Augé. In Dinahet's videos, however, these places of transit are always informed by human presence, whether that of the artist, manifest in the almost imperceptible movements of the camera, or of the voices of people out of frame, or of the silhouettes that appear on the screen (the people on the bridge, the person on the platform in *Irun*). In his most recent works, indeed, the artist gives greater prominence to the human, to the other.

² www.justawalk.com

Body to body

Les portraits (2006) returns to the procedure developed for *Les danseurs immobiles*. For that "video-installation-performance"³ Dinahet filmed dancers with their backs to the side of a swimming pool trying to keep still in the water. The portraits in these minute-long, tightly framed shots exude a sense of concentration, mastery and awareness of the body and of space. During his residency at Abbazia, Dinahet replayed this experience, but with swimmers chosen at random in the public pool. The result is of course very different: the concentration of the people filmed is not as great, their postures are less assured and their bodies are less static than the dancers'. As always in Dinahet's works, the artist's body too is tested since he must keep as still as he can when framing the swaying of the swimmers. Viewers may feel a certain embarrassment at being brought so close to these naked individuals, to their own sense of their bodies, to the effort they must make in order to stay upright, to their difficulties in breathing and to the deformation of their faces seen through the lens of the water. What Dinahet is experimenting with here is the relation to the other, the other's relation to the image, and the relation of the image to the body. These issues were embryonically present in *Nastia* and *Tower Kronprinz* (2004), made during a residency in Russia, and are echoed in *Alex et Virginie* (2007), two portraits filmed during a stay in Martinique. Whether the person stares at the camera or not, whether the scene is prepared or improvised, the shot is always right up close to the face, as if to catch the slightest sign of the sensible relation that develops with the artist.

³ The performance *Les Danseurs immobiles* was given from 26 April to 6 May 2006 at the Ménagerie de Verre (Paris) and from 17 May to 30 June 2006 at Le Triangle (Rennes)

The people filmed for *Les portraits* live on one side or another of the Franco-Spanish border. At the editing stage Dinahet mixed the sequences so as to reflect the mixing of this frontier population (Spanish children, for example, who go to school in France, and Spaniards living on the French side because of the lower property prices) as well as its diversity: the Hendaye region is rural and picturesque whereas Irun is dense and industrialised. There is, then, a contrast in ways of life between these two geographically close territories. As he had often done before, Dinahet chose to exhibit the videos made in Abbazia in a public space close to the locations where they were shot. To reflect the specificity of living on the border between two countries, he organised a touring presentation: the videos were shown on an open truck during one-off sessions on squares and in car parks on both sides of the border. Dinahet is particularly attentive to the spatial presentation of his videos. On several occasions he has placed them in silos or containers, prompting critic Jean-Marc Huitorel to describe these display structures as sculptural.⁴ This way of exhibiting is due essentially to his concern to forge a strong connection with the local context, to seek direct contact with the public and to multiply the possibilities for experiencing and spontaneously reacting to the works.

⁴ Jean-Marc Huitorel, "À la limite," *Marcel Dinahet, Périples*, Quimper : Editions Le Quartier, 2001.

At Abbazia, Marcel Dinahet was able to work on another meaning of the word "frontier." If, in his earlier videos, this word evoked the limits between land, sea and sky, then the works made during this residency evoke political frontiers, the frontier between two nations, two languages and two cultures. The artist has thus embarked on a new phase in which he is moving closer to the urban environment and making human presence an increasingly prominent feature of his works. Physicality and total immersion in an environment are constants, and enable him to reveal the individual's relation to space and the limits of perception. In this sense, his videos, based as they are on simple, minimal and short-lived actions, belong both to the history of conceptual art and to that of contemporary dance.