

An Amphibian Artist

Gilles A. Tiberghien on the work of Marcel Dinahet

Anyone who has looked at medieval maps will remember the way the Earth is sometimes shown divided into three parts: to the north, Asia occupies the upper hemisphere; Europe is in the lower left quarter and facing it is Africa, on the right. The three continents are separated from each other by three "rivers", and all around is a vast stretch of water: the Ocean.

Such was the depiction of our terraqueous globe, and we cannot fail to be struck by the analogy with the drawing of an eye. The ocular globe, too, is bathed in aqueous matter, even if, strictly speaking, it is not surrounded by water. Nonetheless this matter is a kind of transitional zone between us and the world, and Marcel Dinahet's entire oeuvre seems founded on this parallel. It is as if, at the core of his work, the boundary of the perceptible merges with that of the world we live in: with what is usually termed our "environment".

The environment is what provides meaning for a living being. In his work on behavioural differences between animals and humans as determined by their living environments, the great ethologist Jakob von Uexküll focused more on sticklebacks, jellyfish and fighting fish than on the higher mammals and apes. And he demonstrated that for each living creature there exist specific perceptual signs: the grape is one such for the bird, but on the other hand it means nothing to the tick, sensitive solely to butyric acid, or to a human being guided by a wide range of concerns depending on his environment, education and heredity.

Between species of animals, and between men and animals, there exist qualitatively different worlds. "We submit too easily to the illusion that the relationships between the subject in another environment and the things of that environment unfold in the same space and the same time as those that connect us to our human environment. This illusion is nourished by the belief in a single world in which all living creatures are embedded."¹ A belief, says Uexküll, that is completely mistaken, for there is no independent space for these subjects: we live in a visual space delimited by what we call a horizon, with no suspicion that this horizon, for us as living creatures, varies according to our size, age and species. This is why, says Uexküll, "we can picture each of the animals present in the natural world around us, whether butterflies, flies, mosquitoes or dragonflies inhabiting an area of grassland, as living inside a soap bubble that encloses their visual space and determines everything they see."²

The bubble in question materialises perfectly in *L'Île*, one of the brief videos making up the series *Autre part* (Elsewhere).³ Framed in an oval aperture – the one used for hauling up a ship's anchor, for example – we contemplate a seascape with an island at its centre. The title is surely equally valid for the island as for the way it is shown

to us: framed to reveal our way of seeing as a kind of cultural isolate within the domain of the visible.

Indeed, it is as if Dinahet were striving to home in on these visual limits, to test the strength of these envelopes and grasp the kind of visibility they allow in terms of the worlds surrounding us. In which case art for him can be seen as a way of intuiting descriptions of possible worlds, of *imagining* those worlds with the aid of an optical apparatus – a photographic lens or a movie camera – capable of translating what our eye might see if we were a fish, an otter, a water-spider, a dog running madly along a beach, a galloping horse, a child, etc.

This is patent in works like *Sur la baie* (2001) and its indeterminable pace of advance: perhaps very swift, much faster than that of a running man, but perhaps about the same, if we go by various landmarks seen over the distance travelled, which itself seems to stretch out into infinity. The same feeling of limitlessness is to be found in *Paysage frotté* (2001), in which the camera spins flush with the wet sand like a maddened animal, like an insect with one wing torn off trying to break out of its mutilation-imposed immobility by pivoting endlessly on the centreline of its body. Or in other videos, at ground level, *on the beach*, the eye more or less at crab height: there, on the sand, along the waterline or going towards it, we see bathers walking, the lower part of their bodies reflected upside down on the surface of the water; reminiscent of the bodies of those the ancient imagination called "antipodeans", people on the other side of the earth who were thought to walk head downwards, clinging to the ground like flies.

In his *Incidents of Mirror Travel in the Yucatan* Robert Smithson, fascinated by flies coming and going on a tree he had placed upside down in the ground, regarded them as attentive spectators with compound eyes. What a fly sees is "something a little worse than a newspaper photograph as it would look to us under a magnifying glass," he once wrote, quoting Ralph Bussbaum, a specialist on invertebrates. And he closed with the question, "Why should flies be without art?"⁴

But if there is a realm that interests Dinahet more particularly, it is that of fish or, rather, creatures that live in and under water. The goal is not to explore this environment or understand it better, as a documentary filmmaker would do, but to better understand our own world. The point for him is to take a dialectical stance in the sense that Smithson understood it when he wrote – after mentioning but not actually quoting the closing sentence of Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* – "Dialectics could be viewed as the relationship between the shell and the ocean. Artists and critics have for a long time considered the shell without the context of the ocean."⁵ In the case of someone like Marcel Dinahet, alternately facing the sea and turning his back to it, we appreciate the crucial importance of an element whose boundary, in its endless shifting, gives this dialectic its full meaning.

This boundary is called the horizon. According to Hesiod's *Theogony*, in the beginning was Chaos, out of which Earth and Heaven were born separately. A primordial rift, the horizon also represents differentiation: where Earth and Heaven separate is where day begins with the dawn that is often taken as a metaphor of Creation. In any case, this separation is to be found, it seems, in numerous cosmologies, so that in a way the horizon stands for the emergence from chaos. In perceptual terms it orders the world we live in, while at the same time being all but impossible to look at: not only is it too unstable, the gap it represents – or rather the suture it conjures up like some timeless scar – has something about it that defies scrutiny.⁶ And the horizon is omnipresent in the Dinahet oeuvre.

An oeuvre in which it seems represented as fragmented, differentiated, multifarious – in the interests of being more clearly understood. Dinahet pursues the horizon into the innermost part of vision, a sense he considers as no different from hearing, touch and the others; whence the potent synaesthetic sensation triggered by looking at these works addressed to the entire body, a reaction doubtless even more pronounced in the case of the large format video projections. Sound is another highly significant factor here and what merits special attention is its correlation with the images – the way it is filtered, amplified, displaced or recomposed – together with the part played by street noise, radio broadcasts, etc. It can, too, be taken as the core aspect, with the image suddenly seeming secondary; this is the case in the brief portrait in *Lisbonne*, a low angle shot taken under the enormous 25th of April Bridge that spans the Tagus and whose traffic hum, due to two of its lanes being metallic platforms, resembles that of some gigantic wind instrument which in turn resembles a guitar neck upside down. Taking a completely different point of view – or "point of listening" – the nocturnal portrait of the same city offers subdued voices speaking Portuguese in the upper neighbourhoods, these latter shown mainly via their cobblestones, as in the final camcorder images captured by the protagonist of Alain Tanner's *In the White City*.⁷

Another city portrait, once again in two parts, *Chypre à l'Ouest*, *Chypre à l'Est* comprises clear-cut views of the rocky coast of Cyprus, from which we are separated by an expanse of blue water, and underwater views in which we advance through a landscape of seaweed tossed by those submarine winds called currents and by the motion of the diver, without our being able to identify their respective contributions to all this swirling movement. These landscapes display Dinahet's painterly sensibility, as he films the undersea vegetation with a keen eye for texture and the colour relationships between the plants and the sand and rocks forming the backdrop. In the longest video of his I have seen, *Les Finistères* (1999), images of seaweed alternate with static, more or less distant shots of lighthouses of different sizes and periods, and other images of roads and parking lots complete with cars and people going about their business. A world of vigilance, where vertical structures send out signals, is thus contrasted with another one, abandoned to the horizontality of everyday comings and goings. Meanwhile, below and seemingly untouched by all this, is the ever-renewed sea and its incredibly

varied flora. Nonetheless water ultimately, insidiously invades our field of vision, on the car's windshield and at the edge of the wave whose foam submerges the lens. The submarine plants undulate like snakes as yet again the imperceptible transition takes place between two kingdoms, the vegetable and the animal. Now brown, now green, now silver, backlit, almost polarised, or set against a "pointillist" field of white sand whose grains seem suddenly pulverised: these plants fascinate with their diversity. And these underwater brushes are invaluable assistants for an artist who never tires of filming them. Art for fish? But why should fish be without art? It could be said that in a sense Dinahet is an amphibian artist. Equally at ease in water and on land, he looks at the world simultaneously above and below a waterline given tangible visibility in many of his videos. In 2008, for instance, he applied this approach to a series of riverbank buildings – among them, in Strasbourg, Arte TV headquarters, the European Parliament, the Palais des Droits de l'Homme – which seem situated on the fringe of some lurching vision. To look at architecture as if while drowning is also to understand how strange it is to construct, to bring forth houses and buildings from the soil, and how construction is the mark of our capacity to live upright among human beings.

But to look at humans themselves as caught between two worlds – as the artist does in *Les Danseurs Immobiles*, the series of water-level portraits shown at the Ménagerie de Verre in 2006 – is to assert the ambiguity of our humanity. Filmed in close-up, the bathers' faces are shown with the nose just clear of the water; in the lower part of the image we see either their reflection or, if the camera descends a little, like a float being pulled down by some invisible fish, we see the rest of the face, the mouth, the base of the neck, the start of the body. To truly see the other we must look beyond the image of his image, burst the Uexküll bubble each of us lives in so as to achieve smoothness of breathing and airiness of spirit. Thus does the artist offer us a chance to see ourselves differently by *liquidating* our own image.

1. Jacob von Uexküll, *Milieu animal et milieu humain*, translated from the German by Charles Martin Freville, Paris, Rivages, 2010, p.49. This translation (from the French) by John Tittensor.

2. Ibid., pp. 70–71.

3. In *Estuaires* (2002), we find the same type of view, one taken through a porthole and another through an opening seen from the end of a corridor. The mode is different, the effect quite similar.

4. Robert Smithson, "Incidents of Mirror Travel in the Yucatan", in Jack Flam (ed.), *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, University of California Press, 1996, p. 129.

5. Robert Smithson, "Art and dialectics", *The Collected Writings*, op. cit., p.371

6. Or only at the expense of losing this order. Alone in the sea after falling overboard in Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Pip sees the horizon for what it is and goes mad.

7. I mention this film in my book *Le principe de l'axolotl & suppléments* (Arles, Actes Sud, 1997) which, it seems to me, finds broad echoes in the work of Marcel Dinahet.