

To the limit

Prehistory

The work of Marcel Dinahet, insofar as it is possible to sum it up at the present time, can be said to originate in the second half of the 1980s, when the artist made a pretty radical break with his practice thus far. This followed on from the teaching he had received from his masters, who were all "classical" sculptors. A first shift occurred in 1984. It is exemplified by a work that can still be seen in the Domaine Départemental du Douven (Côte d'Armor, Brittany). This piece looks like a primitive hut, a kind of stone dwelling without an entrance, architecture transformed into sculpture. The structure consists of stabilised hand-kneaded bricks of clay. Other pieces whose conception dates back to 1985 were installed in the park in 1990, and still stand today. The sculptures are always built around an axis. This is a constant in my work (...) Here and there I inlaid bits of stainless steel wire in the stabilised clay structure. These come from a totally different universe, forming small spirals on the sculptures. These motifs have been a recurrent feature of my work for many years, although I never really knew where they came from until I realised that I had seen them underwater when diving. These spirals are produced by sea worms known as serpulæ. This discovery played a decisive role in the development of my work, which now began to accelerate⁽¹⁾ It certainly did. We will see how this question of the axis remained important even after Dinahet gave up sculpture as such, and how the idea of a land/sea interface came gradually to the fore. Another piece featured in that exhibition organised in the summer of 1990 by Danièle Yvergnaux was a necklace made out of those same stabilised clay bricks which Dinahet slipped over the tip of a rock lashed by the sea. In retrospect, we can see that this was a seminal work. For what we have here is his first powerfully mimetic, chameleon-like piece, made to be in contact with water, destined to be eroded by it and eventually to disappear, as it indeed has. At the time, in fact, Dinahet had already begun making small black and white sculptures out of dark stabilised sand and amalgamated white shells and immersing them in the water, abandoning them to the aquatic world like "receptacles for undersea plant and animal life."⁽²⁾ With hindsight, these evolving objects, these traps for traces and sediments can be seen as a primitive form of camera, a tool that Dinahet would soon start using. The sinking and regular visiting of these host objects was performed, if not in absolute secrecy, the discreetly (only a few diver friends know of their whereabouts), as if the artist himself was frightened by this break with everything that had gone before, or at least felt compelled to be prudent about it.

Diving Deep

In the summer of 1991, when invited to put together an art show spread over several sites in the Côte d'Armor department,⁽³⁾ Jérôme Sans suggested that Dinahet present a work in the hall of the harbour building at Saint-Quay-Portrieux. This consisted of a video monitor placed in a metal cubicle. The image: sculptures that the artist had put on the seabed and filmed. The sound: the breathing of a diver, the oxygen going from the canister to the mask—strange and disturbing like a stethoscope placed on the belly of a pregnant woman. This intra-uterine impression was heightened by the closure of the booth, by the fact that the body was doubly enclosed: at the bottom of the "box" and in the depths of the sea. It was all here, put before the disconcerted public in the form of a radical break, a total change of viewpoint, attitude, method and, it would seem, medium. It is true that there were still traces of the sculpted object as one might perceive it on the gallery floor, and made from a material close to the raised structures at Le Douven or, even more, the necklace placed at the tip of the rock. The relative continuity that we can now observe should not, however, be allowed to hide what, rather than a break, I would call the true beginning of Dinahet's œuvre. It emerged late in the day but almost immediately achieved in its mature form. From now on, Dinahet's work would be associated with diving. He would be the diver artist just as other artists are walkers. Why not? However, if we want to have a more precise idea of his approach, we need to try to show how deep-sea diving defines but does not delimit this work, and how Dinahet both shares and stands apart from a certain contemporary attitude towards nature.

Even if Dinahet was still using objects—sculptures, the fact of diving, filming and taking photographs implied a process of dematerialising that sculpture, at least in its traditional form; of reducing it to the logic of the image, even if this 7 image was itself presented within a set-up of a constructive, even architectural nature. Thus, if there was still sculpture here, it was to found more in the overall exhibition set-up than in the immersed object shown in the image. But is the idea of sculp-

ture still appropriate here anyway? This cubicle, or any of the other solutions subsequently adopted by the artist (portacabin, grain silo, air transport container, etc.), could be more appropriately interpreted as places of physical, experimentation, concerning either immersion or vision. The artist's physical experience is echoed in the corporeal engagement of the viewer for, strangely enough, by giving up the primacy of the sculpture object Dinahet was displacing all the energy of his action towards the pure presence of the body in action. In his first videos, the camera moves around the underwater sculpture as around an axis, the axis whose importance this artist had already emphasised. Thus the space demarcated around this landmark is obtained through a constant struggle between the body and the multiple counter-forces or restrictions constituted by the pressure of the water, the strength of the current and the animal or vegetal obstacles found ten metres underwater. The image is, to a large extent, the result of these dual forces of "thrust and resistance," which is why the work has as much to do with performance as with sculpture. But it also has very simply to do with the image, an image constantly deferred, mediated and thought-through. For Dinahet does not just transfer what he films from the camera to the monitor. In most cases, or at least in the early years, the image results from several operations designed to reduce its mimetic qualities. The main one consists in refilming the screen on which the images appear in order to reproduce its texture so that this acts as a filter, a counterweight to the physical immediacy of the shoot. However, in these new images we can still see the variations in light and flora between the different places where the artist dives, which he calls "water matter". These are like the geographical colours of a nomadic body of work. In fact, in the combined concepts of displacement and frontier, this nomadism would soon come to constitute the heart of the work. But more on this later.

The Context

Dinahet's work emerged at the end of the 1980s, a time when, with only a few exceptions, the issues of landscape and inter-vention in and with nature were already beginning to lose their topicality. As for Land Art as such, it was already history. What is left if we put aside all those pleasantly decorative pieces, all those "sensitive" interventions, all the tricky practices that recuperated innovations made in the 1970s and used them to go on making pretty much the same sculpture as before, but outdoors—not to mention all that post-hippie tinkering? Not a lot of works in which nature is the true issue or medium. Nothing beyond the founding acts of the historic Land Artists, to which we must add the work of those who always asserted their independence from the Americans: the English walkers, Richard Long and Hamish Fulton. It's not that there were no worthwhile artists any more, just that it was surely a mistake to bring them all together under the theme of nature, a holdall non-concept that merely served as a pretext for a few vague and slapdash exhibitions. It is interesting to note that Dinahet belongs to the same generation as Long and Fulton, even though his work only really emerged some twenty years after theirs. But just because the latter walk and the former dives, we should be wary of making hasty parallels. Long and Fulton, like the Americans Smithson, Heizer and De Maria, are conceptual artists. Dinahet definitely is not—even if, as Hervé Régnauld has pointed out, his work may subsequently lead to conceptual propositions. Dinahet is not a conceptual artist because his use of the idea of a programme is singular and discontinuous. It is true that when he draws up the list of his future interventions—for the Finistères, say—he works with maps in a way that can be considered programmatic, but the intentionality is much less stable than Long's. Dinahet does not think in terms of building objects or making a photograph, but of abandon to the unknown. In his case the programme is merely the basic framework within which he will move, react, wander, face danger, keep risking imbalance and surf on the wave that is his line of vulnerability. But we must add this: the intuitive, sensitive (rather than sensual) approach taken by Dinahet is not applied as directly and as transparently to nature as one might think, even though nature is its context, its medium and the chief substance of what it gives us to see. What Dinahet questions, more than nature, is the idea of the limit or frontier, the idea of a junction, of abutment and interfaces. More precisely, the limits that Dinahet

tests and experiences are in fact the very contours of what we call art. The artist's territory is less the natural space as such than natural space as the metaphor of his particular field, which is art. In this respect he is both close to the concerns of the historic Land Artists and emphatically a part of the period in which he works, a period of which one of the major concern is not the definition of art but the tireless search for what delimits it.

Without an Object

In 1993 Dinahet stopped sinking objects that he had himself shaped and began using a simple stone (a natural sculpture, polished by the water and wind in the cosmic studio that is the beach near Cap Fréhel), taking it with him as he travelled from Portugal to Cap Cerbère, from Sète to Vassivière. This stone was wrapped in rope and then in a metal lattice which could be used as a handle. After leaving it for a while in the waters of Brittany, he then took his Armorican keepsake to more southerly seas before moving it on to a lake in central France. This permanent deterritorialisation in fact corresponds to the gradual dematerialisation of the work, of which the immersion was the founding act, and whose necessary disappearance is confirmed by video. For a while, the stone still linked him to the old sculptural tradition inherited from his masters, but we can see that by now it was merely a souvenir, a slightly ridiculous fetish that one is reluctant to relinquish, that one continues to gratify with the odd gaze, with a tender look whenever the tumult of life affords a little time. The big change came in 1995. The videos Dinahet made in Sicily and Portugal but also in La Dombes, a marshy region north of Lyon, show something other than the undersea world, even when they are still exploring it. The camera now picks up images of the surrounding reality—the mountains overlooking the sea, a bulldozer cleaning the beach, convent buildings, walkers, vegetation above. The soundtrack has changed, too. Now we hear a hymn from a church, now a football commentary from a near by car radio. The car windscreen replaces the diving mask. What is registered here is not only the aquatic reality but also everything that comes before it and indicates its proximity. From movements around the submerged, still sculptural object, we have gone to the use of the forward tracking shot with no object other than the fact of being there. "There" being the buffer zone, still typified by the shore, but now perhaps with a different viewpoint. In Proust there was the Guermantes way and the Méséglise way. When Dinahet extended his sculptural action by moving around his submerged axis, he was by "the sea way", on the side of the mystery that it secretes but also the autism that it undeniably images forth. When the artist left the water, considering the shore not only from the point of view of the water but also from that of the earth, he was taking a very different way. Something emerges here, something "saved from drowning". It is as if the rite of immersion had consisted, in the first place, of drowning a certain idea of sculpture, and no doubt of art, and also, of testing, in extreme conditions, as would often be the case later on, the viability of a new gesture, of an attitude still to be invented. Things get so shaken up and thrown about here that one thinks, at the risk of sounding ridiculous, of a second birth (or perhaps it is the first). It was by abandoning the link to the object that Dinahet fully measured the territory to be explored, which is without a doubt none other than the territory of art.

New Frontiers

As can be seen from what both the artist and observers of his work have said, the burden of his art has never changed. It concerns the shore and the points where the water meets the earth or the air, or the earth meets the air. What does that make it? Is this really a form of landscape art, as some have believed? Or a way of making sculpture by other means? Nobody I am sure would have complained if Dinahet had contented himself with that, but then would he have been anything but another end-of-century artist, working with the vestiges of obsolete techniques, of historical movements that laid down long ago? Whereas it would seem that what sets Dinahet's work apart, especially these last years, is the question of the shore as a limit and frontier—not just the frontier between the elements, but above all as a place of tension between contrary forces, each one seeing how far it can go before reaching breaking point. It is also the interface where the real occupies one

side and art the other. It is a shifting, almost elusive territory that is constantly having to be redefined. It is the absolute contrary of an ethnic territory. It is, again and always, a zone of turbulence.

Take the Finistères. When Dinahet set out to travel to the most westward points along the European coastline and drew up his list in advance, we could, as I have suggested, evoke the idea of a programme, even if this was more accurately a project with a few landmarks, western extremities forming a kind of arc across the Atlantic coast. At each of these extremities, access to which was never anything less than pleasant, and which, although sometimes not visible, nevertheless constituted an essential part of the work, Dinahet came up against a breaking point ("When you come to a limit", he says, "it is easy to pass over on to the other side"⁽⁴⁾). This threshold of rupture, though eminently geographical and physical, is crucial for the artist who is face to face with the insistent question: how far does art go here? What is the relation between my presence here, so far from the centre, from any centre, and the reason for my being here, i.e., art? What matters, then, is to find the legitimacy of this shore, of this lighthouse that scans the night, of this bumpy path that shakes the car, this foam that pushes against the rocks. Not a justification through geography or landscape—the answers there come from elsewhere, but: how does my presence here produce art? Likewise the Flottaisons, with the camera in a watertight box floating in the harbour,⁽⁵⁾ recording a horizon of rocking hulls, swaying ships and a backdrop of towns at once so real and so unlikely—all objects subject to contact, on the fringes, to close to everything that separates and brings near. An incessant back and forth, an action without tool or object. And the sensation of dizziness or seasickness that one could feel at the sight of these floating bodies came from the impression one had of belonging simultaneously to two, worlds, above and below the water, but also the reality of the harbours and their possible representation (dissection of watercolour). Exactly the same sensation was produced by the videos brought back from Cyprus, between the Flottaisons and Finistères. The question had never been posed in this way before.

In one of the most recent works, a camera placed on the edge of the beach films at ground level, at water level. Even lower than a child's eye view. This frontier is of interest for the way it suddenly switches attention towards the sun via the reflective water lapping the sand. It offers a kind of borderline between above and below which allows for all kinds of inversions, all kinds of ways of diving, both real and virtual. The viewer is judge. A variant: the camera filming close to the wet sand, to the rhythm of walking on the strand of Mont-Saint-Michel. Even freer than a dive unburdened of the concern with sculpture. It is only what is shown.

In February 2001, Dinahet took the Saint-Malo to Portsmouth ferry. In one hand, at his hip, the camera; in the other, the handlebar of the bicycle that will get him around once over the Channel. A trusty old woman's bike. He filmed his entry into the hold of the ferry, between cars and lorries. Very noisy, like something being devoured. On the way back, the same thing, only this time he filmed coming out. The image is even more chaotic and uncertain. What we do not see is the broken bicycle (a fall that could have been serious)—which makes itself felt in the wobbly movements of the camera as the artist tries to steady the bike. Until the ferry opens. Never before, surely, has Dinahet so pertinently touched on that uncertain, in-between reality, the non-place that is necessarily the point of friction between two spaces, sometimes two territories. This recalls his visit to the shipyards at Saint-Nazaire as well as his more radical acts of immersion, except that here the violent noise does not come from the artist's own breath but from the turbulence of the world itself, from the clashes that occur on its frontiers. And here, precisely, the frontier is one that moves, the mobile immobility of the point of interference, as close as can be to the most current problematic of art.

Among Dinahet's most recent rushes, which are like a kind of video sketch, we find underwater images filmed in Cyprus and Brittany. They seem so calm and detached, as if freed of destination. In comparison, the views taken by Captain Cousteau seem

saturated with intention. Here, there is nothing but the tracing of these zones that are so close to the bottom and so close to the surface, so near to the open sea and a stone's throw from the shore. No object. No more tanks and therefore no more breathing attesting the presence of the artist. Nothing except the undulating plants and the lapping of water. But in spite of the calm environment, the effortlessness and abandonment of gesture, the artist naturally attains that extreme limit, that infinitesimal point where the question of art is at its most acute, and where there is this answer, which seems so natural: it is enough to be there

Jean-Marc Huitorel

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notes

(1) Catalogue Flux et reflux, 1985 et 1990. Domaine départemental du Douven and L'Imagerie, Lannion. ODDC des Côtes d'Armor, 1990.

(2) *ibid.*

(3) Escales, summer 1991.

(4) Interview at the artist's studio, March 2001.

(5) Saint-Nazaire, Lisbon, Bilbao, Brest, Saint-Malo, Rotterdam