

Sculpting in Video

Larys Frogier on the work of Marcel Dinahet

Ruggedness

Shifting

Friction

Suspension

Irritation

Dilation

Circling

Contraction

Growth

Lurching

Jolting

Flux

Tossing

Envelopment

Immobility

Movement

A few words – disconnected, paradoxical, contradictory – to try to formulate the initial impressions generated by Marcel Dinahet's video projections. Subjective impressions, true, but important in that they identify how hard it can be to "appreciate" the Dinahet oeuvre at first glance. "Appreciate" in the sense of a personal reaction, but also of an objective, discursive, analytical evaluation on the formal level.

The images the artist creates with his camera seem to collide with, and even empathetically penetrate organic, mineral, vegetal, aquatic and industrial matter in its raw state – rock, steel, ice, faces, seaweed, sand, torsos, ships – which divulge purely and simply their appearances, movements, formation and changes, however tiny. Thus it is that the video images offer themselves to the viewer as radically frontal, almost insolent visual images. This results in the collapse of the entire construct of visual attachment to the seductively absorbing formal qualities of an installation or to the art object as narrative composition.

And then there are the films' annoying time frames. They might be short – as a rule between three and eighteen minutes – but they can seem long to the viewer: either drawn out by the relative immobility of the camera within a given setting, or repetitive. Frequently the camera is maintained at a given point in space to record an endless, varied flux – freighter, kelp, car, frost – or is shaken by the continual jolts, rotations and lurchings of a body subject to material forces.

The sound is another source of perceived irritation. Never played down, it emerges raw from a mass of crackings of ice, gusts of wind, ceaseless comings and goings of cars on a bridge, muffled or metallic undersea sonorities. There can be silence, too, sometimes enveloping, sometimes tense and ominous.

This powerful, omnipresent material quality endows Dinahet's images with an unusual harshness and abrasiveness. Which is not to say that it puts the artist in the category of art brut shot through with all the expressiveness of subjective pathos. Let us say, rather, that the frontal materiality at work in the oeuvre is the underpinning of an intransigently complex artistic quest founded on the collision between the act of sculpture and the making of the video image.

To affect this video-sculpture encounter, Dinahet took up an impossible challenge: water as material for reinventing sculptural space. Obviously the Brittany-born artist's geographic and cultural background have shaped works permeated by ocean, shoreline, seascape, port and frontier. Anyone with his roots in a coastal or island environment, immersed since childhood in the marine world and nourished daily by the visual sweep of the ocean, is going to construct his own very distinctive representation of space: not as boundary or configuration, but as endless expanse and extension, as elusive, shifting, indeterminate form.

The importance of this observation lies less in its biographical detail than in its pointing to a fundamental given in Dinahet's artistic practice: the fact that water, prior to being explored or reworked in video, is intrinsically matter without form and, as such, matter out of which any form can be brought forth. It is, then, in no way a metaphor for space and cannot even be considered the constituent element of a filmed landscape. In other words, too-hasty identification of water as the "subject" of Dinahet's works will blind us to simple but crucial questions: how can we "make space" or "shape things" out of absolute open-endedness, perpetual flux, permanent instability? How can we form volume and mass out of matter which, when not contained, restrained, channelled, crystallised, is utterly formless? And how is it, despite all the damming and irrigating, that this instability and mutability of form remain inevitable and necessary?

For Dinahet, then, sculpting in video consists in breaking with a certain idea and a certain practice of sculpture. Where Marcel Broodthaers marked his entry into the visual arts by sealing up his previous collections of poetry inside a shapeless mass of plaster in *Pense-Bête* (1964), Dinahet in 1986 set about taking his sculptures to the ocean floor and filming them as they lay on the sand. So the performative act of drowning sculpture and recording it on video consisted in displacing the sculpture towards an "other space",¹ a kind of sculptural out-of-shot. This made the sea an uncontrollable, uncontainable heterotopia, but one whose breakouts, influxes, interstices, gushings, leaks, opacities, sedimentations and retentions are the very locus of sculpture.

1. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces", trans. Jay Miskowicz, *Diacritics* 16, Spring 1986, pp. 22-27.

Obviously there was no question for Broodthaers of abandoning the act of writing, nor for Dinahet of calling a halt to the act of sculpture. The issue for the former was to cut free of certain literary postulates – the notions of authorship, composition, narrative linearity – and for the latter, to disregard certain sculptural codes: modelling of volumes, exhibition in a predetermined space, creation of site-specific works. And what the viewer finds at the root of these gestures is no nihilist proclamation of the end of an art form, but rather the experience of new modalities of image creation and exhibition. In the "expanded field" of sculpture² this openness had been extensively addressed and utilised by the artists of the 60s and 70s, among them the practitioners of Land Art. It should be said, however, that the Land artists had rethought sculpture in the light of such landscape-marking procedures as excavation (Michael Heizer, *Rift*, 1968), displacement, accumulation and the pouring of sediments (Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970), activation of natural phenomena (Walter de Maria, *Lightning Field*, 1977) and punctuation via arrangements of different materials (Richard Long, *A Circle in Africa*, 1978).

In Dinahet's case, however, the sculptural work is quite different in that the procedure it involves is a dual one:

- elimination of any attempt at inscribing, stratifying or inserting a form into the landscape. The first videos still showed signs of marine landscape-marking, with the submerging of the sculptures in the ocean, followed in 1993 by use of a large pebble taken to the sea bottom. From 1996 onwards, however, the artist stripped his videos of any showing of an artefact in a specific space.
- reduction of the creative act to absolute receptivity on the part of the artist to any manifestation of the living world: friction, dragging, resistance, spasm, floating, rotation, immobilisation, etc. This receptivity led him to consider the recorded performative act not as an imposition, intrusion or authoritarian gesture inflicted on the space in question – a landscape, a body, a building, etc. – but as an act of optimal perception of material entities whose encounter and confrontation would trigger movement and a performative process of change.

The sculptural power of the Dinahet oeuvre lies, then, in this elimination of the art gesture from a given space, with the dual intention of neither establishing a volume nor of imprinting a form on the landscape.

Which for a sculptor is either a culmination or a total aberration.

So where does the act of sculpture lie, then?

The answer is right there before our eyes, but it blinds us: the sculpture-creation procedures have been displaced in their entirety into the business of shaping the video image.

In the first place, when Dinahet films water he always proceeds via collision and balance of power between the body/mass and the eye/camera, and a heavy, ponderous, compact mass. Here we are a long way from the pseudo-poetry of the artist using sculptural artifice to represent the evanescent, filmy or crystalline translucence of water. Whether in the ocean, a river, a stream or a marsh, water is, of course, flow,

2. Rosalind E. Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field", *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, MIT Press, 1986, pp. 276–90.

outpouring, flux; but it is also a density shot through, burdened and impinged on by a mix of elements: sediment, seaweed, ice, mud, sand. Above all, water is the matter that strikes, covers and supports the body/mass, and out of this friction, fusion or floating, the eye/camera will create the image of a shape taking shape. To put it another way, anything can happen when the image is on the threshold between control and disintegration of form.

So the second sculptural quality of the videos lies in the unstable, fragile interstice – which is also an aesthetic balancing act – between control and letting-go, between receptivity and closure, between extension and contraction. The artist's limitless openness to the events of the living world absolutely does not mean that the image does as it likes. While Dinahet lets the image go with the flow, the process is subject to extreme stringency in terms of execution and to image-making rules he sets himself: rules that, later, are very often bent or contradicted by minor, unexpected events, while remaining essential to the shaping of the image.

One of the artist's recurring, self-directed injunctions is that of placing the camera at the median intersection of a body of water, between its above and below. In many videos – among them *Flottaisons* (2000), *Château-Gonthier* (2001), *Les danseurs immobiles* (2006), *Strasbourg* (2008) and *Fleuve* (2009) – the camera held half in the air and half in the water, brings together in one image the inside and outside, the liquid and aerial, the texture and opacity of what is filmed. But fundamentally, looking beyond these sensory interpretations, the division created by the video camera provides a radically masterful reformulation of sculpture's codes of inherent three-dimensionality. Strangely, this line cutting through the image does not just separate two planes: it is the axis around which disturbances, distortions, agitation, flux and multiple vibrations become manifest. The first consequence of this is to reduce the surface effect of the water – and that of the video image – to an indeterminate perception of an inner and an outer three-dimensionality. The waterline becomes an axis around which there fold and unfold events that provide the image with density and depth. Filmed in video, then, a simple waterline allows boldly unlimited experimentation with the body/vision relationship with space. In Dinahet's work this opening into the three-dimensional has nothing of neutral, pure, objective space about it: contrary to what we find among Minimalist sculptors, the spatial reality he is trying to convey via video is a full-time source of destabilisation, unpredictability, reversal, perturbation, shiftings. These signs of three-dimensional entropy are rendered particularly evident in the image through:

- the resistance of the body/mass and the eye/camera to the force of the current and the unsettling eddies of the water (*Falaises*, 2009).
- interference from the sediments and fragments of ice that obscure and sometimes totally cover the lens (*La rivière*, 2003; *Svetlogorsk*, 2006).
- the partial view of what is below the surface and the way it distorts body shape (*Les danseurs immobiles*, 2006). It should be pointed out here that the artist's self-imposed obligation to create a horizontal axis with video in fact addresses another human subject whose face is half in and half out of the water: a shared, dual posture which brings tiny movements and rustlings of forms to the surface of the image as expressions of the body and the subject.

- the view of a building or a landscape which, instead of being anchored to the ground, seems buffeted by the choppiness of the water (*Berder, 2006; Strasbourg – European Parliament, 2008*).
- the face-to-face between the unstable, floating body of the artist and a rocky cliff firmly rooted in the ocean out of which it rises with disarming gravity and massiveness (*Falaises, 2009*).

The actual or virtual presence of an axis has always been fundamental to Dinahet's creative process. Like his clay modules, the early volumetric sculptures contain steel wire spiralling upwards around an invisible axis; and he has also strung clay pancakes together on rock. Many of his other video works detail different axial situations: in *Paysage frotté* (2001) the artist's body turning on itself constitutes the vertical axis via which the camera records the horizon separating sea and sky, a line itself twisted into a whirling, unstable, uneven, vertiginous spiral by the revolving of the body on its own axis.

In every instance the horizontal axis functions as a cut, a line of demarcation, a threshold, a border; but Dinahet's choice of position is deliberate, and consists in always holding to the boundaries in order to articulate contradictory spaces and shapes better, blur spatial cues, break free of aesthetic codes and transcend territorial limits.

Men may seek to control the seas as economic and political zones, but oceans and rivers can never go along with this: demarcation is contrary to their nature. Allan Sekula, another major artist of the sea, has given a masterly description of the artistic challenge in the light of social and geopolitical issues involved:

In an era that denies the very existence of society, to denounce the scandal of an ever more grotesque worldwide "connectedness", and to denounce the ruthless destruction endlessly going on beneath the smooth, liquid surface of the markets, is to put oneself in the situation of an ocean swimmer attuning his movements to the waves, one ear in the water with each breath, listening to the rumble of the stones rolling on the bottom. To insist on social practices is simply to submerge with a clear idea in mind.³

While not directly concerned with social practice, the Dinahet oeuvre shares Sekula's desire to deterritorialise the sea, to dive in with the exigency of "a clear idea in mind". Art has this ability to stand for the absolute necessity of a critical approach to space that looks beyond possession and the power to exclude. The crucial issue for the artist, then, is to formalise what cannot be formalised. This is the challenge that Dinahet seems to be confronting repeatedly, in a perpetual tension between video and sculpture.

3. Allan Sekula, *Titanic's Wake*, Paris, Le Point du Jour, 2003, p.14.