

Scraping

The importance of sound in the work of Marcel Dinahet

"The camera nods in the water, dipping into a coral landscape, then lurching up into a bright blue sky. The factory on distant land looks like a plaything; the distance rendering it in miniature, bobbing around. The ocean bed rises and falls and it seems that the only constant is the glimmering dissecting line; the waves as they lap in the sunshine." À Chypre video, colour, silent, 01:22min 2001

It is perhaps obscure to begin with a silent video when writing about the sound in Marcel Dinahet's work, and it may seem lazy to choose such a seductive piece - a work that brings to mind childhood holidays, is evocatively image based and perhaps the most filmic of any of this video artist's oeuvre. This choice is however strategic. If I can show my underwater companion the sculptural qualities of such a work and the relevance of the use of video, rather than film, then perhaps I can begin to unravel how sound, even when edited out, is inherent to this artist's very physical practice.

The four videos of *Figures* are also silent, though their recent installation in the high ceilinged hall of La Criée in Rennes was echoic - the light from the four large video projections bouncing off the walls and filling the space with swimming-pool-blue. Each projection showed different footage of the same woman submerged underwater. The cameraman circling the woman at a slow underwater pace, filming her face and shoulders, the odd sluggish movement of thick black hair waving in the water, the tiny bubbles clinging to her nostrils. One video is shot at a slight downwards angle, panning round the top of her head, another is filmed closer; the screen filled with a metre long ear, a large expanse of blue tinged cheek. Each viewpoint is describable only by the others - nearer or farther than the last.

It was after seeing this installation that I realized my understanding of all of Dinahet's work is not as a spectator; a reader of art theory, or a viewer of moving image. But as a swimmer. Not as the intrepid artist; taking his chances in Baltic ice of Svetlogorsk, or the murky realms of the Thames. But as a regular frequenter of public baths.

Four times a week I undress and dive into a chlorinated man-made pool, relishing the opportunity to both distance myself from the world and to somehow get back in touch with it. It is an escape into the physical, a chance to feel the weight of water on my skin. And it is systematic exercise; I pull my limbs through the thick mass, building and relieving tension in my muscles, and I tread water, beating my legs, working hard to stay still.

"The woman in the video is in control. The camera does not linger on her flesh in a voyeuristic manner, her eyes are shut and she is turned within herself - a closed physical object. The loops fracture when she comes up for air. The camera remains fixed on her face and the dappled background moves downwards - faster and faster - like when a neighbouring train leaves the station and you think that it is you who is departing. Finally her face appears to move, is moving - eyes... nose... mouth... and at last the chin hits the surface line above and disappears." *Figures*, video, colour, silent (4 screen installation) 2009

To be underwater is not to become weightless, but to be aware of your bulk in a different way - perhaps to be distanced from it, to have a different sense of its scale. Dinahet began his artistic career as a traditional sculptor, carving physical objects. He first used video to capture the sinking of these sculptures into water, records of what were perhaps anchor-like attempts to fix a point. Soon however the physical objects were completely abandoned and the video itself began to uncover a highly corporeal understanding of the relations between objects in space; an acute sense of movement. Location understood as measurable rather than rigid, a sense of the body, and objects, not as weightless, but as constantly *in relation to*.

The title 'Figures' suggests an archetype, a search for an understanding of 'The Body' in space. The work brings to mind Sartre's interpretation of the sculptural forms of Giacometti, as repeated attempts to lend movement to statues;

... in pictures, the unreality of the third dimension causes ipso facto the unreality of the other two [...] If I approach, I come closer to the canvas, not to the figures on it. Even if I put my nose against it, I should see them twenty paces distant [...]

In frontally opposing classicism, Giacometti has restored an imaginary and indivisible space to statues. In accepting relativity from the very start, he has found the absolute.ⁱ

With the air of a rehearsal; stark light and the smell of chlorine, all action takes place in the delimited container, the functional stage that is the swimming pool. *Figures* could be described as a demonstrative choreography of bodies moving to appear fixed, but this is not to deem it simply an experiment. The action of the camera is not merely recording this investigation into movement; video is the process, the *form* of the choreography. Exploring distance and space, Dinahet proves the possibility of *video by videoing*, as Sartre suggested Giacometti must

'prove sculpture by sculpting' [...] 'as Diogenes proved movement by walking.'ⁱⁱ

Thus Dinahet could be described as a Structuralist, a term usually applied to experimental film-makers of the 60s, artists who emphasised *film as film*, making formal work which avoided narrative and attempted to destroy illusionism by drawing attention to film's materiality; the action of light projected through spools of photographic image.ⁱⁱⁱ The video camera, as Bill Viola has pointed out, has its 'roots in the live,' and is 'closer to a microphone in operation than it is to a film camera.'^{iv} In film, movement is an illusion created by a succession of still images, 'In video, stillness is the basic illusion: a still image does not exist because the video signal is in constant motion scanning across the screen.'^v Treading water, Dinahet draws out video's inherent qualities, its nature as a moving medium.

We might continue this comparison with Structuralist film, noting the experiential nature of such works as Tony Conrad's *The Flicker* (1965) a film which did just that, using only alternating black and white frames, to epileptic effect. However, though it investigates and actualizes video's physical properties, Dinahet's video also constantly acknowledges its position as edited recorded perspective, and as such must also be considered as 'documentary' albeit a singular form of this genre. This documentary is uncomplicated with narrative, and unconcerned with the play of fact and fiction pertinent to much moving image work of recent years. Yet it is

documentary nonetheless. Its indexicality, its evoked sense of place, and of *placing*, is fundamental to the work.

Literally immersed, standing among the projections, the viewer is active, physically turning in order to watch different loops, seeking an understanding of the space in which they are placed, and compelled by the slow perfunctory -ness of the non-narrative action. Figures, video, colour, silent (4 screen installation) 2009

Considering the *experience* that Dinahet's work offers by this coalescence of documentary and materiality, perhaps audio recordings may provide the best context in which to consider his oeuvre. A recording of sound is indexical –a trace of a past action. Yet when played it also functions independently as an event in itself, vibrations made inside the speakers. This sound is both demonstrative of the past sound (recorded and edited), and a new sound in itself. Likewise in Dinahet's work the movement of the body in space is both described and experienced.

Blackened tree stumps form in ranks across the exposed coastline, while footsteps tap across the shore, staccato upon rock, then slower, steadier, squelching in and back out of muddy sand and the long puddles of low tide. The footsteps conduct the motion of the camera, the view dragged along, lurching up and down. Wind whips the microphone, and the horizon flows with the camera; a shifting demarcation tilting upwards and running diagonally across the rain splattered screen. Basse marée video, colour, sound, 5:52min, 2003.

By the sea's edge, half-submerged in water or crossing a bridge; Dinahet's practice is often described as one concerned with 'boundaries,' and 'peripheries'. This fascination with limits might imply a search for a negation, a cliff edge from which to consider a jump, and in English 'periphery' suggests the marginal and neglected. The application of these terms to Dinahet's practice, though accurate, is slightly misleading, and may ignore what happens at these junctures; the 'limit' is the point at which one edge hits another, the 'boundary' is where things meet.^{vi} Sound is made by such touching; caused by surfaces clashing and by vibrations against the ear drum.

An earlier work *Finistères* (2000) involved mapping the furthest points of the Atlantic coast, before travelling the perimeter and

filming at these most Westerly Lands' Ends. The resulting video, taken both in and out of these waters is punctuated with the sound of the divers breathing, keeping time with edited synchronised shots of above and below the Atlantic. Writing about the project Sophie Legrandjacques has suggested that 'the sound of the diver's respiration is audible' on the video to remind us that 'sound is distance, a calibration of space, a timespan.'^{vii} Hinting that Dinahet's practice is closer to SONAR than GPS she goes on to discuss how the mapping of positions at sea is no longer achieved by sound radio, but has been replaced by digital mapping systems (GPS) which turns all 'maritime space' into 'global and universal space,' thus instead of finding ourselves in relation to local points, we locate ourselves from a global perspective.

Dinahet's work has no such overarching and fixed viewpoint, and indeed his action, video exploring the near and far, can be compared to sound radio. Sound Navigation and Ranging (SONAR) locates distant submerged objects by emitting pulses of sounds and listening for echoes.^{viii} There is a sense in which SONAR is rather violent, perhaps because it is used to locate vessels in order to attack them but also because it demonstrates the corporeality of sound. Sound waves are physical phenomena and have tangible effects on the body. We may not believe in the legend of the brown note, a specific frequency that causes those in its range to shit themselves, but we do know that sound canons are used by the US police to disperse rioters. Sound then as measure, but also sound as a force.

Active SONAR; feeling its way around space and sharing visual commonalities with surveillance footage, Dinahet's work might appear to survey. However 'sound as collision', is the key. His purpose is not, as some have put it, to 'scan', but to 'scrape.'

"Scraping" describes dragging a hard object across another surface or object, it is violent, it is visceral, 'a scraped knee' evoking only too easily the awkward, restrained pull of hard ground across bare skin. The sound it makes is often piercing, painful to hear, perhaps because of its pitch, or perhaps because of empathy; the sound evokes the action, inducing a sympathetic physical response - the listener winces. Onomatopoeic; imitative and generative, "scraping" both describes and manifests.

Within Dinahet's tactile explorations, the boundary, the 'glimmering dissecting line' may be just that. Writing in 1936, about 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' Walter Benjamin found the cameraman akin to a surgeon,

he greatly diminishes the distance between himself and the patient by penetrating into the patient's body, and increases it but little by the caution with which his hand moves among the organs.^{ix}

Benjamin was writing before the video camera, before work such as Dinahet's was possible. Yet he perfectly describes the potential to get so close that you 'scrape' the image, Dinahet's ability to access spaces in a different manner.^x He describes the 'permeation of reality with mechanical equipment' as offering an interaction that is based on action, and purely physical;

the surgeon at the decisive moment abstains from facing the patient man to man; rather, it is through the operation that he penetrates into him.^{xi}

Scraping accumulates and sculpts. Too close; touching or clashing, the encounters of Marcel Dinahet carve space, scoring it. They are waltzes; choreographed studies of proximity.

Cliffs. Azure sea and golden crags, not looking down from the crest, but hard by the rocks below. The view is tentatively lifted up and peering across the waves, and then dunked, completely submerged; the screen filled with dense cerulean. Coming towards land from the open sea, the diver has got too close, and is confronted by a treacherous wall, the current inching him nearer to harm, and then pulling him back again. Legs thrash weakly against the warm swell of the waves. Falaises #1 video, colour, silent (4 screen installation) 2009

The *Falaises* series provokes an empathy for bodies thrown against hard stone. Sound moves faster underwater, but hearing and the ability to place sound sources is reduced, muffled. This blocking-out may heighten other receptors. Perhaps that is why returning to the *Falaises*, I find myself wondering where the roaring and thrashing has gone. As with *Figures*, where I was convinced that I heard the suffocated echoes of a tiled cuboid, I discover that this piece, so inherently aural, is silent. I wonder if I am picking up different

frequencies, or if there might be a certain synaesthesia at work – a disorientation of the senses, where movement on screen can be sound, and blues and yellows can be tepid. A Romantic legacy has accustomed us to think of sound as fleeting, ephemeral and weightless, but sound is not only heard, it is tactile, it feels and is felt.

The sea is stiff, the waves look like they are slowed down, but they are literally frozen. The view is across the waves; towards a concrete pier, head and ears above water. The sound does not correspond to the position of the eye; it is not of the wind, it is not what the swimmer might hear. It is the sound of brittle water hitting the body, of ice crushing against the microphone.

Svetlogorsk, video, colour, sound, 03:27 min 2006

Interfering, the microphone is too intimate, the lens too close to produce an overview. Yet this immediacy allows an understanding of space which is *of the body*; a perception which though visual, is not image based. A discussion of the sound in Marcel Dinahet's work cannot be reduced to a consideration of its soundtrack. Extensively investigating the movement of bodies in space, sound is not ancillary to Marcel Dinahet's work, but innate to his practice. Sound is his medium; the sculptural substance and the process of his probing explorations.

Louise O'Hare, London, May 2010.

ⁱ '...This is because he was the first one to take it into his head to sculpt man as he appears, that is to say, from a distance. He confers on his plaster figures an absolute distance, as the painter does for those who live in his canvas. He creates his figure 'at ten paces', 'at twenty paces' and whatever you do, there it stays.' Jean-Paul Sartre, 'The Search for the Absolute', catalogue for the exhibition *Alberto Giacometti, Sculptures, Paintings, Drawings*, Pierre Matisse Gallery, New York, January – February 1948

ⁱⁱ '... Giacometti himself perpetually starts afresh. However, it is not a question of an infinite progression; there is a definite goal to be attained, a single problem to be solved: how to mould a man in stone without petrifying him? It is all or nothing: if the problem to be solved, the number of statues matters little. ...'In space,' says Giacometti, 'there is too much.' This too much is the pure and simple coexistence of parts in juxtaposition. [...] to sculpt, for him, is to take the fat off space; he compresses space, so as to drain off its exteriority.' Jean-Paul Sartre, 'The Search for the Absolute', catalogue for the exhibition *Alberto Giacometti, Sculptures, Paintings, Drawings*, Pierre Matisse Gallery, New York, January – February 1948

ⁱⁱⁱ For more on Structural Film see Peter Gidal, Introduction, *Structural Film Anthology*, BFI, London 1976

^{iv} 'Looking at the technical development of both video and film, we immediately notice a profound difference: as film has evolved basically out of photography (a film is a

succession of discrete photographs), video has emerged from audio technology. A video camera is closer to a microphone in operation than it is to a film camera; video images are recorded on magnetic tape in a tape recorder. Thus we find that video is closer in relationship to sound, or music, than it is to the visual media of film and photography.'

Bill Viola, *The Porcupine and the Car, Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House: Writings 1973-1994*, ed Robert Violette, Thames and Hudson Ltd, London, 1995 p62

v 'In film, Arns says, the basic illusion is of movement, produced by the succession of still images flashing on the screen. In video, stillness is the basic illusion: a still image does not exist because the video signal is in constant motion scanning across the screen.'

Bill Viola quoting Robert Arns (writing in *Arts Canada* magazine), *The Porcupine and the Car, Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House: Writings 1973-1994*, ed Robert Violette, Thames and Hudson Ltd, London, 1995 p63

vi Perhaps a place of 'gathering', consider Heidegger –

'A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something *begins its presencing*. That is why the concept is that of *horismos*, that is, the horizon, the boundary.'

Martin Heidegger, *Building Dwelling Thinking, Poetry, Language, Thought*, 1971 translated by Albert Hofstadter, Perennial Classics, New York, 2001 p152 (Originally published by Harper and Row, New York 1971)

vii Sophie Legrandjacques, *Marcel Dinahet: Les Flottaisons*, Centre d'art Le grand café à Saint-Nazaire, France, 2000

viii 'SONAR (from "sound navigation ranging"), technique for detecting and determining the distance and direction of underwater objects by acoustic means. Sound waves emitted by or reflected from the object are detected by sonar apparatus and analyzed for the information they contain.'

Encyclopædia Britannica

ix Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' 1936 translated by Harry Zohn, *Illuminations*, London, 1973

x I owe the use of this term to a short description by Domo Baal in the programme notes accompanying the screening 13+ (April 2005). She writes –

'This space is not described but written, traversed, explored – "scraped" by the camera.'

xi Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' 1936 translated by Harry Zohn, *Illuminations*, London, 1973

Benjamin compared the engagement of the filmmaker to that of the painter, stood away from reality attempting to survey the whole;

'The shooting of a film, especially of a sound film, affords a spectacle unimaginable anywhere at any time before this [...] The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web. There is a tremendous difference in the pictures they obtain. That of the painter is a total one, that of the cameraman consists of multiple fragments which are *assembled* under a new law.'

(my italics)

Of course the artist working in video differs from the artist working in film, in that their task is not to re-assemble but to edit, as Bill Viola has noted;

'the main problem for artists using video these days lies in deciding what *not* to record. Making a videotape, therefore, might not be so much the creation or building up of some thing, but more like the cutting or carving away of everything else until only a specific thing remains'.

Bill Viola, *The Porcupine and the Car, Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House: Writings 1973-1994*, ed Robert Violette, Thames and Hudson Ltd, London, 1995 p60