

ROBERT CAHEN “Landscapes”. *Reproductibilitat* 2.4.

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Learning to look through the pixelated horizon, succumb to its porous atmosphere, like wave magma, like an oscillating curve, a virtual ocean of vertigos, caves and vantage points. Seeking the light between the shadows, and thinking that all things pass.

In the techno-electronic situation of the arts, when hyper-communication and image inflation collapse the panorama of that which is real with the reflection of mirrors that intensify the experience of the gaze, the fact is revealed that video allowed for new ways of seeing and thinking based on time-image.

In its larval, pre-digital origins, we find mechanical registers of happenings or everyday situations. From the beginnings of film and cinema screening with the Lumière brothers, and including the early experiments with video via distortions on TV screens carried out by the pioneers Nam June Paik or Wolf Vostell, formulas arise to transmit the altered real. From then on, the objective register becomes subjective. Travel and landscape are subject and medium.

Thus, after a saturation of films with everyday, familiar stories, the Lumières embarked on sending contributors to unknown countries like Russia, Japan, Morocco, India, Mexico or Spain, and others, with the aim of documenting travels. These travel films, *Travelogues*, are a journey through landscapes and an existential drift. Once recorded, not only were they projected on screens, but also deployed in different exhibition formats, including train carriages themselves. Presented as panoramic views, their effect on the public was to produce even greater fascination than period painting. This fashion of *Travel films* or *Railway films* diluted in around 1907, but their approaches and the influence they had in terms of possibilities for museums and shows such as cinema are still very present today.

A rediscovered classic

Robert Cahen is one of the pioneers of video art, who worked on documental and experimental image since the 'seventies, until transferring his resources and innovations to the application of the moving image, from analogue to digital video. Continuing with the review exhibitions corresponding to the *Reproductibilitat* cycle, Es Baluard proposes a new strategy centred on approaching the analysis of the capturing of landscape based on a retrospective of his worked linked to this subject and a large installation produced thanks to the project “*Missions artistiques a la Serra de Tramuntana*” (Artistic Missions to the Serra de Tramuntana), organised by Es Baluard and the Consorci Serra de Tramuntana (an entity formed by the Govern de les Illes Balears and Consell Insular de Mallorca).

The Serra de Tramuntana mountain range, located in the north-west of the island of Mallorca, was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 2011 in the Cultural Landscape category. In 2017, in the mountain refuge of Can Boi, located in the village of Deià, Robert Cahen and Thierry Maury started a new artistic and experimental training project with some artists, most of them from the Balearic Islands, but also from Iran or Colombia. When conceiving the proposal I considered, from the outset and in dialogue with the people heading up the Consorci, the utility of Robert Cahen's broad experience as a multidisciplinary artist and pioneer in the field of video art. Cahen had carried out projects of this kind all over Latin America, Asia and Europe, and his vision of the landscape is unique and exceptional, enduring

and universal. On his long journeys, for years searching urban and natural landscapes from China to the South Pole, he shows us what occurs outside, but also inside the being.

This transcends the pedagogical facet that runs in parallel to his work, and whose main research points are: light, movement and textures. Based on the real image, alongside different contributors he works on their digital editing in the studio. And it is here where new fictions and interpretations of a lyrical and occasionally a narrative nature, always revealing, are made visible. Having refined the image in post-production, it will seem as though its parts contained text in themselves, the experience of a monologue expanded through film signs with an ordering of temporality based on things subjective and autobiographical.

In the project developed in Mallorca, with his peculiar gaze of the nature of the Serra de Tramuntana area, the orography and light, discovered by classical landscapists, is dissected using the empirical methodology of the hike and the planning of different sessions to capture it using video cameras. A route characterised by a dystopian organisation of temporality. The work of this precursor of video art has been recognised, amongst other aspects, for the way it signifies the journey and decodes the layers of reality of the territories to be discovered, near or remote, making them timeless.

As Michel de Montaigne analysed in one of his well-known essays, speaking of “nature”: “we are before a system of signs and movements interpreted, firstly, by a creator, whatever their genre, and subsequently by the receiver-spectator”.¹

Contemporary creators of Cahen’s, along the lines of Raymond Bellour, also use video as a medium to have us enter another time of images, so that those between-the-images come to be a space of virtual transformation between them and us. We may also remember Stan VanDerBeek’s *movie murals*, but above all our starting point is the relationship between real time and the film time implicit in moving images.

In *La Region centrale* Michael Snow explored over three hours of continuous camera movement on a mountaintop in Québec. Snow said, “I want to make a gigantic landscape film equal in terms to the great landscape paintings of Cézanne, Poussin, Corot, Monet, Matisse and, in Canada, the Group of Seven”.² On this same desire we also find other audiovisual creators, such as Jonas Mekas or Stan Brackage, who have also created a school.

Robert Cahen, in our case, experiments with time by taking it to levels of meta-painting.

Thus, in his work we find sonority and plasticity kinaesthetically merged. His pieces reveal how sound, along with the capturing of the image, is the starting point for a dual formula which Cahen has been combining since his beginnings, in the ‘seventies, influenced by his training as a musician. His time with the Groupe de Recherches Musicales at the ORTF and Pierre Schaeffer, and with the Groupe de Recherche Image and the creation of the INA are key to understanding him. With the utilisation from 1979 of the EMS Spectron, the intervals of his frames acquire fresh nuances, the mark of which still lives on today.

The selection of works presented at Es Baluard by way of a retrospective review of his work on the capturing of nature enables us to reflect on the sense of the sequence shot in landscape. The method of his selective gaze, the focus on which he decides to record, imply an exercise of attention, but also a relinquishing, which brings about a succumbing to the beauty of the aesthetics. Sandra Lichi, one of the experts and the main analyst of his film methodology, would say that he configures his work in video as an eternally fresh pictorial work.

When he executes *Horizontales couleurs* (1979) he plays with patterns and the real image evolves in abstract, producing vibrant effects reminiscent of the *op art* painting of Bridget Riley. In the same year - 1979 - Bill Viola develops the piece *Chott el Djerid (A portrait in*

light and Heat), in which he uses telephoto lenses to capture the phenomenon of mirages and to use it to speak of perception, the physical and the psychological.

In video-installation projects, Cahen resolves the expansion of audiovisual process with simple yet effective resources, as in the case of *Paysages-passage* (1997), a work belonging to the FRAC Alsace collection, composed of 18 screens with transparent cases which are lined up to construct a dual curve, presenting alternate images of nature alternating in rhythmic fluctuations which rewrite the landscape.

Suspended or invisible moments in time are some of the situations which habitually appear in his work. They are strange futures grafted in works like *Françoise* (2007) or associated to travel transfers where speed acquires a subjective rhythm of its own. The pieces I have selected for review regarding the landscape point out to us this reversion of that which real and tangible in liquid experiences as fluctuating as they are eternal. *L'éclipse*, 3' (1979), *Trompe-l'oeil*, 7' (1979), *Juste le temps*, 13' (1983), *Cartes postales* (1984-1986), *Montenvers et Mer de glace* (1987), *Dernier adieu* (1988), *Le deuxième jour* (1988), *Chili impressions* (1989), *Hong-Kong Song* (1989), *L'île mystérieuse* (1991), *Voyage d'hiver* (1993), *Sept visions fugitives* (1995), *Corps flottants* (1997), *Le Cercle*, *Dieu voit tout* (2011), *Entrevoir* (2014) and *Cérémonie* (2015) indicate this to us.

The eternal return of the landscape

As a cultural construction, un landscape is not in itself a reality. When it appears in the history of art, under the name of pictorial genre, around the 16th century, it does so as a consequence of the Protestant Reform, after which time it began to acquire a certain autonomy.

Specialist studies refer to the landscape as an artificial representation, “a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolising surroundings”.³ Some even say that the *genius loci* is nothing more than the art that inspires the place through our gaze, a gaze that is guilty of the authentic value of the landscape in that it attains more than being an unquestionable physical area.

As the protagonist of romantic painting of the last decades of the 18th century, its importance with symbolic language and the metaphor become significant. For artists like Monet, landscape is a resource for analysing atmospheric effects and giving way to the representation of subjective impressions linked to it. Cézanne was interested in its total integrity.

Robert Cahen's current work challenges spectators from the perspective and the construction in and with displacement. Contemplating its digital translocation is as revealing as that a traditional, static painting may offer us, circumscribed in a frame. It is a universal scene, which can be exchanged between regions and frontiers, a gaze with an Asian influence that brings us closer both to the Chinese theory of painting and to the pictorial interpretation of everyday life, the avant-garde precepts of impressionism or abstraction. The treatment of colour, the systems of perception and time expanded as an instrument for portraying things real are key pillars on which the construction of the exercise rests which has been performed in selected places of the Serra de Tramuntana mountains. A part of an island in the Mediterranean, with an orography similar to that of its other islands, united by the atmosphere of gentle contrasts, winds and shared waters.

Accepting that what we have before us, as nature, is a social, cultural and aesthetical construct, its mirror is a field dilated in subjectivity. The mutation of the state of the landscape shows that unforeseeable chance challenges the hunter of the sequence shot and pulls him to the vertigo of the sublime.

Whereas filming painting in movement was one of the challenges we set ourselves in the Mallorca project, speaking of video-landscape as an essay helps us to contribute to analysing a genre that has hardly been researched since contemporary times.

Life is present and allows time past to be restored. The sequence shot is a resource and a trick for amplifying the time of the gaze towards the vastness of the horizon, which measures us with it and asks us what and where we are. The partition of the screens in his installation in the exhibition room, the planning of the assisted viewpoint.

“There is no individual, there is no species. Only the highs and lows of intensity”, wrote Nietzsche in *The Gay Science*. Perhaps only light serves in its nuances to identify those leaps of situations and locate us in each moment from our strength and our fragility.

Lights and vibrations, essay for the painting in movement is the installation resulting from the specific production for the *Missions a la Serra de Tramuntana* project, which peers into this abyss of contrasts. We may think that through this installation, we transit all the aesthetical schools and philosophies on the history of landscape.

And the gestures of contemporary artists like John Cage, who in turn influenced creators of *land art* such as Robert Morris, Walter de Maria, Robert Smithson or Richard Long, convey a new power over the landscape to movement, dematerialisation and that which is conceptual. In the audiovisual drift, the force of the creator is in the relation between time lived, time captured and time handed over to the spectator.

In addition to this is the fact that both natural material and the spectator are subjected to a continuous dynamic of displacement. In his introduction to the book *La mouvance*, Augustin Berque already spoke of that which is mobile as intrinsically related to the landscape.

We know that the state of nature is temporary, and even dramatically unpredictable, heading towards the change in the planet's climate. Thus, introducing the indeterminacy of form and the appropriation of the immaterial as an agent reveals new processes over which the contemporary creator has an influence and acquires the responsibility of perpetuation. With his work, Robert Cahen bestows new value on his time.

Moreover, Cahen's approach shapes a certain contemporary tribute to the sense of the sublime. That reference, established in the subconscious of every human being awestruck by beauty, integrates into it referentially.

We are the scale that gives the proportion, like those characters of Caspar David Friedrich, spectators and subjects.

That which is sublime of the romantic painters of northern Europe transmutes; Cahen renews the genre of landscape without emotional distance. It is a kind of aesthetics of the sublime that is closer to Kant than to Schiller. He glories in manipulating the setback, the challenge of the storm, the untimeliness of a light which was not the desired one, the difficulties of displacement as the day progresses and turns it into an exercise in the history of landscape art. A deconstruction through the possibilities of spaces that can be exchanged, resulting in the moment, and experiment in the digital laboratory and the real space.

¹ Montaigne, “Sur des vers de Virgile”, *Essais III*, 5, quoted in: Alain Roger, *Breve tratado del paisaje*, Biblioteca Nueva, Madrid, 2007 (1^a ed. 1997), p. 21.

² Cornwell, Regina, *Snow Seen: The films and Photographs of Michael Snow*, Peter Martin Associates, Toronto, 1980, p. 117.

³ Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels (pub.), *The iconography of landscape*, Cambridge Studies in Historical Geography, Avon, Cambridge University Press, 1989, 2nd ed. (1st ed. 1988), p. 1.