

# Robert Cahen — Searching Through Memory: The Origins of Time, the Image and the ‘Between’

## Foreword by FUQIAO— On the Origins of a Space ‘Between’

The text Robert Cahen shares here is not a retrospective manifesto constructed after the event. Rather, it stems from a return to memory: that of early discoveries, hesitations, technical experiments, encounters and intuitions that gradually shaped his artistic language.

From musique concrète to the electronic image, from learning to listen to learning to look, Robert Cahen recounts a journey in which his creative process was long shaped by experimentation. This took place even before artistic forms or categories could be clearly defined. He recalls his time with the Groupe de Recherches Musicales and the influence of Pierre Schaeffer. He also speaks of the ORTF’s early special-effects studios, but above all of that constant desire to use tools in ways other than those for which they seemed intended. He wanted to slow down, reverse, transform and displace images and sounds in order to reveal what, in ordinary perception, often remains invisible.



Through these memories, several of the questions that would run through his work for years to come are already taking shape: how can the passage of time be made perceptible? How can one reveal what escapes the immediate gaze? How can one create a tension between appearance and disappearance, movement and stillness, memory

and the present? And what exactly happens in that very moment when one image becomes another?

This last question occupies a special place in Robert Cahen’s career. Speaking of his work, he himself refers to the ‘moment of transition between the moving image and the still image’, and to that space in which something from ‘the In-between’ emerges. It is no longer just the image that matters, but the transition; no longer just a state, but the transformation that leads from one state to another.

It is also from this focus on intervals that the curatorial collaboration behind *\*Porous Instant\** was built.

FUQIAO works specifically to bring out spaces of resonance between artistic approaches that are not based on formal similarity or mutual illustration. The dialogue developed between Robert Cahen and Cécilia Ho was characterised by a refusal to artificially bring two worlds together. The aim was to identify the questions that were already circulating between them: time, the trace, memory, transformation, presence and absence, and the threshold between two states.

Cécilia Ho's work, in particular, has made it possible to extend these inquiries through other materials and other temporalities. An earlier work can thus be revisited several years later, imbued with a new trace, and bring together within a single object two distinct moments of creation and memory. This superimposition of temporalities resonates directly with Robert Cahen's research into memory and the coexistence of different states of time.

From these connections, *\*Porous Instant\** gradually emerged. The project does not seek to produce a synthesis between the two practices. On the contrary, it explores what may arise **between them**: a space where the works retain their autonomy whilst revealing, through their proximity, new dimensions.

From this perspective, Robert Cahen's text published here can be read as one of the project's fundamental sources. Long before *Porous Instant* came into being, he was already articulating this fascination with thresholds, slowdowns, transformations and moments of transition. He also described a way of creating that prioritises discovery over explanation, and experimentation over demonstration.

Publishing it today in the FUQIAO Journal thus allows us to trace the project back to its origins: to the research, the wanderings and the intuitions from which some of its fundamental questions took shape.

**FUQIAO — Journal**

## I search my memory...



I search my memory for a few moments of my discoveries: the significance that musique concrète held whilst I was learning it between 1969 and 1971, and, at the same time, the transition from the world of music to that of the image.

It was electronics that led me to video. In 1968, I didn't know it was possible to manipulate images; in fact, I didn't know exactly how the television I was watching worked: children don't ask themselves such questions; they don't know how a television image can appear before them on a screen. It's an extraordinary given... It's marvellous, isn't it, to receive images that come from who knows where, that transform and take shape right before your eyes. I think I became interested in the electronic image when I learnt that it was possible to manipulate it,

to give it a life of its own – something that, to me, was akin to magic. Throughout my studies and even at the end of my internship in 1971, when I was accepted as a composer and member of the Groupe de Recherches Musicales (GRM), I constantly asked myself which form of creative expression would suit me best: should I make music? Work with images? Paint? I couldn't quite see what was taking shape for me. When you're in the thick of the action, you're not reflecting on your own actions. You need time; now I have that perspective.

When I'd go into the special effects studios of the ORTF's Research Department (the Research Department headed by Pierre Schaeffer, the inventor, the father of musique concrète), I was effectively going there to carry out research, to work on electronic imagery, without any particular aim. I didn't ask myself whether I was making video art or electronic cinema; no, I simply took hold of the tools made available to me, throwing myself into it without a second thought, driven solely by the desire to express myself – or, more precisely, to create impressions and stir up emotions. Whilst video in the 1970s was highly militant in France, and although I was based at the ORTF's Research Department, I threw myself into a 'form of art apart'.

It must be said that I'd only just arrived from my provincial home in Alsace, and that I wasn't quite settled into life yet; I had everything to discover. 1968 had passed me by; I'd just finished my military service.

I was 25 years old; I had everything to learn, and I learnt it all during the 1970s.

I chose to draw on what lay within me, to bring it to the fore, and to go beyond it. Apart from the aesthetic aspect, what interested me was the emotional side: knowing and understanding what, through image and sound, evokes emotions, and learning how to

recreate them. Through musique concrète, I had discovered the power of listening. A particular kind of listening: that of sounds stripped of their causal context. This had opened up a new perspective on the world for me, considerably broadening my creative horizons. Concrete music embodies something innovative, just as the manipulation of the electronic image opens up a world where storytelling can take different forms.

I longed for cinema: having been shaped by it, I dreamt of making films. But I couldn't tell stories in the traditional way, with a beginning, a middle and an end.

My father had founded one of France's first film societies in Mulhouse in 1945. I saw many 'great films' – the classics.

We had a Pathé Babby projector at home. My brother would screen these little silent films onto a sheet pinned to the wall. I remember the first special effect my brother created live as he cranked the projector, whilst I was watching a film with him about parachute jumping. The man flying, perched on the wing of a biplane and about to jump, jumping and falling into the void; my brother would stop the film and say, imitating the voice of the man falling, 'Blimey, I've forgotten my parachute!' Then he'd rewind the film to show the parachutist without a parachute, and repeat the action right through to the end.

As a child, that made a big impression on me and I drew on it later. When it comes to viewing the image 'forwards and backwards', no problem at all.

I didn't question the logic of things. What mattered to me – and still matters – was to lead the viewer into a new way of seeing, of perceiving, of reading between the lines to piece together a story. A glimpse.

In my first video essay, *\*L'invitation au voyage\** (1973), I brought to life a few reflections: on time, on the passage of time, and on the transformation of images.

It was an adventure; I learnt what it meant to produce a film, what it was like to go on location with a small crew, and what it was like to immerse myself in research and experimentation. I believe that at that time, my approach to my work was very much in the 'Schaefferian' tradition, which involved not using machines for their intended purpose, but turning them on their head to see if something else might emerge from them. First, you had to make discoveries. As Pierre Schaeffer said, echoing a phrase by Picasso: 'Discover first, then seek.'

If I had to say something about 'L'invitation au voyage', my first 'video essay' (1973), I'd say that I regard this essay

as the work of a young filmmaker. A young filmmaker discovering a new language to which he applies his own poetics. I put a lot of things into it – memories and emotions that were part of my personal history. I chose photographs – of people I loved, from a trip to Italy that was very important to me – and I coloured these black-and-white images using a so-called 'universal' colourisation technique invented at the Images Department of the

Research Service. I captured a part of my life at that time, and then came 'Juste le temps', a video from 1983.

The question of speed lies at the heart of one of the issues addressed by the theoretical philosopher Paul Virilio: *\*Juste le Temps\** and *\*Hong Kong Song\** are like a response to this issue.

Insightful critics have cited these works in relation to Virilio's thinking. For me, it is through the moving image that I articulate my critical and philosophical stance!

The themes I explore in my work are linked to my personal history: it is Tarkovsky who writes in *\*The Sealed Time\** that we all carry within us stories worthy of becoming cinematic works.

The choice of slow motion, for example, which runs through my entire body of work, remains one of the key elements of my artistic approach: it seeks, amongst other things, to narrate what cannot be seen – the invisible – but also, through its elongation, to offer a new interpretation, an open-ended reading for the viewer, who will project themselves into the slowed-down images and can then tell their own story. There is also the tension, the suspense of what is yet to come, contained within the 'slow motion', and then, as Roland Barthes put it so well, there is 'slowing down to finally have time to see' (in his book *\*La chambre claire\**).

I have been creating video installations for over ten years now. In describing my approach to one or the other, it is highly likely that insights into my way of working, experimenting and discovering will emerge.

Take, for example, "Tombe", a video installation from 1997. This video installation is a response to a filming problem I had been pondering for many years: how do you film an object or a person in free fall? How do you manage to follow that object along its trajectory, and convey its weight whilst placing it in a sort of weightless state?

It was with my friend Patrick Bokanowski—one of the great directors of experimental (and animated) cinema—that, in Paris in the 1970s, during our friendly and amusing get-togethers and discussions, we tackled this problem and sought a solution.

Patrick was particularly concerned with which actor could convey, in a fall that was more acted out than filmed, what was going on in the mind of the person falling. For my part, I was trying to find the technical solution for filming this fall (without yet realising that 'seeing' it took precedence over the effect).

In 1997, an idea struck me: in water, falling bodies slow down! And that's how the idea for this installation came about: I decided to select a large number of objects (and I remember my search through my house in Mulhouse, where I'd recently moved in with my wife and our son, Alexandre, aged 4, gathering kitchen utensils, Alexandre's toys (including a train!), sheets from his little bed, clothes, newspapers, etc.), filling up boxes just before heading off to film in a swimming pool near Strasbourg, to submerge, to plunge all these objects

into the pool water. It was much later, after I'd finished the installation, that I realised I could, in fact, have submerged every object on earth in that pool!

With this installation, I returned to my long-standing obsessions: without technically altering time, the aquatic environment offered me a natural slow motion, a 'retention of energy' as Marc Mercier wrote ('Robert Cahen sculpts time', Bref magazine, 1994). And this time afforded by the slowing-down effect offered everyone the chance to see, with fresh eyes and at their own pace, objects they had seen a thousand times but perhaps never really looked at.

And it was, of course, no coincidence that this comment, reported by Sandra Lischi in the monograph she dedicated to me, *\*Il Respiro del Tempo\** (1995, ETS, Pisa), echoed what I am saying: that what is important to me is the moment of transition between the moving image and the still image, and vice versa. The question that arises is: what happens in this moment of transition? As Jo Attié wrote, "What happens when something of the nature of 'the in-between' takes shape? When 'the in-between' comes to haunt the simple and the obvious" (Jo Attié, *\*Bon Baisers de Mulhouse\**, 1990).

Robert CAHEN 2005