

## Introduction of "The sight of time - films and videos by Robert Cahen"

Sandra Lischi, 1997, Edizioni ETS, Pisa, Italy.

**Robert Cahen is one of the most important and internationally renowned artists in the realm of experimental video. Right from the early 1970s, he was among the first Europeans to tackle the technology of electronic imagery and to employ new machines, testing their effects and attempting, like a pioneer, to extract their fullest expressive potential.**



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Two aspects of Cahen's background must be taken into account straight away, namely his musical training and his professional debut with ORTF, the French national radio and TV broadcasting corporation. Indeed, Cahen's musical past with Pierre Schaeffer's school of concrete music profoundly influenced both his working methods and his poetics (evident later in his approach to video images). His early career at ORTF's research department, meanwhile, gave him an extraordinarily unique grasp, in Europe, of the universe of machines, technicians, picture archives and broadcasting. Cahen continued to keep in touch with that special little world even after his contract came to an end, and he is now considered one of the leading artists at the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (INA), which has spearheaded audiovisual research in France ever since the breakup of ORTF. First musician and photographer, then film director and video artist, the fifty one yearold Cahen is one of the most award winning video artists in the world today. In a rather rare distinction, almost , all his work has been broadcast on TV channels both in France and abroad, while certain short films have even been projected in movie theaters. Furthermore, Cahen's work has been acquired by major museums and is distributed in the form of video disks. His success can be explained in various ways, but must above all be placed in the French context, a context characterized by real sensitivity to new imagery, by institutional dynamism, and by the presence of a certain number of artists who produce high quality material thanks to collective structures of support and promotion, enabling them to maintain ongoing relationships with research units, festivals, production units and sometimes even television stations.

In addition to a cultural landscape more open than most to novelty (at least on the level of national production), the French context includes a "pioneering" cultural infrastructure that emerged and grew within conventional television broadcasting - one need merely think of Jean-Christophe Averty's innovative programs of the 1960s, embodying his search for a creative and pertinent visual language enhanced by all the possibilities of electronic imagery (the importance of Averty's role is stressed in Anne-Marie Duguet's *Jean-Christophe Averty*, Paris: DisVoir, 1991).

Cahen's work, then, honors a twin heritage - on the one hand, it maintains an unbroken dialogue with research centers and institutions, enabling Cahen to cultivate an environment of creative liberty and challenging commissions, while on the other hand it exploits resources of electronic technology in a way that orients the oeuvre toward experimental art (although one marked by a true determination to communicate).

Cahen nevertheless stands apart from other French video artists. Unlike them, he has never been interested in advertising (TV commercials, fashion shows, music videos) and has always deliberately focused on the cultural milieu (museums, centers of performing arts, public institutions). His relationship with TV stations has never been perverted by "fashionable" projects, and his video work has never been subservient or self-indulgent. He is not one of those French creators of a rather widespread genre of "new variety programs" (like the videoperettas that rejuvenate traditional TV with magical effects produced by electronic imagery and digital technology). Nor, however, does Cahen belong to the category of artists who deliberately draw inspiration, in various ways, from literary works.

**As a musician who adopts a poetic approach to images, Cahen is primarily inspired by the image itself and what it evokes. That constitutes the key visual core of the work of this artist who still remains hard to classify. Yet Cahen's overall oeuvre also engages with and recasts stereotyped genres like documentary, fiction, and news reports, along with more recent, less traditional genres like dance videos.**

Cahen did not follow the shift from abstract imagery in the 1970s to the "new narrative" of the 1980s. His approach, although varied across time, has been consistently characterized by "mixed" techniques and thematic choices, as well as by a constant process of assembly and dissociation. His works simultaneously give the impression of reality and of a radical break with that reality by constantly combining and contrasting abstraction and representation, invention and convention, the rejection of narrative and the adoption of fiction. Furthermore, Cahen's oeuvre mixes and mingles photographic and cinematic conventions, musical and pictorial traditions and innovations, and video effects, not to mention tactics borrowed from the contemporary visual arts.

Like many artists, Cahen focuses essentially on perception - indeed, he experiments relentlessly in order to forge a new vision thanks to the help of powerful electronic tools. But, unlike many video artists, his research is not directed solely on the capacities of equipment and technology, nor does it yield lab experiments that may be rich on the conceptual level but impoverished on the emotional level. The attention Cahen pays to a gesture, color or movement (via slow motion, temporal alterations, recoloring, etc.) is an incitement to see the world with new eyes, to grasp the intimate poetry of a place, to perceive the silliness of a

gesture or the unwitting irony of a stereotyped image, and to appreciate the gentle delight or unexpectedly painful seriousness of things.

When combined with various levels of potential interpretation, all of these factors serve as the basis of Cahen's success, a success acclaimed by the general public as well as by specialists. They explain why TV stations (private and public channels in France, Channel Four in Britain, RAI in Italy and RTVE in Spain), research centers ("The Kitchen" in New York, the Pompidou Center, Musée d'Orsay, IRCAM, and Vidéotheque in Paris, etc), and festivals the world over follow Cahen's output with interest, requesting and screening each new work.

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Cahen's work incorporates a number of issues closely linked to the fact that over the past twenty five years he has been interested in fields as varied as music and dance, photography and art, theater and urban environments. His research is profoundly influenced by his musings on temporality (authentic time and supernatural time), on ways of recounting (an eternal balance between narrative and abstraction), on movies (which he admires and to which he willingly alludes), on image and sound (in constant mutual feedback), and on reality both familiar and deformed. Nor should it be forgotten that his musical influences, different as they are from the ones usually cited by video artists (the Fluxus movement, John Cage, etc.), provided Cahen with numerous original stimuli. Tracing Cahen's profile across the manifold works he has produced (well over fifty since 1971) demands appreciation not only of his specific experience but also of other, more general qualities namely the poetic feel to his works, the subtle and tender humor underlying them, their briefness, his sparing use of speech, his mastery of electronic effects, suspense, and the traces of "micro stories" contained in every video. It all adds up to a corpus of work that testifies to a particular attention and total commitment to key features of experimentation, at the same time attaining an intelligent balance between aesthetic rigor and pure emotion. His work follows several lines of research, grasping and clarifying a great number of theoretical issues, offering numerous productive solutions. In fact, Cahen is an artist who opens far more doors than an initial critical analysis of his work might indicate. Obviously, all these ideas and issues cannot not be exhaustively addressed and systematically elucidated in this, the first monograph devoted to Robert Cahen; instead, they will be noted and discussed as they arise. Yet it is these ideas and issues that render his aesthetic research richer and more interesting, confirming the importance of an artist whose work manages to go beyond the initial experimental phase, becoming as fertile on, the conceptual level as it is efficient on the production level.

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