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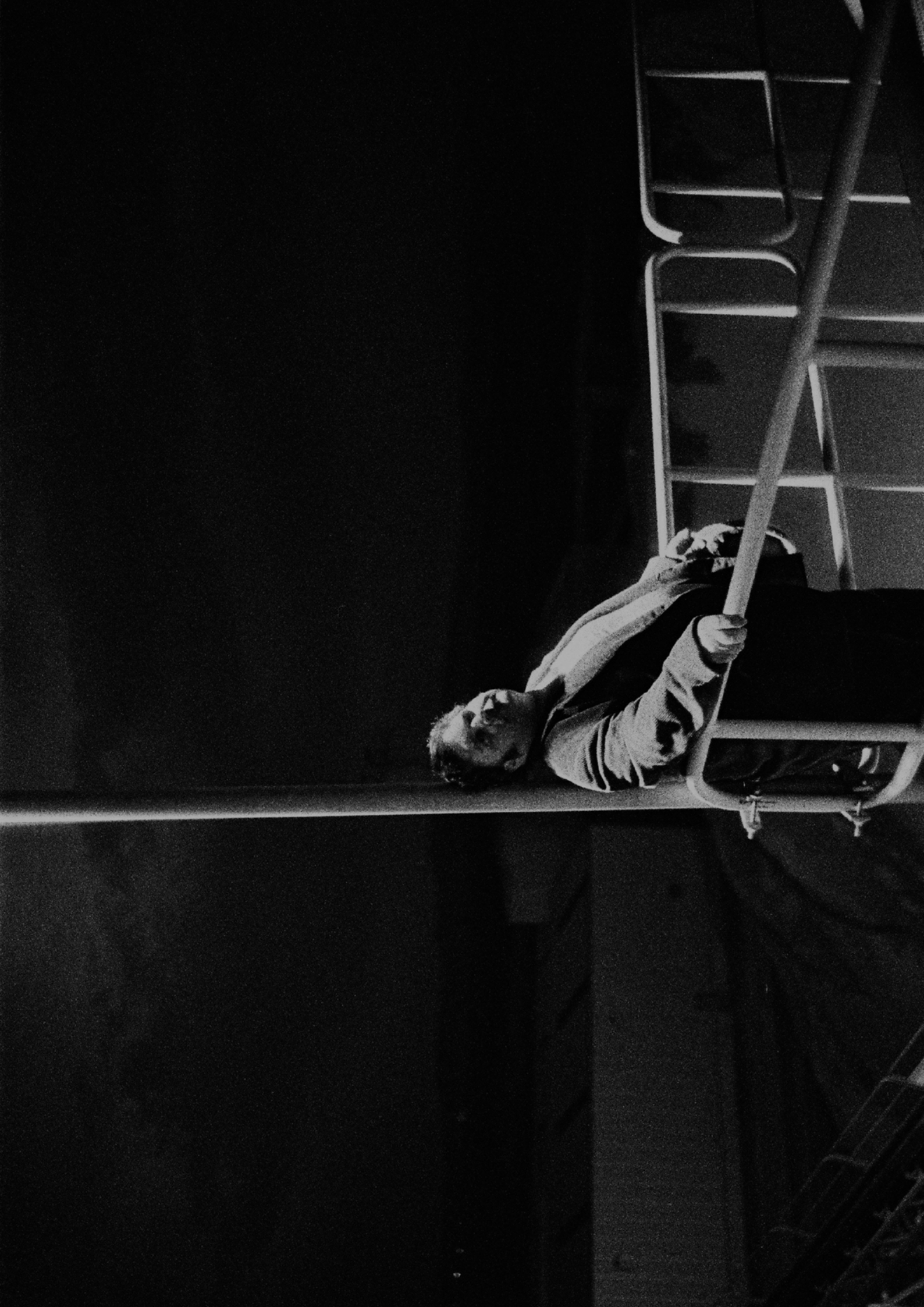














Catalonia in Venice

SINGULARITY

A project of Albert Serra

Curated by Chus Martínez

Albert Serra or the Art of the “Singularity”

If there is an artist in recent years who has been able to draw the simultaneous attention of the film and art worlds it has been Albert Serra (Banyoles, Catalonia, 1975): from the very outset he conceived of film as an instrument both of creation and research —of exploration and risk— and this is why each new work has been received like a gust of fresh air that sheds light on everything and leaves it shining. With equal parts expectation, uncertainty, excitement and confidence, we know that nothing he ever does will ever fail to move us. This is due to his expressive capabilities and his formal daring but especially to how he approaches the creative phenomenon: apparently starting from scratch, tirelessly creating and recreating, almost as if he were the first to start filming again after a hypothetical collapse from oversaturation of stories and images. In short, he forges memorable images like few others, and with each new work he reinvents himself in a way that is as subversive as it is perilous: ever crossing boundaries and skirting precipices, connecting opposites and provoking short circuits.

It is our hope, then, that this bid for the *Singularity* presented by Albert Serra and Chus Martínez at the Venice Biennale of Art 2015 kindles all sorts of reactions and at the same time helps to give maximum visibility to contemporary Catalan art.

Singularity

The Singularity. How can one explain such a concept? How is the world being transformed by the nature of solely human types of intelligence? One might say, but we invented those machines; we built the computers: why is everyone insisting they are advancing beyond us? In reality they are not. They are merely at our side, watching us, thinking about their tasks, and also developing an idea of us. Artificial intelligence is not ahead of us, it is the very now of our relationship with technology. But also, I would be in favor of expanding the concept of artificial intelligence to include any non-human intelligence. The singularity has emerged to give a name to the radically changed nature of these new relationships of non-otherness we have established with things, with nature and with technology. This notion therefore offers us much more than just a sci-fi sort of name for the future of the old modern man-machine relationship. The concept is there to remind us of the many ways in which rational awareness and human logic have been transcended. We are living a period of transition, one wherein the old differentiation of functions between human and non-human is being questioned on many levels. We are beginning to discover new compatibilities which are forcing us to embrace the problems of evolution under new parameters. This project, a complex film installation by artist and filmmaker Albert Serra, deals with only a small facet of this enormous scientific and theoretical program, and it is informed by two main hypotheses:

1. Cinema has acquired enough autonomy to be a tool for researching the human world of emotions and views on its own terms.
2. Film is the perfect medium with which to explore the new innocence needed for approaching the real under different premises but also for reporting from a future that has not yet arrived.

The Embrace

And so, historically a demand for autonomy and separation was posed, “the idea that art has its own sphere demarcated from other human activities and determines its own principles or rules. Art cannot be replaced by other activities without loss. Aesthetic experience should be explained by aesthetic terms or attributes, and art should be valued by itself alone. The idea is intended to protect art from being assimilated to scientific,

religious, or moral functions and to insist that art has a different domain from science and morality.” This definition exposes a cognitive demand, a demand that serves as the basis for judgment. Cinema has long challenged this demand. Cinema in the hands of Albert Serra is never seen as a device, the camera, or as the result of composition, editing.

Singularity, like all of Albert Serra’s other films, departs from the premise that cinema demands we develop an anthropology of the weather rather than an understanding of the theatrical. Cinema is the weather where human movement takes place; the group, non-actors with an open script, acts in relation to a set of conditions that gradually develops its own logic. The plot is, therefore, always quite simple. The lives of eight characters, all of them homosexual, are centered on a mine and what it produces, gold, but also desires: the desire for money, for fortune. But it is also a particular study of exploitation that goes hand in hand with the rise of a feeling much more present today than it was a decade prior: the exposure to humiliation.

The films of Albert Serra are not based in story but in the possibility for the small community of actors and crew to embrace the situation he is proposing for them. He produces an environment where things start to happen when everyone feels they are inside something that is able to transform the way they see and perceive things. They need to abandon themselves to embrace the movie even before they know what the movie is, since cinema is just another name for life, life on an intense stage where every person speaks not in his or her own words but in the words of others —the words of Albert in this case— and acting in the will of this pantomime of power relations that coalesce around a mine.

The Source

Why a mine? One might think that there are obvious reasons for his choice of a mine over a classic text (as on previous occasions) as a point of departure. The mine, like cinema, is a meme. The mine stands for an idea but also for behavior —economic behavior— that has spanned centuries, creating the largest and most powerful culture we have known so far: capitalism. Looking at the beautiful images of the mine, we also get an idea of it not as a place but as a vessel: an enclosure, a ship standing still, where everyone is contained. This organic “being inside” the huge organ of production that may influence

each of them for life works on all of them. The slap of first contact with the “source” impacts the different characters, as does the characters’ first contact with the relationship between the source and its owner. We are reminded of the descriptions of encounters among primitive people and sailors: here, too, we notice the lack of a common language. Everything revolves around this man, the owner of the mine, and it all very soon acquires a heavy physicality. The workers —prostitutes— the artist, all of them endeavor to articulate the inarticulable as in a collective Futurist exercise full of Dada bruitism. The story is the story of common expectations, exploitation, being humiliated and seeking humiliation. The owner is there to turn a profit, everyone starts to imitate him, and in their imitation they all become more abstract, less themselves and more the selfsame new nature of the mine. The only thing they cannot imitate is production. The mine is the organon that produces gold. For the mine production is a transitive verb, as for Marx, as for Engels. What distinguishes human from non-human is this will to produce something rather than nothing; the mine is not nature but a tool man, the character, is using to extract a product from the core of the earth.

This makes the mine’s owner different from the rest of them, however. This is not only because they are all homosexual and interested only in intercourse that will fail to assure the continuation of the species. What makes all of them different from the mine and its owner is their very different understanding of production. For them the verb *production* is not transitive, but intransitive. Unbeknownst to them, they mark the end of capitalistic logic. If production is not, as Marx would have it, about transforming the material world but instead about participating in the world’s transformation of itself, then could we not conclude that human beings produce themselves and one another by establishing, through their actions, the conditions for their ongoing growth and development? In other words, for all of them to produce is for them to hope.

The mine’s presence also explains why the movie unfolds on five screens and remains a movie and not a film installation. Multiform and monotonous, repeating various forms of disorder, the film seems to seek ways to move beyond the Era of Judgment, the Era of Modern Capitalism. The mine allows us to identify this “classic” center, and from there the function of the characters is to find a path that preserves life and is able to transmute our sense of gender, politics understood as a community marked by exploitation in need of a new logic and a new language. The film, almost as if following the logic of quantum physics,

begins to provoke, in every scene, in every section, a million forms of human-image photosynthesis in order to imagine still unknown forms of imagining the image, of producing a different time inside and outside the movie. The different screens are there in order to multiply the viewers' prospects of beginning to mimic the characters. Mimesis is why the movie is shown as fun in the hands of the filmmaker, unfolding before our eyes to stir a moment of biological mirroring between us and them, but also between the mine as an organ and all of these sensuous human excesses escaping the grid of the normative. The movie is all about the future: a future that we cannot even call future because is not ahead or alongside us but inside.

Metabolic Era

The singularity brings to mind a chapter in the life of the controversial Scottish psychiatrist R. D. Laing. In the twilight of a career already marked by his considerably radical views, Laing made a shift, from eminent psychiatrist to enterprising celebrity. There is beautiful and dense archival material that artist Luke Fowler has presented and analyzed in his films like no one else. One installment of Laing's becoming a public persona is of particular interest to me here: his singing. The idea of an eminent scholar and public persona taking up singing to convey his message might sound as if he were delirious, but perhaps he was not. From 1977 to 1978 Laing entered a collaboration with composers Ken Howard and Alan Blaikley. The result was an album titled *Life before Death* (1978), and the lyrics —some of them quite stupid in a good way— were sonnets written by R. D. Laing. One of the most famous tracks on the album (whose music and lyrics one can easily find online) goes as follows:

It's all correct, and crisp, and keen and bright
A place of order, form, and right design.
A haven, in this world of dark, of light.
A Where to start a long and clean straight line.

It would be nice if all around we saw
The grace, decorum of the antique mind
Brought forward to the present as a law
Instead of our cacophonous and brutal bind.

It should not need to hearten me so much
To come across a little worth, among

The slush and drivel, dross and mulch
Which would be better formed of honest dung.

The game's not up. Some children still can sing.
Go tell the falling leaves it'll soon be spring.

There's light and love and joy and freshness yet,
There're those who have something to celebrate.
There can be times we hope we'll not forget.
A helping hand is not always too late.

Up really high there's still clear perfect blue.
Morning must dawn as long as there is night.
Without the old there's nothing to renew.
Occasionally, it almost feels alright.

Altho I know that light needs dark to shine,
I don't expect to tell what atoms mean.
The universe is fine without being mine.
The flowers of countless valleys grow unseen.

What is above subsists on what's beneath.
The world is not entirely blasted heath.

The freedom that you seek is in the mean
Between opposing tensions in your soul.
Achieve the integration of the whole
And then you *are*, and not a might have been.

Remember that to live is to metabolise.
So don't forget en route to the sublime
To check on your mouth-anus transit time
Look at the ground as well as at the skies

You've heard it all before? That's fine.
Reiterated truths soon sound absurd.
To be blasé is not beatitude.
It's just your gluttoned tongue can't taste the wine.
One in a million hears the blatant word
Before it echoes into platitude.

What is my point? Simply that R. D. Laing came to the limit of
one language and switched to another in order to test a different
logic. The singularity departs from similar premises to those

expressed in Laing's song: remember that to live is to metabolize. That is, to absorb and transform, to transfer, to convey, to understand life from the inside, to make things into their radical other through a process of total acceptance. Why did Laing sing? He sang because in singing R. D. Laing was exposing himself much more than in speaking —technically, but also personally since singing stresses even more that one is a performer, aware of the stage and that those who listened to his counseling were transformed into an audience. His singing was an announcement that a new innocence is needed, new exposure within a language (medicine in his case) that will transform it into its radical other, cabaret, in order to discover a new intelligence in both genres.

Innocence

The possibility of innocence is, as well, a common denominator in all of Albert Serra's movies. Innocence acts like a marker, an attitude for registering these plausible operations that moviemaking provokes from the inside of the image, transforming knowledge, transforming the way the humans inside the movie and those outside it see matter, feel language, invent images, perceive form... Nothing is fixed, everything is tilting from the inside. This is, in other words, a different way of naming the challenge that art poses to the problem of coherence, to the possibility for responsiveness, for demonstration, and therefore for institutional legitimacy. This oscillating movement embodies an ongoing performative speculation about ways of affecting and being affected, about ways of naming —a language, a place, a time. The viewer is then obliged to find a language, to imagine a place, to conceive a time, and to surpass the identification with all of these— and at the same time produce a “far away” from all of it.

This vacillation —caused by the artistic method of conveying research into the real, into an artwork— has the virtue of perceiving the unknown without its being transmitted into communication by the superficial sociality of the discourse. To refract the unknown without syntaxes, without the movement of displacing the known and replacing it with a new known or the other known: this momentary forgetting of the syntaxes implies a momentary forgetting about learning —that is, it can carry the unknown into a form, a formulation, that will allow the inconceivable to be conceived. And in not knowing about syntax, it is imaginable that the topology of the subject could be another, and thus in its nature able, if only for a second, to listen

to a plant, an animal, or a drawing. And so innocence comes also to name the possibility of discovering unsuspected positions between the animate and the inanimate as well as among the many forms of life, an imagination capable of conceiving an act of knowledge among those who live beyond language.

This simple, tantalizing vacillation is the opposite of the narcissism of the re-institutionalization of knowledge and culture that transforms artworks into cultural products and exhibitions into ideological demarcations of experience. It is also the opposite of the demand of contesting acculturation with the demand of art to be significant, to deliver what we can call a situation of reading, extenuating meaning and memory to the point of a sterile void.

Innocence, therefore, is not a lack of intelligence, but intelligence itself turned into a virtue.

INSTITUT RAMON LLULL

Director: Àlex Susanna. General Manager: Josep Marcé.
Director of visual and performing arts department: Damià Martínez.
The Institut Ramon Llull is a public institution founded with the purpose of promoting Catalan language studies at universities abroad, the translation of literature and thought written in Catalan, and Catalan cultural production in other areas like theatre, film, circus, dance, music, the visual arts, design and architecture.

EXHIBITION

Curator: Chus Martínez. Artist: Albert Serra Juanola. Organization and Production: Institut Ramon Llull. Executive Production: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA). General Coordination: Carlota Gómez. Coordination in Venice: Tamara Andruszkiewicz. Interior Design: Guri_Casajuana Arquitectes. Graphic Design: Omar Sosa and Ana Domínguez. Exhibition set up: ART%. Translations: Tiffany Carter, Tiziana Camerani, Mireia Alegre.

MOVIE

Albert Serra. *Singularity*, 2015. Installation with 5 screens and 6 sound channels. Color. 1.77:1. Mono and Stereo.
Variable dimensions.

CATALOGUE

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