



ALBERT SERRA

INTERVIEW BY PAU GUINART
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSEP FONTI

Albert Serra is one of the most subversive and creatively liberated filmmakers of the current panorama. He says he does cinema d'auteur, and, of course, has been labeled as enfant terrible, etc. He suggests me to write that in 8 years studying at the university of Barcelona he never talked to anyone more than twice. He made no friends. 4 years of Spanish Literature, 2 of Comparative, 2 of Art History, and 0 friends. He is also very proud of the fact that he is the first person in his family to ever read a book. I ask him how did someone like him pop like a mushroom in a little town like Banyoles, and his answer is as deceiving as it is simple: 'Don't we all go to school?'. In the media he appears like an eccentric figure, with his sunglasses, gold rings, chains and other paraphernalia, but in the short distance, he couldn't be gentler, accommodating and well mannered. In fact, as soon as I walk in he offers me a coffee, which I gladly accept.

Right away, he puts a capsule into his sophisticated vintage Illy machine. It's like a white box with a little quadrangular hole in the middle where the cup is placed. Once loaded, he pushes down a little lever and high quality coffee starts dripping slowly. I ask him if that's better than Nespresso and he tells me that it is way better, but that he shouldn't say so because he actually has Nestle stocks. He also has Amazon stocks. What? I want to know more... but suddenly the coffee machine explodes and coffee starts gurgling through the cracks. Caffeine hemorrhage. 'What the fuck!' he exclaims, and takes a few paper tissues to clean the mess.

As he tries to make sense of what happened (it all points to the summer heat and the inevitable plastic dilatation) he loads another capsule and activates the machine for a second time. He tells me that with his films he aspires to benefit humanity and that, regardless of what people think about them, they deserve to exist, unlike so many films being made today. But the coffee machine seems to object and tries to join the conversation. Once again, espresso is spilled all over the place with even more energy. Another mess. More paper towel. More swiping. And a third attempt. This time he tries to fix the machine by pressing on the cracks and whispering to it... Lever down. Water flowing. Third explosion. Coffee apocalypse. Huge mess. Even more paper. But the cup is finally half full and I can have my espresso.

Life is a struggle, and so is filmmaking. It's people like Albert that succeed, because of their persistence. They just get things done, no matter how much it takes.



Let's begin with common ground: Dalí. I see you have his cover of the Time magazine from 1936 framed on your wall. What does it mean for you?

I still admire him immensely. I feel a strong connection with him. He is a universal Catalan figure, but also feels very local. Even though I was born in Banyoles, my grandparents came from Figueres, like him. But what really inspires me is the subversive aspects of his life, to take challenges till the end and be in constant strive for originality, even if it was by being extremely classical and orthodox sometimes. Let's not forget about what the other Catalan genius, Gaudí, had to say about that: 'Originality consists in returning to the origin'. He was one of Dalí's most important references and both are

of aesthetic ambition though. Integrity above all. Once a really wealthy man (I think it was Warren Buffet's partner) was asked: what's the key to your success? And he said: 'the key to success is, first of all, to deserve it'. Don't focus on success; focus on the content, on deserving it. Long-term thinking. I don't worry about success, or how my work will be received. I just worry about doing. This is my life. It's Sunday afternoon and we are here, and I'll keep working after you leave.

Poiesis is the origin of the term poetry, and it means to 'do'. The poet just does, and that's the origin of all art.

Yes, but let me add that I also like playing with



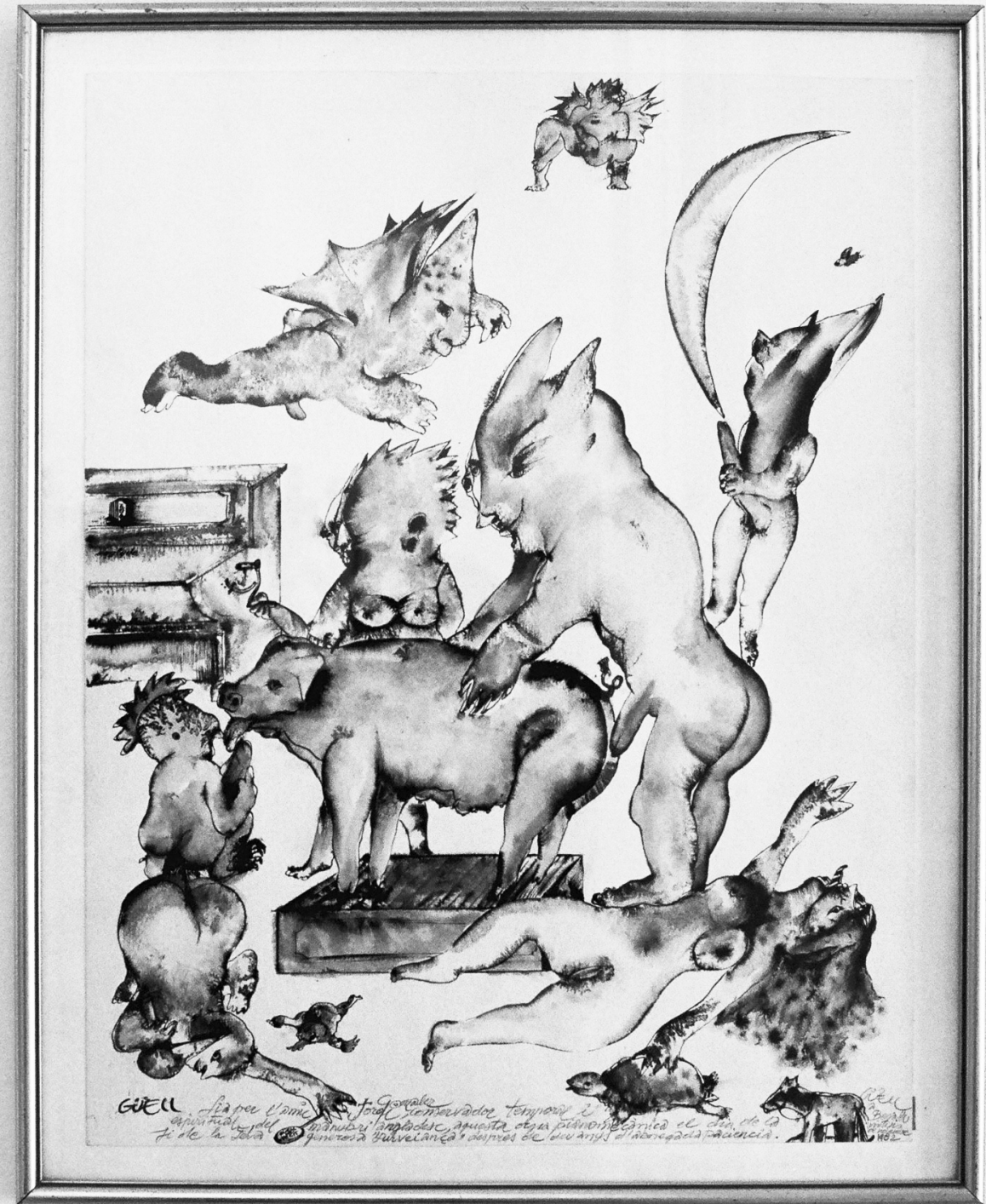
great examples of that. I'm also amazed by his capacity for being mass culture and high culture, underground and mainstream at the same time.

How about you? Do you also look for that kind of permanent originality?

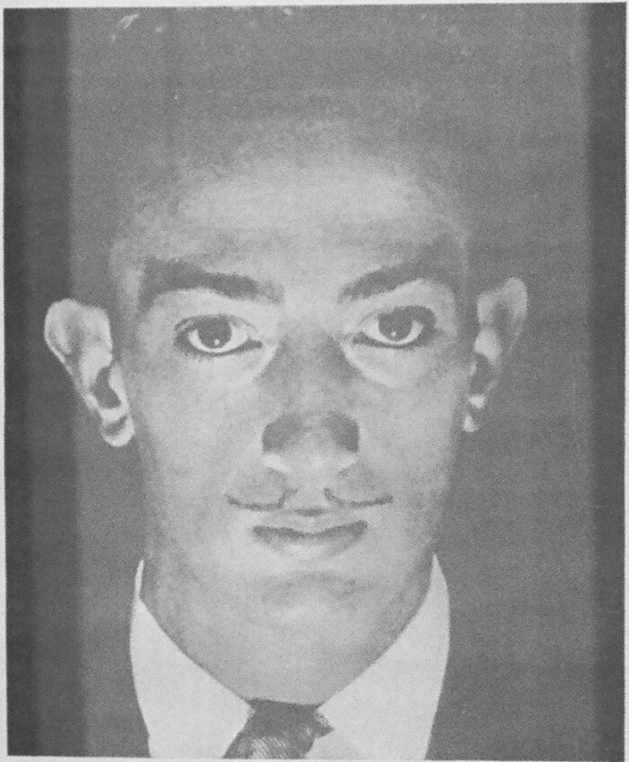
I think these are not things you can look for. These are theories about the others. In my work I just do what I think is worth doing. I'm very interested in analyzing other artists' creative processes, but I have zero interest in how that applies to me. These things work better spontaneously. I try to do things with utmost originality and quality, that's all. The rest takes care of itself, and most of it can't be controlled anyway. I do have a lot

the limits. I have absolute control over my work and what I do. When faced against aesthetic decisions I always choose the purest and most coherent with the film, regardless of what the audience will think. I don't compromise, and that's why I can do whatever in my public appearances and even say things that contradict what I do: because I keep my work pure. I like that game and enjoy playing around those limits. I'm the opposite of the people that are corrupt but want to look like they aren't; it may look like I'll compromise my work, but I never end up doing so.

In relation to that, I wanted to ask you about self-praise, something that you share with Dalí, and that now I understand better. You can justify this







Photograph by Mink Ray, Courtesy of James T. Soby

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A blazing pine tree, an Archbishop, a giraffe and a cloud of feathers went out the window.
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self-eulogic discourse precisely because you firmly believe in what you do and in its value. This mechanism of self-eulogy seems to feed itself, but do you think it actually works?

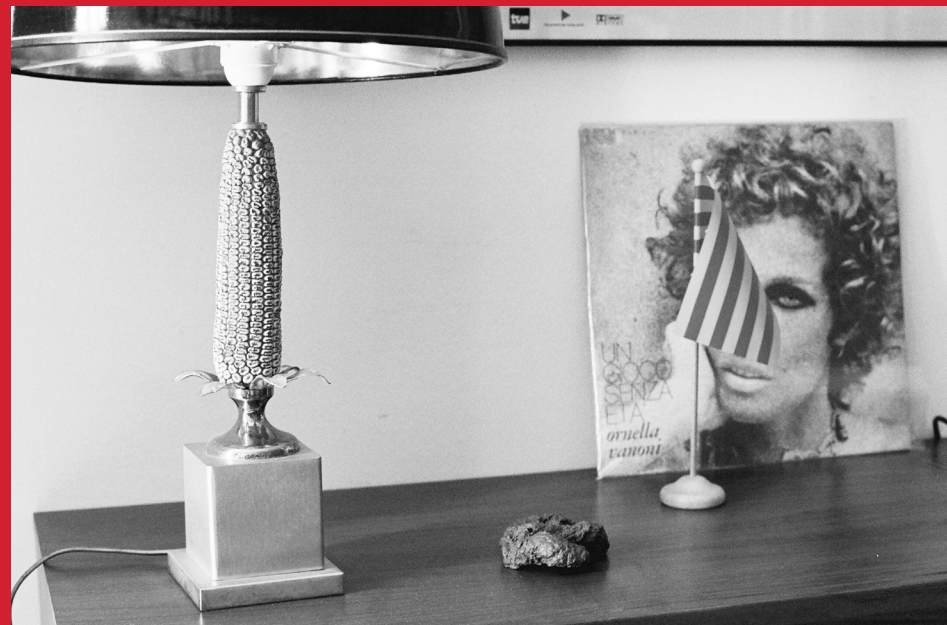
Very few people understand that. Neither in my case, nor in Dali's do I consider it something that strange, at the end of the day it's all about being extremely self-demanding. Sometimes, when I say I'm the best at what I do and someone tries to argue against me, I ask them: so who's better? And usually there's no answer.

It also works as a way of putting pressure on myself, and on the people that have power to make decisions in cultural policies. They have to know that I think what I do is great and that they may be

money... I guess that would be the golden standard. I can live with very little. I have no responsibilities, no partner, nobody I'm in charge of... if I have money I go for a coffee, if I don't, I just don't. I'm the producer of all my movies. Montse, my co-producer, has another part time job. I hire free lancers when there's a new project. I keep it simple and nimble.

Do you think any person can understand and appreciate your movies?

Not really. You need to understand other references and what my films contribute in relation to similar films. You have to be in the know. But that happens in everything nowadays. Ultra-specialization



missing out. Since I know that on the long run I'll be right, if they don't acknowledge me, they'll eventually fuck up big time.

You say your films are unfuckable. Not perfect, just unfuckable. What do you mean by that?

My limits are always aesthetic, never economic. I wouldn't use a certain actor because it will help the film sell more, but once I've made my decisions and kept my purity, then the more success and money, the better, of course. I'm neither a fetishist nor a masochist; it's just that it would make me happier to make a good movie than the money it would pay me to make a bad movie. However, if I could make a good movie and on top of it make some

is everywhere.

What do you think about the idea of cultural industries as a way to elevate the cultural level of the mainstream productions?

Cultural industries work like the placebo effect. They produce shit, like a medicine that doesn't cure, but this shit makes many people feel better, creates jobs, industry... But is it good? Does it work? Is it authentic? No. That doesn't mean we have to kick the poets out of the polis or anything like that. But it's the way things are, and it needs to be pointed out.

It becomes clear to me that you are basically work

ing for a certain type of audience though. It's not cinema the way people understand it in general.

Yes. What I do is auteur cinema, the good old art-house cinema. The only thing is that now it is harder to do and distribute, except for France, maybe.

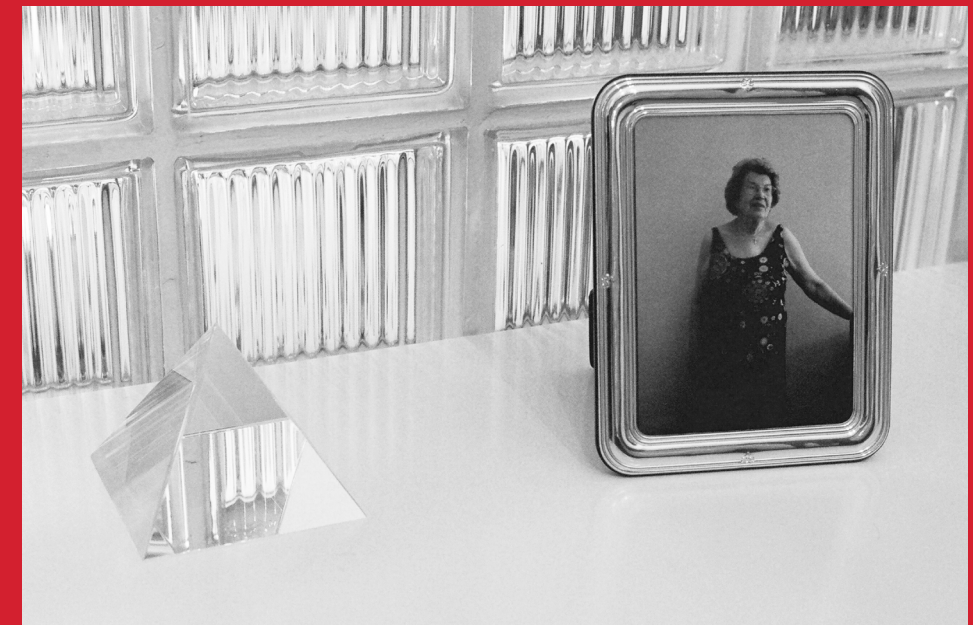
As Woody Allen says in Hollywood Ending, where a blind director makes a movie that bombs in the US but succeeds in France: 'Thank God the French exist'.

Yeah, nice irony, haha... That sentence could be applied to many artists' success actually. For instance, again: Dali. Although the causes of his success are much broader than that. You know, he

either... political correctness is too much nowadays and there's a lot of pressure. People get offended so easily that it has become too dangerous of a game to play.

In the United States there's a whole debate on political correctness, especially among academics.

No question about that, and I think Trump is partly a product of that. As always, the extremes come from the US, political correctness and resistance to it. But a state is not like a private company, it's much harder to run. Even Nietzsche agrees on that. He values a good statesman much more than a successful businessman. There are so many more moral, psychological and unquantifiable factors than in



did things that were objectively against himself, such as signing white sheets of paper or saying that Franco was too soft on terrorists, but he is beyond and above everybody and even himself. He is sovereign at any given moment and every decision is eternal and liminal, also on a creative level. Nothing is strategic. It's all about affirming one's own creativity and freedom, against any moral, economical or commonsensical consequences. Dali never adapted to anything, gave in or abstained; he just imposed his vision. I'm inspired by his attitude; you can't live as if that hadn't existed. Are you going to be less than that? What are you? A domestic animal? But you can't bring this utter affirmation of your views to the final consequences in our bourgeois world

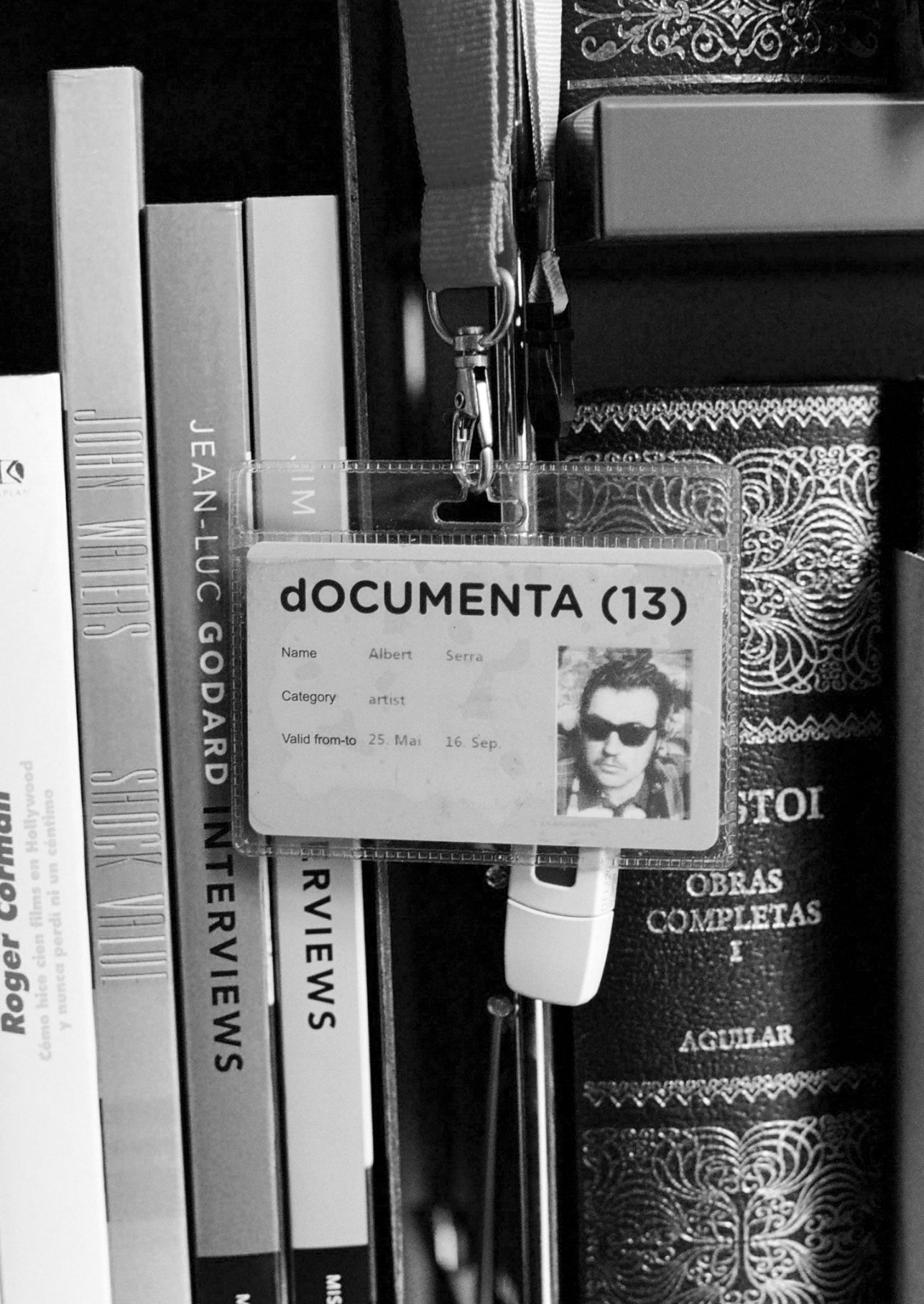
the business world, where everything is basically money. In business, morality is regulated by law. In state or the military you have to obey, even if you are right and the decision-maker is wrong. Obedience is key, and great conflict appears from that. This is tragic, Hegel, Antigone...

Do you read tragedy? What do you read?

Everything. I'm busy now, but I read a lot about what I work on, like XVIII century, and libertinage. Also, recently I've been reading about economy: *Adults in the room: my battle with Europe's deep establishment* by Yanis Varoufakis, about the negotiations between Greece and the EU. Nobody can give you that guy's point of view, not even the richest people

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in the world can have that perspective. That's a great example of what literature can do; that book I'm reading is the same for everybody. For 20 euros you can have it, and it can't get any better. As Andy Warhol said: the best thing about Coca-Cola is that they are all the same. Not even the wealthiest person in the world can have a better coke than yours. It's great and it's the same for everybody.

I remember when I visited you a few years ago at the editing room for *El cant dels ocells* you had a picture of the Pope Benedict XVI and a picture of Stalin on the wall. Do you still keep them?

Not anymore. But back then it reminded me of the Spanish saying: 'A dios rogando y con el mazo dando'. It's good to have projects and pray for their fulfillment, but you have to work too. You need to act upon your ideals. It's sort of 'god helps those who help themselves' kind of thing. I'm my enemies' worst enemy. I'm their whip. My enemies think about me much more than I think about them, but they don't talk much. I have a mission, like Jeff Bezos. I'm executing a mission, and that's what purity is about. Listen to this quote from Bezos:

'Amazon is guided by four principles: customer obsession rather than competitor focus, passion for invention, commitment to operational excellence, and long-term thinking.'

Isn't it awesome? It is this kind of long-term thinking what allows me to keep the purity in my work.

Ok, let's go for a 'pure' question then: What do you think about life?

Life is the battle between the rational and the irrational. We have a very developed rational dimension but we are still struggling with the irrational. The ancient Greeks at some point seemed to find a balance. Freud and the Surrealists were kind of exploring that possibility after Baudelaire, Lautréamont, Rimbaud and all the dark side of Romanticism... Now we may be reentering another phase of perfect balance, our generation is unique in this sense thanks to Surrealism, Psychoanalysis, etc. We have the opportunity to balance this irrational outburst of the end of the 19th and 20th centuries, this dark side, and find a new equilibrium in what I would consider a 'new innocence'. It's not an exaltation of the irrational, but an integration of it that would allow us to live it innocently.

The key here is that for us, all this irrationality is not new anymore, we have interiorized it and now can live it normally. The Greeks had that, but they were not aware of the irrationality in a Freudian way,

this auto-analysis. There was the Dionysian part, but no awareness, no sophistication. Now we are aware of it, and we can live it in a much more subtle and complex manner. Not in a violent way, but in a natural way. It is an ideal of equilibrium always tied to innocence.

It seems to me that you have much to say not only with your films, but also about them, and about many other topics. You've been to several prestigious universities, Harvard has just purchased your films in 35 mm for preservation, and American universities are trying to bring you there to teach seminars...

Yeah, but academia is so boring. I'm here to kill the bad ones, you know. I have a mission. We have to kill the bad ones!