



Yuri Ancarani, *The Challenge*, 2016, HD video, color, sound, 70 minutes.

Yuri Ancarani

KUNSTHALLE BASEL

“*Sculture*,” curated by [Elena Filipovic](#), was [Yuri Ancarani](#)’s first institutional solo show; it featured eight films created between 2010 and 2017. The Italian filmmaker’s early trilogy “*La malattia del ferro*” (The Malady of Iron, 2010–12) transports its viewers to three very different but equally unusual workplaces. *Il capo* (The Boss, 2010), shows workers in a marble quarry in Carrara, Italy. The six scuba divers in *Piattaforma luna* (Moon Platform, 2011) go about their morning routines in a deep-sea capsule, a radio connection to a distant command center their only contact with the outside world. And in *Da Vinci* (2012) Ancarani observes surgeons performing a procedure at a distance with the help of a robot. If these virtually sealed work settings elicit both fascination and profound discomfort, so does the films’ distinctive visual language, defined by unusual perspectives, such as extremely low-angle shots and inquisitive close-ups, which suggest a subjective camera. There is no sign of interaction between the performers and the film crew. The sound design (by Mirco Mencacci) and the highly stylized palettes bathe the worlds Ancarani portrays in an atmosphere blending cool artificiality with solemnity.

The protagonists navigate these exceptionally demanding environments with ease; the audience, meanwhile, can never be certain which way is up and which is down in the claustrophobically cramped pressure chamber, for instance, or which organ is being punctured. Ancarani’s dramaturgy reflects a concern with escape: Each film ends with an opening-up of the hermetic scene. Having lingered in the glaringly white marble quarry to watch the title character of *Il capo* direct the movements of the excavator’s arm with an

almost balletic choreography of hand gestures, the camera finally soars upward for a sweeping shot of the summits of the Apuan Alps. *Da Vinci* culminates not in the successful completion of the operation but in the playful exercise that follows: Having done its surgical duty, the robot, its controls set to idle, runs through its range of motions, after which a doctor hones his skills—but the machine’s screen displays dominos, instead of human organs, which he moves around with its arms. Toward the end of *Piattaforma Luna*, we leave the capsule for the open water, where, in blurry images, we can just make out a diver at work at the bottom of the Ionian Sea.

The Challenge (2016), Ancarani’s best-known film to date, depicts the luxurious lifestyle of young men from Qatar’s leisure class. Their lives revolve around two hobbies: falconry and racing massive sport-utility vehicles across the dunes. In contrast to the trilogy, the film presents a world in which work is invisible. Still, manual occupations cannot be banished altogether: The sheikhs—who are an exclusively male society (they stay among themselves even during a marriage ceremony, as the short *Wedding*, 2016, reveals)—are perpetually fiddling with their mobile phones. Presumably made for a largely Western audience, *The Challenge* serves up plenty of stereotypes about oriental despotism. We are given a tour of an aristocratic world where work is something others do, most hauntingly in the scene where a falcon’s talons are sharpened. The vignette begins with a close-up showing only the hands of a dark-skinned African migrant.

The film ends with a hunting scene and, again, a shift of perspective. Ancarani attaches a camera and microphone to one of the birds. There is little to see other than desert and feathers, but an unedited sequence renders the falcon’s battle with a pigeon in all its cruelty. This transformation of the falcon into a device for visual production is symptomatic of the filmmaker’s striking absence from his work, an absence that raises the critical question of the origin and purpose of these images. It is a question that also concerns the labor of filmmaking.

—Maja Naef

Translated from German by Gerrit Jackson.