



ZABLUDOWICZ  
COLLECTION

# Invites

ROBERT  
CERVERA

7 OCTOBER–  
19 DECEMBER 2021

Robert Cervera interviewed by curator  
Julia Greenway, 9 September 2021

**Artist's presentation:** Saturday 27 November,  
from 3pm. Please check website for further  
details.

**Zabludowicz Collection Invites** is dedicated  
to solo presentations by UK-based artists  
who do not currently have representation  
by a UK commercial gallery.

**Image**

*To Vent*, 2021. Digital photograph.  
Courtesy the artist.

**Julia Greenway:** Throughout your practice, your work has largely been composed within more traditional mediums such as music and sculpture. Yet, with this exhibition, you have facilitated quite an immersive space, including video, audio, floor texturing and the subtle breeze from PC fans. Why is this sensorial experience important to you and your work?

**Robert Cervera:** I do love the sculptural tradition and the language that comes with it: what it means to move around a sculpture and how you approach gravity, scale and volume. But sometimes in my practice the sculptural medium seems to fall short of what I want my work to do. It feels like a discrete object that's put in front of you and part of the engagement is this cerebral, quite intellectual experience. In this show I wanted to focus on a physical engagement with the work. That's what I hope will happen with the installation: that a viewer will enter this immersive environment and be forced to navigate it through sensorial cues.

**JG:** Would it be fair to say that you approached the installation as a sculptural work?

**RC:** Yes, I think so. For example, I use sound as a sculptural material. I love the idea that it can affect you physically: the vibrations can move your molecules in some way,

you can feel the bass of the audio deep in your guts. There's a real physicality to it.

**JG:** You've been interested for some time in the materiality of concrete. It's obviously a dense material, but you seem to focus on capturing its fluidity, almost as if you're preserving the moment when it was viscous.

**RC:** Exactly, yes. With concrete, there's an innate function and practicality connected to construction. But it has its own life, its own behaviour. There's something in its nature before it sets that I've always been fascinated by. It flows and then it stops flowing and then it becomes an artificial stone. It becomes an object or structure intended to last. But there's something exciting about the openness of its liquid state. With the concrete floor piece, I wanted to show this fluidity and to capture another side of the materiality of concrete.

**JG:** As a material, it also references reservoirs and data centres. Could you talk a bit about your thoughts on these types of structures?

**RC:** When I was small, we'd go to a region in Valencia, Spain, where my parents are from. It's an inland, mountainous region where the conditions are ideal for building reservoirs. There were two or three reservoirs we'd visit for picnics, and I was awed by these walls of sheer concrete and their unequal

relationship with my body. I think my interest started there. For years I have been looking into the complex engineering of reservoirs and dams. I was interested in learning how concrete is used to conduct and contain resources.

**JG:** In a similar way to data centres, which also contain intangible power structures.

**RC:** In my research, they were the next step after reservoirs. In a way, water and data are comparable: they're fairly invisible, they're difficult to hold on to, yet they have a lot of importance from a civilisation point of view. Now not only do we need to control water, but we also need to control data. The materials, systems and approaches used to make a reservoir and a data centre are similar. They're trying to do a similar thing: hold a formless material. For the installation, I drew inspiration from data centres: their darkness, constant ventilation, and the low hum of the IT system.

**JG:** Is this why you started using coding in your work?

**RC:** Yes. I was also beginning to make music. I had studied music, but I'd never connected it with sculpture or art in general. I was looking at ways to make music within my practice and began to experiment with a software program to code compositions. The idea of coding in a physical way is

also present in some of my work: making materials go through holes and grids as if I'm trying to make them countable.

**JG:** To me, it feels like you've approached data as another material. It has a strong link between your physical and ephemeral mediums.

**RC:** I'm interested in the interface between the digital and the material and how, at some point, data becomes physical. It becomes perceivable through the materials and infrastructure that are used to hold it: data centres, cooling systems, tubes, cabling. It's so easy to forget that all this data has a physical presence.

In practical terms, I made the sound for this exhibition by creating sculptural instruments with liquid cooling pipes – which are used inside a computer to lower temperatures. I blow through these pipes to produce sound samples, then code the samples using a software called Sonic Pi to create the composition. What was physical – the air going through the pipes – becomes a digital audio file, which is then pumped out through speakers, becoming physical again in your body as it vibrates with you and around you.

**JG:** Can you describe the moving image work *To Vent* and how it developed?

**RC:** The video is shot above a perforated panel – like the ones used for ventilation in data racks and PC builds. I had been playing around with slugs and snails, letting them move in front of the camera, capturing how they behave. One day in the studio, I put one of those vented panels on top of a bucket full of snails. I loved the way they pushed their bodies through it – it made me think of coding in early computing, when they used perforated punch cards in which a hole is 1 and no hole is 0. It's almost like the snails are making a 0/1 decision to go through a hole or not. They attempt to pass through the hole in such a slow, spectacular motion – until their shell stops them. There's something fleshy and almost tender about their struggle. On the one hand, they are like matter pushing through these coding perforations, and on the other, they still have a sense of agency.

**JG:** With the inclusion of the snails, you're bringing the natural world directly into the structure of technology. The snails simulate the flow of concrete or data in a very tangible, physical way.

**RC:** In my mind, all these different materials and subjects are interconnected.

**JG:** Yes, but the snails are quite a distinctive inclusion: without them, the sense of urgency wouldn't be as direct. By referencing the natural world through

these living organisms, you're critiquing the cultural and environmental impact of technological and industrial systems.

**RC:** Yes, everything else we've been talking about regarding infrastructures could have been said fifty years ago, but the environmental concerns are especially pressing now. I'm concerned about how the digital world is creating an ecological footprint that's only growing larger. I'm hoping that in the coming years a green tax will be applied – or maybe an 'upload tax', for example. We keep posting data online and there's no accountability or accountancy of what that means in material terms. But nature, snails included, will be the most impacted.

**JG:** Exactly – there's a system of materiality in our technologies, one that's completely imperceptible to us as users.

**RC:** If I have one hope for the work, it's that it makes visible these invisible systems and foregrounds the physicality of the digital world.



**Robert Cervera** (b. 1976, Barcelona) received an MA from the Royal College of Art in Sculpture and a Postgraduate Diploma in Fine Art, Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design. Recent exhibitions include *Ye\_soft\_pipes/play\_on*, Tangent Projects, Barcelona (2020); *Yes And*, MOCA, London (2019) and *Kelder Projects*, London (2018); *Tomorrow Starts Here*, La Escocesa Barcelona (2017); *Identify your limitations*, Vitrine, Basel (2017); *Salon Acme*, Zona Maco, México (2017); *Outpost Film Open*, selected by Ed Atkins, Norwich and London (2016); *Ichor*, Danielle Arnaud, London (2016); *Charlottenborg Spring Exhibition*, Kunsthall Charlottenborg, Copenhagen (2016); and *Rare Collisions of Purpose*, Boetzelaer|Nispen, Amsterdam (2016).