

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

# ARTFORUM

## 1000 WORDS: ANRI SALA

By: Mark Godfrey (April 2015)



Anri Sala, *The Present Moment*, 2014, HD digital video (color, sound, 21 minutes 30 seconds), nineteen-channel sound installation. Installation view, Haus der Kunst, Munich. Photo: Jens Webber.

**FOR ANRI SALA**, sound has always functioned as both an expressive medium and a register of memory, hauntingly subject to erasure. In the work for which Sala first garnered acclaim, the 1998 video *Intervista*, silence is the sensory analogue of historical amnesia, a condition the artist seeks to reverse, specifically by trying to find, and later re-creating, the lost sound track of a reel of 16-mm footage showing his mother speaking at an Albanian Communist rally, circa 1977. Since then, the artist has produced a series of videos in which sound becomes a means through which to investigate the relationships between past and present, place and displacement. In *Naturalmystic (Tomahawk #2)*, 2002, an actor from Belgrade sits in a Paris recording studio, vocally simulating the sound of missiles falling on Serbia's capital during NATO's 1999 bombardment, as if to articulate trauma's repetition compulsion as syncopated composition. In *Long Sorrow*, 2005, a saxophonist suspended on a narrow ledge near the top of a West Berlin skyscraper appears so absorbed in his playing that he is not perturbed by his precarious situation; at times, however, he emits notes that echo the sounds around him, showing his awareness of his environment. While at every moment of his playing one feels the saxophonist's intense immersion in the present, Sala has chosen to stage this performance in a housing project nicknamed *lange Jammer*, or "long sorrow"—a gesture that prompts reflection on all the historical sorrows crowding in on this fleeting instant, from the violence of Berlin's past to the failed promises of modernist design. And in *1395 Days Without Red*, 2011, set in Sarajevo during the mid-1990s siege, an actor playing a musician on her way to rehearsal hums a melody to help her negotiate the terror of her journey through streets relentlessly monitored by snipers.

Like Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe, artists he came to know during his post-art-school years in Paris, Sala conceives each exhibition not just as a gathering of works but as a distinct place where sound can help choreograph the viewer's experience. Sala's presentation *Ravel Ravel Unravel* at the 2013 Venice Biennale, an exemplar of this approach, was a masterpiece: Representing France but showing in the German pavilion, Sala blocked the

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building's grandiose main entrance, requiring visitors to detour through a side door, past a video projection of a woman shot in tight close-up, and into the vast main gallery. There, viewers found two projections of two pianists playing Ravel's *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand*; in an adjacent space, another film showed a DJ (the woman from the projection) trying to mix the disparate renditions back into a coherent whole. Though the focus was on the manual effort of the musicians, the strange space between their interpretations of the score, and the way the intensity of their performances was matched by the concentration of the DJ, the setting itself was also very much a subject of the work. Sala had filmed the DJ within the empty German pavilion, sometimes directing the camera up to the high windows so that the bright light of that particular day scorched the image: Watching this video in the exact same space, one became conscious of the overdetermined layerings of physical, representational, and historical strata that constitute any given place. Certainly it was difficult to conceive of a more historically overdetermined situation: This was a work by an Albanian-born, Berlin-based artist, representing France in the German pavilion, using a score composed by a Frenchman (Maurice Ravel) for an Austrian pianist (Paul Wittgenstein) who was injured fighting for the German side in World War I and who was later barred from performing in Austria on account of his Jewish ancestry.

While recent critical accounts, especially Michael Fried's excellent essays on the artist, have dwelled on Sala's absorbed protagonists and the ways in which his videos, as Fried puts it, "invariably convey the sense of taking place *in the present*, as opposed to the implied past-ness of traditional narrative film," I have wondered for some time how these qualities or concerns connect to the ways in which Sala has continued to deal with the impact of the past on our sense of the here and now. Rather than history threatening to shatter either the absorption of Sala's characters or our own experience of presentness as we encounter his works, perhaps it is this very intensity of presentness in his art that allows a unique perspective on the meaning of *now* and its correlate, *here*. To be fully in the present is to be paradoxically aware that the present is not a discrete moment—not the gap between past and future, but the experience of these things converging; immediacy is never truly immediate, because it is separate neither from the burdens of the past nor from the possibilities, both hopeful and dire, of moments not yet lived. Arguably, music—so singularly evocative and transporting, yet so conducive to a feeling of immanence, of fully inhabiting a particular moment and a particular body—has unique capacities to mirror and intensify this paradoxical condition, or what Sala calls the "overlays of past and future in the present." And so it was fascinating to hear that, for his current show at Munich's Haus der Kunst, Sala had chosen to fill the space that once hosted the Third Reich's "Great German Art" exhibitions with the music of "degenerate artist" Arnold Schönberg, and that Sala had named his project for something he has wanted to both complicate and intensify since the very beginning of his practice: the present moment.

**BACK IN THE FALL OF 2013**, I was invited by the Haus der Kunst to make a new work for their large central hall. Considering the physical characteristics as well as the history of the site, I decided to create a work that would confront the space through a series of contradictions: I wanted to contrast the monumental size of the hall with the intimacy of a chamber composition, and to oppose a space that was once dedicated to authoritarian speech with a rational conversation among six voices—a sextet of two violins, two violas, and two cellos, with

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no conductor to guide them; that role is nonexistent. Knowing that people are constantly crossing the space to get from one part of the museum to another, I sought to complement the visitors' random movements with a sort of choreographed walkabout through the site. I wanted to create something you can't quite hold all at once, from a single vantage point, but that you're compelled to try to grasp and comprehend, through a succession of distinct phases and locations.



Anri Sala, *The Present Moment* (detail), 2014, HD digital video (color, sound, 21 minutes 30 seconds), nineteen-channel sound installation, dimensions variable.

Once I had decided to use a chamber composition, the choice of Arnold Schönberg's *Verklärte Nacht* [Transfigured Night, 1899] was mostly intuitive. I believe that what strikes me most about Schönberg's sextet, besides its outstanding beauty, is how it both speaks of a period that is coming to an end and announces the suspenseful anticipation of the times ahead. Although it is a late Romantic piece, in my opinion *Verklärte Nacht* already hints at the sounds of the new music that was to come.

Taking the score of *Verklärte Nacht* as a departure point, my collaborator and sound designer Olivier Goinard and I created three supplementary scores, using a method of subtraction and accumulation based on the principle of the twelve-tone system—the compositional method that Schönberg pioneered two decades after he wrote *Verklärte Nacht*. The first of these supplementary scores singles out each appearance of a new tone in the original score of *Verklärte Nacht*. Only solitary notes obeying Schönberg's dodecaphonic rule are played: In his system, and therefore in this score, a tone may be repeated only after all the other eleven tones with which it forms the chromatic total have been played. Each tone in *Verklärte Nacht* that disobeys Schönberg's rule, appearing before the eleven others in the series have been played, is filtered out of the first supplementary score and removed from the staves, so that only the first appearances of the respective tones remain.

In the second supplementary score, having passed through this dodecaphonic filter, each of the notes is played repetitively in the same rhythmic value until replaced by the next note—a new tone—from the aforementioned score. And in the last score, the sextet only plays a single tonality—the D notes—from *Verklärte Nacht*. Each D note is played repetitively until the next D note from *Verklärte Nacht* replaces it. The only distinction among the notes is their original rhythmic value, as well as the ensuing melodic differences when D changes octaves while remaining one and the same tone. At this point we are seeing the musicians perform the composition's ultimate reduction.

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We recorded *Verklärte Nacht*, which was to become our reference point, first, before proceeding with the recordings of the other scores. Although the sextet performed each score together, each musician had to rigorously follow the tempo indications and the pace with which he or she had performed in the previous recording. The real challenge and particularity was in creating this peculiar reliance on a previous recording. As a result, each musician was more “in touch” with his or her previous self in *Verklärte Nacht* than with the fellow musicians playing simultaneously. This reliance between the different scores of *The Present Moment* is indispensable to the work; it stops them from acting like competing chapters in the piece and instead enables them to become complementary instances of the same presentness.

All through this process of transforming and supplementing the Schönberg score, I had been thinking about how the viewer would hear these concurrent renditions of *Verklärte Nacht* simultaneously (hearing all the scores together from one standpoint) and sequentially (moving through the hall). I imagined that one’s encounter with the different scores would spark a string of present moments that would exist both beforehand and at once with one another. Turning these scores into distinct locations within the space of the Haus der Kunst was vital to the experience of the work.

As you enter, you find yourself below an arc of six speakers, and you listen to the recording of the original score. You become aware of a second set of speakers, and of certain solitary tones drifting across the space as if expelled from the main body of the music, thus producing a sense of direction and trajectory. As these tones reach the far end of the hall, they accumulate and play repetitively—under another arc of six speakers—seemingly trapped in a dead end, a space where acoustic memory is condensed. Some notes, all belonging to a particular tone, extend their journey farther to conclude in a video in which they are embodied by the sextet seated together in a semicircle against a wall. There they are instantly transformed into a series of recurring movements of shoulders, elbows, arms, and hands: the physical manifestation of musical gestures. The musical instruments remain nearly invisible, to stress the physical effort that precedes the sounding of the notes.

I called the work *The Present Moment* because I’m interested in how the idea of the present comes across in a time of boundless acceleration. In addition, it is believed that the longest present “moments”—those pieces of time in which memory is not yet activated and notions of past and future do not arise—occur while one is listening to music. The extents of these present moments often correspond to the lengths of what are known as musical phrases or gestures. Observation has shown that the present moment only lasts three to four seconds during most of the activities of everyday life. The exception is when one is listening to music, when it may lengthen to eight seconds.

*Verklärte Nacht*’s own trajectory across the hall is, in a manner of speaking, a journey of a past event toward its own future, since the music was rearranged using the technique Schönberg developed twenty years later. Further, *The Present Moment* produces sounds and induces actions that echo historical events and procedures (such as serialism in music and the increasing specialization and division of industrial labor under Taylorism) that were to occur only later. And as one walks through a space and hears the sounds of *Verklärte Nacht* drifting across a place

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that was erected to expel those sounds, the past is also summoned. These overlays of past and future in the present assign to the current moment a special aura within the flow of time.

This interest in the experience of a “continuous presence” is increasingly reflected in my work, especially in how the characters in the films negotiate the next moment while being absorbed by the present one—for example, Jemeel Moondoc in *Long Sorrow*, suspended outside the top floor of a tall building and coping with the stress of his situation by improvising on a saxophone, or the woman who hums her way across the besieged city of Sarajevo in *1395 Days Without Red*, or even Chloé, the DJ who endeavors to manually sync two distinct executions of Ravel’s *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand*.

I’m especially interested in how music gives weight to the present moment, how it spreads it open. And when I conceive an exhibition, I do not see it as a space where works are exhibited together, but rather as a place where the trajectories of the characters and their presentness in the respective films converge with the trajectory of the viewer in the here and now of the exhibition site. In that regard, I do not see a difference between constituting an exhibition from preexisting works or elements and composing a new work where different elements and sound tracks converse together. Instead, I see an exhibition as a possibility, an opportunity to explore what I would call the now-moment and its contending instances.

*“Anri Sala: The Present Moment” is currently on view (through Sept. 20) at Haus der Kunst, Munich.*