

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

130 CURATOR'S
DIARIES

TEXT BY
MASSIMILIANO GIONI



ANRI
SALA

NEW YORK PARIS LONDON

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REQUIEM FOR A DREAM

The first work I ever saw by Anri Sala was *Intervista (Finding the Words)* (1998), a video presented at the 1999 Venice Biennale in the Albanian Pavilion, curated by Edi Muka and co-organized by Edi Rama and *Flash Art*. I was working at the time for the Milan branch of this magazine, and Sala's name was already being mentioned around the office as one of the young Albanian artists who were beginning to emerge after the country's civil war in 1997.

Intervista, the work made for his thesis project when Sala was a film student in Paris, stands as a milestone marking the shift between the late 1990s and the new millennium. In contrast to the '90s generation of video art—the various neo-structuralist experiments by Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Douglas Gordon, Pierre Huyghe, Philippe Parreno, and the spectacular videos of Doug Aitken and Pipilotti Rist—Sala's video seemed very simple, almost primitive, using disarmingly humble tools and letting narrative win out over images. *Intervista* was a sort of detective story in which Sala tried to reconstruct the soundtrack of an old film that showed his mother talking about socialism and revolution. Like other artists of his generation, such as Phil Collins, Artur Zmijewsky, or the older Steve McQueen, Sala brought the focus back to reality, to documentary, even autobiography: a reflection on history and its traumas, but woven out of personal, private, almost confessional experiences. Along with *Intervista*, his subsequent *Nocturnes* and *Dammi i Colori*—which Sala showed at Manifesta in 2000 and at the 2003 Venice Biennale respectively—formed a sort of trilogy of the Balkans; they described the collapse of communism and the open wounds of history through the existential adventures of solitary characters, swept up in the flow of events and sometimes driven by delusions of grandeur. *Nocturnes* alternates the monologues of an obsessive aquarist, always anxious that his fish may die, with the confessions of a young veteran who seems to get reality mixed up with video games as he recounts his gruesome missions. In *Dammi i Colori* ["Give Me the Colors"], Edi Rama (then Mayor of Tirana, now Prime Minister of Albania) tells of how he tried to transform the capital by painting its buildings, but his monologue turns into a meditation on art as a regenerative force and utopia as poetry and politics. A psychological tension snakes through the Balkan trilogy, as if Sala's characters were prey to a sense of instability and fragility, a sort of "borderline syndrome," to quote the title of Manifesta 3.

A similar mood can be found in *time after time*, a short video shot in the same period as *Dammi i Colori* and in the same streets of Tirana. We see an emaciated horse standing petrified by the divider of an almost deserted highway; it lifts one hoof every time a car passes, as if to defend itself or perhaps gallop away, yet remains inexorably frozen. Like the characters in the trilogy, the horse in *time after time* could be seen as a lone survivor of the collapse of ideology, bewildered by the sudden turn of events. The video also seems to explicitly play on the tradition of eque-

trian sculpture and celebratory monuments.

But rather than a heroic horse and rider, Sala presents a wounded animal that transforms this work into a monument in reverse, an image of surrender. It was owing to this sense of anguish and imminent loss that *time after time* was chosen as one of the opening images in the Berlin Biennale that I curated with Ali Subotnick and Maurizio Cattelan. Sala's work was installed on the ground floor of a former Jewish girls' school, whose architecture served as a time capsule of 20th-century traumas.

Like other coeval works, *time after time* marks an important turning point in Sala's career; it was around this time that he abandoned the words and narrative that characterized his early videos and began to focus on more abstract images, in which sound and music almost became characters in their own right. Nowhere is this transition more evident than in *Long Sorrow* (2005), originally produced by the Fondazione Nicola Trussardi and presented in a solo show at Milan's Circolo Filologico in 2005. *Long Sorrow* is one of Sala's most touching and mysterious works: one long, slow take reveals the interior of an apartment in a modernist building in Berlin that residents have nicknamed the "Long Complaint," or "Sorrow." Outside the window we can see a saxophone player who is improvising a wild rhapsody as he hangs 30 meters off the ground, suspended like a figurehead on the prow of a building that sums up the aspirations and failures of 20th-century modernist ideology. Like many other works by Sala, *Long Sorrow* weaves music and architecture into a sweeping, abstract vision of history, a syncopated requiem for the great illusions that inflamed the 20th century: modernity, utopia, equality, and exceptionalism.

Some of these themes turn up again in a series of video-installations that Sala has been developing in recent years, such as *Ravel Ravel*, presented at the Venice Biennale in 2013 and then at the New Museum in New York in 2016, or *Take Over*, shown in Berlin in 2017. Both of these works—large, complex installations where video and sound take on a sculptural quality—revolve around pieces of music connected to 20th-century history: respectively, Maurice Ravel's *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand in D Major* (1929-1930) and the famous political anthems *La Marseillaise* and *The Internationale*, which Sala takes apart and fits together like musical jigsaw puzzles. Two decades after *Intervista*, Sala is still reconstructing sounds and images as a way of giving a voice back to the ghosts of the past. If history had a soundtrack, its dissonances, harmonies, and cacophonies would surely resemble Sala's aural assemblages.

time after time, 2003 Courtesy: Bick Productions © Anri Sala / ADAGP, Paris (2019), by SIAE 2019

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