

# CULTURED

## *The Interventionist*

*Anri Sala creates unforgettable experiences, manipulating sound, architecture and space.  
Artist Asad Raza sits down with Sala in Berlin to discuss his unique approach to synesthesia.*

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Anri Sala at his Studio in Berlin, Germany. Photograph by Wolfgang Stahr.

I remember walking into *The Present Moment*, Anri Sala's 2014 commission for Munich's Haus der Kunst as clearly as if it was yesterday. I came upon sounds—renditions of symphonic music with no obvious source—that led me across the institution's Middle Hall. Magnetized by the sound, I reached a screen that had been turned parallel to the length of the large room. Suddenly I was rapt. It was a simple thing, but a eureka: encountering the screen at that point in the room reconfigured the relationship between sound and moving image in a powerful, unexpected way, something I believe is one of Sala's great talents.

The artist's work explores connections between space and sound with a depth and complexity unparalleled in the contemporary art world. He draws on music, in both its formal valences and historical meanings, to construct experiences that are always powerfully arrayed in an exhibition space. This attention gives his work a spaciousness but an almost philosophical depth, as was on full display in "Answer Me," his epic takeover of the New York's New Museum in 2016.

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Anri is a true mensch, too. I once talked to him over a dinner about a project I was nervous about; he listened and said, simply, “We know who we are by doing.” It ended the anxiety and it stuck with me. No matter how well he must know himself at this point in his career, Anri never stops pushing. That’s what I learned this summer when we caught up over a long conversation about his process, and a pair of upcoming shows at Mexico City’s Museo Tamayo (through January 7) and “All of a Tremble” at kurimanzutto (through October). And, he’s staging a commission for the 33rd Kaldor Public Art Project (October 13 through November 5) at Sydney’s Observatory Hill Rotunda, that will transform Mozart’s Clarinet Concerto in A Major into a sonic message in a bottle.

**Asad Raza:** One of the newest works in your show at Museo Tamayo is *Take Over*. When I saw it this summer in Berlin, it had a lot of resonance for me.

**Anri Sala:** Well, you remember the music from your apartment...

**AR:** Exactly. For my show, you sent me this piece, *Overtone Oscillations*, made of a pretty haunting vocal of a throat singer combining the melodies from the Internationale and the Marseillaise—the anthems of socialism and of France.

**AS:** And we had it playing on the stereo.



Anri Sala's *Take Over*, 2017. Courtesy of Esther Schipper and Kurimanzutto; Photo by Andrea Rossetti.

**AR:** Yeah, it was great. When I saw *Take Over*, I heard snatches of the two melodies again, only this time played on pianos and projected on a double-screened structure. As I moved, what I saw and heard kept changing. There was no one way to experience it.

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**AS:** The two anthems come together again in the piece. The Marseillaise was written in 1792 and is tied to the French Revolution but it also quickly spread to other countries where it became a symbol for overthrowing oppressive regimes. And the thing is that the 1871 lyrics of the Internationale were set to the tune of the Marseillaise, until 1888 when original music was composed for it, and the song became the anthem of the socialist movement. The ambivalence between the two songs, both having undergone major changes in their political connotations: from revolution, restoration, socialism, resistance and patriotism, and even colonization and oppression in the twentieth century. It is this relationship and flux that I wanted to tackle by means of music.

However at Tamayo, *Take Over* won't be installed with the same glass construction. Actually, all the works constituting the cartography of the show at Tamayo will be in sync and interlocked with each other. What I find interesting at Tamayo, architecturally, is that there are two spaces, kind of like a song with two stanzas, and then a patio which is like a coda, but within that there are also four different levels with the ceiling. So depending on whether you concentrate on the floor or the ceiling, there are different situations—as if you have a tempo of two and a tempo of four, depending on what your body senses more.



Sala in his Berlin Studio. Portrait by Wolfgang Stahr.

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**AR:** The way you talk about it puts together two things that seem important in your work: one is time and sound and the other is architecture.

**AS:** Especially if by architecture you mean the site where... [pause] the rhythm and the pace come together to partition space. The interlocked relation between the two anthems and the two films of *Take Over* will still be present in Tamayo, but the screens will be in separate yet adjacent spaces. I'm also showing *Le Clash* and *Tlatelolco Clash*, which—the latter—I haven't shown in Mexico yet although I shot it there. The Tlatelolco site where we shot *Tlatelolco Clash* depicts the present and the ancient in Mexico so well. You have Aztec ruins, and then a Catholic church built out of stones from the ruins, as faith was moving from one construct into the other, in the form of stones. And then you have all the modernist architecture around. And then, during the earthquake, some of the modern buildings fell, so you have blocks of absence. It's like a syncopated architectural collage, made of on-beat, even if contradictory, presences and off-beat absences.

**AR:** That makes me think of another thing in your work: these tectonic plates of historical moments sort of crossing each other. It's like a slow music going on at the same time as other, faster musics going on in your work. Which connects to the first work I saw of yours, *Intervista*, where there's such a strong connection between the formal strategy and the contents. Like a rhythm. I think of the circling shot, where you're circling the camera around your mother, as she remembers her past in the Marxist-Leninist youth group.

**AS:** These tectonic plates of historical moments that you mention remind me of the tectonic plates in some musical compositions, such as the Ravel's *Concerto for the Left Hand*, that connects to *Ravel Ravel Unravel*, which I'm also presenting at Tamayo, but in a very different way from before. Usually it's installed within an anechoic room on two screens, one above the other, whereas at Tamayo it will be shown on two semi-transparent screens, one after the other, so you can situate yourself before the two screens, in between the two screens, or behind the two screens. When you're looking at one, you see through to the second one and you always see an overlapping of both films. So I'm experimenting with *Take Over* and *Ravel Ravel* very differently from the way I conceived them to be shown. But I think that's part of the fun when you do your show. You don't change the content of the works, but you change the way their inner architecture translates into the architecture of the museum and vice-versa.

**AR:** Yes.



Anri Sala's *Unravel*, 2013. Courtesy of Galerie Chantal Crousel, Marian Goodman Gallery, Hauser & Wirth and Kurimanzutto.

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**AS:** I always said, and I stand by it, when I'm invited to do a show in a museum, I don't take it solely as an opportunity to show my work, but as a way to use my work to invite the space back, merging the works and the space to the point that a new embodiment takes shape. In some of my works there is literally an inner architecture, like in *Ravel Ravel*. When *Ravel Ravel* is displayed in an anechoic room—an entirely muted space where the absorption of the sound reflections annihilates all sense of space—the repetition of the same notes twice induces the impression of an echo. So the temporal interval becomes itself a confirmation of space. It's like a space that increases when the interval is wider and decreases the smaller the interval becomes, when the two pianists come gradually into sync with each other.

**AR:** You seem to be creating a third space that's not just in the work and not just in world.

**AS:** I'm using the work to produce a common space between the inner architecture of the space and the given space of the museum. And then, as a coda, at the very end of the exhibition on the patio, there will be the installation *Bridges in the Doldrums*, where four self-playing snare drums—three suspended upside down from the ceiling and one laying on the floor—play a compositional arrangement of 70 bridges from songs, arranged in order of BPM from lowest to highest. I like the idea how the exhibition follows a song structure; it's spread over two stanzas and ends in a coda (the patio) where song bridges are playing.

**AR:** [laughs] This is the project that that you did the first version of in Havana? When it was a live performance with Andre Vida and other musicians?

**AS:** Exactly. That was the first step, and then we did something tighter in London, and then we did a recording in the studio, which became the soundtrack for the sculptural manifestation of the idea, in which the three suspended drums play the saxophone, trombone and clarinet parts, and the fallen one plays the percussion.

**AR:** Wow. It really evolved.

**AS:** It was a long process. In the sculptural manifestation, you don't hear it throughout as with the recording. You hear the drums' response to the sound. The only place you can hear the recording fully, as a continuous musical arrangement, will be outside, where there will be two speakers. So the drums perform a memory of music that the visitor also has. In my experience, music undoes sculpture, or sculpture undoes music, if they are both full-on.

**AR:** That's very interesting. I find that in this world of live, unfolding exhibition-making, one issue is that if you do it wrong, you turn an exhibition into a set for something.

**AS:** It's very important to reintroduce in a work, especially when works are put next to each other, a certain vulnerability. In my view, when you do a single work, it has to have utmost intensity; but the moment you make an exhibition, you have to make each work vulnerable, more porous.

**AR:** As in your Serpentine show, where the entire museum became porous, as a music box or player piano scroll with the holes punched in the walls of the gallery. And you used The Clash's *Should I Stay or Should I Go* as a leitmotif for the show. I thought that was very appropriate to exhibitions as a format, because that's the question they ask you.

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**AS:** It's a continuous question, when you make an exhibition, you don't want to control too much, but you still want to compose with a sense of direction; conducting and letting go at the same time.

**AR:** Let's talk about the kurimanzutto show.



Anri Sala's *All of a Tremble (Encounter)*, 2017.

**AS:** I am showing two large-scale drawings facing each other in the gallery. Each of them represents vintage wallpaper patterns, manually imprinted on strips of wallpaper by pressing a pencil on the paper against the roller. In the first work—*All of a Tremble (Encounter II)*—two 19th century wallpaper designs encounter each other halfway across the wall. In order to translate the encounter between the two designs into a soundtrack and transform their patterns into music, two halves from the respective original cylinders are joined together into one roller. Consequently, the roller is converted into a sort of music box, in combination with a purpose-built steel comb. Upon streaking against the reeds of the metallic comb, its needles produce musical notes and phrases, thus physicalizing the sound of the neighboring patterns. It is at once the visual manifestation of the merger of the two distinct patterns and the soundtrack of their union.

The other work—*All of a Tremble (Delusion/Devolution)*—a more recent wallpaper design, possibly from the 50s, represents a jumble of Disney characters across a lush landscape. The original pattern is composed of 10 rollers, but during the execution of the drawing I gradually took away each roller one by one, so the image starts to fall apart, like a journey from figuration to abstraction. Gradually only parts of the Mickey and Bambi and the dwarfs remain. And that very reduced part becomes the score for the sound that is emitted. When choosing the tones for the musical combs I usually employ various scales—for instance there are quarter-tone scales, which are Western scales, and Pelog or Kumoi scales which are respectively Malaysian (based on microtones) and Japanese scales. Consequently, you feel that there is as a sort of tension in the sounds, it remains open-ended.

**AR:** Once again this brings up how different cultural and historical regimes are encountering each other in your work.

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**AS:** “All of a tremble,” the title of the works, was also the first phrase ever pronounced by a synthetic voice. In the thirties, E.A. Humphries, an acoustic engineer, analyzed the sound of words and figured out which wave pattern belonged to which word. He found a graphic to each phonetic component, and combined them in a sequence that corresponded with the word. So he carefully drew shapes on long cardboard strips that could be optically read by a machine and transformed into a voice, which said: “all of a tremble.”

**AR:** He drew a voice. You make these synesthesiac connections everywhere. Like the new project in Sydney, that relates to a Mozart concerto?

**AS:** Yes, I’m showing it in a pavilion, like an English gazebo in the park, in what was topologically the highest point in the city. Almost 40 drums will be suspended upside-down from the ceiling, playing a rearrangement of a concerto by Mozart, the last concerto he wrote before he died. What happens if you take a masterpiece of the Enlightenment, and put it in a bottle and throw it in the sea, and let it suffer the weather and endure the currents? How does it sound once it makes it ashore on the other side? It won’t play strictly according to the intentions of its creator, Mozart, because it’s imbued with the experience of the voyage.

In a manner of speaking it was about working with the idea of the journey, but also how it corrupts a musical piece, which is one of the masterpieces of the Enlightenment. I’m interested in this idea of corruption, so this was like composing musically with corruption.

**AR:** Also, corruption is another time-based phenomenon, like weathering.

**AS:** Yes, it’s so time-based! It has so many facets and comprises so many things. You have the will of Mozart, the experience of the sailor and the act of the weather. It’s a matter of introducing weather as a secondary force majeure that takes the reins over the composer, over Mozart, who represents the will of the individual—which was so empowered by the notion of Enlightenment.