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## ***Before Sound Becomes Music***

**Marcella Beccaria**

I shall now perform a small experiment. I push the glass of water beside my computer to the edge of the desk. I then push it a bit further, until part of the bottom sticks out over the edge, and go on pushing, millimeter by millimeter. I hold my breath as my finger touches the surface of the glass. What I want to see, or rather perceive, is the moment that separates the presence of the glass on my desk from its fall to the ground. I am not performing this experiment in order to explain the law of gravity to my daughter or to make room in my working space — even though this is sorely needed. I am doing it for myself, in order to explain to myself, albeit with a certain degree of approximation, the most indefinable and at the same time pervasive aspect of Anri Sala's art, namely his deep interest in what he calls the "present moment." Almost as though opening up the *hic et nunc* of the ancient Latin world to the complexity of quantum mechanics, Sala's present moment is a constantly expanding investigation that enables him to capture in his works the ineffable meaningfulness of the instant in which reality is on the point of materializing, thus revealing a dense interweaving of possibilities. To draw a comparison with the analogical world, it is as though his present moment were capable of isolating the inexpressible instant in which the hour hand is about to move. Nor is this all. Instead of presenting themselves as possible documents that record a specific present moment related in every case to a particular situation, the artist's works also act as devices capable of triggering that instant, thus themselves becoming joint producers of the enigmatic fragment of time and space that separates before and after. The ways in which this spark is struck, giving rise to gripping experiential situations, is the subject addressed here, in connection with the exhibition *AS YOU GO* and the work *Bridges in the Doldrums* displayed there.

Devised by the artist for the galleries on the third floor of the Castello di Rivoli, *AS YOU GO* presents the films *Ravel Ravel* (2013), *Take Over* (2017), and *If and Only If* (2018) in a new dynamic sequence. The exhibition begins to subtly manifest itself to the visitor as a series of sounds pervading the interstitial spaces, including the stairs and the entrance on the third floor. The sounds are enigmatic, evidently percussive but with an unusual rhythm that defies deciphering. As we draw closer, the mystery is solved—but only in part. The origin of the sounds is revealed as four snare drums, each with a seductive chrome skin, positioned on the floor and ceiling. Each drum is being struck by a pair of drumsticks, apparently wielded by invisible hands, since no mechanism is detected by the eye. Closer investigation reveals that their movement is responding to the vibrations of the reflecting surface of each drum, inside which the artist has placed two speakers, one low-frequency and the other mid-range. The low-frequency speaker generates the vibrations that trigger the skin, which in response makes the drumsticks move, thus reversing the habitual relationship whereby the percussive action is performed by the drumsticks. The initially slow rhythm gradually becomes quicker in a gripping crescendo. Thanks to the audible sounds emitted by the mid-range speakers, as opposed to the inaudible sounds emitted by the low-frequency ones, it sometimes seems possible to recognize something, perhaps a familiar tune, but only for a few beats before

another rhythm takes over.

Anri Sala describes the work in question, *Bridges in the Doldrums* (2016), as follows: “a three-part arrangement for saxophone, trombone, and clarinet [...] constructed solely from the bridges of 74 pop, jazz and folk songs from different periods and geographies.”<sup>1</sup> The work was developed by Sala from an initial version in the form of a performance held at the Havana Biennial in 2015. Produced in collaboration with the musician André Vida, this initially included 100 songs in an arrangement for saxophone, trombone, and flute, which was subsequently reworked and edited down to 74 songs, as an arrangement for saxophone, trombone, and clarinet. This updated version of the performance was recorded in a studio in Berlin to become the soundtrack of the sculptural piece *Bridges in the Doldrums*. Prior to the Castello di Rivoli, the work was presented at Instituto Moreira Salles in Rio de Janeiro in 2016, where it was installed with two additional speakers in an adjacent room that played the full audible soundtrack. In all the versions described, the instruments selected often play parts originally written for others, thus responding to one another and altering their role. The fulcrum of the work is always the “bridge,” the short passage in a piece of popular music, usually of four or eight beats, leading up to the melody of the refrain. If the refrain can be described as the apotheosis of the song, the moment in which the latter actually manifests itself, often in such an immediately recognizable form as to become haunting, especially in pop music, the bridge is instead a passage of tension, almost of indecision, in which the instruments can halt the tempo by falling silent together for a brief instant. As a result, the listeners are separated momentarily from what they know before being plunged into the refrain, almost like reaching a safe harbor after being lost on unknown seas. As the artist explains, “the bridge alienates the listener from the song itself, keeping one’s attention while suspending one’s belief and expectations, until the chorus returns to reconfirm their acquaintance with it.”

In *Bridges in the Doldrums* the progression toward ever-faster rhythms further enhances the intrinsic value of the concept of the bridge. By extending the tension of awaiting some recognizable tune, the work constantly renews a sense of expectation and desire. Instead of granting listeners the satisfaction of a known melody, it unceasingly teases their desire for safety, building up palpable tension on every encounter. Paradoxically enough, in this process, during which many instants renew the unrecognizability of those preceding them, visitors are confronted with what they presumably know best, that is, their own faces and expressions. The chrome finish of each drum functions as a gleaming mirror that captures whatever appears before it, thus visually confirming that the work is a part of reality in a given place and a precise moment.

As always in Sala’s art, the title of the work adds a further level of interpretation (the artist insists on keeping all of his titles in the language in which he originally conceived them and avoiding any attempt at translation). The play on words here is evident between the drums, which give the work its sculptural shape, and the “doldrums” (probably derived from a combination of “dull” and “tantrum”), a nautical term that entered English in the nineteenth century. In addition to a condition or state of mind, it also indicates the area now known as the Intertropical Convergence Zone. Extending a few miles north and south of the Equator in accordance with unpredictable seasonal fluctuations, this belt encircling the globe and its oceans is characterized by low atmospheric pressure that reduces the speed of winds, which become extremely variable or completely absent.

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<sup>1</sup> Anri Sala’s quotes in this essay are excerpted from conversations with the author, which started back in 2002 in view of a possible exhibition at Castello di Rivoli. Further references include the artist’s writings, gathered together and published for the first time in this catalog.

Dead calm can alternate with sudden storms, trapping sail-driven vessels for days or weeks on end. Sadly familiar to the sailors who first crossed the oceans and still feared by present-day transoceanic crews, the doldrums correspond to stretches of sea in which sailors know that they have no control over their fate and exist in a state of constant uncertainty.

Further investigation into the semantic possibilities reverberating in the title reveal that the term “bridge” also establishes an unprecedented relationship with the site of Castello di Rivoli. Sala chose to display the work in the room on the third floor of the museum, an unusual kind of loft, which is now equipped with a bridge-like walkway after renovation by the architect Andrea Bruno. During the restoration, commenced in 1979 with the idea of enabling visitors to appreciate the stunning technical complexity of the building’s architecture (as developed by Carlo Randoni from 1793 after the initial work by Filippo Juvarra), Bruno decided to dispense with a conventional floor and design a metal walkway running diagonally across the room, widening out in the middle. This allows viewers to see the extrados of the masonry ceiling of the vast and imposing room below on the second floor. Bruno’s restoration project also preserved the reinforced-concrete roof trusses of the loft as part of the building’s history. Built by the Italian civil engineering corps in 1948, these structures replaced the original wooden beams destroyed in 1943, when Castello di Rivoli was struck by an incendiary bomb during the dramatic air raids of World War II. Sala embraces this extraordinary combination of history and memories by placing one drum on the eighteenth-century extrados and hanging the others on the twentieth-century trusses. The middle of the walkway thus becomes a place rife with meaning, introducing visitors to the sequence of films that comprise *AS YOU GO* and offering them their first experience of the artist’s focus on the poetic value of the “present moment.”

As often in the artist’s work, where various strands of investigation run parallel and one work can give birth to another, *Bridges in the Doldrums* is located within a sequential, organic evolution that includes snare drums as sound-emitting sculptures. First appearing in Sala’s art in the spring of 2009 with *A Solo in the Doldrums*, this “family” can be traced back in turn to themes regarding the ways in which a given place influences the unfolding of the events that occur in it, as initially explored in the video work *Answer Me* (2008). Shot in Teufelsberg near Berlin, *Answer Me* is set in a former secret base, previously used by the CIA and NSA to eavesdrop on Soviet communications during the Cold War. The iconic geodesic dome becomes the scene of a peculiar “quasi-dialogue” between a man and a woman based on a short text by Italian filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni. While the woman attempts to establish verbal dialogue and obtain answers as she seeks to end their affair, the man concentrates all his attention on drumming. Sitting with his back to her, he uses the drum kit to produce a dense series of sounds that drown her words and cause her to fall silent, thus transforming the void of his silence into a solid wall of noise. Though unwilling to enter into conversation, the man establishes a sort of communication that consists of replacing the language of words with musical frequencies. The acoustic characteristics of the dome create a distinctly long echo (Sala’s male lead is a professional percussionist who devised the rhythmic sequence in precise relation to the frequency response of the space in which the film is set). In one scene, the camera captures the woman’s anguish and her awareness that she is receiving answers even though in non-verbal form. More explicit than so many words, the man’s rhythmic drumming makes her deeply distraught. As she holds her bent head between her hands, the snare drum beside her reacts in turn to the power of the long echo sweeping through the dome. Even though no one is actually wielding the drumsticks, they respond to the vibrations imparted to its surface.

As the artist observes, music has gradually taken on a predominant function in his work as a form of expression that, unlike language, amplifies perception of the present: “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 listening to music.” It is after *Answer Me* that snare drums, to which the artist refers generically as “doldrums,” become autonomous works as a logical consequence of their genesis. But unlike in the film, where the frequencies in the dome generate the vibration of the drum and the response of the sticks, in Sala’s subsequent sound sculptures this relationship is reversed. By inserting a low-frequency speaker into the drum, the artist engineers the work so that it is the instrument itself, from the inside, that causes the drumsticks to move. What remains predominant is the role of the “doldrum” as an agent capable of capturing in sonic form — and in accordance with a predilection for the abstract that runs through the artist’s work as a whole — certain characteristics of a given place. It is indeed through the “doldrums” that Sala is able to embrace stories, memories, tensions, and fears, but also physical characteristics such as architecture or even geographic situations and meteorological conditions, and “translate” them into frequencies. These frequencies, which may or may not be audible, gradually open up each work to new interactions and potential meanings. It is this simultaneous presence, this extraordinary array of potentialities, that enables us as visitors to experience the “present moment” to the full, almost as though helping us to attain a state of deep meditation.

Sala explored the great potential inherent in snare drums as elements that reiterate the truth of the present in his first major show in an American museum, namely *Purchase Not By Moonlight* at the Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami in the winter of 2008. Five snare drums were positioned in relation to the columned building’s architectural structure and to the selection of films presented, including *Answer Me*. Interpreting the setting of his films as a veritable choreography with a corresponding rhythmic basis, the artist develops a low-frequency track for each and plays it in synchrony with the film through speakers inserted in snare drums. The movements of the sticks on each drum respond to and reiterate the rhythm of each of the films shown, thus creating a kind of soundtrack made up of pure percussion. While in *Purchase Not By Moonlight* Sala does not regard the “doldrums” as an autonomous work, the exhibition constitutes a significant precedent, a sort of “meta-work” within the trajectory that also includes *AS YOU GO*. It should indeed be emphasized that *AS YOU GO* was conceived by the artist as both an exhibition and a work. Understood as a new piece conceived especially for Castello di Rivoli comprising a set of works, it can be defined in all respects as a “metaexhibition,” thus extending the premises identifiable in the first presentation in Miami.

The first autonomous work in the “family” of *doldrums* is *A Solo in the Doldrums* (2009). It was born out of an invitation from the British choreographer Siobhan Davies to produce a joint work. Sala responded by asking Davies to devise a choreography to be staged in the absence of any audience. Having fitted Davies with a microphone to record the sounds of her breathing and movements while dancing, he then translated these into low-frequency impulses, inaudible to the human ear, and played them on the drum’s inbuilt speaker so that the drumsticks responded to the vibrations. In this sense, the work adds an important element: the paradox of making the invisible visible, placing viewers in the condition of awaiting the movements and sounds of the drumsticks without being able to foretell when they will come.

With the works immediately following this, namely *Another Solo in the Doldrums* (2011), presented at the Serpentine Gallery in London, and *Another Solo in the Doldrums (Extended Play)* (2012),

devised for his exhibition at Centre Pompidou in Paris, Sala developed the frequencies (again in inaudible form) on the basis of the soundtrack resulting from the set of video works presented in the two shows. While the works function in these specific contexts as responses to the sonic emissions that pervade the space, their having been extrapolated from their original setting turns them into memories of past shows, in accordance with a procedure further developed with *Another Clash in the Doldrums* (2014). Conceived by Sala in conjunction with the Vincent Award, where he presented the pieces *Le Clash* (2010) and *Tlateloco Clash* (2011) on two back-to-back screens, the work is a snare drum that responds to the translation in low frequencies of sounds present in the two works. The resulting track seems to represent a sort of competition between the two videos for control over the vibrations to be transmitted to the drumsticks.

*Names in the Doldrums* (2014) saw his first insertion of two speakers into the snare drum, one emitting inaudible low frequencies, as in the previous works, and the other mid-range frequencies, which can be heard by the human ear. The work was created within the framework of a solo show at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Sala's first in Israel, and in relation to the dramatic events occurred shortly before, thus expanding the idea that the work responds to the place and to the echoes that inhabit it. A few weeks before the opening of the exhibition, which Sala significantly called *No Names, No Title*, violent clashes in the Gaza Strip led to the tragic deaths of numerous children. In his studio in Berlin, the artist heard the sad list of names read out on the radio. Banned by the Israeli Broadcasting Authority and no longer transmitted, the recording was used by the artist as part of his work, not only preserving the broadcast of the human voice reading the list of names, but also reiterating its silencing enforced by local authorities: while the speaker transmitted the recording of the voice reading the names, the low frequencies emitted vibrations to the drumsticks, so that the soundtrack simultaneously produced and cancelled the sounds of the names. Delving deeper into the original concept of the *doldrums* as a physical and mental locus of the immobility that accompanies unforeseeable events, Sala then used references to the history of art, music, and popular culture in what can be identified as a further group of works within this broad "family." In *Still life in the Doldrums (d'après Cézanne)* (2015) the wooden drumsticks are customized so that the ends that should be held by the drummer look like two human calf bones, while a composition made up of four human skulls hangs from the ceiling above the drum. Arranged to form a pyramid, the skulls constitute a citation of Paul Cézanne's *Pyramid of Skulls* (1901). The painting is one of the works in which the master's exploration of still life, and in particular the genre of *memento mori* or *vanitas* painting, reveals an anguished obsession with the fleetingness of life and the possible awareness of his approaching death. Sala preserves the expressive pictorial quality of the original by painting the skulls in subtle shades of ivory with burnished nuances. The stark message of Cézanne's *memento mori* is somehow amplified by the way in which the sculptural group, hung on thin nylon threads, sways in response to the movement of the drumsticks. Moments of immobility alternate with vigorous action triggered by the vibrations and the noises — some audible and others inaudible — emitted by the soundtrack that forms part of the work. Opening up to multiple twists, the soundtrack includes a free rearrangement of Arnold Schönberg's *Verklärte Nacht* (1899), composed shortly before Cézanne's painting, and snatches of music from Tom and Jerry cartoons. Composed by Scott Bradley, a former pupil of Schönberg in California, these tunes contributed to the success of Walt Disney's creation. The fact that Disney was born in 1901, the year of Cézanne's painting, is a further coincidence that becomes meaningful in Sala's association. Besides the evident presence of different human skulls, *Still life in the Doldrums (Don't Explain)* (2015) differs from the work described above in terms of sound content. While retaining some of Bradley's tunes, Sala adds excerpts from the jazz song *Don't Explain* (1946) by Billy Holiday and from the cover version by

Nina Simone (1964), a reference to the fact that jazz was established as a musical genre at the turn of the century, when Cézanne painted his skulls. Both of the above works respond to questions Sala asked himself: “How can a doldrum play a still life? How can immobility activate something that must by its very nature remain motionless?” Well aware that he is entering an area on the borderline of paradox, he also harnesses the physical potentialities offered by the sculptural form employed, which enables him through its development in the round to show the back of the still life: the hidden side that the painting cannot show.

A later group of works, with greater importance now attached to the gravity-defying use of space in mid-air, features snare drums hung from the ceiling upside-down so that the playing surface is visible to the viewers below. The titles of this 2015 group, including *Moth in the Doldrums (Overtone Oscillations)*, *Moth in B-flat*, *Moth in D* and *Transfigured Moth*, all refer to the moth, an insect that the artist finds interesting for its close relationship with the butterfly and preference for nocturnal rather than diurnal activity. These works are also characterized by increased complexity of the sound component. For *Moth in B-flat*, *Moth in D* and *Transfigured Moth*, the basis of the soundtrack is once again Schönberg’s early composition *Verklärte Nacht*, which interests Sala as belonging to the tonal period of the Austrian master, who then went on to develop atonal music, becoming one of the most important practitioners of Expressionism in the musical sphere. Exploring the musical structure devised by Schönberg for *Verklärte Nacht*, whose initially unfavorable reception was due to the use of a chord not contemplated in the treatises on harmony of the period, in each work of the *Moth* group Sala pursues his investigations differently. In *Transfigured Moth*, for example, he isolates the moments in which a new tone appears. Here he uses a procedure based on the principle of the twelve-tone technique, otherwise known as atonal theory, developed by Schönberg in his maturity. What does not change is the way in which the artist isolates the notes that will make up his soundtrack in each case. Applying a method that is at variance with the compositional ideas used in *Verklärte Nacht* and belongs instead to Schönberg’s later work, Sala makes the notes played appear almost in the instant when they are expelled from the composition, triggering *en passant* the reaction of the drumsticks. Like the unpredictable winds blowing in the equatorial zone of the doldrums, these works expose visitors to multiple trajectories with no possibility of identifying one dominant direction.

In *Moth in the Doldrums (Overtone Oscillations)* two snare drums are set a few meters apart, one standing on the floor, the other suspended from the ceiling. The source of the sound component is a performance held in London at the Barbican in the summer of 2015. Here Sala collaborated with Anna-Maria Hefele, a specialist in overtone or harmonic singing — a technique originally adopted in Asian philosophical and spiritual practices to attain states of deep meditation, where one voice sings a fundamental note and its overtone at the same time. In this period, while pursuing a number of other projects, as is often the case, Sala also undertook an examination of the history and musical structure of *La Marseillaise* and *The Internationale* that led in 2017 to the film *Take Over*, which is included in *AS YOU GO*. Making use of the overtone technique, Sala intermingles the two anthems in such a way as to highlight their historical affinity and musical kinship.

*In-Between the Doldrums (Pac-Man)* (2016) also consists of two snare drums, one standing on the ground, the other hanging from the ceiling. Separated by a few inches gap, due to their proximity, the drumsticks play both of their skins in unison, emitting a solid body of sound that reinforces the power of the piece as a producer of authentic “present moments.” Moreover, both snare drums feature reflective chrome skin, which is here used by Sala for the first time, opening up to an

exploration of the concept of the “space in between,” another of his favorite areas of investigation. Placed one above the other, the two chrome skins generate a multiplication of reflections that the artist describes as “an infinity of in-between spaces,” with a visual density that enriches the visitor’s synaesthetic experience.

Chronologically, the next work in the *doldrums* “family” is *Bridges in the Doldrums*, described at the beginning of this essay. This piece is followed by *43 Names in the Doldrums* (2017). Presented as a snare drum hung from the ceiling, the work is based on a tragic event that took place in Mexico on September 26, 2014. An attack on a group of about 80 students from Ayotzinapa traveling to a demonstration in Mexico City to commemorate the Tlatelolco massacre of 1968 led to a number of deaths and the still unexplained disappearance of 43 students, as well as arrests by the local police. In Sala’s work, the names of the missing students are read out by a female voice and transmitted by the speaker inside the snare drum. Because of the low frequencies contained in the spoken words, the drum skin vibrates and triggers the drumsticks, whose rat-a-tat prevents the names from being heard. Not unlike *Names in the Doldrums*, the work referring to the children killed in the Gaza Strip, *43 Names in the Doldrums* sends a clear message, reiterating the use of political pressure to silence any talk of tragic events and exposing its coercive nature.

Conceived as a site-specific installation for Kaldor Public Art Projects in Sydney, Australia, *The Last Resort* (2017) is the most ambitious of the *doldrums* works created by the artist so far. It consists of 38 snare drums with reflecting surfaces hung from the ceiling of an outdoor pavilion overlooking the city’s majestic bay on Observatory Hill, a strategic vantage point already known to the Aborigine peoples, and previously the site of Fort Philip, built in 1800 as part of the first defensive works of the Sydney penal colony. As in the previous works, the snare drums are specially altered and, in this case, each fitted with two speakers, a low-frequency and a mid-range one. Reflecting on the early days of the colonial occupation with the arrival of Captain James Cook in Botany Bay in January 1770, followed by the First Fleet of eleven ships carrying convicts as well as officers and their families in 1788, Sala uses Mozart’s almost contemporary *Clarinet Concerto in A major, K. 622* (1791) as a soundtrack. Once again, he alters the music on the basis of precise rules, derived in this case from a reading of the diary of James Bell, a precious historical source again dating from the early days of the British colonization of Australia. Written in 1838, the diary records the epic voyage of its 20-year-old author, kept at sea for six long months instead of the expected 130 days by a series of misfortunes and unexpected setbacks, exposed to all kinds of weather conditions as well as unimaginable situations of corruption and immorality on board. Sala replaces Mozart’s original indications of tempo with observations on wind strength drawn from Bell’s diary, an extraordinary coming-of-age story that narrates the author’s ever-closer contact with the degeneration of most of his traveling companions. The resulting melody was then played by an orchestra and recorded by Sala with separate microphones for each musician. These tracks were installed in the upside-down snare drums, which were arranged in such a way that their positions reflected a possible orchestra playing in the pavilion.

Sala sees his alteration of Mozart’s concerto as a sort of poetic deterioration due to the great length of a hard and exhausting voyage like the one made by Bell and the early settlers. As he wrote in his notes on the work, “I wanted to imagine how a fictional journey through the winds, the waves, and the water currents of the high seas would affect a musical masterpiece of the age of Enlightenment; what would become of Mozart’s *Clarinet Concerto* if it were to float and drift like a message in a bottle, until washed ashore after a long voyage?” Picking up the echoes of a distant past, the

insistence on the concept of corruption that shapes the work also captures the tragic impact of colonial domination in a land where the reiteration of sounds and songs in their original form is an integral part of the spiritual culture of the Aborigines, according to a sacred ritual bond that enables them to create creation anew every time they sing.