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...Until We Belong Together

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“Through this parade, the exhibition as a whole becomes a musical instrument that relies on the visitors’ bearings to gain its full dimension ... *until they belong together.*”

Anri Sala

What lies at the core of Anri Sala’s practice? Is it his interest in sculpting his audiences’ experience of space through video and sound? His fascination with the balance between programmed and improvised actions in the work of committed musicians? His interest in the emotions produced by intervals and gaps, where forms of reparation from historical trauma may occur? One of the most intellectual artists in the field today, Anri Sala creates films and installations, as well as sculptural objects and drawings, that speak elegiacally both of the highest forms of Western culture, often the work of great musical composers and performers, and of the catastrophes of the human and non-human body — its limbs amputated, its hands severed¹.

Yet his works empathetically project an acute awareness of pain in ways that are never dramatically outspoken. Almost all his works refer directly or indirectly to forms of resistance to this amputation

¹ In his essay “Manutensions, or Anri Sala’s Outstretched Hands,” Peter Szendy plays with the words *maintenir* (to hold) and *maintenant* (now), writing that Sala “likes for us to feel the tension that maintains it *now* [*maintenant*]”: in *Anri Sala. Ravel Ravel Unravel*, published on the occasion of the 55th Venice Biennale, *The Encyclopedic Palace*, exhibition catalog, edited by C. Macel and A. Sala (Giardini della Biennale, French Pavillion, Venice), Paris: Manuella Éditions, Institut français, Centre national des arts plastiques, 2013, p. 105. He writes about *Ravel Ravel* (2013), based on a score written in 1929–30 by Maurice Ravel for the pianist Paul Wittgenstein, who lost his right arm in World War I. In this work, two films are projected onto two screens, each showing a performer’s left hand playing the French composer’s concerto in a virtuosic reparation of the hand through the representation of two left hands: “What interests Anri Sala is visibly the manual work, the manipulation necessary to make, to *manufacture* a musical phrase worthy of the name [...] a presence that is constantly manufactured from [the hands’] radical disjuncture”: *ibid.*, pp. 109–10.

through craft—the making of things with expertise, precision, and dedication².

Anri Sala's art investigates traumatic turning points or their aftermath in modern West European history and is deeply rooted in his situated experience as a diasporic Albanian born in Tirana, in 1974, who moved to France at the age of twenty-two in 1996 and has lived and worked in Berlin since 2004.

Albania was part of the Ottoman Empire from the fifteenth century until it first became independent in 1912 following the rise of late nineteenth-century movements of national independence in much of Europe. Albania was never part of the former Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1918–1941) formed in the Balkans at the fall of the Ottoman Empire, yet it lies at the heart of what used to be called the Balkan peninsula — the European lands of the Ottoman Empire to the west of the Bosphorus Straits — the heart of advanced literature and culture for the Ottomans. Occupied by Italy just prior to World War II, after the war it became a communist state, the Socialist People's Republic of Albania, until that collapsed in 1990, with the disintegration of the bloc of states that had been governed under the aegis of the Soviet Union. Anri Sala was fifteen when the Berlin wall came down in 1989. A binary Cold War world that had divided Europe began to shatter and along with it, all the norms and rules of Eastern European life. From 1945 until 1992, Yugoslavia was a socialist federation of six republics comprising Serbia (including Kosovo with a majority of ethnic Albanians), Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, Montenegro, and Macedonia. During the ethnic wars in the 1990s opposing Serbia to these new independent former Yugoslavian states, Albania was nearby, close to the horror — fearfully close, yet not involved in the wars. Today, Albania borders on the Mediterranean Adriatic Sea to the West, Montenegro to the North (itself bordering with Bosnia and Herzegovina, capital Sarajevo), on Kosovo to the Northeast, Macedonia to the East, and Greece to the South. When socialist Albania collapsed in 1990, Anri Sala did not emigrate immediately, but rather attended the National Academy of Arts in Tirana from 1992 to 1996. While the previous socialist regime had enforced Social Realism and academic painting, the new liberal course allowed for young artists to express themselves through abstraction and encouraged the development of a personal style and touch — something that the young artist found just as canonical and forced as the previous aesthetic norms. Rather than indulge in such forms of extreme individualistic self-expression, he began to study the ancient art of fresco painting, a highly enduring technique of wall painting where pigment is not mixed with any binding but absorbed into the fresh, wet plaster of the

² Richard Sennett's *The Craftsman*, published in 2008, posits the importance of manual labor and craft as a form of thinking with matter, and material consciousness, without fear of speaking about a form of quality-driven work, which recalls the chiseling away that all editing and finalizing of an installation by Sala entails. While celebrating and continuing the political philosophical practice of Hannah Arendt, of whom he was a student, Sennett also distances himself from her hierarchy between the maker of things, the engineer, and the political guidance needed. She had expressed her ideas in *The Human Condition* in 1958, shortly after the first nuclear bombs. Her hierarchy manual labor — *animal laborans* — the human who takes the work as an end in itself, the engineer or creator of technology who does not reflect on its implications — is positioned below *homo faber*, the human who reflects on the “Why?” of making things and who thus exercises politics (the philosophical enquiry through human speech and conscious action), which constitute the public realm, which makes life fully lived. In this public realm, people should decide which technologies to pursue and which to repress. Arendt contrasts *homo faber* — the human as conscious maker—to the *animal laborans* who is absorbed in a task. According to Arendt, says Sennett, “people who make things usually don't understand what they are doing. Arendt's fear of self-destructive material invention traces back in Western culture to the Greek myth of Pandora.” In the “public realm, through debate, people ought to decide which technologies should be encouraged and which should be repressed.” Furthermore, for Arendt, decisions should stay provisional and change over time: “The rules issuing from deliberation are cast in doubt as conditions change and people ponder further; new, provisional rules then come into being. Arendt's contribution to this tradition turns in part on the insight that the political process exactly parallels the human condition of giving birth and then letting go of the children we have made and raised. Arendt speaks of natality in describing the process of birth, formation, and separation in politics. The fundamental fact of life is that nothing lasts — yet in politics we need something to orient us, to lift us above the confusions of the moment. The pages of *The Human Condition* explore how language might guide us, as it were, to swim against the turbulent waters of time”: R. Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 2–6.

surface of a wall and fixed inside the wall itself as it dries. To work in fresco means to be extremely aware of time, since one must divide one's work into *giornate* or "days," preparing the fresh plaster area to be painted in one day only. If the plaster dries, the pigment will not be absorbed and the final effect will be lost. The connection between one *giornata* and another is an essential part of the fresco artist's process: never working with a straight line, which would make too visible a division, the artist places the fresh plaster in the sinuous shape that corresponds to the contours of the different forms to be painted. There is something time-based, sequential, architectural, structural, and musical in this form of wall painting, and its skills seem to have seeped deeply into the video-installations that Anri Sala would later create.

From late 1996 to 1998, he lived in France to study video at the École nationale supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, after which he attended the Postgraduate Studies in film directing at Le Fresnoy – Studio national des arts contemporains, Tourcoing. In 1997, he went home for a short time and there he created his first memorable artwork, *Intervista (Finding the Words)*. Completed a year later, it was a documentary narrative based on a piece of silent footage of his mother at a political rally in 1977 and interviewed on TV in 1979 at the age of thirty-three in communist Albania. He recorded her in the present, watching her younger self, unable to remember her own words. That year, 1997, was a year of strong social unrest in Albania caused by the collapse of a number of financial pyramid schemes, and the country was effectively in a civil war; after the death of 2,000 people, the government was toppled.

The work deals with the traumatic legacy of communist Albania. Anri Sala finds an old reel of film footage of his mother, Valdet Sala, as a young and committed communist woman standing next to the dictator Enver Hoxha, First Secretary of the Party of Labor of Albania (PPSh) from 1941 to 1985, as they attend a Labor Youth Union Congress in 1977. On the same reel, she is later seen being interviewed in 1979 by Albanian National Television. The found footage is mute, since at the time sound was recorded separately from image. Anri Sala's artwork narrates his contemporary attempt to reconstruct his mother's words with the help of children from a school for the deaf, as well as through a conversation with his mother as they watch the silent film together. In *Intervista*, he asks his mother, "How do you feel about only deaf-mutes reading into your past?" She replies, "It's an irony of fate [...] We were living in a deaf and dumb system where we only spoke with one mouth and one voice [...] We thought we'd change the world, and little by little we lost everything. Our generation was the victim of past errors." She continues, "I think we've passed on to you the ability to doubt. Because you must always question the truth."

Anri Sala's complex installations encourage his audiences to be alert and pay attention, to decode the structure of the artwork, to exercise and fine tune their interpretative abilities, to emancipate themselves from the passivity produced by our pro-science and pro-technology era of algorithms that progressively remove the interpretative capabilities of the human, and thus our decisional agency. In the filmic installation called *AS YOU GO* (2019), created specially for the spaces of the eighteenth-century Castello di Rivoli, for example, the artist folded three earlier artworks, the films *Ravel Ravel* (2013), *Take Over* (2017) and *If and Only If* (2018) into a new combined artwork. Like a large musical instrument, the display itself constituted not just a frame in which the work was viewed, but a meta-artwork, a moving sculpture, a perceptual device that became the actual subject of the work. Like components of an unusual orchestra, the three works are projected in the galleries, scrolling through the spaces of the museum. And playing music is what goes on in all three films, which respectively take their cues from: Maurice Ravel's *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand in D Major* (1929–30); two songs—*La Marseillaise* (1792) and *The Internationale* (1888); and Igor Stravinsky's *Elegy for Solo Viola* (1944).

Anri Sala, however, is interested in music not for its content but for its structure: how it sets up the

encounter between the artwork and the audience in time; how it transforms an architecture of space into an architecture of time; and how it unfolds and articulates that encounter with the audience. To manifest this interest, he exaggerated the existing architecture of the Castello which is divided into five “gray cube” rooms just over 4 meters high and not covered by a ceiling. Like a giant architectural rendering that you could look at from above, the entire space lay below the overarching ceiling of dark wooden beams. Two 12 x 12 meter rooms are followed by a double-sized 12 x 24 meter hall and finally by other two 12 x 12 meter galleries. A central longitudinal main wall divides this rational eighteenth-century architectural space into two main parts. Anri Sala extended this dividing structural wall so that it penetrated into the large double-sized hall, making this long wall central to the entire architecture. For the artist, it became a double-sided projection screen, passing through all the galleries. The central galleries on each side of the long main wall also had freestanding screens in them, further complicating the experience of viewers, who could choose which way to go. They could enter the space at one end and walk through all the galleries around the long wall, then exit and reenter in a looped itinerary. They could also walk behind or in front of the secondary separate screens, between them and the wall, in the interval: “I am interested in the idea that there is no destination to reach, that the finality is in the trajectory.”³

He also created a synchronized system of multiple projectors so that the three works could be projected consecutively, one after another, in a peculiar way: with important intervals of blank wall in between sections of film, each appeared to literally go on a journey, moving from left to right around the entire space. Wherever you were, you would see the exact same frame of film and the sound in the entire space was in unison. There were two movements: the moving image in each film and the film itself as an object moving in the physical space in front of the viewers. As a viewer, you could choose to stand still and the film would pass by and exit to your right, but shortly thereafter reappear from your left, or you could walk with the moving film so that you would see its evolution in synch with your own body. Anri Sala stated:

«The exhibition takes the form of a “parade,” where video works and their developing narratives travel across the entire space. Visitors can stroll with the flow, accompanying its nomadic substance across the consecutive rooms, gaining ground, or experience the itinerant works from a laid-back position, standing or sitting, as the works pass them by [...]. Even if the sequence unfolds in the continuous present and simultaneously in all the rooms (ubiquitously), the notion of the future tense is omnipresent. From here comes this feeling that upsets us: one sees a film entering the room from the left just after one sees it leave the room to the right. The fact that the future (in a temporal sense) emerges from the space where we have just passed through produces a disturbance.»⁴

To produce this disturbance, the tempo of the intervals and the program for this work, the artist recreated the museum using Virtual Reality in his studio in Berlin, so that he could test the effects. At first sight, therefore, one might imagine that the work celebrates the potential of technology. Yet, on the contrary, in our age of Artificial Intelligence and siliconization of the world,⁵ of constant self-displacement, attention to “elsewhere” because of our smart phones and social media, and traumatic severing of interiority from the experience of an embodied world, an installation like *AS YOU GO*

³ Anri Sala in conversation with the author, January 2019.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ É. Sadin, *La silicolonisation du monde. L'irrésistible expansion du libéralisme numérique* (Paris: Éditions L'Échappée, 2016).

relies on the most sophisticated technology of Virtual Reality and the mapping software Pandora to create an artwork of utterly analog reality. It celebrates the precise opposite of Virtual Reality, since Anri Sala uses technologies as tools with goals opposite to those for which they were created. “I am refining the parade as much as I can here in the studio,” he wrote from Berlin, adding, “I cannot wait to join you in Rivoli for a little bit of reality, because I am spending too much time in simulations and the virtual.”⁶

To be embodied in a place means to be in the present moment. Anri Sala’s viewers are already in the present moment through watching films of musical performances recorded in the present moment. In *AS YOU GO*, there are no narratives, nor cuts to the past or future. Experiencing the movement of the films around a carousel like a conveyor belt or a parade, the viewers become aware of being in the here and now. This attention to the present moment is a reprise of the phenomenological interests of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.⁷ In this sense, Anri Sala claims the space of the exhibition — which in the past was considered a place of removal from reality — as a space of reality, of authenticity: a truly public space. What does this mean today? How does it relate or speak to the urgent questions of now? We live in an era of big data and reproduced images, with a flow of images produced and reproduced on the internet. Overwhelmed by data, we increasingly navigate them through programs of AI that interpret and do the thinking for us, and our only function is to “click.” The wish to rebuild situations of active interpretation is a counter-reaction to this disempowerment by algorithms. In this perspective, Anri Sala’s work is a form of political and aesthetic resistance to the passivity encouraged by the digital.

Interested in intervals in the rhythm of music, images, and experiences, he reverses in this exhibition the emerging paradigm of passivity of the visitors who receive the illusion of reality by standing still, inviting them instead to move with the images in a corporeal way, chasing them along the exhibition path. More than a presentation of three interwoven film works, it is a projection device that becomes a unique and gigantic sculpture in movement. As in earlier films that stage the aspirations and failures of modernity, there is a tone to much of Anri Sala’s work in *AS YOU GO* that refers to traumatized subjects and their ability to react.

With *Ravel Ravel*, the artist stages the simultaneous vision of two interpretations by two different pianists of the *Concerto for the Left Hand*. Composed by Ravel between 1929 and 1930, the concerto was commissioned by the Austrian pianist Paul Wittgenstein, who had lost his right arm during World War I. In the words of Anri Sala, “*Ravel Ravel* was born from the intention to present two performances with their respective tempos. Sometimes they play in unison and then chase each other in temporal shifts, producing echoes and repetitions that seem to transform the physicality of the exhibition space.”

In *Take Over*, he investigates the possible meanings arising from the juxtaposition of *La Marseillaise* and *The Internationale*, whose complex stories are intertwined. Composed in 1792 by Claude-Joseph Rouget de Lisle, *La Marseillaise* became the hallmark of the French Revolution to then spread to other countries and become a symbol of political freedom. At the end of the nineteenth century, *The Internationale* was the anthem of workers’ struggles, welcomed to promote ideals of equality and solidarity. Written in 1871, the text of *The Internationale* was initially sung to the tune of *La Marseillaise*. In 1888, Pierre Degeyter wrote the music with which it became the anthem of the international socialist movement. Taking inspiration from the plots that link these two famous musical pieces, as well as the distances and differences, Anri Sala’s work juxtaposes two consecutive performances: in one the pianist plays *La Marseillaise* on a mechanical piano that is

⁶ Anri Sala in conversation with the author, 15 January 2019.

⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* [1945] (New York: Routledge, 2013).

programmed to play *The Internationale*, while in the second, the situation is reversed and the pianist plays *The Internationale* on a mechanical piano programmed to play *La Marseillaise*. Here, the competition between human and machine becomes explicit, reminding us of the difficulty of defying or contradicting automatic language correctors and many other algorithms of daily life. At times, the two anthems are in accord; at other times there is dissonance and they clash, just as, when considering the symbolic meanings of the songs themselves, we move back and forth, unable to resolve contradictory connotations: is *The Internationale* a song celebrating freedom, or does it instead represent oppression, as it would for a young person from Eastern Europe? Is *La Marseillaise* a revolutionary song, or a song belonging to colonizers, as it may be experienced, for example, in the Maghreb?

The music of the five-minute *Elegy for Solo Viola* (1944) by Igor Stravinsky in *If and Only If* seems distorted, slightly out of synch with the Lento tempo of the score. Here, it is longer than it is supposed to be, by just over nine minutes. The original elegy was commissioned from Stravinsky by the Belgian Germain Prévost in the middle of World War II as a homage to the violinist Alphonse Onnou, who had died in the US just after Hitler had invaded Belgium in 1940. The lengthening of the composition in Anri Sala's work occurs because the viola player Gérard Caussé slows down or accelerates his playing in order to accommodate and protect a snail that moves slowly upwards along the wooden part of his bow to reach its tip, away from what is certainly a danger for it — the place of contact between string and instrument. There is a moment when a second snail suddenly appears on Caussé's bow from the bottom left of the screen, so that you glimpse two snails at the same time on screen, at different positions on the bow. This double appears like a glitch, putting into question the binary and simplistic interpretation of what we are seeing, suggesting there is a space outside the frame where decisions have been made by an author, and the film is a montage of different shots. This moment of awareness of the factual, fabricated and constructed nature of the recorded image is a moment of awareness of our own ability to be attentive, to be precise, to be singular, to be alive — of *homo faber* within *animal laborans*. Because of the looped nature of *AS YOU GO*, this poetic homage to the need to coordinate between human and nonhuman agencies, Caussé and the snail(s), ultimately become a filmic construction where the film could dilate and play infinitely along a strip of wall, the snail forever moving up the bow, and forever starting over. We progress and yet are always at the start, in an existential condition where time is at once linear, circular, multiple, and overlapping.

Indeed, as the axis of the entire building was elongated, the main projection wall became a gigantic bow itself, and we, the viewers, either walked, like the snail, along it up to its tip and around the edge of the wall that ended halfway through the large double-sized gallery, turned around and walked down the other opposite side, following the movement of the scrolling films, or we chose to stay put and watch the film go by us. We are in a space of temporal plasticity, where the violist extends the duration and metamorphosizes the interpretation of a score in order to accommodate and cohabit with a snail (perhaps two, or potentially infinite snails) living on his bow, bending the music to accommodate his movements to those of the snail... *until they belong together*, as Anri Sala put it. This continuous evolution and plasticity of film in space as a consequence of difficult conditions, such as finding oneself on a human viola player's bow, recalls Catherine Malabou's concepts. In *Ontology of the Accident. An Essay on Destructive Plasticity* (2009), she addresses the transformation and change that can occur in the aftermath of trauma, as the consequence of a form of improvisation able to address the need of a subject to regain life:

«In the usual order of things, lives run their course like rivers. The changes and metamorphoses of a life due to vagaries and difficulties, or simply the natural unfolding of

circumstance, appear as the marks and wrinkles of a continuous, almost logical, process of fulfillment that leads ultimately to death. In time, one eventually becomes who one is; one becomes only who one is. Bodily and psychic transformations do nothing but reinforce the permanence of identity, caricaturing or fixing it, but never contradicting it. They never disrupt identity. This gradual existential and biological incline, which can only ever transform the subject into itself, does not, however, obviate the powers of plasticity of this same identity that houses itself beneath an apparently smooth surface like a reserve of dynamite hidden under the peachy skin of being for death. As a result of serious trauma, or sometimes for no reason at all, the path splits and a new, unprecedented persona comes to live with the former person, and eventually takes up all the room. An unrecognizable persona whose present comes from no past, whose future harbors nothing to come, an absolute existential improvisation. A form born of the accident, born by accident, a kind of accident. A new being comes into the world for a second time, out of a deep cut that opens in a biography».⁸

This augural subjectivity usually emerges from damage, and involves becoming a stranger to one's former self, but such transformation may also be apparently inexplicable, not emerging from any evident trauma. Malabou calls this transformative agency "destructive plasticity" and suggests that the forgetting of the former self is a displacement of pain: "What destructive plasticity invites us to consider is the suffering caused by an absence of suffering, in the emergence of a new form of being, a stranger to the one before. Pain that manifests as indifference to pain, impassivity, forgetting, the loss of symbolic reference points."⁹ This is the "survivor's identity, a never before seen existential and vital configuration. A brain damaged identity which, even as an absence from the self, is nonetheless well and truly a psyche. [...] Plasticity thus refers to the possibility of being transformed without being destroyed; it characterizes the entire strategy of modification that seeks to avoid the threat of destruction."¹⁰

Malabou's approach contrasts with the philosopher and psychologist Henri Bergson's late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century theories of "creative evolution," in which time and the experience of consciousness are in a constant state of flow with no ruptures, even though there are accelerations and contractures. At the same time, Malabou builds on his sense of time as subjective duration. Indeed, she acknowledges that there is slow progressive change and there are also sudden instantaneous transformations, and for the traumatized subject, both occur at once.

The space/time that Anri Sala addresses in his works is often that where both such forms of transformation occur and interact, in the *interval* between the before and the after, the former self and the new subjectivity. An interval is a space or gap between objects, units, points, or states. It is more generally associated with the field of music, theater, and cinema as a period of time or duration, usually brief, between two parts, acts or sections of a performance, during which the audience regains consciousness of being in an embodied reality, after and before being transported through the imagination into the parallel world of the performance. It can be a simple blank interruption, intermission and interstice, or it can contain an interlude, a form of content in its own right, like a bridge between two parts of a song.¹¹

⁸ C. Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident. An Essay on Destructive Plasticity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), p. 5 (first ed. *Ontologie de l'accident. Essai sur la plasticité destructrice*, Paris: Éditions Léo Scheer, 2009).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 19 e 44-45.

¹¹ See Marcella Beccaria's essay in this volume.

The existence of an interval therefore implies a form of discontinuity, a before and an after. Yet at the same time, the interval implies its own antonym — which is continuity — because it connects two previously distinct parts. Generally, this juncture is imagined as having no space at all, as just a line or division between a here and a there, a before and an after. Yet this line is thick, and it is more an interval than a point of contact; it is the space between the *giornate* in a fresco, it is a zone of overlap where the past pushes into the future as memory, and memory constitutes the substance of presence. This is the space of *plasticity*, of metamorphosis, the space where a pianist learns the virtuosic ability to play, with only one hand, an entire concerto that sounds as if it were played by two, as in *Ravel Ravel*, or where a subject learns to confront and remember her former, forgotten self with the help of her son, the artist Anri Sala, and of a school for handicapped children able to read her lips, as in *Intervista*, or the interval that is night, the solitary time when Jacques can be at peace in *Nocturnes* (1999), or the interval between sleep and wake, learning to rest even in a seated position as does the old homeless man in *Uomoduomo* (2000), or the space/time of waiting for a bomb to fall during the instant between the sound of its falling and the crash, as in *Naturalmystic (Tomahawk #2)* (2002), or the interval during which a community paints a city in bright colors in *Dammi i Colori* (2003), or the plastic urban space of walking from home to a rehearsal in a vulnerable Sarajevo during the days of the siege in 1992–96, when snipers terrorized the population by shooting at innocent by-passers from the hills above, in *1395 Days without Red* (2011).

In discussing time and temporality, Giorgio Agamben distinguishes chronological time (time characterized by homogeneous linearity, with a succession of moments with no qualitative distinction between one moment and another) from kairological time, which is a special time, detached from linear chronology, where the moment is distinct, an event *hic et nunc*, perceived as outside normal time. Messianic time (the time after Christ's death, as told in the New Testament) is a form of time where every moment of messianic time repeats and completes an event that occurred before the birth of Christ (as told in the Old Testament), in a sequence of moments of Kairos.¹² What Agamben does not address, however, is time as duration, nor the time *between* events, the *left-over* or residue of the great moments of historical or messianic events, as it is experienced in consciousness. These are the intervals of history, the intervals of daily life, entwined with the experience of waiting, itself often a space where emotions such as fear are perceived, or a mixture between boredom and fear and expectation occurs. The experience of time speeding up and slowing down, curving, folding, overlapping, twisting—its distortion, in other words—is very much the experience of Anri Sala's universe, a more complex world of temporality than that of the daily common sense, but surely one more structurally subtle, a deeper one. It is an extra time, extra space, pushing into the space and time in which we live, the chronological time, and the kairological time of the instant. It is the elastic, extended *durée* that pushes itself into the real. Improvisation is the technique of plasticity in the interval and it relies on moments of repose, which interrupt the flow of duration, creating a “spatialized temporality” and “rhythm time.”¹³

In *Naturalmystic (Tomahawk #2)*, a young man from Belgrade named Mihajlo simulates over and over again, like a foley artist, his memories of hearing at night the whistling sound of a missile falling, including the moment of silence — the gap or interval — just before it hits its target. Anri Sala writes, “what moved me most about Mihajlo [...] was the unyielding detachment he felt towards what hit him: that strange event known as the ‘surgical strike.’ Though it did not place his

¹² G. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002). First ed. *Quel che resta di Auschwitz. L'archivio e il testimone* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1998).

¹³ In *La dialectique de la durée* [1936] (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1950), Gaston Bachelard develops these ideas from the notion of *rhythmanalysis* conceived by the Brazilian theoretician Lúcio Alberto Pinheiro dos Santos in 1931. See *Dialectic of Duration* (Geneva: Clinamen Press, 2000).

life in danger, at night it stopped him living it, creating a sense of ennui.”¹⁴ The gap or interval as a subject comes up again when the artist writes about the work *time after time* (2003), in which for a little over five minutes, he films a horse on a highway at night in Tirana, standing still near a cement barrier, unable to escape from the terrifying trucks and cars speeding by. The horse lifts its hoof over and over again, the nervous repetition of a suffering animal. Does the title refer to the repetition of the passing cars, or to the time after time that Agamben described? Anri Sala writes, “Is it possible to produce a visible manifestation of loss? What is the appearance of what is not entirely there? There must be a singular way of inscribing beings or things in the present so that they embody simultaneously what they used to be and no longer are, consequently representing their disappearance in progress.”¹⁵

Anri Sala is able to sculpt intervals so that they connect rather than disconnect. He focuses on the emotional tones produced by distortions of perspective, translations, interpretations, and transformations in order to heighten consciousness, believing in the emancipatory potential of high art and culture. For him, the making of art, and the experiencing of it, aims to create awareness and understanding of how manipulation works. Art exercises consciousness by exploring the delay that interrupts the automatism of the uninterrupted flow of information, without intervals and gaps.

In *AS YOU GO*, no matter where you find yourself in real space along the looped wall/conveyor belt, the image of the film you are watching is contemporaneously everywhere at exactly the same point in the film, as if we were in front of a classical cinema screen. It is a Klein bottle situation therefore, like a 3D Möbius strip, where we the viewers (we, the people) are not standing passively at a central point wearing VR goggles, experiencing a virtual 360 degrees world, our bodies vestigial and atrophied except for our necks turning up and down in servile slavery. Rather, we are looking at the 360 degrees Bubble Vision¹⁶ from the outside, choosing at every moment whether to walk along with the flowing moving image and see the internal movement of its frames, or whether to stand still and watch the film move by us, awaiting the next scene to reach us from the left.

According to Hito Steyerl, new immersive technologies isolate viewers from the world:

«The viewer is at the center of the sphere, yet at the same time, [is] actually missing. They are fully immersed in something they are not part of [...] This kind of vision is shaped by round things, by orbs, by spheres, by rounded lenses. One could call this paradigm “Bubble Vision”. In the last decade, 360 panoramas became common in photography, in video and in VR. In parallel, there were a lot of discussions of “filter bubbles” that are said to create division by creating parallel information universes even though those statements have been contested».¹⁷

Anri Sala celebrates the highest possible degree of sophisticated culture, the most precise

¹⁴ See here, p. 125.

¹⁵ See here, p. 127.

¹⁶ Hito Steyerl first referred to Bubble Vision in a brief lecture at the Serpentine Marathon *GUEST, GHOST, HOST: MACHINE!*, City Hall, London, October 7, 2017, which was repeated in a longer form at the Penny W. Stamps School of Art and Design in Michigan on January 31, 2018, then at Yale University on February 22, 2018, and elsewhere. According to Steyerl, Bubble Vision “refers to the markedly disembodied process of viewing the world through a parallel spherical multiverse. She highlighted aesthetics’ current ubiquity by replicating the immersive experience offered by VR, constructing a 360 degrees view of the hypothesis’ pervasiveness in our everyday lives.” See Emily Sasmor at <http://topicalcream.info/blog/hito-steyerl-bubble-visionaesthetics-of-isolation-yale/> (accessed November 21, 2019)

¹⁷ See Hito Steyerl, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=boMbdtu2rLE> (accessed November 21, 2019).

reverberation of a chord, touched by the keenest pianist, in the face of ineptness, superficiality, stupidity. The more he tweaks his works in space, seeking a certain perfection, the better they become, dense with the efforts of reaching a rhythm that is emotionally potent for himself and, by extension, for others. But there is something Sisyphean in this attempt. “Perfect” seems like an arbitrary word. Perfect according to what and to whom? And is this not an elitist concept to be put away for good in the name of democratic aesthetics?

Perficere, in Latin, is to “complete” something. It is not dissimilar to the notion of *precision*, from *prae* (before) and *caedere* (to cut), although one term implies a gained sense of wholeness (as opposed to separateness, to being in parts), while the other suggests a defined edge, the edge where something has been cut off precisely, thus heightening the edge of what is felt to be complete. The quality of the work is defined by its precision and its perfection.

And yet, Anri Sala stays with the trouble — provoking the definiteness of the edge dividing the surface from the nonsurface, or provoking the boundary between the non-perfect, the non-whole, and the perfect, the complete, the whole. He digs deep into the intervals one did not notice, the spaces on the edge that become distorted or pulled or extended to make space for a miracle, a little bit of extra time, a little bit of extra space, a hesitation. And in these gaps, in these intervals (the time between the sound of the bomb falling and the explosion when it hits the ground) he finds a space of refuge, a space of suspended time and history, of suspended conflict, of peace, a little “extra” conquered at great pain, that is a space of freedom for the individual, an extra-libidinal energy, purposeless, not quantifiable in an economy of time. Our bodies are separated by distances and by shards of overdetermined identities that divide and fragment us, like zombies or ghosts, or survivors perhaps, in a splintered world in which we speak to each other in short summary messages that shoot across the globe in apparent simultaneity. Something intrinsic to all of Anri Sala’s work, however, helps to suture the parts, to connect them like the different *giornate* of a fresco, and this is “the attempt to create a continuity between moments that are separated or have been torn apart, giving presence to what has become absent.”¹⁸

Anri Sala celebrates the highest forms of human culture as the expression of committed minds, practiced craftspeople, and able musicians — *animalia laborantes* that redeem a confused *homo faber*, in order to contrast the self-perception of the human turned into an imperfect, fragile organism by the technophile ideology of Artificial Intelligence. Thus he does not create an artwork embodied like a VR program. He rather reins in and bends VR to become a mere tool, useful to his craft of improvising a moving space/sound/film machine. Once the work was accomplished, he let go of the VR, like in a digital detox clinic, and celebrated instead our wanderings through the barely lit galleries of the museum, a space of a new Situationist *dérive*, a space of bodily freedom in which to stroll, to sit, to stay, to go, free to repose, and to pose the question: “Should I Stay or Should I Go?”

The ultimate question is one of a radical freedom of choice, unwired, unplugged, *virtuosically* human, and in tender miscegenation with our living allies. Like the snails.

¹⁸ Anri Sala in conversation with the author, May 2019.