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Paseo de la Reforma 51, Bosque de Chapultepec, Miguel Hidalgo, C.P. 11560 Tel: +52 (55) 4122 8200

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Three Apples, 2017. Detail. Courtesy of the artist and Esther Schipper, Berlin



ANRI SALA
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MUSEOTAMAYO

In his work, Anri Sala takes distance from the traditional concept of cinema: he inverts the position of the moving image as the main element, incorporating sound, music and architecture as components that form part of the same hierarchy rather than function merely as complements. His exhibition at the Museo Tamayo explore the way in which music has been associated with various political ideologies and social situations, as well as the manners in which sound, music and language create specific meanings, especially when they are juxtaposed. In this interview, the curators of the exhibitions spoke with Sala about the pieces featured in his first monographic show at a museum in Mexico.



One of the threads that connect the artworks in this exhibition is that they all work, in their own particular way, with hymns. When did you start researching this type of compositions and how did your interest in them begin?

In each case I was captivated by the specific attributes of a song and its music, however each time I was particularly interested in the historical conditions and the subjective circumstances that eventually decide why and when a song becomes an anthem. «La Marseillaise» and «The Internationale» in *Take Over* (2017), Ravel's «Left Hand Concerto for Piano and Orchestra» in *Ravel Ravel Unravel* (2013), and «Should I Stay or Should I Go»—the renowned song of The Clash—in *Le Clash* (2010) and *Tlatelolco Clash* (2011), all stem from key moments in history when the past has defined our present.

«La Marseillaise», which later became the French anthem, was written in 1792 and was closely tied to the French Revolution, before it quickly spread to other countries where it became a symbol for the overthrow of oppressive regimes. «The Internationale»—actually its 1871 lyrics were initially set to the tune of «La Marseillaise», until 1888 when its original music was composed—was the anthem of the socialist movement and soon became a hymn of the workers' struggle and solidarity worldwide. Ravel's Concerto (1929-30) is an ode to the missing limb—the right hand—implicitly evoking the unparalleled devastation and loss that was caused by the First World War. Whereas «Should I Stay or Should I Go» (1981)—often considered as the anthem of punk music—exemplifies a moment in songwriting marked by a rising awareness, involvement and solidarity with a number of struggles that echoed the political shifts of the late '70s.

The films in this show work in pairs, but you have also referred to *Le Clash* and *Tlatelolco Clash* as works that are parallel but independent from each other. How do you think up the exhibition space in connection to musical composition?

The films can exist both in pairs and independently from each other. What is proper to each pair is what is at the core of their interrelation, that is, the resonance of a space—be it geographical, political or musical—invoked by the interval in-between. This interval is particularly disposed to syncopation. By syncopation we commonly understand the interval between the offbeat and the instant before the beat establishes itself. However, what I particularly savour in the event of syncopation is how it resists becoming the beat. I'm very keen on imagining syncopation and its attributes spread beyond the field of music and carry their disquieting nature into further aesthetic experiences and (why not) social and political situations as well.

It's noteworthy that in *Take Over* you are re-exploring an instrument you had worked with before, namely the piano in *Ravel Ravel*



Unravel, 2013.
Courtesy of Galerie Chantal Crousel,
Paris; Marian Goodman Gallery;
Hauser & Wirth; kurimanzutto, Mexico City.

***Unravel*. Would you say there's a similar connection here or is the relationship between these works and images different?**

In *Ravel Ravel* two different interpretations of Ravel's concerto for the left hand are heard alongside one another. The respective tempos of each performance have been recomposed, so that both executions continuously shift in and out of unison, one evolving slightly more slowly than the other: first creating a slight echo, then a doubling with the notes heard twice, eventually catching up, only to shift away from one another once again. My intention was to bring out the resonance of a space consecutive to the temporal lag between the two performances and, through the repetition of the same notes, to induce the impression of an echo and a sense of space. Whereas *Take Over* makes audible the entangled relation between two political anthems, mining their musical kinship for traces of their changing symbolic significance. «La Marseillaise» and «The Internationale» have undergone major changes in their political connotations: from revolution, restoration, socialism, resistance and patriotism, to additional associations with colonization and oppression in the second half of the twentieth century (as national anthems of France and the Soviet Union, respectively). To this day, their meaning remains in flux and their differences keep shifting as the two songs continue to be appropriated across the political spectrum.

Both *Ravel Ravel* and *Take Over* explore the interaction between the human body and the instrument, with the difference that the ghost notes of the self-playing piano in the latter have substituted the missing limb in the former. The musical instrument has technologically evolved, reflecting on the advent of programming, the increase of mechanization, and the ensuing tension between the man and the machine.

In a way, one could think of the works in this show as a continued line of exploration, even if they are all independent works. Do you usually formulate a set of queries and then start exploring them through the works, or do you begin conceiving the works and only afterwards note the set of coincidences?

I start by conceiving the works and I guess something in me must be "taking care" of the continuity in the body of work, in an unconscious way. Given that music and sound are fundamental to my work, there is a similarity of approach between the two phases: composing the inner structure of a new work, on one hand, and constituting the architecture of the exhibition that involves different works, on the other hand. In both cases the process implies *composing with*, which also involves composing with the coincidences.

The way you show your works is very attentive of the spatial and sensorial experience of the visitor, and in that sense all aspects of the installation design are crucial to the works themselves. How did the space of the Museo Tamayo influence in regard? Do you have a particular impression of its architecture?

There is something very particular about the architecture at Museo Tamayo: it is the rhythm of its spaces. The overall space of the exhibition expands through two rooms and a patio. Yet, throughout the space, one encounters two different floor levels and four different heights of the ceiling. In my imagination, the space evolves a bit like the structure of a song that contains two or four stanzas, ending with a patio that resembles a bit to a coda.

By means of permutations and synchronization of melodies, or lack thereof, your films often articulate and disarticulate notions of time and how we perceive it. Considering the immersive experience of the video installations, is the route the visitors follow intended for this effect as well?

In a way, I think of an exhibition as a continuum of presence and flow. It's a bit like a musical score, where instead of notes and bars you have notions of time set along elements of space, rhythmically divided



Tlatelolco Clash, 2011.
Courtesy of kurimanzutto, Mexico City;
Marian Goodman Gallery; Hauser
& Wirth; Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris;
Kaikai Kiki, Tokyo.



Le Clash, 2010.
Courtesy of Galerie Chantal Crousel,
Paris; Marian Goodman Gallery; Hauser
& Wirth; Esther Schipper, Berlin;
kurimanzutto, Mexico City.



Take Over, 2017.
Courtesy of Esther Schipper, Berlin;
kurimanzutto, Mexico City.

themselves and arranged by means of curtains and walls as if they were musical bars on staves. Having imagined the exhibition as a song structure, I enjoy the fact that the visitor may cross it in the direction of the flow, but also against its current. In that sense, I always approach the visitor as someone active, whose exact whereabouts are not fixed and whose trajectory compliments the flow of the exhibition while contributing to its texture.

Even in your early works you explored notions of non-linguistic communication and how we derive meaning from our experience of time and space. When was it that you started conceiving your works as multi-sensorial installations?

It was one of my earliest works, *Intervista*, that tacitly pushed me to search for meaning where it is less expected, finding it in our experience of moments and places rather than restricted to the channels of verbal communication. This project also triggered my resolve to not seek meaning just in the content, but extract it from the layers of syntax as well. Content and syntax often play hide and seek with each other and in the wake of a breakup of a given social and political order, syntax may reveal what content tries to hide.

Later on, I started to explore other ways and forms of non-linguistic communication that engage the other senses as well. Having said that, it's not the symphonic merge of all the senses that interests me. On

the contrary, I like working with the partialities of the senses. I often try to provoke some *trouble* in them, in order to affect their usual ways and produce the conditions in which one sense can take on the qualities of another.

You were trained as a painter and shortly before graduating you started working with video. Although one could posit that in many of your works there is a pictorial element going on, it's quite outstanding that you turned back to drawing in order to make a rather large series such as *Them Apples*. Is this somehow related to its subject matter or was it a more organic decision?

To start with, there was something about the urgency of the matter: *Them Apples* addresses Germany's open refugee policy, which has been controversial.

In addition, there was a desire to produce a more intimate and perhaps more privileged encounter with individuals whom we usually face in the news, as a mass. I spent several days last summer with them, organizing a workshop that included all sorts of small activities. While the highlight of the exchanges probably was the making of apple jam according to a German recipe, its ultimate aim was to invite each person to take a bite out of an apple. We took pictures of each apple, and these photographs were to serve later as the basis for each drawing. Once completed, I intended to hang the drawings together on the wall, arranged like notes composing the score of the German anthem.

It's indeed an interesting detail of this work, that you organized a workshop with Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan refugees in order to make the drawings. This process seems quite peculiar in your practice.

Certainly, working with a subject that is so fresh and urgent is unusual in my practice, because I generally prefer to use time as a filter that sets me free from the immediacy of present-day matters, and the *bullying of the current*. But such process is also equally atypical for making drawings. We often imagine drawings as *points of departure*: sketches become paintings, blueprints become buildings, and storyboards become movies. On the contrary, *Them Apples* were the *end-point* in the sequence of a process. I consciously wanted to produce a reality, a process and an experience that would precede the drawings



Ravel Ravel, 2013.
Courtesy of Galerie Chantal Crousel,
Paris; Marian Goodman Gallery;
Hauser & Wirth.

and shape their outcome. In that sense this process is very similar to how my video and sound works take shape.

It's interesting because in this show you are revisiting works from different moments in your career, and, in a way, making connections between them across time. Do you see the exhibition as a conjunction of inter-related works or rather as a larger-scale exploration of a subject through these works? What is the role played by *Bridges in the Doldrums* in this conjunction?

I tend to approach my exhibitions as sites of conjunctions and interrelations, although this exhibition combines both aspects. But I would like to draw the attention to something that came out from a conversation with a friend—which is also one of the attributes that allow these juxtapositions. There is an innate solitude in my individual works: people either perform or stroll alone, fully absorbed within their act. It's as if the different films (and their solitary characters alike) strived for relationships and claimed the company of the other. It's as if they seek solace in the format of the exhibition.

In a manner of speaking, the films intersect with each other like the different components in *Bridges in the Doldrums* (2016). The work—which is on display in the patio—is based on a musical arrangement that has been constructed solely from the *bridges* of pop, jazz and folk songs from different periods and geographies. A bridge is a transitional period nearing the end of a song that helps break away from its set pattern, aiming at building a tension leading up to the climax of the song. It tends to alienate the listener from the song itself, keeping one's attention while suspending one's belief and expectations. That is, until the chorus returns to reconfirm their acquaintance with the song. After such reconfirmation the listener feels at home again, appreciating the estranging twist as long as a reunion ensues.

Likewise, when conceiving an exhibition, I'm eager to subvert my individual works as long as and until a union ensues.



Bridges in the Doldrums, 2016
Courtesy of the artist and Marian
Goodman Gallery

— Anri Sala (Tirana, Albania, 1974) studied at the National Academy of Arts of Tirana and the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. His work has been exhibited at the Serpentine Gallery (2011), the Centre Pompidou (2012), the 55th Venice Biennale (2013), the Tel Aviv Museum (2015), and the New Museum (2016).