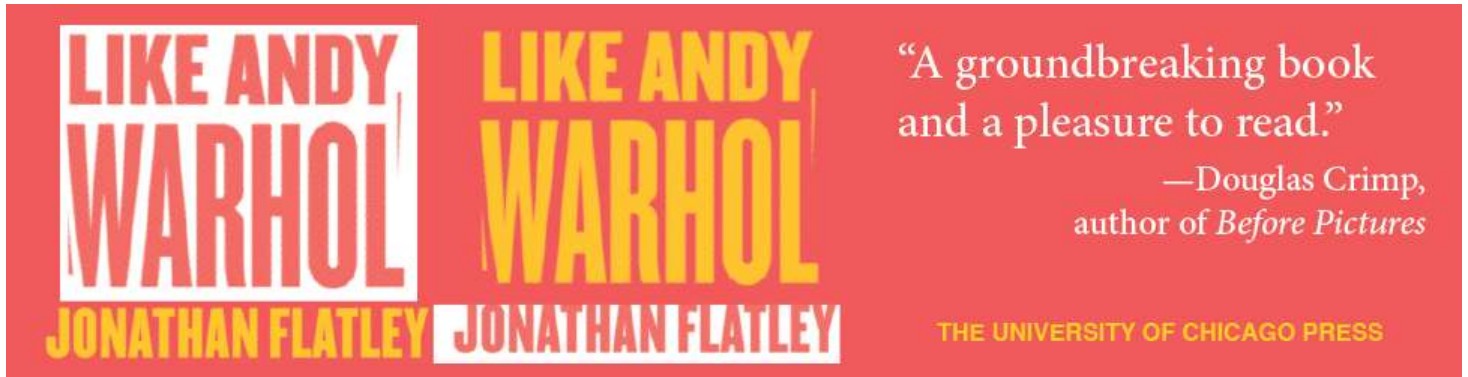


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Massimiliano Gioni and Margot Norton, eds.

Anri Sala: Answer Me

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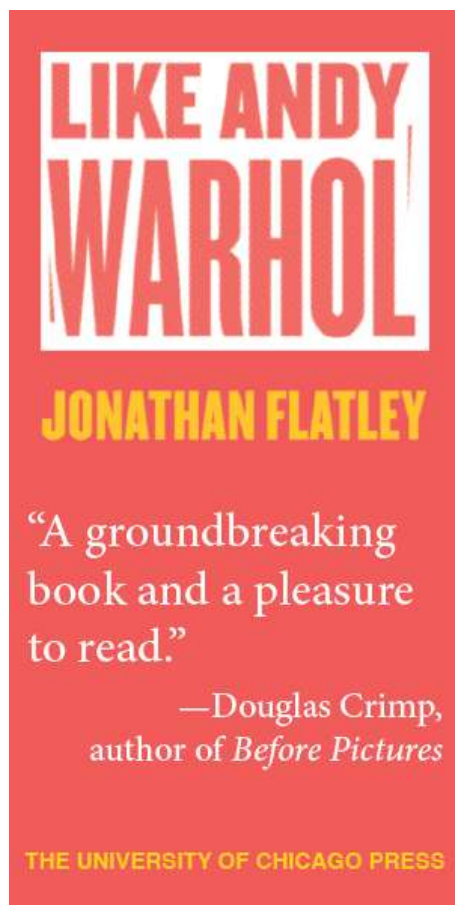
Unravel (2013). Installation view. Courtesy Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris; Marian Goodman Gallery; Hauser and Wirth; and kurimanzutto, Mexico City. Photo: Maris Hutchinson/EPW Studio.

Anri Sala: Answer Me, organized by the New Museum’s artistic director Massimiliano Gioni and associate curators Margot Norton and Natalie Bell, is the artist’s first comprehensive survey exhibition in the United States. Sala (b. 1974) is an Albanian artist who lives and works in Berlin and uses primarily video to investigate the underlying structure of music and sound. Many of his works deal with emotional histories of architectural spaces as told by live and recorded musical performances.

Answer Me fills three floors of the museum and is organized thematically—a minimalistic and technologically sophisticated presentation on the fourth floor; a comprehensive overview of the artist’s major video works on the third; and a selection of small-scale installations, works on paper, and recent sound and video works on the second. The centerpiece of the exhibition—

two interrelated sound and video installations, *Ravel Ravel* (2013) and *Unravel* (2013)—takes up the entire fourth floor. These works introduce Sala’s artistic strategies that often are aimed at multisensory confusion and a questioning of temporal and spatial coherence. In *Ravel Ravel*, for example, two large video projections each show a male pianist’s left hand playing Maurice Ravel’s *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand in D-major* (1929–30) simultaneously. The detailed attention on the pianist’s hand isolates and decontextualizes it as an object, making it unfamiliar and thus contributing to the overall effect of disorientation. By focusing solely on a hand playing a piano, Sala highlights the moment when sound/music is made and asks one to wonder whether understanding the mechanism of making sound helps one understand music.

The lengthy wall label and the catalogue essays provide context for the piece. The historical narrative begins with Austrian pianist Paul Wittgenstein (philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein’s brother), who lost his right hand in World War I and who commissioned Ravel, a French composer, to create a composition for the left hand. (The two would later engage in debates about the extent of a performer’s rights to interpret a score.) The technical account explains the slight modification of the tempo of the concerto in each score, performed by pianists Louis Lortie and Jean-Efflam Bavouzet. A



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result of collaboration between Sala, the composer Ari Benjamin Meyers, and the sound engineer and sound designer Olivier Goinard, this subtle modification creates an unnerving effect, with both soundtracks in and out of sync.

The complementary work, *Unravel*, is less overwhelming in an auditory sense but more interesting visually. On a single screen, a female disc jockey is seen working two turntables with vinyl recordings of the two performances of the concerto. The DJ—composer and electronic music artist and producer Chloé Thévenin—struggles to synchronize both recordings with a varying degree of success. Orchestrating multiple temporalities on several levels is characteristic of Sala's practice. Spatial displacement is another artistic approach he utilizes in these two works. *Ravel Ravel* and *Unravel* were commissioned to represent France at the 55th Venice Biennale (2013). Playing on the troubled history between France, Austria, and Germany, during this particular biennale France occupied the German Pavilion and vice versa. *Unravel* was filmed inside the German Pavilion, and the inscription "Francia" on the building across the pathway is visible through the open door.

The most prominent work on the third floor is *3-2-1* (2011/2016), a live performance in which experimental composer and musician André Vida plays a saxophone in response to the recorded sound of *Long Sorrow* (2005), a video featuring a saxophone improvisation performed by the jazz musician Jemeel Moondoc outside an apartment complex in Berlin. Temporally, this interaction between live and recorded music creates a dialogue between past and present. Like *Ravel Ravel*, *Long Sorrow* never reveals the entire body of the musician, instead focusing on his eyes, mouth, and head. This sense of spatial ambiguity is further emphasized by imagery suggesting that the musician is mysteriously positioned in mid-air outside the window of the top floor of the building. The location of the apartment complex is also unclear. Sala admits that people often think that the building looks as if it could be in the former East Berlin, but is actually in the former West Berlin (88).

In the video *Answer Me* (2008), also on view on the third floor, Sala stages an impossible dialogue between a man who is fiercely playing the drums and a soft-spoken woman in a historically charged location—an abandoned concrete dome in former West Berlin that was used by the U.S. National Security Agency as a surveillance center for spying on the German Democratic Republic. The dome was built on top of the remnants of architect Albert Speer's Nazi-era structure. Among other videos on view on the third floor, two complementary works stand out—*Le Clash* (2010) and *Tlatelolco Clash* (2011). Filmed in politically significant locations in France and Mexico, these works disrupt the traditional hierarchy and historical specificity of musical genres. The underlying common musical motive in both videos is "Should I Stay or Should I Go," a 1982 song by British punk rock band The Clash, which is played with a barrel organ and music box, instruments far predating the era of punk rock. Also on view on the third floor is *Dammi i colori* (2003), a video that features Edi Rama, the artist's friend, sometimes co-author, and then-mayor of Tirana (Sala was born in Tirana). The setting is the afterlife of the failed planned economy and state socialism in Albania, when the previously forced collectivism was replaced with total individualism, represented by the do-it-yourself constructions found on many balconies in Tirana. Rama speaks about his idea to paint the dilapidated facades of these Soviet-style apartment complexes in bright De Stijl colors. The result of this beautification makes it clear that color-field painting on an urban scale only masks the miserable state of the majority of the housing. This video was also included in *Ostalgie* (click here for review), a survey of art from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries, curated by Gioni at the New Museum in 2011, and is one of the works that solidified Sala's career. Unfortunately, it is projected in the narrow space at the back of the hall where attentive viewing is difficult due to the flow of visitors to and from the staircase.

Meanwhile, two other key early works—*Intervista (Finding the Words)* (1998) and *Nocturnes* (1999)—are relegated to the theater in the basement, with screenings offered only on Wednesdays. The narrative of *Intervista* begins with the artist finding 16mm film footage of his mother, Valdet Sala, speaking as secretary of Albania's Communist Youth Alliance in the late 1970s. However, the soundtrack was lost, leading Sala to embark on a quest to reconstruct his mother's words. When Sala presented the recovered transcript to his mother, she was shocked at how absurd her language at the time sounded. She commented, "We lived in a deaf and dumb system in which we only talked with one mouth and one voice" (53). As Gioni notes in an interview with Sala in the catalogue, "it was one of the first works to reintroduce an interest in the documentary, raising questions about the role of art and artists in the face of dramatic social changes," and this work created a "big shock" (81). It is unfortunate that *Intervista* is not included in the main display of the exhibition.

Two major video and sound installations, *The Present Moment (in B-flat)* (2014) and *The Present Moment (in D)* (2014), dominate the second floor. They are based on Arnold Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht*, a composition written in 1899 before he became a pioneer of the avant-garde, twelve-tone system for which he is best known. The videos, projected on two large screens, feature close-ups of the faces, eyes, and hands of musicians. In the multichannel audio only select notes of the score are performed (B-flat and D, as per titles of the works), and the sounds in the large and darkened exhibition hall mix and interact in a disorienting manner. The powerful, amplified sound and large-scale projected video images of *The Present Moment* diptych make the rest of the works on the second floor appear as if they were added as afterthoughts. The two slowly rotating blue rubber gloves (*Title Suspended [Sky Blue]*; 2008) on the wall in front of the elevator seem out of place. Pencil and crayon drawings (*Inversion—Creating Space Where There Appears to Be None*, 2010), co-authored by Sala and Rama, are displayed at different angles from the wall, but it is not clear whether their unusual presentation adds to their effect.

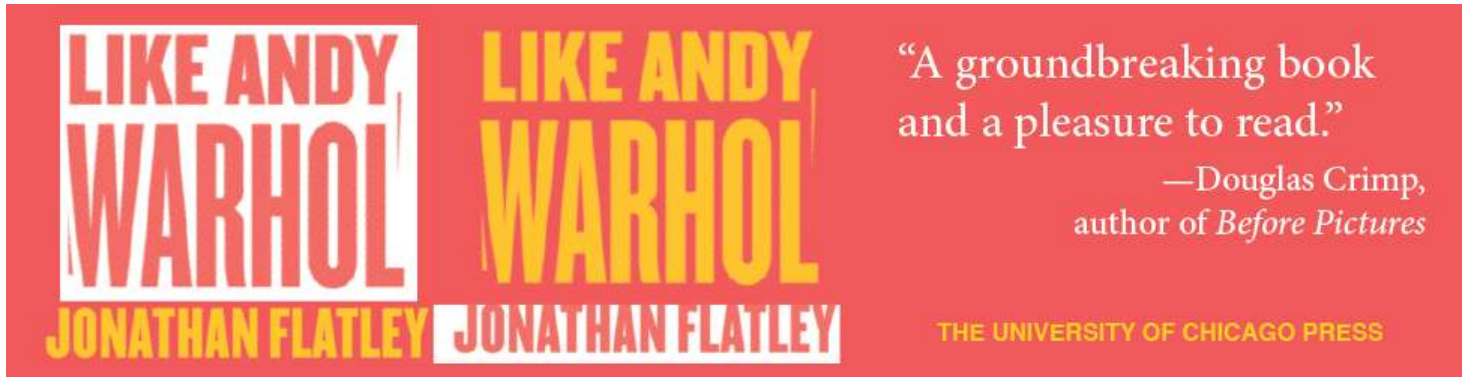
Sala's sound-based, non-narrative work challenges existing methods of displaying and theorizing art, and in doing so reveals their limitations. The layout of the exhibition occasionally struggles to establish a coherent relationship between works in different media, and the catalogue essays hesitate

at times to look beyond the technical procedures and historical facts. Nevertheless, the New Museum succeeds in presenting some of Sala's most complex works in a captivating and engaging setting.

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