

Anri Sala

(Tirana, Albania, 1974)

Within Anri Sala's artistic production, music has taken on an ever more important role: traces may be found of it both in his numerous film works and in his sound sculptures which, since 2009, have included specially modified rolling instruments. In the major video installations of recent years, references have become more explicit, through genuine homages to the biographical vicissitudes of great composers and performers of the past, such as Ravel, Mozart and Puccini.

Acquired for the collection, the video *If and Only If* (2018) shows the performance of *Elegy for Solo Viola* that Igor Stravinsky wrote in 1944, at the start of his American exile, at the request of the Belgian violist Germain Prévost. The piece is dedicated to the memory of his talented colleague Alphonse Onnou, who in Brussels had been among the founders of the famous string quartet Pro Arte. When Hitler occupied Belgium in 1940, Onnou was on tour in the United States, where he died shortly afterwards, without ever being able to return to his country. The *Elegy* is a brief composition, lasting just five minutes, yet in the video the musician Gérard Caussé takes almost double the time to perform it all, to the point of distorting its original rhythm. In the meantime, the close-up framing of the camera shows us the slow progress of a snail along the bow held by the performer: it is indeed to facilitate its movements without harming it that Caussé pauses or slows down his performance, ultimately establishing an empathic relationship with it. However much Sala is a refined and learned artist and the work is an incredibly poetical account of the affinity between the violist and the animal, *If and Only If* goes beyond mere formal virtuosity. Friendship, professional collaboration and forced emigration link the stories of all the characters involved in the genesis of the *Elegy*, and at the same time they intertwine with history and the devastation caused by the Second World War.

Ever since his debut, Sala's works have been characterised by this continuous back and forth between the recounting of the experiences of individuals and the memory of collective traumas. His own personal history also contributes to this particular sensitivity: born in Tirana in 1974, he left his country at the age of twenty-two only to move to Paris and later Berlin, where he lives to this day. In his first work, *Intervista (Finding the Words)* (1997), the rediscovery of film spools featuring his mother when she was young, in her period of political activism, offer the pretext to talk about the cumbersome heritage of communist Albania. In *Naturalmystyc (Tomahawk #2)* (2002), a boy from Belgrade is filmed while he makes a perfect imitation of the sound of the missiles he had heard fall on the city time and time again during the Yugoslavian war. Lastly, in *Take Over* (2017), the points of contact between the *Internazionale* and *La Marseillaise*, on the air of which the first version of the Socialist anthem was originally sung, provide the basis on which to investigate the unexpected connections of history.

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