one: presentness

ANRI SALA

Anri Sala was born in Tirana, Albania, in 1974. He attended art school in Tirana and then, from 1996 to 1998, the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris where he studied film and video. Between 1996 and 2005 he lived in Paris (French critics tend to think of him as their own) but in 2005 he moved to Berlin, where he lives today. In 1998, while still a student, he made a dazzling and deeply thoughtful short film, Intervista (Interview), which went on, deservedly, to win various prizes. A brief summary might go like this: Intervista begins with Sala coming across a reel of old 16-mm film, which turns out to be news footage from 1977 in which his beautiful mother Vladel, at that time 32 (she looks younger), first appears at a meeting of the Albanian Youth Congress by the side of the Com-
munist dictator Enver Hoxha and then gives an interview to the press. However, the film lacks a sound track and Sala shows astonishing resourcefulness, first seeking out the man who originally recorded the sound (which remains lost) and then bringing the film to a school for the deaf and dumb where a student assisted by a teacher provide the missing words. The rest of Intervista consists in Sala's showing the film with added subtitles to his mother, who at first is confounded—literally incredulous—that she ever uttered the political banalities that she is revealed to have spoken. (This hardly does justice to the full, moving, beautifully filmed exchange between mother and son.)

The point of the foregoing, however, is not so much to justify my praise of Intervista as to call attention to one of the chief concerns of Sala's work, the relation of image to sound, which in many of his videos are treated as essentially autonomous elements that nevertheless—or rather, by virtue of that autonomy—are made to articulate each other in fascinating and productive ways. So for example in Mixed Behavior (2003), shot in Tirana on a New Year's Eve, a lone disc jockey stooping under a plastic sheet on a rooftop under steady rain plays records to an invisible audience as fireworks explode and fall (and, unexpectedly, reverse themselves) in the night sky; while in Air Cushioned Ride (2006), shot from Sala's car at a roadside rest area in Nevada as he continuously circles a number of huge parked trucks (others come and go in the course of the work), a station on his car radio playing Baroque music and another station devoted to country and Western regularly (and finally predictably) interrupt one another.

144—d Anti Sala, stills from Intervista, 1995. Video projection. Color, stereo sound, screen dimensions variable, 26 min.

..."with the backing of the Marxist-Leninist Party..."
owing to the blocking wall formed by the trucks, a natural phenomenon known both as cross-modulation and as spurious emission. Indeed a subsequent video, *A Spurious Emission* (2007), shows a group of professional musicians and a singer performing the sound track of *Air Cushioned Ride*, which Sala had had scored by a composer, in a studio, effectively relocating the source of the music within the image instead of, as in the original video, *hors cadre*, in the “surround.” Finally, a recent work, *Answer Me* (2008), filmed in the geodesic dome of a listening station in Berlin from the Cold War, features two characters, a woman who urges a man to answer her (their relationship appears to be at a crisis) but his response is simply to play aggressively on a set of drums, the sound of which reverberates deafeningly throughout the high, curvilinear space which one senses more than actually sees. The origin of the sound is thus both within and outside the image at the same time. It goes without saying that Sala is not the first video artist to conceive of the relations between image and sound in these or similar terms. But he is particularly ingenious in his treatment of that relation, nowhere more so than in the first of the three works I want to discuss in this essay, *Long Sorrow* (2005). The title comes from the nickname (in German *langer Jammer*) given to an extremely large and famously drab apartment block in Märkisches Viertel, an area in Berlin near where the Wall used to be.

I shall not say anything more by way of anticipation except that the duration of the video is thirteen minutes. Thanks to Sala, it has been possible to provide a version of the video on the DVD included with this book. I would now like the reader to play it from start to finish.
long sorrow

I deliberately did not mention in the lead-up to the video that it features the noted “free” or improvisatory saxophonist, Jemeel Moondoc, because I did not want to predetermine the reader/viewer’s experience of the opening few minutes, during which a movie camera located in a bare room in an apartment advances slowly toward a window at the bottom of which, seemingly between the sill and the partly open horizontally pivoting main window unit, indeed seemingly just outside the window (but as if tucked back within it, almost as if left behind on the sill), there rests or hovers something rounded, dark, and shiny that cannot quite be identified (at first we think: some sort of abandoned fruit!), something, as the camera gets closer, we see is entwined with leaves and one or more white flowers, something that finally is observed to move, and not only that, to move in apparently motivated relation to the sounds of somewhat disjointed (and at

15–57 (this and following page) Anri Sala, stills from Long Sorrow, 2005. Super 16 mm transferred to video projection. Color, stereo sound, screen dimensions variable, 12 min., 57 sec.
first notably cool) saxophone playing that we have been hearing from the outset . . . until we realize – this takes about two and a half minutes but feels longer – that the object must be, that it is, the head, seen from behind, of a musician playing the saxophone, and that the musician has somehow been suspended outside the window (outside the room, apparently high above the ground: all this while we have been looking out at sky, and, lower down, at buildings and trees some distance away). As the music continues the camera keeps coming closer, continually reframing the window (the interior of the room seeming to darken slightly in contrast as it does so) and bringing the outside scene into sharper focus; the saxophonist’s head moves more freely (we recognize dreadlocks and conclude that he is black); until just after four minutes into the video, following a brief silence, he breaks into voice improvisation as well (the initial effect of his strange yelps and cries is jolting; from here on he will shift back and forth between saxophone and voice, sometimes as in call and response). By this time the window largely fills the screen, at some point we have become aware of distant traffic noises (also children’s voices), and then at almost exactly five and a half minutes
church bells begin to ring (it must be Sunday) and very quickly the saxophonist begins to respond to them on his instrument, at once confirming and filling out our sense of his relation to his situation. This goes on for more than thirty seconds and then, without warning, at about six minutes the scene shifts from interior to exterior, and from a vantage point off to the side the camera shows us two long wooden supports protruding from the building above the top-story window from which powerful lights have been hung to illuminate the action (even though it is broad daylight) and also, toward the bottom right of the screen (it takes a moment to register this), the head of the musician and, for the first time, a glimpse of his saxophone (the top several inches anyway). Then at around six and a half minutes the camera cuts to a close-up of the player in profile, and from then on until toward the very end the camera stays with him, for the most part outside and – except for a stretch of about a minute, during which we are shown him from the front (but even then we are not shown his hands or his body below the chest) – at extremely close range, never giving us the whole of his face but only part of it at any one moment (indeed at moments we are only shown a bit of his forehead
or cheek or hair with its floral decoration) and never disclosing more of his instrument than is necessary for us to understand the effort he is making (basically we are shown only the mouthpiece), until finally at nine minutes we are back in the room and looking down now past his head at the ground and traffic below so that for the first time we are able to appreciate just how high up he must be—eighteen floors, as it turns out. (The play of traffic reflections in the tilted window unit is brilliant, and requires effort to understand. That abrupt shift of perspective prepares us for the end of the video, which is still some time away.) Around nine and a half minutes we are once more outside: the playing becomes increasingly intense, the camera seems to move to within a few inches of the musician's face (in fact this is done entirely optically; the camera never comes nearer to Moondoc than fifteen or twenty feet, but the effect is of the sheerest proximity), we see, we virtually feel, the intensity of his effort, repeatedly we find ourselves looking directly at his eyes, which mostly look down or actually shut but at moments open wide (when they do they often seem to glance or roll upward), also at the space between them, at his frowns and other changes of expression, at
the imperfections in his skin (we are definitely closer than we want to be); again the musician breaks into voice; at not quite eleven and a half minutes we focus (at first blurredly) on his hair and the flowers twined in it, the playing becomes plaintive, then at 11:40 we are back inside and looking down as the player’s head starts drifting away to the lower right, then we are outside again and we follow the head as it descends toward the right still playing, sharpest focus being reserved for the trees below with their leaves moving in the wind. The unmistakable impression conveyed by the music is of sadness and regret that something is coming to an end. Or simply of loss. (About the fiftieth time I watched this I thought to myself: Orpheus. And from Simone Weil: “La grâce, c’est la loi du mouvement descendant.”) The whole sequence is lyrical, almost dreamlike, until at twelve minutes the music stops. We are given an outside view of the apartment building with the klieg lights still on. We hear another snatch of playing, distant now. Around 12:35 the scene shifts to another view of the building and lights as, in the sky beyond, a passenger plane approaches silently from the left and disappears behind it; one’s associations with this are unavoidable and are clearly
accepted by the artist, who moreover underlines the flight of the plane with a single held note on Moondoc's saxophone. (An extraordinary detail: it is not as if we are invited to imagine that the note is a response to his sight of the plane, along the lines of his playing throughout most of the video. How are we to understand it then? I shall come back to this.) Finally there is a distant view of the building complex and the surrounding neighborhood with the klieg lights still on. At thirteen minutes almost exactly the video is over.

The question now is what to make of *Long Sorrow* as I have described it. Let me go for six main points:

(1) The first thing that struck me about *Long Sorrow* when I first encountered it at the Marian Goodman Gallery – I came upon it when it was perhaps two-thirds of the way along – was the saxophonist’s seemingly total absorption in his playing. This was the point in the video when the music was at its most intense; it may have been fortunate for me that I walked in on it just then because it made the dual issue of absorption and to-be-seenness immediately palpable. There was, I felt in the moment, no question as to the authenticity of the saxophonist’s engagement in what he was doing; it seemed inconceivable that he was merely
mugging for the camera, or that the sounds I was hearing could have issued from any other source than his efforts, though of course that was altogether within the realm of technical possibility. In other words, within a very short time—just a few minutes—I had formed the conviction that I was seeing still another work—not a still photograph but a video—in which a protagonist's absorption was thematized in a way that activated, brought into play, an entire tradition of representation that went back to the middle of the eighteenth century in France if not indeed earlier.

(2) At the same time, the camera (I am still talking about my first few minutes in front of Long Sorrow) could scarcely have been more active. In fact I soon realized that I was being allowed only glimpses of the player's mouthpiece, never of the whole instrument or even of his fingers pressing the keys, and only fractional and decentered views of his face from extremely close range (his lips, his teeth, his cheek, his brow, his eyes, his hair, his skin), as if the camera were intent not only on reducing to an absolute minimum the physical and so to speak the psychical distance between itself and its subject but also of asserting its own priority, one might almost say its willfulness, in relation to the viewer. More broadly,
the viewer of Long Sorrow is from the first made continually aware of the choices and movements of the camera, starting with its slow traveling shot en avant—recalling Michael Snow’s classic avant-garde film Wavelength (1967)—toward the window and the unidentified object half-upon, half-just beyond the sill (I should also acknowledge the presence of the Minimalist object-like radiator below the window), continuing through its subtle reframing of the window toward the close of that shot, its shift to outside the building, its unpredictable leaps from one viewpoint to another, reaching a peak of activity, seemingly in the saxophonist’s face, precisely in the portion of the video I had walked in on. Not surprisingly, I understand Sala’s emphasis on the activity of the camera as an assertion of what in connection with Wall’s Adrian Walker in the Introduction to this book I called to-be-seenness, the difference being that in that photograph what is subtly thematized is the fact that the subject has been posed by the photographer (that the photograph is in essential respects a construction) and that in the video the viewer is made continually aware that he or she is permitted to see only and precisely what the camera—which in the end obviously means the maker of the video—allows to be revealed. The question that now arises is how that emphasis on the camera relates to the viewer’s conviction (I am speaking for myself but I hope others will agree) of the saxophonist’s—Moondoc’s—absorption in his playing. The answer I want to propose is that not only does the viewer’s moment-to-moment awareness of the camera’s seemingly arbitrary jumps and drifts and deflections not come between him or her and Moondoc and his music, it is rather that one’s conviction of Moondoc’s total engagement is made the more intense by the fact of its being presented in so fragmentary, willful, at times even frustrating a manner. Put slightly differently, my personal sense is that no calmer, steadier, more seamless and comprehensive mode of presentation could have yielded a comparably persuasive account of Moondoc’s performance as a whole. If this is correct, how is it to be understood?

(3) Here one has to consider the larger situation in which Moondoc has been placed: he is standing facing outward on a smallish platform (which we viewers
are never shown; in addition, he was restrained for safety from behind) many stories in the air, and – it turns out – required to improvise on the saxophone in response to his surroundings. In other words, the circumstances are anything but ordinary, and it would be astonishing if Moondoc as we see him throughout the video were not in a state of some anxiety, or at least if any weakening of his own concentration on his playing were not likely to have disorienting consequences. (In fact the video was shot in Super 16-mm movie film and then edited digitally. For the thirteen minutes of Long Sorrow Sala shot perhaps five hours of film in ten-minute reels over five days. The sound was recorded separately but in real time.) “From the very beginning,” Sala remarks in a published conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist,

I had in my mind a weird presence caught in between the sill and the pane of a window, a presence that in the beginning looks like something left behind, but then with time the viewer would realize that this something is alive. What might look like a forgotten plant behind a window of an empty apartment is instead the head of a musician who is improvising free jazz while suspended outside, groundless, in a vertigo situation. I wanted someone to improvise free jazz in the void, somebody for whom music is not only an ongoing conciliation with emptiness in life [let that go for the moment] but is also what keeps him together, while being suspended outside the eighteenth floor.²

In other words, Sala deliberately placed Moondoc (with the musician’s consent, naturally) in a highly stressful situation, one that the viewer is made – not quite to share, that would be to go too far – but at any rate to register in an intensely empathic, almost kinesthetic way. What is truly noteworthy is that this is done without ever revealing the basic, engineering facts about that situation – indeed we do not even get to see the larger context of the building and its setting until the last few seconds of the video, by which time Moondoc is gone and the camera unit as well. (In effect, only the lights remain.) Here it is hard to know whether what makes this empathic response possible are certain technological features of
the medium (if so what exactly are they?) or whether, more simply, but in the end more mysteriously, the decisive factor is the artist’s ability to use film, sound, and editing in a way that at every instant leaves no room for doubt in the viewer’s mind as to the veracity, the actuality, of the state of affairs which _Long Sorrow_ purports to depict. This is how I understand the activity of the camera at its most intense and invasive, the viewer registering it as motivated at once by the double project of violating Moondoc’s private space as if in a constantly renewed attempt to break his concentration and thereby of demonstrating that even under so extreme a goad not the least trace of distraction, not even for a split second, is there to be observed. The movement of the camera away from Moondoc’s face, notably to his hair and the flowers in his hair, can seem to express that determination in hyperbolic form, as can the extreme close-ups dwelling on the imperfections in his skin—as if the evidence of less than total absorption might somehow leak from his pores. At the same time, one has a sense of the camera coming progressively to share or catch Moondoc’s improvisatory fervor, in effect doubling and then redoubling the intensity of his playing in sheerly visual terms. No doubt, too, it matters in ways we cannot gauge that no less than six spatially separated microphones were used to record Moondoc’s playing—also certain outside noises—including one inside his saxophone.

More broadly, the video medium in Sala’s hands turns out to have a formidable ability to evoke, to make present, what is offscreen, _hors cadre_—what belongs to the encompassing visual and aural environment of the image on the screen—and although that ability is by no means foreign to traditional cinema, on the contrary one might even say narrative cinema depends on such a power of implication, it would be altogether remarkable to find a movie the action of which, as in _Long Sorrow_, continually depends on that for its grippingness. (It helps that the entire video is only thirteen minutes long.) Considered in this light, the camera and the cameraman, or rather the team, including Sala, in their pod at the top of an enormous crane become just another feature of the environment that Moondoc has to overcome—more accurately, that he has to “transcend”—
in and through the act of improvisation. He himself has spoken of the need he felt "to be totally drawn into the music to forget my situation," which is surely apt, as long as we understand that forgetting his situation was at the same time and by its very nature a matter of converting that situation into music. This is the significance of the extraordinary stretch when church bells suddenly ring out and Moondoc almost at once begins to answer them: it is precisely then that we first fully grasp what is going on, though doubtless "fully" should be in scare quotes: we have still not got outside the room, much less taken in the vertiginousness of the basic dispositif. It is what is equally explicitly at stake when the camera zeroes in on Moondoc's eyes, which even when they look up — at which instants they cannot have been literally unseeing of the filmic apparatus — convey not the least hint of diminished concentration on his playing. On the contrary, the music is then at its most intense, as — we are made to feel — under those circumstances it would have to be in order to maintain the level of engagement that we find ourselves witnessing.

(a) I said in connection with Sala's Intervista that virtually all his work is marked by an interest in the relation of image to sound (or image track to sound track), and Long Sorrow is no exception. In Long Sorrow, as we have seen, the manifest or say ostensible link between image and sound is provided by Moondoc, as he fulfills the task assigned to him by Sala of improvising in the face of his extreme circumstances — as though his commitment to his playing, not to mention the use from time to time of his own voice, has the further, "structural" rationale of keeping image and sound together, of continually motivating each in relation to the other. (The moments of voice suggest that the point of linkage has suddenly migrated to inside his body, so to say in his throat.) The advent of the church bells, a sonic event based in the bers cadre, threatens to mark a break in this, but almost instantly Moondoc's inspired incorporation of the bells in his performance restores the status quo. It goes without saying that no such incorporation would have been possible had Moondoc been following a score rather than improvising; more broadly, it is the project of improvisation that under-
writes the moment-to-moment intensity – the sustained effect of present-tense motivatedness – that marks Sala's video from first to last.

(5) It is here that the highly charged distinction between presence and presentness, first drawn in "Art and Objecthood," comes into play. In the Introduction to this book I quoted my claim in that essay that with respect to a high modernist picture by Noland or Olitski or a sculpture by David Smith or Caro "at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest." This by itself has no clear application to Long Sorrow for the simple reason that the latter is a work that reveals itself in time, but then I go on to say that presentness "amounts, as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself," a claim that is meant to hark back to the short passage from Perry Miller's Jonathan Edwards that I took for the epigraph of my essay:

Edward's journals frequently explored and tested a meditation he seldom allowed to reach print; if all the world were annihilated, he wrote... and a new world were freshly created, though it were to exist in every particular in the same manner as this world, it would not be the same. Therefore, because there is continuity, which is time, "it is certain with me that the world exists anew every moment; that the existence of things every moment ceases and is every moment renewed." The abiding assurance is that "we every moment see the same proof of a God as we should have seen if we had seen Him create the world at first." (p. 148)

I do not pretend that my account in "Art and Objecthood" of the presence/presentness distinction is transparent, or, even less, that I was in control of all the implications of my epigraph (fortunately I did not ask that of myself in order to feel justified in appropriating it), but I now want to suggest that something like presentness, precisely in the sense of a perpetual creation of itself at each successive moment, may be seen as being at stake in Moondoe's playing – more precisely, in Sala's presentation of his playing – in Long Sorrow. (This is the implication of my remarks about Long Sorrow's "moment to moment intensity"
and “sustained effect of present-tense motivatedness.” Sala’s videos invariably convey the sense of taking place in the present, as opposed to the implied pastness of traditional narrative film. I touch here on another specific faculty of video as a medium, one that emerges with special force in Sala’s work.

Now consider the following statement by Sala in the same interview with Obrist cited earlier:

I’m interested in sounds as they become music. Long Sorrow shows the mouth and not the saxophone. Although what one hears makes one “see” the sax, what one really sees is a mouth and a face [only at moments and only in fractions, I want to add]. Watching a mouth move and produce sax sounds fictionalizes the whole thing because a segment in the line of production is missing. It’s never music as a final product, finished and available, that interests me, but music while it becomes, captured on the fly, before it reaches us for our pleasure. So that’s why I film the part where the mouth touches the beginning of the saxophone, instead of the end of the saxophone and the beginning of the music. What interests me is this matter of air that becomes music. It’s like filming the very moment, the fraction of the second, when it becomes music. It’s like filming the intention, the need for music, rather than the music itself, the very fraction of a second when sound is still an activity and not music yet. I don’t know how to explain it. Does it make sense? (pp. 21–2)

Obrist replies, “It’s beautiful, yes.” I would like to say, it makes superb sense above all within the framework of the issues I have been pursuing. As in the case of Thomas Demand’s photographs analyzed in Why Photography Matters and discussed briefly in the Introduction, Long Sorrow, understood in these terms, thematizes intention—which is to say determinacy versus indeterminacy—with a vengeance. (Something similar will turn out to be true of a recent sculpture, Hinoki, by Charles Ray.) In this connection it is striking, to say the least, that Jennifer Ashton, in the last chapter of a brilliant book on modernist and postmodernist American poetry and theory, glosses Edwards’s claim (in The Great
Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended) that the world's "existence in each successive moment, is altogether equivalent to an immediate production out of nothing" in terms of divine intention as opposed to a (materialist, Literalist, one might also say Minimalist) logic of cause and effect. This leads her to cite my epigraph (more broadly, her view of modernism is explicitly aligned with "Art and Objecthood" throughout her book), and to write: "To turn [Edward's] idea around: that the world 'exists now every moment' is what makes it an expression of intention as opposed to any series of effects that might or might not follow from it." As she also states: "In short, what distinguishes the presence of meaning/intention from any succession of effects is, finally, what distinguishes art from objects for Fried and divine from human knowledge for Edwards. Put in terms of the . . . conclusion of 'Art and Objecthood,' 'Presentness is grace.' If my observations and arguments in the preceding pages are to the point, nothing less than all this is manifestly at stake in Sala's video.

(6) I do not feel that it is necessary to go on at length about the relation of Long Sorrow to previous works in the absorptive tradition. But consider: Long Sorrow opens with a slow traveling shot toward what turns out to be a saxophonist facing away from us, a denouement that recalls the basic structure of Chardin's Young Student Drawing (a student with his back toward us sitting on the ground copying a drawing) even as it radicalizes that structure by locating Moondoc outside the room, indeed outside the building, thereby providing a greater challenge for empathic projection (in the absence of his playing no such projection would be conceivable). The climactic intensification of both image and music in the portion of the video I walked in on at Marian Goodman might be compared with the becoming-dramatic of absorption that takes place in David's Oath of the Horatii, though of course in Sala's video there is no equivalent of the complex historical narrative in the painting. There is, however, as already noted, the airplane flying "into" the building, an image which cannot be thought innocent of the events of 9/11 and their aftermath, all the more so in that Sala himself can be understood as taking full responsibility for the held-note accompaniment in the sound track; it is he and we who register the plane, not, we are led to infer, the
departed Moondoc, whose point of view at that moment would be quite other. No doubt, too, there are "historical" implications to Sala's choice of the vast, somewhat notorious langar Jammer public housing project as a setting for the video, not to mention the very fact that the city is Berlin. Plus there is the reference in his conversation with Obrist to music as "an ongoing conciliation with emptiness in life." The precise political valence of any or all of this is unclear. At the very least, however, the inclusion of the airplane signals an awareness of a real-world framing context that threatens to explode the absorptive project of the video as a whole, even as the "capturing" of the plane by the vanished Moondoc's saxophone quietly makes the point that this time anyway it has been possible to stave off that fate.

Finally, the zeroing in on Moondoc's features, especially his mouth and eyes, invites comparison with what in connection with Manet's paintings of the first half of the 1860s I have called facingness, in spite of the sharp contrast between Manet's coolness and "indifference" (Georges Bataille's term) and Sala's almost literally invasive procedures. In the Déjeuner, Olympia, and related works, of course, facingness emerges as a dialectical response to a crisis within the Diderotian tradition, namely, to the increasing difficulty of depicting figures capable of striking contemporary audiences as truly absorbed instead of as merely seeking to appear so (see the discussion of Jean-François Millet's paintings of peasant subjects in Manet's Modernism). Whereas in Long Sorrow the fact that for long stretches the camera seems almost to be in Moondoc's face sets the stage for the overcoming of any observable awareness of being filmed and hence for the achievement of a singularly powerful evocation of absorption. (Compare the discussion of Gordon and Parreno's film Zidane: A Twenty-First Century Portrait in Why Photography Matters.)

Not that Sala had such art-historical comparisons in mind when he made Long Sorrow. Yet he would, I think, be open to considering them pertinent to his artistic decisions—and even if he were not, they nevertheless constitute a deep background to the latter that cannot be ignored. In any case, such a background is even more immediately relevant to the work I now want to discuss.
after three minutes

In 2004, filming in two different locales in Paris, Sala made a silent video of a cymbal with a rather pockmarked surface being struck continually from beneath by two black-gloved hands (his own) while being lit up by strobe lights firing at a rate of approximately ninety flashes per second. Since the camera filmed at twenty-five frames per second, what the viewer sees is a markedly discontinuous sequence of images, most of which are illuminated to a greater or lesser degree but a surprising number of which— that is, a surprising number of frames—are dark, having been shot in the extremely small interval between the flashes of the strobes. Others are not entirely dark; it seems they register the fading of the strobes, as fleeting as that must have been. Sala’s hands themselves are mostly unseen but at moments—more precisely, for a fraction of a second—we glimpse their ghostly image before it disappears. One’s first impression is that the video is in black-and-white but then one becomes aware of brief bursts and then longer stretches of color; nevertheless, the light-dark contrast throughout is extreme, and the overall effect of the movement of the cymbal under the impact of being struck, the suddenness and brightness of the flashes, and the sense of discontinuity between individual frames is disconcerting, even disorienting. (No one prone to seizures should go near this work.) The camera, too, shifts its point of view from time to time, and there is at least one stretch when the cymbal appears unmoving—unstruck, in other words—under the bombardment of the flashes. While being struck the cymbal gyrates widely on its axis but for the most part it fills the frames or comes close to doing so, and now and then it even extends beyond the image edge. All this goes on for exactly three minutes, an authorial decision that gives the work its original title: Three Minutes. Three times sixty times twenty-five—minutes times seconds times frames per second—makes 4,500 frames, and although the viewer can hardly claim to have “seen” them all, the duration of the piece seems perfectly judged, that is, not overwhelmingly long but not five seconds too short, either. The video ends with an extremely brief “still” (as it seems) of the cymbal

at rest. I saw *Three Minutes* some time after it was made and was impressed. I also thought I knew what it was "about," or perhaps I should say I thought I could give an account of its artistic significance. Yet I also felt a nagging qualm to the effect that there was something insufficiently articulated about it as a work of art — as if the cymbal and the strobes went together just a little too neatly, or as if once the video got under way I too quickly grasped its modus operandi, so that actually watching it from start to finish seemed more a deliberate choice on my part than properly speaking it should have been. (I ought to have felt unable to tear my eyes away, in the sense that the slightest flagging of attention might cause me to miss something essential.) So it was with considerable interest that I subsequently learned that Sala had in effect revised *Three Minutes* in a way that responded to these intuitions.

The occasion for that revision was a group exhibition at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) in Dublin, curated by Sala's friend, the French artist Philippe Parreno. What Sala did was this: before the exhibition opened he projected *Three Minutes* on a gallery wall in the museum and then re-filmed it using two security cameras that took two photographs per second instead of the original twenty-five. In other words, whereas the initial filming imposed a rhythm of twenty-five frames per second on a sequence of ninety (or so) flashes per second, the re-filming imposed a rhythm of two frames per second on *Three Minutes' twenty-five frames per second, which also meant that sometimes twelve frames went by in order that a single one be captured and sometimes thirteen — not that one perceives this extremely slight inequality but it is part of the subliminal structure of the new three-minute video (three times sixty times two equals 360 frames, each lasting half a second). As for the security cameras, they occupied fixed positions in the room — one on the opposite wall from the wall on which the original video was projected, the other on a side wall to the right of the projected image-stream — but they could be and were pivoted from time to time to change their angle of view. The result, in any case, is that we are given a strong sense of the room in IMMA where all this took place, and about a minute and a half into

32a and b (facing page, top), 32a and b (center), and 34a and b (bottom) Anri Sala, stills from *After Three Minutes*, 2004. Video projection. Color and black and white, silent, dimensions variable, 3 min. cycle.
the new video the right-hand side camera unexpectedly reveals a large floppy doll – modeled on Parreno – propped up in a sitting position against the left-hand side wall, a further contextualizing move which introduces a certain sort of “persona,” as if Sala both did and did not want to include an actual viewer (more on this below). The final work, which Sala calls *After Three Minutes*, consists in the double projection of the two videos alongside and synchronized with one another, the original at the left and the new, slightly larger one on the right. The proportions of the image-rectangles are also slightly different, nine to sixteen versus three to four; a distance of roughly three feet or a little more separates the two projections. After exhibiting *After Three Minutes* at IMMA in a provisional form – on monitors set above the security monitors at the entrance of the museum – Sala showed it at Hauser and Wirth in London in 2007 in its definitive, projected version. I first saw it there, in fact I watched it repeatedly in an attempt to bring my thoughts about it into focus. By the time I left the gallery, my earlier qualms had been resolved: there was nothing simple about the new work. (I have since watched it numerous times in three venues, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Miami, the Lois and Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art in Cincinnati, and the Marian Goodman Gallery in New York City.)

Basically, I take both *Three Minutes* and *After Three Minutes* to be investigations of a set of issues which, once again, goes back to the middle of the eighteenth century – the dawn of modern painting, if not yet modernist painting – when the notion was first unequivocally formulated that a painting – by which was meant a “history” painting (the highest category of painting as it was then understood), that is, a representation of significant human action – was by the nature of its signifying system (signs coexisting with each other in space rather than succeeding one another in time as in verbal language) restricted to depicting a *single moment* in an action, and that the task of the painter was therefore to make the best, strategically most astute selection of a moment out of all those which a given action (a given narrative) could be taken as presenting as possible

35a and b (facing page, top), 36a and b (center), and 37a and b (bottom) Anri Sala, stills from After *Three Minutes*, 2004. Video projection. Color and black and white, silent, dimensions variable, 3 min. cycle.
choices. For Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in his epochal theoretical treatise *Laocoon* (1766) — a text indebted to Diderot — this meant choosing the "most pregnant" moment available, by which he meant one in which the action was under way but had not yet reached its climax and yet in which the latter, the climax, was somehow implicit in what was shown — a moment of maximum tension and suggestiveness, let us say. Similar considerations must have led David in the *Oath of the Horatii* (1784–5), having in view the complex narrative that formed the basis for Corneille's tragedy *Horace*, to choose a moment that does not occur in the tragedy, the administering of an oath to fight and if necessary die for Rome by the elder Horatius to his three heroic sons. The combat itself, the death of five of the six combatants, Camilla's excoriating of her surviving brother on his return, his killing of her, and his father's defense of him before the citizens of Rome are all in the future, so to speak. (The later phases of the narrative are suggested by the grief-stricken responses of the women in the right-hand half of the composition, foreshadowing the events to come.) However, my point in mentioning Lessing and his theory in this connection has less to do with the notion of "pregnant" than with that of the moment as such. For what after all is a moment in an action? It is not, to begin with, a unit of time: how could it be? If it were, one could ask questions about its actual duration — clearly absurd in the case of painting. Nor is it precisely a unit of narration, as if a particular narrative — say the story of the Horatii — could be subdivided into a precise number of distinct, brief, narratively "equal" phases, each of which presented itself as a clear-cut tableau — as if (to take a single example) the temporally protracted encounter between the Horatii and the Curiatii in the course of which five of the combatants were killed could somehow be imagined to condense naturally into one or more representative images (or "moments"). Yet — this is what must be stressed — the idea that a painting represents a moment in an action proved indispensable not only to art critics and theorists for the better part of a century but also to several generations of ambitious painters, who appear to have found in its resistance to precise theoretical definition a provocation to or an enabling condition of radical
solutions to the problem of pictorial construction. So, for example, Théodore Géricault’s stupendous *Raft of the Medusa* (1819) evokes an excruciatingly protracted “moment,” that is, the extended span of time that would have gone by while the shipwrecked men on the raft struggled to attract the attention of potential observers on the barely discernible ship, the brig *Argus*, on the far horizon. (That this was a strategy of desperation as well as genius is suggested by the fact that the young Eugène Delacroix in *Scenes from the Massacre at Scio* of 1824 sought to bypass considerations of “moment” entirely.)
These brief remarks hardly encompass the full complexity of the issue in post-
1750 painting, art theory, and art criticism. Leap now to the early 1860s and
the advent of Manet in his breakthrough paintings, the *Old Musician* (1862),
*Déjeuner sur l’herbe* (1862–3), and *Olympia* (1863). What we find in these, I argued
in *Manet’s Modernism*, is a kind of instantaneousness that I associate with the crit-
ical terms facingness and strikingness, both of which I originally extracted from
the art criticism of the period. The basic idea is this: in these paintings the “action”
itself is not especially momentary and the principal figures (everyone in the *Old
Musician*, the naked woman and the two men in the *Déjeuner*, the naked cour-
tesan in *Olympia*) are stationary to the extent of seeming to hold poses. It is all
the more noteworthy, then, that all three paintings evoke a sense of a heightened instantaneous encounter between themselves and the beholder by mobilizing a defining material and formal feature of easel painting, namely, that such a painting comprises a delimited flat surface all of which, every bit of which, faces the beholder and which moreover in Manet's case—in part by virtue of the provocative deadpan frontal gaze of the principal figure in each of the three canvases (the old violinist, the naked bather, Olympia), seconded by the abrupt contrasts of light and dark and by a characteristic boldness of brushwork and astringency of color—is felt to do so as a whole, as if the entire painting in its facingness were presented to the beholder, one might say thrust upon him or her, in a single, indeterminately brief instant (a single blow), which is why facingness and strikingness, not flatness per se, are what chiefly mattered to Manet's commentators. Again, there is no way to rationalize such a notion of instantaneousness—in fact I suggested in Manet's Modernism that one small epitome of that fact is the contrast between the stationary but rapidly painted frog in the lower left-hand corner of the Déjeuner and the mid-flight but more deliberately rendered bullfinch hovering in the upper center. In any case, there can be no question but that precisely this aspect of Manet's art played a role in its initial reception, by which I allude both to the positive impact that it had on a handful of younger artists and critics and to the fierce resentment it inspired in almost everyone else.

My next point of reference—I am moving quickly—is the instantaneous photograph of the sort that first became possible in the late 1880s with the development of ever faster photographic film and that reached perhaps its peak with the invention of the small, easily portable Leica camera in the 1920s and '30s and the rise of the dual practices of "street" and combat photography in the work of, for example, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Capa, and Garry Winogrand. (Or sport photography for that matter.) In an obvious sense, such practices mark the emergence of a mode of instantaneousness that lends itself to exact quantification: such-and-such a photograph implies a shutter speed (the time during which the shutter is open) of one-tenth of a second, another a speed of one-hundredth
of a second, still another a speed ten times faster than that, and so on. Yet the photographs that result are themselves static, which is to say that there is the starkest imaginable contrast between the fleetingness of the “subject” and the unchangingness of the image-artifact. Barthes’s way of putting this is that even in the case of a photograph taken at a millionth of a second, a certain sense of posing is inescapable. He writes:

The physical duration of this pose is of little consequence; even in the interval of a millionth of a second (Edgerton’s drop of milk) there has still been a pose, for the pose is not, here, the attitude of the target or even a technique of the Operator, but the term of an “intention” of reading: looking at a photograph, I inevitably include in my scrutiny the thought of that instant, however brief, in which a real thing happened to be motionless in front of the
eye. I project the present photograph's immobility upon the past shot, and it is this arrest which constitutes the pose.  

In *Why Photography Matters* (p. 111) I cite this passage in connection with the larger problem of the theatricality of the photograph as theorized by Barthes, but my point in citing it here is simply to underscore the deeply problematic character of all "pictorial" practices of the momentary or instantaneous, including photographic ones.

My last term of comparison is, predictably, the notion of "presentness" as deployed strategically in "Art and Objecthood," where (as already mentioned) I contrasted the Minimalist/Literalist preoccupation with duration – specifically, with the duration of the subject's experience of the total situation in which a given "work" is only one element – with the high modernist emphasis on something like an antithetical temporal modality. "It is as though one's experience of [modernist paintings and sculptures] has no duration," I wrote in that essay, not because one in fact experiences a picture by Noland or Olitski or a sculpture by David Smith or Caro in no time at all, but because at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest. . . . It is this continuous and entire presentness, amounting, as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of instantaneousness, as though if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it. (p. 167; emphasis in original)

(I did not refer to Morris Louis in that connection, but for me today any one of his magnificent Unfurleds – their bare central expanses of unsized cotton duck at once opening dramatically before the beholder and made abstractly taut and resistant by the banked rivulets of intense acrylic color to the right and left – epitomizes that quality.) Once again, however, the ultimate point of recalling these remarks is to underscore what might be called their metaphorical character: literal instantaneousness, whatever that might be taken to mean, is
obviously not at issue in them. Which is to say that "Art and Objecthood" had a considerable stake in the concept of "presentness" without having been able to define it precisely. But how much and in what ways does that inability matter?

My suggestion, it is probably already clear, is that After Three Minutes amounts to an inspired attempt to take up the artistic and ontological project associated with the works and writings I have just briefly surveyed. The original Three Minutes was a first stab in that direction, but the new work goes considerably beyond the older one in a number of respects it would be useful to spell out.

(i) At the heart of Three Minutes is the mismatch or interference between the speed of the strobe lighting and the slower speed of the filming, both of which enjoy something like equal importance in one's experience of the work. Now it was precisely that mismatch or interference that I wanted to associate with "Art and Objecthood"'s notion of "presentness" when I saw it for the first time, despite the fact that in 1967 I could not have imagined how such an association could be compatible with a filmic medium. However, on further viewings I came to feel (to paraphrase what I said earlier) that there was perhaps something too technological-seeming about Sala's solution — as if once the basic dispositif was set in place (the fixed number of flashes, the fixed speed of the filming) the results, the video itself, followed just a bit too automatically. In point of fact, Three Minutes was strongly edited by cutting out various bright or dark images and sometimes reinserting them in slightly different positions in order subtly to reorganize the image-flow, which no doubt is the main reason why it has nothing of the banality of the strobe experience typical of disco clubs. Yet, because the editing does not declare itself as such, it cannot quite neutralize one's sense that the mismatch or interference is a strictly technological effect (or so it seems to me). To be sure, there is another temporal factor in play, the striking of the cymbal by mostly invisible hands, and of course the rhythm of that striking can be identified neither with the speed of the strobes nor with that of the filming (it can only have been considerably slower than the latter). Plus there are the shifts of the position of the camera in the course of the filming. But these intentional elements as well
turn out to be not quite sufficient to compensate for the technological cast of the video as a whole. By introducing a second filming of the original video at the much slower rate of just two frames per second, a whole new set of mismatches and syncopations is put in place, including crucially the disparity – as it often seems – between the half-second image on the right and the rapid-fire image-flow on the left. That is, one repeatedly has the feeling of having “missed” the frame that was caught by the slower camera. In addition, the jarringness of the disparity in speed powerfully foregrounds the factor of artistic intention – on an instant-to-instant basis, so to speak.

(2) Much more is in play than simply a difference in speeds. The new video was made by projecting the original Three Minutes on a gallery wall and then photographing, at two shots per second, that projection. This too is self-evidently an artistic decision, one with multiple implications of a radical sort. Most important, perhaps, it amounts to a declaration by Sala of the nature of his preferred medium: not simply video – a certain kind of image-stream – but projected video, a significantly different affair. In contrast, Three Minutes had no way of acknowledging this fact about itself apart from the conditions of its exhibition. Moreover, the sense of place that accompanies this thematization of projection is further heightened by the use of not one but two security cameras, the second located high on a side wall near the “front” of the room so as to yield pictures of the projected Three Minutes at a sharply oblique angle – so oblique that the original image-stream seems less important than the intermittent reflected light it sheds or fails to shed on the rest of the room – as well as by the fact that, photographed from the rear wall and being projected toward the bottom of the gallery wall, the image-stream is reflected in the polished wooden floor (for a few seconds we are shown only the reflection, not the projection itself). In addition, the changes in the orientation of the two cameras in the course of filming have the effect of disclosing reaches of the room that would otherwise have remained unseen, including windows screened so as to block light from outside. (There is also a door on the same wall as the projections and to their right.) I think of this as a still more
emphatic acknowledgment of the nature of the video medium as Sala practices it, by which I refer to his intense concern with the presentation of his works, their total installation in different venues, in ways that I have had to learn to appreciate, the risk being, to my previous way of thinking, that such a concern can seem to verge on the theatrical.\textsuperscript{7}

(5) Then there is the doll, an artistic, quasi-human "presence," which turns up seated and propped against a side wall roughly half-way through the second video and which moreover we are shown in relative close-up, under shifting illumination, somewhat toward the end. (Further on it appears to be gone.) The question is what to make of the doll, I mean why Sala introduced it, and here one can only conjecture that he felt a need to assert that the room was in some sense occupied though not, it seems, by an actual person, one whose responses to the projection and more broadly whose physical and psychological presence would have ushered in a whole new range of problems with no bearing on the crucial issue. For example, would such a person most plausibly have been shown seated, standing, or moving around? In each case, the decision would have had to carry its own narrative and psychological rationale, of a sort that would have been dis-

41a and b Ani Sala, stills from \textit{After Three Minutes}, 2004. Video projection. Color and black and white, silent, dimension variable, 3 min. cycle.
tracting: certainly Sala could not simply have sat that person on the gallery floor, as he did the doll; the brief close-up of the latter late in the piece positively underscores the decision not to include a human subject even as it shows the doll with its head turned toward the front wall as if unblinkingly watching the projection, whose ongoingness is registered by the intermittent illumination of the scene. In addition the doll comically alludes to a specific figure, Parreno, who had organized the IMMA exhibition (the risk here is of a somewhat hermetic joke). Put slightly differently, the doll functions as a certain sort of distancing device relative to the actual viewer of the right-hand projection even as it temporarily gives that viewer something “real,” not merely projected, to look at – but of course that “real” item has itself been filmed and projected: the point is that the doll does not start out as a projection as the image-sequence on the gallery wall does. (I am probably belaboring the obvious.) Plus there may be a somewhat anti-Minimalist/Literalist edge in this, the doll alluding to a human subject-in-a-situation even as it invites the actual viewer to do nothing except pay the closest possible attention to what is taking place before his or her eyes (as the doll seems to do, I have already implied). Not that the viewer actually is shown the arrival or the removal of the doll – one instant it is there and at another instant it is gone. What the viewer sees, in that regard, is the evidence of a certain artistic intention, period.

(4) Finally, decisively, the two videos, the original Three Minutes and the video that was shot in IMMA before the exhibition opened, are projected alongside each other, synchronized but with all their multiple rhythmic and scenic disparities – also their fleeting split-seconds of relative accord – in full view. This is the work Sala calls After Three Minutes. What I cannot do, however, is to provide even a minimally coherent account of how those disparities and fleeting split-seconds of accord play out in real time, as one’s attention shifts back and forth from one projection to the other, or indeed takes in both simultaneously, to the extent that one can be said to manage that feat even for an instant – in short I am at a loss how to describe the experience, the perceptual and responsive activ-
ity, of paying close attention to After Three Minutes. (I have not even mentioned the subtle, shifting play of color throughout the piece, which enriches it immeasurably.) Apropos of Barthes’s inspired phrase, "the arrest which constitutes the pose," might one say that at certain instants one has the sense of simultaneously glimpsing such an arrest of a bright image of the cymbal to the right and retinally registering the same fleeting image to the left? The thought is Sala’s, after reading a draft of this essay; not quite the bullfinch and the frog in Manet’s Déjeuner but close. Another term of comparison might be the sense in which the viewer of Louis’s Unfurleds is said by me in a text of 1971 to be unable – disempowered by the paintings – to “bear down on” – look concentratedly at – both banks of rivulets of color at the same time, as a result of which “each bank enjoys a special autonomy relative to the other as regards color.” Yet taking in the painting as a whole consists in nothing else but being struck by the two banks simultaneously, in a single all-inclusive act of visual attention. Simply put, the particular brilliancy of After Three Minutes is that it radicalizes the problematic of “presentness” evoked in “Art and Objecthood” as well as the different forms of “instantaneousness” that I earlier surveyed, all of which taken together indicate one of the obsessive concerns of modern art from its inception.

(5) One last point. Both Three Minutes and After Three Minutes are completely silent, a fact the viewer registers with special force because of what he or she is aware must be the noise made by the struck cymbal. Given the nature of Sala’s project this makes perfect sense: if one heard the clanging of the cymbal, that would inevitably structure one’s sense of what is shown to the extent of overpowering it. But it is also necessary to recall that sound as such, or rather the relation of image to sound, has from the first been one of Sala’s central preoccupations, which suggests that another dimension of his project in these works has been to motivate a silence that amounts to far more than simply the absence of noise.
Charles Ray, born in 1953 in Chicago to a family of art teachers, had a severely schizophrenic sister, a circumstance that led to his being sent away to a military school that suited him not at all. His liberation took place when he went to college at the University of Iowa and in his sophomore year came under the tutorship of the South African sculptor Roland Breuer, then in his early thirties, who during the 1960s had himself been a student of the British sculptor Anthony Caro at St. Martin's School of Art in London. (Caro was born in 1924 and continues to make outstanding work. I stated earlier that my encounter with one of his early abstract welded steel pieces, *Midday* (1960), in the fall of 1962 was a decisive experience for me. I remember meeting Breuer at St. Martin's in the 1960s.)

As Ray has explained in interviews, Breuer was fiercely "formalist" — perhaps more accurately, "constructivist" — in that he purveyed a version of Caro's teach-