

## Concentrations 41: Anri Sala, Opening Lecture

---

January 23, 2002

Dallas Museum of Art  
Horchow Auditorium

Jack Lane                      I'm Jack Lane, Director of the Dallas Museum of Art. I'm very happy to welcome you here this evening for the first North American presentation of the work of Anri Sala. We thank the Friends of Modern and Contemporary Art of the Dallas Museum of Art for sponsoring this get-together this evening. I'd like to offer a special acknowledgement to Chantal Crousel who represents the artist and has a wonderful gallery in Paris and is here this evening—thank you for your support of this undertaking—and to say how delighted we are to have Anri Sala here this evening and thank you Anri for working with Suzanne Weaver, our Associate Curator of Contemporary Art who has been the impresario of this exhibition. Suzanne?

Suzanne Weaver:            I want to thank everyone for coming. There are many people behind the scenes who made this exhibition, this incredible exhibition, possible. I want to recognize and thank for their wonderful assistance and dedication and commitment: Emily and Nicolas and Chantal of the Chantal Crousel Gallery in Paris, DMA staff Ellen Holdorf, Katie Berlin, Michael Mazurek, our A-V Department, Carl, Amber, and Ryan. And I want to thank Carolyn Bess, Tracy Bays in Public Programs, and Elizabeth Fie[?], our new Friends of Modern and Contemporary Art coordinator for organizing this special evening.

I'm going to give you a couple—there is an upcoming educational program that's going to be very fascinating and really worthwhile for you to come.

[00:02:05]

On March 7<sup>th</sup>, Dr. Salomon Grimberg will speak on Anri Sala's *Nocturnes*, looking at it in a psychological approach. And there is someone else I want to sincerely thank. I want to say how much I appreciate the opportunity to know and work with Anri. His videos, films and photographs have this amazing, refreshing simplicity and openness that belie a very rich complexity of ideas and issues, issues and ideas such as memory, history, and identity. Also, his very seemingly straightforward,

spare works also belie a highly advanced, intelligent, and intuitive eye for images of haunting beauty and poetic power.

Anri was born on Tirana, Albania. He studied painting at the National Academy of Art in Tirana, film and video at the National School of Decorative Arts in Paris, and the Les Fresnoy, National Studio of Contemporary Arts. He has received numerous film awards at many film festivals, including ones held in Portugal, Spain, France, and the U.S. Other prestigious awards include Best Young Artist at the 2001 Venice Biennale. He just made the short list for the Hugo Boss Prize, which is awarded every other year by the Guggenheim Museum to an artist whose work represents a significant development in contemporary art. And he will be the French representative for the São Paulo Bienal. He had has had solo exhibitions in Paris, London, and Amsterdam, and his work has been included in several important international group exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale and the Yokohama Triennale in Yokohama, Japan. Please, let's give an Anri a big welcome.

[00:04:00]

Anri Sala: First of all, thank you very much for being here tonight. Thank you Suzanne and I really thank everybody, especially for the installation. I'm very happy with it, so big thanks for everybody.

I'll try to—I'll start to talk and to show a few images which are images from the videos. I have to say that for me, it's always easy when people have seen a few of the works before because then they can ask questions, and then it becomes very interesting for me. Sometimes I don't know where to start, but this time I'll try to start myself and then we'll see.

Okay, most of the works—I mean most of the images I'm going to show, they follow a chronological order besides this image which is the first photograph I worked on which, as you might see, it's not me who did it because I'm in the picture. It's an old film I found where all my family is inside besides my mother who is taking the picture, and this is called *The Gift*.

I'd been doing painting and installations when I was in Albania, the Academy of Fine Arts, and after I arrived in Paris. And one of my first videos was *Intervista* which—I don't know if it's important that I explain the story or if people have already seen it. Okay.

[00:06:08]

*Intervista*, I didn't—actually, I didn't know that I was doing a film when I was shooting for *Intervista*. It didn't have any title and I realized that I did a film when I had to write the credits after and I had to find a title and to thank everybody who helped me with it. It started with—I'd lived in Paris for two years and I was back in Albania in my parents' house and they moved to a new apartment. And there, I found in a corner all the things that I had to decide what to keep and what to throw away because they moved to a smaller apartment.

I found this film which was not at all mine. A 16 mm film, which by chance happened to be in these boxes and I know how to explain it, it's because whatever they thought, like something about film or colors or whatever, pencils, they thought it was Anri's, so I found this in these couple of boxes. I went with it in Paris because I wanted to see what was inside. So inside I saw her, which is my mother. At the moment when I found the film, I didn't know how old she was. For sure she was nearer to my age at the moment when I found the film than to the age that she is now. So this was a point which was very intriguing for me, but what really made me go for it was there was no sound in the film. Like at that moment, they shot the images and registered the sound separately.

So I went back to Albania and wanted to find out what she said at that time. I have to say that I knew it would be something political because at that time, it's not a family[?] film. It's not a family[?] [inaudible]. It was something, a 16 mm film which was shot from the state television.

[00:08:14]

I knew what you would say for the state television camera at the time if you were interviewed, and I also knew what my mother was doing before and where she was employed, what was her CV before.

I'm not going to speak so long about this film. The stories that I had to—I asked her what she was saying at that moment. It was very difficult for her to remember it, so after asking other people who might help me, I finally understood that there was nothing to do. I couldn't find the sound. So then I went for the words.

I went to the deaf-mute children's school and I worked with some of the older students of the school. And finally, we could read the lips and we found out what my mother was saying at that time, which was somehow the key to go on with this wish I had and to ask her more questions about how things were going on now and what changed in her point of view

and what changed in her ideals, what changed in her life, which was quite an experience for me. And it's also something which still concerns me about these sudden interruptions, sudden changes in the life of everybody at that time because of the political changes and because of how it is in this part of the world. The way how it is in Albania is that we are all very politically concerned. We still cannot forget about it.

[00:10:00]

So the film is a little bit about her ideas, the importance of the people's revolutionary movement with the backing of Marxist-Leninist party and so on, and it continues like this, and this is the end of the film. Maybe I might come back not to the film, to the story, but there are a few issues in the film that I've always been interested in and I'm still concerned by them.

So the film I did later is called *Nocturnes*, which is also here in the show. And it's a story of two people who do not know each other with whom I spent lots of time when I was living during a certain moment in north of France. So the guy—you can't really see here—but the guy here is the guy who lives with fishes and with more than 2,000 fishes in fish tanks in his house. And the other guy is a younger guy who is younger than me. We became friends. He was a soldier in the Balkans in Bosnia, a soldier with a kind of special status because he was part of the Blue Helmets but at the same time, he had different—he had also special missions because he was not a part of it the whole time.

He had to also clean the places around the Blue Helmets, the places around the refugees' camp from the snipers, so this was his secret missions. He had a real experience there and he was—he had to kill people and he had to do this mission. And when he came back to France, then it was a big problem for him. I think one of the things which was not in the film but I'll always remember is that he told me that's one of the things that shocks you when you come back, is that you have to put your jeans on because you are used with the military dress and you are used only with military talking and you do not talk about anything else, just about the things of everyday life there.

[00:12:25]

So when you come and you have to put your jeans on and you have to talk about how your wife is, did you see the last movie, then it really makes a big difference in your life.

So these are moments from the film where he tells me about his experience. He had problems when he came back. He had lots of nightmares. He couldn't sleep because he would sleep and he would go through these nightmares, so he was trying not to sleep and for the most part, most of the time during the night, he would play PlayStation games which were quite near—I mean, kind of quite near to what's—we who don't know how it is in those places. It looks like war.

Okay, this is *Byrek* which is a video installation. It's not only video, there is a slide projector with a text with the story I'm telling; and there is this film, this video, that's projected on a sheet of paper where I printed a letter that I received from my grandmother where she was. I don't know why in a certain moment she sent me this letter where she was asking me how I was going and if everything was alright, if I was eating well and so on.

[00:14:08]

So she sent me a recipe, the recipe of byrek which you see in the image. It's a kind of traditional dish. So she sent me this recipe but it's very difficult to make this dish, I've never tried it but I wanted to film it. My grandmother, she can't do it anymore because she's too old and she cannot even eat it anymore because it hurts her mouth, but I found an Albanian woman who was living in Brussels, so I went and I asked her to do the byrek and she was doing it exactly as my grandmother used to do it.

So I filmed her during the time she was doing byrek and what you see in the film at the moment is the byrek getting developed, like, getting done and there is a window where light is coming from. And from this window, every five or six minutes you'll see a plane. I'd realize that the plane was passing by because first, I would hear the noise the plane was doing. I think it's—I mean, I wanted to do this because of this recipe of my grandmother, but I also—I think it's all about the byrek and the planes going by. Here, the image is the contrary of the letter because it's not—these are not the hands of my grandmother. These are the hands of this Albanian woman who is not anymore at the place where the dish comes from but who continues to make this dish in another place, which in this case was Brussels.

[00:15:58]

This is the text—this is the letter of my grandmother. This is another photograph called *Let's Entertain*. This is another series of photographs

called *Two, Three, Four*. Then comes another video which is called *Missing Landscape*. And in this site, which is in a remote part of Albania in between the mountains, there was this village where I went to work on another project which finally I didn't finish. Being there during several weeks, I was very often in this football kind of field where kids were playing. And I found the kids playing football but what I was interested in was not in the ball, it was not in the action of the game, but it was mainly to see the goal keepers because they were the ones to be in between the game and also out of the game. When the ball was on the other side, they would be like—at my point of view, they would be also with the surroundings, with the mountains and with this kind of completely—I mean, they would be conscious about that thing which is different from where I live or from Tirana or from the other places I've been living.

It's called the *Missing Landscape* because when you see this part and you see the other part, there are lots of moments when they are scoring great goals or where they are not scoring them, but the ball is going away and it's falling in the cliff around, so they are going to look after the ball and they are coming back with a ball.

[00:18:04]

There are only mountains around and everything which you imagine should be around like the places where they live, like the village and the adults and so on, is supposed to be in the cliff where the ball disappears. I think there are—I mean, the most important part of why I was interested in this video, I'll keep it a little bit for later. I would come back later to all of the videos because I think there a kind of interconnection between them.

This is another photograph which is called *We Have Other Problems Here* and I was interested in this functional situation where you have two guys with a ball. At my point of view, the ball is something—when you are alone, you can have a ball. But when you have a ball and there is some other person, then you all play with the same one. And I was interested in this image because each of them have this ball and they have this kind of similar position.

I was also—in an exhibition I had in Chantal Crousel Gallery in Paris, it was in the same place with the video, with the *Missing Landscape*, and I was interested in this continuation, different continuation of the horizontal line.

Here comes another video which is called *Promises*, which might be nearer to your context. I found a text about Al Capone and he was—at different times, another Italian family at that time tried to kill him. It was called the Aiello family and they tried to kill him paying his cook and paying people to go and kill him, and they put a bounty of \$50,000.00 at that time. At a certain moment, Al Capone which had to live and sleep in the same room with his bodyguard, he said to his then top bodyguard that, “Nobody puts a price on my head and lives.”

[00:20:10]

I was very interested in this sentence, “Nobody puts a price on my head and lives” and also because I’m not an English speaker, so I had this thing between “lives” and “leaves,” like “Nobody puts a price on my head and lives” and “Nobody puts a price on my head and leaves,” which in the context where I’m interested in and the context that I’m coming from like from Albania, it’s something which remains still the same. Like when you have to leave, if you want to live, you have to leave or vice versa.

So I asked four friends of mine, which are my best friends there to tell it to me, to speak it, to say it. And each of them says it in a different way, and I wanted to know because the reality there is quite hard. But at the same time, it’s not so different from other places. These people, they are working with video and they are making entertainment. So they are in the middle of the reality, of the street reality there and of their studios where they worked with the images and so on.

So because I’m not there very often and I try to keep myself updated, I wanted to see where these friends are, in between the street reality, the Albanian one and the studio reality and the cinema reality. So each of them said it in a different way. He was the last one and at a certain moment, he couldn’t say it. I don’t like so much to kind of play the video of myself now because it’s always about the silence and why he cannot say it and what he’s saying when he cannot say the words.

[00:22:04]

And for me, it’s all about this dilemma between being part of the thing, part of the street, part of the reality, and also depending on different people, trying to remain—someone who tries to remain himself.

So this is another series of photographs which follows the video. It’s called *Casa Zoo* and I worked them in the zoo in Tirana. So the pavilion of the zoo, the only one remaining is here. It’s like a 360-degree corridor.

Outside, there is this partly urban and partly rural situation, lots of dogs laying. And inside there are cages where there are only ten animals, which is a mixture of let's say Albanian animals and the exotic ones because until the '90s we had only the Albanian ones and after the opening of the society and we want it all, we wanted also the lion. The lion came in and the tiger came in. At a certain point, it follows. It's like a parallel of the development of the place there, of the situation there. And in '97—which I have to explain—in '97 there was a breakdown again of the society in Albania because of this pyramidal system. Lots of people lost their money and it was a very hard moment. At that moment, nobody was looking anymore after the zoo.

[00:24:05]

So most of the animals died or got killed or were stolen, so the remaining ones were like seven or eight animals, which is a mixture of—like I said, a mixture of the Albanian and the exotic ones.

What I was interested in was not shooting the animals but what I'm interested in is filming in a very slow way the corridor, which is like a vacuum situation between the animals outside and the animals inside. I was very interested in the sound. And also, when you see this 360-degree corridor, you can see Tirana. You can see the city which you couldn't see before, but it's just developed and it's coming nearer and nearer, kind of like eating, like eating some ground from the zoo, and the same thing is happening with the village. It's taking part of the zoo. So what before was a kind of like a national park, now it's only this pavilion with the animals in.

As I told before, this is more or less a narrative talk about the works. I think here comes the easier and the most interesting part for me. If you have any questions, then I think it would be more interesting.

[00:26:00]

[Applause]

Thank you very much.

Audience Member 1: Earlier, you mentioned that you decided to give up music, playing violin, and went into the visual arts. I find it interesting that you decided to put music away, sound away, and then you come across this film and what you tried to do is recapture sound once again. You left the music in a state of somewhat discomfort because your teacher was too stern and



you didn't want to have anything to do with it. So can you correlate going back and seeking sound once again?

Anri Sala: I think I failed in seeking the sound. I just succeeded in finding the words. I think I failed in seeking for the sounds where I kind of—

Audience Member 1: But you were looking for it?

AS: Yeah and I failed.

Audience Member 1: How come? Why?

AS: Why I failed?

Audience Member 1: Why did you look for the sound once again when you have rejected it at some point?

AS: No, this is because it relates to the work, to the video, to *Intervista* at that point. And I think it took us a few months to work on it but I think it was like an accumulation of ten years, of big changes through ten years which were changes which do not only happen in the society or in my country, but they happened in every single family and in everybody's thoughts.

[00:28:02]

So at that point, it's not—for me, it was not—of course, I was looking for the sound, meaning that I was looking for the words. But when it was impossible to find the sound, then I really wanted to have the language, like the words. And something we're talking about, the words, something which might be interesting about this dead language, it's about a language which was related to an ideology. And with the end of this ideology, at that moment the language changed as well. And from my personal experience, which was an interesting one, was that when I went to that deaf-mute children's school, for me, it was impossible to read the lips because I really tried to do it myself.

When I worked with them, it took some time. It wasn't easy but it was still—they were advancing quite quickly. And the only things that they couldn't find out, the only words were the words which I knew, the words that when I saw my mother's image talking the first time, these were the only words which I found out, which were "Marxism-Leninism" and "working class struggle." And this is because it was, for me, it was something which we used to hear and we used to see people talk every

day. But for the deaf-mute children, because they were like closed and they were not like a real part of the society, but also because they were younger and they were coming after.

The story for them, it was like unknown words. They knew every single word but they didn't know what these words meant. So this, we can develop, why these words mean nothing to those persons. This is all about what happened. This is all about the story and this is all about what's the big problem, the rupture which happened to everybody's life depending of course on everybody's age.

[00:30:11]

Like for me, it was not that difficult because I was still young. But for other people who are like 40 or 50 or 60, this was a big deal they had to—the big thing they had to deal with.

Audience Member 1: At some point you said you were afraid of politics and I was wondering what you associated politics with?

AS: It's very easy. Politics at that time was very easy to associate with. It's what you had in the television; it's what you had in the radio and what you had in the newspaper. And the easy thing about it is because there was only one television channel, one radio channel, and one newspaper. So it was like being in a room with three walls and that was politics, and it was all about the ideals and it was about this perspective of building the new world and with the new people with new mentality, the workers' words, and this was the politics.

But at the same time—I mean, it sounds fantastic and it still sounds fantastic in the words but at the same time, being in the family or being with people, you could realize that something was wrong because you could realize from people talking in a kind of hidden way. I can't remember if it was conscious or unconscious, but I realized that you could be afraid of politics as well.

There was this moment in the film when my mother was saying, telling me, "Do you remember this poem you wrote when were nine years old?" This is the poem. I can't reproduce it. I don't know it by heart but it's saying that I'm afraid of politics and if people would ask me questions, I would just shut my mouth, and it continues like this.

[00:32:08]

Of course, very early you become conscious about the role that politics has in someone's life. I mean, everywhere has their role but in Albania it was very present.

Audience Member 1: Did you have a visual and how is the image linked to your intuitive, to your fear or was it just [inaudible]?

AS: No, I don't—no, I don't remember. I can't say there's any visual image related to it.

Audience Member 2: What made you switch from painting to film?

AS: It happened—maybe I could explain it like this. It happened when lots of things changed around and it happened like—I somehow lost interest in painting and in drawing at that time. It was after the changes in Albania and probably it's because lots of things were going on, lots of information was coming in and lots of things were happening. And I probably didn't find myself capable of taking it and giving it a single image. And I think this is the conscious part, I can—otherwise, it was also because I liked—once I found the camera, once I was in Paris where technically it was much easier for me to work, then I also liked to work with the camera. I started to love editing and so on. But at a certain moment, the first interest I think it was because I couldn't work it out through a single image probably, through painting or drawing.

[00:34:10]

Suzanne Weaver: Anri, what did it do to you to work with something so highly personal? Like in *Intervista*, to go through what you did with your mother and how she revealed things, and even in *Nocturnes*, that's very intense emotionally and psychologically. What did it do to you as a person and an artist to go through those experiences?

AS: I think in both cases, but especially in the case of *Intervista*, I was—I got interested to it first of all because I—what made it possible for me to work with *Intervista* and to work through it in a very personal way was because I wasn't anymore in Albania. And I think that if I was still in Albania, then probably I'd not make the film. Not just because of fear or whatever, partly maybe because of it, partly because people are still very sensitive to these issues, but partly because I'd be fed up with this same story of the past.

I mean, still, people, they are not interested in working or in dealing with these topics. So what made it possible for me was this certain distance I

could have to it being somewhere else. I don't know the answer. I just know that when I can work about something, when I get interested in it, it's something where I'm engaged personally, not engaged personally in the sense of producing a work of art but engaged personally in the experience itself without—before it becomes a work or a project of art or a project of film or whatever.

[00:36:07]

And also, I think in the case of *Nocturnes*, it looks like a completely different story, I mean far from my story but it became mine because I used to spend lots of time with these people and the reason why I spent lots of time with these people is because I recognized certain feelings they had and I recognized a lot of the reality were they lived in, especially in the case of the soldier. Even the landscape he was describing me was very near to the one I know. And in the case of the man with the fishes, I recognize his solitude, his being alone or being different in a given context or in a given society or neighborhood.

Suzanne Weaver: Well, I have another question. Your films are actually shown in film festivals and then now, you're in the context, too, of museums. How do you see the audiences or what happens when you change that kind of context?

AS: Well, you cannot—it can also happen that in a cinema hall you have the right audience but it can also—and much more often, it happens the other way around. Maybe I don't know how clear it would be for me to explain it and how clear it would be to say it out in English, but it's something about keeping the things open. So in most of my works, in the image, when I make photography or when I make a film, I'm interested in the part which is not obvious.

[00:38:15]

I'm interested in the part which is very personal but which is not obvious and which is not fully explained. Or for example when I'm making an image of a place, I'm interested in the open possibilities, of its continuation, not to the work of art but what would it become, what this image, what this specific site will become in a few years or in a few days. So I'm very interested in keeping this thing open and probably, it's something completely idiot(ph) with what I'm saying but probably, it's just related to the fact that in the cinema, you have to close the things. It's very rare that you can keep these things open. And I think in this

other context which I'm not going to name as a museum or a gallery, but this other opportunity, what I like is that I can still keep it open.

Audience Member 1: In *Nocturnes*, why did you choose the man with the fish or the soldier versus for example a house painter or a mother?

AS: Because it was—it's a mixture because this was my own experience. These are the two persons I've spent lots of time with. And of course, it could be two different films, but what was I interested in was not just telling their separate stories but I was interested because in my everyday life when I was talking with them, it made sense to me the fact that they were—I mean, they still don't know each other but it was like a triangle.

[00:40:03]

It made sense to me what one said and what the other said and the way they—all this mixed in my mind. And then, it was not obvious at all in the beginning, I was even afraid when I started to work with it, it wasn't that easy because I worked with someone who was editing, so I had to explain and it was very difficult to get something which after becomes coherent as you put it, like what makes you put a fish, a man with fishes and a soldier inside.

But I think they have completed different lives but they lived in different places for a long moment but they have very common situations like being rejected or not being accepted or being isolated in their own neighborhood. So this was—so this and also the fact that, as I told it, in my personal experience when I got to know them and to know them very well and talk to them, it started to make sense. And in a certain moment, I would talk with them things which would go on, would continue in this idea of it makes sense to work out something with it, to work out something with this experience of talking to these two different persons. And because they're—as I told you, their experiences and their stories, they look very different but they are there and they witnessed a similar situation.

Audience Member 1: Are you like them?

AS: Not in a direct thing but quite—very often when I first came to France, then quite a lot when I went to the north now, to the north in this city, and it's very often when I go back to my country.

[00:42:18]

Suzanne Weaver: I was going to find out how long the films are playing tonight. I don't know. If there are not anymore questions, the films are playing until 8:30, so if you want to go down if you have no more questions. Well, thank you.

Anri Sala: Thank you.

[Applause]

Duration: 00:43:19

Audio file: AnriSala\_01.mp3