

Lawrence Abu Hamdan with Will Fenstermaker

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There's a point about halfway through *After SFX* (2018) where Lawrence Abu Hamdan pauses his performance—he's just relayed the story of Lebanese President Émile Lahoud's security tackling a cameraman after mistaking the sound of a tripod for the sound of a pistol—and a low, screeching hum, like a buzzing bee or a car burning out in the distance, fills the auditorium. Abu Hamdan is particularly interested in these inchoate moments where what we hear becomes dislodged from a physical event. From where I sat in the back of the auditorium, I couldn't see the source of the sound—it was purely auditory—and it took several minutes of peering through the crowd to make out someone playing several commonplace objects arrayed as a bric-a-brac drumset. You'd think at this point that the acoustics would lock into place—that my mind would file them away as the sounds of a felt hammer rattling gently on a car door or a sliding metal grate for when such a case arises that I might need to know them—but that kind of easy cognition was made unavailable to me. For the next few minutes, everything I heard seemed completely untethered, every sound entirely disconnected from some identifiable source. Later, when I tried again to process them, they retained their autonomy.

The effect lingered like an afterglow as Abu Hamdan returned to the mic and resumed his recitation. He described the sound of popping lice between your fingernails—the loudest sound experienced by the inmates of Saydnaya prison, a human slaughterhouse near Damascus, Syria, where detainees are subjected to a brutal regime of silence. He described the sound of a metal lock in *Game of Thrones*, which triggered an auditory flashback to interviewing the prisoners, who estimated the size of the penitentiary by memorizing the unique sound print of each cell door. He described the sound of bread falling to the floor, which could only be satisfactorily reproduced by simulating the reverb of Notre-Dame de Paris, leading the artist to conclude that he wasn't measuring the intensity of sound but rather "the intensity of hunger."

Abu Hamdan often describes his role as a "private ear." In its simplest meaning, it refers to his dual practice: Growing out of his beginnings in Forensic Architecture, the Turner Prize-winning artist conducts acoustic analysis for human-rights investigations, such as Amnesty International's report on Saydnaya. This work often informs his art practice, where he explores different modes of listening, and vice versa. Occasionally writers confuse the two

pillars, critiquing one on the criteria of the other, but they are both distinct and related; many of the artist's projects are connected and he often returns to investigations years later when he feels he's gained the ability to hear something new.

He accessions objects that appear in recorded testimonies into his *Earwitness Inventory* (a word he pronounces *invent-ory*, evoking an acoustic laboratory), which is something of the kernel of his artistic practice. Like all archives, it encodes the attitudes of its curator. In your mind's ear, conjure the two-part sound of a car door slamming. In Abu Hamdan's work, such a simple sound—perfectly engineered and calibrated—presents an opening to ask what else we might be capable of experiencing if we can learn to listen differently.

Will Fenstermaker (Rail): You've just published *Live Audio Essays* with Primary Information, which collects the transcripts from seven performances, including the three you're conducting at MoMA—*After SFX*, *Air Pressure* (2021), *Natq* (2019)—as well as *Walled Unwalled* (2018), which is on display concurrent with their exhibition *Signals: How Video Transformed the World*. It's helpful to be able to read the texts because the material you deal with is quite heavy—torture, interrogation, civil war—and rich in significance. Of course, these essays were written to be recited, but do you think of yourself as a writer in any way?

Lawrence Abu Hamdan: To answer shortly, no. If I was a writer, I would have conceived these texts for the page, but it took other writers and editors, in particular James Hoff at Primary Information, to recognize that this collection of texts should make a book. People have asked to have the texts since I started performing these live essays, and I finally conceded. First, I was like, "James, we need all the stage directions in there and all the images." I had an issue divorcing them from the conditions in which they were designed to resound. James gave much more benefit of the doubt to the reader, and his insistence to just let the essays exist purely as text and let them become their own form was really great and transformative. It has added another life to these works. I am very proud of how the book came out.

Rail: What were you so reluctant to lose along with those acoustic and visual layers of the performances?

Abu Hamdan: When people asked to read them, I always assumed it was because the texts were too dense to follow out loud and people wanted to take their own time with them. But the density was intended. They're not something you're supposed to understand every step of the way; I call them essays because they drift and move, and they often hold contradictory positions. For example, *Air Pressure* is about trying to maintain both the spectacular and mundane nature of the violence—in fact, the ways in which these ideas turn on their heads. Or in *Natq*, it's about moving speedily between the academic production of history and another version of history that pulls the rug out from under those conventions. Or in *After*

SFX, I want to access the fragmentary and seemingly dissociated world of acoustic memory. Or in *Walled Unwalled*, I'm negotiating the wall as something impassable and solid and at the same time entirely futile.

That's all to say, I know how to make these leaps and contradictions with my voice in a room. I know how to hold the listener in confusion and when to release them from it. But a writer would know how to do that on the page alone. With James's help, I finally came to trust that these moves could happen in the mind's ear.

Rail: What you say about the mind's ear is important because the texts are still perceived and processed by an intelligence even if they don't attempt to present a cohesive argument. The principles of rhetoric derive from speech and listening.

Abu Hamdan: Exactly. I think these live audio essays are born to give voice and body to a text, and not only arguments or claims. The latter is what I do in my other written work, be it forensic reports or my PhD on the history and technologies of forensic audio analysis.

Rail: Was your PhD the beginning of your involvement with Forensic Architecture?

Abu Hamdan: Yes, I was part of the first cohort in 2009. We were all Eyal Weizman's PhD students at Goldsmiths University. Lorenzo Pezzani was working on the ocean and water, I was working on sound, and Paulo Tavares and Nabil Ahmed were working on environmental violence. Those initial years were very important in establishing the conceptual and political underpinnings for all the work I do to this day. I'm still deeply inspired by what we did and what Eyal has built. I'm now on the cusp of opening my own agency, Earshot, which will launch in September. It's going to be the first agency for sound and acoustic analysis dedicated to open-source investigators and the field of human rights.

The impetus to start my own agency emerged from the number of requests I've received from journalists and activists and nongovernmental organizations whose fight against state or corporate injustice hinges on audio analysis. Since I started doing my own forensic audio investigations in 2011, our cognizance about audio—what it can do for a story, what we can learn from it—has increased dramatically. When I first started, people looked at me like I was doing this super niche thing, and it frustrated me that sound was treated as some poor version of eyewitness testimony. Look at the Freddie Gray case. Freddie Gray was put into the back of a police van, and the question legally speaking was: Did he die inside the truck or was he already unconscious when they put him in there? The driver said he heard loud banging inside the vehicle, and he was asked no further questions about the nature of this banging. It's like someone saying, "I saw color," and leaving it at that. No one thought to ask, "Well, what color? How bright was it? Where was the color coming from?" I've seen this so

many times, and it's especially excruciating when the audio is key to unlocking important information. Working on that sort of thing consistently over the years means this is something I can now train other people to do.

Rail: How will the Earshot work relate to your artistic practice?

Abu Hamdan: The distinction is that I will never exhibit Earshot's work. That exists purely in the space of investigation or advocacy or journalism. What I am often tasked with in this work is to reconstruct the secret minutia of an event from an audio recording. Who shot first? How long did the thirteenth shot reverberate? What kind of repetitive pattern of electromagnetic interference is that? Is that the sound of a hydraulic door breacher? These are small but essential technical questions—a single jigsaw piece within a much larger puzzle that many different eyes and ears are trying to piece together. The urgent nature of these investigations leaves little space to ask larger structural questions, such as what these sounds mean within a broader politics of listening or how they allow us to otherwise perceive state violence.

We're clearly at a crisis of representation. The necessity of art, for me, is that it's a means to reflect on the investigative work and these longer questions drawn from the minutia. Art is a space where I can experiment with disseminating the voices I encounter in my research—and with the means by which those voices are represented, the means by which you hear them. I'm trying to induce conditions of listening that are not part of the conventional ways that we imbibe political content; I'm trying to understand listening in a much more complex and structural way. I'm often tasked with analyzing violent content at the threshold of human experience, but I believe a careful analysis of these extreme acoustic experiences teaches us how listening can operate more generally as a collective tool for political action.

Rail: The boundaries of what we can consider evidence are codified by law, and testimony is only a representation of a fuller experience. So while your investigative work operates in the former category, your artistic practice extends into the latter. Weizman said this about your work: "Typologies of violence produce typologies of witnessing." I think that's very apt to *Earwitness Inventory*, which collects objects that appear in acoustic testimonies. Through it we can start to develop a way of truly comprehending the nature of the violence that witnesses have experienced.

Abu Hamdan: What I've been trying to do with *Earwitness Inventory* is catalog the ways that memory and sound work in relation to one another. One of the things I've found is that sound effects are key—almost everyone's earwitness descriptions revolve around devising sound effects that produce sonic images in the mind's ear.

Rail: Right, in *After SFX* you quote a witness to Bobby Kennedy's assassination describing the gunshot as "somebody dropping a rack of trays." And *Walled Unwalled*, too, ends with the sound of someone being beaten with a plastic pipe, which a detainee says, "feels like

someone is demolishing a wall.” The sounds are always morphing and moving, speaking to something else like a kind of synapse.

Abu Hamdan: It’s more important than sounds morphing. Both of those examples begin with a negation. Alistair Cooke said, “It didn’t at all sound like gunshots”; Salam said, “It doesn’t sound like something hitting a body.” They are not negating the fact of the event—they know what they heard—but the sound itself is somehow in excess of the event, in excess of the simple process of deducing and analyzing what happened based on that sound. Something much less straightforward than “what happened” was heard in that event. This excess of evidence would not fit easily into a human-rights report, yet in my library it can sit comfortably alongside objects, like a cricket bat or a Dell keyboard, that appear much more concretely within forensic reenactments. That’s to say, *Earwitness Inventory* is both a sound-effects library specifically designed to solicit earwitness testimony for legal and advocacy cases as well as a repository for acoustic experience and the manifold ways in which we commit sound to memory.

You know, with the Saydnaya prison case, it wasn’t immediately clear to me that what I was listening to was significant. It took me years to really *hear* these former detainees. But eventually they taught me to listen, and the performances are a way to accelerate that process for an audience and disseminate some of what I’ve learned. The *After SFX* performance is a set of aesthetic strategies that allow you to unlock a channel of audibility that wasn’t there before.

Rail: In the middle of it is a kind of concert played on a car door and a sliding metal grate. It really opens up this mundane object, which seems to shed a singular meaning. From where I was sitting, I couldn’t see the instrument at first and didn’t realize what I was hearing. Even once I saw the object, I was looking at it and listening and thinking, “What is that *really*?”

Abu Hamdan: Doors are extremely important in earwitness investigations because they punctuate an event—in many legal cases they function as the nexus around which other noises orbit. That’s why so much of the performance is dedicated to a lexicon of locks. I knew that I wanted to build these instruments that could produce many different lock and door noises. They’re quite bizarre looking—they’re clearly objects designed for sound rather than vision, which immediately signals where the work sits in the order of the senses. Though these objects are designed for acoustic reenactment, I wanted Eli Keszler to play them as instruments—to bring in another sonic imagination, mostly honed through the drum kit and percussion, and open these bizarre objects up to another world of potential noises and expand their auditory possibilities.

Rail: It’s almost like jazz.

Abu Hamdan: Yes, I love that while he's playing Eli gets surprised by the kind of sounds he's able to get out of them, sometimes by chance. You can witness that imagination at work. It's important to keep things improvised and to bend the objects' functions in order to hear what other sounds they could be capable of making—and what other kinds of memories they could be capable of retrieving or invoking. And I want this to be infectious for the audience; I hope that when people leave the performance there's a kind of acoustic recasting of all the objects that they are surrounded by—that the next time they open a door, they listen to all the peculiarities and idiosyncrasies that the door makes. Maybe they open and close it again and again, and then they forget why they were going into that room in the first place.

Rail: That was definitely the case; multiple people in the audience described that sort of reaction. I asked about writing because I wanted to get at exactly this kind of response—this shift in comprehension, which I think is related to how you conceive of testimony in your work. Testimony is a kind of proposition or even fiction, and the void between testimony and proof—which we call “evidence”—is filled by belief on the part of the listener. At the heart of that is a technical question: What does one have the *capacity* to hear or believe? So much of that is related to experience and understanding these acoustic phenomena as open and fluid. Therefore, the technical question of what or how one hears ultimately informs a more complicated question about what it's *possible* to comprehend.

The performances seem to be a way of attuning us to a certain richness of experience. You mentioned it took a long time to appreciate the significance of the testimony you gathered in 2016 from detainees in Saydnaya prison in Syria. How did your understanding of what they experienced evolve over the years?

Abu Hamdan: In *After SFX* I talk about researching CIA black sites in Bucharest because that was the first time I ever understood the relationship of earwitness testimony to incarceration. The sounds they heard from their cells were key to figuring out where the prisoners were taken. Did they hear Thai? Romanian? Moroccan or Jordanian dialects of Arabic? I also wanted to ground the work in an American context, to not imagine that this is happening under some brutal regime in a faraway land; rather my earwitness investigations are born out of an effort to uncover US imperial violence.

When I heard about the black sites in 2014, I was working with a Swedish radio theater in this world of foley and acoustic illusion. I thought, “This could actually be quite relevant to the production of situated testimony, where you need to place people in a specific space and reconstruct the sounds they witnessed.” Instead of using these foley techniques for fiction, you could try to re-create the real sounds someone heard as a way of uncovering what it was that they experienced. Then in 2016 the Saydnaya case came along. Amnesty International reached out to Forensic Architecture, and Eyal knew about my research into black sites. They knew about the prison but were trying to glean what was going on inside. Prisoners were blindfolded when they went in and they were rarely let out of their cells, so most of the investigation was dedicated to understanding their acoustic memories.

Rail: Did you know, at this point, that Saydnaya was based on a German Democratic Republic design for a kind of acoustic panopticon?

Abu Hamdan: I didn't know anything yet. We had some pre-testimony, so I understood how important sound was to the detainees' experiences. We set about in Turkey interviewing six former detainees. Most of what we uncovered was corroborated by defectors who testified in December the same year. For example, the detainees told me: "We know there are mass hangings because we heard people being loaded into a truck, we heard the truck leaving, and the truck came back too quickly for them to have been released." There was an off-site building, a white building, where the Syrian regime conducted mass hangings. The detainees memorized the names of everyone who was taken away. After they were released, they made some calls. No one was found.

What's remarkable about this is that they were listening to a gap in time. They were listening to silence. It's not the truck that's important, it's the slightly too brief gap between the truck going and coming back that was significant.

While interviewing the survivors, I, too, devoted much of my time to trying to hear the absence of sound. I was looking for different ways to measure the silence because I believed there was an argument to be made that this state of enforced silence was itself a crime. Prisoners at Saydnaya lived under an order of strict silence restricting their physical movements and suppressing their respiratory functions, forcing them to remain still, not to cough or clear their throats, not to stretch or exercise for fear of making any sound at all. Thousands who could not adhere to this brutal regime of silence did not survive. Together with the witnesses, I set about using tones, white noise, and reenacted whispers to measure the silence and the pressure it exerted. We're used to thinking about silence in isolation or solitary confinement, but in Saydnaya a cell has forty people. I was able to measure the level at which the detainees spoke to each other, and it was all within five decibels. Three decibels comprise the range at which you can hear a difference, so it's quite incredible that they were so consistent. When I reconstructed that speech, I found it would only extend twenty-six centimeters from your body. We can describe a cell as a 3-by-4-meter room, but when you can't make a sound that travels more than twenty-six centimeters, then the space of incarceration must be conceived entirely differently. The enforced silence was a way of constricting people even more than the architecture itself could.

These details were very alarming to Amnesty International. You can imagine what kind of stuff Amnesty investigators hear on a daily basis, but they'd never heard of silence being used as such a considered part of a torture process.

Rail: *Air Pressure* also deals with violence that's transmitted through an acoustic environment—in this case, the sky above Lebanon. It's perhaps one thing to comprehend this sort of manipulation within an enclosed, concrete prison, quite another to conceive of the sonic intimidation of an entire country.

Abu Hamdan: Yes, this work is about the Israeli jets and drones that roar and tear up the sky in Lebanon. The website I created is the first of its kind to aggregate and transcribe a comprehensive, searchable, interactive database; it makes the illegal Israeli aerial invasions of Lebanon visible in their totality. It's also the source material for the performance at MoMA.

When my team and I finally compiled the data for tens of thousands of overflights, we noticed a trend over the last fifteen years. January and February see fewer aircraft in the sky, usually between thirty and sixty, while the summer months can get as high as four hundred to six hundred. Interestingly, winter has lower atmospheric haze, which makes it ideal for aerial photography. You'd think that this would be when the Israeli Air Force gathers their images, but it's not. Each summer—when the air has three times the amount of water vapor, making it difficult to see what's happening on the ground—the Israeli Air Force intensifies operations by at least ten percent. During the summer months the sound of UAVs becomes more present. The density of the atmosphere means the higher frequencies are louder and travel farther. Just in time for tourist season, the jets and drones collude with the humidity to pierce deeper into the lives beneath them.

There was also an anomaly. In May 2021 there were only four fighter jets. You could feel it—suddenly there were no aircraft. It was quite chilling; the sky was suddenly, eerily silent. And yet, what we were seeing on our phones was the complete devastation of Gaza. We weren't hearing the vehicles because they were elsewhere, causing mass destruction. So this silence above us, like the silence of Saydnaya, wasn't a peaceful silence. In it, you could finally understand what those vehicles are capable of: 256 Palestinians killed, 1,900 injured, 72,000 displaced, 1,500 strikes, and 94 buildings and 461 housing and commercial units destroyed.

Rail: You collected recordings of 22,111 violations since 2007 following the July War. Why is it important to analyze the sum of these incursions, instead of any overflight on a case-by-case basis?

Abu Hamdan: *Air Pressure* allows us to speak of one long crime that happened over fifteen years. Before our research no one had a sense of the scale of these combined violations. When we launched the website airpressure.info, Martin Chulov, a journalist at *The Guardian*, told me: "The violation of the airspace is not news, but fifteen years of it is." If we focus on whether any single incursion is litigable according to some sovereign right, then we fail to describe the experience of violence. I'm not arguing for a state's right to air—the air doesn't belong to the Lebanese either—and my interest in this project is not about working within the confines of international law to define a criminal act. I'm trying to use the study of sound to expand the horizon of what a crime is—to show that through these acts the air itself has turned violent. As my friend Mhamad Safa says, through an acoustic perspective all acts of war are disproportionate. If we understand how sound propagates, then the idea of collateral damage must be exponentially expanded.

And yet, one of the most disturbing things about these mock raids is that we no longer pay much attention to them. On our website we've archived hundreds of open-sourced videos capturing these military soirées. Very rarely do you see planes in the sky; usually it's just someone holding up a camera to a rumble in the atmosphere. Meanwhile, in the background kids are playing, people are talking. Two contrasting types of attention are documented within a single video: one that's actively listening to this threat, trying to analyze the location and type of aircraft, and another that's completely ignoring it. For me, this is what makes the *Air Pressure* live essay distinct from the investigative work published online. In the live essay, I want to tell a story about living with these routine sounds that are unimaginable to most people. The point of the work, in some way, is that the familiarity of these violent acts is paradoxically the most exceptional thing about them.

Rail: This idea of a long, continuous crime is also central to *Natq*, a performance that's named after the Arabic word for "vocalization." Among Druze the word refers to the testimony of returned people. It's part of a series of projects following a man who was reincarnated after the Civil War. As such, the interval of silence is a protracted one, bridging war and peace, one life and the next.

Abu Hamdan: Bassel Abi Chahine is a relative who's gathering materials from the war. He's the reincarnation of a child soldier named Yousef Fouad al-Jawhary. The sectarian elite administering the warlord capitalism that controls Lebanon today expends all this effort to ensure there's no general cognizance of what happened in the past. They've hidden the location of mass graves so that the dead can't speak. They've made sure the war is not in textbooks so that future generations can't speak. But no one has effectively thought about someone who returns from the dead.

Rail: What has Bassel collected?

Abu Hamdan: Documents, photography, uniforms, flags, posters, and badges pertaining to the history of the People's Liberation Army and the Chouf War. I know from people who've dedicated their lives to researching the archives and photography of that era that they've never seen this stuff before. Bassel himself says that it was very hard for him to gain access to this information. If any bona fide historians were to show up in the region and ask for this kind of material, they would be told that nothing exists anymore, that it was all burned or destroyed. However, Bassel's reincarnation allows him access. His reincarnation and his research are inseparable. As a returned, fallen comrade, Bassel is treated differently by the community, which believes in reincarnation; after some explanation, he's been welcomed to see—and for the most part, archive—this material. What's so interesting about Bassel's project is that it challenges sectarianism from inside. It's actually using the sectarian logic, in some part, to break down the ways in which that community is held together and "protected" under the banner of certain historical myths and lies and ghost stories.

Rail: *Natq* ends by acknowledging three missing years between Yousef's death and the reincarnation of his soul in Bassel, which presents an opening to someone trying to discredit him. But litigating the validity of his testimony would mean opening "a channel of audibility for a new category of witness." What do we ultimately learn from his testimony?

Abu Hamdan: What we chart in Bassel's life, and in the transmigration of speech from the dead to the living, are not the crimes of war but rather the crimes of the amnesty—the amnesia that the Lebanese sectarian elite perpetuates. I see a seed of resistance in Bassel's research. Either we accept their conception of history as a series of breaks isolating each issue from the other—each culprit separated by some conveniently ascribed context—or we accept the history that Bassel's *natq* presents us with: a line of continuation, a collapse of time and events. Either the crimes of war and the crimes of peace are isolated incidents, or they are the very same crime through which the very same people who were responsible for the death of a child soldier at seventeen are those who have stolen the future of almost all the seventeen-year-olds growing up in Lebanon today.

Rail: What's particularly poignant is how you use the mundane question of the validity of what Bassel is saying—its admissibility as evidence—to shift this broader paradigm of listening and witnessing. This is central to your artistic project, and it provides an extra dimension to "private ear," a phrase you often use to describe your practice. I'm realizing that it refers to more than just investigation because what you uncover is more than just facts and information. You shade in the areas between what we choose to hear, what we're conditioned to hear, and what we're able to hear, within an environment where the very simple act of listening across divisions can be a very radical act. And in doing so you uncover a kind of *possibility*, ultimately a form of historical consciousness, contingent on presence and attunement.

Abu Hamdan: I find that a very articulate account. Indeed, it's more than investigating—I'm trying to remain attuned to what has often been incorrectly defined as "unwanted" or "meaningless" noise. That could be the *natq* of a reincarnated subject that society and conventional justice systems have determined to be irrational and illegitimate speech. Or it could be an unbroken pattern of arhythmic electromagnetic pulses and hisses that I've carefully extracted and measured from a swath of unedited tape recordings in effort to gather evidence for an anti-corruption organization. I make little to no distinction between these different practices of listening—my interest is simply our capacity to listen, which I try to expand with every voice and sound that I encounter.