Earwitness Theatre is a new commission by Beirut-based artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan, featuring three installations that explore the politics of listening and the hallucinatory world of the earwitness. Abu Hamdan describes himself as a "private ear," suggesting a connection between the work of a detective and the experience of listening. His research-based practice centers on true stories and investigations into crimes that are heard but never seen.

Earwitness Theatre is the result of Abu Hamdan’s earwitness research into the Syrian prison of Saydnaya, located just north of Damascus. In 2016 the artist was invited by Amnesty International and Forensic Architecture to conduct an architectural investigation of the prison, which has been designated by the government as inaccessible to outside agencies. Abu Hamdan interviewed former detainees, who were kept blindfolded or in darkness throughout their incarceration, developing an acute sensitivity to sound.

Artist’s Suggested Reading List

Lawrence Abu Hamdan provided the following list of books, essays, and a film to share insights into his art and ideas. In addition, you’ll find links to Amnesty International reports specific to Saydnaya Prison.


On a practical level, the process involved listening and capturing sounds, which would eventually contribute to the mapping of the prison, and to an accounting of the number of detainees and the inhumane treatment occurring within its walls. On an aesthetic level, earwitnessing is how Abu Hamdan can provide evidence of testimonies often considered irrelevant by media outlets and inadmissible within the court of law, which include experiences of darkness, silence, and hunger. The role of the artist is then to create a language through which we can hear evidence that is barely perceptible.

This exhibition addresses the urgency of human rights and advocacy, and the complexity of language and memory—where sounds are remembered as images, where objects have unexpected echoes, and where silence becomes its own language.

**Earwitness Inventory**

Informed by his investigation into the Syrian prison of Saydnaya, Abu Hamdan began researching legal cases to explore the role of acoustic memory. Through this process, Abu Hamdan encountered the ways in which memory—where sounds are remembered as images, and silence becomes its own language.

**Saydnaya (the missing 19db)**

More than 13,000 prisoners have been executed at Saydnaya since 2011, when the civil war broke out in Syria. **Saydnaya (the missing 19db)** makes evident the increase in violence within Saydnaya since the beginning of the 2011 revolution, when the prison was emptied of its previous political prisoners and replaced by protesters of the Assad regime. Abu Hamdan conducted earwitness interviews with former prisoners to unlock sonic memories and gain a scope of the prison complex and the violations committed inside.

**Saydnaya (the missing 19db)** oscillates between earwitness testimonies and reenacted whispers, punctuated by the artist’s analysis. Situated in a soundproof room, this work attempts to show how silence—the absence of sound rather than a sound heard—can be used as evidence. Speaking aloud within Saydnaya, for example, has resulted in punishment by death. For Abu Hamdan, a method for documenting the violence taking place was to measure the silence. To do this, the artist studied the forms and levels of whispering at which the detainees could speak and not be heard by guards. Abu Hamdan noticed a drop in the sound levels by 19 decibels—four times quieter than before the Syrian revolution. Without being able to access the site, this information allowed investigators to realize Saydnaya’s transformation from a prison into something much worse.

**Walled Unwalled**

Comprising a monologue, projected images, and a sound performance, **Walled Unwalled** examines a series of legal cases in which evidence was obtained through walls, doors, or floors. The video analyzes court trials in which sounds—either heard or felt at the threshold of perception—served as evidence. Such a case was that of South African athlete Oscar Pistorius, who was convicted of murdering his girlfriend through the use of audio forensics. The video also focuses on Abu Hamdan’s audio investigations of Saydnaya, specifically exploring the ways in which the prison walls were engineered so that the torture of one inmate was broadcast to fellow detainees by way of reverberation. In this work, Abu Hamdan reveals how solid structures are unable to prevent the flow of information or to maintain the barrier between private and public space. In focusing on the process of acoustic bleed, the video suggests that trauma and violence can cross spatial, temporal, and personal boundaries.