

Lawrence Abu Hamdan (b.1985, Jordan) is an artist and audio investigator based in Beirut, Lebanon, and a 2019 Turner Prize finalist for the exhibition *Earwitness Theatre*. His background as a touring musician led him to develop a deep interest in sound and its intersection with politics, which has become an integral part of his art practice. His audio investigations have been used as evidence at the UK Asylum and Immigration Tribunal, and as advocacy with Forensic Architecture for organizations such as Amnesty International and Defence for Children International. The artist received his PhD in 2017 from Goldsmiths College London and is the author of the artist book *[inaudible]: A Politics of Listening in 4 Acts*. Recent solo exhibitions include Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2018); Portikus, Frankfurt (2016); and Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (2014).

Earwitness Theatre is commissioned and produced by Chisenhale Gallery, London, in partnership with CAM, Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, and Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane. The exhibition is organized for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis by Wassan Al-Khudhairi, Chief Curator, with Misa Jeffereis, Assistant Curator.

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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.

Amnesty International. (2017) 'About Saydnaya' [online] © Amnesty International 2017. Available at: <https://saydnaya.amnesty.org/> [Last Accessed 2 August 2018].

Amnesty International. (2017) 'Human Slaughterhouse, Mass Hangings and Extermination at Saydnaya Prison, Syria' [online] © Amnesty International 2017. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE2454152017ENGLISH.PDF> [Last Accessed 2 August 2018].

Chisenhale Gallery. (2018) 'Chisenhale Interviews: Lawrence Abu Hamdan' [online]. Available at https://chisenhale.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Chisenhale-Interviews_Lawrence-Abu-Hamdan.pdf.

De Palma, B. (2011) *Blow Out* (1981). DVD: Criterion Collection. Hunt, N. R. (2008) 'An Acoustic Register, Tenacious Images, and Congolese Scenes of Rape and Repetition'. *Cultural Anthropology*, 23/2: 220–53.

Morris, R. C. (2008) 'The Miner's Ear'. *Transition*, 98: 96–115.

Moten, F. (2003) 'Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester's Scream'. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1–24.

Weizman, E. (2005) 'Violence at the threshold of detectability'. [online] E- flux. Available at: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/64/60861/violence-at-the-threshold-of-detectability/> [Last Accessed 2 August 2018].

Gallery Guide
Contemporary Art
Museum St. Louis

May 17–
August 18, 2019



Lawrence Abu Hamdan Earwitness Theatre



Earwitness Inventory, installation view, Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, January 27–April 28, 2019. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Kristien Daem.

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.



Audio Tour

Visit camstl.org/audio on a mobile device to hear directly from the artist and curator.



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Museum St. Louis
3750 Washington Blvd
St. Louis, MO 63108
314.535.4660

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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 lived events become tethered to everyday objects, and set about creating his own resource of sound effects and Foley objects—items used to reproduce everyday



Earwitness Inventory, 2018, detail, Chisenhale Gallery, London. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Andy Keate.

sounds in film and other media—that could be used for sonic re-enactments and as mnemonic devices for witnesses. *Earwitness Inventory* consists of ninety-two sourced objects and three custom-designed doors with multiple locks, each item relating to specific earwitness testimony. From one such account, an earwitness described a collapsing building sounding “like popcorn”—represented here with an actual popcorn maker. These objects were collected by the artist and have been sourced from past testimony. He intends to continue to make use of this inventory as a means to restore other earwitness memories for future investigations. The collection on view stands in for a language that we do not yet speak, a language of and between objects.

The installation includes an animated text listing the objects on display, and offers further insights into Abu Hamdan’s acoustic investigation of Saydnaya and aural testimonies from legal cases across the world. To create the piece, Abu Hamdan first recorded himself reading the text aloud. The recording was then played back through a speech-to-text algorithm, which animates the artist’s cadence—his voice is felt but not heard.

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, 2018, installation view, Bienale de Image Mouvement, Geneva. Courtesy Maureen Paley, London. Photo: Mathilda Olmi.

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 seep between the senses and cross spatial, temporal, and personal boundaries.



Earwitness Inventory, 2018, detail, Chisenhale Gallery, London. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Andy Keate.