

Ben Mauk, *Does Sound Deceive? The Forensic Art of Lawrence Abu Hamdan*, *Frieze*, 27 May 2018.

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Does Sound Deceive? The Forensic Art of Lawrence Abu Hamdan

The artist-investigator tunes his work to the undocumented, the surveilled, immigrants and prisoners; those fleeing the talons of the state

BY BEN MAUK

The barn owl tracks its prey acoustically and can hunt in total darkness. It's one of those facts to which we ascribe poetic as well as mythic permanence: not only Lillith and Athena but Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'large white owl that with eye is blind'. Yet, we arrived at this knowledge – by which I mean this scientific knowledge – only recently. In the 1970s, infrared photographs captured a barn owl flying through the pitch of a lightless research room and at the threshold of contact with a mouse. The resulting multiple exposures were revealing; the owl spreads its talons, lowers its heart-shaped head and closes its eyes, its body eerily imbricated with past and future selves like a host of white angels descending. The pictures are the work of neuroscientist Masakazu Konishi, whose experiments in darkened anechoic chambers established our knowledge of a fact long assumed: the owl does not need to see the mouse it hunts. 'The rustling noises of the prey contain all the information needed for the owl to locate it in space,'¹ he wrote.

Konishi also tested the barn owl's hearing against that of his undergraduate students, finding that, above 12 kilohertz, the human ear is more sensitive than the most sensitive bird's. Yet, no pair of ears can define a point in three dimensions. In this and many other respects, noise is demandingly vague. The owl makes its educated guess. We do the same, locating the origins of sounds by attending to the inequality between the sound waves each ear perceives. But there is guesswork. Any given inequality corresponds to not one but a family of points in space. We rely on an array of fallible assumptions, beliefs and prejudices – a kind of acoustic shorthand – to resolve this constellation of possible objects or speakers into a single, well-ordered reality.

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Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *Earshot*, 2016, installation view, Portikus, Frankfurt am Main. Courtesy: the artist and Portikus, Frankfurt am Main; photograph: Helena Schlichting

Lawrence Abu Hamdan is an artist-investigator of our acoustic shorthand. His video and audio installations trace a path from hearing's biological origins to the legal and technological appendages it has lately acquired: a century of aural mutations of which the owl dares not to dream. As a forensic audio analyst, who sometimes collaborates with the human-rights research agency Forensic Architecture, Abu Hamdan has become a Kanishi for the nation-state, a soothsayer whose work augurs the evolution of a new kind of hearing. He calls it 'forensic listening' and its subjects are manifold. A Palestinian in the UK pronounces the arabic word for 'tomato' as benadoora instead of bendoora; as a result, his application for asylum is rejected. A sheikh in Cairo risks official censure broadcasting a sermon on noise pollution from his mosque's loudspeaker. A political detainee maps the prison beyond his cell by the muffled sounds of interrogators beating unseen compatriots with a length of pipe. If we have learned anything from the age of for-profit surveillance and deep-state data, it is that, no matter who we are, someone out there is listening. But who exactly is listening and what is being listened for depends on our political selves. Abu Hamdan tunes his work to undocumented persons, surveilled citizens, immigrants and prisoners – to those scrambling beneath the talons of the state.

Two early projects, *The Freedom of Speech Itself* and *Conflicted Phonemes* (both 2012), used documentary video, infographics and sculpture to interrogate the accent-analysis techniques employed by private government contractors to vet the authenticity of asylum seekers' origin stories. These 'refugee detectives' began to appear in northern Europe in the early 2000s, ordering asylum seekers to speak into their recording machine, then hiring other immigrants to detect falsehoods inside their phonemes. The system is

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purest folly. as any linguist will tell you, accents are not stable markers of origin or identity. nor are consultants always familiar with the accents they have been hired to interpret. *Conflicted Phonemes* consists of a series of colourful infographics describing this capricious legal reckoning, using the cases of 12 Somali asylum seekers whose applications in the Netherlands were rejected because they failed to utter certain shibboleths. For the sound installation iteration of *The Freedom of Speech Itself* – shown at Kunsthal Extra City, Antwerp, in 2012 and HKW, Berlin, in 2014 – the artist used topographical foam sculptures: sound-absorbing mufflers that shaped the sonic atmosphere of the gallery. They are voices riven from language, the purest expression of the new politics of listening.

Elsewhere, Abu Hamdan homes in on ambient rustlings we are not meant to hear. *The Hummingbird Clock* (2016), a work combining sculpture and a website, takes as its medium the background hum of the UK's electrical grid, which is omnipresent and imperceptible. For more than a decade, London's Metropolitan Police has relied on the micro-variations in this hum to verify whether recorded conversations submitted as evidence in criminal investigations have been edited and to pinpoint the exact time of their occurrence, since every ten-second section of any recording made in the UK contains a buzzing fingerprint. Abu Hamdan democratizes this little-known method of surveillance by making it publicly available online, inviting anyone to submit videos for time-stamping. The website augments the sculptural component of the piece, which was commissioned for the 2016 Liverpool Biennial: a cluster of outdoor binoculars pointed at the clock on the Town Hall, across from the Queen Elizabeth II law courts.



Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *Saydnaya (Ray Traces)*, 2017, installation view, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2018. Courtesy: © the artist and Maureen Paley, London

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Abu Hamdan's activities take freely from the traditions of investigative journalism, human-rights campaigns and conceptual art. Yet, unlike the investigative work for which his colleagues at Forensic architecture are known, he is always moving towards an encounter that transcends the legal and extralegal injustices that form his raw material. His work begins in activism but ends elsewhere. In 2016, an Amnesty International team, which included Abu Hamdan, began interviewing prisoners who had been released from Saydnaya – a Syrian military prison north of Damascus. He has since produced a series of ambitious videos, installations, performances and texts based on the concept of 'acoustic leakage' at the prison, which remains an unknown entity to international observers. The prisoners at Saydnaya are blindfolded except when confined to their cells but have managed to reconstruct the prison's layout and its methods of subjugation through aural remembrance. 'We know the cell tile by tile, so well that we can walk in it even in the dark,' one earwitness, Salam Othman, told his interviewers. *Saydnaya (The Missing 19dB)*, an audio installation that depicts the increasing brutality and quietude that followed the start of the 2011 Syrian revolution, combines excerpts of interviews with flat tones representing sonic environments ranging from a freight train to the Chernobyl exclusion zone. The process mimics the 'echo profiling' witnesses used to reconstruct their imprisonment, inviting listeners to enter an imaginative space of limited knowledge. (The newest *Saydnaya* project will premiere at Chisenhale Gallery, London, in September.)

Projects like *The Hummingbird Clock* and *Saydnaya (The Missing 19dB)*, which was first shown at the Sharjah Biennial in 2017, suggest that hearing is both less and more than knowing. The ear's limitations create opportunities for dissimulation and control among those who regulate borders or mete out punishments. at the same time, the ear is often permitted to witness what the eye, whose power is recognized, cannot. Sounds are surplus. And in surplus there is ambiguity, the prerequisite of art.

In English, our language of comprehension suggests it may be easier to fool the uncritical eye than the ambiguous ear. Consider 'seeing things', a phrase that means its opposite: seeing what isn't there. But 'hearing things' suggests an acute and clandestine awareness, shared by spies, slaves and prisoners, who often hear things that contradict the reality in view. It is a subcurrent of knowledge, like the real – not rubber, as the Israeli army claimed – bullets that killed two unarmed Palestinian teenagers in 2014 during protests in the west bank: a fact first identified by Abu Hamdan using forensic audio analysis in a report for Defence for Children International. He has imagined this report as a fictional courtroom testimony in the film *Rubber Coated Steel* (2016), which takes place inside a shooting gallery where no shots are fired and no voices heard. In his 2016 exhibition 'Earshot' at Portikus, Frankfurt am Main, the film played alongside hanging photographic prints depicting the spectographs of gunshots: silent testimonies to violence that visitors were made to navigate.

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Amir Shakib Arslan Mosque, Moukhtara, Lebanon, 2016, interior view. Architecture and design: LE.FT architects (Macramé el Kadi and Ziad Jamaledine) in collaboration with Lawrence Abu Hamdan. Courtesy: the artist; photograph: Iwan Baan

Abu Hamdan's latest project is *Walled Unwalled* (2018), a film installation that will be on view at the Tanks, Tate Modern, London, this October. Presented as a projection onto (and through) a glass wall, the film shows Abu Hamdan behind the windows of an infamous cold war-era recording studio in former East Berlin. He speaks to the viewer about the permeability of walls, citing in the process the US Supreme court thermal imaging case *Kyllo v. United States* (2001), the murder trial of Oscar Pistorius and the survivors of Saydnaya prison. Although Abu Hamdan can seem most confident when working in an essayistic mode, recent film installations like *Rubber-Coated Steel* and *Walled Unwalled* show his growing mastery at synthesizing research and creation. The accumulation of walls, holes and speech in *Walled Unwalled* is polyphonic, even if Abu Hamdan's voice, set to increasingly ominous percussion, is the main one we hear.

There is a village of lost voices an hour south of Berlin, where Abu Hamdan lived recently as a guest of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). Wünsdorf was once home to the first mosque ever erected in Germany, part of a World War I prison complex known as the Half-Moon Camp that housed thousands of colonial prisoners from Comoros, India, Madagascar, Martinique, Morocco, Pakistan, Tunisia and a dozen other lands. The goal of the camp was part strategic, part scientific. military commanders hoped to convince prisoners to foment revolution at home. Academics planned to use the prison's unprecedentedly diverse population to map the speech, songs and physiognomies of every living culture.

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Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *Walled Unwalled*, 2018, installation view, Abraaj Group Art Prize, Art Dubai, 2018. Courtesy: the artist, Art Dubai and Maureen Paley, London; photograph: Photo Solutions

Wilhelm Doegen – an ethnologist born in the same year that Thomas Edison invented the phonograph – made recordings at Half-Moon Camp. He may have been the world's first visionary in the use of state power to extract information from the recorded human voice. With the Kaiser's approval, he founded the Royal Prussian Phonographic Commission and spent the duration of the war instructing prisoners to speak at length into his machine, an Odeon gramophone – in whose dark ingress I would locate the origin of all of Abu Hamdan's work. He recorded over 1,000 wax cylinders and 1,600 shellac discs of wartime biography, lament and song. After the Half-Moon Camp closed, the Nazis took its various ethnographic projects and applied them to their own ideological ends.

Today, Wünsdorf is an oddly shaped town surrounded by military relics from the last century: former barracks, bomb shelters and conspicuously empty fields of gravel and young weeds. During World War II, it was home to the command centres for two competing military intelligence organizations whose complexes were disguised as rural wattle-and-daub townships. Then it was a Soviet military base. Nothing at all remains of the Half-Moon Camp, not even the mosque, and the century-old recordings are sitting in the heavy metal cabinets of various German research institutions. I have heard some of them. Who owns those voices now? They are scattered and out of sight, like the magpies and house sparrows living in the woods nearby. Like the starling and the hooded crow. Like the owl, which, like Minerva's, flies at dusk.

¹ Masakazu Konishi, 'How the Owl Tracks Its Prey', in *American Scientist*, Vol. 61/4, July–August 1973, pp. 414–24

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Lawrence Abu Hamdan is an artist based in Beirut, Lebanon. Recent solo shows include: Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, USA (2018); Maureen Paley, London, UK (2017); and Portikus, Frankfurt, Germany (2016). Last year, his works were shown at the Sharjah Biennial, UAE, and the 8th Contour Biennale, Mechelen, Belgium. He is a recipient of the 2016 Nam June Paik Award and the 2018 Abraaj Group Art Prize. In September, he will have solo exhibitions at the Tanks, Tate Modern, and Chisenhale Gallery, both London, UK.

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Main image: Lawrence Abu Hamdan, The Recovered Manifesto of Wissam [Inaudible] (detail), 2017, installation view, mor charpentier, Paris, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and mor charpentier, Paris

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