

Kuennen, Joel, *Lawrence Abu Hamdan: Earwitness Theatre - Reconstructing Silence/The Torture of Silence*
brooklynrail.org, July 2017.

Lawrence Abu Hamdan: *Earwitness Theatre*

Reconstructing Silence/The Torture of Silence

by Joel Kuennen



Lawrence Abu Hamdan: *Earwitness Theatre*, installation view. Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, May 17-August 18, 2019. Photo: Izaiah Johnson.

We primacy vision: what we see, we take as truth. It may be cliché but clichés are colloquial truths, developed through relatable experiences that come to structure experience. When first drafting this review, I had begun: “Imagine a silence...” but what is an image of silence? How can we even conceive of an image of an absent sense? Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Turner Prize 2019 nominee and member of the research agency Forensic Architecture, is able to render, not an image, but the experience of silence in his solo exhibition *Earwitness Theater* at Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis. Comprised of three sections, Abu Hamdan’s exhibition lays out, methodically, how sound can be used to reconstruct the invisible and what crimes against humanity exist in these unmonitored places.

Saydnaya is a military intelligence prison north of the Syrian capital of Damascus. Since the Arab Spring spread to Syria in 2011, it has been used as the main detention facility to house revolutionaries or anyone suspected of being a revolutionary. The prison itself consists of three spokes radiating from a central axel in a modernized version of the panopticon. Amnesty International has estimated that the prison houses between 10,000 and 20,000 people and between 2011 and 2015, was the site of 5,000–13,000 extrajudicial executions. As one former guard said of the place, “Saydnaya is the end of life—the end of humanity.”¹

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The first section, *Earwitness Inventory* (2018), consists of dozens of Foley instruments placed on the gray concrete floor and on metal storage shelves—celery, eggs, Dell keyboard (circa 2006), bug zapper, metal ladder, etc.—objects used for recreating sounds on stage and in film. As a member of Forensic Architecture, Abu Hamdan is interested in using these objects as investigative tools, as mnemonic devices which can be employed to verify abuses of power, such as *Car Door Instrument* (2018)—an object used to mimic the sound of being in a trunk or van compartment. This object could be called upon to help the earwitness to Freddie Gray’s death, Donta Allen, identify the sounds he heard as Gray’s body was flung against the walls of a Baltimore PD paddy wagon.

This forensic approach to sound was used by Abu Hamdan to assist Amnesty International in producing their report on Saydnaya.² The artist took part in interviewing former detainees, guards and officials, trying to recreate the smallest of sounds that were present in order to not only reconstruct events such as the mass hangings that took place under the cover of night but what objects were used to beat the prisoners and, ultimately, the interior of the prison itself.

Saydnaya (the missing 19db) (2017) is a sound installation in a dark, acoustically dampened room. It begins with a series of test tones, each decibel lower than the last—a Boeing 737 one minute before landing, a highway at 10 a.m. in New York State, frogs croaking throughout the Amazon Rainforest in 2010, the Chernobyl exclusion zone—until finally, a tone below the threshold of my hearing—Saydnaya, the Syrian regime prison. What follows are interviews with former detainees who tell of the extreme torture and acoustic deprivation of this place. Prisoners were beaten if they made a sound; if a prisoner screamed the fury of the beating only increased. As a result of this enforced



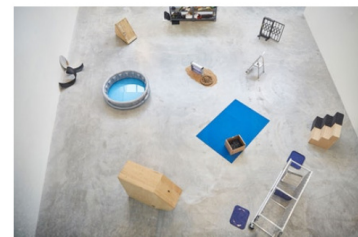
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silence, prisoners became acutely aware of the slightest sound in hopes of avoiding the sadism of the guards who were known to use rape, beatings, and starvation to enforce their control over the political prisoners. In the audio that follows, the artist puts it this way: “Constant fear of an impending attack makes every footstep sound like a car crash.” Abu Hamdan asserts, rightly, that this silence was a torture in and of itself. The artist asked survivors to match a test tone to the level at which they could speak in the prison. What he found was a 19 db difference between those who were imprisoned after the Arab Spring and those who were imprisoned before. This is the difference between a military jet flying 1000 feet over your head and the sound of a blender. The severity of an already renowned prison had increased. 19 db of fear, of rape, of murder, the crimes against humanity perpetrated by Assad’s regime visible like an aural watermark.

A single-channel video work, *Walled/Unwalled*, closes the exhibition. A presentation expertly delivered from a modular sound-stage, Abu Hamdan flexes his narrative muscles, telling a series of gripping vignettes about the lines, imaginary and real, that divide the phenomenological realms. The first is about Danny Lee Kylo, a weed grower in Florence Oregon who was arrested when police officers inspected his house with a military-grade thermal camera which visualizes electromagnetic radiation. Kylo fought the charges for ten years before arriving at the Supreme Court where it was decided that a right to privacy existed not only on a visible level, but on a molecular one—barring the use of technologically-enhanced vision in determining probable cause and thereby setting Kylo free.



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Abu Hamdan’s work seeks to expose the invisible, by showing the permeability of the solid. While his cool, forensic demeanor might suggest a lack of empathy for the horrors he discusses, the truth he amplifies is clarion. As our ability to detect the imperceptible and hide the visible become ever more competent in an unceasing arms race for the real, we must enforce a common set of human rights to protect us from the invasion of militarism into civic life.