

## **Art Museums and Audibility: Invisible Action and Acoustic Reporting in Lawrence Abu Hamdan's Earwitness Theatre (2018)**

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Lawrence Abu Hamdan's audio installation Saydnaya (the missing 19db) (2017) addresses a very specific representational problem. The project of the artwork is to visualize an inaccessible site, a prison 30km from Damascus and framed for listeners as a place wherein detainees are held in near total darkness and a regime of enforced silence. The subject of the installation is thus doubly invisible: access is extremely restricted and the institution remains unseen even by those who have entered it. The artist's approach is therefore premised on accounts from those who have been within but not seen this place. The reports are based not on visual perceptions but on actions overheard in the immediate proximity of the location described. Since pictorial depiction is impossible, verbal images are assembled by the artist and proposed as a means by which to make legible disappeared sites, sounds and bodies. In its artistic rendering, a signified space that is beyond public vision is correspondingly not portrayed visually but reported in speech. While Amnesty International and Forensic Architecture, who commissioned the earwitness interviews, direct these verbal testimonies towards visual reconstruction, Abu Hamdan's investigation is sonic.<sup>1</sup> The politics of the artwork is not about visible representation, and its contested relationships to freedom and power, but alternative modes of visibility constructed in words and sound. Distinctive to the piece also is its self-proclamation as acoustic proof: of the layout of a self-concealing, carceral institution and the acts that have taken place therein. The artist's affiliation with Amnesty International and the research group Forensic Architecture highlights the multiple theatres across which Saydnaya (the missing 19db) resonates (gallery, public opinion, legal courtroom) and the ways in which memory and post-traumatic reporting are crucial to affective processes of justice. There is a doubleness, then, not only inherent to the invisibility of the subject of the installation – it is both unenterable and blacked out – but also to the ways in which Abu Hamdan's practice is represented simultaneously as evidence and as art.

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<sup>1</sup> Forensic Architecture constructed three-dimensional architectural models based on acoustic testimonies. These models are visible at <https://saydnaya.amnesty.org/>

[[figure1]]

Figure 1. Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *Earwitness Inventory* (2018). Commissioned and produced by Chisenhale Gallery, London in partnership with: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam; Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis; and Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane. Courtesy of the artist and Maureen Paley, London. Photo: Andy Keate.

### **Verbal Images and Reported Action**

Layering testimony, translation and the explication of a creative process directed towards the collection and installation of acoustic reports, *Saydnaya (the missing 19db)* was presented at the Chisenhale Gallery in London from 21 September to 9 December 2018. This audio work was displayed alongside an assortment of everyday sound-making objects grouped together under the title *Earwitness Inventory* (2018) (fig. 1). Together, these installations comprise Abu Hamdan's Turner Prize-nominated exhibition *Earwitness Theatre*. The inclusion of this practice on a shortlist for 'one of the best-known prizes for visual arts in the world' indicates a critical recognition of artists working in aural registers by an establishment historically premised on visuality (Turner Contemporary, 2019). The increasing number of sound and text-based installations on display in national and commercial galleries demonstrates a growing interest in verbal art. In the immediate context of Forensic Architecture's nomination in 2018, all of the 2019 Turner Prize nominees engage, in different ways, with sound and voice, with Helen Cammock, in particular, also working with acts of testimony and ventriloquism. *Earwitness Theatre* is thus associable with a cultural shift from visual to verbal images emerging across contemporary art and performance practices. There is, of course, a larger political and historical context surrounding the place negotiated by Abu Hamdan's installation. The encounter with the artwork, however, happens in the gallery and this essay presents a critique focused on the installation's key aesthetic strategies and the politics of its display within the framework of an exhibition setting.<sup>2</sup>

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While representation in the visual arts most often makes reference to images and forms identifiably derived from life, *Saydnaya (the missing 19db)* draws on verbal artistic strategies to render an unrecognisable and unencounterable place. If visual representation has in the past been too easily conflated with political efficacy then, as performance theorist Peggy Phelan suggests, 'by seeing the blind spot within the visible real we might see a way to redesign the representational real' (1997: 3). Phelan's words resonate with recent articulations of 'blindness gain,' and the broader cultural value of blind experiences of art and environment, within critical disability studies (Thompson and Warne, 2018). Through attending to that which is heard but not seen – to a location not only outside visual rendering but also premised on near inaudibility – Abu Hamdan's sonic arguments propose ways to imagine alternative forms of evidence constructed in creative practice and modes of art making with other kinds of representational value. I have written recently about contemporary live events presented in gallery contexts that employ the rhetorical technique of 'reported action' as an innovative curatorial strategy (Guy: 2017). Disclosing specific events and locations through speech rather than enacting their scenes and settings visually, these performance-based examples replace figurative objects (props, costumes and scenery, as well as gestures) with spoken accounts of phenomena otherwise unstageable in art world environments. Since descriptions of events are simpler to stage in practical terms, verbal acts of reporting make performance more amenable to galleries and also creatively extend what it is possible for art museums to contain.

Reported action is always concerned with logistics, with who and what can be performed and represented. If this theatrical device allows practitioners to interrupt the conventional supremacy of the visual in arts institutions, then Abu Hamdan's installation stages an additional level of anti-establishment challenge. *Saydnaya (the missing 19db)* uses verbal images not only to draw an expanded range of events and environments into the art museum and enable their representation logistically, but also to facilitate the cognitive visualization of the site depicted, which is otherwise invisible. The task of the artwork is the exposure of a covert and coercive institution well beyond the immediate frames of cultural and political reference available to gallery visitors. Focusing on a place of imprisonment premised on strictly regulated conditions of silence, Abu Hamdan's project draws expression out of invisibility and

vocal suppression in order to make evident the implications of unseen violence. The narrative conveyed within the installation contends that, since ‘the prison is still in operation, and access is completely denied, the only way to measure the silence of Saydnaya is through the memories of its former detainees.’ In this context, reported action becomes integral not only to the form in which the artwork is presented but also to the processes by which it is researched and made. *Saydnaya (the missing 19db)* raises questions about the levels of aural attention that might be demanded in order to distinguish hidden events and architectures in situations of violent detention. In this undertaking, acoustic reporting offers as a means by which to gain certain kinds of creative access to inaccessible situations and unimaginable experiences.

Beginning on the hour and repeating at fifteen-minute intervals throughout gallery opening times, *Saydnaya (the missing 19db)* is played in near total darkness and thus echoes in its aesthetic the deprivation of visual stimuli ascribed to the place it attempts to communicate. Sitting in the dark, visitors listen to aural evocations of a carceral site that is unseen by those whose accounts we hear and wherein everyday sounds, of trucks leaving and returning, for example, signify, the installation explains, disappearances of a different kind. Given the intricate and multiple layers of invisibility that circulate around this artwork and its subject, it is possible to conceive that *Saydnaya (the missing 19db)* might be the kind of project Phelan had in mind when she wrote that arts ‘institutions must invent an economy not based on preservation but one which is answerable to the consequences of disappearance’ – of spaces, bodies and visual modes of representation (1997: 165). Certainly, the idea of being ‘answerable’ becomes acute in relation to an artwork that positions itself as ‘sonic evidence’ (Chisenhale Gallery, 2018). Building on images that are created aurally, the work of visualizing the place that the installation seeks to report is ascribed not only to the artist, and those whose accounts the artwork assembles, but also to those who listen to these statements within the context of the gallery. The imperative on visitors to join in this act of acoustic witnessing situates those attending to the installation in a different relation to its subject than is the case with figurative depictions or performances centred solely on affect. *Saydnaya (the missing 19db)* is, of course, affective, and deeply so, but its aesthetic strategies and claims to an evidentiary status extend the expected terms of affective encounter.

## Silence, Testimony and Narrative

Aural representation is well suited to subject matters that have only ever been heard. If 'what one can see is in every way related to what one can say,' then what might be expressed in relation to the context negotiated by Abu Hamdan is, at least at first glance, extremely limited, politically and practically (Phelan, 1997: 2). In her writings on the *Political Possibility of Sound*, art theorist Salomé Voegelin engages with Abu Hamdan's 2013 audio essay and audio-visual installation *Language Gulf in the Shouting Valley* so as to 'listen out for and give words to a political condition made apparent in sound' (2018: 25). If this earlier work strives to articulate a particular cultural context through its engagement with interface and noise, then *Saydnaya (the missing 19db)* pushes towards audibility by focusing on silence. Building from previous works, which highlight controlling systems of audio surveillance and aural screening, including speech analysis, accent-testing and lie-detection (*The Freedom of Speech Itself* (2012) and *The Whole Truth* (2012), for example), and thereby question the effective possibility of the right to remain silent, *Earwitness Theatre* calls attention to the capacities of silence as a means of persecution and brutality. What is heard in the installation is a compilation of translated testimony and reports from Abu Hamdan that both describe his creative process and affirm its evidential legitimacy. The voice narrating the project, which, based on the use of the first person, sounds attributable to the artist, affirms that in order to picture the place approached by the installation it is vital to listen not only to what is reported in speech but also to the way silence is 'stored in the muscle memory' of the bodies we hear but do not see.

These figures are also doubly invisible, both in the site represented and in the space of representation afforded by the gallery. Nevertheless, their articulations are cited as measures of places and experiences that are brutally physical. A significant sonic argument articulated through *Saydnaya (the missing 19db)* concerns the volume differential foregrounded in the installation's title. The voiceover explains a process designed to identify the low levels at which interviewees could whisper to one another undetected within the confines of the reported location. The approach is based on aural recollections, with the artist playing audio test tones and asking, was it quieter than this? According to the narrator's description, a discrepancy emerges across the accounts, which tells of a 19db reduction in volume over time and corresponds with the institutional history of the site. The divergence, Abu Hamdan

submits, is a marker of increased violence. It is, he writes on a webpage that documents different iterations and installations of the audio work, 'testament to the transformation of Saydnaya from a prison to a death camp. In these 19db we can hear the disappearance of voice and the voice of the disappeared' (2017). In the context of the temporary listening room that houses the installation in the Chisenhale Gallery, this interpretation is communicated powerfully. The idea of measuring violence on an auditory scale sounds revelatory and convincing. The distinct logic of this approach, and the forceful rhetoric of its disclosure, imbues the artist's reasoning with apparent indisputability. As affected listeners, we are required to participate in envisioning the traumatic spaces and experiences verbalized through the installation, but not, it seems, to question the assertions made about what and who these spoken accounts represent, since they are framed throughout as evidence. It is this claim, however, that simultaneously exposes the artist's narrative to further interrogation.

The intense violence of the events described and the high stakes of Abu Hamdan's project make it difficult not to be compelled by the artist's proposition. In addition to the narrator, and a translator who speaks over the statements of those who testify, four principal contributors are named. As well as forming the basis for the arguments put forward within the installation, the accounts given by these figures, or at least a curated collection of translated extracts, are heard and elaborated within the soundscape of the artwork. In this way, these voices become akin to those of the messengers of ancient theatrical traditions, who arrive to speak about events they have witnessed elsewhere. Their speech, as it staged within *Saydnaya (the missing 19db)*, is entangled not only with the politics of translation but also the problematics of testimony and the context of both the installation and the gallery as aesthetic frames. In claiming his work both as evidence and as art, Abu Hamdan associates his practice with two sets of contradictory expectations that also attend acts of deposition and verbatim expression. Testimony is a mode, as Emma Cox defines in her writing on noncitizenship and asylum, wherein 'imperatives of truth and evidence contend with the inevitable processes of construction and mediation (connected to the fallibility of memory and the translative nature of representation)' (2015: 32). Acts of testimony rely on a seemingly direct relationship to truth, which is complicated not only by their status as both apparently unmediated and representational, but also by their re-performance, in this case, within the playback of Abu Hamdan's installation.

It is not clear from listening to *Saydnaya (the missing 19db)* whether the artwork replays attesting statements as they were voiced by those who bear sonic witness to the atrocities of the represented site, or whether, as seems more probable, these reports are re-performed by actors. The dramaturgy of the piece does not employ meta-theatrical techniques to directly acknowledge the decontextualizing effects of translation and aestheticization, though the consequences of the framing of these testimonies within a gallery-based installation are significant. This art world context, borrowing again from Cox, ‘compounds the representational problems already at stake in the act of testifying,’ involving it more explicitly in ‘aesthetic concerns’ and conventions of dramatic narrative (2015: 32-3). Such processes of selection and editing are appropriate to the installation’s display within the Chisenhale Gallery, wherein the number of earwitness accounts assembled by Abu Hamdan seems relatively large, both in relation to the length of the piece, which is 12 minutes in duration, and the inescapability of the articulated place. Labelling *Saydnaya (the missing 19db)* as part of a ‘series of articles of evidence,’ however, particularly when read in conjunction with Abu Hamdan’s association with Forensic Architecture and Amnesty International, exposes the artwork to a different sort of scrutiny (Abu Hamdan, 2017). Identifying the installation as equivalent to legally admissible proofs might make it matter – in a way that it does not when the project is identified as art – that Abu Hamdan’s narrative of *the missing 19db* is based on just one identification of a louder volume of whisper as compared with a further three. These claims to the status of legal authority raise questions about where the artwork holds as evidence.

[{figure2}]

Figure 2. Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *Earwitness Theatre* (2018). Installation view, Chisenhale Gallery, 2018. Commissioned and produced by Chisenhale Gallery, London in partnership with: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam; Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis; and Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane. Courtesy of the artist and Maureen Paley, London. Photo: Andy Keate.

## Visible Objects and Inaudible Sounds

Encountering *Saydnaya (the missing 19db)* in the gallery, visitors arrive with specific kinds of knowledge, which may differ to those attendant at explicitly legal and activist engagements. Here, the work undertaken by listeners in interpreting the installation signifies a distinctive kind of investigation, as compared with the artist's creative extension of 'forensic' process. In relation to a piece wherein, as Voegelin writes of Abu Hamdan's inspective approach more broadly, the 'represented remains largely inaccessible,' acoustic modes become not more reliable than visual representations but the only form available both to the artist and those whose experience the project attests (2018: 26). By asserting the significance of his art as evidence in the context of an exhibition environment – wherein alternative economies of truth operate – Abu Hamdan allies legal documentation with creative depiction in order to enable, what Voegelin calls, the 'inclusion of the invisible and the inaudible within the authority of the actual' (2018: 27). In physical appearance, the listening room that houses Abu Hamdan's audio work is a self-contained white cube with two narrow windows through which is visible a strange collection of objects (fig. 2): army boots, mobile phones, cauliflowers and bags of sand. Scattered around the gallery space, these materials make up a library of resources used by the artist as aural reference points for the sounds the installation seeks to express. In the Chisenhale, the objects illustrate not only the creative labour involved in assembling acoustic evidence but also the complex relationships between sound and material environment that construct both the testimonial accounts and Abu Hamdan's larger sonic arguments.

Titled *Earwitness Inventory*, this unexpected miscellany of things – paddling pools, unwound film reels, overturned metal catering trays and trolleys – is catalogued and accounted for by an animated text work that details how such objects might assist in audio investigations, drawing out examples from Abu Hamdan's work, as well as other legal cases internationally. The performative potential of these props is taken up by the artist in a live site-specific piece, titled *After SFX* (2018) and staged at Tate Modern, London on 4 October 2018. In the gallery, this text is telling in terms of both the affective and affected status of the sounds represented. An entry focusing on 'Khubz (Arabic bread),' for example, narrates how the sound of food arriving can be identified with an impossibly loud amplification because what is at stake here is not the 'intensity of sound, but, the intensity of hunger.' The sounds that the artist seeks



to recreate are inevitably shaped by the extremity of the conditions described. In order to enable listeners to tune in to the kind of silence the audio installation attempts to communicate, Abu Hamdan begins *Saydnaya (the missing 19db)* by playing a series of test tones that diminish to the low levels of sound reported. Each tone is described in terms of an equivalent and recognisable amplification. The comparisons drawn between the first (loud and startling) tone, and those that follow, gradually reducing in volume, range from aeroplanes, freight trains and other vehicles, to lobby music and intimate conversation. These everyday counterparts serve, Abu Hamdan writes in the text for *Earwitness Inventory*, to simulate acoustics or prompt an 'acoustic flashback,' and stand in place of illusionistic representations.

If the creative process of constructing *Saydnaya (the missing 19db)*, and the sonic reports on which it is based, involved 'trying to hear the absence of sound,' then, many of the accounts, Abu Hamdan explains in the projected text of his *Earwitness Inventory*, also describe what is heard in negative terms: "It didn't sound like a punch," or "It doesn't sound like something hitting a body." This is because, the rolling text of an entry titled 'Yellow Pages' continues, our experience of 'acoustic violence is completely convolved with the production of sound effects.' The title of this record is explained by the fact that the action of dropping a phone book is often used to create the noise of a blow in televisual and cinematic representation. The reality that violent acts might have an unexpected soundtrack, as compared with that to which we are accustomed by mediatized fictional encounters, results in a process whereby those who are interviewed 'describe the real sound in terms of alternate, imaginary sound effects of their own devising.' Metaphors are thus used to translate the overheard resonances of traumatic experiences into the terms of something more recognisable. The event of emerging from the darkness of the listening room and looking at the items assembled by the *Earwitness Inventory* is a nauseating one. Even before reading the text-based catalogue, it is clear what these objects – a watermelon, for example – are standing in for. In this way, their everyday functions, as fizzy drink bottles, carpet beaters and waste receptacles, disappear and are replaced with images of the sort of brutality to which their sounds equate. In the context of the exhibition, these objects work, like the sounds they recreate, to conjure modes of representation that avoid pictorial re-enactments of violence.

While those interviewed by Abu Hamdan in the process of making *Saydnaya (the missing 19db)* imagine alternative sources for the sounds they have overheard, those listening to the installation, and then encountering the objects that surround it, picture violent acts based on the verbal and acoustic images constructed. In the context of the gallery, the materials that make up the *Earwitness Inventory* remain silent and inactivated. Nevertheless, the noises signified by the objects shift how visitors encounter these things; the inferred sounds (and beyond that the acts to which they refer) alter what these articles make visible. At play, here, is a complex detaching and recoupling of sound and image. Within the audio installation, the narrator explains that it is necessary to ‘use sound to map the movements of the guards throughout the prison’ by paying attention to the minute variances that attend the use of different locks and hinges. This approach is extrapolated by the artist and applied as a means by which to render the broader architecture of the represented site. In this way, the distinctive noises of specific doors opening and closing might be employed, the text of *Earwitness Inventory* suggests, like a ‘sonar echolocation device’ and used to plot the layout of an inaccessible place. Under an entry titled ‘Aluminium Step Ladder,’ Abu Hamdan explains how he used relative accounts of a metallic staircase to ‘determine from what perspective and proximity’ other objects and events might have been heard. The artist’s use of the notion of ‘perspective’ here is telling. It connects his work to a legacy of visual representation concerned with the realistic depiction of the visible world on two-dimensional surfaces. In short, it references how auditory perspectives presented in *Saydnaya (the missing 19db)* illuminate a place wherein, borrowing phrasing used by the Chisenhale Gallery on a wall text introducing the work’s installation, ‘sounds are remembered as images.’

### **Theatre, Rhetoric and Inquiry**

Working between silence, darkness, disappearance and articulation, *Saydnaya (the missing 19db)* attempts to make unseen events perceptible for those who were not there. Giving attention to the inaudible – to that which, as Voegelin writes, ‘once sounded and still has consequences’ (2014: 174) – this audio installation speaks volubly about the communicative power of near indiscernible amplifications and the capacity of testimony to simultaneously pertain both to truth-telling and to acts of, in this case sonic, representation. Displayed in the gallery, Abu Hamdan’s exploratory project resituates the task of accumulating and presenting evidence as discursive or

live art. The specific representational problems that circulate in relation to the site negotiated by *Saydnaya (the missing 19db)* – its unenterability and invisibility – and the political exigencies that attend its depiction, however, compel Abu Hamdan to claim a significance for his work beyond the terms of artistic engagement and, further, to recuperate the rhetorical and theatrical as arenas for different kinds of inquiry. The invocation of the evidentiary works to emphasise connections between techniques of reported action emerging in contemporary performance practices and domains associated with investigation and accusation. Acts of acoustic reporting become not only about drawing an expanded range of subjects into the gallery, but also a means by which to look into spaces otherwise inaccessible. Reported action, in this iteration, describes not only the presentational format of the artwork but also the processes of its construction. In *Earwitness Theatre* the connotations of verbal images are likewise doubled. The sounds reported are pictured as images – by the artist in his act of acoustic mapping and by the visitors who hear the work – and the objects used to detail these accounts are read as sounds even as they stand silent in the gallery. In this way, visual referents take on new resonances in relation to their acoustic qualities, making way for representational forms assembled aurally and pressing on us as listeners to rethink the approaches by which invisible actions might be exhibited.

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