

CHISENHALE INTERVIEWS: LAWRENCE ABU HAMDAN

Earwitness Theatre

21 September – 09 December 2018

Ellen Greig: Your new commission, Earwitness Theatre, is a culmination of a large body of work that you have been developing for some time now. Perhaps we could start by discussing how you started working with earwitness as a form of testimony?

Lawrence Abu Hamdan: *Earwitness Theatre* was the name of a project I was trying to do on Swedish radio in 2014-15, but it never happened. I was really inspired by the way that earwitness testimony had been used to locate certain CIA black sites – a network of secret prisons used for the US extraterritorial rendition and torture programme post 9/11 – and I was particularly interested in the one in Bucharest. A guy called Crofton Black who worked for the human rights organisation, Reprieve, had told me about how earwitness testimony had been really useful for locating exactly where the Bucharest CIA black site was; revealing that the CIA was using sites in the European Union and proving that torturing and rendition was happening in Europe. The reason that earwitness testimony within this case is so important is that detainees of this black site were transported to the site blindfolded, so whatever they heard incidentally when travelling to the site was very significant.

I had the idea of using sound effect studios to work with earwitness' testimonies. At that point, I was particularly inspired by a Swedish radio theatre. In 2013, I was on a residency at Iaspis in Stockholm when I went to see a radio theatre. I saw all of the objects that are used for the sound effects: the strange stairs that lead nowhere that have multiple surfaces, all the different locks, different shoes... I realised you could build an entire acoustic world out of these instruments and objects, and perhaps you could use a sound effects studio to assist the memories of witnesses, not as a device that is intended for fiction, but as a strategy for recollecting and restoring sonic memories – and could therefore be used to gain some insight about the CIA black sites.

In 2014, the US Senate report was released, which admitted that the CIA had a network of secret prisons and where these black sites were. And suddenly my project didn't make sense anymore, and it was shelved.

Then, in January 2016, I was with Eyal Weizman of Forensic Architecture, and he asked me if a similar technique could be used for an investigation Forensic Architecture had just been invited to undertake. Amnesty International had approached Forensic Architecture and asked them to do an architectural investigation into the Syrian regime prison of Saydnaya. It is estimated that as many as 13,000 people have been executed in Saydnaya since 2011. The prison is inaccessible to independent observers and monitors, so the violations that take place at the prison are only recorded through the memory of those few who are released. The capacity for detainees to see anything in Saydnaya is highly restricted as they are mostly kept in darkness, blindfolded or made to cover their eyes. As a result, prisoners develop an acute sensitivity to sound. At that point, no one had really heard of Saydnaya outside of Syria, and we didn't know the extent of what we might learn. We knew a few things: we knew that sound is extremely important, because people were blindfolded there, and they never saw where they were. This project was not a case of locating the prison because we knew where it was, but it was a case of understanding what was happening inside, based on what the prisoners had heard.

That was in January 2016, and by April we were doing the interviews with six former detainees.

EG: Where did you do the interviews?

LAH: In Istanbul, Turkey because all the interviewees were refugees in Turkey or in the Turkish part of Cyprus and Amnesty International was working with them there. Interviewing those six people had such an impact on me, not just because of the content but also conceptually. Going into those

interviews and coming out again actually changed the way that I thought. You often find that in moments where experiences are pushed to the extreme, what you thought you knew or took for granted becomes twisted and another perspective emerges. These interviews changed the way I thought about architecture, they changed the way I thought about sound, they changed the way I thought about testimony, and about what the voice is, and what memories are, and how to approach them. They changed the way I thought about art.

In many ways, Amnesty International thought they were hiring an audio expert, to carry out a technical study but what they actually needed was an artist. Why? Because we had to actually work past language and to reconstitute language through form: be that through mouthing sounds; changing and adapting words to be onomatopoeic; re-enacting sounds; playing sounds from film; or listening to tones. Listening to tones and noises and click and pops, all of that became a kind of language that we began to speak with one another over those seven days with those witnesses.

Since then, more than two years later, I have finally come to the point where I have tried to articulate my reflections on that experience, and what I think deserves weight as much as what was given weight through the media outlets and through the way that the report and the interviews that we did circulated in the summer of 2016. If you want a comprehensive account of all that was revealed through those interviews it is all on Amnesty's website, this exhibition does not seek to tell the whole story of Saydnaya but act as a space in which key issues and concepts derived from this experience are explored in a way that are not possible in other forums.

EG: What do the reports generated by Amnesty International focus on?

LAH: We did the interviews and then those interviews were transcribed by Amnesty International and translated from Arabic to English. They then formed part of Amnesty International's huge 'Human Slaughterhouse' campaign. Forensic Architecture, with Amnesty International, then released a virtual 3D reconstruction of the prison, as well as a way that one can watch videos of the testimonies.

This became the most viewed Amnesty International report of 2016, their biggest campaign, based on the interviews that we did. It circulated in the news, and it wouldn't be an overstatement to say that it then started to have a geopolitical effect. At that point, of course, everyone was focused on ISIS as an evil entity and Assad looked like the lesser evil. Whereas when this information about Saydnaya came out, you could see while Daesh are making CGI videos and emphasising the violence they commit, on the other side Assad is doing it in the dark, blindfolded, and no one knows anything. At that point, the European Union and others were ready to go along with Assad, which to some extent they are likely to do again now – but at that point it was crucial in terms of changing the discourse about the regime status as a 'lesser evil' entity.

EG: How did you respond to, and work with, this experience and material?

LAH: Because of the impact that the report had and because of the series of reflections that it generated within me, it felt like it demanded another space and time, and another language to rearticulate some of those details. Not to reconstitute them encyclopedically like Amnesty International do, and not to cover all bases, but actually to focus on some key moments. I thought only art could do this because it was of another order of representation, it wasn't necessarily about evidence, although you could see these things as a kind of evidence, but it was about finding new strategies by which to turn memories into matter and to turn experience into evidence. Distortions in memory, whispers, these artifacts of negative evidence are inadmissible to the courts, but they are actually perfectly suited for the ways in which we experience and interpret art objects. The project in some way intends to mobilise and instrumentalise the use of abstraction in art, the power of non-representation, as well as being informed by the ways in which artists like Harun Farocki and Walid Raad have been dealing with questions of conflicted memories (and memories of conflict).

Even though the material was so heavy and so widely available at a certain point, on a global scale, I still felt as though there was all of this inadmissible information that could neither really enter the news and nor could it enter the law courts. So, where does the information that we don't have a language for go? It demands a certain kind of imagination from its audience. Essentially, we're talking about crimes that were experienced at the very threshold of the senses, when people don't really see or know things, when they're extremely hungry. All of these things – the darkness, silence, the hunger – start to turn testimony in on itself, and in the eyes of the law and in the eyes of the news it starts to become too strange and unmeasurable for these forums.

It seemed to me that it was really important to use the space and language of art as a way to deal with this stuff that had slipped through the cracks. And for me, personally, to reflect on the experiences I had during this project and to recollect the experience of making those interviews for Amnesty.

EG: The first work you made in response to your work on Saydnaya is the audio piece, Saydnaya (the missing 19db) (2017), which is presented in this exhibition in a contained listening room.

LAH: Yes. There are three major works that came out of this project: Saydnaya (the missing 19db) is the first one; there is Walled Unwalled (2018); and Earwitness Inventory (2018).

The first work, *Saydnaya (the missing 19db)* was made in 2017 and it was commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation. When I made this work towards the end of 2016 I was still extremely emotional about what I had heard and my relation to those individuals I had interviewed. This work also captures some of the rawness and shock I was still needing to express. It is about the ways in which I tried to measure the silence of the prison and how the absence of sound was as important as the sounds the witnesses heard. The politics of silence is something I have been really concerned with, and in my earlier work, *Rubber Coated Steel* (2016) you can also see this. I am interested in both the use of silence as a form of resistance to state violence and the power in expressing our right to remain silent, but also as a form of suppression, as a form of censorship; silence as a weapon of state violence. Negotiating the double bind of silence, between silence as resistance and silence as oppression, are very useful in terms of thinking through the politics of sound and audibility.

Saydnaya (the missing 19db) is an experiment in listening that asks: are we satisfied with saying that no forms of representation are adequate? Or can we make silence a form of representation in and of itself? And what does it mean when we listen and when we spend time with silence, with various forms of silence and silencing rather than on speaking for or representing subjects? This piece centres on those questions, it is about trying to understand the absence of sound as a kind of material that could generate some sort of understanding about the forms of violence and the kinds of experiences that those people are being subjected to. Again, not focusing on the beatings and all the horrendous things that were done to them that you can read about in the Amnesty International report, but actually focusing on the whisper as a vehicle that could contain a lot of what we need to know about the prison.

In *Saydnaya* you cannot speak, you cannot cough, you cannot even move, so silence became this extremely physical thing. It was a way to measure exactly how limited the space of incarceration was but in a totally different way. You could say, "I was in a room of three by four metres", but if you cannot speak or you cannot make a sound that reaches out of your body more than 26cm then the whole idea of the architecture of incarceration is transformed. So, it's also a way to think about how sound works in terms of creating space.

During the Amnesty sessions, I had asked the interviewees to first re-enact their whispers, and they were all over the place: some loud, some quiet, some here, some there. But then when I asked them to listen to a tone, which went from very loud and dropped to very low, they all identified almost exactly the same volume, all within five decibels of each other. It was quite amazing that when you shift from

the speaking voice of the subject to the way that they heard each other, then they were able to give this extremely precise reading of what that silence was.

EG: It was through them listening?

LAH: Yes, it was actually through them listening and that is why there is so much focus on tones, like you have in a hearing test, in the piece. The whole piece then became about measuring the difference in the level at which they could whisper before and after 2011 and so about how the prison transformed from a political prison, a prison that was more or less one of the better prisons in Syria, to essentially a kind of concentration camp. It was audible in whispers and in the absence of sound. The actual sound of their voice mattered, sometimes, more than what they were saying. There was this move between registers of listening whereby the same vehicle that gives testimony actually becomes a material trace of the violence itself. The voice carries in it a trace of the prison, of which we have no other trace. We only have the detainees' memories and their testimonies but in terms of the law you need to find substance, you need to find evidence, you need to find artefacts. For me, it was interesting that the voice became both these things. Moving between those registers of listening to the voice as language and as object was extremely important. It spoke more broadly to the whole process, what it was like to do these interviews and the different registers you were moving across, both verbal and non-verbal. That's what the work condenses for me.

We did the interviews in a room in Istanbul that was not the best conditions for audio focused work. All I had with me were digital sound effect libraries, which I had downloaded before I got there. So, I used the sound effects to solicit memories. They were part of this broader vocabulary that included re-enacted whispers and sounds, creating new words, hitting things, and playing tones. At times these sound effects from film and TV were successful, and at other times they just didn't work at all. I thought from that moment that it would be incredibly important to use physical objects in order to get the exact sounds that we needed, for example use an actual door and 'play it' like an instrument. It could have provoked new memories and other information and memories would have emerged if we had had the kinds of objects that I have since amassed, which are now on show at Chisenhale Gallery.

EG: You've titled this collection of objects, Earwitness Inventory (2018) and installed them around the listening room in the gallery. The piece includes 95 custom designed and sourced objects that relate to earwitness cases from all over the world.

LAH: So, the idea of this inventory is not only to make precise and scientific re-enactments of events witnessed, it's also about finding ways to make space for memories that are distorted, and how they have also become invested in objects. Sounds are heard as totally other things. For example, one interviewee described a JCB machine sounding like bread being broken constantly. Of course, it doesn't tell you anything about the way a JCB sounds but it tells you that the witnesses are extremely hungry. Sounds became confused with one another, and they became invested in food or other kinds of objects through that process.

Also, because the witnesses I was working with had never seen some of the weapons that were used in the prison, part of the way that they memorised the sounds was through thinking about how to recreate them. So, someone would say, "That sounds like the familiar noise of hitting a carpet in Damascus", or someone else would say, "You need to get a plastic bag filled with cotton and hit it with an iron bar". Sometimes the witnesses were very specific about how certain sounds should be reconstituted. The way that they did this was through these collections of weird acoustic debris in their minds, which involved strange objects that were sometimes built from their familiar surroundings, sometimes from the state of hunger, and sometimes from just thinking materially about how things sounded, and how you then end up with strange collaborations between objects. It was clear to me that the objects themselves were these vehicles into people's memories, particularly in this case, as they had never seen the actual sources of the sounds.

So, I started to do more research into earwitness testimony. I started to try to see how the work we'd done related to other cases of earwitness testimony, both more broadly across the world and in other projects that I have worked on. I noticed that there is always an interrelation between sound effects and experienced events; people describe sounds as eggs cracking or watermelons smashing. If you look at the news, it's just full of those types of descriptions: a bomb sounding like a thousand pianos dropping to the ground, for example. These are very strange ways of describing events. They have nothing to do with the actual event itself, in fact, often it's a negation of the event: it didn't sound like a punch, it didn't sound like a bomb, it didn't sound like gunshot (by which they mean not sound like it does in the movies or TV); instead it sounded like a rack of trays dropping to the ground or a lighter being thrown on the floor or a popcorn machine going off.

So, it seemed to me that these objects were not only useful as things that would be able to recreate sonic events and re-enact them, but they were also the way that the witnesses themselves had actually stored memories, and therefore the way that you could retrieve them. They are these very strange objects that are, sometimes, knowingly employed. You know it doesn't sound like that because you are working with the distortion in memory, like a metal door sounding like bread dropping to the ground or a JCB digger truck sounding like bread. Sometimes it's about working with the distortions in memory, and sometimes it's about thinking about which objects could actually reconstitute events and re-enact them in order to get closer to what actually happened.

EG: Within the inventory you have installed a projected animated text work directly onto the wall. The piece is a silent account of the objects in the inventory, and their accompanying narratives. Can you talk about this work?

LAH: *Earwitness Inventory* is the inventory of objects, but it is also a kind of database where those objects are listed, and that database includes the testimonies and narratives from which the objects are drawn. I have only included a selection of these stories because it is not essential to have each object narrated for what I want to say and do. Stories are embedded with certain objects: the coins are connected with the story of a teargas cannister in Israel; the popcorn maker leads to a sinkhole in Florida; the wagon wheel connects with a mine collapsing in south Africa; the punchbag is related to the wind and to hearing the first Belgian steam boat arriving in the Congo. It is a transhistorical collection of stories and objects, which speak to the broader concerns of the project and this question of sonic experience, conflicted memories and the acoustic debris stored in our minds ear.

EG: Some of the words are emphasised with a bolder font, other words are underlined and the pace of the unravelling text also shifts and changes. How did you construct the animation?

LAH: The list, the database, the inventory – whatever you want to call it – is played back through a speech-to-text algorithm using software designed by David Rienfurt. I wrote the script and the list and then I recorded myself reading it out aloud. The algorithm animated how I speak in terms of cadence, rhythm and emphasis. So, you feel a voice, but you don't hear it. I did not want any other audible voice outside of the listening room, because everything I wanted to say about the voice as an acoustic object is included in *Saydnaya (the missing 19db)*.

EG: This installation is about sound, but it is silent.

LAH: Yes, exactly. And, again, just like the objects, you don't hear them. They demand a kind of reconstitution in your own brain as a visitor about what that could sound like and what kind of memory it could solicit. Even the text work is a kind of silent/visual sound piece. I want to make sure that people understand that when you hear sound, you don't encode it only as sound. This is the major lesson I learnt from the Saydnaya investigation: hearing things meant making images in your mind; it meant remembering those images. It really is cross-sensory. It doesn't matter how that information went into the witness, pulling it out has to be cross-sensory.

Earwitness testimony is extremely common because most crimes are experienced as sound. They are not meant to be seen. Most of what you have in any given event is earwitness testimony. Yet, still there are no ways of soliciting it or of withdrawing it because, the language around sound is so basic and it parasites onto other adjectives and loses precision. So, we need to actually invent a language in which to speak and reconstitute earwitness testimony. But, also, this has to include the ways in which we experience sound, and I think a lot of the ways that we experience sound are convolved with cinema. A collective acoustic imagination has been shaped by the sounds from television and cinema to a certain extent and these bleed into the way we perceive 'real' sonic encounters. You have to then use cinema. It has to be a process where scientific re-enactment and cinematic theatrics become entangled together. The combination is actually really fascinating for me and thinking about what it means to encode sound into memory, and the role of audio culture within that.

EG: You are currently developing a performance work, After SFX (2018), which will be performed at Tate Modern on October 4, 2018. You have recorded each of the objects in the Chisenhale Gallery space to create a sonic data-base of the inventory. How will this material be used in the performance?

LAH: Although you don't hear the objects in the gallery, I have recorded them as sounds in the space and archived all of the sounds the objects make. They now comprise a digital sound effect library that I could play back if I didn't actually have the physical equipment to hand, although it is important to have the equipment should I do any earwitness testimony. The objects that are in the space at Chisenhale Gallery will be made audible through the performance at the Tate, in which I will move through this list, scored by the sounds of the objects that I recorded and by the testimonies from which they are derived. It is the sound version of the installation here at the gallery, but one in which you only hear, whereas in the installation you only see.

EG: As part of the installation Earwitness Inventory, you have also produced three door instruments. Shall we talk about the doors? Are they sculptures?

LAH: I don't think they're sculptures, I think they're instruments and mnemonic devices. They are the same door instruments you might find in foley studios, but the emphasis is more on the specific kinds of testimonies that I have heard, and what I think would be good objects to use in earwitness investigations.

They were designed to be a set of doors that could make the sound of many hundreds of doors. There are more locks on them, there are more instruments, they are more condensed. For film you don't really have to be that precise, you don't need to have 15 locks you could just have three or two or whatever. However, these doors should be able to make the sound of many multiple doors. Those are three instruments, designed and custom-made for this specific purpose, but very much informed by the kind of objects I have seen in foley theatres.

EG: While developing this work we have been speaking about thresholds. In the exhibition at Chisenhale Gallery there are doors within doors, and rooms within rooms. The idea of the threshold also relates to your film Walled Unwalled, which will also be shown at Tate Modern, and will be included in the presentation of Earwitness Theatre at the three other exhibition partner venues throughout 2019.

LAH: Yes, the last work in the series of the three works that we mentioned earlier is titled *Walled Unwalled*, it is a film that was shot in an old East German recording studio. It deals with earwitnessed events or witnessed events that happened through walls. It is a work that condenses a lot of what I learnt through this investigation into Saydnaya, in which I started to understand the function of walls very differently: their function to both block and isolate things, but also to leak, and how with sound sometimes walls define and blur boundaries between spaces.

It also became an allegory about the ways in which borders function nowadays in relation to technology. Of course, now we think we are more open than ever, but in fact the UK border has never been more violent, the UK border is getting worse. We are more shut than ever. The very fact of the internet being the connector that should break through walls, as all media pertains to do, to break through barriers – and it does in many ways – but exactly the same technology that allows open access is the same technology that is being used to surveil you. The same media that confines you is the same that exposes you. I was trying to capture what that is doing to the contemporary subject, I was trying to make a portrait of that, specifically, speaking from the perspective of an artist living in the Arab world. I am not sure I would have made that work in the same way had I been continuing to live in the UK, even though I have a British passport. On the other side of the Mediterranean, things are just much clearer. I can cross it fluidly but my daughter and many of my friends can't. That changed the entire way I think about borders, their violence being not just that they are shut, but actually in what they allow, in what they permit and what and how they hold back and filter. It is as a filter that they are violent, not as a solid thing that cannot be surpassed.

Interviewed by Ellen Greig, Curator: Commissions, Chisenhale Gallery, on Wednesday 12 September 2018 at Chisenhale Gallery, London. Chisenhale Interviews, series editor, Polly Staple, Director, Chisenhale Gallery.