

# THE COMMON GUILD

Visual arts: Projects / Events / Exhibitions

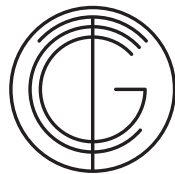


Photo by Alan Dimmick

## COMMENTARIES

# Lawrence Abu Hamdan 'Live Audio Essays'

June 2024



Is it possible for an artwork to address a political topic with such directness, such efficacy, that it ceases to be an artwork altogether? This is a question that the multifarious activities of Lawrence Abu Hamdan would appear to pose, crossing as they do the boundaries dividing social commentary, public advocacy and criminal investigation. The same information might be conveyed as a talk delivered to students at The Glasgow School of Art, elaborated upon a number of months later for a trio of performances mounted during the city's International Festival of Contemporary Art, or offered as sworn testimony in a court of law. What this suggests is that staging determines the value of that information, be it pedagogical, artistic or legal. If that is the case, it is not so much the information being communicated that is transforming, but rather the roles Abu Hamdan is electing to perform.

However we might categorise it, as an enterprise this work shares much in common with a tendency that has been dubbed elsewhere as 'evidentiary realism': artistic approaches that employ methods of analysis gleaned from journalism and documentary practice. Like older proponents Hans Haacke, Harun Farocki and Maria Eichhorn, Abu Hamdan constructs frameworks through which hidden connections can be established: mapping unanticipated relationships that more conventional approaches have failed to capture. What sets his practice apart from those of his antecedents is in where he locates this evidence. One recurring theme is the assertion that our bodies are organic storage devices in which sound physiologically persists. Trauma is a manifestation of this stored information, a form of embodied playback. The piercing roar of a jet or the popping noise of a gunshot remains present for a subject years afterwards, indelibly imprinted on their being. While it is a disconcerting prospect to consider how resolutely embedded these moments of stimulus are, it also means that they can be returned to after the fact and subjected to a forensic degree of analysis. Or perhaps just as critically, they can be accessed as subjects for creative extrapolation.

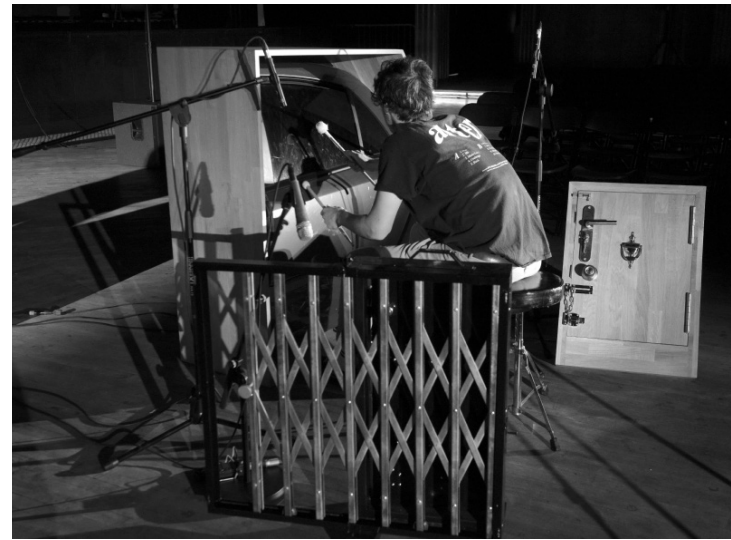
An underlying concept here is that we can construct sonic bridges between radically different times and places. In Abu Hamdan's eclectic textual collages, Western popular culture cuts euphemistically across acts of violence carried out in a variety of geographic and temporal contexts. The harrowing experiences of an inmate of Syria's infamous Saydnaya prison are triggered by Foley from the Warner Bros. cinematic archive in *After SFX*. The interval between the release of songs by Killing Joke and Nirvana serves as a metaphor in *A Thousand White Plastic Chairs* to explain the 8-year silence of translators charged with managing the testimony of war crime victims following WWII. The utility of these points of reference appears twofold. They act to situate different strands of research within a common, overarching matrix: an insidious, capitalist plasma in which all events are suspended. Additionally, they become tools for measuring the comfortable distance from which we ourselves routinely encounter the suffering of others. Frivolous examples of media spectacle take on a ghoulish quality, situated in close proximity to acts of cruelty. In this capacity, they act as a worthwhile reminder of the complacent, arguably complicit role we occupy in hegemonic systems maintaining geopolitical order as it currently stands.

Beyond the vivid scenes they open onto discrete times and places – Beirut 2020, Nuremberg 1946 – these performances suggest a phenomenological method that can be applied to other subjects. The potential to conjure past moments, to spatially model them using a mosaic of individual testimony, bureaucratic data and collectively pooled footage and audio, seems to exceed the reach of those narratives being presented. As an audience we are repeatedly enjoined to think beyond the information that is being relayed to us, and to focus instead on the negative space that exists between and around such documented utterances. In this way, Abu Hamdan's tactics might also allow us to imagine or even picture phenomena that have taken place in the structures that house *Live Audio Essays* in Glasgow. Attending a performance centred around aural mapping at the Barrowland Ballroom in June, I could not help but speculate as to the reverberations, long since dissipated, that might be recovered

from that storied piece of Glaswegian architecture.

Through these offerings, we are momentarily granted awareness of something not otherwise perceivable. The spaces we inhabit are all stage sets, continuously being occupied, vacated and repopulated. They are palimpsests of innumerable, as-yet unsorted interactions which will periodically coalesce as *loci* deemed worthy of remembering. What we often take for granted are the mechanics through which such acts of remembering occur, and who ultimately claims ownership of such knowledge. An enhanced awareness of what Abu Hamdan describes as 'the protocols of listening' would allow us to better understand those mechanics.

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Front and above:  
Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *After SFX*, 2018.  
Performed at the Barrowlands as part of Glasgow International 2024.  
Performers: Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Adam Laschinger, Iain Stewart.  
Photos: Alan Dimmick.