

The Lives of Sonified Images

Omar Kholeif

Lawrence Abu Hamdan, aka Private Ear, is an artist, researcher, author and investigator whose work comes to bear as audio documentaries and cinema as well as performance and installation. Private Ear is recognised for engaging subjects whose lived experiences and human rights have fallen within the interstices of official record or history. Spanning the civil and the criminal, the theological and the supernatural, Private Ear has notably expanded the possibilities of forensic analysis and visualisation, illuminating dissonances in language and speech, fostering a concerted engagement in the politics of listening.¹

Owing to his work, the act of listening has attracted the attention of organisations and groups from Amnesty International to Defence of Children International. The result of these collaborations facilitates spaces of becoming and renewal² for those divested of voice. The act of witnessing

¹ Fabian Schöneich (ed.) (2016) *Lawrence Abu Hamdan: [inaudible] A Politics of Listening in 4 Acts*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.

² Kevin Quashie's theory of 'becoming' refers to experiencing the 'othered' being 'as it is'; on its own terms, alive with its own referents and poetics. See: Kevin Quashie (2021) *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being*. London and Durham, NC: Duke University Press. When pouring over Quashie's work, one cannot help but also consider poet Kevin Young's concepts of 'storying'—sanctioned truths, only legitimate for code-switchers.

the voice—listening to images—visualisations rendered via different schema, or what we have come to understand as a 'sonified' image, is key. In these sonified images, one will locate the paradoxes of human affect and effect. The embodied outcomes that inhabit the body when experiencing violence—close-up, in perfect view, in ear shot—are a constant subject of study. In his visualisations, renderings and the performances that animate Private Ear's aesthetic politics, new forms of perception emerge. A picture splintered and shattered—an imprint that sediments in the body, keeping score, pieced back together.³ The body's sensorium forms a contingent border, holding latent trauma.

Private Ear's investigations in Lebanon are of particular note amongst the artist's opus.⁴ Lebanon, a country where scenes of violence, political or otherwise, manifest habitually and acutely is often referred to as the land of 'exceptions'—trite as that may sound.⁵ Whether one is invoking the Lebanese Civil War, and the conglomeration of tragedies that have followed suit, or the co-existence of beauty and luxury alongside streets of devastation—in the end, there is no real exception.

In continuous acts of coding and de-coding, Private Ear employs a key referent—Professor Ian Stevenson. The Canadian-American psychiatrist grasped Private Ear's attention with his volume, *Cases of the Reincarnation Type: Twelve Cases in Lebanon and Turkey* (Virginia University Press, 1999), which observes the Abu Hamdan family, unfolding their stories as exemplars in his argument for and of a suggestion of reincarnation—a subject that Private Ear has

³ The first book to systematically outline the effects of latent trauma in the body and the result of it—PTSD, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or C-PTSD was Dr Bessel van der Kolk in his now landmark book from 2014, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. New York: Viking Press.

⁴ Lawrence Abu Hamdan, aka Private Ear, was born in Amman to Lebanese and British parentage. Growing up, they split their life between Jordan and the UK, later living in Beirut. They currently live in Dubai.

⁵ Lebanon and Beirut specifically are often referred to as the land of 'exceptions.' See for example: Mona Fawaz (2016) 'Exceptions and the actually existing practice of planning: Beirut (Lebanon) as case study.' In *Urban Studies*. Vol. 54: 8.

sought to demystify from the realm of the esoteric. Stevenson was dubbed a peculiar character, a 'misunderstood genius', at the time of his death in 2007; others thought him the subject of witty anecdote.⁶ Some psychiatrists—the doctors operating in the hybrid space of subjective judgement and the interstices of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders—have conceded to Stevenson's methodological approach. The scholarly links between the perceptual and paranormal as well as his suggestive possibilities of reincarnation were deemed legitimate and worthy of serious consideration by a select group of peers.⁷

In his Dubai studio, Private Ear pulls out the late scientist's 'life work', a bible of more than 2,000 pages, *Reincarnation and Biology*, a travelogue of inter-disciplinary fieldwork that links phobia and philia; children's memory and behaviours to past lives; reincarnations of souls into assigned bodies.⁸ The subtitle of this tome, *A Contribution to the Etiology of Birthmarks and Birth Defects*, serves as stimulation for the large 'birthmarks' collated by Private Ear from Stevenson's travelogues that manifest across window panes in an enclosed courtyard of Sharjah's Al Mureijah Art Spaces. These aesthetic forms on vinyl are part of Private Ear's project, *For the Otherwise Unaccounted* (2019), and espouse what he argues could be Stevenson's assessment 'of how testimony is stored within the body.' The stories that accompany each birthmark serve as activating scripts to a set of absent individuals. These representative etchings, whose identities stretch from Turkey to Lebanon, epitomise the lives of persons subject to erasure.

⁶ Margalit Fox (2007) 'Ian Stevenson Dies at 88: Studies Claims of Past Lives'. *New York Times Obituary*. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/18/health/psychology/18stevenson.html>, accessed 16 February 2022.

⁷ Ian Stevenson's initial research garnered early interest within the psychiatric field, in particular, for his correlations of children's trauma with connected past lives. Following his extensive travels, critics such as Robert Baker, argued that Stevenson's analysis could be explained through conventional psychological methodology. Nevertheless, Stevenson maintained a small network of supporters who continue his legacy. One such figure is Professor Jim B. Tucker. See: Jim B. Tucker (2005), *Life Before Life: A Scientific Investigation of Children's Memories of Previous Lives*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

⁸ Ian Stevenson (1997) *Reincarnation and Biology: A Contribution to the Etiology of Birthmarks and Birth Defects Volumes I and II*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

Inside the white cube behind these inscriptions are eight screens of images that are overlaid with the guiding voice of our Private Ear. In this modular score, titled, *Shot Twice (By the Same Bullet)* (2021), he narrates a choreography of mind-body restitution through the lens of a single-subject, Bassel Abi Chahine. Private Ear enables us to sit inside the mind and imagination of Abi Chahine, a writer and historian who was the subject of the 2019 portrait, *Once Removed*.⁹ Through clear articulations of 'visions' and memory, Abi Chahine is firmly believed by his community in Chouf, Lebanon, to be the reincarnated soul of the soldier, Yousef Fouad Al Jawhary, who died in Aley, Lebanon in 1984 at age 16. Abi Chahine's obsessive self-study holds resemblances to Professor Stevenson's assertions that memory indexes reveal past lives. Distinctly, Abi Chahine, one becomes aware, has amassed military archives that are associated with divisive sectarian political groups—active remnants from the Lebanese Civil War. The intrigue for this viewer lies not purely in the specificity of the material, but in Abi Chahine's relentless determination for gathering, coding and identifying materials that demand the passing of knowledge from a former self—Yousef, transferred in mind and body, tele-connecting to the present.

Fear Stalks the Land

Private Ear takes a trip from Dubai to Lebanon. Having only recently uprooted from Beirut to move to the UAE, he makes note of the city's dissimilar aural landscape. It is lockdown. One induced by COVID-19. The pandemic has emptied the streets of its usual hubbub of squeaking horns from communal taxi cabs, which would traditionally corral pedestrians and jaywalkers into its seats. Metropolitan bodies, it is often argued, are conditioned, held unconsciously

hostage to the leaking auditory sensorium of sirens and car horns. But in this case, the setting of Beirut—a city brought to its knees by an unforeseen blast caused by explosives on the port of Beirut in the summer of 2020, the circumstances appeared as an acute oddity.

The artwork that anchors these white walls, *Air Conditioning* (2022), intends to shift the viewer's pupils from the ground to the sky; or rather, the eyes and ears to the din of warfare. Private Ear points a camera lens to the blue firmament above. *Daght Jawi* (air pressure in English) is all encompassing. Notice is made of omnidirectional sound, also discernible in trails of smoke, as aircraft descend closer to the ground. The search behind these traces leads one back to the July war of 2006 between Israel and Lebanon. A peace declaration is signed at this point with the enforcement of the United Nations. It is assumed that a war has concluded. But the hissing overhead extricates a new temporal order. The pressure in the sky sediments not in an iron lung, but in the tympanic membrane, also known as the human eardrum. The sonic stimulation, the unceasing experience of piercing frequencies of various intensities emerge to be caused by Israeli air surveillance—it signals another act of warfare.

Our investigator begins a process of tracking these overhead sounds over a 15-year period—from 2006 to 2021. His data is collated from hundreds of Israeli flight records found in online UN documents and archives. This sonic violence, it appears, is initially made manifest by F-35s, the Lockheed Martin, single-person military jet, evolving to Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) and drones, among other typologies. Before you is a war of accumulating effects. As much as it is sonic warfare, it is an act intended to invoke emotional hostility; this is a corruption of the bleached sky, as much as it is the human body. Private Ear organises his cumulative data by day, week, month and year. The results gather into

⁹ See artist's website. Available at: <http://lawrenceabuhamdan.com/once-removed>, accessed 16 February 2022.

an image that stretches over 50 metres across four gallery walls. A giant picture that glows from under its matte coating. Here, the density of the sky, the viscosity of the clouds is again, sonified.¹⁰

On 26 July 2020—51 violations of Lebanon's sequestered sky occur—by 44 fighter jets, 6 UAVs and 1 drone. The atmosphere in the sprawling image before us initially appears sumptuous; it is painterly in aesthetic and formation—a signature and foundational feature in art history—from John Constable to Walter De Maria, Vincent Van Gogh to JMW Turner. As one progresses through the sonic illumination of each year, the viewer becomes an active trespasser of a sort—their eyes invading casings of clouds which balloon into blackened smog as thick as time itself. We bear witness. Witness to the air flights as they infiltrate and extend—the density of the sonic image espoused by Private Ear deepens, forming an active statoscope of the violent pollutants scattered from overhead by the Israeli military aircraft.

Ongoing omnidirectional violence triggers what William Reddy articulated as an 'emotional regime'—a mode of emotional expression and/or fixation that emerges as a result of certain historical ruptures which recur.¹¹ The side-effects of air conditioning birth the characteristics of stress and panic—a perpetual age of anxiety, whereby the conditions of supposed reason and rationality can no longer exist. What *Air Conditioning* distils and evokes are the conditions of a society in perpetual free fall, one where the ocular experience of witnessing is synthesised into paralysis.

10 The Sonified Image is a signature aspect of Lawrence Abu Hamdan's practice. In simple terms, it is the process of converting a still or moving image with its complex data sets into sound or/and also converting visual data into aural data. Abu Hamdan's claim is that certain images, especially in cases of contested conflict, 'demand' sonification, in order to reveal the contours and paradoxes of specific acts or moments in history. The Sonified Image lays the foundation to Abu Hamdan's claim towards a sonic image, in this case, an aesthetic politics where the clustering of the sensory enables for a divergent ontology from one pre-determined through and by cultural hegemony.

11 William Reddy (2001) *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

The Israeli flights digitally collated by Private Ear have been mechanised through 3D software known as Houdini—not unlike the famed illusionist himself. It is most recognised for aiding in the visual creation of the Disney animated feature film *Frozen 2* (2019). It was fashioned in and around the auspices of Unreal Engine, a video-game development tool appositely used to create first-person shooter games—a form of 'play' that filmmaker Harun Farocki once revealed to promote violent behaviour in young and aspiring soldiers. As one exits the scene, we take a walk down narrow pathways. Here you might find yourself subject to an act of musically-induced time travel. But this is no ordinary Adagio playing. This is an active nod to a medical study performed by Israel in 1990 titled *Acute Circulatory Effects of Military Low-Altitude Flight Noise*. Here, a single-fragment of a restored Adagio, in G Minor, which was initially destroyed in the 1945 bombing in Dresden, composed by the Baroque Venetian composer Tomaso Albinoni, was played to a focus group of participants.¹² This sound was smattered with interjections of overhead flight noise every five minutes. The result was a rapidly 'conditioned' ear. Still, the after-effects of the hushed din would become absorbed by the body, akin to the manner in which Bessel van der Kolk articulates the deposited after-lives of 'trauma'. It lives, or rather, lays to rest in the body. Hyper-tension, elevated blood pressure, sleep deprivation, cortisol-spiking and paranoia are persistent results of this form of 'aerial subjugation'.

Surveillance is terminal. The act of seeing unawares bears with it the embodied physical experience of pain. The composite image meticulously formed by Private Ear is no uniform waveform. It is non-diegetic. The digital stacks voiced here are evocative of chronic effects, a residue, a trailing cloud

12 Dirty Evidence is a nod to the title of one of the artist's mid-career survey exhibitions staged at Bonniers Konsthall in Autumn 2021.

atlas of time that the artist has sought to de-etherealise of its ephemeral nature. The 'dirty evidence' is rife.¹³

The Alchemy of History

This is no discotheque. The pitch-black lives in your eyes. The yellow light bulb flickers, awakening you to interrogate. You become the sleuth—Gillian Anderson or *Colombo*—seeking to disentangle the aural and spatial codes that encompass you. The genesis of this act of diagramming is a transversal pursuit with Private Ear's obsession in minor speech acts—the nuanced function of what authorised historical records conceal. *The Witness Machine Complex* (2020–2022) presented in these resounding spaces takes as its point of departure, the Nuremberg Trials of 1945–1946 for Crimes Against Humanity. The military tribunals featured a number of witnesses, speaking in four languages. In this case, a traffic-light system for stopping and starting, of utterance and withdrawal, was deployed and adopted.

The qualities of embodied affect—nervousness, temporal lags and breaks within testimony were cleaned up in the final documentation of the trial—annulling the visceral components of expression. Over a number of years, Private Ear has re-inserted the errata—espousing a space for what can be perceived as the marginalia of the juridical process, allowing it to find prudent life.

**You are standing in an open field,
tensions accumulating. You may find yourself
ascending a flight of stairs, where sonified images
rupture through one's consciousness yet again.**

In *Earshot* (2016), Private Ear employs knowledge of forensic analysis to decode the legitimacy of a trial that absolved an Israeli soldier of the murder of two Palestinian teenagers. Rubber bullets they professed; and the legislators apparently

agreed. Time flails with its seeming innocence. Here we are watching CNN, the news network which has been made cognizant, through advocacy group, Defence of the Children International, of Private Ear's visualisation. These detailed studies reveal, in moving image and pictures mounted on foam and steel, the facts as they were. The bullets were real. This was rubber coated steel.

The Sonic Image weaves us through Private Ear's claim to a necessary obligation—to listen to images—but also to look at sound. This act reveals a suggestive aesthetics for politics that is mutable, which can be felt from and through different vantage points. We may return to Walter Benjamin's claims of the aura and John Berger's re-animation of these propositions through his travelogues, where both interrogate the very act of re-production and the potential meaning this creates.¹⁴ The unearthing of the sensorial—the rupture of time—with its many aural leaks, leaves 'history' open for elucidation. Let it be a site of inclusion, and possible reification, for those still waiting to be heard.

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin's essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* originally, *The Work of Art in the Age of Reproducibility* (1936) questions the notion of the authentic art object and its potential to continue to sustain its auratic in the age of reproduction, specifically after the advent of photography. These ideas were famously explored and animated in John Berger's prodigious output, in particular, in his BBC TV programme and publication, John Berger (1972) *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin Books. Also see: Walter Benjamin's *On the Concept of History*. Available at: <https://www.stu.ca/~andrewf/CONCEPT.html>, accessed 14 February 2022.