

Beirut

Cairo

These
are the
tools
of the
present

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**Interview
with**

Lawrence Abu Hamdan

Beirut,

May 2016

How would
you describe
your practice?

My practice has very little to do with sound as such and more to do with using listening, using the context around listening, and using the audience as listeners, as a lens to explore broader political concerns. This approach has sometimes led me to operate as a kind of private ear [*laughs*], like a private investigator doing audio investigations for counter-state or counter-surveillance practices.

Who has been
influential in
helping you refine
this approach?

In 2010 I met with this guy, this expert listener, Dr. Peter French, and he totally changed my understanding of sound. He would spend three working days listening to one syllable that had been recorded in a police interrogation, in order to work out the accent, or to work out other specifics that he was then able to glean from a voice through a form of intense listening. Peter has worked on around 5,000 legal cases that all concern state acts. Usually he is employed by the police. My first few projects were inspired by an interview I did with him in 2010 to investigate some of the strands that he would pick up. I started to work on his practice of forensic listening, following a particular kind of history of voice analysis into its current major application, which is for accent testing of asylum seekers. I was interested in the problems this application opens up and the way it can reframe, aesthetically, sound. How sound can shift from being this thing, which in artistic practice has always been thought of as intangible, or immaterial, to being treated as a kind of material object. This material shift introduces new ways to think about the historical and political implications of working with sound.

Around 2013 I decided to set up my own types of investigations in the same vein as Peter. But the major distinction was that I wouldn't work for the police, I would work for other kinds of situations. The role of artist and investigator really feed each other in very interesting ways.

How are these
investigations
formed and developed?

I spend time with material from a particular situation, exploring it in terms of its aesthetics, in terms of all the other kinds of political nuances that emerge from it, and work on it for a long period, maybe a year, a year and a half. I then develop these moments that were initially framed by an urgency into projects that reflect on both the ways in which sound fits into that narrative, whatever it may be—a murder case, or a case of illegal incarceration or whatever it is—while also considering how that makes us think differently about the act of listening. Then by extension, how that makes us think about the ways in which we're being heard politically and the kinds of conditions of listening we operate within. Trying to do both is very productive, because of these kinds of contradictions, the relations between the real, the fiction, and the artifice.

How do you position
your practice in the
art world?

For me it's very clear why it's art. There are contexts where the works play out in other forms; for example it has been the case that a video was made and broadcast on CNN that used the types of analysis I have done—using exactly the same kind of graphic material. But that's not my medium. There is this kind of shift, let's say, that emerges when artists who leave the white cube to go and work in the field, go on to produce activist-like projects that are considered heroic gestures. I actually have the opposite experience. For example, take the act of testifying in courtrooms, it pushes me back to the gallery as a space in which to operate, because what is absent from the judge's instructions to tell the truth etc., is how he is listening, what he's listening to, and what he's listening for. There are thresholds of audibility for the judge that can nullify your entire testimony. So there was a structure of listening that was going on behind me that I didn't have access to. It is similar to an autocratic system, where you just can't say certain things because if you say them you'll be imprisoned.

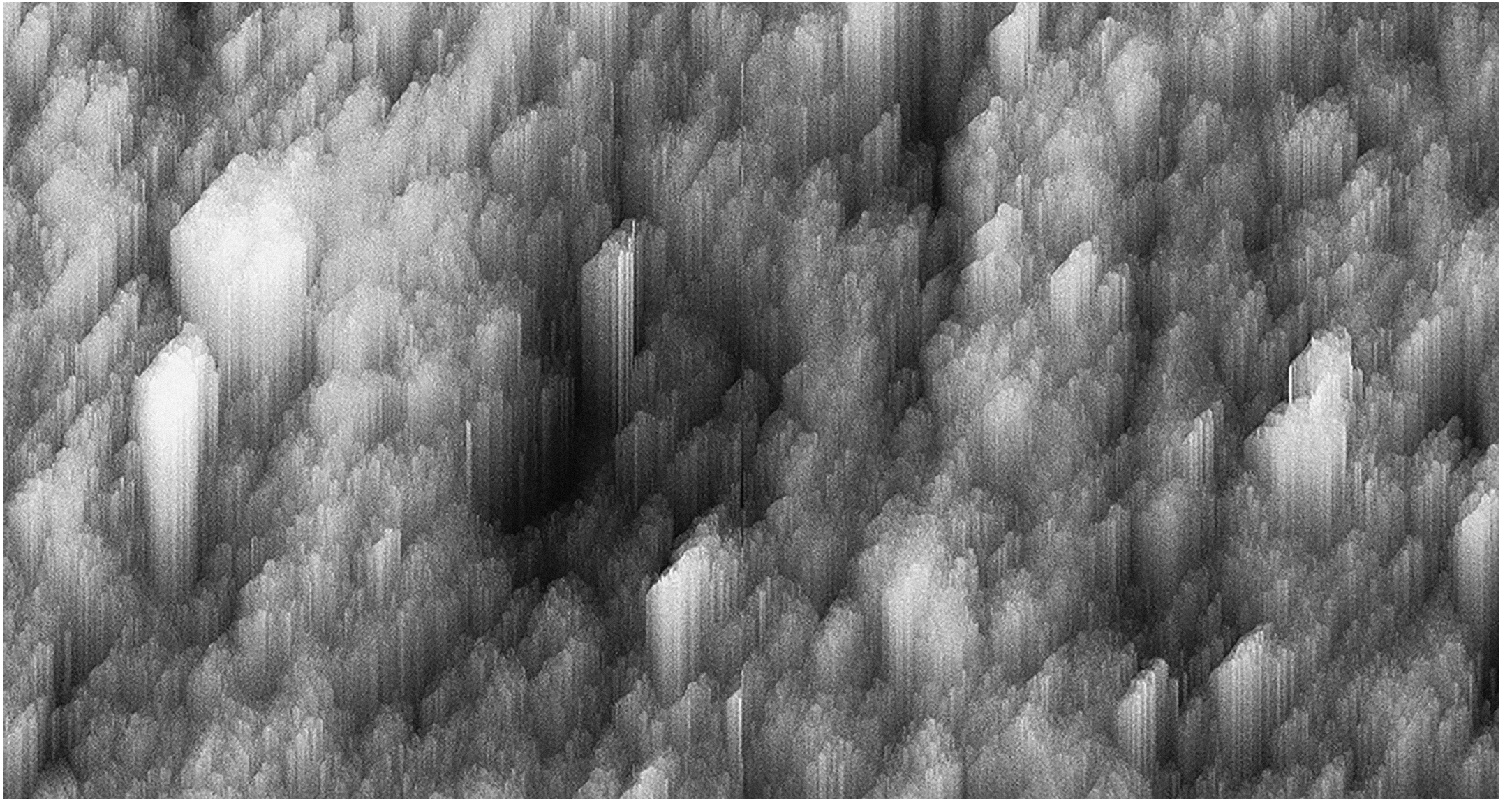
To come back to why this pushed me into the art world: it's not only to accept the conditions of listening that are made available to us, like the context of testifying in a political space such as a court, but because the arts space, or the white cube, or whatever you want to call it, still operates in this sort of gray legal area, where speech is not liable, and that means that those conditions of listening can actually be remodeled and reworked.

Can you describe the interlacing of images and sound in your practice?

Listening is not just about hearing or using your ears, it's about everything; just as much as looking or seeing isn't about only what is visible. Often my use of images doesn't even concern visibility, it concerns another form through which things become visible that were otherwise invisible. So, the clearest example of that is in the case of *Earshot* [2016], and the project and the analysis it came from: I couldn't hear the difference between the sound of a rubber bullet and the sound of live ammunition until it was visualized. The actual people that can hear those differences are the kids and people who are exposed to such sounds every day. It was interesting for me that in some cases it is only possible to hear something after seeing it. Not necessarily through images, but through diagrams, which are kinds of visualizations that essentially replace frequency with color.

Another example is the work *Conflicted Phonemes* [2012], which demanded to be made only in image because it was dealing with a group of people that had been silenced. Specifically, nine Somalian activist asylum seekers who were all rejected because of their accents. To rerecord their voices to tell that story would reproduce exactly the same context and oppression they had been subject to. Their voices had already been muted, had been compromised, because when they spoke to the authorities they didn't know how they were being listened to. They didn't know if it was their accents or their words being taken into account. That context necessitated a work that would give these nine people back a mode of silent existence where they didn't have to use their voices. It amplified the role of silence and made the audience face silence rather than sound. Representing silence for me is also very important in relation to an older postcolonial idea against representation. So the role of images is very important, but again not photography—here it was this form of producing a kind of graphic around the voice and showing the voice as this very complex object.

How do you decide on the kind of image you want to make in relation to the subject you're working with?



Lawrence Abu Hamdan,
*A Conversation with an
Unemployed*, 2013,
photograph, dimensions
variable. Courtesy of the artist.

They're part of the longer story of a work. For example my work *Tape Echo* [2013], about the condition of noise pollution in Cairo. It looks at how hearing damage and noise pollution can be used as subjects of a broader series of political concerns about life in that particular urban context. One example is that in Cairo there's a large percentage of the population that have tinnitus. This condition is triggered partly by the sound levels of the city, as well as noise pollution from open factories, etc. But what is shocking, for me at least, is that the majority of this hearing damage is actually caused from exposure to smog. So this issue returns us to the previous question about the role of our other senses and how other things are read in relation to the context of listening and understanding listening.

The story of the research for this project is that I started to notice people were attempting to battle the city noises by drowning them out with frequent Islamic sermons. Their idea was that a sound that does you good could act like a kind of ethical force field that stops the din from outside. I was interested in the very specific political gesture of putting on instructive sermons to block out sound. So what's interesting is that on a Friday in particular, all the streets in Cairo become awash with these voices. From almost every corner you start to hear people telling you how to live your life in one way or another and it's very intense. I've experienced this in small ways in cities in Jordan and Lebanon, but never in such dense clusters. The entry point for the work was previously used cassette tapes, the type people would pick up from secondhand markets or just buy from the side of the street, throw in the player, and put on whatever the sheikh was saying. Cassettes are never deleted, they are always over-dubbed, and this overlay is very different to digital distribution. Often these cassette sermons have something completely different over-recorded onto them, causing the material to become warped or have other kinds of distortions. The cassettes became a way for me to explore and make a first intervention in the city. I would go out and make recordings, documents of the city and interviews, on top of very worn cassettes that I'd bought.

I was informed by the artist and media theorist Susan Schuppli and her work on the story of the Watergate scandal and the eighteen-and-a-half minutes of deleted or rather overwritten material from Richard Nixon. A number of people were called in to try and understand the original material, because in theory you can get back to the original sound recorded on the tape, but in practice no one has

invented a way to do it. I used a similar technique of visualization on the cassettes in Cairo, by imagining how these thin bands of magnetic tape stored a kind of topography of the city. So to make images, what I wanted to do was take the minute surface of the cassette tape and from that draw a whole kind of urbanity of the city.

This is just one intervention within a larger project, which ends up with me working with, or inviting, three Cairene sheikhs to give sermons on noise pollution and hearing damage. During the same period, a law was passed that said sheikhs could no longer give sermons about anything other than government-sanctioned topics. This censorship was done in the name of noise pollution by the government, to say noise needs regulating. Of course what they meant by noise was anything against the government. So the work became very vital in this debate and again affirmed my initial suspicions that in any place where you probe into listening, a whole series of political dimensions flow out. Here, an issue like noise pollution—which isn't overtly political—became very sensitive because in fact people weren't allowed to talk about it.

Is lecturing in different contexts important for the forging of your practice?

Yes, I think there is something very important in speaking out. I'm very interested in how the voice is used. There's sort of a form-content collapse when I work in the form of lectures. But also, in very general terms, when you write a text you can think about something as much as you want, but when you are forced to read it in front of people, you hear yourself as they hear you and I think that's very productive in the forging of ideas. So usually I lecture when a project is in formation, not when it has been completed.

What impact has moving to Beirut had on your ideas?

There was a period where I was very unproductive. When I was living in London. Economically, lecturing and teaching allowed me to live in London. But then it just got really noisy and I began to repeat myself and there was nothing to it.

So I was very happy to move to Beirut, because I also have a bit of a problem saying no to things [*laughs*]. Being in this location kind of puts a geographical “no” on the table and it makes it harder for people to invite me. It’s much better to be able to focus more.

I was spending at least a couple of months a year in Beirut even when I was living in London, and it would be a very vital time of discussing with particular people, interlocutors. This has been further fostered by moving here. It’s a very small context in a way, but it feels more international, because when people make the trip here, you will get to spend extra time with them, whereas I think if I was living in London that wouldn’t happen. So things emerge which are more precious, and people have more time to offer so you can go into much deeper conversations.

What are the differences between the first generation of contemporary artists in Beirut in the 1990s, and the generation to which you belong?

When there is this talk of a previous generation, I can say that I see very little relation between what Walid Raad does and what Akram Zaatari does for example, or Walid Sadek and Lamia Joreige.

And anyway, it’s very different for me because I grew up in the United Kingdom. One of the major influences on me in terms of my politics, my cultural practice, and thinking about sound, was my experience of music in Leeds. Seeing a kind of DIY culture of music was a really important moment and it offered a way to understand forms of self-organization around structures of music and playing with things like sound systems. It was very specific to the north of England. So my context is just very different. Though I would say of course that one of the artists I feel most closely inspired by is still Walid Raad.

Maybe his experience is a good example for me, because he also emerged in a context that was not so art focused, and didn’t have the language of contemporary art so much by itself, although he uses it very efficiently, and well, and interestingly. For me it was a little bit the same, in that I never went to art school for example.



Judge: These are sounds!

Lawrence Abu Hamdan,
Earshot, 2016, installation
view, Portikus, Frankfurt am
Main. Courtesy of the artist.