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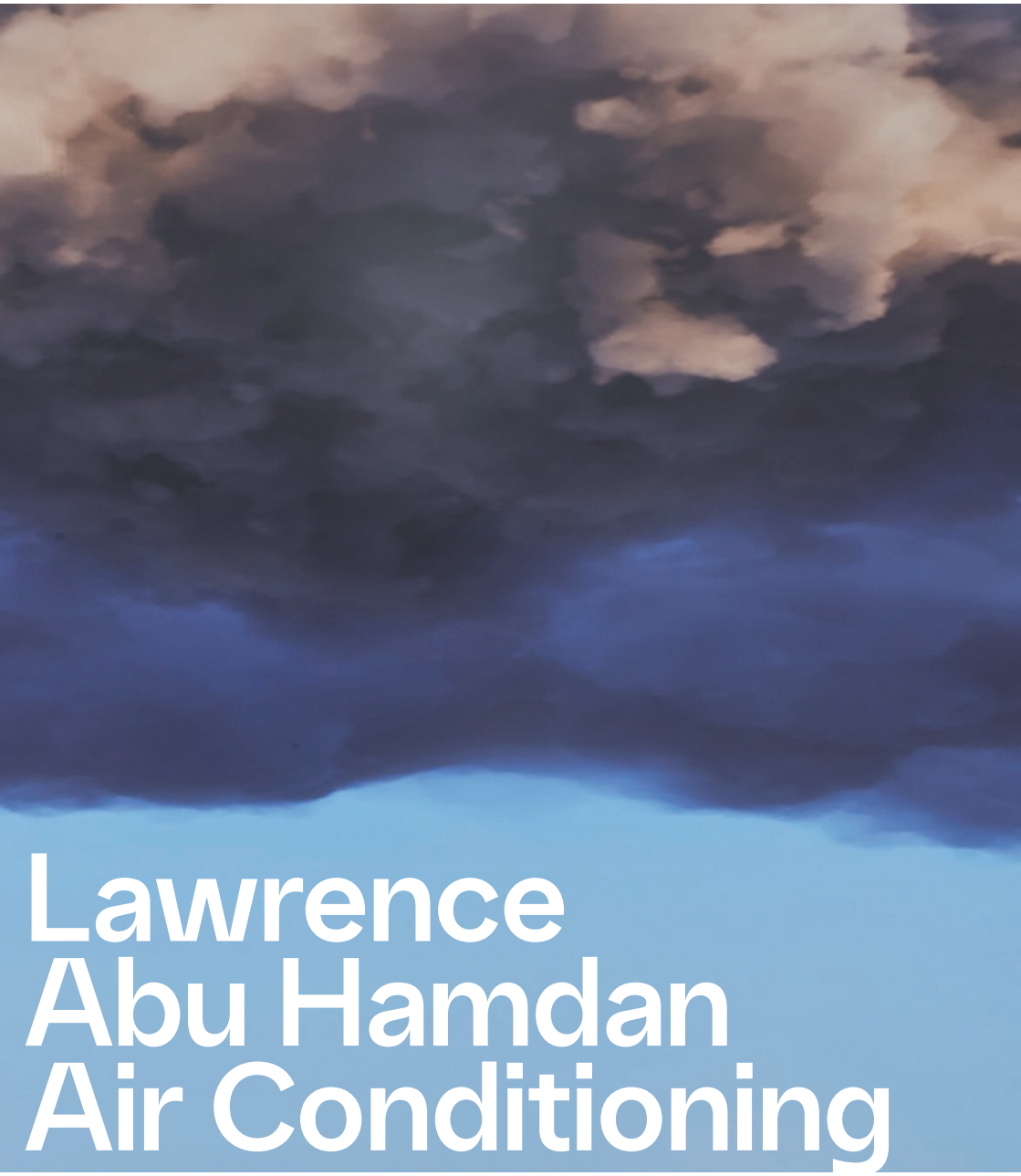

Lawrence Abu Hamdan Air Conditioning

29.03 — 09.06.2024

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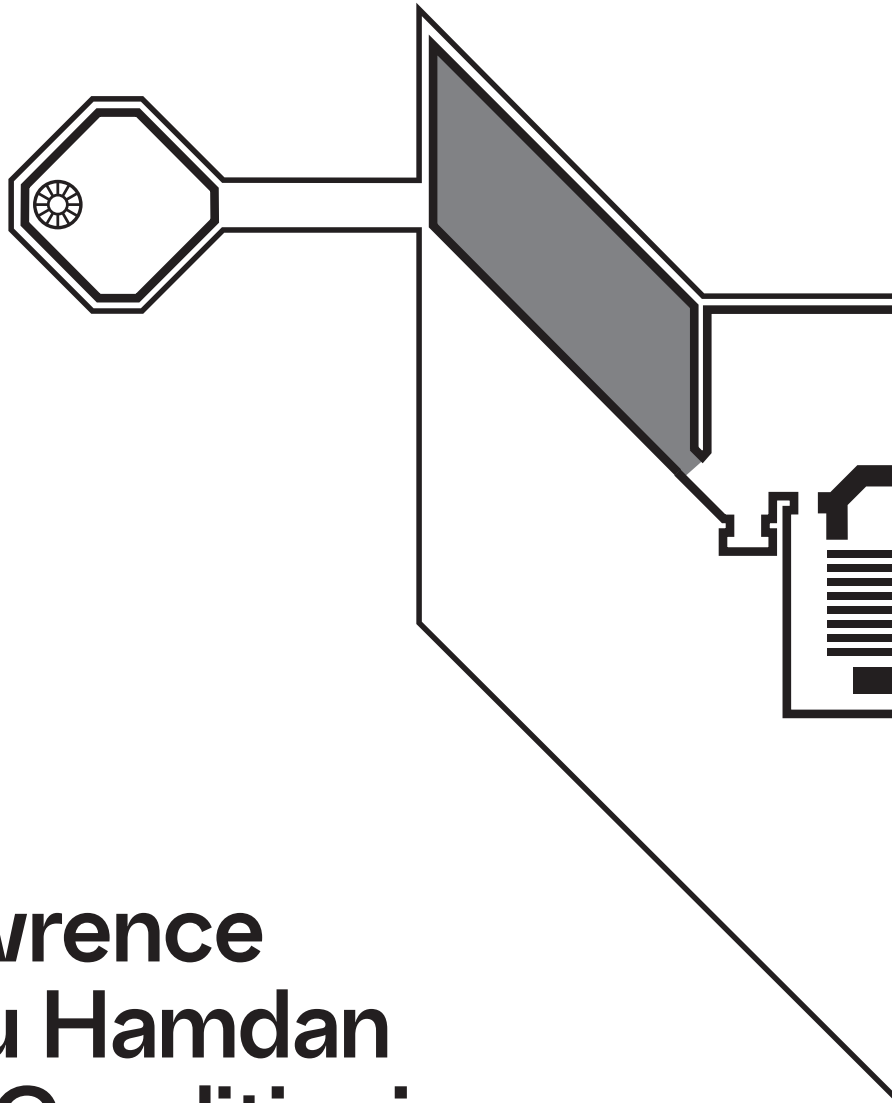
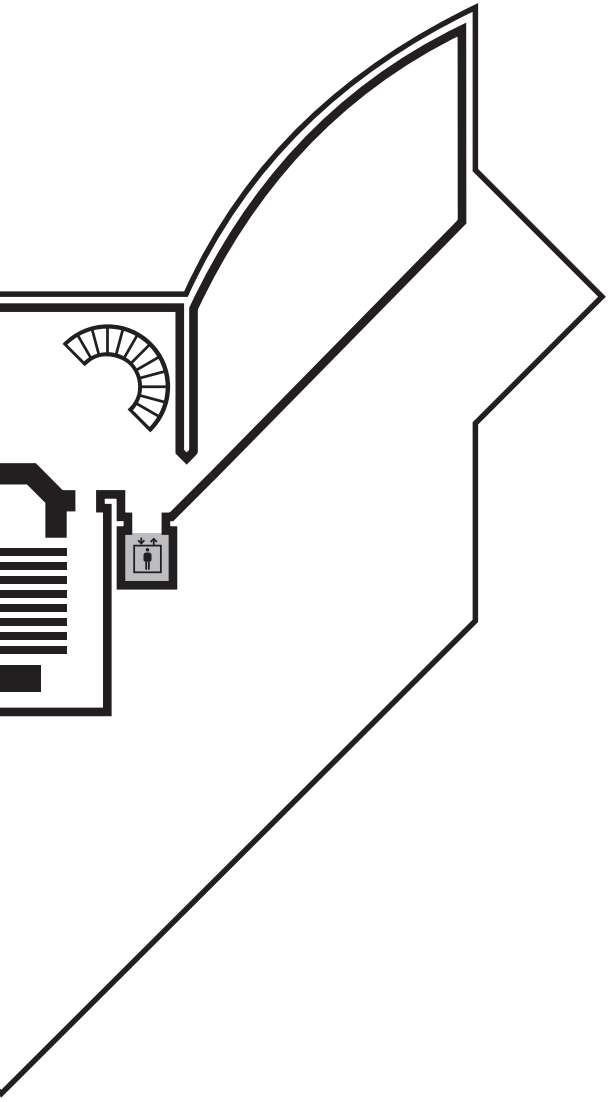


Lawrence Abu Hamdan Air Conditioning

29.03 — 09.06.2024

Curator
Vanessa Lecomte

Production
David Celli, Jordan Gerber, Juliette Hesse, Lourindo Soares



Level -1
East Gallery

The exhibition

Lawrence Abu Hamdan (b. 1985, Amman) is an experimental artist, a researcher-investigator and a self-described 'Private Ear' who has developed a unique body of work involving sound and listening, at the junction between photography, performance, writing, video, installation and audiovisual work. Questions of national identity, human rights, justice, and memory are among his recurring themes. Through his reflective practice, at the intersection of political, legal and social spheres, Abu Hamdan questions the use of sound and its presence in individual and collective memory.

Often produced in collaboration with scientists, activists, and linguists, his sound analysis have been presented on several occasions as advocacy for organisations such as Amnesty International (notably with the Forensic Architecture research laboratory) and Defence for Children International, or as evidence in judicial inquiries at the First-tier Tribunal Immigration and Asylum Chamber in the UK.

Air Conditioning (2022) is a monumental work that has recently entered the Mudam Collection. Located on level -1 of Mudam and spanning over fifty-four metres, it wraps the walls of the museum's East Gallery in silence. This installation is comprised of fifteen photographic panels, produced using a specialised animation software (Houdini), and a looping explanatory video lasting 2 minutes and 42 seconds.

The project was conceptualised between May 2020 and May 2021, when Abu Hamdan carried out extensive research and information collection as he examined the open-source data available on the United Nations Digital Library website. The artist mapped the instances of surveillance and violation of Lebanese airspace by Israeli military aircrafts over a fifteen-year period, from 2007 to 2021, following United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701 in the wake of the July War of 2006 between Israel and Lebanon.

Concurrently, Abu Hamdan developed the website AirPressure.info in an effort to make information pertaining to Israeli incursions accessible through an interactive map (which reveals radar information on overflights – time of day, duration, type of aircraft, and trajectory), a reference library featuring sound and video files of citizen testimonies collected during a participative social media campaign, seventeen scientific articles describing the harmful physical and psychological impacts on the Lebanese population, as well as the 243 letters addressed to the United Nations Security Council.

The artist's first task was to draw up a documented inventory of the Lebanese soundscape and to render an overview of the sequence and accumulation of over 22,111 events. By aggregating this data, he established that the average overflight duration was four hours and thirty-five minutes. Combined, the total duration of these incursions was 3,098 days, or eight and a half years.

How can we represent the unrepresentable? How can we think of sounds as images and how do we give them form? These are the contradictions Abu Hamdan attempts to resolve.

The resulting images are occupied by a horizon of smoke clouds, without beginning or end, like stills from a film where sound is now absent, as if destined to be forgotten. Two dimensions coexist: erasure and trace. Abu Hamdan invites us to take part in a meditative experience where we must take the time to observe and decipher to immerse ourselves in

this fluctuating texture. Fragments of time come and go towards each other, intermingle, expand, and overlap, creating interplays between time and space. Abu Hamdan aims to make the density of time intelligible.

The video provides a preamble. Each 365 cm-long print represents a year, and each centimetre corresponds to a day. The height and thickness of the plume reflect the number of planes and the duration of their flights, respectively. In 2020, for instance, 1,797 unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) (Hermes 450, IAI Heron TP) flew over Lebanon. August 2020 was a particularly eventful month: 405 UAVs were recorded flying over the country for a total 2,212 hours. Each aircraft type is arranged in the image according to the altitude it occupied. Finally, the sonic range of each vehicle – the ominous roar of fighter jets, the dull sound of UAVs and the persistent hum of quadcopter drones – is echoed by the tone and density of the clouds.

With *Air Conditioning*, Abu Hamdan captures the effects of a systematic and prolonged exposure to omnipresent noise pollution, and the trauma it can cause, constituting what he calls 'atmospheric violence'. Speaking on this, he has said: 'These images demonstrate the Lebanese atmosphere is a nexus of high pressure in a global weather system. The air is not a sovereign space but a volatile compound; of noise, carbon dioxide, monoxide, nitrogen oxide, sulfur dioxide and all the other toxic emissions of international militarism.'

This investigation has yielded other projects that complement and bring light to each other. The performative reading *Daght Jawi (Air Pressure)* focuses on one year, as does *The diary of a sky* (2023) the video installation that stems from it. Using a diaristic form, Abu Hamdan recites the raw data, blending in his research narrative, all of which is illustrated by sequences of images of the Lebanese sky crisscrossed by fighter planes and drones. Playing with the juxtaposition of the breaks and gaps in the speed and intensity of his cadence and breathing, and the deafening noise of the planes, Abu Hamdan renders this constant threat palpable. Illuminating the investigation in the present and the past, in Lebanon and elsewhere, he instils a sensitive memory of sounds.

Abu Hamdan has described his research as a 'political ecology of noise'. To this end, the aesthetics of inquiry brings forth the noises to which we have ceased paying attention and allow for a reconstruction of narratives that are often excluded from our contemporary histories, both near and far.





Overlapping Lines: Lawrence Abu Hamdan by Finn Blythe
Mapping the militarised skies over Lebanon

This interview, *Lawrence Abu Hamdan by Finn Blythe*, was commissioned by and first published in *BOMB Daily*, February 13, 2023. © BOMB Magazine, New Art Publications, and its Contributors. All rights reserved. The BOMB Digital Archive can be viewed at www.bombmagazine.org.

Audio investigator. Private ear. Sonic artist. These are just a few of the monikers by which Lawrence Abu Hamdan is known. In reality, the Lebanese artist evades straightforward classification with a dynamic, multifaceted practice that is equally at home in a gallery as in a courtroom. Working like a detective, Hamdan pursues aural traces of violence in politically contested places, piecing together evidence through film, installation, and performance.

Collaborating with organisations like Amnesty International and fellow Turner Prize-winners Forensic Architecture, Hamdan's enquiries have included modelling one of Syria's most notorious prisons from the earwitness testimonies of former inmates (*Saydnaya*, 2017), distinguishing the sound of rubber bullets from live ammunition in the murder of two Palestinian teenagers (*Earshot*, 2016), and amassing an inventory of everyday objects used to recreate disputed sonic evidence in legal cases (*Earwitness Inventory*, 2018).

For a new exhibition at Turin's Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Hamdan presents *Air Pressure (A diary of the sky)*, an investigation into every Israeli violation of Lebanese airspace since the 2006 Lebanon War. The findings are remarkable: 22,111 aircraft in total, from fighter jets to unmanned drones, averaging four-and-a-half hours per flight, equivalent to around eight-and-a-half years of unrelenting sonic intimidation over Lebanese skies. Alongside the website that houses this data, a forty-minute film comprising hundreds of amateur-shot clips documents the daily experience of these incursions, condensing fifteen years of atomised crimes into a single, unignorable case of state-sponsored sonic pressure.

Finn Blythe: I wanted to begin by asking about the genesis of this project. When it began, why, and what your intentions were?

Lawrence Abu Hamdan: During lockdown, when all other air traffic was down, suddenly Beirut sounded louder. The discourse around the world was like, 'Isn't it beautiful that the skies are clear?' And we're like, 'Wait a minute....' The Israeli Air Force was still active, potentially more active. I don't know that for certain, but it definitely sounded louder because of the absence of other aircraft. So I started thinking about it, and then August 4th happened, the explosion, and there was a discussion about whether or not there was a plane heard before. Plenty of people thought they'd heard planes, but I wasn't sure.

FB: Were you in Beirut at the time of the explosion?

LAH: I was not. But based on the recordings and everything, there was a discussion, and I realised how unproductive that discussion was because it didn't matter if there was a plane or not. At the moment of peak anxiety, when people's homes are completely destroyed, these planes emerged from the background. They were no longer rumbling somewhere in the distance; they emerged at the forefront of public discourse. I realised that whether they were there or not at 6:07 PM, they're living

with us all the time. We tend to brush it off and think, 'Okay, it's every day they come; let them come'. It's so routine, so embedded in life; but when something big happens, you realise that they come straight back. You realise the amount of precarity they're actually producing without necessarily being aware of it.

FB: So once you began the project and learned the scale of these aerial incursions was way beyond anything you'd previously believed, did the motivation or the objectives of the work change?

LAH: It started with a document I found from the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) that had all the information about Israeli aerial incursions over a three- or six-month period. So that was the first time I knew they were aggregating the data, but it was kind of all over the place. Through looking at what the UN was doing, I found all these internal letters that were written between UNIFIL and the UN Security Council detailing every single violation. So then, like you say, the project suddenly became very simple. This information is not open source; it's way beyond what we thought we could know, and so at a very fundamental level we just need to extract this from the unsystematic archives of bureaucratic obfuscation. Digitise it and amass it into one single searchable online database so that people could really understand what this is. The reason that was necessary was to give something that's so routine and everyday a discursive value again. I knew by doing this work it would be a war on multiple fronts. It would be in opposition to what was happening in the air above us, and it would expose the silence of Hezbollah – that they in fact had 22,000 opportunities to be the resistance they claim to be, but what in fact everybody knows is that they're using Israel as a boogeyman as much as Israel uses them. They need each other in some perverse game. It also shows the Lebanese government just how much they neglect this issue. For them it was always about the violation of sovereign territory, and for me it didn't matter. Violation is the way this enters the news, and I knew that as a means to an end; but actually I don't think the air belongs to them either.

FB: I arrived at the exhibition with a sense that this film was about a nefarious force infringing upon a neighbouring state, but it's far more nuanced. This isn't about us versus them, victim versus oppressor. It is so much more muddied, and the helicopter at the end of the film offering flights over Beirut kind of embodied that confusion for me.

LAH: It's really a kind of post-uprising film, and that's why I have the reference to 'Kellon yaani kellon,' which translates as, 'All of them means all of them.' That was an expression that emerged out of the uprisings in Lebanon in 2019. It's about showing the theatre of sectarianism and saying that this isn't about one person, that all of these people are in bed together: that Israel needs Hezbollah; that Hezbollah needs Israel. In a way you could say there's atmospheric violence in this work, but it's also about atmospheric resistance. It's an act of asking us to see things in their coalescence rather than in their separate silos.

FB: Does this work feel in any way more personal because of your close ties with this part of the world?

LAH: I think the point is that I always take it personally. And from that the desire to produce the artwork emerges. It's not that I'm interested in politics, and so I make a work; it's that I want to make a political claim, and the work helps me do that.



FB: As a resident of Beirut, could you shed some insight into how these flights affect daily life at ground level?

LAH: Well, that's the thing; it really does exist in the background. There's so much noise on the ground, and at some point you don't hear the noises anymore because of everything else. The last line in the film is, 'When I'm up there in the helicopter, all the other noises of life in Lebanon are on mute.' Including, of course, the jets. You can't hear anything once you're in the helicopter. I think in a way the film is trying to be faithful to a representation that this isn't actually an exceptional force of violence, and that's what makes it so violent. For me it's like the Brian Eno quote on ambient music: he says it's as ignorable as it is interesting, and I would say this is something similar.

FB: There's an insidiousness to it.

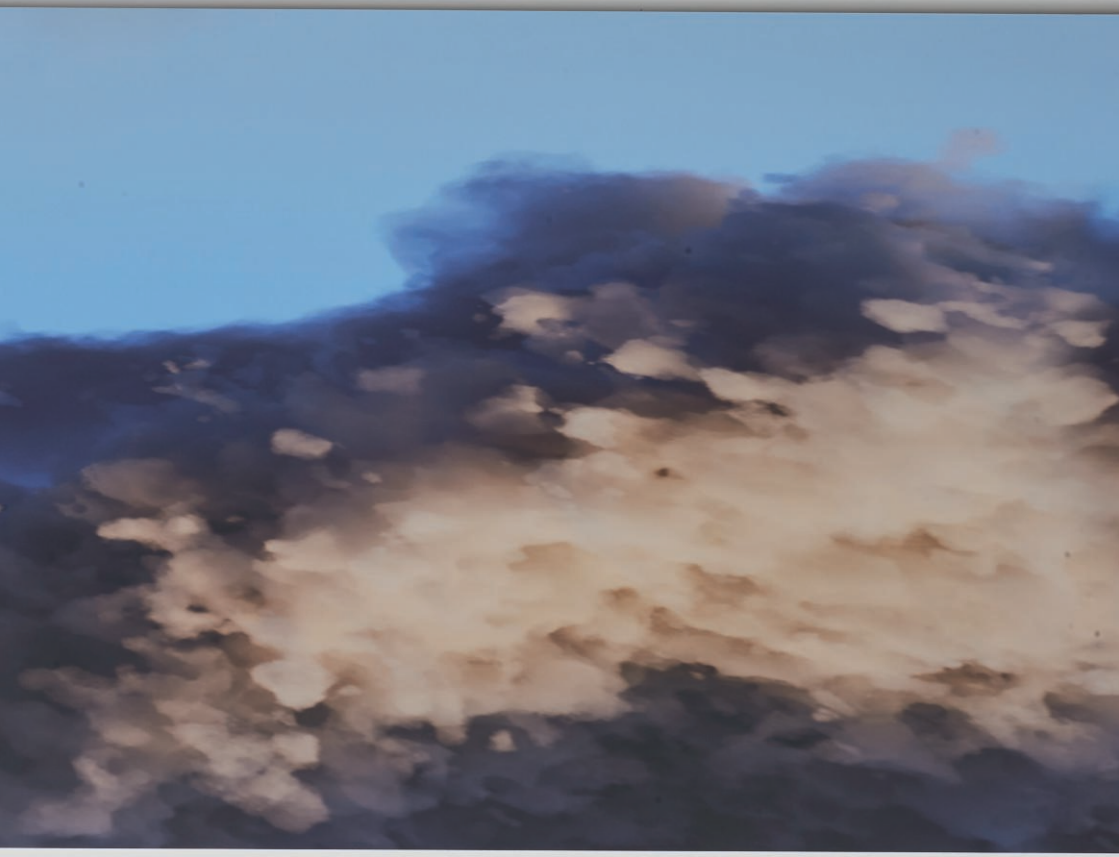
LAH: Yes, but it's also farcical. I mean, 22,000? It's farcical. At some level I think all these things are happening at the same time: it's terrifying; it's farcical; it's ignorable; it's lethal. That's what I've been trying to access with this work – to move between these registers of attention to this sound. For so long they have been an individual experience, so bringing them together and disaggregating it from the pain of the individual witness position became a key part of the project. I wanted to create an aesthetic that allows one to witness this in a way that your eyes and ears can't actually register. In the film that's by aggregating all these hundreds of people's videos and perspectives and times and places, and you get little glimpses of where they are filming from. So it's really about creating the condition where these different experiences become visible as a singular experience, as a fifteen-year-long crime rather than these individual ephemeral moments.

FB: Lastly, I want to ask about your ambitions for this project. Do you think it has the potential to affect legal change?

LAH: Well, there's the hope of how I want people to receive the website, what I want them to think. With these overlapping lines – the first line is a violation – it becomes an interlocking web of lines, and you see that it's actually pressure. It's not about legal and illegal. And so, in that way I'm trying to take this out of the auspices of a legal discussion because I think the law completely fails this. To speak about this as a sovereign violation is absolutely meaningless to most people in Lebanon. It's about understanding the way that sound can turn air violent and exert pressure.

The artist

Lawrence Abu Hamdan (b. 1985, Amman, Jordan) has had numerous institutional solo exhibitions, including at the FRAC Franche-Comté, Besançon (2023); MUAC-UNAM, Mexico City (2023); the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2023); the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin (2022); the Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah (2022) and the Bonniers Konsthall, Stockholm (2021). He has also taken part in numerous international events such as the 12th Berlin Biennale (2022), Manifesta 14, Pristina (2022), the 34th Bienal de São Paulo (2021), the 22nd Biennale of Sydney (2020), and the 58th Venice Biennale (2019). His work can be found in the prestigious collections of a number of institutions, such as the Musée national d'art moderne – Centre de création industrielle, Centre Pompidou, Paris; the Tate Modern, London; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid; the Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin and the Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah. He lives and works in Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates.



Public programme

Conversation with the artist
28.03.2024 | 18h30 – 19h
Lawrence Abu Hamdan in conversation
with Vanessa Lecomte

Guided tour
03.04.2024 | 18h00 – 18h30 | FR
With curator Vanessa Lecomte

Lunchtime at Mudam
03.05.2024 | 12h30 – 13h30

Full programme on
mudam.com

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Images:
Cover, pp. 10, 13:
Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *Air Conditioning*, 2022 (detail)
Collection Mudam Luxembourg
Acquisition 2023
Installation view *Lawrence Abu Hamdan*, Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, 11 June – 18 September 2022
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut/Hamburg
Photo: Volker Renner
pp. 6-7: Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *Air Conditioning*, 2022 (detail)
Collection Mudam Luxembourg
Acquisition 2023
Installation view *Lawrence Abu Hamdan: The Sonic Image*, Sharjah Art Foundation, 4 March – 4 July 2022
Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut/Hamburg

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