



## LAWRENCE ABU HAMDAN LONDON

Lawrence Abu Hamdan's ongoing project *Aural Contract Audio Archive* combines research and archival art practice, and entails exhibitions, events, workshops, and interviews. His most recent presentation, *Aural Contract: The Freedom of Speech Itself*, a curatorial collaboration between the group Electra and the contemporary art center The Showroom, included several appendices to the archive, such as a large-scale visual rendering of the voice patterns of two people pronouncing the word "you" decoratively applied to the wall and a video of a "microphone workshop" with a local Bangladesh Society youth club [The Showroom; February 1—March 17, 2012].

The venue itself looks like a car showroom of the recent past. A concrete construction now converted into a multipurpose gallery painted bright yellow outside, it is located in a multicultural neighborhood in North West London. Inside, the exhibition was visually sparse. Its main component was the central conference table where fragments from the audio archive could be heard on speakers. *Aural Contract: The Freedom of Speech Itself* acted as a stage for sitting and listening.

A voice with a North American accent, one that could well belong to a used car salesman, begins *Free Speech 6.0*, 2011. It eventually became clear that the audio fragment was a demonstration of a voice identification security technology called FreeSpeech, which was developed by the Israeli company PerSay Ltd. The work is reminiscent of Brian Eno's incorporation of radio fragments into his music, though the music on this recording is less energetic and more akin to shopping mall or airport lounge easy-listening.

The audio archive continues with a Hollywood film soundtrack. As this fades, the mood and pace change, transitioning into anxious staged or re-enacted accounts of forensic speech analysis. The relationship between the legal status of the voice and the rights of asylum seekers in the UK is the main subject of this show. Research into the use of speech analysis has exposed flaws or biases in the government interview process. In one dramatization, an asylum seeker is subjected to an interview in order to determine the origins of his accents, which in turn would determine the legitimacy of his claim to refugee status. The interviewer is described as a Kurdish Iraqi citizen who

speaks Fusha Arabic—the standard and literary Arabic—without dialect. The interviewee, a Palestinian refugee, tries to adapt his speech to make sure that he is understood, adopting what is to him an odd dialect in order to communicate and thus distorting the genuineness of his own accent. People who have become refugees are used to border crossing, serial relocation, and adapting to unusual situations in order to survive. Accents can therefore become hybridized and cannot be upheld to prove a place of origin. Another person is dramatized as having acquired a "Hollywood" accent, as if it were the accent for some kind of mass media lingua franca that renders its speakers' true origins untraceable.

Hamdan, a Lebanese Briton, is sensitive to the issues of migration and borders, and the *Aural Contract* project conveyed the experience of the people applying for asylum. Supported by the Forensic Architecture project of the Department for Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, University of London, the project created an aural equivalent to the panopticon's utilitarian visual and spatial design. Surveillance occurs without walls, through listening and speaking.

INSIDE FRONT COVER, ABOVE + OPPOSITE: Lawrence Abu Hamdan, installation views of *Aural Contract: The Freedom of Speech Itself* at The Showroom, London, 2012 [courtesy of the artist and The Showroom, London; photo: Mariona Otero]

*The Right to Silence II* was the second in a series of seminars that took place in the exhibition space, complementing *The Freedom of Speech Itself* by welcoming scholars to reflect upon the political issues it raised. The seminar delved into the legal status of the voice and the chameleonic nature of silence by examining instances of the refusal to speak and various applications of silence. Moderated by Anne Karpf, *The Right to Silence II* featured Dr. Patrick Hanafin, who discussed Maurice Blanchot's ideas of confession and contestation in language, and media theorist Susan Schuppli, who indulged our fascination with the curious eighteen-and-a-half minutes of silence on Watergate Tape 342.

The seminar highlighted how the right to remain silent, if invoked by the asylum seeker, raises the possibility of a shift of the burden of proof. The asylum seeker's rite-of-passage through the UK legal system is fraught with anxiety. As such, silence can act as a form of resistance, producing a deferral or stalemate instead of exploiting the asylum seeker's inadvertent confession. Such purposeful silence is distinct from simply remaining mute. At one point during the proceedings, however, when the description of a woman fainting in court was over-enthusiastically theorized, I began to puzzle over the project's academic conformism, that is, the way that it so perfectly meets the performance metrics that now define research in UK universities. Nevertheless the institutional backing of the project has given the artist access to the 14th session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva and allowed the project to be taken seriously as art and social research.

Discussing the erasure of spoken evidence by the over-recording of quietness in Watergate Tape 342, Schuppli described silence as a "dangerous supplement." Here machine silence became potential proof of concealment of evidence. What's more, the Nixon tape is in deep-freeze, awaiting the evolution of technology that will reveal the recorded conversation beneath its mute hum. In this latency, it reveals the relationship between the archive as a repository of future knowledge of past events and the wider implications of *The Freedom of Speech Itself* project. From the periphery of an archive, we can conjure a growing powerhouse of information.

The project casts art practice as cultural research, project coordination, creative speculation, and spatial rhetoric. It also stages its reach and efficacy in the spheres of education, politics, and law.

—Stephen Lee

