



From Ear  
to Ear  
to Eye

# Introduction

*From Ear to Ear to Eye* is an exhibition that explores sound, music and listening in myriad forms. It traces the acoustic lives of different cities and places across the Arab world, bringing together almost 20 artists and researchers working in the region and elsewhere. Comprising installation, sculpture, photography, video and sound, the exhibition considers how recording and translation can map memories and migration, territories and conflicts. With a title borrowed from a text by the artist Anna Boghiguian, the exhibition assembles graphic scores and field recordings, poetry and acoustic analysis, alongside much else.

Many of the artists in *From Ear to Ear to Eye* are also musicians, run record labels or are engaged with research into the connections between politics and sound. The exhibition presents a wide range of perspectives on complex questions of harmony and violence, traversing very different cities, practices and experiences. It moves from folk music at the dawn of modern Turkey to radio broadcasts in Palestine, from a bird's-eye view of the Egyptian Revolution's aftermath to the shifting urban fabric of present-day Beirut.

The Arab world is often relayed to us via images of catastrophe, such as the refugee crisis, civil war, terrorism and humanitarian disaster. *From Ear to Ear to Eye* is about what might not be possible to comprehend through images alone. Sound and music emerge as tools of power and resistance, as ways to silence as well as to give voice. The exhibition is an argument for the importance of listening, as much as looking.

**Curated by Sam Thorne with Angelica Sule.**

# From Ear to Ear to Eye

Sounds and Stories from  
Across the Arab World

# Lawrence Abu Hamdan

*Earshot* 2016

b. 1985, Jordan;  
based in Berlin and Beirut

© Lawrence Abu Hamdan,  
courtesy Maureen Paley, London

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Lawrence Abu Hamdan is an artist and “private ear”, whose work concerns sound and its intersection with politics. Presented here, *Earshot* is an installation that tells the story of an investigation, and takes the form of a kind of video tribunal. On 15 May 2014, Israeli soldiers in the occupied West Bank fatally shot two teenagers, Mohamad Abu Daher and Nadeem Nawara, in the town of Beitunia. The human rights group Defence for Children International contacted Forensic Architecture, a research agency based at Goldsmiths, University of London.. They worked with Abu Hamdan to investigate the incident. As Abu Hamdan has written, “what happens when we actually *listen* to this event rather than look at it?”

The case hinged upon an audio-ballistic analysis of the recorded gunshots. This could determine whether the soldiers had used rubber bullets, as they claimed, or broken the law by firing live ammunition at the unarmed teenagers. A detailed acoustic analysis, for which Abu Hamdan produced spectrograms to visualise the sound frequencies, established that they had fired live rounds, and moreover, had tried to disguise these fatal shots to make them sound as if they were rubber bullets. These visualisations later became a crucial piece of evidence, which forced Israel to renounce its original denial.

# Etel Adnan

Leporellos 1999-2012

b. 1925, Lebanon;  
based in California and Paris

Courtesy the artist and  
Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut/Hamburg

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Etel Adnan is a celebrated poet, essayist, publisher and artist. For decades, her paintings, poems and tapestries have meditated on displacement, memory and loss. In novellas such as *Sitt Marie Rose* (1978) and *The Arab Apocalypse* (1989), she has reflected on the Lebanese Civil War (c.1975-90). Dividing her time between Paris, Beirut and California, her works are often shaped by this itinerant life. Adnan's leporellos are accordion-folded booklets that fold out to reveal panoramic landscapes, songs, poems and paintings. When fully extended, some of these beautiful works are more than five metres wide. Adnan often uses these hand-painted books as places for poems, fragments and sketches.

As Adnan has said: "My writing and my paintings do not have a direct connection in my mind. But I am sure they influence each other in the measure that everything we do is linked to whatever we are, which includes whatever we have done or are doing. But in general, my writing is involved with history as it is made (but not only) and my painting is very much a reflection of my immense love for the world, the happiness to just be, for nature, and the forces that shape a landscape."

## Haig Aivazian

b. 1980, Lebanon;  
based in Berlin and Beirut

## *Hastayim Yasiyorum* (I Am Sick But I Am Alive) 2016

Courtesy the artist and  
Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut/Hamburg

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Haig Aivazian is an artist, curator and researcher who is currently developing a multi-part project tracking the ways in which music from the Middle East travels around the world. One episode is *Hastayim Yasiyorum* (I Am Sick But I Am Alive), which takes the form of videos, sculptures, installations, drawings and performances. It reflects on the history of Oriental music, starting from the moment in the 1920s when the modern Turkish Republic was formed out of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Aivazian's starting point is the Turkish-Armenian oud master Udi Hrant Kenkulian (1901-78), who was a significant contributor to *Turk Sanat Muzigi*, or "Turkish Art Music". This hybrid style derived from classical Ottoman music but also incorporated Western influences. It became central to a new and apparently progressive republican identity in modern Turkey.

The late 1920s saw the redevelopment of Taksim Square, in the middle of the European side of Istanbul. During this process, an Armenian cemetery was destroyed, its marble slabs dispersed and integrated into the city's architecture. Istanbul Radio was built on the site of the cemetery, and became a central part of this modernisation project, seeking to develop cultured citizens through the collective act of listening. Kenkulian and his ensemble were often featured on the radio station. Aivazian's works presented here loosely follow in Kenkulian's footsteps, while also tracing the routes of the dispersed stones of the cemetery – a reflection on displacement and amnesia.

# Basma Alsharif

b. 1983, Kuwait;  
based in Los Angeles

## *The Story of Milk and Honey* 2011

Courtesy the artist and  
Galerie Imane Farès



Basma Alsharif was born in Kuwait to Palestinian parents, and grew up between France and the US. For the installation *The Story of Milk and Honey*, she initially wanted to write a love story about the Levant, as though it were a classical Arabic song. However, she found herself conflicted by questions of nationalism and orientalism. This work is installed within an environment that is deliberately synthetic; artificially exoticised, the floor is covered with AstroTurf and dotted with pot plants. Alsharif's video *Milk and Honey* tells two stories: one of lost love; the other of the making of the video itself, and its ultimate failure. It tells of collecting materials in Beirut with the ambition of creating a "fictional love story set in the Middle East devoid of political context." Surrounding this are groups of photographs taken surreptitiously of pedestrians walking along the Corniche, the seaside promenade in Beirut.

*Basma Alsharif, The Story of Milk and Honey, 2011, installation view at Galerie Imane Farès. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Imane Farès*

## Mounira Al Solh

b. 1978, Lebanon;  
based in Beirut and  
the Netherlands

Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler  
Gallery, Beirut/Hamburg

*“My speciality was  
to make a peasant’s  
haircut, but they  
obliged me work  
till midnight often”*

2012-ongoing

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Mounira Al Solh has been adding to her ongoing project *I Strongly Believe in Our Right to Be Frivolous* since 2012. It comprises portraits she has made in a number of cities – including Beirut, Istanbul, Athens and Kassel – of Middle Eastern and North African migrants. The series takes the form of texts, drawings and embroideries. It originally started as what Al Solh calls “time documents” of the Syrian refugees who were forced to escape the war, crossing the border in to Lebanon. For each piece, Al Solh discusses the refugees’ life and recent past. As they are talking, she often sketches and writes on a yellow pad of legal paper. A selection of the encounters are transformed into embroideries, as with the series presented here. These works are concerned with migration and oral history, as they come together in the form of one-to-one encounters. The embroidered portraits are accompanied by written narratives, which the artist has developed from the original interviews. For each person, Al Solh creates specific patterns, which she co-embroiders with women refugees, as well as with people from minority communities in Lebanon.

## Ziad Antar

## *Intensive Beirut II* 2017

b. 1978, Lebanon;  
based in Beirut

Courtesy the artist and  
Selma Feriani Gallery



Ziad Antar is an artist whose work includes video, photography, sculpture and installation. The series of photographs that make up *Intensive Beirut II* were taken from a boat travelling up the coast of Lebanon. They were made using an accordion camera from the 1920s, which produces hazy and out-of-focus visions of the coastline, observed from the Mediterranean. They are dynamic visions, frequently askew, over- or under-exposed, and flecked with scratches. These images of Beirut can feel, by turns, stormy and placid. Antar has written that he thinks of Beirut as a city that is “experienced in the form of a blurred knowledge.” He sees it as an ever-shifting city that “keeps escaping the memory, that lacks the tangible, the concrete... What it leaves you with is a thought; an idea of a city, its vibrancy, its intricacies... and a fiction of it you once created in your imagination before you even encountered it.”

Ziad Antar, from the series *Intensive Beirut II*, 2017, giclée print,  
courtesy of Selma Feriani Gallery

## Marwa Arsanios

b. 1978, USA;  
based in Beirut

## *Falling Is Not Collapsing, Falling Is Extending* 2016

Courtesy the artist and  
mor charpentier



Marwa Arsanios' video *Falling Is Not Collapsing, Falling Is Extending* is an investigation into the changing landscape of Beirut, the city where she lives and works. After the closure of a major municipal landfill site in 2015, thousands of tonnes of rubbish clogged the streets of Beirut. This led to public outcry, protests and accusations of government corruption. Since the 1990s, in the years following the end of Lebanese Civil War, Beirut has been rapidly reshaped by property developers. Using strategically placed rubbish dumps, the surrounding land is devalued and left open for redevelopment. The aftermath of this process is the subject of *Falling Is Not Collapsing, Falling Is Extending*, a portrait of a contested urban environment that connects the crisis with the city's property boom.

Marwa Arsanios, *Falling Is Not Collapsing, Falling Is Extending*, 2016, digital video.  
Courtesy the artist and mor charpentier

## Ania Dabrowska

b. 1973, Poland;  
based in London

Courtesy the artist

## *A Lebanese Archive (with the collection of Diab Alkarssifi, c.1890-1992)*

2013-ongoing

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*A Lebanese Archive* is based on a collection of photographs from across the Arab world. This archive came into the hands of Ania Dabrowska in 2010, while the Polish photographer was doing an artist residency at a hostel for homeless people in Camden. The photographs belonged to Diab Alkarssifi, who had moved to London from Lebanon in the early 1990s, following the end of the Lebanese Civil War (c.1975-90). Alkarssifi had taken thousands of photographs, from his student years, frequent travels, his home city of Baalbek, and in Beirut. His collection also included found images from studios in Syria, Egypt, Palestine, Kuwait and Iraq, which span a century. These images are a selection of all that survives of a much larger collection that is hidden or lost in Lebanon.

The chance encounter between Alkarssifi and Dabrowska led to the archiving of this huge trove, as well as to the development of a new body of work by Dabrowska. She travelled to a number of sites across Lebanon, where the original photographs had been taken, encountering places that were, by turns, unrecognisable or barely different. Dabrowska also explored the material qualities of the archive itself, zooming into details through a microscope, or lingering on semi-abstract sections of certain images. These examinations become mingled here with the original images, which are presented in vitrines and as slideshows.

# Forensic Oceanography

active since 2011;  
based in London

## *Liquid Traces – The Left-to-Die Boat Case* 2014

Courtesy Forensic Oceanography  
(Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani)

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Forensic Oceanography is a research project started by Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani, to document the plight of migrants crossing the “liquid border” of the Mediterranean. *Liquid Traces* is a reconstruction of the events concerning what has come to be known as the “left-to-die boat” case. This refers to the 2011 events in which 72 passengers who left the Libyan coast for the island of Lampedusa on board a small rubber boat were left to drift for two weeks in NATO’s maritime surveillance area. This was despite several distress signals relaying their location, as well as repeated interactions, including visits and encounters with a military helicopter and ship. Only nine people survived.

In reconstructing these events, Forensic Oceanography used the Mediterranean itself as a kind of witness. They did this by using the multiple remote sensing devices used to record and read the sea’s depth and surface. The film *Liquid Traces* takes the form of an animation that, in the words of Forensic Oceanography, “gives form to the Mediterranean’s differential rhythms of mobility that have emerged through the progressive restriction of legal means of access to the EU for certain categories of people.”

# Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige

*ISMYRNE* 2016

b. Lebanon;  
based in Paris

Coproduced by Jeu de Paume (Paris) and  
Sharjah Art Foundation (Sharjah), courtesy  
the artists and In Situ - fabienne leclerc (Paris)



*ISMYRNE* is a film in conversation with the poet and painter Etel Adnan, whose hand-painted foldout books can be seen in this exhibition. Adnan met the artist and filmmaker Joana Hadjithomas more than 15 years ago, and the two quickly became friends. Both of their families were partly from the city of Izmir (once known as Smyrna) on the coast of Turkey, yet neither had ever visited. Adnan was born in Beirut – like Hadjithomas and her collaborator Khalil Joreige – but has spent much of her life in California and Paris. In the film Etel and Joana live out an imaginary Smyrna, without setting foot there. Both are currently engaged with questions around the transmission of history, thinking about their attachment to certain places and fictions.

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, *ISMRYNE*, 2016, HD video still.  
Coproduced by Jeu de Paume (Paris) and Sharjah Art Foundation (Sharjah),  
courtesy the artists and In Situ - fabienne leclerc (Paris)

**Malak Helmy**

b. 1982, Egypt;  
based in Cairo

*Music for Drifting*

2013

Courtesy the artist

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Installed in the stairwell of Nottingham Contemporary, *Music for Drifting* is a 42-minute sound installation comprising recordings made around Egypt. In August 2013, Malak Helmy travelled across the country, accompanied by a homing pigeon equipped with a sound-recording device. They visited a range of often overlooked sites that nevertheless altered history. These included: the site of a pivotal World War II battle; a port that witnessed an exodus of foreign communities in 1956; the location of a planned nuclear power station; the impact site of a meteorite shower. As Helmy says, “I began the journey with a question of dislocation connected both with historical events and losing lovers: where do bearings go when they no longer bear significance?”

*Music for Drifting* was made during a month-long pause in bloodshed between the two regimes that were vying for power in Egypt between 2011 and 2013. Helmy’s project was to conclude with her recordings – which are mostly of wind – being delivered by pigeon to the artist’s former partner in Cairo. However, this final flight “home” was never completed, as it was to take place on 14 August 2013, the date of the military coup, which in some senses marked the end of the Egyptian uprising.

## Hiwa K

b. 1975, Iraqi Kurdistan;  
based in Berlin

## *This Lemon Tastes of Apple* 2011

Courtesy the artist, KOW Berlin  
and prometeogallery di Ida Pisani,  
Lucca/Milano

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Hiwa K is an artist and musician who, in fleeing Iraq in the 1990s, travelled to Europe on foot. In 2011, Hiwa visited his home city of Sulaymaniyah in Iraqi Kurdistan. This was during a period of protests across the region, which saw around a dozen civilian deaths and hundreds of people injured in clashes with the militia. On 17 April, Hiwa joined a demonstration with friends, armed only with instruments. Slowly, they begin to play Ennio Morricone's well-known theme for the film *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968). The tense phrase is both a signal of protest and a call to continue; within moments, the protesters are violently dispersed. Hiwa did not plan to document the performance. In fact, the cameraman only sent him the video after the protest. It is intentionally not subtitled, so, in Hiwa's words, "the viewer feels more in charge and physically involved." The day of his intervention was the last day before public demonstrations were prohibited in the region.

The video's enigmatic title, *This Lemon Tastes of Apple*, refers to Saddam Hussein's genocidal use of gas against the Kurds. In 1988, Saddam's forces attacked a number of Kurdish settlements and the gas was commonly described as smelling like apples. This smell continues to have strong associations in the political memory of the country. When, during the 2011 demonstrations, the Kurdish regional government deployed tear gas, protesters bit into lemons to counteract the gas. These two tastes - lemons and apples - form a bridge across two decades in the region.

**Jumana Manna**

b. 1987, USA;  
based in Berlin

*A Magical Substance  
Flows Into Me* 2015

Courtesy the artist and CRG Art Inc.,  
New York. Co-commissioned by the  
Sharjah Art Foundation with Chisenhale Gallery  
with Malmo Konsthall and the Biennale of Sydney

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*A Magical Substance Flows Into Me* is a feature-length film that grew out of Jumana Manna's research into the work of a German-Jewish ethnomusicologist named Robert Lachmann (1892–1939). While attempting to establish an archive of Oriental music in Jerusalem, Lachmann worked for the Palestine Broadcasting Service, a radio station established under the British Mandate (1920–48). In the late 1930s, Lachmann aired a radio show called *Oriental Music*, which featured live performances and explored various vernacular traditions.

80 years on, Manna mimics Lachmann's footsteps, seeking representatives of the myriad communities he recorded with: Kurds, Moroccans and Yemenite Jews, Samaritans, members of urban and rural Palestinian communities, Bedouins and Coptic Christians. Replaying Lachmann's original recordings to these musicians, Manna invites them to perform. These encounters are intercut with scenes of Manna and her parents in their family home in East Jerusalem. *A Magical Substance Flows Into Me* traces links between physically and culturally segregated communities, while also questioning ethnography's fixation on authenticity and categorisation. Throughout the film, Manna aims to show how identities are intertwined.

*A Stage For Any Sort  
Of Any Revolutionary  
Play* 2016

Courtesy artist and CRG Art Inc., New York.



*A Stage For Any Sort of Revolutionary Play* is a series of plaster and body-like vessels. As Manna says “Listening collapses the division of self and other, or of singular and plural, or inside and outside. [...] This idea of the body as a medium and as a place of resonance has been something that has followed me throughout the making of these works. The sculptures are vessels, similar to our bodies, that may be filled with fluids, air or sound; sound is taking place in space but is also spreading within us.”

Jumana Manna, *A Stage For Any Sort of Revolutionary Play*, 2016.  
Courtesy of the artist and CRG Gallery (New York). Photo Tony Hafkenscheid.

## Joe Namy

b. 1978, USA;  
based in London and Beirut

Courtesy the artist

## *Purple, Bodies in Translation – Part II of A Yellow Memory from a Yellow Age* 2017

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Joe Namy's work is often engaged with the unexpected turns of musical history. He has made projects that delve into the overlaps between the musical, military and automobile industries, examining the intertwined politics of sound and conflict. Namy has written scores for construction workers to play with jackhammers and pneumatic drills, and his performances often take place on the street rather than in galleries.

Joe Namy's immersive installation comprises a single colour: purple. This is projected onto a mirrored screen, in which viewers see themselves reflected within the subtitled frame. The work follows two accounts from translators describing the challenges of their work in Syria. The first, Lina Mounzer, reads an excerpt from her 2016 essay "War in Translation: Giving Voice to the Women of Syria." Next, Stefan Tarnowski describes the intricacies of working with Abounaddara, an anonymous Syrian film collective who, since 2011, have been freely releasing weekly videos on Vimeo and Facebook. Interwoven with these two accounts are various fragments – of poems, songs and essays – about purple as a kind of feeling.

# Red Filled the Intervals... Between the Musical Notes

2012/17

Courtesy the artist



This work, presented in the street-facing window of Nottingham Contemporary, began life as a series of prints. These grew out of Namy's research into the history of the photography of music at the Arab Image Foundation in Beirut, a small but important non-profit that was established by artists in 1997. With a holding of more than 600,000 images, its mission is to collect, preserve and study photographs from the Middle East, North Africa and the Arab diaspora. Here, Namy has expanded his original work, an annotated meditation on the history and relationship between photography and music. A red scrim hangs in the window, printed with a bass clef, turning viewers into part of the work, enfolding them into an expanded piece of music, punctuated with wide-ranging annotations.

## Setareh Shahbazi

b. 1978, Iran;  
based in Berlin

*Spectral Days* 2013

*Something Always Falls* 2015/16

Courtesy the artist and  
Gypsum Gallery.

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Setareh Shahbazi's prints, drawings and sculptures often begin with photographs. These can be from family photo albums, snapshots taken by the artist, film stills, postcards or newspaper clippings. Shahbazi digitally manipulates her source images, layering and reordering them into often dream-like collages of different places and times. The series *Spectral Days*, for example, a selection of which are included here, grew out of a trove of family photographs she re-discovered in Tehran in the summer of 2009. Taken between 1978 and 1985, these intimate snapshots document trips to the countryside, parties and childhood games. Scanned, and reworked, they offer a fragmental and almost psychedelic reflection on the time before her family's exile from Iran.

Setareh Shahbazi, *Something Always Falls (Bint El Chark)*, 2015,  
Pigmented ink print on rice paper. Image courtesy the artist and Gypsum Gallery.



## Raed Yassin

b.1979, Lebanon;  
based in Beirut

*Ruins in Space* 2014

*Disco* 2010

*Karaoke* 2015

Courtesy Kalfayan Galleries,  
Athens - Thessaloniki.

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Raed Yassin is an artist and musician, who initially studied theatre in Beirut. He runs the record label Annihaya Records and is one half of the band Praed, with Paed Conca, whose work has been described as a mixture of Arabic popular music, electronics and free jazz. In both music and artwork, Yassin examines personal histories and broader political narratives, often through the lens of pop culture.

*Ruins in Space* is about the legendary Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum (c.1898-1975). Her concerts were broadcast weekly on national radio and, so the story goes, the whole of Cairo would grind to a halt whenever she sang. When she died, four million people attended her funeral. Yassin's playful work imagines that a record by Umm Kulthum has been sent into space, and follows a chain of connections about cultural crossovers in the age of the Space Race. Nearby, the video *Disco* tells the story of the artist's father, a passionate music fan and fashion designer who left his family to find work in Egypt, where he eventually became an actor in horror films. This real-life family history quickly spirals into fiction, as the father becomes the Egyptian film star Mahmoud Yassin (who happens to share the same surname). Also on display, *Karaoke* is a tale of motherhood, memory and loss.

**Shirin Yousefi**

b.1986, Iran;  
based in Lausanne

*The Tales of  
the Cortex* 2017

Courtesy the artist

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Installed at three different points throughout the exhibition, Shirin Yousefi's *The Tales of the Cortex* is a sensory work comprising sounds and fragrances. The work is an attempt to evoke a journey across the Kurdish region of the Middle East, travelling through Turkey, Kurdistan, Syria, Iran and Iraq. This is a journey that Yousefi herself has not made; instead, she developed the work in collaboration with a perfumer, from looking at films and photographs by friends. *The Tales of the Cortex* imagines the scents and sounds of different places – a bazaar, horses in grassy meadows, the harsh sounds of a busy street. The work's title refers to the region of the brain that plays a key role in memory, perception, cognition and language.

# Nottingham Contemporary



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المستودع العربي للفنون والفنون - أافي

Exhibition circle: White Cube, Gypsum Gallery

Cover image: Joe Namy, detail from *Red Filled the Intervals... Between the Musical Notes*, 2012