

## Theatrical Assemblage in Lawrence Abu Hamdan's *45th Parallel*.

### [SLIDE 1]

I would like to offer a further example of what Adrian has called the potential 'investigative criticality' of theatre, arguing further that "theatrical form isn't limited to the aesthetic representation of events as 'events'" but through employing theatrical activations and assemblages - such as the gallery installation - it might explicate the political potentiality of an 'aesthetics of absence'.

I will focus on how the scenographic devices of Abu Hamdan's work - painted backdrops, sonic framing, installation - combine with the techniques of acting and performance - direct address, narration, storytelling - to enable scenes of political violence and oppression to be played out to activate the reappearance of the protagonists, the real protagonists, of the stories being told. The reappearance of these people and stories has a political efficacy: to give voice, to make visible, to show.

### 1. Backdrop

We enter a dark space in Spike Island Gallery, Bristol, UK. [SLIDE 2]. There is a distant set of sounds: a calm, authoritative voice telling a story and the haunting resonance of a pedal slide guitar. Something is happening. The gallery wall label reads: Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *45th Parallel* (2022), Video, colour, sound, black curtains, two painted backdrops, 15 minutes. I have always enjoyed how gallery labels distil a work into its materially constituent parts; this is what it is, this is what you will see, this is how long it will take to see it.<sup>[1]</sup> There is an opening between two large black curtains that frames a huge painted theatrical backdrop. [SLIDE 3] The backdrop shows an aerial view of Damascus - the capital of Syria - and its surrounding landscape. It is rendered in daubs of paint and gestural lines. The city streets and districts are suggested by purple swipes and a landscape stretches out behind it

showing the strata of rock and rivers, our eyes landing on a snow-capped mountain range in the distance. Wisps of smoke dot the scene, emanating from the hill sides and land north of the city. We have the perspective of a bird - or as it becomes clear - the viewpoint of a military drone surveying the scene. Traversing this backdrop another painted scene comes into view. [SLIDE 4] This time we see a large expanse of concrete, an underpass, we think. Moving further into the space, we settle on a bench facing the opposite side of the image. Projected directly onto the back of the painted material is a film. [SLIDE 5]

The film focuses on the Haskell Free Library and Opera House, a building constructed in 1904 on the United States and Canadian border, to symbolically mark the dividing line between the two countries. The building was created as an educational and cultural centre of the border communities that are located on the 45th parallel in Rock Island, Quebec and Derby Line, Vermont. It is accessible from both countries, although only from one entrance on the US side. Visitors entering from Canada must leave from the same entrance and pass along a pathway around the side of the building. A US border guard sits watching in a car outside. The Opera House auditorium sits in the US, the stage in Canada. [SLIDE 6] The camera tracks a thick black line painted on the floor demarcating the border, dividing the library collections and “creating the only cross border theatre in the world, where audiences and actors are in different countries” (Wall Text, Spike Island). The building is both performative and unsettlingly actualised. The symbolism is deliberate and embraced but the politics are real, and really felt.

The film is narrated, directly to camera, by the Danish-Palestinian film director Madhdi Fleifel. [SLIDE 7] Fleifel occupies rooms and spaces throughout the Library and Opera house, gesturing calmly in both close up and at a remove, accentuating the architecture, objects and environment of the space. [SLIDE 8] He tells the story of a recent border crossing on the US - Mexico border, activating the political reality of the site to stage and recount the real story of a fatal cross-border shooting: Hernández vs Mesa. In 2019, a US

Supreme Court Judge ordered that a US border patrol guard (Jesus Mesa Jr) could not be tried for the murder of the 15 year old teenager (Sergio Adrian Hernández) as he died in Mexico and the bullet was fired from the US. Fleifel stands on one side of the thick black border line in the Opera House and extends his hand out as if holding a gun over the border line, the camera sees him from the dress circle overhead, accentuating the proximity. [SLIDE 9] He says, "Though Agent Mesa's firearm was stretched out into Mexican territory, his feet were three inches behind the American border," (Abu Hamdan 2022). The judge ruled that technically, the murder happened on Mexican soil, and therefore Mesa could not be tried by a US court. The Supreme Court Judge ruled that if this case was to proceed, it would set a precedent in which the logic of the trigger and the impact could be used to prosecute countless US drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen, Afghanistan and many more locations. Fleifel states that as many as "91,340 drone strikes" (Abu Hamdan 2022) could therefore be tried in the US and the case would have serious ramifications for US foreign policy and military prowess. At this moment, towards the end of the film, the political implications, hypocrisy and brutality of border politics is pulled sharply into view. Abu Hamdan and Fleifel navigate these horizon lines; from the localised reality of the Haskell Free Library and Opera House; the individual tragedy of Hernández vs Mesa; and the expanded landscape of the United States' theatre of war; to create an activation of spectator experience between the personal and the political, a tracing of a ripple effect that impacts institutional structures of border control and oppression.

The film continues Abu Hamdan's practice of investigative aesthetics - a self-described "private ear" (Abu Hamdan 2016:134) - who uses techniques of reenactment, sound design and theatrical devices to uncover and explore real world politics and situations. Abu Hamdan uses the symbolism and gestural demarcation of the library and opera house to theatrically stage the political hypocrisy - through the symbolic nature of borders and border violence, not via a directly representational theatrical reenactment of the story of Hernández vs Mesa, but through drawing attention to the transformation of the symbolic to the real. The actors of

the scene - Hernández vs Mesa - appear through their absence and animate the institutional apparatuses that inform and impact on their story.

In Abu Hamdan's configuration, the theatre - in this case the Opera House and theatricality of the Haskell Free Library - is presented as a scenario machine, oscillating between presence and representation, both through the symbolic stories that it tells and the reality of the families that attend the site to visit each other without visas. In the *45th Parallel* the past and future are made present, not just through the symbolic mechanisms of theatrical representation, but activated in the reality of the Haskell Free Library and Opera House and the gallery space of the spectator *now*, opening out a relation of what Abu Hamdan might call a "sensorial politics of experience" (2021:132) through the sonic and visual reframing of the stories told.

## 2. Long Shot

### [SLIDE 10]

The *45th Parallel* is an investigation in long shot, both localised and specific but also expanding a landscape of cause and effect. This form of investigation, rather than following the detective paradigm of tracing clues (although these are important) it instead centres on the aesthetics of the contexts and events involved - materiality, atmosphere, memories, tastes, surfaces, sounds etc - as part of a phenomenology of experience. In this context, as Fuller and Weizman state, "*aesthetics* [...] concerns the experience of the world. It involves *sensing* - the capacity to register or to be affected, and *sense-making* - the capacity for such sensing to become knowledge of some kind." (2021:33). The shift from sensing to sense-making is where the political efficacy of Abu Hamdan's form of investigative aesthetics resides. By employing participants' aesthetic experiences (be that through sound, virtual reality, image, and environment construction and so on) new testimony to events can be

revealed. This transforms the artist's studio into a “space for elaboration, imagination, composition. It is a kitchen for play, attentiveness, free association and the perverse” (2021:213). The studio and subsequently the exhibition context enables artists (along with scientists, journalists, designers etc.) to undertake the “work of moving between hypotheses and reality, cultivating attention to reality while constituting it.” (2021:216).

This methodology of practice allows the aestheticisation of exhibitions and artworks to be led by the investigative process and creates an encounter that maintains the integrity and dignity of the experiences of the subjects of the work. In *45th Parallel* this enables not only a centering of the subjects of the stories - the unnamed daily visitors to the Haskell Free Library and Opera House, Hernández and Mesa and so on - but also the non-human actors at play in the events or contexts. These non-human actors include the library building itself, both symbol and actualisation of a border space; the gun used by Mesa in the shooting; the concrete culvert in El Paso-Juarez where the 2010 shooting took place, rendered as another painted backdrop; the drone's eye view of Damascus with dissipating smoke from missile strikes and so on. This enables the spectator to construct a new aesthetic experience - their own sense-making - in relation to the materials made present. A theatre where the human is displaced. A theatre of absent actors.

### **3. Focus**

*“Beyond the theatre, the concept of theatricality points to the constructedness of everyday life. Theatrical forms make visible how our realities are often staged, and also the ways in which our histories are constructed and performed.”*

(Ute Meta Bauer 2016)

The theatrical frame of the proscenium is operating throughout *45th Parallel*, not only as a mirroring to the architecture of the Haskell Free Library Opera house but in focusing the

experience of the encounter for the spectator. The black curtains at the entrance, opening out to frame the stage backdrop, leads the spectator to the main viewing area of the space. The camera is the next frame, as it moves and orientates the view and perspective of Fleifel's narration and storytelling, tracking the thick black border line through the spaces, past the shelves of books in the library and through the closed wooden seats of the auditorium. When the context of the space is complete - the set-up - the gallery audience is placed in the auditorium of the Opera house itself. [SLIDE 11] It is a simple archetype of a Venetian Opera House, gesturing towards that architecture with baroque mouldings and a line of fake candle footlights. It is a space that performs its status as a theatre, it stands in for the 'original' theatrical space of the European Opera House. What comes into view is a series of layered representations. Theatrical representations are the first: Italian stage machines that drop scenic backdrops from above and play at being an opera house. Once this convention is established, the theatre machine can tell its story. Abu Hamden utilises the artificiality and conceit of how theatre can present representations to create distance, an alienation from the violence and hypocrisy of the story being told.

The first backdrop to appear is an original Opera House backdrop used in the space of a traditional Venice Canal, setting the visual language of the flatten stage image. These are then followed by two newly commissioned painted backdrops, one of the aerial views of Damasus, referencing a 1920 painting by British artist Richard Carline (1896 - 1980) and the second of the concrete culvert in El Paso-Juarez where the 2010 cross border shooting took place. The backdrops are revealed performatively by being slowly rolled up to reveal the next. [SLIDE 12] The camera focuses on this action, the gradual rolling of canvas - material on material - to reveal the new image underneath. There is something anti-theatrical about this gesture, it is not done with a flourish or a sense of grandeur, but draws attention to the surface of the painting, the materiality of the image itself. The appearance of the backdrops is accompanied by the strains of a pedal guitar performed on stage. Accentuating a further anti-theatricality, the guitar's sound suggests a theatrical framing but does so without the

operatic grandeur one might expect. By rendering the scenes of violence in this gestural mode and form of theatre's machinery, Abu Hamdan is utilising "theatricality as a tool to engage with reality" (Ute Meta Bauer 2016: 9). Theatricality is being evoked in this context not as a model of excess or heightened representation of the story, but as an underplayed anti-theatrical gesture.

Meta Bauer considers how theatricality might activate territory between fiction and reality, or what Fuller and Weizman might call the relation between sensing and sense-making: "the notion of theatricality instigates reflection on how we experience reality in art and how fiction unfolds in reality. Theatricality provides us with a tool to interfere in what determines reality rather than accept as a given that things cannot be changed. Through theatricality, the *viewer* transforms into an *acteur*." (Ute Meta Bauer 2016:20). In this configuration the spectator becomes a political actor - of acting, or not acting - in relation to the images, stories or ideas they are encountering. Because theatricality holds the potential to traverse fiction and reality - such as the represented painted backdrop of the concrete culvert and the real space and reality of what happened there - it opens a space of uncertainty and critique for the spectator. As Meta Bauer continues, "as an ongoing dialogue between theory and practice, theatricality can serve as a tool to scrutinise the political in the construction of a culture and its history." (2016: 16) and furthermore "...if we see the theatrical in politics, we can better understand how to intervene in what we perceive as status quo" (2016:20). Abu Hamdan takes the theatrical seriously in *45th Parallel*, drawing its potential to activate the spectator firstly from the architecture of the space in which the film is set - a theatre - and secondly from the devices the theatre uniquely processes to operate as a storytelling machine.

[SLIDE 13]

Abu Hamdan describes *45th Parallel* as “highlighting how borders are not just lines but, rather, richly layered spaces, the changing backdrops draw attention to the film's underlying questions about shifting perspectives and vantage points.” (Abu Hamdan 2023). What *45th Parallel* presents to the spectator is not a singular perspective - Abu Hamdan's or Fleifel's - but a series of speculations, recounted events and half constructed realities. In the mode of Investigative Aesthetics, what is produced is not a perspective, but a set of connections constructed by the objects, film, sound, and stories in the space in relation to the spectator - theatrically - as ‘*actuer*’. What is constructed is a shifting set of scenarios, of possibilities as much as certainties, of a recounting of materials from past events, in the present, to enable the thinking of possible futures.

As we make our way out of the gallery, through the curtains and back through the darkness, *45th Parallel* appears to present the protagonists of the film, the visitors to the Haskell Free Library and Opera House - from either side of the border - as being trapped in the scenario machine of border politics, appearing again at the scene of their own disappearance. They occupy what Abu Hamdan describes as the “grey zone” (2023) of the border, a purgatory that is formed from the decisions and actions of the past, promises of the future, but is uniquely felt, violently, in the present. As Diana Taylor suggests of the performances of Commedia dell’arte, “while the actors tested the limits of the scenario, suggesting alternative possibilities and outcomes, at the end of the play they returned to the conventional endings and assumed worldview.” (2016:136). Once again, Abu Hamdan shifts the assemblage of the theatre and theatrical convention away from the metaphorical and utilises it to draw attention to the real and how this might be traversed and transformed. As Taylor continues, “a look at scenarios and simulation point to some ways in which performance practices reactivate the past, rehearse the future, and produce a new ‘real’.” (2016:134).



## References

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[1] Laurence Abu Hamdan *45th Parallel* (2022) Spike Island, Bristol. Saturday 8 October 2022 to Sunday 29 January 2023