fORUM: Lawrence Abu Hamdan with Tina Sherwell

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Speakers: Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Tina Sherwell, Tairone Bastien, Aamna Muzaffar

Host: Mercer Union, a centre for contemporary art

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For more information visit: https://www.mercerunion.org/programs/forum-lawrence-abu-hamdan-tina-sherwell

AAMNA MUZAFFAR: Hello everyone thank you for joining us, we had a bit of a late start. People are still coming in but in the interest of time we'll get started. Just a note that live captioning is available; please send a message in the chat if you need assistance in enabling it. I'd like to start by thanking the Toronto Biennial of Art for co-presenting today's fORUM conversation between Lawrence Abu Hamdan and Tina Sherwell, as well as TD Bank Group for supporting our 2021-22 Online Engagements.

My name is Aamna Muzaffar and I am the Assistant Curator at Mercer Union. I'm joining you today from Toronto, where I have come to reside as an uninvited guest on the traditional territory of the Anishinaabe; the Haudenosaunee; and the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. Today, the meeting place of Toronto is home to many Indigenous peoples from across Turtle Island; and as we're meeting online, I ask that you take a moment to acknowledge the rightful stewards of the land in which you are situated.

Today's fORUM is an accompaniment to the current exhibition at Mercer Union by Lawrence Abu Hamdan, titled *45th Parallel*. This ambitious film and installation commission is collaboratively developed with the Toronto Biennial of Art, and is co-curated by the Biennial's Tairone Bastien and Mercer Union's Julia Paoli. As a project developed over many years of dialogue between the artist, and countless collaborators and partners, it is a truly special achievement to finally share Lawrence's film with our publics near and far, and to extend on that today with a deeper dive and critical reflection on the themes and questions at the centre of this exhibition.

With that, it is my pleasure to introduce today's speakers: Lawrence Abu Hamdan is a "Private Ear." Born in Amman, Jordan, his interest in sound and politics originates from a background as a touring musician and facilitator of DIY music. His audio investigations have been used as evidence at the UK Asylum and Immigration Tribunal and as advocacy for organizations such as Amnesty International. Lawrence has exhibited at the 58th Venice Biennale; the 13th and 14th Sharjah Biennial; the 11th Gwangju Biennale; and Tate Modern in London. As part of a temporary collective with nominated artists Helen Cammock, Oscar Murillo and Tai Shani, he was awarded the 2019 Turner Prize.

Joining Lawrence in conversation is Tina Sherwell, visiting Professor of Art and Art History at NYU Abu Dhabi. From 2017–2021, she was Head of Contemporary Visual Art at Birzeit University, prior to which she was Director of the International Academy of Art, Palestine. She has authored various texts on contemporary Palestinian art and in 2019 curated the major exhibition, *Intimate Terrains: Representations of a Disappearing Landscape* at The Palestinian Museum, Birzeit. Tina is also the author of 'A Pair of Boots', the critical essay accompanying Lawrence's exhibition at Mercer Union.

Following their conversation, Tairone Bastien will join us to moderate an expanded discussion and Q&A, so hold on to your questions as they come up and let's begin today's fORUM. Please join me in welcoming Lawrence Abu Hamdan and Tina Sherwell–welcome to you both!

LAWRENCE ABU HAMDAN: Hello!

TINA SHERWELL: Hello, thank you very much for that introduction!

LAWRENCE: Yes, thank you so much. And thank you to everyone, Aamna, Julia and Beatrice, everybody at Mercer Union, thank you Tairone Bastien and everyone at Toronto Biennial too. Thank you very much for the invitation and collaboration.

TINA: Okay, so we'll get started to discuss this fantastic new film you've done, Lawrence. In the *45th Parallel* you use the site of the library and opera house to explore how seemingly disparate spaces are implicated within each other, and how presumably sterile and mundane non-spaces of borders are in fact deeply layered sites in which questions of

visibility, invisibility and fields of vision, have fatal consequences. I wonder if you could speak to this question of the space of the library and border spaces.

LAWRENCE: For those who haven't seen the work, it's a portrait of a library that's also an opera house. The ground floor is a library and the first floor is an opera house. So it's not that it's just a random place; in the film I'm playing with strange discrepancy between the two functions of the site. It feels like an awkward jump into a parallel world when we enter the opera house, and that's kind of intentional to how you feel when you go there. Downstairs is a mundane library, the building is kind of nice-ish, old, turn-of-the-century building, if that's your kind of thing—it's not my kind of thing. But you know, it's alright.

The weird thing about the building is it has this line [*points to Zoom background featuring the film 45th Parallel (2022)*] Ooh, that you just saw cutting through it, which is in fact the US-Canadian border. It was actually built on purpose to straddle that border line. And at the time of its building, it was a symbolic act. It was built in 1904 by this Haskell family, and it was a symbolic act to make a kind of gesture. [*Points to Zoom background*] There's the border going through. It's demarcated by electrical tape, actually. You're in this site of dual jurisdiction. Though the borderline cuts through the building, and in the opera house, absurdly, it cuts the audience from the stage, so the stage is in Canada, and the audience are in the US. Though de jure that's the case, once you're inside the building it's like the border doesn't exist. You can really have entered from the same door from Canada and the US, it's not like it has two different doors. You both enter from the same door, but from different sides. The US kind of cross the road, Canadians enter from the sidewalk. Even though the door is technically in the US, anyone can enter, and once inside there is no—you're crossing the border all the time. You're browsing the books or moving through the stalls and theatre but you are crossing a symbolic line.

It is interesting, this idea that at one point this was simply symbolic, that this was a gesture between communities who were friendly, where borders were seemingly decided in a very different context than they are today. Then of course post-9/11, the building suddenly becomes under siege. I think technically they can't change the context of the building because of agreements they had when they actually formed the border itself. They can't really change the use of this building or they may have to give back Alaska or something, so there's some stakes involved in keeping this a dual jurisdiction site. Even though it's not a desirable symbolic act anymore in this contemporary landscape post-9/11 but whatever,

borders have been stiffening whether or not that was the catalyst, so this building is kind of under siege. You have a US border guard outside all the time with the engine running, just idling his car, moves a little from here to there, I don't know why. You see him triangulate around the building, most of the time very close, just outside, and of course, looking at who's going in and using that space. The space itself has moved from something symbolic to functional. On the one hand, it's a functioning library, and functioning in an extremely mundane way, in fact. It's a banal, run-of-the-mill lending library with not such a great collection of books—sorry if anyone from Haskell is listening. That's what really attracted me to the site, because it was in one way, extremely exceptional and other way, extremely mundane. I think those kinds of sites and stories are really good at allowing us access to quite complicated, embodied political violence, in many ways. I'm very much attracted to those sites anyway, and so I loved that when I first went there on a site visit with Tairone, actually, we walked in and we were mesmerized by this line going through the space. There was someone was behind us, and he was clearly a regular user of the library, and he kind of shushed us, a "get out the way" kind of thing, you tourists coming to see that stupid line! Just let me get my books. So immediately that tension was there between the mundane and exceptional, it enacted itself as soon as we walked into the space.

TINA: Such an anomaly. When you're speaking about it being porous, and how borders have become so concrete and so defined, the regularities and regulations around them, and this being a symbolic gesture. It's hard to imagine borders in that way after all we've been experiencing.

LAWRENCE: In that sense it is an anomaly. What's sad is that even libraries are increasingly anomalous spaces in general, I think that's also what I was interested in part in telling this story, because they are also under siege, in general. In the UK, in the context which I know best, they were the first thing to be annihilated in the first conservative austerity measures. The first thing was just libraries everywhere shutting down. I don't think it's a coincidence that those are the places where the belt is tightened, because they are inherently anti-capitalist spaces, whether they are explicitly that or not. They are places where there is free exchange of knowledge, free exchange of materials and books, without any necessity to buy. Spaces where you can spend hours without necessity to consume. The only libraries that survive adapted to some necessity to consume, they had cafés and whatever. That was also interesting for me. It wasn't just about the free space that has been under siege but that

place, the idea of the free library. It all seemed increasingly anachronistic, butting against a contemporary that was quite brutal.

These are all the reasons why I ended up there, plus, of course, the stories that I knew going there. We went after the Muslim ban, when this library had a very functional use. It was a place where, let's say, you couldn't get a US visa because you're from Sudan, Iran or Somalia or from the 12 countries banned by Trump. Let's say you had relatives or friends inside, you wanted to meet someone or have a business meeting, whatever you wanted to do became impossible, so people would meet in this library. Let's say you're from Somalia, or Iran and you are living in... this place, I must say now, the Haskell Free Library is more known in Tehran than it is in Canada. When I presented this film in Canada, more people were like "I've never heard of this place, I've never seen it." But when you talk to Iranians [laughs] and you go to Tehran, they are all like "oh yeah, that library, the one that's useful right now." If you can't leave because you won't be let back in—let's say you have an Iranian passport but you're living in the US—you can't leave because you're worried you won't be let back in. You then don't want to leave the US, so the only way to meet people is if they can get a Canadian visa, and you can both meet in this library in the middle of nowhere. The first thing you come across are these big "no eating" signs. That was a measure the library had to put in place, as they explained to us in the first site visit, that essentially it was becoming difficult for them to manage because, of course, there were these big family gatherings, and people bringing food through. They were also clinging onto the library as a space that was about books and learning, and exchange of knowledge and literature, over this other thing that it was becoming because of this spatial and legal anomaly that the building was. There was this kind of struggle; that's what the last line in the film was about. It's a quote from one of the librarians: Yeah, don't eat, but I can't say don't talk, because famously you don't talk in libraries, but we had to make an exception because I don't want to shush you when you haven't seen your grandmother in forever, she said. It seemed to me that it was this very unlikely space which was dealing with a lot of these geo-political conditions.

TINA: It really speaks to the inventiveness of people particularly caught in these kinds of rubics of the fortress cultures of nation states and the questions of borders. The way in which people are so inventive to try and find solutions in these border spaces. You've also got this coming up in your other works, such as *This Whole Time There Were No Landmines*. This idea of how people are inventive in border spaces.

LAWRENCE: That's a really good point, Tina. I think there is something of a shared portrait that's going on in those two works of border sites, but I don't think it's this inventiveness. That's a really great point, but I would say what was really important for me in the kind of "shouting valley" area, which is the area of the occupied Golan Heights annexed from Syria in 1967 by Israel, and basically families gathering on either side of a valley and kind of communicating across to one another. What was really important to me about that story was not that people were shouting to each other, and it was like a space of liberation against the border. What was really interesting to me is that in 2011, when there was an uprising in Syria, and that border was in fact breached by Syrian-Palestinian protesters, Palestinians living in Syria. That border, known for continual transfer of the voice across its path, it was there because it had this symbolic meaning as a place that was being transgressed. Yet when those people came there to breach the border, who were not a part of those divided communities, they broke it down. They broke the border down. And what were those voices on both sides of the border doing, when they were breaking it down? They were telling them stop, they weren't telling them "Go! Yeah, let's break the border!", they were telling them "Stop"!

You understood in that moment, that voice that was crossing the border, it created a kind of fissure that eventually cracked the border open. But actually, it was also supporting the border, it was fluid enough. At some point it was maintaining a status quo, and actually setting that border in its own way, and I found that really important. It was doing both, breaking the border and sedimenting it. I think that spoke to me much more about how complicated it is to live in those communities and to exist in those spaces, more than just the idea of a kind of liberating shriek across the border, a salutation. It's the same thing that's going on here, right? It is this, but it's also not. I think I'm really attracted to these spaces where the cracks are, and aware that those cracks are not really as they seem and they can really quickly invert themselves. And if I may tell a story a bit of the behind-the-scenes of making this film, we were very encouraged by the staff to make that film. They had come off the Muslim ban, they were very much interested in telling the story that was going on in the library. But there was a change of hands, and they became quite hostile to us making this film in the end, and telling this story, and insisting that they didn't want anyone to know about the space, putting on the website "no cross-border meetings allowed." Of course, they couldn't enforce that, because how can you? There was a way in which this place as well was becoming increasingly hostile to its own story. I'm not really trying to make

a direct analogy between those two things, but I think it is interesting to see how these spaces open, contract, close.

TINA: Yes, they're not static, they're always in this transformation, they're always in these transformative states, often in quite short periods of time that they'll be changing. And the communities who use them also, we can't really lump them all together. It's not a case that it's the united front, as you were describing with the other work. It isn't that they're all on the same side, and are all for this, it isn't that case at all. With communities in this situation, there are multiple positions there too. Those cracks are really intriguing and their temporality as well, as you said, just changing in the course of you making the film.

LAWRENCE: Another connection between those two works is that there is this sort of line, a threshold between the symbolic and the real that keeps getting pushed up against. There's a moment when in order to stop those protesters breaking down the border, the divided communities are shouting "there's landmines, there's landmines!" This whole time they were sitting away from each other shouting, thinking there was this explosive force between them, that the border line was ready to blow should they cross with anything but their voice. And yet, when these people came over and just kind of crossed, there was no landmines. You're kind of waiting for this explosion when they're shouting "there's mines!" When in fact, there wasn't. It is also about this imagination of the border, the embodied violence of it.

TINA: It becomes mythic, and actually when you get to borders, they're actually really, not mundane but…they're mythic in their tensions, but actually if we look at their materiality…

LAWRENCE: They're absurd as well, that's the point, they're entirely absurd. I find it hard to find another example of something that's so absurd and so lethal at the same time, you know? Maybe there are many others and people would know them but I think when you are in that site in that film, that's what I was trying to access. It's entirely absurd that there's a line going through this building that is supposed to signify the distinction between two nations. We could go on, but also the absurdity is what makes it so much more brutal, in a way, when you start understanding what these lines are capable of. It's not that it's impossible that place could just explode in landmines, in fact we expect it, and that's why it doesn't need landmines. This whole relation between the symbolic and brutally real is very much a story I wanted to tell around these sites, because I do think that's really what's characteristic of the violence, rather than them just being lines. It's all of these things

happening at once and them playing out in these different spaces. In one of the stories I'm telling in this film, it's no different. The story of the Mesa-Hernández case where a US border agent shoots a Mexican teenager. He's standing on the border line, but the bullet crosses and kills Sergio Hernández. Those were teenagers just playing, running up and down a culvert that was entirely exposed.

TINA: That kind of concrete space, that was dried up because of the weather and the heat, and it wouldn't have been a playground otherwise for them. Hanging out and wasting time like teenagers in that kind of space, and how it becomes absolutely fatal in that instant.

LAWRENCE: Exactly, where you make your free space. Playing on that line was lethal, more lethal than they expected. That's the thing, this film, for those who don't know it, becomes a site: Haskell. It's not just a portrait of that space, it's using that site in its symbolic and real, horrible and absurd potential to tell stories of other such cross-border incidents, overlaid.

TINA: While you were speaking the backdrops have been passing [in the Zoom background featuring the film]. They are fascinating, the different backdrops you have in this piece, both in a reference to theatrical space, but also the different viewpoints you've chosen to have as the backdrops that you've set for each act.

LAWRENCE: So I'm told—I don't know if this is true—the scene painter is actually with us, so shoutout to Alisa Simonel-Keegan of Keegansmission, who do scene backdrop painting for theatre… hi!

TINA: [Laughs] They're just saying hi to us [in the chat].

LAWRENCE: It's fantastic to have you with us, and it would be great to hear from you later. These backdrops—

TINA: Here they are!

LAWRENCE: Yes, here they are [*pointing to Zoom background with the film*], these are the painted ones that we commissioned for the shoot, and there is an existing one which is Venice, which is in the opera house. It's historically been there since the beginning—I could be wrong about that. At least it's been there a long time and it's continuously restored. It

was really crazy for me, going into that theatre, knowing that you are standing in the US, looking at a stage in Canada, and then there's a scene of Venice. And that's what got me into
it got me into this idea of the portal, of parallel worlds, these worlds that keeping opening onto each other. And so in the film, I thought a scenographic device could be that these Russian dolls keep opening up into each other as the story unfolds, which is entirely connected, they're not episodic. Each scene in a way plays into each other. The idea is that the space would expand, that we'd go from this small library, cramped up on the edge of the stage, and behind you is the concrete culvert, which kind of opens up the scene of the Mesa case, and behind that is this aerial view of Damascus and we go wide with the camera.

So this idea that as the case was unfolding and more and more people became implicated in it, the border kept becoming more and more complex and expanding the story. When you watch the film, you understand that Mesa's bullet, which crossed the US-Mexican border, began to implicate, in the Supreme Court, all drone strikes in seven or eight different countries. The cross-border killing of, I think, like 91,000 people started entering. This one Mexican teenager, Sergio Hernández, opening up into thousands of cases. That's why the Supreme Court had to shut it down, because in the end, they saw this mountain of souls knocking at the US border. If they found agent Mesa guilty, they would open themselves up to arbitration and deliberation on all these cross-border murders that they've been doing. Again, it was this small story they were trying to cast as a kind of lone wolf, bad apple agent. Then they started to realize no, this is not a bad apple situation, it's US foreign policy that played out on a small scale. When it started to expand and echo into different spaces, cultures and times…that was the story I was trying to tell. In the end, there's this moment where they win that case, a 5-4 decision, in the last act we shrink back into the library space, where we're kind of back into that one exception. There was a moment where if one vote on the Supreme Court had been different, the Haskell Free Library may not be such an exceptional space that's a fissure or crack in the border. There would be many opened up from the back of that case. Of course, it doesn't. I explain that for those that haven't seen the film, to understand the arc—spoiler alert.

TINA: It's fantastic how those spaces open up through the whole idea of the scenic, and how that's been used in traditions of theatre and painting. How you go into that space is alongside what is being narrated in the acts, and how you take us into these spaces, and then coming back into the library space. It's an incredible movement, and as you said, how

spaces collapse into each other and are very much implicated with each other, even in those legalities. It also brings up this issue of sightlines and visibility, and the accuracy of vision. And really the fatal consequences of that, of "human" vision, and let's say "machine" vision, particularly with the drone warfare and how you raise those issues, how that shooting on the bottom was implicated for drone warfare. You know, with the sightlines of how scenes take you into spaces, like that image of Venice, but also you have the vision of the drones, so to speak.

LAWRENCE: Yeah, I mean that was what was important, especially in telling the case of Mesa versus Hernández. I mean, it's one story but if we think about that concrete culvert backdrop–and maybe one thing to ask the scene painters there–it was an awkward angle, it wasn't the one you would choose for that scene. It was theatrical but also an awkward sightline. I'm sure when they were painting it, they thought "it would be so much better if," you know? Nabla Yahya is here also, so shoutout to Nabla Yahya, who's head of all production research. What she painstakingly did was map that sightline from the border, from where agent Mesa would have stood, onto that scene of the concrete culvert. What you are seeing is also exactly as he saw from that angle. We mapped one-to-one, or as best we could, the borderline where he was onto the backdrop where Hernández was killed. You have this strange scene that opens up into that space; we use the border as a one-to-one diagram to analyze that killing and to understand it in space. Literally one border is layered onto the other, and those become a kind of sightline. Of course, that opens up into a hypothetical drone image; it's much more of a sigh of relief for the scene painters. Why I say hypothetical…the hypothetical was what entered the Supreme Court. They were like, what if when we find this guy guilty, someone in Syria comes to us and says "you killed this person, and that's a cross-border killing.

There's this whole thing about a very far-reaching bullet. First they dismiss it and say "I don't know what you're talking about," kind of dancing around the subject. It would have to be an extremely "far-reaching bullet," as if it was absurd. They are saying it could only ever apply to a Mexican or Canadian border with the US, because that's where only something like this could ever happen: where the bullet could cross the border and kill someone in another jurisdiction, but is fired from the US. They hadn't quite thought it through, so they dismiss it by saying "well, that would be a very far-reaching bullet," forgetting that all these people sitting in Arizona, pulling the trigger in Syria, in Yemen, or in Pakistan, it's exactly the same condition. The defence of Mesa is slowly trying to get them to understand that, but he's

trying not to be too literal. He said, what if someone in Syria came and took us to court? It seemed that Syria was cast like it could have been the city in the film *Aladdin,* anywhere in the Middle East–what if they come back to us? I wanted this quite generic scene, which could be any one of these landscapes. It was important for me to play with this generic or hypothetical imagination that they had of this space.

TINA: It's quite incredible when you think about the way in which they defend those fatalities and fatal consequences of border police, and drone warfare, as you mentioned, and you have in the script. In the film, it says Mesa claimed that he was surrounded by illegal aliens who threw rocks at him. Witnesses deny this, and there are no rocks visible in the video. Invisible rocks versus real bullets was a hard argument to win, and so the US Department of Justice developed a strategy in defence of the agent. They sought to make something so brutally simple, legally complex.

LAWRENCE: Yeah, it became lawfare.

TINA: I mean that also comes into this question of the witness, it comes up in many of your works. The complexities about the position of witnesses and what is inadmissible before the law, such as in your work *Once Removed,* but then even complexity and ambiguity, slippages and alterations of the testimonial process as in the *Witness-Complex Machin*e.

LAWRENCE: Yeah, I think here is a direct connection actually; you almost jumped out of the page at me with the work *Once Removed* and a lot of the work I was doing in Lebanon with Bassel Abu Chahine, how is the return of a soldier who died at 16 in the Chouf War of 1984 in Lebanon. What my claim was with that work was that Bassel presented us with a new category of witness, very much in line with Walid Sadek's work, who would say that there were witnesses that knew too much to speak. There were witness who participated who can't speak because of certain conditions, they know too much. Then there's the attack on the ability to know and learn the position of anyone becoming an expert, or third-party witness who would have developed a kind of knowledge. In the sense that they don't teach it in school, and there's no real historical consensus on what happened during the war. It seemed to me that what the situation demanded was a new category of witnessing, and Bassel was presenting that on some level. To my surprise–when I say you jumped out at me from the page–when I was writing the script, that's exactly the terms in which they describe Hernández, a new category of defendant or plaintiff, because it could open something. There

was a potential, like Bassel is doing, to open something that has formally been sealed, all other paths to witnessing have been blocked. There needed to be a demand for a new path to witnessing, whether that's a legal form, or whatever it is. It seemed to me that's what they were terrified of in the Supreme Court, that's why they couldn't find someone who murdered a child on a border–just because he could–guilty, because he was potentially opening up a new category of defendant, and with it, a whole new category of witnessing: of people who were not American, who were thousands of miles away, but still directly were speaking to those who murdered their family sitting in Arizona. Nevada. Sorry, I keep saying Arizona. It's Nevada. That, for me, is an interesting line, where those things can open up

TINA: It comes into the other work that you did looking at the Nuremberg cases and these slippages and alterations in the testimonial process. This challenging category of witnessing and also taking it apart, really showing the slippages and ambiguities and problematics with something taken to be concrete and solid, in which decisions in court are made and have dramatic consequences to them. Particularly with that piece you're talking about the transformation that took place with translations.

LAWRENCE: I think in some ways that work, *Witness Machine Complex,* is more faithful to the conventional understanding of the witness. What these other works are maybe proposing is a kind of opening or a kind of—I think one, it can't exist without the other, it had to get there through this process. It's not that that work is an old one, I was making it at the same time; I made it after the work I did with Bassel. I think it's more faithful to a kind of witness that emerges through Holocaust studies, the idea of the excess of the witness, what the witness can't say. This is all entirely indebted to people like Shoshanna Felman and Primo Levi. I think these other works are on a slightly different register, there's a sort of desegregation of the witness. It's becoming untethered to that literature in one way, and also to its singularity to its individual, in a way.

TINA: You can really see an investigation of the witness transforming through your practice, if we look at these different positionalities and these different works. Even in the piece that was looking at the questions about hearing and leakages and contamination in terms of disputed utterances. Again, these leakages and contaminations of sound in those particular pieces, you can see the witness all the way through: the witness who knows too much, the witness who was inadmissible in court, the witness who wasn't there, those who were throwing rocks but weren't actually throwing rocks.

LAWRENCE: Yeah, exactly. It goes back to *Rubber Coated Steel,* where the only real witness we should be listening to couldn't speak, wouldn't speak to that forum with the shift in audibility, or a threshold of audibility, and always trying to position myself at that threshold. Be it on the borderline that crosses the Haskell Library or in threshold of audibility, and the silence. In the Saydnaya case, where it's really a sound that's just barely audible. I've always found it important to position myself at these thresholds, and that's very much indebted to my education with Eyal Weitzman all those years ago.

TINA: I think that you really showed how the space of memory and testimonial, and how that got conflated. When you were discussing the sound of bread being distributed and how that got conflated in the imagination of the prisoners, those kinds of thresholds with memory and testimony and witness and the complexity of the layering of those…they're not as clear cut as we presume them to be, and you really take that apart in your work and show those kinds of complexities around the audible and witnessing.

LAWRENCE: Exactly. It's also that threshold that you start to be able to position yourself differently and get out of certain kinds of conventions around the stories we tell and the way we continually retell them, and recast people in the same way. Of course, I think that's of great detriment. We wouldn't need to find new ways of telling these stories should there not be a crisis of representation in the way we are positioning ourselves as storytellers. I'm not sure if I answered your question [*laughs*].

TINA: You did for sure! I was thinking possibly, that I'm sure the audience would like to have a chance to ask you questions. We've been talking for about an hour ourselves. I would like to open up the opportunity for anyone in the audience who might like to ask questions.

TAIRONE BASTIEN: I can field some of those and speak for the person, or if the person would like to speak, please turn on your mic and please proceed. I did want to say there's been a wonderful commentary by Alisa who is, as Lawrence pointed out, they painted the backdrops, them and their team. I don't know Alisa, if you wanted to speak about your comments and insight into working on the project? Were you happy just leave it as a comment? [*Reading chat*] I just wanted to see if you wanted to speak in voice.

LAWRENCE: You have to unmute, or 'allow to talk'.

ALISA SIMONEL-KEEGAN: I am here okay, hi, thank you so much.

LAWRENCE: Thank you so much.

ALISA: I think it's just going to let me do sound. What an incredible opportunity, and this entire project was phenomenal. Lawrence you're amazing, and the background of the piece is amazing. And the Haskell was amazing, and it was fascinating that like you said, nobody who lives in Vermont–I've known Vermonters my whole life–I know a kid who grew up 20 kilometres from there, they never heard of it. My Armenian cousins who had to flee and immigrate through Iran and then to Syria and then to Lebanon and then to Detroit and then to Boston, oh of course knew where Haskell was because they had cousins coming through Canada, and had just been to a wedding reception there for my third removed cousin a couple years ago during the Trump regime. Apparently wedding receptions were a big deal there. It was interesting to listen to the process of you guys just getting your visas in order; the fabrics, the visas, the airplane tickets, the trucking riots, there were so many divisions the pandemic brought that were so much more than just duct tape across the floor.

LAWRENCE: I couldn't believe when we shot the last piece of dialogue, I couldn't believe it. If that hard drive... I still didn't believe it till we had the hard drive, that we actually made this film.

ALISA: I was planning on driving it up myself and ended up with pneumonia, so sorry I could not drive. It's such an important discussion. While I had pneumonia, I printed out the entire Supreme Court brief about Haskell. I've always been accused of being a method scenic artist. And Tina, I worked with some of your colleagues at NYU Abu Dhabi. I was in Berlin studying the Biennale in 2018, and just listening to your plight, I can imagine coming up with visualizations is difficult being a sound analyst, but your work is so greatly important, Lawrence.

TAIRONE: I would just add to that, obviously there was a lot of road blocks in getting this project off the ground. I don't know Lawrence, if you wanted to talk about how you came to choose Mahdi to be the narrator, because I know initially you wanted to be the narrator of this piece but couldn't.

LAWRENCE: We are one hour in and we didn't say the name Mahdi Fleifel, which is remarkable with somebody having seen this film and he's the main attraction. This might sound like one of those homework excuses...I was coming up with this feeling, do I really want to do another monologue myself? Do I really want to put another film in the world where I am talking? In a way, I can justify that by saying that is what I do, that is my instrument, the way I tell the story and the way I find my way through it is particular. That's what I've developed over time, and that's really what's been consistent through all the projects I've done in some ways. I was thinking it would be great to work with an actor, especially this one because there was this remove, it wasn't as close as some of the others, at least in the way that I was implicated within it. So I was already leaning somewhere, and then when the US border told me "No," we implemented it. The three people I approached were all people I've known for over a decade. It felt like it needed to be someone I knew well, or at least known for so long. Mahdi, since 2008 I've known him. What I'm trying to say is it felt like it needed to be someone who could embody what I do, in some way, that kind of craft in there that I've built over the last years. I think Mahdi did such an amazing job, and people who know the other work and see him...it is this parallel world feeling. Mahdi said himself, like Bond, he wants the contract for the next three films to play the Private Ear, we'll see if that goes through. I have to speak to the studio, the bosses. I think he did an amazing job making that strange, uncanny, and he really worked on that uncanny space where it's a film by me, it looks like a film by me, but it's not me–he was playing into that. Being that it's the 45th parallel, that it's continually trying to evoke these parallel worlds, it ended up being one of the strongest things about it. I'm so glad that worked out that way, as long as eventually I can get a US visa.

TAIRONE: Let's hope for that! I wanted to say quickly, Tina, I know at the beginning of the conversation you said you have a bad back right now, so please don't feel you need to stay, we really appreciate your time.

TINA: Thank you, I'm enjoying the conversation. Lawrence, let's see who all your Private Eyes–like the watching the Bonds–will be for each sequence, that will be intriguing. If Mahdi's doing the next two films, who will it be after?

LAWRENCE: Keep getting younger, more handsome as we all age!

TAIRONE: We also have a question in the Q&A from someone who is anonymous. They say "Thank you for this thoughtful talk. I'm curious if you connected with Sergio Hernández's family as part of this project, and if so, what was that like? I ask because I'm interested in how we navigate the line between the personal, intimate and the global in projects like this."

LAWRENCE: No, I didn't connect with the family, I didn't feel I had business connecting with the family or dragging them through this, for something like this. They've been through it. They've been through three or four appeals raising through the heights of the Supreme Court. It would feel frivolous to ask them to be part of something like this. That's the really short answer. Also, what I said about the desegregation of the witness, it's about, of course, Sergio Hernández, but also about all these other cross-border killings. The idea that this person could stand in for all these other souls and voices and people who have had their life taken by the US and its brutal foreign policy, warfare–I don't know what to call it–imperialism. All those people who've lost their lives, including the ones that maybe Aamna was evoking in the land acknowledgement. I was trying to disaggregate, in fact, maybe the opposite of what you were describing of the person and individual, to something more of a network, where the witness becomes a network or nexus.

TAIRONE: In the film too, you speak of all the lives of people who have been affected by drone strikes, the murdered. Both collateral damage, and the targeted.

LAWRENCE: There's a direct connection, I hope I made that clear. They are not analogous, there is a direct connection. That case starting to implicate the killings of the drone strike. We're entering now the second wave of drone warfare, in its second big push.

TAIRONE: Do we know if there's any further challenges to these laws? There has to be cases coming up through Supreme Court in term of drone strikes, and what's happened. I don't know if you've been following.

LAWRENCE: They can't, this is a precedent now, they couldn't before. There's all these precedents where at some point foreign people have been allowed to take the US to court. There were two cases that were invoked through the Supreme Court. When they were deciding on this case, one was a US company sponsoring violence in Biafra. I think it was Shell. Another precedent that is called Bivens, which is very important, which is about a search and seizure of a non-US national. I would have to brush up on that to be more

specific, but these precedents do exist. This is the big problem of making fun of someone like Brett Kavanaugh. The big lesson I learnt doing this research: this person is extremely clever. You know how they tried to put him as this guy, "I like beer," they made him a clown. It's a gift to this guy to be a clown, because you see him in this court, you see what he does. From the perspective of technique, it's very impressive. You saw just how far ahead of everyone else he is in achieving his agenda, and now he has the backing of all these conservatives on the bench. It is also a story about that–look where we are now with Roe v. Wade–there is that sub-narrative. That's kind of one that started with *Walled Unwalled*, the film before this from 2018. It's an important thing to tell that story as it's happening, that hardening of that space towards an extreme conservatism and right-wing-liberal status quo. It occurred to me there was a lot happening that I wasn't yet able to process, but it seemed it was there and it was coming out quite fast, it felt like there needed to be a response to it.

TAIRONE: I have a couple other questions in the chat, this one's from Colette Laliberte: "Thank you for your generous presentation and the film. I just wanted to say that I grew up in Stanstead. The library and the opera house were the first library I used and the first shows I was given to see as a child and teenager. The site, even for us, remains an incongruous space and speaks of how borders are arbitrary."

LAWRENCE: Thank you Colette, that's great to hear that it was opening doors for you. I'm sure you know that moose's head.

TAIRONE: This one is from Alisa: "Thank you for the forum and discussion. I do not see that there is a non-profit organization for drone strike victims? Only partners and medical? Is it too taboo, too corporate in terms of the financial implication?"

LAWRENCE: There's incredible work done for drone strike victims. Aamna, I'm going to mess this up. The big Ivy League university Stanford, they have done a huge thing under the drone, interviewed so many people and did a big analysis. There are tons of organizations working with that, but I think what we're talking about is the internal legal debates that are happening on a national level in the US, not about non-governmental organizations producing advocacy. Of course, advocacy exists, here it buttressed against real legal decision-making. It came really close, one vote and it would've changed.

TAIRONE: Just quickly, Aamna did say it's called the Stanford Clinic, so there is a place that does that work. The final question we can end on from Alisa again, and it's a good one: "As artists, how can we be most useful to support in your opinion? Are there ways to engage and be useful?"

LAWRENCE: Oh shit, I don't know... I don't know if I set out to be useful, or if its use value is important. It's reactive and responsive to the ways stories are being told. I think it's also like, I don't really like even the word artist, that's why I also chose Private Ear. I feel it's more specific and I don't really care that much if something is art, I don't feel very precious about it. I think it is a necessity to mobilize and experiment with the tools we have to tell stories, because they are so sedimented in the forums such as the news or in law courts. The ways are very hardened there, it's important to have spaces where we can experiment with the aestheticization, or making people sensible to such crimes or criminal acts. That's why I do it. I don't know if it's, important but it's what I'm doing. I hope that makes sense.

TINA: I think you show us our contemporary world and the way in which law and institutions are so imbricated in each other and the complexities of our positions as citizens, and the sense of us feeling powerless. The complexity of what's going on, you really shed light on that in ways that are making us see the world differently, and the way these complexities are imbricated within each other. In all of your different projects, you bring that so much to the foreground in the different mediums and tools you use. Our contemporary condition is just so layered and complex to grasp through news and media and major, massive ways information is reaching us. Decision-making, the law, and so forth. You begin to look at fissures and cracks and take that apart in the way in which your work focuses on these different cases you work with.

TAIRONE: I would agree with you, Tina. Just to add too, I think what Lawrence's work does... we're inundated with storytelling from the state, from the media and it's so seductive, and so misleading, and doesn't say the things that need to be said. What you offer is a counternarrative through your storytelling, it's a very strong counternarrative. They're told so elegantly and beautifully that it's an eye-opening experience: "oh right, of course, that is what's happening!"

TINA: It opens something that's under your skin all the time, and your eyes are being held over. Yes, these are where the dots connect.

TAIRONE. Thank you, guys. Thank you, Tina, so much for your essay, and for this conversation and Lawrence thank you so much for your work.

TINA: Thank you Lawrence for your work, it's always so inspiring.

LAWRENCE: Thank you Tina for your fantastic essay and for making the time today despite your back troubles, thank you.