

# **Review of the exhibition *Eavesdropping***

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**City Gallery Wellington, Aotearoa  
Curated by Joel Stern and James Parker**

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I had always taken Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974) to be little more than a psychological thriller set in the world of surveillance. But then I read Thomas Levin's analysis of the film's final scene. Surveillance expert Harry Caul, played by Gene Hackman, searches for a bug in his own apartment. He rips the wallpaper from the walls and tears up the floorboards. The scene is shot from an angle that places the camera outside the apartment – above the ceiling and beyond the walls – a position that is, in Levin's words, 'epistemologically unavailable' to Caul. 'Surveillance,' Levin writes, 'has become the condition of narration itself.'

*Eavesdropping*, curated by Joel Stern and James Parker at City Gallery Wellington, assembles eleven works by contemporary artists exploring the act of eavesdropping and the positions the act establishes. The show also intervenes in the relationship between eavesdropper and eavesdropped, drawing attention to, and problematising, the epistemological distance between listeners (or devices) and the listened-to (most of us, most of the time). A number of the works engage in a kind of forensic listening. In Lawrence Abu Hamdan's audio installation, *Saydnaya (The Missing 19db)* (2016), former prisoners at Bashar al-Assad's notorious prison near Damascus detail the conditions of their detention. Blindfolded and submerged in darkness, their understandings of their surroundings are gleaned largely through sound. After the anti-government protests in the Spring of 2011, Saydnaya Prison was emptied of inmates to make room for those captured and arrested as part of al-Assad's crackdown on dissent. We hear interviews, conducted in collaboration with Amnesty International, of prisoners who identify a significant decrease in the volume of the prison's sonic environment – pre- and post-2011 – when political prisoners are violently punished for speaking. Based on prisoners' testimony, Abu Hamdan estimates that the drop in volume was nineteen decibels, a sonic gap providing the only representation of the inhumane conditions within the infamous prison.

Abu Hamdan's video, *Rubber-Coated Steel* (also 2016), uses real sonic evidence and a fictional judicial framing to demonstrate that Israeli soldiers who shot and killed two Palestinian teenagers in 2014 had attempted to disguise the sound of live ammunition as rubber bullets. The tip in this case comes from Palestinian protestors who are able to hear aspects of gunfire – direction, caliber, steel vs. rubber bullets – that even forensics experts are deaf to.

Susan Schuppli's *The Missing 18 ½ Minutes* (2018) provides headphone access to a recording of the eponymous duration of hissy erased tape from Richard Nixon's extensive archive of audio surveillance. Tellingly (ironically) the removal of the once-present-voices speaks more clearly of Nixon's crimes than the voices themselves could have. The Manus Recording Project Collective is comprised of six prisoners at Australia's Manus Regional Processing Centre, a refugee detention facility. With the help of three artists outside the Centre, the detainees made 84 ten-minute audio recordings (totaling fourteen hours) which play consecutively in a black box space, starting from a different point each day. These recordings provide a fragmented portrait of the artists' lives in detention: talking, singing, listening to recorded music, cooking. A kind of double-eavesdropping emerges. The gallery audience listens-in on the quotidian aurality of life under neoliberal, nationalist, racist detention, while the detainees listen-out to snatches of music, news, the World Cup final, and personal communication from the world beyond their prison walls.

The distance that Levin identifies in *The Conversation* is transposed, in *Eavesdropping*, to a set of geopolitical spaces: identity positions, tribalisms, governments and the governed. Eavesdropping becomes a description of our positions as subjects-cum-objects in a world where everything is overheard, recorded and algorithmically filtered. Sound is so often epistemologically unavailable: signals arriving from distant times and places. It's also vulnerable to capture by distant listeners. Out of sight may be out of mind, but in our wired world it's never out of earshot. The works gathered in *Eavesdropping* insist that the epistemological distance that separates listener from listened-to is always also an ethical distance. Contrary to common appeals to the political "voice," power in the Age of Alexa may reside more meaningfully in the clandestine recesses of the political ear.