Money has never felt more morbid, which is to say that materialism can no longer provide us with the illusion of safety. To stall the economic collapse flowing from COVID-19, Western strongholds of capitalism have increased basic income and social assistance which, despite its valences of care, fail to disguise the hundreds and thousands who will continue to die. We are expected to feel grateful for state redistribution without questioning why it takes catastrophe to be conferred the minimum, or that the good of staying home to curtail the strain on hospitals is offset by the already dead, many of whom lacked healthcare and financial stability in the best of times. »Flatten the curve« is overly generous rhetoric for »do your duty to society« because, as Naomi Riddle [writes](https://rundog.art/letter-from-the-editor-march-2020/), »the dots on the graph are not dots, but people.«

How will we mourn once the pandemic is over? If art is expected to hold a mirror up to these times, poeticizing its casualties will prove slippery. And though it’s tricky to speak in future tense I am already braced for the failure of representation – or rather, I am suspicious of art that might deploy hindsight to obscure the gravity of our present moment. Put another way, who will artists deem worthy of remembering?

In March this year, Turner Prize winning artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan released three of his video works onto [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC5v2iHIhsbFLqk1OrIKWosA), offering those in isolation a way to pass the time. In recent years, streaming platforms like YouTube and Vimeo have been operationalized by artists such as Ryan Trecartin and Sue de Beer to become exhibition spaces that annihilate the prescriptive ways of seeing a museum often demands of its audience. And indeed, while it would be a stretch to label Abu Hamdan’s gesture curatorial, the resonance of his act nevertheless leaves a psychic trace similar to that of a curatorial intervention. Here, the four walls of my bedroom and computer screen appear less as indicators of safety than a reminder that my protection exists at the expense of another – that the distinction between the leisure class to which I belong and the labor class whose tasks range from trolleying dead bodies and delivering food has never been more pronounced. Accessing Abu Hamdan’s work accentuates our reality in opposition to many others who have always lived in situations of greater deficit, a concern of the artist who takes this aphorism and expounds it within the context of fascism in the Middle East.

Viewed wholly, Abu Hamdan’s works are marked by their willingness to sublimate evil: contemplating the aftermath of wars, human rights abuses and the systems which allow for its metastasis. Ben Mauk [surmises](https://frieze.com/article/does-sound-deceive-forensic-art-lawrence-abu-hamdan-0) that Abu Hamdan takes »freely from the traditions of investigative journalism, human-rights campaigns and conceptual art… moving towards an encounter that transcends the legal and extralegal injustices that form his raw material«, which is to say that the strength of his oeuvre lies not in artistry itself, but in his gift for staying close to injustice and exposing it. In *Rubber Coated Steel* (2016), Abu Hamdan presents a video set in an indoor shooting range, centered on the legal question of whether the Israeli Defense Forces killed two unarmed Palestinian teenagers – Nadeem Nawara and Mohamad Abu Daher – using live ammunition, or, as the defendants assert, standard rubber bullets whose ultimate form of injury is inconsistent with these teenagers’ cause of death, thereby negating culpability. The prosecution tries to establish a more insidious pattern of behavior in the IDF, arguing that live ammunition is co-mingled in the magazine of rubber bullets, so that under the guise of dispersing crowds with the latter, Palestinians can be assassinated covertly yet in plain sight.

The transcript of this proceeding is given to us in subtitles, over a video which is otherwise silent but for the mechanical hum of pulleys moving evidence in and out of frame. We read the subtitled testimony of an expert witness who analyzes the sounds captured at the time in issue: a polyphony of live ammunition and rubber bullets, each mapped on infrared diagrams and shown to us as the trial runs its course. Considering the synthesis of sight, sound and the lack thereof, I notice how expertly Abu Hamdan plays with affect: we brace for a volley of gunshots that never arrive, forming a disconnect that situates us as both passive observer and arbiter of fact. The theatre of the indoor shooting range propels this dualism further as an imagined battlefield, alive with traces of violence yet sanitized by the verbal swordplay of lawyers. The ingenuity of *Rubber Coated Steel* lies in its locating of audiences within the parallel subjectivities of observer/judge, suggesting that if what we see represents competing facts, then there is a distinction between that and the truth. Consider how Abu Hamdan omits the ultimate judicial finding from the work, and it becomes manifest that he too is contesting the broader narrative that law delivers this truth, despite what we might otherwise believe.

The subject matter of Abu Hamdan’s work leaves little room for levity. It’s a convention seen again in *Walled Unwalled* (2018) whenhe speaks to us through the testimonies of others, interrogating walls as both object and metaphor, an instrument that assists regimes of xenophobia, torture and other modes of violence. Again, brutality and conflict are extracted in *Once Removed* (2019), an interview between Abu Hamdan and writer/historian Bassel Abi Chahine, whose ability to recall with striking detail the many redacted horrors of the Lebanese Civil War is due to residual memories of his past life as one its soldiers. Gleaned from these works is the idea that the aftermath of violence is rarely linear, and that those subject to the same systemic evil very rarely have the exact same story to tell. Individual suffering is as much a narrativisation of society as it is a unique story of pathos. For Abu Hamdan, storytelling bares the rift between official record and subjective truth, and how at times it’s the grand narrative of history which is most removed from reality. If memories are seen as porous and unreliable, then Abu Hamdan negates this as a falsehood designed by states to allow for violence to remain unchecked. Put simply, it’s only the individual, once subject to evil, who can give shape to events distorted by and omitted from the public record.

Against the chaos of the pandemic, can it not be said that the piecemeal socialism ratified by states to sustain fiscal health is a kind of evil that functions to mask the true collateral being lost? Might focusing on the individual, then, be considered an ideal starting point for artists to create work that resists ignoring the dead, or more accurately, the disproportionate amount of deaths in the lower socioeconomic public? Crucially, should we not fight the fiction espoused by theorists like Judith Butler, when she [states](https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4603-capitalism-has-its-limits) that »the virus does not discriminate… that it treats us equally, puts us equally at risk of falling ill, losing something, living in a world of imminent threat«? Capitalism has failed to create a collective condition of safety, which is to say that one’s complicity in the system sustains another’s subordination. It is the conceit responsible for society’s collapse. To reiterate an earlier point, self-isolation is now the stadium in which we witness the loss of decadence and reflect on our past. Indeed, what stories might we tell as participants and subjects within the matrix of complicity?

To borrow from Hannah Arendt’s formulation, Abu Hamdan’s oeuvre is not scripture for how art must exist *après le virus*. Rather, his marked engagement with storytelling and memory presents a compelling case for how to begin rethinking the relationship between death, systemic neglect and complicity. This existential moment allows his videos to be read differently: of how not to be seduced by the poetics of abstraction so as to stray too far from the truth. Mark Fisher famously quoted Frederic Jameson and Slavoj Žižek when he wrote that »it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism«. Today, it feels apposite to modify this maxim insofar as it’s easier to conceal capitalism than it is to imagine it *as* the end of the world. Abu Hamdan provides us with ways of imagining art after capitalism and its influence on fascist regimes – to produce works imbricated by critiques of evil while remaining focused on the power of individuals and the truths of storytelling. In *Once Removed,* Abu Hamdan confesses to Abi Chahine that he »wasn’t taught anything about the [Lebanese Civil War]« and was in fact »actively discouraged from finding things out« – foreshadowing the ease at which governments can alter history and preserve hierarchies of power. We ought not forget that the most valuable currency within this psychic economy is truth, whose power one might lean on once the dust settles, to oppose the preservation of our present imaginary.

****