

Rooms We Leave Behind: Abbas Zahedi Alessandro Rabottini

Through spatial interventions and performative installations, London-born artist Abbas Zahedi carves spaces for social interaction with the same surgical precision with which he sculpts sound. Orchestrating abandoned venues and participatory situations, Zahedi explores the most primary existential question and the ultimate biological reality: our mortality.

In preparation for this text, I met Abbas Zahedi at a restaurant that, I promised him, would be “nice and quiet.” But I keep forgetting that if you are looking for a place in London to have lunch *and* a meaningful conversation, then you’d better expand and revise your understanding of what “quiet” can mean. When I rush into apologetic mode, Zahedi promptly reassures me not to worry: he is at ease with the pervasiveness of sound and the omnipresence of noise, which, he tells me, bring him back to his teenage years in Ladbroke Grove.

Of sounds, spaces, and bodies, Zahedi has made the materials of a practice attuned to the fundamental questions that bind us together as human beings: the meanings and modes of living together and dying alone. Initially trained as a doctor and a pharmacologist, Zahedi soon left this profession and became involved with community-based initiatives, including a food bank and a philosophical symposium on displacement that he organized in his local chip shop. It didn’t take him long to realize that his concern for social interaction and existential truths could become artistic material, and that contextual responsiveness could be matched with metaphorical precision.

In November 2020, the artist took over a former Royal Mail sorting office in Chelsea and staged *Ouranophobia SW3*, a sequence of minimalistic spatial interventions and expansive sound environments whose title references a debilitating “fear of the heavens and the sky” (ouranophobia) and the post code of the area (SW3) where the building is located, opposite the Royal Brompton Hospital. Echoing the history and past functions of this disused site, Zahedi filled it with Islamic mourning prayers and more descriptive ambient sounds collected on site, creating a space of transcendence and ghostly tasks, an arena of loss and defunct functionality. But what was originally conceived as a meditative void carved out of the congested fabric of the city soon faced new restrictions imposed a few weeks after by the resurgence of COVID-19 cases and had to close its doors, like every “nonessential” venue in England. Confronted with this urgency, Zahedi revived the contextual impetus and responsive ethos that runs through his practice and decided to keep the exhibition open for the sole benefit of those working on the front lines of the pandemic, who were the only ones who could access the building in search for a time and space of respite between shifts at the adjacent hospital. With *Ouranophobia SW3*, Zahedi not only dissected a building and inspected its past histories, but performed a factual and symbolic resurrection of lost functions and present necessities. By quickly turning a temporary exhibition into a tool, a shared space of individual retreat, Zahedi opened up a set of questions that were ingrained in the site and that, at the same time, transcended its specific coordinates: the politics of access, the spatial and social distribution of privilege, the hierarchies that define what we consider essential and vital.

There is a concern at the core of Zahedi’s experiential practice, which is the inspection of those organized forms of spatial separation and the ways they originate and are originated from programs of social segregation. And it is within this architecture that words and sounds become a granular strategy of infiltration, a simultaneously active and contemplative way to reclaim spaces and narratives by means of almost impalpable interventions. One such was 2021’s *Brick Lane Foundation*, a disused police station on Brick Lane that he repurposed to critically reimagine the police’s relationship with local communities and capacity to respond to their needs. The BLF functioned as both a receiver and a transmitter, once again a collaged architecture of untold stories and desirable opportunities. Among its many interventions: a device with emoticon feedback buttons asking visitors “How does it feel?” while their answers were collected in the BLF data hub; an alternating red and green light from a modified lamppost giving information on the majority of positive or negative feelings; and a small still life unassumingly adorning one wall made by the artist’s late father, Faramarz Zahedi, an employee of the Iranian consulate in London and a passionate painter and street photographer who, in the early 1980s, was arrested by the British police for possession of an SLR camera during protests in front of the Iranian embassy. Finally, books donated or suggested by the participants were made available for police officers to borrow and read, again the result of a collective consultation about words and thoughts that could potentially rebuild a fractured connection.

Another space that has been transformed in its function—the former Peckham Road fire station that is now the second venue of South London Gallery—was the theater of *How to Make a How from a Why?* (2020). Evoking the history of the building before its conversion into an art space, one room was innervated by a sprinkler system from which visitors were encouraged to drip rose water into a series of jugs and bowls on the floor. A mournful tone set the mood, but it was a transformative, regenerative one: while the rose water brought back memories of the artist’s family as ceremonial drink makers and the traditional use of this infusion in Iranian religious contexts, the doors emitted a soundscape titled *In This Space We Leave* (2020), a collaboration with musicians Saint Abdullah weaving together several sonic sources, including elegies, acclamations, and Iranian field recordings. Through the economy of means that characterizes his work, Zahedi orchestrated a symphony of leaking and mourning, a landscape of individual dispersion and collective gathering that was emotionally charged, conceptually precise, and spatially concise. Ultimately, infiltration seems to be the dynamic that connects the many elements in his practice and their capacity to intrude into existing structures, saturate them, and claim them back: the permeating properties of sound, the adaptive and transformative fluidity of activism, and the regenerative erosion of liquids.

As in his days at the lab, Zahedi is still experimenting, setting the conditions for different elements to interact with one another and waiting for reactions to happen. There is still chemistry in what he does, but it now runs through bodies that are transient and memories that are here to stay.

195–196 Abbas Zahedi, *Ouranophobia SW3* installations view at Chelsea Sorting Office, London, 2020–21. © Abbas Zahedi. Courtesy: the artist and Belmacz, London. Photo: Belmacz

197 Abbas Zahedi, *the water bearer*, 2020, *Ouranophobia SW3* installation view at Chelsea Sorting Office, London, 2020–21. © Abbas Zahedi. Courtesy: the artist and Belmacz, London. Photo: Belmacz

198–199 Abbas Zahedi, *Brick Lane Foundation* installations view at Old Police Station, Spitalfields & Banglatown, London, 2021. © Abbas Zahedi. Courtesy: the artist and Belmacz, London. Photo: Belmacz





