

To support each other

Abbas Zahedi's installations are created where two very different worlds come together. Based on his religious and medical background, Zahedi creates work that places the bodies of visitors in a closed system, not only in relation to space but also to each other. Titus Nouwens talks to Zahedi about mourning, rituals and the connecting role of art.

Abbas Zahedi's work is strongly connected with his life course. In the last year of his medical training, the artist lost his brother to a failed heart transplant.

He quit his studies and eventually ended up in the arts through social work.

Despite this distinctly personal charge, the visitor is central to Zahedi's work. He creates minimalist installations that

mechanical in appearance and which plays with the architectural functions of the hall, such as emergency exit signs, sprinkler systems, thresholds or museum walls. This is how one is created a unique approach to the relationship between space, artwork and body, and between institution and audience. Zahedi sees museums and art spaces as the perfect place to process a complicated past, where visitors consciously spend time with their emotions. A place for reflection, where you feel supported and connected, by and with each other.

Another reason that the British artist his art is minimalist to allow the audience to experience the emptiness left behind after losing loved ones. Zahedi bena-

expresses how loss and grief are often the result of social inequality, injustice and neglect by the welfare state. For example, his graduation work at Central Saint Martins consisted of an empty refrigerator, referring to the Grenfell Tower disaster, in which 74 residents died after a defective refrigerator caught fire.

spread to the entire building via the facade cladding. The authorities had been aware of the fire risk in this apartment for years. Among the deceased was artist Khady a Saye, with whom Zahedi had previously exhibited

the Diaspora Pavilion in Venice.

In another installation, Zahedi captured the moisture in the room with an air dehumidifier and converted it into sound. "When visitors cry, it is the same fluid they inhaled, and those tears are then released back into the air of the room." This symbiotic relationship between artwork and viewer arises from the way in which Zahedi thinks about systems from his medical background.

Just like in the human body, adjusting one part affects the other parts and therefore the whole. He applies the same approach to museum spaces and the relationships both within and around them

take place, where he also raises questions about access, conditions and barriers to the art world. From hosting a free day prayer at Tate Modern and opening an exhibition for healthcare workers at the height of the pandemic, to organizing philosophy meetings with like-minded people in a snack bar for years; Zahedi connects art and the needs of communities in a radical reformulation of today's art world.

Titus Nouwens: You have a medical one background and was active as an organizer of social meetings and projects. How did you make the transition to art?

Abbas Zahedi: 'Where I come from in the UK, it never felt relevant to make art with a capital A, or to believe

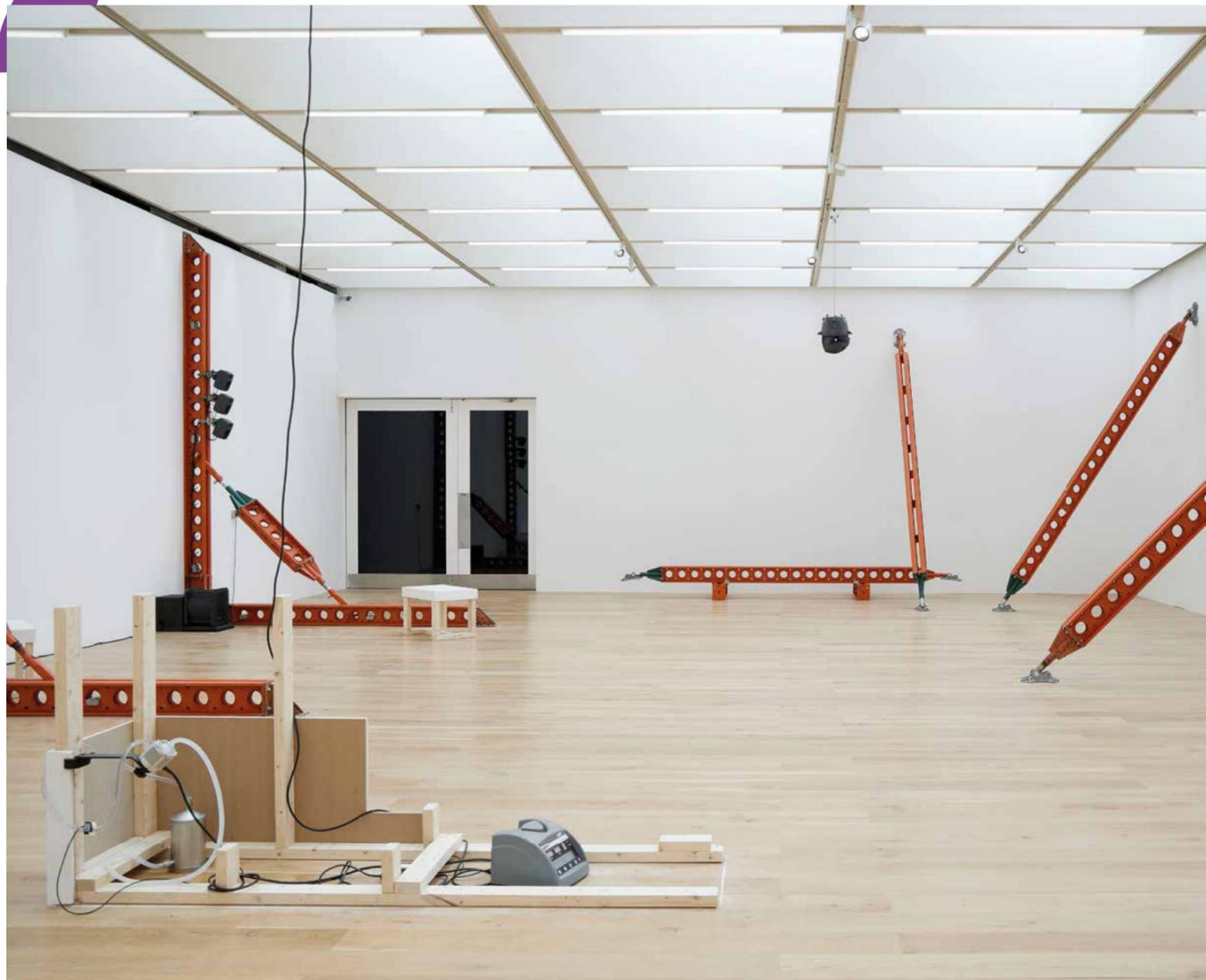


In conversation with Abbas Zahedi

By Titus Nouwens



Abbas Zahedi, 'Waiting With (Sonic Support)', 2022, open mic performance, courtesy the artist, Forma, Frieze and Belmacz



Abbas Zahedi, 'Holding a Heart in Artifice', overview of exhibition at Nottingham Contemporary, 2023, courtesy Nottingham Contemporary, photo Stuart Whipps

that art has an intrinsic value that transcends the individual experience. I grew up in a London council flat in an immigrant family and went to public school. In my environment the emphasis was not so much on art but more on religion. Within that framework, a work of art is never treated as something that stands alone, but rather as a reference, as a devotional symbol.

When I was training to become a doctor, I had a study advisor who was very interested in art history.

He encouraged us to go to museums and describe the painting in as much technical detail as possible. We then applied this practice to our work in the hospital, where we encountered skin rashes

had to describe it in the same precise and technical way as a painting.

I have learned from these experiences to relate to reality in specific ways, both in a very practical way in the medical environment and in a more symbolic and philosophical way from religion. In this meeting I found my way to art, and I still repeat these encounters in the work I now make.'

TN: In that context, what do you consider the role of art?

AZ: 'For me it's about not sticking too much to traditional



views about what art can be or do, but that we see it more as an opportunity to learn about the different aspects of ourselves and the world we live in. I see art as one

an instrument to focus, a tool to bridge the gap between reality and a transported state, without this having to be at the expense of all other possibilities.'

TN: This bridging between reality and art takes a tangible form in your own work in the way you relate to physical barriers and how people feel invited or not to cross them. For example, at the height of the pandemic you opened an exhibition for frontline responders where they could take a break and you presented an *open mic* installation at the entrance to the Frieze Art Fair, in which the contributions of participants inside the fair were heard. In both cases, the audience is an essential part of the work.

AZ: 'I think that being an artist largely revolves around the public nature of art. The ritualistic aspects of certain practices that I have experienced become more apparent when I...

engaged in art. For example, many actions take the form of a devotional practice. The emphasis is on bodies that come together in time and space with the work, while also relating to each other. Every artist who works in

places in a public space must deal with the role of the public.

With every work I create, I ask what is at stake in a given situation, while at the same time recognizing the fundamental premise of art as a public gesture. Both the lockdown exhibition and the installation at the Frieze Art Fair took place in spaces where exclusion took place. During the lockdown, galleries and museums were closed, which they did quite easily

were dismissed as non-essential. I therefore decided to invite those who are the most essential in society – the doctors, the nurses and the public transport staff. In that sense of interdependence, the contrast between essential and non-essential faded.

For Frieze I thought about how we could... can make the exclusive environment of the art market more porous. I wanted to offer people the opportunity to give something of themselves, for example by reading a poem, in exchange for VIP access to the fair so that they could experience how the extremely rich are treated. I am interested in the codes imposed on certain environments or situations, and in making them visible without immediately wanting to dismantle them or deconstruct.'

TN: For your recent exhibition at Nottingham Contemporary, *Holding a Heart in Artifice* (27.5 to 3.9. 23), you went one step further in your research into art spaces and the role of the audience. For example, you placed buttresses against the museum walls to support them against 'outside pressure.' How does this exhibition compare to your previous work?

AZ: 'A common thread that has run through my work for a long time is grief. During my work as a doctor and social worker, I have had a lot to deal with people who are sad and trying to better understand their situation. I have learned that in those situations it is sometimes better to...

to create space to witness, to simply see and acknowledge each other, without necessarily wanting to offer solutions. Art offers a similar space for recognition, so I think of art spaces as one of the few places where we can experience the difficult things we face, like grief and death and loss, outside of everyday life. Such difficult things are usually made visible and dealt with in a religious setting or in a clinical environment that actually has a sterile aesthetic like the *white cube*.

'I always want to put something alive in the art space, something that drowns out the tendency of the art space itself to keep everything static and pristine'

I always want to put something alive in the art space, something that drowns out the tendency of the art space itself to keep everything static and pristine. At Nottingham Contemporary it was the first time I had been in a large museum



working with issues of aliveness and death. Unable to decide whether the space was one or the other, I ended up with the idea of limbo. Similarly, in a medical context, a body can be non-dead and non-living when it is on *life support* with a heart-lung machine .

With this in mind, I placed a real heart-lung machine in the exhibition. The machine was on loan from a hospital and could be recalled at any time if a patient needed it, which should have closed the exhibition immediately. The machine pumped fluid collected from the museum's atmosphere, through which visitors move and breathe. It is an allusion to how a visitor's presence is linked to an institutional body and how neither can function independently of the other. I installed

also huge steel beams, a kind of buttresses, that looked as if they were holding up the walls. I wanted visible how the museum hall can also be done fail, just like the human body, but is nevertheless valuable for the system within which it operates, in this case the art industry.'

TN: You often involve the bodies of visitors and invites them to activate something in the work. How does this interest in the interrelationships of the body and its environment translate into your performance work?

AZ: 'For my installations I think about how presenting an object in a space is always a form of staging

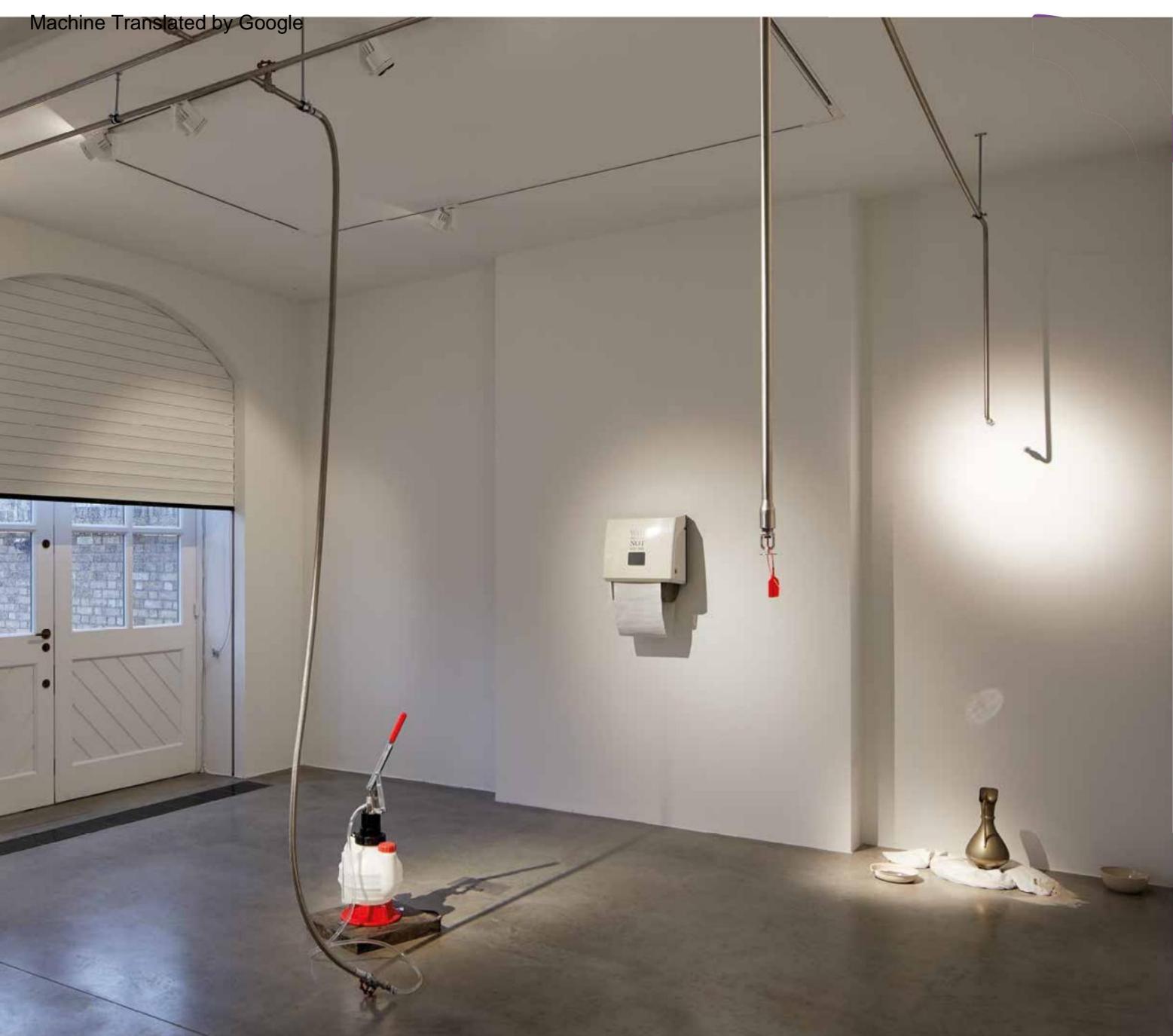


is because bodies move along and through it. At the same time I think about the formal functions of exhibited work. If a work looks very minimalist, visitors may become disappointed because the physical work is not what they expected. My response to that is invariably: "There may not be much to see here, but you are there." For me the most interesting question is: "What are you doing here?"

When it comes to my own performance work, I start from the sense of witnessing, of taking up space and of attuning, and place it in a sonic process.

By that I mean more than just sound. Sonic processes are also about vibrations, resonances and the intangible energy that arises when different entities come into play.

In my performance practice I focus on *spoken word*, but also on capturing and playing sound through the same object, using vibrating plates and contact microphones that I attach to the surfaces. By placing these plates in an exhibition hall, there is a constant negotiation and coordination between different aspects of them. I am interested in aligning the physical space and the boundaries that define it, of myself as a presence that initiates this exploration, and of all other attendees who invest their time and energy. I get the inspiration for this from my experience with spoken word evenings where it feels as if the poets are attuned to the other



Both images: Abbas Zahedi, 'How To Make A How From A Why?', 2020, installation at South London Gallery, courtesy the artist, Belmacz and South London Gallery

performing poets. In a similar way, I try to use sound to create a dialogue between the space itself and how everyone navigates the space in this specific moment of being together.

TN: What do you see as the relevance of performance?

AZ: 'The ritual charge of my performances is important to me. We always carry rituals with us, although they are never the same in two different places. Especially if you are a migrant, you are aware that you bring rituals with you to a new place. It's about doing the same thing, but completely different.'

Titus Nouwens is curator

The interview has been translated from English by the editors

Work by Abbas Zahedi can be seen at Eastside Projects, Birmingham

This text is part of the series *The Looking Body*, an interview series in this magazine and on our website, in which Titus Nouwens talks to artists about collaboration, performance, spectatorship and their shared interest in physicality and embodiment.