A Matter of Use: Abbas Zahedi's *How to Make a How from a Why?* at South London Gallery

How do you make a how from a why? Why, denotes a questioning of reason whereas, how, is inquisitive of the manner, means or condition of something: therefore, the titular question would entail a transmutation from analysis into action. A language game such as this, skirts along what Ludwig Wittgenstein would argue to be a philosophical problem, as to fully answer the polemic would entail a philosophising of each particular word[1]. Thus, language would go on holiday [2]. Instead, one should acknowledge this particular problem as simply a question of *use* - for which Wittgenstein would claim as the main operative device underpinning language. '*How to Make a How from a Why?*' is the result of Abbas Zahedi's (b. 1984, London) six-month long residency at the South London Gallery. In acknowledgment of Wittgenstein's conception of language, *meaning is use*, Zahedi's obfuscated hermeneutics of utility engenders a generative withdrawal from the institution.

'*How to Make a How from a Why?*' is installed within the ground floor of the Fire Station, featuring large arched doors with inlayed windows overlooking the road outside: yet the view is fractional, as one of the interior shutters is lowered to about halfway. The institutions security measures are now exposed; its borders are both permeated and problematised. Zahedi galvanises the doors and the shutters further through attaching a surface transducer, enabling the structural elements of the space to be converted into a speaker. A tinny soundscape, titled *In This Space We Leave*, vibrates off the white enamelled shutter and the base of the bland wooden door. *In This Space We Leave* (2020), produced with the musicians Saint Abdullah - a New York based collaborative producing music inspired by Middle Eastern history and politics – is a cacophony of found Iranian field recordings, eulogies and poetry. The soundscape, however, is unable to overcome the gesture of *using* the institution itself. (A door is both an entrance and an exit, depending on how it is *used*).

Prior to entering the exhibition, in the gallery's hallway, is a fire exit sign light box lying upon the floor. The iconography is not of an ungendered straight-edged person posed mid-sprint, but a cross section of a bodybuilders twisted torso. The placement is nonconforming. Inside the gallery is another, one might say appropriately placed above the interior entrance passageway, yet it depicts a single flailing all-be-it muscular arm. Leading upstairs into the further galleries is a third exit sign with a flexed bicep. The latter is perhaps the most explicit of them all, in portending a consideration of utility. This particular symbolism is perhaps a contemporising of the 'blacksmith's arm'. The blacksmith's arm being such a well-used "example of the effects of use that it has achieved a somewhat iconic status", according to Sarah Ahmed in her book '*What's the Use?*'[3]. The naturalists

---

[1] Wittgenstein, L., 1997 (1953). 1st ed. *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 5-23.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ahmed, S., 2019. '*What's the Use?*'. 1st ed. London: Duke University Press, pp.83-92.

Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and Charles Darwin take up this sign, to exemplify concepts of growth through repeated use over time: the more something is practised the better it becomes – the larger the arm, the stronger and more useful it is for the creation of capital. Sara Ahmed understands this modality through an idiom, she calls a "biography of use"; a *biography of use* is therefore a things history of use [4]. These works – which lack a title and are subsumed under the exhibitions name – muddle with the fire exit signs *biography of use*. By subverting the iconography of a typical fire exit sign, what is in fact exposed is its ableist semiotics: becoming pertinent reminders that a person's ability to exit, is wholly predicated upon being well abled.

These seemingly nameless sculptures build upon a previous body of work titled *Dwelling: In This Space We Grieve* (2019), shown at his graduate show last year. *'Dwelling: In This Space We Grieve'* consisted of a fridge with an internal green light, redolent of the fire at Grenfell Tower in 2017. Lacking any physical contents but housing a soundtrack amplifying and abstracting its inherent whirr; the objects functionality was comparably scrambled. To open the fridge door would enable the sound to filter out into the surrounding atmosphere. Zahedi formed this work as a lamentation upon his former colleague and artist Khadija Saye, who was taken by the fire presumed to be started by a faulty fridge. Each respective work operates through a detailed interrogation of the object's *biography of use*, as prior to and inclusive of its subsumption under the rhetoric of 'contemporary art'.

If we attend to the actual gallery's *biography of use*, it's functioning as a fire station during the latter part of the 19th century: Zahedi's consideration of use is not only explicated, but his conceptualism and its interaction with institutional structures is made overt. For the conception of the exhibition Abbas reflected upon the essay 'Resistant Exits' by Jennet Kirkpatrick, who considers post-Marxist thinkers such as Paul Virno and their theorising upon the radicality of exodus, paying attention to the particularities they miss. Their understanding of a radical exit is hinged upon surplus and an utter romanticisation of withdrawal. Whereas Kirkpatrick, following Chantal Mouffe's critique of Virno, explains how a truly far-reaching exit must engage with existing institutions still, as dominant forces will thus take up the vacuum in their absence[5]. Abbas performs an exit from the institution, while tethered to it and making *use* of it.

A fire sprinkler system is weaved throughout the space, for which encroaches upon you as you traverse the room. Food-grade steel pipes connect to a small cistern and pump – a printed decal of a rose decorates the container - filled with rose water that you are invited to impel; pumping the cistern

[4] Ibid.

[5] Kirkpatrick, J., 2018. Resistant Exits. *Contemporary Political Theory*, (18), pp.135–157.

is somewhat lifeless as mere drips are extruded. Directly underneath each spout are domesticated objects, amassing this fragrant liquid. Roses are indigenous to Iran and hold a variety of uses within the Middle East: they are often used in a ceremonial capacity, for the cleansing of scared religious sites and to 'clean' the dead prior to burial. Here, the use of rose water upon and within the institution operates as a sort of ritualistic cleansing of it. It is perhaps through the cleansing of the institutions *biography of use*, that it can become "more accessible to diasporic bodies of flesh and praxis", as Zahedi explains of his earlier work '*Studio Jum'ah*' (2016) – which transformed part of the Tate Modern into a mosque.[6] While his work explores his Iranian heritage, it refuses a representational formalism. How he chooses to consider his cultural heritage is through the symbolism of the rose, or rose water: an exit, of sorts.

The exodus of representation evident within Zahedi's praxis and his critical engagement with the institution of art not solely bounded by its administerial parameters, but a preference for a movement outside of it, illuminates upon what can be noted or considered as a withdrawal from institutional critique. Zahedi's installation, therefore, makes cuts towards an infrastructural critique, to paraphrase Marina Vishmdt. In the essay *Between Not Everything and Not Nothing: Cuts Toward Infrastructural Critique*, Marina Vishmdt explains how a movement from institutional critique to infrastructural critique, would entail a prioritization of the 'real' as opposed to a "mimetic relation with the phantom antagonistic/enabler of the institution". [7] In other words, its concern becomes unbound by the institute per se. She explains further how "transcendental repetition is abstract (capitalism, class contempt, anti-black racism) and [that] infrastructural repetition is found in the material conditions of possibility (captive regulations, lead pipes, privatized governance) that sustain social relations in a particular shape over time". [8] Infrastructure is that which repeats; repetition normalises things and when something stops functioning, "an aperture is cut into its artifice – through which history and power relations can be seen".[9]

Abbas Zahedi's fire sprinkler system enacts such a tear upon its artifice, as when you pump the cistern rose water doesn't energetically pour out, as you would assume so. This tear is caused by it ceasing to function accordingly, its inability to put out a fire – becoming *useless*. In its uselessness, it thus evokes the failures of and by the system, which led to the fatalities at Grenfell Tower for instance. His

[6] Clifford, J., 2018. *Transforming An Artist's Studio For Prayer: Studio Jum'Ah At Tate Modern – Event Alert | Art Radar.* [online] Artradarjournal.com. Available at: <https://artradarjournal.com/2018/01/17/transforming-an-artists-studio-for-prayer-studio-jumah-at-tate-modern-event-alert/> [Accessed 18 August 2020].

[7] Vishmidt, M., 2016. Between Not Everything and Not Nothing: Cuts Toward Infrastructural Critique. In: S. Sheikh and M. Hlavajova, ed., *Former West: Art and the Contemporary After 1989*, 1st ed. Netherlands: MIT Press, pp.265-269.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

intervention upon the doors and the fire exit signs are also acts which cause such a split. Through subverting an object's *biography of use*, Zahedi exposes the structural inequalities restricting access and exit in the contemporary socio-political landscape. '*How to Make a How from a Why?*' manifests a metaphysical withdrawal from the paradigm of the institution, in order to encounter the complex infrastructure(s) constraining a person's ability to enter or exit: employing various language games, Zahedi performs a subsequent cross-examination of function and form. He *uses* the institution to expose a struggle against hegemonic power.