

POESIS, SYSTEM, AND SENSORIAL REGENERATION: A CONVERSATION WITH ABBAS ZAHEDI

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ABSTRACT

The work of Abbas Zahedi (b. 1984) operates in the space between social action, biological systems, and aesthetic experience. Drawing from his former training as a medical doctor, Zahedi creates immersive, relational frameworks—often employing sound and ritual—that poetically address collective trauma, systemic failures, and the contemporary sense of precarity. This interview explores the artist's unique trajectory, from a background rooted in protocols of care to the design of his artistic systems and methodologies, examining how his practice reclaims sensorial experience and artifice as indispensable tools to generate genuine connection and communal support, from both an artistic and experiential point of view.

Keywords: Abbas Zahedi; Poesis; Social practice; Sonic support group; Fractal systems; Relational aesthetics; Embodiment; Communal care; Artifice.

1. FROM PROTOCOL TO PRACTICE: THE ARTISTIC SYSTEM

Guy Fleisher: Your background in medicine is such a fascinating and unique part of your story. I'm curious how that formal understanding of biological systems, and perhaps the protocols of care, has translated into the way you design the social and artistic systems within your practice?

Abbas Zahedi: I came into art having trained as a medic, trained to be a doctor. I have a science background and stopped doing that around 2009 due to a bereavement, a loss in my family, and that made it challenging to be in a medical environment. I was lucky, being at UCL allowed me to get help for this; I was fast tracked into a psychiatric hospital. That started a 10-year process intensive rehab and psychoanalysis. It made me unable to do anything else, in terms of work, any kind of career or job. I was doing mostly manual labour at this time, working with my hands, making things. I worked in kitchens, a bakery, a brewery making drinks. I found that these environments were highly creative, and the work I was doing internally on myself was very rich in understanding my own instincts, intuition, ideas and thoughts. There was an opening up of my inner world and a way of using this to connect with people socially through the service industry, which is very collaborative.

I went into the arts from this position of doing a lot of conceptual and psychological work, in tandem with very physical work. These two things were guiding each other. When I got into art practice, it was because of the social projects I was involved with at the time. For example, I started a food bank and cultural and community center, working with migrants, refugees, people who are born in the UK but whose heritage is from somewhere else, like myself. Trying to work out how our cultural, intellectual and spiritual standing relates to this new reality we found ourselves within. And at the same time, we were also being deciphered systematically, gaining a kind of awareness that comes with being under a dominant gaze. We were not necessarily welcome. We could exist within certain limits. I went into art because I was told what I'm doing had a kind of artistic relevance to the prism of socially engaged and relational art, social practice, the things that Claire Bishop was writing about. I went in with the idea that what I was doing could translate into an art space.

For me, the practice of working in the arts has always been the same since then. It's about creating a physical and embodied experience of that social relational map I'm trying to make sense of, exploring this through the requirements of organised space and time. The requirement being that it's visual and affective; social in its own way, and ultimately about bringing all of that into a form of relational dialogue. My friend, a few years ago, described this as "dissociative realism" It's through realism, a very embodied experience, rooted in the context that I'm working in, that I found these dissociative breaks, which felt very conceptual. I saw a tension in this dialogue between the embodied and the dissociative. As someone coming from a highly complex, post-traumatic condition, I'm trying to work through this tension, while, at the same time, taking

the aesthetic dimension of it into the space of contemporary art, and not through a kind of refusal or sort of opaque approach. I think the work becomes the process of learning what it is to live through the making of art as opposed to delivering an answer with the work.



Figs.1-2 - Abbas Zahedi, *Waiting With {Sonic Support}*, 2022. Open Mic performances at Frieze London 12-16 October 2022. © Abbas Zahedi. Co-commissioned by Frieze and Forma for the Frieze Artist Award 2022. Courtesy Frieze, Forma. Photo Forma

2. SOUND AS TOOL FOR COMMUNAL CARE

GF: As someone who also works with sound, I'm constantly thinking about its role in our world. So many contemporary sounds are "alerts" or alarms demanding our immediate attention. Your work, like *Sonic Support Group* (2020-ongoing), feels like a powerful counter-proposal—a space for collective processing. I wonder if you could share your thoughts on sound's role, not as an alarm, but as a tool for communal care?

AZ: I approach sound through the cultural engagement we all have with sound. An engagement that often relates to the personal cultures we were raised in; maybe that's through religions, rituals, pop music, folk music, or just the ordinary experiences that many people have daily. I was also growing up in London at a time when my generation was developing new genres of music that combined electronic and migrant [standpoints]. The sound systems and cultures, what Steve Goodman would refer to, as the “hardcore continuum”, that wave of sound that got broken down into jungle, dub, garage, grime, dubstep etc. All of this taught me that people build the sounds they need. That's what I understood from growing up part of a generation that did that. Being part of a migrant community creating space for their rituals, which are often very sonic, or a young generation of people wanting to create a sound that will connect to their influences and inspirations, responding to the codes and landscapes they find themselves within. I always understood sound as something you make to serve a need, often with a collective dimension.

Of course, I'm aware there are these discourses around sound as a form of alarm and sonic warfare¹, the use of sound to control and collapse. I'm interested in that too; it's part of my research; but it's not something I've necessarily directly responded to in my work. My work up until now has been concerned with other dimensions; sound's ability to bring people together in a collective way to develop another, different kind of metaphysical dimension to a space of gathering.

I made *Sonic Support Group* during the pandemic, transforming my solo exhibition *Ouranophobia, SW3* (Chelsea Sorting Office, London, United Kingdom, 2020–2021) into a space for recovery and renewal. Because it was the height of the pandemic's restrictions, the only people who could access the show were health workers and people who had to go outside for their jobs. My friends, who I knew from when I was training as a doctor, came to check out the exhibition during this time, and, as neurologists, they were interested in how I'd created an experience of sound that was very embodied and spatial. Rather than using speakers to create the sounds in the exhibition, I vibrated parts of the building with transducers and audio exciters. This meant visitors could explore the building in a material way, allowing them to have a relationship with the space that wasn't necessarily about identifying sound coming through a speaker. It became more intimate with the space, something felt and colored by its materiality. Later, because of the medics being involved, they were able to designate the space as a support group. It wasn't me calling it a support group. It was the neurologists who came, saying, we would like to instantiate a space like that in the show. The support group in this exhibition was helpful because even though much of the work was visual, it made people understand that this was primarily a sonic experience.

GF: I'm fascinated by the term “Support Group” itself. It's a therapeutic, shared model. As a sound artist, I'm always thinking about the acoustic

¹ See Goodman, S. (2009). *Sonic warfare: Sound, affect, and the ecology of fear*. MIT Press.

properties of support. What does “support” sound like to you? Is it about specific frequencies, the presence of the human voice, or is it more about the shared silence between the sounds?

AZ: I think in every case it's different. I don't always demand the work to have a quality of support, but I think the work creates an unfamiliar experience of sound that cannot be located in any other space, except for the one where you see it or *where* you hear it. I think that's the most supportive use of sound in the sense that it's a sound that doesn't have a clear register. It doesn't give you a sense that I know this sound, or this sound reminds me of another place or something else. The sound is very much about the material and spatial properties of the space you are in. So, it kind of hyperfocuses you on the materiality of the room. By using transducers and audio exciters to vibrate the materials in the space means you were dealing mostly with wood and metal. Ultimately, you end up with the frequencies and registers that these materials can produce. If you spend time tuning those properties, you find resonant frequencies and those are the most stable ones to amplify. That way, you make people very aware of the room. Rather than trying to introduce a sonic element, you are discovering the sonics inherent in the space.

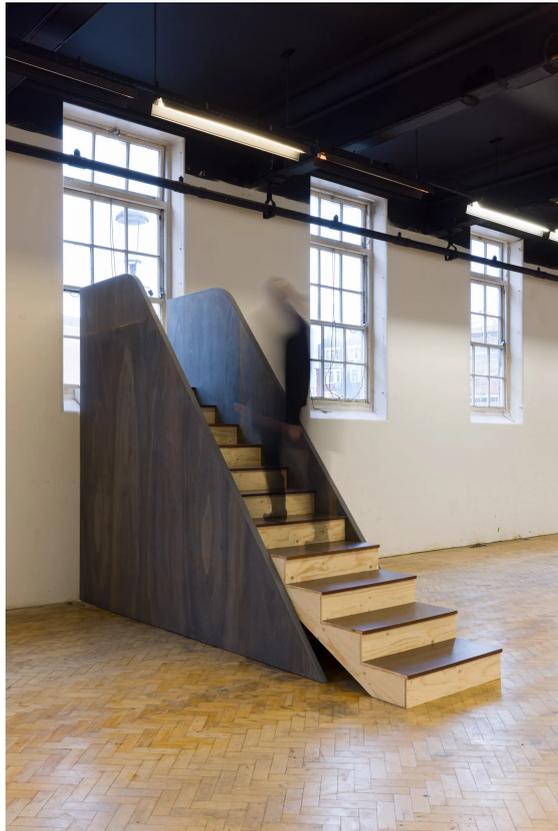


Fig. 3 - Abbas Zahedi, *Ouranophobia SW3*, 2020 – 2021. Installation view at the old Chelsea Sorting Office. Courtesy: Belmacz



Fig. 4 - Abbas Zahedi, *Begin Again*, 2025. Installation view. As part of *Gathering Ground* at Tate Modern, 2025. © Hydar Dewachi

3. THE FRACTAL SYSTEM AND ECOLOGICAL GRIEF

GF: That's a powerful way to frame it. In medicine, an intervention is often precise and targeted. Do you see your art interventions in the same way? For instance, was a performance like *Rose & STEMM* (2019) a specific “injection” of an idea into a context, or do you see it more as a “diagnostic” tool to see what that system does?

AZ: It is a way to describe the whole thing as a system. My support groups, for example, interrupt the exhibitions they are held within—they stop the sound, introducing silence as a collective force, people speak, then go back to silence, and then someone speaks again. I explored this in my artwork *Begin Again* (*Part of Gathering Ground*, Tate Modern, London, UK, 2025–2026). Here, the soundtrack of the show—which has been made using the hidden pipework found in the walls of Tate Modern—mirrors this when it's on, but as a group starts it interrupts the show. This shift between sound, silence and collective speaking happens once a month. What I'm interested in is not only a systems approach, but this as a fractal system of silence and rest.

This exercise is central to *Begin Again*. It starts from an understanding that a lot of what we call systems are not so discreet and self-contained; they are, in a way, models of other systems which are occurring at various scales. This fractal process is something I think you become aware of, especially when you study medicine and you learn about the body. You understand that many of the things happening at a cellular level are then happening at a hormonal level or at another level in the body, at the nervous system level, which creates this other kind of consciousness. Things that are happening within the mind are again happening in a similar way to a cycle within a bodily physical system. I learn to understand that the body itself, from the structure of the DNA

and the helices, and the way things are all happening within some kind of cyclical manner, has a sort of fractal relationship, not only to the body itself, but also to the world around us.

If you look at cells, like a Purkinje fiber in the cerebellum, for example, it looks like a tree, it's a dendritic structure, an arboreal structure, it has all these branches that recall synapses. Reflecting on this relationship, I realised that by observing the world in a particular way, you are observing your own interior reality. For me, the work I'm trying to create—when I succeed in making something that can operate across the register of a visual artwork, a sound work, a social relational space, and also a conceptual space—these layers are in a kind of fractal relationship with each other, and they are mirroring at different scales and intensities the same kind of phenomena that I'm trying to explore in the work.

In *Begin Again*, it's about tapping into the utilities infrastructure of the space. The sound in that case isn't necessarily the experience that I was intending to create. The experience was just about making people very aware of the location, and hijacking and hacking those utility infrastructures. We situate a reflective experience in the space, and sound helps to hold that reflection. The sound work at the Tate is not calm and easy. It actually changes a lot all the time, and it's a generative work. The lack of a predictable score or cycle creates a sense that you're dealing with a form of intelligence. It's an intelligence that is the logic of this system. The soundscape crashes and regenerates. You experience those crashes through distortions and heavy vibrations of particular parts of the room. That, for me, is an important part, where it's a kind of mapping of how we experience emotions and affect, where they come and go in these cycles and waves. Especially when you're dealing with ecological grief—the themes of the show and my artwork in that instance—the feeling of grief is something that is very unstable. The soundscape tries to mirror this process with a sense of unpredictability.

4. HOLDING A HEART IN ARTIFICE

GF: I was so struck by the title of your exhibition *Holding a Heart in Artifice* (Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham, UK, 2023). It's a beautiful phrase that, to me, points to a tension that many of us in new media and installation art engage with. I'm curious about your thoughts on that relationship—between the “artificial” nature of a constructed art space and its very real capacity to foster genuine, heartfelt connection.

AZ: I think using terms like “artificial” are not so clear to me, exactly. From different perspectives, people are picking on a different aspect of the art space and calling it artificial. For example, the clinical nature is what I find most artificial about the art space: the fact that it's white, it's sterile, it's bright. It's kind of designed like a modern day operating theater. With my background, I experience these spaces that way. I just see art spaces as laboratories for aesthetics, maybe, or for a particular kind of philosophical

work with props, which are the works themselves, not the people. The people are trained to act or behave a certain way in these spaces. Different works invite different levels of participatory relationship with the space, not just the work, but the space as a whole.

With *Begin Again* or with *Sonic Support*, there's never an instruction that tells people how to be in the space, It's open. I'm very interested in the ways people engage with the environment. The scale of my work is very familiar. It is composed of objects that are usually quite well understood. I'm not creating anything highly produced or highly outside of ordinary materials, because I'm interested in people creating their own associations with what's there. I think the hyper-produced approach to making artworks now is very challenging. It's hard to create an experience that allows this kind of direct connection, for me that's life support.



Fig. 5 - Abbas Zahedi, *Holding a Heart in Artifice*, 2023. Installation view at Nottingham Contemporary, 2023. Courtesy Nottingham Contemporary. © Stuart Whipps.

FINAL THOUGHTS ON THE POESIS OF RESILIENT SYSTEMS

The poetry of Abbas Zahedi's practice emerges not from a refusal of the world's artifice, but from a profound commitment to using constructed systems—be they medical, social, or aesthetic—as templates for collective engagement and understanding. By translating the body's cyclical, self-regulating, and fractal logic into the logic of an installation, he transforms spaces of crisis into resilient, regenerative structures. The work finds its *poesis* in the shared silence between sounds, the vulnerability of the grief cycle mirrored in a crashing soundscape, and the unexpected creation of care outside of prescribed boundaries. Zahedi's interventions ultimately propose that the most essential function of contemporary art is to provide an embodied, conceptual space where communal repair is not merely represented, but actively and repeatedly generated with, and by, the spectators, as sharing in the circle of support should be.

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