

Uri Aran

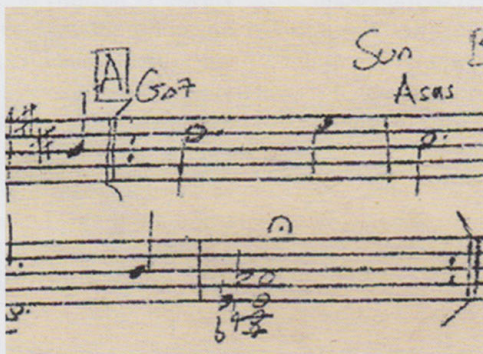


Born 1977 in
Jerusalem, Israel

Lives in
New York, NY

We Have Each Other

Fionn Meade



Untitled (For Dum), 2013 (detail). Mixed-media on paper, 8 1/2 × 11 in. (21.6 × 27.9 cm)

Affect, gesture, and melodrama abound in Uri Aran's installations. The New York-based artist introduces story fragments and half characters into his sculpture, video, and drawing configurations, only then to obstruct any definitive catharsis of plot or identification. Aran's storyboard "personas"—which take form as everything from ID photos, pet imagery, toys, and consumer imagery to the artist's own snapshots—are displayed on sculptural supports (most often shelf-like pedestal structures and rough-hewn worktables), and are subject to rapid substitution patterns, following what the artist calls the "flat logic" of his idiosyncratic design. In these propulsive scenarios, Aran devises his characters' existences like a scriptwriter: plotting out every demise and rebirth and the emotive effect of each transition, revision, and step-by-step maneuver.

In Aran's 2012 solo exhibition at Gavin Brown's Enterprise in New York, for example, a passport photograph of an "uncle in jail" (and its scribbled caption) cropped up somewhat ominously here and there throughout the installation—occasionally trading places with an absurd image of a smiling dog or with a scaled-up or scaled-down photograph of a horse's head. Embedded like pieces on a game board, such human and animal metonyms do not cancel or wholly replace one another in Aran's landscape; rather, they become associative devices within a set of episodes that have no clear beginning or end. Adorned with linguistic labels describing modes of transportation and arrival—"by foot," "by car," "by bus," and so

on—the works in the gallery show functioned as way stations for the estranging sentiments associated with having an "uncle in jail." Various scenes of departure, or evoking loss, shame, or joy, Aran's sculptural tableaux were imbued with the echo of that oddly loaded phrase. A series of quick line drawings in the same installation—depicting a mouse, a horse, a shark, and a cat, and recalling Dieter Roth's comic draftsmanship—were superimposed over the image of a smiling pregnant woman, adding another level of protean transformation. Presented alongside worktables perforated with drill holes and holding configurations of everyday objects and cast-off studio materials—meticulously arranged, like mementos—Aran's images and sculptural topography offer an uncanny register of new life, confinement, and cultural displacement, all positioned among wood shavings and detritus.

Aran constructs a shape-shifting language with the most meager means, collecting an uneasy inventory of pathos, absence, and laughter. His spendthrift materials and halting linguistic repetitions work together to elicit a kind of sadness and nostalgia for the work's own materiality and imagery. Aran repeatedly goes over actions undertaken and sentimental iconographies, embracing and exhausting absurdity to the point of forcibly breaking it down into a new syntax.

While text often pins down an image—even a clichéd one—compelling it to perform as an illustration or a product, in Aran's work, images are forcefully *detoured* by language, in both spoken

I. Stuart Comer

and written form. With their abrupt substitutions and transitions, his installations recall the process of learning a foreign language or studying a grammar primer. Social situations occur in medias res, repeated in various permutations and with different power relations, placing the viewer (now in the role of student) in the midst of the social fray. In his sculptural wall configuration *Dear Tenants (B)* (2013), for example, fragmented and partially effaced textual loose ends take on a foreboding and moralistic tone: close inspection



Untitled (For Dam), 2013. Mixed-media on paper,
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of the stainless-steel backdrop, hung with images, objects, and a framed drawing, reveals handwritten phrases such as “We knew then & there” and “In the end, I guess, I learned such a great lesson.” Scrawled out faintly, such pedantic phrases are obscured by scatological caricature drawings, making the caption-like textual elements seem to function as both mood enhancements and tutelary spirits within Aran’s profiling universe.

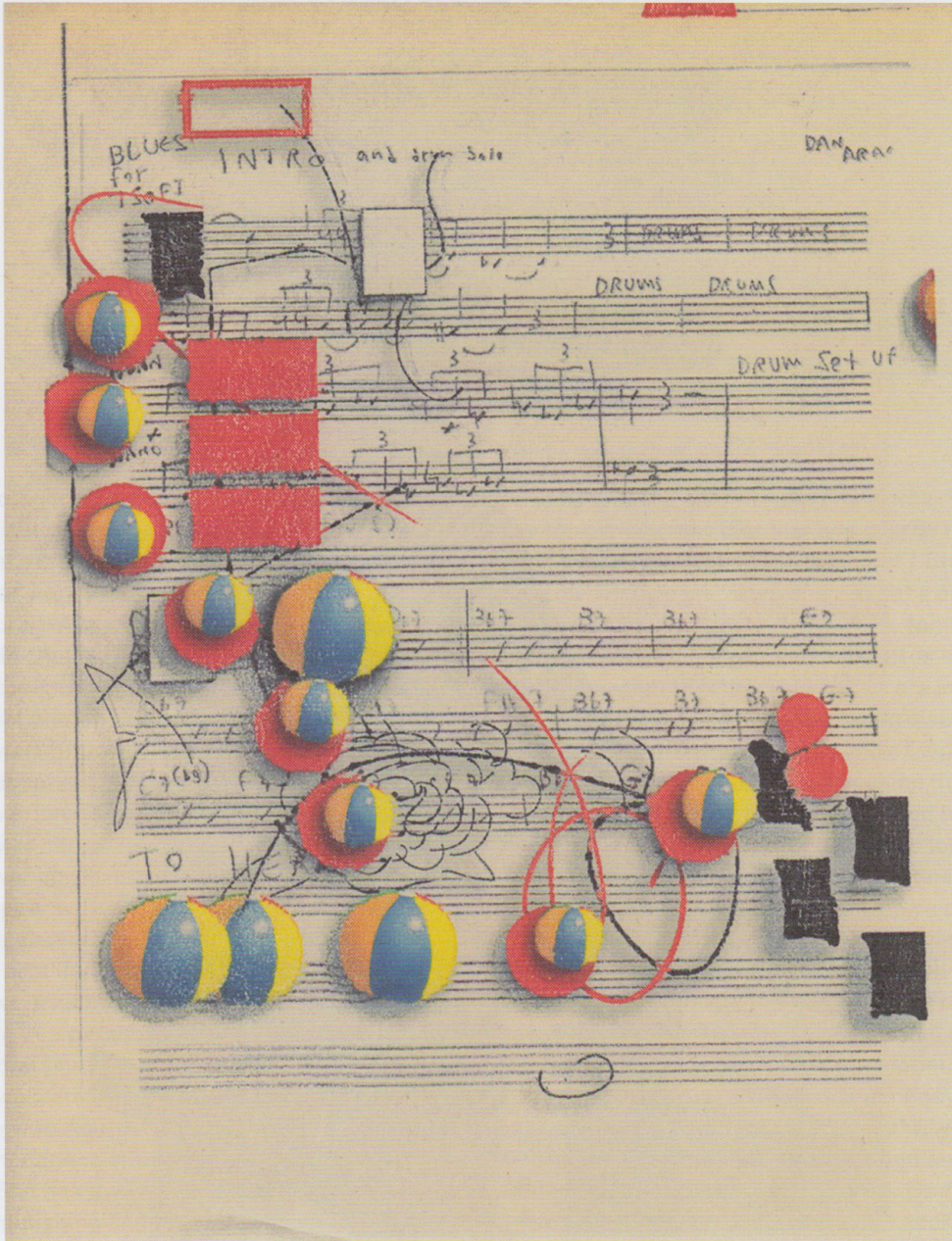
There are potential plot turns and character situations implied throughout *Dear Tenants (B)*: two inkjet print-out images show a young woman taking a smartphone picture of her own pregnant belly; drugstore ID photos of anonymous young men lurk nearby; diminutive cutouts of happy dogs are countered with pictures of trusting, “smile-for-the-camera” human grins. Such socially awkward yet familiar images point to and mirror one another, like understudies in an existential crisis that is never completely enacted, only mapped out and obsessively, continuously rearranged.

The concepts of training and tutoring are also central to the video works that are so pivotal

within Aran’s endeavors, including his contributions to the recent Venice Biennale and his 2013 solo exhibition *Here, Here and Here* at Kunsthalle Zürich. In both presentations, the viewer was indirectly addressed by a directorial voice that is often audible in Aran’s videos—and yet the viewer is notably and irrevocably excluded from any shareable meeting place or direct encounter with the quasi-narrator directing the action. In the video *Chimpanzee* (2013), for instance, a young woman speaks into a studio mic: “This was a special night, Dad dialed the phone and got our favorite pizza . . .”; and a young man and woman trade phrases: “I much prefer our downstairs neighbor on the first floor to our upstairs neighbor on the third floor”; “We have each other.” Aran is seemingly just off camera, giving cues to the speakers, again placing the viewer in the position of estranged dialogue partner. Invoking what theorist Gilles Deleuze termed the “out-of-field” principle of cinema, namely that which “refers to what is neither seen nor understood, but is nevertheless perfectly present,”¹ Aran’s videos conjure a coercive atmosphere of directives, compelling performers to repeat and vary their phrasing, while insinuating the viewer into a voyeuristic role. Everyday phrases and objects work off one another to create heightened moments of mimetic crisis, fear . . . and eventually pleasure. The viewer is in training here, being familiarized with scenes that evoke absence and emptiness, scenes that stay the same even as they change: deepened and yet made thinner and more artificial in their repetition.

Aran’s frequent use of classical and jazz music to transition between scenes in his videos joins with the linguistic phrasing and image profiles of his characters to create a rhythm of metaphor, material, and identity. Though a comedic ambience of genre forms and familiar gags presides over the “poor cinema” that Aran’s installations manage to animate and bring to life, his scenography is opened up throughout to a metaphysical doubt that rings and repeats long after the show is over.

1. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (1983; repr., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 17.



Untitled (For Dan), 2013. Mixed-media on paper, 8 1/2 x 11 in. (21.6 x 27.9 cm)