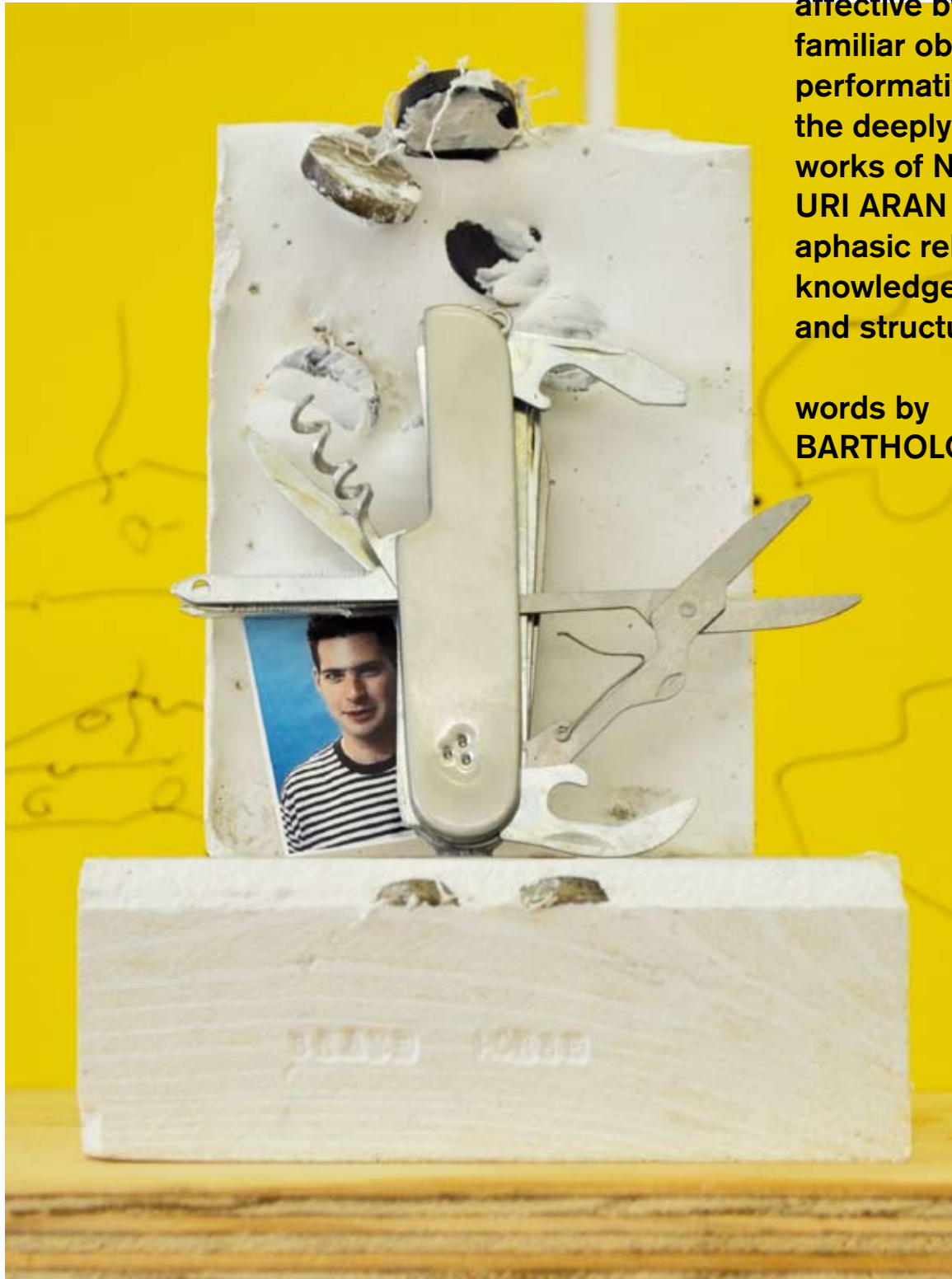


CONSTRUCTIVE AUTISM

Approaching the domestic, popular and affective by means of familiar objects and performative gestures, the deeply subjective works of NY-based artist URI ARAN point to an aphasic relationship to knowledge, meaning and structure.

words by
BARTHOLOMEW RYAN



Previous page:
Untitled (Brave Horse detail), 2011
Courtesy: the artist
and mother's tankstation, Dublin

This page:
Untitled, 2010
Photo: Koen de Waal
Courtesy: the artist
and Office Baroque, Antwerp

Uri Aran makes room for sentimentality, then skews it. Not into the pits of irony, but into something richer and more empty. While the structure of Aran's work is experimental, it does not set itself up as yet another desiccated alternative to the manipulative properties of the culture industry. Rather, it tends towards a more expansive vision, one that is unafraid to lay itself bare in approaching the domestic, popular and the affective. Like many precedents, the work emerges from productive procrastination. Aran begins with the body in a studio surrounded by things. He makes use of readymade familiar objects and of performative gestures with a fluid use of mediums and media that builds character through accumulation.

An Israeli artist who lives and works in New York, Aran's upcoming solo show at Gavin Brown Enterprises (January 2012) will be the first in the city since his 2008 debut at Rivington Arms in the Lower East Side. That this first exhibition was that gallery's last is a biographical vignette whose promise and despondency seems fitting for work that is singular in its hopefulness and pessimism. Titled "Geraniums," the exhibition, according to Liam Gillick, who taught Aran at Columbia University, exemplified the artist's "corrupted approach to materials, structures and narratives." Featuring drawings, monoprints, sculpture and video, it marshaled a series of formal, material and cultural suggestions into a feedback loop of associative logic that ultimately fell in upon itself, pratfall-like.

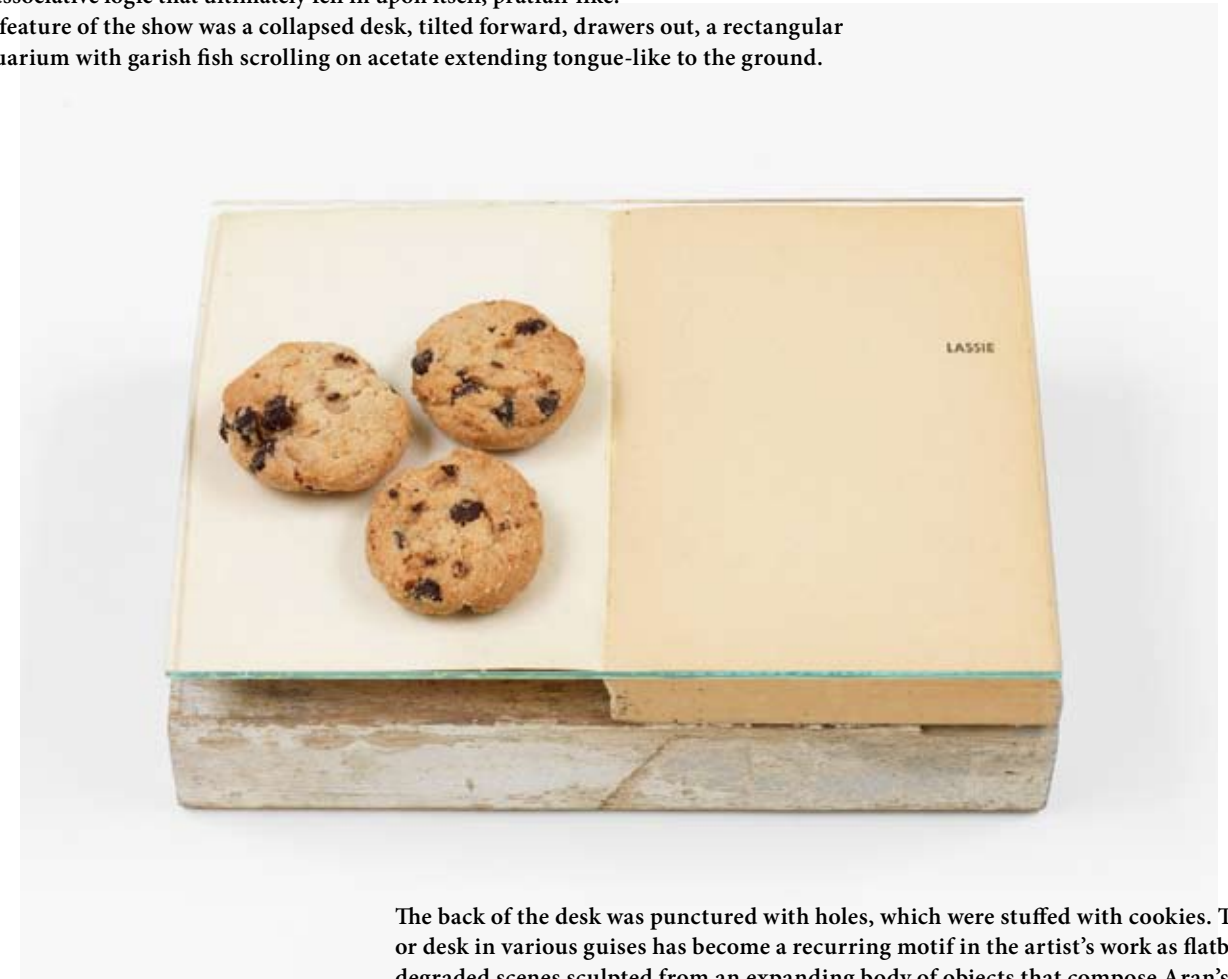
A feature of the show was a collapsed desk, tilted forward, drawers out, a rectangular faux-aquarium with garish fish scrolling on acetate extending tongue-like to the ground.

ARTIST'S BIO

URI ARAN (b. 1977) lives and works in New York. He holds an MFA from Columbia University. He has had solo exhibitions at Mother's Tankstation, Dublin, and Rivington Arms, New York. His work has also been featured in group exhibitions at the Jewish Museum of of Belgium; The Artist's Institute, New York; and the Sculpture Center, New York.

CURRENT & FORTHCOMING

URI ARAN's next project will be a solo exhibition at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York, in January 2012.



The back of the desk was punctured with holes, which were stuffed with cookies. The table or desk in various guises has become a recurring motif in the artist's work as flatbeds for degraded scenes sculpted from an expanding body of objects that compose Aran's material lexicon (generally office supplies, domestic objects, food, pool balls, Lego figures, toys, etc.). Asked about his desk motif, Aran describes it as "bureaucratic formalism." He continues, "I see the desk as a meeting place of time and aesthetics." The desk alludes to work, but also to labor's once distinct compliment, leisure. Hence the allusions to vacation in the tropical references (fish, coconuts, etc.) that suffused "Geraniums," or the sentimental mainstream entertainment tropes that make their way into many of his pieces. Rather than present a rigid bureaucratic systemization, Aran's desks and tables embody the collapse of clear distinctions between work and leisure into the post-Fordist, dematerialized flows of present precarious conditions. The artist's deeply subjective and personal arrangements point to an aphasic relationship to knowledge, meaning and structure, a constructive autism that operates in eerie parallel to the world while remaining autonomous to it. Through a sequencing of materials, quotations and a distinct aural or visual rhythmic ability, Aran invites engagement that is both embodied and psychologically charged, producing a curiously motivated surfeit of affect.

The video *Untitled* (2006) signals the approaches that would emerge in the artist's later work. It features a handsome man (Aran) seated on a chair in an artist's studio (presumably his). On his lap is a large dog (a Labrador?) facing the artist with its back to the viewer, a great heap of cuddly meat, breathing hot air and dripping (most likely) saliva on the artist's shoulder. Aran is crying. The camera passes back and forth a little clumsily, variously closing in and cutting back out. Common to much of Aran's work, sound is pulled into a different temporal register than what is seen, slowed down to create a minor sense of dislocation. Here, Aran's affective register is in full swing, with the doubling emotive impact of the dog (cute) and tears (sad). The work conjures Bas Jan Ader's *I'm too sad to tell you* (1971), the now canonical video that features the Dutch artist in close-up weeping gently, exposing some deep and charged emotional reservoir. Jan Ader's piece seems, in retrospect, to speak to the zeitgeist of his time: a male artist rebooting masculinity with the emergence of second-wave feminist discourse, but doing so in a manifestly confessional presentation that anticipates the coming paradigm of self-broadcasting, a new, not necessarily problematic alignment of subjectivity with entertain-

ment. Even with its sophisticated response to art and historical context, Jan Ader's work functions as a self-portrait. So does Aran's, but to riff on this comparison a little longer, what are we to make of the most obvious difference between the videos—namely, the dog? When asked about his use of animals, a recurring device in his work, Aran states that they function as icons of sentimentality, but also insists on their position outside of culture. Animals respond to instinct, and as such, "they reflect the myth of the artist. [...] Animals occupy an idealized primordial domain from the perspective of society." Where the dog's face is inscrutable, Aran's is alive to the present; deeply traumatized, he clings to the dog as if to an object of desire already lost. Allegorically, the contemporary artist is seen to mourn the passing of the primordial state, the exceptional status afforded the artist (and, by extension, the art field) as something mythic, though defined enough to measure along the twin axes of progress and quality. Yet, taking into account the virtuosity of Aran's work—a virtuosity within the very lack of such systems of measurement—it is possible to see the video as feigning desperate embrace of the primordial while symbolizing knowing release of it.



A - Z (that stops at Q), 2011
Installation view, Art Statements | Art 42 Basel, 2011
Courtesy: the artist and mother's tankstation, Dublin

Aran's subsequent projects have benefited from the current relativizing of artistic criteria, which has liberated them from formal or historical precedents. It is not that they have ceased to trade in the familiar, but they do so with no allegiance to conventions of structure. Nevertheless, Aran sets up his own rules, which operate intuitively and contextually from piece to piece. The simple means of the video piece *A To Q* (2010) typify his approach. We see the screen of Aran's laptop on which is playing a low resolution YouTube video of Brazilian composer Heitor Villa-Lobos's chamber piece for cellos, *Bachianas Brasileiras n.1 - Prelúdio (Modinha)*. The grandiosity of the music and the intensity of the cellist's concentration give way to awareness of the artist's silhouette on the surface of the screen. He is capturing the action on his iPhone. The shot pulls back and his voice, banal and centered, recites the letters of the alphabet, each accompanied by an object from his desk that the artist holds up between himself and the laptop screen. The ob-

jects, which include a pen, a towel, a Sharpie, a book about horses, a copy of Microsoft Word and headphones, are visually and aurally framed by the musical composition. It becomes their soundtrack, imbuing them with an unlikely pathos, but they also cast themselves on the music—estranging it, creating the dialectical pleasure that can only be achieved by allowing singular systems to exist in parallel. The progressive force of the music is accompanied by the onward march of the alphabet. The letters, however, stop at Q, cut short by the music's end. The artist sets up what seems to be a familiar procedural challenge: the alphabet ends in Z, so no doubt he will reach this zenith before the music ends. Aran's partial recital implies that conceptual completeness is antithetical to his approach. Or perhaps he had to pace himself due to a scarcity of objects around him at that moment. Central to the project is the way in which it sets up a relation between various signifiers, producing an associative response in the viewer rather than some rigidly



Untitled (Bus), 2008
Courtesy: the artist, Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York
and mother's tankstation, Dublin





defined path to correct interpretation. Admittedly, this is a near obligatory approach in polite contemporary practice, where meaning is at its most debased when emerging finite and formulated from a given work. But here, it is the use of the romantic and emotive affects of the music that gives the work its particular urgency; Aran's embrace of manipulative properties also pulls them away from the day-to-day schlock that everyday people (yes, me too) use as a refuge from their (our) not always (always) sad lives.

Aran's recurring use of sentimental musical scores from jazz to baroque, his knowing quotations of editing techniques and genre conventions, the assortments of everyday signifiers arranged on the dissipating ground of his table tops, operate on a linguistic level governed by modes of attraction and estrangement. In the video *Harry* (2007), Con Edison workers labor through the flood-lit winter evening on some unspecified repairs in Harlem. Standing in front of them, a man talks to the camera as if reporting for a local television network. He is expressive, but he can't be heard. Instead, an English-accented voiceover speaks sentences from what appears to be a love letter. It proceeds in stops and starts; the narrator rehearses approaches with sardonic friendliness: "My dearest Pet," "Don't worry, I'm loyal as a Dog." The artist chose the setting when he stumbled upon it one evening outside his studio and was immediately attracted to its cinematic quality. Aran draws on the semantic and embodied residues of various conventions, playing the typical New York scene alongside a familiar literary epistolary mode of address, while also intimating television by way of the journalistic non-narrator. These collected residues give the piece an appealing familiarity. The viewer proceeds as if in the world of the previously quantified, even the accent of the narrator may offer comfort—carrying, as it does, wafts of Blighty and days when people understood what was what. The laborers, wearing orange jackets, stand and exhale cold air. "We all feel very proud," says the narrator; the reporter gesticulates and smiles, and all the while, there is the buzzing silence of a recording studio. Quotation in *Harry* functions less as citation than as a device that marks each element of the piece as mediated, proceeding with a certain authorial self-awareness that is also, paradoxically, a distancing from the artist

There is nothing innocent about *Harry*: "I discovered I can provoke just a bit, but with a certain charm or grace, it will go unpunished," says the narrator in the film. The sentence might equally be attributed to Aran, who is building a body of work that rests on no discernable foundation because it does not assume any particular precedent—neither simulacra nor postmodern pastiche, neither deep "criticality" nor self-reflexivity. Work whose material, rhythmic and referential complexity makes it both attractive and unsettling. One gets the sense that Aran understands something subtle about the current paradigm. Rather than contribute to what Hal Foster in another context has termed the "slack relativism" of contemporary practice, Aran is modeling something altogether less casual that, at the same time, appreciates that these days, anything goes. ◇

AUTHOR

BARTHOLOMEW RYAN is assistant curator at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis where, among other projects, he has co-curated "Goshka Macuga: It Broke from Within" and the most recent evolution of Pedro Reyes ongoing Baby Marx project. Ryan has written for *Artforum* and *Metropolis M*, among other publications.



Previous page:
Untitled, detail, 2011
Courtesy: the artist
and mother's tankstation, Dublin

This page, from top:
Harry, video still, 2007
Courtesy: the artist
and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York

Untitled, video still, 2006
Courtesy: the artist
and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York

A to Q, video still, 2011
Courtesy: the artist, Gavin Brown's Enterprise,
New York and mother's tankstation, Dublin

