

## In its Place

### MONOGRAPH

#### Decoding Uri Aran's mysterious work-tables



*Departments*, 2014, installation view at Liverpool Biennial. Courtesy the artist, Sadie Coles HQ, London, Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York, mother's tank-station, Dublin, and the Liverpool Biennial; photograph: Keith Hunter

Among the recurrent components of Uri Aran's low-key, conceptually secretive installations are simple work-tables: standard fixtures of an artist's studio, repurposed as artfully scrappy display structures. Varying in size and style, these utilitarian supports – scored and smeared with traces of agitated creative labour – are laden with meticulously untidy assortments of man-made objects and organic materials. This busily cryptic bricolage – that might include broken spectacles, balls of string, cut-up rubber gloves, coffee cups, chocolate-chip cookies, autumn leaves, pears, pool balls and pizza boxes – appears to manifest, in each instance, a distinct moment within an obscure project of analysis, arrangement or assembly.

Although he was born in Jerusalem, Aran is a long-term resident of New York; as such, his work was included in the Whitney Biennial's survey of American art earlier this year. The show included three of his mysterious, messy work stations. Strips of passport snapshots, stuck onto thin plywood cut-offs, kept company with collections of delicate, dried-out sycamore leaves – as if one group of repeating forms was being studied in relation to the other. Panes of glass, little golden rods and cardboard boxes collectively hinted at a desire for structure and containment, despite the general air of mental muddle. In some sections of the coffee-stained and scribbled-on surfaces, there was contrasting evidence of scrupulous care: several of the gathered bits-and-pieces – especially assorted fruits – were neatly packaged-up or very precisely placed. Progress – in whatever strange direction had been planned – seemed more

advanced in some parts than others. But without inside information as to what kind of intuitive or strategic exercises had been undertaken, how could we know for sure?

A more expanded, continuous and – tentatively – resolved variation of such calculated 'messthetics' featured as Aran's contribution to 'The Encyclopaedic Palace', a group exhibition concerned with eccentric system-building, at the 2013 Venice Biennale. Here, too, a sense of fiddly, table-top activity was prioritized. But on that occasion it was combined with pronounced associations of museological parsing. A miscellany of humble materials – dog biscuits, wood shavings and bunches of grapes – were selected, compared and carefully positioned. New connections were formed; fresh categorizations were tested. A peculiar, incomprehensible kind of control was applied to the chaos of ordinary things. Whatever offbeat systems had been implemented, however, the outcomes achieved by Aran were, as always, deliberately provisional – and, as such, purposefully frustrating. His intricate, inconclusive investigations frequently have the look of abandoned experiments; their forlorn contents the confusing leftovers of tasks that, for some reason, have been temporarily stalled. Rather than supporting a satisfying sculptural pose, Aran's work-table pedestals often present moments of uneasy artistic pause.



Installation view at the Whitney Biennial, 2014. Courtesy: the artist, Sadie Coles HQ, London, Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York, mother's tankstation, Dublin, and South London Gallery

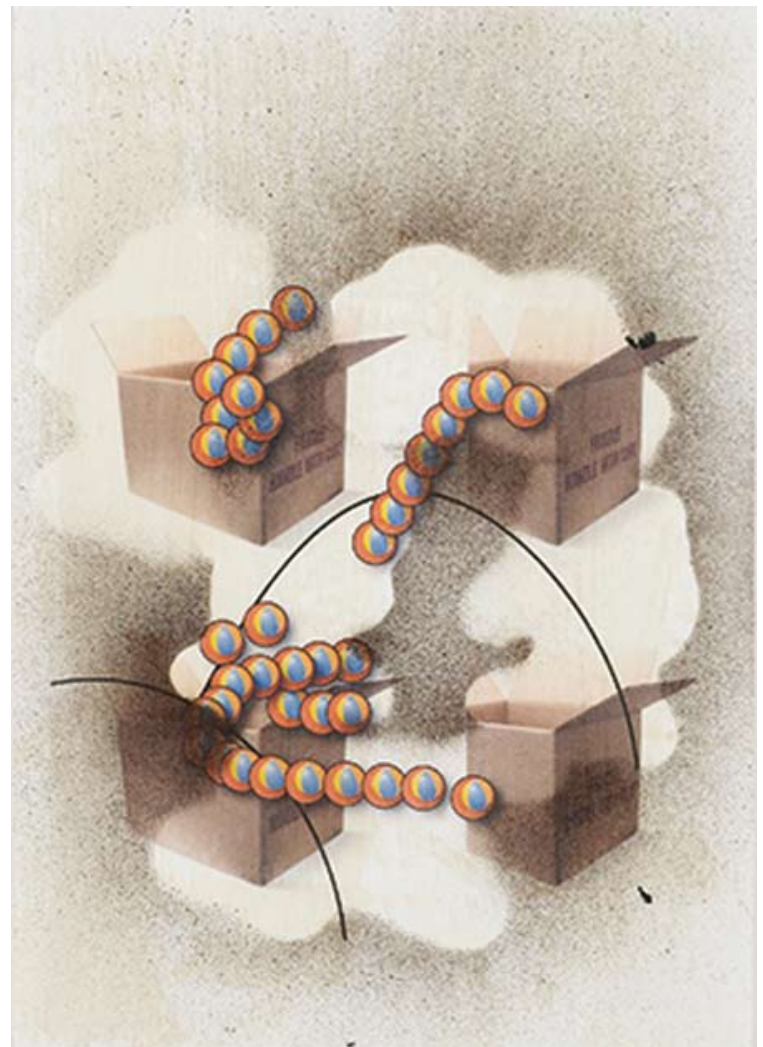
In one way, of course, such a sense of creative hesitation is familiar to anyone with a desk and a deadline. In his brief essay 'Notes Concerning the Objects that Are on my Work-table' (1976), Georges Perec writes of how a 'rearrangement of my territory' tends to take place 'in the middle of those indecisive days when I don't know if I'm going to get started and when I simply cling on to these activities of withdrawal: tidying, sorting, setting in order'. Such periods, for Perec, involved the 'dream of a work surface that is *virgo intacta*: everything in its place, nothing superfluous'. The practical, lived-in reality, nevertheless, is rather different:

'Once my work is advancing or else stalled, my work-table becomes cluttered with objects that have sometimes accumulated there purely by chance (*secateurs*, folding rule) or else by some temporary necessity (coffee cup). Some will remain for a few minutes, others for a few days, others, which seem to have got there in a somewhat contingent fashion, will take up permanent residence.'

Whatever the reasons for these items' arrival into his working milieu, Perec is eventually quite accepting of things as they are, in all their unmanageable randomness. He delights in the patient endeavour of singling out the details of a given reality, cataloguing the elements of its dizzying, day-to-day heterogeneity. As a reflection on the immediate 'territory' of an artist's work, it's interesting to compare Perec's essay to Elizabeth Bishop's peculiar prose poem '12 o'Clock News' (1973), in which a trusty writing desk is envisioned as a mysterious, newly discovered landscape. Neatly listing the main contents of the desk in one column and using the voice of a fictional foreign correspondent to describe them in another, Bishop surveys the suddenly estranged work surface with bemused wonder, making one surprising imaginative leap after another. Her typewriter becomes an 'escarpment that rises abruptly from the central plain'. It has 'elaborate terracing' that 'gleams faintly in the dim light, like fish scales'. The ordinary objects making up this desk-landscape lose their customary meanings. Wild speculation begins about their status and purpose within the table-top realm. A typed sheet of paper could be either 'an airstrip' or 'a cemetery'. Two possible destinies, perhaps, for an artist's work: take-off or untimely demise. If, in his notes, Perec seeks to see things exactly as they are, Bishop strives to escape the received definitions of what is objectively right there, formulating substitute meanings for near-to-hand, comfortably knowable things. A commitment to an intensive process of inventory in one account contrasts with an anxious instinct for invention in the other. Aran's art labours restlessly in the uncertain space between such divergently attentive positions. His assembled odds-and-ends are mostly recognizable for what they are – but they are on their way to becoming something else. His enigmatic tableaux are transitional arrangements, with transitional meanings. In certain works, a dual sense of setting-out seems to apply: the various stray elements that are placed within loosely designed layouts are, in turn, held within

framing structures that seem prepared for imminent moving on, for setting out into the world. So, for example, in addition to work-tables, Aran's installations have featured tailor-made vitrines: formal show cases in which (with a suggestion of preservation) his collected materials come together for inspection. The rudimentary design of such containers, however, also suggests temporary packaging and therefore implies readiness for transportation. The versions included in Aran's solo exhibition, 'Here, Here, Here', at the Kunsthalle Zurich in 2013 are a case in point: constructed from cardboard, they are flimsy, open boxes, precariously held together with packing tape. (And note, too, that repetitive title, with its simultaneous suggestion of dropped-pin mapping and rapid dispersal.)

A similar series of bespoke cases – entitled 'Departments' (2014) – were shown this year at the Liverpool Biennial. Timber-built, they have a more robust materiality, promising greater security and stability. Yet, like the shipping crates that protect artworks as they travel the world, they were made in a way that implies movement. Conservation glass covered the contents in some of these cases but, for the most part, not completely. In one, several small panes rested either on top or at the edges of the box. It was difficult to know if these pieces were in the process of being fitted or removed. As such, we couldn't be sure if this container – neither fully open nor entirely closed – was in a state of arrival or departure.



*Untitled*, 2013, mixed media, 37 × 28 cm. Courtesy: the artist, Sadie Coles HQ, London, mother's tankstation, Dublin, Gavin Brown's Enterprise, and The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; photograph: Ronald Amstutz

Two biographical facts are relevant to Aran's enduring fascination with transitional forms. One is that he initially had a career in design, before changing direction towards art: a disciplinary shift that perhaps gave him license for greater imaginative waywardness in his dealings with cultural forms and their meanings. It's worth noting that Aran's tutor for his MFA in visual art (at Columbia in New York) was Liam Gillick – an artist whose work often envisages alternative ways to move between the historically divided fields of art and design. Even if Aran's installations owe very little to the pristine scenarios produced by Gillick, it seems appropriate to register the influence of the 'dynamic contradictions' that characterize the latter's work: a type of art that seeks to complicate customary relations between sculptural objects and their conditions of comprehension, a practice based around presenting ostensibly stable structures that nonetheless enable a new mobility of meaning. Aran, like Gillick, is interested in simultaneously referencing and refusing established organizational patterns of artistic production. This shared aspiration has provided the foundation for some collaborations between them over recent years: such as on the film *1848!!!* (2010), first shown at Esther Schipper, Berlin, and as part of the one-off group project *To The Moon Via the Beach* (2012), staged at the Roman Amphitheatre in Arles. This event (conceived by Gillick and Philippe Parreno) was described as 'an exhibition about work, production and change – ideas in constant motion': principles that are certainly applicable, in broad terms, to Aran's ongoing if unsteady transitional processes.

The second biographical fact of note is Aran's expatriate status. As an Israeli artist based for many years in New York, he is sensitive to the gaps and glitches in meaning that occur through a back-and-forth movement between different cultural contexts, different languages and different landscapes (or between different ideas of landscape). The passport photographs that he often uses in his work are of acute importance in this regard. While Aran considers these images as having principally existential rather than 'émigré' significance, they are inescapably political: concentrating our attention on the procedural processes and categorization systems that either constrain or facilitate movement. They are deceptively simple things – pictures of faces – that become powerfully charged with meaning at borders. They form a decisive part of the often devastating identification process that determines who might be able to proceed with a planned transition from one territory to another. But, endlessly returned to and resituated within Aran's work – pasted and printed onto different types of surface, brought into unanticipated proximity with other images and objects – their function and meaning as images becomes unfixed and indeterminate. They become 'images in constant motion', even as they also speak of impediments to motion: closed borders, frustrated progress.

Indeed, what is often most fascinating – and even, in the best possible way, a little maddening – in Aran's art, is the extent to which the forms of 'constant motion' in his work are often impeded or troubled. His work is always, down to the smallest detail, invested in process. The grapes he uses will age and rot. The pool balls he sticks into position are designed for speedy roll and ricochet. Even the ubiquitous chocolate-chip cookies might be thought of as crucial sustaining elements within a working process: treats that help to mark stage-by-stage advances. But Aran is also fixated on the conditions and restrictions of process. All of the items listed above are a type of circle – a shape that occurs a great deal in Aran's art, and which could be perceived as the basis of an intentionally tail-chasing aesthetic strategy. In some of the video works that are regularly displayed alongside (and often within) Aran's installations, this circularity is especially evident. In *Untitled Chimpanzee* (2013), (also included in the Kunsthalle Zurich show), or *Uncle in Jail* (2012) (shown as part of 'By Foot, By Bus, By Car' at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York) we are given behind-the-scenes access to recording processes in which various actors speak directly to camera or into obviously imposing professional microphones. They each tell very short stories or make brief textbook-style statements – and then they return to the beginning, starting again, delivering the script slightly differently for each take. Sometimes, the content of a story transforms entirely. Sometimes, it stays more-or-less the same. On occasion, the process will seem to flow – accompanied in several instances by a soundtrack of improvisational jazz – or it will be constantly breaking down, as if we are watching a peculiar, melancholy kind of blooper reel. As in all of Aran's work, there is both repetition and release: a continuing attention to the difficulty of creating movement, as well as to the consistent possibility of new departures.

## Declan Long

is a writer and lecturer at the National College of Art & Design, Dublin, Ireland, where he is co-director of the Masters programme, 'Art in the Contemporary World'.

Uri Aran lives in New York, USA. This year, his work was included in the Whitney Biennial, New York, and the Liverpool Biennial, UK, and he had a solo show at Peep Hole, Milan, Italy. In 2013, he had solo shows at South London Gallery, UK, and Kunsthalle Zürich, Switzerland. In 2015 he will have exhibitions at Sadie Coles HQ, London and mother's tankstation, Dublin.