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URI ARAN

WHEN URI ARAN finished installing his second solo show in New York, at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, he brought a friend's dog to the Greenwich Village space, put paint on its paws, and tempted it with treats to roam through the exhibition. The result was just one possible path through the work. Other courses were scattered throughout the pieces, marked by milk and cookies, *Sesame Street* characters, and old passport photos. Different stories were told while the possibilities unfolded. Every element in Aran's work seems to point toward some personal revelation in an indefinite and suggestive way, expanding our idea of what narrative is. Orit Gat spoke with the Israeli-born artist about his most recent work, which will be on view during Frieze New York, May 4 through 7, as part of Frieze Projects.

ORIT GAT: *What are you doing at Frieze?*

URI ARAN: I am still developing the project. Something like this begins with an idea and it's then developed to form a proposal; I can talk mainly about the initial idea because I always leave room for things to happen when I'm in the space. When Cecilia Alemani, the curator of Frieze Projects, approached me, we took a tour of Randall's Island and she provided me with material about the geography and history of the area. It was important for us both to be aware of what I'm working with in terms of the site-specificity of the project and to think about the historical context, the structures, and the social environment on the island. I thought a lot about the huge hospital there. I always wanted to deal with the notion of the doctor, in the sense of the reproduction of images of doctors in the media and their role

in popular culture. My proposal is to work in an abandoned ticket shack, a very small space. Very *cute*. Within that space, a kind of medical examination will be performed at different times during each day of the fair.

OG: *An examination of people at the fair?*

UA: No. What I wanted to do is actually create a viewing experience for whomever comes. Rather than use real people, I'm making a point by bringing in actors—not necessarily professional actors—I'm still working on the casting. There will be a pretty straightforward doctor's examination going on, while I shoot it on video.

OG: *Will the audience be able to visit the ticket booth itself, too?*

UA: Yes, from a specific view that I provide, in terms of which window I open and how and when: I am thinking of the manipulation I want to impose. The second

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level of the project, in that sense, will be the transmission of those images at the fair. The live video feed might be manipulated, if only a little bit, like slowing it down a fraction. It will refer to the notion of a televised doctor, and on a very basic level, the mediated image. I'm interested in stock images of doctors and how the televised persona of a doctor is almost the definition of what that profession is at this point.

I'm interested in things that have a preconceived moral starting point. In society, a doctor is good—simple as that. Almost like a dog is good or a bear is good.

OG: *How do you script something as basic as a physical examination?*

UA: I've been consulting with doctors. But I'm also going to leave some freedom within the performance, even though it will be directed in terms of what I want specific characters to do. I'm going to be there in this very stuffy situation and impose my opinion.

OG: *The title of your recent show at Gavin Brown's Enterprise was "by foot, by car, by bus." What is that about, exactly?*

UA: It's about the range of possibilities. There are other pieces in the show that could have been called *by balloon, by boat, or by train*. Modes of transportation, as sentimental or poetic tools, suggest a certain notion of narrative. Like *Around the World in 80 Days*. There's a spark of excitement, a journey. It's also a reference to board games or set

pieces on a board: a defined composition in which there are different routes, but the pieces are a representation of the

Installation view from "by foot, by car, by bus" at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, 2012.

social situation of the participants.

OG: *And the display obviously assumes a human presence. The works are set on tables, which suggests an idea of taxonomy and—again—directing or ordering.*

UA: My background is in graphic design and typography. Those have a lot to do with the idea of education, also with being a student and solving a problem. That's how the objects sometimes transform. I wasn't necessarily one of them, but I think a lot about those kids who used to make tunnels with their pencils in their desks. For me, it was more about drawing on the table or organizing my books in a specific way. So there's control, and there's anxiety. There's so much anxiety that has to do with the specific space you get as a student, as part of a system. In terms of ownership of space, there's this way in which the children's world has to do with the studio. The installations also contain a sense of topography in terms of landscape and composition on a larger scale. It occurs in how I installed and treated the show and the space in general—I altered the gallery by making some specific architectural modifications—as well as in the relationship between the pieces and the installation.

OG: *The works can be whimsical, playful. There are cookies, chocolate milk, and Bert and Ernie from Sesame Street.*

UA: Rather than playfulness, I would say *play*, in terms of things that you might know or wonder how they feel and how they're being organized. Some of the materials I use, like cookies, are there because I like their formal aspects. They have a certain kind of rhythm. It's very important for me to have

rhythm in the work: physically, but also in terms of time-based work, music and sound, and harmony or discord. I find it interesting that cookies are used as an instrument for counting. It's not so obvious that one would learn how to count to 10 with cookies. But it's pretty obvious, when you think about it, why it's being used, because then the moral aspect comes in. If a cookie is missing, it means that someone took it. It's a desirable object, and it's being used as a teaching mechanism, both in terms of numeric quantity and also in terms of moral quality. Cookies are a reward both for being good and for being bad. It's not good to eat too many sweets. There's a strong interest in education here.

Why do we have to learn through artificially produced things or through animals and animal metaphors? I think it's because it's easier to apply language to them. Bert and Ernie are puppets, not real people. I don't know if they're human, even though they have two eyes, a nose, and a mouth, but they don't answer back. We assign meaning to these things—for example, I wonder why we decided that mice love cheese.

OG: *I think it's obvious that mice don't necessarily love cheese, but we accept that without asking questions. And this failure of words to represent what actually happens is similar to the failure of puppets to talk back.*

UA: I think, if anything, that the fact that it's a truism, rather than the truth, doesn't mean we don't perceive it as such.

The discord of meaning in language is something I'm interested in. I don't know if it's because English is not my mother tongue; I see a delay of meaning. I see things as mediated—almost everything is quoted. Most of the text in my work is original, but it has a specific feeling of logic or narrative that has to do with existing genres. The installations and videos have a quoted quality to them in terms of formal elements: voice-over, specific kinds of music and drama. Almost as if they were taken from a storyboard but presented as only one still image, one frame. There's a notion of continuity with a before and after, but you're presented with this one still, this one open-ended image. For me, it's not whimsical. I'm very, very careful: These things matter to me. The work has the idea of genre without belonging to one. So it's easy to say things are nonsensical, but I feel quite the opposite. Someone once asked me, "It feels so personal, how do you expect me to get this?" For me, if you just try to take a step to the left or to the right and think about the idea of something feeling personal without having a specific personal narrative to it, it's almost like using it—the idea of the personal—as a formal tool. Using general forms that manipulate potential narratives, I try to explore triggers for default feelings.

