



**URI ARAN**  
DOCTOR DOG SANDWICH  
SEPTEMBER – OCTOBER





Doctor Dog Sandwich Installation view, mother's tankstation

## PAUSA

“Where does beauty begin and where does it end? Where it ends is where the artist begins.”<sup>1</sup>

### The Sandwich

There is a defined structure to Uri Aran’s exhibition at mother’s tankstation, even before entering into the gallery. The title, a list, has a nonsensical order, an internal rhythm that invites us to impose our own logic upon it. The works are displayed within their own contained sandwich — videos projected in darkened rooms bookend the main space. Amongst objects, sounds and images (still, moving and sliding) the viewer applies a system of understanding to try to find the reason behind the assembled parts. Yet, like all good fables (and all good sandwiches), it is perhaps the elusive non-reason that we enjoy the most. While discussing the beautiful intricacies of Aran’s work, it is important not to forget the mouth-watering act of making sense for ourselves. At the artist’s invitation we make our own titles, and begin at the beginning (which is already part way through).

### The Girl

The first work in the show is *The Donut Gang*. “A VIDEO” apparently, as it tells us in white letters at the start. A girl sits on a bed, reciting the words an off-screen voice tells her. It appears to be a screen test, more homemade than Hollywood and consequently slightly more seedy, although the words she echoes are innocuous enough. The authenticity she tries to convey (“oh the donut gang, I remember them”) is constantly undermined by her lack of assurance. She is vulnerable: obedient to a voice we cannot see; at one point we hear a whole crowd repeat “the donut gang”; at another, a hand waves back at her in front of the camera. It is unclear who else is in the room, and who is in control of the situation. Clearly, it is not only she who is vulnerable, since we do not know whose hand or whose voice or what exactly is going on either. The opening sequence seems to mock a viewer’s belief in watching anything – a gunshot sounds as red paint is dabbed on the forehead of a still figure. The sheer volume of the shot provokes a gut reaction, while the on-screen image betrays the manipulation. Our acceptance of cinematic tradition (the blonde, nervous starlet, the gory special effects) is immediately taunted, and almost despite ourselves, our interest piqued. Who are the donut gang? What is this girl auditioning for? Is she in on the secret, or is she being played as much as we are?

### The Boy

At the other end of the exhibition, the film *Harry* plays in the back space. Once again, we are teased with hints of explanation — visual elements of knowledge which openly conflict with the language used. Here, we see in slow motion a group of men carrying out construction work on the cold New York streets, while a voiceover reads a letter which sounds more like the writings of soldiers away at war. We are led to find connections between the two scenarios playing simultaneously: the collective working together for a common cause; conditions of hardship; the absence of (and, by implication, the longing for) women; even the hint of camouflage fabric on a workman’s hood all satisfy our desire for a logical meaning behind the disparate audio and visual parts. Aran stops short of giving us neat ends to tie up. This work is one of the few to have a title, but rather than giving us a coherent summation, this naming of the work gives us manifold questions — is Harry one of the workers, the writer of the letters, or the man who appears in front of the camera speaking silently in some shots, existing alongside but clearly disassociated from

the group at work. Or is Harry simply the title of the video? The apparent arbitrariness of these artistic decisions is perhaps what causes Aran’s work frequently to be described as focusing on the random, but it would be more accurate to say that within his work he highlights how random *everything* is. It is less about him inventing his own random systems, and more about pushing us to reveal how desperate is our desire for meaning and system in all that we come across.

### The Dog

In an exhibition where we are constantly aware of the artist’s presence steering us, the *Untitled* video of the artist and a dog openly manipulates and entrances the viewer. It is as beautiful in its melancholy as any love ballad. The artist cries, the dog cries, they comfort each other. Or rather, the man who looks like the artist (but then he has a twin brother, so we can never really be sure) appears to be crying (but then he could be acting, this is a film after all), the dog cries (but do dogs really cry, or is he reacting to the man, or is he a professional dog responding to training), they hug each other (or is the dog climbing on the man, or the man forcing the dog into a hug, or are they wrestling in the shots where they are together and the whole thing is edited to look like they are comforting each other?). The slowed-down emphasis of the man’s hand on the dog’s fur suggests a painterly preoccupation with the formal importance of the gesture. There is an awareness of texture and tone that resonates around the works in the exhibition and threads them together, overlapping in the same way that the audio from each film reverberates through the space. The visual and musical beauty lures us, as in this video we are drawn into an emotional, sentimental atmosphere without any understanding of the cause.

### The Horse

Where the scene of one man and his dog attracts us with the bittersweet nectar of the intimate, the volume of the soundtrack of *Couldn’t be here* draws us in with gushing sentimentality. The closing credits of the 1979 film *The Black Stallion* are shown on repeat on a tiny black and white portable television. The booming orchestral score and the sumptuous imagery of the boy playing with the horse in the surf demand our attention, neatly encapsulating the movie at its most memorable and evocative.<sup>2</sup> The television itself rests on a makeshift desk — stained plywood (making its own sandwich with a sheet of paper wedged between the layers of the wood). It has holes bored into it, applied by the deliberate misuse of grinding stones on a drill attachment, with scorch marks remaining where it burned as it drilled. There is something of the fidgeter in this — the boy who scratched doodles into the school desk with a knife — creation through destruction, expression through vandalism. It again places the stress on the gesture, and appropriation of meaning, association and object. Those objects placed on the desk among the wood shavings (gold rimmed glasses, cookies, a toy mouse in its packaging, a price tag on a pole) suggest a myriad of possible connections to the viewer, and a material link to the other, smaller desk in the space. This *Untitled* work is situated in the corner, with its proffered cookies neatly arranged in rows. The lack of title negates our attempts to neatly assimilate these two works, and the confusing *Couldn’t be here* title (when it appears that work is here, occupying the space) relates to the literal location of the original desk which wasn’t shipped over from New York, and so bears no relation to elucidating the ‘deeper’ meaning of the work. Pause. Unless we assume that understanding the work has something to do with such material considerations, rather than occupying a purely lofty metaphysical realm far removed from objects and titles.





Untitled Single channel video 3:24 minutes 2006

#### The Muppets

Another *Untitled*, another shared childhood association. Eighteen slides show us a sequence of frozen screen shots from Sesame Street. Bert and Ernie are counting cookies. The intensity of emotion within the scene and the significance of the cookie as reward, token, sacrament is captured (or created). There is nostalgia for a world mediated for us by friendly puppets, and further, an awareness that the man-made reality in which humans and puppets share a neighbourhood is more honest than the constructed heart tugging of cinematography. An alternative logic designed for children applies in Sesame Street. The projector here is set low to the ground, so we have to view it from a child's height to see the picture properly. Aran offers us a small clue in understanding his work: the acceptance of riddles and non-sense as truth without trickery.

#### The Drawings

Brought to you in association with the letters (D), (C), (B), (A) and (By) and in association with the word (Lunchbreak). The framed works on the wall give a formal equality to the objects within: computer drawings, found images, text. Tonally, they coordinate with the other works in the exhibition and in imagery they illustrate the motifs that keep recurring: animal metaphors in *Harry*; the dog in *Untitled*; the horse in *Couldn't be here*. In the case of *Untitled (D)* the act of drawing strays beyond the boundaries of the frame out on to the wall of the gallery itself. *Untitled (By)* brings drawings and photographs of horses, humans and dogs together in a visual list that reads as characters in a narrative. We yearn to make a story out of these, in the same way as we construct a moral from "Good doctor, good dog, good sandwich."

#### The Doctoring

As the girl in *The Donut Gang* uses the eponymous group to trigger a constructed memory ("I remember them"), Aran shows us how often titles are unnecessary descriptors or deliberately misleading guides. Do we accept everything told to us in a Received Pronunciation voiceover, and do we know what we are being told? By unnerving our intellectual understanding, the works encourage a visceral response. The role of the artist here is as animal fabulist like Aesop, and as agent provocateur. In the space between the works, where the exhibition is, the sound and imagery exist in the place itself, the combination of horses and dogs and orchestrated sounds and cookies. Aran brings together an understanding of sound which echoes John Cage's *4'33"* and an assemblage of parts that are a full installation of Rauschenberg's *Combines*. It seems apt then to begin and end with Cage writing on Rauschenberg (another sandwich): "This is not a composition. It is a place where things are."<sup>3</sup>

Mai Blount

<sup>1</sup> John Cage, 'On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work' in *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1973 (1961)), p. 108

<sup>2</sup> The classic children's film was nominated for a BAFTA for cinematography, a Golden Globe for score, and won LA Film Critic Association Awards for both. It opens with the line: "Dad, you know what I saw? It's the most fantastic thing...come look!"

<sup>3</sup> John Cage, p. 99













**Untitled (Lunchbreak)** Computer drawing, inkjet print on paper 37.5 x 29 cm (framed) 2010

**Untitled (D)** Computer drawing, inkjet print on paper 37.5 x 29 cm (framed) 2010





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