

mother's annual 2015

Uri Aran Ones
February - March

Systems Opened

Uri Aran's is not a practice of representation, rendering the world as a whole or in part, but instead a consideration of systems dynamics that surround and govern us, focusing on their 'set points, provisional points, beginnings, circuits, and destinations'.ⁱ It is a practice that assumes the unimposing quotidian materials which quietly testify to closed systems, bringing them into his studio to concentrate on the sequence or pattern in which they first appeared, before exposing these materials to new elements and intensities and standing back to regard their new order. By the time he presents his work to us, Aran will have been considering its composites for months, if not years, but what he shows us is less a fixed hypothesis than an ongoing investigation. Through concentrated and repeated viewing, his work pitches to us innovative open systems as opposed to isolated, closed ones.ⁱⁱ

Ones is Aran's second exhibition at *mother's tankstation* and it begins with a projection of *Documentation, Circle Relieve* (2014), a grainy video (mini-DVD) shot by Aran in Arles' Roman amphitheatre as part of a broader performance programme, 'To the Moon via the Beach' (July 2012).ⁱⁱⁱ There are two protagonists. Harry, who has appeared in many of Aran's videos, is an unassuming looking white Englishman, an untrained actor whose voice is alert but unaffected when repeating monologues or actions the artist has provided him. In *Documentation...* Harry is often in central shot or beside Dan, who is, (not incidentally), Aran's identical twin brother: a close physical substitute for the artist himself. Dan is a musician whose drumming features on the soundtrack, between excerpts of Edvard Grieg's *Elegie Opus 34*. Aran features too, once in shot but more often audible, giving directions from behind the camera.

Aran's untrained 'actors' are treated like basic materials to which new information, in the form of Aran's instructions, is introduced. We watch their improvisations in sequences, each one deviating slightly from the last. From the amphitheatre's terraces, Harry lists off famous dramatic double-acts from politics and popular culture; George Lucas and Stephen Spielberg, Sid and Nancy, Batman and Robin, Bambino and Trinity. He pauses occasionally as if the list is not learned but invented on the spot. In another sequence, the two protagonists play out the roles of passenger and bus driver respectively and repeatedly, where the straight-faced bus driver (Dan) keeps raising the passenger's fare (Harry). Its amount increases irregularly and Harry becomes correspondingly frustrated. Later Dan and Harry perform a cat and mouse chase around the amphitheatre's circumference until the mouse is caught, both men out of breath, videoed from Aran's fixed point. Through repetition of the same task, the emotional registers of Aran's characters are in constant flux: playful, energetic, fatigued. Emphasising this, footage of the action is cut between shots of visitors half-heartedly regarding this performance, distracted, lost or thirsty under Arles' midday sun. The subtleties of these shifting responses are central: core materials can weary or fade under the pressure of mixed energies or strange intensities. And as a viewer, there's a constant push-and-pull between being immersed in their interplay and being conscious that this is an elaborate series of improvisations.

Aran speaks of his approach, "I activate the highly sensible reflex responses that a viewer might have to a trigger, such as a piece of music, a food, or a photo, and I adjust the allegiances of that reflex."^{iv} Playing with our reflexes is not new to art and the avant-garde. Sergei Eisenstein was interested in Pavlovian theories of 'signalisation', of training involuntary reflexes for management purposes.^v Employing them by way of the cinematic, Eisenstein's innovative editing sequences aimed to rouse Soviet audiences into political action, to make 'workers of [his films'] spectators'^{vi}. The purpose of penetrating our emotional circuitry seems quite different for Aran. He triggers our pathos with excerpts of sentimental music, crops of images, studio debris or painterly gestures. But instead of combining these elements, so that cumulative triggers heighten a singular emotional response and motivate a clear action, our emotional responses remain individuated and adrift. His purpose seems to be less to productively re-programme us (as Eisenstein intended) but to highlight the subtle manipulations of coinciding elements necessary to produce effect. Our reflexes are readjusted and short circuit: pathos is a closed system that Aran opens up.

Beyond the video's antechamber, seven works hang on the gallery walls. *Mark One, Mark* (2015) is a painting on paper with a loose, sky blue wash across its background. Over it are various layers of brown paint and varnish, applied at distinct times. A grid emerges, spray painted from horizontals and vertical thrusts and from within these, several shocks of orange streak across the page. The paintings are revisited by the artist on a number of occasions, their aesthetic is not preconceived but are the result of a series of decisions. Aran's serialised engagement with the work is emphasised by the materials he uses, domestic varnish and wood oils mingling with the varieties of paint, acrylic, oil and spray. His materials often come from hardware stores, the tinctures of which are particular to their point of purchase. International manufacturers have to comply with different health codes and ingredients vary. Plaster in Zurich, for some reason, is preferable to that in the United States, or his native Israel. Discovering these differences is a process of trial and error and finding out those particularities creates 'different colours, moods and filters' and evoke a particular vernacular of place.^{vii} The mix of art supplies and DIY materials also evidences his studio performance of work and play, the physical connection between hard labour and refined artistry. They evidence in great detail Aran's long, contemplative processes and what he has previously called his 'studio behaviour'.^{viii}

Also in *Mark One, Mark*, small round ceramic tiles have been used in two ways, firstly as a means of printing: a patina of small circles appears in the upper right corner of the composition. The discs are also applied to the paper, sitting proud between it and the frame. The discs' transition into relief before us is typical of the artist's approach, where found objects are repurposed and relocated within a mobile lexicon. His 'penny rounds' - the kind that might line-up in pre-made mosaic rolls to tile a bathroom - have appeared in too many works to individually mention, beginning with his installation *A to Z (that stops at Q)* with *mother's tankstation* at Art Basel, Statements in 2011, and more recently in his *Arsenale* installation for *The Encyclopedic Palace* at the 2013 Venice Biennale. The penny rounds are picked from the rolls and appear like individual coins that he takes in and out of circulation as he sees fit. And they are not the only suspended currency in evidence. *Untitled Fable* (2015) is the largest painting of the exhibition. A metal wire extends out from the composition's upper section and runs diagonally down the piece in subtle relief, attached to the board's lower left section with its original adhesive barcode. Barcodes seem to appeal to Aran as a location-specific form of encoding: they function in a supermarket as a means of stocktaking and pricing, whereas on a painting they are rezoned and isolated. Aran's work is clearly invested in scrutinising and subtly displacing some of the many systems to which we daily conform.

One (Photograph) (2015) is another mixed media painting on paper. Layers of oil, wood stain, acrylic and pigment dust work together to create the form of a head and neck with the same deft, confident brushstrokes of a late Picasso, its surface finished with lines of varnish and sprayed white dots. To the lower half of the composition, a piece of folded foolscap is stuck. It shows multiple colour passport images, two of different men, the third of a young boy. These photographs have been collected, arranged, scanned and printed on paper, losing the gloss of their original prints. The paper is a little rumpled as if it rested somewhere over time gathering dirt and minor abrasions, before Aran saw its new texture fit for purpose. These photos have been used before in much larger scale in Aran's 'portraits' of unknown sitters, in *Five Minutes Before* at the South London Gallery in 2013. Five faces were printed at scale framed and hung in line, a woman, a boy and three men of mixed ages, among the images of a horse and a dog. Together they ask what a passport photograph might be once severed from its legislative body, modular and mobile. And when their images are reconfigured and affixed onto *One (Photograph)*'s painted face, it too is cast adrift. Aran is not seeking to achieve accumulative effect, trigger our pathos and motivate action, tapping into closed systems that already exist. Instead, his material transfers open pre-existing systems up and, as Liam Gillick astutely describes it, "the work is left ajar".^{ix}

This is the first exhibition of Aran's career where the dynamics within his video are complimented exclusively by works hanging on the wall. He more commonly fills his exhibition spaces with a broader range of media including sculpture and installation. But despite the progression, it would be remiss of us to categorise his works by the medium on which they rest, because it is Aran's sophisticated and thoroughgoing process that might best define his work. This goes beyond what Rosalind Krauss once described as a 'post-medium condition', applied to artists working fluidly across mediums from sculpture to performance.^x In Aran's work, the emphasis is not on the multiplicity of mediums he uses, but rather on the sequestered actions, quiet gestures, discrete materials and complex choices that an artist makes in his studio, an artist who is cognisant, reflective but somehow distanced from the omnipotence of societal systems which inform his social actions. To clarify this, I might borrow a term Haroon Walker coined when writing of Aran's contemporary, Trisha Donnelly, whose oeuvre, he stated, "genuinely has no medium. If anything she is a pre-medium artist, where 'medium' could just as soon

refer to a psychic.”^{xi} And although there are great differences between these two New York-based contemporaries – Donnelly’s misty superstition for example, is nowhere to be found in Aran’s earthy, pragmatic material repertoire – Aran’s work could be usefully labeled ‘pre-medium’. That is, his works cannot be defined by the medium on which they are mounted, sculpted or shot. Their outcome is never fixed or complete. Its composites will reappear time and time again, in this gallery in our future, delicately reconfigured and thoroughly altered.

Aran’s works seem to react to ‘systems’ in the broadest possible sense, but they do so through his own very particular mobile repertoire of found objects and symbols, untrained actors and voices, and by making constant adjustments to these localised, concentrated elements he provides positive alternatives to the closed systems that surround us. The centre of Aran’s work is his private but profoundly performative practice, which takes place in the system boundary of his studio, where materials, energies and information are uniquely permeable, and where systems are ever broken. In constant volume, perpetual flow, Aran opens systems closed.

Isobel Harbison

ⁱ Aran, Zurich, p.80.

ⁱⁱ The ‘open system’ is a term used in many disciplines, from computing, to mechanics and thermodynamics, as well as in the natural and social sciences. The ‘open system’ is one that has external interactions, in the form of information, energy or material transfer, into or out of the system boundary, also known as ‘constant volume’ system and ‘flow’ system. It is unlike the closed or ‘isolated’ system, which, although still subject to energy, does not allow material transfer in and out of the system boundary.

ⁱⁱⁱ This work was commissioned as a performance, part of a broader performance programme, ‘To the Moon via the Beach’, curated by Tom Eccles, Liam Gillick, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Philippe Parreno and Beatrix Ruf.
<http://www.tothemoonviathebeach.com> [last sourced 28th March 2015]

^{iv} Jenny Jaskey, ‘Uri Aran at Kunsthalle Zurich’, *Mousse Magazine*, March 2013, p.146

^v Jonathan Beller, *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle*, Hanover, N.H: Dartmouth College Press, 2006, p.130

^{vi} A given but un-specifically documented principle of Sergei Eisenstein

^{vii} Aran in conversation with the author, March 2015.

^{viii} Aran, Zurich, p.84

^{ix} Liam Gillick, *Imminence and Deterritorialization, Uri Aran’s Sublime Vexation* Kunsthalle Zurich, p.96

^x Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2000

^{xi} Haroon Walker, ‘As Free As The Squirrels’, *The Renaissance Society*, 2008 [last visited April 2015]