

The Boy Who Cried *Cuckoo*

On Ben Hagari's Art¹

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1. Cuckoo Picture

Ben Hagari's premiere exhibition (Rosenfeld Gallery, Tel Aviv, 2007) featured a single piece. Entitled *Cuckoo*, it is a video and a sculpture displayed in the gallery's two-store shop window. Both as a video and as a sculpture, *Cuckoo* seems to disavow its media, and to be perceived as a picture. The video consists of a single, almost static image. Rear projection here not only conceals the presence of equipment, but also enables the frame to be trimmed so as to fit its pictorial role. The sculpture is stylized as a low relief, and it is flattened to the window, as if by its wish for flatness. Moreover, as *Cuckoo* is observed from the window and the gallery remains closed, viewing is prescribed as frontal.

What's in the picture? Soil and pebbles, a vase, a wall whose lower part is clay interspersed with fake precious stones while its upper part is made of fake bricks, some flowerpots and a sewer pipe, skies made of a synthetic carpet, and a big tree with scant leafage made of a few greenish ribbons of *crêpe* paper. The tree's thick trunk blocks the gallery's entrance. While the entire piece is a *bricolage* concocted from the stuff of makeshift set designs, its focal point is a large video projection of a cuckoo clock (showing the right time), which hangs from the tree's single branch.

The clock is itself a picture within a picture. It is shaped as a rustic house, fronted by some shrubs, and figurines of a wanderer and a white

rabbit complete this Swiss kitsch pastoral scene. But from the two arched windows of the balcony the viewer sees Ben Hagari's own eyes. There is a man inside the clock, and for him, the clock is not unlike a knight's helmet. And if the clock is the helmet, the entire scene serves as armor: a second look at the wall would reveal that serpentine black lines on it delineate the contour of a body, while at the legs' meeting point a hole is gaping, like an arrow of negative space pointing at the loins (that strategically placed aperture is the only view one has of the gallery's darkened interior). Once every half hour the cuckoo – itself a flat cut out – will pop from the attic's porthole. Then, four cuckoos will be sung by an agreeable masculine falsetto (this cuckoo cries four time regardless of the hour, perhaps so as not to let down the viewer who waited patiently at one o'clock, and not to overburden the viewer at eleven).

This landscape with a cuckoo performs five reversals: first, it sets a rural scene to mirror the busy *Dizengoff* Street. Second, it turns the interior to an exterior. Third, it denies its own subscribed function as a shop window display by forcing the gallery – the shop – to remain closed, thus failing to sell its goods (art, clocks). Fourth, since the projection only occurs at night, the gallery becomes nocturnal site. And, finally, in a set made entirely of preposterous renditions of nature, Hagari brings the cuckoo-in-a-house back to its natural house, the tree.

1. The artist's first name, Ben, means in Hebrew 'a son' as well as 'a boy'.

The comic mode that produces such oxymorons in content and display is anchored in reversals in mediation and form. On the one hand, the media seems to be negated even as it is employed – a non-sculptural sculpture, a video-against-itself. On the other hand, the work operates according to rigorous principles that stem from the formal and physical conditions of its mediation. Thus, for instance, the work's nightlife is the result of an optic necessity for the street to be in the dark. In that sense, if the work is a farce, it is a formalist farce.

2. Cuckoo Video

Cuckoo is a multimedia work, but the very fact that we perceive it to be turned-off during daytime – when the video is off – begs its consideration as a video work. As such, it is a strange bird. In general, video art from the early 90s tends to either employ its temporal and cinematic characteristic to pursue a narrative format, or to be contextualized as an installation, often featuring multiple screen and advanced technology. In *Cuckoo*, not only is the projection subjugated to role within the work's pictorial logic, but it seems to go against the imagistic economy of time-based works, in the sense that it offers a single image, in one shot: Hagari's head as a clock. A still from a Matthew Barney video, for example, will invariably be a spectacular, grandiose image, yet it is necessarily a frozen instance from a sequence the still cannot contain. A still from *Cuckoo*, on the other hand, will be virtually identical to any other frame: it is the image, an image as a singularity. And the relation between the sculpted elements and the projected image offers logic of singularity of its

own. To pursue the comparison further, Barney's videos employ grand sculptural objects, but in terms of the *mise-en-scene*, they are utilitarian and subjugated (that is to say, they serve the narrative and can be later be divined from it so as to become sellable articles). In Hagari's work, on the other hand, the video is the work's "head," but that head cannot exist without the body that supports it. This is why, paradoxically, the incorporation of the projection to the assemblage and the pictorial nature of the singular frame bestow upon *Cuckoo* something akin to the aura of whose demise in the age of technological reproduction Walter Benjamin reflected (and this bestowing is simultaneously real and a farce).²

Another form of willful self-contradiction stems from the tension between the Rococo economy of the image, with its plethora of cheerful fancies, and the economy of the video, founded upon a heritage of rigorous precision and intrinsic conditions. As a young artist, Hagari's work is exceptional in its persistent, almost compulsive preoccupation with the seminal era of video art. By employing real time that is also reel time he posits himself in direct relation to works produced from the introduction to the market of the Sony handycam in the mid 60s to the mid 70s. In that historical context, the congruity between the tape's duration and the work span has been widely recognized to be not only the result of technological and monetary limitations, but, more importantly, to assert a non-cinematic, that is non-seductive stance. Hagari's *Cuckoo* is unabashedly seductive, yet the rationale for its employment of real time is

2. The tension between an aura stemming from an image by virtue of its singularity, and notion of an aura anchored in material media and vested with the value of the artist's manual touch has been articulated in a number of contemporary art images, such as Shahzia Sikander's projected patterns superimposed on paintings, the animated cutouts of Kara Walker and the hybrids of paintings and projections of the Israeli artist Talia Keinan.

self-reflexive and intrinsic (indeed, tautological): twelve hours is the span necessary for the video to become a clock.

Cuckoo recalls another pictorial image in a film from the 60s: Andy Warhol's *Empire*. Observing both works together, they can be perceived as two clockworks: While Hagari's is a cuckoo clock, Warhol's is a sundial (with the Empire State Building as a gnomon of sorts). Warhol's film, otherwise appearing as an incarnation of stasis, is suddenly grasped as performative – marking time. With Hagari, the artist himself performs an action on camera. Thus, the work is not only a picture that isn't a picture, a non-sculptural sculpture and a video-against-itself, but also a representation of a performance that is a performative farce.

3. Cuckoo Performance

The conditions of Hagari's performance are those of a punishment. When he deems himself a clock he is sentenced to a waste of time, radical constriction and monotonous labor (Hagari stand for twelve hours cries *Cuckoo*, but also manually takes care of the little rabbit's weary movement back and forth and to the emergence of the bird). The clock is his cell, and the duration of incarceration is set by a verdict. Hagari realized a similar contractual action and punishment with himself in an earlier clock piece, *This Is Not a Clock* (2006). Here, an elongated frame scaled to life-size and projected on a box, features a pendulum clock with the artist inside. The dials disk conceals his face, and whereas *Cuckoo* featured a hole near the pubic area, here the pendulum's sway, slightly below his loins can be perceived as a repetitive rubbing or erasing of the genitals.

Hagari's self-punishment is reminiscent of Vito Acconci's own in *Seed Bed* (1971). There, the artist masturbated during the gallery's opening hours as he lay underneath a low elevation of the floor, while weaving aloud his fantasies based on the sound of the spectators' footsteps above him. Here as well, the artist is both the judge and the prisoner, confined and constricted in movement, serving measured time while performing obligatory, repetitive action.

In both cases the artist both appears and is absent (Hagari is projected, Acconci invisible and intangible). Furthermore, the floor ramp that encloses Acconci's body has a double ontological status as an object: a (tilted) floor, and a minimalist sculpture, just as Hagari's object is a clock and a sculpture.

Cuckoo provides a complimentary opposite to *Seed Bed*. Underneath the floor, Acconci busies himself with the all-too-human activity, literally given over to desire, while Hagari strives to get rid of his status as a human being and devote himself to clockwork. Acconci produces his punishment/pleasure through a dialogue with the viewer; the clock, on the other hand, is disinterested. Acconci is the horizon below the horizon; Hagari is a vertical with a two floor high thrust. Both artists thus offer parodies that defy notions of the masculine and the feminine (and with Hagari being a clock, the parody further connotes Western culture's frequent and ideologically charged association of the temporal dimension with masculinity, opposed to, and divined from, feminine space.³

The comic mode of both works centers on the artist's constitution as a subject through action

3. For a magisterial analysis of the relation between time and space, text and image and the masculine and the feminine in text from Burke and Lessing onwards, see: W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology, Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1986)

and self-representation. Acconci molds himself through the conditions of masochistic disavowal, that is, by forging a connection of desire and dialogue with the spectator above him even as he demonstrates this relation as impossible.⁴ Hagari's image faces the viewer, but as a clock, all he has to say is "Cuckoo." The other is not addressed, and hence a self cannot be constituted. The fantasy of becoming an object is certainly a common motif in masochistic fantasies, but as a masochistic trope it is an object of servitude (men serving women as human toilets, for example, in the plays of Hanoch Levin), that is to say, it is dialogic, in need of another. Thus Hagari's apathy as a clock is not an expression of masochism but rather a parody on a masochistic theme (and a parody on Acconci).

Consider *Cuckoo* in relation to another work that was first displayed in the window shop of a closed store: Bruce Nauman's *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths*. Whereas Acconci's mode is that of disavowal, Nauman's rhetoric pursues negation (the sign is lit, but neither truth nor an artist appear), the elimination of a self rather than its fantasized forging. Does this, then, mean that perhaps the interpreter of Hagari's work will do better by dismiss masochistic disavowal and subscribe Hagari, instead, to the rich tradition of self negation? After all, his pendulum clock clearly echoes another self image of a young artist in

the 60s: Robert Morris, who ironically negated self portraiture and notion of self revelation precisely by showing himself in his *I Box*. But this comparison as well only clarifies how different Hagari is from his precursors, because there is in ironic negation a heroic, rebellious dimension that Hagari resolutely refuses to claim. His "self" is too evasive to be negated, and it politely declines the invitation to join the grand polemics of identity. Evading the metaphysic grandeur of claims regarding "identity," also leads to a parodic crumbling of its psychological formulae. As a result, we are denied the diagnostic satisfaction that is so tangible and customary in art (the artist as a masochist, a fetishist, a narcissist, etc.). The devaluation of the artist to a clock, a projection or an absence is not offered as a veritable existential drama, but rather as a trick, a fabrication (in a world where everything, to begin with, is presented as slights of hand). And this is why the comic nature of these works is so surprising: the charged dialectics of presence and absence, subject and object is displayed in such a way that even if its overweight of psychological baggage and angst do not disappear, they become speculative, mere projections, its tensions deflated. In other words, Hagari's comicality is founded on his ability to produce pleasure that denies the uncanny exactly where we expect its apparitions after a history of self-negations and disavowals.⁵

4. For an interpretation of masochism as Acconci's performative mode as opposed to Sadism, see: Roee Rosen, "Sore Eros Conversions: Violence and Humiliation in the Art of Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci" (Hebrew), Itzhak Benyamini and Idan Zivoni, editors, *Slave, Enjoyment, Master On Sadism and Masochism in Psychoanalysis in Cultural Studies* (Tel Aviv, Resling Publishing, 2002), pp. 236-256

5. This comic operation, by which the absence of the self dismantles anxiety (rather than highlight it through irony or black humor), is all the more striking if we consider these works in relation to the Freudian Unheimlich, a concept that has employed so intensively in art and texts on art, and especially when twilight states between the living and the inanimate are pursued. Thus, on a first glance, it seems that the relations between the projected head and the clock in *Cuckoo* closely resembles the relation, in Tony Oursler's works, between projected the →

4. Cuckoo Clocks, Cuckoo Fathers, Cuckoo Son

The human clocks of *Cuckoo* and *This Is Not a Clock* underscore clock-like images and procedures in many other works by Hagari. *A Shot* (2007), presents a loop of Chris Burden being shot in the arm. Here as well the projection is incorporated in a sculpture premised on *trompe l'oeil*: it seems the film is projected on the wall by an old eight-millimeter projector, revealed on a closer look as a façade, a cutout photograph concealing a shelf unit upon which rests the DVD equipment. The clock-like quality here stems from the fact that Hagari cuts the action immediately after the shot. By cropping the end, the shock of abrupt violence and mortal danger is dismantled. Instead of seeing the evident pain on Burden's body and his approach towards the camera, the body is bestowed with immunity, even apathy. The noise of the single shot becomes a repetitive, monotonous rhythm. The shot and the body, in other words, become a metronome.

The Great Dead (2005) juxtaposes two men in a triptych of objects: Robert Morris and Harry Houdini (who appears twice). Morris is shown in a projected photo from the 70s inside a wooden box. As the picture is projected on an actual box, it gains the paradoxical ontological status so common in Hagari's work: the same object is both a projection of a box and a real box (and in fact, it may be seen as a doubled portrait of Morris, being that the box Hagari employs may well have been a clone of an early Morris sculpture!).

Houdini's first appears projected on a tilted cardboard cutout, chained and surrounded by a

crowd. As the projected image slightly exceeds the borders of the cutout, it creates a contour of glowing light on the wall. This projection as well offers a variation on the theme of an object that is simultaneously three-dimensional and flat. Houdini's second appearance is on a monitor presenting a video reworking of a famous photo showing him hung upside down in midair, while astounded onlookers watch him from below. Hagari trimmed Houdini's figure and by gently blowing (off camera) on the cutout, made the great magician swing back and forth. If Chris Burden became a metronome, Houdini has become a pendulum.

This clock collection (a cuckoo, two pendulums and a metronome) is completed by Chaplin's movie *Modern Times*, screened in its entirety in a same-titled work (2007). This movie may well be considered metonymically as the 20th century most iconic image of a clock. In Hagari's ambitious work, a sculptural site presents the room of a compulsive movie-buff. The TV monitor showing the movie is flanked by columns of stacked VHS boxes. Once every forty seconds, the screening is interrupted, and the room is washed in blue light (the same blue that fills the screen when the video is set to the wrong track). Then, one realizes that not only the movie was projected, but in fact the entire set is projected with such precision as to render a set of plain, white cardboard boxes as a TV, video boxes and other equipment. The entire realistic set becomes an assembly of white, minimalist sculptures.

In *Modern Times* the movie, the entire factory seems like the entrails of a behemoth clock. The

pillows and the heads projected on them. But to my mind, the emotive affect of the two bodies of work is exactly opposed. Oursler's is a distilled case of the uncanny, the inanimate, banal and familiar domestic object that becomes subjectified, alive and mysterious. This is why these voodoo-dolls have so much to say (and they do). Hagari's case is the parodic reversal of this state: a (real) artist with a (real) body assembles a complex array of deceptions and simulations set to frustrate the viewer's expectation of psychological depth.

farcical and monstrous regimentation of time in Chaplin is a metonym of the inhumanity of capitalist production, while Chaplin's own body, possessed by automation and sucked-in by the factory's gear, becomes a synecdoche of the effects of industrial time. Comedy in *Modern Times*, in other words, strives to do no less than present the reign of time control, and rebel against it. This extraordinary display of comic virtuosity and social integrity is what Hagari's speculative, spectral spectator chooses to watch time and again.⁶ But the work introduces yet another marking of time: that of the blue light – the intentional disruption of the screening and the recurring disclosure of its trickery. This action clarifies that while Hagari may well admire Chaplin's social dissent, he holds no pretense of sharing its heroic boldness: he assigns himself not only with the role of the admirer, but also the interrupter (just as he does not share Acconci's libidinal desire, Houdini's grandiosity, or Nauman's and Morris' ironic and bold negations).

In lieu of *Cuckoo's* phallic erectile and this abundance of clocks and male artists (who in terms of chronology may well have been Hagari's fathers), it seems that Hagari's scene is that of a masculine drama, that drama – Oedipus. But the same diagnostic discontent I described earlier recurs. Deleuze and Guattari's term, Anti Oedipus, is not entirely precise to describe this scene either. The drama here is not a tragedy, but rather a comedy. First, because the father is not

murdered; at the most his juvenile son annoys and hustles him: Burden is shot ad-infinitum, Chaplin's masterpiece is regularly disrupted, a small trick sabotages Houdini's great one. Second, these fathers do not quite fit paternal roles as they do those of rebelling sons, and the presentation highlights their minor, jester-like and unstable aspects.⁷ It should be clear that Hagari does not mock or denigrate these men. On the contrary: reframing them as minor, fragile, unstable, masquerading, non-productive and eccentric is precisely what makes them suitable fathers (that is, non paternal and non-masculine according to preconceived notions). Finally, these fathers are not really fathers (in the strong sense, of the anxiety of influence), but projections, willful speculations and imaginary relations (this point is amply clear in terms of a stylistic comparison between Hagari and the artists he addresses: his is abundant, fanciful, colorful, sometimes childlike in appearance and, especially against the grain of the heritage of minimalism, illusionistic, quite literally).

Hagari's works avoid symbols and metaphors, and yet it is tempting to remind that the bird Cuckoo adopts the nests of other birds (its notions of home and territory are nature's own parody on the notion of a *Family's nest*), and that in Hebrew, its gender is feminine. But beyond that, it seems the works stage a different question: when there is no dad (or when there is a multitude of them, a daddy-bazaar), is there a son?

6. The communist agenda on the movie, premised on a parody of utopian capitalist notions of industry, is the focus of Joshua Simon's text on Hagari's work. See: Joshua Simon, *The Rear, The First Herzliya Biennial of Art* (Exhibition catalogue, 2007).

7. Compare, for instance, the place allotted Houdini as a figure in Hagari's work, to Houdini as he was shown in Matthew Barney's first one man gallery exhibition, in 1991. There as well Houdini was juxtaposed with another masculine hero, Jim Otto. But in Barney's work, below the ironic crust, this double model of virility, showmanship and athletic bravura declared the very same qualities of the artist's own physical fit (while Hagari dries Cuckoo, Barney climbs on the walls); thus, these are two, quite different Houdinis: that of Barney is auratic, singular and suitable to the artist, that of Hagari is an old fairytale of trickery. Far removed from the artist's own gestures.

5. Cuckoo Theater

I have so far described Hagari's art as a sculpture denying its sculptural nature, a picture that isn't a picture, a video set against the condition of its medium and as a paradoxical performance (by which man turns inanimate and acts as the object he will himself to be). I trust it to be evident that these parodic dismantlings attest to the profound and authentic way these pieces employ and reflect upon their forms of mediation). I suggest, finally, that they also generate (and destabilize) themselves as theater. Theater is at the core of these works, with its deceits and magic. I wish to illuminate, in a preliminary fashion, three aspects of this theatrical state.

First, there is theatricality as a concept in the art-historical chapter that Hagari is preoccupied with: that of minimalism and post minimalism. I am referring, of course, to Michael Fried's classic *Art and Objecthood*, wherein theatricality is ascribed to the way minimalist objects are conditioned by the viewer (and are thus devoid of immanent values).⁸ As is well known, this is a rare textual case where the artists under critique recognized its viability (Fried's critique eloquently articulated their agenda). All of Hagari's works stage an oxymoron of theatrical objecthood: it is realized and negated simultaneously. When Hagari projects an image of Morris-in-a-box on top of a box, he molds the basic characteristic of an object as Fried described it: the object's subjugation to projection as well as its emptiness when projection (here literal and not only perceptual) stops. But quite dazzlingly, his theatrical product also denies this objective void as Fried understood and Morris articulated it himself (think on Hagari's box in relation to the way the minimalists in general, and Morris in

particular, have employed the notion of Gestalt to empty the sculptural object and emphasize its perceptual dependency: an object that looking on one of its sides will enable and complete the sides that remain unseen.⁹ Hagari's box demonstrates and negates this condition as rear or side view will provide no clue of the façade. In other words: the viewing conditions of actual theater – the opposition between a frontal view of the stage what's behind the curtains, are presented as incommensurate with Fried's conditions of objective theatricality even as both cohabit the work. And this selfsame paradox can easily be shown to be ubiquitous Hagari's works.

Second, Hagari always creates stages and stage props. Usually, the stages are empty, that is to say, there are requisites, sets, stage lights and an array of special effects, but there is no protagonist. In many of the works, the spectator is invited to look behind the screens. What appeared from the front seat as a pendulum clock will be revealed from the back as a plain box, just as a movie projector will be revealed as a unit of shelves, concealing equipment used on front-stage. *Cuckoo* both takes this condition to its distilled expression and exceeds it: the work looks from the rear exactly as what it is: the unadorned backdrop of a set – but the viewing conditions prevents the spectator from entering the gallery to see it (just as theater audience is not meant to go behind the screens). And as for the inhabited clocks: Hagari, indeed, can be seen in them, and it even appears as if this is body art in its echo of Morris' *I Box*, that is to say, the proportions of the works seems to follow those of the body. But I would suggest the opposite is just as true: the body does its best to accommodate the object, the theatrical prop, a clock on stage. This is why

8. Michael Fried, "Art & Objecthood," in: Gregory Batcock, editor, *Minimal Art, A Critical Anthology* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995), pp. 116-147.

9. Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture," in: Batcock, editor, *Minimal Art*, pp. 222-235.

Hagari shows no qualms about discarding the real-life scale his work employ as a default for the sake of the street projection that is Cuckoo. The head assumes the proportions of a giant in a fairytale. Theatricality here is a hybrid, an anti-purist state, merging the temporal and the spatial, tactility and fantasy. This state is offered with no claim of being total art or a coherent whole, but quite the opposite. It is a theatrical experience as a potential, a speculation, a bag of tricks, and magic.

But beyond all that, the works reverberate with familiarity and intimacy with the theater as an actual site. In my mind, this quality has to do with the fact that Hagari's mother worked in the theater for many years, and thus the theater, the realm of the artificial, is also the locus of the natural. Founding his art on the brick stones of theater is not only an aesthetic and conceptual strategy, but also a form of expression imbued with memory, childhood, education and wonders. Perhaps this is why this art, that offers so much pleasure and wit and is manned exclusively by men, is also imbued with exceptional warmth and gentleness. Perhaps, in the end, the place assumed by the son, is that of the mother. And if this rather personal and subjective affect stands in contradiction to the anti-psychological stance I labored to elaborate upon, it seems only right.