

From: *Mona Hatoum*, curated by G. Verzotti, exhibition catalog (Rivoli-Torino, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 24 March – 23 May 1999), Edizioni Charta, Milano 1999, pp. 7-31.

Mona Hatoum

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Mona Hatoum has said that when she first visited a European country very different from her native Middle East, in this case it was Great Britain, she was struck by one particular aspect of that culture: namely, the clear separation between mind and body obvious in our most everyday and widespread behavior. The period she refers to was the mid-1970s when various opposition political and cultural movements in Europe were addressing these problems and seeking to overcome them. Yet there is no reason to think that those deeply rooted attitudes have changed that much, since this artist has constructed most of her work on this original schism between dominant modes of knowledge throughout western culture.

Mona Hatoum was born in Beirut to Palestinian parents who were living in exile in Lebanon because of the war in their homeland. Later, Hatoum attended art school in London. Great Britain became her second adopted country with the help of an English passport obtained through her father's work, because the civil war in Lebanon prevented her from returning to Beirut.

Residency in the West and the necessity of living in a foreign country inevitably influenced her work, steering her interest toward a comparison, and often a dash, between different and often opposing historical-cultural horizons.

The artist's autobiographical experience has played a decisive role, as has, to an even greater degree, her awareness of the close tie between her individual experience and the collective history she is part of.

Belonging to a people without a country, the artist herself lives as a displaced subject, and her work reflects on this lack of name and official identity. She makes identity itself a process on exhibit, a place of exchange and, as we have said, collision.

During her school years and immediately afterward, in the early 1980s, Hatoum favorably viewed the aforementioned opposition groups, particularly the feminist movement, and radical modes of artistic expression suitable for conveying political messages, such as performance art and street actions.

The body is central to her working process, and Hatoum takes a deliberately disturbing and provocative stance toward the public that witnesses her work first hand.

Her work characteristically reveals defined behavioral taboos regarding certain aspects of "low" corporeal material, the repression of which is the basis for the conventions that govern interpersonal relations in our world. Hatoum attempts to expose these taboos as cultural codes that are not universally valid.

An intriguing installation proposal in a group show at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London (*Waterworks*, 1982) intended to place TV cameras in some of the toilet cubicles of the art center. These cameras were meant to be linked to monitors in the main entrance and, therefore, would have brought the activity going on in the bathroom into the public domain. This sort of assault on the intimacy of the body and on the clear separation between the private and public spheres proved to be unacceptable. Although the show organizers had initially approved the project, it was, in the end, rejected by the institution that was housing the exhibition.

Under Siege, 1982, demonstrated a political engagement on the part of the artist, alluding to the conflict in the Middle East. *Under Siege* featured the artist, naked, enclosed within a transparent booth, through which one could see her repeated but vain attempts to stand on a surface of slippery mud. The action lasted seven hours and took place, almost prophetically, one week before the Israeli army's invasion of Lebanon, which led to the siege of Beirut.

In contrast, *The Negotiating Table*, 1983, dealt with the theme of peace. Hatoum spent three hours in a semi-darkened room, stretched out on a table illuminated by a single light bulb. Her face was bandaged and her body, covered in animal entrails, was enclosed in a transparent, plastic bag. A tape transmitted radio broadcasts on the civil war and comments from political leaders on the need for a peaceful solution.

The long duration of Hatoum's performances and the effort involved in the actions, as well as the dramatic nature of their visual impact, link these pieces to Viennese Action Art rituals and to Body Art from the 1970s, from Rudolf Schwarzkogler's corpse-like stills to Marina Abramović's self-punishing sequences. Hatoum shares these artists' desire to involve the public through emotional shock, with the hoped-for result of leading people, as Antonin Artaud wished, to the root of their own inner conflicts. However, Mona Hatoum's most explicitly political references lead one to think that her recourse to shock is intended to thematicize observers' irremediable passivity, their condition as empty receptacles faced with the mass-media representation of dramatic collective conflicts.

The street actions that the artist staged in 1985 in Brixton, London, had a more interlocutory relationship with the public. The most famous of these resulted in the performance *Roadworks*, 1985, documented in the photographic piece, *Performance Still*, 1985-95. Standing barefoot and wearing workmen's overalls, the artist walked along the pavements with big boots tied to her ankles that followed her at every step like a military phantom. The boots were actually Doc Martens, usually worn by both the police and Nazi skinheads, and the action took place, significantly, in a predominantly black, working-class area, already the scene of racial clashes.

In all these works, the body is defined as a physical entity (the body of the artist, her co-performers, the public) and, at the same time, metaphorically (the social body, the collectivity the artist is addressing). In all cases, the body is dealt with as a staging ground for censorship defined by the social order and by its ideological legitimization.

The indication of this censorship and its origins is the task that the artist has taken on, at times using values other than her own as a point of departure. Yet her work is also valid as a self-critical reflection on those values, particularly the category of the "political" as a referent for artistic languages.

Two other works reflecting a similar approach are particularly expressive. *Measures of Distance*, 1988, is a video where photographic images of a woman in a shower are superimposed by a handwritten Arabic text, where the cursive marks seem like an embroidered veil. The woman is Hatoum's mother, and the superimposed text is from a letter she sent to London, which the daughter reads aloud, on a sound track that accompanies the visual sequence. In the background, a laughter-filled dialogue takes place between the two women. The intimacy of the mother-daughter relationship, the words of affection and the everyday dimension, the sentiments and sexuality that are the subject of their dialogue, are precisely what motivate reflections on a political plane. The work cannot help but move from the individuality of the personalities involved to their story of exile and to the story of the group of which they are an integral part, for whom mere concepts of home, family, tradition and identity become, of necessity, subjects of vindication.

The work also points to a question of cultural differences and Western prejudices about other cultures. Thus the association of femininity and Arab culture does not present us with a veiled, submissive woman, but with a powerful one, standing naked, laughing and openly discussing her sexuality.

The Light at the End, 1989, was an installation that, according to many critics, marked a decisive turning point in Mona Hatoum's work.

In a corner of a darkened room, the spectator could discern a rectangular structure containing six vertical, luminous bars. On closer examination, the heat emanating from the structure revealed that the bars actually contained incandescent, and thus extremely dangerous, resistors. After bringing to mind the formal clean lines of minimalist structures and the color-light of Dan Flavin, the work was transformed into an alarming device, in a way that was by no means metaphorical.

In *The Light at the End*, the body is no longer present, but is implicated dramatically in the real danger to which it is exposed and the physical discomfort to which it is subjected. A specifically political content is no longer clearly discernable, but is implied by the aggressiveness with which the artist has constructed a perceptual trap, with snares that are more than merely virtual.

Hatoum's language has moved from the explicit or strongly allusive to the ambiguous, and it takes advantage of the semantic riches inherent in the discourses of art. Unlike the language of ideology, this discourse allows a more efficacious testimony to reality, precisely because it removes itself from unambiguous definitions and shifts from a world framed by certainty to a multiform universe of possibilities, revealed as a place of contradictions.

Hatoum's environments can be physically treacherous: razor-sharp steel wires strung from wall to wall, at ankle, groin and shoulder height, defined a path through the Mario Flecha Gallery in London (*Untitled*, 1992). Or her work can involve the spectator on an intense psychological level, as in *Light Sentence* (1992). A vertical structure closed on three sides, made of small, stacked-up metal cages stood in a semi-darkened room. The only light source was a light bulb hanging from the ceiling by a wire, which slowly descended to the center of the structure until it touched the floor, then slowly rose again. On the walls, the light bulb projected the shadow of the metal grids that formed the walls of the cages, and when the light bulb descended, the projections shifted upward and seemed to grow larger, in a vaguely oppressive process, then vibrate when the light bulb touched the ground, quivering. The semi-darkness and the movement of the shadows in the faint light created an overall sinister effect and conveyed a claustrophobic feeling, accentuated by the appearance of the structure. Although the cages had one open side, they obviously evoked images of segregation, like animals in a laboratory.

Hatoum's sculptures are theoretically linked to environments like these, full of hidden deceptions, and almost seem to have been conceived as furnishings for them. *Incomunicado* (1993), for example, features a child's crib with a tubular metal structure, which brings to mind a hospital bed. In place of a base to support a mattress, it has a series of metal wires. This sort of reference is even more obvious in *Silence* (1994), which is a bottomless bed made from glass tubes. *Marrow* (1996) is a collapsed bed frame, made of rubber, without a solid structure to keep it upright.

The artist's recent work is characterized by numerous similar objects, from *Divan Bed* (1996) to *Dormeuse* (1998), where rigid iron mimics the softness of upholstered furniture; in the case of *Untitled (Wheelchair)* (1998), a stainless-steel wheelchair comes equipped with knife blades in place of handles. Her carpet pieces, appropriately installed on the floor but made of the most incongruous materials, are particularly interesting. *Prayer Mat*, *Pin Carpet* (1995) and *Doormat* (1996) are surfaces made up of pins, pointing upward, thus ironically contradicting the use with which they are associated. *Doormat*, with the word "welcome" legible in negative at the center, associates the mat with a device that has a dual meaning, simultaneously inviting and repulsive. The associations of *Prayer Mat* are more complex and perhaps indicative of the direction the artist's work is taking. While Muslims must always face toward Mecca when praying, many of them who live in London can take advantage of prayer rugs that come with a compass attached to the surface to facilitate their eastward orientation. This clever resolution is used by the artist to introduce a double reference to both mid-

eastern culture in one of its salient aspects, the religious, and western culture in one of its most elitist contexts, avantgarde art.

Indeed, it is inevitable that this piece would bring to mind Giovanni Anselmo's compasses imbedded in granite. Anselmo is a protagonist of Arte Povera, the contemporary movement Hatoum has regarded as one of the most interesting forms of artistic expression typical of our world, while the geometric simplification of the piece, its rectangular format and "dose to the ground" configuration, obviously refers to Minimalism.

In all her work, Hatoum avails herself of the minimalist text in order to transgress it. She adopts it as a formal repertory to demonstrate (or overturn) its ideological premises in order to analyze the mind-body schism that constitutes her program.

Emphasizing values of rationality, Minimalism sought to "de-corporealize" the art object, considering it more as a theoretical axiom and abstracting it from any context of meaning. Subsequently, various women artists have addressed or re-interpreted Minimalism as a typically male tendency to be rejected or, as in the case of Hatoum, to be understood and transgressed.

For example, Mona Hatoum gives importance to the context, which conditions the perception of the work and therefore its meaning. The artist adopts a formal language but restores it to the context of relationships of power at work in the society from which it originated, as with the grid, a modernist emblem par excellence. The grid, that is the orthogonal intersection of straight lines or planes, appears in the construction of two versions of *Quarters* (1996), where metal towers, similar to loft beds, are reduced to pure armature. In the larger version, created for an exhibition at Viafarini in Milan, the large number of elements shown increases their allusiveness to beds in barracks, prisons or dormitories, settings intended for confinement or for the temporary accommodation of unwanted guests. In other cases a work may take the context in which it is located as its central theme. This was the case with Hatoum's 1996 exhibition at the Anadiel gallery, in the Arab part of Jerusalem. In one of the works exhibited, *Present Tense*, small white cubes of soap were arranged in a grid that formed a large square on the floor. A pattern of glass beads had been embedded into the surface of the soap and appeared at first glance to be an arrangement of abstract shapes. The cubes were actually bars of olive oil soap still made by hand in Nablus following a traditional process in use for over a century. The glass beads, in fact, represented the boundaries of the Palestinian State as hypothesised by the Oslo Accord. The resulting "map" shows fragmented parcels of land without any territorial integrity or apparent connection.

For the artist, the juxtaposition of an element linked to the historical identity of her people and the affirmation of the impossibility of their self-determination, at present or in the immediate future, takes on the value of a sign of resistance. Another piece is equally emblematic: *Lili (stay) put* consisted of an old bed frame to which the artist added four wheels. She then contradicted the possibility of movement by tying the frame to the floor with innumerable fishing wires (like Gulliver in Lilliput), therefore alluding to the tension between displacement and rootedness. Hatoum resorts to the formal lessons of Minimalism in order to overturn its premises through another important strategy. Frequently, she confronts the simple structural evidence of the forms she devises with the organic and vaguely repellent aspects of the material she uses. In *Socle du Monde*, 1992-93, the artist quotes the work of Piero Manzoni. In 1961, Manzoni used the entire terrestrial globe as a work of art and constructed a pedestal for it, which he exhibited outdoors, upside down. Invited to participate in a group exhibition in Canada the artist proposed another world-turned-into-artwork, but which rested on a base that was corroded, as if struck by some disease that undermined its consistency and stability. The effect of the erosion was obtained by the application of a large quantity of iron filings, applied to the metal surface with magnets. The arrangement of the filings took on a contorted configuration that brought to mind the convolutions of a massive, black brain. The same principle governs *Entrails*

Carpet (1995), a silicone carpet where the surface seems interwoven with intestine-like curves. The relationship between sensually repellent content and its encasement in an ascetic and precise form is the principal motif for *Corps étranger* (1994), perhaps Hatoum's most well known installation, shown at the 1995 Venice Biennale. A tall circular structure had two door openings that allowed the public to enter and observe a screen - also circular, placed on the floor - showing a video made using a medical, endoscopic camera. The video first explores the surface of the artist's body and then penetrates and moves through her orifices to reveal the viscerality of the inside of the body. The vertical elevation of the structure, which seems like a sort of mausoleum, was opposed to the floor placement of the projection, and seemed designed to sublimate the somewhat revolting effect of the view of the interior of the body's organs. Drawn down toward the cavity that pulled them in like some devouring abyss, viewers were confronted not only with the view seen from the endoscope, a medical and therapeutic, if merciless, view, but also with their ambivalent attraction to the spectacle of a gaping and markedly female viscerality, sufficiently explicit to bring to mind the usual psychoanalytical fantasies.

The female as disturbance is also investigated in works such as *Jardin public* (1993), where a triangle of pubic hair emerges from holes in the seat of a metal garden chair, and in a more complex installation, *Recollection* (1995), conceived specifically for the Beguinage St. Elizabeth in Kortrijk, Belgium, where Hatoum worked as an artist-in-residence. Invited to exhibit in the space of the former convent, the artist decided to use a material that refers directly to femininity, and once again she turned to her own body. The viewer entered an apparently empty room, where, with difficulty, he or she could glimpse numerous small balls scattered on the floor, a small loom on a table, and a few other elements. All the pieces were created from the artist's hair, patiently collected by her over a period of more than six years, and, until that occasion, saved in several shoe boxes. Rolled up into small balls and thrown on the ground, or stretched on the loom in place of yarn, bearing witness to a traditional women's activity, the hair was used to contextualize a place and a social role, and at the same time to disturb one's perception of the actual space. Strands of single hairs hung in large quantity from the ceiling, as invisible and annoying as spiderwebs, the hair interfered with the circulation of visitors through the space. Moving between past and present, individual experience and social reality, similarities and dissimilarities, masculine and feminine, the body is always an intermediary element that constructs relationships of meaning between corollary and/or oppositional settings, inscribing within itself the actions and counter-actions performed within these dynamics.

Of course these are dynamics of power that the artist brings to our attention, usually throwing them in our face, to show us the degree of our own involvement. Corporeality is a primary dimension and one, more than any other, that we all share. Her insistence on corporeality, in images and, even more, in metonymic signs, in objects brought to mind through paradoxes or in organic textures is an insistence on the need for its total redefinition, in order to redefine our relationship with the world.

It is significant that one of Hatoum's most recent pieces, *Map* (1998), is a cartographic representation of the world, created with an enormous number of glass marbles arranged skillfully on the floor. The continents can be distinguished clearly in their natural geographic outlines, while their political outlines, defined by history and human actions, disappear in the uniformity of the material.

Yet it is the vibrations caused by the movement of visitors around this monumental representation that modify its appearance, rolling the marbles toward an inevitable state of drift that undoes the boundaries, in an unintentional and involuntarily emblematic action.