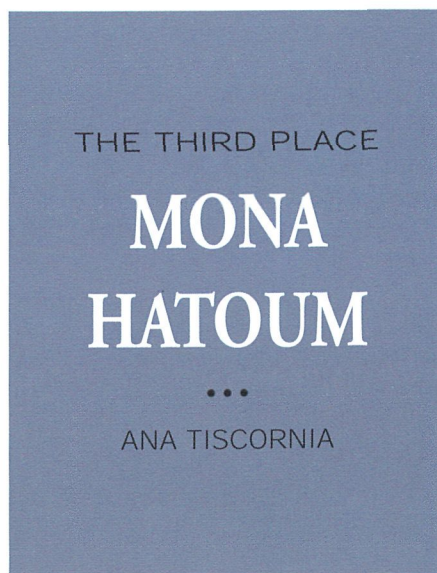


"For someone who comes from the Third World, I was acutely aware of the fact that the flow of information that shapes our notion of the world actually comes exclusively from Western reports interpreting the world for us". [1]

More than a hemisphere, the West to which Mona Hatoum refers is a line of argument: it directs socio-economic, cultural, racial and/or sexual relations in the world today. Consequently, it also directs the way we view Hatoum's work, as well as a substantial part of the discourse surrounding her work: this interpretive discourse tends to oscillate between two different yet not substantially dissimilar extremes.

The tendency is either to ignore all Third World influences and regard Hatoum as just another London artist, or else to treat her with the paternalism generally associated with the discovery of pure, definitive truth in her 'Otherness' (in this case, Palestinian). But perhaps it is precisely this confluence of Third World experiences with her awareness of the overriding directionality of the world at large which has made this artist the constant inventor of a third place; a space where controversies converge, where the tension between opposites is carried to the extremes of paradox. It is a conceptual space with its very own logic of consciousness, in which all eyes are aware of complicity and each gesture incites another (and generally opposite) gesture. This third place is inside Mona Hatoum: it moves with her, inhabits her mind and her eye. It has become a way of experiencing the world, which explains how the body (omnipresent in her work) is equated with geography. Hers is a unique geography, a map with variable borders, with wars, with exiles, with blockades, with oppression, and also with a space for redemption; a semantic field in a perpetual state of flux.



Hatoum's early performances, which were more direct and narrative than her current work, are paradigmatic of this. In *The Negotiating Table* (1983), the artist wrapped herself in plastic amid a pile of bloody entrails. Her body, placed on a wooden table with chairs at each side, was illuminated from above by the glare of a single light-bulb, thus conveying the idea of interrogation and torture which also appears in some of her other work. Meanwhile, a sound recording alternated information about the civil war with the speeches of Western political leaders calling for peace. The piece was an oblique reference to the parallel arguments which will never coincide on the horizon.

*So Much I Want to Say* (1983) is another example of her early work. Mona Hatoum is portrayed struggling to free herself from a man's hands which cover her mouth and prevent her from speaking, while a recording of her voice repeats the title of the piece over and over. This video can undoubtedly be interpreted from a feminist angle, but it also has marked political connotations, and not only those which first spring to mind, involving all the minority groups who have no say in the world. Hatoum

also planned to transmit this video via satellite between Vancouver and Vienna, thereby introducing a new critical facet: that of the supposedly horizontal relationships brought about by the expansion of the "communicators". Fifteen years ago the artist was already using technology to challenge the currently widespread idea that globalization inevitably implies the democratization of communications or, in the words of Christov Bakargiev, "subverts the notion of a free flow of information via electronic media which breaks down barriers towards the global village". [2]

Also in 1983, in *Under Siege*, the artist, naked in a transparent container full of muddy clay, struggled in vain to escape her imprisonment (which clearly symbolized physical, psychological and political confinement). From these early performances, to her installation *Corps étranger* (1994), in which the artist submits herself to a thorough internal examination with a micro-camera and projects this voyage through her insides onto a circle on the floor, Hatoum confronts us with a body which is no longer a mere metaphor but, as Felix Guattari notes, "is that ground that we wish to work on for the liberation of society" [3]. It is a place where individuals and society, the private and public, psychological and sociological, micro and macro, can only exist together as inseparable parts of a complex (although not necessarily binary) dialectic, in which one often takes the role of "the Other". This "Other", this "strange (and foreign) body" (in this case, our own insides) which repels us and attracts us like the feeling of dizziness, is essential to our very existence and yet what is ours, is also foreign to us.

The linear (albeit discontinuous) nature of the camera's voyage sets the fragment in time and matter; a way of making the interior more inaccessible, stranger and less reassuring.

But this body, this place of thought, is an active magnetic field in which each pole is wary of its antagonist, and nothing can free itself from the whole network of implications of which it is a part. The underlying subject of control also arises here, crossing all the semantic strata of these pieces. It is not only a question of the control which is exercised quietly from within the self and the body, but also of external, indoctrinating controls. In this case, technology (the medical instrument) and the public situated around and above the cylinder containing the projection, who are witnesses to, and proponents of this intrusive, expurgatory, controlling society which Gilles Deleuze refers to as "the new society of surveillance".

Mona Hatoum was born in Beirut, where her Palestinian parents were in exile. Chance circumstances led her to study in London; a second exile when the outbreak of civil war in Lebanon caught her by surprise while travelling around Europe. Her work, as she herself has said, is made for a Western audience and responds to Western codes of visual expression, but is influenced by her "experience of having grown up in the Middle East" [4].

The simultaneity of experiences resulting from the circumstances of exile, the sense of belonging to, and being two parts, the knowledge of having grown on one side and growing on another, all filter into her creative approach. It is not only a question of displacement, but also a sort of emplacement; a perspective which enables Hatoum to subvert all conflicts of authority and make them work in a sort of microcosm, in which all disorder



Mona Hatoum. *Van Gogh's Back*, 1995. Courtesy of Alexander and Bonin, New York. Photograph by Stephen White.

gestates new paths and each path is the nucleus of another universe. In a sense, post-modern strategies corrupt themselves; again we are in a third place where we are allowed to revisit modernity with one foot in and the other one out.

Mona Hatoum can look through the eyes of Jurgen Habermas and see totality as a source of conflict with the autonomy of systems, but she can also see the world from the perspective of Francois Lyotard who, skeptical of the potential for consensus, declares war on totality.

In any case, Hatoum's work is not so

much about clarifying controversies as exposing and even exacerbating them. For her, conflicts are accounts of insurrections which can only be understood through the accounts themselves. This tendency to subvert dogmas can also be seen in her frequent incursions into minimalism, to which her work, permeated by an economy of form and expression, is clearly indebted. Repetition, the constructive argument, the technological aspect of certain pieces, are all references, but references made to be transgressed. They are symbols of

apparent self-reference but which, essentially, refer to a live, organic, sensual, threatening world. If it is possible to draw a dividing line characterizing the rift between Minimalism and Conceptualism, then Hatoum has given this space an elusive presence. Not by erasing it, but by installing her third place; altering borders, drawing paradoxes, emphasizing consciousness and erasing the evidence.

Pieces such as *Socle du Monde* (1991-92, titled after Manzoni) – a large magnetic cube sprinkled with metallic dust patterned like brains or intestines via a magnetic field – demonstrate the activity of attraction and repulsion. *Entrails Carpet* and *Pin Carpet* (1995), one of translucent plastic entrails and the other consisting of thousands of steel pins which give the surface a velvety appearance, exemplify this critical profile. Mona Hatoum does not side-step the formal and aesthetic aspects of art – indeed, she holds these factors in notoriously high esteem – but she also emphasizes the contextual references of her art; this situates her both near to and yet far from the Minimalists, in her very own third place, from where she winks ironically at them. Rather than as references to totality, the artist presents repetition and criss-cross patterns as a series of different units, with constant potential for further additions: units of torture, units of imprisonment, units of fear. Far from eluding certain themes, Hatoum weaves them into her work and situates them in the world with a very acute sense of how socio-cultural constructions occur in certain political circumstances and in certain power struggles.

Whereas in the 80's Hatoum used her own body, and in a very direct manner, during the 90's she has used the viewers' bodies, and in a far more complex way;

controlled by the space generated by the object, which involves the public physically. She has moved from spaces of representation to those of presentation or, to be more precise, of experience, since the spectator is also manipulated into becoming a representation while viewing. The transmission of information which was implicit in the narratives of her performances has now given way to the recreation of sensations aroused in the viewer. This imminence of sensation, this "revelation which is never completed" which, according to Jessica Morgan, "engenders a profound sense of discomfort in the spectator" [5], is also a form of what the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges defined as "aesthetic experience".

Evidence of this approach can be found in pieces such as *Light Sentence* (1992), a U-shaped wall of metal cages projecting their enlarged or reduced shadows according to the movement of a small central lamp which is slowly lowered to the floor before rising again. Once more, a reference to police interrogations which involves the spectator physically and emotionally. There is no need to inhabit each of these small cells in order to feel trapped; the shadows are like real cells, and there is no escape from the ongoing genealogy. The formal beauty of the piece merely accentuates the element of trickery; seduction calling out to be absorbed by this space with no way out. This is similar to the notion of attraction-repulsion in *Current Disturbance* (1996): a structure made of wood and wire mesh, more a connotation than a representation of cages, closing in a circle. Each space houses a small lamp which turns on and off arbitrarily, every few seconds, with no apparent pattern. The noise of the filaments charging and discharging energy is amplified and projected towards

the public like a threatening witness. The reassuring order of geometry, repetition and systemization is upset by the interference of intermittent light, darkness and noise, which generates a space where control/lack of control are complementary pairs.

Equally paradoxical are Hatoum's objects. Not least because despite the appearance of abandoning the body, she actually summons it in its absence, either in the cribs with their emphasis on threatened fragility, or in the carpets; the nails concealing the memory of the fakir beneath its velvet surface, or the entrails bidding us to visit the body with other eyes.

As well as the recurrence to paradox, another factor characterizes these objects, as indeed all her other work: that of beauty. A condition sought by the artist who lingers over the work's physical qualities, and develops a poetic sense of its visual effect, differentiating her from other trends in contemporary art which uphold displeasing aesthetics or do not regard the form as a factor which structures the meaning.

This aspect of Mona Hatoum's work is an added factor in the creation of a sort of treaty of paradoxes. Each piece is like a sheet of paper, whose two sides can only be separated by creating a new sheet, which is in turn forever enslaved to follow the same rule.

[1] "Notes on Mona Hatoum by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev". *Arte identita Confini*, catalogue, p. 173.

[2] *ibid*, p. 173.

[3] *Soft Subversions*. Edited by Sylvère Lotringer, 1996, p. 30.

[4] The artist's opinion expressed at the exhibition held at the New Museum, New York, 1998.

[5] Jessica Morgan. *The Poetics of Uncovering*. Catalogue exhibition at the New Museum, p. 1.