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Contrapuntal Narratives and a Map of “Disbelonging”: Mona Hatoum – Unframing Contemporary Women Artists from the Middle-East¹

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Seeing “the entire world as a foreign land” makes possible originality of vision. Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that – to borrow a phrase from music – is contrapuntal.

Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile* (2001)²

People often expect tidy definitions of otherness, as if identity is something fixed and easily definable.

Mona Hatoum, *Bomb Magazine* (1998)³

Palestinian artist (1952, Beirut), nominated for the Turner Prize in 1995, Mona Hatoum lives in London since the mid 1970s. In her work, she mainly focuses on issues of exile, both psychological and physical or corporeal; the

¹ An earlier longer version of this paper was published, in Portuguese, in *Dossier Feminismos transnacionais: saberes e estéticas pós/descoloniais*, org. AG Macedo e Simone Schmidt, *Revista de Estudos Feministas* (UFSC, Brasil), vol. 27, n. 1, e58888, 2019.

² See Said 2001: 186.

³ Mona Hatoum in interview with Janine Antoni for the *Bomb Magazine* (n. 63, 1998). Reprinted in the catalogue of the exhibition *Mona Hatoum*, Centro Cultural Galego and Centro de Arte de Salamanca (3 Oct 2003-5 Jan. 2004), coord. Cristina Zetlich (pp. 118-132). This quote p. 119.

home, and the estrangement from it, the proximity and the separation/dis-location, the domestic and the political are fundamental tropes. "One of the distinctive characters of Hatoum's work is the richness of her methods in bringing unexpected elements together, causing contradictory moments and creating a disturbance in our experience of everyday objects and environments", as claimed by Guy Brett in the essay "Itinerary" (Brett 2010: 64),⁴ which means that she *unframes* and *reframes*⁵ daily domestic objects provoking an estrangement between them and the viewer, which is achieved through a process of *mise-en-abîme*.

A distinctive feature of Hatoum's aesthetics is that the destabilizing work she creates around the images is inseparable from her questioning of the sedentary nature of language, which she exhibits in the titles of her works, as a kind of subtext imprinted onto the images themselves, thus adding to them a second layer of meaning, ironical and, to use Said's word, "contrapuntal". An issue which necessarily connects with her double condition of exile and linguistic nomadism. As Kirsty Bell underlines in her "mapping" of the artist: "Hatoum's relationship to language implies the humorous distance of the fluently spoken second language, foreignness, distance, cultural translation, untranslatability" (Bell 2012: 116). As an illustration of this discussion, see, at the end of this article, the image-objects *Doormat II*; *Grater Divide*; *Homebound*; *Hot Spot III*; *Incommunicado*; *Keffieh*; *Light Sentence*; *No Way II*; *Over My Dead Body*; *Traffic II*.

There are many insightful critical essays on Hatoum's work. However, to this date, Edward Said's "The Art of Displacement. Mona Hatoum's Logic of Irreconcilables" remains crucial, for it touches upon all the complex issues (aesthetic, political, emotional, gender, linguistic) that construct its dazzling poetics and politics. This text was published at the time of Mona Hatoum's first Tate exhibition in 2000, entitled "The Entire World as a Foreign Land", and was republished for the second exhibition of Hatoum's work at Tate Modern from May to August 2016. Here the critic claims:

⁴ Brett 2010: 64.

⁵ On this subject see Kokoli 2008; Parker/Pollock 1987; Macedo 2015.

In Mona Hatoum's relentless catalogue of disaffected, dislocated, oddly deformed objects (...) [the object 's] essential "niceness" (...) sticks out as a refractory part of the dislocation. (...)

Her work is the presentation of identity as unable to identify with itself, but nevertheless grappling the notion (perhaps only the ghost) of identity to itself. Thus is exile figured and plotted in the objects she creates. *Her works enact the paradox of dispossession as it takes possession of its place in the world* (...). (Said 2016 [2000]: 86, 88; my italics)

Said correlates Hatoum's work with the experience of the exile and the refugee, as sharing the same physical, geographical, but also emotional, conceptual and linguistic paradigm of dislocation and disjunction. And he further substantiates his argument in the following words:

No one has put the Palestinian experience in visual terms so austere and yet so playfully, so compellingly and at the same moment so allusively. Her installations, objects and performances impress themselves on the viewer's awareness with curiously self-effacing ingenuity which is provocatively undermined, nearly cancelled and definitively reduced by the utterly humdrum, local and unspectacular materials (hair, steel, soap, marbles, rubber, wire, string, etc.) that she uses so virtuosically. (...) In the age of migrants, curfews, identity cards, refugees, exiles, massacres, camps and fleeing civilians, however, *they are the uncooptable mundane instruments of a defiant memory facing itself and its pursuing or oppressing others implacably* (...). (*idem*: 88, 89; my italics)

Thus Hatoum's aesthetics of familiar and domestic objects travestied as menacing and inhospitable stands as a metonymy for the impossibility of reconciliation with the refugee's world, in the face of its alienation and untranslatability. "Hatoum's work is hard to bear (like the refugee's world, which is full of grotesque structures that bespeak excess as well as paucity), yet very necessary to see as an art that travesties the idea of a single homeland", as claimed by Said (*idem*: 93).

Another crucial feature of Hatoum's work is her deconstruction of controversial issues such as identity and otherness, by refusing to polarize them. In an early interview with Janine Antoni (quoted in my epigraph) for the *Bomb Magazine* (nr. 63, 1998), when asked about her identity and personal trajectory, the artist contested:

I dislike interviews. I'm often asked the same question: "What in your work comes from your own culture?" As if I have a recipe and I can actually isolate the Arab ingredient, the woman ingredient, the Palestinian ingredient. People often expect tidy definitions of otherness, as if identity is something fixed and easily definable. (Hatoum *apud* Antoni 2004: 119)

Indeed Hatoum's "dislocation" in personal and family terms – born of Palestinian parents exiled in Lebanon, herself stranded in London in 1975 when the war broke out in Lebanon – is imprinted in her work, translated and refigured as a recognizable sense of disjunction which nevertheless she consistently refuses to essentialize or reify.

Moreover, she constructs an aesthetics wholeheartedly grounded on dissention and critical confrontation which is deeply dialogical, or to resort again to Said's musical metaphor, *contrapuntal* (Said 2001: 186). For the domestic objects she presents the viewer with are as it were travestied through kaleidoscopic lenses, making them at one time recognizable and totally estranged, undoubtedly a play with memory and an intentional "dislocation" from their natural environment. It is through this set of "contrapuntal juxtapositions" (*ibidem*) that they are *reframed* as catalysts of memory and of an "other culture" and thus become aesthetically and critically resignified.

Henceforth, through my discussion of Mona Hatoum's aesthetics or "map of disbelonging"⁶ I hope to have been able to illustrate the dialogical tension that lies at the core of these three moments – framing/unframing/resisting, in syntony with the current interrogations and the challenges of contemporary Feminism as a transnational and resilient critique. My contention is that the reinvindication of a cultural politics of the body, the inscription of difference and a localized politics in the canons of art, besides contributing to a critical deconstruction of unified and fixed notions of identity,⁷ represent an unsettling translation of *otherness and difference* in a post-

⁶ A concept used by Patricia Falguières in her essay "Disbelongings", an analysis of the artist's "subtle process" of creating spatial dispersion, detachment and unveiling. And she argues: "Hatoum's dispersions also undo the normal conditions of vision, not on canvas or paper but in real space" (Falguières 2016: 77).

⁷ See Hall 2000: 15.

modern, postindustrial and postcolonial world, where homes have increasingly become “provisional” realities, and “[b]orders and barriers (...) can also become prisons” (Said 2001: 185).



Figure 1. *Doormat II*

Mona Hatoum, 2000-2001. Stainless steel, nickel-plated brass pins, canvas and glue – 3 x 72.5 x 42 cm (1 1/4 x 28 1/2 x 16 1/2 in.)

© Mona Hatoum. Courtesy of Alexander and Bonin, New York (Photo: Oren Slor)



Figure 2. *Grater Divide*

Mona Hatoum, 2002. Mild Steel – 204 cm x variable width and depth
(80 1/4 in. x variable width and depth)

© Mona Hatoum. Courtesy White Cube (Photo: Iain Dickens Mona Hatoum)

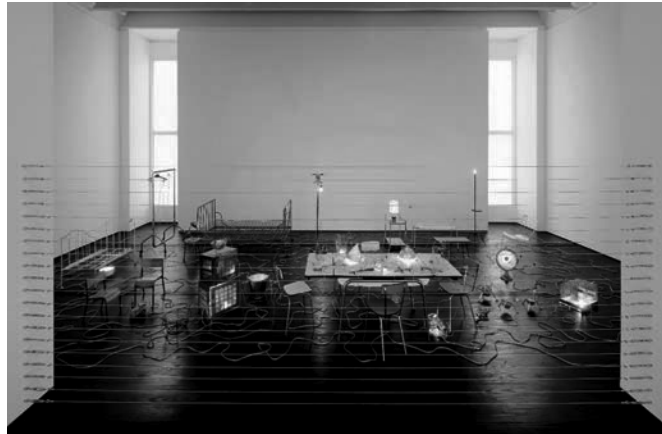


Figure 3. *Homebound*

Mona Hatoum, 2000. Kitchen utensils, furniture, electric wire, light bulbs, dimmer unit, amplifier and two speakers. Dimensions variable.

Installation view at The Menil Collection, Houston

© Mona Hatoum. Courtesy The Menil Collection, Houston (Photo: Fredrik Nilsen)



Figure 4. *Hot Spot III*

Mona Hatoum, 2009. Stainless steel and neon tube –
234 x 223 x 223 cm. (92 1/ x 87 3/4 x 87 3/4 in.)

© Mona Hatoum. Courtesy the artist and MdbK Leipzig (Photo: dotgain.info)



Figure 5. *Incomunicado*

Mona Hatoum, 1993. Mild steel, wire and rubber – 126.5 x 57 x 94 cm (49.75 x 22.5 x 37 in.)

© Mona Hatoum. Courtesy of Arnolfini, Bristol (Photo: Edward Woodman)

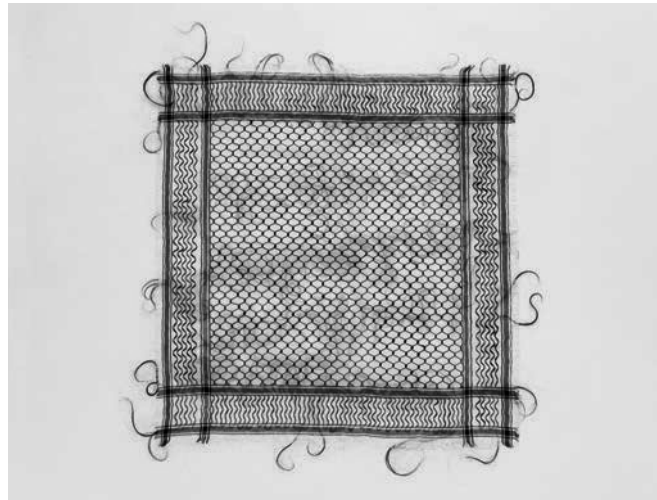


Figure 6. *Keffieh*

Mona Hatoum, 1993-1999. Human hair on cotton fabric. Dimensions variable

© Mona Hatoum. Courtesy White Cube (Photo: Hugo Glendinning)

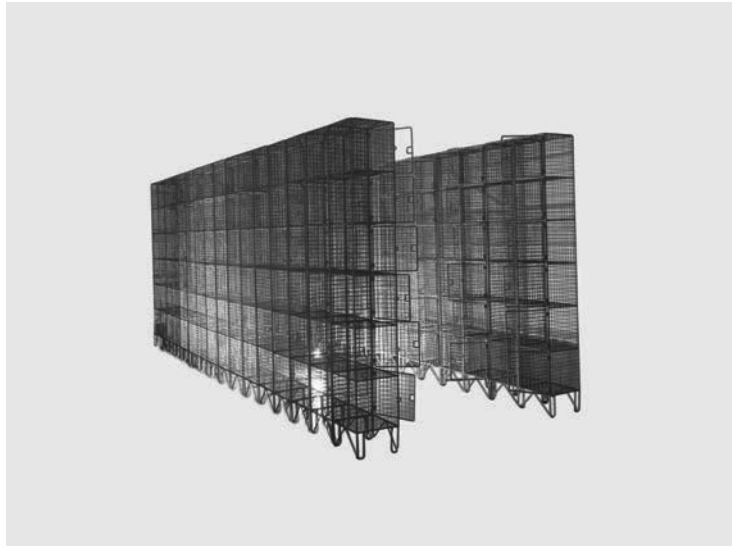


Figure 7. *Light Sentence*

Mona Hatoum, 1992. Galvanised wire mesh lockers, electric motor and light bulb – 198 x 185 x 490 cm. (78 x 72 3/4 x 193 in.). Installation view at Centre Pompidou, Paris
© Mona Hatoum. Courtesy Centre Pompidou, Mnam-CCI / Dist RMN-GP
(Photo: Philippe Migeat)



Figure 8. *No Way II*

Mona Hatoum, 1996. Stainless steel and enamel – 13 x 22 x 27 cm. (5 x 8 3/4 x 10 3/4 in.)
© Mona Hatoum. Courtesy the artist (Photo: Edward Woodman)

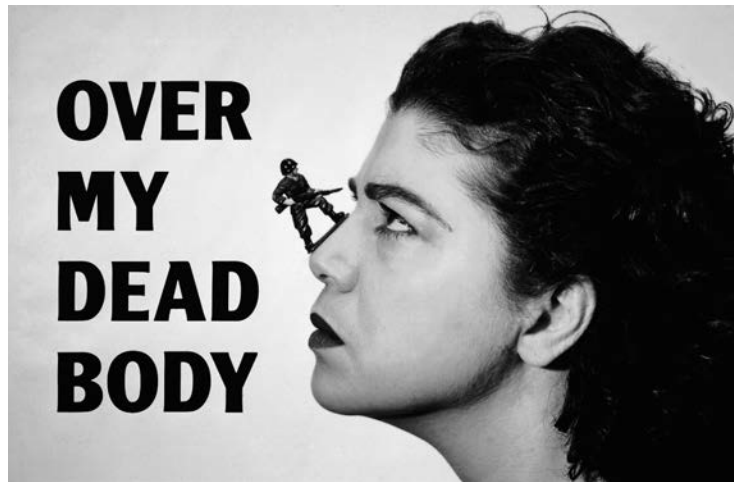


Figure 9. *Over my Dead Body*
Mona Hatoum, 1988. Billboard. Inkjet on paper – 204 x 304 cm. (80 1/4 x 119 3/4 in.)
© Mona Hatoum. Courtesy the artist



Figure 10. *Traffic II*
Mona Hatoum, 2002. Compressed card, leather, metal, human hair –
52 x 81 x 80 cm. (20.5 x 32 x 31.5 in.)
© Mona Hatoum. Courtesy White Cube (Photo: Hugo Glendinning)

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