A MAPPING OF MONA HATOUM*

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"There are different strands in my work that develop over a long period of time and keep coming in and out of focus."[1]

In Mona Hatoum's work, certain forms, structures and methods return with the unchecked regularity of distant memories. These are not inventions but familiar elements derived from a topography of the everyday as much as from the recent history of sculpture. Their familiarity makes her works sometimes appear self-evident, but only until the realisation of a certain estrangement sinks in. The well-known forms and structures are modulated, exaggerated in scale or made from contradictory materials, destabilised to the point where the things we were most comfortable with can no longer be relied upon to be themselves, or to perform their usual function.

There is a sense of ingrained repetition that establishes a formal circularity throughout Hatoum's work. It repeats because, like a memory, we cannot escape it; it is part of us. Like identity, it follows us wherever we choose to go. The result is not, however, a strict seriality or consistent repetition of forms, of the kind found in Minimalist sculpture. Hatoum's revisited forms and structures are threaded like beads throughout her body of work, and become cumulatively and compulsively reinforcing as the themes they embody recur in varying scales and are articulated with a precise and highly resolved approach to material. While they may be fabricated in steel, they may equally be made of human hair, buttons or rubber bands. Her works range from the simplest hand-made weaving to the most elaborate, large-scale, industrially produced sculpture. But in every case, her works have a physical impact before a cognitive one, requiring a kind of kinaesthetic perception like that described by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: "Any perception of a thing, a shape or a size as real, any perceptual constancy refers back to the positing of a world and of a system of experience in which my body is inescapably linked with phenomena."[2] Hatoum's works appeal to the body as a common site of experience of scale, material, place and pain. So while they may be read specifically in terms of her own personal history and the extreme experience of alienation and instability that is the fate of the exile, they also refer to the themes of memory, home, movement, location and space that are part of everyone's physical existence. Borrowing a quote from Palestinian scholar Edward Said, Hatoum titled one of her exhibitions "The Entire World as a Foreign Land". This oxymoronic yoking of the familiar and the strange, particularly as it relates to a body in the space that constitutes our 'world', is the crux of her work and the source of its strength. It is articulated in Hatoum's contradictory approach to material; she employs it in ways contrary to its nature or to express themes that seem to be in direct opposition to its inherent qualities. In this way, although the forms she presents to us may be familiar, a reversal occurs that effectively turns them inside out. And although there may be an initial similarity, the impact of her works is the exact opposite of the 'truth to materials' stance proposed by Minimalism or Arte Povera.

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1 Mona Hatoum in an interview with Michael Archer, in *Mona Hatoum* (London: Phaidon Press, 1997), p. 25.

2 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith and Forrest Williams (New York and London: Routledge Classics, 2002), pp. 353f.

Maps and Traces

"Space begins with that model map in the old editions of the *Petit Larousse Illustré*, which used to represent something like 65 geographical terms in 60 sq. cm., miraculously brought together, deliberately abstract," writes Georges Perec at the beginning of his poetic treatise, *Species of Spaces*,[3] a fascinating breakdown of types of space, from bed to bedroom to apartment to building to street to neighbourhood to town etc., which makes illuminating reading when considering Hatoum's handling of different kinds of spaces.

A map, as the fixing of landmass and water, is a tracing of physical presence, the plotting of space. It tells us where we are, shows us where we want to go and presents to our imaginations a bigger picture. But a map is also the contested arena of disputes over boundaries, territories or national identity. While on the one hand it is stable and trustworthy, on the other it is unreliable, politically motivated, subject to change and open to interpretation. And now, with the looming threat of climate change and rising water levels, even the physical attributes of the map acquire another urgently instable dimension.

Hatoum's maps may be read as an extension of the 'mappings' of her early performance works where she traced the outline of her body in chalk on a black floor (*Live Work for the Black Room*, 1981), literally drawing the evidence of her presence as she moved around the space. Maps are also a kind of compulsion; they can be found everywhere. Even the grease stains on a paper plate can be outlined to turn them into complex archipelagos and clusters of islands (*Clouds (9)* and *Clouds (10)*, 2007).

A map's instability is often expressed in material terms. An accumulation of glass marbles on the floor draws a precarious world map that could roll out of shape at any moment (*Map*, 1999), while the boundaries of Palestinian territories under the Oslo Agreement are marked with red beads set in small square blocks of soap arranged grid-like on the floor (*Present Tense*, 1996), forming tentative lines which would break apart the moment the soap was used.

In other sculptural works, the map is the trace of some activity or process, and the pattern it creates is the result of a process of accumulation or disintegration. A world map, seen from above, appears in moth-eaten patches on an Afghan carpet (*Afghan [red and black]*, 2008). The carpet itself, an indicator of comfort and domestic stability, here assumes a Rorschach-like imprint that invites the foreign and the transient into the security of home.

This constant mapping implies an ongoing need to pin down, locate and define space, a need which is in turn denied either by the unstable materials Hatoum chooses or by the reliance on processes of accumulation, disintegration and outlining to create form—processes which, in theory, could go on forever. As the map is never final, the need is never satisfied.

3
Georges Perec,
"Species of Spaces",
in Species of Spaces and Other Pieces,
transl. John Sturrock
(London: Penguin Books, 1997),
p. 13.

Globes and Spheres: The World Goes Round

The perfect symmetry of the sphere is always seductive, but its beauty is unsettled by its tendency to roll. Unstable, full of potential energy, it is on the move. From a pearl of blood beading on a fingertip to the great globe that is our world.

In Hatoum's work, the sphere appears as the red beads dotted like blood cells in soap blocks or as glass marbles cleaving to the floor like atoms attracted by a magnetic force. Strands of Hatoum's hair—rolled between her fingers into delicate, gossamer-webbed spheres and collected for years in shoeboxes—litter an exhibition space, gathering in corners and on the window sill (*Recollection*, 1995). Their accumulation articulates the passing of time, the circular process of shedding and shaping anew.

At the other end of the scale is *Hot Spot* (2006), a spherical gridded steel frame through which a map of the world is threaded in hot red neon; a person-sized version of the world, but without a solid core, it is just a web of overlapping lines. *Globe* (2007) is slightly smaller, matching the artist's own height. Without the map it is a clear and open grid structure, a primary form, tilted on its axis. But with steel bars woven together in a kind of medieval structure, it looks like a rolling cage: a prison for the self in space—within the dimensions of the body but ready to roll, on the move. This sense of movement, of potential energy, occurs throughout Hatoum's work and is reflected in her own nomadic working habits. Although she has homes in London and Berlin, she frequently travels to distant countries for artist residencies and for the freshness of outlook an unknown culture can afford. Or, perhaps, to rediscover the same recurrent forms, ideas and insistent memories in a new place, as Perec describes:

"To be far away. (...) [T]o discover what you've never seen, what you didn't expect, what you didn't imagine. (...) Not what, over time, has come to be listed among the various wonders and surprises of the world; neither the grandiose nor the impressive; nor even the foreign necessarily. But rather the reverse, the familiar rediscovered, a fraternal space..."[4]

Home and Away

The twinned experiences of, on the one hand, the luxury of freedom of movement and, on the other, the inevitability of homesickness, are the contradictory fates of the exile.

As Edward Said put it, "What is true of all exile is not that home and love of home are lost, but that loss is inherent in the very existence of both."[5]

But where is home, and what defines it? Furniture, or family?

Hatoum has made only one work that directly addresses her own fractured

4
Ibid., pp. 77f.

5
Edward Said,
"Reflections on Exile" (1984),
in Reflections on Exile and other Literary and Cultural Essays
(London: Granta Books, 2001),
p. 185.

biography: a video from 1988 titled *Measures of Distance*. It is a many-layered work which, through spoken word, filmed image and superimposed Arabic script, describes the relationship between Hatoum, who had been based in London since the outbreak of the war in Lebanon in 1975, and her mother, who still lived there. A direct and affecting work, it conveys the distance—physical, emotional and cultural—between a mother and her adult daughter now living abroad. For Hatoum, it acted as a kind of catharsis of the personal subject of home, or homesickness, and by manifesting the distance she herself experienced, led her to a more removed approach to this theme.

In subsequent sculptural works, this distance is expressed through objects associated with the home, which are alienated or held at length through various strategies. In *Home* (1999), a table laden with a collection of kitchen implements is cordoned off from the viewer by a wire barrier; this is just as well, given that the utensils, which glow intermittently and emit an uneasy hum, are wired up to light bulbs and charged with electric current. The innocuous objects are displayed like electric sculptures in which the twin comforts of cooking convenience and electric light are fused into a potentially lethal Frankenstein-like experiment. Just as the stability of the globe is rocked by its potential to roll, so the security and convenience of the home is infused with real danger. The kitchen as the traditional centre, the heart of the home, comes up repeatedly in Hatoum's frequent use of kitchen utensils as sculptural vehicles. The humble grater appears in several of her works, often blown up to a human scale, so that its sharp perforations become gaping, sharp-edged holes and pose a violent threat, while its pared-down form approximates types of furniture: upright as a standing screen in *Paravent* (2008), lying down as a bed in *Daybed* (2008). Perec calls the bed "the individual space *par excellence*",[6] and Hatoum herself says, "I see furniture as being very much about the body",[7] but here the relation to the body is one of aggression rather than comfort or support.

Whereas an artist like Robert Gober uses furniture in his work to imply a kind of psychological unrest through uncanny doubling or unexpected fusions of materials, Hatoum's works disturb more through their physical, visceral effects: a threat of physical pain rather than psychological upset. Gober's distorted baby cots may hold within them claustrophobic nightmare scenarios of childhood, but Hatoum's cut straight to the quick, replacing the cot's mattress with a series of wires strung taut and sharp (*Incommunicado*, 1993).

6
Perec, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

7
Hatoum, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

From Cube to Cage

The cube, one of the key 'primary structures' of Minimalist sculpture—its *Ur*-form, perhaps—represents a paring down of sculptural content towards a literal appreciation of medium and material on its own terms. This sculptural history is implicitly cited by any artist now adopting this form, but in Hatoum's decidedly

post-Minimalist sculpture, the cube more often than not takes the form of a cage. *Cube* (2006) is a structure woven from steel and, at just over 170 cm high it is about the right height for you or me. But with no opening, you cannot get in or out. This cage can be seen to conflate two primary Minimalist structures: the cube and the grid, which expresses notions of serial order and modular repetition. Rosalind Krauss described the grid as a ubiquitous figure in the work of the modern avant-garde:

"The absolute stasis of the grid, its lack or hierarchy, of centre, of inflection, emphasises not only its anti-referential character, but—more importantly—its hostility to narrative. This structure, impervious both to time and to incident, will not permit the projection of language into the domain of the visual, and the result is silence..."[8]

The result of Hatoum's conflation of cube and grid into cage is one that works in opposition to this description, however. While referencing modernist sculptural tradition, it combines the two forms to allow exactly that infiltration of reference, narrative and language which Minimalism rejects. It does not claim to profess originality or autonomous existence, but rather exactly the opposite: it functions by drawing on external associations from across the board, from politics to aesthetics to the everyday.

Hatoum's use of this form together with an acute sense of scale appeals to the body in a visceral sense, and it is instructive to remind oneself that Hatoum came to sculpture through performance. Towards the end of the 1980s, several of her performance works became more installation based, involving situations where the artist was locked inside a cage- or shed-like structure and could only be viewed by the audience from the outside (e.g. *Matters of Gravity*, 1987). The harsh combination of ideas of imprisonment with pared-down, repetitive structures reaches its apotheosis in the new work *Cube (9 × 9 × 9)*, 2008, a dense alignment of open, cage-like units that are stacked together to form a cube. The harmonious, LeWitt-like arrangement is ruptured, however, by the material of its construction: it is made entirely of barbed wire. This is the most extreme of uninhabitable structures, the antithesis of her interest in the home, conflating several features listed by Perec under "The Uninhabitable": "coastlines bristling with barbed wire (...) thousands of rabbit hutches piled one above the other (...) the confined, the out-of-bounds, the encaged, the bolted."[9]

8
Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA; London: The MIT Press, 1986), p. 158.

9
Perec, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

Objects of Conflict

For one of Hatoum's first exhibitions, the gallery space was left essentially bare save for rows of wires strung between pillars (*Untitled*, 1992, Mario Flecha Gallery, London). The formal effect was something like Fred Sandback meets Agnes Martin: a clear outlining and drawing of space within space. But

in Hatoum's hands, this simple fundamental structure also became a barrier, a line of defence. These schemata of lines recur in many of Hatoum's works: in the wires of an egg-slicer blown up to massive scale and cast in marble (*Marble Slicer*, 2002), for example, or the simple barrier separating viewers from the lethal *Home*. In *5 RPM* (2008) the defensive aspect is heightened as the material used is again barbed wire, strung between pillars and rotating. The effect is hypnotic, but the associations are hazardous. *Nature morte aux grenades* (2006–2007), has a similarly seductive effect: gorgeous lozenges of crystal in jewel-like colours are arranged on a steel trolley. Though they look like decorative crystal fruits, these are blown and hand-shaped versions of hand-grenades formed after organic shapes: a pomegranate, a pineapple, a lemon, an egg. Here, in a similar but inverse strategy to Hatoum's alienating treatment of the home, the threatening becomes appealing and the seduction of war is made manifest by her precise use of materials.

Stacks of sandbags form part of the landscape of barriers and checkpoints in conflict-ridden lands. Brought into the gallery in all their roughness, they approximate the aesthetics of Arte Povera but, sprouting with tufts of startlingly green weeds and grass, they become about something else instead (*Hanging Garden*, 2008). They are about stalemate and waiting, about the absorption of the machinery and accoutrements of war into the everyday landscape of war-torn countries. A landscape where checkpoints and gun-toting soldiers are no longer noticed, and forgotten sandbags can rise into a kind of Smithson-esque entropic ruin and become an organic, living sculpture—a weed-ridden ecosystem flourishing between the cracks of war.

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Krauss, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

Weaving and Waiting

Weaving is another kind of waiting game. In Greek mythology, Penelope engaged in weaving as an ongoing act of procrastination; waiting for her husband Ulysses to return from the wars, every evening she would undo what she had woven during the day, forever putting off the time when she must meet her anxious suitors. Weaving expresses the stalemate of waiting for return, for things to get back to normal. As Hatoum's mother says in *Measures of Distance*, "I wish this bloody war will be over soon so you and your sisters can return and we will all be together again like the good old days..."

Weaving comes up again and again in Hatoum's work and is perhaps one of the most central structures of her art, given its multifaceted ability to refer to primary aesthetic tropes such as those central to Minimalism (Krauss refers to the grid as a kind of weave: "through its mesh it creates an image of the woven infrastructure of the canvas",[10] thus relating the grid and the woven to the organisational principles of the painted image and the picture plane), as well as the home-made or domestic, and the physical structures of such existing

things as chicken-wire, the pattern of the typical Arabic 'keffieh' headscarf, a cage or a basket. Child-size looms weave human hair into rough mats (*Recollection*, 1995), strings of spaghetti are woven into tiny baskets (*Vitrine*, 2006) and a spider's web made of string spans between a chair and a wall (*Static*, 2006). Weaving becomes another compulsive activity, a means of passing time or creating form from next to nothing.
Undercurrent (red) (2008) is a large square tapestry woven from bright red cloth-covered electrical cables, whose long ends curl out to form a wide circle on the floor, each tendril of cable ending in a light bulb that glows bright and dim as if breathing with unnerving regularity. A floor-bound creature, it is elegant and precise but unaccountably unsettling, perhaps due to the way its initially tight, contained structure seems to unravel and spread, moving out across the floor like a pool of blood or the arms of a hungry animal.

In Words

While Hatoum's sculptures are essentially body-related, her work also contains a literary element through the use of language, often simply in the titles she chooses. Her handling of words proves to be just as slippery, unreliable and contrary as the solid materials she works with, however. Hatoum's relationship to language implies the humorous distance of the fluently spoken second language, where words and phrases that are taken for granted by native speakers can be seen from a distance to reveal a different, richer or comically literal meaning. The titles she chooses are often plays on words or *double entendres*: *Grater Divide* for a grater-turned-paravent, *Mobile Home* for a collection of moving domestic detritus, or *Nature morte*... for a still life of deadly symbols. The reversals that occur in Hatoum's use of materials, where their intrinsic qualities become unreliable, are found here in language, where understanding depends on reversals, flips and two-sided readings. Occasionally words also find their way into the works themselves, such as in *Sprague Chairs* (2001), where pairs of two chairs, stacked one upside down on top of the other, are held together by words woven in copper wire through their adjoining seats. In bold, almost object-like monosyllables, the words 'DOWN TOOLS' on one pair and 'LAID OFF' on another convey the finality of redundancy. These old, well-used chairs were found, left behind, in a factory building turned art centre.

Round and Round

The circular, looping, inescapable is as recurrent a feature in Hatoum's work as the cage, the weave or the map. The broad circle that *Undercurrent* forms

on the floor is repeated in other floor-based works: a round puddle of half-sunk bottles (*Drowning Sorrows [wine bottles]*, 2004); a ring of wine bottles, neck to end, in a never-ending circuit of drinking (*Vicious Circle*, 1999); the long loop of gloves that hangs from a pulley cog as an endless circle of labour (*Chain*, 1999). As ever with Hatoum's work, it is the chosen material just as much as the form it takes that dictates the meaning of the work (or opens it up to meaning).

The circle articulates the fluid, mobile nature that is essential to Hatoum's work, where nothing is static; everything is on the move. Electrical current, too, is a circular, uninterrupted system, which, as Hatoum uses it, implies a link to life with the humming and breathing of light bulbs. It has the same circularity as our every breath. And perhaps the same futility, as implied in *Self-Erasing Drawing* (1979), where an arm rotates through a bed of sand, one end of it inscribing a pattern in the sand, the other erasing it smooth again.

11
Perec, *op. cit.*, pp. 90–91.

The End

There is no end. In the loop of interweaving references that constitute Hatoum's work, forms appear again and again and slowly draw their own topology of space, time and form. But it is by nature an unstable topology, clouded by memories and unsettled by movement. As Perec so poignantly puts it:

"I would like there to exist places that are stable, unmoving, intangible, untouched and almost untouchable, unchanging, deep-rooted; places that might be points of reference, of departure, of origin:

My birthplace, the cradle of my family, the house where I may have been born, the tree I may have seen grow (that my father may have planted the day I was born), the attic of my childhood filled with intact memories (...)

Such places don't exist, and it's because they don't exist that space becomes a question, ceases to be self-evident, ceases to be incorporated, ceases to be appropriated. Space is a doubt: I have constantly to make it, to designate it. It's never mine, never given to me, I have to conquer it."[11]