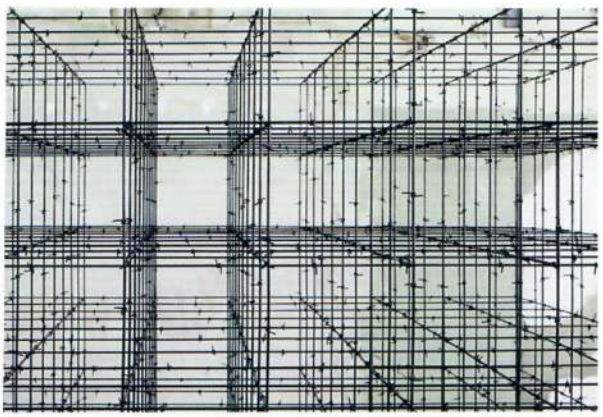
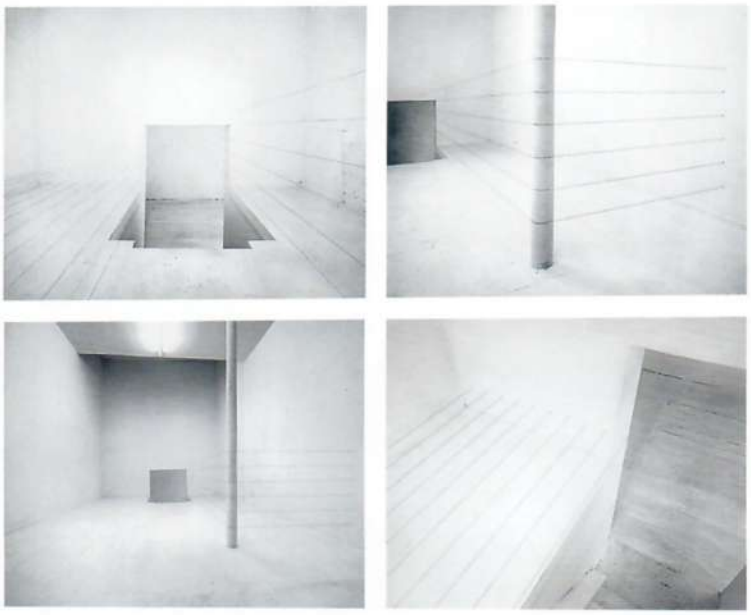
DISBELONGING

Patricia Falguières

Here is one way into the work of Mona Hatoum: a black and white photo of a young woman – a corpulent young beauty bent over her sewing, her right hand raised confidently brandishing the needle (fig. 14). On the wall and under her feet are oriental carpets; above the sofa, in the mirror precariously balanced (for the photo?) on a cushion, a window frame is reflected in the opalescent haze of strong sunlight. To the right, the ray of light passing under a closed door hints, like the mirror, at a further space. The photograph, dated 1948, is of the artist's mother, Claire Eid-Hatoum; it formed part of a portfolio published by the artist to mark her exhibition at the Querini Stampalia foundation in 2009. In my memory, it is superimposed on one of Mona Hatoum's most famous exhibitions, *Recollection*, her intervention at the Beguinage St. Elisabeth of Kortrijk, Belgium, in 1995 (fig. 1). In the broad luminous spaces of the main hall with its timber floor and ceiling and its walls of faded green, under the tall windows with their small panes, the eye, gradually coming to terms with the rays of entering light, makes out a scattering of small, brown, exquisitely woven balls on the floor: the artist's hair, long filaments of which hang from the beams almost imperceptible to the eye, caress the face of the visitor crossing the room. In one corner, on a little schoolgirl desk, lies a miniature loom, where the work in progress is a recently woven square: a tissue of human hair. The vanished lives of the beguines and their devotion to work and meditation (and to lace-making, part and parcel of both) were so powerfully evoked that one felt a very tactile sense of their absence. This might be one path by which to enter the work of Mona Hatoum, the path that leads from the photograph of an absent mother to the Kortrijk beguinage that empty, negative monument to the industrious, lay mysticism of the pious women of times gone by. And as a staging post on that journey, *Measures of Distance*, the video that Hatoum made in 1988 of the letters exchanged between mother and daughter, between Beirut and London, and conversations with her mother recorded in Beirut in 1981 (fig. 2). It is her most famous video work: the three threads of live dialogue, monologue and letters inscribed on



15 *Cube (9 x 9 x 9)*, 2008



16 *Untitled*, 1992, Mario Flecha Gallery, London

the screen interweave to simultaneously reveal and conceal their common fabric – the images of her mother undressed to shower, a block of sensuality at once veiled and shown. This way in, through the mother-daughter relationship, would be quite as legitimate as that other, more frequented route into Hatoum's work, the path of exile and war. Mona Hatoum was born in Beirut of a Palestinian family living in exile and protected by a British passport. During a visit to England in 1975, she became stranded due to the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war and enrolled into an art school in London. That these two paths intersect, *Measures of Distance* is there to tell us. But categorization makes its own priorities; war and exile are the obvious landmarks in Hatoum's work. For Louise Bourgeois, for example, the family scenario, the father-daughter relationship, the evasions of biography;[1] for Mona Hatoum, the overwhelming resonance of the Middle-East wars and exile. A luminous text written by Edward Said for a Hatoum exhibition at the Tate Gallery – 'The Art of Displacement: Mona Hatoum's Logic of Irreconcilables', that extends Said's great writings on exile – has acquired talismanic status for those approaching Hatoum's oeuvre in this perspective.[2] The artist herself confirms the legitimacy of this directly political reading, whose universality she asserts against any excessively localized reference: 'I have now spent half my life living in the West, so when I speak of works like *Light Sentence*, *Quarters* and *Current Disturbance* as making reference to some kind of institutional violence, I am speaking of encountering architectural and institutional structures in Western urban environments...the Western institutional and power structures that I have found myself existing in for the last twenty-odd years.'[3] Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin have taught us to recognize in the exile, the refugees and the stateless, an index of modern societies, making explicit the regime of terror that both commands and sustains the social order. Hatoum took care to point this out from her earliest performances and subsequently in a series of works (*Quarters* and *Current Disturbance* in 1966; *Kapan iki* in 2012) that stage imprisonment and surveillance. This is the explicit aspect of her work, pursued in a sequence of critical interventions fuelled by irony, puns and *witz* (to cite a term dear to the German Romantics): the capacity to condense into a word or oxymoron, through the radiance of an intuitive metaphor, an analysis that might otherwise be laboriously over-complex. In these works, then, Hatoum makes unapologetic use of formats and tropes that she herself describes as 'rhetoric', allegory being one example of this. Thus a carefully articulated installation such as *Interior Landscape* (2008, figs. 5–6) lays itself open to interpretation in much the same fashion as an eighteenth-century sculpted group. One by one, each of its components comes to light: the coat-hooks with a travel bag woven out of a map (in which we find both a reminiscence of Duchamp's *Sculpture for Travelling* from 1918 and the quotidian presence of a string shopping bag), the wire hanger that geopolitics has, in obsessive mode, deformed (into the contours of the pre-1948 Palestine), the cheap bedside table on

which a paper tray bears suspicious stain-marks (the topography of the future Palestine as defined by the Oslo Accords?), the bed with its springs of barbed wire and the long hairs, abandoned like traces of dreams on the pillow (that also draw the contours of Palestine). The allegorical mode persists in *Kapan*: a group of cages made of reinforcing metal bars that both *in*hold and *up*hold, construct and imprison; the uprightness of each cage, combined with the way each leans at a different angle from the vertical, evokes the human figure (pp. 22/23). One is reminded of the *Burghers of Calais* (1884–1889), which Rodin wished to exhibit directly on the ground, without a pedestal, each figured isolated in its own distress yet indissociable from the others. At the lower corner of each cage is a bubble of red glass, something living and breathing that attempts to escape from the restraining grids – yet at the same time also something vaguely obscene, refuse crushed like a pig's bladder beneath the weight of fetters. *Witz* and irony triumph in a piece like *Keffieh* (1993–1999, fig. 8), the emblematic head-covering of a cause, whose fringes are suspiciously extended down to the floor and turn out to be (laboriously) woven from human hair as a re-emergence of the repressed feminine in one of the key accessories of the Palestinian resistance's ultra-virile imagery. Compare, too, *Witness* (2009, fig. 7), a reduction in biscuit porcelain of the monumental group from Martyrs' Square in Beirut, reproduced on the scale of a mantelshelf ornament with the machine-gun bullet marks included. When setting out to oppose the imagery of militant certainties, Hatoum is not afraid to 'raise the stakes': the giant prayer beads in the form of cannon balls in *Worry Beads* (2009, pp. 34/35), *Medal of Dishonour* (2008) and a *Prayer Mat* (1995) studded with pins and equipped with a compass combine the caricaturist's 'barbed traits' with the humour of Jonathan Swift – as in his 'Modest Proposal' or 'Tale of a Tub'.

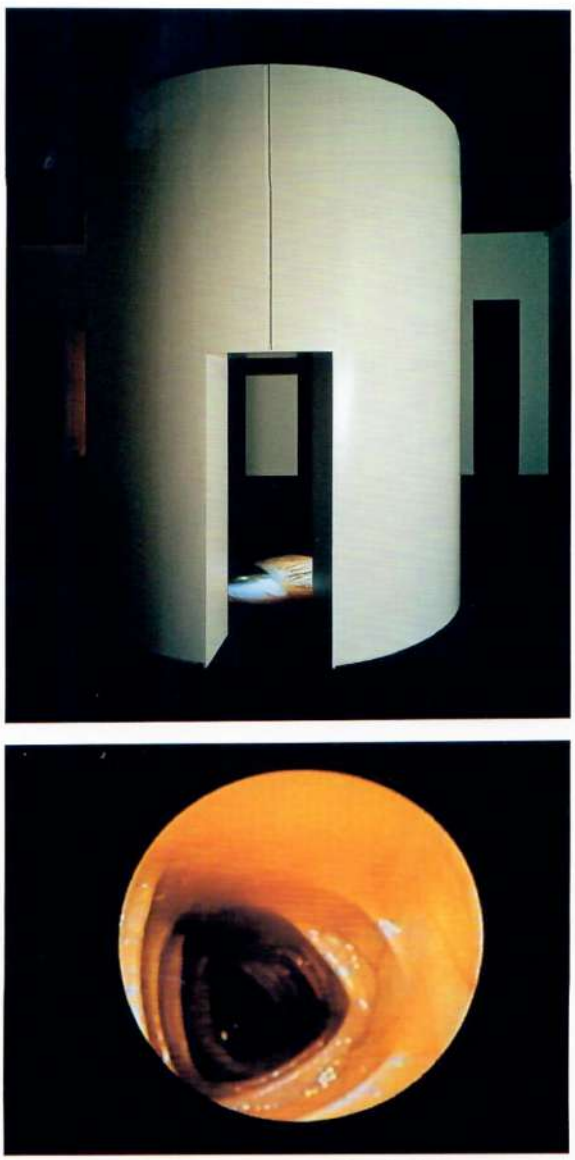
Here even the most explicit elements contribute to unsettle the appearances of affiliation and identity and undermine the logic of belonging. But these ironies can also permit a surprising excursus, entering into a powerful and ambiguous relationship with the history of twentieth-century art. As the movement of disaffiliation, of *disbelonging*, in Hatoum's work intensifies, that relationship grows in strength. *The Light at the End* (1989, fig. 9) marks a turning point. A metal frame placed at the angle of two walls carries six vertical incandescent elements, in which the casual viewer recognizes a reference to the fluorescent tubes of Dan Flavin. Then the heat given off by the 'sculpture' confirms the doubts instilled by the theatrical lighting (an overhead spot) and the red-coated brick walls (as if citing cinematic gore). The incandescence of the verticals is entirely literal; the 'Flavin' is a sort of grill. The seductive sense of recognition, the attraction of the familiar, all this was

17 *La grande broyeuse (Mouli-Julienne x 17)*, 1999

a trap: the spectator cannot help but fantasize a world of suppositious pain. Hatoum's capacities for projection are harnessed in a way that goes far beyond the museological realm toward an 'elsewhere' in which war and terror prevail. Several other pieces by Hatoum exhibit this tactical use of the canons of art history. *Quarters*, for example, borrows the formal vocabulary of Minimalism – and more particularly the intermediacy between furniture and sculpture characteristic of Donald Judd's work – to deliver a powerful symbol of the carceral in the oh-so-polished/policed societies of the West (fig. 4). *Bunker* (2011, pp. 24/25) amplifies this analogy: a 'town' of steel modules scarred by bullets is deployed through the space of the gallery like a combination of Sol Le Witt's structures and Judd's steel blocks, but one that has been irremediably spoiled, sullied, made unusable. Inscribing this 'unusable' on classics of modern art while still calling up their liberating power (the powers of emancipation of modern art) – here lies the singularity of Hatoum's rapport with twentieth century art. In this light, we see that she has few affinities with the artists of her own generation, those generally gathered under the heading 'post-modern'. She has much more to do with a recent generation, which has set itself the goal of critically re-appropriating the 'modern' art and architecture of that moment in the history of the twentieth century when modernism was still (to cite the title of Anatole Kopp's classic book) 'a cause'.[4] But Hatoum effects this re-appropriation without either nostalgia or, for that matter, fascination. In her work, dialogue is one of the possible forms taken by this relationship: a dialogue of equals with her preferred interlocutors. She has more than once talked about the significance on her own development of the exhibition *The Knot: Arte Povera* (1985 at P.S.1, New York) or the work of Eva Hesse or Felix Gonzalez-Torres. In the perverse kitchen utensils of her *No Way* series (1996, fig. 10–11) and the buzzing, electrified kitchen table alive with disquieting impulses of *Home* (1999, fig. 12), we identify a very literal figuration of the *unheimlich* – which we should translate rather as 'the domestically bizarre' than as 'anxiety-inducing strangeness'. We also recognize elements of dialogue with that emblematic feminist critique of the 1970s, Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975). These it both adopts and adapts in an act of displacement: the accessories whose deviant, absurd uses (striking a metal saucepan with a cleaver, stabbing a frying pan with a fork) of Rosler's burlesque are literally reactivated by Hatoum with an electricity that sets them all atremble. In Rosler's video (*Semiotics* is a filmed performance), the artist's body undertook the movements required, but Hatoum delegates this to the objects now seemingly endowed with a life of their own. Hatoum, like Rosler thirty years before, conjugates these ingredients of femininity without 'assuming' them. And one might add to these kitchen instruments the entire panoply of domesticity and maternity, which many of her works explicitly

18 *Homebound*, 2000, Tate Britain, London

reject: see the variations on children's beds in *Incommunicado* (1993), *Marrow* (1996) or *First Step* (1996, fig. 13), where, from the steel mincer-bed to the pattern of icing-sugar left behind by the child's bed on castors, all the moods of maternity can be counted disastrous. *Cube (9 x 9 x 9)* (2008, fig. 15) or *Impenetrable* (2009/2010, pp. 36/37), like the much earlier *Light Sentence* (1992, fig. 3), also belong to this kind of dialogue. The 'drawing in space' aspect of *Impenetrable* (an almost evanescent block of metal stems that hovers just above the floor) has the seductive power characteristic of Jesús Rafael Soto's 'penetrables' from the 1960s. But Soto's optimism, his South American evocation of 1920s avant-garde utopias, is abruptly terminated here: Hatoum's 'penetrable' is studded with barbs. Something has been kept: from a distance one seems to 'recognize' the atmosphere, the vibration, the virtualization of an object that has become a weave, a visual field. But the significance of the form (affording a sensuous welcome to the visitor) has vanished. Hatoum is a true 'modern' in Theodor Adorno's sense: conscious of the irrevocable nature of loss, she exhibits and confronts it; she elaborates the impossibility and puts this absence to work.



19 *Corps étranger*, 1994, Centre Pompidou, Paris

Cube (9 x 9 x 9) of 2008 might seem to be the precursor to *Impenetrable*, which was made the following year: the same material (barbed wire) and the same reference to an emblem of modernism, in this case the cube that was so central to Minimalism. But one might take a different approach and situate it in the lineage of *Light Sentence*. That would give us greater insight into the operations performed by Hatoum on art history. The medium common to the two works – a metal network, in one case fitted with barbs – takes us back to a glorious phenomenological tradition: the perspective grid, the optical invention that inaugurated the combined powers of narrative and representation in Quattrocento Florence. The grid is the condition of sight, the framework of Western narrative. In a rightly celebrated analysis, Rosalind Krauss has demonstrated how the artists of the twentieth century reversed this equation and reduced the grid – soon to become an emblem of modern art – to self-referentiality.[5] Hatoum prefers something else that no longer pertains to Modernist ambitions: *Light Sentence* presents itself as a scaffolding of metal cages 'animated' by the coming and going of the light bulb that projects onto the surrounding walls a grid of light in constant oscillation. Entering the room, the visitor is disorientated by this constant movement which disturbs all spatial coordinates – to the point of nausea. This is an unprecedented use of the grid: instead of framing, of being firmly implanted within the certainties of a determined space or narrative, the spectator is deprived of all orientation. No other 'story' is present beyond that which you experience in entering the room, one of vertigo and malaise. This makes clear what connects *Cube (9 x 9 x 9)* and *Light Sentence:* the perspective grid has now completed the process of objectification to which Hatoum has subjected

it. It has 'shrunk'; it has become a 'box' or 'sculpture' in a space that it can no longer hope to organize or render intelligible. It is reduced to the status of an object, a hostile object bristling with points, the vestige of an aesthetic regime to which we no longer have access.

20 *Map*, 1999, Casino Luxembourg

We know the path into sculpture taken by Hatoum in the early 1990s. An untitled installation realized at Mario Flecha Gallery in London 1992 (fig. 16) gives us some insight into this. It was a drawing of metal wire within the gallery space, which was a stratified space on two levels connected by stairs. Hatoum arranged, vertically and horizontally, two sets of half a dozen metal wires that still further constrained access, confining the visitor to a very narrow path from which there was no escape. The passage thus created was the object of Hatoum's intervention and the gallery's topography lent itself perfectly to this: the object was to make the body of the visitor appear within the framework of the doorway as if cut off at the waist by the floor of the upper level. The spectator makes an appearance as if bodily 'summoned'. Such summonses are present in a number of Hatoum's works from *The Light at the End* to *Light Sentence*. In each case, there is a summoning of the spectator in person, which means endowing that spectator with a body. Twentieth-century sculpture acquired its autonomy by rejecting *the statue* – the upright human figure that belongs to the logic of representation – in its most explicit fashion.[6] Here *the statue* makes an implicit comeback in the form of the spectator but outside the field of representation. It is therefore the body of the spectator that intrudes into the space of *Light Sentence* and, by experiencing the vertigo and disturbing it, becomes an actor in the piece. *The Light at the End* like *Impenetrable* endows the visitor with the imaginary body of suffering that the hostility of the material summons by projection. *La grande broyeuse (Mouli-Julienne x 17)* of 1999 (fig. 17), a variant of Duchamp's 'chocolate grinder' but here liberated from the *Large Glass* in which it was imprisoned, implicitly summons the body of the spectator, which is challenged to define by its presence a scale for the work on view. All of these pieces bring the spectator into a presence whose specific duration the work forces us to experience. 'My work is always constructed with the viewer in mind,' Hatoum told Janine Antoni.[7] This is precisely what Michael Fried, in a famous article published in 1967, stigmatized in the Minimalists: their works were, he said, unable to assert through their internal articulation the effect of presence required in a work of art and depended for this effect on their environment and

relation to the spectator; their presence was strictly *scenic*, and the temporality into which they were inscribed was that of the spectator's confrontation with their presence; in short, they were *theatrical*.[8] It is the implicit theatricality of Minimalist works that Hatoum brings to light and reactivates in explicit fashion. Minimalism is her terrain and her material. From it she has drawn the resources of her art. *Homebound* (fig. 18) at the Tate Gallery in 2000 might serve as her manifesto. In the 'nave' constituted by the Duveen Galleries, a theatre set seems prepared for a bourgeois drama (Ibsen re-envisioned by some German director, Castorf or Ostermeier?). Here are all the accessories of an interior: bed, armchair, sofa, table and chairs, wardrobe, bird cage and kitchen utensils... All of these objects (which appear separately as individual works, elsewhere in Hatoum's oeuvre) are decisively consigned to the status of props. It is therefore a major transgression of the historical conventions of sculpture, 'sculpture' having everything to lose from such ontological 'degradation'. The entire work is closed off by a 'fourth wall' such as was supposed in the eighteenth century to divide the spectator from the scene but is here entirely literal: a double barrier of horizontal metal cables stretches in front of the set and keeps spectators at a distance, thus transforming them into 'the audience'. The only thing offered to the audience's sight (the disqualification of the viewer's body being the subject of the piece) is the electric vibration transmitted to each object on the set by cables and clamps, amplified and broadcast. An automaton-like animation possesses the props. The spectator's body having been deposed and placed out of shot, the object is taken over by a 'bad vibe': Kafka's Odradek, the mysterious, unpredictable and destructive creature that haunts the house, makes its appearance. The work is both an extraordinary commentary on the art that has fuelled Hatoum's own oeuvre and a reopening (in an unprecedented register, impure and presented as such) of the main challenges that can constitute sculpture today.

21 *Present Tense*, 1996, Anadiel Gallery, Jerusalem

And the more the works of Hatoum recover and assume the motives of what Fried stigmatized as 'theatre' (the relation to the spectator, the temporality of 'presentation', and even, in the extreme case represented by *Homebound*, the duration of automatic movement), the more the polarities of subject and object become uncertain. Hatoum takes for granted what the art of the 1960s defined as the 'death of the author'. Where the body of the spectator is actively summoned by the work, the body of the artist has quite literally become her material. Its refuse, humours, fluids and secretions, gathered

22 *Bukhara (maroon)*, 2007

by the artist over successive daily ablutions, have supplied the material for more than one piece, as witness the carbuncles of *Recollection*. The title is to be understood in its two senses: the work of memory and the daily collecting, in this case, of hair. *Corps étranger* (1994, fig. 19) is a kind of manifesto in this regard. The body of the artist is penetrated, visited, opened to the intrusive gaze of a camera that, over the course of a paradoxical endoscopy, scrutinizes its every internal nook and cranny. Unlike Richard Fleischer's film *Fantastic Voyage* (1966), where a team of surgeons progressed through a body of merely cartographic intelligibility, here it is established that in *this* body we can recognize nothing whatsoever. The inside is another outside. It also lies beyond all distinction of sex. Niki de Saint-Phalle's giant *Hon* (1965) offered her spread legs to the visiting public, presenting a clearly identifiable sex; our intrusion into Hatoum's proffered body reminds us that the *self* lies beyond figuration and that nothing is less localized than gender. It is to objects, for example to a garden chair whose rococo seat is supplemented with a triangle of pubic hair, that the signifiers of the sexual must be delegated (*Jardin public*, 1993).

Here then we confront the ultimate self-surrender of the artist, the most radical disaffiliation imaginable. To her regime of militant intention or critical voluntarism, Hatoum has intermittently added, as though in counterpoise, a sort of quietism. This takes the form of pieces that find their place on the floor, not because they belong to the 'low' or 'base' in the sense of Georges Bataille's category, but because they supply the kind of foundation without which there could be no visual field, a kind of 'out of frame' imposed at the periphery of vision. On the floor for another reason, too: because they speak of abandonment, of 'letting be', of oblivion. They are a carpet of marbles (*Map*, 1999, fig. 20), a cartography composed of blocks of soap (*Present Tense*, 1996, fig. 21), an oriental carpet whose bare patches reveal a world map (*Bukhara (maroon)*, 2007, fig. 22) or modest cardboard trays marked with grease stains (*Clouds*, 2009). This was a series opened by the scattering of finely woven balls of hair on the parquet of the Kortrijk beguinage (*Recollection*, 1995). Marbles, soap and cocoons of hair: the materials here lead back to childhood. They *float*, having no fixed dimensions or directions, neither up nor down. Their governing principle seems to be aleatoric – they are *scattered pieces*, dispersions (*Map*, *Clouds*, *Recollection*) or the effect of attrition and wear (*Bukhara*): these are all processes lacking 'authorship'. They may reveal images – for example the map of Palestine as prefigured in the Oslo Accords – but these offer themselves to the gaze as optative, authorless

23 *Clouds*, 2009

images just like a halved apple, a shelled walnut or a slice of coloured marble may reveal images 'made by chance'.[9] Moreover, in the exhibition at the palazzo Querini Stampalia in 2009, Hatoum carefully placed three *Clouds* on the stormy topography of a patterned, black and white marble table (fig. 23). They are furtive 'borderline' images, apparent only to the unsuspecting glance. And they can as quickly be unmade, like the marbles of *Map*, whose contours can be frayed by the spectators' movements, dissolving the map on the floor into a scattering of atoms. Here is the subtlest variant of *disbelonging*: the recovery of self in this detachment. Griselda Pollock has described how the 'abstract' paintings of Agnes Martin, by a complex work of veiling, slippage and spatialization of the picture plane, overflow the modernist lexis of the grid, thus affording the viewer the chance to render 'vision itself a movement in space that escapes the location of the eye and makes the whole body feel as if it is virtually moving through space'.[10] Hatoum's dispersions also undo the normal conditions of vision, not on canvas or paper but in real space. These are vast open planes that the eye scans without any firm contour on which it can fix and compose itself – but in which tiny disturbances constantly solicit it, forcing it to 'dematerialize', to disburden itself of its own body. *Turbulence* (2012, pp. 8/9) brings together and confines this experience within the severely framed format of a square on the ground, which evokes the formats of Minimalism no less than the outlines of a carpet. The impression of a featureless surface over which the eye helplessly wanders is created by a combination of thickness and textural effect. Like a pebble beach, here is the flat depth of a field of marbles of different sizes, which an invisible thread, imprisoning them, forces into imperceptible ribs and ridges. The rêsult is a kind of optical machine presenting infinite work to the eyes of those who stand, motionless, on its edge: regular as they seem, the marbles exhibit sufficient differences (of size, luminosity, transparency and opacity) to create, out of their chance overlaps and captured reflections, motifs, contours and suggestions of form, a thousand and one micro-events that have scarcely arisen before they again subside. It is this evanescence, this denial of any definable scale that the viewer's gaze must confront, losing itself in the unaccommodated turbulence.

1 On the indirections and dead-ends of biography in art criticism, see Mieke Bal, *Louise Bourgeois' Spider. The Architecture of Art-Writing* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001).

2 See *Mona Hatoum: The Entire World as a Foreign Land* (London: Tate Gallery, 2000).

3 'Mona Hatoum/Janine Antoni' Interview in BOMB Magazine 63 (1998), reprinted in *Mona Hatoum* (Amman: Darat al Funun – The Khalid Shoman Foundation, 2008), p. 19.

4 See Anatole Kopp, *Quand le moderne n'était pas un style mais une cause* (Paris: École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 1988). The exhibition *Rehabilitation: The Legacy of the Modern Movement* at Wiels, Brussels 2010, presented a rich variety of attitudes toward that legacy exhibited by artists working after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

5 Rosalind Krauss, 'Grids' (1979), in *The Originality of the Avant-garde and other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 9–22.

6 See Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), ch. 2, 'Modern Figures', pp. 63 ff.

7 See note 3.

8 Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' (1967), in Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). For a critique of this text see Patricia Falguières, 'Aire de jeu: À propos du théâtre et des arts au XXe siècle', in *Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne* 101 (autumn 2007), pp. 48–71.

9 See Jurgis Baltrusaïtis, *Aberrations: Essai sur la légende des formes* (Paris: Flammarion, 1983), ch. 2, 'Pierres imagées'.

10 Griselda Pollock, 'Agnes Martin and Abstractionism by Women' in Catherine de Zegher (ed.), *3 x Abstraction: New Methods of Drawing by Wilma Af Klint, Emma Kunz, Agnes Martin* (New York: The Drawing Center; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 170.