

Impenetrable

From a distance, *Impenetrable* appears to be an ethereal cube levitating in the gallery. When approached, the work reveals a menacing aspect: the cube is composed of hundreds of barbed wire rods dangling from fishing wire. Like many of Mona Hatoum's installations since the early 1990s, *Impenetrable* takes the form of a grid. Yet the austere geometric form, which recalls [Minimalist](#) sculpture, also harbors a psychological charge. The steel latticework appears to be as delicate as it is threatening, and the barbed wire evokes architectural forms—fences, prisons, camps—designed both to confine and repel. Such images are evocative of conflict, violence, and state authority, and Hatoum's work is often discussed in relation to her own experience as a Palestinian exile. Still, the artist herself suggests that the significance of her work extends beyond biographical references: "I find it more exciting when a work reverberates with several meanings and paradoxes and contradictions."¹

The human body remains an axial thread throughout Hatoum's artistic practice, though the late '80s marked a departure from the usage of her own body to the construction of phenomenological situations for the viewer, as in *Impenetrable*. In a turn of dark humor not uncommon in Hatoum's work, the title refers directly to the often brilliantly colored, monochromatic cubes of Venezuelan kinetic artist Jesús Rafael Soto's *Penetrables* (1967–97) that are composed of masses of hanging plastic cords into which spectators are welcome to enter. In contrast to Soto's exuberant blurring of the static and dynamic, the interior and exterior, Hatoum erects an impasse, a cube of space partitioned by wire, which spectators may view but never penetrate.

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1. Mona Hatoum quoted in Michael Archer, *Mona Hatoum* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1997), p. 25.