

**Mona Hatoum**  
*No Way III*, 1996  
Stainless steel, 4 1/4 x 9 3/4 x 11 1/2 inches  
(11 x 25 x 29 cm). Courtesy of the artist

# THE DEVICES OF MONA HATOUM

Anna C. Chave

**When Mona Hatoum made her first visit to Europe**—arriving in London in 1975 for a would-be brief stay that became effectively permanent—she left behind a “visually rich and sensual culture” in storied, cosmopolitan Beirut, one with “a very lively art scene” and “many new and young galleries showing contemporary art,” as she recalls.<sup>1</sup>

London thus came to serve as the aspiring artist’s main gateway to the contemporary Euro-American art scene, broadly deemed by its denizens to be *the* art world. And from the vantage point of those denizens, Hatoum appeared to have come from “nowhere,” as she puts it.<sup>2</sup> Relative to New York (which she would first visit in 1979),<sup>3</sup> London itself had actually long been seen as somewhat marginal to contemporary art practice, but by the time Hatoum arrived there, it could boast of a newsworthy Conceptual art scene, plus a complement of alert curators and institutions organizing significant shows.<sup>4</sup>

1. Hatoum, in “Interview with Chiara Bertola, 2014,” in Michael Archer et al., *Mona Hatoum*, 2nd ed. (London: Phaidon, 2016), 154. It is “typical of the post-colonial condition in the Arab and North African region” that “so many different cultural influences produce a richly complex sense of identity,” Hatoum explains further, 155. Despite the ravages of a protracted civil war, Beirut even now reportedly boasts a lively art scene; see, for instance, “Mounting Resistance: Nasser Rabbat on New Art in Beirut,” *Artforum* 55, no. 7 (March 2017): 216.

A youthful ambition to become a successful artist may border in general on fantasy, even for those white Western males whose numbers continue to swell the ranks of publicly visible artists. But for a Third World female born in 1952, such an ambition was all but preposterous. Hatoum's practical father therefore vetoed his youngest daughter's plan to study studio art, their compromise being that she completed instead a vocational course in commercial art.<sup>5</sup> Once stranded in London by the outbreak of civil war back in Beirut, however, Hatoum managed to work her way through successive studio art programs at the Byam Shaw School followed by the Slade School of Fine Art. That training served further—in the albeit scattershot ways of art school curricula—to acquaint her with the dominant narratives of twentieth-century Western art. Forthright in her acknowledgement of other artists, Hatoum says her initial "point of entry into the art world was through Surrealism,"<sup>6</sup> but that once she discovered the paradigm-shifting Marcel Duchamp, "I never looked back."<sup>7</sup> That occurred about two years into her art school training and, around the same time, she was "completely taken in by Minimal and Conceptual Art."<sup>8</sup> (The Minimalists and 1960s Conceptualists owed the Dadaist Duchamp some debts of their own that they tended not to admit, it bears adding.)<sup>9</sup> As a student in 1977, Hatoum recalls having exhibited, for instance, some mirrored cubes inspired in part by the example of California Minimalist Larry Bell, but with one smoky glass box said to contain *Night Air 8000 c.c.* in a salute to Duchamp's 1919 ampoule of Paris air.<sup>10</sup>

As artists come of age, they tend to be captivated not only by the example of prior artists but also by particular texts. Hatoum names as her own early "bible" Lucy Lippard's 1973 illustrated timeline of Conceptual art, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*. She prized also a monograph on Eva Hesse, whose hands-on 1960s sculpture evinced a defiantly eccentric approach to the Minimalists'



**Marcel Duchamp**  
*Sculpture (50 cc of Paris)*, 1919  
Glass ampulla (broken and later restored), height 5 1/4 inches (13.3 cm).  
Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection

- Hatoum, in "Interview with Janine Antoni, 1998," in Archer et al., *Mona Hatoum*, 143.
- Hatoum, interview with author, July 25, 2016.
- Regarding the unusual degree of institutional openness to Conceptual art in Britain, see Andrew Wilson, Introduction, in Wilson, ed., *Conceptual Art in Britain 1964-1979* (London: Tate Britain, 2016), 10.
- Hatoum, in "Interview with Chiara Bertola, 2014," 152.
- Hatoum, in "Interview with Janine Antoni, 1998," 141.
- Hatoum, in "Unstable Ground: Mona Hatoum Interviewed by Virginia Whiles," *Art Monthly* 396 (May 2016): 5.
- Hatoum, in "Interview with Janine Antoni, 1998," 136.
- In her introduction to her early survey of Conceptual art, Lucy R. Lippard noted that the "question of sources" was "a sore point. Marcel Duchamp was the obvious art-historical source, but in fact most of the artists did not find his work all that interesting." Lucy R. Lippard, "Escape Attempts," in Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (1973; rpt. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), ix. The Minimalist cohort likewise had a complex, often ambivalent or grudging relation to (especially) the precedent represented by Duchamp's readymades.
- Hatoum, interview with author, July 25, 2016. In the same conversation, Hatoum credited Lucas Samaras as a further reference point for this early project.



**Mona Hatoum**  
*Night Air (8000 c.c.)*, 1979  
Glass, lead, wood, and stainless steel, 15 x 11 x 11 inches (38.1 x 27.9 x 27.9 cm)

rigorously hands-off (or removed-looking) practices.<sup>11</sup> Hatoum's hopes that not only some rare exceptions—such as Hesse—but a full complement of women might manage to breach the male-dominated art world got bolstered, in the meantime, by her contacts within the heady feminist community enlivening 1970s London, notably including Conceptual artist Mary Kelly.<sup>12</sup> And like many of her female peers and (1960s and '70s) predecessors, Hatoum did manage to find a relatively unguarded back door onto the art-world stage, so to speak, through the edgy yet comparatively unprestigious (and unremunerative) practice of performance art, which chiefly occupied her during the 1980s. Although she came to be skeptical of the applicability of First World feminist discourses to Third World women's constituencies—with which she continued to feel a deep solidarity—feminist approaches to deconstructing endemic systems of power and control (or patriarchy, in feminist dialect) would have a lingering effect on Hatoum's artistic strategies.<sup>13</sup>

Once she resumed her sculptural practice, Hatoum would go on to produce—by her own hands or those of commissioned artisans or fabricators, in materials ranging from human hair to marbles to mild steel—an exceptionally diverse, lively, and compelling body of work, ranging from intimate to monumental in scale. Often her sculptures have made sly nods to other artists, whether Duchamp or René Magritte, the Arte Povera figures Piero Manzoni or Jannis Kounellis, or Carl Andre or Hesse, among others. Minimalist precedents, for that (last) matter, have somehow factored in much of her work, starting with a hellish homage of sorts to Dan Flavin. Her now iconic 1989 *The Light at the End* featured—at the cul-de-sac of a dark-red-painted exhibition space—a grill-like row of six glowing vertical bars, which turn out to be burning, not with Flavin's signature fluorescent light, but instead with high heat. Returning to Hatoum's distinctive phrasing, that she was "taken in" by Minimalism, to be taken in can mean to find a refuge, including a form

- Ibid. The book in question was likely Lippard's foundational text: Lucy R. Lippard, *Eva Hesse* (New York: New York University Press, 1976).
- In an era when the full-time teaching staffs of European and United States' art schools remained almost exclusively male, Kelly made occasional instructional appearances at the Byam Shaw and the Slade schools, and Hatoum counted herself fortunate for those contacts. Interview with author, July 25, 2016. The importance of feminists in altering a masculinist art-educational milieu in Britain is underscored in Elena Crippa, "Teaching Conceptual Art," in Wilson, ed., *Conceptual Art in Britain*, 115. Further, feminists are credited with having helped politicize Conceptual art practices in Britain, where "political positions [had] rarely surfaced as content"; feminists effectively mounted "a critique of conceptual art from within and using its own terms," notes Wilson in his Introduction, 10–11.
- While at the Slade, Hatoum says that she "got involved with feminist groups and this opened my mind to all sorts of situations of power and control on a global level"; in "Interview with Chiara Bertola, 2014," 157. She has recalled also how, "I became involved in analyzing power structures, first in relation to feminism, and then in wider terms as in the relationship between the Third World and the West." "Interview with Janine Antoni, 1998," 136.





**Mona Hatoum**  
*The Light at the End*, 1989  
Metal frame and six electric heating elements, 65 1/4 x 56 x 2 inches  
(166 x 142 x 5 cm). Installed at The Showroom, London, 1989



**Dan Flavin**  
*untitled (to Barry, Mike, Chuck and Leonard)*, 1972–75  
Yellow and pink fluorescent light, 8 x 8 feet (243.8 x 243.8 cm), installed  
in a corridor 8 x 16 feet

of aesthetic home ground. But to be taken in can also mean to be seduced, deluded, or deceived, as may have happened initially to viewers impelled toward *The Light at the End*, which belies the hopeful platitude (strategically) half iterated by its title.<sup>14</sup>

What was arguably deceptive about Minimalism in general were the artists' claims to a purely nonreferential or autotelic practice when all the while they were using (commonplace) materials, (geometric) forms, and modes of organization (grids, series, and modular repetition) that were deeply embedded in the infrastructure of the industrialized world. In an influential 1984 tract, "The Crisis in Geometry," artist Peter Halley summarized some of the key insights from a 1977 text by Michel Foucault that proved for a time influential studio reading, including for Hatoum:

In *Discipline and Punish* we find deconstructed the great geometric orderings of industrial society. The omnipresent unfolding of geometric structures in cities, factories, and schools, in housing, transportation, and hospitals, is revealed as a novel mechanism by which action and movement (and all behavior) could be channeled, measured, and normalized, and a means by which the unprecedented population of the emerging industrial era could be controlled and its productivity maximized.<sup>15</sup>

Key to Foucault's text are design principles epitomized by the Panopticon, an eighteenth-century model prison plan featuring a central viewing point intended to optimize surveillance efficiency.<sup>16</sup> For her part, Hatoum's status as a displaced person from an unstable region helped amplify her alertness to the prevalence of surveillance apparatuses in an adopted city (London) made reflexively leery by protracted experience with terrorism.<sup>17</sup>

14. That is, of course "the light at the end of the tunnel." Hatoum explains: "Instead of my delivering a message to the audience through my actions as a performer, I decided to set up situations where viewers could experience for themselves feelings of danger, threat, instability, and uncertainty through the physical interaction with the work." H.G. Masters, "Domestic Insecurities," *ArtAsiaPacific* 59 (July/August 2008): 114. With *The Light at the End*, more specifically, Hatoum notes that "when you experience the intense heat projected by the electric heating elements forming the bars of a gate, you can almost feel the physical pain that someone in a situation of imprisonment and torture could feel.... I am...creating a situation which would hopefully trigger those associations in the spectator's mind." "Interview with Claudia Spinelli, 1996," Archer et al., *Mona Hatoum*, 128. When it was initially shown—in a small venue with a small audience—there were no warning signs or barriers; subsequently Hatoum has had to put a fence up to keep visitors at bay. Interview with author, July 25, 2016.

15. Peter Halley, "The Crisis in Geometry," *Arts* 58, no. 10 (June 1984), www.peterhalley.com. Accessed March 30, 2017. *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977) was originally published in France by Gallimard in 1975 as *Surveiller et punir*.

16. The Panopticon was the conceit of philosopher Jeremy Bentham.

17. The terrorist activity in question was perpetrated mainly by the IRA (Irish Republican Army). Regarding Hatoum's awareness





**Mona Hatoum**  
*Quarters*, 1996  
Mild steel, 108 1/2 × 203 1/2 × 203 1/2 inches (275.5 × 517 × 517 cm).  
Installed at the Menil Collection, Houston, 2017. Dallas Museum of Art,  
Gift of the Friends of Contemporary Art



**Robert Morris**  
*Hearing*, 1972  
Zinc table, copper chair, lead bed, speakers, wood platform, water,  
batteries, and 3 1/2 hour recorded tape, 54 × 144 × 144 inches  
(137 × 366 × 366 cm)

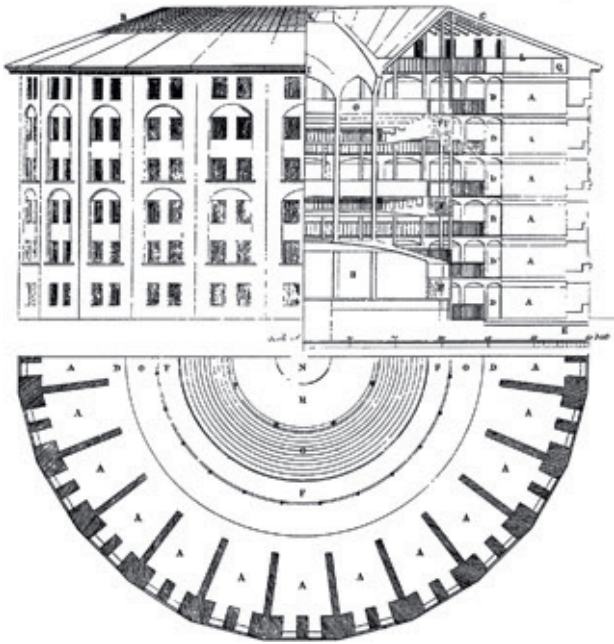


Diagram of the Panopticon from *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*  
(1843)

In a version of her 1996 *Quarters*, Hatoum effectively staged a panopticon by organizing four steel bunk-bed-like structures—each representing a quarter of the quarters—as spokes radiating symmetrically from a central hub. By its use of fabricated steel grids and of modularity and repetition, *Quarters* conspicuously deploys Minimalist visual syntax and tactics. But in using that syntax to compose not would-be abstract sculpture, but offbeat furnishings instead, Hatoum summons less the argot of canonical Minimalism than of some of its offshoots. One might think, for instance, of Robert Morris’s sinister 1972 *Hearing*, with its electrically connected, Minimalist-looking lead bed and zinc table, and its copper chair containing water heated almost to boiling. One might remember also Dan Graham, an outlying figure in the Minimalist ambit, whose blunt 1966–67 *Homes for America* spelled out some real-life implications of the grid by invoking, in a deadpan illustrated essay, the banality of mass-market housing.<sup>18</sup> For that matter, in the United Kingdom a comparable exercise, Stephen Willats’s 1978 *Living with Practical Realities*, illuminated the dysfunction, for an actual elderly resident, of a putatively practical public housing complex rigidly organized on a grid.<sup>19</sup>

Hatoum was herself in time affected by the spectacle of desolate low-income housing complexes found on the margins of some major European cities, often sheltering—or isolating—immigrant populations.<sup>20</sup> And she has underlined the relation of works such as *Quarters* or the loosely comparable 1992 *Light Sentence*—an enclosure of sorts made up of stacked wire-mesh lockers lit by one bare, disturbingly mobile light bulb—to “institutional structures” and “institutional violence...in Western urban environments.”<sup>21</sup> But with its readily surveyed cluster of twenty stacked bed frames, *Quarters* evokes not individually housed families or citizens (as in Graham’s or Willats’s projects), but clustered or massed detainees. And if institutional accommodations reflexively conjure barracks-like or baldly functional, space-efficient

of surveillance devices, see, for example, Michela Arfiero, “Measure the Distances: A Conversation with Mona Hatoum,” *Sculpture* 25, no. 9 (November 2006): 32; and “Interview with Chiara Bertola, 2014,” 157.

18. *Homes for America* was illustrated in Lippard, *Six Years*, 20.

19. This work is illustrated and more fully described in Wilson, ed., *Conceptual Art in Britain*, 104–05. After visiting the show for which that catalogue was produced, Hatoum remarked, “It was very nice to see all these works that I was very familiar with and [that] were part of the artistic landscape I ‘grew up’ in.” Email to author, July 31, 2016.

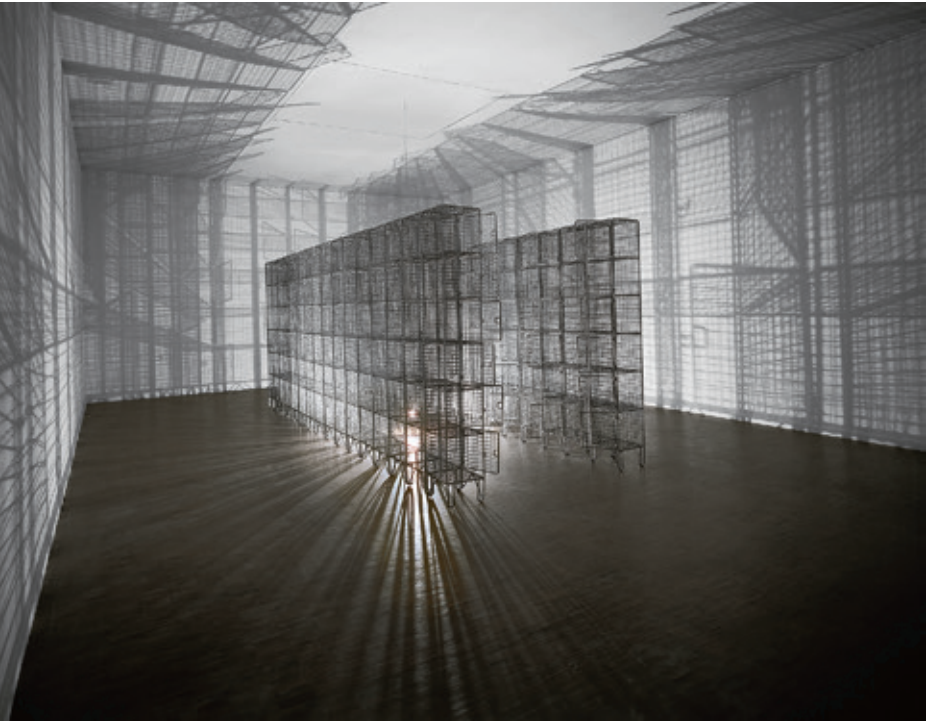
20. *Light Sentence* has been said to reflect in part Hatoum’s awareness of such complexes by Volker Adolphs, “The Body and the World,” in *Mona Hatoum*, Hamburger Kunsthalle (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004), 54.

21. Hatoum, in “Interview with Janine Antoni, 1998,” 136.



fixtures, in Hatoum’s Kafkaesque vision such trappings of functionality have instead been nightmarishly amplified to a point of utter dysfunction. The weirdly elongated metal bunks offer scant headroom and the upper tiers appear practically inaccessible: “Have a bed! (You can’t have a bed!) Sleep! (Don’t sleep!)” seems to be the furnishings’ cruelly twisted message.<sup>22</sup> Such a message may summon visions of detention facilities, whether for convicts or for immigrants and refugees, whether within or without European borders. Immigrants were a matter of urgent public concern in the 1980s United Kingdom of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and so too were they in Lebanon, where Hatoum was born and raised in a displaced Palestinian family. (Though her father had been comparatively fortunate in obtaining British employment and British citizenship papers, the grim reality for most uprooted Palestinians was instead perennial statelessness and refugee camps.)

Among its winning qualities, the art of Mona Hatoum tends to evince a finely tuned sensitivity to the properties of materials. And the artist recalls that she responded particularly to “the emphasis on the material reality of the work” of the Minimalists, as well as to its “economy of form.”<sup>23</sup> What she seems, moreover, to have been especially taken by, if not taken in by, in Minimalism were its claims for the transformative possibilities implicit in the viewer’s would-be immediate experience of the stark Minimalist object. Building in a way from the bodily focus of her performance practice, Hatoum says that she aspired in works such as *Quarters* “to implicate the viewer in a phenomenological situation in which the experience is more physical and direct,” such that viewers could end up “psychologically entrapped”—or, in other words, taken in.<sup>24</sup> (Incidentally, it follows that Hatoum dislikes the distancing barriers normally interposed between her works and the public in institutional settings, as I learned while accompanying her through her 2016 survey exhibition



**Mona Hatoum**  
*Light Sentence*, 1992  
Galvanized-wire mesh lockers, electric motor, and light bulb, 78 × 72 3/4 × 193 inches (198 × 185 × 490 cm). Installed at Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1994



**Bruce Nauman**  
*Double Steel Cage*, 1974  
Steel, 179 7/8 × 72 3/4 × 129 7/8 inches (457 × 185 × 330 cm). Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Purchase: 1980

22. According to one source, the “component parts” of *Quarters* are made to scale, based on a photograph taken by the artist of a dilapidated cell in a Philadelphia prison.” Ursula Panhans-Bühler, “Being Involved,” in *Mona Hatoum* (2004), 20.  
23. Hatoum, in *Masters*, “Domestic Insecurities,” 114.  
24. Hatoum, in “Interview with Janine Antoni, 1998,” 141, 143.



**Jackie Winsor**  
*Burnt Piece*, 1977–78  
Cement, burnt wood, and wire mesh, 33 7/8 × 34 × 34 inches (86 × 86.4 × 86.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Agnes Gund

at London’s Tate Modern.) Critic Michael Fried famously deduced of Minimalist sculpture early on that it was “theatrical” at its core;<sup>25</sup> and some of the first Minimalist objects—as by Simone Forti or Robert Morris—were actually props for experimental dance performances. Violating the imperative not to touch that is implicitly attached to all artwork, some Minimalist sculptures, such as the metal floor “plains” of Andre, were instead meant for physical interaction with viewers, who thereby got cast more as participants than as removed spectators. Extrapolating Minimalist strategies into the realm of furniture—as Morris, Judd, Richard Artschwager, Scott Burton, and others had variously done—would effectively allow Hatoum to enunciate a relation between the viewer’s body and the work. Furnishings are “objects that we encounter in our everyday life so we already have an established relationship with them,” she points out; it follows that “they can refer to the body even when it is absent.”<sup>26</sup> Since the 1990s, Hatoum has repeatedly incorporated fabricated or found beds and other furnishings in her work.

Ordinarily, furniture gives ease and rest to, or otherwise accommodates, the human body. When presented in ways that render them “strange,” however, furnishings may reveal instead “an undercurrent of hostility, danger and threat,” underlines Hatoum.<sup>27</sup> That threat can inhere in Minimalist objects had at times been made more or less explicit, as in Morris’s treacherous *Hearing*; or in Richard Serra’s scaling up of the Minimalist enterprise, including in ways that pose physical risks to the viewer; or in certain works by Bruce Nauman, such as his 1974 *Double Steel Cage*, which confines a viewer in the narrow outskirts of one cage while denying access to a second, enclosed cage. If, as I have argued elsewhere, Minimalism’s aggressiveness may fairly be said to have some masculinist valences,<sup>28</sup> then Hatoum may be counted among an ensuing generation of women who were drawn to remake that enterprise, including in ways that would variously turn tables. Jackie Winsor, for

25. Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” *Artforum* (June 1967); rpt. in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 116–47.  
26. Hatoum, in *Masters*, “Domestic Insecurities,” 117.  
27. Ibid. Also, “a sense of threat...is something that is present in a lot of my work,” observed Hatoum. “Interview with Claudia Spinelli, 1996,” 131.  
28. See, especially, Anna C. Chave, “Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power,” *Arts* 64, no. 5 (January 1990): 44–63.



instance, burnt and then dynamited cubes—an archetypal Minimalist form—in works of 1978 and of 1980–82, respectively. In *Gnaw* of 1992 Janine Antoni chewed for over a month on two 600-pound cubes—one made of chocolate, the other of lard—and then made artifacts such as lipsticks out of the foodstuff she spat out. And, in *Mass (Colder Darker Matter)* of 1997, Cornelia Parker approximated the shape of a cube with a fragile grid of threads dangling charred remnants of a church struck by lightning.

How the threat of any given artwork resonates is bound to hinge not only on its material specifics but also on what is known of the artist’s subject position—whether from an empowered or a disempowered demographic: a demographic historically versed in making and making good on threats, or one more apt to be on the receiving end. There is as well the X factor of the ways or degrees to which threat may inhere in spectators’ lives. Whereas a threat from a white Western male will tend to resonate differently from one by, say, a Palestinian woman, just how it does so can be calculated only by each of us in our turn. What Hatoum herself says she hopes to prompt from viewers is some “self-examination” relative to “the power structures that control us: Am I the jailed or the jailer? The oppressed or the oppressor? Or both? I want the work to complicate these positions and offer an ambiguity and ambivalence rather than concrete and sure answers.”<sup>29</sup>

Besides harsh furnishings, another favored theme of Hatoum’s has been kitchen devices, especially implements for cutting or draining—functions in themselves metaphorically loaded. In the case of the 2008 *Dormiente* (Italian for “dormant” or “sleeping”), we find both themes at play at once: a cot-like bed consisting of a kitchen grater remade to outsize proportions—manipulation of scale being another of Hatoum’s preferred devices for engaging, by disrupting, the viewer’s bodily compass. Inasmuch as *Dormiente* proffers as an



**Man Ray**  
*Gift (Cadeau)*, 1963 (original 1921)  
Flatiron and 14 iron tacks, 6 1/4 × 3 1/2 × 3 1/2 inches (15.8 × 9 × 9 cm).  
The Art Institute of Chicago, Through prior gift of Mrs. Gilbert W. Chapman



**Mona Hatoum**  
*Untitled (wheelchair II)*, 1999  
Stainless steel and rubber  
37 1/2 × 19 × 25 inches (94.5 × 48.5 × 63.5 cm)

artwork something closely resembling a commonplace object, it may be counted a loosely Duchampian exercise. But Hatoum’s initial aesthetic foray into the kitchen involved instead actual commonplace objects—such as Duchamp conscripted for the very first readymades—objects that she would alter and so rendered (in Duchamp’s vocabulary) “assisted” readymades. More specifically, to produce her compelling *No Way* works of 1996, Hatoum laboriously blocked with nuts and bolts all the many holes of a kitchen skimmer and a colander. The results tacitly acknowledge a debt to such mischievous Dada and Surrealist icons as Man Ray’s household iron botched by a row of metal tacks (the 1921 *Gift*) or Meret Oppenheim’s 1936 fur-covered teacup.

The impulse to revisit the readymade paradigm is one that Hatoum has long shared with a veritable generation of (what might be termed) neo-Duchampians.<sup>30</sup> For that matter, she felt some artistic kinship with Felix Gonzalez-Torres, for one, who made some subtly poignant works out of commonplace lightbulbs strung together during the 1990s; and she was impressed, too, by the early work of Jeff Koons, such as his mid-1980s basketballs suspended afloat in aquariums.<sup>31</sup> The *No Way* sculptures by Hatoum may conjure equally, however, certain feminist art initiatives including especially Martha Rosler’s pioneering 1975 *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. In that performance cum video—shown around 1980–81 to a London audience that included an impressed Hatoum<sup>32</sup>—Rosler tersely identifies and crossly demonstrates an array of kitchen devices. As unsettling as those devices tend to look in her hands, they are not nearly so disconcerting as the thwarted skimmer and colander of *No Way*, which are widely described as evoking a medieval mace and a land mine respectively.<sup>33</sup> To many feminists of bourgeois backgrounds from Rosler’s and Hatoum’s era, the home kitchen threatened to waylay women and keep them from any prospect of a fulfilling professional life by trapping them as housewives. If only in

29. Hatoum, in “Interview with Janine Antoni, 1998,” 141.

30. “[T]he idea that the readymade is the central aesthetic principle of the post-war era seems both inarguable and hackneyed,” asserts David Hopkins, *Dada’s Boys: Masculinity After Duchamp* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 109.  
31. On Hatoum’s admiration for Gonzalez-Torres, see, for instance, “Interview with Janine Antoni, 1998,” 141. Her interest in Koons’s early work emerged in her interview with author, July 25, 2016.  
32. Hatoum, in *ibid*.  
33. Hatoum herself made the land mine comparison in “Interview with Jo Glencross, 1999,” Archer et al., *Mona Hatoum*, 147. Hatoum’s intrigue with weaponry not typically deployed by women became the more explicit in *Nature morte aux grenades*, 2006–07. There, however, the facsimiles of the eponymous weapons are disarmingly, decoratively crafted out of colorful glass, like so many nightmarish Christmas ornaments, and incongruously arrayed atop a wheeled metal table or gurney suitable either to an institutional kitchen or a morgue.

fantasy, the kitchen tools’ hazardous, even lethal potential might help quell incipient female desperation; and “No way!” might be a reflexive response to the abiding pressure to don an apron. The range of cultural constraints on the one hand, and of professional possibilities on the other, that faced First World women such as Rosler, however, were generally of quite another order than those confronting, say, Arab women. For her own part, Hatoum recalls having refused blandishments to learn “the art of cooking as part of the process of being primed for marriage”; and, for that matter, “spending any time in the kitchen is something I resisted.”<sup>34</sup>

Hatoum’s preferred way of undertaking exhibitions is generally to do some type of artist’s residency at a given location before mounting a show there (including in Houston in advance of the Menil exhibition). Given that she shows far more internationally than most of her peers—in Europe and the Middle East and, to a lesser extent, the Americas—that preference tends to have afforded her quite an itinerant life. The first iteration of *No Way* resulted in fact from Hatoum’s inaugural trip to Palestinian territory, which occurred as she was preparing a show for an East Jerusalem gallery in 1996.<sup>35</sup> In those surroundings she was reportedly struck by the prevalence of roadblocks superintended by military police, who ensured there was “no way” through many areas, especially for Arabs.<sup>36</sup> Plainly, the specter of a kitchen tool as a weapon or explosive device accrues more complex valences in this light, as the work of an artist from a war-torn region—indeed, one whose parents had been forced to abandon their former home (in Haifa) and all its contents during The Nakba, or Catastrophe, as Palestinians call the devastating 1948 conflict that Israelis term their War of Liberation or Independence. One colander iteration of *No Way* got made, however, in a deeply pacific place, during an artist’s residency in Maine at the Shaker sect’s last surviving active community. Hatoum has recalled experiencing there “a wonderful feeling of being settled,”



**Mona Hatoum**  
*Dormiente*, 2008  
Mild steel, 10 3/4 x 90 1/2 x 39 1/4 inches (27 x 230 x 100 cm).  
Courtesy of the artist and Alexander and Bonin, New York

34. Hatoum, in “Interview with Jo Glencross, 1999,” 147. (Eventually, Hatoum would take the wise feminist tack of marrying a man who likes to cook. Interview with author, July 25, 2016.)
35. Self-identified as Palestinian (though born in Beirut, she was never granted Lebanese citizenship), Hatoum has been back twice to Palestinian territory, including in 2008 to do some teaching at the Art Academy in Ramallah. Email to author, April 12, 2017.
36. Laura Steward Heon, “Grist for the Mill,” in Heon, ed., *Mona Hatoum: Domestic Disturbance* (North Adams, MA: Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001), 17. Recalls Hatoum, “The saddest thing in Jerusalem was the policy of ‘closure’ that restricted movement for the Arabs. I gave a piece the title *No Way* as a response to that.” “Michael Archer in Conversation with Mona Hatoum,” (1997), Archer et al., *Mona Hatoum*, 29.



**Claes Oldenburg**  
*Soft Dormeyer Mixer*, 1965  
Vinyl, wood, aluminum tubing, electrical cord, and rubber, 31 3/8 x 20 1/8 x 12 inches (79.7 x 51.1 x 30.5 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Purchase, with funds from the Howard and Jean Lipman Foundation, Inc.

which reminded her just how “nomadic and undomesticated my own existence is,”<sup>37</sup> and thereby “activated all sorts of forgotten needs.”<sup>38</sup>

Even more for the displaced, home can present an elusive ideal, while it may equally spell a sort of trap. Confusing matters, too, the home kitchen typically conjures vital familial nourishment and pleasures even as it remains an endemically risky site, harboring (for instance) graters, slicers, and grinders—the cutting devices that have particularly engaged Hatoum. Given that female identity has historically been more bound up with the home and its kitchen, such paradoxes may prove more charged for women. That an outsized kitchen device produced by, for instance, Claes Oldenburg tends to get framed in far more playful terms than such a device by Hatoum—notwithstanding that her work can also have its playful aspects—may not be attributed only to their disparate visual vocabularies; the fact that a life consigned to the home and its kitchen could never have been in the offing for Oldenburg remains material, too. In her 1999 *La grande broyeuse (Mouli-Julienne x 17)*, Hatoum would scale up an object filched from her own childhood kitchen—a countertop food grinder shaped incongruously like a fanciful creature—into a monument and so “turn the domestic into something menacing and all engulfing,” as she once described it.<sup>39</sup> In the *mise-en-scène* of her 2000 *Homebound*, however, the artist instead subjected actual kitchen equipment, caged behind wires and eerily lit from within, to something visibly and audibly resembling electrocution: a literally charged home environment gets aggressively kept away from the viewer—or are we viewers being kept instead from it?

Hatoum’s 1996 residency in Jerusalem proved generative not only for her initial artistic use of kitchen implements but also of a map—a different sort of device that she would likewise go on to explore successfully for decades to come.

37. “Interview with Jo Glencross, 1999,” 147. Also: the “family-like atmosphere” among the Shakers “was something I was missing in my own family.... Because I have been traveling and am barely rooted anywhere, that feeling of settledness that they have and that I had while living with them was a very strong emotional experience. I was in tears the day I had to leave.” Janet A. Kaplan, et al., “The Quiet in the Land: Everyday Life, Contemporary Art, and the Shakers: A Conversation with Janet A. Kaplan,” *Art Journal* 57, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 13.
38. Hatoum, in “Interview with Janine Antoni, 1998,” 144.
39. Hatoum, in “Interview with Jo Glencross, 1999,” 148.



Her first sculptural map was of the dispersed or scattered territories that Palestinians were pushed to accept through the Oslo Accords, signed as a would-be interim measure by Yasser Arafat in 1993.<sup>40</sup> To make *Present Tense*, Hatoum used tiny red glass beads to delineate that bizarre map onto the surface of thousands of bars of Nablus soap (a Palestinian product fabricated from olive oil and familiar to the artist from her childhood) laid out on the gallery floor. By the time Hatoum began deploying them, maps had already factored in myriad ways in Conceptual art practice. Thus, for instance, British artist Richard Long had variously enacted and explored the trope of the journey, incorporating maps in some of his ensuing installations; his 1969 *A Sculpture*, for one, featured a map of an area of Wiltshire with concentric squares drawn on it and a typed inset stating the amount of time it had taken him to walk each square.<sup>41</sup> Where maps are concerned, the matter of who, historically, has been empowered to draw and redraw global borders and who has had to suffer the consequences, as well as who gets to travel most freely over borders and whose movements get restricted, becomes all the more charged when the artist crafting the map is one whose parents' home got sacrificed to imperialist exercises in the redrawing of borderlines—masterminded, for that matter, largely by the British. By making many of her maps from intrinsically transitory or unstable materials, such as soap or—in her *Map* works of 1998–99 and 2015 *Map (clear)*—marbles likewise spread over a floor, Hatoum deftly, poetically evinces the historical mutability of mapping. And in *Projection* of 2006 and *Projection (velvet)* of 2013 she has deployed a particular world map format (the so-called Gall-Peters Projection) calculated to be more scrupulous in rendering the continents' relative sizes than the maps more commonly circulated, and on which the (historically wealthier) northern continents no longer appear so outsized in comparison to southern ones.<sup>42</sup>

40. In Hatoum's description: "It was the map showing the territorial divisions arrived at under the Oslo Agreement, and it represented the first phase of returning land to the Palestinian authorities. But really it was a map about dividing and controlling the area." "Michael Archer in Conversation with Mona Hatoum," 25.  
41. Reproduced in Lippard, *Six Years*, 118.  
42. Regarding this map, first issued in 1973, and *Projection*, see Christine Van Assche and Clarrie Wallis, eds., *Mona Hatoum* (London: Tate Publishing, 2016), 106. "It was not a foregone conclusion that a pro-Third World map, as it was then described, would be adopted, at a time when global mapping was considered by many...as a prerogative of the West." Ibid. Hatoum says that she initially chose the map "for formal reasons but then I understood the significance of it being more egalitarian." "Unstable Ground: Mona Hatoum Interviewed by Virginia Whiles," 4.



**Mona Hatoum**  
*Map*, 1999  
Glass marbles, each 1.4 × 1.4 × 1.4 cm (0.5 × 0.5 × 0.5 in.), overall dimensions variable. Installed at Casino Luxembourg, 2007



In view of her family’s history, Hatoum’s penchant for mapping in subtly loaded ways has at times been used by critics to help frame her as a sort of figurehead for the ever more conspicuous cause of the world’s forcibly displaced. To be, or to have been, a Middle Eastern immigrant is, after all, to occupy a charged cultural space. For her part, Hatoum has mostly discouraged approaches to her work that would pivot narrowly around her life story or that would tend to exoticize her despite her longtime residency in Europe. For that matter, female artists have long been more subject than their male peers to biographically framed accounts, which may tend to restrict unduly the dimensions of their contributions.<sup>43</sup> Even as she has steered art writers away from her biography, however, Hatoum has intermittently proceeded to inscribe it in compelling ways in her art. Her 2008 *Interior Landscape* (an installation made for Darat al Funun in Amman, Jordan, that addresses the Palestinian diaspora), as an example, includes (among other charged elements) a fragile map of Palestine’s historical outlines delineated with her own hair on a pillow. And in a collaborative work of 2012–13, *Twelve Windows*, she incorporated a dozen traditional textiles skillfully embroidered by displaced Palestinian women. Even as the implications of Hatoum’s oeuvre continually and reliably exceed the reach of her life story, then, that story has remained inextricable from her practice. And, in describing here some of the complex poetic resonances attaching to Hatoum’s devices, I have been in part narrating how she has all along managed to recast as a resounding benefit the glaring deficit initially (seemingly) attaching to her subject position.<sup>44</sup>

Furnishings, kitchen equipment, maps: all may be counted as devices of a sort. Behind the repertoire of objects that Mona Hatoum invokes or deploys in her work, however, lie her strategic devices. She has continually revisited a range of avant-garde strategies in ways that have made her utterly recognizable as a figure of her postmodern or



**Mona Hatoum**  
*Interior Landscape*, 2008  
Steel bed, pillow, human hair, table, cardboard tray, cut-up map, metal rack, and wire hanger, dimensions variable. Installed at Darat al Funun, Amman, 2008

43. On this issue, see, for instance, Anna C. Chave, “Minimalism and Biography,” *The Art Bulletin* 82, no. 1 (March 2000): 149–63.  
44. In 1987, while she was working principally as a performance artist, Hatoum observed: “in general my work is about my experience of living in the West as a person from the Third World, about being an outsider, about occupying a marginal position, being excluded, being defined as ‘Other’ or as one of ‘Them.’ I work with black groups in London on shared issues of colonialism, imperialism, racism and the stereotyping of people from other cultures.” “Interview with Sara Diamond, 1987,” Archer et al., *Mona Hatoum*, 122.



**Mona Hatoum**  
*Interior Landscape*, 2008 (detail)

neo-avant-garde generation (as it tends to be labeled). Yet Hatoum has also consistently remained something of a figure apart. As a female artist raised far beyond the pale of the Euro-American art scene, she was seemingly doomed at the outset to become at best a marginal figure. That she became instead among the most respected artists of her time is surely due in part to her command of some dominant idioms of contemporary Euro-American art practice. For that matter, such mastery is generally demanded of outsiders within a realm that has, since the late twentieth century, however belatedly, been expanding its geographic purview. Hatoum has all along uttered avant-garde idioms with a sort of foreign accent, however—as variously emerges in all the instances described here—in which she effectively adapted, complicated, and amplified neo-avant-garde strategies with the benefit of insights accrued through her complexly global or transnational subject position.

For all the refugee’s struggles and misery, it turns out that there may also be advantages to and even “pleasures of exile,” as Edward Said once affirmed; “Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience,” he added.<sup>45</sup> Hatoum has likewise acknowledged that, “working within different cultures...makes you realize how relative everything is. Other realities and other systems of belief force you to remain open and fluid and it makes me feel expansive rather than restricted.”<sup>46</sup> Rather than ever having appeared marginal or provincial, Hatoum’s art has often effectively pointed up instead a degree of provinciality that may inhere in the work of her Euro-American forerunners and peers. All the while she has been coming to prominence, Hatoum has been steadily helping to remake the West’s contemporary art scene as more truly the art *world* it had for so long, so unconvincingly, pretended to be.

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45. Edward W. Said, “Reflections on Exile, 1984 (extract),” in Archer et al., *Mona Hatoum*, 110. Exiles enjoy “plurality of vision...an awareness of simultaneous dimensions” that is “*contrapuntal*,” further suggested Said. Ibid. (Emphasis in original.)  
46. Hatoum, in “Unstable Ground: Mona Hatoum Interviewed by Virginia Whiles,” 3. A “range of contemporary critical theories suggest that it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history—subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement—that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking. There is even a growing conviction that the affective experience of social marginality—as it emerges in non-canonical cultural forms—transforms our critical strategies. It forces us to confront the concept of culture outside *objets d’art* or beyond the canonization of the ‘idea’ of aesthetics, to engage with culture as an uneven, incomplete production of meaning and value, often composed of incommensurable demands and practices, produced in the act of social survival,” noted Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 246–47.



# MONA HATOUM

# TERRA INFIRMA

MICHELLE WHITE

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY  
ANNA C. CHAVE  
ADANIA SHIBLI  
REBECCA SOLNIT

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