EXAMINING EMBODIMENT

IN THE WORK OF MONA HATOUM

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[G]o back to the body, which is where all the splits in Western Culture occur.

--Carolee Schneemann

Most art scholars and critics examine the work of Mona Hatoum in relation to her ethnic and geopolitically charged background. In her own writings and interviews, however, Hatoum cautions against this "journalistic" approach. For her, the most important element of her art is its relationship to the body. When Hatoum emigrated from the Middle East to England, she immediately felt a sense of displacement when she perceived a mind/body disjunct that contradicted her own cultural experience:

> …it became immediately apparent to me that people were quite divorced from their bodies and very caught up in their heads, like disembodied intellectuals. So I was always very insistent on the physical in my work (Hatoum/Brett, 59). We relate to the world through our senses. You first experience an artwork physically…Meanings, connotations and associations come after the initial physical imagination, intellect, psyche are fired off by what you've seen (Hatoum/Archer, 8).

I weigh this statement against theory by performance scholar Nelly Richard:

> The body is the physical agent of the structures of everyday experience. It is the transmitter of cultural messages…a repository of memories, an actor in the theatre of power, a tissue of affects and feelings. Because the body is at the boundary between biology and society…in terms of power, biography and history, it is the site 'par excellence' for transgressing the constraints of meaning (Richard, 208).

Focusing on four works by Hatoum, I take a position that respects the artist's own intent and uses the body as a starting point for analyzing her work. However, I argue that it *is* necessary to consider her background in relation to the content of her art; it is *because of* her background as an exile from political violence that so much of Hatoum's work evokes a sense of danger by eliciting a visceral response from the viewer. I also argue that Hatoum's work insists that the viewer recognizes a second body, the implicit body of the oppressed. That insistence comes primarily from two elements of her background: her direct

experience of living in the shadow of oppression, and her experience with feminist groups as an art student in London. Thus, in Hatoum's work, two bodies—the body of the viewer and an implicit body--engage in a dialectic.

Necessarily then, I offer a brief glimpse into the background of Mona Hatoum. She is a Palestinian whose parents were exiled to Lebanon before she was born. Then Hatoum herself was exiled to England when the 1975 war broke out between Israel and Lebanon. To label her as a Palestinian artist, though, or any kind of identity artist, greatly detracts from the complexity of her work and the universal issues addressed therein.

Hatoum's Western avant-garde art education influenced both the form and the content of her art just as much as her Middle Eastern experience. It is obvious from looking at her work that she found inspiration in post-World War II sculptors, Surrealism, Minimalism and Postminimalism, Arte Povera, Post-Conceptual video, film and performance. What takes more careful study is how her political involvement at Slade School of Art shaped her thought. Particularly through her affiliation with feminist groups, Hatoum began to look at the roots of power structures. In opposition to the conservative tone of the Thatcher era[1], she found her voice and focused her intent using the deconstructive tools of feminism to examine class issues, imperialism, and racism. She came to identify with groups who have been subjugated by sociopolitical power, and she speaks of the misuse of power through her work.

[1] The 1980s in Britain marked an era of nationalism and conservativism. Though the Prime Minister was a woman, she was hardly progressive in her views on women's issues. She promoted domesticity as the ideal for women and supported traditional sexual/racial roles.

Hatoum employs many media, often in combination, to convey her ideas. Given her focus on the body, physicality, and embodiment, it is no surprise that most of her early work was performative. Performance was the ideal means of communicating for Hatoum at this time. Performance art theorist Amelia Jones reads body art as:

> …dissolving the metaphysical idealism and the Cartesian subject…embedded in the conception of modernism hegemonic in Europe and the U.S. in the postwar period…Body art, however, does not *illustrate* Merleau-Pontyan conceptions of the embodiment of the subject and theories of the decentered self that we are now familiar with from poststructuralist theory; rather it *enacts* or *performs* or *instantiates* the embodiment and intertwining of self and other (Jones, 37).

Performance was an accessible means of breaking down the mind/body split that Hatoum found to be prevalent in England. She needed the immediacy and physical presence of body-centered performance because the content of this early work was urgently and overtly political. Note that she was, not, however, pointing to specific political events; rather, Hatoum was using her body as a metaphor for oppressed people in general. Thus, the intertwining of self and other was paramount to her performance; it was important that the audience feel enough sense of identification with the oppressed via Hatoum to feel some degree of empathy/identification. Otherwise, they would not carry away the full impact of the piece, and Hatoum would become mere spectacle.

One such performance was the 1983 piece *Under Siege*. Hatoum boxed herself into a transparent container filled with clay. For seven hours she repeatedly slipped and fell and pulled herself back up, desperately biting at a plastic lining all the while. The sound of radio static and news broadcasts

occupied the space that her body did not. She staged this performance one week before the invasion of Beirut that set her parents under siege.

The piece incorporated several elements that were common to all of her performances: a barrier between herself and her audience to represent displacement; the interplay of dichotomies such as order/chaos, oppression/resistance, victor/victim, strong/weak; vulnerability through nudity or containment; a self-imposed physical ordeal, a masochistic act. On performance Richard said, "Voluntary pain simply legitimates one's incorporation into the community of those who have been harmed in some way" (Richard, 211). In Hatoum's case, the community in question is initially the people of her homeland, but it extends to become a global community.

After a period of such intense performances, Hatoum was seeking a more subtle sophistication in her work. She reached the conclusion that "…art is [not] the best place to be didactic. When you present someone with a statement in your artwork, once they get it, they either agree…or dismiss your argument and move on…no need to look again" (Hatoum/Archer, 13). She began to create installations with an emphasis on their spatial construction. In *Untitled (1992)*, Hatoum created a white walled corridor with stainless steel wire defining the interior pathways. As participants[2] walked through the piece, they become aware of thin horizontal wires closing in at ankle height on the left. Turning to the right did not allow for safety; instead groin-height wires narrowed the passage.

[2] I use this word rather than "viewers" because the piece was not only about looking but also about experiencing space and internally feeling the sensations associated with threat.

Rather than providing a way out to safety, a door led to a second room was strung with wires at neck height.[3]

Formally, the piece offers a twist on Minimalism. Generally Minimalism provides a contemplative space, an ordered visual environment free of chaos and information overload. Here, however, Hatoum uses a Minimalist aesthetic in conjunction with materials capable of inflicting pain to create a physical tension in the body of the viewer. The intellectual associations that follow include imprisonment, harm, torture, entrapment, spatial dislocation—all conditions by which Hatoum grew up threatened. Critic Dave Cameron suggests that yes, the grid can be a symbol of order, but the connotation of "order" is altered if it is enforced from the outside rather than embraced voluntarily (Cameron, 26). Thus the formal aesthetics of *Untitled (1992)* extend to speak of the conditions under which the body of the socially oppressed endures (Wagstaff, 28). The piece emphasizes the connection between the physical senses and their context in sociocultural experiences such as pain and confinement.

If it is the viewer who experiences a moment of embodiment in this piece, through becoming aware of his/her body via the physical sensations the piece evokes, then it is the implicit body who becomes the "Other" in the self/other dialectic as described by the French phenomenologists:

> Phenomenology interprets and produces the self as embodied, performative and intersubjective. The critique of Cartesianism thus also involves a Hegleian dimension as the French phenomenologists theorized a self that was both embodied but also articulated in relation to a self/other dialectic" (Jones, 39).

[3] I could not find information on whose proportions these heights were based on. I see this as being important in terms of defining an audience for the piece. Women, for example, generally have a lower neck height than men, Anglos are taller than Arabs.

This theory suggests that the intersubjective art participant, spatially separated from their ordinary reality and immersed in a reality of Hatoum's interpretation, engages in a relationship with the implicit body of the oppressed. If the piece is successful, then Cameron is right and *Unititled (1992)* thus pushes the viewer to see outside existing power structures and to imagine how to replace them (Cameron, 29). What but a transference-oriented connection to the implicit body that would provoke one to do so?

Guy Brett argues for this sort of transference in Hatoum's video installation *Corps Étranger:*

> …in drawing her own body as the object of the spectator's gaze, the physical intensity was transferred to the spectator's self awareness…Hatoum brought the spectator to see that the act of seeing is inseparable from the body (Brett, 58).

In *Corps Étranger*, Hatoum used endoscopy with the assistance of a physician to generate images of her body inside and out. The camera traveled into Hatoum's body through her varied orifices. She used echography to record her heartbeat and breath. She projected the video images onto the ground inside a cylinder lined with soft black fabric. The images changed rapidly. She conceptualized the piece while in art school in 1981. However, no doctor would help her. Finally in 1994 the Centre Pompidou commissioned her, provided a space, and helped her to find a willing physician.

Though Hatoum returns to using her own body here, the body becomes often genderless and completely classless through the construction of close up video shots (Brett, 71). Therefore Hatoum's body becomes any body, once again

symbolic. As with her performance pieces, her body is really a stand-in for the implicit body of the oppressed.

In this piece Hatoum wanted to create a sense of threat to the implicit Any Body under surveillance. The projected Any Body becomes ultimately vulnerable as it is subject to the scientific eye, "probing it, invading its boundaries, objectifying it" (Hatoum/Archer, 137). The medical establishment becomes the exploiter and depersonalizer of the human body, merely an example of any oppressive paradigm or power. It calls into question: under whose control and whose containment is any body (Morgan, 2)?

How does the self (the viewer) respond to this condition being a universal one? How does the viewing self connect to the implicit body through the piece?

> Through the notion of flesh—a hinge or two-sided boundary marking 'being's reversibility'—Merleau-Ponty theorizes the interrelatedness of both mind and body (the embodiment of the self) and the reciprocity and contingency of the body/self on the other. This is what Lacan…describes as the *phenomenology of transference* by which the self is located in the other (Jones, 42).

Perhaps because of this transference, and because the oppressor behind Hatoum's microscope is so ubiquitous, the initially presumed divide between the body of the viewer and the body of the oppressed becomes especially narrow. The viewer no longer thinks *about* the oppressed body, the viewer recognizes herself/himself *to be in* the oppressed body.

Art writer Jessica Morgan, however, takes a different position. To her, the figure in *Corps Étranger* is too fragmented to create this particular phenomenological dialectic. It is, rather, the *ambiguity* created by this fragmentation that allows for a reading of universality, and therein lies the

identification: this could be any body, including mine. She paraphrases Lacan to say that typically "the demarcation of prohibition surrounding the body's orifices are what help to define the individual subject and to differentiate between the other and the self" (Morgan, 3). In her argument, without a complete figure, the projection of self onto other is not possible.

In writing for Art Papers, Alex Ohlin had a unique association with this piece, Presumably his reading is inspired in part because of the form of the installation, a cylindrical structure that cloaks the images of what *he* knows to be a female body. He describes *Corps Étranger* as a commentary on veiling in Islam. Therefore the implicit body becomes a bit more specific, that of the Islamic woman. In Islam the female body, with its inherent sexual power, is a dangerous threat to established order where patriarchy is the oppressor. "For Arab women of Hatoum's generation, to wear the veil or not was a charged issue. To cast it off represented the rejection of patriarchal oppression; to wear it a rebellion against Western capitalism and imperialism" (Ohlin, 18). How does this commentary relate to Hatoum's caution not to read too much of her background into her work?

Perhaps one of the most difficult of Hatoum's works to read critically *without* knowledge of her background and development as an artist is *Mouli-Julienne (x21).* This mammoth vegetable shredder, 21 times the size of a usual vegetable shredder and made of solid black steel, imposes quite a formidable presence.[4]

[4] Hatoum began to explore domestic items as inspiration for sculpture/installations after a one-month residency at a Shaker community in Maine. She was intrigued with the simplicity she found there and with the focus on the home's interior and basic items. Living in a constant state of displacement, the idea of "home" was a loaded concept for her.

The installation creates a physical tension for the viewer with a scale shift that dwarfs the viewer's body. It also creates tension by ripping away the association of home with safety. As Hatoum sets out to facilitate in all of her work, the immediate response from the viewer is visceral. Then intellectual associations follow. Because no particular body is framed here, *Mouli-Julienne (x21) "*allows for limitless fantasy, projection, identification" (Garb, 31).

The identification is meant to be, as with Hatoum's other works, with an implicit body or bodies, those who have suffered the kind of sociopolitical nightmares that this installation calls to mind. This vegetable tool is modeled after one that holds down a vegetable then shreds it. Hatoum's Surrealistic version of the tool becomes the oppressor and the implicit body takes the role of the ill-fated fleshy vegetable. In an interview about the piece, Hatoum referred to Franz Kafka's story *The Penal Colony.* In this tale prisoners are detained for unspecified misdemeanors. The prisoners suffer tortuous punishment. A machine serves as a character in the story. Its arm descends upon the condemned and carves the words of their sentences onto their bodies. They are powerless under this great omnipotence, as is the case in geopolitical situations that pit oppressor against oppressed.

Though I can see how this piece would be effective in conveying a sense of threat and oppression through a visceral response, without having researched Hatoum's background, I doubt I would have made the connection to geopolitics without a text-based cue. I would likely make an association with the potential oppression of domesticity and the sort of traditional roles for women that

Thatcher encouraged. Perhaps this would please Hatoum. After all, this would support the assertion of her work that oppression is about power structures, and those power structures pervade life and confine the body in innumerable ways.

In each of the works presented in this essay, Hatoum first pulls the viewer into a somatic awareness of what confinement "feels" like. Only then does she coax him/her to intellectually examine what confinement means and what forms it can take. She suggests as examples war zones like her homeland; the domestic sphere; social hierarchies such as those between medical authorities and the bodies they monitor. She examines the roots of power structures that allow for hierarchies of oppressor/oppressed to exist. She does all of this by speaking most immediately to the viewer's body, through his/her senses. Sometimes Hatoum communicates through the use of her own body, but when she does so her body serves as a *symbol* for a more general body that is under the thumb of someone or something else. Through the works presented herein, the artist intends for a viewer to connect to this implicit body. In so doing, Hatoum gives voice to or brings awareness to a body that cannot be present or adequately visible to speak for itself. She also leads the viewer to recognize that everyone is subject to some sort of oppressive power structure because such powers are all-pervasive. The question then becomes, what will the viewer do with this new awareness?

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