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Amina Khan April 12, 2016

Art in Exile:
Dislocation and Disruption in the Work of Mona Hatoum

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An abstract of
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of Emory University in partial fulfillment
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Department of Art History

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Abstract

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By Amina Khan

This thesis considers the work of Lebanese-born, Palestinian artist, Mona Hatoum who, in 1975, was displaced from her home in Beirut to London. Throughout Hatoum's career, her work has been viewed as an indication of her experience of exile, and yet, these biographical readings fail to adequately account for the ways in which her subjective experience informs the nuanced commentary Hatoum offers on the political and social structures in the Western countries she has lived in during the last twenty-five years. While scholars have considered the how Hatoum's work suggests her experience of exile and how her work is disruptive, especially in its engagement of art historical tradition, there has been no commentary on how Hatoum engages her subjectivity in its delivery of political meaning.

With attention to two works in Hatoum's work, one of her earliest performances, *Under Siege* (1982) and one of her most recent installations, *Impenetrable* (2009), I reflect on how each of these works alludes to Hatoum's personal history while commenting on Western institutions and systems of power. By tracking the ways in which Hatoum's practice changes and matures between *Under Siege* and *Impenetrable,* it is possible to discern how the Hatoum's experience of exile and the disruption and dislocation it produced has informed her artistic disruption of Western art history and, ultimately, the imperialist, masculine subjectivity that undergirds it.

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Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the unrelenting support of Dr. Gagliardi and Dr. Lee. It was an incredible privilege to receive their guidance throughout this process, which has taught me more than I could have ever imagined. Through their mentorship, I am able to present a thesis that I am proud of.

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Introduction

Imagine entering a room. The only light comes from a single, incandescent bulb hanging from a cord in the ceiling. The bulb, attached to a motorized pulley, moves to and fro, up and down inside an upright, U-shaped structure composed of thirty-six small wire cages stacked in rows one atop the other. The light radiates ethereally from inside the caged structure, projecting the grid-like silhouette on the white walls and ceiling of the space. There is a sense of being fenced in despite one's knowledge that the doorway to the room is still open. The shadows on the walls sway eerily and distort as the motorized light moves around the interior of the cage structure, electrifying the space with the notion that perhaps the translucent image projected on the wall has somehow physically enclosed you. An acute awareness of claustrophobia or disorientation inevitably arises in this strange, threatening space.

Such is the perceptual experience of Lebanese-born, Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum's installation, *Light Sentence* (1992) (fig. 1). The surreal rendering of the gallery space evokes senses of dislocation, disorientation, and confusion. Those sensations can be traced throughout Hatoum's oeuvre. In the past thirty-five years, Hatoum has engaged the sensual experiences of viewers to implicate them in pieces that isolate, threaten, and mystify them. Those bodily sensations are juxtaposed against the formal beauty of her highly aesthetic works. In a work like *Light Sentence,* that sense of beauty stems from the harmonious symmetry of the cages and the transcendent rays of light that shine through them. While *Light Sentence* seems to imprison the viewer in the white space of the gallery, the effect of the dim, ethereal light glowing in the midst of steel cages continues to allure her. Despite the threat of entrapment, viewers are tempted to enter the caged structure to detect the source of the light. The work thus simultaneously attracts and repels spectators, leaving them uncertain of how to feel or interact with the installation.

That ambiguity allows for a variety of interpretations. Curator Sam Bardaouil believes the work "reflects on the modern man within an urban setting, the obstruction of space and mobility."[1] Hatoum has stated the work is about "encountering architectural and institutional structures in Western urban environments that are about the regimentation of individuals, fixing them in space and putting them under surveillance."[2] These arguments, which tie the work to broad concepts of restriction and institutional oppression counter interpretations that immediately link it to Hatoum's history. Consider one viewer's understanding of the work as a reference to Palestinian refugee camps.[3] This reading is part of a larger argument that reads Hatoum's work as evidence of her past.

Despite the multitude of possible interpretations, the disorienting effect of *Light Sentence* and of other works in Mona Hatoum's oeuvre are often quickly linked to the biography of the artist without any acknowledgment of the work's intricacy. Hatoum's family was one of the hundreds of thousands expelled from their homes during the *Nakba,* the Palestinian term for catastrophe that describes the 1948 expulsion of Arab-Palestinians from Israel. Forced to leave their home in Haifa, the family was displaced to Beirut, where the artist was born in 1952. Although Hatoum was born in Lebanon, she was keenly aware of her estrangement from her peers. When she was twenty-three, the Lebanese Civil War broke out during a short trip the artist took to England. It was then that Hatoum experienced firsthand the traumatic destabilization of

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[1] Sam Bardaouil quoted in "Some of the Most Important Works by the Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum are at Doha's Mathaf," Anna Seaman, *The National,* February 17, 2014, accessed March 22, 2016, http://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/art/some-of-the-most-important-works-by-the-palestinian-artist-mona-hatoum-are-at-dohas-mathaf.

[2] Janine Antoni and Mona Hatoum, "Mona Hatoum" *Bomb* 63, 1998, http://bombmagazine.org/article/2130/mona-hatoum.

[3] Farah Nayeri, "The Many Contradictions of Mona Hatoum," *The New York Times,* July 7, 2015, accessed January 21, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/08/arts/international/the-many-contradictions-of-mona-hatoum.html

exile. That disruption in Hatoum's life is evidenced in the qualities of disorientation and dislocation evoked by *Light Sentence.* Yet, a purely biographical reading lacks the complexity that Hatoum's work merits.

While Hatoum's work is often informed by and conveys a sense of her experience of exile, the meaning of any given work in her oeuvre cannot be fixed to a depiction of her biography. Although Hatoum employs her subjective perspective of the world in her art, it is often to centralize marginalized identities beyond her own, calling attention to violence and oppression on a broad scale. Denying a fixed, biographical interpretation of her work, she has stated, "The concerns in my work are as much about the facts of my origins as they are a reflection on or an insight into the Western institutional and power structures I have found myself existing in for the last 20-odd years."[4] Hatoum acknowledges that her background informs her to a certain extent but argues that meaning in her work cannot be derived from a purely biographical analysis. She urges viewers to consider how she portrays and critiques institutional hierarchies and systems of power on a larger scale. As a person living in exile, Hatoum's sense of self is ultimately intertwined with Western-centric power structures and politics that have determined the lives of her family and others who are casualties of global political systems. Her portrayal of her experience of exile, whether enacted as self-inflicted violence on her body or in a gallery space redefined by the looming, potential threat of her medium, speaks to a subject beyond her subjective "I" to broadly critique political issues within Western power structures.

Considering the complexity of interpreting a work like *Light Sentence,* one can begin to think critically about the roles of biography and politics in Hatoum's work. In this thesis, I

[4] Janine Antoni and Mona Hatoum, "Mona Hatoum" *Bomb.*

consider how Hatoum integrates her experience of exile into her work to create politicized meaning. To do so, I compare one of Hatoum's earliest performances, *Under Siege* (1982), with one of her most recent installations, *Impenetrable* (2009). In the over twenty-five years that elapsed between the two works, Hatoum's practice shifts from video and performance pieces to installations that refer to abstract tendencies of minimalist sculptural traditions. Both works draw upon Hatoum's experiences in exile to evoke a sense of dislocation and disruption in the viewer's perception. While *Under Siege* violently draws attention to Hatoum's marginalized position as a Palestinian woman living in exile to critique social and political structures in Western cultures, *Impenetrable* is neither explicit in its reference to Hatoum's background nor in its delivery of a political message. Instead, *Impenetrable* suggests meaning through its materiality. The abstract nature of the work refuses fixed meaning by allowing space for viewers to respond according to their perception. Hatoum thus opens up the associations that may be drawn from the work but also subtly references minimalist works that also engaged the viewer's experience, although to a different effect.

Through an examination of Hatoum's transition from performance to installation and Hatoum's increased emphasis on the viewer, I shall show how her artistic practice matures from work that evokes a rhetorical, political message to pieces that formally suggest their critique of Western power structure through their engagement of art historical forms and materials. Ultimately, as Hatoum begins to engage more deeply with art historical traditions, she extends her critique of Western power structures to proffer something outside of her own message and bias. Even though both *Under Siege* and *Impenetrable* engage the artist's experience of exile to evoke meaning, the works are not simply a presentation of her personal narrative. By engaging her subjective perspective of the world, Hatoum criticizes art historical practices that did not

create space for the individual subjectivities of historically ignored groups. Situating herself in response to predominant discourses of Western art history, Hatoum thus exposes the social structures that enabled the marginalization of historically disempowered groups.

Introduction Images:

Fig. 1, Mona Hatoum, *Light Sentence*, 1992. Galvanised wire mesh lockers, electric motor, light bulb, 77 15/16 x 72 13/16 x 192 15/16 in. (198 x 185 x 490 cm)
© Mona Hatoum. Photo © Philippe Migeat Courtesy Centre Pompidou, Paris

Chapter 1: Literature Review

The compelling yet elusive nature of Mona Hatoum's diverse body of work has been commented on in a diverse range of scholarship that has spanned the last thirty years. Although there are nuanced interpretations in the vast variety of works published on Hatoum's oeuvre, readings of the work can be divided into factions based on how these authors understand the role of Hatoum's biography in her work. Consider the titles of the books and essays published on the artist: "Homesick,"[5] *Domestic Disturbance,*[6] and *Unhomely*[7] immediately relate the artist's oeuvre to a disruption of home typical of exile. "Disbelonging,"[8] and "A Living Between,"[9] suggest the liminality of a life in a foreign land that exists outside of one's nation or homeland. *Turbulence*[10] and *Shift*[11] simultaneously draw attention to sudden, unexpected movement and disturbance, qualities that are not innately linked to exile but characteristic to it. Writers such as Chrisoula Lionis and Edward Said interpret the themes of displacement, disbelonging, and instability in Hatoum's work as a political commentary on the Arab-Israeli conflict and the subsequent war in Lebanon, reading the pieces as responses to her specific history of exile from Palestine and Lebanon. Curators and critics such as Guy Brett, Sam Bardaouil, and Till Fellrath interpret Hatoum's installations as metaphors for the nature of exile as it is embodied by the theme of displacement, a phenomenon that defined the twentieth century. Readings by Patricia

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[5] Tamar Garb, "Homesick" in *Mona Hatoum.* Salamanca: Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, 2002.
[6] Laura Steward Heon, *Mona Hatoum: Domestic Disturbance.* North Adams Mass: MASS MoCA; Pownal, VT: Storey Publishers, 2001.
[7] Kirsty Bell, *Mona Hatoum: Unhomely,* Berlin: Galerie Max Hetzler: Holzwarth, 2008.
[8] Patricia Falguieres, "Disbelonging," in *Mona Hatoum: Shift* (Berlin: Holzwarth Publications, 2012)
[9] Richard Noble, "Mona Hatoum: A Living Between," *Parachute* no. 108 (2008: 178. *Biography Reference Bank (H.W. Wilson)*, EBSCO*host* (accessed February 25, 2016).
[10] Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, *Mona Hatoum: Turbulence*. (Doha: Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, 2014)
[11] Mona Hatoum, *Mona Hatoum: Shift* (Berlin: Holzwarth Publications, 2012).

Falguieres and Nina Zimmer acknowledge the influence of Hatoum's exile on her work but focus on the formal ways in which Hatoum critiques, extends, and expands upon the works of prominent, minimalist and feminist artists of the twentieth century to convey her subjectivity.

While no scholarship on Hatoum entirely avoids the mention of her experience of exile, authors often choose to interpret how it specifically influences her work or to demonstrate how the work cannot be reduced to her personal history. Yet, the biographical and non-biographical readings of Hatoum's works are not entirely disparate. Instead, it is possible that Hatoum draws from her biography to create works that achieve a critical, political meaning in addition to any personal significance they might hold.

Specific History

Biographical readings of Hatoum's oeuvre link her works to the Arab-Israeli conflict. These understandings of her work consider how they reflect a particular Palestinian experience of exile. Chrisoula Lionis, a researcher and curator at Australia's National Institute for Experimental Arts, is one such author who connects Hatoum's work to a post-war Palestinian condition. She describes Hatoum's oeuvre as: "shaped by the memory of critical events in Palestinian history that the artist did not experience directly."[12] The notion of recollection undergirds Lionis's discussion of Hatoum's work as a reflection of a "postmemory," which defines "the collective Palestinian experience of dispossession and occupation."[13] In accordance with this understanding of remembrance, Hatoum's representations of displacement and isolation

[12] Chrisoula Lionis, "A Past Not Yet Passed: Postmemory in the work of Mona Hatoum" *Social Text* 119, vol. 32, no. 2 (Summer 2014), 76.
[13] Ibid., 77.

are ultimately shaped by the events that took place during the 1948 Israeli-led mass expulsion of Palestinians.[14]

Consider the work *The Negotiating Table* (1983), one of Hatoum's first major performances (fig. 1). According to Priscilla Marques at the Centre Pompidou, the work was produced after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon as a symbolic staging of both the war occurring in Beirut as well as Hatoum's reaction to it.[15] During the three-hour performance, the artist, cocooned in transparent plastic film, lies on a table flanked by two empty chairs. Her naked body pushes blood and animal intestines against the clear sheet wrapped around it.[16] The room is pitch black except for a single light that illuminates her stationary figure.[17] Surgical gauze covers her face, hiding her identity from the audience. The artist's suggests that this could be any of the hundreds of thousands of people affected by conflict in the Middle East. Over speakers, one can hear radio reports of the war in Lebanon coinciding with recordings of speeches delivered by European and American leaders proposing peace in the Middle East.[18]

Lionis interprets the mutilated, intestine-covered body on the table as a reference to Palestinian "collective memory" of the mass disembowelment of pregnant Palestinian women by Israeli soldiers in the 1948 Deir Yassin massacre.[19] Citing a dream Hatoum recollects that referenced this mass disembowelment that might have caused of Palestinian exodus, Lionis asserts that Hatoum's "own experience of violence, oppression, and massacre of Palestinians is indicated through this dream to be subconsciously bound to the events of the Nakba."[20] Lionis's

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[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Lionis, "A Past Not Yet Passed: Postmemory in the Art of Mona Hatoum," 87.
[17] Ibid 77.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid, 85.
[20] Ibid, 87.

interpretation of *The Negotiating Table* demonstrates how literally Hatoum's Palestinian heritage can be linked to her work. This connection of the work to Hatoum's biography indicates a broader reading that considers her subjectivity as an Arab woman living in exile.

Although Lionis interprets the reference to Deir Yassin in *The Negotiating Table* as Hatoum's attempt to deal with the Palestinian collective memory, the work suggests a more politically critical meaning. The performance seems to comment on the phenomena of global politics in which prominent world leaders, most often Western, safely sit far from any conflict and negotiate treaties or deals without a concern for the impact their actions have on the impoverished or oppressed. The empty chairs flanking the table offer a metaphor for the empty actions of those politicians and their literal, physical absence from the conflict. Hatoum's body embodies the unnamed individuals who have lost their life as politicians negotiate treaties. Thus, although Lionis's reading of *The Negotiating Table* as an indication of the Palestinian experience remains relevant, it is clear that other interpretations of this work are possible.

In a work like *The Negotiating Table,* the artist's concern with political conflict in the Middle East is made explicit through the audiotapes, but, in Hatoum's later installations, the references are not as immediately recognizable. In Edward Said's essay on the artist's work, he specifically considers pieces where the reference to the artist might not be so obvious. His analysis focuses on a series of Hatoum's domestic objects, in which she manipulates everyday forms associated with home in startling and disconcerting ways. In one of the few analyses that considers Hatoum's works in their environmental effect, Said writes: "Exile is figured and plotted in the objects [Hatoum] creates. Her works enact the paradox of dispossession as it takes possession of its place in the world, standing firmly in workaday space for spectators to see and

somehow survive what glistens before them."[21] Said thus asserts that the perceptual effects of Hatoum's works encapsulate the sense displacement and discomfort of exile.

Consider her large-scale rendition of a mouli-julienne, *La Grande Broyeuse (Mouli-Julienne x 21)* (2000) (fig. 2). The steel, anthropomorphic sculpture is enormous, towering over viewers. Contributing to the dislocating effect of the installation's scale, it quickly becomes clear that the old-fashioned food processor is just large enough to fit a human body. The cold steel surface only emphasizes the work's hostility. In Said's understanding, Hatoum's domestic objects create an environment that dislocates the viewer specifically from the space.[22] Her depiction of the home as a place of discomfort and violence quite implicitly links her work to her loss of home. Said accounts for this sense of dislocation as Hatoum's visual representation of "the Palestinian experience."[23] Still, just as one could argue against Lionis's understanding of Hatoum's performance as a reflection of the Palestinian experience by presenting an alternate reading, one can challenge Said's interpretation of the more abstract installations. Hatoum's intimidating kitchen utensils present a general suggestion of domestic violence, leaving one to imagine how the work could signify domestic abuse or homelessness just as easily as it signifies exile.

Despite the differences in Said's examination of a viewer's experience with Hatoum's installations and Lionis's analysis of postmemory, both authors argue that the dislocation and sense of loss Hatoum's art evokes are directly connected to her background. Accounting for the way in which her work defies concrete meaning, Said notes, "The past cannot be entirely recuperated from so much power arrayed against it…it can only be restated in the form of an

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[21] Edward Said, "The Art of Displacement: Mona Hatoum's Logic of Irreconcilables," *Quaderns de la Mediterrania* 15, 2011, 109.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.

object without a conclusion."[24] Just as Said argues that the inconclusive nature of the Hatoum's works reflects the continued trauma of exile for Palestinians, Lionis asserts, "the past is not yet passed" to emphasize the ongoing relevancy of issues to the Palestinian condition in the work of Mona Hatoum.[25] These specified readings argue that, despite the complexity of Hatoum's artistic practice, her work is self-reflexive.

However, as has been shown in the discussion of each of these scholars, it is impossible to reduce Hatoum's art, whether in the form of performance or permanent object, to her experience of exile. These readings that account for Hatoum's work as a reflection of her personal history are not irrelevant. They crucially note that the work is informed by Hatoum's subjectivity, a notion that I shall examine in my own study of Hatoum's work. Yet, Lionis's and Said's analyses extract a specific narrative from works that might evoke different readings for each individual viewer considering them. I propose that while the notion of Hatoum's work as evidence of her particular experience remains significant in the understanding of her work, one must also consider alternative narratives as meaningful and relevant to the discussion.

Metaphors for Loss

Despite the popularity of the aforementioned biographical mode of interpretation, Hatoum does not encourage readings of her work that fix meaning in her work to her past. In an interview with Farah Nayeri of the New York Times, Hatoum states, "They come with this preconceived idea of where I come from and therefore what I'm putting in my work, and they tend to over-interpret the work in relation to my background."[26] That over-interpretation of Hatoum's work is complicated by authors such as Guy Brett, Sam Bardaouil, and Till Fellrath

[24] Ibid, 110.
[25] Lionis, "A Past Not Yet Passed," 80.
[26] Nayeri, "The Many Contradictions of Mona Hatoum."

who argue that Hatoum's work offers metaphors for the essential qualities of exile as an experience without fixing the meaning of those metaphors to a specific history.

Hatoum does reference issues that have personally affected her, but her works offer metaphor for situations beyond her own. Take the work *Present Tense* (1996) (fig. 3). The sculpture is made of cubic blocks of traditional, Palestinian olive oil soap made in Nablus in the West Bank arranged in a rectangular form on the floor of the gallery. Atop the malleable, beige soap, Hatoum embeds red glass beads in curvilinear forms to evoke the map of the territories that were granted to Palestine in the Oslo Peace Accords in 1993.[27]

Yet, even in its specific reference to the situation in Hatoum's homeland, *Present Tense* abstracts its specific reference to support a more metaphorical understanding of the installation. Without prior knowledge of the political history of the Arab-Israeli conflict, one may not recognize the map on the blocks. The red beads only lightly trace borders that could simply be amorphous forms on the surface of the installation. In a broader, geographic sense, the untraditional medium draws attention to the arbitrary construction of borders through its implication that the red beads could be washed off the soapy surface. The easily dissolvable borders in the work suggest a reference to the fact that three years after the peace accords, Israel had still not returned the agreed upon lands to Palestinians.[28]

With works such as *Present Tense* in mind, London-based art critic, curator, and lecturer, Guy Brett that the dialectical oppositions and paradoxes in Hatoum's art are united under metaphors for place and displacement.[29] Using the metaphor of place to understand Hatoum's

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[27] Jack Persekian, "Mona Hatoum: Present Tense," *ArtAsiaPacific* July/August 2013, http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/84/PresentTenseMONAHATOUM

[28] Today, the agreements made at the Oslo Peace Accords remain unfulfilled as conflict continues throughout the Israeli-occupied territories.

[29] Guy Brett, "Itinerary" in *Mona Hatoum.* (London: Phaidon, 1997), 86.

work, Brett encompasses the prevailing themes within Hatoum's oeuvre, especially those of disruption and instability. Ultimately, the metaphors of place and displacement that Brett derives from Hatoum's oeuvre are emphasized by the perceptual effects of works that often dislocate viewers by confusing and redefining their experiences of a space. Accordingly, installations such as *Light Sentence* suggest their entrapment of the viewer to displace them. Performances like *The Negotiating Table* horrify viewers and energize the space with violent energy.[30]

Brett's analysis of the metaphors that emerge from Hatoum's work is echoed over a decade later by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, co-founders of the curatorial platform, Art Reoriented. The curators recently organized a retrospective of Hatoum's work at Mathaf: Museum of Modern Arab Art in Doha.[31] As one of the most recent examinations and exhibitions of Mona Hatoum's oeuvre, the exhibition, entitled *Turbulence,* responded to the wealth of material that has already been published on Hatoum by examining her oeuvre through the lens of turbulence. They assert, "Turbulence becomes the gateway into a renewed understanding of Hatoum's work; a metaphor for this state of hovering between certainty and uncertainty."[32] Hatoum's disruption of art historical styles reflects this notion of turbulence, which is evident especially in her engagement of minimalism.[33]

In *Present Tense,* for example, the placement of uniform blocks of soap in a rectangular formation on the ground brings to mind Carl Andre's *Equivalent I-VIII.* Andre's "rectangular configurations" of industrially manufactured bricks redefined the spaces in which they were

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[30] Ibid.
[31] "About Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath," *Art Reoriented,* accessed February 9, 2016, http://www.artreoriented.com/home/#about
[32] Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, *Mona Hatoum: Turbulence*, 13.
[33] Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, *Turbulence,* 15.

placed.[34] Hatoum's sculpture reimagines Andre's horizontally oriented, spatial interventions in a work that both redefines physical space and demonstrates the variable nature of our imagined spaces delineated on a map. This metaphorical interpretation of *Present Tense* is not explicitly tied to her biography yet still suggests that influence of her experience of dislocation on her artistic concerns. Hatoum takes a work whose meaning relies wholly on a viewer's experience with it in a space and makes it suggestive of content outside of itself.

The notion of turbulence also encompasses how Hatoum disrupts Western-centric notions of art history. As a Lebanese-born, Palestinian artist, Hatoum's work is as influenced by her cultural and national origins as it is by Western movements of contemporary art. Although most curators would look at a work like *Present Tense,* cite Andre's influence, and proceed with their analysis, Bardaouil and Fellrath suggest that Hatoum's geometric minimalism could also be informed by Middle Eastern responses to Western modernism, like the work of Lebanese painter, Saliba el Douiahy, whose abstract paintings of Lebanon aim to capture the essence of places around the country.[35] Finally, the metaphor of turbulence can be applied to understand the synthesis of Hatoum's personal experience of exile with a broader, collective experience of displacement and disruption in her work.[36] Bardaouil and Fellrath tie the metaphor of turbulence to the "totality of ruptures that pervade the modern age," whether that be migration, exile, or the estrangement of modernity.[37]

Bardaouil's, Fellrath's, and Brett's metaphorical readings of Hatoum's work are significant in that they allow for interpretations that go beyond the artist's motive for creating the

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[34] Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art.* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003), 30.
[35] Ibid 16.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid 17.

work. They suggest the possibility of work that engages the themes of displacement or turbulence on a larger scale. While certain pieces in Hatoum's oeuvre might represent Hatoum's experience, they also comment on issues in countries beyond Lebanon or Palestine. By extending, yet not refusing, the biographical interpretation of Hatoum's work, Brett, Bardaouil, and Fellrath demonstrate that Hatoum's installations proffer varied analyses when audiences who may not have similar experiences to Hatoum choose to consider how their perception of a piece relates to their own life.

A Postminimal Perspective

While the abstract quality of Hatoum's installations enables metaphorical readings, it also frees viewers to interpret a piece according to their individual experience of it. In the essay, "Home and Away," author Alix Ohlin remarks, "viewers of Hatoum's work step into her world as strangers in a strange land."[38] Ohlin points not only to the dislocating effects of Hatoum's work but also to her engagement of the viewer in those effects. Drawing on a tradition of minimalist sculpture, Hatoum's objects and installations are meant to impact the viewer's perception. With this in mind, there is the possibility for a formal interpretation of Hatoum's work that connects it to Western art historical discourse.

Nina Zimmer, curator at the Kunstmuseum Basel in Switzerland, is one such scholar who opts for a primarily formal analysis of Hatoum's work, considering the physical aspects as a reflection of a postminimalist response to minimalism.[39] Bearing in mind Hatoum's installations beginning with *Light Sentence*, Zimmer relates Hatoum's aforementioned use of industrial materials and grid or cube-like forms to minimalist work preceding them but demonstrates that

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[38] Alix Ohlin, "Home and Away: The Strange Surrealism of Mona Hatoum" *Art Papers* (May/June 2002) 17.
[39] Nina Zimmer, "Epiphanies of the Everyday Materiality and Meaning in Mona Hatoum's Work," in *Mona Hatoum* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hamburger Kunsthalle, 2004), 66.

the "everyday context" of the materials differentiates Hatoum from her predecessors.[40] By connecting Hatoum to a minimalist tradition that, according to Michael Fried, "is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the viewer encounters literalist work," Zimmer distinguishes how historical formal tropes are subverted and reimagined in Hatoum's work to engage a viewer's perception of that work's form or material.[41]

French art historian, Patricia Falguieres, also specifically highlights the ways in which Hatoum engages viewers using techniques derived from minimalism. Consider one of Hatoum's first installation pieces, *The Light at the End* (1989) (fig. 4). In the corner of a dark room stands a steel frame with six vertically oriented rods emitting a glowing, yellow light. The area is illuminated by a single overhead lamp, which projects a reddish spotlight on the installation. Some viewers might recognize Hatoum's reference to Dan Flavin's fluorescent light sculptures. Flavin's arrangements of commercial fluorescent lights, such as *the nominal three (to William of Ockham)* (1963), aimed to create perceptual effects that animated a viewer's engagement with space and time. In Hatoum's response to Flavin, the luminous, warm quality of light in *Light at the End* immediately invites viewers closer. Falguieres describes the effect as "a summoning of the spectator in person, which means endowing that spectator with a body."[42] Hatoum's engagement of and dependence on the viewer suggests the relationship between her work and minimalism, which Michael Fried critiqued for its "theatrical" existence for an audience.[43]

Despite the similar role of the viewer in both Hatoum's and Flavin's installations, there is a crucial difference between their works. Flavin denies meaning in his work beyond its

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[40] Ibid, 67.
[41] Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" (1967) in *Art in Theory*, *1900-2000*, (New York: Thames & Hudson Inc., 2004) 825.
[42] Patricia Falguieres, "Disbelonging" in *Mona Hatoum: Shift* (Berlin: Holzwarth Publications, 2012) 70.
[43] Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 825.

relationship to the space in which it has been placed. He once stated, "It is what it is and it ain't nothing else."[44] Yet, the perceptual effects of Hatoum's work are not limited to their existence in space. Rather, Hatoum engages a viewer's sensory perceptions. As one approaches *Light at the End*, the warmth evoked by the red and yellow light is less visual and more sensual as it becomes clear that the rods are physically emitting scorching heat. Suddenly, the work presents a distinct threat and its allure is complicated by its dangerous qualities. This emphasis on the spectator's complex, almost contradictory, perceptual experience demonstrates Hatoum's extension of the minimalist movement. Accordingly, Falguieres states, "Minimalism is [Hatoum's] terrain and her material," situating Hatoum in an art historical narrative that critically engages the work of her predecessors.[45] In this reading, Hatoum's practice is linked to artists who have a "goal of critically re-appropriating modern art."[46] With its appropriative aspects in mind, new meaning can be derived from a work like *Light at the End.* Hatoum's sensuous rendition of Flavin's work is imbued with danger and would evoke a visceral response from the viewer. While the seduction and repulsion from the installation might be tied metaphorically to a specific political issue, it is also possible that the sensuous attributes of this installation are meaningful simply for the fact that they subvert the neutrality of *the nominal three.*

In Zimmer's and Falguieres's formalist readings of Hatoum's works, it is clear that while Hatoum's works might evoke personal or political meaning they can further be contextualized within art history in their subversion and engagement of minimalist and postminimalist forms and techniques. I have divided the biographical, metaphorical, and formalist readings of

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[44] Govan, Michael., Dan Flavin, Tiffany. Bell, Brydon. Smith, David Gray, and National Gallery of Art. *Dan Flavin: The Complete Lights, 1961-1996*. (New York: Dia Art Foundation in Association with Yale Univ. Press, 2004), 70.
[45] Falguieres, "Disbelonging," 71.
[46] Ibid, 68.

Hatoum's work into distinct sections. However, these understandings are often derived from impressions of Hatoum's work that echo each other. Lionis describes it as an "emphasis on broader issues of trauma,"[47] while, like Bardaouil and Fellrath, Falguieres refers to it as "unaccommodated turbulence."[48] This shared perceptual experience indicates that biographical, metaphorical, and formal readings of Hatoum's works are based on the same understandings of the works' effects. The three readings need not be mutually exclusive. While Hatoum's response to Flavin's purely perceptual light structures in *Light at the End* has art historical significance, it also reflects a perspective on the world that saw Flavin's work on the verge of instability. I would connect the disruption of Hatoum's experience of exile discussed by Lionis and Said to the disruption of minimalist forms that Falguieres and Zimmer note in their analyses of Hatoum's work. Ultimately, the formal abstraction of her work enables the metaphorical reading proposed by Brett, Bardaouil, and Fellrath, demonstrating intrinsic connections between seemingly disparate understandings.

In my examination of *Under Siege* and *Impenetrable,* I shall not limit my engagement with her work to one of the specific modes of interpretation I have outlined here. Instead, I will consider how Hatoum's biography and the subjectivity it has engendered influences any metaphorical meaning or formal technique in those works. Negotiating these different readings, my examinations of *Under Siege* and *Impenetrable* shall demonstrate that the biographical is not distinct from the formal. Ultimately, Hatoum's critique relies on both her personal investment in the works as well as her attempts to distance herself from them.

[47] Lionis, "A Past Not Yet Passed," 77.
[48] Falguieres, "Disbelonging," 73.

Chapter 1 Images:

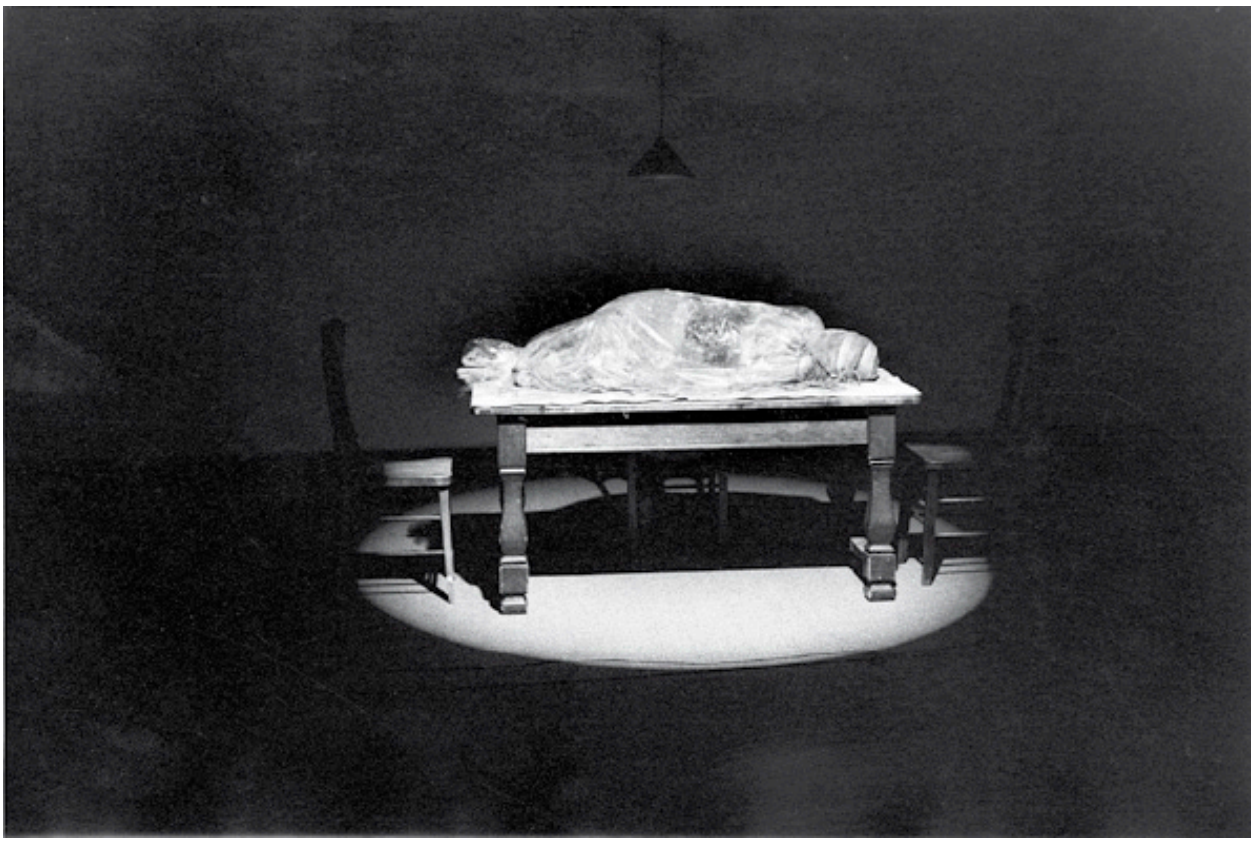

Fig. 1, Mona Hatoum, *The Negotiating Table*, 1983. Performance. The Western Front Vancouver © Mona Hatoum. Photo © Eric Metcalfe Courtesy White Cube

Fig. 2, Mona Hatoum. *La Grande Broyeuse (Mouli-Julienne x 17)*, 1999, Mild steel, Discs, each: 1 15/16 x diam 66 15/16 in. (5 x diam. 170 cm), 135 1/16 x 226 3/8 x 103 9/16 in. (343 x 575 x 263 cm).
© Mona Hatoum. Photo © Wim van Neuten Courtesy MUHKA, Antwerp and White Cube

Fig. 3, Mona Hatoum, *Present Tense*, 1996. Soap and glass beads, 4.5 × 299 × 241 cm. Installed at Anadiel Gallery, Jerusalem. 1 3/4 x 94 7/8 x 117 3/4 in. (4.5 x 241 x 299 cm)
© Mona Hatoum. Photo © Issa Freij Courtesy Gallery Anadial, Jerusalem and White Cube

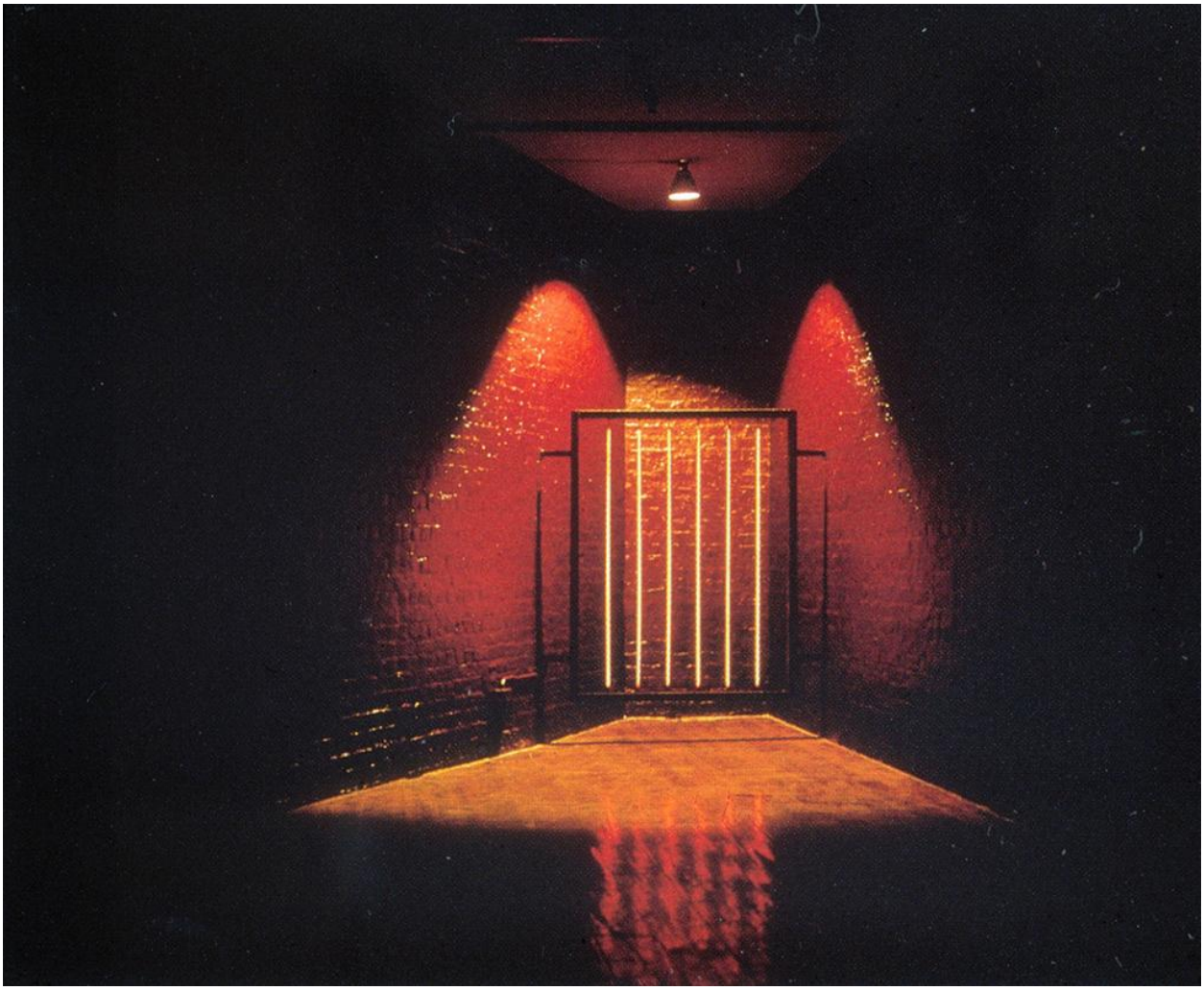

Fig. 4, Mona Hatoum, *Light at the End,* 1989. Iron, steel, brass, glass, aluminum and electrical elements. Showroom Gallery, London. Reproduced from http://www.artspace.com/magazine/art_101/book_report/phaidon-mona-hatoum-53046, accessed March 23, 2016.

Chapter 2: Performing Exile in Mona Hatoum's *Under Siege*

Before considering how Hatoum engages her subjective perspective to create meaning in *Under Siege* and *Impenetrable*, one should understand the circumstances under which her subjectivity was formed. As noted in the discussion of pieces like *Light Sentence* and *Light at the End*, the sense of disruption and instability Hatoum's work evokes suggests a parallel to the experiences that have defined her life. Living in a country that never felt her own, Hatoum's childhood was defined by "tremendous loss" and "a sense of dislocation."[49] Unable to obtain Lebanese identity cards and marked by foreign accents, Hatoum's family and countless other Palestinians were discouraged from fully integrating into their new homes.[50] Life in exile not only affected Hatoum's sense of belonging but also made her parents wary of allowing her to pursue her early passion for art.[51] The high value placed on survival and stability made her father hesitant towards his daughter's desire to enter a notoriously unstable field. Hatoum explains: "Because they lost everything, and they didn't care so much about property and things. They cared more about building the character of their children and making them strong, so they could stand alone."[52] Regardless, Hatoum retained her enthusiasm and intended to study art as an undergraduate in Beirut.[53]

Before beginning her studies in Lebanon, Hatoum had embarked on what was meant to be a brief visit to London. This was the fateful trip during which the Lebanese Civil War broke out. The twenty-three-year-old, suddenly isolated in the United Kingdom, was forced to deal

[49] Mona Hatoum and Janine Antoni, "Mona Hatoum," *Bomb.*
[50] Ibid.
[51] Parry, "Finding the Essence: Mona Hatoum," *Canvas Magazine* 117.
[52] Nayeri, "The Many Contradictions of Mona Hatoum."
[53] Parry, "Finding the Essence: Mona Hatoum," 117.

with the destabilizing trauma of exile and its repercussions.[54] No longer able to begin school in Beirut, Hatoum enrolled in a yearlong foundation course at the Byam Shaw School of Art. As she waited out the conflict, one year at the school soon turned into four. Those four years were then supplemented by a two-year course at the Slade School of Art as the war continued.[55]

These formative years of Hatoum's artistic life were marked by the disruption and sense of disbelonging that pervaded them. Far from her family and stranded in a foreign country, the young artist attempted to find security and safety in London.[56] In conjunction with coping with the sudden disruption of being unable to return home, Hatoum was crippled by "constant fear" for the safety of her family and friends as she watched from a different continent as the war destroyed her home in Lebanon.[57] The trauma of this loss would have been compounded with Hatoum's social isolation. One can imagine how, as a lower-income, Palestinian woman, she would have been confronted with her 'otherness' among British peers who could not understand the distinct psychological effects of the loss and displacement inherent to living in exile.

The repercussions of Hatoum's exile are manifested in the works she created once she graduated art school in 1981. These works were primarily highly charged, often physically demanding performances that reclaimed and reasserted her marginal identity as a Palestinian exile. Low-cost, site-specific performances allowed her to create critical and powerful works without exhausting the minimal resources available to the recent graduate.[58] Drawn to the ephemeral nature of the medium, Hatoum felt performance had the potential to critique the

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[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Guy Brett, "Itinerary," 42.
[57] Mona Hatoum, Acceptance of an honorary doctorate from the American University in Beirut, June 28, 2008. https://www.aub.edu.lb/doctorates/recipients/2008/Pages/hatoum-speech.aspx
[58] James Parry, "Finding the Essence: Mona Hatoum," 128.

commodification of art and deliver a direct, political message.[59] The ephemerality of performance had the added benefit of leaving these works that deal closely and often explicitly with Hatoum's personal history and experiences in the past. In an interview with James Parry, she presents a third reason for her attraction to performance: "Nothing stayed behind – except perhaps a photo or two – and I really liked that, mainly because I was so critical of my own work that I couldn't live with it."[60] This self-criticality could simply suggest the insecurity of a young artist attempting to establish herself in the art world; however, perhaps this early self-deprecation and desire for ephemerality has a deeper significance. Permanence might feel unrealistic for someone who has lost their home, family, and country to the destabilizing effects of violent conflict. With this in mind, Hatoum's early preference for impermanent performances begins to suggest how when one has lost family, home, and nation, nothing can be fixed or permanent. Transience and ephemerality not only characterize performance but also the sense of instability that arises from living in exile.

Under Siege (fig. 1), which first took place at the Aspex Gallery in Portsmouth, England, is one of these early performances that directly confronts Hatoum's personal history to evoke a political message. The performance lasted for seven hours, from ten a.m. to five p.m., in a long, narrow gallery space.[61] In the center of the room stands a vertical structure enclosing the upright body of the artist. The durable, wooden frame of the container holds transparent plastic sheets that allow the audience to see Hatoum and vice versa. Since the container is placed in the middle of the room, viewers have the option to view the box from any vantage point, yet a photograph of the performance shows audience members huddling together and leaning against the walls as

[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.
[61] A second performance of the work lasted three hours and took place in a Canadian gallery.

they watch, suggesting that few people chose to move around the gallery. Inside the container, Hatoum's naked body is covered in liquid, red clay poured out from a bucket suspended over her head.

The performance begins as Hatoum attempts to stand up in the container. She slips on the clay, her naked body collapsing against the panes of the narrow box, pressing against the transparent, plastic walls. Her movements leave behind smudged, gestural marks.[62] Now on the floor of the container, Hatoum attempts to stand up and slips a second time against the container, producing a new smear of clay. The standing-falling action is repeated again and again for the seven-hour piece. As her body slams against the receptacle, the clay increasingly obscures her nude form from the audience. The action takes place as conversations, revolutionary songs recorded during a march in London, and news reports in English, Arabic, and French are played simultaneously on repeat. Even in the unlikely circumstance that one could understand all three languages, the words would be difficult to discern.[63] Amidst the cacophony, Hatoum's face contorts with pain and her body displays physical exhaustion as she continues to struggle against her self-imposed confinement.

The thin, yet unwavering walls separate the artist's emphatically bodily and personal experience from the spectatorial experience. Meaning seems to differ in the distinct spaces the container delineates. In a picture taken of the gallery space during the first iteration of the performance, audiences stand at a distance from the box. Their distance in the photo may suggest fear of being implicated in the violent act taking place in the interior space or perhaps discomfort with their inability to help Hatoum escape confinement. As viewers watch the artist inflict harm

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[62] Mona Hatoum and Christoph Heinrich. *Mona Hatoum: Hamburger Kunsthalle, Kunstmuseum Bonn, Magasin 3 Stockholm Konsthall*. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004.
[63] Ibid.

upon her body, they may either stand and observe, becoming spectators to violence, or walk away, choosing to ignore the plight of the woman in the container. Despite the unease the audience must have felt as they watched Hatoum enact physical trauma on her body, the photograph of the performance, which shows spectators attentively staring at the container, suggests they remained captivated by the work while physically safe on the outside of the barrier.

A preliminary sketch of Hatoum's initial conception for the performance provides evidence for this intentional separation of artist and audience. Originally, Hatoum drew a hand reaching out and penetrating the wall. Beneath the drawing she wrote "Occasionally penetrates barrier," but the illustration of the idea is crossed out with an x. To the right of the drawing she writes "No!" Separated from the violence, audiences must consider their relationship to what is being said over the speakers. The recordings bombard listeners with news of violent conflict, attempts at peace, and the struggles of displaced peoples in Lebanon. Visitors to the British gallery may or may not have personal connections to Beirut or Palestine, but it would be difficult to glean information from the cacophony to relate to their own experiences. Still, even if audiences could not understand everything being said over the tapes, it is clear that the tracks are somehow linked to Hatoum's struggle.

Hatoum refuses to let the audience ignore the effect that the audiotapes have on her, implicating them in her self-imposed cycle of violence. They must gaze upon her figure in the container as she throws herself against its walls and question their role, not only in relationship to the artist inside the container but also in regards to the circumstances that led her to be confined to it. The impermeability of the barrier not only forces audiences to consider their relationship to Hatoum but also suggests the condemnation of the artist's body to a perpetual struggle within the confined space. If the barrier were penetrable, Hatoum would have implied

that she could step outside of the entrapment she felt living in exile; that Palestinians in Lebanon, like her family, could easily walk away from the Israeli siege of Beirut. More generally, a permeable barrier would have implied that there is the possibility of escape from the disruption and chaos that traps and restricts bodies in different ways around the world. Thus, Hatoum's implication of the British gallery visitors in the performance might prompt them to consider their relationship not only to the confined figure inside of the container but also to global conflict more broadly. Through Hatoum's literal struggle against confinement, she physically realizes a state of siege that the audience may never have otherwise seen from their privileged position in a European country. She elicits an acknowledgment of the reality for oppressed bodies throughout the world and thus engages them in a critical, political action.

By isolating and inflicting pain on her body, Hatoum critiques Western inaction, as represented by the audience, towards and tolerance of the violence that continues to affect marginalized groups around the world. Hatoum performs the suffering and pain ignored in Western countries, thus representing those who have been deemed 'other.' In its basic formal qualities, *Under Siege* is not subtle in its reference to Hatoum's biography. Ignoring the fact that Hatoum utilizes her body as the medium, thus asserting her own identity, the recordings on the tape refer to conflict in Lebanon and Palestine and its repercussions to comment on an issue that immediately affected Hatoum's family and self. Ultimately, the critique that *Under Siege* offers is tied to Hatoum's perception of conflict in the Middle East as someone whose life has been shaped by it. Drawing on the viewer's interaction, the performance relies on a viewer's empathy for the artist's struggle and her ability to look past the specifics of Hatoum's reaction to understand a broader political commentary the work might offer. Even though it is able to

comment on disruption and conflict on a global scale, the work draws most of its strength from Hatoum's powerful examination of her Lebanese-Palestinian heritage and experience of exile.

Although this performance suggests a particular political meaning for audiences, the inclusion of the body of the artist in *Under Siege* also merits an analysis of her experience of the performance, which is decidedly different from that of the spectator. Her experience inside of the container is increasingly personal and isolated from that of the audience. It is almost painful to envision the mental state the artist would have had to enter in order to repeat the action of the performance. One can imagine how her body would be taxed by her repeated attempts to stand, how it would strain under the continued, performative labor. The extreme mental and physical demand of the performance indicates that as much as *Under Siege* is about the audience's experience of inaction and immobility, it would have an entirely different significance and meaning for the artist.

To that effect, Hatoum once stated: "[*Under Siege*] represent[s] an act of separation…stepping out of an acquired frame of reference and into a space which acted as a point of reconnection and reconciliation with my own background and the bloody history of my own people," explicitly revealing her personal investment in the piece.[64] Hatoum acknowledges that in her self-imposed exile in London, she was safe from the immensely real conflict and violence that was destroying Lebanon at the time. However, her physical safety would not have ameliorated the emotional stress of knowing one's home is being destroyed and one's family and friends are in physical danger. As the revolutionary songs, conversations, and news reports are played over the speaker, Hatoum responds to the words, each new headline or dialogue stimulating her bodily response and enacting her mental distress. The piece thus allows Hatoum

[64] From a brochure published on the occasion of Mona Hatoum's first performance tour in Canada. Extracts reprinted in Archer, Brett, De Zegher 1997, 122.

to achieve a deeper connection with her own past even though she is in a different place. Perhaps, to go further, it enabled her to come to terms with her inability to help her family or share in their struggle.

With Hatoum's biography in mind, symbols and metaphors become clear in the work. The seven-hour duration of the work is not an arbitrary length of time but reflects the seven years Hatoum had spent in exile when she performed the piece. The clay is not only a slippery substance, but shows the natural ground becoming unstable underneath Hatoum's feet. Just as the destabilization of Hatoum's nation and homeland displaced and disrupted her life, the clay in *Under Siege* renders it impossible for Hatoum to regain stability and stand in the container.

This notion of art as revealing the psychic turmoil of the artist is not new. In Harold Rosenberg's "The American Action Painters," he discusses abstract expressionist painting as an enactment of the artist's unconscious.[65] Rosenberg describes the "new painting" as "inseparable from the biography of the artist…a moment in the adulterated mixture of his life."[66] Beyond the connection between Hatoum and these artists who enacted their selves in their work, Hatoum's gestural marks of clay in *Under Siege* recall the impulsive brushstrokes of those action painters. In the terms of abstract expressionist, Jackson Pollock, the modern artist was "expressing an inner world" through his gestures.[67] These quotes, taken from documents dating from the 1950s, illustrate a fascination with capturing an artist's subjectivity through painting. However, while the artist's performance of the self within abstract expressionist paintings was grounded in the notion of the heroic, male artist as both subject and object in art, Hatoum's self-reflexivity is not the end in her work. Instead, although *Under Siege* draws on Hatoum's personal experience, it

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[65] Harold Rosenberg, "from 'The American Action Painters'" in *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, 590.
[66] Rosenberg, *"*The American Action Painters*,"* 590.
[67] Jackson Pollock, Interview with William Wright, in *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, 583.

still offers meaning that goes beyond her own attempt to reconcile herself to her own immobility in exile by incorporating the audience's distinct experience into the work.

Although *Under Siege* has a personal meaning for Hatoum, the spectator still plays a crucial role, immediately differentiating it from works by abstract expressionist artists. For example, in viewing a drip painting by Pollock such as *Full Fathom Five* (1947), viewers are able to trace the artist's movement across the canvas. The cigarette butts and footprints that can be found in many of his works evidence his presence inside and around the painting. These physical traces allow viewers to imagine the American artist actively creating the work without hesitation or pause. Although viewers are able to optically trace the gestures of each drip or smear of the palette knife, Pollock's paintings do not allow for audience's to consider their own relationship to the gestures on the canvas. The meaning of the painting, if we are to agree with Rosenberg's description of action painting, is solely derived from the way it demonstrates the psychic process of the artist whose genius is evident in the finished painting. Although Hatoum's work is intertwined with her biography and psyche, she extends the performative aspect of Pollock's paintings to leave room for and emphasize the experience of the viewers as strikingly different from her own and meaningful in itself.

The role of the viewer in *Under Siege* thus more closely recalls feminist artists than it does abstract expressionism. During the 1970s, women artists portrayed their nude bodies in videos, photographs, and performances in a critique of the male gaze. Artists like Yayoi Kusama and Hannah Wilke, for example, would take nude photographs of themselves in exaggeratedly erotic or submissive positions. Although male artists painted the female nude for centuries, Kusama's and Wilke's hypersexual self-portraits newly asserted the female form. A photograph of Kusama showed her posed erotically, her nude body covered in polka dots and reclining on

phallus-covered-couches. She wears heavy makeup and stilettoes exaggeratedly performing the Oriental trope of a hypersexual, Eastern woman. Wilke's early photographs often feature the artist semi or fully nude and covered in chewed gum. Her seductive gaze and pose are reminiscent of Hollywood starlets but the gum on her body, suggestive of the vagina, counters that seduction. In these works, these artists dictated the presentation of their bodies, ultimately staking a feminine position in art historical discourse to reclaim traditionally fetishized bodies. In their dramatic performances of sexuality and gender, feminist artists forced viewers to consider how their subjectivity informed their perspective on the work and their gaze on the feminine form. Through this engagement of the gendered gaze, their performances pointed to the viewer's implication in the artist's objectified position. These artists provocatively asserted their femininity, thus challenging modernist notions of artistic purity and neutrality through its engagement of the viewer's subjectivity.

According to scholar Amelia Jones, Kusama's and Wilke's works are categorized as body art, a sub-genre of performance marked by its incorporation of the body as "the locus of a 'disintegrated' or dispersed 'self,' [an] elusive marker of the subject's place in the social."[68] In accordance with this definition, Hatoum's work establishes her traditionally 'othered' body and experience in its social context. In its essence, the exiled body is decentered. Inherently, *Under Siege* performs Hatoum's "disintegrated" self and her inability to regain stability. In this assertion of her marginalized body, Hatoum challenges the modernist notion of the heroic artist, undoubtedly male, that abstract expressionists epitomized. She stresses her experience to assert a body that would otherwise be ignored in Western-centric art history. Hatoum's message thus goes beyond her condemnation of Western inaction in Lebanon to critique power structures that

[68] Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, 13.

would have silenced her historically excluded voice. *Under Siege* highlights Hatoum's marginalized identity as a Palestinian woman in exile and physically conveys her otherwise invisible experience. The use of the body in these performances, which Hatoum describes as "fueled by anger and a sense of urgency," removed any boundary between the body and the psyche and allows for the immediate delivery of Hatoum's critical, political messages to audiences who would then have to respond.[69]

*Under Siege'*s early engagement with modernist art historical discourse and implicit critique of art that privileged the concept of a 'neutral' subjectivity recalls the subversion of minimalism that was evident in the installation, *Light at the End.* The work furthers its immediate political implication of the viewer and its personal significance for Hatoum to critique an art historical tradition of modernism that privileged the Western male psyche as it abstractly manifested itself on the canvas without any narrative beyond the act of creation. Her reaction against abstract expressionism and the Western, imperial male gaze that it privileged is deemphasized as the visceral, physical reaction of both artist and audience are foregrounded. As Hatoum engages her personal experiences to cope with her experience of exile and to critique Western inaction in the face of suffering in the Middle East and around the world, she begins her engagement with and response to art historical traditions. As her work matured and became distinct from her experience, that art historical engagement would become her method of critique as she privileged the viewers experience and abstracted her reference to her self.

[69] Mona Hatoum and Janine Antoni, "Mona Hatoum," *Bomb*.

Chapter 2 Images:

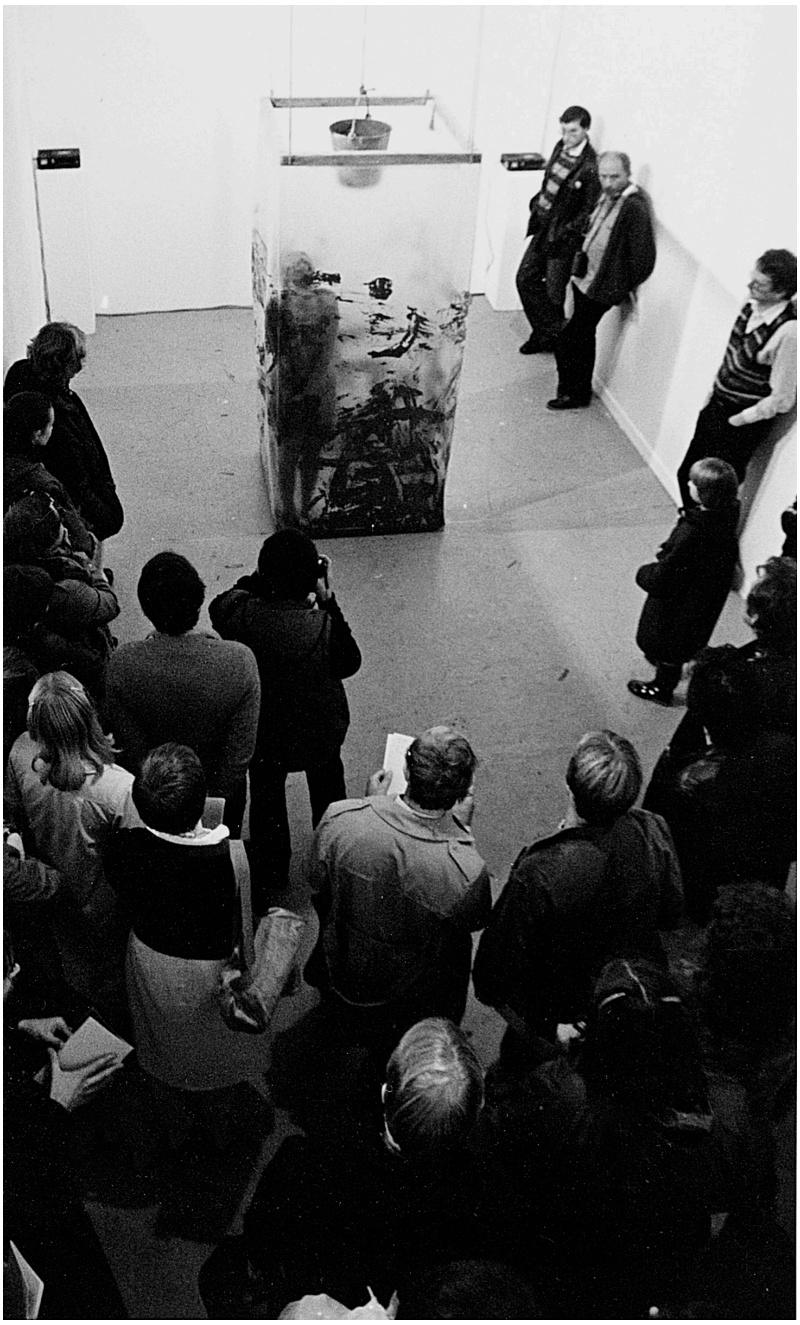

Fig. 1 Mona Hatoum, *Under Siege,* 1982. Performance within a wood and plastic sheeting structure; sound tape and liquid clay.
© Mona Hatoum. Photo © J. McPherson Courtesy White Cube

Chapter 3: Exile and Objecthood - An Examination of *Impenetrable*

Under Siege represents the early stages of Hatoum's career in which she drew on her own pain and suffering in exile to critique issues that affected her directly. However, after a decade of creating physically demanding, emotionally charged performance pieces such as *Under Siege*, Hatoum began to transition away from the medium of performance towards installations that no longer involved Hatoum's body.[70] The turning point of this transition is delineated by the work *Measures of Distance* (1988) (fig. 1). The deeply personal video features a series of photographs Hatoum took of her mother on a visit to Lebanon in the early eighties. Overlaid on the images of Hatoum's mother bathing is the black script of the letters she had written her daughter from Beirut during the civil war. The delicate, sinuous lines of the Arabic text, evocative of intricately barbed wire, highlight the separation between the viewer and the image behind the screen and more figuratively the distance between Hatoum and her mother. Her mother's naked form does not suggest sexuality but the profound intimacy between the photographer and subject. In a voiceover, Hatoum reads an English translation of the letters inscribed on the images, which describe her mother's longing for her distant daughter and details her mother's domestic life in a war-torn Beirut.

Measures of Distance conveys the pain of loss inherent to Hatoum's experience in exile through its artistic representation of that experience. Hatoum discusses the piece as marking a critical moment: "I felt afterward that I could get on with other kinds of work, where every work did not necessarily have to tell the whole story, where I could deal with one little aspect of my experience. That's when I started making installation work."[71] In other words, in the process of making *Measures of Distance,* Hatoum was able to confront and express her sense of loss and

[70] Guy Brett, "Itinerary," 56.
[71] Mona Hatoum interviewed by Janine Antoni.

sorrow in its totality. The video delves deeply and powerfully into the artist's biography to convey the immense sorrow and loss inherent to exile, perhaps more so than any of Hatoum's other work. This piece, which derives meaning from its connection to Hatoum and her experience, delineates the moment in Hatoum's career when she begins to distance her personal life from her work, eventually ceasing to include any trace of her body in her art.

As she detached her body from her work, Hatoum stopped including specific references to her personal political beliefs and experiences in her work. While *Under Siege* explicitly dealt with Hatoum's emotional state in her early years living in exile, later works do not offer the same overt acknowledgment of any meaning that is particular to Hatoum. Disconnected physically and perhaps emotionally from the work, Hatoum developed an oeuvre of abstract sculptures and installations drawing on minimalist forms and techniques to appeal to visual and physical perception. These new works evoked meaning for viewers by stimulating a sense of isolation, threat, and instability. By pointing away from herself, Hatoum was able to give greater attention to how her work might offer metaphors for loss, violence, and instability as she disrupted Western art historical forms. If performances like *Under Siege* created an arena for Hatoum to deliver explicit political messages through the enactment of violence on her body, then her permanent objects suggest meaning to viewers through their form and materials that shape the audience's perceptual experience. These objects and installations are no longer directly mediated by the body of the artist and encourage viewers to interpret the works based solely on their own experience with them rather than with consideration for Hatoum's biography. By reducing the complexities and nuances of Hatoum's experience of exile to their "essence," these installations evoke a sense of isolation, detachment, or disjunction through the associations linked with their

forms and materials rather than from the powerful reclamation of Hatoum's 'othered,' body that can be seen in *Under Siege*.[72]

Impenetrable (fig. 2) is one such installation whose material and form engage the audience's perception to suggest meaning. Transparent fishing wire suspends tall, thin, black rods from the ceiling to evoke the image of an enormous cube hovering above the ground. The nine-foot tall installation encourages viewers to step back and grasp it in its entirety. Each uniform, industrially crafted rod is hung precisely to create, at the right visual alignment, the incredibly ordered and symmetrical cube. The reflective quality of the steel generates a sense of movement and energy as the arrangement and image of the shining, hovering wires change as one moves around the work. Carefully spaced gaps between each rod allow for visual penetration and create the illusion that the large cube is dissolving into the space. These attractive qualities draw viewers closer to the installation. As one approaches, however, it becomes clear that the wires in *Impenetrable* are barbed, and the space is thus activated with a menacing quality.

With the realization of the medium and the subsequent associations that arise in a viewer's mind as she perceives *Impenetrable*, the space is electrified with a violent charge. The installation aggressively asserts its materiality to viewers, who recognize the reference to confinement, containment, and threat based on their associations with barbed wire. Yet, the appeal of the object does not dissipate with the revelation of its threat. Instead, although physical penetration is not possible, one is still able to optically engage the installation, the symmetry and delicacy of which maintain their compelling effect. The kinetic potential of the static work engages the eye despite the fact that, if the work physically moved, the latent threat suggested by the barbed wire would be activated. *Impenetrable* thus presents a complex instability. Its

[72] James Parry, "Finding the Essence: Mona Hatoum," 124.

aesthetic beauty, deriving from the lightness of the thin rods and the work's optical effects, is complicated by the threatening qualities. Viewers are left to navigate their uncertainty as they attempt to derive meaning from the contradictory effects of the installation.

The ambiguity created by the tension between the seductive qualities of the work and its inherent threat is predicated upon the ways in which one's perception of the form changes based on a viewer's distance from it. At a close proximity, the installation no longer presents the image of a cube, but rather a sea of seemingly endless, towering rows of barbed wire that deny physical engagement. Any attempt to grasp the image of the entire cube from this close distance has a dizzying effect. As one's eyes follow the vertical lines of the rods, one becomes aware of the enormous scale of the installation towering over her, each rod ending in a sharp point. Yet, stepping away from the installation, the chaotic assemblage of wires once again evokes the image of the cube. Form is asserted and dissolved as a viewer's relationship to the installation shifts. Despite the unchanging position of each rod, there is the illusion of movement as one's optical perception of the form is challenged by an installation that refuses to fix itself into a single, observable shape. The installation thus opens itself to the infinite perceptual encounters one might have with it, rendering a quality of endlessness to one's experience of the work.

If *Impenetrable* seems vaguely familiar to a viewer conversant in art of the twentieth century, it is because Hatoum draws upon and subverts the work of Jesus Rafael Soto, the Venezuelan kinetic artist. Hatoum's references Soto's *Penetrables,* a series begun in the 1960s. These installations are frequently noted for their popularity amongst audiences used to a barrier between them and the art. The works in this series allow viewers to physically step inside. Each installation is composed of thousands of thin PVC tubes suspended from a visible support, often to create a cubic form, although certain installations take a rectangular form. The sea of

luminous, brightly colored, plastic strands is ultimately designed so that someone could enter the space and encounter a multisensory experience. It is not surprising that museums, such as LACMA and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, advertising their *Penetrables,* show pictures of children running through the installation to highlight the dynamic and engaging qualities of the pieces. As a viewer moves through the work, her perspective of the environment constantly changes with the effects of light and movement. Soto's immersive, kinetic installations are considered incomplete without physical participation, and the artist does not hesitate to urge the viewer to enter as he allows for gaps between the tubes. One can easily imagine how the multisensory environments created by Soto are almost magical to experience.

In *Impenetrable,* Hatoum rescinds Soto's invitation. Describing the *Penetrables,* Hatoum stated, "[Soto] made these hanging cubes from very thin rubber tubes that fall like an avalanche from the ceiling to form a structure you can actually walk through…I did the opposite."[73] The opposing qualities Hatoum references are immediately evident in the titles of the works. While one allows penetration, the other denies it. Hatoum's installation engages many of the formal qualities of the *Penetrables* but complicates their overtly engaging and participatory characteristics with the suggestion of violence. *Impenetrable* thus simultaneously draws the viewer into the work as it pushes him or her away.

Hatoum's disruption of these engaging kinetic installations demonstrates a continuation of Hatoum's critique of Western art historical traditions that attempt to universalize art. As discussed in Chapter 2*,* Hatoum's evocation of her marginal experience in *Under Siege* is analogous to feminist performance in the seventies that critiqued the male gaze in modernist art. The critique Hatoum offers in the performance critically considers Western involvement in the

[73] Jim Quilty. "An Art of Disrupted Continents and Hair." *The Daily Star*, February 13, 2014.

Middle East while her assertion of her marginalized identity implicitly critiques the Western, colonial power structures behind modernist art that privileged the male gaze. In *Impenetrable,* however, any particular message or meaning takes the background to her art historical critique. Thus, in *Impenetrable,* Hatoum focuses on her subversion of Soto's kinetic practice in lieu of delivering a particular message or critique. Through a purely formal means, Hatoum is able to present her political commentary without relying on biographical narrative.

None of this is to say that Hatoum's experience of exile cannot be discerned in *Impenetrable.* Instead, her reference to Soto suggests how living in exile has informed Hatoum's perception of the world as a place where anything can become volatile. The trauma of the sudden loss of home and family cultivates, to reference Edward Said's description of exile, a detached, critical perspective of the world only possible through living in a constantly unstable state.[74] When, in the words of Hugo of St. Victor, "the entire world is as a foreign land," security becomes tenuous in the navigation of strange spaces.[75] The instability of exile discussed by both Said and St. Victor is formally realized in *Impenetrable.* Hatoum's interpretation of the *Penetrables* renders the safe, welcoming space inside of the rubber tubes threatening and volatile. Removing the visible frame that supported Soto's plastic structure, Hatoum's work literally destabilizes the work. *Impenetrable* thus indicates that when Hatoum viewed Soto's *Penetrables*, she immediately saw the potential for the work to transform into something violent or volatile despite the invitation that the works present. Even though the work does not explicitly refer to her experience of exile, her subjectivity is evident in the formal subversion and destabilization of Soto's installations.

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[74] Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile," 148.
[75] Hugh of Saint Victor, *The Didascalicon of Hugh of Saint Victor: A Medieval Guide to the Arts.* Quoted in Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile."

Although *Impenetrable,* unlike *Under Siege,* does not explicitly reference the artist, the perceptual experience of the installation suggests its relationship to Hatoum's experience of exile. *Impenetrable* captures not only the sense of instability that comes with the dissolution of form and revelation of material but also the exclusion of the body from a hostile space.The space between each rod is still visible, just as someone living in exile knows her home still exists, but it is physically inaccessible. The occlusion of the viewer from the area within *Impenetrable* is thus suggestive of the way people are forced to distance themselves from places that were once homes but are now only markers of loss. The continuous seduction of the installation, which counters its repulsive qualities, indicates a sustained, yet futile, love and desire for that lost homeland.

While *Impenetrable* offers insight into Hatoum's experiences of exile and the disruption and instability that have defined her life, its meaning is not limited to her experience. Unlike *Under Siege,* which points to Hatoum's body and her Palestinian nationality as a particular experience, *Impenetrable* does not overtly specify what it references. With the knowledge that Hatoum has lived in exile for forty years, I have argued that the simultaneous attraction and repulsion a viewer experiences looking at *Impenetrable* are metaphors for an exile's impulsive and impossible desire to return to the inhospitable space which was once her home. However, alternate meanings can still be derived from the work. Without drawing from Hatoum's biography, one could just as easily argue that the aesthetic appeal of this threatening installation comments on the ways in which violence is fetishized in a society in which the media constantly portrays loss, suffering, and death. Looking beyond the Palestinian experience, one can imagine how the barbed wire could conjure associations with Nazi death camps, the Berlin Wall, or Japanese-American internment camps. Describing the effect of her installations, Hatoum states:

"With the installation work, I wanted to implicate the viewer in a phenomenological situation where the experience is more physical and direct. I wanted the visual aspect of the work to engage the viewer in a physical, sensual, maybe even emotional way; the associations and search for meaning come after that."[76] By emphasizing the sensory impression her work has on the viewer, Hatoum enables a multiplicity of meanings that stem from the connotations viewers draw from a specific material.

As was the case with works like *Light at the End* and *Present Tense,* Hatoum's strategic use of material and form to create meaning in *Impenetrable* is not unique to her practice but draws on and extends the tradition of twentieth century art that precedes her. Begin with her choice of the cube, a form historically tied to both modernism and minimalism. Describing the role of the grid in modernism in 1979, Rosalind Krauss writes, "The grid declares the space of art to be at once autonomous and autotelic…the bottom line of the grid is a naked and determined materialism."[77] Krauss lauds the flatness of the grid for its truth to the two-dimensionality of the modernist canvas and negation of narrative. As minimalist sculptors responded to and reacted against modernism, the cube, or the "three-dimensional equivalent of the rectangular canvas," was similarly deemed an autonomous form.[78] Consider how Krauss's analysis of the grid echoes minimalist Robert Morris's understanding of the cube as a "self-contained unit for the formation of the gestalt, the indivisible and undissolvable whole."[79] In both the modernist and minimalist understanding, the grid and its three-dimensional counterpart, the cube, are noted for their independence from external associations or narrative. In painting, the

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[76] Mona Hatoum, Interview by Janine Antoni. *Bomb*.
[77] Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October* 9 (Summer 1979): 52.
[78] Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist*, Yale University Press (New Haven 2000) 288.
[79] Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture," in *Art in Theory* ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (New York: Thames & Hudson Inc., 2004) 818.

inert, simplistic grid self-reflexively asserted the flatness and shape of the canvas. Minimalist renditions of cubes were not meant to be self-reflexive. Rather, the cubic form was utilized for its relative meaninglessness. The presumed non-representational nature of the geometric shape enabled minimalist artist Tony Smith to use the neutral form of his six-foot-tall cube *Die* (1962) to accentuate a viewer's phenomenological perception of its occupation of space.[80]

Even though Hatoum's use of the cube references this earlier tradition, she does not by any means simply replicate the grid-like or cubic forms of modernism and minimalism. To a certain degree, *Impenetrable* has a similar effect to a work like *Die*. The neutrality of the basic, cubic shape highlights the perceptual effects of its occupation of space and its medium. While minimalist objects occupy space in a neutral fashion, supposedly lacking association or narrative, Hatoum's installation is full of connotations, whether of violence, imprisonment, or containment, that complicate it formal simplicity. The recognizable minimal form is suddenly confused by Hatoum's suggestive material.

Unlike Smith's dispassionate, inert cube, *Impenetrable* undeniably suggests aggressive force, motion, and emotion. In fact, Hatoum's reimagining of the cube is perhaps more similar to the post-minimalist work of German-born, American artist, Eva Hesse, whose sculptures similarly engaged with minimalist tradition. Although Hesse draws her engagement of the viewer and formal influence from minimalism, her work does not proclaim neutrality. Instead, she denies the notion of a truly objective work of art and creates works that immediately evoke sensual experiences in viewers. Hatoum's rendition of the cube specifically recalls Hesse's *Accession II* (1968). Audiences are invited to peer inside the opening on the top of Hesse's steel sculpture and view the countless rows of flimsy, plastic tubes that have been inserted into the

[80] Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination*, 289.

metal frame of the cube through the grid of small openings on its surface. The tubes introduce tactility and sensuousness to the untouched, industrial surfaces of minimalism.

Although one might consider how Hesse's cube fulfills the minimalist ideal of a gestalt form, at close proximity it reveals that it is a composition of seemingly infinite parts where one can discern the artist's hand carefully inserting each tube into the surface. In an interview with Janine Antoni, Hatoum acknowledges the influence of Hesse's subversive practice: "Eva Hesse was very much a model figure for my generation of women artists. She was around when Minimalism was happening, but her work was so much more organic and to do with the body."[81] The bodily nature of Hesse's work that Hatoum notes here is tied to the perceptual effects of the piece. The tactility of the flaccid tubes invites the touch, a sensation that complicates minimalism's emphasis on a purely spatial and temporal engagement with the gestalt form. As viewers long to touch the interior of the cube, their attention wanders from how the cube exists in their perception of space to wondering how the tubes might feel against their skin were they to be inside of the box. Would it be cozy and fuzzy? Painful? Strange? The cube is both literally and figuratively filled with tactile associations as viewers imagine its bodily effects. Using the same composite technique, Hatoum creates a sensual and threatening experience for viewers through the cumulative effect of the over four hundred individual barbed wire rods. The effect of the arrangement of wires in Hatoum's work emphasizes the optical and perceptual effects that further extend Hesse's subversion of the gestalt, minimalist cube.

The influence of Hesse's cube on Hatoum's practice is not limited to her agitation of the minimalist gestalt but encompasses broader shifts in art history towards art that embraced perspectives beyond the prevalently represented Western white men. The introduction of tactility

[81] Mona Hatoum, interviewed by Janine Antoni, *Bomb.*

in *Accession II* can be situated in a prevalent feminist critique of minimalism. During the seventies, while Kusama and Wilke were creating body art, feminist sculptors challenged the exclusionary principles behind the implicitly phallocentric ideal of a neutral gaze in minimalist art.[82] Even though the viewer's perception was critical to minimalism, the minimalist emphasis on a purely perceptual experience presumes a detached, implicitly masculine, subjectivity.[83] Hesse and her contemporaries rebelled against the minimalist mode of abstraction to acknowledge both "the subjective agency of the maker in the factual details of the object and the subjective agency of the viewers in our experience of it."[84] The representation of the feminine self in feminist, post-minimalist sculpture in the 1970s reclaims art with the acknowledgment that the work cannot have a fixed meaning, but rather any interpretation of the work will depend on a viewer's individual subjectivity and the experiences that inform it. In *Impenetrable,* Hatoum extends the feminist critique of minimalism to one that encompasses her marginalized identities, not simply as a woman but as a person living in exile.

While a work like *Under Siege* allowed Hatoum to perform her marginalized identity in a critique of a Western-centric worldview, *Impenetrable* draws on the feminist, post-minimalist tradition to create works that distilled her perception of the world into the formal details of the work. By abstracting her experience, Hatoum implicitly references her exile while allowing others to glean their own meaning from the formal qualities of the work. *Impenetrable's* engagement with minimalist abstraction thus represents a broader movement in postmodernism to create art that speaks to identities beyond that of the artist. Curator Elizabeth Adan notes that

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[82] Susan Stoops, "Introduction," *More Than Minimal: Feminism and Art in the 1970s,* Waltham, Mass: Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University (1996) 9.
[83] Susan Stoops, "Introduction," 10.
[84] Jessica Benjamin, "A Desire of One's Own: Psychoanalytic Feminism and Intersubjective Space," *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies,* 93-94. Cited in Susan Stoops, *More Than Minimal*, 11.

Hatoum falls into a group of artists working in the 1980s and 1990s, like Doris Salcedo and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who "have combined the spatial engagements of Minimalism with the expanded material possibilities of Postminimalism to explore the experiences of bodies historically excluded from and denied visibility in traditional political, social, and cultural categories."[85] Adan crucially notes how these artists' responses to discourses in art history were ultimately aimed at increased representation of marginalized identities in the art world. Remember Patricia Falguieres's analogous connection between Hatoum and "re-appropriation" artists.[86] This younger generation of artists subverted and critiqued the techniques and ideas put forth by abstract expressionism, minimalism, conceptual art, and other formally driven art practices that engaged the presumably 'neutral' eye. Using minimalist formal techniques, they demonstrated that these earlier Western artistic movements that aimed to create a art without external narrative or associations inherently excluded the narratives of marginalized groups as worthy subjects for art.

Consider Doris Salcedo's engagement of the violent history of Colombia. In her installations of subverted domestic objects, which are often rendered unusable, and personal belongings of those who were forcibly disappeared by paramilitary and guerilla groups, Salcedo responds to the loss of those people by representing their nonappearance. Creating works that draw viewer's attention to the absence of bodies, Salcedo engages materials inherently rife with the specific history of particular bodies in Colombia yet speaks to broader issues of loss, death, and mourning. Although the material in *Impenetrable* is less directly related to immediate bodies in Lebanon or Palestine, Hatoum's work comparably asserts the experience of traditionally

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[85] Elizabeth Adan, "Seeing Things," in *Doris Salcedo,* eds. Julie Rodrigues Widholm and Madeleine Grynsztejn, University of Chicago Press (Chicago) 31.
[86] Falguieres, "Disbelonging," 71.

marginalized bodies. Drawing upon the absence of a body in her work, Salcedo conveys a sense of loss that references the disappearances of millions in Colombia without explicitly portraying it. *Impenetrable* operates quite similarly. The disruptive impact of *Impenetrable* on the viewer's perception of form and material in the work suggests its relationship to the artist without any visible evidence of that connection. Thus, viewers are able to perceive and empathize with the issues raised in both works without the artist delivering an explicit message. Through empathizing with both Salcedo's and Hatoum's work, one might reconsider what experiences of loss and instability might be like even if one hasn't experienced them.

Physically removed from the art object, Hatoum allows viewers to engage their own subjectivity in their analysis of her work's formal qualities. As audiences encounter *Impenetrable,* regardless of whether or not they recognize Hatoum's reference to minimalism, they perceive the threat. Although the viewer's ephemeral interaction with the installation will never be wholly analogous to Hatoum's experience of exile, she may be able to understand momentarily what exile might be like. The privileging of the viewer's experience in *Impenetrable* calls to mind Roland Barthes's argument, "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified."[87] Accordingly, Hatoum refuses to acknowledge her authorial presence, utilizing industrially manufactured steel rods rather than clay and her body, and opens the work to a multiplicity of meanings. Ultimately, her implicit reference to the disruption that defined her adolescence enables Hatoum to evoke instability, loss, and disruption as universal concepts that define experiences beyond just exile. When Bardaouil and Fellrath connect the sense of turbulence that emerges from Hatoum's work to the

[87] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text,* 147.

"totality of ruptures that pervade the modern age," they discern in her oeuvre this potential to account for marginalized experiences beyond her own.[88]

In *Impenetrable,* Hatoum shifts the focus from her body, physically present in *Under Siege,* to the viewer's by subverting minimalist and postminimalist works through her material. *Impenetrable* engages Hatoum's biography insofar as its perceptual effects threaten the viewer and disrupt their experience of the space. However, the work refuses to explicitly reference the artist or offer a fixed political commentary, unlike *Under Siege.* Instead, Hatoum abstracts her experience to reimagine, and implicitly critique, works from Western art historical movements that intrinsically deny individual voices in their attempts to create purely optical or experiential art. Hatoum thus reclaims her subjectivity as a Palestinian woman in exile by subverting the minimalist tradition. In doing so, Hatoum extends her art historical critique to comment on Western institutions more generally. In her reclamation of her identity as an exile, Hatoum is able to position herself against political structures that would otherwise ignore the traditionally excluded identities that Hatoum asserts.

[88] Bardaouil and Fellrath, *Turbulence,* 17.

Chapter 3 Images:

Fig. 1 Mona Hatoum, *Measures of Distance,* 1988. Color video with sound, 15 minutes. A Western Front video production, Vancouver, 1988
© Mona Hatoum. Courtesy White Cube

Fig. 2 Mona Hatoum, *Impenetrable,* 2009. Black finished steel and fishing wire
118 1/8 x 118 1/8 x 118 1/8 in. (300 x 300 x 300 cm).
© Mona Hatoum. Photo © Markus Elblaus Courtesy Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha

Conclusion

Throughout her career, Mona Hatoum's work has been read in terms of her experience of exile. Those readings draw critical conclusions about the Palestinian condition, but also fail to account for the full complexity of Hatoum's political critique. Still, it is important to acknowledge that it is oddly tempting to identify the aspects of Hatoum's work that coincide with qualities of exile. In his "Reflections on Exile," Edward Said describes how "exile is strangely compelling to think about," referring to the way in which exile has been romanticized throughout the twentieth century. Said identifies a human fascination with the loss of home and nation and the instability in invokes.[89] Perhaps that mesmerizing nature of exile accounts for how *Under Siege* could captivate an audience for seven hours or the way in which *Impenetrable* continues to allure the viewer despite its threat. The violent, sometimes overtly political message of the work is thus juxtaposed against its eerily beautiful physical presence. In contrast to the instinctual fear her works evoke, Hatoum engages the eye of the viewer, whether it is by manipulating light as she does in *Light Sentence* or *Light at the End* or by emphasizing symmetry and order in works like *Impenetrable.* The viewer, paralyzed by their simultaneous attraction to and fear of works like *Under Siege* and *Impenetrable,* is invited to contemplate their perceptual experience. Unable to account for the way these works redefine the space of a gallery or museum, viewers might find it tempting to turn to the narrative of Hatoum's life in order to interpret their paradoxical attraction and repulsion from both *Under Siege* and *Impenetrable.*

However, to give into the temptation to read Hatoum's works solely as representations of her experience ultimately neglects the artist's complex negotiations with art historical tradition. It is through the presentation of her perspective of the world that Hatoum challenges social

[89] Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile," 137.

hierarchies and systems of oppression in Western countries. She voices her marginalized experience in order to encourage viewers to consider their own relationship to loss and suffering on a global level. Hatoum thus accounts for a perspective that is not otherwise represented in art. Even though both *Under Siege* and *Impenetrable* draw from her individual experience to dislocate viewers, Hatoum's works lend a voice to the masses of people who have been displaced and dislocated in a postcolonial world, unjustly imprisoned, confined against their will, torn from homes, or wrenched from families. These marginalized identities are not acknowledged in modernist paintings or minimalist sculptures that presume that art can have universal meaning through optical and perceptual effects. In her evocation of her experience, her multilayered works offer a crucial perspective on loss, inequality, and exclusion in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Under Siege and *Impenetrable* both critique an imperialist exclusion of certain identities, yet there is a crucial difference in their methodology. While *Under Siege* is powerful in its overt assertion of Hatoum's psychic experience of exile, *Impenetrable* coolly presents its political critique through her use of form and material. In *Under Siege,* the personal significance of the work to Hatoum and her violent action captivates the audience but points to differences between their experience and her own. As Hatoum distances her body from her work, she privileges the viewers' understanding of a work over her own and encourages those viewers to consider their perception of the work more deeply.

The subtle delivery of political critique in *Impenetrable* suggests the ways in which Hatoum's practice has matured over the course of her career. Situating her work in postmodern discourse, Hatoum's disruption of modernist and minimalist ideals uses the language of art history to critique their exclusion of marginalized identities. Through this subversive engagement

of art historical traditions, Hatoum thus critiques a larger system of Western, imperialist oppression that would deny the validity of her perspective in art. She describes how her work "shifted from the obviously political, rhetorical attitude into bringing political ideas to bear through the formal and the aesthetic."[90] By engaging more deeply with art history and embedding political commentary in the form and material of her installation, Hatoum's work becomes more complex in its delivery of its critique of Western power structures.

Mona Hatoum's representation of her experience and critique of the Eurocentric, patriarchal systems built upon the exclusion of certain groups is critical to the contemporary moment. Just as masses of people were displaced and lost amidst the various conflicts and wars that took place throughout the twentieth century, the twenty-first century is currently witnessing an enormous population shift as millions of people flee third world countries being torn apart by religious extremists, terrorist groups, and the loss of resources resulting from global warming. Amidst humanitarian crises in Syria, Iraq, Sudan, Somalia, Nigeria and other regions of the world, Hatoum's work has the potential to convey to audiences in the first world the significance of the loss of one's home and the injustice of a Eurocentric view that would ignore the struggles of those people. Perhaps Hatoum's work has the potential to evoke a sense of empathy in a time when scholars believe that mass migration will critically determine the trajectory of the next century.[91] Works such as *Under Siege* and *Impenetrable* within Hatoum's oeuvre notably convey the significant effect that the experience of exile has had and continues to have on the lives of people whose voices are most often unheard. Hatoum speaks broadly to concepts of dislocation

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[90] Mona Hatoum and Janine Antoni, "Mona Hatoum," *Bomb.*

[91] Alexander Betts, "Human migration will be a defining issue of this century. How best to cope?" in *The Guardian,* September 20, 2015, accessed March 12, 2016, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/20/migrants-refugees-asylum-seekers-21st-century-trend.

and violence and critically engages viewers, enabling them to come to their own conclusions about the issues that continue to affect people on a global scale today.

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