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Mona Hatoum and the Biographical Influence on Cross-Cultural Exchange

Nicole Shelton
Curt Germundson

Artist Mona Hatoum, a Palestinian born in Beirut and educated in London, has experienced the boundaries and displacement of exile. These have become influential in her work and are implied within some of her statements. Compared are the external experiences of a double-exile directly to her subjectivity, culminating in a discussion of works of art such as *Light Sentence* (Fig. 3) and *Homebound* (Fig. 7), and highlighting the issue of cross-cultural exchange. This artist is one of many exhibiting cultural exchange within art as a manifestation of hybridization of different cultures, even if the artist does not acknowledge this multiplicity. Because Hatoum values the way viewers experience and interpret her installations, her themes are made ambiguous promoting a type of universality, although, as I want to argue, at heart they are linked to her personal history. Her intentions are given physical form through the space in which her minimalistic installations communicate to her audience. The nature of installation goes hand-in-hand with the needs of the artist to create an experience of displacement, which seems to resonate with themes of exile. Misinterpretation of her work occurs when over-emphasis is placed on her origins and a separation from western influences is assumed. Although her aesthetic concerns are important, I see her biography as equally important towards affecting the subject matter of her work. In reference to *The Light at the End* (fig. 10), the artist stated: “This is partly a personal metaphor but I think my most successful work has managed to distance itself from any personal or historical specificities”.¹ In this instance, I have found biographical analysis equally important as visual interpretation. Within Hatoum’s case, I believe the connection of biography to creation is not only present, but also essential to thorough understanding, even though it may not be recognized or willingly acknowledged by the artist. Hatoum’s denial of the importance of biography within her works complicates communication of her experiences, ultimately limiting the possibilities for audiences to gain authentic cultural exchange.

¹ Benezra, Neal, *Distemper: Dissonant Themes* (D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1996), 51.

Mona Hatoum and the Biographical Influence on Cross-Cultural Exchange

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Post-modern artist Mona Hatoum, a Palestinian born in Beirut who grew up in Lebanon and was educated in London, has experienced the boundaries and displacement of exile. Such struggles became instrumental to her work. The influence multiple cultures may have upon the process and outcome of art may be manifested through ways audiences and even artists do not recognize or acknowledge. It will be argued that biographical analysis is equally important as visual interpretation by comparing the external experiences of a double-exile directly to her subjectivity. To fully understand and appreciate Hatoum's work, we must consider her origins and identity as an exile including its effects, her approach, and the issues of misinterpretation, categorization and communication. Although not usually a conscious effort, Mona Hatoum's biography consistently affects her work more than she realizes or admits, and this connection of biography to creation is essential to thorough understanding. Hatoum's denial of the importance of biography complicates the ability of her works to communicate her experiences, ultimately limiting the possibilities for audiences to gain authentic cultural exchange.

Mona Hatoum is a double-exile who was born into a Lebanese family already within exile, then experienced it on her own in London. She was born in Beirut, Lebanon, in 1952, as the third daughter of Palestinian parents (see fig. 1).² From birth, her family retained a



(Figure 1) Map of Lebanon

² Benezra, Distemper, 48.

sense of dislocation.³ Following the founding of Israel, her family had fled Palestine in 1948, retaining unspoken memories of the circumstances of their emigration.⁴ Hatoum attended Beirut University in the early 1970's.⁵ While visiting London in 1975, civil war broke out in Lebanon positioning her as an émigré and unable to return to her family for several years.⁶ Now planted in England, she enrolled at Byam Shaw School for four years, then Slade, at which there were more complex ethnic, class, and gender structures, encouraging her rejection of the art establishment, paired with an activist approach, stated Benezra.⁷

The video *Measures of Distance* (Fig. 2) showed her relationship with her mother before and after her exile to London. The video “spoke of the complexities of exile, displacement, the sense of loss and separation caused by war,” Hatoum



(Figure 2) *Measures of Distance*, 1988

stated to Antoni.⁸ Meskimmon informs us that voice-over in Arab filmmaking is a rare, radical device of self-revelation, which serves to give a voice to collective political

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Antoni, Mona Hatoum, 57.

concerns.⁹ According to Benezra, “When it was complete, she felt liberated artistically, as...she ‘said all that could be said,’ [which] freed her of the self-imposed obligation ‘to tell the whole story’ in future work.”¹⁰

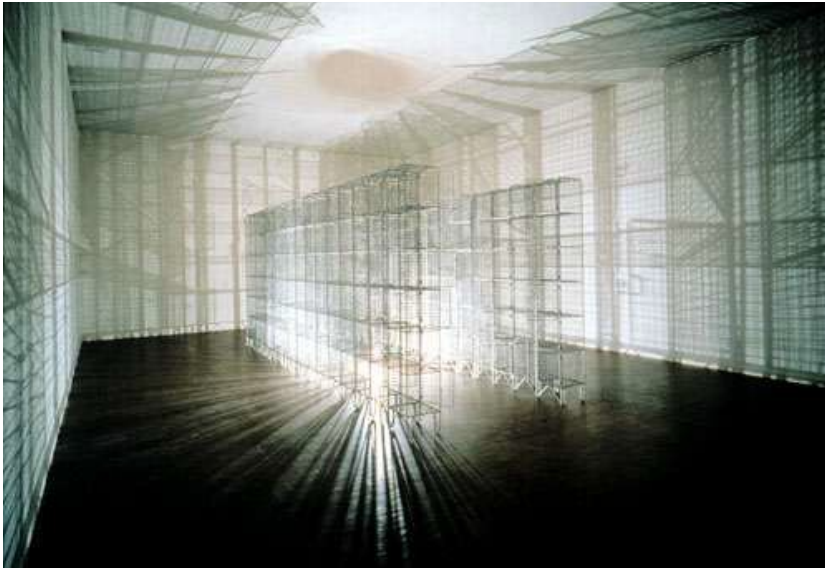
Although mostly known for installation works, she began with performance, which appeared more physically direct, but which could also be elaborated upon through explanations and interviews.¹¹ Hatoum later realized that installations were a direct form of communication as they could implicate the viewer into established situations.¹² Through new mediums, her quiet voice brought social and political reinterpretations stemming from her uniquely attained perceptions of new cultural environments, which resulted in powerful installations. Considered a minimalist, her intentions are given physical form through simplification and encouragement of viewers to assume ambiguous approaches within the spaces. The nature of installation complements her goals towards experience by literally casting others into a space that communicates her intentions and creates an experience of displacement, which seems to resonate with themes of exile. Installation requires an experience and the presence of bodies, and ambiguity is manifested through this created distance, which induces onto others a sense of herself, demonstrating her personal experiences.

⁹ Meskimmon, Marsha, *Women Making Art* (London: Routledge, 2003), 141.

¹⁰ Benezra, *Distemper*, 50.

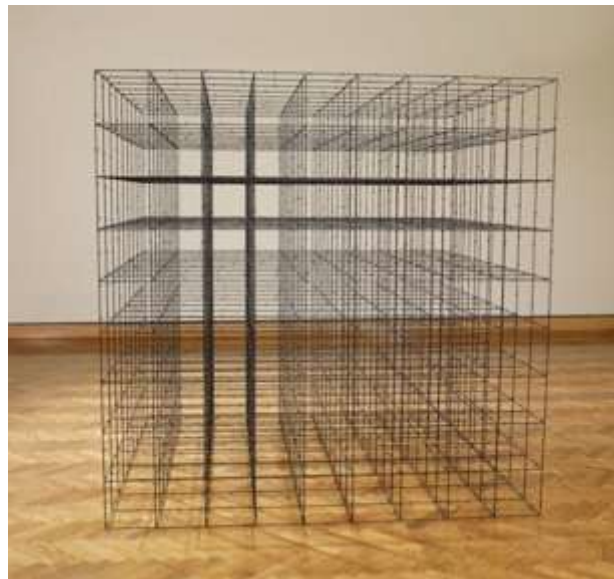
¹¹ Benezra, *Distemper*, 49.

¹² Janine Antoni, and Mona Hatoum. *Mona Hatoum. BOMB*, No. 63 (Spring, 1998), 58. [New Art Publications \(http://www.jstor.org/stable/40425560\)](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40425560) (accessed October 10, 2011).



(Figure 3) *Light Sentence*, 1992

Her initial experience as an alien in Western society was illustrated in *Light Sentence* and *Cube* (Figs. 3 and 4), composed of divided spaces. She felt opposition towards the control time has on people's lives, and the constraint of conceiving homes as uniform units.¹³ These boxes literally divide space, which shows the confinement she felt existed within the living spaces provided to the urban and suburban public of Western societies. Regarding controlling power structures, Hatoum explained to Deuchar: "I want the work to complicate these positions and offer an ambiguity and ambivalence rather than concrete and sure answers [that an object] is not what it promises to be. So it makes you question the solidity of the ground you walk on



(Figure 4) *Cube*, 2008

¹³ Drathen, *Vortex*, 137.

which your attitudes and beliefs lie”.¹⁴ In this instance, Hatoum does not address her experiences, but she does effectively communicate the topic of exile to her audience.

Valuing the way viewers experience and interpret her installations, Hatoum’s themes are made ambiguous, promoting a type of universality, although still contain a link to her biography. Through abstraction Hatoum presents “the audience with a set of objects and materials that may have certain associations and may bring out general feelings of discomfort or uncertainty,” Hatoum Stated to Wright.¹⁵ Her work is more concerned with the experience of the viewer and comments on more general political or social issues rather than personal issues. In her interview with Antoni, Hatoum refers to her approach as reductive, abstraction of forms into aesthetic structures that are not self-referential.¹⁶ As her work fills with meaning and associations, it is meant to reflect our inhabited social environment. Interpretation and variation were encouraged to come through the thinking processes of the viewer, rather than directly feeding them her message. Mona stated “I find work that obviously reveals itself, its intentions, so boring”.¹⁷ This explains why she aspired to keep interpretation open: to allow viewers their own experience, to draw their own conclusions. This seems contradictory, as much of her work centers on specific issues, although in a broad manner. Because of this indirectness and openness of interpretation, the greatest issue Hatoum faces is misinterpretation. Hatoum told Benezra that she finds instructive text labels, known as didactics, to fix meaning and limit reading of her work, and does not allow for the viewer

¹⁴ Entire World, 41.

¹⁵ Karen Wright, "Nature Morte aux Grenades "I am not trying to illustrate my personal experience";" *Art Newspaper* 17 (July/August 2008): 34. Art Full Text, WilsonWeb (accessed October 10, 2011).

¹⁶ Janine Antoni, and Mona Hatoum. *Mona Hatoum. BOMB*, No. 63 (Spring, 1998), 58. [New Art Publications \(http://www.jstor.org/stable/40425560\)](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40425560) (accessed October 10, 2011).

¹⁷ Antoni, Mona Hatoum, 60.

to have an imaginative interpretation of their own that reflects on their own experience.¹⁸

If she is open towards imaginative interpretations, then why should supposed misinterpretations upset her?

When control is relinquished to the minds of the audience, the artist's expectations can not always be met. It seems as though Hatoum does not want to be confined by artistic boundaries as she had been by actual boundaries of her exile. In an interview with Karen Wright, Mona Hatoum expresses apprehension towards compiled interpretations of content and over-reading into her background.¹⁹ Misinterpretation of her work occurs when over-emphasis is placed on her origins and a separation from western influences is assumed. It is important to acknowledge her past, but not to make assumptions about a piece as mere telling of her past. And although her aesthetic concerns are important, I see her biography as equally important towards affecting the subject matter of her work. Indeed, her background holds a degree of importance since misinterpretations of content upset her. Although Hatoum admitted to Karen Wright that her background of war and issues of exile may unconsciously feed into work, she claims she is not trying to give form to personal experience.²⁰ With this, it appears that her awareness of influence is not consciously realized. Her intentions seem defined yet diverted into an ambiguous language.

This ambiguity becomes clearer when paired with emotional states that she may have been familiar with. Demos explains that "Were the exile to latch on to any site, it appears, the attachment would too easily be exposed as compensatory or nostalgic,

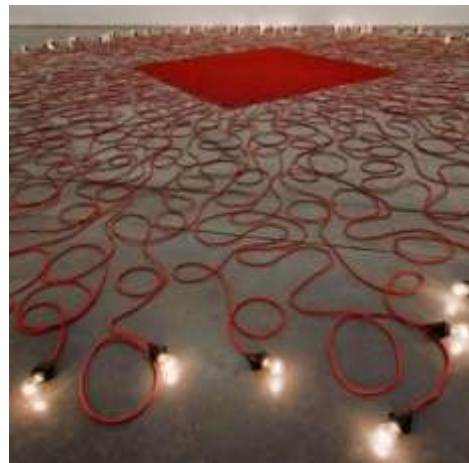
¹⁸ Antoni, Mona Hatoum, 58.

¹⁹ Wright, Nature, 34.

²⁰ Ibid.

reactionary or escapist”.²¹ Let us remember that Hatoum rejected conformity, and any kind of nostalgia could be seen as a retreat. Demos also suggests that exiles have problems realizing their own desires. Thus, the intentions of Hatoum may not be articulated as such, leading me to emphasize biographical influence as retaining a starting reference throughout much of her work.

Mona Hatoum is often categorized as an oriental artist. Antoni proposes that Hatoum’s work has been seen either as responsive to middle-eastern craftsmanship traditions, or to the horrors in Lebanon.²² Unobservant minds critiqued her works solely on the basis of biography, ignoring the possibility that she



(Figure 5) Undercurrent, 2008

could hold different aesthetic ambitions. As pointed out by Drathen, upon more critical examination, it can be seen that her body of work offers evidence on how much her preoccupations deviate from



(Figure 6) Entrails, 1995

²¹ Demos, *Desire*, 69.

²² Doris Von Drathen, *Vortex of Silence: Proposition for an Art Criticism Beyond Aesthetic Categories* (Milano: Edizioni Charta, 2004), 135.

those premature categorizations.²³ For example, *Undercurrent* and *Entrails* (figs. 5 and 6) refer to carpet weaving, but they were not created nor presented in a traditional sense. The materials manipulated, which include silicone and light bulbs, are contemporary. Daftari makes a good point that “It is often far from obvious how one should identify any particular ‘ethnic element’ in a given body of work”.²⁴ Drathen points out that it would be misguided to read her craftsmanship as an oriental affinity since it is also exotic to Western art, which she was educated in and had experience with.²⁵ Morgan suggests that biographical writing sometimes disregards her schooling in London, in favor of her Palestinian upbringing.²⁶ But even Morgan’s perspective ignores the fact that we should not critique her merely from Palestinian nor British perspectives, as she belongs to both. Contrary to initial appearance, the process she applied to her materials (see fig. 5 and 6) was not something acquired from her Palestinian past, since she rarely saw that art form in practice.²⁷ In order to abolish false definitions, we need to grasp a better understanding of hybrid cultures, allowing space to imagine their experience, and accurately refer to their past. Demos suggested that exile denied for part of Hatoum’s life “the nourishment of tradition, family, and geography”.²⁸ Her separation from these basics allowed her to present threatening situations. Springing from her personal experiences as an exile, Edward Said describing *Homebound* (Fig. 7) to Deuchar, states:

²³ Drathen, *Vortex*, 135.

²⁴ Fereshteh Daftari, *Home and Away MoMA*, Vol. 3, No. 8 (Nov., 2000), p. 3 *The Museum of Modern Art* <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4420518> (accessed October 11, 2011).

²⁵ Drathen, *Vortex*, 139.

²⁶ Jessica Morgan, *Mona Hatoum* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997), 7.

²⁷ Drathen, *Vortex*, 139.

²⁸ T.J. Demos, *Desire in Diaspora: Emily Jacir*. *Art Journal*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (Winter, 2003), p. 69 College Art Association. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3558490> (accessed October 13, 2011).

“Homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons...(Exiles cross borders and break barriers of thought and experience)...Seeing the entire world as a foreign land makes possible originality of vision”.²⁹



(Figure 7) *Homebound*, 2000

Malleable formation of identity allowed her to adapt to corresponding circumstances and separate from comforts one feels at home, which supplied her with the viewpoint on modern home utilities as questionable entities, as foreign objects.

Realizing how undomesticated she was, kitchen utensils were equated as exotic, and responded to as beautiful objects, Glencross stated.³⁰ In *Homebound*, she transformed domestic items into a realm of anti-conformity on feminine ideals. This transformation of familiar objects also resulted in alien devices, creating an experience of physical sensation, implying no actual cruelty but a sense of threat, Drathen suggested.³¹ The objects lit with flickering light, the speakers transmitting the buzzing sounds, and the horizontal steel wires that block the objects and limit the viewer's allowance of space, all

²⁹ Entire World, 36.

³⁰ Glencross, Jo, *Mona Hatoum: Domestic Disturbance* (Massachusetts: MASS MoCA 2001), 65.

³¹ Drathen, Vortex, 132.

work together to immerse viewers into her estranged perspective. *Homebound* seems to be a glimpse of her initial experience living within the Western world.

As an exile and an artist, Hatoum is confronted with expectations arising from her “otherness”. As she explained in an interview with Janine Antoni: “People often expect tidy definitions of otherness, as if identity is something fixed and easily definable”.³² Antoni reports that these questions negatively affect Hatoum into sometimes creating overly self-conscious representations, such as *Measures of Distance* (Fig. 2).³³ Such questions pressured Hatoum towards defiance. Hatoum asserted to Antoni that these questions create expectations for her work to articulate struggle or to be a representative voice of people, and such pressure causes her to desire contradiction of expectations.³⁴ These ideas involving expectations resonate with the practice of categorization, which for her turns into opposition towards any possibility of being placed within a mold. The expectations are countered by attempts to create new experiences for the viewer that represent those of Hatoum’s past.

According to Drathen “She is not concerned with triggering physical or spiritual experience in the viewer or probing the boundaries of pain, but with inducing a certain moment of displacement”.³⁵ Hatoum seems to tell her story by placing bodies into situations that allude to her own experiences. While her work is meant to be a physical experience, equally important is the ideological intent of the installation, whether she admits it or not. Much of her work contains a remote feeling, communicating what she has received from her experiences with exile. “There is no sure footedness to be

³² Antoni, Mona Hatoum, 56.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Antoni, Mona Hatoum, 56.

³⁵ Drathen, Vortex, 141.

found...echoing the real life uncertainty of these disputed territories,” argues Chaudry in reference to *Present Tense* (Fig. 8).³⁶ In effect, it shows her experiences in a relationship between abstract and actual boundaries by presenting the bodies of viewers into her boundaries of the created installation space.

The experiences exiles face could be broadly compared to social issues common among all cultures. Recognized as possessing a universality, Chaudry proposes that Hatoum’s work springs from ideas we can all relate to- the territory of not belonging or fitting in.³⁷ Chaudry claims: “It could be argued that the state of exile is very much part of the human condition and hence subjective to all”.³⁸ According to Chaudry, the modern period is seen as alienated, we seem to



(Figure 8)
Present Tense and detail, 1996

be living within an age of estrangement.³⁹ This helps explain why her work contains a unique universality, possibly commenting simply on being. Even within direct political comments, the audience can glean something familiar through the simplified materials.

³⁶ Kashif Nadim Chaudry "Globe; Bukhara; Present Tense (2); Mobile Home II Exhibition Review: A Search for Belonging in the Exile's World: Mona Hatoum Exhibition at Parasol Unit" *Textile 7*, no. 2 (July 2009): 265, Art Full Text, WilsonWeb (accessed October 10, 2011).

³⁷ Chaudry, *Search for Belonging*, 267.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

Hatoum's recurrent form of interaction between art and humans involves observers more actively. The endoscopic video installation *Corps Etranger (Foreign Body)* (Fig. 9) showing Mona Hatoum's intestines could be associated with feminism as it de-familiarizes male and female viewers alike.⁴⁰

Through title and imagery, she fashioned the familiar body as not only foreign to humans, but also into a form of disgust, which differs from the historical



(Figure 9) *Corps Etranger (Foreign Body)*, 1994

record of sensual and erotic depictions of females. She may be pointing towards our universality as humans, perhaps going so far as to comment on gender equality. Existing as the same species, each viewer is able to relate to images of the internal body, giving Hatoum an edge towards successfully positioning others into confrontation of both a foreign and universal experience. These experiences consistently occur throughout Hatoum's body of work.

As explained by Benezra, themes of a divide or barrier, physical or psychologically, have been central to Hatoum's work and these often refer to social, political and historical divisions.⁴¹ Notice that many of her installations center on feelings of separation. In reference to *The Light at the End* (Fig. 10), the artist stated to Benezra "This is partly a personal metaphor but I think my most successful work has

⁴⁰ Drathen, Vortex, 142.

⁴¹ Benezra, Distemper, 51.

managed to distance itself from any personal or historical specificities”.⁴² Dualistic or hybrid notions are consistently present in her work, seen through themes such as freedom and bondage. *Light at*

the End (Fig. 10) allows

the viewer freedom

within the space but

either repels their

presence through the

excessive heat it emits

or suggests confinement

through an

unexplainable unease.



(Figure 10) *Light at the End*, 2002

Jabri suggests that “Each work contains a remembered past, a deep history, while in and through this history, the present, in all its tensions, all its dangers, is opened out to the viewing public”.⁴³ Vivienne Jabri assumes the presence of Hatoum’s story, while that may not be the case. Nevertheless, Hatoum’s openness provides opportunity and encouragement for the viewer to reach individual realizations. It seems her desire is to inspire new arrangements of thought, yet she limits possibilities by trying to exclude herself. Indirect communication is exhibited through re-creations of her past.

Meskimmon interprets that “The aesthetic intervals materialized by these works do not provide a final resolution between differences or translate one culture into the terms of another, but they enable us to explore our embodiment and location as crucial factors in

⁴² Benezra, *Distemper*, 51.

⁴³ Jabri, *Exiled Art*, 40.

making knowledge”.⁴⁴ According to Jabri, Hatoum goes against how she has been treated, offering “reflection instead of denial and exclusion”.⁴⁵ In some ways, Hatoum is successful, but I think a consistent acknowledgement of her biographical influence would create the opportunity for more effective global communication, extending her universality to a new level. Such acknowledgement would also promote an increased awareness of human diversity through more realistic and accurate knowledge of the experiences of others, in this instance, of Mona Hatoum.

This analysis argued that Mona Hatoum’s approach has been influenced by her experiences with exile. The multiple cultures of Lebanon and London affected her work subconsciously through ways not consistently recognized. Although she creates experiences dealing with distance and unease, she does not directly address the reason behind her installations. These unique experiences are often subverted to aesthetics, limiting what audiences could gain. Counter to the approach of Hatoum, scholars often over-exaggerate her biography, neglecting the objects themselves. Material, audience, and her origins with exile are important aspects when exploring her work. Within Hatoum’s case, I believe the connection of biography to creation is essential to thorough understanding, even though the artist might not be able or willing to recognize this. The balance between biography and aesthetics within her creations is lacking, as one or the other is emphasized, creating a flux of confusion. This research suggests that a fusion of formal and contextual analysis bestows equal attention onto the objects themselves as well as the influences that may have prompted the artist. Recognizing and improving

⁴⁴ Meskimmon, 150.

⁴⁵ Jabri, *Exiled Art*, 40.

upon these issues introduces opportunity for increased awareness of diversity through cultural communication.

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Author Biography

Nicole Shelton is acquiring a major in art history with a minor in studio art. After obtaining a bachelors degree, Nicole will pursue a master's degree in art history as well. This education will provide the basis to enter an art museum within a research, archival, or educational department. Presenting this body of research at Minnesota State University, Mankato and the Cleveland Museum of Art has expedited skill development and increased perception of the processes that research requires.

Mentor Biography

Curt Germundson is an associate professor in the Art Department at Minnesota State University, Mankato, where he has taught Art History courses since 2001. He received his BA in 1988 from the University of California at Berkeley and his Ph.D. from the University of Iowa in 2001. Dr. Germundson has published articles on the German collage artist Kurt Schwitters and is particularly interested in the way Schwitters uses the idea of the "Cathedral" in his work in order to create a synthesis of "private" and "public."