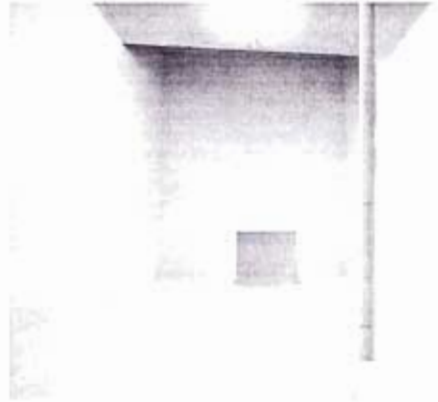


77. *Untitled* (1992). Site-specific installation at Mario Flecha Gallery, London. Stainless steel wire



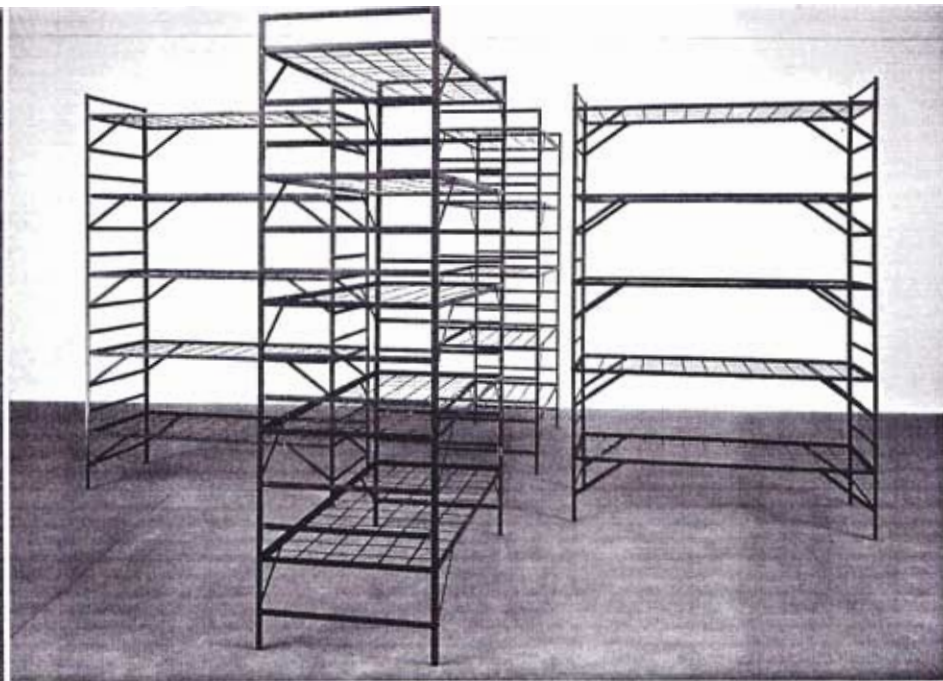
An untitled 1992 installation by Mona Hatoum, possibly the most spartan of all her environments, stands as a terse summation of her work's concerns. Parallel thin stainless-steel wires stretch tautly across an empty white room, at ankle, groin, and neck heights, marking off virtual no-man's lands and leaving only a narrow corridor for unhindered passage. Despite the simple openness of the arrangement, one cannot help but impute a sense of overarching danger to the situation: it is "almost ethereal but also quite lethal."¹

Using such deliberately stripped-down means, Hatoum's installations quietly expose the structures of control – and, related to this, the latent turmoil – embedded in the commonplace objects and edifices that shape daily life. Often skeletal or transparent, her architectonic arrangements of familiar objects suggest racks, barriers, or enclosures, and institutional spaces of alienation and oppression. These objects take the human body as their essential measure, proposing it as the field upon which power is contested.

Quarters (1996), another deceptively simple arrangement, carries many of the same associations. Four five-storey steel bunk-bed frames are arranged into a compact cross-shaped plan. Their immediate resemblance to dormitory bunks or barracks cots implies regimentation and control, but they also metaphorically shift in scale to imply social institutions of imposed order, such as prisons or urban housing blocks, where discipline, utopian visions of social order, and punishment are sometimes difficult to differentiate. Their ambiguity of scale, tied to their geometric regularity, suggests an unsettling potential for infinite expansion. For those familiar with Michel Foucault's critique of the panopticon, Jeremy Bentham's eighteenth-century architectural structure for constant surveillance, the reference to societal forms of discipline is inescapable.²

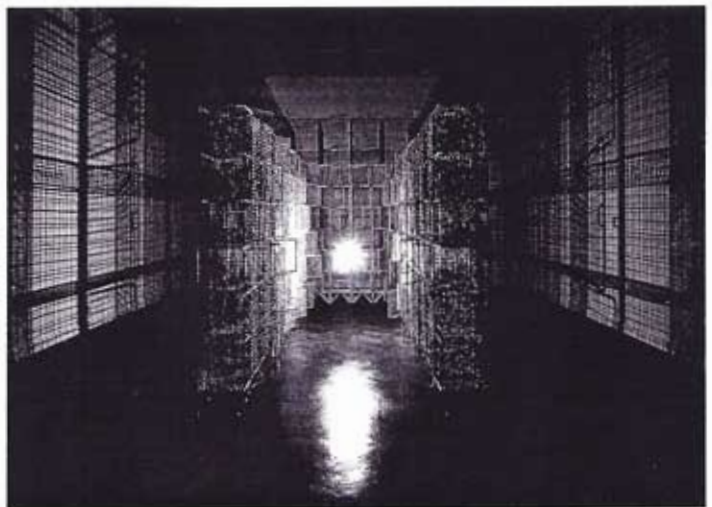
The elision of scale in *Quarters* seems related to the enthralling movement of *Light Sentence* (1992). An open three-sided enclosure built up of unfastened wire-mesh cages surrounds a bare hanging light bulb, which slowly, repeatedly, rises from and sinks back to the floor, casting compelling shadows of the cages onto the surrounding walls of the room. The effect brings to mind the exuberance of architectural tracery, but inverted, or the shadows misinterpreted by the prisoners

76. *Socle du Monde* (1992-93). Wood, steel plates, magnets, iron filings. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto



78. *Quarters* (1996), Mild steel

79. *Light Sentence* (1992).
Thirty-six wire mesh lockers,
motorized light bulb,
National Gallery of Canada,
Ottawa



in Plato's cave.³ Here the starkness of the structure becomes more menacing as it is revealed and amplified in the shadows created by the light bulb's omnidirectional yet penetrating gaze. The animated shadows bridge and collapse solid architectonic space, and encompass the body of the viewer to produce a loss of temporal and spatial certainty.

A loss of bearings is also a central feature of Hatoum's video installation *Corps étranger* (1994).

In a small circular enclosure, the floor seems to give way to a fleshy abyss: it is the screen for a round video projection recording a tiny camera's probing journey over the subject's skin, penetrating into her orifices and through her body. By transgressing normal corporeal barriers, the medical technology renders ambiguous the limits of the body, which depend on a separation of inside and outside. Thus the *foreign body* of the title is not only the invasive camera, but also the body rendered foreign, another site for the exercise of power.

As a literal exploration of the subject, and in its use of the artist's own body, *Corps étranger* relates to many of Hatoum's early works. She came to London in 1975 on a one-week visit, but the outbreak of civil war prevented her return to her native Beirut. As the war continued into the 1980s, Hatoum studied in London and produced a number of potent and politicized live-performance works and videos in

60. *Corps étranger* (1994). Video installation.
Musée National d'Art Moderne,
Centre Georges-Pompidou, Paris

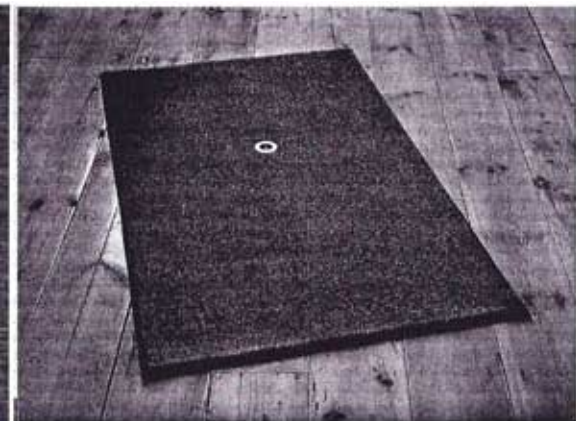
which she investigated feelings of cultural and gendered oppression and vulnerability. These often involved her being separated from but palpably present to the audience, as in performance works such as *The Negotiating Table* (1983), in which she lay still, heaped with entrails and wrapped in a plastic body bag, atop a starkly-lit table flanked by two chairs; and videos like *So much I want to say* (1983), featuring a head shot of herself, gagged by a man's hands, accompanied by a voice track of her repetitively speaking the title of the work – a regretful allusion to both repression and the difficulty of communicating in a foreign language. A celebrated videotape from the end of this early period, *Measures of Distance* (1988), is a poignant representation of Hatoum's relationship with her mother, and of the structures of separation that acted on them as her Palestinian parents were living under siege in Beirut. Visual screens of Arabic text (letters from her mother) veil still images of the mother showering, overlaid by voice tracks of Mona reading the letters in English, and of Arabic conversations between mother and daughter. The layering of these intangible narrative elements is a sensuous translation of the barriers and dislocations that she and her family experienced.

Although Hatoum's more recent work focuses less specifically on the emblems of her own dislocation, it continues to measure the distances between comfort and oppression. She has produced discrete objects that alternate, at different proximities,

between threat and seduction, including several lush carpets that turn out,

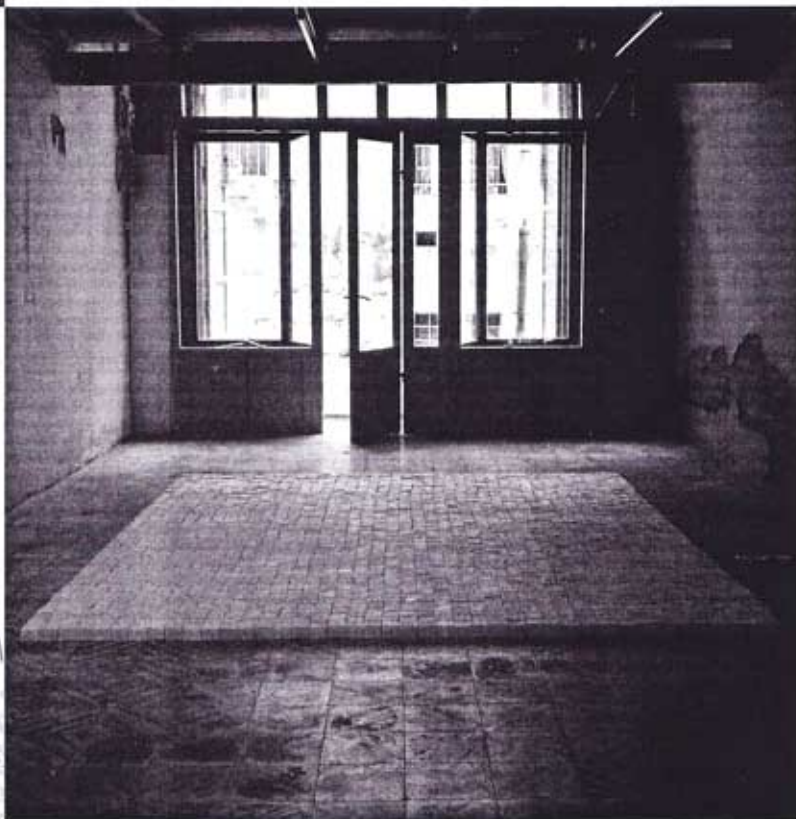
viewed closely, to be constructed of up-thrusted pins. One of these, *Prayer Mat* (1995), includes a compass to aid orientation towards Mecca, adding to the dangerously attractive mix all the associations of disciplined submission attached to faith.





81. *Prayer Mat* (1995). Nickel-plated brass pins, brass compass, canvas, glue. Edition of 3. British Council, London; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Caldic Collection, Rotterdam

82. *Present Tense* (1996). detail and overall view. Soap and glass beads. Installation at Anadief Gallery, Jerusalem



Hatoum's austere objects seem to intersect with an ongoing debate about the social implications of American minimalism. Like one classic formulation of minimalism, her work takes the encounter of human body and object as the essential reference point for object-making. But whereas some art critics have reproached minimalism for speaking a "rhetoric of power"⁴ through its severe forms, Hatoum's version of minimalism is neither an exercise of power, nor a hermetic critique of minimalist practice. Instead, it arises from observation of

the world at large. Through attention to the social dimensions of the barest encounter between subject and object, she reveals a tension or even coercion written into the very structure of quotidian objects. There is a wariness to Hatoum's work, a willingness to make objects, but always with an awareness of their ideological entanglements. The critical beauty of her works is based on exposure rather than artifice; it is a poetics of subdued attention. G. K.



83. *Measures of Distance* (1988).
Videotape, 15:26 minutes

Notes

1. Mona Hatoum in interview with Michael Archer, *Mona Hatoum* (London: Phaidon, 1997), p. 20.
2. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979).
3. Plato, "The Allegory of the Cave," *The Republic*, book VII. Plato's allegory suggests the conceptual limitations unknowingly adopted by those ignorant of a higher world and, more generally, the impossibility of knowing truth within restraints.
4. See Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts Magazine* (Jan 1990), pp. 44-63.

Additional Reading

- Assche, Christine van, et al. *Mona Hatoum* (cat.). Paris: Musée national d'art moderne, Centre national d'art et de culture Georges-Pompidou, 1994.
- Philippi, Desa, et al. *Mona Hatoum: Recent Work* (cat.). Bristol, U.K.: Arnolfini, 1993.

Selected Exhibitions

1998

**Wounds*, Moderna Museet, Stockholm (cat.)

*Alexander and Bonin, New York

**Real/Life: New British Art*, Tochigi Prefectural Museum of Fine Arts, Japan; Fukuoka City Art Museum; Hiroshima City Museum; Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (cat.)

1997-98

Mona Hatoum, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York; Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, U.K.; Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh (cat.)

1997

Mona Hatoum, Galerie René Blouin, Montreal

**The Quiet in the Land*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Portland, Maine

**De-Genderism: Détruire dit-elle/il*, Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo (cat.)

*: *Engel: Engel*, Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna (cat.)

*2nd Kwangju Biennale, Kwangju, Republic of Korea (cat.)

1996

Mona Hatoum, De Appel, Amsterdam (cat.)

Quarters, Via Farini, Milan (cat.)

Current Disturbance, Capp Street Project, San Francisco

Mona Hatoum, Anadiel Gallery, Jerusalem

**Inside the Visible*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C.; Whitechapel Art Gallery, London; Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth (cat.)

**Distemper: Dissonant Themes in the Art of the 1990s*, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (cat.)

**NowHere*, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark (cat.)

**Life/Live, la scène artistique au Royaume-Uni en 1996, de nouvelles aventures*, Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris (cat.)

1995

*4th International Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul (cat.)

**Turner Prize Exhibition*, Tate Gallery, London (cat.)

**Rites of Passage*, Tate Gallery, London (cat.)

*46th Venice Biennale, Venice (cat.)

**Ars 95*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki (cat.)

Mona Hatoum, White Cube, London

Mona Hatoum, C.R.G. Art Incorporated, New York

1994

Mona Hatoum, Centre national d'art et de culture Georges-Pompidou, Paris (cat.)

Mona Hatoum, Galerie René Blouin, Montreal

**Heart of Darkness*, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, Netherlands (cat.)

**Cocido y Crudo*, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid (cat.)

**Sense and Sensibility: Women Artists and Minimalism in the Nineties*, Museum of Modern Art, New York (cat.)

**V Bienal de la Habana*, Havana (cat.)

1993

Positionings, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto (with Barbara Steinman) (cat.)

Le Socle du Monde, Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris

Mona Hatoum, Recent Work, Arnolfini, Bristol, U.K. (cat.)

1992

Dissected Space, Chapter, Cardiff, Wales (cat.)

Mona Hatoum, Mario Flecha Gallery, London

1991-93

**Interrogating Identity*, Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Madison Art Center, Wisconsin; Center for the Fine Arts, Miami; Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin, Ohio (cat.)

1990

**The British Art Show*, McLellan Galleries, Glasgow, Scotland; City Art Gallery, Leeds, U.K.; Hayward Gallery, London (cat.)

1989

The Light at the End, Oboro, Montreal; The Showroom, London

*Asterisk indicates group show; all others are solo exhibitions.