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From Spectator to Protagonist: a Barthesian Analysis of Mona  
Hatoum's Approach to Socio-Political Issues.

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This essay will examine contemporary artist Mona Hatoum's ability to create an experience for the viewer that disturbs their sense of reality. It argues that a crucial aspect of this is a shift in the role of the audience from spectator to protagonist. The artwork is transformed into a theatrical stage where the viewer becomes the main character of an often nightmarish scenario. Thrown in at the deep end of a threatening scene, the spectator becomes an actor in the play Hatoum has artfully devised. It is the full immersion in this main role that prompts the audience to question assumptions at the core of their belief system. Through the prism of semiotician Roland Barthes' work, this essay will illustrate how the viewer is compelled to question power structures and societal constructs that are generally hidden from view.

The essay will focus on three main defining features of Hatoum's work that are instrumental in endowing the viewer with such an active role: the use of materials, the incongruous juxtapositions of everyday objects and the ingenious use of space of her installations. It will expand on each of these elements, providing examples of her work that evidence this shift and its implications for the viewer. In the first part, the essay will delve into the importance of materials in providing a direct experience for the audience that elicits meaning by spontaneous associations. Following this, it will demonstrate how her pairing of irreconcilable ideas contradicts the spectator's assumptions about reality by turning everyday objects into unfamiliar tools. Finally, the last part of the essay will focus on the curation of the space of Hatoum's installations, designed to lure in the viewer, and trap them in a psychological prison. In each of these sections an in-depth analysis of the artworks discussed will make reference to the theoretical thinking of Barthes, which will provide a key to understanding how Hatoum's work can disrupt the audience's view on reality, sparking questions of a socio-political order.

Before expanding on these three aspects of her work, it is crucial to consider Hatoum's biography in the context of the themes she deals with which are an essential part of her oeuvre. Her concerns with confinement, issues of identity and segregation are central to her practice and are generally expressed subtly and poetically, often with a hint of humour. These issues are extremely relevant to Mona Hatoum as her personal history is rooted in conflict zones, exile and a continuous sense of estrangement caused by forced dislocation. Of Palestinian origin, she was born in Lebanon in 1952, where she lived with her family as a refugee until 1975. She then became stranded in London during a short trip that

coincided with the onset of the war in Lebanon. Her forced residence in the UK, away from her family, became an opportunity to fulfill her aspirations to study art. She remained in the country graduating from the Slade with an MA in the late 70s.

Nowadays she is based in London and Berlin. Her studios in the two cities are used merely as springboards that she occasionally returns to, only to dive again into a new corner of the world to take up the numerous residencies offered to her internationally. Her nomadic artistic practice keeps evolving borrowing both from her life experiences and from the richness of the specific culture that surrounds her (Cooke, 2016). This constant moving around and experiencing of different places, traditions and textures reflect her history of dislocation and an overall feeling of not belonging yet being at home which is a recurring feature of her work. This is perfectly captured in literary critic Edward Said's essay *Reflection on Exiles* which inspired the title of Hatoum's exhibition at Tate Britain in 2000: *The Entire World as a Foreign Land* (Hatoum & Said, 2000). Although her artwork is informed by her own history, it is not defined by it. It engages critically with the complexities of the global world we inhabit, providing an opportunity for the viewer to gain a wider perspective on reality.

Hatoum's artwork is conceived to give the spectator a deep sensory experience through materials. Materiality plays a prominent role in creating this impact for the viewers, immediately appealing to their senses and bypassing reason. In an interview with artist Janine Antoni, Hatoum states: "I want the work in the first instance to have a strong formal presence, and through the physical experience to activate a psychological and emotional response" (1998, pp. 54-61). By engaging them with the material qualities of the work, the viewers are placed at the centre of the experience. Meaning is made only after they have reacted to the work instinctively (Archer, 1997, p.8). The following two examples of Hatoum's work show how, without warning, the spectators are turned into the protagonist of the scene they enter as they respond to the formal qualities of the objects in front of them. These works also demonstrate the way in which the audience engages with the socio-political issues presented to them.

The installation titled *Map* (1999) consists of a large number of clear iris-sized glass marbles that are displayed in clusters on the floor to form the image of the world map as a unified territory, with no geopolitical borders. From a distance, the shape of the map is immediately recognisable but the material it is made of requires further investigation; its

shiny and tactile appearance is intriguing and invites the viewer closer. Once near, the elements of the artwork become increasingly clear. At first, the viewers are struck by the fragility and the inherent sense of danger represented by the loose marbles, precariously arranged on the floor as they are, with nothing to contain them. Their instincts recognise it as a safety hazard. Immediately after, the viewers become aware of the impact that their own steps have on the artwork. The glass marbles gently shift and reassess the morphology of the territories as a result of the vibrations caused by the movement around them (Van Assche and Wallis, 2016, pp.97-102). The spectator is unwittingly redesigning borders and actively contributing to the idea of their arbitrariness. They have no choice but to participate in the artwork by restructuring it. The surprise and the weight of the responsibility of their actions, added to the instinctive sense of danger elicit a very personal and emotional response to the artwork. They are no longer merely viewers, but unintentional agents.

Every aspect of this installation makes reference to the concepts of instability and arbitrariness, presenting the world as “a precarious space with unstable boundaries and a shaky geography” as Hatoum defines it (Serpentine Galleries, 2011, 00:02:54). This is contrary to the Western perception of national borders as unassailable truths. It prompts us to question the idea of national identity and clear demarcation of borders as constructs, bringing to the fore the reality of dislocation and segregation. A deeper insight into this contradicts the Western assumption that we live in a stable world and in turns reveals an ideology at the basis of its existence, a focal point of Barthes’ theory of naturalisation (Robinson, 2011a). This demonstrates how Mona Hatoum exploits materiality to create an experience that sparks questions of socio-political order, putting the viewer in the driving seat as they steer their way into the artwork.

Another work where material is crucial in dealing with the issue of the relativity of borders is *Present Tense* (1996). Here 2200 cubic soap bars are assembled on the floor to create a large raised surface made of numerous squares, similar to a tiled floor of marble. This grid like structure recalls the work of minimalist artist Carl Andre. His signature series *Equivalent I-VIII* (1966) consists of eight arrangements of 120 white sand-lime bricks, displayed on the floor in eight different rectangular formations. Just like his work, Mona Hatoum’s sculpture dispenses with plinths but merges with the environment, affecting the way the viewer relates to the artwork and the space around it. As this work demonstrates,

minimalism is a strong influence on Hatoum. However, unlike Andre's work, purposely devoid of narrative and focused on the use of non-art materials to question art's validation (Baker, 1988, p.9, p.52), Mona Hatoum's floor is evocative and referential. The rigid structure of Andre's bricks gives them anonymity, whereas the waxy and uneven surface of Hatoum's work is imbued with allusions. This is enhanced by a series of small red glass beads which are inserted onto the surface of the soap to form an archipelago of heterogeneous shapes.

These dotted lines faithfully reproduce the cartography of the 1993 Oslo Peace Accords, a controversial agreement between the Palestinian and the Israeli authorities that has affected the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. The red beads mark the territories that the Israelis agreed to return to the Palestinians as a series of disjointed areas. This represented a critical step in the peace process in the region which eventually failed, extending and aggravating the conflict that remains unresolved to this day (Shlaim, 2013)<sup>1</sup>. The work is overtly dealing with the Palestinian-Israeli issue making a strong political statement by highlighting the question of borders with a material that dissolves in water as a metaphor for a sense of impermanence.

For the viewers the first response is through the senses. The simple geometrical arrangement gives an impression of a muted and clean surface; it appears harmless. A visual and olfactory experience informs us of the material and invests us with connotations attached to soap, primarily as something connected with our skin, our own borders. However, the spectator soon realises that this installation is not simply about seductive materials and pure aesthetic pleasure. These objects don't belong here. Beside the inherent risk of slippage on a soapy floor, the translucent red beads on its surface warn us of a more sinister aspect to the artwork, and the word 'tense' in the title reinforces this feeling. The unconscious connection between soap and skin formulates a vision of droplets of blood that catches us unaware. Once we realise what the subject matter is, the idea of blood spillage has already inundated our imagination and the silence of this dense yet ephemeral material has become deafening.

Once our deeper responses are activated the matter becomes more personally relevant; we make meaning only after the emotional reaction. The word 'present' in the phrase of the title is loaded with connotations: it speaks of presence in the seemingly empty space of the

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this topic, see Shlaim, 2005, pp.241-261

gallery, but also of our presence as witnesses of the blood spilt; it echoes how current the issue is; it references the Israelis' 'gift' of returning the land to the Palestinians that never materialised, exacerbating the conflict to this day (Ibid.). Less subtly than with other works, Mona Hatoum puts a spotlight on the specifics of the Palestinian issue whilst at the same time expanding on the wider question of borders, exiles and dislocation on global scale. Hatoum offers no chance to avoid the issues, prompting the viewer to question the conflict and the fact that the world allows it to go on.

The smell of this artwork elicits diverse responses from different audiences. It is made of Nablus soap, named after the Palestinian city where it has been produced for over 1000 years using the region's olive oil (Purtscher, 2018). For a Western audience it is the smell of something innocuous. This is subverted by the associations with the idea of blood and the question of borders, which produce in the viewer a direct experience of the contrived issue. The idea of cleansing in the context of Palestinian problem assumes a perverse connotation that is unsettling. The work can be read as a hidden, dark, humorous joke that twists the claim of soap-making during the Holocaust to present the Palestinian issue as a form of persecution worthy of the Nazi. This is heightened by the visual impact of the clean surface covered in gore. By positioning the spectators in front of this map, Hatoum transports them onto the battlefield, into the heart of the matter and makes them witness the bloodshed.

Each one of us interprets the work individually and makes meaning based on our own unique personal experience, yet those who share a similar cultural background are likely to base their understanding on a similar belief system. Generally speaking, for Western society fighting over territories is something that happens elsewhere or is relegated to the past. We are not used to considering borders as things that can be moved and deleted as we perceive our world as stable. We are aware of the conflict but we are able to detach ourselves from the issue by way of the process of cognitive dissonance (McLeod, 2018). This artwork forces us to question the certainties we take for granted by involving us in something that is contrary to our perceived reality. It awakens us to the concreteness of the issue, encouraging us to pose wider questions over the stability of the world and the true nature of international law.

Contrastingly, the same artwork creates a very personal response for Palestinians, for whom the smell of soap triggers familiar associations with a traditional object of everyday

life.<sup>2</sup> *Present Tense* activates deeper layers of meaning in the Palestinian people because Nablus soap is part of their identity (Purtscher, 2018). For those who are the protagonists of the conflict, and cannot afford the luxury of taking borders for granted, the work has a profound resonance. Palestinians identify with the work as the embodiment of their struggle as they view the dwindling production of Nablus soap as a symbol of resilience and resistance (Ibid). The qualities of the materials link their personal histories to the history of the conflict. The artwork acts as a bridge between their condition and the rest of the world.

A great emphasis is therefore on the materiality of Mona Hatoum's work as a carrier of meaning. From the initial stages of the development of an idea, meaning is embedded in its fabric and expressed poetically through associations (Cooke, 2016). Materials are the gateway to understanding the deeper assumptions that govern our thinking. Hatoum's work tends to subvert these assumptions and, in so doing, it uncovers new perspectives, drawing a parallel with the aims of semiotic analysis. The fact that a material is capable of carrying meaning presupposes an underlying system of signs and codes which defines our reality, guaranteeing that a group of people with the same cultural background would share common belief systems (Chandler, 2007, p.11).

For Barthes our shared interpretations of reality are based on what he calls 'myths' as detailed in his 1966 book titled *Mythologies*. Myths are the constructs at the basis of our ways of conceptualising meaning within a culture. Through them we assume that the way we interpret reality is the natural state of things, confounding the socially conventional with the natural. For Barthes the function of myth is precisely to transform history into nature. He describes it as follows:

Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact.[...] In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without

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<sup>2</sup> This installation was shown at the Anadiel Gallery in the Arab part of Jerusalem in 1996.

contradictions [...] Things appear to mean something by themselves (Barthes, 2009, pp.169-170).

Myths are the social constructs at the source of our interpretation of reality. They establish the cultural codes and conventions we unconsciously adopt as guidelines for our thinking, providing us with the commonsensical rules of our culture. Barthes argues that myths are intentionally created and promoted by the dominant social group; they serve a particular ideology (economic, social or political) that exists to maintain its privilege over other groups. Crucially, Barthes argues for a 'denaturalisation' of such myths, a process that reveals their artificiality and questions the power structure they uphold, propelling social and political change (Chandler, 2007, pp.218-219).

If the work of semioticians is to uncover the ideologies that are behind our assumptions then Hatoum's work goes in the same direction as it prompts us to question these meanings and the belief systems on which they are based. Her alterations and incongruous pairings overturn our usual interpretation of reality and uncover the hidden constructs that make us experience reality in a certain way. As art historian Sheena Wagstaff puts it "[An object] is not what it promises to be. So it makes [the viewer] question the solidity of the ground [they] walk on, which is also the basis on which [their] attitude and beliefs lie" (Hatoum and Said, 2000, p.41). Glass marbles and soap are metaphors that represent maps and that contradict our thinking with regards to borders and identity, shedding light on our deeper beliefs of living in a stable world. The myth that everything is ordered has stripped away all details of the real human struggle of the world we live in, deleting its complexity. Hatoum's work confronts our assumptions and reveals the ideologies that lurk behind them. The spectator, endowed with the role of the protagonist, gets to experience the work profoundly and directly and gains a deeper insight into it. Hatoum's *mise en scène* gives the audience a more balanced appraisal of reality, echoing Barthes' ideas. As observed by political theorist and activist Andrew Robinson, Barthes highlights the importance of artistic creation that presents alternative narratives as opposed to art that imitates reality. The latter only serves the purpose of reinforcing our stereotypical views on reality whereas the first is a crucial step in the process of denaturalisation of signs, which helps us uncover our assumptions. The Barthesian idea of art as a metaphor can "denaturalise the present and provide utopian alternatives" (Robinson, 2011b).



Hatoum often subverts domestic objects to –in her words- “create a situation where reality itself becomes a questionable point” (Van Assche and Wallis, 2016, p.97). More often than not, paradoxes and irreconcilable ideas are tightly woven together to create a whole that is both familiar and alien and which confuses, surprises and even frightens her audience. Once in the space of the artwork, presented with the anomalies and contradictions she creates, we are thrust into the realms of folk tales and dreams; a place where our usual parameters for assessing reality are temporarily made redundant. From here we get to experience what she has in store for us. We are put on the spot in a risky situation devised to push us to reassess our own view on the concept of home. This is evidenced by the following two examples where scaled up kitchen implements are transformed into menacing tools of torture, demonstrating the influence of surrealism in her work.

The *Grater Divide* (2002) is a large steel sculpture that resembles a scaled up cheese grater arranged as a concertina partition wall made of three segments. Despite its unexpected size and distorted arrangement as a real size room divider, the artwork is immediately recognisable as a variation on the classic upright grater. Its slick and elegant appearance faithfully reproduces the surface of each side of the original object distributed over the three panels, each of them with its specific type of blades for the required culinary application. The central panel features three classic slits as slicers spaced apart in regular intervals. It is suspended from the floor, held up by the other two segments connected to it on both sides. Metal bars at either end of these panels mimic the metal handles of classic cheese graters. These create openings in the lower and top part of the partition wall, exposing the least private parts of our bodies. The lower handles rest on the floor holding up the structure as it zigzags through the gallery floor dividing the space in two. A whole segment is dedicated to coarse grating with rounded holes organised impeccably over its entire surface, the blades made by gentle protuberances. The other panel incorporates two types of blades respectively for fine and finer grating. They are both grids of repetitive holes like the results of stab wounds to the metal surface, with sharp edges curved up to maximise their carving potential.

The unexpected size of the common kitchen implement gives it a playful feel that attracts the viewers, suddenly dwarfed by something they usually hold in their hands. Hatoum magically transports the spectators into a different world which they explore with curiosity, attracted by the seductive steel surface. This grater belongs to giants and this is both

amusing and disturbing as it speaks of vulnerability. Once at close range, the viewers are immediately repelled by the instinctive realisation of the danger it poses as the innocuous blades could potentially become instruments of torture. Far from providing privacy, shelter and a sense of security this partition wall leave us exposed and unprotected and could potentially harm us. Before making meaning, our instincts have already warned us of something unexpectedly unpleasant. As the artist says: “There is this tension between what you are looking at –very seductive, very attractive- and its implications” (Menil Collection, 2017). At once our senses experience safety and threat, familiarity and suspicion, privacy and exposure, wonder and menace.

Similarly, the spectator’s sense of wonder is disrupted by a deep-seated sense of fear with the artwork *La Grande Broyeuse (Moulin Julienne x 17)* (1999). This artwork is the perfect replica of an old style food processor, only seventeen times larger than the original, with a selection of three interchangeable disks of different blades displayed on the floor in front of it. The visual impact of the imposing three legged metal structure is remarkable.

Undeniably, it is a thing of beauty. Transformed into Alice in Wonderland, the viewers explore the scene with hilarity. However, the closer they get, the more disquieting the artwork becomes. The size of the central drum, originally designed to contain vegetables, could hold a human in the foetal position. Scaled up as it is, the raised arm at the back - which would be used to push the vegetables into the drum- resembles a giant scorpion’s tail (ibid.). To add to this, the handle at the front, which is designed to rotate the blades around by a circular motion of the hand, is reminiscent of some kind of antennae. The more details the viewers take in, the stronger their unconscious reaction, firing primal responses that once protected our species from large predators. The spectators are caught unaware by the towering beast as the anthropomorphised embodiment of their worst nightmares. Turned from viewers to victims they find themselves at the centre of a scene that revives latent primal fears of being eaten alive (Hatoum & Said, 2000, pp. 29-31).

In both installations the spectator experiences a sense of anxiety at a deep unconscious level, as an instinctual response to the inherent dangers posed by the scaled up objects. Each in their own way these artworks act on primordial, innate feelings still present in the archaeology of our species. These are re-activated as we trespass into unconscious territories, like in dreams or storytelling, where suspension of disbelief induces real feelings for something that logic would discredit (Naar.). When the familiar turns

menacing we experience the uncanny, a term coined by psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud from the German word 'unheimlich', which literally translates as 'un-homely' (Freud, 2003). The uncanny describes a sense of alienation that sparks questions on the order of things.

Once again, by turning common everyday objects into threatening tools, Hatoum subverts our assumptions. In the space of the installation people can no longer reliably consider the grater or the shredder as a signifier of a homely meal in the safety and privacy of their kitchen. By contradicting these signs she questions the notion of home and in so doing she disrupts the deeper myth -to use a Barthesian term- that we live in a world of certainties. With her artwork she subtly puts under scrutiny the myth that simplifies the idea of home-as-a-safe-place, revealing the economic and socio-political ideology that hides behind it. On one hand this ideology pushes us to invest in our homes and view them as status symbols, ensuring economic growth and accumulation of riches for the few, whilst on the other hand it allows us to unconsciously brush away all evidence that contradicts this notion in a process of detachment from the issue. From this perspective it is easier to dismiss those who don't match our reality and to consider them as deviant and somehow responsible for their own misfortune. We unconsciously other the less privileged and view them as problematic. As protagonists of the scene in these installations, we have a personal experience of being denied a sense of safety and a place to call home, which in turns reminds us that this condition is arbitrary. Privilege is a lottery. In the moment we experience the deep-seated fear at the mercy of a giant monster which turns a domestic environment into an unexplored jungle, we get to engage in the first person with the issue, sensing what our life would be if the tables were turned and it was us who had no place to call home. Crucially, this can inspire more tolerance and cohesion among people which undermines the power of the dominant group.

It is of paramount importance to notice the cultural specificity of this argument, which is based on the fact that Hatoum operates in the Western world where the myth of stability is prevalent and reinforced by the perceived stability of our system. However, these artworks resonate also for those who deal with segregation on a daily basis and cannot take safety for granted, providing an opportunity to identify with the artwork. This applies to exiles as well as marginalised people within Western society. Mona Hatoum gives the less privileged a presence in a world that segregates them. In essence, it depends on whether or

not the viewers are privileged that they will either question their assumptions on reality or interpret the works as representations of their lived experiences.

A common trait of the works described so far is the relevance of the spatial arrangement. Space is a critical aspect of Hatoum's current production, having moved away from the explicitly political performance and video art she created in the 80s. Her installations are carefully curated to resemble theatrical settings, drawing a parallel with the theatricality of Baroque sculpture, particularly with the work of Italian sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Bernini created the illusion of a moving image from a still object making use of the space around the sculptures to engage the viewers, a great innovation of 17<sup>th</sup> century Rome. The celebrated *Daphne and Apollo* (1622-1625) exemplifies this. The sculpture portrays the movement of Apollo's chase of Daphne, creating a twirling motion that directs the spectator around it to witness her gradual transformation into a tree. Viewed from her right hand side, the nymph's body seems intact, but by the time we face the back of the sculpture we can only see a tree in her place. The transmutation has happened before our eyes as we move around the sculpture. The human scale of the characters portrayed, the impetus of the chase and the emotionally charged subject matter produce an active engagement of the viewer, generating intense feelings. These characteristics are also present in Hatoum's installations. However, the latter tends to place the viewer in the centre of the scene, not just by recreating it theatrically and inviting them to actively move around it, but by producing in them a direct experience of it, triggering a deep personal response. No matter how involving Bernini's sculpture might be, it does not ignite Daphne's trepidation in the viewers. It satisfies their voyeuristic pleasure. They empathize with her mixed feelings of dread and elation at her escape, which is also her doom; they do not, however, experience them in the first person.

An interesting comparison can be made with the installation *Light Sentence* (1996). Here Hatoum dispensed with the presence of the statue, endowing the spectator with that role. Both artworks are a portrayal of entrapment. Far from the representational depiction of Apollo's lustful chase and of Daphne's predicament, this is an abstract depiction of what being trapped feels like. The installation is made of two lines of wire mesh lockers stacked high to create two parallel walls with a gap in between. A single naked light bulb constantly moves along the horizontal plane in this narrow space, projecting the shadow of the wire mesh lockers onto the white walls of the room that hosts them. The simple and

effortless movement of the light bulb is magnified by the enlarged moving shadows, creating a world of its own, devoid of points of reference. Like Bernini's sculpture, it is designed to invite the viewers to walk around it, placed as it is in the centre of an empty room. With *Daphne and Apollo* the viewers identify with the Ovidian characters by temporarily giving up their own identities whereas, by contrast, in *Light Sentence* the spectators are the main characters who inhabit this space. They are directly confronted with the unsettling feelings of a vertigo-inducing world. Their own presence becomes part of the work in the play of light and shadows (Van Assche and Wallis, 2016, p.66). Whilst Bernini depicted movement by the fluttering drapes and the twirling figures, Hatoum inflicts movement onto the viewer as a form of imprisonment. The audience is trapped in a place that signals a form of institutionalised living; restricted by cages and haunted by the ghostly presence of larger and unstoppable psychological barriers beyond the physical ones of the metal structure. With Bernini the viewer experiences the intense emotions vicariously by looking at the scene; with Hatoum they experience them directly on a subconscious level by inhabiting it. This is achieved by the careful curation of the space. Hatoum's theatricality reverses Bernini's. The latter fills the image with realistic details, whereas Hatoum presents it economically with the language of minimalism.

Hatoum's work openly challenges Michael Fried's claim that theatricality is a degeneration of art. In his 1967 essay *Art and Objecthood*, Fried critiqued the theatricality of minimalism art, as a reaction to the emerging art movement of the 60s. He denounced the minimalists' use of space as a mere artifice. He believed minimalists employ theatricality to give their artwork the presence that it would otherwise lack. For Fried an artwork should emanate power from within, unaided by the space around it. Hatoum re-appropriates minimalist aesthetics and challenges Fried's critique. Her artwork is unapologetically contingent on the space to have presence, openly employing sculpture as theatrical props (ibid.). The artwork happens when the spectator experiences it as they enter the scene.

Cornelia Parker's *War Room* (2015) provides a contemporary comparison to *Light Sentence* for its theatricality. Here red draping -hanging loosely from a middle line in the ceiling- entirely covers the white-walled structure around it, creating a large tent. The viewer actively moves into the artwork and is enveloped by its materiality. The draping is made of red strips of paper with regular holes in the shape of remembrance poppies. They are the leftovers of the paper used to produce them. Here the cut out poppies look white, as

their absence allows the non-colour of the gallery walls to appear behind, linking the idea of peace and war, and making reference to absence and loss. The colour red connected to the war deaths, as symbolised by the poppies, inspires a reflection on the pointlessness of war (Thorpe, 2015, pp.57-60). *War Room* too can induce vertigo in the viewer as they move inside it due to the optical illusion created by the holes; as in *Light Sentence* the pairing of different signifiers makes reference to a political message. However, Parker's installation lacks the urgency and deep-seated reactions that Hatoum's work delivers. There is no sense of being physically or psychologically trapped which is strongly present in *Light Sentence*. The viewers are invited rather than tricked into the artwork. In *War Room* materiality has a different function; it is not directed at the viewers but at history providing a different level of engagement of the audience.

*Light Sentence* has the gravitas of a real trap. Its rigid aesthetics and seductive materials create a false sense of security which lures the viewer into the installation. It promises an orderly world as bait, and then betrays the viewers' expectations once they are locked in space of the artwork. The emotions it elicits are more similar to the sense of imprisonment created by Graciela Carnevale's contribution to the Cycle of Experimental Art of 1968, organised by the Group of Avant-Garde Artists in Rosario. This work of participatory art literally trapped the audience in a space that they were allowed to enter but could not leave. The over-crowded space was visible from the outside world through a glass shop window. The viewers were trapped for a considerable time before an onlooker finally took the initiative of breaking the glass to free them (Bishop, 2012, pp.119-121). Without physically trapping the viewers, Hatoum elicits a similar response by engaging them emotionally in an immersive subjective experience. A feeling of dislocation from everyday life turns the unsuspecting audience into participants.

This essay illustrates how Hatoum makes the spectator into the protagonist of the scene: the viewer is unwittingly placed at the centre of a painstakingly orchestrated environment designed to activate deep unconscious responses. The artworks analysed here consistently show how the audience is skillfully manipulated into the artwork, attracted by seductive materials, familiar objects and pristine aesthetics, only to be trapped in a space that defies certainties. Rather than viewing the installations, they inhabit them, transformed into the protagonists of the world Hatoum creates, where she presents reality from a different perspective. Here one experiences first-hand what it is like to be at the mercy of violence

and segregation. Immersed in the role of protagonists, the spectators are turned into the disenfranchised and the dislocated. In this process, common Western assumptions of reality are disrupted and undermined, often leaving the viewers with an unresolved dilemma. Mona Hatoum plays tricks on us; she designs her installations so as to replicate the way in which the story is told to society at large by the dominant group, which semioticians are engaged in uncovering. She controls the world of meanings within the artwork in the same way as dominant social groups construct a reality, through codes and conventions, which allows them to maintain privilege over other marginalised groups. Her installations are engineered so as to create a construct defined by those who are normally othered, exposing the reversed dynamics at societal level. This insight goes hand in hand with Barthes' intuition. Walking in the shoes of the other, we gain a deeper understanding of the possible limitations of our own view of reality. This prompts us to reflect upon the constructs that hide behind our assumptions, making us aware of the ideological forces at their core. This process could potentially inspire new ways of being which may foster a more equal redistribution of power within society. This is the sheer power and relevance of Hatoum's oeuvre.



Figure 1: Mona Hatoum, *Map* (1999)  
Glass marbles, dimensions variable



Figure 2: Mona Hatoum, *Present Tense* (1996)  
Soap, 232.5 x 289 x 5.5 cm  
Tate





Figure 3: Mona Hatoum, *Present Tense* (1996)[detail]  
Soap, 232.5 x 289 x 5.5 cm  
Tate



Figure 4: Carl Andre, *Equivalent V* (1966-1969)[series of 8]  
Firebricks, 137.2 x 114.3 x 12.8 cm  
MoMa



Figure 5: Mona Hatoum, *Grater Divide* (2002)  
Mild steel, dimensions variable  
Museum of Fine Art Boston



Figure 6: Mona Hatoum, *La Grande Broyeuse (Mouli-Julienne x 17)* (1999)  
Mild Steel, 263 x 575 x 343 cm, Discs each 170 x 170 x 5 cm  
CGAC Collection, Santiago de Compostela



Figure 7: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Daphne and Apollo* (1622- 1625)  
Marble, Life-size  
Galleria Borghese Rome



Figure 8: Cornelia Parker, *War Room* (2015)  
Paper, dimensions variable

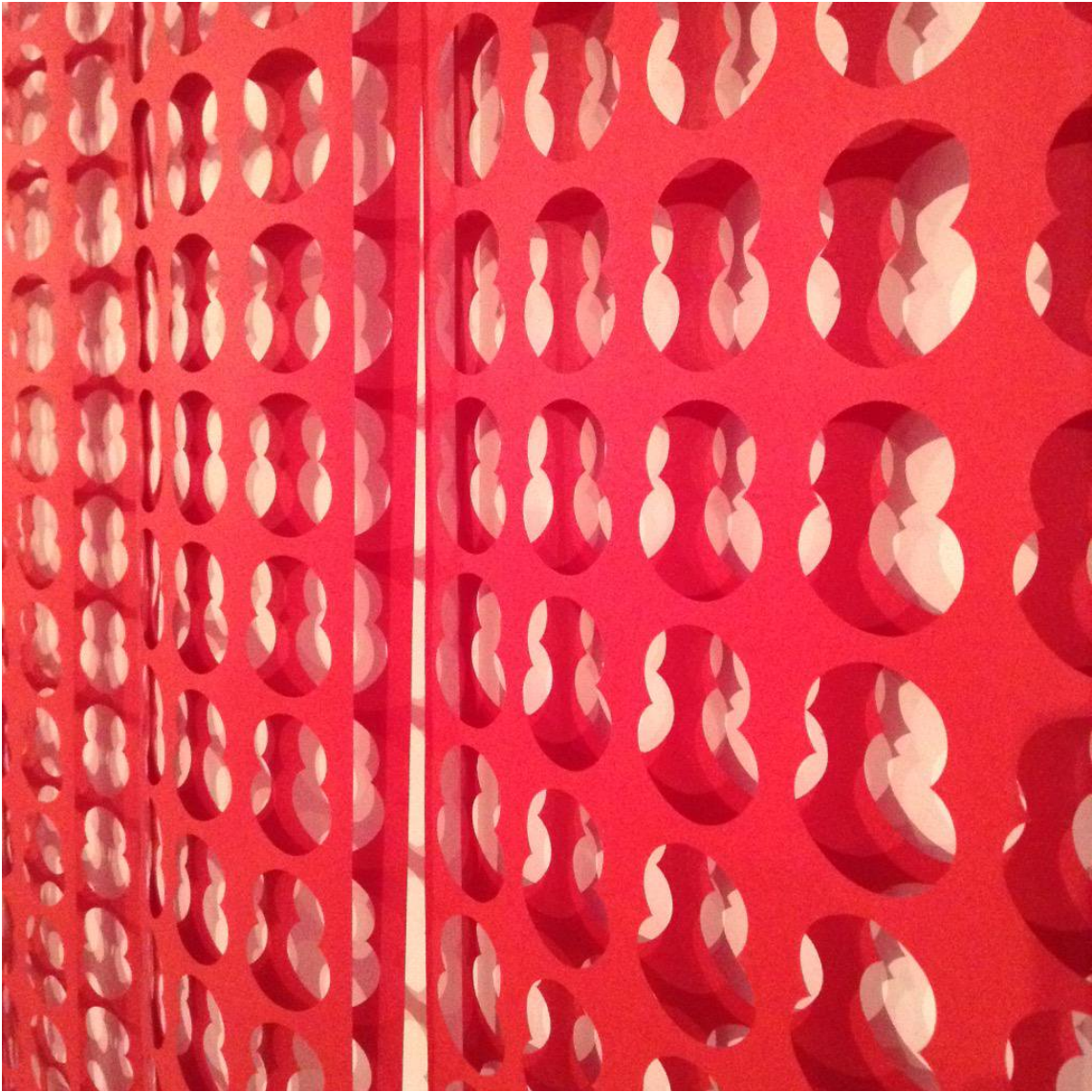


Figure 9: Cornelia Parker, *War Room* (2015)[detail]  
Paper, dimensions variable



Figure 10: Gabriela Carnevale Cycle of experimental art (1968)  
Participatory art

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