

Mona Hatoum

(Beirut, Lebanon, 1952)

The perception of imminent dangers, the coercive violence of boundaries, and the horror of imprisonment, or worse, of torture are some of the profound feelings that Mona Hatoum's works arouse in those who encounter them. Born in Beirut to Palestinian parents in exile, when civil war broke out in Lebanon in 1975 the artist found herself in Europe, suddenly separated from her family. This double exile, the uncertainty of the present and an arbitrary encounter with the Western world have profoundly marked Hatoum's development and have become the principal themes of an artistic investigation that, starting from her personal biography, embraces the urgency of themes that are painfully recurrent on a global scale.

Struck by the gap between body and mind that she experiences in her adopted Western culture, compared to Arab culture, the artist utilizes her own body as material, creating distressing performances that, from her viewpoint as an Arab woman without a country, reactuate the need for a political and civil commitment to a renewed feminist matrix. The fragility of the body, in its multiple value as both individual and social body, also continues in subsequent works, where, although no longer visible, it is evoked through the presence of domestic objects or environments. In numerous installations both everyday tools and iconic forms that pertain to the history of contemporary art—such as the minimalist cube, enlarged or modified and rendered similar to internal parts of the human body such as the brain or the intestines—become threatening and disturbing presences. Since the mid-1990s Hatoum has utilized the form of the carpet in various works, investigating the different significances it can assume—as a familiar object of domestic use, as an element of nomadic culture, and as a place of prayer or even of magical rituals—depending on the cultural and religious identification of the person who makes it, sells it, and uses it. In *Undercurrent (Red)*, 2008, the reference to the carpet becomes the starting point for a large-scale floor installation. Referring to the presence of a current beneath the surface, and thus not immediately visible, the title of the work evokes ideas related to the discomfort of a feeling, a clue, or an opinion different from what is shown in public. The installation spreads out from a quadrangular center, where the original form of the carpet is reduced to its essence of an interweaving of warp and woof, whose traditional colored threads, however, hide sturdy electrical cables within. Almost like decorative fringes, or frays caused by excessive use, the external end of each cable, with tentacular deployment, culminates in a light bulb, the totality of which end up describing a broad circle. On a daily basis, the electricity that traverses the installation—indispensable but also threateningly dangerous—is expressed as a pulsating matter that crosses through the work and connotes it as a realm both allusive to domestic warmth and inhospitable and menacingly lethal. (MB)

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