

Mona Hatoum's Corporeal Xenology

"Between the speechless pain of the actual stranger and the sequestered fear of one's own strangeness lies the real frontier to be challenged. Can art operate as a revelatory, expressive, and interrogative passage through such a frontier? Can it be an inspiration, provocation, and opening act for a new form of communication in a nonxenophobic community? If the stranger is a prophet who interrupts history, today's artists and designers should help the prophet by designing special equipment for such an intervention."¹

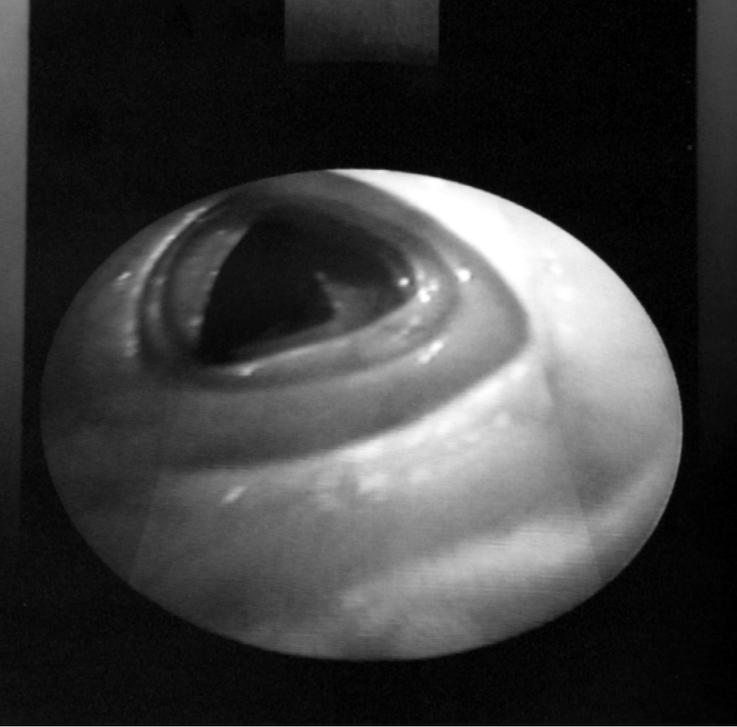
As an immigrant who creates, Mona Hatoum conflates both Krzysztof Wodiczko's roles of the prophet and the artist in the passage above. Her 'interruptions of history' manifest themselves in the present moment, through installations that challenge viewers' senses of corporeal and ontological autonomy. Her praxis, like Wodiczko's, is one of "xenology," a field of knowledge which Wodiczko has described as an "external and internal displacement [that] is about crossing the boundaries inside of yourself."² By injecting the unfamiliar into notions of home, and revealing the strangeness in each spectator, Hatoum's interdisciplinary artworks help to uproot the very logic of xenophobia—How can one be afraid of the stranger if the stranger is within?

In this article, I apply the language of diaspora studies to a reading of Mona Hatoum's work. To this end, I transpose the notion of home onto the body as the seat or 'home' of the self, and read subjecthood as a microcosm of the nation-as-home. I note the conflation of a national ideal onto a physical territory, and its parallel conflation of the self to the physical confines of the body. In this construction, "diaspora" refers to the process of othering, in a variation on diasporic "rupture," which I link to identity becoming. The notion of "return," so crucial to the diasporic imaginary, is replaced by a new dwelling-in-diaspora-as-home. This article addresses how continual ruptures of the body and self via border transgression in Hatoum's video installation *Corps étranger* perform a positive diasporic experience and contribute to an auto-renewal of identity.

As a Beirut-born Palestinian exiled in London, Hatoum speaks as a stranger through an adopted tongue. She has adapted



the European and masculine language of Minimalism only to subvert its foundational tenets by injecting anatomical discrepancies into the minimal grid. Hatoum practices resistance from the inside out (as an established artist), and from the outside in (as an immigrant to London). Her linguistic and aesthetic hybridization of a 'corporealized grid' becomes explicit through its *iteration*: in the acts of production and reception of her relational works.



It is precisely thanks to the performative dimension of her installations that Hatoum's oeuvre can be read as manifesting a certain *counter-musealization*.³ Rather than being cemented in memory, nostalgia, or fixed identity, the works find their meaning through present re-iteration, in the symbolic exchange between art object and art receptor. Taken strictly in their fixity, within their physical boundaries or as objects of the past, the works become mere corpses, traces of themselves. Their investment of meaningful 'life' is contingent upon the physical presence of a spectator. For in Hatoum's practice, it is both the identity of the author and of the artwork that is "no longer completely within the root but also in Relation," to borrow Édouard Glissant's words.⁴

Hatoum's 1994 *Corps étranger* is not, at first glance, directly tied to the themes of diaspora and exile or east / west relations. However, a brief analysis of the corporeal foundations of identity via psychoanalytic theory, and an interpretation of the discursive mechanisms embedded in the work will hopefully draw parallels between the operation of *Corps étranger* and its manifestation of a certain "diasporic consciousness."⁵

Within the Other / The Other Within: The Body and the Foundations of Identity

If the body were to be regarded as a topographical map, one would find that its nation or selfhood is delineated by the parameters of its epidermis. Like the often abrupt and artificial boundaries created to separate countries, the epidermis is the normative delineation of the end of one's self. Yet, countless

studies of proxemics have shown that the size of personal social spheres varies significantly from one culture to another, and that these spheres necessarily trespass the boundary of skin. As national borders are guarded, so is the epidermis: protecting the self from the harm of the world, insulating the core from external contagion, and serving as the iconic distinction dividing 'me' from 'you' or 'us' from 'them'. The body is indeed a battleground, whose very propriety often requires an engagement in 'civil' wars.

This battle appears, amongst other things, in the daily acts of self-representation which individuals undergo in order to enter the world: "civilization carves meanings onto and out of bodies," writes Elizabeth Grosz.⁶ Rituals dressed in the guise of self-pampering actually operate small-scale amputations to the boundaries of the body: cutting, tucking, waxing, cropping, and even washing, imply the removal of tarnishing elements. Conversely, insertions are made to compensate for lacks in height and in curves, and to highlight and balance features. Would the skin then be a malleable frontier between self and other? If so, who or what monitors the extent and direction of its malleability?

"The discipline and normalization of the female body," writes Susan Bordo, "[...] has to be acknowledged as an amazingly durable and flexible strategy of social control".⁷ Bodily control in its subtler forms via the cosmetics and media industries has become a profitable venture. Such patrolling of corporeal borders creates a form of suggestive surveillance that operates surreptitiously, even in non-emergency states. Policed boundaries are to be maintained at all times, and what's more, they are to conform to a moral-aesthetic ideal that comes from outside oneself. The body, which delineates one person's subjecthood, is thus easily transformed into an object for another.

Such a transformation also occurs in the very construction of subjecthood. According to Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, the maturation of identity depends on a synthesizing perception of a managed corporeal self, and an imposed optical control over the otherwise partially seen body. In the passage through the mirror stage, the subject perceives the body-object as being distinct from the rest of the world, and whole. Identity, therefore, is grounded in the coherence of one's objective bodily image. The epidermal border strengthens that coherence, as do the impenetrable borders of patrolled nation-states with regards to national identity. But it is clear that this somatic and moral integrity is managed both from within and from without, and that the child only sees herself as whole *because* she is distinct from that which is outside her. Thus, without an acknowledgement of the other, there can be no self. What's more, self-othering, or subjective objectification, is part and parcel of the materialization of self.

Lacanian theory shows us that the geography of the body is insufficient in delineating the identity territory of self. Paral-

els to this geographical insufficiency can be drawn from the discourse of diaspora in relation to nation-states. Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin write:

“As the very terms “state” implies, nation-statism as a global and universal logic seeks to fix ethnically (genealogically and culturally) homogenous human groups within nonoverlapping, neatly bounded, and permanent geographical boundaries. It is this neat mapping of nations onto non-overlapping and unique global spaces that the powers of diaspora confront, by which they are manipulated, and which they manipulate in turn.”⁸

“The powers of diaspora” reveal the tensions between state mappings and overlapping ethnic identities. Diasporic consciousness imaginatively inhabits spaces that are both painfully literal and blissfully figurative. These imaginary spaces do not necessarily reproduce the course of actual landmarks or geopolitical boundaries.

In the same vein, what of the seepages, both material and moral, which transgress the imposed boundaries of the body? What of the abject excretions of the body, which, like the spiritual ties of the immigrant to a homeland, belong *neither here nor there*? The insurance of coherent identity through the sealing of skin, like the creation of national identity through the implementation of borders, is little more than a masquerade. Human bodies leak and grow out of themselves. Nationhood is not confined to a ‘homogenous’ interiority. Yet the symbolic power attached to abject objects – those ‘illegal’ migrants that trouble the taxonomy of the Symbolic Order – is so strong that it can lead to psychosis. In the case of nations, to security certificates.

In this light, *Corps étranger* could be read as a “disordering practice” on multiple levels: within cultural institutions, within the art viewing exchange, and here, within the bodies of both the author and spectator.⁹ Putting forward abject bodies in museums that traditionally exhibit bodily ideals is but one of these acts of conscious disorder. What interests me here is the disorder it provokes for stable conceptions of the self, and how this might be read as a larger proposal for ways of conceiving identity in terms that resist essentialization.

Foreigned Bodies

Corps étranger consists of a small, white, cylindrical tower with two narrow opposite entrances. Inside, a video image is projected onto a circle on the floor, and a narrow passage between the projection and the padded walls leaves room for the spectator. With their backs against the wall to view the image, Frances Morris has identified the spectators’ positions as “the classic pose of victim.”¹⁰ Critics’ comments seize upon the witness / victim duality that is at the heart of *Corps étranger*’s

mechanism of reception, which could be read as a push and pull inside and outside of oneself.

The video projection consists of a visual mapping of Hatoum’s body. The camera grips the external epidermis, scanning in one long close-up all the details of her physical shell, then probes her insides, entering through all cavities and making visible that which normally cannot be seen. Turning her body inside out like a glove, spreading its surface to render it in a two-dimensional map, Hatoum offers a variation on the self-portrait in *Corps étranger*. In order to chart the undiscovered countries of her anatomy, both the video image and the soundtrack have been recorded with specialized medical equipment, endoscopes and ultrasounds. The soundtrack is an irregular recording of Hatoum’s body, breaths, and heartbeats, whose sonorities vary according to the location of the microphone.

The cylindrical space architecturally reproduces and magnifies the physical environment explored by the microphones and cameras. Standing against its padded walls as a spectator is like being inside Hatoum’s body and sliding downwards through the internal cavities of her organs. The constant forage into the cavernous tunnels of Hatoum’s anatomy ostensibly poses a “threat against the viewer’s own sense of corporeal autonomy.”¹¹ Resisting against being sucked in by the image amounts to resisting being assimilated into another being.

Because its images are not resolutely insides or outsides, nor recognizably male or female for the most part, *Corps étranger* unmoors “the functional logic of the body”,¹² blurring the boundaries between self and other. Organs and orifices are mistaken for other ones, thanks to the camera’s ability to level them to their common forms, undifferentiated by touch or texture. Spell-bound by the visual forward movement, the viewer’s body threatens to also be pulled out of control, aspired into the other body’s tunnels. The camera in *Corps étranger* follows the same path as that of any foreign object entering the body, from outside to inside, and from mouth, through digestive system, to anus. We too as viewers are ingested and digested, and the looping of these images reproduces the cycles of existence in the daily repetition of intake and excretion.

Hatoum presents her body in sacrifice, as an offering open to exploration. But it does not let itself be freely consumed. The installation’s circular screen witnesses the viewer’s indiscretion, sometimes even showing Hatoum’s closely filmed eye. It warns that such voyeurism cannot be gratuitous, and that the cost of invading another body is the threat of being invaded by one in return. We are all, and all have, “foreign bodies.” Not only are our insides foreign to us, but so is the medical equipment that gives us access to physical exploration, and so is the body that lends itself to be explored. Hatoum’s is a foreign body because it is not ours, but also because it is that



of a foreigner. Conversely, in accepting, as viewers, to be privy to her exploration, we also accept to be the foreign bodies that are invading her.

Corps étranger provokes a certain constructive alienation, revealing the unfixedness of bodily parameters, art object parameters, and ultimately, personal identity. Judging by critical responses to the work, it appears to be an effective “disordering practice.” The installation’s indirect stratagems of revelation share something with Wodiczko’s referral to Brechtian interruption in his proposal for the production of “Immigrant Instruments”¹³: Meta-theatricality, combined with an alienation effect experienced through the body, function as tools divulging the constructions of narratives and identities. Via these devices, dynamism and vitality are seen to be the undercurrents beneath any spatio-temporally-contingent identity. Only constant change is of the essence. In *Corps étranger*, we are not faced with a single frontier nor a centre and periphery, but rather with multiple borderlands whose very liminalities are in continuous transgression. *Corps étranger* performs a variation on Édouard Glissant’s “circular nomadism”: By going “from periphery to periphery,” it “makes every periphery into a centre,” and “abolishes the very notion of centre and periphery.”¹⁴ Inside and outside are seen to be only conventionally separated. Spectators choose to enter the cylinder, and choose to enter the body of the foreigner. By staying there, spectators also choose to be alienated. But as they leave, they may become aware of their intolerance towards being rendered foreign themselves.

Hatoum’s production provides a space in which the very concept of dwelling can take on a nomadic, and thus productively interruptive, form. Her non-teleological model of identity resembles the optimistic proposal for “nomadic becoming” elaborated by the feminist scholar Rosi Braidotti.¹⁵ It also harkens to James Clifford’s notion of “dwelling-in-travel”,¹⁶ which I reclaim here in the form of dwelling-as-travel, where “dwelling” connotes identity, and “travel” suggests becoming. For it is not within the binary construct of either travel / or dwelling that we can escape the trappings of static essentialization, but rather in an ongoing negotiation *between*—a negotiation that takes time, and that will perhaps never be satisfyingly conclusive, as it resists the very notion of ever being fixed. Of greater interest, perhaps, is not the final victory of identity, but the shapes and pressures of its contests, and most importantly, the very fact that these contests are allowed to exist.

Notes:

1. Krzysztof Wodiczko, “Designing for the City of Strangers” in *Critical Vehicles* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 9.
2. Krzysztof Wodiczko and Bruce Robbins, “The Science of Strangers” in John Knechtel, ed. *Alphabet City no. 6: Open Cit.* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1998), 142. Wodiczko describes xenology as “a field of knowledge which also connects with the field of experience.”
3. Cf. Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2003), 22. “Musealization” is a term that Huyssen borrows from Herman Lübbe, and which refers to the “expansive historicism of our contemporary culture”. By counter-musealization, I mean to suggest that Hatoum’s practice seeks to engage in a continual present through its performative “iteration,” and resists being stifled by being in or of the past. Hatoum’s works become at least partially dysfunctional outside of their present interaction with a spectator.
4. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1997), 18.
5. Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora: Two Essays on the Relevance of Jewish Culture* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2002), 4.
6. Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodie*, (London, New York: Routledge, 1995), 34.
7. Susan Bordo, “The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity” in Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury, eds., *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 91.
8. Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin, *op. cit.*, 9.
9. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 17.
10. Frances Morris, “Mona Hatoum” in *Rites of Passage: Art for the End of the Century* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1995), 103.
11. Dan Cameron, “Boundary Issues: The Displaced Self in Mona Hatoum’s Work” in *Mona Hatoum* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997), 28.
12. Jessica Morgan, “The Poetics of Uncovering: Mona Hatoum In and Out of Perspective” in *Mona Hatoum* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997), 3.
13. Krzysztof Wodiczko, *loc. cit.*, 146.
14. Édouard Glissant, *op. cit.*, 29.
15. Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).