

Dear Mona,

This text was retranslated by Frank
Sormens, the new editor of *Flesh Art
Internationale*. He is enthusiastic of
your work, so he wanted to add
the first paragraph, but this
will not go on the catalogue.

I send it to you for respect of his
work.

If his work is o.k., please confirm
me tonight, if not, we'll put
only the Italian text.

Thank you for calling me as
soon as you decide. I'm sorry
I don't know what else to do!!

Debitie

fax

Numero di fogli con questo

da DARRIEA BRUSANOSCO

a CRIS

note URGENTE LA VORO:

MI POTRESTI CHIAMARE
DOMANI, DOMENICA 6?

GRAZIE

P.S. Per VOVO ANGEA VERESE/
MOTO NATOUR

MONA HATOUM — QUARTERS

ion, sterile and

erg overt

Mona Hatoum's work on one hand invites the obvious comparisons with other women artists such as Ann Hamilton, Rebecca Horn, and perhaps most notably, Eva Hesse. On the other hand, as much as these comparative claims are valid, their virtue lies in the fact that they all rely on materials at once suffused with content. Though they all do different things with varied materials that are somehow kinetically abstract. Hatoum's installations and sculptures are first and foremost signatory poems. She casts a spell on the formalist ethics of purity and universality—it is what it is—by conceptually reworking the tenets and aesthetics of minimalism and abstraction and adding content to artistic concepts founded greatly on the premise of mathematical science, the use of machinery, and depersonalization.

Entering *Quarters*, the installation that Mona Hatoum has prepared specifically for Viafarini, is to step into the midst of a forest composed not of Baudelaire's "living pillars," but of metal barriers. Bed-like structures stacked five high intersect in space. Without mattresses these beds are unusable and suggest a cage or labyrinth, transmuting the sense of rest usually associated with beds into one of anxiety and fearful insomnia. The installation was conceived when the gallery was still unrestored, with pitted floors and bearing the scars of previous installations. The artist, born in Lebanon but forced to move to London in 1975, originally considered a delicate yet tragic counterpoint for that specific space, with ideas ranging from spheres of blown glass containing locks of hair to a carpet of glass

for two, becomes the site of an indolent depression, sterile and solitary. In the post-war period Robert Rauschenberg overturned his single bed, displaying it vertically, visually insisting on the relationship between order and disorder, between comfort and discomfort. The checked cover recalls the quilts mothers would once sew by hand from scraps of cloths providing a sense of snug well-being. But nobody remade the bed when the child got up: the brush-strokes of color that, on the upper part of the painting, invade the sheet and pillow contradict the repetitiveness of the underlying squares and indicate the achievement of an adult and disordered existence. In the plates of steel and wood that Jannis Kounellis exhibited from the late Sixties attention is shifted to that particular portion of space occupied by a living body in a state of repose but also of relative movement. The surface area of a bed is roughly twice that of a coffin and similar to that of a door. Thus the bed becomes a homeland, one's "personal space," a marker for the identification of the persona, the body, and all the physiological phenomena associated with it, from sleep and reproduction through to sickness and death.

According to the artist her primary inspiration was her observations of urban quarters (~~particularly in New York City~~) which from the earliest times have represented a form of segregation for social classes and are composed of cells of greater or lesser dimensions and luxury. Huge residential buildings (projects) in metropoli around the world often duelly function as cages of the masses, and in some cases making daily existence a negotiation of a claustrophobic affair, as Frantz Fanon has described in great detail. This structure, reduced to

its basic essence, can also be seen in barracks and above all in prisons. Hatoum was greatly impressed by visits she made, during a trip to the United States, to the Alcatraz penitentiary in San Francisco where prisoners were housed in cells not much wider than a bed, and to the jail constructed in 1825 by John Haviland in Philadelphia. The latter, Eastern State Penitentiary, was based on the Panopticon central control and radiating arm system designed by Jeremy Bentham in 1791. In fact, problematics of this kind, in regard to social control, were analyzed by Michèl Foucault and influenced Hatoum as a student.

Quarters assumes, perhaps unconsciously, a little of all these meanings but this work also associates them with the problems of systems of cohabitation together with the themes of social control, the relationship between space and the body and between the body and the rhythm of life, punctuated by its own movement. As mentioned above, the installation was preceded by many other works that suggest and refer to its salient points. Vertically suspended beds meshes linked to one another with visible springs and hooks were the principal elements in *Short Space* (1992). These were the types of beds usually found in such locations as hospitals and prisons and all those spaces in which the body is barely permitted to satisfy its basic needs. The installation was equipped with three motors which allowed the entire structure to rise and sink slowly, underlying the mechanical and dehumanizing aspects of the ensemble. A similar sense of torture is found in *Light Sentence* (1992), an assemblage of metal cages capable metaphorically^{of} evoking both the containers used

containers. She also contemplated working with those objects of industrial design that are so closely associated with the city of Milan. The raw aspect of the Viafarini exhibition space, today rather less shabby, must have prompted her to remain within the realm of furniture, albeit employing the services of a blacksmith and privileging reflection on structure, whether that of the body or that of the conventions of society. Technically her decision to use metal, with its threatening luminescence that lends itself to an insistence on the objective, sculptural, and architectonic aspects of the works, is an extension of her predilection to use the material in similar recent works. *Quarters* also represents the artist's current position after having tackled the theme of the bed and the body in many ways, ever attracted by its enormous symbolic, and ambiguous potential.

It is possible to study the history of art in relation to the metaphor of the bed: in Titian's *Venus* it appears soft and chaste, covered with a finely worked white sheet that harmonizes with the domestic life glimpsed through the window in the background. The woman with the rounded belly lying on the bed appears as an exaltation of eroticism not unrelated to the sense of maternity confirmed by the flourishing vegetation behind her. The bed on which Manet's *Olympia* is lying is in a closed room and the relationship with nature is lost. The *dormeuse* is draped with silks indicating a desire for respectability but also a poor sense of decorum, including a pair of disillusioning slippers on the feet of this flat-bellied girl. In the present century Francis Bacon has contorted the characters in his paintings on unmade beds located in blind rooms illuminated by squalid light-bulbs. The bedroom, born

for keeping animals and the cells of a prison; the very title of the work was a pun based on judicial terminology. Illuminated by a swinging light source, the work inspired a strong sense of insecurity in observers and recalled the lights used to illuminate prisons. The room had no windows and the shadows of the cages were projected on the walls like in a hospital ward in which X-rays are taken.

The paradox of denied comfort probably reached its visual zenith in *Incommunicado* (1993), a child's cot in which not only did the structure bring to mind tubular steel hospital beds and therefore the state of sickness, but the bedspring and mattress were actually replaced with wire. That "secure base" represented by the mother and by extension every support for the body, becomes fragile and dangerous, all the more so when the situation of emergency can only be communicated by the baby through a generic cry. A childhood lived in the same state of anxiety as adulthood was incisively summarized in the work *Untitled* (1992) consisting of a chair in steel mesh (a metaphor of the parent, but also of a prison) between the legs of which fits perfectly a small reproduction of itself (a metaphor of the child simultaneously protected and imprisoned): no matter how much the mother may want to protect the child it proves dramatically impossible for her not to instill in him the roots of her own anxiety. The geometry of the work suggests to the spectator that this same imposed relationship between the large and its small-scale replica is capable of reproducing itself in identical form *ad infinitum*. A work by Hatoum in which the artist recorded fragments of a conversation held with her mother in Arabic between London and Beirut is only

slightly more explicit in this sense. This group of associations can also be found in *Silence* (1994), another cot made of glass laboratory tubes. As if this was a circulatory system through which no sap flows, underlining the fragility of the body and the impossibility of its being able to lie down or rest. The recent piece, *Marrow* (1996) is yet another cot this time made of semi-translucent brown rubber. The name of the work and the material refer to bone marrow that, lacking any form of support, spreads over the floor.

Additionally, the bed is the place of the body in *Divan Bed* (1996) which resembles a container comparable with a sarcophagus. In *Lili (stay) put* (1996) it is a found object from the streets of Jerusalem on which the artist has mounted wheels to give the double impression of rootedness and precariousness. Subsequently, however, the bed has been immobilized by invisible fishing wire attached to the floor by metal hooks and herein lies the paradox of a bed-body born to move (and live) but prevented from doing so. The theme of the living body in movement searching for its own space without succeeding in moving and finding peace—existence— leads to the performances that represented Hatoum's first mature works, for example, the performance *Position: Suspended* (1986). For the performance, Hatoum spent a whole day within a rudimentary cage wedged in the middle of a doorway, moving as though she was searching for a position in the company of the tools of manual labor.

Paying tribute to Piero Manzoni's *Base del Mondo* (1961), Hatoum proposed a cube that would support the entire body of the world. In

the Palestinian-British artist's tribute, Manzoni's dadaist and proto-conceptual eccentricity, that for her represented a monument to irony as well as the capacity of art to involve the entire world, became something much more dramatic: the cube that acted as the "base" in *Socle du Monde* (1992-1993) revealed an internal vitality. The work is made of iron filings clustered onto an arrangement of small magnets; the pattern produced by the magnetic fields is strongly reminiscent of the lobes of the brain or intestinal loops. These internal surfaces of the body were also the subject of the video *Corps Etranger* (1994), exhibited at the Venice Biennial in 1995, where, with the floor (that is to say the most rudimentary form of bed) being used as the screen, the audience was treated to an enormously enlarged projection. Hatoum underwent a medical examination, an endoscopy, of the internal passages of her whole digestive system, recording the event with all its physiological rhythms, colors, and noises.

What from the outside might appear attractive and healthy reveals all its anti-aesthetic vulnerability when seen from the inside. Like a bed, a metaphor as well as a longed-for support, the body seen from the outside provides an image of apparent ease, but internally, with all protection and padding removed, and reduced to a skeleton or a functioning soft machine, it becomes a representation of discomfort; a state of mind that can indifferently refer to personal sensations, specifically female problems, the situation of those people in the world that are currently living under threat. In *Quarters*, Hatoum reveals in revealing what at first glance seems to be an undescriptive tract reiterating the formalism of the 1970s, upon closer inspection

Conclusion's
of Frankfurt!

lends a study in the conceptualization of the body and movement (or
lack thereof) in space.

Angela Vettese