

Mona Hatoum Quarters

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 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 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 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 duely function as cages of the masses, and in some cases making daily existence a negotiation of a claustrophobic affair.

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 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