

## Boundary Crossings: The Political Postminimalism of Mona Hatoum

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*Investment in the look is not as privileged in women as in men. More than any other sense, the eye objectifies and it masters ... In our culture the predominance of the look over smell, taste, touch and hearing has brought about an impoverishment of bodily relations.*

Luce Irigaray<sup>1</sup>

Early minimalist art challenged the privileging of the gaze by foregrounding art's relation to its surrounding space and the viewer's corporeal experience.<sup>2</sup> Luce Irigaray's critique of the privileged gaze is similarly subverted on many levels by Mona Hatoum. We can feel and hear her works – well-nigh even taste and smell them – and one of them literally even touches us. They are insistently corporeal, experienced viscerally within our guts. The materials she uses – cold steel, human detritus, dead skin, strands of hair, nail clippings, plastic, glass, soap and the like – play a highly potent role in the intricate signification process in which she embroils the viewer/experiencer.

The first time I saw her work was at the Centre Pompidou in the summer of 1994.<sup>3</sup> Earlier that spring, I had just seen a Robert Morris retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and the Guggenheim Museum SoHo in New York. Even though these two powerfully spatial artists represent different generations and genders, seeing their work in such close

1 Quoted in Marie-Françoise Hans and Gilles Lapouge (eds.), *Les femmes, la pornographie et l'érotisme*, Paris, 1978, p. 50. Luce Irigaray is a French linguist, cultural theoretician, psychoanalyst and philosopher whose writings address the problem of the relation between man and woman vis-à-vis gender difference.

2 Gregory Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1995.

3 See *Mona Hatoum*, exhibition catalogue, Centre Pompidou, Paris, June–August 1994. One of the featured pieces, *Light Sentence*, 1992, was later shown at the Ateneum in Helsinki in ARS 95, an exhibition organised in 1995 by the Finnish Museum of Contemporary Art.

succession tempted me to draw parallels between them, particularly as both draw inspiration from the same traditions, minimalism and performance art. Many of Morris's works in the exhibition marked an attempt to subvert the Western mind-body dichotomy, as Rosalind Krauss, the curator, stated in her seminal essay for the exhibition catalogue.<sup>4</sup> Yet, despite its powerful spatiality, its message was relayed primarily on an intellectual level, subordinate to the authority of the subject's gaze. Many of Morris's works occupied the gallery space as aesthetic artefacts, impermeable to our access.

A preoccupation with the Western mind-body dichotomy similarly pervades the oeuvre of Mona Hatoum.<sup>5</sup> Yet, her exhibition had a very different effect on me than Morris's. With her work, my experience as a viewer was not just intellectual, but also physical and emotional. I identified with it viscerally, which compelled me to question how I relate to everything, from my own identity to world politics. How did she achieve such a powerful destabilising effect, and why did she move me in such a fundamentally different way than Morris, whose minimalistic art largely elicited feelings of aesthetic and intellectual gratification? Was it the political subtext that slowly unfolded through a complex web of associations, or was it that I am a woman and closer in age to Hatoum than I am to Morris? Many such questions filled my mind back then. Now, 20 years later, this essay offers a chance to revisit some of them – and perhaps to find answers.

## The politics of (post)minimalism

Born to Palestinian parents, Hatoum spent her childhood and youth in exile in Beirut. In 1975 she was on a short visit to London when civil war broke out in Lebanon and she found herself stuck in the city. Originally intended only as a detour, London became Hatoum's home.<sup>6</sup> Her diasporic background finds reflection in the sense of foreignness, otherness and dislocation that is often evoked by her works, which deal with issues of displacement and expose the nebulous nature of social constructs.

Hatoum found fertile soil for her artistic growth in the feminist-inspired performance art and postminimalism of the late-1970s.

The minimalism of the 1960s was widely regarded 'as art that somehow generated and occupied a special sphere, aloof from politics and commerce and above personal feeling'.<sup>7</sup> Inexpressiveness and primacy were among the attributes commonly associated with it.<sup>8</sup> Postminimalism retained the formal attributes of minimalism – its serialism, grids, materiality, simplicity and spatiality – yet it opened itself to a new plethora of subtexts and associative meanings. Instead of embracing a clinical industrial aesthetic, the postminimalists returned to working with their hands.

Although the minimalists foregrounded spatiality and the viewer's role in the signification process, most of their works were hermetically sealed artefacts accessible only to the gaze. Minimalism redefined the viewer's role, triggering a process which eventually culminated in a wholesale interrogation of the artist's role from the late 1960s onwards. Minimalism nevertheless upheld the modernist notion of artistic 'purity', enshrining art as something unsullied by subjective interpretations and external associations. The minimalists thus in fact epitomised modernist tenets rather than debunking them.<sup>9</sup>

4 Rosalind Krauss, 'The Mind/Body Problem: Robert Morris in series', in *Robert Morris: The Mind/Body Problem*, exhibition catalogue, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Guggenheim Museum SoHo, New York, 1994.

5 See 'Michael Archer in Conversation with Mona Hatoum', in *Mona Hatoum*, London, 1997, p. 8.

6 Ibid.

7 Anna C. Chave, 'Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power', *Arts*, vol. 64, No. 5, January 1990, p. 117.

8 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge, MA and London, 1996, p.35.

9 Ibid.; see also Pamela M. Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in Art of the 1960s*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA and London, 2004, p. 47.

Anne C. Chave questions the alleged purity and social aloofness of minimalism by analysing the power rhetoric intrinsic to early minimalism.<sup>10</sup> She sees the hulking, domineering vocabulary of minimalism as mirroring the ethos of the 1960s, a decade of brutal displays of power by the US military in the Vietnam War and the police on the streets. Although the minimalists stripped their art of symbolism, personal messages and exhibitionism, their work was nevertheless a product of its time and the prevailing patriarchal discursive context. Indeed minimalism has later been accused of indifference to art's institutional context and symbolic power, as well as to inter-subjective differences.<sup>11</sup> In many respects, postminimalism framed a rebuttal to many of the accusations levelled at the minimalists.

The formative period in Hatoum's artistic evolution was the 1970s, a decade marking the juncture where modernism ends and postmodernism begins, when politics and feminism exploded onto the art scene,<sup>12</sup> necessitating the prefixing of 'post' to the mainstream movements of the 1960s, minimalism and conceptualism.

The early minimalists lent force and power to their work by emphasising its weight, materiality and massive dimensions.<sup>13</sup> What is it, then, that lends Hatoum's art its great force – what makes it so politically and emotionally engaging, so impactful, so visceral?

To a greater degree than any of the male minimalists, women artists such as Eva Hesse, Meret Oppenheim, Yayoi Kusama and Louise Bourgeois can be counted among Hatoum's artistic forebears, particularly in terms of opening their art to new realms of sensual experience.<sup>14</sup> Mel Bochner, who has researched the journals of Eva Hesse, sees her work as encapsulating the early feminist rally cry 'the personal is political'.<sup>15</sup> The same applies to Hatoum's art – the personal *is* political – yet the personal also becomes universal, something shared by us all.

## Warped reality / transgressing the inner-outer boundary

*There looms within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable.*<sup>16</sup>

The radical politics of Hatoum's art stems not from her directly depicting or documenting acts of injustice, oppression or violence. Rather, she subjects the viewer/experiencer to sensations of fear, menace, threat of violence and disquieting ambiguity, making us run the gamut of emotions in our bodies, viscerally, as a form of physical irritation or disturbance. The strategies she employs to achieve these intrusive effects – such as the use of materials that evoke revulsion or the exposure of human innards – can be characterised as inherently 'feminine' via the concept of the abject. The abject by definition operates in the Real rather than the Symbolic Order; it transgresses boundaries between the outer and the inner, the accepted and the taboo, the suppressed and the exposed.<sup>17</sup>

10 'Carl Andre, Artworker', interview with Jeanne Siegel, *Studio International*, vol. 180, no. 927, November 1970 (cited in Chave 1990). The minimalists did not explicitly campaign for social change with their art, although some took a visible stand in other domains of social activism. Carl Andre and Robert Morris were both members of the Art Workers' Coalition, which spoke out against war, racism and oppression. Chave 1990, p. 117.

11 Foster 1996, pp. 43–4.

12 *Ibid.*, pp. 59–60.

13 Chave 1990.

14 See Lucy Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, New York, 1992, p. 187: 'I once used the term "body ego", which I understood to mean strong, virtually visceral identification between the maker's and/or viewer's body and abstract or figurative form.'

15 Mel Bochner, 'About Eva Hesse: Mel Bochner Interviewed by Joan Simon' (1992), in Mignon Nixon (ed.), *Eva Hesse*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA and London, 2002, pp. 36–37.

16 Julia Kristeva, 'Approaching Abjection', in Amelia Jones (ed.), *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, Routledge, London and New York, 2003, p. 389.

17 *Ibid.*

Conventional inner-outer boundaries are dismantled in *Corps étranger (Foreign Body)*, a video installation originally conceived by Hatoum as a project for the Slade School of Art, though it was not realised until her exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in 1994.<sup>18</sup> The work consists of a clinical white cylinder with two doors for the viewer to enter. On the floor inside the cylinder we see a projection, starting with close-ups of the surface of the body, of the skin's surface, of an eyeball and a nostril, and continuing with medical footage of an endoscopic journey through the artist's body, the disquieting effect of which is heightened by a soundtrack of breathing and a beating heart. The viewer is physically compelled to invade the artist's internal cavity: in order to see the images, we must literally stand on top of them. We are struck by the feeling that we have been swallowed into the gut of an unnameable, slimy organism – we become the foreign bodies invading the artist's body.

Hatoum's fascination with the transgression of inner-outer boundaries is pervasive also in her early performative videos, such as *Don't smile you're on camera!*, staged at the Battersea Arts Centre in London in 1980.<sup>19</sup> The performance was transgressing social constructs and conventions of decorum. The resulting montage seemed to suggest that the camera could strip the audience and cut right through the civilised veneer of social correctness, revealing shocking images of hidden goings-on and gender-bending.

The inner-outer boundary is also transgressed in many of Hatoum's later works. Her exposure of what is normally suppressed conjures a sense of abjection, which has a destabilising effect on the viewer. *Socle du monde (Base of the World)*, 1992–93, is Hatoum's tribute to the work of the same name by Piero Manzoni. What initially appears to be a clinical, minimalist black cube turns out to be a menacing, light-sucking block wrapped in something akin to blackened intestines. A similarly uncanny effect is conjured by *Daybed*, 2008, which from afar looks like a mute minimalist sculpture, but close-up inspection reveals the 'bed' to be an enlarged grater, an uninviting steel surface embossed with a pattern of aggressive barbs. The softness of beds and all that we associate with them – rest, privacy and comfort – are disconcertingly denied. This ostensibly simple work evokes a world of pain, discomfort, torture and abuse.

Everyday kitchen utensils normally associated with femininity are likewise transformed into vehicles of political commentary by Hatoum. *Grater Divide*, 2002 is an oversized cheese grater that is splayed as a violent symbol of division, partition and abrasion. Enlarged to the dimensions of a life-sized room divider, this commonplace tool from the domestic sphere is transformed into a metaphor illustrating the frontiers that divide nations and neighbours. A similarly perturbing effect is achieved in *Home*, 1999, which consists of a table filled with domestic kitchen items: a sieve, a colander, cheese graters and a whisk. Snaking through them is a buzzing wire that conducts an electrical current that periodically lights up light bulbs positioned under the items. The table is cordoned off behind a wire barrier, which quarantines the domestic vignette, infusing it with a sense of menace that undermines the safety and familiarity we conventionally associate with kitchens.

Many of Hatoum's works can be interpreted in terms of Luce Irigaray's concept of 'women's writing', *écriture féminine*.<sup>20</sup> They do not loudly proclaim a feminist agenda, yet their form and cerebral content are informed by feminist discourses. Their forms and materials also elicit our compassion for values such as respect for humanity, otherness and equality. They intrinsically manifest a particular way of being in the world that is filtered through a feminist lens, illuminating differences between masculine and feminine modes of experience. By the same token, however, Hatoum's art also foregrounds the universality of human experience, fusing the universal and the private.<sup>21</sup>

18 See *Mona Hatoum*, exhibition catalogue, Centre Pompidou, Paris, June–August 1994.

19 This performance was repeated during the *New Contemporaries '81* exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, on 3 and 4 March 1981. For a description of the performance, see above, p. 43.

20 Luce Irigaray defines *écriture féminine* as a style of writing that emphasises tactility, simultaneity and fluidity, thereby enabling 'jamming the theoretical machinery itself, (...) suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal. Which presupposes that women do not aspire simply to be men's equals in knowledge'. *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, 1985, p. 78.

21 The interface between public and private was the theme of the *ARS 95* exhibition in 1995, where Hatoum's *Light Sentence* had its Finnish debut: *ARS 95, Private/Public*, Museum of Contemporary Art – Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki, February to May 1995.

## Destabilising light

Hatoum's unsettling inversions of scale have a physically jarring effect that pushes us out of our comfort zone. There is often tangible tension between the viewer and the work, which physically throws us off balance, as if the ground were literally shifting beneath our feet. This destabilising effect is often achieved with light and shadows, a good example being *Light Sentence*, 1992. The viewer enters a corridor-like structure of stacked wire mesh lockers, their doors left partly ajar. Suspended in their midst is a bare incandescent bulb which is slowly raised and lowered by a motorised pulley. Attracting yet also repelling us, the movement of the light creates a sense of perpetual flux and an eerie play of shadow. As described by Briony Fer, Hatoum turns something appealing – light – into something menacing and disquieting, the moving shadows transforming the cage-like construction into a swaying, unstable space. Rather than using light to enlarge the pictorial ground, Hatoum uses it to entrap the viewer in an intimidating, ambiguous construct. The space is rendered alien and incomprehensible through the manipulation of light.<sup>22</sup>

Light both reveals and conceals. Materiality and immateriality collide in the unstable, swaying space of *Light Sentence*. As its physical occupants, we too are pulled into the restless play of light, our shadows mingling among the cages. Hatoum often creates contrary spaces that subvert the possibility of a univocally valid interpretation. Their messages are often bipolar: they are both material and immaterial, pulling us in, yet pushing us away at the same time. In Hatoum's hands, light becomes an instrument of ground-shifting and disintegration. The viewer's self-image is similarly disrupted by Hatoum's use of materials such as fragile human detritus, cakes of soap and translucent glass beads in works such as *Map (Clear)*, 2015 and *Present Tense*, 1996.

## Touched by an-Other

Floor-bound art became part of the repertoire of sculpture through minimalism.<sup>23</sup> Arguably its most famous early proponent was the American sculptor Carl Andre, whose hard, industrial sculptures crept horizontally across the floor of the gallery space. Resembling floor tiles, they blended so imperceptibly with the real floor that viewers were known to step on them accidentally. Assigning any specific meaning to such art was rendered impossible, as indeed with minimalist pieces generally. Andre's razed sculptures of aluminium, zinc and copper tiles have also been interpreted as a 'blind wall', as they banish the artwork from the viewer's eye level.<sup>24</sup> The artwork's refusal automatically to surrender itself to the viewer's gaze mirrors a phenomenological turn in the reception of art, with vision no longer proclaiming supremacy over the other senses.<sup>25</sup>

Hatoum's floor pieces honour the legacy of the floor-bound minimalist tradition, yet their organic narrativity subverts the usual muteness of minimalism – or perhaps 'blindness' is more apt in this case.

*Recollection*, 1995, is an installation that spreads across the floor and hangs from the ceiling. It was created specifically for Kanaal Art Foundation in a very special setting, the St Elisabeth Beguinage in Courtray, Belgium. Before its conversion into an artists' residence and exhibition space, the building had served as a semi-monastic women's community since

22 See Briony Fer, 'Light-pieces', *Mona Hatoum*, exhibition catalogue, Kunsthalle Basel, 1998.

23 See Jack Burnham, *Beyond Modern Sculpture: The Effects of Science and Technology on the Sculpture of this Century*, George Braziller, New York, 1967.

24 See David Bourdon, 'The Razed Sites of Carl Andre', *Artforum*, Vol. V, October 1966, reprinted in Battcock 1995, pp. 103–08.

25 Hanna Johansson, 'Depth and Reflection: On the Surrealism of Marja Kanervo', in Patrik Nyberg, Jari-Pekka Vanhala & Maija Kasvinen (eds.), *Marja Kanervo. (Dis)appearing*, exhibition catalogue, Museum of Contemporary Art publication 138, Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, Helsinki, 2013, pp. 9–31.

medieval times.<sup>26</sup> Hatoum's work consists of a room scattered with small, barely perceptible balls of human hair. Strands of hair are also suspended from the ceiling, brushing our faces as we move towards the table at the far end of the room, upon which there is a miniature loom and an unfinished weaving of human hair.

Hatoum spent years collecting strands of her own hair from bathroom sinks, hairbrushes and combs. This disembodied hair fills the ambiguous space of *Recollection* with her metonymic presence, which the viewer can sense as a spectral caress, like brushing up against a ghost.<sup>27</sup> In order to view the miniature loom at the far end of the room, we must first cross the floor strewn with hair balls and allow ourselves to be brushed by the strands of hair suspended from the ceiling – a sensation that feels intrusive and repulsive. Like all things abject, the disembodied hair evokes a sense of dirt and excess.<sup>28</sup>

What does *Recollection* evoke in our minds? Catherine de Zegher suggests that it reawakens childhood memories of grandmother's attic, or the comforting, intimate moments when she cleaned our hairbrush. She interprets the piece as a commentary on the social ordering that is based upon behavioural patterns of dirt-affirmation and dirt-avoidance, which are inexorably bound to social hierarchies. Without a definition of what is 'clean' and 'appropriate', we would have no sense of what is 'dirty' and 'forbidden'. Relating the piece to Hatoum's diasporic background, de Zegher also sees it as re-inscribing her identity within the void of exile, the word *re-collection* referring not only to memory, but also to the act of regathering pieces of oneself.<sup>29</sup>

*Recollection* can also be interpreted as a tribute to the women of the beguinage, and more generally to the quiet chores performed by women: praying, writing, acts of charity and lace-making.

Invisibility is another intrinsic element of *Recollection*. Its sub-elements are difficult to distinguish as we first enter the space. Briony Fer theorises that women artists are better armed than men to explore the relationship between seeing and blindness, the inner and the outer, because the privileging of the gaze is an inherent attribute of masculine culture.<sup>30</sup> In her analysis of blindness and floor-bound art, Fer concludes that the special strength of women's art lies not in celebrating the opposite of masculine blindness – touch and gesture – but rather in entering a zone where pleasure and the loss of sight intersect. This is not a matter of turning the gaze inwards, but rather of making visible the interface between the inner and the outer.<sup>31</sup>

Another work that pushes the viewer to the brink and gives a visible form to invisible interfaces is *Undercurrent (Red)*, 2008. Unfurling from a square tapestry laid out in the middle of the floor is a web of electric cables that brings to mind a splayed placenta – a giver of life. The light bulbs at the end of each cable fade in and out to the irregular rhythm of breathing in the background. Without light, there is no life, and without a connection, there is no life force. The redness of the installation evokes associations with blood.

Luce Irigaray describes colour as a talisman of the feminine and the material. It blurs the boundary between the inner and the outer by flagging up the ambiguous line between the toucher and the touched: 'colour signals to me that it holds sovereignty over the purchase or the influence of my gaze. That it allows me to see rather than that I make it conform to my decisions (...). That it pours itself out, extends itself, escapes, imposes itself upon me as a reminder of what is most archaic in me, the fluid.'<sup>32</sup> We can almost feel and picture the

26 Catherine de Zegher, 'Hatoum's Recollection: About Losing and Being Lost', in *Mona Hatoum*, London, 1997, pp. 90–105.

27 See Elisabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indianapolis, 1994, p. 81.

28 On the significance of human hair in art, see for example Marja Sakari, 'Destabilized Gaze Positions and Reminders of Mortality', in Patrik Nyberg, Jari-Pekka Vanhala & Maija Kasvinen (eds.), *Marja Kanervo. (Dis)appearing*, exhibition catalogue, Museum of Contemporary Art publication 138, Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, Helsinki, 2013, pp. 133–39.

29 See de Zegher 1997.

30 See Briony Fer, 'Treading Blindly, or the Excessive Presence of the Object', *Art History*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 1997, pp. 268–88 (p. 274).

31 Ibid.

32 Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, 1996, p. 130.

‘spineless’ material of *Undercurrent (Red)* escaping and burgeoning, taking over the entire space like a living web. Embodying a sense of ‘excess’ and corporeality, sculptures such as this have the ability to elicit powerfully physical responses and erotic sensations.<sup>33</sup> Lucy Lippard coined the term ‘eccentric abstraction’ to describe the excessive, overflowing element of corporeal materiality inherent in this genre of sculpture.

## The sense of sens

Both Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Luc Nancy have pondered the concept of *sens* (sense) in their writings on art and philosophy.<sup>34</sup> The concept transcends the subject-object divide, for *sens* does not reside within the subject, but ‘somewhere, out in the world, where the unknown can become known’.<sup>35</sup> It is an ineffable, intra-sensual zone that is difficult to encapsulate in words.

Merleau-Ponty argues that all perception has an irreducible, underlying figure-ground structure: to perceive a thing is to select it out against a background from which it is distinct. But for Merleau-Ponty, the perceptual gestalt is more than just a figure against a background – it also involves an oblique meaning, or *sens*, which ‘transfuses’ the two: ‘[A] “figure” on a “background” [e.g., a coloured patch on white paper] contains (...) much more than the [sense-]qualities presented at a given time. It has an “outline”, which does not “belong” to the background and which “stands out” from it; (...) the background on the other hand having no bounds, being of indefinite colouring and “running on” under the figure. The different parts of the whole (...) possess, then, besides a colour and qualities, a particular *significance* [sens].’<sup>36</sup> Lawrence Hass concludes that: ‘One doesn’t see the background “running on” behind the figure; rather one has the *sense* that it does – a sense that, as it were, *radiates* from or *inhabits* the difference or gap between the patch and the paper.’<sup>37</sup> Perceptual meaning for Merleau-Ponty is *sens* – an irreducible yet oblique sense that impregnates the gestalt.<sup>38</sup>

Hatoum’s miniature paper works have the same destabilising, subverting effect as her large installations. Using a variety of techniques, she creates indexical imprints of herself and common everyday items in works such as *Untitled (râpe cylindrique) (Untitled (Cylindrical grater))*, 1999, *Hand Made Paper*, 2003 and *Untitled (Brain)*, 2003. The figure is inseparable from the ground in works such as *Skin, Nail and Hair*, 2003, or inscribed as a repellent stain that seeps into the texture of the paper, such as in *Blood Drawing*, 2003, thereby subverting the conventional figure-ground polarity of perception in a Merleau-Pontian way. As Hass points out, with the rich and multiple *sens* at the heart of perception, the perceptual gestalt is not best understood as the ‘figure-ground structure’, but rather meaning-laden complex beyond the form-content distinction altogether.<sup>39</sup>

Hatoum’s small works on paper are executed with the most infinitesimal of gestures, the figure barely perceptible, consisting of no more than a few hairs affixed horizontally and vertically across the sheet, forming a precise grid structure similar to the work of artists such as Agnes Martin. It is difficult, however, to force hair and other human-derived matter into a rigid, disciplined order. The body refuses to yield to the mould. Grey hairs – which are normally associated with ageing and decrepitude – are elevated to the status of sacred relics in *Untitled (Grey Hair Grid with Knots)*, 2001.

33 See Briony Fer, ‘Objects Beyond Objecthood’, *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 2, 1999, pp. 25–36 (p. 25).

34 See Lawrence Hass, ‘Sense and Alterity: Rereading Merleau-Ponty’s Reversibility Thesis’, in D. Olkowski and J. Morley (eds.), *Merleau-Ponty, Interiority and Exteriority, Psychic Life and the World*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1999, pp. 92–93.

35 Susanna Lindberg, ‘Introduction’, in Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. by S. Lindberg, Tampere, 1996, p. 16.

36 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Colin Smith, New York, 1962, p. 13. Originally published as *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris, 1945, p. 20. The bracketed additions are by Lawrence Hass, from his citation of this work by Merleau-Ponty in Hass 1999, p. 92.

37 Hass 1999, pp. 92–93.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 93.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 94.

Hatoum's art destabilises our perception in many ways. She embeds her own hair and nail clippings in her hand-made paper. These abject elements uproot the viewer's sense of identity and the rules separating the viewer from the viewed, the subject from the object. Being metonymic, the material accentuates the viewer's encounter with the Other as something intimate and poignant. Again, now in miniature scale, the privileging of the gaze is undermined.

Masculine authority is challenged and destabilised in *Keffieh*, 1993–99, a cotton cloth with embroidery of human hair on it. A *keffieh* is a traditional Palestinian scarf worn by men, but Hatoum's scarf is distinguished by the unruly feminine locks sticking out around its edges. This work, too, acquires richer meanings if we think of it in terms of touch. A lock of hair is a motif that transgresses and exposes the social ordering of Arab culture. We can imagine the scarf being worn by a man, exposing his scalp to contact with a woman's hair, an element infused with powerful associations of feminine sexuality. With this work, Hatoum brings to light the taboos, conventions and tensions that govern gender relations within the ruling patriarchal order.

The figure and ground impregnate one another in Hatoum's miniature paper pieces. Her human-derived materials – disembodied hair and nail clippings – are embedded in the very fabric of the paper, and her blood seeps deep into its very texture. Again recalling Irigaray, we are dealing with something that is fluid, inseparably intertwined and organic. A third dimension intrudes upon the dualistic figure-ground constellation: the pre-conceptual notion of *sens*.

The difference between Robert Morris and Hatoum that I remarked on in the opening passages of this essay lies in the different ways they affect the viewer. Morris's art – like that of many minimalists – is heavy, reflective, concealing, enclosing, hermetic and inaccessible. It is impassive and self-preserving. By contrast, Hatoum's art has a materiality that escapes, floats, absorbs, reveals and overflows – it is in perpetual flux, giving and sustaining life. It touches us and gets under our skin. It intrudes upon the viewer's raw, corporeal, primary signification space, stripped of prophylactic armour.