

## Designed Geographies: Mona Hatoum

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### Abstract

*Known for her conceptual art, performances, and sculptures, Mona Hatoum is a Palestinian artist whose work since the 1980s has focused on the concept of homeland. Through metaphorical and tangible means, Hatoum explores identity, home, and homeland, touching on past, present, exile, and belonging. Through the prism of migration and aesthetics, Hatoum critically assesses and transforms the pain of physical and mental exile from multiple angles. Her works decode mental and physical migration, geography, identity, and the 'other' with a discerning eye. Exploring the meaning of settlement in the globalized era, Hatoum roots her search for the meaning of existence in her geographical origins. In her art, borders symbolize more than physical enclosures; they embody concepts of permission, annexation, prohibition, transit, and residence. Hatoum's concerns extend beyond personal struggles to broader societal and governmental issues. This article analyses Hatoum's cartographic works, such as "Present Tense", "Map" and "3D Cities", exploring their visual, contextual, metaphorical, and historical dimensions while examining the artist's experience of the challenges of migration.*

**Keywords:** *Mona Hatoum, Geography, Map, Installation, Cartography.*

### 1. Introduction

Hatoum was born into a Palestinian family and spent her childhood and youth in exile in Beirut. 1975, when the Lebanese Civil War broke out, she was in the UK, a place she initially considered only a temporary stop but later became her home. Hatoum's works concentrate on diasporic history, displacement, and the uncertain nature of societal structures, evoking a sense of alienation, otherness, and displacement. Her works reflect and convey the emotions of these feelings (Sakari, 2016: 2).

In her pieces, exile, the fate of identity severed from its roots, and the resultant pain of being separated from home ultimately transform into intellectual freedom. Utilizing various media, including sculpture, installation, performance, video, and photography, Hatoum establishes relationships with themes such as borders, exile, belonging, displacement, and relocation, both physically and sensually (Tzelepis, 2013: 169). She manipulates familiar objects into contradictory, dysfunctional, or attractive ones.

Throughout the ages, Palestine has been regarded as the cradle of harmonious coexistence among peoples and nations, filled with respect and dialogue. Mona Hatoum intertwines her individual story with collective history and experiences through geography and maps in this context. Hatoum reflects on her life and presents a perspective derived from the

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Palestinian people and the broader region. Most of Hatoum's works reflect her effort to transform her geographic affiliation, personal experiences, and the socio-political challenges faced as a Palestinian woman into an artistic narrative. The complexity in presenting her poignant, chaotic, and struggling details from her personal memory corner is evident. The presence of memory elements in her works reflects her effort, especially in acknowledging the battered state of her memory. From her point of departure, Mona Hatoum's works can be interpreted as an individual narrative and an expression of societal and geographical components. Viewers encounter surreal drama through perceptual and physical interaction in her works, exploring the memory elements that include her people's painful past and how the artist addresses universal themes such as exile, belonging, and struggle.

The artist's exile experience shapes itself by focusing on the echoes of a battered memory, striving to add depth through art. Therefore, memory emerges as a significant theme in Hatoum's works. Her other works referring to the geography of her roots exemplify the disturbing elements in her memory. The distinction between disturbing and narrative memory comes to the forefront. Disturbing memory divides the continuous story in two and severs the connections between the past, present, and future (Lionis, 2014: 82).

This article explores Hatoum's approaches that detach from a defined absolute geography, showcasing the desire to do something. Her works, namely *Present Tense*, *Map*, and *3-D Cities*, focus on transforming individual and collective relationships with geography and homeland.

## 2. Designed Geographies

Mona Hatoum's works, encompassing geography, the tangible and the real, present a vivid relationship between local and global issues. Her cartographic installations, involving meaning shifts, delve into desire, memory, and displacement themes. These themes harbor an aesthetic that questions power structures through resistance to cartographies of authority and political-cultural boundaries. The viewer can create meaning and explore contexts on various layers as fundamental elements interact. Hatoum's artistic process is defined as a journey, and her relationship with maps can be characterized as an allegory of this journey. Like all artists, Hatoum's works are traces and documents left behind from her experiences. In this context, maps are read as documents carrying traces of vital experiences spatially.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, in a complex unity that can account for the bodies and spaces, "a map is open and connectable in all its dimensions." In this context, cartography is needed to escape the linearity of normativity (Deleuze et al., 1987: 12-13). "A cartography is a theoretically informed and politically informed reading of the power relations process" (Giudice, 2016: 34).

The interpretation of Hatoum's artworks aids in a broader understanding of contemporary debates that are still relevant today. In her works, the artist consistently establishes connections between multicultural, layered, consistent, and dynamic elements, open to displacement and conflict resolution. Aiming to draw maps for movement and life, Hatoum can be defined as a multi-subject. As a multi-subject, Hatoum redefines her position, taking an ethical and responsible stance by drawing maps of her past and present existence. Through emotions, Hatoum creates states of being by associating contradictory emotional experiences such as desire and rejection, security and fear, instability and power, belonging and displacement, and exile and home using maps (Mulet, 2018: 64).

Several theorists, such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, have theories on geography, space, power, and biopolitics. According to Hubbard, Kitchin, Bartley, and Fuller, despite the claim of 'singular diversity,' the fundamental principle of geography is that everything happens somewhere. According to them, whether virtual,

structural, or procedural, geographical location is a necessary feature of most human thought or effort, offering abundant material for both thinking and making geographically (Baldacchino, 2004: 805). Therefore, considering the issues Hatoum addresses in her works, especially in the context of her geographic roots, they go beyond time, geographies, borders, and political agendas.

Hatoum's works represent a resistance against power maps, emerging from the experience of exile and the resulting upheaval. By transforming the experience of exile into an intellectual experience, Hatoum explains this situation: "You cannot take anything lightly; you have to look behind the visible. I want people to respond instinctively to the artwork first, and then they can start thinking about what it might mean" (Anwar, 2016: 51-52).

In his work "The Performative Transformation of Space," Phil Hubbard suggests that the world is an empty canvas, forming a surface on which social relationships are played rather than actively shaping social life. However, these can only be seen in isolation when considering space as a whole, and evolutions can question the objectivity of spatial studies. Lefebvre does not accept space as a scientifically purified object, free from ideology or politics, in the paradigmatic shift in spatial transformation and spatial uses. According to him, space has always been political and strategic. Space is shaped and formed by historical and natural elements, but this is a political process. Space is political and ideological as a product filled with ideologies (Mulet, 2018: 55-56). In this regard, Hatoum's works, especially when considering the geography of her roots, go beyond the confines of time, geographies, borders, and political agendas.

Hatoum's constant exploration in her artistic productions against the mechanisms created by power invites interactive participation, revealing invisible resistance actions. The concept of resistance, while inviting the viewer to Hatoum's creative experience through interaction and participation, is also an expression of a stance against powers. It compels viewers to reshape their memories, emotions, and fears. Hatoum's internal sense of alienation emerges at every stage of her works, allowing the viewer to share this feeling. This inner sense of alienation also indicates that she is in an internal war against forces that detach her from her roots. Her art is designed to reveal the workings of unjust power and confront viewers with this reality. Describing herself as a wanderer who feels at home and a stranger anywhere, Hatoum envisions a contemporary world where nothing is absolute due to constructed boundaries (Sazzad, 2008: 3).

## 2.1 Present Tense

Present Tense is a representative presentation of a map showing the borders of Palestine according to the agreement signed between Palestine and Israel in 1993. After being forcibly exiled, Hatoum visited Palestine for the first time in 1996. During this visit, she created Present Tense within the Nablus factory closed by Israel. She used traditional methods to produce local olive oil soap with tiny red glass beads, symbolically representing the borders of the disjointed and isolated areas planned for the State of Palestine (Figure 1). The ideological purpose of Present Tense is significant. As with her other works born out of the experience of exile, Hatoum conveys her lived experiences (Shelton, 2012: 13). Hatoum's map does not respond to a colonial logic of division and control. Instead, her map is more of a reference to the desire for unrestricted movement. Beyond creating a physical experience, Hatoum's work aims to build meaning by establishing a relationship with individual and collective memory. This allows the viewer to understand Hatoum's artwork by relating it to their life experiences. The work not only tells the artist's individual story but also prompts reflection on societal, political, and cultural contexts, making the viewer sensitive to issues of displacement and belonging on a global scale.

The displacement of individuals and the actively producing factory on the map represent an individual experience and an installation that symbolizes broader social issues and injustices. The title Present Tense and the materiality of the installation both signify a

duality of tension and the present moment's action. In Judith Butler's terms, what temporality is enacted in the context of spectral belonging and non-belonging? Belonging to Palestine, being deprived of rights, and overcoming the impossible, regaining the rights and citizenship of Palestinians elsewhere, persists as an imposition on this new sense of belonging. It remains a historical and current global injustice, i.e., an ongoing catastrophe, without being addressed (Tzelepis, 2013: 172).



Figure 1. Mona Hatoum, *Present Time*, Anadiel Gallery, Jerusalem 1996 (Archer, 1997: 9)

Mona Hatoum's focus on the history of Palestinians becomes evident through symbols that evoke the history and culture of Palestine. Hatoum, particularly by incorporating the evocative scent of "homemade" soap into the work, creates another layer of meaning against the continuous denial of this historical process. The scent of the soap not only provides a sensory experience but forces the viewer to think about this issue by evoking collective memory and history. The artist emphasizes symbolism when addressing spatialized power relations and the effects on the human geography of Palestine. In this context, "homemade" soap serves both as a cleansing tool and evokes stories and sorrows that have persisted from the lands of Palestine. Hatoum's attempt to cleanse the hands and souls of everyone from this issue through soap can be perceived as a symbolic act. With this act of cleansing, the artist both lightens and burdens the weight of the historical process.

In the installation "Present Tense," where soap serves the function of a map, the fact that soap is one of the traditional craft products of Nablus and its continuous production even during wartime are crucial points. Therefore, due to its temporary materiality and resistance against the barriers of power, it symbolizes resistance. The soap, destined to melt, washes away the bloody border lines confined within an eternal present moment, representing the ephemeral nature of these lines (Ferrer & Val, 2014: 22). The melting and disappearance of the soap also symbolize a transient symbol associated with the impermanence of experiences, lost memories, and erased identities. Choosing traditional soap as a product also functions as a carrier of Palestinian culture and history. The origin of conventional soap establishes a deep connection with the cultural identity and history of the region. Although Hatoum's works are rich and diverse and cannot be exclusively viewed through the prism of Palestinian history, understanding the symbols directly related to events in Palestinian history is essential (Lionis, 2014: 85). The fate of the Palestinian people, is intertwined with the soap's melting and disappearing, also dissolves the borders carved into the land of Palestine or the drawn map. This map represents all contradictions to the validity of a nation.

Referring to *Present Tense*, Chaudry states (2009: 265). "There is no solid ground reflecting the real-life uncertainty of these disputed territories," emphasizing the feeling of exclusion brought about by the acts of dividing and fragmenting the land. The work highlights the sense of exclusion resulting from actions of dividing and fragmenting the land. Describing the soil as a shell known to everyone and carried in their memories

implies that changes on the land represent a geographical change and a personal and social trauma. The flexibility of maps questions the power of fixed borders and identities, providing an awareness of the power mechanism. Criticizing traditionally drawn boundaries and determined identities as a power tool representing control over people's lands and identities, flexible maps emphasize the variability of geographical borders and identities, reinforcing feelings of exclusion or belonging based on where people live and their identities. These statements emphasize the importance of questioning maps and boundaries to understand the complexity of geographical, political, and cultural interactions between societies and individuals. At the same time, narrating the sense of exclusion experienced with the division and fragmentation of the land expresses that these actions deeply affect personal and social identities.

Mona Hatoum's chosen narrative method encourages viewers to participate while positioning them as observers actively. Although Hatoum aims to create meaning for her audience through her works, the chosen subjects carry personal and universal qualities. The simple installation communicates directly with the viewer and offers a concrete experience rather than abstraction. In Hatoum's art, while the viewer is encouraged to actively engage in internal exploration and meaning-making processes, it also provides an opportunity to find their context in the depths of her works. Therefore, the feeling in the relationship where conceptual boundaries meet actual boundaries is based on experience. It can also be considered a validation of experiences gained as the other and as an exile outside. Mona Hatoum states, "I want to create a situation where reality becomes a point of questioning, where people must rethink their assumptions and attitudes toward what is around them. The idea of 'exile' I create puts us in a position where we must question ourselves, our perception of the world and reality." (Sazzad, 2008: 19).

According to Chaudry (2009: 267), Hatoum's installation stems from not belonging or adapting. It suggests that the state of exile is a part of the human condition and, therefore, experienced subjectively by everyone in the modern era (the era of alienation).

## 2.2 Map

Three years after *Present Tense*, Mona Hatoum introduced her work titled *Map* (1999) to the audience (Figure 2). Hatoum draws a world map with marbles on the floor of a museum. *Map* (1999) is a cartographic presentation using hundreds of marbles on the ground. In contrast to *Present Tense*, the *Map* does not show the political borders of nations on continents; only the main outlines of the continents are visible, and the map is fragile. As viewers walk into the room, their steps shake the floor, marbles move from their places, and due to the scattered glass marbles on the floor, one may be slipping or losing balance. In this work, where borders are more geographical than political, Hatoum destabilizes the surface the viewers walk on, conveying the idea that the world is on shaky ground.



Figure 2. Mona Hatoum, *Map*, 1999, 14 mm transparent glass marbles, installation dimensions variable. Photo: Christian Mosar. Courtesy Casino Luxembourg. (Schulenberg, 2014: 20)

Unlike the Present Tense, Map is less politically charged as it reveals geographies' distribution while keeping political borders unseen. The concepts of nations and borders on the map are elements that lead to the context of conflict and power relations. When the viewer becomes part of the artwork as an observer, the position and appearance of the marbles change instantly. Through this work, Hatoum conveys that everything can change at any moment, and one should be prepared for it. Simultaneously, an ironic approach is evident in how Hatoum addresses how geopolitical borders sometimes heavily condition people's lives. Hatoum states that the map is so unstable that even the geographical boundaries of continents cannot be fixed because the simple movements of those walking on the ground alter and threaten to destroy it (Giudice, 2016: 34).

Hatoum, in Map, represents global instability through a world map formed by thousands of transparent glass marbles that have rolled, no longer defining borders but shifting toward the oceans, their boundaries disrupted by gravity, movement, or indirectly, political distraction and the recklessness of children's games (Roberts, 2016). Marbles evoke a childhood game, resonating with an unusual sense of order or a puzzle on the ground where everything is in its proper place. However, upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that this is not just a game but a representation of the "real" world. The map is perfect; it can be changed beneath your feet because the glass marbles can roll. In reality, maps are made by cartographers, i.e., humans. They show not the truth but what is intended to be hidden. In this way, Hatoum highlights the assumed neutrality when making and interpreting maps. She wants viewers to be aware of this, asserting that as knowledgeable and responsible subjects, good and bad if viewers do not pay attention, they may not see what they claim to be invisible. This representation mirrors the superiority complex characterizing Western culture and has become so ingrained in our minds that Hatoum's different reflection of representing the world is complex to notice (Giudice, 2016: 35-36).

### 2.3 3-D Cities

Another example of Hatoum's work on geographies and disputed regions is the installation titled 3-D Cities (2008-2009) (Figure 3). The installation connects three bomb attacks that occurred in Kabul in 2001, Baghdad in 2003, and Beirut in 2006 through these three cities in shared memory. The touches representing the traces of the bombs are presented on each map in the form of concave and convex geometric incisions in a circular shape according to the locations of Beirut, Baghdad, and Kabul on the map. The areas marked on the maps are associated with war and destruction, strategically significant politically, and contextually related to conflict and power relations.



Figure 3. Mona Hatoum, 3-D Cities, 2008-2009. Printed maps and wood, dimensions variable. Photo: Kleinfenn. Courtesy of Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, and White Cube (Ferrer & Val, 2014: 26-27)

Mona Hatoum's "3-D Cities" (2008-2009) is a work centered around disputed areas in the territories of Middle Eastern countries. The emphasis on the places where bombs were dropped in Kabul, Baghdad, and Beirut indicates the political strategic connection of war and destruction with these regions. Geometric incisions, both concave and convex, represent touches and traces, conveying physical damage and the sense that life continues intermittently and the human tragedy experienced in these cities. This work aims to confront viewers directly with the immediate effects of war and conflict, questioning the meaning of geographical spaces and their impact on people.

"3-D Cities" serves as an intertwined representation of geographies and space-time; it includes recent collective memories of cities that have become dysfunctional due to traces and physical wounds from recent wars, disrupted daily evolutions due to violence, and communities separated from each other (Mulet, 2018: 62). Mona Hatoum presents the installation resembling a military command center with three ordinary tables arranged in an arch, using strategic maps showing seismic signs that render the perception of cities unrecognizable and make spaces appear shifted. By transforming a regular city map into a heterotopic representation, Hatoum challenges the location of emptiness and questions recognition and identification procedures, drawing attention to an alternative critical heterotopic line (Ferrer & Val, 2014: 25). Maps create ownership through laws, contracts, and treaties. Similarly, such maps produce "border," "privilege," and "Law" for those outside them (Rogoff, 2000: 75).

Hatoum highlights through her maps the memory action that redirects the view of uprooted geography. The presentation reminds us of the colonial policies of the West that manipulated current knowledge and power maps over culture and economy in the past and present. The work questions the continued centrality, hegemony, and subordination of the locations of countries on these maps. Therefore, Hatoum, in the work, has created a counter-alienation geography that disrupts and continually redefines this persistent power map. The implications of the struggle over geography and its contested areas evoke unsettling consequences. These incisions are more signs of the violence left by wars. Against the modern cartography of differentiated powers, Hatoum's maps have created ontological displacement areas, intersections of time and space, and connections between distance and proximity, forming personal and collective memories. The artist pulls the viewer into an alternative critical heterotopic space by questioning the position, established recognition, and identification procedures on geography. Here, the viewer witnesses the emergence of another challenging configuration by overcoming obstacles, borders, enclosures, divisions, folds, and unpredictable flows in favor of another space (Ferrer & Val, 2014: 25).

Hatoum's choice of paper as a material can be considered symbolic. The selected material implies that Beirut, Baghdad, and Kabul are constantly threatened. A touch is enough to disrupt regional coordinates, and the borders are unstable in case of possible intervention. The idea of fragmentation and division after an attack, represented by geometric incisions, keeps the constant threat element on the agenda. The artwork evokes a sense that the world's cartography can irreversibly change. This work recalls Jean Baudrillard's observation: "There is no reference system that will tell us what has happened to the geography of things. We can only have a seismographic perspective" (Cragg & Thrift, 2000: 230). Hatoum questions the stability of the ground one lives on, creating a new reference system that makes it impossible to establish roots and grow using paper as a material. This "new geography of things" surpasses boundaries, uproots, mixes codes, and includes dislocation, homelessness, and regionalization through disintegration and closeness (Ferrer & Val, 2014: 25). The artist skillfully brings the viewer physically close to the work's experiences of fear, threat, rupture, and disturbing uncertainty. Hatoum's life events, which almost always frame the interpretations of her works, shape the artist's thinking.

### 3. Conclusion

The possibilities of contemporary art repeatedly circulate the issue of space as a place where individuals and collectives construct their imagination, hopes, and dreams. In these three analyzed works, along with Mona Hatoum's other works, it can be seen that she repeatedly confirms the cartographic return to the space that carries identity. In her works, the geography to which culture, nation, tradition, and identity belong has been displaced, intersected, and damaged. Therefore, losing a place in Mona Hatoum can also create an identity crisis. The resulting crisis deepens the politics of migration and the mixing of cultures. The nostalgia for the loss of place, home, and identity in Mona Hatoum's works also approaches this process.

In the analyzed installations of Mona Hatoum, a central issue is shaped around the symbolic meanings she assigns to maps. What makes Hatoum's use of maps unique is her complete commitment to a reference in direct contact with reality. By expressing the fate of geography through map dimensions, she points to the flexible and variable nature of geographical space by transforming maps into forms that can be dismantled, reversed, and constantly changed. The objects Hatoum uses, such as marbles, soaps, and paper, symbolize the meanings loaded onto maps. These materials emphasize that maps are structures that can be physically intervened with and altered. Hatoum's works reveal the multiple meanings of maps continually reprocessed by individuals, groups, or social formations using these materials.

While Hatoum's art production can be designed broadly from political actions to meditative experiences, these works go beyond a tracing understanding of "the same." Hatoum's maps are dynamic structures with multiple layers and meanings assigned in changing contexts over time. This reminds viewers that maps are not static objects with a single definition but representation tools that evolve, change, and diversify over time and context. Therefore, Hatoum's representational cartographies refer to real people living or departing from those geographies. Her repeated return to her roots and the issues there directs viewers to think and evaluate. Hatoum's representations of the psychic effects of exile criticize the displacement of Palestinians and, increasingly, the annexation of the territories lived by Arab peoples.

Mona Hatoum's art production is built on establishing relationships with everything in life to continue its path and create new ways. Her sensitivity is related to adapting changes seen in space and geography to her cartography. Here, the simple displacement of an image by the artist's will returns to an intimate meaning that includes the tragedy of many people. The artist's definition transforms more profoundly with the word "homeland," familiar to everyone. Hatoum raises whether everyone can define the place they live as a homeland by thinking about their history. According to Hatoum, the necessity of displacement is not a process that concerns only one person. It is also a process of reconstructing a nation and national identity, extending for a long time. Therefore, the basic terminological assumption on which the article is based is the visual representation of the image of reality through images, representation systems, and images based on the concepts of homeland and belonging. In this context, Mona Hatoum's works question how the clichés of stereotyped perceptions and power mechanisms created situations in constructing subjectivity and collective consciousness, making the visual reality through codes and mechanisms of meaning. The examined installations of Hatoum aim to arouse critical thinking. The artist's thinking and presentation process takes what she deals with to a practical point. The reading of the works aims to reveal the knowledge of their codes and the workings of their operations and to bring enlightenment to the fore. As an observing and actively participating individual, she creates a critical attitude towards realizing, approaching, and understanding the power mechanisms of power and engages in dialogue.



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