

Diasporic Geographies and Émigré Bodies: the politics of identity in Mona Hatoum's *Measures of Distance*

Eliza Waterhouse

The invitation to Mona Hatoum's exhibition *Under Siege* began with this brief yet profound instruction to those who would gaze upon her work:

Step out of an acquired frame of reference and into a space which acts as a point of reconnection and reconciliation with my own background and the bloody history of my own people.¹

Hatoum, a Palestinian born in Lebanon now living in London, stands among the most celebrated of contemporary female Arab artists. Her candid words here provide a starting point for examining the intricate themes of her work that circulate between displacement, gender, memory, public history and the complex interplay of all these notions within private identity. The video artwork *Measures of Distance* is one such example of her work. In the video, the artist attempts to recreate the memory of her mother, distanced by the cultural dislocation of exile. Produced in 1988, *Measures of Distance* received far less scholarly attention than Hatoum's broader body of work. Moreover, as the post 9/11 surge of Arabophobia continues to destabilize claims of personal identity within diasporic Arab communities² works of visual self-ethnography may prove persuasive forces of intercultural exchange and understanding.

Hatoum's ancestral homeland of Palestine was torn apart by *al Nakba* (or the catastrophe) of 1948 upon the territory being annexed to establish Israel. In the uprising, civil war and the ensuing displacement of defeat her family fled their home to find asylum in a refugee camp in Lebanon, where Hatoum was born a short time later. At the outbreak of the 1975 Lebanese civil war, the artist was studying abroad in England when the precarious military situation made a return home impossible. Consequently the experience of exile is pervasive in much of Hatoum's artwork³, particularly *Measures of Distance*. Yet whilst the video addresses diasporic themes of expulsion, separation and war it contains no archival footage of either the Palestine Israel conflict or the Lebanese civil war. Rather than having the observer bear witness to violence and bloodshed, Hatoum

fashions a visually rich sequence of images, creating a personal record of war and displacement that is complex, bold and strikingly intimate.

On the surface *Measures of Distance* addresses the artist's life in exile, indeed a kind of double exile since the video moves between Hatoum's Mother (a Palestinian-in-exile living in Beirut) and her daughter, (born in Lebanon living between cultures in Europe and Canada). Produced in the space between home and exile by an artist living on the cusp of separate cultures and between different ways of knowing, the video may be described as intercultural. In *The Skin of the Film*, Laura Marks's broader study of intercultural film, Marks describes a crisis at the heart of many works as: "the directly political discrepancy between official history and 'private memory'".⁴ Through a close reading of *Measures of Distance* this article aims to extrapolate this 'political discrepancy', laying bare the various points of overlap between politics, memory and personal identity.

As the film begins, granular, flesh toned shapes fill the frame. Cast in lustrous nocturnal tones - deep blue, beige, black and silver - these shapes softly gleam with light. Overlaid across the lens of the camera is a sheaf of transparent writing paper, drawn with a grid pattern and printed with Arabic lettering acting like a curtain or a blind, protectively shielding the shapes beneath. Rising from some place on the other side of this translucent paper, the voices of the artist and her mother can be heard chatting in Arabic, occasionally laughing. A short time into the video, a voice rises from the sound track, this time speaking in English. Gradually we discover the voice is reading correspondence between the artist and her mother. Hatoum's absence and her place in exile is obliquely implied as these letters are read:

"My dear Mona the apple of my eye. How I miss you and long to feast my eyes on your beautiful face that brightens up my days. When you were here, the whole house was livened up by your presence..."⁵

The correspondence goes on to detail an encounter between the artist and her parents, recording her father's shock and then anger at finding his wife and daughter showering together naked as the artist photographed her mother's naked body. It is these photos that are arranged in a sequence to make up the video's visual form. Such private and intimate depictions are not commonplace in Arab Middle Eastern film⁶, but rather than adopting a patriarchal approach of censoring

the female form⁷ Hatoum uses various methods of shrouding the images, using the camera to frame only parts of the photos in the early sequences and draping transparent paper over the images through the rest of the film.

In the early frames, the images depicting her mother are slight, indecipherable and almost meaningless in themselves. Writing more generally on intercultural film Marks proposes: “there is an additional, more overtly political suspicion of the image, given that its clichés bear the weight of dominant history. For many works of intercultural cinema, then, the image is barely a beginning, and any extension of narrative must be hesitant, or suspicious”.⁸ Drawing eloquent parallels between intercultural cinema and time-image cinema described by Gilles Deleuze, Marks describes such images as typical of both time-image and intercultural cinema, that is avant-garde works that are suspicious of clearly discernible representation.⁹ For Deleuze, time-image cinema emerged as a reaction to the global cataclysm of World War Two. Marking a shift away from the schematic nature of classic, pre-war movement image cinema, time image cinema is characterized by a directionless, a fragmentation of narrative that refuses resolution¹⁰. Marks suggests that the “violent disjunctions in time and space”¹¹ caused by dispossession and exile may have similar effects on the production of intercultural film.

Images typical of Deleuze’s time image cinema are recognizable in Hatoum’s video. The opening frames of *Measures of Distance* are incomplete, thin images. Borrowing Deleuze’s terminology Mark’s identifies these as optical; one severed from the natural succession as convention of narrative cinema, to become “a pure optical and aural image” that “comes into relation with a virtual image, a mental or mirror image”.¹² Visually they are baffling; blurred shapes, slight and grainy, with the only identifiable visual register being Arabic lettering. The recorded conversation between Hatoum and her mother in Beirut is also left untranslated. The frames and accompanying sound cannot be deciphered on their own terms (particularly so for the non-Arabic speaking observer), thus we must draw on our own subjective resources to make sense of them. In order to coax meaning from these early frames and to extend Deleuze’s notion of the optical image, let me explain the way I read the opening of *Measures of Distance*.

Beginning with the Arabic lettering, which Hatoum refuses to translate. Dipping into the well of past memory for something resembling these letters, I find the jagged lines and gentle curves of a foreign language. They are recognisable as

Arabic so the video may be contextualized as belonging someplace in the vast Arab Middle East. Yet, linguistically they have no meaning, provoking a surge of curiosity tinged with frustration. The lettering thus creates a language barrier between the image and the observer. In my encounter with the film, the artists renders a sense of alienation, perhaps even, a visual appropriation of the kind of isolation the displaced person experiences when forced into the liminal space of exile; an experience of dislocation from the familiar, confronted with an entirely new set of signs. To the displaced person the new language of exile would be perceived the way the Arabic on the screen is perceived, as nothing more than shapes. The translucent paper sheafing the photographs of her mother adds to this sense of dislocation, for it creates an obstruction to vision, a partial blindness to the image. The physical senses we might associate with diaspora - separation (from the thin veil of paper) isolation (from the unreadable Arabic lettering) - are evoked through affect. A sense of isolation engenders a slight, virtualised sense of diaspora in the mind and the body of the observer.

This first sensation is followed by a second, seemingly in opposition to the first. The second sensation was intimacy, an almost overwhelming sense of emotional closeness. Because shortly into the video, these barely recognizable shapes slowly become visible as a whole and though still blurry, become identifiable as images of a woman's body. Gradually, as the letters on the voiceover are read, we realize we are gazing upon the image of the artist's naked mother. The closeness described stemmed from the rich sensory information in each frame. Imbued with tactile intensity, such images draw the observer closer to the image, so much so, that it takes restraint not to reach out and touch the screen with one's fingers. The images of the voluptuous warmth of her mother's flesh triggers sense memories of being cradled by my own mother's body as a child. Because I recognize the sight of skin, a mother's skin, a feeling of maternal closeness registers through sense memory.

By bringing together these two seemingly opposing sensations of dislocation and intimacy something astonishing occurs. The video transmits the "paradoxical state of geographical distance and emotional closeness".¹³ Distance – from the foreign lettering, the sheaf of paper - and closeness – from the images of the mother's body engenders a virtualized sense of diaspora in the body and mind of the observer. Because they do not immediately unfold into action, because they are

scant and incomplete, such images cause the observer to search the memory so that meaning is created by connections between the screen and the self.¹⁴ Though almost “meaningless in themselves”¹⁵ they cause the observer to recall virtual images and sensations stored in the memory. Thus rather than being unsatisfying or empty, these narratively scant images become the film’s most rewarding moments.

Gradually, these early frames widen to reveal more complete images. Soft, sparse light creates the sense of a gently lit room, as though we are gazing into an intimate place. Indeed, it is as though we are peering into someone’s private space, an initial impression soon proved correct. The video’s setting becomes discernible as the shower space of a bathroom, perhaps among the most personal of all private spaces. In the reporting of conflicts and war, the inside of the house, the domestic space is not a place often looked upon by journalism. The Lebanese civil war and the Palestine Israel conflict (both of which the video reacts and alludes to) have been brought into the Euro-American West¹⁶ principally through the pictures in news media. A narrow set of images showing militaristic aggression and violence set in the public sphere and balanced only with the occasional footage showing the veiled and grieving widow or mother. As an example, news images of the second *intifada* focused primarily on young males¹⁷: teenage boys masked by keffiyehs facing down tanks and armed soldiers wielding slingshots, throwing stones and Molotov cocktails.¹⁸

The private, domestic space of the home is rarely shown and when revealed, we see only the outside as part of the war ravaged landscape. But such images are short and simplistic, generating little understanding of the private experience of those living under the spectre of conflict. *Measures of Distance* provides a counter perspective to such dominating representations of war. The contrast between the images of the video and contemporary news media representation are stark. In *Measures of Distance* the director’s gaze is set inwards on the private space of home, a perspective often absent from journalistic representations of conflict.¹⁹ Under this gaze, narrative voices that record private experience become diminished. *Measures of Distance* poses a reply to the public accounts at the forefront of history recording the realms of the private and domestic, both integral but often overlooked aspects of collective history²⁰.

Her adoption of the female body - her mother's body - is another revealing aspect of Hatoum's work. Both recently and historically in the Euro-American West (the crucial dissemination points for most of Hatoum's work) the Arab female body has been popularly imagined under the gaze of men, as object not as subject. Laura Mulvey's essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, brings to the surface the political implications of the male gaze: "Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning."²¹ We may extend Mulvey's statement here into an examination of broader popular visual cultures. Certainly forms such as art and film play a part in shaping our understanding of history and identity, yet a survey of Arab women in the tropes of Euro-Western popular culture – from Hollywood films, television and art – uncovers a problematic set of images. The European art movement known as Orientalism²² - a period monopolised by the male gaze - brought the first widely disseminated impressions of the Arab female body to the Euro-American West. Later, Arab women became depicted as harems or belly dancers²³ in Hollywood films so that historically, visual representation of Arab women were both eroticised and exoticised.²⁴ Yet such images are imposed on Arab women and verily have their foundations in the gaze of men, a gaze that according to Mulvey reinforces the language of patriarchy.²⁵ Recent representations of Arab (particularly Muslim) women in film and television have taken on a silent and monolithic cast. In his analysis of the depictions of Arabs in popular culture, Jack Shaheen describes: "bundles in black, veiled women in the background, in the shadows, submissive..."²⁶ Hatoum points to these later portrayals of Arab women as "a mass or herd and not as individuals"²⁷ as incentive for making *Measures of Distance* as visual self-ethnography²⁸.

The power of Hatoum's own gaze is then significant, both as an individual and as a woman. The cinematic language in *Measures of Distance* reframes the image of the Arab female body to offer new narrative of the Arab woman as subject. Revealing the intimate disclosures of the letters she reads:

"I can't understand this expression, 'lie back and think of England.' You mean they believe that women are not supposed to enjoy sex? Well my answer to that is of course we do, as much as men, if not more. Why do you think I keep

telling you to get married? After all, life is not worth living if it's all hard work and no fun."²⁹

Hatoum's presentation of the female body is a sharp contrast. Here we are allowed into the mother's private disclosures, affirming her heterogeneous identity and challenging representations of the Arab woman as passive or as object. The artist's camera, fixed upon the naked body of her mother reverses the male gaze. Then, when interrupted by the patriarchal intrusion of the father, angered at catching his daughter and wife together he is duly ignored. Thus in *Measures of Distance* the visual pleasure of the male gaze is not only reversed but completely subverted.

The body also becomes a motif that exposes the tension between private identity and public discourse. The mother's presence in the photographs, the narrated letters and the recorded conversations in the background, discloses the fissures and ruptures of war. The body itself becomes a visual realization of diaspora; Hatoum's mother becomes "a living map where sociocultural and geopolitical boundaries are violently marked on the skin/screen's surface".³⁰ Private space becomes interwoven with public struggles; a national war becomes entangled with mother and daughter through a voiceover narrating personal memory. In reading fragments of her mother's letters, the artist evokes a notion Deleuze describes as 'story-telling', a collective act that makes the private and political inseparable: "Story-telling is not an impersonal myth, but neither is it a personal fiction: it is a word in act, a speech-act through which the character continually crosses the boundary which would separate his private business from politics".³¹ The artist's tender recollection of her mother and her mother's recollection of her are shown inseparable from this public sphere of war:

"When you were here, the whole house was livened up by your presence. Now it feels like the house has lost its soul. I wish this bloody war would be over soon so you and your sisters could return and we could all be together again like the good old days".³²

Political and public history is verbalized in letters that articulate the traumatic outcome of war, the fracturing of family, the exiled life of the artist and her mother's longing to restore a past now lost. Return is fantasised in the Mother's nostalgic musings of living on the land in Palestine: "that was paradise compared

to where we are now”.³³ In voicing the private self as inextricably linked with political and historical history, the work exhibits characteristics of something Michel Foucault describes as a “historical ontology of self”³⁴ it is at once a critique of the present and an awareness of the place of history in the constitution of the self. Indeed, such ontology is revealing, disclosing the pain and fragmentation of Hatoum’s life in exile:

“...Of course this must have affected you as well. Because being born in exile, in a country that does not want you is not fun at all. And now that you and your sisters have left Lebanon, you’re again living in another exile in a culture that is totally different to your own. So when you talk about a feeling of fragmentation and not knowing where you really belong, well this has been the painful reality of all our people”.³⁵

Juxtaposing the recorded conversations between the artist and her mother taped earlier in Beirut and the voiceover reading her mothers’ letters on the voice over from London, Hatoum fashions a vocalised sense of exile. The artist herself is not visible in the work, because although we hear her voice, we never see her³⁶. She exists in the gap between the longing voice of a daughter and the mother and daughter’s laughter filled conversation recorded earlier in Beirut.³⁷ It is through this contrasting audio that the film creates a space that audibly transmits the liminal identity of exile. Thus *Measures of Distance* works to show a threshold Homi Bhabha refers to as ‘an in-between location’³⁸; Hatoum exists in this liminal zone, between her home, her mother’s home and her birthplace so that home for the exile is the distance between places.

This fraught attempt to reconcile private memory and public discourse remains the most powerful aspect of Hatoum’s work. The video’s cinematic language – two voiceovers marked at different temporalities, the intimate pictures of her mother - fashion a private yet strangely disjointed space. Then in recounting her mother’s experience of war, the artist draws public discourse into this sphere so that *Measures of Distance* visualizes and vocalizes the often-sorrowful interface between the two. In fact, the most affecting image occurs towards the end of the video, when the camera abruptly closes this space. The screen falls black as Hatoum’s voice reads one final letter:

“My dear Mona. I have not been able to send any letters for the past few months because the local post office was completely destroyed by that car

bomb back in April and there's no sign of them fixing it.... Now even the most basic form of communication is being denied to us".³⁹

The photographs fade, leaving the screen blank and the story undone. Is the mother ever able to post another letter or does communication between the two become severed? Like the optical images described earlier, the breakdown of vision and movement generates a space. The image gives us no answers, no action unfolds and the observer is left to contemplate such questions for themselves.

In the process of excavating memory *Measures of Distance* exposes the fragile and fraught relationship between private identity and public discourse⁴⁰, ultimately disclosing the disparity between each. This gap becomes visualized in the thin, incomplete images that refuse to come together to form an ordered, linear narrative, ultimately denying any resolution. The limits of representation become exhausted, images break down and in the process they come to express the limits of the seeable and sayable. Such a break down also signals the complexity inherent in transmitting the complex experience of the video's subject, the identity of the artist herself. The images point directly to the disjunction identified by Marks, between private memory and discourse, exposing the inadequacy of a public discourse in being able to visually recreate personal memory for nationalistic discourse cannot comprehend nor express the strata of identity within the diasporic female subject.⁴¹ With her gaze set inward Hatoum reveals a perspective and understanding of Arab women not found in Euro-Western journalism or the popular cultural forms of art or film. In this sense, Hatoum disrupts "...the predictable and challenges conformity while at the same time articulating a subjectivity that is deeply aware of the place of memory and history in the formation of the self and the self's relations with the other".⁴² Yet, the artist makes no attempt to re-create private history in a singular form or as metanarrative for Palestinian women in exile. Instead, a far more intimate portrait emerges.

Eliza Waterhouse examines the notion of identity in exile through a close reading of Mona Hatoum's video artwork Measures of Distance (1998), extrapolating the complex, frequently contentious relationship between politics, identity and private memory.

Acknowledgments: The author thanks the generous and thoughtful contribution of Dr. Tara Forrest in this article's early life as one chapter of an honours thesis.

-
- ¹ Mona Hatoum, "Under siege" in *Mona Hatoum*, Michael Archer, Guy Brett and Catherine de Zegher, eds. (London: Phaidon Press, 2001), 122.
- ² Mehre T. Khan, "'Shaking up' vision: the video diary as personal and pedagogical intervention in Mona Hatoum's Measures of Distance", *Intercultural Education*, 18, no. 4, (2007): 317-334, 318.
- ³ See also the artworks *Under Siege* (1982), *Light at the End* (2002), *Light Sentence* (1992), *Corps étranger* (1994) and *Rutas* (Routes, 2002).
- ⁴ Laura U Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2000), 60.
- ⁵ Mona Hatoum, *Measures of Distance* (WMM: Lebanon, 1988) video tape, np.
- ⁶ Ella Shohat, "The Cinema of Displacement: Gender, Nation and Diaspora" in *Dreams of a Nation: on Palestinian Cinema*, ed. Hamid Dabashi (London, New York: Verso, 1991), 88.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.
- ⁸ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 42.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.
- ¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1986), 210.
- ¹¹ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 1.
- ¹² Gilles Deleuze, "On the Movement-Image", *Negotiations: 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 52.
- ¹³ Shohat, *The Cinema of Displacement*, 87.
- ¹⁴ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 47.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.
- ¹⁶ For the purpose of this article the Euro-American West is defined as Britain and (post) colonial outposts in the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia.
- ¹⁷ Khan, *Shaking up vision*, 319.
- ¹⁸ As a matter of practicality, I have offered a brief summary of visual representations of the second intifada based upon images appearing in major publications such as *New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Daily Telegraph*. For a more in depth examination of media representations (including those of the broader conflict) see for example Kathleen Christison, *Perceptions of Palestine Their Influence on US Middle East Policy*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1999).
- ¹⁹ Sana Wassef quoted in Laura U Marks, "What is That 'And' between Arab Women and Video? The Case of Beirut", *Camera Obscura* 18, no. 2 (2003): 40-69, 18.
- ²⁰ Shohat, *The Cinema of Displacement*, 89.
- ²¹ Laura Mulvey "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Screen*, 16 no. 3 (1975): 6-18, 7.
- ²² On the multiple meanings of Orientalism see for example John MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory, and the Arts* (Manchester. University Press: Manchester, 1995), 4.
- ²³ Belly dancers reoccur in the Bond films such as *From Russia With Love* (1963). Also see *Intolerance* (1916), *Road to Morocco* (1942), *Looking for Danger* (1957), *Young Sherlock Holmes* (1985), *Son of Pink Panther* (1993) and Humphrey Bogart's *Sirocco* (1951).
- ²⁴ Shohat, *The Cinema of Displacement*, 88.
- ²⁵ Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure*, 7.
- ²⁶ Jack Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, (Northampton: Media Education Foundation, 2006), video recording. Shaheen sites films such as *Indiana Jones* (1984) and *Death Before Dishonor* (1987) for their monolithic depictions of Arab women. For more recent releases see for example *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012).
- ²⁷ Mona Hatoum in Claudia Spinelli, "Interview with Mona Hatoum" in *Mona Hatoum*, Michael Archer, Guy Brett and Catherine de Zegher, eds., (London: Phaidon Press, 1996), 140.
- ²⁸ Khan, *Shaking up vision*, 318.
- ²⁹ Hatoum, *Measures of Distance*.
- ³⁰ Mehre Khan, "Resisting vision: video as a site of the cultural imaginary in the work of Mona Hatoum". (Masters diss., University of British Columbia, 2000), 2.
- ³¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1989), 228.

³² Hatoum, *Measures of Distance*, np

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment", in Paul Rabinow ed., *The Foucault Reader* (Penguin: London 1984), 319.

³⁵ Mona Hatoum, *Measures of Distance*.

³⁶ Khan, *Shaking up vision*, 24.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 1-2.

³⁹ Hatoum, *Measures of Distance*.

⁴⁰ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 60.

⁴¹ Shohat, *The Cinema of Displacement*, 89.

⁴² Vivienne Jabri, "Exiled Art and the Politics of Resistance", *Social Alternatives* 20 no.4 (2001): 37-40, 39.