

UCLA

Thinking Gender Papers

Title

Jumping scale, mapping space: feminist geographies at work in the art of Mona Hatoum

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7tt02239>

Author

Khullar, Sonal

Publication Date

2008-02-01

Jumping Scale, Mapping Space: Feminist Geographies in the Art of Mona Hatoum

In Mona Hatoum's sculpture *Traffic* (2002) [slide 1], two used suitcases stand upright on the wooden floorboards of the gallery with a swathe of dark hair spilling over into the space between them, intransigent traces of an excess of desire and the futility of its containment. The hair overflows from the suitcases as if by accident and serendipitously connects them, compelling us to consider them as a double articulation. The closed forms of the suitcases, locked tightly shut, articulated with the fluidity of hair that forces its way out of their restraint, serve as a reminder that incarceration and migration, repression and expression, are contingent relations that produce and reinforce the other. The uprooting of hair and its rerouting enacts an everyday yet also exceptional violence, recalling the processes by which human beings are removed and resettled.

The juxtaposition of the impenetrable, permanent solidity of the plastic and steel frames with the fragile, ephemeral tactility of the long strands that escape its enclosure highlights the impossibility of containing bodies in boxes. Human experience cannot be contained in binary categories such as everyday and exceptional, organic and inorganic, public and private, permanent and transient, home and world. This, I propose, is a critical spatial argument made by Hatoum's sculptural objects and installations in the 1990's. Through the dialectics of the displaced domestic, Hatoum suggests that space we inhabit is always already implicated in other, larger and potentially dangerous spaces. In *Traffic*, a pair of battered, old suitcases becomes an eerie reminder of the traffic in humans.

For in what way can the traffic in human bodies implied by these entangled suitcases be simply a matter of the personal or of the political, the private or the public? The sale of human organs and their movements across borders are transactions in which

the biological and the commercial, the local and the global, are also untidily entangled.

The metonymic “part-presence,” to use Homi Bhabha’s term, of the hair compels us to consider the absent body, the (rooted) person to which the (uprooted) hair belongs, or at least once belonged.ⁱ Where is she? Who are the owners of this left luggage? Without identification tags attached, the suitcases deny legibility of origin or destination, and thereby the possibility of the hair’s disentanglement or return to a right(ful) home.

Indeed the only right(ful) home for such baggage is the world, for in Hatoum’s suitcases we perceive what Bhabha calls “the stirrings of the unhomely,” that “estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world,” which produces “the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the home-in-the world”.ⁱⁱ *Traffic* evokes all the messy spillovers of human experience, its “enforced social accommodation,” “historical migrations” and “cultural relocations,” which make it impossible to maintain an unassailable integrity of domestic space, to insist upon the sanctity of the home apart from the world.ⁱⁱⁱ The exchange between local and global is two-way traffic.

Drawing on Doreen Massey’s theory of a global sense of place and Henri Lefebvre’s conception of spatial critique, I focus on two of Hatoum’s recent installations, *Home* (1999) [slide 2] and *Homebound* (2000) [slide 3], which arguably represent the culmination of her investigations into the displaced domestic and forcefully deliver “the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the home-in-the world”.^{iv} I argue that it is imperative to consider these works as participating in a dialectical relationship with Hatoum’s sculptural objects such as *Traffic* and *Grater Divide* [slide 4] as those works invoke the body. Whereas the sculptural objects operate through a mode of *appropriation*, by which the body of the viewer is directly and proximately implicated in

the sculptural space; the installations work to demystify the *domination* of social space through processes of capital and patriarchy, which have absented bodies, and produced space as exclusionary, unusable and akin to ‘pure’ image. If the sculptural objects treat the physical body (and its memory or fantasy) as their subject, then the installations refer to the metaphorical social body. It is the recovery of both these bodies – the physical and the social – and their relocation in home and world that Hatoum’s work demands.

Home, place and home-places

Feminist geographer Doreen Massey draws attention to the phenomenon of the simultaneous homogenization and fragmentation of space under late capitalism, which has in turn led to the expression of a longing for “a place called home” to serve as a refuge from the disorientation wrought by accelerating capitalistic expansion.^v Under these conditions, the home is associated with “oneness, security, stability” and positioned against the world of discombobulating “time-space compression”.^{vi} Massey notes similarities between this conception of home and that of place, which has been equated with “identity, belonging, security,” as if its conservatism was ontologically given.^{vii} Both place and home come to represent monologism, stasis and nostalgia. The outcry against time-space compression and its corollary, the desire for “a place called home” or “a sense of place,” is characteristic of agendas such as the chauvinistic nationalisms of contemporary Europe and the commodity capitalism of the heritage industry. But, according to Massey, similar claims about place have emerged from Marxist scholarship on the postmodern condition that dismisses “place and locality as foci for a form of romanticized escapism from the real business of the world”.^{viii}

In particular, Massey challenges David Harvey's notion that place-identity necessarily implies a project of backward-looking nostalgia or reactionary, even racist, traditionalism. In Harvey's critique of "place-bound nostalgias," Massey believes that the geographer fails to distinguish between place-identity that is *place-bound* from that which is *place-based*.^{ix} Harvey contends that "the search for secure moorings and longer-lasting values in a shifting world," which translates into the desire for place-identity, inevitably descends into "parochialism, myopia and self-referentiality in the face of the universalizing force of capital".^x Massey traces Harvey's suspicion of local place, and of space in general, to a valorization of time and a false assignation of value to space over time. Whereas time is equated with movement and "the prospects of Becoming," space becomes its reactionary corollary, and is associated with "the stasis of Being".^{xi}

The home emerges, in Harvey's analysis, as the most static of places, "a private museum" in which to retire and heal from the traumas of postmodernity and which must be fiercely protected from the brutal invasions of the outside world.^{xii} But the configuration of the home as apolitical, private and past is a gendered myth. The home can function as static memory and private sanctuary only for those who have left it, but not for those who continue to labor in it.^{xiii} It is this figure of the abandoned home, abandoned by men and populated by their mothers, which has been claimed by feminists, who assert its centrality to the capitalist economy and public sphere.

Making a feminist intervention in the discourse of place, Massey posits that "a large component of the identity of that place called home derived from precisely the fact that it had always in one way or another been open, constructed out of movement, communication, social relations which always stretched beyond it".^{xiv} Consequently,

place-identity, such as that of “the” home, carries the potential for multiple social formations that are “inevitably unfixed” and “open to contestation”.^{xv} Following bell hooks, Massey proposes that we think of “home-places as the complex product of the ever-shifting geography of social relations present and past”.^{xvi}

Focusing on feminist projects that have reappropriated, or “recycled,” the domestic rather than rejected it, Rosemary George discusses how these take the “homely location” as their necessary site.^{xvii} In particular, George refers to Kitchen Table Press, a feminist press, which “recast domesticity as a launching pad for radical reflections on material conditions rather than as a location that serves as a refuge from the same” and refuted the notion of a home/work or home/world split.^{xviii} It becomes productive to think of the domestic, then, as an articulation, or a classed, raced and gendered co-formation, and of home as a set of locations, or multiple “kitchen tables,” to borrow George and the Kitchen Table Press’ term.^{xix}

Dialectics of the displaced domestic

It is a kitchen table that forms the literal site of Hatoum’s installation *Home* in which an array of stainless steel kitchen utensils are arranged on a rolling wooden table, a common site of homework. But this is a kitchen table in revolt from routine. The electrically-wired objects on it recall an army of toys that has come alive and risen up against its owners. An amplifier, which reproduces the sound of the electrical current passing through the objects, ventriloquizes the buzzing, humming, crackling, grating noisiness of their rebellion. A computerized dimmer switch randomly turns on a light bulb, which brightens and fades through the shiny steel perforations of the grater and colander, imparting a sinister glow to these objects.

These are utensils that resist utility, implements that do not deliver on their promise to implement: a pair of scissors lies there with its blades pulled wide apart, a colander and funnel are defiantly turned upside down and a forlorn heart-shaped cookie cutter rests on the table without any sign of the dough to fill it. Nor is there a can to open, apples to core, vegetables to grate or meat to grind. In their refusal to perform the homework required of them, the familiar household objects appear as menacing weapons, promising to cut and scrape, grate and slice, chop and pierce, the person who attempts to put them to use. The electrical wires strewn casually under the table remind us to tread carefully in this domestically declared war zone, and as if anticipating an eruption of unpredictable violence, imposing steel wires fence the table off from our reach. The wheels of the table bestow on *Home* the quality of a traveling minefield with each utensil possessing the power of a hand grenade. Contrary to being static, this home quite literally moves and threatens. Hatoum's undomesticated kitchen table, metonymic with the space of the home, emerges as a field of visible electrical and political charge.

Homebound, which was first displayed at the inaugural exhibition of Tate Britain, is an ambitious expansion of *Home*. In this installation, Hatoum arranges furniture for a bedroom and living room, supplying the basic, bare frame of a home, behind intimidating horizontal steel cables. Once again this home is evacuated of human subjects and populated by electrified objects, which are distributed underneath the furniture as well as above it. Light bulbs, programmed to a computerized dimmer switch that turns them on at random intervals, illuminate intermittently while the electric current flowing through them is materialized in sounds from the amplifier. Like the estranged objects, severed from their usual domestic setting, these strange sounds serve to alienate the viewer.

What does this sparse and chaotic assemblage of chairs, tables, lamps, crib, cage, bed, coat and clothes racks tell us about its erstwhile inhabitants? The chairs and table, painted in cheery primary colors, contrast sharply with the spare, linear frames and sharp, metallic edges of the crib, bed and cage, informing us that something is terribly awry in this abandoned home. While this 1950's-style furniture may evoke the memory of a patriarchal nuclear family from the past, it is not a memory imbued with a soft, radiant glow but on the contrary, one that lights and buzzes, sputtering with discontentment.

Two bright red chairs and a pale yellow one surround the abandoned table mirroring the seating arrangement directly behind it – of a loveseat and solitary chair. There are places for three, perhaps a couple and their child. The pair of bulbs burning brightly beneath the child's cot (on the extreme left of the installation) call attention to the pair of bulbs inside the animal cage (on the right), announcing the crib and the cage as a double articulation. The forsaken pair of chairs and toy train by the crib and the pair of white feeding basins in the cage point to the home as the paradigmatic place of a dyadic, conjugal, heterosexual union, functioning much like the unfulfilled "loveseat" in the background. If there is a dollhouse-like quality to *Homebound* in its abandonment, then it is the disenchantment of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* that we are reminded.

The double meaning of the work's title, *Homebound*, points to an ambivalence between the home as a place of nightmarish entrapment and home as non-place of unfulfilled dream. Being homebound can imply desire for an unattainable "place called home," and it can also refer to a state of house arrest. The first meaning recalls Massey's formulation of place-identity as place-based, in flux and contestation, and the second meaning indicates the perils of place-boundedness with longing for fixity and security.

Hatoum mobilizes both meanings to establish a dialectical relationship between the home and other living spaces. For some critics, the scene of “unknown catastrophe” and “unclear threat” contained in the installation conveys the sense that “[o]ne might be looking into a prison camp” or across a controlled border”.^{xx} Other critics view this installation, “fenced off by cable reminiscent of high security borders,” as evoking the Palestinian condition, or a personal condition, “her [Hatoum’s] ambivalent relationship towards home, household and family”.^{xxi}

However, *Homebound* amounts to more than a sum of the artist’s biographical parts.^{xxii} Hatoum’s installation makes another world visible in the home. This other world is that of prison cells, transit quarters, curfew zones, refugee centers, resettlement areas, internment camps, boxed-in office buildings and low-income housing projects, whose intimate relationships to the everyday, the familiar and the homely are so often elided. In its address to the extraordinary, the unfamiliar and the unhomely, *Homebound* displaces these relationships into view. Hatoum’s selection of objects, such as the grater, colander and funnel, which transfer and transform substances, serves as a handy metaphor for her art practice. Marshaling the psychic and somatic potential of these utensils to sieve and sift, perforate and penetrate, cleave and carve, Hatoum shows how social experience is sorted and sealed into spatial categories.

Noting the organic quality to Hatoum’s installation, Sheena Wagstaff writes of the kitchen utensils and household objects “connected to one another with electric wire, through which courses an alternating current of electricity, like arterial and venous blood connecting organ to organ, making them alive”.^{xxiii} There is indeed something organic, even arterial and venous about the electric wires with their blood-red plastic coating. As

they curve and slither expansively like snakes on the floor, the wires are vaguely reminiscent of human entrails and give the appearance that the body of the house has been laid bare for us to perform a clinical examination.

This examination of the body of this home, formed as it is by skeletal fragments and electrical currents, inevitably leads to reflection on the absent bodies which once occupied it. If human beings are to be counted among the costs and debris, “the collateral damage,” of our normative forms of domesticity, then Hatoum’s art practice demands that we account for that damage by reinserting these absented bodies into the very center of the social body of her home. We are reminded of Henri Lefebvre’s prescription: “[a]ny revolutionary ‘project’ today, whether utopian or realistic must...make the reappropriation of the body, in association with the reappropriation of space, into a non-negotiable part of its agenda”^{xxiv}

Hatoum traces her commitment to the body as a reaction to the “the disembodied intellects” around her at the Slade School of Art in London, where she trained in the 1970’s, and where she began “focusing intensely on the body first using its products and processes as material for the work, and later using it as a metaphor for society – the social body”.^{xxv} *Homebound* metaphorizes this social body in which an exploitative exchange between local and global has resulted in the replacement of human bodies, which are boxed in and fenced off, with free (and invisible) flows of capital and current.

The abolition of sculptural space around the object through the screening effect of the electric wires creates an exclusionary position for the viewer, whose body is excluded from participation in the space of the installation, and temporarily unites the body of the viewer with the absented bodies that are the subject of the work. The installation

collapses spatial distance by making the experience of the viewer congruent with that of other excluded bodies in other living spaces. One critic reflects on “the people who once lived in this strange, uncomfortable home” speculating whether “[t]hey have either escaped its confines or been evicted from it; [whether] the wire fence exists to protect the viewer on the outside or to hold in the family”.^{xxvi} One body’s social and physical exclusion and eviction is contingent on another’s inclusion and fortification.

Let us turn to another kind of screen, that of *Grater Divide* (2002), in order to better understand the role of the body in Hatoum’s work. *Grater Divide*, which was also the name of Hatoum’s traveling exhibition in 2002, is a three-part, fold-out cheese grater scaled up ninefold from its original version so that it stands at an imposing six feet in height. The grater, acting as screen and divider, compels us to consider relations of visibility and invisibility, mobility and immobility, home and world. Its spare, elegant design attracts while the razor-sharp edges of its blades repel. This grater recalls the violent function and decorative form of wire fences in a distant refugee camp or nearby science laboratory. That is to say, Hatoum’s sculpture performs the work of borders and returns us to *Traffic*, the piece with which we begun our analysis.

The hinges of the grater, which unite the three parts of the screen, recall the unruly hair, which so occupies and links the sculptural space between the two parts of *Traffic*. If *Traffic* emphasizes flows and their costs, *Grater Divide* highlights boundaries and their damages. Hatoum critically activates our sense of scale, artistic and geographic, to understand these two sculptures, like the two suitcases in *Traffic*, as a double articulation. Globalization, with its “free” flow of capital, technology and of labor, has an underside – of refugee camps and organ parts, of industrial farms and home offices, of

dissection tables and prison beds, to name but a few. To address the ethical demand of Hatoum's project is to ask: who lies on the other side of the (grater) divide? What is our role in this (global) traffic?

ⁱ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) 120.

ⁱⁱ Bhabha 1997, 445.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bhabha 1997, 445.

^{iv} Bhabha 1997, 445. See also Doreen Massey, *Space, place and gender* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1994) and Henri Lefebvre, *The production of space*, Donald Nicholson-Smith [Tr.] (London: Blackwell, 1991).

^v Doreen Massey, *Space, place and gender* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1994).

^{vi} *Ibid.*, 167.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 167. See also Gillian Rose, *Feminism and geography: the limits of geographical knowledge* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1993). Rose notes masculinist biases in humanist geography, which have led to the conflation of home and place, and characterizes "the desire for "place/belonging/home as masculinist" (53). While "man is the implicit norm of humanist geography," Rose remarks that certain spatial realms of social life have been designated feminine such as "the everyday, the emotional, the bodily, the domestic" (53). Rose describes home as providing "the ultimate sense of place" in this humanist geographic imaginary and explicates the ways in which this idealized notion of home as "conflict-free, caring, nurturing and almost mystically venerated," has little to do with actual homes labored by women and in particular, mothers (56). Finally, Rose proceeds to outline how the categories of "woman," "mother" and "place" come to be conflated such as, for example, woman-as-mother-nation (55).

^{viii} *Ibid.*, 151. For the seminal discussion of "time-space compression and the postmodern condition," see David Harvey, *The condition of postmodernity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989). See also Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the logic of late capitalism," *New Left Review*, no. 146 (1984): 53-92.

^{ix} Harvey 218.

^x *Ibid.*, 292, 351.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, 359. Drawing on Heidegger's notion of dwelling, Harvey locates Being in the home, "the space which is paramount for memory," and deplors the nostalgia fuelled by the unchanging space of memory, which longs to secure time and disable movement. But Harvey remains uncritical of the masculinist assumptions behind the idea of an unchanging home such as Bachelard's formulation of the house as "the land of Motionless childhood" and space of "Immemorial things." In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre takes Bachelard and Heidegger to task for their obsessions with home as "intimate and absolute space," which elide contradiction and history, and offer only nostalgia instead. In Lefebvre's view, Bachelard and Heidegger confer an "ontological dignity" on the house and assign it the status of "special, still sacred, quasi-religious and in fact, almost absolute space." While repudiating the nostalgia that stems from idealized notions of "dwelling," Harvey and Lefebvre do not actually contest the basis for such beliefs; neither provides a critique of the characterization of home as feminine, as a maternal bosom that envelops and shields, nor its construction as memory, the domain of static Being. Instead they reject the home altogether in holding out the possibility for a progressive politics or emancipatory praxis.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, 292.

^{xiii} Massey remarks on how the characterization of home as fixed has been overdetermined by a historically male experience of "setting out to discover and change the world" with the female, and specifically, the figure of the mother, being conflated with the home, "a place which did not change" (166). The division of social life into gendered spatial relations such as male/public/production/world and feminine/private/reproduction/home follows. See also Gillian Rose, *Feminism and geography: the limits of geographical knowledge* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1993).

^{xiv} Massey 1994a, 170-1.

^{xv} *Ibid.*, 169.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, 172.

^{xvii} Rosemary George, "Recycling domesticity: long routes to and from domestic fixes," in Rosemary George [ed.]. *Burning down the house: recycling domesticity* (Boulder: Westview, 1998) 9.

^{xviii} *Ibid.*, 10.

^{xix} *Ibid.*, 11.

^{xx} *Ibid.*, 188.

^{xxi} Okwui Enwezor [ed.], *Documenta 11_Platform Short Guide* (Kassel: Hatje Cantz, 2002) 106.

^{xxii} See "Mona Hatoum interviewed by Jo Glencross, Summer 1999" in Laura Steward Heon [ed.], *Mona Hatoum: domestic disturbance* (North Adams: MASS MoCA, 2001) 69. In an interview with Jo Glencross, Hatoum has indicated that she intended *Home* to "shatte[r] notions of the wholesomeness of the home environment, the household, and the domain where the feminine resides" because she had "always had an ambiguous relationship with notions of home, family and the nurturing that is expected out of this situation." However, to reduce Hatoum's artistic achievement to her own relationship to the domestic leaves otherness inscribed on the body of the artist when the work itself invites us to consider and challenge our own otherness (and sameness) in relation to the space of the home.

^{xxiii} Wagstaff 31.

^{xxiv} Lefebvre 166-7.

^{xxv} Antoni 26.

^{xxvi} Ohlin 18.