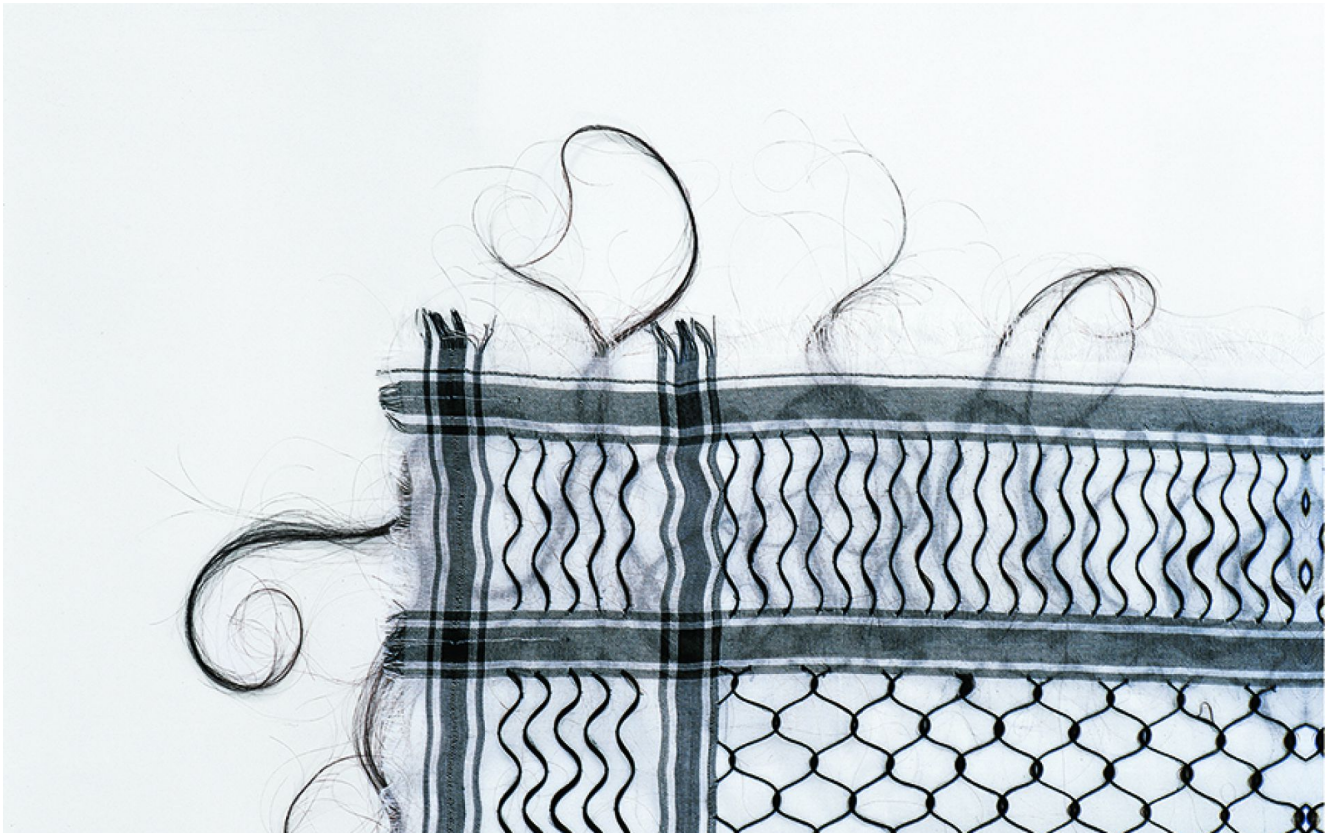


Rêveries Urbaines

## **Mona Hatoum's hair**

Interweaving strands, and the artist's work

Hettie Judah



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Mona Hatoum, *Keffieh*, 1993–99, hair on cotton fabric. Commissioned by the French Ministry of Culture; produced in partnership with the embroidery programme (CAP Broderie) at the Lycée Professionnel Régional Gilles Jamain, Rochefort-sur-Mer, as part of the 'Métissages' project. Courtesy collection agnès b. Photo by Hugo Glendinning, Courtesy White Cube © Mona Hatoum

Great quantities of shed and purchased hair have gone into Mona Hatoum's works. In *Recollection* (1995), scattered hairballs suggest the women that once populated a sixteenth-century beguinage; the surrealist homage of her 1993 work *Jardin Public* sees a metal chair sprouting a pubic triangle from its seat; and her handmade sheets of paper (1979 and 2003) are embedded with moultings alongside other shed fragments of the artist's body, including skin and slivers of fingernail.

Of these works, and others that repurpose quotidian materials such as soap, theorist Edward Said wrote that: "In the age of migrants, curfews, identity cards, refugees, exiles, massacres, camps and fleeing civilians, [...] they are the uncooptable mundane instruments of a defiant memory facing itself and its pursuing or oppressing others implacably."<sup>1</sup>

Said, like Hatoum, was of Palestinian origin, and experienced a shifting polycultural identity as an adult. He draws parallels between the sense of displacement in Hatoum's work and the evolving sense of dislocation experienced by Jonathan Swift's Gulliver, whose ability to experience 'home' is progressively undermined each time he assimilates within an alien culture.





Mona Hatoum, *Jardin Public*, 1993, painted wrought iron, wax and pubic hair. Photo by Edward Woodman. Courtesy Arnolfini, Bristol © Mona Hatoum

In Hatoum's work, hair is a human product, in the way that wool is the product of sheep, or silk the product of the pupating *Bombyx mori* moth. It is material evidence of the self: in its shed form it announces the existence of its generating body. Uprooted, nomadic, the margins of the physical self become the borders of what is experienced as home.

There are also erotic associations with hair, of course: an idea explicitly present in its crudest (pubic) form in *Jardin Public*. In other works, Hatoum also addresses hair as a tool of allure and, by extension, a site of gendered taboo. In her performance *Pull* (1985), the thick, glossy braid

dangling from an opening in the wall is still attached to the artist's head, and her response to having it handled by visitors is relayed live on a video monitor.

Hatoum explicitly addresses embroidery and weaving as activities of the female realm. The panels of embroidery suspended in *Twelve Windows* (2012-23) were created by Palestinian women living in refugee camps in Lebanon: each represents a distinct typology and tradition, a history of pattern, colour and dexterity passed down, mother to daughter, over generations. In her woven works, too, Hatoum seems to treat hair as a specifically feminine material.

For *Keffieh* (1993-9), a headscarf of white cotton has been embroidered with locks of black hair in a pattern now politically synonymous with Palestine. This *Keffieh* has silky curls in place of cotton fringing and is a hybrid object, at once masculine and feminine. Writing about *Keffieh*, Homi Bhabha has explored its subversive play with gender roles within the culture that has grown up around the struggle for Palestinian independence.<sup>2</sup> As dictated by its pattern, this is a scarf, but explicitly not a headscarf: rather than covering a woman's hair it exposes it, albeit in camouflaged form. Beside its political associations, *Keffieh* is a lovely thing: a beautiful and alluring object, delicately made.

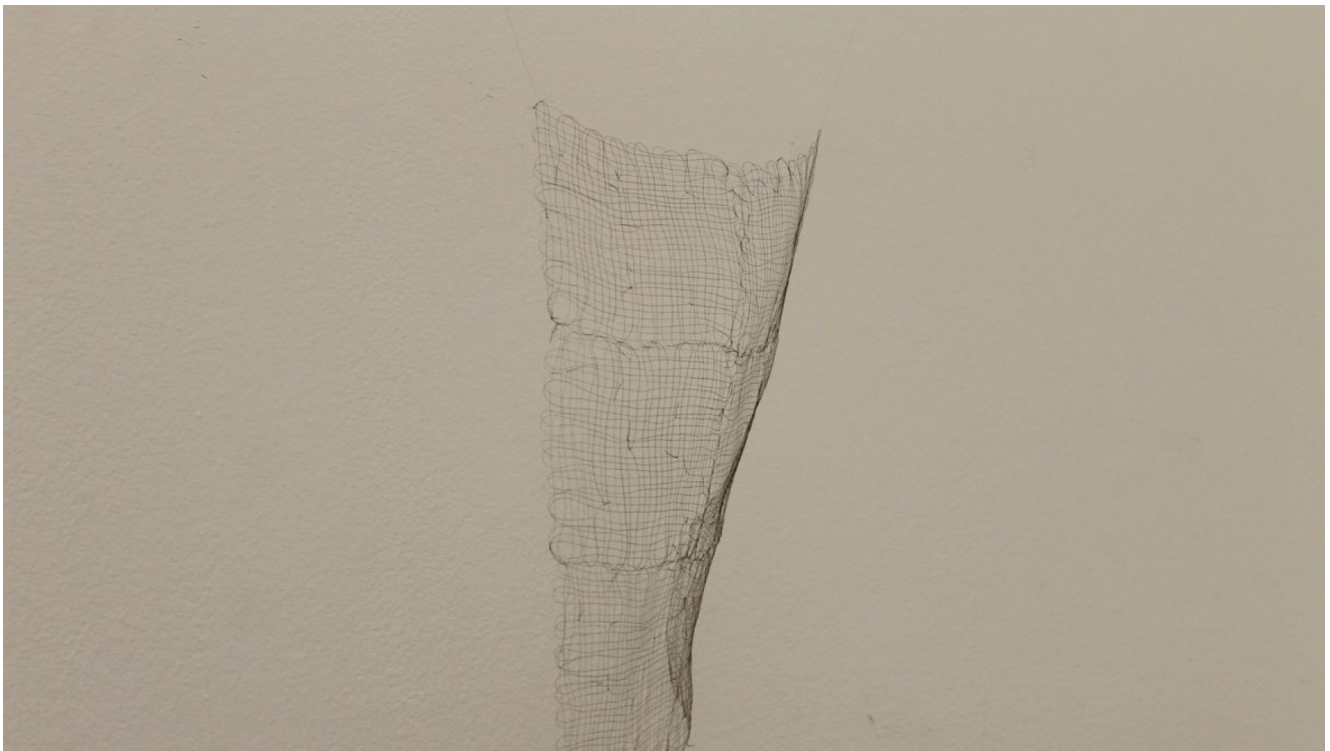




Mona Hatoum, *Hair Grid*, 2015, hair, hairspray on vellum. Courtesy of artist © Photo Walid Rashid, Courtesy of Collection Raya & Antoine Nahas

Much rougher, formally, are Hatoum's woven *Hair Grid* (2001–) works made on small handheld looms of the type used by hobbyists or schoolchildren. Unlike the decorative, tightly knotted squares of *Twelve Windows*, these weavings are gappy and open. There is no pattern but the grid itself: a form seen by earlier generations of artists as the ultimate expression of non-objective art, here transformed into something personal, expressive and rich with association.

Hatoum's *Hair Grids* appear to be a set of works made on the move, swiftly – if dextrously – formed with simple tools (hands, the loom) from available material (hair). They have a fragile, ephemeral quality. A faint breath of wind might carry them off. They're vulnerable to being overlooked or thrown out.





Mona Hatoum, *Hair Grids with Knots*, 2006. Courtesy of artist © Photo Patricio Pidal /Fundación Proa

Where grids appear elsewhere in Hatoum's work they are rendered in stiff wire as lockers or fencing, totemic of oppression and imprisonment. Hair is not as compliant as wire and these woven grids won't conform to parallel lines, instead coils and undulations particular to each head of origin force their way into warp and weft. Thinking of the language used to describe women's hair – wild, unruly, rebellious – suggests an issue of feminine compliance in the act of 'taming' hair and encouraging it straight.

As in *Recollection*, preserved hair is traditionally an emblem of absence (a lover's lock) or even death. Hatoum's panels are made with hair from a number of sources, carrying the suggestion of multiple bodies and, in the case of *Untitled (grey hair grid with knots 3)*, 2001 of growing older. They're a record of lives ongoing – *memento vivere* – rather than ones departed.

The major monographic exhibition *Mona Hatoum* is at Kiasma, Helsinki, until 26 February 2017.

