

Mona Hatoum  
by Janine Antoni



Mona Hatoum, *Performance Still*, 1995, gelatin silver print on aluminum, 30 x 42½ inches. Caldic Collection, Rotterdam. All images courtesy of Alexander and Bonin, New York.

I met Mona Hatoum in December 1994 when we were installing our work, side by side, at the Reina Sophia in Madrid. The exhibition was called *Cocido y Crudo*, "The Raw and the Cooked." Mona was showing *Corps Étranger*, a video made with a medical camera that had been threaded in and out of her orifices and along her body's surface. I was showing *Slumber*, a performance where at night I slept in the museum's gallery, and in the day I weaved, from strips of my nightgown, the pattern of my rapid eye movements into an endless blanket.

The Reina Sophia, a former hospital, was a beautiful and scary place. Each night in the old building I could hear many sounds—as if the spirits were wandering around its long halls. Even the guards who passed through my room every hour told me they were afraid of a ghost named Ataulfo. It wasn't easy to sleep. And every morning at six o'clock I would jump out of my skin, waking to the lights and sound of Mona's video automatically turning on.

Since then, Mona and I have often appeared, side by side, in many exhibitions. Most recently, we spent a month together at the only active Shaker community in Sabbath Day Lake, Maine. This is where I finally got close to Mona; but I felt I knew her back in Spain, when all day long I weaved while listening to the pulse of her body.

**Mona Hatoum** I dislike interviews. I'm often asked the same question: What in your work comes from your own culture? As if I have a recipe and I can actually isolate the Arab ingredient, the woman ingredient, the Palestinian ingredient. People often expect tidy definitions of otherness, as if identity is something fixed and easily definable.

**Janine Antoni** Do you think those kinds of questions have made us overly self-conscious about how we represent ourselves and its effect on the work?

**MH** Yeah, if you come from an embattled background there is often an expectation that your work should somehow articulate the struggle or represent the voice of the people. That's a ta

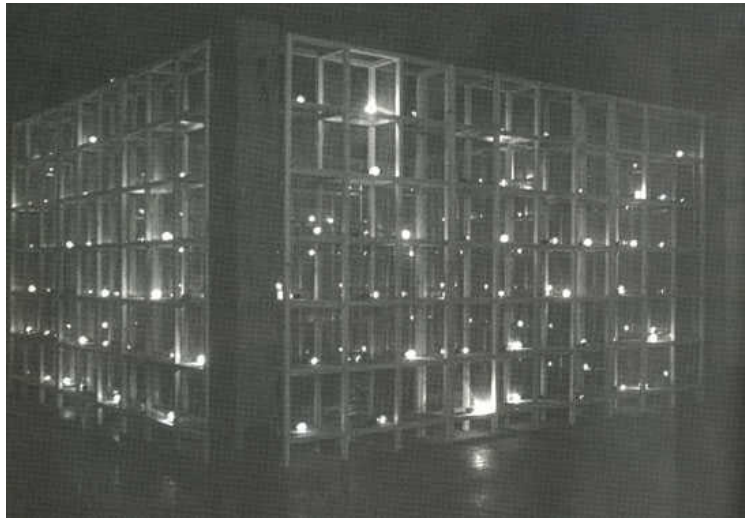
order really. I find myself often wanting to contradict those expectations.

**JA** Everyone seems eager to define you. When I was looking at your catalogue and the articles written about you, I was struck by a certain consistency. Three articles started as follows: “Lebanese-born artist, Mona Hatoum”; “Hatoum was born into a family of Palestinian refugees”; “Mona Hatoum is a woman, a Palestinian, a native of Beirut...”

**MH** It’s more the inconsistencies that bother me, like when people refer to me as Lebanese when I am not. Although I was born in Lebanon, my family is Palestinian. And like the majority of Palestinians who became exiles in Lebanon after 1948, they were never able to obtain Lebanese identity cards. It was one way of discouraging them from integrating into the Lebanese situation. Instead, and for reasons that I won’t go into, my family became naturalized British, so I’ve had a British passport since I was born. I grew up in Beirut in a family that had suffered a tremendous loss and existed with a sense of dislocation. When I went to London in 1975 for what was meant to be a brief visit, I got stranded there because the war broke out in Lebanon, and that created another kind of dislocation. How that manifests itself in my work is as a sense of disjunction. For instance, in a work like *Light Sentence*, the movement of the light bulb causes the shadows of the wire mesh lockers to be in perpetual motion, which creates a very unsettling feeling. When you enter the space you have the impression that the whole room is swaying and you have the disturbing feeling that the ground is shifting under your feet. This is an environment in constant flux—no single point of view, no solid frame of reference. There is a sense of instability and restlessness in the work. This is the way in which the work is informed by my background. On the other hand, I have now spent half of my life living in the West, so when I speak of works like *Light Sentence*, *Quarters* and *Current Disturbance* as making a reference to some kind of institutional violence, I am speaking of encountering architectural and institutional structures in Western urban environments that are about the regimentation of individuals, fixing them in space and putting them under surveillance. What I am trying to say here is that the concerns in my work are as much about the facts of my origins as they are a reflection on or an insight into the Western institutional and power structures I have found myself existing in for the last 20-odd years.

**JA** What makes one claim one history and not another? I am from the Bahamas but was educated in the US as you were in London. Isn’t Minimalism as much a part of our history as where we are from?

**MH** Precisely, I was completely taken in by Minimal and Conceptual Art when I was on my first degree course. Going to University afterwards, which was my first encounter with a large bureaucratic institution, I became involved in analyzing power structures, first in relation to feminism, and then in wider terms as in the relationship between the Third World and the West. This led me to making confrontational, issue-based performance works which were fueled by anger and a sense of urgency. Later, when I got into the area of installation and object making, I wouldn’t say I went back to a minimal aesthetic as such, it was more a kind of reductive approach, if you like, where the forms can be seen as abstract aesthetic structures, but can also be recognized as cages, lockers, chairs, beds... The work therefore becomes full of associations and meaning—a reflection on the social environment we inhabit. Unlike minimal objects, they are not self-referential.



Mona Hatoum, *Current Disturbance* (installation view), wood, wire mesh, light bulb dimmer, amplifier, speaker, 9 feet 2 inches x 18 feet 3/4 inch x 16 feet 6½ inches. Installation at Capp Street Projects, San Francisco.

**JA** In the show at the New Museum I was struck by the difference between the formal aspects of your later sculptures and an earlier piece like *Measures of Distance*. It is a piece that haunted me ever since I saw it a couple of years ago. This work is very personal and yet its form is illusive. You can't quite get at it. Visually you are looking through layers of information: first, the handwritten letters in Arabic, and finally, the figure of your mother; you never quite see the nude image of your mother clearly. The sound works in the same way. I felt like I was straining to eavesdrop on a private conversation. The video doesn't have the direct quality that those later pieces have.

**MH** Yeah, *Measures of Distance* is quite a significant work for me. I see it as the culmination and conclusion of all the early narrative and issue-based work. For years I was trying to make general and objective statements about the state of the world. With *Measures of Distance* I made a conscious decision to delve into the personal—however complex, confused, and contradictory the material I was dealing with was. During a visit to Beirut in 1981, I had taken a dozen slides of my mother taking a shower. At the time, feminism had so problematized the issue of representation of women that images of women vacated the frame, they became absent. It was quite depressing. For a few years I agonized over whether I should use these images of my mother in my work. I didn't make the work in its final form until 1988, but in between I used the material in a performance work. Anyway, once I made the work I found that it spoke of the complexities of exile, displacement, the sense of loss and separation caused by war. In other words, it contextualized the image, or this person, "my mother," within a social-political context.

**JA** I can relate to your battle about whether to work with those images with your mother, because I had similar questions when I started to work with my parents. I suddenly realized that my baggage had somehow come from them and to work with them meant asking them to confront these issues. At a certain point I had to ask myself whether it was my right to ask this of them and to expose them in this way. I was wondering whether the fogginess of *Measures of Distance* reflects a kind of ambivalence about exposing something quite intimate about your relationship with your mother. As well as an attempt to express the complexity by not allowing it to settle down anywhere.

**MH** Yeah, sort of wading through a mess of meaning.

JA Which you do so beautifully, visually.

MH Well, I wanted to explore the complexities through the juxtaposition of several formal and visual elements that create paradoxical layers of meaning. I wanted every frame to speak of closeness and distance. You have the close-up images of my mother's naked body, which echo the intimacy of the exchange between us, overlaid by her letters which are supposed to be a means of communication, yet at the same time, they prevent complete access to the image. People saw the Arabic writing as barbed wire.

JA Or a veil.

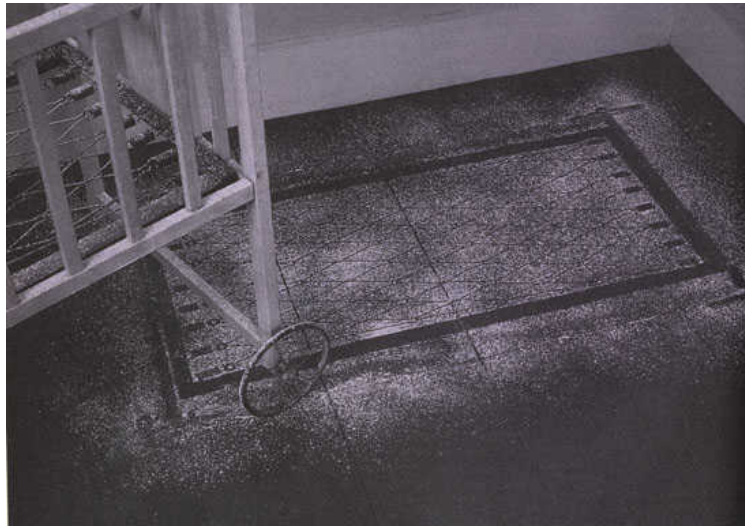
MH That's right. I structured the work around my mother's letters, because letters imply distance yet they are dealing with very intimate questions. And you've got our animated voices speaking in Arabic and laughing, which is contradicted by the sadness of my voice, reading my mother's letters, translated into English.

JA I love how your questions are very confrontational, and yet she keeps saying, "My dear Mona, the love of my heart."

MH Right, she uses even more flowery expressions that have no equivalent in the English language. When I made *Measures of Distance* it felt like I had unloaded a burden off my back. I felt afterwards that I could get on with other kinds of work, where every work did not necessarily have to tell the whole story, where I could just deal with one little aspect of my experience. That's when I started making installation work.

JA If we look at your body of work at the New Museum, the later work becomes much more open. The political is there but it has changed forms. Rather than being topical, it is experimental. Especially in the installations where the viewers find themselves in an uncomfortable position—from a position of instability, their response seems to yield the meaning.

MH In the early performance work I was in a sense demonstrating or delivering a message to the viewer. With the installation work, I wanted to implicate the viewer in a phenomenological situation where the experience is more physical and direct. I wanted the visual aspect of the work to engage the viewer in a physical, sensual, maybe even emotional way; the associations and search for meaning come after that. And although the title might direct your attention to one aspect of the work, I hope the work remains open enough to allow different interpretations. A woman here at the New Museum said that the light bulbs fading on and off in *Current Disturbance* made her think of a sexual orgasm. How beautiful! But, she said, then she remembered that my work is supposed to be political and had to think about the lights in the cages as representing people in prison. So I think that's a very good example. There is no single interpretation, which is why I always find it problematic when museums and galleries want to put up an explanatory text on the wall. It fixes the meaning and limits the reading of the work and doesn't allow the viewer to have this very expansive imaginative interpretation of their own which reflects on their experience.



Mona Hatoum, *First Step* (detail), wood, metal, paint, powdered sugar, 37¼ × 41¾ × 23½ inches. Collection of Penny Cooper and Rena Rosenwasser.

**JA** What role do you want your art to play and what role do you feel the art world has cast you in?

**MH** I want the work in the first instance to have a strong formal presence, and through the physical experience to activate a psychological and emotional response. In a very general sense I want to create a situation where reality itself becomes a questionable point. Where one has to reassess their assumptions and their relationship to things around them. A kind of self-examination and an examination of the power structures that control us: Am I the jailed or the jailer? The oppressed or the oppressor? Or both. I want the work to complicate these positions and offer an ambiguity and ambivalence rather than concrete and sure answers. An object from a distance might look like a carpet made out of lush velvet, but when you approach it you realize it's made out of stainless steel pins which turns it into a threatening and cold object rather than an inviting one. It's not what it promises to be. So it makes you question the solidity of the ground you walk on, which is also the basis on which your attitudes and beliefs lie. When my work shifted from the obviously political, rhetorical attitude into bringing political ideas to bear through the formal and the aesthetic, the work became more of an open system. Since then I have been resisting attempts by institutions to fix the meaning in my work by wanting to include it in very narrowly defined theme shows.

**JA** Well, in this climate of political correctness, people really don't know what to do with you if you don't fulfill certain stereotypes. Do you think that has pushed us, as artists, into making work that refuses to be defined in that way? That it is a natural response to shy away from reinforcing stereotypes. Knowing it's much more complicated than that.

**MH** I've always had quite a rebellious and contrary attitude. The more I feel I am being pushed into a mold, the more I feel like going in the opposite direction. Like when I made a work called *Jardin Public*. I discovered that etymologically the words "public" and "pubic" come from the same source. I used a wrought iron chair similar to those you see in public gardens in Paris—I gave it a French title to emphasize this association. And I implanted pubic hair in a triangular shape on the seat like grass growing out of the holes. I enjoyed the surreal aspect of this work. By the way, my point of entry into the art world was through Surrealism—in fact the first art book I ever bought was on Magritte. So this work was quite humorous and light-hearted; but at the same time you could read it as a comment on the fact that women's genitalia are always on public display. A number of people were surprised by this work. I

realized that people didn't expect to see humor in my work.

**JA** When you were talking about people wanting you to speak from the margins, as an outsider, as the other, it reminded me of the artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres trying to locate himself at the center. He took a form which was recognizably art, in the high art sense of the word, and slid his content underneath or inside of this form. People would accept his pieces initially and then have to deal with what they were really about.

**MH** With the early performances, I saw myself as a marginal person intervening from within the margins of the art world, and it seemed logical to use performance as a critique of the establishment. After a while I was becoming dissatisfied with the obviously rhetorical attitude and I wasn't sure any more whether the work I was doing was really what I wanted to do or the result of internalizing other people's expectations and the fact that I had been molded in the role of political artist. It's quite a thin line. I wanted to make work that privileges the material, format, visual aspect of art making and try to articulate the political through the aesthetics of the work. I like Gonzalez-Torres' attitude because his work is both aesthetic and political. What I admire most about his work is that it looks very simple, yet it deals with issues of vulnerability of the body, early death issues etc., but doing it all through the language of art.

**JA** So let's talk about "the body." We both get lumped into this category. Could you speak about the specific role of the body in your works. In a lot of your pieces the body is physically absent but implicitly present, or the body in question is really that of the viewer. I'm interested in the way you make the viewer feel physically in an installation or in front of an object.

**MH** The body became an issue for me when I was a student in the late '70s at the Slade School, which is part of London University College. It was a very cool environment which favored intellectual inquiry. But I had this distinct feeling that people around me were like disembodied intellects, and it was in opposition to this kind of attitude that I started 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. Without going into too much detail here, it seemed that anything I wanted to work with at the time was faced with restrictions and even censorship. I was perceived as this isolated incident, a person coming from nowhere and trying to disrupt a respectable intellectual environment. Those same issues that I was trying to discuss in my work at the time have become such common currency in the art world now—I mean in a very general sense the focus on the body. By the late '80s I wanted to take my body, the body of the performer, out of the work. I wanted the viewer's body to replace mine by interacting directly with the work. My work always constructed with the viewer in mind. The viewer is somehow implicated or even visually or psychologically entrapped in some of the installations. The sculptures based on furniture are very much about the body too, they encourage the viewer to mentally project themselves onto the objects.

**JA** There are two works that have epitomized the range from which you approach the body in your work, both are bed pieces, which in the end somehow become the body. One is *Marrow* which for me is a collapsed body. It is so moving because it brings me to the fragility of the body, or a kind of disappointment when the body has failed you. The fact that it is a collapsed crib also makes me think of a past that has imploded under its own weight. *Divan Bed*, a bed made out of cold steel, seems to be about the alienated body, a body grown uncomfortable with its own environment. Do you want to talk about that range?

**MH** I called the first work *Marrow*, as in bone marrow but without the bone structure to

support it. So as you say, it becomes the collapsed body. I used a honey-colored rubber which looks quite fleshy. In *Divan Bed*, I used tread-plate, which is an industrial flooring material. The distinctive raised pattern of the tread-plate is a cold unyielding equivalent to the soft quilted material that usually covers a divan bed.... I was originally going to call the piece "Sarcophagus." That gives you an idea of what I was thinking about.

**JA** Both *Divan Bed* and *Marrow* are built in the same way that surrealist images are constructed.

**MH** Yeah, it makes me think of the paintings Magritte made where every surface in the painting, the person, the table, the window, everything has been chiseled out of rock. Also Magritte's *Madame Récamier* where the stiff-looking woman from David's painting has been replaced by a coffin lying on a chaise lounge.

**JA** Earlier we talked about whether people pick up these references and how most people are likely to talk more about everyday life. That piece has as much to do with Surrealism as it does with Minimalism. One would think that was a big leap in one work, but in the end they seamlessly come together. (*pause*)

**MH** I like to use furniture in my work because it is about everyday life. Some of the objects are vaguely useful, but often they turn into uncanny objects. We usually expect furniture to be about giving support and comfort to the body. If these objects become either unstable or threatening, they become a reference to our fragility. For instance, *Incommunicado* is an infant's hospital cot. It has been stripped to the bare metal which makes it cold and harsh, and instead of having a solid base to support the mattress, there are thin wires that have been stretched across the frame. It looks more like an egg-slicer, and you immediately associate it with a situation of danger and abuse. I called it *Incommunicado* to associate it with prisoners in solitary confinement. But also an infant in those situations has no ability to communicate about extremes of fear or pain.

**JA** It's an interesting object, because it feels so cold. The minute you look at it and think of an egg-slicer, it becomes incredibly visceral.

**MH** When I started making these works I was criticized for not showing the "spectacle of horror," but expecting the viewer to imagine for themselves the impending disaster. I personally felt that this was precisely the strength of the work and a sign of maturity in the way the work conjures up certain images in the viewer's mind. That these things are implied through the visual poetry of the work rather than didactically stated is much more satisfying for me.

**JA** I wonder whether it's something to do with the fact that people want you to act out for them, to do for them what they can't do themselves. I agree that it's much more interesting to have the viewer establish a relationship to the object and then analyze that response, as opposed to seeing you act out a relationship.

**MH** I find work that obviously reveals itself, its intentions, so boring. It is about spoon-feeding people instead of treating them as intelligent and imaginative beings who could be challenged by the work.

**JA** Why don't we talk about *Corps Étranger*. First, what was it actually like to do the piece? Did it hurt? And second, what about the position of the camera as literally penetrating your body?

**MH** The video was shot with the help of a doctor using an endoscopic camera. It didn't hurt at all. I was given a drug that seemed to dull the pain, but I remained completely conscious, and as my insides were being filmed— I was directing the video at the same time. I called it *Corps Étranger*, which means “foreign body,” because the camera is in a sense this alien device introduced from the outside. Also it is about how we are closest to our body, and yet it is a foreign territory which could, for instance, be consumed by disease long before we become aware of it. The “foreign body” also refers literally to the body of a foreigner. It is a complex work. It is both fascinating to follow the journey of the camera and quite disturbing. On one hand you have the body of a woman projected onto the floor. You can walk all over it. It's debased, deconstructed, objectified. On the other hand it's the fearsome body of the woman as constructed by society.

**JA** It also swallows you. You go into the body, both in the image but also in the installation.

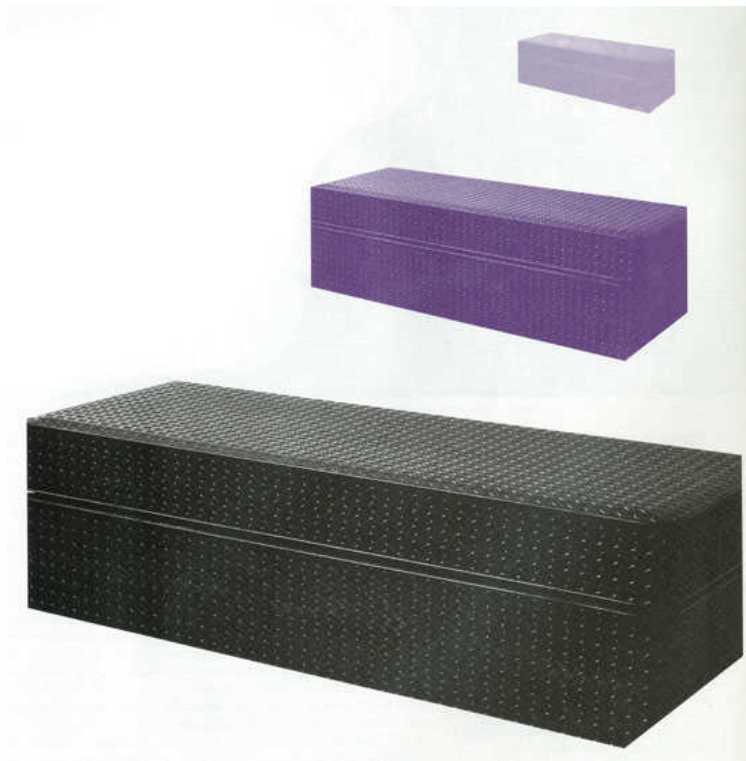
**MH** Precisely. You enter a cylinder and you stand on the perimeter of the circular video image projected onto the floor. You feel like you are at the edge of an abyss that threatens to engulf you. It activates all sorts of fears and insecurities about the devouring womb, the *vagina dentata*, the castration complex.

**JA** In the end, was it important that it was your body?

**MH** It had to be my body.

**JA** In a weird way it's a kind of offering. It's an exposure. Did you feel invaded in any way?

**MH** I wanted the work to be about the body probed, invaded, violated, deconstructed, by the scientific eye. But when we were filming I was too concerned about getting the right images for my video to connect personally with any of these feelings.



Mona Hatoum, *Divan Bed*, 1996, steel thread plate, 24 x 75¼ x 30½ inches.



**JA** What role does intuition play in your art?

**MH** As I got more confident about my work I started allowing myself to be more intuitive. One of the first and most intuitive decisions I made was to make the video with my mother, *Measure of Distance*. At the time, it wasn't quite resolved in my head, but I decided to make it and worry about the consequences later. I was going against the grain of the current ideological discussion, but I'm so glad I made it.

**JA** Does the work change very radically while you're making it or do those decisions happen beforehand?

**MH** There is a certain amount of decision making that happens beforehand. But as you probably know being an artist yourself, when you start working with materials they sometimes take you elsewhere and one has to be open enough to make changes if something is not working out the way you conceived it on paper or conceptually. For instance when I was making *Incommunicado*, I was originally going to connect safety pins together to make a grid that would replace the mattress support. I was going to call it something like "Safety Net." But when I started putting the pins together, it did not work visually. I felt that it looked too literal. Having put the bed together without the platform, I loved that feeling of void in it. Somehow there was something wrong with activating that void too much. I wanted it to be much more subtle. I had already done an installation where I had stretched thin wire across a whole gallery space, and the wires were interrupting the body of the viewer in the main space at ankle level. When you got to the lower space the same wires hit you at the neck level. I wanted to rework that feeling of threat and dissection of the space into a more contained object, and of course because it is an infant's cot, it gives it a more psychological dimension.

**JA** I find your objects to be stubborn in the best of ways. They are unyielding, conceptually tight, and formally imposing. They are what they are. It is your taste for the literal that I am most interested in. I want to talk about how you make meaning, and the fact that your meaning is in the object and not applied to it.

**MH** I want the meaning to be embedded, so to speak, in the material that I'm using. I choose the material as an extension of the concept or sometimes in opposition to it, to create a contradictory and paradoxical situation of attraction/repulsion, fascination and revulsion. For instance, I intentionally used a very sensuous, translucent silicon rubber to make the *Entrails Carpet*. You want to walk all over it with bare feet. On the other hand, when you recognize the pattern on the surface of the carpet, you realize it's something very repulsive, it looks like entrails splayed out all over the floor as if it's the aftermath of a massacre. There's a kind of attraction/repulsion operating here.

**JA** When I was looking at your show at the New Museum, I thought of Eva Hesse and some of her poems and was wondering whether she is an influence.

**MH** Eva Hesse was very much a model figure for my generation of women artists. She was around when Minimalism was happening, but her work was so much more organic and to do with the body. Someone once made a parallel between my *Socle du Monde* and the series of cubes Eva Hesse made which she called *Accession*. Like they said, my piece was like an inversion of the cubes she made with industrial material—perforated steel where she inserted rubber tubes into the holes. So on the inside she created a furry surface. A quiet exterior and a tumultuous interior. In fact, when I made *Socle du Monde* I wanted to use the cube, the minimalist form par excellence, and turn it on its head, so to speak, by covering it with

something that not only looks very organic, but is almost frightening because you don't immediately recognize what the texture is made of. Unlike the minimalist cube which would have been made of perfectly machined surfaces, untouched by human hands.

**JA** It's interesting because it feels very solid, the surface is very vulnerable. And, of course, you're dying to touch it. *(laughter)*

A year and a half ago we both spent a month at Sabbath Day Lake, which is the only active Shaker community left in the world. We lived with seven Shakers in a residency that was called "The Quiet in the Land." That's really where we got to know each other. How did the experience of living with the Shakers and their philosophy affect your work?

**MH** There was such a beautiful, family-like feeling about the Shaker community which activated all sorts of forgotten needs. They had taken us in as a part of their family, which I thought was very courageous of them, because who knows what artists are up to. There was a beautiful feeling of settledness and warm domesticity, which is in complete contrast with my nomadic existence. The work I made there happened very organically and ended up making reference to kitchen utensils and a kind of nostalgic domesticity. Being in this situation gave me permission to work with simple craft processes, maybe even reconnect with a gentle side of myself. I felt like working with my hands rather than constantly conceptualizing about the work before making it. The Shakers talk about "hands to work," which is quite nice, this kind of focusing all the time on the making, being always occupied was a wonderful and sobering experience.

**JA** The other half of that statement is "hands to work, hearts to God."

**MH** Oh, I forgot about that one. *(laughter)*

**JA** How was it for you to be in these spiritual surroundings where that was really the focus of the making?

**MH** Although this was the focus it never came out in any kind of preaching. They are the perfect example of a truly spiritual community which you experience in the way they conduct their ordinary every day life without the dogma and the preaching. They show their beliefs by what they do, not what they say.

**JA** It wasn't imposed upon us at all.

**MH** Yeah, I'm against organized religion but that doesn't mean I'm not a spiritual person. It was only when I found myself living in the West that I started valuing the spiritual side of myself. Keeping hold of the spiritual side became quite a focus at one point. I got into meditation in order to compensate for the lack of spirituality around me.

*— Janine Antoni exhibits her work both nationally and internationally. Her work has appeared in the Whitney Biennial, the Venice Biennial, The Guggenheim Museum SoHo's Hugo Boss Prize 1996, and at the Guggenheim Museum New York's Rose is a Rose is a Rose exhibition in 1997. She is a recipient of The Irish Museum of Modern Art's Glen Dimplex Award, and in 1998 her video installation Swoon will be on display at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Born in Freeport, Bahamas, Janine Antoni now lives in New York.*