

PARCOURS

Notes on the Exhibition

No illusions, no allusions.

Donald Judd¹

The works become full of associations and meaning – a reflection on the social environment we inhabit. Unlike minimal objects, they are not self-referential.

Mona Hatoum²

Installation: Fields and Cubes

Based on her performative ideas, Hatoum consequently began to integrate both surreal and minimalist vocabulary into her formal visual language. Beginning in the 1990s, she replaced the body of the performer – that is, her own – with the body of the spectator who interacts directly with the work, thereby switching the role of the spectator to that of the performer. Viewers suddenly become participants – they are seen as a part of the installation and their physical experience is soon followed by a circumvention of visual and emotional perception.

Hatoum's impressive series of large-scale installations in this exhibition, from *Quarters* (1996; pp. 90–91) to the very recent works, starts off in the first exhibition room with the work *Turbulence* (2012; pp. 54–57): 'The work consists of a "mat" of thousands of crystal-clear glass marbles of various sizes arranged into a square. The variables of size between each hand-made marble create natural patterns that are reminiscent of an undulating liquid surface. The overall impression is of a highly irregular ground, turbulent and swirling, yet it remains contained within a formally abstract square.'⁸ It is probably the ambivalence of this floor piece that immediately casts a spell and can really 'capture' the viewer's gaze. Thousands of marbles, their surfaces sparkling in the natural side light,

seem to be kaleidoscopically transformed by the slightest movement of the viewer and evoke an entire spectrum of sensory impressions: black dots, cracks in the parquet floor visible as if through a magnifying glass, endless brown hues in the refraction of the floor, glistening reflections. The viewer is tempted to step on to the seductively sparkling carpet of light. But its glittering appearance is very fragile: only held together in the square by a fine thread. The smallest vibration could upset the geometrical setting and shatter the contours. The marbles actually seem reluctant to coalesce in the field's rigidly square outer form as the potential movement of each single one seems bound to break up the strict arrangement of the whole – formal contrasts that become valid beyond the work as a metaphor for the basic contradictions of the world.

One could understand *Turbulence* as an artistic research into simple geometric shapes or deduce references to Richard Long or Carl Andre's floor work from recent art history, even though the latter developed the overall shape of a piece from individual plates and based everything on an underlying system. Not so with Hatoum: she rejects systemic approaches and rigid rules and instead works both in terms of form and of content with precise fractures and exaggerated antitheses – order and chaos, restriction and expansion – as well as sophisticated associative or art-historical references. Compared to Andre's steel plates, the glass marble is in no way connotation-free but charged with meaning, with childhood memories, with the world of innocent play or simple jewellery as well as with the sphere of magic and occultism. Even though Hatoum has been generally inspired by the formal traditions of Carl Andre or Minimal Art, she meaningfully transcends the artistic self-referentiality of those earlier days and opens it up to life: her art is imbued with things experienced, things remembered, without ever limiting the potential multiple readings to a single dimension.

The same could be said for other installations such as *Undercurrent (red)* (2008; pp. 84–87), *Hair Grids with Knots* (2006; p. 83) or *Impenetrable (s version)* (2010; pp. 78–81). The first of these is a floor work, a woven square of red, cloth-covered electric wire, with spreading tentacles at the end of which light bulbs fade up and down, reminding us of a powerful Medusa head, almost breathing in time with the ebb and flow of the lights. The interlacing technique, employed basically here, refers to textile traditions and can be found in other works with such materials, such as the earlier *Hair Grids with Knots*. Here a fine network of intersecting lines will reveal itself as an almost free-floating weaving of hair only when we move close up. The artist recycled organic waste materials, such as hair, weaving the discarded strands into a loose grid, which she fastened to two

wooden sticks protruding from the wall with just two single strands of hair. The delicate tracery swings back and forth with the slightest air current. The geometric grid structure, another archetype of modernism, resembles a fine pencil drawing and captivates with the minimalist character of its horizontal and vertical lines. At the same time, it points to an ambivalent contrast: the innate carnality in the hair detached from the head and thus now superfluous, which speaks of loss and decay. Handmade, the fragile knotted and woven piece also recalls hand-woven textiles made by women. But unlike conventional fabrics, the hair weaving has lost its enveloping and protective functions.

The title *Impenetrable (s version)* includes a reference to the so-called *Penetrables* (1967/1997), a series of hanging sculptures with numerous plastic or metal tubes by the artist Jesús Rafael Soto (1923–2005). Visitors were invited to walk through these and push the hanging elements aside, thus transforming the static work into a kinetic one. With *Impenetrable*, Hatoum seemingly subverts the invitation to physical participation and immobilises the kinetic potential of its predecessor: The hanging sculpture consists of twenty rows of thin 3-metre-long metal rods that hang from the ceiling on fishing wire, forming a cube weightlessly floating in space. The individual metal rods, however, are fitted with numerous hooks that make us think of barbed wire. The materialisation of the cubic shape brings to mind military or police barriers, the presence of institutional power transmitted into our homes from conflict zones around the world by the media or familiar from our own experience of them. Barbed wire offers a universally readable metaphor. And if you attempted to walk through Hatoum's reinterpretation of Soto's kinetic sculpture, it would inevitably lead to injury.

Despite its martial appearance, *Impenetrable* also seduces the eye with foreshortened perspectives, sophisticated staggered skeins and lines of sight that change with each step and intersect anew, transforming the work and its potentially painful contents into a fascinating trap of perception. This aspect of a sharpening of the senses harks back to the aesthetics of 1960s Minimal Art, where simple stereometric forms with regular internal subdivisions demonstrated the act of seeing to the viewer, but at the cost of radically abandoning any thematic connections apart from the sheer physical presence of the work itself. With its obvious reference to barbed wire, this is definitely not the case in Hatoum's installation. Through her choice of materials, she questions both the playful participation and the formal self-reference of her art-historical models, transcending modernist ideologies and utopias while still paying tribute to the traditions she quotes by keeping them alive: 'I was completely taken in by Minimal and Conceptual Art when

I was on my first-degree course. [...] 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 is more a kind of reductive approach, if you like, where the forms can be seen as abstract aesthetic structures, but can also be recognised as cages, lockers, chairs, beds... The works become full of associations and meaning – a reflection on the social environment we inhabit. Unlike minimal objects, they are not self-referential.”⁹