



Mona Hatoum's Other Story

"Third World Post-modernism" in 1980s Britain

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Abstract

During the upheaval of the early civil war months in Lebanon in 1975, Mona Hatoum (b. 1952) found herself stranded in London, where she decided to study art. In the early 1980s, she graduated from the Slade School of Art, where she immersed herself in postmodern thought and the concurrent development of critical theory in the United Kingdom. Inspired by artistic movements challenging the norms of contemporary British art, she shaped her artistic approach by blending the artistic, social, and political realms. The ideas of Rasheed Araeen gave her a conceptual framework, exploring his reflections on Third World art, postcolonialism, questions of identity, and the notion of "black artist" in the United Kingdom. This article aims to examine Hatoum's involvement in British Black Arts through her activities with Rasheed Araeen, presenting a fresh analysis of key works that assess their critical impact. While she is now a globally recognized artist, there has been limited research dedicated to the phase of her life when she existed on the fringes of art history during her youth in Beirut, then working in the then-contested field of performance and video, and often being considered a migrant artist, or as she once wrote: a black one. Drawing from an exclusive interview with the artist, this article offers an intersectional approach to both western art history and that from the SWANA (Southwest Asia and North Africa) region, shedding new light on this crucial period in her artistic development and its broader implications for understanding diverse artistic narratives.

Keywords

Mona Hatoum, British Black Arts, Third World, Third Text, Rasheed Araeen

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Introduction: Reopening the British Black Arts Loop

Long ignored by canonical art history, artists associated with the British Black Arts movement have gained significant visibility in scholarship since the early 2000s.¹ Emerging as a deliberate political project during the Thatcher years (1979–90) in the aftermath of widespread civil unrest across British metropolitan centres, this movement erupted onto the cultural landscape with unprecedented intellectual force.² Encompassing artists of Caribbean, African, and Asian heritage working throughout the United Kingdom (UK), the movement was profoundly influenced by post-civil rights, Black Power movements in the United States of America and anti-apartheid activism in South Africa—such as BLK Arts Group and Pan-Afrikan Connection³—and retrospectively by cultural theorist Stuart Hall's pioneering work on race and media representation.⁴ They systematically challenged imperial paradigms within institutional frameworks, fundamentally transforming both the constitution and perception of British cultural identity in enduring ways.

The British Black Arts movement was not a unified entity but rather a heterogeneous collective with multiple leaders and divergent strands. Its historiography consequently presents a complex tapestry. Early accounts on the movement were authored by active participants such as Eddie Chambers (b. 1960), Lubaina Himid (b. 1954), Maud Sulter (1960–2008) and Rasheed Araeen (b. 1935). These protagonists-artists-historians began documenting and theorizing their collective struggles even before the conclusion of the decade in which they emerged, establishing contemporaneous frameworks that have shaped subsequent scholarly discourses.

This article employs a microhistorical approach to excavate Mona Hatoum's overlooked connections to this movement, constructing an alternative narrative that challenges her relegation to the periphery in canonical accounts. While her Palestinian and Lebanese roots are frequently discussed, what remains underexamined is that she once identified as a black artist and was affil-

1. See, for example, in chronological order: David A. Bailey, Ian Baucom, and Sonia Boyce, eds., *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Eddie Chambers, *Black Artists in British Art: A History since the 1950s* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014); Anjalie Dalal-Clayton, "Coming into View: Black Artists and Exhibition Cultures 1976–2010" (PhD diss., Liverpool John Moores University, 2015); Sophie Orlando, *British Black Art: Debates on Western Art History*, trans. Charles La Via (Paris: Dis Voir, 2016); Leon Wainwright, *Phenomenal Difference: A Philosophy of Black British Art* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017); Salah M. Hassan and Chika Okeke-Agulu, eds., "Black British Art Histories," special issue, *NKA Journal of Contemporary African Art* 49, no. 2 (2019); Riana Jade Parker, *A Brief History of Black British Art* (London: Tate, 2021); Alice Correia, ed., *What Is Black Art? Writings on African, Asian and Caribbean Art in Britain, 1981–1989* (Dublin: Penguin Books, 2022).

2. The term "Black Arts Movement," like the period, has no fixed terminology; it is also referred to as the "British Black Arts Movement," as found in the Tate's online glossary: "British Black Arts Movement," Art Terms, Tate, accessed 1 April 2025, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/b/british-black-arts-movement>. In this article, I use "British Black Arts" (plural) to emphasize the heterogeneous nature of the movement and the multiplicity of artistic practices, voices and approaches it encompassed, rather than suggesting a monolithic or unified field.

3. See the chronology (1941–1989) at the end of *The Other Story* catalogue that outlines lots of developments along this axis: Julia Engelhardt, "Chronology," in *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain*, ed. Rasheed Araeen, exhibition catalogue, London, Hayward Gallery, 29 November 1989–4 February 1990; Wolverhampton, Wolverhampton Art Gallery, 10 March–22 April 1990; Manchester, Manchester City Art Gallery and Cornerhouse, 5 May–10 June 1990 (London: South Bank Centre, 1989), 128–41.

4. From his groundbreaking work *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1978) through his theories on "new ethnicities" and "the politics of difference," Hall's writings have transformed race research methodology. In *Selected Writings on Race and Difference* (2021), editors Paul Gilroy and Ruth Wilson Gilmore compile Stuart Hall's essential essays on race, identity, and diaspora. The collection includes influential texts like "The Whites of Their Eyes" and "Race, the Floating Signifier," demonstrating Hall's commitment to concrete rather than merely descriptive analysis of race and its intersections with culture, consciousness, and social structures.

iated with the British Black Arts movement in 1980s London. How did Hatoum's encounter with Araeen—and his conceptualization of British Black Arts as a politically charged, anti-imperialist framework—give her a conceptual framework and nurture her artistic trajectory? To what extent did she embrace this affiliation and how did it influence her subsequent practice?

Lubaina Himid's drawing *Thin Black Line(s): Moments and Connections* (2011) offers a revelatory entry point for this investigation (fig. 1). Resembling the London Underground map, this visual cartography catalogues the interconnected artists, institutions, exhibitions, and publications that constituted the movement's ecosystem. Himid organizes these connections specifically around women artists' movements between 1983 and 1985, centring figures like Sonia Boyce (b. 1962), Claudette Johnson (b. 1959), Maud Sulter (1960–2008), Houria Nati (b. 1948), Ingrid Pollard (b. 1953), and herself while displacing male-dominated histories to the margins. Significantly, Hatoum appears along what Himid labels the "Other Artists" tube line—a secondary trajectory alongside figures like Isaac Julien (b. 1960) and Keith Piper (b. 1960), positioned between David A. Bailey (b. 1961), Mowbray Odonkor (b. 1962), and Rasheed Araeen, to the upper left of the drawing.⁵

This marginalized positioning merits deeper investigation, particularly given Hatoum's own acknowledgement of Araeen's influence. When asked about the politicizing of her cultural difference, she responded: "When I met Rasheed Araeen in the mid-1980s, it was a revelation. He was someone who had rationalized and theorized issues of Otherness."⁶ This connection is crucial for understanding Hatoum's engagement with concepts of "Third World arts" and postcolonialism during this formative period.

Araeen's conceptual framework and activist practice profoundly reshaped discourses on art in postwar Britain through multiple channels: conceptual art, critical writing, exhibition curation, and editorial work on journals like *Black Phoenix* (1978–79) and *Third Text* (since 1987). His strategic redefinition of "black"⁷—as well as the proposition of the term "Afro-Asian" which emerged from grass-roots black and South Asian political organizing in the 1970s—as a political rather than racial designation created a form of collective resistance encompassing individuals from the Global South who shared experiences of colonial subjugation and cultural marginalization.⁸ Simultaneously, he critiqued institutional approaches that confined black artists within an "imposed otherness" or tokenistic multiculturalism.⁹

5. Her name has been misspelled "Odonka" in the drawing.

6. Michael Archer, "Michael Archer in Conversation with Mona Hatoum," in *Mona Hatoum*, 2nd ed., rev. and expand., ed. Michael Archer et al. (London: Phaidon, 2016), 10.

7. Throughout this article, I have chosen to use the lowercase "black" when referring to racial identity. Whilst I acknowledge the ongoing debate surrounding capitalization practices and recognize that many style guides now recommend capitalizing "Black" to denote shared identity and cultural heritage, I align with perspectives that resist prescriptive rules on blackness itself. No single authority should impose orthographic rules on how blackness is expressed or written, as this risks constraining the fluid, multifaceted nature of black identity and experience. The lowercase form reflects a deliberate choice to resist the homogenization of diverse black identities under a single typographical convention.

8. Rasheed Araeen, "Preliminary Notes for a Black Manifesto," *Black Phoenix* 1 (Winter 1978): 3–12, reproduced in *Black Phoenix: Third World Perspective on Contemporary Art and Culture*, ed. Rasheed Araeen and Mahmood Jamal (New York: Primary Information, 2022).

9. Sou-Maëlla Bolmey, "Discours divergent chez Rasheed Araeen: 'L'écriture et la publication comme travail artistique conceptuel,'" in *Quand l'artiste se fait critique d'art: Échanges, passerelles et résurgences*, ed. Ophélie Naessens and Simon Daniellou (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2015), 101. Bolmey also refers readers to Araeen's contributions to *Third Text*, in which he wrote about this idea: Rasheed Araeen, "From

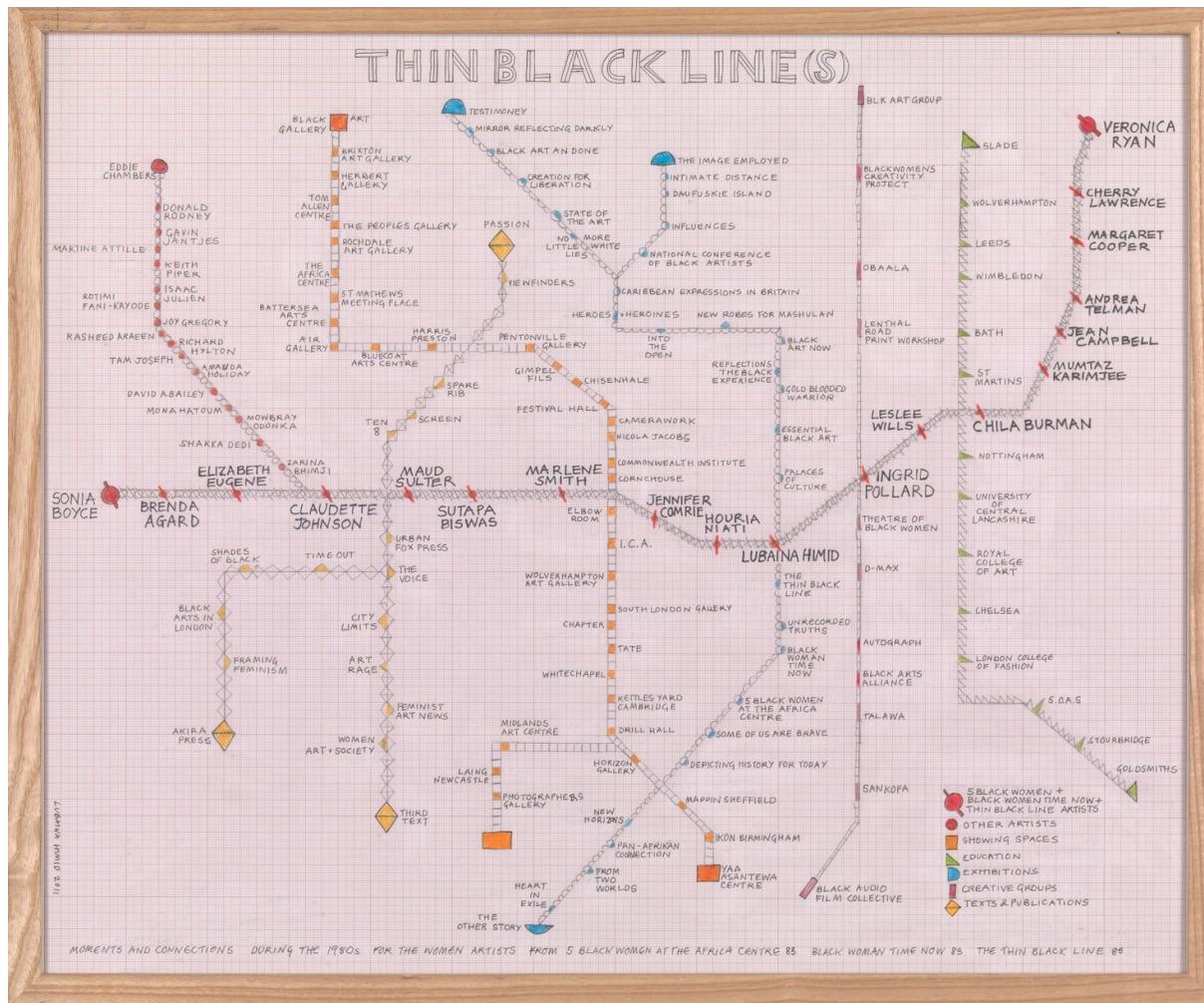


Figure 1: *Thin Black Line(s): Moments and Connections*, 2011, Lubaina Himid, coloured pencil on paper, 747 × 620 mm, Tate Britain, London © Lubaina Himid. Photo: Tate.

This article begins by examining Hatoum's formative experiences in 1970s Beirut before focusing on her art education in London—a crucial period that shaped both her aesthetic approach and political consciousness. Through analysing her participation in key exhibitions, publications, and networks associated with the British Black Arts movement—coupled with an exclusive interview with the artist centring on these formative times of her life¹⁰—I will demonstrate how Hatoum's artistic path intersected with and diverged from its central concerns. The paper challenges simplified narratives about her artistic development, revealing instead a transnational trajectory where

Primitivism to Ethnic Art," *Third Text* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1987): 6–25; Rasheed Araeen, "The Other Immigrant: The Experiences and Achievements of Afro Asian Artists in the Metropolis," *Third Text* 5, no. 15 (Summer 1991): 17–28; Rasheed Araeen, "How I Discovered My Oriental Soul in the Wilderness of the West," *Third Text* 6, no. 18 (Spring 1992): 85–102; Rasheed Araeen, "A New Beginning: Beyond Postcolonial Cultural Theory and Identity Politics," *Third Text* 14, no. 50 (Spring 2000): 3–20.

10. Mona Hatoum, interview by Joan Grandjean, 2 July 2024. Whenever there is a quotation from the artist without a footnote referring to a specific source, it will be taken from this interview in order to facilitate the reading.

her practice evolved through dialogue across diverse geographic, cultural, and conceptual contexts—ultimately resisting the very categorizations that have marginalized her contribution to this significant moment in various nationalistic and nationalist art histories.

A Step Sideways into 1970s Beirut

Mona Hatoum's artistic identity emerges from multiple displacements, making her work a powerful meditation on belonging and exile that would later distinguish her from many British black artists. Born in 1952 to Palestinian parents who had fled Haifa during the 1948 Nakba, Hatoum grew up in Beirut with the peculiar status of having a British passport through her father's employment with the British administration, yet never obtaining Lebanese citizenship. This early experience of existing between identities—Palestinian by heritage, Lebanese by upbringing, British by documentation, woman by gender binary—established themes of displacement and belonging that would become central to her artistic practice and differentiate her approach within British art circles.



Figure 2: Faris, Waddah. *Portrait of Mona Hatoum at the Baalbek Festival*. 1973. Black and white photography. 42 × 35 cm. © Waddah Faris. Courtesy the photographer estate.

Pre-civil war Beirut of the early 1970s provided Hatoum with an active artistic environment that shaped her later engagement with art in the UK. While often mythologized as merely a Mediterranean playground for the wealthy, Beirut harboured a sophisticated cultural scene documented by figures like Waddah Faris (1940–2024), whose photographs captured Hatoum at twenty-one during the 1973 Baalbek Festival (fig. 2)¹¹—a moment when she stood at the threshold of her artistic journey.

Hatoum herself described this period as artistically vibrant. Beirut boasted half a dozen new galleries showcasing both local and international contemporary art.¹² The Contact Gallery in Hamra, co-founded by Faris, became particularly significant in Hatoum's artistic formation. As an experimental space showcasing both local and international contemporary art, it exposed Hatoum to cutting-edge practices that transcended national boundaries—an internationalist perspective that would later inform her nuanced position between the identity-based focus of the British Black Arts movement and the formalist concerns of British contemporary art.

Her social circle included creatives from various disciplines—art, design, fashion, and photography—including the aspiring art dealer Edward Totah (1949–95) and painter Fadi Barrage (1939–1988). The city's cultural dynamism was further enhanced by numerous international cultural centres and the annual Baalbek Festival, which attracted global artists, musicians, and performers.¹³ Her immersion in Beirut's diverse creative community established a first pattern of cross-cultural dialogue that helps to understand her navigation in London's art world and others.

The year before Faris pressed the button, Hatoum had graduated from the Beirut College for Women (BCW)¹⁴ with an Associate of Applied Science degree in graphic design.¹⁵ This path represented a compromise with her father, who refused to support her through a four-year art programme, insisting instead on a more “practical” education. Though focused on graphic design, Hatoum seized every opportunity to pursue her true passion, enrolling in art classes whenever

11. Most of these photographs were first printed as part of the exhibition *Beirut, The City of the World's Desire: The Chronicles of Waddah Faris (1960–1975)* that took place at the Saleh Barakat Gallery in 2017. See Saleh Barakat Gallery, ed., *Beirut – The City of the World's Desire: The Chronicles of Waddah Faris (1960–1975)*, exhibition catalogue, Beirut, Saleh Barakat Gallery, 19 May–29 July 2017 (Beirut: Salim Dabbous, 2017), accessed 13 December 2024, https://salehbarakatgallery.com/Content/uploads/Exhibition/4938_Saleh%20Barakat%20Gallery%20Waddah%20Fares%20Catalogue%20low%20res.pdf.

12. See Monique Bellan, “Ruptures and Continuities: Lebanon's Art Galleries in the 1980s with a Focus on Galerie Damo (1977–88),” *Manazir Journal* 7 (2025): 21–56, accessed in pre-publication format 22 May 2025, <https://doi.org/10.36950/manazir.2025.7.2>.

13. Nadia von Maltzahn, “Heritage, Tourism, and the Politics of National Pride: The Baalbeck International Festival in Lebanon,” *Quaderni storici: Rivista quadrimestrale* 2 (2019): 371–89, accessed 17 December 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1408/96904>.

14. Recognized as a liberal arts institution, BCW served the educational, social, and economic needs of the region, attracting women from across the Middle East. In 1970, the Lebanese government recognized BCW's BA and BS degrees as equivalent to the national Licence. The college then became more inclusive, admitting men and changing its name to Beirut University College (BUC) in 1973. In the 1990s, it officially became a university and was renamed Lebanese American University (LAU) after receiving approval from the Board of Regents in New York. See “History,” Lebanese American University, accessed 11 September 2024, <https://www.lau.edu.lb/about/history/>.

15. An Associate of Applied Science degree (AAS) is a type of degree typically awarded by community colleges and technical schools. The AAS is designed to provide practical, career-oriented skills and training in a specific field, such as information technology, healthcare, or engineering. Unlike some other associate degrees that may focus more on general education, the AAS is more specialized and geared towards preparing students for immediate entry into the workforce.

possible. As she recounted in interview, she particularly cherished a “Drawing from the Human Figure” class taught by Samia Ouseiran Junblatt (1944–2024) and developed an early interest in photography.

After graduation, Hatoum worked at Young & Rubicam, a major American advertising agency in Beirut. Despite the company’s prestige, she found the eighteen months there deeply unfulfilling. While she gained valuable technical skills in printing, photography, and filmmaking—which later enabled her to take on better-paying freelance work—she grew increasingly troubled by the ethics of advertising. To nurture her creative spirit during this period, she enrolled in evening classes, including drawing with Hassan Jouni (b. 1942) and ceramics courses with Dorothy Salhab Kazemi (1942–90) at what had become Beirut University College (BUC). Kazemi became a significant mentor, encouraging Hatoum to pursue further art education abroad.

In June 1975, what was intended as a brief visit to London became an indefinite stay when the Lebanese Civil War intensified. With Beirut’s airport closed for nine consecutive months, Hatoum remained in Britain, eventually establishing herself there permanently. The initial two-year war (1975–77) was followed by a series of related conflicts between shifting alliances of Lebanese groups and external actors, who destabilized Lebanon until 1990 and beyond. With the turmoil in Lebanon, Kazemi’s suggestion would materialize sooner than expected. Moreover, this abrupt and forced departure from Beirut would mark a significant turning point in Hatoum’s life and artistic trajectory, transforming her relationship with place, belonging, exile, and creative expression—themes that would become central to her internationally acclaimed body of work.

Unlike artists born in Commonwealth countries who formed the core of the British Black Arts movement, Hatoum’s experience of double displacement—through her Palestinian heritage and then her prohibited return to Lebanon—gave her approach a distinctive complexity in addressing questions of belonging. This complexity would both align her with and distinguish her from Araeen’s theoretical frameworks, which primarily addressed postcolonial identity within the British imperial context at large rather than the intricately layered displacements characteristic of the Israeli colonization and the Lebanese Civil War experience beyond the British imperial realm. Hatoum’s formative Beirut years thus provided not just biographical background but the essential conceptual foundation for her later artistic interventions in the UK—establishing a transnational perspective that would both contribute to and complicate the discourses of the British Black Arts movement.

A One-Way Ticket to London: A Decisive Journey

Hatoum’s arrival in London in 1975 on what was meant to be a short visit—soon permanent due to the Lebanese Civil War—positioned her uniquely within Britain’s artistic landscape at a pivotal moment when identity politics were beginning to reshape British art discourse through what Hall called “the black experience,”¹⁶ which emerged as a hegemonic identity framework that critiqued the positioning of non-white communities as the invisible “other” within predominantly white British aesthetic and cultural discourses. By then, Hatoum had already left her position at Young & Rubicam, having made the decision to return to BUC to pursue a BA degree in Fine Art.

16. Stuart Hall, “New Ethnicities [1988],” in *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, ed. Paul Gilroy and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 246–56, here 246, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1hhj1b9.16>.

She had registered for her first term, confident that her acquired freelance design skills would sustain her financially during her studies. Her long-term vision included applying for postgraduate studies in London afterward, and her 1975 visit to the British capital was partly to explore suitable programmes. When violence escalated in Lebanon, she adapted quickly—viewing this unexpected turn as an opportunity to accelerate her artistic education. Having missed application deadlines for government-funded art schools, she enrolled in a foundation course at the private Byam Shaw School of Art,¹⁷ an institution whose traditional approach would both inform and ultimately provoke her movement toward the politically engaged art practices that would later align with aspects of the British Black Arts movement.

The traumatic circumstances of Hatoum's early London years critically shaped her artistic development in ways that would later distinguish her work within British political art circles. Living in "a cold and harsh environment" while carrying the emotional weight of war in Lebanon—she was "too concerned about the war and felt a constant fear of losing [her] parents who lived very close to the green line where most of the fighting took place"—Hatoum experienced what Edward Said would later term "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place."¹⁸ This existential condition of exile provided her with a lived experience of marginality that would position her work at a critical intersection with British black artists' concerns, even as her specific experience differentiated her from British-born artists of colour and those from former colonies.

Hatoum's encounters with traditional art education at Byam Shaw (1975–79) became instrumental in her eventual rejection of western artistic conventions. The school's insistence on traditional forms and dismissal of photography ("I buried my Nikon camera in a bank vault for a long time") represented precisely the Eurocentric artistic hierarchy that Rasheed Araeen and other black artists and theorists would critique. Despite this traditionalism, the foundation year introduced her to diverse methods and materials, differing significantly from the American-style education she had experienced in Beirut. She particularly valued the British tutorial system, which provided dedicated studio space and one-on-one guidance from instructors whenever needed. Her initial compliance with these traditions—progressing from life drawing to abstract expressionism's "strange cathartic effect"—became almost ritualistic: painting through the night until physical exhaustion overtook her, surrendering completely to the creative act in a profound emotional and intellectual journey. Followed by her intellectual rebellion against them, it paralleled the broader movement in British art toward questioning canonical western, racist, and misogynistic art representations from non-western perspectives.

This broader questioning of artistic traditions influenced the artist's engagement with kinetic and performative practices, which can be traced to a pivotal encounter in 1977, when David Medalla (1942–2020) visited the Byam Shaw to deliver a lecture on his work alongside that of several Brazilian and South American artists, including Hélio Oiticica (1937–80), Lygia Clark (1920–88), and Tunga (1952–2016). This presentation proved formative, introducing concepts that would influence Hatoum's artistic approach. At the time, she was experiencing dissatisfaction with the static

17. The Byam Shaw School of Art—commonly known as Byam Shaw—was an art school in London founded in 1910 by the artist John Byam Shaw (1872–1919) and Rex Vicat Cole (1870–1940). It was well known for its focus on fine art and traditional art techniques, with a curriculum that included painting, drawing, and other classical disciplines. The school gained a reputation for its teaching style, which emphasized craftsmanship alongside creative freedom.

18. Edward Wadie Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 137.

nature of painting and had begun experimenting with a large-scale work that documented the daily transformations occurring within her studio environment. Medalla's observation that her painting appeared dynamic, with nothing seemingly fixed within its composition, affirmed her intuitive move towards more fluid artistic expressions.

Another turning point came with her discovery of Marcel Duchamp's work and Lucy Lippard's *Six Years: The Dematerialisation of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*,¹⁹ which became her "bible." This intellectual encounter catalysed a decisive reorientation toward conceptual practice, as she began "making 3D objects, using industrial materials and playing with what [she] called invisible forces like light, electricity and magnetism." This shift represented not merely a stylistic evolution but a political one—anticipating the formal strategies through which she would later engage with issues of displacement, power, and exile while maintaining her distinctive artistic vocabulary.

Hatoum's transition to the Slade School of Art (1979–81) marked her entry into circles more directly engaged with critical theory and postmodern thought.²⁰ At this prestigious institution, her artistic development benefited from encounters with key mentors whose influence transcended technical instruction to shape her political consciousness. Mary Kelly's (b. 1941) visit during Hatoum's first year proved transformative, as Kelly "turned [her] on to feminist theories, especially the discussions around the gaze and the representation of the female body." These feminist perspectives provided Hatoum with critical tools to analyse power relations embedded in visual representation—theoretical concerns that paralleled the British Black Arts movement's critique of racial representation while adding a gendered dimension often underdeveloped in Araeen's frameworks.

Stuart Brisley's (b. 1933) "antiestablishment attitude" further radicalized Hatoum's approach, offering a model of institutional critique that complemented her growing political awareness. Through these mentorships and her engagement with performance-oriented student peers, Hatoum developed an artistic practice increasingly centred on "women's and minority rights through artistic, social, and political discourse"—a focus that positioned her work in productive dialogue with surveillance and Michel Foucault and Jeremy Bentham's idea of ever-visible inmates, echoing the British Black Arts movement's concerns while maintaining her distinctive perspective as an artist from the Mashreq navigating complex displacements.

Hatoum's educational journey thus represents a crucial evolution that positioned her at the intersection of multiple artistic and political currents in 1980s Britain. Her progression from traditional training to conceptual and performative practice, informed by feminist theory and institutional critique, equipped her with a sophisticated artistic language through which to address issues of power and belonging while maintaining a perspective shaped by her specific transnational journey. This particular trajectory established the foundation for her later engagement with Araeen's theoretical framework, as her work increasingly negotiated the politics of identity—which Hatoum considered not as something fixed but as forever changing, rendering point-

19. Lucy Rowland Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialisation of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973).

20. The Slade School of Fine Art, founded in 1871 as part of University College London, is renowned for its rigorous fine arts programme, producing numerous influential artists in painting, sculpture, and multimedia practices.

less any attempt to engage with rigid definitions of identity, as these inevitably lead to clichés and stereotypes from which she sought to distance herself²¹—and representation from her unique position of double displacement.

From “Free Experimentation” to “Issue-Based” Work

Art critic Guy Brett (1942–2021), in a comprehensive monograph on Hatoum’s work, identified three distinct phases in her artistic evolution.²² The first—brief but formative—encompassed her “free experimentation” during her art education in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Between 1982 and 1988, Hatoum transitioned into what Brett termed her “issue-based” period, expressed through performances and videos exploring themes of violence, gender, alienation and exile.²³ Brett marks the third phase from the creation of *The Light at the End* (1989), an installation signalling Hatoum’s return to the minimalist language she had explored during her education, which became infused with subtle political connotations. This final phase led to her now-renowned installations and sculptural objects.

These artistic phases unfolded against the backdrop of significant upheaval in British art during the late 1970s and early 1980s—a period defined by feminist movements, postcolonial critiques, and growing awareness of institutional power structures. As a British-Palestinian artist navigating a predominantly white, upper-middle-class British art environment, Hatoum developed a uniquely powerful, intersectional artistic voice. Her early 1980s performances investigated the complex relationships between body, technology, and audience perception through visual illusions and multisensory experiences.

Artworks like *Don’t Smile, You’re on Camera!* (1980) (fig. 3) revealed her early intellectual engagement with Foucault and Bataille, alongside feminist reinterpretations of Freudian “master narratives,” as she explored surveillance, bodily representation, and technological manipulation. In this piece, Hatoum deployed a live video camera as a provocative instrument of scrutiny. By slowly panning across the audience and focusing on intimate body parts—faces, torsos, crotches—she challenged traditional boundaries of personal space and visibility. The performance was technically sophisticated: shirts seemingly faded to reveal ghostly images of bare skin, jackets turned transparent, and bodies appeared overlaid with X-ray-like representations. This complex visual experience, created with three unseen assistants using multiple camera feeds, questioned fundamental notions of privacy, consent, and the gaze.

Hatoum’s early performances were guided by a purist vision of live art as inherently ephemeral—existing only in the moment of enactment. For her, the audience’s experience and memory—inevitably distorted over time—constituted an integral element of the work itself. Practical constraints reinforced this approach; lacking resources to organize her own documentation, the few existing records of these performances were facilitated by hosting venues, emphasizing the intangible nature of her early practice.

21. Mona Hatoum, email correspondence with Joan Grandjean, 16 June 2025.

22. Guy Brett, “Survey,” in Archer et al., *Mona Hatoum*, 36.

23. Mona Hatoum always made a distinction between a video artwork, of which she produced a handful, and video documentation of performances, which she considered as the document of a performance and not an artwork. Mona Hatoum, email correspondence with Joan Grandjean, 16 June 2025.



Figure 3: Hatoum, Mona. *Don't Smile, You're on Camera!* 1980. Live action with two live video cameras, three monitors, one dissolve unit, x-ray images, technical assistant, and two live models. 40 mins (duration). First performed at *Five Days at Battersea*, Battersea Arts Centre, London, on 26 March 1980, in collaboration with Paul Jackson. © Mona Hatoum. Courtesy the artist.

A year after graduating from the Slade, Hatoum participated in the Women Live festival at London's Film-Maker's Co-op in May 1982. In a performance lasting seven hours, she covered her naked body in clay and confined herself within a small transparent polythene structure, repeatedly struggling to stand, slipping and falling. This action was accompanied by a cacophony of sounds—revolutionary chants and news bulletins in Arabic, English, and French—and a distributed leaflet stating:

As a Palestinian woman this work was my first attempt at making a statement about a persistent struggle to survive in a continuous state of siege. [...] As a person from the 'Third World', living in the West, existing on the margin of European society and alienated from my own [...] this action represented an act of separation [...] stepping out of an acquired frame of reference and into a space which acted as a point of reconnection and reconciliation with my own background and the bloody history of my own people.²⁴

Presented on 30 May 1982, *Under Siege* was performed a week before the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, on 6 June 1982, that led to the siege of Beirut. In fact at the time, she thought that her performance was a premonition for what happened a week later. It also marked her first performance explicitly denouncing the Israeli government's violence, the issue of otherness in the UK, and expressing her Palestinian identity to a British audience. The work received serious critical engagement, with some commentators drawing parallels to the Irish prisoners' hunger strikes of the previous year.²⁵ It proved controversial both for its medium—rejecting the traditional art object in favour of concept—and for its approach to body, gender, and political identity.

Under Siege was performed again at Aspex Gallery in Portsmouth, on 2 October 1982, and lasted three hours (fig. 4). The media response revealed more about societal prejudices than the performance itself. Hatoum later reflected: "All the fuss that was made about this performance came out before it even took place at the gallery in Portsmouth. It was all based on a false assumption that the performance contained nudity." The sensationalist headline in *The Sun*—"Naked in Red Slime"—triggered a national controversy, transforming her serious artistic statement into tabloid scandal. Forced to defend her artistic integrity, she held a press conference to articulate her intentions. Ironically, despite numerous photographers present at the performance, no substantive reporting emerged—the clay-covered structure so completely obscured her form that the sensationalist premise collapsed. This media reaction exposed the complex landscape of performance art in early 1980s Britain, where the press seemed more comfortable sensationalizing the work than engaging with its profound political commentary on Palestinian and Lebanese resistance under Israeli oppression.²⁶

24. "Mona Hatoum: Under Siege," Re.Act Feminism: A Performing Archive, accessed 13 December 2024, <http://www.reactfeminism.org/entry.php?l=lb&id=65&wid=292&e=t&v=&a=&t=>.

25. The 1981 Irish hunger strikes were protests by republican prisoners in Northern Ireland's Maze Prison demanding political prisoner status. Led by Bobby Sands of the Provisional IRA, ten prisoners died between March and August 1981 after the British government refused their demands. The strikes generated international attention and became a defining moment in the Northern Ireland conflict, significantly boosting support for Sinn Féin.

26. This consideration of performance art at the time mirrors that of video art and photography as artistic media in their own right, as Rose Issa observes in this volume: "Imagine, the video of Mona Hatoum that I showed in 1987 was acquired twenty years later by the Tate. That same video. At that time, neither Mona Hatoum nor me knew that we could sell video, nor photography. I had her 'Over my dead body,' the beau-

It also aligns with the broader approach of Black Arts in interrogating the white gaze, where artists like Adrian Piper (b. 1948) similarly questioned dominant institutional structures, and as Amina Kayani emphasizes, both Piper and Hatoum's work "directly interrogates the complicity of white audiences in the imperialist structures" they denounce.²⁷ Furthermore, this performance exemplifies the shift Brett identified as Hatoum's second phase of work. What he termed "issue-based" work, she herself called "time-based work" of the 1980s—art operating through metaphors that positioned the body as a representation of broader society.

Although Hatoum had presented several solo performances, including *Don't Smile, You're on Camera!* at the Battersea Arts Centre in 1980 (fig. 3) and at the Institute of Contemporary Arts' *New Contemporaries* in 1981, followed by the 1982 performance *Under Siege* mentioned above (fig. 4), the mid-1980s trajectory of Hatoum's practice was significantly shaped by international opportunities beyond the constraints of the British art scene. In 1983, a pivotal invitation from the artist-run centre Western Front in Vancouver marked a transformative moment in her career. Western Front not only facilitated her first Canadian performance tour but inaugurated a series of annual international engagements that expanded her artistic horizons, resulting in works such as *So Much I Want to Say* (1983), *The Negotiating Table* (1983), *Changing Parts* (1984), and *Variation on Discord and Divisions* (1984). These international networks proved crucial for her.²⁸ By 1984, her performance and video work had begun circulating through significant alternative spaces, including New York's Franklin Furnace.

The year 1984 proved central for Hatoum beyond her transatlantic endeavours. The initial connection with Medalla at the Byam Shaw in 1977 led to a significant opportunity in 1984, when he was serving as curator of the Second International Festival of Performance at South Hill Park Arts Centre in Bracknell and invited Hatoum to perform *Them and Us ... and Other Divisions* (1984) (fig. 5). It was at this festival that she encountered both Rasheed Araeen and Guy Brett: "Meeting those three individuals [Medalla, Araeen, and Brett] was not only a very significant moment for me but it connected me for the first time with like-minded people who became my support system and like family to me." By this period, she had already begun creating installations that explored what she termed "invisible forces"—magnetism, light, and electricity—while incorporating kinetic elements into her sculptural practice, exemplified by works such as *Self Erasing Drawing* (1979), which subsequently evolved into the large-scale installation *+ and -* (1994). Brett, whose book on kinetic art aligned with her artistic investigations,²⁹ demonstrated keen interest in her performative work, attending several of her Brixton performances the following year and subse-

tiful photograph, behind my desk. And nobody asked, can we buy a photo or can we buy a video? This was not at all fashionable then. So we have to think that the word curator did not really exist, the word video art did not exist, even photography did not have a market, really." In Nadia von Maltzahn, "Roundtable Discussion with Rose Issa and Mohammad El Rawas on the Exhibition *Contemporary Lebanese Artists* at London's Kufa Gallery in Early 1988," *Manazir Journal* 7 (2025): 248–65, accessed in pre-publication format 22 May 2025, <https://doi.org/10.36950/manazir.2025.7.10>.

27. Amina Kayani, "Stranding the Audience: On the Performances and Installations of Mona Hatoum and Adrian Piper," *Full Bleed* 5 (2021): n.p., accessed 22 May 2025, <https://www.full-bleed.org/stranding-the-audience>.
28. To read about the development of her performance in Canada, see Sara Diamond, "Performance: An Interview with Mona Hatoum," *Fuse Magazine* 10, no. 5 (1987): 46–52, accessed 21 April 2025, <http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/1792/>.
29. Guy Brett, *Kinetic Art* (London: Studio-Vista; New York: Reinhold Book Corporation, 1968).

quently reviewing them. Their professional relationship developed into a lasting friendship that endured until Brett's death in 2021, with his continued support proving invaluable to her artistic career.



Figure 4: Hatoum, Mona. View of the performance *Under Siege* as part of the group exhibition *Reflections – 9 Women Artists*. 2 October 1982, 3 hours (duration). Aspex Gallery, Portsmouth © Mona Hatoum. Courtesy Aspex Gallery, Portsmouth. Photographed by John McPherson.



Figure 5: Hatoum, Mona. *Them and Us... and Other Divisions*. 1984. Live action with black hood, bucket, brush, red paint, newspapers, and wire mesh. 23 June 1984, 50 mins (duration). Performed at the 2nd International Festival of Performance, South Hill Park Arts Centre, Bracknell, Berkshire. The image features David Medalla on the right and Guy Brett on the left. © Mona Hatoum. Courtesy the artist. Photographed by Robin Morley.

While these four did not collaborate formally altogether, their encounters fostered a shared artistic sensibility that emphasized independent thought and personal subjectivity, transcending both national narratives—Britishness—and overarching discourses on postcolonialism or “black artist” and “Third World arts.” This constellation presented expanded possibilities for negotiating “transnationalism” as both perspective and artistic method in Britain between the 1960s and 1980s. Known for their stance against the endemic racism and discrimination in British art institutions, this constellation provided Hatoum with like-minded individuals who made her feel less isolated. It was at this juncture that she found in Araeen’s conceptual framework a verbal language to define the issues she had been grappling with concerning the notions of “Third World arts” and the “black artist.”

Rasheed Araeen’s definitions of these concepts were intrinsically connected to the political and social dimensions of the category “Black British”—a category with significance beyond the art world.³⁰ This classification emerged partly from massive labour organizing efforts in the 1980s protecting immigrant workers recruited from South Asia and the Caribbean to rebuild British manufacturing, who upon arrival faced treatment as second-class citizens.³¹ Because this “Black British” category actively drove political demands, it resonated powerfully within the art world as well, representing “other artists” organizing against colonial power structures.

“Third World” and *Third Text* as a Third Place: Alternative Spaces of Artistic Resistance

During the 1980s, class struggle and worker organization in Britain provided critical historical context for artists of colour, establishing frameworks for racial confrontation that transcended purely aesthetic concerns. The concept of a “third place”—neither fully integrated into the mainstream art world nor limited to ethnic community art—emerged as a vital alternative space where artists like Hatoum could develop work that challenged colonial power structures while engaging with western artistic traditions.

While neither Hatoum nor Araeen were directly involved in grass-roots political movements or resided in Brixton—an area where youth of colour had risen against systemic police brutality—their artistic practices were deeply informed by political consciousness. Araeen had been active in the Black Panther Movement since the 1970s, a connection that significantly shaped his approach to art and cultural activism. This political engagement manifested in his work with the Brixton community,³² particularly through the Brixton Art Gallery (BAG),³³ where both he and

30. Paul Gilroy, *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Hutchinson, 1987).

31. While Gilroy provides the broader theoretical framework for understanding the cultural politics of race in Britain, the assertion about labour organizing efforts specifically can be read in Ambalavaner Sivanandan’s work: “From Resistance to Rebellion: Asian and Afro-Caribbean Struggles in Britain,” *Race & Class* 23, no. 2-3 (1981): 111–52, which documents in detail how these immigrant communities organized politically against discrimination in the workplace and society at large.

32. Collective, “Rasheed Araeen,” in *Roadworks*, exhibition catalogue, London, Brixton Art Gallery, 18 May–8 June 1985 (London: Brixton Art Gallery, 1985), n.p.

33. The Brixton Art Gallery was housed in three railway arches on Atlantic Road in Brixton’s commercial district. Operated by the Brixton Artists Collective—a limited company and registered charity—the gallery received funding from Lambeth Council and the Greater London Council (GLC), with subsidized rent from the British Rail Property Board. Its democratic governance structure allowed any artist to participate in decision-making. The gallery hosted diverse exhibitions, including annual Members Shows featuring approximately two

Hatoum collaborated with the collective between 1984 and 1986. These connections represented more than professional associations; they were strategic alliances in creating counter-institutional spaces where marginalized artists could present work outside the white-dominated mainstream.

On 23 March 1984, the Brixton Artists Collective (BAC) invited Hatoum to participate in the *Multiples* exhibition—a showcase specifically designed for serially produced works including photographs, prints, videos, and posters. Her contribution, “*Under Siege*” Summer 1982. (Series One), comprised photographic documentation of her earlier performance at the London Film-Makers Co-op (fig. 3).³⁴ This marked her first engagement with art spaces explicitly organized around racial politics. Araeen was similarly invited to participate in the second open exhibition organized by Creation for Liberation (CfL)³⁵ from 17 July to 8 August 1984, where he presented *How Could One Paint a Self-Portrait?* (1978–79),³⁶ a work directly addressing the complexities of identity in a postcolonial context.

The following year, both artists deepened their engagement with marginalized communities through participation in *Roadworks* (18 May–8 June 1985). This initiative, organized by artist Stefan Szczelkun (b. 1952), deliberately positioned artistic interventions outside conventional gallery contexts, bringing them directly to Brixton’s predominantly black working-class neighbourhood.³⁷ In one documented performance, Hatoum walked barefoot through Brixton’s streets with heavy Dr. Martens boots—footwear symbolically associated with police authority and skinhead subculture—tethered to her ankles (fig. 6, top left). This created a powerful visual metaphor juxtaposing vulnerability with oppressive power, making visible the everyday violence experienced by racialized communities. In a companion performance with Szczelkun, both artists appeared barefoot, dressed in black with mouths sealed by tape, enacting a sequence wherein they alternately outlined each other’s prone bodies with white markings reminiscent of crime scene demarcations—a powerful commentary on the criminalization of black bodies in British society (fig. 6, bottom right).

hundred artists utilizing its extensive wall and floor space. This grassroots arts venue exemplified community-driven cultural initiatives in 1980s London. See the Brixton Art Gallery Archive by Andrew Hurman, accessed 17 April 2025, <https://brixton50.co.uk/>.

34. See Andrew Hurman, “Multiples – Photography, Xerox & Edition-Based Media,” catalogue of the Brixton Art Gallery Archive, accessed 17 April 2025, <https://brixton50.co.uk/multiples/>.
35. *Creation for Liberation* was a black artists’ cultural organization based on Railton Road, Brixton, established in the 1980s to support black artists and confront institutional racism in the arts in Britain.
36. See Andrew Hurman, “Creation for Liberation: 2nd Open Exhibition by Black Artists,” catalogue of the Brixton Art Gallery Archive, accessed 17 April 2025, <https://brixton50.co.uk/creation-for-liberation/>.
37. “... because the Brixton community is predominantly a Black community, I found myself in this rare situation of creating work which although personal/autobiographical, had immediate relevance to the community it was addressing. I found that I was working ‘for’ the people in the streets of Brixton rather than ‘against’ the indifferent, often hostile audiences I usually encounter in the art world.” In Diamond, “Performance,” 49.

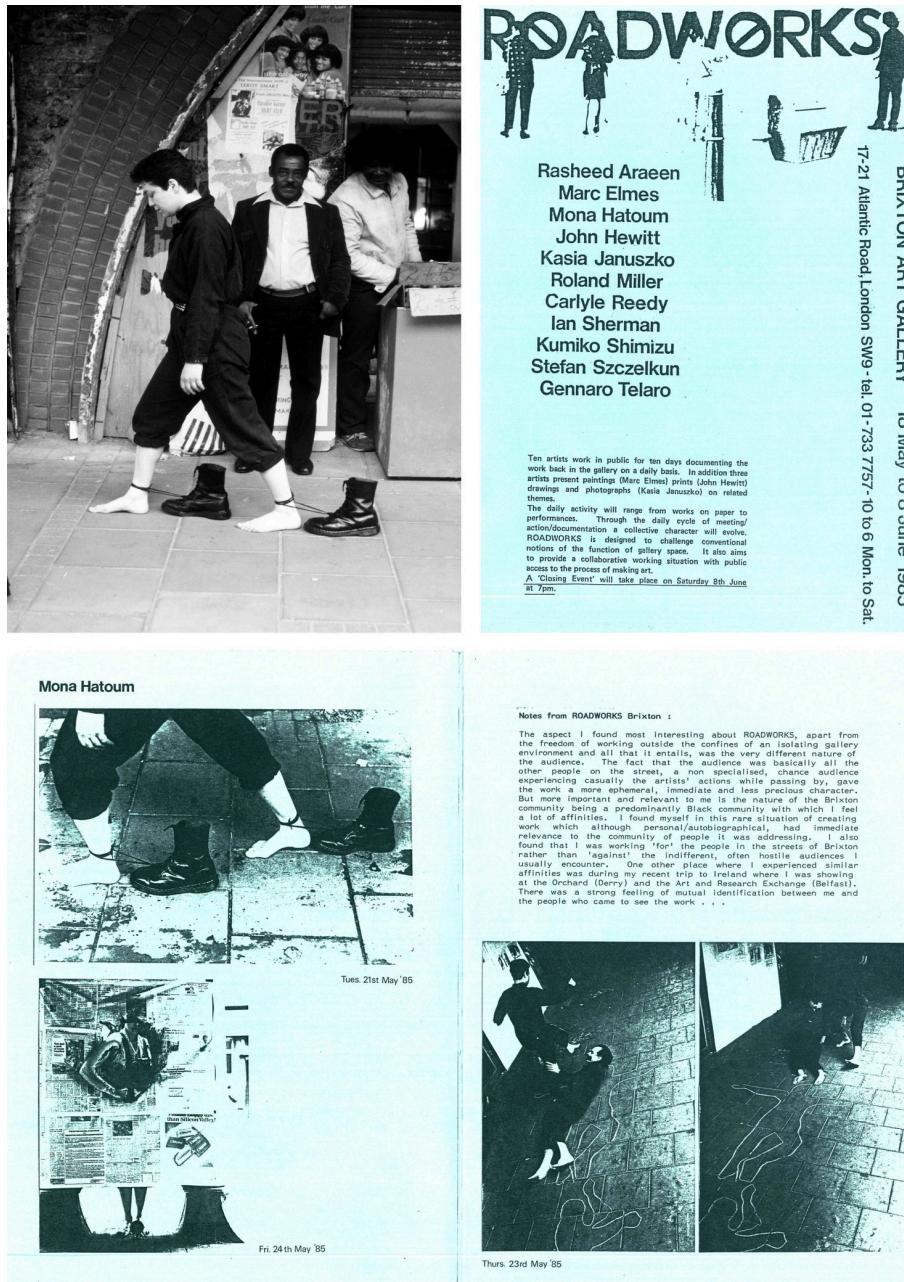


Figure 6: Top left: Hatoum, Mona. *Roadworks*. 1985. Live action with Dr. Martens boots, performed in Brixton, 21 May 1985, London © Mona Hatoum. Courtesy Brixton Art Gallery. Photographed by Patrick Gilbert; the following images are from Collective, ed., *Roadworks*, exhibition catalogue, London, Brixton Art Gallery, 18 May–8 June 1985 (London: Brixton Art Gallery, 1985), n.p.; top right: Catalogue cover listing participating artists and exhibition concept; bottom right: Hatoum's reflections on engaging with Brixton's "chance audience" and predominantly black community, alongside documentation of her collaborative performance with Stefan Szczelkun, 23 May 1985, London; bottom left: Hatoum, Mona. Street performance. 21 May 1985. London © Mona Hatoum and Stefan Szczelkun. Courtesy the artists.

A pivotal moment in this developing “third space” came in March 1986, when funding cuts from the Greater London Council (GLC) forced the cancellation of the proposed *Essential Black Art* exhibition. In response, Araeen quickly organized an alternative exhibition titled *Third World Within* at BAG (fig. 7), where Hatoum hung the artworks, as Araeen was away at his father’s funeral.³⁸ Running from 31 March to 22 April 1986, this exhibition showcased works by Afro-Asian artists in the UK, including Hatoum’s video *So Much I Want to Say* (1983)—a work that powerfully expressed the silencing of marginalized voices through a series of images showing a woman’s face with male hands covering her mouth. The exhibition aligned with the objectives of Black Umbrella, an organization Araeen established in 1984 to document the overlooked contributions of black/Afro-Asian contemporary artists to British culture. This initiative represented more than mere documentation; it was an act of historical intervention against systematic erasure and division.



Figure 7: Scan of the Brixton Art Gallery’s monthly newsletter showing people attending the *Third World Within* private view. From top left to bottom right: Saleem Arif plus unknown, Houria Niati, unknown plus Kumiko Shimizu, Lubaina Himid plus unknown, unknown plus Teri Bullen (one of the co-directors of Brixton Art Gallery), Merdelle J-Irving plus unknown. Date unknown. Courtesy Andrew Hurman and the Brixton Art Gallery archives. Photographer unknown.

In his accompanying press release for *Third World Within*, Araeen offered a critical redefinition of “Black Art” that would prove influential. He argued that it was not merely art produced by black people, but rather a specific contemporary art practice emerging directly from the struggle

38. Andrew Hurman, email correspondence with Joan Grandjean, 24 June 2025.

against racism and explicitly addressing the human condition of black people in western society.³⁹ This definition provided a theoretical framework that transcended essentialist notions of identity, focusing instead on political positioning and critical engagement.

It was within this intellectual and political framework that Hatoum situated herself in the latter half of the 1980s. Her involvement extended beyond exhibition participation to active theoretical engagement through Araeen's journal *Third Text*, which sought to create a "third space" of critical discourse outside mainstream art publications. Her membership—alongside David A. Bailey, Guy Brett, Mahmood Jamal, Gavin Jantjes, Sarat Maharaj, and Partha Mitter—on the editorial advisory committee positioned her inside a platform developing postcolonial art theory. In the journal's landmark first issue in 1987, Hatoum contributed the article "Body & Text," articulating her artistic approach in conversation with Araeen's critical thinking (fig. 8).⁴⁰ This theoretical contribution demonstrated how her practice was not merely responding to identity-based expectations but actively reshaping the discourse around art and politics.

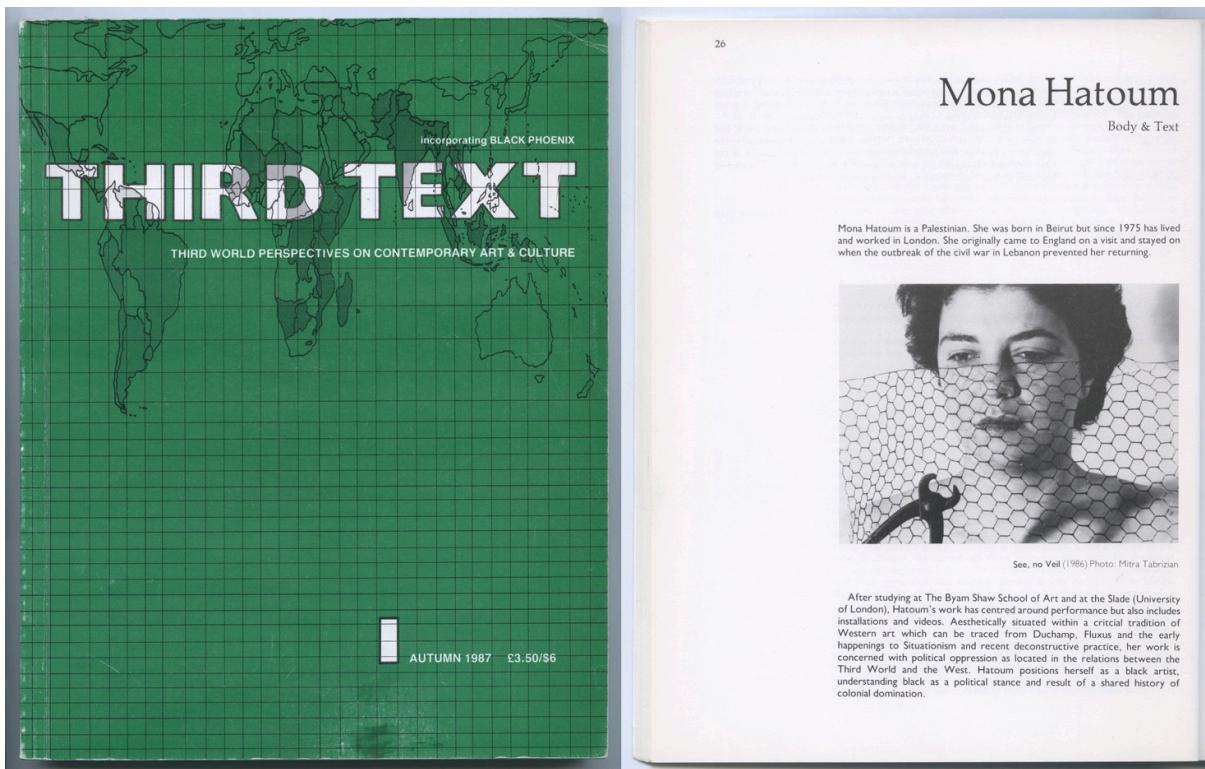


Figure 8: Left: Cover of *Third Text* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1987), edited by Rasheed Araeen; right: extract of Mona Hatoum's article, "Body & Text," *Third Text* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1987): 26–33, here 26 © Mona Hatoum and *Third Text*. Courtesy the artist and *Third Text*.

39. See Andrew Hurman, "Third World Within: AfroAsian Artists in Britain," press release and catalogue of the Brixton Art Gallery Archive, accessed 17 April 2025, <https://brixton50.co.uk/third-world-within/>.

40. Mona Hatoum, "Body & Text," *Third Text* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1987): 26.

Hatoum's artistic strategy during this period was sophisticated and multi-layered. She positioned her work within the lineage of western avant-garde movements—citing influences from "Duchamp, Fluxus and the early happenings to Situationism and recent deconstructive practice"⁴¹ (fig. 8)—while simultaneously reframing these traditions through the lens of postcolonial critique. Rather than simply adapting western artistic languages, she transformed them by centring the political dynamics of oppression, particularly the complex power relations between the Global South and the west. This approach represented not mimicry but radical reinterpretation and critique. By simultaneously engaging with western artistic traditions while identifying as a black artist as defined by Araeen, Hatoum occupied a unique position that allowed her to challenge established hierarchies from both within and outside dominant structures. This dual positioning enabled her to critically redefine British modern and contemporary art in a postcolonial context while also contributing to political and feminist art discourses.

Araeen's own experience illuminated the necessity of this strategic positioning. Prior to advocating for an emancipatory arts movement across the Third World, he had been denied recognition as a minimalist sculptor and excluded from the British artistic sphere due to his non-western origins.⁴² This exclusion led to his work being interpreted solely through the lens of his cultural background rather than in conversation with the western minimalist tradition it clearly engaged with.⁴³ Hatoum's alignment with Araeen's critical framework helped her navigate similar potential pitfalls in the predominantly white British art world of the 1980s.

Her conscious adoption of the term "black artist" functioned not as a limiting label but as a political stance challenging racial hierarchies in art institutions. This identification served multiple strategic purposes: it provided a protective framework against potential marginalization while simultaneously creating space for a critique of systemic racism in the contemporary art world. By rejecting narrow definitions based on national or ethnic origins while embracing political solidarity, Hatoum positioned herself within a broader, more nuanced artistic discourse that effectively dismantled restrictive categorizations of "ethnic art" and "primitivism."

Through these strategic associations, Hatoum participated in two additional landmark exhibitions curated by Araeen. *The Essential Black Art*, running from 5 February to 5 March 1988, at the Chisenhale Gallery, showcased her work alongside other significant artists including Piper, Biswas, and Himid. The exhibition's catalogue featured Hatoum's 1984 performance *Variation on Discord and Divisions* on its cover—a work that powerfully addressed fragmentation, conflict, and the politics of representation (fig. 9).⁴⁴ This visual prominence underscored her growing significance within black artists.

41. Hatoum, "Body & Text," 26.

42. Rasheed Araeen, *Making Myself Visible* (London: Kala, 1984).

43. Rasheed Araeen, "How I Discovered my Oriental Soul," 85–102.

44. Rasheed Araeen, *The Essential Black Art*, exhibition catalogue, London, Chisenhale Gallery, 5 February–5 March 1988 (London: Chisenhale Gallery and Black Umbrella, 1988).



Figure 9: Left: Invitation card for the exhibition *The Essential Black Art*, curated by Rasheed Araeen, Chisenhale Gallery, London, 5 February–5 March 1988; right: cover of Rasheed Araeen, *The Essential Black Art*, exhibition catalogue, London, Chisenhale Gallery, 5 February–5 March 1988 (London: Chisenhale Gallery and Black Umbrella, 1988), featuring Hatoum's 1984 performance *Variation on Discord and Divisions* © Chisenhale Gallery and the artist. Courtesy the artist.

The Essential Black Art served as precursor to Araeen's most ambitious curatorial project, *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain*, presented at the Hayward Gallery from 29 November 1989 to 4 February 1990, where Hatoum presented three videos—*So Much I Want to Say* (1983), *Changing Parts* (1984), and *Measures of Distance* (1988)—and *Over My Dead Body* (1988), a metro billboard project hung outside the Hayward Gallery (fig. 10).⁴⁵ As the first comprehensive retrospective of British African, Caribbean, and Asian modernism in a major institution, the exhibition represented a significant intervention in British art history. However, its polarized critical reception—simultaneously attracting both derision and acclaim—revealed the deep-seated resistance to integrating these artists into mainstream historical narratives.⁴⁶

Despite its groundbreaking nature, *The Other Story* did not immediately transform institutional practices. Only in recent decades have scholars begun systematically interrogating the meaning of “black” as a political category and engaging meaningfully with the historical stakes involved. This newer scholarship has illuminated important ideological divisions within British Black Arts movements: between Black Power art (with its explicit political agenda serving black communities), Third World solidarity models advocating cross-communal organization against colonial structures and broader cultural affirmative approaches embracing all artistic production by black creators without imposing political requirements.⁴⁷

45. Araeen, *The Other Story*. The show iterated at Wolverhampton Art Gallery from 10 March to 22 April 1990; and Manchester City Art Gallery and Cornerhouse, from 5 May to 10 June 1990.

46. See for example Amanda Sebestyen, Homi Bhabha and Sutapa Biswas, Reviews of *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain, 1981–1989*, curated by Rasheed Araeen, in Correia, *What Is Black Art?*, 288–300.

47. See the history of these divisions in Sophie Orlando, “British Black Art,” in *British Black Art*, 18–42.



Figure 10: Installation view at Hayward Gallery, London, 1989, featuring Hatoum, Mona. *Over My Dead Body*. 1988. Black and white billboard. 204 × 304 cm. © Mona Hatoum. Courtesy the artist.

A revealing aspect of this complex landscape emerges when examining how certain exhibition spaces were treated in artists' professional narratives. According to Szczelkun, both Hatoum and Araeen notably omitted the BAG from their official curricula vitae despite their significant involvement with the gallery.⁴⁸ This interpretation appears questionable, as Hatoum has explained that the BAG was consistently included in her extensive CVs, and omissions in certain catalogues were due to space constraints and editorial decisions to focus on her installation work from 1989 onwards.⁴⁹ However, Araeen's landmark *The Other Story* exhibition made no mention of his earlier *Third World Within* show.⁵⁰ Beyond the facts, this episode illuminates the precarious position

48. "I should mention that both Mona and Rasheed, who quite quickly became well-known and did well after their Brixton shows, both omitted to list Brixton Gallery on their CVs. Such as the big show that Rashid [sic] organized at Hayward in 1989—'The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-war Britain'. It shows you the kind of difficulty we were facing in terms of acceptance. People felt that because there was no formal selection committee and they just put themselves forward for shows, the art was not seen as having that official quality assurance!" In Stefan Szczelkun, "Panel 3 – Archive and Contexts (Followed by a Discussion)," plenary session at the symposium Activating Brixton Art Gallery, 1983–86: Archives and Memories, University of Westminster, London, 5 June 2010, proceedings updated June 2023, accessed 21 April 2025, <https://stefan-szczelkun.blogspot.com/2012/05/activating-brixton-art-gallery-1983-86.html>.

49. Mona Hatoum, email correspondence with Joan Grandjean, 16 November 2025, and notably in her Tate retrospective catalogue. See Archer et al., *Mona Hatoum*, 213.

50. Kate Fowle, "Missing History," in *Rasheed Araeen*, ed. Nick Aikens (Gateshead: BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art; Moscow: Garage Museum of Contemporary Art; Geneva: MAMCO, Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain; Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2017), 298.

of alternative exhibition spaces within art world hierarchies. Without conventional selection committees—where artists instead self-nominated for exhibitions—these venues apparently carried less professional capital despite their cultural significance. These dynamics reveal how deeply entrenched notions of institutional validation can render important platforms for diverse artistic voices effectively invisible in official histories.

Hatoum's own reflection on these dynamics, articulated in her 1987 statement, offers crucial insight into her strategic navigations:

There is also the issue of community arts. There is a lot of pressure on Black artists to work within their own community. We are being told, "The most useful contribution you can make is to work with your own 'ethnic' art within your own 'ethnic' community." In other words, "Leave the mainstream art space for the 'more important' Western white male figures to project their fantasies in." It seems to me that this is a deliberate attempt to keep Black people in their place. What I'm hearing then is marginalization, and there is an implicit racism in this attitude. The implication is that we do not have full creative potential and we are not capable of participating in art activity at all levels. I am not saying that there is something wrong with community arts, but it will never be my main area of activity. I would like to use every platform available to me to fight for access to those spaces that are denied me.⁵¹

This statement crystallizes Hatoum's refusal to be confined to prescribed artistic territories. Her insistence on accessing all platforms—from community spaces to mainstream institutions—reflects a sophisticated understanding of power within the art world. Rather than accepting a binary choice between assimilation and separation, Hatoum carved out a third position that maintained critical distance while engaging with dominant institutions. This approach would prove foundational to her subsequent artistic development as she transitioned toward installation work in the late 1980s and early 1990s, eventually achieving international recognition while maintaining her political commitments.

Hatoum's navigation of these complex terrains during this formative period demonstrates how the creation of "third spaces"—whether through alternative galleries, critical journals, or strategic identifications—provided crucial platforms for artistic development outside restrictive categories. Her experience illuminates not just personal artistic evolution but broader structures of exclusion and resistance that continue to shape contemporary art discourse. By understanding these historical dynamics, we gain deeper insight into how artists from marginalized positions have actively shaped artistic traditions rather than merely responding to them—creating alternative spaces that transform the very meaning of contemporary art.

51. Diamond, "Performance," 50.

Conclusion: Reframing Mona Hatoum's Artistic Trajectory in 1980s Britain beyond Categorization

Through the employment of a monographic approach, this article has traced the multifaceted complexity of Hatoum's artistic evolution throughout the 1980s. This detailed portrait constitutes a critical microhistory that challenges established narratives, revealing precisely how her formative experiences shaped the conceptual foundations of her subsequent international practice.

Hatoum's artistic development emerges as far more complex than conventional narratives suggest. Her formative period in Beirut's experimental artistic milieu—particularly through her interactions with spaces like Contact Gallery—provided crucial conceptual, international, and political groundwork that predated her London training. Similarly, her engagements in Canada from 1983 onwards represented transformative opportunities that allowed her to develop her distinctive voice within new institutional frameworks. By recognizing these multiple, interconnected centres of influence, we can challenge Eurocentric art historical frameworks that position London as the exclusive catalyst for her artistic maturation, instead revealing a transnational trajectory where her practice evolved through dialogue across diverse geographic and cultural contexts.

Revisiting Hatoum's participation in *Third Text*, the BAG, and Araeen's exhibitions illuminates not only Brixton's significance as a nexus for politically engaged art practice but also chronicles the early collaborations between Hatoum and Araeen that would prove influential. This historical contextualization reveals how terms such as "Third World," "British Black Arts," and "Black British" underwent continuous redefinition during this decade, reflecting the fluidity of cultural identities within Britain's postcolonial artistic landscape. Notably, Hatoum's critical positioning as a "black artist" in these contexts has been systematically marginalized within art historical narratives—a neglect evident even within British black artists' discourses and in her subsequent artistic statements.

Hatoum's engagement transcended mere affiliation with the British Black Arts movement. She strategically positioned herself within a precisely delineated symbolic space—a networked constellation of intellectual and artistic solidarity. Through nuanced associations with figures like Araeen, she navigated the complex terrain of institutional critique not by subscribing to a monolithic collective identity, but by cultivating a sophisticated, interconnected discourse of resistance and artistic autonomy. This distinctive positioning explains her placement among the "Other Artists" in Himid's conceptual mapping of the movement (fig. 1).

The trajectory of Hatoum's career underwent a decisive transformation in 1989 when she secured a position as senior fellow in fine art at the Cardiff Institute of Higher Education. This institutional appointment marked what she characterized as "a full stop" in her performance practice, catalysing a return to object-making that would propel her from the margins of British art into its mainstream.⁵² The security of a regular salary and access to a dedicated studio space for the first time liberated her from the financial precarity that had constrained her earlier work. This shift coincided with a growing disillusionment with performance art, prompting her to reconnect with

52. Rachel Cooke, "Mona Hatoum: 'It's All Luck. I Feel Things Happen Accidentally,'" *The Guardian*, 17 April, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/apr/17/mona-hatoum-interview-installation-artist-tate-modern-exhibition>.

the conceptual frameworks and minimalist language that had initially shaped her practice. This strategic reorientation proved remarkably effective in establishing her institutional recognition: her first solo museum exhibition at the Pompidou Centre followed in 1994, a Turner Prize nomination in 1995, and her inaugural show at Tate Britain in 2000. This rapid ascent from marginal performance artist to internationally acclaimed contemporary one demonstrates how Hatoum's nuanced navigation of artistic and institutional contexts ultimately enabled her to achieve the visibility and influence that had remained elusive during her more explicitly political performance period. While maintaining personal connections to Lebanon, her artistic engagement with the region's contemporary scene only materialized around the late 1990s and early 2000s, when she began to connect with local artists like Akram Zaatari (b. 1966) and Walid Raad (b. 1967) when they participated in the Ayloul Festival in Beirut in 2000.

The 1980s, while characterized by resistance to far-right policies, also saw a problematic tendency to fetishize works associated with the British Black Arts movement, often reducing them to mere documents of the era⁵³ or simplistic expressions of non-white identity.⁵⁴ Hatoum's practice fundamentally resists such reductive categorization by refusing confinement to singular narratives, categories, or geographies. This nuanced understanding not only enriches our appreciation of her artistic development but also broadens our conception of how artistic movements and identities formed across borders during this pivotal period, inviting a more complex framework for understanding transnational artistic trajectories within postcolonial contexts.

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53. Eddie Chambers, "Re-reading Black British Artists' Practices: Black Artists and the Fetishization of the 1980s," lecture at the Knight Foundation Art + Research Center, 13 May 2021, posted 8 November 2021, by the Institute of Contemporary Art Miami, YouTube, 1:11:38, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZMbO-JvEQQ8>.

54. Rasheed Araeen, "The Success and the Failure of the Black Arts Movement," in Bailey, Baucom, and Boyce, *Shades of Black*, 21–34.

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About the Author

Joan Grandjean is an art historian specializing in contemporary art from the Arab geocultural space. He earned his PhD from the University of Geneva, focusing on “Arab futurities” in contemporary art, exploring how artists from the region envision and construct imagined futures. From 2017 to 2024, Grandjean served as an academic assistant at the University of Geneva before joining the University of Rennes 2, France, as a teaching and research fellow at the department of Visual Arts and associate member of the research unit Practices and Theories of Contemporary Art (PTAC EA 7472). His research examines the intersections of contemporary art, globalization, and speculative imaginaries. His notable publications include co-editing the double issue “Photographie et Politique” for *Tumultes* journal (2023) and the exhibition catalogue *Arabofuturs: Science-fiction et nouveaux imaginaires* (Paris: Institut du monde arabe, 2024). He is an active participant in the ARVIMM research group in Paris, France, and co-founded the Manazir platform in Switzerland.