THE ART OF DISPLACEMENT: MONA HATOUM'S LOGIC OF IRRECONCILABLES*

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Consider the door handle's place as you stand before the entrance to a room. You know that as you reach forward, your hand will move unerringly to one side or another of the door. But then you don't encounter the handle, curl your fingers around it, and push forward because... it has actually been placed two feet above your head in the middle of the door, perched intransigently up there where it eludes your ready grasp, cannot fulfil its normal function, and does not announce what it is doing there. From that beginning dislocation others necessarily follow. The door may be pushed open on only one of its hinges. You must therefore enter the room sideways and at an angle but only after your coat or skirt is caught and torn by a nail designed to do that every time the room is entered. Inside, you come upon a carpet of undulating curves, which on close examination reveal themselves to be intestines frozen into plastic stillness. The kitchen to your right is barred by minuscule steel wires strung across the door, preventing entrance. Gazing through those wires you see a table covered with colanders, large metal spoons, grinders, sifters, squeezers and egg beaters, connected to each other by a wire that ends up connected to a buzzing light-bulb that flutters off and on disturbingly at random intervals. A bed in the left corner is without a mattress, its legs akilter in a grotesque rubbery wilt. A mysterious tracing of white powder forms a strange symmetrical pattern on the floor beneath the bare metal springs of a baby's crib next to it. The television set intones a scramble of jumbled discursive sounds, while a camera imperturbably emits animated images of an unknown person's innards. All this is designed to recall and disturb at the same time.

Whatever else this room may be, it is certainly not meant to be lived in, although it seems deliberately, and perhaps even perversely to insist that it once was intended for that purpose: a home, or a place where one might have felt in place, at ease and at rest, surrounded by the ordinary objects which together constitute the feeling, if not the actual state, of being at home. Next door, we find a huge grid of metal bunks, multiplied so grotesquely as to banish even the idea of rest, much less actual sleep. In another room, the notion of storage is blocked by dozens of what look like empty lockers sealed into themselves by wire mesh, yet garishly illuminated by naked bulbs.

An abiding locale is no longer possible in the world of Mona Hatoum's art which, like the strangely awry rooms she introduces us into, articulates so fundamental a dislocation as to assault not only one's memory of what once was, but how logical and possible, how close and yet so distant from the original abode, this new elaboration of familiar space and objects really is. Familiarity and strangeness are locked together in the oddest way, adjacent and irreconcilable at the same time. For not only does one feel that one cannot re-

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turn to the way things were, but there also is a sense of just how acceptable and 'normal' these oddly distorted objects have become, just because they remain very close to what they have left behind. Beds still look like beds, for instance, and a wheelchair most definitely resembles a wheelchair: it is just that the bed's springs are unusably bare, or that the wheelchair leans forward as if it is about to tip over, while its handles have been transformed either into a pair of sharp knives or serrated, unwelcoming edges. Domesticity is thus transformed into a series of menacing and radically inhospitable objects whose new and presumably non-domestic use is waiting to be defined. They are unredeemed things whose distortions cannot be sent back for correction or reworking, since the old address is unreachably there and yet has been annulled.

This peculiar predicament might be characterised, I think, as the difference between Jonathan Swift and T.S. Eliot, one the great angry logician of minute dislocation unrelieved by charity, the other the eloquent mourner of what once was and can, by prayer and ritual, be restored. In their vision, both men begin solidly, unexceptionally from home: Lemuel Gulliver, Swift's last major persona, from England; the narrator of Eliot's poem 'East Coker' sets out from home as a place 'where one starts from'. For Gulliver the passage of time culminates in a shipwreck after which he fetches up on a beach, tied down by tiny ropes affixed to his hair and body, pinioned to the ground, immobilized by six-inch human like creatures whom he could have wiped out by his superior strength but can't because (a) he is unable to move and (b) their tiny arrows are capable of blinding him. So he lives among them as a normal man except that he is too big, they too small, and he cannot abide them any more than they can him. Three disconcerting voyages later, Gulliver discovers that his humanity is unregenerate, irreconcilable with decency and morality, but there is really no going back to what had once been his home, even though in actual fact he does return to England but faints because the smell of his wife and children as they embrace him is too awful to bear. By contrast, Eliot offers a totally redeemable home after the first one expires. In the beginning, he says, 'houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended, are removed, destroyed'. Later, however, they can be returned to 'for a further union, a deeper communion/ Through the dark cold and the empty desolation'. The sorrow and loss are real, but the sanctity of home remains beneath the surface, a place to which one finally accedes through love and prayer. In 'Little Gidding', the last of the elegiac *Four Quartets* ('East Coker' is the second), Eliot borrows from Dame Julian of Norwich the line 'all manner of thing shall be well' to affirm that after much sorrow and waste, love and the Incarnation will restore us to a sense of 'the complete consort dancing together', a vision that shows how 'the fire and the rose are one'. By contrast with Eliot, Swift's profanity is incurable, just as the dissociation of Gulliver's sense of homely comfort can never be made whole or what it

once was. The only consolation—if it is one—is the ability he retains to detail, number and scrupulously register what now stocks his state of mind in his former abode. Hippolyte Taine called Swift a great businessman of literature, someone to whom objects no matter how peculiar and distorted can be carefully placed on a shelf, in a space, in a book or image. In Mona Hatoum's relentless catalogue of disaffected, dislocated, oddly deformed objects, there is a similar sense of focusing on what is there without expressing much interest in the ambition to rescue the object from its strangeness or, more importantly, trying to forget or shake off the memory of how nice it once was. On the contrary, its essential niceness—say, the carpet made of pins, or the blocks of soap pushed together to form a continuous surface onto which a map is drawn with red glass beads—sticks out as a refractory part of the dislocation. A putative use value is eerily retained in the new dispensation, but no instructions, no 'how-to' directions are provided: memory keeps insisting that these objects were known to us, but somehow aren't any more, even though memory clings to them relentlessly. There is nothing of Eliot's sacred discipline here. This is a secular world, unpardoned, and curiously unforgiving, stable, down-to-earth. Objecthood dug in without a key to help us understand or open what seems to be locked in there. Unsurprisingly then, *Lili (stay) put*, is the name of one of Hatoum's brilliantly titled works.

Her work is the presentation of identity as unable to identify with itself, but nevertheless grappling the notion (perhaps only the ghost) of identity to itself. Thus is exile figured and plotted in the objects she creates. Her works enact the paradox of dispossession as it takes possession of its place in the world, standing firmly in workaday space for spectators to see and somehow survive what glistens before them. No one has put the Palestinian experience in visual terms so austerely and yet so playfully, so compellingly and at the same moment so allusively. Her installations, objects and performances impress themselves on the viewer's awareness with curiously self-effacing ingenuity which is provocatively undermined, nearly cancelled and definitively reduced by the utterly humdrum, local and unspectacular materials (hair, steel, soap, marbles, rubber, wire, string, etc.) that she uses so virtuosically. In another age her works might have been made of silver or marble, and could have taken on the status of sublime ruins or precious fragments placed before us to recall our mortality and the precarious humanity we share with each other. In the age of migrants, curfews, identity cards, refugees, exiles, massacres, camps and fleeing civilians, however, they are the uncooptable mundane instruments of a defiant memory facing itself and its pursuing or oppressing others implacably, marked forever by changes in everyday materials and objects that permit no return or real repatriation, yet unwilling to let go of the past that they carry along with them like some silent catastrophe that goes on and on without fuss or rhetorical bluster.

Hatoum's art is hard to bear (like the refugee's world, which is full of grotesque structures that bespeak excess as well as paucity), yet very necessary to see as an art that travesties the idea of a single homeland. Better disparity and dislocation than reconciliation under duress of subject and object; better a lucid exile than sloppy, sentimental homecomings; better the logic of dissociation than an assembly of compliant dunces. A belligerent intelligence is always to be preferred over what conformity offers, no matter how unfriendly the circumstances and unfavourable the outcome. The point is that the past cannot be entirely recuperated from so much power arrayed against it on the other side: it can only be restated in the form of an object without a conclusion, or a final place, transformed by choice and conscious effort into something simultaneously different, ordinary, and irreducibly other and the same, taking place together; an object that offers neither rest nor respite.