Mona Hatoum  (1952. Beirut)

is a lebanese-Palestinian (by birth) artist who lives and works in London.

Apart from my own personal deep interest for Hatoum , the vast feauters provided by this choice was highly considered as well :

Firstly she’s from here -middle east- , A woman who gets world famous through her strong work of art which is not at all limited to the boundaries of her feminine
gender, although many of her artworks are seriously engaged in women’s issues.

And by this, I mean the technical strength of her production which roots in her interest for minimalism (quiet a men’s movement derives from the reductive aspects of Modernism, trying to deemotionalise the work of art). But combining this strict façade of presentation with very witty, humorous, even contradictory and conflicted subjects (in both meaning and etymology) is her point of power:

“I was completely taken in by Minimal and Conceptual Art”.

She is a multidisciplinary artist who works in almost all media from photography and sculpture, to performance and installation.

Among several important issues, body and it’s vulnerability is of a remarkable significance to her, often acting as a metaphor for social struggle, and arguably
brings political questions (particularly those concerning gender politics) to the fore.

That’s why I choose these three works related to a female, a male and a non-gendered body:
Corps étranger

Video installation with cylindrical wooden structure, video projector, video player, amplifier and four speakers, 1994
One of her most important works about the significance of the body.

An endoscopic camera explores the surface of the artist’s body and suddenly enters through various orifices to explore the inner labyrinth of the body. These repeated intrusions into every orifices are seen as a visceral journey. The alien eye presents seductively beautiful yet horrifying landscapes, cavities and tunnels of tissue and blood red flesh.

The French title of this installation, which translates as “Foreign Body,” conveys a double hint:
1- the spectator's involvement - an uneasy witness entering the hidden structure –
2- and the camera eye - itself a corps étranger - entering the body –
It also refers simultaneously to the body of an individual foreigner—could be Hatoum herself to any viewer—but also to the
multiple degrees of intrusion into the morphological unknown of the interior, complemented by sound recordings, an audio-visual journal in which all symbolic detachments meet their limits.

To make the video, Hatoum had a doctor insert a tiny endoscopic camera (itself a foreign body) inside her. Even in her early videos and performances she had already experimented the theme of observation and surveilance.
The resulting film combines close-ups of the body's surface, draws a highly magnified map of the human form: traveling from her eye to the inside of her flesh, over the geography of her skin. As the camera moves across living tissue and trails along her skin, it shows the body in
amazing detail: in shades of red and brown and white, wet and dry, highly visceral, and pulsating with life.

The images play on a circular screen set into the floor, while the screen itself is placed inside a wooden cylinder which the viewer must enter.

Corps Étranger turns a woman’s body inside out and puts that interior on display. By closing in on that territory, it forces us to look at the body in an unusual way. As a result, its images cleverly overturn the objectification of the woman’s body pervasive in Western society: you may see every part of a woman in a men’s magazine, but you surely won’t see her capillaries, organs or the inner cavities of her body.
The installation can also be interpreted as a commentary on the veiling of the female body in many Eastern societies. Feminists such as Fatima Mernissi have argued that sexual inequality in Islamic societies is based on a view of the female body as the source of some threatening power, a danger that has to be contained. To neutralize this threat, women must be covered — which is to say dressed, veiled, and secluded.
In Corps Étranger, the ultimate private space becomes public, and the largeness of the images of the female body lends them a frightening power. Yet it would be wrong to say that there is no veil or seclusion here. The cylinder that encloses the video, adds a layer of confinement that the viewer is forced to share; in order to see these images, you must step inside and join the body in its secretive place. You must look down on the images too, since the video, set in the floor, plays at your feet. So the viewer’s position in relation to the work is complicated by its formal elements: you have to examine where you stand.

This subject shift, leaves us with the disturbing feeling that our own bodies are not unaffected by what is happening in the body of another.

Meanwhile we are surrounded by quadrophonic speakers that make it difficult for us, standing there as we are with our own bodies in the middle of it all, to
associate the sounds with the images, and
each viewer’s experience is different,
depending on whether this view into the
body of the opposite sex - again, a corps
étranger - or indeed into the body of another
of the same sex is perceived as fascinating
or repulsive, and also on whether anyone
else - any other corps étranger - is present as
a witness in the room.

The feelings are ineffable. Believe me! I
had this very unique experiment.

Our sense of shock at discovering
something beyond a symbolic order cannot
be expressed or shared in words.
A short video installation focuses on an extreme close up of the moving image of a man’s scrotum. In a darkened room, a video projector shows a moving image on the wall at short distance.

It is a circular detail of a scrotum, just like Wysocka’s “Jewel”, which is also presented in a circular video projection.
The sensible skin is reacting to even minimal changes in temperature, with no relation whatsoever to a pornographic close-up.
This is a male counterpart to Corps étranger. In Testimony there is no penetration. Instead, the view is from the outside and instead of looking down, we look ahead.

In Ancient Rome, men appearing in court would place a hand on one testicle when taking an oath. Hence the title Testimony,
which subtly shifts this memory, to which we are witnesses.

Testimony is a hypnotic piece from which it is hard to tear oneself away.

By isolating this anatomical image on a black background the audience focuses their collective attention as they ask what part of the body they are presented with — although the title may give them a gentle nudge in a particular direction. The viewers silently guess what they see, but refuse to voice their assumptions out of potential embarrassment. Perhaps it is this possibility of embarrassment that Hatoum also wishes the viewer to question. It asks the audience to be in a constant state of uncertainty whilst they ask a series of questions from, ‘What am I looking at?’ to ‘Should I keep my opinions to myself?’ and ‘Should I feel embarrassed about what I see?’ Through such questioning, Hatoum allows the audience to re-examine
themselves, as well as their cultural and political significance.

Sheep ‘s testicle , 1996
Deep Throat (1996)

Table, chair, tablecloths, plate, fork, knife, water glass, monitor and DVD player
Deep Throat without emphasising any gender, blends humour with uneasiness:

on a table set for one, the plate is used to serve up not food, but images from an endoscopic video of the digestive tract of her own body like in Corps Etranger.
But here is no emphasis on any sexes. A general body behaviour which could be any viewer’s, a degenderized body.
Hatoum transforms familiar household objects such as chairs, table, table cloth, plates,... into dangerous, threatening and even alarming objects. She has broadened the materials she used to create her art by using an endoscopic camera for the works ‘Corps étranger’ and ‘Deep Throat’ These installations use the artist’s own body as a landscape for the art.
So much I want to say, 1983
B/W video, sound, 5 minutes.
Kitchen:

Hatoum’s art is located on the border between reality and illusion, where recognizable ordinary objects such as everyday kitchen utensils (with which women have their most daily contacts) are distorted and transformed into unpleasant and even physically dangerous objects. Many of Hatoum’s works are menacing with obviously dangerous connotations.

Indeed, in much of Hatoum’s work, areas of the home we associate with female nurturing and comfort—the kitchen, the bedroom,…—are charged with menace and distortion. The result is a sense of domesticity against itself, of dissonance between the traditional function of the
objects displayed and their materials and execution.

Hatoum uses the 'assisted readymade' in the sense that she minimally alters everyday objects or reproduces them in unlikely materials or, in the case of a readymade enlargement, creates a shift of function or addressee. Hatoum not only touches upon a biographical resistance to the traditional female role, but also addresses the unresolved power struggle between the private and the public, and, with that, the gender issue that is the other side of the same coin.
The grid as a medium of control is explored in *Grater Divide* (2002) in which a Victorian three fold-out cheese grater is scaled up to human dimensions. Here is where a woman might change clothes behind—but is pocked with the holes of a cheese grater, so that the object evokes not privacy but a visceral terror of abrasion.
Here, domesticity at a distance transforms into a threatening menace up closer. The menacing serrated holes of the grater are like camera apertures following the viewer’s every move. The grid’s rigid and precise pattern becomes the viewer’s mental and physical incarceration: there is no central point of reprieve. Its seriality overpowers body and mind.

Kitchen devices are traditionally long-lasting. It was not until the late fifties that they, like shavers and dusters, became electric appliances. Tinged with a nostalgic beauty today, all these things are the low-tech counterparts to more heavily high-tech industrial products.

In all of them Hatoum uses assemblages of household furniture wired up with an audibly active electric current. There are allusions here to minimalism and surrealist humour, hence allowing the audience to connect on an emotional and intellectual level.

Slicer
1999
40 15/16 x 46 1/4 x 36 13/16 in. (104 x 117.5 x 93.5 cm)
Varnished steel and thermoformed plastic

No Way

Hatoum plugged the holes of a strainer and a colander with metal bolts, so that these objects take on the appearance of weapons (a mace and a land mine). According to Hatoum, who made the first of these sculptures during a residency in Jerusalem, the inspiration for these works came to her when she experienced the frequent and
unexpected obstruction of roads by military police in that city. But the connotations evoked by these pieces do not end there. Because they are made from kitchen objects most frequently used by women, No Way and No Way II seem to express a sense of claustrophobia, even deep rage, experienced by women alone.

Home
1999
wood, galvanized steel, stainless steel, electric wire, computerized dimmer unit, amplifier, speakers

Homebound
2000
Dimensions variable
Kitchen utensils, furniture, electric wire, light bulbs, computerised dimmer device, amplifier, speakers

Home (1999), consists of a rectangular table behind a wire fence, cluttered by the same kind of mechanical kitchen implements (colanders, graters, a whisk, a ladle, a grinder) made of gleaming stainless steel. Arrayed on the table, these tools glow with light and buzz with an audible electrical current. They could be a nightmare version of a child’s fantasy—that his toys come to life at night, when he is not present to witness their behavior—or they could be weapons, though it is left to the viewer to imagine how they would be deployed. Home is frightening in the same way that darkness and music are parts of horror movies: a sense of danger infuses the atmosphere, but the exact nature of the threat remains unclear. Regardless, the
danger zone of Home is clearly a domestic area, and therefore one that is feminine. Electrified and behind wire, Home suggests that gender itself may be a dangerous territory, as well as a form of exile.

The contents of the kitchen and bedroom stand in an empty space, behind a wire fence. Though removed from the building that once housed them, these objects are nonetheless situated as they would be inside. Scattered on top of the table lie various utensils: a cheese grater, a sieve, a colander. Lights strung within these utensils brighten and dim and the electrical current that connects them is amplified to a threatening buzz. She cleverly uses electricity to create an atmosphere of threat.
Kefieh,
A small weaving loom in which she has woven pieces of her own hair, an ephemeral grid of hair—a delicate and
unruly material to be woven—, reminiscent of those worn by Palestinians.
Keffieh is an Arab traditional headscarf for men with its characteristic black pattern embroidered (here using long strands of women’s hair creating a strange object full of contradictions, lends this piece a vivid and snakelike animism and a clever manifestation for the history and geopolitical situation of Palestine.

This re-creation of a men’s headdress by women's hair could be read as the symbol of Arab masculinity and machismo.
Through material and form, Hatoum suggests the proximity of female hair and male in order to comment on Arab and Islamic social norms and gender roles. Indeed, the piece questions taboos by feminizing a symbol of masculinity. Hatoum attributes this work to a common expression. Hatoum explains: “I imagined women pulling their hair out in anger and controlling that anger through the patient act of transcribing those same strands of hair into an everyday item of clothing that has become a potent symbol of the Palestinian resistance movement. The act of embroidering can be seen in this case as another language, a kind of quiet protest.”

"Can you for instance imagine a man wearing it with trailing hair?" asks Hatoum. In 'Keffieh' then, she is subtly giving women visibility through both the work's medium and its technique.
Homi Bhabha also gives an interpretation of this enigmatic work:

"The macho style is an externalized response to the powers of domination; but it is also a form of domination turned inward, within the community poised against the presence of women, whose voices are either repressed, or sublimated in the cause of struggle. Hatoum's feminized headscarf reveals this rejection of the place of women
and re-inserts their point of view through the embroidered strands of hair that hang loose beyond the boundary, breaking the pictorial grid of the material in the process of redefining the symbolic surface of political struggle."

The "globalisation" of the Palestinian keffieh and its transformation, in Western societies, to a fashion accessoire, the phenomenon has spread to the Arab world where the keffieh has been adopted by many young men and women with its trendy look (with all
sort of colors and sometimes a modification of the patterns). In the “historical Palestine” for instance, Israeli Jews may wear the “new” keffieh, something unbearable for many Palestinians who see it as another spoliation of their national heritage (as it has been the case before with the hommous and the falafel).

For old people, the rejection of the modernized keffieh transformed in an accessoire à la mode could be less a political question than a “moral” one, as the keffieh has always been traditionally associated to masculine values. In Palestine as in other places, the keffieh is a reliable barometer of the public opinion. After the bombardments of Gaza, the classical keffieh has made a noticeable come back on the shoulders of many stars of the Arab screen as around the neck of many demonstrators in the streets.

Is it still possible for the classical keffieh to
reaffirm itself as the symbol of the Palestinian identity?

Jardin Public
painted wrought iron, wax, pubic hair, 1993
Hatoum has always employed the body and bodily relics as material for art, down to the use of her own hair, a chair sports a neat triangle of pubic hair.

In its punning title (public/pubic) and its clever portrait of the body in an object Jardin Public conjures the Surrealist spirit and wit of Magritte. According to Hatoum, the piece is rooted in the common etymology of public and pubic, referencing the advent of sexual adulthood, and the
concomitant entrance into civic life on the part of an individual.
Jardin Public literally interweaves two apparently opposed, yet foundationally linked concepts.
By displaying publicly what usually remains private, while the same time adding an erotically charged element to an object, it may act to rehabilitate the pubic hair that has been excised from Art History.
An obvious issue for her is “memory and loss” like European artists: german Anselm Kiefer or french Christian Boltanski.

Agnes Thurnauer, Life-size portraits, 2007-2009
ELLES exhibition,
Women artists in the collection of the Musée national d'art moderne Centre de création industrielle (MNAM CCI)
It is not about freeing ourselves from painting and the constraints of the canvas: on the contrary, all of this is born of a pictorial concern, [...] to represent the absence of female artists in art history until the 20th century. Yet to represent means to render present by giving form. The entire idea of painting depends on this notion of representation.”