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Performance: And interview with Mona Hatoum

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P E R F O R M A N C E

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MONA HATOUM

MONA HATOUM is a Palestinian video and performance artist who resides in London, England. She has developed live performances for many gallery and community venues in England, North America and Holland. **Variations on Discord and Divisions, The Negotiating Table, and Changing Parts** are some of her performance and video works developed for Canadian audiences. Her video productions include live interaction with the audience and experimental works. Hatoum's works center on issues of war and displacement. In this interview, she speaks with FUSE writer, **SARA DIAMOND**.

Sara: Where are you living and working now?

Mona: I'm a Palestinian. I was born and brought up in Beirut and I lived there until 1975 when I went to London for a visit. That was my first trip to Europe, and I was stranded there because the civil war broke out at that point. So I have been living and working in London for the last 11 years. I went to the Slade School of Art, where I ended up getting involved in performance and video.

I was attracted to performance because it has always been — well maybe not always but at least at the beginning — meant as a challenge to the status that painting and sculpture had been given by the art establishment, you know, as the ultimate and unique art objects. And this sort of action was a comment on the art object as a commodity, the art market and the gallery system....

What I like about performance is that the work is impermanent and the emphasis is on communication and a direct rapport or interaction with the audience without the mediation of an art object. Afterwards, it's all dismantled and all that remains is a memory in the mind of the spectator. This is how things are in life: they come

and go and the memory fades or gets transformed in time by people according to their own experience and background and what they bring to it and how they interpret it.

So I was really attracted to this challenge or critique of conventional art forms, and to the subversive element in performance. But I'm still aware that even with this kind of work there's still the mediation of the institution and this is becoming more and more the case since performance has become legitimized by the art world.

Sara: Do you change every performance depending on the context?

Mona: I have usually done a performance for a space and that's it. But the last time I came to North America, I had six galleries to work in (5 in Canada and 1 in New York). I decided to do something that could be adapted to any space. Although there were lots of variations — it was entitled *Variation on Discord and Divisions* — after the fourth performance it became like a routine. I've never experienced that before because I don't usually like doing the same piece twice.

Sara: Can you describe the performance that you did at the *Strategies for Survival Conference in Vancouver in 1986*?

Mona: I allowed myself a week here before the performance because I wanted to create a work that would be relevant to the conference which was about issues of survival and to relate it to what was happening outside in the consumer world. I knew about EXPO '86 because I was in Vancouver last year when the preparations for EXPO were very much underway. I was aware of all the changes that were taking place, like property developers evicting local tenants, so I knew that EXPO would be something that I really wanted to oppose, work with, make a statement about. When I first arrived, I spent the whole day at EXPO, looking around, trying to find something to work with. I got really depressed because I found it was such a gigantic concentration of all that is negative in the West. In the end I just bought a slide of that dome that has become the symbol of EXPO '86.

The next day I thought, "I'll look around the Western Front and see if there's anything there that I can use." In the basement I found these really nice, beautiful old signs for different countries (the Western Front building had been a masonic lodge, and these old hand painted signs on brass bases had been left behind). I wanted to use the slide of the dome and project it above where I was performing, because I wanted it to look like the fantasy up

there and down here the reality. You go to EXPO and there are pavilions for big powerful countries and they are all happily living together. But the reality is not like that at all. On the floor I had the country signs dotted all over the place on a black plastic sheet and I put barbed wire in a chaotic tangle separating the different countries. I wanted to use sound that would be reminiscent of war, but I did not want it to be too obvious. I did not want to use sound effects. I decided to arrange it so that whenever I accidentally touched the barbed wire, the scraping sound was amplified. Basically the action consisted of me crossing from one country to another. The first thing I noticed when I walked into the conference room where the performance was to take place was this huge installation of speakers from floor to ceiling. I thought, "I must do something with this."

The performance was happening in a side room open to the main space, but the sound of the barbed wire was filling the entire conference hall, like thunder or bombing.

I imagined that people would spend five or ten minutes in my space and then go away. But because the sound was so powerful it was like people being reminded wherever they were in the hall about war somewhere in the world, far away. They hear the echoes of it but they don't want to be part of it.

Sara: Even if I wasn't in the room I knew you were caught on the barbed wire because the sound was being

generated only when you connected with it. It wasn't an abstraction about war and conflict between different countries, it was a human equation with people being destroyed or caught.

Mona: I was visualizing it very much as the 'above' and the 'below' — the fantasy and the facts. The slide of EXPO was not overstated. You could just see it, and my shadow travelling across it as I moved. While I was doing the performance I suddenly thought, "Oh, My God this is about me!" I started thinking about my family and how my sisters and all my cousins and relatives are spread all over the world. This is true of all Palestinian families. They are scattered around.

Sara: Your work deals with issues of displacement, war and the experience of victims of war. How do you keep working with and developing these themes?

Mona: I keep hearing about "Keeping the Peace." We keep hearing this in relation to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). The implication is that we've had peace for forty years and we want to keep it. I feel very cynical about this concept of "Keeping the Peace" because in my experience there hasn't been a year without war since the day I was born. It's not just the experience of Lebanon but many parts of the Third World, which makes me wonder sometimes whether their definition of the world is just the West. There's nothing more violent than dying of hunger. I don't call that a state of peace.

I am not a pacifist. I think that people who are pacifists accept the idea of nations as they are at the moment. They are the privileged ones who have an interest in keeping things as they are. They are basically saying "The situation is okay, but we want to have a guarantee of peace."

My work often refers to hostile realities, war, destruction, but it is not localized, it refers to conflicts all over the world while hopefully pointing out the forces of oppression and resistance to these forces — cultural, historical, economic and social forces. In fact I can think of only one piece which referred specifically to the invasion of Lebanon. It was entitled *The Negotiating Table* and it was more like a 'tableau vivant.' I was lying on a table covered with entrails, bandages and blood and wrapped up in a body bag. There were chairs around the table and sound tapes of speeches of Western leaders talking about peace. It was basically a juxtaposition of two elements, one referring to the physical reality and brutality of the situation and the other to the way it is represented and dealt with in the West. This piece was the most direct reference I had ever made to the war in Lebanon. I made this work right after the Israeli invasion and the massacres in the camps which for me was the most shattering experience of my life.

But in general my work is about my experience of living in the West as a person from the Third World, about being an outsider, about occupying a marginal position, being excluded, being defined as 'Other' or as one of 'Them.' I work with groups of Black people in London on shared issues of colonialism, imperialism, racism and stereotyping of people from other cultures.

Sara: In producing the work that you did last year at the Western Front and the one you described previously,

what do you want your audience to learn from the work?

Mona: I want to remind the audience that there are different realities that people have to live through. The video, *Changing Parts*, which was produced at the Western Front during my residency last year, is about such different realities — the big contrast between a privileged space, like the West, and the Third World where there's death, destruction, hunger. But I don't think that any artist's work is going to move armies. I don't have any illusions about that. If the work creates an awareness of certain issues, a questioning in the mind of the spectator of certain assumptions, then that's something — I don't think that an art work will provoke political action.

Sara: Could you elaborate on that? I think some artists whose politics are very much engaged in what they produce do see their work as having almost an agitational role, that it will inspire people to act or deal with issues.

Mona: I feel you can only inspire people to act if they share with you a common concern, if they are directly affected by the issues you are talking about. I have worked a lot with political groups in the past and I found that you only get support from other groups of people who are dealing with similar issues. So in a sense, there too you are preaching to the converted. You don't win people over just by presenting them with a carefully thought-out argument even if you are using the most direct and simple language.

I'd like to tie this in to the issue of working outside the art establishment. I recently took part in an event called *Roadworks* which was taking place in the streets of Brixton. I found the freedom of working outside the confines of an isolating gallery environment, and the very different nature of the audience, very satisfying. Basically the audience was the people on the street, a non-specialized, chance audience casually experiencing the artists' actions while passing by. But also 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.

If you've heard about the riots in Brixton, then you know it's a very charged area. I wasn't going to do something very heavy — it had to be lighthearted. If you do anything for a long period of time, and you gather a crowd around you, you get into trouble with the police. So I had to do things that were either very quick or moving. In one of the pieces, I walked around barefoot, dragging a pair of big, heavy Doc Martin boots attached to my ankles — that's what the police wear. These boots have become a symbol of the fascists because the National Front wear them as well. I just walked around an area of 3 blocks, in and out of the street market there. I got very good comments.

Sara: How did your audience respond? Did people follow you? Did they stick with you?

Mona: One comment I really liked was when a group of builders, standing having their lunch break, said, "What the hell is happening here? What is she up to?" And this

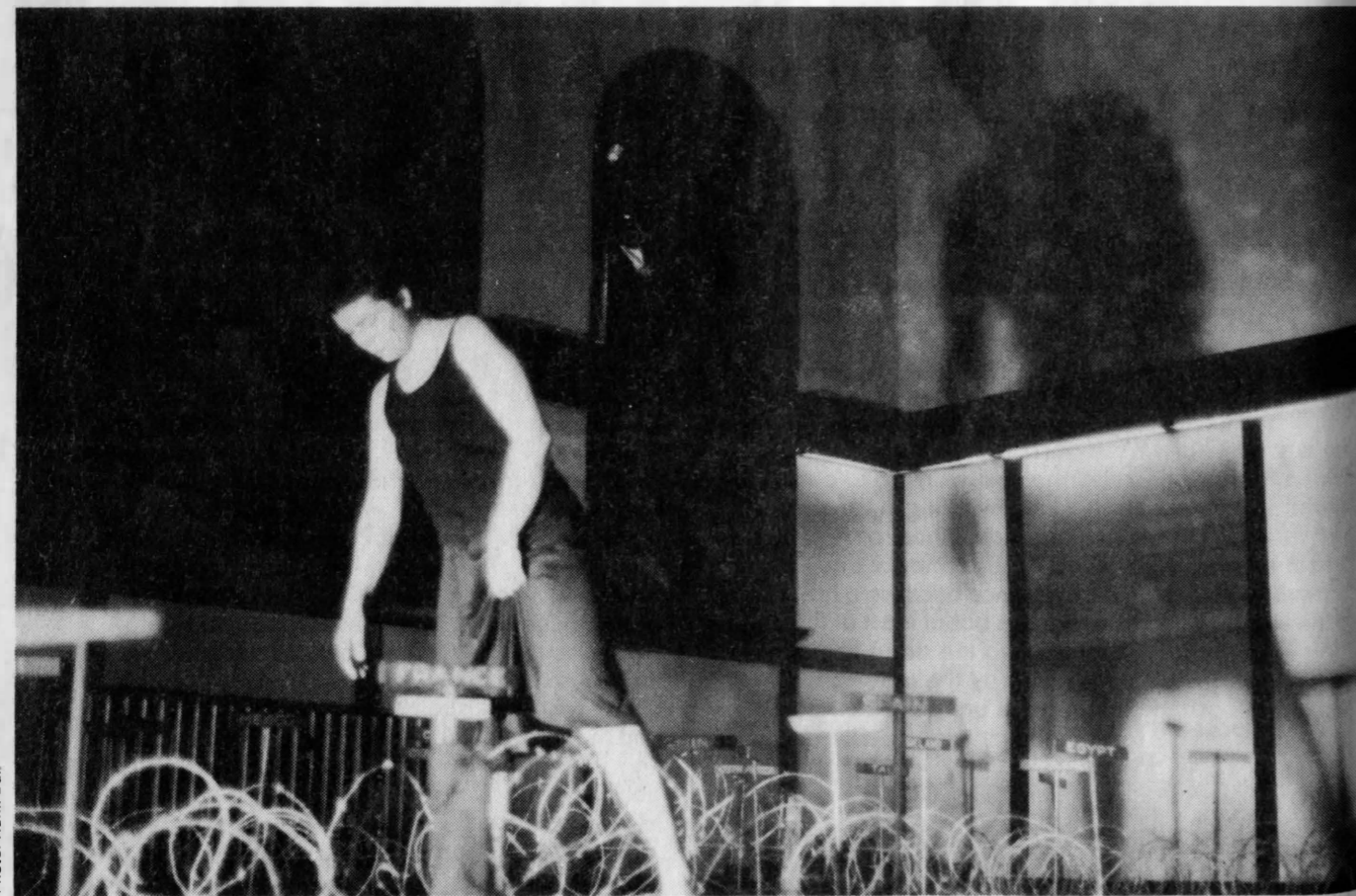


Photo: Hank Bull

Mona Hatoum in performance at the *Strategies for Survival Conference*, June 1986, Vancouver.
"...the sound of the barbed wire was filling the entire conference hall, like thunder or bombing..."

Black woman, passing by with her shopping, said to them, "Well, it's obvious. She's being followed by the police." Very cool, and just went off. One guy came up to me and said, "Excuse me. Do you know you're being followed?" And old people with their shopping, stopping and watching as I went past would suddenly burst out laughing, or people would come and look inside the boots to see what was in there.

Sara: That's a very different kind of relationship to audience because people in galleries, when faced with performance, tend to go completely passive. I remember the performance that you did at the Western Front. You pulled entrails out of your clothes, put them on plates and fed them to people. It was a powerful image. You had been trying to create a domestic environment by feeding people within the complete chaos of war and destruction. But the 'food' was both from your body and a product of war. I remember people in the audience just accepting these plates and not refusing complicity, not reacting. People within the gallery audience assume a kind of spectator role; however, when you're dealing with a public that doesn't have such a conscious sense of their 'role,' people are a lot less passive. If they don't like what you're doing you're going to know it, or if it fascinates them you're also going to know it.

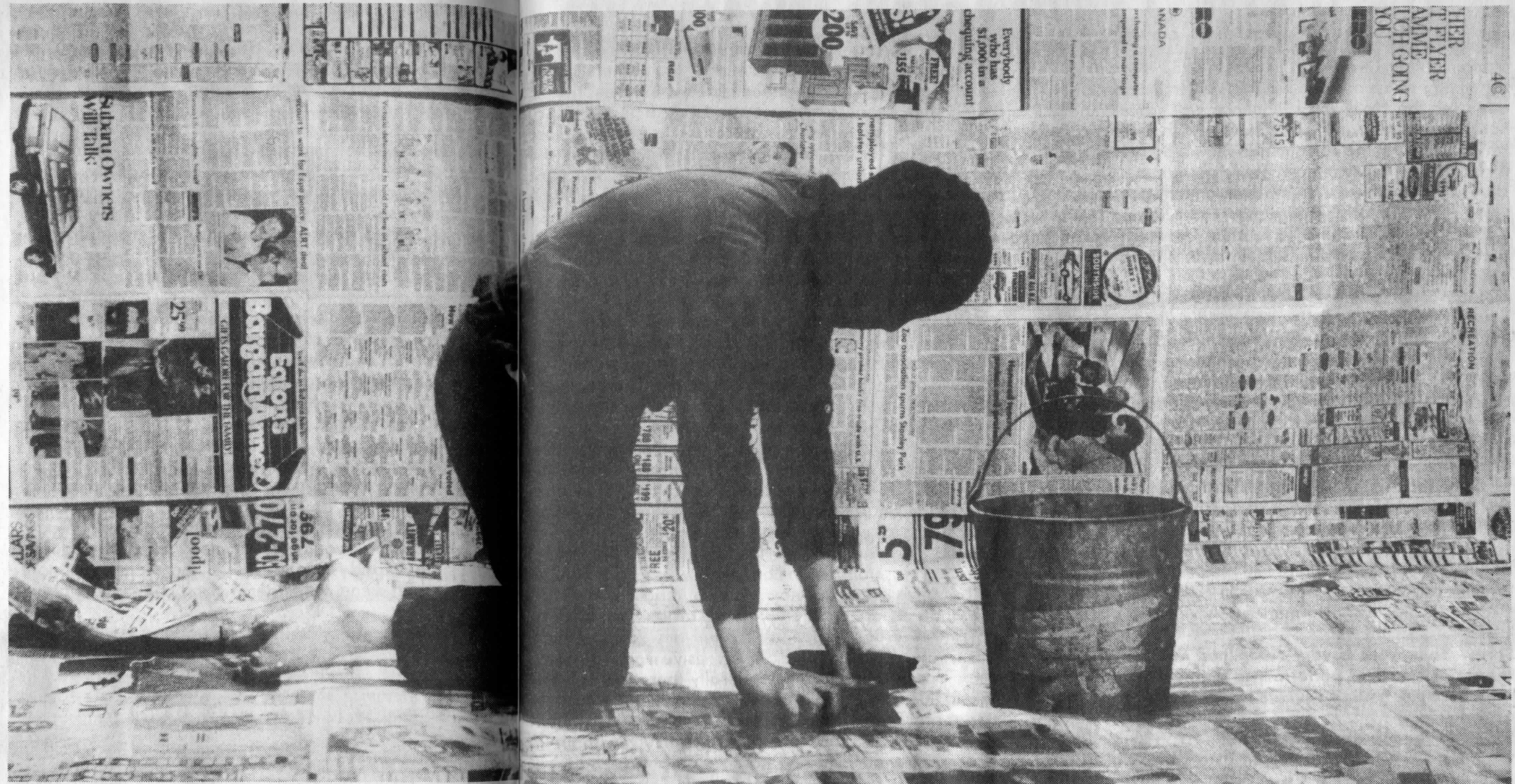
Let's get back to the gallery context.

Mona: Well yes, what I wanted to say about the Brixton event is that even in this case where the work was taking place out in the streets, we were documenting the performances and building up a record of the actions back in Brixton Gallery. Okay, it's very much an alternative space which is run by a collective of artists. But we got money from the Greater London Arts Council — although very little — to support the event. So you're always dealing with the art establishment in one way or another and all you can do is intervene within it. I am not sure to what extent you can be totally independent and work outside of it.

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.

Sara: To what extent is your presence central to making the piece work as a statement? Why do you always perform alone?

Mona: My presence is important because my attitude toward performance is that the artist is being herself, making her own statement and not pretending to be someone else, somewhere else. When you get people to do it for you it becomes a theatre piece. They are acting out something that you've scripted for them. I never script



Hatoum performing *Variation on Discord and Divisions* at The Western Front, Vancouver 1984 (see p. 46).

anything. I just have an idea and I hope for the best, and if while I am actually doing the performance things don't work out as I'd hoped, if the circumstances or the audience's reaction tell me that I should make changes, I am quite often open to that and work with it. For that reason it doesn't ever occur to me to ask someone to do my performances for me. I feel that the work is presenting my own view of the world according to my own history and past experience. But often I do work collectively, by organizing with Black artists' groups, women's groups. I present my performances myself, on my own, because I have not yet found other people who are involved in this area who work with the same issues or have the same concerns.

Sara: It seems that there's a point in your work where the audience is tested on an emotional level, in terms of the physical risks that you take. To what extent is that consistent in all your works? The piece at *Strategies for Survival* put people into a state of anxiety as to whether or not you were going to fall into the barbed wire and cut yourself.

Mona: In my performances there's always the risk of something going terribly wrong — I might fall into the barbed wire. I was afraid that my feet would get sweaty

and I would slip on the plastic, or I would lose my concentration because the performance went on for two and a half hours — a couple of times I wavered and had to hold on to something. In this one I was taking the most risk because I was actually cutting myself on the barbed wire, which I was trying to avoid but it still happened. Usually, although it looks dangerous, I never cut myself. I'm not into the S&M aspect of it at all. These actions are metaphors for the brutality and injustice we are subjected to by the politically oppressive social system we exist in.

Sara: How much of the risk is about building consciousness in the audience? How much is it personal?

Mona: I just want the work to have a raw edge to it, which seems to be a reflection of my own experience in life. The tension is there when you're taking risks and it's a metaphor for oppression and harsh reality. In the performance I did at the Western Front in 1985, I crawled on my belly for about fifty feet. I started crawling from outside because I wanted to be visibly tired by the time I got to where the audience was. It was quite a struggle to crawl on my belly from one point to the other. I was actually tired and short of breath when I got in there. I wasn't pretending.

Sara: You implied that performance is changing as a

medium. In what areas do you perceive change and with what implications?

Mona: Performance has become a legitimate area in the art world. In England, the Arts Council has started what it calls the promoter's scheme, where it is working out a way to promote performance and give it a 'high profile.' The Arts Council is distributing the grant money — which in the past has gone to individual performance artists — amongst 3 or 4 spaces across the country. It is now up to those promoters to come up with a package and each one of these organizations has a specific definition of what performance is. It is becoming very bureaucratized. You have the Zap Club which is a cabaret/night club-type of venue and obviously doesn't suit everyone. You have the Midland Group in Nottingham and it's a space that very much wants to raise the profile of performance and usually goes for more fringe theatre-type of work. They are very much into the tried, the tested and the safe. And you have Projects U.K. in Newcastle which I think is the only group which is not too rigid about its definitions and therefore they allow a great variety of approaches in their programming.

Sara: It sounds entertainment-oriented which is a significant direction in Canadian performance. Some of it is

cabaret, some of it is installation.

Mona: When I went to the States in 1983, I was amazed to see how much performance was entertainment-oriented. I felt the Hollywood influence was travelling right across the whole American culture. But this influence has travelled across the Atlantic and the situation in England is very much the same now. There are none of these unstructured, chaotic, anarchic interventions any more.

Sara: **The role of choreography and scripting is much heavier. The level where it's random, or where that edge that you describe exists, is when artists don't have the budget or six months to rehearse.**

Mona: Six years ago I used to send documentation of previous works to galleries and say I'd like to do something there. It was okay then to just turn up and do something and be invited on the strength of your previous work. Now they ask you for an advance, really precise description of what you will be doing and sometimes they want it six months ahead. So if you are creating a site-specific piece and you say that you'll be working on it till the last minute, that's not on at all. The Midland Group recently decided that it can't trust artists just by looking at the documentation they send, it doesn't want to take any risk so the Group organizes audition days — the performer goes, presents the actual performance and gets selected or rejected. It's just like theatre. They say, "We want you to premiere your piece in our gallery." The implication is that the performance gets repeated again and again and again.

Sara: **Your work is very disciplined and you combine formal elements of performance with political content. How have you trained yourself and how do you maintain your discipline?**

Mona: Training has been the subject of much debate in England recently. I was trained as a visual artist and I consider myself to be a visual artist. I've never actually trained to walk or move or act in a specific way and I

don't see the necessity of that. I don't think my performances are about exhibiting a skill that others don't have. I feel each performance requires different things of me and because I don't rehearse, it is always a challenge for me to see if I can actually perform the intended action for the length of time and within the conditions I set up. So it is very much a process of discovery; in a sense I learn about what I can do while I am doing it. I haven't had any formal training in movement, dance or theatre. I would like to have more technical knowledge, of how to make multi-track sound recordings for instance, and I will probably do a course about that or advanced video editing techniques.

Why I have said that training seems to be an issue in England at the moment, is because there have been some debates recently between the formalists and those whose work is more content-oriented. Incidentally, I don't really subscribe to the view that there are two distinct categories; although my work is issue-based I think formal considerations are very central to my work. The so-called formalists are calling for more training, for establishing an academy of performance and raising the level of the art. There is talk of 'excellence.' I wonder who's going to set up the terms of 'excellence.' Obviously some 'wise men.' The last issue of *Performance Magazine* — published in London — was all about how performance artists are now training in ballroom dancing, scuba diving, etc. Performance artists have always brought different disciplines to their area, but I don't think it is necessary to have any extensive training or any special 'performing' skills. Generally there is a call for making things more polished, more skillful, more formally spot-on. But of course there are some people who have some skills and use them effectively without it becoming just a display of those skills. A very good example is Rose English. She's wonderful!

(See Interview with Rose English, by Gillian Chase, *FUSE*, Vol. VII, No. 5, February 1984.)



Mona Hatoum dragging Doc Martin boots in the May 1985 street action *Roadworks*, Brixton.