Chapter Four

*Interwoven memories*
Memories lie slumbering within us for months and years, quietly proliferating, until they are woken by some trifle and in some strange way bind us to life. … what would we be without memory? We would not be capable of ordering even the simplest thoughts, the most sensitive heart would lose the ability to show affection, our existence would be a mere never-ending chain of meaningless moments, and there would not be the faintest trace of a past.

When I first saw Mona Hatoum’s *Measures of Distance, 1988*, it moved me so deeply I cried. At the time I was living and working in London, certainly homesick and missing my own mother on the other side of the world. Hatoum’s video is created from layered Arabic script, which veil images of her mother showering. The aural interlaced translations and recordings of their telephone conversations echo throughout the piece, as though the viewer is listening from the distant end of a long tiled tunnel. Similarly Janine Antoni recalls that this piece “haunted me... This work is very personal and yet its form is illusive... I felt like I was straining to eavesdrop on a private conversation.”\(^2\) *Measures of Distance* certainly struck a personal chord within me, although Hatoum’s story is more dramatic than mine.

Hatoum’s family had been exiled to Lebanon, from Palestine, before she was born. Her parents never felt at home in Beirut, but they did not want to return to the war torn country of their ancestors. Then another war broke out in Lebanon whilst Hatoum was visiting London and she has not since been able to returned home in a permanent sense. Her mother, in the video, tells of her distress that all her children are scattered around the world. She has constant difficulties obtaining a telephone so they rely on letters. Then bombing became even more intense and she was too frightened to leave the house to post the letters. The mother and daughter’s communications were almost cut off, giving the work a desperate resonance. One feels the precious value Hatoum places on each fragment of previous conversation.

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Although from a family of letter writers, I have never mastered this discipline. My mother and her mother, my Nana, sent aerograms around the world, one each per week, from the time my mother left home at seventeen, until my Nana’s death, a few years ago. The first artwork I made, after I returned home from London, was based on the single remaining letter from my Nana that had survived the anti-hoarding, anti-clutter mentality of those two women. The remaining letter does not contain much family drama, or reveal a shocking skeleton in the closet. Instead, most of the letter is about Grandad’s continuous failed attempts to fix their car and its subsequent breakdowns. But there is a tremendous presence in the copperplate handwriting and Nana’s charming turn of phase; I can clearly hear her voice in my mind as I read her sentences.

I wished to feel closer to her, to hold familial memories in my hands in the form of these lost letters. One solution was to undertake the onerous task of replacing the vanished correspondence by tracing her words using carbon paper. It was a strange experience copying Nana’s handwriting, as though trying to embody her ghost. The
The bodily presence found in a person’s handwriting conveys an immediate sense of connection between the writer and the reader. The writer is implicitly present in the physical weight and marking movements of the pen, aided by the tangibility of the paper that has been handled, folded and directed. The layers of memory and attachment bound up in handwritten letters convey a wealth of personal connections. For centuries letters were a vital link in maintaining ongoing connecting dialogues between people but now in our computerised society, such intimate records of communication are almost mere redundant relics of the past.3

Mona Hatoum calls Measures of Distance a seminal piece, following a “conscious decision to delve into the personal – however complex, confused, and contradictory the material I was dealing with was.”4 It addressed the bond between mother and daughter as they reassess their relationship as adults, under the strains and pressures placed on them by the difficulties of communication. There is an invisible red thread of connection between them, like a resulting piece of this laborious process, titled I wanted to tell you, 2006, was a fragile floating grid of semi-transparent letters that all spoke of the same things, sharing the mundane details of life. My palimpsest approach, tracing Nana’s antiquated handwriting, forged a new bond between my three maternal generations.

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3 For a detailed discussion about language over distances and letter writing see Joanne Morra, “Daughter's Tongue: The Intimate Distance of Translation,” Journal of Visual Culture 6, no. 91 (2007).

4 Antoni, "Mona Hatoum."
memory of the umbilical cord that linked them while the daughter was in her mother’s womb. “…a bright crimson thread wrapped once around her wrist and again around my waist, a thread that would extend between the farthest corners of the empire… whenever I touched the thread, I would feel her pulse beat the lullabies of my childhood…”

Hatoum’s work conveys a sense of yearning, examining her personal experience of displacement. However, her work also speaks more broadly beyond physical geography, to everyone who at times feels unable to keep up with the pace of the world. Hatoum’s mother’s description of layers of connections that filter through her family’s continuing sense of loss, resonates on a different personal level for each viewer, “and I am not just talking about the land and property we left behind, but with that our identity and our sense of pride in who we are went out the window… Yes of course this must have affected you as well, because being born in exile in a country which does not want you is not fun at all.”

A range of intimate personal connections and histories are contained within Hatoum’s works. Her considered selection of materials is key in communicating to the viewer a sense of these emotional ties. *Untitled (hair with knots 3), 2001,* is created from individual strands of hair, perhaps some of which could have been collected from her mother’s shower. These small woven grids of hair are “incredibly tender, ephemerally fleeting yet meditative objects.” The warp and weft of these unusual threads leads the eye across and down, as though reading a letter. The repetitive flowing pattern ends at a strand that “hangs down as though the fabric were a

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5 White, The Sultan’s Seal, Phoenix 2007 London, p 163
6 Morra, "Daughter's Tongue: The Intimate Distance of Translation."
temporary interruption of a freefall through the endless void, as though this fragile something were borne along by nothingness.”

These hair grid pieces express personal connections on several levels. Firstly in the artist’s unusual choice of collecting personal bodily products, discarded hair strands. Then Hatoum pursued a challenging process of construction and display. Her careful handling of this material implies the vulnerability of personal emotions, this intimacy is then further enhanced by the close attention required by the viewer to look at the work, “almost an impossible distance: about seven centimetres …(suggesting) Hatoum’s proximity to the material as she manipulated it”\(^9\). The two types of differing intertwined hair strands alludes to a close connection between two people, presenting an intriguing ambiguity, not just as to who owned and grew the hair, but also about the possibilities of the relationship between them.

The use of human hair combined with the ancient craft of weaving, carries with it a sense of the feminine as well as of the occult, voodoo and witchcraft. Artists frequently identify a parallel between their creative processes and that of the alchemist, sorcerer or soothsayer, perhaps this link is even more apparent when the artist is female. “Women have traditionally been labelled deceitful and devious, in other words, crafty, but crafty and artful mean much the same,

\(^8\) Ibid.
\(^9\) Robert Machado, “Deflecting the Grid: Mona Hatoum’s 2001”Untitled (Hair, Grid with Knots 3),” Bezalel, no. 3 (2002).
both words indicating how many people associate art and craft with magic, linked either to witchcraft or the art of necromancy." There is an almost memorial sense of bodily presence in Hatoum’s hair strands. Similar associations of touch and loss are explored in my work *To have and to hold*, 2008. I collected various elbow length white satin gloves, which were then scorched by smoke and embroidered with red thread in linear patterns. The resulting series, installed on the underside of a flight of stairs seemed ghostly, as though echoing the plights of fabled heroines waiting for their elusive rescuing prince.

Fig. 29. Kath Fries, *To have and to hold*, 2008, detail view

Often in myths and fairytales a seemingly everyday object acts as the catalyst for the drama surrounding the main characters. Sometimes this is a spindle, on which *Sleeping Beauty* pricked her finger and the entire kingdom fell asleep for hundreds of years. Then there is *Aladdin’s* lamp from which springs a djinni or genie to change his life. Or the simple cup from the *Last Supper*, which becomes known as the Chalice and later the Holy Grail searched for during medieval crusades and retold in numerous stories like those of King Arthur, and more recently in the 1989 *Indiana Jones* film and Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*, 2003. Such objects frequently act as markers or vessels holding the narration of culture and memory. These objects and associated stories range from the personal to the communal, as well as national and universal; sometimes transforming from a symbolic object to iconographic mark. “Even when we don’t actually know the stories, we frequently think of objects as repositories of narration. And we are likely to account for our ‘things’ by telling stories about them. Stories form contexts within which craft objects resonate with meaning.”

When artists work with the found object, these elements are usually selected to reference specific associations of history, time and place. The found objects that feature in Simone Mangos’ work carry a clear sense of memory, as she investigates and clarifies the object’s origins in an almost archaeological sense. Mangos turns her “…attention to the very everyday instances that unintentionally witness a past and its people”\(^{12}\). Her objects act as signifiers of a certain time and place, one which many people think is best forgotten, the Nazi era of Berlin.

Mangos is an Australian artist who has been living and working in Berlin since 1988. Over these last twenty years she has developed a subtle, insistent rapport with the city. Picking up on the deep psychological layers buried within the ground, despite society’s efforts to rip up and build over the landscape.\(^{13}\) Mangos still remains somewhat of an outsider, an Australian citizen rather than a native Berliner. However, this enhances her wide ranging perspectives on this city’s citizens, how they view themselves in the present and relate to their country’s past. Germany, as a nation, constantly seeks to transform its identity, sometimes by literally burying the places connected to its problematic past. Mangos addresses such political inconsistencies, attacking the superficiality of the city’s frequent facelifts. She consciously places herself in precarious predicaments, as a critical outsider unafraid of asserting her thoughts on contemporary attitudes relating to Germany’s awkward relationship with history.

Mangos’ found objects act as vessels containing stories that transport the viewer to the place and time of the item’s origins. Her work conveys a pressing

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need to address the past, to hold it as real and tangible as the object in our hands, preventing it from being ignored, diminished or repeated. Her work is like an offering of red thread, demonstrating how every ordinary person is connected to the past. “The work neither dictates to us, nor forces itself to be heard. … Because of its sensuousness and sensuality, one can easily walk into such a work and become a part of it.”

Berlin is a city that has re-created itself, more than any other, over the last 250 years, hiding its history “like the proverbial deformed and unwanted relative, confined to a cupboard in an inaccessible part of the castle…” or like the Cretan Minotaur hidden underground in the labyrinth. Although the government claims that some sites are “generally, ‘historically and politically empty’ “, Mangos, who now knows the city so well, contests that almost every site bares historical traces, a phenomenon around which she constructs her work. Berlin is a place where fact and fiction have purposely been muddied, because people accept the “practice of replacing; of failing to point out that something is there; of endlessly debating what something is, rather than touching.”

It is this very act of touching, initiated in Mangos’ work, of holding the object up to the light so one can better examine it as a physical connection to the past, which connects to the raw nerve of the twitching aliveness of history.

Mangos’ intended viewers are everyday people, each of whom, like her found objects, carry connecting stories and relationships that can be brought to light when examined closely from a certain angle. One of her most recognisable installations in Berlin is *Tolling – läuten*, 1989. Consisting of a suspended round platform of what appeared to

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15 Ibid.: 250.
be a pile of rubble, in the centre of the gallery. The weight of the rubble was held by only one steel cable and pulley attached to the wall, causing viewers to hold their breaths. The precarious balance of the piece seems to promise a dramatic tumbling demise at any moment. The work “employed the concept of embodied memory; used inert matter to blur the boundary between innocence and culpability”\(^\text{18}\) The artist had collected the pieces in 1988 from a vacant lot at the edge of the Berlin Wall, at the time there had been nothing immediately visible to suggest that this was the site of the SS-Gestapo Headquarters. Mangos’ discovery of that fact enhances the objects’ ability to contain a sense of memory. The viewer, seeing a piece of china jutting from the elegantly crude pile starts to ask “questions such as: ‘Which Gestapo officer once drank from that cup?’”\(^\text{19}\) The play of natural light seeping around the partition at the rear of the gallery facilitates a glowing ambience, giving the work a subtle halo and the space a reverent, repentant atmosphere. The viewers in the gallery become like reflective pilgrims offering their own thoughts, associations and memories, in acknowledgement of connections to the past.

Mangos uses netting in several of her installations; strung across a room, throughout an entire gallery or covering a garden. The netting can be interpreted in several ways, “often the tension in Mangos’ work lies in the way her light, irreverent materials expand to fill enormous volumes of space.”\(^\text{20}\) Whilst I may read the grided threads of Mangos’ netting as connections, inter-linking people with each other, with place and the past, others like Geczy see it as an uncertain material asking “…for whose good something has

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\(^{19}\) Ibid.: 252.

been trapped and contained…?  

21 Stasis, 1994, features a chair, implying the capacity to support, contain and hold a human body, which is attached to the outside of a building. Coupled with the netting that extends from one chair leg spanning across the internal courtyard, this work suggests escape attempts, ladders, tightropes and the wish for a safety net. Mangos addresses the individual’s roles and responsibilities in society, considering us all to be connected by memory and emotions to each other and to history. Mangos’ work suggests that if we can do better at acknowledging these interlinking threads, then perhaps the personal strands can intertwine with the collective forming a safety net, which may prevent the repetition of some of humanities’ catastrophic past mistakes.

References

Machado, Robert. "Deflecting the Grid: Mona Hatoum’s 2001"Untitled (Hair, Grid with Knots 3)." Bezaile, no. 3 (2002).