The body is of key importance in the oeuvre of Mona Hatoum. She has experimented with the body, using hair, nails and body fluids as source material in her works on paper right from the start of her artistic career in the late seventies. In the eighties she took the radical step of using her own body in performances. Then, towards the end of the eighties, she started creating installations in which the body appears only fragmentarily or is alluded to by objects it uses. These works, in particular, trigger an intense response in the spectator.

Hatoum has given a number of explanations for her interest in the body as a crucial coordinate of art. As she remarked in a 1996 interview, ‘I come from a culture where there isn’t that tremendous split between body and mind. When I first went to England it became immediately apparent to me that people were quite divorced from their bodies and very caught up in their heads, like disembodied intellects.’ For Hatoum, however, the integrity of the human being is inextricably linked with the unity of body and mind. It is for this reason that she has always emphasised the physical aspect of her art – not just by addressing the physical senses in her work, but also by developing the artwork as an event or as a body in physical space. ‘I did not want my work to be one-dimensional in the sense that it just appeals to the intellect. I wanted it to be a complete experience that involves your body, your mind, your emotions, everything.’ On the basis of this significance of the body, the artist, especially in her early works, has used the body as a metaphor for social struggle and for the inhumane violence to which people are subjected; later, with the awareness of the threat of AIDS, imbuing her works with a palpable sense of our vulnerability and mortality.

If a work of art is to be more than merely self-referential, relating instead to our experience of the world and of life itself, it has to be based on the body. Hatoum has described the body as a ‘starting point’ and as the ‘axis of our perceptions’. ‘We relate to the world through our senses … Meanings, connotations and associations come after the initial physical experience.’ In her approach to the body, Hatoum poses the fundamental question of the role played by the body in terms of how it constitutes the seemingly ever less tangible self confused by the complexity of an increasingly globalised, networked, virtual world and disoriented by computer-simulated spaces and visual worlds. Perhaps the body, as the last authentic locus of the subject, is able to retain the integrity and identity of the self and self-awareness because it constitutes the specific, the immediate and the tangible that define the boundary between the self and the world as the Other. In spite of the significance that the body possesses in terms of the individual as entity, Hatoum does not perceive the body as a protected and inviolable whole. She shows the body threatened by manipulation and injury, as an object of surveillance, as foreign matter. Yet even though – and perhaps precisely because – the body appears to be endangered, vulnerable and reduced to fragmentary