

**Original Research Article****Identity and Resistance: An Analysis of Mona Hatoum's  
"Light Sentence" Installation through the Lens of Foucault's  
Panopticism Theory**Majid Asadi Farsani<sup>1\*</sup>, Razieh Mokhtari Dehkordi<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract**

"Light Sentence" (1992) by Mona Hatoum, a Palestinian-British artist, employs visual and symbolic elements to represent concepts of surveillance, identity, and resistance within the Palestinian experience. However, analyses applying Michel Foucault's panopticism theory to this work remain limited. This research addresses three questions: 1) How do the installation's visual/symbolic elements convey identity and resistance? 2) How does Foucault's panopticism elucidate surveillance mechanisms in this work? 3) How does Hatoum's lived experience as an exiled Palestinian manifest in this piece? Using visual-analytical methodology, data was collected through qualitative analysis of the work's visual elements (metal mesh cages, moving light, shifting shadows) and related documents. Analysis integrated Foucault's panoptic framework with visual symbolism interpretation. Results indicate the mesh cages metaphorize territorial occupation and identity constraints, while the moving light symbolizes pervasive military surveillance. Viewer movement through the cages and interaction with dynamic shadows recreates symbolic resistance rooted in Hatoum's exile. This installation links Palestinian identity to a global critique of power structures, prompting viewers to reconsider contemporary human conditions. The study offers novel insights into contemporary art's role in critiquing power and representing resistance.

**Keywords:** *Mona Hatoum, Light Sentence, Foucault's Panopticism, Palestinian Identity, Resistance, Michel Foucault.*

**Introduction**

Contemporary art, particularly amid 21st-century globalization and socio-political complexities, serves as a powerful tool for representing identity issues and resisting structures of domination. Artists with specific cultural-political backgrounds, like Palestinian-British conceptual artist Mona Hatoum, address concepts such as identity, exile, borders, and resistance through their work. Having experienced exile and instability firsthand, Hatoum reflects these experiences in her art, connecting them to broader global issues. The installation "Light Sentence"

(1992) is a seminal work where light, shadow, and metal structures create a contemplative space symbolizing surveillance, control, and resistance. This study's central problem is analyzing Light Sentence through Foucault's panopticism theory and examining identity/resistance roles within it. Panopticism—referencing surveillance/control mechanisms in modern societies—provides an apt theoretical framework: the installation's mesh cages and moving light visually and symbolically reflect perpetual surveillance and identity constraints, aligning with Hatoum's Palestinian experience of exile and oppression.

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This theory was selected for its ability to explain linkages between power structures and lived experience, particularly regarding military surveillance and cultural resistance in Palestine. However, limited analyses exist connecting this work to identity/resistance concepts within Hatoum's Palestinian experience and contemporary global contexts. This research addresses this gap. Its primary objective is analyzing *Light Sentence* through Foucault's panopticism while examining identity/resistance roles. Specifically, it aims to deepen understanding of connections between the artist's lived experience and the work's conceptual framework through its visual/symbolic elements. Research questions: 1) How does Hatoum use artistic/symbolic forms in *Light Sentence* to express identity and resistance? 2) How does Foucault's panopticism enhance understanding of surveillance/control in this work? 3) What connections exist between Hatoum's lived experience as an exiled Palestinian and the representation of identity/resistance in *Light Sentence*? The study's significance is threefold: First, given scarce in-depth studies linking Hatoum's work to power/surveillance theories, it enriches existing literature. Second, analyzing this work within the Palestinian context—especially amid heightened relevance of identity/resistance in occupied territories—offers new perspectives on art's role in representing socio-political issues. Third, by combining visual analysis, Foucaultian theory, and socio-historical context, it proposes a multifaceted approach for understanding contemporary art, serving as a model for similar studies. Ultimately, the research demonstrates how contemporary art—particularly by artists like Hatoum—functions as a tool for articulating identity and resistance against dominant structures, inviting viewers to reflect on the human condition in our contemporary world.

### Research Background

Mona Hatoum's *Light Sentence* (1992) is a landmark work in her oeuvre, uniquely representing surveillance, identity, and resistance through visual/symbolic elements within the Palestinian experience. Edward Said noted that Hatoum's installations, including "*Light Sentence*,"

"create spaces that defamiliarize everyday objects while rendering them threatening, inviting viewers to confront deep identity-based and political contradictions" (Said, 2000). Selected for its fusion of visual minimalism with profound political concepts and immersive transmission of exile/surveillance, *Light Sentence* differs from Hatoum's body-focused works by offering potent metaphors of military surveillance and cultural resistance through mesh cages and moving light. It stands as a masterpiece amenable to multilayered analysis via Foucault's panopticism. In Persian sources: "Examining New Media in Works of Four Contemporary International Female Artists" (Esmaili & Hassanvand, 2018) briefly addresses Hatoum's works without focusing on "*Light Sentence*." "The Body in Performance Art Based on Gilles Deleuze's Theories" (Pourkasmaei et al., 2020) considers the body in Hatoum's work as a tool for socio-political reflection but neglects installations like "*Light Sentence*." In English sources: "Mona Hatoum" (Brett, 1997) analyzes her early industrial-material use without mentioning "*Light Sentence*" or panopticism. Similarly, "Mona Hatoum: The Entire World as a Foreign Land" (Said, 2000) examines exile in her work without direct focus on this installation or Foucault. "Mona Hatoum: Turbulence" (Ayad, 2015) notes light/shadow in *Light Sentence* as reflecting political instability but lacks theoretical depth. "Mona Hatoum: *Light Sentence*" (Corwin, 2016) describes it as a minimalist-political hybrid without exploring Foucaultian connections. "Mona Hatoum: *Terra Infirma*" (Nayeri, 2015) mentions *Light Sentence* multilayeredness but prioritizes visual/biographical aspects over theory. Unlike these studies emphasizing visual, biographical, or geopolitical angles, this research uniquely analyzes *Light Sentence* through Foucault's panopticism to examine identity/resistance within Palestinian and global contexts. Its innovation lies in interdisciplinary analysis framing *Light Sentence* as a political-cultural statement via Foucault's framework—an approach absent in prior studies lacking theoretical depth or contextual specificity (Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of sources reviewed in the literature. Source: Authors.

References	Main topic	Main topic	Relation to “Light Sentence”	Limitations
Esmaili & Hassanvand, 2018	The role of new media in expressing concerns of women artists	The role of new media in expressing concerns of women artists	Brief reference to Mona Hatoum’s works	Lack of focus on “Light Sentence” or Panopticism theory
Pourkasmaei et al., 2020	The role of the body in performance art based on Gilles Deleuze’s theories	The role of the body in performance art based on Gilles Deleuze’s theories	Examination of Hatoum’s bodily works	No attention to Hatoum’s installations like “Light Sentence” and Panopticism
Brett, 1997	Analysis of early works of Mona Hatoum	Analysis of early works of Mona Hatoum	Emphasis on use of industrial materials to express identity concepts	No specific mention of “Light Sentence” or Panopticism theory
Said, 2000	Experience of exile and instability in Hatoum’s works	Experience of exile and instability in Hatoum’s works	General review of Hatoum’s works	No direct focus on “Light Sentence” or Foucault’s theoretical framework
Ayad, 2015	The role of light and shadow in Hatoum’s works	The role of light and shadow in Hatoum’s works	Reference to “Light Sentence” as a reflection of political instability	Lack of deep theoretical analysis with Panopticism
Corwin, 2016	Combining minimalism and political concepts in “Light Sentence”	Combining minimalism and political concepts in “Light Sentence”	Description of “Light Sentence” as a work resembling surveillance structures	No exploration of the connection with Foucault’s Panopticism theory
Nayeri, 2015	Comprehensive review of Mona Hatoum’s works	Comprehensive review of Mona Hatoum’s works	Reference to “Light Sentence” as a dynamic work	Focus on visual and biographical aspects, without Panopticism analysis

## Research Method

This research employs qualitative methodology with a visual-analytical approach to analyze Mona Hatoum’s *Light Sentence* (1992) within the framework of Foucault (1977)’s panopticism theory. This approach relies on conceptual interpretation of the work, focusing on its visual and symbolic elements within theories of power, surveillance, and identity. Data were collected through library research and examination of primary/secondary sources, including theoretical texts, art critiques, and documents related to the work and its socio-historical context. First, the work’s visual and structural features—metal mesh cages, moving light, and dynamic shadows—are descriptively analyzed to determine their role in creating sensations of surveillance and resistance. Subsequently, through visual-analytical methods, these elements are interpreted through Foucault’s panopticism theory, which emphasizes mechanisms of perpetual surveillance and self-surveillance in modern societies. Concepts such as power, surveillance, identity, and resistance are examined by focusing on the work’s visual-symbolic connections (e.g., cages as identity constraints, light as military

surveillance). Additionally, contextual analysis methods elucidate the 1990s socio-political conditions, particularly within Hatoum’s Palestinian experience and exile, to clarify their impact on the work’s concepts. Finally, integrating findings from visual analysis, panopticism theory interpretation, and socio-historical context provides a comprehensive reading of “*Light Sentence*,” revealing connections between artistic form, theoretical concepts, and socio-political context.

## Theoretical Foundations

### • Foucault’s Panopticism theory

The panopticism theory, proposed by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, examines mechanisms of power and surveillance in society. This concept draws inspiration from Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon prison design. In this design, prisoners are under constant surveillance yet unable to see the observer. This situation induces individuals to feel surveilled even in the observer’s absence, leading them to regulate their behavior. Foucault uses this concept to explain power dynamics in society. He argues panopticism

extends beyond prisons to institutions like schools, hospitals, and workplaces. This perpetual, invisible surveillance compels individuals toward self-regulation and institutionalizes power throughout society. Foucault writes: “The Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being-seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen” (ibid., 202). He further notes: “The major effect of the Panopticon is to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (ibid., 201). Foucault emphasizes these surveillance mechanisms are not confined to prisons: “The Panopticon must not be understood as a dream building: it is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form” (ibid., 205) (Fig. 1).

#### • **Mona Hatoum: from exile to conceptual art**

Mona Hatoum was born in 1952 in Beirut, Lebanon, to a family of Palestinian origin. After studying graphic design at Beirut University, she migrated to London in 1975 due to the Lebanese Civil War and studied at the Slade School of Art (Archer, 2002, 67). Hatoum initially addressed political and identity issues through street performances and video art, but from the 1990s increasingly turned to creating sculptures and interactive installations. From her earliest years, Hatoum became acquainted with the dark aspects of politics and war. The experience of living in a region marked by political and social conflicts profoundly influenced the formation of her identity and artistic perspectives. To escape the tensions and terrors of war, Hatoum migrated to London, where she gained the opportunity to seriously explore various forms of art

and design (Spence, 2016, 45). This migration not only enabled her to express herself more freely but also paved the way for discovering an artistic language through which she could convey her perspectives and feelings about global and personal issues. Her works, created from the 1980s onward, reflect a wide spectrum of tensions and conflicts occurring in the contemporary world (Ayad, 2015, 12).

Hatoum’s cultural background and personal experiences, including exile and migration, played a significant role in shaping her interest in political and social issues. She was particularly interested in examining the impact of these issues on individuals and communities. Throughout her artistic career, Hatoum created works acclaimed not only for their visual quality but also for their profound and critical conceptual content. Many of her works address political and social issues, thereby inviting the audience to contemplate the complex realities of the contemporary world. According to Linden (2016, 23), “Hatoum’s works examine geopolitics, gender, art history, and her personal past to reveal a terrifying and complex world”.

In Hatoum’s works, place and displacement coexist paradoxically. Her works reference her homeland, territory, and birthplace, yet these places are fluid and unstable. Palestine’s borders, due to prolonged wars and political instability, have constantly transformed with no definitive fixed boundaries. This fluidity of borders and wandering identity is clearly reflected in Hatoum’s works. Additionally, as a migrant, she experiences a form of spatial and psychological displacement that manifests in her works as spatial and inner restlessness (Brett, 1997, 12). Her works persistently engage with concepts like belonging, identity, exile, and statelessness. Through her art, she reflects the personal and collective experiences of Palestinians and symbolically references places that are both real and imaginary. These places, while rooted in memory and history, constantly transform due to political and social conditions. Thus, Hatoum’s works not only reflect her personal experiences as a displaced individual but also express broader conditions faced by many Palestinians and stateless people worldwide.

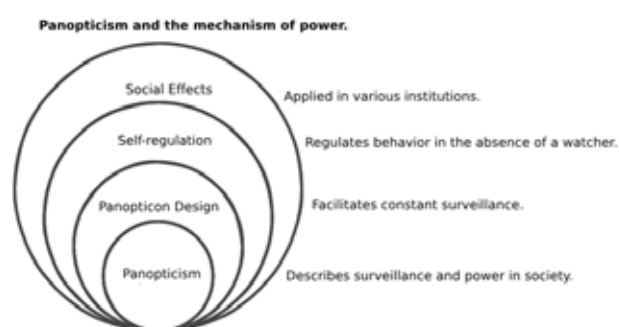


Fig. 1. Foucault’s panopticism and mechanisms of power. Source: Authors.

Mona Hatoum's early works primarily focused on the artist herself and her body. In the 1980s, Hatoum attracted the art world's attention through her performances. During this period, she created installations and sculptures using diverse materials and objects such as steel cages, sandbag walls, wires, and domestic objects. These works, combining industrial and everyday forms, created multilayered and complex meanings reflecting the socio-political conflicts of her time. One of her most prominent works, *Light Sentence*, exemplifies this approach. Using a complex structure and shadow patterns, it creates an enigmatic and contemplative space that compels viewers to reflect on concepts like surveillance, control, and resistance (Archer, 2002, 67).

• **The “Light sentence” installation: light, shadow, and movement in minimalist space**

*Light Sentence*, one of Mona Hatoum's most iconic installations, was created in 1992 and is recognized as one of her earliest major works. Utilizing principles of Minimalist art, this three-dimensional work is based on simple, repetitive geometric forms. The piece consists of two parallel metal mesh shelving units arranged linearly and repetitively in space, positioned at a specific distance from each other in a U-shape. These two sets of galvanized mesh shelving, an electric motor, and a moving light bulb occupy a space measuring 198 × 185 × 490 cm (Fig. 2). The bulb, moving slowly up and down, creates dynamic, multilayered shadows on surrounding walls, producing an enigmatic and contemplative space (Corwin, 2016, 34). The work premiered at the Centre Pompidou (part of the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris) and was exhibited in Hatoum's 2016 retrospective at Tate Modern, London (Nayeri, 2015, 12).

*Light Sentence* combines simple elements—light, shadow, and metal structures—to create a complex, multidimensional space that invites viewers into a visual and mental experience. The linearly arranged parallel metal mesh shelves allow light to pass through their grids, casting geometric, shifting shadows on surrounding surfaces. These shadows, changing with the bulb's movement, generate a dynamic, living space that compels

viewers to contemplate concepts like light, shadow, space, and time.

The way an installation shapes and activates space is based on the artist's analysis of the physical site and its contextual frameworks—social, historical, political, institutional, and theoretical. *Light Sentence* exemplifies this approach. Like Hatoum's other works, it is characterized by formal simplicity reflecting Minimalism's profound influence and artists like Eva Hesse on her artistic language (Archer, 2002, 45). However, inspired by Conceptual art and feminism, Hatoum developed an approach where content and the body (both the viewer's and the artist's) become central elements. She states: “From my earliest performances, the body became the core of my work. I always felt dissatisfied with works that addressed only the viewer's mind without physically engaging them. For me, artistic embodiment exists in the tangible, corporeal realm; the body is the axis of our perception—how can art ignore this fundamental reality? We engage with the world through our senses. Our first encounter with art is physical. I want my works to simultaneously engage the viewer's sensory and intellectual dimensions. Meanings emerge after this primary bodily experience” (Hatoum, 1995a, 23). Furthermore, in works like *Light Sentence*, Hatoum uses abstract and symbolic forms to address identity and political issues. These works reflect



Fig. 2. Mona Hatoum, "Light Sentence," 1992, wire mesh shelves, slow-moving lamp, dimensions 198 × 185 × 490 cm. Centre Pompidou, Paris. Source: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/mona-hatoum-light-sentence>

her personal experience as an exiled Palestinian while engaging broader global themes of power, surveillance, and resistance. As Archer (2002, 70) notes: “Through industrial materials and abstract forms, Hatoum creates spaces where personal and political concepts merge, inviting viewers to reflect on human conditions in the contemporary world” . Despite its Minimalist simplicity, the work embodies profound contradictions: light and shadow, isolation and unity, small and large coexist simultaneously. Each mesh cell casts a larger, more complex shadow—symbolizing collective power and unity against oppressive structures. This resonates particularly within 20th-century socio-political movements where individuals fought for human rights and freedom (Linden, 2016, 23).

Light Sentence is interpreted not only as a Minimalist-conceptual work but as a political statement. Hatoum employs light and shadow to examine surveillance, control, and resistance. The light—simultaneously illuminating and constricting—symbolizes power and hope amid darkness. By creating an unsettling yet captivating space, the work immerses viewers in sensations of imprisonment and powerlessness (Spence, 2016, 45). Inspired by her exile as a Palestinian and 1990s socio-political conditions (e.g., the Gulf War, arbitrary detentions in Western countries), Light Sentence raises critical questions about war, hope, and humanity. Ayad (2015, 14) observes: “Combining industrial and symbolic forms, Hatoum creates spaces where personal and political concepts fuse, compelling viewers to reflect on contemporary human realities”.

#### • Reflection of dadaist thought in Mona Hatoum’s “light sentence” installation

The Dada movement, which emerged during World War I (1914–1918) and continued through the 1920s and 1930s, is recognized as an anti-art and protest movement against the prevailing societal mentalities that Dadaists believed were the primary cause of the war. Employing diverse artistic forms, the movement sought to rebel against a society they deemed irrational and uncivilized (Richter, 1965, 45). Works produced by Dadaists were

often shocking, nonsensical, and irrational, serving as tools to reflect the confusion and absurdity dominating the world at that time (Tzara, 2003, 12). Marcel Duchamp, a prominent figure in this movement, challenged the concept of art and its societal value through works like his readymades, such as “Fountain” (1917)—an ordinary object presented as art simply by his signature (Duchamp, 1957, 32). This artistic approach, elevating mundane objects to the status of artworks, not only subverted traditional artistic values but also became a critique of consumerism and the wartime economy (Jones, 2004, 78).

Contemporary artist Mona Hatoum operates in a manner akin to the Dadaists in her work Light Sentence (1992). She creates a conceptual installation using readymade wire mesh cages. This approach—where the artist utilizes simple, accessible materials—recalls Dadaist methods in which any material could serve as an artistic tool (Ball, 1916, 23).

Light Sentence relates to the Dada movement not only in its materials and construction method but also in its content. The work, structured as a wire cage, symbolizes the entrapment of humans in conditions beyond their control. Hatoum depicts citizens mistakenly caught in wars and internal conflicts, imprisoned as symbolic captives within their own cages (Hatoum, 1995b, 58). This imagery, reminiscent of post-World War II conditions and its political crises, powerfully reflects the confusion and stress born of war (Adorno, 1978, 34). Hatoum’s approach in Light Sentence—her use of simple, readily available materials—and the resulting enigmatic, thought-provoking work, reflect Dadaist thought in the contemporary era. Like many Dadaist works, it seeks to challenge traditional artistic concepts and mirror the prevailing social and political conditions of society (Foster, 1996, 89).

Consequently, Mona Hatoum’s Light Sentence can be viewed as a continuation of the Dada movement. Using simple materials and anti-art methods, it effectively reflects the confusion and absurdity dominating the contemporary world, acting as a symbol of human

entrapment in circumstances beyond their control (Hatoum, 1995a, 60). This approach—where the artist employs any material to express profound social and political concepts—echoes Dadaist methods in which art served as a tool for rebellion against an irrational and uncivilized society (Richter, 1965, 50).

• **Foucault’s Panopticism and the representation of surveillance in the installation *Light Sentence***

As mentioned, *Light Sentence* consists of a bare light bulb suspended from the ceiling within a U-shaped framework of mass-produced, wire-mesh lockers. These lockers are arranged in a stepped formation around the inner U-shaped space, functioning like walls higher than human height. The enclosure is narrow enough to stand in, yet so cramped and blinding that one hardly dares to enter—except in the realm of imagination. The actual position of the viewer lies in the passageway between the exterior of the lockers and the real walls of the room. As the bulb is slowly raised and lowered by a motor, dramatic mesh-like shadows are cast restlessly across the gallery walls.

The bare bulb evokes the cold, soulless interior where deprivation and suffering prevail; the anonymous metal lockers recall cages, prisons, repression, and confinement. Yet, since many of the locker doors are left open, they may also symbolize freedom, release, and the possibility of escape (Deutsche, 1998, 67). To grasp the title *Light Sentence*, one must attend to the multiple meanings of the lockers. At first, the phrase may suggest the optimistic sense of “receiving a light sentence,” while the electric bulb reminds us that light also signifies illumination and hope. At the same time, however, *Light Sentence* may equally be read as a pun on “life sentence,” emphasizing the ominous connotations of prison cells and incarceration (Foucault, 1977, 200). In fact, it has been noted that the artist—before creating this work—was strongly influenced by Michel Foucault’s theory of surveillance and control (Hatoum, 1995b, 34).

Thus, *Light Sentence* may be seen as a partial reflection of a broader cultural-historical context, a reflection that finds its parallel in contemporary cultural and historical studies, particularly in the identification of “disjalini” (or visual

regimes). Disjalini refers to historical changes in modes of visual experience examined by philosophers such as Foucault and the American historian of ideas, Martin Jay. In his book *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Jay (1993, 45) demonstrates how René Descartes’ Enlightenment-era philosophical separation of body and mind continues to shape Western thought. In Foucault’s writings, the (re)discovery of central perspective in the European Renaissance embodies the rationalization of vision, which, in relation to structures of power, appears oppressive (Foucault, 1977, 150).

Central perspective, by situating the observer in an ideal, all-encompassing vantage point, aids the exercise of power. This position grants the observer complete control over what is seen. One of Foucault’s most famous examples of the power of the gaze embodied in the spatial structure of central perspective is Jeremy Bentham’s seventeenth-century prison design, the Panopticon. Foucault regarded the Panopticon as the first articulation of total surveillance and the disciplinary order that came to pervade much of modern society (*ibid.*, 200). He used it as key evidence to argue that modern society rests upon the depersonalizing power of social institutions.

The Panopticon was designed with cells arranged in a semicircle around a central guard tower, from which guards could observe prisoners. By contrast, prisoners, due to a complex system of lighting and blinds, could not see the guards. The Enlightenment-inspired principle behind this penal institution was that prisoners should never know when—or by whom—they were being watched. This uncertainty compelled them to feel as if they were under constant, invisible surveillance—not by the all-seeing eye of God, but by the all-seeing power of the state. Through such psychological control, combined with isolation and perpetual visibility, prisoners were forced into obedience and self-regulation (*ibid.*, 202).

The architectural similarities between *Light Sentence* and Bentham’s semicircular surveillance design are striking: in Hatoum’s work, the symbolic prison of the cages is arranged in a horseshoe around the “eye” of

the bulb, which, from its center, gazes upon all with its light. At the same time, the network of shifting shadows surrounding the viewer conjures an imaginary prison—a spatial metaphor for the mental prison of self-discipline, to which one may easily be condemned. This metaphor extends to the viewer's position within the installation: the viewer stands outside the physical cells of the cages yet inside the imaginary cells of the prison of shadows (Deutsche, 1998, 70).

Light Sentence is designed to draw the surrounding physical space inward, yet it was not created for any specific, fixed site. Rather, it has been installed in various locations and, thus, it is more precise to say that Light Sentence exists in multiple versions adapted to each site. It alters itself in relation to the room in which it is placed. The larger the room, the lighter, more poetic, and mysterious the shadows appear (Tate, 2013). In smaller spaces, the darker shadows highlight the work's menacing qualities.

In the version exhibited at Vision and Reality: 20th-Century Perspectives at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Denmark (2000), Light Sentence was installed in a narrow corridor, where visitors were guided through tight spaces along the structure's sides (Archer, 2000, 89). At irregular and unpredictable intervals, the slow rising and falling of the bulb was disrupted by sudden jerks and jolts. This caused the shadows on the walls to swing dangerously from side to side, inducing acute anxiety in viewers, as if the structure and the entire room were shaking. The movement of the shadows produced the illusion that all stable connections had collapsed, and the ground beneath one's feet was trembling. As the room seemed to lose its solid and stable nature, the human body felt intensely vulnerable and defenseless while navigating the shifting, unpredictable space (Hatoum, 1995a, 45).

This destabilization of space on multiple semantic levels is a hallmark of Mona Hatoum's work. Light Sentence may be read as a critical subversion of the specific physical environment of the "white cube" gallery. At the same time, Hatoum's transformative use of the highly rational organizational principles of Minimalism (the grid and

serial repetition) invites more existential interpretations of the work's spatial structure. The fixed structure of the grid is generally associated with stable order and the impulse to control physical space and the bodies within it. Perhaps the most prominent expression of this impulse can be traced to the use of the square grid in organizing pictorial reality since Renaissance studies of perspective (Krauss, 1979, 50).

Yet, in Light Sentence, the orderly grid is projected as distorted, diagonal shadows upon the white cube walls, introducing contradictions such as order versus disorder, rationality versus irrationality, and control versus lack of control. At the same time, the U-shaped wall divides the installation into two distinct realms: the "inside" (an interior space where the bulb glows steadily without casting shadows) and the "outside" (a dark passageway where chaotic shadows perform irregular movements). The contrast between light and darkness, stability and instability, and the viewer's own entanglement in the shadows directs interpretation toward an experience of exclusion (Deutsche, 1998, 72).

These structural relations have often led Light Sentence to be interpreted as a reflection on the living conditions of exiles, shaped by Mona Hatoum's personal experiences. While such meaning appears plausible, Hatoum herself has consistently resisted reductive biographical readings that seek to bind the rich interpretive potential of the work solely to her personal life (Hatoum, 1995a, 56). Biographical interpretation is readily accepted as the ultimate and "real" reading, since it sustains an expressive paradigm that views the artwork as a direct reflection of the artist's inner emotional experiences. This idea is reinforced by another dubious belief—that the artist's spiritual life is the primary and most significant content of the work (Krauss, 1979, 60).

• **Identity, exile, and surveillance: an interpretation of Mona Hatoum's "light sentence" installation through lived experience**  
Mona Hatoum was born in 1948, coinciding with the establishment of the Zionist regime and its associated violence. Forced to flee her home in Haifa, she sought

refuge in Lebanon. Growing up in Lebanon, she perpetually felt disconnected from her homeland and vulnerable, as her Palestinian heritage and accent marked her as distinct and foreign. In 1975, while visiting London, the Lebanese Civil War erupted, preventing her return. Consequently, she enrolled in art school and established her artistic career in England (Hatoum, 1995a, 23). Here, she found the art academy a sanctuary from Middle Eastern conflict, yet simultaneously felt alienated as a non-Western individual. As Guy Brett notes, Hatoum observed that the confidence displayed by British students stemmed from their sense of belonging and rootedness—a stark contrast to the restlessness and rootlessness she experienced (Said, 2000). Given this life narrative, *Light Sentence* can be interpreted as a spatial embodiment of the exiled experience: rootlessness, instability, vulnerability, displacement, and loss. Through its enclosed luminous space, the work symbolizes dual forms of exclusion: expulsion from a homeland rendered unreachable, and alienation within a foreign culture where one can never become a rooted, integrated member (Deutsche, 1998, 67).

Hatoum describes her experience: “I grew up in a war-torn country; my Palestinian family was forced from home into exile in Lebanon. This shaped my worldview. My work reflects this instability—where nothing is taken for granted, not even the solidity of ground beneath our feet. In ‘*Light Sentence*,’ viewers feel the earth slipping beneath them” (Hatoum, 1995a, 34).

This shared instability represents a quintessential modern experience. As Palestinian scholar Edward Said wrote: “Beyond the boundary between ‘us’ and ‘others’ lies a perilous terrain of collective vulnerability: where ancients exiled peoples, and modernity’s masses wander as refugees and displaced” (Said, 1990, 12).

*Light Sentence* exemplifies how Hatoum’s installations retain theatricality and performative dynamism—including the physical immediacy characteristic of her early live works (Said, 2000). He explains that even after abandoning live performances in 1989, Hatoum preserved the physical intensity and durational experience

of her earlier practice. Rather than positioning viewers as passive observers, she invites them to actively participate. In her installations, viewers engage spatially through multisensory interaction—sight, touch, space, light, materials, sound—forging deeply personal encounters (*ibid.*, 52).

Hatoum rejects the Western mind-body dichotomy she acutely felt upon migrating to London—a contrast to her Palestinian-Lebanese cultural roots. This became a catalyst for her persistent integration of sensory and intellectual experience. As she states: “In England, I noticed people seemed detached from their bodies—minds without physicality. Hence, my work emphasizes corporeality. I want a holistic experience engaging body, senses, mind, emotions—your entire being” (Hatoum, 1995b, 45).

In “*Light Sentence*,” this ambition manifests as an installation operating simultaneously on phenomenological and contextual levels. It immerses visitors physically, emotionally, and spatially while prompting critical reflection on cultural, theoretical, and historical themes: power, exile, confinement, behavioral regulation, and socio-psychological instability (Deutsche, 1998, 70).

The viewer’s embodied participation hinges on the installation’s spatial design. Hatoum compels visitors into the narrow passage between cage and wall, denying detached observation from a “safe” external vantage point. This exemplifies installation art’s “aesthetics of reception,” where—as Gerhard Gravenhorst asserts—“being with, in, and amidst the artwork is fundamental” (Grave, 2001, 34).

Within “*Light Sentence*,” viewers experience simultaneous physical and psychological entrapment. This is viscerally materialized when the cage’s mesh patterns cast shifting shadows onto their faces and bodies—symbolically incarcerating them within the structure. Thus, the viewer’s bodily experience as an active participant forms not merely a supplement, but the essential foundation for interpreting this critical work (Deutsche, 1998, 72). By inviting active engagement, the installation places viewers under perceived perpetual surveillance—mirroring Foucault’s panoptic theory. Hatoum rejects mind-body

separation, insisting on a holistic experience engaging senses and emotions. *Light Sentence* not only reflects exile and vulnerability but compels reflection on power, surveillance, and identity—collectively encapsulating experiences of identity and surveillance as summarized in Fig. 3.

#### • Resistance in Mona Hatoum's installation *light sentence* from Foucault's perspective

Foucault, in his theories, points out that power is always accompanied by resistance, and that every surveillance structure inherently generates the potential for resistance (Foucault, 1982, 221). In this installation, Hatoum uses wire mesh cages and a moving light to create a space in which the viewer simultaneously experiences feelings of surveillance and confinement. This space can be interpreted as a metaphor for the conditions in the Palestinian territories occupied by the Zionist regime. In his panoptic theory, Foucault argues that constant and invisible surveillance forces individuals into self-regulation (Foucault, 1995, 202). In *Light Sentence*, the moving light and the shadows of the cages symbolize this constant surveillance. The viewer feels observed, even in the absence of a physical observer. This situation mirrors that of Palestinians in the occupied territories, where they are subject to intense military and social surveillance, with their every movement controlled (Khalidi, 2010, 45).

At the same time, Foucault maintains that every structure of power creates within itself the possibility of resistance (Foucault, 1982, 225). In *Light Sentence*, by physically

entering the space of the work, the viewer is subconsciously invited to resist the surveillance. This resistance can be interpreted as a symbol of Palestinian resistance against occupation and oppression. Despite intense surveillance and numerous restrictions, Palestinians have continuously resisted through various means, including civil, cultural, and artistic forms of resistance (Pappe, 2006, 112).

Hatoum, as an artist of Palestinian descent, reflects her personal experiences of exile and occupation in her work. *Light Sentence* can be seen as a metaphor for the Palestinian territories under Zionist occupation. The wire mesh cages represent the borders and constraints imposed on Palestinian lives, while the moving light represents constant surveillance and repression (Shohat, 2006, 78). However, the presence of the viewer within this space and their interaction with the piece also symbolizes resistance and resilience. Despite all limitations, Palestinians have preserved their identity and culture and have continued to resist (Khalidi, 2010, 56) (Fig. 4).

Foucault (1980, 142) emphasizes cultural and artistic resistance as a significant form of opposing power. Through works like *Light Sentence*, Hatoum not only expresses her personal experiences but also gives voice to the Palestinian people. This artwork, as a form of artistic resistance, draws the viewer's attention to the situation in Palestine and invites them to reflect on injustice and the occupation of Palestinian lands (Said, 1993, 23).

#### Conclusion

Mona Hatoum's installation *Light Sentence* (1992) creates a dynamic space where visual elements—such as metal mesh cages and a moving light—serve as metaphors for constraint and surveillance in modern societies. By positioning viewers within structures that cast shifting shadows on walls and their own bodies, the work generates a physical and psychological experience that evokes a sense of being watched. The cages, with their open doors and gridded design, symbolize not only the barriers that confine individual identity but also, through their invitation to enter and interact, offer the possibility of reclaiming space and resisting these limitations. The

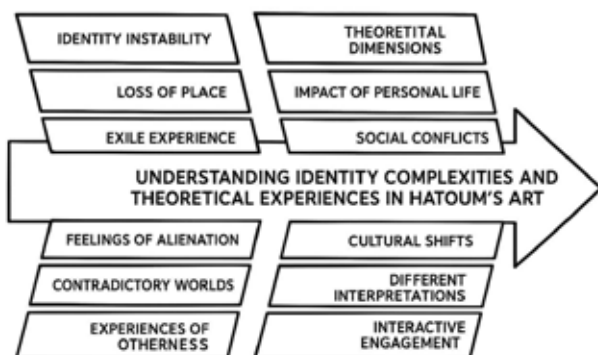


Fig. 3. Analysis of identity experiences and surveillance in Mona Hatoum's Installation. Source: Authors.

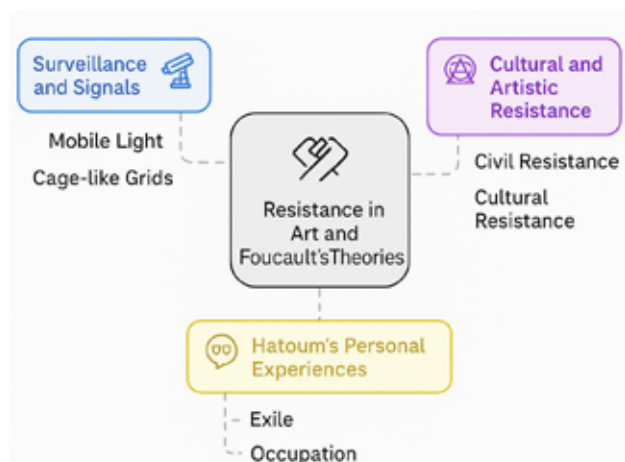


Fig. 4. Resistance in Mona Hatoum's Light Sentence installation. Source: Authors.

moving light, constantly shifting direction, acts like an invisible sentinel—its presence felt but unseen—aligning precisely with the concept of perpetual surveillance in contemporary societies and compelling viewers to reflect on mechanisms of power and control.

This visual and sensory experience is rooted in Hatoum's life as someone who has endured exile and occupation. The cages recall the physical and psychological boundaries imposed on Palestinians in occupied territories, while the moving light represents the ceaseless surveillance permeating every aspect of daily life. Yet the installation does not merely represent constraints; the viewer's active presence and movement through the space symbolically evoke the endurance and resistance of a people who preserve their identity and culture despite repression.

Furthermore, employing Foucault's panoptic framework—which emphasizes invisible surveillance and self-policing—the work reveals how individuals internalize constraints under power, even without a physical overseer. Light and shadows in Light Sentence render this idea tangible: the gridded shadows cast onto the viewer's body intensify the feeling of entrapment, integrating them into the work itself. This interaction creates a critical experience that not only reflects specific conditions but also addresses broader issues of domination and control in the contemporary world. Through this

spatial creation, Hatoum connects her personal experience of exile to a collective narrative, transforming art into a vehicle for cultural resistance.

By combining industrial materials and abstract forms, the installation invites reflection on the link between individual and collective identity, demonstrating how art can amplify the voices of the oppressed. Here, resistance emerges not overtly or directly, but through the viewer's subtle, symbolic engagement with the space: walking among the cages and sensing shadows upon themselves, they unconsciously resist surveillance—a process mirroring the struggle to preserve identity against oppressive forces. Thus, Light Sentence functions as both an artistic and political statement, drawing global attention to human conditions and transforming contemporary art into an arena for critiquing power structures.

The work exemplifies art's capacity to address profound human concerns. By creating an immersive experience, it transforms viewers from passive spectators into active participants who, through engagement, gain deeper insight into resistance and identity.

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