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Language as visual and conceptual tool in selected video installations of Candice Breitz and Mona Hatoum

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Abstract

This research focuses on selected artworks by contemporary artists Mona Hatoum and Candice Breitz to critically examine how they have explored language as a visual and conceptual tool through the use of video and installation. The primary aim is to consider how and why these artists have explored paradoxical aspects of language and to examine the ways in which they have used their medium to question or challenge the adequacy of communication through language. Born in Palestine but exiled in Britain as a result of the outbreak of war in her home country, Mona Hatoum's artworks reach deeply into her own experience of exile. Her video work *Measures of Distance* (1988) is concerned with language and its effectiveness in communication between people separated by geographical and emotional distance, a theme that is very close to the concerns I have in my own practical work. I critically examine Hatoum's artwork to demonstrate how the complex layering of spoken word, written script and visual imagery, together with the complication of the viewer's position, merge to foreground contradictions and conflicting states. I consider Candice Breitz's investigations into the contradictory and provocative nature of speech and language against the background of her upbringing in apartheid South Africa and critically examine her concern with the ways in which identity is culturally constructed. Her preoccupation with the relationship between the mass media and the linguistic formation of self is examined. I have chosen to focus mainly on her video installations: *Babel Series* (1999), *Alien* (2002), *Karaoke* (2000), *Four Duets* (2000) and *Legend* (2004).

My own practical work is discussed alongside these concerns, particularly in relation to contemporary electronic communication such as email and sms text messaging – along with the frustration that results from its impersonal nature (in contrast to old fashioned letter writing). I also discuss its impact on relationships separated by great geographical distances.