

PROFILES: ARTISTS IN EXILE

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The suppression of freedom of speech in the Middle East has always been met with opposition and resistance. Some artists have dedicated their life to this cause even after fleeing their home countries, labeling themselves as artists in exile and becoming an uncensored voice for the people through their art.

Etymologically, the word exile refers to the separation of earthly life from heavenly life. Whereas emigration refers to voluntary migration, exile is the involuntary departure and separation from one's home. An exiled person is deprived of the right to live in their own land, often because their works challenge their government's narratives.

But have artists always been better off in exile than artists living in their homeland? According to many artists, exile inspires their art rather than causing it to disintegrate. Lamentably, some are not fortunate enough to ever return to their home countries, stranded in a state of perpetual longing and unbelonging.

Mona Hatoum^{1,2,3}

Mona Hatoum is a globally renowned contemporary artist known for her work in sculpture, installation, performance, and video. She was born in 1952 in Beirut, Lebanon to Palestinian parents, who initially lived in Haifa but moved to Lebanon in 1948 due to political unrest. Hatoum identifies as Palestinian and not Lebanese as she—like many exiled Palestinians—is not eligible for Lebanese citizenship.

Hatoum enrolled in Beirut University College with the hope of studying graphic design; however, in 1975, she took a trip to London in pursuit of a new career. Coincidentally, the Lebanese civil war broke out during her trip, forcing her into exile.

Hatoum's artwork revolves around confrontational themes like violence, oppression, and voyeurism, with a focus on gender and the human body. Tensions are evident from her juxtaposition of opposites such as beauty and horror and desire and revulsion.

Hatoum unites personal themes with political ones and public themes with private ones. She sees her role as an artist not to answer questions but to pose them, and as a Palestinian artist who has spent the majority of her life in London, the question of what and where "home" is shapes her work.

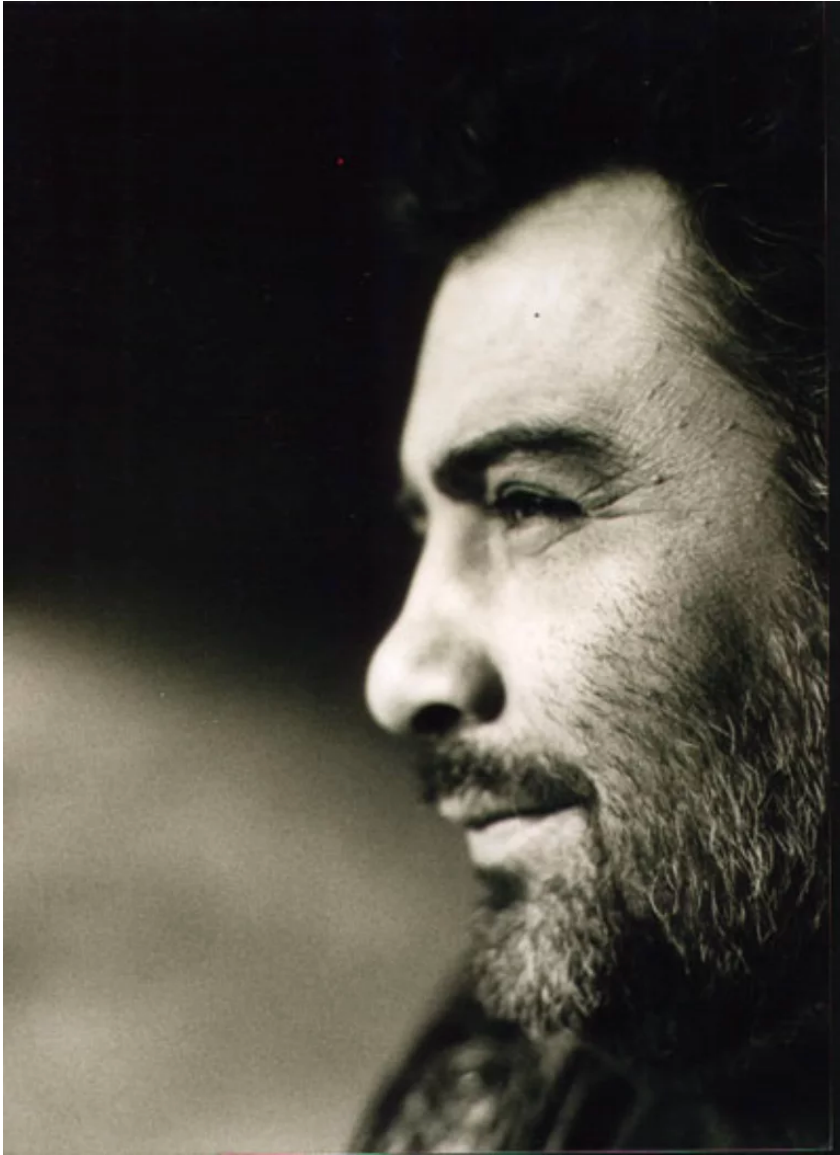




Measures of Distance (1988) by Mona Hatoum



Hot Spot (2006) by Mona Hatoum



Ahmet Kaya^{4,5,6,7,8}

Ahmet Kaya is a Kurdish-Turkish folk singer who has recorded approximately 20 albums in his career. He is known for his protest music and social justice advocacy. His music often includes themes of sacrifice, hope, and motherly love.

Born in the province of Malatya to a Kurdish father and a Turkish mother, Kaya always identified himself as a “Kurd of Turkey.” He first encountered music at the age of six and was influenced by his father, who bought him a real bağlama, a traditional Anatolian seven-stringed musical instrument.

His professional career took a turn for the worse on February 10, 1999, during a televised music awards ceremony. After winning the “Musician of the Year” award, Kaya announced that he wanted to produce music in Kurdish, his native language, as he was of Kurdish origin.

Following this announcement, Kaya, who had already been under government scrutiny due to his leftist ideology, faced massive opposition from Turkish people and officials alike. Later, Kaya was attacked by many celebrities in his country. “All of

a sudden,” his wife recalls, “all of those chic women and men, they all turned into monsters, grabbing forks and knives and throwing them at us, insulting, booing. Imagine the atmosphere changing in just five minutes, almost a Kafkaesque transformation.”

This incident led to persecution that forced him to leave Turkey; Kaya moved to France in June 1999, escaping his March 2000 sentencing to 45 months in prison for spreading separatist propaganda. In 2000, he died from a heart attack while in exile at the age of 43 and was buried at the Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris.

Although many artists describe their conditions with different words—“exile,” “emigration,” “displacement,” “homelessness,” or “diaspora”—many agree on one thing: an artist becomes a part of a global movement by producing books, films, ideas, theater, music, and paintings in the languages of their home countries. The study of exiled artists is a window into the cultural and sociopolitical dimension of the arts as a whole, shedding light on the exchange and cross-fertilization that have enriched contemporary arts.