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**abstract:**

Conversation with Miriam Cahn on the occasion of her exhibition at the Modern Art Museum in Warsaw. 

**Katarzyna Bojarska** - Assistant professor in the Department of Cultural Studies of the SWPS University. From 2008 to 2019, she worked in the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Co-founder of Widok. Since 2024 head of Center for Comparative Research on Memory Cultures (CCRM). Author of articles and translations interested in the relations of art, literature, history and psychoanalysis. She translated among others Michael Rothberg's "Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization" (Warsaw 2016). Author of a book "Wydarzenia po Wydarzeniu: Białoszewski – Richter – Spiegelman" [Events after the Event: Białoszewski – Richter – Spiegelman] (Warsaw 2012). Editor and one of translators of Ernst van Alphen's book "Criticism as Intervention: Art, Memory, Affect" (Krakow 2019). Recipient of numerous research grants and awards, including Fulbright, National Centre for Science, Horizon2020.

**Miriam Cahn** - Swiss painter, graphic artist, and writer. She studied at the Allgemeine Gewerbeschule in Basel. In the 1970s she associated with the Swiss Stampa gallery which gathered a young international community of artists experimenting with the new media, such as video and performance. In 1983 she had her first institutional solo show in Kunsthalle Basel, and a year later she represented Switzerland at the 41st Venice Biennale. Her work can be found in collections of MoMA, New York, Tate Modern, London, Reina Sofía Museum,  Madrid, as well as at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. Miriam Cahn is the recipient of many awards, such as the Käthe Kollwitz award (1998), the Meret Oppenheim award (2005), and the award of the city of Basel, Basler Kunstpreis (2013).

## re-considered escape ways

**Katarzyna Bojarska:** After getting hold of your recently published book, *Writing in Rage*,<sup>1</sup> I could not stop reading it for several reasons which I will address later on in our conversation. For now, I would just like to ask you about one detail regarding your female genealogy: grandmother-mother-daughter (yourself), a detail that caught my attention. In 1977, it says, you came to Warsaw for the Peace Congress. Could you talk a little more about that visit?

**Miriam Cahn:** Oh yes. I was a part of a delegation from OFRA, which was a new leftist feminist organization. The conference was held in the Palace of Culture and Science, it was international, Arafat came, a daughter of Allende came, and many other important people. It was very interesting. After two days I had had enough, and I decided to take a walk around the city and that was something. In the conference everyone was envisioning a socialist future with equality and justice for all. But when I found myself on the streets, I saw the poorest and most miserable city I had ever visited. I was in Peru and Bolivia before, so I had seen poverty. That day in Warsaw I realized how all these ideas clash with reality, with the lives of ordinary people. We were accommodated in the Bristol Hotel, we talked international and universal, but at the same time we were discouraged from talking to the Polish people, from inviting them to the bar.



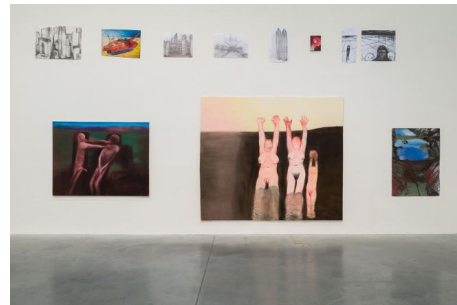
Meet the Artist, Miriam Cahn, Art Basel, 2019

**KB:** Were you involved in OFRA as an activist or an artist-activist?

**MC:** No, at that time these were separate activities to me. I was an activist in the feminist movement and in an anti-AKW [anti-nuclear-energy – ed.] movement, because they wanted to build a big power plant near Basel. So, we demonstrated, and some people lived on the site. In the end, they gave up the construction. But to be honest, I was never much of an activist, a protester. After those experiences, I decided not to get involved in that kind of way anymore. Which is not to say I refrain from engaging in politics, only it's in a different form.

**KB:** Do you consider your art political?

**MC:** I do. I consider my art to be political but not in a sense of polit-art. And I consider my art feminist. Pipilotti Rist, the most famous Swiss artist, says feminism is a question of honor. I like that very much. For as long as it is necessary, I will be a feminist. And I am afraid it will be necessary as long as I live.



Miriam Cahn, exhibition view: *I as Human*, Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw. Photo: Daniel Chrobak.

**KB:** In your text entitled *Anger My Machine* (1990) you powerfully stated:

I too love men, love their work and their art; their everyday world surrounds me, gives me food for thought, exerts influence on me and enters into competition with my work. BUT: I am a woman artist, working from out of my day-to-day life, out of my female history and biography, working with my body in anger against disregard and violence, working with the discord and disjointedness that I experience daily... (138).

Thirty years went by and we are all getting impatient and enraged with how things remain the same...

**MC:** It is still the same! #metoo shows it is still the same, from the 1970s onwards. The struggle continues. Equality needs to be legalized and sexual violence criminalized – this seems to be the only solution.

**KB:** Would you say that with exhibitions like *I as Human* you can intervene in the *status quo*? What I mean is that people come to the gallery and they leave enraged or mobilized or confused to such an extent that they will rethink their political and ideological choices.

**MC:** I treat my exhibitions more like commentaries than actual interventions. It is not the function of art to have a direct influence. Indirectly is how art operates. Neither according to a plan or for a purpose. My art works with distance, hence I say it is a commentary, in my case an angry one. (laughs)

**KB:** Let me return to the chronicle of your life once again. In 1995, you went to Sarajevo and exhibited there. It was during the ceasefire, a few months before the siege ended, before the Dayton agreement.

**MC:** Yes, but at the time I was going there nobody really knew whether it was going to end or when. Obala Art Center invited me and I immediately decided to go. They came to me to Basel. I was so touched by this invitation.

**KB:** You noted: "doing an exhibition meant normality meant inviting international artists." Did it feel "normal" to you?



Miriam Cahn, *at the border*, 2018

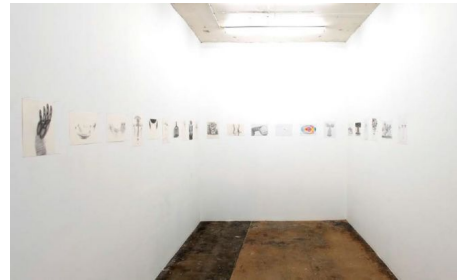
**MC:** These were their words: “art as a token of normality.” I would have never said it, if not for them. It was their declaration of survival. Very powerful. They wanted their own images, images of their own, not what Western media was showing, especially when it came to Muslim women.

**KB:** When I read that sentence in your notes, it echoed with what collaborators of Susan Sontag and Haris Pasovic, who staged *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo in 1993, were saying.

**MC:** I have had many discussions with my friends in Switzerland, who could not understand why I was doing it. For the people from Obala Art Center it was as – if not more – important than water or food. Art was like a *Lebensmittel* for them, indispensable for survival, for living on. I realized it was so good for me to hear that. Coming from a world where art is treated as a luxury, an excess to ordinary life. I liked seeing my work in this new light.

**KB:** And being so close to war, how did that feel? You wrote: “i was 'occupying' myself with war, cahns got a tic about war, must be because of her history - + biography constellation.” (102)

**MC:** Unbelievable. Inconceivable. Too close. For me it was the first time, after World War II which left a huge trauma in my family, that I encountered war and nationalist violence and genocide. It was so frustrating, the hope of the 1989 opening suddenly ruined in 1991. Upon my return home, to Switzerland, I began closely observing the everyday lives of the people surrounding me, my friends, the non-war normality. I saw the familiar landscape and ways of living anew. I began questioning certainties.

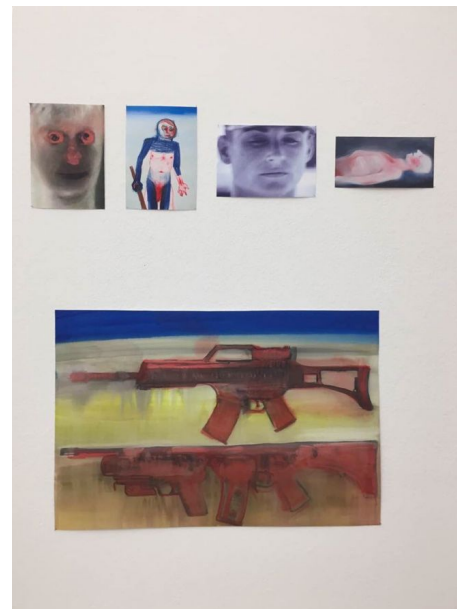


Miriam Cahn, *what I see*, 27.08.1992-15.05.1993, exhibition view: *sarajevoarbeit/le travail sarajevo*, Galerie Jocelyn Wolff, Paris, 2011

**KB:** Would you say the war in the Balkans made you realize history as trauma was not over, but actually unfolding before your very eyes?

**MC:** I would not say so. I have always been interested in history and in politics. How could I not be! My parents, as war survivors, talked a lot about history and war: the Algerian war, Switzerland's attitude towards atomic weapons, etc. It was not so much their experience or testimony that shaped me but rather ceaseless conversations we had at home about what was going on out there. So, my house, my world has always been populated by all these decolonizing people, by victims and refugees, suffering and combating.

**KB:** In that sense, your works are immersed in history as it unfolds and in memory as it recurs. Not only Hiroshima, but also the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of 1986, the Gulf War in 1990–91, 9/11, and many other historical moments that we share. I was struck by your note written in 1983 (*WILD LOVING*): "i dream that my hair is falling from my head in tufts like with the people from Hiroshima. i am the first in whom the contamination of our region makes itself visible." (30) To me it seems like the contamination you talked about enters your paintings and, in turn, intoxicates us, implicates us on so many levels. I treat many of your works as history paintings for our times: feminist, dissident, resistant and protesting images in themselves.



Miriam Cahn, exhibition view: documenta 14, *learning from Athens*, documenta Halle, Kassel, Germany 2017

We are invited, if not forced, to take history personally and make it personal, painful and present. This is a complicated and demanding process.

**MC:** It is, but I hope it works. I try to put myself in the position of various historical protagonists, try to imagine what they see, how they escape, where they hide, how their bodies are huddled one next to the other. And yes, you are welcome to imagine that for yourself while looking at my works.

**KB:** Do you need or want to be in control of what your works mean, how they are understood or felt by people? Let's take Eichmann for example, do we need to know what is in the picture, and what if we don't get it? Is it a fatal or beneficial misreading?

**MC:** No, I am not interested in control. I give guidance. The titles as well as the arrangement of the works in the show serve as some kind of guidance. But it also leaves a lot of freedom to the viewer. Freedom to wander (emotionally, intellectually) but also to get lost. You can feel and think whatever you find available in the moment. I am only pointing to things which are important to me. We might miss one another but this is fine. I am not into control. No.

**KB:** I was thinking of artists such as Luc Tuymans, for example, who would spend a lot of time explaining his works, pointing to the right contexts and interpretations.

**MC:** Oh no. I am not into this. See, I do think what Tuymans is doing is polit-art. It is not my thing. I like his early works, they are more open.



Miriam Cahn, *to the right, quick*, 2005-2017

**KB:** In those paintings where the figure depicted is you (as we learn from the title), what are we to make of it? Who are you for us? A medium, a translator, a witness, a messenger who brings bad news? Is the female body in the picture that of Miriam Cahn?

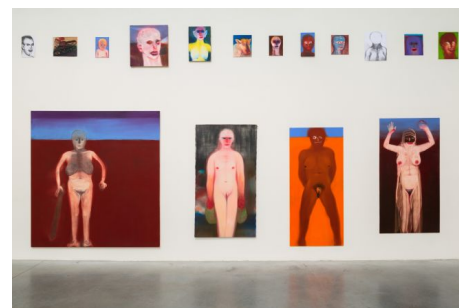
**MC:** Somehow it is. But not like in Maria Lassnig's painting. Lassnig is very interesting for me, precisely because she used to do something different than me. She worked with the self-portrait. I loved her work very much, as well as her attitude, she did not give a shit. She used to say, I am Picasso. I admire her a lot.

**KB:** Interesting that you bring her up. We have recently published a couple of interpretations of her work occasioned by Lassnig's show at Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw. I can see how you two aim in a similar direction, yet in two different ways. What I find especially interesting though is the choice to paint in order to pursue the same feminist and historical-political struggle.

**MC:** You see, I have never thought the technique is important. It is an individual choice. Painting is better for me. Better than video or performance. Of course, in the 1970s we had so many discussions about making these kinds of choices. There were these fights going on: you can't paint anymore! But painting is mine.

**KB:** Would you say your practice is biographical or autobiographical? One critic called your work "a biographical way of looking at the world." What does it really mean for you?

**MC:** It seems to me every artist shows her life. Also, not only, I am a person with a biography, and it penetrates my work. But it does not mean my work is biographical or autobiographical in the



Miriam Cahn, exhibition view: *I as Human*, Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw. Photo: Daniel Chrobak.

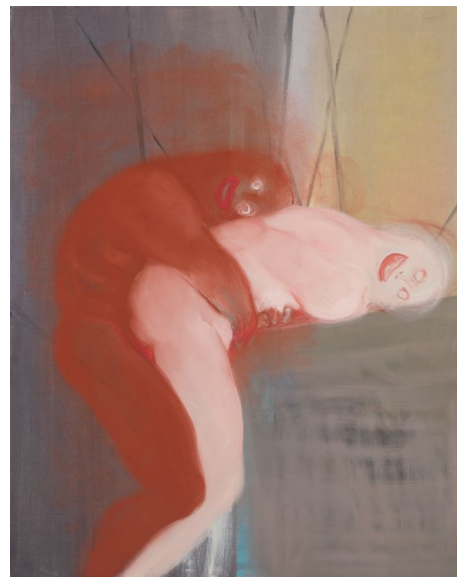
sense that it is about me. It is important but it does not exhaust the sense of my work.

**KB:** Maybe it is time to rethink what autobiography means: not when something that happened in the artist's life is represented in their work. Rather, that the artist can be perceived as a medium of a common story. What happens in the world, registers through the artist. General history becomes what it is because we get it through you. Such reframing would allow us to rethink women's autobiographies as an almost obligatory filter for their art.

**MC:** Oh, you are so right. It is such a ghetto. Women's art. I'd rather say, it has nothing to do with me. (Laughs) It is so limiting and so unfair how it has traditionally been read. It should not be, but it is, still. Just like inequality. I find it so enraging that women still have to fight to be equal humans.

**KB:** Let me return to *Writing in Rage* as it is such a lavish source of thoughts and feelings. I was very much struck by your discovery of antisemitism among your friends. The discovery, that – as I read it – positions you very powerfully. You write:

was i not to this person's  
liking? did she know  
that I was a jew? i was  
unable to react, my mood  
had taken a nose-dive,  
these were my friends, these were my jews. my jews were not  
to people's liking. These were my friends. my friends and my  
jews. (100)



Miriam Cahn, *loving*, 2009 + 2018

And then a poem follows:

my jews in germany  
 my jews in switzerland  
 my jews in japan  
 ATOMIC BOMBS (117)

**MC:** It was a very intense moment, you are right. I grew up in Switzerland. I knew I was a Jew. But Switzerland is not Germany. Of course, I knew about the Holocaust, but I did not care, I could say. It has changed with time. I went on a DAAD stipend to Berlin. And it all became much heavier, so to speak. I began to ask my father more and more questions. How it was and why exactly, how it was in Switzerland for them, for us. What it meant for him to go to Germany (he used to go a lot to Germany). I have begun realizing what it MEANT to be Jewish. Not a matter of choice. With my name, I am Jewish. It was in the 1970s. There is a story to it, do you mind if I tell it.

**KB:** Of course not!

**MC:** It was in the mid-1970s. Fassbinder was working on a theater play in Frankfurt, entitled *Der Müll, die Stadt und der Tod* (Trash, the City, and Death). It was about a greedy Jew, a real-estate guy in Frankfurt who relentlessly plays with German guilt over the Holocaust to earn big money. The show was cancelled, Fassbinder charged with anti-Semitism. Big scandal. And I remember being totally confused: Fassbinder was "our guy"! What was wrong with these people? And then I realized he used such a cliché and I began thinking what if the so-called conservative Jews are right and not him? What would that mean for me? I think I still have a letter I wrote to my father and one he wrote me back explaining why he thought it was antisemitic. That was when I began realizing what ordinary antisemitism meant.

It was in clichés, in language, in images. Initially I was shocked, I did not know how to react. Now I know. Antisemitism is not going away.

**KB:** Is it something that makes you angry?

**MC:** Now, when it happens, yes. Also, when I hear it, I react to whomever says it. You can say whatever you like when I am not in your company, but when I am here as Miriam Cahn you cannot be saying these sorts of things. It is a little like #metoo. You began thinking, oh my God, it was my friend, I knew him so well ...

**KB:** Well but it is never about individuals really, but rather structures.

**MC:** But I know individuals! It is my friend who says this, right? So, I can tell them, stop doing this, here is what it means (what it means to me). They might not know, I get it, it is structural.

**KB:** Let me now concentrate for a while on your paintings. One in particular that was included in the exhibition in Warsaw, entitled *lying around / foreign body* (2016), is an uncanny shape, something that looks like a heart that was torn out of a chest...



Miriam Cahn, *lying around / foreign body* (2016)

**MC:** (laughing) So many people say that. It is only a tree!

**KB:** It seems to me nothing is ever *only* something in your work. First and foremost, we are confronted with what is in the painting. The presence is most of the time very intense, imposing, difficult to resist and even more so to reject. Interpretation serves as a relief if not salvation. The fact that meaning cannot be grasped or determined in a single interpretative gesture, annoys us. It always seems at least two-sided: organic and inorganic, human and inhuman, abstract and figurative, dead and alive (as in so many of your horizontal naked human figures).

This troubling proximity, the tension in the image, why is this so crucial for you?

**MC:** Well, it is the only interesting thing in art. Even Warhol with his Brillo boxes worked with tension. It fascinates me because it plays with expectations. What I concentrate on is how not to make things too clear. Of course, one could say, this is only a tree. Yet it haunts, it will never stop.

**KB:** You wrote that you tend to get impatient with people who want to know things for real. Who want to get it once and for all. Is this a dog? Why does it have three legs? In that sense your works are unbearable, as it is unbearable not to know. Once you are not sure what an image does to you, then it starts doing the *real* thing.

**MC:** Exactly. But art is not a safe space. It is disappointing. You never get what you expect. Art should not give you what you expect. Then it is false or a commodity. So, I get frustrated when someone is trying to push me there.

**KB:** Overwhelmed by images nowadays, and being producers of images ourselves, we give in to the illusion of control and mastering what's captured in the picture. Hence, I guess, the difficulty in welcoming and accepting disappointment. I was wondering what the color code is when it comes to painted bodies and landscapes in your works: do colors carry particular meanings? Or is it something else each time depending on the temperature of your emotions and intensity of your relationship to what is being painted?

**MC:** Well, I used the code only in the beginning; the women were blue, the men were red. Now it seems rather silly, but then it worked for me just fine.



Miriam Cahn, *l'origine du monde stares back*, 2017

**KB:** In *Writing in Rage*, we can find an excerpt from “reading color” (processing) where you offer a little guidance (again):

yellow = toxic, deadly, death, destruction  
 magenta (red) = to preserve, to store, a storehouse  
 cyan (blue)= plants, shadow, shade  
 mixture = paths, roads, car-parks, indeterminate terrain  
 movement of color (nuclear bombs)  
 i hurl the water with the colors/paints – yellow, magenta, cyan  
 – up the  
 paper (like a nuclear explosion), they flow down again (like  
 fallout), escape  
 my control and mix together (contamination). (144)

You talk about processing images and scenes you saw, about intensities and affects you felt overwhelmed by. It reads as a fascinating testimony of art-working, especially when you enumerate “various ways of seeing” and listening, registering movement as related to working in various media such as drawing, oil painting, filming, watercolors, etc.

**MC:** Yes. I am trying to work and at the same time reflect on how this work is actually being done. Writing for me is like painting. A way of processing the world. I am very happy the book *Writing in Rage* came out. I am glad to have shared this part of my work too. Processes attract me. This self-analysis is another kind of work.

**KB:** I can see the work of analysis in some of your paintings as well. Like *The Woman Warrior* (2013) for example. Not only is the subject matter being analyzed in painting, but the painterly portrait is self-analyzing, so to speak. I'm not sure if that makes sense. What I mean is how one image seems to get wiped, or the paint is smeared, the contour emerges on the surface, eyes are as if "reworked" etc. The color-pencil-like lines make me think of a kid drawing over a painting. How does it work for you?



Miriam Cahn, *woman warrior*, 2017

**MC:** Mostly it is not very clear where one ends as a human. Where are our bodily limits or contours, if you like. Who knows this for sure? Nobody. We know it by feeling. We protect and cover our holes so that the outside does not get in, we feel uncomfortable or excited when someone gets too near. Another space of indistinction that fascinates me.

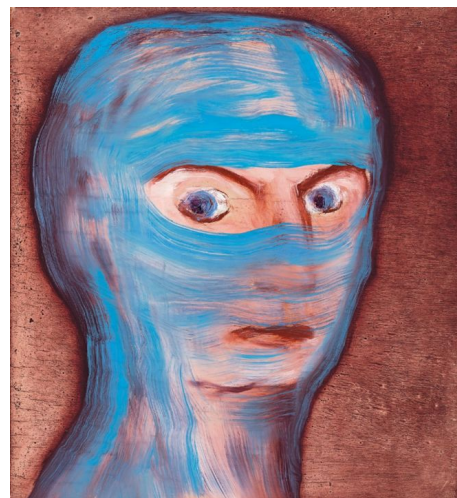
**KB:** In some of your paintings the figures merge with the background or with one another, sometimes they disintegrate, or lose bodily parts, sometimes they "alienate" themselves. The directness of this encounter is challenging: the helplessness of these creatures, the implied violence that leaves marks on their bodies, their skinlessness, their bare heads, etc. All this and more, builds the intensity which then begs for release. I can see now how the "human" in the title *Ich als Mensch (I as Human)* is again playing with expectations and disappointment between the traces of a body and the shadow of an idea.

**MC:** Exactly. I know it is grammatically incorrect in English. But I like the idea that you stumble on this phrase. And yet, is human something we are sure of? I don't think so. Who is and who is not human? Where does a person begin and what is its surroundings, what human commonality evolves in a space – you can look at this in paintings depicting groups of people, adults and children; people on the move, in violent relationships and in restless conditions.

**KB:** Who are these people?

**MC:** It depends. I paint people I have seen, like Freddie Mercury (*Popstar*, 2014) seen on television, or Meredith Grey also seen on TV. Others are figures like the handsome Nazi, woman warrior, blackwoman, refugees, etc. I have most probably seen them. I cannot stop seeing them, different people merge into figures on my canvases. I imagine them. One space, like here in Warsaw, is really something different for how these works begin to work with one another, how they relate to one another and to the people in the room, and how the people in the images relate to people looking at them, and how people in the room become the public, connected by this experience of being with my works.

**KB:** Also, there is an interesting choreography, looking around, turning around and walking in circles, being in front and with one's back to the image at the same time. Looking and being looked at, being surrounded.



Miriam Cahn, *meredith grey seen yesterday on tv*, 2015

**MC:** As you can see some of my paintings are mounted at eye level, so that the figures look back at the viewers.

**KB:** Yes, and we are all caught up in this feedback loop of gazing, or witnessing, when one witnesses for the other and imagines lives that are no more.

**Katarzyna Bojarska owes her gratitude to the artist, Marta Dziewańska and Jocelyn Wolff. Images courtesy of Miriam Cahn, Galerie Jocelyn Wolff, Paris and Meyer Riegger, Berlin/Karlsruhe.**

- 1 *Miriam Cahn, [Writing in Rage](#) (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2019). All references to this book are in brackets in the text. See also Miriam Cahn, [Mare Nostrum](#), documenta 14.*

