

Meyer Riegger

MIRIAM CAHN

Text by Katinka Bock, 2018

Miriam Cahn

Born in Basle in 1949, she now lives in the Swiss mountains, in Bregaglia (Grisons). She is known above all for her paintings in colour, although she began to paint in oils only in 1990. Prior to that, she created installations and drawings in charcoal – sometimes on a large scale in situ – and interventions in public space, always of an ephemeral nature. Constantly in a state of experimentation with her artistic means, she works with the media of performance, sculpture, film, sound and photography.

The body is a major cursor in her work – her own body used as a tool or instrument, the human body, the bodies of animals, but also the body of the city and of the house, and of objects. Her work used to be in black and white, and then, like television, discovered colour. It was Chernobyl that brought colour into her work.

“Je suis une passoire” – I am a sieve, what is around me and what is going on in the world infiltrates me. Some things are lost and some remain inside me.

Titles as Material (always, or almost always, in German)

Lesen in Staub : lire dans la poussière : reading in dust : leggere nella polvere : leer entre el polvo

Schweigende Schwester : la soeur qui se tait : silent sister : sorella silenziosa : hermana silenciosa

Porno : Porn

Mein Frausein ist mein öffentlich(st)er Teil : mon être-femme est ma part (la plus) publique : my woman-ness is my(most) public part: il mio essere donna é la parte di me piú pubblica : mi feminidad es mi parte pública

Wachraum : salle d'observation : watch room/observation room : stanza del risveglio : sala de guardia

Haus Fernseher Bett : maison télévision lit : house television bed : casa televisione letto : casa televisión cama

Grand-mère - mère - Miriam : grandmother - mother - Miriam : la nonna - la madre - Miriam : la abuela - la madre - Miriam

schreiender Säugling + Körperteile : nourrisson hurleur et parties du corps : screaming nursling + body parts : neonato piangente + parti del corpo : bebé gritando + partes del cuerpo

Lachen bei Gefahr - rire face au danger : laughing in face of danger : ridere al pericolo : reirse en el peligro

Unbenennbar. Was mich anschaut. : innommable. ce qui me regarde. : unnameable. what is looking at me : indicibile. ciò che mi guarda : indescriptible. co que me mira

Fisch, Baum, Geschwür : poisson, arbre, ulcère : fish, tree, ulcer : pesce, albero, ulcera : Pez, árbol, úlcera

Blutungsarbeiten - travaux de menstruation : menstrual works : lavori sanguinati : trabajos hemorrágicos

Das klassische Lieben : l'amour classique : classic loving : l'amore classico : el amor clásico

Morgen Grauen : l'aube, le point du jour, l'horreur du point du jour : morning twilight, morning horror : mattino grigio : mañana gris

Nach der Nacht : après la nuit : after the night : dopo la notte : después de la noche

beirut (les noms de lieu en minuscule. ainsi le lieu peut être partout): (place names in small letters. thus the place could be anywhere.)

Das Alterswerk - Körper als Schlachtfeld : l'oeuvre de la vieillesse - le corps comme champs de bataille : work in old age - the body as battlefield: l'opera della vecchiaia - corpi come campo di battaglia : el trabajo de la vejez - el cuerpo como campo de batalla

Man and Woman. Inside and Outside.

Working on the ground: I drop distance, let it fall away.

“Ich lehne die Behauptung ab, Kunst sei geschlechtsneutral.” – I reject the assertion that art is gender neutral.

1980: I divide my works into female works and male works. Female signs, male signs.

Today : “C'est un statement du féminisme qui avait du sens dans les années 70 et 80, aujourd'hui c'est plus complexe.” – That is a feminist statement which made sense in the 70s and 80s; today, things are more complex. She no longer speaks of signs, but of “what surrounds us”.

“Mein Frausein ist mein öffentlich(st)er Teil” : - My woman-ness is my (most) public part.” This is of great interest because one tends to associate the interior, the habitat, the private hearth and home with woman. And manifestly, the public sphere, space and speaking in public is the place of the man.

“Le corps est le sujet principal dans mon travail.” – The body is the principal subject in my work. The body as battlefield. It is very important to see this as a feminist position.

There are series of pornographic drawings, different in style from her other drawings. They are more plastic, almost academic. Penetration, muscular bodies, loving threesomes.

Living and working the horizon : sleeping and dying

In order to talk of the importance of horizontality in her œuvre, one has to begin with verticality: today, verticality is found above all in her paintings of the family. Then in falling, in free fall. 9/11 2001: World Trade Center. She draws the perspective of people leaping into the void. It is a rather particular perspective seen from the sky. Another perspective viewed from the sky is that of a pilot in a warplane. She took great interest in the first and second Gulf Wars. (see below) In general, one encounters people in verticality. Above all the head. A horizontal head is a head laid to rest, a head that is sleeping, that is tired, ill, dead. Or again it is an intimate perspective.

Miriam Cahn confirms the difficulty of drawing a human body, a head in a horizontal position. She works in series. She begins with the head of a man lying down and she is struck by the difficulty, which is not only on the technical plane. It is a difficulty on the level of mind. She breaks off the series when the drawing and her own state of mind become too morbid.

Another horizon: for a long time, her method of working is horizontality. In the 80s, she produces very large drawings on sheets of paper unrolled across the floor (women, men, warships, television sets, houses). This is a highly physical method and one directed by an absence of distance. Setting things at a distance is a posture she does not like: the artist who retreats, who admires his work and then continues. On the ground, this is not possible. She is down among the dust of her instrument of work, she is the instrument, the chalk, the charcoal or the graphite, the hands, the legs, all the limbs of the body become instruments. In the studio, she has not been able to look at the finished piece in a vertical position because the walls of her studio are too low and there is thus no chance of stepping back. For Miriam Cahn, there is thus an effect of surprise and of truth the moment the work is hung in an exhibition. It is courageous to take into consideration the possibility of failure. Miriam Cahn speaks of "Übersichtsverlust" – a loss of overall vision: losing control and orientation while working. Right up to today, this has become a working strategy. Today, having become older, and her knees worn out, she no longer works on the ground. It became necessary to move on from horizontality to verticality.

At present, Miriam Cahn is painting a great deal in colour, but says that drawing remains her principal language. It is so minimal, so simple, only black on a surface. It is a horizontal tool: nothing but black. At first, this was a political decision. In 1974, she took the firm decision: no more oil on canvas, no more preparatory drawing, no more pyramidal stance of the artist with his assistants, no more drawing from a model. She draws notebooks. The notebook is the work. These are not sketches. She works in series but never in a hierarchy: there are preparatory drawings, no draft versions. It is always direct and swift. 2 hrs for a notebook, 2 hrs for a picture.

When she draws the human figure, she never draws with a model. Nor from photos or documents. She works from memory. (I ask myself: what is memory? She does not say that it is imagination. Realism? Goya?)

Space: in situ the exhibition. Now and here, a performative work with no audience

She works fast, she takes decisions fast, the decision seeming to be taken through empathy and the rightness of spontaneity. (A tango with the gallerist and the curators: choosing, hanging, giving birth.)

Assembling an exhibition: pictures with their images facing the wall. Getting away from habit. Installing quickly, on the alert. Empathy with the work. "Je n'aime pas regarder trop longtemps mes trucs" – I don't like looking at my stuff too long. "Hängefreude." – the joy of hanging. She hangs her works alone, swiftly, physically, a performative act. Thus, the picture, when turned around, guarantees a surprise.

Space: in situ_motorway_anger and love.

In 1979, in Paris, in residence. She is alone and her studio is too small. She has to conquer the city. She declares the Alma Tunnel to be her studio. Like a book, every pole or post is a page, going, coming back. Black charcoal that disappears with time. She takes photos and that same evening the drawings have already disappeared. They are cleaned off by the police. These drawings are her first performative act: to be able to breathe, to do something on a big scale in this big city. Making a new kind of performance, not on stage, not video art.

"Mon être femme est ma part publique." – My woman-ness is my public part.: Northern Bypass Basle 1979: return to Basle. A working-class living area is demolished to construct a motorway bypass around the city. Now her elementary and vital performative act becomes political. It's different from in Paris. Large spaces, large drawings (boats with crosses, phallic tubing spitting black liquid, television screens, houses and pieces of writing). But the rage against this motorway slips over into a love of these empty, enormous spaces. The beauty of her drawings. The dialectic dissolves itself. She notices this and intends to stop. She wants only to finish work on one particular post, and just at this moment the police arrive and arrest her. There is a court case, which she loses. She writes some magnificent letters to the public prosecutor, in which she defends her actions as an essential artistic act. The procurator replies and in this way they have a discussion on art, freedom of expression and creativity, and the role of the state in the support of art. Years later, she is invited to undertake artistic interventions in the public domain on a legal basis. She refuses. She notes: "J'ai l'habitude de faire des dessins en espace public sans autorisation de l'état et même contre l'état. Je me prends mes murs, je me sers tout simplement sans demander. Le fusain disparaît sous les temps, dans très

peu de temps même. Il disparaît comme les idées, les sentiments, changent et disparaissent. Le moment de la confrontation est important. Soit la confrontation du fusain doux avec le mur dur, soit le fait de faire un acte illégal. Toute autre chose comme maintenir l'oeuvre d'art en bon état, la durabilité des matériaux, l'attitude de l'art en espace public (Kunst am Bau ou des 1%), sont un problème de cette société, mais pas le mien." – It is my habit to make drawings in public spaces without state authorization and even against the state. I take my walls, I use them very simply without asking. The charcoal disappears under the impact of the weather, in a very short time even. It disappears, just as ideas and feelings change and disappear. What is important is the moment of confrontation. Be it the confrontation of the soft charcoal with the hard wall, be it the fact of undertaking an illegal act. Everything else, such as maintaining the work of art in good condition, the durability of the materials, the attitude of art in a public space (Art in Architecture or 1%) is a problem of this society, but not my problem. For Miriam, art is free, is liberating, and is devoid of utility and function.

In situ, Sarajevo in Sarajevo , 1992

She does a series of pieces on Sarajevo, the war in Bosnia. Her sources of information are newspapers, television and her travels. Her commitment goes further, beyond exhibitions: she travels to Sarajevo several times, speaks with women in the street, helps refugees. There are paintings of veiled women, dead bodies, many dead bodies. Scenes of flight, fugitives and refugees. This ensemble she exhibits first of all in Switzerland. This must be shown in Switzerland, she says, in this "neutral" country far away from everything. Then an invitation comes to do an exhibition in Sarajevo. How can one exhibit Sarajevo in Sarajevo? The woman curator says to her: no veiled women – if not, people will think that this is a Muslim city, whereas that is not the case. The horizontal bodies are not a problem to show: they are used to dead bodies in Sarajevo. – Miriam then exhibits one veiled woman. There must be at least one, she says. Because what must also be shown is her perspective, living in Switzerland. The world that is shown to us by the media in Switzerland. "C'est ainsi que j'ai travaillé et réfléchi : Sarajevo en suisse, pas Sarajevo à Sarajevo." – That's how I worked and thought: Sarajevo in Switzerland, not Sarajevo in Sarajevo.

Alone

Miriam Cahn does not draw in public or when travelling; she does not draw from a model, nor on site. But she does write when travelling, on buses, on trains. She often says that that writing and drawing are very close to one another. They are, perhaps, sisters or cousins. She takes notes in a handwriting that only she (or not even she) can decipher. Hence writing comes close to drawing. She describes her method of writing on a voyage to Alaska, where she wants to meet Inuit

women to propose a communal project between writing and drawing. In the end, she abandons the idea. But there are pictures of the faces of these women in Alaska. I was not surprised that she was interested in Alaska. She describes the place where she lives: in the last valley where the sun melts the snow – the sun doesn't arrive there until extremely late. She speaks of the place with enthusiasm. In the same discussion, she says that she will never teach. "Enseigner déforme l'artiste" – teaching deforms the artist, creating relations of master and pupil, a vertical relationship that she refuses to adopt. So, it is better to be alone than to surround oneself with pupils and assistants. She works and lives alone. She likes people, she is very communicative, she writes and a multitude of publications bear witness to very rich and frank exchanges of ideas.

When one is alone, since one lives alone, one must give oneself one's rhythm: the day, the week, the year. There are no children one has to take to school, no partner who is there or not there, no job and no teaching. So there remain very few things that have to be done or that give one the purpose and the driving force to get up in the morning. She doesn't make a romantic story of this, no suffering – there's no pathos about it. It's a fact, and she observes facts, states of the world and her own states. In her notes, she often describes different rhythms, which are also linked to her work, her technique and her subjects and motifs. "Je me lève tard, je lis le journal (4 différents), je prends le café, puis je travaille. Un cahier pour 2h, un grand tableau 2-3 h, jamais plus. Puis repos." – I get up late, I read the newspaper (4 different ones), then I work. A notebook for 2 hrs, a large painting 2-3 hrs, never more. Then rest.

She has noticed that she does not work in the same way when she is just before or after her periods or again on the day of her ovulation. She takes note of this, makes lists and this accounts for the name given to her works in a major exhibition held in the Kunsthalle Basel: "Blutungsarbeiten" – Menstrual Works. She notes: "J'essaie de travailler dans un rythme féminin: 24 jours de travail, puis 6 jours de repos; ou 25 jours de travail et 5 jours de repos, ou 26 jours de travail et 6 jours de repos." – I try to work in a feminine rhythm: 24 days of work, then 6 days of rest; or 25 days of work and 5 days of rest, or 26 days of work and 6 days of rest.

Repetition yes, routine no. The latter is a trap she seeks to escape from. "Quand je m'ennuie au travail j'arrête. Le rituel est autre chose, c'est beau. C'est une méthode." – When I get bored at work, I stop. Ritual is something different – it's wonderful. It's a methodology.

"Quand je peins des plantes je ferme les yeux, et je perds le contrôle." – When I paint plants, I close my eyes and I lose control.

"Je travaille de mémoire, pas d'après modèle. La même chose compte aux montages d'exposition. J'imagine le tableau avant même de l'accrochage. Il faut que le dos du tableau me regarde, pas la face." – I work from memory, not from

any model. The same thing goes when hanging an exhibition. I imagine a picture even just before hanging it on the wall. I must have the back of the painting looking at me, not the front.

Remembering through the repetition of subjects and motifs. The house for example: "C'est une maison universelle qui m'attache au contemporain, à un passé, un futur et à tout le monde. Toute personne dans le monde a une idée d'une maison." – It's a universal house that attaches me to the present-day world, to a past, a future and to everybody. Every person in the world has an idea of a house.

Forgetting: "C'est le privilège de l'artiste. Tout le savoir et le savoir-faire, il fallait que je l'oublie, pour échapper à la routine." – It is the privilege of the artist. All the knowledge and all the technique: I had to forget them so as to escape from routine.

- M Menschen – human beings. The fewer there are, the better.

Frontal / Thoughts

Many of her written texts published are records of dreams. They resemble works that she would have been able to make or perhaps has made. Her texts are specific, violent, gentle. Then there are texts that I would rather call thoughts, they too being akin to the dream records. The thoughts are extremely interesting because they elude style. They are free and non-shareable. "Nur die Gedanken sind frei" – only thoughts are free. A written text has a style, an elaborated, corrected, smoothed out syntax. A thought cannot be really captured: it is vaporous or fluid. It can be given a recipient, a container, but it remains unique and unfiltered. A thought noted down is, for sure, no longer a thought. Nevertheless, there are thoughts of this kind in Miriam's texts, and perhaps also in her artistic works.

- H Hände: hands. They are my instruments of thinking.

In order to work, therefore, instruments of thinking are required, and for Miriam these are her hands. They translate her thought. I can well understand that solitude is necessary for thought. There are people who need an interlocutor and monologue or dialogue in order to think, to develop thoughts simultaneously in the act of speaking. It seems to me that for Miriam this is not the case. There is a series of pieces in wood, trunks of wood, enormous in girth, often with a miniscule inscription chiselled into the wood.

"Körper als Schlachtfeld, Alterswerk" – Body as Battlefield, Work in Old Age. The bodies of the trunks are elongated, disorderly, busts without limbs. Carving: it is as if Miriam is using these trunks as a bearer of writing, a memory stick for thought. What can be found noted on them, cut with a chisel into the wood is abstract, almost decorative. It is a totally different form of writing than in the paintings. That gives proof of its freedom.

"Travailler est une forme de penser et sentir. Je ne sais faire rien d'autre et j'adore ça." – Working is a form of thinking and feeling. I am not able to do anything else and I adore it.

Miriam Cahn's themes: sexuality, war, death. "That's life," she says.

I would add the family. The key to her work is not her own family history. She has drawn and painted the family above all since the 2000s, in the foreground, all on the same plane, the background being colour. What she paints is frontal: relations between members of the family and their relation to life, to politics.

There is violence, domination, protection. The men and women resemble each other: often naked, they merge into one another. There are genitals, revolvers, fists. There is rage, anguish, domination, aggression, mistrust. Decidedly little peace and harmony.

I see you: the painting looks at the visitors. Hands up, you are surrounded. One meets the figures in the pictures on the same eye-level. A face-to-face encounter. Consciousness and stress – the difference between memory and reality. "Une catastrophe et un accident ça peut arriver à tout le monde." – a disaster and an accident can happen to anybody. She had a car accident, a free fall of some twenty metres. She compares her reaction, her immediate actions under stress, under shock as unconscious, like an animal. Afterwards, this reaction is peopled with images and with a memory that does not have to correspond to the facts but is just as real and correct. She compares these mechanisms to those of a soldier at war.

Colour and war

"So lange mischen bis es schwarz gibt (weibliches Grundmuster)." – Mix long enough for it to become black (basic feminine pattern).

Colour is a cursor for memory, which is often based on the media that trigger our recollections.

First and Second World Wars: black and white.

First Gulf War: green. Night cameras.

Third Gulf War: red (I don't know why).

Up to the mid-80s there is only black and white in her work. Black+white are the essence, truer. – Although we live in a world containing colours. Generational cause: television and the documentaries of childhood were in b/w.

Then there is Chernobyl. 1986. She introduces yellow, blue, then red into her chalk drawings. It's little, but a touch of colour is present. Colour is introduced like a poison. Here still, is the bird's eye view from the sky, onto the reactor and the radioactive cloud – this break with an age that leads her to a break with herself and her work. At first, her work resembles b/w films that have been coloured; then, the colours become autonomous.

Letters : speaking out.

Miriam Cahn speaks out. She makes no distinction between people and their place in society. At the opening of an exhibition she speaks in a highly committed and frank manner.

Open letter (Art funding, Art in Architecture, Police Commissioner) Rejection of invitations to exhibitions (Women's biennales = ghettoization), 1982 documenta room-space too low: "Dann fangen sie doch nochmal an." – Then start all over again.)

Humour ? Or solace ?

T Trost: solace, consolation. One needs it.

Torture Pictures – Switzerland and Sarajevo – Our wars (Sarajevo, the Gulf and Syria)

The atom bomb, sarajevo, beirut, iraq, the Gulf War, today Syria : "Je suis touchée que la Suisse ne prend pas plus de réfugiés, il y a de la place ici." – I am concerned that Switzerland is not accepting more refugees: there is room enough here.

What she works on: the bomb, the pilot's perspective, the crater, the dead, flight, the refugees ...

The difference between the author and the literary figure. The "I" who tells a story is not the same person as the author. She draws maltreated bodies, painting bodies without limbs. She paints family violence and violence across the world. But is it autobiographical? She did not decapitate the head of the man in her picture; she is not the dead woman or the goat with an erection. Or perhaps she is, a little. Because it is the narrator, the ability to shift the I, the ME and YOU and US. It is "Vorstellungskraft" – the power of the imagination that is her driving force, for Goya too, she says, (who killed neither the soldier nor himself in order to paint the "Desastres").

HAVING TO LAUGH

The work is painted and bears the title "drawn 2009+30./31.12.2017". Drawing and writing are cousins. Is the person drawn the person described or the person who writes?

"lend a hand, lay a hand on" invade look closely stare at accuse protest resist tenderly suck gentle brutal

Someone receives, endures, invades, recoils. Frozen Moments on impact.

She looks back, a grimacing face stares and laughs soundlessly.

Cuts between eyes and mouth. A grimacing face. "rufen" - "shout", don't scream.

Lust rage lamentation will way away, get away there!

Chalk is more ephemeral than oils. Rage and loss. Loss of overall vision a not a loss.

Faust and Judith

"meine rechte ist meine linke, 22.08.2017". – "my right hand is my left hand, 22.08.2017". To the left the Mediterranean to the right.

Laughing cut having to

Coalescing: "lachenmüssensollen" - havingtooughttolaugh, "liebenmüssen" – havingtolove

Holding laughter in the hollow of the hand and then throwing it away.

Read out: A Anfang, D Denken, K Krieg, T Trost

Translation: Richard Humphrey