

**Rita Segato** holds the UNESCO chair of anthropology and bioethics at the University of Brasilia and heads the anthropology and human rights research group of the National Council of Scientific and Technological Research of Brazil. She was awarded a PhD in anthropology from Queen's University Belfast, Northern Ireland. Her most recent published works include *Contrapedagogías de la crueldad* [Counter-pedagogies of cruelty] (Prometeo Libros, 2018); *La guerra contra las mujeres* [The war against women] (Traficantes de sueños, 2017); and *La crítica de la colonialidad en ocho ensayos* [The critique of coloniality in eight essays] (Prometeo Libros, 2016). Her academic work is enmeshed with activism, and she frequently collaborates with organizations that work on issues of gender and race. A significant part of her work deals with the murders of women in places like Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala, among others.

## THE WRITING OF *WOMEN'S BODIES*

**“W**riting *on Women's Bodies*” is the title of an essay I originally wrote in 2006 to talk about what is known today as the femicides of Ciudad Juárez, where the northern border of Chihuahua, Mexico, meets the southern border of the United States. The connection between that essay and Miriam Cahn's work can be seen in the amputations portrayed in her paintings, in the bloody fissures on the bodies, in the brutality to which humans are inexorably exposed, in the nakedness and precarity of the lives they lead, in the cruelty they have clearly undergone but that, strangely and surprisingly, has failed to turn them into objects or to appropriate their agency—because they shine; that is, they emit light. Because they walk, they move, however slowly, laboriously, and seemingly directionless. Because they continue to nurture.

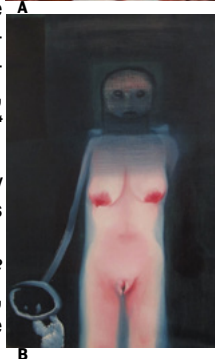
The horizon remains clear and attainable, if remote. The staging of history has dissolved, and it stands, so to speak, open, exposed, without either final destination or origin, free with an aimless freedom. The rules of living with other people in a society have been suspended. And so the bodies seem to float above a ground that flows, far away, beneath their feet, and beneath a too-heavy sky.

They are sites without structure. Or ones in which the only structure is the void: an anomia in which the only accurate, unerring signifier is the wound on the defenseless body. Evidence that the body has been subjected to an attempt to cause damage, to inflict suffering, to suppress a carnality that is softness, roundness, luminosity. A feminine carnality . . . **O.T.** (untitled) <sup>A</sup> (2014 & 2018)

Why has this happened? Who did it? Why did they do it? Why have they wounded defenseless flesh? Or did they harm only life itself?

What is the meaning of what we're seeing? Who needs to hurt life and let it wander, suffering, through spaces with no way out, spaces in which hope has lost all shape?

For twenty-five years I have been probing the purpose and meaning of what Cahn's paintings show me. **KRIEGERIN** (warrior) <sup>B</sup> (2009 & 2010)



### The Fundamental Structure: Its Violent Cell

A while back, I discovered, through lengthy conversations with street rapists in a prison in Brasilia

- that aggression against women's bodies was a declaration of masculinity to the world; an expressive, not an instrumental, form of violence;
- that such a statement was simply obedience to a mandate that the group issued to each of its members: the mandate of masculinity;
- that the mandate of masculinity was, therefore, a mandate to rape;
- that sexual assault represented a fate that went beyond death—sexual assault is death, asserts the patriarchy;
- that the ability to impose death was men's only way of confirming their manhood;

- that such a fate imposed a genital straitjacket on women—the decisive primacy of womanhood over personhood: “you are a woman, nothing more—I limit you to the orifices and protuberances of your genitalia” is what rape declares;
- that far from being an infraction, damaging women was the fulfillment of an unappealable command issued to the members of what I, at that time, called a male “brotherhood” and today, more accurately, call a male “corporation;”
- that masculinity has, in simple terms, the organizational structure of a corporation, just as mafias, police forces, large economic conglomerates, all military forces, and judicial power are also corporations. Two essential characteristics confirm that the masculine brotherhood is a corporation that is replicated in other structures of power and prestige: Loyalty to the corporate group is the supreme value to which all other values are subordinated, and its internal order is strictly hierarchical and authoritarian;
- that the idea of a “mandate to rape” as part of the mandate of masculinity implies that only the processing, ingestion, and disintegration of a sacrificial victim sustains and reproduces the male brotherhood, in a seamless, deadly feedback loop, which is the factory in which an ever-asymmetrical, unequal, and violent world is reproduced;
- that the male corporate group is erected upon the exaction of a female tribute via subjugation, which regularly feeds masculinity, and serves as its core;
- that it is by his peers, in an endless staging, that an aggressor is spurred to assault, and it is to his peers—whether physically present or merely a presence in the aggressor's mental realm—that he dedicates the exhibition, the great “spectacle” of the forcible possession of and exertion of control over his victim's body. It is

from his peers that the mandate of masculinity issues, as well as the title of “man” that is assigned to anyone who carries out that mandate.

What Cahn shows us is precisely the life that remains after the violence. A bare life, the hardest one to kill. The one that endures. It even transcends and survives the warriors. They are left defeated, like the detritus of their own death.

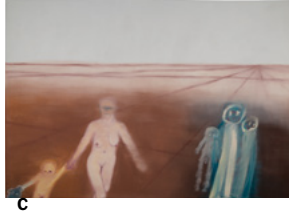
**Ciudad Juárez, México; Sepur Zarco, Guatemala; Northern Triangle of Central America; Buenaventura, Colombia's Pacific Coast: *The New Forms of War***

It is for that reason that the soldier and the gang member defy and triumph over their enemies, always provisionally, through the bodies of women.

- Contempt for and plundering of women's bodies is the central lesson of the “pedagogy of cruelty,” which trains us and accustoms us to turn life into objects, that programs us to deactivate our channels of empathy, that forges the functional psychopathic personalities in this age of ownership and mastery.
- There is no such thing as empathy for objects, there is only empathy for living things, for vitality, for sensitivity; but the world-as-object is the ownable world.
- The systemic sexual assault on women's bodies is also a way of dissipating or destroying local and community cohesiveness and rootedness, since the method by which immense territories are seized is through the infliction of arbitrary cruelty against defenseless bodies, bodies that are “innocent of war”—bodies that, in an archaic imaginary like that of gender, are not those of the enemy soldier.
- The feared collateral damage of war on women's bodies has now been transformed—the new forms of war have made those bodies war's tactical targets to achieve a strategic aim: bringing an end to the enemy's unity and morale.

- War has become feminized, and the patriarchy reveals, unwittingly, our centrality, our importance.
- The gendered context for a push for conquest has never been curbed in a post-conquest, ever-colonial world, a modernity born of generations of conquest.
- The authority expressed in unnecessary cruelty is the language of those who exert ownership and assert their sovereignty.
- The destruction of a body that is not that of the enemy soldier through sexual means expresses the authority and the capriciousness of that sovereignty—the gratuitousness of its cruelty.
- The profanation of that body decimates the victim's morale and demonstrates jurisdictional control over lives and territories.
- The impunity that is characteristic of owners is made explicit, even exhibited; they need it.
- Patriarchal context is replicated and developed throughout this “patriarchal prehistory of humanity” in its colonial iteration, with the mark of conquest traced back to its very core. It is the “elemental structure,” the first context, the originating cell—within the family, on the streets, and in war—of all violence; its incubator is the breeding ground for all other forms of violence and domination.
- The patriarchal context for the initial, foundational political order, where the patriarchal prehistory of humanity begins, is where, in its final, postcolonial phase, it also ultimately disintegrates.

How do we stop that war, which has no beginning and no end, no declaration and no armistice, no possibility of peace accords? The war will stop only with the dismantling of the mandate of masculinity, since without men's collective obedience to that mandate, there will be no human resource, no manpower for such an undertaking. The service will no longer be able to be carried out.



### The Life that Remains: The Writing of Women's Bodies

Miriam Cahn's paintings offer us an illustration of the end of that world, in which the only thing that remains is the luminous, wandering carnality of the female body with her offspring, in search of some wellspring that might offer shelter. Hardly anybody else is around. There, in the solitude and freedom of that new, unstructured world, she will be able to reconstruct and reorient history and head toward the unobstructed horizon in some unknown direction, toward a destination that is unknown but, for that reason, utterly free. She will be what her body is going to trace, forging a path, seeking a direction.

In Cahn's work, the body suffers; there is harshness and absolute precarity; the pedagogy of cruelty has taken the body hostage but has failed to vanquish it: without question, *it is not an object-body*. This demonstrates the oracular quality of the project of art.

As in life, the two-dimensionality of the canvas is unable to reduce light to two dimensions. Light triumphs once more on the rounded, mobile bodies, moving slowly and steadily toward another history. Without a utopia. Making the path by walking. Without the authority of an obligatory arrival. This time, Ulysses has been turned upside down. There is no destination. In Cahn's work, even in the portrayal of shadows, or extreme scarcity, or a procession toward death, the light creeps in and her people remain in motion. They walk. They speak even in silence: It is not possible to injure light or to quiet a life that is not an object. **O.T.** (untitled) © (2016)

I find in the luminosities of wounded flesh an answer, a path, a sense of hope, one that inspires me to approach Cahn's work not from the usual perspective of our defeat, but from that of a victory of life over pain and death. I am surprised. I consider it surprising. It's not what one expects when talking about wounds on the bodies of women.

Certainly this has not been the way I've talked about this subject previously. My analyses up to this point have led me to discuss another kind of writing: Writing *on* the body, the writing of the *other* on the body. Cahn's work—despite its intense drama and sorrow and privation—positions that body and has it trace a radiant

route, makes it walk, portrays it in life, despite all the things being carved on its surfaces. It doesn't matter if the body becomes a canvas full of inscriptions, since its luminosity and carnality overpower, erode, undermine the burden of the patriarchy on the self.

Can it be that politics in a feminine key, a politics that harmonizes with women's carnality, is life itself? If we put it in those terms, it becomes clear that the place and role of the feminine in the world transcends, shatters, and upends any idea of minority status or minoritization. A politics of life could never be minoritarian. Who claimed that? Who posited it thus? What institutional regimen has pigeonholed politics and the project of living flesh as a minority phenomenon? The essential question remains floating in the air: Why have we yielded to it?

Up to now, my answer has been that the State and its bureaucratic rituals, despite its rhetoric of efficiency and rights, are nothing other than the final stage of patriarchal history. Genocide is the consequence of bureaucracy and patriarchal monopoly of politics. However, what we see remaining and surviving from its ashes, floating in an extra-institutional, limbic atmosphere, in Miriam Cahn's painting, is finally another kind of life, a different type of pact, a quest for survival in a futuristic world in which signifiers are in search of meaning outside the deathly code we knew and have abided in the long patriarchal history of humankind.

In the atmosphere of a world that has come or is coming to an end that is seen in Cahn's visual work, it's very clear: the only thing that remains is the luminous carnality of life itself, attempting to rise and walk, seeking another destination, another history, another politics, another collective project . . . one that is yet unknown. There, life will be nurtured again, by the hands of women. In a world without owners, a world in which the mandate of masculinity has been dismantled.