

Sahar Al-Khateeb  
MFA Essay, Konstfack  
2021

## RE-CONSTRUCTION

## Index

Introduction .....	2
Reconstruction .....	4
Where I go from here .....	11
References .....	12

## Introduction

RECONSTRUCTION is a conversation that shifts between analyzing and locating the artist's position in their society. Especially the power of the majority in the society over the individual. Reconstruction is a way of resistance, or the only way of resistance, at least for me.

In these pages I will talk about reconstruction as a tool in my art, and find connections between my experience and others, people who share one or several of the identities that I have, as an artist, asylum seeker, or queer. Illustrating the different use of the concept of reconstruction that I'm working on, I will introduce the artist Leileh Babirye, a Ugandan artist, living in New York. She works in a multidisciplinary practice that transforms everyday materials into objects that address issues surrounding identity, sexuality and human rights. I will also discuss the work of Miriam Cahn, through the book "I as Human", proposing new perspectives on her writing, and her paintings based on her personal experiences, from other writers like Poul Preciado, a Spanish writer, with a long history of writing about trans struggle and rights through his own experience.

In this essay I want to try to explore and discuss the relationship between the artwork (with its why, when, what etcetera), the artist and the audience. For me, they are connected, and I want them to be so. My ideal, or at least what engages and interests me, is when we let art be a communication. When the work is facilitating a conversation. I see the art piece as a connecting point, with different points outside it, that exchange their reflections and communicate. I want to make this connection clear and obvious. It's a multiple way conversation, everyone both receiving and reaching for the other. I see the artwork as a communication channel, which should have a shape that conveys the concept to make the conversation possible. That means that the artwork is a material.

That was one of the things that I tried to research in the past two years in my master studies at Konstfack. I did an experiment around this at my solo exhibition. I didn't include an art statement to explain about the work, instead I was in the space to make a conversation with the audience and tried to listen first to what my artwork was telling them. I saw how my concept was perceived, got their reflections and reflected back. And through the conversations arose the issues I'm trying to talk about through the installation. At the same time I didn't try to "correct" anyone, didn't try to remove the abstract, or the dramatic stories people told about the piece. The balance, the sides, the unequal power dynamics: all this I got the opportunity to discuss with my audience. In person.

I also address a number of questions connected to my work. Like: When is art private? is art always political? Does my existence in this field have to be a political statement? Making art as a minority: how the position as artist makes the art political, and how the audience makes the

context political. I'm questioning how we read and engage with the artwork, the visual output and the concept of the work, how they work together to convey the artist's conclusion of a process, is it convenient to address the environment that surrounds the artwork. This is a process of discovering and digging and revealing whether it is just about the work itself or also the way it is read depending upon its context. Everything that comes spontaneously and makes it a statement.

**Reconstruction** is my act of rebuilding or describing a relationship. In my practice it is a reconstruction of domestic furniture and space, describing and fixing this materialistic relationship, exploring how materiality itself is charged with sentimental value, with tensions of memories and relationships. Letting it become physical, material and visible.

I use the chair in my work often as a reference to human presence, exploring a particular tension in each one of my projects, to address a particular condition of human existence and identity, in relation to place and surroundings which for me is a fragment of society.

In my installations, there are two sides staged in the space, to represent one stronger than the other. To illustrate this, I can give an example from one installation from 2015, image on the right side of the text: A setting with one group of chairs stuck together, packed, crowded – you cannot move any of them to take a seat. They are standing on the floor, attached to one side of a desk, their weight/power lifts up the other side of the desk, where one a single chair hangs. It's two sides of a discussion, one side is heavy and confident, the other is hanging in the air. It is not an equal discussion, but a powerful side in front of a weak side.



The reconstruction here is not just in the sense of improving or changing the relationships, it is more of a description – a reconstruction like you would reconstruct a scene, to perform it again – of my relationship with society, my life as it was and had been up to that point. This describes the situation of being oppressed, and not treated fairly by society, even one's own society. It dates from a time when I was here in Sweden, but without identification papers for years and other related issues.



The reconstruction is about the society I left, as much as about the society I am in (and part of) now. I need in my work, as in my life, to rebuild both these relations in the right way, reconstruct both how they are supposed to be, to fill them with what I need in terms of support and community.

The first artist that influenced me a lot is Mona Hatoum. She was the first artist to open my eyes to when art is more than beauty, more than art for art. That it can deal with public issues, that it can say something about the public through the private. Especially when it comes to political and feminist issues as a Palestinian.

Today, the relevance of the concept of reconstruction in how she represents her relationships (for example with her homeland and her family) is obvious to me. I identify this in how she presents

her relationship with her mother in the video installation *Measure of distance*, for example. Here, her private life is telling the story of a much more general/shared experience. She shows the emotional intimacy in her relationship with her mother (even being naked in the video). The separation she deals with in the video is not only her very personal one. As she puts it herself, quoted in the museum catalogue (MoMa 2021): “it also speaks of exile, displacement, disorientation and a tremendous sense of loss as a result of the separation caused by war.”

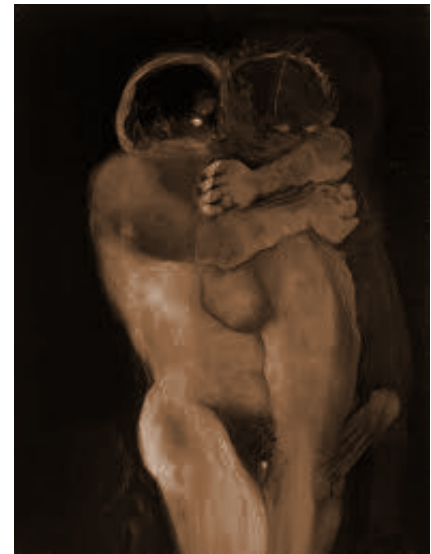


The installation *Hot spot III* (Hatoum 2013) is named after a military term referring to areas of military or civil unrest. Red neon lights place conflicts on the globe. She reconstructed the world from her point of view when she was stuck in Lebanon during the war while she was visiting her family. It was an unusual time for her since she lives in the UK.

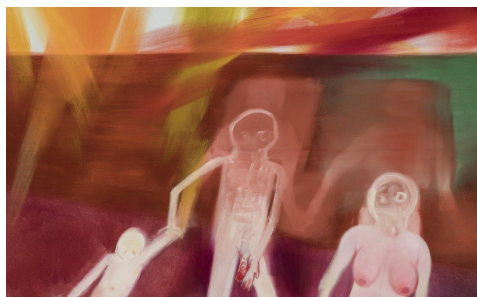
\*\*\*

I can also see the reconstruction in the work of Miriam Cahn describes her relation to different political and social issues, critiquing these issues and producing her own image of what she believes to be justice. Her art and words are her tool of resistance, her way of reconstructing is to reveal and stage what she witnessed through her life: political events, intimate relationships, feminism, war and her family’s history from the holocaust.

In *Having to love* (Cahn 2017), for example, the strong female body she Cahn presents in the painting, performs her position as the dominant one in the relationship.



Reversing the gender roles, and putting men in women’s positions and – as I see it – reconstructing the balance. I interpret this as a statement to her society: the strength exists,



but it's oppressed and denied by the patriarchy. Reconstruction in her work is often not fixing a relationship but rather more of witnessing and expressing her position in the society. Sometimes, I understand it as she is mirroring the situation, relating to what she witnesses. Like in the example to the left *The body electric* (Cahn 2017) the child in the image can be any child of today, fleeing with

their parents. But at the same time, it's her family's history of fleeing – and therefore private, in a way. This happened, and is happening.

Telling her story is telling the story of others. This makes me see myself in her work, since I had the experience of fleeing from my country and can see her telling my story as well. This is also what I want to reach in my installations: to put my private story out there, and at the same time invite everyone to relate and belong to it in some way.

\*\*\*

Reconstruction is my process of finding my position and strengthening it, as a human in the society. I started my artwork with the concept of Re-Construction in 2012 during my studies in Ramallah, (Palestine), by describing myself as a not-functional chair, standing beside a group of chairs. The self is not part of the society, it can't participate, is forced to be outside because of patriarchy. The norm and power, the group sticking together with nails in a closed circle, a closed gathering that the self can't attend. And that was, and still is, the situation with the society where I came from.



The others (1) ,2010  
Mixed media installation

After that, after coming to Sweden, it took a couple of years to be able to evaluate the new surroundings, and the results were not different for me, a big power taking charge over me or any individual that went through similar circumstances. That made me have the same construction of the self relating to being in opposition to the group.

The power dynamics in my work are still similar. But for me it describes new conflicts, new relations, new oppression. With my new society in Sweden came more gender equality, more space for women (as I was perceived back then). But there were also oppressions that were new to me such as racism and homo- and transphobia – and the position it put me in to live undocumented, lacking a lot of possibilities others take for granted.

A difference that is evident more and more over the years though: I have more of a platform to change this structure and put more value and light on the one chair in the actual life and in the installation, trying to expand my understanding of this relationship and how to steer the focus from the other side and put it on the self. One example of that is an installation from 2017 in Våxjö konsthall (Sweden). The monster is present, the two sides were still in the picture, and one is obviously stronger. But the self, the one, is a golden chair, independent, under the spotlight,



obviously strong, making a statement. Although they were both sides connected and affected by each other, somehow, the standing chair is taking the stage, not letting itself be silenced. At the same time, it is also reaching out for the other side, somehow wanting to be part of it. Taking its own space and voice, but also wanting/needing to belong.

For me doing any artwork is always fighting physically, but not to hit/hurt somebody, but instead to destroy and then rebuild. It is – no matter how it might look to someone outside during the process – the opposite of destructive. Used chairs collected randomly, reshaped to describe an imbalance – or to make the equation equal between two sides of a conversation/conflict.



One early and important act of resistance – to me and also to, for example Miriam Cahn and Leileh Babirye – was crossing borders. In a literal way, as in borders of nations, but also in crossing lines, breaking rules. Crossing borders is the tool the artists have. It is a way of resisting, in itself, taking power over a situation.

For me, that was art and art is political. Everything has political dimensions when you connect it to history, and any artwork created is the product of the current cultural and political situation. I think this is well put by the director of the Critical Theory Workshop in Paris, Gabriel Rockhill (2014) *“The problem is no longer ‘what is the relationship between art and politics?’ It is ‘how do the diverse aspects of practices identified as aesthetic and political overlap, intertwine, and sometimes merge in precise socio historical conjunctions?’”*

There is someone behind the art, a person, with a position. But how important is this? I am aware of my own standpoints/statements when I present my work. I know, for myself, that I am pointing out and criticizing aspects of a society from my position, what power balances and relations I am describing. But what happens when the audience, in their turn, perceive the artwork through their own political filters? When they see themselves in it, when they see the layers of and collect facts around it?

*TRANSURANIC FLESH*, the part in the book *I as human* -Miriam Cahn where the writer Paul Preciado explores and analyses the colors, feeling the figures as a perfect position to face the majority or heteronormative society in his situation. I thought a lot about that when I read this quote that projected his trans struggle with the society through Cahn’s paintings.

*“I say: I want you to paint the only existing portrait of me. I want your portrait of me as a legal document opposing the government's description of what my life was like. They will see that I did not have the sex that they believed. They will note that one of my arms was given to me and come*



*to take the place of a penis. They will see that my hair was made of luminescent algae. They will not believe it. But you will invent it as true. You will paint that image with traces of plutonium that will last eighty million years.*

*You say: Do you not realize that this is not your portrait? Do you confuse your face with any mass of transuranic flesh?*

*The intensity of your blue will set the computer of the world on fire and the skin of nuclear power planets will fall revealing a woman's belly.*

*Utopia or death. Color or death. Painting or death.*” (Preciado 2019)

In Preciado's words I got reminded of what I was processing during the past year. In the beginning, I felt exposed and vulnerable being private. I was scared about being used when being public, being shown as an example, being a token, something making others look better, justifying the existence of spaces. Since then, I've been questioning all this. I've faced the conflict and connected myself to my art. This means exposing what I formerly kept as “too” private, making my personal public. I choose when and what, but accept that my personal and private are public issues, as those public issues are part of me.

I believe in what Joanne Morra & Emma Talbot presented in their project *Intimacy Unguarded: how the personal becomes material*, *Journal of Visual Art Practice*. It is risky to expose the private to the public, but what is private in terms of humanity? Even the private is common knowledge and mentality between humans in general.

*“The personal is determined by culture, yet does not adopt it wholesale. It is the idiosyncratic thing that makes us who we are – yet it is problematic – raising questions of gender, sexuality, family, love, honesty, truth, history, memory, subjectivity, politics and expression. The personal is certainly something that we possess in our own right. And yet, we are also possessed by it.”* (Morra and Talbot 2017)

Therefore: what one human goes through right now, is private and common at the same time. Revealing the private and making it public is a way to reach the audience since it has the potential to touch their private thoughts and feelings. And that is what Cahn explores through her art, and what Bühler demonstrates during her analyses of Cahn's artworks: “[h]er private life forms part of her ideological declaration (...)” (Bühler 2019). She is making the private public, and vice versa. And that's what I try to explore in both directions, the private issues as public and the opposite.

\*\*\*

When I look at the Ugandan artist Lieleh Babirye's artwork, I can see the connection between all the works she made. All of them try to reconstruct the portraits of hetero-masks and reveal the queer identity of faces from her community. She draws on personal experience in her work, particularly in relation to queer and trans identities.

Babirye's works changed in an obvious way after she moved to the USA in 2017. To me, it's obvious how strong her voice is now, with huge sculptures and brave statements. I can see how



she fills the space she is getting, and that makes me think about the strength of her voice. Like in this image, which caught my eye: the huge sculpture, the strength, the chainsaw. And the background story about how she fled her country where it was impossible to stay, being the artist and the activist she is.

Her work is an obvious statement relating to LGBTQI activism within her country. Seeing her work made me wonder what she thinks and how she feels about using that new space. I wonder if the issues she deals with in her art changed as well. When I got this space here in Sweden, my concept developed and my material also.

But for my work, the place and the new environment with the people and the culture, let me deal with different and new things like racism and capitalism and sexism and other things that shaped my work and pushed it to a new stage. I wondered if Babirye has had a similar experience, as we went through similar things - being queer, an activist, seeking asylum in a new country etc. So I contacted her.

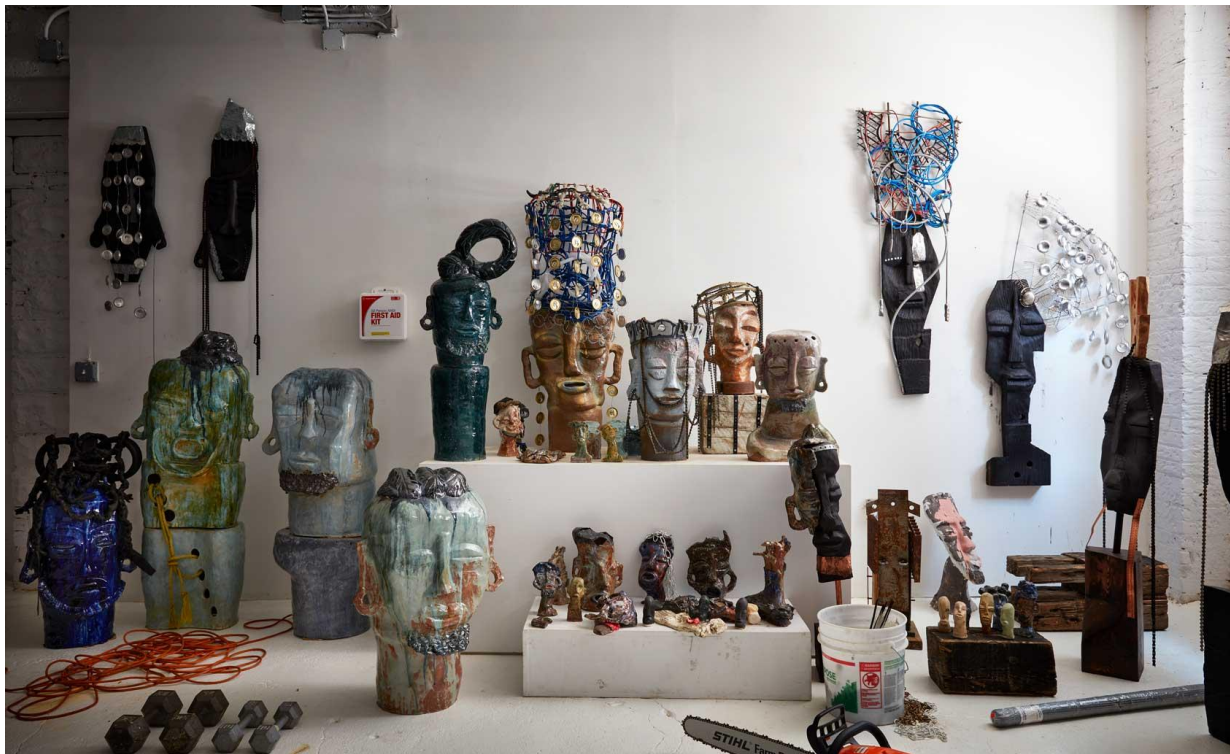
Many issues came up when we were writing to each other about the common and the different experiences we both went through, and one thing I wondered was: how people received her art in Uganda, and her comment was:

*"Since I started working in art, all my work tells about my journey of frustration to get answers, I put my activism into work and try to get answers through this journey. My works are seen as aesthetic art in Uganda, but the titles and themes of my work are LGBTQI-related, which is a sensitive topic. The fact that there is the anti homosexuality bill that practically bans LGBTQI so it's hard to show it in many places. Well, the USA is a free country.*

*For example if I take one of my drawings, and put a lot of realism in them ... like a typical boy putting on lipstick and earrings. What I want to communicate, because this is very important to me, is that transgender people are the face of the LGBTQI Community; they will look at it as an ironic way of criticism, like how they will take a comedians. The comedian is serious, but the*

*audience is not taking it in the same way, as many comedians end up in prison and that would be the reaction to my artwork in my country...". (correspondence with the artist, Dec, 2020)*

If I would make a comparison between what I had in my country and what she explained, I think that there was a different reaction to my work from the audience. They demonstrate that they get the criticism and share how they feel about it, with a discussion.



This is some of Babirye's earliest works in the US. To me, it represents the reconstruction of the gender diversity that she wanted to create through projecting her own knowledge of hidden genders of many people around her in the queer/trans community. Here, I see her trying to make their portraits in terms of how they should/could be, using simple materials she collected from the streets such as cans and metal pieces. To me, this is the construction of queer/trans femininity, alongside the queer masculinity (present in the picture through the dumbbells and the artist's own chainsaw).

The life change brought about by being in a new country didn't change her concept or her fight, she is still working on the same issues, although in a stronger and bigger way. This is evident in the faces with the connotation they hold, and the relationships that they convey.

Here, I don't see myself in her. For me, the process of transitioning from one country to another and from one body to another, is obvious in my art, is part of it. But for her, the new audience gave her that strength, and the stage for her work to be received how she thinks it should be.

I always think that it is a complicated relationship between the artist, the artwork, and the audience. If the audience changes, as when one moves to another society, the response changes. How the audience understands and reflects upon the work, and how they see me, changes.

Making art in a white society changes my art, and it seems that for Babirye it doesn't necessarily do this.

Is this because we're approaching the same public issues through different ways? While she is staging an issue itself, like the situation of a queer community, in a way that I recognize for being activist, I do it through my private life, by exposing private experience. Still I see it that both of us are reconstructing, the sense of telling it like it is, and in the sense of making it better.

\*\*\*

## Where I go from here

I think the continuation or next step for me in the process is to explore the connection to the space more, in terms of place or emptiness, and how the concept turns in different places, for example a public space or a private place.

I want to experiment with work connected to new spaces. To explore the connection between installations and spaces beyond white cubes. To find space, take space, and build there. I want the experiment with the conversation to continue, I want to be present and listen in one way or another, see how the audience interacts with my work. I'm here for the conversation, the relation more than the artwork itself. The artwork as material.

My normal process is to destroy and throw away the work. Now I'm starting to experiment with what happens if I recycle parts of an installation, if I move them on to new spaces. I also wonder what would happen if an installation was to stay for a long time. If I put it in a public space, have it in a city center. Finally giving it citizenship, letting it stay.

I also want, one day, to recreate the whole development of the concept of deconstruction in my art, the whole process. Maybe doing all the pieces again, connecting them to each other, lining them up. All this to put an end to this ongoing process of reconstruction.

## References

- Cahn, M. (2015). *The body electric*. [painting], MoMA, New York.
- Cahn, M. (2017). *Having to love*. [painting] Grazyna Kulczyk Collection, Warsaw.
- Hatoum, M. (1988). *Measure of distance*, [video installation] Video Data Bank, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago.
- Hatoum, M. (2013). *Hot spot III*. [Sculpture] Tate Modern, London.
- Joanne Morra & Emma Talbot (2017) *Intimacy Unguarded: how the personal becomes material*, Journal of Visual Art Practice, 16:3, 159-162, DOI: [10.1080/14702029.2017.1384910](https://doi.org/10.1080/14702029.2017.1384910)
- MoMA online catalogue: Measure of distance (2021). *Measure of distance*. [online] Available at <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/118590#:~:text=Measures%20of%20Distance%20is%20an,living%20in%20exile%20in%20Beirut.&text=Mona%20Hatoum%20has%2027%20works%20online.> ) [Accessed 2 March 2021]
- Preciado, PB; Bühler, K, et al. Marta (red.) (2019). *Miriam Cahn: I as human*. Warsaw, Poland: Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw.
- Rockhill, Gabriel (2014[2014]). *Radical history & the politics of art*. New York: Columbia University Press.