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The Monster and the Mirror:
A Reflection on Claude Cahun's Self-Portraits

By

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THESIS

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Abstract

Many scholars have studied French Interwar photographer Claude Cahun's use of mirrors in their self-portraits. However, scholarship of these photographs remains largely in discursive isolation. Indeed, scholars have yet to connect these artworks to the rest of Cahun's oeuvre, as well as thoroughly flesh out how these artworks anticipate more contemporary discourse on the formation of gender and sexual orientation.

This thesis addresses Cahun's engagement of the mirror and how it upends early twentieth-century notions of gender and sexuality. With the aid of the mirror, Cahun eschews essentialist notions of gender construction, which insists that gender is inherently tied to the biological body. Instead, they showcase in their self-portraits that gender is a marker of social difference and self-construction, grounded in performance. In and through their use of photography and the mirror, Cahun also demonstrates that non-binary attraction is not a product of narcissistic self-admiration: it is a form of desire rooted in the other. The aforementioned sentiments are expressed not only in Cahun's works that showcase mirrors, but are also strongly demonstrated in their "monstrous" self-portraits. Here, we define the term "monstrous" to mean much more than hideous creatures of legend that contradict notions of typical beauty. To be "monstrous" is to harbor a message that conveys an inconvenient truth to society at large. Overall, this paper will give a novel perspective of Cahun's artworks that elicit how unwanted messages from artists may construct freer, more equal societies for all.

Introduction

“Under this mask, another mask. I will never finish removing all these faces”.¹ These are perhaps the best-known words of French photographer and writer Lucy Renée Mathilde Schwob, better known as Claude Cahun (1894-1954). Like a masked theatre actor, Claude Cahun actively “performed” within their self-portraits, which comprised the vast majority of their oeuvre.² Rather than presenting themselves in a societally-expected fashion within their photographs, Cahun performs, allowing alternate personae to breathe life into their artworks. In recent years Cahun’s self-portraits have captured the attention of many. Art historians, queer scholars, and the general public have turned to these artworks for scholarship as well as for a source of creative inspiration. Of particular interest are Cahun’s photographs featuring mirrors. For example, we may consider Cahun’s *Self-Portrait with Mirror* (1928) (fig. 1). This self-portrait appears deceptively simple at first: Cahun, dressed in a man’s checkered jacket, poses adjacent to a mirror.³ Clutching this piece of clothing, Cahun stares coyly at viewers, with the mirror readily adding a second rendition of their mien.

In this thesis, I will address Cahun’s engagement of the mirror and how it upends early twentieth-century notions of gender and sexuality. With the aid of the mirror, Cahun eschews essentialist notions of gender construction, which insists that gender is inherently tied to the

¹ Claude Cahun, *Aveux non avenus*, London 2007, Tate Publishing, p.183.

² Claude Cahun deemed neither the male nor the female genders to fit them, as evidence by their famous quote, “Masculine? Feminine? It depends on the situation. Neuter is the only gender that always suits me”. As a result, I am using “they” as a pronoun to reference Cahun. However, it is important to recognize the anachronicity of this pronoun usage; the concept of “choosing” one’s pronouns beyond their birth-gender was not an option in 20th century French society. In contemporaneous times, there is a slow trend toward the usage of a gender-neutral pronoun in the French language; “Claude Cahun,” Tate, accessed July 5, 2020, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/claude-cahun-10611>.

³ Gen Doy, *Claude Cahun: A Sensual Politics of Photography* (London/ New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 59.

biological body. Instead, they showcase in their self-portraits that gender is a marker of social difference and self-construction, grounded in performance. In and through their use of photography and the mirror, Cahun also demonstrates that non-binary attraction is not a product of narcissistic self-admiration: it is a form of desire rooted in the other. The aforementioned sentiments are expressed not only in Cahun's works that showcase mirrors, but are also strongly demonstrated in their "monstrous" self-portraits. Here, I define the term "monstrous" to mean much more than hideous creatures of legend that contradict notions of typical beauty. To be "monstrous" is to harbor a message that conveys an inconvenient truth to society at large. Acclaimed poet Ocean Vuong echoes similar sentiments, "[A] monster is not such a terrible thing to be. From the Latin root *monstrum*, a divine messenger of catastrophe, then adapted by the Old French to mean an animal of myriad origins: centaur, griffin, satyr. To be a monster is to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once".⁴ In particular, Cahun's "monstrous" artworks parallel Vuong's words and act as prescient entities that point toward contemporary discussion of queer topics. At this time, French society was not ready for Cahun's portraits and would have disputed their sentiments. It is in this fashion — one that is actually much more informative than literal — that Cahun's photographs truly exist as "monstrous".

In the course of this paper, I first analyze Claude Cahun's *Photomontage Frontispiece to Chapter 11 of Self-Portrait with Mirror* (1930) (fig. 2). This provides a basis for the discussion tied to my other selected artworks. Next, I analyze Claude Cahun's *Self-Portrait* (ca. 1914) (fig. 3). An early work within Cahun's oeuvre, this photograph demonstrates what I mean by monstrous-appearing and shows how this label may be viewed as a sustained trope throughout

⁴ Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019), pg. 29., Hathi Trust.

the duration of Cahun's career. Finally, I consider Cahun's *Que me veux-tu ?* (1929) (fig. 4) that includes no actual mirror, but instead, a collaged reflection of themselves; this photograph acts as a thorough extension of *Self-Portrait* and concludes my discussion. While a number of scholars such as Gen Doy and Erin Pustarfi have addressed Cahun's use of mirrors in relation to sexual orientation and gender, they have largely ignored in a fuller fashion how the ideological concept of the "mirror" appears and operates in Cahun's photographs. In other words, while there may not be a literal mirror pictured in a photograph by Cahun, the conceptual underpinnings of the mirror operate on multiple levels that I will explore in this thesis.

Over the centuries, a number of myths and narratives have been associated with mirrors, from the Greek myth of Medusa, to the reflection found within the famous Disney tale *Snow White* (1937). Within the plastic arts more specifically, the mirror has an illustrious symbolic precedence, and has been a powerful pictorial instrument in revealing people or objects, offering alternative perspectives, or even distorting reality. For the sake of this discussion, the mirror will be defined as an optical device (usually a flat or curved surface of glass that has a reflective metallic coating) that produces either an identical or near-identical rendition of the self upon a viewer's gaze. Importantly, the mirror bears special significance within surrealism, the art movement into which scholars have embedded Cahun. According to Erin Pustarfi, the mirror motif was greatly popular amongst the surrealists, and symbolized the nature of vision as well as the reality of self-image.⁵ In addition to bearing psychoanalytic significance, the mirror has been used especially by female surrealist artists. Scholars note that these artists prominently employ the mirror as a means to convey statements pertaining to gender from a uniquely female

⁵ Erin F. Pustarfi, "Constructed Realities: Claude Cahun's Created World in *Aveux Non Avenus*", *Journal of Homosexuality* 67. no. 5. (2020): 704, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epub/10.1080/00918369.2018.1555391?needAccess=true>.

perspective.⁶ Within the artworks of other female surrealist artists, such as Remedios Varo (1908-1963), the mirror exists as a prominent pictorial device (fig. 5).

Some relevant scholarship has specifically focused on Cahun's conveyance of their unique ideology via the mirror. In Pustarfi's article that focuses on Cahun's *Aveux non Avenus*, she analyzes *Photomontage Frontispiece to Chapter 11 of Self-Portrait with Mirror* (1929). Pustarfi asserts that the mirror within this image permits Cahun to fully separate themselves from the male and female genders that society presents.⁷ To Pustarfi, the mirror permits Cahun the ability to present themselves on their own terms without societal interference.⁸ As a basis of her analysis, she turns to text within Cahun's *Aveux non Avenus* that accompanies this collage. Pustarfi also describes how the surrealists viewed the mirror as a pictorial device tied to narcissism in relation to homoeroticism.⁹ Consequently, the mirror may serve as a visual pun of the phrase "sexual inversion", a contemporaneous term for homosexuality in Cahun's time.¹⁰ As a result, this scholar argues that the mirror may be deemed as a symbol of Cahun's relationship with their partner Marcel Moore.¹¹ Mirrors double and invert subjects' faces; Cahun and Moore could be viewed as each other's doubled inversion.

Other scholars have considered Cahun's use of the mirror as well; Gen Doy describes in her book *Claude Cahun: A Sensual Political Photography* (2007), how mirrors and reflections appear in Cahun's photographs.¹² According to Doy, the mirror appears overtly throughout Cahun's *Aveux non Avenus*, as well as subtly within Cahun's oeuvre (perhaps most notably,

⁶ Pustarfi, 703.

⁷ Pustarfi, 702- 703.

⁸ Pustarfi, 702- 703.

⁹ Pustarfi, 702-703.

¹⁰ Pustarfi, 702-703.

¹¹ Pustarfi, 702-703.

¹² Doy, 59.

Cahun's *Bell Jar Photographs*).¹³ Doy loosely describes these mirrors as an apparatus to enable Cahun to provide a performance that upends social norms of their time.¹⁴ Doy demonstrates how in Cahun's photograph *Self-Portrait with Mirror* (1928), when paired with its companion photograph, *Marcel Moore with Mirror* (1928) (fig. 6), troubles the notion of presuming male spectatorship.¹⁵ She opines that these photographs may suggest viewership between Cahun and their female partner, Suzanne Malherbe (1982-1972).¹⁶ Doy has described the camera's close relationship to the mirror. To Doy, Cahun's camera would have been tied to this object on a physical level, as cameras during Cahun's time contained small mirrors in order to function; these cameras also possessed surfaces covered in light sensitive substances that function in similar ways to mirrors.¹⁷ Doy also describes the concept of "camera-as-mirror" within Cahun's oeuvre. Perhaps most notably, she writes about this concept as it appears within Cahun's *Self-Portrait* (1914). Here, Cahun's head may be seen to appear as that of Medusa's, and the camera may act as the mirror that Perseus from the eponymous Greek myth used to slay this creature.¹⁸

Within photography, the self-portrait bears unique significance. According to scholar Amelia Jones, in any portrait of any kind a subject becomes documented.¹⁹ In the self-produced portrait, the subject is the artist, who promises to convey themselves to the viewer.²⁰ This sentiment is magnified in the photographic self-portrait.²¹ Through technological means, an

¹³ Doy, 58.

¹⁴ Doy, 61.

¹⁵ Doy, 61.

¹⁶ Doy, 62.

¹⁷ Doy, 57-58.

¹⁸ Doy, 18.

¹⁹ Amelia, Jones. "The 'Eternal Return': Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment," *Signs* 27, no. 4 (Summer 2002): 951, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/339641>.

²⁰ Jones, 951.

²¹ Jones, 951.

image is mechanically produced that seemingly presents itself as an undeniably accurate representation of reality.²² However, Jones also asserts that an artist's performance within the photographic self-image may distort this trusted connection to the "real".²³ According to Jones, the screen that bears a photographic self-portrait permits viewers to psychically merge with the figure within. During the viewership experience, the observer and subject "clasp" and intertwine as one.²⁴ Both of these entities reify each other in a fashion that leaves lasting impressions on the other.²⁵ At the basis of Jones' argument is the notion that identity within the photographic self-portrait is transient and fluid when considered within the context of this dialectical relationship.²⁶ Importantly, Jones states that during this viewership process, the viewer exchanges his or her "otherness" with the photographed subject. It is no longer the case that this subject is "other" the viewer is in an equal state of strangeness given the reciprocal nature of the gaze during the viewership process of self-portraits.²⁷ To this end, through his or her own performance, a person within a self-portrait may signify a viewer's "otherness".²⁸

All of this ties together with Cahun in a unique fashion, given the presence of mirrors and reflections in their artworks. Within these photographs, Cahun acts as a subject, whereas their reflection becomes a non-person object that bears the traits of Cahun. This demonstrates that Cahun's "queerness" is not inherently tied to them it is a construct that is formulated and not essential to their being. This bears great significance within Jones' thinking. Now, there is a horizontal axis of subjectivity within the image between Cahun's subject-self and mirrored

²² Jones, 951.

²³ Jones, 951.

²⁴ Jones, 966.

²⁵ Jones, 966.

²⁶ Jones, 966.

²⁷ Jones, 966.

²⁸ Jones, 967.

object-self. There is also a perpendicular axis beyond the image-plane among Cahun's subject-self, reflected object-self, and viewer. Across all of these channels, subjectivity is continuously exchanged, and ultimately reveals that the process of "queering" involves the recognition, acceptance, and demonstration of the non-static nature of self-identities. This "triangular" relationship among subject, reflection, and viewer also demonstrates that subjectivity is inherently "queer", as no one's self exists in a stable vacuum, and is always in flux. With this model in mind, every time a new viewer observes one of Cahun's self-portraits, he or she brings with them a novel subjectivity that continues to participate in this triangular relationship with the instability of Cahun's subjectivity. Ultimately, using Cahun's oeuvre as a visual anchor, I wish to propose an addendum to Jones' model and add an extra dimension that updates further contemporary queer discourse.

To flesh out this point, let us briefly compare Cahun to a similar, popular artist, Cindy Sherman (b. 1954) (fig. 7). These two artists are frequently compared, given their similar proclivity for performance within their artworks. Like Cahun, Sherman engages in self-portraits and dons "masks" in order to be fully seen and appreciated within their photographs. However, it is within their photographs pertaining to mirrors that a key differentiation is made between these two. While Sherman may never pose as an "object" to become a "subject", Cahun does this by means of creating "reflections" of themselves. Through the infinite, repeated iterations of performance that may be found within their self-portraits (accompanied by a viewer's gaze), Cahun's objectified reflections showcase the failure of the proper formulation of a stable gender role. If gender is constituted by reiterated performances, then Cahun's reflections show us that Cahun has *chosen* specific attributes and attitudes from standard stereotypes of both masculine and the feminine states of being. As these traits are inscribed upon an object, rather than a

subject, viewers will see the artificiality of these traits. Time and again, upon viewing, participating, and completing the reiterative process, viewers will experience Cahun's failure in creating a well-defined gender role.

To best understand Cahun, one must first briefly consider their biography as well as their professional relationships. Born on October 25, 1894, in Nantes, France, Cahun came from a Jewish family.²⁹ Scholars have discerned that this artist was strongly influenced by the men of their family, including their father, Maurice Schwob, who owned the newspaper *Le Phare et la Loire*.³⁰ Cahun also strongly identified with their uncle, Marcel Schwob, who was a famous Symbolist writer. However, Cahun's mother, Marie-Antoinette Courbelaise, was absent entirely from Cahun's life. When Cahun was only four years of age, Courbelaise experienced a major psychiatric illness and was hospitalized indefinitely in a clinic away from her daughter.³¹ Cahun's father would come to divorce Courbelaise in 1917, and married a widow named Mme. Malherbe. This new marriage brought Cahun's stepsister, Suzanne Malherbe (who would come to adopt the masculine name, Marcel Moore) into Cahun's life.³²

In 1937, Cahun and Moore moved to the Island of Jersey, a British Crown Dependency of the Channel Islands.³³ According to scholar Tirza True Latimer, the couple was drawn to this island as a result of its political isolation, cultural hybridity, and history of sanctuary.³⁴ In 1940,

²⁹ Danielle Knafo, "Claude Cahun: The Third Sex", *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* (2001): 5, Semantic Scholar.

³⁰ Knafo, 5.

³¹ Knafo, 6.

³² Cahun would develop a long-lasting romantic relationship with Suzanne, a relationship that their two families attempted to repeatedly discourage. These attempts caused Cahun to experience much distress, to the point that they experienced anorexia and thoughts of suicide.; Knafo, 8.

³³ Tirza True Latimer, "Claude Cahun's Mirror in the Lens", *The Gay and Lesbian Review*, 2018, 6. <https://glreview.org/article/claude-cahuns-mirror-in-the-lens/>.

³⁴ Latimer, 6.

during World War II, Jersey was captured by the Germans.³⁵ Rather than flee, the two decided to stand their ground, as more than half the population had.³⁶ Cahun and Moore would engage in resistance efforts against the Nazis. Eventually, however, the Nazis captured Cahun and Moore.³⁷ Ultimately, both were sentenced to death by beheading for their “incitement to murder” German troops.³⁸ However, they were spared from death, and instead, the two were sentenced to life in prison.³⁹ Finally, Cahun and Moore were liberated on May 8, 1945.⁴⁰ Cahun’s health was compromised by their time in captivity, and they died in Jersey on December 8, 1954.⁴¹

While all of Cahun’s life may be seen as worthy of study, an important aspect of Cahun’s life to consider is their relationship to surrealism. In 1920, Cahun moved to Paris with Moore, where they were exposed to the surrealist art and literary movements, and at times, very intimately so.⁴² For example, Cahun and Moore would invite members of the Parisian intelligentsia into their home. This would result in their being steeped in “concepts regarding psychoanalysis, Symbolism, surrealism, and Dada [that] led to critiques that are embedded in her writing and imagery in *Aveux non Avenus*.⁴³ Also during the 1920’s and early 1930’s, Cahun would come to frequently participate in surrealist exhibitions and strategy meetings, while Moore also aided this group behind the scenes.⁴⁴ In 1932, Cahun joined the *Association des*

³⁵ Latimer, 6.

³⁶ Latimer, 6.

³⁷ Michael Löwy, “Claude Cahun: The Extreme Point of the Needle,” in *Morning Star: Surrealism, Marxism, Anarchism, Situationism, Utopia*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 76 ProQuest.

³⁸ Löwy 76.

³⁹ Löwy, 76.

⁴⁰ Löwy, 76.

⁴¹ Löwy, 78.

⁴² Knafo, “The Third Sex,” 34.

⁴³ Erin Pustarfi, “Constructed Realities”, 700.

⁴⁴ Latimer, “Claude Cahun’s Mirror,” 5-6.

Écrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires, with which Cahun signed and even helped to compose political documents created by this group.⁴⁵ During this time, Cahun maintained an eccentric appearance, and even painted their head gold and rose colors. This did not go unnoticed, and made Cahun's interactions at times difficult.⁴⁶ Ultimately, it was with the *Association des Écrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires* whereupon they worked with surrealist theorist, poet, and artist, André Breton (1896-1966).⁴⁷ Breton was a key figure of the surrealist movement, and one of its initial founders. He wrote many publications central to the surrealist movement including surrealism's first two manifestos.⁴⁸

Initially, due to his homophobia, Breton was uncomfortable with Cahun's presence. Breton disliked Cahun given their extremely unusual, gender non-conforming appearance to the point that Breton would physically distance himself from Cahun upon sight of them. However, Cahun eventually earned his respect, and he came to value Cahun's arguments and opinions about surrealism and deemed them an essential member of the surrealists.⁴⁹ As the surrealists began to splinter into different factions, Cahun sided with Breton, and the two became comrades who bonded over their similar artistic and political ideologies. For example, in 1934 Cahun published a pamphlet on poetry's connection with revolution that extolled views that matched Breton's, called *Les Paris sont ouverts*.⁵⁰ Moreover, while some surrealists favored other communist leaders, both Cahun and Breton preferred the ideologies of Leon Trotsky.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Löwy, 67-68.

⁴⁶ Löwy, 75.

⁴⁷ Latimer, 5.

⁴⁸ Breton would famously pen the *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924) and the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1929). For more information on Breton's views, see

⁴⁹ Löwy, 74.

⁵⁰ Löwy, 73.

⁵¹ Löwy, 73.

In addition to their mutual political ideologies, the two “approached the concept of beauty in art in a similar way; convulsive beauty, a term that first appeared in Breton’s novel *Nadja* (1929) became their focus. Surrealism, as Breton envisioned it, aimed to redefine beauty.⁵² Rather than embrace conventional standards of beauty in artwork, Breton desired for the perception of beauty to center around “convulsion” and “shock.”⁵³ To Breton, in the modern era, the subconscious mind became fettered and suppressed by contemporaneous norms and mores. He believed that convulsive beauty would produce shock in a fashion that pierced the mind’s now-clouded state and reach the subconscious, wherein ultimate truth lies.⁵⁴ Thus, Breton aimed for convulsive beauty to be liberating to the subconscious.⁵⁵ Breton postulated three aspects of convulsive beauty.⁵⁶ The first called “*érotique-voilée*,” in which one animal imitates a different animal, or when inorganic matter appears as statuary.⁵⁷ The next aspect is labelled “*éxplosante-voilé*,” which occurs when something should have remained in motion, but has stopped.⁵⁸ In Breton’s final aspect of convulsive beauty “*magique-circonstancielle*,” a found object or word is brought by an emissary from a different world.⁵⁹ This object subsequently informs the recipient of his or her own desire.⁶⁰

Breton would eventually view photography as a means to achieve his goals of psychic liberation via convulsive beauty within the surrealist movement. This is as many surrealist

⁵² “Convulsive Beauty,” Sydney College of the Arts, accessed August 28, 2021. <https://lowanna.weebly.com/convulsive-beauty.html>.

⁵³ “Convulsive Beauty.”

⁵⁴ “Convulsive Beauty.”

⁵⁵ “Convulsive Beauty.”

⁵⁶ Rosalind Krauss, “Photography in the Service of Surrealism,” in *Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism*. Edited by Alan Axelrod, (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1985), 31.

⁵⁷ Krauss, 31.

⁵⁸ Krauss, 31.

⁵⁹ Krauss, 31.

⁶⁰ Krauss 31.

photographic styles extolled the semiotic concept of *spacing*.⁶¹ With the presence of spacing, a photograph loses its connection with the “real.”⁶² With spacing, the image of reality becomes fractured, and “convulsed from within.”⁶³ These fractures and convulsions challenge definitions of formal beauty, enmeshing the familiar with the unknown and grotesque in surrealist works of art, and ultimately produce representations of convulsive beauty.⁶⁴

Importantly, Cahun’s “monstrous” artworks manifest convulsive beauty. If we do accept these artworks’ ability to convey ideologies that would have disrupted contemporaneous societal thought, then Cahun’s “monstrousness” dovetails neatly with Breton’s convulsive beauty. If to be “monstrous” is to harbor messages that, if became known, would disrupt many societally-held concepts, and benefit society, such a definition closely aligns with the goal of Breton’s theory. It is in this way that Cahun’s artwork may seem to be properly “surrealist”, albeit within its own unique framework. However, Cahun’s “monstrousness” should not be named a synonym for convulsive beauty; it deviated from Breton’s own personal beliefs toward gender and sexuality. Instead, Cahun’s “monstrousness” within their artworks was presented in a fashion that aimed to validate non-heterormativity, including their relationship with Moore.

In this vein, one must also consider the collaborative nature of Cahun’s artworks. While many of Cahun’s self-portraits are labeled “self-portraits”, Cahun’s work may most accurately be considered within a collaborative context with their partner Moore.⁶⁵ In many of their literary

⁶¹ Krauss, 28.

⁶² In its place, the spaced photograph becomes akin to a language.

⁶³ Krauss, 28.

⁶⁴ This may be considered in artwork that blends the familiar with the unfamiliar, such as close-ups of body parts positioned at unusual angles. An example of such exists in Méret Oppenheim’s *Breakfast in Fur* (1936). With this sculpture, Oppenheim paired a familiar object (a teacup) with an unfamiliar lining (animal fur). To many viewers, such elicits feelings of humor, disgust and ultimately shock.

⁶⁵ Tirza Latimer, “Entre Nous”, 46.

efforts, Cahun served as the author, whereas Moore acted as an illustrator.⁶⁶ Their first major collaborative textual effort was *Vues et visions* (1919). Within this book, Moore's illustrations serve to reinforce Cahun's poetic text.⁶⁷ Later, Cahun and Moore would collectively create the biography *Aveux non Avenus* (1930).⁶⁸ This book provides fragmented images and facts that utterly disavow the norms of standard biographical writing.⁶⁹ Moreover, it is important to note that many of their photographs could only have been produced in a collective setting, and even could not have been produced without the aid of a time-released cable.⁷⁰ As such, in some photographs, both Cahun and Moore would appear.⁷¹ In other photographs, a "trace" of Moore would appear in the photograph, such as her shadow.⁷² Beyond being unique, Cahun's and Moore's collaboration was significant given its relationship to traditional surrealist constructions of the self-portrait. In many surrealist artworks, the presumed artistic operation involved a male artist gazing upon and producing an image of a female muse. In comparison, in this pair's artworks, a female acts as both the artist and muse. However, like other surrealist self-portraits, Cahun's and Moore's photographs subvert the standard concept of the bourgeois self-portrait: no longer does the representation of the self serve as a flattering document of one's likeness; this mode of representation was meant to shock and to breathe truth into viewers' consciousnesses.

This conversation about self-portraits soon appears problematic when considering the idea that the "self-portrait" becomes compromised in the context of Claude Cahun's artworks.⁷³

⁶⁶ Latimer, 46.

⁶⁷ Latimer, 46.

⁶⁸ Latimer, 46.

⁶⁹ Latimer, 46.

⁷⁰ Latimer, 47.; As a prime example of such, see Cahun's "bell jar" photographs.

⁷¹ Latimer, 47.

⁷² Latimer, 47.

⁷³ Latimer, 47.

Even the insistence on the label “self-portrait” regarding Cahun’s oeuvre serves to be problematic.⁷⁴ Not only does it faultily place Cahun as the singular subject of their photographs, but it emphasizes Cahun’s work as “art.”⁷⁵ Many scholars, such as Tirza True Latimer, instead, believe that Cahun’s work would more appropriately be considered as visual documentation of performances.⁷⁶ Rather than exist as photographs meant to be shown to the public, Cahun and Moore kept these self-portraits private, and much of their photographic work was unknown to the artworld until recent decades, after their rediscovery by art historian François Leperlier in the 1960’s.⁷⁷ In the interim, perhaps one of the few witnesses of Cahun’s photographic efforts were mirrors.

Part III-The Mirror

Cahun’s performances in their photographs, especially those involving mirrors, truly allow Cahun to refuse contemporaneous sentiments pertaining to homosexuality and gender formation, as well as afford Cahun the opportunity to anticipate more modern views on these topics. In Cahun’s autobiography *Aveux non Avenus*, their *Photomontage Frontispiece to Chapter 11 of Self-Portrait with Mirror* (1930) duly confronts traditional notions of sexuality and gender. One of Cahun’s two major texts, Cahun collaborated with Moore to create a work that evades straightforward interpretation.⁷⁸ Commonly translated as “Cancelled Confessions”, Cahun and Moore present a poignant critique of autobiography (the literary analogue of self-

⁷⁴ Latimer, 47.

⁷⁵ Latimer, 47.

⁷⁶ Latimer, 47.

⁷⁷ Latimer, 47.

⁷⁸ Tirza True Latimer, “Entre Nous: Between Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore”, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Volume 12, Number 2, 2006, pg. 210, Project Muse.

portraiture).⁷⁹ This duo shared evenly in the creation of the photomontages of this text: Cahun performed and wrote, whereas Moore visualized and arranged the images on paper.⁸⁰ The medium of photomontage – the process of deconstructing fragments of material and reconstructing them in a novel fashion – is of great significance within the context of Cahun’s and Moore’s work. While photomontage, pioneered by Dada artists, was not too common amongst surrealists, some surrealists, such as Breton, strongly favored this medium.⁸¹ Indeed, surrealists such as Breton believed that photomontage possesses a special means of uniting psychic automatism and the automatism associated with cameras.⁸² Significantly, Cahun’s photomontage disrupts traditional surrealist artistic production in a tangential fashion. While like the surrealists, through photomontage, Cahun and Moore attempted to subvert standard, cartesian, Enlightenment-based logic, they also produced art in a fashion completely foreign to the other surrealists.⁸³ In their case, two people, both who were not male, created pictures of a person of the female gender (rather than the singular male rendering the female form). Often, the subject would be rendered in an utterly indecipherable state.

It is in this way that *Photomontage Frontispiece to Chapter 11 of Self-Portrait with Mirror* presents a figure: viewers are thrown into a sea of body parts placed against a sheer black, grainy backdrop. Perhaps most prominently, Cahun places their partially covered head within a mirror, which a giant, pale hand grasps. This head is mostly obfuscated by black garments that melt into the background of the same color. Most striking about this figure is its almost confrontational gaze- the eyes stare evenly and directly at viewers. Surrounding this

⁷⁹ Latimer, 210.

⁸⁰ Latimer, 205.

⁸¹ Krauss, “Photography in the Service”, 8.

⁸² Krauss, 8.

⁸³ Latimer, “Entre Nous”, 210.

mirror are numerous other dismembered body parts of a woman, including a pair of legs and collections of arms. There is no logic to the orientation and placement of these limbs, and they add an almost mysterious quality to the image. Moreover, some of these limbs overlap, such as when a leg and connected foot step between the fingers of a giant hand in the rightmost margin of the composition. At the bottom lies an inverted human eye, which bears Cahun's likeness yet again. This time, Cahun's face (now flipped) is less covered and has a fully revealed bald head. Its gaze remains mostly unchanged when compared to the prior mien and does not compromise on the intensity of its stare. Finally, throughout the image are cut newspaper clippings in seemingly haphazard shapes. They bear incomprehensible words strung together and create a feeling of absurd chaos. One of these snippets exists in the shape of a hand in the upper-right corner of the collage. Its index finger rests on the top of the mirror that bears Cahun's likeness, further drawing viewers' gazes into Cahun's own.

Collectively, within this photomontage, Cahun seems to exist in the form of two faces spread at opposite ends of this artwork, each within two means of seeing: a mirror, and an eye. Surrounding these are an absurd tangle of limbs and words, so as to make the only certainty within this photomontage exist in the form of Cahun's fierce gaze. Viewers are ultimately at once torn between confidence and chaos, perhaps not unlike when one experiences certain psychological phenomena. I propose that this photocollage bears significance when considering the "Mirror Stage" of human development.⁸⁴ It was first Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) who postulated this theory in 1936, elaborating upon the theories of Henri Wallon (1879-1962).⁸⁵ This theory is perhaps Lacan's most famous theoretical contribution, and has served as the basis

⁸⁴ Doy, *Claude Cahun*, 59.

⁸⁵ Doy, 59. Lacan would deny any association with Wallon.

for numerous other psychological theories. At first glance, this theoretical stage of human development appears seemingly simple: at or around six months to eighteen months of age, a human child will be able to recognize their reflection in a mirror as their own.⁸⁶ Despite this apparent simplicity, Lacan's Mirror Stage bears immense significance within psychodynamic theory.⁸⁷

Lacan asserted that this stage is inherently "narcissistic", a term that was grounded in the Greek myth of Narcissus.⁸⁸ According to many psychoanalysts, this term meant an obsessive self-infatuation and admiration of one's genitals. Freud believed that while such was normal in all people at a young age, homosexual people failed to relinquish this self-admiration. To this end, Freud believed that homosexual people based their models of desire on themselves as a result of a unique progression through this stage.⁸⁹ Ultimately, lesbians and gay men did not advance through this stage in a fashion that yielded a transference of desire to the opposite sex,

⁸⁶ "Mirror Phase", *Oxford Reference*, accessed August 19, 2021, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100200931>.

⁸⁷ Perhaps most importantly is the fact that this stage is rooted in the concepts of "misrecognition", "desire", and "disidentification". The first of these is the process in which an infant will view his or her own self in a mirror and mistake their reflection. While the infant will believe that this image is of him or herself, in reality, it is only a reflection. To this end, according to Lacan, a young child's sense of "self" is inherently faulty, as this self-construct is grounded in an illusion derived from a reflection. Lacan's Mirror Stage carries further significance when considering the psychodynamic concept of desire. Emerging from the Mirror Stage a young child will begin to experience a sense of "lack" that is related to the mother's lack of a phallus. This causes immense frustration to the child, and ultimately manifests within the child a sense of desire to "complete" the mother. Finally, disidentification results from the shattering of the ideal ego and the interplay between desire and lack. Disidentification is the process in which a child fully recognizes a separation of the self and the (m)other.; "Misrecognition," *Oxford Reference*, accessed August 19, 2021; Jeanne Willette. "Jacques Lacan: The Mirror Stage, Art History Unstuffed, accessed August 2021. <https://arthistoryunstuffed.com/jacques-lacan-mirror-stage/>.

⁸⁸ Jeanne, "Jacques Lacan: The Mirror Stage."

⁸⁹ Doy, 60.

and away from members of the same sex.⁹⁰ Cahun would have possibly been familiar with Lacan's Mirror Stage theory. Cahun and Lacan had mutual friends, including Lise Deharme (a collaborator on some of Cahun's works).⁹¹ Moreover, Lacan loosely associated himself with the surrealists as a result of his interests in the concept of "paranoia".⁹² Lacan would even attend meetings of avant-garde art groups in which Cahun was present, such as one meeting of the *Association des Ecrivains et des Artistes Revolutionnaires*.⁹³

Specifically within *Photomontage*, through Cahun's performance behind the mirror, Cahun refutes Lacan's theory by means of their performance. This may be observed by considering the direction of Cahun's disembodied head's gaze. Cahun does not look *into* the mirror at their own reflection, but rather, *through* it, and directly at viewers. I contend that this allows viewers to read their work as a defiant gesture against contemporaneous societal views relating to the topic of homosexuality.⁹⁴ It would likely have been expected for homosexual people to be looking toward a mirror; they themselves were the sources of their attraction as a result of their progression through the Mirror Stage resulting in a failure to cease "identification" with their own image.⁹⁵ As this work was a collaborative effort, involving the presence of their lifelong partner Moore, I propose that Cahun refuses the mirror as a means to defiantly look into the face of Moore. Indeed, as Cahun's artwork was meant to be shared directly with Moore in private, this sentiment is magnified when considering the fact that the mirror may be seen as a

⁹⁰ Doy, 60.

⁹¹ Doy, 60.

⁹² Doy, 60.

⁹³ Doy, 60.

⁹⁴ Note, scholars have labeled Cahun's gaze as "impudent" in other artworks, the reading of Cahun's gaze here as defiant is defensible. Christy Wampole, "The Impudence of Claude Cahun", *L'Espeir Créateur*, 53, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 8, JSTOR.

⁹⁵ Doy, 60.

metaphor for sexual inversion- homosexuality, as labeled in 1920's-1930's France.⁹⁶ A mirror image inverts a subject's portrait. Through the mirror, Cahun may have literally been showcasing themselves as Moore's "inverted" double. In the process, Cahun demonstrates that their lover is someone else, not themselves. Cahun ultimately shows us that similar to heterosexual people, homosexual people base their attraction on others, and that their process of "identification" is in actuality, similar to heterosexual people.

Additionally, as biologically female, it might have been expected for Cahun in this image to be looking directly at this mirror (instead of through it) and ponder their appearance as a result of vanity.⁹⁷ According to Doy, by the time of Cahun's birth, it had become commonplace in 19th century French stereotypes that women would become preoccupied with their appearance.⁹⁸ For example, a popular contemporaneous "moral advisor", Mrs. E. Lynn, wrote in her book *Modern Women* (1868) that, "[woman], we suspect, lives before her glass, always makes a mirror of existence".⁹⁹ To this end, to many 20th century European citizens, reflections of the female self, as seen in mirrors and in the gaze of others, confirmed women as beings who lacked agency and independence.¹⁰⁰

However, once again, Cahun's gaze toward viewers, and not at the mirror itself, serves to disrupt this notion. I propose that this action exemplifies that Cahun was prescient of the concept of performance being central to the concept of gender, as postulated by seminal gender studies scholar Judith Butler. Butler posits within her essay *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory* (1988) that gender identity exists not as a

⁹⁶ Erin Pustarfi, "Constructed Realities", 704.

⁹⁷ Gen Doy, *Claude Cahun*, 61.

⁹⁸ Doy, 56.

⁹⁹ Doy, 56.

¹⁰⁰ Doy, 57.

stable entity, but rather, as something that becomes reified through repeated, performed actions. Butler asserts that, “[Gender] is an identity tenuously constituted in time- an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gender”.¹⁰¹ Through Cahun’s defiant performance and consequent refusal of the mirror, they assert themselves not as a person constructed as a “woman”- a being who would be trapped in the passive role of self-reflective gaze- but as a non-binary-gendered person who possesses full agency over their identity. It is through performance, in conjunction with the mirror, that Cahun reifies their gender, and makes it known to viewers.

Part III- The “Monster”

Cahun continues similar sentiments in their artworks that symbolically reference physical mirrors, while not explicitly showcasing these objects. Many of Cahun’s artworks that do this frequently visually allude to “monstrous” creatures. Importantly, these monsters act as harbingers of inconvenient truths regarding the contemporaneously accepted notions of the constructions of gender and sexual orientation. It is through these monsters’ miens that viewers are presented with visual metaphors that remind viewers of the tenuousness of their own identities. One of Cahun’s photographs that demonstrates this capacity is their *Self-Portrait* (1915). Some scholars, such as Doy, assert that it is reasonable to expect for Cahun to have

¹⁰¹ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal*, 40, no. 4 (Dec., 1988): 519, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3207893>.

consciously referenced the Greek myth of Medusa within this photograph.¹⁰² This is observed given the deliberate arrangement of Cahun's head atop a white bed. Just as presented in the myth, Cahun's head is subtly decapitated (by the white bed sheet) and has "tendrils" of black hair reaching out in waves, akin to the fashion in which Medusa's head appeared in ancient Greek mythology.¹⁰³ Cahun's head bears wide open eyes and a corresponding blank facial expression suggestive of an almost catatonic presence. While Cahun stares at the viewer, they remain unobjectified and calmly unavailable to their viewers. The significance of this photograph comes to light when considering the details of the narrative of the myth of Medusa. In this myth, one could not glance at Medusa's head directly without risking death. To this end, the Greek hero Perseus employs the surface of his shield (which acts as a mirror) to kill Medusa without looking at her.¹⁰⁴ According to scholar Rainer Mack, Perseus' shield/mirror causes us to not reflect ourselves, but another person whom we have come to objectify as a means to preserve our selfhood.¹⁰⁵

As *Self-Portrait* was made in a collaborative environment alongside Cahun's lover, Marcel Moore (as well as was intended to be kept privately), I forward that this artwork may be read as a photograph that demonstrates both Cahun and Moore basing their attraction on each other, rather than themselves. This photograph suggests that Cahun presents their own head as an object of desire to Moore, with which Moore forms her identity and selfhood. Thus, Cahun once again upends the concept of Lacan's Mirror Stage, as understood contemporaneously. Cahun confirms once again that it is erroneous to assume that homosexual people fail to continuously

¹⁰² Doy, 18.

¹⁰³ Doy, 18.

¹⁰⁴ Doy, 18.

¹⁰⁵ Doy, 18.

“project” and “identify” with their own images in a Freudian fashion; rather, they progress in the same way as heteronormative people and form their attraction and relationship accordingly.

Self-Portrait also disrupts notions of gender in the early to mid-20th century as manifested and portrayed by surrealist artists. I argue that while numerous male surrealists deemed the female gender to be an object that assumed the traumas of wartime, Cahun’s employment of the “mirror” (exemplified in this photograph), in conjunction with Cahun’s portrayal of dismemberment, showcases themselves refusing this notion. Instead, as a female-bodied person, Cahun demonstrates the non-male genders as capable of possessing agency within their relationships. These notions may best be observed when considering the prolific occurrences of dismemberment within the surrealist movement. Dismemberment appears almost ubiquitously within this movement; even Breton in his first surrealist manifesto describes a man being cleaved in two by a window.¹⁰⁶ Perhaps it is not surprising that this concept has also been applied to the rendition of the female form. It has been well established that numerous surrealist artists sought to portray the female form in an eroticized, dismembered state.¹⁰⁷ Likely no other artist than Hans Bellmer (1902-1975) exemplifies such. His dolls reorganize female body parts into awkward conglomerations that exemplify objectified femininity (fig. 8).¹⁰⁸

There has been ample discussion as to why objects like Bellmer’s were created, and what they have come to mean. Many scholars speculate that the creation of these dismembered forms was an attempt to relocate anxieties regarding the horrors and traumas of World War I (1914-

¹⁰⁶ André Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924), 1, <https://www.tcf.ua.edu/Classes/Jbutler/T340/SurManifesto/ManifestoOfSurrealism.htm>.

¹⁰⁷ Amy Lyford. “The Aesthetics of Dismemberment: Surrealism and the Musée du Val-de-Grâce in 1917,” *Cultural Critique* no. 46 (Autumn 2000): 15. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1354408>.

¹⁰⁸ Lyford, 15.

1918) inflicted upon the male population, resulting in such anxieties being reinscribed onto the bodies of women.¹⁰⁹ I contend that adding to these sentiments is the fact that many of these dismembered female forms were rendered in a decapitated state. As the human head is a symbol of agency and the source of one's gaze, the removal of such led to the female gender becoming truly stripped powerless in much of surrealist art.

I argue that Cahun debunks this misogynistic depiction and construction of the female gender by means of their own unique portrayal of dismemberment involving the mirror. Within *Self-Portrait*, Cahun, a female-bodied person, visually severs their head from the rest of their body via a bedsheet. However, rather than discarding their head, they discard their body. By doing such, Cahun preserves their agency as a human being, as well as refuses to acquiesce to the male gaze.¹¹⁰ Moreover, I propose that the "mirror" is what most solidifies these sentiments, as in this photograph, when read in its collaborative context, Cahun portrays themselves as the "inverted" subject of their partner Moore's gaze. In the process, Cahun reifies themselves as an object of desire for Moore. Ultimately, this interaction demonstrates that the non-male genders may exist not as powerless people who lack agency, but as people who may partake equally in their own relationships.

Other artworks that portray Cahun as "monstrous" that reference the concept of the reflection exist in Cahun's oeuvre; this is not an isolated occurrence. In addition to *Self-Portrait*, let us consider Cahun's *Que me veux-tu ?* (1929). This photograph bears two identical, pale, bald heads and accompanying upper-chest that bear Cahun's likeness in front of a dark-gray background. While perhaps not obvious at first, this artwork was constructed in the form of a

¹⁰⁹ Lyford, 15.

¹¹⁰ Doy, 17.

photomontage- the two heads have been pieced together within the same picture plane via manipulation in the dark room. Accentuating these figures' paleness is their lack of eyebrows and long, drooping, aquiline noses. These heads are superimposed such that one is looking into the other's pointed ear, posturing for a whisper. The other head refuses both their twin's and viewers' gazes alike, with a mouth parted in potential disgust. While there lack any substantial contextual cues about what has occurred in this image, suggests that it is as if the camera has captured the initiation or termination of a difficult conversation between these two figures.

Unlike the other self-portraits discussed in this paper thus far, Cahun's *Que me veux- tu ?* references the concept of the reflection as a result of its demonstration of the surrealist technique, that is doubling. According to scholar Rosalind Krauss, photography was deemed to have a special connection to reality.¹¹¹ One way surrealist photography disrupts this connection to the real is by means of a certain semiological device, "doubling."¹¹² When objects are doubled within a photograph, an object has been added to the original, and serves to erase the unique presence of the first object.¹¹³ Via doubling, a photograph registers the signs of the reality that the photograph exists as a trace of.¹¹⁴ Ultimately, the act of doubling within photography facilitates access to Breton's central concept of convulsive beauty- a process in which reality contorts or convulses itself into its opposite, or "sign".¹¹⁵ In Breton's final aspect of convulsive beauty, "magique-circonstancielle", a found object or word is brought by an emissary from a different world.¹¹⁶ This object subsequently informs the recipient of his or her own desire.¹¹⁷ I

¹¹¹ Krauss, "Photography in the Service", 28.

¹¹² Krauss, 28.

¹¹³ Krauss, 31.

¹¹⁴ Krauss, 31.

¹¹⁵ Krauss, 31

¹¹⁶ Krauss, 35.

¹¹⁷ Krauss, 35.

propose that this third point of convulsive beauty is key to understanding *Que me veux- tu ?* (or, in English “What do you want from me?”). Importantly, in this photograph, Cahun’s head has been “doubled”- their head has been visually “repeated”. Some scholarship supports the notion that the question in this title is being asked between the heads. If we consider this question literally within the context of convulsive beauty (which we can, given the presence of “doubling”), it is almost as if one head of Cahun references *themselves* directly as the emissary from another universe, as per Breton’s third point of convulsive beauty, and the other head as the recipient of this knowledge.

In conjunction with these points, it is also important to consider what Cahun is portraying themselves as in this image. Scholars Laura Bailey and Lizzie Thynne note Cahun’s appearance within *Que me Veux- tu ?* to be “monstrous.”¹¹⁸ According to these scholars, Cahun parodies sexologist Havelock Ellis’ description of the “sexual invert”- a homosexual person, as labeled in 1920’s and 1930’s France.¹¹⁹ Sexology emerged in the waning years of the 19th century and created a means to categorize non-normative sexual orientations by means of physical appearance.¹²⁰ To create this system, Ellis, a staunch defender of racial eugenics, heavily drew upon existing models of racial physiognomy.¹²¹ Sexology would come to heavily influence both proponents and opponents of homosexuality alike for years to come- the categorization of phenotypes as part of sexual orientation has remained part of the commonplace discourse regarding sexuality. Ellis’ writings on sexology declare homosexual people to be of a hideous

¹¹⁸ Laura Bailey and Lizzie Thynne, “Beyond Representation: Claude Cahun’s Monstrous Mischief-Making,” *History of Photography* (January 19, 2015): 143, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2005.10441366>.

¹¹⁹ Bailey and Thynne, 143.

¹²⁰ Bailey and Thynne, 141.

¹²¹ Bailey and Thynne, 142.

appearance.¹²² Cahun heavily parodied these attitudes, both in their photographs, and writings.¹²³ Indeed, Cahun's contemporaneous description of themselves reads as an almost absurdly grotesque statement of mockery, "Superfluous breasts; irregular inefficacious teeth; eyes and hair of the most banal state; rather soft hands, but twisted and deformed. The oval head of a slave; the forehead too high... or too low... a nicely made nose of its type- a horrible type; too sensual a mouth... ." ¹²⁴ In a similar vein, Scholars Bailey and Thynne note that Cahun's *Que me veux- tu ?* and related images existed to create farcical statements pertaining to sexology.

These scholars have also discerned a connection between Cahun's formulated appearance and the vampirical. In particular, they have linked Cahun's appearance to the vampire Nosferatu from director Murnau's eponymous film from 1922.¹²⁵ Cahun's crafted resemblance to the vampirical in this photograph is yet again likely tied to ironic performance.¹²⁶ According to Bailey and Thynne, the fear of the vampire mirrors the fear of the racial "other", in particular, that of the Jewish people.¹²⁷ Like the vampire, much of early 20th century European society deemed the Jew to be an agent of deception that existed as a menace of society. The appearance of the vampire, compares similarly to the early 20th century anti-Semitic notions of typical Jewish physiognomy, such as the presence of an odd nose, claw-like hands, predatory teeth, and sharpened ears.¹²⁸ In *Que me veux tu ?*, Cahun very clearly possesses these features.

I assert that through Cahun's use of their reflection of their "monstrous" self, as produced by doubling, that Cahun upends contemporaneous normative notions of homosexuality. Here,

¹²² Bailey and Thynne, 142.

¹²³ Bailey and Thynne, 143.

¹²⁴ Bailey and Thynne, 142-143.

¹²⁵ Bailey and Thynne, 143.

¹²⁶ Bailey and Thynne, 143.

¹²⁷ Bailey and Thynne, 143.

¹²⁸ Bailey and Thynne, 143.

one head of Cahun, who portrays themselves as a “monstrous” and “vampirical” creature, mockingly asks the other head if they desire them. Rather than appear “beautiful” in a fashion that elicits narcissistic desire, Cahun’s head, via its “monstrous” and “vampirical” appearance in a satirical fashion, elicits convulsive beauty- a state of being that shocks the psyche on a deep level. Significantly, the other head of Cahun looks away from the questioning head, and refuses its twin’s gaze, perhaps in a state of shock and disgust. Here, we see that rather than accept oneself as a source of beauty, as contemporaneous psychoanalytic theory held homosexual people would do, one head is actively rejecting the other. By doing such, I once again propose that Cahun’s self-portrait demonstrates that homosexual people do not form their attraction on themselves, but on others. Cahun employs both surrealist techniques and sarcasm (centering around contemporaneous social discourse) to fully construct their statements.

In a similar fashion, *Que me veux-tu ?* further disrupts gender norms as understood contemporaneously via the “doubled” appearance of Cahun. Once again, as in *Self-Portrait*, *Que me-veux tu ?* features dismemberment, albeit in the fashion that Cahun seemed to uniquely embrace. Here, Cahun not only preserves their head, but “doubles” it while simultaneously discarding the rest of their body. Significantly, this act of doubling serves to magnify Cahun’s statements regarding gender. With one head refusing the other head’s question of “Que me veux-tu ?” (most likely sexual in nature) Cahun appears to reject the concept that the female form is inherently an object of desire. This concept further reinforces the similar sentiments conveyed by the fact that Cahun discarded their body below their chest. Cahun’s visual imagery is once again drastically different than that of numerous other surrealists, who chose to only keep the bodies of female subject matter and deny female figures any sense of agency. It is in this fashion that

Cahun's "monstrous" photographs showcase the female gender as a gender that bears the status of a full-fledged human being.¹²⁹

Part IV: Conclusion

As a final remark, I wish to proffer my hopes that this paper may contribute in a meaningful way to the reframing of antagonistic binary conventions regarding sexuality and gender. In this paper, I reach back through the past century in order to bring Cahun's self-portraiture into discussions of contemporaneous notions of subjectivity and identity. In the process, we see that Cahun (and Moore) demonstrate the tenuous nature of existence. It is in this fashion that we may see that subjectivity is inherently "queer" and identity closely follows suit. If existence is inherently ephemeral, then so are especially the labels and constructs that society gives us to permanently adopt- "straight", "gay", "man", and "woman". Equally true, but much more poignant is the fact that enforcing these labels is an extremely nefarious endeavor that stems from strictly man-made machinations. To summarize my position, we may consider more established scholars' voices. Pioneering British philosopher Alan Watts has said in reference to the world,

Look, you see we live in a rectangular box, all the time; look at the bookshelves, see, everything's straightened out. So wherever you look around nature and you find things often straightened out you know people have been around. They're always trying to put things in boxes. Those boxes are classifiers, pigeonholes. Words are labels on boxes. But the real world is wiggly, wiggly, wiggly."¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Overall, *Que me veux- tu ?* changes in meaning if posed directly to society at large, rather than solely to Moore. When posed to society, this question may be deemed a challenge; one that asks society to re-evaluate commonly held beliefs and assumptions about the permanence of self-identification and self-presentation. It is only when extrapolated in this larger context that Cahun's beliefs can be fully realized.

¹³⁰ Alan Watts, "The Nature of Consciousness, Part 4: A Wiggly World", *Alan Watts Audio Archives* (2004).

Indeed, Cahun's art shows us that it is not only acceptable, but necessary, to accept that we live in a "wiggly world", full of monsters that show their ugly, but necessary faces for the benefit of society. And this is not a dangerous or malicious change, as being "a monster is not such a terrible thing to be. From the Latin root *monstrum*, a divine messenger of catastrophe, then adapted by the Old French to mean an animal of myriad origins: centaur, griffin, satyr. To be a monster is to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once."¹³¹ Monsters are necessary for our society in their own unique way. When viewers look upon them, these monsters draw out the shakiness of the foundations of their own identities. It through accepting the monster that the foundations of a society in which all identities are fully accepted and cherished may be constructed.

¹³¹ Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, 29.

Images:



Figure 1. Claude Cahun, *Self-Portrait with Mirror* (1928), Photograph



Figure 2. Claude Cahun, *Photomontage Frontispiece to Chapter 11 of Self-Portrait with Mirror* (1930), Photocollage



Figure 3. Claude Cahun, *Self-Portrait* (1914), Photograph

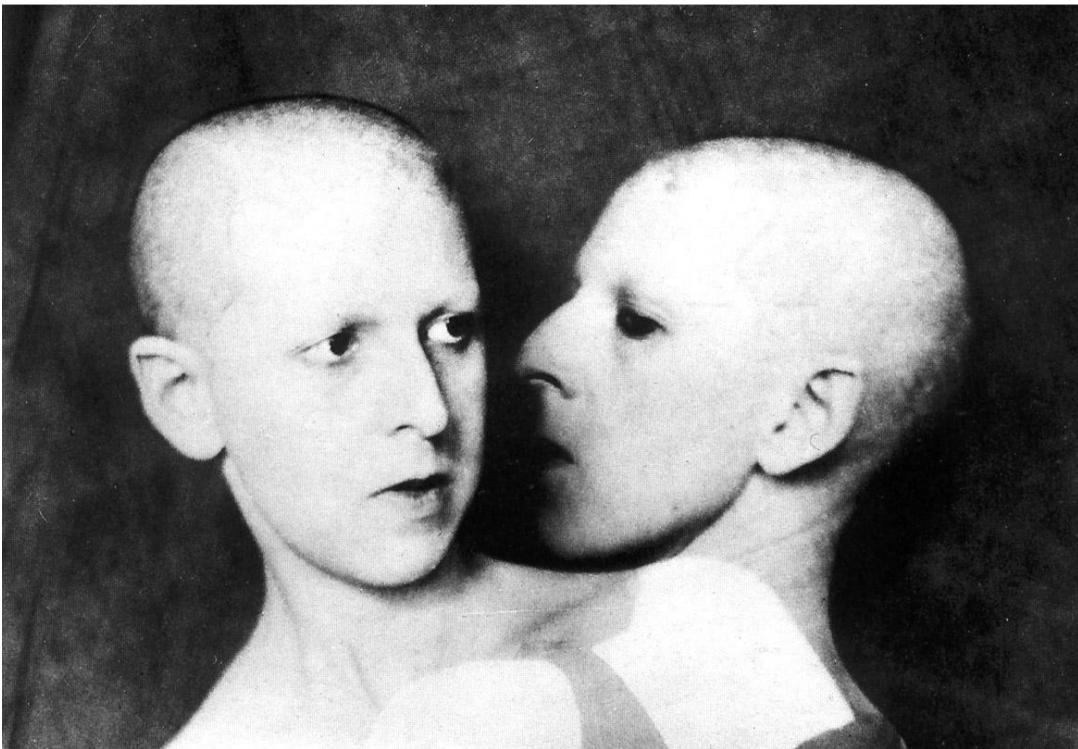


Figure 4. Claude Cahun, *Que me veux-tu ?* (1929), Photograph



Figure 5. Remedios Varo, *The Lovers* (1963), Photograph



Figure 6. Claude Cahun, *Marcel Moore with Mirror* (1928), Photograph.



Figure 7. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still* (1978), Photograph



Figure 8. Hans Bellmer, *La Poupée* (c. 1936), Photograph

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Figure 5. Varo, Remedios, *The Lovers*, Painting, 1963,
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Figure 6. Cahun, Claude, *Marcel Moore with Mirror*, Photograph, 1928,
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Figure 7. Sherman, Cindy, *Untitled Film Still*, Photograph, 1978,
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Figure 8. Bellmer, Hans, *La Poupée*, Photograph, Ca. 1936,
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