

Disavowals or Cancelled Confessions. By Claude Cahun, with original preface by Pierre Mac Orlan, translated by Susan de Muth, introduction by Jennifer Mundy, afterward by François Leperlier, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2007, xxii + 226 pp., plates, notes, £14.99. ISBN 978-0-262-53303-4

Claude Cahun became a post-modern cult figure in the 1990s, thanks to events such as the retrospective *Claude Cahun, Photographe*, at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (1995). The edgy performance portraiture featuring Cahun crossed the channel to Britain and the Atlantic to America, instantly capturing the imagination of Anglophone audiences. By the time *Surrealism, Desire Unbound* opened at the Tate Modern in 2001, no surrealist exhibition checklist would have been complete without some object or photograph representing Cahun. Since then, no less than three English-language documentary films have taken Cahun's life as a focus and the photographic oeuvre has engendered at least a dozen American and British dissertations. Today, scholarly articles in print and on-line continue to proliferate. Over twenty major exhibitions featuring Cahun have explored the terrain where gender play, surrealism, and photography overlap. Most have generated catalogues.¹ Why all the interest now in an artist who had a relatively low profile during her heyday in interwar Paris?

In the 1990s, the 400 some odd extant photographs attributed to Cahun – most, as I have argued in *Women Together/Women Apart: Portraits of Lesbian Paris*, taken in collaboration with her partner and step-sister, the graphic artist Marcel Moore – seemed to prefigure the theories of gender that were then gaining credence, and struck a chord with a generation of artists preoccupied with the role that images play in processes of gender and sexual identity formation. 'If Cahun had not existed, we would have had to invent her,' the art historian Jennifer Shaw has suggested, adding that '... the dominant interpretation of Cahun's photographs fits almost too neatly with contemporary theory.'² Pictures of Cahun in a variety of highly coded costumes and poses visually theorize the artificiality of gender in ways that appear to anticipate by sixty or seventy years the writings of queer theorists such as Judith Butler, author of *Gender Trouble*, not to mention the strategies of contemporary artists employing masquerade, such as Cindy Sherman and Yasumasa Morimura.³

Guided by contemporary cultural imperatives, the recent spate of exhibitions, films, and publications frame Cahun as a gender-bending surrealist photographer, obscuring her primary vocation, which was literary. Born Lucy Renée Mathilde Schwob, Cahun – who adopted a more gender-neutral pen name in her early twenties – was the daughter of Maurice Schwob, publisher of the Nantes newspaper *Le Phare de la Loire* as well as the regional literary journal *La Gerbe*. Cahun's uncle, who deeply influenced the young Cahun, was the symbolist author Marcel Schwob, frequenting such literary figures as André Gide, Remy de Gourmont, and Oscar Wilde. He was also one of the founders of the prestigious literary



journal, *Le Mercure de France*. From an early age, Cahun provided copy for family publications as well as contributing to important surrealist reviews as *Minotaure*. In addition to 75 published articles, poems, editorials, and works of short fiction appearing between 1914 and 1936, Cahun published two books: in 1919, *Vues et visions*, a symbolist reverie, and, in 1930, *Aveux non avenues*, a surrealist anti-memoir.⁴ Both books were illustrated by Moore.

The first book, *Vues et visions*, enjoyed a modest print run of 460 copies, suggesting that the authors and/or publisher viewed this as an 'artist's book' and did not envision mass or even moderate circulation. The book consists of 25 paired verses by Cahun embedded in symbolist-inspired visual frames penned by Moore in black ink, in the style of Aubrey Beardsley. The title *Vues et visions* describes a bifurcated initiative in which picture and text elevate the worldly 'view' to an other-worldly register by placing the mundane here-and-now in dialogue with an ideal of past, while juxtaposing literary and pictorial images. Moore's graphics both anticipate and reinforce the drift of Cahun's poetics. The book's dedication justly acknowledges the importance of the visual partner's complicity. 'I dedicate this puerile prose to you,' Cahun writes to Moore, 'so that the entire book belongs to you and in this way your designs may redeem my text in our eyes.'⁵ The interlacing of possessive articles here, like the interlacing of text and images in the book, creates a grammar of intersubjectivity.

This grammar also marks Cahun's second book-length publication, *Aveux non avenues*. This book had a similarly limited print run of 500 copies. Comprised of snippets from journal entries, imagined or real dialogs, letters, poems, philosophical reflections, reveries, biblical tales, and fables, the book amounts to a literary collage. Ten collages created by Moore 'after the designs of the author' announce the book's central organizing tropes and provide face plates for each chapter.⁶ These collages prominently feature elements drawn from Cahun and Moore's vast archive of photographs representing the author. One collage, signed by Moore, served as the book's frontispiece. Here, as in the earlier joint publication, the illustrations and text perform in concert. But what they perform, in this case, is the deconstruction of the very genres into which they intervene: the autobiographical memoir and its visual equivalent, portraiture.

The title of the book, *Aveux non avenues*, announces the project of deconstruction by embodying a contradiction that translates (very approximately) into English as 'disavowed confessions,' or 'cancelled confessions.' 'Disavowals,' the title privileged by the English translator, registers this contradiction with more subtlety. The word 'disavowal' registers both the autobiographical 'avowal' and its denial, alerting readers from the onset to the ambivalence of Cahun's project. She expresses the desire to exist, to memorialize her own existence, but this desire coexists with another: the desire to unmask the authoritative self as a fictional construct. Reflecting on the extent to which images mediate all projects of self-



representation, Cahun writes, 'The death of Narcissus has always seemed totally incomprehensible to me. Only one explanation seems plausible: Narcissus did not love himself. He allowed himself to be deceived by an image. He didn't know how to go beyond appearances.'⁷ The recurrent theme of narcissism surfaces again a few pages later when Cahun reclaims 'absolute Narcissism: Non-cooperation with God. Passive resistance' as a subversive authorial strategy.⁸ By re-coding this and other pejorative terms that have been used historically to maintain social control over both women and sexual dissidents, *Aveux non avenues* challenges naturalized values that remain embedded in cultural discourse to this day.

This is an important book, not only for its conceptual sophistication, its aesthetic merit, its ethical positions, and its vanguard experimentalism, but for also the way it advances the ambition, in the wake of the 1914 - 1918 war, to expose as flawed the Cartesian premises underlying Western claims of cultural superiority. Deploying surrealist poetics of displacement, the text and illustrations do not permit the formation of a rational, one-to-one ratio of symbolic to real, but replicate instead mechanisms of association described by Freud and other contemporary theorists of unconscious psychic life.⁹ The book is all the more important in that it was authored and illustrated by two women at a time when surrealism, the European cultural sector, and their society more broadly, were dominated almost exclusively by men.

The book, compiled between the years of 1919 and 1928, must be viewed as Cahun and Moore's crowning artistic achievement. While the photographs by which we recognize Cahun today were rarely exhibited outside the couple's home, this book's publication in 1930 Paris confirmed the author's status as a serious contributor to the surrealist movement. At her first meeting with André Breton in 1932, Cahun presented the movement's acknowledged leader with a dedicated copy of this book. The publication found favour with other members of the surrealist milieu as well – most notably Henri Michaux (with whom Cahun attended psychiatric rounds at Paris's Saint Anne's Hospital), René Crevel, and Robert Desnos. It also received accolades from Pierre Albert-Birot, the director of the experimental theatre, Le Plateau, where Cahun performed and Moore designed sets and costumes in the late 1920s.

The level of difficulty (the convolutions, esoterism, and discontinuities of the French prose), in addition to the book's relative scarcity in library collections (even in France), have prevented most English-speaking scholars from factoring *Aveux non avenues* properly into accounts of Cahun's career. English-language scholars to date have relied almost exclusively on the excerpts and interpretations offered by the French authority on Cahun, François Leperlier, whose recently revised and re-released Cahun biography and key contributions to the milestone 1995 Paris retrospective of her photographic work, more or less put Cahun on the cultural map of interwar France.¹⁰ The release, in 2002, of Cahun's collected writings, edited



painstakingly by Leperlier, made *Aveux non avenues* widely available to French-language readers for the first time.¹¹

The release of *Disavowals*, the English translation, while unquestionably of interest to scholars of surrealism and twentieth-century French culture, does little to make the book more accessible. The double and triple meanings that animate the original version simply do not translate. This is not to say that the professional translator, Susan de Muth, has not made a competent effort. She has. But, without extensive annotation the book is simply incomprehensible to contemporary readers. It demands knowledge of surrealism and symbolism, the two literary sources that cross-fertilized Cahun's oeuvre, as well as some familiarity with classical texts, and grounding in the intellectual, cultural, and political history of nineteenth and twentieth-century France. De Muth, because she is not a scholar of the histories and cultures that produced Cahun, could not hope to capture the complexities that made *Aveux non avenues* such a path-breaking literary undertaking. In short, the book requires much more extra-textual support than her scant 160 footnotes provide. As she herself admits in the book's preface, 'the cultural, as well as historical, context in which a work is written (and read) presents its own challenges for the translator. Cahun often addresses the reader's subconscious, relying on associations of ideas, images and meaning; naturally these change with a relocation from post-First World War France to early twenty-first century Britain or America.'¹² The translator has 'not chosen to footnote such instances' but urges the reader 'to bear this in mind.' Difficult, without a little support, to bear in mind the myriad of references, here, to classical mythology (Cahun learned Homeric Greek on the knees of her paternal grandmother, Mathilde Cahun), decadent aestheticism, French and English literature, psychiatry, symbolism, Catholic and Judaic teachings, Eastern religions, surrealism, Western philosophy, European politics, avant-garde theatre, art history, modern dance, and French interwar popular culture – to name just a few. The Tate Modern curator Jennifer Mundy's eleven-page introduction does gesture at providing the necessary historical and literary background and Leperlier's 'Afterword' offers a few valuable points of reference. He acknowledges, however, that 'there is not room here to disentangle in their entirety the collection of sources, contextual indicators, intertextual processes, which all feed into the body of the text and testify to a great capacity for assimilation.'¹³ Having extensively annotated *Aveux non avenues* for reproduction in his edited volume *Claude Cahun, Ecrits*, Leperlier is well aware of the efforts required to assure the success of such literary revivals.

We can only hope that the English publication of *Disavowals* will pave the way for an English edition of Leperlier's informative Cahun biography and an influx of English-language interpretive studies shedding light on the complex web of cultural references that comprise *Aveux non avenues*. One such study is already in the pipeline: *Claude Cahun's Disavowals: Writing, Sexuality and Representation* by Jennifer Shaw (forthcoming, Ashgate). Shaw's



comprehensive analysis promises to attend to the complex interrelationship between the photomontages and writings, situating *Aveux non avenues* within the context of Cahun and Moore's cultural milieu and historical circumstances. Her rigorous study will no doubt offer new perspectives on the book's relevance to historical as well as contemporary cultural debates. It will provide a very necessary complement to *Disavowals*.

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¹ In addition to the retrospective that François Leperlier organized at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 1995, *Claude Cahun, Photographe*, exhibitions showcasing images of Cahun include events conceived by the following curators: Juan Vicente Aliaga, *Claude Cahun*, Institut Valencia d'Art Modern, 2002: David Bates, *Mise-en-Scène: Claude Cahun, Tacita Dean, Virginia Nimarkoh*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1994: Jennifer Blessing, *A Rose is a Rose is a Rose: Gender Performance in Photography*, Guggenheim Museum, 1997: Henri-Claude Cousseau, *Le Rêve d'une ville: Nantes et le surréalisme*, Musée de Beaux-Arts de Nantes, 1994: Whitney Chadwick, *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation*, San Francisco MOMA, 1998: Tirza True Latimer, *Acting Out: Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore*, Judah L. Magnes Museum/Jersey Historical Trust, 2004-5: Shelley Rice, *Inverted Odysseys: Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, Cindy Sherman* Grey Gallery, NYU, 1999: and numerous exhibitions at the Zabriskie Gallery, New York, in the early 1990s.

² Jennifer Shaw, Lecture, Beatrice Bain Research Group, University of California, Berkeley, June, 15, 2003.

³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, London and New York, 1990. While Cahun's theatrical images appear to prefigure today's postmodern, feminist, and queer theories of gender performativity and embodiment such as those elaborated by Butler, we should keep in mind that the earliest theories emphasizing the role of social conditioning in the production of gender issued from the same era in which these photographs were produced. For example, the psychiatrist Joan Riviere, regarding the hyper-feminine performance of a female colleague following her brilliant intervention in a male-dominated forum, responded, 'The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the "masquerade." My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference.' Womanliness and masquerade, Riviere insists, 'are the same thing.' Joan Riviere, 'Womanliness as Masquerade,' reprinted in *Formations of Fantasy*, eds. Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan, Routledge, London, 1989, 38. The essay originally appeared in *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 10, 1929.

⁴ Claude Cahun, with illustrations by Marcel Moore, *Vues et visions*, Georges Crès et Cie, Paris, 1919: Claude Cahun, with heliogravure illustrations by Marcel Moore, *Aveux non avenues*, Editions du Carrefour, Paris, 1930.

⁵ Cahun, dedication, *Vues et visions*, n.p. 'À Marcel Moore: Je te dédie ces proses puérides/ afin que l'ensemble du livre/ t'appartienne et qu'ainsi/ tes dessins nous fassent/ pardonner mon texte.'

⁶ *Disavowals*, title page.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.



⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁹ While Freudian theory was required reading in surrealist circles, Cahun's engagement with psychology had a deeply personal dimension. When Cahun was still a child, her mother was diagnosed with schizophrenia and institutionalized. Her father scrutinized the child's development carefully for signs of any hereditary tinge. Cahun's homosexuality, too, was doubtless perceived by many as a degenerative mental illness. To learn from psychoanalysts such as Freud and Lacan (whose name can be found in her address book) and sexologists such as Havelock Ellis (whose work she translated) that psycho-sexual life is patterned, not by biology, but by social relations must have been reassuring. Cahun's critical remove from psychoanalytical theory is none the less evident in her photographic and literary reworkings of narcissism, a notion particularly charged with negative implications for both women and homosexuals.

¹⁰ François Leperlier, *Claude Cahun. L'écart et la métamorphose*, Jean-Michel Place, Paris, 1992; François Leperlier, *Claude Cahun. L'exotisme intérieur*, Fayard, Paris, 2006.

¹¹ François Leperlier, ed., *Claude Cahun, Écrits*, Jean-Michel Place, Paris, 2002.

¹² *Disavowals*, xx.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 210.

