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CAROLYN J. DEAN

Claude Cahun's Double

Look at the moon! How strange the moon seems! She is like a woman rising from a tomb. She is like a dead woman. You would fancy she was looking for dead things.

—Oscar Wilde, *Salomé*

Les personnages qui évoluent dans ce cortège de morts imaginaires ne sont pas précisément des fantômes. Plus exactement ce sont des apparences dont on peut, cependant, calculer le poids et qui n'échappent point à la sensualité des mains.

—Pierre Mac Orlan, *preface to Claude Cahun, Aveux non avendus*

Claude Cahun's particular artistry consisted in the staging of her own death. Her insistence that death represents mobility rather than stasis, and that "life" as such is never reducible to "biography" (the tidiness of thoroughly documented research) manifests itself in her texts and photomontages. Her subjects (mostly herself and self-surrogates) are *morts imaginaires*, opaque and inaccessible. They are always peeling off their skin, only to find their hearts still beating and imagining they are singular (uncomplicated, immobile), only to find they are infinitely mutable. In this essay, I argue that homosexuality represents the staging of the subject's mobility in Cahun's work—especially in her written texts—and further, I historicize homosexuality in order to suggest that its production both legitimated and challenged any immobile, transcendental concept of "Art."

None of the critical studies on Cahun—a marginal writer-photographer whose lesbianism has been well-established—has focused on homosexuality and its complicated function in her work. Most of the work on Cahun (1889–1954) has been done by art historians and has focused on her photomontages, very few of which were published in her lifetime. Feminist art historians frame their analyses in terms of recent (often psychoanalytically grounded) debates about the construction of female subjectivity in women artists' work. François Leperlier's recent biography links Cahun's writing and photographs to

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symbolism and surrealism (she was Marcel Schwob's niece, and changed her name from Lucie Schwob to Claude Cahun—an androgynous first name).¹ Although certainly inspired by surrealist appropriations and critiques of late nineteenth-century French avant-garde themes, Cahun challenges the surrealist leader André Breton's latent Cartesianism and subverts the normative heterosexuality implicit in surrealist texts and images.² She was an artist who shied away from direct involvement in surrealist activities, except for short-lived political engagements.³

Perhaps because of this marginality, she was not included in Whitney Chadwick's recent book on *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*; and in their 1985 exhibition catalogue of surrealist photography, Jane Livingston, Dawn Ades, and Rosalind Krauss, for want of information, speculated that she may have died in a concentration camp.⁴ In fact, Cahun was imprisoned by the Gestapo for Resistance

1. See François Leperlier, *Claude Cahun: l'écart et la métamorphose* (Paris: Jean Michel Place, 1992) for all the details regarding Cahun's life. He has amassed a remarkable amount of information, using a wide variety of unpublished sources. Leperlier establishes that she had a life-long partner, Suzanne Malherbe (pseudonym Marcel Moore) with whom she collaborated on all her photomontages. See also Honor Lasalle and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Surrealist Confession: Claude Cahun's Photomontages," *AfterImage* 19 (March 1992): 10–13. For two excellent articles in the now voluminous work devoted to moving beyond "gaze" theory in its initial formulation see: Elisabeth Lyon, "Unspeakable Images, Unspeakable Bodies," *Camera Obscura* 24 (1992): 169–93, and Carol Armstrong, "The Reflexive and the Possessive View: Thoughts on Kertesz, Brandt, and the Photographic Nude," *Representations* 25 (Winter 1989): 57–70.

2. Cahun preferred photomontage, whereas most surrealist photography did not employ montage. Rosalind Krauss has persuasively argued that surrealist photography undermines Cartesian perspectivism through its use of "doubling" and "spacing" (a temporal deferral effected through the strategy of doubling). See Rosalind Krauss, "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), especially 109; and "Corpus Delicti," *October* 33 (Summer 1985): 31–72. It is not my intention to enter this discussion, which is better left to art historians. In my discussion of Cahun's use of the "double," I am explicitly concerned with gender and sexuality as categories of analysis, and with how Cahun's homosexuality helped define her work.

3. See Claude Cahun's one explicitly "political" essay, *Les paris sont ouverts* (Paris: José Corti, 1934). There, she repudiates Louis Aragon's defense of socialist realism and insists that art is intrinsically antidogmatic. She was also engaged for a short time in the political action group *Contre-attaque*, formed by Georges Bataille and André Breton to fight fascism in 1935.

4. Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (Boston: Little Brown, 1985); Rosalind Krauss, Jane Livingston, Dawn Ades, *L'Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985), 205. See also Laurie J. Monahan's review of Leperlier's biography, "Claude Cahun's Radical Transformation," *Texte zur Kunst* 3 (September 1993): 100–09. Monahan notes that most of the recent work and

activities during the German occupation of the Isle of Jersey, Cahun's residence before and after her years in Paris. She lived until roughly a decade after the war ended with her companion and collaborator of over thirty years, Suzanne Malherbe.

The few analyses of Cahun's work that do exist have little in common except a tendency to transform lesbianism into a rigid identity category. They all conceive Cahun's same-sex desire as irrelevant, even contrary, to her intellectual project. Abigail Solomon-Godeau and Honor LaSalle claim in a footnote that, in keeping with Cahun's spirit (her book makes no direct references to her gender or sexuality), they do not want to reduce her to a fixed gender or sexual identity (LaSalle and Solomon-Godeau, 13). They never refer to her lesbianism except in the context of a warning about the dangers of extrapolating from biography (from stable identity categories) to the artist's work. Their post-structuralist refusal to stabilize the subject by reference to a putatively stable biography (their refusal to consider her solely from the point of view of "woman" or "lesbian") is certainly in keeping with the artist's own insistence that identities are never static. Although they focus on her disruption of normative gender roles, however, they inadvertently assign her lesbianism the status of a "fixed" identity. In other words, they analyze her gender as a site of mobility, while for some inexplicable reason, they make her lesbianism the subject of a warning against the theoretical consequences of immobilizing identity—indeed of immobile identity itself (13).⁵

catalogues concerning women and surrealism have excluded Cahun and that in the 1978 exhibition *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed* (London, Tate Gallery), one of Cahun's pieces, displayed in the 1936 surrealist exhibition of objects, was listed as having been made by "Anonymous."

5. The authors also raise eyebrows when they put a set of quotation marks around "life partner" when referring to Suzanne Malherbe (13n8). Are they referring to someone else's words or are they refusing the category? When they claim, in a footnote, that biographers "indicate she was a lesbian," they relegate her homosexuality to the status of biography and thereby imply that her lesbianism is not germane to their analysis. But why, the reader must ask, does the fact that Cahun was a woman not interfere with the task of radical cultural criticism if the fact that she was a lesbian does, at least implicitly? Another art historian refuses to shy away from Cahun's lesbianism, but does not interpret it in the context of her work. See Therese Lichtenstein, "A Mutable Mirror: Claude Cahun," *ArtForum* 8 (April 1992): 64–67.

There is, of course, a voluminous literature dealing with the way in which homosexuality challenges normative heterosexual subjectivity. For recent work on lesbian identities, see, among others, Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Teresa De Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana

In contrast, François Leperlier, whose biography is the first and only major text devoted to Cahun, argues that her lesbianism is a form of regression and narcissism (19; 58–59). Although he claims she was a lesbian, he also asserts that she is better conceived as an androgyne (i.e., she rejected all gender identity) who would snub feminists, lesbians, and anyone else who sought to “fix” her identity. There is, of course, a great deal of tension between these two positions: she cannot be narcissistic and regressive and yet elude all identity categories. Leperlier exacerbates this tension by implicitly linking Cahun’s own criticism of centered subjectivity to “*la relation impossible*”—heterosexuality—and her lesbianism to autoeroticism. The entire book is structured around a homology between this impossible relation and Cahun’s putative, unrequited love for the surrealist André Breton, although Leperlier provides little if any evidence for that passion. He thus extrapolates (phantasmatically) from biography to text in order, finally, to render heterosexuality the site of epistemological instability (the impossible relation) (137; 120).

Such resurrections of Cahun as artist-heroine transform her into an artist by separating her gender from her sexuality, by making her lesbian sexuality the site of that which is not art because same-sex desire is not mutable or unstable *enough*. This fantasy about the stability of homosexual desire, however, has the effect of purging Cahun’s work of the mobility these critics claim define its originality. That is, by taking the homosexuality out of Cahun’s work, they transform that work into the transcendental, idealized art they themselves rightly presume she criticized. Without representing same-sex desire as intrinsically destabilizing and subversive, I would argue that it is emblematic of the critique of transcendental aesthetics in Cahun’s work. I first address the question of homosexuality in terms of the relationship between same-sex desire and literary production during the interwar years in France. Then, I want to suggest that homosexuality was the privileged signifier for the erosion of stable (boundaried, coherent, impermeable) heterosexual subjectivity in Cahun’s work. In this context I focus primarily on how Cahun’s texts, in contrast to both elite and popular literature concerned with homosexuality, differentiate between male and female same-sex desire and theorize lesbianism as the primary site of resistance to normative heterosexuality.

University Press, 1994); and Mandy Merck, *Perversions: Deviant Readings* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

I. By the interwar years, homosexuality in France could no longer be confined to a certain special group of hereditary and recognizable—at least to the medical gaze—“inverts.” Views of inversion were always fraught with tension about whether it was congenital or acquired. But in spite of the apparent triumph of the former conclusion in early twentieth-century medical circles, popular anxiety about its contagion increased. Literary critics called the interwar years a transition from a “literature of homosexuals” to a “homosexual literature”; in so doing, they reconceived heretofore decipherable, marked authorial identities as mobile ones that compromised the boundaries between the works of homosexual and heterosexual writers and so between inferior and canonical literature.⁶

The first homosexual French revue, *Inversions*, published in November 1924, was seized by the police, and reappeared a month later in 1925 under the title of *L'amitié*. The first issue of *Inversions* proclaimed itself a journal not “of but for homosexuality,” reinforcing in other terms the dissolution of the boundary between homosexual writers and “homosexual literature.” It also defiantly proclaimed that heterosexuals should theoretically be considered as bizarre as homosexuals.⁷ Cahun (along with Havelock Ellis and others) contributed a response to a “poll” conducted in the first issue that asked writers (rather ironically) if and why they found the review offensive.⁸ The police finally seized *L'amitié*, and condemned the editors to six months in prison under the antipornography law (since homosexuality was not illegal) for “propagande anti-conceptionnelle.”⁹

Most of the commentators in yet another poll in *Les marges* and devoted to the question of homosexuality in literature (inspired, no doubt, by the publication of *Inversions* and of André Gide's unapologetic treatise on male homosexual desire, *Corydon*),¹⁰ declared

6. *Les marges*, (March-April 1926). Reissued in *Cahiers Gai Kitsch Camp* 19 (Paris, 1993): 57.

7. *Inversions* 1 (15 November 1924): 1.

8. Cahun, “Response,” *L'amitié* 1 (April 1925).

9. Willy, *Le troisième sexe* (Paris: Paris-Edition, 1927), 106.

10. An incomplete and “extremely small anonymous limited edition” of *Corydon* was published in Bruges in 1911 (*C.R.D.N.* [Bruges: The St Catherine Press Ltd], 1911; anonymous), then published in a limited edition of twenty-one copies in 1920 (*Corydon*, nouvelle édition [Bruges: L'Imprimerie Sainte Catherine], 1920; anonymous), and was finally published under Gide's name and put on general sale in 1924 (André Gide. *Corydon*. Nouvelle édition. [Paris: NRF 1924]). See Patrick Pollard, *André Gide: Homosexual Moralism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), Chap. 1, “The Chronology of *Corydon*,” and 474.

their repugnance for homosexual practices and insisted that literary celebrity was now dependent upon being homosexual. The results of the poll inspired Colette's famous ex-husband Willy to claim that if that were true, most of the respondents would not hesitate to pose as "inverts" (Willy, 28–29). Willy sought to profit from the apparent notoriety of homosexuality—its presumed contagion and infiltration of all ranks of society—with his own popularization of sexological views and a voyeuristic account of "homosexual life" in France modeled after anecdotal German and French accounts of gay life in Berlin and Paris which became popular at the end of the nineteenth century.¹¹ Willy condemned the State's seizure of *Inversions* but also echoed (and quoted) Georges Anquetil's alarmist assertion that "sapphism and pederasty [now] display themselves in public places and . . . penetrate austere and closely-guarded dwellings of yesteryear's bourgeoisie."¹²

Most literary and other commentators were primarily worried about its prevalence among artists, for whom homosexuality was conceived traditionally less as sexual practice than as an aesthetics. The association between homosexuality and the aesthetics of moral ruin has been well-documented in both England and France. In some nineteenth-century avant-garde movements, homosexuality constituted an aestheticized opposition to the dominant bourgeois culture that celebrated (re)production and progress and associated the correlation between word and deed with virtuous living; for this reason, as one critic has noted, writers used lesbianism as a metaphor for Decadent writing itself.¹³ The presumed narcissism of homosexuals exemplified the sterility, stasis, and artifice associated, often subversively, with homosexuality since the late nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. Even Colette, whose original version of *Le pur et l'impur* was published as *Ces plaisirs* in 1932, still implicitly equated Jean Lorrain's homosexuality with "masks, black masses, and happy be-

11. In fin-de-siècle Germany, a scandal about the putative homosexuality of high-ranking officers in the Kaiser's entourage (the "Eulenburg Affair") became the subject of a great deal of satire in both Germany and France. In France, authors sought to depict homosexuality as a German vice, whereas German writers always spoke about its French origins. During the interwar years, when the anxiety about homosexuality increased, such accounts became more and more numerous.

12. Georges Anquetil, *Satan conduit le bal* (Paris: Editions Georges Anquetil, 1925), 25.

13. Nicole Albert, "Lesbos et la décadence. Images du sapphisme dans la littérature décadente," *Diplôme d'Etudes Approfondies, Université de Paris IV* (1988).

headed women . . . [the lascivious, narcissistic, necrophilic and sterile Salome]."¹⁴

Drawing on fin-de-siecle stereotypes and a well-established association between perversion (e.g., homosexuality) and the Decadent literary tradition, artists now expressed anxiety about their own tendency to treat homosexuality as something "romanesque," linked to the sublime beauty of moral ruin. Homosexuality, narcissistic and sterile, existed only "for its own sake," the same charge cultural conservatives once leveled against avant-garde art. In his preface to Willy's *Le troisième sexe*, Louis Estève noted that "in its blind pursuit of sensual joy, homosexuality is only an aestheticized form of egotism" that threatens the "judicious altruism" on which civilization is based.¹⁵ This metaphorical sterility implies a boundaryless self that sees nothing but its own reflection (hence its real "blindness"). The identificatory logic of homosexual desire precludes the recognition of a boundary between self and other, and so between fantasy (the ego-ideal) and reality (the alterity of the other). Because they can only see in others phantasmatic reflections of themselves, homosexuals cannot see things as they are: in short, they live in a dream world of their own making. In cultural terms, homosexuality violates the most basic rules of the social contract—the recognition of the distinction between self and other implicit in the ability to distinguish between reality and fantasy. Homosexuals thus cannot practice the "judicious altruism" that guarantees national harmony.

The surrealists' later 1928 "investigation" into questions concerning sexuality was one more manifestation of the interest in and the threat posed by deviant sexuality in particular during this period. In that investigation, published in *La révolution surréaliste*, André Breton infamously pronounced his repugnance for male homosexuality (the Marquis de Sade's sexual practices excepted); male homosexuality received a lukewarm if more tolerant reception from the other participants.¹⁶ In spite of their general indifference to so-called deviant sexual practices, the surrealists opposed *heterosexual* freedom to bourgeois repression, so that liberated sexuality marked freedom from the perversion of nature imposed by the bourgeoisie in the name of moral order. Breton did not use sexuality to question bourgeois morality and

14. Colette, *Ces plaisirs* (Paris: J. Ferenczi & Fils, 1932), 107.

15. In Willy, 21.

16. See "Recherches sur la sexualité" (January 1928-August 1932), José Pierre, ed. *Archives du surréalisme* 4 (1990), 67–68.

its oppositions between good and bad, pure and impure. His problem with bourgeois morality was that it was not moral or pure enough, and he countered it with an idealized, liberated, natural heterosexuality purged of the tainted, repressed, and hence compromised bourgeois ideal of love that *produced* adultery, treachery, and presumably, homosexuality. In other words, sexual repression produced perversion.

Breton merely echoed the ideas of most interwar sexual liberationists and sexologists (including Willy, Louis Estève, Victor Margueritte, and others) whose tirades against the bourgeoisie had as their targets hypocrisy rather than bourgeois values. Breton's repugnance for male homosexuals, his purported discomfort with Cahun and her lover (he apparently changed cafés to avoid them) simply confirm this assertion.¹⁷ I do not want to reduce surrealism to homophobia and belittle the movement's undeniably radical accomplishments: my point is rather that the surrealists' antibourgeois sentiments—at least in the realm of gender and sexuality—sustained the dichotomies between heterosexuality and homosexuality, pure and impure, and fantasy and reality they sought in theory to challenge. Purified, magical heterosexuality (Breton termed it *l'amour fou*) replaced homosexuality as the site of opposition to bourgeois culture. As Georges Bataille noted long ago, Breton was more bourgeois than the bourgeoisie, ready to be cast out from his own class in the name of its (now compromised) ideals.¹⁸

The surrealists, including Breton, did not express the same explicit discomfort with female homosexuality and often depicted women lovers as erotic objects. Whereas surrealists ignored or disdained male homosexuality, lesbianism served a complicated and sometimes parallel function to idealized heterosexuality in the surrealist imaginary.¹⁹ In his preface to Valentine Penrose's *Dons de féminines*, a surre-

17. Marcel Jean, *Au galop dans le vent* (Paris: Jean-Pierre de Monza, 1991), 27. Leperlier criticizes the surrealist Jean's memoirs for being less than generous to Breton (he claims Jean had personal accounts to settle). See Leperlier, 160n30.

18. Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 51–109. Feminist critics have long made the same charge. See Susan R. Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990).

19. The meaning of lesbian sexuality and its representation in surrealist work is a complicated one that has received little attention. Chadwick argues that Penrose, a woman artist, differs from Ernst because the "implied narrative built out of freely associated images replaces the Freudian model of erotic disjunction," so that women surrealist artists refused to violate the integrity of human form. Whatever the merits of this claim, Penrose herself both does and does not diverge dramatically from male surrealists, at least to the extent that their work expressed *tension* between purifying the human form

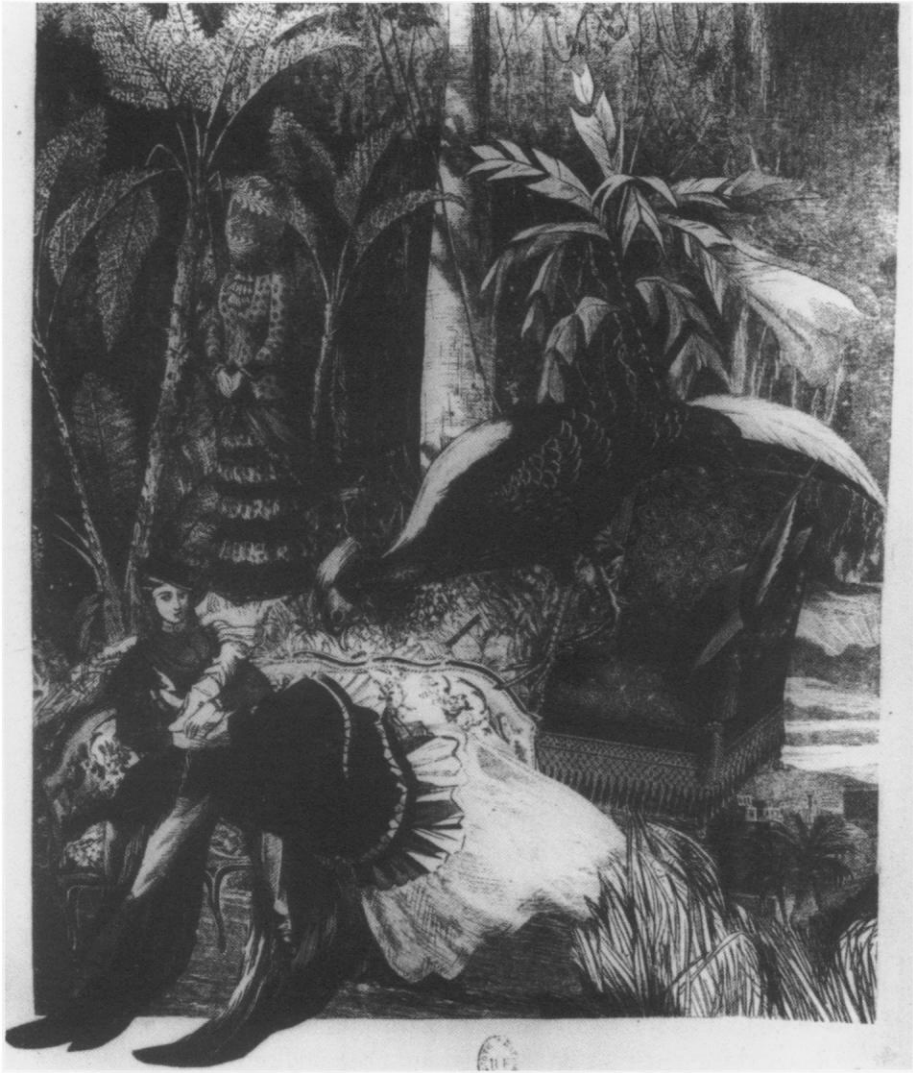
alist dream narrative about two lesbian lovers, Paul Eluard claimed that the women must perish by the very force of their love. In this romantic narrative, true love is inevitably bound up with self-annihilation; here, desire transcends base corporeality and takes on a metaphysical dimension. The Max Ernst-inspired etchings that Penrose drew to accompany the text depict an otherworldly love signified by exotic and dream-like decors (see Figure 1). Whitney Chadwick has argued that Penrose's drawings rely on the juxtaposition of unrelated images and dislocations of time, place, and scale to create a hallucinatory world. This otherworldly representation of lesbian love marks the surrealists' tendency to idealize, purify, and thus eliminate the subversiveness of the putatively subversive things they celebrated. Unlike Cahun's "hors natures," Valentine Penrose's lesbian lovers go to heaven.²⁰ In this instance, surrealists used purified lesbian love rather than heterosexual love to oppose bourgeois cultural norms.

II. I have speculated thus far that the concept of a "homosexual literature" obscured the boundary between heterosexual and homosexual writers and between "pure" and "impure" writing and became the dialectical point of departure for the drawing of new boundaries. The surrealists used representations of lesbian love to draw boundaries between purity and impurity in terms that both inverted and reinforced the hegemonies they challenged. In contrast even to her anti-bourgeois avant-garde contemporaries, however, Cahun used lesbianism to mark the *absence* of clear boundaries between pure and impure literature. One of her first essays addressed a 1918 British trial concerning Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé* and its presumed capacity to transform spectators into homosexuals. When the trial restaged the play as a drama about "inversion," it *produced* homosexuality as the displaced cause of England's social ills, including the collapse of normative gender roles and the nation's emasculation at the end of the Great War.

I analyze Cahun's reproduction of the trial—she excerpted and translated specific moments—together with a 1925 series she published in *Mercur de France* entitled "Héroïnes." In her vignette on

and violating its integrity. Feminist critics have often noted that the surrealists rather traditionally divided lesbian love into "love" (e.g., Penrose) or sexuality (e.g., erotic drawings and paintings), therefore replicating the binary division associated with female subjectivity (Armstrong, 66; Chadwick, 227). See also Mary Ann Caws, *The Eye in the Text* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), especially 127.

20. Valentine Penrose, *Dons de féminines* (Paris: Le Pas Perdu, 1951), np.



1. Valentine Penrose, *Claude Cahun's Body Double*. © Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, France.

Salomé in that series, she uses what I term the “trope of the body double” to destabilize the putative stability the production of homosexuality achieves. The “body double” is a term used in cinema to denote the stand-in for the real actor (or the real actor’s body parts) when he or she is either unavailable or possesses inadequate body parts for the required role. The trope is especially pertinent because both Cahun’s texts and photomontages invoke theatricality and cinematic illusion as the privileged vehicle of subject formation. Moreover, Cahun uses this trope—which itself is a means of reading female homosexuality more specifically—to break with the figuration of same-sex desire as either an aestheticized opposition to bourgeois normalcy or a symptom of bourgeois repression.

In the same issue of *Mercure de France*, the writer Rachilde denounced the trial and implicitly reaffirmed the link between homosexuality and aesthetics; a denunciation of homosexuality was tantamount to a denunciation of art.²¹ Cahun, whose own article followed immediately after, instead mobilized the fantasy of an infinitely mutable body to question the dichotomy between homosexuality and bourgeois culture. Cahun’s article suggests that the trial demonstrated paradoxically that homosexuality was no longer a reliable marker of the distinction between reality and fantasy or purity and impurity; the need to restage it in legal form in 1918 signified the instability of the “reality” and the “purity” homosexuality putatively threatened. Moreover, to make her case, Cahun mobilized the fantasy of the body double to undermine the dichotomy between impermeable and permeable (contagion free, secure) bodies in the same way the fantasy of a body of “homosexual literature” challenged the contained and marked “literature of homosexual” bodies.²²

The private production of Oscar Wilde’s play *Salomé* in London in 1918 became the pretext for a new public attack on homosexuality. Maud Allan, chosen to play Salomé, sued Pemberton Billing, the editor of the right wing journal *Vigilante*, for defamation of character after Billing published in the journal an article whose “obscenity,” as Cahun noted, “lay in its title, which English newspapers refused to print; it is,

21. Rachilde, “Oscar Wilde et lui,” *Mercure de France* (1 July 1918): 59–68.

22. Leperlier interprets Cahun’s article as a defense of art against censure and as an affirmation of free expression regardless of circumstances (35–36). This seems to me simply to replicate the themes of the French interwar reception of Wilde. As for the trial itself, I have been unable to locate any reference to it in the recent and voluminous work on Oscar Wilde, perhaps because the trial was not about Wilde per se but used him as a symbol.

it seems, a medical term describing the morals of any person who takes part in or attends performances."²³ The *Times* of London put it more directly: the defamation case concerned a paragraph in the *Vigilante* "meaning that the said Maud Allan was a lewd, unchaste, and immoral woman and was about to give private performances of an obscene and indecent character, so designed as to foster and encourage unnatural practices among women, and the said Maud Allan associated herself with persons addicted to unnatural practices."²⁴ Like Wilde himself, Allan lost the trial amidst spectacular accusations, all of which were published in *The Times* of London from 30 May to 5 June 1918.

Pemberton Billing chose to be his own lawyer and focused on three issues: whether the desire to perform or the performance of a particular role reveals something about the actor's real identity; whether Oscar Wilde's "perversion" meant that the play itself was perverted; and whether the audience might be endangered by the performance. All his queries thus revolved around the assumption of homosexuality behind the curtain and its presumed infectiousness if the play were performed (if the protective barrier were lifted). These three lines of inquiry were, however, only pretexts meant to prove something else: the existence of a "black book" comprising a list of 47,000 influential British perverts identified by the German government. Billing called witnesses who claimed to have seen the book, but no one could produce a copy. He accused Maud Allan of having associated with the perverts listed, accused the judge presiding at the trial of being on the list, and claimed that most of the people who went to see the private performance of *Salomé* were named in the book.

Cahun excerpted Billing's exchanges with Maud Allan and with witnesses testifying to Wilde's perversion. Billing asked Maud Allan whether or not her brother had been executed for the murder of two girls in San Francisco and whether they had been raped after their death. Allan qualified his statement but acknowledged it to be true. When asked by the judge about the purpose of such questions, Billing responded that the "vices referred to . . . are hereditary, and . . . in some cases the victims give expression at great personal risk to their vices. . . ." He suggested that "pantomime is used by people who lack courage, or who are not sufficiently debased to take the risk of the

23. Cahun, "Le *Salomé* d'Oscar Wilde, Le procès Billing et les 47,000 perversis du 'livre noir,'" *Mercure de France* (1 July 1918): 69. I quote directly from *The Times* of London, since Cahun took no poetic license in her translations.

24. *The Times* (30 May 1918): 4.

actual practice of the crimes in real life, and I shall have to satisfy the jury that in this case the passion for the head of John the Baptist is a clear case of this practice."²⁵ Billing also called expert witnesses, including Lord Alfred Douglas, to attest to the fact that homosexuals reveal their perversion by the obliqueness of their language, and that, indeed, *Salomé* expressed Wilde's homosexuality in this manner.²⁶

In Cahun's version of *Salomé*, "Salomé la sceptique," Salomé is depicted as an actress, a stand-in for the Biblical figure. Like Allan, then, Salomé is only a double for the real thing. For Billing, Salomé stands in for Wilde's "real" identity; in his view, Allan performing Salomé performs Wilde, so that Allan and Wilde must both be homosexual. Cahun inverts Billing's logic: in her piece, contrary to Billing's assertion, Salomé's presumed homosexuality is revealed because she does *not* desire the head of John the Baptist. On the one hand, Salomé's body double performs her role as prescribed: she will dance for Herod, she will kiss the head of John the Baptist and, in so doing, leave the fantasy (and the fantasy as fetish) of Salomé as an unnatural, seductive, and castrating woman intact. On the other hand, Salomé in Cahun's parody is a "vièrge jusqu'à l'âme" ["virgin to the very soul"], absolutely incapable of understanding why she should kiss so repulsive a head, and dances for Herod in part to persuade him to explain what he thinks about the artificial head the directors of the play want her to embrace.²⁷

Here, the body double paradoxically parodies the fantasy it leaves intact, protects the lesbian desire she expresses—"If I vibrate according to other vibrations than yours, must you conclude that my flesh is unfeeling?" ("Héroïnes," 642)—by performing "lesbian" desire as others have constructed it. Salomé's desire for John the Baptist's head is marked as a male fantasy that Salomé's stand-in finds repulsive, inexplicable, and bloodless: art and life, the world of the theater, now "leave her cold" (643). Desperate to leave behind the humdrum life for art, she finds to her amazement that those men (painters, writers) who designate her a "heroine" only copy life as they imagine it. These men, she

25. Cahun, "Le *Salomé* d'Oscar Wilde," 70–71; *The Times* (30 May 1918): 4.

26. Cahun, "Le *Salomé* d'Oscar Wilde," 74–75; *The Times* (31 May 1918): 4. Billing also argued incoherently that "healthy" people might resist temptation, but weaker souls would become "infected." Hence the figure of the moon in Wilde's play, which is a metaphor for Salomé herself, had "a bad effect on sexual mania," and might make sexual pervers of "innocent persons" (1 June 1918): 4.

27. Cahun, "Héroïnes," *Mercure de France* (1 February 1925): 642. Translations mine.

claims, all think of themselves as “damned, parricides, incendiaries . . . How they intimidate themselves!” (642; 641). Once again, the actress is the extension of someone else’s fantasy (she is Wilde imagining Salomé), which she performs knowingly but without understanding why it does not conform with her own vibrations. Like Maud Allan, who professed innocence when accused of being “unnatural,” Cahun’s stand-in for Salomé is also “innocent” even as she performs the part of an unnatural woman.

Cahun’s reading of the trial also implicitly differentiates between the “staging” of male and female homosexuality. The trial renders Oscar Wilde’s identity opaque because always staged or “put on”: Billing tried to show, with his allusions to Wilde’s love of performance and indirection, that homosexuality reveals itself, paradoxically, through its opacity. Billing’s inability to produce the “black book” in the trial may then be easily read as a metaphor for the production of male homosexuality as an indecipherable identity. To the extent that Billing could not prove or produce the very thing he claimed was self-evident (the homosexuality of the entire English elite), he got himself into the bind Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has defined as peculiar to homosexuality: it is “minoritizing” (specific to a defined subset of marked individuals) and “universalizing” (a tendency potentially in all individuals—at least since Freud).²⁸ Thus, homosexuality is at once decipherable and impossible to decipher, since everyone is potentially gay. If everyone is potentially homosexual, the question at stake in the trial—who is really gay?—cannot be answered except tautologically by reference to everyone’s potential homosexuality. But it is precisely this circularity, homosexuality’s empty signification, that produces and subtends a paranoid cultural fantasy about the specter of contagious homosexuality: Billing was acquitted because the black book became an empty signifier onto which anxieties about the instability of social order could be projected. The absent black book served in the end to stabilize normative heterosexuality by standing in for an indecipherable and yet omnipresent threat against which righteous and moral men had to mobilize political and social energies.

But as Cahun suggests, the trial renders Maud Allan’s identity doubly opaque. To the extent that her perversion is coextensive with Wilde’s, it is not merely an empty signifier; because her lesbianism

28. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 90.

exists deprived of any referent except male homosexuality, it remains outside of signification. Moreover, although Cahun codes Salomé as a lesbian (perhaps in retrospective reference to the trial), lesbianism and female sexuality are treated throughout "Héroïnes" as equally unnatural or other. All of the heroines in Cahun's series replicate the trope of the body double: all of these figures, mostly biblical, some literary, perform roles whose meaning they do not understand, are complicit with but distant from, or, in "Sappho's" case, turn to their own advantage. These heroines play roles that reinforce traditional cultural narratives about natural and unnatural women, narratives that must constantly be reenacted. They must, like the trial, eternally reproduce figures (the homosexual, the sinful woman) that justify witch hunts and wars whose purpose is not to discover or defeat enemies but to render the cultural fantasy of normative heterosexuality natural. Hence the "too credulous Eve," fooled by the manipulations of modern consumerism, allows men to displace their own impotence onto her "original sin"; "Helen the Rebel" is in fact quite unattractive, but fools herself and everyone else into thinking she is as beautiful as the legend claims; Judith, redeemer of her people, goes through the motions of beheading Holophernes only to comment cynically that "the joy of the crows has a thousand mouths and no ears," replicating Cahun's own sarcasm about the enthusiastic and vocal acclamation Billing received when the jury announced his acquittal. Marguerite (after Goethe) wonders whether she is a monster and is certain she has not been sensitive enough to the "eternal masculine" ("Héroïnes," 622–24; 631–32; 627–30; 637). And these are but a few of the many heroines depicted.

Cahun reserves the most dramatic role of all for Sappho. If Salomé represents how the trope of the body double implicitly reinforces and protects "other" desires, Sappho *self-consciously* fabricates her own body double in order to be left in peace. When Phaon becomes too domineering ("He wants to give Sappho, the arbiter of lesbian elegance, lessons in style and behavior!"), she orchestrates his departure and has her "daughter"—a young smitten girl who will do her bidding—push a mannequin of Sappho off the cliff at Leucade:

All the people, amassed on the beach, saw me above, immense and yet small, at the edge of the fatal cliff. Not so stupid! It was only a model . . . that Cleis, hidden, pushed into the violet sea (it's easy to be fooled by the movies). While out at sea, sitting in my bark, singing low and tuning my lyre . . . I attract passers-by and preferably women. ["Héroïnes," 636]

Sappho's staging of her own death thus leaves the myth about her heterosexuality intact (she commits suicide for a man) and allows her to continue, unseen and unheard, to seduce women wayfarers. Sappho's silence, like Cahun's absent "lesbianism," does not represent her refusal to name same-sex desire, but her complicated insistence on its expression.

For Cahun, Sappho's "passing" is not, as Colette saw it, an unfortunate sort of destiny in which one labors to hide one's true identity.²⁹ Rather, passing is embedded in the paradox of the body double, which suggests that identity is always subverted to the extent that it appears intact. In other words, lesbianism represents the loss of referentiality in the guise of an identity category embodied either metaphorically (the stand-in) or metonymically (the fetish). Cahun represents lesbian desire as the *undoing* rather than the fashioning or production of identity.

III. Cahun's only extended work, *Aveux non avenues* (*Disavowed Confessions*), is a series of nine chapters illustrated by nine photomontages.³⁰ In this text, the first-person narrator employs conventional tropes of autobiography in order to challenge the model of self-actualization the genre presumed. Organized around moments that punctuate the life-cycle, the book targets in particular a standard Freudian paradigm of sexual development by mocking castration as the determinant of normative heterosexuality.

In one vignette, Cahun identifies with Oedipus, "condemned before birth," and condemned for an unspeakable crime: "How poorly made the world must be, if a nonconforming but sexually sociable creature is compelled to seek refuge in crime as if in a convent, not only to live, but also to create new values! But what crime? . . . an impasse" (*Aveux non avenues*, 167–68; ellipsis in text). This metaphoric equation of crime and convent suggests that sexual nonconformity and the refusal of sexuality implicit in the religious vows she evokes, are the same thing. Celibacy may be a form of "sexual nonconformity," but Cahun's "convent" raises the specter of lesbian desire that writers well before Diderot associated with Mother Superiors and their underlings. The refusal of sexuality therefore amounts oddly to an articulation of lesbian desire in terms that simultaneously erase it. ("But what crime?

29. Colette, *Le pur et l'impur* (Paris: Hachette, 1971), 168–69. This is certainly Colette's implication.

30. Cahun, *Aveux non avenues* (Paris: Editions du Carrefour, 1930).

. . . an impasse.") When Cahun invokes Oedipus in this allusion to lesbian (or "nonconforming") desire, she deprives the Oedipal narrative of its conventional heterosexual trajectory. For in her version, the tale tells many possible stories.

Solomon-Godeau, Lasalle, and to a lesser extent Therese Lichtenstein, have rightly interpreted Cahun's challenge to determinate meaning (as it manifests itself in her photomontages rather than the text) as a challenge to stable, singular subjectivity. For them, the impasse to which Cahun's work continually returns marks "precisely . . . that point where surrealism intersects with the notion of the 'unspeakable'—both in the Lacanian sense as that which language cannot name, and thus that which cannot be represented, as well as in the sense of the woman as taboo—[and that it is at that point] that Cahun's confession, as a specifically feminine expression of subjectivity, can be read" (Solomon-Godeau and Lasalle, 13). Lichtenstein puts the case in similar terms: "Embedded in [Cahun's] art . . . is a nonsensical . . . uncanny return of the repressed, of that moment existing paradoxically before the symbolic" (67). In a somewhat questionable extrapolation, however, these critics all further link this presymbolic and hence unspeakable subjectivity to the pre-Oedipal maternal body, and read Cahun's "nightmare" in the seventh chapter of *Aveux non avenue* in these terms. The nightmare is about castration, and the photomontage accompanying the text refers also to the "thematics of castration" (see Figure 2). It includes images from the nightmare—a severed head, scissors, a bird's beak—as well as an image of birth that is "layered with allusions to castration fear" because Freud argued that (in fantasy) the baby replaced the mother's lacking penis. Thus, Cahun "orchestrates symbols of female power with male anxieties" (Solomon-Godeau and Lasalle, 13).

Although Cahun's photomontage certainly does play upon the "thematics of castration," it is extremely difficult to read the image as a simple phantasmatic repudiation of castration. Rather, the image implies a simultaneous repudiation and embrace of castration through the trope of the body double. In so doing, the photomontage and the text, which are meant to be read together, replicate the Freudian script about the origins of gender and sexuality and mark the absence of its natural referents. The epigraph of the seventh chapter and the nightmare that opens it refer, once again, to the Salomé Cahun fabricated in 1925. The epigraph notes that Salomé dances for Herod because she hopes he will help her "retrace her steps, to weave together her



2. From Claude Cahun's *Aveux non avenus*. Reproduced courtesy Galerie Zabriskie, Paris, France.

dreams"—the same hope Salomé's stand-in clung to before her disappointment. In Cahun's nightmare she looks with curiosity at a severed head that she presumes to be her father's. After a brief moment of desire, she runs away, claiming to have "renounced [her] conquest" as well as her destiny (as a woman? as a lesbian? it does not matter since the point is that her destiny is meaningless except *as a script*) (*Aveux non avenues*, 155). Like Salomé, she realized that "Herod" cannot help her sustain her dreams; he cannot help her become an artist because he is one of the authors of the scenario in which she must desire the head of John the Baptist (in the nightmarish version of the vignette, of course, the father *is* the head from which she flees). In other words, the nightmare weaves Salomé's story into Freud's reworking of Oedipus' tale, a script Cahun/Salomé parodies and repudiates as she performs it.

In the next part of the dream, in which she parodies the "thematics of castration," she goes to taxidermists and cuts off birds' beaks "at the roots." She describes this symbolic castration as an act of "bravery" and "genius." Cahun is a camped-up Salomé, the castrating woman whose expert beak-shearing testifies to her courage and intellectual prowess. In another scenario from the same dream, an object falls out of nowhere: at first she is "frozen" with "horror" (like the boy witnessing his mother's castration) and finally relieved when she realizes the object she is holding ("by a bit of warm and viscous flesh") is only a wooden panther. (*Aveux aux nonavenus*, 157).³¹ The wooden panther, besides being depicted as a rather silly fetish object, is usually the symbol of a cunning female and hence the site of the anxiety it is supposed to relieve. Like the nightmare, the montage poses the problem of infinite substitution (of man for woman, the fetish—the severed head—for the father, Salomé for Cahun the dreamer).

Through the trope of the body double, Cahun uses substitution not simply to trouble or transgress binary distinctions between genders, but to deprive those distinctions (and hence the relationship between gender and sexuality) of a referent even as she (again parodically) leaves them intact. In the image, she employs the body double to fetishize herself. The parody permits her to remain happily and benignly castrated, to "be" the phallus in order to escape the economy of meaning organized around the phallus. After all, the "birth image" is the image of Cahun herself *as* the Medusa and hence *as* the phallus. It is the

31. This allusion to being frozen with horror evokes the "man" frozen and "stiff" with terror in Sigmund Freud's "Medusa's Head," in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* (New York: MacMillan, 1963), 212.

reversed double of Cahun's face, shorn of hair, which appears twice in the upper part of the montage. Similarly the fetishized, headless image just below the "real" Cahun's head, like the fetishized, headless image of Venus de Milo, functions metonymically to (protect and) reassure us jokingly that Cahun is not castrated. She looks back at the viewer more annoyed than defiant, as if to ask what all this has to do with her—the same question that stumps all the heroines she has similarly fabricated.

Solomon-Godeau and Lasalle note that "If Cahun's photomontage implies there are *only* masks, and thus no authentic self beneath them, her attempt both to portray and remove them implies . . . the possibility of self-presence" (Solomon-Godeau and LaSalle, 13).³² This assertion still begs the question of *how* her portrayal and removal of masks denotes self-presence. I have argued that Cahun's self-presence is continuous with, rather than temporally anterior or posterior to, the Symbolic—it is the Symbolic's parodic double.³³ Self-presence might best be understood as an uncanny parody of the "uncanny" in Freud's sense of the term. Freud associated the uncanny with the "doubling, dividing, and interchanging of the self," with "the recurrence of an emotional impulse repressed and transformed into anxiety" and hence with the confusion of self and other, present and past, familiar and strange, animate and inanimate so central to Cahun's subversion of the aesthetics Freud himself equated with the "beautiful, attractive, and sublime."³⁴ Freud, however, links the doubling and recurrence associated with the uncanny to the repression of castration: female genitals are at once our original "home" and something "we" fear. In Cahun's work the trope of doubling also expressed the uncanny "return of the

32. Oddly, they conceive her emerging self as embodied by the "undistorted and unmarked" face at the bottom of the image. This interpretation makes very little sense in relation to the text, which clearly codes the head as John the Baptist's. Moreover, the dismembered head (which the authors perhaps rightly assume describes Cahun's struggle with her own image) is again a parodic image rather than a "monstrous" one because it is the double of the (doubled) musicians who appear in the upper-right hand corner.

33. In his recent summary and criticism of the idea of a "pre-Symbolic" subjectivity alluded to by the art historians I have quoted here, Martin Jay points out that this notion does not accord with the Lacanian model of identity formation they invoke, since all subjectivity is contingent on the Symbolic. Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). Kaja Silverman made this point already in *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

34. Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," *Standard Edition*, vol. 17 (London: Hogarth Press, 1955): 234, 241, 219.

repressed"—the doubling of Salomé, of Sappho, and of Cahun herself manifests the disturbing recurrence of familiar unfamiliarity, a "memory" at once tangible and yet forgotten. But the uncanny here is not the return of repressed castration anxiety; instead, it is the return of the repression of the fact that castration anxiety is a cultural myth. As in the text and the photomontage, the myth of female castration is a joke that is not all that easy to laugh at because doubling renders castration's status as cultural myth ambiguous. Cahun's testimony to "Freud's glory" at the end of her account of the nightmare epitomizes this ambiguity: it is a deadpan parody as well as a real tribute (*Aveux non avenues*, 157).

The possibility of self-presence is best embodied by the uncanny effect of Cahun's "obscene" eyes—I use the word as Cahun meant it, to denote an idea so blasphemous "God" entrusts it only to angels (*Aveux non avenues*, 158). Confessions of some secret reality beneath appearances—stable identity categories—are only ever paranoid cultural fantasies (homosexuality and gender included) perpetrated by those individuals who cannot bear desire's mobility, who cannot bear not knowing who they really are. The epigraph that precedes the chapter on "sex" uses homosexuality to express the impossibility of knowing: "You don't really think you are more of a pederast than I am?" (*Aveux non avenues*, 43). The lesbian who is more of a male homosexual than a male homosexual is simultaneously a manly woman (in the cultural terms I assume Cahun is parodying) and a womanly (the womanliest) man. Again, gender inversion in this context (she poses as a male homosexual) does not simply signify the transgression of normative gender roles, but marks the undoing of any stable binary distinction between genders or between gender and sexuality, and hence the undecidability—the mobility—of all identity. It is thus because female homosexuality is the privileged manifestation of the mobile immobility that constitutes normative, gendered subjectivity as a lost and yet indispensable referent that Cahun never names lesbian desire in her book. Lesbianism can only be marked through the body double—the paradoxical series of substitutions that renders (all) women's desire commensurate and yet incommensurate with established systems of meaning and hence tangible but indecipherable.

This representation of desire is no giddy repudiation of epistemological certainties, no celebration of unknowability, but an ironic, cynical, and never-complacent insistence that responsible knowledge, like art, can only ever refuse its own stability even when it appears contin-

uous with a stable canon. Although this insight may now be predictable, I have speculated that it developed—at least in Cahun’s work—as part of a more general historical shift in which homosexuality no longer signified a distorted reality, but, rather, distortion as a permanent dimension of all social relations, a shift in which homosexuality symbolized the social body’s real permeability. Moreover, her work breaks decisively both with the literary tradition that linked homosexuality with a static, oppositional “art” and with the avant-garde that (sometimes) implicitly linked it with the opposition. Cahun suggests instead that homosexuality, and female homosexuality in particular, undermines the dichotomy between purity and impurity on which all aesthetic production is founded and judged. With the benefit of hindsight derived from Oscar Wilde’s tragic hubris, Cahun worked to define lesbianism as the site of a double distortion precisely to demonstrate the simultaneous danger and necessity of the artist’s “self-presence.” Thus, Cahun staged her own death as a means of staying alive. Every body has a double.