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Jennifer L. Shaw, *Exist Otherwise. The Life and Works of Claude Cahun*. London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2017. 326pp. 134 illustrations. \$45.00 (cl). ISBN 978-178023-728-2

Review by Elza Adamowicz, Queen Mary University of London.

“To travel at the prow of the self”: Claude Cahun (1894-1954) never ceased extending the limits of the self and identity through her activities as essayist, poet, photographer, actress, artist and political activist. Her work was marginalised by the Surrealists and long neglected by art historians. Renewed critical interest in Cahun in recent years is largely due to the biography by François Leperlier, *Claude Cahun. L'Écart et la métamorphose*,<sup>[1]</sup> the Paris retrospective *Claude Cahun photographe* (Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1995) and, above all, her appropriation by feminist art historians. She has become a cult figure, promoted as anticipating postmodern feminist and queer theories and the work of artists such as Cindy Sherman and Sophie Calle. Her photographic and photomontage works, produced in collaboration with her lover and half-sister Suzanne Malherbe (Marcel Moore), have been widely exhibited alongside the work of contemporary women artists, as in David Bate's *Mise-en-scene. Claude Cahun, Tacita Dean, Virginia Nimarkoh* (London, Institute of Contemporary Art, 1996), or the recent *Gillian Wearing and Claude Cahun. Behind the Mask, Another Mask* (London, National Portrait Gallery, 2017). Her status was confirmed by the publication in 2002 of her collected works, *Écrits*, while her most important text, *Aveux non avenues* (1929), was translated into English in 2008 under the title *Disavowals or Cancelled Confessions*.<sup>[2]</sup> She has been, furthermore, the subject of several documentary films, including Lizzie Thynne's excellent *Playing a Part* (2005).

Born Lucy Schwob, she adopted the pseudonym Claude Cahun, thereby underscoring simultaneously her Jewish identity and her sexual ambiguity. In seeking to resist the notion of a unified subject and a fixed sexual identity, her texts and photographic works reflected the post-1918 media construction of the New Woman, *amazone* or *garçonne*, whose economic and social independence destabilised phallogocentric order. In adopting this position Cahun relied on the notion of bisexuality developed by Freud; the hypothesis of a “third sex,” combining masculine and feminine traits, as argued by English sexologist Havelock Ellis (whose work she translated into French); and Joan Rivière's notion of “Womanliness as a masquerade” (1929), which advocates a definition of femininity in terms of performance.<sup>[3]</sup>

Cahun's strategies of masking and masquerade, like her overt commitment to the performative dimension of identity, prefigure recent work in gender studies and queer theory by Judith Butler, Mary Ann Doane and others.<sup>[4]</sup> To this end, she used the technique of (photo)montage and the photographic series to embody the notion of the constructedness of identity, performing identity as open-ended, both masked (through role playing) and unmasked (as fictional). Frequently, in echoes of the fin-de-siècle dandyism of her uncle Marcel Schwob, she photographed herself in theatrical poses with her stepsister and lover Marcel Moore—“so much artifice in me, so little of the primitive!”—generating a series of hyper-codified roles, vamp or vampire, weightlifter, Buddha or oriental prince. Driven by the desire to *s'indéfinir* (to un-define or render herself in-definite) she writes on one of her photomontages, alongside

a series of superimposed masks: “Under this mask another mask. I will never be done removing all these faces.” In pursuing the rejection of essentialist notions of female identity, she ridiculed clichéd representations of women, parodying the myth of female instability, for instance, via the multiplicity of disguises, the excessive make-up and the overt theatricality of her poses. Elsewhere, the diverse and divergent voices, the range of rewritings, parodies and pastiches of her texts echo the multiple roles played out in her photographic self-portraits.

Jennifer Shaw has written the first full biography of Cahun in English, acknowledging her debt to François Leperlier’s biography. The originality of Shaw’s approach lies in her situating Cahun’s work and thought within contemporary Symbolist and Surrealist aesthetic and political positions, while drawing on recent feminist theory, unlike Leperlier, who tends to bypass Cahun’s lesbianism, and unlike some recent scholarly work which, in seeking to integrate Cahun into the corpus of women artists of the late twentieth century, can risk losing sight of her historical and cultural specificity.

Shaw’s biography is conventionally structured in four parts, each focusing on an identifiable period of Cahun’s life and work: her early Symbolist works in Nantes; the 1920s in Paris in contact with the literary avant-garde; her political engagement alongside the Surrealists in the 1930s; and her resistance activities in wartime occupied Jersey. Each chapter is divided into two sections: the first constitutes an account of Cahun’s personal life and the cultural, social and literary context, framing the second, a detailed analysis of her main texts, many of which were illustrated by Marcel Moore. By first situating Cahun’s texts in both a biographical and a broader, socio-cultural, context, Shaw enhances our understanding of texts that appear at times resolutely exploratory, at others frustratingly hermetic. The book ends with an appendix containing both a useful selection of Cahun’s writings translated by Shaw, and footnotes which clarify some of the dense literary references and intertextual allusions characteristic of Cahun’s writings.

The first section, titled “Views and Vision,” traces Cahun’s literary beginnings among the Symbolist literary figures associated with her family milieu. Her role models include figures like her uncle Marcel Schwob, Oscar Wilde (and Lord Alfred Douglas) and André Gide, proponents of alternatives to the traditional codes of heterosexuality, and promoters of homosexual relations uninhibited by social conventions. At this time she wrote articles for *Le Phare de la Loire* (a republican newspaper published by her father) and *Mercure de France* (founded by Schwob) under the pseudonym Claude Courlis. It is in this context that Shaw discusses Cahun’s first major publication, *Vues et visions* (1919), which opposes the actual repression of homosexuality (*vues*) with imagined alternatives (*visions*) through descriptions—supported by Aubrey Beardsley-like illustrations by Moore—of a real and imagined Le Croisic, the seaside town where Cahun spent her holidays as a child.

In the second section, which covers the 1920s in Paris, Shaw analyses the ways in which Cahun critiqued moral, social and literary conventions associated with the post-World War I return to order, exploring the possibility of alternatives in new paradigms of creativity (photomontage, avant-garde writing) and desire (“to lead lovers into treacherous harmonies” [5]) informed by Surrealism’s liberatory ideals. Two major literary texts are analysed in this section. *Heroïnes* (1925) is a series of short texts which exploits strategies of *détournement* to rewrite traditional biblical or mythological texts with female protagonists, giving them a voice as subject. Unexpected agency, in fact, since Judith and Cinderella are shown to be masochist; Penelope is cast in the role of seductress of her pretenders; and in “Beauty and the Beast,” the heroine is in love with the Beast and spurns the prince. However, the most important text of this period is arguably *Aveux non avenues* [Disavowals], a complex literary collage illustrated with photomontages produced by Moore and Cahun, subversive of both autobiography and portrait genres. In open rejection of the conventional single authorial voice, Cahun creates an intertextual space for multiple contradictory voices (voices of revolt, poetry, commentary, philosophy); divergent styles, ranging from friendly pastiche to ferocious satire, from Symbolist excesses to Surrealist automatism; and references to classical and contemporary literature. In order to confront this complexity, Shaw bases the discussion of *Disavowals* on detailed analyses of the photomontages at the

head of each chapter. She analyses the relation between image and text and contextualises the work within the 1920's debates on identity, gender and aesthetics. This section takes up the main elements of Shaw's revealing 2009 book-length analysis of *Disavowals* (*Reading Claude Cahun's Disavowals*), which examined Cahun's complex dialogue with contemporary literary texts, and clarified many of the intertextual references, parodies and rewritings.[6]

In 1932 Cahun met André Breton, and throughout the 1930s she was politically engaged alongside the Surrealists. The same year she joined the Association of Revolutionary Writers and Artists (AEAR), affiliated with the Communist Party; and in 1934 she published a Trotskyist pamphlet, *Les Paris sont ouverts* [Place your bets] on the relations between poetic activity and political commitment (echoing André Breton's 1932 text "Misère de la poésie"). Here, she rejects literature reduced to the role of propaganda (criticising Louis Aragon's defence of socialist realism), advocates the freedom of expression, and argues that radical art is, in itself, a form of revolutionary activity. In this militant context she signed a number of anti-fascist and anti-imperialist manifestos alongside the Surrealists, including "Protest!" (1933) and a tract which denounced fascist aggression in Spain and Léon Blum's non-interventionist politics: "There is no freedom for the enemies of freedom." Militant, too, as demonstrated by her membership in the anti-fascist and revolutionary movement Contre-Attaque (1935-36), under the leadership of Georges Bataille. On the art front, she exhibited three surrealist objects at the *Exhibition of Surrealist Objects* at the Ratton Gallery in 1936, and published a piece on the surrealist object, "Beware of domestic objects" (1936) for a special issue of *Cahiers d'art* (to coincide with the exhibition). Shaw rightly situates this text in relation to the fascination for the object among the Surrealists in the 1930s, notably in the transformation of everyday objects into Surrealist objects, in a shift from the functional to the irrational—and thus openly cocking a snook at the realism advocated by the Communists.

In 1937 Cahun and Moore left Paris to settle in Jersey and, for this last period, Shaw focuses on the couple's resistance activities against the occupying Nazi forces on the island. Documentation for this section is drawn from as yet little-exploited material from Cahun's postwar letters; her unfinished memoir *Confidences au miroir* [Secrets in the Mirror 1945-46]; and material from the Jersey Heritage Trust, which holds both Cahun and Moore's archives and documentation on the Nazi occupation of the island. The couple embarked on a counter-propaganda campaign aimed at demoralizing the occupying forces, writing and distributing tracts, many of them in German, signed "Der Soldat ohne Namen" [The Soldier without a Name], which they left in letterboxes, slipped into soldiers' pockets, pinned to fences... The principle shaping the tracts was that of *détournement*—appropriation and inversion of Nazi discourse. By cutting up German propaganda leaflets and resorting to montage, they could subvert the original message, for example writing the words "ohne Ende" [without end] on discarded cigarette packets, in a perverse appropriation of a well-known Nazi (pre-1939) slogan: "Schrecken ohne Ende oder Ende des Schreckens" [Terror without end or an end to terror]. Such activities were not taken lightly: Moore and Cahun were arrested in June 1944, imprisoned and condemned to death; but released in 1945 when the island was liberated.

This study is a richly documented and well-balanced account of a major twentieth-century artistic figure, in which Cahun's life and work are interwoven in such a way that they illuminate each other.

## NOTES

[1] François Leperlier, *Claude Cahun. L'Écart et la métamorphose* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1992). See also François Leperlier, *L'Exotisme intérieur* (Paris: Fayard, 2006).

[2] Claude Cahun, *Écrits* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 2002) and *Disavowals or Cancelled Confessions*, translated by Susan de Muth (London: Tate Publishing, 2008).

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[3] Joan Rivière, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 10(1929):303-13.

[4] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Femininity and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).

[5] Cahun, *Disavowals*, p. 102.

[6] Jennifer L. Shaw, *Reading Claude Cahun's Disavowals* (New York: Lewiston, 2009).

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