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Claude Cahun, *Disavowals or Cancelled Confessions*. With original preface by Pierre Mac Orlan. Trans. Susan de Muth. Intro. by Jennifer Mundy. Afterword by François Leperlier. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007. xxii + 226 pp. Plates, notes. \$25.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-262-53303-4.

Review by Tirza True Latimer, California College of the Arts.

In the 1990s, thanks to such events as the retrospective “Claude Cahun, Photographe,” at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, images of Claude Cahun began to circulate internationally. The edgy performance portraiture featuring Cahun crossed the channel to Britain and the Atlantic to America, capturing the imagination of Anglophone audiences. Since then, no less than three English-language documentary films have taken Cahun’s life as a focus. One by the lesbian independent filmmaker Barbara Hammer, *Lover Other: The Story of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore*, premiered at the Museum of Modern Art in 2006. The photographs have engendered at least a dozen American and British dissertations in the course of the last decade. Countless articles and over twenty major exhibitions featuring Cahun have explored the terrain where gender play, surrealism, and photography overlap. [1] Why all the interest?

Looking at the 400 some odd extant photographs attributed to Cahun (most taken in collaboration with her partner and step-sister, the graphic artist Marcel Moore) it seems obvious why the work struck a chord, surfacing as it did in the 1990s when performative theories of gender were gaining credence and identity politics preoccupied a generation of artists identified as queer. “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 such queer theorists as Judith Butler, author of *Gender Trouble*. [3]

The recent spate of exhibitions, films, and publications, however engaging, 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 such important surrealist reviews as *Minotaure*. In addition to seventy-five 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-autobiography. [4] Both were illustrated by Moore.

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 twenty-five paired verses by Cahun embedded in symbolist-inspired visual frames penned in black ink, in the style of Aubrey Beardsley, by Moore. 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 hybridity—meaning, on the one hand, a sign whose elements are drawn from different languages and, on the other, dissimilar components that produce the same results. Here, the results are more vigorous than either partner (or either artistic genre) could produce alone.

This grammar also marks Cahun's second book-length publication, *Aveux non avenues*, released in a similarly small edition of 500 copies. Composed of fragments, the book proposes a literary equivalent to collage. Appropriately, Moore created 10 photomontages to illustrate the book out of the vast photographic archive made in collaboration with her masquerading partner. One such collage served as a frontispiece, and the other nine plates headed the book's nine chapters. Here, as in the earlier joint publication, the illustrations and text perform in tandem. But what they perform, in this case, is the deconstruction of the very genres into which they intervene: autobiography (in the case of the text whose narrative thread is broken beyond recognition) and portraiture (in the case of the collages which produce an equally indecipherable effect of the self represented).

The title of the book, *Aveux non avenues*, announces the project of deconstruction by embodying a contradiction that translates (very approximately) into English as "disavowals" or "cancelled confessions," the two titles advanced by the book's English translator. The word "disavowal," which registers both the autobiographical "avowal" and its denial, alerts readers from the onset to the ambivalence of this project: the desire to exist, to memorialize one's own existence, coexists with the desire to unmask this authoritative self as a fictional construct. 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." (p. 31) 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. (p. 33)

This is an important book, not only for its conceptual sophistication, its aesthetic merit, and its vanguard experimentalism, but for also the way it advances the surrealist ambition, in the wake of the 1914–1918 conflagration, to expose the flawed Cartesian premise underlying Europe's convictions about its evolved status as a civilization. Deploying the 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 and displacement described by Freud and other contemporary theorists of unconscious psychic life. [6] The book is all the more important in that it was authored and illustrated by two women at a time when Surrealism, the cultural sector, and European society more broadly, were dominated almost exclusively by men.

The book must be viewed, moreover, as Cahun and Moore's crowning artistic achievement. While the photographs by which we recognize Cahun today were rarely exhibited outside the home during the artist's lifetime, this book's publication in France confirmed her 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 favor with other members of the surrealist set as well—most notably Henri Michaux (with whom Cahun attended psychiatric rounds at Paris's Saint Anne's Hospital), René Crevel, and Robert Desnos.

The book's difficulty (the convolutions, esoterism, and discontinuities of the French prose), in addition to its relative scarcity in library collections (even in France), have prevented most English-speaking scholars from factoring it properly into accounts of Cahun and Moore's careers. 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.[7] It was the release, in 2002, of Cahun's collected writings, edited painstakingly by Leperlier, that made *Aveux non avenues* widely available for the first time.[8]

The release of this key work in English translation, while unquestionably a boon to scholars of surrealism and twentieth-century French culture, does less than one might imagine to make the book even more accessible. Why? Because the prose, translated or not, remains purposefully opaque and the images resolutely indecipherable. What is more, the double and triple meanings that animate the original version, as well as the book's idiosyncratic organizational logic, do not translate without annotation. This is not to say that the translator, Susan de Muth, has not made an admirable effort. She has. The book is not marred by mistranslations nor is its iconoclastic tone misconstrued. However, *Aveux non avenues* requires fuller extratextual support than de Muth's scant 160 footnotes provide. As she herself admits in her 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." (p. xx) The translator has "not chosen to footnote such instances" but urges the reader "to bear this in mind." Difficult to bear in mind the myriad of references embedded in this book 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 theater, art history, modern dance, and French interwar popular culture—to name just a few ingredients—without a little guidance. Leperlier's "Afterword" offers some valuable context, but acknowledges 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." (p.210)

This said, the feat of translation that brings *Disavowals* to English readers is worthy of respect and gratitude. The handsomely conceived publication advances a project of illumination that will permit Anglophones to better appreciate a figure Breton described as "one of the most curious spirits (among four or five) of our times." [9] We can only hope that this translation will pave the way for an English edition of Leperlier's informative Cahun biography and an influx of interpretive studies shedding light on the complex web of cultural references that comprise *Aveux non avenues*.

NOTES

[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." (SFMOMA, 1998), Tirza True Latimer, "Acting Out: Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore," (Judah L. Magnes Museum/Jersey Historical Trust, 2004-2005), 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* (London and New York: Routledge, 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 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 Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan, eds. *Formations of Fantasy*, (London: Routledge, 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* (Paris : Georges Crès et Cie, 1919). Claude Cahun, with heliogravure illustrations by Marcel Moore, *Aveux non avenues* (Paris: Editions du Carrefour, 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] 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.

[7] François Leperlier, *Claude Cahun, L'Ecart et la metamorphose* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1992); François Leperlier, *Claude Cahun, L'Exotisme intérieur* (Paris: Fayard, 2006).

[8] François Leperlier, ed., *Claude Cahun, Ecrits* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 2002).

[9] André Breton, cited by Leperlier, "Afterword," *Disavowals or Cancelled Confessions* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), p. 213.

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