Chapter 1, Part 2: Claude Cahun's ambiguous self/images

Beneath this mask, another mask. I will not stop removing all these faces.

Claude Cahun[77]

Figure 31, Claude Cahun, *Untitled (I am in training, don't kiss me), 1927-1929*

In this section I will examine the self/images of French artist Claude Cahun, 1894-1954. The ambiguous nature of Cahun's performative photographic self-portraits will be examined, along with the themes of gender, identity, and societal roles that her photography explores. It is important to consider Cahun's work in this chapter since she lays the foundation for performative photography and the contemporary self/image. French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and

[77] This quote is taken from the text written on Claude Cahun's photomontage, *IOU*, 1929, Fig. 33. It is also the title of a chapter in Amelia Jones, *Self/Image*, 35-79.

French psychoanalyst Felix Guattari's progressive philosophical concepts of difference as a positive experience and the Lacanian language used in contemporary art criticism will be discussed to reveal their connections with Cahun's photography and contemporary self-portraiture. The work of Cindy Sherman will be discussed to compare and contrast her photography with her predecessor Cahun's photography. Lastly, Swedish artist Pipilotti Rist's video will be discussed to view a more recent societal intervention that extends the performative elements in Cahun's photography.

As this section continues Cahun's photography will be revealed as an obvious pre-cursor to Cindy Sherman's photography. Cahun was a pioneer in regard to the representation of deconstructed gender roles however her work was largely overlooked during her lifetime. It has taken a long time (fifty years) to understand her work and its influence historically and in contemporary art. Her presence in contemporary art may have come just at the right time. Cahun's photography demands examiners that can properly elucidate her pioneering work, some of whom are referred to in this chapter, including Rosalind Krauss, Amelia Jones, Jean Baudrillard, Whitney Chadwick and Judith Butler.

Claude Cahun was born in 1894 as Lucy Schwob in Nantes, France to an affluent and literary Jewish family. During her lifetime she was known mainly as a writer. A pivotal manuscript Cahun wrote was *Heroines*, a series of fifteen stream-of-consciousness monologues written in the voices of major women of literature and history.[78] For Cahun to choose the name ‘Claude’, which is androgynous, and ‘Cahun’, which is the Jewish name ‘Cohen’ in English, was to suggest her lesbian and Jewish identity. This was an act of bravery at a time when it could be dangerous to identify as either. By the early 1920s Cahun was living and making her art in Paris. Although the Nazis occupied France, Cahun remained and eventually moved back to Nantes in 1938 with her lifelong partner Marcel Moore (born as Susanne Malherbe, 1892-1972).[79] The two lovers were imprisoned and sentenced to death for their part in the French Resistance. Fortunately, they were released after four months when the Germans were defeated.

Cahun’s main motivation was to be a raging individualist. By exploring her identity she subverted societal norms and has become one of the most influential artists of the 20th century. Her conviction is evident in her representations of herself that typify her individualism. What was lost in time, in regard to Cahun’s oeuvre, was regained in a deeper appreciation and understanding of her work. The subject of ambiguity is central to Cahun’s photography. Her self-portraits, analogous to tableaux vivants, exemplify her impact on contemporary self-portraiture and subjectivity. The impact of Cahun’s legacy will illuminate the deconstructed boundaries that are blurred, merged and dissolved in contemporary self-portraiture.

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[78] Shelley Rice, ed., *Inverted Odysseys Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, Cindy Sherman*, trans., Norman MacAfee (Cambridge: MIT Press,1999), 43.
[79] Louise Downie, *don’t kiss me The Art of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore* (London: Tate Publishing, 2006), 7.

Figure 32, Claude Cahun, *Untitled*, 1927

The elusive self

Cahun's numerous self-portraits grapple with the concept of identity. In Fig. 32 Cahun performs both genders. On the left side of the photograph she has her hand on her hip signifying the feminine; on the right side her hand is in her pocket signifying the masculine. Her hair and attire are masculine, her face is without makeup and handsomely feminine. Cahun describes her androgynous posing in her own words:

> We only know how to recognise ourselves, love ourselves, through dreamlike, unrefined and fleeting reflections—moving bodies that we can contemplate only in passing.[80]

[80] Kent, Rachel, ed., *Masquerade: Representation and the Self in Contemporary Art* (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2006), 23.

This statement by Cahun can also inform the work of contemporary artists' self/ imagings, including Pipilotti Rist, Cindy Sherman, Francesca Woodman, Nikki S Lee, Christian Thompson, and Andy Warhol.

Cahun: ambiguous self - ambiguous gender

The American art critic Rosalind Krauss, in her book *Bachelors,* has said of Cahun's art:

> Cahun's autobiographical project not only puts her on both sides of the camera simultaneously the subject and object of representation – but it also endows her, a woman, with the power of projecting the gaze and returning it, as Claude's eyes meet ours, sometimes seductively, sometimes hostilely, sometimes quizzically, from the image. Indeed…the very enterprise of self-portraiture, otherwise so absent from the entire corpus of surrealist photography, comes down to reclaiming agency for the female subject.[81]

The ambiguous self that Cahun performs in Fig. 31 and Fig. 32 represents the "unrefined and fleeting reflections" in her photographic oeuvre. These two black and white photographs are consistent with her small scale photographs. Cahun's questioning gaze is the strength and mystery in these photographs. Cahun gesticulates and masquerades an ambiguous gender. Fig. 31 is more feminine and Fig. 32 is more masculine, yet Cahun's gaze looks directly at the viewer as if she is challenging them: 'Well what about you?' 'What gender are you?' and 'Does it really matter?'

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[81] Rosalind Krauss, *Bachelors* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 37.

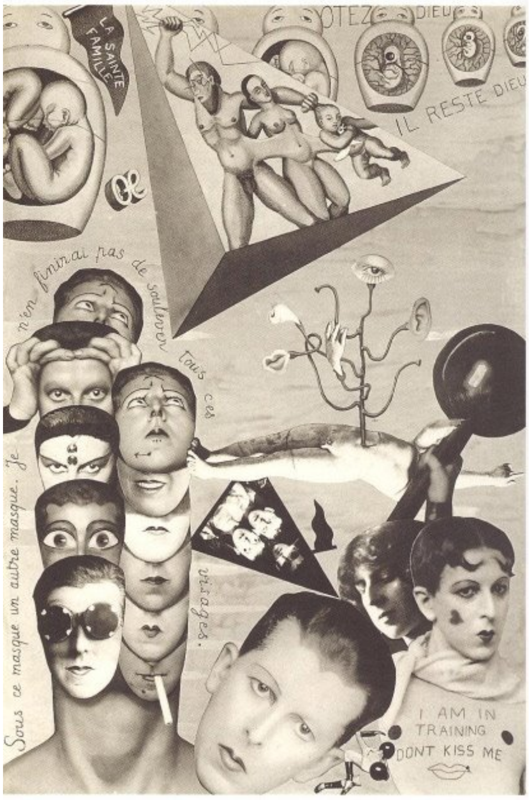

Figure 33, Claude Cahun, *IOU*, 1929

Joan Riviere, masquerade and Cahun

Cahun's concept of the self is represented by her recognised phrase, "beneath this mask is another mask". This is a self in constant movement and transformation. All the different masks that Cahun employs reveal her in relationship to various societal roles. She also challenges the conventions of personal appearance. This performative play elicited the need for a survival tactic, as highlighted by Joan Riviere in her groundbreaking essay, *Womanliness as a Masquerade*:

> Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it—much as a thief will turn out his pockets and ask to be searched to prove that he has not the stolen goods. 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; whether radical or

superficial. They are the same thing.[82]

The masquerade as defined by Cahun and Riviere revealed gender identity to be a condition that was not fixed. Cahun's photography confused the meaning of "womanliness", which began its deconstruction. The year 1929 was an interesting one, since Riviere wrote *Womanliness as a Masquerade*, Jean Baudrillard was born, and Cahun completed *I.O.U. (Self Pride),* Figure 33.[83] "The surface of *I.O.U. (Self Pride)* is itself shattered, splintered into multiple fragments. There is no literal coherence to it…"[84] It is on this surface that Cahun wrote her famous phrase, "beneath this mask, another mask". Amelia Jones hypothesises that Cahun:

> seems to have sensed (fifty years before Baudrillard) that the modernist belief in a subject behind every image, securing its meaning and value (the artist, the critic, the gallery-owner) was beginning to peel away—itself a "mask" of illusion bound to decay under the increasing pressures of the exchange of money, information, and bodies in capitalist, then late-capitalist, Euro-American culture. The succession of gazing (even glaring) heads seems to suggest such a peeling away: of masks, of faces, of selves.[85]

The role-play performed by Cahun in her photography destabilises the status of the subject and object and the self and other. Performing identity ruptures the Cartesian notion that the self has a fixed identity and portrays the instability of identity. As Roland Barthes stated, "Photography is a kind of primitive theatre, a kind of tableau vivant".[86] Cahun was a pioneer to utilise performance in her self-portraiture. Cahun's masquerades hid her femininity to eventually reveal her self. The autobiographical work that Cahun depicts in her photography explores

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[82] Riviere, 303-313.
[83] Jones, *Self/Image,* 36.
[84] ibid., 37.
[85] ibid., 36-37.
[86] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans., Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 31-32.

her identity as a woman and a lesbian. If gender can be performed than it is not fixed, but instead is a mutable mask anyone can wear.

Performing as men and women

I perform as both men and women in my photographic masquerades, as does Cahun. The performative role-play evident in Cahun's photography was, as American philosopher Judith Butler identified, a playful way that artists destabilised conventional constructions of meaning, in particular gender and sexual identity.[87] The strategy that Cahun employed in her self-portraits, to make repeated and numerous portraits and representations of masking and unmasking, was a fight for life, an affirmation of her own vitality even if it was fleeting and fragmentary.

The reason Cahun is such a trailblazer is because she was a female artist playing with the construction and representation of women and self during the 1920s when women were, for the most part, represented as the objects of men's sexual desire. Instead, Cahun pursued her own path and examined societal roles through representation and self-portraiture. Rosalind Krauss states:

> …the very enterprise of self-portraiture, otherwise so absent from the entire corpus of surrealist photography, comes down to reclaiming agency for the female subject. [88]

As Krauss has pointed out Cahun "reclaimed the female subject" because it was otherwise lost (or desired over). The fact that Cahun represented reflections of

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[87] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
[88] Krauss, *Bachelors*, 37.

herself in art was enigmatic during the Surrealist movement. This was particularly remarkable in light of the industrial revolution's mass-production of images. The mass-production of images cultivated an image of women that supported the capitalistic power structure, but did not suit Cahun. The truly enigmatic act that Cahun performed was that she produced photographs of herself that were depictions of defiance. She challenged the concept of what a woman was in representation because she certainly did not exemplify the image of the feminine, demure, sedate women, sexualised to seduce men of the early 20th century.

Figure 34, Claude Cahun, *photograph*, 1929

Figure 35, Man Ray, *Rrose Selavay*, 1921.

Concurrently, identity and gender were themes that French artist Marcel Duchamp, 1887-1968, explored when he performed as his alter ego, Rrose Selavay, which was documented by Man Ray. He performed as a woman and transgressed his own gender. Cahun dressed both as a man and as a woman in her photographs. The similarities of cross-dressing are evident in both Cahun and Duchamp's work. However there are important differences. Duchamp, as a man dressed as a woman, still has agency; for Cahun, dressing like a man gives her agency in a patriarchal world. Additionally, dressing like a woman allows Cahun to reveal the masquerade of femininity, by drawing attention to the rigidity of gender roles.

Cahun and Duchamp were contemporaries and revolutionaries in their art. Duchamp borrowed the term *readymade* from commercial culture and implemented the concept into his art and eventually altered Western art. The *readymade* or manufactured object was selected by the artist, who altered or signed it, making the object into art. This was a minimal way to make art and a tactic to comment on mass production.

Cahun subverted the conventional, which can also be viewed as *readymade* subjective roles, which was her lifelong artistic motivation. Some of these roles Cahun digested from society included: man, woman, Buddhist, pilot, angel, girl, monk, transvestite and Jew. Since Cahun rejected the conventional appearance of a 1920s woman and performed in various guises based on gender identifications she highlighted the *readymadeness* and subversion of gender roles.

Both Cahun and Duchamp subverted artistic and cultural conventions in the early part of the 20th century. Each artist unhinged the boundaries and definitions of art and identity. Cahun altered the genre of self-portraiture by performing gender roles in her photographs. Duchamp reclaimed mass-produced objects, which gave artists license to import meaning to these objects. Cahun reclaimed the representation of herself (as the subject) through masking and unmasking conventional roles and representations of identity.

Cahun, Deleuze & Guattari and Lacan

The contemporary concept of the self is complex and ambiguous like Cahun's photography. The self-portraits discussed in this chapter represent selves that are unstable. The concepts of self explored in this thesis are informed by the photography of Claude Cahun, Deleuze and Guattari's view that difference is positive, Jacques Lacan's theory of subject and object, and the phenomenological position that the others we resonate with reflects us. To return to Cahun's quote:

> We only know how to recognise ourselves, love ourselves, through dreamlike, unrefined and fleeting reflections—moving bodies that we can contemplate only in passing.[89]

The self is "fleeting" and the reflections of the self are "dreamlike". A dreamlike reflection challenges the reality of self. Cahun exhibited her art along with the Surrealists in Paris and London. She assimilated with her contemporaries yet distinguished herself from them. Cahun employed the tactics of the Surrealists when she used photo-montage, depicted altered realities, and overlapped photographs of her self. The various roles Cahun wore suggest self-reflection. The Surrealists employed psychoanalysis, which had been newly invented by

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[89] Kent, ed., 23.

Sigmund Freud in the 1890s. The concept of the subconscious allowed the Surrealists to access their dreams and imagination as raw material to create surreal, “dreamlike” realities. The subconscious provided a world of dreams, stream of conscious writing, and imagery that was not based on re-creating reality. Instead, Surrealist art could be characterised by distorted landscapes and unrealities, which questioned the notion of perception, including perception of the self.

In regards to the boundaries Cahun blurs Rosalind Krauss states:

> The realities distorted by the Surrealists and Cahun alike were meant to dissolve the boundaries and conventional notions of gender, identity, sexuality, and art through defiance. [90]

This leads me to discuss the frame through which the art I present in this chapter and throughout this thesis is analysed. Deleuze and Guattari’s criticism of psychoanalysis stems from their analysis of Sigmund Freud’s Oedipus complex, which is the historical basis for psychoanalysis. They argued that it was built on the notion of loss (of the mother) and a negative idea of difference.[91] Deleuze and Guattari’s deconstruction of the Oedipus complex, which is the basis of the Lacanian notion of the signifier and the signified used to analyse contemporary art, suggests this language can also be re-examined.

The language of psychoanalysis, as observed by French Psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche, has infiltrated everyday language and has become an understanding

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[90] Rosalind Krauss, “Corpus Delicti,” October, Vol.33 (Summer 1985), 40. Available from: The MIT Press http://www.jstor.org/stable/778393 (accessed 16 June 2009).
[91] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Œdipus,* trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane, (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), and *Capitalism and Schizophrenia Vol. 1*, trans. (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1972-1980).

we live with in popular culture.[92] The theories of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan are used in contemporary art to discuss the subject/object relationship. The "phallus", as defined by Jacques Lacan, was identified with the subject. I found it an uncomfortable necessity to utilise Lacan's notion of the "phallus", as it is the male power centre that the signified (female) submits to. This dynamic, outlined by Lacan and contemporary psychoanalysis, is the standard used in art criticism and it reflects the contemporary reality. It supports Western power structures and has clarified the conversation of identity in postmodern theory, in particular the connection between capitalism and subjectification.

This complexity leads me to discuss both the traditional notion of the subject while also conversing about change. Since Cahun was the signified and the signifier, she eradicated those divisions. Deleuze and Guattari push past the Lacanian notion of the "phallus" and suggest a language outside of the confines of psychology may be more relevant. The philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari offers the possibility of becoming and experiencing difference as positive. Cahun's photography exemplifies Deleuze and Guattari's notion of becoming since she moves beyond either gender to represent her ambiguous identity. In this context binaries are merged.

The Lacanian other is about objectification.[93] However Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical endeavors challenge the way difference is thought of. From their perspective, difference is a positive experience. This proclamation is a

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[92] Jean LaPlanche, *The Foundation of Psychoanalysis*, trans. David Macey, (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 12.
[93] Jones, *Self/Image,* xviii.

fundamentally different thought process than the currently held notion of the self and subject, which has a higher value than the object and other. Ultimately, thinking positively about “difference” will inform the representations of the self and other.

Coincidentally, in 1938 the German Philosopher Martin Heidegger wrote in his essay *The Age of the World Picture* that “the fundamental event of the modern age is the conquest of the world as picture”.[94] The technology of analogue photography has mediated Cahun’s self-portraits and Duchamp’s performance, *Rrose Selavy,* Fig. 35. The camera permitted Cahun to take numerous, instantaneous, and fleeting self-portraits. The photographs that Man Ray took of *Rrose Selavy* allowed Duchamp’s performance to be documented and mass-produced, otherwise there would not be a representation of the actual performances in real time.

Similarly, Portapaks, hi8 video cameras, and instant Polaroid cameras gave post-1960s performance artists license to document and distribute their work. The performances by artists in the 1960s, such as Marina Abromivic and Ulay, Yayoi Kusama, Dennis Oppenheim, Paul McCarthy and Joan Jonas, can continue to be viewed in the contemporary context because of this technology. In the 21st century, digital technology has overtaken its analogue counterparts. The digital video camera used by Pipilotti Rist according to Jones,

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[94] Martin Heidegger, as quoted in Jones, *Self/Image,* 5-6. Jones quoted from “The Age of the World Picture” (1938), in *The Questioning Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lobitt, (New York: Harper & Row, 1977, 132, 134).

exemplifies the potential for artists, who often work at the edges or against the grain of permissible or common ways of using technology in mass media contexts, to push technologies to their limits and beyond – thus to probe and even push beyond the limits of the contemporary self.[95]

Cahun's influence

Figure 36, Kim Connerton, *Warhol Re-Incarnated (Back From the Dead)*, video still, 2007

Cahun's phrase "beneath this mask is another mask", inserted in her photograph, *I.O.U.*, and her statement that, "we only know how to recognise ourselves, love ourselves, through dreamlike, unrefined and fleeting reflections—moving bodies that we can contemplate only in passing" will act as a guide in how contemporary self-portraiture will be analysed in this section. I will examine Cahun's photography and contemporary artists' self-enactments using the terms camouflage and masking to differentiate self-exposure and self-concealment. Although both terms are about assimilation as a way to enter into a dialogue with conventional modes of identity, I see a difference. Camouflage will mean concealment is the tactic used to combat the masquerade. Masking

[95] Jones, *Self/Image*, 11.

will mean that exposing the artist's identity is part of the motivation behind the work. The act of masking is a way for an artist to reveal her/his identity and employ masquerade to destabilise the conventional representation of self.

Cahun and Sherman

Revisiting Cahun's photography, the work of Cindy Sherman comes to mind immediately. This connection is obvious and widespread in contemporary art for their mutual photographic depictions of a woman playing numerous roles. In fact any female artist that photographs herself playing various female roles will be compared to Cindy Sherman, myself included. Since the re-discovery of Cahun's work a more complex reading can subsume. In almost all of Cindy Sherman's photographs she also performs the subject, as Cahun did. They are both female artists that enact self in their portraits and have been immortalized in their photographs.

There are important differences between Cahun and Sherman that elucidate the genre of self-portraiture. Sherman's strategy in her photography is to camouflage her photographed self.[96] Cahun, however, represents the masked and unmasked self. In Fig. 38 Sherman conceals her identity, camouflaging her subjectivity to perform a stereotype of a female starlet in American cinema from the 1950s. The genius of Sherman's photography is her technical mastery and styling techniques. Her images have a high standard of production and execution, which creates a distance, as the male gaze she recycled does in

[96] Leach, 241.

Untitled Film Stills. Sherman wears this male and objectifying gaze to illustrate its existence. This is a tactic she continues to use today.

In her photography in the 1990s she highlighted the abject realities of simulated living that contemporary image-driven culture produces. These realities were so horrifying that she disappeared as the subject in her work for a while. This horror can be understood through French writer, theorist and filmmaker Guy Debord, who anticipated the seeming impossibility of negotiating life in the digital age in *The Society of the Spectacle*:

> Behind The Glitter of the spectacle's distractions, modern society lies in thrall to the global domination of a banalizing trend that also dominates it at each point where the most advanced forms of commodity consumption have seemingly broadened the panoply of roles and objects available to choose from.[97]

The photographs of Sherman are encasements of postmodern dilemmas. When Sherman took the camouflaged self away, she looked "behind the glitter of the spectacle's distractions" and made photographs that were representations of the abject. Although Cahun wore societal roles as a mask she didn't camouflage or conceal herself. She moved away from the abject to comment on gender and societal roles. Like the personal nature of Cahun's work Sherman, now in her 50s, is depicting women who are ageing, which is a more personal theme.

In her most recent photographs Sherman performs stereotypes of the type of older elite women she has met at her level of success in the New York art world. Her tactic reveals her identity, while it subverts the masquerade she performs.

[97] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, ed. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge: Zone Books,1995), 38.

To elaborate on Cahun and Sherman's motivations the American art historian, Katy Kline, has said:

> Obviously, both Cahun and Sherman predicate their elaborate mise-en-scènes on the notion of the unstable subject. But whereas Sherman posits multiple roles, Cahun posits multiple selves…demonstrating that identity is not a fixed, autonomous condition. Cahun's surrealism was defined by the unknowable at the bottom of reality. She lived, wrote, undertook political action, and made photographs on the edge of limits where all understanding breaks down, ever present and at risk in her unapologetic ambiguity.[98]

Figure 37, Claude Cahun, *Self-Portrait*, 1920

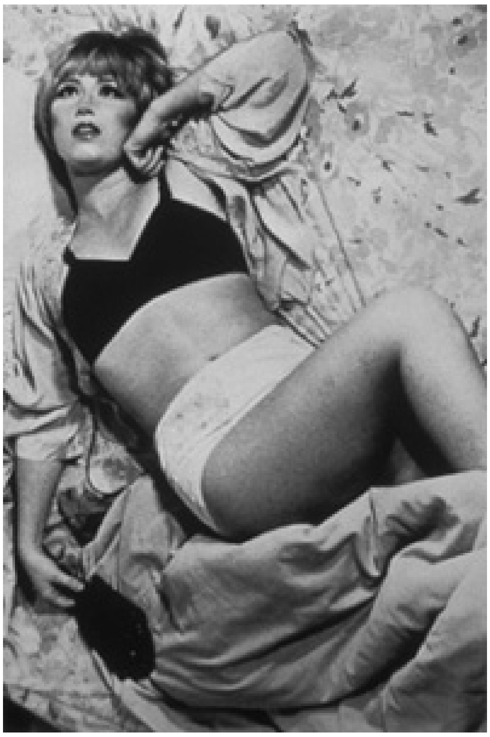

Figure 38, Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #6*, 1977

In Fig. 37 it as if Cahun is saying, 'I am a woman that looks like she could be a man and today I feel like being a monk. I want to sit quietly and be in this moment'. Cahun doesn't wear the image of a woman that the conventions of her time would dictate. Instead, she dissolves them by her individualistic personal

[98] Katy Kline, "In or Out of the Picture Claude Cahun and Cindy Sherman, " in Whitney Chadwick, ed., *Mirror Women, Surrealism, and Images Self-Representation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 66-81, 79. Kline referenced Katy Deepwell, "Uncanny Resemblances," *Womens Art Magazine* no.62 (January/February 1995): 18.

appearance. When she sits as a monk Cahun posits one of her "multiple selves", which represents the possibility of becoming a monk or a self-transformation of some kind. Unlike Sherman, who "has set up situations in order to be seen", Cahun set up scenes "in order to reveal herself incrementally to herself".[99] Also both works engage with the sexuality of the self – Cahun is an asexual monk, and Sherman's sexuality is doll-like.

Both Cahun and Sherman enact the female subject and "reclaim" it in different ways. Sherman re-presents the conventional image of women in the 1970s, to critique its ownership. Cahun enacted her self-portraits with less artificiality than Sherman. Artificiality is a key element in Sherman's photography, which exemplifies the postmodern critique of gender roles. Sherman reuses existing conventional representations of women from cinema or popular culture.

[99] Chadwick, ed., 79.