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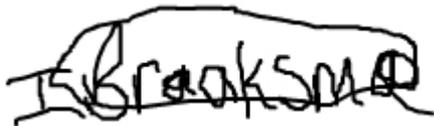
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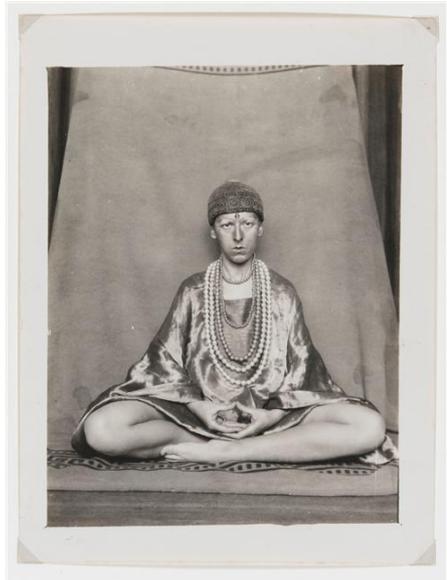
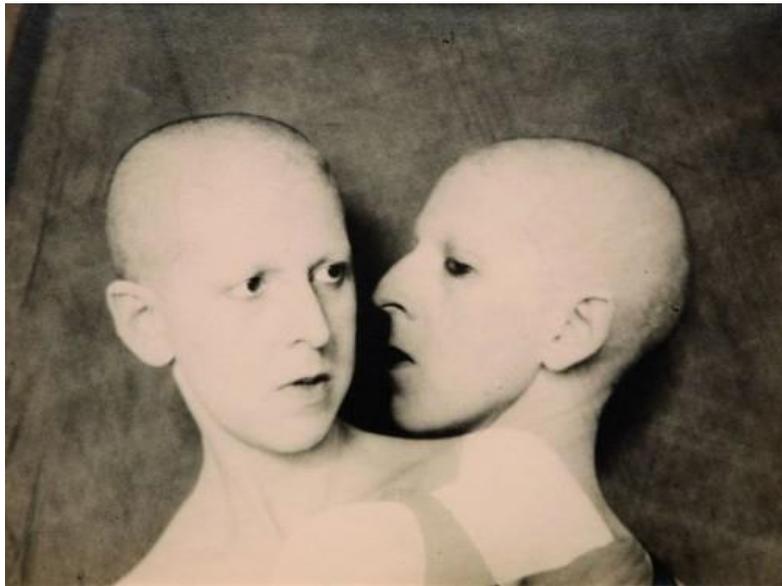
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A gender analysis of Claude Cahun's self-portraits



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Abstract

During my cultural studies education I developed an interest for gender studies as well as Surrealism. When I came across the work of Claude Cahun, it quickly became clear that her self-portraits would become my object of study for this BA thesis, as they combine both the subject of gender and the Surrealist movement. The gender courses I have followed as well as my background in art history make it possible to fruitfully analyze Cahun's photographic works. The course about the culture of fashion provided me with "new materialism" as an approach to Cahun's oeuvre.

This BA thesis discusses different photographs by Surrealist artist Claude Cahun (1894 – 1954) from a feminist perspective: *Autoportrait* (1927), *Que me veux-tu? Autoportrait double* (1928) and *Photomontage, Plate 1, Aveux non avendus* (1919 -1929). Cahun's oeuvre has often been analyzed in terms of gender performativity, a concept introduced by Judith Butler. In order to complement an interpretation based on Judith Butler's gender performativity, I emphasize the materiality of the body as a means to deconstruct gender with theories by Rosi Braidotti's feminist materialism. The first chapter gives a short overview of both Claude Cahun's (artistic) life and the Surrealist movement. In chapter two I lay out the theoretical framework that will base my analysis of the three photographs. The last chapter consists of an analysis of Cahun's photographs in terms of both gender performativity and new materialism. The conclusion provides a comparison of the photographic works as well as a reflection on the used theories.

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Introduction

“... she is Claude Courlis, a lesbian whose lifelong partner was her stepsister; she is Daniel Douglas, named after Oscar Wilde’s lover, Lord Alfred Douglas; she is “the unnamed soldier,” veteran of the Jersey Resistance, sentenced to death for urging occupying German troops to mutiny and desertion; she is Claude Cahun, a little-known Surrealist photographer, writer, actor, object maker, and political activist.” (Knafo, 2001, 30)

The poet and photographer Claude Cahun, born in 1894 in Nantes as Lucy Schwob, has changed her name multiple times during her life time. Claude Cahun was the last change and was also the pseudonym under which she published most of her art works. The description of Cahun by Danielle Knafo demonstrates the complexity of her identity and makes clear that she did not have an easy life. She lived during a war in which she was a target for different reasons: she was a lesbian, a Jew and an activist. Having survived the war, Cahun lived together with her stepsister Marcel Moore (originally Suzanne Malherbe), who was also her lover for most of her life.

Claude Cahun’s works have often been discussed using Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity. Cahun’s play with gender ambiguity and the theatrical performances in her self-portraits have been viewed as a perfect example of Butler’s concept of an “unfixed self” and the social construct of gender roles (Knafo, 2001). Discussions of Cahun’s oeuvre have emphasized the theatrical aspect in her work and the use of masquerade as well as the relation with her writings. In these texts a “Butlerian” approach is always central. Further, these writings often lack an elaborate photographic analysis. In this thesis, I will approach Cahun’s oeuvre through New Materialism to complement an analysis with gender performativity. I also provide a detailed analysis of each of the discussed works.

My hypothesis is that gender theory, specifically gender-performativity, is relevant but not sufficient to describe and analyze all of Claude Cahun’s works. Emphasizing embodiment in the photographs seems relevant to analyze the construction of her gender ambiguity. I will demonstrate this by using the concept of gender-performativity by feminist philosopher Judith Butler (1956) first. Then, I will refer to “New Materialism” by Rosi Braidotti as an alternative theory and a way to supplement the current discourse in gender studies, which is dominated by the notion of performativity (Braidotti in: Van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2010). In order to do this, I will focus on three of Claude Cahun’s works: *Autoportrait* (1927), *Que me veux-tu? Autoportrait double* (1928) and *Photomontage, Plate 1, Aveux non avendus* (1919 -1929). Each of these works revolves around gender, but the way in which Cahun questions this notion differs. In her self-portraits Cahun seems to comment on gender differently than in her (fragmented) photomontages. By choosing the three works that I have picked, I thus want to show the diversity of Claude Cahun's works in terms of her play on gender. Further, they have been made during the same period, namely between 1927 and 1929.

American philosopher Judith Butler was one of the first to introduce the concept of performativity in gender studies. In *Gender trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, her most prevalent work, she argues that gender is not something you are born with. Rather, it is something you perform and *become* because of the repetition of this performance (Butler, 1990). Gender is thus something you “do” and not something you inherently are; it is

an act, a role you take. Using this notion to analyze Cahun's art works results in an analysis focused on symbolic representation. I want to propose the approach of New Materialism by Rosi Braidotti as a way to deepen my analysis of works by Claude Cahun. This is an interesting approach to Claude Cahun's self-portraits because of its emphasis on the concept of materiality and embodiment. The theoretical framework of this thesis is thus a combination of Judith Butler's gender performativity and Rosi Braidotti's feminist materialism.

The works I have chosen to analyze in this thesis are works that were probably not very well-known during Claude Cahun's life. They are also a very small part of Cahun's oeuvre, considering the fact that her oeuvre is dominated by poetic works and that she has also made a lot of self-portraits. Because of the fact that gender (androgyny and homosexuality being the most prevalent examples) seems to be considered more subtly in two of the chosen works, I emphasize different aspects of Cahun's identity that have formed her works. A "New Materialist" approach of her oeuvre is relevant, as my hypothesis is that a focus on the "embodied nature of the subject" results in a fruitful analysis. Because I want to emphasize gender as one of many aspects of Cahun's identity, it is important to also consider her Jewish identity and other elements of her persona. I do not wish to isolate "gender" as a way to look at Cahun in analyzing her works. The research question that derives from the thesis statement and hypothesis is: How can a feminist gender analysis be used to analyze the construction and representation of Claude Cahun's identity in her self-portraits *Autoportrait* (1927), *Que me veux-tu? Autoportrait double* (1928) and *Photomontage, Plate 1, Aveux non avendus* (1919 -1929)?

The methodology I use is firstly iconographical analysis, where I discuss the Surrealist background in which Cahun's works were made. A photographic analysis using film analysis by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (2012) emphasizes use of mise-en-scène, camera technique and framing. The focus of this thesis is feminist theory, while the art historical context of Cahun's oeuvre will be less prominent in my analysis. The first chapter of this thesis consists of a short overview of both Claude Cahun's (artistic) life and the Surrealist movement. In chapter two follows a summary of Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity as well as Rosi Braidotti's contribution to New Materialism. Chapter three provides an analysis of the chosen photographic works, using both gender performativity (as a starting point) and New Materialism. The conclusion demonstrates the way in which both theories differ and complement each other.

Chapter 1: Claude Cahun and Surrealism

1.1 Gender and Claude Cahun's identity

Claude Cahun was a Jewish lesbian, which possibly made her marginal for three reasons: firstly because she was a woman, secondly because she was gay and lastly because she was Jewish. She was relatively well-known during her time, but seems to be “forgotten” later on in art history, although it has been suggested that this was her own choice (Gravano, 2009). Cahun portrays multiple identities in her self-portraits. This is interesting if one wants to analyze her work in relation to woman's art history. There are multiple ways to approach the role that gender has played in Claude Cahun's life, and therefore in her artistic works. Claude Cahun was not only female in a masculine-dominant discourse, but she was also a politically active homosexual who played with (for instance) androgyny in her artistic career. This makes it possible to focus on gender in relation to various aspects of her life: gender in her political life, gender as a part of her identity, the gender ambiguity in her artistic works. The concept of intersectionality – “the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations” (Leslie McCall, 2014, 1771) - comes into play here: in my thesis I do not only discuss Claude Cahun's femininity, but also consider other aspects of her identity as they are represented in her works. The fact that Cahun was Jewish at a time when anti-Semitism was widespread is also important to consider in this context. Her way to deal with this part of her identity was to be politically active, both in her artistic works and personal life. As a Jewish, lesbian and feminist activist she was in many ways a marginal figure who was not afraid to stand out. There are thus multiple aspects that have formed Cahun's identity and that make her oeuvre an interesting object of analysis.

1.2 Gender and oeuvre

Most of the works that Claude Cahun published during her life were poetic writings. It was only in the 1990s that her photographic works were published and discussed. Visual works were mostly published in function of her books or they were published after Cahun's death. It is also not clear how Cahun was involved in Surrealism during her life. It has been argued that she was a marginal figure, but also that she had strong connections with André Breton, who was the leading figure of Surrealism (Gravano, 2009). The role of gender in Claude Cahun's (artistic) life is highly complex. It evokes questions such as: Could her use of androgynous or masculine features in her self-portraits be viewed as an attempt to change the patriarchal power dynamics of her time? Does the fact that she is a lesbian play a role in this? These are questions that show how different aspects of Cahun's identity have influenced her oeuvre, while it will never be clear in which way specifically. Apart from issues of identity, there is also her upbringing and social context which have had an influence on her (and therefore her artistic output). This thesis does not emphasize how her social life and Jewish upbringing might have played a part in her further life and artistic practice. I will focus on the influence of Surrealism as well as Cahun's own relation to gender issues and the way she plays with gender ambiguity. In discussing the movement of Surrealism, I choose to highlight the relevant aspects in relation to the artistic works of Claude Cahun that will be discussed in this thesis.

1.3 Surrealism

“Photography was one of the most fruitful allies in surrealism’s exploration of desire. The human body and human face, massively enlarged through close-ups, dislocated from one another and left separate or recombined across a single surface become the intimate coinage of surrealist photography’s examination of inter-subjective spaces and sexual ambiguities.” (Ades, 2001, 186).

Surrealism was a highly divergent and fragmented artistic and intellectual movement, flourishing between 1925 and 1940 (Ades, 2001). Surrealist art aimed to “liberate the human imagination”, critiquing conventional ideas that became dominant through rationalism (Ades and Gale, 2001). It was a revolutionary movement, of which André Breton was the leader. His first *Manifesto of Surrealism* was written in 1924. Initially a circle of writers, soon painters and other visual artists were welcomed to the movement, basing their art on memories, feelings, and dreams. Surrealist photography was often uncanny, using techniques such as double exposure and a combination of printing, montage and solarization. If not produced by Surrealist artists (such as Man Ray, Gyula (Julius) Halász Brassai (pseudonym) and Maurice Tabard) themselves, images would be disrupted from their original context and placed in Surrealist journals like *La Révolution Surréaliste* and *Minotaure* to evoke the same effect. Psychoanalysis inspired a deep fascination for the subconscious and deviating, resulting in techniques such as “automatic writing”. Eccentric ideas and unique techniques characterize the movement. Influenced by the Dada movement, Surrealism sought to go against traditional art. Another important aspect of Surrealism is the notion of Occultism, associated with irrationalism and marginality (Bauduin, 2014).

Although often critiqued by feminists as a “male movement”, Whitney Chadwick argues: “Surrealism also battled the social institutions - church, state, and family - that regulate the place of women within patriarchy. In offering some women their first locus for artistic and social resistance, it became the first modernist movement in which a group of women could explore female subjectivity and give form (however tentatively) to a feminine imaginary.” (Chadwick, 1985, 5). Claude Cahun can be placed in the tradition of female Surrealist artists like Frida Kahlo, Meret Oppenheim and Dorothea Tanning) who battled social institutions through art and writing. However, she was not associated with other female artists and her closeness with André Breton is often doubted by art historians.

Claude Cahun was thus a marginal figure to the movement of Surrealism in a time where, moreover, her lesbianism and Jewishness were considered problematic. Although the role of gender in her life and works is highly complex, it is clear that feminist theories are relevant to discuss both her persona and oeuvre. The following chapter consists of an explanation of the theoretical framework that bases my analysis in chapter three.

Chapter 2: Performativity of Gender and New Materialism

‘Thus “neo-materialism” emerges as a method, a conceptual frame and a political stand, which refuses the linguistic paradigm, stressing instead the concrete yet complex materiality of bodies immersed in social relations of power.’ (Van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2010, 21)

This chapter provides a short overview of the theories that I will use to analyze the works of Claude Cahun. In the first paragraph I briefly describe the concept of gender performativity. The second paragraph summarizes Judith Butler’s gender performativity as it has been associated with Claude Cahun’s oeuvre. The relevance of Rosi Braidotti’s new materialist ideas as a new approach to Cahun’s works can be found in the last paragraph.

2.1 The Performativity of Gender

Both the philosophy of performativity and new materialism can be placed in a tradition of social and cultural thinking that are part of the contemporary discourse in the Western system of thought (Rocamora and Smelik, 2015). The notion of performativity is related to post-structuralism and occurred for the first time in association with gender in *Gender Trouble* (1990). Here, Judith Butler describes how “sex” is not a biological given but “is as culturally constructed as gender;” therefore, it is “always already gender” and the body is “always already a cultural sign” (Butler, 1990, 10). In terms of performativity she writes: “the performativity of gender revolves around [...] the way in which the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself. Secondly, performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration.” (Butler, 1990, xv). This notion comes from the theory that is proposed in Simone De Beauvoir’s *Le deuxième sexe* in 1949 (translated as *The Second Sex*), which is that the woman is portrayed as ‘the other’, whereas the man is ‘neutral’. Both De Beauvoir and Butler wanted to get rid of this duality as a means to deconstruct the binary opposition of gender. According to Judith Butler, gender is a cultural construct, which is naturalized through repetitive action. It is also not fixed, as it can be changed by the “performer” depending on different contexts. In order to deconstruct gender, the concept of performativity can be used to point out how it is performed rather than a biological given. Judith Butler’s gender performativity is thus concerned with the repetitive character of gender identity, understanding gender as a social and cultural construct.

2.2 Performativity in Claude Cahun’s works

“Such acts, gestures, enactment, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (Butler, 1990, 136)

Claude Cahun’s works have often been discussed using Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity (Stel, 2014). Five years after the publication of *Gender Trouble*, art historian Laurie J. Monahan published an article discussing the subjectivity of gender identity in Cahun’s oeuvre (Stel, 2014). This was the start of numerous discussions of Cahun’s gender ambiguity based on Butler’s ideas. These analyses emphasize concepts such as the impossibility of a fixed identity, often connected to Cahun’s use of masquerade (Stel, 2014). Laurie Monahan (1995) argues: ‘Cahun takes her own subjectivity as the means of revealing the impossibility of fixing

the self; her text and images speak of its dissolution, fragmentation, and transformations, as biography itself becomes suspect, another mask among many' (Monahan, 1995, 128). Whidney Chadwick (1998) argues that Cahun's artistic practice (and that of other female surrealists) is an example of using the body as a place where the performative process of gender occurs. Authors such as Gen Doy (2007) and Shelley Rice (1999) have critiqued the 'Butlerian' approach. Their critiques were based on the notion that historical context should be considered when studying Cahun's oeuvre. However, their interpretations of Claude Cahun's work still show similarities to postmodern views on gender such as Butler's theory. It can also be argued that an approach through gender performativity does not exclude this aspect, since Butler based her ideas on the psychoanalytical theories of Freud, Lacan and Rivière (Stel, 2014). It is thus clear that the concept of gender performativity has been very influential on gender studies ever since its introduction in feminist discourse. Stel writes that theorists focus more on different aspects of Cahun's artistic practice (Stel, 2014). The historical and cultural context of her works gets more attention, as well as her lesbian identity and her literary works. These shifts in focus are presented as a different point of view to Judith Butler's theory rather than as an extension. It is however impossible to avoid poststructuralist theory in order to interpret Cahun's works in the context of the twenties and thirties, since the influence of Butler's ideas is evident. Furthermore, poststructuralist thought allows different perspectives to be put next to each other without excluding any of them (Stel, 2014). In this thesis I do not aim to deny the importance of gender performativity as a concept, but I suggest an alternative or complementary interpretation using the theoretical framework of "new materialism".

2.3 New Materialism as a new approach

"a general direction of thought is emerging in feminist theory that situates the embodied nature of the subject, and consequently the question of alternatively sexual difference or gender, at the heart of matter." (Van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2012, 19-20)

New (feminist) materialism, as a whole, rethinks feminist concepts and can be used to rethink the notion of gender performativity too. New materialism can be viewed as a new metaphysics that came about in the 1990s through a collection of (re-)readings. According to Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, "(...) a new metaphysics does not add something to thought (a series of ideas that wasn't there, that was left out by others). It rather traverses and thereby rewrites thinking *as a whole*, leaving nothing untouched, redirecting every possible idea according to its new sense of orientation." (Van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2010). "New" materialism, however, is not actually that new according to Agnès Rocamora and Anneke Smelik. In *Thinking Through Fashion*, they emphasize the "long and prestigious genealogy" of new materialism and the different sources and disciplines that have influenced this metaphysics. The main source of inspiration that is important for my understanding and application of new materialism comes from "the materialist branch of feminism", which "rethinks the materiality of the human body and its gendered nature." (Rocamora and Smelik, 2015). For an analysis of the photographic works of Claude Cahun, I will mainly use theories by the feminist author Rosi Braidotti, which emphasize materiality and embodiment.

Since new materialism as a way of thinking is relatively new, there are no analyses of Claude Cahun's works considering this approach yet. While gender performativity as a way to study her works seems to be quite an obvious choice, new materialism is an interesting approach to

Claude Cahun because of its emphasis on materiality and the concept of embodiment. This approach allows for an understanding in terms of embodiment and the individual, recognizing the collectively shared social space in which cultural phenomena take place (Braidotti, 2013). An analysis based on experience and agency derives from this type of understanding (Rocamora and Smelik, 2015). In this research specifically, I choose to use theories by Rosi Braidotti because of her contribution to feminist discourse. Braidotti's feminist materialism focuses on embodiment, as well as sexual difference and "the sexualized nature and the radical immanence of power relations and their effects upon the world." (Van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2010). In terms of sexual difference, Braidotti argues: "Sexual difference in particular poses the question of the conditions of possibility for thought as a self-originating system of representation of itself as the ultimate presence. Thus, sexual difference produces subjectivity in general." (Van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2012, 28). This idea is closely related to Judith Butler's concept of gender subjectivity. However, her ideas merely come from a textual analysis, an analytical approach situated in the poststructuralist discourse where textuality is dominant. As Daniel Miller argues in his book *Stuff* (2010), "putting the emphasis on materiality [...] does not preclude an understanding of matter as symbolic; rather, it shows that there is a constant negotiation between the material and the symbolic." (Miller, 2010, 156). Here, the notion of embodiment comes into play, a materialism "of the embodied and embedded kind." (Van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2012, 22). Braidotti argues that "the starting point for most feminist redefinitions of subjectivity is a new form of materialism that develops the notion of corporeal materiality by emphasizing the embodied and therefore sexually differentiated structure of the speaking subject." (ibid, 2012, 33). This notion ties in with Claude Cahun as a subject, using materiality as a medium through which she alters her body in order to construct her art. In the second chapter I will demonstrate how this perspective of materiality creates a productive interpretation of Cahun's self-portraits. In order to do this, my analysis of her works will have a strong focus on the material elements in the photographs.

New materialism re-evaluates feminist ideas and emphasizes the importance of materiality, resulting in an analysis focused on embodiment. The notions of materiality and embodiment are the most important in relation to my analysis of self-portraits by Claude Cahun. In the following chapter I will use both gender performativity and feminist materialism to achieve an understanding of *Que me veux-tu? Autoportrait double* (1928), *Autoportrait* (1927) and *Photomontage, Plate 1, Aveux non avendus* (1919-1929) and to analyze how the construction and representation of Claude Cahun's identity takes place in her self-portraits.

Chapter 3: Analysis of the chosen photographic works

“...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.” (Krauss, 2000, 37)

This chapter consists of three types of analyses. First, I will study each of the works (*Que me veux-tu? Autoportrait double* (1928), *Autoportrait* (1927) and *Photomontage, Plate 1, Aveux non avendus* (1919-1929)) through an iconographic analysis of the image, which entails that I analyze what the photographs show (Margolis & Pauwels, 2011). In order to do this, I will first use both art historical iconographic analysis and film analysis by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (2012). The combination of iconographic analysis as well as film analysis works well to interpret photography, since it focuses on both art historical context and photographic techniques. Secondly, I will explain the use of the theoretical framework of both the concept of gender performativity and feminist materialism. Thirdly, this chapter provides a gender analysis based on both concepts.

3.1 Iconographic analysis

Analysis of *Que me veux-tu? Autoportrait double*, 1928 (fig. 1)

The black and white photograph *Que me veux-tu? Autoportrait double*, made in 1928, shows a montaged double portrait of Claude Cahun. The head on the right is a self-portrait made in 1920 (fig. 2), slightly tilted to position her as if she is in contact with the head on the left (a self-portrait from 1921), creating a visual dialogue. Her head is shaved in both versions of herself, and her face on the left is clean of makeup. This face shows a surprised or almost startled look. On her face on the right, Cahun wears make-up on her eyes and mouth, to create a shadow-like effect. This face is connected to the face on the left, which has the effect that they look just past each other. In terms of *mise-en-scène*, the most prominent aspect is the use of low-key lighting, which results in a highly contrasted picture: the two heads are relatively white, while the background is relatively dark. The minimal setting and minimal use of costume are striking in this photograph. There is nothing in the background and Cahun does not wear any eye-catching clothing or jewelry. The combination of such a plain *mise-en-scène* with low-key lighting causes the attention to move towards Cahun's facial expressions. The framing through a close-up camera position helps to navigate the gaze towards Cahun, creating an alienated effect. Surrealist artists explored the possibility of different identities and blurring boundaries in terms of gender, race and ethnicity (Ades, 2001). This work reminds of a Surrealist play with ambiguity, since it does not portray one clear persona, but plays with the notion of multiple identities (Ades, 2001).

Analysis of *Autoportrait*, 1927 (fig. 3)

Cahun rarely titled her works but they are usually referred to and identified as “Autoportrait” (Smith, 2008). In this black and white *Autoportrait*, made in 1927, Cahun has a rather oriental outlook. She is dressed as a yogi and sits in an Eastern meditating position. This oriental appearance is enhanced by the setting, which consists of the patterned fabric she is sitting on and a large piece of cloth that hangs behind her, as well as the worn costume. Cahun wears a shiny silk garment, paired with multiple shiny pearl necklaces and a woolen hat. The transparent, glass-like, dot on her forehead reminds of the traditional Bindhi sign, worn in

countries such as India. Cahun sits cross-legged, with her hands folded into her lap. She looks away from the lens, but towards the viewer. The contrast between light and dark in this picture is low due to the use of high-key lighting. This creates an almost silver-like coloring and a lack of shadows. A separate lighting has been used to illuminate the dress, enhancing the shiny material. The subject of this work, the representation of a Buddha, can be related to Surrealist interest in Occultism (Bauduin, 2014) as well as Cahun's personal interest in the notion of the 'Other' through exoticism and orientalism (Gravano, 2009).

Analysis of Photomontage, Plate 1, *Aveux non avenues*, 1919 -1929 (fig. 4)

This black and white collage is a collaboration with Marcel Moore, which is the pseudonym of Cahun's lifelong partner Suzanne Alberte Malherbe. It is a complex work that uses multiple symbols. The composition of this work consists of three pairs of arms. The pair of arms on the left forms two fist-like hands stacked on top of each other, creating a base for the rounded shape in which three figures and one bust are portrayed. Each of these assembled photographs show Cahun with a shaved head. The person to whom the hands belong appears to be wearing a cape, and the rounded shape almost looks as if it is wearing the hood of this cape. The middle pair of hands is holding another pair of hands, which is holding an eyeball. Beneath this pair of hands, Cahun and Moore have placed a pair of shiny lips. The pair of hands on the right is holding a globe in between folded hands. The elbows to which these hands are connected are floating in the rest of the photo-montage. In the center, below the prominent lips, props such as a stack of fruits are placed, one of which looks like planet Earth. The peeled pomegranate is held by a hand of which one finger is shown. Above the eyeball that is held by the hands in the middle is a bird resembling an eagle with its wings spread and two heads. Around this bird symbol, letters are placed backwards, which makes the birds look like a sign. All these symbols are flanked by unidentifiable shapes and objects that give the photo-montage a space-like atmosphere. In the following paragraph I will go into more detail of what these different symbols could mean. The symbol of the eye is placed prominently in the middle, while the arms beneath it are highlighted, directing the look of the viewer towards the eye. The self-portraits on the left are aligned with the globe on the right, creating a relation between the two (Shaw, 2013). The use of photomontage in this collage can be placed in the Dadaist tradition to achieve a fragmented and multiplied narrative (Krauss, 1981). Cahun was, however, also interested in Surrealist activities while producing *Aveux non Avenus* (Shaw, 2003). The title of this work is generally translated as 'Disavowals', or 'Cancelled Confessions' (Shaw, 2013). Tirza Latimer writes in *Papers of Surrealism*: "The title of the book (...) announces the project of deconstruction by embodying a contradiction." (Latimer, 2010, 2). This contradiction is different for each photomontage in the book, and in relation to this particular collage could be associated with subjectivity. The assembled images present the Surrealist notion of the uncanny, questioning not just gender norms but "also boundaries of visual representation" (Zachmann, 2003, 397).

3.2 Use of theoretical framework

Gender performativity

As I have written in chapter two, the concept of gender performativity is based on the impossibility of a fixed identity. When it comes to interpretations of Cahun's self-portraits, this concept is often connected to her use of masquerade (Stel, 2014). This type of analysis focuses on the way the body is used as a site where the performative process of gender occurs,

including the historical and cultural context in which the art works are made. The performative aspect lies in the fact that gender performativity is, rather than a “singular act”, “a repetition and a ritual”. (Butler, 1990). I will thus emphasize the way in which Claude Cahun uses repetition as a way to manifest her gender, focusing on her use of masquerade. The theories of Judith Butler relate to poststructuralist thought, which focuses on language. I will emphasize symbolism in order to analyze and interpret the three photographic works, analyzing the symbolic meaning of elements in the photographs. An approach through Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity is based on the post-structuralist tradition in which language is believed to be “paradigmatic for meaning” (Rocamora & Smelik, 2015, 8).

According to Joanne Entwistle, structuralism and post-structuralism have ‘effectively displace[d] the idea of embodiment and the individual and can give us no account of experience or agency’ (Entwistle, 2000, 70). The notion of embodiment is relevant as it considers not just the body, but also looks at the way the body is experienced. (Entwistle, 2015). In order to come to a better understanding of the role of embodiment in Cahun’s works, it is relevant to not just emphasize language (through symbols and representation), but to analyze the use of materials in relation to the body. This asks for a different approach for each of the discussed works, which I will mention in the analyses specifically. Focusing on the way Cahun embodies her (gender) identity through Braidotti’s feminist materialism results in insights that cannot be achieved through an analysis based on gender performativity. Exploring the role of embodiment in each of the works will therefore help me answer part of the research question. In the remainder of this chapter I will thus demonstrate how feminist materialism might be useful to analyze these photographs.

New materialism

In the previous chapter I explained that Rosi Braidotti’s approach to gender subjectivity emphasizes embodiment and materiality, which are the main concepts I want to use in order to analyze Cahun’s works. This chapter will continue with an analysis of each self-portrait based on this concept and, by doing so, explore the embodied practice of Claude Cahun in her photographic works. In the analysis of *Que me veux-tu?* and *Autoportrait*, I will put the central focus on the worn clothing and the role these fabrics have on the body, while *Photmontage, Plate 1* will be explored through the materiality of the objects shown. By doing so, I hope to complement a ‘Butlerian’ analysis in a meaningful way. A focus on the material is not just necessary to understand art and fashion, “but also for our bodies and identities, which are constructed and mediated not only through signs but also *materially* (2010: 60). Identity ‘matters’,” write Agnès Rocamora and Anneke Smelik (2015, 12). In this paragraph, I want to explore the relation of ‘matter’ to the identities conveyed in the three works by Cahun. I analyze the use of costume, not just for its symbolic meaning or aesthetic, but in relation to the body (Rocamora and Smelik, 2015). In her oeuvre, Cahun does not represent a “universal woman-ness” (Meskimmon, 2003, 91). She portrays a very specific woman: a lesbian activist who associated herself with Surrealism. Her wish to give female subjectivity a voice and to refuse the notion of a fixed identity resonates with the ideas of Judith Butler. I would argue that these ideals also come forward through an analysis of embodiment and sexual difference, although this approach results in a different interpretation.

3.2 Gender analyses of the photographic works

Gender analysis of *Que me veux-tu? Autoportrait double*, 1928

For *Que me veux-tu? Autoportrait double* (fig. 1), Butler's concept of gender performativity can help to describe and analyze how Cahun acts out her gender in two different ways. First, I want to argue that this photograph questions Cahun's identity by using the notion of the double (Sturm, 2014). Cahun plays with the notion of an "unfixed" identity by creating two versions of herself, both sporting a shaved head, illustrating different identities. In *Que me veux-tu?* it almost appears as if there are two separate people; one looking unsettled, while the other seems in charge. This idea can be related to the title of this work, which can be translated as 'what do you want from me?'. I would argue that the persona on the left is asking this question to Cahun's alter ego on the right. The title is ambiguous however, because it can also be translated as 'What do you blame me for'. Cahun uses body language and facial expressions in order to perform these opposite characters. She thus demonstrates how one person can use his or her performativity to "create" multiple identities and how, therefore, identity is not fixed. As Jules Sturm (2014) argues: "I interpret Cahun's double as a move away from the self – away from a stable, fixed, or normed self and towards a multitude of selves, which give the artist more freedom to become a person beyond traditional social categories." (Sturm, 2014, 97). This idea can be related to the Surrealist aim to loosen the principle of identity 'like a bad tooth' (Ades, 2001, 183). In terms of gender, I interpret Cahun's use of the double as a way of portraying simultaneously a female and male persona; the left representing Cahun's feminine self and the right being a more masculine figure. In order to realize this gender ambiguity, Cahun uses masquerade in a rather subtle way. On the left, she wears a top that shows her shoulders, suggesting a feminine fragility. The right figure wears a sleeveless shirt, which implies masculinity, as this is a more masculine type of clothing. It is especially in the confrontation depicted here that this opposition takes shape. Cahun's body does not have any feminine or masculine features; it is one of her well-known androgynous self-portraits (Smith, 2008). Or, as Laura Cottingham refers to Cahun's self-representations: they are "nonfeminized" (Cottingham, 2000, 191). The performance in this photograph, which is mainly created through altering pre-existing images and creating a montage, creates the illusion of two different characters with both a different gender.

The concept of embodiment can be applied to *Que me veux-tu? Autoportrait double* as well. As Sharon Morris (1997) argues: Cahun strived to "nullify sexual difference". She wanted to do this through polymorphism, which could be explained as an indifference to sex and gender (Morris, 1997, 173). This indifference is almost directly embodied in *Que me veux-tu?*, where Cahun embodies no sex or gender in specific. She uses her body in order to express both her identity and to convey her message, which is her belief that heterosexuals and homosexuals should be equal (Morris, 1997). Cahun's use of materials to convey her different identities in this work is minimal, yet effective. In one version of herself, Cahun is wearing a top that uncovers her shoulders; in the other she wears a plain black sleeveless top. The effect of these garments is striking in the sense that they play a significant role in shaping Cahun's portrayed gender identities. While her bare shoulders in the left self-portrait make Cahun appear vulnerable, the black sleeveless top gives her a more dominant appearance. This does not just have an effect on a symbolic level; the use of these specific garments also influence Cahun's body, making her posture and facial expressions more convincing. Emphasizing the materiality

of Cahun's features, however, results in an interpretation that goes beyond gender. The combination of her bald head, the accentuated hawk nose and the strange make-up give her an almost alien-like appearance. The nose, which is highlighted to create a dramatic effect, makes Cahun bird-like, but could also be interpreted as a comment on the anti-Semitic time she was living in. As I have mentioned in the analysis with gender performativity, the title can alternatively be translated as "What do you blame me for?". If this translation is considered, Cahun could ask this of the viewer, who might blame her of being "non-human", "alien-like", or at least different than the (feminine) norm of her time. In this double self-portrait Cahun does not just question gender roles by performing different persona; she also deconstructs gender by creating an inhuman image which does not conform to any socio-cultural norms at all.

Gender analysis of *Autoportrait*, 1927

Scholars have argued that Cahun embodies a Buddha in this photograph (e.g. Cottingham, 2000). This notion makes sense when you consider the fact that she started her career engaging with symbolist themes, using the image of Medusa in one of her first works. This self-portrait (fig. 3) is another example of Cahun's use of performativity. By dressing as a yogi (or Buddha), using her body to portray this kind of person and presenting herself in a setting that reminds of an oriental space, she is acting out the persona she wants to portray in this photograph. She does not cover herself, allowing the gaze to focus on her body, which is accentuated by the shiny garment. Her face, however, is not overly feminine in this portrait. Although her (probably bald) head is covered up, perhaps suggesting the idea of hair underneath, her eyes and mouth wear no make-up. Furthermore, Cahun's body and face seem to express something different here: while the position of her body makes herself the subject of the gaze, her eyes look back at the viewer, reminding us that she is aware of her body and aware of the gaze. She is subject and object at the same time, enhancing these roles through her performativity. In this work, Cahun portrays her feminine self, simultaneously warning that she is not a passive subject. In this ambiguous role-play, gender performativity has a significant function. The element of masquerade comes into play in a rather obvious manner: Cahun uses her clothing (shiny silk dress, pearl necklaces, woolen hat and the Bindhi resembling dot) to reinforce and convince her chosen identity, in this case a Buddha. By wearing these garments and creating a fitting entourage, she creates a type of masquerade that supports her performativity which consists of her posture and facial expression.

For the interpretation of this work, the concept of embodiment is relevant in relation to Braidotti's feminist materialism. This self-portrait makes clear how the ways Cahun positions and expresses herself have a direct effect on the power relation she manifests between her and the viewer. This manifestation occurs through the way she both opens herself up by the way she sits, but also confronts the viewer with her own gaze. The notion of sexual difference comes into play here as well. By using body language that expresses a female identity, Cahun assumes a male gaze: she seemingly conforms to surrealist practices where women are always object of the gaze (Ades, 2001). This clear hierarchy is troubled, however, because she looks right back at the viewer. Her own gaze towards the spectator is making her an object instead of a subject, giving her both feminine and masculine qualities. This photograph thus questions the power relations existing in this dialogue and the effect of these in the contact between her and the viewer. In this picture, Cahun herself does not portray a very outspoken gender, but the

clothing she wears gives her a more feminine appearance. Moreover, the fabric of the silk garment touches her and therefore has an 'affect' (Christinidis, 2013): it empowers her feminine self, which subsequently influences the way she positions herself. The material used for the cloth in the background enhances this feminine quality because of its softness. Combined with the soft lighting and coloring, and the highlighted dress, materiality emphasizes Cahun's female identity. Her prominent bare legs (a feminine feature), which also appear to be smooth, that are touching the soft cloth beneath her, give this self-portrait a feminine sensuality. Through the materiality of the fabrics that create an iconography of the Buddha, Cahun creates an exoticization of this figure. The shiny material of the dress contributes to this, as well as the shiny "third eye" or Bindhi sign. This results in a representation of herself beyond gender. The Buddha can be both female and male, which aligns with the concept of gender ambiguity. It is, however, through adopting this identity that she conveys her message, rather than through the repetitive act of gender performativity. The materiality of the clothing thus suggests femininity, but also exoticizes her persona to create an alternative identity, demonstrating the notion of an unfixed self.

Gender analysis of *Photomontage, Plate 1, Aveux non avenues, 1919 -1929*

This photomontage is different from the other photographs I discuss, because it does not portray Claude Cahun herself. In this work, Cahun chooses the strategy of bodily fragmentation, depicting parts of her own and her partner's face and body in often unrecognizable ways. Or, as Dawn Ades puts it, Cahun appears to be "disguised" (Ades, 2001, 194). The lips could be Cahun's own, and other body parts displayed here might be hers too. It could be argued that she uses this motif in order to support her different methods of shaping her own identity. These different methods can be seen in the book *Aveux non avenues* of which this work is the frontispiece. In this particular work, Cahun does not display one specific gender, since she does not use her body as a whole to represent either masculine or feminine features. Rather, Cahun and her partner Marcel Moore question masculine and feminine roles in the world through different symbols. In the left corner, multiple self-portraits of Cahun are represented. Here, she shows her androgynous self: none of the used self-portraits show masculine or feminine features and Cahun has a shaved head in all of them. I interpret this as Cahun's way of taking a position "in between" the existing notion of masculine and feminine, which are represented in the depicted symbols. Symbols such as the eye can be seen as masculine, since the eye has been used as a symbol for the masculine by influential Surrealist artists (Pilgrim, 2012, 45). If the idea of the eye as masculine is followed, the feminine hands and lips could represent the female self, possibly offering a critique on the male-female binary. This idea would fit in with the Surrealist practice of questioning gender roles (Stel, 2014). However, it could also be argued that the eye is Marcel Moore's. One of Cahun's early drawings depicts an eye and a mouth, with a similar composition as *Photomontage, Plate 1*, in which the eye belongs to Moore. In this work, the eye represents Moore's artistic value, whereas the mouth stands for Cahun's writing and performing (Smith, 2008). These symbols have also been interpreted as sexual symbols, thematizing the masculine and feminine as well (Pilgrim, 2012). By centering the eye symbol, this work highlights self-reflection (or, according to Roger Pilgrim, self-perception) and therefore subjectivity (Shaw, 2013). This notion could easily be related to gender performativity. In this collage, Cahun uses masquerade in a specific way. Rather than dressing up her body as a means to represent a certain persona and thereby creating a different identity,

this photomontage investigates the concept of masquerade in a more fragmented way. Different body parts are mixed with symbolic elements, creating the effect of a masked body. In this collage, the concept of masquerade is used to question subjectivity and to play with the gaze of the viewer.

In this work, the notion of embodiment emerges in a fragmented way. It denies the body as an organic unity through its fragmentation of different body parts. Through this collection of faces, hands and arms, Cahun rejects the idea of a self-portrait as a fixed or stable image of the self (Adamowicz, 2004). It also denaturalizes the body by giving body parts the function of other objects, such as a globe, mirror or crystal ball. Discussing the book *Aveux non Avenus*, of which the photomontage is the frontispiece, Gayle Zachmann argues: "the *Aveux* are, in fact, characterizable only by their resistance to any extant category of verbal representation. (...) The seemingly self-generating multiplicity of the generic montage is matched by the plethora of issues and themes juxtaposed in the textual collage of the self and "woman." Like the text, woman often appears as a mix or double-at least. Both woman and text emerge as hybrid creatures, analogous to the figures of the androgyne (...) (Zachmann, 2003, 396). This quote suggests that the collage should not be interpreted in a textual, but rather in a material way. Rather than interpreting what the symbols represent, an analysis should engage with the composition of the material objects and explore how these relate to each other. The notion of materiality can consider both the body and the materiality of the (worn) clothes and fabrics, but it can also refer to the materiality of the shown objects. An analysis of the materiality of the objects in this photomontage, results in an interpretation of the work in which a play with gender is not very prominent. None of the shown symbols are inherently masculine or feminine; an interpretation of the objects as such only comes forward through an analysis in terms of representation, based on cultural norms. When analyzing the composition of the assembled objects, it is striking how Cahun (and Moore) placed the notion of the world (in the globe) against the multiplicity of the self (in Cahun's self-portraits), with the word "God" (Deus) above it. The eye in the center enhances the notion of mirroring the self and therefore questioning the self. I would therefore suggest that an analysis in terms of materiality results in an interpretation of this work as a critique on existing norms, questioning concepts such as God and the universe, which is shown in the setting. Cahun places herself in this dialogue between self and world, God and universe through her self-portraits, showing her "difference".

This chapter demonstrated how, in her self-portraits, Cahun shapes her identity in a performative way: through a repetition of performance, she creates the persona she wants to portray by assuming its identity through role-play, masquerade and bodily fragmentation. An analysis with the concept of embodiment shows how the materiality of the worn garments affect the body and therefore Cahun's posture, facial expressions and possibly her depicted identity. I came to an understanding of Cahun's work beyond gender, where she deconstructs the notion of identity all together.

Conclusion

This thesis started with the research question: 'How can a feminist gender analysis be used to analyze the construction and representation of Claude Cahun's identity in her self-portraits *Autoportrait* (1927), *Que me veux-tu? Autoportrait double* (1928) and *Photomontage, Plate 1, Aveux non avendus* (1919 -1929)?' To answer this question, I first briefly explored the (artistic) life of Claude Cahun and the role gender has played in it. I also discussed in short the relevant developments of Surrealism in relation to this subject. Further, I discussed the concept of gender performativity and how this notion has been used in discourse around Claude Cahun, as well as relevant concepts in feminist materialism. Lastly, I used these theories along with iconographic analysis and film analysis in order to interpret the three chosen works by Cahun.

In this BA thesis, I have shown how Claude Cahun's self-portraits and photomontage examine inter-subjective spaces using two theoretical approaches. For each of the photographs, the notion of performativity results in a productive analysis. These interpretations are based on symbolism as well as iconography. The language based approach limits an understanding of the works, since a focus on representation hardly takes the materiality in the works into consideration. I used the theoretical framework of new materialism in order to complement the notion of performativity and possibly come to a different interpretation of Cahun's oeuvre. I focused on the concept of embodiment and emphasized the materiality of the body (sometimes in relation to clothing), as well as the used materials.

The analysis of Cahun's oeuvre through new materialism, demonstrates that gender ambiguity is one important aspect of her work, but there is more to her photographs. It results in an understanding of the photographs as deconstructing (gender) norms through the materiality of the body and objects as well as use of composition. The iconography of the Buddha, for instance, is enhanced by the materiality of the clothing and fabrics, as well as the *mise-en-scène* of the worn costume. It is therefore not just a play with gender ambiguity, but a deconstruction of identity through adopting the characteristics of the Buddha. Still, the materiality of the fabrics and clothing can also be interpreted as an enhancement of Cahun's feminine identity. New materialism thus complements an understanding of the works in terms of gender, but also demonstrates how Claude Cahun uses embodiment beyond gender, namely as a means to convey different identities and question existing cultural norms.

To answer my research question: Feminist gender analysis, combined with iconographic analysis and film theory, can be used to analyze the construction and representation of Claude Cahun's identity in her self-portraits by first pointing out how gender is performed rather than a biological given. The concept of gender performativity by Judith Butler helps to understand how this works as it demonstrates how Claude Cahun plays with gender ambiguity, shaping her assumed (gender) identity. Rosi Braidotti's approach to New Materialism is fruitful to analyze the representation of the multilayered identity of Claude Cahun to come to an understanding of her photographic works beyond gender. It complements an analysis through performativity successfully: emphasizing the materiality of the body and used materials resulted in an interpretation of the self-portraits as alien-like or exotized, bringing the idea of the "non-human" to the attention. The use of "fragmented embodiment" in the photomontage questions Cahun's identity and the possibility to represent identity through self-portraits.

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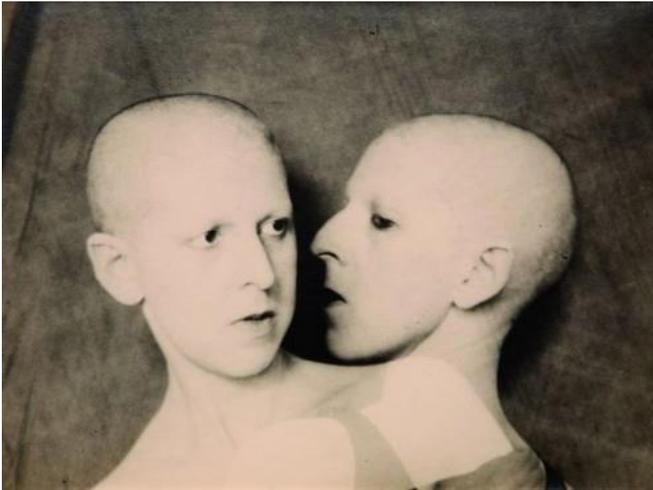
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List of illustrations



1. *Que me veux-tu? Autoportrait double*, 1928

Claude Cahun

23 x 18 cm

Gelatin silver print

Le Centre Pompidou



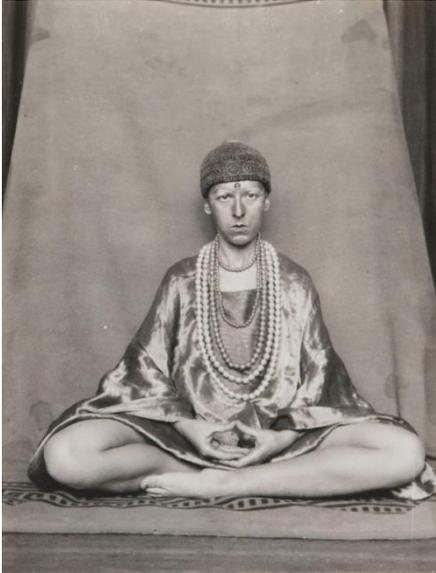
2. *Claude Cahun, self-portrait*, 1920

Claude Cahun

23.6 x 14.9 cm

Gelatin silver print

Jersey Heritage Collection, United Kingdom



3. Autoportrait, 1927

Claude Cahun

Gelatin silver print

19,5 x 14 cm

Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes



4. Photomontage, Plate 1, Aveux non avendus, 1919 -1929

Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore

Photomontage, gelatin silver print

39 x 26 cm

Private collection