

A

Forgotten Gender Bender

*Surrealist photographer Claude Cahun's dress-up
self-portraits were ahead of their time*

By Leslie Camhi



COURTESY, JERSEY MUSEUMS SERVICE

She photographed herself in various guises: as a dandy in a dark suit and white ascot, her head shaved and her hand poised on her hip; or as a swami, swathed in silk robes and skeins of pearls, whose half-closed eyes seem to contemplate an inner mystery. There she is, a bow-legged sailor, her hands in her pockets and her white cap worn at a rakish tilt; that's her as a little girl, wearing white bobby socks and a ribbon in her long blonde curls. There's her disembodied head, peering out from beneath a crystal globe like some strange scientific specimen.

This might be the work
of a contemporary
artist, hanging in
a Chelsea

gallery. But the small black-and-white prints bear the patina of age, and the props—masks, makeup, barbells, jewels, and turbans—are quaintly theatrical. In fact, Claude Cahun has been dead for 45 years, and for decades her work languished in near total obscurity. Now her photographs from the 1920s and '30s are being rediscovered at a time when artists, from Cindy Sherman to Lyle Ashton Harris, Karen Kilimnik, Mariko Mori, Yasumasa Morimura, Shirin Neshat, and Nikki S. Lee, along with countless others, are using photography to create imaginary autobiographies and multiple identities.

American viewers will get their most extensive look to date at this elusive personality in "Inverted Odysseys: Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, Cindy Sherman," a show cocurated by art historian Shelley Rice and Lynn Gumpert, director of New York University's Grey Art Gallery, where it opens on the 16th of this month and runs through January 29. Over 45 vintage photographs by Cahun will be included, along with books, a manuscript, and photomontages. Three of her photographs are also in "Who's That Girl," a group show at New York's Sandra Gering Gallery through the 20th of this month.

She was born Lucy Schwob, in Nantes, in 1894, into a family of cultivated, bourgeois Jewish intellectuals. Her father published an important newspaper; her uncle Leon was an eminent Orientalist; her uncle Marcel was a famous Symbolist writer. Early on, she decided a change of name was in order. Cahun was her mother's maiden name; Claude provided a frisson of gender ambiguity. Her parents divorced, and her father remarried. His new wife was a widow with a teenage daughter. That stepsister, Suzanne Malherbe, became Cahun's lover, collaborator, and companion for life.

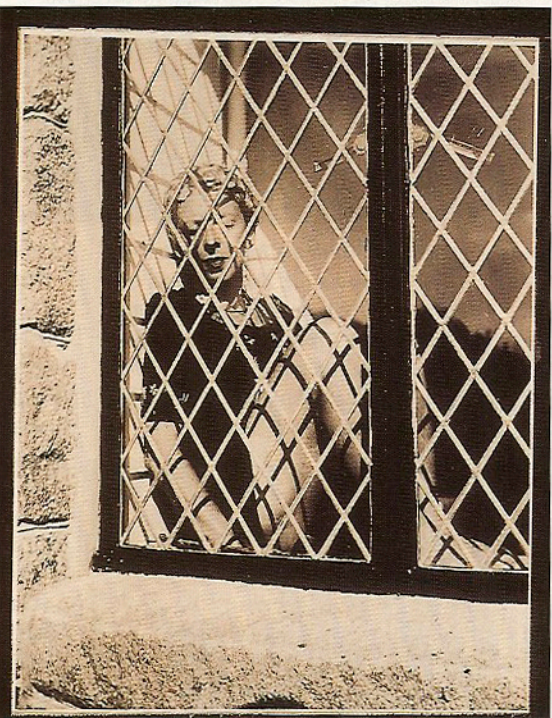
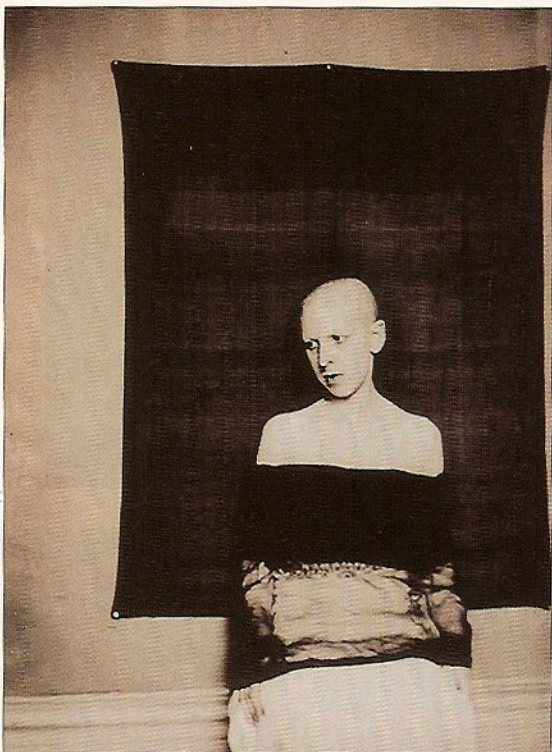
In the 1920s, she moved with Malherbe to Paris. An icon of lesbian chic, she published articles on Oscar Wilde, translated sexologist Havelock Ellis, acted in both male and female roles in avant-garde theater, and dabbled in radical politics. Surrealism's experimental approach to art, the unconscious, and daily

life appealed to her; she signed Surrealist tracts and contributed dream-inspired assemblages to their exhibitions.

She also wrote prolifically, issuing esthetic treatises and a Surrealist autobiography. In *Heroines*, a manuscript published for the first time in the "Inverted Odysseys" catalogue, she parodies famous female figures from myth, religion, and history. Cahun's Penelope is a faithless adulteress; her Cinderella is married to a foot fetishist; her Virgin Mary is a beleaguered Jewish mother.

But photography was the medium that could best accommodate her taste for quick changes of identity. Before the camera, her shaved head and lithe body became a screen for infinite fictional projections. Cahun's intimate prints, the size of snapshots, seem not to have been made for public consumption; few were published in her lifetime. Some record her theatrical performances, but mostly her extraterrestrials, Little Red Riding Hoods, and harem ladies were roles in a private theater of the imagination.

In the late 1930s, Cahun's self-portraits behind the bars of window gratings and her photographs of a screaming doll fashioned from newspaper headlines about "Hitlerian Fascism" bore witness to her rising political anxieties. When war broke out, she and Malherbe moved to their family's summer home on the Isle of Jersey. There they mounted a campaign of Surrealist-inspired resistance, spreading counterpropaganda that included photomontages, radio broadcasts, and graffiti to demoralize the German occupiers. Arrested by the Gestapo, they were sentenced to death. Their house was ransacked and much of Cahun's work destroyed, but the war's approaching end saved them from execution. Cahun lived for another nine years, though she never fully recovered from the shock, and her remaining oeuvre (about 300 prints) disappeared from view for decades.



OPPOSITE Claude Cahun strikes a pose in her *Self-Portrait*, 1927. TOP *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1921. ABOVE *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1938.

COURTESY JERSEY MUSEUMS SERVICE (2)

Ten years ago, gallerist Virginia Zabriskie visited the Isle of Jersey with Cahun's biographer, François Leperlier, and purchased about 100 prints from a man who had acquired them after Malherbe's death in 1972. In 1992 Zabriskie organized solo shows of the artist's work at her New York and Paris galleries. The moment was right, she sensed, for Cahun's reemergence.

At the time, fashionable academics were beginning to focus on gender as something that could be tried out through performance—a learned behavior, rather than an innate identity. Drag had become a common reference point in post-modern theory. Meanwhile, a new generation of artists, in the wake of feminist precursors like Eleanor Antin, Adrian Piper, Hannah Wilke, and Martha Wilson, were beginning to use images of themselves to explore the social construction of sexuality.

Today, Cindy Sherman is the artist most frequently associated with Cahun, though their works clearly differ in scale and tone, and Sherman's early work is filtered through the popular culture of cinema, which in Cahun's day was in its infancy. The women in Sherman's "Untitled Film Stills" appear intimately familiar; they're roles we've seen on-screen and inhabited in our imaginations. In tone, Cahun's work seems closer to that of artist Francesca Woodman, who died in 1981, at the age of 22. Woodman's photographs of her own body melding with the peeling walls of an abandoned building or slipping beneath the waters of a bathtub suggest, like Cahun's work, an ongoing private testing of the limits of identity—at once discreet and revealing.

Since the 1980s, Japanese artist Yasumasa Morimura has created large-scale Cibachromes in which he appears as travesties of figures in famous paintings (such as Manet's *Olympia*) and actresses in signature roles (Audrey Hepburn as Holly Golightly, for example). American artist Karen Kilimnik has filtered her photographic self-portraits through celebrity culture, scrawling with grease pencil across glossy photographs of herself and titling the results *Me as Isabelle Adjani*, for instance. While Cahun's work



COURTESY: 303 GALLERY



COURTESY: LESLIE TONKONOW

TOP Karen Kilimnik, *Me as Isabelle Adjani in Ishtar, Part II*, 1994.

ABOVE Nikki S. Lee appears at right in *The Seniors Project (10)*, 1998–99.

BELOW Yasumasa Morimura, *Self-Portrait (Actress), after Audrey Hepburn 2*, 1996.



COURTESY: LUHRING AUGUSTINE

celebrated her own peculiarly supple personality, these artists seem to suggest that our autobiographies are now inseparable from the lives of those we watch in movies and on television and read about in magazines (or in art history books).

More recently, Japanese artist Mariko Mori has starred in her own elaborately staged photographic and video tableaux, which draw upon both Japanese popular culture and ancient Asian religion and philosophy. Far more than Cahun's art, her work holds private life at a distance; it's

barely autobiographical. The artist's image appears as one more cipher in a field of pop cultural signs.

Have our private lives become such public material that dressing up and pretending to be someone else can seem more revealing than the most brazen confession? In her work, artist Nikki S. Lee cheerfully presides over the self's deconstruction. Ms. Lee emigrated from Korea as a student five years ago and had her first

solo show this fall at Leslie Tonkonow Artworks & Projects in New York. Since 1997 she's been infiltrating social groups in New York City—Hispanics, punks, yuppies, elderly people, young Japanese—mimicking their codes of dress and behavior, making friends, and being photographed among them. In these snapshot-like pictures, formal considerations remain secondary to Lee's playful sociology and to the sense of a life conducted as an ongoing movie.

Cahun did most of her dressing up in private. Her roles as an actress in avant-garde theater, which formed the basis for many of her images, were separate from the multiple identities—as artist, author, and activist—that she assumed in real life. Lee's work goes a long way toward collapsing these distinctions. For her, our social identity is forged from a collection of bodily tics, facial expressions, and sartorial habits. Cahun's work unfolds the strange flower of a rare personality; Lee offers a model for everybody's autobiography.

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