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Author(s): Anne O'Hehir and Andrea Wise

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Sole Survivor: Re-evaluating and Conserving Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore's Only Known Remaining Photomontage Used for Cahun's 1930 Publication *Aveux non Avenus* (Disavowed Confessions)

Anne O'Hehir and Andrea Wise

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Abstract

Claude Cahun (1894-1954) and Marcel Moore (1892-1972) were the pseudonyms used by Lucy Schwob and her life-long partner and step-sister Suzanne Malherbe. These women's lives were extraordinary and ground-breaking. Cahun, one of the few women whose work was taken seriously by the Surrealists, created theatrical and playful images which have attained cult status in recent years. Seen primarily as self-portraits, the collaborative nature of these works and Moore's contribution to them requires more in-depth examination. A large photomontage *Aveux non Avenus* in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) is the artwork used as the basis for the reproduction for the frontispiece in the book of the same title. Published in a limited edition of 500 in 1930, the book contains Cahun's philosophical texts and literary aphorisms, interspersed with photogravures signed by Moore. The photomontage is complex in structure, being composed of a number of collaged photographic and printed pieces laid onto Bristol board; on top of this, Moore has then painted and drawn. The work is the only original artwork known to still exist, and as such it is one of the women's most significant pieces, with complex symbolic readings; Cahun represented as the writer, by the lips and Moore, the artist, by the eye. The women lived on the island of Jersey from 1937 and when Moore died in the early seventies her possessions and those of Cahun, piled into tea chests, were sold as one lot at auction. The provenance of the photomontage is not known but its fragile and damaged condition would suggest that it is likely to have been included in this batch. The work is frequently requested for loan and exhibition and it was most recently seen in a large retrospective which travelled to Paris, Barcelona and Chicago. It underwent conservation treatment in preparation for this loan, in order to stabilise the various components; and while it was necessary to improve its appearance, treatment decisions were agreed jointly by conservation and curatorial staff, in order to respect the unique nature and history of the work.

Introduction

Claude Cahun was a poet, essayist, literary critic, translator, actor, and political activist, as well as a photographer and sculptor associated with the Surrealist movement in France in the 1930s. 'Claude Cahun' was the pseudonym adopted by Lucy Schwob. Her autobiographical essay *Aveux non Avenus* (*Disavowed Confessions*) was published in Paris in 1930. Cahun and her lifelong partner Suzanne Malherbe, who took the name 'Marcel Moore', collaborated on the making of the ten photogravures that accompany the text. The work held in the NGA collection is the original artwork from which the photogravure plate used to print the frontispiece was made. It is the only known original artwork for the book to have survived the women's

tumultuous lives, and as such it is of huge significance in the oeuvre. That she had been a prominent member of the Parisian avant-garde was, at the time of her death in 1954, largely forgotten. Cahun was rediscovered in the mid-1980s at a time when many artists were exploring issues of gender and identity. She has achieved a cult following for her photographic self-portraits, which have attracted the critical attention of curators and feminist theorists. In them she appears in enigmatic guises, playing out different androgynous personas, often using masks and mirrors.



Fig. 1. Before treatment: Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore *Photomontage for frontispiece for Aveux non Avenus (Disavowed Confessions)*, 1929-30, gelatin silver photographs, offset lithography, gouache, pencil, intaglio. National Gallery of Australia, purchased 1993.

Claude Cahun

Claude Cahun was born Lucy Renée Mathilde Schwob on 25 October 1894 in Nantes, France. She grew up in an intellectual Jewish bourgeois family, part of the French literary aristocracy. Her father was the publisher Maurice Schwob, owner of the newspaper *Le Phare de la Loire*, her uncle was the Symbolist writer Marcel Schwob, founder of the prestigious literary review *Mercure de France*, and her great-uncle was the Orientalist David Léon Cahun. Her mother suffered from mental illness, spending time in an asylum, and Lucy was primarily raised by her blind grandmother Mathilde Cahun. Lucy attended school in Nantes and was, for a time, at boarding school in Surrey, England.



Fig. 2. Claude Cahun, *Self-portrait*, c.1929, gelatin silver photograph, Jersey Heritage Collection.

After trying out a number of pseudonyms, Lucy settled on adopting the gender ambiguous ‘Claude Cahun’ around 1917. It was also at this time she began living with Moore, whom she had met when she was fifteen. They also became stepsisters in 1917, when Cahun’s father and Moore’s mother married. The following year, she began studies in philology and philosophy at

the Sorbonne in Paris. Cahun and Moore moved to Paris in 1920, settling in an apartment in Montparnasse, which in time became a meeting place for artists, actors and writers. They were friends with, amongst others, editors Adrienne Monnier, proprietor of the bookstore La Maison des Amis des Livres, a favourite hangout for the literary community; and with Sylvia Beach, a prominent lesbian expatriate and owner of the famous British-language bookstore Shakespeare and Company. Cahun was also an active member of a number of experimental theatre companies in the 1920s.

Cahun and Moore were fortunate in being independently wealthy. Cahun regarded creativity as not only a central pursuit but also a largely private one. She began making photographic self-portraits as early as 1912, when she was eighteen years old. Although she continued taking images of herself throughout her life, she felt little compulsion to exhibit.

Aveux non Avenus

Cahun worked on the text for *Aveux non Avenus* during the early part of the 1920s, and it was mostly complete by 1926. The meaning of the title is difficult to convey in English but implies confessions that are then cancelled or denied. It is a radical reconsideration of the biographical genre. It consists of autobiographical text fragments, poems, letters, the recounting of dream sequences and aphorisms in a number of different styles. It was influenced primarily by the Symbolists, to whom Cahun was linked through her uncle Marcel Schwob. There is a poetic and elegant preface by Pierre Mac Orlan, a French writer and admirer of Schwob. 'This almost cruel poem', he writes, 'is infused with a very peculiar light, emanating from emotional ingredients of perfectly human origin'.

Cahun's, however, is a deliberately difficult, fractured text full of statements that are then repudiated, full of biblical, mythic and literary allusions, full also of word play and punning. Cahun demonstrates the impossibility of locating a fixed, stable definition of self; and states in the text: 'the only way we know how to recognise ourselves, love ourselves, is through dreamlike, unrefined and fleeting reflection'. The book is divided into nine chapters preceded by an introduction entitled 'L'Aventure Invisible' (The Invisible Adventure). Each chapter explores notions around nine 'deadly elements', including fear, narcissism, sex, vanity, lying, greed and self-pride.

The Invisible Adventure

A photomontage appears before the introduction to *Aveux non Avenus* and between each chapter. Cahun's text presents female identity as constructed, multifaceted, and ultimately as having a nihilistic absence at the core. These themes are explored in a variety of ways in the photomontages. All present fragmentations of the body that float in a black visual space - mostly faces, but often hands, arms, legs and eyes. These were mainly collaged photographs made by, and of, Cahun but also drawings by Moore and appropriated imagery. One of the collages includes text that succinctly expresses Cahun's thoughts on identity and more specifically of being a woman: 'Beneath this mask, another mask. I will never be finished lifting off all these faces'.

The frontispiece is perhaps the most esoteric and difficult image to interpret. The image includes obscure symbols, which only become clear when decoded using one of Cahun's drawings for a bookplate featuring similar motifs: the eye represents Moore, the artist, and the mouth, Cahun, the writer and actor. Mirrors and mirroring occur throughout Cahun's writings and imagery, exploring notions of not only narcissism but also flux and change, as the image in the mirror is never fixed, an unattainable illusion. The word 'Dieu' (God) that appears above a dove-like, double-headed Holy Spirit motif in the top of the image is reversed as in a mirror. She wrote elsewhere, 'each time one invents a phrase, it would be prudent to invert it to see if it holds up'. Cahun confronts the idea of God in the text. The epigraph of the final chapter of *Aveux non Avenus* is 'We get the god we deserve, unfortunately for us'. That the highly unconventional Cahun found living in a predominately Catholic, patriarchal society difficult - she was unable to vote, for example, until the end of her life, is hardly surprising.

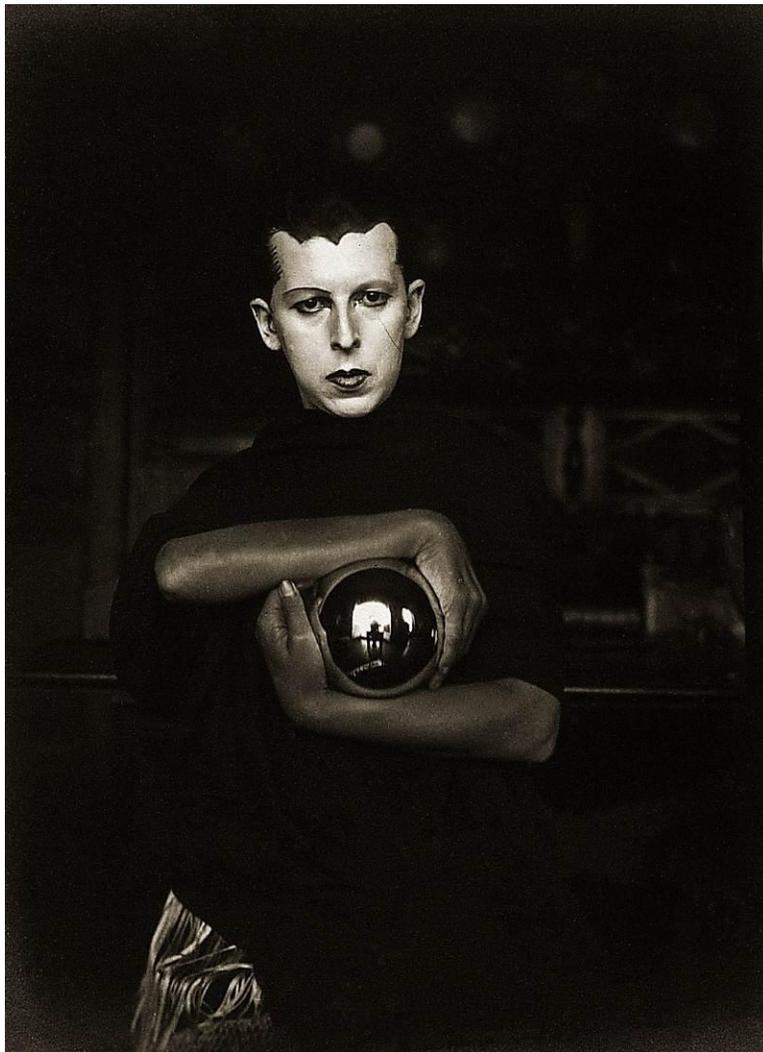


Fig. 3. Claude Cahun, Self-portrait, c.1927, gelatin silver photograph, Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase, Albert and Peggy de Salle Charitable Collection and the DeRoy Photographic Acquisitions Fund/The Bridgeman Art Library.

The nature of the collaboration between the two women is difficult to pin down exactly. On the title page, Moore is credited with making the heliogravures, or photogravures, after Cahun's designs ('projets'). This is supported by Cahun's signature on the drawings used as the basis of the photomontages. Moore's signature, however, is prominent on the photomontage for the frontispiece - it is the only image in the book she signed. Cahun refers to Moore as 'l'autre moi' (the other me). Certainly the notion of collaboration was one that Cahun actively pursued. It was a position that looked upon the cult of individuality and concepts of artistic sovereignty with doubt.

The Surrealists

Cahun became politically aligned to the left in the 1930s. Alarmed by the growth of Fascism, she briefly joined L'Association des Écrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires (AEAR), a group of revolutionary artists, and through them met leading Surrealist artists and writers such as André Breton. In 1934 she became a member of Contre-Attaque, an anti-fascist political coalition founded by Georges Batailles and André Breton. In the 1930s she contributed sculptural constructions to a number of Surrealist exhibitions, including the London International Surrealist Exhibition at New Burlington Galleries in London and Exposition Surréaliste'Objets at Charles Ratton Gallery in Paris, both in 1936.

Women in the Surrealist circle most often occupied the role of model, muse and lover of the male artists. In Surrealist imagery, women appear as eroticised objects. Cahun was determined to elude cliché - her life was devoted to exploring different ways she could define herself and questioned if that were even possible. Cahun was fairly unique in being taken seriously by the Surrealists, in part, it must be said, because she came from such an illustrious literary family. She was even able to win the grudging admiration of Breton, who wrote to Cahun: 'You have extensive magical powers at your disposal. And it is essential that you write and *publish* - you must keep telling yourself this. You are well aware that I consider you one of the most curious spirits (among four or five) of our times'.

End of life

Sadly, Cahun was only to publish a few articles in the many journals of the Surrealist group and one more book after *Aveux non Avenus - Le Coeur de Pic (The Heart of Spades)*, a book of Cahun's photography and Lise Deharme's poems with a preface by Surrealist poet Paul Eluard, published in 1937. *Aveux non Avenus* remains her most important work. It was released in a limited edition of 500 copies. In keeping with French publishing tradition, the edition consisted of one example on *Japon nacré* with original plates, nine examples on *Japon impérial* with original sketches for the plates, forty examples on Madagascar, 425 examples on *Vélin pur fil Lafuma* and twenty-five copies designated for the press. (The NGA owns a copy of the book, numbered 149, which was gifted by GalerieZabriskie, Paris, in 1994.) When released, although admired by her friends, it was met mostly with hostility and indifference and was soon forgotten.

Fleeing the looming Nazi threat, Cahun and Moore settled on the Isle of Jersey, part of the Channel Islands off the coast of Normandy, in 1938. The women had spent their holidays there since their teenage years. In a cruel twist of fate, Jersey was occupied by German troops in July

1940 (the Channel Islands were the only English part of the British Isles to be invaded during the war and were the last to be liberated). Instead of fleeing to the English mainland, like half the Jersey population, the women embarked on an extraordinary clandestine guerrilla propaganda campaign that led to their arrest and imprisonment by the Gestapo in 1944. They were sentenced to death and only saved by the end of the war. Cahun, whose health had always been fragile (she most likely suffered from anorexia nervosa at times in her life), never fully recovered from the ordeal and died at the age of sixty on 8 December 1954.

History of the work

After Moore's suicide in 1972 her possessions, and those of Cahun, piled into tea chests and cartons, were sold cheaply at auction. Ten lots, which ended up the basis of the Jersey Heritage Trust, sold for just £21. The provenance of the photomontage is not known but its fragile and damaged condition suggests it may have been included in the batch sent to auction. Why this photomontage survived when the other nine apparently have not, is not known. For the book's launch, some of the originals, but not the frontispiece, were included in a window display in Paris. Perhaps that is when they went missing? Sadly, most of Cahun's works were ransacked and destroyed by German troops during the war.



Fig. 4. Photographer unknown, *Window display of the bookshop José Corti, 6 rue de Clichy, Paris, June 1930, launch of Aveux non Avenus*, gelatin silver photograph, Jersey Heritage Collection.

Description

The support is lightweight Bristol board with an oval blind stamp including the words ‘Bristol Extra Fin’ and ‘AU’ in the top left corner of the sheet. The upper third of the sheet is painted in black gouache with highlights in white and grey gouache. The lower third is almost exclusively photographic collage, with the exception of the globe, which is intaglio with hand-applied watercolour. The central area has two sections of collaged intaglio print on paper, on the left and right sides. The photographic collage elements are all gelatin silver on fibre-based paper, sometimes with additional painting in gouache. The signature in the lower right is in white gouache.

Condition

The work has suffered extensive mechanical damage: the top left corner has been crushed, and across the entire surface are scratches and indentations. There are some small losses and edge tears to the Bristol board. Bristol board is regarded as being good quality, usually hot pressed and fairly white in tone. This board, however, is slightly textured and the cream tone appears to have discoloured and darkened to a light brown. Associated with the mechanical damage, there is loss of media, both paint and photographic emulsion. Other surface loss has resulted from insect attack and above the central eye emulsion loss had occurred where a collaged element has detached. The photogravure in *Aveux non Avenus* shows that the lost element was an upper eyelid.

There is general surface dirt, much of which is ingrained. The photographic collage varies in tone, some areas slightly warmer and others cooler, which would indicate that different pieces have been used from a range of photographs. Consequently, the degree to which these pieces have oxidised also differs, with the darker areas, in particular, exhibiting strong and visually disruptive silvering out. An interesting feature of the photomontage is its three-dimensionality; this results from the nature of the composition and the

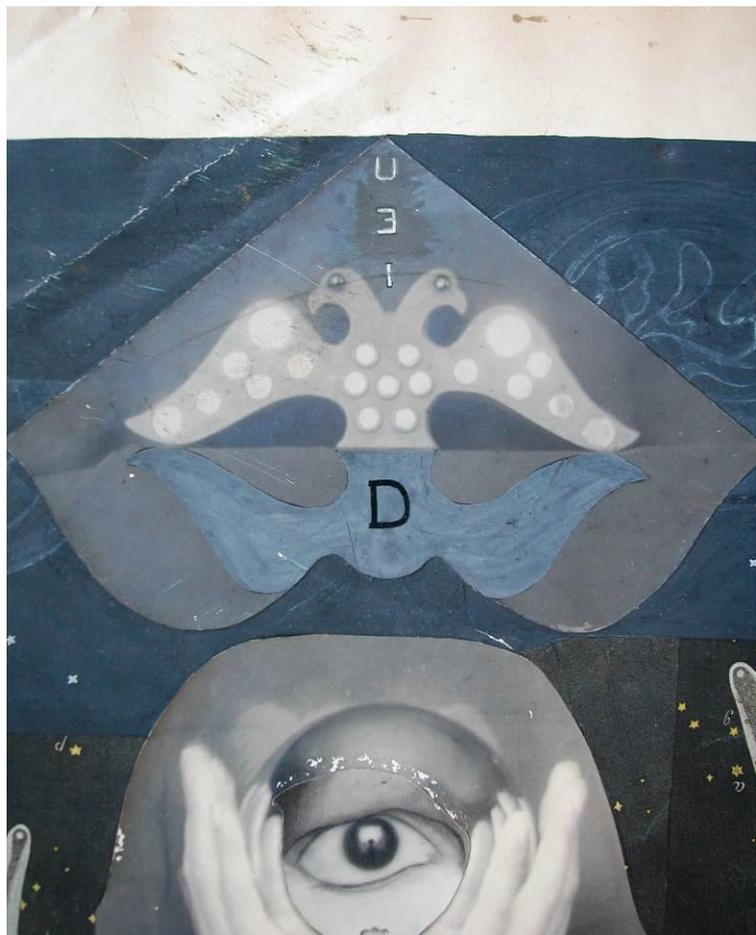


Fig. 5. Before treatment, detail, area of collage loss and lifting, silvering out, abrasion, surface dirt and creasing.

build-up of layers and it is further enhanced by the delaminating edges of the collaged elements. This effect, although probably not intentional on the part of the artists, was carefully considered during treatment.



Fig. 6. After treatment: Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore *Photomontage for frontispiece for Aveux non Avenus (Disavowed Confessions)*, 1929-30, gelatin silver photographs, offset lithography, gouache, pencil, intaglio. National Gallery of Australia, purchased 1993.

Treatment

After photography and documentation the work was carefully surface cleaned using a soft brush, taking care around areas of flaking or loose media. A Mars Staedtler plastic eraser was used to reduce the ingrained surface dirt on the edges of the Bristol board. The same eraser, grated, was used to reduce the surface dirt on the photographic collage. Flaking paint in the upper left corner was consolidated using a 1% solution of ethylhydroxyethyl cellulose (EHEC) in water. The loss to the edges of the photographic collage was consolidated with 1% gelatin in warm water. The most severe areas of silvering out were reduced by surface cleaning with 50:50 ethanol and water. A 0.5% solution of methyl cellulose in water was applied to the surface of the same areas, resulting in much greater image detail being apparent. Local pressing using water-moistened blotter was completed in the top left corner. The edges of the collage that were dramatically lifting were re-adhered using dilute wheat starch paste. These edges, however, were largely only partially adhered and other less noticeable areas were left untouched to ensure that the three-dimensionality and immediacy of the image was not affected. Orthello pastel pencils were used for minimal retouching in the paper collage and painted background. Artist's quality Winsor and Newton watercolours were used to retouch losses in the photographic collage; these areas were first isolated using 1% gelatin in warm water. Microcrystalline wax in white spirit was tested as another method by which surface gloss could be restored; however, the saturation proved too difficult to control and the wax was removed from the test area.

Conclusion

The photomontage by Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore remains in high demand for exhibition and loan. It was most recently seen in a large retrospective organised by the Jeu de Paume, Paris, subsequently travelling to Barcelona and Chicago. The work underwent conservation treatment to stabilise the various components in preparation for this loan. While it was necessary to improve its appearance, decisions were made jointly by conservation and curatorial staff to respect the unique nature and history of the work. Given the extraordinary lives of Cahun and Moore, it is remarkable that any of their works should have survived. It is to be hoped that more are eventually discovered and that there is further insight into the ambiguous creative collaboration between the two women.

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Anne O’Hehir

Curator of Photography
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Australia

Andrea Wise

Senior Conservator
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Australia

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