

# MAGIC MIRROR

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NUNNERY GALLERY  
181 BOW ROAD  
LONDON E3 2SJ

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CLAUDE CAHUN | SARAH PUCILL

## INTRODUCTION

### Across Two Worlds By Liena Vayzman

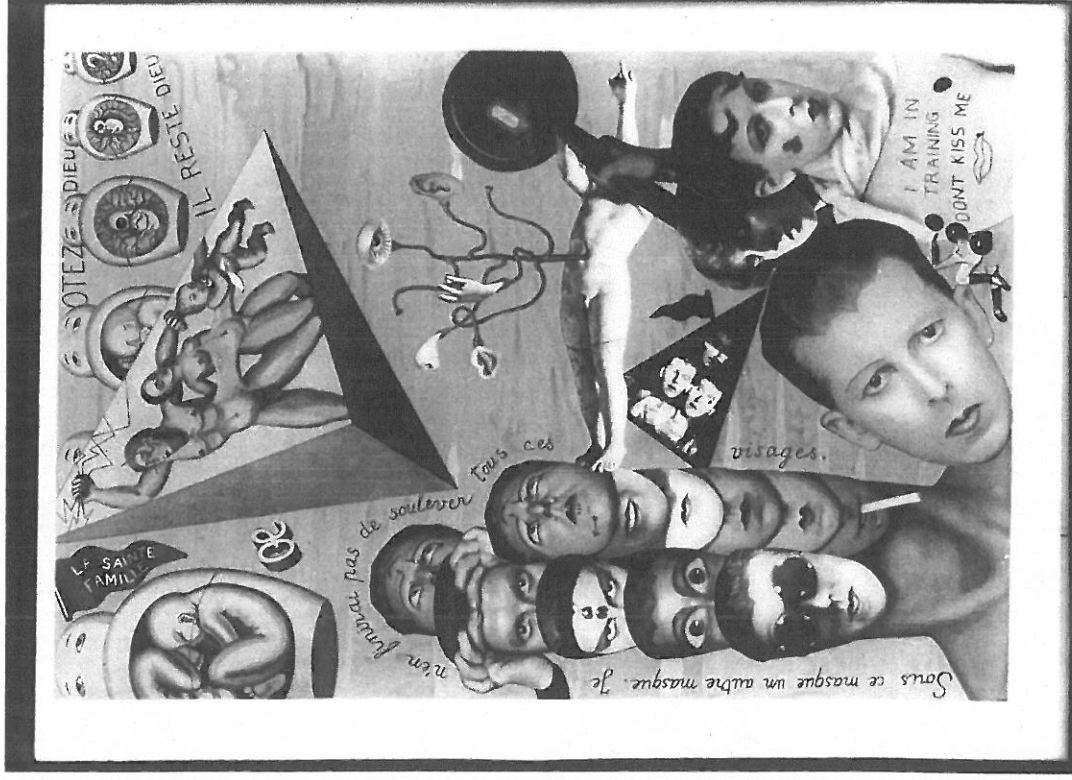
Androgyne, rag doll, Buddha, Devil, Medusa, magician of the self – Surrealist artist, writer and activist Claude Cahun played all these roles in her enigmatic photographs. What might a moving image film by Claude Cahun look like? This innovative exhibition brings together London filmmaker Sarah Pucill's 2013 film *Magic Mirror* with the original photographs from the 1920s, '30s, and '40s by Claude Cahun that inspired the film. *Magic Mirror* fulfills Cahun's photographs' implied filmic potential, almost a century later.

The exhibit juxtaposes Claude Cahun's photographs and Sarah Pucill's film as parallel cultural missives on the primacy of self-invention and the power of imagination, with Cahun playing muse to Sarah Pucill's 21st century cinematic interpretation. On the walls of the Nunnery Gallery, a former convent in London with distinctive archways, Cahun's self-portrait photographs – some depicting her in the stone archways at her house in Jersey, Channel Islands – echo architecturally and cinematically across time and space.



The shift from photography to film enacts an alchemical transformation from the two dimensions of the flat photographic surface to the four dimensions of film, adding the aspects of moving image and time. Cahun's photographs enact a performative *mise en scène*. The photographs that art historians earlier deemed self portraits sometimes were made in collaboration with Cahun's life partner Marcel Moore, who likely was behind the camera at times, together enacting what I've called an 'erotics of collaboration' whereby reciprocity during the photographic process intertwines with queer sexuality. A number of Cahun's photographs portray her as a performer in *avant-garde* theatre. Bringing the photographs and photomontages to life in an unprecedented manner with 16mm black and white celluloid film technology, innovative production, and meticulous sound design, Pucill marshals theatrical *mise en scène*, staging, voice over of translations of Cahun's text *Aveux non avenue* (Disavowals, 1930)<sup>2</sup>, and stop motion animation of portions of Cahun and Moore's photomontages. Pucill casts London performance artist Andro Andrex in the guise of Cahun, not for a physical similarity, but for the parallel sensibility of gender non-conformity, performativity, and pioneering queer visual identity. Two other main actors, Rowina Lennon and Kate Hart, also appear as Cahun, complicating any notion of a singular stable subject position.

Pucill uses selections of Cahun's writings in English translation as the voice over, with the chapter titles of *Aveux non avenue* forming the structure for the sections of the film. Each film section begins with an animation of one of the corresponding photomontages made by Marcel Moore "after designs by the author" reproduced as heliogravures in the 1930 edition. Thus, *Magic Mirror* engages with both the text and the images of *Aveux non avenue*, staging imagined filmed scenarios in response to the text and re-making, re-photographing, and animating the photomontages and Cahun's other unpublished photographs. The resulting film forms a hybrid, fluid interchange between artists and worlds.



Claude Cahun & Marcel Moore, Photomontage Plate IX: I.O.U. Aveux non avenue, 1930. Courtesy of the Jersey Heritage Collections

The placement of stills from Pucill's film among the installation of Cahun's photographs at the Nunnery Gallery further elides boundaries between artists and historical timeframes. As Helena Reckitt and Pucill herself have noted, the appropriation and interpretation of Cahun's work in *Magic Mirror* raises questions about "the practice of re-staging the work of an artist who has no say in the matter."<sup>3</sup> However, the artistic strategies of appropriating, sampling, remixing, and quoting historical precedents are characteristic of our postmodern era, evident across contemporary art, photography (e.g. Cindy Sherman, Yasumasu Morimura), music, fashion, film, and popular culture. Indeed, Claude Cahun herself drew upon an encyclopaedic knowledge of mythology, literature, classics, philosophy, and pop culture stereotypes in writing the multi-voiced *Aveux non avenues* (*Disavowals*) and in staging herself for the camera. The remarking and quotation of images – akin to the concept of "intertextuality" in literary criticism – can function as a particularly queer strategy, both of trenchant cultural critique (as for Cahun) and homage (in Pucill's case). Cahun's face in its many disguises proliferates, for example, in Plate IX: I.O.U. of *Aveux non avenues*. Around the conglomeration, Cahun writes: "Under this mask another mask. I shall never finish taking off all these faces." Overlapping, fusion, fragmentation and replication of the body and face are key pictorial strategies in nearly all the photomontages, announcing a self that is always multiple and in transformation. Likewise, *Magic Mirror* enacts a 21st century transformation in conversation with the work of Claude Cahun, entangling the two artists and eras together like the hair of the two women weaving together in the film: "The moment when our two heads, ah, our hair becoming inextricably entwined, bent over a photograph. A portrait of one or the other. Our two narcissisms drowning in it. It was the impossible realised in a magic mirror."<sup>4</sup>

Significant differences exist between London in 2015 and the years of Cahun's life, which spanned the avant garde between WWI and WWII in Paris, a time of progressive cultural vibrancy tinged with misogyny,

homophobia, and increasing conservatism: French women did not have the right to vote; and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people at times gained artistic terrain (particularly among the economically privileged, such as Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas), but not yet political gains such as marriage rights and non-discrimination protections as we see today in the West. Cahun, as a queer Jewish artist, lived through the rise of fascism, catastrophic anti-Semitism, World War II, and the German Occupation of the Channel Islands, which Cahun and Moore actively resisted. The gravity of Cahun's historical moment is redeemed by the life of the imagination, which Pucill ignites as a sort of everlasting flame burning across the generations.

We are witnessing Claude Cahun's cinematic afterlives.<sup>5</sup> Two prior films have explored Cahun's art and biography in the past decade: Lizzie Thynne's *Playing A Part* and Barbara Hammer's *Lover/Other*.<sup>6</sup> Both blend staged scenes and documentary interviews with art historians and associates. In contrast to these hybrid documentary films, Sarah Pucill's *Magic Mirror* functions as trans-chronological cinematic collaboration between two artists – kindred spirits, one living and one dead. *Magic Mirror* samples, remixes, and reimagines Cahun's written words and visual images in a thrilling, uncanny way. The thrill comes from seeing and hearing what Cahun might have created with film and sound, or in collaboration with a filmmaker. Pucill has been engaging with the work of Cahun for over 15 years as exemplified in her short film *Cast* (2000). Pucill's staging of two women kissing through a mirror is an artistic approach that re-embodies Cahun's photographs, animating them in the sense of breathing in life, but also innovates by visually enacting the written texts. Moving between the languages of written word, spoken word, moving image, and still photograph, *Magic Mirror* transcends boundaries of media and authorship. Comparing Cahun's still photographs with Pucill's imagined scenarios tangibly visualises processes and backstories, where Pucill dialogues with Cahun. By linking a 21st

century artist with her predecessor/muse, this exhibition participates in continued mapping of a queer genealogy and intergenerational dialogue.

The current mining of Cahun's oeuvre goes to the heart of today's theoretical concerns in the fields of gender and sexuality studies, contemporary art, photography, film, video and music. The wilfully anti-mainstream aesthetics of a countercultural identity, masquerades, performativity, attack on restrictive gender norms, and a politics of resistance that are hallmarks of Claude Cahun resonate in artists as diverse as performer Leigh Bowery; video artists Patty Chang and Narcissister; punk rock (recall Cahun's shaved head in 1920); photographer Catherine Opie who documented queer culture in the 1990s; transgender artist duo Zachary Drucker and Rhys Ernst who photograph their transformation and relationship; and post-pop queercore band The Third Sex (taking their name from a concept by Havelock Ellis, the sexologist whose work Cahun translated into French).<sup>7</sup> Like Sarah Pucill, all of these artists share Claude Cahun's commitment to imaging other worlds where restrictive societal rules are broken and reshaped, bodies are not stable, identity is malleable, and historical trajectories collide and fuse.

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Liena Vayzman, *The Self-Portraits of Claude Cahun: Transgression, Self-Representation, and Avant-Garde Photography*, PhD dissertation, Yale University, USA, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Claude Cahun, *Aveux non avendus*, Paris: Carrefour, 1930. Published in English: Claude Cahun, *Disavowals*, translated by Susan de Muth, London: Tate Publishing, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Helena Reckitt, *Between Mirrors*, brochure accompanying DVD, *Magic Mirror*, London: LUX, 2013

<sup>4</sup> Claude Cahun, *Disavowals*, Chapter 6, and as voice-over in *Magic Mirror*.

<sup>5</sup> I developed the concept in the talk *Claude Cahun's Cinematic Afterlife*, prepared for the Queer Experimental Film and Video Panel, College Art Association conference, New York, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> *Playing A Part: The Story of Claude Cahun* (Dir. Lizzie Thynne, UK, 2005); *Love/Other* (Dir. Barbara Hammer, USA, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Havelock Ellis, *L'hygiène sociale: La femme dans la société, Volume I of Études de psychologie sociale*. Trans. Lucie Schwob [Claude Cahun], Mercure de France, 1929.

# IN CAHUN'S MAGIC MIRROR: A CONVERSATION

By Sarah Pucill

There is a difficulty to Cahun's work that draws me into her world. Following her argument in *Les Paris Sont Ouverts (Place your bets)*,<sup>1</sup> where she warns of the dangers of artistic or poetic language that becomes propaganda, her message is always latent, not manifest. She shaves her head and shows off her 'unfeminine' Jewish-looking nose and painted white vampiric skin by giving us an acute side profile. Offering, in her own words, 'the courage to be repulsive', Cahun strikes a pose of independence and self-reinvention.

Cahun never smiles in her photographs, her gaze at the viewer is serious, concentrated. She writes in *Aveux non avenue* that 'Smiling is the province of women'. In front of a mirror in a Surrealist chessboard coat, Cahun's ungendered gaze looks instead into the other mirror, the camera, head turned to us, that will immortalise the moment. In a photograph of the same space, Cahun is replaced with her life-long partner Marcel Moore. But here Moore looks back through the mirror and into the camera, at Cahun to whom she smiles. In another photograph Moore looks into the mirror, left and right are inverted as inverted desire. This labyrinthine play of a gaze that embraces the viewer to explore the complexity of female self imaging in relation to a queer sexuality has been a point of stimulus for my own work. In my film *Cast* (2000) these two 'mirror' images became a mini scene, where a lesbian kiss initiates a passing through the mirror. This journey to a different place where bare feet tread on soft sand occurs in a similar way in *Magic Mirror* (2013), but here the text narrating the 'story' of a journey through the mirror is Cahun's writing.

Having lived with Cahun's images since being introduced to her work in 1990, to discover the English translation of her text *Aveux non avenues* in 2007 was strange. Having imagined her thoughts whilst being confronted with her otherwise silent images for so long, to suddenly hear her speak was for me an experience of the uncanny, something of Cahun had come to life. This concern with the uncanny that is a key root of Surrealism, and is core to much of Cahun's work, is also part of how I encounter her as a dead artist that has left inanimate objects of photographs and print behind.<sup>2</sup> Her images started to speak in a way that opened up a new world. I wanted to make a film 'to do' with her but as she was resistant to being defined, the only way was to make a film 'with', as if alongside her as a way of exchange, to share a dialogue.

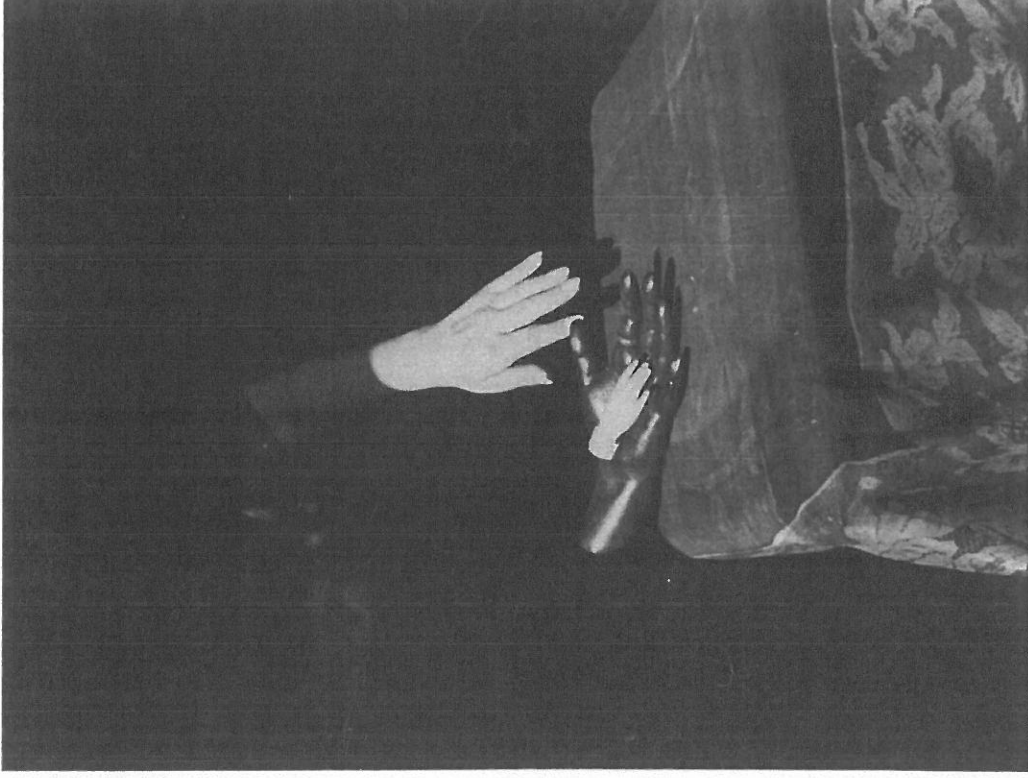
*Aveux non avenues* is described by Pierre Mac-Orlan, who writes the preface in the original publication, as "a series of cinematic glimpses".<sup>3</sup> Kaleidoscopic in structure, reminiscent of a fairground, and introduced by Cahun as 'An Invisible Adventure', Agnes Lhermitte describes the book's scrutiny of self as a 'a scalpel's investigation into the dark zones of the psyche, the painful gaping of a cracked being'.<sup>4</sup> The chapters of 'cut up' text mixes letter-writing, poem, dream, monologue, dialogue, and essay, and are headed with a collage 'photo-gravure' that Cahun and Moore collaborated on.<sup>5</sup> It is in the spirit of this mosaic juxtaposition that I hope to contribute as a filmmaker, a further collaged layer. The animation of my re-staged photographs and photo collages is stitched to Cahun's writing that is transformed into a soundscape. The word-image dialogue in the book becomes a layered conversation between word, image, sound and movement.

The reason I wanted to make the film was to bring together Cahun's examination of the genre of self-portraiture (implicit in her ironic 'self portraits) with her examination of the genre of autobiography in *Aveux non avenues*, both of which critique the representation of self



as singular, coherent and known. Cahun's writing in *Aveux non avenues* shifts grammatically between first, second and third person. In *Magic Mirror* I combine this plurality of selves in her writing with the plurality of self she creates in her images. These multiple projections of self onto 'others' extends also to the world of the inanimate, where mannequin eyes travel between mirror, living performer and spectator. I wanted to highlight in the film a productive schism I see in Cahun's oeuvre which engages both a philosophical and psychoanalytic understanding of self, with a politicisation of the socially divided body across lines of gender, sexuality, class, race and religion. Confounding the binary idea that an artist might need to choose between politics or art, Cahun is unwavering in her absolutist commitment to both; she risks her life for her political ideals but equally will not sacrifice art for political propaganda. The writing selected from *Aveux non avenues* attempts to highlight the power of Cahun's insights, which relate across and between my own history of filmmaking as well as to Cahun's photographs so that a mixing of authorship became inevitable.

I am interested in the question of what a filmmaker can do with the archive of a dead artist especially with regards to photographs and writing. Exploring Cahun's photographs by re-staging and extending a still moment to the duration of time, and adding her words was a method that combined research into Cahun's work, whilst turning interpretation into a creative act that re-invents through re-enactment. The opportunity to animate the written word through voice, and to animate the photograph through a re-staging, can occur only because of and since the invention of cinema. I like the idea that it is possible to 'play' a photograph by transforming it into a film, by performing it as a written script or as music score can be *played*. The sound of the fairground organ that accompanies the animation of selected sections of the photographs, is to celebrate the circular structure of *Aveux non avenues* where photographic duplication is itching to be animated.







Sarah Pucill, *Phantom Rhapsody II*, 2010.  
Photographic Print from Neaative

Cahun was interested in avant-garde and silent cinema<sup>6</sup> and I believe she would have made films had she had the means. Where Cahun's period marks the beginning of cinema, we are now witnessing the end of celluloid cinema in terms of the industry. The film labs were closing as I was making the film that was all shot on 16mm black and white.

I love the way Cahun uses curtains in her photographs to evoke both a theatre stage with a public audience as well as a private space of the home. Her use of curtain makes the slippage between performing for a photograph and performing for a live audience, both being sites of Cahun's practice.<sup>7</sup> She describes the curtain that rises then stays down on the actor, and an audience that doubles as a past lover and her prey, has disappeared.<sup>8</sup> These different spaces that curtains mark, that intersect Art and life, life and death, private and public, either protect or expose a body to light, to the world. The contrasting evocations of 'stage' (and therefore curtain), that move from a private introspective journey to a public arena, represent the schizophrenic needs of an artist: to need and not need an audience. I am interested in the degree to which an artist may be speaking to an audience of another time and the relevance of 'history' for the now.

In response to the poor reception Cahun received for the publication of her book *Aveux non avenue*, Cahun writes:

"In vain in *Disavowals* I tried through black humour, provocation, defiance to shake my contemporaries out of their blissful conformism, their complacency. Ostracism was more or less the general response. Aside from silence, the book was met with the basest insults. This is how 'literary criticism'... sought to welcome the 'prose-poems' of this unwanted Cassandra"<sup>9</sup>

Looking at, listening and responding to earlier women artists has a long history in my filmmaking. A key inspiration for *Magic Mirror* was *Johnny Panic*, (2000), made by the experimental filmmaker, Sandra Lahire who was also my late partner (lover) when she died in 2001. I took Lahire's idea to 'collaborate with a dead artist', whose trilogy of films, *Lady Lazarus* (1991), *Night Dances* (1995) and *Johnny Panic* (2000) on the poet Sylvia Plath explore a collaboration between Plath's writing and voice with Lahire's cinematic choreography and soundscape. In a similar way *Magic Mirror* explores word and image, largely in relation to the body that speaks and is seen.

#### END NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Claude Cahun, *Les Paris Sont Ouverts (Place your bets)*. Paris: José Corti, May 1934
- <sup>2</sup> Claude Cahun, *Aveux non avenue*. Paris: Carrefour, 1930. Published in English: Claude Cahun, *Disavowals*, translated by Susan de Muth, London: Tate Publishing, 2007.
- <sup>3</sup> Pierre Mac-Orlan, 'Preface', Claude Cahun, *Aveux non avenue*. Paris: Carrefour, 1930.
- <sup>4</sup> Agnès Lhermitte, 'Postscript: some brief observations,' Claude Cahun, *Disavowals*, London: Tate Publishing, 2007.
- <sup>5</sup> *Aveux non avenue* – writing by Claude Cahun with collaborative photo-gravures between Cahun and Marcel Moore, "after designs by the author".
- <sup>6</sup> Conversation with François Leperlier, author of *Claude Cahun: L'Exotisme interieur*, Fayard, 2006.
- <sup>7</sup> Cahun performed in avant-garde theatre group *Le Plateau* directed by Pierre Albert-Biroi, Paris 1929-30. Two 'self' portraits are taken directly from costumes she wore as 'Elle'; Bluebeards wife in *Barbe Blue* and 'Monsieur' in *Banlieu*. Information from *Don't Kiss Me: The Art of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore*. Ed. Louise Downie, Tate Publishing, Jersey Heritage Trust, 2006.
- <sup>8</sup> Claude Cahun, script for the film, *Magic Mirror*, Sarah Pucill, 2013, translation by Rachel Gomme.
- <sup>9</sup> Claude Cahun, 'Lettre á Paul Levy,' 3 July 1950, *Confidences au miroir* unpublished 1945-6, in François Leperlier, *Ecrits*.

