

# Claude Cahun and The Queer Experience in Photography

Sarah Del Toro

## Abstract

*Art is often created to comment on thought-provoking concepts and explore self-expression, such as depicting experiences with sexuality and gender identity. This topic is often stigmatized due to the traditional gender binary and heteronormative society that ridicules non-conforming members, forcing many LGBTQ individuals to hide their identities to avoid ostracization. However, Claude Cahun, a queer surrealist artist, disregarded this prejudice and explored being a gender-nonconforming individual in much of her work. Her style was influenced by not only her queer identity but the Surrealism art movement and other philosophies. Cahun implemented key concepts from Surrealism, Sexology, and Narcissism to depict her experience with gender and sexuality. She also collaborated with her lesbian lover, Marcel Moore, in their photography as a way of exploring her sexuality. Cahun stayed true to her queer identity, changing perceptions of gender and sexuality despite social norms.*

Throughout history, society has operated under restrictive social norms that often punish those who disregard them. A relevant example is the traditional gender binary and heteronormative society that often ridicules non-conforming members. Many of these individuals identify with LGBT—Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender—orientations. In the case of Claude Cahun, a queer surrealist artist, this prejudice did not stop her from exploring her queer identity in her various works. Cahun portrayed her experience with gender and sexuality through her photography, which functioned as a motor to change society's perception rather than reject those that deviated from the norms. Her two photographs *I am in training*, *don't kiss me*,

1927, silver gelatin print, and *Untitled* (Cahun with mirror image), 1928, gelatin silver print, are two critical examples commenting on being a queer person.

## Cahun's Brief Background and Historical Context

To analyze Cahun's photography, understanding influences from her background and the historical context is important. First, Surrealism is a 20th-century art and literature movement that explored human nature and the subconscious through psychoanalysis, or the investigation of how the mind's conscious and unconscious elements interact. This pursuit to explore human nature is reflected in Cahun's work as

she dissects gender and sexuality. Additionally, Cahun's photography is informed by her being a gender-nonconforming lesbian in a relationship with fellow artist Marcel Moore. Originally born Lucy Schwob, Cahun later opted for a more gender-neutral pseudonym and demonstrated her disconnection from the gender binary by describing herself as "neuter" and "me, he, she—or simply it" (Reznick, 2022, pp. 54-55). Today, this "neuter" identity is often interpreted as nonbinary, a gender outside the traditional binary system.

Alongside her rejection of heteronormativity and the gender binary, Cahun studied sexological literature to understand her identity better. Sexology is an interdisciplinary science that focuses on diverse aspects of human sexual behavior and sexuality, including LGBT identities. Another philosophy that influenced Cahun's work was Narcissism, defined by Sigmund Freud, which proposed that the sexual desire between women was an extension of traditionally feminine autoerotic drives (Latimer, 2005, p. 90). While Narcissism's modern definition is "being excessively self-absorbed", Freud's Narcissism claims feminine autoeroticism, or a female fantasizing about one's body for stimulating sexual excitement, leads to homosexuality. Despite having a negative connotation, Cahun puts a twist on Narcissism's motifs of vain women looking into mirrors to express her homosexuality.

### **Cahun's Exploration of Gender Identity**

Cahun's first photograph *Untitled* (Cahun with mirror image), shown in Figure 1, combines feminine and masculine expressions through toned-down makeup and clothing. Yet, it still pits the feminine and masculine features against one another, creating a more androgynous gender expression. In addition, Cahun's shaved head

was common for lesbians, who regularly appropriated stylized male haircuts, portraying her experience with both gender and sexuality (Reznick, 2022, p. 55).

Similar to *Untitled* (Cahun with mirror image), Cahun's second photograph *I am in training, don't kiss me* (Figure 2) uses gendered presentation and motifs to explore a gender-nonconforming identity. Her costume overstates masculine elements (her male attire) and feminine elements (her painted exaggerated pout, applied spiderlike eyelashes, and prominent spit curls) to create the appearance of a male and female, or a third sex (Hacking, 2012, p. 249). Her masculine attire references Cahun's role as a performer while furthering the metaphor of gender-nonconforming expression. The stage framed by curtains highlights that Cahun is playing the part of a boxer or circus performer, metaphorically balancing male and female (Hacking, 2012, p. 249). This hybrid gender expression can be interpreted as androgynous or nonbinary, challenging society's traditional binary system and perception of gender.

### **Cahun's Exploration of Lesbian Sexuality**

Cahun explored not only her gender but her sexuality as a lesbian, intrinsically tying her artwork to her love and relationship with Moore through their collaboration. In *I am in training, don't kiss me*, both artists defy traditionally masculine boxing to establish their homosexual relationship. Cahun is not alone in her performance of lesbianism, as she shares her experience with Moore. Together, they challenge sexuality norms and change society's traditional perception of homosexuality.

Cahun further changed society's perception of homosexuality by denying Narcissism's negative connotations being an accurate depiction of her lesbian experience in *Untitled* (Cahun with mirror image). She was in control of her so-called "feminine

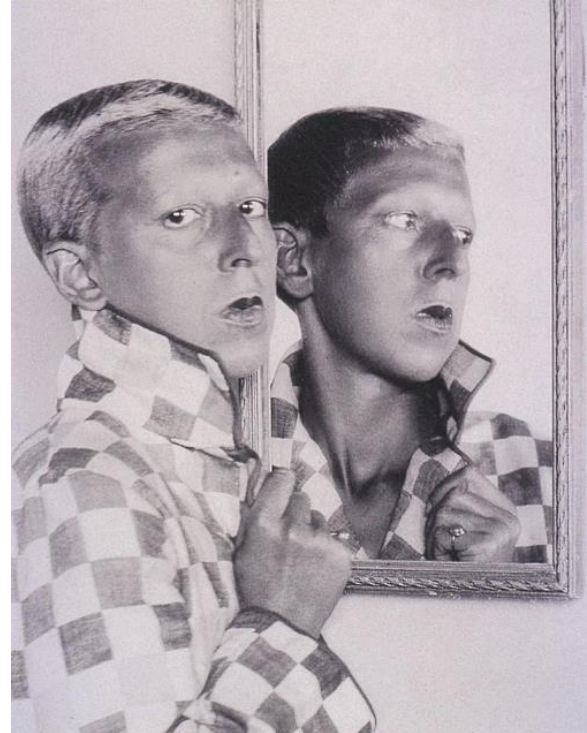
sexuality,” in contrast to depictions of women being consumed by their self-absorption and vanity, symbolized by peering into mirrors, in Narcissism. Cahun instead looks directly at her lesbian lover and collaborator Moore. She rejects feminine Narcissistic sexuality and instead embraces her lover, who exemplifies the reality of her sexuality. The gaze is replicated in *I am in training, don't kiss me* with Cahun looking at Moore behind the camera.

### Conclusion: Cahun's Perception Challenging Social Norms

Cahun explored her experience with gender and sexuality through photography, altering the perception in a society that disapproved of straying from tradition. *I am in training, don't kiss me* and *Untitled* (Cahun with mirror image) are two prominent photographs depicting Cahun's experiences as a queer person. Despite her queer identity being relatively unknown during her lifetime due to social stigma, studying it provides insight into gender identity, gender expression, and sexuality. The emphasis on self-expression and identity exploration are critical reminders of art's power to convey messages and truly show oneself to the world. Continually analyzing queer work also reinforces how the perception of gender and sexuality influence art, simultaneously evolving within society. Cahun's legacy of changing queer identity perception rings true as her expressive work is still studied today.

### Figure 1. *Untitled* (Cahun with mirror image)

*Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, untitled (Cahun with mirror image), 1928, gelatin silver print.*



**Figure 2. *I am in training, don't kiss me.***  
*Claude Cahun, I am in training, don't kiss me, 1927, silver gelatin print.*



## References

- DeBrine, M. (2019). The exploration of a nonbinary gender identity in the visual work of Claude Cahun. *Honors Undergraduate Theses*. 617.
- Hacking, J. (2012). *Photography: The whole story*. New York: Prestel.
- Latimer, T. T. (2005). *Women together/women apart: Portraits of lesbian Paris*. Rutgers University Press.
- Reznick, J. (2022). Through the guillotine mirror: Claude Cahun's theory of trans against the void. *Art Journal* 81(3), 54-55.