

IN OR OUT OF THE PICTURE

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CLAUDE CAHUN AND
CINDY SHERMAN

Katy Kline

Claude Cahun's startling *Autoportraits*, lost to view for several decades, came to light in the late 1980s. The audacity of these unusual personae led a number of critics to rush to classify them as prescient harbingers of the staged self-representations of Cindy Sherman. The coincidence of two women creating a large body of photographic work in which they function as both subject and object, staging affective scenarios with scrupulous attention to pose, lighting, costume, and backdrop, appeared persuasive. "The sense of multiple selves, of masquerade, of gender as a series of conventions, and also of narcissism . . . prefigures Cindy Sherman's photography—the black and white *Untitled Film Stills* of the late seventies and the color images of the eighties and nineties which stage stereotypical and historical feminine identities as self-portraits."¹

Never mind that relative scale alone ought to have put the brakes on any premature pairing. After all, Cahun's spare and concentrated black-and-white statements are surprisingly intimate, often the size of a page from a personal diary. Sherman's exaggerated size, color, and theatricality, on the other hand, align themselves with the ambitious reach of painting. This essay will look closely at Cahun's still incompletely known work, selecting singular and representative images to evaluate both in the context of their historic moment and in relation to some of Sherman's later images. Only with careful scrutiny can we begin to appreciate their differences and the degree to which each participates in aspects of the Surrealist belief system.²

During the 1920s Cahun produced an astonishing number of self-portraits in various guises. She/the figure generally occupies a good deal of the frame. Background details and stage props are kept to a minimum, compressing an enormous psychological weight and affect into the figure. She presents herself as coquette, body builder, skinhead, vamp and vampire, angel, and Japanese puppet (as well as characters from actual theater works such as *Bluebeard* and *Le Mystère d'Adam*). Most of these images she reworked several times, playing with slight variations in size, focus, and point of view.

Her many female variations make no attempt to seduce. She either parodies flirtatiousness and ridiculously exaggerates the facial makeup of a vamp (emblazoning "Do Not Kiss Me: I Am in Training" on her chest) or adopts other unalluring incarnations ranging from hollow-eyed doll to helmeted tap dancer. She also puts herself forward unapologetically as a



Claude Cahun

Autoportrait (Self-Portrait), 1928

Gelatin silver print, 3 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 2 $\frac{5}{8}$ in.

San Francisco Museum of Art, Gift of Robert Shapazian

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variety of male types, ranging from a surly dandy to a conventionally suited civil servant to an oriental deity. These early figures refuse to play to any preconceived relation of subject to viewer and return the viewer's inspection with an uncompromising, even confrontational, gaze.

Though the mask is generally considered a tool of evasion or concealment, Cahun's many masks and maneuvers reflect rather than deflect. The artist and the individual are present within each disguise, any one of which represents an aspect of an extraordinarily complex self. It is in their degree of participation in or removal from the world that Cahun and Sherman will be seen to diverge.



Cindy Sherman
Untitled Film Still #2, 1977
Black and white photograph
10 x 8 in.
Private collection

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Consider for example Cahun's *Autoportrait* of 1928 (fig. 15), a three-quarter-length view of the artist in a masculine tailored jacket standing close before, and reflected in, a mirror. The artist depicts herself as startled and slightly uneasy; she clutches the geometrically patterned, harlequinlike costume close around her neck as if in response to a sudden draft.

Her location is unclear; the space is abstract and flattened and would be bilaterally symmetrical if the mirror extended to the bottom of the image. The mirror itself is unexplained; unrelated to any boudoir or bathroom, it almost reads as a window onto some external plane. The "real" figure registers the presence of the viewer and does not flinch from eye con-

tact. Her other half, the mirror image, however, averts her eyes gazing glassily into the unknown. The brittle gleam of the glass refracted onto the faces cranks up the emotional pitch. The two faces register a shock; they have been interrupted by some intrusion from the outside world in the midst of a private exchange.

Compare this scene to Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Still #2* (fig. 16) in which the (toweled) artist is seen in a narrow three-quarter view reflected in a steamy bathroom mirror. Her nubile body occupies the prominent foreground of the picture plane, but all attention, unabashedly directed by her pointing finger, is riveted upon the closed circle of eyes engaged in the mirror. Although also apparently surprised in the act, this water nymph has eyes only for herself. The viewer/voyeur representing the outside world is effectively closed out of the self-absorbed conversation.

Already early in life Cahun had constructed several identities. Lucie Schwob was born in 1894 into a provincial but prominent intellectual Jewish family in Nantes. After receiving secondary schooling in England, she returned to France and sometime around 1917 "became" Claude Cahun. (The gender-neutral significance of this sly pseudonym has often been noted.) A year later she published an article in the distinguished *Mercure de France* drawing attention to the contemporaneous Billing Trial in London, a notorious exploitation of paranoid homophobia.¹ This was an extraordinarily bold and public entrance into a contentious and (sexual) arena for a young woman, and it set the stage for her unconventional lifestyle and for the decade of gender-enigmatic self-portraits that followed.

From the early 1920s on Cahun lived openly in Paris with her friend, stepsister, occasional collaborator and lifelong companion Suzanne Malherbe, who adopted the only slightly less equivocal pseudonym Marcel Moore. Together they formed an important lesbian couple who figured prominently in the intellectual and artistic ferment of Paris in the interwar years.

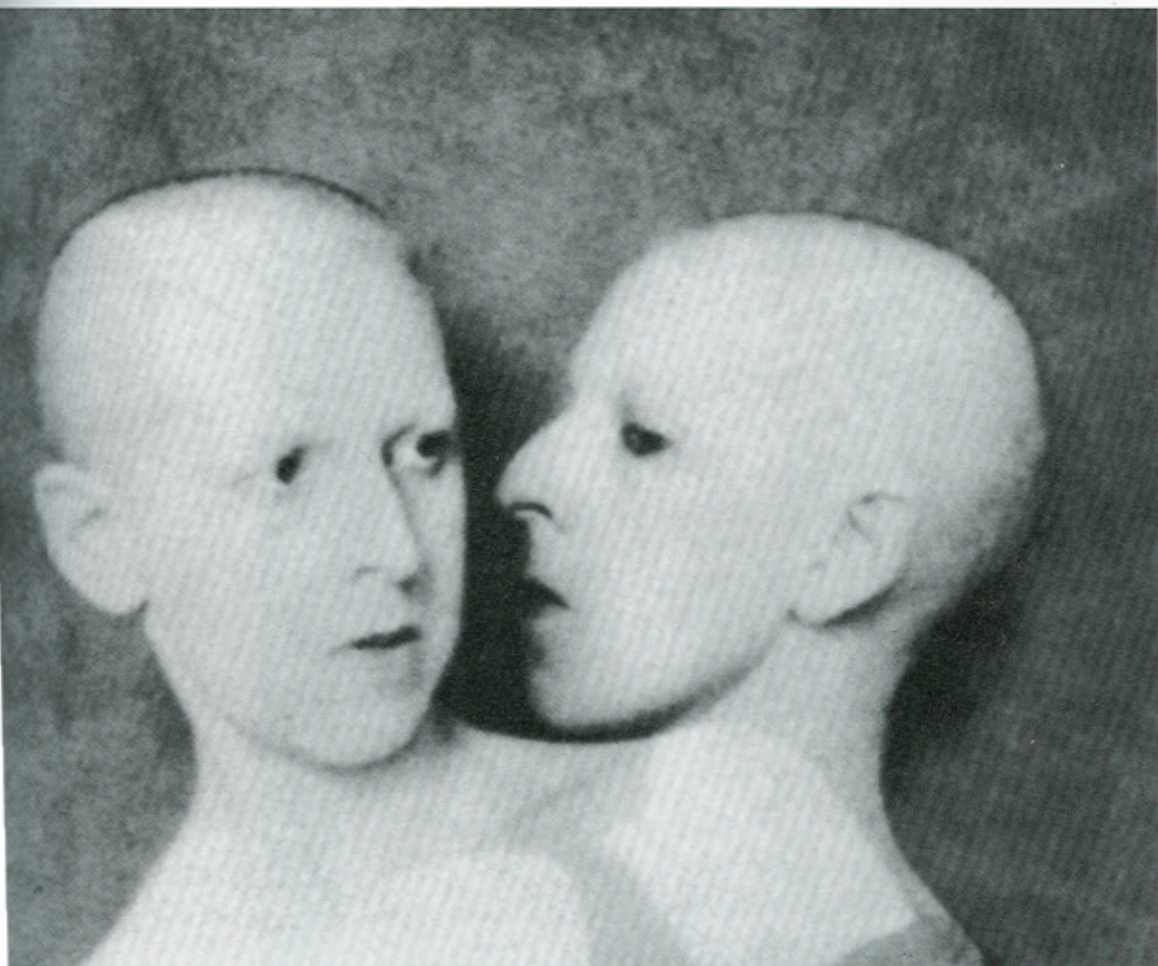
Cahun was one of few women close to the original Surrealist group and appended her signature to their manifestos. (Breton, however, is said to have been so put off by her assertively unconventional manner and appearance that he would abandon his favorite café upon her arrival.) She was

Claude Cahun

Que me veux-tu? (What Do You Want of Me?),
1928

Black and white photograph
7 x 9 in.

Private collection, Paris



politically active in anti-Fascist groups like the Association des Ecrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires and in the 1930s allied herself with *Contre-attaque* until the Breton-Bataille power struggle began to erode its influence. Perhaps most significantly, drawing on her command of the English language and her earlier encounter with English attitudes toward sexual deviance, in 1929 she translated into French some of the writings of Havelock Ellis, whose controversial theories on human sexuality introduced the possibility of a third sex, "uniting masculine and feminine traits but existing as neither one nor the other."⁴ Her extravagant self-dispersion into conventional-



ly incompatible types begins to make sense as part of both her life decisions and an ongoing quest for self-definition.

The self-portraits discussed above are conceptually straightforward, participating in surrealist dialogues by their willful disregard of normality. The theatrical exaggerations and strange inconsistencies posit a self and a reality that are ultimately unknowable. A more familiar visual strategy enjoyed by surrealist photographers is the medium's invitation to disrupt the integrity of the body. Cahun adopts this approach relatively rarely, usually by doubling her figure, but these strange pairs constitute some of her most powerful images. The striking contraposed profiles of *Que me veux-tu* (fig. 17), for example, construct doubles who are nonetheless not quite mirror images. This poignant hybrid is one of the few images for which the artist provided a title. Both image and title pose the title's question "What do you want of me?" and underscore Cahun's uncompromising self-interrogation in her quest for identity. The interrupted narcissistic dialogue signified by the broken eye contact implies the impossibility of any answer.

Cahun's most extreme reworking of the human form is her striking anamorphic self-study in a dark void (fig. 18). The same severely shaven head is stretched so that she is seen simultaneously from two vantage points. The feminine décolletage below and the "unwomanly" bald skull above construct an uneasy combination. As David Bate ponders, "To become not-a-woman and not-a-man in representation is to become what?"⁵ One possible answer lies in Ellis's neither-masculine-nor-feminine.

In 1930 Cahun published her original book-length personal narrative *Aveux non avenues*, a compendium of reveries, aphorisms, and enigmatic intimacies on love and self-knowledge. Just as her *Autoportraits* of the twenties constituted an ongoing inquiry into the nature of her identity and proposed a series of unstable selves, many of these strange texts reiterate the absence of fixity. Early in the publication she poses the essential question of self-definition, only to back off from the possibility of forging any stable self. "Individualism? Narcissism? Of course. It is my strongest tendency, the only intentional constancy [*intentionelle fidélité*] I am capable of. . . . Besides, I am lying; I scatter myself too much for that."⁶

Claude Cahun
Autoportrait (Self-Portrait)
 c. 1929–30
 Black and white photograph
 9 5/16 x 5 7/8 in.
 Private collection, Paris

To demarcate the individual chapters in *Aveux non avenues*, Cahun produced ten photomontages. Although the built-in interruptions, disjunctions, erratic scales, and fluctuating focus ought logically to have made photomontage, like collage, a Surrealist medium of choice, Cahun is one of the few photographers to have exploited its possibilities. As Honor Lasalle and Abigail Solomon-Godeau observe, "Doubtless not the least of the attractions of photomontage for her was its disruption of the putative naturalism of the photographic image. In this respect, the technique of photomontage is fully consistent with the stated goals of surrealism in general: the denaturalizing of vision, an uncompromisingly anti-realist bias, and, most programmatically, access to unconscious processes and the aleatory."⁷

These ten densely packed pages feature repeated fragments of the artist's previous self-portraits juxtaposed with additional images and visual devices. The organizing vehicle "for this simultaneously fragmented and organizing gaze," according to Lasalle and Solomon-Godeau, is the mirror.⁸ Cahun does not put this familiar emblem of narcissism, however, to such disquieting effects in the photomontages as in several of her earlier straight self-portraits. Both in images already discussed and in others, such as two disturbing and mysterious *Autoportraits* (nos. 36 and 38),⁹ the mirror actively confuses scale, disrupts internal spatial arrangements, and disorients both subject and viewer.

The photomontages' fragmented, distorted, and repeated body parts undoubtedly contributed to the early history of the genre, but they seem strangely dated today. The mutating identities of the earlier self-portraits constitute a subtler but ultimately more unsettling surrealism. The photomontages provide visual counterpoints to the erratic, confused, and confusing rhythm of the text that so convincingly communicates the incoherence of reality. At the end of the book Cahun voices an almost poignant credo, resigning herself to a mutable, multiplicitous identity. "Make myself another vocabulary, brighten the silver of the mirror, blink an eye, swindle myself by means of a fluke muscle; cheat with my skeleton, correct my mistakes, divide myself in order to conquer, multiply myself in order to assert myself; briefly, to play with ourselves can change nothing."¹⁰

A careful consideration of the title *Aveux non avenues* suggests a fruitful way to appreciate Cahun's overall intentions in art and in life. *Aveux* has generally been understood to signify "confessions," although this is actually the dictionary's fourth meaning of the term. Other preferred meanings involve an acknowledgment of personal social/political arrangements such as of a vassal to a lord, a statement of approbation and consent. *Non avenue* is a juridical term meaning "null and void." The title may indicate the voiding not of intimate "unbosomings" (confessions) but rather the invalidating of a set of arrangements to be, or to stand in relation to, accepted societal expectations, such as gender definition and role.

During the 1930s Cahun continued to photograph herself. But instead of the mysterious, charged interior spaces of the earlier work she began inserting herself more visibly in the real world of gardens or architectural settings. Rarely did she don the extravagant or provocative costumes of her previous years; these new situations unsettle by virtue of their deeply enigmatic meaning. A key work from 1930 (no. 72), for example, depicts her lying nude on a stretch of beach, half-covered with clinging skeins of seaweed. The tide washes over her, the sense of pull and erosion underscored by the deliberate diagonal of the composition. This abject figure is at a far remove from the confrontational close-ups of the previous decade. Positing self as a process of gradual disappearance, this image is a startling precursor to the works of Ana Mendieta, who would later prostrate herself at the edge of the sea in an attempt to metamorphose into the landscape.

An even more unsettling series depicts the prostrate Cahun encroached upon by voracious vegetation that threatens to consume her altogether (nos. 95 and 96). The horizontality and overhead camera move beyond Mendieta to strategies successfully exploited in Cindy Sherman's 1980s centerfold and disaster series. Rosalind Krauss has spun a complex but convincing case for the significance of these two conjoined conditions in Sherman's work, which she traces back to Bataille.¹¹ In *Le Langage des fleurs*, published in *Documents* in 1929, Bataille looked down (!) upon flowers' traditionally admired blossoms whose fate is to rot in the sun and located his reward instead in the disreputable region of the base, vile, and ignoble below the surface.

In Cahun's *Autoportrait* no. 96, the recumbent artist is clothed and apparently sleeping. An ominous portent, however, is transmitted by ripe stalks and blossoms closing in upon the body, which lies on a disturbingly reptilian or animal fabric. A dark stain created by the looming shadow of the viewer's head encroaches on the artist's vulnerable throat. In no. 95 (fig. 19) the fetid and erotic overtones become even more disquieting; the fleshy white blossoms have disappeared. The body of the artist, now nude and engulfed by the exotic skin, appears to sink down into a dangerous subterranean realm; her tormented expression bespeaks a far more extreme condition than the peace of sleep.

During the 1930s Cahun also turned to the construction and photography of strange hybrid objects and elaborate scenarios in which she herself no longer figures even by implication. Of the self-portraits that have survived from the 1940s, when she and Malherbe/Moore settled on the island of Jersey, only a few, such as the faceless figures at the cemetery (nos. 104 and 107), carry any reminder of the visual and psychological punch of the earlier self-portraits. The most radical part of her work was over. As Laurie Monahan has pointed out, Cahun's "unconventional dematerialization of the limits of the self promised social change because it is the stable coherent self that is key to cultural and social stability." And "by the early 30s the period of cultural flexibility was coming to a close."¹²

But for those twenty turbulent years her astonishing oeuvre aggressively undercut traditional notions of coherent individual subjectivity. David Bate believes that "there is no original Claude to be found in her *mise-en-scène*."¹³ In my view, however, this assessment seriously misrepresents her achievement. There is no *single* original Claude to be found. Or, alternatively, authentic aspects of the original Claude are to be found in every one of her multiple manifestations. She might be seen as a demonstration case of Joan Rivière's influential 1929 thesis, which argued that the strategy of masquerade cannot be distinguished from the woman herself. Cahun's achievement was to stretch, permeate, and infiltrate the established boundaries of gender definition. She demanded attention for a new, third sex, the ongoing negotiation of a creature, in Katy Deepwell's felicitous phrase, simultaneously "virgin, androgyne, soldier."¹⁴ Ellis could not have found a more sym-

Claude Cahun
Autoportrait (Self-Portrait), c. 1939
 Black and white photograph
 3 3/16 x 3 7/8 in.
 Jersey Museums Service, JHT/1995/31/c



pathetic translator, nor postmodernism a more prescient interrogator of female identity.

How, finally, does her prescient interrogation stack up against the paradigmatic postmodernist practitioner, Cindy Sherman? Both artists after all rely, in varying degrees, upon mediated images; Cahun's early work references theater bills, circus posters, circulars, and postcards. Despite her disavowal of any interest in postmodern theory, Sherman's "sources" in art and fashion photography, advertising, movies, pornography, and medical illustration have been definitively established.

Formal coincidences between the two are frequent enough to be intriguing but ultimately prove superficial. The situational similarity but interior differences of the two women at the mirror, for example, has already been noted. Still, other startling formal similarities exist, for example Cahun's disturbing *Autoportrait* no. 95 (fig. 19) and Sherman's well-known Untitled #153. Here Sherman's upper body is diagonally laid out upon a dank and gritty patch of greenery, her vacant expression indicating terminal disassociation.

Cahun's singular self-study in the process of erasure (no. 72) finds a cold postindustrial counterpart in Sherman's Untitled #168 (pl. 26). A blue interior landscape strangely littered with dust and sand is crowded with a jumble of technological detritus. Most significant amid the chaos of discarded cords and terminals are a vacant screen and a tiny but strategically placed empty mirror. These deliberate, assertive examples of the absence of image underscore the central emptiness, the recumbent vacated business suit that still maintains the contours and volumes of the artist's vanished body.

Sherman's virtuoso self-casting has diverted attention from the real implications of her way of working and the very particular nature of her self-representation. Unlike Cahun, Sherman replaces the bravura creation of contesting identities by voiding the very notion of identity. In her work, as Norman Bryson has so cogently argued,

Identity—the interior depths supposed to stand behind or within the surface of appearance—is only an identity effect, the semi-hallucinatory transformation of a material surface into imaginary profundity. . . . Sherman exposes the material underpinning of identity-production, not only the theatrical codes of costume and gesture but the photographic codes that come to join them. If graininess in the print makes the figure seem different (distanced or mysterious or disfigured), that proves beyond a doubt that what we had taken to be the source of the presence to which we respond—the figure, the referent, with its/her inwardness and depth—actually emanates from the materiality of the signifying work, from the photographic paper and the way it has been processed, from the apparatus of representation itself.²¹⁵

In Sherman's most recent sex pictures, the artist's body is entirely replaced by a battery of ever more repulsive and unat-

tractive medical mannequins and prostheses. Much attention has been drawn to the implications of this radical reformulation of the human body, which transgresses all norms and pushes surrealist sexual grotesquerie to previously unimagined extremes. The truncated trunk of Sherman's hideous hybrid in *Untitled #263* (1992) so flaunts hyperliteral androgyny that it approaches mechanistic parody. Claude Cahun's androgyny, on the other hand, was her own and hard-won: personal, political, and performed.

Obviously both Cahun and Sherman predicate their elaborate *mise-en-scènes* on the notion of the unstable subject. But whereas Sherman posits multiple roles, Cahun posits multiple selves. As Katy Deepwell has observed, Cahun prefigures the development of queer theory, postulating the postmodern "possibility of a plurality of gendered identities and identifications" and demonstrating that identity is not a fixed, autonomous condition.¹⁶ Cahun's surrealism was defined by the unknowable at the bottom of reality. She lived, wrote, undertook political action, and made photographs on the edge of limits where all understanding breaks down, ever present and at risk in her unapologetic ambiguity.

Sherman, on the other hand, is entirely absent from her work; her "nominal referent exists only by means of representation."¹⁷ From the outset, with the moody nostalgia of the *Untitled Film Stills* of the late seventies through her series of centerfolds, fashion images, disasters, and fairy tales, and up to her physical removal from the scene in the most grotesque and abject late images, Sherman has been consciously playing to an audience. She has set up her situations in order that they be seen, not, as was the case with Cahun, in order to reveal herself incrementally to herself. (More research remains to be done to understand how, where, and for whom Cahun's *Autoportraits* were exhibited or even primarily intended for public perusal.)

Laura Mulvey, in an extremely perceptive discussion of the development of Sherman's work, notes that while the *Untitled Film Stills* simply imply the camera, from the 1981 centerfolds on Sherman's choice of color, pose, scale, and surface conspire to declare a photograph, with every maneuver directed toward the camera and, by implication, to the spectator. Sherman's trajectory increasingly exploits an overall, glossy, coloristic, surface effect that Mulvey aligns with the

movement from the focus on the single subject toward a singular and sophisticated exploitation of fetishism. Starting with Sherman's centerfolds, Mulvey notes that "the photographs have a glossy, high-quality finish in keeping with the codes and conventions of commercial photography. While the poses are soft and limp—polar opposites of a popular idea of fetishized femininity (high-heeled and corseted erect, flamboyant and exhibitionist)—fetishism returns in the formal qualities of the photography. The sense of surface now resides not in the female figure's attempt to save her face in a masquerade of femininity, but in the model's subordination to, and imbrication with, the texture of the photographic medium itself."¹⁸

Mulvey masterfully integrates recent chapters in psychoanalytic theory into a charting of the stages in Cindy Sherman's work. Starting from her early evocation of private feminine emotions of longing and reverie to parodying desire and desirability into a monstrous otherness, she evacuates the body altogether, leaving as evidence only interior fluids and processes. She goes on to develop the phantasmatic topography of fetishism, but Sherman herself has never been in the picture, even when she *was* in the picture. Of Cahun the French adage "plus ça change . . ." applies with only a minor adjustment. The more she changed, the more she declared herself. Sherman, however, relies on savvy postmodern strategies to pretend and deflect, even as they simultaneously defend and protect.

Notes

1. Therese Lichtenstein, "A Mutable Mirror: Claude Cahun," *Artforum* 30, no. 8 (April 1992): 66.
2. Virginia Zabriskie remembers Cindy Sherman seeing Cahun's work on a visit to her New York gallery, but "long after she had begun making her own work." (In conversation, August 1996.)
3. In 1918 Britain was faced with the real possibility of defeat in the Great War. Amid a widespread scapegoating of pacifists and homosexuals, two articles by a Noel Pemberton Billing in *The Imperialist* purported to identify a number of prominent establishment "sodomites" listed in a German prince's "Black Book of 47,000" whose perversions threatened the virility of the nation. He implied that the actress Maud Allan, appearing in a private performance of Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*, was a lesbian. She promptly sued. The six-day trial was an early example of a media circus. (The English novelist Pat Barker draws on this chilling episode in her recent *The Eye in the Door*.)
4. François Leperlier, "Claude Cahun," *Mise en Scène* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1994), 18.
5. David Bate, "The Mise en Scène of Desire," in Leperlier, *Mise en Scène*, 9. His probing Lacanian analysis of this image asserts "the phallic relation of Cahun's anamorphosis as an 'erection of the head.' In that logic the image would show the phallic nature of 'woman as masquerade' revealed in the image as either a defence (mimicry) or a derision (mockery) of the phallus" (10).
6. Claude Cahun, *Aveux non avenues* (Paris: Editions du Carrefour, 1930) (all translations mine). The most useful description of Cahun's narrative approach is Laurie Monahan's: "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, "Radical Transformations: Claude Cahun and the Masquerade of Womanliness," in *Inside the Visible*, ed. M. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 128.
7. Honor Lasalle and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Surrealist Confessions: Claude Cahun's Photomontages," *Afterimage* 19, no. 8 (March 1992): 11.
8. *Ibid.*, 12.
9. Photographs by Cahun are cited according to the numbering in the catalogue raisonné of *Claude Cahun: photographe* (Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1995).
10. Cahun, *Aveux non avenues*, 235.
11. Rosalind Krauss, "Cindy Sherman's Gravity: A Critical Fable," *Artforum* 32, no. 1 (September 1993): 164.
12. Monahan, "Radical Transformations," 132.
13. Bate, "The Mise en Scène of Desire."
14. Katy Deepwell, "Uncanny Resemblances," *Women's Art Magazine*, no. 62 (January/February 1995): 18.
15. Norman Bryson, "House of Wax," in *Cindy Sherman* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), 218 (my italics).
16. Deepwell, "Uncanny Resemblances."
17. Bryson, "House of Wax."
18. Laura Mulvey, "A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: The Work of Cindy Sherman," *New Left Review*, no. 188 (July/August 1991): 143.