

---

H-France Review Vol. 16 (August 2016), No. 157

Jennifer L. Shaw, *Reading Claude Cahun's Disavowals*. Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2013. xii + 233 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$149.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4094-0787-4.

Review by Tessa Paneth-Pollak, Michigan State University.

In her monograph on the outsider Surrealist Claude Cahun (born Lucy Schwob), Jennifer L. Shaw insists that Cahun was an artist engaged with her time and who, in spite of the evasiveness and opacity of her work, desired to communicate. This marks a significant new direction in the interpretation of the work of an artist known for making frequent use of her own image in works she produced from a multiply marginal position: Cahun was Jewish, gender non-conforming, a lesbian, and spent 1937-45 in exile on the British isle of Jersey. As the result of her tendency to serve as her own model together with her works' refusal to yield easy readings, the artist has come to be associated with solipsism and narcissism and her work to be interpreted—like the work of so many woman artists—as mere personal confession.

Shaw's study seeks not to rescue Cahun from the pejorative descriptor of "narcissism," but to use historical method to remove the pejorative's teeth. Shaw shows how Cahun consciously took up narcissism and self-regard as a practice, even refashioning it into her own philosophy of "neo-narcissism" (p. 71), in which self-regard and relation to the Other are not opposed. Shaw trains her focus on the enigmatic photomontages and the "collage of texts" (p. 3) that make up the book *Aveux non Avenus* (literally, "Avowals Null and Void," but typically rendered in English as *Disavowals*), a collaborative project by Cahun and her stepsister, lover, and ultimately life partner Marcel Moore (born Suzanne Malherbe) produced over the course of the 1920s and published in 1930. Through a series of close readings and analyses, Shaw reveals the manifold links of Cahun's project to her contemporary world, its discourses, norms, and values. As she reconstructs contexts for the fragments of Cahun's book, Shaw restores their resonance beyond the "personal" or the "confessional," forging a new set of historically grounded terms with which to understand and situate Cahun's work in its historical present. Most importantly, her study reveals that, in spite of its repetitions of her own image, Cahun's book (like her work more generally) insistently addresses an Other.

This insistence on Cahun's connectedness and sociability makes Shaw's study an important corrective for art history and literary studies, which have largely staged the rescue and rediscovery of this outsider woman Surrealist in terms of the theoretical priorities of the 1980s and 1990s. As Shaw points out, queer theory and postmodernist studies found in Cahun's work the perfect object, claiming her as a foremother for feminist performance artists' tendency to turn the camera on themselves as well as contemporary theoretical ideas about gender performativity and malleability. Shaw works against the grain of a literature that has explained the ill fit of Cahun's work within its own time by seeing it as ahead of its historical moment and, thus, better equipped to communicate with the late twentieth-century viewer.

Accounts that rely on the values of the present to rescue Cahun from obscurity, Shaw's study shows us, necessarily obfuscate Cahun's degree of engagement with her cultural present. In particular, they have failed to address the extent to which her work took shape in resistance to the specific ideologies about gender, sexuality, and love that governed Cahun's coming of age at the turn of the century and interwar adulthood. The very granularity of Shaw's account and the wide intellectual and discursive territory with which Shaw is able to show Cahun engaging—from the writings of Havelock Ellis to André Gide and from Symbolist poetry to interwar breastfeeding propaganda—show us just how much those accounts have been missing. By drawing our attention early on to a photograph of the montages of *Disavowals* displayed literally alongside the work of Max Ernst in a bookshop window in 1930, Shaw succinctly announces that her argument that Cahun's work can and “should hold its place alongside” (p. 1) the work of her Surrealist colleagues will be no mere work of revision. Rather, Shaw's aim is to reconnect us with the value Cahun had and sought to have in and for her own time.

Though critical of her culture, Shaw argues, Cahun was far from disconnected from it. Indeed, at every turn, Cahun sought to invite her contemporary reader/viewer into alternatives to the culture's dominant values around sexuality and the family. In Cahun's own words, she sought with *Disavowals* to “force [her] contemporaries out of their sanctimonious conformism, out of their complacency” (p. 2). Shaw thus reveals a central challenge or paradox of Cahun's project-to-be: can one craft a set of values that are discrete and insulated from those of the dominant culture while still making those alternative values legible to the members of the dominant culture?

Shaw contends that, in order to access the alternatives Cahun offers, the viewer must participate in a labor of unraveling Cahun's many connections to her contemporary world that takes and merits time. Shaw's commitment to taking this time accounts, perhaps, for the narrow scope of her study, which trains its focus singularly on *Disavowals*. In Shaw's own words, she seeks to produce “a guidebook” to Cahun's book (p. 5). Her analysis proceeds in the order of Cahun's own book, patiently taking her reading through it, chapter by chapter: Shaw's first chapter addresses Cahun's first, her second unpacks Cahun's second, and so on, until chapter four, which addresses Cahun's intertwined fourth and fifth chapters and chapter five, which addresses the remaining five chapters of Cahun's book. Since *Disavowals* is itself a kind of Bildungsroman (an “anti-autobiography,” in Shaw's words [p. 7]), which offers an account of the development of Cahun's intertwined sexuality and creativity from childhood, Shaw can simultaneously craft a thorough account of a single text while using that text to complicate our sense of Cahun as an artist. Through patient readings of the text and montages of *Disavowals*, Shaw raises questions that ramify through Cahun's broader project. Shaw is also a generous guide through Cahun's world. She balances out her subject's obliquity with a lucid, unpretentious writing style that brings the reader along with her, refusing to alienate. As it reconstructs contexts for Cahun's mysterious fragments, Shaw's “guidebook” seems designed to slow the contemporary reader down so that *Disavowals* might be able to do its work of crafting us “otherwise” (p. 1).

Yet the one-to-one correspondence of Shaw's study to its object leaves little room for the reader to maneuver the difficult territory of Cahun's work on her own. The reader wishes, at times, that Shaw had taken more liberties with Cahun's work rather than allowing its shape to determine that of her own. This structure can also have the opposite of its intended effect. While Shaw seeks to bring us into Cahun's world, she sometimes intercepts our access to it because we depend on her as interpreter of its “clues” (pp. 74, 196) and deliverer of its “answers” (p. 74). This organizational decision also produces some repetitions in Shaw's argument since, rather than offer us critical terms that pull together the conceptual threads of Cahun's work, Shaw follows the sequence of ideas prescribed by Cahun.

Shaw convincingly argues that Cahun's work took shape in resistance to contemporary discourses, from Havelock Ellis to Freud, which pathologized homosexuality, particularly lesbianism, as a form of narcissism or excessive self-regard that led women to shirk social roles structured around the care for others. Even more compelling than Shaw's marshalling of psychological discourses about narcissism,

however, is the way she locates these ideas about self-knowledge in the aesthetic discourses surrounding Cahun's literary upbringing (Cahun's uncle was the Symbolist poet Marcel Schwob). Conservative critics of Symbolism and Aestheticism, for instance, faulted Symbolism's commitment to *l'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake) as an inward-looking, self-centered movement that indulged in "egoism" (p. 86). By giving us a sense of this landscape, Shaw makes apparent the stakes of Cahun claiming the space of narcissism for herself, as a woman artist and as a lesbian. By insisting not only that she has a self, but a self "worthy of exploration" (p. 86), Cahun seizes a space typically reserved for the male poetic genius while, at the same time, resisting the construction of feminine desire around self-sacrifice and care for the Other. Shaw argues convincingly that Cahun's work reclaims narcissism as a legitimate form of desire and of artistic self-knowledge. In this way, her book makes the powerful case that if our contemporary criticism continues to balk at Cahun's "narcissism" or opacity, it will remain beholden to the gender prescriptions of the turn of the century.

Shaw also manages to defamiliarize Cahun's narcissism by revealing the surprising degree of skepticism Cahun seemed to have harbored about her favorite motif: her own image. Shaw calls this the "external" (p. 145) or, by way of Lacan, "specular" self (p. 143); that is, the self available to the eye of the Other and captured by photography and the mirror. But for Shaw's Cahun, it would seem, the specular self offered to the outside world may not, in fact, be the most significant locus of selfhood. Rather, we learn through Shaw's readings of Cahun's texts (particularly in chapter four) that the artist may have been more interested in the utterly personal process of self-regard embodied by her character Aurige. Shaw defines self-regard here as the sustained, difficult, and resistant practice of valuing oneself outside of the culture's norms and idealizations. Since this process unfolds internally, it eludes capture on film. As a result of Shaw's informed readings, Cahun's returns to and manipulations of her own image before the camera begin to seem less like a postmodern celebration of gender fluidity and performativity or of identity's existence on the surface and more like cynical meditations on the eye and the camera's shared gullibility (i.e., the gaze's ultimate impotence to grasp the self at all). The self, Shaw's Cahun seems to be telling us, is not a question of surface. The more times Cahun presents her "specular" self to the camera, the more she seems to be holding in reserve: "I...divide myself in order to conquer myself; multiply myself in order to make my mark" (p. 220).

Each of Shaw's chapters analyzes Cahun's texts in relation to the photomontages that appear at the head of each chapter. Shaw's discussions of the relationships between image and text are illuminating and well integrated. But her analyses of the montages' form in relation to their content tend to be less so. As Shaw reads the montages fragment to fragment, reconstructing contexts for them and unraveling their references, her readings can feel rebus-like. She does well with imagery and iconography but treats their compositions as an afterthought. Indeed, Shaw tends to reserve her discussions of the montages' form or the media of photography or photomontage for brief sections towards the end of each chapter.

Still, Shaw raises some fascinating questions about Cahun's engagement with the medium of photomontage that she might have pushed further. At one point, for instance, Shaw insinuates that the procedure of cutting bears a concrete, even mechanical, connection to Cahun's semantic opacity by highlighting the cut's decontextualizing power as she looks at the metaphor of shattered glass that appears in Cahun's second chapter. In a montage, "portions will read clearly, 'transparently,' whereas others will be so detached from their contexts as to be opaque... Thus, in [Cahun's] metaphor of the shattered glass, we have an emblem of Cahun's refusal to allow the text or images to be fully transparent" (pp. 91-92). In this moment, Shaw raises some compelling avenues of connection between Cahun's deployment of the medium of photomontage and the questions of selfhood and epistemology central to her study. Exploring these questions further might have enabled her study to define Cahun's unique contribution to that medium. Frustratingly, Shaw frequently notes such connections between form and content as "parallels" (pp. 88, 146) without digging deeper into their resonances.

---

One has the sense, finally, that Shaw could not count on a reader who, already convinced of the importance of Cahun's project, would take the time to unravel its references. While, at times, it can feel like Shaw is underestimating her reader, she is probably and unfortunately correct in her diagnosis. Her study provides convincing evidence that it is, in fact, well worth our while to stop and consider the project of Claude Cahun and to not let its difficulty deter us, even if--especially if--art historians will need to reconsider some disciplinary dogma in order to access what it is trying to tell us. For it is only if we take our time with Cahun's work, Shaw shows us, that we can allow it to shape us--as individuals and as art historians--"otherwise."

Tessa Paneth-Pollak  
Michigan State University  
[tpaneth@msu.edu](mailto:tpaneth@msu.edu)

Copyright © 2016 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172