Claude Cahun

24 May – 25 September 2011
Claude Cahun (1894-1954) has something approaching cult status in today’s art world. However, her work was almost unknown until the early 1980s, when it was championed by the research of François Leperlier, after which exhibitions at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Nantes (1994) and the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (1995) brought it to public attention. Her life and work (both literary and artistic) bespeak an extraordinary libertarian personality who defied sexual, social and ethical conventions in what was an age of avant-garde and moral upheaval. Among her many photographs, it is undoubtedly her self-portraits that have aroused the greatest interest in recent years. Throughout her life, Cahun used her own image to dismantle the clichés surrounding ideas of identity. She reinvented herself through photography, posing for the lens with a keen sense of performance and role-play, dressed as a woman or a man, as a maverick hero, with her hair long or very short, or even with a shaved head. This approach was extended in innovative ways in her photographs of objects and use of photomontages, which asserted the primacy of the imagination and of metamorphosis.

By exploring the many different analyses made of Cahun’s work since the 1990s, and ranging across its different themes: from the subversive self-portraits that question identity, to her surrealist compositions, erotic metaphors and political forays, this exhibition confirms the modernity of a figure who, as a pioneer of self-representation and the poetry of objects, has been an important influence for many contemporary artists.

**Metamorphoses of identity and the subversion of gender (I)**

This set of photographs, going from 1913 to the end of the 1920s, includes some of Cahun’s major works, in which she staged her own persona, emphasising disguise and masks, and working through variations on gender: feminine, masculine, androgynous, undifferentiated. Sexual ambiguity is consciously cultivated and calls into question established norms and conventions. In 1928, she even represented herself with her head shaved, wearing a singlet, in profile, or with her hands against her face, or wearing a loose man’s jacket. Some of the mise-en-scènes from this period seem to anticipate contemporary performance.

**Poetics of the object**

The “assemblages of objects,” which make their appearance in around 1925, inventively explore what at the time was still a rather new form. This work came to wider attention in the Surrealist exhibition at the Charles Ratton gallery, in May 1936, and then with the commissioning of 22 photographic plates to illustrate a book of poems by Lise Deharme, Le Cœur de Pic (1937), prefaced...
by Paul Eluard. These photographs capture ephemeral set-ups, often in a natural setting (garden, beach). Each “sketch” is a composition of heterogeneous elements, both found and made, such as knickknacks in spun glass, sewing items, twigs, bones, insects, feathers, gloves, pieces of fabric, shoes, tools, etc. This “theatre of objects” has both a visual and symbolic significance, which Cahun explained in her text Prenez garde aux objets domestiques (1936).

Metamorphoses of identity and the subversion of gender (continued)
The 1930s saw Cahun continuing to explore images of the self. However, questions of sexual difference and its social and cultural construction were now less to the fore as she went deeper into the potential of situations and disguises and experimented with duplication in a way that extended the work of the photomontages from the late 1920s.

Metaphors of desire
Eschewing the direct and sometimes reifying display of the female body found in many paintings and photographs, Cahun opted for a more subtle kind of “veiled eroticism” using distance and irony. Here we find some very evocative examples of her calculating games with desire. Whether through the contained display of the body, allegory (the bacchante or faun, surrounded by sensuous vegetation), or anthropomorphic objects (the hermaphroditic “père”), she aimed to capture the essence of desire, to bring out its essential grounding in fantasy.

The two of us. Claude Cahun and Suzanne Malherbe (Marcel Moore)
The photograph Entre nous (1926) clearly establishes the spirit of this section, which evokes various aspects of Claude Cahun’s intimate relationship and artistic collaboration with her partner, Suzanne Malherbe. In fact, a number of the photographs here were taken by Suzanne following Claude’s suggestions. A double portrait from 1921 shows a surprising parallel which could be read as a metaphor of their relationship, a deep closeness and understanding between two strong personalities. The linchpin of this section is constituted by the four photomontages used to illustrate Aveux non avenus (1930), Cahun’s most significant literary work, gathering together all the artist’s main themes and obsessive metaphors. The plates were executed by Moore in collaboration with Claude Cahun.

Elective encounters
This series of portraits, which reflect the importance of friendship in the development of Cahun’s work, gives an idea of the figures who were important to
her and influenced her, or to whom she felt close, among them Henri Michaux, Robert Desnos, André Breton, Jacqueline Lamba and Suzanne Malherbe. There are also two photographs from performances at Pierre Albert-Birot’s theatre Le Plateau (1929). They attest Cahun’s keen interest in theatre and acting.

**Poetry and politics**

In the 1930s Cahun’s positions grew increasingly radical in response to the rise of totalitarianism. She joined the Surrealists and associated with a number of groups on the left and far left. This radicalisation is reflected in her aesthetic. In line with the ideas put forward in her pamphlet *Les Paris sont ouverts* (1934), she exploited the subversive qualities of “indirect action” in the sphere of symbolic expression, making a number of objects in which poetry and politics are intimately intertwined. This process culminated when she used these pieces for two big series of photographs dominated by a mood of irony, revolt and provocation: “La Poupée” (The Doll), a figure fashioned out of newspaper, and “Le Théâtre” (The Theatre), a wooden mannequin surrounded by various elements and placed under a glass dome.

**Beyond the visible. The last self-portraits**

Close study of Cahun’s photographs reveals the presence of allusions to non-visible phenomena, pointing the way to other realities – and perhaps, too, beyond death. Her attraction to symbolism, her interest in Eastern doctrines and her closeness to Surrealism only confirmed the primacy of fantasy and metamorphosis evidenced in the intellectual and aesthetic approaches she took throughout her life. The series *Le Chemin des chats* (The Way of Cats, around 1949 and 1953), suggests a mediation on and questioning of reality and appearance. Cahun was a true cat lover: for her, this animal was the great intercessor, the medium of an intuitive contact between the visible and the invisible, leading to sensorial worlds that are both unfamiliar and yet very near.

Juan Vicente Aliaga and François Leperlier, curators of the exhibition
some dates

1894 Lucy Schwob born in Nantes on 25 October.
1909 Meets Suzanne Malherbe.
1912-1915 First writings and first photographs. Publication of Vues et Visions in Le Mercure de France.
1917 Lucy adopts the pseudonym Claude Cahun. Studies literature and philosophy.
1922-1925 Contributes to various journals. Meets Henri Michaux.
1929 Acts in several productions at the Le Plateau theatre.
1930 Publishes Aveux non avenus (Disavowals) with a preface by Mac Orlan and illustrated by photomontages made with Suzanne (who signs as “Moore”).
1932 Meets André Breton and joins the Surrealist movement.
1934 Publishes a polemical essay, Les Paris sont ouverts, in which she attacks the cultural policies of the Communist Party. Close friendship with René Crevel.
1936 Has several objects in the Surrealist exhibition at the Charles Ratton gallery.
1937 Publication of Le Coeur de Pic, a volume of poems by Lise Deharme illustrated by Claude Cahun’s photographs. Moves to Jersey.
1940-1945 Having been politically active against the German occupying forces in Jersey, Cahun is arrested by the Gestapo. She is not released until 8 May 1945.
1954 Dies in Jersey on 8 December.

around the exhibition

I reading/performance by the Théâtre du Chat Huant company around excerpts from Héroïnes, the book published by Claude Cahun in 1925.
Friday 27 May 2011, 7pm
Saturday 24 September, 5pm

I symposium “Art, history, politics: contemporary interactions and reflections,” moderated by art historian Elvan Zabunyan.

Session 2: “Deconstructing clichés,” with Angela Ferreira, artist, Thierry Hoquet, philosopher, Griselda Pollock, art historian and critic, and Santu Mofokeng, artist.
Claude Cahun and Santu Mofokeng are two avant-garde photographers from totally different historical and cultural backgrounds, but both show a way of going beyond sexual and racial clichés. This symposium will refer to their experiences in order to deconstruct the stereotypes that beset all thinking on “gender” and “race.”
Friday 17 June, 6pm

I guided tour with Juan Vicente Aliaga.
Tuesday 6 September 2011, 7pm

I projection of La Dame masquée by Victor Tourjansky (1924, B/W, 87”), with costumes designed by Claude Cahun. Presented by François Leperlier and Danièle Hibon.
Tuesday 20 September 2011, 7pm
Jeu de Paume – Concorde
1 Place de la Concorde, 75008 Paris
access via the Tuileries Gardens,
Rue de Rivoli entrance
www.jeudepaume.org
information +33 (0)1 47 03 12 50
Tuesday (late opening) noon–9pm
Wednesday to Friday noon–7pm
Saturday and Sunday 10am–7pm
closed Monday

exhibitions: admission: €8.50; concessions: €5.50
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Mardis Jeunes: free admission for students
and visitors under 26 every last Tuesday
of the month from 5pm to 9pm
tours: free on presentation of exhibition ticket
performances: free admission (by reservation
on infoauditorium@jeudepaume.org)
symposia/projections: €3 per session /
free on presentation of exhibition ticket

exhibitions
24 May – 25 September 2011
• Claude Cahun
• Santu Mofokeng, Chasing Shadows:
  30 Years of Photographic Essays
• Satellite Programme, France Fiction:
  Billes-Club Concordance Accident

until 16 September 2011
• Virtual Space, “Side Effects” cycle:
  Precarious Identities

Tours for individual visitors*
with guides from Jeu de Paume
Wednesday and Saturday at 12.30pm

Family Tours*
Saturday at 3.30pm

Mardis Jeunes Tours**
by the presented artists
every last Tuesday of the month at 7pm

upcoming exhibitions
18 October 2011 – 5 February 2012
• Diane Arbus
• Satellite Programme, Audrey Cottin

publication: Claude Cahun
Texts by Juan Vicente Aliaga, Patrice Allain,
Tirza T. Latimer and François Leperlier
co-edition Hazan / Éditions du Jeu de Paume
170 illustrations, 240 pages, 21.5 x 27.5 cm, €35

Jeu de Paume – hors les murs

exhibition
19 June – 6 November 2011
• The Republic of Amateurs
Château de Tours
25 Avenue André Malraux, 37000 Tours
Information +33 (0)2 47 70 88 46
Tuesday to Sunday 1pm–6pm
admission: €3; concessions: €1.50

* free admission on presentation of exhibition ticket (valid on the day
of purchase only) and for members; Family Tours, by reservation on
+33 (0)1 47 03 12 41 / serviceeducatif@jeudepaume.org
** free admission for students and visitors under 26

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