



Transformation

Claude Cahun

Self-portrait (as a young girl) (1914, cat.8) is one of the earliest extant examples of a Cahun self-portrait. In common with the majority of self-portraits produced in her lifetime the likelihood is that, although the concept was Cahun's, the photograph was taken by her partner, Marcel Moore. Photographed from above, lying on a pillow, Cahun stares directly at the photographer or viewer. The image exists in negative and print form, with the negative revealing a wider shot and a hand-drawn rectangle to indicate the crop that was made for the final print. In this symmetrical composition Cahun's head, with her wild hair, Medusa-like, spread out across the pillow, appears disembodied, as though she's floating above the sheets. The young artist has a haunted look, older than her years. Between the ages of fifteen and eighteen she had displayed suicidal tendencies and was diagnosed with anorexia. Perhaps this image, in which she looks like an invalid in a hospital bed, references these periods of ill health.

The following year Cahun's literary career was already under way when she created *Self-portrait (reading, with L'Image de la femme)* (The image of woman) (1915, cat.9). In 1914 she had enrolled in a literature and philosophy course at the Sorbonne, and her first article, 'Vues et visions', was published in a French literary magazine. In the same year she wrote the semi-biographical text 'Les Jeux uraniens', using the pseudonym Claude Cahun for the first time.¹ The serious, academic mood of this self-portrait contrasts with the more playful photographs Gillian Wearing has described taking with her friends at a similar age. The image shows Cahun in her early twenties seated at a desk, dressed in a sailor suit. On the desk are two large tomes, one of which is clearly titled *L'Image de la femme*.² A box camera sits on the desk beside Cahun. It is with this camera that Cahun and Moore would go on to challenge the female stereotypes highlighted in the book and create their own responses. Unlike Wearing's *Me as an artist in 1984* (2014, cat.23), in which Wearing re-enacts a photograph of herself at twenty-one, before she was fully aware of her own destiny, Cahun at a similar age appears to have a clear sense of who she is and where she is going. *Self-portrait (reading, with L'Image de la femme)* (The image of woman) is a conscious performance on Cahun's part, and the image reveals both her love of literature and interest in photography at a formative age. The sailor suit she wears also hints at the androgynous figure she is to become. Although the sailor dress became a popular mode of dress for young girls around this time, Cahun wears the sailor suit that was more popular with boys. Some years later, she was to make another self-portrait wearing a sailor suit. In *Self-portrait (in sailor hat)* (c.1920, fig.6) both the outfit and the stance contribute to making this an unequivocally male portrait.

The guise Cahun adopts in both *Self-portrait (in turban)* (1913, cat.11) and the tableau scene, *Self-portrait (in an Orientalist setting)* (1916, cat.10), suggests that she may have been influenced by her Orientalist

great-uncle, Léon Cahun. In *Self-portrait (in turban)* Cahun wears a turban with a jewelled ornament on her forehead and strings of beads around her neck, projecting an exotic and feminine image. Cahun has been compared in this self-portrait to the beautiful dancer and courtesan Cléo de Mérode, who was popular at the time.³

In *Self-portrait (seated on granite rocks)* (c.1915–17, cat.13), Cahun has cropped her long hair so that she looks like a young boy. In this early example of Cahun using the beach as a backdrop for her portraits, she looks out at the photographer, who was probably Moore. Her partner's presence is felt in the form of her shadow in the bottom right-hand corner of the photograph. In *Self-portrait (hand on breast)* (c.1916, cat.12), Cahun adopts a more mannered, classical pose. The robe she wears has a Grecian appearance, and her skin looks bronzed, either by the sun or the use of make-up. Again she uses a stone wall on the beach as a backdrop. Her head and gaze are directed downwards, suggesting a moment of reflection.

Self-portrait (against granite wall) (1916, cat.14) is one of the first examples of Cahun's transformation into a gender-neutral figure. She wears a masculine shirt and braces. Her shaved head emphasises the symmetry and beauty of her face, as well as creating a politically charged androgynous look. Her gaze is internalised and not directed at the viewer. *Self-portrait (plaited fringe)* (1917, cat.16) in which Cahun holds her right arm above her head, reveals a more self-conscious pose. The inclusion of a constructed backdrop is a new development in her work, although the cloth appears makeshift. Cahun's hair is slightly longer than in *Self-portrait (against granite wall)*, and her headdress creates a more feminine appearance.

Self-portrait (seated cross-legged on beach) (1923, cat.17) is an example of Cahun's early experiments with the performative in an outdoor setting, in this case the beach, a backdrop she revisits in later works. Cahun and Moore spent time at the harbour town of Le Croisic in western France and on the beaches of Jersey, and the setting for this portrait is likely to be one of those locations. The artist adopts a fluid pose that is almost balletic. The sculptural form of her head is delineated by a swimming cap, which contributes to her androgynous appearance.

In *Self-portrait (shaved head, material draped across body)* (c.1920, cat.15), Cahun, set against a dark backdrop, presents herself like a sculpted bust, defined by the black line of her top against her porcelain-white skin. The image has a contemporary feel and could almost be a portrait of the late fashion editor and muse Isabella Blow. In conversation about this work Wearing has commented: 'There's a sense in her eyes of a vulnerable interiority.'

Self-portrait (shaved head, looking over left shoulder) (cat.19) and *Self-portrait (head between hands)* (cat.18), both dating from c.1920, are more staged and stripped back than Cahun's earlier works. Her black

vest, worn against her white skin, creates a monochromatic look of stark contrasts. Her distinctive profile, with her birdlike hooked nose, has been compared to that of her father, Maurice (*Self-portrait (in profile, wearing corduroy jacket)* (c.1919, cat.20) and fig.7).⁴ The transformation from feminine boy to gender-neutral figure is complete. In *Self-portrait (head between hands)* it is as though she is holding a mask of her face. As Wearing comments: 'It's almost like she's in a Greek play, and she's put the head on. You can almost detach it from the body. Because the hands look real, the body looks real – but the face doesn't.'

Sarah Howgate



1 Claude is a gender-neutral forename, which can be male or female in France. Cahun was the surname of her paternal uncle, Léon, and grandmother Mathilde.

2 *L'Image de la femme* (1899) is a two-volume, illustrated publication written by Armand Dayot that includes cameo portraits of exemplary women throughout the ages, from Penelope, faithful wife of Odysseus, to Empress Eugénie, wife of Napoleon III and last empress consort of France.

3 Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'The Equivocal "I": Claude Cahun as Lesbian Subject' in *Inverted Odysseys: Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, Cindy Sherman*, ed. Shelley Rice (The MIT Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London, 1999).

4 Louise Downie, 'Sans Nom: Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore', *Jersey Heritage Trust: Heritage Magazine*, 2005, p.9.

Cat.8 *Self-portrait (as a young girl)*, 1914, CC



← Cat.9 *Self-portrait (reading, L'Image de la femme)*
(The image of woman), 1915, CC

↑ Fig.6 *Self-portrait (in sailor hat)*, c.1920, CC



← Cat.10 *Self-portrait (in an Orientalist setting)*, 1916, CC

↑ Cat.11 *Self-portrait (in turban)*, 1913, CC



← Cat.12 *Self-portrait (hand on breast)*, c.1916, CC

↑ Cat.13 *Self-portrait (seated on granite rocks)*, c.1915–17, CC



↑ Cat.14 *Self-portrait (against granite wall)*, 1916, CC

→ Cat.15 *Self-portrait (shaved head, material draped across body)*, c.1920, CC





← Cat.16 *Self-portrait (plaited fringe)*, 1917, CC

↑ Cat.17 *Self-portrait (seated cross-legged on beach)*, 1923, CC



← Cat.18 *Self-portrait (head between hands)*, c.1920, CC

↑ Cat.19 *Self-portrait (shaved head, looking over left shoulder)*, c.1920, CC



← Cat.20 *Self-portrait (in profile, wearing corduroy jacket), c.1919, CC*

↑ Fig.7 *Maurice Schwob, Cahun's father by an unknown photographer, 1917*