



Women on the Rise!

TEACHING INSTRUCTIONS: Claude Cahun

THEMES:

- Performance of gender
- Surrealist art making practices
- New Woman movement
- World War II

FEATURED WORKS:

No specific works—instructor's choice

RESOURCES:

Links to images

- http://www.jerseyheritagetrust.org/collections/fame/cahun_gallery.html
- http://www.nyu.edu/greyart/exhibits/odysseys/images/cahun/body_cahun.html

Books

- *Inverted Odysseys: Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, Cindy Sherman*
Edited by Shelley Rice (1999): MIT Press
- *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation*
Edited by Whitney Chadwick (1998): MIT Press
- *Claude Cahun: A Sensual Politics of Photography* by Gen Doy (2008):
I.B. Tauris
- Documentary Film: *Lover Other: The Story of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore* directed by Barbara Hammer (2006)

DISCUSSION POINTS AND QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS:

- Formulate questions about how Cahun constructs characters using makeup, clothes, photographic effects, and settings.
- Prompt students to describe the “personalities” of several figures in Cahun’s work.
- How do people “perform” identity? (e.g. modes of dress, taste in music, hobbies, with whom they associate)
- Do Cahun’s images remind them of other types of artistic production such as theatre, film, and/or fashion photography? How?
- Why do you think Cahun titled many of her works “Self-Portrait” when they feature such different personas?

MATERIALS FOR HANDS-ON PROJECT: Claude Cahun

Surrealist Photo-Collage

- Assortment of masks
- Camera (digital or film)
- Printer and paper (photo paper not necessary)
- Metallic markers
- Heavy black paper
- Mirrors of various sizes (optional)
- Embellishing materials such as ribbon (optional)
- Mirror paper (optional)
- Glue
- Scissors
- Access to a photocopier

PROCEDURE FOR HANDS-ON PROJECT:

The hands-on component of this lesson is based on Cahun's photographs and surrealist collages.

- The class will be formed in groups of 2-3
- Students will take turns wearing masks and assuming various poses in relation to props such as mirrors and other objects in the space
- Partnering students will photograph the "performers"
- After the film is printed / developed students will manipulate their images using a photocopier by changing the size ratios and contrast. Students should create multiple copies of each variation for use in the collage.
- Students will use the metallic markers, photocopies, original photos, and other embellishing materials to create a multi-layered surrealist collage.

APPLICABLE NATIONAL VISUAL ARTS STANDARDS (GRADES 5 -12):

- NA—VA.5-8.1 (9-12.1): Understanding and Applying Media, Techniques, and Processes
- NA—VA.5-8.3 (9-12.3): Choosing and Evaluating A Range of Subject Matter, Symbols, and Ideas
- NA—VA.5-8.4 (9-12.4): Understanding the Visual Arts in Relation to History and Cultures



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STUDENT HAND OUT: **Claude Cahun**

Claude Cahun (b. 1894—Nantes, France)

Claude Cahun lived and worked on the island of Jersey, located off the coast of Northern France, from the 1920s through the 1950s. Her work included photography, collage, and theatrical set design. She is best known for her photographs and collages, in which she uses masks, props, and makeup to create different identities and characters.

Cahun was considered part of the “new woman” movement of the 1920s in Europe. “New woman” was a term used to describe women who chose to pursue educational, artistic, and professional goals instead of playing the role of wife and mother that society expected them to fulfill. Although the situation for women in Europe was improving, Jewish people were in serious danger due to the rise of Nazi Germany during World War II. Much of her work was destroyed when the Germans occupied Jersey and pillaged her home.

Cahun’s work has been described as Surrealist. Surrealism is a style of art that developed in Europe in the 1920s as a response to the violence of the World Wars. The artists of the Surrealist movement believed that the increasing **industrialization** of the world and the rise of “rational” thought over instinct were partly to blame for the wars. Surrealist artists responded to the disturbing realities of war by creating art that explored dreams and the unconscious. They believed that art could expose truth and used experimental methods such as collage and **automatic drawing**.

Cahun used her body to play with the idea of **gender**, as she created male, female, and **androgynous** characters. For artists such as Cahun, personal identity is a performance, something that can be staged and transformed. Cahun’s work portrays gender and “self” as a masquerade. Many contemporary women artists are inspired by Cahun’s work because it presents female identity in a new way and explores the universal question “Who am I?”

Vocabulary

Industrialization-Historical period when the economy in Europe became focused on manufacturing (creating items in a factory) with machines as opposed to farming and creating goods by hand.

Automatic drawing - In automatic drawing, the artist’s hand is allowed to move “randomly” across the paper to create marks.

Androgynous-Having both male and female characteristics.

Gender¹-Unlike “sex”, which refers to the biological concept of male and female, gender defines aspects of *being* a man or woman in society.

¹ Definition adapted from *Gender Matters in Art Education* (2007) by Martin Rosenberg and Frances Thurber.