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| Cahun, Claude (1894-1953) |
| **[Enter any *variant forms* of your headword – OPTIONAL]** |
| One of the emblematic figures of the French Avant-Garde, Claude Cahun was born Lucy Renée Mathilde Schwab on 25 October 1894 in Nantes, the niece of the modernist writer Marcel Schwob and daughter of Maurice Schwob, who directed the journal *Le Phare de la Loire*. Educated in France and Britain, she started publishing in the *Mercure de France* under the pseudonym ‘Claude Courlis’, then, from 1917, as Claude Cahun, a sexually ambivalent pen name that reflected her provocative stance on gender identity. |
| One of the emblematic figures of the French Avant-Garde, Claude Cahun was born Lucy Renée Mathilde Schwab on 25 October 1894 in Nantes, the niece of the modernist writer Marcel Schwob and daughter of Maurice Schwob, who directed the journal *Le Phare de la Loire*. Educated in France and Britain, she started publishing in the *Mercure de France* under the pseudonym ‘Claude Courlis’, then, from 1917, as Claude Cahun, a sexually ambivalent pen name that reflected her provocative stance on gender identity.  File: Claude Cahun.jpg  Claude Cahun  Source: Image available at <http://www.twinfactory.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/ordinary.jpg>  Cahun first came to prominence in the 1920s when she settled with her life-long partner and stepsister, Suzanne Malherbe (pen name: Marcel Moore), in Paris, and designed the costumes for *The Masked Lady* (1924), a film by Viktor Turjansky (Abel Gance’s future assistant for *Napoleon* – 1927). She then published a series of texts on female mythological characters and artists (from Eve to Dalilah and Sappho), entitled *Les Héroïnes* (The Heroines) in *Mercure de France* in 1925. Although her early work included both fictional writing and photography, she is best remembered for her series of photographic self-portraits which stage transsexuality in a manner reminiscent of Marcel Duchamp’s cross-dressing experiments as his female persona, *Rrose Sélavy* (a pun on ‘Eros, c’est la vie’ or ‘Eros, that’s life). However, Cahun’s highly elaborate play on double images, mirror effects and constantly alternating gender roles predates Duchamp’s morphing into the opposite sex in 1921-22 by a decade. As early as 1912-1913, she started photographing herself wearing stylized or caricaturized ‘gender-coded’ costumes and make-up that radically subverted conventional perceptions of femininity. These images confront the viewer with a burlesque objectification of male desire in the form of a succession of characters or female ‘masks’ that properly belong in the circus, the pantomime or the puppet theatre.  In 1928, Cahun joined the theatre company *Le Plateau*, run by the avant-garde writer Pierre Albert-Birot, and acted in the play *Blue Beard* that Birot directed in 1929. This experience can be said to have shaped her distinctive approach to photography as a means of exploring gender identity, through carefully staged self-portraits which prefigure the work of contemporary artists such as Cindy Sherman and Francesca Woodman. Circumventing the sado-masochistic innuendo of Hans Bellmer’s eroticised puppets, Cahun’s impersonations of the ingénue, which compete in her photographic works with a wide range of male and non-gender specific personas, point to an unstable sexual determination. One of her photomontages from *Aveux non avenus* [Inappropriate Confessions], a book of essays and recorded dreams published in 1930, features a column of overlapping heads reduced to eyes or mouths in the manner of masks (cut out from her previous self-portraits), and carries the inscription: ‘Under this mask another mask. I shall never finish stripping away all these faces’. Cahun was a member of the Surrealist movement from 1932 when she joined the AEAR (The Association of Revolutionary Writers and Artists) and met André Breton.  Having bought a farm in Jersey and settled there with her partner in 1937, Cahun became an active member of the Resistance during the German Occupation (1940-1945). In 1944 she and Suzanne were arrested and sentenced to death, but the sentences were never carried out. Cahun's health never fully recovered from her treatment in jail, and she died in 1954. Her work has only been rediscovered over the past two decades, and since 1994 has been made the object of several major exhibitions in Paris, London and New York. During her lifetime, Claude Cahun participated in the Surrealist Objects Exhibition in Paris and in the International Surrealist Exhibition at the Burlington Galleries in London in 1936.  List of Works  Claude Cahun, *Héroïnes*: *'Eve la trop crédule*', *'Dalila, femme entre les femmes'*, *'La Sadique Judith*', '*Hélène la rebelle'*, *'Sapho l'incomprise*', *'Marguerite, sœur incestueuse*', '*Salomé la sceptique*', Mercure de France, No. 639, 1 February 1925.  *Récits de rêve*, in the special edition Les rêves, Le Disque vert, Third year, Book 4, No. 2, 1925  *Aveux non avenus*, Editions du Carrefour, 1930.  *Frontière Humaine*, self-portrait, Bifur, No. 5, April 1930  *Contre le fascisme Mays aussi contre l'impérialisme francais* (AEAR), Feuille rouge, No. 4, May 1933.  Lise Deharme, *Le Cœur de Pic*, 32 illustrated with 20 photos by Claude Cahun, Paris: José Cortis, 1937. |
| Further reading:  (Cole)  (Cottingham)  (Rice)  (Latimer)  (Monahan) |