Claude Cahun and Marcel Duchamp:

Him & Her & Her & Him

Maia M. Lee

AH400: Thesis

Dr. Janet Kaplan

12/15/04

"I wish I could change my sex as often as I change my shirt." – André Breton[i]

Through this casual statement of a desire to explore sexual change, André Breton, the prime theorist of Surrealism, invites inquiry into the possibility that gender, widely understood as a set of mutually exclusive binary opposites --male/female-- might instead be more fluid and open to change and individual preference. Early French Surrealist artists Claude Cahun and Marcel Duchamp use their own bodies and self-portrait images as vehicles through which to explore such gender constructs. Cahun presents herself in various guises that operate along a male to female spectrum as a reaction to popular notions of gender polarities and in an attempt to embody the genders of British sexologist and theorist Havelock Ellis' "mixed or intermediate sexual anomalies."[ii] In a related, but different move, Marcel Duchamp creates the persona of Rrose Sélavy, who he uses as an alias, a collaborator, and as a female alter ego, and presents the popular understanding of male and female, seemingly influenced by Viennese psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, as separate in a way that destabilizes our cultural understanding of gender. Using their various mediums and modes, both artists actively choose a gender, be it male, female, or a combination thereof, and carry its portrayal to such an extreme that their self-portrait works ultimately become a performance of gender.

When looking at these manifestations of gender identity, a distinction between sex and gender is important to understand. While sex is based on an anatomical and biological makeup, gender can be understood as a social construct of personal identity theorized to be structured around anatomical sexual distinctions and manifested in a

display of indicators. Both Cahun and Duchamp use the adoption, display, and performance of gender roles through such indicators as a device in their art in a way that one might see as allowing them to fulfill Breton's wish to change gender identity, ironically, as easily as one's clothes. Cahun's performance exists in the portrayal of herself along a spectrum of male to female, and in an array from the mundane and ordinary to a theatrical display of multi-gendered personas; Duchamp's creation of the separate persona Rrose Sélavy as his female counter-part in a photographic series of her and in the application of her name as the signature on multiple works functions as a performance of gender in that it is a display of her independent presence through a feminine name and feminine appearance in juxtaposition to the knowledge of Duchamp as a man.

Cahun and Duchamp's work also serves as a response to cultural trends that these psychological theories provoked. Ellis proposes the state of "gyandromorphism"[iii], not as a negation of sexual differentiation, but as the possibility of a fusion of gender opposites, or what can be conceptualized as a Third sex[iv]. This avant-garde approach to gender is seen in opposition to the popular view of Freudian theory, in which gender is either male or female with no possibility for an integration of the two. Both perceptions of sex and gender were interpreted different by the public, and the ideas they provoked served as a source for inspiration among a number of artists in Surrealist circles.

Claude Cahun (1894-1954), a French photographer, using her own body as her subject, dressed and positioned herself in various gendered roles that display an array of possibilities for combinations of masculine and feminine identification. Cahun was inspired by Havelock Ellis' concept of sex and gender as malleable, which she literally

tried to embody in her work. Through her self-portrait photographs, Cahun enacts a range of gendered positions as a means to identify herself as existing among Ellis' alternative possibilities. Cahun had long been interested in Ellis' theories. Under her given name of Lucy Schwob, she translated a part of his text The Study of Social Psychology into French as "La Femme dans la Société," vol. 1 of L'hygiene sociale: Etudes de psychologie which appeared in Le Mercure de France in 1929.

Havelock Ellis' theories deviated from the popular understanding of gender and sex. Publishing writings on the study of sex at a time when many were in fear of violating obscenity charges, Ellis' scientific interest toward a personal and socially taboo subject deemed him a controversial figure toward the end of the 19th Century. His first major work of writing was Sexual Inversion in 1896 (partially co-written by John Symonds), which he later integrated into his larger seven volume Studies in the Psychology of Sex. In these writings, Ellis broached the tricky topic of sex and the notion of it as binary. He wrote, "We may not know exactly what Sex is; but we do know that it is mutable, with the possibility of one sex being changed into the other sex, that its frontiers are often uncertain, and that there are many stages between a complete male and a complete female."[v] With this proposition, Ellis offers an allowance for an indeterminacy of sex. Or what others, like Cahun, theorize as a Third sex, where neither masculine nor feminine qualities would be dominant but their attributes combined in one form. François Leperlier, Cahun's one and only biographer to date, wrote, "By way of dressing up or stripping down, Claude Cahun was forever casting roles, creating more identities, and taking to the 'indeterminateness', of which she dreamed of making a Third gender. In effect, she aspired to a cross-over and a transfiguration of all genders:

homosexuality, bisexuality, androgyny… The angel's sex!"[vi] In presenting the possibility of multiple sexes beyond the biologically defined male and female, Ellis offers just such possibility for gendered identities beyond male and female, as Cahun depicts**.**

Not only did Ellis's writings resonate with Cahun to the extent that she translated his work, but it is clear that his theories permeated her life and her art. Although born as Lucy Renée Mathilde Schwob in Nantes, she chose the neutrally gendered name of Claude Cahun around 1917 as an embrace of this concept of gender fluidity by taking the last name of her maternal grandmother. In addition to taking on a gender-ambiguous name, she lived in a gender-ambiguous body, adopting a personal appearance ranged from the stereotypical feminine female to the male Dandy, the latter a feminized male form associated with aristocracy that became prominent in Europe in the early 19th century. By the beginning of the 20th century women had begun to adopt the Dandy form, resulting in the formation of *la garçonne*, or the "new woman," whose masculine eroticism reflected the collapse of boundaries between men and women in social spheres, and the collapse of male and female as binary gender identities.[vii] In some of her photographs, Cahun enacts this role of *la garçonne*.

Cahun had shortly cropped hair and a thin physique. She went beyond the popular female coif of a bobbed haircut and kept her hair extremely short, occasionally shorn. In her photographs she acknowledges her femininity at times by wearing makeup and lipstick, but for the most part remains mysterious and aloof, as she does not fully inform the viewer with a complete set of socially recognized feminine attributes. Her large nose and unrevealing facial features allowed for a cross over of masculine and feminine classification. The way she maintained the body she lived in, acclimating to the

fashion of the Dandy, alludes to an interest in androgyny. Cahun's ability to exist between two genders was perpetuated in art history literature where until the 1990's, she was referred to as male. Terese Lichtenstein, an art historian specializing in women's art, and critic for *Art Forum* magazine wrote, "The ignorance about Cahun is such that there are source books on Surrealism that refer to her as a man."[viii] Based on the way she portrayed herself in her photography, it is an easy mistake to make, given her embrace of Ellis' theory of the limitless boundaries of sex in her many modes of self-portrayal in an ambiguous and multi-gendered body. In her earlier photographs, Cahun portrays herself as neither complete male nor complete female, but existing somewhere in Ellis's stages between the two.

In Cahun's self-portrait photographs, most of which are titled *Auto-portrait*, the viewer is unsure if the figure they are looking at is male or female. In Figure 1 (1920) Cahun appears with an almost freshly shaved head before a stone wall. The hardness of the surface behind her fits the toughness to her gaze. She confronts the viewer, seemingly angry, but with her non-chalant gesture of leaning against a wall, the attitude conveyed is one of indifference or slight irritation. In this photo, Cahun's female form is masked beneath her sweater, with the only indicators that she might be a woman resting in the scarf over her shoulders and the bow tied around the collar of the sweater. Here we see Cahun at the age of 26, an age when most bodies have fully matured, but Cahun's is just coming into its ambiguity.

In Figure 2 (1920) Cahun is depicted sitting in profile to the camera. She appears with a completely shaved head sitting cross-legged, her form virtually masked as she is wrapped in what looks to be a large coat, and wearing matching pants. The light hits her

face, emphasizing the masculine jagged lines of her profile. She appears as a solitary figure, not reaching out to the viewer but involved in personal thought. She is self-contained and independent, masculine in her seclusion, as in Figure 3 (c. 1921) where she stands facing the viewer, staring seriously as she is dressed as a Dandy in another suit. Here we see Cahun begins to embrace a popular but atypical mode of gender identification for women at the time, however she does not yet abandon the embodiment a purely ambiguous gender.

In *Que me veux-tu?* (c. 1928) (translated in English as *What Do You Want From Me?*) (Figure 4) Cahun fuses two photographs of her shaved head into one image. They appear against a neutral background, forcing the viewer to focus on the heads as subject matter. The two heads appear neither feminine nor masculine but somewhere in between. Both heads and necks stem from an overlapping set of shoulders, appearing to be looking in the general direction of each other, but avoiding actual eye contact. The title leads the viewer to believe this question is being posed between the two personas in the image, that it is a display of Cahun looking into herself at some other self, asking and looking for answers. On the other hand, viewing the title as a question being posed to the viewer, it can be seen as Cahun's reaction to the social demands of the time, requiring that she identify with one gender or the other, thus the photograph can be read as an image of Cahun looking into herself to see what she might offer to such demands, looking at herself in search of what the viewer would prefer to see.

Not all of Cahun's photographs rest entirely in that rich area between male and female. As her work progresses, Cahun begins to align herself with stereotypical notions of male and female. In her essay “The Equivocal ‘I’: Claude Cahun as Lesbian Subject”

art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau wrote, "Cahun also performed as an actor in the short-lived, symbolist-influenced, experimental theater of Bierre Albert-Birot."[ix] Whether it be because of her involvement in the theatre or her desire to change, it is my view that Cahun realized her potential as a physical blank canvas, and chose to take the appearance of her physical and gender identity to a level of performance, taking on overtly male, female, or gender-neutral forms. In Figure 5 (c. 1927), Cahun stares out blankly in what appears to be a meditative state as she depicts herself as the eastern male deity, Buddha. Obviously dressed in costume with her reflective top, long beads, cap, and makeup avant-garde even for the Parisian social scene, she portrays herself as a figure above the physical realm of body and gender, and capable of existing as nothing other than itself. In "Heroines" Cahun's collection of short stories, she identifies with other recognized forms ranging from The Virgin Mary, Sappho, and Cinderella to Helen of Troy, Delilah, and the Androgyne.

In contrast to this depiction of herself as bound to neither sex nor gender, Cahun appears hyper sexualized in Figure 6 (c. 1927), as a type of boy-girl. She is seated, dressed in a white suit with black shorts, with a barbell across her lap. She stares out at the viewer with an inviting gaze, pouting her rouged lips, with hearts for dimples painted on her cheeks, and short but styled hair. Then we look on her shirt, and see nipples painted onto her flat chest with the words "I AM IN TRAINING DON'T KISS ME" scrawled above a pair of lips, with a heart drawn on her leg as well. Here Cahun invites a sexual gaze onto her male/female body while repelling it with a sign that only reinforces sexual thought. Cahun employs stereotypes of femininity and masculinity as a shorthand for gender attribution. Through her seated pose, she is complacent and feminine, while

masculine in her gaze. We see her in this costume again in Figure 7 (c. 1927) actively lifting her barbells. Cahun takes this stereotypically masculine portrayal of strength and feminizes it through her costume and gesture of ease and allure. She depicts the act of lifting barbells as a performance of masculinity as she mocks it through her feminine costume and playfully sexual gesture.

In *Auto-portrait* (1928) (Figure 8) Cahun is standing in front of a vanity mirror, looking out at the viewer with the other side of her face reflected in the mirror and looking away. With this Cahun plays with a feminine appearance while holding onto the idea of ambiguity. She appears with shortly cropped hair, wearing a checkered coat that offers no hints concerning her sex from her form, leading the viewer's focus to rest on her face and rely on the information one can pull from it alone. Looking out at the viewer with a masculine authority as she clutches her lapel, Cahun's gender is not set as she mixes a masculine presence with feminine attributes in her lipstick and coat. Her reflection shows a more feminine face gazing away in a timid manner, with the delicacy of her neck exposed and the ring on her hand more visible. Cahun combines popular gender binaries into one form through this depiction of herself as existing somewhere in between the face gazing out at the viewer and the face in the reflection looking away. She emphatically presents the issue of gender in her striking presence as central through a variety of means, which are confrontational, theatrical and performative.

Cahun's alliance with stereotypically gendered personas increases as she moves toward more traditional depictions of male and female. She appears dressed in a collared shirt, tie, and jacket in Figure 9 (c. 1929), interacting with the camera through her carefree gaze, undeniably portraying herself as male. The photograph is cropped,

offering no information regarding the body attached to the face portrayed, save for the clues that Cahun has left us with.

Further using costume to push notions of gender identity, we see Cahun taking on the identity of a young girl in Figure 10 (c. 1932), with curly blonde hair held back in a bow. Here she positions herself within a bureau, eyes closed, as if she were hiding from something and fell asleep, or was just recovered from having been shut away. With her limp gesture, closed eyes, and feminine coif, Cahun resembles a doll that has been forgotten and/or rediscovered. Again Cahun appears as a woman as she is photographed laying on the beach in Figure 11 (1937) wearing a woman's bathing suit, displaying herself as potentially hurt, lying lifeless in the sand, wrapped and caught in seaweed skeins. Although her back is turned to us, here she is a stereotypical female from the tip of her swimming cap to the delicacy of her feet. She is seen laying lifelessly, a victim to her circumstances. Cahun is similarly confined in Figure 12 (1938) where she is seen again, hyper feminized with curly blond hair and lipstick, seated on a windowsill, withheld from the outside by the bars in the windows. She looks down, as if in submission with silent muted anguish. Due to the setting and the cropping of this photograph, Cahun appears trapped in this stereotypical female form. It is in these hyper-feminine forms that her gaze ceases to be confrontational. All of Cahun's hyper-feminine forms appear to be either helpless or in some sort of peril. Where before it was Cahun's relentless gaze that was the cause of discomfort, it is now the lack of interaction with the viewer that creates a sense of unease.

Through her embraces of the extremes of male and female, Cahun does not deny the sexual poles, but utilizes them in addition to androgyny to perpetuate the idea of

male, female, and everything in between. It is apparent in these works that Cahun uses clothing as a device, performing her gender of choice. Through the use of conventional clothing as indicators of gender, Cahun plays with the viewer's understanding of her potential sex. She uses costume as a way of taking on social ideas of gender codes so that she will be recognized as different levels of male or female, as she so chooses, and as a device for breaking traditional gender roles. By dressing her anatomically female body in men's clothes, she allows herself to be neither one nor the other. To depict her spectrum of gender identity, Cahun is dependant on the clothes and costume she takes on for each portrait, but Cahun embodies her personas rather than merely using them to play a part. Cahun becomes each persona in her photographs as a means to explore her personal gendered potential. In "The Mise-en-Scene of Desire*"* David Bate wrote, "her photographs tend to emphasise the cultural *coding* of the body rather than the body itself," as he argued that, "any serious consideration of her work will show that they are *about* undoing social identity and disrupting psychic identifications."[x]

Cahun's work was most likely collaborative. The compositions of many of these photographs are too complex to have been created by Cahun alone. While art history credits Cahun as the sole artist, it is a reasonable assumption to make that friend, stepsister, and partner Suzanne Malherbe, who like Cahun took the alias of Marcel Moore, was the eye behind the camera, assisting Cahun's exploration by documenting her gender performance. It is likely that Moore was not the originator of Cahun's performance of identities, but might well have assisted in the documentation of them.

Through out her career Cahun published little of her work. In 1930 one piece appeared in the magazine Bifur, and in the same year she and Moore put forth a

collection of photomontages in Aveux non avenus (loosely translated as Unavowed Confessions, or Avowals not Admitted). Numerous factors resulted in Cahun's lack of publications. Few female artists were known at the time, and Cahun, being of Jewish decent, suffered many of the social restrictions that were applied in Europe with the rise of fascism and World War II, including being sent to a concentration camp in 1944, out of which she barely survived. It is also likely that her work was something private to her. It was not only Ellis's "indeterminateness" of sex and the rigid social structure of gender identification that influenced Cahun's work towards a portrayal of sexual and gender fluidity, but the social conditions at the time that limited her. The world in which she lived did not readily accept her work, or her. When Nazis raided Cahun's home, a local described her work as obscene and "of an especially revolting nature."[xi] Claude Cahun's intimate production of photographs explored the versatility available through gender ambiguity. By taking on and performing different, atypically gendered personas, Cahun became things, figures, and people, transforming herself into, as Shelley Rice, art historian, critic, and co-curator of the exhibit "Inverted Odysseys", wrote, "roles denied to her in the social world."[xii]

Cahun's work, which was lost to history, was rediscovered in the late 1980s due to its striking resemblance to the self-representations of then contemporary photographer Cindy Sherman, and after the exhibition *L'amour Fou* reinstated an interest in surrealism, specifically in surrealist photographic work. While originally compared to a female artist from the latter half of the 20th century, Cahun's virtually unknown photographic performances from the 1920's and 30's (aided by Moore) offers a striking comparison with the far more widely known gender inflected portrait series of Rrose Sélavy created

by Marcel Duchamp in collaboration with Man Ray beginning in 1920 (Figure 13). Having been an elite in Parisian art circles and then joining (or creating) the New York Dada scene while living between France and The United States, Marcel Duchamp, born in Normandy in 1887, was a star of the art world who did not face the same social restrictions as Cahun. He had the social advantages that came with being male, as well as the artistic notoriety to get away with many things others might have been criticized for, such as creating a new identity. When discussing Duchamp and Rrose in the context of prominent women in the Dada movement, historian Susan Fillin-Yeh wrote, "They [downtown Greenwich Village bohemia] recognized Marcel Duchamp cut loose from conventional notions of gendered individuation to present himself as the woman he name Rrose Sélavy – a woman with veiled and shadowed eyes who has posed as if resting her elbows on a café table. Duchamp, so the image read to his audience, was double gendered, and – seemingly – changed his sexual aspect as easily as he changed clothing"[xiii] thus fulfilling Breton's stated personal desire. This is most apparent in one photograph of Rrose taken by Man Ray in 1924 (Figure 14), which became the most famous public presentation of Marcel/Rose.

On first glance, you see an ordinary glamorous photograph of a 1920s woman dressed in a scarf, Art Deco cloche hat, fur collar, and coat. With a soft focus and staged light she provocatively looks out at the viewer with smoky eyes covered in eye shadow, and painted lips curling in a neutral, self-contained smile, rather like that of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. She clutches her fur collar in a staged way as though she is puffing it up for display, with her fingers adorned in rings. In the top right hand corner is hand written, "To my friend Sam White, Feb. 1924, Man Ray" and in the bottom right hand

corner in a different hand it reads, “Lovingly, Rrose Sélavy – alias Marcel Duchamp.” Looking at the photograph, it feels staged, due to the light, the signature, the fancy clothes, the gesture of the hands, and the figure’s gaze. With further investigation you realize you cannot see the figure’s hair, that she has rather large eyebrows in comparison to the style of thinly shaped eyebrows for women in the 1920s, and that the delicacy and proportion of her hands does not match the size of her head. In the end, you realize with the signature “alias Marcel Duchamp” that it is not a woman seated before you, but Marcel Duchamp dressed as a woman he has named Rrose Sélavy. You are confronted by an oddly compiled female figure with the knowledge of it being enacted by a male artist. The figure you are looking at is simultaneously male and female in a way that does not allow a fluid middle ground of gender like that presented in Claude Cahun’s photographs. It is through this deployment of the specific character of the female Rrose Sélavy and her relationship to the male Marcel Duchamp that the artist questions and is provoked by the popular social constructs established in Freudian theory. But as Duchamp does not present a singular fixed vision of himself or Sélavy, he does not align himself with a fixed theory. Aspects of Freud's and Ellis's theories on the sex and gender identity can be found in Duchamp's work, but the artist does not take a stand embracing one over the other, let alone outwardly embracing one at all.

At the time Marcel Duchamp and Claude Cahun were creating their work, Sigmund Freud's newfound psychological theories were entering the popular discourse and proving very influential in Europe. Where Ellis proposed a state of gyandromorphism, which Cahun interpreted as a Third gender, popular culture interprets Freud’s writings as establishing gender as either male or female alone. Freud’s theories

on sexual difference and gender identification became known with the publication of his "3 Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" (originally titled in German as "Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie") in 1905. Jennifer Blessing, author of Rrose is a rrose is a rrose: Gender Performance in Photography, attributes Freud's texts as key to psychoanalytic accounts of the formation of gender identity as unequal, through his focus on the female as the Other.[xiv] In the way Freud discusses sexual difference as about and relating to the male, pushing the idea that a person's gender is either masculine or feminine, and their identification lies with one or the other, he establishes a foundation of gender polarity between male and female, which the public (artists included) absorbed. Freud centers gender identification around object choice in his writings, arguing that we identify with the opposite object we desire. Through Freud's sexual definition of the female in opposition to the male as the Other, and assessment of gender identity as linked to sexuality, Freudian theory established heterosexuality and specific gender roles of male and female for men and women as normative, allowing few, if any, socially acceptable exceptions. Many artists at the time greatly embraced Freudian theories on psychoanalysis and dreams as the key to tapping into one's subconscious, which reflects the weight of Freud's influence over various circles. Ellis, while a contemporary and predecessor of Freud, was lesser known at the time, which is part of the reason why his views did not have the same mass appeal as Freudian theory. Popularized Freudian stereotypes can be seen as enacted by Duchamp in his "gesture" of Rrose Sélavy through the constant separation of male and female.[xv]

Fancis Naumann, an art historian specializing in early American modernism and known for his knowledge and writings on Duchamp, wrote in reference to works

preceding the Rrose Sélavy persona, "But whether Adam and Eve, King and Queen, or Bride and Bachelor, these exclusively male and female identities represent established polarities of opposition…"[xvi] By allowing this to influence the thinking of Duchamp's gesture of Sélavy, it is possible to view Duchamp as embracing popular culture's gender indicators of male and female in a way that makes the viewer realize, if not question, the cultural understanding of gender. With this view, we see that Duchamp, too, used the performance of gender by enhancing and enacting notions of masculine and feminine through gender indicators of dress to depict male and female as coexisting in one form. In contrast to Cahun's creation of a harmonious fusion of male and female, Duchamp utilized sexual difference and the then widely accepted popular notion of gender as binary opposites to depict male and female existing in conjunction with each other as two separate things.

Through the gesture of Sélavy, Duchamp plays with the dissonance of gender binaries by portraying the two as entities that are separate yet present in one piece. Duchamp once told an interviewer "I wanted to change my identity," and that he'd tried to give himself a Jewish name, but then claimed the idea to change sex as "much simpler."[xvii] In creating this alternative identity Duchamp made Sélavy so different from himself that he created another person, separate and capable of existing on her own, but bound to Duchamp through his undeniable creation and portrayal of her. It is not with this famous photograph alone but through looking at the multiple manifestations of Duchamp's gesture of Rrose Sélavy that we see the artist play with popularized Freudian stereotypes of gender separation of male and female by enacting himself as either Marcel or Rrose – even going so far as to place one or both of "their" signatures on certain works

– in an act of seeming male/female collaboration. Amelia Jones, an art historian specializing on Duchamp and his impact on postmodernism wrote, "Rrose is presented not as an androgyne but as an independent other – a partner of sorts, a complete second ego."[xviii] He embraces the general cultural assumption of mutually exclusive binaries to convey their impossibility of unification through the depiction of their constant separation and dissonance.

Rrose Sélavy first sprang to life in the eyes of the public through the presence of her signature as COPYRIGHT ROSE SÉLAVY in 1920 on the platform base of *Fresh Widow* (Figure 15), a Duchamp readymade play-on-words with French Window, with the added play-on-worlds title in English, a language in which he, like Cahun, was fluent. The piece itself is a set of French windows painted blue, with highly polished black leather panels for window panes, rendering the window unable to allow any view, be it in or out. The presence of Sélavy's signature on this piece renders her an artist, complete on her own, thus separating Duchamp from his work, and separating gender into distinct binary forms: Marcel Duchamp and Rrose Sélavy, male artist and female artist. Through the application of the word COPYRIGHT next to Sélavy's name, Duchamp has completed the separation, assigning to Sélavy the essence of artistic individuality, the right of intellectual property. Duchamp created the entity of Sélavy to be separate from himself, as evident in this first display. *Fresh Widow* thus can be seen as a work created through a collaboration between two separate artists, Marcel Duchamp and Rose Sélavy.

Her name appeared again in 1921 on what Duchamp terms an assisted readymade titled *Why Not Sneeze Rose Sélavy* (Figure 16), a rectangular metal birdcage with a thermometer, marble cubes shaped like sugar cubes, and a cuttlebone, with the words of

the title inscribed on the bottom in black paper-tape letters. This piece, that looks light and sweet, has been reported to be heavy and cold when lifted and inspected, thus depicting Duchamp's play. Sélavy's name appears again as a signature on the painting *L'Oeil cacodylate* (Figure 17) a collection of signatures of early surrealist artists created by Francis Picabia, fellow artist and collector of Duchamp's. Sélavy's name reappeared slightly changed in the piece *La Bargarre D'Austerlitz* (*Brawl at Austerlitz*) (Figure 18), a miniature window similar to *Fresh Widow*. On this piece, one side is inscribed in white paint with the name *Marcel Duchamp*, and the other side with *Rrose Sélavy / Paris 1921*. Here, we see, the spelling of her name has changed.

As an artist, Rrose Sélavy took on multiple manifestations. Her initially common-place name of Rose was changed to Rrose, budding into a play on the word Eros (or erotic desire), a sexualized love that was the source of much Surrealist inspiration.[xix] Similarly, Sélavy is a pun on the French phrase, "C'est la vie," which translates into English as, "That's life." Taken together, the two parts of the name "Erotic love, that's life" becomes a clever twist on issues of sexuality and morality. This becomes especially pointed in the context of the severe social restrictions of the time. Art historian Jennifer Mundy has described such works as a response to "the conservative social ethos, ...strict censorship laws, pervasive influence of the Catholic Church, stark legal and social inequalities between men and women, political and ethical dilemmas posed by the rise of fascism…"[xx]

Similar to the way Cahun was most likely assisted by Marcel Moore in the creation of her photographs, in 1920 Duchamp collaborated with the American photographer Man Ray to present Sélavy as a separate persona in a series of portrait

photographs, one of which is well known in the art world. In this first portrait (Figure 13) in which Duchamp enacts Rrose Sélavy, he is seen as a figure with curly dark hair, wearing a hat that comes down to her eyebrows. The typical gender indicators of makeup, a pearl necklace, broach, and women's clothes all point to the figure as female, but there's something about her presence, be it a masculine ambiance or pure unattractive lack of sex appeal, that makes it difficult to believe. When viewing the photograph, the integration of male and female doesn't quite work because Duchamp is posing, if not performing, as Rrose Sélavy, and the viewer remains aware it is theatrical and staged. The photograph of Sélavy from this first portrait series was not released in an artistic arena until it was used for the label of the Dada perfume, *Belle Haleine, Eau de Voilette* (Figure 19) which functioned as another outlet for Duchamp's play with the viewer. The name of the piece literally translates into *Beautiful Breath, Veil Water*. Through this twist of words Duchamp plays with interpretation as he uses *Belle Haleine* to reference beautiful Helen of Troy in juxtaposition to a photograph of himself dressed as a not-so-beautiful woman. He further plays with the use of the words *Eau de Voilette* instead of eau de toilette (the French term for perfume), with *voilette* introducing the idea of veiling, an action Duchamp takes through donning women's clothes. Duchamp enacts the separation of male and female by utilizing an unattractive photograph of himself, a man, as the face to sell perfume, a feminine beauty product. Rrose's mark is again present through the backwards R and S on the label, in addition to her signature on the exterior of the box. Like Cahun's self-portrait photographs, Duchamp's photographic gesture of Rrose Sélavy is linked to the clothes he uses to adorn the portrait. Duchamp, too, enacts a gender performance, dressing his male body in women's clothes, but he does it in an

effort to create the figure of Rrose Sélavy, not as a form in which to portray his feminine attributes, but in an effort to depict an alias, a figure separate from himself, distinct and autonomous.

In the second portrait taken by Man Ray later in 1920 (Figure 14) (previously described on pages 12 and 13), Rrose becomes a hybrid of the masculine and feminine as Duchamp adds the hands of a third artist, and another woman, Germaine Everling, making Rrose a three person collaboration. Duchamp's choice in Everling, the mistress of Francis Picabia and a female Surrealist artist, for the hands was due in part to her name: Germaine, which was associated with germanism, considered by Duchamp theorist Antonio Castronuovo, to be the "burning core of romantic allusion."[xxi] Everling's adulterous, Eros-inspired relationship with Picabia embodying the surrealist attitude of sexual freedom, coupled with the ring on Everling's hand propels further the pun Sélavy's name conveys on sexuality and morality, while solidifying Sélavy as married to (or from) such Surrealist ideals.

In 1926 Sélavy's copyright reappeared on the film *Anémic Cinéma*, (Figure 20) (seemingly a palindrome, but not) which Duchamp worked on with Man Ray and Marc Allegret, another surrealist artist. Finally, Rrose Sélavy appeared at the first *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* in 1938 (Figure 21). Here her name serves as a title scrawled onto the genital region of a female mannequin, which like today's Barbie doll, was anatomically incorrect, in that there were no genitals beyond a generalized mound. This mannequin was located in a hallway of mannequins, each altered by separate Surrealist artists. She appeared as a female in drag; a complete female with makeup and a wig but dressed in Duchamp's male shirt, tie, waistcoat, jacket, hat, and shoes, with her

lower half exposed. Here Duchamp's male to female drag as depicted in the Man Ray portrait photographs is reversed with the female mannequin presented in men's clothes. Instead of Duchamp performing the Sélavy persona, we now have Sélavy performing Duchamp's persona. Through the inscription of Rrose Sélavy along the genital region, it is as if the mannequin was branded as property. Seeing a female mannequin dressed in men's clothes perpetuates the dissonance Duchamp creates in his gesture of Sélavy. The common by 1938 that Rrose Sélavy was Duchamp's alias only reinforces that idea.

Rrose Sélavy functions as a recurring theme in several of Duchamp's works and as a work in and of herself. The play with Freudian stereotypes is enacted as Duchamp uses himself as the idea of male in opposition to the creation of this female alter ego in Rrose. Through the use of male and female with Duchamp as Sélavy (and Sélavy as Duchamp) distinct sexual, gendered identities are maintained and their opposition ironically asserted, as pointed out by Naumann. The gesture of the binary opposites coexistence between Duchamp and Sélavy serves a tool for commentary on period gender codes by the conforming of Sélavy attire to the demands of society according to assumed and established feminine codes of grooming - as in Sélavy's appearance in the applied attributes of hair, makeup, and jewelry. Through this juxtaposition of a male to women's clothes, Duchamp reflects the popularly assumed gender role of the female as the antithesis to the male.[xxii]

While she was a literal gender performance in the making of the photographs, Rrose Sélavy was created to be separate from Duchamp, existing on her own to be seen in a context where he, too, could observe her. According to Amelia Jones, Duchamp uses Sélavy as a way to break the identification of artist and originator with men, and with

Sélavy, he asserts the artist as the mother of the work. Jones wrote, "Duchamp's gesture can be seen not only as a deconstruction of gender, a marking of it as a social construction produced as visual sign through signifiers of clothing, coiffure, and facial makeup, but also as a positive means of conferring authority on 'woman' as author."[xxiii] It's not so much an exploration of self but an exploration of the abilities of an artist to create another artist that is an extension of the first, complete on her own, but bound to the original creator, separate but equally present. Duchamp affirmed this when he said, "My intention was always to get away from myself, though I knew perfectly well that I was using myself. Call it a little game between 'I' and 'me.'"[xxiv]

As with most of Duchamp's work, there are numerous ways to read the multiple gestures of Rrose Sélavy. It is through this confusing message of male and female as separate but always present that the idea of gendered identity is questioned. Duchamp plays with our interpretation of his gender performance as a way of making us question our cultural understanding of gender identity. By being unable to fully assert what or how Duchamp as Rrose is, we realize the limited vocabulary and understanding we have for gender. Duchamp reflects the popular Freudian understanding of gender as fixed in his ability to maintain two distinct genders, but plays with it in the clashing combination of the two genders collapsed in one form through the changes is Sélavy's appearance and function.

Marcel Duchamp's use of the popular cultural male and female binaries is reflected in another work preceding the Rrose Sélavy persona. For *L.H.O.O.Q.* (Figure 22), (1919) the artist drew a moustache and wispy beard onto a postcard reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, asserting, as described by Jennifer Blessing, "he had

discovered the hidden sexual identity of the portrait sitter."[xxv] The irony here is that the figure of the Mona Lisa has long been suspected as having been modeled on a male sitter, perhaps even Da Vinci himself. Duchamp's gender play is engaged with the initials L.H.O.O.Q., which are hand lettered in the position of the title at the bottom. When pronounced in French, the letters can be read as "Elle a chaud au cul." Given that the literal English translation for this is, "She has a hot ass," Duchamp uses this doctored postcard, or as he termed it, a doctored readymade, to sexualize this famous renaissance icon. In *L.H.O.O.Q.* Duchamp juxtaposes the polarities of gender as he takes an already questionable but recognizable female figure, and masculinizes her through the application of a moustache and goatee, making her into a him[xxvi] In contrast to the popular reception that this is a joke, it can be read as a serious work fitting into Duchamp's larger project about the construction of gender identity. What looks like a superficial idea has additional depth. Many questions are raised about the form Duchamp depicts. It is difficult to accept the form as a serious portrait because we cannot understand it. In this gesture, Duchamp uses a world famous image made by another artist to enact and perform multiple gender possibilities. Mona Lisa is painted as a *she*, who then becomes a *he* through drawing and then reverts back to a *she* in the title. Rrose, on the other hand, is a more independent figure. She had her name on artwork, and her photo on a perfume bottle. She was also the subject of glamorous photographs, had her own baggage labels and calling cards, and even had a mannequin named in her honor. Duchamp's gesture of Rrose was so thorough that she came to exist as if separate from him, even though every manifestation of her was a result of his actions.

What is the essence of the difference between Cahun and Duchamp? With his gesture of Rrose Sélavy, Marcel Duchamp creates a dichotomy between male and female through the depiction of the two extremes, while Claude Cahun depicts herself at every possible stage between male and female. Cahun's way of creating art was intimate and personal, where as Duchamp seems to have distanced himself from his work so that it could function as social commentary. He created an alias, be it Rrose or Marcel, playing with the multiple ideas of viewing through multiple methods in the many manifestations of Rrose Sélavy. Cahun, on the other hand, internalized ideas about male and female and different permutations thereof to create and perform her self-portraits. Duchamp and Cahun both explore gender constructs through the use of gender performance and gender fluidity as strategic elements in their work. Cahun plays with the possibilities of numerous gender identities through her photographs, while Duchamp plays with the possibilities of gender in his refusal to commit to a fixed understanding of the gesture of Rrose Sélavy. Despite their varied depictions and polarities of personal involvement with their work, it was through the act of dressing in a gendered performance, be it emphasizing femininity, masculinity, or androgyny, that both artists responded to ideas raised by popularized Freudian stereotypes and Ellis's theories, thus achieving Breton's personal wish to change sex, ironically, through a change of clothes.

---

[i] Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation, ed. Whitney Chadwick, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998), p. 37, quoted from Michael Taylor "Photography is Not Art," *View*, series III, no, 1 (December 1943), p. 23.
[ii] Havelock Ellis. *Studies in the Psychology of Sex,* 2nd Edition (New York, NY: Random House, 1942), II, p. 315.
[iii] François Leperlier. "Claude Cahun." Mise En Scene. (ICA: London, 1996), p. 20. Leperlier, Cahun's biographer, attributes Cahun to twisting Ellis's theory into one of a Third Sex.
[iv]Ellis. *Studies in the Psychology of Sex,* 2nd Edition, p. 315.

---

[v] Havelock Ellis. *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (New York: Ray Long and Richard R. Smith, 1933) p.255, quoted in Jennifer Blessing, Rrose is a rrose is a rrose: gender performance in photography (New York, NY: H.N. Abrams, c1997), p. 10.
[vi] Leperlier, p. 20.
[vii] Susan Fillin-Yeh "Women in Dada," Women In Dada: Essays on Sex, Gender, and Identity, Ed. Naomi Sawelson-Gorse (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998), p. 146.
[viii] Therese Lichtenstein, "A Mutable Mirror: Claude Cahun" *Art Forum*, April 1992, p. 64.
[ix] Inverted Odysseys: Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, Cindy Sherman, Ed. Shelley Rice (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press. 1999), p. 112.
[x] Mise En Scene. (ICA: London, 1996), p. 8.
[xi] Lichtenstein, p. 65. Taken from *The von Aufesess Occupation Diary,* by Baron von Aufesess, ed. And trans. Kathleen J. Nowlan, Chichester, Sussex: Phillimore & Co. Ltd., 1985, p. 61-62.
[xii] Inverted Odysseys: Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, Cindy Sherman, p. 21.
[xiii] Fillin-Yeh, p. 177.
[xiv] Jennifer Blessing, Rrose is a rrose is a rrose: gender performance in photography (New York, NY: H.N. Abrams, c1997), p. 18.
[xv] Amelia Jones, Postmodernism and the Engendering of Marcel Duchamp (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
[xvi] Francis M. Naumann, Marcel Duchamp: Artist of the Century (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1989), p. 29.
[xvii] Ibid, p. 21.
[xviii]Jones, p. 159.
[xix] For a full discussion of Eros as an inspirational source for surrealist desire see Jennifer Mundy's book Surrealism: Desire Unbound (London: Tate Gallery Publishing Ltd., 2001).
[xx] Ibid, p. 20.
[xxi] Antonio Castronuovo, "Rrose Sélavy and the Erotic Gnosis." Tout-Fait v. 2/ Issue 5 http://www.toutfait.com/issues/volume2/issue_5/articles/castronuovo/castronuovo.html
[xxii] Jones, p. 147
[xxiii] Ibid, p. 156.
[xxiv] Ibid, p. 154.
[xxv] Blessing, p. 20.
[xxvi] Ibid.