MISGENDERING ARTISTS IN THE ARCHIVES: A TRANS READING OF CLAUDE CAHUN’S SELF-PORTRAIT (1928)

Jay Bossé
Claude Cahun
25 October 1894 – 8 December 1954

- Born October 25th, 1894 in Nantes France
- Life long partner, Marcel Moore
- lived between Paris and Jersey island
- permanently relocating to Jersey in 1938
- 1940 the couple is arrested and detained in a concentration camp until liberated in 1945
- Cahun pass away December 8th 1954
- Moore takes her life in 1972
“Masculine? Feminine? But it depends on the situation. Neuter is the only gender that always suits me.”
– Claude Cahun
"She holds onto her lapel, as if teasing the viewer: is she about to remove her coat to reveal her body or has she just put it on and is covering up? ... Via this duplicate image, we are offered a peek at a sliver of the artist’s flesh: the hollow of Cahun’s throat as it is reflects in the mirror. This sliver is seductive, erotic. We may slide down the neck and caress the opening of smooth skin with your eyes. While forming a soft “V” at the artist’s neckline, the hollow is vulnerable, penetrable and private, much like the “V” that may symbolize the space between a woman’s legs.” – Topdjian, 73.

“While the hollow of the throat may be perceived as ‘feminine,’ the neck itself appears ‘masculine.’ Like the surrounding collar, Cahun’s neck is literally an erect shaft, phallic in appearance.” – Topdjian, 74.
“Cahun did more than appropriate masculine features; she created a third sex. She conceived a hybrid cultural identity not easily assimilable within the overdetermined categories of masculine and feminine. One can appreciate her fascination with the writings of Havelock Ellis, an early sexologist whose controversial theories allowed for the possibility of a third sex. Cahun translated Ellis (1933), who 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.’” – Knafo, 38

“Whereas Cahun explored transgender themes and symbolically overturned sexual binarism revealing the masquerade inherent in all identity...” – Knafo, 57
A Trans Reading

- History and Surrealism
- Body of Work
- Non-gendered Readings of the Mirror
- Self-portrait
Surrealism

- Beginning in the early 1920s
- Based in Psychoanalytic theory
- Freud’s theories and work around the subconscious, desire and gender.

Marcel Duchamp’s alter ego, Rrose Sélavy
Character
Self-representation