

n.paradoxa

online, issue 1

Dec 1996

Editor: Katy Deepwell

Published in English as an online edition
by KT press, www.ktpress.co.uk,
as issue 1, *n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal*
<http://www.ktpress.co.uk/pdf/nparadoxaiissue1.pdf>
Dec 1996, republished in this form: January 2010
ISSN: 1462-0426

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Editor: ktpress@ktpress.co.uk
International Editorial Board: Hilary Robinson, Renee Baert,
Janis Jefferies, Joanna Frueh, Hagiwara Hiroko, Olabisi Silva.
www.ktpress.co.uk

The following article was republished in
Volume 1, *n.paradoxa* (print version) January 1998:
Katy Deepwell 'Interview with Catherine de Zegher: Curator of *Inside the Visible:*
An Elliptical Traverse of Twentieth Century Art in, of and from the feminine'

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Uncanny Resemblances: Restaging Claude Cahun in *Mise en Scene*

Katy Deepwell

Mise en Scene was an exhibition held at the ICA in London, England, 13 October-27 November 1994.

On the tail end of the Signals festival in 1994, the ICA, London staged a comparison between the photographic self-portraits, 1927-1947, of a much neglected Surrealist Claude Cahun (a woman who worked in both Paris and the U.K.) and two young contemporary British-based artists, Virginia Nimarkoh and Tacita Dean. The film concept of *mise en scene* was redeployed to link the many diverse identities represented in the photographic/video works in this show. The rediscovery of Cahun's self-portraits has added a new dimension to this artist's work, which until the publication of Leperlier's biography in 1992, had been known only to a few cognoscentiamongst Surrealist scholars through her published essays and the inclusion of several Surreal still-lives in the Hayward Gallery exhibition *L'Amour Fou* in the 1970s.

David Bate, who wrote the accompanying exhibition catalogue, suggested that Claude Cahun's self-portraits 'hit contemporary practice like an arrow through time', encouraging the audience to draw immediate comparisons to the American artist, Cindy Sherman. However, the resonances and codes of Sherman's comparatively well-known film stills, history portraits and more recent critiques of pornography are not echoed in Cahun's images of herself as dandy, skinheaded androgyne, nymph, model, soldier, etc. For this comparison to work a specific set of theoretical debates was mobilised which undercut the different modes and sites of these works' production and the gap of 50-70 years between Cahun, Nimarkoh and Dean. Central to this is the renewed analysis of Joan Riviere's 1929 essay 'Womanliness as

Masquerade' by cultural/film theorists actively renegotiating the legacy of Lacan and semiotics. But the stage is also set, in the context of the London ICA's own programming, by blending its programmed debates on Queer Theory with Rosalind Krauss's work in *Optical Unconscious* (USA: MIT Press, 1994) and Hal Foster's *Compulsive Beauty* (USA: MIT Press, 1995). These books engage with Modernism's Other, Surrealism, and seek to reconsider the formal and psychoanalytic disruptions within Surrealism through Freudian theories of the uncanny and fetishism. Breton's concepts of 'convulsive beauty' and the 'marvellous' in particular are also explored (exclusively through the work of male Surrealists and by highlighting Breton's differences with Bataille). It is not just these trends in current theoretical work which assist the production of an audience now for Claude Cahun's self-portraiture but current fashions in hairstyles (e.g. skinhead haircuts) and androgynous/bi-sexual body images which are echoed and repeated in the codes of representation identifiable within her work.

Two theoretical points strike me as absent from the presentation of this show via the catalogue: the first is the situation of the works within the codes of representation manifest in popular culture which the artists work both maintains and subverts. The second, is the absence of feminist perspectives on these three women. The ~~orthodox~~ reading provided for this show via Lacan/Riviere and identities constructed for the male gaze (with a nod toward space for a female gaze) is lacking precisely because while it seeks to problematise ~~feminine~~ identities without engaging in its necessary correlate the problematising of masculinity.

Because of the above, the analysis of gender relations does collapse into individualised (auto)biography and a further staging of the Surrealist problem of woman (in the case of Claude Cahun); a form of gender indifference marked by attention to racial difference (in the case of Virginia Nimarkoh); and the presentation of ~~passing~~ from female to male ~~roles~~ and a ritualistic re-enactment of Catholic mythologies surrounding St Agnes (in the case of Tacita Dean). Exploring the feminine becomes another extension of a masculinist agenda: rediscovering the Other. The questions feminism asks about women's ~~resistance~~, feminist intervention in the dominant discourses and any ~~potential~~ transformation of the position of women disappear from the agenda. The link between Dean and Cahun in Dean's appropriation of the 1928 photograph which forms the basis of her installation artwork *The Stowaway* masks the generational gap amongst the three artists with respect to contemporary feminist politics.

Mise en Scene stages two artists born in the mid-late sixties, a generation apart from the Women's Liberation Movement, against an artist born in 1894, whose career significantly spans the ~~uncharted~~ period between Radcliffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1944). The comparison tacitly acknowledges but not engage women's relationships (as gendered artists, subjects of representation, or viewers) to feminist debates, both now and then, which

with renewed work on the lesbian sub-culture of women writers in Paris has increasingly brought back into view.

Does this show represent the further evacuation of feminist concerns from the London ICA - exhausted no doubt by the effects of *Bad Girls* (its 1994 Anglo-American version of the American New York, NMOCA and California, UCLA exhibitions) for the next few years - or is it a mark of feminism's 'success' in academe (where we might note continued marginalisation via limited incorporation) that it is now absent from view in the ICA's attempts to mark what it defines as new? 'Justifications' about the indifference to the 'gender' difference are frequently *staged* in terms of the need to defeat or supersede certain conceptions of early 1970s feminism (humanist, essentialist, *sisterhood*). The stakes in these 'imaginary' battles are embodied through stereotypes about Women's Liberation in the 1970s positioned against a liberated transgressive, even perverse, now (as in *Bad Girls*) or, in academia, through forms of *rigorous* theorizing in which the ghoul of biological *essentialism* - even simple identifications / interests between women as women - must be subsumed to engagement with post-structuralist *Theory* via the Lacanian/semiotic model.

The negative effects of this *staging* of the stakes in feminism post-1968, mix well with the prevalent sexism of art school culture, and close down quickly any sustained attention to the very complex and engaged theoretical debates that feminist research has initiated and developed over the last twenty five years (or its linking back to women's struggles for equal rights and education since the mid-19C, including its recent re-evaluations of the twenties). Perhaps some will see this characterisation of a particular closure as echoing the old for and against *Theory* debates of the early eighties but what is absent now is the desire of both camps then to value and re-evaluate women's contributions to culture.

Supposedly, to be a feminist now necessitates a form of engagement with psychoanalytic questions of the formation of the subject (left ungendered) and the *feminine* (always problematised), without recognising or considering any critique of the investments of masculinity in the singular or plural. A commitment to the production of more research on women's activities as writers and artists is not necessarily part of the identi-kit. Lacanian psychoanalysis (including his own heretical followers) is the only orthodoxy acknowledged. An all too loyal exegesis replaces that recognisable angry witty punning voice of feminist critique which is/was not frightened to ask irreverent questions which intervene in dominant discourses, for which Rosi Braidotti and Meaghan Morris, amongst others, argue. Before dismissing this as just another form of generational conflict in the history of shifts in feminist engagement and concerns since 1968, perhaps we need to ask, is this a renewal of patriarchal authority re-entering through the subjection incurred by women engaging uncritically with the Lacanian legacy which Somer Brodribb mocks as another form of self-imposed psychic torture for women? In Lacan's writing of woman as lack, as an id(entity) which does not exist, are women

accepting their so-called abjection as 'woman'? Isn't this a further submission to women's status as a non-subject, as something unworthy to study except through men's problems with both 'woman'(concept) and 'women'(social beings)? For what is missing in much of the orthodox referencing of Lacan in art criticism and art history is that early and key feminist element of identifying the stakes for women across the 'woman'/'women' divide. The stakes lie in feminist work which names the 'technologies' of gender in a patriarchal society; identifies the investments in and reproduction of femininities; and articulates where interventions can and have been made.

The relative closure on feminist questions, which is the starting point of most critiques of Lacan, is interesting in comparison to the embrace of queer theory by the ICA. In queer theory (where lesbian and gay perspectives meet post-structuralist theories of the unstable subject) arguments are now clearly emerging about the plurality of gendered identities and identifications and the differing subject positions within the gaze (e.g.the work of Parveen Adams, Leo Bersani and Judith Butler).

Feminist variants of critiques of Lacan are no less prolific. They include a refusal to accept the Phallic symbolic as the only symbolic order (Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger); gender read away from the terms of 'securing' identity through the independent autonomous ideal (male) in terms of instability and 'performativity' (Judith Butler) ; a renewed interest in gendering fetishism and exploring its forms in women's activities (Lorraine Gammon and Merja Makinen); analysis of philosophical ideas of embodiment positioned against the mind/body split and stressing again an ethical politics (Susan Hekman or Rosi Braidotti) ; critiques of 'vision' and the West's overwhelming stress on 'visuality' (including new readings of Irigaray), to name but a few.

So how might these ideas enable fresh readings of the artists in *Mise en Scène*. For Claude Cahun, it might have enabled a reconsideration of her self-portraits beyond the staging of a 'self' as play or masquerade within the prescriptive and circumscribed Surrealist images of the muse/*femme-enfant*. To do this, one could highlight the different investments for a female Surrealist subject by the immediate contrast with other male surrealists, like Hans Bellmer. Bellmer's images and *poupees* (puppet/doll) were made after much of the work shown in the ICA exhibition (1934 onwards). Bellmer is well-known for objectifying his female *poupee* in both 'a reverential fetishism...and a sadistic degrading' (Hal Foster). The 'shock value' of their disturbing and violent dismembering has nevertheless been regarded as part of a committed Surrealist politics and, by Hal Foster, as a critique of both fascism and patriarchal authority. By comparison, Cahun's project to create a series of self-images as a third sex, virgin/androgynous/soldier, should not be confined to the personal but need to be read in terms of the Surrealist, anti-fascist and anti-bourgeois politics she embraced.

What were the political stakes for a woman to embark upon a visual exploration of figuring the body against the codes of bourgeois femininity and her colleagues fantasies of woman as loved and adored? When her portraits are seen as a 'mixing of seduction and voyeuristic threat' or a *Phallic woman*, are we not reading another version of the Surrealist enigma of woman? A feminist reading of Cahun's work might position it instead as a set of resistances and refusals enacted in and through identifications surrounding contemporary lesbian figures like the 'invert', the cross-dresser as well as a critique of the male Surrealist's view of woman as loved and adored.

Another reading might emphasise the collaborations and assumptions of identities of Claude Cahun/Lucy Schwob (her family name) with her stepsister Suzanne Malherbe/(pseudonym) Marcel Moore in the making of a new identity as an avantgarde artist. It may also have brought to the fore the poetry and literature produced by Claude Cahun in the 1930s, translating and presenting more of 'Aveux Non Avenus' (*Avowals not Admitted*) or 'Les Paris Sont Ouverts', explaining more of her political sympathies and allegiances in 'Contre-Attaque' and for the underground resistance in Jersey in the fourties for which she was imprisoned. For, the relationships, literary, political and Surrealist between her writing, her photomontages and sculpture-objects are of interest in developing her importance as a theoretician and not just another spectacle of Woman through the series of self-portraits shown.

Perhaps too, it would open up the difference in the engagement of the two contemporary artists outside the overblown reference to a Surrealist reading of the *uncanny*. The chance encounter with a photograph was the starting point for the narrative coincidences at work in Tacita Dean's artworks *The Stowaway* and *The Martyrdom of St Agatha*. The interweaving of events, re-enactments in film and of her plans and research link the artist to identifications with her female subjects. The juxtaposition of *original* object, video and dubbing plans suggest an unresolvable narrative, but this impression is at odds with the narrative about the project provided by artist's statements to the catalogue. Apart from the fascination the subject engenders in the artist, the combination of essay and work leaves the spectator as if a witness to a research project, but strangely one which does not transform one's perceptions.

Perhaps a feminist reading would have opened up the critique of masculinity within Virginia Nimarkoh's appropriation and re-presentation of photographs of black and white people. Instead, her work is positioned separately within the catalogue as an intervention in *post-colonial* discourses of race developed in the writings of Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall. The archetypal male traveller, the exile and migrant of modernity is replaced by the young black woman, suitcase in hand, hesitating outside an ironwork gate waiting to leave. In another of these large-scale photographs, the focused, if momentary, glance of 5 men of different races and in

different ethnic and Western dress is captured in profile as they march through the waiting room of what appears a colonial station. Nimarkoh's work relies upon the existence of the photo as an arbitrary 'documented fact' which negates apartheid, racist or colonial 'fictions' throwing certain historical relationships into question.

This exhibition emphasised for me, the dilemma which Roland Barthes identified in his concept of the 'punctum' - the impact of a photograph punching through time - because of its necessary and important relationship to the 'studium' - the cumulative general human interest in photography. For meaning to be established in the context of an exhibition, relying on the effect of the 'punctum' may well impoverish the 'studium'.

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N.Paradoxa: Issue 1,December 1996

A version of this article was first published in *Women's Art Magazine* No.62 Jan/Feb 1995 pp.17-19.