

# Reconsidering Self-Portraits by Women Surrealists: A Case Study of Claude Cahun and Frida Kahlo

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## Abstract

Both Claude Cahun and Frida Kahlo were affiliated with the Surrealist movement in the 1930s for political and professional ends. In their respective bodies of self-portraiture, they mirrored or doubled their own images and stretched the boundaries of gender and sexual representation in order to challenge heteronormative conceptions of identity.

## Résumé

Claude Cahun et Frida Kahlo toutes les deux étaient affiliées au mouvement surréaliste durant les années 30 à des fins politiques et professionnelles. Dans leurs spécialités respectives de l'art de l'auto-portrait, elles ont dupliqué ou doublé leurs propres images et étiré les périmètres de la représentation du genre et sexuelle afin de mettre en défi les conceptions hétéronormatives de l'identité.

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## Introduction

From the point of view of a casual observer, Claude Cahun and Frida Kahlo had much in common. Both were affiliated with the European Surrealists in the 1930s, focused obsessively on self-portraiture, and fell into obscurity after their deaths (which occurred the same year, in 1954), to be resuscitated via major biographies - Hayden Herrera's *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (1983) and François Leperlier's *Claude Cahun: l'écart et la métamorphose* (1992), respectively.<sup>1</sup> The rediscovery of these artists, which took place at a moment when many scholars were focused on reconsidering the writing of art history from a feminist perspective as well as on rethinking the Surrealist movement, was followed by a massive increase in the attention devoted to their respective oeuvres (Chadwick 1998, 7). The rise of "Fridamania" (Lindauer 1999, 12), most strikingly, is demonstrated by the numerous retrospective exhibitions, scholarly works, and popular accounts (including a major Hollywood film) that have appeared over the last two decades.<sup>2</sup> Cahun's photography, meanwhile, has been the subject of two major retrospectives, and has also been exhibited in conjunction with the work of female artists and photographers from our own time, including Cindy Sherman and Francesca Woodman.<sup>3</sup> While this scholarship has produced valid and interesting readings of Kahlo's and Cahun's self-portraits, an emphasis on Kahlo's personality and the relatively easy annexation of Cahun's images into a contemporary, postmodernist

discourse has tended to overshadow discussions of their work in terms of Surrealism.<sup>4</sup>

This article will focus on a photograph and a photomontage published by Cahun in France in 1930 and on paintings that Kahlo included in Surrealist exhibitions in Paris and Mexico City in 1939 and 1940, in order to consider and compare these publicly disseminated works within their historical contexts. Striking formal similarities between a number of Cahun's photographs and photomontages and Kahlo's paintings, particularly those that appear to present a mirror or a double of the artist's self (tropes often associated with Surrealism), initially inspired this comparison. However, Cahun and Kahlo can be fruitfully compared on other terms as well. Unlike many of the women artists associated with Surrealism (including Leonora Carrington, Leonor Fini, Jacqueline Lamba, Dora Maar, Alice Rahon, and Remedios Varo, among others), neither Cahun nor Kahlo was romantically involved with a male member of the group.

Furthermore, both artists spent much of their lives at a geographical remove from the Parisian center of the movement: Cahun spent her early and later years on the Isle of Jersey, while Kahlo lived in Mexico. This double periphery of both Cahun and Kahlo, I argue, made it possible for them to use self-portraiture as a means of challenging the normative gender and sexual identities that, as Whitney Chadwick and others have argued, were reinforced in many works by male Surrealists.<sup>5</sup>

Chadwick's *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*, published in 1985, was the first attempt at a comprehensive discussion of the relationship between female artists and the Surrealist movement. It discusses twenty-one women who were affiliated with the movement, including Kahlo, though not Cahun (who was at that time considered to be a male artist by some scholars; Krauss 1999, 29). Chadwick argues that women

were objectified by male Surrealists who considered them as muses, *femmes-enfant*, and the embodiment of desire or *l'amour fou*. In response to this, women affiliated with the movement tended to make themselves the subject of their work: "[i]nternalizing the muse, women artists rejected the search for an idealized Other and interrogated the image in the mirror" (1985, 97). Applying this definition to Kahlo's career, Chadwick stated (contrary to the facts in Herrera's biography, which is cited as her source) that "[t]he image Kahlo chose for herself, that of a captivating personality, substituted for a definition of self as a professional artist. There is no evidence that she ever worked for exhibitions, sales, or reviews. Instead, she defined painting as something she did for herself" (1985, 90). In a later text, however, Chadwick has gone on to argue that the Surrealist movement did have something to offer to the women artists who were its contemporaries, as it "also battled the social institutions - church, state, and family - that regulate the place of women within patriarchy. In offering some women their first locus for artistic and social resistance, it became the first modernist movement in which a group of women could explore female subjectivity and give form (however tentatively) to a feminine imaginary" (1998, 5). As exemplified by Cahun and Kahlo, by engaging with male Surrealists and employing Surrealist visual concepts in their own self-portraiture, women artists could enter into polemical dialogues with their male counterparts, in effect subverting Surrealism from the inside.

#### Claude Cahun's Public Works

Born into a literary Jewish family in Nantes in 1894, Cahun (née Lucy Schwob) was educated at Oxford and the Sorbonne, and was active in European avant-garde literary and artistic circles from an early age.<sup>6</sup> In 1917 she adopted the gender-ambiguous pseudonym Claude Cahun; two years later she and her

lifelong partner and half-sister Suzanne Malherbe (sometimes identified by the pseudonym Marcel Moore) moved to Paris. Though Cahun may be best-known today for the small-format black and white photographs of herself that she began producing as early as 1914, during her lifetime she worked as a "poet, essayist, literary critic, short-story writer, translator, actress, photographer, and revolutionary activist" (Leperlier 1994, 17). Cahun was active in Parisian literary circles during the 1920s, publishing poems, short stories, and criticism in various journals and reviews; she became well-acquainted with Adrienne Monnier and Sylvia Beach (as well as other members of Paris's lesbian subculture) beginning in 1919. Leperlier posits that it was in their neighboring bookshops, La Maison des Amis des Livres and Shakespeare and Co., that Cahun became acquainted with André Breton, Louis Aragon, and other Surrealists.

By 1930, Cahun had amassed a considerable image bank of photographic self-portraits; that year, she publicly disseminated a handful of those images for the first and only time. One was a startling image printed in the literary journal *Bifur*, with the caption "Frontière humaine."<sup>7</sup> In the photograph, Cahun stands against a dark background wearing a black off-the-shoulder sweater. Her elegantly pale, graceful shoulders float in an otherworldly fashion against the darkness from which she seems to emerge as a ghostly apparition. Her head is turned to the left and tilts downward slightly in the direction of her wide-eyed gaze, which is directed not toward the viewer but at something just beyond the edge of the frame. The delicate femininity of her large, dark eyes, slender, refined nose, and full lips contrasts strikingly with her decidedly unfeminine shaved head. Cahun has heightened the uncanniness of the image further by distorting the image, elongating her forehead so that her head takes an unnatural, egg-shaped form.

Rosalind Krauss et al. have written that photography was in many ways the exemplary medium

for the concerns of Surrealism, as the artist could alter the apparent veracity of an image through the use of distortion, doubling and montage, thereby creating an uncanny, alternative reality (1985, 35; Lasalle and Solomon-Godeau 1992, 13). As its caption suggests, Cahun's image blurs the boundaries between the real and the otherworldly or impossible; the veracity implied by the photographic medium forces the viewer to question whether such a distorted shape might actually be an anatomical possibility. Cahun's use of anamorphic distortion can be seen as anticipating André Kertész's *Distortions of 1932-3* (Leperlier 1992, 231). However, while Kertész distorts the lower limbs of his female subjects, simultaneously shrinking or altogether cropping out their heads, Cahun manipulates her image in a way that privileges her head. Although viewers in our own time may be relatively accustomed to seeing women with shaved heads, one must consider the impact that such a sight would have had in Paris in 1930. More shocking still would be the sight of such a shaved head anamorphosized into a form that emphasizes the size and dominance of the brain, and that might be understood in Lacanian terms as an "'erection of the head'... as either a defence (mimicry) or a derision (mockery) of the phallus" (Bate 1994, 10; Kline 1998, 81 n. 5).

The same year, Cahun published *Aveux non Avenus* (sometimes translated as "Disavowed Vows" or "Voided Confessions"; Monahan 1996, 128), a book of self-referential prose and poetry divided into sections by a series of ten photomontages that were constructed by Cahun and Moore from Cahun's self-portraits, as well as a number of other photographs. The combination of text and photomontages functions as a dialectical strategy of continuous affirmation and negation, weaving together an unstable autobiographical narrative in which a continuous process of self-definition and self-doubt calls into question every positive statement. In their

important article on Cahun's photomontages, Honor Lasalle and Abigail Solomon-Godeau have written that "the technique of photomontage is fully consistent with the stated goals of [S]urrealism in general: the denaturalizing of vision, an uncompromisingly anti-realist bias, and most programmatically, access to unconscious processes through the operations of chance and the aleatory. From a feminist perspective it can also be said [that] photomontage possesses a particular instrumentality, namely [its] demolition of the illusory seamlessness and plenitude of the conventional photographic image" (1992, 11).

In order to explore Cahun's use of these strategies I focus on one of the ten photomontages in *Aveux non avenues*, Plate IV.<sup>8</sup> The self-portrait that was the basis for *Frontière humaine* is seen twice in this montage. In the central section, it is reversed and paired with another self-portrait which, seen in profile, appears to be staring interrogatively at the other Cahun with stern eyes and a firmly set jaw. The pair might conceivably be seen as Siamese twins, or as a visual metaphor for conflicting inner voices, but what is essential to note is that they are not locked in an internal dialogue: one Cahun looks away, denying the possibility of a narcissistic gaze. In the lower portion of the composition, this central image is inverted. In the second instance, the original self-portrait emerges upside down from "a uterine shape (which, reversed, provides it with angelic wings)" at the top of the image (Lasalle and Solomon-Godeau 1992, 12). On the bottom, yet another self-portrait of Cahun, this time in a theatrical costume, holds the image up like a figure of Atlas.

As the references to birth and self-interrogation make clear, this montage is concerned with the formation of the self. Two small photographs on either side of the central image, of a male and female classical sculpture, respectively, function as traditional "icons of gender" (Lasalle and

Solomon-Godeau 1992, 12). Cahun's doubled images seem to reject these stereotypes, instead asserting another conception of gender identity - perhaps that of a "third sex" or an "Androgyne" - which is not necessarily male or female, but has characteristics of both (Solomon-Godeau 1999, 117). As with *Frontière humaine*, Cahun inserted her disruptive, startling self-representations into the public sphere in the form of printed matter with this photomontage.

Despite its apparent applicability to their goals, photomontage was put only to limited use by Man Ray, Breton and other Surrealists in Paris during the 1930s (Ades 1976, 12-21; Lasalle and Solomon-Godeau 1992, 13 n. 10), and so Cahun and Moore's photomontages and the distorted photograph from *Bifur*, both dating from 1929-30, were ground-breaking in their technique as well as their challenging content. Furthermore, Leperlier has noted that Cahun was unique in that she was the only woman to engage with Surrealist visual concepts during the 1920s and early 1930s, arguably the movement's "most critical and complex years" (Solomon-Godeau 1999, 112). Thus, although these were the only instances in which Cahun publicly circulated her self-portraits, by the time that she began participating in organized Surrealist political activities beginning in 1932, Cahun "had already contributed her radical sexual and political ideas" to the movement through her published images and words (Bate 1994, 6-7).

With the rise of fascism in Europe, Cahun joined the *Association des écrivains et artistes révolutionnaires* (AEAR), a united front organization controlled by the *Parti communiste français* (PCF), with Breton and others in 1932. She soon withdrew from the group, however, and in 1934 published a critique of the PCF's politics and aesthetic positions in a pamphlet titled *Les paris sont ouverts*, which "Breton later described it as providing 'un image vraiment évocatrice

de cette époque" (Monahan 1996, 126). In 1935, joining Georges Bataille, Breton, Paul Eluard, and others, Cahun was the only woman to sign the first resolution of the group *Contre-Attaque: Union de lutte des intellectuels révolutionnaires*, an organization formed "not only to challenge the Party but to 'explore the continuation of politics by other means'" (Harris 2001, 91-2). In 1937, Cahun and Malherbe left Paris and direct participation in Surrealist political activities in favor of Jersey, where Cahun continued to maintain contact with Breton and other members of the Surrealist group and to produce self-portraits until her death in 1954.

I now turn to a consideration of three self-portraits by Frida Kahlo, whose engagement with the Surrealists began just as Cahun's active involvement in the movement was ending in 1937. Though the media and milieus in which they worked were quite different, I emphasize the ways in which Kahlo, like Cahun, employed Surrealist visual concepts, doubling and distorting her own image in order to disrupt traditional definitions of gender. Beyond this formal comparison, I also discuss the ways in which identification with the Surrealists was professionally significant for Kahlo, as it was politically significant for Cahun.

#### Frida Kahlo's Play of Mirrors

Born in 1907, Kahlo identified closely with the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917).<sup>9</sup> During the 1920s she was actively involved in the Mexican Communist Party, through which she met Diego Rivera; the couple spent much of the early 1930s in the United States, where Rivera had various mural commissions.<sup>10</sup> Returning to Mexico in the mid-1930s, Kahlo and Rivera continued their participation in communist political activities. Rivera joined the Mexican section of the Trotskyite International Communist League in 1936, and was instrumental, with Kahlo, in securing political asylum for

Leon Trotsky and his wife, who arrived in Mexico in January 1937.

Anxious to meet Trotsky and to visit Mexico, which he had anticipated to be a "Surrealist place par excellence" (Herrera 1983, 226), Breton and his wife Jacqueline Lamba left France to visit Mexico in April 1938. Herrera writes that "[Kahlo] did not take to [Breton]. His theorizing and manifesto making seemed to her pretentious, feckless, and boring, and she was put off by his vanity and arrogance" (1983, 227). Breton, however, was fascinated by her paintings, and suggested a Paris exhibition. Early in 1938 Kahlo had received a letter from New York art dealer Julien Levy, who represented a number of Surrealists, inviting her to have a one-woman exhibition at his gallery in the fall of that year. While in Mexico, Breton offered to write an essay for that exhibition. In the resulting text, he describes his delight at traveling to Mexico and finding that Kahlo's work had "blossomed forth...into pure Surreality, despite the fact that it had been conceived without any prior knowledge whatsoever of the ideas motivating the activities of my friends and myself" (Breton 1972, 36).<sup>11</sup>

Despite the generally patronizing tone of Breton's essay, which reinforced a conception of the Surrealist woman artist as a *femme enfant* or *seductress*, the solo exhibition at Levy's gallery marked Kahlo's entry into professional activity, as she was for the first time able to sell her work and to have an artistic identity that was not defined by her relationship to Rivera. Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen have written that Kahlo "painted originally for herself and it was not really till Breton recognized the value and fascination of her work for others that she conceived the possibility of holding exhibitions and marketing the paintings" (1982, 155). Contrary to Chadwick's statement from 1985 that Kahlo had painted only for herself and not for the art market, by engaging with the Surrealists she self-identified as a professional artist. Affiliation with the

movement also provided a means of distinguishing her work from Rivera's, which was so closely tied to the public expression of revolutionary Mexican nationalism.

Following her visit to New York, Kahlo did not return to Mexico but sailed to Paris to participate in the exhibition that had been suggested by Breton. It seems that Kahlo's understanding of the show had been that it would function much as the Julien Levy exhibition had, with her works exhibited independently of those of others in a professional gallery space. She was consequently greatly disillusioned when, upon arrival in Paris, she found that Breton had neither arranged a gallery space nor claimed her paintings at customs, and that he intended to show her works together with nineteenth-century Mexican paintings, photographs by Manuel Alvarez Bravo, and what Kahlo termed "lots of popular objects which he bought on the markets of Mexico - all this junk" (Herrera 1983, 242; Jean 1960, 291). Despite this presentation, which would have both exoticized and diminished the presence of Kahlo's paintings, the exhibition did bring some significant professional success: one work, *The Frame* (Figure 8) was purchased by the Louvre, and Kahlo wrote glowingly to friends of meeting and receiving accolades from Wassily Kandinsky, Joan Miró, and Pablo Picasso, as well as from Surrealists such as Yves Tanguy and Wolfgang Paalen.

Though it maintains close ties to Mexican folk traditions, *The Frame* is a painting that bears comparison with Cahun's self-portraiture. As with Cahun's photographs, the work is relatively small, only 28.5 by 20.5 centimeters in size. Kahlo's image is painted on tin, covered with glass and enclosed in a brightly painted wooden frame that bears motifs of flowers and birds. Unlike many of her later self-portraits in which the figure and background elements seem to crowd the frame, Kahlo's likeness appears somewhat distanced from the surface, and she is surrounded by an empty blue

field: it is as if she has painted over her own reflection in a mirror, fixing her image to the glass. One possible reading suggested by the painting is that it narrates Kahlo's shift of identity from the role of Rivera's wife to that of a professional artist exhibiting in New York and Paris: the bright wooden frame defines her as Mexican, while at the same time Kahlo allows herself the possibility of stepping away from that image and recreating herself in another mold.

Despite Kahlo's disappointment with Breton's exhibition, she returned to Mexico a successful artist whose engagement with Surrealism had brought public awareness and sales of artworks. Her involvement with the movement was evident when, after her return, she worked frantically to prepare two large-scale paintings (the only ones of her career) for the opening of the International Surrealism Exhibition organized by Breton, Paalen and others in Mexico City in 1940. One of these paintings, *The Two Fridas*, (1939; Figure 9) is one of Kahlo's most often referenced works; its strong ties to Surrealism are indisputable, but are rarely commented on.

In this work, Kahlo mirrors her own image in an uncanny way that, like Cahun's doubled self image in Plate IV of *Aveux non avenus*, destabilizes the idea of a fixed, immutable identity. Though her response to reporters when asked about the work was "I began painting it three months ago and I finished it yesterday. That's all I can tell you," her resistance to an easy interpretation has been ignored in favor of the interpretation that American visitor MacKinley Helm made upon seeing the work in Kahlo's studio on the day that she received divorce papers from Rivera: "[o]ne of them is the Frida that Diego had loved...the second Frida, the woman whom Diego no longer loves" (Herrera 1983, 278). Though Helm's analysis is not grounded in iconographical details, it is accepted and repeated by Herrera, as well as by Chadwick in *Women Artists and*

the Surrealist Movement, thus becoming the canonical reading of the work that has been further entrenched by the psychoanalytic interpretations of Chadwick (1985, 92), Salomón Grimberg (1998, 97), and others (Lindauer 1999, 108 and 144-6). Grimberg's statement that "[Kahlo] uses the dual images to portray two opposing forces: living and dying" (1998, 97), bears no relationship to the work itself: in fact, neither of the two Fridas appear to be dying, nor are they engaged in an oppositional dialogue.

The image of Kahlo on the left, with lighter skin and in an ornate white Victorian dress, is connected symbiotically to the other, of darker skin and wearing a Tehuana dress (traditionally worn by women from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Mexico), by the vein that links their two hearts and in the way that they hold hands lightly as sisters or friends. The more Victorian Kahlo holds a pair of forceps to the end of a dripping vein; the Tehuana Kahlo holds a tiny framed image of Rivera. The widely-accepted interpretation of the work involves a common assumption concerning Kahlo and her work: that the Tehuana dress functioned as a part of her "masquerade" of femininity, in order to captivate Rivera and camouflage her physical wounds.<sup>12</sup> Helms' reading of *The Two Fridas* whereby Rivera is understood to be divorcing Kahlo because he cannot come to terms with her "European" side, represented by the Frida in Victorian dress, essentializes the conflicts of their relationship as well as the subtleties of Mexican nationalist debates in the late 1930s, and Kahlo's participation in them.

By contrast, Margaret Lindauer offers a reading of *The Two Fridas* that links the work specifically to those debates, arguing that the overarching duality presented in the work is not that of European vs. Mexican, but of two interpretations of the notion of *mexicanidad*, or Mexican nationalist ideology: the *criolla* (or woman of European descent born in

Mexico) on the left, who represents the blending of European and indigenous roots that was celebrated in post-independence Mexico, and the *indigenista* (or woman of indigenous and European descent who self-consciously identifies with native traditions) in the Tehuana dress on the right, who represents a view of *mexicanidad* that was more prevalent in post-revolutionary Mexico (1999, 146-7). Seen in this light, Kahlo does not bifurcate her identity into a harsh duality based on her parentage, but represents her own heritage as a modern Mexican woman who has not severed the ties to the pre-revolutionary age and remains systemically connected to her past. Lindauer establishes this continuity through a discussion of the status of women in Mexico in the 1930s, pointing out that organizations such as the Frente Único Pro-Derechos de la Mujer (United Front for Women's Rights), of which Kahlo was a member, fought throughout the decade for voting rights for women. By 1940, however, "antifeminist rhetoric diffused the possibility of women's suffrage" (Lindauer 1999, 148); thus *The Two Fridas* may be understood as a statement that though the revolution had brought significant social change, to some extent these developments were little more than veneers covering the fact that little had actually changed for Mexican women.

Viewed through this lens, *The Two Fridas* becomes a social and political statement produced for a major public exhibition, rather than simply an internalized discourse about physical and psychological suffering. Kahlo mirrors her own image in order to avoid fixed readings concerning her identity as a woman and as a Mexican, just as Cahun doubled her own in order to move beyond traditional conceptions of male and female. By decentering and thus complicating her self-representation, Kahlo produced a work that has not one but many possible interpretations, on both personal and political levels.

Herrera notes that after Kahlo's exhibitions abroad and participation in the International Surrealism Exhibition in Mexico, "[r]ecognition brought patrons, commissions, a teaching job, a prize, a fellowship, participation in cultural organizations, conferences, art projects, and even the occasional invitation to write for periodicals" (1983, 316). Due in large part to the positive reception that her work had received in Surrealist circles, Kahlo, now divorced from Rivera, was truly "a painter in her own right" (Herrera 1983, 229-30). Her new personal and professional independence meant that Kahlo was now a threat to traditional gender conceptions, particularly in Mexico. Kahlo's *Self Portrait with Cropped Hair* from 1940 (Figure 10) can be interpreted as an overt challenge to narrowly defined gender roles, in much the same way that Cahun's androgynous self-portraits subversively articulated an active female subject who could take on male characteristics, perhaps as a means of participating in patriarchal power dynamics.

This image of Kahlo sitting on a chair in a suit, holding a pair of open scissors between her legs and surrounded by strands of hair that float strangely around her, is marked by the lyrics of a popular song: "Mira si te quise, fué por el pelo, ahora que estás pelona, ya no te quiero" ("Look, if I desired you, it was for your hair; now that you're bald, I no longer desire you"). Based largely on these words, Herrera again ties Kahlo's iconography to her intense and troubled relationship with Rivera, stating that:

[b]y destroying attributes of female sexuality, Frida has committed a vengeful act that serves to heighten her loneliness...[As in *The Two Fridas*] one senses that some macabre act has been performed - a violent rejection of femininity, or a desire to excise the part of herself that possesses the capacity to

love...Here, as in *The Two Fridas*, anger and pain join forces to sever Frida's connections with the outside world - and most specifically, with Diego. (1983, 285-6)

Viewing Kahlo's paintings through the lens of her biography, Herrera misreads actual iconographic details within the work, claiming that Kahlo wears Rivera's suit (1983, 285). In fact, the suit that Kahlo wears in the painting cannot be Rivera's, as it would dwarf her tiny figure. The suit she wears does not cover her hands and feet, but accommodates her proportions: it is her own suit. Stating that Kahlo's earrings are her only remaining vestige of femininity, Herrera seems perplexed that the artist has forgotten to remove them in her "violent rejection" of it, instead of considering the earrings as a conscious expression of feminine qualities in a more androgynous self-depiction, not unlike Cahun's elegant off-the-shoulder dress in *Frontière humaine*. Herrera further states that "a mood of angry retaliation is expressed" (1983, 285); in fact, Kahlo's expression is not a vengeful glare but a cool, reserved glance that is wary but at the same time deliberate in its address to the observer - similar in many ways to Cahun's expression in certain self portraits. The use of the song lyrics may be read as a challenge to Rivera, a statement of independence whereby Kahlo does not have to maintain her long, feminine hair in order to keep his love as she is now a self-sufficient, professional and unconventional woman in her own right; it is not, as Herrera describes it, as "a rueful jest of her feckless retaliation" (1983, 286), a sign of utter hopelessness and inaction.

#### Conclusion

Both Cahun and Kahlo stretched the boundaries of their own images in order to expand the limits of definition of their professional, sexual and

artistic identities. It is important to note that this identity shifting did not play out in an internalized, narcissistic, private arena, but in the cafés of Paris where Bifur and Aveux non avenues would have been discussed, and in the galleries in New York, Paris and Mexico where Kahlo's work was exhibited: spaces of public debate. Steven Harris advocates a reconsideration of Cahun's work, both ideologically and formally, in light of the Surrealist project, viewing it "...through the prism of the avant-garde aesthetic and political positions she shared with contemporaries like Breton and Bataille, rather than apart from them; for Cahun, this involves a challenge to the verities of sexual difference...in the very attempt to negotiate a space for herself as a female artist and intellectual in a patriarchal culture" (2001, 91). I would argue that the same is true of Kahlo, though her engagement with Breton and other Surrealists led more to the development of her professional artistic life than to the expression of an avant-garde aesthetic ideology.

It is not my intention to pose Surrealism as the single or dominant discourse of Cahun's or Kahlo's projects, but as one that is significant in conjunction with others. Cahun's writing and photomontages found resonance in other avant-garde modernist movements in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as within debates concerning gender identity that were based on ideas of the "new woman" and Joan Riviere's psychoanalytic concept of "womanliness as masquerade" (Solomon-Godeau 1999, 115). The same is true for Kahlo, who hardly belongs exclusively within the framework of Surrealism. In her case, an additional discourse that must be taken into account is the nationalistic revolutionary climate in Mexico during these decades, with its emphasis on *mexicanidad*. The International Surrealism Exhibition did not inspire Mexican artists to embrace Surrealist ideas as Breton had hoped, and European Surrealist ideas did not take

hold in Mexico until after the beginning of the 1940s when a community of European Surrealist exiles, including Remedios Varo, Benjamin Péret, Leonora Carrington, Wolfgang Paalen, Alice Rahon, and others settled in Mexico City (Rodriguez Prampolini 1969, 44). Even then, the exile and émigré community kept a certain distance from the Mexican art community during their first years in Mexico, and artists such as Kahlo and Rivera demonstrated a hesitancy to engage with them (Chadwick 1985, 194).

Kahlo, however, like Cahun, did employ Surrealist aesthetic concepts in her work and participated in Surrealist-organized exhibitions. In her discussion of women writers in avant-garde Paris, Susan Rubin Suleiman states that "[i]n a system in which the marginal, the avant-garde, the subversive, all that disturbs and 'undoes the whole' is endowed with positive value, a woman artist who can identify those concepts with her own practice and metaphorically with her own femininity can find in them a source of strength and self-legitimation" (1988, 153-4). In their work, Cahun and Kahlo fought to enter and expand the avant-garde using avant-garde ideas. Through their separate involvement with the Surrealist movement, both Cahun and Kahlo destabilized their own representations in order to subvert and transgress the limitations placed upon women politically, professionally and sexually in their contemporary milieus.

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#### Endnotes

1. Kahlo's work, which was exhibited in the United States and in Europe during her lifetime, continued to be exhibited and written about in Mexico after her

death; however, it was not included in major exhibitions outside of Mexico between 1944 and 1978.

2. See Mulvey and Wollen (1982), Oles (1996), Taymor (2002), Bonito Oliva and Sanfo (2003), and Dexter and Barson (2005), among others.

3. See Bate and Leperlier (1994), Bossé and Audinet (1995), Rice (1999), and Aliaga (2001).

4. Margaret Lindauer (1999) addresses the ways in which writers including Hayden Herrera (1983), Whitney Chadwick (1985), and Solomon Grimberg (1998) have minimized the significance of Kahlo's political and professional affiliations in favor of personal and psychological interpretations of her work. Two alternative readings are Mulvey and Wollen (1982) and Ades (1998). Texts that consider Cahun's work in relation to contemporary photography include Kline (1998) and Bate (1994); see also Camhi (1999). In contrast, Steven Harris (2001; 2004) emphasizes Cahun's political activities, while Abigail Solomon-Godeau (1999) considers Cahun within the context of the lesbian subculture of 1920s Paris.

5. For more on women artists and Surrealism, see Chadwick (1985; 1998; 2002); Caws, Kuenzli and Raaberg (1991); and Rosemont (1998); on the representation of women in Surrealist art, also see Krauss, Livingston and Ades (1985); Krauss (1999); and Mundy and Ades (2001).

6. Unless otherwise noted, biographical details on Cahun are from Leperlier (1992).

7. *Bifur 5* (April 1930), Éditions du Carrefour. This image is reproduced as Figure 18 in Chadwick (1998, 73), and in Leperlier (1992, 112). Note that the caption

mistakenly identifies the opposite self-portrait as having been published in *Bifur 5*, an error that is repeated in Monahan (1996, 127).

8. *Aveux non avenues* (Paris: Éditions du Carrefour, 1930).

9. Unless otherwise noted, biographical details are from Herrera (1983).

10. If she had not already come into contact with European Surrealism at this time, it is likely that Kahlo was exposed to it in the United States, where she often participated in the Surrealist game "cadavres exquis," which emphasized Surrealist ideas about automatism and chance and was related to psychoanalytic ideas of condensation and displacement (Herrera 1983, 162).

11. He continues, "there is no art more exclusively feminine, in the sense that, in order to be as seductive as possible, it is only too willing to play alternately at being absolutely pure and absolutely pernicious" (Breton 1972, 36).

12. Lindauer discusses readings of Kahlo's Tehuana dresses by Herrera, Orianna Baddeley, Janice Helland, Terry Smith, Robin Richmond, and Alejandro Gómez Arias (1999, 115; 120; 142; 155).

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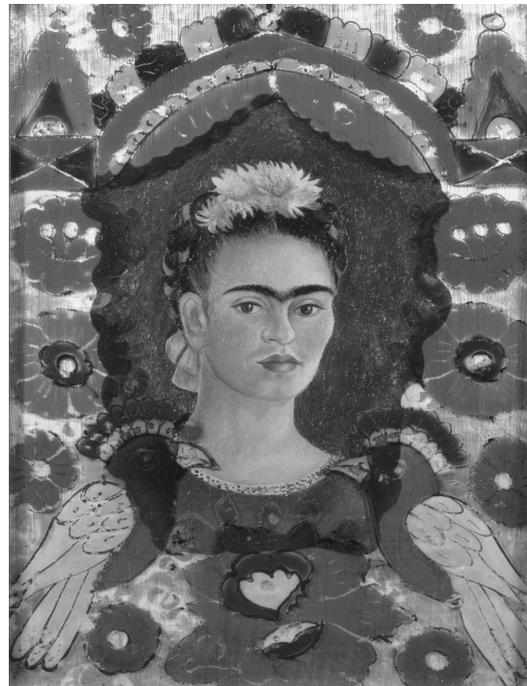


Figure 8. Frida Kahlo, *The Frame*, ca.1937-38. © 2006 Banco de México Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust. Av. Cinco de Mayo No. 2, Col. Centro, Del. Cuauhtémoc 08059, México, D.F. Photograph courtesy of CNAC/MNAM/Dist. Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY.



Figure 9. Frida Kahlo, *The Two Fridas*, 1939. © 2006 Banco de México Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust. Av. Cinco de Mayo No. 2, Col. Centro, Del. Cuauhtémoc 08059, México, D.F. Photograph courtesy of Schalkwijk/Art Resource, NY.

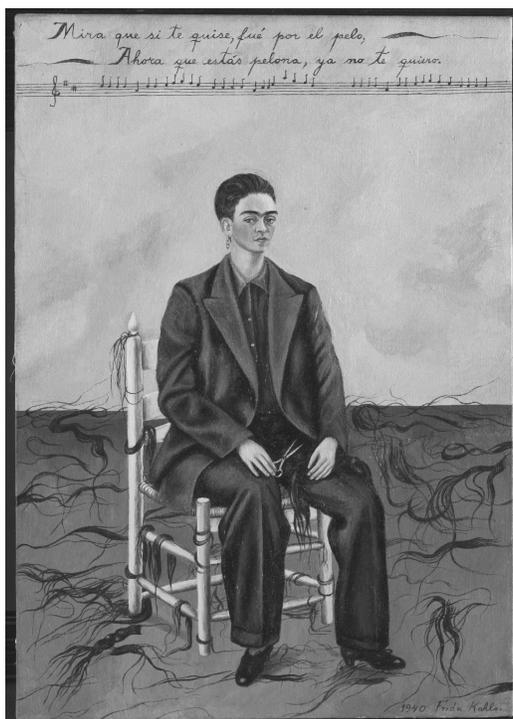


Figure 10. Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair*, 1940. © 2006 Banco de México Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust. Av. Cinco de Mayo No. 2, Col. Centro, Del. Cuauhtémoc 08059, México, D.F. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.