

By the late 1920s women artists had begun to seriously examine the dialectics of speech and image in the creative spaces of literature and visual art. The French avant-garde performer, image-maker and writer Claude Cahun first published their transgressive work *Héroïnes* in 1925. Soon thereafter, in 1929, Virginia Woolf's feminist text *A Room of One's Own*, from which this essay takes its title, argued that there was a real and figurative gendered bias in women's writing. In all of their work, Cahun and Woolf probe concepts of androgyny and gender identity, centered on the psyche as comprised of multiple selves.¹ Nearly one hundred years later, conceptual artist Sherry Wiggins arrives on this continuum, presenting THE UNKNOWN HEROINE, a work in dialogue with these two feminist founders. More specifically, Wiggins responds to the surreal yet scholarly text titled “THE ESSENTIAL WIFE or the the Unknown Princess” found in Cahun's *Héroïnes*.

Héroïnes, a series of fifteen monologues, operates within the thematics and artifices of the theatrical avant-garde, the space in which Cahun performed during the 1920s. The text is an experimental work, layered with allegory and parable, where Cahun deploys fictional characters such as Cinderella alongside biblical figures like Salome and Delilah, all representing the gendered plight of women in the early twentieth century. In “THE ESSENTIAL WIFE or the the Unknown Princess,” Cahun's “heroine” is wed; bound by name to her husband, she eventually submits to domesticity out of self-interest. Like this heroine, Wiggins knows the roles of wife and mother and princess, albeit a self-proclaimed princess. Cahun calls attention to the gendered narrative behind Names for such roles. Likewise, Wiggins's heroine performs the tasks associated with those roles, offering a fiction that affirms the mask beneath those masks.²

Over the course of her career, Wiggins has interacted with the work of many other artists. But it is examining Claude Cahun's life and work that has led her to interpret, through artmaking, feminist readings of the image (self) and the gaze (other). At the intersection of these concepts is the subject/object relationship—subject being the observer, object being the person, place or thing observed. Visually, these often conflicting and weighted points of view formulate identity construction, away from or toward an autonomous selfhood. THE UNKNOWN HEROINE represents Wiggins's search within selfhood for otherness acknowledging that women are still perceived as referent to the redacting and nullifying male gaze.

The images and text herein present us with the feminine space as one of emotional and physical confinement; this space is also the location of potential liberation as identified by Woolf and

of multiplicity and otherness as established by Cahun in their narratives and performative photographs.

THE UNKNOWN HEROINE is Sherry Wiggins's most recent installment in a much larger body of conceptual envisages manifested through drawings, performance photographs and, now, text. In 2013, Wiggins initiated a multi-year, interdisciplinary project titled *Searching Selves* as an investigation into the work of remarkable women artists of the twentieth century. Centered upon feminine/feminist enactments that become artworks, Wiggins created a new open-ended practice whereupon she interacts with artists through study and mirroring. These subjects are international artists who, during their lifetimes, maintained peripatetic disciplines embedded in early to late conceptualism that align with Wiggins's own. To date, exhibitions and historical analyses of these notable women and their contributions to art history are in various stages of curatorial development and scholarly examination, some being regarded, others still in need of recognition. Wiggins's desire is to push these artists forward in visibility and recognition.

To date, *Searching Selves* has included, in order of production, Russian-American avant-garde filmmaker Maya Deren; Indian minimalist Nasreen Mohamedi; Portuguese conceptualist Helena Almeida; Brazilian multimedia artist Mira Schendel; and, now, Claude Cahun. Unlike the others, Cahun, who died in 1954, before the common usage of the pronoun *they*, identified as androgynous beginning at an early age (fig. 1). In Cahun, Wiggins has found an early example of countervisuality, an aversion to masculine structures behind gazes, looks and general visuality.

Wiggins's search for selves, her own through others, has led her to delve into the artistic practices of other artists, ultimately making her own work in adjacency to theirs. That process, a kind of conjuring or ‘tunneling’ akin to a writer's process, has resulted in work that is an interplay on views of the perceptions of subject/object.³ Some complications in the nature of *Searching Selves* relate to the multiplying effects of subjects/objects. Wiggins makes the self a theoretical subject on its own.

Over the years, embodying other artists' ideas by physically occupying kindred sites—cities, countries, houses, studios—often under theoretical provisions set by the other artists, has become a singular methodology for Wiggins. One aim of this intensive research has been to challenge the idea of images as always being gendered, a concern largely conveyed by the gaze.⁴

In the mid-1970s, feminist Laura Mulvey, speaking specifically on cinema, posited that women are “image” and men “the



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Fig. 1 Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, *Untitled* (reflected in the mirror), ca. 1928, courtesy of the Jersey Heritage Collection, Saint Helier, Jersey.

Fig. 2 Gillian Wearing, *Me as Cahun holding a mask of my face*, 2012, C-type print, 157.3 x 129 cm., collection Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Fig. 3 Helena Almeida, *Pintura Habitada* (*Inhabited Painting*), 1976, black and white photograph, 205 x 128 cm., edition of three, collection Galeria Filomena Soares, Lisbon.

bearer of the look.”⁵ Images of women on screen are saturated with objectifying masculine psychological markers that mirror accepted cultural and social norms. As Mulvey discusses, we see that the projected image on screen operates like Lacan’s mirror stage, where recognition/misrecognition and identification distort self-image. In other words, we see our self in the heroic presentations of the fantasies before us. In these fantasies, women come to occupy the screen as the bearers of meaning whereas men are understood to be the makers of meaning.

While cinema differs from still photography, the relationship to the gaze in viewing artworks remains the same, reinscribing those same systems of power. As they pertain to women and otherness, images can appear as conquered, colonized and demonized. It is through those terms of viewership that Mulvey ascribes an imbalanced meaning. Even abstracted from feminist root arguments, those ideas remain in art viewing. How can women be seen outside of these terms? How can we see them as they see themselves? Or, perhaps more relevant to the Wiggins effort: How could she see (or present) herself as undefined or unobligated to such old, unwanted stereotypes?

Of all the artists throughout *Searching Selves*, looking to Cahun’s *Héroïnes* has given Wiggins a unique literary work with which to confront the history of gender as it pertains to art and representation. It is important to note that Cahun’s work commenced after World War I, a time when critical thinking around the subject of the gaze and gender in viewing in art had yet to begin; Woolf’s critical text largely spoke on gender in relationship to the literary arts. The weight of feminist theory and criticism on the gendered nature of viewership arrived long after Cahun’s death, through Mulvey and others, in the late twentieth century. In sum, Cahun’s visceral and androgynous work has presented Wiggins with an interrogative view of women’s representation as subject to identification with the masculine gaze, long before there was a theory of such a thing.

Images of Claude Cahun, taken by their life partner Marcel Moore, are directed at masking or playing to stereotypes of gender through androgynous identity. The beauty of androgyny is its lack of identification with either the heroic masculine or feminine.⁶ Plurality frees reductive ideation. Wiggins’s audacious pursuit of understanding such a complex figure as Cahun—their artistic methods, ideas and responses to historical and cultural projections on the making and reading of their identity and art—has led her to a daring confrontation with normative expectations of the gaze.

Other artists such as Gillian Wearing (fig. 2) have responded to Cahun with projects of their own. While Wiggins’s activation of

the interior subject in the Cahun monologue “THE ESSENTIAL WIFE or the the Unknown Princess” represents a first, both she and Wearing have used their bodies as sites, spaces subject to ideas and critiques about display, spectatorship and the gaze. For Wearing, the body is itself a vehicle for explorations of personal identity. Like Cahun she sees the mask for its duplicating affect in self-transformation and meaning. The mask is a double projection, one hidden identity under another. In addition, Wearing’s work demonstrates a deep propinquity to her subjects which are not always women. Wiggins, however, works with the body, affording it an extroverted subjectivity that she refers to as an embodiment. These embodiments appear dominant yet relatable, less duplicating than a mask while under scrutiny.

In order to build the fiction realized in the *THE UNKNOWN HEROINE*, Wiggins enlisted her longtime collaborator, Portuguese photographer Luís Filipe Branco. Their partnership began in 2015 at OBRAS-Portugal in Evoramonte, a residency program for international visual artists and writers located in the rural Alentejo region. While at OBRAS, Wiggins wanted to investigate the work of the late Portuguese artist Helena Almeida (fig. 3) who, like Wiggins, had a history of making performance portraits. Branco was brought to the project to document Wiggins’s live responses to Almeida’s work. In brief, when completed, those first photographs of Wiggins/Branco’s spoke to an interior subjectivity—the architectural nature of movement and space—that occupied Almeida throughout her career and drew Wiggins to enact a mirror practice.

From this first effort—Wiggins’s making of performance portraits inspired by Almeida, photographed by Branco—the duo evolved. They came to make other photographs that moved beyond the studio to sites within the cork tree dotted Portuguese landscape. To date, Branco has shot Wiggins in rivers, canyons, drought-stricken reservoirs and mountaintops, many eliciting images of historical archetypes of the feminine in the landscape. For example, *Woman Rising* (fig. 4), a photograph set amongst the pastoral cork oak forest, easily conjures a reference to Jean-Honoré Fragonard’s *The Swing or The Happy Accidents of the Swing* (fig. 5), a Rococo swirl of objectification with obvious layers of fetishism. While the landscape photographs sit outside of projects where Wiggins directly responds to another artist’s oeuvre, the images can still be considered part of her *Searching Selves* or search for self, a determination to defy notions of age and beauty and to reset a feminist eye in her own artmaking.

Emerging in Wiggins’s work from that point forward is a more focused argument about the gaze and its gendered position.



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

Fig. 4 Sherry Wiggins and Luís Filipe Branco, *Woman Rising*, 2019, color photograph, 81 x 54 cm., collection of the artists.

Fig. 5 Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *Escarpolette (The Swing)* also known as *Les Hasards heureux de l'escarpolette (The Happy Accidents of the Swing)*, 1767, oil on canvas, 81 x 64 cm., Wallace Collection, London.

From there, Wiggins came to occupy the space within the confines of the camera. Branco was at the lens, but it was as if he were not there at all. In a way, the camera became controlled by her dance-like movements instead of Branco's will or vocalizations to strike a pose. That moment marked the beginning of a new relationship with the lens where technology offered a more desired surrogate eye for Wiggins's performance portraits. In a feministic reversal of subject/object, Wiggins insured that Branco was not the subject, that he was instead the *other*.

For *THE UNKNOWN HEROINE* Wiggins and Branco traveled to OBRAS-Holland to occupy a lovely two-story Victorian mansion in the small village of Renkum. Armed with Wiggins's research on Claude Cahun, they entered a site which presented ideal conditions for theatre. The undefinable architecture of the house seemed Gothic but also Victorian. An odd series of spaces, mise en scènes, connected the pair to roles as the fictional wife and husband in Cahun's "THE ESSENTIAL WIFE or the the Unknown Princess." The house also displayed an embedded formality to animate. Architectural conditions such as passageways and stairwells drew attention to notions of women in confinement. Windows presented opportunities for display of the figure as a trapped object, echoing a time when women were seen to be as unpredictable as nature and therefore a threat when freed from domesticity. Even with the camera positioned as a kind of surrogate gaze, Branco's presence supplied a literal gaze for Wiggins to react against, reject or occupy. The camera does offer a third mode for creation and viewership, but both are hard to disentangle from Mulvey's concept of image and bearer, especially when the dynamic includes a male shooter and female performer, as it was in this case.

What is at stake in these performance portraits? Unfortunately, most viewers, lookers or spectators adhere to objectifying, gendered visualizations and interpretations of images. To this problematic, Wiggins offers what we know: the male gaze was demystified decades ago. Or, as Cahun writes in "THE ESSENTIAL WIFE or the the Unknown Princess": The Monopolist of Names is no longer named by anyone.

Where there is unity of the two artists—Cahun and Wiggins—it is Wiggins's (re)presentation of the problem of gendered readings, some hundred years later, that allows us to read Cahun from contemporary feminist perspectives. We now know the game. We can see Wiggins's performance portraits on differing terms: as historical interplay between artists over time, as commentary on the unchanged nature of the gaze, as complicated by the known female/male normative behind the photographs.

Has Wiggins's activation of "THE ESSENTIAL WIFE or the the Unknown Princess" been enough to subvert that truth?

Ascribing to the gender-normative roles of the characters as written by Cahun, Wiggins gives us a woman of the house and a man behind the camera. Is the camera a tool of power?⁷ An instrument that shoots? Or is it a means to diminish power, a means to further contest Names for roles that women have been societally relegated to perform? While Wiggins performs the duties of the housewife, we also read her as we did in the landscape occupied by a certain unwillingness to be duty-bound, a want to subvert chore for play. And we can connect the figure before us to the problem of Names that Cahun identified in "THE ESSENTIAL WIFE or the the Unknown Princess."

What we see in *THE UNKNOWN HEROINE* blurs reality and art. Claude Cahun as a singular identity is elusive. Images of Cahun multiply in meaning over time, and their complex text lacks the artist's own reasoning to guide us; attempting to locate Cahun in the singular can only emerge as theoretical. That said, Cahun's grounding in avant-garde theatre sets forth a world of fantasy and façade, the essential language of the actor.⁸ Wiggins's use of herself as subject is a similarly complicated form of self-expression—perhaps, even, an attempt at self-transcendence. As Virginia Woolf asserts, "the unknown woman" was a descendent of all the other women.⁹ Considering *THE UNKNOWN HEROINE* as such a descendent places the concept of the isolated individual within the context of the larger collective consciousness. Here, we dissociate selves from Names and their gazes.

NOTES

1. Lexi Manatakis, "How Virginia Woolf Influenced Art," *DAZED: Art & Photography*, online, (February 6, 2018).
2. Claude Cahun states, "Under this mask, another mask. I will never finish removing all these faces," in *DISAVOWALS; or Cancelled Confessions (Aveux non Avenus)*. (Paris: Éditions du Carrefour, 1930).
3. Virginia Woolf's diaries speak of "tunneling" as a process of burrowing into characters' pasts to unearth their histories. Peter Childs, *Modernism* (London: Routledge, 2000), 165-6.
4. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972).
5. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, Volume 16, Issue 3, (Autumn, 1975): 6-18.
6. Phyllis Kenevan, "The Jungian Interpretation of the Feminine." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol. 1, No.1 (Autumn, 1975): 122-127.
7. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*. (New York: Picador, 1977).
8. Miranda Welby-Everard, "Imaging the Act: The Theatre of Claude Cahun," *Oxford Journal* 29, Oxford University Press, (2006): 1-24.
9. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929), 80.