



CONFESSIONS
TO THE MIRROR

A film by Sarah Pucill

INTRODUCTION

Sarah Pucill

I have been making 16mm films for over two decades that draw upon queerness, interior space, and inter-subjectivity through disturbances between self and other. Having been influenced by the photographic work of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore throughout all this time, when *Aveux non avenus* (1930) was translated into English, I wanted to make a long film that would bring together Cahun's words and photographs whilst at the same time incorporate some of the visual language I felt I shared with Cahun. I decided to film in my home studio in the same way that Cahun had done and to shoot it on black and white 16mm. In this way I had a close material involvement with camera technique, making sets and costume, and translating and editing the text. Finally I would also step into the place she or Moore had taken in the picture.

My first Cahun film, *Magic Mirror* (75min, b/w, 2013), mostly focusses on the self-portrait photographs made in Paris during 20s and 30s with text from *Aveux Non Avenus* (*Confessions Denied* 1930). The bringing to life of these photographs that are prolonged as stilled tableaux vivants, are also set alongside tableaux that illustrate Cahun's text. There is something magical about an artist leaving something behind that can be re-played by an artist at a later time, as a music score or play that is re-performed, re interpreted and

made to speak again through the vehicle of an artist alive at a different time.

Confessions to the Mirror re-stages many of the black and white photographs in colour. Extracts read an abridged translation from Cahun's posthumously published and hitherto un-translated text, *Confidences au miroir* (1945-54). The film focuses on the life-long partnership and collaborative work between Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, and re-stages lesser known still life images as well as the outdoor self-portraits in Jersey. The biographic and fragmented text in the film narrates Cahun and Moore's anti-Nazi propaganda activities in Jersey in WWII and their consequent imprisonment during the Occupation of the island. Their artwork made in peacetime is set alongside the propaganda artwork the couple made and distributed to Nazi officers on the island. Unlike *Magic Mirror*, my process and journey researching her life and artworks is made visible in moments of tracing, copying and projecting film footage of their home, garden and views of sea and graveyard in Jersey, into my home studio in London a century later.

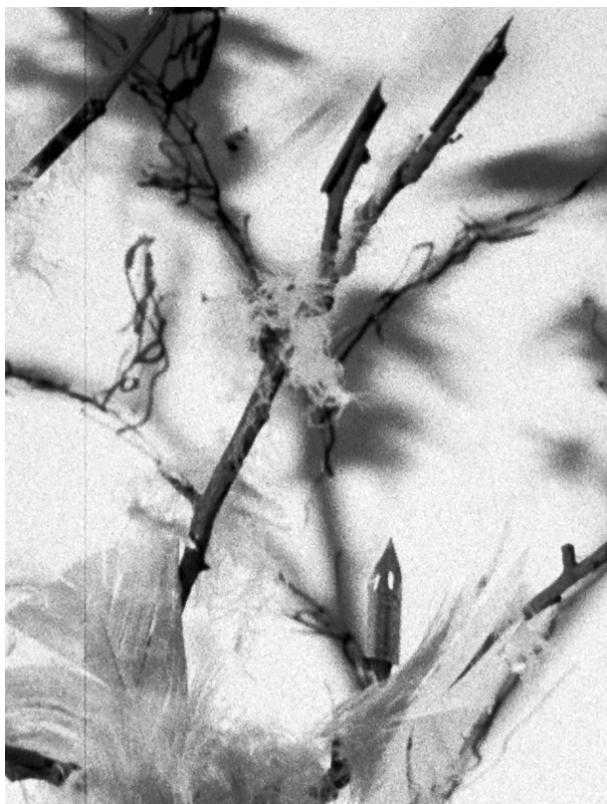
Sarah Pucill

Sarah Pucill has been making 16mm experimental films for three decades that have been shown and won awards at festivals, in museums, galleries and cinemas internationally. *Magic Mirror* (75min, 2013) premiered at Tate Modern, toured internationally and was staged as an exhibition with Claude Cahun's photographs the Nunnery Gallery, London and at Coreana Museum Gallery, in Seoul. The sister film to *Magic Mirror*, *Confessions to the Mirror* (68min, 2016) premiered at London Film Festival, and showed at international film festivals (Alchemy, Creteil, Dortmund) and museum galleries including National Portrait Gallery, White Cube Bermondsey, Cobra Museum Gallery, Netherlands and as an installation at Ottawa Art Gallery, Canada due to tour. A chapter on the film has been written by Sarah Pucill in *Experimental and Expanded Animation* (Palgrave Univ Press) 2019 and *Cinematic Intermedialities* (Edinburgh Univ Press) 2021. Sarah Pucill lives and works in London, has a doctorate and is Reader at University of Westminster. Her work is archived and distributed through BFI, LUX London and Light Cone, Paris.

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Filmography

You Be Mother 1990
Milk and Glass 1993
Backcomb 1995
Mirrored Measure 1996
Swollen Stigma 1998
Cast 2000
Stages of Mourning 2004
Taking My Skin 2006
Blind Light 2007
Fall In Frame 2009
Phantom Rhapsody 2010
Magic Mirror 2013
Confessions to the Mirror 2016
Cut Out 2020



Film Still, *Confessions To The Mirror*, 2016

MIRROR TRICKS: THE MAGIC OF OBJECTS

Maxa Zoller

Sarah Pucill's fascination with Surrealism has marked her practice to a great extent. But her interest in surrealist art is not just personal; it was, in fact, part of a generational, art historical shift of the late 1970s when a post-conceptual generation started to find out more about the forgotten his- and herstories of Surrealism. It was also at that time that academic work on women surrealists began. Claude Cahun's work, though, resurfaced a bit later, her *nom de plume* having complicated her exact identification¹. While Pucill was introduced to Cahun's art in the late 1980s it was only in the early 2000s that she chose the artist as the subject of two of her major films, *Magic Mirror* (2013) and *Confessions to the Mirror* (2016). I will introduce the main stakes of *Confessions to the Mirror* before the core argument in the second half of this text; the importance of objects and object making in Pucill's films is to question and potentially undo narrow definitions of art and film making in favour of an open, yet precise re-reading of Pucill's work that does justice to its complexity.

¹ See Laura Cottingham, 'Considering Claude Cahun', in: *Seeing Through the Seventies: Essays on Feminism in Art*, Routledge, London, 2000, p. 200.

Confessions to the Mirror takes Cahun's later life, which changed drastically during World War II as a source of inspiration. Cahun's life, her and Marcel Moore's move to the small island of Jersey did not turn out to become the freedom the two had hoped for. With the Nazi occupation of the island only three years after their arrival in 1940, the couple's life turned into a political act – and threat. Cahun and Moore were sentenced to death and imprisoned for their activities in the Resistance, which included their art practice. Suspended between life and death, Cahun survived prison but suffered subsequently from an illness which prevented her from returning to Paris, and to which she succumbed at the age of 60 in 1954.

The focus of *Confessions to the Mirror* is led through Cahun's autobiographical text of the same name, *Confidences au miroir* (1945-54) which was posthumously published. This 'second chapter' of Cahun's life is the source of inspiration of Pucill's second film on Cahun. Shot in colour primarily², the film combines images of the photographic and sculptural work of Cahun of this period with passages from Cahun's text. Pucill's radical re-assemblage of image and text, pushes the nature of historical interpretation to its very limits, so that the film while research-based and knowledge-producing also opens the semiotic field of meaning in language, visual and otherwise.

With the two Cahun films Pucill (re)turns to a particular artistic language that has marked her oeuvre throughout, but in particular the films of the 1990s and early 2000s. By means of multiple projections, reflections and animation, she layers and plays with different visual levels creating enigmatic and highly complex spaces, film *trompe l'œil*s, that require attentive viewing. Her production processes are not limited to scripting, shooting and post production but involve painting, prop and sculpture making and theatrical set ups in the studio.

A multi-disciplinary artist, Pucill makes films that do not allow straight-forward categorisation nor instant gratification. In the British context, the emergence of digital film coincided with the commercialisation of 'contemporary art' in the mid 1990s. The combination of the opening of the global market post-Perestroika, the individual commercial interest in new

² Some scenes, such as the still lifes are shot in black and white.

capital of the powerful British advertising agency Saatchi&Saatchi and young art graduates that had reclaimed for themselves post-conceptual practices, brought about the so-called Young British Artists ('YBAs'), that would deeply mark the British and international art landscape. As the experimental film scene started to shift and transform around Pucill and the other filmmakers of her generation that still worked primarily in a Coop system³, the value of her multiple skills – Pucill had studied Combined Arts at Manchester University and Fine Art at the Slade School of Art⁴ – also changed. Today, Pucill's persistence in creating complex, intermedial film works is also a form of resistance to the market, its pressure and the impact this can have on artistic freedom. "I am not interested in working purely individually. I prefer to work in dialogue with an historical artist in order to bring the past into the present and frustrate the demands of the market", Pucill said in an interview.⁵

There is one particular aspect in her filmmaking that has been overlooked and deserves a closer look; the object. Objects play an essential role in *Magic Mirror* and *Confessions to the Mirror* in particular, as Pucill's re-making of Cahun's surrealist objects does not only pull Cahun's art "from the past into the present", it also allows us to widen our understanding of Pucill's film art.

Between World War I and II a new radical chapter in the tradition of sculpture began. While the object had been vital for the Duchampian Dada movement of the WWI period, the Surrealist object came into being at a later stage, between the 1924 Second Surrealist Manifesto's highlighting the 'mystical object' and the 1936 Surrealist exhibition at Charles Ratton Gallery in Paris. This enthusiasm for the Surrealist object also took hold of Cahun, who arranged *objets trouvés*, most notably the bell jar and mannequin works. Around this vital time André Breton introduced Cahun to the poet Lise Deharme, for whom Cahun made a series of photographs of Surrealist arrangements in the publication of Deharme's poetry in 1937 *Le Coeur de Pic*.

³ The London Filmmakers' Coop that was founded in 1966 had established a production and distribution system that worked in a cooperative way. The Coop was of major significance for filmmakers working with analogue film.

⁴ Topics taught at Manchester University were music, theatre, dance, visual arts and creative writing.

⁵ Author interview with Pucill, 4.9.2019



Film Still, *Confessions To The Mirror*, 2016

One of them, the quill pen twig tree (p4), was remade by Pucill for one of the most memorable scenes in *Confessions to the Mirror*. The object is an assemblage of a few thin tree twigs the tips of which end in small quill pen nibs. At the foot of the tree rests a pile of white feathers. Originally, the image of the quill pen twigs is a visual pun that refers to Deharme's poem and the French word 'plume', which translates as 'quill pen' and 'feather'. But this haunting object is of course a meta-image of the cerebral system and its nervous ramifications in/to the limbs of the body. The body of the writer is the medium through which creative impulses flow. Through the metallic prosthetic caps on the finger tips passes a dark fluid, ink – expression of thought. It is often forgotten, that Cahun was not only a visual artist but also a poet. The Surrealist method of automatique writing, *écriture automatique*, is clearly worked into this image.

Outgrown finger nails, a motive that returns in the only film quote in *Confessions to the Mirror*, F.W. Murnau's 1922 horror film *Nosferatu*, also signify the hand of death who extends his bony fingers toward us. It is almost a relief to see the white feathers fall on the pen tree in the next scene. Like tender snow flakes the soft feathers create a stark contrast to the black, pointy twigs and place the tree into the concrete context of a winter landscape. This is important as this image also stands for Cahun's bare survival under extremely harsh living conditions on the occupied island of Jersey the consequence of which advanced her death. The voice-over of this scene offers a new interpretation: Cahun describes her experiences in the prison cell and the difficulty of defeating death, surviving and finally 'coming back to life'. To combine the quill pen tree sculpture, that only a few years ago had accompanied her friend's poem, with the dramatic description of Cahun's 'bare life' in Nazi confinement moves the meaning of this image from Surrealist pun to existentialist metaphor.

Another important element of this scene is a quill pen tracing the shadow of the twigs that are cast on the white back wall. With fragile, nervous black lines, the pen moves up and down the shadows on the white surface. A match-cut introduces the next scene in which a hand holding a pencil retraces Cahun's writings of one of her prison letters. We are being told by the voice-over how vital paper and pencil were for the artist, for whom the possibility to draw and to write was a life-saving coping mechanism until her release in May 1945.

In conceptual terms, also, the act of tracing elongates Cahun's life into ours. *Confessions to the Mirror* is the result of Pucill's retracing of Cahun's poetic art. The quill pen tree scene acts therefore as a key scene for understanding the film beyond the narrative of Cahun's life; it also opens up the methodological tool of a retracing that connects Cahun to the filmmaker, and by extension to us, the audience.

But what does it mean to retrace the work of another artist? Retracing is different from copying or re-enacting. In fact, it occupies an interesting place between these 'closed' and 'open' modes of repetition. To retrace, to calk; in French the terms are similar, 'calquer', 'copier'. In German they are very different; 'nachzeichnen' (to draw after something), 'durchpausen' (calk through). I would suggest that Pucill's retracing – or calking – of Cahun's sculptures and objects, gives us the opportunity to reinterpret her film work in broader terms than has previously been done.

The commonly argued themes that made Cahun so attractive for the artist Pucill: the surrealist imaging, lesbian desire, Cahun's symbiotic relationship with Marcel Moore and their political work in the *Résistance antérieure français*, are important. But what about the less obvious and possibly more difficult question of what Cahun means for Pucill methodologically?

As an artist, I work between the brush, the object and the camera. One minute I am doing one thing, the other I am doing something else. There is a sort of madness to it.⁶

Brush, object, camera – these three elements constitute Pucill's film art. They are particularly prominent in *Magic Mirror* and *Confessions to the Mirror* as Pucill's objects are 'backed up' through the retracing. This allows us, the viewer, to pull to the fore the often overlooked significance of the object in Pucill's practice. This observation further begs the questions of the significance of the mirror in the films and the choice of the titles. Is Cahun Pucill's 'mirror artist'? In *Magic Mirror* in particular Pucill focuses on Cahun's complex (re)interpretation of the Narcissus myth in terms of 'going through the mirror'. But the transgressive power of this scene should not be limited

⁶ Author interview with Pucill, 4.9.2019

to the obvious and academically well-established analysis of the *cinematic* dimension of the ancient Greek myth. The mirror is also a powerful Surrealist object!

The mirror of the classic Narcissus myth also serves as a starting point for Pucill's first art installation *Garden of Self Portraits after Claude Cahun*, which she presented in the exhibition *Facing Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore* at Ottawa Art Gallery⁷. On the floor of a dimly lit gallery a small projection screen shows extracts of all the garden auto-portraits that are re-staged as *tableaux vivants* in *Confessions to the Mirror*. In front of it, is placed a square frame tray of water that is lined with black plastic sheeting and serves as a dark reflecting surface for the images of the film. An arrangement of artificial flowers around the black water reinforce the idea that we are looking at the lake of Narcissus. Four small mannequin heads carrying different wigs seem to stare into the black water. Costumes shown in the extracts (a beige coat and a shirt) hang on a coat rack. In this installation, Pucill presents the object for the first time as an installation in the gallery space.

Pucill has always been categorised as a filmmaker but already her earliest films involved objects that she collected, arranged and staged. From her groundbreaking *You be Mother* (1990) to *Milk and Glass* (1993), *Backcomb* (1995), *Cast* (2000) surreal objects take centre stage, quite literally. After *Stages of Mourning* (2004) her work takes on a structural turn with the films *Taking My Skin* (2006), *Blind Light* (2007) and *Fall in Frame* (2009). There is a gradual return to object-based animated films with the use of props in the theatrically staged *tableaux* of *Phantom Rhapsody* (2010). Pucill's animation films are *Wunderkabinette* full of (magic) tricks, wonder and awe. The hair-table in *Backcomb*, the flower-eating scene and the dress in *Swollen Stigma*, the *tableaux vivants* in *Phantom Rhapsody* and the mask in *Magic Mirror* – the portrait and the still life, are important 'genres' amongst Pucill's artistic vocabulary. The uncanny character of the displaced and alienated domestic object (and this includes the female body) has a gender-political agenda in that it transforms the male fetishistic gaze into one that is Surrealist and ambiguous. The scholar Alyce Mahon wrote about the still life genre in the art of inter-war women surrealists:

⁷ The exhibition *Facing Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore* took place from September 2019 until February 2020 at Ottawa Art Gallery.

Often drawing on the power of the *trompe l'oeil* to trick the eye into seeing the two-dimensional as fantastically three-dimensional, the still life presents the real without the appearance of the reality maker. In its familial and domestic subject-matter, focus on the private space, emphasis on experience and contemplation, and refutation of the masterly gaze, we might also describe this genre as inherently feminine.⁸

Great Surrealist still lifes have a timeless metaphysical power that goes beyond the intention to critique, so continuing to bewitch with its magic today. The magical process, that is Pucill's art cannot be limited to the category of filmmaking. The artistic dialogue that the artist engages in with her materials includes the object – and object making. In fact, could it be argued that *objectmaking* brought Pucill to *filmmaking*, rather than the other way around? Did her sculptural skills mark her 'hands-on' approach to filmmaking, in which until today she uses analogue 16mm film? Throughout her film art practice Pucill has sustained a resistance to orthodox art making and (hetero)normative narratives. But *Confessions to the Mirror* pushes us, Pucill's audience, to finally and fully understand her work as a complex, transdisciplinary practice in which the magical objects take centre stage.

Maxa Zoller

Maxa Zoller is the Artistic Director of the Dortmund | Cologne International Women's Film Festival, one of the world's oldest and largest women's film festivals. Maxa received her Ph.D. from Birkbeck College in 2007. Her interest in the interrelationship between art and cinema has marked her academic career at the American University in Cairo, Goldsmiths College and Sotheby's Institute of Art, London. It has also informed her curatorial work for Tate Modern, now.here, Art Basel and the EYE Filmmuseum in Amsterdam, where she co-curated a major solo exhibition of Anthony McCall in 2014. Her understanding of 'expanded cinema' also informs her work as director of Dortmund | Cologne IWFF, where she initiated artist residencies and book publications.

⁸ Alyce Mahon, 'Women Surrealists and the Still Life', in Patricia Almer, ed.: *Angels of Anarchy, Women Artists and Surrealism*, Manchester Art Gallery and Prestel, 2010, p. 54

DOUBLING IMAGES,
TROUBLING OBJECTS

Laura Guy

Film Still, *Confessions To The Mirror*, 2016

Early on in *Magic Mirror* (Sarah Pucill, 2013), a performer attempts to break with their reflection. The trick is made possible by the camera, the product of a 16mm technique that duplicates footage through re-winding and re-filming. Over the oscillating double image (two faces, two shaven heads), two voices speak nearly, but not quite, in synch. The spoken text is taken from Claude Cahun's book *Aveux non avenues* (1930), or *Disavowals*, an apparently autobiographical work by the French Surrealist photographer comprised of collaged text and image fragments that constitute a radical reappraisal of the self. "I can't see how one can leave oneself, this house, this obsession, I will not get out of here... this house, this haunting, there is only one solution: to set fire to it". As with the out-of-synch voices, the double image of the performer never settles to form a single likeness. It introduces the film as another uncertain play of self and image.

Magic Mirror and its sister film *Confessions to the Mirror* (Sarah Pucill, 2016) inhabit the photographs that Cahun made with Marcel Moore from 1920 until Cahun's death in 1954. Drawing on images and text, both films foreground the part of Cahun and Moore's collaborations in which identity is irreducible to a whole or coherent thing. This proposition is focused through the lens of Pucill's thirty-year practice as a filmmaker. The spirit of another time and place, conjured through the works of Cahun and Moore, comes to inform Pucill's practice and the contribution it has made to contemporary queer and feminist perspectives about image and identity.

To inhabit something is to live inside it. The threat, and possibility, that being in synch with another poses to the self hovers across many of Pucill's films. This is not simply an interest in imitation. In *Taking My Skin* (2006), the artist and her mother take it in turns to pose and film one another. As their roles shift between image-maker and image they also shift across generational lines. The daughter holds the mother, if only for the time of the frame. This exchange of skin is replaced in *Magic Mirror* and *Confessions* by costumes and masks that are put on and removed. Sets are arranged and stages created only to be adjusted. Comprised as a series of unfixed vignettes, both films construct and reconstruct second impressions of images, objects and texts that were originally authored by another.

Perhaps it would be better to say authored by others? Cahun's work does not represent a straightforward translation of the identity of an artist into art object or written word.

The proper noun, Claude Cahun, is a signature that enacts a breaking with the author. Unmoored from paternal ties, and posing a challenge to individual authorship, the name grounds both processes and products of making in a complex matrix of affinities. Deploying Cahun's name, *Magic Mirror* and *Confessions* encompass other pairings such as Pucill's posthumous collaboration with her partner, Sandra Lahire. In *Stages of Mourning* (2004), self-portraits created by the two filmmakers are animated through moving image. The device closely resembles the methods employed in *Magic Mirror* and *Confessions*. Look closely and Lahire's name can be spotted, written on a playing card in the first of the two films. (The card is the Joker, the only one in the deck of which there are two.) The films of Cahun's photographs conjure other absent collaborators so that even when Cahun is in the frame, it never really is Cahun, or just Cahun, at all.

In the two films, appearance always seems to pivot on difference. Photographs are adapted for film, the still image blinking at the viewer. Words and pictures are overlaid, a doubling of meaning by other means. In psychoanalysis the double takes various forms: doppelgänger, shadow, reflection and mirror image. But where for Freud, writing on the uncanny, the double signals an immature desire turned inward rather than toward an outward object, Pucill engages with Cahun's theoretical reappraisal of narcissism.

In *Magic Mirror*, an image of Cahun-as-Narcissus is mirrored in the surface of a silvery pool. A hand plays across the surface, disrupting the reflection. Then at the beginning of *Confessions*, a mass of seaweed is dragged from beneath the pool's surface (p19), the voiceover recites: "my memory swells in vain. Gorged with false treasures / It's my whole life that I pull from there". The depiction of Narcissus that follows (p1) creates a twin with the one in the earlier film. Here though, the gaze shifts from the surface of the pool to the camera. The sleight of hand gestures toward what is visible and what is not, to what might be touched beneath the surface of the image.

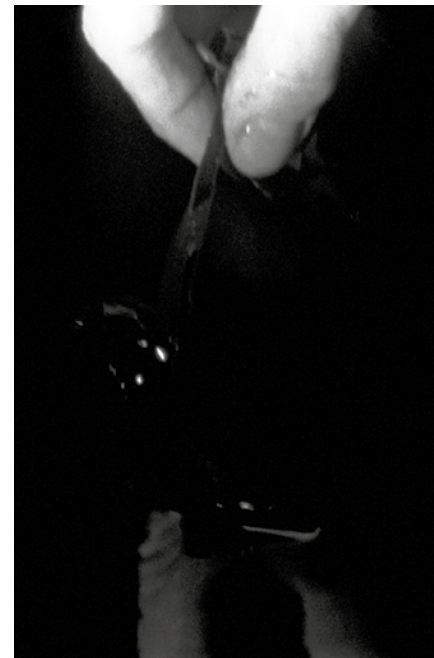
Like Freud, Cahun's writing links the uncanny manifestation of the double to self-love. Yet Cahun's double represents a desire to hold fragments together so that the ideal self is never rendered whole. Narcissism, a state to which Freud thought women and homosexuals particularly prone, becomes the ground for a radical exploration of self connected as much to loss as it is to a surplus of identification, indeed showing the ways that the two are intimately intertwined.

Identification does not only take place between bodies. In *Magic Mirror* and *Confessions* it also relates to objects such as small sculptural forms that feature in the two films. Many of these are animated versions of sculptures that appear in Cahun and Moore's tableaux. Each object exerts its own pull of desire on the image and creates an excess of signifiers that can barely be contained. In even Pucill's earliest films the life of objects are implicated in the life of the image. In *You Be Mother* (1990) a self-portrait is distorted as a hand pours tea from a pot. A straightforward signifier of the domestic sphere is transformed into a face that invites recognition. *Backcomb* (1995) features a wig that gathers momentum as, animated, it crawls across a table, carrying objects in its wake. (Is this the opposite of the magic trick in which a cloth is pulled from a table leaving all objects in place?). Many objects that appear in *Magic Mirror* and *Confessions* are deployed for other than their intended use. The meaning of these signifiers without referents, as Carolyn Dean once characterised Cahun's images, seem to float like reflections on water.

Many of the objects that appear throughout *Confessions* are lined up on a table in a courtroom in one part of the film, creating a moment of apparent order that gives evidence to the lives of Cahun and Moore. A similar table of evidence was assembled by Nazi official when Cahun and Moore were tried for resistance activities during the occupation of Jersey, where the couple moved during World War II. Detached from the magical world created by Cahun and Moore, these objects were called as witnesses under the law of the Fascist state. In *Confessions*, however, the objects are assembled by the filmmaker and serve a different purpose. This jury trial turned jumble sale, as Cahun mockingly describes it, is farcical. Where the law of fascism instrumentalises identity as an absolute, Pucill's dialogue with Cahun and Moore's work obliterates this logic. Both films conjure a fragmented understanding of the self that remains a troubling presence for fascism and its afterlives.

Laura Guy

Laura Guy's writing on queer feminist art and culture has been published across various platforms including *Frieze*, *MIRA: Moving Image Review and Art Journal*, *Women: A Cultural Review*, *Aperture* and *Photoworks*.



Film Still, *Confessions To The Mirror*, 2016

Front and back cover: *Film Still*,
Confessions To The Mirror, 2016

Published 2020 in the UK by
LUX, Waterloo Park Centre, Dartmouth
Park Hill, London, N19 5JF
www.lux.org.uk

Designer Silke Klinnert
Editors Sarah Pucill / Benjamin Cook

Blu-ray

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Film Sarah Pucill
Text Individual authors
Publication LUX

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Publication supported by
University of Westminster

LUX is financially supported by
Arts Council England



Supported using public funding by
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