

The Impudent Gaze: Claude Cahun's Micro Poem

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Education level: High School

Genre: Poetry

Time frame: 60-75 minutes

Objective: To demonstrate the long, global history of gender role resistance; to inspire provocation in creative practice.

Prior knowledge and skills: Basic understanding of and/or sensitivity to gender theory and queer politics.

Required materials: Collage materials: magazines, newspapers, as well as glue sticks, scissors, and construction paper.

Literary model: ["I am in training, don't kiss me"](#) photograph by Claude Cahun

Claude Cahun (birth name Lucy Renee Mathilde Schwob) was a surrealist photographer born in Nantes, France in 1894, who later relocated to Paris. In Paris, Cahun rubbed elbows with other surreal artists of the time, namely André Breton who lauded her. Cahun identified as "elle" (a feminine French suffix), but writes in her autobiography, *Disavowals*, on her gender identity: "Masculine? Feminine? It depends on the situation. Neuter is the only gender that suited me."

I taught Cahun's photograph "I am in training, don't kiss me" in my work with One-in-Ten, a queer youth program based in Phoenix, Arizona. Students in this program came to my workshop already empowered on issues of gender and sexuality. I knew I wanted to stoke their passion as well as contextualize gender history and share that free gender expression has been a struggle since the 1920s and beyond.

I settled on Cahun's photograph "I am in training, don't kiss me" because of its wonderfully meta, sarcastic, and, importantly, impudent tone. Surrealism, as defined in Andre Breton's *Manifeste du surréalisme*, was foremost a nonconformist movement. Cahun carries this torch of nonconformity and shines a light on the coded and conformist language of gender. Dressed as a male bodybuilder, sitting with legs crossed holding a barbell, she dons the boots, shorts, hairstyle, and "bare chest" (a white shirt with stitched-on nipples) of bodybuilders, while wearing heavy eye make-up, drawn-on eyebrows, demur lipstick, and dainty, painted hearts on her cheeks. Cahun hyper-performs masculinity and femininity simultaneously. By emphasizing, embodying, and exaggerating the two poles on the gender identity spectrum, she subverts both.

We explored Cahun's provocative methodology and subversion of mainstream gender expectations via her kaleidoscopic visual performance of gender in conversation with the text written across her costume: "I am in training, don't kiss me." I encouraged students to refer to this text as a micro poem embedded within the photograph.

This micro poem is a wonderful example of another Surrealist feature: the non-sequitur. The two clauses “I am in training” and “don’t kiss me” don’t feel immediately relevant to one another. The mystery between these two clauses asks the viewer to do interpretive work: Is the micro poem a provocation? Is she taunting us?

Below are discussion points I wanted to hit on in my workshop but, of course, I leave it to you to shape discussion as you see fit. Unpacking this photo with young people was incredibly stimulating and I hope you have as much fun as I did!

Discussion *15 minutes*

Project Cahun’s photograph or pass out copies for students to view. Next, facilitate a discussion on Cahun’s piece. I like to avoid hand-raising, and allow for natural conversation right from the start, allowing students to join in when they feel called. Once several people have shared, I repeat back what I’ve heard in the discussion thus far. I follow up with action-oriented questions like: What is this photograph doing? What is happening in the photograph? What do all the things we mentioned thus far do for the photograph and do *to us* as a viewer? Feel free to let students guide the conversation and employ any discussion methods you usually use.

- Where do we see culturally masculine and culturally feminine objects in this photograph? What does the presence of both do to our relationship with gender roles within this photograph? How does this duality make you feel about culture *outside* of this photograph?
- What might the juxtaposition of both masculine and feminine objects reveal about Cahun’s subconscious?
- How do these objects affect Cahun’s relationship to us, the viewer?
- Does Cahun situate herself as voyeur or exhibitionist? Both? What might this juxtaposition, common to Surrealist ideology, reveal about Cahun? Do you meet the subject’s gaze? How does doing so make you feel?

Below are notes for discussing the text on her shirt.

“I am in training, don’t kiss me”

- Why does Cahun incorporate and center this phrase in her piece?
- What is the tone of the text? Confrontational? Impudent? Playful? Inquisitive?
- What do we think of when we hear the phrase “in training”? What kinds of things do we train for?
- How do you read this “in training” phrase with the phrase “don’t kiss me”?
- How does the text further the Surrealist juxtapositions that we see in the rest of the piece (masculine vs feminine objects, voyeur vs exhibitionist)?
- What might non-sequitur, another feature of Surrealism, in this text reveal about Cahun’s subconscious? Ours?
- Does the text have a gendered and/or sexual charge to it? If so, what does this do to our relationship to the subject?

Pre-Exercise: Scour source material for images/texts that appeal 15 minutes

Cahun's micro poem cannot be read separate from the imagery it is surrounded by. As such, I wanted students to create something visual *before* writing their text. I asked students to skim source material from magazines, newspapers, and old maps I had brought into the class and make a collage – a “vision board,” of sorts.

Lay out the magazines and source material. Ask students to scour the magazines for words and images that stand out to them.

Prompt 15 min

Instruct students to write a micro poem inspired from the visual components of their collage. Their micro poem can also pull from any text they found in the magazines, etc. Encourage students to, like the Surrealists, think of juxtaposition and non-sequitur. Ask: “How do you want the text and images to interact? What can juxtaposition between each medium reveal about the other?”

Some other reminders/guides for students:

- Think of audience. Is there a person/social group/structure you want to send a message to? Who do you wish you could speak your mind to if it were safe to do so? What have you been wanting desperately to say?
- Like Cahun, you can pack a punch in just a few lines. Think of Cahun's micro poem.

Share 10 minutes

Ask students to share! You can invite students to go around popcorn style. If there's time, you can even set up the classroom as a gallery wherein students walk around the space, viewing one another's pieces.