

something of a national institution. Gender fluidity has become a marketing strategy, which surely suggests it is gradually gaining acceptance. Cahun and Moore were significantly ahead of their time, to the point that they would have struggled to find real acceptance anywhere. After a breathtaking introduction to the vibrant cultural milieu of Paris, their refusal to be confined to a fixed identity made Cahun and Moore increasingly elusive. They became an enigma. For too long, their intangible nature condemned them to one of art history's many blind spots.

Furthermore, within the progressive circles of surrealism, homosexuality was not as acceptable as we might imagine. This – coupled with the years they spent in Jersey isolated from Europe's cultural hubs, the destruction of much of their work at the hands of the German occupier, as well as the current need for remarkable stories about the artist – perhaps answers the question as to why it took so long for their work to be evaluated afresh. Since Cahun was always the one in the photos and the one who expressed herself in writing, Marcel Moore's place remains unjustifiably neglected to this day. The downside of the inclusion of Cahun and Moore in the canon of art history is that they have at last been firmly allocated a place in the kind of unambiguous narrative they themselves detested. *Mea Maxima Culpa.*

#### CLAUDE CAHUN / MARCEL MOORE

CLAUDE CAHUN (b. 1894, FR – d. 1954) and MARCEL MOORE (b. 1892, FR – d. 1972) were creative and romantic partners best known for their surrealist photographic portraits. Born Lucy Schwob and Suzanne Malherbe respectively, in 1920 they adopted gender neutral pseudonyms and moved from Nantes to Paris where they became involved in the surrealist and avant-garde movements. To escape Nazism, they moved permanently to Jersey in 1937 where they distributed anti-fascist propaganda – their equally powerful artistic and political actions were used to undermine an authority that they abhorred. Much of Cahun and Moore's acclaim came posthumously, and multiple exhibitions have featured their work, including at Tate Modern, London (2001). Much of Cahun and Moore's work is held by the Jersey Heritage archives.

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#### KIM KNOPPERS

(b. 1976, NL) is an art historian (University of Amsterdam) and curator at Foam. Since 2011, she has worked on exhibitions by Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin, Anne de Vries, Jan Hoek, Lorenzo Vitturi and Jan Rosseel to name but a few. Kim is founder of *Artists' Recipes* which explores the intersection of art and food. She lives and works in Amsterdam and stays on a regular basis in Istanbul.

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# A CARNAL MEDIUM BY WILLIAM J. SIMMONS

Roland Barthes could be describing Laurie Simmons' work when he said in 1981, 'A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed.' Though Simmons has been associated with a more conceptual critique of identity politics, her recent work is, in fact, a deeply corporeal commentary that is real enough to caress with our fingertips. There is a characteristic self-awareness in Simmons's recent work that sets her apart from her colleagues that are associated with conceptual photography also known as 'The Pictures Generation'. Her understanding of identity and its relationship to the photographic medium has always been evolving, and each new series is a simultaneous extension of and departure from the last.

For the series *Kigurumi*, *Dollers*, and *How We See* (2014), Simmons photographs real people in fantasy/fetish cosplay gear, expanding her focus on the living human body, tracing back to her *Water Ballet/Family Collision* (1980-1981) series, which dazzles with painterly swaths of naked bodies swimming in glorious maritime paradise and whose only competition might be Alfred Steiglitz's beautiful bell peppers and sexy sand dunes. Similarly, *Fake Fashion* (1984-1985) combines statuesque female models

with colour film projections. *Color Pictures* (2007-2009), while containing no living models, features lifelike found images of women from pornographic magazines. Finally, in her most recent series exhibited at the Jewish Museum in New York, Simmons photographs a diverse group of individuals with painted-on eyes over their closed eyelids. The body, in all its physicality, has always been important territory to Simmons, and to consider her a photographer of the inanimate is a misnomer.

Keeping this relationship to the body and physicality in mind, we might understand Simmons' new works depicting cosplay as occupying a space between photography, painting, and performance. All of the figures occupy multiple registers of space. In *Brunette/Red Dress/Standing Corner* (2014) the model places her hands on adjacent sections of the wall, delineating a space with her body, just as the photograph delineates a space with its viewfinder. We might assume this room originally belonged to a little boy, now all grown up. Adorned with tiny race cars, the tattered room is at odds with the latex perfection of the female 'body.' Similarly, *Brunette, Black Dress, Orange Room* (2014) finds its *punctum* in the subject's gloved hand that grasps the wall. She tells us that this is her photograph as much as it is Simmons'. Moreover, her shadow is doubled and thereby deepens the



















photographic space with an index of her solitary performance. The model is the subject of the photograph, but she is also the architecture. She is the house in all its glamorous disrepair, but she is also a mechanically flawless manifestation of desire.

Even though these people seem post-human, as many of Simmons' subjects do, the body is thus at the forefront of these photographs, certainly, but so is the peeling, bubbling paint of Simmons' scenery, which, in a strange way, mirrors the flamboyant pigments of her subjects' costumes. Yves Klein's *Anthropométries* (1960) – in which he covered female models in his trademark 'Klein blue' and directed them to press their bodies against paper as 'living brushes' – is a perfect parallel to Simmons' bodies/pigments/humanoids. Klein's project was a more literal and distinctly French *Nouveaux Réalistes* adaptation of Robert Rauschenberg's and Susan Weil's earlier *Female Figure* (c. 1950). In both cases, a parallel arises to Simmons' *Yellow Hair/Brunette/Mermaids* (2014). Klein, Rauschenberg, and Simmons all suggest that an intellectual or 'postmodern' approach need not neglect the specificities of the body, or more importantly, the corporeality of the medium itself.

While the gender politics of Klein's performances have been debated elsewhere, what is more relevant in this context is that, although the *Anthropométries* survive as 'paintings,' they live on more forcefully in the cultural imaginary as photographs, especially pictures of Klein with paint-

drenched women. More iconic than the performance or the paintings are the photographs, because the photographs record the spectacle and the cult of personality. The physical body becomes inseparable from the photographic documentation of the body, which might complicate the way we discuss photography deemed 'postmodern'. This is especially important with regard to Simmons's work, recognizing her multifaceted dedication to performance, photography, fantasy, reality, and intellectual rigor.

Simmons requires the formalist reading more often associated with painting, even as she engenders a sociopolitical critique more often associated with photography. She requires that the 'postmodern' relationship between photography and identity politics be renegotiated. Her work is not merely an illustration of a sexual subculture but rather a historically replete and formally rigorous discussion of how the body and the photographic document might productively relate in a nuanced fashion. This is a pressing thought experiment because no identity is as simple as normative art histories would have us believe. Race, gender, sexuality, ability have come to the forefront of national and art world attention, but the real world events surrounding these lived experiences always confound easy explanation. Simmons's photographs ask us, perhaps, to look to the multiplicity of the human body, as well as the multiplicity of possibilities available to photography as the privileged medium of post-modernity.



## LAURIE SIMMONS

(b. 1949, US) has had solo exhibitions at galleries including MoMA PS1, Long Island City; Gothenburg Museum of Art, Sweden; Neues Museum, Nuremberg, Germany; The Jewish Museum, New York. Her work was featured in *The Pictures Generation*, at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1974) and various other group exhibitions worldwide. In 2018, Simmons will have a traveling retrospective originating at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. In 2006 she wrote and directed a short film, *The Music of Regret*, and her first feature film, *My Art*, recently premiered at the 73rd Venice International Film Festival.

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courtesy Salon 94

## WILLIAM J. SIMMONS

(b. 1992, US) is a lecturer in art history at the City College of New York and a Ph.D. student in art history and women's studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He is the author of numerous essays, reviews, chapters, and features for a variety of international publications. Simmons also serves as the art editor for *CRUSHfanzine*.

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