

**MAURICIO HERRERABARRÍA**  
**AESTHETICS AND CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE WESTERN WORLD**  
**502-CF1-AS**

**EXHIBITION**

**PRESENTED TO MR. MICHAEL BELCHER**

**LASALLE COLLEGE**  
**DECEMBER 5TH 2019**

**TITLE:**

*Gender Benders: The Study of a Continuum.*

**THEME:**

It is undeniable that art is a man's world —more so, heterosexual, cisgender and white.

*Gender Benders: The Study of a Continuum* aims to recount art's history from the perspective of some of the marginalized queer individuals who created art from a place of rejection, intolerance, self-questioning, and defiance.

And just like the concept of gender, art evolves.

From the ancient caves of Bethlehem to New York's Guggenheim, this exhibition raises questions, suggests notions and sets new standards, but most importantly, allows us to realize that far from preconceived assumptions, human history is more diverse than we thought.

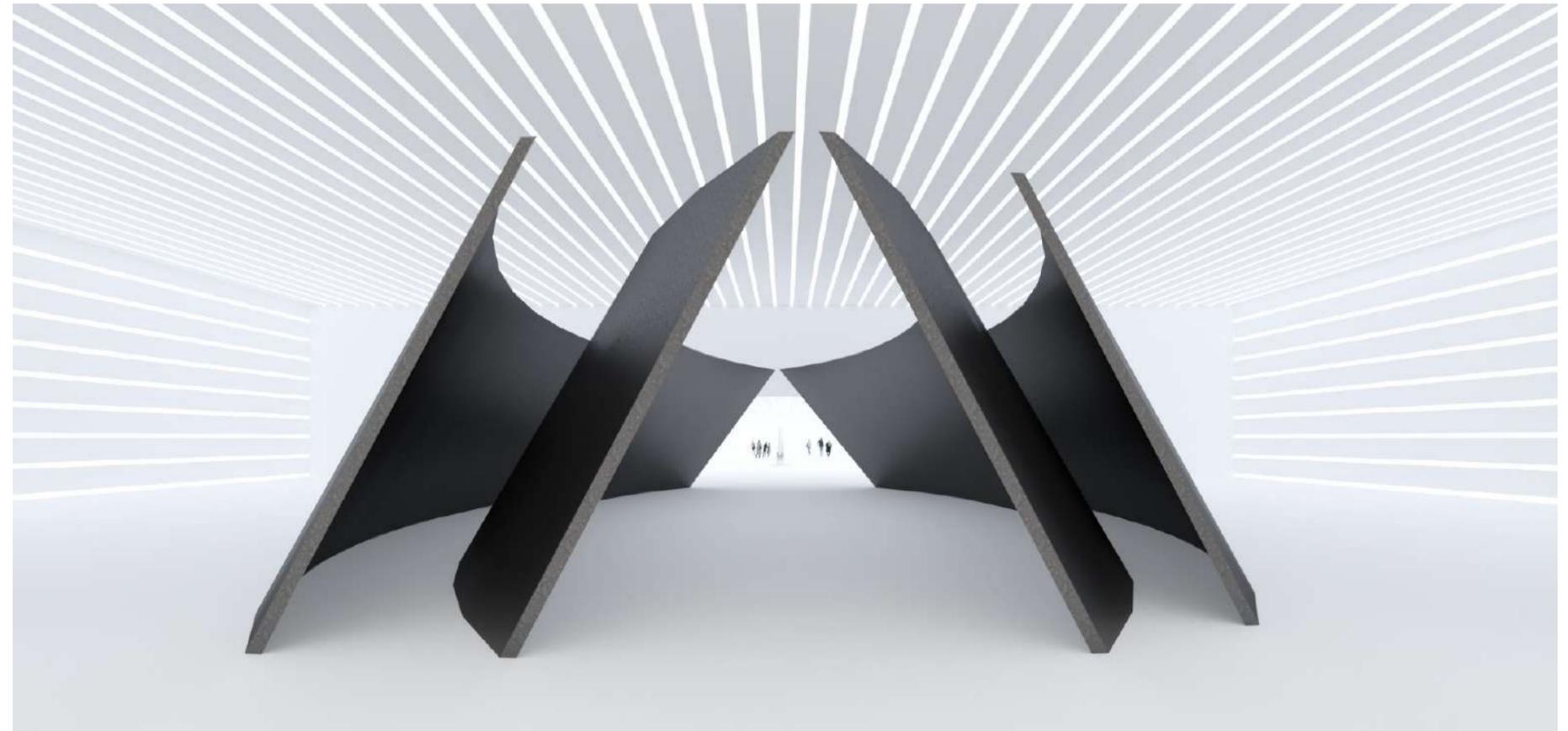
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**AESTHETIC ELEMENTS OF THE EXHIBITION:**

The exhibition's look is minimalist. Composed of one large room, the exhibition is continuous —just like gender. An infinite highway effect lit by LED strips to create an elongated and futuristic vision. Every artwork in the exhibition is placed one after the other to appear as one when seen from the entrance of the exhibition.

White floors, white ceiling, and white walls. The room is meant to feel like a laboratory, a laboratory for gender studies. Sculptures and more-3D pieces will be placed on clear-plastic display boxes, while photographs, paintings and audiovisuals will be hanging from the ceiling and supported by clear-plastic cases. For audio tours, wireless white earphones are going to be given to those who purchase.

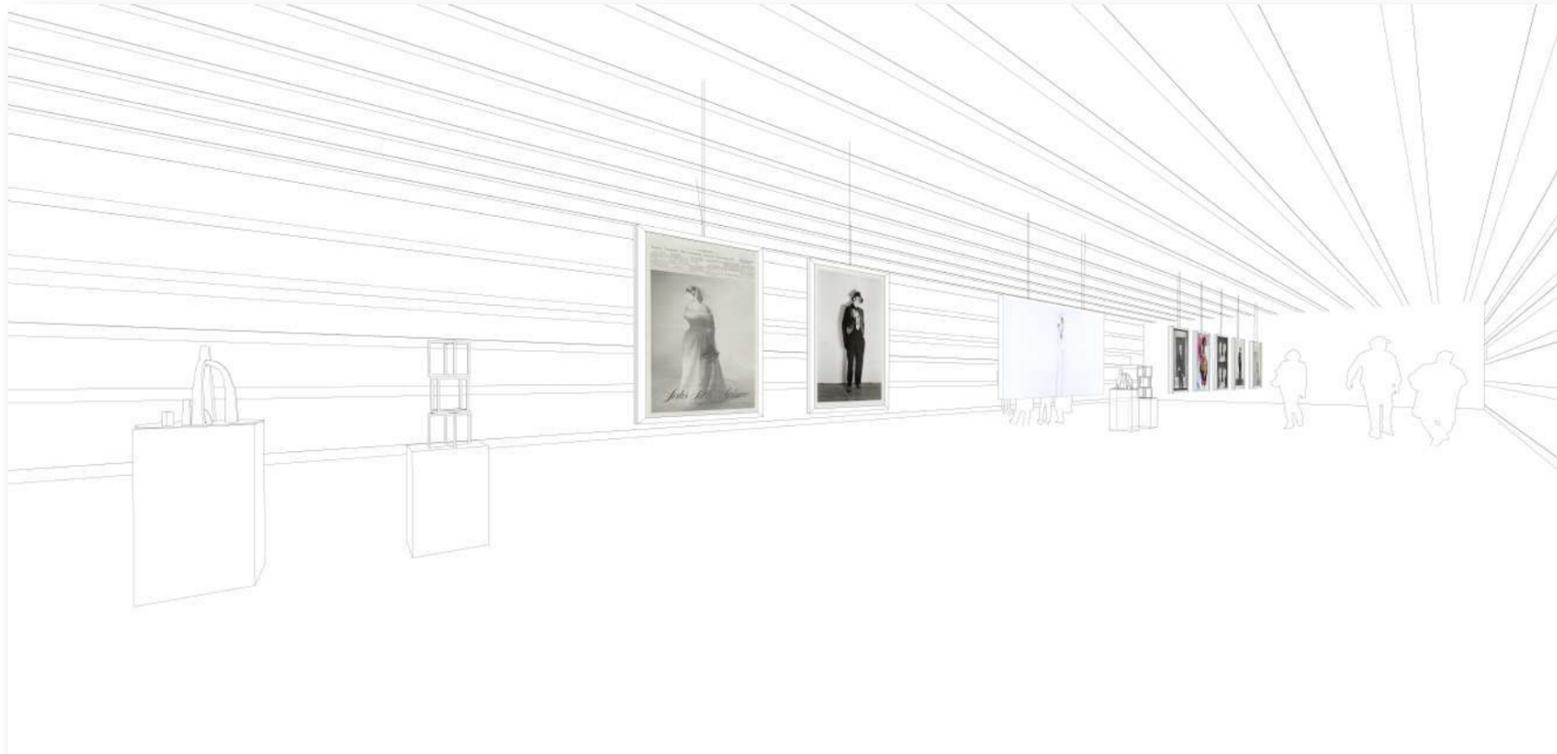
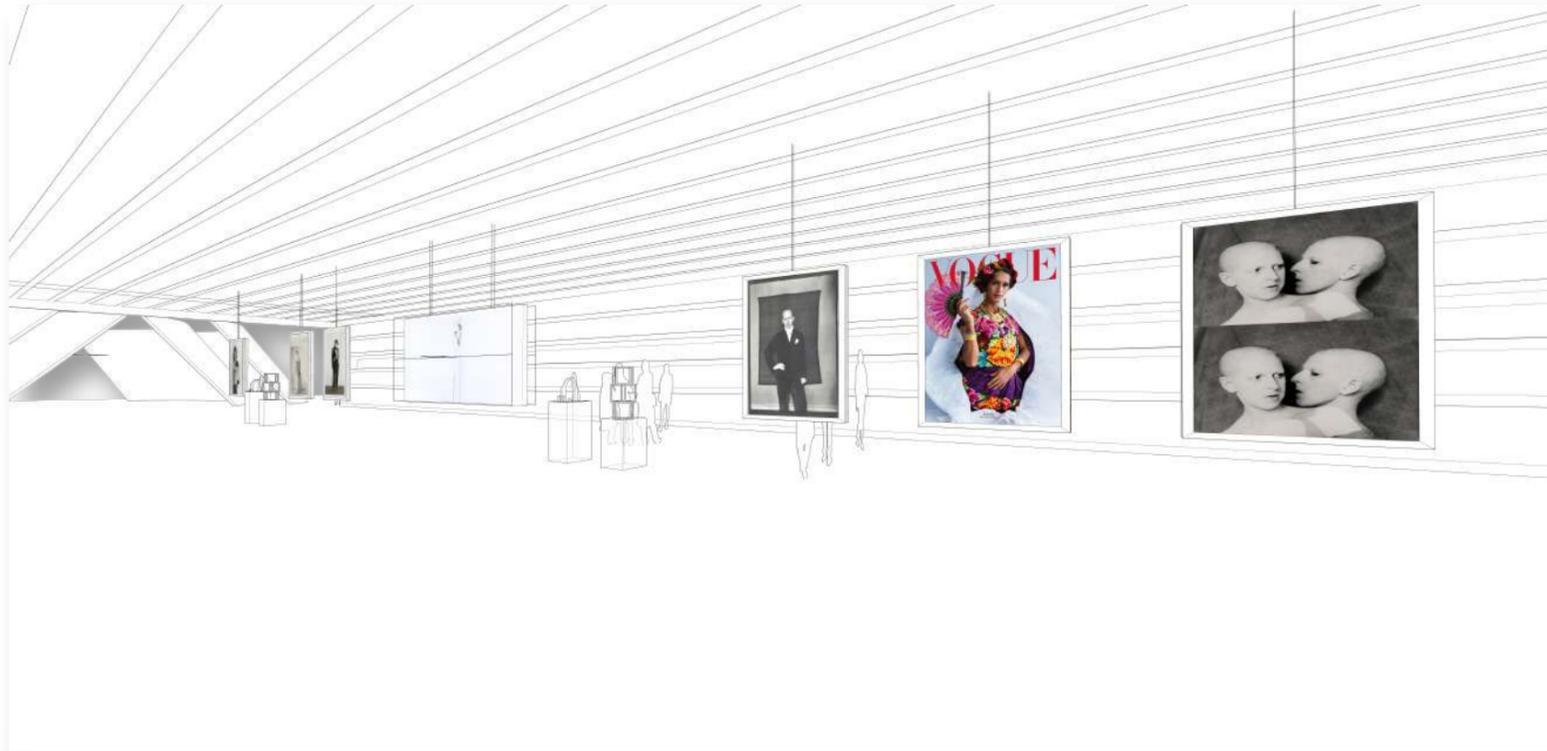
For the ambiance, the track "dlp6" from William Basinski's *The Disintegration Loops IV* album will be playing continuously. The room needs to have a feeling of limitlessness as a symbol of the continuum in study.



# ENTRANCE VIEW



# RENDER SKETCHES



**WORKS/OBJECTS**

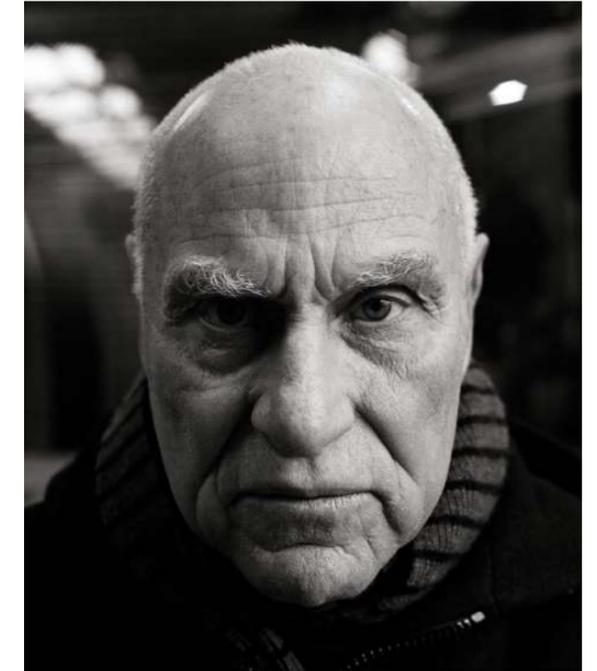
# *Tilted Spheres* RICHARD SERRA, 2002-04



Entering the exhibition, grandiosity welcomes: a 39-foot-long by 14-foot-high steel sculpture by Richard Serra that from bird's eye view denotes the origin of life.

Serra's sculptures are known for defying physical laws of scale and weight, and since a big part of Serra's career has been dedicated to public art, creating large-scale structures for parks, airports (this one is found at the Toronto Pearson Airports's Terminal 1), plazas, and many other spaces that intersect the personal with the public, this addition to *Gender Benders* aims to symbolize our relationship with society and the public life, and therefore the space it leaves for questioning and developing identities.

As written by Peter Schjeldahl in his *The New Yorker* article, "The works, rather than complementing their settings, oppose them. They jolt you awake [and make you] aware of where we are in a given space and how our sensations alter as we move. There's something profoundly satisfying [...] about keeping company with the Serras, as of being entrusted with a home truth of yours and, for that matter, anything's earthly existence." (p. 74)



Serra photographed by Oliver Mark. Siegen, 2005.

And it is this experimentation with weight and scale the one that makes us stop to reflect about what's real and what's not, about who we are and represent in the immensity of this world. As explained by Serra himself: "Everything we choose in life for its lightness soon reveals its unbearable weight. We face the fear of unbearable weight: the weight of repression, the weight of constriction, the weight of government, the weight of tolerance, the weight of resolution, the weight of responsibility, the weight of destruction, the weight of suicide, the weight of history which dissolves weight and erodes meaning to a calculated construction of palpable lightness. The residue of history: the printed pages, the flicker of the image, always fragmentary, always saying something less than the weight of experience.

It is the distinction between the prefabricated weight of history and direct experience which evoked in me the need to make things that have not been made before. I continually attempt to confront the contradictions of memory and to wipe the slate clean, to rely on my own experience and my own materials even if faced with a situation that is beyond hope of achievement. To invent methods about which I know nothing, to utilize the content of experience so that it becomes known to me, to then challenge the authority of that experience and thereby challenge myself." (*Richard Serra: Forged Steel*, p.23)

# *The Ain Sakhri Lovers*

## 9000 BCE

A small (height: 102 mm.; width: 63 mm.; depth: 39 mm.; weight: 343 gm.) calcite cobble sculpture is the first representation of love ever made by a human (in specific by the Natufians, a Mesolithic culture of Palestine and southern Syria known for being the first to domesticate animals and to farm [The British Museum]).

Found in the cave of Ain Sakhri in Bethlehem, the sculpture denotes a couple making love, but its shape is unrecognizably phallic, inciting the observer to think of two males.

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**"This sculpture's ambiguity is a reminder that we should not project our assumptions onto the past. We need not assume that heterosexuality or the modern nuclear family as we know them are the default options for any society, ancient or modern. "**

**(R.B.Parkinson's *A Little Gay History...*)**

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# Two Figures

## FRANCIS BACON, 1953

Oil on canvas



Two diffused human shapes stand —or lie— as the focal point in Bacon's canvas.

Diluted in cold brushstrokes of lilacs and blues, this 1953 painting is one of Bacon's most intimate, bleakest and grimmest interpretations of the tribulations as a gay man during mid-XX Century Britain.

Elongated and ghostly vertical lines array the movement of the artwork. A sense of tumbling down, of falling. A false perspective off-puts a scream (of pain or pleasure, we'll never know) that is forbidden by the painter's hand in an attempt to blur the lines of identity.

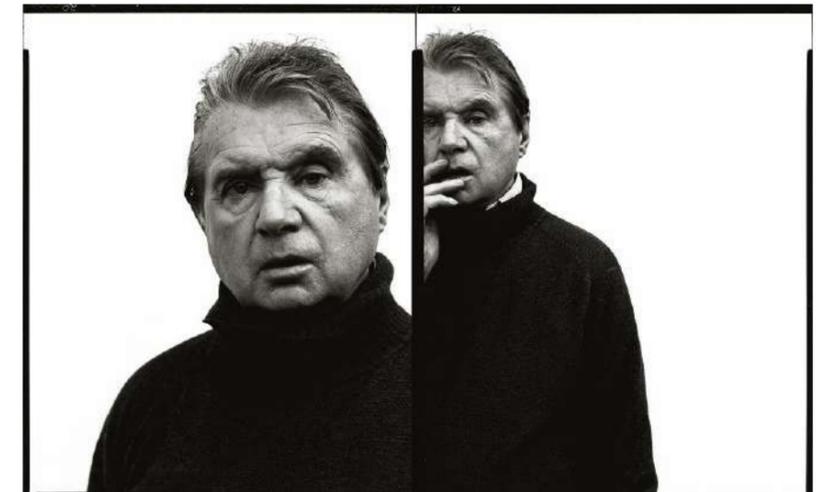
The painting denotes an intimate scene between Bacon and George Dyer, his lover of eight years who was found dead of an overdose just two days before Bacon's 1971 Grand Palais retrospective.

Melancholic glazes of oil —almost iridescent— highlight and embody the sumptuousness of the flesh, a poetic representation of desire and violence put against a stark dark blue background.

A rather psychological and emotional image that acts as confirmation of the predicament of rejection of the queer minority in mainstream art. (The artwork was painted in 1953 but hidden from the public eye until 1971 due to its blunt depiction of homosexuality and sex, two words that together were legally condemned at the time).

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Referenced from Michael Peppiatt's colloquium with Judith Benhamou-Huet on Youtube. [See bibliography]



Bacon under the lense of Richard Avedon, 1979.

[Formal Analysis]

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# Self-Portrait CLAUDE CAHUN, 1920



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# Murder Mystery People CINDY SHERMAN, 1976-2000

Throughout art history, the female figure slowly transcended from muse to artist. Claude Cahun (born Lucy Renee Mathilde Schwob in 1894 in France), is considered the first surrealist woman.

Though self-proclaimed as female, Cahun disguised identities multiple times: first as Claude Courlis, then identified by the acronym R.M until 1917 when she finally came of age as Claude Chaun.

It is this playful attitude the *pièce de résistance* of her *oeuvre*, "By manipulating the existing categories of identity and defying the boundaries of established femininity, by fusing the traditional subject-to-subject dichotomy, and by placing herself firmly at the center of her work, Cahun challenged the surrealist conception of 'woman' in ways never before seen." (Bower James, p. 3)

In the same manner, a couple of decades later US-artist Cindy Sherman begins her work that eventually solidifies as an identity pendulum that, to this day, still oscillates between male and female (and vice-versa), all while maintaining herself in the eye of the storm—a constant dual focus. "It is not the intangibility of the self that is at the core of her work—a self-playing with illusions on the surface, a self-leading parallel lives, either in denial or in recognition of that self. The focus is not on metamorphic power. Nor does it seem to me to be about parodying images of femininity in the media, or an attempt at creating a series of self-portraits in search of identity. Rather, it is about addressing the symptom. The symptom is the woman-as-image which distorts the split within the subject; subjectivity divided. What she produces is non-identity. An embodiment that fails to embody" (Vinken, p. 127)

Both of Cahun's and Sherman's bodies of work are testament to the role of gender, identity and most important femininity in art.

# Self-Portrait

ALBERTO MARTINI, 1929

Oil on canvas

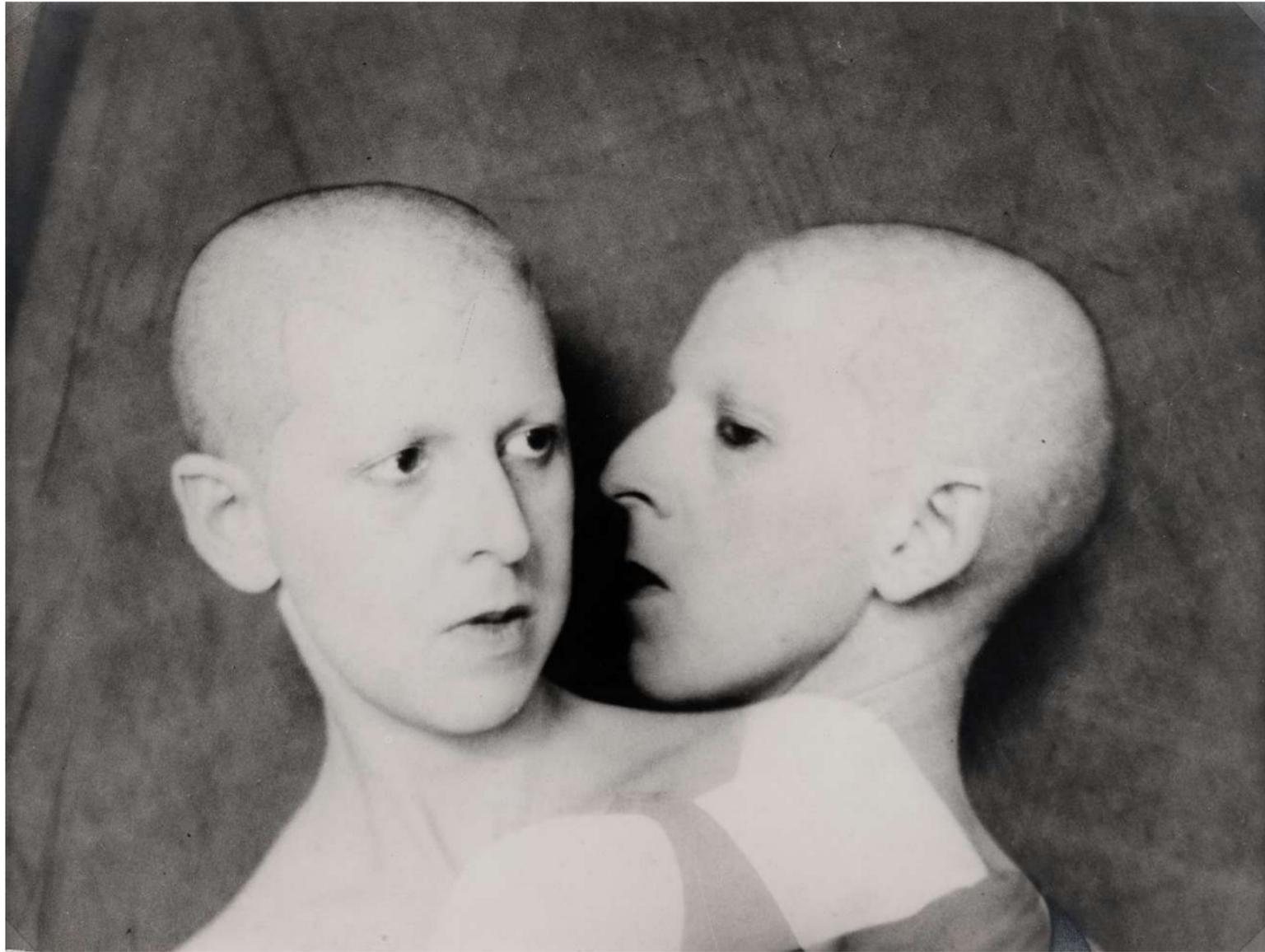
Different from Cahun, Martini refused to be a part of the Surrealist movement to work on his style that ranges from Symbolism, Italian *pittura metafisica* and Surrealism: proto-Surrealism.

Heavy, macabre and psychological, Martini's work is of high visual impact. It is erotic and bizarre. His technique flowed with the mind with absolute restraint and intense creativity that oftentimes found its roots in clairvoyance and hypnosis.



His dark shadows and marble-white distortions create a world where demonic monsters are in control, a violent and aggressive discomfort.

The displacement of the identity is pictorially like an X-ray of the human soul, "his perception of the self-obsessed with erotic visions that fire the senses of sight and touch, expressing voyeuristic, even murderous, impulses." (Referenced from the artwork's wall text. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Montreal).



*Que Me Veux Tu?*  
**CLAUDE CAHUN, 1929**

*[Iconographic Analysis]*

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It was Paris' Belle Époque, right at the beginning of the Third French Republic up until the First World War, when Claude Cahun came to form as the artist we now appreciate.

A buoyant group of individuals who were always looking for answers: literature, painting, photography, sculpture, architecture, every form of art at the time was sensible to the changing paradigms dictated by a titillating economy caused by political friction in Europe.

The queers in the art and literary world were still shaking after Oscar Wilde's trials, at the same time, from Germany, publications by activist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs spread the new-found concept of uranians (a term derived from the Greek goddess Aphrodite Urania, who was created out of the god Uranus' testicles [Wikipedia]) which referred to the 'third sex' —a term later used by Cahun in her work, as described by Gavin Bower James, "She had written the unpublished *Les Jeux Uraniens* [...] around 1914. Sapphic, emblemist, comprising a rearranging and replacing of text, *Les Jeux* was playful and subversive – Cahun's first attempt towards a verbalism of her concerns over multiple identities (p. 11)." Sigmund Freud's ideas of sexuality and psychology, the birth of psychoanalysis.

"It was a vital time – the growing women's suffragette movement on the one hand, Colette editing *French Vogue* on the other (Bower James, p. 9)."

*Que Me Veux Tu?* is a symbolic representation of the internal struggle Cahun was going through when, by osmosis, she was being bombarded with so many revolutionary ideas. "Surrealism, with its antipathy to bourgeois morality and its experimental approach to fixed poles of gender and sexual identity." (Bower James, p. 29)

"For Cahun, who reveled in ambiguity and sought disruption—in life and in art—to reconceptualize the self was to reconceptualize society." (Bower James,

“I will follow the wake in the air, the frail  
on the water, the mirage in the pupil...  
I wish to hunt myself down,  
to struggle with myself.”

- CLAUDE CAHUN'S AVEUX



## Estrella TIM WALKER, 1929

as seen on the cover of *Vogue México* for its December 2019 Issue.

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"The muxes have existed on this Earth ever since pre-Hispanic times, bordering with exquisite perfection a part of the many traditions that compose this place, a place known as the birthplace of insurgents. No matter the concentration had in the work, each time someone walks by the surroundings, the muxes chin and stand up to give a respectful and warm greeting; that is how we have been taught," is the introduction Karina González Ulloa gives in her *Vogue México* piece that goes together with this colorful and majestic portrait by genius photographer Tim Walker.



Other portraits from the series/issue.

"Being a muxe is a duality. We carry a gender role depending on the circumstances, sometimes I can pass on as male while other times I am a complete woman," explains Pedro Enriquez Godínez Gutiérrez, also known as La Kika, in the same article.

With her fan open, her eyelashes curled and her hair high up, the portrait is imminent yet vulnerable, just like the white lace intertwines with the ferocity of the floral textiles and gold jewelry.

# Orlando

## VIRGINIA WOOLF, 1928

Virginia Woolf is the voice of a generation of female writers. Her literature echoes issues of gender and sexuality, especially with Orlando.

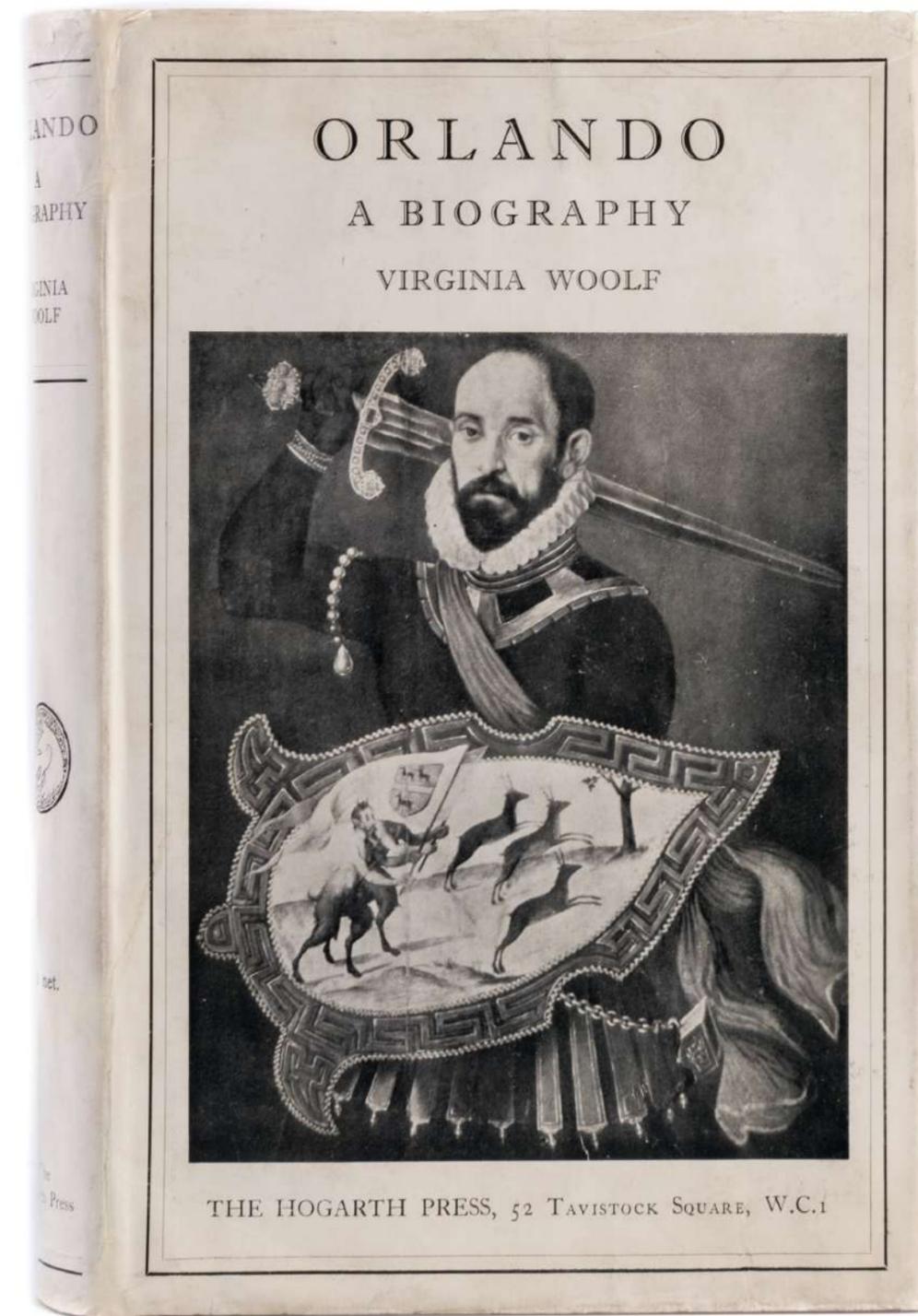
"He, for there could be no doubt about his sex ... " reads the first line of the novel. A shapeshifting story of a man who metamorphoses into a woman and lives for centuries "has sometimes been dismissed as a romp. [Nonetheless] it was far ahead of its time in terms of gender politics and gender progress. [It is considered] as the first trans novel in English [and it opened the doors to other publications with similar topics]." (The Guardian)

But more than a novel, Orlando is an autobiography: the story was written in the middle of Woolf's romantic and fleeting relationship with English poet Vita Sackville-West (who was married to Leonard Woolf, who also had his affairs on the side). Orlando, then, stands as the compilation of lesbian love, of the forbidden and illicit. "What Vita and Virginia did or did not do in bed is much less important than the effect of Vita on Virginia's imagination. Had the love affair not happened Orlando would never have been written." (The Guardian)

"A biography beginning in the year 1500 and continuing to the present day, called Orlando. Vita; only with a change about from one sex to the other," wrote Woolf in one of her diaries once upon a time.

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*[Historical Factor]*



A copy of Orlando's first UK edition, 1928.



# Untitled ROBERT GOBER, 1992

The piece in question exemplifies his dominance of the trompe l'oeil method, this time in printmaking after creating Newspapers, a series of photolithographs that look exactly like pages torn from The New York Times—a group of thirty-two bundles tied with twine that resemble stacks ready for recycling.

The magic behind this artwork lies in Gober's insertion of his persona into the layouts. What seems like a bride is, in reality, Gober dressed in a gown and a wig. Above the photograph is a story about the Vatican's discrimination against homosexuals.

Robert Gober's work is mystic and multi-layered. "His oeuvre has been perceived and experienced more as a series of manifesto-like individual appearances than as a continuous narrative. They appear to live in an intermediate realm between familiar reality and an unsettling dream world in which the clear meaning of things is broken up and turns into an open flux." (Vischer, p.14)

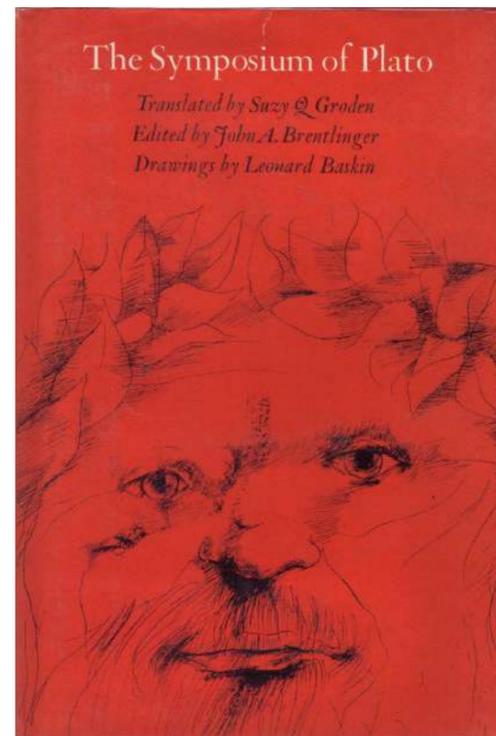
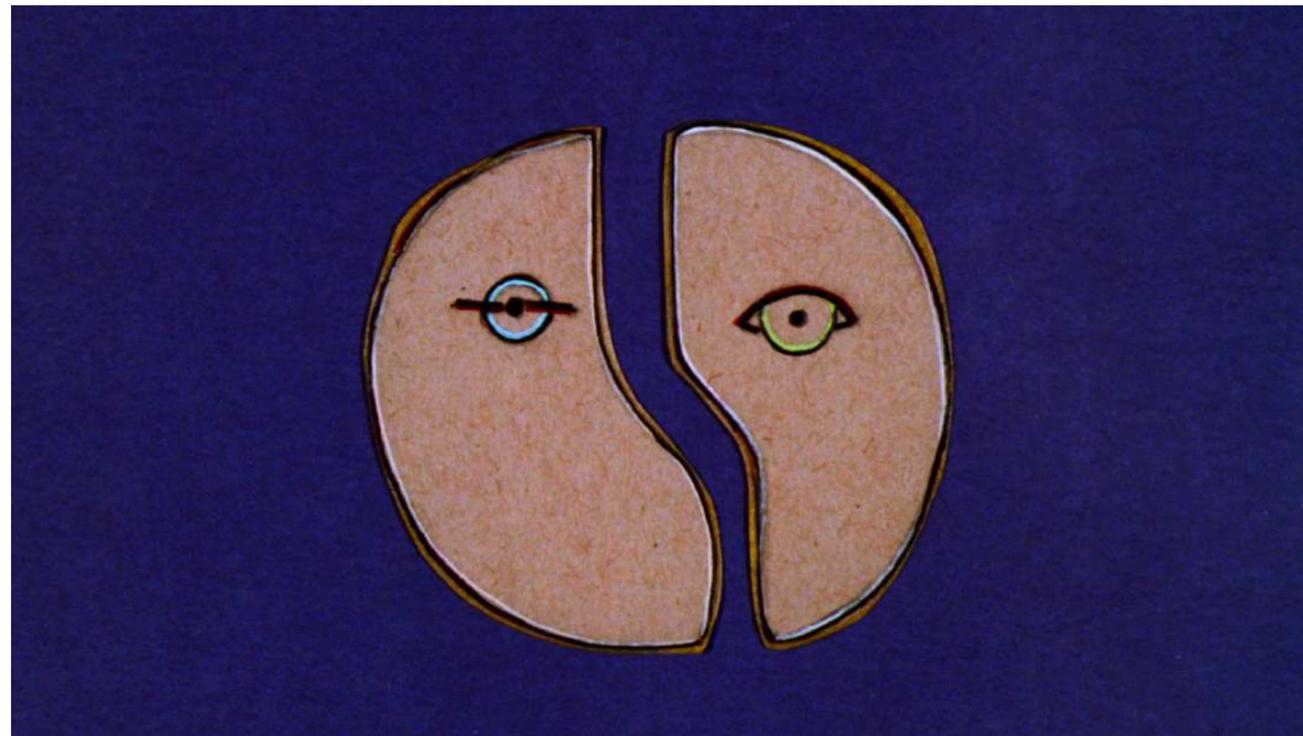
A homosexual, Gober has explored issues of sexual and cultural identity ever since the 1980s. "His slightly distorted beds, cribs, sinks, and drains speak to difficult childhood memories and unease with the domestic rituals and lingering puritanical attitudes of the suburban middle class. His surrealistic wax body parts, so extremely fetishized as to include actual human body hair, prompt contradictory sensations of terror, longing, and dissociation." (MoMa)

[Psychoanalysis]

# Symposium PLATO

*The Origin of Love*  
EMILY HUBLEY AND JOHN CAMERON MITCHELL, 2001

*The Myth of Us*  
MARIA ISABEL BURNES, GUILLE MONTIEL &  
MAURICIO HERRERABARRÍA, 2017



Clockwise: a still from *The Origin of Love* from *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001); the cover of Plato's *Symposium* and lastly, a still from the shortfilm *The Myth of Us*.

Greek philosophers have influenced partially every train of thought in history. They were the first to ask complex questions and the first ones to talk about freedom, beauty, truth, and love.

This latter is the topic of one of Plato's discernments in his *Symposium* text.

A compilation of speeches and conversations the philosopher had with fellow thinkers, in a colloquium with Aristophanes he disserts on the 'origin of love', in his fashion, Plato narrates a mythological story about a being that was so perfect the Gods were jealous —it was a single whole with no gender nor identity.

When the Gods got tired and realized the being was more powerful than them, Zeus decided to split it in half, creating the female and the male.

This same tale was brought to mainstream knowledge in 2001 John Cameron Mitchell's cult film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, a film that follows a transgender woman who struggles to find herself, her art and love in suburban USA.

In the film, Hedwig breaks into song in *Origin of Love*:

"And there were three sexes then, One that looked like two men  
Glued up back to back, Called the children of the sun.

And similar in shape and girth Were the children of the earth. They looked like two girls rolled up in one.

And the children of the moon Were like a fork shoved on a spoon. They were part sun, part earth, part daughter, part son." (Metrolyrics); an animation by artist Emily Hubley accompanies Mitchell's songwriting.

The same premise was the inspiration for the short film *The Myth of Us*, directed by Panamanian visual artists Maria Isabel Burnes, Guille Montiel, and Mauricio Herrerabarría. A narrative that follows two individuals that as they make their way into modern society while controlled by a higher entity, just to find themselves intertwined, just like it was meant to. The film is a representation of Plato's tale, but more than that, it's a statement about the unity of the self, and of how, regardless of gender, humans fulfillment is dependable of our ability to shake hands with the duality that lives inside of every one of us.

The male and the female altogether in one.

[Influence/Influenced]

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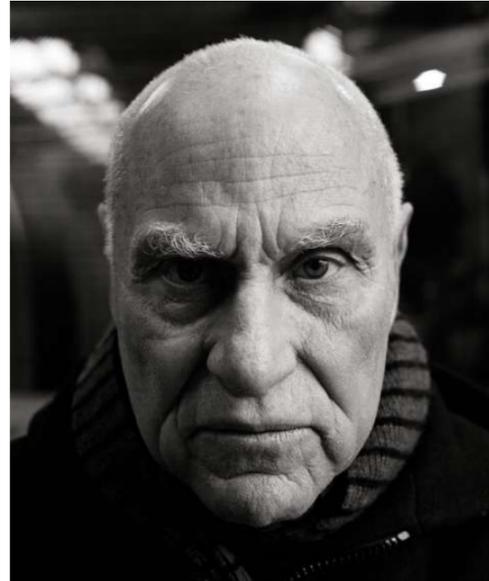
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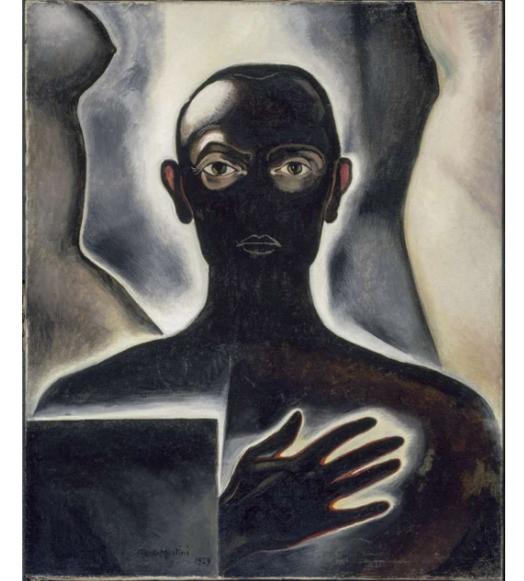
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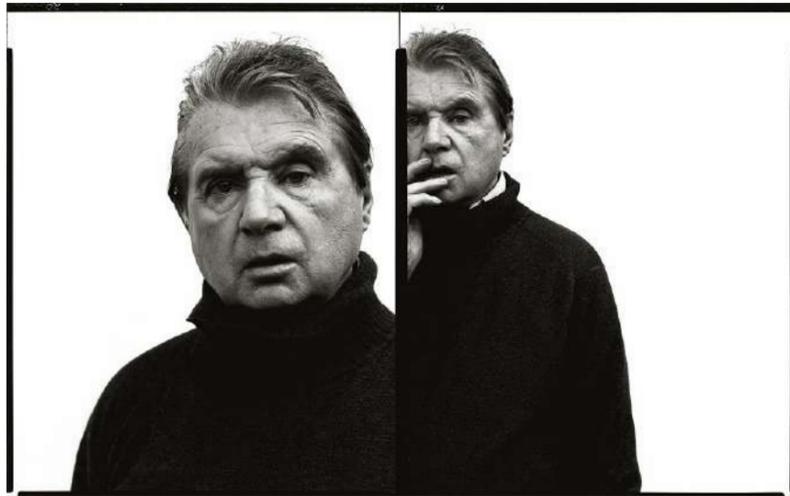
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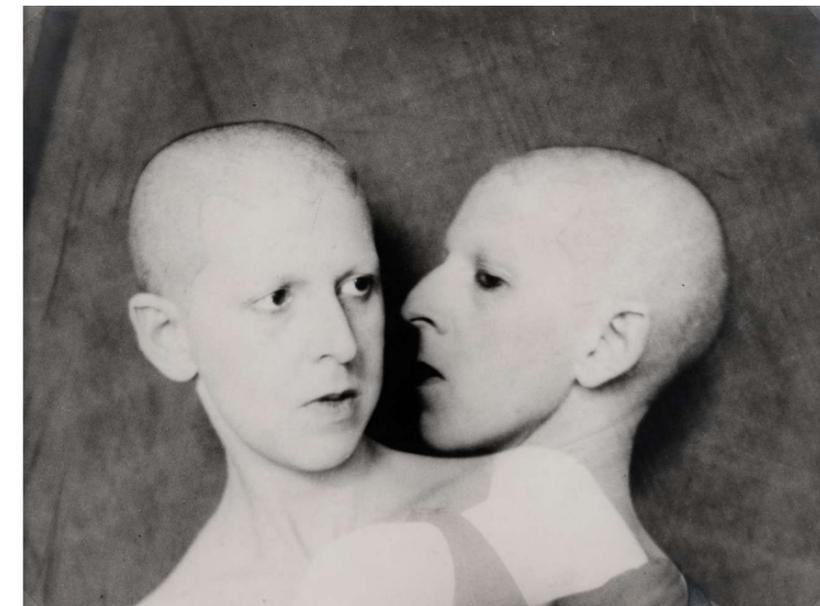
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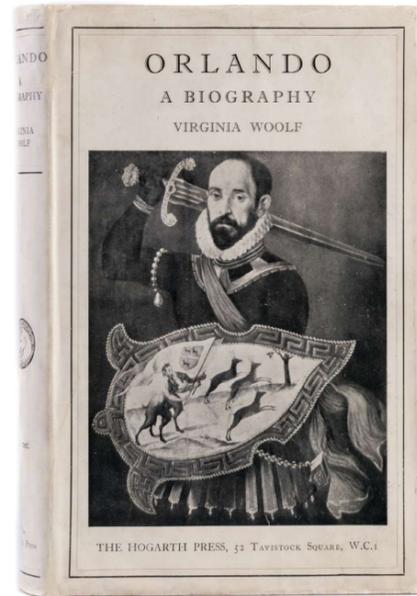
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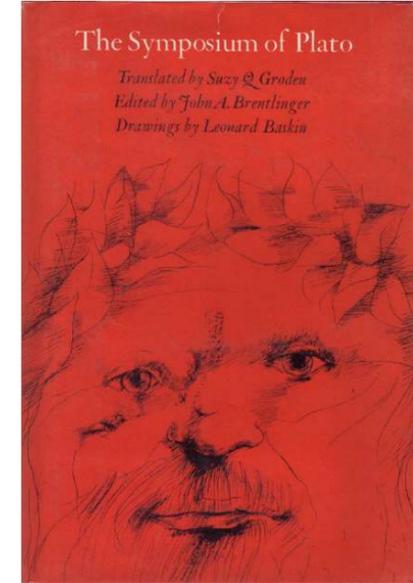
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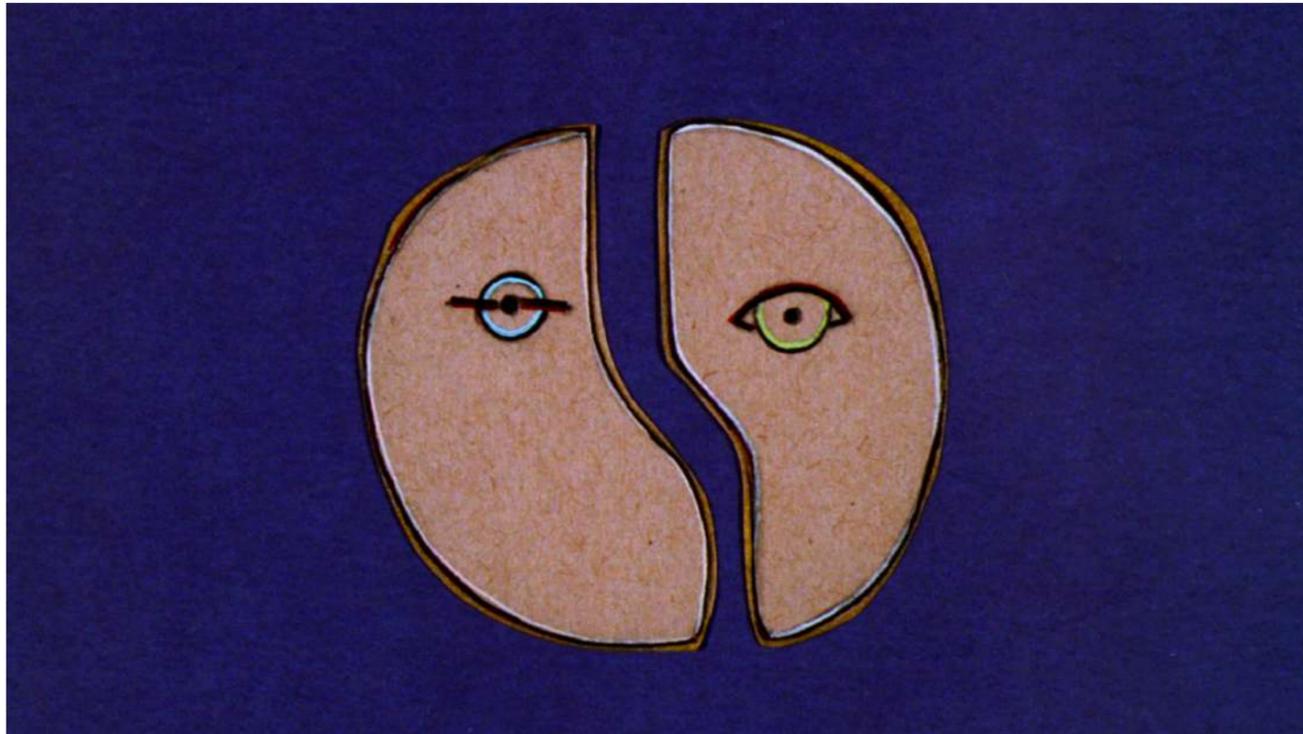
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