CLAUDE CAHUN & MARCEL MOORE
ARTISTS OF RESISTANCE

JAMES NASON

Claude Cahun & Marcel Moore: Artists of Resistance

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Dedicated to:

Lucy Renee Mathilde Schwob
Claude Cahun
25 Oct 1894 – 8 Dec 1954

Suzanne Alberte Malherbe
Marcel Moore
19 Jul 1892 – 19 Feb 1972

Identity, Art, and the Path to Resistance

Claude Cahun (born Lucy Schwob in 1894) and Marcel Moore (born Suzanne Malherbe in 1892) were far more than just artists; they were lifelong partners whose lives intertwined in a profound creative and personal collaboration spanning over four decades. Their journey together began in Nantes, France, culminating in an extraordinary act of defiance that earned them a unique place in the history of wartime resistance.

Lucy and Suzanne

Claude Cahun's self-portraits were revolutionary for their time, challenging fixed notions of gender and identity long before such concepts gained mainstream discussion. Through elaborate costumes, masks, and poses, Cahun explored masculine, feminine, androgynous, and ambiguous personas. This radical artistic practice was not merely aesthetic; it was a deeply personal and intellectual quest to dismantle societal expectations surrounding identity, making their work highly relevant to contemporary discussions on gender fluidity and self-expression.

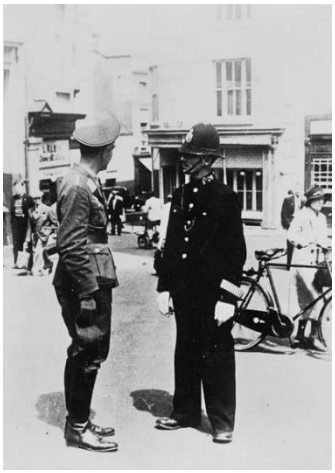
From the outset, their lives challenged convention. Both adopted gender-neutral pseudonyms – Lucy Schwob became Claude Cahun in 1919, and Suzanne Malherbe chose Marcel Moore. This decision was part of their broader exploration of identity and their rejection of traditional societal norms, themes central to their artistic practice. Cahun, in particular, became renowned for their pioneering self-portraits, a striking series of photographs where they adopted a multitude of personas, blurring the lines of gender and challenging fixed notions of self. Their work encompassed writing, photomontage, and sculpture, often created in close collaboration with Moore, whom Cahun referred to as "the other me." These creations resonated deeply with the principles of the Surrealist movement in Paris, where they were active participants for many years.

In 1937, seeking respite and a quieter life away from the escalating political tensions in mainland Europe, Cahun and Moore relocated to the tranquil island of Jersey in the Channel Islands. This seemingly idyllic retreat, however, placed them directly on the precipice of an unprecedented conflict. Just three years later, in the summer of 1940, Jersey would fall

under direct Nazi occupation, transforming their peaceful artistic existence into an unexpected theatre of war and resistance. It was here, on this small island, that their intellectual and creative courage would be tested in the most extreme circumstances, revealing a profound commitment to liberty that transcended their artistic endeavours.

Jersey Under the Swastika

The idyllic existence of Jersey, the largest of the Channel Islands, came to an abrupt end on 1st July 1940 when German forces completed their swift and unchallenged occupation. Following the evacuation of British troops and the demilitarisation of the islands, the German military moved in, initiating a five-year period of direct Nazi rule. This made the Channel Islands the only British territory to be occupied by Germany during the Second World War.



Life under occupation was immediately transformed for Jersey's civilian population. The German military administration imposed a strict regime designed to assert control and maintain order. Basic freedoms were curtailed; censorship became pervasive, affecting everything from mail to public information. Curfews were strictly enforced, limiting movement, particularly after dark. Food, fuel, and other essential supplies became scarce, leading to severe rationing as the islands were largely cut off from external provisions. Property was frequently confiscated for German military use, and civilians were often conscripted for forced labour. The constant and visible presence of uniformed German troops on the streets served as a daily reminder of the loss of sovereignty.

The psychological impact of living under enemy rule was profound. Islanders experienced intense isolation from mainland Britain, with communication severely restricted. The absence of news from the outside world, combined with German propaganda, fostered an environment of uncertainty and fear. The daily imposition of German laws and the constant surveillance created a sense of oppression and anxiety, fundamentally altering the fabric of island society.

Owning or listening to a radio was strictly forbidden from June 1942, punishable by severe penalties, including imprisonment or worse.

Strategically, the Channel Islands were seen by Germany as a crucial part of their Atlantic Wall defences. Consequently, vast resources were poured into transforming the islands into formidable fortresses. Extensive fortifications, including concrete bunkers, tunnels, gun emplacements, and minefields, were constructed across Jersey. These immense building projects not only solidified the German presence but also drained local resources and often involved the forced labour of islanders and foreign workers, further cementing the oppressive nature of the occupation.

Artistic Resistance

Amidst the pervasive control of the German occupation, Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore embarked upon an extraordinary and highly personal campaign of resistance. Driven by their deep anti-fascist convictions, developed during their years in Paris, and leveraging their considerable artistic and intellectual talents, they chose to actively undermine the occupying forces as a self-contained, two-person unit. Their resistance was a methodical and daring act of psychological warfare, meticulously planned and executed from their home, "La Rocquaise," in St. Brelade.

Their primary method of defiance involved the creation and distribution of subversive leaflets and propaganda. These were not mass-produced documents but carefully typed and often hand-decorated, unique creations, demonstrating their artistic precision. They reportedly used their own typewriters to produce the German-language texts, which were then cut and glued to form small, easily concealable messages. The content was highly sophisticated, targeting the morale of the German soldiers. Instead of overt calls to violence, their messages often employed sarcasm, irony, and subtle subversion, drawing on their deep understanding of propaganda techniques. They would cleverly twist excerpts from Hitler's own speeches against his regime, highlight the futility of the war, or subtly appeal to the soldiers' homesickness and disillusionment, reminding them of families, friends, and normal lives far from the conflict. Some messages were direct translations of BBC news reports, offering uncensored truths. They frequently signed these anonymous communications "The Soldier with No Name" or "The Unknown Soldier," a choice that added to the mystery and the psychological pressure on the German command.

Their distribution methods were as daring as they were ingenious, relying on meticulous observation of German routines and a high degree of personal risk. Cahun and Moore would venture out disguised, sometimes with Cahun wearing a fake beard or adopting a masculine appearance, to blend into the population. They engaged in subtle acts of sabotage:

- **Direct Placement:** Leaflets were discreetly slipped into the pockets of German soldiers' uniforms while they were queuing for shops, attending concerts, or at public baths. This required getting incredibly close to the enemy.
- **Public Spaces:** Messages were left on benches in public parks, under the windscreen wipers of military vehicles parked in town squares, or tucked into German newspapers left for collection at cafes and newsstands.
- **Creative Dispersal:** They would even climb to elevated positions to drop messages, timing them precisely to fall onto or near unsuspecting German patrols. One particularly bold method involved attaching a stone to a leaflet and throwing it into a moving German military vehicle. They also reportedly left notes in phone booths, public toilets, and on specific shop counters.

The consistent appearance of these anonymous, sophisticated propaganda messages began to have a significant psychological impact on the German command. Believing that such a well-organised and German-literate campaign could only be the work of a large, entrenched resistance network, the German authorities diverted considerable resources

and manpower into a fruitless and frustrating search for the elusive "Soldier with No Name." This constant, unidentifiable pressure undermined German morale and forced them to expend valuable resources, proving that even a small, determined unit, armed with intellect and courage, could pose a significant challenge to an occupying power.

A leaflet distributed by Claude and Marcel.

I think the waves swallowed
At the end, the ship and the boat
And that did with his road
Adolf Hitler did.

Heine (Colonel ?)

Capture, Imprisonment, and Unyielding Defiance

Cahun and Moore's audacious campaign of resistance, while effective in its psychological impact, carried immense personal risk. Their activities intensified as the war progressed, but their meticulous discretion eventually faltered. In July 1944, just weeks after D-Day and with the tide of the war turning, their luck ran out. The Gestapo, having tirelessly pursued the anonymous "Soldier with No Name," finally identified them. They were arrested at their home, "La Rocquaise," and taken into custody.

The Geheime Staatspolizei, or Gestapo, was Nazi Germany's official secret police, notorious for its ruthless efficiency and terror tactics. During the occupation of the Channel Islands, a small but effective Gestapo unit operated, tasked with intelligence gathering, suppressing dissent, and enforcing Nazi ideology. Their presence instilled fear, and their methods of interrogation and surveillance were designed to break resistance. Cahun and Moore's arrest by this formidable force highlights the extreme danger they faced and the gravity with which their subtle resistance was viewed by the occupying power.

The charges against them were grave. They were accused of listening to the BBC, an act strictly forbidden under German occupation law and punishable by severe penalties, including imprisonment. More critically, they faced accusations of inciting troops to rebellion, a charge that amounted to treason against the Reich. This was a capital offence, reflecting the German authorities' deep concern over their sophisticated and unsettling propaganda.

Their imprisonment in Jersey's Newgate Street Prison was harsh. Conditions were spartan, marked by cold, poor food, and isolation. Despite interrogations, Cahun and Moore maintained their composure and never betrayed any associates, ensuring that their two-person resistance remained truly isolated. Their trial before a German military court was swift, and in November 1944, they were both sentenced to death. The severity of this sentence underscored the German command's view of their actions as a significant threat to military discipline and control.

Even whilst incarcerated and facing execution, their spirit of defiance remained unbroken. Cahun reportedly continued to write anti-Nazi poetry on scraps of paper smuggled into their cell, a testament to their unwavering ideological commitment. Their resilience under extreme duress was remarkable. Crucially, their sentences were commuted to imprisonment just days before the liberation of Jersey by Allied forces in May 1945. This last-minute reprieve spared them from execution, allowing them to witness the end of the occupation they had so bravely fought against.

A Legacy of Courage and Creativity

The story of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore stands as a powerful testament to the multifaceted nature of resistance during World War II. Their unique intellectual and artistic partnership, forged over decades, transformed into an extraordinary act of defiance against the brutal reality of Nazi occupation in Jersey. Far from the conventional image of wartime heroes, these two women, through sheer ingenuity and unwavering conviction, carved out their own vital role in the fight for freedom.

Their "two-person army" waged a psychological war, using carefully crafted, German-language propaganda to sow dissent and undermine the morale of the occupying forces. Their daring distribution methods, placing messages directly into soldiers' pockets or leaving them in public spaces, demonstrated a profound personal courage. This subtle, yet persistent, campaign earned the disproportionate attention of the Gestapo, who mistakenly believed they were hunting a vast network, validating the effectiveness of Cahun and Moore's isolated efforts.

Their arrest in July 1944, followed by their harsh imprisonment and a death sentence, brought them face-to-face with the ultimate sacrifice. Yet, even under extreme duress, they refused to yield, maintaining their silence and continuing their defiance. Their last-minute reprieve from execution, just before Jersey's liberation in May 1945, allowed them to witness the victory they had fought for.

While Claude Cahun's health suffered irreparable damage from the ordeal, leading to their death in 1954, and Marcel Moore later died in 1972, their shared grave in Jersey marks the resting place of true heroes. Their extraordinary story, initially overshadowed by the larger narratives of the war, has since been rediscovered. Today, Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore are rightly celebrated not only for their groundbreaking contributions to art and their radical exploration of identity but also, crucially, for their immense bravery and unwavering commitment to freedom in the face of tyranny. Their legacy serves as an inspiring reminder that resistance can take many forms, and that courage can flourish in the most unexpected of circumstances.