**An Event Between History and the Everyday:**

**The Secret of Charlotte Salomon’s *Life? or Theatre?***

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**1. The Event and the Everyday**

*The* Event for many thinkers, historians and scholars is the Holocaust. Adorno thought it impossible to imagine that life will continue “normally” or even that culture might be “rebuilt”. (Adorno, 2003: 46). The artist Charlotte Salomon (1917-143) was destroyed horrifically in that event. This fact makes the art historical convention of adding the artist’s dates after her name—concluding in 1943—shout out a life aborted by state-sponsored murdered in exceptional and catastrophic times. If you walk today on Wielandstrasse, in Berlin, the street on which Charlotte Salomon lived, and if look down, you will notice a *Stolperstein,* a stumbling stone (fig.1). This is a recent form of German remembrance for its murdered citizens, a paving stone covered in brass laid in the pavement. This one reads: ‘Here lived Charlotte Salomon born 1917, fled to France 1939, 1940 in Gurs Camp, interned in Drancy and deported to in 1943, murdered in Auschwitz.’ Do the arithmetic. Charlotte Salomon was 26 years old at her death.

Yet the reason that *culturally* we remember Charlotte Salomon—namely a single composite image-music-text work titled *Leben? oder Theater?— Life? or Theater?—*is all about a time-space of several lives and several deaths ‘*before* Auschwitz’, the locus of her death alone and the punctuation to a cultural intervention hardly begun and never made public in its moment. My focus here is not that exceptional dying—the annihilating event erupting to destroy the everyday—although its shadowing of the reception of what this young woman left behind cannot be avoided. Like Anna Frank, Charlotte Salomon is claimed for a specific configuration of femininity and vulnerability that has a central place in Holocaust commemoration. My question is about murder between the event and the everyday.

Philosopher Alain Badiou has redefined our concept of event as a ‘truth procedure’. (Badiou. 1988 and 2005) Events are those ruptures to the fabric of life and time whose meaning is experienced only through our fidelity to their intrinsic unknowness and their unassimilable novelty that we process and ultimately make real by living a relation to them in mediated doses through maintaining faith with what is traumatically—ungraspable in its initial coming—transformative. We then become a subject of and through the event through fidelity. Death is not one of the events in Badiou’s system through which the subject becomes a subject by witnessing an event. For obvious reasons. No one can remain faithful to an event that annihilates all subjectivity. For Badiou, events are love, politics, science and art.

Bending the Badiou-ian concept of the event, however, I want to argue that death is an event precisely because it is the event of the *survivor*, the bereft, the one who may spend a life-time living out and becoming who or what s/he is as its after-affect. The subject of death cannot be the one who is dead. It is s/he who is left to witness the gap created in his or her life by the death of another. Yet if death is not the event that comes, but one that is encompassed over time in the subjective space of another, a new question emerges. What is the subject position in this logic of someone who imagines, desires or effects, rather than passively enduring, the death of another? How deep is the divide between mourning and guilt, between being killed and inflicting death? How does the exceptional event become an element of the quotidian? What has this to do with the performances of gendered subjectivities?

Classic theorist of the everyday, Henri Lefebvre declared that ‘Everyday life weighs heaviest on women. Some are bogged down by its peculiar cloying substance, while others escape into make-believe… They are the subject of everyday life and its victims.’ (Lefebvre:1984:73). I aim to explore this combination of the *burden* of the everyday and its imaginative recasting in a gendered and racialized space as a theatre of living but also significantly of dying. I shall do so by presenting a reading of a singular modernist artistic project that exceeds the frame of art historical intelligibility and requires another framing of its multiple registers of narrative, visuality, musicality and textuality.

Predominantly appropriated by its cultural readers as both ‘autobiographical’, and historical, as both a woman’s narrative and a Holocaust testimony, Charlotte Salomon’s *Life? or Theatre?* (1942-42)yields well to the thematics of the event and the everyday, the exceptional and mundane. In the case of women writers and artists, however, the autobiographical interpretation often occludes the *burden* and fails to recognize the *fantasy*: what we might better theorize as the work of imagination that at once exceeds the limitations of the everyday and infuses it with affective meanings. The classic loci of the gendered everyday are the family and the home. Yet we know that ‘events’ happen in such place, often in the form of unwitnessed crimes of violence and sexual predation. Indeed feminist interventions in social and cultural theory have their greatest impact in refuting the classic opposition between an eventless private sphere and eventful public space with its historically significant temporality. By virtue of their habitualness, however, certain events register as just the everyday even when they involve violence and violation, even killing. On occasion, singular artworks may disclose this veiled ‘eventuality’. Thus Salomon’s work as itself an event in cultural representation solicits a feminist-inflected reading of the meeting of the mundane and the exceptional.

**2.The Family Album**

What are the visual registers of this problematic? I want to begin with the representational trace of family space and time that is the family album.It wasphotography scholar Julia Hirsch (Hirsch 1980), anticipating both the work of photographer Jo Spence (1934-1992) and cultural theorist Roland Barthes (Barthes. 1980/81) who taught us to read the indexical traces of the everyday in the family photographic album. In 1980, Julia Hirsch wrote:

Lumps of experience, rites of passage, grains of poignancy and promise: all of these turn us into artists sorting through life in search of shapes and events which our cameras will turn into symbols and allegories. The sleeping child, the fleshy mother, the tired father, the testy siblings, can, in the quick eye of the camera, be transformed into images of innocence, protectiveness, enterprise and sharing. Family photography is not only an accessory to our deepest longings and regrets; it is also a set of visual rules that shape our experience and memory. (Hirsch, 1980: 12)

There is fractured family album of Charlotte Salomon. It includes what remains of and was conserved by a scattered family forced into exile as they fled for their lives. It is already a trace of *the* Event. It reminds us of the extraordinary fact that, in extreme circumstances, family photographs are so often the precious treasures of a ruptured family history that are the portable means to maintain links across the process of deportation or escape. For the scholar and cultural analyst, the photographic album holds the promise of some access to the missing subject, in this case the author of *Life? or Theater?*

A little girl sits on a balcony holding a doll (fig. 2). There is a plant in a plant pot on the small table on which she rests her right arm. Vegetation surrounds her, forming a permeable frontier between the outdoor private space of the balcony and the space beyond. Sitting upright, the little girl with her bobbed hair stares very evenly at the photographer. The child is about eight years old. The photograph dates from 1926. The apartment is in Wielandstrasse, Charlottenburg, a fashionable part of Berlin. That places the scene politically in the middle years of the Weimar Republic (1919-1933), before the economic disaster and the political madness in which it perished with the victory of the National Socialists. Is anything of the complexity of German society, politics and economics visible here in this private domestic scene? Or is this the epitome of the everyday, a domestic situation, a snatched interruption of a little girl’s imaginative play with a doll that performs both social gendering and the replay of psychic fantasies from her own infantile formation in a mother and child dyad? Her right hand overlays or ‘holds’ the tiny hand of the doll. At whom is she looking? Was she told how to look up? Was she playing with her doll and someone arrived and asked her to look at him/her? Or is it a posed photograph? What kind of person is a child who looks at the camera like this?

It was only after I began asking myself about this photograph that I found the complete object (fig.3). It is a *carte-de-visite* photograph with an added script. This reads (in translation from the original German): ‘*Hopefully, the improvement (in the medical sense of the term) will continue. Thousands of greetings and kisses, your (familiar) Albert’*. No longer a chance record of one childhood, the photograph now reads as a message created to be sent to a wife/mother absent from both child and Albert. She will receive a photographic token of the homely scene from which she is absent, but which, in her play, the child replicates and thus substitutes. Unfortunately, the hoped-for improvement was not sufficient. The missing mother died on 24 February 1926. That knowledge retrospectively adds poignancy to our encounter with the stiff but powerful image of the child holding her doll, caressing its tiny, helpless hand.

Another scene on the same balcony (fig.4). The child is older. It is summer. Now the family is only two. The child smiles wryly as she perches on the arm of the same chair, her own arm now cast around the bereaved but stalwart Albert, very German with his toothbrush moustache and duelling scar.[[1]](#footnote-1) Motherless, the child will then be photographed on chilly seaside holiday with a governess known as Hase, the Hare, a photograph possibly taken by the father, Albert, sometime around 1928. Then a new woman enters the world of father and child. There will be a stepmother, a singer of international repute, beautiful, gracious, gifted, determined, religiously observant. Life will change. Love will return. Jealousy will arrive too.

Then, after a break, we find an identity photograph of a teenager or young woman, twenty perhaps (fig.5). It is now 1938. We see the same even gaze, while a smile plays around the young woman’s lips. The photograph is necessary for identification. In the aftermath of Kristallnacht, the shocking pogrom against Jewish Germans 9-11 November 1938 in which her father was arrested and sent to Sachsenhausen concentration camp, the young woman is seeking a weekend pass to ‘visit’—that is, escape to—her grandparents then living in the South France, having left Germany in 1934. The Third Reich is marking people for life or death on the basis of its new, racializing identification system. Blonde, blue-eyed, but bearing a suggestively Jewish surname—Salomon—her travel pass will be inscribed with a large red **J** for *Jude*—Jew—to make sure everyone understood her exile from citizenship and ultimately the exile from humanity of those thus marked.

Then in a garden in the south of France—she has got away from Berlin—the young woman stands or sits between elderly maternal grandparents who have found refuge in a villa in Villefranche near Nice with an American Ottilie Moore (fig. 6).

A final image then records this young woman’s existence (fig.7). It is taken in 1939 or maybe early1940. She is sketching in the gardens of Ottilie Moore’s spacious garden. She has become an artist making landscapes that she sells to Mrs Moore. She looks up from her sketching. She has become lonesome, withdrawn, recluse, only at home with her artworks.

Do these photographs tell the story of an everyday life of a Jewish German woman between 1917 and 1943 that these photographs capture momentarily and yet structure for us, as Hirsch suggested, as allegory of childhood, loss, exile and art? Can we read the central traumatic maternal absence in this child’s life, or sense the nature of the change occurring between the first and the third images? Maternal absence is present only in its indirect effects: substitutes such as governess and stepmother. The other key event here is political: the institution in 1933 of a totalitarian dictatorship in Germany with racial genocide as its core policy that led to forced migration, statelessness and ultimately state-sanctioned murder. It is inscribed in the album only its premature foreclosure.

It would seem that these uneven photographic remains of one family’s life cannot register the collision of the exceptional events and the everyday. The bereaved little-girl became exiled artist, who, having been incarcerated in and released from a French concentration camp called Gurs— no image documents this event—created a unique and unclassifiable modernist visual, narrative, musical project to inscribe that collision with its specifically gendered structure. Why? What was its purpose?

Many people, myself included, have succumbed to a fascination with the story of this child who became this woman and this artist and with her one major surviving artwork, titled *Life? or Theatre?* I first came across this work under the rubric of recovery of women modernists and the impact of fascism in destroying the cultural revolution women modernists had engendered between 1900 and 1933. Despite writing eight articles or chapters and drafting two manuscripts, I appear to have ‘failed’ so far to find a way to to read it. But then in the summer of 2012, there was an event that has changed the landscape. It has, however, presented new problems.

**3. Two films**

Let me first sketch in that landscape. Jewish-German artist Charlotte Salomon made a single work comprising 784 pages, 25 x 25 cm, in gouache between 1941 and 1942. Made in an intensive period, the paintings were selected after six months of even later, numbered and framed by painted introduction and concluding text pages. Given a unifying if perplexing title *Life? or Theatre?*, called a musical play or operetta, ‘the work’ and many the related sketches, other portraits and rejected paintings numbering in total 1325 items were hidden in the house of a doctor in Villefranche, in the South of France in 1943. Returned to the artist’s surviving parents in 1947 by the American under whose name they had been sheltered, the whole lot was taken to Amsterdam. Some of it was exhibited there in 1961 in a museum of modern art. A selection of its images was published in 1963 under the post-Anna Frank’s diary title *Charlotte: A Diary in Pictures*. A facsimile of all the images formally redacted as *Life? or Theatre?* thus excluding all the works included in the packages and the transparent overlays that accompany one third of the paintings that were hidden in 1943 was published in 1981 by Gary Schwartz in a publication that also personalized and familiarized the work by titling the volume *Charlotte and by* presenting it as ‘an autobiographical play’. Thus by 1981, the first-named woman and a life-story, but not her artworking, came to the fore and the autobiographical reading has dominated interpretations since then. In 1994 an extensively researched biography was published by Mary Felstiner titled simply: *To Paint her Life* and placed under the dread sign of her murderers: *Charlotte Salomon in the Nazi Era* (Felstiner 1994). In 1998 the paintings began a journey to international recognition as a major modernist artwork through a series of exhibitions initiated by curator Monica Bohm-Duchen at the Royal Academy in London. The literature on Salomon’s one massive work has increased considerably since that date as have indeed plays, dance performances and other ‘translations’ from the work. Since the 1970s, he artist and her work have inspired several films, mostly documentary.

In 1981, a Dutch filmmaker Franz Weisz, made a film based on the ‘story’ he extracted from this artwork. Titled *Charlotte*, the film starred Birgit Doll as Charlotte and Derek Jacobi as the other key character, Amadeus Dabherlohn based on the historical vocal theorist and survivor of the trenches of World War I, Alfred Wolfsohn (1896-1962). When, in the summer of 2012, I was told that Weisz had made a second film, I was not interested. I resist the dominant tendency, exemplified by the 1981 film’s translation into a narrative drama, to see through the paintings made by Charlotte Salomon and to extract from them a purely autobiographical story of this woman, and thus to treat her painted images as a potential story board for a film. There can be no doubt that *Life? or Theater?*  was deeply impregnated with the new visualities of cinema in its sequential conception but that has to be balanced by her equally conscious deployment of the condensation of meaning that is the potential of painting.

I was ultimately persuaded to overcome my disinclination to see yet another film about Charlotte Salomon. ‘You have to see it’ said a friend and fellow feminist scholar. I did. It contained a shocking revelation, at least I found it so because I would have to write a whole new manuscript to come to terms with its problematic revelations.

There are two sequences from this film (fig.8) I want to consider as a device for placing new information in the public sphere. The first comes at the beginning. Then a similiar device is repeated at the point of revelation using the audience’s familiarity with a series of ‘experts’ on Salomon as a rhetorical device.

At the start, Weisz creates a double montage. In the background the camera pans along a line of facsimiles of Salomon’s sketchbook sized gouache paintings that open the vast painting project comprising 784 paintings of which ten pages are painted text of introduction and conclusion. The camera movement thus creates an effect of each image being like a frame of a slowed down analogue movie. It links them with the implied passage of a viewer/reader moving from left to right along a line of images that become thereby a narrative sequence. In front of this moving backdrop of images that signify ‘Charlotte Salomon’ and her story rather than single paintings ( significantly of other people’s lives), Weisz inserted the talking heads of key experts in the Charlotte Salomon field: two curators, a museum director, an art historian, a researcher. One by one, they explain their enthrallment to this work, and the qualities for which they value it: Salomon’s sincerity or her irony, its exceptionality, the exploration of a family and its tensions, the tracing of the impact of the persecution of German Jewry, the quality of being a storyboard for a film she never made. (fig. 9)

Then the film maker introduces his own encounter with *Salomon’s work*  in 1971 ( at an exhibition at the Jewish Historical Museum, not the Stedelijk Museum of Modern art) and his determination to make his film during the course of research for which he was shown by the artist’s surviving stepmother some painted text pages that had not been included in the donation of the entire 1325 elements of what was packaged and hidden in 1943 and given to the artist’s parents in 1947. He made a transcription of the entire text from which pages had been reserved. But he was asked not to use what was revealed in these pages in his film, completed, as I mentioned in 1981. The pages come from what is know now as a ‘postscript’, not published in the facsimile inn 1981 but translated and published by American scholar Julia Watson only in 2002 (Watson 2002a). The text named by biographer Mary Felstiner as ‘Postscript” had been available since the mid-1990s when the Jewish Historical Museum made a CD-Rom of the entire 1325 items (Felstiner 1994). The extant postscript ends abruptly, and without explanation in the middle of a sentence. This missing pages have never been mentioned to any scholar since.

Thirty years after completing *Charlotte*, Frans Weisz came back to these pages and decided it was time to make a new film returning the complete text to public knowledge. His idea was to ask Birgit Doll, the German actress who had played ‘Charlotte’ in the 1981 film to come with him to Villefranche where the artist had lived 1939-43. She would read, and be filmed doing so, and also read out loud the lines from the sequestered pages. Her voicing the text was played— and this is the second sequence I mentioned above—over images of the same experts interviewed in the opening sequences, themselves now silently reading the same contents as we are hearing on the sound track. We watch their slow realization of what they are reading and troubled reactions to what they discover in this text. A third sequence documents their attempts to come to terms with the new knowledge received from their reading. What is shocking to me, is how swiftly they accommodate it to their understanding, justifying the presumed act and even empathising with the agent.

What was it they learned?

Here’s the rub. What indeed does the text they were given to read mean?

Put bluntly, it appears to be a confession of murder.

**4. The Textuality of the Murder Mystery**

Writing mischievously about one of the classic novels *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) by the queen of British detective fiction, Agatha Christie, Pierre Bayard argues that the murderer in the plot may not be the murderer produced by the written text. (Bayard 2000) Spoiler Alert! Famously, Christie’s device in this novel was to make the narrator her killer, challenging the reader’s trust in the narrative voice while using that feint to disguise the culprit until Hercule Poirot reveals all in his usual brilliant way. Bayard’s deconstructionist reading of Christie’s text reveals, however, the devices Christie typically used to disguise and distract the reader from the truth while, at the same time, exhibiting that truth everywhere in what is actually written.

Bayard reminds us of the rules for writing detective fiction defined by American writer SS Van Dine (real name Willard Huntington Wright) two of which are critical: the truth must be hidden throughout the text, and while being hidden, it must be accessible to the reader, even in plain view. Thus detective fiction has to proliferate distracting signs and plausible possibilities while promising that there will be one truth. Dispersed complications will finally congeal into a single resolution. The effect of these strategies and rules is, however, that, in the writing, language runs away with itself. As the medium and content of the text, what language sets in motion to perform these rules, cannot ultimately be contained by the fictive hope of single truth. Bayard thus argues that the generative architecture of probabilities is necessary for the detective novel to function

…to overarch the whole text like a set of reserve hypotheses that are valid until the final resolution imposes one of them… The question is, then, *to what extent this virtual multiplicity of meanings finally generates undecidability*, therefore annulling the model of readability that Van Dine proposes. (Bayard 2000:30)

Having failed over twelve years to find a means to write my book about *Life? or Theatre?* I am comforted. My incompetence might merely reflect the effect of such a multiplicity of meanings and the resulting undecidability because there is not one solution but a series of disguises and distractions within which many are deposited that both veil and expose a crime and its culprit. Weisz’s revelations might, however, tempt us to return to the safety of finally knowing what this work is about. That is not my purpose. Bayard enjoins me to explore the textualit of the redacted work that made the direct confession, archived in the appended ‘postscript’ unnecessary, even while its discovery points more heavily to what is already inscribed in the redacted work’s creation of images to make visible scenarios and subjectivities other than the author’s.

My question has always been: what is *Life? or Theatre?*?

Here is a map of the work that reveals its ‘theatrical’, geopolitical and narrative structure, with its massive emphasis, in the disproportionally large Main Part (Hauptteil) on events during just one year 1937-38 (fig.7).

There are acts and scenes within acts; but there are also chapters as if it were at times imagined as a book. The vast central section is framed by two wings, a Prologue with two acts taking place in Berlin 1913-1936, an Epilogue in France 1939-40. Each element has a dominant colour and specific set of musical references or motifs. Act 1 of the Prologue covers events in the lives of four women living between the 1880s and 1932. Act 2 notes the historical event of 30 January 1933 and the effects on one teenage girl. History will again intervene to end the Main Part: the Kristallnacht pogrom of November 1938 that drives the woman into exile in a France that will be overrun in 1940 by those same forces she had sought to escape in 1939 by leaving Germany.

The Main Part involves an encounter with a man and his teaching. The man, named Amadeus Daberlohn (penniless Mozart) was a survivor of the trenches of WWI who had been left for dead amidst the dead and dying. He references what was until that moment the major traumatic event in twentieth century history. The survivors of the trenches carried something of the awe and awfulness that later attached itself to the survivors of Nazi concentration and death camps.

His trauma, as a seventeen-year-old having to play dead amidst the terrible groans of the dying men, left him amnesiac and voiceless. His recovery led him to embrace a Nietzschean theory about the voice as direct line to the soul/psyche, and the healing that linked song and sex to renewal of life after the missed encounter with death. He appears not only as a character in the work, but through repeated painting as a speaking head, he is being installed as the vocal source of the philosophical ideas about survival after encountering death that is set against the feminine deathliness repeatedly emplotted in the prologue. With the golden singing stepmother, he functions as the figure of life-creating and death-defying creativity through the voice but also through erotic initiation. A slightly different musical map of *Life? or Theatre?* reminds us that the conception of this painted work was, nonetheless, deeply indebted to the sensuous and acoustic affectivity of recently created sound and colour cinema, a dimension I cannot explore, show or make audible here. It is this aspect, however, that makes the translation of Salomon’s ‘object’ into a storyboard for, and then a realized film, so troubling. The work registers the impact of the new audio-visual technology of sound and colour cinema without being cinematic. It shares the narrative possibility of durational sequencing of images while equally holding to the internal formal compositionality and visual semantics of the painted rather than the still image (playing its role as counterpoint to cinema’s mobilising of thousands of tiny stills to create the effect of living movement).

To bring back the artifice and aesthetic opacity of the artwork, we need to start at the beginning of a work it is impossible to illustrate (space and cost prohibit it) so we shall have to remain with ekphrasis, a evocation of a sequence of images for the purposes of arriving once again at Weisz’s revelation.

**5 The First and the Last**

The redacted painting cycle begins at night in Berlin in 1913 (fig.8) with a suicide and ends with a painting (fig.9) showing an artist painting outdoors on the Mediterranean coast. These bookends function mythically to link disparate times and spaces, and two characters who share a name. Yet the artist represented at work in the final painting is, in fact, beginning the first painting. Warping time, the work thus concludes at its own beginning, rendering what precedes the final painting as the initiating backstory: perhaps existing to tell us why it—the event of beginning to paint this narrative—exists. It is as if the entire work was painted to arrive at the inception of its own memory work. This also makes the work what I have named an Orphic journey backwards into the ‘underworld’ to meet the dead and temporarily resurrect its Eurydices in order to make them speak their dying through the painter’s artistic ventriloquism.

The bookends of the work are visually mythic: night and day, but they are also geopolitical: Weimar and Third Reich Berlin and avant-garde/Vichy France. The first binary might invite us to see the work as a journey from political darkness to modernist sunshine, with its cleansing light and new dawns. The artist, however, knowingly satirizes the fascist appropriation of such imagery in her introduction referencing France’s adoption of Pétain’s fascist rhetoric of the new nation. But that interpretation does not convince me.

These two paintings, first and last belong together. They speak across the huge visual architecture of the work to each other. Beginning and Ending, they are in fact reversed in the layout. The last is the beginning for the Berlin night scene is not a remembered, lived scene; it is the invented memory projected from the moment of painting in 1941, to use art to stage an unwitnessed event and to give it an image. That image is not created to begin a linear story—Once upon a time there was a girl who drowned herself at night—but to insert a clue to the project’s purpose by making this otherwise unexplained event of this woman’s suicide the event that compels a telling that is not a story. The painted image witnesses now the unwitnessed event of an individual’s desperation that leads over multiple moments of disintegrating subjectivity to self-inflicted death.

Drawn together, the twin paintings seed into the work and put on view what the work will tell without saying. The final painting is also the clue. In that sense, this work is cinematic, relying on the semantic potential of the interval in montage to prompt the reader’s recognition of a meaning that does not need to be shown. The final painting is telling us that whatever is now the present becomes intelligible only if we know about the event in November 1913 when an eighteen-year-old girl, also called Charlotte, left her family home in an apartment in the centre of Berlin and apparently walked 21 kilometers to drown herself in the icy waters of the pleasure lake the Schlachtensee.

**6. The Last Painting and the Crime**

There are several curious features of the last /first painting apart from its evident conversation with modernist French avant-garde painting from Cézanne to Dufy and Matisse, the latter two sitting out the war in nearby Nice to which I could draw attention.

Salomon’s young woman wears bathing costume and she is painting. Secondly, the paper that the artist holds before her and on which she begins to paint is transparent—it is thus not a blank white page awaiting her marks and colours. Its edges merely frame the sea beside which the artist sits to paint. The scene of painting is not the motif that will be painted. (fig.10) Thirdly, at the horizon, against a patch of paper left unmarked, the stroke of the brush diagonally laid over the washes that form the sky creates an uncanny effect: the suggestion of a face, eyes closed and in profile, rising out of the sea. Is this haunting of the scene with a face identified with water chance or intention? (fig.11) What is its effect, once seen? Finally, perhaps most remarkably, there are three words on the painting woman’s bare back. Why should such words be thus blazoned on her skin invisible to she who paints, but exposed to the imagined viewer?

The cultural historian Michael Steinberg first suggested a link with Franz Kafka’s short story, ‘In the Penal Colony’, written in 1914 and published in 1919 (Steinberg 2006: 1). Kafka tells the spine-chilling tale of a machine that over twelve hours carves into the skin of the back of a condemned prisoner the crime for which he has been condemned. The torture leads to both the prisoner’s eventual death but also, according to the machine’s prime and enthusiastic operator, the Officer, to an ecstatic experience half-way into the twelve-hour torture from which the prisoner ultimately dies. Whether or not the artist here was aware of Kafka’s grim tale, the reference allows me to pose the question: is there a link between these words ‘written on the body’ and a Kafkaesque crime?

Furthermore, painted rather than engraved, the three words meaning ‘Life or Theatre’ appear in this form *without*the two question marks that will punctuate these same words when written as a title to the whole work or the three interrogatives — functioning as exclamatory—emphatically stating ‘and from this (dabei) came *Leben oder Theater* ??? that are the transparency overlaying the final painting.

The emblazoning of the worlds on the body of the painter, in contrast to the insertion of words as speech around painted figures, or as sound-links between individuals, or as ironic commentary from outside the painted world written on overlays that prevails throughout the rest of the work, must have significance. If this is the point of disclosure of the truth of the image-music-text, we need, following Bayard, to re-read it all for its signs that apparently congeal here in a body, engraved now with a statement, turned away, beginning to paint the death of another woman in 1913. Refusing to treat this as a story of events, or as an analysis of the everyday, or as an autobiography, I have to read the text for the proliferating signs of the ‘crime’ of which these paintings are the visible signs.

**7. Suicides**

The very first painting, titled 1913, is the unexplained scene of a young woman in terrible psychological distress escaping at night and alone through an empty city to kill herself far away. Replications of the central figure intensify and visualize psychic pain and disintegration leading to watery and lonely self-destruction. This opening scene is not a chronological but a narrative beginning. It functions like the murder that initiates the detective fiction: narrative we know begins with the break in the everyday, the rupture from the ordinary and the habitual. It is the event. The painting looks like a suicide: but is that what the work as a whole produces as its sole meaning?

*Act I scene 2*: focuses on the first subject of death, namely the first witness, the suicided woman’s older sister. War breaks out 1914. She too can get away. She will become a nurse. At the front in 1915 she will work beside a less socially elevated young surgeon. He will do. She marries him in two ceremonies, civil and religious. Using the device of film frames slipping through the gate, the artist paints a scene of the marriage night. But the surgeon must return to the front. A different spatial organization comes into play here to produce a painting full of meaning we need to deconstruct from its composite.

The painting combines a number of different spaces on a single page. The composite single image signifies a narrative by its multiple compartments. Starting on the upper right, we see a train packed with the khaki-clad soldiers being seen off by their loved ones. Peering closely you may notice a tiny figure in blue bidding farewell to her soldier while a wounded man is carried on a stretcher behind her. Turning to the upper left segment, just visible in the slide on the left, we see this platform re-laid under the overlapping scene of farewell as a ribbon of departure. The platform has emptied and the woman in blue becomes more noticeable alone remaining with her handkerchief aloft as the train is represented in a streak of paint speeding away. The crossing of these vignettes creates the underpass through which the weeping woman in blue now approaches her parents. In in the centre of this newly formed spatial zone, she stands in conversation with an elderly couple, both leaning back in stern remonstrance. The outcome of this exchange is represented by the diverging paths of woman in blue and the couple following the lines of the framing triangle of platform scenes. Suddenly the multiplying woman in blue slips across the border of the central section. Sliding down to fall out of the bottom frame, she re-directs her movement along a different axis to approach a doorway in the hallway of an apartment block where she raises her key to unlock her very own front door.

We need to read the relations between the scenes to understand the visually created narrative of farewell, departure, sadness and return home alone. Yet a transparent overlay with its musical notes and commentary that accompanied this image indicates another drama played out at the centre of the page: that of filial disobedience, a woman’s claim for independence, a refusal to return to the parental home. This is made into a significant refusal. Thus the lower frame signifies not only the opening of the door, but an opening, an assertion, a freedom for a figure who emerges slowly over this page as its subjective centre, the figure inviting our identification and recognition as more than a mere character in a story. The woman in blue is gradually transformed by the interplay of this painting’s spatial segments into its subject and this retrospectively redefines the painting as the staging of a becoming moment of her subjectivity.

The painting signifies decision: a decision not to live with her parents. (Pollock 2008) It is followed by a view of the apartment with all its disposition of gender, service and anticipated child. Then in a non-architectural space, images of the woman in blue float against a floral ground. The year is now 1917, she plays the piano, she writes letters, and, she watches out of a window punching a hole into the centre of the page for a tiny returning figure. She is clearly pregnant. The husband returns. A baby is born bringing intense joy and pride. Motherhood has meaning and daily purpose until the child enters school, complete with tiny detail of the *Schultüte*. The bourgeois German family takes its holidays in the Bavarian Alps, donning plus fours and dirndls like the Freud family who were photographed thus dressed in the Dolomites. Trains frame the scene, going and returning – this is a pre-Auschwitz painting. An intimate scene of mother and daughter introduces the troubling notion of the mother’s dying. The window is a passage between the two worlds. Then the tone darkens dramatically. The sombre colour and multiple registers across the page create a chaotic scene of psychological disintegration and attempted suicide. The whole is held together along the left hand side by the haunted face and looming presence of the depressed mother no longer finding joy in the activities of life with a child, sitting staring again out of a window. A physician’s visit tells her to buck up, She steals poison from her husband’s medical bag.

Now she is forced to return to the parental home to be watched by them. A scene of the visit to the recovering mother by husband and child gives us a context for the photograph with which I opened this lecture. They are shown waving goodbye. The commentary is ironic about the chiding and infantilizing tone used to buck up the mortally depressed woman. The painting’s point of view remains with the woman who, left alone by the nurse’s momentary absence, rises from her bed, moves to the window now placed in the centre of the image which, itself now then gapes like an opened window, yawning to the outside. There we see only the trailing foot: the clue that the woman has jumped to her death and as I shall show perhaps also a memory of another traumatic and witnessed death. The viewer of the image is unplaceable, but is made witness not only to this imagined event but the astute visualization of the progressive psychological self-alienation that precedes such an action, almost slowed down into slow motion while being condensed in a single multi-charactered image.

Then in another multi-scened panel, we see the anxious mother visit her sick daughter only to find the room empty and the window open. A telephone call to the other apartment on Wielandstrasse, informs the shocked husband. Now now for the first time, there is a brief focus on the subjectivity of the daughter: she comes into view, but alone, and uncomforted as the locus of the deathly affect of this death. She is shown in her hospital-like bed, knees tucked up in a defensive posture, the whole scene bleached of colour :… she has been told. She has turned to stone. But what has she been told? She has not been told the truth that fifteen years later, when the scene is created by her own painting, she will make herself paint agitated stroke by agitating stroke: a body disarticulated by a fall and a skull crushed and bleeding on the hard pavement. The brushstokes do not describe a street in Berlin, but rather their semi-abstraction capture the velocity of a downward fall into a no-place that the painter/viewer now contemplates in close-up as if on the street beside the battered corpse. A transparent page covers the painting, however. Almost tenderly the words of the melody from the opera *Der Freischutz* by Weber that have been the leitmotif of this woman so far traces the outline of the body and caresses the bleeding head. The text reads: ‘Franziska died immediately. The apartment being on the third floor. There is nothing more to be done about the tragedy.’ (JHM 4181) Whose voice is being replayed, speaking brusquely and without any space for compassion? Is this ‘theatre’ speaking when faced with a kind of traumatic reality and grief that painting voicelessly articulates with its own intensities?

A sequence of paintings, using different modes of composition and spatialities produce a related set of meanings for registering death and representing grief. We must remember this intense blue window hole in the centre. Within its painted form, we see that a child understands it childishly. Remembering her mother’s promise to return from heaven as an angel and give her a message, she visits the tomb and waits anxiously at the window for a message that never ever comes. As an adult, however, the artist then creates a series of remarkable paintings about (the subject of) grief, whose effects require new *pathos formulae*, that is visual forms for registering psychic suffering bodily. Husband/father Albert claws his head raw in his unbearable grief, and is bathed in a blood red hue. He is presented as an Orpheus and Gluck’s famous aria of loss is introduced for the first time. The text speaks: ‘ “Oh I have lost her, all my happiness is gone!” Albert is inconsolable. He sits on his lonely red quilt, ready to make any sacrifice to have lost one restored to him.’ If we were to hear Gluck’s aria, we could imagine how the music’s swelling forms endow the anguish with an additional acoustic pathos formula: imagine this being hummed as the painting is being created blood flow by blood flow. Then we have a scene where the child enters to observe adult grief, her father’s head shockingly covered in blood, signs of a distress excessive as a response to his wife’s death from influenza: the story the child has been told. The commentary is a later, ironic if not sarcastic comment on adult deception of a vulnerable child, while the images themselves visually register the actual and remembered shocking impact of a child seeing an adult thus broken and wounded by a distraction of grief. The signs are also there of the deceit she the painter in 1941 is now denouncing. The child is told one thing but sees the signs of a secret she is not told. She knows there is a secret because of the bloody signs.

The dead woman’s mother now comes into view and her grief is represented by her collapse: she is seated on the floor huddled in sorrow. The text reads: ‘Mrs Krarre does not cry but her grief seems to penetrate the profoundest depths of the world. From the topmost tips of her hair down to the farthest joints of her small feet, her grief seems to spread through her body. It transcends her own suffering. It is the suffering of the world, the suffering of the fate that Frau Knarre, née Bend, has been elected to bear.’ (JHM 4182)

The opening words tip us towards empathy with the twice-bereaved mother—to outlive a child is unbearable, to bury both who killed themselves must be beyond endurance. The final lines, however, introduce an ironic tone, as if the real of her suffering risks its own theatricalization. *Née Bend*, invokes social snobbery deflecting this woman’s posture of sorrow from the understanding of why her daughters took their own lives. The deaths of these daughters will be represented again in Scene 5 when they are retold from the subjective position of their mother, from inside her memories. The elegant Frau Knarre is again shown huddled and reduced, sitting on the bare floorboards like a ravaged woman by Käthe Kollwitz. This whole section will be bookended by another image of the grandmother’s grief, rendered however in Modigliani style and the elongated style of grief shows her seated at a window, but that is clearly in the south of France, clearly 1940. This is all memory work.

The painting mode deployed by the artist for this hypertextual dive into the imagined memories of the older woman involve the brilliant use of contemporary photographic and cinematic rhetorics of the photograph and the close up. (Pollock 2007/2008) The voice of these paintings is the grandmother’s with her own self-deceptions and repressions. She tells us that her daughter Franziska was haunted by the depressed face of her sister Charlotte. After the latter’s suicide, she is haunted by her ghostly presence. Marriage and motherhood bring intense experiences of passion but then both child and husband turn away. We have an exquisite imaging of the isolation of depressed solitude and social alienation. These images take us close in and put before us the face of the woman whose broken body, whose effacement in brutal death, has been so graphically shown to us before. A different need, another investment in creating such images becomes apparent with this repeated used of the face. This sequence brings us face to face with the ‘face’ of Franziska Kann, the missing mother, of whom the photographic family album retains no trace. There is no surviving photograph of the woman whose features are so intently studied and repeatedly evoked by this series of transposed memories, as if the grandmother’s memory was photographic, imprinted with her daughters’ faces of sorrow and as if the painter needed to summon this face again and again to trace its own subjective space close up. (Pollock2007/2008)

The sequence then takes the woman, fully dressed, back to a window out of which she stares. She is seen face-on in this painting face as she gazes into the nothingness she feels her life has become. The viewpoint is outside the window. The painter then borrows from cinema to switch our viewpoint and place the ‘camera’ or gaze behind the woman looking out: shot reverse shot reworked. We now share the sight of the blue void, the void that is coloristically continuous with her, the one buried in the scene of discovery. Then the third scene in the cinematic sequence. Not what we might expect. The camera remains there, in that space. The third painting in the sequence shows us only the empty window. It signifies her death. She has jumped. It shows she is missing. Death does not have an image. It is located in the survivor, the bereaved. Showing us absence, not seeing the broken body, we are made to feel disappearance. Furthermore, the painting stops time. It waits at that moment. The work pauses. And then we notice, that outside the window is not a Berlin street. We see a red tiled roof; it is, I argue, the roof outside the window of the Hotel Belle Aurore where the painting was made in 1941-42. (Pollock 2006c) The grandmother’s memories fade from view. The pause, the window, the detail of the place, makes this painting speak of another woman, and inscribe another hesitation before an open window, this open window, posing another question of potential suicide: the subject who is painting this scene as a scenario of choice.

Here, embedded in this second telling of the event of the mother’s suicide that now acquires its traumatic surcharge from repetition and difference, reframed by the theatre of another’s memory, a single painting speaks its own, the work’s key, question: life or death? As a painting made meaningful by sequencing and repetition, it registers the dangerous longing to be with the mother, to pass into her space, and to share her relief. Thus it also speaks of the invisible suffering of the abandoned child, now the stateless refugee, abandoned and rejected by the world itself. It also, I shall argue, reveals indirectly, or directly, that the mother and daughter might share a motive for suicide. For at the time of her suicide in 1926, the mother was *not* a refugee, *not* a released internee from the concentrationary universe, *not* a menaced Jewish exile from Nazi Germany. So why surrounded by love and family and home did a woman like her, or did her younger sister, so inexplicably jump from windows or drown in icy lakes to escape their lives? Was it to escape that which the artist is building as a picture of ‘theatre’ that is related to the home the mother refused to re-enter but from which she escaped through jumping?

This question of what was life or theatre will take us to the Epilogue where the bereaved mother of the mother, the painter’s grandmother, will herself take the same way out. She *is* an exile. She *is* a persecuted refugee hearing on the radio of more and more terrible things done to the Jews in Germany. She goes to the bathroom and finds her husband’s medical supplies, the sleeping drugs and poisons they have brought just in case they run out of money. She tries to poison herself, just like her daughter. She is found before it is too late. But refused by her husband the morphine she craves to kill her psychic pain, she becomes hallucinatory and tries to kill *him*. Why? For what does she blame him?

The granddaughter living with them is driven to her own limits trying to reach the desperate woman, her grandmother. Here the rapid washes of colour cover the page with only fragile blue lines that attempt to hold the bodies in place. In ironic paintings the granddaughter passes the night trying to reclaim the woman for life by singing the Beethoven setting of Schiller’s ‘Ode to Joy’ from his ninth symphony: the epitome of the German High Culture that the Bendas and Grunwwalds had assimiliated to no avail. It is of no avail.

Blue lines sketch the framework of the window, yellow the billowing curtains, red the outlines of the figure jumping. Only the red quilt and bed linen receive much painterly attention, obstructing our access to the sketchy vision. Then comes a painting that narratively has the granddaughter at the window, having arrived in the room too late, looking out and down… is this again a moment of pause: should I jump too? Then the scene that was really witnessed by Charlotte Salomon when she found her grandmother’s broken body and crushed head on the pavement below their Nice apartment. It this reality that she borrowed to make herself paint the truth of what happened fifteen years before when her mother had jumped. The chronological order of events is 1926 and then 1940 but the order of knowledge is 1940 and then 1926.

I have left out one event. The moment during the desperate struggle to keep the grandmother alive when the granddaughter is told the truth of her mother’s death: it was not influenza but suicide. This death then takes its place in a family history of multiple suicides that pours forth from the heartless grandfather. We know that children sense the secrets of their parents. We know too that for a truth to be revealed belatedly undoes all trust we have in a life up to this point that now becomes illusory. The catastrophic discovery of the suicides of mother and aunt and more, while soon to witness the suicide of her own grandmother, might well have unhinged the granddaughter… she tells us as much through the painting of the pause at the open window.

*Life? or Theatre?* is not telling a story. It is not creating a narrative of tragic events. It is not the annals of a family in Germany—phrases used in the 1963 documentary screened at the beginning of Franz Weisz’s film (0.44). It is not even what I tried to name it in my early studies, a Benjaminian *Theatre of Memory*. (Pollock. 2006) Sequencing provides the conditions for the eruption of the exceptional that, none the less, by recurrence and re-encounter, begins to become a norm: it is a gendered norm and a norm of women’s self-destruction whose cause is neither explained nor explored in their representation but is being ‘written on their bodies’ by the aesthetic machine that is *Life? or Theatre?*

**8. The Confession**

So now comes the belated revelation of what might be the evidence that *Life? or Theatre?* is hiding in plain site. In the final sequence of Frans Weisz 2012 film, borrowing from his own 1981 filming of the death of the grandfather, Birgit Doll reads the missing pages of the letter and the same figures we saw at the beginning reading what we are too hearing. They are exposed to the words that explode their confident adulation so affirmed in the opening interviews. Their faces register dawning awareness, shock, distress.

What they read and we hear is what appears to be a confession—of murder—by having put an overdose of barbiturates—Veronal—into the breakfast omelette of the grandfather. The writer is watching the man die as she writes. ‘When my grandfather first fell asleep from his Veronal omelette and I drew him, it was as if a voice was calling out to me’ Das Theater is tot.[Theatre is dead].’ (1:14.12-1:14:24)

Life? or Theatre?

Our experts in Weisz’s film shock me for the speed with which they accommodate the outrageous confession of cold-blooded murder as fact and reality and accept it as justifiable homicide. They imagine why she might have felt she could not go on living with this awful man whom she clearly disliked. The Salomon experts in Weisz do not appear to have a clue why ‘she’, the real ‘Charlotte’ they so often seek and find through the work, might have done such a thing or even written that ‘she’ in character might have wished to do it. The speakers whom we met in the opening sequence full of their enthusiasm and admiration now twist and turn as they try to make sense of the catastrophe that has been inflicted by this revelation on their idealized image of Charlotte Salomon: what can they make of a confession to murder by a figure who has been claimed, like Anna Frank to represent both the vulnerability of the victim and human creativity defiant in the face of political cruelty? They assume that she has done the deed and that the ‘she’ is Charlotte Salomon.

**9. Reckoning**

Does this mean that the historical person Charlotte Salomon killed her grandfather Ludwig Grunwald? We know from Mary Felstiner’s research that the real Dr Grunwald, aged eighty-one, died at 11.00am after collapsing on the street in Nice, mid-morning on 12 February 1943. He did not fall asleep after a poisoned breakfast. So there is an apparent disjuncture. The letter could have been written as the old man dozed recovering enough to go out only to collapse later, thus inciting no suspicion of having being poisoned.

*But who is speaking in this text?* *What is this text?* We are hearing a reading of a typescript transcript of a painted ‘letter’ appended as part of an image-text artwork is addressed to a character, Amadeus Daberlohn, in the ‘singspiel’ or musical play as which the artwork is framed, and it is written as a love letter four years after there had been contact between this character and the signatory, that signatory, now the writer now using the personal pronoun I, which does not occur during the texts accompanying the redacted paintings that form *Life? or Theatre?*, might have to be understood as *Charlotte Kann,* not Charlotte Salomon. *Charlotte Kann* bears some relation to Charlotte Salomon but not one of identity since ‘she’ is a figuration in a painting, a vehicle for memory, a virtual witness of events, a chorus-like commentator, a character in a visual *Bildungsroman* (Watson, 2002)*.* But this is where the distinction between the burden of the everyday and the fantasy of which Lefebvre spoke becomes useful.

The ‘text’ confesses to its writer’s having poisoned the grandfather’s breakfast. It does not, however, explain why. The experts in Weisz’s film justify homicide, it seems, on the grounds of the character of the man, the antipathy in which he was held by his granddaughter, the difficulty of the times.

Had this text been appended to the work as its conclusion in lieu of that which was selected and included, it might have made the work, *Life? or Theater?* an indictment and the explanation for the murder this excluded postscript revealed or inscribed as that which the writer desired to commit. Being reserved as outside the redacted numbered pages that formed *Life? or Theater?* while being included in the package that *was placed in hiding*, its function becomes deeply ambiguous. Does it register a fantasy, the author’s wishful thinking, like Lefebvre’s ‘Some [women] are bogged down by its peculiar cloying substance, while others escape into make-believe…’. But this is not day-dreaming of escape from the everyday. It is an act between the event that ruptures and the everyday in which the latter is already the locus of a crime.

In *Archive Fever* Jacques Derrida examined the historian Yerushalmi’s fanciful ‘letter’ written to the ghost of Freud, seeking confirmation of the truth of his and psychoanalysis’ Jewishness (Derrida. 1996). Yerushalmi had focussed on Freud’s last great text, *Moses and Monotheism* in which Freud made the outrageous but brilliantly psychoanalytical claim that the Hebrew rabble, summonsed to leave Egypt by the Egyptian dissident Moses, murdered him (Yerushalmi. 1993; Freud. 1939/1964). Traces of the constant rebellions of the Israelites are numerous but in the biblical text of Numbers 14 we find ‘And the whole community threatened to stone them [Moses and Aaron] with stones...when the glory of the Lord appeared.’ Yerushalmi wants to stress that despite this suggesting that the Israelites wanted to kill Moses, they did not. Derrida has two comments. On a non-psychoanalytical plane, even if the murder did not occur, the truth is that there was an intention to kill and its carrying out was interrupted from outside: the supernatural intervention of the ‘glory of the Lord’. There was an effective attempt on Moses’ life. Turning to *psychoanalytical* logic, however, Derrida argues that there is little difference between the intention to murder and the act of murder. ‘The unconscious does not know the difference between the virtual and the actual, intention and action’. (Derrida. 1996:66) Finally Derrida remarks that ‘the unconscious may have kept the memory and the archive of the intention to kill, of the acting out of this desire to kill—even if there had been repression; because a repression also archives that of which it dissimulates or encrypts the archives’. (Derrida; 1996:66)

So I am confronted with a text that, offering itself as a confession, inscribes a desire to kill, writes of an acting out of the desire to kill, records calmly watching the supposed effects of some action that could kill. There were murder cases in the 1930s in which Veronal was named as the murder weapon. Forensic scientists called to give evidence had no data-base on which to base their conclusions as to what amounts were needed against what body-weights surely to bring about a death from a planned overdose.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Under the Derridian reading, the writer stands psychoanalytically self-accused of murder. The letter archives that desire and sets the imaginary scene of its realization within a text it has created with painted letters just like those finally selected other painted capitals used to preface and conclude the vast theatre of visualized memory.

If there were intention and even action—effective or not—that the work obliquely archives by appending an excluded alternative preface/conclusion, we might then ask two questions: why would the writer wish to murder ‘Theater’ who is now specifically impersonated by and identified with the grandfather and all he represents and what does this equivocally positioned document do to our reading of a work titled *Life? or Theater?*

I suggest that the invocation of the will to kill might not point to an *actual murder* ***of*** *the old man* by the young woman, but to the *virtual murder* ***by*** *the old man* of several young women starting with ‘Charlotte’ in 1913. The last page that we know of this censored text before the confession reads:

I was in despair. To have gained insight into everything, and then to have to return to take care of this “puppet”. It was a winter that few people could have endured. Lost in a profound stupor, unable to lift a finger. Everything I did for my grandfather made me blush. I was sick. I was constantly beet-red from mute rage and grief. Spring arrived. I had to finish it! Whatever it costs. What do I care about the police, grandfather. I must go back to…JMH 4931-4

Something was thus also happening between the ‘I’ of the text and the grandfather that disgusted, revolted or shamed that she/I sufficiently to ‘finish it’ so as to ‘return to my work and my happiness…’. The ‘it’ to be finished is not ‘my work and my happiness’. What was to be finished was perhaps what had emerged as the work and what making the work alone could disclose. I am suggesting that ‘it’ is the traumatic recurrence of familial sexual abuse.

The evidence is, however, that of a literary device, a letter, written to a character, or a disguised person masked by a theatrical naming. The experts’ autobiographical collapse, in Weisz’s film and their previous representations of Salomon and her work, of artist, subject, and author and character tempts them to take this rediscovered document of ‘confession’ at face value. Did Charlotte Salomon murder her own grandfather because she could not bear him, because life became too hard with an old man in tow? Can we accept this as the grounds for taking a life of an old man however hideous he had become? Or is this writing part of the staging of the real crime: what the grandfather had done and what should happen because of **his** crime?

None of the experts for all their fascination have seen what the *Life? or Theatre?* shows in true crime fiction fashion: everywhere exposed and visible but hidden amidst to much else that offer equally plausible answers to what the work is about: namely that a crime already has already being committed, and repeatedly, against the women of the artist’s family, and finally, against herself.

*Life? or Theatre?* thus becomes legible as an oblique, disguised, deflected but plainly presented indictment of domestic incest, of familial sexual abuse and a tracing of the conditions of resistance to what is already a form of murder: murder of the self, ‘soul murder’ as it has been called, that so often leads to a real murder completed, however, by the victim herself: suicide (Shengold, 1989) but rarely to the revenge killing of the abuser. Another way of reading this ‘postscript’ might be in the order of political allegory that exposes the everyday locus of the menace to life as we see in Michael Hanneke’s unsettling portrait of proto-fascism in the abused pre-war generation of rural Germany. In his film *The White Ribbon* (2009) the doctor of the village has lost his wife, leaving him with two young children. The doctor has used his medical assistant for sexual services since that time, or even before, but now rejects her cruelly, begins to use his teenage daughter. Seated in his surgery late at night, they are discovered by the little brother who has awoken from sleep and wandered in search of his sister. Filmed from the little boy’s point of view, we hear the daughter’s distress on the sound track before we see her raised up on the medical bed, nightgown raised, with the father seated in front of her opened legs. Weeping and seeking to re-cover her body, the daughter protects the little brother by protecting her father with a lie: he is just re-piercing her ears and that is why she crying. Hanneke includes this scene as part of his political analysis of a pre-war Germany engendering the seeds of fascism without more confirmation of what is going on than a passing taunt by the rejected lover-medical assistant.

**10 The Monster in the home**

Weisz’s disclosure of the missing pages confirms everything I had long suspected.

The first paper I ever wrote on Salomon in 1995 picked out as its point of entry one painting of a scene of a vast skeleton stalking a Berlin apartment under whose opened legs we see a tiny female figure fleeing down the endless corridor towards a closed door. (JHM 4189 fig.13) It seemed so remarkable, so gothic in its horror, so unlike the manner in which domestic life in Berlin had been represented in the paintings around it that I sensed it was one of the key paintings to another level of meaning seeded into the visually voluble work. The painting is inserted following the death of the mother, after the funeral, after the grief paintings I have discussed above. Its overlay reads:

Whenever she has to walk along the wide, endless passage in her grandparents’ home, she imagines something terrible, with skeleton’s limbs that has something to do with her mother. The she is filled with panic and begins to run..run.. run

The child locks herself in the bathroom—the only room with a lock. Sitting on the bath, the little girl says: *so that’s what they call life !* with the exclamation mark over the toilet chain. The overlay over the monster painting plays the musical reference that is the leitmotif associated with the now dead mother along the arms and down between the legs of the monster as if hanging his giant red penis over the retreating figure of the girl child. He is a cinematic monster. His outstretched arms and giant grasping hands reminiscent of German Expressionist cinema’s monstrous *Nosferatu*. in the film by Murnau (fig.14). Thus painted in retrospect and seeded into the sequencing that distracts us with its narrative movement is a terrifying and gothic image of the abuser as experienced by an imagined child with which the adult painter projectively identifies, now burdened with a knowledge gained by her own, recent subjection to the same abuser’s sexual demands, of what might have been the cause of her mother’s and aunt’s desire for death rather than continuing in this ‘theatre’ of a life.

Let me bring in some more explicit evidence for my claim: The penultimate sequence is shaped by political history. Following the invasion and capitulation of France in May-June 1940, all German refugees Jewish and non-Jewish were rounded up and incarcerated, this lot in a French concentration camp at Gurs. There are no scenes of camp life, but there is a painting of a moment after painter and grandfather were released. The scene is painted in fecal colours associated with the encounter with fascism throughout the work. Groups of people huddle on the ground in a railway carriage or a waiting room. For reasons associated with the confusion following the French capitaluation and the establishment of the Vichy regime the grandfather was released by the French authorities, before the Germans arrived to take over Gurs, on condition that his granddaughter be released to be his carer. They were to walk from Pau on the Atlantic Coast back to Nice. The granddaughter was thus forced to live with the grandfather. There is no painting of the camp experience. There are, however, paintings of the journey home, the point at which Charlotte is responsible for, and exposed to the grandfather alone. This painting reads: *rather ten such nights than one alone with him*. She is shown painting. Then overleaf, on a coloured background brushed in with agitated speed and moving from blue to blood red, the grandfather stands in his nightshirt telling the girl :

I don’t understand you. What is wrong with sharing a bed with me when there is nothing else available I am in favour of what is natural.

The Girl: Don’t torment me. You know exactly what I have to do. JHM 4915 verso)

The paintings in this final sequence are made on both recto and verso in haste. This means the artist had paper for this series (others in the epilogue are borrowed from the main part) But why back and front? Another one shows her huddled on the edge of the bed and then the asking the hotel owner if there is no other possibility for sleeping separately from her grandfather. Then the final two paintings of the sequence:

A little love, a few laws, a young girl, a big bed. That’s life and those its joys after so much pain, so many dead. A little education, a few laws, and inside a vacuum—that’s what’s left. That’s what the human being has now become. (JHM 4920recto)

Then the girl to her grandfather:’ I feel as if the whole world has to be together again.’

His reply, airbrushed out of the 1963 illustration: ‘Go ahead and kill yourself and put an end to all this babble.’(JHM 4920verso)

It is clear that Charlotte Salomon made space in her vast theatre of memory to install as image the fact that it seems she too contemplated suicide. She asked the question life or death, set against another kind of death she named and notionally killed— ‘Theatre?’—the latter being the dangerous parody of external respectability masking inner corruption that had murdered two women-selves and led to the self-destruction of the invaded bodies and broken souls of his own daughters. Her question is implanted in the work at the window the second time she takes us to the moment of her mother’s death. Now that scene takes on new meanings. In the paintings she places at the conclusion of *Life? or Theatre?*  when *Charlotte Kann* is exposed to her grandfather alone, as on the return from Gurs, the deadly grandfather openly proposes his incestuous habit. ‘I am in favour of what is natural’ is the recognizable line of the abuser. It also links his deceptive ‘Theatre’ to his false claims to the ‘natural’.

The last painting that shows the beginning of the project by painting of the scene of the first Charlotte’s suicide in 1913 acquires the novelistic quality of setting up a detective story. Is the second ‘Charlotte’ [Kann] telling us obliquely why the first killed herself—to escape what was happening in that apartment haunted by the groping vampyr? The second Charlotte decided, however, not to kill herself but drew on a counter philosophy, a post-traumatic life strategy of voicing: Daberlohn’s Nietzschean proposition of joyous sex and death-defying singing. But six months after ‘Charlotte Kann’ had arrived at her choice of life through rehearsing orally, musically and visually Amadeus Daberlohn’s philosophy as a bulwark against the restaging of the feminine everyday and its hidden crimes, the painter writes through the device of her artistic work that gave her all these insights, that she, forced to live alone with the grandfather, who like the doctor in Hanneke’s *The* *White Ribbon* may have used medical right to molest his daughters and granddaughter sexually or make demands for sexual services they did not freely wish to give him, decides to end his days by poisoning his breakfast with the barbiturate Veronal. ***Dabei***: from this, not the telling but the showing, from this experience or from this knowledge revealed of the past victims, the work emerged: not to tell a story but to indict a crime and perhaps leave a case for the defence.

Abusive incest is a crime against the vulnerable within humanity in the structure of the family and the domestic sphere. Statistically it is part of the everyday. Defence lawyers in abuse trials, however, have argued the point that it happens to so many children and so often that it cannot be considered exceptional, thus cannot be counted as trauma, defined as the event ‘outside the range of human experience’. (Brown 1995: 100-101) Specific dimensions of gendered life experiences fall out the category of the event but they also used to fall below the social or cultural analysis of the everyday. Do we place them in the category of the normal or the secret, the trauma or the crime? Incest is what Holocaust survivor and psychoanalyst Dori Laub would call an ‘event without a witness’, a crime committed in privacy that does not provide its subject/victim with the reflective mirror of a verifying witness to violation, to the silenced murdering of a self. (Laub, 1992)

What would be the writing of this ‘event’ that is also the terrible truth of the gendered everyday?[[3]](#footnote-3) I think *Life? or Theatre?* possibly reveals what that might look like. Yet its form leaves us, as both Bayard and Derrida reveal, with the profound ambiguity in its ‘writing’ that disallows us from simply romanticising or condemning the victim/executioner, while a psychoanalytical reading of the work as archive forces a confrontation with a murderous desire that marks the text to which this ‘writing’ of the real or imagined event was appended. It is in the tortuous collision of the event of the everyday that the work elaborated in its semi-fictional form using image, music, text, and sequence and the historically exceptional event in which the 26-year-old author-painter was herself murdered that has produced the silencing of the crimes she placed, like the ‘Purloined Letter’ of Edgar Allen Poe (Poe 1844), in the obscurity of plain view.

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Illustrations

1. Photograph: Charlotte Salomon on a balcony, detail, 1926 JHM Courtesy of the Charlotte Salomon Foundation

2. Photograph: Charlotte Salomon on a balcony, 1926 JHM Courtesy of the Charlotte Salomon Foundation

3. Photograph: Charlotte Salomon with Albert Salomon, 1928 JHM Courtesy of the Charlotte Salomon Foundation

4 Photograph: Charlotte Salomon, 1938 JHM Courtesy of the Charlotte Salomon Foundation

5 Photograph: Charlotte Salomon with her grandparents in Villa L’Hermitage. JHM Courtesy of the Charlotte Salomon Foundation

6.Photograph: Charlotte Salomon in Gardens of Villa L’Hermitage,Villefranche France, 1940 JHM

7. Structural Map of Charlotte Salomon *Life? or Theatre?*

8. Charlotte Salomon. First painting [Berlin 1913] *Life? or Theatre?*  JMH 4156 Courtesy of the Charlotte Salomon Foundation

9. Charlotte Salomon Last Painting [St Jean de Cap Ferrat 1042]  *Life? or Theatre?*  JMH 4925 Courtesy of the Charlotte Salomon Foundation

9. Frans Weisz *Leven? of Theater?* 2012: montage of first sequence of experts

10. Frans Weisz *Leven? of Theater?* 2012:The transcript

11. Frans Weisz *Leven? of Theater?* 2012 montage of the confesssion

12. Michael Hanneke  *The White Ribbon* (2009)

13. Charlotte Salomon [ …she imagines something terrible with skeleton’s limbs] *Life? or Theatre?*  JMH 4189 Courtesy of the Charlotte Salomon Foundation

14. F.W. Murnau *Nosferatu* 1922.

1. In German universities the acquisition of the scar in a fencin duel was the mark of initiation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There was one murder trial involving Veronal in New Zealand in 1935 but the pathologist knew of no previous cases. <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/32969002> accessed 23 August 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I use this phrase within the family setting. Recent events have shown how widespread institutional abuse of vulnerable boys has been. There is also the incidence of priestly abuse of both boys and girls in the context of the educational and religious instruction. The work of Charlott Salomon is testimony to its specific heterosexual and gendered instance. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)