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Charlotte Salomon Life? or Theatre?
London and New York: Overlook Duckworth 2017 hardcover in a case
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Includes a translation of the missing pages of the Postscript by Mary Felstiner and Darcy Buerkle. Reprints an essay by Emil Straus from 1963.

Charlotte Salomon *Life? or Theatre? A Singspiel 1940-42: A Selection of 450 Gouaches*
Essays by Judith C.E. Belinfante and Evelyn Benesch
Berlin: Taschen, 2016 Hardcover, clothbound £30.00 600pp ISBN……

This year marks the centenary of the birth of Charlotte Salomon, the German Jewish artist who was killed in Auschwitz in 1943 aged twenty-six, a year after she had completed one of the most complex, fascinating and challenging artworks of the modern era. Enigmatically titled *Leben?oder Theater?[Life?or Theater?]* and comprising 784 paintings of which 330 sport transparent overlays with painted words and musical cues, this single work demonstrates a dazzling variety of painterly modes, from detailed vignettes on a single page to freely painted fields of colour with barely established figures. In many paintings, words are painted directly onto the paintings, serving as ironic commentary or indications of dialogue. There are also pages of pure text, also painted, that preface and conclude the work, which is presented with a title page but also fronted by a playbill with Brechtian character names, suggesting an almost satirical theatrical form, and a sombre memorial page, followed by anonymous author's preface that explains the origins of the work in the relation of image and music. The work is signed only with the cipher, *CS*, veiling both the gender and the Jewish ethnicity of the painter making work in dangerous times.

The Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam—to whom *Life? or Theatre?* was donated in 1971 by Salomon's parents, who had survived hidden in the Netherlands and where they remained after the war —is celebrating this centenary by exhibiting *Life?or Theater?* in its entirety for the first time (20 October 2017 - 25 March 2018). The curator Mirjam Knotter argues that only with a complete showing of all 784 of the paintings can the significance of *Life? or Theatre?* as an artwork be fully grasped. This unique exhibition of everything will, she hopes, shift the tendency, evident since paintings and drawings by Salomon were first shown in Amsterdam in 1961, to read this work mostly as an autobiographical narrative rather than a modernist work of art.

Overlook Duckworth's handsome and substantial volume is the first publication of *Life? or Theatre?* to give English readers access to all of its 784 images with the 330 graphic overlays on transparent paper reproduced, quarter size beside them. Also included is the full text of additional painted pages, known as the "postscript" which has never been included in any previous reproduction of Salomon's work. This is important because nineteen pages of this critical explanatory text were suppressed by the artist's family and have disappeared. A typescript was made of the missing 'paintings' in 1975 and their contents were made public only in a Dutch documentary film in 2012 (Frans Weisz, *Leven ? of Theater?).* Duckworth offers the first complete English translation of the rediscovered pages.

A slightly less massive, also richly illustrated selection of 450 of Salomon's paintings, printed on gloss paper with a selection of the most visually intriguing of the graphic overlays, is published by Taschen with essays by former museum director

Judith Belinfante and curator Evelyn Benesch. These provide a general introduction to the artist and her life and sketch out the artistic context of Berlin art and culture during the 1930s. Belinfante has made clear her interpretation of *Life? or Theatre?* as an imagined play by firmly identifying the preliminary paintings with which Charlotte Salomon prefaced her work as 'The Programme' as if we had a theatre programme in our hands. The Taschen volume curiously prints the translations of Salomon's handwritten pencil and painted graphic commentary from the overlays in a typewriter font, perhaps to suggest the casualness of her often pencilled annotations. Unlike Duckworth, where the reproductions of the overlays are too small to allow close study of the sometimes densely written or colourfully painted words, Taschen selectively reproduces large scale those overlays that strikingly compose coloured and pencilled words on the page, enabling us to grasp the often visual relay between the image and the overlying transparency on which words are also boldly painted with the same brush that is created detailed vignettes or dramatically painted scenes. Thus published for the first time, the overlays display their own extraordinary graphic inventiveness and effect paralleling the originality of the paintings beneath.

Charlotte Salomon was born in Berlin, and trained as an artist during the mid-1930s in conditions of the radical civil and psychological dis-emancipation of German Jews that historians name a social death. After the Kristallnacht pogrom 9-10 November 1938, she fled into stateless exile in Villfranche, in the South of France. In June 1940, along with the many other German refugees living on the Côte D'Azur, she was rounded up by the French authorities and briefly incarcerated in the concentration camp of Gurs, on the Atlantic Coast, before being released to care for her elderly grandfather and allowed to return (on foot) to Nice (then under Italian protection and a refuge for 40,000 Jewish refugees). Helped by the generosity of an American friend, Ottilie Moore, Salmon was financially supported in an intense period of creativity to devote herself between summer 1941 and early 1942 to completing over 1,000 paintings. Each painting is 32.5 x 25 cm, the scale of a medium-sized drawing pad. She worked in gouache, a water-based paint that has the fluidity and quick drying properties of watercolour with the substance and depth of oil paint.

Returning to what she had created later in 1942, Salomon then arranged and numbered the paintings three sections. A Prologue paints a saga of life and death in Berlin between 1913 and 1936 of four women: a teenager who commits suicide by drowning, a mother (her older sister) who leaps from a window, the grieving mother of both women, who is also the grandmother of a bereaved child, and a stepmother who is a beautiful singer. After 1933, Hitler's take-over of Germany forces the child now a teenager out of school, who decides to become an artist. A Main Part, the largest section, covers in intense detail one 1937-1938 when the art student encounters a survivor of the First World War, who preaches a philosophy of art and life drawn from Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling and the works of Nietzsche. His teaching is rehearsed in innumerable paintings of tiny speaking heads or dreaming bodies around which curl his inspirational words about song, creativity and how the near-encounter with death can become a pathway to loving life, the importance of cinema and of recovering childhood memories.

An Epilogue is set in the South of France between 1939 and July 1940. This includes the now exiled young woman and artist's desperate attempt to prevent the grandmother from committing suicide as she recalls the deaths of both her daughters and listens anxiously to dreadful news of persecution of the Jews in Germany. The rescue attempt fails and the granddaughter-artist witnesses her shocking death. The work ends with a luminous, Dufyian painting of the young artist in bathing costume,

seated beside the blue Mediterranean, picking up her brush to paint what we recognize is the background for the very first image of the work, its antithesis— a night scene when a suicidal teenager steals out of her parents' house and throws herself to her death in an inky lake. Night and Day, North and South, Death and Life are aligned.

Each section is painted in a different mode. The Prologue demonstrates an astonishing ability to weave an integrated whole out of many tiny scenes. There are brilliant composites painted with telling details of domestic interiors, train stations, holiday travels, encounters with art in Venice and Rome, as well as single image paintings that capture the often agonised inner world and imagined memories of several women, thus making feminine depression and suicide both culturally visible and a major theme of this work. History brutally erupts with paintings of riotous fascist crowds. One painting marks Hitler's rise to power on 30 January 1933 showing the streets filled with celebrating brown-shirted SA men marching under a Nazi flag. Charlotte Salomon inverts the swastika. The Main Section creates many close-up paintings and dialogues and as well as several series of many sheets reproducing the thoughts, writings and lectures of its key character, the war survivor-singing-teacher-philosopher. This character falls in love with the stepmother while enthralling the lonely and depressive twenty-year-old art student with his Nietzchean programme for achieving psychological truth. The Epilogue is brilliantly colourful with the paintings reaching new levels of painterly freedom in fluent gestures of the loaded brush creating a breath-taking economy of form where the barest indications of struggling figures convey the night terrors of a disintegrating mind and the desperation of the young woman trying to reach out to save the older woman from death or murder.

To invent so many modes of paintings, *Life? or Theatre?* draws on a considerable knowledge of modern art from Van Gogh, Munch, Kollwitz, Grosz, Dix, Chagall, Beckman, Kirchner, Matisse to Dufy. It equally engages with opera—Gluck, Von Weber, and Bizet. In addition, Beethoven and Mahler, Weimar cabaret music and a Fascist anthem are mentioned as musical cues to emotions and unspoken thoughts. The artist references German Expressionist black and white films from Murnau to Riefenstahl while she is clearly thinking through the innovations of the 1930s in both colour and sound that made possible the screen musical. Perhaps it was that cinema that made possible her daringly hybrid combination in the visual arts of narrative, theatre and song. Although she named her work 'my book', the artist subtitled *Life? or Theatre?* a *Singspiel,* a musical play which evokes both Mozart's fable, *The Magic Flute* and the domestic comedies of nineteenth century German operetta.

Having finalised this unique combination of image, text and indicated musical melodies in two packages together with the rejected and related material, Salomon placed two packages in the safe in the keeping of a local doctor in Villefranche in February 1943. She then went into hiding only to be betrayed to the Gestapo in September of that year. Transported first to the holding camp of Drancy, near Paris, and then to Auschwitz, she was murdered on October 10, 1943. Blonde and blue-eyed and young, she was an obvious candidate for selection for slave labour. Only because she was pregnant, she was gassed immediately.

We do not know how Charlotte Salmon herself imagined the reception or exhibition of the work. While providing images for intense experience that seek to pierce the enigmas of the suicides of the women, *Life? or Theatre?* is also the affirmation of the life-saving philosophy the artist had learned from the character in the work she humorously named *Amadeus Daberlohn* (fusing the musical genius of Mozart with the idea of an impoverished scrounger) and who is based on the musical innovator, Alfred Wolfsohn (1896-1962) whose legacy lives on in the Roy Hart Theatre.

Salomon's work was never exhibited in her lifetime and no one saw it publicly until 1961. As she painted she was still in effect a *nameless* artist, and knew herself to be so not just in terms of public recognition but also in a deeper existential sense. She had not yet become herself.

In the puzzling set of paintings called a "postscript", (now available in Duckworth's edition and revealed as a letter), the artist writes to her character *Amadeus Daberlohn* that finding "a name for myself" was one of the reasons she undertook this vast painting project. I suggest that it was an artist's name she sought and the only way of finding it was by making such an artwork. I stress this because the prevailing reading of *Life? or Theatre?* these publications included, presents it as her life-story.

Salomon's characters are affectionately, cruelly or satirically renamed in the work in a way that is radically at odds with what we know of Charlotte Salomon herself, who was introverted, silent and withdrawn. Her stepmother, an opera singer, is cast as *Paulinka Bimbam*. The Grandparents appear as *Mr and Mrs Knarre,* meaning the Groaners; the artist's avatar is *Charlotte Kann,* meaning something like 'Charlotte Can-Do'. Then through the overlays, comes an unexpectedly sardonic, sometimes judgemental, voice in chorus-like commentaries on all these characters. Behind these characters lies a historical family of suicidal women and men, a beloved but envied diva stepmother, a distant surgeon father, and a seductive war survivor. The elaborate staging, naming and composing of images, complete with ironic commentary on the failings, foibles and melancholy of adults is, I would insist a poetic fiction in sound, images and words, creating from the world the artist Charlotte Salomon inhabited a theatre she directed with devastating frankness and passion. Much of what we see in this work is thus, like any great fiction or film, an aesthetic transformation of experiences known to the artist or imagined by her as those of others she could not know. Salomon created her own hybrid and original audio-visual visual art form that thus falls between book and cinema while existing materially as a painted work of art.

First exhibited in Amsterdam in 1961 and again in 1971, Charlotte Salomon slowly gained international recognition through partial exhibitions across Europe, Israel and the United States. In 1981, the first facsimile edition of the 784 paintings had been published in German and English giving general readers and scholars access to the images but not to the overlays or the music—a problem finally solved by the making of a CD-ROM in 1995 and the coming of the internet. In 1998, Royal Academy exhibited considerable selection from *Life? or Theater?* in London for the first time.

In 2015, the Parisian publishing house Tripode undertook the first complete French translation and reproductions almost full size of 784 paintings (26.4 x 20 cm; the originals are 32.5 x 25 cm), placing all the overlays beside the images, thus revealing exactly where the artist used them and where they do not. The Overlook Duckworth volume is an extended English version of the Tripode edition. It prints, however, the English translations from the first 1981 publication, which are sometimes misleading in relation to the original German because grammar and punctuation has been tidied up. Because the reproduction of the overlays is quarter size, the German original is hardly legible. Certainly this publication will take its place as the scholarly reference text for both general readers and scholars, even though its scale necessitates the use of a matt paper that cannot do full justice to the originals. It neither reproduces any of the rejected works for comparison, nor indicates if the selected paintings we see are recto or verso. In some critical cases, in the Epilogue for instance, Salomon painted on both sides of the paper in other cases it is as if she hid a difficult subject on the back. Although the CD-ROM (1995) and the currently reformulated Jewish Historical Museum internet files allow us to click on the overlays and position them over the images and even listen

to music associated with the images, it is only the book form that allows a concentrated study of the paintings, inciting new ideas for further research. There is no commentary in this volume. At the end there is short account of the exhibitions, films and interpretations of the work and it reprints a brief memorial essay by Emil Strauss, a friend who knew Salomon in Nice in 1940, composed but severely edited by the family for the first publication on the artist in 1963 misleadingly titled: *Charlotte: A diary in pictures.*

Duckworth has, however, commissioned the first English translation of the so-called "postscript" now revealed as a "Letter to Amadeus Daberlohn" from the American Salomon scholars Darcy Buerkle and Mary Felstiner. This is the first time that the complete postscript has been included at all in a publication of Salomon's work (the known fragments were translated into English by Julia Watson in 2002).

Why is this important? When preparing his first his biographical-narrative film *Charlotte (*1981) Dutch filmmaker FransWeisz had been shown several painted pages of the 'postscript' that the family had not deposited in the Jewish Historical Museum with the rest of their gift. Weisz made a typescript and used some sections for the voice-over in a film that turned Salomon's paintings into cinematic scenes and told to her story as a love story between Charlotte Salomon and Alfred Wolfsohn. But, he promised Salomon's stepmother, crucial passages in this typescript would remain secret. After her death in 2001, Weisz felt the typescript should become public. So he made a second, this time, documentary film in 2012. These newly revealed pages appear to contain a confession to a murder.

The suppressed painted pages imply that the writer of the text (are we to imagine this as Charlotte Salomon herself or is it still her avatar Charlotte Kann?) laced the breakfast omelette of her grandfather with a barbiturate, Veronal, and was painting this text as she watched him fall into a mortal stupor. According to legal records, Charlotte Salomon's grandfather Ludwig Grunwald, aged eighty-one, died at 11.00 am after collapsing in the street in Nice, on 12 February, 1943. His French death certificate contains no mention of a suspicious death. Might this this confession express a wish rather report an actual attempt on his life, or could the barbiturates have been insufficient to kill immediately, while weakening an already frail old man who went out to collapse in the street from its delayed effects? There is no answer. What the confession does do, however, is challenge the image created for Charlotte Salomon by the largely autobiographical framing of her elaborate artwork in terms of a battle with suffering.

For his documentary film, Weisz filmed an eminent group of scholars, curators, publishers, including Salomon's biographer, Mary Felstiner, stunned and shocked as they read the these revelations for the first time. He also filmed them trying to make sense of a confession to murder in terms of their fascination with and admiration of the work of an artist hitherto perceived in terms of pathos and courage. One of the interviewees in Weisz's film, is former museum director Judith Belinfante. In her introductory essay in the Taschen publication, Belinfante has to address the confession. She suggests, in the light of currently changing attitudes to terminal illness, that we might want to understand what Charlotte Salomon did as an act of assisted dying suggesting: "Did Charlotte Salomon wish to spare her grandfather the agonies and indignities of extended old age?". Does that mean she accepts the letter as proof of a deed?

When I first saw Weisz's film, I had been writing about Salomon for almost two decades and was completing my monograph (Yale, 2018). I too was stunned, but knew we needed to puzzle out this ambiguous text. I now think that our reading of the painted

letter — a confession that is at once artwork and text—must depend on a re-reading of the whole of *Life? or Theatre?*. I have compared it to a work of detective fiction. Implying a crime—not the artist's—Salomon's work of art is peppered with real and distracting clues as to the nature of the crime and its perpetrator. Perhaps the artist herself discovered that there had been a crime, something that incited the women to commit suicide, only in the process of making paintings through which she could imagine stories of the women in her Berlin past and its dead women. The exact relation between what was packaged up as *Life? or Theatre?* and the 29-page postscript-letter, included in the package yet excluded from the titled work, remains undetermined, and significantly undeterminable.

It adds another question mark to the enigma of what *Life? or Theatre?* is. We still puzzle over why was it was made, and, most importantly, what the making did for the artist, or failed to do for her six months after its completion when, according to the postscript-letter dated February 1943, she apparently suffers a deadly, possibly suicidal, depression and confesses to this actual, imagined or wished-for murder of a man who represents the antithesis of the life-giving *Amadeus Daberlohn*. What had the artist discovered through her invention about the lives and deaths of women in her family by invented their lives in her paintings? Did what she discovered by working through the imagined past in images shape what she confesses retrospectively in the letter to *Amadeus Daberlohn*?

While giving us almost complete (Duckworth) and a substantial selective (Taschen) access to illustrations of Charlotte Salomon's extraordinarily varied paintings, with translated texts and images of the overlays, these volumes still point their readers through the brief or introductory essays to a largely autobiographical and narrative interpretation of what we are seeing. They show us the work but offer no substantial art historical or textual analysis. I remain unconvinced that we can learn who Charlotte Salomon was or what she made if her paintings are repeatedly presented melodramatically as a self-reflecting narrative of the poignant and tragic life-story of a young woman burdened by a traumatic family history.

The title, *Life? or Theatre?*, with its two question marks, replaces narrative with interrogation, for which uniquely a hybrid work of image-text-music was its specially fashioned modern medium. Tasking questions, the title also implies a choice. As an artist, Charlotte Salomon invented an entirely new form of art culled from the fullest range of modernist visual, musical, screen and popular cultures while being inspired by a post-traumatic Nietzschean philosophy formulated by a musician who had survived the First World War (an event that was clearly for Salomon ***the*** trauma of the twentieth century). By 1943, she had found her voice and made for herself, self, a name as an artist, a name to be remembered for the unique art historical event she created. *Life? or Theatre?*, however, with its many unanswered questions and incredible range of artistic forms and changes of mood and tone awaits probing art historical interpretation for which these valuable new translations and richly illustrated volumes provide an extended documentary foundation.