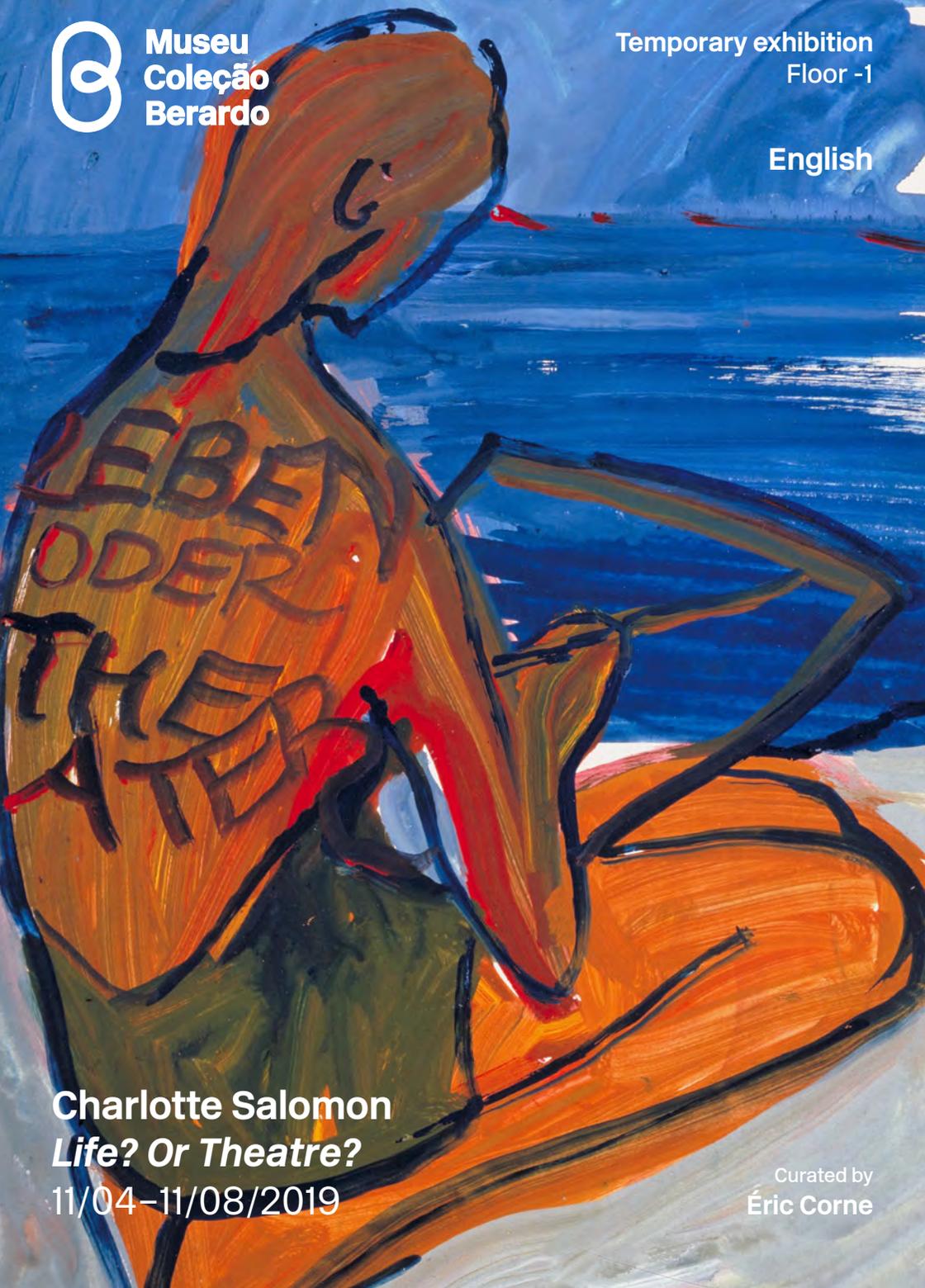




Museu
Coleção
Berardo

Temporary exhibition
Floor -1

English



Charlotte Salomon
Life? Or Theatre?
11/04-11/08/2019

Curated by
Éric Corne

Leben? Oder Theater? Ein Singespiel Charlotte Salomon's two windows

Éric Corne

Charlotte Salomon's life

Charlotte Salomon is born on 16 April 1917 in Berlin. She is named in homage to her aunt, who had committed suicide in 1913. She is 8 years old when her mother, Franziska, kills herself; she is told that she died of the flu. Her father, Albert, is a surgeon and an associate professor at the University of Berlin. He remarries, this time to famous singer Paula Lindberg, who introduces to the Salomons her friends and admirers, such as Albert Einstein, Erich Mendelsohn, Max Liebermann... Charlotte is fascinated by Paula, and devotes her a profound adoration.

In 1933, Hitler and the Nazis rise to power; with them, anti-Semitic legislation comes into effect, and restrictions are imposed on the Jewish community. Albert loses his teaching license and must work as a physician in a Jewish hospital, while Paula is booted in her concerts.

Kurt Baumann and Kurt Singer (neurologist, musician, and a friend of Paula Lindberg's) found the Kulturbund Deutscher Juden (Cultural Association of German Jews), where Jewish artists are allowed to continue creating and expressing themselves. Paula Lindberg performs there many times.

Anti-Semitism becomes the binding element of the German nation. Jewish children are insulted, assaulted, and injured at school, and Charlotte decides to abandon high school. She then takes a design course at a fashion academy. In 1936, she is accepted at the Fine Arts Academy in Berlin, despite being Jewish, because her father is recognised as war veteran.

She meets Alfred Wolfsohn when he becomes Paula Lindberg's singing teacher. After a traumatising experience during World War I, he developed theories on the *human voice* and its ability to express every emotion, and made considerations on the link between life and art. Alfred Wolfsohn has great influence on Charlotte, and is probably her first (dreamed, fantasised?) love—yet, most importantly,

he is a spiritual and artistic guide to her. At the academy, Charlotte is awarded the first prize for her work *Death and the Maiden* in a contest. As she is Jewish, however, she never receives it, and decides to abandon the school.

In 1938, after the so-called Crystal Night, the Nazis' murderous rage and violence towards Jewish people increase. Albert Salomon is sent to the Sachsenhausen internment camp; using her network of influences, Paula Lindberg is able to rescue him.

Charlotte leaves Germany at the beginning of 1939, at the age of 21, in order to flee Nazi persecution and join her grandparents, Ludwig and Marianne Grunwald, in Southern France, where they had taken refuge. They are staying in Villefranche-sur-Mer, at Otilie Moore's country house, the Villa L'Ermitage, where refugees of different nationalities are being sheltered. Otilie Moore is of German descent and the widow of an American official. She encourages Charlotte to paint.

The outbreak of World War II leads Charlotte's grandmother to commit suicide. Despite Charlotte's vigilance, she throws herself out the window in front of her, recreating the death of her daughter Franziska. After this tragedy, Charlotte Salomon learns from her grandfather that almost all her family members—including her mother and her aunt—had committed suicide. She is the only survivor.

In order to avoid a fate similar to her family's, she decides to *undertake something wildly eccentric*. Between 1940 and 1942, she paints over 1300 gouaches, from which she selects 769 to create *Life? Or Theatre?*. When she finishes her work, she dedicates it to Otilie Moore, who then leaves for America, taking with her all the refugee children she had under her protection.

Charlotte stays at the country house with Alexander Nagler, a Swiss Jewish refugee whom she marries after grandfather Grunwald's death. Aware of the precariousness of their situation, she leaves the precious folder with the gouaches to Dr Moridis, with the words, "It's my whole life."

The Germans take the place of the Italian occupiers, and arrest the couple at the Villa L'Ermitage on the orders of Aloïs Bruner. They are sent to Auschwitz via the Drancy internment camp. On 12 October 1943, Charlotte—who is five months pregnant—is murdered, while Alexander Nagler dies from exhaustion a few months later.

In 1947, Paula and Albert Salomon, who had survived as refugees in the Netherlands,

return to Villefranche-sur-Mer, where Ottilie Moore, who had come back from the United States, gives them *Life? Or Theatre?*. After the exhibitions held in the Netherlands in 1961, and then in Germany, they follow the advice Anne Frank's father had given them and entrust the artwork to the Amsterdam Jewish Historical Museum in 1971.

Life? Or Theatre?

The creation of the following paintings is to be imagined as follows:

A person is sitting beside the sea. He is painting. A tune suddenly enters his mind. As he starts to hum it, he notices that the tune exactly matches what he is trying to commit to paper. A text forms in his head, and he starts to sing the tune with his own words, over and over again, in a loud voice, until the painting seems complete. Frequently, several texts take shape, and the result is a duet, or it even happens that each character has to sing a different text, resulting in a chorus. The varied nature of the paintings should be attributed less to the author than to the varied nature of the characters to be portrayed. The author has tried—as is apparent perhaps most clearly in the Main Section—to go completely out of himself and to allow the characters to sing or speak in their own voices. In order to achieve this, many artistic values had to be renounced, but I hope that, in view of the soul-penetrating nature of the work, this will be forgiven.

Moo4155-5-6

With a sense of urgency, Charlotte Salomon produced one of the most extraordinary artworks of the twentieth century. In *Life? Or Theatre?*, Charlotte Salomon becomes Charlotte Kann ("Kann," from the German verb "können," "can"?) and never employs the pronoun "I."

The *I* is definitely an *other*, as in Arthur Rimbaud. It is not totally adequate to describe *Life? Or Theatre?* as an autobiography; "autofiction" or "remembrance" are more apt terms to define this work. Using her artistic genius, her virtuosity and her cultural knowledge, Charlotte Salomon confronts reality and questions the world's order. The subject matter concerns memory, one's connection to time, and one's relationship to others and oneself.

Charlotte Salomon writes in German, but she brings in sounds and sonorous traces from other languages, such as French. In order to enhance her work's polyphonic sense, the characters—actors of the *Singspiel*, the operetta—all have names which are simultaneously sign, meaning, and sound: Knarre, meaning "squeak,"

for grandparents Grunwald; Paulinka Bimbam, similar to "ding-dong," for her stepmother, Paula Lindberg; Klingklang, evoking the sound of a piano, for Paulinka's teacher; Singsang, recalling a monotonous song, for Kurt Singer, musician and friend of Paula Lindberg's. Amadeus Daberlohn's name—for Alfred Wolfsohn, Paula Lindberg's singing teacher—is more complex. "Amadeus" is a clear reference to Mozart; "Daberlohn" is often read as "miserable wage." There is, however, another more meaningful interpretation of this name regarding his role: "Amadeus" can be read as "love God" in Latin; "Daber," as the Hebrew word for "word," here linked to "lohn," "salary" in German. The name thus appears as "Loving God is the salary of the word."

Charlotte Salomon survived because Alfred Wolfsohn encouraged her upon her departure from Berlin: "May you never forget that I believe in you."

Salomon introduces the music teacher Amadeus Daberlohn in the Main Section, rendering him as an almost messianic figure.

Daberlohn, Paulinka Bimbam, and Charlotte form a love triangle, merging together with the mediation (transference) of art. Daberlohn is madly enamoured with Paulinka, but gradually becomes more and more interested in Charlotte, who devotes all her love to him.

Fleeing Nazi persecution, the artist, exiled in Southern France, is free from all power and any foresight; her work is one of freedom and of the farewell to Germany, the land of the abyss, and its culture.

Inhabited by her family tragedy, Charlotte Salomon writes, paints, and plays out her work, *Leben? Oder Theater? Ein Singspiel*, between heaven and earth, between two worlds, in a suspended temporality—responding to the existential need not to die. Each brushstroke becomes a way of resisting death and despair. The bodies, faces, interior spaces, and landscapes all merge together to manifest this plunge into herself, into the depths of her soul, of the soul. The audacity, sensitivity, and astuteness demonstrated by Charlotte Salomon in her visual work are also social, political, and feminist.

Life? Or Theatre? is a sum of experiences, dreams, fantasies, hopes, and traumas (her aunt's, mother's, and grandmother's suicides, as well Nazi persecution). To render them visible, Charlotte Salomon summons different temporalities in the same gouache. It is a total artwork—sonorous, visual, and literary at once; a space-time in constant renewal, whose timeless nature ensures the permanence of its contemporaneity and, in a way, of humanity.

Music and painting are a form of orchestration organising the whole work and determining its intensity. Such sonorities shared by painting and music were often used by Baudelaire when evoking the *mélodie du tableau*.

Charlotte Salomon's style evolves throughout *Life? Or Theatre?* and acquires dexterity and expressiveness with its urgency. She also deliberately cites art history. Both style and approach resonate with the historical moment she describes.

Charlotte's tragic lineage is followed by another—a happier, more colourful one, composed of painters she admired. Edvard Munch had a particularly strong impact on her,

having himself been inspired by the intimate theatre he had seen. Charlotte Salomon also includes references to works by other artists: Michelangelo, Vincent van Gogh, Auguste Rodin, Marc Chagall, Georg Grosz, Henri Matisse, Raoul Dufy, Marianne von Werefkin, Karl Hofer, Gustav Klimt, Rudolf Wacker...

Notwithstanding these influences, how could she have understood and worked on matters related to art, philosophy, and psychoanalysis in all their forms with such precision? The Charlotte Salomon enigma is that of an artist, an *inhabited* woman, who captures and conveys the culture of a collapsing world by means of a few paintbrushes and three colours. Her material deprivation is compensated by her spiritual magnificence.

Charlotte Salomon holds onto the window of art to refrain from committing suicide by defenestration (as her mother and grandmother did).

Life? Or Theatre? is a cry, a last cultural contribution from a German Jewish woman: an artwork with music, painting, theatre, and literature, but also philosophy, psychoanalysis, and religion—each one clarifying the others.



Charlotte Salomon, aged around 10 years old, with her father, Dr Albert Salomon, Berlin, ca. 1928
© Charlotte Salomon Foundation, Amsterdam



Charlotte Salomon painting in the garden, Villefranche-sur-Mer, ca. 1939
© Charlotte Salomon Foundation, Amsterdam

Through this continuum between life and theatre, Charlotte Salomon plunges into the matter of *representation* that underlies the act of painting. Defying all the syntaxes of painting, hers is a work of fusion and of fusion that resists all historicity.

Duality is constant throughout *Life?*

Or Theatre?: Charlotte Kann and Charlotte Salomon, the two evoked windows; and also life and death; life and/or theatre; feminine and/or masculine. One must look *twice* in order to approach the never-ending richness and complexity of *Life?* *Or Theatre?*, where what one reads does not settle what one sees.

Life? Or Theatre? is a love song—one of the most beautiful love songs of the twentieth century—in which the

passion chained to art must be perceived as it commands us to, in its ubiquity of remembrance and mental projection.

In the eight written pages that conclude the work, she faces the sun, and sees the face of her beloved Daberlohn. She sees herself dying, fading, escaping to be reborn as an artist.

And suddenly she knew two things. First, that Daberlohn's eyes seemed to say: "Death and the Maiden, that's the two of us"; second, that she still loved him as much as ever. And if he was Death, then everything was all right, then she did not have to kill herself like her ancestors, for according to his method one can be resurrected; in fact, in order to love life still more, one should once have died. So she was in fact the living model for his theories [...].

And with dream-awakened eyes she saw all the beauty around her, saw the sea, felt the sun, and knew: She had to vanish for a while from the human plane and make every sacrifice in order to create her world anew out of the depths.

M004923v-M004924v



Cover and back cover:
Charlotte Salomon, *Life? Or Theatre?* (M004925 and M004817), 1940–1942, Villefranche-sur-Mer, France.
Gouache on paper, transparent overlay. Amsterdam Jewish Historical Museum Collection.
© Charlotte Salomon Foundation, Amsterdam

Education Service

Guided visits and activities
for schools and families
Information and bookings
T. 213 612 800
servico.educativo@museuberardo.pt
www.museuberardo.pt/educacao



Bilingual publication in regard to this exhibition featuring new essays by Éric Corne (in French as well), Stéphanie Jamet, and Margarida Bak Gordon, in addition to Christine Fischer-Defoy's "Tracing the Life of Charlotte Salomon"

Hardback; 170 × 240 mm; 156 pp.;
38 images, ed. Stolen Books.
On sale at the museum store: 25 €

Share your visit

@museuberardo

#museuberardo

Museu Coleção Berardo

The exhibition *Life? Or Theatre? Charlotte Salomon. Berlin, 1917 – Auschwitz, 1943* has been organised in cooperation with the Amsterdam Jewish Historical Museum.

Follow us



/museuberardo



Sponsor:



Exhibition support:



Charlotte Salomon Foundation

