

To Play Many Parts: Reading Between the Lines of Charlotte Salomon/CS's *Leben? oder Theater?*

Nicholas Chare in conversation with Griselda Pollock

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

This conversation with Griselda Pollock, Professor of the Social and Critical Histories of Art in the School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies at the University of Leeds, UK, focuses on her most recent book, *Charlotte Salomon and the Theatre of Memory* (New Haven and London : Yale University Press, 2018). The latter provides new readings of *Leben ? oder Theater ?* (Life ? or Theater ?), the artistic project of the German Jewish artist Charlotte Salomon (1917–1943), who painted as CS — the cipher the artist purposely used to disguise both her gender and her ethnicity — thus challenging previous interpretations that treat this remarkable intermedial work as straightforwardly autobiographical.

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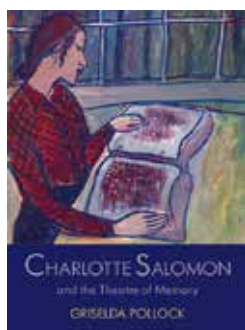
Cette conversation avec Griselda Pollock, professeure titulaire en histoires sociales et critiques de l'art au département des arts visuels, d'histoire de l'art et d'études culturelles à l'Université de Leeds, au Royaume-Uni, porte sur le nouveau livre de Pollock, *Charlotte Salomon and the Theatre of Memory* (New Haven et Londres, Yale University Press, 2018). Celui-ci propose une relecture du projet artistique *Leben? oder Theater?* [Vie? ou théâtre?] de l'Allemande d'origine juive Charlotte Salomon (1917–1943), qui signait de ses initiales CS afin de dissimuler son sexe et son appartenance ethnique. L'ouvrage remet en question les interprétations précédentes qui considèrent cette œuvre intermédiaire remarquable comme étant strictement autobiographique.

NICHOLAS CHARE Perhaps a good place to begin is with an overview of the genesis of your remarkable new book *Charlotte Salomon and the Theatre of Memory*. This has been a long-term project. You discuss the book as having been your “troubled and troubling companion for over fifteen years.” The delay in completing the manuscript was linked to your desire to echo the words of one of the characters in Salomon’s, or CS’s, *Leben? oder Theater?*—to “say new things.” In what ways do you view your work on Salomon as a fresh departure?

GRISELDA POLLOCK I do not like the idea of seeking for novelty or making a fresh departure. The long gestation of this book was determined by the challenges that *Leben? oder Theater?* poses for art history. The initial reception of the paintings by Charlotte Salomon was in an exhibition in Amsterdam in 1961 that included landscapes and portraits as well as the gouaches from *Leben? oder Theater?*. It thus took place before people understood what she had made. The single work, *Leben? oder Theater?*, is composed of 784 paintings, but in this first exhibition the paintings were not shown in the order she had determined. They had been mixed up by her parents when they were first given the packages in which she had hidden them in 1943. Furthermore, the show mingled the selected paintings with works she had rejected from the whole or added to the packages. There were also paintings on both sides in many cases, only some of which were part of the numbered series.

In this confusion, viewers were drawn to the vivid storytelling of many of the early paintings in the three parts into which *Leben? oder Theater?* is divided (Prologue, Main Part, and Epilogue). The first publication that resulted from the showing of selections in 1961 in Amsterdam was titled *Charlotte: A Diary in Pictures*. The illustrations are very selective, sometimes out of order, including works she rejected, and minimizing two key elements: the suicides of three women and the role of one man. The whole cast of the publication and the reception of the exhibition was that this work was both testimony to the rise of fascism and the persecution of German Jews, and also that it was her story—that Charlotte Salomon is the “Charlotte Kann” in the work. This autobiographical reading has been extended by a biography and many fascinating studies by feminist scholars working on women’s life-writing.

My approach originated from a different set of concerns. I was interested in Charlotte Salomon as a modernist artist who was both a woman and Jewish at a critical moment in which modernism, and, let it be said, early



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twentieth-century feminism, was about to be crushed by a militantly racist fascism. As such, what art-historical study can be undertaken of an artist with no name, in terms of established records of exhibition and sales and critical writing, etc.? What is the status of a nameless artist whose work falls into no category offered by art history to locate and analyse it: is it a book, a work of theatre, a film script, a narrative painting series, German, French? How can we make sense of a single work comprising 784 images, some of which are painted texts, many of which have graphic overlays, and some of which are associated with music? At the point at which I became interested in this work, both Jewish studies in the visual arts and feminist Jewish studies were just emerging to provide critical terms for thinking about gender, ethnicity, Jewishness, and modernity. Furthermore, *Leben? oder Theater?* represented violent deaths by suicide and seemed to contain the suggestion that suicide was a question being posed by the artist to herself. Hence what do the question marks in the title (and how strange to have a composite work with a title) ask?

I have been trying out various strategies for approaching *Leben? oder Theater?* since 1995. So it is not that I was seeking a new departure. Apart from work by Christine Conley and Astrid Schmetterling, Edward Timms and Deborah Schultz, there has been very little art-historical analysis of *Leben? oder Theater?*, while there has been enormous interest across art, dance, music, and theater in Charlotte Salomon. I do not know who she was. I do not find her as a subject in the work. My approach involved drawing deeply on all the methodological and theoretical research that formed my practice in offering feminist interventions in art's histories. Yet I also feared that these might make the originality or difference of *Leben? oder Theater?* invisible. The work could be fitted into so many of my frameworks—*modernity, femininity and representation*, for instance. But concurrently with facing the challenge as a feminist art historian wanting to understand this unique project *Leben? oder Theater?*, I was also dedicating myself to Jewish studies and specifically to the study of the cultural memory of the trauma of the Holocaust. This took me down a variety of paths—literature, philosophy, museology, photography theory, film, and major ethical debates, the study of testimony and witnessing, and above all the field of trauma studies.

While *Leben? oder Theater?* has been a companion and study over these many years, each of my other projects fed into ways of analysing this work so as to avoid fitting it into existing frameworks and so as to clear a space to see it.

With all these caveats, what am I offering to those interested in Charlotte Salomon and those who might come to be interested in this work *Leben? oder Theater?* as a result? I would suggest it is a reading of a modernist cycle of paintings that challenges all our conceptions of each of those terms while being structured by the double helix of historical events and the gendered traumas of the everyday and the home.

nc Thank you for situating the project. It was clumsy of me to refer to it in terms of a fresh departure, but I was struck by your very open and honest discussion of a reader report for the 2002 proposal for the book, which took you to task for employing theoretical and art-historical “ready-mades” you had developed in other contexts, rather than attending to the singularity of *Leben? oder Theater?*. From this perspective, I feel that your style of writing in *Charlotte*

Salomon and the Theatre of Memory is crucial. It seems to me that what you develop here is something akin to an ethic of art-historical writing. There is a studied refusal to overwrite the paintings or to force them to fit into extant art-historical categories of analysis.

GP Thank you for this question. This is indeed a vital element. The difficulty of feminist and postcolonial *writing* is integral to my project. Since the 1970s, I have been challenging the discursive and ideological effects of canonical art history as it was presented to me. I would distinguish my work from most other feminists in the field in terms of this dedicated historiographical and critical address to modes of knowledge rather than changed content. I have always argued that Art History—the discipline—is performative, what Teresa de Lauretis long before Judith Butler termed a “technology of gender.” Feminist discourse is also a technology of gender. We are producing gender in the manner in which we speak or write of it. Some technologies/discourses performatively iterate dominant power systems; others, caught up in the same systems, seek deconstruction and displacement from the off spaces, the repressed possibilities, the subjectivities folded out of sight. Feminist, queer, postcolonial practice needs to be constantly vigilant about its own implications in these relays. The key figure of art-historical discourse and its involvement with financial and symbolic value systems is the artist. While a focus on representation and the semiotic re-orientation of some of our practices rejected that model of artist-oeuvre and created the field of representation as the focus, we then lost aspects of what I named “inscriptions” from, of, and in specific moments and configurations of subjectivity and sexual difference. Negotiating an interest in subjectivity, itself susceptible to specific formations and deformations, traumas and desires, while avoiding the cult of artistic subjectivity as a source of meaning (and value, since not all subjectivities are valued as sources of meaning or status), is a tricky project. Thus, the close reading of images as singular sites of subjectivity-inflected production of meaning involves the art historian in what you rightly call an ethic. There are knowledges to be deployed as part of asking questions: What am I seeing? What is happening here? What are its materialities, its forms, its constructions, and its internal relations? How is something being produced? Yet, this is not inert. As art, it calls for a reading, and that involves a careful attuning to its otherness, as well as a subtle, always-cautious and avowed borrowing from my own experience that might register or resonate with the affective tone, and note the singular turns of a work.

Your point about not over-reading, not imposing, not forcing work into the organizational categories is vital, since all of these habits fail to confront the event that happened when a painting was being made and was left. I call it an event, since a world came into formal existence as materials were deployed at the intersection of conscious intent and reverie, while unconscious inscriptions also shape the result, because of the temporality of making and the suspended state of mind of the artist attending to technical and material questions, while holding the unseen, intimated image-to-come as both the unknown past and the imagined future of this artistic event. So, on the one hand, I put aside all assumptions and preconceived notions (art

history: Is this like...? Does it relate to...? Is it influenced by...? Where does it fit in the story?), while I also lend to the reading a kind of attentiveness created by feminist, queer, and postcolonial vigilance (these all challenging each other). My role as a historian makes me question what I do not know and what evidence might have to be considered. My role as a reader layers such critical thinking with acknowledgement of the complexity of subjectivity that is at once psychoanalytically informed and qualified by critiques of psychoanalysis, itself yet another technology of gender. In a way, the model involves the resistant otherness of what was made remote from us/me and hence represents newness and difference, while acknowledging the possible sharing of knowledges, each of these positions testing each other out with absolute respect for the artwork as not-me, and understanding that its life as a cultural form depends upon the partner-in-difference it summons, invites, and can survive. Behind this clearly lies my debt, on the one hand, to Mieke Bal and, on the other hand, to Bracha Ettinger: both make the exercise of reading the image and working with the aesthetic event as encounter.

NC In terms of knowing and not knowing, there appear to be a number of practical difficulties relating to the archive that anybody seeking to engage with *Leben? oder Theater?* must confront. The precise ordering that Salomon intended for the work is now lost. From the missing pages (known only in transcript) of the Postscript, it looks as if material was withheld when the work was donated to the archive. Can you tell me about any such difficulties you encountered in your research for the book?

GP Researching the work of Charlotte Salomon is made easy because of the donation to one museum of the entire 1,325 paintings held by her parents alongside family photographs and some artefacts that had belonged to the artist, because they were taken with her to France when she fled from Germany in 1938. On the other hand, apart from the work itself, there are no other documents, diaries, writings, or reviews (the work was never exhibited in her lifetime). Christine Fischer-Defoy in Germany has undertaken considerable research on elements of the background, such as the history of the art school Charlotte Salomon attended. Assembling all other possible evidence was undertaken by Mary Felstiner, the indefatigable biographer of the artist, who spent twelve years travelling to various locations to study documents, such as the archives in Nice, as well as interviewing many people who had known the artist. The work itself contains pointers for research: individuals such as Alfred Wolfsohn, a survivor of war trauma, a singing teacher and theorist, for instance. There are the locations to be visited: Berlin, Villefranche, Nice, and Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat. I have written about the meaning of “being in the places” when doing this kind of research as a way of tuning into a lost past traced into and mediated by an artwork.

The key issue was the revelation made in a documentary film in 2012 that some parts of this seemingly complete archive had been withheld, probably by Paula Lindberg-Salomon, the artist’s stepmother, because of what it appeared to contain. I say “appeared” because a number of painted pages were part of the archive. How do they relate to the entity *Leben? oder Theater?*, which

we can define as an entity by the fact that 784 elements are numbered in two related sequences and appear to have title pages and preliminaries and a conclusion? Scholars, like Mary Felstiner, name the supplementary painted pages, which are painted on a paper of different quality from the redacted work, the Postscript. But it was fragmentary, breaking off mid-sentence and beginning again after a clear break. What were missing, we now know, are eight pages from the beginning and eleven from the end. Has their absence had an impact on research? If the object of research is to know the state of mind of Charlotte Salomon months after she had completed her monumental project: yes. But the question then emerges: to what belongs the revelation that she appears to have put a barbiturate into the breakfast of her elderly grandfather and is watching him die at the moment of writing this painted text? Is it an admission of her depression, in which she either has to die herself or remove the man who is causing it? For the missing pages now returned are dated six months after completing the paintings that form *Leben? oder Theater?* If the new material is about this period afterwards, should we read it in relation to new circumstances? Or does it relate at all to the artwork? That was the new challenge. There is no answer, but there are possible ways to speculate.

My solution was to read the artwork *Leben? oder Theater?* as if I did not know what was in the newly re-acquired material of the so-called Postscript, now defined as a “letter,” in order to resist all biographical reading. I wanted to pose the question: What did the artist discover by creating her “theatre of memory”? What became available to her understanding of the states of mind and actions of others *precisely because she had painted them, and had given them a space through composition, colour, pose, gesture and words?* Did this result in a burden of knowledge of what her grandfather had done to his daughters that made proximity to him, now in 1942–1943, unliveable. The new material did not radically alter my approach, but confirmed, in a way so shockingly radical that I could not have expected it, my long-held suspicion that *Leben? oder Theater?* is both an investigation and a discovery rather than a narrative of known events and memories.

NC The inspiring close readings you provide of *Leben? oder Theater?* make use not only of the “finished” artwork, but also of the deselected or “rejected” paintings, paintings that Salomon signalled were not for inclusion through defacing them by means of carefully cutting and placing tape over the eyes and mouths of figures. These gestures of (self-)censorship, you suggest, are at once violent and gentle. They also sometimes seem calculated, unnerving even. I’m thinking, for example, of when only Charlotte Kann’s face is not taped over in the alternative version of the train departing. Could you talk a little more about the significance of these works in which the possibility of seeing and of speech is closed down? How do these carefully reworked images potentially register and process the highly traumatic events, aspects of which you have just mentioned, that inform the broader logic of Salomon’s project?

GP This is a challenging question. The study of the entire body of works that were deselected is my next project. I began systematically to map the relation between the works on the recto, numbered and included, and on the verso, often taped over, but not always, in order to see if I could discern a



Figure 1. Charlotte Salomon, *Paulinka Bimbam singing Halleluja. Excluded and defaced painting*. Courtesy of the Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam, and the Charlotte Salomon Foundation.

supplementary logic of their relations. This involved imagining when each was made. I think the Main Part (the work has three elements: a prologue, a main part, and an epilogue)—which has the majority of paintings CS later found supplementary, that is, that could be sacrificed to create the epilogue for instance—was the core of the project and hours were spent by the artist detailing every conversation and reflection of the two characters *Amadeus Daberlohn* and *Paulinka Bimbam*. I did discover that there were thematic or analytical relations between the works selected to be turned over and those re-used in another part of the project. So, it is as if there is a hidden commentary, a silent joke, a witty addition, if we could lay them all out. Yet the fact of having to turn a painting over, of creating two-sided images, is itself fascinating, as we ponder how she imagined a reader and why she placed certain images on the reverse. This is what made me choose for my cover an image of the avatar of the painter—*Charlotte Kann*—sitting with a ringed binder of a manuscript, with her tools beside her, planning on turning words into paintings, ideas into images.

I think it was imagined as a book that could be read, and thus the pages would be turned over, one by one, in that kind of intimate reverie. We now exhibit mostly the recto paintings in sequence, losing any wit involved in her choices.

As you say, to make sure we know which are the recto and rejected verso, in some cases the artist placed tiny strips over the eyes and mouths of the key faces, whose words and voices, whose masculinity and femininity, are part of the critical duet the paintings of the Main Part create. He is the Prophet and Teacher of Song. She is the Golden-Haired and Golden-Voiced Singer. To inhibit their gazes and silence their voices is a violent gesture, but the gentleness of laying these tiny strips of tape over otherwise undamaged images allows them a presence nonetheless. Rather than enacting trauma, my sense is that these are both tender and fierce gestures. | **fig. 1** | These gestures combine the ambivalence of love, jealousy, idealization, and anger. The gesture of painting multiple images of these two people, while deciding which ones will form the final, redacted work, which ones will slip into secondary, off-stage existence, and which ones will be reused to support other scenes in subtle uses of double-sidedness of paper, is itself very complex and fascinating. I am not sure I have yet plumbed its full meaning. They take us again to the question of how the doing/making process creates a space of discovery: what feelings might be swirling around these “Ædipal” figures, mother and father, beloveds and lovers, and what was being worked out by painting them and mastering their fate, as it were, by the control the artist has in the end.

The one image you mention, where all the others of a big scene of farewell and departure are taped out and only the tiny figure of *Charlotte Kann*, desperately leaning out of the window as the train departs, is left untouched is particularly fascinating. This gesture means something since this image, although deselected in favour of a somewhat more subtle rendering of the same scene, is used precisely as the verso for the first painting of the Epilogue where *Charlotte Kann* sits with her grandparents in the South of France and the grandfather suggests she take work as a housemaid instead of wasting her time painting. Linking her anguished departure from all she knew and loved in Berlin to (a) painting and (b) life away from those who are committed to art, the types/characters/personae *Amadeus Daberlohn* and *Paulinka Bimbam* are part of the process of producing meaning in the often oblique and associative, suggestive and ironic, manner that characterizes **CS** the painter. (Just to be clear, I distinguish between the personae of the work, the historical person Charlotte Salomon, and the artist who signed the works with a cipher **CS**. This avoids and resists the collapse of an authorial voice into the historical person, and also allows the gap between **CS** the painter, and *Charlotte Kann*, the avatar in this cinematic novel.)

nc From your answer, it's clear that Salomon's deselections form a complex body of work in their own right. Could you tell me briefly about your own decision-making concerning which paintings to focus on in *Leben? oder Theater?*? Given the scale of the project, it is clearly not possible to give each work equal attention. Your reading is broad and encompassing, yet nonetheless necessarily places more emphasis on some works over others. For example, the rich sequence of paintings in which **CS** depicts herself learning how to

draw and to paint, *Becoming an artist*, which portrays her art teacher, her professor, and her fellow students, is discussed only relatively briefly. Were there any particular works that lent themselves less easily to your readings and frames of analysis, yet which you wish you could have considered further?

GP Inevitably this book forms a particular reading and others will recognize in my focus overdeterminations at many levels. The strategy for confronting the tendency to read *Leben? oder Theater?* as a narrative whole and, as such, as an autobiographical narrative has to be interrupted without losing sight of narrativity and referentiality.

My decision was to build the book around seven key images as I determined which ones constitute exceptions, supercharged by the manner of painting, the compositional inventiveness, or what I felt were punctuation points—syntheses of visual arguments, if you wish, that were laid around or before them. Once I had established such keys, I could then re-read the sequences of which they were a part to remain faithful to the fact of repetition or elaboration that was clearly necessary to the artist in the making of the work. This also enabled me to disassemble the final form and read the work in a different order, to subvert the apparent narrative and bring into view rhymes and repetitions, echoes and connections, that hold the whole through its internal relations, rather like a work of cinema. A film works formally as a sequence of shots and scenes, but our understanding depends on constantly composing what has happened and will happen into an order of meaning that is not the same as an order of sequencing. As a film-studies scholar alongside an art historian, this model seemed appropriate. On its basis, I have made an interpretation of this work as a project that uniquely articulates the Event and the Everyday, the scenes of historical/political violence and of the struggle of creativity and gender. At their intersection, the collision of feminine subjectivity with different modes of violence—sexual abuse, psychological abuse, and political persecution—is played out, examined, and argued over. Hence, I attend to both the visual track and the voice inscribed in the texts or rehearsed in the lectures of *Amadeus Daberlohn* rewritten by hand and image by the artist as re-voicing them for herself and to herself.

I have my own ways into this work, which I have always argued we need to acknowledge and examine critically. Maternal loss is one key area, of course, in my own artwork and my research. But such concerns are tested against the evidence of *Leben? oder Theater?* when the whole is approached in a rigorous art-historical accounting: How many images of what character? Why this order? What is the meaning of Act I of the Prologue in relation to Act II? Why is the Main Part a drama of two adults observed by an art student? Once I decided to name the types not the characters, I could treat the work in the manner of a structuralist mythographer, such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, or a psychoanalyst such as Sigmund Freud, reading a Greek myth. *Becoming an artist* is not for me a fact of the biography of Charlotte Salomon. As CS, the artist represents this choice as a historical decision made in the face of the double scene of violence: women's suicides and the victory of Nazism. Thus, I chose as the key painting for this sequence a painting that appeared to be out of order, and yet was critically placed in relation to a sequence about learning

observational drawing. I call it the Manifesto Painting, and by reading it as such, I concluded that the manifesto it declares articulates the artist's claim to being an artist as both a woman and Jewish, because it claims and resists the historical conjunction in Nazi ideology of modernism and Jewry. The two axes history/politics and creativity/gender are reconfigured in this manifesto painting. Around the attempts to get into art school, and the portraits of a fellow student named Barbara, we can place a subtle and often-gentle engagement with the Aryan ideal, and also a potential infatuation with another figure of *fascinance*, for the beautiful Barbara is also the source of sexual knowledge for *Charlotte Kann*. CS does also portray the historical art teacher Professor Bartnung, a known and important character whose anti-fascist affiliations I acknowledge. Christine Fischer-Defoy has documented these historical people and interviewed "Barbara." Fischer-Defoy also identified many of these students as members of the anti-fascist resistance movement, who perhaps protected Charlotte Salomon as the solitary, Jewish student in their class. If we set this against the Manifesto Painting, and also the indication that *Charlotte Kann* is singing the Marseillaise as she passes her entrance examination while sitting in classes shared with brown-shirted students, I conclude that these sequences are significant *politically*. *Becoming an artist* forms a set of paintings that directly follow the first historical painting, bearing a dated banner 30.1.1933, which shows the victory parade of the Nazi Party on January 30, 1933, when Hitler was first made Chancellor. I see a clear link in this juxtaposition that makes becoming an artist an act of resistance.

I would, therefore, answer this question by saying that it took me sixteen years to deconstruct many of the assumptions that I brought to the work, to abandon many of the feminist issues I thought it raised, and to go beyond many of the frameworks I was anticipating I would mobilize to write about *Leben? oder Theater?*. I discuss this in my appendix, and also in the preface, where I remark on the reader's comments that challenged me to think outside what I already brought to it. While acknowledging many other readings, the most notable of which are offered by Edward Timms and Deborah Schultz, Christine Conley and Gertrud Koch, my method was to identify the "odd one out," the painting that could become a key at once to its own environing images and their purpose, as well as to the overall proposition of the work. In order to convey to the reader that CS was investigating what she needed to understand, not telling us what she already knew, I had to refuse the lure of sequential narration and discern the plot. I argue, therefore, for a tendency in this work of proliferation as distraction, for there are secrets hidden in the book that are everywhere displayed yet occluded in characteristic detective-fiction fashion. It was for what is being said by the work overall, not by each image, that I was reading so closely what I proposed as key images.

nc Through attending to phenomena such as recurring chromatics, motifs, and gestures that are used to unite chronologically distinct experiences and events, you are able, as you say, to refuse the lure of sequential narration, and, I would suggest, to tease out the complex temporality of *Leben? oder Theater?*. Could you, however, say a bit more about its spatiality? I'm thinking here of Charlotte Salomon/CS as a woman in exile who, through her art, revisits

spaces and places familiar to her in Germany, engaging in a kind of vicarious travelling at a time when her ability to circulate freely was restricted.

GP The concept of space is central to the titling of this work: theatre of memory. I draw this concept in part from Walter Benjamin, and notably his writings on his own Berlin childhood. He rejects the idea of autobiography as a linear sequence of reminiscences and imagines memory as flashes of photographic images that are associated with places. He calls language a theatre of memory. In the book, I pay attention to the psychological weight created by the artist when she has to paint her departure from Berlin, the locus of all her life to date. This is minutely charted, moment by moment, in a long series of paintings. The artist paints *Charlotte Kann* as she revisits all the rooms of her home, is forced to leave the house, travel through the streets, hang around on the platform, and finally be torn from all she knows. To provide depth for this traumatically imprinted sequence, I have turned to Benjamin, of course, but also to Freud and his forced exile, and to the writings of Hannah Arendt, who wrote an essay titled “We Refugees,” in which she beautifully and succinctly summed up the nature of the loss of home, of language, of familiarity, of wit and irony, and of the mother tongue. Arendt focuses on the loss of language as a space of being. CS the painter paints images, and these images are the spaces of subjectivity (a link to my early work on the spaces of modernity and the spaces of femininity). How is modern social space represented? How is social space differentially subjectivised by the mode of representation? How is the psychological space of the subject of spatialized sexual difference inscribed into a materially produced image? Is she revisiting her youth? I do not think so.

I am arguing that the act of painting is a staging of an unknown past that is created to pass before her eyes: the eyes of the artist in whose gaze women she never knew, women whose subjectivity she could not know, men and women who fascinated or appalled her, are invented so as to pass before her, now, at the time of painting. In the Postscript/Letter, she does write about leaving the human plane and diving in the depths to create life anew. The past is not another country to which she journeys simply as a nostalgic exile. Something in the present of the summer of the 1940s, when she has been released from the concentration camp of Gurs, made this departure from the now urgent and necessary. It was the condition of living, or choosing to die. Her resource was painting, which included the histories of art as much as illustration (Michelangelo and the German tradition of book art) and the radicality of narrative space in modern art (Vincent Van Gogh, Marc Chagall, and Edvard Munch), and finally, cinematic sequenced narrative and voiced, musically infused space. Spatializing events, whose configuration she had to *invent* as much as draw on her own memories, produced her Benjaminian theatre of *invented* memory.

For an intense period, alone in a hotel in Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, CS lived in the visual theatre she was creating. But it was not to regain it or remember it as a lost past. My view is that she had to make these images to learn something by asking herself as a painter what that feeling would look like. What would she learn by seeing it as she had used her own artistic resources to imagine it and give it form on paper in space? This work is not made out of a longing to revisit, but out of a necessity to invent for the characters she is

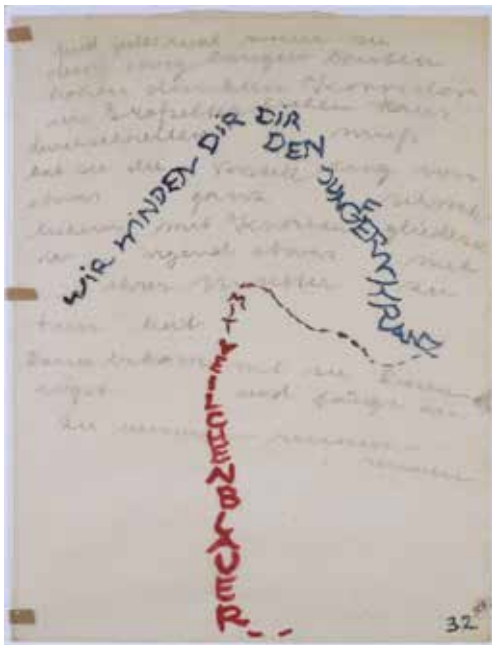


Figure 2. (left) Transparent overlay for CS, *The Monster*, Prologue Painting no. 32. The penciled text reads, “And whenever she has to walk along the endless wide high dark passage in her grandparent’s home, she imagines something terrible, with skeleton’s limbs that have something to do with her mother. Then she is filled with panic and begins to run-run-run...” The painted text reads, “We twine for thee the maiden’s wreath with violet coloured...” Courtesy of the Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam, and the Charlotte Salomon Foundation.

Figure 3. (right) Main Part Painting no. 369. CS, Charlotte Kann reviews the manuscript by Amadeus Daberlohn as if she is preparing to create paintings to accompany or illustrate it. The overlay reads, “Chapter Eleven. It looks to me as if someone were playing ball with the whole world, or Socrates singing.” Courtesy of the Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam, and the Charlotte Salomon Foundation.



impersonating spaces of their being so as to ask them: Why did you choose to die? What resources can you give me now not to take my life? Life? or Theatre? are the terms of this work, and she stalks the figure of death that stalked the lives and caused the deaths of three women—like her. My argument makes this work a philosophical and analytical inquiry, not simply a work of memory. The memories of which her paintings are the theatre are those which the artist created for otherwise unremembered dying women and soon-to-be extinguished (so she also imagined) creative survivors.

NC In relation to giving form to feeling in space, the visual appearance of words in *Leben? oder Theater?* is often intricate, as happens in the overlay for the painting of the crumpled form of Franziska Knarre Kann with its words that you see as “almost caressing the dead body.” The text of this overlay is like concrete or shape poetry. The colour and scale of the words is also important at times. Can you talk a little about CS’s uses of painted writing and about how they interact with the images they often accompany?

GP This is a fascinating aspect. There are simple answers that might do. CS is an artist witnessing the use of language in silent (but musically accompanied) cinema as intertitle and also witnessing the beginning of sound-synchronised talking pictures. Her work is also indebted undoubtedly to certain aspects of book art, and both nineteenth-century and early modernist illustrated children’s story books. Thirdly, the world of Nazi Germany post-1933 is full of words in public spaces through the public exhibition of the pages of the violently anti-Semitic paper *Der Stürmer*. There are posters everywhere. There are painted words JÜDE on shops. There are constant marches through the streets with noisy militias. Fourthly, because of the unemployment of Jewish

performers, and the exile of Jewish Germans from public entertainment, a Jewish cultural organization was formed. Her stepmother Paula Lindberg was a key figure alongside Kurt Singer. Charlotte Salomon grew into adolescence in an enclosed, Jewish world of sound: opera and specifically the singing voice of her stepmother practising in the house and performing of an evening. All these levels of a modern use of spoken and sung words form the acoustic envelope of the artist's life in Berlin in the 1930s. The device of a transparent overlay is used for the Prologue, which has multi-scened pages of images as well as single-imaged paintings. | **fig. 2** | Pencilled handwriting is used as a kind of chorus voice, often emotionally flat, sometimes offering information or ironic and sardonic commentary. This is the equivocal voice of **CS**. Some of the words stand for imagined dialogue or inner speech of a character. The elements you refer to as concrete poetry are painted and echo or comment on the scene, or even the body below. Each one is different in effect and purpose, but they all exhibit a graphic sensibility that makes these overlays a singular aesthetic element of the work. Did she run out of the transparencies or decide on another strategy when she began to paint words directly on the paper? One experiment with this involves a continuous line of words punctuated by miniature versions of the speaking head; this is used largely for the three discourses by the Nietzschean teacher/prophet survivor *Amadeus Daberlohn*. | **fig. 3** | For *Paulinka Bimbam*, the words are the words of her song and thus are almost heard to their own music. Scale and colour indicate gender of the voice and indeed the volume of the words heard in the artist's head. **CS**'s use of words also raises the question: When did they become necessary? If we cannot really figure out the order of the making, we are still puzzling over their varied uses. Edward Timms and Deborah Schultz argue brilliantly that, because of the use of words, the moments of visual silence, when there are none, become significant and demand their own analysis. Before what scenes, or memories, did the artist fall silent or feel unable to speak? How does the bare image register trauma?

NC I'd like to pick up on your reference to Daberlohn in the context of the use of avatars in *Leben? oder Theater?*. Their use enables **CS** to associate with the personalities and feelings of others, even to move across genders. **CS**, for instance, identifies with the character of *Amadeus Daberlohn* and thus, in a sense, inhabits his desire for *Paulinka Bimbam*. You draw on Ettinger's idea of *fascinace* to read the exploration of this relationship by **CS** as, simultaneously, an expression of masculine desire and, on a different psychic register, of a girl-child seeking to know what she will become as a woman. Given your encouragement to resist any simple autobiographical reading of *Leben? oder Theater?*, is it necessary to foreclose reading these works and those of *Charlotte Kann* and *Paulinka Bimbam*, and of *Charlotte Kann* and her school friend going to see *Mädchen in Uniform*, as additionally signalling at least a temporary exploration of lesbian desire (which sheds a different complexion on the seemingly awkward intimacy which later develops between *Charlotte Kann* and *Daberlohn*)? Might homosexual desire, rather than heterosexual desire, overlay *fascinace* in the works of this section?

GP This is a tricky question. I first explored this in a paper I gave at CAA in Toronto in 1998. By raising the issue of both hysteria and *fascinance*, I drew out the clear declarations of love for the Singer *Paulinka Bimbam* and the pointed reference to Leontine Sagan's queer film *Mädchen in Uniform* (1931) that is hidden in plain sight. The reaction from some Salomon scholars in the audience to such speculations was fierce, as it seemed that explorations of sexuality and desire that countered the narrative of *Charlotte Kann*'s passionate love for *Amadeus Daberlohn* were deemed problematic. We do have this declaration of love in several places, notably the Postscript, but was it love for the ideas that saved her rather than for the man *qua* sexual adult. CS does paint what appears to be a callous seduction in which *Charlotte Kann* is presented as entirely indifferent. Are the images those of a woman who had not known sex but imagined it? The way I plot it is to remain on the level of the work itself that presents these contradictions, these overlaying desires, moving through bereaved childhood to passionate adolescence and marking some kind of coming of age in the independent and often-secret pursuit of *Amadeus Daberlohn* by *Charlotte Kann*. Significance lies in the unresolvability of these contradictory images, themselves marked by sardonic commentary.

Fascinance itself might be read queerly as opposed to defining heterosexuality versus homosexuality. Ettinger is arguing that feminine subjectivity and indeed sexualities involve a specific form of gazing-learning-becoming addressed to the adult, sexual woman from whom the girl-child acquires some sense of this otherness that is adult femininity and also some intimations of desirability. In order to avoid the fixing of oppositions with sexuality as the only way to imagine sexed subjectivity, I turn both to Ettinger's brilliant reading of Marguerite Duras's novel *The Ravishment of Lol V. Stein* and to Kaja Silverman's work on the acoustic mirror when she reminded us of (a) Freud's hypothesis of the negative Oedipus Complex that allows for the girl-child's desire for the Mother and (b) the need for representational support for feminine subjectivities not articulated in relation to a phallic definition of sexual identity.

In the light of this, I prefer to point to the elements within *Leben? oder Theater?* that, like the work of Louise Bourgeois or Virginia Woolf, complicate the given narratives of sexual identity and development by allowing much more complexity to feminine subjectivity and sexuality. This leads to the debate initiated by Adrienne Rich about a lesbian continuum, an idea contested by many who felt it necessary to distinguish between queer desire and its others, rather than losing the specificity of desire itself in some asexual continuum.

This issue turns on the attention to sexuality, performance, or disposition, rather than psychic identifications and translations, which both Judith Butler and Elizabeth Grosz explore using different elements of Freudian theory. If the subject is constituted both in relation to identifications that are incorporated, plural, and diverse from the beginning, and are themselves, in Laplanchean terms, emitting the enigmatic signals of their own desiring sexualities, and if the subject is also shaped in relation to the ever-enigmatic signifier the phallus, we need to read across the surface of aesthetic forms for impressions, if not inscriptions, of co-existing forms of desire and desirability that may, under the traumatic conditions of the Oedipus Complex, coalesce into a predominant "orientation" of desire and affection, or remain diffused and

uncertain, or layer each other in relation to fantasy, imagination, and actualization. There is no doubt that *Leben? oder Theater?* is legible as an aesthetic project suffused with the complexities of desire, love, identification, and the violence of misused masculine sexuality. The full reading of this dimension became possible, for me at least, only when I dared to track through the actual work what I call the dialectic of the Event and the Everyday—the grand historical canvas of fascist Germany against which CS pits her artwork and the anguish of the suicidal everyday experienced by women subject to patriarchal sexual violence in the family. Even finding my way to this understanding in a culture so complicit with the sexual abuse of women and children was already a work on myself and against the silencing of these crimes. The Event, the artist's death in Auschwitz as a Jewish woman, trumps the murders of the selves of three women through the crime of abuse that the victim survives to live with. Finding a form of writing to hold these two in tension was partly why the book took so long to complete.

NC Your argument that *Leben? oder Theater?* provides a record of familial abuse and an effort to work through that legacy is compelling. The distressing painting that shows the grandfather, the abuser, seeking to justify his actions as “natural” to his granddaughter, with its thick, rapid, aggressive strokes of blue, red, and brown paint, and its use of words painted in blue (for the grandfather) and red (for the granddaughter) really brought home to me the importance of attending to sub-narrative aspects in the paintings in order to explore the complex interplay of the psychical and the technical present within them. You urge your reader not to view the paintings simply as representations, because of the psychic work they perform. Can you say more about this need to think beyond representation?

GP This is a challenging question. You have put it beautifully when you talk about sub-narrative aspects and note that we must read all of the material, representational, and affective elements together in their interdependence and also their antiphonies. The technical is the point of the artist bringing something onto the screen of her page, making it take shape, and making it do so by means of many decisions as to stroke, density, colour, size, and so forth. The psychic does not pre-exist the making, and yet, of course, unknowingly it does, contributing to decisions as well as confirming those taken when looking at what has appeared on the page.

Representation typically allows us to imagine it all in her mind or memory. But that is not the case. Something presses shapelessly forward seeking visual realization and at all moments the painter may decide to leave it, to change it, to start again, to turn it over and deselect. Where do the elements of an artistic decision-making and those that are psychically inflected converge? We can no longer tell or even ask. But the trace is there always posing both questions. For this, an art-historical training in profound attentiveness to formal aspects, technical processes, and material effects is a vital methodological substrate. Indeed, what is it that art historians offer to the world? Surely not tired stories of greatness and beauty and value. I think it is precisely this attention to creative practice that is as materially grounded as it is psychically freighted—that is

predetermined and transformative. The variety of modes of painting in *Leben? oder Theater?* present, then, a variety of artistic resources at the artist's disposal and pose the question of what each signifies and why that mode became the one necessitated by what it was that she wanted to bring into being as an image. The image is not of x, but is the form that holds that which cannot be said or is not yet represented. This affective supplement cannot be tracked purely semiotically and must not be reduced merely to material effects. The pivot of the two contradictory poles of visual art is their perplexing collision.

NC Your answer reminds me of a passage in the article "Staging Subjectivity" in which you trace resonances between the paintings of Charlotte Salomon and Edvard Munch. There you describe a "painterly energy" and chromatic intensity present in both artists that at once *formulates* and undoes "the containment promised by form." You do not, however, read Munch as influencing Salomon in any simple sense. Salomon, instead, performs readings of his works. Could you tell me a little more about how Munch and other artists, such as Vincent Van Gogh, resonate within *Leben? oder Theater?*?

GP One of the problems I encountered in the analysis of Charlotte Salomon's work as an artwork was the evident knowledge of a range of modernist work on the part of an artist enclosed in the exclusion of being a Jewish non-citizen in Nazi Germany during the 1930s. How did she acquire knowledge since modern art was being systematically removed from the walls of museums and galleries, staff at the art school sacked, and so forth? I mention in the book the possibility that one source for Charlotte Salomon was the "Degenerate Art Exhibition," which was, in effect, a retrospective overview of European modernism, perhaps the first in Europe assembling all its facets—as these had been collected in Germany. Would she, as a Jewish art student, have dared to go to this show when it came, slightly altered, to Berlin? On the other hand, looking at her work, an art historian cannot but ask about some of her painterly processes, compositional choices, and affective devices in relation to specific modernist artists whose work we know circulated in Berlin or had a presence, like Van Gogh, in early illustrated art history books that might well have been part of the library of the art school she attended in 1936–1938. I am saying all of this to indicate the grounds for speculating in concrete art-historical fashion: What could she have seen and what could she know?

Another methodology draws from these possibilities, but in a reverse direction. Is not what we see in her work a different kind of evidence that resists the unidirectional concept of influence and draws on Mieke Bal's use of the preposterous reading, a discovery of the meaning, in this case of Chagall or Munch or Van Gogh as artists through the prism of a "reading" of their work in the paintings and by the paintings by CS? The latter is not following whatever art-historical interpretation will later be canonised. She needed these artists to provide possibilities for her that may have been unknowingly acquired or less consciously absorbed into her extraordinarily varied painterly vocabularies. In one way, I was forced by Charlotte Salomon's paintings to look back at Munch and Van Gogh again. Van Gogh was the topic of my doctoral thesis, and I hold a very critical view of the artist, countering the universal adulation,

as you know. But what I find in Charlotte Salomon makes me see something else in Van Gogh, particularly in terms of narrativizing space, a tendency that was at odds with the generally acknowledged direction of modernist practice. Going to Munch, who is the most pressing artist a Salomon scholar will find herself considering for all sorts of reasons, was more difficult for me. I had been alienated from his work. Salomon enabled elements of his painterly practice to become visible. Indeed, in some way, although she could not have known it, his *Frieze of Life* remains one of the only comparable modernist projects in terms of single compositions being recast as an entity. That is for the future, to be studied more.

What I wrote in “Staging Subjectivity” was a hypothesis that resulted from going to Oslo and experiencing the paintings of Munch in terms of the tension between the energy of the gestures, which register as marks, and surfaces created in paint as a will to formulate. Formulation for me is deeply Warburgian in his understanding of the transmutation of gestural bodily energy into a form that is not form in the classic sense, but formula, a means of registering as well as conveying that which has intensity. Expressionism might be read as a curious historical coincidence with Warburg’s theories of the origin of images in ritual formulations of affects that become formulae capable of re-evoking affect through the combination of figuration *and* its excess. In his case, that excess was registered in the inexplicable agitation of accessories, the hair and draperies in classical figures such as the Nympha. In modernist terms, that excess passes into the materials and processes of the artworking that may produce an image. The will to figuration—Chagall, Van Gogh, and Munch being key artists in this area of modernism, which formalist modernist art historians find difficult, except by individualizing the anguished or expressive artistic subject as their explanation—coexists with this affective surcharge. That surcharge is affective as well as effective at the point at which this will to figuration generates form and the excess destabilizes it. Form for the art historian is a containment, a realization. For the psychoanalytically minded, it is associated with the depressive position in which there is detachment from the other, and the other remains indifferent to us, self-contained. It provides a sadness and a relief. We contemplate the object’s self-sufficiency. Not to allow containment within a form while aspiring to figuration that evokes the embodied gestural site of affect and the energy of the affect that is like the drive, erotic and thanatic, a movement through the subject and beyond, overcoming its boundaries—this is a delicate balancing act. Thus, in my description of what I sense in both Munch and Salomon, or rather in Munch, because he is not like Salomon in any simple sense, but at this level that they seem to share, I found myself unconsciously using my reading of Warburg’s *pathosformula* model for understanding the dynamics of the painting as it aspired to become image. To conclude, the term *resonance*, which also has echoes of Bracha Ettinger’s concept of *resonance*, which works alongside *fascinace*, which I have already discussed at the level of the gaze, allows me to propose a matrixial art-historical reading. That means that a reading of Munch’s paintings co-emerges with a reading of CS’s paintings at the shared borderspace of the novel modernist *pathosformulae* of figuratively charged brushwork and colour.

Ettinger's borderspace is about proximity-in-distance, partnership-in-difference: logical paradoxes of course that enable us to think about something shared between two subjective entities that have different effects in each partner. They are not alike; there is no directional influence. But our understanding of both artists co-emerges when we evoke a borderspace between them that operates within our understanding of what was happening art historically within the varied sites and subjectivities of modernism, while exceeding the limitations modernist art-historical interpretation places on those aesthetic events. The reading of CS as an artist reading Munch and the other artists also models a feminist method of co-creation without the Oedipal hierarchy of a lineage of descent that has been used repeatedly to exclude, ignore, or render secondary artist-women.

NC A final question, if I may. In several of your answers here you have referred to CS's "theatre of memory" in relation to film, and at one point in the book you refer to *Leben? oder Theater?* as intermedial. Can you tell me about the influence of cinema and of music on Salomon? What do the cinematic qualities she inventively brings to her paintings, for example, enable her to achieve?

GP This is so fascinating historically and culturally, as well as technically. Many years ago, when I was a rookie in the 1970s teaching twentieth-century art history for the first time, while spending a great deal of time watching Hollywood cinema as part of a concurrent engagement with film theory, I dared to argue to my modernist co-leader of the class that perhaps modernist art history had failed to understand the impact on the artistic imagination of modernism of the co-emergence with cinema in its rapidly changing forms. We were allowed to mention visual artists who also made experimental films. But it was not art historically kosher to imagine the fine arts and the cinema in parallel. Yet artists went to the movies and, like everything else in modernity, this novel viscosity/temporality/medium was grist for their mill, or was the other to be outsmarted.

Charlotte Salomon is one of the artists who made the co-existence of modernist art and silent/sound/colour cinema the vehicle for her unique art form. By using the term intermedial, I am not arguing that she was influenced by cinema or that, as some suggest, she was effectively creating a storyboard for a movie. I am suggesting that she was imaginatively and aesthetically liberated by an appreciation of cinema's novel possibilities to create a singular form that could marry traditional narrative figuration (Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling for instance) to modernist space and materiality. *Leben? oder Theater?* has the qualities, as I have suggested, of a book, providing an intimacy of turning pages and reading works on a particular scale. It also has the qualities of theatre, staging scenes with dialogue infused with the melodrama of operatic singing and recurring acoustic leitmotifs. But it also registers what silent cinema did notably in its German-expressionist forms, and what happened when sound and colour created the possibility of the musical. This form is specifically referenced in *Leben? oder Theater?* in the teaching of *Amadeus Daberlohn*, a name that refers to both the Mozart of the playful *Magic Flute* and of the sombre punishment of *Don Giovanni*. The intermedial creates an aesthetic space which the artist registers, but also transforms by means of a singular entanglement

of still-image making, narrativity, spatialized events, and coloristic and acoustic tonalities. Only by holding in our heads the diverse potentialities of opera, cinema, theatre, literature, and, above all, the visual arts—from Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling to Van Gogh's, Chagall's, and Munch's psychological memory working in painting—can we grasp the extraordinary qualities of *Leben? oder Theater?* as an event in the history of twentieth-century art.

By the same token, what CS did to her sources enables, or rather requires, us to think each of them in new ways not tied to the conventions of the disciplinary language in which we academics and users confine them. What the specifically cinematic—grasped in terms of the radical, internal changes within this art form between the 1920s and late 1930s—offered to CS was a means to imagine a unity created out of the many that involved a temporal dimension and a spatializing of narrative—an unknowing echo of Benjamin's famous essay?

The cinematic was also a means of creating a delay, an unfolding of an enigma slowly explored and only making sense once the entire duration and visual-acoustic-graphic experience has been passed through—by the artist who made it, reviewed it, finalized its form—and by each of us who meets it, either on the walls of an art gallery or in the pages of a massive book. What film studies have offered to art historians, as well as film theorists, is the combination of sequential “telling” and belated discovery of meaning from the point of its completion. This is why I compare the work of CS finally to detective fiction, rich in clues and intimations, seemingly openly displayed but everywhere coded and oblique. The work is not a simple story being told any more than even the most narrative film is. Narrative classically begins only with a rupture, the eruption of the extraordinary into the banality of the ordinary. This can be a crime, a murder, an arrival, a departure. Narrative as cultural form is created around a break in time and it is driven towards some kind of resolution that can never contain what was set in motion or made visible in that drive. The excess remains and is witness to the defeat of narrative as a mode of containment. It is in this sense that the modernism of this painting practice is at once a theorization of modern temporality and subjectivity, of the problems of telling when telling is itself creating an image of a reality that we did not know before it acquired this form. CS took that into a painting practice when so many modernists had abandoned that project, because there was a mystery to be solved and a dilemma to be confronted. Cinema, like psychoanalysis, was the modernist means for doing so. But CS was above all a painter and made all three converge in a remarkable work we are still trying to fathom.

Thank you for such a subtle reading of both the book and Charlotte Salomon's work and for these really demanding questions. ¶

Leeds and Montreal, February 2018