

The Virtual Archive and the Missing Trace: Charlotte Salomon on CD ROM

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In 1941 the German Jewish artist Charlotte Salomon, living in exile in the south of France, created an unprecedented work of art combining image, text and music. Before Salomon died in Auschwitz at age twenty-six she had created more than 1,300 gouaches, 769 of which comprise what the artist entitled *Life? or Theater? A Singspiel, or A Play with Music*. Painted with only primary colors (red, yellow and blue) and white, and mixing them to create vivid hues, the images are a fictionalized autobiography, incorporating as “characters” important and influential individuals in her life. In *Life? or Theater?* Salomon narrates the story of her life, her family and the German Jewish cultural world that was destroyed in the Holocaust. While it is often read as an act of defiance in the face of Nazi persecution, *Life? or Theater?* also illustrates the artist’s struggle to live in the aftermath of the suicides of her grandmother, her mother and her aunt, rather than to succumb to what seemed to be the family fate. When she faced the dilemma of suicide or self-creation, Salomon wrote: “I will create a story so as not to lose my mind.” Before she was deported to Auschwitz, where she was murdered in 1942, she entrusted the work to a family friend, reportedly saying “this is my whole life, please take good care of it.”¹

Although the work may be considered a musical-theatrical piece, it was not intended to be performed, but rather to be viewed and read. *Life? or Theater?* consists of a prelude, a main section, and an epilogue with distinct acts and scenes; it reads like a storyboard for a film, complete with musical citations. For roughly the first third of the work, Salomon includes text on transparencies that were taped over the paintings. Salomon’s work resists easy classification, and its unique multi-media format confers a singularity that confounds efforts to display and categorize it. As a result, *Life? or Theater?* remains essentially unviewable as a whole. Contemporary museum exhibits display only selected portions of the work, and when the transparencies are included they are displayed separately from the gouaches.² Even the most comprehensive printed reproduction of the work (the 1998 Waanders edition) reproduces the paintings without any indication of the existence of the transparencies. As such, *Life? or Theater?* occupies an ambivalent status as a work whose imaginative complexity exceeds the boundaries of the historical archive but does not conform to the archive of art history, with its attendant practices of classification and display.

This essay responds to the question posed by the work’s title *Life? or Theatre?* by considering the kind of rethinking of the archive such a work of art suggests. In particular, I examine the work’s presentation on a CD ROM entitled “Charlotte Salomon: The Complete Collection.”³ Due to preservation concerns, this technology is one of the few ways researchers can view the entire work *Life? or Theater?*, including the relationship of the transparencies to the gouaches. But this completeness comes at the expense of the work’s materiality. What might be lost or found in encountering *Life? or Theater?* in such a format?

After Auschwitz: The Reception of *Life? or Theater?*

Although Charlotte Salomon died in Auschwitz, her father and stepmother, Albert and Paula Salomon, survived the war. In 1947, as soon as it was possible to travel to France, they collected the work from Otilie Moore, an American who had sheltered Charlotte in Villefranche. The Salomons stored the work until 1959, when they brought it to the attention of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, where it was exhibited for the first time in 1961. After the Amsterdam show, the work was exhibited in France, Israel and Germany, and in 1963 the first catalogue was published, in which eighty reproductions were printed. Finally, in 1971, the Salomons donated the work to the Jewish Historical Museum (JHM) in Amsterdam. By this time the work was in disarray from its various travels. Ad Peterson, who curated the first exhibition of the work at the Stedelijk recalls:

Before an inventory could be made it had to be put in order once more. Some of the sheets had numbers; others had transparent text sheets that were provided with a number. Through the wear and tear of use these transparent sheets of paper had here and there been pulled loose from the sheets they belonged to and these had first of all to be found and brought back together again.⁴

However, as Peterson warns the reader, a number of sheets were missing, and “it is possible that the order in which the sheets are now is different from the order that Charlotte herself gave them.”⁵ The artwork we now know as *Life? or Theater?* had to be reconstructed from this scattered archive.

At the Jewish Historical Museum, *Life? or Theater?* posed a dilemma to the registrars tasked with accessioning the work into the museum’s collection.⁶ Generally, each group of documents in an archive is assigned a single catalogue number, indicating the collection as a whole. Originally, this had been the case with the hundreds of gouaches and transparencies that comprise *Life? or Theater?*, but as the work became more popular and was increasingly used for research and traveling exhibitions the museum changed this system, assigning a separate catalogue number to each painting and transparency. This new system proved to be significant for the contemporary reception of the work, for it confers onto each element an individual status as a work of art that disrupts efforts to view and display the work as a whole. It also shifts the status of *Life? or Theater?* from a document within a larger archive to an archive unto itself.

Salomon herself had constructed *Life? or Theater?* as an archive, numbering and ordering the sheets, arranging them into a linear narrative. The creation of the work thus involved two moments of archivization: first of creating images and texts from the Salomon family’s secrets and lies; second of ordering and numbering these into a coherent narrative. Upon its accession into the museum’s catalogue, *Life? or Theater?* was re-archived. The exclusion of the transparencies in later exhibits, however, indicates that the work ultimately had to be “de-archived” for display purposes. This strategy is reflected in the Jewish Historical Museum’s classification scheme, in which the work went from having a single accession number within the Museum’s collection to becoming an archive of images, each with a separate catalogue number. This reclassification, meant to aid in organizing the work and facilitating smaller traveling exhibits, transformed the work from its difficult status as a singular, total work of art to a more manageable series of paintings suited for display in art museums.

Writing about the archive’s role in the production of knowledge, Jacques Derrida observes that “archival technology no longer determines . . . merely the moment of the conservational recording, but rather the institution of the archivable event . . . archivization produces as much as it records the event.”⁷ This was clearly the case at the Jewish Historical Museum, where the attribution of distinct reference numbers for each of the elements in *Life? or Theater?* “produced” the work as a series of images, rather than a “total work of art” and laid the ground for the subsequent separation of the gouaches and the transparencies.

A Virtual Archive: *Life? or Theater?* on CD ROM

In 2003, I traveled to Amsterdam to view *Life? or Theater?* in the Jewish Historical Museum's archive. Although I had made specific arrangements in advance, upon arrival I was informed that I would not actually be able to work with the collection, for researchers were not permitted to handle the fragile gouaches and transparencies. I begged for at least a peek into the archive, and was given a fifteen-minute tour of the vast storehouse where Salomon's work is preserved. The museum's registrar Peter Lange, who gave me the tour, briefly opened a few boxes for me and then encouraged me to conduct my research using the Museum's CD ROM "Charlotte Salomon: The Complete Collection" (available in the gift shop). As Lange explained, the CD ROM would offer me a more "complete" experience of the collection than the nearly one hundred boxes of gouaches and transparencies could provide.⁸

The CD ROM "Charlotte Salomon: The Complete Collection" was created by the Jewish Historical Museum in response to the difficulties of displaying and viewing *Life? or Theater?* and offers a virtual medium as a solution to the fragility of the work. Lange suggested that the CD ROM might actually provide a superior viewing experience for Salomon's work, allowing me to see all the paintings, the verso sides and even the transparencies at my leisure. The implication was that the CD ROM would function as a traditional historical archive, a clearly defined space where each discreet object awaited my examination.

Life? or Theater? was originally created to be experienced as an unbound book, by an individual viewer turning pages. It is not a series of paintings to be exhibited. This is indicated by one of the work's most innovative features, the inclusion of transparencies with the first 211 gouaches. Each transparency was originally attached with tape to one side of the gouache, forming an overlay to the image. Although the transparencies have proven difficult to address in reproductions and museum exhibits, they play a significant role in the relationship between narrative and dramatic text. Griselda Pollock suggests that the transparencies provided Salomon with a distancing mechanism, a screen between ". . . what the artist could easily paint and what she could barely bring herself to deliver without the shielding cover of the semitransparent paper on which she could inscribe a distancing textuality."⁹ Yet they also indicate the artist's role as mediator between the images and the audience.

Indeed, the transparencies reveal an intrinsic connection between the image and the word, between visual memory and its narration. They destabilize the story being told in the images, standing in for, and later (in contemporary exhibits) becoming the inassimilable dimension of the work. In this sense the transparencies are at once historical documents and aesthetic strategies. They perform what neither the image nor the text alone can communicate. The transparencies introduce a temporal dimension, revealing the story in layers and gesturing to another story that exists in-between the layers of the narrative.

The transparencies remain largely invisible in museum exhibits, the Waanders book and the Jewish Historical Museum's website.¹⁰ Already created from fragile material, they reside in these places as fragile traces, too delicate to be handled and thus to be incorporated into the display of the work. These various strategies of display rely on the exclusion of this critical component in order to produce a form for the work, whether as art in a museum or images reproduced in a book. This exclusion has been considered necessary to make *Life? or Theater?* readable and viewable as art. Yet it is the transparencies that constitute the singularity of the work's production. Ironically, it is only through the CD ROM's technology of the virtual that the transparencies become accessible.

As the story told in *Life? or Theater?* progresses, the transparencies take on the function of narrative text, as opposed to the dramatic text that is inscribed directly on the gouaches. By excluding the transparencies, the various reproductions and public presentations split *Life? or Theater?* into artwork and document.

This split can be seen as an effort to conform to the archival practices of an art history based on easel painting, as well as a disavowal of the singularity and complexity of the work.

Although scholarship of *Life? or Theater?* generally suggests that Salomon simply stopped using transparencies when she ran out of tracing paper, an examination of the work on CD ROM reveals that her usage of these transparencies was also strategic. In the “Prelude”, where Salomon depicts her family’s background and her own pre-history, the text is largely confined to the transparent overlays. But this strategy changes significantly in the “Main Section” of the work, when Salomon’s “play within a play” begins. Whether the transition from text on transparency to text on gouache was intentional, or influenced by the unavailability of tracing paper, or a combination of the two, its timing is significant. At the moment when her character, Charlotte, ventures into an artistic realm largely forbidden to Jews (in 1936 the Berlin Art Academy had a quota of 1.5% Jewish students), the artist ventures into the paintings themselves in order to speak.¹¹ Here Salomon cautiously begins to paint the text directly onto the gouaches.¹²

In the first few images, the lettering is very small and the text is located discreetly in a corner of the painting, appearing as a kind of caption. The first image where this spoken text appears directly on the gouache is [JHM 4334](#)¹³, which shows the character Charlotte beginning her studies at the “Fashion Academy.” In the painting, a teacher stands behind Charlotte, criticizing her work: “Yes, drawing is a difficult art. One has to have some talent for it—and unfortunately you haven’t.” Charlotte responds, “No, I refuse to stay here with this stupid old cow, where through the dirty window even the sun’s bright ray can only dimly play.” Both parts of the dialogue are included on the transparency, in which Charlotte is nearly obscured by the words of the teacher, and her own response in turn obscures the repeated self-portraits at the bottom of the painting. But when the transparency is removed, the teacher’s words are painted in small letters at the upper right-hand corner of the image, while Charlotte’s response appears in the lower right-hand corner, underneath her self-portraits. The force and placement of the words are given different dramatic emphasis in each layer. The repetition of the text on two layers coincides with Charlotte’s assertion of her creative self, and allows for a reverberation of the spoken text across the layers.

Salomon’s strategy of repeating the spoken text on both layers continues for the next several images. In each, the lettering on the transparent overlay obscures the painted Charlotte and is repeated discreetly in a corner, as a caption on the gouache itself. Three pages later we see Charlotte taking the test for the Art Academy. On the gouache, the spoken text appears in the lower left of the image. On the transparency, the text is repeated, “Oh, I’m trying, but in vain! My lovely dream is down the drain! Not for me--Academy” ([JHM 4337](#)). On the transparency, the letters *Akademie* descend in a diagonal, mimicking the action of going down the drain. Viewed on its own, the gouache simply describes a moment in the education of a would-be artist. But viewed together with the transparent overlay, word and image become inseparable, and the work of art itself contradicts the spoken words of the young Charlotte.

In another image ([JHM 4348](#)) we see Charlotte trying to draw a cactus after receiving criticism from a teacher for not being able to count the number of leaves on a plant. There is no spoken text on this image, nor on the transparency, which simply depicts the individual leaves of the plant flying off Charlotte’s sketchpad. Here the individual leaves replace words, telling a story of artistic self-creation that is confirmed not by the narrative but by the existence of the work of art, *Life? or Theater?*.

The beginning of the “Main Section” opens with the entrance of Amadeus Daberlohn, “prophet of song” ([JHM 4371](#)). Daberlohn is based on Alfred Wolfsohn, Paula Salomon-Lindberg’s singing teacher and possibly Charlotte Salomon’s first lover. In the story, Daberlohn plays a central role in inspiring Charlotte’s self-discovery as an artist. Armed with a letter of introduction from Dr. Singsang, Daberlohn makes his way to the Salomon apartment, “And that’s how the new man enters the Bimbam-Kann home .

.. And now our play begins!” (JHM 4376). The function of the transparencies changes significantly at this point, as Charlotte’s role switches from that of child and student in the “Prelude” to that of creator and director in the “Main Section”.¹⁴

From now on the transparencies are fewer and the text in the gouache begins to take on a life of its own. If the “play” has indeed begun, this switch makes sense, for the characters are represented as speaking in their own voices. The transparencies and their absence here are crucial to the dramatic structure of the work. In the few places where the transparencies reappear, as in JHM 4425, the text is spoken by an omniscient narrator, describing but not speaking the inner thoughts of the characters. From now on the transparencies only appear in order to provide the voice of the narrator. If Salomon was indeed running out of tracing paper, her strategic use of material is indicated in the thin strips of paper laid across the center of the pages and offering just a few words of narration.

The transparencies at the end of the “Prelude” gradually take on the function of stage curtains, drawing back to reveal the action. In the “Main Section”, the transparencies are transformed from curtains into scrims, which are subtle enough to reveal the action unfolding behind them. As opposed to a stage curtain that is completely opaque, a scrim is a gauzelike curtain of fabric used for special effects. When illuminated from one side, the material is translucent; when illuminated from the other side, it is opaque. A scrim can be used to give the illusion of a wall; then, with a change in lighting, the audience can see the action going on behind the wall. A scrim can also help dull the image, creating a greater sense of depth. Like scrims, the transparencies in the “Main Section” function in various ways, at times concealing, at other times revealing the action. By excluding the transparencies from the book and the museum exhibits, the evolution of the artist’s role from character to director and scenographer is obscured.

An Archive of Working Through

The CD ROM is the only instance where the viewer can “handle” the images in *Life? or Theater?*, albeit virtually. By clicking on a “transparency” icon, the viewer can “reveal” the transparency that originally covered the image on view. This procedure is the reverse of the original operation, where the viewer first encounters the image muted and covered by the transparency, and lifts it to reveal the gouache underneath. But this tool at least partially conveys the significance of the transparencies, which are not simply text sheets but integral visual, textual and dramatic components of the work.

This interactive experience of the work is not available in either the Waanders book or in museum exhibitions. The transparencies are not referred to at all in the book, where the text is simply provided as a caption to the paintings. Various museum exhibits have handled this problem in different, but ultimately unsatisfactory ways. As a result, the transparencies have become the unassimilable trace in the presentation of Salomon’s work. In order for the work to be viewed as a work of art, the element that makes *Life? or Theater?* singular, its layering of life and theater, must be excluded.

From an examination of the transparencies in the virtual medium of the CD ROM, it appears that Salomon used this element strategically. The transparencies form a third dimension to the work, and function almost independently of the images and the text, although they serve to connect the two. In the “Main Section” of the work, the transparencies stand in for the presence of the artist herself, alternately closing the curtain and drawing it back to reveal the action. In this way, the transparencies mediate between life and theater, organizing the dramatic structure of the work and serving as the boundary between the events represented and the artist’s mediation of those events. In a sense, the transparencies constitute the true archive of the work, and indicate the role of the artist as archivist and dramaturge.

Ernst van Alphen suggests that *Life? or Theater?* presents an “aesthetic of working through.” In his view, Salomon achieves this by embedding the dramatic text, where the characters are not in control of the

action, into the narrative text, where Salomon herself is in control through the process of representation. He writes, “this embedding of dramatic text in narrative text is where, or when, the family trauma is mastered. It is by means of the narrative technique of embedding that the trauma is healed, is transformed into a memory which can be told and shown to others.”¹⁵ The psychoanalytic theory of trauma proposes an event that cannot be assimilated at the time of its occurrence and returns through traumatic re-enactment, or acting out. This acting out is triggered by a secondary event, so that it is not the initial disaster that is registered but rather its traumatic invocation at a later time. In order to be mastered, the initial event must be worked through and assimilated into a linear temporality. Salomon’s work presents such a working-through by assimilating the repressed “event” of her mother’s (and other relatives’) suicide into a narrative, a story that is at the same time a history.

Charlotte Salomon narrated what was becoming a progressively chaotic and destroyed life, trying to create a sense of wholeness in a world that was increasingly totalizing in its destruction of such a possibility. We are compelled to view her story retrospectively, in light of our knowledge of Salomon’s fate in Auschwitz. Although Salomon provides a formal conclusion to her work, it does not offer a sense of closure. If the work of memory (or working through) involves developing a capacity to generate significance in different contexts, Salomon’s multiply mediated work offers a methodology for such a project. *Life? or Theater?* does not proffer a privileged understanding of history, but instead creates a potential space for the viewer to tolerate the lack of resolution between different levels of reality and dimensions of experience. If *Life? or Theater?* offers an “aesthetic of working through,” the transparencies function as Salomon’s *archive* of working through. These transparencies stage the relationship between the narrative text and the dramatic text, and provide the material traces of Salomon’s imaginative negotiation between life and theater.

In the CD ROM’s virtual archive of *Life? or Theater?*, I was able to see what had been lost in the work of art in its contemporary incarnations. Derrida remarks that in order for the archive to be the site of an encounter with that which is not presentable, “it will be necessary, to keep a rigorous account of this other virtuality, to abandon or restructure from top to bottom our inherited concept of the archive.”¹⁶ Yet while the CD ROM may serve as a virtual archive, it is not an archive of virtuality in Derrida’s sense of the term. Because of the difficulties of display and reception of Salomon’s work, the “virtuality” or remainder of *Life? or Theater?* is only to be found in its inaccessible material traces.

NOTES

¹ Charlotte Salomon, *Life or Theatre?*, trans. Leila Vennewitz (Zwolle: Waanders Publishers, 1998), 27.

² Reesa Greenberg discusses the presentation of *Life? or Theater?* in various museum exhibits in her essay “The Aesthetics of Trauma: Five Installations of Charlotte Salomon’s *Life? or Theater?*” in *Reading Charlotte Salomon*, Michael P. Steinberg and Monica Bohm-Duchen, eds. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006), 148-166. Greenberg notes, for instance, that the Royal Academy in London chose to display only five of the transparencies in their installation.

³ *Charlotte Salomon: The Complete Collection*, CD-ROM (Amsterdam: Jewish Historical Museum Amsterdam, 2002).

⁴ Ad Peterson, “Leben? oder Theater?: The history of the collection”, in Charlotte Salomon, *Life or Theatre?*, trans. Leila Vennewitz (Zwolle: Waanders Publishers, 1998) 28.

⁵ Ad Peterson, “Leben? oder Theater?: The history of the Collection”, 29.

⁶ Conversation with Pieter Lange, Registrar, Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam, April 17, 2004.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 17.

⁸ Conversation with Pieter Lange, Registrar, Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam, April 17, 2004.

⁹ Griselda Pollock, “The Theater of Memory: Trauma and Cure in Charlotte Salomon’s Modernist Fairy Tale” in *Charlotte Salomon*, 58.

¹⁰ Although the transparencies are reproduced on the JHM's website (<http://www.jhm.nl/collection.aspx?ID=7>), they must be searched for individually and cannot be viewed superimposed on the painted gouaches.

¹¹ This restriction is emphasized by the inclusion, in the documentation section of the CD ROM, of a registration document listing Charlotte Salomon among the 1.5% of Jewish students allowed to register at the Art Academy in 1936.

¹² I have distinguished here between Charlotte Salomon the artist, who I refer to as Salomon, and her character in the work, Charlotte.

¹³ The images reproduced in the 1998 Waanders edition of *Life? or Theater?* are here referred to by their accession numbers in the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam (JHM).

¹⁴ Given the disarray of the work upon its accession by the JHM, it is probable that there were additional transparencies used selectively throughout the "play."

¹⁵ Ernst Van Alphen, "Giving Voice: Charlotte Salomon and Charlotte Delbo" in *Reading Charlotte Salomon*, 216.

¹⁶ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 67.