



Jüdisches Museum Berlin

Zwei Jahrtausende Deutsch-Jüdische Geschichte

Charlotte Salomon "Life? or Theatre?"

A Special Exhibition at the Jewish Museum Berlin
In Cooperation with the Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam
17 August to 28 October 2007

"She had to disappear from the world for a while and sacrifice everything to recreate herself from the depths of her being."
Charlotte Salomon in "Life? Or Theatre?"

In the throes of a severe existential crisis, Charlotte Salomon paints the story of her life. She produces over 1,300 pages in just two years (1940-42) in a period of isolation following emigration to southern France. "Life? Or Theatre?" – the cryptic name she gives her work – is a unique biographical work of art with modern visual language. Close-ups, truncated perspectives, and series of pictures taken as though in quick succession seem inspired by film while other pictures are in a comic-like abbreviated form. The texts are added to the illustrations in a colorful and expressive way as are music titles, leading the observer to recall the accompanying tune.

Charlotte Salomon was born into a bourgeois, assimilated family in Berlin in 1917. Following her mother's early death, her father remarried and thus the famous singer Paula Lindberg came into her life bringing concerts, performances and receptions with her. The Nazis' rise to power and with it the ostracism of Jews from public life meant the banning from professions and performances and anti-Semitic incidents in school and university for the family. In 1939, Charlotte Salomon was sent to join her grandparents in southern France where they had emigrated in 1933. When her grandmother panicked and took her own life at the threat of German invasion in 1940, Charlotte Salomon heard for the first time of the many suicides in her family including that of her own mother. She later wrote in her memoirs "Dear God, let me keep my sanity!" Following her return from the internment camp in Gurs, in a state of mental and physical weakness, she saw

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herself "faced with the question of whether to end her own life or to do a crazy and special thing." In a small coastal hotel in Saint Jean Cap Ferrat on the French Riviera, she began to reinterpret her life in paint. In "Life? or Theater?" Charlotte Salomon condenses her life down to a few people, sets new priorities, and records it like a stage performance. The chapter on childhood and youth begins in 1913 with the suicide of her Aunt Charlotte after whom she is named. Much space is devoted to her greatly admired step-mother, worldly and astute, who shone not only on the domestic front. However the main character is Amadeus Daberlohn, based on Alfred Wolfsohn, a vocal coach to Paula Lindberg who came to the family through the Jewish Kulturbund (Cultural Association). Paula Lindberg smiles upon his theories on psychic effects on the voice while Charlotte reveres him. She quotes him throughout the whole series of pictures and draws on the core phrases of his philosophy to counteract her own dispiritedness. Soul-searching to find oneself and his phrase "Never forget that I believe in you!" are repeated insistently. Charlotte exaggerates the Daberlohn character from the perspective of the crisis she is going through and the relationship with him becomes a love story.

Charlotte Salomon directs with irony, mockery, and a sharp eye for the vanity and ambivalence of the characters, who are all named differently in the piece. The famous Paula Lindberg becomes Paulinka Bimbam and Professors Ochs and Singer are known here as Klingklang and Singsang. While Amadeus Daberlohn is named after the genius and infant prodigy Mozart where his christian name is concerned, "darber Lohn" (meager wage) is the root of his surname, referring to the humiliating situation of his dependency on charity from his benefactress Paulinka. The Knarre grandparents are also clearly a dissonant element to the story. Her own alter ego "Charlotte kann" defensively stands her ground and is defiant in her encouragement of herself with respect to the family curse, which would appear to have her fate decided as the next in the line of the family suicides.

Charlotte Salomon and her husband Alexander Nagler, an Austrian immigrant whom she had met in Villefranche, were arrested in 1943 and taken to the assembly camp



in Drancy near Paris on 27 October and from there to Auschwitz on 7 October. Charlotte Salomon was probably murdered on the day of her arrival. She had entrusted her doctor with her work of art before her arrest. Albert Salomon and Paula Lindberg-Salomon, who had survived in the Netherlands, received their daughter's legacy when they went to the south of France in 1947. They donated it to the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam in 1971.

Here in Berlin, the location where much of it took place, the Jewish Museum Berlin will show 277 sheets from "Life? or Theater?" alongside a wealth of photographs and original documents stemming from Berlin archives, private collections, and the Jewish Historical Museum. Moreover, documents on Alfred Wolfsohn, whose bequest has been kept at the Jewish Museum Berlin since 2003, will be exhibited for the first time. Further in-depth information will be available at media stations.

In connection with "Life? or Theater?" the installation "Walking Next to One's Shoelaces into an Empty Fridge" by Chantal Akerman will be shown.

Chantal Akerman

"Marcher à côté des ces lacets dans un frigidaire vide," 2004

The installation evolved from the Belgian artist's search for her own family history. The diary written by the Polish grandmother Akerman in her youth, found only after her murder in Auschwitz, is at the center of the three-part work. Projected onto translucent tulle, it represents the heart and the centerpiece of the work. The film of a conversation between mother and daughter about this recovered treasure from times past is visible through the fine material. They gingerly read their way into the world of the then young grandmother and her thoughts and feelings. The mother Akerman bridges the two generations and acts as a translator also in the literal sense for her daughter, who through emigration grew up speaking a different language. Reading and interpreting, they both immerse themselves in the text and reflect on their family history, of which almost no material traces remain, just the piecing together of memories and fleeting images and emotions.



Like Charlotte Salomon, Chantal Akerman began her work following an unexpected confrontation with her past. Their memories take different courses. Chantal Akerman's installation provides a contemporary contrast to Salomon's series of pictures.

The art historian Dr. Margret Kampmeyer heads the exhibition project.

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