

Re-Framing Charlotte Salomon's *Life? Or Theatre?*: Utilising the Imaginative Approach For Holocaust Remembrance

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"The absent potential of what one does not yet know can only be recognised when it's possible presence can be imagined." (Bala, 2017:340)

Abstract

Much academic discourse on Charlotte Salomon's Leben? Oder Theater? (Life? Or Theatre?) is dominated by, and within, a narrow framework that calls to extract meaning from within the work itself. Life? Or Theatre? is such an interesting work, not just because it defies and rejects traditional artistic and historical genres, but as a multidisciplinary offering, it also ruptures tropes that reign over the collective effort to "remember" the Holocaust. Salomon provides a plethora of allegorical opportunities to contemplate the moral ambiguities surrounding Holocaust representation in the broader context of contemporary Holocaust memory. We should embrace Salomon's imaginative approach as an invitation to re-member it. Only by expanding the epistemological frame that currently surrounds Life? Or Theatre? are we able to see that its artistic composition – its temporal and performative constructions – is emblematic of theatrical "ghosting" (Carlson, 2001). By examining Life? Or Theatre? beyond its historical or cultural frames, and instead, expanding said framework to include our relationship to the work, we allow for an ontological space of the continuous renegotiation of Holocaust memory so that it continues to live in our future consciousness rather than as a thing of the past.

Keywords

Art,
Holocaust,
Remembrance,
Charlotte Salomon,
Theatre,
Performance,
Historical,
Imaginative

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The first time I ever visited London back in February 2020, pre-pandemic and still an undergraduate student, I made an impromptu visit to the Jewish Museum London. I did not know what exhibitions the museum housed and, looking back, I also had no idea how my stream of academic inquiry would be changed by it. To my astonishment, I spent the entire afternoon walking through, reading, looking, and absorbing a display of over 700 gouaches painted by a Jewish woman who, before her untimely death in Auschwitz, managed to disclose her life story in a series of beautifully haunting images. All along the narrow exhibition space hung a colourful series of medium-sized impressionist images, each unique, yet when hanging next to its neighbour, was as if a never-ending scroll had been unravelled, revealing a lively mosaic of a story winding about the room. Some of the paintings depicted a single body, some depicted several bodies, some had faces, and some contained painted words from corner to corner. The paintings were not simply accompanied by, but in concurrence with text, a script, a cast list, and musical allotments.

At the time, my encounter with Charlotte Salomon's *Leben? Oder Theater? Ein Singspiel* felt serendipitous. I had never heard of Salomon or her work before.¹ But as I walked slowly through the exhibition, reading English translations of the painted script – from its original German – I connected deeply with it, noticing similarities between her life and my own family history. My memories of this encounter have stayed with me to this day, while the work's aesthetic possibilities and moral ambiguities left my imagination kindling. If not simply owing to the work's title, as a student of theatre, I felt that *Life? Or Theatre?* was suited for the stage.

1. Salomon's *Life? Or Theatre?* was first exhibited in Amsterdam in 1961. The collection has since, and continues to, travel all over the world – from Europe to North America, Israel, and Asia – however, Salomon has yet to have an exhibition in Australia. In recent decades, Salomon's work has gained more recognition, however she remains relatively unknown, likely in part that her art is not in international markets, as the entire collection is under ownership of the Charlotte Salomon Foundation and held at the Joods Historisch Museum. Today one can access majority of the work digitally on the JHM website, <https://charlotte.jck.nl/>.

I could see it all, hear it all; the expressionistic set, the period costumes, the lights, movement that would mirror projections of her paintings, the mix of performance styles.

Perhaps it was naïve of me to think that few others also knew of Charlotte Salomon because shortly after, while I was back in London as a Master's student, I was met with disappointment when I discovered an adaptation of *Life? Or Theatre?* had already been done. In fact, it had been done multiple times, by multiple artists, in multiple artistic disciplines. 2002 saw the UK company Horse + Bamboo use puppets/masks in their adaptation of Salomon's work entitled "Company of Angels". In 2014 the Salzburg Festival presented the opera "Charlotte Salomon". In 2015, a ballet with vocals, "Charlotte Salomon: Der Tod Und Die Malerin," was commissioned and premiered at the Musiktheater Im Revier Gelsenkirchen in Germany. A Canadian company, Theaturtle, premiered their "multinational collaboration" of "Charlotte: A Tri-Coloured Play With Music" at Toronto's Luminato Festival in 2017. In 2018 *Life? Or Theatre?* was adapted again by the Annex Theater in Baltimore.

I started to doubt; What would another play about Charlotte Salomon do? Was there anything new to contribute? Was there something that had not already been illuminated?² Upon further reflection, however, I began to see that perhaps another re-doing of Salomon's work may not only be favourable, but necessary. Particularly in light of the shocking closure of the Jewish Museum London in July 2023, it seems there is more to be said for the possibilities, and importance, of theatre as an exhibitory space to tell stories of Jewish life.³ Considering that the Australian public has yet to receive any encounter with *Life? Or Theatre?* in any major⁴ capacity, I would further ask, in what ways can

2. Even after I completed the original version of this study, a new animated film, *Charlotte*, which had actress Keira Knightly voice the role of Charlotte Salomon, premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2021.

3. On 1 June 2023, the Jewish Museum London released a public statement announcing the closure of their site in Camden which would take place on 31 July 2023. They cited "unanticipated rising costs" and being "unable to meet all the demands" of the community in a small building as reasons for this closure. They would begin moving their collections to "specialised storage" and announced they would continue their projects and learning programs online. Helen Atkinson, "Jewish Museum London Announces Closure of Current Building," *The Jewish Museum London*. June 1, 2023.

<https://jewishmuseum.org.uk/2023/06/01/jewish-museum-london-announces-closure-of-current-building/>.

4 The last major show of Salomon's work in UK was at the Royal Academy of Arts nearly twenty years prior to the JML's exhibition of *Life? Or? Theatre?* in 2019/2020. Eliana Mendelsohn, "Charlotte Salomon: Life? Or Theater?" *The Jewish Museum London*. October 29, 2019.

<https://jewishmuseum.org.uk/2019/10/29/charlotte-salomon-life-or-theatre/>.

performative adaptations of Salomon's work allow for her story to become more accessible to Australians?⁵ But beyond these geo-cultural contexts, what can performance accomplish in the collective effort to revitalize Charlotte's memory?

Upon surveying the existing literature on *Life? Or Theatre?*, I maintain that much academic discourse on Salomon's work is dominated by, and within, a narrow framework. This prevailing framework calls to extract meaning from within the work itself, overemphasizing what, literally, can be seen on the page. Whether it be within the discipline of history, Holocaust studies, art history, or feminist studies, the discourse on Salomon's work often focuses on her – as a figure – in context to her work and what her work depicts. While extracting meaning from any artwork is important, I noticed a pattern that rarely considered what *Life? Or Theatre?* offers in the larger framework of Holocaust memory and its transmission. There was little focus in the scholarship on what the work itself can do for Holocaust remembrance, for Salomon, and what we can continue doing for her and those lost to the Holocaust. In other words, *Life? Or Theatre?*, the work, is itself an act constitutive of significant meanings.

Life? Or Theatre? is such an interesting work, not just because it defies and rejects traditional artistic and historical genres, but as a multidisciplinary offering, it also ruptures tropes that ultimately reign over the collective effort to remember the Holocaust. Salomon provides a plethora of allegorical opportunities to contemplate the moral ambiguities surrounding Holocaust representation in the broader context of contemporary Holocaust memory. It is imperative to embrace Salomon's imaginative approach – her own process of creating personal historical renderings – as an invitation for us to remember it.

5. The lack of Australian encounters with Salomon's work is surprising, particularly given the significant community of Holocaust survivors who immigrated to Australia from 1933-1954. For more on the demographics of Jewish immigration to Australia see Malcolm J. Turnbull, *Safe Haven: Records of the Jewish Experience in Australia* (Canberra: National Archives of Australia, 1999).

Only by expanding the epistemological frame that currently surrounds Salomon's *Life? Or Theatre?* can we see that its artistic composition – its temporal and performative construction – is emblematic of the theatrical phenomenon Marvin Carlson calls “ghosting”.⁶ What might we find when we expand the lens through which we look at Salomon's work? By examining *Life? Or Theatre?* beyond its historical or cultural frames, and instead, expanding said framework to include our relationship to – or even with – the work, we allow for an ontological space of the continuous renegotiation, a reverberation, of Holocaust memory so that it continues to live in our future consciousness rather than as an article of the past.

I do not attempt to explore *Life? Or Theatre?* from the disciplinary perspective of an art historian or museologist. Rather, this exploration aims to position the work within its own ontology – the metaphysical quality of “beingness” – as an object of testimony, and it is here where one can find the work's suitedness for theatrical adaptation. While its artistic composition would undoubtedly affect its theatrical disposition, I shall focus on Salomon's *Life? Or Theatre?* as a work of living memory. It is not simply an artwork or historical artefact; It lives and lives on through its own creation and re-creation.

Life? Or Theatre? is a series of 769 gouaches – and another 556 sketches, amounting to a collection of 1,325 paintings – that Salomon used to convey a narrative of her and her family's life; she delineates a lived Jewish experience in interwar Germany and the early years of WWII.⁷ Painted between 1940–1942, the visual work is complemented by descriptive text – in German – some with additional transparent overlays containing text, and in others, text becomes part of the images.

6. Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press: 2001).

7. None of the paintings are individually titled. Salomon numbered the gouaches in a sequential order. However, some gouaches are missing numbers. When the Amsterdam Jewish Cultural Quarter acquired the collection, the archivist catalogued each painting according to the order desired by the artist.

She makes references to numerous literary, musical, and artworks within the European cultural canon of the early twentieth century, such as Bizet's *Carmen*, Mozart's *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* (A Little Night's Music), Schubert's *Der Tod und das Mädchen* (Death and the Maiden), and Bach's "Bist du bei mir" (If you are with me).

The series begins with a "Program" where Salomon provides a cast list and an author's note (Fig. 1 & 2). Just as any playwright sets the scene with stage directions, Salomon paints her preamble in her characteristic colour palette of red, blue, and yellow; below her cast list she tells us – rather, she paints – "The action takes place during the years 1913 to 1940 in Germany, later in Nice, France," and in the tone of a playwright she instructs us that "The creation of the following paintings is to be imagined as follows."⁸ But who is she addressing? The reader? Viewer? Creator? Audience? The relationship between the work and those who encounter it is, considerably, ambiguous.

A "Prelude" follows, which provides details of Salomon's family history between 1913 and 1926, including the suicide of her maternal aunt – and namesake – Charlotte Grunwald, the marriage of her parents Albert Salomon, a physician, and Franziska Grunwald, a nurse, her mother's subsequent suicide and her father's remarriage to opera singer Paula Lindberg. The characters in *Life? Or Theatre?* are based on these real people from her life; she makes acute variations to the names of the characters and their real-life counterparts, renaming herself Charlotte Kann. As Judith Belinfante describes, "Charlotte Salomon herself plays no part in *Life? Or Theatre?*; The artist refers to Charlotte Kann in the third person. Her own presence is not different from the other actors."⁹



Figure 1. Charlotte Salomon, *Leben? Oder Theater? Ein Singspiel* M004155-B, 1940-1942, [Web], Joods Kultureel Kwartier, Amsterdam. <https://charlotte.jck.nl/>. Dedication and "stage directions."



Figure 2. Charlotte Salomon, *Leben? Oder Theater? Ein Singspiel* M004155-C, 1940-1942, [Web], Joods Kultureel Kwartier, Amsterdam. <https://charlotte.jck.nl/>. A list of characters.

8. Charlotte Salomon, *Leben? Oder Theater? Ein Singspiel* [Online Collection], trans. Leila Vennewitz, <https://charlotte.jck.nl/>, M004155-C and M004155-E.

9. Judith C.E. Belinfante, "Theatre? Remarks on a work of art," in *Charlotte Salomon: Life? Or Theatre?*, trans. Leila Vennewitz (Zwolle: Waanders, 1998), 33.

The “Main Section” depicts Charlotte throughout the 1930s as a teenager growing up as an art student in an increasingly polarizing Berlin. It is heavily focused on Charlotte Kann’s love affair with her stepmother’s singing tutor Alfred Wolfsohn – renamed Amadeus Dabehlor – who is paradoxically infatuated with Paula-Paulinka. Following the violence of Kristallnacht (Fig. 3), Albert sends Charlotte to live with her maternal grandparents in the French countryside. The “Epilogue” takes place in 1939 when Charlotte takes care of her grandmother, who, succumbing to her depression, dies by suicide. In June 1940, Charlotte and her, albeit emotionally abusive, grandfather are sent to Gurs concentration camp (Fig. 4a & 4b). They eventually return to their house in the South of France where Charlotte battles her own depression. She finds the will to continue living by spending the next two years painting *Life? Or Theatre?*, and this is where the narrative of the collection ends. These life events and more are represented in her paintings. We know, posthumously, that soon after bequeathing the work to her friend Otilie Moore, Salomon – who was then pregnant – was gassed upon arrival at Auschwitz at the age of 27.¹⁰

Aesthetically, Salomon’s paintings could be described as expressionistic, however, many art historians find the style of her work difficult to categorize, contending to the “challenge [of its] aesthetic containment and definition.”¹¹ The ambiguities surrounding its aesthetic categorization blend into the debate of its classification as an object – of history. *Life? Or Theatre?* is not meant to be “viewed” in the traditional sense of visual art, nor is it meant to be “read” in the traditional sense of biography. Salomon herself titled it a *Singspiel* – a “song-play.” Art historian Griselda Pollock contends it is a “fantasia.”¹²



Figure 3. Charlotte Salomon, *Leben? Oder Theater? Ein Singspiel* M004762, 1940-1942, [Web] Joods Cultureel Kwartier, Amsterdam. <https://charlotte.jck.nl/>. A depiction of Kristallnacht.

10. By this point, Salomon had married Alexander Nagler, also a German refugee, whom she met while in France. In the spring of 1943, Salomon and Nagler were both taken to Drancy before being sent to Auschwitz. Nagler was sent to forced labour until his death in 1944.

11. Ariela Freedman, “Charlotte Salomon, Degenerate Art, and Modernism as Resistance,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 41, no. 1 (2017):3–4.

12. Griselda Pollock, “Theatre of Memory: Trauma and Cure in Charlotte Salomon’s Modernist Fairytale,” *Reading Charlotte Salomon*, eds. Michael P. Steinberg and Monica Bohm-Duchen (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 68.

Others classify it as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or “total theatre,” a unified work of art where all elements work together.¹³ It could be compared to the likes of a film storyboard, and, in some ways, it even resembles a theatrical director’s notebook. Yet, regardless of its material aesthetics or historical content, the collection undoubtedly narrates Salomon’s life through its own theatricalization. This “theatre of memory” refuses stagnancy or fixity by historical or artistic definition.¹⁴ However, rather than fearing *Life? Or Theatre?*’s ambivalence towards stasis, we might perceive its very ambiguity as an opportunity to interact and resonate with it.

Concurrent to its artistic ambiguities, *Life? Or Theatre?* also defies traditional reputability in historical discourse. Ernst Van Alphen describes this “dichotomy between the historical and imaginative approach” to memory which surfaces as a conflict between the “objective” and “subjective.”¹⁵ Van Alphen challenges the dominant – historical – approach, which holds that to achieve historical credibility the witness’s testimony “must seem natural and unconstructed.”¹⁶ Van Alphen suggests that figurative discourse “allegedly implies that the subject could be represented in many different ways [thus] it has no necessary, and perhaps not even an actual, basis.”¹⁷ Therefore quantitative, tangible documentation such as records, diaries, and physical objects tend to constitute “objective” historical evidence. *Life? Or Theatre?* challenges these presiding historical beliefs because it is a form of testimony, though transmitted via artistic means. Assuredly *Life? Or Theatre?* “was an artistic staging not of the real, but of invented memory and imagined subjectivities,” yet, this does not mean that what Salomon depicts did not actually happen.¹⁸

Before deferring to the strictures of dominating historical procedure, relying on historical tropes of



Figure 4a. Charlotte Salomon, *Leben? Oder Theater? Ein Singspiel* M004915, 1940-1942, [Web], Joods Kultureel Kwartier, Amsterdam. <https://charlotte.jck.nl/>. Charlotte and her grandfather, Mr.Knarre, on the train to Gurs.

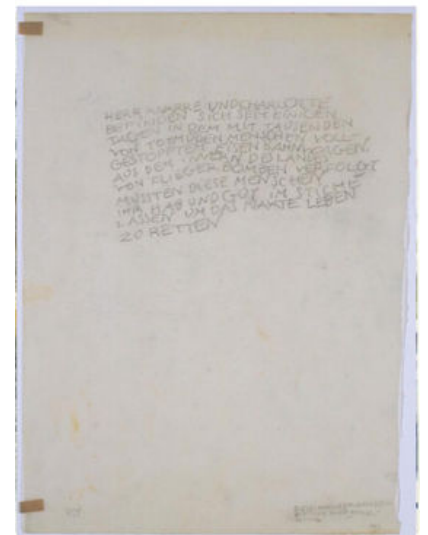


Figure 4b. Charlotte Salomon, *Leben? Oder Theater? Ein Singspiel* M004915, 1940-1942, [Web] Joods Kultureel Kwartier, Amsterdam. <https://charlotte.jck.nl/>. Accompanying overlay to 4a with descriptive text.

13. Oxford Reference, “Total theatre.” <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803105038165>.

14. Pollock, “Theatre of Memory.”

15. Ernst Van Alphen, *Caught by History: Holocaust Effects is Contemporary Art, Literature, and Theory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 17.

16. Van Alphen, 24.

17. Van Alphen, 28.

18. Pollock, “Theatre of Memory,” 68.

“Testimony” and “Witness” to establish historical factuality, we should look more closely at the value of figurative discourse. To further echo Van Alphen’s argument, this methodological hierarchy is essentially unfounded because no history can be truly objective; In actuality, all constructions of history are subjective because they are just that; constructions.¹⁹ Effectively, the level of “objectiveness” for both historical and imaginative approaches balances out. Both the historical and the imaginative are subjective, making them equally valid. Van Alphen takes this argument further. By stating that using the figurative can convey historical truths that cannot be easily expressed using “literal, factual, historical language,” Van Alphen posits that, “figurative expressions are [actually] more precise; they are able to represent situations and experiences that cannot be conveyed by literal expressions.”²⁰

Life? Or Theatre? delineates the imaginative testimony as subjectively and historically real. As a work that refuses artistic and disciplinary classification, Salomon offers a multidisciplinary imaginative personal account of the European Jew’s experience leading up to the Holocaust. Rather than purely objective or subjective, the work is, as Van Alphen explains, one of “allusive or distanced realism”:

Reality is there, in its starkness, but perceived through a filter: that of memory (distance and time), that of spatial displacement, that of some sort of narrative margin which leaves the unsayable unsaid.²¹

19. Van Alphen, *Caught by History*. The recent rise of digital methods in Holocaust education and preservation efforts has perpetuated a new stream of critical discourse among Holocaust Studies scholars. In *Reframing Holocaust Testimony*, Noah Shenker comments on the character of Holocaust testimony in the digital age, introducing the concept of “testimonial literacy.” Shenker calls for a critical and mindful consumption of Holocaust media, advising that we acknowledge the “layers, ruptures, and tensions” of a given source’s constitution, especially noting the things that “emerge...but [are] not necessarily [included into their exhibitory or official]” form. While Shenker’s analysis looks specifically at archival video testimony from leading Holocaust video archives, I propose that the treatment of any source of Holocaust material should include “testimonial literacy” so we can discover new, unmediated meanings. With this case study, by looking at *Life? Or Theater?* through a lens of testimonial literacy, the conditions of Salomon’s method, means, and circumstances of production come to light. Noah Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 2.

20 Van Alphen, *Caught by History*, 29.

21 Van Alphen, *Caught by History*, 34.

Life? Or Theatre?, fundamentally, portrays real historical events, societal issues, and personal and collective emotions from extractions of Salomon's memory. It thus "presents itself as a restaging in which the unintelligibility of lived life is reframed, rescripted, and given a dramatic structure" extracting dual meaning from the everyday mundane.²² It is a work that simultaneously defies the dominant understanding of Holocaust testimony, and offers new, multidisciplinary, opportunities for continued interaction with it.

It is precisely *Life? Or Theatre?*'s refusal to define itself within both artistic and historical conventions that invite engagement from diverse disciplines. Rather than trying to force *Life? Or Theatre?* into said categories through analyses of its artistic and historical context, we must expand the frameworks of these analyses to include its artistic and historical construction. By shifting our attention to the conditions of the work's temporal and performative fashioning, we discover that Salomon infuses it with potential, not just to present her history, but to re-present it as well. We find that these constructive elements of Salomon's work mirror Marvin Carlson's concept of theatrical "ghosting" or "recycling". Carlson defends that each new theatrical event or performance recycles elements seen or used in previous enactments; "Ghosting presents the identical thing they have encountered before, although now in a somewhat different context."²³ Carlson goes as far to suggest that "every play is a memory" itself:

Theatre, as a simulacrum of the cultural and historical processes itself, seeking to depict the full range of human actions within their physical context, has always provided society with the most tangible records of its attempts to understand its own operations. It is the repository of cultural memory, but, like the memory of each individual, it is also subject to continual adjustment and modification as the memory is recalled in new circumstances and contexts.²⁴

22. Pollock, "Theatre of Memory," 47.

23. Carlson, *The Haunted Stage*, 7.

24. Carlson, *The Haunted Stage*, 2.

Carlson argues that every work of theatre is always an inevitable reverberation of some element, ritual, cultural reference, or performative act from the past. His theory resonates that something does not come from nowhere; rather, everything comes from something, which came from something before it. This “ghostliness” is a somatic, perhaps uncanny, “sense of return” of something we have seen or encountered before.²⁵ Salomon affectively calls for imaginative representation of *Life? Or Theatre?* in various art forms, a process that would corroborate Carlson’s phenomenon. By exploring the ways Salomon constructs the work, and how the work inadvertently constructs itself, we find several ways in which *Life? Or Theatre?* exudes suitability, and desire, to be performed and performed again.

The temporal significance of *Life? Or Theatre?* demonstrates how memory and the imaginative can come together to create a reliable and expressive testimony of the Holocaust. As Van Alphen explains, no matter what historical event one recalls, it will always only be a recollection “because experience of the event is the only access one has to the event.”²⁶ He continues: “Experience is not a *transposition* of the event to the realm of the subject; it is an interpretive *transformation* that depends on the symbolic order to occur.”²⁷ Salomon relied on her own memories, and her memories of others, to create *Life? Or Theatre?*, ultimately allowing her to make sense of her life and experiences – as a Jew, as a woman. Although the events she depicts in her paintings could never be tangibly accessible after they have occurred, Salomon accesses and visualises these memories from the source of her own experience. If, as Van Alphen posits, “the experience of an event is already a representation; it is not the event itself,” then nobody, not even Salomon, could actually bring about events of

25. Carlson, *The Haunted Stage*, 1.

26. Van Alphen, *Caught by History*, 59.

27. Van Alphen, *Caught by History*, 59.

the past.²⁸ Just like anyone who lived through this period, including other Holocaust survivors who gave testimony post hoc, Salomon relied on memories of her experiences to represent the past. Through the act of painting, she expressed her own, subjective, conceptions of those moments in her life.

If we further widen this frame, another layer of temporality is exposed. As touched upon briefly, Charlotte Salomon began painting *Life? Or Theatre?* sometime in 1940 after returning from Gurs with her grandfather.²⁹ Yet, the narrative of the work – the first scene that Salomon depicts following “The Program” – begins in the year 1913. The first image (Fig. 5) is an abstract scene of dark streets lined with little trees, lampposts, and people. In the top left, a woman descends from a staircase holding – what seems to be – a book. In the bottom right, there is a large willow tree separating the streets from a dark river. A small figure – presumably Salomon’s aunt – jumps in the river to her death. The year “1913” is printed at the top of the scene.

In the final – and most notable – image of the series (Fig. 6), Charlotte Kann is kneeling in a green swimming costume, with her back to the viewer, against strokes of a royal blue sea; she is painting, and “Leben Oder Theater” is printed across her back in capitalized letters. Salomon ends *Life? Or Theatre?* by painting Charlotte – herself – starting to paint *Life? Or Theatre?*. As Claudia Barnet imparts, “[Salomon] ended *Life? Or Theatre?* with the moments of her life that preceded it, never painting the present tense.”³⁰ By inserting *Life? Or Theatre?* into itself, Salomon covertly acknowledges the very “gap” that integrates the past with the present. The reverberant process itself is brought into the light.



Figure 5. Charlotte Salomon, *Leben? Oder Theater? Ein Singspiel* M004156, 1940-1942, [Web], Joods Cultureel Kwartier, Amsterdam. <https://charlotte.jck.nl/>. The first illustration, from the “Prelude.”

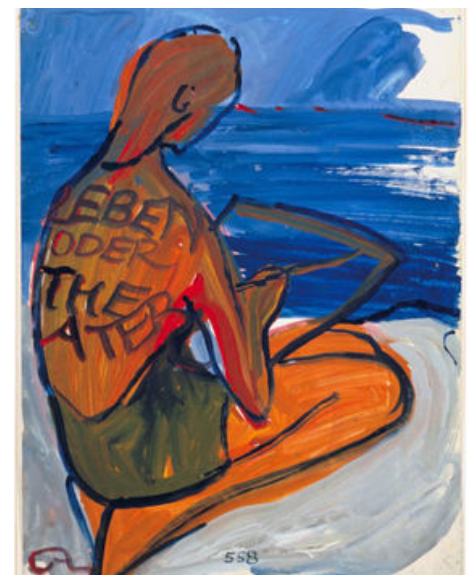


Figure 6. Charlotte Salomon, *Leben? Oder Theater? Ein Singspiel* M004925, 1940-1942, [Web], Joods Cultureel Kwartier, Amsterdam. <https://charlotte.jck.nl/>. The final image of *Life? Or Theatre?*

28. Van Alphen, *Caught by History*, 44.

29. Claudia Barnet, “Painting as Performance: Charlotte Salomon’s *Life? Or Theatre?*,” *TDR* (1988-) 47, no.1 (2003): 118.

30. Barnet, “Painting as Performance,” 118.

Life? Or Theatre? relies on memory to help do the telling and recognizes its own use of memory to create a work of memory art. The temporal circumstances of its construction, conflated with the temporal recognition within the artwork, validate it as a hybrid of historical artefact and artistic rendition. Moreover, we begin to see the likeness between the temporal process of memory and the imaginative/artistic process. *Life? Or Theatre?*'s insistence on exhibiting itself as a work to be experienced or performed is evocative of how Attilio Favorini views theatre, as "a 'time art'...[with] a formal affinity for memory."³¹ *Life? Or Theatre?*'s temporal construction as a work of "memory"/"time" art highlights the – albeit unavoidable – imaginative reworkings of the past. Its temporal self-awareness suggests its "temporal connectedness" with theatre as an art form that recycles past cultural practices in order to reperform them in the present.³²

Following these realisations, one can subsequently experience a recognition of themselves within this temporal frame; the work is constructed in Salomon's imagined present, from memories of her past. Today, one would experience a work of the past, which depicts Salomon's even farther past, in our present. It is a phenomenon that Meike Bal calls "preposterous": when "a historically later work changes an earlier one, or at least sheds a specific, new light on it that the make of the earlier work could not have known."³³ *Life Or Theatre?* was created in the era of the Holocaust and consists of a narrative from a time that preceded it. But given the nature of its creation and Salomon's death, its known and experienced ontological presence in the world could only ever come after Salomon's death – the work would have a completely different meaning had Salomon survived the Holocaust, had she not been rushed to finish it or had she

31. Attilio Favorini, "Some Memory Plays Before the 'Memory Play'," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 22, no. 1 (2007): 30.

32. Van Alphen, *Caught by History*, 25.

33. Mieke Bal, "Aestheticizing Catastrophe," *Reading Charlotte Salomon*, eds. Michael P. Steinberg and Monica Bohm-Duchen, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 177.

continued painting it.³⁴ If we are cast in the role of spectator, there is an added, subsequent layer of laboured imagination required of us because Salomon did not survive to share her story. This is indicative of “ghosting” in the sense that *Life? Or Theatre?* recycles memories of the past to create a palpable expression of Salomon’s memories for us in the present. Therefore, if *Life? Or Theatre?* actively recycles memories of the past to create its own reconstruction in the present, shouldn’t this process, a process innate to the imaginative approach, continue?

Another constructive quality to consider is *Life? Or Theatre?*’s performativity. At first glance, we might designate *Life? Or Theatre?* a performance piece, an object of work. But as Claudia Barnet insists “Salomon’s goal was not only to present a narrative, but to enact it.”³⁵ *Life? Or Theatre?* is a performance, a work of total theatre consisting of a script, characters, dialogue, and score; it is multidisciplinary, therefore, it calls for multidisciplinary expressions of itself. While this alone provides suitable justification for its representation on stage, Salomon does not simply contribute performance material. *Life? Or Theatre?* is not just a performance; it is performative. Salomon’s very creation of it calls us to include performance theory, which reveals how she and the work actively perform, to be designated, consequentially, already in a constant state of re-creation.³⁶ *Life? Or Theatre?*’s performativity ultimately assists its potential for artistic representation and for keeping Salomon’s memory – and that of the Holocaust – alive.

Without being too meticulous, I must establish an agreed understanding of performativity as a concept. While it has been – and still is – consumed in ongoing scholarly debate, for this study I refer to Elin Diamond’s

34. Bal, “Aestheticizing Catastrophe,” 177.

35. Barnet, “Painting as Performance,” 111.

36. Barnet, “Painting as Performance,” 97.

definition of a “Performative”, something constituted by a “doing” – an action, utterance, behaviour – and a “thing done” – something that is created by a particular doing within its temporal present.³⁷ Diana Taylor explains how “this doing/done lens allows us to understand performance across temporalities – present and past.”³⁸ Using this model in conjunction with the “testimonial genre,” the simple “act of writing in a diary” does not simply recall events of the past, but the writing is an event in and of itself.³⁹ As J.L. Austin asserts, “to utter the sentence...is not to *describe* my doing...or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it.”⁴⁰ Thus, by shifting the form of doing from speaking to painting, Salomon does not simply describe or express her memories in the paintings. Rather, in the very act of her painting them, she re-*does* them; She brings scenes, characters, and songs into existence within her present. Performance scholar Peggy Phelan notably reminds us that:

The description itself does not reproduce the object, it rather helps us to restage and restate the effort to remember what is lost. The descriptions remind us how loss acquires meaning and generates recovery – not only of and for the object, but for the one who remembers.⁴¹

The performative quality of any object, artistic or other, is dependent on a process of recollection and its ability to enact presence, making it “real” in the present and thus “a/live”. To deem *Life? Or Theatre?* as performative we acknowledge a “doing” – Charlotte recalling and painting her memories – and a “thing done” – the artwork as an object of re-presented memories. The very act of *Life? Or Theatre?*’s construction, its physical becoming, constitutes itself as a reiterated “thing,” a performance, that is ontologically present – its quality of “being” is heightened within present consciousness.

37. Elin Diamond, *Performance and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

38. Diana Taylor, *Performance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 7.

39. Van Alphen, *Caught by History*, 26.

40. J.L. Austin, “Lectures 1 and 2,” *How to Do Things With Words*, 2nd edn, eds. J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), 6.

41. Peggy Phelan, “The Ontology of Performance: Representation Without Reproduction,” *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 147.

Furthermore, *Life? Or Theatre?* is also considerably, what Vivian Patraka coins, a “Holocaust Performative”.⁴² Positioned against the model of the “Performative” embodied by a “doing” and “thing done,” the Holocaust Performative constitutes representation and reiteration as two symbiotic processes and two symbiotic objects. The representing and reiterating – the concurrent “doing” of re-presenting the Holocaust – allows for the “thing done” – the representation of “the thing *gone*” – to be “made ‘real’, through its own reiteration.”⁴³ With the Holocaust Performative, Patraka is concerned with the simultaneous presence/absence of those lost to the Nazi-orchestrated genocide. In this case, *Life? Or Theatre?* is not a performance of Salomon’s art or memories, it also becomes a means through which to make the absent – Salomon and her characters – ontologically present in the consciousness of those who encounter it. As Barnet emphasizes, Salomon “creates an artistic context in which she positions herself against a backdrop of characters whose very presence implies her own.”⁴⁴ By re-creating the people in her life through imagined characters manifested in her paintings, “she created bodies that could not be killed” by the Nazis, nor, by the hands of the characters themselves.⁴⁵

There is a thematic layer of absence within the work, as it is infused with the topic of suicide and allows one to observe Salomon’s own contemplation of life. An example of this is in one of the final gouaches in the “Epilogue” containing Salomon’s final monologue, her final “Verso”, where she paints the words:

Despite her utter weakness, however, she refused to be drawn into the circle of the straw-graspers... .. and remained alone with her experiences and her paintbrush. Yet, in the long run, to live day and night like this became intolerable even to a creature thus predisposed. And she found herself facing the question of whether to commit suicide or to undertake something wildly eccentric.⁴⁶

42. Vivian M. Patraka, *Spectacular Suffering: Theatre, Fascism, and the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

43. Ariel Roitman, “The Ontological Phenomenology of Puppetry in the Holocaust Performative,” *Etudes* 8, no. 1 (December 2022); Patraka, *Spectacular Suffering*.

44. Barnet, “Painting as Performance,” 116.

45. Barnet, “Painting as Performance,” 117.

46. Salomon, *Leben? Oder Theater?*, M004921 & M004922

But as Salomon tells us in the final line of this speech, the final line of *Life? Or Theatre?*, and into the final image:

With dream-awakened eyes she saw all the beauty around her, saw the sea, felt the sun, and knew: she had to vanish for a while from the human plane and make every sacrifice in order to create her world anew out of the depths....And from that came: Life or Theater?⁴⁷

As Michael Steinberg highlights:

Since Charlotte chooses to work as a way of choosing life, of choosing not to honour the family curse of the suicide of its women, the act of representation, together with its inherent theatricality, becomes the choice of life.⁴⁸

Steinberg presents a doubling magnitude for why we should continue to perform *Life? Or Theatre?*, so that we may further maintain the memory of the life she was given and that which she chose to live. We acknowledge how “[Salomon] implicitly projects a future, [by drawing] her audience into her past, and [thereby inhabiting] the continuous present.”⁴⁹ Every time someone encounters *Life? Or Theatre?* Charlotte’s story is re-performed. In Barnet’s description, Charlotte “haunts the work like a ghost, seeming fully present in her absence.”⁵⁰ *Life? Or Theatre?*’s construction renders it a tangible object in a spectator’s temporal present – their “now” – while simultaneously keeping Charlotte, her characters, and her testimony ontologically present – “here”.

Salomon’s construction of *Life? Or Theatre?* is performative in itself, but through its intentional artistic construction, the work dually performs as a means to re-present the absent. Its performativity speaks through its multiple ontological layers, accentuating evident correlations with theatrical “ghosting”. But as Freddie Rokem maintains: “It is obviously never the event itself that we see onstage. When the historical figures reappear

47. Salomon, *Leben? Oder Theater?*, M004924 & M004925.

48. Michael P. Steinberg, “Reading Charlotte Salomon: History, Memory, Modernism,” *Reading Charlotte Salomon*, eds. Michael P. Steinberg and Monica Bohm-Duchen (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 7.

49. Barnet, “Painting as Performance,” 120.

50. Barnet, “Painting as Performance,” 98.

on the stage through [the performers], the historical events are, rather, performed again.”⁵¹ Can we assume that Salomon’s artistic construction of *Life? Or Theatre?* implies her intention for it to be performed? By bestowing *Life? Or Theatre?* in an art form, Salomon allows the work to perform her own memories vis-à-vis imaginative recollections of the past. Thus, as a performance of memory, each subsequent adaptation of *Life? Or Theatre?* is a re-performance of Salomon’s memory. For every production company that performs it, the act of performing literally and ontologically represents her narrative, emulating the performativity already found in its construction. Essentially, it is “the dynamic of recognition” we find in the work’s performative construction, an “awareness of witnessing something once again,” that mirrors phenomenological “ghosting”.⁵² Every play, opera, or ballet adapted from *Life? Or Theatre?* echoes re-verberations of Salomon’s story.

By expanding one’s analytical framework to include *Life? Or Theatre?*’s artistic construction, we discern the process of theatrical “ghosting”. However, this processual recognition of the work alone is not enough. Any frame surrounding the analysis of this work must arguably extend to include *Life? Or Theatre?*’s relationship to relevant contemporary discourse. Those who prioritize the historical approach over the imaginative, maintain fear that any changes, additions, or extractions run the risk of distorting the artwork.⁵³ I, however, turn back to Van Alphen who posits that today “many Holocaust representations are based on the premise of forgetting instead of maintaining contact.”⁵⁴ In other words, there is a risk of closure if we do not maintain our own relationships with it. He continues:

51. Freddie Rokem, “Introduction: The Notions of ‘Performing History’,” *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), 6.

52. Carlson, *The Haunted Stage*, 6.

53. Reesa Greenberg, “The Aesthetics of Trauma: Five Installations of Charlotte Salomon’s *Life? Or Theatre?*,” *Reading Charlotte Salomon*, eds. Michael P. Steinberg and Monica Bohm-Duchen (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006) 162.

54. Van Alphen, *Caught by History*, 18.

The ultimate importance of remembering the Holocaust is situated not in the past events themselves, but in the past events as they exist in relation to our contemporary and future concerns.⁵⁵

Phelan supports this sentiment, denoting that historical preservation needs to answer to the, albeit imperative, “consequences of disappearance.”⁵⁶ With *Life? Or Theatre?*, the risk of closure percolates throughout the existing academic and historical discourse that surrounds it. Because, as Favorini reminds us, “theatre’s fundamental mode of repetition makes it a child of memory” through the omnipresent process of re-cycling, performance as a medium is well suited to showcase Salomon’s work.⁵⁷ In this regard, memory is and can be negotiated. We can shape and re-shape our social, historical, and political constitutions of the past and its relationship to the present. For, just as “performance is simultaneously real and constructed,” so is memory.⁵⁸ We recognize that *Life? Or Theatre?* is Salomon’s reconstructed imagination. Pulling from memories of her past, she reconceives them through artistic methods and means. The artistic re-imaginings of Salomon’s work by Bamboo + Horse, Theaturtle, the Salzburg Festival, and all the others, work to maintain and enhance the public’s relationship to it. For, as Carol Martin remarks:

[Theatre] is the reciprocity of cultural memory but, like the memory of each individual, it is also subject to continual adjustment and modification as the memory is recalled in new circumstances and contexts.⁵⁹

With each new potential adaption of *Life? Or Theatre?* we can participate in the re-making and re-presentation of Holocaust testimony. Only in allowing these adaptations and re-adaptions of Salomon’s work to occur do we, consequently, allow more space in which to encounter it.

55. Van Alphen, *Caught by History*, 63.

56. Phelan, “The Ontology of Performance,” 165.

57. Favorini, “Some Memory Plays Before the ‘Memory Play,’” 30.

58. Diana Taylor, “Translating Performance,” *Profession* (2002), 45.

59. Carol Martin, *Theatre of the Real* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 15.

By expanding our epistemological framework of *Life? Or Theatre?*, we create a space that presents us with the – creative – agency to ensure the maintenance of *Life? Or Theatre?*'s unruptured presence in our consciousness. It forges a place for Salomon in our future rather than regarding her simply as a figure of the past. This further speaks to the notion that performance – whether it be musical, dance, or theatrical – has immense potential to not just preserve Jewish stories but to widen their reach when physical exhibitions are inaccessible to potential audiences overseas.

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