Fig 1: Charlotte Salomon, Leben? Oder Theater? *1941-42, 'Franciska Haunted', JMH 4277, gouache on paper, 32.5x25 cm, 1941-42, Amsterdam, Jewish Historical Museum, reproduced courtesy of the Charlotte Salomon Stichtung*

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The Missing Photograph: Charlotte Salomon *Life? Or Theatre?* As the Encounter with Maternal Loss

Griselda Pollock

I

One hundred and twenty images into the cycle of 769 paintings that form an image-music-text, presented as a 'three-coloured operetta' and, titled, teasingly, *Leben? Oder Theater?/Life? or Theatre?* created in 1941-1942 by a twenty-five year old painter, Charlotte Salomon (1917-1943), we find the first full-face image of one of its key characters, Franziska (fig.1).

A long oval face is surmounted by two mounds of brown hair that frame her forehead. Large, almond-shaped brown eyes gaze out from beneath strong brows. A long straight but full nose leads down towards half-opened red lips. The figure is dressed in a dark jumper that fits closely with a frill round her neck. The face is painted against a deep blue, otherwise plain, background. In the empty hollows on the page on each side of her face two, mirroring, death masks enter into the picture from each side of the frame. White, with closed eyes but red lips, their ghostly presences might explain the distress on the face of the 'character' who stares out of the image. On tracing paper laid over the image, and written in large red capitals in gouache in a pattern that descends across the face and upper body of the central female figure is written: '"Am I to blame for her death?" my Fränzchen asked herself'. The 'her' whose death seems to haunt the central figure may be the intruding, repeated face with the closed eyes and deadly pallor. From their place in the sequence of paintings/texts of *Life? or Theatre?* we know that the death masks represent the recently deceased younger sister, Charlotte, who committed suicide in 1913 of the pictured 'Fränzchen.'

The enunciator of the overlaying statement, however, is not in the image. Nor is she the author of the painting. 'She' is the mother of both the women in the picture, the living and the dead sisters. The image represents her memories of her daughters. A painting, 23 paintings earlier in the sequence, introduces the dive into memory as *Scene 5* of the Prologue to *Life? or Theatre?* theatrically declaring that 'Mrs. Knarre has withdrawn entirely into herself and lets her tragic, troubled life pass before her eyes in her own poetic form.' (JHM 4254).[1] As if in hypertext, *Life? or Theatre?* has opened a wormhole into what the artwork *invents* as the memories of an old woman who has suffered terrible bereavements largely through suicides of many members of her family, including both her two daughters.[2] In this device of imagining her reflecting back upon her memories of her tragically burdened life, the viewer is made to

1. Charlotte Salomon's *Life? Or Theatre?* was given by her parents to the Charlotte Salomon Stichtung at the Jewish Historical Museum (JHM) in Amsterdam. I shall use their accession numbers as the means of identifying the paintings to which I shall refer. These are used in the CD-Rom version of the massive work. The paintings, without overlays are published in Facsimile as *Charlotte: Life or Theatre? An Autobiographical Play by Charlotte Salomon*, introduced by Judith Herzberg, London, Allen Lane, 1981.

2. Marianne Benda-Grunwald, the referent for this character Marianne Knarre, who endured her mother's prolonged attempts at suicide, the suicides of her two daughters, her brother, her sister, and her niece.

see her daughters through the eyes of a mother who traumatically, unnaturally, outlived both her children. Scene 5 works like a cinematic flashback to create a subjectivity for a woman who, at the time the paintings were being made, was herself also dead, overwhelmed by grief and terror at the fascist conquest of France, through suicide. It is in this 'telling' of events leading to the death of 'Fränzchen' that have already been narrated in the opening section of the work ((JHM 4179-4181) by means of a completely different visual mode and in a 'historical' rather than discursive manner that the viewer is brought 'face to face' with an image of Franziska.

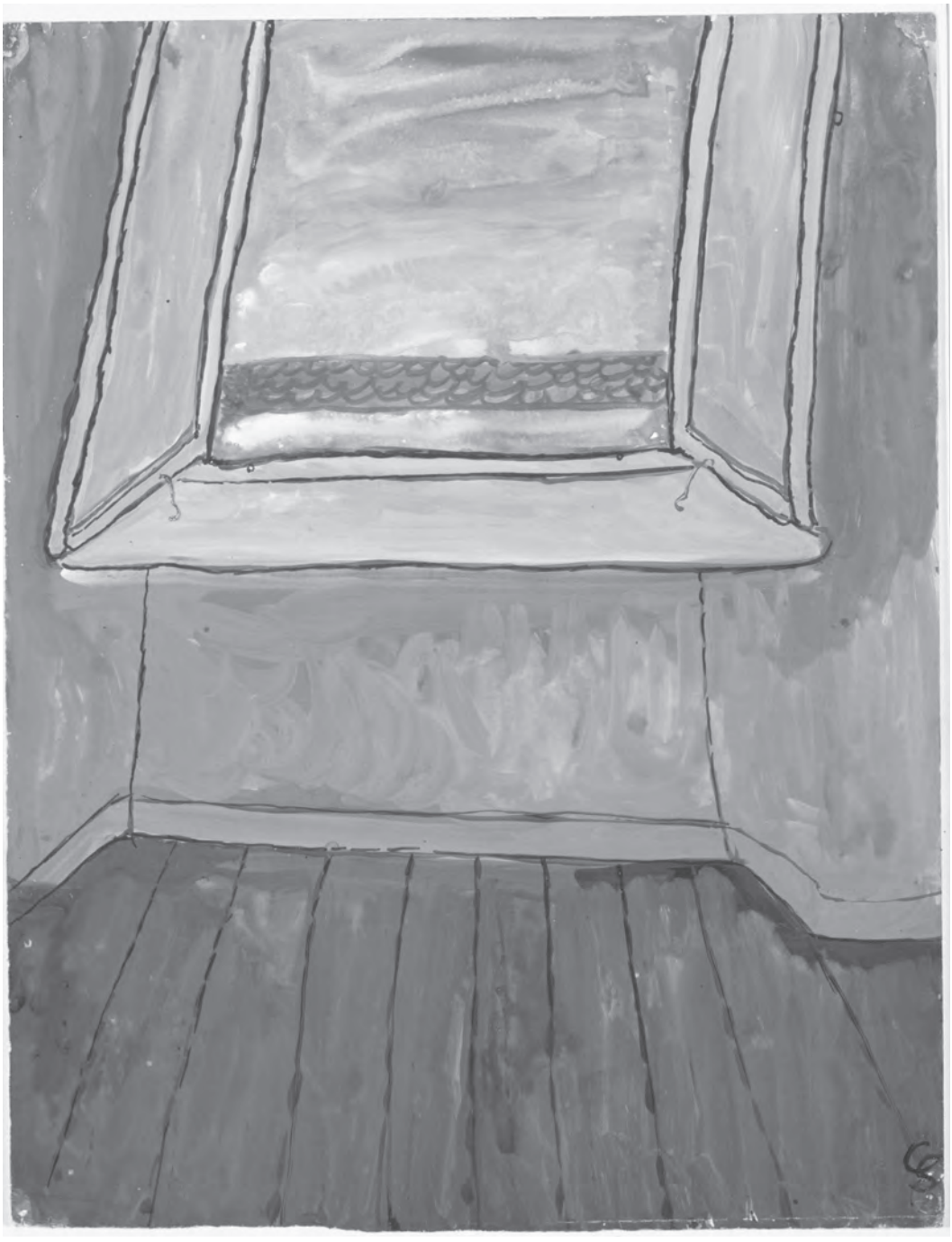
In painting 131 (fig. 2) another 'portrait' of Franziska occurs. Frontally and centrally positioned, this time the face appears in a reverse rhyme flanked by two other faces that seem to emanate from her head. Both face outwards and away from her. Far from pressing in to haunt her, they represent familial others who look away. These represent the woman's husband and daughter. Over this image lies a transparency on which we find reference to a melody: and the words: 'And my husband loves me not/ And my child, she needs me not/ Why, oh why am I alive … So her thoughts ran in her mind'. The final phrase inscribes again the narrating mother's/ the outsider's point of view, or, for the work, the invisible (grand) maternal narrator telling us how Franziska feels; the verses are provided as her own song, reminding us of the operatic motif of the aria as interior monologue. The work provides a visual image (that is not a portrait) to show, outwardly, the inward and invisible state of feeling abandoned by those in whose gazes of love and need the woman might find both her place and a reason to remain alive. Semiotically, this composition of three faces, therefore, signifies despair, but it indicates a specific kind of feminine despair, and further, someone else's despair, as imagined by an implied narrator telling (to herself in contemplative interior monologue) her troubling memories of her own daughter's apparent state of suicidal melancholy and also suggesting others' responsibility for it.

At a third level, both of the two characters' psychological states are being imagined and painted by a third person, temporally removed from both the moment of telling and the moment of feeling, but imagining both the grandmother's and the mother's states of mind in an activity of visual recreation, retrospectively performing its service for she who is painting absent women and examining such desperate feelings in a painting project created to hold something vital for life before her eyes.

This sequence will continue with a trio of paintings that borrow again from cinema's devices of shot/reverse shot to stage Franziska standing fully dressed looking out of a window where the viewer confronts her alone, face-on from a no-place outside that window. The second image swings around to view the same figure from behind, and thus from inside a room as she stares out into deep blue nothingness beyond the window. In the third image, the imaginary 'camera' remains in the same place. But the view before it is now empty (fig. 3). The woman has disappeared, and we are to understand, from the previous and much more graphic telling of her suicide in another section

Fig2 : Charlotte Salomon, Leben? Oder Theater? *1941-42, 'Franziska Despairs', JMH 4288, gouache on paper, 32.5x25 cm, Amsterdam, Jewish Historical Museum. Reproduced courtesy of the Charlotte Salomon Stichtung*

Fig 3: Charlotte Salomon, Leben? Oder Theater? *1941-42, JMH 4290/4291 gouache on paper, 32.5x25 cm, Amsterdam, Jewish Historical Museum. Reproduced courtesy of the Charlotte Salomon Stichtung*



of the work, that such absence signifies her leap to her death through the window. But instead of dark blue nothingness into which she formerly gazed, outside the window, we now are shown the brilliant light of a southern French Mediterranean seaside town flooding into the empty room. Beyond the

frame, therefore, is not the Berlin street scene in which the imagined suicide of Franziska 'historically' took place in 1926. Instead, I have established elsewhere that the image evokes the red tiled roofs of St Jean de Cap Ferrat on the Côte D'Azur where this massive painting and text work, *Leben? Oder Theater?* was being painted in 1941-2 in the Hotel Belle Aurore.[3] The gaze that this painting, therefore, inscribes into the image is finally that of the painter herself, located in her hotel room, painting the invented memories of /and the deaths of others.

Two things are happening here. Death is registered visually as a disappearance, which leaves a space of an emptiness. It remains within the image that employs it as an enigma and, at the same time, menacingly, as a luminous invitation. Is the painting eloquent of the painting subject's own moment of choice to live or die like this m/other? Secondly, the stalling of the visual 'camera' also produces an image of absence, a sense of what the report of another's death feels like because it cannot be registered except as what Tom Stoppard insightfully defines as nothing;

> Death is not anything … death is not … It's the absence of presence, nothing more … the endless time of never coming back … a gap you can't see, and when the wind blows through it, it makes no sound.[4]

Unlike the first narration in *Life? or Theatre?* of Franziska's violent death which concludes with a full page painting of the mutilated and bleeding body (JHM 4181), this death sequence, lodged inside the evocation of grandmaternal memory, ends with a consoling close-up of the sleeping face of the dead woman, painted now not in her distinctive blueness, but in earth colours, for as the text poetically, and sentimentally, if not tritely, declares, evoking German Romanticism: 'She was but part of nature's heart and earth again has claimed her [*Sie war ja nur…ein Stück Natur, und die Erde hat sie wieder*]' (fig. 4). In the(grand)mother's memory, the absent/dead woman is sustained by a consoling, idealised image, a remembered face.

II

I want to argue that Charlotte Salomon's *Life? or Theatre?* (1941-42) is about the death of women. Or rather, it asks: why do women kill themselves? In the light of the answers the artist discovered by visually and textually reconstructing other women's living and their dying in painted images framed by musically keyed texts, she will herself explore whether to live or die. Rather than autobiography telling a story that has been lived from a point always after that living, we might then follow Julia Watson and call this work *autothanatography*.: a writing about self and death.[5]

In *Life? Or Theatre?*, two Virgil figures accompany the painter as a modern Dante to Hell; two figures of Amor accompany her as Orpheus to the underworld to speak again to maternal and grand-maternal Eurydices whom the art work re-invokes and thus suspends between two deaths – their

3. For the evidence documenting this proposition and further discussion of this argument see Griselda Pollock, 'Life Mapping, or Walter Benjamin and Charlotte Salomon Never Met, in *Conceptual Odysseys*, Griselda Pollock (ed), London, I.B.Tauris, 2007, pp63-90.

4. Tom Stoppard, *Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, London, Faber and Faber, 1967, pp90-91.

5. Julia Watson, 'Autobiography as Cultural Performance: Charlotte Salomon's *Life or Theatre?*' in *Interfaces: Women/ Autobiography/Image/ Performance*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2002, p21 drawing on Susan Egan, *Mirror Lives*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1999.

Fig 4: Charlotte Salomon, Leben? Oder Theater? *1941-42, JMH 4292, gouache on paper, 32.5x25 cm, Amsterdam, Jewish Historical Museum. Reproduced courtesy of the Charlotte Salomon Stichtung*

first dying, and that which the art work restages for its traumatising re-examination. These two, still living others are a traumatised soldier who survived the trenches of World War I to become a Nietzschean-inspired singing teacher whom Salomon re-named Amadeus Daberlohn and an alto-soprano diva, her stepmother, who appears in *Life? Or Theatre?* as Paulinka Bimbam. Their faces and teaching will dominate a large part of this work. Neither a simple autobiographical narrative, therefore, nor even an autothanatography, this vast work is, I propose, an investigation into the deaths of others: it is, therefore, an *allothanatography*, *allos* being the Greek for other, *thanatos*, death. This thread leading to death is plotted out against the counterforce of artistic creativity represented in the masculine by Daberlohn, who believes art is created only by a close encounter with death, and in the feminine, by the golden Paulinka Bimbam: the teacher and the singer.

From the point of view of its own visual rhetoric, *Life? Or Theatre?* combines visual images of faces and visual recreations of their location and emplacement cued with a musically coded script that serves as the externalised, acoustic expression of inner feelings while the whole is framed by comments of its sometimes ironising chorus that represents the viewpoint of its author. In a postscript that was not included in the completed work, but was preserved, the artist provides an insight into this transitive structure when she writes:

> At that time I began work on the pages gathered here. I was devastated when I realized that my old despair about certain people was gaining the upper hand again and making me relapse into a slow, deathlike lethargy. If I cannot enjoy my life and work, I will kill myself. I am living only for you, to prove that people need mentors … I had to go further into solitude, completely away from all humanity. Then maybe I could find what I had to find: namely myself – a name for myself. And so I began Life or Theatre … The war raged on and I sat there by the sea and looked deep into the heart of humanity. I became my mother, my grandmother, in fact all the characters who take part in the play. I learned to travel their paths and become all of them.[6]

6. Charlotte Salomon, *Leben/Oder Theater?*, JHM 4930/4931 pt.1/2, Julia Watson (trans), in Julia Watson, 'Charlotte Salomon's "Postscript" to *Life? Or Theatre?*', *Signs* 28, 1, (2002): 428.

This passage suggests a double movement. As Julia Watson, translator and commentator on this postscript, stresses, the artist is searching for '*mich selbst*', myself, and for a name, which is not to be taken literally because her authorship is only marked by a self-disguising monogram, CS. We are to understand how central, therefore, a name is to a sense of identity, while authorship is only produced, performatively, by the creative production of a work that is itself the search for both a self and its self-inhabitation. Paradoxically, this search involves the radical alienation from the self and its projection into a host of characters, to one of whom, the Daberlohn character, the work is effectively addressed (he is the you of the above quotation), creating a metalevel I-Thou space within the work. The most challenging aspect of the work, however, is that the artist has to enter into the subjectivities of her mother and her

grandmother, both of whom were dead at the time of the creative withdrawal from humanity to make this work beside the sea.

I want to focus on giving the dead, the missing, the disappeared, a face and a voice, a face that shows on its exterior surfaces inner states of feeling to which musically inflected song lends affecting elaboration. The lure of being with the dead, which means also dying, therefore, is countered by luminous and intense faces that speak philosophy and sing consolation (Paulinka Bimbam is repeatedly shown singing the moving work once attributed to Bach, *Bist du bei Mir – If your are with me, gladly will I go to my rest*), while becoming spaces in which to lose oneself erotically or fantasmatically. I want to ask how can staging the faces of the dead and the living save a life (*bios*) that was not yet lived but was being endured as bare life (*bloße Leben*, *zoë*) under conditions of its imminent suspension by a fascist, anti-Semitic regime seeking world domination through world war? The immediate precipitate for Charlotte Salomon's despair, withdrawal, and intense creative work was the double horror of her thankfully brief but still traumatic incarceration in a French concentration camp at Gurs in June 1940 from which she was released to take care of her elderly grandfather who, it appears from the text and other evidence, was a sexual abuser of his daughters and his granddaughter. Thus the shadow of historical trauma linked to the specificity of Jewish history in the twentieth century falls powerfully over this work, whose author was cruelly murdered on her arrival at Auschwitz because she was pregnant, hence a living bearer of a Jewish future. Ernst van Alphen was one of the first scholars to explore the weight of this history, but also to argue against allowing it to overwhelm other, equally significant, questions posed by this work about gender, subjectivity and self-representation.[7]

Since *Life? Or Theatre?* was first exhibited in 1961 and extracts published in 1963, the dominant mode of analysis of this work has been autobiographical. But that in itself begs many questions. In his text, 'Autobiography as Resistance to History', Van Alphen declares the work 'a unique work of art', unique because it defies its own categories. The complexity of its registers, characters and sequencing signal the deformations impressed upon the life of Charlotte Salomon by a progressively more terrifying history. Gender also impinges and derails this attempt to speak as a woman-artist. Van Alphen identifies the battleground in the work between masculine images of creativity (Daberlohn's heroes being Adam and Orpheus) and feminine suicide. Ultimately he defines the work as a work of resistance against all for which her German-Jewish grandfather stood:

> The triple resistance against the grandfather demonstrates her gendered and artistic becoming. It also shows why interpretations of Salomon's work in the exclusive terms of either Jewish history and the Holocaust or a phase in the history of art profoundly misread this work. Her fictional representation concerns her alto-ego's struggle against this man who threatens her private life, her art, and, by extension and symbolically,

7. Ernst Van Alphen, 'Salomon's Work', *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, 3, 2 and 3 (1993): 239-253. I have also discussed the work as product of the moment 'before Auschwitz' in my 'Theatre of Memory: Trauma and Cure in Charlotte Salomon's Modernist Fairy Tale', in Michael P. Steinberg and Monica Bohm-Duchen (eds), *Reading Charlotte Salomon*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2006, 34-72, and in 'What does a Woman Want? Art investigating Death in Charlotte Salomon's *Leben? Oder Theater?*', *Art History*, 30, 3 (June 2007): 383-405.

> even the collective history in which she lived. Salomon transgresses the boundaries between categories that confine our readings, and she resists the traditions – of art, of history, of autobiography – that precluded her access to creation … or would have, if it had not been for her resistance.[8]

Over a decade later Julia Watson begged to differ from Van Alphen. She contested his conclusion that as a woman, Salomon was a 'woman narrator in quest of an autobiography'.[9] Drawing on Sidonie Smith's idea of autobiographical performativity, Julia Watson reads *Life? Or Theatre?* as a performative constitution of Charlotte Salomon as an autobiographical subject, providing a series of cultural frames through which to recognise the process of a such a production: Salomon's variations on the possibilities of self-representation that are not conventional self-portraiture, her play with the *Kunstlerroman*, the *Bildungsroman*, the Gothic narrative, the trauma narrative and the Ethno-Political narrative of Anti-Semitic persecution. Thus she concludes that the work represents radical experimentation:

> Taking herself exemplarily as an occasion for activating familial memory through self-study in the contradictions of a particular cultural moment, Salomon fuses self-portraiture and life writing into a hybrid form that radicalizes both in its articulation of subjectivity. The quest in Salomon's *Life? Or Theatre?* for a 'name' that will be paradoxically both image and process is a sustained and provocative autobiographical experimentation.[10]

Perversely, I have struggled against this tide of autobiographical readings of *Life? Or Theatre?* Even in the face of many remarkable commentators, and armed with the elaboration of ever more subtle theorisations of both autobiography itself and autobiography, gender and sexual difference, I remain troubled by the deeper implications of the tendency always to bind the work of women artists back so reflexively to their authors in ways which make it difficult to tease out the subtle, complex and challenging relations between gender and self-representation and between the artistic modes for enunciating subjectivity and the histories of sexual difference. In so many, almost infamous, cases of artists who are women, identification between the statement and its author causes what Vanessa Corby named a 'biographical collapse' so that feminine authorship can hardly be distinguished from the always suffering subject of an almost confessional and certainly unmediated exposure of a transparent self. Femininity all too easily, even within feminist discourse, becomes a form of psychopathology and is disidentified from any form of rhetorical invention, mediation or articulation of subjectivity as an effect of discourse. Frida Kahlo became the emblematic figure of this reductive reflexivity in the early development of feminist studies in art history.[11] Louise Bourgeois has now become the contemporary one.

8. Ernst van Alphen, 'Autobiography as Resistance to History: Charlotte Salomon's *Life or Theater?*' in Ernst van Alphen, *Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature and Theory*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1997, p89.

9. Julia Watson, 'Autobiography as Cultural Performance', op. cit, p350.

10. Ibid., p372.

11. Margaret Lindauer, *Devouring Frida: The Art History and Popular Celebrity of Frida Kahlo*, Middletown CT, Wesleyan University Press, 1999. For a counter example of serious art historical study of this artist see Gannit Ankori, *Imaging Her Selves: Frida Kahlo's Poetics of Identity and Fragmentation*, London and Westport CT, Greenwood Press, 2002, and Patricia Mayayo, *Frida Kahlo: Contra el Mito*, Madrid, Ediciones Catédra, 2008.

For the December 1982 issue of the leading American art magazine, *Art Forum*, Louise Bourgeois was commissioned by editor Ingrid Sischy to do a project for publication. The project appeared under the title *Child Abuse*. It opened with the lines:

> Some of us are so obsessed with the past that we die of it. It is the attitude of the poet who never finds the lost heaven and it is really the situation of artists who work for a reason that nobody can quite grasp. They might want to reconstruct something of the past to exorcise it. It is that the past for certain people has such a hold and such a beauty … Everything I do was inspired by my early life.[12]

The text then refers to the double page spread of two photographs. Each shows a young girl, the same one. In one photograph she is with an older woman; in the other with an older man. Both scenes are set in the mountains, taken perhaps on the same day. The child is wayward and unstill in both images. The text tells us:

> On the left, the woman in white is The Mistress. She was introduced into the family as a teacher but she slept with my father and she stayed for ten years.

This is an art project. In part, it appears to have developed from the creation of a montage of family photographs the artist assembled at the time of the commissioning of the first ever retrospective of the work of Louise Bourgeois which took place at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1982. The ever sagacious Anne Wagner, writing in 2002, reflects on the curious, troubling and ultimately overdetermined, fit between the cultural moment of the 1980s with its emerging 'wound culture' and hunger for survivor revelations of all kinds and the unexpected delivery into public by the hitherto cautious Louise Bourgeois of a ready-made trauma narrative of 'child abuse' which, as one critic Wagner cites declares, 'snaps the dossier on Miss Bourgeois closed before it could be fully opened'.[13]

Thus a provided story of the intrusive mistress, the betraying father and nanny/English teacher, taken at face-value, swiftly served an art critical community of the 1980s with *the*, biographical and traumatised, explanation of the art work which enabled a generalising reduction of Louise Bourgeois's work to direct, autobiographical expression, while rendering her, already in 1982 seventy-one years old, yet another version of the hysterical woman, the mad woman in the attic, the suffering feminine subject who is never master of herself but simply brings forth her pain. Clearly, serious art historians have tried to resist this cruel caricaturing of a truly remarkable and astonishingly inventive artist, notably Mignon Nixon who, like Anne Wagner, seeks to introduce the mediating insights of psychoanalysis about the pre-structured nature of our memories, and indeed to recognise the pre-figuring of our

12. Louise Bourgeois, 'Child Abuse', *Art Forum* 20, 4 (1982): 40-47, reprinted in *Louise Bourgeois: Destruction of the Father/Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews 1923-1997*, Marie-Laure Bernadec and Hans Ulrich Obrist (eds), London, Violette Editions, 1998, p133

13. Anne Wagner, 'Bourgeois Prehistories or the Ransom of Fantasies', *Oxford Art Journal*, 22, 2 (1999): 8. Mark Selzer, 'Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere', *October* 80, (Spring 1997): 3-26.

singular historical experiences in formative familial situations by fantasy.[14]

The point I want to make here comes from a different direction that concerns the image itself, the photograph, as the transport of forgotten pasts, whose often chance, or unplanned, casual registration of bodily gestures and poses, situations and relations with others, none the less, fix for later re-encounter the latent forces unconsciously enacted in the everyday events the photographs record. Two major sources hover: inevitably Roland Barthes who never showed the determining photograph of his mother in *Camera Lucida* and Jo Spence.[15] Feminist photographer and cultural theorist, Jo Spence broke the mould when she created her installation *Beyond the Family Album: Private Images/Public Conventions* for *Three Perspectives on Photography* at the Hayward Gallery, London in 1979.[16] Spence made us see the family photo, the family holiday, the family event as iconically prefigured, and as ideologically preframing our own knowledge and ignorance about the processes of socialisation within the family. We take up our poses, each in our own singular histories, to perform them for the camera. Returning, however, in adulthood to childhood images, now assembled as a jumbled mass, or sometimes carefully sequenced in chronological order by some family archivist, the image repertoire throws back to the viewer an iconological image of the past, disclosing what was hitherto unremembered and possibly unknown.

> Making and preserving a family snapshot is an act of faith in the future. Looking back at these modest records, made precious and mysterious with age, is an act of recognition of the past. But interpreting family pictures poses a series of challenges to different pasts, as memory interweaves with fantasy and public history.[17]

Louise Bourgeois did feel the pressure of her past, always. It was a creative resource. In 1994 she wrote: 'My childhood has never lost its magic. It has never lost its mystery and it has never lost its drama. All my work of the last fifty years, all my subjects have found their inspiration in my childhood'.[18] That something of its singular psychological qualities, its dramas, mysteries and pains pressed upon her and emerged in her work, providing its unfolding sculptural and graphic forms with certain psychic knots and emotional charges, even certain kinds of imagery: groups of standing figures, women's bodies trapped in houses, is unquestionable. In terms of current surrealist or expressionist art making, such uncanny images, especially when transformed by abstracted materialisations, however, called for no special explanation since the idea that the sources of creativity arose in childhood intensities was, after Freud, a *donnée*. But at a certain point, this past acquired a narratable form; it became a trauma narrative: *Child Abuse*.

My suspicion would be that the 1982 collation of the family photographs, to form a visual support for the required biographical chronology that accompanies a major retrospective publication, staged a renewed and visually provocative, *iconic* encounter with this past, stored and symptomatically

14. Mignon Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Study of Modern Art*, Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 2005.

15. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Richard Howard (trans), London, Fontana, 1982.

16. Jo Spence, *Beyond the Family Album* shown at *Three Perspectives in Photography* London, Hayward Gallery, 1979, reproduced in Jo Spence, *Putting Myself in the Picture: A Political, Personal and Photographic Autobiography*, London, Camden Press, 1986.

17. See also Jo Spence and Patricia Holland (eds), *Family Snaps: The Meaning of Domestic Photography*, London, Virago, 1991, p1.

18. Frances Morris (ed), *Louise Bourgeois*, London, Tate Publications, 2007, p81, statement dated 1994.

configured in the image-history of the family album.

I want to suggest, by means of this digression, that Charlotte Salomon's project involved the *invention* of such an iconic history of the world into which she had been born, a public history and a private family world which from the perspective of revelations made to her by her grandfather in 1940, turned out to be full of secrets and deaths whose traumatic loads she may have felt without ever knowing their shape or cause. I cannot go into detail here but there is one painting situated in the aftermath of the death of the mother Franziska that shows tiny Charlotte haunted by a horrible skeleton whenever she visits the grandparental apartment which is linked with her mother's death. It could be read either as the spectre of death or the menace of the sexual abuser. Either way it is represented through the iconography of German expressionist cinema like a Nosferatu threatening the child.[19] At a moment of decisive choice about her own living and dying in 1941, Salomon created a visual theatre for invented memories of the others who should fill the isolated and menaced exile's missing family album, and who could, by means of her artistic hybridisation of theatre, opera, modern art, illustration and cinema, be made to speak/sing to her from either the grave or the lost home of Berlin from which she was exiled.

19. JHM 4189.

When art historians seek in supplementary documents for biographical information, they call upon the archive of photographs each family now preserves. It is possible to match the existing photographs of people in Charlotte Salomon's family and educational circles to the characters she created and so fancifully named. Indeed in one of the post 1998 cycle of extensive exhibitions of *Leben? Oder Theater?* which took place at the Holocaust Art Museum at Yad Vashem, Jerusalem in 2006, the curators made a fascinating choice.[20] In order to assist the visitors into their typically autobiographical reading of the work that is now unchallenged in curating this work, they lined up surviving photographs of the family members and friends with their real names alongside their images in the art work with their operatic names, thus, for example identifying Paula Lindberg as Paulinka Bimbam, Ludwig and Marianne Grunwald with Dr and Mrs Knarre and so forth (fig. 5).

20. Monica Bohm–Duchen pioneered a new sequence of major exhibitions of Charlotte Salomon's work in international art and Jewish Historical Museums after the show she curated and toured that began at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, a sequence which has continued up to the most recent installation of a second set of exhibitions curated by Edward van Voolen in Frankfurt, Hannover and Berlin in 2006-07.

This juxtaposition of two systems of representation, in which the photographic image functioned as the indexical referent for a historical individual of whom the painting was then a resembling portrait, effectively eradicates from view everything significant about the act of creating the work, the paintings, the namings, the stagings, and return to the past and the creation of a theatre of memory. But let that problem stand for a moment. What struck me profoundly was the fact that this doubled sequence was incomplete. It could not be sustained, because amidst the many photographs that remain of the personalities invoked in the work, there is none of Fränze Grunwald-Salomon, Franziska Kann in the work, the mother of the artist/Charlotte Kann. So glaring was the gap on the wall, so telling a void, so unremarked the violence of erasure, that it cried out for explanation.

Fig 5: Introductory Installation of Family Photographs at the exhibition of Charlotte Salomon, Leben? Oder Theater? *At the Holocaust Art Museum, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 16 June 2006, curated by Yehudit Shendar*

Fränze Salomon was the second daughter of a doctor, Ludwig Grunwald and his wife, a poet, Marianne Bender. She died in 1926. Her only daughter, the artist Charlotte Salomon was then eight years old. In a state of prolonged depression, Fränze committed suicide by leaping from a window in her parents' apartment on Kochstrasse in Berlin where she was being nursed by her parents. Her child was simply told that her mother had succumbed to the deadly influenza epidemic. In 1930, her widower, Albert Salomon remarried a woman, Paula Levy/Lindberg, an opera singer, with whom Charlotte became enamoured and ultimately, rival for the love of the singing teacher Alfred Wolfsohn. After the pogroms of November 1938, Charlotte Salomon was forced to flee Germany under the pretence of a weekend visit to her grandparents in France, since her parents' passports had been confiscated and she would need her own once she reached the age of 21.

If these are the 'facts', the absence of any surviving photograph of the artist's mother, in either her grandmother's archive, her own, her father and stepmother's, invites several, all traumatic, explanations.

1) All photographic material from her own family was left behind when the grandparents left Germany shortly after the Nazi take-over. (Not true as we have several.)
2) No photographs were given to the child to become part of her fundamental treasures that would have accompanied her when in turn she had to flee Germany in 1939.
3) No images were preserved by her husband and taken with him when he fled to Amsterdam at the same time.
4) All Charlotte Salomon's personal effects perished when she was arrested in 1943 by the Gestapo.

Whatever the cause, it was only when the curatorial decision was taken at Yad Vashem to create this information panel that the empty space of the missing

photograph shouted out its traumatic absence, at least to this feminist art historian. Yet, when we turn to the work itself, the life and death of Fränze Salomon insists; her life is detailed in richly painted scenes and her death represented not once but twice, in two different representational systems. It was with these full-face images of the mother Franziska that I opened this paper.

How do we read these paintings now in the light of the apparent non-existence, disappearance, non-survival of any photograph, any indexical documentation of this person, the artist's mother? Is this absence of an image significant in shaping the work as the story of the mother whose life and death changed the shape of her daughter's while becoming, in 1941, in the moment this unusual and atypical work of invention was conceived, the central death as absence that needed to be worked through, confronted in various forms and countered by love and art, sex and song?

Mother-loss is a major, traumatic event for any daughter. Hope Edelman's impressive and important collection of women's testimonies to its effects, varying by age of death and age of bereavement but never ending, *Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss* was for me a revelation when I found it in 1994, just a year after I had first dared to speak/write publicly about the death of my own mother, when I was fourteen, in a performance work titled *Deadly Tales*.[21] My move into personal reference within the context of a reflection on death and sexual difference was made possible by what we later recognised was itself a widespread feminist moment of 'getting personal' and focussed feminist interest in the memoir and the autobiographical.

Anyone thinking about feminism, memoir and biography-writing linked with mother-loss will, predictably, think back to Virginia Woolf. In 1976, Jeanne Schulkind transcribed several unpublished fragments of autobiographical writing by Virginia Woolf under the title 'Moments of Being'.[22] The phrase occurs in *Sketch of the Past* and was interpreted as a fundamental statement of Woolf's philosophy of life, in which she linked fiction and autobiography as simultaneous quests for a means of writing towards such 'moments of being' in which otherwise mundane and insignificant living is recognised as part of a larger whole. Not merely about telling personal stories, writing in whatever genre thus seeks to find the means to register and articulate moments of individual intensity of both self-awareness and its inevitable, necessary and defining inter-connectedness. Such relationality is both inter-personal, social and historico-cosmic.

Virginia Woolf's life was decisively altered by her mother's death in May 1895. She was thirteen. It is in *A Sketch of the Past* that Virginia Woolf discloses two very important revelations about her mother and the role of her mother's death in her consciousness:

> Until I was in my forties … the presence of my mother obsessed me. I could hear her voice, see her, imagine what she would do or say as I went about my days' doings. She was one of the invisible presences who after all play so important a part in every life.[23]

21. Hope Edelman, *Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss*, New York, Delta, 1994; Griselda Pollock, 'Deadly Tales' in *Looking Back to the Future: Essays on Art, Life and Death*, London, Routledge, 2000.

22. Jeanne Schulkind (ed), *Virginia Woolf: Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, London, Pimlico Editions, 2002.

23. Virginia Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past' in Schulkind, op. cit, p92.

This deeply personal avowal is followed, however, by a more general reflection:

> This influence by which I mean the consciousness of other groups impinging upon ourselves; public opinion; what other people think and say; all those magnets which attract us this way or that or repel us the other and make us different from that; has never been analysed in any of those Lives which I do so much enjoy reading, or very superficially.

The sense of others, the ordinary daily way in which others haunt and impinge upon the becoming-subject seems never to be captured in the traditional modes of biographical writing which wish to set off the individual from the ground of *his* world. It would be easy here to suggest a classic gender difference between the notion of the Life, the proper biography of the proper biographical subject, the Great Man that Leslie Stephen wrote and the new, modernist, and perhaps feminine avant-garde exploration of sensibility and subjectivity that Virginia Woolf was seeking to bring forth into literature by writing. At this intersection of difference, the remembered presence and then the absence of her mother becomes a critical figuration of the specific nature of connection and the specific trauma of its unprocessed rupture between generations of women.

> Yet it is by such invisible presences that the 'subject of this memoir' is tugged this way and that everyday of his life; it is they that keep him in position.

Then from the general, Woolf returns to the originating statement:

> It is true that she obsessed me, despite the fact that she died when I was thirteen, until I was forty-four.

What released her at forty-four? Woolf tells that one day, walking around Tavistock Square, she made up *To the Lighthouse* in a great apparently involuntary rush. The form of the book and its writing functioned as what we can call a 'working through' of an incomplete mourning. Thereafter, Woolf tells us that 'I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her.' She muses:

> I suppose I did for myself what psychoanalysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest (p93).

Woolf does not admit to knowing what the *explaining* was or did. It leaves us, as does analysis itself, only with the effect of a talking, or here a writing, or perhaps for Salomon, a painting cure without really knowing how its effects come about except through the encounter with the past returned to the

subject, structured by representation.

The death of a mother is, as Virginia Woolf testifies, the end of something. Nothing is the same thereafter. It introduces a finality and a radical change that alters the life that comes thereafter irrevocably. Charlotte Salomon was almost nine when her mother 'died'. She was twenty-two when she learned how she died, and within days of discovering the fact of her mother's suicide, she witnessed that of her grandmother by the same horrifying means, finding the broken body and cracked, bleeding head upon the pavement outside a Nice apartment. The hidden trauma, the unknown but ever-present secret, suddenly revealed, now appeared before her eyes as she witnessed the death of her mother's mother, the last link to her maternal line, the suffering woman whom she had tried to keep alive by singing Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* to her through anguished sleepless nights, and by inviting her to tell her life-story in her own poetic words as a substitute for wanting to die.

How would she blot out the image of the broken, bleeding body, that, none the less, she would have to track her way back to, through plotting the story of her mother's life, a story that is begun with the death in 1913 of the sister Charlotte who haunted the image with which I started. In the final image that is inserted after six pages of explanatory text, the folded CS body of a young woman sits beside the sea and takes up her brush to begin to paint. The brush makes its first scan of the paper, laying on the dark tones of the night scene of suicide with which the work began and will begin, blocking out the sea seen through the apparently transparent paper on which the painting is being laid. This blue of sea and sky, this blue that is the support for the painting to come, is that now the dispersed and displaced presence of the maternal found everywhere in this landscape of southern colour? Does she, who was haunted and haunted her daughter, no longer need to be figured, given the face and presence that was missing in the absence of any visual reminder, but whose face seems so vividly imprinted on her daughter's memory that she can repeatedly paint it? Was Charlotte Salomon released by her own *To the Lighthouse*, not a novel but a grand, multi-media creation that needed to be both text and image, that needed both visual and acoustic dimensions, that was painted because there were no images of this history she needed to review? Is the missing photograph of the artist's mother one of the clues to the way in which this artwork came into being? Not autobiographical, none the less, the work can find its place in genealogies of artistic work by women about their pasts, their families, their mothers because these are fundamental to the becoming of a subject who can begin to name her-self, a subject in the feminine by means of these connections and resolutions of the nature of relations past and present.

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A photograph exists in the surviving Salomon family album. I am told that it shows Charlotte Salomon aged eight, that is between April 17 1925 and

Fig 6: Photograph of Charlotte Salomon, as a child in Berlin. Amsterdam, Jewish Historical Museum, reproduced courtesy of the Charlotte Salomon Stichtung

April 16 1926, the year her mother killed herself (fig. 6). It shows the little girl on the balcony of the apartment on Wielandstrasse, in fashionable Charlottenburg, Berlin. She is holding a doll in one hand, the other lies along the table. The child does not smile at the camera. She stares with an even unflinching gaze towards whoever was there watching her. Was she playing quietly with the little other when her father found her and photographed her? Was it her mother who looked that summer's day at her daughter replicating maternal tenderness? Was it taken elsewhere by grandfather Grunwald, already predatory? Without other histories, photographs do not yield such information. Thus I do not know the answer. But the gaze of this child now stares out to greet us, wondering who she was, so fearless? stern? self-contained? prematurely grown-up as the daughter of a depressive mother? When she looked into her own face to paint it as self-portrait or for her great work, whose trace did she seek? Is it her own gaze that we encounter when we look at the paintings she made of a mother she had not seen since she was eight, and of whom she apparently had no image?

Writing of *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* Leigh Gilmore argues that by studying cases that lie at the very limits of autobiography and appear not to conform to its conventions, we can, none the less, identify autobiographical processes at work.[24] Thus it is hard to suggest that anything falls outside of such a pliable genre. Perhaps Charlotte Salomon's work is such a limit-case, legible in terms of the ways in which trauma and its testimony necessarily deforms the normal modes of self-representation, forcing a kind of projection into third persons and others: *allos* in place of the impossible, still to become 'self': *autos*. But without a specifically feminist attention to which *other* the work sets out to encounter from across time and the grave, we will miss the vital, as well as deadly, core of the work in the creation of an image for the missing m/other.

24. Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2001.