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Mary Lowenthal Felstiner. *To Paint Her Life: Charlotte Salomon in the Nazi Era.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. xiv + 291 pp. $16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-21066-0.

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A Theatre of Truth

This book is a biographical review based on an autobiographical work. It is one of the few critical pieces on Charlotte Salomon currently available in English. In its second edition, it boasts a powerful insight into the artist, her work, and how the Holocaust both forced her to develop at great speed, and to die prematurely.

It is an important publication for Holocaust scholars as well as students of art history, psychology, and women's studies. It will also hold value for the lay reader. This is a book which presents an artist who, in a wave of intensity in the year prior to her death, produced a body of work in its execution and conception comparable to that of the great modern masters. Salomon is an important female protagonist in the fields of visual culture and Holocaust studies, and one that is seldom addressed in curricula. Above all, Felstiner has represented Salomon as human and fallible and as a woman with the guts and integrity to construct meaning from her own fragile existence.

The book has been very cleverly designed and written. It moves on a number of parallel levels, linking Charlotte's use of layering with the levels of deception with which she was raised. Charlotte's narratives are exciting, moving, and poignant, and they illustrate the flexibility of the human psyche before inevitable destruction. Felstiner's commentaries on Charlotte's work illustrate the complex dilemma of self-destruction for Charlotte: not only was suicide widely seen as a solution to the political quandaries of the time, it was an internal blight, activated by the clinical tendency to suicide in Charlotte's family.

The book takes the reader through the narrative of *Life? Or Theatre?* , an operetta constructed by Salomon from more than a thousand drawings and interwoven with text, image and song on semi-transparent overlays. In doing so, it mirrors Charlotte's life with that of her semi-fictional alter-image, Charlotte Kann. It also documents the way in which the Holocaust touched the life of one individual and everyone close to her. Felstiner links the main protagonists carefully throughout. One of the subsidiary lines of narrative which she traces focuses on the coming of age and rise to power of Alois Brunner, who headed the war machine that eventually killed Charlotte.

The three sections of the book are broadly determined by the places in which Charlotte lived. The subsections focus on her different emotional states of mind–and they cast an image of the developing Charlotte, who grew from a nondescript little girl into a woman of passion and integrity, not frightened to express herself or reveal her Jewish identity–even through anti-Semitic official channels.

Felstiner has enabled the structure of this book to emulate that of the operetta. Elegantly written and carefully researched, it is a very emotional read and follows clear story lines. In many scenes, the distinction between the events recorded in *Life? Or Theatre?* and Charlotte Salomon's lived experiences is not always clear. This is because of the dearth of information on her, but it effectively contributes to the drama of the narrative. As the threads connecting Charlotte with Brunner remain tenuously present throughout, so is there a constant undertone of the terrible events which forced Charlotte to take steps back from the horrifying realities of her life–in its historical time-frame as well as personally–to create *Life? Or Theatre?* . Making this work was a source of emotional succour and a place from which to question and criticise people's behaviour and examine the contin-

uum of her life.

Charlotte responded unusually to all the destruction which she was heir to. Unlike her family members, she did not elect to destroy her life but rather to recreate it in what she terms a three-colour opera. This concept is profound as it is modern. It is the actualisation of a play or film through painting each separate scene or still and writing the words and music appropriate to each, on overlays. In making this work, Charlotte is articulating the choice which she made to live for all of those who had committed suicide. Unlike a purely factual account, the author has poetic license. Here, each character speaks through Charlotte.

Interestingly, the unbearably demeaning conditions which Charlotte faced in Gurs, France and later in Auschwitz, are not dealt with at all in her work. *Life? or Theatre?* is about seeking out a positive reality in an overwhelming negative situation.

Felstiner has researched into the areas of Charlotte's life not mentioned in *Life? Or Theatre?* . Significantly, one of the areas raised is that of the discrepancy in behaviour and treatment of women and men in single sex prisons. This aspect of Felstiner's research and writing raises issues of woman abuse during the Holocaust not previously explored in the literature.

Through Felstiner's interpretation and translation of many of the overlays, an absurd and black humour becomes evident. This is due in part to the blatancy of many of the expressed emotions, which in some instances are almost obscene in their outright spontaneity. This outlet is significant in the psychological make-up of a young woman, stained by so many suicides in her family and the brutal way in which she learnt about them. Her renditions, perceptions and commentaries were also sullied by her contemporary world and by premonitions of the horror it would hold for her. Salomon's life testimony is neither sweet nor sentimental: it is a harsh and critical overview of the distorted truths and layers of deception which constituted and boldly coloured so much of her life. This sense of layering was one which compelled her to be as explicit as possible in every given circumstance of her life.

The book follows chronology, in European history as well as in *Life? Or Theatre?* . Felstiner begins in 1913, at the suicide of Charlotte's aunt. Charlotte was born four years later, and *her* narrative intermingles this suicide with subsequent events. In recording events leading up to the mid-1940s, Felstiner's writing becomes staccato in form–comprising quotes from different witnesses in unison.

The book follows all the main protagonists' lives to their ends, bringing the reader to the present day, where Brunner may still be alive and, pathetically, his significance may still be inescapably linked to the Holocaust.

The layout and design of the book emulates a quality of *Life? Or Theatre?* . The page which introduces each new section features one of Charlotte's images, reduced to a watermark–as though it were an overlay. It is a pity that the amount of images contained in this book are restricted, as many of them are analysed in detail by Felstiner, whetting the reader's appetite.

The book is a powerful and evocative exploration of a life so damaged by people near and far from Charlotte that her only recourse was to the truth which she found in the act of painting. Felstiner has ably given life, freedom, and credibility to Charlotte's gesture of recreating herself and immortalising her story through her legacy of paintings. Ultimately, Charlotte's making of this work and secreting it for future readers, beholders, and performers was a victorious one, one which has indeed given her immortality.

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