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Charlotte Salomon's Interventions

with Darcy Buerkle

March 02, 2016

59 minutes, 43 seconds

Speaker: Darcy Buerkle

Transcribed by: Rachel E Lieu

[Holocaust Living History Workshop](#)

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Time Transcription

00:00 [UCTv University of California Television www.uctv.tv]

00:19 [Read Write Think Dream The Library UC San Diego Channel]

00:24 [Read Write Think Dream www.uctv.tv/librarychannel]

00:28 [The UC San Diego Library and the UC San Diego Jewish Studies Program Present]

00:33 [The Holocaust Living History Workshop Charlotte Salomon's Interventions featuring Darcy C. Buerkle author "Nothing Happened: Charlotte Salomon and the Archive of Suicide" Associate Professor of History, Smith College March 2, 2016]

00:39 Darcy Buerkle: You know because you've seen the posters for this talk that I am going to talk about Charlotte Salomon and I am going to talk about suicide and I know that that makes everyone nervous and uncomfortable and that is still the case for me and I have been working on this for a long time and every single time I come back to this material or give a talk about it I am very aware of that. I also believe that Charlotte Salomon's work is it okay if I put this here, yeah, suggests to us that we do have to pay attention to things that make us uncomfortable. That her work is precisely an appeal not to turn away and to that end I'm interested in an argument against what I see as the management of survivor testimony and the disciplining of the survivor's story and we'll come back to that. So but it is right, to be clear from the start, that what follows moves into territory that has been often avoided and with good reason. So this lecture will it be both about the artist and aspects of her work that in my view function as important interruptions in a narrative of German Jewish history that only a uniquely talented and desperate human being could achieve. To that end we will look at many of her paintings, We'll spend a lot of time looking at paintings. In closing, I will say a few words about the story of my own book on Salomon, what looking closely at the interventions that she sought to make involved and I'm grateful for the opportunity to share a bit of that with you this evening as well.

02:27 Darcy Buerkle: So first some biography, Charlotte Salomon was born in 1917 in Berlin. She took refuge in the South of France in 1939 with her grandparents on the grounds of a villa owned by the American Author Lee Moore who was at that time housing and hiding Jews. Salomon arrived there having left Berlin with a tennis racket, some records, and a small suitcase. Less than a year later, simultaneous with the news of the advancing German army, Salomon's grandmother Mariana Grunwald died by suicide. After a first and failed attempt to overdose, she had jumped to her death. Following her initial effort, however, her husband, Salomon's grandfather, had already turned to their granddaughter Charlotte and revealed family secrets. This is when she learned, so she tells us, that her grandmother's suicide was not the first in the family. Her mother Franziska and her aunt Charlotte, both of the Grunwald's daughters, and their only children had also died by their own hand and they had done so before 1933. This made them part of an emerging statistical situation in which German Jewish women were exceeding the rate of suicides by non-Jews considerably. By the 1920s German Jewish women were four times as likely as Catholic women and three times as likely as Protestant women to be recorded suicides.

- 4:02 Darcy Buerkle: These numbers were a source of both profound concern and shame in the German Jewish community, of course. There were however public conversations and organizing to push back against these expressions of despair at the time. In the wake of her grandmother's death on March 5th, 1940 Charlotte Salomon painted over 1,300 semi-autobiographical paintings to visually record her life. Of these, she chose 769 sequenced images to comprise a work she called *Life? or Theater?* The title of this talk is shadows is Charlotte Salomon's interventions and just the sheer fact of the enormity of the project Salomon managed to complete is the first and most general of several interventions I want to discuss in this most general sense than by intervention I mean not only the force of Salomon's will that allowed her and compelled her to make so many paintings but the force of her will to tell a version of her story that had specifically been hidden from her until her grandmother's first suicide attempt. By aloud reading in gouache the lives of the women in her family who had died by suicide Salomon pries open a secret that was fundamental to her family but, it turns out is just as fundamental to the study of suicide more generally.
- 05:26 Darcy Buerkle: In telling her family's story Salomon also tells a larger story about how the secret of death by suicide is linked to a culturally agreed-upon pact to deflect the details of interior lives in crisis, especially when such detail threatens to disrupt the social fabric of the bourgeois family. This is particularly true when the suicide is that of a woman. Some of the most recent reception of Charlotte Salomon's paintings has worked to secure her place in the canon of art history. I support this effort of course, but I think her canonization in art history, so to speak, cannot, should not be the whole of the story. In leading you through a central narrative in Salomon's oeuvre. I mean to highlight her participation in a generational critique that was stopped short by the Holocaust, but which was no less committed to departing from the perceived superficialities of bourgeois life than the German Jewish critics whose reception reached its apogee in the wake of the war. I believe that Charlotte Salomon, in other words, while younger than the likes of Walter Benjamin and other Frankfurt School critics was involved in thinking through the same set of presuppositions that animated those much more famous and philosophical Jewish inquiries into authority, the family, and fascism.
- 06:55 Darcy Buerkle: By looking specifically at her suicide paintings, and there are close to 300 of them, so this will be a partial survey, I want to focus less on the fact of the suicides than on the meaning that the artist assigned to them. Meaning that positions these suicides as devastating loss but also as a site of critique and of conventions, The paintings represent a space of intervention then, not only for their interruption of a familiar narrative but also for the way that they interject questions about the specific conditions of the lives she reimagines. Salomon's commitment to a history of events that were specifically hidden from her disrupts the common historical practice devoted to notion of -- notions of events for which there is a particular kind of empirical evidence. Her work challenges the very notion, not only of what counts as an event in this sense but the kind of archive that is necessary to support it. We can think of her paintings as a response to this situation, this familial and cultural history that lacked an archive, as an effort to create her own version of one.
- 08:05 Darcy Buerkle: While Salomon called *Life? or Theatre?* a Singspiel [German light opera], in reference to the popular romantic and comedic ballad operas of the late 18th century, in a decidedly contemporary move she also tells her spectator directly

that they - we - should see the work as if in film. Cinematic conventions abound in her paintings among them are the tracing paper overlays that accompany approximately 300 of the images on which she has described, in prose, the narrative unfolding in each. The tracing paper overlays function as material intertitles in silent film and the way that they necessarily obscure the image is in keeping too, with the cacophony that talkies inaugurated. In other words, the spectator to these paintings is also always a reader. The image arises through the text. The rest of the paintings, and you will see some of these have painted language incorporated into the painting itself, and yet some of them are only painted language. That in fact is how *Life? or Theatre?* Begins. The sequenced prose paintings with which *Life? or Theatre?* opens anticipates Salomon's figural work. They introduce the characters, that's what you see here, and also announce the significance of her palette as an aspect of the visual rhetoric with which she will engage her viewer. Her painted prose on these pages begins with blue paint, switches to red, back to blue, then back to red. Delivered on lines of red some of the words are framed in yellow for emphasis. She describes a particular state she was in which he made this work very often and she conveys a sense of urgency from the start. The words Salomon used for her work was seelen eindringerliche, soulful urgency and thus framed the whole finished project as testimony to the effort that it was to make it; an effort made possible by her intervention in the conversations and the conventions of the archive and fixities of time and subjectivity.

- 10:10 Darcy Buerkle: In *Life? or Theatre?* these concepts become malleable. She says that she had to "leave herself to make it." In an appeal to future viewers, she asks that her spectator, "forgive the lack of artistry on the basis of this necessary exit." In doing so, she anticipates that there will be a time that such instruction will be critical to those who see her work. Even as her first pages prepare the reader and spectator for the time and images that await, even as we know that they are reflecting on the whole of the work and must have thus been produced last, they appear first in their anticipating anticipation of a future. Her appeal is thus, suspend time aesthetic judgment, this work exceeds chronos or aesthetics. While the artists work to put mechanisms in place that would engage her spectator's full attention, such as the extraordinary number of paintings, and the cyclic nature of the tale, the intensity of this effort also signals that the work is about something to which even - it - has only limited access. While she makes dissimulation and psychological obliteration plain, by showing it, by making it literally visible the performativity of *Life? or Theatre?* is such that the spectator occupies a circumscribed, affective relationship to the story that recapitulates the inaccessibility of information. In other words, even with more rigorous access to the so-called truth, the spectator, like the artist, is locked in a narrow range of possible understanding.
- 11:48 Darcy Buerkle: This lack is a matter of circumstance full reconstruction of the story of suicide is never possible but it is also a matter of another kind of rhetorical limitation that was important to Salomon, and that she thematized; a matter of the limits to what we can ever say or see. Salomon makes glaring the absences that dissimulation and traumatic experience produced and secures her spectators' experience as a sight of this paradox. Her paintings emphasize the very bodies that she could not see. They show us what the characters in her play could not see or tried to obscure. In *Life? or Theatre?* she made missing stories appear present through paint. Time is reversed enough for the spectator to see what happened but not enough to apprehend it fully and not enough thus to do anything about it. Importantly and without deliberation, the

spectator becomes a witness who, along with the artist, cannot fully escape, at least considering culpability, receiving a story that we can do nothing to affect, but which, if we believe the artist, we have every responsibility, not just to know but to live with and through. In this too, it could be said, Salomon anticipates the interventions of post-war critique, and its efforts to fully stigmatize the ethical responsibility of not turning away, and so too, it must be said, the early 21st-century commitment that we are witnessing, that does exactly that. On a November day, Charlotte Salomon wrote on a transparency that covers the first figural painting of *Life? or Theatre?* "Charlotte Knarre left the parental house and threw herself into the water."

- 13:30 Darcy Buerkle: So, the transparencies were attached on one side with tape, and in order to see just the painting you have to remove the transparency - move it to the side like in a book. And, but what she meant for us to do was see - see the painting through the transparency with this narrative on it. The image beneath the transparency is dark in browns, grays, reds. The spectator has an aerial view down onto the streets of Berlin. From a staircase, a distant and small figure faces the spectator. It is a woman; her arms are crossed. Her face could not be made out clearly in this first instance. It appears enlarged, and slightly lighter than the multiple versions of her character that move through the streets below. Each individual figure is outlined with a red line, sometimes she appears doubled over, collapsed on her journey - only to be followed by another upright version of this walking woman as she continues on. The long line of, of mini Charlotte Knarre indicate her motion through the streets, and also the literal repetition of the act of suicide that the spectator witnesses throughout *Life? or Theatre?*. She traverses the page. "1913" reads the center top of the image. The numbers stand in her way seemingly interrupting the character's progress toward her destination.
- 14:54 Darcy Buerkle: The viewer can see that she is heading toward the water described in the overlay, quoted above. Water, outlined in a dark foreboding red that traces her figure and will become familiar in this work. Reaching the bottom of the painting, she has also reached the water. A structure approximating a wedding canopy is off to the side. A spectral figure outlined in red haunts it. The figure passes by this elusive scene, jumps in the lake arms outstretched approximating the posture of abandon and even, it has been suggested, of crucifixion. In the cinematic unfolding of *Life? or Theatre?* the second image stands in direct relation to the first. Here again, the narrative develops from left to right beginning with an ironized reference to the trope of the beautiful corpse, which appears to float in midair. Charlotte Knarre's body is laid out on a pink slab against the blue of the lake. The character's father Mr. Knarre stands at the foot of the pink oval-shaped area on which the body is presented. His head is off the page; all that is visible is the back of his headless body. There is no overlay. The text on the page is a fictional obituary in painted blue block letters. It serves as a spacial divider between Charlotte Knarre's dead body and the mourners below. "Suicide of an 18-year-old, Charlotte seeks death in Schlachtensee. The corpse was identified by her father in the morgue this morning. We send our most heartfelt condolences to the parents and hope that they will find some comfort in their older daughter." Unlike the common familial commitment to keeping this and all other suicides a secret, this obituary announces it at the center of the painting. These first figural paintings are not only about the shocking death however of a young woman by suicide, they are therefore also about its erasure from the public record, and from Salomon's familial discourse.

- 16:54 Darcy Buerkle: It was 1913 when 18-year-old Charlotte Grunwald drowned. Solan-Salomon's biographer Mary Felstiner has observed no one spoke of it as suicide. By creating an obituary that named suicide, when the actual obituary did not, these pages of *Life? or Theatre?* unapologetically undo an evasion made up a familial and cultural shame about suicide and the warped history and memory it leaves in its wake. Salomon's overturning of these fixtures is not only a matter of providing more accurate information, the paintings cultivate a relationship to spectatorship, what we see and we do not see, and hence to the events in the paintings. They problematize and reorient the placement of women and suicide as an object of our attention. As the eye moves to the bottom of the page it is red that bleeds into the otherwise overwhelming blue background. Eventually red predominates the rest of the painting and appears to be emanating from the back of the obituary. It seeps into the spaces around the mourning women. In Salomon, the red line is language, in fact, language of the red line announces itself early, and in these first paintings, links them to each other, and to the other suicides that will follow. It surrounds characters in desperation, characters who are nearing death and in Charlotte Knarre's case, it is the dress she wears. Red becomes especially indicative of loneliness, and it is this loneliness against which Salomon's paintings will increasingly rebel, wish to intervene, and from which the spectator cannot escape.
- 18:34 Darcy Buerkle: Entirely clad in red, Charlotte Knarre floats above her own obituary and above her sister and mother at the bottom of the page. They both appear to be at the bottom of the lake, while the lost daughter and sister sit suspended, improbably and peacefully above. Separated by the text of the newspaper and the magical realism that animates Salomon's paintings, gravity allows for the dead to float, for the mourning to switch places with them, occupying her place of death utterly by sitting in grief at the bottom of the lake. While the shrouding of the first image with the tracing paper overlay alerts to the importance of text and its power it would seem that these paintings thrive little on obscurity. In particular, it would seem that there are no missing bodies in either of these first two figural paintings. But when we imagine the painting that announced Charlotte Knarre's death at its center, into individual frames that move from left to right, and we read it accordingly - then the painting deconstructs Mr. Knarre's body. Situated at the top, his head as we have already seen as missing entirely. If the spectator keeps to the practice of reading from left to right, then in the lower part of the image, his head is parallel to "Vatter" father in the obituary. Placing the paternal - appears in dialogue with the news of death. The artist's objections to her grandfather become entirely clear later in the narrative of the real. But they are also implied here too, and they suggest an, as of yet, barely articulated critique that accompanies the very clear claim on a history she tells as a matter of fantasy.
- 20:15 Darcy Buerkle: Salomon's narrative begins then with a story of the suicide of her namesake her aunt Charlotte Grunwald. This image of a woman she did not know but whose names she shares sets the stage. A young woman moving through the streets of Berlin toward her death with an explanation seemingly limited to the intention itself. The artist tells her spectator all this as fact and paints it as a lonely walk and as a departure. What she left behind with intention the artist seems to indicate, was the parental home. We do not have an adequate history of the German Jewish generation of 1914, but their emergent critiques, which centered largely on rethinking the conditions of their existence as Jews, in one way or another, are exemplified that same year in 1913 by the eventual philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin in

his *Metaphysics of Youth*, which has been called his most programmatic speech of that period. It was also the same year that he wrote to his friend Carla Seligson about a student-run pedagogy congress that would take place in Breslau [Wrocław] later that year. Before that time, Benjamin wrote, two of our magazines will come out, and now, as difficult as it is, I must respond to what you write about the new ways of youth and your question. Will the kind of youth we want to promote, will it make the individual less lonely? For him, one of the central reasons for the youth movement was to address a radical loneliness that finds visual resonance in Salomon's work. Before the war broke out the following year, Carla Seligson, for her part, would lose two sisters and a close friend, Walter Benjamin's closest friend, all of them involved in the youth movement, to suicide.

22:02 Darcy Buerkle: The sentiments the German Jewish youth movement expressed might have been meaningful to Franziska Grunwald, Charlotte Salomon's mother. But she was not part of the University crowd, even though the Gymnasium [academic secondary school] education she received could have technically allowed it. Instead, she volunteered as a nurse in the War, which is where she met her husband the surgeon Albert Salomon. She married him in 1916 and the couple inhabited an apartment in the tree-lined affluent area of Berlin-Charlottenburg. Salomon describes her mother's life as one organized around household supervision which, so Salomon imagines, made her feel superfluous. The majority of the images devoted to explaining her mother's unhappiness are about the loneliness she imagined she felt, and so Salomon, a husband who did not love her, and a child who did not need her. "My husband, he does not love me. My child does not need me. What for what am I living then." This was the thought process, reads the tracing paper overlay. She reaches for her husband's hand in this image and does not find it. The child eludes her too. The bodies in this image are again outlined in red. Albert Knarre's ambition to become a surgeon and a professor occupies all his time and energy. "I will become a professor please do not bother me, don't bother me and I will become a professor," reads the overlay. The red line that connects her mother's movements in the house is the same red line that outlines her body in the image and refers back and forward to the legacy of despair that Salomon announces by way of the red line throughout as I've mentioned.

23:49 Darcy Buerkle: The chasm between her mother's desire for an emotionally and intellectually engaged life and her lived experience is stark in her daughter's imagination. It reads like a crystallization of the forces with which she had to contend, 19th-century German-Jewish confidence in assimilation through Bildung [education], and an emerging sustained critique of contemporary culture. Salomon regularly refers to her mother's interests in Nietzsche for example, as well as unsurprisingly, Goethe and Schiller. When Salomon was eight years old her mother's loneliness, so she tells us, would not leave her. One of the first ways that the spectator learns of Franziska's plan to die is in a bedtime sequence with her daughter. St. Peter sits above, while in the lower-left corner of the painting the character Charlotte and her mother are in bed, facing one another under a red blanket that extends to both sides of the page. The daughter listens as her mother elaborates on a fantastical scene relayed on the tracing paper. I'm quoting now, "Charlotte's mother talked about death a great deal and when she gets to heaven we learn further she will leave a letter for Charlotte on her windowsill." The right side of the painting shows just that, an angel with wisps of red in her otherwise white figure, places a letter outside the window. As in the suicide

in the first sequence, the artist uses repetition to indicate motion. The upper portion of the painting mimics and therefore conjures Salomon's indication of Charlotte Knarre's walk to the lake in the first paintings we saw, with several near-identical figures that make their way to a rather elaborate rendering of heaven. The blue sky that her astral body ascends recalls the blue water in which Charlotte drowned in 1913. Red markers accompany the story too, the blanket that covers mother and daughter, the wisps of red in the Angels dress on the windowsill, a few in the waiting heavenly crowd. Colors repeat windows float and frame the action in the painting.

- 25:57 Darcy Buerkle: Salomon repeats important stories in *Life? or Theatre?*, her mother's death is one of those. Here the whole unfolding is consolidated into one layered image. The tracing paper narrates each of these layers, five strips in varying hues of deep red show scenes that repeat and illustrate the prose superimposed on the tracing paper. I want to share with you the text in its entirety in this case, so I'm quoting from Salomon "quite inexplicably Franziska suddenly ceases to find pleasure in anything. She continues her singing lessons with Mrs. Klata to which Charlotte is allowed to accompany her. She plays the piano, she helps her husband, she continues to keep entire dinner parties entertained with her high spirits, and accompanies Charlotte's gym lessons on the piano. But none of it gives her any pleasure. She is in despair. Her expression has completely changed. She speaks only of death. Albert tells her he needs her, and that Charlotte needs her mother, too; she was so young, just eight years old, but all in vain Franziska had lost all desire to go on living, and one night she got out of bed and from her husband's medical kit took a strong dose of opium, swallowed it and returned to bed," end quote. The first two strips are divided into individual square panels, portraying Franziska involved in her various daily activities. Their presentations suggest a predictable symmetry and when read along with the tracing paper even a rote quality.
- 27:34 Darcy Buerkle: The artist has inserted a woman's torso and head into the left side of this painting covering the full length of it. She is the witness, dressed in red, observing the scenes through which Franziska passes in a day, observing her as her husband pleads with her, as she is bent over in despair across the center of the image. The female figure on the side of the painting appears to be the character herself; sitting outside herself, observing the busyness and at the center of the painting, and of the tracing paper message, observing the weight of depression. While the weight of the visual message is in the two strips at the center. The strip at the top and the other at the bottom of the painting appear as bookends to the central location of these sequences within the sequence. Painted in dark reds the spectator encounters Franziska again, first alone, and then in the strip below it - receiving the pleas of her husband. She sits impassive, the tracing paper narration betrays the failure of these less than adequate interactions. Quite inexplicably Franziska suddenly ceases to find pleasure in anything. The deep reds and the way the strips spill over into one another deepens the description of an inescapable effect of the situation for Franziska who does not respond to appeals from her husband that Charlotte needs her mother too. Franziska Salomon first tried to die by suicide in 1926 by ingesting opium. She was not successful.
- 29:04 Darcy Buerkle: People crowd around her bed, doctors, her parents, her husband, her daughter. "People," Salomon wrote, "hope and think therefore that she is doing much better." Her figure is no longer overtaken by red, as it is in the layered painting that

precedes it, but remains outlined in red in both of the paintings that follow. The accompanying text reveals the interests and analyses of Franziska's many visitors quote "What kind of nonsense is this? How can anyone take poison? Well, thank God it didn't come off! Thank God the dose wasn't strong enough and Albert succeeded in his efforts to bring her back to life.... A psychiatrist is consulted, but he pronounces her perfectly healthy and regards the attempted suicide as no more than a sentimental fancy," end quote. Franziska's interpretations are not included among these less than satisfying evaluations. We learn only what her visitors are saying to her as they decry her behavior as, quote "nonsense." Eventually, though Franziska makes her single and only utterance after her suicide attempt, which suggests an ongoing theme that points beyond the paintings, to which I have already referred. She says simply "I cannot bear it any longer, I am so alone."

- 30:19 Darcy Buerkle: The painting is more fantastical in its relationship to time and space than the previous two but it still demonstrates a narrative progression starting from the upper left side of the page. The spectator can literally read as in a book through the multiple images of a woman in bed being checked on by a nurse and then finally floating in mid-air. The symbol of the window figures twice in this image. First, as if suspended in midair but unmistakably the center of attention, there is a small window with a disproportionately large windowsill. A diminutive figure stands on the edge, but the whole painting is framed by a larger windowsill. As you can see, on the lower left edge a foot is clearly set against it at a 90-degree angle. It is as if the character, as if Franziska is falling out of the frame, and toward the spectator. There is no ground in this image; the ground is the viewer. Franziska is falling toward us and we can see into her last moments through the window from which she jumps with her foot in midair at the bottom of the page just below the windowsill. This image is followed by the most graphic in this particular series. On February 22nd, 1926 Franziska Salomon jumped to her death from a window in her parent's home where she had been recovering from her initial suicide attempt. So this is that sequence.
- 32:00 Darcy Buerkle: In *Life? or Theatre?* Franziska appears outside her interior space, domestic space, only after her death. The unfolding of events that precede her suicide is primarily anchored in the interior of her home. This spatial configuration stands in relationship to her sister's suicide sequence too, insofar as outside the home is all we saw, and Charlotte's funeral journey to her death. The door that remained closed behind Charlotte is from open in the second sequence. The home Charlotte left behind is the same one Franziska will leave behind she jumped from the window of her parent's apartment, but this time she has taken her spectator inside, and therefore the absence of confrontation that the aesthetics of the first Charlotte Knarre sequence maintained by leaving much to inference is undone here. Not only are we spared in this instance the realism of a bloated corpse, and are thus invited to reside in both ignorance and beauty, but the contrast between the virtually nothing that we can know about Charlotte Knarre, except the fact of her death, and that she lived at home with her parents, is made to sting. In this second suicide sequence, the viewer is confronted. Confronted not just with the fact of a woman's suicide, and the refusal of those around her to see it, but with the physical damage as well.
- 33:25 Darcy Buerkle: If Salomon spared her viewer anything in the first sequence, then by aestheticizing Charlotte Knarre's dead body, and placing it on a bucolic pink slab that seemed more magical than tragic, that image now appears in the repetition of suicides

representation as more of an indictment of the viewer than anything else. When it comes to Franziska's death the artist demands that her audience see the contorted bloodied body and she does so in a painting that is also beautiful. Seeing these images together as a reminder of suicide as that which does not entirely insist upon itself, early on in the narrative. Even as it presses in as a dominant theme, its presence is only barely announced, mostly felt in the form of tragic loss to look like something else that's recalling to the seriousness of Salomon's appeal to the historian. In Salomon's work, women do commit suicide and there's as a demise that takes place in spite of the web of intimate relationships that surround them. They live in utter silence, save their utterance of despair conveyed in stark directness. Even in the second suicide sequence, the poverty of the historical detail to which Salomon and through her *The Spectator* have access finds resonance and the emotional poverty of the character's situation. The Jewish feminist newspaper, *Judische Frau*, in February 1930 took on the particularities of the experiences of motherhood in the middle class when the front cover asked, "must mothers always be lonely."

- 34:59 Darcy Buerkle: I cannot bear it, Salomon has Franziska, say I am so very alone. Salomon's critique of the emotional experiences of women, in their homes through Franziska, appears in the pages of the Jewish women's movement of the same period, but with very different conclusions. The 1930 article on motherhood and loneliness suggests that an antidote to loneliness would be for women to quote, "pretend to be interested in things that their children want to talk about whether they are or not," end quote. Salomon's implied critique of a bourgeois life, that left her mother empty and without the will to live, has its own musical score. According to Salomon's direction, all of these paintings about her mother's demise are to be accompany, accompanied by a wedding march. So, she wrote on the back of the paintings the music that she wanted to accompany each. Franziska's relationship with her child was mitigated by convention, to the point that she felt superfluous. And in a painting that Salomon chose not to include in *Life? or Theatre?* but is among those she made as part of this project, her mother sits at the head of the, of a dining room table. She is participating and seems to be the facilitator of a nature reading group. The overlay reads "Franziska had a special affinity for Nietzsche's philosophy. You will see that something like this is not always the best for people, for the people involved."
- 36:19 Darcy Buerkle: I mentioned this image here as a way to point toward another aspect of the loneliness in Salomon's mother's life - an absence of conversation that produced, not only an interpersonal but an intellectual loneliness. However, it is in the final suicide that Salomon paints that her dissatisfaction with the status quo becomes most apparent. The painted credit reads Herr and Frau Knarre at the beginning of the series. A married couple, and indeed throughout the over 700 paintings, whenever the grandmother character appears, it is always either in relation to her husband or as a narrator of a suicide. Her narrative voice is animated by worry, by judgment, and finally by her own suicidal impulses. Based on Charlotte Salomon's grandmother's death by suicide in 1940 in the South of France, the sequence of paintings is not as remote, or as semi-autobiographical even, as the other suicides that Salomone reimagined in *Life? or Theatre?*. In fact, the suicides of the women in her family that Salomone documented could be read in terms of their own increasing proximity. In this case, a suicide is a death that she witnessed, not a death that she encounters shrouded in a secret. This is not only the last suicide that Salomone included in *Life? or Theatre?*, it is also very near the end of the whole work, and in these final images,

the artist delivers the most unabashed, and direct version of a critique that has thus far in the story relied on irony, and nuance. If *Life? or Theatre?* becomes most potentially a work of critical intervention in these pages, it is also here that its status as a work of grief is most palpable.

- 38:00 Darcy Buerkle: The separation between character and biography breaks down precipitously in these final pages, and by the time *Life? or Theatre?* ends so has the artist's pretense of distance from the repeated suicides. Time itself, and the dividing line between fantasy and the real, in this final sequence, become ever more fluid and attenuated. In the paintings of her grandmother's suicide attempt, color and line are invoked similarly to the ways they had been in the paintings that just preceded it of Charlotte's bedtime ruminations, which are now also visually linked to the grandmother's actions. As in the other principal suicide, paintings discussed thus far, the first image of the grandmother's step away from her life positions the Spectator above the room for the perspective from which many of the paintings observe the suicides. The viewer is suspended, privy again to information that could only be accessible by magic. There is again a relationship between scenes seemingly unrelated, in this instance between the paintings of Charlotte preparing for bed, and the grandmother in another room with Herr Knarre sleeping next to her, getting out of bed to make her way to the bathroom to hang herself this time. the connection is purely visual; there is no tracing paper, no narration for this painting in which the grandmother's bed echoes the one we have just seen Charlotte prepare for sleep.
- 39:23 Darcy Buerkle: Much earlier in the play, in another reference to marriage, at her parent's wedding Salomon painted the grandmother's mood. How but especially Mrs. Knarre seemed the tracing paper says to be thinking of something very sad. Salomon's critique has been consistent. The Ehebett, the marriage bed, is a site of unspoken turmoil, and here she reminds her spectator again of these notions, but this time even more powerfully. Here by placing Frau Knarre in a bed that resembles the one in which Charlotte has just gone to sleep - I just want to show you that again - the lineage of which she is a part, is not only a matter of suicide, it is a matter of fateful circumstance. She inscribed romantic utterances of her Berlin memories "Tonight or Never" in such direct proximity to her grandmother's literal walk away from her husband that Salomon reminds her spectator again of the very gendered conditions of bourgeois life as she sees it. As Frau Knarre walks away determined to die, her husband sleeps soundly. The second image of the suicide attempt is narrated extensively on the tracing paper. It is a failed attempt, Charlotte and the grandfather appear in the painting. Frau Knarre is on the floor. Charlotte holds her grandmother while the grandfather stands over them both "She is not dead, thank God," is painted directly on the page.
- 40:51 Darcy Buerkle: Still from the perspective of the aerial observer, the words on the page are in red and sit between the grandfather and the two women. As always in the paintings in the aftermath of suicide in which he appears, Herr Knarre is standing over, looking down. The relationship of the Charlotte Knarre character to her father, the patriarch who has overseen the death of her aunt and her mother, is critical to the last suicide sequence. Her caustic estimation of the character, and his judgmental invulnerability, reaches a level of clarity by the end of *Life? or Theatre?* that was primarily visual in the previous paintings. As in the Charlotte Knarre suicide sequence, his head and face, often literally partially absent, it's again painted off the page. Most

glaringly is, in this image, it is difficult to discern whether he is smiling or whether it is just his mustache that gives us that impression, but either way the point is clear. In fact, this double use of her paint stroke clarifies Salomon's indictment of his implacable cruelty. The grandmother's words, again painted in red between Charlotte and Herr Knarre begged them, "please I am begging you, please let me die."

42:06 Darcy Buerkle: The following 61 paintings depart from the other suicide narratives, as they continue pushing the story that unfolds into a level of articulated, affective detail unprecedented in the work as a whole, until this final moment. The details continue to come, culminating eventually in the artist's complete retreat from the figural into painted prose. Charlotte's character again appears in muted tones. Her body almost indistinguishable from the bed on which she lays. The painted prose describes her shock, an effect that had been entirely absent in response to Franziska's suicide attempts, characterized, as it was, by activity, doctors, and tracing paper overlays that described the rampant projections of those around her. In this later sequence though Charlotte begins caring for Frau Knarre herself. Nine paintings detail Charlotte's entreaties. She leads her grandmother through descriptions of beautiful landscape, asking her to imagine her way into them. But when her grandmother finally calms and sleeps Charlotte's grandfather complains to her about the nonsense. Charlotte rebuffs him. Herr Knarre then proceeds to reveal to Charlotte the suicides that had been kept from her throughout her life. He does this in a series of eight paintings, five of which are his head painted in cascading repetition alongside words painted directly on the page. Here, as in the painting of Frau Knarre's suicide attempt, he seems to be smiling. Until then, the familial legacy of suicide had remained veiled, like the paintings with their tracing paper - transparent but avoidable - removable, the story could slip away. Here they indelibly mark the painted image.

44:00 Darcy Buerkle: Charlotte's efforts on her grandmother's behalf will fail but not before Frau Knarre utters a whole list of regrets to her granddaughter. She imagines she is responsible for the deaths of her daughters; she feels her age as weakness; she speaks thwarted desires, especially and most powerfully, her desire to strangle her husband, and when she is left alone she goes to the window and jumps. By this time in the sequence, the images are gestural. The visual detail from early in the play is gone, as is the vivid color. The images of the grandmother's death are gray, and gauzy, and muted - except for the ever-present brightness of the red that accompanies all of the suicide paintings. Again, we can follow the red line, which I suggested at the outset, is the line of loneliness, and importantly of narrative movement. In Salomon's work, it marks despair. In one of the three images solely dedicated to the grandmother's death, Charlotte is standing at the window looking down. She is too late. From here she can see what the spectator finally, and for the first time, cannot. Occupying the spot that affords this perspective, from which so many of the suicide paintings place the spectator, she sees her grandmother's dead body on the ground outside the house. The painting that follows is similar to the image of the mother's death, but the fact that it includes another human figure standing next to the twisted body looking down at it makes it more penetrating, and less aesthetic - aestheticized than the earlier painting. "May you never forget that I believe in you," is painted across the body of the onlooker.

45:40 Darcy Buerkle: The artist quotes her Berlin beloved beau from earlier in the play. The words seem paltry, weak in the face of the violence that the character has witnessed.

We see the mangled human form from a bit more of a distance, and with brush strokes that are less precise than in the earlier painting of her mother's body, which makes its representation appear less focused, distracted, and utterly necessary. At the same time mapping out the ethereal clarity of grief, the gestural painting strokes contribute further to the breaking down of the authorial distance implied, and semi-autobiographical as the artist's physical presence character - the character representing the artist - is now included in the scene of suicide. The fact that in *Life? or Theatre?* Herr Knarre speaks the cause of death for the many members of Charlotte's family is no accident, As far as Salomon was concerned he is responsible for the conditions under which - under which such things happened. This observation is as much a matter of the details of his character as it is the milieu that he represents. In a discarded postscript to *Life? or Theatre?* which she did not include in the final version, the artist was even more explicit about her grandfather. Quote, "We must note," she wrote, "that we were living in an exclusively Jewish society which was under severe attack at the time, in Germany, above all from a political party that came to power shortly thereafter at the beginning of the first painting of our second act." She continues, "the world fell apart but he believed it was still standing. Really, as time passed it disintegrated more and more. As people fought everywhere, we were living seemingly peaceful lives in the Côte d'Azur. My love for drawing grew and grew the more I experienced it as a spiritual act, and my grandfather came to symbolize the people I had to struggle against. He was someone who had never felt true passion for anything. His attractive appearance helped him succeed in work and other things, and after he married my grandmother his ambition led him to imagine that he was her cultural equal," end quote.

47:48 Darcy Buerkle: Her criticisms of her grandfather however continued to accumulate, she continues quote, "after the deaths of her mother and her brother, grandmother was in despair and sought consult - consolation from her husband. This, he offered her to the limit of his ability. Saying we have just to take things as they come. There's no need for exaggerated sentimentality. It won't get us anywhere." The postscript, Salomon's postscript seems to end mid-sentence. "I have to get back to." When she was finished with her work, Charlotte Salomon packed the paintings in a suitcase and delivered them to a confidante, a doctor in the town outside of Nice where she had been living. In an effort to inure her art and its story from confiscation or destruction, the suitcase was marked "Property of Ottilie Moore " on the outside. The paintings survived but Charlotte Salomon did not. When she married Alexander Nagler in 1943, who was also in hiding at the villa, the marriage was registered by the magistrate as Jewish. It was not long before they were found and deported. I should say, I should add, that I learned as recently as last week that someone from the village has stepped forward and we now know who denounced Salomon and Nagler. So, it's not in my book. We just found out.

49:27 Darcy Buerkle: Charlotte Salomon died in 1943 in Auschwitz, pregnant at the age of 26. What she left us, she left with intention. Even as Charlotte Salomon's intervention indicts, it charges us with the responsibility not to look at all, but not to look away. But that isn't all Charlotte Salomon's intervention is also a demand, and a plea, as I said at the outset, to look more closely and deeply at the things that challenge us the most. Meeting that challenge has been complexified by the unfolding of post-war narrative. We can see, in the earliest catalog of her work published in 1961, that there was a special effort to bring it into conversation, and alignment with Anne Frank's diary. That

clear line could only be drawn by way of erasure. In this painting, Charlotte exclaims to her grandfather, "I have the feeling that we have to put the whole world back together." But, what I am showing you here is the published version from 1961, as a result of this telegram in which the demand to erase text from the painting is undeniable. Here though, is the actual painting with a full text. The grandfather responds, "go ahead and kill yourself, and put a stop to all this nonsense."

50:57 Darcy Buerkle: When I finished my book about Salomon I thought that the postscript was incomplete. That it ended with an unfinished sentence. Mary Felstiner, Salomon's biographer, thought so too. We both thought it ended with the page I just showed you - I have to get back to. This it turns out is not accurate and what I have to tell you now is that I learned this after my book was in production and I pulled it. I hope that you will hear what I'm about to tell you, as in the context of what I see as the extreme desperation that Salomon tried to convey throughout her work. I hope that you will hear it as an example of the kind of absolute secret that some survivors had to live with, still live with, and they hear my telling of the secret as a sign of respect. Salomon's missing final pages in *Life? or Theatre?* offer a rendering of events that her stepmother chose to remove from the work, and thus from scholarly attention, let alone the museum-goers experience. These pages of the postscript were censored until 2012. At that time, Franz Weiss who had survived in hiding in the Netherlands, and as a Dutch filmmaker, returned to materials he had collected for a film about Salomon in the 1980s. Included among these materials was an audiotape discussion with Charlotte Salomon's stepmother about a decision to safely in quotes remove incriminating pages.

52:28 Darcy Buerkle: Thanks to the generosity of Franz Weiss and the Charlotte Salomon Foundation, I was given access to these pages. That's when I pulled the book, and after I read the context - contents of those final pages which I'm going to share with you, and then we will open for questions. While it was clear that the postscript ended mid-sentence, and that therefore a page must be missing, at least, it was not generally understood that the postscript does not start the way we had long believed. Instead, it starts, a letter to Amadeus Daberlohn, with a following date line - six months after finishing these pages, February 1943 - and then continues in the first person to Alfred Wolfsohn, her beau from Berlin. This slippage is itself noteworthy since even writing in the first person and addressing him with the informal "du" means that she keep - even if she keeps his fictitious name she writes "dearest friend how I love you. No one has ever loved another. How I thank you. No one has ever thanked another. You gave me courage and strength to become alive. My life began when my grandmother wanted to commit suicide when I learned that my mother had also taken her own life. It was as if the whole world, and its depth and terror, opened up in front of me when I tore my grandmother away from my grandfather's throat as he slept soundly. She definitely wanted to choke him even though she loved him so much. The almost laughable but in this situation devastating flatness of this little petit-bourgeois next to whom this deeply soulful and talented woman sought protection for over fifty years lay before me. And the most terrible part of it was that it appeared to her, as though she found it soothing."

54:26 Darcy Buerkle: She continues, "then when it was over with my grandmother, and I stood alone in front of her bleeding corpse when I saw her little foot that still moved in the air, and twitched an automatic reflex. When I then threw a white sheet over her,

and I heard my grandfather say, she did do it after all, at that moment I knew that I had a task and that no power in the world may stop me." Pages later, she also - the postscript continues, she gives a description of what others had said about her and the difference at the recognition that Wolfsohn, her boyfriend, had given her - had made. She quotes these others, I give you this for context, quote "not very talented, not very beautiful, not very industrious, very comfortable, undisciplined, and selfish - you said," addressing again Wolfsohn, "that I was talented. Even though all the world said otherwise. You even protected me. You knew how to give me a place in life." All of this was - was censored and was replaced with "loneliness had made her" - the artist - "aloof, unable to confide in others, hypersensitive in love. With nature and art, she had lived in a private dream world." I'm returning now to the actual postscript she writes, "I was in despair to see everything so clearly and have to go back - back to take care of this puppet. It was a winter that few people could endure. Lost in a profound stupor, unable to lift a finger. Everything I did for my grandfather made me blush. I was sick. I was constantly deepest red with mute rage and grief. Spring arrived. I had to complete it, cost it, cost it what it may. What relevance would the police, our grandfather, have for me? I must get back," and this is the rest of that sentence, "get back until - to life, to my work, to happiness. I came - I came to the end of *Life? or Theatre?* and swore to myself that I would never go back to my grandfather, who I discovered was the barb causing my sick condition.

- 56:32 Darcy Buerkle: But she could not stay away. She did not, as she wrote, "want to be sent into uncertainty at that moment. Not for my own sake but for the sake of the person who is lying weak in the hospital" and she's referring there to Alexander Nagler, whom she had married. She writes "I stayed with grandfather, but the more time that passed the more I noticed that the old dullness appeared in me again, and started to take possession of me. I could not do anything about it. I told myself it wasn't true. The insecurity started again, and now comes the confession - the reason that I am writing these lines to you. I was sick with despair. When my grandparents left Germany they took with them the poisoned morphine opium Veronal, so that they could take their lives together when their money is gone. My grandmother had not thought of the poison, and my grandfather had refrained from using it. He, who had antipathy to suicide, as he puts it. His natural ways. I knew where it was, and while I am writing, it is working. Maybe he is already dead. Forgive me, a lot of strength was necessary, and this strength was the last that was left from the summer of *Life? or Theatre?*. When he was falling asleep peacefully from his Veronal omelet and I drew him, it was as if a voice was calling out to me. The theater is dead" end quote.

Darcy Buerkle: The centrality of suicide to Charlotte Salomon's project, project and the loss of her grandmother, the full story of the suicides in her family, that all of that drove her was never in doubt for me. Neither was the idea, as I've shared with you today, that the critique she delivered hinged on her grandfather's character. That for her, he was emblematic of a much larger problem which he demonstrated - demonstrated primarily through his blasé reactions to sadness, and loss in this family. Her words in the postscript underlined these strands of my argument indelibly. What I could not have known was that she told her reader in no uncertain terms just how desperate she was. Charlotte Salomon felt that her survival depended on her grandfather's demise. Thank you.

Charlotte Salomon's Interventions - with Darcy Buerkle (2016)
Holocaust Living History Workshop

- 59:03 [The Holocaust Living History Workshop Charlotte Salomon's Interventions featuring Darcy C. Buerkle author "Nothing Happened: Charlotte Salomon and the Archive of Suicide" Associate Professor of History, Smith College]
- 59:10 [Presented By The Holocaust Living History Workshop / The UC San Diego Jewish Studies Program and The UC San Diego Library]
- 59:15 [The Audrey Geisel University Librarian, Brian E.C. Schottlaender / Director of Communications and Outreach, Dolores Davies / Program Coordinator, The Holocaust Living History Workshop, Susanne Hillman / Director of The Jewish Studies Program, UC San Diego, Deborah Hertz]
- 59:21 [The UC San Diego Library Channel / Producer, Shannon Bradley / Camera Operators, John Menier, Jacob Parker / Editor, Matt Alloto]
- 59:25 [The UC San Diego Library Channel / Post-Production Supervisor, Mike Weber / Managing Director, Lynn Burnstan / General Manager, Mary L. Walshok]
- 59:29 [The views, contents, and opinions expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of the University of California]