

“ And with dream-awakened eyes she saw all the beauty around her; saw the sea, felt the sun, and knew: she had to vanish for a while from the human plane and make every sacrifice in order to create her world anew out of the depths.”
(From “Life? Or Theater?”, Charlotte Salomon, 1940-42)

The year 1940 caught Charlotte Salomon on the French Riviera, in the throes of a deep depression. Forced to leave her parents behind, she had fled her German homeland a year earlier and joined her beloved grandparents in France. But the Nazis had invaded France, and her grandmother committed suicide. Now, 23 years old and desolate, Charlotte felt that her life, too, had come to an end.

New Exhibition

Charlotte Salomon

“Life? Or Theater?”

As a possible antidote to Charlotte’s crippling depression, her doctor recommended she resume painting. And when Charlotte received a shipment of art supplies, the despairing young woman began using them to liberate her tormented soul.

Charlotte’s art turned into an existential voyage of self-discovery, an odyssey in which she could explore life, death and art—and the links between them. Over the course of two years, she produced 1,300 works of art, her prolific creativity fueled by an uncontrollable urge, and the fear that the clock was ticking.

She named her works “Life? Or Theater?” and her question-marks call for the viewer’s response. Are we witnessing reality or illusion? Where is the boundary between art, life and death? The answers are found in the body of her works, which are nothing less than a personal encounter between each of these components. Helpless, we are pulled into a marathon that leaves us breathless and drained—almost like the artist herself.

For young Charlotte, a protagonist in the theater of life, a final curtain awaited. Deported from France and sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau, she was murdered upon arrival, along with the child she carried in her womb. When these two lives were cut short, the question marks lost their significance, for in Auschwitz there was neither life nor theater. There was only the cowardly murder of an artist who had succeeded through the power of her soul to delve into the depths and retrieve hues of such colossal vitality that they continue to awe onlookers 60 years after her murder.

“I will create my story so that I will not lose my mind,” wrote Charlotte in her last letter to her parents. And, indeed, by the sheer strength of her creativity, she was able to escape the suicidal fate that haunted her family. Yet even such resolve could not withstand the physical power of Nazi troops.

Art cannot replace life, but it has the power to endure. In this display of her works at Yad Vashem, Charlotte Salomon finally becomes the victor in the cruel theater of life.

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**Charlotte Salomon
1917-1943**

Charlotte Salomon was born in Berlin in 1917 to a family immersed in the city’s cultural and social life. Despite being Jewish, she was admitted in 1935 to the city’s School of Fine Arts and Applied Crafts. Charlotte’s father was arrested during *Kristallnacht* and, in the wake of the pogrom, her family decided that Charlotte should join her grandparents, who had found refuge in Villefranche, France. There, under Nazi occupation, she

created a series of hundreds of paintings, entitled “Life? Or Theater?”—an autobiographical narrative recounting the fate of her family and that of German Jewry. In the summer of 1943, Charlotte married Alexander Nagler, a Jewish refugee, and in September the couple was arrested. They were deported to Auschwitz, where Charlotte, pregnant with their first child, and Alexander were murdered.

The Exhibition “Life? Or Theater?” was organized by the Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam, and sponsored by Le Comité français pour Yad Vashem, Stichting Vrienden van Yad Vashem - Nederland, and Jacqueline and Michael Gee, UK. It will be on display between 16 June and 1 October 2006, in Yad Vashem’s Exhibitions Pavilion.