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RETROSPECTIVE OF GERMAN COLLOQUIUM FALL 1998

(The Colloquium Series was covered by graduate students who have signed their contributions.)

The work of Walter Benjamin presents special challenges for an enquiring historian. While he was, in the latter part of his career, centrally concerned with a critique of historicism, Benjamin's idiosyncratic involvement with a range of usually incompatible intellectual currents also cries out for historical contextualization. The semester's first meeting of the German Studies Colloquium on September 4 was devoted to an intervention on just this terrain in the form of **Beatrice Hanssen's** presentation "Portrait of Melancholy (Benjamin, Warburg, Panofsky)." Hanssen, an associate professor at Harvard University, was continuing the recent engagement with the work of Benjamin contained in her book, *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels*. Hanssen's talk took up thematics from this work, such as Benjamin's critique of historicism, and the importance of his *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* as a precursor to his later theorizations of the dialectical image. The central gesture of Hanssen's presentation, however, was to offer "a historical genealogy of Benjamin's dialectical image, whose origins revert back to nineteenth-century picture theories." More specifically, she attempted to connect Benjamin's reflections on the dialectical image to central figures in the emergence of the discipline of art history – the art historian Erwin Panofsky, and the cultural historian Aby Warburg.

Hanssen's discussion of the importance
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THE AESTHETICS OF CATASTROPHE: CHARLOTTE SALOMON'S ART AND HISTORY Adam J. Sacks

The remark of audience surprise ("Why haven't I heard of her before?") frequently heard in reference to German Jewish artist Charlotte Salomon sounds a note of horror-tinged remorse, as the emergence of the work of one killed in Auschwitz signals the absence of what could have been in the countless voices that were silenced. The nightmare of a full confrontation with this loss, a loss whose contours and particulars can never be articulated, left the work of Charlotte Salomon in the essentialized context of the Holocaust. As censorship, and then obscurity gives way to a belated, generalized awareness in the public sphere, the possibility exists that the work of Salomon could be instituted as a redeeming or compensatory vehicle for the past, wherein the context of the Holocaust is repressed. Between this binary opposi-

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PUTTING THE CULTURE BACK IN CULTURAL STUDIES: A TRANSATLANTIC WORKSHOP

Jaimey Fisher

On October 2 and 3, 1998 the Institute for German Cultural Studies held a transatlantic, comparative workshop on cultural studies and *Kulturwissenschaft*. The Workshop was the second meeting on this topic for a group of professors from Cornell and the Humboldt University of Berlin: they met for the first time in the summer of 1997 in Berlin to discuss their newly formed partnership around the growing field of cultural studies. After a welcoming remark by Provost Don Randel, **Peter Hohendahl**, director of The Institute, opened the Workshop by asking if Americans and Germans mean the same thing when they discuss cultural studies and *Kulturwissenschaft*. Two of the presentations, the first and last, dealt explicitly with the definition of culture in cultural studies, while others illuminated the discussion by practicing cultural studies in their respective research fields.

In his presentation "The Positioning of Literary Studies in light of the Challenge from *Kulturwissenschaft*," **Klaus Scherpe** addressed two fundamental questions arising from the growing attention to "*Kulturwissenschaft*": what its relation to traditional disciplines should be and what its objects of study should become. On the former question, Scherpe asked whether traditional disciplines were to become interdisciplinary or whether a new transdisciplinary field of cultural studies should be built from the ground

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(Salomon - continued from page 1)

tion is the position of necessary tension out of which unfolds the critical work which continues exhaustive research, while signaling that a new mode of thought about Salomon may begin.

The symposium "The Aesthetics of Catastrophe: Charlotte Salomon's Art and History" held on Sunday, November 22, 1998 at the A.D. White House at Cornell is indicative of the growing recognition of the significance of her work as a text of culture. Sponsored by the Institute for German Cultural Studies, the Women's Studies Program, the Society for the Humanities, the University Lectures Committee, and the Program of Jewish Studies, the symposium furnished a staging ground for the raising of issues and a catalyst for debate. The topic of Charlotte Salomon's life and history is of both unique focus and extremely broad resonance "ethically, aesthetically, historically and theoretically," as event convener **Michael P. Steinberg** elucidated in his introduction. Prof. Steinberg, History, Jewish Studies

and German Studies, Cornell, opened the symposium by introducing Salomon with a brief biographical sketch. Significantly, he noted the formative influence and consequential impact of the *Jüdischer Kulturbund* in Berlin, a forcibly segregated artistic conglomeration comprising the vast wealth of German-Jewish talent during the early years of Nazi Germany, and its director Kurt Singer, upon the musical inter-artistic dimension of Salomon's resulting work. Having left behind the convulsions of Nazi Germany in the south of France, familial traumas in the form of the suicide of Charlotte's grandmother led to Charlotte's discovery, through her grandfather, of a repetitive record of suicides in her family. Believing this pattern to be a curse, Charlotte was confronted with the choice of continuing this family pattern or disrupt-

ing the cycle with an extraordinary act. "*Leben? oder Theater?*" a "life-saving", sense-discerning project for Charlotte, is a collection of 1300 gouaches consisting of image and text which tell the story of her life, family and cultural milieu through an alter-ego.

As Professor Steinberg underlined, the medium of the symposium brought together four scholars forming a unique combination. Including two renown Salomon scholars who bring to bear historical work and two scholars who of-



Griselda Pollock and Michael Steinberg

ferred to turn to the topic especially for this event, this association fused ongoing history and new perspectives.

Commencing the program was **Griselda Pollock**, professor in the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Leeds. The author of *Vision and Difference*, she is a figure of unparalleled importance, who explores art history, feminist theory and their interconnections. Professor Pollock opened the day's program and the presentation of her paper, "The Theater of Memory: Trauma and Cure in the Work of Charlotte Salomon," with an unequivocal statement that the shadow of the Shoah hangs over present-day encounters with the work of Charlotte Salomon while adding that "we must not confuse the artwork *Leben? Oder Theater?* with the terrible trajectory recounted."

For Pollock, the precipitating

overdetermined condensation of a range of forces and personalities and the struggle to find a way of being in the politically intensified self-awareness of being Jewish and being a woman produced a process of avant-garde productivity to confront the death rearing up against the Jews and within her family, as passed down the female line threatening her with a self-destructive melancholia. As a scholar who works against the art historical Christological Van Gogh myth by situating artists who are women within the field of Modernity, representation and difference, her aim is to put the genesis of *Leben? oder Theater?* back into a history shadowed by pain and persecution yet enriched by the still vivid promises of a modernism similarly outlawed in the terms of degeneracy.

Pollock understands Salomon's work as a memorial geography of subjectivity which turns the flow of events into a tableau through the staging of the past, and as a work of an

Through familial dysfunction, Charlotte knot-

ted together traumatic real death as resistance, aesthetically inflected imaginary art, and the maternally inscribed text, into what Lacan termed the "sinthome"; fusing archaic symptom with the artistically invented, fabricated self. What Pollock terms a talking, singing cure which stages a contest between spaces of the nightmare and death and those of life and sexuality, is here read as a feminine fantasia of subjectivity which defends against gendered self-destructiveness, producing an aesthetically impassioned dream space for the representation of trauma and familial dysfunction and a supplementary means to create an absent coherence that the name of the father that is lacking should provide. This access to intense *jouissance* is not autobiography, but the narration of several women's lives. *Leben? oder Theater?* as an *invented*

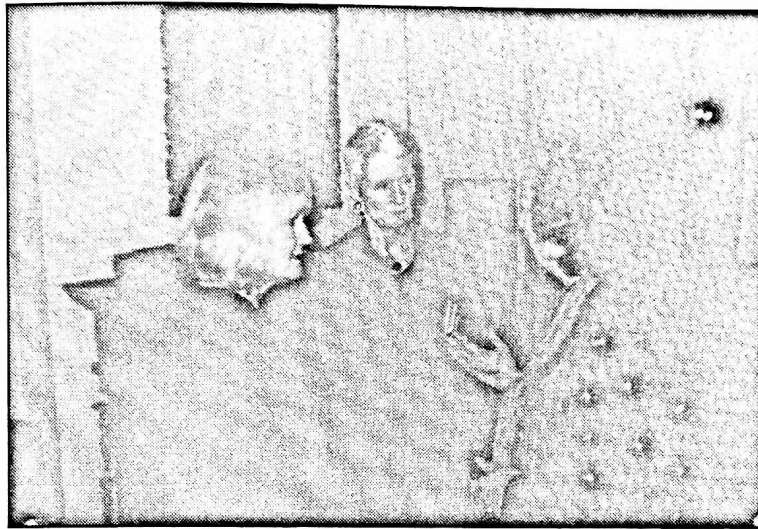
form of analysis presents the final chapter in the long history of an encounter between psychoanalysis and Jewish women's experience in modernity. Its key message is that in order "to remember the dead the dead have to be made to remember."

In the stimulating discussion period that ensued, **Professor Dominick LaCapra**, Director of the Society for the Humanities, Cornell, pointed to bereavement as grieving in its interiority, its relation to mourning, and as a ritual and social process. LaCapra then characterized the early Benjamin as resistant to mourning, with the implication that working-through in general is inauthentic, given the shattering nature of trauma. In some sense there is a valorization of melancholia, in opposition to a working through that inevitably leads to kitsch and pseudo-transcendence. **Ernst van Alphen**, Director of Communication and Education, Boijmans van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam, characterized Pollock's use of trauma as Lacanian. As the unassimilable real, he questioned how can such a uni-

versalist theory about the constitution of subjectivity do justice to the specificity of trauma such as the Holocaust and familial suicide. Pollock responded by enunciating the two fundamental traumas for Lacan, castration and loss of loved object, and then stressed that all trauma is mimetic, and other traumas are derived from the capacity to lapse back into these two.

Ernst van Alphen, the author of *Caught by History*, an examination of "Holocaust effects" in literature and visual arts, was the second presenter on the program. His paper, "Giving Voice: Charlotte Salomon and Charlotte Delbo" contrasted the work of these two women utilizing an approach centered around the mastering of trauma through controlled narration. Delbo gives voice to the traumatic experience of Auschwitz, by utilizing the rhetorical

technique of apostrophe, where the first person narrator is directed to a second, unreal, which is not contiguous with the reader. For Delbo, those who are not camp survivors cannot be directly addressed, as they inhabit a different world exterior to the temporal transgression of traumatic reenactment, and thus cannot understand. Though this narrative reenactment of trauma isolates the reader who is presented with a traumatic subject that can't be reached, this narrative strategy connects the women in the work together through the bond of shared trauma.



(l. to r.) Griselda Pollock, Mieke Bal and Mary Jacobus

By contrast, Salomon tries to present the effect of narrativity, employing a communicative situation between external narrator and viewers and audience. The reenactment of death in this instance is comforting and healing because it provides the frame of reference through which these suicides make sense. The presence of the viewers enables the traumatic story to be spoken as the catastrophic acts are placed into a sense-making framework. Whereas Salomon sought to work through senselessness, whose end result produced an aesthetic which isn't symptomatic of unresolved trauma, Delbo was less successful in working through trauma and established a contact between I and you, wherein the second persona is absorbed in close circle while the reader is left out.

Professor Nanette Salomon, Depart-

ment of Performing and Creative Arts, the College of Staten Island/CUNY, who concentrates in the field of Dutch art and has written on the practice of art history and representation and ideology, presented her paper, "On the Impossibility of Charlotte Salomon in the Classroom." The paper examined the dual conditions of the art of Charlotte Salomon and of those teaching art history in its presently constructed formulation in the college classroom and argued for the incompatibility of the two.

Salomon confronted issues involving the traditional art historical canon, and its inclusions and exclusions. She put forth paradigms that have consistently excluded women, or that included women who have not disrupted the canon. Salomon indicted the methodology of "compare/contrast" as a tool for ranking value and prestige, which sets up a structure of binary opposition, with a master and pupil, and contributed to the creation of a ghettoized sub-category of women.

Noting that Charlotte Salomon has been consistently left out of most dictionaries of art and women artists, Professor Salomon offered that Salomon confronts many problems in traditional and modern ways of making sense of art. Specifically the issue of biography has left woman artists mired in qualifying conditions, as critics have sought out a therapeutic motivation for art practice. Professor Salomon stressed the importance of biography in the work, while noting that post-modern trends in criticism have marginalized the importance of biography. In a revisionist view of art history, Barthes critiqued biography, Foucault rejected the author as a vehicle of unconscious consequences, while even feminists have rallied against biographical identity. Yet Professor Salomon aptly

maintained that Salomon's artistic expression stands apart from Holocaust history, and added that if they are related than they cannot be ranked or placed in a hierarchy. Other resistances which reinforce Charlotte Salomon's "impossibility" is that she is treated not as having an *oeuvre*, but as having produced one work, the added factor of her use of paper is designated feminine. Finally, the physical conditions of her art fight against its exhibition in current museum practices, that due to its large number, a collection is a necessity, even in reproductive books. Professor Salomon was resolute in her overall contention that to bring Salomon into the classroom new paradigms of knowledge need to be tried and developed.

The last speaker on the program was **Mieke Bal**, of the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, Theory and Interpretation, University of Amsterdam and now a Cornell faculty member as an A.D. White Professor-at-Large. Declaring, that for a contemporary audience, catastrophe is inextricably bound up with Holocaust, Bal hopes to continue the discussion initiated by Adorno about the Holocaust and its effects. The matter is more pressing currently due to the disappearing of survivors and witnesses. Bal sees the specific case of Charlotte Salomon as confronting, through the act of opting for life, the strategy of turning catastrophe from a "punctual to a durative event," from narrative to spectacle. Salomon's empathetic spectacularization of private catastrophe and its intersection with public catastrophe are instructive in their prescient connection of the personal and the political. Though the Holocaust touched her work, it is not represented by it, yet her second person approach to the spectator bridges the gap between experi-

encing and witnessing. Professor Bal stresses that allegorical representations from which we may derive pleasure make us forget the catastrophe that traumatizes actual subjects in order to proclaim a higher aim. Using Salomon as an allegory of the Holocaust is just another way of aestheticizing her work out of origin.

Catastrophe challenges the dividing line between private and public and the tension between past and present makes catastrophe not only suitable but the ex-

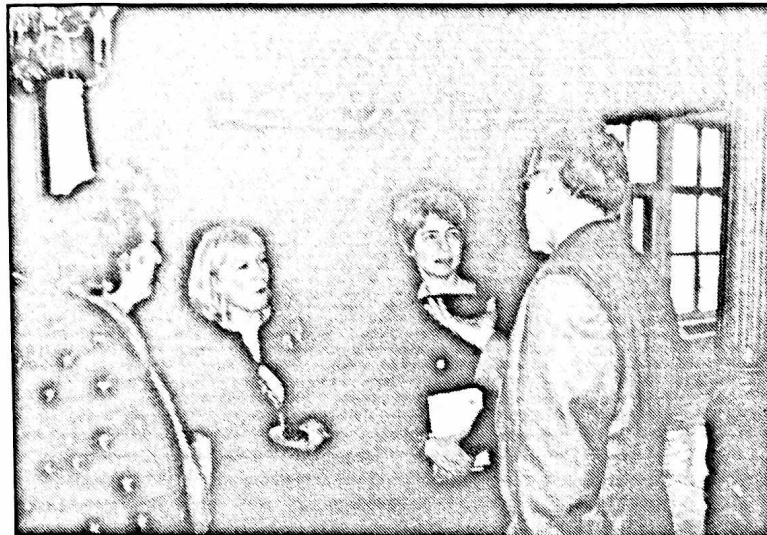
phasis on the aesthetic covers over residues of religion and sacrifice, specifically, the taboo on aesthetic representation, leading to a negative sacralization of the event, opting instead for indirect allegorical allusive representation. After this lively discussion ensued, Steinberg illustrated that a common denominator among the oft-mentioned concerns of narrativization, aestheticization and working through is that they are subject to assumptions of closure.

Indeed, closure is something to militate against when dealing with the continuing debates over the subject of Charlotte Salomon's life and history and its place within the larger critico-theoretical approaches to the understanding of the Holocaust and its representation. The reflection in the work of endurance and teleological propulsion suggests both that a "Holocaust" contextualization doesn't answer all the questions of interpretation and, additionally, may point in insightful ways in which discussions of the Holocaust and Holocaust Studies can prevent understanding by substituting a singular understanding for its processual, multi-varied character. As Steven Aschheim has proposed, there is a need for continuous revision in the study of the Holocaust and sensitivity to the demands of a contextualization that is always open to question. •

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NOTICE

The Esther Dischereit readings held here in September and reported in this issue were made possible in large part by the initiative of **Kizer Walker** who arranged the visit, organized readings and receptions and raised the necessary funding. •



(l. to r.) *Mary Jacobus, Griselde Pollock, Janet Wolff and Dominick LaCapra during a break in the Salomon symposium*

emplary, unique suitable object of art, both for the sake of working through catastrophe and the work that art can do. Professor Bal calls for catastrophe as a paradigm, to give the ideological binary between past and present a new urgent meaning through a willful dialogic and respectful adoption of the past in the present as opposed to its subsumption.

Professor Pollock proposed a cumulative understanding of trauma through laying out the impact of events backwards and recording a progressive adjustment by degrees to trauma. Visiting IGCS Fellow Michael Rothberg helpfully intervened, questioning the stark polarization of Delbo and Salomon, putting forth that Delbo doesn't eradicate narrative, but instead exchanges a master narrative by a series of micro narratives which amounts to an archive made available for the public. LaCapra wondered whether the em-