



Inside the Worlds of the Dead

A Conversation with **Christian Boltanski**



COURTESY MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY, NY/PARIS

Theatre d'ombres, 1984. Set of oxidized figures, tin brackets, and electrical lights, installation view.

BY JAN GARDEN CASTRO

Christian Boltanski's ideas often germinate over time and address notions involving time.¹ In 2005, he used his own heartbeat in a pitch-black void for a Paris exhibition. Heartbeats also provided a soundtrack for his recent large-scale installations in Paris, New York, and Milan and are being collected worldwide for *Les Archives du Coeur* (*The Heart Archive*), on view last summer at London's Serpentine Gallery and as a permanent installation at Teshima Island, Japan. Later this year, Boltanski will re-invent the French pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

Boltanski was born on September 6, 1944, the day when Paris was liberated from the Nazis. His Jewish father, a convert to mystical Catholicism, was nevertheless forced to hide between floors of the family home during the war, and his mother was a part-Corsican, Catholic, Communist. He grew up cloistered among intellectual family members who all slept in the same room and whose idea of going to Sunday mass was sitting together in silence in their car parked outside Saint-Sulpice. Family and friends talked ceaselessly about the Shoah—the Holocaust. He devoted his adolescence to painting, drawing, and staging battles of toy soldiers. He also helped run a small gallery, for which he eventually began selecting artists.

Boltanski's first art audiences were other artists and art directors. A 1969 book, *All that Remains of my Childhood*, invented artifacts, mislabeled photos as autobiographical, and used hypothetical images such as *Reconstruction of an Accident Which Has Not Yet Happened to Me and in Which I Met My Death*. In his first films, books, mail art, and mixed-media exhibitions, he self-consciously used himself, life-size effigies, and handmade or recycled objects to joke about the death of childhood and ways to commit suicide. When Louis Aragon reviewed this show, he invoked young Werther, Robinson Crusoe, Kafka, and



Above: *Le Coeur*, 2005. Light bulb, CD, sound, and electric cable, dimensions variable. Below: *Après*, 2010. Mixed media, view of installation at the Musée d'Art Contemporain du Val de Marne.



others to suggest that Boltanski was entering uncharted territory. Boltanski's self-effacing charm, obsession with death, and warm humor quickly launched his career, which soon led to a prize for a collaborative work at the 1969 Paris Biennale, installations at the Grand Palais, the Centre Pompidou, three appearances at Documenta (1972, 1977, 1987), and installations worldwide. Among his awards, Boltanski has received the 2006 Praemium Imperiale for Sculpture from the Japan Art Association and the 2008 Adenauer-de Gaulle Prize (with Anselm Kiefer). His minimal, expressive vocabulary includes symbolic, spiritualized formations of rusted tin biscuit boxes built into shrines for ghost-like copied photos dimly lit by dangling light bulbs, as well as symbolic mountains, lakes, and fields of used

clothing. In Boltanski's view, one's life can never be reconstructed since memory interweaves truth and falsehood; art-making is "not about telling the truth but making the truth felt."²

Jan Garden Castro: *You spent your childhood years painting religious battles, and in 1968, you shifted into mixed media, using self-portraiture and, in some ways, parody. What prompted you to change your direction and medium?*

Christian Boltanski: For me, it's always one and the same thing. The big paintings that I made when I was young were not so different from what I made later. The purpose is the same, but the forms change. I use different ways to look at the same question.

JGC: *How do you now view your early work?*

CB: My work began in 1969. Before that, I was a child. The little book *tout ce qui reste de mon enfance* [1944–50, published 1969] was the beginning of my work, and I haven't changed since that time. When you travel, you can speak about the food, the landscape, the people, but it's always the same travel. For me, it's always the same question, but I think about it in different ways.

JGC: *What is that question?*

CB: I believe that everyone is unique and very important, and everyone disappears so quickly. After three generations, everybody disappears. In my first work, I understood that my childhood—the life I had with my parents—was dead. It was a kind of shock, and I was trying to say something, but I understood that this was impossible. I always try to observe and protect what I call small memories of dead people, yet I knew from the beginning that it was not possible to save anything.

JGC: *You've said that your creativity bloomed again after your father died in 1984. Could you discuss *Lessons of Darkness in the Salpêtrière Hospital Chapel* exhibition and also the "*Lessons of Darkness*" exhibition?*

CB: When your father dies, you become more of an adult; it's another part of your life. For me, I became more visual. There are very few times of creativity in your life: as a young man, after your father and mother die, and when you become old.

JGC: *How did you start using wires, light bulbs, and biscuit tins?*

CB: I wanted to use something simple that everyone would recognize. A box is a minimal object. At the same time, it's a moving object. I am trying to reconstruct memories.

JGC: *Did you put anything inside the tins?*

CB: Sometimes.

JGC: *Were the pictures of the dead Swiss mounted on biscuit tins?*

CB: I've collected a lot of dead Swiss. I have over 7,000 of them at home. I couldn't make a piece with Jews. The Swiss have no historical reason to die.

JGC: *I'd like to talk about your installation No Man's Land at the Park Avenue Armory. Does the title refer to the mountain of discarded clothing that is no longer alive or in use?*

CB: The show's real name is *Personne*, which has two meanings: somebody and nobody. The coats on the floor [a huge grid, each square lit by bulbs dangling from posts] are somebody, but the mountain is a place to die. From the beginning of my work to now, somebody and nobody are the same thing. This applies to the used clothes and to the photos—a photo is an object with a subject.

JGC: *When did you begin using heartbeats?*

CB: Six or seven years ago.

JGC: *How did you start The Heart Archive?*

CB: *The Heart Archive* opened in Japan in July. Soichiro Fukutake gave me part of Teshima Island. We are recording heartbeats in many countries, but there will be more and more and more. It's never finished.

JGC: *You worked with Ilya Kabakov on an installation of Wagner's Ring Cycle in Berlin.*

CB: We used a partly destroyed hospital and made a very, very large installation in different locations between two buildings. I've done a lot of theater spectacles, but never on a stage. I always try to find something between an installation and a theater building. If you attend an opera or a play, you have a beginning and an end, a work situated in time. A sculpture is a work of space. I intermix a work of time and a work of space. For that piece, the audience walked around and could stay for 10 minutes or six hours.

JGC: *The performance designed for the Armory in New York was beautiful; people were walking around and interacting with the sculpture.*

CB: When people see my work, they are walking around inside it. They are not in front of a painting; they are inside the painting. That is important for me.

JGC: *This is an important feature in all of your installations, or most of them.*

CB: That's right.

JGC: *The Missing House (1990) in Berlin is a memorial to two generations who lived in a house that was bombed.*



Above: *Reserve: the Dead Swiss*, 1990. 200 black and white photographs, 1,168 boxes, and photographs, dimensions variable. Below: *Humans*, 1994. Black and white photographs, bulbs, and wires, dimensions variable.





Above and detail: *No Man's Land*, 2010. Clothing, rig, pick, lights, and steel beams, dimensions variable.

CB: In a way, it's close to *No Man's Land*, because it's about chance and the finger of God—why someone is dead and someone else is not. In Berlin, there were houses side by side, with staircases A, B, and C. Why did the people in B die and not the others? You know, when you become older, like me, you never understand why you are alive or if you're going to be alive tomorrow. There is no more reason.

JGC: You made a life-or-death bet with a Tasmanian art collector, who has an ongoing live video of your studio. I believe that you have to live longer than eight years to win.

CB: For me, it is very important not to refuse the fact of dying. I wish to survive, and I wish to be alive in 20 years, but it is good to think about it. To be human is to die. We must accept it, and we must speak about it.

David Walsh pays me money every month to buy the piece. If I die in five years, the piece is less expensive; if it takes 10 years, the piece becomes more expensive. Three cameras view my studio day and night, and the Web cam is showing in a cave in Tasmania. Afterward, he will preserve all of the DVDs.

JGC: And you have an archive in Paris as well.

CB: Yes. What can I say? My life can be filmed and placed on DVDs, but I shall be dead. You can film somebody day and night, but he will not survive for this reason.

JGC: You suggest that systems of classification destroy what we pretend to protect.

CB: If you put your reading glasses in a vitrine, they no longer serve a purpose. If you put a man in a room without air, his body will survive longer, but he will not be alive.

JGC: The Buddhists say that life is suffering. Do you agree with that?

CB: Life is beautiful. Life is awful. I love life so much. There's a story that I



Above and detail: *Les Bougies*, 1987. Oxidized copper with candles, 12 elements, 81 x 102 x 12.5 in.

always tell. A man just lost his wife, and he's so sad he thinks he's going to kill himself. His friend takes him and walks with him in the garden. After five minutes, the man says, "Look the sky is so marvelous! The flowers are so beautiful!" He says, "Oh, I forgot!" We can survive because we forget that life is terrible.

JGC: Werner Spies, for your huge "Time" exhibition (2006) in Darmstadt, Germany, called you a "master of memory" who "renders visible the disturbing energy of remembering and forgetting." Do you want to discuss your ideas about God and time?

CB: Humans can do many things, but they can't fight against God and time. For one, God is the Master of Time. You've lost another 10 minutes of your life talking with me, and you can't do anything about it. I just installed a talking clock in the crypt of the Salzburg Cathedral in Austria. A computer speaks the time. We have, you and I, 10 minutes less to survive. You can't stop the time.

JGC: Did you recycle the objects at the Armory installation?

CB: All of the clothes were returned to the lender in New Jersey.

JGC: The installation also traveled to Milan?

CB: It was shown there in an airplane hanger larger than the Armory, but it was totally different. Like a musical composition, you can play it again with a small orchestra or a full orchestra. You don't need the same clothes or objects.

JGC: You've always been very generous in how you credit other artists for adding to your creative con-



sciousness, and you've mentioned Sigmar Polke, Joseph Beuys, Pina Bausch, Anselm Kiefer, and Tadeusz Kantor. Could you discuss why you relate so strongly to artists from German and Slavic cultures?

CB: Polke just died. He was, for me, the best painter. I'm from Central Europe, because my father's roots are Ukrainian, and Germany is the beginning of Central Europe. My country is in the eastern part of Europe. I'm French, but my dream country is farther east.

JGC: How has your idea of identity changed? Are you giving up your identity to do art projects that feature humanity?

CB: What can I say? The more you become your art, the more you no longer have a face—my face becomes my art.

Notes

¹ I would like to thank Linda Pellegrini and the staff and interns at the Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, for facilitating this interview.

² Quotation from the film *Christian Boltanski* by Heinz Peter Schwerfel.

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