

According to Robin Vousden, director of the Marian Goodman Gallery in New York, the thematic link across both the years and the media is Boltanski's "profound interest in the loss of identity ... whether focusing on children displaced in the war, soldiers passed away or his own Jewish heritage ... But it was his pivotal Monument series from the early '80s, in which he explored personal and cultural ideas of memory and memorial by creating monuments out of photographs, wires, and naked lightbulbs, that thoroughly established his commercial market."¹

"Boltanski's market has been steady for the past 20 years or so," confirms Vousden. Even in the most dramatic recession of the early '90s, Boltanski continued to sell to museums and a "good handful of dedicated collectors". Last year the Marian Goodman Gallery held two critically acclaimed Boltanski exhibitions of new works, with prices ranging from \$75,000-90,000 for unique works, installations were between \$100,000-150,000, and multiples ranging from \$10,000-50,000. In 2000 his 1989 piece *Monument (Odessa)* soared to \$138,000 against an estimate of \$60,000-80,000. Price-wise, all of Boltanski's top 20 works date from between 1985-1991."²

For this exhibition, Boltanski ... explores the many layers embedded in the notion of reflection. *Part I* of '*Coming and Going*' ... consist(s) of an installation of new works, ... titled 'Lumieres' and 'Miroirs'. *Part II* of the exhibition ... consist(s) of another work, titled 'Reflection'. 'Reflexion' extends his use of photographs of unknown subjects, this time mechanically removed from their sources, reproduced on fabric, and illuminated by spot or 'interrogation lamps'.

"Boltanski's installation, *Coming and Going*, deals with death and the passing of time, more crucially with the need to mourn the dead. The dimness of the installation – it is lit by rows of small bulbs, green and blue, and reddish orange, such as those used in lieu of candles in French memorial chapels – suggests a melancholy surrounding the idea that the dead continue to haunt and even possess the living. ... There is an air of quiet desperation to the installation – the restrained repetition of annihilation anxiety: row after row of bulbs, photograph after photograph, figure after figure, all concentrated in discreet configurations signaling fear and the failure of life. Variation is introduced into this devastating unity, the relentless consistency of death and absence, by the tilting of the photographs, their different sizes and coloration, the placement of the figures, and the different sizes of the geometrical patterns formed by the bulbs, with their steady spots of discreet light. This adds certain tension, but there is no hysterical climax; all remains subdued and morbid. We are clearly in a sacred space, set apart from the world – a meditative space devoted to the spirit of the dead, or at least the past. Boltanski's work creates a new sense of the sublimity and sacredness of death ... dealing with what we are reluctant to acknowledge – our demise and the fading memory we will become. (His) work is terrifying, for Boltanski reminds us of the transience of our existence, moving us to our depths, forcing us back on ourselves."³

¹ Holmes, pg 53

² Holmes, pg 53

³ Kuspit, pg 9

“Monuments- Ironically titled, they have none of the characteristics that constitute the monumental (imposing size, noble materials designed to survive the weather), the Monuments re-use photographs already used by Boltanski but recycled in a way much closer to the bad taste of popular rituals.”⁴

Monuments: The Children of Dijon

“Process is also used to enhance the sense of transition, of time passing. In confronting the individual portraits, one is aware that the subject of the photo, his or her life and vitality, no longer exists. Boltanski uses crude, unpolished photos taken by amateurs and re-shoots them several times, increasing their grainy texture to exaggerate the distance from reality. Other images are not treated chemically to stop the changes inherent in the developing process; they darken with age to the point that the image is barely visible. Here physical change, occurring over a period of time, becomes an integral part of the work. Boltanski also constantly recycles images from one installation to the next, creating a sense of ongoing relationships between pieces both in concept and in actuality. This continuing, sequential series seems to be an effort to resist completion or finality.”⁵

“Knowing whether an image is true or not, what distance separates the model from the copy, whether the image is an image of death or life, these are among the most fundamental questions posed by artists of the twentieth century. Christian Boltanski poses them in a way very close to their original incandescence. In particular, he does this by working on the permeable boundary between the icon and the idol, between the images that are venerated and that are looked at.”⁶

B “I don’t think it’s about Jewish history. I often get this kind of misunderstanding with my work. Of course it is post-Holocaust art, but that is not the same as saying that it is Jewish art. I hope my work is general.”⁷

B “It is certain that everything must disappear. All attempts to fight against death, against disappearance, are vain ... Death is a very strange thing. We are unique beings, with a small history, knowledge, and a memory, and from one moment to the next we become ignoble, disgusting objects ... Artistic work is always within the impossible. It is to try to prevent death knowing that the battle is already lost.”⁸

B “I always see a relation between a secondhand garment, a dead body, and a photograph of a person. In all cases, there is an object that recalls a subject and its absence.”⁹

⁴ Garb pg 75

⁵ Rosen, pg 26

⁶ Garb, pg 63

⁷ Garb, pg 23

⁸ Tansini, pg 78

⁹ Tansini, pg 78

“The use of *vitrines*, a major aspect of earlier works, also echoes the theme of mortality. Influenced by visits to the Musée de l’Homme in Paris, Boltanski came to view museums as cemeteries, the vitrines as tombs for dead objects, artifacts whose significance was gone, remains of cultures whose meanings were indecipherable.”¹⁰

Vitrines “The idea of the collection makes its appearance early in Boltanski’s work, and it proceeds from a form of neurosis common to all collectors, halting the passage of time out of a fear of forgetting, seeing an identity embodied in labeled and arranged objects that one cannot definitely fix.”¹¹

“Irony often appears, in Boltanski’s work, as a rhetoric of confession: a painful truth is more easily stated in the form of mockery, without ceasing to exist as truth, as pain. From the Reference Vitrines onwards, all of Boltanski’s work operates through accumulation and recycling. ... The artist doesn’t invent anything new because there is nothing new to invent.”¹²

“In 1988, Christian Boltanskii showed an installation titled *Canada* at the Ydessa Hendeles Foundation in Toronto. The title is not merely a nod to the country that hosted the exhibition: Kanada is also, in the curious dictionary of euphemisms developed by Nazis to formulate their programme of extermination, the name of the depot where the effects of the deported were stored then recycled.”¹³

B “People often view my art in a very mournful way, but I feel that there’s a lot of humour in it. When I do a large piece with used clothes some people talk about it in relation to the Holocaust and say how sad the piece is. But the children find it fun, it makes them happy because they can try on all the clothes.”¹⁴

B “I tend to use the same faces in my work. What I can say with certainty is that if you use a life in your art you are always dangerous and a crook. I’m like a bad traveling preacher, preaching doom and destruction and then asking for money. I almost always include photos of the actor Robert Mitchum in my catalogues because sometimes he played a man of God in his films, but he could also be a murderer. I think that’s what I am.”¹⁵

B “I try to touch people in a direct way. It’s true that sometimes I use very heavy things to do this – and the Dead Swiss is a good example. But, then again, it is a way of speaking to people. I chose the Swiss because they have no history. It would be awful and disgusting to make a piece using dead Jews – or dead Germans for that matter. But

¹⁰ Rosen, pg 27

¹¹ Garb, pg 56

¹² Garb, pg 56

¹³ Garb pg 80

¹⁴ Garb, pg 19

¹⁵ Garb, pg 30

the Swiss have no reason to die, so they could be anyone and everyone, which is why they're universal."¹⁶

B "I ... know that I have a morbid relationship with death. I remember when I was working on the *Dead Swiss*, ... a friend of mine would send me newspaper photos on a weekly basis of the Swiss who had died. So I would receive about sixty or seventy photos each week. And each week I would get excited by what I might be seeing, what kind of people would be dead that week. I suppose this relates to some kind of forbidden pleasure, a taboo. I'm not only mourning death, I also take a kind of 'bad pleasure' in the spectacle of death."¹⁷

"*Reserve: The Dead Swiss*, a pile of hundreds of white iron boxes featuring photographs cut from the death notices of a Swiss newspaper. The title holds a twofold resonance, an impurity which means that it cannot be read as a funeral oration, but which, on the other hand, shed some light on the mechanisms by which barbarianism can take over people's minds. In French, *suisse* is not very far removed phonetically from *juif*, Jew, since the two words are based around an identical syllable. But in French popular mythology, the word *suisse* is more likely to prompt a joke; the Swiss are popularly received as rather ridiculous characters: slow, pathologically attached to cleanliness and respect for civic rules. It is almost impossible in France, and perhaps elsewhere as well, to hear *Reserve: The Dead Swiss* without bursting out in laughter: as if the Swiss were not suffering subjects worthy of pity and compassion, were not mortals. When you find yourself laughing at the phrase 'dead Swiss', you suddenly shiver to realize that no so long ago the phrase 'dead Jew' was an abstraction as well. *Reserve: The Dead Swiss* attracts our attention to the essentially plural sense of artistic work; we might perhaps say that all of Christian Boltanski's work deals not with the memory of the Holocaust – then it would have been completed with the emergence of explicit pictures of the camps – but with the extraordinarily complex mechanisms that have made horror possible, with that which enables us to conceive the inconceivable."¹⁸

"The image is fundamentally ambiguous: if you take what I say or what I show you seriously, what are you going to do with those images in which I denounce myself as a trickster, a fraud, a crook? This act of putting things in perspective – the simultaneous choice of several contradictory points of view – is one of the keys to Boltanski's art. It is because of this that pairs of opposites, true/false, good/bad, religious/profane, are so difficult to handle."¹⁹

"We must also beware of an interpretation presenting the development of the artist as perfectly logical on the one hand, and free of outside influences on the other."²⁰

¹⁶ Garb, pg 30

¹⁷ Garb, pg 30

¹⁸ Garb pg 85

¹⁹ Garb pg 65

²⁰ Garb pg 71

“Boltanski’s work is particularly hostile to discourse; begun in clandestine conditions, it continues in semi-darkness, and it is important that it shouldn’t be dragged from this twilight where it must legitimately be seen.”²¹

“From the beginning, Boltanski’s work has whispered that the picture lies, that its association with language is the place where all manipulations take place.”²²

²¹ Garb, pg 90

²² Garb, pg 86

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