

MEMORY AND DEATH: AN ANALYSIS OF CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI'S ART

by

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ABSTRACT

The current interpretation of Christian Boltanski's artwork understands it as a metaphor for the Holocaust. Writers who pursue this interpretation conclude that the main drivers of meaning behind his work are found in the identity of the subjects, seen as Jewish Holocaust victims, and Boltanski's own Jewish background. But these interpretations neglect to take into account that Boltanski's work openly invites a collaboration with each viewer to resuscitate forgotten childhood memories and seeks to inspire personal reflection on the lost past and existential death. Building on the main themes in Boltanski's art, this thesis asks who determines meaning in Boltanski's art and on what basis.

An in-depth textual study of the existing literature surrounding Boltanski's work, close visual analysis of his and other artists' works, and the application of relevant theoretical concepts come together to contribute significant new and previously underdeveloped ideas in the discourse surrounding Boltanski's art. This thesis argues that Boltanski deliberately employs various cognitive strategies and visual devices to entice the viewer into an empathic engagement with his works. They are found in the recognisable yet ambiguous images and artefacts that represent generic, everyday, shared memories that were seemingly pulled from an unknowable yet real person in the past who is now forgotten or dead. Since the subject cannot be identified, the viewer internalises the familiar images and determines the meaning of Boltanski's work based on similar yet personal memories from his or her own past. On this basis, it is argued that Boltanski's artwork readily absorb polysemic interpretations because meaning is determined by the recuperated memories retrieved from each viewer's own background and past experiences.

DEDICATION

I dedicate my PhD dissertation to Elodie.

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INTRODUCTION:

MEMORY AND DEATH: AN ANALYSIS OF CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI'S ART

This thesis examines how Christian Boltanski's artwork derives its meaning. I am looking at Boltanski because he is generally regarded as the most important and renowned living French artist. He exhibits his work internationally in some of the most prestigious art galleries and museums in the world since the 1970s and has been awarded several prizes throughout his career, such as the Kaiserring Prize from Goslar, Germany in 2001, the Kunstpreis from Nord/LB, Braunschweig, also in 2001, the Praemium Imperiale Prize for sculpture from the Japan Arts Association in 2006, the Créateurs Sans Frontiers Award in 2007 from Cultures France, and, most recently, the Generalitat Valenciana's International Julio González Award in 2015.

Boltanski employs a wide variety of media, such as old photographs, rusty tin biscuit boxes, second-hand clothing, video projections, and other various objects that appear to be old, outdated, and worn. The discourse surrounding his art repeatedly mentions four common themes that have consistently appeared. Namely, the ambiguous identity of the subject, the relationship between personal and collective memory, the deliberate falsification of authenticity and pastness of the objects that comprise his art, and an anxious obsession about death. I will critically analyse each of these four themes in detail.

Most of the writers who have examined Boltanski's work have mentioned these four common themes, usually within one review. Writers such as Brett Kaplan, Marianne Hirsch, and Kate Palmer Albers are typical of the breadth of scholars who have mentioned the elements of ambiguity, memory, fictionalised accounts of identity and the past, and ideas of death that inhabits Boltanski's oeuvre. For example, Palmer Albers wrote that 'Boltanski's core strategic methods incorporating blur, mass quantity, anonymity, and ambiguity, and his

much-discussed “obsessions” with death, childhood, memory, and loss, are evident’.¹ She continued to say that Boltanski’s works are not constructed from truthful remnants of the past. Rather, they consist of ‘mute façades’ because ‘for him, it’s not important to be honest—as he puts it—about what is inside’.² Palmer Albers’s reading of Boltanski’s art is only one example from many others which consistently point out these recurring themes. My thesis focusses on these four main themes found in his œuvre because the analysis behind Boltanski’s employment of them is both persistent yet underdeveloped. My research aims to fill in these gaps of knowledge that are so vital in the interpretation of Boltanski’s art as well as revise any misunderstandings. During my investigation, I will also contribute to wider concerns that have profound relevance to contemporary artistic practices such as the conventions of visual representation of art that expresses the memory of the Holocaust, the aesthetic role of ambiguity, the nature and artistic manifestations of collective memory, the development of an increasingly deployed aesthetic strategy called the postindex, and a closer, more considered examination of how death is understood and represented in contemporary art. By revealing these new insights, my research offers new and inclusive ways of thinking about not only Boltanski’s art but also contemporary art practices that currently remain unnoticed or underdeveloped.

I begin my thesis by reviewing the literature and mapping out the evolution of the interpretations covering his work from the early 1970s up to the present in order to provide a context for what has become the dominant understanding of his art. This is important because the most popular explanation of his work is solely reflective of one dominant narrative. That is to say that previous writers have mainly used one narrative framework to

¹ Kate Palmer Albers, “‘It’s not an archive’: Christian Boltanski’s *Les Archives de C.B., 1965-1988*”, *Visual Resources*, 3, 27 (2011), 249-266 (pp.250).

² Palmer Albers, p. 261.

explain all of his work. This narrative revolves around the Holocaust. By restricting the meaning of his art – or any artist’s work – into one storyline, myriad meanings are discouraged from coming forth and the work becomes one dimensional. I examine the reasons why the Holocaust has become the main understanding of his art and why one predetermined interpretation is not able to capture the complexities of his art nor each viewer’s personal engagement with it.

I look at why so many writers understand Boltanski’s art as representing indirect yet powerful depictions of Jewish Holocaust victims as innocent children before the catastrophe of the camps. I unpack the work of several authors who advocate a Holocaust-based account of his art from Marianne Hirsch to Ernst Van Alphen, Lynn Gumpert, and Brett Kaplan, just to name a few. I want to see if there are common assumptions that each writer makes of Boltanski and his art which have been unchallenged and allowed to accumulate, leading to one undisputed reading of his work that prohibits other relevant observations from flourishing.

I also deconstruct the comparisons that have been made between Boltanski’s art and the work of artists who are included in the artistic tendency of what Brett Kaplan referred to as ‘Holocaust art’.³ This art refers directly to the imagery, conditions, and memory of the Holocaust and Nazism. Specifically, I want to understand why Boltanski’s work has been compared to the work of German artist Anselm Kiefer and American artist Shimon Attie. Both Kiefer and Attie created works which undoubtedly point directly to the Holocaust and Nazism by appropriating the distinctive imagery conventionally associated with them. But Boltanski does not use imagery associated with either the Holocaust or Nazism. As an

³ Brett Kaplan, *Unwanted Beauty: Aesthetic Pleasure in Holocaust Representation* (Champaign: University of Illinois, 2007), p. 4.

example of what I will argue in this chapter, Kaplan points out the difficulty in placing Boltanski's work into a Holocaust-based framework when she wrote that, 'The ambiguity of, and fluctuations in Boltanski's understanding of the Holocaust content of his art speaks to the ambiguous possibilities of reading much of his art as Holocaust art while it also speaks to other moments of loss'.⁴ I want to understand the motivations behind these comparisons in order to establish how and why Boltanski's art is interpreted as an ambiguous reference to the Holocaust.

My contributions in the first chapter focus on analysing the historiography of Boltanski's art. For the first time, I explain the reasoning behind why writers situate the understanding of his work into one overarching narrative of the Holocaust, and if it is productive to do so. To be clear: I do not wish to invalidate all interpretations of the Holocaust. Indeed, the crux of my thesis argues that so long as the viewer exercises his or her own volition regarding the meaning of his work, instead of conforming to a pre-established narrative, then the reading may be valid. My issue with Holocaust-based readings is that they are widely circulated documents, in the form of books, exhibition catalogues, and websites, which encapsulate his entire oeuvre within one narrative which has the potential to seal off divergent meanings his art can accommodate from other viewers.

Once I loosen up the dominant interpretation of the Holocaust, I want to examine the prevalent element of ambiguity. Since this element is so often mentioned in Boltanski's work, I want to understand what purpose it serves in its overall meaning. I pinpoint the ambiguous elements in order to unpack their function. To this end, I call upon the notion of 'openness' theorised by Italian novelist and semiotician Umberto Eco.⁵ Openness, or the

⁴ Kaplan, p. 137.

⁵ Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. by Anna Cancogni (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

open work, is a modern art tendency identified by Eco that explains the reason why some artforms are intentionally incomplete.

I begin by defining Eco's idea of openness, or ambiguity, and how and why it is used in modern works of art. I discuss the role of the artist and the role of the viewer in order to shed light on the important functions they play in the meaning of work that is deliberately ambiguous. The biography and background of the artist takes a back seat in the work's message. In open works, the artist's role is relegated. Whereas in traditional works of art, the artist has complete control over constructing a scene that represents a pre-established narrative, in an open work the artist is more restricted in his or her influence on its ultimate structure and meaning. The artist of an open work sets a loose parameter of meaning based on general themes. Crucially, certain elements in the open work's loose, general ideological or physical structure are intentionally left unresolved or incomplete by the artist in order to invite an engagement with the audience.

The viewer commandeers the main role in driving the work's meaning. This distinguishes modern and contemporary art from traditional works which are meant to be understood in one particular way. I then apply Eco's ideas to Boltanski's work to see what new insights they can reveal. I want to understand how and why Boltanski instils, in much of his entire artistic output, palpable elements that are purposefully underdetermined, and how the viewer is meant to derive meaning through his or her engagement with the ambiguous components. To this end, I scrutinise the overt tactics that Boltanski uses to empower the viewer to engage empathically with the work, such as through game playing and physical interactions.

My contributions in the second chapter evolve around examining and explaining the ambiguous aspects of Boltanski's art, and how and why they were created that way. Since the anonymous subjects, usually children, form the main elements of ambiguity, I critically analyse the figure of the child, or childhood, by comparing it to previous concepts and visual representation of children since the Middle Ages.

I will also unravel for the first time the capricious connection in Boltanski's art between the ambiguous imagery from the past and what message it communicates to the viewer. I show a new way of thinking about his work using concepts and terminology about openness developed by Umberto Eco.

Since the past and memory are widely acknowledged as the main tropes in Boltanski's work, in my third chapter, I want to understand what kind of memory he depicts and what influence it has on the explanation of his work. I turn to Maurice Halbwachs's theory of collective memory in order to understand the structure of collective memory. Since much of Boltanski's imagery depicts childhood and the family, I want to know what those images mean in regards to collective memory.

Martin Golding is in line with many other writers who detect the vital significance of memory in Boltanski's work. He wrote that Boltanski represents the 'small memories', seen in the old photographs, rusty biscuit boxes, and second-hand clothing that makes up much of his works. These objects represent everything that has ever happened to him, 'but which are continually in the process of evaporating'.⁶ In Boltanski's art, I want to understand the relationship between the personal memories that he represents and the 'great memory' of collective memory and history.⁷ For this investigation, I look to Jan Assmann's theories of

⁶ Martin Golding, 'Photography, Memory, and Survival', *Literature and Theology*, 14, 1 (2000), 52-68, (p. 61).

⁷ Golding, p. 61.

communicative and cultural memory. I want to know if the concept of communicative memory is similar to Boltanski's idea of 'small memory' and how those memories mingle with 'great memory'. This kind of memory is analogous to Assmann's concept of cultural memory. This kind of memory is seen in prestigious art museums and is preserved for generations by specialists. Its temporal horizon spans the remote past and forms an entire society's collective identity.⁸ I want to understand how the exhibition venues that display Boltanski's art affect the reception of the objects of 'small memory'.

But the analysis of the structural composition and types of collective memory that are represented in Boltanski's art do not go far enough to explain their character and meaning in contemporary culture. The condition of contemporary memory will also be investigated using Pierre Nora's concept of the 'site of memory' from current collective memory discourse.⁹ Nora described these sites as the ambiguous, simulated remnants of collective traditions, values, and memory which form a contemporary culture's history and identity. What is being remembered in these sites is dynamic and dependent upon who is doing the remembering. There is no unifying narrative dominating sites of memory; they expose conflicting viewpoints of the past. Sites of memory characterise the past as disconnected from the present. They compensate for the loss of a society's living memory by staging manufactured versions of it.

I want to know what insights are gained when I apply Nora's concept to Boltanski's artworks. I argue that Boltanski's work can be seen as a site of memory because the mnemonic imagery he represents is 'ambiguous' and 'fake'. Put succinctly, the objects that

⁸ Jan Assmann, 'Communicative and Cultural Memory' in *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, ed. by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter Publications, 2010) pp. 109-118 (p. 113).

⁹ Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*', *Representations*, 26 (1989), 7-24 (p. 7).

represent memory in his works, such as old photographs and rusty tin boxes, are not really from the past. Rather they are manufactured and encrusted with artificial markings that simulate the look of age and decay. I want to know why Boltanski takes new photographs of old photographs and artificially corrodes new tin boxes for his art, and what that practice says about the condition of memory.

I then situate Boltanski's fascination with memory in the contemporary artistic tendency called 'countermonuments' which began in Germany in the 1980s. I define and describe this tendency with several examples because I argue that these artists approach and represent memory in a way that will shed light on how Boltanski represents memory himself. I want to know how Boltanski's art relates to issues raised in relation to countermonuments such as the primacy of personal memory versus collective memory and aesthetic strategies of the void and ambiguity. I want to know if countermonuments interact with the viewer in a way that can reverberate with how we understand the role of memory in Boltanski's art.

My contributions of this chapter are found in my methodological approach which employs concepts from contemporary collective memory discourse. This is the first time that Boltanski's work has been critically analysed within the context of collective memory scholarship. In fact, many artworks which engage with memory can benefit from such a methodological approach based on some or all of these concepts.

In my research, I also expose important aspects about the visual representation of memory in contemporary art. For example, how communicative memory is represented in the personal items that many people hold onto in order to remember their childhood memories, like old school pictures and photographs from the family photo album. Equally important is my discussion about the distinct ways that Boltanski characterises memory in a

way that distinguishes his work from other artists who also represent memory. I argue that it is important to understand that the underlying pathos that his art secretes is not necessarily based on a specific loss, such as the Holocaust. Rather, the dark mood that infuses so much of Boltanski's work represents a ubiquitous feature of contemporary life which mourns the disappearance of collective memory and tradition, knowing that it is always in the process of evaporating into the oblivion of the forgotten past.

My penultimate chapter goes one step further into this element of the past. Here, I concentrate on how and why Boltanski simulates certain elements. Specifically, I look at the way he fabricates the look of age and the meaning of his own name. I approach this analysis by drawing on the semiotic theory of the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. I apply the concept of the symbol, icon and index to Boltanski's works.¹⁰ Peirce's tripartite sign theory is useful for my argument because it enables me to understand the meaning of the simulated quality of the various elements.

Peirce defined the symbol as a kind of sign that is based on an arbitrary, culturally learned connection between the representation and what it means to the viewer; an icon is a sign that points to its referent through its similarity or resemblance in some capacity; an index is a sign which has a direct physical or causal connection with that to which it refers. I argue that there are two types of indexical signs that Boltanski distorts: the physical trace and the deixis. The indexical trace refers to its referent through physical contiguity whereas the deixis is a linguistic expression whose referent is dependent on the time and place denoted in the sentence, or in Boltanski's case, in the context of the title.

¹⁰ Charles S. Peirce, 'What is a Sign?', in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. by Justus Buchler (New York: Dover Publications, 2012) 98-119.

I look to other writers to continue my discussion of the indexical sign. Rosalind Krauss employed Peirce's sign theory to analyse the artwork from the 1970s. She argued that certain artworks tended to signify presence through their direct reference to that which they represent.¹¹ In other words, there is a propensity in some contemporary art to point directly, through actual physical contact or causal connection to the object that it represents. This tactic highlights the presence of the object to which the artwork refers. Krauss was writing about artists such as Dennis Oppenheim, Gordon Matta-Clark, and Lucio Pozzi, but I think that an analysis of the index is applicable to Boltanski too. I say this because the meaning of his work hinges on it being perceived as containing an imprint of its referent. The look of genuine pastness is part of the fiction that exists in his work. Many writers have noticed this aspect of Boltanski's oeuvre and explained it as his attempt to expose the gap in representation between the index and its referent in the past. This is where their argument stops but I take it further.

Ernst Van Alphen is one of the writers who argued that the objects in Boltanski's art are not really indices of the past; their message is about the failure of the indexical sign to make the past present in the here and now. He wrote that 'It is again the failure of the indexical significance of these archived items that confronts us. If these pieces of clothing were successful as indexical signs, then their owners would be evoked. A suggestion of their presence would be made. But the opposite effect is created. The individuality and specificity of each owner is dissolved.'¹² Van Alphen's comment concludes that the deliberate erasure of identity in Boltanski's portraits contradicts the conventions of portraiture which promise

¹¹ Rosalind Krauss, 'Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America', *October*, 3 (Spring 1977) 68-81 and Rosalind Krauss, 'Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America, Part 2', *October*, 4 (Autumn 1977) 58-67.

¹² Ernst Van Alphen, *Staging the Archive: Art and Photography in the Age of New Media*, (London: Reaktion Press, 2014), p. 77.

the viewer some disclosure of the viewer's unique persona. As a result, Van Alphen argues that Boltanski's art is about the failure of indexical representation. I want to dig deeper into this explanation offered by Van Alphen because I see more in Boltanski's work than a crisis of representation.

Indeed, some prominent analyses, such as by Marianne Hirsch, have hinted that there is more to know about the semiotic signification operating in his work. Hirsch wrote that his art is comprised of symbols which masquerade as indices.¹³ Whilst this is an insightful observation, she never developed it further. I expand upon Hirsch's observation using the vocabulary of Peircean semiotics that I described before, focussing mainly on the indexical sign. My analysis eventuates a discussion on an aesthetic device called the postindex, even though Hirsch nor have any writers applied this concept to Boltanski's work. I will be the first one to do so.

The postindex is a relatively new concept which has seen increasing development in contemporary artistic discourse. What has been written about it involves either the way digital technology can mimic the indexical appearance of a past reality or the gap in signification which represents trauma and historical violence in some contemporary art. The postindex is not an index at all; it is a symbol that is intentionally manipulated to appear like an index. I argue that the postindex simulates the 'aura' of the indexical sign. Strictly speaking, it mimics the faithfulness and uniqueness of time and space verified in the indexical sign. I argue that the aura, simulated or real, is *the* vital ingredient that enables the viewer to form an empathic connection with Boltanski's work.

¹³ Marianne Hirsch, 'Past Lives: Postmemory in Exile', *Poetics Today*, 17, 4, (1996), pp. 659-686 (p. 675).

I apply the concepts of the postindex and the aura in order to clarify why and how Boltanski fabricates certain elements in his art, namely the physical imprint of age and the disruption of the deixis to point to its referent. At this point, I tie all the loose ends together into the main thrust of my argument: that once the individual viewer invests empathically with Boltanski's art, it has the capability of signifying as an icon to him or her specifically. In short, Boltanski's images and objects may appear similar in some capacity to the viewer's own past memories and experiences. I want to understand the complex semiotic signification process underlying Boltanski's work and how it wields the referential power of the symbol, index, and icon in order to form a strong empathic connection between the work and the viewer. This discussion is crucial for my argument because ultimately I want to understand how Boltanski succeeds in developing an affective connection between his work and the viewer.

The contributions in my fourth chapter centre on the referential conditions of art which falsifies the truthfulness of indexical characteristics and how they affect the message relayed to the viewer about authenticity and the past. To conduct my critical analysis, I develop the idea of the postindex, which forms part of my wider contribution to not only the discussion around Boltanski's art but also for wider considerations of contemporary art. Specifically, my research is the first discussion that pinpoints the indexical characteristics which are forged: authenticity of the referent and evidence of the past. This concept will continue to grow in its significance, especially as the immeasurable malleability of digital technologies challenges our standards and conventions of truthful representation.

My final chapter examines the foundational drive behind Boltanski's work: the awareness of death. Boltanski has held an unceasing, dark fascination with death since the beginning of his career. In his 1990 textual work, *What They Remember*, 100 statements are written about Boltanski after his death (in fact, they were all written by him). It is a sort of

‘composite obituary’.¹⁴ Statement 66 is particularly apt in our appreciation of Boltanski’s obsession with death. It reads, ‘Death, death, that was all he ever talked about, death, death had become his stock in trade’.¹⁵

Whilst I discussed in chapter one that death is usually read as pertaining to Jewish Holocaust victims, I want to understand the idea of death in another way that lies beyond the physical cessation of the body. To this end, I turn to the existential ideas of German philosopher Martin Heidegger. I want to know what new insights can be gained by recognising that the core impulse behind Boltanski’s art refers to existential death – a kind of death which upends our everyday way of life but can be survived. Whilst many writers have commented on the prevalence of death in Boltanski’s art, they have not delved into what his work actually says about it. Therefore, the crux of the meaning behind his work is underdeveloped. For the first time, Boltanski’s art is subjected to an in-depth examination of what kind of death is represented and what he says about it.

I begin this chapter by defining and explaining Heidegger’s notions of existential death. I look into whether seminal ideas such anxiety and the uncanny can expose new ways of perceiving the condition of death that Boltanski’s represents. Anxiety, or *angst*, according to Heidegger, involves a sort of sudden mood or way of thinking that renders the individual unable to cope with life as he or she knew it. Everything is now called into question. As a result, the anxious individual sees everything around him to be unclear, or ambiguous, because the normal ways of behaving and thinking no longer apply. It is a frame of mind defined by the realisation that the world is not what it seems.

¹⁴ Richard Hobbs, ‘Boltanski’s Visual Archives’, *History of the Human Sciences*, 11, 4, (1998), pp. 121-140 (p. 126).

¹⁵ Lynn Gumpert, *Christian Boltanski*, (Paris: Flammarion, 1994), p. 168.

Anxiety opens our eyes to the uncanniness at the core of our existence. It exposes the limit of what we can comprehend about our own essence. Heidegger wrote that ‘the uncanny itself is what looms forth in the essence of human beings and is that which stirs in all stirrings and arousal’.¹⁶ The uncanny is what we fear when we become anxious.¹⁷ It reveals the basis of our existence as death.

I move on to discussing the idea of death in the current dominant findings of Boltanski’s art: death of the Jewish Holocaust victim. I apply Heidegger’s notions of ‘inauthenticity’ in order to situate this dominant interpretation in the discussion of Boltanski’s work. I also look at Heidegger’s notion of the ‘they’, or societal conventions and rules, and apply them to Boltanski’s work. I want to know if any of his works conform to societal placations of death. For example, when the ‘they’ pacifies us into thinking that death only happens to other people.

Since so many images appear in Boltanski’s art as depictions of anonymous children, I want to apply Heidegger’s ideas of existential death to see what may be revealed about them. To this end, I pick up my earlier discussion from chapter two on the figure of the child in order to discover how Boltanski represents the figure of the child. I want to know if it has any relationship to his recurring statement that a dead child lives inside of each one of us.¹⁸

Finally, I explore for the first time the relationship between Boltanski’s art and the artist whom he claimed was the most influential on his work: the theatrical work of Polish director and visual artist Tadeusz Kantor. Kantor’s theatrical production from 1975 entitled *The Dead*

¹⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin’s Hymn “The Ister”*, trans William McNeill and Julia Davis (Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1996) p. 72.

¹⁷ Katherine Withy, *Heidegger on Being Uncanny* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015) p. 97.

¹⁸ Catherine Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, trans. by Marc Lowenthal, (Boston: MFA Publications, 2009), p. 77.

Class will be the focus of my investigation since Boltanski has referred to it as deeply affecting him and his art.¹⁹

Through my discussion, I compare works from the two artists in terms of how they represent childhood imagery in relation to themes of death, the past, and memory. Whilst stylistic and thematic similarities exist between the two artists, the overall message concerning memory differs. More precisely, Kantor's work is autobiographical whilst Boltanski's art represents collective memory. Kantor provides the narrative and meaning of his work for the viewer; Boltanski deliberately leaves his work underdetermined so that the viewer can complete the work's meaning with his or her own memories and reflections.

The contributions from chapter five are based on introducing a new methodology and philosophical approach to an analysis of Boltanski's work based on Heidegger's writings. I argue that the issue of death in Boltanski's work is most productively understood as an existential crisis that all of us suffer during our lifetime: the death of our childhood.²⁰

Through my comparison between his work and Kantor's plays, I contribute, also for the first time, the new insight that Boltanski represents the figure of the unknown child as a *memento mori* symbol that portends the death of childhood and its memories.

Understanding that the figure of the anonymous child in Boltanski's art is a figure of death and forgotten memory may elicit myriad personal reflections, which in turn, resonates more profoundly with each individual viewer. This renders the awareness of death more intimate to our daily life and not just an objective inevitability that we will succumb to one day in the future.

¹⁹ Grenier, p. 82.

²⁰ Grenier, p. 80.

Finally, my analysis breaks new ground concerning how death and forgotten memory are represented in a distinctively different way in each artist's work. On the one hand, Kantor's work represents his own memory and reflections on the death of childhood. On the other, Boltanski does not draw upon his own background. Rather, he represents collective imagery of death and childhood memory that is recognisable to most members of a society.

'I OFTEN GET THIS KIND OF MISUNDERSTANDING': THE DOMINANT INTERPRETATION OF CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI AND THE HOLOCAUST

This chapter begins my thesis with a crucial assessment of the literature surrounding Boltanski's art. I examine the critical reception because I want to understand how and why his art is widely understood as referencing the Holocaust. Since the narrative of the Holocaust forms the main reading of his art, I want to uncover on what aspects these observations are founded.

The early reading of his art, from the late 1960 to the mid-1980s, alluded to two themes: collective, everyday imagery that is familiar and common to everyone in a society, and as a challenge to established conventions surrounding artistic and museum practices. However, a turn in the reading of his art occurred in the 1988 with his North American exhibition tour, 'Lessons of Darkness'. This new interpretation saw his art as referencing the Holocaust. As Lynn Gumpert, one of the curators of 'Lessons of Darkness' claimed, 'Looking back at his early work, Boltanski saw in it an attempt not only to deal with the mass murder of the Jews, but with the agonising question of how such an atrocity, at odds with basic notions of humanity, could have occurred'.²¹ I examine why Gumpert, and other writers, lock all of Boltanski's art into the memory of the Holocaust.

At the same time when this analysis was applied to Boltanski's art, the Holocaust story had developed into a universal symbol of evil in the world, no longer limited to a specific space and time. I examine the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961 because I want to understand how it

²¹ Lynn Gumpert with Mary Jane Jacob, *Christian Boltanski: 'Lessons of Darkness'* (Chicago: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1988), p. 99.

affected the current condition of Holocaust memory and if it influences how Boltanski's work is understood.

In the early 1980s, artists increasingly became concerned with the Holocaust and its memory, producing work that has been categorised as 'Holocaust art'. I discuss the characteristics of artwork that directly address the Holocaust because I want to ascertain if this overarching, pre-established narrative is productive to a nuanced comprehension of Boltanski's works. Many writers have placed Boltanski's art into this category since the late 1980s. But I think that his art seldom, if ever, refers directly or solely to the Holocaust. This is an important point which previous writers concede but have never developed. Therefore, his placement within the realm of art that exclusively depicts the Holocaust must be open to question.

This chapter reports in several crucial issues. I begin with focussing on the early readings of Boltanski's art. Then I chart the evolution of Holocaust memory in Western society and how visual artists have represented Holocaust memory in contemporary art. Next, I determine if Boltanski's art fulfils the same established criteria of faithful Holocaust representation as is applied to other artists. Finally, I analyse if the application of the predetermined Holocaust narrative to the interpretations of Boltanski's art holds up to critical scrutiny.

In this chapter, my contributions to the knowledge surrounding Boltanski's art are twofold: to explore the evolution of the critical reception of Boltanski's art and to critically examine, for the first time, how the preordained, unequivocal narrative of the Holocaust overlooks other interesting and insightful nuances in his work. This discussion is important to my overall thesis because it enables me to unveil new ways to understand this art, which I

explore in the remainder of my research, that lie outside the domain of one specific and predetermined narrative.

Boltanski's artistic career began in May 1968 at the Théâtre de Ranelagh, a cinema in Paris, with his exhibition entitled '*La Vie Impossible de Christian Boltanski*' ('The Impossible Life of Christian Boltanski'). At the same time, the student riots were aflame in Paris, and even though Boltanski did not participate in them, he ended up benefitting from his nonparticipation in the protests. He said, 'I was furious! It was my opening – who was going to come? But it was quite useful for me. There was a meeting of journalists on strike at the cinema, I met them, they were very nice to me. And I sold a piece which ended up in the Centre Pompidou'.²² At his first show, Boltanski showed works in various media: painting, installation, and film. He described his exhibition to Catherine Grenier when she was the Director at the Centre Pompidou in Paris when he said:

The exhibit was held in the cinema lobby in May '68. It was pretty big: there were about fifteen paintings and some Dolls. I'd begun making big dolls, life size, which I set on chairs and inside display cases. Kind of strange dolls – I'd dress them in my sister's or my mother's clothes and fill them with kapok. I had masks of France Gall or Françoise Hardy and I'd put them on these dolls [...] I made my first film, *La vie impossible de Christian Boltanski*, and set the dolls in motion for it: I threw them out the window,

²² Peter Aspden, 'Christian Boltanski: "We give ourselves things to do so that we don't die"', *Financial Times*, (30 March 2018), <<https://www.ft.com/content/182368ec-3212-11e8-ac48-10c6fdc22f03>> [accessed 27 August 2019].

hung them upside down in stairwells [...] In the Ranelagh exhibit, I showed paintings, doll installations, and the film [...] My film was screened inside a kind of room on wheels that you could walk into.²³

The most influential early responses to Boltanski's work saw it as a combination of two main characteristics reflecting France in the late 1960s and early 1970s: as challenging the arts establishment in its museal practices and displays (espoused by the student riots of May 1968 in Paris), and representing collective imagery relating to childhood and other common themes. One of the earliest art critics to review Boltanski's work was French curator, Jean Clair, who suggested that he staged challenges to the established conventions of artistic truth when it comes to depicting autobiographical self-portraits. That is that the self-portrait can be trusted in good faith that it is an honest representation of the subjective autobiography of the artist. Clair wrote in 1970 about Boltanski's 1969 work, *Recherche et Présentation de Tout ce qui Reste de Mon Enfance, 1944–1950* (*Research and Presentation of All that Remains of My Childhood, 1944–1950*). This work is a small six-page art book, measuring 22 x 16cm, that was made cheaply by photocopying fifteen black-and-white photographs of Boltanski as a child onto standard photocopy white paper.

On the first page we see an old classroom photograph: nineteen young children standing in three rows. They are outside in a leafy green park or perhaps schoolyard. There is a handwritten 'x' above one of the boys on the top row. This is Christian Boltanski as a five-or-six-year-old boy in 1950. The opposite page has two photographs. The top one shows a young child playing with some toy wooden blocks. The caption below indicates that this is

²³ Catherine Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, trans. by Marc Lowenthal, (Boston: MFA Publications, 2009), p. 32.

Christian Boltanski as a two-year-old toddler: 'Christian Boltanski jouant aux cubes – 1946' (or 'Christian Boltanski playing with cubes – 1946'). The bottom photograph shows the wooden blocks that he played with, according to the other caption on the page which reads, 'Cubes de Christian Boltanski en 1949' (or 'Christian Boltanski's cubes in 1949'). The third page again shows two photographs. The top one is of a child's bed and the caption indicates that this is Christian Boltanski's bed when he was three to six years old: 'Lit de Christian Boltanski – 1947-1950' (or 'The bed of Christian Boltanski – 1947-1950'). The bottom photograph shows a small, striped, well-worn shirt that belonged to young Christian Boltanski: 'Chemise de Christian Boltanski – Mars 1949' (or 'The shirt of Christian Boltanski – March 1949'). The opposite page shows two more photographs. The top one is of a cut-out of a piece of fabric from Christian Boltanski's jumper when he was six years old: 'Morceau d'un pull-over porté par Christian Boltanski en 1949' (or 'Piece of a sweater worn by Christian Boltanski in 1949'). The bottom photograph is of some of Christian Boltanski's baby hair. The caption reads, 'Cheveux de Christian Boltanski – 1949'.

The next two pages show one photograph on each page. The left page shows a lesson from Christian Boltanski's schoolbook from 1950, 'Page 69 du livre de lecture de Christian Boltanski – 1950', and the opposite page shows a handwritten lesson that Christian Boltanski wrote in June 1950 when he was six years old, 'Composition de recitation de Christian Boltanski – Juin 1950'. The final two pages show six holiday snaps that are common to family photo album photographs. Each photograph depicts either the young Christian at the beach in Penderf, Morbihan or La Baule in France, or one of his family members, such as his father 'Etienne Boltanski, père de Christian Boltanski (Penderf, Morbihan) – 1949'. In each photograph, it is difficult, if not impossible, to detect any distinguishing characteristics since the reproductions are so grainy or over-exposed. All the

photographs are pictures of everyday childhood objects or experiences, such as family holidays. Only the accompanying captions indicate who the photographs depict and when they were taken.

Clair wrote that when looking closely at these photographs, ‘We realise that all the dates contradict each other and the boy that appears in the photographs is never the same’.²⁴ He concludes that “‘Christian Boltanski’, in truth, never existed’.²⁵ In fact, Clair was correct: the boy in the photographs was actually Boltanski’s nephew, Christophe, who was born in 1962, except for the first classroom photograph, which was truly Christian Boltanski as a young boy.

The captions accompanying the photographs provide false information in two ways: the boy is not Christian Boltanski, but is Christophe Boltanski, and the dates that the photographs were taken are not from 1945 to 1950, but from roughly 1963 to 1968, if we can trust that Christian Boltanski stayed true to the age of Christophe in the photographs.

What Clair revealed was that Boltanski’s alter ego, indicated in titles with ‘Christian Boltanski’, ‘C.B.’, or ‘my’, which he used extensively throughout his early works, was a fictional character. Whilst I will analyse the artist’s use of his own name and initials in chapter two and four, in this chapter my point is that Clair recognised early on that Boltanski used his own name to represent the photographic images of a different boy. The photographs in *Recherche et Présentation de Tout ce qui Reste de Mon Enfance, 1944–1950*, as well as other early works, are actually representations of ‘the debris of a monument that never existed’.²⁶ As a result, the viewer never gets to know the real artist through his

²⁴ Jean Clair, ‘Expressionnisme ‘70: Boltanski – Sarkis’, in *Le Temps des Avant-gardes: Entretiens et Chroniques de l’art 1968-1978*, (Paris: Essais Éditions de la Différence, 2012) 68-72 (p. 71).

²⁵ Clair, p. 71.

²⁶ Clair, p. 72.

declared self-portraits. The photographs actually depict stereotypical images of a young boy in France doing average, normal things like going to school or going on holiday with his family to the beach. What Clair intuited is that Boltanski is depicting common collective imagery of childhood in *Recherche et Présentation de Tout ce qui Reste de Mon Enfance, 1944–1950*.

In the autumn of 1974, art critic Gilbert Lascault reviewed the work, *Le Récit du père* (*The Story of the Father*), from Boltanski's series, *Saynètes Comiques* (*Comic Sketches*) which was shown in Münster, Germany at the Westfälischer Kunstverein. Lascault exalted Boltanski's work which is made up of five black-and-white photographs of Boltanski satirically posing in various ways as the typical, middle-class French father figure. He is wearing a simple jacket and holds a toy rifle. Boltanski playfully salutes the French tricolour flag, which is upside down, whilst pulling funny faces. In other individual works in the *Saynètes Comiques* series, Boltanski represents himself in various stereotypical familial roles such as of 'mother' by wearing a flower, a 'little boy' by pulling his suit jacket over his head and rolling up his trousers, and the 'dying grandfather' by lying in a bed with a cross over his head.

At this time, photography was still at an early stage of being considered a legitimate art medium, with conceptual artists playing an important part in this process. For Lascault, Boltanski's photographic artwork 'attacks bourgeois society in many ways', not only by questioning the notion of what is an acceptable artistic medium, but also by reflecting 'capitalist society' through the use of the degraded medium of photography, such as 'paper, vinegar water, and some other chemicals used by other intellectuals and manual workers'.²⁷ This also applies to Boltanski's humorous depiction of how 'the bourgeoisie dishonoured the

²⁷ Gilbert Lascault, 'Huit Critiques Grotesques pour un travail de Christian Boltanski', in *Vers une Esthétique sans Entrave*, ed. by Mikel Dufrenne (Paris: Union Générale D'éditions, 1975) 483-491 (p. 489).

flag of the sans-culottes', or the lower-class French who rose up against the Ancien Régime during the French Revolution.²⁸ For Lascault, Boltanski's early work, *Saynètes Comiques*, is a satirical symbol of the upper middle-classes who advocate a capitalist ideology. He reflected that this work represents capitalism which 'destroys nature, makes it unrecognisable. The sketch does not name the enemies: the bourgeoisie declares wars for their profit; the middle classes and the proletariat are sent to the abattoir without explanation'.²⁹

Boltanski's early works, he said, were a satirical challenge on middle-class values and artistic conventions of the established norms of artistic media.

In a similar vein, German art critic Irmela Franzke noted that Boltanski's mid-1970s series of large-scale photographic prints of everyday objects, *Compositions*, featured such common objects such as children's toys, flowers, and everyday idealised, generic images. The photographs do not point at a particular moment in time and space, but represent what is commonly characterised as amateur photography, or that aesthetic which depicts stereotypical and easily identifiable objects and scenes in a banal or average taste.³⁰

Boltanski said that the inspiration for the photographs in the *Compositions* series was the aesthetic style of common amateur colour photography.

I believe that the aesthetic value that one attributes to the photography that developed in the [mid-seventies] is due to the following: the acceptance and general use of colour, the development of specialised magazines that have created certain standards and rules which, consciously or unconsciously, a good

²⁸ Lascault, p. 489.

²⁹ Lascault, p. 490.

³⁰ Gumpert, p. 62.

number of amateur photographers adhere to. In the same way that photographic subjects are stereotypical, photographic beauty follows very precise rules.³¹

For example, the photographic works for the 1977-1978 series, *Compositions photographiques* (or *Photographic Compositions*) are six large pictures, measuring one square meter each. All the photographs depict objects taken from the traditional genre of still life painting. For example, 'several candles, a bottle of wine, a framed antique print, an open book, and fruit' are composed within a simple black background.³² These are Boltanski's depictions of pictures that define average, stereotypical tastes which amateur photographers typically photograph.

Franzke states that Boltanski played a major role in establishing photography in the echelons of fine arts in the seventies when she suggested, 'The photo found a new kind of evaluation and attention, which at times superseded and outflanked contemporary painting in the exhibition industry of the time [...] Christian Boltanski played a part in this tendency from the outset'.³³

She compares works in *Compositions* to the monumental, staged tableaux seen throughout the lineage of traditional painting. By depicting objects in a painterly manner, that is idealised objects in a large-scale format typically reserved for paintings, Boltanski is equating photography and painting.

³¹ Gumpert, p. 62, taken from Jacques Clayssen, 'Boltanski' *Identité/Identifications*, exhibition catalogue, (Bordeaux: Centre d'Arts Plastiques Contemporains, 1976).

³² Gumpert, p. 62.

³³ Irmela Franzke, 'Christian Boltanski: Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden', *Bruckmann's Pantheon*, (1984), p. 372.

Despite the underlying conceptual nature of the work, they consistently have a highly sensual appeal and meaningfulness. This is especially true of Boltanski's 1978 *Compositions*. They are large format and seem like paintings, especially when viewed from a distance, because the specific characteristics of a colour photograph are largely neglected. Boltanski's close-ups do not shine with their particular sharpness and colour fastness, they are rather imperfectly rendered by raw photographic criteria. It is no coincidence that the formally staged *Compositions* [...] give the appearance of depiction of a painterly means.³⁴

Again, as we saw in Lascault's reading, Franzke claims that Boltanski challenged the conventions of artistic media and their appropriation into arts museums.

Rebecca DeRoo has focussed more on the role of Boltanski's early work as a form of institutional critique.³⁵ DeRoo's point was that Boltanski's art exposed the gap that exists between the upper middle-class collective memory, communicated through arts institutions, and the lower middle-class or working-class viewers' inability to project their own memories onto those elitist images. She stated that Jean Clair was the first critic that championed Boltanski as bringing 'the aesthetic into the "ethnological" realm'.³⁶ Case in point, she argues that Boltanski's early work was inspired by the objective presentation of artefacts associated with ethnological museums through his use of glass display cases, or vitrines, and photographs of bits of clothing and locks of hair that participated in non-

³⁴ Franzke, p. 373.

³⁵ Rebecca DeRoo, 'Christian Boltanski's Memory Images: Remaking the French Museum in the Aftermath of '68', *Oxford Art Journal*, 27, 2 (2004), 221-238.

³⁶ DeRoo, p. 227.

aesthetic strategies. Boltanski's art was understood to 'provide a more accessible, everyday, "ethnological" alternative'".³⁷ However, instead of Boltanski's work fulfilling the aims of the arts museum establishment to create artistic 'emblems of inclusiveness and accessibility' after the riots of May 1968, Boltanski's work actually undermines that aim because his work is only truly similar to the memories and backgrounds of upper middle-class elitists.³⁸ In effect, the lower-class viewer of Boltanski's artwork was 'encouraged to imagine their past in terms of one particular history, flattening out the specificity of their personal memories'.³⁹

DeRoo argued that Clair's observations into Boltanski's work, which saw it as imagery from the collective storehouse of generic childhood memory, became the dominant interpretation of his artwork, and still is. Whilst I disagree with her claim that the dominant analysis of Boltanski's work is currently about notions involving generic collective memory and death, DeRoo is representative of writers who view Boltanski's early work as representing collective imagery of the family and childhood as a form of institutional critique.

Another example of a critic who regarded Boltanski's early work as depicting collective imagery of childhood is French art critic Chantal Boulanger who reviewed the work *Les Ombres* exhibited at Gallery Optica in Montreal, Canada in January 1985 as part of the 'Narrativity/Performativity' exhibition. *Les Ombres* (or *The Shadows*) (Figure 33) consists of small cardboard cut-outs of skeleton-like figures projected onto the walls of a darkened room, appearing to dance and flicker. Her interpretation treated these works as a reflection

³⁷ DeRoo, p. 227.

³⁸ DeRoo, p. 221.

³⁹ DeRoo, p. 236.

on the nostalgic desire of an adult to recapture the loss of childhood through the play of lights and puppetry.⁴⁰ Boulanger argued that Boltanski depicts easily identifiable collective imagery that forms part of everyone's own childhood: 'Boltanski builds his reminiscences by drawing on the visual reservoir anchored in our collective memory'.⁴¹

Art critic Didier Semin and artist Démosthènes Davvetas reviewed *Monuments: Les Enfants de Dijon* (Figure 19) and found it alluded to generic, collective religious imagery. Whilst I provide a deeper analysis of this work in subsequent chapters, in this chapter it suffices to say that this work depicts small black-and-white photographs of young children, typically found in school portraits. Each portrait is individually encased in a flimsy tin frame. The portraits are hung from floor to ceiling of the gallery wall and are surrounded by small electric lights in a darkened room. In other individual works of this series, portraits of children are hung on top of a simple, geometric construction of tin biscuit boxes, alluding to generic temples and altars. The works in *Monuments* imbue a sombre, reverential atmosphere in the gallery akin to religious ceremonies and veneration.

Semin suggested that, 'Boltanski accepts and even anticipates this religious reading: in Salpêtrière, at the Venice Biennale, he has referred to the popular culture of religious imagery. The biscuit boxes topped by a photograph and a little lamp watching over them are called 'altars', and the title of his exhibition in the USA ('Lessons of Darkness') is taken from the Christian liturgy'.⁴² In a similar vein, Davvetas interviewed Boltanski during an exhibition of *Monuments: Les Enfants de Dijon* at the Elisabeth Kaufmann Gallery in Zurich, Switzerland. Davvetas asked Boltanski, 'In another work, at Elisabeth Kaufman in Zurich, you

⁴⁰ Chantal Boulanger, 'Christian Boltanski: The Nostalgia of Painting' *Vie des Arts*, 30, 121 (1985), pp. 65-66.

⁴¹ Boulanger, p. 65.

⁴² Ilma Rakusa and Didier Semin, 'Christian Boltanski: An Artist of Uncertainty', *Parkett*, 22 (1989), 26-35 (p. 27).

presented an installation of electric lights around childhood photographs of different people. These pieces had the effect of icons'.⁴³ Boltanski replied with words that reinforce the generic religious nature of the work, 'They're atmosphere pieces. They are directly related to their environment. This work was intended to create an ambiance instead of a picture'.⁴⁴ I understand Boltanski's quote as differentiating between the work's amorphous religious character or tone from any specific faith or tradition.

Accentuating the iconoclasm of traditional artistic media as well as the collective nature of Boltanski's art, critic Gilberto Cavalcanti wrote in 1975 that 'since 1968 he has continued gathering, accumulating the most diverse things divested of all artistic value, such as fragments of letters and photographs; in brief, everything that falls into his hands'.⁴⁵ Cavalcanti continues to say that Boltanski's work is marked by 'the search for the collective ego aiming at the meeting with the individual ego'.⁴⁶ Writing about various works by Boltanski from his early career, Cavalcanti concludes that his art 'is the document of everyone'. That is to say that Boltanski's oeuvre reveals everyday collective imagery that is familiar to most people in Western society. Boltanski is quoted by Cavalcanti to illustrate his point: 'I am a sum of others. Even if an experience never lived by anyone should happen to me, I would not have any new thoughts to suffer it, nor any new words to express it. Therefore, I repeat, we always repeat what has already been said, even while drawing analogies, like that of the astronaut who, going around Earth, said it was blue'.⁴⁷

⁴³ Démosthènes Davvetas, 'Christian Boltanski: Interview with Démosthènes Davvetas' in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: a sourcebook of artists' writings*, ed. by Peter Selz and Kristine Stiles (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996) 515-518 (p. 517).

⁴⁴ Davvetas, p. 517.

⁴⁵ Gilberto Cavalcanti, 'Christian Boltanski: Amuser et sorcier', *Vie des arts*, 20, 79 (1975) 76-7 (p. 76).

⁴⁶ Cavalcanti, p. 76.

⁴⁷ Cavalcanti, p. 77.

Finally, I offer one more example of the early interpretation of Boltanski's work. Michael Krugman wrote in 1976 about Boltanski's exhibition featuring his photographic series *Saynètes Comiques* at the Sonnabend Gallery in New York. Krugman discussed one of the works entitled *A Kiss on the Mouth*. This work features Boltanski in the role of a curious child peeking through a keyhole and watching an erotic scene between his mother and father. Through 'puckish tongue-thrusts, emphatic finger-pointing, grins, scowls, and tearful eye-wiping', Boltanski playfully and humorously depicts the 'diabolical wit that focuses on a varied terrain of juvenile remembrance. The results are amusing without being smug or bitter. The artist plays all the parts (mother, father, himself-as-child, etc.) in his abbreviated re-enactments of typical childhood episodes'.⁴⁸

The readings that I have discussed are only a few examples of the debates surrounding Boltanski's early work which saw it as originating from the vast storehouse of familiar collective memory and imagination. For these writers, his art was not only a challenge to established norms in the arts which had grown tired and irrelevant to many members of contemporary society, solely upheld by an elitist art world that catered to wealthy, well-heeled audiences, but it was also easily accessible and understandable because his art drew from familiar imagery that was similar to memories from most viewers' own backgrounds. These audiences felt more capable of projecting their own experiences of childhood onto Boltanski's work, rendering them relevant and capable of resuscitating forgotten memories in the mind of most viewers. This observation changed in late 1988 when the 'Lessons of Darkness' exhibition toured North America. From this exhibition onward, Boltanski's artwork – his entire oeuvre – is claimed by the majority of critics to reference the Holocaust. However, before I discuss the new interpretation attached to his art, it is important to

⁴⁸ Michael Krugman, 'Christian Boltanski at Sonnabend', *Art in America*, 2, (March-April 1976), p. 106.

understand the role that the Holocaust and its memory played internationally, specifically in America, since the 1980s.

The Holocaust re-emerged as a topic of intense scrutiny and examination with the trial of senior Nazi officer, Adolf Eichmann, which took place over several months in Jerusalem between 11 April and 14 August 1961; the death sentence was delivered to Eichmann on 12 December. Philosopher Hannah Arendt was sent by *The New Yorker* magazine to report on the trial. The result of her accounts was the book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, published a couple of years later in 1963. Arendt's book caused waves of international controversy, mainly coalescing around her description of Eichmann as a 'brainless' man who was remarkably *banal* in character and appearance. No one doubted that Eichmann and the Nazis were evil, but Arendt's description of Eichmann made the evil he committed perplexing.⁴⁹ At the time, most people understood that only criminal monsters could be 'evil'. To characterise, sometimes flippantly, that an 'evil' man such as Eichmann could be marked by 'shallowness', 'faceless', and with an 'incapacity to think', caused Arendt to suffer the scorn of many intellectuals and Jewish leaders around the world.⁵⁰

Even though Arendt became something of a pariah in the Jewish community and intellectual circles for her description of Eichmann, her report nonetheless brought the issue of the Holocaust to the forefront of cultural and intellectual awareness. One of the most important aspects of Arendt's accounts of the trial centred on the idea of 'crimes against humanity'. She felt that these crimes were without precedent in human history; she feared that Eichmann's trial, held in an Israeli court, focussed too strongly on his crimes against the

⁴⁹ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. xiv.

⁵⁰ Arendt, p. xiii.

Jewish people rather than against the totality of humankind.⁵¹ She wrote that the Holocaust was not just a case of anti-Jewish discrimination or anti-Semitism, but its nature which made it a 'crime against humanity, perpetrated on the body of the Jewish people'.⁵²

It was the nature of the Nazis crime that made the Holocaust not only a crime against one group of people singled out for extermination, but a crime which threatens humanity as a whole. The evil of the Nazi crimes was not an aberration localised to Germany in the 1930s and 1940s, but a crime against the 'moral nature of the world.'⁵³ Now, the entirety of humanity had a stake in the memory and lessons of the Holocaust. As such, within the past 30 to 40 years, the meaning of the Holocaust has been redefined; no longer merely of the worst case of systemic anti-Semitic violence, it was turned into a universal, or collective, symbol for mass violence and genocide. As Shoshanna Felman wrote, 'Prior to the Eichmann trial, what we call the Holocaust did not exist as a collective story'.⁵⁴

Since the mid-1980s, the impact of Arendt's reportage dominated global Holocaust memory, especially in the United States.⁵⁵ For Jeffrey C Alexander, the narrative surrounding the Holocaust already started to become a universal symbol of evil when the United States became involved in World War II in the early 1940s. Once the Allied Forces defeated Nazi Germany, the story of the war was dictated by the American government who pushed the end of the war toward Allied victory.⁵⁶ Initially, the United States government turned a

⁵¹ Ross Poole, 'Misremembering the Holocaust: Universal Symbol, Nationalist Icon or Moral Kitsch?' in *Memory and the Future: Transnational Politics, Ethics, and Society*, ed. by Adam D Brown, Yifat Gutman and Amy Sodaro (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 31-49 (p. 36).

⁵² Arendt, p. 269. Also, Poole, p. 44.

⁵³ Shoshana Felman, 'Theaters of Justice: Arendt in Jerusalem, the Eichmann Trial, and the Redefinition of Legal Meaning in the Wake of the Holocaust', *Critical Inquiry*, 27, 2 (2001), 201-238 (p. 203).

⁵⁴ Felman, p. 233.

⁵⁵ Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*, trans. by Assenka Oksiloff, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006) p. 132.

⁵⁶ Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Remembering the Holocaust: A Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 9.

blind, or indifferent, eye toward the war in Europe, but once they became involved, the idea of the US military defeating the great evil of anti-Semitism took on greater and deeper significance in American culture.⁵⁷ A new narrative developed within this arena of events; the Holocaust trauma created by anti-Semitic evil would be defeated, and Nazism would be eradicated from the world.⁵⁸ However, with the Nuremberg trials of 1945-1946, the horrors that were exposed were seen less as specifically Nazi crimes and more as a part of human nature. The term 'crimes against humanity', levelled at the Nazi regime, was indicative of the 'first step toward universalising the public awareness of the Jewish mass murder'.⁵⁹

For many Americans, confronting and destroying anti-Semitism was the way to eradicate evil from the world. This narrative trope of the Holocaust was circulated and recycled in Western culture through numerous films and television shows, literature and poetry, and in museums and memorials. As Levy and Sznajder argued, the 'Americanisation' of the Holocaust formed the new bedrock upon which Holocaust memory would be developed. The American model dominated for two reasons: 'On the one hand, the American media has turned the Holocaust into a product for consumption; on the other hand, it has transformed it into a universal imperative, making the issue of universal human rights politically relevant to all who share this new form of memory'.⁶⁰ For instance, in 1945 the box office hit film entitled *Pride of the Marines*, the main protagonist rebuked his friend for not having hope that Americans can eliminate the evils of anti-Semitism and racial hatred from the world.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Alexander, p. 15.

⁵⁸ Alexander, p. 15.

⁵⁹ Alexander, p. 19.

⁶⁰ Levy and Sznajder, p. 132.

⁶¹ Alexander, p. 25.

The main American sensibility of the story of the Holocaust seeped into popular culture and symbolised the mythical 'archetypical sacred-evil' of the twentieth century.⁶²

Representations of Holocaust memory are tasked with never forgetting the victims. In order to never forget, many cultural expressions emerged in America which personalise the victim's suffering and trauma through strong affect in the context of the family, parents, and children: 'the victims became everyman, and everywoman, every child and every parent'.⁶³

Artistic expressions of Holocaust memory emerged to create a strong emotional personal identification with its audience, such as the American television mini-series *Holocaust* in 1978, the popular film *Schindler's List* in 1994 by American director Steven Spielberg (adapted from the 1982 novel by Thomas Kinneally, *Schindler's Ark*), or the opening in 1993 of the Holocaust Memorial in Washington D.C. These American cultural expressions communicated a broader, more universal message of the Holocaust; this message applied to the horrors suffered by all victims of genocide and mass murder. The ordeals of Holocaust victims became universalised into the America model in order to sell cultural products which taught lessons about the evil of hatred and mass violence to a global audience.

Holocaust scholar Dan Stone pointed out in his text on the historiography of the Holocaust that there is a 'paradox' of wanting to turn the Holocaust into universal lessons which address global concerns 'alongside the desire to maintain it as living memory'.⁶⁴ I take him to mean that there is a contradiction between how the events of the Holocaust can be subsumed into universalised, world-wide concerns whilst still retaining its uniqueness, or

⁶² Alexander, p. 34.

⁶³ Alexander, p. 38.

⁶⁴ Dan Stone, *Constructing the Holocaust: a Study in Historiography* (London: Vallentine Mitchell Publishers, 2003), p. 6.

factual specificity in space and time. The story of the Holocaust can be both universal and unique simultaneously, but it needs to be understood in different contexts.

Felman stated that Arendt's account of the Eichmann trial is appropriated into universal terms because its lessons can be applied to legal and political issues which transcend national and cultural boundaries, such as in the legal term 'crimes against humanity' and the global adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations. These contexts of the Holocaust story undoubtedly can be applied to other genocidal and racial problems which extend beyond the confines of the actual event. But by so doing, the uniqueness of the Holocaust is lost; memory of the specific events and victims are sacrificed to broader, global concerns. Felman suggested that 'Law distances the Holocaust. Art brings it closer'.⁶⁵ What I mean to say is that there is a 'slippage between law and art' of the Holocaust: the former aims for universal lessons to be learnt and applied to global issues whilst the latter seeks to retain the specific individual and historical accuracy of the actual event.⁶⁶

Arendt's report on the Eichmann trial created a new discourse about the evil which exists in the 'moral nature of the world'.⁶⁷ But her writing on the trial made the prospect of confronting evil take on a global scale in the form of legal and political conventions. A legal case, such as the Eichmann trial, was put on a world stage because history, and I think humanity itself, was on trial.⁶⁸ Therefore, the issues of racial hatred and mass violence became a concern for more than just the Nazis and their victims, but for all of humanity

⁶⁵ Felman, p. 202.

⁶⁶ Felman, p. 202.

⁶⁷ Felman, p. 203.

⁶⁸ Felman, p. 212.

since their crimes were committed against the world which sought to 'eradicate the concept of the human being'.⁶⁹

Despite the Holocaust becoming a universalised event of good versus evil and tolerance versus racial hatred, artistic representations of the Holocaust can help safeguard the memory of the specific victims. Alexander saw that the unique tragic story of the victims of the Holocaust is achieved 'by personalising the trauma' which allows us to personally empathise with the horrors met by the victims of that event.⁷⁰ He said that the artistic representations of the Holocaust 'portrayed the event in terms of small groups, families and friends, parents and children, brothers and sisters'.⁷¹ By expressing the tragedy of the Holocaust through personal, private stories, those who never suffered that unique event can begin to learn from their unique ordeal.

Artworks that address the Holocaust are a way for a society to understand the uniqueness of the actual event. Ultimately, I look at specific examples of this kind of art in order to evaluate the appropriateness of interpreting Boltanski's art as strictly and decisively referencing a Holocaust narrative. I find that writers who compare Boltanski's work to works that clearly and deliberately inspire a Holocaust-based explanation tend to base their reading of his work on two main characteristics: Boltanski's Jewish background and the identification of the nameless subjects as Jewish, presumed murdered camp victims.

Henry W Pickford described this tendency in art as intentionally and overtly about the Holocaust, in terms of 'the Nazi project of humiliation, deprivation, degradation, and

⁶⁹ Felman, p. 205. From Arendt's letter to Karl Jaspers, dated 17 December 1946, in *Hannah Arendt – Karl Jaspers: Correspondence, 1926-1969*, trans. by Rita and Robert Kimber, ed. by Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992) p. 59.

⁷⁰ Alexander, p. 43.

⁷¹ Alexander, p. 43.

extermination against the Jews and other marked groups'.⁷² He cites examples of Holocaust artistic expressions such as the poetry of Paul Celan, a Jewish survivor of a work camp in Romania during World War II, the Lanzmann film, *Shoah*, and the comic books, *Maus*, by Art Spiegelman. Pickford stipulated that the goals of such art are twofold. On the one hand, it must have a factual and explicit historical relation to the Holocaust. That is, it must 'refer, invoke, bear an intentional relationship to the Holocaust'.⁷³ On the other hand, this genre of art must have an aesthetic relation. In short, it must 'evince aesthetic properties'.⁷⁴ It must be considered 'art' and not an historical document.

Berel Lang said that this type of art should depict the Holocaust 'accurately, to the last detail – that is, to recreate the Holocaust itself [...] its representation of events that occurred without mediation but also without bringing the events themselves once again to life'.⁷⁵ Knowledge and commemoration of the actual Nazi genocide are the goals of Holocaust art and creative expression.⁷⁶ Views on the content and context of Holocaust art are consistent: they refer to the actual event of the Holocaust, the death of Jews and other groups, and denouncement of Nazi ideologies and practices. By not referring directly and unequivocally to the specificity of the event's place in space and time, its memory is diluted and eventually the memory of those individuals who died is erased. 'However, the application of Holocaust imagery to entirely and inherently different situations in order to evoke an unthinking

⁷² Henry W. Pickford, *The Sense of Semblance: Philosophical Analysis of Holocaust Art* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), p. 3.

⁷³ Pickford, p. 3.

⁷⁴ Pickford, p. 3.

⁷⁵ Berel Lang, *Holocaust Representation: Art Within the Limits of History and Ethics* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000), p. 13.

⁷⁶ Lang, p. 13.

response does not really further the moral aim; it may, on the contrary, hinder it as it distorts the original meaning and lessons of the Holocaust'.⁷⁷

In the visual arts, art of the Holocaust is seen in examples such as Gerhard Richter's epic photographic work, *Atlas*, which he has developed since 1962. This work is constructed from various panels of photographs and newspaper clippings, with panels 635-646 from 1997, each entitled *Holocaust*. The black-and-white photographs show various scenes of marching crowds of starving and beaten camp victims, scenes of victims hanging from a tree with a noose around their neck, shots of the outside of Auschwitz and other concentration camps, and Hitler addressing a large audience at a rally. Some photographs are crisp and sharp; others are blurry and grainy. These panels are clear references to the suffering and death of Jewish camp victims during World War II and to Hitler and the Nazi party.

The paintings of R.B. Kitja, especially his painting from 1975-76 entitled *If Not, Not*, are understood to directly refer to the Holocaust. The review of this work states that either it comes from the poem, 'The Wasteland' by T.S. Eliot, or that its title is from a 1968 book by historian Ralph E Giesey, *If Not, Not: The Oathe of the Aragonese and the Legendary Laws of Sobrarbe*. 'These words are part of an oath which the people of the Aragon region of Spain were supposed to have uttered when they received their king: "We, who are worth as much as you, take you as our king, provided that you preserve our laws and liberties, and if not, not"'.⁷⁸ Either way, the imagery in the painting is a clear reference to the Holocaust:

Auschwitz looms heavy in the sky in the top left-hand corner whilst the rest of the painting depicts sickly colours of orange, blues and greens. The landscape in front of the

⁷⁷ Neil Collins, 'Holocaust Art: Characteristics, Types, Images, Iconography', *Encyclopaedia of Art Education*, (n.d.) <<http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/definitions/holocaust-art.htm>> [accessed 31 August 2019].

⁷⁸ 'How R B Kitaj created his Holocaust masterpiece', *The Jewish Chronicle*, ed. by Stephan Pollard (8 March 2013) <<https://www.thejc.com/culture/features/how-r-b-kitaj-created-his-holocaust-masterpiece-1.42536>> [accessed 12 July 2019].

concentration camp dissolves into stagnant pools of water where a bust by Henri Matisse floats and disintegrates in the foreground. Kitja remarked that he believed that ‘I could be a Jew only if I wanted to be a religious one; if not, not. I was dead wrong! Or, luckily, “alive wrong” through all those murderous years when one third of the Jews in the world were killed regardless of whether they wanted to be Jews or not’.⁷⁹ What I want to emphasise is that artworks that are considered to remember the Holocaust retain direct references, historical accuracy, and compassionate frankness to the plight of the murdered victims that are unique to the Holocaust.

As far as Lang is concerned, the foremost moral obligation of Holocaust representation is to remember the actual event and victims:

The content may – must – act on form. And in the case of the Holocaust, that content, with its flagrant particularity – specifically, the Nazis and their allies attempting to destroy, also specifically, the Jews – is endangered, artistically, as well as morally – by the push of universalisation [...] it points to the danger faced by any work [...] that uses aspects of the Holocaust as an idiom or even metaphor for the many other dark events and sides of human history of character.⁸⁰

I take him to mean that the artistic expression, although aesthetic and imaginative, must give priority to the accuracy of its content. When the Holocaust, in artistic representation, is universalised, the work becomes less about the memory of those who suffered at the hands

⁷⁹ ‘How R B Kitaj created his Holocaust masterpiece’, *The Jewish Chronicle*, ed. by Stephan Pollard (8 March 2013) <<https://www.thejc.com/culture/features/how-r-b-kitaj-created-his-holocaust-masterpiece-1.42536>> [accessed 12 July 2019].

⁸⁰ Lang, p. 123.

of the Nazis and becomes a message about the wrongs of racial hatred and violence that are applicable to other traumatic events.

When Boltanski's 'Lessons of Darkness' exhibition toured North America in 1988, his work began to be interpreted primarily in reference to the Holocaust. Yet the content of his art had not changed significantly from previous work that had *not* been associated with the death and memory of Jewish camp victims. I mentioned previously in this chapter that early readings of Boltanski's art saw it as primarily concerned with institutional and artistic conventions in the arts. However, this early critical reception was overshadowed by a new explanation of his work which was introduced in the exhibition catalogue for the 'Lessons of Darkness'. I look at several writers who have read Boltanski's works too narrowly because they put too much emphasis on two aspects of his work: his Jewish parentage and the assumption that the subjects in his art are Jewish Holocaust victims.

Exhibition curator Lynn Gumpert introduced a new interpretation of Boltanski's art by arguing that it represents a specific kind of memory and death dealing with Jewish victims of the Holocaust. She argued that, 'And though Boltanski's preoccupation with death centres, in part, around his own demise, his interest, again, is not in his own eventual death, particular and isolated, but in death in general [...] even mass death, as he indirectly addresses the inconceivable number who died in concentration camps during World War II'.⁸¹ Since then, many writers have continued seeing Boltanski's entire oeuvre as being about the mass murder of the European Jews during the Holocaust. Art critic Daniel Soutif acknowledges that, in his attempt to reconstruct the critical interpretation of Boltanski's art, this new Holocaust reading was born from the 'Lessons of Darkness' exhibition when he

⁸¹ Gumpert, p. 51.

said, 'In the text of the catalogue, the art of Christian Boltanski is very explicitly related, for the first time, to the extermination of the Jews by the Nazis during the Second World War'.⁸²

Literary theorist Ernst Van Alphen made the Holocaust central to his interpretation of Boltanski. For Van Alphen, the artist's photographic and archival work produces 'Holocaust effects'. He said that, 'a Holocaust effect [...] is not brought about by means of representing the Holocaust, but by means of the re-enactment of a certain principle that defines the Holocaust. It is performatively re-enacted, producing an effect'.⁸³ Even though Boltanski does not directly represent imagery from the Holocaust, his art mimics or repeats tortures inflicted by the Nazis onto their Jewish victims. Van Alphen claims that Boltanski's anonymous collective imagery negates or empties out the Jewish identity of the photographed subject. Van Alphen equates Boltanski's art with the Nazi project of dehumanising their victims.

Van Alphen wrote that his artworks 'have no referential relationship to the Holocaust and do not contain objects or representations of Jewish victims', yet he continued to claim that the images of anonymous children represent the Holocaust victims because Boltanski depletes their subjectivity.⁸⁴ Van Alphen argues that Nazi scientists and administrators used photography and archives as media of documentation that robbed their Jewish victims of their unique identity. Thus, the consequence for Boltanski, when it comes to Van Alphen, means that by representing photographs of anonymous, unknowable children, a 'Holocaust effect' is set in motion. A narrative based on the Holocaust is justified for Van Alphen

⁸² Daniel Soutif, 'An Attempt to Reconstruct Christian Boltanski' in *Christian Boltanski*, ed. by Danilo Eccher (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 1997) 33-177 (p. 109).

⁸³ Ernst Van Alphen, *Staging the Archive*, p. 199.

⁸⁴ Van Alphen, p. 199.

because Boltanski replicates the same torture – erasure of a knowable, unique identity – inflicted by the Nazis onto their Jewish victims.⁸⁵

Van Alphen has stated multiple times that *all* of Boltanski's work deals with the Holocaust. He argued that, 'And although Boltanski did not approach the subject of the Holocaust head-on until 1988 with his installations *Chases High School* (1988), *Reserves: The Purim Holiday* (1989) and *Canada* (1988), and although not all his portrayed subjects are Jewish, it can be argued that all of his work deals in some degree with aspects of the Holocaust'.⁸⁶ I want to look more closely at Van Alphen's interpretation of *Le Lycée Chases* (Figure 16). Van Alphen wrote that, 'It is more likely that most, or even all, of the Jewish students represented did not survive the Holocaust. *Chases High School* is in that sense an explicit and direct reference to the Holocaust'.⁸⁷ Whilst I provide an extensive visual analysis of this work in subsequent chapters, my point here is to show that we know that these children escaped the Holocaust. Let me explain.

The caption that Boltanski provided at his inaugural exhibition of the work, *Le Lycée Chases* at the Kunstverein in Düsseldorf in 1987 gives minimal information about the time and place of the photograph's subjects in the past. It read, 'All we know about them is that they were students at the Chases High School in Vienna in 1931'.⁸⁸ This particular work represents photographs of anonymous teenagers from the Chases High School in Vienna, Austria, but the viewer would have to know in advance that Chases High School was a Jewish school in order to identify the children in the photographs as specifically Jewish. But the work itself gives no indication that the photographed subjects were killed in the Holocaust. In fact, one

⁸⁵ Van Alphen, p. 100.

⁸⁶ Ernst Van Alphen, "Visual Archives as Preposterous History" in *Art History*, 30, 3 (2007) 364-382 (p. 366).

⁸⁷ Van Alphen, *Staging the Archive*, p. 198.

⁸⁸ Gumpert, pp. 102-3.

of the boys represented in this work, Leo Glueckselig, contacted Boltanski in 1987 after seeing the work in a newspaper to say that he and all the other children in this photograph survived the Holocaust and many had relocated to America before the outbreak of war.⁸⁹ Another student from the class, Debora Preschel, also wrote a letter to verify that all the children had survived.⁹⁰

Van Alphen applies a similar reading to *Les Suisses Morts (The Dead Swiss)* (Figure 8). I describe and discuss this work in more depth in chapter four, but it suffices to say now for the purposes of this chapter that this work drew imagery from the obituary adverts from a regional Swiss newspaper, *Le Nouvelliste du Valais*, and the title of the work identifies its subjects as recently deceased Swiss. Each black-and-white portrait shows a face, usually smiling, that is enlarged and severely cropped to similar dimensions, and encased in its own frame. The portraits are displayed in two different ways: hung with no space in between them on a wall, floor to ceiling, or the portraits are small and affixed to the outside of a rusty tin box that forms a vast number of other similar rusty tin boxes. Van Alphen claimed that Boltanski's work represents anonymous dead people without a unique identity. Since Boltanski represented the dead Swiss in this manner, his work enacts a 'Holocaust effect' because it operates much like how the Nazis viewed their victims: a nameless mass of the dead.⁹¹ Van Alphen says that their distinctive facial features in *Les Suisses Morts* have been neutralised and thus, their specific identity as Jews are negated.⁹² This work enacts a 'Holocaust effect' since the viewer is unable to know who the subjects were. He wrote, 'One

⁸⁹ Andrea Liss, *Trespassing Through Shadows: Memory, Photography and the Holocaust* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), pp. 44-45.

⁹⁰ Gumpert, p. 161.

⁹¹ Ernst Van Alphen, 'Deadly Historians: Boltanski's Intervention in Holocaust Historiography' in *Visual Culture and the Holocaust*, ed. by Barbara Zelizer (London: The Athlone Press, 2001) 45-73 (p. 56).

⁹² Van Alphen, 'Deadly Historians', p. 56.

sees a collection of exchangeable objects. Precisely this transformation in one's experience as a spectator re-enacts the Holocaust'.⁹³

Susan Gubar, borrowing from Van Alphen's concept of the 'Holocaust effect', stated that Boltanski's use of photography erased the specific identity of his subjects, thus his works represent subjects whose identity has been taken away. For Gubar, as we saw in Van Alphen's argument, Boltanski repeats the victimisation of the Jews because his artworks rob the subjects of their identity as unique individuals. As she suggested, 'Beyond reminding us that photography played a crucial part in the criminalisation of the Jews, one dependent on their devolution from subjects into objects, Boltanski graphically uses devices of the darkroom to replicate the torture of that process'.⁹⁴ To put it briefly, Gubar states that Boltanski deliberately depersonalised Jewish Holocaust victims.

This view has been widespread in the literature on Boltanski's work since the 'Lessons of Darkness' exhibition and the comments like those provided can easily be multiplied to include media outlets such as internet-based blogs, various websites, and popular magazine articles. What is important to note is that in much of the literature surrounding Boltanski the Holocaust is ever present. Similar instances can be found in reviews of Boltanski's work from the 'Lessons of Darkness' by renowned writers, Arthur Danto and Donald Kuspit. On the one hand, Danto focusses his Holocaust-based interpretations on the identity of the subjects, whilst on the other, Kuspit rests his interpretation on Boltanski's Jewish parentage. *La Fête de Pourim* (Figure 9) is a black-and-white photographic portrait of anonymous Jewish children's faces placed alongside rusty tin biscuit boxes and second-hand clothing.

⁹³ Van Alphen, 'Deadly Historians', p. 56.

⁹⁴ Susan Gubar, *Poetry after Auschwitz: Remembering What One Never Knew* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), p. 132.

This series of works looks similar to other Boltanski works such as *The Dead Swiss* and *The Chases High School*. Danto attributed this series of works to the Holocaust when he said that ‘But the raw light from the lamps, the crisscross of electrical wires, suggest instead that the work concerns a Jewish disaster, that these emblemise the discarded garments of children led naked to the gas chambers [...] It becomes a piece of Holocaust Art’.⁹⁵



Figure 1: Christian Boltanski, *La Fête de Pourim* (Tin boxes, photographs, lamps, electric wire) (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Art Gallery, 1988).

Kuspit wrote about the pathos that he felt from Boltanski's art, or 'gloom' in his own words, 'I submit that it is the gloom of the Paris basement in which Boltanski's Jewish father hid during World War II: it is the gloom associated with his father. It is Jewish melancholy that is embodied in the very material gloom of Boltanski's art – the ingrained melancholy of the eternally persecuted'.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Arthur Danto, *Encounters and Reflections: Art in the Historical Present* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 259-260.

⁹⁶ Donald Kuspit, *Signs of the Psyche in Modern and Postmodern Art*, Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1993), p. 257.

In the exhibition catalogue for 'Lessons of Darkness' Gumpert wrote that, 'Although he previously did not admit it privately or publicly, he now acknowledges that this interest in the Holocaust extended to more than just his paintings and impacted as well on a substantial part of his early work'.⁹⁷ She goes on to say, 'Clearly, [the Holocaust] informs a body of work that Boltanski made in the early seventies'.⁹⁸ Essentially, Gumpert, like Van Alphen, claims that the Holocaust has always been a major theme in his artistic practice from the very beginning, even if Boltanski was not aware of it. But they provide scant evidence because Boltanski's work never refers to the Holocaust directly and makes no specific reference to the subject's identity as a Jewish Holocaust victim with factual historical accuracy. However, even though there are no factual historical references nor identifying elements to a specific Holocaust victim in Boltanski's work, she claims that the 'Lessons of Darkness' exhibition powerfully represents 'the millions of Jews who died in the concentration camps during the Holocaust'.⁹⁹

It is the anonymity of the represented subject's identity as well as the reliance on Boltanski's Jewish family background that makes room for these slippages in Gumpert's interpretation to occur. Boltanski was unable to face his Jewish identity until, as Gumpert argues, he produced the work featured in the exhibition, 'Lessons of Darkness'. Gumpert remarked, 'Boltanski, it would seem, was only able to come to grips with the genocide of European Jewry and his own Jewish heritage in the mid-eighties'.¹⁰⁰

Any allusion to the Holocaust cannot be found in the content of Boltanski's works since the anonymous subjects are pulled from the storehouse of collective imagery. Gumpert

⁹⁷ Gumpert, p. 54.

⁹⁸ Gumpert, p. 54.

⁹⁹ Gumpert, p. 97.

¹⁰⁰ Gumpert, p. 97.

suggested that most, if not all, of Boltanski's work can be seen through a Holocaust lens. She wrote about *El Caso*, a work comprised of family photographs of both criminals and their victims pulled from the pages of a Spanish crime magazine, named *El Caso*. None of the portraits are accompanied with identifying captions so, with no information to retrieve the identity of the subject, the viewer is unable to distinguish between who is the victim and who is the murderer. In Gumpert's words, 'Reprinting the violent and brutal deaths pictured on the pages of the Spanish tabloid was the closest Boltanski would come to suggesting the horrific documentation of concentration camp victims featured, for example, in the film *Nuit et Brouillard (Night and Fog)*'.¹⁰¹

In *Unwanted Beauty: Aesthetic Pleasure in Holocaust Representation*, Brett Kaplan assumes that Boltanski represents the anonymous subjects as Holocaust victims. She said that, 'Boltanski's art in general invites us to mourn those lost in the Holocaust through powerful, beautiful images that nonetheless suffer from aestheticised forgetfulness'.¹⁰² From this statement, she continues to ruminate on his Jewish family and the Jewish milieu in which he was raised.

The Holocaust is a dominant feature of Boltanski's work as a whole and has been a major part of it from the beginning, according to Kaplan because, generally speaking, it asks the viewer to mourn Holocaust victims.¹⁰³ She initially says that Boltanski's images are ambiguous mnemonic symbols of collective memory and death and that Boltanski himself dismissed claims that he was a 'Holocaust artist'.¹⁰⁴ However, for Kaplan, Boltanski's works are understood as referencing the Holocaust due to his own Jewish parentage and because

¹⁰¹ Gumpert, p. 122.

¹⁰² Kaplan, p. 127.

¹⁰³ Kaplan, p. 127.

¹⁰⁴ Kaplan, p. 140.

his works consist of ambiguous images of death 'that contribute to Holocaust art by catalysing Holocaust memory, even as they challenge our desire to read the Holocaust into mourning tableaux'.¹⁰⁵ For Kaplan, not only does the artist's Jewish heritage factor into her analysis of his art but so does the assumption that the subjects are Holocaust victims.¹⁰⁶ She wrote, 'Boltanski's photo-sculptures only sometimes refer directly to the Holocaust, yet they always seem to evoke the Nazi genocide even when the images have been enlarged and otherwise manipulated so that they are de-historicised. Despite their historical ungrounding, Boltanski's photo-sculptures are nonetheless meaningful and nuanced productions of Holocaust memory'.¹⁰⁷

Kaplan compared Boltanski's work to Anselm Kiefer's works and saw them both as harbouring ambiguous elements in their work. The ambiguous elements in Kiefer's work do not reside in questions about whether or not his work refers to the Holocaust – it clearly does. For Kaplan, the ambiguity that exists in Kiefer's work centres on whether or not it celebrates the Nazi genocide or rather tries to come to terms with it in a consolatory manner.¹⁰⁸ She wrote that Kiefer's reticence to discuss the role his father played in the German army during World War II along with his use of Nazi imagery 'has contributed to the deeply divided reception his work has received'.¹⁰⁹ For example, artist Susan Silas produced an artwork entitled *Ohne Titel, or Untitled*, in 1989 which is comprised of a black background with lettering which asks, 'Anselm Kiefer, Where was your daddy during the

¹⁰⁵ Kaplan, p. 140.

¹⁰⁶ Kaplan, p. 135.

¹⁰⁷ Kaplan, pp. 134-5.

¹⁰⁸ Kaplan, p. 110.

¹⁰⁹ Kaplan, p. 110.

war?’ Silas points directly to the controversy Kiefer’s art raises when a non-Jewish German uses overt Nazi imagery.¹¹⁰



Figure 2: Anselm Kiefer, *Occupations* (1969).



Figure 3: Anselm Kiefer, *Your Golden Hair Margarete* (1980).

Kiefer’s late 1960s photographs in the *Occupations* series show him saluting the camera with the Sieg Hitler gesture. (Figure 2) This is an obvious reference to Nazism. Furthermore, Kiefer’s famous painting that features the words ‘your golden hair, Margarete’ which are a

¹¹⁰ Kaplan, p. 112.

direct reference to the well-known poem by camp survivor Paul Celan, 'Death Fugue', about the concentration camps during the Holocaust:

A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents
 he writes
 he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair
 Margarete
 your ashen hair Shulamith we dig a grave in the breezes
 there one lies unconfined.¹¹¹

Therefore, Kiefer's painting is a direct reference to the Holocaust. (Figure 3) Whether or not Kiefer's work celebrates the atrocity or tries to face up to its horrors is Kaplan's debate.

What is not ambiguous is that Kiefer's work accurately and specifically references the event of the Nazi genocide. In Boltanski's art, Holocaust memory is not a universal, free-floating symbol of death and mass murder, but a unique event in time and location with its own particular, recognisable imagery that distinguishes it from other genocidal atrocities.

However, with Boltanski's work, Kaplan's reading of ambiguity lies in the doubt of whether or not he actually refers to the Holocaust at all. Kaplan acknowledges that Boltanski's work is mnemonic and refers to death in general. But her interpretation is built around her memories and desires conjured up by his use of collective memory. She says of *Canada* (Figure 4), 'While the clothes themselves do not directly indicate the Nazi genocide – they were clearly crafted long after the war and are mostly cheap, colourful items – their

¹¹¹ Paul Celan, 'Death Fugue', *Commentary*, 20 (1955), pp. 242-3.

crowding in together and sheer profusion seem to indicate so many ghosts or the presence of things absent'.¹¹²



Figure 4: Christian Boltanski, *Canada*, (used clothing) (1988).

Whilst it is true that any two artists can be compared, such comparisons are not always insightful. By placing both artists' work within the Holocaust narrative, she is reading them in similar terms. I can understand her observation of Kiefer's work as a direct reference to the Holocaust, but Boltanski's work fails to meet the same criteria: his art is not directly linked to the Holocaust and neither were his parents. On the one hand, in her analysis of Kiefer's work, she uses the criteria set down by Terrence Des Pres in his 1988 essay, 'Holocaust Laughter'. Des Pres demanded that representations of the Holocaust must subscribe to particular tenets in order to preserve the memory of those who suffered and died at the hands of the Nazis. He pronounced that:

¹¹² Kaplan, p. 143.

The Holocaust shall be represented, in its totality, as a unique event, as a special case and kingdom of its own, above or below or apart from History. Representation of the Holocaust shall be accurate and faithful as possible to the facts and conditions of the event, without change or manipulation for any reason – artistic reasons included. The Holocaust shall be approached as a solemn or even sacred event, with a seriousness admitting no response that might obscure its enormity or dishonour its dead.¹¹³

But, on the other hand, Kaplan reads Boltanski's art by applying universalised concepts of mass murder as well as his Jewish background. By placing Boltanski's anonymous and generic imagery within the framework of Holocaust representation, her reading collapses the conceptual underpinning of Holocaust art: to never forget the actual victims. The lack of specificity is not a metaphor for forgetfulness of Holocaust memory, as Kaplan suggest, but, as I discuss in the next chapter, as a device to encourage viewers to stamp their own similar memories onto its meaning. The anonymity of the subjects precludes them from contributing to the narrative of any specific event, especially Holocaust memory which demands accuracy and direct reference to the actual event. Yet Hirsch, Kaplan, Gumpert, and many other writers say that the element of ambiguity powerfully reinforces the link between Boltanski's work and Holocaust memory.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Terrence Des Pres, 'Holocaust Laughter' in *Writing and the Holocaust*, ed. by Berel Lang (New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1988) 216-233 (p. 217).

¹¹⁴ Kaplan, p. 133-4. Also see Van Alphen, *Staging the Archive*, p. 199; Gumpert, *Christian Boltanski* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994), p. 99; Hirsch, 'Past Memories: Lives in Exile', *Poetics Today*, 17, 4 (1996), p. 678.

For Marianne Hirsch, Boltanski's photographic portraits of anonymous children in *Monuments: Les Enfants de Dijon* (Figure 19) represent the victims of the Holocaust. Whilst I shall return to this work in chapter three and chapter five with a more detailed visual analysis, it suffices to say for now that Hirsch believed that the photographs represent adult Holocaust victims as they were when they were children or Holocaust victims who were actually children during the early 1940s. Either way, the photographs, Hirsch argued, are of Jewish children before the camps. She writes that the children in this work 'ended up in Hitler's death camps' even though the actual photographs are not connected to the Holocaust since the photographs are not from the 1940s and the children are not explicitly identified as Jewish nor as camp victims. Her assumption that 'Boltanski connects these images of children to the mass murders of the Holocaust' is not based on historical accuracy.¹¹⁵

In fact, Boltanski obtained the photographs in the early 1970s for his commissioned work, *Portraits des Élèves du C.E.S. des Lentillères en 1973* (*Portraits of the Students of the Lentillères College of Secondary Education in 1973*) from the children themselves. They are not childhood photographs of future camp victims but normal children one encounters every day.¹¹⁶ This work was based on normal French children who lived near Dijon in the early 1970s: Boltanski asked the children to give him their favourite pictures of themselves.¹¹⁷ For *Monuments: Les Enfants de Dijon*, Boltanski 'used the same photographs' from *Portraits des élèves du C.E.S. des Lentillères en 1973*.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Hirsch, p. 676.

¹¹⁶ Hirsch, p. 678.

¹¹⁷ Gumpert, p. 38.

¹¹⁸ Gumpert, p. 84.

If a stringent feature of Holocaust representations insists on the historical accuracy of representations pertaining to the actual event, Hirsch acknowledges this requirement of historical accuracy but ultimately does not apply it to her reading. She highlights, just as we saw in Kaplan's reading, that the work gives 'no specific informational content' yet she chooses to apply a Holocaust narrative, nonetheless, overlooking the provenance of the photographs.¹¹⁹ She wrote that even though, 'neither we nor the artist have a way of knowing whether the individuals in the photos are Holocaust victims or random schoolchildren'.¹²⁰ But we do know that the children in the photographs are not Holocaust victims and are not connected to the event. Hirsch even cites Gumpert's exhibition catalogue for the 'Lessons of Darkness', which gave the origin of the photographs.

Hirsch illustrated her concept of 'postmemory' by looking at artworks by Shimon Attie, *The Writing on the Wall* (Figure 5) and Boltanski, *Les Enfants de Dijon (The Children of Dijon)* (Figure 20) and *Autel du Lycée Chases (Altar of the Chases High School)* (Figure 16).

Postmemory is the concept Hirsch coined to describe the belated experience by those who grew up dominated by narratives of events that happened before their birth.¹²¹

Postmemory is the memory of second-generation survivors of traumatic events. This concept is personally significant for Hirsch since both her parents were Jews who were exiled from their home, Czernowitz, in Romania, during World War II. Postmemory is a belated, mediated representation of a private memory from a traumatic collective past represented in diverse artistic expression such as literature, poetry, fiction, and, most powerful of all, photography.¹²²

¹¹⁹ Hirsch, p. 678.

¹²⁰ Hirsch, p. 676.

¹²¹ Hirsch, p. 662.

¹²² Hirsch, p. 660.

For Hirsch, photography is the most apt medium of postmemory expression because photographs bear the trace of the past. She argued that, 'Because photographs are often read as traces, material connections to a lost past, and because many photographic images have survived even though their subjects did not, photography provides a particularly powerful medium of postmemory'.¹²³ For Hirsch, both Attie and Boltanski's photographic works combine 'ambivalence and desire, mourning and recollection, presence and absence', however at no point are historical accuracy and direct reference to the past event required as essential criteria.¹²⁴

Hirsch's assumption that all the children depicted in *Autel du Lycée Chases* died during the Holocaust is erroneous. As we know, all the children survived the Holocaust after being transported to America before war broke out.¹²⁵ However, what can be understood is that Hirsch's reading of this work as relating to exiled children during the Holocaust comes from her own personal history. She is doing as Boltanski intended: projecting her own personal background onto his work. She said, 'Looking at the children's faces in Boltanski's installations [...] I see the children in my mother's and father's classes who did not survive, I see the buildings of Czernowitz now inhabited by young people who don't remember their parents' neighbours. I see the child I could have been and the child I was in my own early nightmares'.¹²⁶

Hirsch seems to find a kindred spirit in Boltanski since he also had a Jewish father. She says, 'Boltanski, whose middle name is "Liberté," grew up after the Holocaust; he was born on the very day that Paris was liberated from Nazi occupation. Boltanski's father was born a

¹²³ Hirsch, pp. 659-60.

¹²⁴ Hirsch, p. 659.

¹²⁵ Liss, p. 43.

¹²⁶ Hirsch, p. 683.

Polish Jew and, though he had converted to Catholicism, he spent the years of the Occupation hiding under the floorboards of his home in Paris [...] Boltanski's paternal history has no doubt shaped his avant-garde photographic career'.¹²⁷ To be clear, any grand narrative that envelopes the understanding of an artist's entire oeuvre should be treated with suspicion because it will inevitably gloss over important aspects in the work that could potentially wrangle it lose from that particular reading. To base an interpretation of an artwork on the artist's ethnicity and family background is troubling because it is built around an external element as its most compelling aspect.



Figure 5: Shimon Attie, *The Writing on the Wall*, (projections onto buildings in Berlin) (1995).

Just as Anselm Kiefer's work is a direct reference to the Holocaust, Shimon Attie's work, *The Writing on the Wall*, of 1994, is a direct reference to the murdered Scheunenviertel Jews of

¹²⁷ Hirsch, p. 675.

Berlin in the 1920s and 1930s.¹²⁸ (Figure 5) Scheunenviertel is a part of the Mitte district which, up until World War II, was considered a slum with a large population of Eastern European Jews. Attie's work consists of powerful photographic images of missing or murdered Berlin Jews and projects them back onto the walls of houses and other buildings where they were situated in the original photograph. Attie symbolically returns the missing Jews of Berlin back to their homes, synagogues, and schools. They are, metaphorically, re-established back into the fabric of Berlin society. He asked, 'Where are all the missing people? What has become of the Jewish culture and community which had once been at home here?'¹²⁹ Hirsch says, 'Making slides of them and using several powerful projectors, Attie projected these old images onto the precise locations where they were taken, thus 'rebuilding' the ruined world on the very site of its ruin'.¹³⁰ Since Attie is referring directly to photographs of Berlin's Jews just before World War II, his work is a strong example of Holocaust art because the work refers directly to the actual victims and the specific locations recorded in the original photographs in Berlin's Jewish Quarter; he leaves no doubt about the meaning of this work. Attie's work, like Kiefer's art and other examples of Holocaust art, explicitly refer to and protect Holocaust memory.

Ideas from postmemory are applied by Hirsch to read the work of both Boltanski and Attie and this is what makes her interpretation of Boltanski's photographic works problematic. Hirsch points to Boltanski's work as ambiguous yet powerful references to exiled and dead Jewish camp victims. This ambiguity 'calls the truth of pictures into question' by representing subjects with no discernible link to the Holocaust.¹³¹ As I have shown, Boltanski

¹²⁸ Hirsch, p. 682.

¹²⁹ Hirsch, p. 682. From Shimon Attie, *The Writing on the Wall: Projections in Berlin's Jewish Quarter* (Heidelberg: Edition Braus, 1994), p. 9.

¹³⁰ Hirsch, p. 682.

¹³¹ Hirsch, p. 681.

did not source his generic collective images from historical records of the Holocaust. This gap in representation is resolved in Attie's work because it is much more direct and explicit to the actual event of the Holocaust. She wrote of Attie's work, 'icon merges with index, context and content restored'.¹³²

Since Hirsch sees Boltanski's ambiguous, generic images in the same light as Attie's images of the Berlin Jews during the Holocaust, I see the concept of postmemory as a symptom of the universalisation of the Holocaust. To be precise, she sees an equivalence between the anonymous imagery in works by Boltanski and the factually accurate and explicit imagery used by Attie. In truth, her mission to retain the memory of those who suffered at the hands of the Nazis is negated because she replaced the specific experiences of the victims with collective imagery of normal children.

I agree that the interpretations regarding the Holocaust in the art of Kiefer, Attie, and other artists are productive. However, I think blanket Holocaust-based explanations of Boltanski's art are symptomatic of the universalisation of Holocaust memory that I discussed earlier.

Hirsch, Kaplan, Van Alphen, and other writers who hold similar views, must rely on external elements to evidence their reading. In truth, these writers carry along with them a pre-established narrative, the Holocaust, which they apply to *all* of Boltanski's work. They must pull elements from outside of the work itself to support their Holocaust-based interpretations, rather than engaging directly with the work itself. As a result, the analyses apply the aims of Holocaust art, which is to remember those specific individuals, too loosely.

I want to emphasise that I do not wish to devalue a Holocaust-based reading of Boltanski's work so long as it is determined by the personal memories of an individual viewer. If a

¹³² Hirsch, p 683.

viewer engages with his art and it conjures up his or her personal memories that relate to the Holocaust, then the polysemic nature of Boltanski's work is upheld. My issue focusses on the fact that the dominant reading of the Holocaust is predetermined and is meant to encapsulate his art in a strict and univocal narrative for everyone who sees it. By doing so, the polysemic nature of Boltanski's art, which is so central to its power and appeal, is denied. Furthermore, faithfulness to the particularities of those individuals who perished in Holocaust is important because it is our moral responsibility as a society, and as individuals, to remember those who died, who they were, and even how they suffered. This saves them from disappearing into the historical anonymity which the Nazis sought to resign them.¹³³ Assigning all of Boltanski's art to the narrative of the Holocaust dilutes the specificity of those who truly suffered at the hands of the Nazis.

I have argued that early interpretations saw Boltanski art as challenging the arts institutions and artistic conventions by using generic childhood imagery from collective memory. However, this reading changed in the late 1980s with the 'Lessons of Darkness' exhibition where the curators put forward the view that his work, *all of his work*, references the Holocaust. I explained that an overarching, pre-established Holocaust-based reading relies on external factors operating outside his art, such as the assumed significance of Boltanski's Jewish background and the idea that the anonymous subjects are stand-ins for Jewish Holocaust victims. These factors obscure essential aspects of Boltanski's work which I will discuss in the following chapters.

¹³³ Poole, p. 39.

This reading became dominant because, at least in part, the overarching narrative of the Holocaust universalises the specific Jewish catastrophe in order for it to address global concerns and other 'holocausts' that happen around the world. Due to Hannah Arendt's account of the Eichmann trial in articles which first appeared in the *New Yorker*, and later collated into the book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, the crimes against humanity committed by the Nazis were seen as being too parochial. The American government initiated a model of the Holocaust that expanded the narrative into a global issue: the Nazi genocide turned into a universal trope of good versus evil. As a consequence of expanding the war on anti-Semitic and racial hatred to a global scale, Holocaust memory became a universal paradigm of memory and applicable to other genocides and brutal conflicts. When the Holocaust becomes a universal signifier for memory, violent death, and evil, a slippage occurs where the specific horrors of the Nazi genocide dissolve into more generalised instances of mass death and violence. This is relevant to the previous readings of Boltanski's work because I showed that they take part in the universalisation of Holocaust memory.

My contribution to the discussion surrounding Boltanski is clear: I showed, for the first time, that the main interpretation of his art is dependent on external factors operating outside of the work, such as his own half-Jewish background and the assumption that the anonymous subjects are stand-ins for dead Holocaust victims. I revealed that the sole, dominant reading of his art is not particularly apt since it overlooks both the nuances found in Boltanski's deeply ambiguous art and undermines the truthful and direct aims of Holocaust representation. My insights into the reasoning behind why writers have placed his art within one narrative is vital to my thesis overall because I am able to show that this interpretation overlooks many other interesting and important aspects. One dominant narrative filters out

the complex ambiguities in his art, which I discuss in chapter two, that renders it one-dimensional and ultimately, irrelevant to other concerns outside of that one specific description.

I am not attempting to disqualify outright all interpretations of his art based on the Holocaust because I recognise that this particular narrative may be applicable to his art when it is freely and spontaneously determined by the individual viewer's own memories and experiences. My contribution to the dialogue around Boltanski's art is the observation that when it is understood only within the strict confines of one blanket and dominant narrative, vital elements that enrich it go unnoticed or underdeveloped. Any preordained narrative that blankets the totality of his oeuvre erases other ideas that may inspire each individual viewer. I develop my argument that Boltanski's ambiguous art resists unequivocal interpretations in the following chapter.

THE AMBIGUOUS, OPEN ART OF CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI

In the previous chapter I explained how one dominant interpretation of Boltanski's art overlooks its inherently polysemic nature. This chapter looks at one of the defining elements of his art: the strong element of ambiguity. This discussion is highly consequential to my overall thesis for two reasons. It has been a recurring element found in much of his work since the beginning of his career. Several writers have mentioned it in their reviews of his work but their explanations do not go far enough. In some cases, I expand upon what has been written, and in other cases, I clarify misunderstandings. But most importantly, by pinning down the function of ambiguity and how it is created, I can argue two crucial points: that the most prevalent ambiguous element is found in the anonymous subject and that the viewer is responsible for resolving the meaning of ambiguity in this artist's work. Both observations have a major impact on my overall thesis because they allow me to forge a path into new ways of understanding his artwork.

I approach this topic through the lens of the theory of 'openness', developed by the late novelist and semiotician, Umberto Eco, in his text, *The Open Work* from the early 1960s.¹³⁴ For Eco, a number of modern artists produced works that were 'open', or intentionally incomplete and ambiguous, in that they required the viewer to supply meaning in order to complete them. Such works manifest 'openness' because they are 'deliberately and systematically ambiguous'.¹³⁵ To be succinct, artists create ambiguity by disrupting the conventional understanding of some element in the work.

I sense a strong convergence between the purpose and characteristics of ambiguity and Boltanski's artworks. This is a prevalent feature of his art, yet it remains underdeveloped by

¹³⁴ Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. by Anna Cancogni (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

¹³⁵ Eco, p. x.

previous writers. Brett Kaplan's discussion of ambiguity in Boltanski's art that I discussed in chapter one is typical of what has been said before about it. She wrote that the element either 'romanticises memories of the Nazi genocide' or merely serves to give the impression that the artist is a 'creature of ambiguity, mystery, illusion, and deceit'.¹³⁶ But Kaplan's explanations, like many others, gloss over or misunderstand this very important and consistent element in Boltanski's oeuvre. I want to clear up misunderstandings about how and why he cultivates ambiguity. This is my main contribution in this chapter: to explain the strategic function of ambiguity in his art.

I want to understand the differences between how meaning is determined in traditional works of art from those modern art works with a high degree of ambiguity. I will interrogate the prevalence of portraits of anonymous subjects, often children, in Boltanski's oeuvre with the aim of determining whether or not the conventions of portraiture and the concept of childhood shed light on how he portrays them. I also look at the display technique of the grid to understand why he continuously deploys it in the presentation of his work.

I continue my discussion of ambiguity by exploring Eco's idea about the diminished role of the artist in art works with a palpable sense of indeterminacy. By relegating the biography of the artist and restraining his or her power in the meaning-making process, the interpretations of open works more readily accommodate the viewer's own point of view. This argument is helpful in contradicting the significance of Boltanski's biography in the meaning of his art which I discussed in chapter one. However, I do not claim that any reading is valid for ambiguous works. To be more precise, the artist's role is to construct a

¹³⁶ Brett Kaplan, *Unwanted Beauty: Aesthetic Pleasure in Holocaust Representation* (Champaign: University of Illinois, 2007), p. 108 and p. 135.

loose, general theme surrounding the work to quietly and gently nudge the viewer to a reading based on his or her own memories and experiences.

I examine Olga Smith's text about the role of autobiography in the artist's early work. She contends that he purposefully subverts the autobiographical convention of a unified, knowable personality by fracturing his identity into various characters. Boltanski, she claims, conforms to the idea that a truly singular identity is a fiction since an author, or artist, is more correctly understood as the summation of a collective society. But such readings still place Boltanski's biography as the centre of his work's meaning. I offer a new way to understand the role that Boltanski adopts in his artworks.

I want to understand why he distorts and confuses his moniker in the context of the titles and captions accompanying his work. I acknowledge that Boltanski's tactic is not without precedent; Andy Warhol was famous for deflecting attention from his own inner, personal identity. I want to know if Boltanski does something similar to other artists, like Warhol, in this regard.

Finally, I investigate the role of the viewer in inherently ambiguous works of art. If ambiguity, according to Eco, seek out the viewer's engagement in order to determine their meaning, I want to know if this element plays a similar role in Boltanski's work. I look at his use of interactive strategies, such as game playing and physical interaction with the artwork, in order to clarify the mysterious function of ambiguity.

My contribution to the debate built around Boltanski is to explain the complex function of ambiguity. To this end, this chapter interrogates the role of ambiguity in several ways. I begin with a description of Eco's notion of ambiguity, what he calls 'openness', in modern

artistic expression. I then apply his ideas to Boltanski's overall artistic practice such as the main points of ambiguity, the artist's role, and the role of the viewer.

Umberto Eco was well-known as a novelist and semiotician, but his idea of openness began in what is called his 'pre-semiotic' period, when he was more concerned with the ways that ideas are dependent on sociohistorical, political, psychological, or other cultural contexts.¹³⁷

Although I examine *The Open Work* in terms of art, it was written to encapsulate many modern artistic modes of expression such as music, literature, theatre, and visual art. In the Introduction to the third, and last, edition of *The Open Work*, David Robey reminds us that openness anticipated major tropes in contemporary cultural and artistic practice. Openness amplifies implicit or underdeveloped elements which already existed in traditional works of art of various artistic mediums.¹³⁸

It is worth considering what elements Eco saw in open artworks that differ from traditional works of art. The message of a traditional work of art, Eco argued, typically corresponds to the habitual way that both the artist and the viewer understands it within their society.¹³⁹

Elements, such as familiar imagery and composition, communicate to the viewer all the necessary information he or she requires in order to arrive at an interpretation that corresponds to rigid and preordained ideas.¹⁴⁰ These artworks afford the viewer little opportunity for grasping its meaning in novel or unconventional ways. An example of a

¹³⁷ Sangjin Park, 'Reconsidering the Implications of the "Pre-Semiotic" Writings in Umberto Eco', in *Illuminating Eco: On the Boundaries of Interpretation*, ed. by Charlotte Ross and Rochelle Sibley (London and New York: Routledge, 2004) 123-137 (p. 124).

p. 124.

¹³⁸ Eco, p. viii.

¹³⁹ Eco, p. 118.

¹⁴⁰ Eco, p. 6.

traditional artwork with a rigid, pre-established meaning is Michelangelo's fresco in the Sistine Chapel, *The Creation of Adam*. This is a well-known painting of a well-known story. Adam reclines in the Garden of Eden as he reaches out his finger to touch the out-stretched hand of God and receive the gift of life. Michelangelo created this fresco based on the familiar narrative found in Christian culture and Italian society: the Book of Genesis. He had no pretension to paint or design the fresco to elicit a vague reading since the Biblical narrative that it followed was unmistakable. Traditional artworks represent imagery that conforms to established and familiar conventions in order to control the interpretation of the work.¹⁴¹

Whilst traditional artforms may spark various responses, they aim 'to channel these responses in a particular direction; for readers, viewers, and listeners there was in general only one way of understanding what the text was about, what a painting stood for, what the tune was of a piece of music'.¹⁴² The pleasure of reading a traditional work lay in grasping the univocal message whereas, for an open work, aesthetic pleasure is found in deciphering and determining the ambiguity of its message.¹⁴³

Even though Eco did not discuss artworks created after the 1960s, such as Boltanski's, as an example of an open work, Roger Seamon argued for a connection between art that is conceptually informed and incomplete. He said that what makes an artwork ambiguous 'is that, in contrast to, for example, a nude sculpture, where we are not puzzled by the choice of object, it is not clear what the purpose of the work is'.¹⁴⁴ When it comes down to it, the meaning of the traditional work of art is anchored in its conventional forms, materials, and

¹⁴¹ Eco, p. xi.

¹⁴² Eco, p. x.

¹⁴³ Eco. P. 42.

¹⁴⁴ Roger Seamon, 'The Conceptual Dimension in Art and the Modern Theory of Artistic Value', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 59, 2 (2001), 139-151 (p. 143).

content; its significance is predictable and univocal. But 'openness and uncertainty' leaves the meaning of the work unanswered and the viewer's role is to resolve its meaning that 'constitutes its main artistic value.'¹⁴⁵

As Seamon has argued, whilst traditional artworks have always allowed the viewer some power to construct his or her own interpretation, in contemporary works there is a larger gap between image and meaning.¹⁴⁶ My point is that the deliberate creation of ambiguity to defy conventions and raise questions about meaning has a distinct and well-trodden precedent in modern and contemporary art.

For Eco, a prime example of an artist who created ambiguity and openness was Jackson Pollock. (Figure 6) The nebulous dribbles of paint obliterate any figuration that may communicate any recognisable imagery or narrative structure to the viewer. Rather, Pollock created paintings with explicitly chaotic content and innovative, bewildering formal structures that explicitly showed 'the disorder of the signs, the disintegration of the outlines, the explosion of the figures' in order to 'incite the viewer to create his own network of connections'.¹⁴⁷

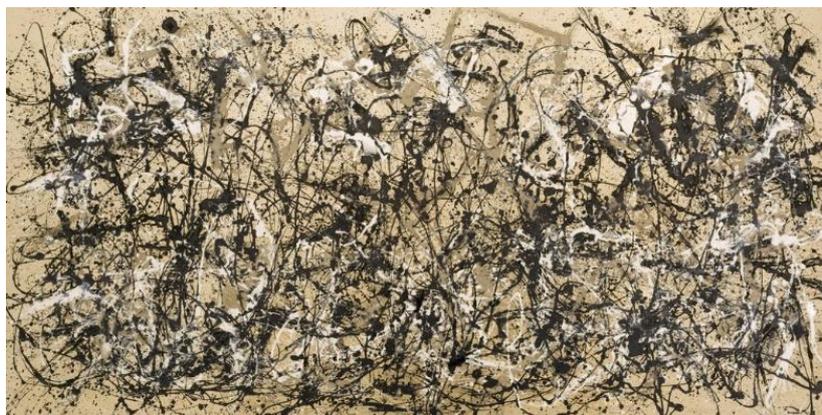


Figure 6: Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm* (oil on canvas)
(New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1950).

¹⁴⁵ Seamon, p. 143.

¹⁴⁶ Seamon, p. 144.

¹⁴⁷ Eco, p. 103.

Eco observed the concept of openness in artistic forms of expression not only through ambiguous content, but also through the work's composition or structure. As Park's suggested, 'art, inasmuch as it is a structuralisation of forms, has its own way of expressing the world and its people. A work of art can make any assertion about the world through its content, but it can do so much more effectively through the way in which it is structured. In this way, art seems to maintain its relevance to the world'.¹⁴⁸ The manner in which a contemporary work of art relates to, or depicts, its sociohistorical environment can also be understood as a characteristic of openness. If a lack of the 'conventional sense and order' is experienced, if there is 'a feeling of senselessness, disorder, and discontinuity' on which the experience of the work is based, then that unease or awkwardness signals a sense of openness in the work of art.¹⁴⁹

Creating ambiguity is a conscious act made by the artist; it is an enigmatic element in the work that should not be construed as a fault or flaw. Ambiguity is regarded as an element in the work which defies an artistic convention, rendering its meaning indeterminant since the clue to deciphering its meaning is not forthcoming.¹⁵⁰ Robey commented that 'Ambiguity, for Eco, is the product of the contravention of established conventions of expression: the less conventional forms of expression are, the more scope they allow for interpretation and therefore the more ambiguous they can be said to be'.¹⁵¹

Within the context of Boltanski, the enigmatic element centres around the anonymity of the subjects he represents. Writers have commented on ambiguity in his work before, but they have not explored it in any depth. This endeavour is my main contribution in this chapter: to

¹⁴⁸ Park, p. 124

¹⁴⁹ Eco, p. xiii-xiv.

¹⁵⁰ Eco, p. 67.

¹⁵¹ Eco, p. xi.

explain the strategic function of ambiguity in Boltanski's art. As I discussed previously, many writers who interpreted the anonymous subjects saw them as metaphoric representations of dead Jewish Holocaust victims, usually as children. I interpret it differently and see the ambiguity in the anonymous subjects as a conscious strategy to lure the viewer into the work. The reason why the anonymous subjects create so much speculation is because they disrupt artistic conventions of portraiture.

Portraits, in line with convention, allude to a unique, discernible person who actually exists or existed in the real world.¹⁵² The expectation is that a portrait will reveal something about that particular sitter, that this person is worthy of identification and preservation.¹⁵³ Hence, the viewer expects to discover the identity of the sitter and this is why names are an essential element of a portrait, 'because names so precisely identify the reference at the core of the genre'.¹⁵⁴ Thus, it is a convention that portraits provide names of the specific person who they represent in order to 'distinguish him or her from all others'.¹⁵⁵ However, whilst the anonymous images of children in Boltanski's works do not suggest that they never existed, the ability for the child to be knowable or identifiable is nullified.

The subjects are not autonomous, identifiable individuals in their own right. It is the convention that well-known people normally serve as the subject of traditional works of art; their uniqueness or extraordinariness bear the message of the traditional portrait. But the unnamed subjects in Boltanski's works become stereotypes, or stand-ins for a sort of 'average' person built up from a general consensus. Hirsch claimed that Boltanski turns the credibility of the convention of portraiture on its head when he represents subjects with no

¹⁵² Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (London: Reaktion Press, 1991), p. 8.

¹⁵³ Brilliant, p. 14.

¹⁵⁴ Brilliant, p. 29.

¹⁵⁵ Brilliant, p. 46.

discernible identity of their own.¹⁵⁶ When she cannot locate the identity of the anonymous children, she draws from her own background story as the daughter of exiled Jewish Romanian parents to claim that all the children depicted in the artist's entire creative production are actually metaphors for exiled or dead Jewish Holocaust victims.

Previous writers who commented on the erased identity of the subjects acknowledged that ambiguity is an element worthy of consideration, and in some cases understand that Boltanski is deliberately trampling over conventions in order to create ambiguity, but rather than leaving the meaning of the ambiguous element open-ended for each viewer to resolve, they plug the gap in meaning with an overarching story that consolidates and concludes the work's meaning: the Holocaust. This closes off the artwork's meaning from myriad potential meanings that would make the work relevant and personal to each individual viewer. As a consequence of their writings, many viewers may understand the identity of the subject as emanating from a singular narrative, closing down any divergent meanings once and for all.

It is important to consider at this point the meaning of the image of the child in Western culture since Boltanski so often features photographic images of children. My aim is to better understand how his representations of childhood operate within the conventions of portraiture, specifically portraiture of children and depictions of childhood. It is widely acknowledged that French writer and historian, Philippe Ariès, was the first to explore the history of how Western society viewed depictions of children in art and literature in his book, published in 1960, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. He explained that the idea of childhood is founded on more modern social and historical particularities. He went so far as to claim that the idea of childhood did not exist in the Middle Ages: 'In

¹⁵⁶ Hirsch, p. 675.

medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist; this is not to suggest that children were neglected, forsaken, or despised. The idea of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children: it corresponds to an awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature that distinguishes the child from the adult, even the young adult. In medieval society this awareness was lacking'.¹⁵⁷

What Ariès was describing was the visual depiction of children in medieval works of art. In many works, we see depictions of children as homuncular adults. In other words, rather than representing children with their natural bodily proportions, artists of the time painted them as having miniature adult bodies. However, Sophie Oosterwijk clarified that medieval culture did have an awareness of childhood: it was an 'imperfect, early state' of physical and mental development.¹⁵⁸ She stated that medieval depictions are different than the more naturalistic modern representations of children, such as by their size and visual balance of the body.

It was only until the 18th century that the concept of childhood emerged and was manifested in cultural expressions such as painted portraits of children, who were often born into the aristocracy or wealthy merchant class. Ariès concluded that the concept of childhood is, in fact, an adult construction based on social and historical fluctuations. This idea has been adopted and expanded upon by subsequent writers who discuss the cultural meaning of the figure of the child throughout modernity and postmodernity.¹⁵⁹ Joe Moran

¹⁵⁷ Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. by Robert Baldick (New York, New York: Vintage Press, 1962), p. 128.

¹⁵⁸ Sophie Oosterwijk, 'Adult Appearances?: Representations of Children and Childhood in Medieval Art', in *The Oxford Handbook of Archaeology*, ed. by Sally Crawford, Dawn M Hadley, and Gillian Shepherd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 590-605 (p. 605).

¹⁵⁹ See Anne Higonet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998); James R. Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), amongst others.

summarises these cultural conventions when he wrote, 'The myth of childhood innocence has particular potential as a resource for heritage because it is essentially an invention of the upper and middle classes, produced in the 18th and 19th centuries...'¹⁶⁰

By the 18th century, the concept of childhood focused on the qualities of passivity, innocence, and purity. However, children had no voice, no social agency, and were understood only from the viewpoint of the adult. Karen Calvert noted that, 'Childhood was imbued with an almost sacred character. Children were pure and innocent beings, descended from heaven and unsullied by worldly corruption. The loss of this childish innocence was akin to the loss of virginity, and the inevitable loss of childhood itself was a kind of expulsion from the Garden of Eden'.¹⁶¹

The figure of the childhood in 18th century representation had little to do with the real life and experiences of a particular child but more to do with the emotive reactions their image elicited in an adult audience, such as sympathy and parental protection: children were sacred and needed to be protected from the harsh evils of the world because they were still in touch with God and Nature. This new sentiment toward children emerged due to a few important factors: the new, smaller bourgeois family where parental relationships with their children were more poignant, formal schooling for the middle classes marked a specific 'period of life' devoted to childhood, and new products opened up a profitable market aimed specifically at children such as books, toys, and clothing.¹⁶² These innovations

¹⁶⁰Joe Moran, 'Childhood and Nostalgia in Contemporary Culture', *The European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 5,2 (2002), 155-172, (p. 157-8).

¹⁶¹ Karin Calvert, 'Children in the House: The Material Culture of Early Childhood' *The Children's Cultural Reader*, ed. by Henry Jenkins (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998), p. 79.

¹⁶² Moran, p. 158.

enhanced the profile of children in Western society, especially those from upper and middle-class families.

An example of an eighteenth-century portrait painting of a child is Joshua Reynolds', *Master Hare*, of 1778. This is a well-known painting of a two-year old toddler named Francis George Hare, the son of Francis Hare-Naylor, an English playwright, and Georgina Hare-Naylor, an English painter and art patron. The young toddler takes up most of the picture space, which establishes him as an important person who is worthy of a portrait. The rest of the setting is painted around his figure. We see the young Hare in an idyllic green garden with gently swaying trees and soft grass. The boy is dressed in white, representing innocence and purity, with one shoulder of his dress hanging off his shoulder. He has flowing blonde hair and snow-white skin. Young Hare points to something in the distance, outside of the picture frame, signaling that his inquisitive personality is caught by something beyond the concerns of the adult world.

But what is of crucial importance to my discussion, in the context of Boltanski's anonymous child subject, is that the portrait painting's title directly identifies the sitter: the young Master Hare. Even though Francis Hare is represented in an idealized manner, he is still a knowable subject whose personality and curiosity seeks to elicit genuine affection from the viewer and, importantly, can be identified in the real world. Thus, the naming of the sitter in the work's title conforms to the contemporaneous eighteenth-century conventions of childhood and portraiture painting. To put it concisely, the expectation that the painting will identify the sitter and offer a glimpse into the toddler's innocent, curious personality is its *raison d'être*. This romanticised ideal of childhood, found mainly in wealthy European communities, continued well into the later part of the 19th century with the same sort of defining characteristics as those found in the previous century.

A Calling by William Adolphe Bouguereau in 1896 is an example of how Victorian-era children were viewed by adults. Bouguereau's affinity for producing paintings of children was renowned; he represented them as full of charm that foretells their unique character and personal interests. The young girl in *A Calling* is clearly from a middle-class family, dressed in a white and pink dress, and sits on a step amid an idealized natural setting. She sweetly smiles at the viewer whilst holding a pen and drawing paper: she wants to be an artist. By the mid-19th century, there remained an avid celebration of childhood which revered children to be innocent, honest, and close to God; adults wished to return to childhood and remain there forever. This is the time when nostalgic children's literary classics emerged such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and JM Barrie's *Peter Pan*.

By the mid-20th century and the advent of new media technologies, the concept of childhood took a radical turn. No longer was the child a symbol of innocence; now the child is seen to have a voice of his or her own and has developed a sense of social agency. The boundary that once separated the child from the evils and concerns of the adult world has dissipated. Now the cultural representations of children see them struggling with adult concerns of violence, disappointment, even sexuality. For example, the exhibition, *Almost Warm and Fuzzy*, from 4 February to 8 April 2001 at MOMA PS1 Gallery, brought together a group of more than 30 artists whose work focused on ideas of childhood in the contemporary world. One of the artists, Takashi Murakami, exhibited a vinyl sculpture entitled *Mr DOB*. This is a normal-sized, three-dimensional oval balloon-shaped sculpture floating in the mid-air of the gallery space. This work pairs two common memories of childhood: balloons and Mickey Mouse.

The work is purposefully reminiscent of Mickey Mouse in that the character, Mr DOB, has similar protruding ears. The character is coloured brightly like a cartoon character but there

is a sinister element to this work: *Mr DOB* has a monstrous face with six eyes of various sizes and a huge, open-mouthed smile showing its sharp, jagged teeth. *Mr DOB* appears often in Murakami's work as a symbol of death and disillusionment with the world. Murakami said, 'Mr Dob is my alter-ego. At first glance, the painting may not appear serious, but through Dob, I recount many dark things. It's an image about life, about having to live – even if I have to puke to do it. I borrowed the theme from [Sir Francis] Bacon, that sickness is part of life and brings you slowly closer to death.'¹⁶³ To be precise, through the 'voice' of his alter ego, Mr DOB, Murakami is showing a familiar cartoon-like character transformed, with a vivid child-like imagination, into a frightening, anxious symbol of fear and death. The work aims to show, in the imagery and perspective of the child, the deep-seated uncertainty of the contemporary adult world.

This new conception of the figure of the child can be seen also in the photography of Sally Mann's 1992 photobook, *Immediate Family*. This series consists of 65 black-and-white, photographic portraits of her children (Emmett, Jessie, and Virginia) when they were all under ten years old. Over a dozen of the photographs depict nudity and a handful show the aftermath of minor injuries or violence. They all depict the struggles and life experiences of her children. What is certain is that these images do not conform to the eighteenth-century concept of the child: these children are not represented as passive or particularly innocent, but rather are sexualised with a confident agency. They already participate in adult experiences and concerns.

¹⁶³ Robert Murphy, 'POWER POP', *Women's World Daily*, (23 June 2020.) < <https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2082/docview/231140136/fulltext/E60BA51921BC48D7PQ/1?accountid=13042> > [accessed 9 October 2020].

For example, *Candy Cigarette* from 1989 is a photograph of Jessie, then an 8-year old girl, holding a candy cigarette in a way that suggests she is an adult smoking an actual cigarette. Her aloof pose and irreverent, direct gaze at the viewer endow the photograph with a palpable sense of Jessie's lost innocence and streetwise attitude. *The Last Time Emmett Modeled Nude* from 1987 is a photograph of Mann's son Emmett, then an 8-year old boy, looking at the viewer in a coy manner as he, in the nude, floats in a clear-water lake. His hands skim the surface of the water as an attempt to block his nudity from the gaze of the viewer. This work is uncomfortable, not least because of the young boy's candid nudity in a photograph taken by his mother and disseminated into the public realm of art, exposing him to the adult gaze. This photograph does not harken back to bucolic images of a charmingly nude cupid or cherubim, but more akin to voyeuristic, perhaps even erotic, images of young boys. As Richard E. Woodward wrote in the *New York Times* in 1992, 'Rather than preserving their innocence, the photographs seem to accelerate their maturity by relying on the knowingness of the viewer'.¹⁶⁴ Put another way, the adult viewer knows about what the children themselves are discovering in the photographs.

The experience of violence is explored in *Damaged Child* from 1984. This photograph shows Jessie, this time at age three, from the shoulders up, against a wall and glaring at the viewer. Her lace collar and gingham dress belie the fact that half of Jessie's face is swollen, perhaps from a hard slap. Like the other photographs by Mann in *Immediate Family*, these are not children who fit into the convention of sweet, well-behaved childhood but children with a discernible, sometimes confrontational personality. But what is most significant for me is

¹⁶⁴ Richard E. Woodward 'The Disturbing Photographs of Sally Mann' *New York Times*, (27 September 1992) < <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/09/27/magazine/the-disturbing-photography-of-sally-mann.html> > [accessed 15 October 2020].

that many of the portraits still bear a title that points to a knowable identity; the viewer can look at these photographs and gain an idea of Emmett, Jessie, or Virginia's personality.

What is more is that the photographs of the Mann children exemplify the realisation that contemporary childhood does not exist outside of history and culture. Their childhood is distinguished as happening in a certain place and time. These are children who grew up in the rural community of Lexington, Virginia in the 1980s and 1990s, as opposed to, for example, black children from the urban ghettos of Harlem in the 1950s, and freely exert an explicit agency in their own particular life experiences. My point is that the new concept of childhood takes into account the differences between children based on factors such as personality, social class, ethnicity, culture, and other distinguishing aspects.¹⁶⁵ Just like previous eras of childhood portraiture, the portraits of the Mann children depict a knowable, specific child that is distinguished from the plethora of other children.

At first glance, the anonymous children in Boltanski's work are innocent, passive, and voiceless. They imbibe adult projections of childhood and memory. But, contrary to earlier depictions of childhood in portraiture, the nameless children do not have a demonstrable identity that dominates the narrative of the work's message or meaning. Boltanski's portraits of children function as a blank screen upon which adult viewers project their own emotions, memories, and experiences of childhood. They reflect back to the viewer what is projected onto them.

As recent controversies suggest, our culture has a great deal
invested in the children's innocence and vulnerability – and at

¹⁶⁵ Allison James and Alan Prout, 'A New Paradigm for the Sociology of Childhood, Provenance, Promise, and Problems' in *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, ed. by Allison James and Alan Prout, (London: Routledge Falmer Publishers, 2007) pp. 6-28 (p. 7).

the same time, in their eroticism and knowledge. Less individualised, less marked by the particularities of identity. Moreover, children invite multiple projections and identifications. Their photographic images elicit an affiliative and identificatory as well as a protective spectatorial look marked by these investments.¹⁶⁶

By incessantly representing portraits of passive, innocent children, it seems that Boltanski partially adheres to earlier conventions of childhood. However, if the conventional concept of childhood acknowledges the uniqueness of an actual child's personality and lived experiences, then the artist sidesteps this aspect of the convention and dismisses it altogether. I want to emphasise that what is consistently missing from the portraits of children by Boltanski is any information that provides insight into their unique identity. They are almost always referred to by more generic characteristics such as their city, name of school, or social club. Boltanski decontextualised the children's faces from their original setting where their identity would have been known, such as from family photo albums, classroom photographs, and school portraits. But he represents each child as voiceless and nameless, and often manipulates their images in order to erase any defining facial features. Boltanski transforms old photographs that originally served as conventional childhood portraits into anonymous images of children by erasing their name and any distinguishing characteristics. His photographs of anonymous children look like portraits but do not act like them.

¹⁶⁶ Marianna Hirsch, 'Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy' in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer (Hanover and London: University of New England Press, 1999) pp. 1-23 (p. 13).

What is more noteworthy is that Boltanski mixes in contemporary notions of childhood by consistently equating childhood with the adult concerns and anxieties of death, the past, and forgotten memory. Whilst, I develop this concept further in the chapter on death, it is important to note that the childhood portraits emit the characteristics of passivity and innocence at the same time as being profoundly anxious. They are voiceless, naïve, and utterly vulnerable to the memories and fears of the adult viewer. As for whether or not Boltanski conforms to or challenges convention, I contend that he borrows sparingly from the older concept of the innocent and passive child whilst forfeiting any attempt to idealise nor identify the subject. Akin to Murakami's alter ego of *Mr Dob* symbolising fear and death, Boltanski deliberately constructs the images of unknown, passive, naïve children who absorb adult anxieties of forgotten childhood, resulting in adult fears of death and memory.

However, I do not wish to resolve the ambiguity of identity in Boltanski's work. This would be an impossible task. Instead, I assert that, for the first time in Boltanski's discourse, ambiguity serves an important purpose in the meaning of his work. Within the context of the work itself, the subjects are meant to remain unknown because Boltanski purposefully provides either little or no information about the subject, rendering the question of a unique identity closed. The artist leaves the question of their identity open to imaginative speculations. By undermining the conventional tenets of identity in portraiture and replacing notion of innocence in childhood with experiences that feature adult concerns, the narratives of the anonymous children are in continual fluctuation because they cannot be pinned down to one overarching theme.¹⁶⁷ They are unknown, anxious figures of contemporary childhood.

¹⁶⁷ Eco, p. 86.

In addition to the lack of identifying information of the subjects, Boltanski routinely employs the display technique of the grid; it is formal element which serves to further emphasise the averageness of the subject. Of course, Boltanski is not the first or only artist to utilise the grid format in this way. With this in mind, it is useful to consider how other artists, specifically the Bechers, have used the seriality of the grid in order to generalise their subject or create a sense of an average consensus.

The Bechers introduced the grid display technique in art through their book of industrial architecture, *Anonymous Sculptures: A Typology of Technical Constructions*, from 1970. The book consists of 204 black-and-white photographs, taken between 1961-1970, that documents various derelict, outmoded industrial buildings, like cooling towers and gas tanks, found in European countries such as Germany, France, Belgium, and the United Kingdom. The photographs record each structure in a similar way: 'from a half height that of the object, with a wide-angle lens, presenting the object frontally – a perspective that causes the horizon to recede and the surroundings to become panoramic- giving the impression of distancing the object from its background, yet planting it firmly on the ground, and removing any sense of comparative scale'.¹⁶⁸

It is routinely acknowledged that the Bechers' photographs document these buildings as symbols of Europe's outmoded industrial landscape worthy of being preserved in cultural memory. However, the photographs also function to depict objects typologically, or as a way to categorise of a certain kind of industrial building. In this way, the building can be held in comparison with other similar buildings in order to determine an average consensus of

¹⁶⁸ Sarah James, 'Subject, Object, Mimesis: The Aesthetic World of the Bechers' Photography', *Art History*, 32, 5 (2009), 874-893, (p. 875).

that particular architectural design.¹⁶⁹ One way the Bechers typified old industrial buildings in order to hold them up to comparison was through the serial and sequential exhibition display format of the grid. The grid lends a generalised context where 'shapes of specific types of industrial structures could be discerned'.¹⁷⁰ By objectively recording these objects as a sequence of industrial forms, the Bechers presented a universal idea of the buildings' structures whilst preserving them in cultural memory before they are lost to the oblivion of the past.¹⁷¹ I understand the Becher's use of the grid as a way to typify buildings in order to remember them based on a general design, not in their particularities.

Rosalind Krauss's 1981 essay on the use of the grid in modernist works of art sheds light on the reasons why Boltanski used this format to enhance the uniformity of the children. She wrote that the grid symbolises an 'absolute stasis' and a 'lack of hierarchy' with a 'hostility to narrative'.¹⁷² In essence, the grid repeats the same thing over and over, with no original, only model copies of each other: 'the grid can only be repeated', she said.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁹ Chris Balaschak, 'Between Sequence and Seriality: Landscape Photography and its Historiography in *Anonyme Skulpten*', *Photographies*, 3, 1 (2010) 23-47 (p.32).

¹⁷⁰ Balaschak, p. 34.

¹⁷¹ Balaschak, p. 40.

¹⁷² Rosalind Krauss, 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition', *October*, 18 (1981), 47-66 (p. 54).

¹⁷³ Krauss, p. 56.



Figure 7: Christian Boltanski, *Les Archives (The Archives)*, (photographs) (Kassel: Documenta 8, 1987).

I want to discuss a few works by Boltanski that utilise the grid format in order to argue that he often uses this technique to highlight the averageness of our shared collective memories of childhood. In 1987 at the international contemporary art exhibition, 'Documenta 8', Boltanski exhibited *Les Archives (The Archives)* (Figure 7) in an accountant's darkened office in the Fridericianum Museum in Kassel, Germany.¹⁷⁴ The work is composed of 350 black-and-white photographs of children's faces taken from class photographs or family album photographs. Each photographic portrait is a different size. Some are blurry, whilst others are sharply focused. Some of the photographs are hung closely in rows and columns on wire panels, which themselves further underscore the grid structure, whilst others are similarly hung tightly together on the adjacent walls. Stark, bright lights are clamped to the top of the wire panels and throw a harsh, spotlight onto the photographs directly below them. The work sits in a cramped, compact office in the museum, a room that the public seldom, if

¹⁷⁴ Gumpert, p. 100.

ever, sees. There are no captions or labels explaining the photographs. Since the artist objectifies these childhood photographs in a serial display pattern, much like the technique used by the Bechers, he represents an average yet contemporary idea of childhood that is silent, forgotten, and anxious.

It is reasonable to expect that the viewer approaches these photographs as portraits of children with expectations of discovering who they are and why their portrait sits in the office of the museum. Why are these children so extraordinary? But there is no information or clues to their personality or extraordinariness. They are, by default, passive, universalised images of childhood for an adult audience. In fact, this work is the culmination of Boltanski's photographic practice up till 1987; all the photographs in *Les Archives* came from previous artworks, such as *Le Lycée Chases*, which features blurry, enlarged photographs of Jewish teenagers, and *The Album de Photos de la Famille D., 1939-1964*, which depicted family photo album photographs of an anonymous, typical French family, and *Portraits des élèves du C.E.S. des Lentillères* which were also recycled into *Les Enfants de Dijon*. In a way, *Les Archives* is a work not just about contemporary collective images of childhood but is also a document of Boltanski's oeuvre up to that point. At no point has he provided any information about the children in these artworks. He described the photographs as similar to dead corpses.

... I don't remember any of their names, I don't remember anything more than the faces on the photograph. It could be said that they disappeared from my memory, that this period of time was dead. Because now these children must be adults, about whom I know nothing. This is why I felt the need to pay homage

to these 'dead,' who, in this image, all look more or less the same, like cadavers.¹⁷⁵

As we can see from this quote and the grid format on which the portraits of anonymous children are displayed, Boltanski equates the children in *Les Archives*, as in many other works, with pictures of nameless, 'dead' children since they are now, presumably, adults. Whilst I delve deeper in to Boltanski's equivalency between childhood and existential death in the final chapter, my point is that the discernible pathos in the oppressive repetition of photographic representations of silent, forgotten children in a dark, remote, seemingly abandoned office powerfully symbolises a contemporary and ubiquitous adult nervousness. The anxiety fixates on a quiet, existential death where forgotten childhood memories are forever exiled to the burial chamber.

There are a plethora of examples I can call upon to illustrate the contemporary figure of the child in Boltanski's work as both innocent and vulnerable to adult concerns. I want to return to the 1990s black-and-white photographic series, *Les Suisses Morts* (or *The Dead Swiss*) (Figure 8) that I briefly discussed in chapter one. This series depicts black-and-white photographic portraits of men and women of equal size, hung from floor to ceiling, in tight columns and rows. The various installations comprising *The Dead Swiss* are nearly identical and have been exhibited several times at venues such as at the Marian Goodman Gallery and Galerie Ghislaine Hussenot in Paris, the Whitechapel Gallery in London, the Instituto Valenciano de Arte Moderno in Spain, Musée de Grenoble in France, Palais de Beaux-Arts in Brussels, and the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

¹⁷⁵ Gumpert, p. 80-2.

In some shows, such as at Marian Goodman in Paris, the biscuit boxes were arranged in a large grid-like block that was 16 boxes high by 35 wide by 5 deep and was situated in front of a higher wall full of photographs. At Galerie Ghislaine Hussenot, the work was more of an installation. This version of *The Dead Swiss* was composed of 2,580 rusty biscuit boxes and stacked into tall, unsteady single-box columns of various heights. One column may be 19 boxes high whilst an adjacent one may be 10 or 24 boxes high. Likewise, at the Instituto Valenciano de Arte Moderno, Boltanski said that this show was ‘made of towers of tins stacked very high. The visitors would walk around the tins, and the stacks are so unstable that inevitably someone will get a shower of tins on his head...The last time I installed it was in Arles, and everything fell: there was a snowball effect – the stacks fell one after the other with a gigantic crash. And I left the piece like that, scattered on the floor’.¹⁷⁶ Whichever way the boxes were stacked, the effect of creating such large installations repeatedly in a grid-like serial format communicates a massive accumulation of the dead. References to the collective, unknowable dead is what I think Boltanski was aiming for when he said that ‘It’s a universal thing to die’.¹⁷⁷

The works in the photographic versions of *The Dead Swiss* are comprised of over seven thousand old-looking, black-and-white photographs of anonymous dead Swiss pulled from obituary adverts in a regional Swiss newspaper, *Le Nouvelliste du Valais*. Since the photos were pulled from the obituary pages, the photographs of the deceased, originating mainly from family photo albums, must have been chosen carefully by the families to commemorate and represent them. The photographs are either cut into an individual small square and affixed to the front of a biscuit box or they are enlarged and encapsulated as

¹⁷⁶ Grenier, p. 213.

¹⁷⁷ Jeni Fulton, ‘Fragile Time: Talking About Death with Christian Boltanski’ < <https://www.sleek-mag.com/article/christian-boltanski-interview-death> > [accessed 27 October 2020].

portraits in thin black frames and hung tightly together from floor to ceiling in serial rows and columns.



Figure 8: Christian Boltanski, *147 Suisses Morts (147 Dead Swiss)* (photographs) (Paris: Marian Goodman Gallery, 1991).

For the boxes with an affixed photograph, the assumption is that they contain the deceased's personal keepsakes, perhaps letters, certificates, or other private mementos. But it is not readily known if the boxes house documents which can be directly linked to anyone in particular. Whether or not they contain anything at all is immaterial since the viewer is not meant to open them by the request of the artist (and surely, the museum). As a result of not being able to know or even identify each dead Swiss, their portraits are transformed from beloved family photographs into stereotypical images of average adults primed to absorb the memories and thoughts of the viewer.

Ambiguity through anonymity and stereotypical representation is also seen in earlier work, such as *Les Enfants de Berlin (The Children of Berlin)* from 1975. The work is composed of 32

colour portraits of young boys and girls from a school in Berlin, and arranged in tight rows and columns of four by eight. Each portrait is taken the same way: full frontal shot of a child from mid-chest up. Few children smile, many seem to be unprepared for the shot to be taken. Indeed, Boltanski took each photograph in quick succession in order to forefront the idea that he shot them with improvised spontaneity. He stated, 'the photos were all taken in the same way, very quickly, one after the other'.¹⁷⁸ What Boltanski sought to achieve in the photographs was an automatic, uncalculated representation of average societal tastes and cultural clichés.¹⁷⁹ This work discloses a generalised notion of childhood found in collective imagery of class portraits that is common to most members of society. The grid format of *Les Enfants de Berlin* enables the viewer to compare each photograph to others. By typifying these kinds of similar memories and objects of childhood – photographs that we all have in our childhood or of our own children – the recollection of common memories is ignited in the viewer's mind.

Much like the Bechers grid format of industrial buildings, the repetitive, objective display of *Monument: La Fête de Pourim* (*Monument: The Purim Holiday*) (Figure 9) enables the viewer to easily compare the images in order to form a general commonality of the various children represented in the black-and-white photographic portraits. I briefly discussed this series in chapter one when I explored Arthur Danto's comment about it being a piece of 'Holocaust Art'. However, in this chapter I want to take a second look at this series of works through a different lens which understands it as an attempt to universalise and create an average consensus of children's faces. My analysis defies the explanation that this work is specifically about the Holocaust or even any sort of traumatic memory. Rather, I argue that the grid

¹⁷⁸ Grenier, p. 102.

¹⁷⁹ Gumpert, p. 60.

display format renders the children's faces too ambiguous because it amplifies their commonality rather than their specificity as Jews, or anyone else with a distinct identity.



Figure 9: Christian Boltanski, *Monument: La Fête de Pourim* (metal boxes, photographs, spotlights) (1988).

One version of this work, which exhibited at Galerie Bébert in Rotterdam in 1988, shows a horizontal sequence of sixteen blurry photographs of young children's faces, each the same size and the same height, resting on top of a column of seven rusty metal biscuit boxes. Sixteen spotlights, each one affixed to the wall just above each portrait, casts a stark light onto the picture of the child's face. In fact, the lamp falls right in front of each portrait, disrupting the viewer's ability to easily see. The inability to see the child's distinct facial features further lends credence to the averageness and commonality of the portraits. The work forms a tidy and succinct repetition of vertical and horizontal rows, like a grid: the dimensions, colour, and magnification of each photographic image is the same, each used biscuit box is virtually the same, the only difference being the various gradations of rust. Loosely hanging black electrical cords powering the spotlights echo the geometric frame of the work's grid-like structure. The serial arrangement of the boxes compliments the repetitive content found in the photographs. The grid display format of the boxes as well as the repetitive portraits work together to clearly show that these children are not in any way

unique with a distinct personality. Instead, these portraits are symbols of a generic and average childhood.



Figure 10: Hans-Peter Feldmann, *All the Clothes of a Woman* (70 gelatin silver prints) (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1970).

In a similar way, German conceptual artist Hans-Peter Feldmann typifies the imagery of an anonymous woman in *All the Clothes of a Woman* (Figure 10) by way of the grid format to induce an objective categorisation and comparison of their particular everyday content. The work is composed of seventy photographs taken by Feldmann, each one is individually framed and of the same dimensions. Repetition of the objects is important to Feldmann because it creates ‘an average value that’s more correct than an individual picture can be’.¹⁸⁰ By placing images of the woman’s clothing in a grid format, it eases comparisons for the viewer to reflect on their similarities and differences in her clothing, and by extension,

¹⁸⁰ Eric David ‘Conceptual Art Master Hans-Peter Feldmann Brings Appropriated Paintings to Hong Kong’ Yatzer, (29 December 2016) < <https://www.yatzer.com/hans-peter-feldmann> > [accessed 25 December 2019].

her personality or her life experiences. A general consensus about the type of woman represented by her clothing may be imagined.

The grid format can set up an affective dimension to some artworks because they exist to preserve something which has been or will be imminently lost. Like the Bechers' photographs of outdated industrial buildings in Europe, these artworks portray ideas surrounding memory and loss. What I mean is that artworks that display imagery in a grid style can be 'born of a desire to preserve' disappearing everyday objects.¹⁸¹ Feldmann's works act in a similar manner. *All the Clothes of Woman* shows the viewer everyday imagery that 'gravitates around issues of absence and loss'.¹⁸² Because these used items of clothing belonged to an unnamed woman, the viewer can imagine how she looked through the folds and creases in the fabric. This work presents personal, intimate items of a woman who can and will never be known – she is noticeably absent from the work. The viewer is left to try and reconstruct the identity of an unknown woman through her personal remnants – all her used clothing. A pronounced feeling of frustration and loss is accentuated by the impossibility of knowing this woman, or anyone, merely through items of discarded clothing.

There is a palpable morbidity underpinning these works because, whilst they display banal yet intimate objects in an emotionally distanced way, those same objects can induce a sense of mourning because they can stand in as an 'emblem of lives once lived'.¹⁸³ This is important for an appreciation of Boltanski's art because it operates in the same manner. Boltanski said that Feldmann's art was 'extremely related to my work. Sometimes he made them six months after me; in other cases, I did a similar work six months after him. It wasn't

¹⁸¹ Balaschak, p. 38.

¹⁸² Mark Alice Durant, 'Hans-Peter Feldmann: A Paradise of the Ordinary', *Aperture*, 203 (2011), 37-41, p. 39.

¹⁸³ Godfrey, 314.

an imitation on either of our parts, but we were truly in the same world, just with different forms'.¹⁸⁴ Boltanski's series of photographic and installation works, *Inventories*, of the early to mid-1970s, depict objects in a documentary manner and, as Gumpert remarked, they recall 'similar work by other conceptual artists of the seventies'.¹⁸⁵

The works in *Inventories* represent the objects that occupy a place in ordinary life; they point to a life that is easily relatable to most members of society. But the actual person to whom these items belonged remains elusive. This a deliberate strategy of Boltanski's: 'The principle was that I didn't choose anyone specific; it had to really be anyone, as neutral a person as possible'.¹⁸⁶ Put another way, Boltanski uses common imagery in order to make his work relatable to as many people as possible.

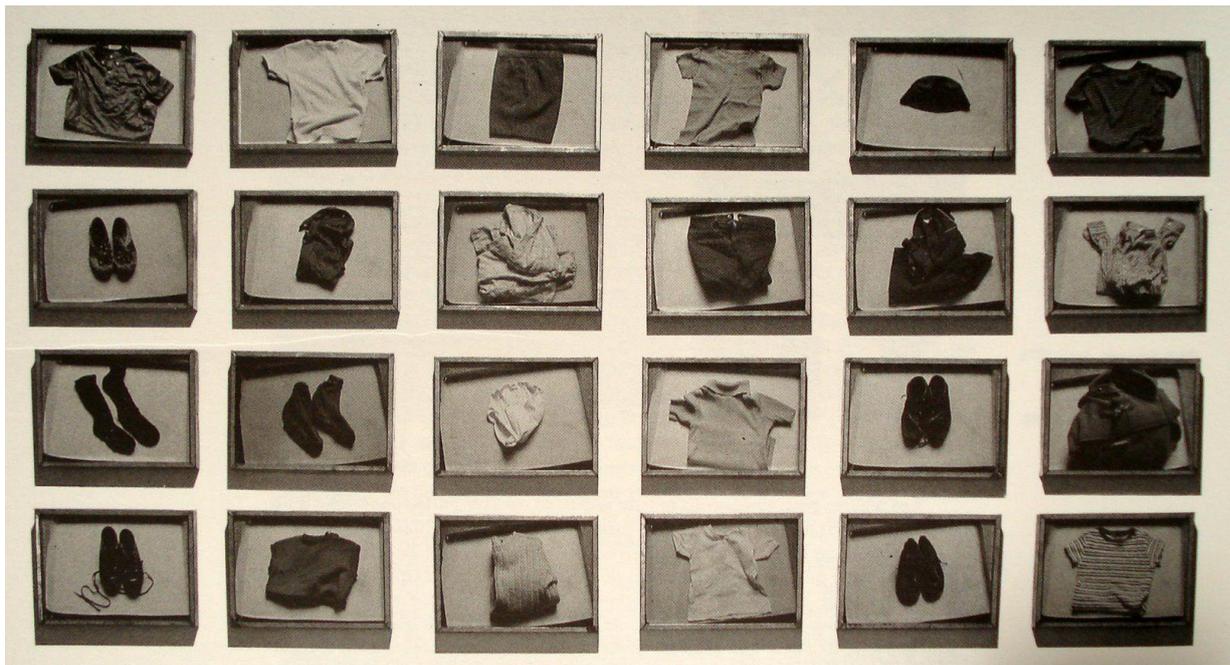


Figure 11: Christian Boltanski, *The Clothes of François C.* (photographs) (1972).

All the works in the *Inventories* series depict, in either photographs or object-based installations, the objects that once belonged to someone who has presumably died or disappeared. *Les Habits de François C.* (*The Clothes of François C.*) from 1972 is a black-and-

¹⁸⁴ Grenier, p. 83.

¹⁸⁵ Gumpert, p. 45.

¹⁸⁶ Grenier, p. 76.

white photographic work in the *Inventories* series. It shows 25 images of folded children's clothing, each article contained in a tray, that belonged to an unknown young boy named François: a coat, shirts, trousers, socks, and shoes. (Figure 11) All the images are of equal dimensions and they are displayed in tidy vertical and horizontal rows. The grid format allows the viewer to easily inspect each article of François's clothes.

Ambiguity is not only seen in the nameless faces and grid format in Boltanski's photographic works. In 2005, Boltanski exhibited *Le Coeur (The Heart)* as an installation piece that consists of a single lightbulb hung in a dark room. The light flickers on and off with the sound of a heartbeat emanating from speaker that fills up the room. A male voice is overheard, 'Qui êtes-vous?' ('Who are you?'). The identity of both the subject of the work and the visitor are held in question and perhaps never fully resolved. When meaning is not readily communicated in the artwork itself, as is the conventional expectation, the viewer's 'natural impulse at that point to search for a conceptual meaning that will make sense of [the work's] very existence'.¹⁸⁷ My point is that ambiguity does not extinguish the interpretative process but ignites it.

Eco pointed out another strategy that encourages ambiguity in a work of art. This relies on the relegated role of the artist. Precisely, the artist's background and biography must be consigned to a very minor role. According to Eco, the artist of a traditional work of art supplies the viewer with a familiar, identifiable narrative structure. The work's meaning is essentially closed, in that it is not designed to accommodate myriad interpretations. But the role of the artist changed in some modern artforms. Eco explained this change by way of a comparison between Dante Alighieri, the fourteenth-century poet of traditional literary works of art, and James Joyce, the Irish twentieth-century writer. Eco argued that Joyce

¹⁸⁷ Seamon, p. 143,

intentionally left his works open to multiple points of view. Eco highlighted Dante's poetic description of the nature of the Trinity in the *Divine Comedy*, arguing that its meaning was not open for discussion because it was 'already univocally clarified by theological speculation, this concept is no longer open to interpretation, since it can have only one meaning, the orthodox one. The poet, therefore, uses only words with very precise referents'.¹⁸⁸ Whilst Dante is exemplified as a writer of traditional works which offer only one prescribed, dominant meaning, James Joyce is examined for his ability to use language to open up the meaning of his work to myriad speculation. Eco argued that Joyce wrote about a mysterious letter in the fifth chapter of *Finnegan's Wake* in a way that renders the letter to be the reflection the 'linguistic mirror of the universe. To define it amounts to defining the very nature of the cosmos'.¹⁸⁹

Eco presented this sentence from *Finnegan's Wake* as an example of how Joyce's work is open to myriad responses: 'From quiqui quinet to michemiche chelet and a jambe-batiste to a brulobrulo! It is told in sounds in utter that, in signs so adds to, in universal, in polygluttural, in each ausiliary neutral idiom, sordomuti cs, florilingua, sheltafocal, flayflutter, a con's cu-bane, a pro's tutute, strassarab, ereperse and anythongue athall'.¹⁹⁰ Joyce's role as the author was to construct the text that communicates an explicit sense of ambiguity so that the reader will take over the responsibility to decide its meaning for him or herself. Eco pointed out that Joyce's text conveyed a 'chaotic character' which operates in a way that, through its ambiguity and polyvalence, represented the ambiguity and polyvalence of what we understand about the nature of the universe.¹⁹¹ 'The cosmos-

¹⁸⁸ Eco, p. 40.

¹⁸⁹ Eco, p. 41.

¹⁹⁰ Eco, p. 41. From James Joyce, *Finnegan's Wake* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2012), p. 17.

¹⁹¹ Eco, p. 41.

Finnegan's Wake-letter is a *chaosmos* that can be defined only in terms of its substantial ambiguity. The author must therefore speak of a nonunivocal object, by using nonunivocal signs and combining them in a nonunivocal fashion'.¹⁹² In short, Joyce constructed his sentence as a sort of loose, contextual guide for the reader to understand the experience of the irrationality and absurdity that comes with offering a definition about the nature of the universe. Joyce's words did not say that defining the universe was absurd, rather his text demonstrated it through unconventional, incoherent syntax and words that have no meaning outside of the book.

So, even though the artist who uses openness does not provide a unified, prescribed meaning to his works, he does not completely relinquish his role in the work's meaning. The work still retains the artist's stamp, or their original conceptual gesture, because he was the one who originally 'proposed the number of possibilities which had already been rationally organised, oriented, and endowed with specifications'.¹⁹³ These original specifications provide a loose or general context to its meaning and are firmly rooted in the visual elements that the artist represents in the work. The artist gently influences meaning by delimiting its interpretative possibilities; he restricts himself to provide only the most essential parameters in order to curtail interpretations which it was not designed to easily accommodate.¹⁹⁴ His function as the artist is to invite the viewer 'to explore all possible directions in search of the original (and now lost) gesture till we find it and, with it, the communicative intentions of the work'.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹² Eco, p. 41.

¹⁹³ Eco, p. 19.

¹⁹⁴ Eco, p. 19.

¹⁹⁵ Eco, p. 102.

The role of Boltanski in the meaning of his art has been the subject of much debate throughout his career. The artist presents a very difficult public personality to fully grasp or firmly pin down, although many writers have tried. I consider this a strength of Boltanski's work and public image because his artistic persona remains allusive and fuels the elements of ambiguity so prevalent throughout his oeuvre. From the start of his artistic career, Boltanski's identity in his artwork, especially those that either use his initials, such as *Les Archives de C.B., 1965-1988*, or his name, such as *Reconstitutions des Gestes Effectués par Christian Boltanski entre 1948 et 1954* (or *Reconstructions of Gestures made by Christian Boltanski between 1948 and 1954*), have been the subject of speculation by art critics because they serve to expose a gap between whose identity is suggested in the caption (or title) and who the photographs actually represent.

Boltanski is not the only artist who has experimented with photographic 'truth'. By the 1960s and 1970s, the tendency known as photoconceptualism gave artists a way to expose and challenge the idea that photographs were the result of an objective recording device, the camera, which depicted reality as it actually is, with no subjective trace of the photographer or the photographed subject in the photograph. Boltanski, like conceptual artists of his time, started asking questions about the role of photography in everyday life and how they are used to convey meaning.¹⁹⁶ Conceptual artists exposed the ideology inherent in photographs, even ones that seem objective and matter-of-fact.

Mel Bochner created a work in 1968 entitled *Misunderstandings (A Theory of Photography)* and explored similar ideas. This work consisted of nine index cards, each one with a photograph stuck to it and a hand-written quotation from a famous author. One of the index cards had the image of an earlier work from 1968 by Bochner, *Actual Size (Hand)*.

¹⁹⁶ Godfrey, p. 301.

Even though the original version of *Actual Size (Hand)* was scaled to the exact dimensions of Bochner's arm and hand, the version of *Actual Size (Hand)* in *Misunderstandings* was reduced in size to fit the index card, therefore the 'actual size', as read in the work's title, is a misrepresentation. For both Boltanski and Bochner, the meaning of the work is not directly contained in the image itself but in the idea that is aroused by the gap in meaning between photographic image and what the caption says about it. Captions can lie.

Conceptual artists Jan Dibbets and Reiner Ruthenbeck photographic work entitled, *The Energy of a Real English Breakfast Transformed into Breaking a Real Steel Bar by the Artists Dibbets and Ruthenbeck*, from 1969 also plays with the truthfulness of photographic images and captions (or titles). This work consists of four black and white photographs. The first one shows Dibbets and Ruthenbeck seated at a restaurant table, presumably waiting for their English breakfast. The second shows Ruthenbeck outside the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, after breakfast, with his hands on either side of a steel bar which he has presumably bent. The third photograph shows Dibbets in the same pose, bending it with great effort even further. The fourth photograph shows both artists together, each holding an end of the bent steel bar. The title of the work, which is captioned below the four photographs, asks the viewer to believe that both artists bent the steel bar after an English breakfast, even though there is no proof that they actually did: to bend a steel bar would surely entail more strength than what a person can muster. This work 'draws attention to the seemingly transparent, but in fact problematic, relationship between text and image.'¹⁹⁷ What I take from these two examples, Bochner, and Dibbets and Ruthenbeck, is that the questioning of the truthful reality depicted in the photograph was nothing particularly new when Boltanski played the same joke. They point to the

¹⁹⁷ Godfrey, p. 125.

potential false narrative which a caption provides to a photograph; captions and names in titles can be faked and therefore should be treated with suspicion.

I discussed in chapter one that the French art critic, Jean Clair, commented in the late 1960s that Boltanski purposefully misrepresented the name of the subject and the date of the photographs in his early work, *Research and Presentation of All that Remains of my Childhood, 1944-1950*. As a result, Clair said, "'Christian Boltanski", in truth, never existed'.¹⁹⁸ The same can be said for other works by Boltanski that use his initials or name in the title. He deliberately misrepresents his identity as the subject in his 'autobiographical' artworks. The subject is either not him at all or only provides scant information about him and his background.

Critics tend to discuss Boltanski's fictitious identity as either the denial and erasure of his own unified and unique identity or as a multiplication and overflow of various, contradictory personas. I have already discussed *Research and Presentation of All that Remains of my Childhood, 1944-1950* in a previous chapter where the photographs of the young toddler never depicted the artist, but were, in fact, of his nephew Christophe. Didier Semin conceded that when trying to understand autobiographical works by Boltanski, 'We need not take what is said in these autobiographical works entirely at face value, any more than we do Vasari's stories or Minnelli's films... the clues supplied are completely false, or partly false – and there's hardly any difference from the point of view of the truth.'¹⁹⁹

Olga Smith has written the most sustained critique regarding the fallacious identity of the artist. She stated that Boltanski's intentionally fictitious persona in his early photographic

¹⁹⁸ Clair, p. 71.

¹⁹⁹ Didier Semin, '*Boltanski: From the Impossible Life to the Exemplary Life*', in Christian Boltanski, ed. Didier Semin (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 1997), pp. 44-91 (p. 46).

work signalled his interest and contribution to contemporaneous literary debates about artistic identity and autobiographical function. Hence, 'Boltanski thus emerges as an active participant in the polemical debates surrounding the artist's identity and function in artistic debates in France at the end of the 1960s and the early 1970s'.²⁰⁰ *10 Photographic Portraits of Christian Boltanski, 1946-1964* was one work that Smith discussion specifically. (Figure 12).

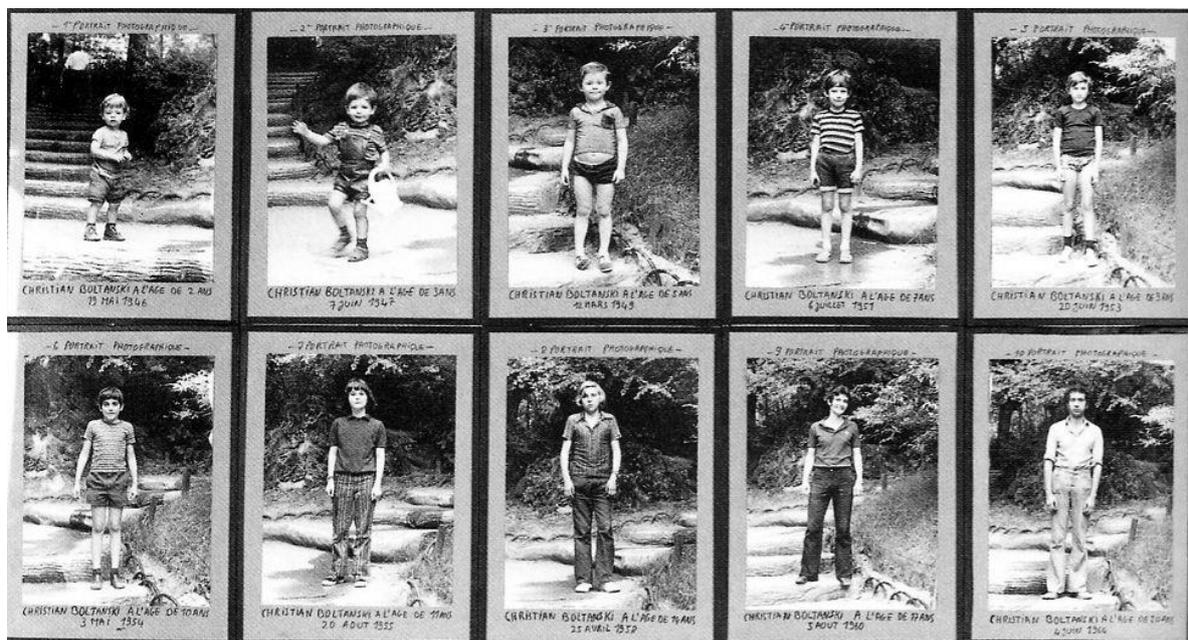


Figure 12: Christian Boltanski, *10 Photographic Portraits of Christian Boltanski, 1946-1964* (Photographs from artist's book) (1972).

This photographic work, an artbook to be precise, consists of ten black-and-white photographic portraits of a young boy from the ages of two to twenty years of age. As the viewer flips through the book, she reads the caption under each photograph. They indicate that these are photographs of 'Christian Boltanski' as well as provide his age that he was in the photograph, and the date it was taken. For example, the first portrait says, 'Christian Boltanski a l'age de 2 ans, 19 Mai 1946' (or 'Christian Boltanski at the age of 2 years, 19 May

²⁰⁰ Olga Smith, 'Authorless Pictures: Uses of Photography in Christian Boltanski's Early Work (1969-70), *Art History*, 40, 3, (2017), pp. 634-657 (p. 636).

1946'). The photographs were seemingly shot by a parent or relative in the same place and time of year throughout his young life since the background setting is consistently the same: the young boy stands on the same steps in a green, grassy garden or park. It serves as a reminder of similar photographs we have of ourselves or our own children which plot that particular child's growth and age. The format of an art book is apt since it is similar to a family photo album where such mementos are usually kept.

However, the captions lied about who the photographed subjects actually were. All the photographs were taken of different boys of various ages on the same day in 1972 in the same local park, Parc Mont Souris, by Boltanski's partner and fellow artist Annette Messager. Only the final photograph is actually of the artist; the caption indicated that he was age 20. But he lied about that too: he was in fact 28 years old.

Because Boltanski intentionally falsified his identity in the captions describing the photographed subjects in this and some of his early photographic works, such as *Recherche et Présentation de Tout ce qui Reste de Mon Enfance, 1944–1950* (*Research and Presentation of All that Remains of My Childhood, 1944–1950*), Smith argues that Boltanski is undermining the work of Philippe Lejeune, whose writings explored the use of autobiography in literature in the late 1960s and early 1970s. To Lejeune, 'every autobiographer makes an implied promise to relate his/her life-story truthfully, thereby entering into a binding contract with the reader: the 'autobiographical pact'.²⁰¹ However, Smith contends that Boltanski's use of 'ruse, falsification, and impersonation' was actually his response on the artist's use of autobiography which sought out to oppose the views expressed by Lejeune.

²⁰¹ Smith, p. 638.

But my approach toward this work slightly differs from Smith because I see the most important aspect of this work located not in Boltanski's visual comment on the erasure of his own identity and a failed attempt to reconstruct it, but in the captions which accompany the photographs: they lie about who the photographs actually depict. Rather than conclude that this artbook challenged the conventions of autobiography in the 1970s, I claim that the journey toward finding the meaning of this work has just begun.

The photographs themselves in *10 Photographic Portraits of Christian Boltanski, 1946-1964* do not misrepresent the subject they depict; they are not manipulated in a way which would distort the image. In fact, the style of the photographic work is objective and factual in style: all the boys stand with the same frontal pose and stand in the same setting. The serial layout of the photographs themselves opens up a kind of typological scrutiny. The root of the lie is in the title and captions below the photographs. As Roland Barthes wrote in his essay of 1964 'Rhetoric of the Image', 'the caption [...] helps me to choose *the correct level of perception*, permits me to focus not simply my gaze but also my understanding [...] the linguistic message no longer guides my identification but interpretation'.²⁰² This means that the veracity of captions to their photographs is challenged and replaced with doubt, and I adopt this point of view to Boltanski's autobiographical works. He exposes photography's reliance on captions to secure their meaning and their ability to misrepresent the photographs that they are meant to describe.

Boltanski also multiplies the number of identities in his autobiographical works. For instance, Semin wrote that the multiple identities which Boltanski inhabits in his early work, mainly of collective, stereotypical social roles, contradicted the notion that the artist

²⁰² Roland Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image' in *Roland Barthes: Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 32-51 (p. 39).

problematized his own unique identity in his artwork. By creating a singular eponymous fictional character, Semin claimed that 'it is not an absence that ruins Boltanski's identity, but it is an overflow. It's not that he does not have a role, it's because he has them all'.²⁰³ In short, the artist's identity as 'Christian Boltanski', when it appears in the titles and captions of an artwork, is not solitary or fictional person. Instead, 'Christian Boltanski' represents an overabundance of roles found in various collective identities to which everyone belongs. Semin concluded that where the convention of identity sees it as unified and fixed, or that 'a = a', Boltanski substitutes the conventions of a unified identity with a labyrinthine personality where 'a' simultaneously equals myriad collective roles as 'b, c, d, etc'.²⁰⁴

Returning to Olga Smith's, she highlighted not only Philippe Lejeune's work, but also the literary theory of Roland Barthes, in particular his 1968 essay, 'The Death of the Author'. Smith wrote that, 'Boltanski's consciously mendacious strategies of self-reconstruction intersect with these debates in a way that opens onto the wider concerns regarding the status and identity of the author, deconstructed by Barthes in his seminal essay 'La mort de l'auteur'.²⁰⁵ She refers to Barthes's idea where there is no unified, single author of a text because, in his words, 'a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture'.²⁰⁶ In truth, the idea that a text is the original work of only one particular individual is a fallacy; it is a conglomerate of different ideas which stem from other cultures and sources. The only 'power' of the author, Barthes argued, is to

²⁰³ Didier Semin, 'Un récit mythique', *Artpress*, 128 (1988) 60-4 (p.61).

²⁰⁴ Semin, p. 61.

²⁰⁵ Smith, p. 635.

²⁰⁶ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans, by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 142-8 (p. 146).

'mix writings, to counter the ones with the others'.²⁰⁷ For Boltanski, Smith contends that, his interest in presenting himself as multiple, fabricated characters such as 'The Saint, The Ethnologist, The False Preacher, The Clown, The Painter and The Trickster' was his response to the ideas put forth by Barthes that the author, or the artist, is actually an array of different sources and that the idea of a single author is merely a myth.²⁰⁸ Through these various personas, Smith argued that Boltanski reinforces the notion that a multiplicity of influences underpin the façade of the unique, unified artist's personality.

What I want to make clear about these writings regarding Boltanski's autobiography is that they retain the premise that Boltanski's persona is the main supplier of the work's meaning. That is to say that the work's meaning still revolves around the question of the artist's own identity: Who is 'Christian Boltanski', or more precisely, who *are* 'Christian Boltanski'?

Boltanski's problematic public and artistic persona is front and centre, dominating the meaning of his works. They expect that the meaning of the work to centre on the persona of the artist or to be supplied by the artist, rather than acknowledging that a main, consistent feature of Boltanski's work is to deliberately create ambiguity in order for the viewer to step in and control the meaning-making process. When the main message is focused on the artist's own persona, it leads nowhere because all we are left with is what we perceive as a lie. This seems superficial and cynical on Boltanski's part and, most importantly, discounts the complex function of ambiguity operating within his work.

I want to make it clear that the reason why Boltanski problematises his identity in autobiographical works goes deeper than Smith's claim that he is deliberately challenging Lejeune or conforming to Barthes' literary developments of the time. In fact, I contend that

²⁰⁷ Barthes, p. 146.

²⁰⁸ Smith, p. 142-3.

Boltanski's falsification of captions and titles goes beyond the aim to expose the gap between what the photograph depicts and what is indicated, such as the photoconceptual works I discussed by Bochner, and Dibbets and Ruthenbeck. Boltanski distorts his own name in order to force the viewer to look elsewhere for meaning. He makes it plain that his role in the meaning-making process is limited to mirroring the desires and anxieties of the viewer. There is a convergence between how he plays his artistic role as a blank screen and how he depicts children as ambiguous through their anonymity: both are done in order for the viewer to project memories, desires, and fears onto them. He said, 'I didn't exist anymore. I am only this persona. I had an idea, a very Christian idea, that the artist is just like a man who has a mirror. The artist is behind the mirror and everybody is looking at him saying, "Oh, it's me." The man who hangs the mirror doesn't exist anymore. He's only what the people want'.²⁰⁹ However, if we take Boltanski at his word, then his comment means that he uses his own initials and name *in the context of his art* to call attention to the fact that they function as a blank screen, receptive to the projections of each viewer.

It is widely acknowledged that Boltanski uses his own name and initials in the titles of his art in order to coax the viewer into assuming that the photographs truthfully depict him as a child. But when the viewer realises the irony in the work, that nine out of the ten photos in *10 Photographic Portraits of Christian Boltanski, 1946-1964* are not really of the artist, the ambiguity caused by the transgression of the convention of self-portraiture leads him or her to the conclusion that they were lied to about the subject in the photographs. In the discussions surrounding his art, this is where the meaning of his autobiographical works

²⁰⁹ Irene Borger, 'Christian Boltanski', *Bomb* (1 January 1989) <<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/christian-boltanski>> [accessed 24 September 2020]

stop: he lied, and we cannot trust him. He is merely showing us that there is a gap in representation between the photograph and its caption. But I think there is more to it.

By appreciating Boltanski's use of autobiography as ironic, that is to create an opposing or multiple meaning to what is represented, his work takes on new dimensions. For instance, in *10 Photographic Portraits of Christian Boltanski, 1946-1964*, by labelling the nine boys as 'Christian Boltanski' when they clearly are not the same person as the artist, a new message becomes clear in the context of Boltanski's œuvre: the duplicitous identity of 'Christian Boltanski'. It is simultaneously the name of the artist as well as the name of a collective entity that the artist uses to depict collective stereotypes of childhood. This is what I think Boltanski meant when he said, 'every child is Christian Boltanski.'²¹⁰ Let me put this in different terms: 'Christian Boltanski' is obviously the artist yet, in the context of the work's title, the name refer to a collective entity who shares similar memories and anxieties as the rest of society. This is what art critic Gilberto Cavalcanti meant when he said that Boltanski presents himself as 'the document of everyone'.²¹¹ Jean Clair said something similar when he wrote in 1970, very early in Boltanski's career, that when Boltanski referred to himself in *Recherche et Présentation de Tout ce qui Reste de Mon Enfance, 1944-1950*, and I apply this idea to many works where Boltanski refers directly to himself, that "'Christian Boltanski", in truth, never existed' as unique person in his own right.²¹² To be precise, when the name 'Christian Boltanski' or the initials 'C.B.' appear in the title of one of his artworks, they do not refer to the artist. Rather, they refer to an entity who shares in the same common

²¹⁰ Grenier, p. 77.

²¹¹ Gilberto Cavalcanti, 'Christian Boltanski: Amuser et sorcier', *Vie des arts*, 20, 79 (1975) 76-7 (p. 76).

²¹² Jean Clair, 'Expressionnisme '70: Boltanski - Sarkis', in *Le Temps des Avant-gardes: Entretiens et Chroniques de l'art 1968-1978*, (Paris: Essais Éditions de la Différence, 2012) 68-72 (p. 71).

experiences and memories of everyone else in society. I shall continue this argument about the meaning of Boltanski's name and initials in further detail in chapter four.

Boltanski is not the first artist to play with his identity and public persona in his work. Semin noted in passing the proclivity for both Andy Warhol and Boltanski to distort or negate their private persona in their art, albeit in different ways. Whilst Warhol dissolved his personal identity into his public one, Boltanski created a false artistic identity who acted as a stand-in that encapsulated all children into a consensus of averageness. Semin wrote, 'Where Warhol erased the reality of his identity, changed his name, as if he came either from nowhere or from a universe of pure artifice, Christian Boltanski reconstructed the thousand and one events of an absolutely ordinary childhood, like that experienced more or less identically by all children in post-war Europe'.²¹³

Andy Warhol famously elided his private self, claiming that his 'inner self' was nothing more than his public persona: '...he emptied his private life into the public arena'.²¹⁴ When asked personal questions, he was often flippant and conspicuously insincere during interviews.

Blake Gopnick noted that Warhol's friend, the art critic Gregory Battcock, said in 1970 that 'Like so many really good artists, Warhol is a fraud. He is not what he pretends to be.'²¹⁵

Both Warhol and Boltanski used their name to deny or fabricate a false public identity, and any attempt to read their work in order to find some clue to a true inner self is doomed to failure. Warhol famously said, 'If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the

²¹³ Didier Semin, '*Boltanski: From the Impossible Life to the Exemplary Life*', in Christian Boltanski, ed. Didier Semin (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 1997), pp. 44-91 (p. 46).

²¹⁴ Cécile Whiting, 'Andy Warhol, the Public Star and the Private Self', *Oxford Art Journal*, 10, 2 (1987), 58-75 (p. 70).

²¹⁵ Blake Gopnick, 'Think You Know Andy Warhol? Here Are Five Truths That May Surprise', *New York Times*, (1 November 2018) < <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/01/arts/think-you-know-andy-warhol-here-are-five-truths-that-may-surprise.html> > [accessed 29 September 2020].

surface of my films and paintings and me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it'.²¹⁶ The uncertain identity of Boltanski can be understood in a similar vein since the viewer cannot know for certain if anything of his real private self actually surfaces in his work.

Warhol thwarted the media's attempts to discover his unique personal identity by saying that, 'I think everyone should be like everyone else'.²¹⁷ In one famous interview from 1963, 'What is Pop Art? Answers from 8 Painters' by Gene Swenson of *Art News*, Warhol was quoted as saying he wanted to be like a machine.²¹⁸ That is to say that Warhol wanted to appear as a non-human mechanical object with no inner self that operates in repetitive, automatic manners. In a similar way to Warhol, Boltanski does not truthfully reveal his distinct inner personality in his works. Instead when Boltanski uses his name and initials in his art, they serve to point to collective notions of childhood or memory. Warhol employed similar strategies when he used his public persona to advocate a collective identity or destroy any semblance of individuality. Both Warhol and Boltanski prop up his own moniker to act as 'the blank screen that functions as an all-purpose zone of projection'.²¹⁹ By distorting or negating his inner selfhood and distinct personality, both artists successfully evaded the convention where the artist's personality holds sway over the interpretation of a work of art.

Boltanski's fluctuating expression of his artistic identity may go some way to explain why in interviews after 1988 and the *Lessons of Darkness* exhibition tour of North America, he both confirmed and denied that his art is about the Holocaust. In fact, there is a precedent where

²¹⁶ *Andy Warhol: 17 February to 28 March 1971*, ed. Richard Morphet (London: Tate Gallery, 1971) p. 8.

²¹⁷ Whiting, p. 70. Quotation taken from Peter Gidal, *Andy Warhol: Films and Photography* (London: Studio Vista, 1971), p. 9.

²¹⁸ Gene Swenson, 'What is Pop Art? Answers from 8 Painters. Part 1', *Art News*, 62 (November 1963).

²¹⁹ Simon Leung, '... And There I Am: Andy Warhol and the Ethics of Identification', *Art Journal*, 62, 1 (2003), 4-5 (p. 4).

Boltanski pushed a particular narrative about his private self in an interview in order to supplement meaning to his artwork. He admitted once that, 'In one of my first interviews, I played the part of the desperate and tormented young man. While I was speaking, I was thinking, I'm acting very well, they believe me'.²²⁰

Boltanski propagates the Holocaust-based perception of his work as well as denies it stringently, sometimes within the space of one interview or text. For example, over several recordings in Catherine Grenier's book, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, the artist confirmed and denied the interpretation of the Holocaust. In the beginning of book, he said that the Holocaust was the main event that marked his life and his art: 'I think that some primary event very often marks artists' lives; for me, that was [the Holocaust]. I read very few books, but a lot on the concentration camps'.²²¹ Yet, later in the book, he concedes that his interest in the Holocaust is really his morbid fascination with death: 'I probably shouldn't say this, but I think one of the reasons – which isn't really the only one – for my fascination for the Shoah is a fascination with the corpse-like state, with death'.²²²

The oscillation between confirming or denying the narrative of the Holocaust has not gone unnoticed by many writers and no doubt fuels the present dominant analysis of his art. However, I propose a more cynical reason why Boltanski plays with this significant aspect of his art: to sell his work. He remarked once that:

After *Monuments*, there was a long active period for me with American exhibits, then joining Marian Goodman, exhibits in Europe in the big museums, Hamburg, Whitechapel, Eindhoven,

²²⁰ Didier Semin, 'Boltanski: From the Impossible Life to the Exemplary Life', in Christian Boltanski, ed. Didier Semin (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 1997), pp. 44-91 (p. 65).

²²¹ Grenier, p. 23.

²²² Grenier, p. 221.

Grenoble, exhibits in Japan... That lasted four or five years, from 1989 to 1993 or thereabouts. It was like when a young artist emerges. On the whole, it was always the same exhibit, but with modifications: I showed the *Shadows*, the *Monuments*, the *Clothes*, and, after a while, biscuit-tin altars like the *Altar to the Chases High School*.²²³

Indeed, Boltanski's career did take off after 1988 and he started selling work regularly. He attributes his overnight success to the fact that his art was finally on the radar of Jewish American collectors due to the 'Lessons of Darkness' exhibition catalogue and subsequent reviews. To be more precise, because Boltanski himself said on occasion that he was a Jew and his work was about the Holocaust. I think it is important to offer a comprehensive summary of his words:

I made a fortune! I was with Ghislaine Hussenot Gallery at the time: she began presenting my work at fairs in the United States, and I don't really know what happened, but I started to sell very quickly, whereas before that she had sold practically nothing...It wasn't because of the gallery, which wasn't a big international gallery. What probably played a big role in the United States was my travelling exhibition [*Lessons of Darkness*]. I truly became 'rich' and 'famous' in three months. Those *Monuments* touched people... I struck a chord with American Jews... Why Jews saw something, I really don't know. I think the memorial aspect

²²³ Grenier, p. 140.

possibly played a role... At the same time, it's difficult to say whether Jews bought me more than others did, because in the United States three-quarters of the collectors are Jewish.²²⁴

Whilst Boltanski confirmed a Holocaust-based reading of his work in the United States, he was well aware that such an explanation would not play out well in Europe or his native France. He said that:

People think, 'He's a royal bore with that suffering stuff...' 'It's just a bunch of whining...' For years now there's been this idea about me: 'He's a fraud, he's making a living out of suffering and the Shoah.' There's always a bit of truth in everything, but this type of reaction places enormous limitations on any understanding of my work... All things considered, there is in France – not anti-Semitism, it would be grotesque to say that – but the feeling that there's a Jewish lobby that exploits suffering to make money.²²⁵

Boltanski's fluctuating identity, which either highlights his Jewishness or downplays it, is able to attract two audiences at once: those Jewish American collectors who purchase his art, perhaps to support a Jewish artist and as a memorial to the Holocaust, and those European collectors who buy his art because it represents familiar childhood memories.

Whilst the duplicitous public personality of Boltanski may affect the sale of his art, he does not often comment on his Jewishness in most of his interviews. So, I want to return back to

²²⁴ Grenier, p. 119.

²²⁵ Grenier, pp. 130-1.

the laissez-faire role that he plays as the artist in the meaning of his work. Boltanski commented on his role as an artist when he said, 'The artist sends out a sort of stimulus, and the viewer takes the image, appropriates it, and finishes the work...The viewer completes the image'.²²⁶ What Boltanski's quotation highlights is that, more often than not, he sees his role as the artist as supplying a general meaning that guides what interpretations his art can accommodate.

For example, in *Les Enfants de Dijon* or a host of other works which feature depictions of anonymous children, he sets a common, everyday theme: a young child from a school portrait or family photo album picture, decontextualised into a new setting. This is a basic framework that Boltanski supplies in his work: something to do with childhood, something to do with memory. No information is given about who he or she was, where he or she is now, or the story about what he or she was like as a child back then. The child is a stereotypical representation for all young children.

In this respect it is worth considering the role of titles in many Boltanski's works, for he uses them to strategic effect: to corral potential observations around a general theme. He looks for titles that could hold a double meaning in order to discourage univocal readings.²²⁷ He provides a simple title that gives a basic narrative background. Yet, if titles are the closest the viewer has to a helpful caption to set the stage for the meaning of the work, he provides little information, and what he does provide is generic. Examples abound: *Les Enfants de Dijon*, *The Dead Swiss*, *Le Lycée Chases*, *the 62 Members of the Mickey Mouse Club in 1955*, *Inventory of Objects That Belonged to a Woman from Bois-Colombes*, *The Lake of the Dead*, *Storage Area of the Children's Museum*. One could name many other titles that are equally

²²⁶ Grenier, p. 78.

²²⁷ Grenier, p. 207.

generic. My point is that Boltanski intends the generic titles to guide the viewer to a general parameter of the work's potential meaning.

Yet although his works are meant to open up to myriad interpretations, they are not open to all of them. Put another way, Boltanski does not leave his works untitled. He provides titles that, in their non-specificity, open up a space for doubt and reflection on the meaning of the work, and thereby scales back his role as the artist. But the artist is not eliminated entirely. Boltanski retains some influence over the meaning but it is constrained to generally shaping the content of the work's meaning. His titles are designed to frame interpretations without seeking to dictate the specifics.

When Boltanski turned seventy years old in the first decade of the new millennium, the focus shifted from only representing the 'small memories' of others to creating a legacy for himself. His name and image began to appear more often in his work and take on a more identifiable subjectivity. Boltanski said that before he became old, he thought that death only happened to other people. But when he turned into his seventies, he began to think about his own mortality.²²⁸ For instance, his work entitled, *The Life of C.B.*, is a work of continual video footage shot in Boltanski's studio since 2009. Boltanski's pacing, pottering around, and thinking, as well as the darkness of the studio after he goes to sleep, are all recorded. Now, 'C.B.' means more about the actual artist than those initials did in past works. The footage is feed to a grotto in Tasmania's Museum of Old and New Art. David Walsh, a Tasmanian gambler, businessman, and the museum's founder, made a bet with Boltanski: Walsh will pay him a monthly stipend of around \$2,500 to film his studio 24 hours

²²⁸ Emily Bickerton, 'Christian Boltanski Expands his Repertoire', *Apollo* (1 May 2018) <https://www.mariangoodman.com/usr/documents/press/download_url/31/apollo-magazine-may-1-2018-.pdf> [accessed 26 October 2019].

a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year until Boltanski dies. ‘Walsh wagered that Boltanski would die within eight years’.²²⁹ If Boltanski lived past 2017, Walsh would have paid Boltanski more money than what he deemed its worth.

Other works that focus more acutely on Boltanski’s own life are *Dernière Seconde (Last Second)* from 2012 which hangs on a wall and consists of a large, red-LED digital counter, measuring 500 x 60 x 9 cm, recording the seconds of Boltanski’s life since birth. Once he dies, the counter will stop, reflecting the number of seconds that he was alive. Another example is *Entre Temps (In the Meantime)* from 2003. This work is a video loop, rear-projected onto a large white curtain, featuring the artist’s self-portraits. The projection changes between portraits of him as a child (the same photograph he wrote an ‘x’ over in *Recherche et Présentation de Tout ce qui Reste de Mon Enfance, 1944–1950* and *Monument: Les Enfants de Dijon* in 1985), to a photo of Boltanski as a twenty year-old young man (from *10 Portraits Photographiques de Christian Boltanski, 1946-196*), and a photograph of the artist as a sixty year-old man. This work emphasises the physical changes in specifically the artist’s face from boyhood or old age.

In 2015, Boltanski made a video installation of a scene in the Atacama Desert in Chile, *Animitas*. The work debuted as a live-streamed video during the artist’s retrospective at the Fine Arts Museum in Santiago, Chile. It showed hundreds of Japanese bells attached to the top of long stems planted in the ground. The configuration of the bells echo the constellation of the stars on the evening of Boltanski’s birth on 6 September 1944. Also, in 2015, *Animitas* was live streamed to the Cricoteka in Krakow for Boltanski’s installation, *In*

²²⁹ Amy Serafin, ‘Christian Boltanski on Mortality, Whale Sounds, and a Wager Over Death with a Tasmanian Devil’, *Wallpaper* (1 April 2018).
<https://www.mariangoodman.com/usr/documents/press/download_url/34/wallpaper-april-1-2018-.pdf> [accessed on 26 October 2019].

the Blink of an Eye. It was made three more times in different locations: in 2016 on Teshima Island off the coast of Japan, then in 2017 in both Quebec and near the Dead Sea.

In these more recent works, by making his own biography a more integral part of the work, Boltanski's role as the artist increases because he asserts more control over its meaning by providing a specific narrative: his own life. They are less ambiguous than his earlier work; the meanings rest more squarely on the artist's own life. This new direction aligns more with conventional ideas of self-portraiture where the artist's identity is truthful and identifiable. Since the works' meanings are intended to be attributable to Boltanski himself, he hopes they will add a dimension to his legacy. As he wrote in 1969 in the text accompanying *Research and Presentations of All That Remains of My Childhood, 1944-1950*, 'That's why – because one of us has to give an example – I decided to harness myself to the project that's been close to my heart for a long time: preserving oneself whole, keeping a trace of all the moments of our lives, all the objects that have surrounded us, everything we've said and what's been said about us, that's my goal'.²³⁰ Whilst his older works appear to preserve the traces of others, now his work concentrates more on preserving his own.

If the artist's traditional role is to guide the viewer toward a prescribed meaning, then the viewer traditionally plays a passive, receptive role when it comes to the interpretation of the artwork. The conventional role of the viewer is that he or she merely acts as the recipient of the work's one and only message. Basically, the viewer is spoon-fed the meaning and their role demands only that they recognise and absorb that message.

²³⁰ Christian Boltanski, *Research and Presentations of All That Remains of My Childhood, 1944-1950*, in *The Archive: Documents in Contemporary Art*, ed. by Charles Merewether (London: Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2006), p. 25.

Ambiguity asks the viewer to reflect upon why the artist chose to work in that manner.²³¹ But what is more, when Eco talked about openness in modern art, he was referring to an element that explicitly seeks to prompt the viewer into action – to become an engaged participant who performs or directly impacts the meaning of the work. To define the work's message, the viewer relies on, in Eco's words, 'My memories, my unconscious persuasions, and the culture I have assimilated (in other words, my acquired experiences) fuse with the exterior stimuli to endow them with the form and the value they assume in my eyes according to the aims I am pursuing'.²³² The viewer is asked to fall back on his or her own background, desires, and memories to impact the meaning of the work.²³³ As a result, the viewer becomes the central figure of its interpretation; it becomes something uniquely personal to each person to engages with it. Yet for each new interaction with an open work, its ability to absorb more and more interpretations is never exhausted.²³⁴ Each encounter with an open work is both 'an interpretation and a performance of it, because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for itself.'²³⁵ Eco said, 'In short, we can say that every performance of the work offers us a new and complete version of it'.²³⁶

The way in which the viewer normally engages with an artwork is mainly through cognitive interaction. Whereas this is no different for traditional artworks, the degree to which the viewer must act in an open work is greatly increased – his or her role is more akin to collaborator, rather than passive observer.²³⁷ It is imperative that the viewer assumes the primary role of meaning maker. Without the viewer's vital contribution, the work remains

²³¹ Eco, p. 4.

²³² Eco, p. 72.

²³³ Eco, p. 75.

²³⁴ Eco, p. 15.

²³⁵ Eco, p. 4.

²³⁶ Eco, p. 15.

²³⁷ Eco, p. 11.

unfinished. The viewer must resist the traditional convention of slipping into a passive role; he or she must take command and assume responsibility for defining the work for him or herself.

An important consideration when discussing the role of the viewer of an open work is determining who is this viewer, and how they come to realise that their role differs from the passive viewer of a traditional work of art. Boltanski's audience has evolved over his artistic career. Artist Alan Kaprow said that by 1970, it was still considered unusual for the viewer to take part in the production or interpretation of a work of art.²³⁸ So Boltanski, in his early practice, had to identify viewers who were already part of the art world or, at the very least, savvy gallery goers; those who were cognisant of new developments in contemporary art practice and viewer participation. Kaprow said in the early 1970s that 'the audiences were mainly art-conscious ones, accustomed to accepting states of mystification as a positive value'.²³⁹ Boltanski's early participants' names and addresses were pulled from his gallery's mailing list, Galerie Givaudan in Paris, for his mail artwork from 1970, *You have to Help Me*. I will discuss this work in more detail in the final chapter but what is important to stress now is that Boltanski relied on the viewer's familiarity with contemporary art practice and understood that ambiguity in Boltanski's art was an invitation to engage with it. This work instantiates that he was already engaging, from the beginning of his career, with the kind of viewer who was familiar with taking charge of the meaning in modern artwork.

Since the 1980s, Boltanski sought to expand his audience to include the general public. For example, in 1995, *Missing Person's Notice* consisted of an anonymous teenage girl's

²³⁸ Allan Kaprow, 'Participation Performance', in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. by Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 181-194 (p. 184).

²³⁹ Kaprow, p. 184.

photograph, pulled from an old class photograph, and transferred onto a newspaper advertisement in August 1995 for *Der Standard* in Vienna, Austria as well as broadcasted over a local television channel. As a consequence, the viewer was no longer required to be fluent in contemporary art in order to interact with it. In fact, they may not have realised that the missing person's advertisement was not real life.

The title of this work communicates that this young teenager disappeared and Boltanski is searching for her. Just like his earlier mail art piece, *You Have to Help Me*, Boltanski makes a direct plea for help from the viewer. The newspaper advertisement contains this request:

In 1931, she was a student in the last class of Zwi Perez Chajes School in Vienna. If you know what has become of her, write to Christian Boltanski, museum in progress, Fischerstiege 1. A-101 Vienna.

The woman's photograph is sixty-four years old so the prospect of finding her is highly unlikely. Boltanski guides the viewer by setting basic parameters of meaning that the work was designed to accommodate: the old photograph and the caption suggesting that the teenager has been missing for several decades. What is more, another parameter is set to create the experience of disorder and ambiguity: the address that Boltanski provided was not his residence nor a museum's address. In truth, there was no way to contact Boltanski, even if information was presented concerning the missing teen's whereabouts. My point is that Boltanski's work was aimed less at savvy gallery-goers and more at the general public, and the format of his art – a newspaper advertisement – supported his desire to reach a new, uninitiated audience of contemporary art novices.

There are other novel ways that Boltanski uses to lure the audience into actively relating to his artworks: game playing and physical interaction. For example, *Déetective* (Figure 13) is a photographic series from the late 1980s. It represents old black-and-white portraits of an anonymous man, woman or child seemingly pulled from family photo albums. The title of the work refers to the French tabloid that shows family snapshots of murderers and their victims, before the crime took place.²⁴⁰ In either case, the magazine reader knows which photograph is of the murderer and which one is of the victim.



Figure 13: Christian Boltanski, *Déetective* (cardboard boxes, photographs) (1987).

Some of the portraits in *Déetective* are hung up on gallery walls, from floor to ceiling, whilst other portraits are affixed to the side of a cardboard box, stacked high on flimsy metal shelving with dozens of other similar boxes. The boxes seemingly contain the keepsakes,

²⁴⁰ Gumpert, p. 118.

documents, and other remnants that supply the identity of the photographed subject. But they are not meant to be opened.

Boltanski does not reveal which portrait is of the murderer and which is the victim since there is no accompanying information or caption. Once again, identity is ambiguous and the viewer is invited to resolve the puzzle. He is playing a game of Whodunnit with the viewer. By withholding the identity of the subject, Boltanski contravenes the established convention that requires photographs to be accompanied by helpful captions to name the identity of the subject. The stakes are high in *Déetective*, especially since the work blurs the distinction between who is the murderer and who was the victim. To leave this essential information out of the work's meaning risks equating the immoral criminal with the innocent victim, or at least dilutes their differences.

Since the second half of the 19th century, photography has been a social and scientific practice used to verify the identity of the photographed subject. For example, institutions such as the police, prisons, asylums for the insane, hospitals, and governmental departments have regulatory powers which establish the conventions of photographic representation as verifiable truth of the subject's official identity.²⁴¹ This is seen in such forms of identification as passports, drivers' licences, and work badges. But since the viewer of *Déetective* has no caption to help them determine the identity of the anonymous subject, he or she must rely on their own assumptions in order reach some conclusions about the work. The object of the game is implied in the title: a detective aims to resolve who is the murderer.

²⁴¹ Tagg, p. 5

But *Detective* is an impossible guessing game. There are not enough clues to solve the mystery of Whodunnit because the parameters that Boltanski set for this work's interpretation – the work's title, the anonymous subjects' photographs, and the forever closed boxes – provide too little information. But this is the point. Boltanski said of the work, 'everyone is a victim, and everyone is a criminal [...] and also that there is no "criminal face"'.²⁴² Indeed, the viewer is met with an impossible task: to work out who is the criminal from the victim based on a lone, anonymous photograph. The hidden identity of the subjects provokes the *experience* that the work's parameters are meant to convey- that it is impossible to single-out a criminal by how they look. Boltanski explained that this idea was made clear to him when he was watching footage of the Gulf War. He reflected, 'I remember watching television and seeing the pilots returning from the Middle East; they were so young and sweet, kissing their girlfriends and babies, yet only the day before they had been killing women and children'!²⁴³

Another example of game playing can be seen in *Be New* (Figure 14). It is an interactive photographic work from Boltanski's 2011 exhibition for the Venice Biennale, *Chance*. The work composed of a slot machine with a big red button on the front; it means to catch the viewer's attention and invite interaction. The screen sets the parameters of the game: a slot machine, a game of chance. The screen is divided into three sections and displays a third of the face of either a newborn Polish baby or a deceased Swiss adult. The participating viewer pushes the button and the screen scrambles, either displaying a fully intact, actual face, thereby winning the game, or, most likely, three different sections, creating a monstrous

²⁴² Grenier, p. 179.

²⁴³ Tamar Garb, 'Tamar Garb in conversation with Christian Boltanski', in *Christian Boltanski*, ed. Didier Semin (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 1997), pp. 22-23.

face randomly slotted together. The odds of winning are extremely low: 1 in 40,000.²⁴⁴ The possible range of interpretations set for this work is based on randomness and chance.



Figure 14: Christian Boltanski, *Be New* (detail), (Sydney Australia: Carriageworks, 2014).

Another strategy Boltanski employs to elicit interaction is through instructing the viewer to physically engage with the work. One example is *Rules*, a work where Boltanski installed a photocopier in the exhibition space. Viewers were invited to bring along their own photographs to the exhibition, but they must be portraits of themselves. Boltanski enlarged each portrait on the photocopier and hung the paper copies on the exhibition walls. By the end of the exhibition, the work covered the gallery wall with several layers of images.²⁴⁵

Another work which involved the viewer's physical interaction was *Dispersion* from 1993 for two months at the Quai de la Gare in Paris. This work consisted of thousands of used garments of clothing – three to four tons worth – in several large piles. Visitors were given a

²⁴⁴ Tea Romanello-Hillereau, 'Christian Boltanski: A Cheerful Conversation' *Drome Magazine* (Spring/Summer 2012) <<http://dromemagazine.com/christian-boltanski>> [accessed 24 March 2017].

²⁴⁵ Grenier, p. 194.

bag with the name of the work on the outside of it, '*Dispersion*: Christian Boltanski, 91 Quai de la Gare, 75013 Paris'.²⁴⁶ The artist said that visitors could either take the clothing away with them for a modest fee – and thus owning a piece of art from Boltanski, or they could simply wear it out immediately, and have a new item of clothing, 'bought pretty cheaply'.²⁴⁷ Either way, the visitor was expected to physically rummage through the piles of clothing, filling up the bag, or putting the clothing on at the site. By interacting with the work, its meaning was determined strictly by the visitor-collaborators engagement. Indeed, the work would have meant something very different had no one physically interacted with it. By inviting the audience to have a hand in its composition and content, the message of the work is different for each participant. Boltanski provided the essentials: the exhibition space, the used clothing, and the bag, but the viewer's physical engagement informs the work's message. Without the visitor's collaboration, there would have been no meaning.

Another example is seen in 1993 when Boltanski participated in an exhibition curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist entitled *Do It*. Boltanski contributed two works, *The Schoolchildren* and *Instruction*. Both of the works adopted the mode of the 'event score', made famous by Fluxus artist George Brecht in the 1960s, as a way of 'ensuring that the details of everyday life, the random constellations of objects that surround us, stop going unnoticed'.²⁴⁸ Event scores are typically a set of instructions and dependent on viewer participation to perform them. That performance *is* the work of art. Therefore, the end result of an event score requires the viewer to perform it which also contributes to its meaning. Boltanski's two

²⁴⁶ *Expertissim*, 'Christian Boltanski. Dispersion. Ready-made', at <<https://en.expertissim.com/christian-boltanski-dispersion-ready-made-12235676>> [accessed 4 January 2020].

²⁴⁷ Grenier, p. 194-5.

²⁴⁸ Ken Johnson, 'George Brecht, 82, Fluxus Conceptual Artist Is Dead', *The New York Times* (15 December 2008) at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/15/arts/music/15brecht.html> [accessed 25 March 2017].

event scores instructed the viewer to either help create photographs or interact with other people in order to determine their meaning.

The Schoolchildren gives this instruction:

Ask the photographer who usually takes the end-of-term photos at the school nearest to the exhibition venue to take individual portraits of all the pupils in one of the classes. These photos, varying in number, are to be enlarged to an 8 by 10 inch format and glued onto a sheet of cardboard.

Arrange the photos on the wall in several rows, leaving a 3 inch gap between each photograph. On the back of each photo, stamp the name of the photographer who took the photos, as well as my own name (the wall label should feature both my name and the photographer's name).

At the end of the exhibition, give the photos to the children portrayed to their parents.²⁴⁹

Boltanski performed this event score himself in 1992 when he was commissioned by the Serpentine Gallery in London to photograph 144 schoolchildren from North Westminster Community School. Each portrait was exhibited at Lisson Gallery, a nearby contemporary art gallery, and Boltanski presented each child's family with a framed print.

Instruction provides this direction:

²⁴⁹ *Do It: the compendium*, ed. by Hans Ulrich Obrist (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2013), p. 103.

[1] Get your neighbour's photo album [2] Give the neighbour yours in exchange [3] Enlarge all the pictures to 8 x 10 [4] Frame them in some simple fashion and hang them on the walls of your apartment [5] Your neighbour should do the same with your album.²⁵⁰

Boltanski provides instructions for not only the viewer to interact with the resulting photographs, but also to prompt interaction with other participants: the school photographer, the parents of the children, and one's neighbour. By engaging directly with the photographs and other people, the engaged viewer keeps the memory of others alive, as well as their own. This harkens back to Boltanski's 1969 work, *Research and Presentation of All That Remains of My Childhood, 1944-1950* when he wrote about saving our memory from the oblivion of death: 'What we need to do is attack the roots of the problem in a big collective effort in which each of us will work towards his own survival and everyone else's'.²⁵¹ In effect, Boltanski is asking each viewer to save their own memory as well as everyone else's around them.

I have explained, for the first time, how and why Boltanski purposefully and consistently instils distinct elements of ambiguity into his work. This argument is important to my thesis because ambiguity is one of the most recurring features in his work yet what has been written did not go far enough or misconstrued the function of ambiguity. By explaining the

²⁵⁰ Obrist, p. 103.

²⁵¹ Merewether, p. 25.

function of ambiguity, my thesis gets closer to unravelling its nature and relevance. This is what is at stake.

I discovered that Boltanski deliberately leaves his works incomplete by contravening a convention, usually to do with the genre of portraiture. The reason for ambiguity in his art is to attract myriad interpretations from the viewer. I argued that Boltanski purposefully represents the subjects in his works, often children, as unknown in order to create a strong sense of ambiguity around their identity. By not disclosing their unique identity, Boltanski creates a gap in the work's meaning which must be resolved by the viewer.

I introduced, for the first time, the idea of the figure of the child in Boltanski's ambiguous portraiture since it is the most prevalent subject matter. I examine the established conventions of the innocent, pure child, handed down from the 18th and 19th centuries, to contemporary notions of the child who has a more independent agency apart from their parents. But they also struggle with distressing adult concerns. Whilst Boltanski's depictions of childhood borrow from both established conventions of the innocent child and contemporary notions of the child who wrestles with adult fears and desires, he also adds his own personal convictions about the equivalence between childhood based on death, which I analyse more deeply in chapter five. For the purposes of this chapter, I showed that he constructs anonymous, stereotypical portraits of average children who are, at once, both innocent and passive, and reflect the common anxieties that accompany thoughts of death and the realisation of forgotten memories for adult viewers.

Through my discussion of Olga Smith's text, I explained that her argument that the artist creates ambiguity by challenging conventions of autobiography and self-portraiture still left Boltanski in complete control of the meaning-making process. She overlooked the fact that

ambiguity is an aesthetic device used by artists to pull the viewer into a dialogue with the work in order to define its meaning. I clarified that Boltanski defers his role as the ultimate judge of meaning to the viewer.

I showed that he distorts his moniker in an ironic attempt to create a rupture in the meaning of his own identity. In the context of titles, the artist reframes his name and initials into a sort of collective entity who partakes in similar experiences and memories that many others share in contemporary Western society. Boltanski's tactic is not without precedent; Andy Warhol was famous for negating his own inner personality in favour of an average, collective persona. I argued that Boltanski does something similar in this regard for twofold reasons: to decrease the influence that his own personal biography has on the meaning of his work and, perhaps paradoxically, to appeal to a broader range of collectors who buy his art for a particular reason. I called out Boltanski's ploy to distort his identity in order to sell his artwork: he embraced Holocaust-based interpretations in the USA in order to appeal to Jewish-American collectors which downplaying his Jewish heritage with European audiences who he thought had less of an appetite for such artwork.

Eco revealed that ambiguity is caused by the transgression of a convention. To put it succinctly, ambiguity creates a gap in meaning that acts as a kind of gateway for the viewer to engage with the work and determine its meaning. I argued that Boltanski's uses interactive strategies, such as game playing and physical interaction with the artwork, to clearly invite the viewer to engage with his work. Once the viewer realises that Boltanski leaves no clues to the identity of the subject, the viewer is forced to pursue another angle to derive the work's meaning. By leaning into the ambiguous elements, the viewer is free to define the work's meaning by projecting his or her own experiences and memories onto the anonymous subjects portrayed in it.

Eco said that ambiguous works speak to a sense of estrangement or separation from the past and shared, traditional values. It does not resolve the problem of estrangement or alienation. Rather, the underdeveloped meaning exposes the instability of our contemporary condition.²⁵² Whilst issues around anxiety and the past will be explored in the next chapter on memory, in this chapter my contribution is in my explanation of the complex function of ambiguity in Boltanski's work. Specifically, I showed that ambiguity is a deliberate strategy to enable the work to engage more directly with the viewer. Furthermore, I deconstructed the relegated role of the artist and the enhanced role of the viewer when defining the meaning of Boltanski's ambiguous works of art. I do not resolve any specific ambiguous element because it is not my place to do so. I stand by my conviction and my contribution to the knowledge about Boltanski: he wants the resolution of its mysterious meaning to be reserved for each viewer to resolve for him or herself.

²⁵² Eco, p. 153.

**THE COLLECTIVE AND THE PERSONAL:
THE REPRESENTATION OF MEMORY IN CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI'S ART**

In the first chapter of my thesis, I began with an analysis of the literature surrounding Boltanski's work. I explained that the Holocaust evolved as the dominant explanation because of misunderstandings about the nature and content of what has been deemed necessary for 'Holocaust art'. In chapter two, I looked at the main element of ambiguity. I discovered that Boltanski deliberately creates ambiguity in order to invite the viewer to define its interpretation based on his or her own similar memories. This chapter centres on another integral and recurring aspect of his artwork: mnemonic content.

This discussion is important to my thesis because it allows me to unveil the subject matter that dominates his art: imagery from the realm of collective memory. To be precise, since the viewer defines the meaning of his work and that definition is based on recognising similar experiences from their own background, it is imperative that I uncover exactly what kinds of memories his art represents and rekindles for the viewer. To this end, I consider the main ideas revealed by the most influential thinkers in contemporary memory theory.

I begin my investigation by discussing the notion of collective memory by one of the founding thinkers of contemporary memory discourse, Maurice Halbwachs. I want to know if his ideas about the structure of collective memory, based on myriad communities and groups, sheds light on Boltanski's work. I argued that the most persistent subject matter in his oeuvre is the ambiguous figure of the anonymous child, therefore I want to know why the figure of the unknown child or the depiction of a forgotten childhood memory is constantly represented.

Then I move on to Jan Assmann's two types of collective memory: cultural and communicative memory. I want to know what type of memory the recurring anonymous portraits represent and how that kind of memory influences meaning. Next, I look at Pierre Nora's concept of the site of memory. The site of memory explores the condition of contemporary memory. I want to learn what the ambiguous portraits of anonymous individuals say about the state of memory in contemporary culture.

Finally, I explore the countermonument as a recent trend in contemporary art that addresses collective notions of memory. I want to know how Boltanski's art relates to recent debates manifested in countermonuments. These discussions revolve around issues like who has the authority to decide the official memories of a society as well as exploring the various aesthetic devices countermonument artists use to address issues that also appear in Boltanski's art, namely the disappearance of memory.

I provide several contributions in this chapter. I introduce a new methodology in the debates around Boltanski's work through the application of concepts derived from collective memory. I contribute an in-depth analysis of the images that inhabit his work. Namely, what kind of memory they represent, who they commemorate, and how they interact with other memory types. Finally, I situated his work into a historical context with other works that directly address the function and condition of contemporary notions of collective memory.

Before delving into notions surrounding contemporary collective memory, it is useful to briefly consider the work of French sociologist, Maurice Halbwachs and his seminal text

from the 1950s, *On Collective Memory*.²⁵³ Halbwachs's was one of the first thinkers to attempt a comprehensive theory of collective memory and his ideas form a cornerstone for the many subsequent ideas relating to social memory, especially from the 1980s onward when an intense engagement with such ideas was circulating in both academic circles and popular culture. He explained that the vast, far-reaching memory of a society is composed of the memory formed by myriad smaller groups. Collective memory is passed down through generations; memory that was received by an older generation is subsequently passed down to their heirs. It accumulates through the generations as the 'totality of thoughts common to a group, the group of people with whom we have a relationship at this moment, or with whom we have had a relation on the preceding day or days'.²⁵⁴ To be succinct, the collective memory of a society is constructed from the recollections and experiences of various groups which comprise a society and is subsequently passed on to later generations.

Group memory comes from all sectors of a given society, such as the institutions of religious organisations, social classes, and workers' unions, but the most fundamental group forming collective memory is family memory since it underpins the basis of the earliest recollections of its individual members. Halbwachs said, 'There is in short no object upon which we reflect that cannot serve as a point of departure, through an association of ideas, to retrieve some thought which immerses us again, in the distant or recent past, in the circle of the family'.²⁵⁵ This is important because, as I will discuss later, much of Boltanski's imagery comes from the collective storehouse of family memory, such as old photographs of childhood from family

²⁵³ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

²⁵⁴ Halbwachs, p. 52.

²⁵⁵ Halbwachs, p. 61.

photo albums. He chooses this kind of memory because it forms a common basis for most people in society. He said, 'I talked about childhood because it's the most shared experience'.²⁵⁶

After we leave the comforts of family, and enter into the world on our own, we become members of many different groups simultaneously, such as our own family, workplace, membership in social clubs, or political affiliations. Halbwachs argued that our memories and relationships with our numerous group affiliations are essential because they provide the structures for our personal, individual memory. Our individual experiences and memories are dependent on the mnemonic frameworks of the groups to which we belong because they enable us to make sense of our personal experiences and memories. When we recall individual memories, it is necessary 'that we place ourselves in the perspective of this group, that we adopt its interests and follow the slant of its reflections'.²⁵⁷ Hence, our personal memory is meaningless to us outside the context of a group memory we share with others.²⁵⁸ When we see an object, conceive a thought, or propose an idea, we label and organise it into a specific category that conforms to the group's conventions since they provide the framework of our experiences and memories.²⁵⁹ This can be seen in groups such as our religious affiliation: it provides a framework to structure personal experience and memory.

Another important claim by Halbwachs was that whilst collective memory frames personal memories, at the same time, personal memories of the individuals making up the groups are absorbed into collective memory, reinvigorating collective memories by keeping them

²⁵⁶ Grenier, p. 79.

²⁵⁷ Halbwachs, p. 52.

²⁵⁸ Halbwachs p. 53.

²⁵⁹ Halbwachs, p. 168.

relevant and meaningful to its members. Even though ‘no memory is possible outside frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve their recollections’, there is an interdependent relationship between personal and collective memory within a given society.²⁶⁰ When an individual introduces something new or different into the group memory, the conventions or memory of the group may change or be modified.²⁶¹

Halbwachs argued that ‘society from time to time obligates people not just to reproduce in thought previous events of their lives, but also to touch them up, to shorten them, or to complete them’.²⁶² So there is a co-mingling between group and individual memory: collective memories provide a structure to individual recollections whilst the individual adds their own personal experiences and memories to rejuvenate and moderate collective memories.

I emphasise the mutual relationship between collective and personal memory because Boltanski draws from the storehouse of familiar collective mnemonic imagery in order to facilitate personal recollections in the mind of the viewer. By looking at his work through the lens of Halbwachs’s theories, we can see that the reception of it exposes the dynamic relationship between collective and personal memories at large. What I mean is that he constantly depicts generic mnemonic imagery in order to revive similar yet distinct personal memories in the mind of each viewer. Therefore, the meaning of his work is not dependent on one overarching grand narrative but is formed from the myriad personal memories of its audience. In other words, even though we all remember our childhood experiences, clothing, toys – and they are similar to everyone else’s memories and childhood artefacts –

²⁶⁰ Halbwachs, p. 43.

²⁶¹ Halbwachs, p. 184.

²⁶² Halbwachs, p. 51.

we still have our own unique experiences which build the general collective framework of childhood memory.

Jan Assmann divided Halbwachs's concept of collective memory into two types: cultural memory and communicative memory. Cultural memory is associated with official, grand narratives that have a lifespan over many generations and millennia. They are represented in the official public realm, such as in war memorials, statues of revered political or social figures, commemorative parades and celebrations, museums, libraries, and databases. Cultural memory is, 'a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behaviour and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practices and initiation'.²⁶³ It is characterised by its distance from the everyday, or its *extraordinary*ness. It has a fixed point in the past which does not change with the passing of time. Cultural memory is maintained through official texts and monuments and communicated through practice and observance.²⁶⁴

In contrast to cultural memory, communicative memory is based on the everyday, informal experiences that comprise collective memory. It is distinctly communal in scale and is comprised of common, personal memories, such as a first kiss, a funny joke, or the childhood memories of neighbourhood clubs.²⁶⁵ It is associated with everyday events that occur throughout the lifetime of most individuals in a society. This type of memory has no fixed point in the temporal horizon since it is fleeting in nature. In fact, the temporal instability of communicative memory is its defining characteristic because it is based on oral traditions which must be regularly maintained. Assmann noted that 'its most important

²⁶³ Jan Assmann, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity' in *The Collective Memory Reader*, ed. by Jeffrey K. Olick, Daniel Levy and Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 209-215 (p. 212).

²⁶⁴ Assmann, p. 213.

²⁶⁵ Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity', *New German Critique*, 65 (1995) 125-133 (p. 126).

characteristic is its limited temporal horizon. As all oral history studies suggest, this horizon does not extend more than eighty to (at the very most) one hundred years into the past, which equals three or four generations or the Latin *saeculum*'.²⁶⁶ Whilst cultural memory is based on official, grand narratives, communicative memory is routinely unremarkable and based on localised and informal collective memories.

The use of familiar everyday imagery features in other artists' work as well as Boltanski's output. By using imagery and objects that are seemingly pulled directly from everyday life, these artists create artworks that 'were so "ordinary" that the viewer was made to think about the uncertain distinction between things in art and things in the world'. By representing everyday objects in their art, this aligns with 'being in the everyday world'.²⁶⁷ Yuriko Saito argued that everyday objects are plain, non-descript, and do not normally evoke contemplative appreciation in their original context.²⁶⁸ They 'do not engender a special, distinct experience disconnected from, and standing out from, our everyday affairs; hence, they generally lack memorable presence or lofty intellectual, emotional, or spiritual enlightenment. As a result, they tend to disappear from the aesthetic radar that has been calibrated to capture those special, standout experiences'.²⁶⁹

An example of this aesthetic tendency to use everyday imagery can be seen in Hans-Peter Feldmann's photographic work from 1976, *Sunday Pictures* (Figure 15). This work is an arrangement of roughly two dozen photographs, taken from 1960s posters, which show a wide range of kitsch mass-media imagery, such as an anonymous couple on their honeymoon, a photograph of an unidentified tropical beach, a photograph of a painting of a

²⁶⁶ Assmann and Czaplicka, p. 127.

²⁶⁷ Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*, (London: Phaidon Press, 1998), p. 119.

²⁶⁸ Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 10-11.

²⁶⁹ Saito, p. 47-8.

small girl holding a puppy, a photograph of Neuschwanstein Castle in Bavaria, a picture of two horses, a field out in the country, and other innocuous scenes which ‘capture moments in life when nothing memorable is taking place’.²⁷⁰



Figure 15: Hans-Peter Feldmann, *Sunday Pictures* (installation, photographs)
(New York: Gavin Brown's Enterprise, 1976)

Sunday Pictures elevates common objects and imagery into ‘art’ that seeks to inspire recollections and reflections on ideas not typically associated with those same objects when encountered in their original sphere of everyday life. In doing so, the experience of seeing everyday imagery in an art context separates those common images from the ordinary world that is ‘a kind of capsulated unit that is hermetically sealed off from our ordinary engagement with daily life’.²⁷¹ The ideas prompted by everyday imagery and objects, now endowed with ‘specialness’ as art, add to their significance as something precious and meaningful; these common objects represent a memory from everyday life that is important and worthy of deeper contemplation.²⁷²

For Feldman’s *Sunday Pictures*, the images are represented as objective and deadpan, rather than subjective and affective, and tend to prompt thoughts about the ubiquity of

²⁷⁰ Helena Tatay and others, *Hans-Peter Feldmann: Catalogue* (London and Bonn: Koenig Books, 2012) (no pagination).

²⁷¹ Saito, p. 44.

²⁷² Saito, p. 39.

saccharine imagery that reveal the obsessions of contemporary collective consumerism, and a taste for platitudinous objects and imagery.²⁷³

Like Feldman, Boltanski's desire for his work to be understood as deeply connected to ordinary life can be seen when he said that he purposefully uses objects that appear to have been pulled from everyday life: 'My work, even if it's fictitious, appears to come directly from reality [...] So my sense was that art was supposed to be like that: maintain a link with reality, but in such a way as to let the viewer tell himself stories'.²⁷⁴ However, whilst Feldmann's artworks conjure up more objective, unemotional thoughts and observations about everyday life, such as *Sunday Pictures*, Boltanski's work strongly evokes ideas and memories associated with affective states of mind. He said, 'I think that emotion comes from a place that's a bit do-it-yourself and poorly executed. It has to be "homemade" [...] they cannot be too polished'.²⁷⁵ By adding a handmade or lived-in quality to the objects and images, the artist creates an empathic and mnemonic dimension to the commonplace objects and imagery that he employs in his work.

I take Boltanski's recurrent use of commonplace imagery that bears the mark of age as a tactic to simulate memories from everyday life; to connect his art to common memories and experience. I want to expand on this idea using two examples: biscuit boxes and blurry photographs. Boltanski uses battered looking and rusty tin biscuit boxes as a way of representing keepsake boxes that stimulate emotional connections and sentimental reflections aimed at preserving one's life. As he suggested, 'I must have found some biscuit tins in the house, since every family always has some, and they must have interested me'.²⁷⁶

²⁷³ Durant, p. 37.

²⁷⁴ Grenier, p. 138

²⁷⁵ Grenier, p. 210.

²⁷⁶ Grenier, p. 41-2.

For example, I want to return to Boltanski's series of works entitled *Le Lycée Chases* (*The Chases High School*) (Figure 16). There are several versions in this series of works but each one consists of blurred black-and-white photographs of young teenagers from 1931 who were students at the Chases High School in Vienna. Each individual face was cut from a class photograph of 23 students posing outside of the school surrounding their teacher. He is sarcastically looking up at the sky as if he is asking the heavens for strength. Two girls have joined in his joke by placing their hands on his shoulders as if to say that they are not such a burden. The class photograph clearly shows the affectionate relationship between the young teacher and his students.



Figure 16: Christian Boltanski, *Le Lycée Chases* (metal boxes, framed photographs)
(New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1988)

Each version of *The Chases High School* rests the photographic portraits on plinths comprised of old-looking, tattered biscuit boxes. The roughed up, rusty boxes have a perceptible sense of being used and touched. The message they convey alludes to the safe storage of treasured keepsakes. What is more, the keepsakes belonged to the child whose portraits rests upon the box which contain them. Boltanski uses rusty tin boxes as a way to show that he wants to preserve the memories of someone's life. He said, 'I was trying to can my life in order to preserve it'.²⁷⁷ By using the biscuit boxes upon which to rest the portraits of the anonymous children, Boltanski is suggesting that the rusty boxes house the remnants of that particular dead or disappeared child from Chases High School.

Boltanski's use of blurry photographs is reminiscent of a similar technique featured in the work by Feldmann. Both blur their photographs in order to erase any distinct identity and open up the image to polysemy. Feldmann's artbook series entitled *Voyeur*, which spans the mid-1990s to 2011, contains hundreds of black-and-white photographs from the realm of informal popular culture, advertising, and stock images. Yet, they are decontextualised from the magazines, advertisements, or newspapers from where they originated. As Feldmann said, '*Voyeur* is a small paperback with about a thousand little pictures in it [...] And because the pictures are so blurred, you can fantasise about what you can and can't see in them [...] It's a nice illustrated book for the everyday'.²⁷⁸

My point is that Boltanski represents everyday blurry photographs in a similar way to Feldmann. (Figure 17) As I was saying, in *Le Lycée Chases*, Boltanski appropriates common imagery, in this case from a children's classroom photograph, and decontextualises each child's face by separating it from its original setting. He then enlarges each face. This

²⁷⁷ Grenier, p. 41.

²⁷⁸ Tatay, no pagination.

technique erases the child's distinct facial features, rendering it blurry and completely nondescript. As a result, when the viewer interacts with blurred images, the main meaning cannot be found in the identity of the children in the portraits because they divulge only scant information.

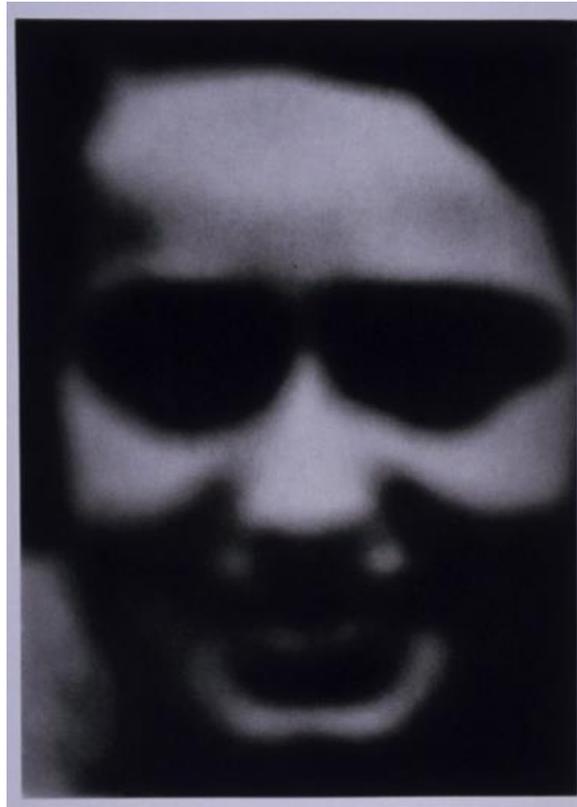


Figure 17: Christian Boltanski, *Le Lycée Chases* (detail) (Photogravure on Somerset Satin White paper) (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, 1988).

Communicative and cultural memory, Assmann argued, operate principally as binaries, in that the kind of memory we experience is experienced as *either* cultural *or* communicative. He provides a table of the two memory classes that illustrates the contrasts between them: everyday versus mythical history; tradition versus ceremony; living versus mediated; 80-100 years versus millennia; unskilled layman versus specialised professional.²⁷⁹ Even though Assmann concedes, albeit in passing, that the two memory types can combine, he does not

²⁷⁹ Jan Assmann, 'Communicative and Cultural Memory' in *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, ed. by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter Publications, 2010) pp. 109-118 (p. 117).

develop ideas which account for the oscillation that frequently occurs between them.

However, as far as Halbwachs is concerned, collective memories of the larger group do intimately interact within the local, personal memories of its members.

For example, the coronation of Elizabeth II in June 1953 is part of the collective memory of the United Kingdom since it was the first coronation of a monarch to be televised. It captured the pomp and ceremony of the transition from one regnum to another. But the coronation equally informed the personal memory of ordinary British people since it was also associated with the acquisition of many families first television sets. Local communities watched the spectacle together, either at their neighbour's house or in their own living room. Even though I can point to an example of how the memory of the nation or society can exist simultaneously with local, personal memory, Assmann's theory did not engage with this aspect of how the two types of memory relate to each other. What he offered was a brief, simple comment on the dynamic transformations in collective memory as the one-way progression from communicative memory into cultural memory.²⁸⁰ Assmann suggested that this interaction is an anomaly, or a rupture, in 'historical consciousness' from recent, communicative memory which transforms into traditional, cultural memory.²⁸¹

Halbwachs's contention that the memory of larger society and everyday, local memory can exist together simultaneously and are interdependent has been taken up by recent memory theorists, such as Astrid Erll and José van Dijck, who develop ideas surrounding contemporary memory groups and types. They claim that Assmann's ideas do not reflect the fluid and dynamic nature of collective memory in contemporary societies. Erll says that the same experience can be understood on the official, national level as well as on the

²⁸⁰ Assmann, 'Communicative and Cultural Memory', p. 117.

²⁸¹ Assmann, p. 112.

everyday, informal level, and that this relationship is 'a recurrent characteristic of modern memory culture'.²⁸² Van Dijk suggests that collective memory should not be distinguished by its type, that is either cultural or communicative, but by how they are interpreted by members of society. On the one hand, communicative memory is experienced as ordinary, fleeting, and communal, whilst on the other hand, cultural memory is understood as an official, hegemonic, and normative experience.²⁸³ Whilst the idea that the two collective memory types co-mingle seems obvious, Assmann did not take the relationship between them into consideration.

Collective memory types can interact interdependently. When they do, their dynamic nature of memory is revealed. At any given moment, the same event can be subject of both collective and personal reflections on the past.²⁸⁴ This has resonance for understanding the kind of imagery Boltanski uses in his artwork. He depicts artefacts that represent common everyday memory of the most fundamental group in society: the family. The objects he represents, old photographs, rusty tin biscuit boxes, and used clothing, are familiar and common to all members of society. But the substance of his work is not found in these objects but in the personal memories they help conjure up in the mind of the viewer.

Boltanski intuited the ability of cultural and individual memories to co-mingle and stimulate each other at the same time. To put it succinctly, whilst Assmann argued that the two types of collective memory are mutually exclusive, Halbwachs's asserts that collective memories have a mutually beneficial interdependence with the personal memories of its members.

This observation into the two main types of collective memory and the relationship between them allows new insights into how Boltanski's artworks perform the experience of

²⁸² Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture*, trans. by Sara B. Young (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), p. 31.

²⁸³ Erll, pp. 32-3.

²⁸⁴ Erll, p. 31.

memory. His work conveys familiar, ordinary communicative memory of the family and childhood which in turn stimulates similar personal memories in the mind of the viewer. The dynamic relationship between the two memory types can be seen to work together in the performance and interpretation of Boltanski's artwork.

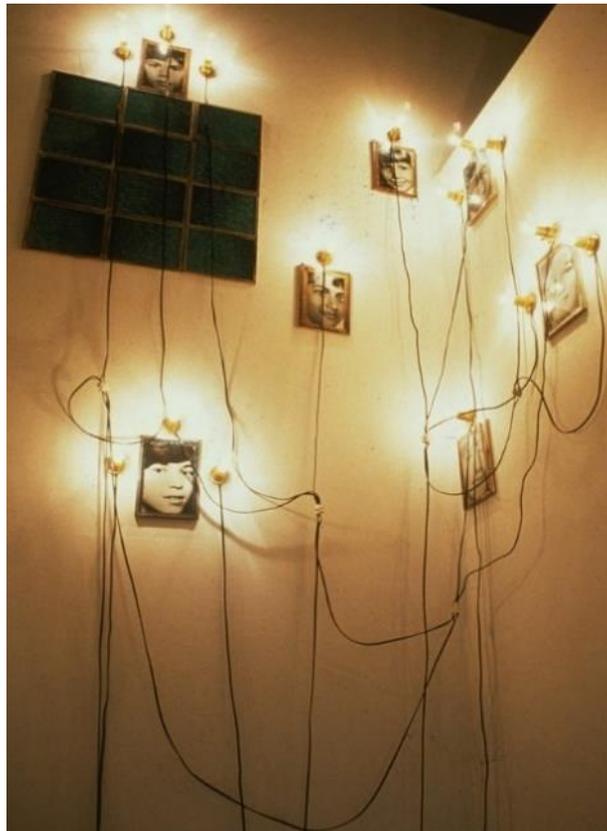


Figure 18: Christian Boltanski, *Les Enfants de Dijon* (detail), (framed photographs, wrapping paper, electric lights) (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1986)

I want to give a couple of examples that disclose the interdependence between the cultural and personal memories by looking at *Monuments: Les Enfants de Dijon* (Figure 18) and *Lost Workers: The Work People of Halifax, 1877* (Figure 21). *Monuments: Les Enfants de Dijon* represents collective artefacts that are from childhood memory, a time when most individuals share the most similar experiences. In this case, the artefacts are children's classroom photographic portraits. Whilst I stated in chapter one that Marianne Hirsch

associated the photographs of children in this work with the Holocaust, in this chapter I offer a different approach that is more inclusive of a variety of interpretations.

This series consists of recycled photographs from the 1973 Boltanski work entitled *Portraits des Élèves du C.E.S. des Lentillères en 1973*. It is formed from numerous shabby, cheap, tin frames that enclose enlarged, cropped, black-and-white student portraits from children around six to eight years of age. Each picture measures 28 x 24 cm. Some of the portraits in *Les Enfants de Dijon* are affixed to the top of a flat, simple, geometric altar which hangs on the wall. The altars are comprised of the same shabby, cheap, tin frames as the portraits but they contain coloured papers, such as ‘monochromatic colour prints – usually grey, red, gold, or blue – made by simply photographing “papiers de Noël”, shiny or metallic Christmas wrapping paper’.²⁸⁵

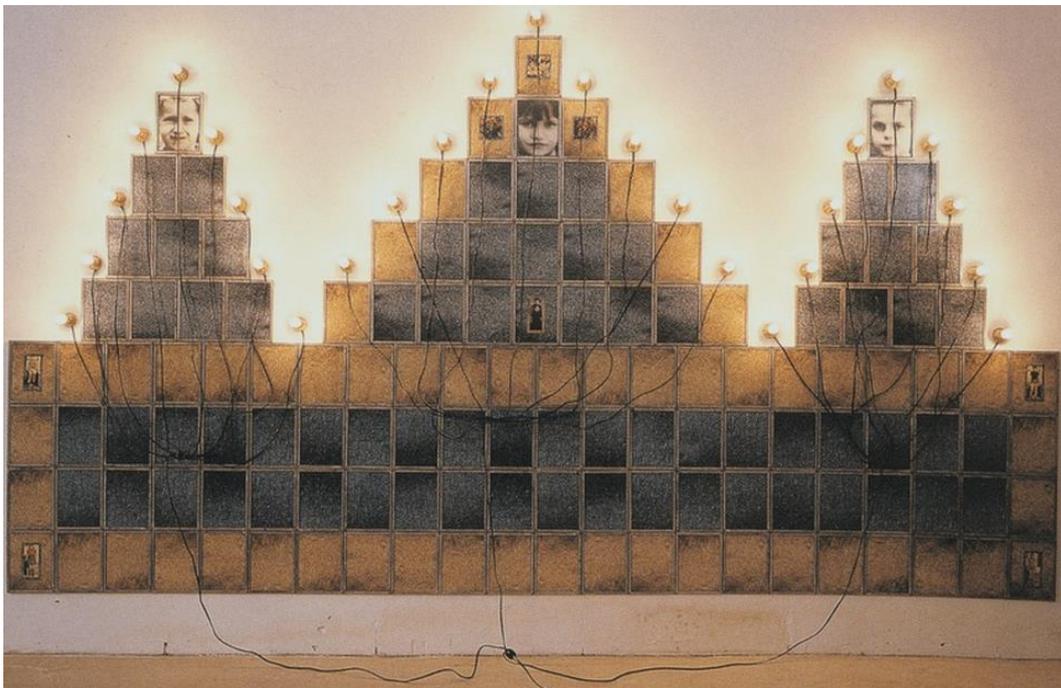


Figure 19: Christian Boltanski, *Monuments: Les Enfants de Dijon*, (framed photographs, wrapping paper, electric lights) (Bern: Kunsthalle Bern, 1987)

²⁸⁵ Gumpert, p. 83.

Other portraits of the children from Dijon hang individually on the wall, loosely separated, from floor to ceiling. All of the portraits, no matter how they are displayed, are surrounded by small white lights that illuminate each child's smiling face in a darkened, hushed room. The thick black cords from the lights hang loosely around the photographs, ensnaring the individual photographic portraits into a web of forgotten childhood memories. Boltanski confirmed that these children are 'dirty kids that one sees everyday'.²⁸⁶ None of the children are named or have any identifying information. Their anonymity erases any individuality and therefore the effect on the viewer discloses them as symbolic of all children. In short, these photographs of 'dirty kids from Dijon' typify communicative symbols of childhood memory. The dimly lit, muted surroundings of the venue and the vast number of photographic portraits of forgotten children generate an air of reverential and solemn reflection that border on the edge of pathos and anxiety.

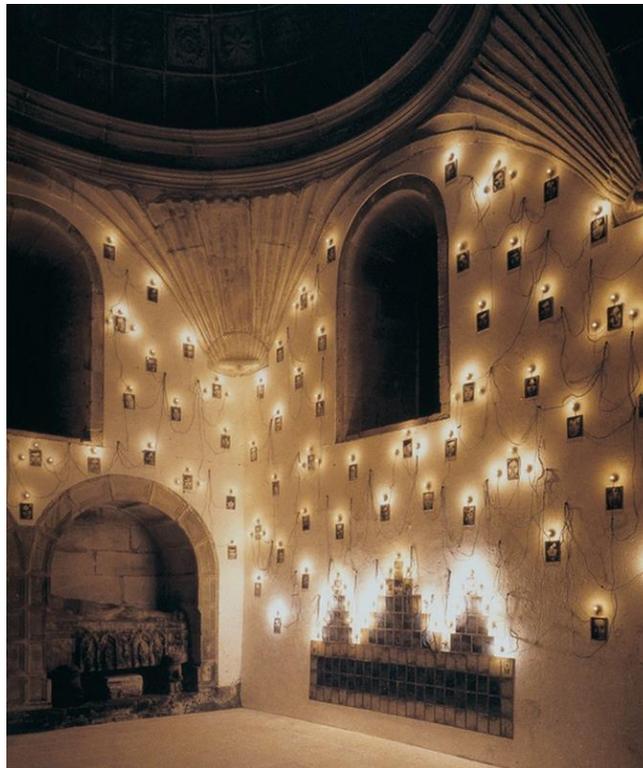


Figure 20: Christian Boltanski, *Monument: Les Enfants de Dijon* (detail), (framed photographs, wrapping paper, electric lights) (Paris: Chapelle de la Salpêtrière, 1986)

²⁸⁶ Elisabeth Lebovici, 'Entretien: Christian Boltanski', *Beaux Arts*, 37 (1986) 26-31 (p. 29).

I approach Boltanski's art through the lens of Halbwachs because it seems clear that Boltanski wanted these portraits to symbolise the most commonly shared time of life for most people: childhood. Whilst I do not claim that Boltanski was familiar with the theories of collective memory, he intuited the way that imagery which depicts common, personal memories spark similar memories in the mind of the viewer. He said, 'Large memory is recorded in books and small memory is all about little things: trivia, jokes. Part of my work then has been about trying to preserve 'small memory', because often when someone dies, that memory disappears. Yet that 'small memory' is what makes people different from one another, unique. These memories are very fragile: I wanted to save them'.²⁸⁷

I said earlier that, in accordant with Halbwachs, group memory comes from all sectors of a given society, such as the institutions of religious organisations. Collective religious imagery is represented in *Monuments: Les Enfants de Dijon*. As I indicated before, the basic altars which support and anchor the portraits of the anonymous children represent indistinct religious imagery seen in the generic pyramid shapes. Boltanski described the altars when he said, 'In the case of the *Monuments*, I took religion as the common reference point. They were religious monuments, but not tied to any specific religion – more to the idea of the religious. They were in the form of altars or pyramids, and anyone could recognise a familiar building from his childhood in them, a temple or a church.'²⁸⁸ The artist pulls from collective, stereotypical religious imagery to conjure up familiar memories to which most people can relate. When the images of anonymous children are viewed within a setting tied up with religious connotations, it becomes clear that Boltanski encourages his viewers to reflect upon personal memories that commemorate their own lost childhood.

²⁸⁷ Garb, p. 19.

²⁸⁸ Grenier, p. 139.

Another example of the collective imagery Boltanski pulls from various groups can be seen in the workplace memory in *Lost Workers: The Work People of Halifax, 1877-1982* (Figure 21). This is an installation piece that depicts the workplace memory of the Crossley Carpet workers who worked in the Dean Clough factory buildings in Halifax, Yorkshire in northern England from the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. The Dean Clough factory building was half a mile long and was the world's largest carpet factory. By 1900, around 5,000 workers worked at the Dean Clough factory. But by 1982, the factory was forced to close down due to the fierce competition from cheaper overseas imports.²⁸⁹ In 1983, businessman Ernst Hall and the Mountleigh Group bought the building and transformed it into various commercial and arts businesses. Later in 1993, Hall was knighted for rejuvenating the old factory building and exemplifying the successful practice of urban regeneration.

In one room of Boltanski's installation, 72 cheap cardboard boxes are housed on industrial metal shelves. They are arranged neatly into six rows and twelve columns. Each box has the name of a former worker at the factory printed onto a plain white label and stuck on the front. Another room consists of dozens of rusted tin boxes, tightly placed into neat rows and columns that are eight boxes high, creating a claustrophobic and oppressive atmosphere. Just like the cardboard boxes in the other room, each rusty tin box has the name of a worker affixed to the front on a generic, basic white label. Boltanski remarked about the memory housed in this work when he said, 'On another occasion I was working in Halifax in the north of England and one of the pieces I did there was about the carpet workers that were sacked after the factory shut-down. What I did was to create a room for them, and each worker had

²⁸⁹ Eric Webster, 'The Record of Continuous Progress: the 19th century development of John Crossley and Sons carpet manufacturers of Halifax', *Industrial Archaeology*, 16, 1 (1966) 58-72 (p. 59).

his own box in which he could put some kind of souvenir of his part at the factory. The piece was not that good, but what was interesting was that someone was prepared to go and speak to them and find out about them. They had all left the factory by then and this was the first time they returned, and it felt like the factory belonged to them.²⁹⁰ It represents an archive that supposedly (since we cannot open the boxes) contains personal memorabilia from the workers time at the factory such as clippings from the in-house magazine, long-service keepsake certificates, and old patches of carpet.²⁹¹



Figure 21: Christian Boltanski, *Lost Workers: The Work People of Halifax, 1877-1882* (cardboard boxes and photographs) (Dean Clough, Halifax: The Henry Moore Studio, 1994).

Finally, the last room of the installation dedicated to the Halifax workers is found in a vast, cavernous industrial space that must have seen the production of the immense rolls of

²⁹⁰ Garb, p. 40.

²⁹¹ Adrian Searle, 'Up the Workers. A Travelling French Artist Takes his Cue from Rusty Biscuit Tins, Inspirational Carpets, a Town's Forgotten Past and Trouble at t'Mill', *The Independent* (10 July 1995) <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/up-the-workers-a-travelling-french-artist-takes-his-cue-from-rusty-biscuit-tins-inspirational-1590887.html>> [accessed 8 March 2019]

carpet. The room has light grey cement walls, and around a dozen enormous steel columns to buttress the weight of the low ceiling. On one side of the space, several large windows flood the room with light. In this room we find an ocean of colourful, frayed fabrics and second-hand clothing spread thickly, knee-deep, over the entirety of the floor. This part of the installation echoes the factory's past function of producing endless miles of carpet as well as each garment symbolising a worker who laboured within the factory's walls. Much like the collective mnemonic imagery of childhood found in *Monuments: Les Enfants de Dijon*, Boltanski's *Lost Workers: The Work People of Halifax, 1877-1882* depicts collective imagery of another group which forms part of the collective memory of society: the workplace. This particular workplace formed a large part of the community of Halifax when it was in operation. The memories and souvenirs of the workers symbolise the collective memory of the workplace which many of us partake in our own community.

Whilst I do not claim that Boltanski depicts imagery of official, broad cultural memory, the kind of experiences involved with them still inform the interpretation of his artworks. Not only do his artworks highlight the relationship between communicative memory and personal memory, but also the interactions between the two types of collective memory espoused by Assmann.

Boltanski exhibits in many of the most world-renown arts museums, such as the Pompidou Centre in Paris, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Japan, and other important cultural venues like the Palazzo della Prigione for the 1986 Venice Biennale, Saint-Louis Chapel of La Salpêtrière Hôpital in Paris, and Santiago de Compostela Cathedral in Spain. The prestigious arts venues correspond to the dimension of cultural memory; they are highly significant locations that form the official narratives and conventions of the nation and the arts in wider society. Artworks shown in these venues

carry with them a gravitas which proves that what is on show is part of the establishment of a society's identity and official narrative. Museums demonstrate respect and adherence to the tradition and values of society.²⁹² These cultural institutions normalise, idealise, and present the cultural identity and memory of the nation to its public.²⁹³ Cultural memory is safeguarded and protected for the benefit of future generations within the confines of museums and important historic venues. My point is that whilst Boltanski's imagery comes from the realm of communicative collective memory, his work also partakes in the cultural memory of society when it is exhibited in respected museums and cultural institutions. The memory associated with these historic venues amplifies the mnemonic overtones existing within Boltanski's imagery and shows that his art accommodates communicative and cultural collective memory simultaneously.

Kate Palmer Albers noted in her exposition on Boltanski's work entitled *Les Archives de C.B., 1965-1988*, that his art is immortalised in the walls of the museum. His art comprises part of the official canon of art that is protected and saved for posterity. She said, 'By boxing up one's archive, calling it artwork, and – best of all – selling it to a major museum [Musée National d'Art Moderne (MNAM) at the Centre Pompidou in Paris] would seem to achieve this goal. After all, a museum's primary function is to care for its collection, and the ingenious move to transform the ordinary photographs and documents from one's life into art assures Boltanski's quotidian artefacts a safe and long-lasting home'.²⁹⁴ Put another way, Boltanski's artwork, even though it is comprised of informal, everyday imagery of

²⁹² Carol Duncan, *Civilising Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 22.

²⁹³ Duncan, p. 61.

²⁹⁴ Kate Palmer Albers, "'It's not an archive": Christian Boltanski's *Les Archives de C.B., 1965-1988*', *Visual Resources*, 3, 27 (2011), 249-266 (pp. 258-9).

anonymous subjects, is tightly bound up within the arts establishment as part of society's wider cultural memory.

Yet the relation between the work and its institution setting is also more complex than this initial observation might suggest. Martin Golding and Rebecca DeRoo argued that, 'Boltanski's ambition is evidently to create a monument that will disrupt the order of its architectural setting, undercut its grand collective desire for immortality in the nation by the evidence of an innumerable miscellaneous population with its infinitely differentiated labours, which include their deaths – and to create something objectively commemorative'.²⁹⁵ What they mean is that the memories depicted in the imagery of anonymous schoolchildren undercut the function of big museums and other cultural institutions to immortalise and preserve only the memory of nationally significant victories, heroes or other important events and figures. The artist represents modest subjects; they commemorate no one in particular. For Golding and DeRoo, his art commemorates only the 'innumerable miscellaneous population'.²⁹⁶

This highlights an important point: Boltanski's art exists in the formations associated with both types of collective memory simultaneously. Boltanski's imagery originates from the realm of communicative memory but is exhibited in important venues that constitute part of the wider cultural memory of the nation. Artefacts can represent both communicative and cultural memory; memories associated with these types of memory are not mutually exclusive, as Assmann wrote. This claim can only exist on the theoretical level. The lived

²⁹⁵ Martin Golding, 'Photography, Memory, and Survival', *Literature and Theology*, 14, 1 (2000), 52-68, (p. 62).

²⁹⁶ Golding, p. 62.

reality of the forms and practices of both cultural and communicative memory types is that they are interwoven together.²⁹⁷

An example of the co-mingling of communicative and cultural memories that play in the interpretation of Boltanski's artwork can be seen in *Advent* from 1996. This work was exhibited at the Santiago de Compostela Cathedral in Spain. It is an installation of second-hand clothing laid in tidy rows inside the main aisle of the cathedral; the clothing represents the remnant of its owner who lies prostrated in reverence and subservience. The cathedral represents and projects an important part of the cultural memory of Spanish society, and even wider collective memory of European and Christian cultures.

Rebuilt in the 9th century after being destroyed by Muslim armies, the cathedral holds the relics of martyred and revered Catholic saints, most notably St James, the first disciple to join Jesus. The cathedral has been a site for pilgrimage and prayer since the medieval ages and is part of the Santiago de Compostela World Heritage site. I mention these facts and history in order to suggest that when *Advent* was exhibited here in 1996, the status of the cathedral as preserver of collective cultural memory amplified the mnemonic qualities already represented in the work. Boltanski depicts the imagery associated with the personal, communal memory of an unknown subject whilst participating in the associations built up around the cultural memory of the cathedral.

The used clothing in *Advent*, mainly coats, retains the physical imprint of their former owner through its creases, folds, and stretched out sleeves. This work takes its title from the first season of the Church year, leading up to Christmas. It marks the time when the Catholic

²⁹⁷ Harald Welzer, 'History and Development of the Concept of "Communicative Memory"', in *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, ed by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010) 285-300 (p. 285).

Church remembers and prepares for the birth of Christ. Hence, if Boltanski's works depict 'the innumerable miscellaneous population' this is in order to undermine the immortality and national significance that the museum traditionally bestows upon the objects which it displays. But I do not think his work challenges the cultural status afforded to art museums and prestigious cultural institutions. The exhibition setting of these great buildings amplifies the mnemonic characteristics of his work, proclaiming their mission to stimulate memory in the mind of the viewer even more forcefully. How different the meaning of *Advent* would be if it was encountered, for example, in a former prison or clothing factory. Whilst the religious element would be missing in those alternative sites, *Advent* may have soaked up other memories distinctive to them. By depicting everyday clothing within prestigious and historic venues like the Santiago de Compostela Cathedral, the work absorbs the memories and meanings unique to the venue. In this particular case, the viewer may recollect personal memories based around their religious faith.

Rebecca DeRoo also discussed the challenges in the relationship between the personal, everyday imagery in Boltanski's artwork and the associations linked to cultural memories and conventions instilled in arts institutions. She says that museums are traditionally seen as 'crucial symbols of national identity and repositories for collective memory'.²⁹⁸ However, as discussed earlier, after the student riots and the social changes to cultural institutions that followed directly after May 1968, museums were forced to present themselves to the public as dismantling traditional elitist concepts of art by exhibiting artwork that was more accessible to the layperson. As a result, his work was exhibited in major art museums in order to satisfy this new political directive.²⁹⁹ DeRoo argues that his work contradicts the

²⁹⁸ DeRoo, p. 221.

²⁹⁹ DeRoo, p. 221.

museum's new mission because it exposes the museums' inability to communicate personal experiences and memories of the French middle-class to its wider audience.³⁰⁰

It challenges, according to DeRoo, the art museum's strategy to promote itself as a representative of collective culture and memory to the general public. She uses his artist book from 1969 entitled *Recherche et Présentation de Tout ce qui Reste de Mon Enfance, 1944–1950* (or *Research and Presentation of All that Remains of My Childhood, 1944-1950*) to illustrate her point. As discussed previously, this work consists of photographs of items from childhood such as items of clothing, a lock of hair, and other objects associated with childhood memory.³⁰¹ Boltanski frames this work as an ethnographic investigation into the collection, conservation, and presentation of his own childhood imagery, but DeRoo argues that it fails to convey any information that would allow the viewer who is not part of the French middle-class to internalise and resuscitate similar memories from their own experiences. DeRoo's point is that Boltanski's work depicts French middle-class tastes and values, which creates a gap, or a rupture, between the personal memories it seeks to spark in the mind of the viewer and the actual audience it serves.³⁰² That is to say that when a viewer cannot easily forge a relationship with the middle-class French subjects depicted in his artwork, a breakdown ensues because it is not reflective of common, shared memories and the museums' ability to communicate with *all* members of society. DeRoo claims that Boltanski's photographic work, *Photo Album of Family D., 1939-1964* (Figure 31) makes 'an ambiguous upper middle-class a new point of identification for nationhood'.³⁰³ But I stand firm in my claim that Boltanski's work has relevance for most members of society outside of

³⁰⁰ DeRoo, p. 221.

³⁰¹ DeRoo, p. 227.

³⁰² DeRoo, p. 229.

³⁰³ DeRoo, p. 236.

those concerned with the French social class system or any other specific group. I pick this discussion up again in chapter four where I explore the empathic connection that photographs can create between the viewer and the subjects they represent.

I can point to an example of how Boltanski's art has resonance for different groups and cultures outside the French middle-class. His work, *The Lake of the Dead* (Figure 22) was exhibited in the renowned Japanese art museum, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Nagoya. It would be fair to say that French politics and social classes are not the most obvious points of reference for the Japanese viewers to engage with it. In fact, the Japanese reception of *Lake of the Dead* centred on traditional Japanese mythology.



Figure 22: Christian Boltanski, *The Lake of the Dead*, (used clothing, wooden bridge) (Nagoya, Japan: The Institute of Contemporary Art, 1990).

The work is composed of tons of used clothing, all donated by the residents of Nagoya, strewn across the vast museum floor. A prominent feature of the work is the wooden bridge that runs along the vast gallery floor, allowing the viewer to walk across the clothing without stepping on it. The bridge is reminiscent of a *hanamachi*, a ramp which symbolises

passage from life to death or from the world of the living into the world of the dead.³⁰⁴ The *hanamachi* originated in traditional Japanese Kabuki theatre so it would be familiar to most Japanese viewers. Since the *hanamachi* was where the dramatic, emotional scenes of intimacy and death were normally performed, the viewers of *The Lake of the Dead* experienced it as a *memento mori*, or image of death.³⁰⁵

The exhibition venue can have an influence on how a work is interpreted. The historic and culturally significant spaces have a history and memories of their own. They form an important part of the cultural memory of society. The history and memory associated with historic and important sites interact with and compliment the 'small memory' already existing in his artwork. His work can be linked to associations with both communicative and cultural memory simultaneously. The artefacts linked to the realm of communicative memory depict 'a trace of all the moments of our lives, all the objects that have surrounded us, everything we've said and what's been said around us'.³⁰⁶ When these artefacts are exhibited in the arts institutions of certain societies, or as Halbwachs might say, of certain collective groups, the epic memories and experiences associated with that venue may affect the interpretation of the work. When seen in the Spanish cathedral in Santiago, associations with religious memory may be privileged, but when a similar work of used clothing is exhibited in a Japanese cultural institution, the interpretation takes on a different point of reference. Viewers and commentators from both cultures recalled personal memories from their own background through the anonymous imagery in Boltanski's artwork, but the particular 'small stories' revisited in those personal memories will naturally vary. It is these

³⁰⁴ Faye Ran, *A History of Installation Art and the Development of New Art Forms: Technology and the Hermeneutics of Time from Space in Modern and Postmodern Art from Cubism to Installation* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 169.

³⁰⁵ Ran, p. 169.

³⁰⁶ Merewether, p. 25.

myriad 'small stories' that Boltanski's works conjure up in the mind of viewer. They engender interpretations that, at once, are unique and personal reflections on common experiences shared by individuals from all cultures: childhood, religion, work, and death.

Boltanski's art can be understood as oscillating between communicative and cultural memory. But Assmann's ideas cannot help to understand the *condition* of contemporary memory. For this part of my discussion, I turn to French historian Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire*. Even though the English translation of Nora's concept is 'realms of memory', I use the term 'sites of memory' in my discussion since it is most widely used by English-speaking writers to whom I refer. I provide some examples of sites of memory then highlight two fundamental characteristics of these memory sites in order to reveal the nature of contemporary memory inhabiting Boltanski's works: they are based on a sense of anxiety about remembering the past through its memories and traditions, and mnemonic reflection by individuals is privileged over collective remembrances and grand narratives dictated by broader societal conventions.

Sites of memory are 'where memory crystallises and secretes itself'.³⁰⁷ They range from archives where the 'deliberate and calculated secretion of lost memories' is built up and preserved, to 'libraries, dictionaries, and museums as well as to commemorations, celebrations, [...] cemeteries, festivals, anniversaries, treaties, depositions, monuments, sanctuaries, fraternal orders – these are the boundary stones of another age, illusions of eternity'.³⁰⁸ Sites of memory are mediated, constructed places, things and events where memory must be continually re-enacted, renewed, and rejuvenated in order to reinforce their precarious links to the traditions of the past. Contemporary society must protect sites

³⁰⁷ Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*', *Representations*, 26 (1989), 7-24 (p. 7).

³⁰⁸ Nora, p. 12.

of memory or else the traditions and memories associated with them will dissipate into forgetfulness since they are no longer sustaining, instinctive ways of life.

Nora said, '*Lieux de mémoire* originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organise celebrations, pronoun eulogies, and notarise bills because such activities no longer occur naturally'.³⁰⁹

The deluge of museums, films, TV shows and books about historical figures and events, obsession over family genealogies, even recent interest and increase in the monetary value of antiques and 'retro' fashion are just a few examples which all signal a pervasive neurotic anxiety centred around the crisis of lost collective tradition and memory in contemporary society. 'We speak so much of memory because there is so little of it'.³¹⁰

If traditions and memories of the past were not threatened by the contemporary world, which Nora argues is driven by an unquenchable thirst for change and progression, we would have no reason to protect them.³¹¹ We can say that these contemporary memory sites compensate for a ubiquitous, collective anxiety in society; as social traditions and memories fade into the past, and established collective identities along with them, sites of memory proliferate as a last-ditch attempt to preserve what little of pre-modern customs and values still remain. Their fundamental purpose, therefore, is 'to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things', or in other words, to atone for the disintegration of age-old customs and rituals which are transformed and mythologised into

³⁰⁹ Nora, p. 12.

³¹⁰ Nora, p. 7.

³¹¹ Nora, p. 12.

legend for the contemporary world.³¹² 'We moderns have lost contact with the past, and the role of sites of memory is to provide an illusory substitute for that loss'.³¹³

When you approach most of Boltanski's artworks, initial impressions tend to focus on two elements: the vast number of objects each work contains and the sense of pathos underpinning his art. His artistic statement from his early work, *Recherche et Présentation de Tout ce qui Reste de Mon Enfance, 1944-1950* in 1969, holds the key to the reason why Boltanski accumulates so many objects and incorporates them into his work. Boltanski wrote that, through his art, he wants to preserve all the traces and remnants of his life. It is worth quoting the entirety of Boltanski's words as they appeared on the flyleaf to the book.

We will never realise quite clearly enough what a shameful thing death is. In the end, we never try to fight it head on; doctors and scientists merely establish a pact with it, they fight on points of detail, they slow it down by a few months, a few years, but it all amounts to nothing. What we need to do is attack the roots of the problem in a big collective effort in which each of us will work toward his own survival and everyone else's.

That's why – because one of us has to give an example – I decided to harness myself to the project that's been close to my heart for a long time: preserving oneself whole, keeping a trace of all the moments of our lives, all the objects that have

³¹² Nora, p. 19.

³¹³ Poole, p. 48, footnote 5.

surrounded us, everything we've said and what's been said around us, that's my goal.

The task is vast, and my means are frail. Why didn't I start before? Almost everything dealing with the period that I first set about saving (6 September 1944 to 24 July 1950) has been lost, thrown away, through culpable negligence. It was only with infinite difficulty that I was able to find the few elements that I am presenting here. To prove their authenticity, to situate them precisely, all this has been possible only as a result of ceaseless questioning and minutely detailed research

But the effort still to be made is great. So many years will be spent searching, studying, classifying, before my life is secured, carefully arranged and labelled in a safe place – secure against theft, fire, and nuclear war – from whence it will be possible to take it out and assemble it at any point. Then, being thus assured of never dying, I may finally rest.³¹⁴

To this end, Boltanski sought to collect everything associated with one's childhood and life. When all is said and done, his artistic practice represents a mania, or obsession, with retrieving all the things which one came into contact with during their life. The anxiety of saving oneself from being forgotten after death is the main motivation behind his preservation of memories and the objects associated with himself and others.

³¹⁴ Merewether, p. 25.

The anxiety behind Boltanski's obsessive accumulation of old photographs and various objects can be seen throughout his career. Examples include *Inventaire des Objets Ayant Appartenu a une Femme de Bois-Colombes* (*Inventory of Objects Belonging to a Woman of Bois-Colombes*) from 1974 which comprises 310 different items of clothing, kitchenware, used toiletries, books, and family photographs owned and used by an anonymous woman from Bois-Colombes. Each artefact is individually photographed as a document and organised in the artist's book in tidy rows.

We recall *Les Enfants de Dijon* from 1985 which shows dozens of anonymous children's portraits hung on the wall of a darkened gallery, each framed individually and enveloped in small white lights. More recent examples include *Wheel of Fortune* from 2014 which 'resembles a giant newspaper press assembled from 20 tonnes of scaffolding, piping and computer screens' and shows hundreds of individual photos of Polish newborns, or *Les Abonnés du Téléphone* (*The Telephone Directories*), from 2002, which shows 3,000 telephone directories, placed in shelves on all four walls of a darkened room at the Southbank Gallery in London.³¹⁵ The directories are from around the world and the work endeavours to invite the viewer to contemplate the sheer volume of people, many who are dead since the directories are a few years out of date. In these works, and many more, there is an overwhelming sense of desperation underpinning the immense number of items collected. The accumulation of an anonymous person's clothing, portrait, or name in the telephone directly, as a testimony to the past existence of an individual, is recorded, stored, and preserved by Boltanski as a strategy 'to struggle against death. The first text I wrote, for my 1969 book [*Recherche et Présentation de Tout ce qui Reste de Mon Enfance, 1944–*

³¹⁵ Andrew Taylor, 'In Art and Life, Christian Boltanski takes a chance', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 January 2014, <<https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/in-art-and-life-christian-boltanski-takes-a-chance-20140107-30fdq.html>> [accessed 15 April 2019].

1950], said almost the exact same thing I could say today: “Death is a shameful thing. We must try to preserve everything, save the slightest memory”³¹⁶.

When I translate Boltanski’s works through Nora’s concept of sites of memory, the anxiety of remembering the past in his works is clearly exposed. His artworks are laden with anxiety; they are fundamentally based on a profound need to preserve what little remains of memory and the deep unease in the ability to protect those memories from disappearing into oblivion. Nora argued that sites of memory attempt ‘the complete conservation of the present as well as the total preservation of the past. Fear of a rapid and final disappearance combines with anxiety about the meaning of the present and uncertainty about the future to give even the most humble testimony, the modest vestige, the potential dignity of the memorable’.³¹⁷ When reading his artistic mission through the concept of the site of memory, his art acts as a way to fight against the forgetfulness that comes with death and disappearance, all the while knowing that his struggle will end in failure.

Boltanski admitted the failure his artistic aims will ultimately meet when he said, ‘You can’t retain anything [...] it’s impossible. And all the archival work I’ve done from the beginning, this wish to keep track of everything, certainly translates this kind of desire, a desire to halt death in its tracks’.³¹⁸ Boltanski’s artworks aim to materialise the remains of a long-past, forgotten person or event. The inevitable failure of Boltanski’s art to hold on to the past is understood when Nora identified the qualifying feature of a site of memory as its ‘failure to have become what its founders hoped’.³¹⁹

³¹⁶ Grenier, p. 45.

³¹⁷ Nora, p. 13.

³¹⁸ Grenier, p. 81.

³¹⁹ Nora, p. 20.

In my chapter on the critical reception of Boltanski's art, I argued that the dominant interpretation surrounding his work centres on narratives of the Holocaust. Writers such as Donald Kuspit supported this claim when he wrote that the pathos inherent in his art refers to his Jewish father's trauma suffered during Holocaust. Marianne Hirsch has also written that 'we recognize not the people or the world rebuilt, but the forms of memorialization and mourning, the technological shapes of Holocaust persecution and extermination, the names of a destroyed world and of the means of its destruction'.³²⁰ When we understand the sheer volume of objects comprising many of Boltanski's works and the visceral sense of anxiety oozing out from them through Nora's concept of the site of memory, an open-ended interpretation of his art is revealed. Rather than the underlying pathos and hordes of objects alluding specifically and solely to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust, they can be understood to relate to the pervasive anxiety and desperation inherent in many contemporary mnemonic sites that try, albeit unsuccessfully, to capture and contain a society's collective memories that will inevitably disappear.

When traditional collective remembrance practices suffer a breakdown in their connections to the past, the interpretation of any remaining traces is determined by diversified local communities and individuals who do the remembering.³²¹ Collective memories that have atomised into sites of memory are reduced from 'habit' and 'unspoken traditions' to 'individual, and subjective', no longer 'social, collective, or all encompassing'.³²² That is to say that an objective meaning informed by tradition is transformed into 'its subjective

³²⁰ Hirsch, p. 678.

³²¹ Bill Schwarz, 'Memory, Temporality, Modernity: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*' in *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, ed. by Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010) pp. 41-60 (p. 54).

³²² Nora, p. 13.

reception' by the individual.³²³ Nora argued that in contemporary society, the individual is tasked with the duty to remember since collective memories and commemoration practices are no longer dictated by society as a whole. He wrote that 'the less memory is experienced collectively, the more it will require the individual to undertake to become themselves memory-individuals'.³²⁴

The mnemonic images are from what Boltanski calls 'small memories', or the fleeting, unremarkable memories of individuals which often go unnoticed. The 'small memories' stem from common and familiar communicative imagery from childhood since this is the time of life which most members of society have in common. Boltanski starts with anonymous imagery pulled from the collective unconscious – old photographic portraits of unknown children, rusty tin souvenir boxes in which children traditionally used to store their keepsakes, used children's clothing – and presents it to the viewer in order to stimulate similar memories from their own background and memories. 'What's most important about art is that it's utterly universal and collective, but everyone who takes it in thinks it's personal and recognises himself in it'.³²⁵

When we filter Boltanski's comment through Nora's idea of sites of memory, we understand that the artist intends his work to promote individual reflection. In Nora's own words: 'an order is given to remember, but the responsibility is mine and it is I who must remember'.³²⁶ To be clear, Boltanski does not present a pre-established or prescribed narrative which hand-feeds the meaning of the work to the viewer. Rather, the individual alone recognises similar memories from his or her own life through the anonymous collective imagery found

³²³ Nora, p. 15.

³²⁴ Nora, p. 16.

³²⁵ Grenier, p. 238.

³²⁶ Nora, p. 15.

in the work. This recognition rekindles those personal memories in the viewer's mind, and here rests the meaning of his artwork. 'Everyone will reconstitute their own history, their own world which is more felt than perceived, like an odour. Everyone sees what they want to see'.³²⁷

Boltanski himself engaged with the imagery associated with communicative imagery to elicit his own childhood memories in his work from 1972, *The 62 Members of the Mickey Mouse Club, 1955*. This work depicts sixty-two images of anonymous children's black-and-white photographs from 1955 sent in by average children to the Mickey Mouse Club magazine. The photographs, seemingly pulled from family photo albums, are closely arranged side-by-side in a grid of six columns by ten rows (one of the photographs depicts three children). Boltanski commented on how he identified with the children when he first saw them when he said, 'I was eleven years old and I resembled these sixty-two children, whose photos were pictured in that year's Mickey Mouse Club magazine [...] They had the same desires and the same interests as I did.'³²⁸ For Boltanski, the anonymous images of children who loved Mickey Mouse were similar to the dreams and desires he also had as a child; their anonymity meant that their own story receded whilst Boltanski's own desires came to the foreground of meaning. Their photographs reminded him something personal about himself. Whilst the images of unknown children have no specific message in their own right, since they are decontextualized from their original place (the Mickey Mouse Club magazine) and time (the 1950s), Boltanski was able to reignite similar memories from his own background and apply them to his own work. For him, the meaning of the works centres on

³²⁷ Georgia Marsh, 'Christian Boltanski: An interview with Georgia Marsh', *Christian Boltanski: Reconstitution* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery Publishers, 1990), p. 9.

³²⁸ Gumpert, p. 36.

his own background; for another viewer, the meaning of the work will centre on his or her own similar memories inspired by the generic imagery.

Boltanski relies on the ability of broad collective imagery to act as a breeding ground for multiple interpretations. The meaning attached to a site of memory, and we can see this in his artwork, is therefore not grounded in one dominant traditional narrative that encapsulates the experience and memory of an entire society. It is shattered into myriad, polysemic interpretations. Sites of memory have an 'endless recycling of their meaning'.³²⁹ When we understand his art through the concept of the site of memory, the work 'crystallises and secretes' memory that acts as a catalyst to precipitate personal memory in the viewer.

I now cast my net out to include the mnemonic tendencies in contemporary artistic practices since the 1980s. Boltanski's art, I argue, can be understood to participate in similar mnemonic and aesthetic strategies as 'countermonuments', a term coined by historian James E. Young. I continue my discussion by tracing the history of countermonuments, investigating some of their essential characteristics, and applying them to two of Boltanski's artworks: *The Missing House* of 1990 (Figure 27) and *Les Archives de Coeur* (*The Heart Archives*) which Boltanski began in 2008. I argue that these two works share similar tendencies as expressed in specific countermonuments: the use of the void to signify irreparable loss, and the work's ability to inspire viewer participation to construct the work and determine its meaning forged from their own background.

Young wrote that countermonuments have a disruptive function in the traditional collective memory practices of a society. In his words, 'Its aim was not to console, but to provoke; not

³²⁹ Nora, p. 19.

to remain fixed, but to change; not to be everlasting but to disappear; not to be ignored by its passer-by but to demand interaction; not to remain pristine but to invite its own violation; not to accept graciously the burden of memory but to throw it back at the town's feet'.³³⁰ He was describing a new tendency in public monuments which was seen as a backlash against traditional public monuments. In the late 1980s, disgruntled German artists struggled to express their dissatisfaction with the inability of their own national memorials and monuments to remember victims of the Holocaust and National Socialism in a revitalized, meaningful and contemporary way that did not entail a glorification of fascism. In fact, this new breed of monument – the countermonument – opposes the traditional conventions of traditional public monuments in their exhausted and unflinching adherence to an official, state-sponsored and celebratory representation of a victorious event or national figure.

These German artists claim that traditional monuments breed amnesia in the viewer in a way that displaces memory, locking it away into the monumental object, thus becoming forever ossified and outdated. Strictly speaking, the monument becomes memory's grave. This displacement, instead of aiding memory, encourages forgetting as society neglects its duty to remember in favour of abdicating its obligation to the monument. In turn, the monument becomes the depository for memory, not engaging the viewer to remember the past themselves. The monument no longer attracts attention and numbs the recollection of the event or hero which is, by now, consigned to a distant and forgotten past. What was

³³⁰ James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 7-8.

once impossible to forget becomes impossible to remember. As Austrian writer Robert Musil observed in 1927, ‘there is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument’.³³¹

Traditional monuments typically represent national heroes or military victories, or those who are deemed worthy by officially sanctioned narratives of commemoration for posterity.

Traditional monuments were first erected in the early nineteenth century in order to commemorate ‘important personages or patriotic events and memories.’³³² Motivated by political agendas, these monuments to fallen heroes and military triumphs solidified national and official histories allowing for specific state-sponsored identity to become concretised and eternalised.



Figure 23: Armand de Vée, *Statue Napoléon*, (Cherbourg-Octeville: France, 1858).

In the late 1980s, German artists were keen to examine how they could express their feelings of shame in National Socialism and fascism. Their work began to address memory

³³¹ Robert Musil, ‘Monuments’, in *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, trans. by Peter Wortsman (New York: Archipelago Books, 1995) 64-68 (p. 64).

³³² Sergiusz Michalski, *Public Monuments: Art in Political Bondage 1870-1997* (London: Reaktion Books, 1998), p. 8.

not in terms of celebrated war heroes and imperialistic conquests but by advocating the voice of the victim and traumatised survivors of military and ideological catastrophe. By highlighting the victim instead of the victor, these artists created public works that challenge official histories and narratives, allowing for other points of view to surface and be acknowledged. The countermonument seeks to interrogate – but importantly, not dictate – collective memories, subverting official national histories of the hero and the triumphant nation.

Opposed to unified, large scale, and figurative formal designs typifying traditional monuments, such as de Veél's mid-nineteenth century memorial entitled *Statue Napoléon* (Figure 23), countermonuments are stylistically characterised as abstract, fragmented, and make use of voids and ephemerality within the monumental structure itself. Abstraction of form and voids disallows grand themes or narratives to be promoted since figurative styles enable viewers to construct narratives which maintain and reaffirm outdated and contentious histories and ideologies. Artists incorporate invisibility, absence and voids structurally within the countermonumental object as a way to represent missing victims who have died or disappeared. Michalski states that invisibility and absence connects to the philosophical-aesthetic debate on the Holocaust during the 1970s and 1980s where it was described as a 'black hole'. A visual manifestation of this idea led to invisibility and voids: 'a way of delimiting the empty space by a whole civilisation which has perished in the gas chambers'.³³³ The void can be seen as an inconsolable expression of the hole left behind by the victims of the attack as well as the monument itself. The void can never be filled, and this visually signals physical and existential loss and disappearance.

³³³ Michalski, p. 176.



Figure 24: Jochen Gerz, *The Harburg Monument Against Fascism* (Harburg, Germany, 1989).

An example of an artist using the void and invisibility is Jochen Gerz. His work, *Harburg Memorial against Fascism* (Figure 24) was unveiled in 1986 and stood twelve meters high, composed of a hollow aluminium column that is plated with a soft layer of dark lead, enabling and encouraging visitors to inscribe names or messages into the lead as a show of solidarity against fascism. The tower slowly disappears; each time a visitor signs their name or writes a message onto the column, they build up thus prompting the tower to be lowered further and further into the ground. The disappearing structure of the countermonument is meant as a gesture by the artist to leave the work of memory with the townspeople and its visitors, not with the monument itself. At the base of the tower reads in seven languages (German, French, Russian, Hebrew, Arabic, Turkish and English):

We invite the citizens of Harburg and visitors to the town, to add their names here to ours. In doing so, we commit ourselves to remain vigilant. As more and more names cover this 12-meter-tall lead column, it will gradually be lowered into the ground. One day, it will have disappeared completely and the site of the

Harburg monument against fascism will be empty. In the end, it is only we ourselves who can rise up against injustice.³³⁴

Another example of a countermonument structured around the void and negative space is Horst Hoheisel's *Ashrottbrunnen* in Kassell, Germany (Figure 26). It was designed as the negative form of the original *Ashrottbrunnen* fountain. The original was commissioned in 1908 by a Jewish entrepreneur, Sigmund Ashrott, and designed by architect Karl Roth (Figure 25). The fountain was situated in the Courtyard of Honour on the grounds of City Hall and symbolised the townspeople's civic pride.³³⁵ In 1939, because it was considered a 'Jew's foundation', the Nazis tore it down, replacing it with flowers and dubbing it 'Ashrott's Grave'.³³⁶



Figure 25: Karl Roth, *Ashrottbrunnen*, (Kassell, Germany, 1908).

³³⁴ Young, p. 275-6.

³³⁵ Horst Hoheisel, 'Ashrott Fountain (Kassel1985)' (n.d.)

<http://www.knitz.net/index.php?Itemid=3&id=30&option=com_content&task=view&lang=en> [accessed 29 September 2019]

³³⁶ Ellen Handler Spitz, 'Loss as Vanished Form: On the Anti-Memorial Sculptures of Horst Hoheisel', *American Imago*, 62, 4 (2006) 419-433 (p. 423).



Figure 26: Horst Hoheisel, *Ashrottbrunnen Monument*,
(Kassell Germany, 1987).

In 1986, Hoheisel was permitted to make a work to commemorate the original *Aschrottbrunnen*. The result is a fountain, the exact negative form of the original, albeit underground (Figure 26). Visitors cannot see the countermonument but they can hear the water pouring down into a seeming abyss. Hoheisel's own words describe the fountain, 'With the running water, our thoughts can be drawn into the depths of history, and there perhaps we will encounter feelings of loss, of a disturbed peace, and of partially forgotten form'.³³⁷

The Missing House is a public work by Boltanski which makes use of the void, when seen through the lens of the countermonument (Figure 27). It is comprised of an empty space between two terraced houses on East Berlin's Hamburgerstrasse. The house, which stood at 15/16 Hamburgerstrasse, was bombed in 1945 but was never rebuilt. Boltanski hung plaques inside the remaining two walls either side of the house, marking the approximate parts of the building where the former Jewish and non-Jewish tenants lived. Listed are the names, professions and years of residency of the former inhabitants. It was produced as

³³⁷ Handler Spitz, p. 424.

part of an exhibition entitled, 'Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit' ('The Finitude of Freedom') which considered the conditions faced by Berlin after World War II, and later the fall of the Berlin Wall and communism. This particular space was chosen by Boltanski, however, he was unaware of the Jewish ethnicity of some of its former inhabitants.³³⁸ Abigail Solomon-Godeau stated, '*The Missing House* in its permanent incarnation is consistent with a growing number of countermonuments in Germany in so far as it takes its presiding metaphors as the historical facts of absence and disappearance. On the other hand, it universalises these facts, since as earlier indicated, the genesis of the work involved no consideration of the particular fate of Berlin's Jews, nor of their occupancy prior to the building'.³³⁹



Figure 27: Christian Boltanski, *The Missing House*, (Berlin, Germany, 1990)

During the exhibition, which ran in 1990, *The Missing House* had another part, located at the former site of the Berliner Gewerbeausstellung, or commercial exhibition hall, entitled *The*

³³⁸ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'Mourning or Melancholia: Christian Boltanski's *The Missing House*', *Oxford Art Journal*, 21, 2 (1998), 3-20 (p. 3).

³³⁹ Solomon-Godeau, p. 7.

Vitrines. The ten vitrines contained the documentary evidence of the former inhabitants. The exhibition's curator, Wulf Herzogenrath, described the contents of *The Vitrines* as, 'recollections of the inhabitants by survivors, address books, accounts of the bombardments, property records from the main tax office, and records on fires from a fire insurance company'.³⁴⁰ Also in possession was 'information on the Jewish residents provided by genealogical trees kept by the Reichssippenamt, or Office of Genealogy, as well as property lists and deportation records of the Jewish tenants. In particular, records on a Jewish civil servant, named Julian Schnapp, show he was ordered to give details of his assets from communication with the Gestapo. His possessions were taxed on their worth, his apartment was sealed, and he was deported to Theresienstadt concentration camp on 17 July 1944'.³⁴¹

Loss is the predominant feature of this work, signalled by the negated structure of the void. Even though *The Vitrines* provides specific information about identifiable people, especially Julian Schnapp, the permanent work does not feature *The Vitrines* and therefore, the name plaques alone render the identities of the former inhabitants too generic. So generic, in fact, that instead of it pointing to the identity of the former inhabitants, it fails to recuperate their memory and therefore commemorates nothing in particular. *The Missing House* is itself a permanent memorial to loss and absence. As such, the passer-by is alerted to the fact that this is a marked site, a commemorative space which nothingness has been inscribed with a historical reference, but a reference whose significance remains troublingly

³⁴⁰ Wulf Herzogenrath, *Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit 1990: Ein Ausstellungsprojekt in Ost und West* (Berlin: Edition Hentrich, 1990), p. 85.

³⁴¹ Herzogenrath, p. 85.

enigmatic [...] there is no way to reconstruct the existence of the immediately previous residents [...] there is no way to infer what happened to the building itself'.³⁴²

Another defining feature of the countermonument is the dominance of the viewer in deciding the work's meaning. Some artists solicit viewers to construct the work as a strategy to stimulate memory in the viewer themselves. As Young points out, 'The site alone cannot remember [...] it is the project of memory by visitors into a space that makes it a memorial'.³⁴³ So when engaged visitors interact with the countermonument, they are better able to project their own experiences onto the work. For instance, Horst Hoheisel's monument entitled *Denk-Stein-Sammlung* (*Thought-Stone-Collection*) (Figure 28) also in Kassel, is a memorial to the Jewish citizens of the city who were deported to concentration camps during National Socialism. To construct the monument, Hoheisel invited German students from the local school to visit former Jewish neighbourhoods near their homes and learn as much as they could about a Jewish Holocaust victim. He instructed them to write something about that person on a piece of paper and then attach it to a stone for deposit into a specially-designed bin.³⁴⁴



Figure 28: Horst Hoheisel, *Thought-Stone-Collection* (Kassel, Germany, 1989-1993).

³⁴² Solomon-Godeau, p. 7.

³⁴³ Young, p. 286.

³⁴⁴ Handler Spitz, pp. 425-6.

By inviting the students not only to conduct research into the subject of the monument – Kassell’s Jewish Holocaust victims – but also to write a story about the victim and attach it to the stone from which the monument would be made, Hoheisel demonstrates that memory is best kept alive when fully engaging the visitor. In this way, the visitor becomes activated as not only an observer, but also as the gatherer, producer and builder of memory, empowering them to fulfil their responsibility for keeping the memory alive, good or bad, of their town and country.

In a similar vein, although not built on the trauma of the Holocaust or wartime victims, Boltanski’s work, *Les Archives du Coeur*, also relies on the visitor to actively engage with the construction of the work. Since 2008, the artist has been collecting and storing thousands of recordings of visitors’ heartbeats. The work is located on Teshima, a remote island off the coast of Japan, in a purpose-built building. Boltanski started recording the heartbeat of visitors to his shows from all around the world, but once the work was relocated and housed in Teshima, visitors are able to listen to other peoples’ heartbeats as well as have their own recorded and stored. In the recording room, visitors can record their own heartbeats as part of the archive. Visitors may also search through and listen to recordings of other people’s heartbeat.

Much like the blurring of the visitor-as-participant or visitor-as-creator of the work in *Denk-Stein-Sammlung*, the visitor to Teshima is asked to not only listen to the recordings of other peoples’ heartbeats but to also provide a digital recording of their own heartbeat as a future testament to their own existence. Although these two works differ in terms of the content – one is based on the traumatic local stories of their Jewish neighbours who perished during the Holocaust whilst the other is more benevolent and autobiographical – both are similar in that they rely on the viewer to build up and provide content for the work. The language of

the countermonument allows us to understand that the production of memory in *Les Archives du Coeur* is made by the visitor, not by Boltanski. The artist provides the means, but the individual visitor provides the content of memory for future generations and even their own descendants. In effect, the countermonument resists the didactic stance of the traditional monument in preference of an interrogative perspective where grand narratives, hegemonic histories and dominant ideologies are challenged, albeit without offering new perspectives or insights. Any meaning derived from *Les Archives du Coeur*, as we have seen with the countermonument, is left open to the visitor to determine for themselves.

Since countermonuments contest official narratives, the meaning of the work is located firmly with the viewer. Their own present-day memories, desires, and interests colour the interpretation of the work. Young stated that artists of countermonuments seek to enable the visitors themselves to remember and are 'left to look inward for memory' rather than rely on pre-established, official narratives to provide the meaning of the work.³⁴⁵ Boltanski's works, *The Missing House* and *Les Archives du Coeur*, as well as his entire oeuvre, also empower the viewer to construct the meaning of his works for him or herself. Boltanski said, 'For me, being an artist means emphasising something that exists [...] The artist reveals to people looking at the work something that's already inside of them, something they know deep down, and he brings it up into their consciousness'.³⁴⁶ By approaching Boltanski's works through the issues surrounding countermonuments, we see that he clearly uses similar strategies. What is revealed is that his artworks do not simply retell grand narratives which seek to encapsulate meaning within its own terms, such as the Holocaust narrative, but asks the viewer to use the generic, ambiguous imagery to stimulate similar

³⁴⁵ Young, p. 294.

³⁴⁶ Grenier, pp. 163-4.

memories from their own background, and thus, decipher meaning based on their own desires and interests.

In this chapter, I have shown that Boltanski depicts familiar images and objects associated with the collective memory of a society. Specifically, imagery of the family group, or more precisely of childhood, because it appeals to the broadest range of individuals. 'It is true that all sorts of ideas can call to mind recollections of our family. In fact, from the moment that the family is the group within which we pass the major part of our life, family thoughts become ingredients of most of our thoughts. Our kin communicate to us our first notions about people and things.'³⁴⁷ Boltanski intuited that childhood is that period of life when individuals share the most common experiences and artefacts: school pictures, family photo album photographs, and other more personal imagery pulled from collective memory.

This is important to my overall argument because I can now nail down the fact that this artist represents stereotypical images that come from the realm of collective memory, and not, as the dominant interpretation says, from the memory specific to the Holocaust. This discovery has significant implications for the understanding of his work and my argument going forward.

I contributed the idea that most of Boltanski's everyday images are taken from the realm of communicative memory. Old family photo album photographs, rusty tin biscuit boxes, and second-hand clothing are the most frequently used objects in his oeuvre because he sensed

³⁴⁷ Halbwachs, p. 61.

they are highly recognisable yet the most vulnerable to forgetfulness. If these kinds of memory are not constantly maintained, they will fade into oblivion.³⁴⁸

Furthermore, I shed light on the symbiotic relationship between personal and collective memory. Halbwachs claimed that, 'the framework of collective memory confines and binds our most intimate remembrances'.³⁴⁹ This artist relies on the mutually beneficial relationship between collective and personal memory; he wants the collective mnemonic imagery to stimulate personal memory in the mind of the viewer. I contributed to the knowledge that Boltanski's work accommodates both types of collective memory simultaneously. Informal memories of local communities and close-knit groups mingle with the official, broad memory of society as a whole to enhance each other.

The convergence between Boltanski's art and the site of memory is another contribution to the discussion about his work. I illuminated new insights: his art exudes deep-seated fears and anxiety regarding the eroding nature of memory in contemporary society. This pathos is based on the fear that the memories of someone or something from the past is inevitably consigned to forgetfulness. The imagery that he uses tends to represent are displayed in vast accumulations: articles of clothing, family photo album photographs of children, and rusty tin biscuit boxes. The enormous weight of memory reveals an anxious underbelly to his work. His obsession with collecting, I argued, compensates for the contemporary condition of forgetfulness.

A site of memory highlights that the once ubiquitous, spontaneous collective memory of society is dissolving into atomised places and events which compensate for it through deliberate performances and continuous reconstructions. The traces are 'the end of a

³⁴⁸ Assmann and Czaplicka, p. 127.

³⁴⁹ Halbwachs, p. 53.

tradition of memory' and therefore must be conjured up in the mind of the individual.³⁵⁰ I applied this idea in order to prove that Boltanski anticipates the primacy of the individual viewer to recall similar memories from their own past, rather than relying on pre-established narratives.

Finally, I contributed to the historical relevance of Boltanski's work by situating it within the context of countermonuments. Many concerns and aesthetic devices found in countermonuments run parallel to similar concerns exercised in Boltanski's art. I argued that the idea of disappearance and the void in *The Missing House* alludes to the physical and existential loss of anonymous individuals who are dead or disappeared. What is more, I showed that an essential feature of countermonuments is their opposition to overarching, grand narratives. This idea allowed me to clarify the fact that the collective images in themselves do not conform to the narrative on any specific event. Instead, they are intentionally receptive to many different personal interpretations, each one based on similar memories from the viewer's own background.

What is more, the mnemonic images are unsettling because they do not belong to anyone in particular. They are deliberately manufactured to look like they come from the past. Strictly speaking, the images have no direct connection to actual memories. In the next chapter, I explore how the artist manufactures false representations of the past and memory and what impact this practice has on the meaning of his art.

³⁵⁰ Nora, p. 11.

**SYMBOLS DISGUISED AS INDICES:
THE PLAY OF THE POSTINDEX IN CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI'S ART**

This chapter is about the appearance of authenticity and pastness that Boltanski manufactures in his mnemonic imagery. I want to understand how and why he constructs his art in a way that makes it look like it directly refers to a real but unknown person in the past when, in truth, it does not. I discuss the meaning of two important features which he frequently falsifies: the authenticity of his name in the context of self-portraiture and the material quality of age and decay in objects such as old photographs and rusty old tin biscuit boxes.

In the previous chapter, I argued that these objects and imagery represent the collective storehouse of communicative memory. The images allude to 'small memories', in Boltanski's words, which are part of the private, everyday, fleeting experiences and memories that are common, and therefore familiar, to most people in Western societies. However, whilst I explained the mnemonic content and condition of the imagery, in this chapter, the concept of the postindex, or a symbol which mimics the appearance of the index, provides me with the ability to pinpoint how and why Boltanski falsifies those memories.

Before examining the concept of the postindex in more detail, it is important to explore the principles from which it originated: the triadic sign theory of Charles Sanders Peirce based on the symbol, the icon, and the index. His ideas associated with the three kinds of signs allow me to distinguish, in a deeper and more succinct analysis, the false sense of authenticity and old age which operate in Boltanski's work. To be clear, Fernand de Saussure's bilateral theory of the sign, composed of the signifier and the signified, does not give me the vocabulary I need to approach Boltanski's art with this amount of precision.

I focus on the indexical sign since it features most prominently in his work. I can dig deeper into the significance of the index by splitting it into two types: the physical imprint of the referent and the deixis, or a linguistic expression which points to the referent through the context of which it appears. What I mean to say is that the referent varies because it is dependent on the time and place in which the deixis is used.

Since Boltanski uses imagery and objects seemingly pulled directly from reality, I explain that their meaning changes when situated in different contexts. More precisely, meaning can change when an everyday object is placed in the aesthetic setting of an artwork. I show that conceptual artists in the 1960s and 1970s, when Boltanski's artistic career began, were already exposing the altered meaning of objects in aesthetic visual representation.

Specifically, their works asked if visual artistic practices are truly able to capture the lived reality that surrounds those everyday images and objects. I target artists whose works challenged the ability of the indexical trace and deixis to signify real life because I want to discover if Boltanski also focusses on similar ideas.

This brings me to my discussion about the postindex and how it appears to refer to an actual person in the past. I show that the objects in Boltanski's art *simulate* certain visual characteristics associated with indexical signs, such as physical traces of the past in analogue photographs, the patina of rusty decay on old biscuit boxes, and used clothing which retains the smells and bodily imprints of previous owners. He designs generic collective mnemonic imagery to bear fake hallmarks of indexical signs, such as old age and a lived-in quality of the human touch. He also distorts the referent of his own name in his works which are presented as self-portraits. Whilst self-portraits are meant to represent the artist, this is not the case in much of Boltanski's oeuvre. I want to understand why and how he does this and what function it serves his art.

My contributions in this chapter are, firstly, to expose that Boltanski skilfully constructed a ruse in much of his work. To be precise, he falsifies the aura, or the object's uniqueness in time and space, that accompanies most imagery from collective memory. This brings me to my second contribution: development of the concept of the postindex. I distinguish the two indexical features that the artist fabricates in the aura with the help of the concept of the postindex imitates. Boltanski uses the strategy of the postindex to mimic the mnemonic images faithfulness to its referent and testimony to a past reality.

This has implications for my thesis as a whole because it fills a gap in the knowledge around Boltanski's reasoning for falsifying the look of the past. Also, most importantly, I explain that Boltanski creates ambiguous images that simulate the appearance of personal memories which most people have in common. These ill-defined images of a fabricated past stand the best chance of reviving similar memories in the mind of the viewer. These are my contributions found in this chapter.

Peirce argued that a symbol is a sign that draws its meaning from general, shared conventions which must be learnt. Its meaning is arbitrary and so has no natural relation to the object or idea to which it refers; members of society must learn the meaning of each symbol. An example would be the alphabet. The meaning, sound, and pronunciation of the letter 'A' are different in various languages. One must learn its meaning in a language system. The symbol refers to something else 'by virtue of law, usually an association of general ideas'.³⁵¹ And further, 'a symbol is a sign which would lose the character which renders it a sign if there were no interpretant. Such as any utterance of speech which

³⁵¹ Charles S. Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. by Justus Buchler (New York, Dover Publications, 2012), p. 102.

signifies what it does only by virtue of its being understood to have that signification'.³⁵²

Peirce's example of a spoken word highlights that it conveys meaning only if the speaker and the receiver of the utterance learned and understood the same or similar meaning for that particular sound.

The icon is a sign that resembles its referent in some capacity since they share an objectively similar characteristic.³⁵³ An icon can look, smell, sound, or taste like the object to which it refers. An icon is a sort of twin to its referent in varying degrees; in some respect it is homogeneous to the object to which it refers. Peirce wrote, that the icon 'is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes merely by virtue of characters of its own, and which it possesses, just the same, whether any such Object actually exists or not'.³⁵⁴ The iconic sign can be a 'quality, existent individual, or law [...] in so far as it is like that thing and used as a sign of it'.³⁵⁵

Finally, the index bears a causal relation or physical connection to its referent. In some way, it bears the imprint of its referent.³⁵⁶ Examples mentioned by Peirce include photographs. He said, 'Photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that they are in certain respects exactly like the objects they represent. But this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature. In that respect, they belong to the second class of signs, those by physical connection'.³⁵⁷

³⁵² Peirce, p. 104.

³⁵³ Peirce, p. 104.

³⁵⁴ Peirce, p. 102.

³⁵⁵ Peirce, p. 102.

³⁵⁶ Peirce, p. 102.

³⁵⁷ Charles S. Peirce, "What is a Sign?" in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings, volume 2 (1893-1913)*, The Peirce Edition Project (ed), University of Indiana Press: Bloomington, 1998, p. 5-6.

Pierce also identified photographs as icons since they visually resemble their referent however, my point about the index is that it is the physical trace, or imprint, of its referent. Photographs, particularly analogue photographs with which Peirce was familiar, are indices because they are the result of the physical effect of light rays bouncing off an object and embedding into the filmic negative slide inside the camera situated in front of it. Those light rays shape the subject's image, point for point, on the filmic negative's chemically sensitive surface. In this way, the photograph is traditionally understood as physical proof that a certain subject or object really existed at a particular place and time in the past in front of the camera's lens.

The three types of signs may exist simultaneously; rarely are signs purely indexical, iconic, or symbolic. For example, if we see a footprint in the sand at the beach, all that we can really be certain of is that *something* left its imprint. Peirce wrote that, for example, a loud boom indicates that something considerable happened, though we may not know precisely what the event was that created it.³⁵⁸ Basically, an indexical sign can only verify existence in the past. But footprints also carry iconic elements, such as resembling the outline of the foot when it hits the ground, but the indexical features can only point to the fact that someone walked on the sand and left the mark conforming to its shape. Even more, footprints can possess symbolic meaning, such as ideas of the beach, or if it is an infant's footprint, with childhood, parenthood, or a multitude of other conventional associations. My point is that a single sign can signify in all three ways at the same time. And since their referents differ, they remain conceptually distinct. It is important to distinguish between these types of signs because we must know how we read Boltanski's work: is our interpretation based on

³⁵⁸ Peirce, p. 109.

symbolic metaphor, iconic resemblance, the indexical pointer? Or, as I will argue in regards to Boltanski's art, all three types play their own distinctive part.

Before discussing signification in Boltanski's works, it is worth considering some of the issues that arise more generally in relation to the different kinds of indexical signs and the meaning they generate in an image. As Mary Ann Doane has noted, because Peirce applied the concept of the index to such 'diverse signs as footprints, a weathervane, thunder, the word "this", a pointing finger, and a photographic image, it is not difficult to see why the concept has occasioned confusion'.³⁵⁹ Consequently, Doane distinguishes between two types of indexical signs: the physical trace and deixis. Both types of indices are useful in the interpretation of Boltanski's work.

The deictic index has been associated to the linguistic term of the shifter. It is a context-dependent indexical sign that points directly to its referent and experienced in words such as 'this', 'there,' 'I', or 'you' in a sentence. Whilst indices of the physical trace refer to their object due to physical contiguity, deictic indices are attached to their referent through the context of the other words in the sentence. The deixis isolates its referent in order to absorb its meaning. What is more, its referent varies depending on the time and place in which it is used. Its indexical quality is 'guaranteed by the existential presence of just this object'.³⁶⁰ If I say, 'I want to read *this*', there is no clear message about what I want to read because the referent is missing. But if I say that 'I want to read *this* book, not *that* newspaper', the referent that the deixis points to – the book – is direct and explicit within that particular situation.

³⁵⁹ Mary Ann Doane, 'Indexicality: Trace and Sign: Introduction', in *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 18,1 (2007) 1- 6 (p. 2).

³⁶⁰ Krauss, p. 78.

Both types of indexical sign, the trace and the deixis, point directly to its referent to verify its existence. Whilst the index of the trace verifies the reality of the past through the evidence of the physical imprint or direct causal relationship to its referent, the deictic index communicates through 'a series of codes, conventions, and varying ascriptions'.³⁶¹ The deictic connection of the indexical sign to its referent through context is seen by some theorists as more valuable than evidence provided through the physical trace. For instance, photography is traditionally understood as the physical emanation of a person or event in the past, and since the second half of the 19th century, it has been used as a social and scientific practice to verify the identity of a particular subject. These regulatory powers helped to establish the conventions of photographic representation as scientific, verifiable truth of the subject's official identity.³⁶² If the context of the photographic portrait is the government, then the photograph's content serves as reliable identificatory evidence that requires only a name and an image issued by the institution. This is seen in passports and drivers' licences.

When a particular sign is experienced in certain situations, it may adopt meanings that it does not have when it is found in a different context. All objects exist within socially constructed spaces which imbue them with meaning. For example, the meaning and use of a cardboard box depends on the context and its use. It can mean 'storage', or 'moving house', or various other ideas. Children may use a cardboard box as a pirate ship. 'Sign-makers use the forms they consider apt for the expression of their meaning, in any medium in which they can make signs. When children treat a cardboard box as a pirate ship, they do so because they consider the material form (box) an apt medium for the expression of the

³⁶¹ Peter Geimer, 'Image as Trace: Speculations about an Undead Paradigm', *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, trans. by Kata Gellen, 18, 1 (2007) 7-28 (p. 8).

³⁶² Tagg, p. 5.

meaning they have in mind (pirate ship), and because of their conception of the criterial aspects of pirate ships (containment, mobility, etc.)'.³⁶³ In this example of the cardboard box, certain characteristics of a box coincide with characteristics of what a child understands as a pirate ship. Depending on the context and how it is used, the box changes from an item that stores objects into material for a child's pirate ship.

The indexical sign is perceived differently when it is seen in an aesthetic setting. In an aesthetic context, the indexical sign appropriates a part of its significance from the established conventions and expectations of artistic convention.³⁶⁴ I will continue with Jackson Pollock's painting, *Autumn Rhythm*, which I discussed in chapter two as an example. Gesturality is understood as the symbolic reference to brush marks on the canvas. But Pollock's marks also signify as indices whose interpretant was the artist's presence.³⁶⁵ Put another way, dribbles of paint seen in everyday life signify something more mundane, perhaps analogous to the clumsiness of a home decorator. But in an artistic context, especially the Action Painters of the 1950s, similar paint dribbles signified the existential presence of the artist. Art critics Harold Rosenberg and Meyer Schapiro both wrote about the existential meaning of the mark in Abstract Expressionist paintings. Rosenberg famously wrote that 'What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event'.³⁶⁶ Schapiro explicated further on this notion of the visual mark as the indexical trace or imprint of the artist's presence when he wrote, 'The consciousness of the personal and spontaneous [...] stimulates the artist to invent techniques of handling, processing, surfacing, which confer to

³⁶³ Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (New York: Routledge, 1996) p. 8-9.

³⁶⁴ Michael Leja, 'Peirce's Visuality and the Semiotics of Art', in *A Companion to Art Theory (Blackwell Companions in Cultural Studies)*, ed. by Paul Smith and Carolyn Wilde (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley and Sons Publishers, 2002) 303-317 (p. 314).

³⁶⁵ Leja, p. 314.

³⁶⁶ Harold Rosenberg, 'American Action Painters', *ArtNews* (December, 1952).

the utmost degree the aspect of the freely made. Hence the importance of the mark, the stroke, the brush, the drip, the quality of the substance of the paint itself, and the surface of the canvas as texture and field of operation – all signs of the artist's presence'.³⁶⁷ Pollock's traces and marks became recognisable as his own signature style, different from the marks by other Abstract Expressionist painters and certainly more meaningful than similar dribbles of paint in an everyday, non-art context. In an aesthetic context, an indexical mark also has iconic and symbolic significance that it might not have outside of an artistic setting.³⁶⁸

It is important to consider some of the ways which conceptually orientated artworks in the 1960s and 1970s problematised the truth value of photography and other recording media because this practice goes to the heart of Boltanski's work.. Many conceptual artists investigated the premise that indices are secure in their relationship to the real world.³⁶⁹ Artists such as Ed Ruscha engaged with the documentary, objective recording qualities of photography in works such as *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations* from 1963 which depict black-and-white photographs of petrol stations on the highway journey between his home in Los Angeles and Oklahoma City where his parents lived.³⁷⁰ Each photograph contained a caption which detailed the name of the petrol station, such as Texaco, and its location. This work explored the power of photography to document and record reality in a factual manner. Since the photographs are taken in an objective manner, Ruscha's photographs reinforce the truth claims of the indexical trace and their captions.

³⁶⁷ Meyer Schapiro, 'The Liberating Quality of Avant-Garde Art', *ArtNews* (Summer, 1957).

³⁶⁸ Leja, p. 314.

³⁶⁹ David Green, *Where is the Photograph?* (Brighton and Maidstone: Photoforum and Photoworks 2003), p. 48.

³⁷⁰ Maria White, 'Ed Ruscha: Twenty-six Gasoline Stations, 1963' (May 2013) <<https://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/projects/transforming-artist-books/summaries/edward-ruscha-twentysix-gasoline-stations-1963>> [accessed on 22 November 2019].



Figure 29: Robert Barry, *Inert Gas Series, Helium, Sometime During the Morning of March 5, 1969, 2 Cubic Feet of Helium Released into the Atmosphere, 1969*, (1969).

Whilst Ruscha examined the factual documentary features of photography, other conceptual artists, such as Robert Barry, tested the limits of photographic recording in his project entitled *Inert Gas Series: Helium, Sometime During the Morning of March 5, 1969, 2 Cubic Feet of Helium Released into the Atmosphere, 1969* (Figure 29) from 1969. This photographic work problematised the ability of the photograph to verify visual traces of its referent. It depicts a harsh, rough desert landscape with tumbleweed and hills in the background. Barry explores the restrictions of photographic recordings to provide a verification of reality. Through the title, of the viewer is told that helium gas was released into the atmosphere at on specific date and time, but since the helium cannot be seen, the viewer must take the artist's word for it. This work highlights the fact that veracity of the photograph to point to its referent, and I will extend this discussion to Boltanski's art later, are based social practices and beliefs than the recording of the referent's trace. As David Green summarised, many conceptual artists used photography in their work for twofold reasons. On the one hand, to test out the medium's limitations to depict its referent, but

more importantly, on the other hand, these artists exposed the fact that photography 'deictically invoked the real through "pointing to" the event and, in effect, declaring it to be the case'.³⁷¹ The artist relies on the convention that he or she is a legitimising agent of fact, along with the caption declaring the date, location, and referent (helium) of the indexical recording.³⁷²

Perhaps the most influential writings about indexical signs in contemporary art came from art critic Rosalind Krauss. As Mieke Bal said, herself a prominent scholar on semiotic studies, Krauss's two essays, 'Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America' from early 1977, and her follow-up later that autumn, 'Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America, Part 2' are still dominant works in subsequent writing about the index in recent art.³⁷³ Some art in the 1970s, Krauss argued, sought to undermine artistic established conventions that prioritised artistic 'style'. Abstract painting of the previous generation in the 1960s linked their artworks with a 'logical investigation, attempting to tie the event of the work to what could be truly stated about the internal relations posited by the pictorial code'.³⁷⁴ Abstract painting depicts its meaning through a special code of artistic conventions. As a result, art from the previous generation was dependent on conventions and historical styles in order to communicate its message rather than through the unmediated physical or causal connection to its referent. By eliminating conventional styles in artistic representation, artists of the 1970s sought an 'image of personal freedom, of multiple options now open to individual choice or will, whereas before these things were closed off through a restrictive

³⁷¹ Green, p. 58.

³⁷² Green, p. 50.

³⁷³ Mieke Bal, *On Meaning-Making: Essays in Semiotics* (Sonoma, California: Polebridge Press, 1994) p. 168.

³⁷⁴ Rosalind Krauss, 'Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America, Part 2', *October*, 4 (Autumn 1977) 58-67 (p. 66).

notion of historical style'.³⁷⁵ The use of Indexical signs allowed artists to side-step conventional notions of artistic style and forefront the residual trace of the artwork's absent referent.³⁷⁶

As an example of this new artistic practice in the 1970s, Krauss highlighted Dennis Oppenheim's earthwork of 1975, *Identity Stretch*, as a work comprised of indexical signs. She said Oppenheim 'transfers the image (index) of his own thumbprint onto a large field outside of Buffalo by magnifying it thousands of times and fixing its traces in the ground in lines of asphalt. The meaning of this work is focused on the pure installation of presence'.³⁷⁷ The trace of Oppenheim's thumbprint speaks for itself as an actual trace of living reality, rather than relying on mediated artistic conventions of style.³⁷⁸

Krauss wrote that the index 'speaks as a literal manifestation of presence [...] there is a message which can be read or inferred from this trace [...] a message that translates into the statement, "I am here"'.³⁷⁹ The indexical trace can only truthfully communicate that someone existed or something happened but can say nothing more about the name or identity of those involved. There is no way of knowing if, for instance, Gordon Matta-Clark, whom Krauss singled out for his work, *Doors, Floors, Doors*, cut out the floors and walls of the building housing the artwork by himself, or if someone else did. 'A cut in a floor could mean that it was created by the artist Gordon Matta-Clark, or it could mean that termites

³⁷⁵ Rosalind Krauss, 'Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America', *October*, 3 (Spring 1977) 68-81 (p. 68).

³⁷⁶ Alexander Robins, 'Peirce and Photography: Art, Semiotics, and Science', *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 28, 1 (2014) 1-16 (p. 10).

³⁷⁷ Krauss, p. 80.

³⁷⁸ Doane, Introduction, p. 3.

³⁷⁹ Krauss, 'Part 2', p. 59.

had eaten it away. [The index] merely indexes that an indeterminate physical event occurred'.³⁸⁰

However, I think differently about the indexical sign than Krauss in relation to Boltanski's work. Whereas she read the indexical sign, both a trace and a deixis, as a direct and truthful pointer to its referent, Boltanski undermines the veracity of the indexical trace through his use of photography, rusted biscuit boxes, and used clothing. This can be seen in two of his works, *Storage Area of the Children's Museum* (Figure 30) from 1989 and *The Photo Album of Family D., 1939-1964* from 1971 (Figure 31) for example, which indicate some of the ways that he destabilises the referential function of the indexical sign in his art.

Used clothing, in Boltanski's oeuvre, has a similar significance as photographs: they indicate the existence of someone from the past, someone who is now dead or disappeared. He said, 'The main interpretation of these works is that the garment is an image of absence'.³⁸¹ For Boltanski's, therefore, used clothing acts as an index of a previous wearer. Laura Mulvey has suggested used clothing, in aesthetic contexts record 'the reality of the dead body and, in preserving it, assume a ghostly quality'.³⁸²

Storage Area of the Children's Museum (Figure 30) consists of used children's jumpers staked high to the ceiling on four rows of metal shelving in the basement of the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris where has been a permanent installation since its debut in the 'Histoires de Musée' exhibition in 1989. Viewers were made to climb down a private staircase to a claustrophobic, dank basement, lit dimly only by a few spotlights. This area was previously forbidden to the public: 'The works location in the museum's reserves, an

³⁸⁰ Robins, p. 11.

³⁸¹ Quotation by Christian Boltanski in *Christian Boltanski*, ed. by Danilo Eccher (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 1997) (p. 151).

³⁸² Laura Mulvey, *Death 24 x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), p. 59.

area used to store works of art not on exhibition, contributed to its melancholy ambience'.³⁸³ The fact that this work sits in the marginal space of the basement has significance, which I will discuss later.

The second-hand clothing is complimented by a series of black-and-white photographs in the next room. Each photograph depicts an anonymous child which Boltanski cut-out of a newspaper or magazine. The images are enlarged to a 50 x 60cm dimension and hung in the usual way which he displays photographic portraits: from floor to ceiling in a *horror vacui* style. Spotlights are affixed to the top portrait which shines down onto the lower photographs. Black cords hanging loosely around the photographs and echo the lines that constitute the repetitive composition. Each portrait sits directly alongside the next; the physical space of the installation is cramped and visually overwhelming. Mateusz Kapustka suggested that the first thing one notices when approaching this work is the smell: 'we immediately perceive the disturbing odour of old clothes, an indefinable trace of their former, now absent wearers'.³⁸⁴ The used clothing only bear the bodily residue of the shape, creases, stains, snags, and smells of their former owners, but not their names or their stories.

Boltanski suggested that he uses second-hand clothing as a kind of metaphor for the dead or disappeared, or the presence of an absence, when he said, 'In my work, [...] a piece of clothing is always about presence and absence. There is someone or there was someone. Just showing a presence also signifies the absence of that person'.³⁸⁵ Boltanski employs used clothing as a sort of portrait of the previous owner. 'Clearly clothes [...] are regarded as a

³⁸³ Gumpert, p. 128.

³⁸⁴ Mateusz Kapustka, "Folded Memory: Clothes in the Art of Christian Boltanski and the Impossibility of Evidence", in *Metatextile: Identity and History of a Contemporary Art Medium*, ed. by Tristan Weddingen (Berlin: Emsdetten, 2011) 29-40 (p. 29).

³⁸⁵ Grenier, p. 194.

point of material contact with the body of a once-living person. They thus provide a means by which memories of that living body can be generated. The clothes are a memory material by virtue of their past physical proximity to the now deceased body'.³⁸⁶ Used clothing can be understood as the physical remnant and reminder of the dead – a portrait – of the deceased because they represent and testify to the existence of the person who wore it.



Figure 30: Christian Boltanski, *The Storage Area of the Children's Museum*, (used clothing, steel shelving, lights) (Paris, France: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1989).

If we accept the used clothing as a sort of portrait of their previous owners, then the viewer expects certain information to be provided in order to determine who these children were. However, there are no labels on the clothing nor the photographs; they are not categorised into any sort of taxonomy, and no captions describe the former wearers. Since the owner of the clothing remains unknown, the viewer may feel frustrated because the used clothing does not name their referents. Who were these children and what has become of them?

³⁸⁶ Elizabeth Hallam and Jennifer Lorna Hockey, *Death, Memory, and Material Culture* (London: Berg Publishers, 2001), p. 115.

Kapustka concludes that 'Boltanski's simulation of intimacy and its instantaneous denial are intensified within a very short moment, between smelling and seeing the work. The uniformity and anonymity of a common human odour arising from used things blurs the identity of their former owners'.³⁸⁷ The artist undermines the convention or expectation that the jumpers and the accompanying photographs – as portraits of the children – should disclose the identities of their referents. Once again, the viewer is left in a lurch as to the identity of the anonymous children represented in the photographs and used clothing.

Kapustka had an expectation that *Storage Area of a Children's Museum* would provide the identity of the child who wore a particular jumper. When the anonymous child cannot be identified, he claims that Boltanski's indexical signs of children's clothing and photographs do not provide 'evidential testimony to past reality'.³⁸⁸ But these jumpers *do* contain the residual evidence of someone who really wore them in the past through the creases, stains, and smells, but they cannot reveal the unique personality of the wearer. Kapustka's desire to know the identity of the child is beyond the ability of the indexical trace. He said that the jumpers represent 'art's inability to speak'.³⁸⁹ I would reframe his comment and look at the work through the lens of the indexical sign: Boltanski's use of second-hand clothing, such as in this work and others like the *Lake of the Dead or Advent*, expose the indexical trace's inability to speak the name or reveal the identity of their particular referent. It can only speak about existence of the referent, not the essence of its identity.

Storage Area of the Children's Museum, like so many of the other works by Boltanski which consist of the physical trace in used clothing, does not speak only about the failure of art to

³⁸⁷ Kapustka, p. 29.

³⁸⁸ Kapustka, p. 37.

³⁸⁹ Kapustka p. 37.

represent the past in the present, as anticipated by Kapustka and other writers such as Ernst Van Alphen.³⁹⁰ Indeed, Van Alphen, Kapustka, and other previous writers expect Boltanski's portraits of anonymous individuals, whether they are photographs, used clothing, or rusty tin biscuit boxes, to name their referent so that the viewer may come to know the subject's personality and current whereabouts. Boltanski frustrates this expectation deliberately and repeatedly. In fact, the identity of the previous owner is essentially unknowable.

In her book on the 'Lessons of Darkness' exhibition, Gumpert referred to Susan Stewart's reflections on the significance of the 'out-of-the-way places'. She remarked that rooms like the kitchen in a house – and I extend this to accessible, public spaces such as the main exhibition area in a museum – have an everyday function. As a result, what is housed in that room is tied to the temporality of the present because it retains relevance to our everyday life. We use those rooms everyday, in the present.

However, other spaces, like an attic in a house or the closed-off basement of a public museum, are tied to the temporality of the past because the objects stored there are 'destined to be forgotten; its tragedy lies in the death of memory'.³⁹¹ In truth, the indexical traces in the used clothing which comprise *Storage Area of the Children's Museum* do not resurrect the children who once wore them. The work is mute when it comes to the past. Through the physical imprint of the children who are no longer with us in the present, this work represents memories that are long resigned to oblivion.³⁹² Boltanski is exposing the

³⁹⁰ Ernst Van Alphen, 'Visual Archives and the Holocaust: Christian Boltanski, Ydessa Hendeles and Peter Forgacs' in *Intercultural Aesthetics: A Worldview Perspective*, ed. by Antoon Van den Braembussche, Heinz Kimmerle, and Nicole Note (New York City: Springer, 2008) 137-155 (p. 140).

³⁹¹ Gumpert, p. 128. Taken from Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1984) pp. 150-1.

³⁹² 'Réserve du Musée des Enfants I et II Christian Boltanski', *Musée d'art Moderne Paris*, <<https://www.mam.paris.fr/en/oeuvre/reserve-du-musee-des-enfants-i-et-ii>> [accessed 25 October 2020].

idea that objects can only carry the physical imprints and remnants of the past wearer into the present. On their own, they cannot speak the names of the deceased.



Figure 31: Christian Boltanski, *The Photo Album of Family D., 1939-1964* (framed photographs) (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1989).

Another work by Boltanski where he revealed the limitations of what information the indexical trace can convey was in his 1971 photographic work, *The Photo Album of Family D., 1939-1964* (Figure 31). As with his use of second-hand clothing in *Storage Area of the Children's Museum*, he is once again examining the idea that the indexical trace cannot communicate the actual identity of the referent. Even more, Boltanski shows that social conventions of the family and familial collective imagery do not provide specific information about to whom they refer.

The work was originally shown at Documenta 5 in Kassel in 1972 and consists of roughly 150 black-and-white photographs from the family D. album: 'D' for Durand. Boltanski's friend, curator Michel Durand, lent him his family photo album for this work. The artist chose

Durand because it a common surname in France. He said, 'I used Michel Durand's family because Durand is the most common French name [...] For this piece of work, I needed a reference point that was common to everyone'.³⁹³ Each photograph is decontextualized from the original family photo album and hung on a large broad wall in multiple columns and rows. Each one is framed in its own flimsy tin frame and all are the same small width and height, 20 x 30cm. There is a stark incongruence between the intimate family snapshots on display, in the warmth and genuine affection they show each other, and the cold, objective seriality and repetition in which they are represented.

Boltanski tried an experiment involving this work; it was a test: could he reconstruct the timeline of the family by simply looking at their photographs? By looking at clues like their gestures, ages, clothing, and frequency of their appearance in the family photo album, he tried to reconstruct the history of family D. He relied on his knowledge of the collective conventions of family roles within his own culture as well as his personal memories of his own family to correctly reconstruct the timeline. Boltanski gave an example of his identifying strategy when he said, 'the older man who appeared only at festive occasions, must be an uncle who did not live in the vicinity'.³⁹⁴ Boltanski set out to examine the social expectation and convention that many members of society hold to be true: that photographs, and specifically family photographs, are meant to reveal the family's story and their relationships to one another. The expectations of this convention can be understood through Marianne Hirsch's notions of the familial gaze.

³⁹³ Grenier, p. 64.

³⁹⁴ Gumpert, 'The Life and Death of Christian Boltanski', in *Christian Boltanski: 'Lessons of Darkness'*, ed. by Lynn Gumpert and Mary Jane Jacob (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1988), p. 59.

The familial gaze represents, in her words, ‘the conventions and ideologies of the family through which they see themselves’.³⁹⁵ She borrows this notion from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who argued that family photographs reflect the family function or ‘rather by the function conferred upon it by the family group, namely that of solemnising and immortalising the high points of family life, in short, of reinforcing the integration of the family group by reasserting the sense that it has both of itself and of its unity’.³⁹⁶

Specifically, Hirsch argued that the familial gaze explains the strong, affective connection between any family photo album photograph and the personal memory of the viewer.

Hirsch states: ‘as we read photographs, we project particular masks, particular ideological frames, onto images’.³⁹⁷ But personal projections and cultural ideologies cannot tell us about that particular family’s history.

In the end, Boltanski did not accurately reconstruct the chronology of the family D photo album but he did expose a valuable insight. He remarked that the family photos cannot tell, just on their own, much about the personal memories of the family D. He found that these photos serve as collective mnemonic symbols of familial conventions which only ‘send us back to our own past’.³⁹⁸

Bourdieu said that family photographs are produced for private use by the family and provide no specific information about that particular family to those outside of it. He wrote that family photographs have ‘no meaning, value or charm except for a finite group of

³⁹⁵ Marianne Hirsch, *The Familial Gaze*, ed. by Marianne Hirsch (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1998), p. xi.

³⁹⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*, trans. by Shaun Whiteside (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 19.

³⁹⁷ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 86.

³⁹⁸ Suzanne Pagé, ‘Interview with Suzanne Pagé’ in *Christian Boltanski-Compositions* (Paris: A.R.C. / Musée d’art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1981) p. 7.

subjects, mainly those who took it and those who are its objects'.³⁹⁹ Family photographs are taken and preserved within the family to reaffirm their identity as a unified group. The family photograph, as an everyday index in its original context, refers directly to the family members, but as a work of art, it can no longer abide by the same rules. The aesthetic context changes the significance of family photographs: they lose their ability to point directly to their reference and signify only as a symbol. Bourdieu addressed the changed meaning of family photographs in art when he said, 'If certain public exhibitions of photographs [...] are felt to be improper, this is because they are claiming for private objects the privilege of the art object, the right to universal attachment.'⁴⁰⁰

When family photographs are exhibited as works of art to the public, their function and meaning changes. Whilst in their original context of the family, they directly refer to and reinforce the unified family group to themselves, but when seen as art, the unique identities of the family members are erased. This is the case for Boltanski's use of family photographs, such as *The Photo Album of Family D., 1939-1964*: they no longer can refer to unique family members with their own special history and memories; the photograph, when seen as 'art' can only represent stereotypical depictions of family or childhood.

Aleida Assmann said something similar when she wrote that when family photographs are taken out of the context of the family, they no longer can point to that particular family: 'The photographs which, for example, may appear on sale at flea markets after the dissolution of a household or an estate, provide evidence of only one thing: they show that the family memory, which these photographs once framed and supported, has been dissolved. To be clear: family memory – as opposed to cultural memory – is not meant to be

³⁹⁹ Bourdieu, p. 87.

⁴⁰⁰ Bourdieu, p. 87.

stabilised and does not promise to be eternal. It is restricted by the temporal limitations of life. The photograph's material capacity for memory continues to exist: the people photographed are still recognisable as people. However, the memorial power of the photographs has been extinguished as no one recognises these people'.⁴⁰¹ The family photographs no longer act as an index to the actual Durand family; they are now the generic 'Family D' which only conveys a stereotypical averageness of a French family. Boltanski said, 'When I show images from photo albums, what I want is for people to recognise themselves and think about their own lives and if they are touched it is because they recognise themselves. It is not a new image but one we know already'.⁴⁰²

The conventions governing the veracity of the index to point to its referent has re-emerged since the 1970s and is again debated in recent aesthetic and artistic discourse since the late twentieth century. I want to extend the discussion about the vulnerability of the indexical sign to be manipulated in order to refer to a false referent by looking at the idea of the postindex. Although it is not clear when the term was first used, it has gained increasing currency in debates surrounding contemporary art. The postindex is a symbol that refers to either media commonly understood to have indexical qualities or indexicality itself. To be succinct, the postindex is a symbol that takes the appearance or form of the index but cannot assume its power to directly refer to an actual past reality. I argue that much of Boltanski's work uses the postindex strategically by manipulating the appearance of collective generic symbols to *look* like indices from an actual but unknown past. That is to say that since Boltanski represents neutralised collective imagery so that it is easily

⁴⁰¹ Aleida Assmann, 'Fury of Disappearance: Christian Boltanski's Archives of Forgetting', in *Christian Boltanski: Time*, ed. by Ralf Beil (Darmstadt: Mathildenhöhe Darmstadt, 2006) p. 92.

⁴⁰² Mark Durden and Lydia Papadimitriou, 'Sans-Souci: Christian Boltanski interviewed by Mark Durden and Lydia Papadimitriou' in *Creative Camera: Thirty Years of Writing*, ed. by Britten (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) 213-9 (p. 213).

recognisable, he sacrifices a direct connection between his art and a knowable person in the past. Therefore, Boltanski must manufacture the look of a direct link.

Boltanski creates works by appropriating collective symbolic images that one sees in everyday life and altering them to look like they bear the imprint of an actual but unknowable person. Because the postindex is a symbolic medium of communicative memory, it has no way to point directly to a specific person. Therefore, Boltanski must not only endow the postindexical objects with markings that give the impression of an indexical link to its referent, but also a sense of pastness. To imbue the postindexical images with the perception of age and pastness, Boltanski fabricates the aura, a concept made famous by Walter Benjamin that verifies the object's uniqueness in space and time.

Aura as a concept was developed by Walter Benjamin in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in 1935. He theorised the idea against the backdrop of photographic reproductions of paintings as unique works of art. Photographic reproductions of artworks enabled them to be seen outside of their original context by the public which previously did not have access to them. As a result, photographic reproductions, which can be replicated limitlessly, have no aura about them because they lack uniqueness; reproductions of the same image exist in myriad locations as they are simultaneously viewed numerous times. The original painting confronts the viewer with all of its own particular history, a uniqueness which reproductions can never claim to have for themselves.

Benjamin's claim that photographs cannot have an aura has lost support in recent years. Since he staked this claim solely based on reproductions of paintings rather than photographs of other objects, scholars such as Carolin Duttlinger have begun to challenge

the idea that old photographs cannot radiate an aura. She explained that, in Benjamin's concept of the aura, 'the main purpose of photography, according to this essay, is not the (primary) representation of reality but rather the (secondary) replication of pre-existing traditional works of art which are made widely available through the technique of photographic reproduction'.⁴⁰³ The idea of the aura in contemporary photographs is an expansion of Benjamin's original concept however the integrity of the aura's unique place in the past is upheld. Old photographs, such as those appropriated by Boltanski, are not reproductions of unique works of art but come from family photo albums which have a temporal quality of pastness stamped onto them through their analogue characteristics such as graininess, blurriness, and sepia-tinged discolouration due to their age. The aura of old photographs enables the viewer to perceive their historical condition.

Even though Benjamin wrote that photographic reproductions have no aura, his first writing about the aura granted old photographic portraits with the quality of pastness. In his essay 'A Short History of Photography', the concept of the aura is more flexible and universally applicable to objects that signify the essence of pastness.⁴⁰⁴ Benjamin wrote about the pastness of an old photograph of the photographer Karl Dauthendey and his wife from 1857, when he said there is a 'magical value' to the photograph 'that imperceptible point at which, in the immediacy of that long-past moment, the future so persuasively inserts itself that, looking back, we may rediscover it'.⁴⁰⁵ The magical value of an old photograph is the aura since it creates the perception of a past reality.⁴⁰⁶ Old photographs are imbued with a

⁴⁰³ Carolin Duttlinger, 'Imaginary Encounters: Walter Benjamin and the Aura of Photography', *Poetics Today*, 29, 1 (2008) 79-101 (p. 82).

⁴⁰⁴ Duttlinger, p. 91-2.

⁴⁰⁵ Walter Benjamin, 'A Short History of Photography', *Screen*, 13, 1 (1972) 5-26 (p. 7).

⁴⁰⁶ Duttlinger, p. 85.

strong sense of auratic uniqueness due to their ability to communicate notions of ‘that long-past moment’.

New questions have been posed by scholars such as Claire Grace regarding the veracity of documentary recordings and imagery in relation to their object in reality.⁴⁰⁷ These questions have resonance for my examination of the postindex because it is a device that some artists use to simulate the look of the indexical trace whilst depriving it of its referential function. Grace claimed that a palpable sense of doubt has emerged in regards to the legitimacy of the conventional claims to objective truth in documentary-style photography. She argued that since the advent of digital technology, the physical trace between the photograph and its referent is replaced with the infinitely malleable electronic code of 0s and 1s. Therefore, photographic images, especially ones that represent analogue characteristics, such black-and-white colour scheme or graininess, now engender an atmosphere of doubt regarding whether they genuinely refer to their contents, or if they have been deliberately manipulated to refer to something in the past which actually never existed. Despite the fact that analogue and digital technologies have always come with a warning about their veracity, even back to the invention of photography in the nineteenth century, the imperative to come to terms with dubious truth claims of photography have come to the forefront recently due to the ease of digital technology to erase or mimic the physical link to its subject matter.

Grace contributes to this debate by exemplifying the artist Gabriel Orozco’s photographic work from 1991, *Green Paper*. This work entails a photograph of a roughly crumpled piece of green paper which landed on a patch of foliage. It is shot in an objective manner that

⁴⁰⁷ Claire Grace, ‘Notes on Diffraction: Gabriel Orozco and Photography’, *Art Journal*, 78, 2 (2019) 68-84 (p. 70).

testifies to the factual value of the depiction. But the high angle from where the photograph was taken conceals the three-dimensional quality of the crumpled paper, rendering its appearance more two dimensional.⁴⁰⁸ In other words, rather than capturing the sense of volume found in the paper in real life, the green paper in the photograph looks flat. If the conventions of documentary photography ensure the depiction the objective truth of reality, Orozco's photograph admits its inability to represent the true form of the object as it existed in the world. Grace argues that Orozco's photograph of a three-dimensional object declares itself as a two-dimensional representation, thereby undermining the truth claim of documentary photography to faithfully reproduce the past. Orozco's work highlights the naiveté of present conventional assumptions regarding documentary photography's ability to faithfully record lived reality. This is significant because Boltanski also undercuts conventional truth claims that indices, like photographs, can faithfully represent lived reality.

I want to look again at *10 Photographic Portraits of Christian Boltanski, 1946-1964* from 1972 (Figure 12). I discussed this work previously in chapter two, so I will summarise: this work consists of ten black-and-white photographs of a boy named 'Christian Boltanski'. Each photograph is shot from a frontal position, emphasising the documentary nature of the child's progress, in the same place and time in an outside setting. They are shot to look like objective recordings, taken by a parent or relative, of Boltanski as he grew up from two years to twenty years old. But only the last photograph is of the artist himself.

Boltanski has been accused of lying in this and other photographic works which use his name or initials. Basically, his name in the title of the work does not refer to only the artist,

⁴⁰⁸ Grace, p. 70.

like in a self-portrait. The referent of his name is distorted to refer to himself *and* the other nine boys. But that is not all. Boltanski also deceived us when the title indicated that the photographs were shot between 1946 and 1964. In truth, the photographs were all shot on 17 July 1972 in Parc Mont Souris in Paris by Boltanski's wife, Annette Messager.

Previous writers, such as Olga Smith, likened Boltanski's ruse of falsifying the captions and the dates of the work as a comment on the conventions of autobiography prevalent at the time in Paris. I concluded that, *in the context of his art*, Boltanski redefined the meaning of his name and initials. I argued that 'Christian Boltanski' should be thought of as a fictional entity that represents the average consensus of everyone in society. However, with the help of the postindex, I have the tools I need to explain that not only is the referent of 'Christian Boltanski' reframed in the context of his art but so are the dates attributed to the photographs in *10 Photographic Portraits of Christian Boltanski, 1946-1964*.

On the face of it, the name 'Christian Boltanski' in the work's title refers to Boltanski the artist. That would designate the name as a sort of deictic index that takes its referential power from the conventions of self-portraiture as well as the context of the title. The name is like a shifter; in the context of the work's title, the name 'Christian Boltanski' gains its meaning only through its direct connection to the name of the artist. The captions accompanying the ten photographs also lend to the idea of self-portraiture because they 'are generally invested with an authoritative interpretation function, which leads to a reduction or glossing over of the significant differences between the pictures (there is even a young blind boy who has been smuggled into the series)'.⁴⁰⁹ We expect 'Christian Boltanski' to be the speaker who is showing photographic portraits of himself as a boy.

⁴⁰⁹ Aleida Assmann, p. 90.

But, as I discussed previously in chapter two, Boltanski deliberately creates ambiguity in this work, and others which bear his name or initials in the title, by challenging the conventions of self-portraiture which points to a knowable person who can be identified. Whilst Christian Boltanski is the name of the artist, yet the nine boys in the photographs, save one, are not Boltanski the artist, so this work cannot be a self-portrait. 'The ten photographs then do not show the development of one person, but ten distinctively different people, who, within the cultural frame of a biographical series, are contracted into the format of a transitional portrait'.⁴¹⁰ I argued that Boltanski's moniker acts as a sort of collective idea that evokes an average childhood: 'Every child is Christian Boltanski'.⁴¹¹ My point is that the name 'Christian Boltanski', *when it appears in the titles of his works*, behaves like a shifter since its meaning fluctuates depending on the context.

In chapter two, I explored the similarity between Andy Warhol's negation of his own unique persona in the meaning of his art. Warhol's example helped to evidence that Boltanski does something similar. I showed that Boltanski is not the only artist who troubled the referent of his own name when it was used in the context of his artwork. With this in mind, I want to look briefly at another example of an artist who creates a gap between his own persona and his art, Marcel Duchamp. Rosalind Krauss discusses Duchamp's alter ego, Rose Sélavy, as an indication of the doubling of the deictic index and the speaker, or the artist. Even though the viewer knows Rose Sélavy is the artist dressed in women's clothing and make-up, Duchamp still refers to his alter ego as someone distinct from himself when he wrote: 'Rose Sélavy and I'. Krauss said that 'Duchamp's photographic self-portraits in drag, as Rose Sélavy, announce a self that is split, doubled, along the axis of sexual identity. But the very

⁴¹⁰ Aleida Assmann, p. 90.

⁴¹¹ Grenier, p. 77.

name he uses for his “double” projects a strategy for infecting language itself with a confusion in the way that words denote their referents’.⁴¹²

In a similar way, it seems that Boltanski distorts the referent of his name, but only when it appears in the title: it is a symbol of childhood as well as the artist. However, when we approach this issue through the lens of the postindex, we realise that the name ‘Christian Boltanski’ adopts the *appearance* of a deictic index, but it is deprived of its ability to refer directly to the artist by showing photographs of boys other than himself. The result is that the work’s purpose is redefined from self-portraiture of one person to a composite picture of ten boys, represented by the name ‘Christian Boltanski’, who all share the same memory of standing in that specific place and time in the park.

Boltanski also constructs an auratic sense of pastness found in the title’s description of the photographs in *10 Photographic Portraits of Christian Boltanski, 1946-1964*. Through the work’s title, the photographs are presented to the viewer as old photographs taken during 1946-1964. But these are not old photographs, as the title indicates. They were shot in 1972. Boltanski said, ‘These were children in the Parc Mont Souris, all in the same spot and in the same pose. And I wrote down: “Christian Boltanski at age eight,” with a date; “Christian Boltanski at age ten”, etc. I myself only appeared in the last image, which was also misleading since it was captioned “Christian Boltanski at age twenty”, whereas I must have been thirty’.⁴¹³

What I want to make plain is that the aura, even if it is artificial, is the essential feature that makes it possible for the viewer to trust that the photographs depict an actual person in the past. But Boltanski perpetrated the deception of who is ‘Christian Boltanski’ and the dates

⁴¹² Krauss, p. 72.

⁴¹³ Grenier, p. 77.

for a reason. The deceptions enable the viewer to become aware of two truths: that captions can lie but, more importantly, that the childhood memories and experiences depicted in the photographs are ones which we all have in common, even if we have forgotten them. As a result, 'Christian Boltanski' is a reflection of everyone.

I want to give another example of how the postindex mimics the indexical link to their referent. Johannes Völz uses the term 'postindex' to explore the gap, or lack of indexical connection, between the photographic image and its referent in the age of digital reproduction. He argues that since the digital image is limitlessly malleable, the photographer is able to easily manipulate images in order to express his or her imagination. The manipulation of the image devalues the connection between subject in the photograph and its past reality. This is what Johannes Völz defined as the postindex: the lack of an indexical link to its referent in the digital image.⁴¹⁴ A strong sense of symbolism is injected into the photographic image whilst the indexical trace is weakened. However, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to know if a photograph has been manipulated or not. This creates suspicion in the veracity of photographic images.

Boltanski manipulates photographs from family photo albums in order to enhance the look of analogue technology through their old age and decayed condition. He photographs old photographs, rendering them objects of memory rather than factual depictions of the subject, such as in the series of photographic works, *Le Lycée Chases* (Figure 16). The portraits are not original photographs of children but, as I discussed earlier in chapter three, they are new photographs of an old classroom photograph from 1931.

⁴¹⁴ Johannes Völz, 'The Index and its Vicissitudes: Hyperrealism from Richard Estes to Andreas Gursky', *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, 52, 1 (2007) 81-102 (p. 84).

The new portraits have been manipulated in order to enhance the appearance of the auratic qualities associated with old analogue photographs such as blurriness, graininess, a monochromatic black-and-white colour scheme. By photographing old photographs, Boltanski said that ‘the fact that the photographs weren’t taken by me differentiated them from photography. It was really an object’.⁴¹⁵ What I take Boltanski’s comment to mean is that the viewer is not meant to understand the old photographs in *Le Lycée Chases* as a document of particular children. Rather, the old photographs are objects that appear to exude memory and pastness through their appearance of decay and an outmoded analogue medium.

Boltanski enhanced the indexical characteristics of the old photographs by manipulating the material in which they are embedded for the purpose of making them look older, blurrier, and of a time when monochromatic black-and-white photographs were the most popular option. Doane noted that the pastness in old photographs, and I apply this to those found in *Le Lycée Chases*, may be amplified ‘not only through their deterioration but in the type of film stock, lighting, colour system, and so forth. In the viewer’s recognition of an old photograph or film as old, the fact of the medium’s materiality is foregrounded, not escaped’.⁴¹⁶ The postindex ensures that the look of the photographs’ historical ties to an earlier time can ‘extend and prolong the aura of that indexical authenticity’.⁴¹⁷

An often-cited writer who has attempted to define the postindex in contemporary artistic practice is Lisa Saltzman.⁴¹⁸ However, whilst on the one hand, Grace and Völz equated the

⁴¹⁵ Grenier, p. 104.

⁴¹⁶ Doane, p. 144.

⁴¹⁷ Doane, p. 142.

⁴¹⁸ See Margaret Iversen, *Photography, Trace, and Trauma* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Bryoni Trezise, *Performing Feeling in Cultures of Memory* (New York and London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014); Mark K. DeShazer, *Mammographies: The Cultural Discourses of Breast Cancer Narratives* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

‘crisis of legitimation’ within the realm of digital technologies because they cast doubt on direct, physical indexical signification, on the other hand, Saltzman places the origins of the postindex in representations that seek to come to terms with historical trauma, memory, and absence of a past reality in the present.⁴¹⁹ Saltzman writes that artists whose work refers to traumatic memory critique the index’s capacity to signify presence. These artists use ‘strategies of representation to make clear that such forms are, in the end, just that: forms, conventions, structures’ that mark a ‘self-conscious relation to, yet irredeemable distance from, the historical objects that it takes as its subjects’.⁴²⁰

She goes on to name the ‘postindex’ as a representational artistic strategy of ‘the empty index, the impotent index, the index at one remove, the index that is no longer a sign, but instead, pure signifier’.⁴²¹ Put another way, Saltzman claims postindexical signs point to absence of the referent in the present. As a result, the postindex discloses nothing but an absent signified. It can only symbolise trauma, grief, and absence. The postindex is a symbol which refers to traumatic grief due to the physical absence of its referent, apart from the memory of it. She says that ‘the index, even if emptied of its semiotic function, emerges as a compelling form of concretising and commemorating loss, for marking and memorialising absence’.⁴²²

Saltzman highlights Kara Walker as an example of an artist who uses the postindex in her work to talk about the traumatic memory of slavery in the American South. Walker’s large-scale murals represent the antiquated genre of silhouettes which were popular in the late eighteenth-and-early-nineteenth centuries in Europe and America. The silhouette is a

⁴¹⁹ Doane, p. 1.

⁴²⁰ Lisa Saltzman, *Making Memory Matter: Strategies of Remembrance in Contemporary Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 13.

⁴²¹ Saltzman, p. 13.

⁴²² Saltzman, p. 20.

portrait represented as a black shape whose edges are the indexical trace of the subject's profile, typically using a physiognotrace:

The person to be traced, sitting in a Chair, rests their head on the concave part, & the hollow of the board below embraces the shoulder—The Physiognotrace is fixed to the board, A at a, and in the centre of the joint b, is a conic steel point with a spring to press it against the paper. . . . This index moving round to trace any subject that the edge is kept too, as it moves, the steel point of the upper joint, gives a diminished size a perfectly correct representation.⁴²³

Saltzman said that Walker's work entails 'a logic in which the subject of representation is at once absent yet present, schematised yet utterly recognisable, neither fully visualised nor materialised, but nonetheless, legible'.⁴²⁴ In essence, the black silhouettes are postindexical because they appropriate the appearance of the indexical trace in silhouettes but are actually symbols of the past and the historical trauma of slavery: cut-outs of imaginary people made by Walker and arranged into a composition on the wall. The black shapes *simulate* actual old silhouettes that are the indexical trace of their subject's body, but in reality Walker only uses the silhouette as a symbolic representation of the historical past and to signify absence due to trauma.⁴²⁵

Walker mimics the aura of the silhouette, in terms of its connection to ideas of a real person in the past, in order to symbolise the trauma of black slavery in the United States: 'Not only

⁴²³ Lilian Miller, *The Selected Papers by Charles Wilson Peale and his Family, 2, 1*, ed. by Lilian Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 481-2.

⁴²⁴ Saltzman, p. 53.

⁴²⁵ Saltzman, p. 13.

does the silhouette reduce the subject of representation to a schematic form, to a “profile”, to a semblance that derives its relation to the human subject more from its indexicality than its iconicity. But it reduces all of its subjects, renders all of its figures, black’.⁴²⁶ This is relevant to Boltanski because he too simulates the aura of the indexical trace through his use of rusty tin boxes in order to represent the past, decay, and death.



Figure 32: Christian Boltanski, *Les Suisse Morts* (*The Dead Swiss*) (tin boxes, spotlights) (Paris: Marian Goodman Gallery, 1991).

‘The auratic experience connects with a more general aesthetic motif: the description of art and the effect of art on the perceiving subject in terms of a phenomenal distance of farness’.⁴²⁷ As we can see, the aura and the perception of pastness exists not only in photographs but also in non-photographic works of art, such as those by Boltanski that include rusty, old tin boxes. They feature prominently throughout his oeuvre since the 1980s in works such as *The Dead Swiss*, *Les Archives de C.B., 1956-1988*, *Le Lycée Chase*, and

⁴²⁶ Saltzman, p. 61-2.

⁴²⁷ Miriam Bratu Hansen, ‘Benjamin’s Aura’, *Critical Enquiry*, 34, 2 (2008), 336-375 (p. 352).

Monuments: La Fête de Pourim. Boltanski buys shiny, new tin biscuit boxes from a factory in France and manipulates them to look tattered, old, decayed, and used by someone in the past so that they appear to be 'homemade' and bear the markings of the human touch.⁴²⁸ He does this in two ways: by artificially corroding them with his own urine or by bathing them in Coca-Cola so they develop rust prematurely and he keeps boxes in his studio so he can inflict some damage onto them.⁴²⁹ In order for the tin boxes to appear old, they must appear that they decayed through scratches, corrosion, and chemical deterioration.⁴³⁰

As I discussed in chapter one and chapter two, *The Dead Swiss*, a series of installation works that began in 1990, is an example of Boltanski's works that make use of rusty tin boxes and old-looking photographs. The photograph of a recently deceased Swiss person is attached to the front of each box. The expectation is that each box safeguards the documents, souvenirs, and keepsakes of the person whose face appears on the outside of the box. But, as Kate Palmer Albers mentioned, since the viewer cannot know the identity of those represented through the old decayed boxes, they function 'as a platform from which to consider the role of personal storage and individual attempts at archiving the material of our lives, photographic or otherwise'.⁴³¹

What is important to note is that Palmer Albers picks up on the idea that the viewer is not meant to dwell on the identity of the anonymous person in the photograph whose remnants are contained in the boxes. She suggests that the power of the work is revealed when the viewer understands that the anonymous people, seen as a whole rather than as unique individuals in their own right, exercise an important influence on the meaning of the

⁴²⁸ Grenier, p. 210.

⁴²⁹ Grenier, p. 210.

⁴³⁰ Doane, p. 144.

⁴³¹ Palmer Albers, p. 258.

work: instead of offering a fresh discovery of someone else's memories, the work acts as an indictment on our inability to recount our own.

Aleida Assmann argued that Boltanski's works that appear to store or archive mementos of the past are actually hollow spaces. She said that they are 'purely a façade... the patinated tin boxes and cardboard cartons are empty.'⁴³² Moreover, Boltanski confirmed that the tins are empty.⁴³³ The rusty tin biscuit boxes, which constitute a significant media throughout Boltanski's oeuvre, are not actual keepsake boxes and are not marked by naturally occurring traces of age and decay. The boxes are postindexical because, in reality, they are new boxes which bear an artificial patina of corrosion that makes them give the impression of old age and worn through use. In truth, the decaying rusty boxes and old faded photographs are symbols that form part of collective memory of the past. Boltanski said that the works in *The Dead Swiss* series are created 'with the idea that the dead pass on something to us, since we all have traces of our ancestors within us'.⁴³⁴ They are made to look like the indexical remains of genuine memories but, in truth, they have no direct connection to that which they seemingly refer.

Other photographs in *The Dead Swiss* series are rephotographed and enlarged to amplify their graininess: a technique to forefront the idea of pastness and the appearance of age found in analogue photographs. For instance, in the exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in 1990, 364 enlarged, blurry photographs of the dead Swiss are hung together in a rectangular shape on two adjacent walls facing in the same direction. The columns are 14 portraits high by 13 portraits across; a black lamp is attached to four portraits at the top on

⁴³² Aleida Assmann, p. 95.

⁴³³ Grenier, p. 213.

⁴³⁴ Grenier, p. 236.

each wall with black cords hanging loosely from the top to the floor. Boltanski provides no information about them: no names, no dates, nothing.⁴³⁵ There is a palpable feeling of the sublime in that the viewer is confronted with an especially high wall of photographs of people who they know are dead.

The individual subjects themselves in the photographs do not form part of the meaning of the work because they have no identity around which to build a narrative. Boltanski's photographs pursue the idea of pastness as paramount, not the identity of the subjects in their own right. They serve as mnemonic objects. He said, 'I remember when the Tate Gallery bought one of my pieces [in *The Dead Swiss* series]. When I sold it, the curator mentioned that...the photos would fade, so I told him that's okay, there are always more dead Swiss – I don't care which ones you use. Moreover, even the shelves were not going to fit, as they had been made for a different room! And the curator asked, what did we buy? And I said well, you bought photos of dead Swiss and shelves. But it's not an object, it's an idea'.⁴³⁶

What I think Boltanski meant is that the actual subject is not important to the meaning of his art. What is vital is that the photographs unmistakably *look* like they are from the past. This strategy partakes of the postindex. The old photographs are newly rephotographed and deliberately manipulated to enhance analogue, indexical characteristics. Like the artificially corroded tin biscuit boxes, the old photographs are postindexical collective symbols because they were designed to mimic indexical features, such as a black-and-white monochrome colour palette, graininess, and faded appearance, in order to represent objects taken from an actual past reality.

⁴³⁵ Hobbs, Richard, 'Boltanski's Visual Archives', *History of Human Sciences*, 11, 4 (1998) 121-140 (p. 127).

⁴³⁶ Garb, p. 16.

I have argued at length how Boltanski uses the postindex as a visual strategy to falsify both the look of the direct connection to the referent and the perception of aura, or pastness. But I have not discussed to what end the postindex serves Boltanski. If his works are not about the subject's identity, then are his works only about exposing and overturning conventional standards of indexical truth? This is where the emotional response of the viewer comes into my discussion. It is through the viewer's ability to internalise the images in and recognise a resemblance to his or her own memories that imprints a personal, possibly affective meaning onto the work. To be precise, the viewer resolves the ambiguous element in Boltanski's work by deciding whether or not the images resemble their own memories.

If the icon 'is dependent on the subjective ability of the interpreter to see the sign as resembling something else', then Boltanski's works may become iconic to the individual viewer if he or she recognises something in them which resembles a memory from their own past.⁴³⁷ Iconicity exists when the viewer associates the work with something similar to their own past experience.⁴³⁸ In brief, the concept of the postindex enables me to isolate the semiotic play of each sign operating on Boltanski's work: collective symbols are dressed up to look like indices in order to stimulate an iconic meaning for each individual viewer.

This is not a new idea, that the viewer can personalise a photograph by seeing something in it which sparks memories of their own past experiences. Duttlinger pointed out that viewers who internalise images with an aura are able to relate to them on a deeply personal level, whether or not they know who the subjects are. When this happens, the process can be understood as an 'empathetic engagement with particular images' that 'breaks down rigid

⁴³⁷ Robins, p. 4.

⁴³⁸ Robins, p. 4.

boundaries between self and other, creating a play of identification between viewer and image'.⁴³⁹ As an example, she brought up Walter Benjamin's own instance of personally identifying with a photographic portrait of Franz Kafka when he was a boy. When he wrote about the young Kafka's eyes as an emblem of 'infinite sadness', he saw something in the photograph that he also perceived in himself.⁴⁴⁰ Duttlinger said that 'by projecting himself into Kafka's childhood photograph, the narrator appears to erase the difference between self and other and thereby the distance between viewer and image'.⁴⁴¹ In a nutshell, the photograph of Kafka develops iconic characteristics for Benjamin because he recognised something in it – Kafka's sorrowful eyes – that was reminiscent of himself. Kafka and Benjamin, in the space of that one photograph, share a particular homogeneity. Duttlinger continues to say that such an empathic encounter between image and viewer is dependent on the viewer perceiving a sense of the work's aura.

My point is that the postindex is essential for detecting and analysing the appearance of the aura of authenticity and pastness in Boltanski's art – and other artistic and cultural forms which follow a similar strategy – where they were not noticed before. The aura is the catalyst of the empathic connection between the viewer and work of art in twofold ways: the perception of pastness and memory conveyed through the object, and the testimony to the existence of a real person. Even though existence and pastness are simulated in postindexical images, the viewer is still able to overcome the deception and internalise the familiar imagery. This, I claim, is the function of the postindex and why it is used so fervently throughout Boltanski's work.

⁴³⁹ Duttlinger, p. 97.

⁴⁴⁰ Benjamin, 'A Short History of Photography', p. 18.

⁴⁴¹ Duttlinger, p. 93.

The empathic connection between the postindexical image or object and the viewer is vital to appreciating the powerful affective pull of Boltanski's art. Even though Boltanski is a white French male with a Jewish and Catholic background who had dark hair and dark eyes with a middle-class upbringing, the aura created by the postindex may enable the viewer of any ethnicity, religion, gender, or social class to empathically connect to the memories of 'Christian Boltanski' in a way that he or she can internalise as similar to their own. Duttlinger said that the aura has the ability 'to disturb and affect the viewer in ways which break down any sense of critical distance and detachment'.⁴⁴² The aura, even if simulated, allows the viewer to recognise some aspect of him or herself in the images because it inspires a strong empathic response. The empathic connection may revive similar memories and experiences to resurface in the mind of the viewer. In that moment, Boltanski's work takes on iconic meaning for the individual viewer.

However, that is not to say that Boltanski's insistence that 'Christian Boltanski' represents an average childhood has gone unchallenged. For instance, we recall that in chapter one Rebecca DeRoo suggested that the old photographs of children and family life in *Photo Album of Family D., 1939-1964* estrange viewers who are not themselves from the French middle class. She wrote, 'The viewer of the Family D. photos was thus encouraged to orient his personal history through the terms of the one he saw, projecting his memories into the photos and desiring a past like this, thereby making an ambiguous upper-middle class a new point of identification for nationhood.'⁴⁴³ But her claim overlooks the empathic connection that can form when the viewer perceives the aura. We have evidence of this connection when Benjamin testified to how he saw himself in a photograph of young Kafka's sad eyes.

⁴⁴² Duttlinger, p. 98.

⁴⁴³ Rebecca DeRoo, 'Christian Boltanski's Memory Images: Remaking the French Museum in the Aftermath of '68', *Oxford Art Journal*, 27, 2 (2004), p. 236.

Therefore, the empathic connection between the auratic image and the viewer, simulated or genuine, overcomes the criticism that 'Christian Boltanski' cannot act as a stand-in for a collective symbol of an average childhood because he looks too middle class. The viewer may internalise 'Christian Boltanski' as analogous to his or her own childhood in some capacity despite any overt gender, ethnic, or religious differences.

Since the memories depicted in Boltanski's work are common and are designed to resemble similar memories in the mind of the viewer, he or she may decide to leave behind the desire to know or name the depicted subject, and form an empathic engagement with the work 'in which my memories, my unconscious persuasions, and the culture I have assimilated (in other words, my acquired experience) fuse with exterior stimuli to endow them with the form and the value they assume in my eyes according to the aims I am pursuing'.⁴⁴⁴

Boltanski said that his job as the artist entails sending out a stimulus for the viewer in order to determine the work's meaning: 'The viewer is part of my work. I try to communicate with him by stimulating his memory: the viewer has the right to interpret the work as he likes, to make it his own pictures. For me, it's enough to simply give him the signs, to communicate with him without trying to teach or direct him. I want to bring out the viewer's interior and invisible powers'.⁴⁴⁵ In the end, the viewer's memories become the real subject of Boltanski's work because they define its interpretation.

At the beginning of this chapter, I wanted to uncover the meanings that the objects in Boltanski's art signify to the viewer, especially since it is widely acknowledged that they are

⁴⁴⁴ Eco, p. 71-2.

⁴⁴⁵ Davvetas, p. 517.

forgeries. Marianne Hirsch's observation is indicative of this omission when she said that 'many of his images are, in fact, icons masquerading as indices or, more radically, symbols masquerading as icons and indices'.⁴⁴⁶ Such a statement was insightful but the tantalising ideas it touched upon went unresolved.

Similarly, in previous chapters, I showed that other writers, such as Olga Smith and Rebecca DeRoo, reasoned that Boltanski's deception of temporality and authenticity was allied to institutional critiques but these explanations do not go far enough to explain his motives. I do not think that Boltanski was particularly mindful of literary theories floating around in Paris at the time nor did he participate in the student riots of 1968, as I discussed in chapter one. My point is that even though Boltanski's work has often been confronted with accusations of deception, an in-depth analysis about how and why he fakes reality has not been conducted until now. My contribution, therefore, satisfies a gap in the knowledge about Boltanski which goes beyond the confines of autobiographical literary theories or institutional critiques of art museum practices and ideologies.

I argued in this chapter that Boltanski challenged the ability of the index, both the physical trace and the deixis, to represent reality, much like other visual artists in the 1960s and 1970s. But he differentiated his work by adding a powerful affective dimension that was missing from the artworks of his peers. The significant emotional dimension in Boltanski's work was absent from both Smith and DeRoo's accounts. Hence, their explanations were too narrow. I wanted to know why this emotional dimension is so important to Boltanski. This question led me to the concept of the postindex.

⁴⁴⁶ Hirsch, 'Past Lives', p. 675.

Through the idea of the postindex, I developed the case that the objects are symbols of everyday memory that impersonate indexical signs. In order for a collective image to bear the hallmarks of an index, even if they are falsified, it must be infused with an aura of genuine pastness, usually in the visual manifestations of age and decay. When Benjamin asked, 'What is an aura?', he answered that it sits in a 'peculiar web of space and time: the unique manifestation of distance, however near it may be'.⁴⁴⁷ I claim that Benjamin's concept of the aura illustrates why Boltanski simulates truth and age in the everyday generic images that he appropriates: he infuses detached, generic imagery with the *look* of an aura in order to make them *appear* lived in, seemingly rubbed up against someone from the past. As a consequence, the viewer is more likely to form an empathic connection between the objects and his or her own personal memories because they seem to bear the traces of the human touch from the past. When the viewer engages empathically with a work such as *Storage Area of the Children's Museum*, her reaction may take the form of a recognition of a similar jumper from her own childhood or perhaps from her own child's wardrobe. Once this familiarity is established, the work takes on an iconic resonance for that particular viewer because its meaning is impregnated by her own memories and background.

The postindex helps me to explain that Boltanski does not use actual indices, such as old photographs and real metal keepsake boxes, because they are tied to something too specific for his purposes. He needs neutral, collective images that average out into stereotypes. The index cannot signify universal stereotypes; that is the job of the symbol. Georges Didi-Huberman said that the indexical trace is akin to a specific name when he quoted Peirce: 'Peirce also considers the proper name to be a paradigm of the index, because it is associated with an absolutely specific subject [...] Peirce writes that "if an index could be

⁴⁴⁷ Benjamin, 'A Short History of Photography', p. 20.

translated into sentence form, that sentence would be in the imperative or exclamatory mood, as in 'Look over there!'"'.⁴⁴⁸ Actual old analogue photographs and keepsake boxes refer strongly to one particular person in the past. Boltanski explained this when he said that old photographs 'bother me too much these days because they represent someone too much'.⁴⁴⁹ When seen through the postindex, the artist retains the generic signification of a collective symbol – it is untied to anyone in particular – whilst fabricating it to look like it was pulled directly from a real past life.

My contributions are twofold. First, to show that the postindex helps to explain why and how Boltanski creates the *illusion* of age and authenticity captured in his art: it is not to proclaim that we have the power to resuscitate the past through the objects that we or our loved one touched, but on the contrary, his art implies the truth: 'you can't bring someone back to life; labelling and archiving won't revive anyone'.⁴⁵⁰ All we can do is remember the past; we cannot relive it. This important insight fuels my entire argument.

Yet my research on the postindex can also have wider bearings on contemporary art and culture which encounters new forms that adulterate the look of truth and the past. This is the second of my contributions: I isolated the indexical characteristics that the postindex mimics: direct connection to the referent and veracity of the past. This has resonance for our contemporary culture, especially since it is obsessed with new products adopting the 'retro' or vintage look.

Creating art that simulates the past allows Boltanski to whisper an implied message: through falsity, the truth is revealed. He said 'the point of artifice is to show the truth: the

⁴⁴⁸ Georges Didi-Huberman, 'The Index of the Absent Wound (Monograph on a Stain)', *October*, 29 (Summer 1984) 68-81 (p. 68).

⁴⁴⁹ Grenier, p. 197.

⁴⁵⁰ Grenier, p. 73.

more falsely you act, the more you reveal the truth'.⁴⁵¹ Eco had a similar idea in mind when he said that 'what an artist tells us explicitly is often contradicted by what he tells us implicitly, in the way he has constructed his work'.⁴⁵² Boltanski's truth is, in his own words: 'art is an attempt to prevent death. [...] And what I love is that [the artist] knows from the start that they'll necessarily be failures. Art is always a sort of defeat, a struggle you can't win. You try to pause life [...] and you try to capture it, but of course you don't'.⁴⁵³ With the help of the postindex, I think I know what he means: the past can be imitated and memories rekindled but they are always consigned to death. The struggle to understand and come to terms with one's death is the focus of my final chapter.

⁴⁵¹ Grenier, p. 238.

⁴⁵² Eco, p. 151.

⁴⁵³ Grenier, p. 80-1.

**'THE DEATH OF OUR CHILDHOOD': EXISTENTIAL DEATH
AND THE ART OF CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI**

This chapter is about death and the art of Christian Boltanski. Since the start of his artistic career, Boltanski has obsessively addressed notions of death and forgotten memory. Most of the previous writers have commented on the prevalence of death in his œuvre but have not explored his recurring dark fascination in much depth. What is written about death tends to reiterate the physical death of the Jews during the Holocaust but this reading seems superficial because his work says so little about it.

I want to approach his art from a different point of view: existential death. I want to know if notions from existentialism can illuminate previously overlooked insights into his art beyond the physical cessation of the body. That is to say, I want to understand if Boltanski's work conveys the realisation that death is a condition of all human experience and existence. Since I have argued that the viewer determines the meaning based on his or her own memories and background, I want to know what death means in the context of the relationship between the work and the viewer. In order to better understand this kind of death, I explore it through the lens of German philosopher Martin Heidegger's notions of Existentialism.

I want to know what death means in the dominant interpretation of Boltanski's art, based on the Holocaust, with the help of ideas developed by Heidegger. Specifically, I apply Heideggerian notions about the *death of others* and *inauthentic* understandings of death, such as *perishing*, in order to illuminate what death means in his art. I also approach his work with integral aspects of death that feature in existentialist thought such as the uncanny, anxiety, and resoluteness. I do with this with the intention of uncovering

important and previously overlooked statements and innovations Boltanski made in regards to the contemporary sense of death and the part that memory plays within it.

In chapter two, I argued that the figure of the child in Boltanski's art is a *memento mori* symbol because it is linked to death. Here, I continue my examination of the figure of the child. I want to unpick the reason why Boltanski so often equates childhood with death and forgotten memories. I flush out these ideas with an in-depth analysis of the artist who Boltanski proclaimed is most important and influential to his practice: the late Polish theatre director, Tadeusz Kantor. I look at Kantor's strong proclivity for representing collective and personal memory of childhood with death in his 1975 manifesto, the 'Theatre of Death', and more precisely in his most renown and acclaimed play, *The Dead Class*, in order to introduce new insights into the meaning of death in Boltanski's art.

By presenting innovative approaches to understanding death, I contribute a new appreciation regarding its potential to unveil something of the human condition that speaks to all of his viewers in profound and personal ways. This discussion and insights are important to my overall thesis about Boltanski because it allows me to culminate the themes of ambiguity, memory, and falsification into main force of his work: death. In short, my investigation into the ambiguous memory images from an anonymous childhood that never existed reveals a deep fear of death which the artist struggles to fight against in his work. Even though it is ultimately a lost cause, his obsession with remembering and asking the viewer to remember is all that can be done to protect us from the oblivion of death and the past.

Martin Heidegger's notion of death from his seminal text from 1929, *Being and Time*, and subsequent works by other writers who have continued to work with Heidegger's ideas, remain integral to contemporary understandings of death.⁴⁵⁴ His ideas are still very influential in the most recent philosophical thought. The plethora of texts that have expanded upon or clarified certain aspects of Heidegger's existential ideas are indicative of his sustained prominence in Western philosophy. He introduced many ideas that have been adopted and expanded by contemporary writers who expand his ideas from such diverse perspectives as theology, such as George Pattinson,⁴⁵⁵ and art history, such as in the writings by Iain Thomson, just to name a few.⁴⁵⁶

Both Heidegger and Boltanski return to ideas of death as a recurring major theme throughout their careers. Boltanski has depicted memory and ideas about death throughout his entire career. For instance, Boltanski links memory with death through the darkened or unsettling exhibition settings of his work. These set a palpable tone that is at once, affective, sombre, nostalgic, even haunting. Boltanski frequently exhibits in ancient and historic buildings, which conjure up reflections on the past and death, such as the Chapelle de la Salpêtrière in Paris, Palazzo delle Prigione in Venice, Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid, the Park Avenue Armory in New York City, the Grand Palais in Paris, the storage area rooms of the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh and Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville in Paris, San Domingos de Bonaval Church in Santiago de Compostela, and others. These historical contexts lend an overwhelming sense of the past, loss and gravity to his art. When coupled with a dark, or dimly-lit exhibition setting, the effect can be chilling.

⁴⁵⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2003).

⁴⁵⁵ George Pattinson, *Heidegger and Death: A Critical Theological Essay* (New York: Ashgate Publishing, 2013).

⁴⁵⁶ Iain Thomson, *Heidegger, Art and Postmodernity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Death is also signalled through the titles of his works. Some examples, among many, are taken from throughout his career: 1969's *Reconstruction of an Accident That Hasn't Happened Yet And In Which I Meet My Death*; 1970s, *Everything I Know About A Woman Who Is Dead And Whom I Did Not Know*; *Comic Sketches: Grandfather's Death* from 1974; his photographic series from the late 1980s and early 1990s, *The Dead Swiss*; *The Lake of the Dead* in 1990, just to name a few. What I take from Boltanski's proclivity for titles pointing to death and pastness is that he does not conceal or shy away from this aspect of his work. He exposes it and expects the viewer to understand that his work aims for the viewer to reflect, in some way, upon death and the irretrievable past.

Boltanski and Heidegger both explore ideas about the individual's personal relationship to death and loss, not about the event of one's biological death. In fact, I argue that approaching Boltanski's work in an attempt to understand physical death makes his work appear superficial because he does not say much about it. He said that he is interested in existentialism and considers his work as belonging to that school of thought. He said, 'My forms change but my preoccupations remain Existential, even if I was unaware of those ideas at the time [...] I belong to that current of thought. Things happen like that, through conversations, a state of mind at the time, and so my activity wasn't very removed from Existentialism'.⁴⁵⁷ He said that his art 'poses questions about life, about our understanding of who we are, which are similar to the questions a philosopher or a mystic ask. But instead of using words, I use images'.⁴⁵⁸ His art can be understood more fruitfully as depicting an existential kind of death: a painful and life-changing death we can survive but is preceded by a total collapse of our personal, everyday life.

⁴⁵⁷ Grenier, pp. 57-8.

⁴⁵⁸ Grenier, p. 124.

Heidegger's ideas about existential death must be unpacked before I argue how they can explain a new perception of Boltanski's art. Death underpins much of Heidegger's thinking because its inevitability structures our life and gives it meaning. Death is the awareness of the finiteness of life and the revelation that we do not have the time to do everything we want to do. It demands that we make choices. This condition greets us upon our birth and stays until our physical cessation. Death is the foundation of the human condition; it is not something that happens to us from external forces and circumstances, but it constitutes an awareness that forms an integral part of our life.

Death is a breakdown of future possibilities and projects; it is a profound and painful loss, such as life-threatening or life-changing illness or injury, or other challenging and traumatic experiences that force us to accept the death of the life we used to live. Our life is never the same afterward, but we can survive it because it is existential, not necessarily a physical death. Death for Heidegger is not that we no longer exist, but that we no longer exist as we did before: 'the desolate experience he calls "death", the self – temporarily cut off from the world in terms of which it usually understands itself'.⁴⁵⁹

In the first chapter, I discussed the previous literature on Boltanski's art which painted his entire oeuvre as referencing the Holocaust. This interpretation, I argued, began in 1988 with Boltanski's 'Lessons of Darkness' exhibition in North America, and currently dominates the most widely referenced and accepted reading of his work. To summarise, the exhibitions' curators, Lynn Gumpert and Mary Jane Jacob, connected his art with indirect yet powerful references to the Holocaust. Their interpretation of his work as referring to Jewish camp

⁴⁵⁹ Thomson, p. 267.

victims became highly influential and was subsequently adopted by other writers.⁴⁶⁰ I showed that these interpretations are based on problematic factors, such as the uncritical assumption about the identity of the subjects as Jews⁴⁶¹ and Boltanski's own personal Jewish lineage.⁴⁶²

The images and old photographs in Boltanski's art are not Jews who died in the Holocaust: they are images of old photographs, usually of children, who are long forgotten. *How* they died does not play into his art, only that they did, indeed, die. These dominant interpretations impose one, overarching narrative of the Holocaust onto the viewers' interpretations; the artefacts represent the remains from a massive grave of anonymous Jewish camp victims. But this point of view results in the awareness that his art can only mean something about the physical death of someone else: Holocaust victims. Heidegger may have considered these interpretations to reflect what he called an 'inauthentic' approach to perceiving death because it only considers the biological death of other people, rather than what death personally means to the individual viewer. He said, 'Death does indeed reveal itself as a loss, but a loss such as is expressed by those who remain. In suffering this loss, however, we have no way of access to the *loss-of-Being* as such which the dying man 'suffers'. The dying of Others is not something which we experience in a genuine

⁴⁶⁰ Examples include: Lynn Gumpert, *Christian Boltanski* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994) p. 99; Nancy Marmer, 'Boltanski: the Uses of Contradiction', *Art in America* (October 1989) 169-180 (p. 169-70); Arthur Danto, *Encounters and Reflections: Art in the Historical Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989 (pp. 259-60); Ernst Van Alphen, 'Deadly Historians: Boltanski's Intervention in Holocaust Historiography' in *Visual Culture and the Holocaust*, ed. by Barbara Zelizer (London: The Athlone Press, 2001) 45-73 (p. 48); Susan Gubar, *Poetry After Auschwitz: Remembering What One Never Knew* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003 (p. 132); Sarah Gendron, 'It's the Real Thing: The Limits of Realism in Holocaust Visual Art', in *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 13, 4 (2009) 415-22 (pp. 418-19); Janice Bergman-Carton, 'Christian Boltanski's *Dernières Années*: The History of Violence and the Violence of History', *History and Memory*, 13, 1 (Spring/Summer 2001) 3-18 (p. 14).

⁴⁶¹ Hirsch, Marianna, "Past Lives: Postmemories in exile", *Poetics Today*, vol 17, no 4, Winter, 1996, p. 676 and Liss, Andrea, *Trespassing Through Shadows: memory, photography, and the Holocaust*, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1998, p. 43.

⁴⁶² Gumpert, p. 97; Garb, p. 24; Kuspit, Donald, *Signs of the Psyche in Modern and Postmodern Art*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1993, p. 257.

sense.⁴⁶³ The interpretation of his art as Holocaust victims cements the idea of death in the corpse, the pain of grief for the survivors, and other experiences that only understand corporeal death as something which always happens to someone else.

Paying attention to the *death of others* is a practice that humans use to detract from the uniqueness, imminence, and ubiquity of death in their own life. For Heidegger, focussing on the death of others is the way that societal notions of death lulls us into thinking that, “one dies too, sometime, but not right away.” All that we have interpreted thus far is the “one dies” as such.⁴⁶⁴

Heidegger points out that confrontation with the death of other people, even the death of loved ones, can only be a weak, insufficient encounter with death because we are only there ‘just alongside’ and not coming to terms with our personal relationship to our own death.⁴⁶⁵ Contemplation of the death of other people denies us the opportunity to understand what *our* death means to us personally. There is little encouragement in Holocaust-based readings for the viewer to understand death as relating directly to him or herself because those deaths are forever marked by a unique set of tragic circumstances: terrible historical trauma and mass violence.

As I said in a previous chapter, by assigning a definite meaning or identity to the anonymous subjects in Boltanski’s art, the creative ambiguity that invites each viewer to determine meaning for him or herself is nullified. Therefore, the true power and impact goes unnoticed and remains hidden in a one-dimensional conclusion of his work.

⁴⁶³ Heidegger, p. 282.

⁴⁶⁴ Heidegger, p. 299.

⁴⁶⁵ Heidegger, p. 282.

It is important to understand Heidegger's idea of *inauthenticity* when approaching the theme of death in Boltanski's work. Preordained, overarching narratives based on the death of Jewish camp victims are symptomatic of the directives, opinions and beliefs manifested through society, or what Heidegger called the 'they'. Heidegger said, 'The "they" is constituted by the way things have been publicly interpreted, which expresses itself in idle talk. Idle talk must accordingly make manifest the way in which every day Dasein interprets for itself its Being-toward-death'.⁴⁶⁶ The strong influence of the 'they' on the individual can be seen when 'we are under the domination' of society's conventions and 'do "what one does" or "what anyone does" according to current understanding of things, their nature, and their purposes, that we share with others'.⁴⁶⁷ My point is that the distracting and often superficial opinions, rules, beliefs, laws, etc. are ways in which the 'they', or institutions in society such as the media, government, the law, medicine, science, even the arts, attempt to restrict our quest toward recognising what life and death means to us on a personal level. The 'they' obfuscates our own unique relationship to death. 'In the inauthentic mode, Dasein's understanding and discourse are expressed within idle talk and curiosity of the "they-self", disclosing existence in a superficial and ambiguous manner. Tranquillised by what seems a complete understanding of things, Dasein never sets out to acquire an authentic understanding of existence and is unconcerned with clear-sighted projection of its own most possibilities. Lost in the "they-self", Dasein does not enact its own Being and either avoids, or remains oblivious to, the uniqueness and "peculiarity" of its Being and its genuine possibilities'.⁴⁶⁸ Philosopher George Steiner interpreted Heidegger to mean that the

⁴⁶⁶ Heidegger, p. 296.

⁴⁶⁷ Carol J White, *Time and Death: Heidegger's Analysis of Finitude*, ed. by Mark Ralkowski (Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, 2005), p. 41.

⁴⁶⁸ James Magrini, "'Anxiety" in Heidegger's *Being and Time: The Harbinger of Authenticity*, *Dialogue* (April 2006) 77-86 (p. 77).

‘they’ are, ‘those who would rob us of this anxiety – be they priests, physicians, mystics, or rationalist quacks – by transforming it into either fear or genteel indifference to alienate us from life itself’.⁴⁶⁹ In these ways and more, Heidegger states that the ‘they’ inhibits and conceals our potential and freedom to come to terms with our own unique and personal relationship to our death. Because of the numbing effect of the ‘they’, we forget to ask ourselves, ‘What does death mean *to me*?’

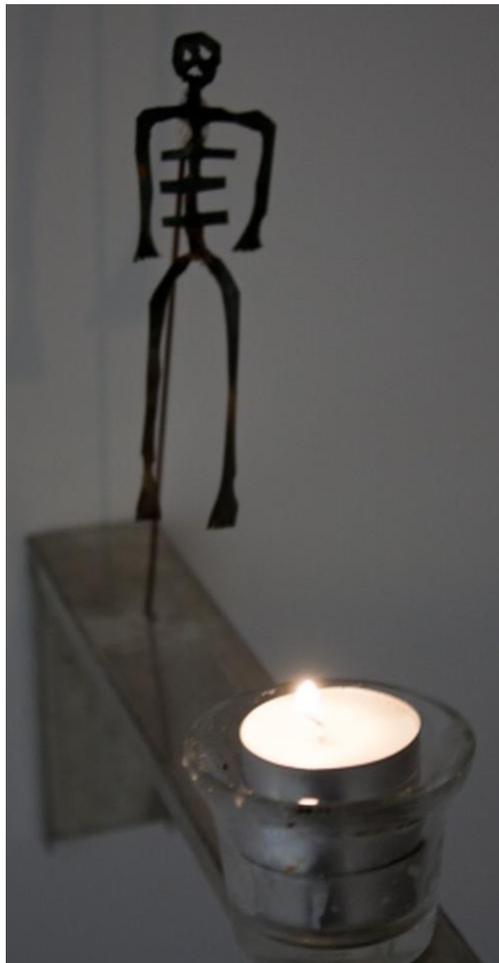


Figure 33: Christian Boltanski, *Les Ombres (The Shadows)* (oxidized copper figures, candles) (Paris, France: Yves Lambert Gallery, 2011).

Boltanski has produced works which parody conventional ideas and images of death. Some of the works even appear to stem from what children are told about it. For instance, *Les Ombres (The Shadows)* from 1984 can be described as ‘puppet like’ in that they are all made

⁴⁶⁹ George Steiner, *Heidegger* (London: Fontana Press, 1992) p. 105-6.

from materials that children have to hand: feathers, tin foil, cardboard. They are roughly cut and constructed in figurines of skeletons, skulls, and ambiguous winged creatures, analogous to child-like sensibilities about devils and demons (Figure 33). The figures either encircle a bright light from a projector which is situated in the middle of the gallery floor in a darkened room, or they are situated on a wall, in front of a single candle.

When *Les Ombres* was exhibited at Galerie 't Venster in Rotterdam, the work dazzled its audience as a 'magical theatre'.⁴⁷⁰ A small fan in the gallery blew the figurines into motion along the gallery walls.⁴⁷¹ Gumpert said that the viewers realised that these were 'an army of hanged men, interleaved with menacing skeletons and supernatural beings. Among the group and constructed out of wire, the hunched figure of the grim reaper, scythe in hand, reinforced the bleaker aspects of this macabre dance of death'.⁴⁷² The figures in *Les Ombres* are representative of a naïve, child-like explanation of death.

The artist created similar works such as *L'Ange d'Alliance (The Angel of Accord)* and *Les Bougies (The Candles)*, both from 1986. What the viewer saw were the spectacular, yet cliché figures and characters that both children and adults are taught to accept as the typical images of death.⁴⁷³ In these works, Boltanski represents the collective images that signify conventional comprehension of death. They reflect the numbing effects of the 'they' when it comes to any discussion about it. Here, death is a phantasmagoric spectacle of other-worldly creatures of the night. But death never touches us. Rather, it delights and entertains us.

⁴⁷⁰ Gumpert, p. 80.

⁴⁷¹ Gumpert, p. 79.

⁴⁷² Gumpert, p. 80.

⁴⁷³ Gumpert, p. 94.

In *Morts pour Rire de Christian Boltanski* (*Deaths for Fun of Christian Boltanski*) from 1974, the artist enacts scenes of different kinds of suicides. This work consists of black-and-white photographs with Boltanski dressed as a sort of prankster or clown (dishevelled black suit, white shirt, black tie, and black hat which makes him look slightly absurd). The photographs come in pairs which are marked as 'before' and the other as 'after' death. The 'before' photographs show Boltanski dying by various means. For example, in *La Noyade* (*The Drowning*), we see a 'before' photograph of Boltanski, from the waist up, with a rope attached to a large rock or brick around his neck. He has a child-like, over-exaggerated frown on his face with his hands clasped in front of him as if he is about to dive to his death. The 'after' photograph shows a full-body shot of Boltanski, laughing at the camera (and the viewer). He is standing in a tiny bucket of water, just big enough for his feet. Boltanski is 'gleefully demonstrating that the suicide attempt was a fake'.⁴⁷⁴

In all of these works, Boltanski is trying out various ideas of death that are espoused by the 'they': that death is like a fairy tale with winged demons, dancing skeletons, and flickering skulls. Or death is like a joke and nothing to take too seriously. Since the black-and-white photographs from *La Noyade* show him in a white studio, the artificiality and entertainment value of ideas about death are underscored. He once remarked that we deny death by sending people to hospitals to die, as if there were a cure for the natural process of dying. In these works, Boltanski is enacting those ideas of death which are so rampant in the comforting, numbing conventions of the 'they'. He exposes the absurdity of platitudes which try to ease our discomfort about our own mortality.

⁴⁷⁴ Gumpert, p. 51.

One of the ways in which the 'they' obfuscates our perception of death is by deflecting our attention onto what Heidegger called *perishing*, or the biological termination of life in the physical body. He said, 'In our terminology, the ending of anything that is alive is denoted as "perishing"'.⁴⁷⁵ But, as far as Heidegger is concerned, death for humans is part of life: 'The ending of that which lives we have called "perishing". Dasein too "has" its death, of the kind appropriate to anything that lives'.⁴⁷⁶ So *perishing* is different from what Heidegger called 'death'; perishing is physical, bodily cessation whilst death is existential cessation of our life's plans, and relationships. In Heidegger's idea of existential death, all connections to our everyday life are severed and we float adrift, because the opinions and beliefs of the 'they' no longer make sense or benefit us.

Boltanski has rarely shown images of dead bodies, save once in a booklet he made for *Parkett* magazine in 1989 which showed the murdered bodies of victims appropriated from the Spanish crime tabloid, *El Caso*. Instead, his way of showing a metaphor for the death of the body, or what Heidegger may call perishing, can be seen in a work such as *Exit* from 2006. This is an installation of large clear plastic sheets and clothing hanging from the ceiling of a large darkened room. The clothing is not crumpled or even used but appears akin to funeral attire of the unknown dead: sombre, simple black dresses and tidy, smart black suits. The bodies of the dead are dematerialised, floating toward a bright light emanating from a distant corner in the room. This all sounds very formulaic: the bright light at the end of the tunnel when we die. We even recall the instruction: Go to the light. These are the old chestnuts of the 'they'.

⁴⁷⁵ Heidegger, p. 284.

⁴⁷⁶ Heidegger, p. 291.

I discussed the work, *The Clothes of a Woman*, by Hans-Peter Feldmann in chapter two in order to compare it to *The Clothes of François C.* by Boltanski. I showed that both artists used similar techniques to represent ordinariness. Everyday, generic images from mass media are well-trodden themes in Feldmann's work. I want to see if his art book, *Die Toten, 1967-1993* (or, *The Dead, 1967-1993*), published in 1998, can shed any light on how Boltanski represents the unknown dead.

Die Toten features 91 course-grained, black-and-white photographs, appropriated from newspapers and magazines of 87 people who died (three were still missing) due to their ties with left-wing terrorism in the 1960s and 1970s in West Germany.

However, unlike Boltanski, Feldmann provides basic information about the dead. He lists the names of six terrorist groups on the front cover: Studentenbewegung, APO, Baader-Meinhof, Bewegung 2. Juni, Revolutionäre Zellen, RAF. Each page of the book depicts one person who has died due to the conflicts. The only information the reader is given initially is their name with a cross next to their date of death. For example, one photograph shows a dead body carried on a stretcher by four people and flanked by another as they make their way through a field. It appears this photograph was borrowed from a newspaper due to its journalistic, documentary appearance. The caption under the photograph reads, 'Petra Schlem +15.7.1971'.⁴⁷⁷ Another photograph shows a young woman with dark hair staring defiantly at the camera. She is standing up against a brick wall with her hands on top of her head. Again, it appears to be taken from a newspaper which covered the story of her arrest. The caption says, 'Ulrike Marie Meinhof +8/9.5.1976'.⁴⁷⁸

⁴⁷⁷ Hans-Peter Feldmann, *Die Toten 1967-1993* (Düsseldorf: Feldmann Verlag, 1998) unpaginated.

⁴⁷⁸ Feldmann, *Die Toten 1967-1993*, unpaginated.

Other photographs in *Die Toten* show more images of dead bodies. We see the chilling image of Benno Ohnesorg's dead body taken from a newspaper. Another photograph shows some people looking at the dead body of Ulrich Schmücker by the side of the road. As the viewer turns each page of the book and reviews each image, the captions accompanying the photographs provide only a name and date of death. This tactic serves to level out any moral inclinations the viewer may have about grieving for one person but not another. *Die Toten* is playing with the notion that the sorrow we feel about someone's death should not be based on what the individual did or did not do during their life. Feldmann explains that 'they all died either at the hands of terrorists or, being terrorists themselves, were killed by the police'.⁴⁷⁹

Only at the end of the book does the factual information about each person's cause of death appear. Petra Schlem and Ulrike Meinhof were both part of the German left-wing militant group called the Red Army Faction. Whilst Schlem was killed in 1971 by a gunshot to the eye during a police chase in Hamburg, Meinhof was arrested for murder by the German police in 1972. Before she could be sentenced, she was found dead in her jail cell in Stammheim Prison, Stuttgart: an apparent suicide by hanging. Ohnesorg, we learn, was a 26 year-old university student in Berlin who was tragically shot and killed by police during a demonstration against the Shah of Iran on 2 June 1967. Schmücker was killed by his own left-wing terrorist group for turning on them and becoming a police informant.

Since Feldmann provided identifying information about each person and the circumstances of their demise, *Die Toten* is a work that, first and foremost, highlights moral questions.

These questions are framed within the context of death, rather than asking the viewer to reflect on death itself. The most important message of *Die Toten* is not about *who* died, 'but

⁴⁷⁹ Élizabeth Wetterwald, 'Hans-Peter Feldmann's Picture Show', *Art Press*, 277 (2002), p. 51.

of pointing out that in each case, however they described themselves, people died'.⁴⁸⁰ To be precise, *Die Toten* does not give the viewer an opportunity to reflect about one's own death. This differs from much of the work that Boltanski creates; he anonymises the dead so their identity cannot form part of the work's meaning. This frees the viewer to reflect upon death in a way that is not caught up with issues about identity.

Heidegger explained that, 'The dying of Others is not something which we can experience in a genuine sense'.⁴⁸¹ This means that the pictures of dead bodies in works of art can only be of other people who are strangers to us. Their images may elicit a wide range of emotions in the viewer from sympathy, fear, and horror to a sense of justice or even *schadenfreude*. But the pictures of dead strangers can never reveal what death will be like for each individual viewer. We are only ever there alongside the dead as a sort of spectator. One person's death cannot be experienced as a kind of substitute or 'trial run' for our own. This is what Heidegger meant when he said, 'This is what one presupposes when one is of the opinion that any *Dasein* may be substituted for another at random, so that what cannot be experienced in one's own *Dasein* is accessible in that of a stranger'.⁴⁸²

I want to move away from the death of others to another existential idea relating to death: the uncanny. Heidegger argued that it is a 'peculiar indefiniteness of that which *Dasein* finds itself alongside in anxiety' which points to 'the "nothing and the nowhere"'.⁴⁸³ Succinctly said, the uncanny is an experience where something with which we are familiar becomes strange to us and we start to question what things *are*.⁴⁸⁴ Everyday familiar conventions of how we and the world around us exist become unfamiliar, unintelligible, and our

⁴⁸⁰ Kaspar König, 'Hans Peter Feldmann and Kaspar König in conversation', *Frieze*, 91 (May 2005) <<https://frieze.com/article/hans-peter-feldmann>> [accessed 31 July 2019].

⁴⁸¹ Heidegger, p. 282.

⁴⁸² Heidegger, p. 283.

⁴⁸³ Heidegger, p. 233.

⁴⁸⁴ White, p. 13.

understanding of our world breaks down.⁴⁸⁵ Uncanniness attracts our attention and asks us to look more deeply into the world around us. We realise that we feel strange not just to our surroundings and relationships, but we feel strange *to our self*. 'If we do not just feel uncanny but *are* uncanny then uncanniness is not just a window onto human life but itself belongs to the human essence'.⁴⁸⁶

Through the revelation of the uncanny, we recognise a remoteness and strangeness that exists at the core of everything around us and in ourselves. It discloses the ambiguous, unknowable foundation of who we think we are. Boltanski's art prompts feelings of uncanniness in the viewer through ambiguous elements in the work. With the help of Heidegger, we detect an inherent indeterminacy reflected in Boltanski's art.

I want to spend some time on the idea of the uncanny in Boltanski's work by looking at his depiction of the figure of the child. I argue that his notion of childhood is uncanny because it appropriates the conventional understanding of childhood – innocent, passive – and turns it into something strange and threatening: a *memento mori*. I illustrate my discussion by comparing his deathly figure of childhood with the artist who he claimed influenced him the most: Polish theatre director, Tadeusz Kantor.

In chapter two on ambiguity, I introduced the figure of the child in Boltanski's art. I said that he depicts the figure of the child as innocent and passive and that these characteristics correspond to eighteenth and nineteenth-century concepts about childhood. I continued to argue that he also borrows from more contemporary notions of childhood since these children also struggle with adult concerns. What Boltanski contributes to the figure of the

⁴⁸⁵ Heidegger, p. 233.

⁴⁸⁶ Katherine Withy, *Heidegger on Being Uncanny* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015) p. 4.

child, and I think this applies to Kantor as well, is the equivalence of childhood with death and forgotten memory. The images of children become a screen where the adult projects his or her anxieties and fears. Childhood comes to be understood as the first breakdown of our everyday life *as it was when we were a child*. The rose-tinted world of our childhood with which we knew and were familiar disappears as we become adults and take on adult responsibilities and concerns. Boltanski said, 'I had the fear of emerging from childhood, and the understanding that suddenly, despite my best efforts, I would become an adult – that the period of childhood would be over and lost forever... The first major death one experiences is of one's own childhood'.⁴⁸⁷

Heidegger said that, 'Death is a way to be. As soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die'.⁴⁸⁸ What I take Heidegger to mean is that as soon as we are born, death is at once a part of our life. Even though Heidegger did not discuss childhood much in *Being and Time*, he did make a few comments about it during his 1928 lecture course, *Einleitung in die Philosophie (or Introduction to Philosophy)* which he delivered in 1928-29, a year after the release of *Being and Time*, at the University of Freiburg. Heidegger thought that childhood was the 'twilight condition' characterised by 'rest, warmth, nourishment, sleep, and a kind of nontelic directness of movement toward and away from elements in the environment'.⁴⁸⁹ This means that childhood is an early part of life that entails nurturing but the child is not yet taken over by an inner direction or aim regarding its life's choices and purpose. Yet,

⁴⁸⁷ Grenier, p. 80.

⁴⁸⁸ Heidegger, p. 289.

⁴⁸⁹ Lawrence J Hatab, 'Dasein, the Early Years: Heideggerian Reflections of childhood', *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 5, 216, 1 (2014), 379-91 (p. 383). Taken from Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, ed. by Otto Saame and Ina Saame-Speidel, (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Vittorio Klosterman, 1996), p. 124.

Heidegger acknowledged, childhood and the past 'does not simply lie behind us' but stays with us throughout our life.⁴⁹⁰

One of Boltanski's most well-known and enduring statements illustrates his conviction about our condition as adults: 'we each bear a dead child within us – ourselves as dead children – and that the more we move forward, the more we forget that child'.⁴⁹¹ This quote is obviously not to be taken literally; I understand him as saying that even though we grow out of our childhood and leave it behind, our memories of it are always with us, albeit hidden and forgotten, because we 'survived' it, we endured the *existential* death of our childhood.

The Polish theatrical director Tadeusz Kantor and his work had a profound effect on Boltanski. Both address notions of personal and collective memory and death through the use of childhood memory at a contemporaneous moment in the late twentieth century. One can gain a sense of Kantor's importance for Boltanski from the fact that in 2015 the artist produced an installation, *In the Blink of an Eye*, at the Cricoteka in Krakow, a cultural institution, founded by Kantor himself in 1980 that archives and documents his work, on the centenary of Kantor's birth. The work is composed of actual grass and cut flowers lining the floor of the gallery whilst a video of Boltanski's 2015 outdoor installation in the Atacama Desert in Chile, *Animitas*, is projected onto one of the walls. The title refers to 'animitas' which are Chilean roadside shrines to the dead. Boltanski's *Animitas* began as a live-streamed video during his retrospective at the Fine Arts Museum in Santiago, Chile. It shows around 800 Japanese bells attached to the top of long stems planted in the ground. The chiming bells release their sound to the wind, in effect, freeing the music of the souls of the

⁴⁹⁰ Lawrence, p. 383.

⁴⁹¹ Grenier, p. 77.

dead.⁴⁹² Ten red digital chronometers accompany the video and displays the time since the debut of Kantor's theatre company, Cricot-2, and 'is testimony of the implacability of time and the earthliness of human life that invariably seems to pass "in the blink of an eye"'.⁴⁹³ As the exhibition progresses, the grass and flowers slowly decay. *In the Blink of an Eye* has a universal theme of death, decay, and time: themes that both artists shared. Boltanski dedicated the installation to the memory of Kantor, even if there are no overt references to the Polish director.

Boltanski spoke of admiringly of Kantor's work and underscored his significance to his work when he said:

Kantor's most famous play is *Dead Class*, in which he stages some old men carrying a dead child on their back. His work revolves completely around the idea of ghosts, the ghosts who live in our heads. He brings these ghosts to life in burlesque or grotesque forms. Because he's a genius, they're both his own ghosts and the ghosts of Poland, a blend of historical and the anecdotal. That's closely related to my work. He came to France later in life. I discovered his work around 1983, when I went to see a play of his at Chaillot, and I met him. I was very proud to have a text by him in the catalogue for my exhibition at the Pompidou Centre... I immediately recognise myself in his

⁴⁹² Marian Lacombe, 'Animitas or the Music of Souls: In the World's Driest Desert, a Poetic Sound Installation by Christian Boltanski' <<https://www.sculpturenature.com/en/animatas-or-the-music-of-souls-in-the-worlds-driest-desert-a-poetic-sound-installation-by-christian-boltanski/>> [accessed 3 August 2019].

⁴⁹³ Eugen Wokl, 'Book review: Christian Boltanski's *In the Blink of an Eye*', *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai – Dramatica*, 2 (2015), 302-307 (p. 303).

work, and I admire his theatre more than anything in the world. It's what I would most like to do.⁴⁹⁴

The fact that Kantor dealt with similar issues of personal and collective memory can be seen in Boltanski's 2007 exhibition catalogue for *Time*, shown at Institut Mathildenhöhe in Darmstadt, Germany. The poem, *The Room*, by Kantor was included in the monograph at the request of Boltanski. The poem begins with these words:

The room of my childhood is dark, a cluttered CUBBYHOLE.
It is not true that in our memory the childhood room is sunny and light. It is only in a mannered literary convention. What we are dealing with is a DEAD room or THE DEAD'.⁴⁹⁵

What we read in Kantor's poem are his notions about childhood and death. Even if there is no analysis or commentary in *Time* regarding the links between Boltanski and Kantor's mutual fascination with death and childhood memory, from this poem, the connection becomes clear that for both artists, death and childhood memory are mutual fascinations. Even more, both artists engage with existentialist notions of death. Theatre critic, Irving Wardle, observed in 1976 at the opening of *The Dead Class* in Edinburgh's Richard Demarco Gallery for the Edinburgh Festival that Kantor's play was an existential meditation on the, 'The contrast between what we were, and what we become; the inescapable persistence of childhood into adult life; the idea of the world as a schoolroom, a place of imposed discipline and humiliation where, to the last gasp, we are hoping to learn something that

⁴⁹⁴ Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, p. 81-2.

⁴⁹⁵ Tadeusz Kantor, 'The Room' in *Boltanski: Time*, ed. by Ralf Beil (Darmstadt: Mathildenhöhe Darmstadt, 2006) p. 39-41.

makes sense of it all'.⁴⁹⁶ Likewise, French actor, journalist, and theatre critic, Jean-Pierre Leonardini, also commented on the existential slant to *The Dead Class* when he wrote that 'The play goes round and round like a squirrel in a wheel without beginning or end. We stand face to face with the camera obscura of philosophical determinism to a quite unprecedented degree. Kantor's ontological range bursts all bounds. The symbols he makes use of, economical and spare, bear witness to his appropriation of this domain of death'.⁴⁹⁷ My point is that not only did Kantor and Boltanski address collective memory in their works but both also had an affinity for linking childhood and death together through an existential connection.

In 1975, Kantor wrote his manifesto, 'Theatre of Death'. The ideas expressed in it manifested themselves in five plays: *The Dead Class* (his most famous play which premiered in 1975), *Wiepole, Wiepole* (premiered in June 1980), *Let the Artists Die* (premiered in June 1985), *I Shall Never Return* (premiered in April 1988), and *Today is My Birthday* (premiered in January 1991, a few months after Kantor's death). In the 'Theatre of Death', Kantor 'articulated his desire to abandon a theatre grounded in physical reality for a theatre that embraced an instant double of the Self—the Other' and what was needed was a 'new subject constituted by the mental gaze of the Self'.⁴⁹⁸ Kantor aims to create theatrical works where 'the concept of LIFE can be vindicated in art only through the ABSENCE OF LIFE in its conventional sense'.⁴⁹⁹ Kantor represents life through its negation: death.

⁴⁹⁶ Krzysztof Miklaszewski, 'Around the World with Dead Class', in *Encounters with Tadeusz Kantor*, ed. by George Hyde (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge Press, 2005) 47-67 (p. 50). Originally from Irving Wardle, 'The Dead Class', *The Times*, 30 August 1976.

⁴⁹⁷ Miklaszewski, p.55. Originally from Jean-Pierre Leonardini, 'L'écureuil sur la roue. Le Polonais Kantor gère l'économie de la mort', *L'Humanité*, 10309 (1977).

⁴⁹⁸ Michal Kobialka, *Further On, Nothing: Tadeusz Kantor's Theatre* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 223.

⁴⁹⁹ Tadeusz Kantor, 'The Theatre of Death: a Manifesto', in *The Twentieth Century Performance Reader*, ed. by Michael Huxley and Noel Witts (New York: Routledge, 2013), 249-259 (p. 269).

In 'Theatre of Death', the mannequin, in the form of a child, was the main strategy that he sought to communicate death – the 'other'. He wrote, 'DOUBLES, MANNEQUINS, AUTOMATONS, HOMUNCULI. Artificial creations, a mockery of the creatures of NATURE, bearers of absolute degradation, ALL human dreams, DEATH, HORROR, and TERROR.'⁵⁰⁰ By using mannequins as harbingers of death, Kantor 'THOUGHT, memory, and TIME become increasingly clear'.⁵⁰¹

Kantor used child-mannequins for a specific function, 'they were like a non-material extension, a kind of ADDITIONAL ORGAN for the actor, who was their "master" [...] DOUBLES of live characters, somehow endowed with a higher CONSCIOUSNESS attained after the completion of their lives. These mannequins were already clearly stamped with the sign of DEATH'.⁵⁰² What I take Kantor to mean is that by presenting a child-mannequin as similar to human actors in their visual likeness, but dissimilar in that mannequins are not alive, the audience will understand that it is an embodiment of death through a negative ontology: death is what life is not. The child-mannequins allow the audience to glimpse into the mortality that sits in 'THEIR VERY SELVES'.⁵⁰³ If we accept that the child-mannequins represent the dead children that bear the memory of the adults as well as the problematic collective memory of Poland after World War II, the themes of memory and death become resonant.

Boltanski's puppet 'Little Christian' was similar to Kantor's puppets in his play *The Dead Class*. 'Little Christian' was a ventriloquist's dummy that Boltanski dressed like a child and performed with during his exhibition at Westfälischer Kunstverein in Münster, Germany in

⁵⁰⁰ Kantor, p. 267.

⁵⁰¹ Kantor, p. 269.

⁵⁰² Kantor, p. 270.

⁵⁰³ Kantor, p. 272.

1974 in a series of works entitled *Comic Vignettes*.⁵⁰⁴ 'Little Christian' represents the dead child that lives inside of Boltanski. He said, 'I began to work as an artist when I began to be an adult, when I understood my childhood was finished, and was dead. I think we all have somebody who is dead inside of us. A dead child. I remember Little Christian that is dead inside me'.⁵⁰⁵

The connection between Boltanski and Kantor's use of child-mannequins to represent the dead child that is inside of everyone was highlighted by Boltanski himself.⁵⁰⁶ He said, 'Kantor's most important play is *The Dead Class*, in which he stages old men and women carrying a dead child on their backs. His work revolves completely around the idea of ghosts, the ghosts who live in our heads [...] he's burlesque, sardonic; his figures are clowns'.⁵⁰⁷

During an interview with Ralf Beil, the art director of the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg and editor of the *Time* exhibition catalogue, Boltanski said that 'I created a puppet, "Le petit Christian" ("Little Christian"). It's interesting how close that gets to Kantor's play with puppets, *The Dead Class*, because I only got to know Kantor six or seven years later. I don't even know if *The Dead Class* had been written by then, but I definitely had "Little Christian" on my arm and was able to talk with him, as if I were both father and child. The puppet was a kind of double'.⁵⁰⁸

⁵⁰⁴ *The Great Parade: Portrait of the Artist as a Clown*, ed. by Jean Clair (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 203.

⁵⁰⁵ *Tate International Arts and Culture*, 2 (2002) <<https://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/studio-christian-boltanski>> [accessed 29 March 2019].

⁵⁰⁶ Ralf Beil, "'Life is just a short black line": A conversation with Christian Boltanski', *Boltanski: Time*, ed. by Ralf Beil, (Darmstadt: Mathildenhöhe Darmstadt, 2006), p. 77.

⁵⁰⁷ Grenier, p. 81-2.

⁵⁰⁸ Beil, p. 77.

The Dead Class premiered on 15 November 1975 in the vaulted, low-arched ceiling basement of the Krzysztofory Gallery in Kraków, Poland.⁵⁰⁹ ⁵¹⁰ The play depicts memories or reflections from Kantor's childhood; each scene is situated within the dark, sombre, hidden classroom from his childhood (Figure 34). The play does not follow a traditional structure with a narrative and plot but progresses more like a series of snapshots depicting Kantor's childhood memory. Teresa Brayshaw has argued that Kantor's 'Theatre of Death' manifesto stipulates that his works depart 'from all the main traditions of European theatre in advocating non-linear form'.⁵¹¹ What the play represents is not a typical narrative with a plot, but multiple reflections and moments from Kantor's own personal childhood memory. In *The Dead Class*, mournful, grotesque elderly men and women enter the stage, each carrying a child-mannequin on their back representing their own dead childhood: 'The dead carcasses of children are hanging over or are trying to cling to the Old People not to fall off; others are dragged behind, as if they were heavy burdens, bad consciences, "chains around their necks", as if they "crawled" over those who got old, and who killed this childhood of theirs with their sanctioned and "socialised" maturity'.⁵¹² The elderly students take their seats at their desks and await their teacher's instruction.

Throughout the play, the audience is introduced to several characters; they all embody familiar generic stereotypes whilst also imbuing the play with ambiguity. There is Charlady (the lady who cleans the classroom), the Beadle (someone of lowest standing), the Woman in the Window (she calls to the audience from the other side of the grave), the Old Man in the Wash Closet, an Old Man with a Bicycle, a Somnambulist Prostitute, and a Woman with

⁵⁰⁹ Konstanty Puzyna, Tadeusz Różewicz, and Andrzej Wajda, 'On Tadeusz Kantor's *The Dead Class*', *Polish Theatre Perspectives*, 1, 1 (2010), 343-353 (p. 343).

⁵¹⁰ Kobialka, p. 197.

⁵¹¹ Brayshaw, T., in *The Twentieth Century Performance Reader*, ed. by Michael Huxley and Noel Witts (New York: Routledge, 2013), 249-259 (p. 275).

⁵¹² Kobialka, 'Let the Artists Die? An interview with Tadeusz Kantor', p. 242.

a Mechanical Cradle. 'The figures in *The Dead Class* are ambiguous individuals. As if stuck and patched together from various bits and pieces left over from childhood'.⁵¹³ However, there is no discernible development of the characters. The actors move about the stage carrying out various tasks without any apparent narrative. They are simply acting out their own role within the world of the play.

Yet, each familiar character in *The Dead Class* is not only associated with childhood and the schoolroom but are also endowed with a degree of ambiguity because they take on new meanings associated with death. Kantor said that the character of the Charlady, the school cleaning lady, is intimately linked to death when he said,

In particular, she has a huge brush that takes the place of a scythe. A completely expressionless face; movements which are set, precise, mechanical, and repeated hundreds of times. She starts by tidying up things, but soon turns her attention to people as well. A ritual aspect dominates her activities: washing the actors' bodies puts us in mind of the last rites for the dead. This is all the more intelligible as her activities become more and more comprehensive, and she begins to be identified with death'.⁵¹⁴

⁵¹³ Umarla Klasa, 'The Dead Class by Tadeusz Kantor', *Bomb* (1 April 1983)

<<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/umarla-klasa-the-dead-class>> [accessed 4 August 2019]

⁵¹⁴ Krzysztof Miklaszewski, 'Dead Class, or a new treatise on mannequins (Conversation, October 1975)', in *Encounters with Tadeusz Kantor*, ed. by George Hyde (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge Press, 2005) 34-41 (p. 34-5).



Figure 34: Tadeusz Kantor directing *The Dead Class* (Kraków, Poland) (20 January 1988).

Both artists represent childhood in an uncanny way. What I mean is that both artists attempt to unsettle the usual way we think about collective notions of childhood by injecting a strong element of death. This juxtaposition between innocence and death in the figure of the child is unsettling because it is uncanny. Kantor's notes from *The Dead Class* are remarkably similar to Boltanski's sentiment about the dead child in us all when he wrote, 'The Wax Figures are carried on their back, in their hands, across, dragged behind, etc. [...] as if these were corpses of the children [...] The Old People, carry them - their own childhood'.⁵¹⁵

I want to look at the connection Boltanski established between death and childhood to see if it has any resemblance to how Kantor linked the two notions. In chapter one, I showed that early reception of *Les Enfants de Dijon* (Figure 20) by art critic, Didier Semin, and artist, Démosthènes Davvetas, was interpreted as referencing collective imagery of religion and childhood. But I want to understand what the work says about forgotten memory, death, and childhood. I described *Les Enfants de Dijon* in chapter three as a series of works that

⁵¹⁵ Kobialka, *Further On, Nothing: Tadeusz Kantor's Theatre*, p. 242.

consist of dozens small, black-and-white portraits from schoolchildren in Dijon around six to eight years of age. The photographs are familiar because they are the common sort of school portraits that many have in their own family photo album. These children's portraits reflect similar experiences, memories, and artefacts that we all have in our personal lives. In some works of the series, the portraits are affixed to the top of a basic altar and hung on the wall. Other portraits of the children are independently hung on the walls of the exhibition room from floor to ceiling. In the quiet, darkened room of the gallery, soft white fairy lights encircle each photograph. The feeling is akin to being in church during a liturgical ritual, such as those found in the Catholic Church or any number of other religions where candles burn in darkened rooms in order to commemorate an event or person. Carola Kemme from Mathildenhöhe Darmstadt wrote that 'the themes of memory and death are interwoven in the aura of the work, which united the sacred and the profane'.⁵¹⁶ Black industrial cords from the fairy lights are not hidden but rather they are allowed to hang lazily amongst the children's portraits.

As in most of Boltanski's other works, these children have no names, no identifying information other than from the title which tells us that these children are from Dijon. Each individual frame was constructed by Boltanski to represent one forgotten child. Since we do not know whose memories they represent, the pictures, taken together as a whole, are an accumulation of everyday, collective memories of childhood from the prospective of the adult viewer. What I mean is that, in a similar way to Kantor's child-mannequins in *The Dead Class*, these children's pictures manifest the anxious adult projections about the loss of their childhood and childhood memories.

⁵¹⁶ Carola Kemme, 'Christian Boltanski Biography', *Boltanski: Time*, ed. by Ralf Beil, (Darmstadt: Mathildenhöhe Darmstadt, 2006), p. 131.

The equivalence between childhood and death is ubiquitous in Boltanski's oeuvre. Another example is the series of photographic works entitled *Le Lycée Chases (Altars: The Chases High School)* from the late 1980s (Figure 16). I have discussed this work in previous chapters so I will summarise it. This series of works depict individual portraits of children separated from a large class photograph. Boltanski rephotographed each of the 23 faces and separated them from the old class photograph. The portraits were enlarged to the point of erasing their distinctive facial features. He arranged each anonymous portrait into a composition resembling a small and simple monument, usually supported or accompanied by several old, rusty tin boxes which seemingly contain the child's keepsakes and souvenirs. The uncanny representations of death emanating from this work stem not only from the anonymous children but also from the overly bright spotlights, which is what I want to emphasise here. Each of the portraits have a spotlight attached to it. My point is that, rather than gently illuminating the children's faces, the lights conceal them.

If the traditional purpose of light is to illuminate, the stark lighting for *Le Lycée Chases* does not abide by this convention. Not only are the children anonymous, but their faces are partially concealed. Instead of aiding the viewer to see the portraits more clearly, the spotlight cancels out the child's face. The spotlight itself hangs directly in front of the centre of the photographic image, going some way to erase the child's portrait, and problematise viewing. The intensity of the light and its glare off the glass in front of the child's portrait further disrupts any potential for the viewer to see the face clearly.

A strange disparity exists between the expectation to study the face and the inability to do so. The irrationality of the lighting creates an uncanniness with the potential to provoke anxiety in the viewer, and if they pursue it, a glimpse at the strange nature of death. The uncanniness of anonymous children's' portraits is doubled: once by the lack of their identity

and again by the struggle to see their partially obliterated faces. The blazing intensity of the spotlights seem to burn away their faces rather than increase their visibility. The anticipation of gentle illumination is rendered unstable and therefore strange; this realisation may allow the viewer a glance at the unsettled nature of death.

There is a parallel representation of the notion of childhood between the child-mannequins in Kantor's play and the anonymous children depicted in Boltanski's photographic works. Both depict children and childhood similarly as uncanny characters: the dead child that still exists in the adult. Their stereotypical familiarity as innocent and passive children becomes strange when they stand in as *memento mori* symbols. Essentially, for both artists, the figure of childhood is represented as dead, forgotten memories that still exist inside the mind of the adult. Kantor said that *The Dead Class*, and I think it could equally apply to Boltanski's work, brings together the imagery of childhood with death and forgotten memory.

In come some human beings in the twilight of their lives, dressed in rustic mourning clothes, who have become "ingrown" with the corpses of children. These child-corpuses, growing in some kind of an extra-biological dimension, are like parasitic excrescences on their bodies. They are actually the same person in larval form which contains the entire memory of their childhood, discarded and forgotten out of insensitivity because of the mindless drudgery of everyday life, which strips us of the capacity to grasp the bigger picture. It is the facticity of everyday life which kills our ability to imagine the past'.⁵¹⁷

⁵¹⁷ Krzysztof Miklaszewski, 'Dead Class, or a new treatise on mannequins (Conversation, October 1975)', in *Encounters with Tadeusz Kantor*, ed. by George Hyde (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge Press, 2005) 34-41 (p. 36).

Despite the similarities between the two artists in terms of the figure of the child and death, the forgotten memories that the dead children represent in the art of Boltanski differs from the memories harboured by child-mannequins in Kantor's play. These differences allow me to draw out the role of the artist as it exists in both their works. For Kantor, classroom memories of childhood are common to all, but the performed memories are of his own personal experiences. In fact, Kantor participates as the main protagonist in *The Dead Class*, as well as in his other plays. He is at once the play's director and lead actor: 'The actors are completely subjugated to his will. The visual aspect of the performance is something that only he would know how to create.'⁵¹⁸ Kantor acknowledged that critics understood him as a narcissist or exhibitionist since he constantly turns up and takes a leading role in directing and performing his plays' outcome.⁵¹⁹ Kantor's role as the play's main driver of meaning 'is his alone; he is the sole author'.⁵²⁰

But Kantor's identity and personal memories serve as a sounding board for the individual audience members to understand and recollect their own similar memories. He said that this 'strictly personal dimension, this what I called "mine"' should be translated into universal terms so that everyone who sees the production can say that it concerns him or her to some extent. Otherwise everyone will dissociate themselves from the play instantly.⁵²¹ Even though he wants the audience members to identify with his own story, and to understand it as similar to their own, this is not the main interpretation of his play. It is more of an afterthought. Kantor's memories drive the meaning of his works. That he

⁵¹⁸ Puzyna, Różewicz, Wajda, p. 344.

⁵¹⁹ Barbara Sawa, 'Art is a Kind of Exhibitionism', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 6, 21 (1990) 64-69 (p. 65).

⁵²⁰ Jan Klossowicz, 'Tadeusz Kantor's Journey', *The Drama Review*, 30, 3 (1986) 98-113 (p. 112).

⁵²¹ Sawa, p. 68.

represents concerns and experiences similar to those of his audience is important but the individual audience members subjugate their own unique personal memories in deference to Kantor's storyline and performance.

The dominant role that Kantor adopts in his theatrical productions diverges from Boltanski's artistic practice. Even though both have an interest in collective memory and death, Boltanski devalues his role as the driver of his work's meaning; his inner personality and personal memories do not form the main message of his works. As I discussed in an earlier chapter on ambiguity, if he includes his name or initials in the title of the work, it serves to highlight the fact that Boltanski considers his name to be a signifier for everyman, every child.⁵²² In *Les Enfants de Dijon*, his role as the main meaning maker of the work is relegated. Since his identity and that of the photographed subjects are erased from the meaning of the works, this allows the ambiguity of the anonymous children to take on deeper resonance for the viewer.

Since meaning for Kantor's play resides with his own narrative, the individual audience member still retains a more passive role. The audience absorbs the meaning of the work through Kantor's performance of his own story. The spectator of *The Dead Class* is physically cordoned off from the stage, even though the play takes place in a basement where no traditional division between the stage and the audience is constructed. The stage is physically and deliberately separated from the audience by a rope in order to emphasise the aporia between the illusion of the play onstage and the real world of the audience: 'A rope separated the performance space from the auditorium [...] the space with the audience trying to see its reflection in the representations onstage, and the space where Kantor

⁵²² Marjorie Perloff, "'What has occurred only once': Barthes's Winter Garden/ Boltanski's Archives of the Dead", in *Writing the Image After Roland Barthes*, ed. by Jean-Michel Rabaté (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997) 32-58 (p. 43).

moved among the school desk.⁵²³ For Kantor, the audience does not participate in the play nor influence its meaning in any way.

Kantor rekindles his own childhood memory as a way to represent to the audience members their own shared background and memory, as both individuals and as Poles with a troubled history after the Nazi invasion in World War II and subsequent Communist rule by the Soviet Union. However, Boltanski resigns his own identity and memories in order for the viewer to rekindle their own similar memories of their own 'dead' childhood and project them onto the anonymous subjects. Rather than suggesting that his own memory speaks for everyone, Boltanski allows the viewer to complete the work directly, by filling in the gaps of ambiguous meaning – the anonymity of the subjects – with similar stories and memories from their own past.

Many of Boltanski's works also deal with notions of death in the context of collective memory, such as seen in *Menschlich* of 1994 (Figure 35). This is a photographic installation which consists of 1,200 black-and-white portraits of anonymous subjects seemingly pulled from family photo albums. However, each portrait is recycled from previous works such as *El Caso* and *Detective* from 1987-88, *Sans Souci*, also from the late 1980s, *Le Lycée Chases*, and *the Dead Swiss*. The portraits in *Menschlich* are of similar dimensions and hung tightly together in a claustrophobic *horror vacui* from floor to ceiling in a sort of stumbling grid format. The effect of the grid display structure and the *horror vacui* hanging technique creates an overwhelming feeling of mass, anonymous humanity and the lost and forgotten past. Boltanski shows portraits of anonymous men, women, and children of all ages and backgrounds, not a particular person with a knowable identity, but generic, common photographic portraits of anonymous people seen every day. Boltanski said that *Menschlich*

⁵²³ Kobialka, *Further on Nothing: Tadeusz Kantor's Theatre*, p. 198.

represents ‘human bothers’ who are, quoting Saint Francis, ‘all equal, all similar, all lovable’.⁵²⁴ Whilst we share these commonalities with the people in the photographs, we can never know them as unique individuals.

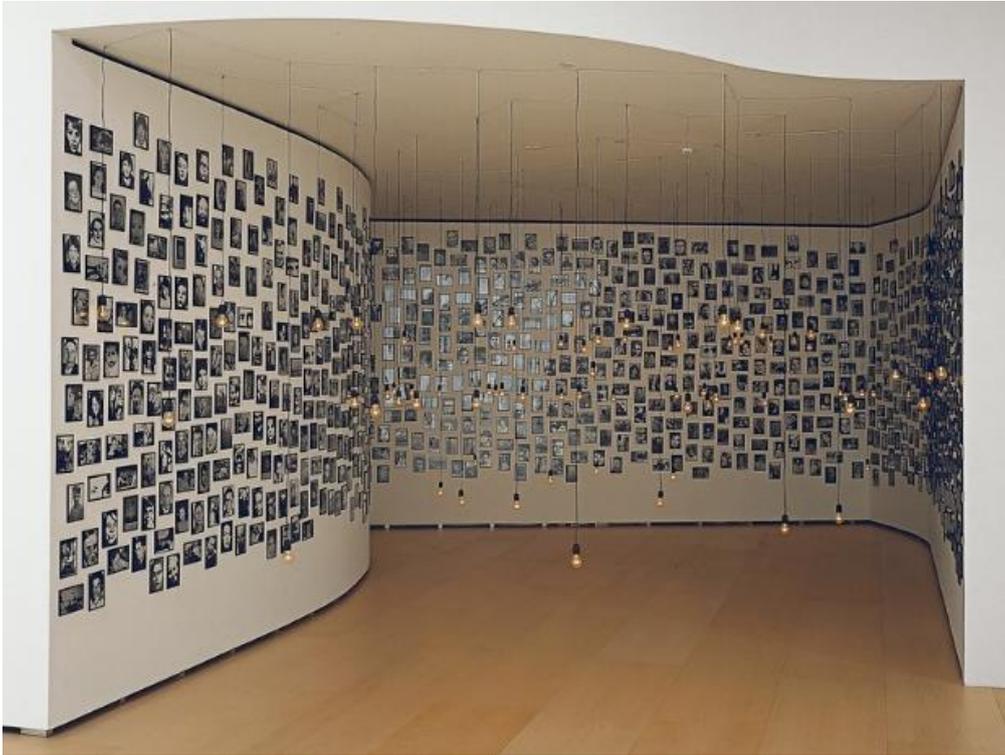


Figure 35: Christian Boltanski, *Menschlich (Humanity)*, (photographs) (Bilbao, Spain: Guggenheim Bilbao. 1994)

Before the photographs ever appeared in Boltanski’s art, they existed in the realm of communicative memory because they appear as old photographs from a family photo album, a place that safeguards personal, private, and informal ‘small memory’. Since they are recycled from Swiss obituary notices and French and Spanish crime tabloids, we know that the people depicted in the photographs are already dead. The faces in *Menschlich* are collective symbols of death.

⁵²⁴ Grenier, p. 126.

By leaving their identity unknown, as I have shown in other works, this becomes a point of ambiguity which calls for the viewer's attention to resolve the meaning of the work. Eco said that the artist designs ambiguity as 'an obvious point of reference: indications of a particular direction, suggestion of possible connections'.⁵²⁵ Boltanski has set the general parameters for this work around their ambiguity: an overwhelming accumulation of the dead and their lost memories.

This work, as in many others by Boltanski, expose our alienation from truly comprehending death in our lives. If the viewer notices something in a photograph that corresponds to his or her own memories, an empathic connection can be formed between the photograph and the viewer. At this point the faces in *Menschlich* can be a platform for the viewer to confront their own thoughts and fears of one day being consigned to oblivion where no one remembers them anymore. Much like the medieval *memento mori* story of 'The Three Living and the Three Dead' where three skeletons address the living with a message of the inevitability of death, the anonymous, forgotten faces in *Menschlich* provide a premonition to the viewers of their own death: 'We have some tyme abyden our chaunce, In this worlde passinge tyme lustily, But now ye must come trace on our daunce, All Adams kynde be ordeyned to dye'.⁵²⁶ If the viewer internalises this message of death and anonymity as something which will come to us all, he or she may have the potential to realise that when 'death stops being the death of others and starts being your own death. That's when we realise our days are numbered'.⁵²⁷

⁵²⁵ Eco, p. 98.

⁵²⁶ The Rouen Primer, 1555, <<https://www.canterbury-cathedral.org/heritage/archives/picture-this/the-three-living-and-the-three-dead>> [accessed 6 December 2019].

⁵²⁷ Grenier, p. 137.

Boltanski said that the idea behind the wall of photographs in *Menschlich* was ‘to bring together an enormous amount of people’.⁵²⁸ He said it was an important work for him because it was a ‘dubious aspect of mixing together victims and executioners, putting them all on the same level. You’ve got the dead Swiss, the children on the Purim holiday, the Nazis of Sanssouci Palace, the children of the Mickey Mouse Club, certain photographs of the family D., the people from El Caso’.⁵²⁹ But this work also recalls Boltanski’s remark about the uniqueness of each individual death, that each one must be ‘counted in ones’.⁵³⁰ Whilst the work as a whole is a massive accumulation of death, it is possible for the viewer to internalise the faces of the dead and their experiences captured in the photographs. The empathic connection may provide the viewer with a glimpse at the reality of death. In turn, reflections on death becomes deeply personal to each viewer.

The ambiguity found in the anonymous faces of the dead in *Menschlich* allows each viewer to interpret them and the work independently. There is ‘no privileged point of view, and all available perspectives are equally valid’, as long as they coincide with the general, loose parameters of the mass of anonymous dead set by Boltanski.⁵³¹ By accepting and acting upon the freedom of interpretation enabled by ambiguity, *Menschlich* offers an insight into the feeling of death and alienation that inhabits our times. Rather than subjugate our own agency and voice to the will of the ‘they’, the potential for polysemy in *Menschlich* offers an avenue for the viewer to exercise his or her capacity to determine their own ideas about the work. The disjointed experience of the uncanny running through the anonymous collective

⁵²⁸ Grenier, p. 178.

⁵²⁹ Grenier, p. 178.

⁵³⁰ Garb, p. 23-4.

⁵³¹ Eco, p. 18.

mnemonic images in Boltanski's art can be a catalyst for the viewer to begin to think about the inherent uncertainty that permeates his or her place in the world.

According to Heidegger, the result of recognising the uncanny nature of death is a distraught sense of detachment and remoteness from others in the world; this is what he calls 'angst' or anxiety. 'Anxiety thus takes away from Dasein the possibility of understanding itself, as it falls, in terms of the "world" and the way things have been publicly interpreted.'⁵³² Heidegger said that anxiety acts to differentiate us from others in society, it individualises us from the 'they'.⁵³³ The sense of our own individuality opens our eyes to what the authentic possibilities are that lie before us.⁵³⁴ Yet, whichever possibility we choose, anxiety will always follow us because it is our most basic state-of-mind since uncanniness can be experienced at any moment.⁵³⁵ *You Have to Help Me* from 1970 plays on the anxiety and alienation felt by Boltanski's audience which emerged when the meaning of the work turned disturbing and strange.

You have to Help Me is a piece of mail or correspondence art which consists of a letter posted by Boltanski to 60 patrons from the mailing list of his gallery, Galerie Givaudan in Paris. It reads:

You have to help me, you have no doubt heard of the difficulties I have been having recently and of the very serious crisis I now find myself in. I want you first to know that everything you might have heard against me is false. I have always tried to lead an honest life, I think, moreover that you know my work; you

⁵³² Heidegger, p. 232.

⁵³³ Heidegger, p. 232.

⁵³⁴ Heidegger, p. 235.

⁵³⁵ Heidegger, p. 233.

certainly know that I dedicate myself to it entirely, but the situation now is at an almost intolerable point and I don't think I will be able to stand it much longer, which is why I ask you, why I implore you, to answer me *as quickly as possible*. I am sorry to bother you, but I have to find some way out of this situation.⁵³⁶

The ambiguity over the letter must have been fresh in the minds of the recipients. Is this a joke or something serious? Boltanski was sure to send the letters only to those whom he thought would understand the work as contemporary art: 'I chose that list because it was strategic, but also because I thought it wouldn't be right to annoy people who hadn't taken that initial step towards art [...] If I send it to someone who has already been to a contemporary art gallery, he has a thread to follow to understand what it's about'.⁵³⁷

In fact, Boltanski received five responses from concerned gallery patrons.⁵³⁸ *You Have to Help Me* is an example of uncanniness because it undermines what is normally understood as art: is it an artwork or a plea for help, or could it be both? As I discussed in a previous chapter, Boltanski offers no clarifications but, because of the unresolved ambiguity regarding the work's seriousness, defers the decision of the work's meaning squarely with the reader. He said that as the artist, he does not offer a prescribed narrative to the viewer but only gives a general, loose theme that his work is meant to accommodate. He said that he as the artist, 'has no face of his own, only the face of other people's desires, of what people want to see. I think the artist is like that. When he talks about himself, or of an

⁵³⁶ Gumpert, p. 9.

⁵³⁷ Grenier, p. 37.

⁵³⁸ Gumpert, p. 10.

'invented' self, he is talking about each person, and everyone can recognise him or herself in him'.⁵³⁹

If we put ourselves in the shoes of the 60 recipients of *You Have to Help Me*, an anxious feeling emerges because it is impossible to tell if this is a genuine letter crying for help from a suicidal artist or a work of art. This uncertainty is strongly affective because the answer could be a matter of life and death but also because the unknown intention of the artist reflects the viewer's inability to establish the work's meaning. The work creates a palpable sense of anxiety because it is impossible to figure out what it is all about.

Heidegger said that anxiety is not based on some threat in the external world, but is 'nowhere'.⁵⁴⁰ What I think he meant was that there is no particular event or place in the outside world where the threat originates because anxiety comes from within us. He said, 'it is so close that it is oppressive and stifles one's breathe, and yet it is nowhere'.⁵⁴¹ We become anxious because of the inherent instability of everything within us and our increasing dissatisfaction with the pacifying clichés of the 'they'.⁵⁴² The fact that five of the recipients felt anxious when they could not decipher the intention of the letter is reflected in the responses of concern that they felt compelled to send to Boltanski.

As the above example shows, the viewer's determination of the Boltanski's work is of paramount importance. The ambiguity in artworks, such as *You Have to Help Me*, reveals the ubiquitous condition of anxiety and alienation that affects everyone in contemporary society.⁵⁴³ When we feel disconnected from the ideas of the 'they', a palpable sense of

⁵³⁹ Grenier, p. 78.

⁵⁴⁰ Heidegger, p. 231.

⁵⁴¹ Heidegger, p. 231.

⁵⁴² Heidegger, p. 234.

⁵⁴³ Eco, p. xv.

alienation ensues. We may feel objectified and estranged from the placations of the ‘they’ because our subjectivity is held in question.

You Have to Help Me exemplifies works by Boltanski where the distinction between real life and art is slippery. This is important because if the letter cannot immediately be regarded as art, then it might be a legitimate cry for help. Gumpert said that the artist, ‘has produced a substantial oeuvre out of such insubstantial materials as newspaper clippings, bare light bulbs, rusty biscuit boxes, found snapshots, flickering shadows, and used clothing. Modest though their means are, these works are at once highly sophisticated and extremely accessible. Disconcertingly, they are also often impossible to distinguish as “art”’.⁵⁴⁴

Similarly, the late contemporary art curator Okwui Enwezor said that in many cases, it is unclear whether Boltanski’s works are composed of factual documents or fictional representations when he wrote, ‘This is the essence of Boltanski’s ambivalence, for one never knows what is properly historical or semantically archival’.⁵⁴⁵ Boltanski wants his artworks to look like they are real life. He said that his works are ‘always meant to be in reality: the reality of objects [...] there is always a direct link to reality’.⁵⁴⁶ As a result, the indistinct motives of the letter may lead the recipient to become anxious.

Beyond the troubling contents of the letter, Boltanski remarked that he handwrote this letter sixty times, a reflection of the fact that he was depressed at the time and had recurring thoughts of suicide which he tried to excise through the repetition of handwriting this work. He said that since he is an artist, ‘I wrote sixty of them, that is, the same one sixty times, and told myself, “What a good piece and what a fine reflection on the relationship

⁵⁴⁴ Gumpert, p. 9.

⁵⁴⁵ Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (Göttingen: International Center of Photography, Steidl, 2008), p. 32.

⁵⁴⁶ Grenier, p. 167.

between art and life!”[...] When you want to kill yourself, you make a portrait of yourself in the process of committing suicide, but you don’t actually do it’.⁵⁴⁷ Rather than simply photocopy one handwritten letter and post the copies to the 60 recipients, Boltanski handmade each one. I take this to mean that he understood that there is strong, referential power in his own handwriting. It is clear that, for this work, the authentic indexical trace matters because it shows Boltanski’s own anxiety.

The handwritten letter is an indexical sign, or physical trace of the artist himself. The forms of the letters were produced directly from his own hand. It communicates the authenticity of his physical existence and his feeling. The message would have been watered-down had he sent photocopied versions of the letter. The intensity of feeling and human touch would have degraded. Boltanski rarely, if ever again, produced handwritten letters as works of art, so this may be a lonely example where his art and life truly converged. But my point is that, in this work, the indexical trace of Boltanski’s handwriting forefronts death and existence in the past more authentically than if it were a photocopy.

Boltanski said that we ‘must count deaths in ones’.⁵⁴⁸ What I think he meant was that everyone knows that they will die but each death is also unique and personal; death is different for each individual. His art confronts the engaged viewer with the return of forgotten memories mixed with feelings of anxiety and disjointedness, and allusions to death and the past. He said, ‘I’ve always said that you have to be friends with death since you can’t avoid it – that’s part of my spiel’.⁵⁴⁹ Boltanski wants the viewer to think about his or her death; the aim of his art is to engage the viewer to think about their own mortality.

⁵⁴⁷ Gumpert, p. 10. From ‘Monument à Une Personne Inconnue: Six Questions à Christian Boltanski’, *Art Actuel Skira* (Geneva: Skira, 1975) pp 146-8.

⁵⁴⁸ Garb, p. 23-4.

⁵⁴⁹ Grenier, p. 136.

Boltanski said that ‘The artist reveals to people looking at the work something that’s already inside of them, something they know deep down, and he brings it up into their consciousness.’⁵⁵⁰ This revelation of death has been an ambition for his art since the start of his career.

What is the benefit of recognising that Boltanski’s art is a way to reflect on our personal relationship to death and our lost, forgotten past? An awareness of death forces us to make our own choices to live a meaningful life based on our own rules rather than those platitudes and conventions pushed on us by the ‘they’. Having an awareness of death as ever present in one’s life, conscious choices can be approached with resoluteness, or what Heidegger called ‘constantly certain of death – in other words, since it *anticipates* it – resoluteness thus attains a certainty which is authentic and whole’.⁵⁵¹

Resoluteness is an important idea in Heidegger’s notion of death and one which I think has resonance for Boltanski’s work. Even though Heidegger did not understand resoluteness as the reward or compensation for surviving our existential death, I see it as the acceptance, or awareness, of death as the ground of existence. This awareness frees us to relate to our life and its choices with more positive intention. Heidegger said, ‘He who is resolute knows no fear; but he understands the possibility of anxiety as the possibility of the very mood which neither inhabits nor bewilders him. Anxiety liberates him *from* possibilities which “count for nothing”, and lets him become *free* for those possibilities which are authentic’.⁵⁵² Put succinctly, the feeling of anxiety, the experience of the uncanny, and a glimpse at death can have a motivating, creative effect.⁵⁵³ After our struggle through existential death, according

⁵⁵⁰ Grenier, p. 163-4.

⁵⁵¹ Heidegger, p. 356.

⁵⁵² Heidegger, p. 395.

⁵⁵³ Steiner, p. 115.

to Heidegger, we re-emerge on the other side to a resolution, able to anxiously stand by our own values and beliefs, even when faced with the conventions of society. Heidegger said an awareness of death, 'brings it face to face with the possibility of being itself [...] in an impassioned freedom towards death – a freedom which has been released from the illusions of the "they"'.⁵⁵⁴

By incorporating the nature of death into our life, we begin to lead what Heidegger called an authentic life. Heidegger said that, 'Dasein is itself in and from its own most peculiar possibility, a possibility that has been seized upon and chosen by the Dasein itself'.⁵⁵⁵ We live authentically, we move away from the opinions and values of the 'they' and deliberately rely on our self to freely but wisely choose which projects and plans we pursue. 'In resoluteness, Dasein released from the oppressive influence of the "they-self", pushes forward authentically into its possibilities with an existential understanding of what is factually possible at each and every moment'.⁵⁵⁶ Boltanski's work can be understood in this manner. When the viewer is encouraged to rely on their own past memories and reflections on death to inform the meaning of the work, Boltanski is inviting the viewer to think about death personally. He does not represent any known narrative or give any identifying information about the subjects of his works because meaning is not to be found in them. Of course, the viewer's reflections may mirror societal conventions, but it is the *opportunity* for each individual viewer to think about death personally that affords an important and new insight.

⁵⁵⁴ Heidegger, p. 311.

⁵⁵⁵ Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 287.

⁵⁵⁶ Magrini, p. 83.

Even though Boltanski has said that he wishes to revive memory as a way to stave off forgetfulness and death, he also knows that the fight is impossible. Death is unconquerable.⁵⁵⁷ Boltanski is one of those artists, along with Kantor, who plays with the idea of defeating death by recollecting long-lost memories of the past. In effect, this keeps the memory alive. It is only through realising the struggle against death and our inevitable defeat that we can begin to find a way toward resoluteness. We acquire an awareness that death means that we must make choices; these choices are part of our personal relationship to our own sense of death.

In this chapter, I argued that fixation on the physical death of others, such as Jewish Holocaust victims, can be seen as inauthentic to our own awareness of what death means to us personally in our own life. Heidegger said that no one's death can reveal what death will mean for us personally when he wrote, 'If death as experienced in Others is what we are enjoined to take as the theme for our analysis of Dasein's end and totality, this cannot give us, either ontically or ontologically, what it presumes to give'.⁵⁵⁸ The viewer of Boltanski's work may feel overwhelming sorrow and anger by interpreting death as that which befell an innocent stranger but the *death of the other* has less power to mean something deeply and uniquely personal.

I introduced the idea in chapter two that the figure of the child in Boltanski's work is pure, voiceless, and struggling with adult anxieties. What is more, in this chapter, I provided for the first time an in-depth comparison of childhood between his work and Tadeusz Kantor's

⁵⁵⁷ Grenier, p. 81.

⁵⁵⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2003) p. 283.

play, *The Dead Class*. I argued that both artists created an uncanny experience when seeing imagery associated with childhood linked to death and lost memories in the adult.

Uncanniness is felt when something which was once familiar suddenly becomes strange. Its conventional meaning becomes unstable. In Boltanski's figure of the child, uncanniness resulted in a feeling of anxiety since the traditional perception of childhood can no longer explain how an idealised time of innocence, freedom, and gaiety can turn threatening and herald reflections on death.

I opened up the discussion surrounding Boltanski in order to make room for the idea that death means a collapse of one's worldview where the placations and distractions of society no longer satisfy or ameliorate the deep anxiety that exists within us. Boltanski's work is a productive space for personal reflections on the radical instability at the core of meaning and, potentially, at the core of existence. He suggested this when he commented that, 'I've always said that one of the great misfortunes of our time is that death is denied [...] Talking about it, describing yourself as old, is in opposition to what the world wants to say and show. You mustn't be old, mustn't be senile, and if you are, you're shunned as quickly as possible. I think it's a remarkable thing to present yourself as weak or ill, to display your weakness, your human weakness. To me, it's a way of saying, "This is how it is, you're going to die. This is how you are, this is your condition"'.⁵⁵⁹

Rather than resign to the inevitability of death, I showed that Boltanski constantly confronts the viewer with images and ideas of death in order to consciously become intimately aware of them. Even though the struggle to defeat death will inevitably end in failure, he openly acknowledges this fact, yet struggles anyway. Why bother? We will not be able to preserve

⁵⁵⁹ Grenier, p. 133.

or re-experience all that we have done in our lives. Yet, when understood through Heidegger's notions of death, Boltanski's art has the potential to lead to a path toward what Heidegger called resoluteness. Whilst an ever-present awareness of death serves to remind us that we cannot do everything in our life since choices must be made, we can learn for ourselves how to come to terms with our inevitable annihilation so choices can be made with more awareness whilst we still have time. This awareness is surely more preferable than clinging to the 'idle talk' of society who insist that death is always something that happens to someone else much later on.⁵⁶⁰

I contributed to the debates around Boltanski in three ways. First, I introduced a new way of understanding the recurring theme of death in his art. This is a vital contribution since most, if not all, previous writers have noted this trope in his art but seldom have any of them devoted a thorough, sustained analysis of it. Through an in-depth investigation of how death is represented in his art, I showed that Heidegger's notion of existential death allowed me to highlight the figure of the child. For Boltanski, the figure of the child is innocent, voiceless, and the harbinger of death. This can have wider implications about the contemporary figure of the child in other artforms or as interpreted by other artists. These other forms of creative expression may be in the form of literature or a theatrical play. My final contribution lies in my analysis of the figure of the child in the context of Boltanski's art and Kantor's play, *The Dead Class*. An analysis of the two artists has not been done before. I showed that both artists similarly equate childhood with adult anxieties about death and forgotten memory. However, they both represent different kinds of forgotten childhood memories. Whilst Kantor displays his own psyche on stage in his plays, Boltanski shows

⁵⁶⁰ Heidegger, p. 299.

childhood imagery associated with communicative memories which are significant to many members of Western society.

CONCLUSION:

MEMORY AND DEATH: AN ANALYSIS OF CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI'S ART

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued for ideas and concerns in an interpretation of Boltanski's work that reaches beyond the dominant, overarching interpretation of the Holocaust. I looked at four main themes, the role of ambiguity, the representation of memory, the simulated authenticity of the past, and death. These themes have been highlighted repeatedly in the discourse surrounding Boltanski's art but remained underdeveloped. My thesis offers new ways to understand his art and fills the previous gaps in knowledge.

My main question was broad and admittedly vague. I wanted to know what his art meant, and how and why it accommodates that meaning. My guiding principle was that meaning is formed around the recuperated memories in the mind of the viewer. This is significant because it challenges the current dominant interpretation of his art which claims that his entire oeuvre represents the memory of the Holocaust. However, I presented new evidence to show that one overall interpretation cannot contain the myriad meanings that his art can inspire.

In chapter one, I argued that, as a consequence of Hannah Arendt's writings about the Eichmann trial, the universalisation of Holocaust memory in the 1980s led to the idea that it represents the general idea of evil in the world. In turn, any event which resulted in the loss of a multitude of people was understood as a 'holocaust'. This slippage of the uniqueness of the actual Holocaust event in Germany led to writers interpreting Boltanski's deeply ambiguous works as representations of Holocaust memory and the loss of specifically Jewish camp victims.

I said that this blanket interpretation of his art works at cross purposes to the aims of Holocaust memory and representation since their main tenets dictate that such representation must be unambiguously and directly tied to the Holocaust. When Boltanski's deeply ambiguous art is placed strictly within the confines of one overall reading, such as the Holocaust or any other univocal narrative, other voices who understand his work differently are stymied. His work becomes one-dimensional because it is solidified and stuck in one interpretation.

I showed that the writers who read the Holocaust in his art emphasise Boltanski's Jewish background and, based on his biography, assume that the anonymous subjects are stand-ins for those who died during the Holocaust. But Boltanski has never appropriated images of the Holocaust. I showed that the comparisons between the work of Boltanski to both Anselm Kiefer and Shimon Attie are problematic. The criteria that are used to judge the significance of the Holocaust in Kiefer's or Attie's work differs from the criteria used to judge Boltanski's work. I argued that the artworks by Kiefer and Attie directly appropriate imagery from the Holocaust, or Nazism in Kiefer's case, thus satisfying the main principles of Holocaust representation. However, Boltanski's art never uses imagery from the Holocaust and does not make direct references to it. Therefore, his art does not satisfy the same criteria as artwork from Kiefer and Attie.

My contributions in chapter one are based on a critical, historiographical analysis of the literature surrounding Boltanski's work. I did this in order to present my most important contribution in this chapter: to show that the dominant reading of the Holocaust was applied to Boltanski's oeuvre for a few problematic reasons. These reasons are the universalisation of Holocaust memory in contemporary Western culture, the assumption of

the significance of Boltanski's Jewish background to the meaning of his work, and the misunderstanding that the anonymous subjects were or represent Jewish camp victims.

In the hopes of clarifying my position, a Holocaust-based reading of Boltanski's work is possible and valid when it originates from an individual, independent viewer who recognises specific elements within his work that corresponds to his or her own memories and experiences relating to the Holocaust. The viewer's personal understanding is accommodated when it evolved from general themes of childhood, memory, and death. My argument targets the situation when one narrative is given to the viewer *before* they can engage with his work. I showed that when one interpretation overshadows the meaning of an artist's work, other interpretations are more likely to be stifled.

In chapter two, I argued that the images in Boltanski's art represent anonymous subjects because they are designed to relate to general themes of forgotten childhood memory, the past, and death. The anonymous subjects contravene the conventions of portraiture which stipulates that the portrait depicts a knowable subject in the real world. In the end, had Boltanski made the identity of the subjects known, then the meaning of the work would necessarily follow on from their unique narrative. Their story would be the meaning of the work. But by purposefully making the subject unknown and unknowable, Boltanski is encouraging the viewer to resolve the ambiguity of the subject's identity. The fact that the viewer is not provided any information about the subject's personality breaches the traditional, established principles of portraiture. When a convention is transgressed, ambiguity is the result. Consequently, the viewer cannot detect the subject's identity and this renders them stereotypical depictions of everyday children or everyday people. This is an intentional and recurring strategy in Boltanski's artistic practice.

I showed a convergence between what Umberto Eco termed ‘openness’, or the deliberate inclusion of incompleteness in a modern work of art, and Boltanski’s ambiguous artworks comprised of nameless faces and generic subjects. Rather than accepting previous readings of his art which understand the pervasive element of ambiguity as a reflection of the artist’s traumatic memory of the Holocaust, such as that proposed by Kaplan when she commented on his ‘shadowy images of its possible victims’. Instead I offer a new way to understand that ambiguity in Boltanski’s art is productive and intentional: to draw the attention of the viewer to that aspect of the work that needs to be completed or resolved through empathic engagement.⁵⁶¹ Indeed, I argued that the anonymity of the subject *is* the main focal point of the ambiguity.

The role of ambiguity in his art led my argument to his role as the artist. I argued that Boltanski purposefully does not provide or drive the final interpretation of his work. The artist does not spoon-feed a pre-existing story or meaning to the viewer. Rather, he provides generic imagery as a way to delimit general themes to do with childhood, memory, and death in order to corral possible interpretations. My explanation of Boltanski’s role as the artist parallels what he has said himself where he consistently maintains that his role is to hold up a mirror to the viewer; to reflect back to him or her what is already inside of them. Strictly speaking, he does not present them with something new but with something that they already know. He said that ‘the artist is someone who has a mirror instead of a face, and every time someone looks at him, they think, “That’s me!”’⁵⁶²

I also introduced the idea that the viewer plays the dominant role in the meaning of Boltanski’s art. I argued that the viewer holds the key to its interpretation. I showed that

⁵⁶¹ Kaplan, p. 109.

⁵⁶² Grenier, p. 78.

Boltanski uses game playing tactics and physical interactions with the intention of cajoling the viewer to engage empathically with the work. For this artist, the viewer must invest in resolving the ambiguous elements with which they are presented.

My contributions in chapter two are important because I explained what purpose the oft-mentioned element of ambiguity serves in Boltanski's art and how it is achieved. I argued that ambiguity is a deliberate aesthetic strategy to coax the viewer into an engagement with the work in order to resolve the underdetermined elements which reside within it. Boltanski creates ambiguity by contravening a convention, usually to do with portraiture, by withholding or erasing the identity of the subject.

I also presented a new methodology with which to approach ambiguity in Boltanski's work: Eco's concept of openness. I argued that Boltanski relegates his role as the main driver of meaning by presenting the viewer with clues about the loose, general parameter of meaning that his art is designed to accommodate. These themes are forgotten childhood memory and death. Due to my research into the role and representation of ambiguity in Boltanski's art, I filled a gap in the knowledge. I opened up a new way of thinking about Boltanski's work, his role within it, and how each viewer derives its interpretation.

If the identity of the ambiguous subjects depicted in his art are open to interpretation, in chapter three I explained what kind of memories are represented. I argued that a main trope in Boltanski's art is collective memory and its generic imagery. With the help of ideas from Halbwachs, I showed that Boltanski depicts the kinds of memory associated with the family and childhood because this is the fundamental group of everyone's life – we all start our life in our family group. Boltanski said as much when he commented that he uses childhood memory because it is the most shared, the most recognisable.⁵⁶³

⁵⁶³ Grenier, p. 79.

The collective imagery of childhood and family has a particular character. It represents fleeting, local life of the family and childhood. Boltanski pulls from the dimension of collective family memory but the images are specifically from the realm of communicative memory. These are memories represented in personal artefacts such as children's school portraits from family photo albums and old, beat-up biscuit tins that safeguard keepsakes and souvenirs. These kinds of memories differ from cultural memory which exists in grand institutions, official commemorations, and national collections and libraries which are maintained by specialists and continue on throughout millennia. Yet, when the 'small memories', as Boltanski calls them, are exhibited within the walls of prestigious art museums around the world, the cultural memory amplifies the idea of memory and the past already inhabiting his images.

For instance, when *Les Enfants de Dijon* was showed in Palazzo della Prigione in 1986, the meaning of the work adopted particular historical overtones when seen in a Venetian medieval prison as opposed to when the same work was shown in the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. The cultural memory linked with the venue infuses the work on display, and vice versa. The cultural memory of the exhibition venue mingles with the communicative memory in Boltanski's art which exposes a dynamic relationship between them.

But these mnemonic images are represented with a palpable atmosphere of anxiety. I showed that the sense of pathos can be seen outside of Boltanski's personal story of the Holocaust. I argued that anxiety is a condition of contemporary collective memory with the help of Nora's concept of the 'site of memory'. I put forth the idea that the desperation underpinning contemporary society's urge to cling onto social traditions and practices before they disappear sheds new light on Boltanski's obsession with collecting and

preserving everything he can. I argued that Boltanski is driven to save all the mementos from his life, and those of others, in order to stop them from evaporating into oblivion. But he knows this is a losing battle. The artist's compensatory strategy to save the 'small memories' of childhood and the forgotten dead is similar to how the last vestiges of society's collective memory and traditions crystallise into sites of memory: what memories are recalled are polysemic depending on who is remembering; meaning is no longer unified but multivalent and often conflicting.

I looked at the contemporary art tendency of countermonuments as a way to show that Boltanski, like many other artists, is concerned with addressing issues surrounding memory. The collective memory represented in countermonuments is open to individual reflection and polysemic interpretations, rather than dictated by one official interpretation. I explained the ability of his art to elicit different interpretations. This is a strength of his art: 'I think whatever strength my work can offer is that it always allows for new readings'.⁵⁶⁴

In chapter three I contributed to the knowledge surrounding Boltanski's art by contextualising it within the realm of contemporary collective memory scholarship. My research explained, for the first time, that his art depicts communicative memories of the family and childhood because those memories are the most common and fundamental as well as extremely personal and ephemeral. Going forward, interpretations of an artist's work that deeply engages with memory could benefit from acknowledging the kind of memory it represents and its nature. Indeed, these considerations have a profound effect on discerning who is remembering and who or what is being remembered.

⁵⁶⁴ Grenier, p. 113.

In chapter four, I wanted to understand the reasoning behind why Boltanski simulates the conventions and hallmarks of authenticity and pastness in his work. To argue the intricacies of meaning, I borrowed from Peirce's tripartite sign theory because it allowed me to identify, with precision, what the different signs in Boltanski's art mean. I was able to show, for instance, that the anonymous subjects in his photographs refer to collective symbols whilst the medium of those photographs mimics an indexical trace pointing to a direct contiguity with the past. But this was only the start of my research into the simulations appearing in his art.

I discussed that the current understandings of Boltanski's tendency to 'fake' the past reality of the images and objects was in order to highlight the failure of art and the indexical trace to make the past present. Van Alphen illustrates this viewpoint when he wrote that, 'Boltanski confronts the viewer with the failure of the indexical sign to make something present'.⁵⁶⁵ But I argued that the images and artefacts that Boltanski uses are purposefully manufactured to look like they were pulled from an unknown past life. But most importantly, he imbues these simulated objects with a strong affective dimension for a reason. This is an aesthetic strategy revealed through the concept of the postindex.

I introduced and developed the concept of the postindex. I argued that it is a collective mnemonic symbol which is deliberately manipulated to simulate characteristics of the indexical sign. I presented two ways that Boltanski uses the postindex. First when he refers to his name or initials in the title of his works. Within the context of self-portraiture, Boltanski's name acts as a deictic index that points to him as the artist of the work. By

⁵⁶⁵ Ernst Van Alphen, *Staging the Archive: Art and Photography in the Age of New Media*, (London: Reaktion Press, 2014), p. 88.

convention, it is assumed that what content is represented in the work has a direct relation to the person named in the title: 'Christian Boltanski' or 'C.B.'. But Boltanski disrupts this convention.

I argued that Boltanski distorted the referential power of the deixis in the titles of his self-portraits. As a result, 'Christian Boltanski', when appearing in titles of artworks, should be understood as a collective consensus of the average child or the most stereotypical person. When the same name appears outside of a title, it resumes normal signification and refers directly to the artist. To be precise, the referent of 'Christian Boltanski' is context dependent. In the titles of his art, it is a linguistic symbol that stands-in as an average consensus of everyone. Outside of titles, the name refers to the artist.

I also showed that Boltanski simulates the markings of physical traces in his art. When he represents old photographs, they are in fact new photographs of old photographs. He enhances their analogue hallmarks such as graininess, blurriness, and a black-and-white colour scheme so they appear old. I explained that these are characteristics normally associated with analogue photographs which are trusted as faithful indicators of the past. I also showed that the artificial corrosion of rust on the tin biscuit boxes also exemplifies the postindex because they are new boxes which are manufactured to bear the markings of old age and decay. These visual effects strongly signify the past. But in Boltanski's work, the authenticity of the past is fabricated. Their material quality *looks* old and worn through use but, in reality, they are brand new. This, I claim, has important implications for the meaning of Boltanski's work.

I argued that the postindex is used in order to create the appearance of the aura, the seal of uniqueness in time and space. To be precise, the aura signifies a faithfulness and

authenticity to the past. The implication for the viewer is that the postindexical sign allows him or her to form an empathic investment with Boltanski's art because it looks familiar – as collective symbols do – as well as bearing the trace of the anonymous subject in the past. As a result, I introduced the idea that Boltanski simulates the indexical sign not only in order to highlight the failure of art to make the past present in the here and now, but, more importantly, to allow the viewer to internalise the familiar imagery, form an empathic connection to it, and ultimately recognise that they have similar memories in their own background. He said that, 'I used to quote the expression, "It's not about discovering but about recognising." Art isn't there to make you discover things, but to make you recognise them. It's through recognition that emotion is elicited, when a person thinks, "Of course!", "I know this story," "How did he know my aunt was like that?"'⁵⁶⁶ It is at this point of recognition that the meaning of the work is defined by the recuperated memories of each individual viewer.

My contributions in chapter four are founded on the critical analysis of the complex semiotic signification operating in Boltanski's work. I used a methodology based on semiotics as a way to reveal the complex signs. Whilst other writers, such as Hirsch and Van Alphen, have applied semiotic concepts to Boltanski's art previously, they did not delve into the signification which seems to whirl around in his art. My research has, therefore, offered a resolution to a gap in the current knowledge.

I also developed the concept of the postindex during my discussion. This is a significant contribution since the simulation of a direct connection to a particular past reality will affect how we come to understand our world in direct proportion to the increase in digital

⁵⁶⁶ Grenier, p. 78.

technology. The malleability inherent in digital technology will continue to erode our conventional standards of truth. As it does, it is vital to be able to appreciate that things which we may have relied upon in the past to verify truthfulness is now open to manipulation.

Finally, in chapter five, I acknowledged that Boltanski's work is full of allusions to *memento mori* and the death of the past. I went into this final chapter wanting to understand, specifically, who died and what kind of death was referred to in his art.⁵⁶⁷ I decided to approach death with a methodology not used before in regards to making sense of his art: Heidegger's philosophy of death. The ideas presented by Heidegger gave me the necessary language that I needed to explain how death in Boltanski's art was not necessarily about the physical demise of the body.

I argued that, when seen from a new existentialist point of view of death, his art is about the collapse of one's worldview. I argued that ideas such as anxiety can be sparked inside of us when we contemplate Boltanski's work. Anxiety explains the dark mood that envelopes so much of his art. I also explained that the structure of some of Boltanski's works may signal thoughts aligned with the uncanny, or what Heidegger called a 'peculiar indefiniteness of that which Dasein finds itself alongside in anxiety' which points to 'the "nothing and the nowhere"'.⁵⁶⁸ In short, from the contravention of established norms proceed feelings of anxiety because the rules which we are used to abiding by are broken. These ambiguous elements demand resolution if we are to make sense of Boltanski's work. The uncanny is revealed to us through those disruptions. The uncanny is the glimpse of the groundlessness and instability of existence at the core of our being. But we can survive existential death, but

⁵⁶⁷ Garb, p. 22.

⁵⁶⁸ Heidegger, p. 233.

it creates a situation where the conventional views about oneself and the life we knew break down, and we are no longer the same afterward. I argued that this is what Boltanski meant when he said that ‘we all have a dead child within us. We don’t die once, we have already died several times over’.⁵⁶⁹

I argued that Boltanski’s long-standing fascination with death and its relationship to collective and personal memory is similar to the work of Tadeusz Kantor, an artist who he openly declared is a major influence. An in-depth comparison between the two artists has not been carried out previously. I showed that Boltanski’s affinity for equating childhood with death and memory is similar to Kantor’s famous play, *The Dead Class*. In Kantor’s play, as in Boltanski’s art, childhood memory sets the stage for reflections on death and forgotten personal memory. Both artists placed the figure of the child in their works as the bearer of forgotten memory and death.

However, the differences between the artist lie twofold: first in the role of the artist and from who the forgotten memories and reflections of death originate. Kantor’s persona as the artist and his own personal memory of childhood is at the forefront of his play – indeed, he directs and oversees the play on stage. Boltanski’s role, however, is restricted to setting loose parameters of themes which his work can accommodate. Therefore, the memory represented is reflected in the generic collective memory of childhood and anonymous dead individuals.

My final chapter contributes a sustained analysis of what death means in Boltanski’s art. Specifically, I applied Existentialism as a new methodology for uncovering the overlooked or underdeveloped ideas about death. These existential ideas are not only appropriate for a

⁵⁶⁹ Garb, p. 24.

new way to understand his art but also for other artists who address notions of death. They offer a richer, more nuanced, and productive way of understanding what death means to *me*.

My other main contribution in chapter 5 is the development in the concept of the figure of the child in contemporary culture. I showed that Boltanski, like Kantor, assigns adult anxieties about the disappearance of memory and its inevitable death to the figure of the child and images of childhood. My research into the transformation of the child from an innocent, silent projection of adult desires into a *memento mori* may have far reaching impact on the interpretation of other artworks that also address contemporary notions of childhood.

The limitations of my research can be seen in the ambiguous, even contradictory, nature of Boltanski's work. Therefore, I recognise that one reading of his work, even one such as mine that argues for no particular narrative, may be insufficient to encompass all of his *œuvre*. Rather than this being a weakness of his art, I propose that it is indeed its strength. The ambiguity depicted in his art means that the memories it inspires can never be exhausted. And this is Boltanski's desire: for his work to be remade by future artists. Indeed, the recreations of his art are a possible area for new research. The composition will always be his own, but the reincarnation of his art for a new generation culminates in his wishes for his legacy: 'secured against theft, fire, and nuclear war – from whence it will be possible to take it out and assemble it at any point. Then, being thus assured of never dying, I may finally rest.'⁵⁷⁰

⁵⁷⁰ Merewether, p. 25.

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