



Fig. 1. Christian Boltanski, *Reliquary*, 1990, metal boxes, wire mesh, electric lamps, fabric, photographs, 218.4 x 134.6 x 66 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

## Christian Boltanski's *Reliquary*: A Work on Mourning

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Christian Boltanski (b. 1944) was born in France at a pivotal moment in history, when Paris was being liberated from Nazi Germany during the Second World War. His Christian and Jewish background has influenced many of his artworks, which investigate the nuanced meanings of and contradictions within the concepts of death, childhood and memory. *Reliquary* (1990) (fig. 1) is no exception; this sculptural installation is part of Boltanski's mixed media series of the same name, created between 1987 and 1990. Made with tin boxes, wire mesh, electric lamps, fabric scraps and enlarged prints of photographs, this piece evokes a funereal tone. While *Reliquary* may be understood within the context of the artist's biography, it is a spare work with universal emotional appeal. This installation generates a public space for collective mourning; even an awareness of its constructedness does not detract from its capacity to move the viewer.



Fig. 1. Christian Boltanski, *Reliquary*, 1990, metal boxes, wire mesh, electric lamps, fabric, photographs, 218.4 x 134.6 x 66 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Through the use of religious symbols, Boltanski allows us to connect his piece to the death of something holy. This is already made clear in the title, *Reliquary*, which invites the viewer to engage with the work within a religious framework. This installation appropriates elements of Christian tradition: The dim lighting of the lamps on the children's faces is reminiscent of devotional candlelight, while the work's structure, forming an inverted cross, resembles an altar or a shrine. The pieces of fabric in the tin boxes represent the relics of the children depicted in the obscured photographs. As the viewer studies these images, they quickly come to understand that it is the children's lost lives that are being commemorated.

As a postmodernist, Boltanski explores the construction and deconstruction of religious discourse by creating works that contain intentional contradictions. He has no personal relation to the photographed individuals in his installations; most of the images he uses are found in Parisian flea markets. *Reliquary* features archival photographs that are not sourced. The tin boxes have been rusted and made to look old. Ultimately, each object that Boltanski uses in his creation is a deceptive prop, and together they form a spectacle. Incidentally, he has likened himself to those preachers who take over American television on Sunday mornings, suggesting that he really believes in art but also sees himself as a crook;<sup>1</sup> in other words, he is fully aware of his role in creating manipulative and paradoxical elements in his artworks. A prominent contradiction in Boltanski's work pertains to religion. The artist states: "All the arts are very close to religion. I think a painting or a piece of art is just like a relic of a saint."<sup>2</sup> However, he adds: "The idea of the relic is completely stupid, especially in art today. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, more than half of the art produced is not even touched by the artist."<sup>3</sup> Boltanski's works thus simultaneously evoke and reject the relic, deconstructing the idea of holiness in relation to art.

The objects he uses are not genuine relics at all, and he is conscious of the fact that when he sells a work to a museum, he is essentially being paid for a few lamps which will eventually burn out, some photographs which may fade and rusted tin boxes.

Despite its everyday, inexpensive materials, *Reliquary* is a powerful work that creates a public space for people to mourn, a place for death in the midst of life. Sigmund Freud has said: “We are of course prepared to maintain that death ... [is] natural, undeniable and unavoidable. In reality, however, we [are] accustomed to behave as if it were otherwise.”<sup>4</sup> Boltanski agrees with this statement in that he believes one of the great misfortunes of our age is that thoughts of death and aging have been suppressed to the point where it has become nearly impossible for the bereaved to properly grieve. *Reliquary* speaks directly to this issue, as the purpose of a shrine is to commemorate someone who has passed. Sociologist Jason Glynos has determined two key conditions for mourning: “(1) an event or site that enacts for an individual or collective subject a publicly shared recognition of loss; and (2) an appropriate context within which loss can be processed ethically and relatively integrated into one’s individual and collective life. Practices organized around death and loss can be understood and critically engaged with reference to these conditions.”<sup>5</sup>

Fulfilling these two requirements, *Reliquary* functions as a public memorial created out of objects that can be linked to someone’s past and that through mourning become imbued with potent meaning.<sup>6</sup> This is only one of many works by the artist that allow for collective mourning. *Monument: The Children of Dijon* (1986) (fig. 2) and *Altar to Chases High School* (1988) (fig. 3) also take the form of memorials.



Fig. 2. Christian Boltanski, *Monument: The Children of Dijon*, 1986, electric lamps, photographs, metal boxes. Photo credit: Fred Scruton. Courtesy the artist and New Museum, New York.  
[http://archive.newmuseum.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object\\_id/3437](http://archive.newmuseum.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/3437).



Fig. 3. Christian Boltanski, *Altar to Chases High School*, 1988, electric lamps, photographs, metal boxes. Photo credit: Fred Scruton. Courtesy the artist and New Museum, New York.  
[http://archive.newmuseum.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object\\_id/3445](http://archive.newmuseum.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/3445).

While all three pieces share similar formal aspects, such as the black and white photographs of children's faces and the use of lamps and boxes, the installations take on different shapes depending on where they are shown. *Monument: The Children of Dijon*, for example, was

exhibited in New York, in a cathedral in Santiago de Compostela in Spain, as well as in a medieval chapel in Paris. The meaning of each work is partly shaped by the space in which it is displayed.

The most striking similarity between *Reliquary*, *Monument: The Children of Dijon* and *Altar to Chases High School* is the use of representations of children's faces, which recall images of child saints. The idea of the child saint emerged in late antiquity and gained popularity during the Middle Ages. "Children became saints through martyrdom, pious behavior combined with untimely death, or murder for secular motives."<sup>7</sup> The latter can be directly linked to the Holocaust references in Boltanski's installations. While those murdered in the Holocaust during the Second World War are being commemorated, so is the "death" of innocence. As Patricia Healy Smith writes of child saints, "In virtually all cases, the quality of innocence was the greatest single impetus for the veneration of these children as holy figures."<sup>8</sup> This loss of innocence constitutes a more universal idea of death, inviting the viewer to associate Boltanski's works with their own memories of childhood. The artist remarks: "I believe that the child in us is the first thing in us to die. Tadeusz Kanto, a dramaturge whom I regard highly, once said 'We all carry a dead child within us'. I feel that very strongly; I remember the little Christian that is dead inside of me."<sup>9</sup>

Although the artist emphasizes that he does not consider his works to be Jewish art, *Altar to Chases High School* and *Monument: The Children of Dijon* clearly address Jewish history and the link between mourning and national identity. The photographs in *Altar to Chases High School* were taken from a Viennese Jewish high school yearbook dedicated to the class of 1931.

Most of the children depicted presumably perished before the end of the war. The photographs in *Monument: The Children of Dijon* are from a high school yearbook from Dijon, a region that was occupied by the Nazis before being liberated by the French Resistance. Boltanski's installations examine the role of mourning in the production of histories.<sup>10</sup> The allusions in his works to the atrocities of the Second World War merge the autobiographical with collective history. For *Reliquary*, he specifically chose the metal boxes because they resembled biscuit tins that anyone who grew up in France around the same time as him would immediately recognize. Boltanski thus integrates his own origins into the piece while inviting the viewer to reflect on their own experiences. His installations challenge the idea that there is only one way to recall history.

With the exception of *Altar to Chases High School* and *Monument: The Children of Dijon*, most of Boltanski's works indirectly reference the Holocaust, inviting the viewer to attribute their own meaning to them. Boltanski has said that the Holocaust is symbolic of something more universal to him: it is an example of dying, of common and impersonal dying.<sup>11</sup> Boltanski's choice to leave the chords of the lamps exposed as they hang from photograph to photograph may be interpreted as a reminder that we are all connected. The public spaces that Boltanski creates allow for new forms of community and togetherness, regardless of the viewers' interpretation of the piece.

Boltanski's *Reliquary*, *Monument: The Children of Dijon* and *Altar to Chase High School* are examples of how collective memory is manifested in public spaces. These works not only examine the mourning process but also provide spaces in which it can be enacted. At the same time, Boltanski's installations create a rupture between personal and collective history and memory, reflecting the postmodernist's quest for discontinuity as a means of resistance to the

ruling metanarrative, or what Michel Foucault calls “total history.”<sup>12</sup> These histories may at times contradict each other, reflecting the reality that life is full of inconsistencies. Boltanski’s works remind us that death—a fate we all share—is the ultimate paradox, for it prompts meaninglessness but also provokes life.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Ralf Beil, ed., *Boltanski: Time* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2006), 58.

<sup>2</sup> Irene Borger, “Christian Boltanski,” *BOMB* 26 (Winter 1989), accessed October 2015, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/1148/christian-boltanski>.

<sup>3</sup> Didier Semin, *Christian Boltanski* (Paris: ArtPress, 1988), 16.

<sup>5</sup> Sigmund Freud, quoted in Jason Glynos, “Death, Fantasy, and the Ethics of Mourning,” in *The Social Construction of Death: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Leen Van Brussel and Nico Carpentier (Houndmills; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 153.

<sup>5</sup> Glynos, 157.

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Mitchell, *Remember Me: Constructing Immortality, Beliefs on Immortality, Life and Death* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Patricia Healy Smith, “Martyrdom, Murder and Magic: Child Saints and Their Cults in Medieval Europe” (PhD diss., State University of New York at Binghamton, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Christian Boltanski, “Studio: Christian Boltanski,” Tate, last modified December 1, 2002, [www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/studio-christian-boltanski](http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/studio-christian-boltanski).

<sup>10</sup> Paul Connerton, preface to *The Spirit of Mourning: History, Memory and the Body* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), ix.

<sup>11</sup> Borger.

<sup>12</sup> Connerton, 2.

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