



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 (b. 1944) is known for his works dealing with childhood, memory and death. This sculptural installation is part of his mixed media series *Reliquary*, created between 1987 and 1990. The title, meaning “a container for holy relics,” describes the resemblance of the work to a shrine or altar on account of the artist’s use of lighting and composition. The mystery lies in who is being memorialized. Although he was raised a Christian, Boltanski’s Jewish descent has had a

strong influence on his practice. Several of his installations explicitly commemorate the Holocaust and are composed of photographs of Jewish youth before the Second World War. In this work, however, the origins of the faces pictured are unknown. The images are archival photographs that have been enlarged and obscured in the process. This manipulative aspect is characteristic of Boltanski's oeuvre. He manages to construct the history of a person that anyone can relate to, regardless of their own origins. His work evokes sorrow but also emphasizes theatricality and melodrama. Boltanski incorporates everyday items such as tin biscuit boxes, which have been made to look old, and scraps of fabric. He places these props in a way that appeals to the viewer's emotions by encouraging them to associate the work with their own memories and perceptions of death. Even as they become aware of this construction they remain moved by the work's mournful connotations of innocence lost.

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