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Boltanski, in Bienal de Veneza | 2019 | MEMOIRS's archive

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ABSENCE: THE MATERIAL OF MEMORY

Roberto Vecchi

The Christian Boltanski retrospective at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, [Faire son temps](#) (until 16th March), is a tribute to a major French contemporary artist who has, through a sustained effort of salvage, re-discovered and disseminated the “art of memory”. The exhibition is also a form of (“false”, in the artist’s terms) biography told through his work, laid out on the top floor of the gallery. It brings together a



variety of objects: photographs, installations, paintings, material objects and more. What is surprising about this homage – 35 years since the first retrospective put on by the Pompidou – is how a relentless international artistic life of over half a century manages to maintain a deep line of coherence in spite of its broad and multi-directional development. It is as if everything holds together around a vast repertoire of themes that concentrate (return, we might say) on a single theme: desperate resistance to the inexorability of loss -- of the past, of life, memory, pain, justice and the scars of history.

In this sense, Boltanski is an exemplary figure for the idea of the contemporary as elaborated in a much-read essay by Giorgio Agamben: “the contemporary is what keeps its gaze fixed on its own time, perceiving it not in the light, but in the darkness” (*What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, 2009). It is this darkness of another time, a palpating and hidden archaism, that feeds Boltanski’s art. An untiring interrogation of irredeemable, unspoken loss, and of a past whose lives and objects have drained entirely away.

In the shadow of this past, diverse aesthetic approaches intersect. Presenting the exhibition, Boltanski himself comments, not without irony, that his work has become inscribed in “supplementary time” because there are at least three aesthetic phases that the artist himself can identify: 1969-1980, in which photography and family photo albums define a style which is at once happy and tragic; 1984-2000, the shadow period, in which childhood and memories reemerge, as in *Leçons de ténèbres*; and finally 2000-2005, when the work of memory takes centre stage once again.

Born in 1944, Boltanski’s sensitivity to the catastrophe of the Holocaust is strengthened by familial links. Through art, Boltanski challenges extinction, death and destruction, without the ruination that would posthumously and urgently enable the salvage of some meaning or trace of what is absolutely past. The autobiographical form itself is constituted by the extreme force of pushing both life and voice towards the contingency of death; that which autobiography implies is impossible. Within the force field of the 20th century the French artist acts out his own distinctive style in the production of absence and invisibility that Gérard Wajcman calls the absolute heart of the century of extremes. Yet the artistic act cannot be based on filling voids. This would result in an art that fetishizes absences through false and inadequate correlations.

His body is at one with the traumas of history, above all from the 80s on, when the theme of



extermination gradually grew to be more important than the recollection of family history, and then became a permanent battlefield of artistic choice. This theme intersects deeply with the work of memory through a number of surprising works: *Les Archives de C.B.*, a mosaic of photographs in black and white; the papers, lights and threads that introduce *Reliquaire* (1990), a montage of hyper-illuminated portraits that become spectral images; the geometric composition of hundreds of “human” faces of *Menschlich* (1994); or the series *Les regards* (1998-2001) that attend to the detail of looking.

However, it is impossible to put together a thematic genealogy, because of the surprises that the artist always throws up. It is better to reflect on materials and gestures that allow us to capture how behind the work is the real: the unrepresentable, unspeakable, opaque object that interests Boltanski. Death or extermination. Emotions that leave no trace. We cannot forget here the installation from the Grand Palais in 2010. The rooms were left deliberately unheated and in the cold air, up against a wall, was a column of numbered metal boxes and three rows of dresses laid out among into 23 rectangles, posts and lights. Everything like in an extermination camp. At the bottom, a 20-metre deep pile of clothes, where a crane endlessly picked up garments and dropped them on the floor. The technology of destroying lives, efficiently, inexorably, shockingly. The accumulated clothes became a metonym for destroyed lives. Total disqualification. *Personnes*, the installation was called. The nothingness of the body made meat. This mediated use of materials identified a form for recounting, and an expression for the unsayable. It emerged from the experience of Boltanski's *Vêtements* of 1988 that may not initially have thought of itself in this way, but became a route to present the catastrophe of unrepresentable extermination.

The project *La maison manquante* (1990) is an even more radical act dedicated to representing the Holocaust. It is configured as the mobile, pulsing heart of Boltanski's work. It reveals, above all, the counter-monumentalism of making art through absence. The Senate of Berlin invited the French artist to make a work about the reunification of the city after the division which the dark core of the twentieth century had forced upon it. In East Berlin, in the neighbourhood of Scheunenviertel, where East European Jews lived before being deported and killed, Boltanski spectrally reconstructed, through absence, a house between two buildings that had not been destroyed by the bombing. On the walls of the surviving houses, plaques were attached at the heights of each story. Based on deep research, they testify to names, professions and dates of arrest and death. Based on inscriptions placed at phantom points on the two walls, it is possible to conclude that something has happened to the people who lived



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in the missing house; something that would make sense of the historical information displayed on the walls of adjoining houses.

Through this minimalist aesthetic act, Boltanski creates a poetic of memory stripped of monumentalism. A poetic which shows the means of its own making. Aleida Assmann referred to *La maison manquante* as the “absence of lost bodies”. Determined by a traumatic history, it makes disappearance visible. Emptiness speaks, becomes prosopopoeia and shows that profound loss is an active element of the construction of memory. Thus absence becomes presence and the work functions as a performative tool of memory that preserves what would otherwise be lost. Nothing could better show that the art of memory, in the way that Boltanski thinks about it and makes it, is memory itself. It knows its workings and saves it from erasure. This is the lesson that Christian Boltanski repeats to us in all the corners of his immense oeuvre. And that, literally, *makes time*.

Translated by Archie Davies

Roberto Vecchi is professor of Portuguese and Brazilian Literature in the Department of Literature and Modern Cultures of the University of Bologna. He has recently published, with Vincenzo Russo, *La letteratura portoghese. I testi e le idee* (2017). He is an associate researcher with the project MEMOIRS: Children of Empire and European Postmemories (ERC Consolidator Grant n. 648624).

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