

# Conversation Christian Boltanski, Paris, March 12 2014

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Editors' note: By way of a preface to this, the first issue of a new journal on artistic research, we begin with a moment of encounter with the artist Christian Boltanski, where we asked him to reflect on the question of judgement.

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## CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI

Christian Boltanski is a photographer, painter, sculptor, and installation artist. The child of a Ukrainian Jewish father and a Corsican mother, Boltanski's early years were marked by the Nazi occupation of France, which forced his father to go into hiding. His work deals with the concepts of loss, memory, childhood, and death, often functioning as memorials or shrines to collective cultural rituals and events. Many of his installations may reference the lives lost in the Holocaust, striking both societal and personal chords. During the 1970s Boltanski participated in a number of important shows, exhibiting at the Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris (1970); *Documenta 5* in Kassel, Germany (1972); Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, Germany (1973); and *Venice*

*Biennale Architettura* (1975). Since the 1970s he has participated in many other important exhibitions, including *Documenta 8*, Kassel (1987), and more recently has had solo shows at the Institut Mathildenhöhe, Darmstadt, Germany (2006); La maison rouge, Fondation Antoine de Galbert, Paris (2008); and Kunstmuseum Lichtenstein, Vaduz (2009). He received the Kaiserring prize from the city of Goslar, Germany (2001), and the Nord/LB, Braunschweig art prize later that same year. He was awarded the Praemium Imperiale for sculpture by the Japan Art Association (2006). Boltanski lives and works in the Malakoff neighborhood of Paris with his wife, Annette Messager, with whom he occasionally collaborates on projects.

**THINK I WAS VERY TOLERANT.** I had very few students. I am not optimistic enough. If the students left me, it was perhaps because I was too depressed. I was very nice. I always accepted everybody. Everyone who wanted to be in my atelier I always accepted. And I tried to be very nice with everybody. But, after some time, people left. In my atelier, there were no chairs. Everybody was sitting on the floor. And most of the time there was only one student, and sometimes I was alone during two hours. They expected somebody who knew the truth and could explain the truth in an easy way. And give some rules: To have success you must do that. I refuse to have assistants. Because, if you have assistants, you must give them something to do everyday. And then you must repeat yourself, because you have no new ideas. And I cannot have an assistant because I have a new idea only every two years. It is always the same idea... What I try to do is to do something in a place that is not directly a cultural place... and someone arrives... who doesn't understand anything of contemporary art, and who is touched, and who doesn't understand if it is art or not art, but only is touched. That's what I want. You know, I told you, I am a bad preacher. I believe that in our fate we have a part of all the people who lived before us... A kind of a puzzle. And I believe that our spirit is also full of all the people that were before us. I have a lot of people who lived before me, but I am sure I have a rabbi. And I can be a rabbi. I shall be a bad rabbi... but a rabbi. But I am sure that a part of me is also a Corsican farmer. And a part of me is a Mongol. My brother the sociologist is very political. And he is a great sociologist and a very clever man. But I am not political at all. In a way I am very conservative. And it is also because I want to be only an artist. If you go into politics, it is so funny that you might forget to be an artist. I don't like cars. I don't like holidays. I wake up in the morning – and it is time to think

about art! There is food, and there is sex and so on. But I can't be involved in something too important. To be married with an artist is awful. But I cannot be married to someone who is not an artist. With Annette we have a lot of rules. I never go into her studio. The last time she was in my studio was perhaps ten years ago. We have two separate homes. If she buys a book, she is not going to say to me "I have bought this book". I am afraid, because I know she is clever. And I know she is going to speak the truth. You know. I can lie. It is very easy for me to be a great artist with you. With her, I can't. She knows exactly that I am stupid and a crook and... I cared about the judgement of Szeeman, of four or five people. Now I don't know... only about the judgement of my own. And now I am so old. You know what is marvellous with being so old? I will die soon. I don't care. I have enough money to survive until I die. I don't need to sell anymore. I don't care to be at the Venice Biennale. I care to go there, but not to be there. Everything is done. And now, I am very free. I can do what I want. And I am lucky, because I can choose to do a piece in the middle of the desert of Chile... I really believe that I am going to die soon. And I have so many shows programmed for the next year. I am so busy I can't die; I have no time to die. I must survive. It is a way to survive to take appointments with a lot of people. I love life. You can't imagine! Everybody thinks I am sad. You can't imagine how light I am. I love to eat. I love to have fun. I love life in a bad way. It is too much, you know. I spent a large part of my youth in cars, together with my parents. I looked out. I was in love with a little girl. I never spoke to her, but I can see her walking everyday at eleven o'clock. I was looking. Many years ago I was in New York, at Grand Central and it was six o'clock and I saw all those people who were going home from work and each of them had a story. Someone is happy with his girlfriend, someone has been fighting with his boss. I wished to go into the spirit of all these peo-

ple and to love them and to know that everybody can give me so much. At my first show in Japan, everybody said you are so Japanese because I told them something they knew. The Parisian taxi drivers... most of them are not nice. Most of them are awful. But if you begin to talk to them you find a lot of people who are quite nice. One who is in love with Marguerite Duras, mystic people, etc. If you find the right way to go, everyone is marvellous, everyone loves you so much. I can't speak about Bourdieu because I never read a book of Bourdieu. I don't like Bourdieu. I don't think that everyone who has lived in a poor family can't speak about Duras. There is always someone. There is always someone who is different. That is the problem that I have with my sociologist brother: I don't believe in evil. I believe that everybody is nice. All of us are criminals. See what happens in Syria, and we do nothing. We know that. We are not going to change our lives for that. All of us are criminals, but not at the same level. And the Nazis were very sweet people. What I can say is that I am deeply involved in the art of my generation and the generation before. You are involved with your generation and with people 10-to-20 years before, but not 30 years before. I like very much that the theatre goes into the art scene. I like that very much: theatre in the arts. I love painting. I love van Gogh and Artaud. The problem with Bill Viola is that the older you get, the more you want to talk about serious things, and you become pompous. And the pieces he did before were really good, and now they are becoming a little pompous. And I am afraid for myself to be like that. "I am very old now, and now I know what is life" – that is very dangerous.

**WE MEET CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI ON** the bridge leading to the *Conservatoire national de Paris*. This is Paris – and he is surrounded by an enthusiastic group of people from the research school of the *Ecole Normale Supérieure*, the head of the composition department of the *Conservatoire*, friends, admirers and *auditeurs libres*.

There is a big dark seminar room in the basement of the building. Students and doctorands are waiting. Boltanski speaks about placing public art in semi-concealed spaces, reacts, gives elaborate answers to questions from the students, always ambivalent, always attentive, re-enacting. The discourse floats wonderfully, tautologically, empathically and paradoxically, oscillating between the pole of *history/sociology/disenchantment* on the one hand and *poiesis/praxis/life* on the other.

Boltanski is always in the opposite camp. The economy here is about doxa and paradoxa. "Art produces the key that doesn't fit anywhere". That key – which is *the human* – is also the key concept of his art and cannot be defined by difference and identity, only by a never-ending *différance*, a *deferred difference* or differing deference: contemplation.

The conversation goes on, the pendulum moves slowly back and forth between poetics and aesthetics, construction and deconstruction, history and person, judgement and pardon, recognition and discovery, fetishism and dismantling of the *illutio*... Here, there is only discrepancy and postponed judgement.

Deferring judgement we descend and enter the installation *La Réserve du Conservatoire de Musique* – a closed crypt some 20 meters under earth. The "dead", the applicants who were rejected and therefore not registered in the archives of the *Conservatoire*, have been on show here since the opening of the *Conservatoire* in 1991 – but the place has only rarely been visited since.

A dark corridor. Walls and floors of concrete. Dust and sand on the floor. Protection/imprisonment. Along the left wall there are blow-ups of portraits of young musicians. Not unlike the portraits you see in concert halls all around the world: black and white, tail coats, evening gowns. But here: *Mises en scène*, and *mise à mort* of non-recognized *Wunderkinder*. The expression of their faces is justly (or: kindly and tautologically) characterized later on by a theatre director in this way: “*The portraits of ‘the dead’ under earth remind me of something that I try to achieve as a director in my work with the actors. That expression of a face. A glance into the future, a definitive, doomed and simultaneously eternal expression. This is ‘art’ and not ‘life’. The secret of acting.*”

Later on, we have lunch with Boltanski in the Parisian spring light and he pays. He selects a Burger Vilette for himself, with Burgundy. He loves food. We have fish. You see a compressed version of the lunch talk above.

During the lunch, we address Boltanski with one single question:

“*What happens to judgement today?*”

And, of course – he does not reply. By no means. The reason for this being probably that Boltanski, as any good artist, is entirely *en aval*, downriver. Art comes after research, as it were.

His work – including his accompanying performative discourse – is a dialogical response to the world of crime, punishment, research and catastrophe. Memories of judgement and doom, as something personal and collective is the main *aboutness* of his art, based on things that are, above all, recognizable and empathic in their frailty, *mises en abyme*.

“*I am interested in memory, not in the Proustian, autobio-*

*graphical way. But as the passage from the highly personal to the highly collective.*”

Not doing judgements, selections and evaluations and critique – but being with the judged; surviving, or dying, with the judged. Not doing research, not being busy with “discovery”, not being busy at all, dealing slowly only with the recognizable and with recognition of the recognized. One idea every two years. That is being in art. Full stop.

“In a way I am very conservative. And it is also because I want to be only an artist. If you go into politics, it is so funny that you might forget to be an artist. I don’t like cars. I don’t like holidays. I wake up in the morning – and it is time to think about art!”

Boltanski’s work is ephemeral, and he works with fragile materials, old clothes, photos of the forgotten and disappeared, unidentifiable heartbeats, leftovers and debris from everyday life. Recognizable objects to be recycled and used. His work could and should certainly not be assimilated to any “research culture”: it is individuation, but not individualization.

But we live our lives, we do research and make discoveries, there is knowledge to be brought out of the interaction of practice and context, and there are research questions lurking in that very context that make us – and himself – move into the work of art, and interact with it, make it and reconstruct it.

There is certainly a zone of interaction and complexity in there that challenges our constructions of knowledge, and more. And the knowledge of what that challenge is about, and how it is made, and the materiality of that knowledge, is the artist’s knowledge; and, if it is knowledge, it is a shared one.