

# THE GOD OF TIME

**BOLTANSKI TIME**

EDITED BY RALF BEIL

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In a site-specific installation at the Mathildenhöhe in Darmstadt, Germany, Christian Boltanski combined new and old works to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk*—a synthesis of his art. The exhibition presented Boltanski's complicated autobiographical oeuvre that, whether fictional or real (Boltanski has a reputation for intentionally making erroneous, contradictory, and misleading statements), provides the foundation for his pieces about time and its effect on memory. The monograph *Boltanski Time* documents the exhibition (held November 12, 2006–February 11, 2007) using art historical, literary, and philosophical essays as well as an interview with the artist to examine Boltanski's disturbing archive of cultural, ethnic, social, and personal histories that are haunted by themes of death, loss, and recollection. In an age of celebrity and digital noise and in opposition to contemporary trends that highly value hyper-reality, the gripping power of Boltanski's work lies in his haptic evocations that pay homage to millions of “anonymous” people who have disappeared.

Boltanski was born in Nazi-occupied Paris in 1944 to a Jewish father and a Christian mother—who ultimately divorced for the sake of the father who had spent nearly a year hiding under the floorboards of their apartment. Surrounded by this background of anxiety, uncertainty, and betrayal, young Boltanski stopped going to school at age twelve and began making art shaped by his intimate experiences of the Final Solution.

Creating assemblages from ethereal materials such as nondescript documentary photographs, light bulbs, and heaps of discarded clothing, Boltanski established innovative approaches for indirectly representing the Holocaust and to express a sense of melancholy absence in its aftermath. His shrines to the unknown dead, which fall someplace between installation art and theater, rescue and transform the existence of ordinary people from the oblivion of war and time. Despite its postmodern appearance, Boltanski's work strikes a deep internal chord because it is not ironic and it respects the past in a beautiful yet unsentimental manner.

Through the photographs of others, Boltanski depicts himself as he searches to complete his own absent or “post-memories” (those of the children of Shoah survivors)<sup>1</sup> as he states, “I hold a mirror to my face so that those who look at me see themselves and therefore I disappear.”<sup>2</sup> In his series *Les Suisses morts* (The Dead Swiss, 1995), Boltanski appropriated photographs from Swiss obituaries, noting that photography carries with it the apparition of death—we all die—as well as the presence of those who have died. Viewers are

cast into the position of newly diagnosed Alzheimer's patients who struggle to remember, as they are aware their memories are slipping into nothingness.

Although the Shoah is the starting point, Boltanski claims he does not make “Jewish Art.” His subject matter suggests what can happen when one group claims divine authority to declare another group of people subhuman, vermin who must be exterminated. Yet rather than assigning blame, Boltanski contemplates the connection between perpetrator and victim. He recognizes the corruptive effect of power and how each of us possesses the capacity to be cruel and murderous one moment and kind and loving another. The work raises the question, what would I have done? Is there a murderer in me as well? This drives Boltanski's theme of transience—we are all basically the same and over time we will be forgotten. All are dead and nobody knows who was who, inferring that identity, race, and religion are a waste of the short time we have on earth.



Paradox, contradiction, denial, and inconsistency are hallmarks of Boltanski's work. He flat out tells us, “I never speak directly. Perhaps that explains why I often decide to hide things. That's also why I lie and I admit I am a liar.”<sup>3</sup> By maintaining a fog of ambiguity, Boltanski can retreat into a safe place when tough questions about the Holocaust and anti-Semitism arise.<sup>4</sup> The clue Boltanski provides within his uneasy and circuitous statements is that “God is the God of Time,”<sup>5</sup> for we need time to ponder these questions that do not have painless answers.

Ultimately Boltanski cannot escape the situation he examines. His efforts to bewilder only clarify the futility of his mythmaking and the merit of his art.

*Boltanski Time*, with its range of concise essays, biography, and interview, provides a fine place to begin navigating this artist's multifaceted work. It supplies a first-rate resource for those wanting to expand and re-examine how the artist's dramatic staging of situations and spaces resonate with one's own perception of time and memory, and how in union with personal history we utilize these elements to determine meaning and life direction.

**ROBERT HIRSCH'S** next book, *Light and Lens: Photography in the Digital Age*, will be published this fall by Elsevier's Focal Press. His visual and writing projects can be seen at [www.lightresearch.net](http://www.lightresearch.net).

**NOTES 1.** See *Marianne Hirsch, Family Frames: Photography Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 21–23. **2.** *Didier Semin and Tamar Garb, et al., Christian Boltanski* (New York: Phaidon, 2004), 24. **3.** *Stuart Morgan, “Little Christians” (Christian Boltanski in conversation with Stuart Morgan)*, *Artscribe* #72 (November–December 1988), 49. **4.** *Twenty-five percent of French Jews have considered immigrating to Israel or the United States due to escalating violent anti-Semitic acts.* See *CBS/AP, “Fearful Jews Fleeing France,”* July 28, 2004; available at [www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/07/28/world/main632610.shtml](http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/07/28/world/main632610.shtml). See also *Shmuel Trigano, “French Jewry: The End of a Model of Jewish Identity,”* *Covenant*, Vol. 1, Issue 2 (April 2007); available at [www.covenant.idc.ac.il/en/vol1/issue2/trigano\\_print.html#bio](http://www.covenant.idc.ac.il/en/vol1/issue2/trigano_print.html#bio). **5.** *Christian Boltanski, in Ralf Beil, ed., Boltanski Time* (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2006), 66.