



Christian Boltanski: 'We give ourselves things to do so that we don't die'

Peter Aspden meets the man routinely described as France's greatest living artist

by Peter Aspden (March 30, 2018)



© Marguerite Bornhauser

The ghosts of the great and the echoes of near-forgotten dialogues resound in the dining room of La Closerie des Lilas, a famed restaurant in Paris's Montparnasse district. Its cultural heritage is celebrated in the form of small plaques laid into the corners of its tables: there is one for Jean-Paul Sartre, sharing his space, of course, with Simone de Beauvoir, the two of them facing a solid wall, which may or may not be cleverly remarking on the ultimate futility of existentialism. Samuel Beckett is a few feet away, all ears.

This is the perfect spot to meet Christian Boltanski, the man who is routinely described as France's greatest living artist, and whose work is inspired by spectres, memories, absence and death. He is waiting for me patiently with a glass of red wine in front of him, and I order one to keep him company. There is a fierce Arctic wind outside, and a respectful hush inside the restaurant. This is no casual rendezvous spot for Boltanski; it is his workplace. He travels here from his home and studio in Malakoff, a Paris suburb, four or five times a week, he tells me.

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

There are no obvious scenes of artistic activity around the table. What form did his work take?

"I speak with people," he replies. "I have a lot of projects in mind, and to speak to people is very useful. It is also a great pleasure." I thought artists struggled with their demons in the isolation of their own studios, I say. "But it is so difficult to be alone," he says.

"The most important part of my work is lying in bed watching television. But it is so difficult. And depressing." Home, he says, is where he chooses to "wait, and hope". For inspiration?

"For understanding." He points to me. "You came by train here this morning, but I'm sure you would have preferred to stay at home." I take a mouthful of wine. I'm not so sure.

"We give ourselves things to do so that we don't die," he continues seamlessly. "The reason I am doing so many shows is so that I don't die. I can't die next week, because I have too many meetings." That sounds superstitious, I say.

"Yes, and also it is a way to not think. It is much easier to keep active, and not to think."

So much for the small talk. If the work ethic of the 73-year-old Boltanski constitutes a fear of mortality, he must be very afraid. His forthcoming show at London's Marian Goodman Gallery is one of a pile of projects he has planned for the coming months. Most are large-scale installations, of the type that have given him a stellar profile in the contemporary art world over the past decade: haunting riffs on the fragility of our lives.

There was *Chance*, at the 2011 Venice Biennale, when a reel of images of newborn babies was drawn through an elaborate tangle of scaffolding, occasionally making a random stop, so that one image could be chosen and projected on to a large screen, the winner in some mysterious, metaphysical lottery.

In *Personnes* (2010) at the Grand Palais, a giant mechanical claw pointlessly lifted items from a massive mound of used clothes, and put them down again. The same year saw the opening of *Les archives du coeur*, an ongoing collection of recorded heartbeats playing in a room on the Japanese island of Teshima, to which Boltanski is constantly adding new examples.

All these works stop us short, and ask us to think of the transience of human life. The forthcoming London exhibition includes the film installation *Ephémères*, or *Mayflies*, a short documentary on the insect with the super-fast lifespan. "They are born, they make love, and then . . . pff! It's the end," says Boltanski. That is like us, but just a bit faster, I say, and he lets out a slightly uneasy laugh.

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY



The diptych 'Départ/Arrivée' (2015) © Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, Paris and London



Départ/Arrivée (2015) © Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, Paris and London

Also in the London show is *La traversée de la vie*, a reprise of one of his early works, 1971's *Album des photos de la famille D*, which reconstructed an anonymous family album from the 1950s. In the new version, the photographs, a kind of celebration of the unexceptional, will be printed on screens, seemingly faded over time. Viewers will pass through veils, suspended from the ceiling, as they look at them. Together with the neon-sign diptych *Départ/Arrivée*, they evoke the evanescence of our lives. "That is what we do," says Boltanski with disarming reductiveness.

"We arrive, we depart."

NEW YORK PARIS LONDON

WWW.MARIANGOODMAN.COM

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

Boltanski, whose partner is Annette Messager, another formidable artist, talks in short, busy bursts, often in epigrams, most of which contain an ironic reflection on our cosmic insignificance. I can almost feel Sartre and Beckett jostling to join in. His anxious air is testament to the depth of feeling in his work, which might otherwise seem like a series of intellectual speculations.

He says he likes to destroy many of his artworks after they have been displayed.



'L'Album de la famille D. entre 1939 et 1964' (1971) © Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, Paris and London

"I believe that stories and mythology are stronger than artworks. What I am trying to do is create mythology." He tells me about his recent installation in Patagonia, in which three large wind-powered trumpets play in an effort to communicate with whales off the shore. "I hope the story of that piece will stay around. And in a few years, people will ask, 'Do you remember that crazy guy who tried to speak to the whales?' That is more important than the piece itself."

The underlying nervousness and preoccupation with mortal concerns in Boltanski's work are routinely attributed to his eccentric childhood in Paris. Born to a Ukrainian Jewish father and a Corsican mother towards the end of the second world war, he was brought up with his extended family in a sprawling Saint-Germain mansion. A bohemian way of life turned downright bizarre, not to say frightening, when his father, Étienne, was forced to hide in a secret space under the floorboards to avoid detection by the Nazis.

The events in the house are recounted in last year's Prix des Prix-winning novel *The Safe House*, written, beautifully, by Boltanski's nephew Christophe, a former London correspondent for *Libération*. Boltanski has often admitted to mixing elements of truth and fiction when describing his childhood years, but tells me that the novel's account is accurate. According to this, he was pulled out of formal education by his parents aged 10, having regularly "grabbed the lamp posts and screamed" as they took him to school in the morning, "as if they were taking him to the slaughterhouse."

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY



'Misterios' (2017), installation, Patagonia © Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, Paris and London



'La traversée de la vie' (2015) © Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, Paris and London

Why did he dislike school so much? “I was afraid. Of not being with my parents. Other children didn’t like me because I was different.” (According to Christophe, Boltanski was nicknamed “little rabbi” at the mainly Catholic schools he attended.) His childhood was, in any case, “totally strange but very happy”. He says he loves Christophe “like a son” (he does not have children), and loves the fact that his family’s story will survive through the book. “Your childhood is what makes you what you are now. To be against your own childhood is to be against yourself.”

Those early years were dominated, he says, by discussions of the Holocaust. It gave him his calling. “I believe artists have some kind of trauma at the beginning of their lives, and they learn to survive that trauma through their art. For me, the trauma was the Shoah. When I was young, all my parents’ friends, everybody, spoke and spoke of it. And it was also a trauma for me that I had survived.”

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY



'Personnes' (2010), at the Grand Palais, Paris © Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, Paris and London

It is impossible to view many of Boltanski's works — the pile of clothes in *Personnes*, for example — without regard to this defining event. Despite the shadow it casts, and the solemnness of his work, he calls himself an optimist. "You are a journalist, I am an artist. We are having this conversation. In some years, you will be dead, I will be dead. But things go on. Things go on."

I like the idea of things getting better too, I say. "But the horror is always there. People ask, why did the people who knew about the Shoah, and about Stalin, refuse to speak? But we know about Syria, about migrants. And what are you doing? What am I doing? Nothing." Art offers scant solace. "The Nazis loved Schubert. I love Schubert too. But Schubert didn't change the spirit of the Nazis."

The timing of Boltanski's first major show, at the Ranelagh cinema/theatre, might have been auspicious: *The Impossible Life of Christian Boltanski* opened in May 1968, with Paris aflame in revolutionary fervour. But Boltanski's solidarity with the rioters was limited. "I was furious! It was my opening — who was going to come? But it was quite useful for me. There was a meeting of journalists on strike in the cinema, I met them, they were very nice to me. And I sold a piece which [later] ended up in the Centre Pompidou."

So he felt disconnected from the revolutionary spirit? "Totally. Those communists were awful, so stupid. I am a conservative. I don't like revolutions, because the worst part of you comes out. I am very happy there was a French revolution, but it was awful because so many people were killed for no reason. I hate fascism, I don't like communists. If [Marine] Le Pen wins, I shall escape to Madrid. My politics stop there. I love Madrid."

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY



Christian Boltanski in his studio © Marguerite Bornhauser

We decide to continue our conversation in Boltanski's studio in Malakoff. He drives me there in a black Mini. "It is communist," he says, "but it has a good council. Thirty years ago it was a workers' place, but now it is many little flats for teachers, professionals." The two-floored studio, where he also lives, is a little dishevelled, with what look like uncompleted works leaning none-too-ceremoniously on the walls.

As we enter, he reminds me we are being filmed. We are, in fact, in the middle of an artwork. In 2009, Boltanski was commissioned by the Australian art collector David Walsh to allow himself to be filmed in his studio, and have a live 24-hour feed transmitted back to Walsh in his native Tasmania. The project incorporated a grisly and complicated bet on the amount of time Boltanski would live, according to which Walsh will have purchased the work — *The Life of CB* — for more, or less, than it was worth. "I have already won the bet," he says with quiet satisfaction.

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY



'Chance' (2011) © Courtesy of the artist and
Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, Paris and London

Behind his desk, there are large blow-ups of babies' faces, from his research when he was making *Chance* for the Biennale. "I chose these babies. They are so ugly," he says cheerfully. He elaborates on the title of his show. "I am what I am because my parents decided to make love at a particular moment. What you are is only something which happens by chance." Most of us prefer not to be reminded of our parents making love, I say. "Yes, it is depressing," he replies.

I ask to see a copy of *Sans-Souci*, a 1991 book based on a photo album from the 1930s that Boltanski bought in a Berlin flea-market. It shows snapshots of a German family, its members posing happily before the cameras as if in an innocent idyll. He made the piece after seeing pictures of US servicemen reunited with their own families after serving in the first Gulf war.

He disappears downstairs and returns with a copy of another book-based work, *Les habitants de Malmö*, from 1993. It comprises a telephone directory from the Swedish city, on top of which Boltanski has glued a white cover. He alerts me to the phone book's supplement, which lists the people who had recently died. In time, he says, the book will be nothing but a memorial listing of the city's inhabitants.

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY



'Autel familial' (1990), black-and-white photographs, lamps, metal drawer, clothes, electric wire
© Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, Paris and London

His eyes light up as he tells me of an updated version of that project, which he failed to complete. “I tried to work with Facebook. I wanted to find the people who are still listed but who have died. I tried to find them but it was so difficult. They are like ghosts. But some people still send them messages. They give life to them. It is so funny — they can’t put the dead away.”

Nobody dies on Facebook, I say. He chuckles, and repeats approvingly: “Yes. Nobody dies on Facebook,” not making it at all clear whether that is a world to be envied, or avoided.

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY



'Animitas' (2015), HD video, filmed at Talabre, San Pedro de Atacama, Chile
© Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, Paris and London

'Ephémères', Marian Goodman Gallery, London, April 12-May 12; mariangoodman.com