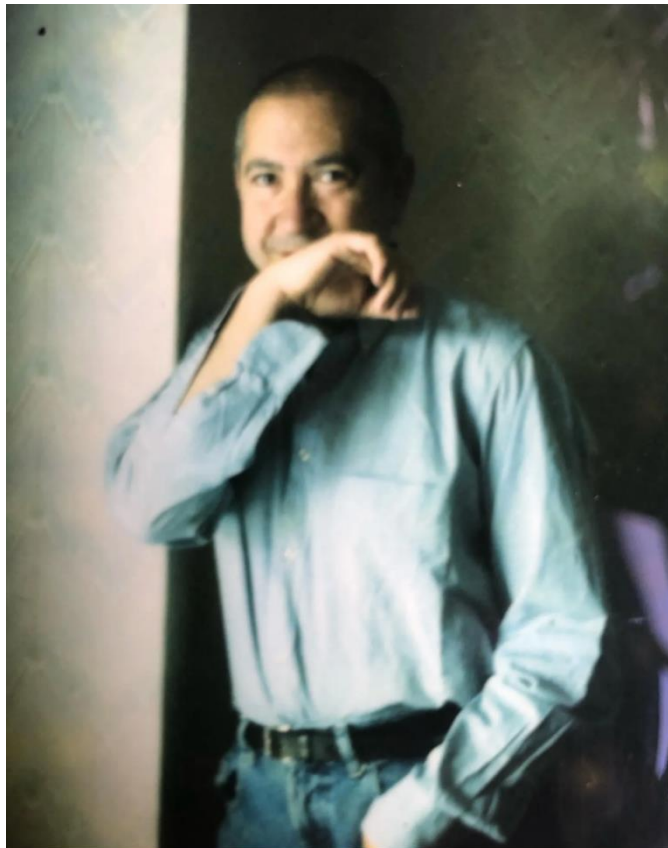


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VOGUE

An Appreciation of Christian Boltanski, Brilliant Artist, My Friend

By Leslie Camhi



A polaroid taken by the author, c. 1996 Leslie Camhi

When he was young, the late French artist Christian Boltanski liked to recount, he devised a novel, if slightly louche method for making his way through the vast (and for an aspiring artist, potentially intimidating) masterpiece-lined halls of the Louvre Museum. Upon entering, he would find an attractive young woman and follow her at a discreet distance, remaining entirely unnoticed by her, but pausing whenever she paused, to stop and look at the art she chose.

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I thought of that story as I made my way through those same labyrinthine, hallowed halls recently, when Christian, who died in July, was being honored by a trifecta of great Parisian museums. Long-term installations of his work were opening that day at the Louvre and the Château de Versailles, and that evening in the parking garage of the Centre Pompidou there would be a restaging, for a single night and with singers from the Opéra Comique, of *Fosse*, his visionary, avant-garde opera, a musical limbo, a netherworld with no beginning or end, created in collaboration with Jean Kalman and Franck Krawczyk and first performed in January 2020.

What was I doing there? The artist had played an important role in my young life. We'd first met decades earlier, at the start of a year I spent researching my doctoral dissertation in Paris, when a New York art-world friend on vacation had taken me to visit some artists' studios, set down in the working-class, Parisian suburb of Malakoff.



French artist Christian Boltanski poses in front of his installation on the eve of the inauguration of the "Monumenta 2010" event on January 12, 2010 at the "Grand Palais" in Paris. Photo: PIERRE VERDY/AFP via Getty Images

We'd grown particularly close in the 1990s, out of what was probably a shared sense of desperation. He'd achieved, early on, a considerable measure of worldly success. He was best known at that time for a haunting series of works in which he arranged black-and-white archival photographs (blurred almost beyond recognition), weathered tin biscuit boxes, and electric lights (naked bulbs, or the kinds of lamps one imagines are used in interrogations) into altars evoking memories both personal and historical—the Shoah, in particular, which had marked his life. (More on that later.) But he'd kept the habit, begun when he was just starting out, of pretending to be desperate, and the play-acting sometimes bled into reality.

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Nevertheless, though he often claimed to spend his days doing nothing, he was in fact intensely prolific, with a profusion of works nearly impossible to enumerate. There were early drawings and paintings, most of which he destroyed. (I possess one.) Beginning around 1968, there was mail art; there were artist's books, short films, and installations both strangely intimate and (as his international reputation grew) theatrically monumental. These ranged from the shadows of little handmade puppets—fashioned from bits of wire and bark, their dark forms magnified and swirling by candlelight in the chapel of the 18th-century Parisian psychiatric hospital the Salpêtrière (*Les Ombres*, 1986)—to the secondhand clothing that lay spread out on the floor like rugs in a mosque or piled high under the vaulted ceiling of a chilly, wintertime Grand Palais and the 60-foot crane that repeatedly picked up a few clothes from the mountainous pile and dropped them, arbitrarily, like the hand of God (*Personnes*, 2010), to the archived throbbing of approximately 80,000 heartbeats, recorded by visitors to an island off the coast of Japan, a project the artist began by recording the beating of his own heart in 2010. (I listened to that recording recently, and realized that the fact that in the past I had heard that particular heart beating was irrelevant—that anyone listening would sense, reflected in it, their own mortality.)

The means he employed were always low-tech, humble; the emotions evoked bordered on the grand guignol, while often calling forth more poignant associations. But there was a formal coldness to his art that saved it from sentimentality, a refusal of closure that threw you back on your own life with unanswerable questions.



Christian Boltanski poses for a portrait among a sculptural installation memorializing victims of the Holocaust, circa 1992. Bob Berg

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In 1995 we created a work together, one of four site-specific projects he devised for the Public Art Fund, on view simultaneously at different locations around Manhattan. (The other three sites were Grand Central Station, the New-York Historical Society, and the Church of the Ascension in Harlem.) Our installation, which he very generously co-signed with me, took place at the Eldridge Street Synagogue on the Lower East Side, a magnificent, Moorish Revival sanctuary over a century old and at the time in great disrepair. (It's long since been restored.) For it, I interviewed and recorded public elementary school children who were touring the synagogue on class trips; second graders at Ramaz, an Upper East Side Jewish day school; and two children belonging to the synagogue's still active but tiny, ultra-Orthodox congregation, about their memories or the stories they'd heard concerning their own, their parents', or their ancestors' emigration. Upon entering the sanctuary, you heard only the low murmur of children's voices, their fragmentary testimonies gradually emerging, one by one, as you wandered among the pews in the half-ruined space.

We were never again as close as we were in those years, but we'd kept up, employing on the rare occasions when we met the peculiar, playful intimacy of people who knew each other only too well. We'd last seen each other in February 2020, a time I now think of as on the eve of COVID. I was in Paris on assignment for *Vogue*, and I stayed on an extra day, in part to have lunch with him at the Closerie des Lilas and to see a retrospective of his work then on view at the Centre Pompidou. (I'd texted him afterward that I'd overheard, at the exhibition's entrance, a young man asking his girlfriend if the artist was dead. No, he's alive, she'd responded. "You see," I'd written to Christian, teasingly, "people are up to date!")

This past summer, I learned of his death (from blood cancer, an illness he kept so secret that his passing was utterly unanticipated by both his long-term gallerist, Marian Goodman, and by me) in the brutal modern manner—through Instagram. The news was shattering. I had thought the trip to Paris would make his loss more real to me, and perhaps it did. But it also raised a host of questions, about the relationship between art and biography, about memory and what remains alive in the work of an artist when the artist is no more.

Conceived during the wartime occupation of Paris, while his French Catholic Corsican mother, a writer, kept his father (a doctor descended from Ukrainian Jews) in hiding under the floorboards of the family's Left Bank *hôtel particulier*, Christian Liberté Boltanski long claimed that his birth, on September 6, 1944, coincided with the Liberation of Paris. In fact, the German army had surrendered the French capital 12 days earlier. But with his death on Bastille Day 2021, "he inserted himself very neatly into the history of France," my friend, a Parisian psychoanalyst and philosopher, wryly observed.

The third of three brothers, and with a younger sister adopted later, Christian and his family lived with a horror of being separated—a legacy, in part, of their wartime experience. Their home was spacious, but the boys slept at the foot of their parents' bed well into their teenage years, only rarely venturing beyond its walls alone. By the age of 12, Christian had abandoned formal schooling and was left largely to his own devices—the artist as idiot savant, a persona he cultivated, both intentionally and not.

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Childhood and autobiography were among the great themes of his work, but it was autobiography presented always through the veil of fiction, and childhood as something irretrievably lost. Chance, fate, and death—mortality's inexorable drumbeat—rounded out the list of his obsessions. Yet he was, as he liked to claim, a “bon vivant,” with an iron-clad memory for every restaurant meal he'd ever eaten. He was also capable of inordinate tenderness.

So it was that I found myself en route to the Place de la Concorde in Paris just after dawn on a foggy October morning. Following instructions that had been sent from Marian Goodman Gallery days earlier, I boarded a bus waiting there to take me to Versailles. (For Christian, the journey to discover site-specific installations was always an integral part of the work.) Seated inside were a motley crew of people whom I assumed were fellow mourners, including a gaggle of middle-aged men—French art critics?—and two beautifully dressed, distinguished-looking Japanese women, deep in conversation. No one spoke to me. About 40 minutes later, gazing out the bus window, I noticed, in the fog then lifting over Versailles, a golden cross winking at me from atop the château.

Upon arrival, we were ushered into the Royal Chapel, a gilded, 18th-century confection of soaring vaults and colonnades, with the painted figure of Christ high up in the apse, ascending to Heaven accompanied by angels. (The chapel had recently reopened after an over-three-year renovation.) There we joined the president of Versailles, Catherine Pégard; the artist Annette Messager (Christian's widow, though she later told me she loathes that appellation); and dozens of others who had come by car from Paris, all of us milling about as a relentless, recorded voice announced, dryly and at brief intervals, the hours, minutes, and seconds as they passed. The architecture suggested transcendence; the voice told another story, of mortal creatures stretched upon the rack of time.

I felt a cold panic rising within me as I realized this was the work. (Christian's sound installation, *The Speaking Clock* [2003], was on view at Versailles for three weeks this fall, but visitors to Salzburg, Austria, may find it permanently installed in the crypt of the city's cathedral.) “It's quite a harsh lesson,” I said to an older woman leaning against a column, whose eyes, seemingly filled with tears, met mine. “Yes, it's terrible how quickly time passes,” she replied—a lesson whose full weight was brought home to us when we all gathered to bow our heads for a minute of silence.

Later that morning, a very different kind of shock awaited me at the Louvre, where on a day when the museum was closed to the public, a still larger group had assembled in the Grande Galerie to witness the installation of a monumental work by Christian, *The Archives of C. B., 1965–1988* (1988). Rows of rusted tin biscuit boxes, stacked 20 boxes high and 32 across, surmounted and illuminated by black task lamps, were said to contain some 2,000 photographs and documents from over two decades of the artist's life.

It's a strange work, and strangely off-putting. While formally it draws on the language of Minimalist sculpture by the likes of Richard Serra and Carl André, its materials, rusted and timeworn, suggest the pathos of personal memories. In her speech at the Louvre that day, the French minister of culture, Roselyne Bachelot, quoted Christian, who described the biscuit box (a favored material) as “the safe-deposit box of children and of the poor.” She said his art was engaged in a struggle against forgetting, resisting time and death.

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Capitale Européenne de la Culture, April 2015. Photo by François Goudier/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images

Yet the decades of an individual life that the work claims to represent (*C.B.*'s "1965-1988") remain inaccessible to us, walled off as definitively as life is from the tomb. The work gives none of its secrets away. Seeing it in that place of honor in the Louvre—directly facing four paintings by Leonardo da Vinci, including the Renaissance master's exquisite, unfinished *Virgin and Child with St. Anne*, and his profoundly mysterious *St. John the Baptist*, finger pointing skyward—I felt at once the force of this official acknowledgement of Christian's achievement and utterly bereft. I could find no trace of the artist I had once loved in it. Is that the feeling of alienation, I wondered, when personal experience is transformed into history?

"It's everything he would have detested," the Parisian gallerist Martine Aboucaya, who long ago had worked closely with Christian, grumbled. I said that it was not a bad showing, after all, for an artist who had died. (The only other modern and contemporary artist whose works had hung beside the Old Masters in the Grande Galerie had been Picasso, in celebration of his 90th birthday in 1971.) Martine looked at me, appalled. "Christian is NOT dead," she replied in a huff, before dispersing along with the crowd. "His works continue to agitate in our imaginations." (*The Archives of C. B., 1965–1988*, will remain on view at the Louvre through January 10, 2022.)