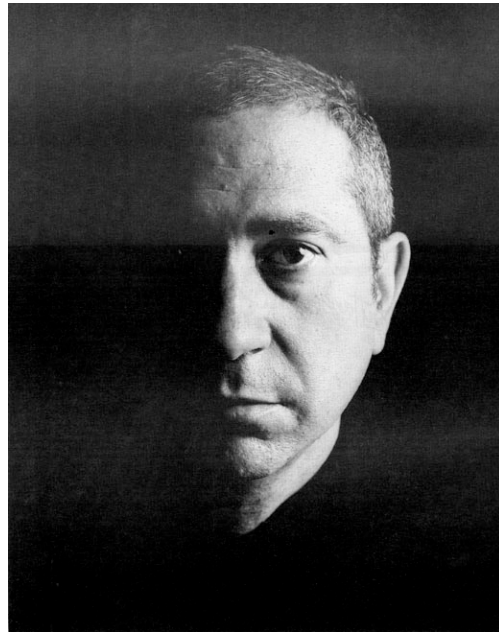


# Boltanski Re- archiving De- archiving

By Renato Osoy



## **Introduction**

Christian Boltanski comes as a familiar name for those researching on the use of the archive in art practice. Essentially because Boltanski has been evolving through the different uses of the archive throughout his career, from the 70's till today, ranging in his practice from the use of the personal archive: things from his childhood memories, collected objects, towards using public archives and acquiring exterior goods to confront larger issues of the general human condition.

Being at the crux of the postmodernist evolution right through the early 70's further on into the 90's (e.g.: Documenta V in 1972 to the 54<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale 2011). Boltanski has been producing relevant work bringing forth questions and proposing new mediums of representation that have kept him always at edge with contemporary art movements. The array of periods and transformations in art practices that have taken place through his artistic trajectory make him an interest candidate for researching, as his practice is in constant evolution.

In recent years 'archive-based' art has been taking a new leap in contemporary practice and debate, although this practice is not new, it certainly has become renewed through a variety of recent proposals. In contemporary photography for example the use and inquire on the archive is gaining territory. Also as history becomes recontextualized with the emergence of new scientific facts, and new collections are built through the different digital mediums and old ones are facing deterioration, new issues tend to appear in the range of misinformation, storage, and access and distribution of the materials. Essential questions come to mind: What good is an archive if no one visits it? Who has access to the archive? What is the purpose of accumulation if there is no consumption? Can an archive go stale? Why should artists work on archive-based proposals?

For my bachelor project I have chosen to work with images and text from an archive. In the last year I have been able to join different classes and lectures where this topics have been discussed, enabling me to confront this issues from different perspectives. Besides sketching a profile from Boltanski and situating his context to understand the foundational character of his work, I will attempt through out this paper to encounter similarities in my own practice to those that Boltanski has engaged on, while at the same time I will also try to find new strategies to approach my view on the conceptual part of the work I am engaging on.

### **Boltanski, From Then Till Now**

Born in Paris, France in 1944, the self-taught Christian Boltanski is a world wide exhibited artist that has been producing art for more than four decades, his practice and production has varied in forms of representations as it has in its mediums of use. According to the production and nature of his artistic activities, and the setting of his chronological manifestation, he can be considered a postmodern artist. Locating him in a historical timeline gives us a clearer frame of reference to consider and survey his practices, but at the same time we'll approach his work in a random manner to gain insights and different points of view in order to encapsulate a sort of global perspective. In that sense, by overlooking and reflecting on some of his relevant artworks, we might gain at least a thoughtful insight on his artistic strategies through out this survey.

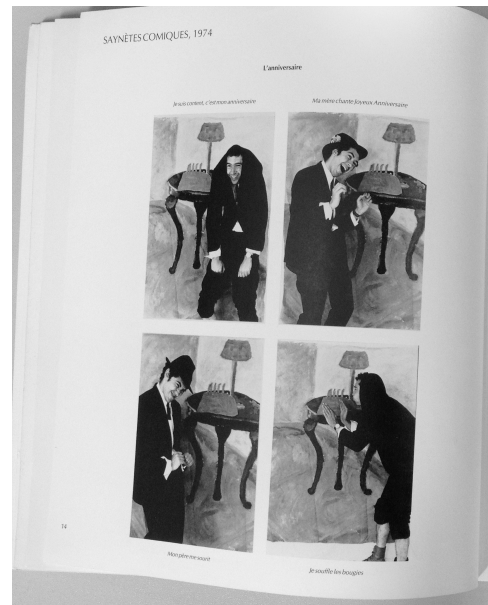
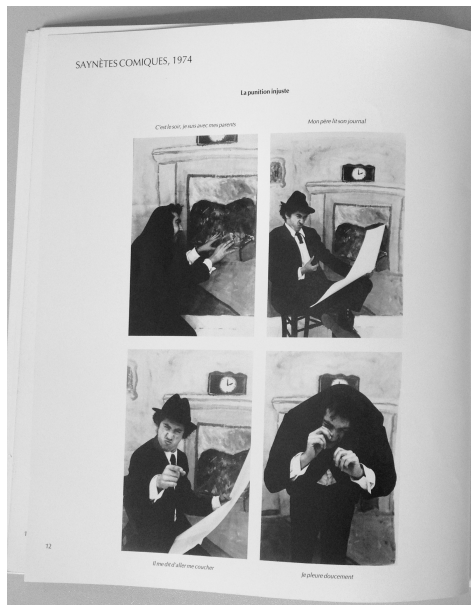
Contemporary art borrows (steals, copy-paste's, appropriates, etc) quite a lot from previous art manifestations, not to say that that didn't happen previously throughout art history, but it never has happened with such an intensity and freedom like today. "By the 1950's, however, modern art appeared to have exhausted its initial fund of dogmas -- either that, or the artists had simply grown tired of them". Notes Christopher Finch in his book *Image as Language, Aspects of British Art 1950-1968*, and later he adds "Young painters were able to look back over half a century of

modernism and did not limit their interest to any one movement or tendency; they found things to admire and be interested by in all aspects of the new painting and were able to accept without difficulty work produced from many different polemical viewpoints which had at one time seemed mutually contradictory, mutually destructive”.<sup>i</sup> A whole new environment has been creating itself in art practice since the revolutions of the late 60’s, where an explosion of styles appear in art while at the same time endless manifestations of social emancipation took place through out the planet, but essentially in the great capitals of the western world.

The pulse of the time was clearly represented by a diversity of artists that were seeking new ways of expression to retro-nourish their new evolving audiences in the ‘postmodern global urban milieus’. That situation of course brought a number of issues to rise at the time, especially in the ways that artists were defining a new aestheticism in their representations. Lyotard reflects on artistic practice that, “The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable”. The idea of breaking rules and challenging common sense through art and writing reaches a sort of philosophical peak, distorting even further the status quo of modernist ideals and creating a sense of ambiguity, as Lyotard concludes: “A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done”.<sup>ii</sup>

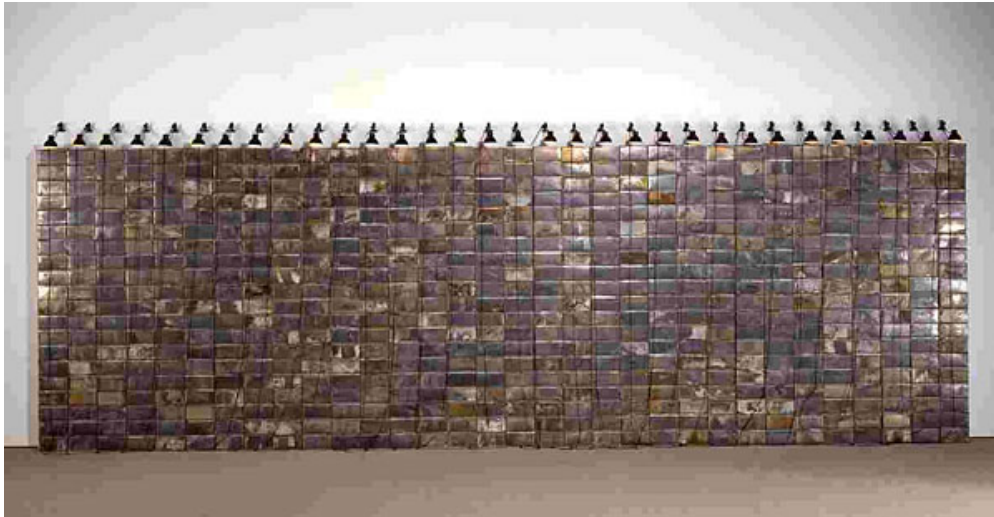
The use of the self (the self-portrait) as point of departure in the work of art around the 70’s was quite common ground for artists at the time, think of Cindy Sherman, Bruce Nauman, John Baldessari to name a few. One of the main characteristics of this artists practice including Boltanski, was to incorporate the use of photography and video in their practice, this mediums besides having the capacity to document also proposed a new channel to bring representation about. “Photography/media-based art has a more critical potential because it intervenes in mass media images and styles of representation. The mass media is seen to be an image bank full of repressive stereotypes and capitalist ideology. Strong postmodernism subverts the language of media and consumer society, and at the same time criticizes the complacency of the bourgeois art world”.<sup>iii</sup> As Boltanski moves away from Painting and starts to get into photography and collecting images in the late 60s, he also starts to tap in to two of the central concepts of his art practice, the creation of a ‘personal history’ and the staging

of the 'individual mythology. Photography at the time was still far from many artistic debates and its social and documental power was about to enter the arena of discussion in the art world.



Saynetes Comiques, 1974

Going quite intimate and tragic about himself, Boltanski was immersing his persona in a very intense representation of his individual mythologies, but in 1974 Boltanski's 'autobiographical-exploring-endeavors' took a lighter turn. Or, as he puts it in his memoirs, "he outdid himself, he surpassed himself, he took a step back and started making fun of himself. Until then, he had been trying to tell the story of Christian Boltanski the character. But then he got to a point where, in his words, "That make-believe character became too heavy, and I felt the urge to kill it (...) kill the myth (...) kill it in ridicule."<sup>iv</sup> Although that posture didn't last long, eventually Boltanski returned to those more existentialist topics that were central to his concern and that can still be felt in his later works till date. For example in *Les archives de C.B. 1965-1988* a sort of personal archeology, Boltanski exposes himself but at the same time he seals the containers, leaving its content to be seen by no one.



Les archives de C.B. 1965-1988

This practice of gathering things, sources and ideas from different mediums is another characteristic of the postmodern artist, an approach that has given these artists a complete new way of creating representations. Rather than focusing directly on producing a defined object that can be named the work of art, they have chosen to create spaces and installations where the audience has a personal experience rather than just stand in front of an object and nod or acquiesce in complacency. “He has worked with the ephemera of the human experience, from obituary photographs to rusted biscuit tins. Several of Boltanski's projects have used actual lost property from public spaces, such as railway stations, creating collections which memorialize the unknown owners in the cacophony of personal effects”.<sup>v</sup> This approach of using and reusing, to deconstruct in order to reconstruct, changing the meaning of average objects to make them become something else has also brought a sense of familiarity for the viewers in some of Boltanski's pieces. As he notes “Something like 60 per cent of my work is destroyed after every show. And if it's not destroyed, it's removed, or I'll mix one piece with another. When I make a show it's like when you arrive at home and you open your fridge at night and there's two potatoes and one sausage and two eggs, and with all that you make something to eat. I try to make something with what is in my "fridge".<sup>vi</sup> Boltanski's approach to his own art production always leaves us with a sense of being at the liminal, of gathering materials for ideas at the exhausted sites of social wastelands. We cannot stop to wonder how one man's archive can become every man's archive, and although Boltanski might be putting himself out there, we rather get the feeling that it is us out there he is displaying.

In his late installation for Monumenta 2010, “Personnes” at the Grand Palais in Paris we can't feel anything, but that great sense of being overwhelmed, not by the grand size of the mount and the display, but at the fragility of the concepts that erupt in our minds from this installation, where dead and alive stack themselves together. “Boltanski's art is filled with tragedy, humour and a sense of the absurd. It's a hoot. It

is also exceptionally cold. Monumenta usually takes place in late spring, but Boltanski delayed the opening to take advantage of lightless days and winter chill. *Personnes* is filled with intimations of the dead. To begin with, one is confronted by a long, high wall of stacked rusted boxes, each of them numbered, the contents of which are unknown”.<sup>vii</sup>



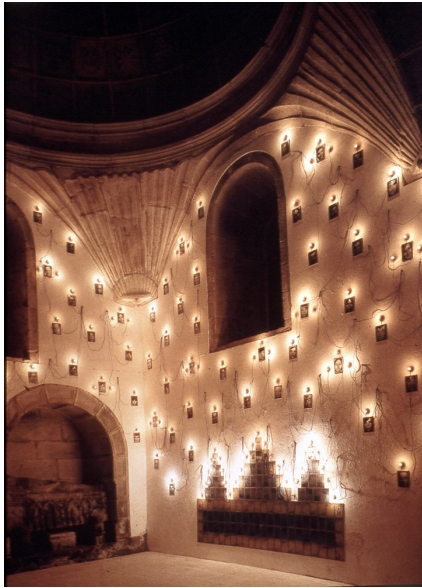
*Personnes*, 2010

In this image for example we see the displaying of clothes on the floor in front of the mountain of drapes, far in the background those metal cases. This almost macabre setting where people (spectators) dwell in order to get an artistic experience, resembles more a cemetery or a forensic site rather than an art show. As it was referred earlier in the practice of postmodern artists, a new venue opened up where art work and the spectator could actually make the work become the work by the experience that this two could engage on.

Boltanski’s earlier photographic practices and collecting activities, led him to use and seek to understand photography with a somewhat renovated approach. On this matters he adds: “You see all the photos of a normal family album. What I wanted to say is that we all have the same kind of family album. In fact, we don’t learn anything about this particular family, we learn about ourselves. When we see the little child on a beach, for example, we already know this photo. We remember our first time on the beach or the photo of our little brother. We learn images very early and thereafter we have plenty of images in our head. When we see reality we always try to match the image that we have with the reality before us. I think we don’t see reality, but we always try to recognize reality”.<sup>viii</sup> In that sense, using existing archives or creating his



own, he brought about a sense of personal accumulation for his own conceptions that bit by bit led him to create a magnification of his works.



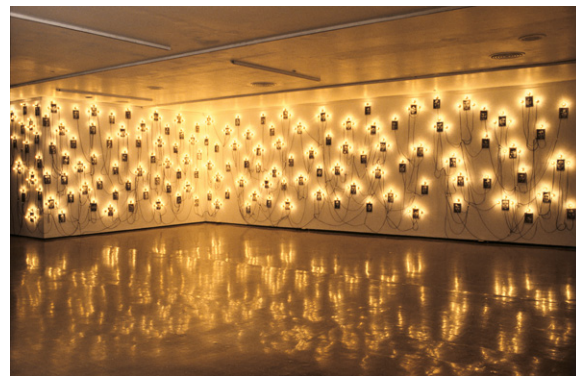
Monument to the children of Dijon



Humans



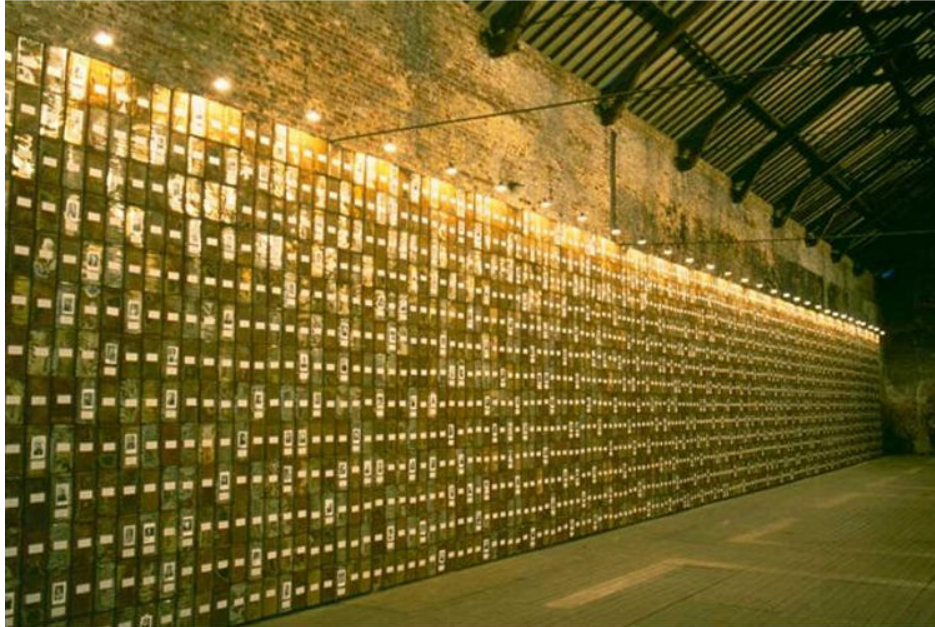
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Lessons in Darkness

In the work “The Children From Dijon”, “Lessons in Darkness” or in “Humans”, to cite a few, this very sense of what a photograph does for us, for our memory, becomes quite clear as we see how the re-contextualization of images act as a sort of hyper enhancer on our perception, making average photographs that would normally lay dormant in a forgotten archive, to transform themselves into a whole new experience for the spectator by triggering hidden aspects of the memory that can somehow relate to questions on the fragility of our mortality, our vulnerability to life and death. A clear paradox appears when we think of a photograph as retaining the celebration of a person, but at the same time only the object photograph retains that quality, as time passes death is inevitable but the photograph retains the life that once was there. This photographs that Boltanski uses, appear so banal, simple identification portraits in some cases or vacation pictures in others, but the arrangement of the images brings another quality about. "The fascinating moment for me is when the spectator hasn't

registered the art connection, and the longer I can delay this association the better."<sup>ix</sup> In the end it seems that what makes Boltanski's work so captivating is precisely what lies in that 'in between space' where nothing is said, the invisible bridge that hangs in the abyss from where there is no information to where the silence resonates within us.



Registres-Grand-Hornu

In this installation for example we clearly sense Boltanski's strategy of de-archiving and re-archiving as a pricking agent on the spectator. The situation is so overwhelmingly present that we immediately raise questions in our minds about the act of archiving in itself. Why do we continue to collect things from the dead on and on? How does the postmodern attitude confront the modernist ideal of unifying everything? Has the act of archiving as an individual practice just become a fetish or a fetishisation of the collection fetish?

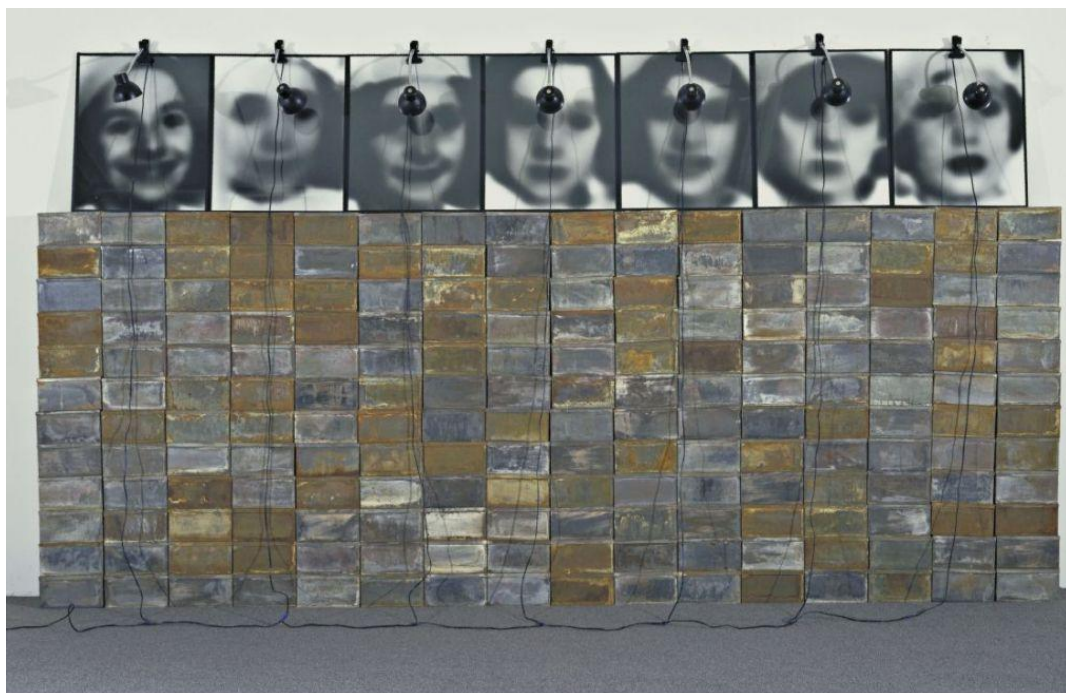


The Reserve of the Dead Swiss



This activity, the individual that engages in the act of collecting systematically, or say the very act of archiving, seems to be a reaction to a sort of existential claustrophobia that relates to death more than anything, a fear of being buried bellow layers of dirt, leaving now timeline of our passing through space and time, no footprint of ourselves in history, no physical memory; the archive is all that remains, the archive of today for the memory of tomorrow.

Photographic material tends to be the ultimate source of archival reference do to the nature of it's indexical capacity, actually it is one of the closest ways we can get to physically record a defined moment of reality, we could say with precision: 'the millisecond of a moment'. This statement has been contested in the postmodern debate on the condition of the veracity of the photographic document in contemporary life, truth, reality and ethics of the image. Boltanski and his artistic practices on the archive have emerged as a clear contestant to these matters, developing a new postmodern aestheticism. In Boltanski's installation "The Store House" which almost resembles a cemetery mausoleum or an archival cabinet, images distorted or out of focus, arranged in grids with the metal boxes, appear to be telling us a direct reference of the young girls portrayed in them. We as spectators can tell that the things and the pictures we see in front of our eyes might tell us a concrete fact, a fact that might actually can redeem us from the darkness within us that this piece might create, but actually the only fact that we come across is that we stand in front of a work of fiction.



The Store House

Although some of these aesthetical approaches have also been counter argued by critics such as Virilio in his text *Art and Fear*, that consider Boltanski's practice as a sort of applied aesthetic of disappearance for a consumer society that evades critical confrontation and seeks comfort in the concealment of evasion. Art works that rather than conflict with the issues of horror they attempt to represent and expose, use the very medium and its content as a device of concealment, continuing the lineage of contemporary art production as a product of consumption and entertainment, frivolously layered with the intentionality of a moral aura. "[...] the photofinish imposes the instantaneity of its violence on all the various 'artistic representations' and modern art, like war – BLITZKRIEG - is no more than a kind of exhibitionism that imposes its own terrorist voyeurism: that of death, live. [...] In the twinkling of an eye we have, on the one hand, the birth of the portrait in all its humility, its discretion. On the other, systematic use of the *freeze frame* as a death sentence revealing THE LOOK OF DEATH." Later he adds "Two versions of an 'art' that French artist Christian Boltanski has tried to pull off according to his own lights in order to fend off forgetting, negation: this aesthetic of disappearance that, alas, simply provides a cover for those who still, even now, reject the impiety of art."<sup>x</sup>

Boltanski's work could be read under the scrutiny of many different lights, we could love or hate it, but it could be hard to ignore it. Do to the presence and cleverness that the arrangements of its formal qualities exceed, Boltanski's work in all its simplicity stands monumentally in our minds. Although Boltanski himself refers to two main issues that are a central concern in his work, life and death, other aspects tend to dwell and recur in the orbit of his representations, bringing us as spectators, closer and closer to the fragility of our humanness.



Monument

### **Finding Answers in Boltanski, De-archiving & Re-archiving**

After researching and reflecting on Boltanski's artworks it has come to my notice that among the many characteristics of his practice, the two most intriguing aspects that relate to my own artistic concerns, have a lot to do with the simplicity of his approach, and I don't mean simple as in frivolous, but rather as in simple with cleverness. This approach I refer to, is essentially the gesture of reverting things from their natural order, in order to re-order them to create a whole new meaning, a clear Duchampian approach. Boltanski uses this action in what I call 'de-archiving & re-archiving'. Secondly, I find that Boltanski has brought a very interesting approach to the use of photography in artistic practice.

In Boltanski's works, objects serve as relentless reminders of the human experience, and sometimes suffering or mortality. This ambivalence the he plays with is precisely the essence of the works, the value of contradiction is so ever present whenever we attempt to understand or interpret his works, but I notice that the moment we just try to feel his works in a more intuitive manner, the more sense they make and the less contradictory they become. Considering Jeffrey Kastner words on Boltanski: "Is the work so seemingly guileless because of some subtle, inherent grace the artist sees in his subjects, or is it just the straight man in some dead-pan gag played out at the expense of the viewer's postmodern sensibilities? It is this sense of disorientation, this collision between what we see and what we think we should be seeing which frees Boltanski's pieces to play their sly havoc, working on and against our expectations not only of them, but of contemporary artworks in general, challenging the visual prejudices which shape our appraisals of both art and artlessness."<sup>xi</sup> Simple things like making stacks of stacks, divisions of divisions or boxes of boxes become powerful elements on the formal qualities of his work, for example how he stacks clothes in little bunches or in a big mountain, without much intervention they become a classification of something, while at the same time become something else, art perhaps. Walking through one of Boltanski's installations also gives us a physical experience, one feels almost obliged to contemplate it and immediately one adopts a meditational posture towards it, a feel.

It seems to me that we have been archiving quite a lot of things for the past centuries, and that at some point we also need to un-dust the coffins of our memories to unveil mysteries or questions about our own selves. I find that in art practice especially using the archive as source can open new venues to creation, we can freely create a sort Dr. Frankenstein intervention on the dead corpses of the archive and bring about new life, even if it is in a distorted manner, we can bring back life to those long gone dead, that were once alive. In essence the simple act of de-archiving and re-archiving to change meaning and context as an applied strategy, can bring new questions and meanings about.

## NOTES

<sup>i</sup> Christopher Finch, "Image as Language: Aspects of British Art 1950-1968". Pg. 13, Penguin Books, 1969.

<sup>ii</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, "The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge". Pg. 81. Manchester Univesity Press, 1986.

<sup>iii</sup> Glenn Ward, "Postmodernism, Teach Yourself". Pg. 51, Hodder Headline, UK, 2003.

<sup>iv</sup> Interview with Delphine Renard published in the catalogue from the exhibition at Centre Pompidou, 1984, Musee National d'art Moderne, Paris.

<sup>v</sup> A Biography by TATE, <http://www.tate.org.uk/magazine/issue2/boltanski.htm>

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> Adrian Searle, "Christian Boltanski: It's a jumble out there". The Guardian, UK, 13 January 2010. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2010/jan/13/christain-boltanski-grand-palais-paris>

<sup>viii</sup> Interview by Irene Borger, "Chrisitian Boltanski", Bombsite Magazine, Winter 1989, New Art Publications, USA. <http://bombsite.com/issues/26/articles/1148>

<sup>ix</sup> As quoted by Arthur Danto, "Christian Boltanski," *The Nation*, February 13, 1989 (reproduced in Arthor Danto, *Encounters & Reflections: Art in the Historical Present*, University of California Press, 1997: p. 263).

<sup>x</sup> Virilio, "Art And Fear". Pgs. 23-24, Continuum Books, UK, 2006.

<sup>xi</sup> Jeffrey Kastner, Chrisitan Boltanski at Lisson Gallery, London UK. Frieze Magazine, Issue 8, February 1993. [http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/christian\\_boltanski/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/christian_boltanski/)