

MUSÉE CANTONAL DES BEAUX-ARTS LAUSANNE

Press release

Relics and monuments.
Works by Christian Boltanski
2.7. – 26.9.2021

Espace Focus
Free admission

In 1993, the Musée cantonal des Beaux- Arts, Lausanne mounted a show featuring the work of Christian Boltanski (*1944, Paris) titled *Les Suisses morts* (The Dead Swiss), after which the museum acquired several of the French artist's works. Since then donations and long-term loans have been added to the original group of pieces. This has given rise to a fine selection of works by the artist from the years 1985 to 1996, the central theme of which is the worship of "the dead, the living and the dead to come". They richly justify this special display in our Espace Focus gallery. The present show also includes Boltanski's artist's books, which play an important role in his body of work alongside the large installations, to which they are linked in part.

Starting in 1984, after the death of his father, the artist created his first *Monuments*. He reappropriates the traditional models both of which have religious roots. But, unlike the classic monument (pyramid, mastaba, altar, funerary stele, etc.) celebrating a pharaoh, a king, or a poet, or the reliquary, which contains the remains of a particular saint, Boltanski's monuments are dedicated to anonymous individuals, often children, and so are imbued with a strong force that leads viewers to identify with them. That force is heightened by the process of enlarging photographs, which blurs and furs the outlines of portraits and thus de-singularizes them, reminding us of the dead child in all of us and the great tragedies that have tested humanity, although without referring explicitly to any one of them.

Exhibition display and layout as practiced by Boltanski in his *Monuments* and *Reliquaires* also share this will to the universal by striving to escape the context of contemporary art and its iconic exhibition space, the white cube. The artist of course uses that space, but he also tries to negate it through focusing the light on the works themselves, integrating stage effects by suggesting the lighting of certain churches, synagogues, crypts, and memorials – lighting effects that are liable to encourage silence, concentration, and commemoration.

The lighting creates a theatricalization of the "human condition" that engages viewers. The act of seeing must be performed to lend existence to the drama. That drama only becomes visible through a lighting effect and our own will to pierce the shadows. When the light is extinguished, all sinks back into oblivion once again. Since his *Monuments* in the mid-1980s, Boltanski, who has been involved in projects for the stage and created productions for shadow theater, has systematically made the tension between concealing and revealing, memory and forgetting, an integral part of his work. He has fully embraced the monument as a force in and focus of his art.

In Boltanski's body of work, the artist's book is of primordial importance, not only because of the large number of publications he has indeed produced, but also for their conceptual relevance with respect to the rest of his artmaking. Indeed, the artist's book as he practices the form is above all an archival product the artist creates in order to gather data (that is, traces of an ancient or recent past), classify

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these facts, and finally make them public. Archives conserve documents indiscriminately while monuments point up heroic deeds; archives are spread out (over a table when you want to study them, behind glass in a display case when you want to show them), while monuments are raised, built up, erected; horizontality and verticality. Archives and monuments complement each other.

The traditional container for an archive is a case or box. Boltanski has used them on a number of occasions. For his books, Boltanski favors a classic cover “in the old style,” a plain simple graphic design suggesting works published by Gallimard and the Nouvelle Revue Française with centered title, simple border line, print in black and/or red on gray, beige, or brown cardboard. This “normality” lends them a timeless aspect that goes hand in hand with the universal aspirations of the *Monuments* and *Reliquaires*.

Exhibition curator: Bernard Fibicher, director

Publication:

Bernard Fibicher (ed.), *Reliques et monuments. Œuvres de Christian Boltanski*,
with texts by Bernard Fibicher (FR), 48 pages, 30 ill.,

Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne, 2021 (Espace Focus no. 4)

Price: CHF 8.–

Available at the MCBA Book and Giftshop

Event:

Guided tour

Tuesday 24 August 2021, 12 : 30 pm

with Bernard Fibicher, the exhibition curator

Details:

mcba.ch/expositions

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Lausanne, June 29, 2021