TWELVE OBSERVATIONS ON CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI'S SHADOWS AND MONUMENTS

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1.

Christian Boltanski's (born in 1944) most recent works consist of two series of pieces: SHADOWS (since 1984) and MONUMENTS (since 1985).

2.

For instance in 1985 at the Biennale de Paris, Christian Boltanski designed a closed, dark space for himself inside the Grande Halle de la Villette. While most of the participating artists looked for the most conspicuous locations with the best lighting, Christian Boltanski chose a small, dim spot which guards its secrets. He made himself a cave with small, airy shapes suspended (inside it), set in motion by a fan and illuminated by a few modest spotlights... No, it is not possible to touch these little shapes, to approach them, to enter the cave. Here the viewers are excluded from the scene. They are voyeurs watching the shadow play through something like windows. This corresponds to Christian Boltanski's desire for a «cooling-off» distance. The little objects, jumping jacks of sorts lit up by spotlights, are like the artist's playthings, his «fetishes.» He may speak of them with humor but he will not allow others to touch them, for they are too close to him, they are too much an intimate part of himself. He has to protect his «fetishes.» Even though they are the visible source of the shadows, they must impress the public as being less important than the shadows. Drawing attention more to the shadow than to its victim is the artist's strategy, his way (he would tell us) of «cooling off» the show, of detaching it from the warm intimacy of its creator, of playing down the «em-

barrassingly» personal character of these little jumping jacks. The fan, the spotlights, the little figurines tend to efface themselves for the benefit of the huge, animated shadows, either distinct or blurred (depending on where they fall). The sources of the shadows tend to be self-effacing but they also remain visible.

3.

Of course, had he wanted to, Christian Boltanski could have easily concealed the minute and almost mocking mechanism used to produce the shadows. But he had no desire to. He wanted to show how the illusion is created. He conjures up the magic of shadow plays only to undermine it again immediately by unveiling the mechanics of the illusion. For him (as for Spoerri) art is a certain magie à la noix, both powerful and mocking, unnerving and slightly ludicrous. Moreover, the mechanics are placed in the center of the «cave» while the enchanted projections are located on the periphery.

4.

Exposing the mechanics: this is one of Christian Boltanski's frequent (but not constant) concerns. It is also an aspect of the MONUMENTS series, in which photographs are illuminated by unconcealed lightbulbs attached to the wall by exposed electric wires whose messey tangles contrast with the geometric arrangement of the photographs themselves.

5.

In Christian Boltanski's shadow plays, the figurines are made of corrugated cardboard and bits and pieces found near the door to his home. Junk that could be found anywhere, at a construction site, for instance: ends of wire, broken screens, string, old corks, fragments of plastic, bark, and nails. Christian Boltanski does not buy any of the material that goes into the making of his little fetishes; nor does he look for it. He takes what he finds, he does not even make a selection, he simply trusts to chance, playing with his discoveries like a little child, like some makers of art brut. With his found materials, he creates silhouettes of skeletons, hands, devil's heads, human shapes.

6.

These shadow plays thrive on contrast: the small (figurines) and the immense (projected shadows), magic and mockery, light and darkness, the evocation of children's play and the terrifying invocation of shades from the netherworld. They border on naiveté and simultaneously recall famous texts: Plato's parable of the cave in the REPUBLIC, certain tales by E.T.A. Hoffmann, or THE WONDERFUL STORY OF PETER SCHLEMIHL (1824) about a man who lost his shadow, as told by Chamisso.

7.

These shadow plays which focus on silhouettes also call to mind one of the myths about the origin of painting. The tale goes that the daughter of the Corinthian Butades drew the outline of her lover's shadow on a wall as he was marching off to war. Thus painting may have been born of shadows and love.

8.

Christian Boltanski's MONUMENTS, too, are mocking and disturbing. They are a celebration and a parody of the act of celebrating. They are paper monuments lit by an improvised system of lighting. They evoke the family photos of old people, the ex-votos displayed in churches, the ornate tiles in mosques, the structures of Minimalist art, the symmetries cherished by makers of art brut (the Augustinian brother Lesage, for instance), Christmas tree lights, and much, much more. Thus they hark back to a culture in shambles, made of odds and ends: junk culture with its predilection for mixtures and impurities.

9.

These monuments always include photographs of children. They form the memory of suppressed childhood, memory mixed with oblivion. Some of these pictures are «pulled» out of one of Christian Boltanski's own class pictures, but Christian Boltanski doesn't remember the little girl on whom he had a crush, doesn't remember which ones

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were his friends and which ones his enemies. Death is present here. Here the past proves to be utterly irretrievable.

10.

Christian Boltanski often suggests parodies. For an exhibition in June, 1986, the catalogue (on Bible paper) will be made up somewhat like the parody of a prayer book. But this parody rules out neither the sacred nor the tragic. Instead it gives them an ambiguous and complex status. It makes them funny and at the same time unsettling...

11.

In both recent and older works (for example, L'ALBUM DE LA FAMILLE D., 1972; INVENTAIRES, since 1973), there are aspects that evoke the memorials to deportees. For a long time, Christian Boltanski did not dare to admit this; he wanted nothing to do with it. He now believes that much of his work is based on the horror of the concentration camps and the determination to protect himself against this horror. His INVENTAIRES (INVENTORIES) evoke the stockpiles accumulated by the Nazis of their victims' belongings, as shown in Alain Resnais' film, NUIT ET BROUILLARD (1956)...

12.

Although the adults are alive, their childhood is dead. Christian Boltanski's MONUMENTS relate to what is expressed by Gustav Mahler's title, KINDERTOTENLIEDER. But the tragedy is always veiled. The artist hides his embarrassment by smiling and poking a little fun at himself.

(Translation: Catherine Schelbert)



CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI, MONUMENTS,
INSTALLATION LE CONSORTIUM DIJON, 1983.