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Christian Boltanski, Whose Art Installations Dazzled, Dies at 76

In often sprawling works that used old photos, discarded clothes and other found objects, he pondered loss, chance and memory.

by Neil Genzlinger (July 15, 2021)

Christian Boltanski in 2010. His works were at times informed by the Holocaust, but he often viewed them with optimism and humor. Credit: Béatrice de Géa for The New York Times

Christian Boltanski, an internationally acclaimed artist whose striking installations dealt with themes of memory and forgotten lives, chance and fate, death and the passage of time, died on Wednesday at a hospital in Paris. He was 76 and lived just outside the city, in Malakoff.

The Marian Goodman Gallery, which represented him, announced his death. No cause was given.

Mr. Boltanski once filled the cavernous Wade Thompson Drill Hall of the Park Avenue Armory in Manhattan with 30 tons of discarded clothing, a work about loss and remembrance that he called “No Man’s Land.” An exhibition he created at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville in Paris in 1998 included thousands of objects he had gotten from the lost and found at Grand Central Terminal in New York. Another exhibition consisted of photographs he had appropriated from obituaries in a Swiss newspaper. He created a permanent installation at a museum in Bologna, Italy, devoted to a controversial airplane disaster, with the wreckage of the plane as its centerpiece. Since 2008 he had recorded the heartbeats of people all over the world for what he called “Les Archives du Coeur.”

Those and his many other works were rich in visual and aural impact and open-ended in their invitation to the viewer to contemplate the past, what has been lost and what endures.

Mr. Boltanski's "No Man's Land" being installed at the Park Avenue Armory in 2010. The project used 30 tons of used clothing and 3,000 stacked cookie tins. Credit: Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris; Béatrice de Géa for The New York Times

"What interests him is not so much particular people — whether it be children he knew, people he encountered in photographs or images of himself — but rather the mechanics of memory," Michael Brenson wrote in The New York Times in 1988, reviewing a Boltanski exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. "His works are both meticulously ordered and claustrophobic. His recent installations sweep us in, sometimes entertain, then ask us to step back and consider images and feelings that seem too full, too immediate, to consider."

Mr. Boltanski's works, with their suggestions of countless vanished lives, were often said to evoke the Holocaust, and he had a personal connection to it. Yet he said his pieces were never directly about the Holocaust, but rather were informed by it. And, he said, although he was often seen as being preoccupied with death, he saw optimism and even humor in some of his works.

"When I do a large piece with used clothes, some people talk about it in relation to the Holocaust and say how sad the piece is," he said for a 1997 monograph. "But children find it fun. It makes them happy, because they can try on all the clothes."

One of Mr. Boltanski's odder projects was "The Life of C.B.," a work not by him but featuring him. In 2009 he struck an unusual arrangement with a collector named David Walsh: Mr. Walsh agreed to pay Mr. Boltanski for the right to livestream his studio perpetually until one of them died. The stream was still running at Mr. Walsh's Museum of Old and New Art in Tasmania, Australia, at Mr. Boltanski's death.

In an interview with The Brooklyn Rail last year, Mr. Boltanski said he had long since grown accustomed to Mr. Walsh's cameras.

"At the beginning I would try to say hello, and sometimes I would arrive naked," he said. "Now I totally forgot about the cameras. What is funny is that when you look at someone's life you can't have your own. For this reason he hired someone, and this poor guy's job is to stay in front of the screens and look at me."

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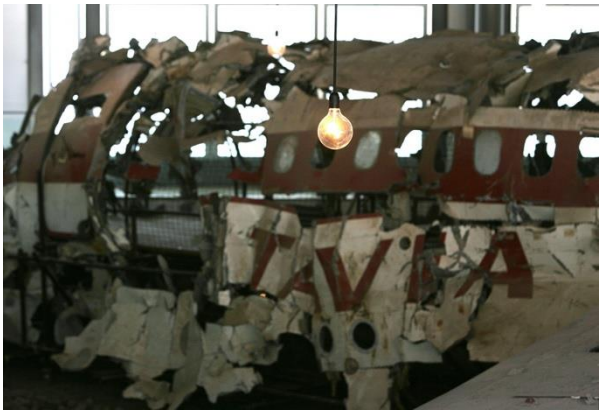
Credit: Rémi Chauvin/MONA Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia

In a 2017 interview with The Times, Mr. Boltanski mused on his own passing.

"I hope that when I shall be dead, somebody that I don't know in Australia is going to be sad for two minutes," he said. "It would be something marvelous because it means you've touched people you've never seen, and that is something incredible."

Christian Liberté Boltanski was born on Sept. 6, 1944, in Paris. (The city had been liberated from Nazi occupation weeks before — the inspiration, he said, for his middle name.) His father, Étienne, was a doctor, and his mother, Marie-Elise Ilari-Guérin Boltanski, was a writer.

His mother was Roman Catholic, and his father was descended from Ukrainian Jews. When World War II came, he said, his parents, living in occupied Paris, faked an argument to create the appearance that his father had left the family, when in fact he was hiding under the floorboards; on one of his father's rare ventures out of his hiding place, Christian was conceived. The wartime and Holocaust stories that his parents and their friends told after the war were formative for him, he said.



One of the 81 lightbulbs symbolizing the victims of an airplane disaster in Italy near the carcass of a DC-9 airplane, part of an installation at the Museum for the Memory of Ustica in Bologna. The plane went down near the island of Ustica, off Sicily, in 1980. Credit: Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris; Marco Bucco, via Reuters

“At the beginning of the life of an artist,” he told The Times in 1988, “there is often a trauma, and for me the trauma was hearing always that everything was very dangerous.”

He started painting and drawing as a young teenager, and often credited an older brother with being the first to tell him he could be an artist. He was self-taught, having dropped out of school at 12, and, he acknowledged, it took him some time to find his way.

“I made many canvases that are now luckily destroyed; they were very close to outsider art,” he told the art magazine Apollo in 2018. “And then I met people, I grew up, I made strange films, and bit by bit I entered into an artistic system.”

By the 1970s he was making conceptual works, often using found objects, old photographs acquired at flea markets or culled from newspapers, and similar detritus.

“I’ve used a lot of biscuit tins in my work,” he said, “and at the beginning they were more personal somehow because I peed on them to make them rust. But I was using so many boxes that I couldn’t do this anymore, so I started using Coca-Cola to rust them.”

“Odessa’s Ghosts,” at an architecture museum in Moscow, part of the first Moscow Biennale, which took place in 2005.
Credit: Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris; James Hill for The New York Times

A pile of discarded clothes in 1995 was his contribution to a group exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery in London called “Take Me I’m Yours” — visitors were invited to help themselves to the clothing.

“There are two things that are forbidden in a museum normally — to touch and to steal — and here you can both touch and steal as much as you want,” he told the art website americansuburbx.com 20 years later, when he revisited the idea for an exhibition at La Monnaie in Paris. “The deeper aspect is the question of the meaning of the relic.”

Also in 1995, Mr. Boltanski created an installation in New York that stretched the length of Manhattan, requiring visitors to stop at several locations where he had placed displays.

“A visit to Christian Boltanski’s ‘Lost: New York Projects’ requires a handful of subway tokens and an hour or two of travel,” Holland Cotter wrote in reviewing the work in The Times, “from a church at the top of Manhattan to a synagogue at the bottom, with stops at a museum and a train station in between. The tour is well worth making, less for Mr. Boltanski’s Minimalist installations at each site — a pile of old clothes here, a taped voice there — than for the way his work calls attention to and subtly poeticizes some of the city’s most richly atmospheric spaces.”

Mr. Boltanski at the New-York Historical Society with part of his 1995 conceptual work, “Lost: New York Projects.”
Credit: Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP; Chester Higgins Jr., via The New York Times

Mr. Boltanski is survived by his wife, the artist Annette Messager, and two brothers, Luc and Jean-Elie.

In 2017 Mr. Boltanski created an installation in a remote part of Patagonia, in South America, that included some large horns; when the wind blew through them, they would create the sound of whale calls.

“Maybe in a hundred years my name will be forgotten,” he told Wallpaper magazine in 2018, “but someone will say, ‘There was a man who came here and talked to whales.’”