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Photographs and Souvenirs Preserving the Past

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But consider what value, what meaning is enclosed even in the smallest of our daily habits, in the hundred possessions which even the poorest beggar owns: a handkerchief, an old letter, the photo of a cherished person. These things are part of us, almost like limbs of our body; nor is it conceivable that we can be deprived of them in our world, for we immediately find others to substitute the old ones, other objects which are ours in their personification and evocation of our memories

(Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man*, Italy 1958)

In examining the need to record and document the past the following points will be explored.

- * Photography, as a means of recording memory and family history.
- * Links between the treasured personal possession, photography and memory.
- * Museums and their role as colossal memory banks.
- * Relics and the western world; a fixation with preservation.
- * Christian Boltanski and his use of photography and the object.
- * Shimon Attie and his use of photographic projections.
- * Boltanski and Attie's links to and rejection of holocaust art.

The age of mechanical reproduction begins with photography. Its discovery stands as one of the most important and significant events of the industrial revolution.

George Eastman invented Kodak in 1888. "You push the button, we'll do the rest!" became the slogan that persuaded many ordinary families to buy a camera. Thus photography became the family's means of documenting memories and recording their stories in the form of the family album.

Memory pervades life; we devote much of the present to getting or keeping in touch with some aspects of the past. Few waking hours are devoid of recall or recollection. Only intense concentration on some immediate pursuit can prevent the past from coming to mind. Mementos are cherished, recollections purposefully salvaged from the mass of things recalled. This hierarchy resembles relics; everything familiar has some recollection with the past and can be used to evoke recollection: "Like a collection of antiquities, our store of precious memories is a continual flux, new keepsakes all the time being added, old ones discarded."¹

Memory enables us to remember telephone numbers, people's names and faces, to memorize poems and song lyrics, how to carry out every day functions as well as to remember a collection of events from the past. There have been a lot of psychological studies carried out on memory. Since it is not something physical which can be removed and dissected in order to be examined and, since each person's memory and capacity to remember is different, this seems a difficult task. However psychologists continue to carry out tests and experiments on the memory and they have divided it into various categories such as everyday memory, memory for scenes and events and autobiographical memory. Memory can be personal and collective, but most of what we remember is highly individual "Nothing is so uniquely personal to a man as his memories... and in guarding their privacy we seem to be protecting the very basis of our personality."² But memory by its nature cannot be

shared fully. Our memories are uniquely our own, to tell someone about a memory is not the same as their having that memory. "Though we speak of sharing our memories with others we could no more share a memory than we could a pain "³

Even a collective memory of a certain event in the past, that is shared with others, is remembered by each individual differently. Memory converts the public event into a personal experience. Since each individual stores a collection of uniquely personal memories, these expire at the time of death. Among the Swahili, those who have died but are still remembered by those who are living are known as the 'Living Dead'. Their complete death occurs when there is no one left to remember them.

Memories make their mark on the unconscious, functioning as indexing signs, in that through the marks they make they become comprehensible. Photographs are also indexing signs; marks left by light on film and paper. The relationship of photographic images to memory is framed in terms of the fact that a photograph shows 'what once was'. Additionally, it is this relationship between photographs, as indices of the visual, and memories as indices of events -both marking the unconscious- which makes photographic media particularly well suited for dealing with history and memory.

All the qualities of the old images -their black and whiteness, their graininess, and their existing only through the light being emitted from some seemingly unidentifiable source -mirror the nature of memory itself.⁴

Photographs have been described as evidence. Not that they should be taken only at face value. Annette Kuhn hints at the need for a narrative by saying:

A photograph can be material for interpretation -evidence in that sense: to be solved, like a riddle, read and decoded, like clues left behind at the scene of a crime...Family photos are supposed to show not so much that we were once there, as how we once were: to evoke memories that might have little to do

with what is in the picture. The photograph is a prompt, a pretext: It sets the scene for recollection.⁵



fig.1

This photograph was taken of my grandfather (fig.1), who died when I was five years old. I have little memory of him, and when I try to remember I have only two images of him. One is an image of him watching horse racing and the 'Sunday Game' and the other is of him working outside as he is in this photo. One side of this picture is over-exposed and fades to white on that side. This mirrors the kind of memory that I have of him, an image like a movie still. I'm not convinced that this memory is real, but rather a recollection of having seen the photograph. The memory I have of him indoors is more real. I remember him sitting on his own particular chair in one corner of the room, and in order to see the television he had to sit forward slightly to see around the open door. This image is also accompanied by sound; the sound of the horse racing that he is watching. There is also a smell and atmosphere recalled. Recalling this image leads to other memories, as though one window of memory opens another; and that in turn opens others.

An intimate relationship exists between images and memory and the



relationship between photographs and memory is even more intimate. "Photography's relation to loss and death brings the past back in the form of a ghostly revenant, emphasizing its irreversible pastness and irretrievability. "⁶

Photographs also provide some illusion of continuity over time and space. They provide details, connecting lives and stories across continents and generations.

We can examine old family photographs in much the same way that we examine museum pieces. They both provide evidence of our ancestors' existence as well as giving us insight into their lives and providing us with a mental image to go along with what facts we already know. Family photographs are often chronicled in series; pictures get displayed one after another, their selection and ordering as meaningful as the pictures themselves. Museum artifacts are usually displayed in this way.

The family photo album documents a person's life, the life of their family, and the lives of people who came before them. It also documents important dates in these lives - births, weddings, christenings, holidays. All these events act as milestones in a person's life and are documented by photography for that reason. By the process of using, producing, selecting, ordering and displaying photographs, the family is in the process of making itself.

Photography has also been accused of acting as a counter memory. Roland Barthes wrote in his book *Camera Lucida*⁷ that, "not only is the photograph never in essence a memory...but it actually blocks memory, quickly becoming a counter memory." Marguerite Duras claims that "Photographs promote forgetting...It's a confirmation of death." This would suggest that, because we have these reminders, we could feel it is acceptable to forget. Perhaps it is more the fear of forgetting that makes photography so precious, and in doing ones utmost to preserve the memory (with photographs as a means of recording) we feel more comfortable with being able to forget. If this were

the case then it would confirm photography's role as a counter memory, and would suggest that in order to forget, we must first remember. Susan Sontag, in her book, *The Way We Live Now*, wrote

The difference between a story and a painting or photograph is that in a story you can write, He's still alive. But in a painting or a photo you can just show him being alive.⁸

So a photograph can also be evidence of life. It holds evidence that we were once there, as well as evidence of events in the past that only rely on memory as a means of recording. Christian Boltanski, a French artist who uses old photographs and found objects in his work, takes the pessimistic view of photography's capabilities to signify loss and death. He is making the point that, the past is the past and therefore dead. Whereas Shimon Attie, an American artist who projects old photographic images onto the original site, is concerned with bringing the past into the present and giving it a new lease of life. - If not a very fleeting one. But Attie's projections *do* mourn the loss of life that was once there and the decay or disappearance of the buildings and inhabitants of those streets intensifies this. The context in which we view a photograph influences our mood and the way we view it.

There is certainly a simultaneous presence of life and death in photographs. For example, Marianne Hirsch wrote about a photograph of her husband's aunt - a survivor of the Holocaust. Her husband vividly remembered the arrival of this photograph in 1945:

This photo arrived in a letter announcing Frieda's survival and detailing the death of the rest of her family. I can picture the family sitting around the kitchen table in La Paz, reading Frieda's letter, crying and studying the picture, which had crossed the ocean as proof of life and continuity.⁹

This same photograph had been sent to other relatives, scattered around the world. Not needing a narrative, this photograph is clearly saying 'I have

survived' - 'I am here'. As there is nothing in the photograph to indicate the holocaust, it has meaning only for those who know its background. The photograph acts as a relic, and has a

Connection with the material presence of the photographed person - that at once intensifies its status as harbinger of death and, at the same time and concomitantly, its capacity to signify life.¹⁰

People often store items or belongings almost as sacred objects. These objects have special significance and are souvenirs of a time in the past, or have special association with a person or experience with which there is an affectionate bond. The importance of these everyday personal belongings is evident in the many museums holding everyday items from the past or houses that have been kept in or restored to their original state as taxidermised slices of life. It might be the owners of the items that are of special interest to visitors, or maybe it is the objects themselves that are of interest; even everyday household objects that our parents or grandparents may have possessed, used or worn at one time.

There is a tenement house in Glasgow (fig.2). Built in 1892, it was inhabited by a certain Agnes Toward. She was a single woman who had lived there with her mother from 1911 to 1939, when her mother died, leaving Agnes alone until her own death in 1975. Agnes had been in hospital for ten years before she died and had not been back to her house since her departure for hospital in 1965. All her possessions were as she left them. The house, now open to the public, draws a huge crowd each year. Perhaps people have an interest in the belongings for nostalgic reasons, or maybe they are interested in the story of a woman called Agnes Toward whose life story is laid out in front of them - except it is a story told through possessions instead of words.



fig.2

It seems Miss Toward never threw anything out. Her house was described as though the ashes of Pompeii had been spread over all the mundane objects. Empty aspirin bottles, used bus and train tickets, old shoes, theatre programs, wireless licenses, sheet music, tickets for exhibitions, membership cards, not to mention her clothes, furniture, books, accounts, letters, kitchen utensils, in fact, everything she ever owned all in that house at 145 Buccleuch St., Garnet Hill, Glasgow. Like photographs, these possessions are 'material for interpretation; evidence in that sense: to be solved like a riddle, read and decoded like clues left behind at the scene of a crime.' They also show, more than photographs, that we were once there and, less, how we once were. These possessions also 'evoke memories' that may have little to do with an object itself. The object in this case is 'a prompt, a pretext: it sets the scene for recollection.'

It is when these objects are taken out of context, away from what they were made to do and placed in the unnatural environment of a museum, that they are then looked at and somehow revered as sacred. Because museums tend to commodify their exhibits, these objects become precious. Within that context, they become involved with the creation of a relic.

In Washington D.C. the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American Art enshrines George Washington's false teeth, trimmings from Abraham Lincoln's hearse, and a Swiss collection of Sherlock Holmes memorabilia; including a bottle of 'genuine London fog', certified by a lost passer by. In many museums, world famous relics can scarcely be seen for the hoards of visitors. One critic wrote, "I've heard the *Mona Lisa* is quite a painting, but in all the times I've been to the Louvre, I've never seen it. I have seen the glass box it's housed in, and once I almost caught a glimpse, but I was pushed to the benches."¹¹

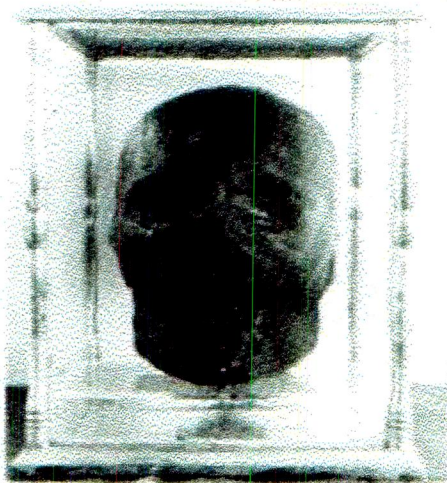


fig.3 St. Oliver Plunket's head,
St. Peter's Church Drogheda

It would seem from this account that the preservation of the painting has become more important than allowing the public certain access to this National Treasure. It would also seem true that this rather inaccessible art is the kind that draws a crowd, perhaps because of its celebrity status, more than its merit as a work of art.

In an interview with Tamar Garb Christian Boltanski was quoted as having said

In the middle ages the town cathedral would keep the relics of its saints - rather like a museum, today housing works of art.

People would do pilgrimages to the cathedral and the town would earn its wealth from that. The new princes don't build cathedrals anymore; they build museums. Museums have today become the new churches¹²

Western Christian culture is all about the worship of sacred objects or relics. It does not seem so important for Africans to preserve a 16th century mask, but what *is* important is that there is somebody who still has the skill to make it. Other traditions place emphasis on knowing the idea or story behind the object rather than the object itself. For example, the Zen temples in Japan must be rebuilt every ten years because they are so fragile. If it were not for the idea behind the temples being so important, they would never be rebuilt.

At the origins of Christian art in early medieval times, the object was thought to be the means by which to tell a story. Now the story seems to have gone and the object has become a thing in itself. Memory, nostalgia and preservation of memory are topics that are explored by artists all over the world. Christian Boltanski deals with the notion of preserving oneself, by recording and documenting his own memories and experiences through his work, and ensuring a kind of immortality

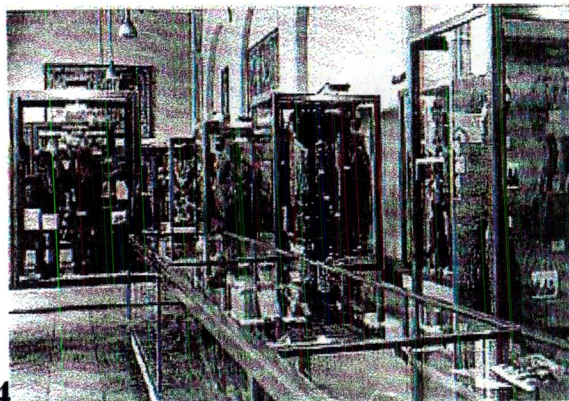


fig.4



In his work, Christian Boltanski talks about the Musée de l'Homme in Paris(fig.4), which contains huge glass cabinets displaying dead cultures. He describes each cabinet as like a large tomb. Then he goes on to say:

I think what I was trying to do in my work was to take strange objects -objects that we know have been useful for something, although we don't know exactly for what, and show their strangeness -it has something to do with individual mythology. The objects I display come from my own mythology; most of these things are now dead and impossible to understand. They might be insignificant things, but people looking at them can imagine that they were once useful for something.¹³

In most of Christian Boltanski's work it is the idea that is of importance. The objects are often discarded or distributed after an exhibition, but the show can still be done again. The objects are used as a means to relay the message. The message lives on in the minds and memories of the spectators, and because images are less precise than words each interpretation will be different.

Death, memory and childhood are recurring themes in Boltanski's installations. He believes that our childhood is not an idealised passage into adulthood, but instead is the first part of us to die. This is portrayed by his use of photography, which seizes a moment in life and is its death. A preoccupation with death is evident in a lot of his work.



fig.5

On the cover of Boltanski's first book, *Recherche et Présentation de tout ce qui reste de mon enfance, 1944-1950*, made in May 1969 is a photograph of himself, aged seven, alongside seventeen classmates(fig.5). It is a formal photograph: he is positioned in the back row. About this photograph he observed:

Of all the children among whom I found myself, one of whom was probably the girl I loved, I don't remember any of their names, I don't remember anything more than the faces on the photograph. It could be said that they disappeared from my memory, that this period of time was dead. Because now these children must be adults, about whom I know nothing. This is why I felt the need to pay homage to these 'dead,' who in this image all look more or less the same, like cadavers.¹⁴

Here, Boltanski is capitalising on photography's close ties to memory and death by commenting on the irony that photographs, which are meant to preserve what they record, also perish; that they are only made of paper.

In 1971 Boltanski completed a piece of work titled *Album de Photos de la Famille D 1939-1964*(fig.6). For this work he had borrowed several boxes of family photos from a friend, identified in the work as Michel D (later revealed to be a Paris gallery owner Michel Durant.) Boltanski attempted to arrange the photographs chronologically in an attempt to reconstruct the family's history. He assigned identities to the people in the photographs. For example, an older man who only appeared on special occasions he called 'an uncle who did not live nearby.'¹⁵

In a statement about his work he wrote,

I wanted - I who knew nothing at all about these people - to try and reconstruct their life on the basis of these pictures which, having been taken at all the important moments, would remain after their death, as the evidence of their existence.¹⁶



fig.6

Despite his effort, Boltanski did not learn much about the family; also the chronology he devised was incorrect. About this he says,

I realised that these images were only witness to a collective ritual. They did not teach us anything about the 'Family D...but only sent us back to our own past.'¹⁷

This work may be more effective for people who share a similar cultural background. Certain images may trigger collective memories. Boltanski may be demonstrating that what photography conveys is not reality but instead, a set of cultural codes. The *Album de la Famille D* teaches us nothing about the lives of that family, but addresses itself to the area of family mythology. The family photographer does not attempt to capture reality, but attempts to reproduce a preexisting and culturally imposed image. The images are of happy smiling children and close family gatherings. The family photograph conveys an ideal rather than real family life. These photographs reinforce the power of the notion of 'family'. They possess the power to select and include, but also to exclude.

It doesn't seem, however, that Boltanski is too concerned with portraying childhood or triggering collective memories, but rather with using



photography's connection with death to dramatise the perception that the adults and children in the photographs no longer exist.

In 1972 Christian Boltanski exhibited a piece of work named *Les 62 Membres du Club Mickey*(fig.7) (The 62 members of the Mickey Mouse Club in 1955). It consisted of black and white prints displayed in tin frames. Boltanski had taken the images from a children's magazine. About this piece he wrote,

fig.7



I was eleven years old in 1955 and I resembled these sixty-two children, whose photos were pictured in that years Mickey Mouse Club magazine. They had each sent in the picture that had in their opinion, represented them best: smiling and well groomed or with their favourite toy or animal. They had the same desires and the same interests that I did. Today they must all be about my age, but I can't learn what has become of them. The picture that remains of them does not correspond anymore with reality, and all these children's faces have disappeared¹⁸

This ability to view photographs and recognise ourselves in them is also demonstrated in a piece of work entitled *Images d'une année de faits divers*. (Images from a year of news items) which was made between 1972 and 1973. It consists of 408 images of criminals and their victims from a weekly tabloid named *Déetective*(fig.8). The images were glued onto grey paper and tacked to the wall. The impact caused by the sheer number alone must surely have been overwhelming. The magazine *Déetective* illustrates its stories like most tabloids, with family snapshots, presumably the last photograph taken of the victim or



fig.8

the photograph taken of the offender before it 'all went wrong'. What attracted Boltanski to these images was the fact that, when you remove the captions and the text, it becomes impossible to distinguish the victim from the offender. In the same way, the photograph of *Famille D* could have been taken by families such as our own. Boltanski seems to imply that the murderers or the victims in *Détective* could just as easily have been a friend, relative or, for that matter, ourselves.

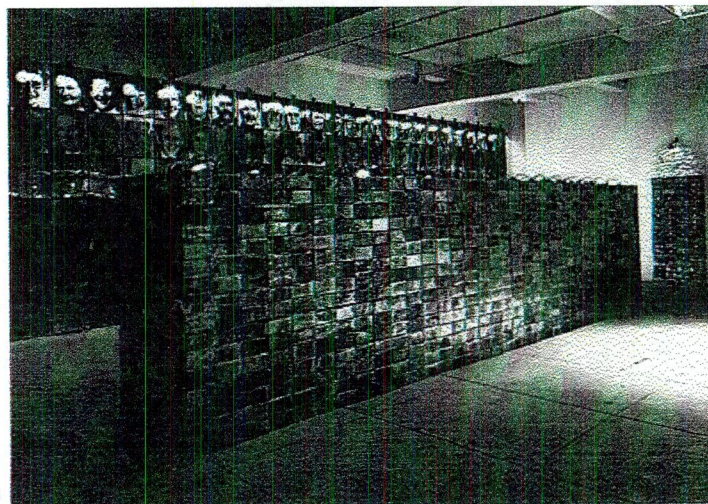
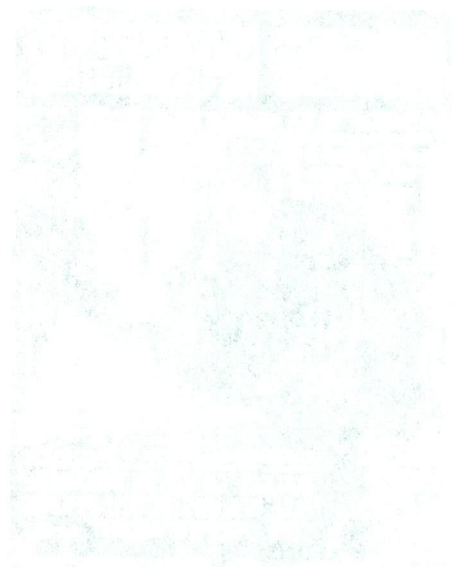


fig.9

Another example is a series titled *Les Suisses Morts* (The Dead Swiss)(fig.9) where Boltanski used photographs taken from obituaries in Swiss newspapers. The photographs were usually smiling family shots of the deceased, or studio portraits commemorating significant events such as weddings or graduations. He photographed these photographs and enlarged them to slightly over life-size, taking care not to distort them as he had done in previous works. He seemed to want to emphasise these peoples normality. He explains why he chose Swiss



people by saying

Before, I did pieces with dead Jews but 'dead' and 'Jew' go too well together. There is nothing more normal than the Swiss. There is no reason for them to die, so they are more terrifying in a way, they are us.¹⁹

In 1989, Boltanski arranged an exhibition at the Musée d'Art Modern de la Ville de Paris. Here he explored the historicising function of the museum. It was titled *Réserve du musée des enfants* (Storage area of the Children's Museum)(fig.10).

To get to it, viewers had to descend a staircase previously off limits to the public. In one room there were fifty-five black and white photographs of children. They were placed in a rectangle and lit from the top by clamp-on lights, whose

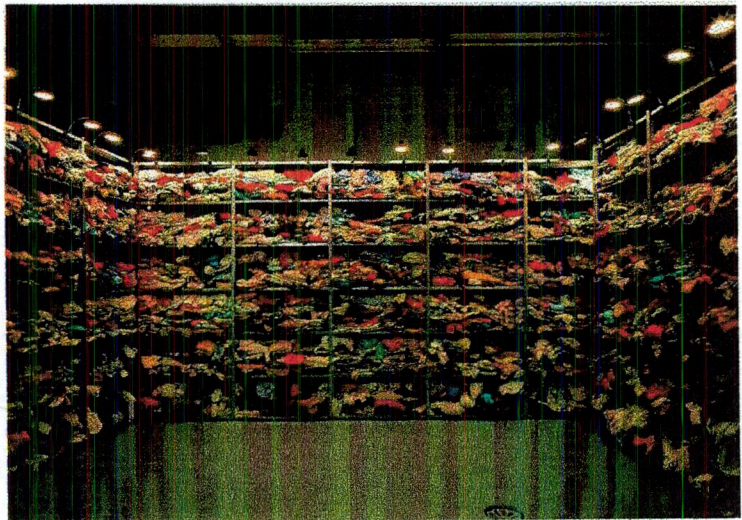
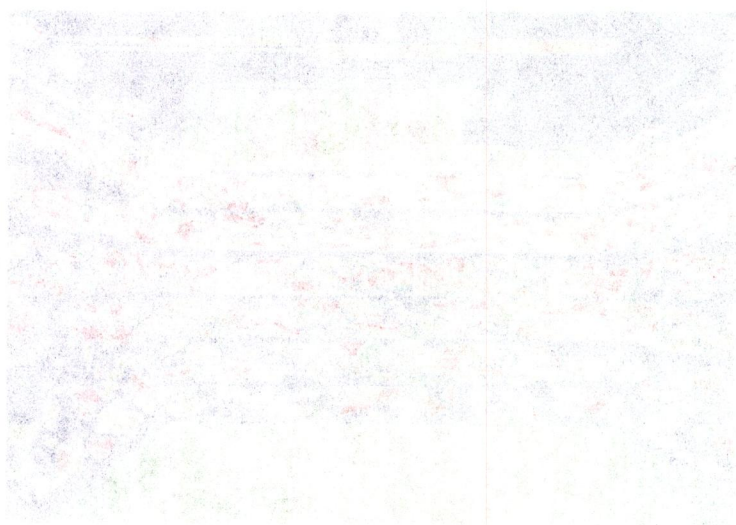


fig.10

cords fell down over the young faces. In the next room, displayed on shelves from floor to ceiling was carelessly folded children's clothing, lit with the same institutional lamps. The location of the work contributed to an air of melancholy evoked by these pieces. They were located in an area that usually stores works of art that are not being exhibited. A writer named Susan Stewart had written that "it is to out-of-the-way places like attics and cellars that ordinary mementos are removed to make way for 'real life.'" She also says about the souvenir that it is "destined to be forgotten" and that its "tragedy lies in the death of memory, the tragedy of all autobiography and the simultaneous erasure of the autograph."²⁰



Here Stewart is referring to personal souvenirs but her comments about the attic and cellar also apply to museums, museums being, “oversized repositories of immortalised memories in the form of works of art. Pieces relegated to storage are in fact often forgotten, in spite of the museums specific charge to commemorate. Museum archives are, in a funny way, particularly poignant places, documenting and chronicling the history of the histories they are charged to preserve.”²¹

In an exhibition shown in the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, in 1990, Boltanski demonstrated the notion that we are all destined to be forgotten, all memory of us removed to make way for real life. The installation is entitled *Réserve-Les Suisses Morts* (Reserves- the Dead Swiss)(fig.11) and consists of a room with columns of biscuit tins (which Boltanski urinated on in order to make

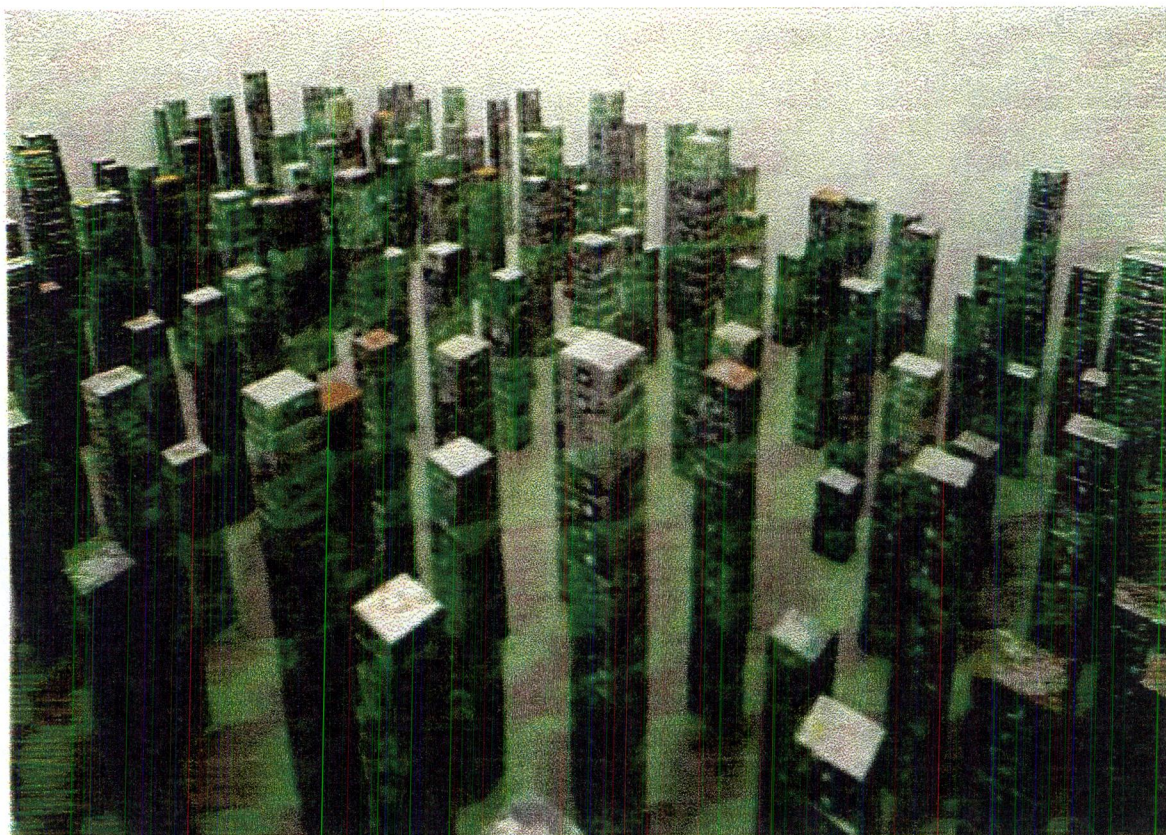


fig.11

them rust.) On the front of the tins he glued faces, taken from the Swiss obituaries. (the same as he had done in *Les Suisses Morts*) Each biscuit tin suggests that inside each one you would find any information known about the face on the front, someone whose name is not even known, and that that information is doomed to obscurity, like an unmarked grave.

In 1970, Boltanski had begun displaying objects and documents in glass vitrines. In them he showed labeled samples of his work since 1969, With this simulation of a museum environment, he was using the purpose of the museum as a vehicle in his own work. (In doing this he may have had future installations in mind, for example *Reservé du Musée des Enfants* (Storage area of a Children's Museum)). To Boltanski it is life that is more moving than art, so he tries to come as close as possible in his work to life. This is evident in his use of real objects and real museum cabinets; for example, *Inventory of objects belonging to a young woman of Charlestown.*(fig.12)



fig.12

In this exhibit the items are labeled and displayed in glass cases and, in a formal museum setting, Boltanski is pointing to how things become precious through

association rather than intrinsic value. To him, the avant-garde occurs when a work cannot be identified as to whether it is art or life. By blurring-virtually eliminating -the line between art and life, Boltanski makes his art more powerful and articulate.

If we look at the personal possession, stored away and kept for no other reason other than as a souvenir, it can be viewed in the same way as a photograph that immortalises a special occasion. In the same way parents who keep their children's possessions as sacred, for example; a lock of hair, or their first pair of shoes are preserving their memories in a similar way to having photographs of the child's various stages. The possession and the photograph are both linked to a time in the past. The photograph is something that is shown to others, it requires a narrative. The possession/souvenir, however, cannot, it has special significance but only for that one person - the person who has considered it important enough to keep as sacred. A photograph is capable of showing 'what once was', but a possession\souvenir can only imply that someone once owned it. Outside the context of its being a cherished possession it loses its 'sacred' status, and becomes just a lost object.

Like memories, relics once abandoned or forgotten may become more treasured than those in continued use; the discontinuity in their history focuses attention on them, particularly if scarcity or fragility threatens their imminent extinction. Artifacts of initially transient and diminishing value that fall into the limbo of rubbish are often later resurrected as highly valued relics. But memories are unlike relics, in that they are only representations of things recalled, whereas relics *are* things. Each generation creates its own relics, saving some and forgetting others from the generation before.

Our own past landscapes will lose consequence for our descendants as our present and imminent future become constituents of their past.²²

1. The first part of the paper discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all transactions. It emphasizes that proper record-keeping is essential for the success of any business and for the protection of the interests of all parties involved.

2. The second part of the paper discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all transactions. It emphasizes that proper record-keeping is essential for the success of any business and for the protection of the interests of all parties involved.

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Our own personal relics can only be of importance to us. One individual's treasured belongings left behind after death may not have the same associations or emotional attachment for the generation left holding these once 'sacred' possessions. It is here that these relics can drift into the limbo of rubbish but may be discovered years on, and returned to their 'relic' status. This time the emphasis is on their antique, qualities and not the original associations and reasons for preservation.

Part of Boltanski's work has been about what he calls 'small memory.' According to him, 'large memory' is that which has been recorded and documented in books, whereas small memory is all about the little things: trivia and jokes for example. He is trying to preserve this small memory because, when someone dies, there is a fear that their memory will disappear completely, and it is this small memory that makes people individual and unique. He says "These memories are very fragile. I want to save them"

Boltanski claims to be committed to the task of "preserving oneself whole, keeping a trace of all the moments of our lives, all the objects that have surrounded us, everything we've said and what's been said around us. That's my goal." (pg 126) By doing this he feels that his life will be "secured, carefully arranged and labeled in a safe place, secure from theft, fire and nuclear war, from whence it will be possible to take it out and assemble it at any point and that, being thus assured of never dying, I may finally rest."

Our childhoods are not idealised passages into adulthood, but instead the first part of us to die.²³

In his early work, Christian Boltanski was concerned with recording his own personal history. His first book entitled *Recherche et Presentation de tout ce qui reste de mon enfance, 1944-1950* (fig.4) (Research and presentation of everything that remains of my childhood, 1944-1950) was produced in 1969 and one hundred and fifty copies were sent out as 'Mail Art'. It was a nine-

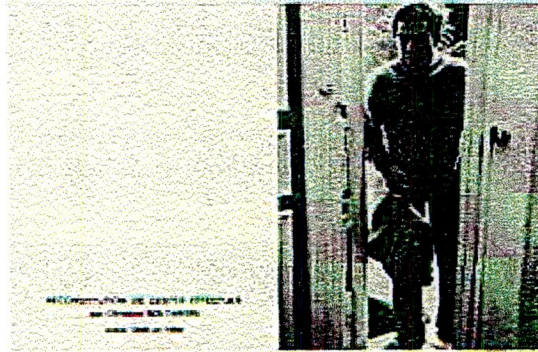
paged book, which included black and white photographs of family outing, a class portrait from 1951, a photograph of his childhood bed and a shirt that he had worn as a child, as well as a page from a school essay. Boltanski described the book as "a search for a part of myself that had died away, an archaeological inquiry into the deepest reaches of my memory."²⁴

From the book he discovered how little tangible evidence remained of his childhood. It may be true that few of the objects photographed actually belonged to Boltanski but, instead, belonged to his nephew. If this is the case, then it is one example of how Boltanski uses photography to mislead the viewer, either by adding a misleading caption or by omitting one completely. Why would Boltanski intentionally mislead his audience? Perhaps he is illustrating how all our personal effects and belongings don't give an accurate description of us. Because something that is implied is not necessarily true. Because, for example, someone owns a shotgun it does not make him a killer. Annette Kuhn talks about photography as being a 'prompt' or 'pretext' - "clues left behind at the scene of the crime"²⁵. But in the same way a photograph can be used to mislead, to throw us off a track.

Six months later, Boltanski came up with another book, six pages that claimed to be documenting the future. The title of the book was *Reconstitution d'un accident qui ne m'est pas encore arrive et ou j'ai trouve la mort* (Reconstruction of an accident that hasn't happened and in which I met my death).

The book documented Boltanski's own death in a bicycle accident. It showed Boltanski's emergency health card, an identity photo, and a diagram, with a map of the street, reconstructing the scene of the accident and a police photograph of the outline of a body on the street. This being another example of how we should not believe everything that we see or read. Since we are given no concrete evidence of Boltanski's death, why should we believe it?

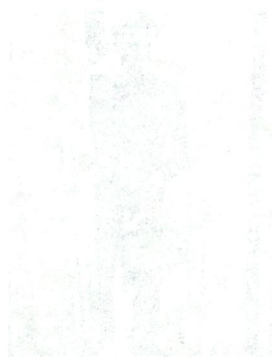
In 1970 Boltanski began reconstructing events that actually had happened - or so he claimed! This was also in book form. The book was entitled *Reconstitutions des gestes effectues par Christian Boltanski entre 1948 et 1954* (Reconstructions of gestures made by Christian Boltanski between 1948 and 1954)(fig.13).



.fig.13

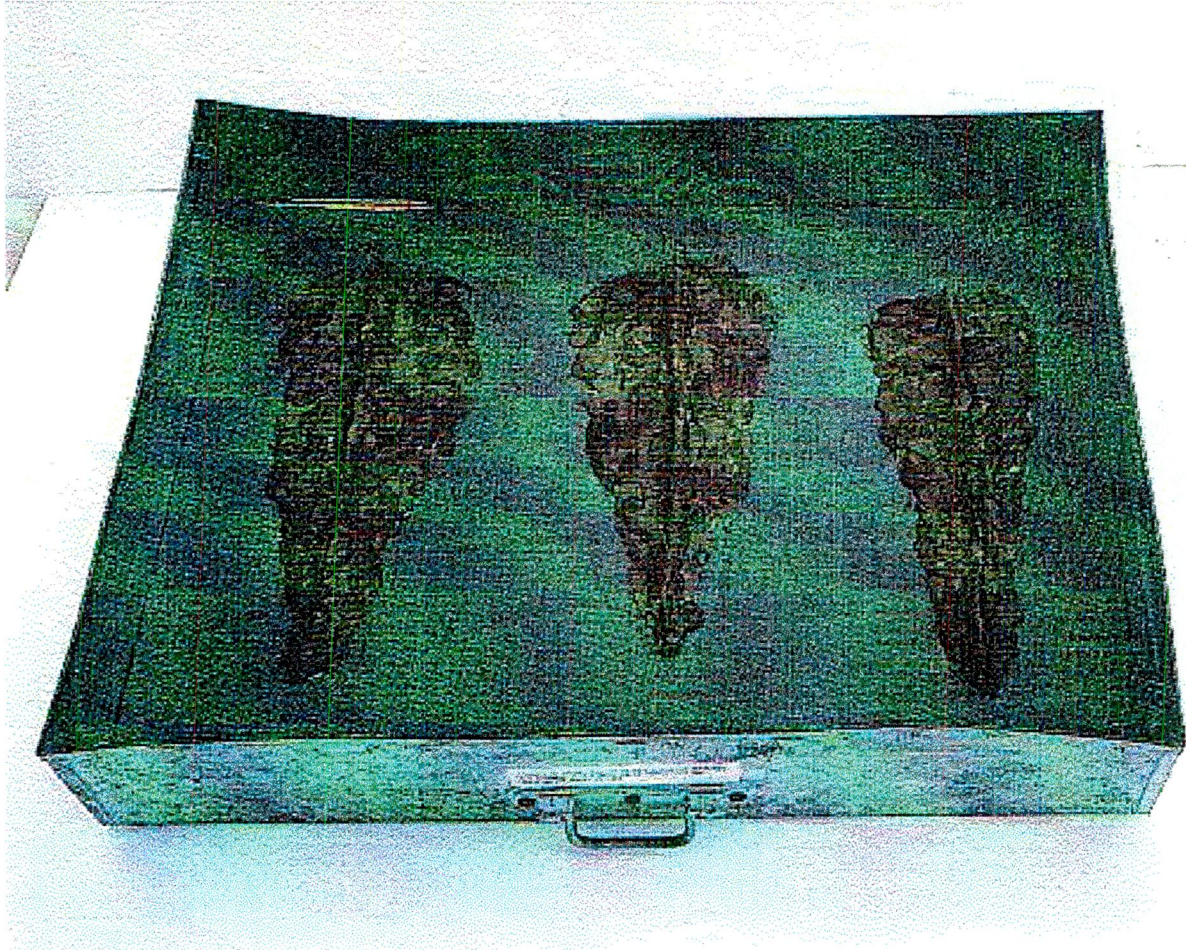
It was made up of a series of comic photographs of Boltanski as an adult acting out everyday episodes from his childhood. *Reconstitution VII*, for example, pictures him coming home from school on February 10 carrying his schoolbag. It is as though by acknowledging these memories he could then piece together his childhood bit by bit. Each 'small memory' he remembered and documented through his art brought him one step closer to completing his own picture, a picture made up of every single experience that he could remember since his birth. If every day is spent recording the past then it must be continued until the precise moment of physical death or it will never be complete. By securing his life through his art and making sure that it is arranged and labeled in a safe place, he feels assured that his memory, and therefore he, will be assured of never dying.

Other works attempting to 'preserve oneself whole' include *Essais de reconstitution d'objets ayant appartenu a Christian Boltanski entre 1948 et*



1954 (Attempts to reconstruct objects that belonged to Christian Boltanski between 1948 and 1954)(fig.14).

fig.14



Here he reconstructed some of his lost toys, utensils and clothing with plasticine, which he displayed in tin drawers covered in wire mesh.

The objects mentioned here were representations of the actual objects. In the same way Boltanski thinks it possible to see ourselves in his photographs. Perhaps these objects could have belonged to any one of us because they are not the original objects. Rather, they are representations of the originals evoking images of our own childhoods.

Shimon Attie is an American artist who completed a project entitled *The*

Writing on the Wall in 1996 (fig.15,16,17). He also uses old photography, but projects his chosen images onto the original sites where the photographs were taken.

In his work Attie is exploiting photography's capacity to evoke absence as well as presence. He is effectively bringing back the presence that was once there. The *Writing on the Wall* project, he explains, grew out of his response while walking through the old Jewish neighbourhoods of East Berlin, most of which are long since gone. He found himself asking, where are all the missing people? What had become of the Jewish culture and community which had once been at home here? He says that he "felt the presence of this lost community very strongly even though so few visible traces of it remained."²⁶ Attie doesn't describe himself, as a 'holocaust artist' but wanted to 'give this invisible past a voice'.²⁷

His work began in a number of archives looking at historical photographs of Jewish street life in Berlin during the 1920's and 30's. Meanwhile he was making forays through the city, seeking out traces of a former Jewish presence. His searches lead him to Berlin's Scheunenviertel neighbourhood near Alexanderplatz, in what was East Berlin. After assembling photographs for the project Attie then had to locate prewar maps, as the East German Government had renamed and renumbered many of the streets after the war. He was attempting to match up the pictures with the actual sites that had been photographed, sixty years before. But he discovered that most of the original buildings had been either bombed during the war or torn down to be rebuilt in the 'mass produced' style of the so-called Plattenbauten, common during the socialist regime. His first attempts at projecting these photographic images were projected - for the sake of historical accuracy - onto the original sites that the photographs had been taken. He found the results often to be a visual and aesthetic failure, as the historical images simply did not fit or in anyway correspond to what replaced them. Despite Atties effort to project them onto



fig.15

fig.16







fig.17

their original sites, this was only possible in 25% of the installations. Other images were projected onto neighbouring buildings. Images with strong architectural components interacted strongly with the existing architecture. When having to choose between a good historian or a good artist Attie chose the latter. He says about the installations, "the *Writing on the Wall* project should be seen as a simulation of Jewish life as it once existed and not as a literal reconstruction"²⁸.

Not wanting to be described as a 'holocaust artist', Shimon Attie's projections are primarily about loss. Michel André Bernstein talks about photography in relation to Attie's work, and the "sense of separation, of an irrecoverable gap between the perceived image and the now vanished world from which it came,"²⁹ true of even the most commonplace family snapshots. He goes on to say, "part of the power of a photographic image depends upon our trust that for each picture there once existed a physical reality, dense with particulars and



unique to the moment the camera shutters clicked.”³⁰

The sense of loss in Attie's work is intensified because it immediately signifies the holocaust, even though the photographs were taken before the war. We have all seen images like these before, in museums, documentaries or books. By his projections, Attie provides us with the opportunity to viscerally comprehend that our contemporary knowledge of these images is displaced, and fragmented. This 'invisible past' is brought into the present in a ghostly, haunting, otherworldly way, with faces of this past now made visible sixty years on. He has created moveable memorial sites and allowed us a fleeting glimpse of the past, the nature of projection making it all the more fleeting.

Similarly to Christian Boltanski, Attie attempts to fill in some of the gaps left by the war and the holocaust. By in some way replacing the people who once walked those streets, he is asking the questions, Where have they gone? What destiny befell them? Did any of them survive? As we are all familiar with the history that surrounds the images, Attie is dealing with our collective memories. He is concerned with this particular collective history.

While neither artist chooses to be described as a 'holocaust artist', there are definite connections to the Holocaust in their work. Boltanski's art tends to emphasise the tragedy through the individual. We are struck more by each individual, and the sheer number of 'individuals' that confronts us adds extra poignancy to the work. He claims that his work is about the fact of dying and not about the Holocaust while in Attie's work we are struck by the historical reality of the Holocaust and the Second World War.

It is more the loss of entire neighbourhoods that is mourned here. There is a sense of detachment however when viewing Attie's images. We view them from a different time, different culture and tradition. The faces seem to want to remind us of the futility of war.

Boltanski does not use images of the holocaust. He describes his work as 'after' the holocaust. The images he uses are not directly related but they are used against a definite holocaust backdrop. While Boltanski wishes us to see ourselves reflected in the faces he uses in his work, the faces in Attie's projections are almost invisible against the enormity of this same backdrop.

Many artists have created work about the holocaust, a lot of which tends to slip into the trap of being over sentimental or being vague generalisations that rely on an abstract history of victimisation. It could be argued that so-called 'holocaust art' has been over-viewed so much so that it loses its impact. Because neither artist wishes to be described as a holocaust artist they may be making potent statements about the manner in which the holocaust is represented today. In my view they have both used recycled photography in an unsentimental way, which allows their audiences to draw their own conclusions.

Photography and memory are strongly connected to the holocaust and the post-holocaust recovery. The survivors need to remember is essential. So much has been lost that the need to recall is intensified. Primo Levi, a survivor of the holocaust, wrote in his book *If This is a Man* about how the removal of all that is personal attempts to destroy identity.

There is nowhere to look in a mirror, but our appearance stands in front of us, reflected in a hundred livid faces.³¹

He talks about the removal of ones possessions as an attempt to remove memory.

Nothing belongs to us anymore; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair, if we speak, they will not listen to us, and if they listen they will not understand. They will even take away our name: and if we want to keep it, we

will have to find ourselves the strength to do so, to manage somehow so that behind the name something of us, of us as we were, still remains.³²

Everyone can appreciate the importance of their own treasured memories and relics. Primo Levi asks us to consider the value and meaning in each of our smallest daily habits; "in the hundreds of possessions that every beggar owns: a handkerchief, an old letter, the photo of a cherished person. These things are part of us, almost like limbs of our body."³³

He considers these personal possessions as "objects which are ours in their personification and evocation of our memories."³⁴

In conclusion, It is evident that memory and having the ability to recall our personal past is a universal concern. Museums act as huge memory banks, established for the sole purpose of preserving our ancestors existence and evidence of their existence. This is a worldwide concern and particularly in the western Christian world, where everything from our past seems to be placed under a preservation order. Perhaps there is too much attention paid to this mummification of past life. But so much time, energy and resources are spent attending to this task, that it is indicative of our desire to do so. Surely this is evidence of our need to record and acknowledge human achievements. By doing this we can move into the future with a knowledge of what has been done and what is left to do. So rather than prevent future development, attention to the past is actually helping us to move on and continually break new ground.

Personal relics and souvenirs have a similar role to museum pieces. They record a personal history and act as milestones in a persons life. They are like photographs in that they are snapshots of a time in the past, documenting our proud moments and achievements, as well as personal tragedy. A national museum is also about National pride, as well as a countries tragic past.

Photography's role as an instrument for recording memory has been well documented. The family photo album attempts to record our family's history, but perhaps we are only recording an ideal family history, in common with every other family album. I noticed while going through an American photo album, belonging to a friend, that it was remarkably similar to my own. This family, from a different cultural background, was able to record a past that could represent any other family, including my own. In this way, photography has given us, if not a rather naive notion of a 'One Worldliness', uniting families and saying, 'We are the same' regardless of our race, colour or creed. Photography, and in particular, old black and white images seem to mirror the nature of memory itself; a fading image that seems to be just on the verge of vanishing. It is this quality that makes photography so suitable for recording our memories. Memories of events may or may not coincide with a photograph of that same event. This may be because of the photographs ability to mislead, or our memories not being accurate recording devices. In this way, photography may have the power to block memory. Photographs of a deceased loved one, although treasured and displayed to prevent forgetting, may in fact act as an aid to forgetting. It may be that, having those photographs visible, helps with the recovery from mourning.

People often store personal possessions which are treasured, and kept as souvenirs of a time in the past. These can act in the same way as photography. in that they can trigger memories. But while photographs deal with images of the past, the treasured possession deals directly with the person or time with whom they are originally associated. For example, a photograph of a child, wearing his first pair of shoes, evokes a subtly different emotion than holding that pair of shoes. The possession appeals to faculties other than the memory, it is tactile, there may be a scent or atmosphere that evokes other emotions. These things are evident in the object but not available in the photograph.

Christian Boltanski was concerned with preserving the past through real objects, whether lost or found objects, belonging to one single person, or masses of objects belonging to nameless individuals. He treated these now redundant belongings as museum pieces. He describes the Musée de l'Homme in Paris as presenting a lost world, with an "entire series of every day objects: Eskimo fishhooks, arrows from the Amazon Indians, stored in what he describes as being 'a big morgue.' The objects are now redundant, but at one time did have life and carried out everyday tasks. His use of photography was usually in connection with death. Photographs of children representing the death of childhood, and our childhoods being the first part of us to die. He believed that once we take a photograph we are recording the death of that moment. He also deals with the notion of photography that reconstructs a family's history in the form of the family album. This he found to be inaccurate, and that what we are recording is a collection of cultural values and ideals. About this he also believes it possible to recognise ourselves in the photographs of others.

He also explores the historicising function of the museum, and examines the notion of museum storage areas where pieces relegated to these out of the way places are 'destined to be forgotten.' This, going against the intentions of the museum whose main purpose is to preserve. He uses this notion in relation to people and how one day, all evidence of us will be erased. As if, when we are no longer physically present, we are relegated to a storage area in other's memory, and when they are gone it is then that we are 'destined to be forgotten.'

He believes life to be more moving than art. This is motivation for him to use real objects, photographs and simulated museum settings.

Because, as he believes, we are all 'destined to be forgotten,' he claims to be committed to the task of 'preserving oneself.' What he calls small memory he

believes to be about the trivial things that make a person individual. Large memory, being what is recorded in books and commonly shared. It is small memory that he attempts to record, and in doing this he believes he is saved from ever dying.

Shimon Attie, through his *Writing On the Wall* projections examines the ability of a photograph to express a sense of presence as well as emphasising absence. He is bringing a past, that is virtually lost forever into the present and giving it one flickering glance at what has become of itself. Almost as though we were time travelers, allowed a glimpse of the past and the past allowed a glimpse of us. The faces in Attie's images however, seem to do more than glimpse. They seem to be asking many unanswerable questions of us, when all we can do is be assured that what's past is past and we are not responsible. Attie's use of photography in his work is focused on a collective memory, or what Boltanski calls 'large memory.'

It is interesting to note that neither artist would like to be referred to as a 'holocaust artist.' It is as though they are rejecting other artists who may have overused the holocaust but also have dealt with it in an over sentimental way. But worse than that, used it as a bandwagon to trivialise something that will remain in our collective memories as one of the most horrific realities of human history. Christian Boltanski and Shimon Attie have succeeded in stepping back from the dictative approach, and allowed the viewer to ask questions of the work, and the work to ask questions to ask questions of the viewer.

- ¹ *The Past is a Foreign country* David Lowenthal, pg.194
- ² *Remembering* BS Benjamin, pg171
- ³ *Remembering* BS Benjamin, pg171
- ⁴ *Seized Images: Photography Memory and the Holocaust* Rachel Schreiber, New Art Examiner vol24 April 1997 pg25
- ⁵ *Family Secrets* Annette Kuhn, pg12
- ⁶ *Family Frames* Marianne Hirsch, pg20
- ⁷ pg65
- ⁸ pg120
- ⁹ *Family Frames* Marianne Hirsch, pg20
- ¹⁰ *Family Frames* Marianne Hirsch, pg20
- ¹¹ *Jostling over the Mona Lisa* Goldberg, IHT 5-6 July 1980, pg8
- ¹² *Christian Boltanski* Tamar Garb, pg17
- ¹³ *Christian Boltanski* Lynn Gumpert, pg17
- ¹⁴ *Christian Boltanski* Lynn Gumpert, pg81
- ¹⁵ *Christian Boltanski* Lynn Gumpert, pg34
- ¹⁶ *Christian Boltanski* Lynn Gumpert, pg34
- ¹⁷ *Christian Boltanski* Lynn Gumpert, pg34
- ¹⁸ *Christian Boltanski* Lynn Gumpert, pg36
- ¹⁹ *Christian Boltanski* Lynn Gumpert, pg132
- ²⁰ *On Longing* , pg150
- ²¹ *Christian Boltanski* Lynn Gumpert, pg128
- ²² *The Past is a Foreign country* David Lowenthal, pg.240
- ²³ *Christian Boltanski* Lynn Gumpert, pg12
- ²⁴ *Christian Boltanski* pg82
- ²⁵ *Family Secrets* pg12
- ²⁶ *The Writing on the Wall* Michael Andre Bernstein, pg8
- ²⁷ *The Writing on the Wall* Michael Andre Bernstein, pg8
- ²⁸ *The Writing on the Wall* Michael Andre Bernstein, pg10
- ²⁹ *The Writing on the Wall* Michael Andre Bernstein, pg6
- ³⁰ *The Writing on the Wall* Michael Andre Bernstein, pg6
- ³¹ *If This is a Man* Primo Levi, pg32
- ³² *If This is a Man* Primo Levi, pg33
- ³³ *If This is a Man* Primo Levi, pg33
- ³⁴ *If This is a Man* Primo Levi, pg33

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