

The Individual will not Remain Silent - On Boltanski's "Portrait Syntax"

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The King of Spades, the Queen of Hearts, the Jack of Clubs and the Six of Diamonds: If we shuffle the cards again will their destinies be altered?

Will the "babies" delivered by the roaring conveyor belt installation become the next revolutionaries - or urban dropouts?

At the French artist Christian Boltanski's solo exhibition "Storage Memory", at the Power Station of Art in Shanghai, two huge - scale installation works - "*Nobodies*" ["*Personnes*"] and "*Chance - Wheel of Fortune*" - rise up dramatically from the vast ground floor space. The mechanical claw, like the "Hand of God", clutches repeatedly at the tonnes of clothes piled up below in a huge heap; inside a large scaffolding installation, countless photographs of babies move, then come to an abrupt halt, waiting for the selection process that constantly repeats. It's as though they are performing a visualization in response to the question "how does destiny move". And, with this question emphasized up front, the exhibition thus begins.

Although the title of this exhibition is likely to lead to a focus on memory, we cannot ignore the fact that the main division between the individual and memory is forgetting. Rather than expressing its concern for memory in the ontological sense, the exhibition is more a way of resisting forgetting, and thus allowing the individual to exist forever in the artist's syntax.

So whose memory does "Storage Memory" actually store? The object that is missing here is "the individual" itself. And my focus in this essay relates specifically to the question of how the use of "portraits" in Boltanski's works has composed an "ode to the individual."

Leaving the two huge installations behind, the work "*Humans*", made up of more than 100 gauze sheets and lightbulbs, floats like a ghost in mid - air, on the second floor of the PSA. Indeed the whole second - floor gallery has been divided up into a corridor linking several

“rooms”: in the work *“Corridor of Lightbulbs”*, more than a hundred black coats are suspended, conveying a sense of being at death’s door - and the low wattage Tungsten - filament light bulbs which accompany them also seem to be hanging on by a thread.

As soon as you set foot in the entrance to the “colonnade” you see an installation made up of faces of children and a supporting framework. (*“Behind the images”*, 1996) Influenced by the faces, the framework seems to be playing the role of a body in their midst. Gazing at the faces of the people in these photographs, one sees what are clearly not their wrinkles but are actually folds or damage to the pictures – yet in the atmosphere that Boltanski creates, the features of the people and the images seem logically suited to each other, as if ... as if, even though the people in these photographs will never grow old, they will still age as a result of the material the pictures are made of.

“Individual”, “destiny”, “death”, “memory” ... These key words have lingered constantly over Boltanski’s creative path. The vast majority of people are thoroughly convinced by them - but what concerns me more is how the confirmation of the individual is implemented here? Or to go further, how does a photographic portrait live up to its name, like a living person? It’s as though, before this kind of confirmation takes place, it’s not possible to start discussing these key words about which people talk so much.

In the artist’s linguistic system, it seems in fact to have been tacitly agreed that one portrait or one garment is equivalent in value to one individual. However, people these days can no longer return to an age when seeing the Veil of Veronica was equivalent to seeing the true face of Jesus; nor can we go back to the days when photography was so misunderstood that people believed that if a camera filmed them it would take away their soul.

So to summarize, this kind of benediction, in which people believe so deeply, can perhaps be boiled down to two aspects: On the one hand, the use of photos and artefacts in Boltanski’s work suggests that we really only need people to exist or to have existed, and do not need their essential nature or character. On the other hand, once a photograph has been endowed with the authority that comes with being a symbol of life, it must, to ensure that it does not lose this authority, continue to be stored in some structure of a ceremonial nature - such as the artist’s altar - or shrine - style installations, the light -

bulbs which suggest a memorial service, and the ceremonies that come from some unknown religion ... From this moment on, the people and their portraits not only resemble each other, they also perpetuate each other, affect each other – they are both visible images and invisible bodies.

The portrait is without a doubt the external form that most directly expresses individual characteristics. The large - scale use of portraits has accounted for a huge proportion of the works that Boltanski has created since the 1990s. Looking back now, it seems like a fateful coincidence that, in around 1986, the first work in which the artist used a portrait as source material was called “Veronica”: the portrait was simply a close - up of a woman’s head, but it was placed under a hazy veil, which seemed to create the illusion that it was alive, as though it had a body. Through the use of this famous classical allusion, the work predicted the authority of the portrait and the power of analogy, and exerted an extraordinary influence on the artist’s subsequent creative career.

However, portraits in themselves raise many doubts, and we may well need to ask precisely where these pictures came from? Which phase of an individual’s time - line are they from? Because we all know that before a “face” attains its final appearance, it must battle, for the remainder of its life, right up to the final moment of death. In the exhibition, “*Detective Altar*” and “*Social News*” are placed facing each other in the same room; although these two works are very different in their external structure, what connects them is the source of the portraits - these come from newspapers, with various people mixed together. Yes, there are criminals and victims, deceased Swiss people and children from Dijon in France. And simply by looking at their faces, it’s quite impossible to judge on which side of the divide between good and evil in a civilized society they stand. And now they are all gone. In this way, Boltanski has built a cemetery devoted to peace. And this gives us further confirmation of the artist’s credo when it comes to “the ode to the individual” - he does not worry about individual character or choosing people based on their qualities; rather he builds this on an innate respect for the individual.

As Tzvetan Todorov put it, “Since people are not all base or unworthy of mention, and since they deserve respect, does this not prove that people should be carefully depicted?” Clearly, Boltanski’s depictions are not intended to be an aestheticized portrayal of an individual, as in 15th century portraiture, but are rather a broader, more

general paean to humanity, one which is unprecedented in its universal love for humankind.

To remove humans from society or ethics, so that they become pure individuals, and then to treat them indiscriminately - or to put it another way, to lump them all together - has long been Boltanski's ideal; indeed this lumping together may even be expressed by a crossing of the boundaries between life and death. The artist has previously mixed up portraits of the living and the dead, with the result that it can be equally hard to judge whether these images are the last glimpse of the world of the living before they bid farewell, or a means of extending the world of the dead. Perhaps the important thing is that the tone of the works that stand in front of us seems to suggest a greater tendency towards a kind of symbol of "having existed." Here the artist has monumentalized "individuals". In fact this type of monumentalization is an approach he has used frequently, as can be seen in works such as the "*Altar*" series, the "*Monuments*" series, "*Scraping*", "*Behind the Images*", and "*After - DOPO*".

Thus we can of course say that the artist has a pronounced inclination to become a Creator, yet at the same time we cannot deny that the subjects he is concerned about really are founded on the broad macro - perspective of the individual human. If the sending of the first man - made satellite into space in 1957 - described by Hannah Arendt as "second in importance to no other" - was a moment of progress in the annals of human history, it actually also provided a new angle for assessing the condition of mankind, because the idea that humans could move to another planet was probably the greatest transformation people could imagine in those days. To a certain extent, this reflects a pattern comparable to Boltanski's practice - sparing no effort to construct and make metaphors for the plight of mankind

Finally I want to return to the frequently discussed key words that I mentioned earlier: "individual", "destiny", "death", "memory"... Here they can finally be elaborated on: the individual refers to the praising of every individual without favouritism; destiny, to a calm assessment of the cycle of human life; death focuses on the inevitability of one's own passage towards death; memory refers to creating an everlasting "archive" which will do its utmost to combat amnesia. Ultimately they converge, and history and

characters from the distant past can re - emerge, and, in the midst of a crisis which is shaking mankind's consciousness, return to remodel themselves.

Leaving the main gallery, I go inside the Power Station of Art's chimney, where there is an installation in which a light flashes in time with Boltanski's own heartbeat. I had never been able to work out whether this was a case of some kind of narcissism on the part of an artist with a Creator complex, or whether he was using it as a subtle way of hinting at his respect for other individuals' perceptions of self. In the final analysis, the feeble flickering light bulb seemed to be imminently awaiting the moment of its final demise; so should we start to worry about the weakness of the human life with which it shares a common destiny? On the day I left the exhibition, I suddenly felt, as I caught sight of the thermometer - shaped symbol which has always adorned the top of the PSA's chimney, that it seemed particularly well suited to this exhibition.